Heroes Assemble!

by Stargon

Summary

After five years travelling the world, Harry Potter has landed in New York. He figures that there's no better place than the city that never sleeps to settle in and forge a new life. If only the heroes, villains, aliens and spies had received the message. Begins just before the Avengers movie and continues through the MCU. Expect a long story with some extra faces along the way.
Chapter 1 – The Sixth Continent

Harry James Potter stepped out of the tunnel and immediately to the side. Around him, the passengers that had travelled with him from Lima continued on, either in search of their baggage or to connecting flights or even in search of transportation from JFK International to New York proper.

After travelling for so long and so far, Harry knew what to expect: the hordes of travellers would surge past, intent on their destinations and anyone who got in their way or impeded their progress was in for a jostled, uncomfortable time. More often than not before he’d learnt his lesson, Harry’d been bumped into walls, cut off from his own destination or lost. Once he’d been knocked completely to the ground, an experience that he never wanted repeated.

Once the way before him seemed to have settled down, he began making his way through the airport.

Passing through customs here had been a little more of an issue than it had been in almost any other country that he’d explored, and especially the South American ones that he’d been travelling through for nearly the past year. Only the fact that he’d had the foresight to cast notice-me-nots, muggle-repelling charms and disillusionments on the series of miniature trunks strapped to his belt had gotten them past the officials. Thankfully, he’d learnt early on to keep anything magical in the trunks, saving his muggle belongings - clothes, some books, toiletries and a few knickknacks - for his backpack.

Having the backpack as his only luggage was another blessing. No trips to baggage claim for him, not to mention the horror stories that he’d heard from people who had arrived in one country, only for their luggage to arrive in another.

He weaved his way through the crowd, past the duty-free shops, eateries and other businesses, intent on finding his way out of the airport. This was why he’d decided upon his next course of action - he was getting tired.

Five years.

Five years he'd been travelling the world – visiting communities, muggle and magical alike, learning the customs and seeing the sights. He'd picked up untold amounts of knowledge, both magical and muggle. And he'd become a bit of a pack-rat. Books, souvenirs, clothes, knickknacks and doodads of all variety and interest that he could find had found their way into one of his trunks.

Some things were incredibly useful, like the small silver stud that he now wore in his right ear. To anyone else, it was simply an earring. To him, it was a translation device. Using it, he could understand any language that he heard. He couldn't speak it, of course, but he could at least understand what was being said. It was an amazing find, one of many that he’d picked up in Japan. The only limitation that it seemed to have was the fact that it could only translate human languages - nothing of the goblin, merpeople, dwarf or any of the other magical people languages dotted about the world.
But after five years and four continents, he was ready to settle down, at least for a little while. And while the thought of going home to Britain had been mildly appealing, knowing that he had yet to explore and learn about North America had decided him on this course of action. Oh, there was also Australia, but he was in no rush to go there again - he had already spent quite some time there when he’d gone with Hermione to find her parents and return their memories to them.

So, when the time had come that he felt ready to move on from South America, or more precisely, Peru, he’d taken the very first plane that he could get to North America. To New York, to be precise.

Exactly what he was going to do there, he still hadn't quite decided. All that he had in mind was to find somewhere to settle, to use as a base as he explored the continent. And if it took him a little longer to explore said continent, with being based in one place, well, he could live with that.

The bright sunlight after being cooped up in a plane for nine hours, plus the time in the airport itself almost blinded him when he emerged from the heavily tinted glass doors. When he'd finally blinked the spots from his eyes, he looked around.

A long line of yellow taxi cabs sat waiting for passengers off to his left. In the distance, a slight haze in the air marked where the city was, not unlike what he'd experienced anytime that he'd first arrived in the more heavily populated cities of the world.

Hitching his backpack a little higher onto his shoulder, he headed towards the first cab in the rank.

"Where to, Boss?" the little driver of obvious Indian descent asked the instant that Harry'd shut the door to the cab.


"Know just the place, Boss," the man said.

The car was put into drive and the cab took off in a rush into the swirl of traffic. The fact that the little man hadn't even bothered to look for on-coming traffic had Harry scrambling to find his seatbelt.

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The hotel that the little Indian taxi driver - Manish, according to the little plastic card that Harry'd taken care to memorise so that he'd know the name of his potential killer, a likely outcome with the way the man seemed to ignore even the most basic of road rules - had taken him to was mediocre at best. Harry'd definitely stayed in a lot worse places, though. It had its own bathroom, which was a plus, as well as a bed that was only marginally lumpy in places. The fact that the woman behind the counter when he checked in was Indian explained exactly why he'd been brought there.

Harry, though, wasn't overly concerned; he had no intention of staying there long.

And thus, he was out exploring the area, learning about this new city that he'd found himself in.

New York City, Harry quickly realised, was very aptly named. The 'City That Never Sleeps', was a hive of millions of people and cars, all hustling and bustling every which way in their important lives. In terms of people, it reminded him a lot of the largest cities that he'd experienced in India and China. But in terms of buildings, it was more comparable to Tokyo. Skyscrapers towered above him, each vying to be the biggest, the tallest, the most ostentatious.

The Empire State Building was clearly one of the most impressive, even if it was no longer the tallest. Oscorp Tower was another that stuck out against the skyline. The Chrysler Building was
amazing. And then there were the older buildings, the ones built with more charm than glass, like the Baxter building.

As Harry wandered from street to street, he found that even more towers were planned for the mega city. The ground was still in the process of being cleared for one called Stark Tower. Idly, he wondered what distinctiveness it would bring to the New York skyline - would it be impressively tall or designed more artistically; would it be filled with glass windows or perhaps even a helicopter landing pad on the roof?

The further that he walked, the more that Harry was forced to dodge and weave his way through the crowds. It seemed that no matter which way he decided to go, it was always against the crowd. More times than he cared to count, he was bumped and jostled, sometimes even into poles or signs on the sidewalk.

Deciding that he'd had enough of fighting the crowds, Harry took the next right, sighing in relief as he found himself on a less populated street. Here, the buildings seemed slightly smaller, only standing between three and six stories tall. They also had a slightly older feel to them, as though the technological advances of the past decade or so had left them behind.

Even the very sight of these buildings felt more welcoming. Instead of concrete, steel and glass, almost all were made of old red brick. Here and there, if one cared to look closely enough, wood trim on some of the buildings enhanced the old-world feel.

Feeling some of the tension that had begun to build in his back and neck begin to ease, Harry slowed his pace.

This.

This was an area that he felt comfortable in, a neighbourhood that he felt that he could settle in, at least for however long he decided to stay in North America, which, judging by how long he'd spent in the other continents, could easily be a year. But, then, he realised, if he had a base to come back to instead of simply wandering from place to place, that one year could very easily stretch to several. It wasn't as though he was in a hurry to get anywhere.

The smell of fresh bread hit his nostrils and he turned, following the urging of his growling stomach.

The bakery was small, with a counter near the back wall and several tables and chairs set just inside the door. A flash of movement from the corner of his eye drew his attention to the T.V. in the corner, the newscaster on the screen droning on about something that Harry had no idea about.

A chocolate scroll and cappuccino were quickly ordered and given to him. He was just about to leave when the flash of multiple explosions on the television caught his attention.

Harry moved to the side and absently leant against the wall as the amazing images continued to roll. Most of them were tiny and blurry, obviously shot from a long way away. But others ... they were the ones that really caught his attention. There seemed to be two metal ... men. One, the smaller of the two, was Gryffindor to a tee, all shiny red and gold. The other was a flat grey and seemed the more powerful of the two.

The cameras had caught some kind of fight between the two, one where cars, buses and buildings alike were demolished in great numbers. At the end, after a massive explosion at some place called 'Stark Industries', the images shifted to show a newsroom.

"And now we cross live to where Tony Stark himself will be giving a statement about the incident
between Iron Man and the Iron Monger,” the young news reporter stated.

Harry watched the television spellbound, his only concession to the real world was taking the occasional sip of his cappuccino.

The image that appeared when the screen cut to the live feed was that of a military man, who the text at the bottom of the screen identified as Lieutenant Colonel James Rhodes.

"And now, Mr. Stark has prepared a statement," the Lieutenant Colonel was saying. "He will not be taking any questions. Thank you."

While Colonel Rhodes was giving his introduction, a man in a crisp black suit with the most intricate facial hair that Harry had ever seen, joined him on the stage. At once, Colonel Rhodes stepped back and to the side, giving up the microphone to the man identified as Tony Stark.

"Ah, been a while since I was in front of you. I figure I'll stick to the cards this time," Tony Stark said, holding up the indicated cards. Then, holding out the cards in front of him, he began to read. "There's been speculation that I was involved in the events that occurred on the freeway and the rooftop ..."

"I'm sorry, Mister Stark," a female journalist in the audience interrupted, "but do you honestly expect us to believe that that was a bodyguard in a suit that conveniently appeared - despite the fact that you ..."

"I know that it's confusing," Stark interrupted her, an annoyed look on his face. "It is one thing to question the official story, and another thing entirely to make wild accusations, or insinuate that I'm a superhero."

"I never said you were a superhero," the female journalist pointed out.

"Didn't? Well, good, because that would be outlandish and fantastic," Stark replied. "I'm just not the hero type. Clearly. With this laundry list of character defects, all the mistakes I've made - largely public ..."

It was then that Colonel Rhodes stepped back into the screen and whispered something in Stark's ear. The fact that Tony Stark immediately looked down at the forgotten cards in his hand and then held them back out in front of him told Harry exactly what was said.

Tony Stark paused then, staring at the cards for a long, long moment before his hand dropped and he looked right into the camera.

"The truth is: I am Iron Man."

Not only the reporters on the screen, but also everyone in the bakery with Harry immediately began talking and sending questions every which way.

Harry, though, couldn't see what the big deal was. He thought that Stark was saying that he was in one of the iron suits that had been on the screen not long before - most likely the Gryffindor red and gold one - but to him, it didn't mean all that much.

So, the guy could obviously do stuff that the ordinary person couldn't. Harry could relate to that. The big difference between the two of them that Harry could see was that Stark seemed to eat up the attention that the media was giving him, and that was not something that Harry'd ever been
Deciding that, since he'd seen the 'big news announcement' and not wanting to stay around where a bunch of people were beginning to talk louder and louder to the person next to them, he sidled out of the bakery and continued his explorations of his new home.

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Sipping his cappuccino and munching on his chocolate scroll, Harry continued wandering the streets. He particularly loved the old world feel that the old red-bricked buildings gave him. He wondered idly about that, especially when he realised that, no matter what country or continent he'd visited over the past four years, he'd naturally seemed to gravitate towards the oldest section of the city or town. But then, the more he thought about it, the more that it made sense.

When it came down to it, the first place that Harry had ever been happy to call home, the one place that he'd always felt most comfortable in, was Hogwarts. And if you wanted the old world feel, then Hogwarts was always bound to win. Diagon Alley, too, was an extension of that. Both were places where he began to come into his own. Especially the summer before his third year when he got to spend a number of weeks living in the Leaky Cauldron and exploring the Alley every day.

Whenever Harry found that he was starting to leave the old neighbourhood behind, he'd turn back, exploring a different street or even simply the opposite side of a street that he'd already been down.

It wasn't surprising then, when he found the place that seemed to instantly call to him.

The building was much like the ones around them - all red-brick and old wood and steel. Huge plate glass windows lined not only the front of the building, but were also set into the top third of the old oak door in wedges that formed a semi-circle, a small circular piece of glass set in the bottom centre of the glass as though it was the sun and the other pieces were its rays shining forth.

It was only three stories high, the highest level even having a small balcony set in the centre. To one side of it, a second building, made from the same materials, only twice as high, butted up against the one that had caught Harry's attention. On the other, across from the small alleyway, was a second building, much like its counterpart, six stories high and seeming to loom over the smaller, forgotten building.

And it was indeed forgotten.

An old, grubby for sale sign hung lopsidedly in one window of the building, catching Harry's attention.

As though drawn like a moth to a flame, Harry quickly found himself standing right up against one of the big glass windows. But even having cupped his hands around his face and leaning right in, he was hard-pressed to see anything inside - the windows were just that grubby and stained that they simply obscured everything from sight. The only thing that Harry could make out was a large, seemingly empty space that was completely devoid of light.

Stepping back, he looked up at the building again, this time a little more closely.

The outside looked to be in fairly good shape, but he assumed that that had more to do with the materials used in its construction than anything else. Deciding to investigate it further, he walked the few metres to the alley and turned down it.

The alley was filled with piles of rubbish and old boxes. A dumpster, completely overflowing, seemed to have been long forgotten hear its end. Partway down the alley, Harry found a single old
door with three padlocks on it that led back into the building. And a little further down, was a pair of
doors that could only lead to a cellar.

He knew that he was being impulsive. Foolish, too, if he was willing to admit it to himself; but there
was simply something about the old building.

Yes, he suspected that it needed a lot of work. But magic could do wonders. In some ways, it almost
reminded him of himself. After the war, he'd been almost lost and in need of a lot of work to make
him better. A tiny fraction of that he'd been able to accomplish in England, but it took leaving and
travelling, experiencing new and different cultures for him to slowly heal and put himself back
together again.

Maybe, just maybe, he reasoned, that's what this old building needed - a new lease on life and some
good hard work to help it live again.

Rounding the building to the front again, Harry dug into one of the front pockets of his backpack to
find the small notebook and pen that he kept there. In it, he carefully wrote down the name and
number of the agency selling the building.

Now, all he had to do was find a phone.
Harry leant against the door to the old building that he'd found a couple of days ago. It'd taken that long for him to, firstly, get himself a phone and secondly, get in contact with the agent that was selling the building and to set up this appointment.

Already he'd been waiting for close to a quarter of an hour, but he wasn't too worried about that - he had arrived early after all. Occasionally, a person walking past would look at him, but New Yorkers, he'd found, tended to stick to their own business, rarely if ever putting their nose in where it didn't belong. In fact, he'd had a first-hand experience of that just the day before. He'd been out exploring more of the city that he'd landed in when he'd noticed movement down an alleyway that he was passing.

Upon glancing down it, it was to see a group of four men beating up a fifth man. Judging by the whimpers coming out of the alley, not to mention the dull thuds that accompanied said whimpers, it'd been going on for some time and not one person had dared to intervene. Ignoring something like that simply wasn't in Harry's DNA. He hated bullies, had ever since his cousin Dudley and his friends bullied Harry when they were younger. And the fact that, when it came right down to it, old Tom Riddle and his merry band were nothing more than bullies intent on beating up people different then themselves emphasised it. Which was a large factor in why they and Harry hadn't gotten on so well.

Harry had just taken his first step down the alleyway to help out, a shake of his hand loosening his wand in its concealed holster in case it was needed, when he'd felt a hand on his shoulder.

"We'll take it from here," a large police officer said as he and his partner, batons in hand, passed him.

Harry nodded, pausing where he was. Within a very few minutes, the four thugs had been rounded up and the man on the ground was being attended to. Seeing that, Harry had continued on, content knowing that there were others willing to do the right thing.

"Mister Potter?" a voice asked, pulling him from his reminiscing.

"Yes," he said, straightening from his lean.

"I'm Amelia Larson," the woman said.

Harry smiled, recognising the name of the realtor that he'd spoken with on his phone. A quick glance took in the woman before him. She was older than she sounded on the phone, maybe in her late forties or early fifties. Her dark brown hair was cut in a bob that framed her oval face. Thin silver spectacles highlighted her brown eyes. And, as with most professional people in the city, Amelia wore a crisp navy blue skirt and jacket with a white button-up shirt. A dark blue scarf with tiny white dots completed her apparel.

"I understand that you are interested in looking at this building?" Amelia asked.

"I am," Harry confirmed.

"I'm sorry, but I simply must ask. Are you sure, Mister Potter? It's only that this building has seen better years, heck it's seen better decades and if it's an apartment that you're looking for, then I have a few dozen that you might be interested in or if it's a shop that you're looking for, then I know of three of four which might fit you better. And all at a much better price."

Harry blinked at the woman. He was sure that real estate agents weren't supposed to talk you out of
buying a place that you were interested in.

"I'd like to see this one, if I may," Harry said. "It's got a good feel to it."

Amelia gave him a dubious look.

"Well, if you're sure," she said before turning to unlock the door.

Harry stepped in after her and had to instantly repress the desire to light his wand - the interior was that dark.

"I'm afraid that there's no power into this building at the moment," Amelia told him.

Using what little light that filtered through the open door, Harry looked around. It was a large room, deceptively large in fact. The room went back a lot further than he would have guessed from the outside. It was completely unfurnished as well, which may have helped with the impression of spaciousness. A long wooden counter ran across the room near the back. Walking over to it, Harry laid his hand upon the ancient wood and then promptly ran that hand down his pants leg to rid it of the dust and grime that it'd just accumulated.

Behind the counter was a space that was obviously designed for the staff of whatever shop this once was to serve their customers. Set in the back walls just to either side of the ends of the counter were a pair of doors.

"Would you be interested in hearing about the building?" Amelia asked, her voice echoing slightly in the cavernous room.

"Please," Harry replied.

"Like most buildings in this area, it was built in the mid-1800s," Amelia began. "This particular building was built in 1843. The outside is made up of the original red-brick that was the popular building material of the time. Because of this, the building has been heritage listed."

"What does that mean?" Harry asked, pausing on his way to check out the door to the left of the counter.

"That means that the building cannot simply be torn down and something newer and more modern built in its place," Amelia explained.

Harry shook his head, not understanding why someone would want to tear down something with such obvious character.

"And because of its position, this has caused this particular building to be left on the market for a long time, allowing the interior to deteriorate somewhat," Amelia continued. "It was actually one of the first buildings in this area to become protected and, when the family that owns it went out of business quite some time ago, they were restricted in who wanted to buy it."

"I can assure you, Ms Larson, that I have no intention of wanting to tear it down," Harry said.

"That's good, but even if you don't touch the exterior, it's going to need a fair bit of work - that's the other reason that it's been on the market for as many years as it has," she said.

"What kind of work are we talking about?" Harry asked.

Amelia sighed as she opened up the large black folder that she'd been carrying and flipped a couple
"The electricals need to be completely ripped out and put back in; the plumbing needs an overhaul; the cellar - which can be accessed through the kitchen - has a tendency to leak and fill with water whenever it rains; and the two upstairs living areas need new interior walls."

"You know, you're not exactly doing a good job of selling me on this place," Harry remarked amusedly.

Amelia smiled slightly. "You seem like a nice young man and I simply wouldn't feel right selling you something without making sure that you knew what you were getting in for. And besides, for the price that the owners of this place are asking, you could get something much more modern and in much better condition than you're seeing right now."

"And how many of them would have the same feel as this place?" Harry asked, and before she could answer, he raised a hand to indicate that he hadn't finished. "I'm an old-fashioned kind of guy, Ms Larson; I like the old-world feel. And this building, even with its list of defects does give me that feel."

"Well, how about we look at the rest of the building and see if that feeling is still there after you've actually seen these defects first-hand, hmm?" Amelia said.

Together they went through the door on the left of the counter that Harry had been aiming towards not long before. There they found a massive kitchen area. One side, the one closest to them, had a large walk-in fridge/freezer that looked as though it needed to be replaced decades ago. The stoves and counters were likewise decades out of date, although the large sinks only looked to need a decent cleaning. There was storage space galore in the form of cupboards, both open and with doors.

On the opposite side of the room were a pair of doors - one which led outside to the alley and one which descended on a spiral staircase to the cellar. As Amelia had noted, the cellar was damp. Mould and mildew grew unchecked on the walls and Harry stopped on the bottom step, unwilling to venture any further into the dark, dank place. By crouching and twisting slightly, he was able to make out a slither of daylight that obviously came in through the trapdoor in the alley - most likely the culprit of the water problem as well.

After re-emerging into the main section of the building that they'd first entered into via the right-hand door to the counter, Amelia and Harry opened the door that was tucked away in the corner behind a pillar. A flight of stairs greeted them that Harry led them up. He paused after the third step, feeling the wood beneath his feet creaking ominously, only to proceed a lot more cautiously from there on up.

The first level that they reached was littered with pieces of broken wall, dust and the evidence of animals - small piles of rubbish, rat droppings everywhere and what looked like an old bird's nest on top of one of the rafters. Apart from the main living area, there was a small kitchen and dining area, a bathroom and three small rooms.

The second level was actually in slightly better repair, although Harry could see that the walls were also in desperate need of replacement, as well as the bathroom and a couple of the windows.

The last level that they reached was actually the roof. It was completely flat, with a low wall - about four feet high - around three of the sides, the last side being the side of the neighbouring building. At the moment, it was completely void of any structures, but Harry could easily imagine adding a small greenhouse or something up there.
After descending back through the building to the main ground floor area, Amelia turned to Harry, asking him what he thought of it.

"So, do you still have the same feeling of old-world charm for this building after seeing its state of disrepair?" she asked. "You wouldn't prefer to have me show you something else?"

Harry looked around the large room once more, taking it all in, despite the limited lighting.

"I think that this place has a lot of potential," he said slowly.

"That's definitely one way of looking at it," Amelia said dryly. "If you don't mind my asking, what is it about this place that has caught your attention?"

"As I said earlier, Ms Larson, I'm an old-world kind of guy. I spent seven years of my schooling in a private boarding school that was housed in a castle and the nearest village could have come straight out of medieval times. I guess that I really grew to love it and I kind of miss it," he explained. "And while I could go home, I don't think that I'm ready for that. I guess spending five years travelling the world has made me outgrow it in some respects and yearn for it in others. This, this could be a way to have the best of both worlds - the old-world charm in amongst the bright new world out there."

Amelia nodded as though she understood, something Harry highly doubted, especially considering that he wasn't sure that he completely understood what he was feeling.

"And what will you do with the place if you buy it?" Amelia asked.

At this Harry shrugged. He'd been dwelling on that very question since he'd found the place and still had yet to come up with an answer. Instead, he answered her question with a question of his own.

"If I was to buy it, how much would a building like this cost?"

Once again, Amelia consulted her black folder.

"The asking price is three million," she said. "A big chunk of that has to do with the heritage listing and the fact that you're so close to downtown New York. The Empire State Building is within walking distance and once Stark Tower is completed, you'll only be three blocks away from that. One is already a high-density traffic area and the other is expected to be."

Harry nodded absently, once more turning about as he took in the room. Three million was a huge chunk of money in anyone's currency. And then there'd need to be a lot more spent on it to make it habitable again.

Idly he attempted to do some currency conversions. He had a rough idea what the exchange rate was between US dollars and British pounds. And then he needed to convert that figure into galleons. Four hundred and fifty thousand galleons was a lot less than he expected, a figure that was only a small portion of the money that Sirius had left him.

He knew that he was going to be in North America for a while - easily a year or three, if not longer. And the idea of having the option of running his own little business to occupy himself when he wasn't off exploring the continent appealed. The fact that he could add space expansion charms to the place, not to mention any other sort of magic that he wanted to was also a bonus. A small smile lit his face as he thought about making sure that there was a small library and a room especially for Hermione to come visit - she was definitely the one person from home that he missed the most.

"I'll take it," Harry said suddenly.
"What?" a startled Amelia replied.

"I'll take it," Harry repeated.

"You will?" Amelia asked.

"Yep, now where do I sign?" he asked.

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Really, Harry knew that he shouldn't be there. Sure, he'd basically bought the place, but it'd be weeks before the deal settled. But he simply couldn't help himself - he had to look through it again, this time at his own pace. And if he happened to do a bit of cleaning or a couple of *reparos*, well, what harm could it do.

Even with as dirty as he knew the windows were, he refrained from lighting his wand after *apparating* into the main downstairs area - it'd be just his luck if a stray bit of light seeped through and caught the attention of the wrong people. Instead, he waited until he was in the big kitchen before casting the *lumos* charm.

The kitchen was just as he remembered it: enormous and in serious need of a massive overhaul. It was also perfectly designed and placed for a small restaurant or perhaps a pub of sorts. The fact that there was a walk-in fridge/freezer plus a cellar definitely supported the idea.

Not seeing much that he hadn't already seen here, Harry descended into the cellar. *This* was a room that he hadn't looked at properly at all.

Holding his wand high, he stepped down and quickly grabbed at the banister of the stairs to keep from slipping over. Directing his wand downwards, he quickly identified the problem: a layer of black slime coated the stone floor.

"*Scourgify*," Harry intoned, swinging his wand backwards and forwards in front of him.

He had to repeat the cleaning charm another half dozen times just to get a somewhat decent area to move around in. And even then, the floor wasn't completely clean. Harry suspected that it'd need another dozen cleaning spells or more likely a high-powered blaster to get rid of the slime.

The slimy floor, though, wasn't the only thing about the cellar that needed a good cleaning. One entire side of the room was filled with old rotting cupboards and boxes. What they held was anyone's guess and not something that Harry had any desire to experience right then.

The glint of reflected light rebounded from a different corner and Harry cautiously edged closer to find that a wooden wine rack had been built into and across the back wall. The gleam had come from one of the few remaining bottles that still sat there. Whether they had anything fit to drink in them was a question for another day when it was safer to cross the length of the room.

Deciding that he'd seen enough, Harry turned to go when an idea occurred to him. Turning back, he pointed his wand at the trap doors that led to the outside alley.

With a small smile and a thought of a bushy-haired, buck-toothed witch in mind, he cast a spell he'd first learnt back in his third year.

"*Impervious!*"

That, he hoped, would stop any more water from getting into the cellar, at least until he could have
the doors replaced with new watertight ones.

Harry quickly retreated back up the stairs, through the kitchen and into the main area. He was just about to ascend to the first floor when a *click*, loud in the silence of the bare room, sounded from the front door.

Whipping out his wand, Harry retreated to the shadows behind the counter. The fact that the door unlocked all by itself in the dead of night told him that someone was using magic to break in.

"Ministry aurors! Put your wand down! We're coming in!" a deep gruff voice announced.

While Harry did in fact lower his wand, he refused to put it down. Nor did he come out from his hiding place. He'd spent far too many years in a war to ignore his instincts, despite the fact that the war had finished so many years ago. He was sure that somewhere old Mad-Eye was looking down on him and smiling his grisly smile.

As the front door opened, Harry's eyes narrowed. He watched as a pair of large men came in, quickly separating to either side of the doorway. Then, as one closed the door behind them, the other flicked a ball of light out and up that lit up the room like Harry had never seen it before.

He winced slightly but refused to look away. Instead, he focussed on the two men and the uniforms that they were wearing. For it could only be uniforms. Each wore a long, floor-length trench coat that could easily double as a robe in the magical world. A gold shield of some description hung on their left breast. Their clothes underneath were all black and, if Harry had to guess, he'd say that they were made of dragon skin. At least, the pants and tunic definitely looked identical to the ones that he had been given by Charlie Weasley when he'd visited the Romanian Dragon Preserve all those years ago.

"Show yourself," the auror on the left called out. "We know that you're here."

Warily, Harry did as requested. But, even though he stepped out of the shadows, he remained behind the counter, his wand hidden in his hand below their eyesight.

"Are you the only one here?" the auror asked.

"Yes," Harry replied.

"Who are you?" the auror asked.

"Who are you?" Harry countered.

This time it was the one on the right who replied. "We already told you. Ministry aurors."

Harry shrugged. "Anyone can say that they're an auror."

"And the uniform doesn't give it away?" the second auror asked dryly.

"Auror Michael Stevenson," the first auror identified himself. "My partner is Auror Peter Jenkins."

"Harry Potter," Harry replied.

He sighed, then, seeing their starts of recognition.

"The-Man-Who-Conquered?" Auror Stevenson asked.

"Yes. Or The-Boy-Who-Lived or The Chosen One or whatever other stupid name I've been given since I left England," Harry groused.
"Not a fan of your titles, I take it?" Auror Stevenson chuckled.

Harry only dignified that with a dark look.

"I take it you're the one responsible for the magic that we detected coming from this building this evening?" Auror Jenkins asked.

"Yeah," Harry replied.

"Right, well, it was only low-level spells, but we'll still have a report to write up when we get back," Auror Stevenson said. "Can we ask why you were casting spells here?"

"I own the place," Harry replied.

"You own it? We don't have a record of that," Auror Jenkins remarked.

"Well," Harry replied, rubbing the back of his neck. "When I say, I own it, I mean that I will own it. I've got a contract on it and it'll settle in about a month."

"Close enough, I should think," Auror Stevenson said. "We'll lodge the building as being in the ownership of a wizard."

"Thanks," Harry replied. "You guys were pretty quick getting here."

"That'd be because there are so few magicals living in New York," Auror Jenkins replied and then elaborated at Harry's puzzled look. "There are simply far too many nomag-es living in the city for most magicals to feel comfortable with. Tend to settle in smaller places - Salem, outside Chicago, Seattle, they're probably the biggest areas. But here in New York? No, not so much. Once, when the city wasn't so busy it was a bit different, but things have changed in the last couple of decades. Too easy for a mistake to be made and for the nomag-es to find out about us. Thus, we keep a pretty close eye on the city."

Harry nodded absently, filing away the American term for muggles for future reference. "That makes sense, I guess."

"Now that we know you're here, we'll know to ignore this place. And we've got your magical signature on file, so we'll know if you're not the one doing the magic here or if you're performing magic somewhere you shouldn't," Auror Jenkins said.

"Just keep it away from the nomag-es," Auror Stevenson said. "We'd hate to have to arrest you for breaking the Statute of Secrecy."

"Not a problem," Harry assured them. "I have no intention of casting spells anywhere where muggles can see me."

"In that case, we'll leave you to it, then," Auror Jenkins said. "Nice meeting you, Mister Potter."

"Thanks, you too," Harry replied.

Once they were gone, he made sure to check the lock before heading upstairs to continue his explorations.
"Mum, I'm home!" Hermione called as she walked through the door to her parent's home.

"In here, Hermione!"

Following the sound of her mother's voice brought Hermione to the door of the kitchen. One look was all Hermione needed to find her mother sitting in the small breakfast nook enjoying the mid-morning sunlight. A cup, most likely of tea, and the daily newspaper lay on the table in front of her.

Hermione bounded across the room, a great smile on her face and, once she was close enough, she launched herself at her mother, wrapping the woman who looked like an older version of herself in a great hug.

"Not that I'm not pleased to see you, Hermione, but why do I suspect that this greeting is more because of the letter that you know is here for you rather than the fact that you're happy to see me?" Jane Granger asked mock-seriously.

"Mother! You know that's not true. I love getting to spend time with both my parents," Hermione protested.

"Hm-mmm," her mother hummed, clearly not believing her daughter.

She sat a little straighter, then and folded the newspaper before her.

"In that case, take a seat and I'll make you some tea so that we can catch up," Jane said, indicating said seat across from her as she stood.

Knowing that she didn't have much choice, Hermione complied, albeit with a sigh.

"Cream and one sugar?" her mother asked as she clicked away into the kitchen.

"Yes, Mum," Hermione replied.

Soon her mother came bustling back, sliding a cup of tea in front of her daughter, a plate of biscuits placed on the table between them.

"So, how's work?" Jane asked.

"Oh, you know, about the same as always," Hermione replied with a careless wave.

"I refuse to believe that, Hermione Jane," her mother countered. "You work in a magical law office, in the department that specialises in magical creatures. There has to be something interesting happening there."

"Well, I suppose so," Hermione allowed.

"We-ll?" her mother asked expectantly.

After taking a sip of tea, she placed her cup carefully down and resigned herself to a lengthy wait until she could get her hands on the reason that she'd come in the first place.

"At the moment, we're working repealing some of the laws that were put in place during the war against centaurs," Hermione began.
"Wait! I thought that you were doing that for the werewolves," Jane interrupted.

"We were," Hermione nodded, "and we had some success, but it's stalled at the moment, stuck in some committee that the Wizengamot created to look at both sides of the argument. So, while we're waiting for that to resolve itself, we've switched focus to the centaur laws. Hopefully, they'll be easy to have revoked."

"If they'll be easier, then why didn't you start with them?" Jane asked.

Hermione sighed. "Simply because the centaurs didn't care about the laws. Really, those laws didn't affect them anyway. They've got their own land and they never venture off of it. The laws that Umbridge put in place simply ensured that if they ever did want to leave their forests, then they'd be breaking the law and be subject to imprisonment or death. Most likely death, since even imprisoning a centaur would amount to being a death sentence for the free-spirited race."

Her mother nodded, giving Hermione hope that she understood why they'd focussed on the werewolves first.

"But what about the house elves? I thought that that was where your passion lay, in getting laws in place to protect them," Jane asked.

Again, Hermione sighed. "Yes, that is my ultimate goal. But obtaining rights for the house elves is always going to be an uphill battle. And it's not one that we'll win anytime soon. Our goal at the moment is to be taken seriously as a legal department by obtaining wins for other magical species first before tackling the hardest cases."

Seeing her mother frown allowed the tension that had just arisen in Hermione to dissipate slightly. She, at least, could see the injustice of it all.

"What you need is a sponsor," her mother suggested. "Someone high profile and with a great deal of political or public clout that could get the ball rolling for you."

"Yes. Well. I thought that we had someone like that," Hermione stated. "Unfortunately, he's been travelling the world for the last five years and refuses to come home!"

"Speaking of which," her mother said, a small smile turning the corners of her mouth upwards, "there's a letter for you on the desk in the library."

Hermione's eyes lit up and she quickly slurped down the rest of her tea. Then, with a nod of acceptance from her mother, she raced from the room.

"Thanks for the tea," she called over her shoulder.

The Granger Library was in reality simply one of the spare rooms on the bottom floor of their house. Three of its walls had been covered with floor to ceiling shelves and then filled with books collected from the three Grangers. The fourth wall consisted of a small desk to the right of the large bay window and a comfy armchair to the left of said window. The bay window, itself, had been fitted with a plethora of pillows and a rug and was often the most sought-after place in the house for reading.

Hermione's eyes lit up at the sight of the white envelope sitting in the exact centre of the desk and her pace increased as she raced across the room to snatch it up. With her eyes glued to her name and parent's address written in her best friend's messy scrawl, she shuffled sideward until she could sit in the corner of the bay window. Pillows were placed under her bum and against her back as she settled in for what was sure to be the highlight of her day, let alone her week.
The stamp in the corner of the envelope caught her attention.

"America," she whispered, unaware that she'd even spoken out loud.

Flipping the envelope over, she blinked in surprise. There, on the back, was a return address. Harry never wrote a return address. And really, what would have been the point? By the time that she would have received his letter, he was sure to have moved on. The fact that there was an address this time caused her mind to whirl with the possible reasons for it being there.

Harry may be her best friend, but their relationship had become decidedly one-sided the last few years. He was able to write to her, always using muggle post, sending her letters care of her parents. But those letters were by no means regular. Sometimes she might receive two or three a month; and then at other times, he might go two or three months without sending a letter. Occasionally, Harry'd let her know where he was heading next and, whenever he did, she made sure to send a letter there for him to collect. Not that that happened very often.

And as for seeing each other, well, she could count how often they'd met up in the last five years using the fingers of one hand. And it was always Hermione portkeying out to see him; he never once ventured back to Britain.

Hermione opened the envelope carefully, making sure not to tear it where the return address was. Three pieces of paper fell out into her hand - an average length letter then, for him.

Placing the envelope to the side, she opened the paper and turned it around.

Dear Hermione,

Before you say it, yes, I know I'm a prat, inconsiderate, the worst best friend in the world and whatever other adjectives and phrases that your brilliant mind can come up with. I should have written much, much sooner than this.

Hermione nodded her head in satisfaction. And yes, while she could easily think up half a dozen other words and phrases to describe Harry's lack of communication skills, the fact that there was a letter in her hand - with a return address on the envelope - meant that she'd save them up for later. For example, when she wrote back to him.

As I'm sure that you've already sussed out, I've finally stopped moving about and have a fixed address that you can write back to or even visit me (hint hint).

But I guess that I should really tell the story of what's been happening with me in a logical order, just like I know you've always tried to bang into my head to do.

Hermione scowled at the paper in her hands. Of all the times for Harry to take her advice, he had to do it now? She was half-tempted to skip ahead to find out why he had an address in the United States of America of all places, but her own sense of following a logical course of action prevented her. Besides, what were the odds of Harry actually sticking to a logical order? More than likely, if she skipped ahead, he'd get side-tracked by something and she'd be forced to backtrack.

I think I was in Peru the last time that I wrote? That sounds right. Anyway, the highlight of my time there had to be Mach Picchu. I wish you could have seen it, Hermione. It was breathtaking. It was so high up and the buildings and walls were all incredible. And to think that it was built so many centuries ago and people nowadays still don't know exactly what it was built for.

The fact that a lot of the structures there were designed in such a way as to have something to do with the stars and planets and seasons is amazing. I didn't understand much of what the guide was
saying at all. Guess I should have paid better attention in Astronomy class, huh?

Anyway, I took dozens and dozens if photos to show you when I see you next. After that, I headed off to the wizarding tribal village in the Sacred Valley. If you think wizarding Britain is living in the stone age, you should have seen these people.

I didn't end up staying there all that long - even though I had my translator earrings in, it only meant that I could understand them, not that they could understand me. So, after picking up a few souvenirs, I headed back to Lima.

I think I ended up spending about another three weeks there before I decided to move on.

Hermione nodded thoughtfully. That'd been Harry's pattern for years now: arrive in a country, explore it a bit, go see all of the major muggle tourist places, visit the wizarding enclaves, look around a bit more and then move on to the next country.

Oh, and of course, write letters back home teasing her with all that he'd seen and saying that he took a heap of photos and bought souvenirs without ever sending them on to her! It was enough to drive her mad and most likely explained why her hair still retained some of its frizz years after her mother's had settled down when she was Hermione's age.

I realised that I'd seen all that I'd wanted to of South America, so decided to head north to the next continent on my list. But I was also getting tired, Hermione. Don't get me wrong, I absolutely love all of the sightseeing and travelling that I've been doing, but I was missing being with friends or even making friends that I would see for longer than a week or two before moving on.

And I know what you're thinking, why didn't I just come home to Britain?

Hermione nodded. She was thinking that, but she also already knew the answer. She knew what things had been like for Harry after the war and especially how needy and... invasive certain people were. Harry had needed his space, to explore and to find out who he was without the fame and trappings that he'd lived with for so many years.

But you know why. And besides, with four continents down and only three to go (although, does Antarctica really count? And you know that I've already seen some of Australia), I wanted to finish what I started.

So, I made a plan. I still have plenty of money, not only from the Potters, but even more from the Blacks, so I was going to use some of it to buy a place and use it as a, I guess, a base. I'd have somewhere to live and could do day trips or something like that to explore the continent.

Hermione was impressed. It seemed that Harry was starting to think smarter. He'd still get to explore and do his travelling, while getting a chance for a bit of normalcy as well. The fact that he'd have a semi-permanent base that meant that she could send letters to him was a definite bonus.

Of course, I then had the problem of deciding where to 'settle'. So, I let fate decide. I went to the travel agent and bought a ticket on the first plane heading to North America.

And there was the Harry that she knew and loved so well - completely impulsive, jumping in feet first without doing any research whatsoever and hoping for the best.

As I'm sure that you've already guessed from the return address on the envelope, I've ended up in New York. I've bought myself an entire building. It's really old and run down, but it has a great vibe to it, lots of old world charm. It's three stories tall, well, four if you count the basement. Oh, and a flat roof that I'm thinking of putting a small greenhouse on.
The top two floors will be where I live. There'll be a bedroom especially set aside for you (hint hint) and I'll make a library where I can have all of the books that I've picked up around the world as well as all of my souvenirs on display. (There! If that doesn't get you to come visit me, then nothing will. ~smile~ )

Hermione wasn't sure whether to scowl or laugh. Harry made it so easy to do both. And he was right, already she could feel herself salivating at the thought of exploring all of the books, souvenirs and photos that he'd gathered from his world tour. Deliberately supressing the thoughts of asking for some time off, she read on.

I'm still not a hundred percent sure what to do with the bottom floor yet. It does have a massive kitchen, though, and I've always been good at cooking. Plus, it's something that I enjoy and it would be good to have more of an income than whatever investments the goblins made for me. So, I'm considering something like a cafe-restaurant-pub kind of thing. We'll see.

Or, at least you will when you come visit. (Are you sensing a bit of a theme here yet, Hermione?)

Seriously, though, I miss you terribly. I can't wait to hear from you or see you or even talk to you (although you'll have to give me your phone number again, I seem to have put it somewhere really safe where even I can't find it).

Best be off, the builders are due here any time now.

Love,

Harry.

With a sigh, Hermione lay the letter in her lap and looked out the window, not that she was really seeing anything. Hearing from Harry was wonderful and always left her with a bunch of mixed feelings. There was the warmth and affection for her friend; the thrill of hearing about his adventures and experiencing them, even if it was second-hand; regret that she never went with him; irritation at just hearing snippets and not every fact that she'd love to hear; and, of course, the longing to actually see and be able to talk to and hug her best friend.

And now he'd added in temptation. She'd love to be as carefree as Harry, to be able to simply pack a bag, jump on a plane or grab a portkey and go. But that wasn't her, as much as she sometimes wished it were.

America. New York. The temptation was so, so strong. And it wasn't like she hadn't accrued a bunch of leave time after working at the Ministry for over six years. Yes, as soon as her latest assignment was settled, perhaps it was time to take a holiday.

OOO000OOO

Harry peered up the shaft that he'd created. It went all the way up from where he was in the basement, past the walled in first floor, and ended on the second floor. Satisfied with his work, he took the doll-house sized circular staircase out of his pocket and carefully positioned it on the ground.

It'd been a major find that he'd discovered in a building slated for demolition on the far side of the city. The fact that it encompassed three floors, exactly the size that he was looking for, meant that he simply couldn't pass it up. Sure, it needed a couple of reparos and a touch of transfiguration on a few of the steps, but that was neither here nor there. Especially for something that only a very few people would ever see.

Stepping backwards, he flicked his wand free from his arm holster and pointed it at the miniature
"Finite incantantum," he intoned.

Instantly, the stairs grew, expanding to their original size.

Harry grinned as he stepped forward, twisting and turning his head as he peered upwards. Taking the stairs two at a time, the tip of his wand providing the only light, Harry raced up to the first level of his apartment. But where he found himself at the top of the stairs, was about twenty degrees to the right of where it needed to be, mostly facing a brick wall.

Climbing the rail, he slipped out of the staircase and into the back of the broom cupboard. It was with a touch of irony that he'd built the false door into the broom cupboard. He could just imagine the look on Hermione's face if she ever came over and he suggested that she accompany him into the broom cupboard because he had something 'special' to show her.

Then, with a slight twirling of his wand, he rotated the stairs until they aligned correctly with the doorway. It was then simply a matter of fixing it in place, both up here and then down in the partitioned off area of the basement that he'd created by building an extra wall and then expanding the small space using space expansion charms so that the basement area was now twice its original size.

And the only way down there was by accessing this hidden doorway up here.

He figured that having a large hidden space that could be used to house the blatantly magical items that he owned, plus be large enough (and warded enough once he got around to it) to use as a duelling area would be a very good thing. Not that he expected to do much duelling, but he'd let his skills lapse a lot more than he was comfortable with these past five years.

Today, of course, was the perfect day to work on these 'secret' projects of his: the builders doing the renovations had finally finished and it'd be another two days before the decorators began their work.

At least, he figured, he finally had some ideas of what he wanted to create on the main floor. He even had a name for the mini-restaurant cum pub cum café that he was planning on opening. Not that that could happen any time soon, there was still a lot of permits and decorations and hiring or staff and half a hundred things to do.

But that was okay, Harry was in no hurry. And between times, he had his own little projects, plus a host of sightseeing that he wanted to do.
The tapping on the window near his bed didn’t exactly wake Harry up that morning. Really, how could a soft noise like that, no matter how persistent, wake someone who hadn’t really slept that night anyway?

Twisting his head while fumbling for his glasses on the nightstand, Harry peered at the window as the world suddenly came into focus with the introduction of said glasses. As expected, there was an owl standing on his window ledge, peering in.

Throwing off his covers, Harry slid from the bed and padded across the short distance. The letter was quickly untied after the window had been slid open. The owl didn’t even wait around for a response, taking flight as soon as the envelope was in Harry’s hand.

As Harry retreated back to sit on his bed, he slit the envelope open to find a couple of pieces of parchment.

Dear Harry,

It was so good to hear from you and to know that you’re doing well. And to be able to communicate with you like this after so many years is truly wonderful. I’m glad that you’ve finally started to settle down, even if it is so far away instead of here where you belong. Not that I don’t understand why you’re staying away, because I do, Harry and as much as I wish my best friend was closer so that I could see you and talk to you properly, I do understand.

If my calculations are correct – and they usually are (grins) – you should get this the morning of your Grand Opening. Congratulations and good luck! I’m certain that your … is it a restaurant or a café or a pub, you seemed a little vague on that part? Well, whatever type of establishment best describes it, I’m positive that it’s going to be a success.

I wish that I could be there to help you celebrate your big day, but I’m swamped at work at the moment. There’s rumblings in the Wizengamot of someone wanting to reintroduce some of those vile werewolf laws that we’ve managed to get repealed and I need to be here to head it off.

I do have some vacation time up my sleeve and as soon as the situation here is under control again, I’ll be taking it and coming out to see you. So, make sure that you stay put! No wandering off again. I’d be most annoyed if I turn up on your doorstep one day and you’re not there to greet me. And you know that the consequences for annoying me can be quite severe. (grin)

Everyone here is doing well. Ron’s still with the Cannons, playing keeper and there’s talk that they’ll even make it out of the bottom half of the table one of these years. Neville and Hannah seem to be very happy. Somehow, they’re making the fact that one works at Hogwarts while the other works at the Leaky Cauldron work for them. Luna, of course, is off once again on one of her adventures for her imaginary creatures. To be honest, I’m surprised that you never ran into her while you were travelling, probably because you delved into the muggle side of the world as well as the magical, while Luna stays strictly off the beaten path.

Well, I’d better wrap this up, I’m sure that you’ve got a lot to do this morning to prepare for your grand opening. (I still can’t believe that you’re opening a food establishment of all things! You, in a kitchen, I just can’t picture it, not after watching you for six years in potions.)

Once again, Congratulations!
All my love,

Hermione.

The smile that Hermione’s letter brought to his face never disappeared all through his morning ablutions and as he began preparing for the day. He dearly wished that Hermione had been able to come for today – Merlin knew he’d been pestering her about it in every letter that he’d sent back for the past month – but it seemed that some things simply couldn’t be helped.

As he emerged from the door that led to his apartment, Harry made sure to lock the door behind him with a *colloportus* – there was no need to tempt any customers into wandering where they weren’t wanted. Besides, he could imagine the trouble he’d get in if someone got up there and discovered his magical knick-knacks or books, or worse yet, the fact that a number of the rooms were much bigger than they had any right to be.

His eagle eye very slowly scanned the enormous room, seeking out anything out of place or to see if something needed to be done. Just as he’d known it was, the room was perfect.

He’d put in a lot of hard work here and between the contractors that he’d hired and what he’d done at night with a bit of judicious magic, the place was unrecognisable from the vast, empty, dusty place that it’d been when he’d first seen it.

The long bar remained, now cleaned and highly polished. It was enhanced by a set of stools in front of it, just waiting for customers. Behind the bar, he’d had a bench and shelves installed, a bench that was now filled with coffee machines and machines for making milkshakes and smoothies and thick shakes and juices. The shelves were filled with glasses and mugs and bottles of various kinds.

Directly in the middle of the wall behind the bar, a window to the kitchen had been placed to allow ease of access for some meals to be passed through, not to mention the orders for the food in the first place.

Booths with polished oak tables and benches padded with deep red cushions lined one wall and across the front of the room in front of the large windows. A fireplace with a half grate had been installed on the remaining side wall. Above its mantle, a set of enormous stag antlers had been hung on the wall, adding a sense of not only atmosphere, but nostalgia whenever Harry saw them.

The rest of the room contained smaller tables and chairs that could be used separately or pushed together for larger groups to sit around.

With a nod of satisfaction, Harry strode across the room and behind the bar. Picking up the black apron, he quickly tied it around his waist before seeing to the final preparations for the (hopefully) coming customers. Coffee machines were started; kettles were filled; a whirl through the kitchen ensured that everything was ready in there to make the meals that he offered.

Finally, Harry came to a standstill. Everything was as ready as it could be. Glancing at the clock, he saw that it was still a few minutes before he was due to open the doors. But a shrug was all it took to indicate that he had no problem opening early.

As he opened the doors, Harry couldn’t help but look up at the sign that he’d hung the afternoon before.

To one side of it, a set of three animals stood proudly – a great stag in the centre, flanked by a wolf and a large, shaggy, black dog. And where once there may have been a rat at their feet, now the three stood in a field of white lilies. And in fancy, old English letters, the name of the business stood
The Den was only marginally busy the afternoon of the second day after the grand opening, nothing that Harry couldn’t handle by himself. He had vague hopes that business would pick up after school got out or the general workday finished for everyday people.

His day had been good, at least, he’d been happy with it. Customers had come in steadily throughout the day, their heads swivelling as they took in the old world feel of the restaurant cum cafe (he still wasn’t sure exactly which description fit best). The woods and tables, chairs and booths seemed to be well liked; the fireplace in the corner caught a lot of interest and positive interest at that, judging by the comments that he’d managed to catch.

He’d just placed a two plates of black forest cake topped with fresh whipped cream in front of a pair of customers at one of the tables when the bell above the door jingled.

Harry looked up, a smile on his face to see a nervous-looking teen enter, a folder of some kind clutching protectively to her chest. The pair of straps around each shoulder indicated that she’d come straight from school.

Harry let his gaze sweep over the Den, taking in the dozen customers, before nodding slightly to himself as they all seemed relaxed and content, along with the fact that none seemed to need his attention. By the time that his eyes drifted once more towards the teen, it was to find her standing almost in front of him.

Judging by the way she was biting her lip, not to mention the way she seemed to be nearly hopping from foot to foot, Harry guessed that she was nervous for some reason. The instant that his eyes landed on her though, she stilled and seemed to almost suck in her courage along with a deep breath.

Harry’s eyebrow rose at the blond-haired girl.

“How can I help you, Miss?” he asked.

“I was looking for the owner,” she said and it was all Harry could do not to laugh at the way her words had almost jumbled over themselves with the speed that she’d spoken.

“You’re in luck. You’ve found him,” Harry replied.

The girl’s eyes widened slightly and one hand came away from the folder still wrapped tightly to her chest in order to touch her hair and black headband, obviously checking her appearance.

“Good afternoon,” she said, suddenly sounding very formal. “My name is Gwendolyn Stacy and I’d like to apply for a job here.”

Harry blinked at the totally unexpected proposition. He hadn’t even advertised for any help yet. But then, as he thought about it, he decided that it wasn’t such a bad idea.

At the moment, it was just him running the Den and if, as he hoped, business started picking up, then he’d need the help – wait staff, a cook, perhaps even someone to help tidy up at the end of the day. And if he had all of that in place, then it’d be so much easier to explore North America like he’d done with all of the other continents.

“Well then, Gwendolyn Stacy, pull up a stool and tell me why I should hire you,” Harry said, leaning on the bar.
The instant that she’d taken a seat, Gwendolyn placed her black folder on the bar before twisting it so that it was the right way up for Harry.

“Please, Mister …”

“Potter, but just call me Harry,” he supplied.

She smiled, then, bringing a sparkle to her blue eyes. “Harry, then. Please call me Gwen.”

“As you wish, Gwen,” Harry replied, opening up the folder in front of him.

As he flipped through the pages of academic records and certificates, Gwen proceeded to ‘sell herself’ to him as a prospective employee.

“As you can see from my records, I go to Midtown High School of Science and Technology where I am currently in Junior year. As my academic records show, I regularly rank as either the top or second top student in my year. I am very outgoing and have a high drive to learn and succeed at any task I set myself to.”

“I see you’ve listed one of your referees as a Captain George Stacy. A relative?” Harry asked.

A slight tinge of red coloured her cheeks as she answered.

“My father.”

“So why this job, Gwen? You’d most likely be a waitress here, although I must say that, if you got the job and seeing as how you’d be my first employee, the prospects of advancement are very good,” Harry asked.

“My ultimate goal is to attend Empire State as a science major,” Gwen explained. “Next year, I’m hoping to get an internship at Oscorp Industries, but as neither of those exactly pay anything, then I’ll need a job. The Marauder’s Den is nicely located between home, my dad’s work and school, with Oscorp not that far away either. Plus, I like the feel of the place.”

Harry nodded absently as he flicked through Gwen’s resume once again. She was obviously very smart and motivated and despite her clear nervousness, was confident enough to come into an unknown place and to talk herself up in order to achieve her desires. It didn’t hurt that Harry could see a little bit of Hermione in her personality either.

“I’ll tell you what, Miss Stacy. If you’ve got a couple of hours free this afternoon, I’ll give you a trial run. If it goes well and we’re both happy, then we’ll talk about pay rates and hours and whatnot.”

“Really? That’s brilliant! Yes. Yes, I’ve got the rest of the afternoon free. I mean, I don’t have to be home until dinner and that’s not until seven.”

Suddenly, Gwen stopped and visibly composed herself.

“Thank you, Mister Potter,” she said formally. “I accept.”

“Excellent,” Harry smiled and picked up the folder. “How about you put this somewhere safe in the kitchen – through that door, there. You’ll find a spare apron on the rack to the left of the door. And when you’re ready, come on back here and we’ll get to work.”

Two days was all that it’d taken after hiring Gwen Stacy for students to start filtering in to the
Marauder’s Den after school. That day, there’d been a grand total of four. The following day, the number of students in the Den from Midtown Science had doubled.

Now, a week later, the place seemed to be nearly packed with teenagers. And while there were still a number of adults dotted about the room, they were mainly confined to a couple of tables off to one side. The teens had claimed the booths that lined the walls and the stools at the long bar.

The noise level rose with the teen onslaught as well, but it was a sound that only made Harry smile, reminding him somewhat of the type of noise that he was once used to hear in the Great Hall at Hogwarts nearly every meal.

The loudest bunch was centred around a large blonde lad who Harry guessed played for the school’s football team. The amount of laughter and jokes and friendly pushing and shoving in that corner was music to Harry’s ears – it proved that the teens were comfortable here and comfortable teens were inevitably hungry and thirsty, something that every owner of a food place wanted.

The increase in customers, not to mention the amazing job that Gwen did every afternoon on her shift, prompted Harry to recruit a further two teens as wait staff. For now, he was still doing most of the work himself during the day, both cooking and serving, when the Den was less busy, but he had hopes that one of the two applicants that he was due to interview the next day would work out as a cook.

Weaving his way through the tables, he carried a large round tray full of drinks nearly above his head to keep it out of the way of careless elbows or waving hands and arms. A slight sticking charm didn’t hurt to keep everything exactly where it was supposed to be either.

“Right. Who ordered a coke?” Harry asked, interrupting the largest group.

“Oi, Flash, your drink’s here,” one boy called out, catching the attention of the ring-leader.

“Cool. Thanks,” the boy said, taking his drink.

“I’ve got two strawberry milkshakes,” Harry continued, handing out the beverages at hands began waving for his attention.

When all that was left on his tray was a single drink, Harry moved on to the next table.

“I think this is yours,” he said, placing the chocolate thick shake in front of the teen slumped at the table by himself.

As the mousy-brown head raised itself, Harry found himself staring down at an old-fashioned looking camera nestled between the boy’s arms. Instantly, Harry was transported into the past to another mousey-haired boy with a camera that he’d once known.

Colin.

That kid’d been annoying as hell, but a good friend nonetheless. A brave kid with far too much energy and a fierce determination to follow his heart and his dreams. A determination that had led Colin to ignoring his elders and to sneak back into the middle of a war-zone. He’d died there in Hogwarts castle, one of many to fall that day.

It’d been years since Harry had thought of the tiny Gryffindor, but seeing this kid with a camera brought it all back. Slowly, Harry sank into the chair across from the boy.

“You any good with that?” he asked, nodding at the camera.
“I’m alright, I guess,” the boy mumbled.

“What’s your name, kid?” Harry asked.

“Peter. Peter Parker.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Peter. I’m Harry. I own this place,” he replied, gesturing at the crowded room around him.

The boy, Peter, took an absent look around before focussing back on Harry once more.

“As I’m sure you know, we’ve not long opened and I haven’t even had a chance to do any advertising for it yet. I was wondering if you’d be interested in taking some photos for me?” Harry asked. “I’d pay you for them, of course.”

Peter blinked at him, looked down at his camera, looked up at Harry and blinked some more.

“Why me?” he eventually asked. “There’s got to be a bunch of better photographers than me around.”

“There probably are,” Harry admitted. “But let’s just say that you remind me of someone that I used to go to school with who also loved taking pictures. And his were quite good, almost professional quality, I’d say.”

“Why don’t you get him to do it, then?” Peter asked.

Harry had to swallow hard before he answered. “He died.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay, it was a long, long time ago,” Harry said. “But I’m betting that my old friend wasn’t the only one to take some good pictures. So, what do you say, are you interested in earning a bit of cash and getting some exposure for what you can do with that camera of yours?”

Slowly, the corners of Peter’s mouth turned up.

“Yeah, yeah, I think I’d like that,” he said.
Harry still wasn’t sure about the large screen television that he’d mounted in the corner of the Den. Sure, it was out of the way and unobtrusive and he kept the volume mostly on mute, but still, he was sure that it took something away from the atmosphere of the place. The fact that it’d been one of the most requested things in the suggestion box that he’d placed on the end of the bar for close to two months meant that he’d finally caved and bought the thing.

Unfortunately, he’d installed the thing three days before the start of the big Stark Expo that was taking place over in Flushing Meadows.

Initially, Harry’d had no interest in the thing – magic and technology didn’t exactly get along too well unless you were one of the Japanese technomages or knew someone who could teach you enough runes to dampen the magic like he’d learnt during his couple of months in Japan. But then, due to, once again, popular demand, Harry’d started watching the all Stark Expo channel over the last couple of days and was now starting to reconsider.

Obviously, he’d make sure to keep his wand holstered, but judging by what he’d heard that some of the technology that was being shown and developed in the various pavilions could do, it sounded like it could be interesting.

Just as long as he managed to avoid Stark himself. The man was such a showboat. How anyone could crave the constant media attention the way Stark did was beyond Harry’s comprehension. Harry’d had that before and it was one of the reasons why he’d left Britain in the first place.

“Hey, could you turn that up?” a guy at one the tables asked, a forkful of Sheppard’s pie in one hand as he gestured to the television with the other.

Harry paused where he was and looked over at the TV. In blaring letters across the screen, were the words ‘Breaking News’. Curious, Harry complied.

“… DiFilipo has been replaced by Tony Stark,” the announcer was saying. “Judging by his reaction, DiFilipo is less than impressed, but as the owner, Tony Stark has the right to choose his own driver for the Historic Grand Prix of Monaco.”

Harry shook his head in wonder. Granted, he didn’t know much about racecar driving, but pulling out your main driver for something that sounded so prestigious sounded like benching your number one seeker in a World Cup match. The guy was an egotistical maniac. But when you’ve got that much money and you’re Iron Man and can take on pretty much anyone in the world, Harry guessed that he could get away with it. Didn’t make him any less of a prat, though.

It was sometime later that Harry finally tuned in again. And that was more in response to his customers than anything else. Disbelief and horror in their voices, combined with the fact that every single person there was engrossed in what the TV was showing had him looking up.

And what he saw amazed him.

A man with some type of contraption strapped to him and long, thick cords crackling with energy at the end of his hands was throwing Iron Man about. Half destroyed cars and flaming wreckage surrounded the two. Iron Man’s suit was burnt in paces and it seemed that it wasn’t in full working condition.

Finally, Iron Man seemed to catch a second wind and began winding one of the energy whips about
his body, nullifying its potential to do damage. One final punch knocked the pretender down before Iron Man ripped out the source of the man’s energy.

Harry may never have had that great of an impression of Tony Stark, but Iron Man, that was a different story. He could recognise something in the suited hero – a grim determination to get the job done and to stand up to bullies, no matter what it took.

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Neville would be ashamed, Harry decided.

Walking into his rooftop greenhouse, he’d stopped to take note of the wilting plants or the ones that were beginning to outgrow their pots. Everything in here needed a lot of TLC.

If he’d been wearing a long-sleeved shirt, Harry would have pushed the sleeves up, prepared for a long few hours in a desperate attempt to right the wrongs that he’d done to these plants.

Really, it was his own fault. Too many long hours every day was wearing him thin. Yes, every new business required it to make sure that it survived the first encounter with the public, or at least, that’s what the business management books that he’d scoured seemed to say. And while hiring some help had lessened some of the workload, Harry knew that he was putting in far too much time to be healthy in the long run.

And as for his plans to do some travelling around the continent, he didn’t actually think he’d gone any further than a couple of blocks since he’d opened the Den. No, something had to be done and soon. It wasn’t like he couldn’t afford to hire more staff, there was still plenty of gold in the bank, after all.

For the next few hours, Harry let his mind relax from the worries of the business downstairs and simply focussed on a simpler task: gardening. He’d always been good with it, nowhere near Neville’s level, of course, but then, who was? It was simply a matter of remembering and relearning all of the lessons that he’d learnt taking care of the Dursleys’ garden and the lessons that Madam Sprout had drummed into his head.

A flicker of coloured light in the corner of his eye distracted him and he frowned. As it came again, he turned his head. And then there were more and more of them, dozens even.

Orientating himself, he realised that the lights were coming from the direction of Flushing Meadows. He’d never realised that he could see the fireworks from up here. He’d have to remember that. Although, when he considered it, the lights didn’t have the same characteristics as fireworks, but maybe that was because he was used to Weasleys’ Wildfire Wizzbangs? And they also seemed a little low in the sky.

Not that it mattered too much, it was probably just Stark and his shenanigans again.

With that thought, Harry turned away from them and back to the important matters of his evening – righting his greenhouse.

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“We interrupt your regularly scheduled broadcast to bring you a report coming out of Culver University, Willowdale, Virginia. The University has been evacuated after reports of a huge, green ‘sasquatch’ on the premises. We are still in the process of confirming this report, although the fact that the army is on site and has set up a cordon does lend credence to the rumour. There are reports of buildings on the university that have been damaged and injuries as well.
“We have just received some eye-witness footage of the event. While the quality of the video is poor, there is definitely a large, green rage monster at that location. We will bring you more reports as they come to hand.”

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“Had to be a twister,” a large man at the table behind Harry stated emphatically.

“Twister? It would have had to be a big one and New Mexico isn’t exactly known for tornadoes at the best of times, let alone one big enough to have levelled an entire town,” his companion argued.

“Alright, then, if you’re so smart, what was it?” the first man challenged.

“Aliens. Had to be aliens,” the other answered smugly.

Even without turning, Harry knew that the first man was shaking his head.

“I take it back. You aren’t smart in the slightest. You’re as dumb as a rock. Aliens? What in God’s good name would aliens want to go to New Mexico for? There’s nothing there! You think aliens visited Earth just to destroy a town and then left again?”

“Maybe it was a bunch of aliens,” the second man persisted.

“A bunch?”

“Yeah, you know, maybe they had a fight or something and that town just got caught in the middle.”


Harry had to struggle to hold in his laughter until after the second man had chased the first right out of the Den. Aliens. Now he’d heard it all. Some days he simply loved running his café.

ooo00ooo

“Residents of Queens are advised to stay inside their homes or seek shelter as quickly as possible. We have multiple reports of two large unknown creatures in the area and both appear to be incredibly aggressive. Police have cordoned off an area within a five-block radius. If you are inside this area of Queens, please seek shelter immediately.”

Suddenly, the news reporter lifted one hand and pressed it to her ear.

“I have just been advised that the army is on route to deal with the situation. The Channel Five news helicopter should be overhead within the next couple of minutes. As soon as they are, we’ll transmit images to you of what is happening.”

A sudden, unexpected buzzing at the base of Harry’s skull diverted his attention away from the television. With a frown, he focussed on the feeling before suddenly looking up.

“Now who would you be and what would you be doing on my roof?” he asked quietly.

Pushing himself from his chair, Harry took two steps before reconsidering. There was no reason not to take his cup of tea. After all, he’d only just made it and it’d be cold and be needed to be thrown out if he left it behind. And while he could simply reheat it with a charm, it never tasted quite right that way.
Harry considered the wards that he’d placed on the building as he ascended the staircase. There were the regular ones, of course – fire, water damage, and one to deflect minor spells. But then there were the extras that he’d placed – strengthening of the building’s structure, unbreakable spells on all of the windows (including the ones in the rooftop greenhouse) and alarm charms to deter thieves. Now, it seemed, that he might have to add a muggle-repelling ward to keep people off of his roof.

Deciding that discretion was the better part of valour, Harry slipped onto the roof without turning on any lights or using a *lumos*. His wand, though, was ready in its disillusioned holster; with one flick, he could have it out and a spell cast with barely a thought.

His eyes scanned the rooftop and it wasn’t until their second pass that he finally found his ‘guest’.

The man was casually standing in the shadows, leaning up against the tall wall that abutted his own building. From what little Harry could make out, it appeared that the man was watching down the road, and not so much straight down, but further afield.

Deciding that there wasn’t anything overtly threatening in the man’s posture, Harry began to move out of the shadows.

He’d barely taken a single step, a step that he thought was silent, when the man swivelled about. His hands moved in a blur and before Harry could even take a second step, he found that he was staring down the barrel of some weapon. It wasn’t until the man moved slightly, allowing the distant streetlight to glint off of his weapon of choice that Harry realised what it was.

“An arrow? You’re seriously pointing a bow and arrow at me?” he asked incredulously.

“Yeah. I am. And if you don’t want the arrow to get a whole lot closer, a whole lot faster, then I suggest that you remain exactly where you are,” he man growled.

Harry obeyed, his movements completely frozen. He knew that he was good with his wand and thanks to quidditch and Dudley, that he had amazing reflexes, but he didn’t think that he could avoid an arrow from that short of a distance.

“Whatever it is that you’re holding, drop it,” the man ordered.

“Um, I’d really rather not,” Harry replied.

“And why is that?”

“Well, you see, it’s really good tea and it’d be a shame to waste it,” Harry replied.

Even from across the rooftop, Harry could hear the man’s sigh. A shift in the man’s posture showed that the bow had been lowered, although Harry was positive that the arrow was still nocked and could be fired in the blink of an eye.

“You’re British, aren’t you?” the man said with a shake of his head. Without waiting for a response, he continued. “What are you doing up here?”

“Ah, you see, I own the building and when I heard someone on the roof …” Harry shrugged.

The man moved into the light allowing Harry to see the look on his face. It was clear that he didn’t believe that Harry’d heard him.

*Hopefully, Harry thought, he’ll just put it down to some kind of security camera or something.*
The man was dressed in all black, but it looked more military than something that a burglar would wear, not that Harry could imagine a thief using a bow and arrow. Unless they were Robin Hood or something and that, quite frankly, was completely ridiculous. He was also short, roughly Harry’s height, with a stocky build and powerful-looking arms.

“Can I ask what you’re doing on my roof?”

“I’m with the government,” the man replied.

“I’m supposed to just take your word for that?” Harry asked.

In response, the man dug into a pocket and pulled out some kind of badge which he held up but in the dim light, there was nothing about it that Harry could make out.

Deciding to give the guy the benefit of the doubt, Harry moved a little closer.

“And why would the government have you standing on my roof in the middle of the night?” Harry persisted.

“Can I assume that you’ve heard about the … event that’s happening in Harlem at the moment?” the man asked.

“That thing on the news about the two giant … whatevers fighting?” Harry clarified.

“That’s it. Well, the government’s stationed a bunch of us in a ring around the city, just in case it moves,” he explained.

“And I suppose that you’re going to shoot them with your bow and arrow if they come this way?” Harry smiled.

The man shrugged. “Something like that. Or we’ll just radio in so that those in charge know what’s going on where.”

“Fair enough,” Harry replied. He took a sip of his tea while he thought about that. “I guess, in that case, there’s no harm in you using my roof. Next time, though, it’s only good manners to ask. You might find yourself on the roof of someone not quite as nice as me, someone who’s likely to shoot first and ask questions later.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” the man replied with a wry smile. “Doubt I’ll be here too much longer in any case.”

“In that case, I’ll leave you to it,” Harry replied.

With a last nod, he turned and made his way to the door; after it was sealed shut with a *colloportus*, there was no fear of the man gaining entry, be he government agent or not. Before he disappeared inside, he paused and turned for one last look at the man. Only the fact that Harry knew what he was looking for allowed him to pick him out of the shadows, otherwise, he’d blended right back in, his vigil resumed.

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Colonel Nicholas J. Fury stepped from his S.H.I.E.L.D. transport helicopter and surveyed the damage around him.

Harlem was a mess.
Buildings had massive chunks out them; in fact, if he was to guess, there’d be a few that’d need to be demolished due to their lack of structural integrity. There were cars flattened or torn in two. One nearby to his right looked to be almost in pristine condition, if you ignored the giant-sized footprint in its bonnet.

Banner and Blonsky had definitely done a number on the city tonight.

The unexpected part of it all was that Banner had been the good guy in all of this. Every report that the Director of S.H.I.E.L.D. had read or heard completely reversed everything they had worked up on the scientist. For now, Banner was reclassified as an ally, however tentative that designation was.

For now, S.H.I.E.L.D. would continue to watch and monitor and build contingencies, just in case.

Knowing that two of his top agents awaited him, Fury strode forth, the winds whipped up by the helicopter behind him making his long black trench coat flare behind him.

“Report Agent Barton,” Fury ordered, choosing to get the quicker report out of the way first.

“Nothing to report, Sir,” Barton replied, quickly, a touch too quickly perhaps.

Fury narrowed his one good eye at the man. There was something there but he was willing to give the benefit of the doubt. And if it turned out to be something important, well, he was sure Barton could guess what would happen.

“Agent Romanoff?”

“The lab at Greyburn college is secure,” the red-haired woman replied. “Blonsky definitely underwent his transformation there. For what we can gather, Sterns received a cut to his head when Blonsky evacuated, which we think might have been infected with some of Banner’s blood; there was definitely a broken vial there. He underwent some kind of mutation to his cerebral cortex, whether it was a result of just the blood or the gamma rays that we detected or a combination of both, our scientists have yet to determine.”

“Where is Sterns now?” Fury asked.

“Sitwell has both Sterns and Blonsky sedated and restrained,” Romanoff replied. “They’re on route to a S.H.I.E.L.D. holding facility. Sitwell didn’t tell me which one, said it’d be in his report to you.”

Fury nodded. He looked forward to reading that report, particularly in light of Romanoff’s information about Sterns.

Hopefully, this would put paid to one hell of a week.

First Stark blows up half of Flushing Meadows and then the New Mexico incident with damn aliens – Coulson was still cleaning up that mess – and now Banner, Blonsky and this Sterns character. The world was becoming weirder every day and it was becoming increasingly harder to police it all.

But he must admit that he did like a challenge. And perhaps, just perhaps, he could use these events to convince the World Security Council of some home truths. It was time that they came to the party and gave him the tools that he needed to get the job done.
First Forays in Exploration

It’d taken another month and a half after he’d had his realisation, but finally, finally, Harry was out of New York and beginning to explore North America.

Deciding who to leave in charge of the Den, though, hadn’t been easy. His senior employee, the one he’d had the longest, was still a school girl. But the fact that it was the school holidays was a bonus and after a long talk with Gwen’s parents, it was decided that she could handle the responsibility, so, here he was.

And once Harry’d known that he was going, the really tough decisions then had to be made – deciding where to go. Mexico was a possibility, from what he’d heard, it did have some sweet Aztec relics and magical hotspots. Canada, too, drew his eye. But in the end, he decided to stick with the United States, threw a dart at a map and ended up in Los Angeles. It didn’t hurt that they had one of the larger magical districts in the country.

At first, Harry had stayed strictly muggle and done the tourist thing. He’d jumped on a sight-seeing bus and spent the day hopping off and on at anything that caught his eye. Two days had been spent exploring and enjoy the rides at Universal Studios and he’d even apparated up to see the famous ‘Hollywood’ sign.

Now, though, he wanted to explore the magical district, thus why he was wandering around the Old Plaza.

From the magical guide book about Los Angeles that he’d owl ordered, he knew that the entrance to city’s largest magical shopping district was around here somewhere. All he had to do was find the right ‘tree’. Just like back home, and indeed the world over, witches and wizards were adept at keeping the entrances to their magical places, districts and sights hidden from muggles. And after five years of wandering the world finding them, Harry felt that he was becoming quite good at it.

This one, though, was proving to be tricky. The guide-book said that it was glamoured to look like a tree unless you were within a radius of about twelve feet. The Old Plaza, though had hundreds of trees, all artfully placed to blend in with the dozens of statues and plaques.

A slight flicker of something to his left, only caught out of the corner of his eye, had Harry veering sharply off in that direction before a smile blossomed on his face. The trunk of the giant tree twisted upon itself, split in two and spread apart to form an arch, capable of allowing entry to someone even Hagrid’s size.

Knowing that a muggle-repelling field also extended around this spot meant that Harry didn’t even have to worry about anyone seeing him disappear – as soon as he was close enough to the tree, anyone watching him would instantly lose interest.

As the guidebook had instructed, once in the very middle of the arch formed by the tree’s trunk, Harry gave a tap to each side with his wand and waited.

He lurched slightly as the ground under him began sinking before he righted himself, remembering a similar time, many years ago, when there were six of them descending into the bowls of the Ministry of Magic in London in a similar fashion.

The sight that opened before his eyes as the ground disappeared above him had Harry’s eyes widening and his jaw dropping in awe.
Where Diagon Alley felt closed in and old and grimy, this was the complete opposite, despite being underground. A vaulted arch rose dozens of metres high with a ceiling enchanted the same as was in the Great Hall of Hogwarts – today, it was showing a clear blue sky with just the hint of wisps of clouds floating about.

The walkway was wide enough to allow small stalls to be set up in the very middle and still allow shoppers to walk a dozen or more abreast. And the fact that the floor was made of immaculate white marble with hints of pink and grey running through it told Harry that the witches and wizards of Los Angeles took great pride and care of their district.

As had become habit after that disastrous experience in Cairo, Harry took a careful look around him to get his bearings – not knowing the way back out was never a good feeling – before he then set off in a random direction.

The shops here seemed to be the same as the ones the world over, there just seemed to be more of them and the quality of their merchandise appeared to be much higher. There were dozens of clothing stores, catering to both magical and muggle attire; pet stores; apothecaries; places to buy magical aids like wands and staffs and other magic foci; dozens of shops filled with trinkets of all manner; and bookstores.

It was these that caused Harry’s smile to broaden on his face. While he knew that he’d wander through almost every shop here, he always made it a point to visit the bookstores first. Back at Hogwarts, he’d never been particularly studious, but that didn’t mean that he didn’t enjoy learning. And as his travels had progressed, he’d discovered that he enjoyed learning new magic from different peoples and cultures. Getting one of the locals to teach him some of their spells and enchantments hadn’t been particularly easy, but if he could teach himself, well, then it didn’t matter if he didn’t get it straight away, he wasn’t wasting anyone else’s time but his own. Books gave him the opportunity to learn at his own pace and he was quite proud of the collection that he’d put together.

Stepping into the first bookstore, Harry looked around. A set of stairs to one side indicated that there were multiple levels here, just below him instead of above him, as one would expect in a muggle store.

As Harry browsed the store, putting the occasional book into the basket that he’d found just inside the door, a conversation in the next aisle caught his attention. The fact that his earing buzzed as the two women talked told him that they were speaking a different language – Spanish, if he had to guess.

He loved his translator. It meant that he could understand any language and while that didn’t help him speak it or read it, it made getting about in other cultures at least a little easier.

“Louis has been after me for months to take him there,” one woman stated.

“Well, is it any wonder? Everyone knows that he wants to be a magical creature’s handler when he grows up,” her friend said.

“I know, I know,” the first woman sighed. “And I suppose that it’s not that far away. I could apparate there and back one afternoon later this week. You could come, too, and bring Angela.”

“If I did that, we’d be spending the day there,” the other countered. “You know how she is with horses and the fact that they’ve just got in a herd of Abraxan to go with all of their other herds of winged horse means that we’ll be spending most of the day there.”

“Well, at least we won’t have to worry about seeing any of the thestrals,” the other woman said and
Harry could imagine her shuddering.

Abraxans and thestrals; he hadn’t seen any of them since his days at Hogwarts. Both brought back memories that he hadn’t thought about in years.

“Come on, if I have to take Louis and traipse after him as he runs around looking at all of the other magical creatures, you can bring Angela and suffer with me,” the first woman cajoled.

“Well, I suppose we could; at least it’d get them out of the house for the day.”

“Wonderful. Now what day works for you?” the woman’s voice petered out as the two drifted further into the stacks.

A magical wildlife preserve, Harry mused. He’d seen it in the guidebook but hadn’t really given it much thought. But after hearing that they had Abraxans and thestrals, he found himself interested. It was probably the nostalgia or something. But if you couldn’t follow your whims when you were on vacation, what was the point of going on vacation in the first place?

Jackalopes, Harry decided, had to be one of the odder animals that he’d ever laid eyes on. They were the same size as rabbits and looked identical to a jackrabbit, but with the minor added detail of a pair of small antlers between their large rabbit ears.

Thinking about it, though, he decided that they weren’t really the oddest animals, it was just that it was so unexpected to see tiny, antlered rabbits hopping about the specially warded field so that they couldn’t escape.

The jackalopes were one of the many different magical creatures that one could get up close and personal with – provided the animals let you, of course – at the Scarmander Beast Reserve. The entire two hundred acres was warded in a similar way to Hogwarts, layered with muggle-repelling wards, forget-me-not charms, confusion spells and a whole host of others that were all designed to cause muggles to either forget about the area, get distracted by something else whenever they got close or simply made their technology behave erratically.

So far, Harry had spent the vast majority of the day wandering from one magical area to the next, interacting with animals when possible, simply observing them, if they were reluctant to come to him. He’d stuck with the X – XXX class beasts so far, saving the more ‘exotic’ ones for last, although he was sure that Hagrid would be mightily disappointed in him ignoring the beasts for so long.

The nifflers had been fun and cute, just as he remembered from his lesson on them. The fact that he’d nearly lost his watch to one, though, had been a little alarming.

Crups, small dogs with a forked tail, with a very eager to please personality were great fun. Harry spent ages throwing sticks for them to bring back to him before moving on.

Harry had no idea about the porlocks. There were supposed to be a few dozen in their habitat, but the sign erected near the entrance noted that they were very mistrustful of humans and tended to hide whenever one was around.

And the mokes, magical lizard critters, were interesting, watching them scurry up and down tree trunks.

Harry’d taken copious amounts of photos to add to his collection. There were some that he was even
considering having enlarged and framed. He wondered if it would be breaking the statute of secrecy too much to hang them in the *Den* as a part of a collection of strange creatures of myth and legend.

Having had the thought, he quickly ran his eye across the map of the Reserve that he’d been given when he paid his entry fee to check which XXXX and XXXXX creatures they had here. Thankfully, there were no acromantulas (an animal that Harry never wanted to ever meet again, even after all these years), or fire crabs (they’d just remind him of Hagrid’s blast-ended screwts) or dragons (and he just wouldn’t feel right being near them considering he was wearing the black Norwegian Ridgetail dragonhide boots and blue-grey Swedish Short-snout dragon cloak).

But before he went to see the graphons and the others of their class, Harry wanted to spend time with the winged horses.

For old times’ sake, he chose to begin at the thestral enclosure.

The black skeletal horses with bat-like wings were milled around near the entrance when he arrived at their enclosure. There were eight, each one with their reptilian head pointed towards the gate, as though they were expecting something.

“Come to see the thestrals, have you, lad?”

Harry spun around at the sound to find a large, rotund wizard ambling towards him, a dead cow levitating in the air behind him.

“Yeah, it’s been a while,” Harry replied.

“Well, that answers my next question then,” the man stated. “You can obviously see them.”

“I went to Hogwarts, in Scotland,” Harry supplied. “They’ve got a herd there that they use to pull the school carriages.”

“Then I dare say that you know a fair bit about them already,” he man smiled. “I’d offer to let you help me feed them, but there really isn’t a lot to it.”

With that, the wizard lowered the enchantments on the gate and levitated the dead cow inside. Instantly, the eight thestrals began tearing into it. As Harry watched, a mixture of disgust and fondness trying to coexist on his face, he noticed that the wizard leaning on the gate beside him was frowning.

“Is something wrong?” Harry asked.

The man’s head turned to study the paddock before he replied.

“There should be nine of them here,” he replied. “And I can only count eight. I was trying to work out where the last one was. It’s not like any of them to fail to be here when it’s feeding time.”

“Would you like a hand looking for it?” Harry asked.

“Thanks, I’d appreciate it. Can’t exactly ask all of the other keepers, for obvious reasons – if you can’t see the animal, it’s pointless looking for a lost one. Name’s Scott.”

“Harry,” he replied as the two slipped through the gate.

After skirting the still eating herd, the two of them separated slightly, heading towards the wooded section at the back of the paddock. The light dimmed quickly in there and the temperature dropped as
well, conditions that Harry was sure that thestrals would enjoy. He hadn’t picked his way too far into the woods when he heard an angry shout and a lot of swearing.

Unconsciously, his wand dropped into his hand as he moved to find out what had happened to Scott.

He found the wizard, his hands on his hips, glaring at a section of fritzing magic between two large trees. The fact that a third had recently fallen and now lay in the midst of the erratic magical field told the story of what had happened here.

“A breach in the wards?” Harry surmised.

“Got it in one, lad,” Scott replied sourly. “I’m guessing the thestral slipped out through here. The problem is that this enclosure backs straight on to the muggle woods. And with those wings of theirs, there’s no telling where it might be. I’ve got no idea when the last disillusionment spell was cast on them, don’t usually have to worry about it, not with them confined to the Reserve.”

“I’m guessing that you’re going to need to make sure this breach is sealed before you do anything else,” Harry commented.

Scott nodded, drawing his wand. “Yep, don’t want the others wandering off while we’re looking for the other one.”

“If you like, I can see if I can track it down while you fix this?” Harry offered, knowing that if Hermione was there, she’d be smirking at him and muttering about his ‘saving people thing’.

“Thanks. I’d appreciate it,” Scott smiled. “I doubt you’ll have any trouble getting ’em back, they’re all fairly docile. Just conjure a rope, slip it around their neck and lead ’em back.”


With that, he slipped through the breach in the wards and disappeared into the muggle woods.

ooo00ooo

A hoofprint here, a broken branch there. It wasn’t much, but it was something and Harry was surprising himself that he was picking up on the signs of the thestral passing.

His biggest worry was the fact that thestrals had wings, and if this one decided to go for a fly, there was nothing that Harry could do to find it or bring it back. It might have been different if he had a broomstick, but he’d never gotten around to buying a new one to replace his beloved firebolt, something that he thought that he should probably rectify.

Thankfully, the overhead canopy of this particular part of the woods was rather thick, meaning that the thestral would need to find somewhere much clearer before it could even think about stretching its wings.

A noise, foreign to the regular birds and small animals in the woods or the wind in the trees caught his attention and Harry paused. His head moved this way and that as he attempted to capture the allusive sounds. Yes, yes, it was definitely there, somewhere up ahead, but human or animal was impossible to tell.

Just in case, Harry flipped the hood of his cloak up and drew the folds close together, blending him into the background of the woods.

The tracks from the thestral, he found, veered off to the right, while the unidentifiable sounds
continued on ahead. A snap decision had Harry continuing on. He slowed, instinctively sliding into the shadows as the noise that he was following grew louder.

Something had him pause just before he passed the next tree and his eyes darted about. And then he saw it. He blinked hard, shook his head and blinked again.

A young girl, probably in her early teens was seated on the ground, surrounded by tiny animals. Her bent head and deep reddish-brown hair hid her face. It looked like she was wearing an old leather bomber jacket over some brown and grey clothes. Her crossed feet were encased in a pair of fur-topped brown leather boots.

As Harry watched, he realised that she was pulling something out of a pouch on her belt. Whatever it was, the small animals definitely saw it as food. There were dozens of the little mammals, all darting about, taking their turns at getting their share and then sitting back and holding the food in their front paws and nibbling it.

Squirrels, Harry realised with a start. But squirrels acting in a way that he’d never seen before. Obviously, this girl had been making friends with them for a very long time if they were as tame as they were.

Ever so slowly, Harry backed away from the muggle girl, disappearing back into the woods. He was just glad that he’d neither spooked her or her little squirrel friends.

It didn’t take too long to find the thestral’s tracks once again and begin his quest once more.

It took another twenty minutes of tracking, with the occasional guess and hope for the best thrown in, before Harry lucked upon the missing winged horse.

Thankfully, Scott had been right – the animal was incredibly friendly and it was easy to get a rope around its neck.

“Come on, girl,” Harry said to the thestral, giving a gentle tug on the rope, let’s get you back. Scott’s got some lovely cow there for you.”

As though it understood, it began trotting back the way it came.
Together Once Again

On a whim, Harry stepped between a pillar and wall and conjured a small placard. A thick black pen was added which he used to write on said placard. And then, feeling completely ready, he re-joined the crowd milling about the arrival gate.

The plane, he knew, had landed some time ago, but having vast experience with how long it took to get through customs when entering a new country, not to mention the general slowness of people disembarking a plane and gathering their luggage in the first place, he wasn’t worried.

In fact, he was kind of surprised when the first people emerged from said gate, looking around for either friends, family or simply a sign pointing where to go.

Straightening, Harry manoeuvred himself into a prime position and held the placard between his hands. He was sure that he was failing abysmally at keeping the mischievous grin off of his face, but he didn’t care.

Two dozen people had already filed out of the small entryway with Harry giving each one a brief look over before dismissing them.

And then, at the very back of the next group, he spied a head of bushy, brown hair. Well, it was in actual fact a lot more tamed than it once had been, but that didn’t diminish Harry’s ability to pick it out from a crowd.

Suddenly the path between them opened up and Harry could see her properly.

Hermione.

She had hardly changed at all; still as beautiful as the very last day that he saw her so many years ago. She had filled out a little in the hips and chest area, perhaps, but still maintained her slim figure. And her outfit accentuated that figure very nicely indeed – a pair of jeans and a snug dark blue shirt.

He watched as her eyes systematically began scanning the waiting crowd before fixing on him. Her eyes flicked down to the sign that he held and an eyebrow rose along with a small smile as she looked back into his eyes.

And then she was running towards him, her luggage rocking dangerously on its little wheels as it tried to keep up. It was dropped, along with Harry’s placard as she flung herself into his arms.

“Harry!” she near-squealed into his ear.

“Hey, ’Mione,” Harry replied as he took in the all-too familiar scent of her – some type of berry that he’d never been able to identify with just a hint of parchment.

Slowly, she pulled back, her hands cupping his face as her eyes intently roved over him – eyes, hair, scar, before she frowned slightly at his ear. A single look told him that he’d be explaining what he was doing with a pierced ear or else and he couldn’t help but give a lop-sided grin. It was a look that he’d never been able to resist, all the way back to first year at Hogwarts when she’d first looked at him that way.

“I promise that you’ll hear everything,” he told her.

“Good,” she said, giving a single emphatic nod. Then, “oh, Harry, it’s so good to see you! It’s been
far too long."

“I know, I’ve missed you, too, ’Mione,” he replied.

Then, stepping slightly apart from her, he reached down and grabbed up her luggage and his placard with one hand, took her hand in his free one and tugged her along.

“Come on, let’s get out of here before the crowds grab all the taxis,” he said.

She smiled and swung his arm wildly, excitedly, in a way that he’d never seen her do before. He could see the thousand and one questions bursting inside her. Finally, she seemed to settle on one.

“Granger”? Really?” she asked, motioning to the placard in his hand.

“Well, you might have forgotten what I looked like you see,” he grinned.

A playful smack against his arm rebuked the very thought. “Never gonna happen, Harry,” she told him.

In response, he gave her hand a squeeze, only to feel an answering one in return.

“I know you’ve got a lot of questions, Hermione,” Harry said, “but let’s save the big ones until we get you home.”

“Home,” Hermione repeated with a smile. “I like the sound of that.”

Ascending the stairs from the side door had easily taken four or five times as long as it should have as Hermione insisted on stopping to examine every picture that lined the walls. To keep it on the safe side, these were strictly photos that he’d taken of various mundane landscapes and places of interest from all over the world and every continent – the pyramids of Egypt, the Victoria Falls in Zambia, the Taj Mahal, the Great Wall of China, the great plains of Africa filled with various wildlife. Some had Harry in them, some didn’t, but what they all had in common was that they were all places that Harry had actually been to.

His magical photo collection he kept either in the magical part of his library or his bedroom, places where people wouldn’t normally go, thus protecting the Statute of Secrecy.

It was almost as though Hermione had even forgotten that he was there as she glided forth, drawn around the room, examining everything in detail. The mantle above his average-sized fireplace was her first stop, there to lightly reach out and touch each of the intricately carved figurines there. He’d collected them from all around the world, each one an animal native to the land that it came from and each so well done that one could almost imagine that they would be able to get up and run around.

From there, it was to the back across the room, lightly tracing her hand along the top of the coffee table, made by a man in a small village in the depths of the congo from a rich dark wood.

The pile of photo albums sitting on one of the side tables beside the couch caught her attention though, and with a mischievous grin in his direction, she picked up the top one and plopped herself down on the couch, expectantly looking between the couch and Harry still leaning in the doorframe.
“You don’t want to see your room or freshen up first?” Harry asked as he crossed to her.

“When there’s something to learn instead?” she replied, wrinkling her nose.

“What exactly are you hoping to learn?” Harry asked, barely resisting from mentioning the library that he’d accumulated over his travels.

“All about your last five years, Harry. Where you’ve been, what you’ve done, what you’ve seen, the people you’ve talked to,” her expression switch to one of mild disapproval. “You didn’t honestly think that those brief letters that you’ve sent me, so erratically I might add, was sufficient, did you?”

“Um, no?” Harry replied.

After checking the date on the first of the album and then her watch (which Harry was unsurprised to see was set to New York time), she gave a nod.

“There should be more than enough time to get through this one before you go and make me dinner while I get unpacked,” she stated.

As he settled back into the couch, Hermione shuffled closer to him and opened the album on their combined laps.

“Well, I didn’t really know where I wanted to go at first, which I have no doubt that you remember, which is how I ended up beginning my journey in Europe, Bulgaria, to be precise,” Harry began, pointing to a picture of he and Viktor Krum standing together in front of an iced-over quidditch pitch.

With the chicken parmigiana placed on the angel hair pasta and the mixed salad in the large bowl on the table, Harry looked up and around for his houseguest. A quick warming and stasis charm later and he headed off to find her.

“Hermione?” he called, lightly tapping on her bedroom door.

When there was no answer, he tentatively opened the door and took a quick look around. From what he could tell, she was completely unpacked, but totally absent from said room. Obviously, her curiosity had gotten the better of her and she’d wandered off to explore.

An instant grin formed on his face. There was one place in any house or building in any country or continent that Hermione was sure to gravitate to, even subconsciously. With quick steps, Harry crossed the small hall and bounded up the stairs to the second floor of his apartment.

Yep, exactly where I thought she’d be, he smiled to himself.

The library. He’d had floor to ceiling shelves installed throughout most of the room, with only a few spaces left vacant for windows and the occasional set of photos. In the centre of the room, atop the genuine Persian rug, was a set of comfy armchairs, big enough for one person to curl up in or for two to sit side by side if they didn’t mind snuggling up together.

Extra small bookshelves, set back to back ran in a row near the back, leaving an aisle between it and the back shelves. An ancient desk with the wear and tear of centuries marring its top sat under the window.

Hermione, as Harry would have expected, was currently perusing the shelves, one hand lightly
running over the tomes while the other arm held what looked to be at least eight volumes.

“Having fun?” he asked lightly.

Her response was so sudden and the glower on her face so pronounced that he involuntarily took a step backwards. Her empty hand balled and landed on her hip even as one foot began tapping.

“Exactly when, Harry James Potter, were you going to mention this library that you’ve created here?” she asked.

For a few seconds, Harry’s mouth moved without a sound coming out.

“Surprise?” he eventually managed to squeak before continuing in a rush. “I had you in mind when I created this room, thought that it’d be something that you’d enjoy. There’s books here from every continent and nearly every country that I’ve visited in the last five years.”

Quickly, he crossed the room and tapped his wand against one particular bookshelf, which obediently slid forward and to the side. With an impish grin, he beckoned her to follow him.

The gasp that she let out as she entered told Harry all he needed to know.

The room was almost an identical size to the main part of his library, but where the other was open, airy and relaxing, this room was filled with rows upon rows of tall bookshelves, with nearly every one of them filled to capacity.

“This is my magical library,” Harry explained. “There’s books in here in languages that I can’t even read, but I got them anyway. Figured it’d give me incentive to learn an extra language or two.”

“If you’d told me about this, I would have come months and months ago,” Hermione said as, eyes wide, she began wandering down the first aisle.

“Um, Hermione,” he called before he lost sight of her, “dinner’s ready.”

She turned back to look pointedly at him. “You’re not forgiven for keeping me from this, you know. But if you bring my dinner to me up here, I’ll consider it.”

Obediently, Harry turned to head down to the dining room. Now that she’d found his library, he wondered whether he’d ever be able to pry her out of it again.

ooo00ooo

“Your coffee, Boss.”

Hermione looked up at the waitress with a smile, moving back in her seat slightly to allow the girl to place not only Harry’s cup of coffee beside his plate, but also her own tea. She seemed to know what she was doing, not that Hermione thought that being a waitress in a café was a particularly hard job. The noise from the rowdy groups of teens on the other side of Harry’s Marauder’s Den caught her attention and she slightly altered her opinion – dealing with them could be difficult.

“You’re the Boss today, Gwen,” Harry countered. “I’m just a customer having a lovely late breakfast with my friend.”

The waitress, Gwen, shrugged her shoulder and smiled, her blue eyes lighting up before she winced slightly at the sudden outburst of laughter coming from a dozen or so teen boys.

“They’re in good spirits today,” Harry commented. “And here much earlier than normal.”
“I think Flash organised for them to go to a game later today and they chose to meet here,” Gwen stated. “I’ll be glad when they go, perhaps we’ll get a bit more peace and quiet.”

“At least your admirer over there is always quiet,” Harry commented and Hermione could hear the teasing quality in his voice.

Looking across the room to where Harry’d nodded, she saw a dark-haired boy fiddling with a camera while reading a small booklet, possibly its instruction manual, a tall stainless steel glass in front of him.

Gwen sighed irritably at her Boss. “It’s just Peter. We’ve known each other for years. There’s nothing between us, believe me.”

Harry’s *hmmmm* caused Hermione to lay a hand on his arm and give him a warning shake of her head. Thankfully, he took the hint and dropped the subject.

“I’d better let you get back to work, never know when the Boss is going to show up,” Harry smiled.

“I thought that *I* was the Boss today,” she countered with a raised eyebrow. Then, “See you later, Harry. Enjoy your meals.”

Hermione waited until the girl was out of earshot before leaning into the table.

“Isn’t she a little young to be in charge of the *Den*?” she asked.

Harry shot a glance at the girl now back at the bar before turning back.

“She’s more than capable. And besides, think of what we were doing at her age,” he said.

“We were in a war,” Hermione replied sotto voce.

Harry simply raised an eyebrow and she had to concede that his point was made.

“Tell me about everyone back home,” Harry said. “What’s everyone been up to since I’ve been gone?”

For a few seconds, she pushed some egg around on her plate, trying to decide exactly what it was best to tell him. There’d been a lot of very upset people at the way he’d just disappeared overnight, even if, in retrospect, he had said his goodbyes. Ron, Ginny and Molly had all been particularly angry, for similar sorts of reasons, for quite some time.

“Well, I’ve told you about Neville marrying Hannah,” she began, deciding to start on the easier people first. “They seem to have found a balance that works for them, with their different jobs at either end of the country. Oh, and Hannah’s pregnant. They announced it about a week before I left.”

“Really? That’s brilliant! I’ll have to get something special to send to them when the baby comes,” Harry beamed.

Hermione smiled and took a bite of her eggs benedict before moving on to the next one.

“I hardly see Luna anymore, but the *Quibbler’s* still going strong and she seems to be enjoying life. Minerva’s really changed things up at Hogwarts. There’s a lot more tolerance between the Houses.”

“Really?” Harry asked.
“Yes. And it hasn’t been easy and it’s still a bit shaky, but it’s working,” she replied. “Hagrid’s still his old self, I don’t think anything could ever change him and, his cooking is still as atrocious as ever, at least, his rock cakes were the last time I visited.”

She watched Harry’s eyes glaze over slightly and a soft smile form on his face. For an instant, he looked a lot younger, much more like the boy that he was probably remembering himself as, rather than the world-travelling man seated across from her. He really had aged well, she had to concede. He’d grown into his looks and updating his wardrobe and glasses had played a large part in that. But it was more than that. Even a couple of years after the war, when he was still in Britain, it was easy to see that he carried a massive weight on his shoulders – the burden of being The-Boy-Who-Lived, the Chosen One and then the Man-Who-Won. As much as she didn’t want to admit it, leaving Britain really had been the best thing for him.

“What about the Weasleys?” Harry asked. “Ron, George, Molly, Bill and Fleur … Ginny. You haven’t mentioned them.”

Internally, Hermione sighed. She’d known this was coming.

“To be honest, they’re all still a bit peeved at you for leaving like you did,” Hermione told him. “Well, not George, Bill or Fleur. Nor Arthur come to think about it. George probably understands the most and wishes that he’d followed you. But he’s been throwing himself into WWW and it’s been booming ahead – literally at times. He’s still with Angelina, although there’s no sign of any pending nuptials there.

“Arthur, Bill and Fleur are all doing well. Fleur seems content with just the two children. And Arthur seems happy as Undersecretary to the Minister.”

Harry shook his head. “I still can’t picture that. I was sure that he’d stay in the Misuse of Muggle Artefact Department, fiddling with his spark plugs and what not.”

“Yes, well, Kingsley did a good job of convincing him otherwise and the country’s better off for it, I think,” Hermione replied.

“The others?” Harry prompted after she had been silent for too long.

“Molly enjoys being a grandmother and bustling about the Burrow,” Hermione said. “She’s forever trying to get everyone together for meals. She misses you, though, always saying that ‘all of her kids should be here, even the missing one’.”

“She was suffocating me, Hermione, I had to get away from her” Harry stated, staring down at his plate. “I know that she was still grieving from Fred, but it felt like she was using me to compensate – plan out every facet of my life, where I lived, what job I was to do, even who I was to marry. Did you know that about a month before I left I accidentally came across a little book that detailed every detail of my and Ginny’s wedding? We weren’t even together and she was still planning it.”

“I’m sorry, Harry,” she said sympathetically, laying her hand over his. And she could relate; she was sure that Molly had a similar book for her and Ron.

“Ron’s doing well at the Canons,” she said, trying to change the topic. “There’s some talk of him becoming the Assistant Coach as well as being the Keeper. I don’t see him as much anymore, of course, not since you left.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry said.

“Don’t be,” she told him. “We didn’t work as a couple, really that was a spectacular error on both of
our parts, I’m sure that I don’t know what we were thinking! We simply can’t help but argue all the
time. We’re still friends, we’re simply on separate paths.”

“And he blames you for my leaving,” Harry said in a burst of rare insightfulness. “He expected that
if anyone could get his best mate to stay so that he didn’t have to grow up and do things for himself
and could be there to hang out and play chess and go drinking whenever he wanted, it’d be you.”

“I won’t say you’re wrong, Harry,” Hermione replied. “Five years ago, he was a lot like that. But he
has matured some since then.”

“Enough to not be angry for ‘abandoning him’?” Harry asked.

“Possibly,” Hermione finally decided.

Harry gave a single nod as though it answered a hundred questions.

“And Ginny?” he eventually asked.

Once again, Hermione found herself sighing, an action that was beginning to really annoy her.

“Ginny’s … Ginny,” she began lamely.

“Well, that’s helpful,” Harry deadpanned.

“Hush, you,” she admonished. “It’s taken Ginny a long time to get over you and quite frankly, I
don’t think that she ever really will. Sure, she’s been dating off and on, a lot these past few years,
but I doubt she’ll ever find someone that’ll measure up to what she’s looking for.”

“Me,” Harry stated flatly.

“Well, yes.”

At that, Harry shook his head. “What she wants is something that never existed. I’m not the boy in
those ridiculous stories. I’m not The-Boy-Who-Lived.”

“Yes, and Ginny knows that; she’s known since she was eleven,” Hermione told him before rushing
on to cut off whatever he was about to say. “Yes, she grew up hearing those stories and developed
quite a crush on him. You. Whatever. But then, at the end of her first year of Hogwarts, what
happened? She woke up to find you standing over her, sword in hand, dead monster behind you and
you’d just saved her very life. You, Harry Potter, instantly surpassed all of those books of The-Boy-
Who-Lived in her mind; she realised that the reality was better than any story.”

“But she never really took the time to get to know me,” Harry complained. “All she ever wanted was
the fame and celebrity status that came with being the girlfriend of The-Boy-Who-Lived. I never
wanted that; I hate that.”

“I know, Harry” Hermione sympathised, “and it took Ginny a long time to come to terms with that as
well. I don’t think you would have ever worked well, but you could have worked as a couple and
Ginny knows that. Unfortunately, you’re the measure that she holds every other guy up to and it’s
impossible to find anyone that good. Well, except for maybe Neville, but he’s taken.”

“Why, Hermione, are you saying that you measure other guys by my standard as well?” a playful
Harry asked.

As much as she tried to control her blush, she wasn’t sure that she was exactly successful. In lieu of
an answer, she quickly changed the topic.

“Really, the only other really important ones from back home, I’ve already told you about – Teddy and Andromeda. And now that you’ve settled, you should see about having them out here. You don’t want to be an absent Godfather, after all, and sending bundles of gift back doesn’t count! Quality time, Harry, that’s what the two of you deserve.”

“I know, Hermione, and I’ve been seriously thinking about it,” Harry replied. “But I wanted you to see what I’ve put together first. Guess I’m still wanting you to look over my homework and check that I haven’t been making a right mess of things.”

“Oh, Harry, you could never do that,” she told him. “What you have here is extraordinary. It’s like a breath of fresh air after stuffy old England. I can see why you like it so much.”

“Enough for you to move here, too?” he asked, somewhere between playful and hoping.

“You know why I can’t, Harry,” she told him. “The work I’m doing with the Ministry is incredibly important, not just to the common witches and wizards, but for every species who live there. I’m helping to build something that will change the very nature of our society and I can’t turn my back on it. I’d always feel that I’d left something undone and you know that I could never do that.”

“I guess that I’ll just have to enjoy the time that I get to spend with you now, then,” Harry replied, reaching across the table to squeeze her hand.
It's Not Exactly Safe Here Is It?

It was a pleasant spring day and for once, Harry was able to convince Hermione that it’d be fun to get out into the sunshine and just relax. It helped that he was able to remind her of the times back in school where they would just laze around on the banks of the Black Lake or even of their ‘camping trip’.

Most of the week that she’d been there, the two had either been holed up at Harry’s place just talking or sitting doing little together (usually with Hermione reading a book from Harry’s library) or else they’d been visiting the various museums or cultural centres dotted throughout the city that Hermione had always wanted to visit.

Today, the thought was to take a walk through New York’s famous Central Park, while Liberty Island and the Statue of Liberty would be left for another day.

It hadn’t been hard for the two to fall into patterns very reminiscent of ones that they’d shared so many times in the past: walking slowly while talking and telling stories, Harry teasing her and Hermione getting mock-upset and giving him a shove or a playful slap on the arm. Their feet seemed to have no real direction to them, simply ambling wherever the mood took them. At one point, Hermione slipped her hands up around Harry’s upper arm and rested her head on his shoulder.

It was as they were standing in line to get one of New York’s famous chilli dogs from a vendor with a little cart that their day turned strange.

The sudden appearance of a policeman on horseback startled everyone there.

“I’m going to have to ask you all to move away from this area for your own safety,” the officer stated.

“Why? What’s going on, officer?” one man asked.

The answer to that came in a great *whoosh* and roar as a red and gold blur sped by overhead.

“Iron Man!” a young boy screamed excitedly, jumping up and down on the spot.

As though the hero was a magnet, a crowd of people quickly formed around where Harry and Hermione were, surging forward to see what was going on. Unfortunately, the two were dragged along for the ride, quickly holding hands to make sure that they weren’t separated.

Unexpectedly, the crowd stopped moving and gave a sudden lurch backwards, leaving Harry and Hermione near the front with a clear view across the large open flat ground. They were near an edge of the park with a road to the left and trees some way to the right. Police barricades had already appeared out of nowhere to halt traffic and divert it away from the area.

But it was the two combatants in the middle of the clearing that had everyone’s attention.

One was the Iron Man, red and gold armour glinting in the sunlight, the palms of his hands and circle in his chest glowing a bright white light.

The other was dressed in all black, including the sunglasses that he had on his face. A bag of some kind had been dumped at his feet as both hands held some kind of silver stick-like things that Harry couldn’t identify. Looking closer, he noted that there were more of the silver things stuck through the man’s belt and even attached to his legs and arms.
“Give it up, Myers, this simply isn’t your day,” Iron Man ordered.

“The metal man,” the other, Myers, sneered. “You think you’re so tough? We’ve all seen that you can be hurt, you’re not so invincible.”

“Better men than you have tried to take me down, Myers and they’ve all failed,” Iron Man replied. “So, are we going to do this the easy way or the fun way?”

Myer’s answer was to quickly bring his arm back and throw his silver stick towards Iron Man before quickly switching his stance and throwing the other as well.

Iron Man seemed to react surprised, standing up slightly, no longer in a combative stance.

“That’s the best you can do? Really? Throw some sticks at me and miss?’ Iron Man asked.

He was in the process of shaking his head when the two silver sticks returned from their elliptical orbit to slam into Iron Man’s back and explode, throwing the hero forward off of his feet. Only some quick repulsar work stopped the armoured man from face planting.

“Boomerangs,” Hermione breathed and Harry nodded, surprised with himself that he hadn’t recognised them earlier, after all, he’d seen them and even thrown a few himself while he was in Australia with Hermione.

“Bad move, Crocodile Dundee,” Iron man stated, having flown himself upright.

Then, setting his feet, Iron Man raised the palms of his hands, simultaneously creating a high-pitched whine, before shooting out a pair of energy blasts at Myers.

Myers dodged and spun, sending another pair of boomerangs at the hero. Iron Man, though seemed to have learnt from the first ones. A quick repulsar blast destroyed one while the second was knocked away.

Unfortunately, that second one was sent flying off-course to impact a food stand, exploding it instantly. People were sent flying and screams of terror filled the air as even more scrambled away and began to flee.

Harry, though, simply narrowed his eyes and dropped Hermione’s hand. He didn’t expect this to be a long fight, not after what he’d seen Iron Man do on television, but the longer that it lasted, the more chance there was for people to get hurt.

“Harry, no,” Hermione hissed, obviously recognising the signs of what she’d dubbed his ‘saving people thing’.

Repulsar blasts and boomerangs were beginning to criss-cross the areas between the two combatants. As a second exploding boomerang landed dangerously close to a section of crowd, Harry let his wand drop into his hand, shielded against his leg and with Hermione standing so close.

Taking a quick glance about to make sure no one was paying him any mind, he sent two quick spells.

The first was a simple banishing charm aimed at one of the off-course boomerangs headed towards a crowd of people. It wasn’t a perfect shot, but it was enough to have the silver explosive weapon land in a clear patch of grass where it was able to explode harmlessly.

The other was a \textit{confundus} charm, catching Myers mid-step. The man paused, seemingly unsure...
about what he was doing. But that pause was enough for Iron Man to finally connect with one of his replulsar blasts, sending the man flying, the boomerangs that he held falling limply from his hands.

A short flight and Iron Man was standing over the guy before he stepped back, gesturing to a pair of police officers not too far away.

“Okay, it’s safe now, he’s down for the count,” Iron Man called, before shrugging at the crowd.

“Sorry about the mess, folks. Tourists, eh? Love ’em or hate ’em, they always end up here, just can’t keep them away from the Big Apple.”

“Come on, Harry,” Hermione hissed, tugging on his arm.

One look was enough to tell him that she wasn’t exactly pleased with what he’d just done and he was in for a right telling off. He couldn’t help but give a wry grin. It was just like old times.

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“That was incredibly reckless, Harry,” Hermione scolded. “You could have been seen!”

Harry’d known this was coming. He was only surprised that she’d been able to restrain herself until they were safely behind the doors of his apartment. He knew the signs and he knew the laws. In fact, he thought it might be something that he could use to at least gain a stalemate in the argument.

Unfortunately, he was stopped before he could reply by a knock at the door. As he moved to answer it, he caught Hermione’s eye telling him that the discussion wasn’t over. He made a mental note not to forget his counter-arguments.

He blinked at the two uniformed men at his door.

“Oh, it’s you two,” he deadpanned.

The two aurors glanced at each other before they turned back to him.

“May we come in, Mister Potter?” the one on the right asked.

Stepping aside with a barely suppressed sigh, he gestured them in.

“Do you remember us, Mister Potter?” the one who ha first spoken asked.

Harry did, although their names escaped him. These were the two who confronted him in the basement of the Den just after he’d bought the place, thinking that he was using magic in a muggle area.

“Aurors … Steven and … Jerry?” he asked.

“Close. I’m Jenkins. My partner is Auror Stevenson,” Auror Jenkins replied. “May I ask who this is?”

“Hermione Granger,” Hermione replied, shooting Harry a Look that told him that he had a story to tell her as soon as they were gone.

“I take it you’re from Britain as well?” Stevenson asked.

Hermione nodded. “Yes. I’m here on holiday.”

The two aurors turned to Harry. “Do you know why we’re here, Mister Potter?”
Well, he did, but that didn’t mean that he was going to make it easy for them.

“No, I’m afraid that I don’t,” he replied.

Hermione’s roll of eyes told him that she knew that he was lying through his teeth.

“Mister Potter. Two spells were detected being performed in a highly public area. Both spells were low level but contained your magical signature,” Jenkins stated.

“Is that right?” Harry asked.

“You know that that’s correct, Mister Potter,” Stevenson replied. “The last time we were here we informed you that we kept a careful eye on magic being performed within the greater New York area as well as the fact that we now had your magical signature on file.”

Harry shrugged. “Fine. I did the spells. A banisher and a mild *confundus*.”

“And you know that performing both of those spells in a nomaj area is a breach of the International Statute of Secrecy, a breach that carries a fine at minimum?” Stevenson asked.

This, Harry thought, *would be the perfect time to use those arguments that I was going to use against Hermione.*

“Isn’t there a clause within the Statute that states that magic may be used in the defence of non-magicals or to aid the saving of lives?” Harry asked.

Hermione’s gasp was music to his ears. She’d worked out exactly what his argument was.

Jenkins and Stevenson looked at each other, a slightly uncertain expression passing across their faces for a fraction of a minute.

“There is,” Jenkins allowed. “Perhaps you should give us your version of events that would justify using those spells within a nomag-inhabited area.”

A parchment and quill had appeared in the auror’s hand to take notes.

“Hermione and I were in Central Park,” Harry began, “when there was some altercation between Iron Man and some other guy with exploding boomerangs.”

“We’re aware of the situation that occurred this afternoon,” Stevenson stated.

“Then you’ll know that with the way the two were fighting, people were getting hurt. A couple of those boomerangs were knocked off course by Iron Man and exploded where there were people. There were at least a dozen people injured before I did anything,” Harry relayed. “I saw one the boomerangs heading for the crowd and used a banisher to knock it away where it could explode harmlessly. And then I used a simple *confundus* to confuse the guy so that Iron Man could take him down quickly and easily.

“No one saw me. I made sure that Hermione was between me and anyone else,” he added.

“Under those circumstances, I believe that we can let you off with a warning today,” Jenkins said. “A note will, however, be placed in your file.”

“Make sure it doesn’t happen again,” Stevenson stated bluntly.

Harry couldn’t resist. “Make sure what doesn’t happen again? Stopping people from getting hurt? Or
helping Iron Man?”

Jenkins’ eyes darkened. “You know exactly what I mean, Mister Potter. We’ll see ourselves out.”

The door had barely closed before Hermione was on him.

“Did you want to get arrested? Mouthing off at an auror like that. Honestly!” she slapped his arm and shook her head, but before he could reply, she was pointing at the nearby couch. “Now. Sit and tell me why it is that aurors know your magical signature.”

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“In some ways I envy you, Harry,” Hermione said.

Harry looked at her, having to squint into the wind even with his glasses to do so. They were currently leaning on the rail of the ferry that was taking them back from Liberty Island. It’d been a brilliant day for them both, one of their last together before Hermione’s holiday would come to an end. They’d spent it travelling on ferries around the bay before stopping to see New York’s most famous monument. Now, they were heading home, the sun slowly sinking behind them.

Hermione was staring at the city, the tie that held her ponytail doing very little to keep her long brown hair from flying about in the wind.

“What do you mean?” Harry asked.

She looked at him then and her eyes held something that he couldn’t quite identify. There was a hint of sadness, of wistfulness, of pride and something else.

“You’ve been following your dreams, Harry,” she said. “Ever since you left Britain, you’ve been following your heart, living life on your terms and getting out of it exactly what you want. And now … now you’ve begun settling down and again you’re doing it your way. You’re doing what you want, living in a place that you love and even have a job that you enjoy.”

“It’d be pretty silly to start a business doing something that you didn’t enjoy, Hermione,” he smiled.

“True, but how many people are doing exactly what they want to do?” she asked.

“You, Luna and Neville from what you’ve told me,” he replied.

She shrugged, vaguely conceding the point.

“Come on, you know it’s true!” Harry countered. “Neville is immersed in his plants; Luna is still having fun looking for crumple-horned snorkacks and nargles and what have you. And as for you, I’ve heard how proud you are of the work you’re doing for the Ministry. Yes, I think that you’re putting in far too many hours and forgetting to take some Hermione time, but you are doing what you enjoy – researching and making life better for others. Everyone’s different, Hermione; we can all find our happiness in our own different ways.”

She bumped shoulders with him, smiling up into his face.

“And just when did you get to be so smart?” she asked.

“I’ve been to a lot of places and visited a lot of cultures; something was bound to rub off somewhere along the line,” he replied.

“I just wish that you’d found somewhere different to finally find your happiness,” she said after
they’d stopped laughing.

Harry raised a quizzical eyebrow at her.

“Even you have to admit it: it’s not exactly safe here is it?” she stated. “I’ve followed the news since you’ve been here, Harry and New York has had some crazy stuff happen. Robots blowing up one suburb; two giant unidentified monsters flattening another; all the strange crime starting to emerge. There was even some speculation about some masked vigilante in some place called Hell’s Kitchen on the television the other night.”

Harry shrugged, not sure what to say to that.

“And then there’s you, Harry. You and your saving people complex,” she added. “You know what happened the other day and if I thought that would be the last time you’d do it; I’d be lying to myself. It’s who you are, Harry Potter. A good man who can’t help but look out for people in danger, for those who need saving.”

“I can’t stop being me, Hermione,” Harry told her. “Besides, a little good every now and again isn’t a bad thing.”

“No, Harry, it’s not. And I’d never want you to be anything but the man that you are,” she smiled. “Just promise me one thing.”

“You know I’d do anything for you, Hermione,” he smiled.

“Be safe. Help others if you have to, but do it safely. I’ve seen you hurt more times than I ever want to. I don’t want my next trip out here to be because you got yourself in some sort of trouble that you couldn’t get yourself out of,” she told him.

“Really, Hermione? You want me to stay out of trouble?” he leaned in, then, to ensure that they couldn’t be overheard. “Isn’t that like asking a dragon not to breath fire?”

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The big board told the story and it wasn’t one that the two under it were all that impressed about. When one read the fourth line down, the one that said ‘JFK to London Now Boarding’, it didn’t produce a happy feeling.

“I’m going to miss you,” Harry said. “I’ve enjoyed the last couple of weeks.”

“Me, too, Harry. It feels like we’ve almost caught up and now it’s time to leave,” she agreed.

“Guess you’ll just have to come back again soon,” he stated.

“And why should I be the one to have to fly back over here?” she asked with a raised eyebrow. “You could come for a visit, too, you know. Britain is still your home and there’s a lot more than just me that would love to see you and spend time with you.”

“Yeah, I know. Maybe. One day,” he temporised.

“It’s been nearly six years, Harry, I think you can safely walk down Diagon Alley without getting mobbed,” she reasoned.

This time it was Harry’s turn to raise an eyebrow.

“They even know who I am over here, Hermione,” he told her. “The-Boy-Who-Lived or The
Chosen One or The-Man-Who-Conquered or whatever stupid name they’re calling me now is still huge over there. And I’ve never wanted fame. I just want to do my bit and live my life.”

He sighed, seeing her downcast expression.

“But for you, I’ll … I’ll make an effort. It may not be anytime soon, but I’ll visit. Promise.”

A huge smile broke out across her face and she threw herself into his arms.

“Thank you, Harry,” she whispered into his ear.

“Final boarding call for British Airways Flight one seven eight,” a near-muffled voice announced. “Please have your boarding passes ready.”

“Time to go, Hermione,” Harry said, releasing her and pushing her back slightly. “Take care of yourself.”

“I will, Harry, you too,” she leaned in and kissed his cheek before meeting his eyes. “Write. And don’t forget your promise.”

Then, with one last squeeze of his hand, she grabbed her luggage and stepped up to the gate. One final wave later and she’d disappeared into the tunnel.

Harry stayed until the plane had finally pulled away from the terminal, taxied to the runway and then taken off.

His promise. He wasn’t sure exactly which one she was referring to – the one to visit her in Britain or the one to stay out of trouble. Either way, he’d do his best to fulfil them.
In the months that Harry had been running the *Marauder’s Den*, he had seen a lot of different people walk through his doors.

The largest group were the students from Midtown High, but even within them, there were as many different types of personalities as there were teenagers. There were the sporty-types, the ‘jocks’, he’d been told that they were called. They were often the most boisterous, the centre of attention. Then there were the ones who just wanted to ‘hang out’ with their friends, sitting in small groups, talking and laughing or sharing stories. And then there were the loners, the fringe part of the crowd, like Peter, who was often there, but off by himself, watching and taking it all in.

Most of his adult customers could fit into these broad categories as well. Some came to eat and relax with their friends. Others were there in body, but not in mind, their noses buried in reports or their phones. Occasionally there were small parties and groups that seemed to take over the entire place with their personalities, regardless of how much physical space or tables they occupied.

Thus, when the small bell tinkled above the door, Harry had grown into the habit of looking up and seeing if he could categorise his latest customer.

But Harry found the latest person to walk through his door hard to categorise. He definitely wasn’t in the ‘party’ mode group, being as there was only one him. The way his eyes scanned every part of the room, taking it all in and noting the people in attendance, indicated that he could be a part of a smaller group, an idea that was squashed when he strode across the room and took a seat at one of the smaller tables by himself.

The man seemed to be a bit of an enigma. He carried himself with extreme confidence, but there was something there, something tiny, that told Harry that he was a little uncertain, a little unsure about things. And then there were his clothes. Now, Harry would be the first to admit that he had next to no fashion sense, but even he could see that the man’s clothes were out of date.

He wore a plain button-up shirt under an old-style brown leather jacket. His pants were made from some sort of linen and were held up by a wide belt. To complete his look, the man had his blonde hair neatly combed and parted.

Harry waited until the man was seated and looking at the menu, a frown appearing on his face, before approaching him, his order pad in hand.

“Hi! Welcome to the *Marauder’s Den*. What can I get you today?” Harry asked.

The man looked up with clear blue eyes, that frown still there.

“You know, I’m not sure,” he replied.

“Well, we can cater to most things,” Harry replied. “I can do you a meal or simply a dessert or a slice of some kind.”

“Would you have any apple pie, at all?” the man asked.

“Sure do,” Harry smiled. “Would you like it with cream or ice-cream at all?”

“Cream or ice-cream?” the man repeated with a small shake of his head. “No, I think I’ll pass on those.”
“And what would you like to drink? A tea or coffee? We can do latte or cappuccino or an espresso …” Harry trailed off at the lost look that appeared on the man’s face.

“You know, I have absolutely no idea what those are,” he admitted.

“How about I bring you a simple cup of coffee?” Harry suggested. “Would you like it with milk or sugar?”

“Just plain black coffee sounds great. Thanks,” he replied, placing the menu back into his holder on the table.

“Be back in a moment,” Harry promised.

By the time he returned with the man’s order, it was to find that he’d pulled out a pad and a pencil and was in process of sketching the room.

“Thanks,” the man said as Harry placed the coffee and plate of pie beside him.

“You’re welcome,” Harry replied before nodding to the sketchpad. “You’re very good.”

“Thanks, it helps me unwind. Hope you don’t mind,” the man said.

“Not at all. Stay as long as you want,” Harry assured him. “This time of day is always quiet. That’ll change later after school gets out, though.”

“School?” the man asked.

“Yeah. The students of Midtown High have kind of adopted this place to hang out at every afternoon,” Harry explained with a shrug. “Keeps them off the streets and out of trouble.”

“And I’d assume that it’s not bad for business, either,” the man smiled.

Harry simply acknowledged that with a smile of his own.

“I’ll let you get back to your drawing. Enjoy your coffee and pie and if you need anything else, all you have to do is ask,” he said.

“Thanks, I’ll keep that in mind,” the man replied.

Harry frustratedly flicked through page after page of the map book that he’d bought. Surely somewhere in it, it’d tell him where he was.

This whole adventure was beginning to grate on his nerves and he questioned the very wisdom of leaving the safe, quiet (well, sometimes quiet) Den and relying on others or the public to get around.

But, no. Somehow he’d been convinced that getting a driver’s licence and a vehicle of his own was a good idea.

‘More freedom to do what you want, go where you want,’ he’d been assured.

‘It’d be easier to take off at the drop of a hat,’ had been another recommendation, that one from his new chef, David.

In the end, after weeks of advice from his staff and then his customers when they’d cottoned on to
the idea, he’d given in.

Taking a day off, he’d gone to the nearest Department of Transport office and completed the written test. After travelling so much over the past five years, it hadn’t been hard. Really, the hardest part had been remembering those rules that pertained to driving in America, like the fact that they drove on the wrong side of the road compared to people back home in jolly old England.

A couple of lessons later and he was pronounced a natural, thus, he’d gone and taken the driving test. The tester, an older man with a very large combover that Harry did his very best to ignore, assured him that if he could drive in New York, then he could drive anywhere in the world. Harry believed it, too.

The streets around the city were pure chaos. Drivers pushed their cars into the tiniest of spaces in an attempt to get them where they wanted to be in the shortest amount of time possible. And the horns! Harry’d once heard that the shortest measurement of time in the universe was the ‘New York second’ – the time it took for the light to turn red and the first horn to sound. And after driving in the city and experiencing it himself, he wholeheartedly agreed with that sentiment.

And so, with fresh licence in hand, Harry decided to treat himself with a small road trip around the State, hired a car … and had promptly gotten lost.

He knew that he was somewhere in the county of Westchester, possibly in its northwest corner, although that wasn’t a given. Really, with the way he’d been navigating, he could be anywhere. A sign that he passed not that long ago said ‘Salem Centre’, so that was something.

After flipping backwards and forwards through the map book for nearly a minute, he finally found ‘Salem Centre’ and surprisingly, it was indeed in the northwest corner of Westchester County. Now all he had to do was to find the name of the road that he was on and he was sure that he’d be able to navigate his way back the nearest highway to get himself home. Hopefully before nightfall.

Dropping the open map book on the passenger seat, Harry put the car in gear and rolled slowly along the road, looking for something to give him more information.

And then he saw it.

A large oval metal sign was attached to a high brick fence, just beside a double metal gate. 1407 Graymalkin Lane, Salem Centre. That was the address of the school that he was outside of.

Throwing the car into park, he searched the map, his finger moving rapidly about. A sigh of relief escaped him.

“Oh,” he said to himself. “I follow this Lane to here; hang a right and keep going ’til I reach this town and go left and that should lead me straight back to the highway.”

Getting home before nightfall would be iffy, but at least he wasn’t lost anymore.

After getting lost in Salem Centre in the upper part of the state of New York, Harry found that he had an urge to visit the real Salem, or at least, the one that he’d heard about and read about back home – the one where there was a magic school and the site of one of the most famous historical events of the magical world in America that there was.

Salem, Massachusetts was only about a three-and-a-half-hour drive from New York, so Harry decided to make a weekend of it and drive up there and stay overnight. Thankfully, it being a
weekend, it hadn’t taken much to convince Gwen to take over running the _Den_ for him.

Finding a map of the area wasn’t hard – a simple stop at a travel agent was all that was needed for that. Using it, Harry drove into the city with one eye out and very quickly found a place to stay. It was a quaint, little bed and breakfast. But what made it particularly attractive to Harry was the fact that it was located in a two-storied house that could have been dropped out of seventeenth or eighteenth century merry old England.

The couple that ran the place were extremely friendly, especially when he mentioned that he’d come up simply to see the sights – apparently, it was rare for a young man to do so on his own. Before he was able to excuse himself to go see the sights, he’d been gifted with nearly a dozen recommendations of ‘must see’ places.

Knowing that he was likely to be quizzed later, Harry decided to stick to the muggle parts of the town for the rest of the day.

The tour of The Witch House that he took was a bit of a let-down, really. It was an authentic seventeenth century house, decorated with period furniture and with mannequins strategically placed to simulate what life would have been like back then. But for Harry, after living in a castle for seven years, staying in the _Leaky Cauldron_ for a summer, owning and living in Grimmauld Place, not to mention the countless trips to Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley, it felt incredibly mundane.

The Salem Witch Museum was much more interesting. It was filled with realistic sets and exhibits that detailed the Salem Witch Trials of sixteen ninety-two as accurately as possible. He’d startled slightly when the first of the signs that he was reading blurred slightly and a second sign appeared directly beside it. This one gave a magical accounting of the scene in question – the death by crushing of a man accused of witchcraft.

Now knowing what to look for, Harry spent the next couple of hours examining everything and being sure to look out for the many magical signs. Unsurprisingly, he decided that he’d learnt more in those couple of hours than he would have in a couple of years’ worth of Binns’ lectures.

The next day, after a hearty old-English breakfast that found Harry going back for seconds, and then checking out, Harry moved on to the magical side of Salem.

His first stop was one of the most famous magical schools in the world: The Salem Witches Institute of Magic. From what he’d been told, all muggles saw of the sprawling campus was a huge farm, complete with cows and a windmill. While it was interesting and was something that he could now cross off his list of places to see, Harry found it relatively unimpressive. He guessed that after living in a castle, most schools would feel that way.

From there, Harry headed back into town searching for the magical district.

This one wasn’t that hard to find, especially as he’d noticed a magical sign giving directions near the end of the tour of the Salem Witch Museum the day before.

Stepping into Old Salem Town was like stepping back in time or at least, stepping into Diagon Alley once more. Harry found himself shaking his head at how much he was comparing this visit to an historical site to back home – it was really highlighting how behind the times magical Britain was.

After his usual stop in at the bookstore where he bought a basketful of books, Harry finally succumbed and entered the one type of shop that he’d been avoiding ever since he’d lost his Firebolt all those years ago: a broom store.
He knew that this was going to be an entirely frivolous purchase – he lived in the middle of one of the largest cities in the world, for Merlin’s sake. It wasn’t as though he was exactly going to get much time to ride a broom.

The thing was, after Los Angeles and searching for the missing thestral, he’d promised himself that he’d buy himself a broom. And he hated breaking promises, even to himself.

Salem was the first magical district that he’d encountered since then, so today, it seemed, was the day.

The largest section of this store was set up for the sale of merchandise for quadpot, an American sport that was still played on brooms, but was more popular than quidditch was, even though that, too, had a following here.

“What sort of broom are you looking for?” the young man asked. “We have your average brooms for everyday people; brooms designed for sport and ones designed for different positions; racing brooms; and even brooms to learn on, if that’s what you’re after. Have you had a broom before?”

Harry couldn’t help but smile as he answered. “My first broom when I was eleven was a Nimbus Two Thousand and the next was a Firebolt, actually, it was one of the first Firebolts out of production.”

“A speed demon, huh?” the young man said. “Well, if speed’s your thing, we’ve got just the thing.”

Harry was led into the next aisle over and his eyes widened and a smile blossomed on his face. Just looking at these brooms was enough to know that they were built for speed. The footrests were angled just right; the bristles were perfectly aligned and the handle was polished to perfection.

“This is our top of the line broom at the moment,” the salesman said, going into his pitch. “It’s the latest from Nimbus, the company that made your Firebolt. It’s called the Lightning Bolt. 0-350kph in ten seconds. Comes with the newest and best wind shear charms as well as all of the standard charms that’d you’d expect.”

Automatically, Harry’s hand reached up and caressed the smooth cherry wood. It was a thing of beauty and he knew that he wanted it.

“How much?” Harry asked, his eyes still glued to the broom.

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By the time that Harry arrived back in the outskirts of New York City, the sun had already gone down. He knew his way, though, so he wasn’t worried. Oh, it’d mean taking the car back to the rental place the next day, but he’d already rung them and arranged for that.

The hundreds of high rise buildings in New York really emphasised why cities of this size were often called ‘urban jungles’. Every building was like a massive tree reaching up to the heavens and each one was trying to outdo everyone around it.
There were some, though, that simply outstripped all others. The most notable of these was, of course, the Empire State Building – the tallest in the city. Another was the Chrysler building that, even after all these decades, was still in the top five.

And then there were the newer additions. Oscorp Tower was one that reached high above its nearest neighbours. But compared to the newest building in the city, it seemed blocky and outdated.

No, the latest building was designed to be artistic as well as functional. It started wide at the base before tapering high on one side. A large section jutted out near the top which, from what Harry’d heard, was going to be a platform for helicopters to land on. Really, the only garish thing about the entire building was the giant word on the side just under the platform: Stark.

As Harry drove into town, he found that he instinctively looked for the new tower being built a scant few blocks from the Den. What he found, though, wasn’t what he was expecting.

For the very first time, Stark Tower was lit up. Windows up and down its length were lit in sharp white lights. And in a bright electric blue, the name of the tower as well as the line under it told everyone exactly who it belonged to.

It wouldn’t be long now, Harry knew, and Stark Tower would be open for business.
Seeing the tables all but empty, Harry decided to take advantage of it. He was the lone staff member in the Den today – David, his chef, having needed to take the day off to look after his sick fiancé and it still being too early for Gwen and his other High School staff to have arrived yet.

Grapping up a tray and throwing a cloth over his shoulder, he began buzzing about the tables, collecting empty plates and cups, wiping down the tables and replacing the small menu card and condiments in the little racks that he’d fashioned for the centre of the tables. Meanwhile, he kept an eye on the two couples and three lone individuals finishing their late lunches or their coffees. He also kept an ear out for the tingling of a bell, the sound that would announce someone entering the Den.

For now, the café was near empty, but he knew that in an hour or two it would be almost filled to overflowing with the afternoon crowd and especially with the teens from Midtown High who’d seemed to decide that the Den was the place to be.

It was when he was just over half-way through his task that a distant sound made him pause. He half-straightened and almost unconsciously turned towards the door, a slight frown on his face.

It came again, the distant sound of an explosion, only this one sounded louder. He was more than familiar with that sound – he’d gone to school with Seamus Finnegan, after all, not to mention that he’d fought in a war.

When a set of explosions went off in concussion, a small rumble of the ground accompanying it, he dropped the rag to the table and quick-stepped to the door.

The instant that he opened the door, the sounds of explosions multiplied. Screams of terror and cries of pain drew his eyes left. What he saw caused his wand to instantly drop into his hand.

People were running, tears of terror and screams of pain coming from every which way, even as dozens of flying things zipped past just above the nearby buildings, shooting bright blue bursts of energy into the people and buildings below, destroying everything in their path.

A dozen arms raised, pointing far up overhead had Harry looking up. What he saw there was beyond his comprehension. There appeared to be a hole in the sky. A hole through which the inky blackness of space could be seen. And a hole from which hundreds more of the weird flying bike-like things were appearing.

“Aliens! Aliens!” a terrified woman screeched as she huddled behind a nearby car, her hands on her face in her disbelief and panic.

The sight of small explosions happening far above, all emanating from a speck of red and gold, told Harry that Tony Stark’s Iron Man was fighting back.

Harry’s eyes darted between the hero fighting way above the city and the people down below being shot at, injured and killed. He’d made his decision in an instant.

Racing back inside, he slammed the doors open, instantly gaining the attention of his few customers.

“New York’s under attack!” he blurted. “Aliens! From the sky. Iron Man’s fighting them but we’re in danger down here. You need to get out of here and somewhere safe. There’s a subway entrance around the corner and down a couple of hundred feet. Get there and stay safe. The streets aren’t safe.”
The flicker of the television in the corner flashing in with breaking news showing the beginnings of the destruction emphasised his point, accompanied by the real-life sounds of explosions drawing closer had his customers deserting the Den within seconds.

A tap of the door to his apartment unlocked it and Harry wrenched it open, only to simply point his wand up the stairs. A couple of seconds later, the blue-grey cloak made from the hide of a Swedish Short-Snout shot down the stairs towards him. Swinging it around his shoulders, he snapped the clasp near his throat closed and pulled up the hood.

It wasn’t much, but he thought that the cloak should be enough to protect him – the dragon hide from whatever those aliens were shooting and the hood to hide his face when he broke every one of the International Statute of Secrets laws.

ooo00ooo

Finding people to protect had been easy; actually doing the protecting and helping, that had been hard.

Harry flung himself at the fleeing people, slid to a halt with him between them and the three flying bikes, which he now realised were more designed like a chariot and raised his wand.

“Protego!” he yelled, just as the first of the bolts of energy raced towards him.

The impact caused his arm to buck but the shield charm at least held, the energy splashing harmlessly against it. A quick glance behind him assured him that the people had kept going.

Shielding, though, he realised, wasn’t going to be enough.

The instant that the energy beam let up, Harry dropped his shield and cast, his arm a flurry of movement.

“Bombarda!” That took out the middle chariot, dropping it from the sky in an erratic pattern that had it slamming into the side of a nearby building.

“Sectumsempra!” The driver of the chariot to his left lost his arm.

“Protego!” starved off the attack from the last chariot, before with a quick twirl of his wand, “Incarcerous!” put that last chariot out of action.

Seeing that he’d bought the people some time, Harry raced after them. There had to be nearly two dozen in the group and thankfully, the ones in the lead actually had some sense. When the subway entrance came into sight, they doubled their pace, almost flinging themselves down the stairs in their haste.

Kaboom!

Harry spun around, dropped to one knee and sent out his most powerful banishing charm. The ball of light smashed into the chariot that had appeared from out of nowhere, sending it careening into the side of a building.

The instant that it was gone, Harry raced across the short distance to the car now on its side. Flames were licking around its engine and he wasn’t sure how long it’d be before the petrol tank ignited. A quick glance through the windscreen showed him a groggy-looking young woman blinking about her.
Quickly, Harry vanished the glass, leant in and cut through the seatbelt with a low-powered cutter. A levitation spell later, and he had her out. From what little he could tell, she seemed alright, although there was a cut on her forehead that was bloody. Scooping her up, Harry dashed back across the street towards the subway entrance to give her to someone there to look after.

He’d barely finished passing her off to an older gent when the sound of a motorbike caught his attention. The guy riding it was completely unprotected – no helmet or anything and worse yet, he was headed straight towards the centre of the battle.

“Hey! Not that way! You’ll get killed going that way!”

But Harry’s cry of warning was either not heard or ignored.

Tony was trying hard not to panic. His scans showed dozens more of these aliens, these Chitauri, coming through the wormhole by the minute. Shutting down the power source was a priority. But not quite as much of a priority as getting the half-dozen chariots off of his tail.

“Stark, you got a lot of strays sniffing your tail,” Hawkeye’s voice said into his ear.

“Just trying to keep them off the streets,” he replied, dodging a concentration of energy blasts by mere inches.

“Well, they can’t bank worth a damn. Find a tight corner,” Hawkeye advised.

“I will Roger that,” Tony replied.

Instantly, he changed direction and altitude, taking the group down and amongst the buildings where they’d have less time to react.

Noting a small, curved tunnel between two buildings, Iron Man shot between them. He was in and out in barely a few seconds, but that was enough for him to ensure that they were committed. And once they were, he used his extra manoeuvrability to jink around, shooting off a couple of repulsar blasts before taking off again.

Unfortunately, that manoeuvre only knocked out one of the six.

“Oh, boy,” he groused.

A second tunnel attracted his attention. This one had civilians near it, but it couldn’t be helped. Hoping that he had the chariots’ full attention, he continued with his plan. Energy blasts shot past him, slamming into the buildings and raining debris towards the civilians.

Foolishly, one man in a ridiculous cloak stepped forward and raised his hand towards Tony and the pursuing chariots.

Tony could only blink as a series of dark red, blue and yellow bursts of energy shot from the man’s hand, missing him and slamming into the chariots behind him. He watched his scans as four of the five remaining chariots either exploded or careened away to slam into the buildings or ground.

“Jarvis?” Tony asked.

“I am at a loss, Sir. Energy readings are inconsistent with anything in my databanks,” his A.I. replied.
“Log it for later analysis,” Tony ordered.

With silent thanks to the man on the ground, he shot into the tunnel as planned, ready to deal with his last pursuer.

ooo00ooo

This, Hawkeye decided, was exactly what he was born for.

From this position, he could track the entire battle, well, maybe not all of it, but enough to be able to help out his teammates.

Noting a squadron of chariots coming in from the west, he used the controls on his bow to select his next arrow. Acid, he decided.

A quick draw, aim and, when the distance and position was correct, he released, tracking its trajectory. As he knew it would be, his aim was true, striking right between the main part of the chariot and the driver’s spot. The acid did its job wonderfully, eating through the coupling and sending the two parts of the chariot in two different directions.

Hawkeye tracked the parts only until his sharp eyes locked onto the next part of the battle.

There were a pair of chariots harassing a group of civilians, shooting energy blasts down towards them. A low growl escaped him as he realised that there was nothing that he could do from here. He was just about to call in for back-up from Thor who was the closest, when he saw something inexplicable.

A golden dome appeared above the pinned-down civilians. The cloaked individual responsible for stopping the attack motioned behind him and the civilians scampered away, seeking what little shelter that he could find.

The instant that they were clear, the done disappeared as the man rolled away, coming up on his knees and returning fire with coloured energy blasts of his own.

“We have an enhanced in the field,” Hawkeye announced over the radio.

“Seen him. He’s a friendly,” Stark replied. “At least, he’s protecting the people and dishing it back out to the Chitauri.”

“Noted,” Hawkeye replied.

An extra person to keep an eye out for made his job that little bit harder, especially when this one, just like Thor and Hulk, didn’t have an earpiece to communicate with.

ooo00ooo

“Who are you?” the older, bald man gasped even as he threw his arm over the cloaked figure.

“Just a friend,” Harry replied. “Now, can you walk? We need to get you and your family to safety.

The man nodded.

Slowly, Harry helped the man limp his way along the side of the building, his wife and three small grandchildren sticking close enough to them that Harry suspected that if he stopped, they’d run straight into the back of him.
He’d found the family of five huddled in a small bakery. Around them, buildings had been smashed and crumpled to pieces by one of the giant leviathan-like creatures when it’d been killed. The old man’s leg had been pinned by fallen rubble and it seemed that his wife refused to leave him and neither of them would even consider sending their grandchildren out into the midst of a battle.

It’s taken a simple *wingardium leviosa* to free the man.

Thankfully, they were only a block from the nearest perimeter barricade that the police had set up. This far out from the battle, Harry didn’t even need to cast any protection spells to get them there safely.

As he’d been helping more and more people, he’d gradually made his way further and further away. It wasn’t that he didn’t expect there to be others in deeper in the battle, it was simply that he went from group to individual to group as he saw them.

“I suspect he’s got a broken ankle,” Harry stated to the officer who left the safety of the police cars to help the six across the last stretch of road.

“Thank you, thank you,” the old woman said, grasping at his hand.

“It was my pleasure,” Harry smiled, gently disengaging himself so that he could return to where he was most needed.

“You’re not going back in there?” the officer asked incredulously.

“There are others that need help,” Harry replied simply.

Then, with a sharp turn and a loud *crack* he apparated away.

ooo000oo

Harry arrived back near the battle and instantly looked around, to not only assess his safety, but to see if there were some people in need of some help.

What he found, though, wasn’t quite what he was expecting.

A short distance away, a masked man wearing a blue uniform with red and white stripes around his midriff and a star on his chest, carrying a similarly adorned shield, was in a slugfest with a group of aliens. Nearby, a red-headed woman in a black body suit was flipping around, alternating between shooting the aliens with her gun and shocking them with some sort of blue TASER-like thing attached to her wrist.

Noting a group of a dozen aliens creeping up on the occupied pair, obviously preparing to catch them in a cross-fire, had Harry instantly leaping into action.

Noting their exact position, he apparated to just in front of them and whipped his wand up.

*“Lumos maxima!”* he screamed, flicking the end of his wand forward to force the intensely bright light directly into the faces of the aliens, instantly blinding them.

And then he went to work before they could recover, his wand a blur of motion, spells zipping out at an insane speed.

*“Bombarda Maxima!”*

*“Flippendol!”*
“Diffindo!”

“Levicorpus!”

“Bombarda!”

“Sectumsempra!”

Every spell did damage. Aliens were blasted away, sent careening into walls and half-destroyed cars. Two were left hanging upside-down in mid-air. Others dropped where there were, vicious cuts littering their bodies.

A crackle of energy zipped by him and Harry spun about.

“Expelliarmus!”

The alien’s weapon was ripped from its hands to go clattering down the street, before a silver shield spun out of nowhere into the alien’s head, knocking it out.

Harry shot a grateful look at the star-spangled man and nodded. He nodded back, all the time that they had before they were once more being inundated with aliens to battle.

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Exactly what the giant green troll-like monster was, was anyone’s guess. The fact that it was smashing aliens and their chariots left, right and centre, though, was enough for Harry to class it as an ally. But then, anything from earth should be classified as such against an alien invasion. It almost made him wish that there were some dragons nearby; now that would have made this battle interesting.

At the moment, though, the great green guy looked as though he could use a little help. A squadron of twelve chariots were sitting just above the buildings, firing a continuous stream of blue energy projectiles at the … guy.

Harry took exception to that. His eyes narrowed as he tried to work out the best way to help. The chariots were too far away for accurate spell fire, or at least spells that would have any kind of punch to them.

If he could only provide enough of a distraction, he thought that the other guy could throw things at them or leap from building to building to get to them that way.

Throwing things, though, that was an idea that he thought could work.

Harry eyed the couple of dozen cars in a nearby carpark. A dozen featherlight spells later and he was ready. One by one, he levitated them off the ground until they hung just above him. Taking a peek out, he breathed a sigh of relief. The big guy sure seemed to be able to take a beating. And he hadn’t yet been noticed.

Gathering up his magic, Harry prepared to release it in one massive burst. As he felt the magic pool, he snapped his eyes open and jabbed his wand forward.

“Depulso!” he screamed.

Instantly, the dozen cars shot away into the air at the chariots.

Four smashed straight into the aliens, destroying them before the others were aware of the danger.
Three more veered straight into each other, sending them spinning away behind the nearby buildings where Harry heard the fantastic sound of explosions. The remaining five were forced to pull up and away.

And that, as Harry expected, was all that the green guy needed. In one massive bound, he’d leapt from the ground half-way up the nearest building. From there, a second leap took him in range to swing a massively powerful arm to catch a hold of one of the chariots, pulling it down with him as he landed on the nearby smaller building. The remaining three retreated.

Harry grinned and waved at the big guy. Instead of a returning wave, though, the great green monster flung the chariot towards him. Instinctively, Harry ducked, only to realise that it was going nowhere near him.

Instead, the wreckage of the chariot slammed head on into a chariot that was attempting to sneak up behind Harry. An instant or two later, and he suspected that he would have been shot in the back and from that distance, he had to wonder if the dragonhide would have saved him.

“Thanks!” he called.

The other guy gave a menacing grin in return before bounding off to find something else to smash.

ooo00ooo

The instant that Thor noticed the cloak of blue-grey in the midst of a group of Chitauri, he changed direction. Steve had mentioned one such as this, one who was an ally, fighting for Midgard, just as they were.

The man was bobbing and weaving, ducking and spinning about in a poetry of motion as he mixed attack with defence. But Thor could easily see that he was close to being overwhelmed. The battle had been going for some time now and those of Midgard were bound to be getting tired.

Thor dropped to the ground amongst the battle, instantly swinging his hammer up to block a blow before twisting about to dodge a shot. Throwing his hammer caught two, knocking them out and away from the battle; recalling it, dispatched another.

The Midgardian hadn’t wasted the opportunity his arrival and distraction had provided. Energy blasts erupted from a tiny stick in his hand, something that jogged a memory deep in Thor’s brain. But this was not the time for such thoughts; this was battle and only the battle mattered. To dwell on such things could easily lead one to being caught unprepared and being defeated.

When all of their opponents were down, Thor took one last look down at the small man and nodded, swung his hammer in a circle and took off, rocketing into the sky once more.

ooo00ooo

Harry was getting tired. He couldn’t remember ever having performed so many spells in such a short time. He didn’t think that he’d even done it during the Battle of Hogwarts. Still, it’d been worth it. He’d helped dozens and dozens of people to safety, not to mention battling and taking down a whole bunch of aliens.

The problem was, they simply kept coming. That hole in the sky was the problem and the key. Something had to be done to close it, not that Harry even had a clue what would be needed for that. No, he’d leave that sort of thing to those others – Iron Man and the rest of them who seemed to know what was going on.
He’d done his part and he’d keep doing it until he dropped. Currently, he was taking a short breather before he’d have to start again. Just so long as they could keep the fighting here.

A sudden roaring sound rocketed by overhead snapping Harry’s head up. He frowned in confusion as Iron Man sped past, a large white rocket of some kind on his back.

He watched as Iron Man sped towards Stark Tower before taking a sudden sharp upturn and vanishing into the hole in the sky.

Harry stood there, watching, waiting for him to return. When the chariots and aliens suddenly dropped as though their power or strings had been cut, Harry started, taking a couple of steps back.

Suddenly, the bright blue beam of energy emanating from the top of Stark Tower and disappearing into the hole in the sky cut off. The hole stuttered once before collapsing in on itself, leaving only a single speck in the sky, a speck that resolved itself into Iron Man plummeting towards the ground.

If Harry’d had his broom with him, he would have considered racing off in an effort to catch him. Fortunately, though, the great green guy came flying out of nowhere to catch the falling figure and using the side of the nearby building to slow its descent before being lost to Harry’s view.

With a soft smile, Harry dropped his head. The battle, it seemed was over. Everywhere that he could see was a disaster. Buildings were either toppled or smashed beyond repair. Alien carcasses and chariots littered the streets. The wrecks of cars dotted the streets, some in more than one piece, others still with flames licking from them. Debris littered the roads – chunks of buildings and glass and what have you.

Knowing that he was in no condition to apparate home without possibly splinching himself, Harry took a look around, orientating himself before beginning to pick his way deeper into the zone of destruction.

ooo00ooo

“Director Fury,” Maria Hill called.

Fury turned, instantly noting the look of confusion on the face of his second in command and quick-stepped across the deck of the helicarrier.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I’ve been monitoring civilian coverage of the battle and we have a potential problem,” she said. “News reports and coverage are stating that there were seven members of the team of heroes working against the alien invasion.”

“Did I hear that right?” Fury asked. “Seven, not six?”

“That’s correct, Director,” Agent Hill confirmed.

Playing her monitor like a piano, she brought up an image of a hooded figure, a blast of red energy leaping from his hand towards the nearby Chitarui warrior.

“So far, this is the best image we have of him,” she said.

“Scour the news reports and any other footage available. I want a file on this individual created yesterday,” Fury ordered.
“Yes, Sir,” Agent Hill replied.

Fury stared at the image on the monitor. Something about it seemed familiar, perhaps from a briefing he’d once had a long time ago. He’d check his own records, by then, Hill should have compiled a report that would go a long way to unravelling this mystery man.

oooo0000oo

“I do not think that we are going to find this shawarma that you speak of here,” Thor stated.

There was no denying Thor’s conclusion. The restaurant that Tony had led the group to had a Chitauri chariot lodged in its front door.


“But I feel like shawarma. How was I to know it’d been shish kababbed?” he whined.

“Really, anything’s good,” Bruce commented.

Of the six, he appeared the most tired, but how much of that was because of his Hulk-ing out and how much was because of the wrong-sized clothes that Tony had lent him was anyone’s guess.

“There’s a small café just around the corner,” Steve suggested. “It serves good food.”

“Let’s do that,” Clint said, before turning and beginning to trudge off in the direction that the Captain had indicated, forcing the others to follow.
I Know A Guy

“This place’s in remarkably good shape,” Tony commented as the six Avengers stood outside the old redbrick building.

“Doesn’t look like it got a scratch,” Natasha agreed, eyeing the shingle that hung above the door, proclaiming the place to be The Marauder’s Den.

“Who cares?” Clint shrugged. “There’s someone in there and they can make us something to eat.”

It was only by looking carefully that the others noticed that there was the shadow of somebody moving about in the café. That was enough to get the six moving. Slowly, they trudged in through the door that Steve held open.

Just inside the door, they stopped, milling about as they took in the décor. Booths lined the front of the place and along one wall, the opposite wall containing a currently unlit fireplace. Additional tables and chairs were strategically placed about the large open-plan room. A long wooden counter cum bar sat at the back of the room, stools in front of it, and shelves full of cups and glasses and ingredients of all kinds lined the wall behind it.

As Tony looked around, he couldn’t help the shiver that ran through him. Everything from the woods to the myriad black and white photos on the wall to the old-style swing doors that he assumed led to the kitchen screamed out-dated or old-world, nothing like the clean, new lines that he preferred.

“It’s got charm,” he allowed.

“Come on,” Steve said, leading the way deeper into the room, “the food and coffee here’s great.”

“You’ve been here before,” Natasha stated.

“A couple of times,” Steve shrugged.

“Oh, hi,” a man said as he emerged from one of the doors to the kitchen. “Sorry, didn’t hear you come in at first.”

The man was short, maybe even a little shorter than Tony. Currently, he was drying his hands on a towel, a towel that he promptly threw over one shoulder. The glasses that he wore in front of his emerald green eyes were something that Tony would have tossed into the bin a decade ago – all black with heavy frames. And Tony was sure that his barber would have heart palpitations seeing the bird’s nest that was his black mop.

The fact that most of them were still suited up didn’t seem to phase the guy in the slightest. The only ones who weren’t were Tony himself and Bruce who was no longer doing his green rage monster trick.

“Feel free to push a couple of tables together,” the guy said, waving at said tables.

“Many thanks,” Thor nodded as he and Steve proceeded to do just that.

Finally, when all were seated with menus in their hands, the guy reappeared just over Steve’s left shoulder.
"I’m guessing a plain black coffee for you," he smiled at the Captain.

"That’d be great, thanks. I don’t think we’ve ever been properly introduced. I’m Steve," the Avenger said, reaching around to shake his hand. "Thanks for opening up for us after all … that.”

"Harry," he replied. "And my pleasure. After what you guys did, it’s my honour to serve you. And just so you know, superheroes don’t pay here.”

"Superheroes?" Thor asked.

"The kid’s only doing his civic duty, Point Break," Tony cut in.

"But 'superheroes’, Tony?" Clint asked. "I don’t think I’d go that far.”

"You guys just stopped an alien invasion and saved the world," Harry pointed out. "In my book, that counts as being 'superheroes’. So, what can I get you?"

"I wanted shawarma. Do you do shawarma?" Tony asked.

"Shawarma?" Harry blinked. "I don’t even know what that is. I can do hamburgers, though. And fries or if you’re willing to wait a while, an Irish stew or a shepherd’s pie or even a traditional English breakfast.”

"It is past noon," Thor pointed out.

Harry shrugged. "I’ve cooked stranger things at weirder times.”

"How big’s your hamburger? Can I get one with double beef? And bacon? But no pickles, they shouldn’t even be a food group," Tony said. "And fries. Actually, just make it a couple of huge baskets of fries. Oh, and coffee, but spice it up, give me something amazing.”

"Yes! A hamburger. I have had one of those before and enjoyed it,” Thor agreed. "Although after that battle, I am unsure that one would be sufficient for my needs.”

"Can you just make it burgers all around?" Natasha asked. "And just keep them coming. Thor and Steve and Bruce are going to want a couple each. Clint, too, for that matter. I’ve seen what he can pack away.”

"And coffee. Lots and lots of coffee,” Bruce added, "if it’s not too much trouble.”

"No trouble at all," Harry replied.

He ducked off, then, only to return a few moments later with a stack of plates and forks in one hand and a covered cake stand in the other.

"The burgers and fries are going to take a while,” he said as he put the objects on the table. “I thought that this might tide you over until then.”

So saying, he whipped off the cover of the stand to reveal a whole pie.

"Apple?" Steve asked.

"Would I serve you anything else?" Harry replied, handing him a knife. "If you wouldn’t mind serving, I’ll get to work on the rest of the order.”

"This is good," Natasha sighed after taking her first bite.
“How’d you find this place, anyway, Spangles?” Tony asked.

“I spent a bit of time after … after waking up, exploring the city,” Steve replied. “Everything was just so different from what I remembered and then I stumbled upon this place. It kinda felt like coming home, at least just a bit.”

The six sat back in silence for a bit then, slowly devouring the pie and allowing their bodies to relax after the pounding that they’d been through in the last few hours.

“How’d you find this place, anyway, Spangles?” Tony asked. “Everything was just so different from what I remembered and then I stumbled upon this place. It kinda felt like coming home, at least just a bit.”

“Guys? Why does that seem familiar?” Bruce asked, pointing to a blue-grey coloured cloth draped over one of the stools at the end of the counter. “The … the other guy, he seems to be indicating that it’s … friendly?”

Bruce shook his head as he tried to explain something that didn’t even make sense to him. Tony, though, was never one to leave a question unanswered. Pushing away from the table, he crossed the room and picked it up.

What he found was a large cloak, complete with hood. Whatever it was made from wasn’t something that he was familiar with. At first, he thought that it might be leather, but no leather that he’d ever felt before felt like this.

“Guys?” he said, swinging around, holding the cloak up in front of him for the rest of them to see.

Instantly, Steve was up out of his chair and across the room.

“This is the cloak that the other guy was wearing, the one helping out in the fight,” he said.

It was at that instant that Harry returned. He backed through one of the swinging doors to the kitchen, two overloaded trays in his hands, one filled with basket of fries, the other with a platter filled with hamburgers.

He stopped dead at the sight of the two Avengers standing at the counter, the blue-grey cloak in their hands.

“I take it this belongs to you?” Steve asked.

“Worthy allies are always to be celebrated,” Thor added.

After eyeing each of the six, Harry gave a small nod and a shrug.

“I did what I could to help people,” he said.

“Thor, grab another chair and bring it over here,” Clint said. “I’ve heard it said that this table’s for superheroes.”
Harry had only just put the food on the table after Tony and Steve had returned to their seats when the door to the Den opened once more.

“Nick!” Tony beamed, waving a fry at him. “Pull up a seat, we’re celebrating.”

The two that entered wore the same black jumpsuit as Natasha with the S.H.I.E.L.D. logo on their shoulders and right breast. But that was the only similarities that the two had.

The first to enter, the man whom Tony had addressed as ‘Nick’, was a tall, bald black man whose most distinguishing feature was the eye patch that he wore over his left eye. He also wore a long black trench coat, giving him a mysterious and forbidding demeanour.

The other was a blonde-haired woman with striking blue eyes. In addition to the gun at her hip, the top of a baton could be seen peeking out from the holsters strapped to each of her thighs.

“The next time you decide to ‘celebrate’ clue me in on your whereabouts,” Nick stated.

He came to stand next to the table, looming between his two agents.

“Nice to see that you all survived,” he commented. “Well done. Loki?”

“My brother is secure within Stark’s mighty tower,” Thor replied. “I assure you that he will not be going anywhere.”

“And the sceptre and tesseract?” Nick asked.

“In one of my vaults,” Tony replied easily. “Jarvis’ keeping an eye on them.”

Nick’s eye narrowed and the tension rose, a tension that Harry decided to diffuse.

“Can I get you something to eat or drink, Sir?” he asked.

Nick turned to face him, eyeing him up and down before speaking to his agents.

“Who’s this?”

“Harry, the owner of this place,” Clint replied easily.

“He also helped us out in the fight,” Natasha added.

“Is that so?” he asked before reaching across the table to shake hands. “Nick Fury, Director of S.H.I.E.L.D. Thanks for your help.”

“My pleasure,” Harry replied.

“Director, there are two men approaching,” the blonde agent announced from her position near the window.

“Thank you, Agent Morse,” Nick replied.

The two men in red robes that entered the café took one look around and Harry sighed, a sigh that was instantly heard by all of the Avengers.

“Mister Potter, we need to have a word with you,” one stated emphatically.

“And who might you be?” Fury asked, his eye narrowed.
“Aurors Stevenson and Jenkins,” Harry replied, indicating each one. “They’re … they’re police officers?”

This time it was the two robed men whose turn it was to sigh.

“You shouldn’t have said that, Mister Potter,” Stevenson stated.

“Wait, aurors?” Fury asked.

In reply the two men raised their right arms, wooden sticks in their hands.

“Seriously?” Harry asked. “You’re going to try to take on the group that just fought and beat an alien invasion from out of space? And expect to win?”

Seeing that the group that they were facing wasn’t as defenceless as they’d first appeared the two backed off. Looking around the Den, Harry couldn’t blame them. Captain America had his shield in place, also covering Bruce; Thor had raised his mighty hammer; Clint, Natasha and Fury had guns pointed at the pair; and Tony was holding some kind of glowing disk in his right hand. Even Agent Morse looked ready for battle, having drawn her batons and holding them at the ready.

“Wait, aurors?” Fury repeated. “As in Ministry of Magic?”

“Magic?” Tony and Bruce repeated confusedly.

“Is that what you were doing, Harry? Magic?” Steve asked.


“How do you know about the MACUSA?” Auror Jenkins demanded.

“My name is Colonel Nicholas J. Fury. I’m the Director of S.H.I.E.L.D. and I have Level Ten clearance from the World Security Council. That means that I know all about your Magical Congress of the United States of America and exactly what an ‘auror’ is,” Fury replied.

“If that’s true, then you know why we’re here,” Jenkins replied.

Nick’s eye flashed to Harry.

“I can take a guess,” he growled.

The two aurors stepped forward until they were just in front of Harry.

“Harry James Potter,” Stevenson said. “You are hereby charged with performing in excess of one thousand spells in the sight of muggles, a direct and blatant violation of the International Statute of Secrecy. You are required to surrender your wand immediately and to come with us where you will be held in custody until your trial.”

Fury stepped forward, his hand slashing the air, instantly quieting the protests that had begun from the assembled Avengers.

“This man helped stop an alien invasion, saving countless lives in the process and you want to throw him in jail because of it?” Fury asked incredulously.

“We don’t make the laws, we just enforce them,” Jenkins stated.

“Mister Potter?” Stevenson insisted.
Harry’s eyes darted about the room before he visibly sagged. A flick of his wrist ejected his wand and he held it out where it was promptly taken from him, tagged and placed into a secure box.

“Feel free to stay as long as you like,” Harry said. “And if someone could check that the stove’s off and turn off the lights and lock up when you leave, I’d appreciate it.”

Cuffs were placed on Harry’s wrists then, cuffs which crackled slightly with swirling black energy.

“Don’t worry, Harry, I’ll look after the place until you get back,” Steve promised.

Jenkins grasped Harry’s upper arm and with twin cracks, the three men vanished from sight.

“Director? Tell me that that wasn’t legal,” Natasha said.

“Oh, it was legal alright, but I’m sure that there are provisions for extenuating circumstances somewhere in those laws of theirs as well,” Fury stated.

“I’d think that an alien invasion would count as ‘extenuating circumstances’,” Bruce commented.

“The kid did his part, he’s not going down for this,” Tony stated, fishing a phone out of his pocket.

“And what, exactly, do you think you’re going to do with that, Stark?” Fury asked.

“Um, call my lawyers for the kid?” Tony replied.

Fury shook his head. “The magical world is well-hidden. I only know about it because I’m the Director of S.H.I.E.L.D. and I’ll be held responsible if any of you go around talking about it. And believe me, we don’t want them mad at us. They have ways of erasing memories and all kinds of tricks that we can’t combat.”

“So, what, we’re just going to leave Harry to face this on his own?” Clint asked.

“There is no honour in that,” Thor emphasised.

“No. No, I’m not going to leave him to face it on his own,” Fury promised. “I know a guy.”

“Hermione! Hermione, you need to come home right this minute!”

Instantly, Hermione dropped her phone into her bag, took a quick look about her to ensure that she had everything that she might need – keys, handbag, a couple of basic potions, her wand – and apparated straight out of her apartment.

It was so unlike her mother to cut her off in the middle of her greeting. And to then order her home like that. Dreadfully, dreadfully wrong.

How she didn’t splinch herself, Hermione would never know. Her mind was too focused on her parents – was something wrong with her mother? Did something happen to her father? Either way, she’d know in a few moments.

Hermione appeared in her old bedroom, the designated place for her to appear, just in case her parents were entertaining. Instantly, she spun about, yanked open the door, shot through it and raced down the stairs.

“Mum! Dad!” she yelled.
“In here, Sweetheart!” her father called.

That was a good sign, she’d now heard both of her parent’s voices, so neither were too seriously injured or something worse.

Entering the loungeroom at a run, she slid to a stop at the sight of her parents sitting in front of the TV. Her dad was in his favourite armchair, one arm wrapped around her mother’s waist as she perched on the arm of the chair.

“What? What is it? What’s happened?” Hermione asked, ignoring the movie that her parents were watching.

“Look, Hermione! Just look!” her father said, her mother being unable to talk with her hand covering her mouth, a look of horror on her face.

Hermione turned confusedly to the TV. There seemed to be some science fiction show on there. The quality wasn’t great – obviously, whoever had shot this wanted to give the impression that it was happening a long way away.

Her confusion turned to a frown as she tried to piece together what she was seeing. If her parents had insisted that she come straight home and watch this, there must be something particular about it.

The scene was set in a large city. Centred above the tall buildings was a huge black hole in the sky, a beam of bright blue connecting it to the top of one of the taller buildings. From out of the mouth of the great black hole, small things were emerging, only to fly away, bursts of blue energy shooting from them. And then there was something bigger, much, much bigger. It looked kind of like a flying whale. A flying whale wearing armour.

The screen snapped to a different angle of the city and Hermione got her first good look at the things flying about the city. They looked like flying bikes or maybe chariots, being piloted by strange grey aliens.

The camera zoomed out and Hermione gasped. The building that the blue beam of light was connected to was very familiar, indeed, she’d been within a hundred metres of it not that long ago.

“Tell me this isn’t real,” she gasped, sinking to her knees.

“It’s real, Baby,” her father replied, disbelief clear in his voice. “Started a short time ago. This is live in New York City.”

“Harry,” Hermione whispered, her hands coming up to cover her mouth, a trickle of tears beginning to fall.

The three sat there in stunned silence as they watched the destruction happen. People were being shot; buildings destroyed; cars blown up.

And then the cameraman was able to show that there was resistance. There were people fighting back.

Iron Man, zipping around the city, shooting the things from the sky with his hand lasers. A man in silver armour and a bright red cape holding on to the top of the Chrysler building, raising a hammer and summoning lightning. A man shooting at the aliens with a bow and arrow. The great green Hulk jumping about, smashing everything non-human in sight. A man with a shield, named as Captain America, working with a red-haired woman in black to fight the aliens in the street. A man in a blue-grey cloak using some kind of invisible shield to protect people from harm.
“No! Go back!” Hermione yelled at the TV after the camera had switched away from the cloaked man.

“Hermione?” her mother asked.

“Harry! I’m sure that was Harry! He’s got a cloak just like that; Charlie Weasley gave it to him, it’s made from the hide of a Swedish Short-Snout dragon,” she explained.

“Harry?” her mother repeated.

“Dragon?” her father latched on to.

“Yes, and that shield could only have been done with magic. A protego, if I’m not mistaken,” she said.

The nerve level in the small room ratcheted up tenfold from then on as the three eagerly hoped to see Harry Potter still protecting, still fighting, still alive.

Finally, after who knew how long, Iron Man was seen carrying a missile through the city and then up, straight into the black hole above the city. They, like the world around them, held their breath as the hole closed until they saw the falling form of Tony Stark.

Then, the fight was over and news reporters were put on the screens, talking about the destruction and the incredible, unbelievable things that had just happened, not to mention the extraordinary individuals who’d saved them all.

The instant that they started to show repeated footage, Hermione was up and heading for the door.

“Hermione? Where are you going? I doubt that the phone lines are working in that area right now,” her father said.

Hermione shook her head. “I know that Dad. And talking to Harry wouldn’t be enough. All he’d say would be that he’s fine. No. I’m going there. I’m sure Kingsley can get me an International portkey. I’m sure that I’m owed that at least.”

“Wait up, Hermione,” her mother said. “if you drop me at your place, I can get a bag packed for you while you’re talking to Minister Shacklebolt.”

“Thanks, Mum, I’d appreciate it,” Hermione said, before grabbing hold of her mother’s arm and apparating them away.
Matt Murdock walked up the last flight of stairs with ease, a feat that not many blind people could accomplish. One would think that his lack of using his cane at this particular staircase could be due to familiarity, and in some way, that was true. The fact that he had enhanced senses, was more correct, though. Every sense, bar sight, worked for him far beyond the human norm.

Thus, upon entering his penthouse apartment, he was instantly aware that he wasn’t alone.

The sound of breathing was nearly indistinguishable, but it was there. Turning slowly, Matt placed his briefcase on the floor and faced the lounge.

The intruder was absolutely still, making it hard to tell much about them. The one thing that he was able to determine was the fact that they were seated in the right-hand single chair.

“Might I ask what you are doing in my apartment?” he asked.

“Seeing how long it would take you to notice me,” a deep male voice replied, just a hint of amusement in it.

“And?” Matt asked.

“Just as fast as I expected, perhaps even a bit quicker,” the man answered.

“That still doesn’t answer why you’ve broken in to my apartment,” Matt said. “And believe me, doing so to a lawyer isn’t your best move – they tend to know all the laws to charge you with.”

“Are you threatening me?” the man asked, that amusement back.

“If I need to. Now, leave,” Matt ordered.

“I came here to hire a lawyer,” the man stated.

“The offices of Nelson and Murdock are open between nine and five. I can even give you the address if you need it,” Matt said.

“Don’t worry, I know where you work. I’m good that way. I like to keep my eye on extraordinary people,” the man said.

Matt stiffened slightly. If that wasn’t a directed barb, then he didn’t know what was.

“Are you in some kind of trouble?” Matt asked. “I presume that that is why you’re in need of a lawyer.”

“Not me, someone else, someone just as extraordinary as you are. Perhaps introductions are in order. My name is Nick Fury and I am the Director of S.H.I.E.L.D. I, of course, know who you are, both when you’re a lawyer and when you’re not.”

Matt walked forward with ease, slipping past his furniture until he was directly across from Fury, the coffee table between them.

“If you know who I am, then you know not to antagonise me,” Matt near growled.

Fury gave a low chuckle. “Oh, I definitely know that. That’s something that you need to learn that
we have in common. As I was saying …”


“Ordinarily, nothing. While your methods are unorthodox, we can’t fault your results. Doesn’t mean that we won’t keep a close eye on you, though, just in case,” Fury stated. “But that’s not why I’m here. As I said, I’m in need of a good lawyer.”

“What’s the case and why me?” Matt asked, taking a seat.

“Tell me, Mister Murdock, do you believe in magic?” Fury asked.

ooo00ooo

Matt stood to one side of the foyer of the Woolworth Building in Broadway, New York. Currently, his hands were folded atop his cane, his briefcase on the floor beside him and his head slightly lowered.

He was certain that this was the place. He’d detected a person disappear into a door mere metres from where he stood, a door that had his senses screaming, indicating that there was something unusual about it. A passer-by had confirmed that there was indeed a carving of an owl above the door that he was looking to enter.

His problem now was finding a way through that door; after all, his new client was somewhere on the other side of it.

His head shifted slightly as the outside door opened and a woman entered. Her long hair bounced around her head and there was a faint scent of apple in the air, most likely from her shampoo. Her steps paused briefly as though she was looking for something before she resumed walking, this time on a course for the very door that Matt was waiting to enter. Noting that her hand twitched slightly against her sleeve, he knew that he’d found exactly what he needed.

Picking up his briefcase, Matt took the necessary strides to intercept her, deliberately tapping his cane a touch harder than necessary.

“Excuse me, Miss, I was wondering if you could help me?” he asked.

“I’ll try,” she replied, in a British accent, “but I’m not from around here.”

“That’s okay, I think that you have the information that I need,” he leaned in then, lowering his voice so that none but her could hear. “I’m looking for the entrance to the Magical Congress of the United States.”

He noted her start. She knew exactly what he was talking about.

“I’m sorry?” she asked.

“I’m a lawyer who needs to see his client,” Matt explained. “And I can’t do that until I locate his whereabouts.”

The woman was silent for a long few seconds and Matt could feel her gaze focussed upon him.

“What’s the name of this client?” she asked suspiciously.

“Harry James Potter,” Matt replied and her sharp intake of breath confirmed his suspicion that she
knew who his client was.

“You know Harry?” she asked.

“Not yet. But we can change that quite easily if you help me,” Matt pointed out.

“And you’re his lawyer? Is Harry expecting you? Who hired you?” she asked.


He could almost see her eyes narrowing at the way he’d answered her questions and he smiled slightly.

“Right. I’m Hermione Granger. I’m Harry’s best friend and if you’re here to help him, then we best get you to him,” she stated forcefully.

She reached for his elbow but a simple sway was enough to keep her hands away.

“I can make my own way, as long as you’re able to get us in,” Matt told her.

“I suspect that physical contact will make the passage easier,” Hermione counted.

A slight nod of his head allowed her to take his elbow and walk them the last few metres to the door that he’d been staking out. Her hand rose and something, a stick he thought – her wand? – appeared briefly before disappearing and they stepped forward.

There was a sensation that they were spinning in place, the door revolving around them almost too fast to comprehend, before they stumbled forward, out the other side into a place that was far too large for what the Woolworth Building should be able to accommodate.

“Why magicals insist on the most unpleasant methods of travel is beyond me,” Hermione muttered, obviously a long-held resentment that she held.

Once again, Hermione made to grasp his elbow and he evaded her with a small sway.

“Lead the way, I’ll be right behind you,” Matt said.

He could feel her looking before she shrugged and took a moment to look around the great hall before striding off to their left. Instantly, Matt moved with her, allowing her, as the magical, to be half a step in front.

“Good morning,” Hermione said to the man behind a large counter.

The man appeared to be slightly higher than they were, even though he was sitting, leading Matt to believe that he was on an elevated platform.

“Can I help you?” the man asked.

“We’re here to see Harry Potter,” Hermione replied. “I believe that he’s being held here by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.”

“Sorry, Miss, no one gets to see the prisoner,” the man replied.

“What about his lawyer?” Matt asked, stepping forward.

“Lawyer?” the man repeated, the sound of his clothes moving, followed by the swish of hair and the
scratch of skin telling the story of the man’s movements. “I haven’t been told about any lawyer.”

“My name is Matthew Murdock, from Nelson and Murdock Law Offices. I have been retained as Mister Potter’s lawyer,” Matt stated.

“And I’m his assistant, Hermione Granger. I’m from the British Ministry of Magic,” she said.

Matt raised a single eyebrow at that, however, for now, he didn’t question it.

“Well, I guess everyone’s entitled to a lawyer,” the man mused. “Right, let me see your wands so that I can register them, then I’ll give you a pass to go down to the DMLE.”

Matt waited patiently as Hermione handed over her stick (so, he was right).

When the man turned to him expectantly, Matt answered the unasked question.

“I don’t have a wand; I’m non-magical.”

“You’re a nomaj? Well, I never. How’d you get in here, then?” the man asked suspiciously.

“I escorted Mister Murdock,” Hermione replied. “Unless you’d prefer to bring Harry out to the foyer of the Woolworth Building?”

“No, no, can’t have that,” the man backtracked. “Right, put these on and follow the signs to the DMLE. It’s on Floor Seven. They’ll assist you from there.”

A deft hand was required to snatch the badge from the man before Hermione could take it and attempt to pin it to him. Not that there was a pin, he found, nor anything sticky on the back. However, when Matt attempted to copy his new partner’s motions by holding the badge to his jacket, he found that it stuck there by itself automatically.

Magic, he grunted silently. Guess I’m going to have to get used to that pretty quickly.

Harry barely managed to stand before a brown-haired missile impacted his chest, strong arms squeezing around his middle.

“Hi, Hermione,” he said, “what are you doing here?”

Instead of replying, she pulled back, looked him in the eye and smacked his shoulder.

“You and your saving people thing!” she accused. “You could have been killed.”

“Hey, I’m good. Fine, even. Not a scratch on me,” Harry protested.

“Thanks to Charlie Weasley,” she countered.

Harry gave her a confused look. “Charlie? What does he have to do with anything?”

“I saw you on TV, Harry; you were wearing the dragon-hide cloak that Charlie gave you,” she replied.

“Huh,” he grunted, “so I was. I was on TV?”

“The whole invasion and battle was,” she replied.
“You know that you didn’t have to come all the way over here just because I got arrested on some stupid charges. You know as well as I do that I have a legitimate defence,” Harry said.

“I didn’t come here because of that,” she replied. “I didn’t find out that you had been arrested until I arrived in America. I came because I was worried about you and that I had no idea how badly you were hurt – or even if in fact you had been hurt – and there was no way to contact you.”

“I’m glad to hear that you believe you have a defence for your situation,” the man that Harry had barely noticed entering with Hermione said.

Harry gently pushed Hermione to his side so that he could see the man properly. He was taller than Harry and he had the impression of a lot of strength hidden under his business suit. The man also carried a walking stick, which, when combined with his dark glasses, told Harry that he was blind.

“Harry Potter,” he said, automatically sticking out his hand and instantly feeling foolish for doing so. Surprisingly, though, the man clasped his hand unerringly.

“Matt Murdock. I’m your lawyer,” the man introduced himself.

“Lawyer?” Harry echoed. He looked at Hermione for an explanation.

“Don’t look at me, I only just met Mister Murdock in the foyer of the building,” she said. “He’d been hired for you before then.”

“O-kay,” Harry said slowly. “Mind telling me who hired you to be my lawyer?”

“Nick Fury on behalf of S.H.I.E.L.D.,” Matt replied. “And I’ve actually got to thank you. S.H.I.E.L.D.’s put me on retainer, a nice big fat retainer at that.”

“No problem?” Harry replied, not quite sure how he was supposed to respond to that. “I mean, I only met Fury the once, just before the aurors turned up, and that was only for a few minutes. I don’t quite understand why he’d go to all that trouble for me.”

“You, Mister Potter, are now known to the world as one of the Avengers, the group of extraordinary people responsible for saving the world,” Matt smiled.

“The world knows who I am?” Harry asked panickily. “I mean, I know I screwed up leaving my cloak out for the Avengers to find, but I honestly thought that the whole neighbourhood was deserted. I never pegged them for telling the world who I am.”

“The world does not know your true identity,” Matt reassured him, “just that someone was there with extraordinary powers wearing a very distinctive cloak. The press seems to be having a field day trying to find information about you, information that your fellow Avengers are being very careful with. Don’t be surprised if the press or the public have given you a moniker by the time we get the charges dropped. Speaking of, I take it that you are aware of the charges against you and you even have the basics of a defence in mind?”

“Well, obviously, Harry’s been charged with breaking the International Statute of Secrecy,” Hermione began, a fact that Harry nodded his agreement with.

“Stop,” Matt commanded, holding up one hand. “I haven’t had time to learn the laws of the Wizarding World. Miss Granger, you’ve just been hired as my assistant. Now, tell me the basics of this Statute so that I know what we’re dealing with.”
“The Statute has been in effect since sixteen ninety-two and decrees that all aspects of the wizarding world – our magic, the way we dress, magical plants and creatures – must be hidden from the non-magical world at all costs,” Hermione replied.

“Okay, basically everything to make sure that your world and culture stay hidden,” Matt mused. “I can understand how breaking it would be a big deal. I can also see how Harry’s actions would have blown that right out of the water. Tell me about the defence that you believe would work in this instance.”

“Clause Seven,” Harry stated. “I’m sure that Hermione knows the exact wording, but it basically says that magic may be used in front of mugg… er, non-magicals if there is an imminent threat to life.”

“Which I would think an alien invasion definitely qualifies as,” Matt nodded. “The fact that the world does not know your identity or where your abilities came from, plus the fact that you were working in conjunction with others with superhuman abilities, will also be useful to us.”

Matt moved unerringly to the table and took a seat, laying his briefcase on the table.

“Let’s get to work,” he said. “The first thing that I’m going to need is the exact wording of the laws – the Statute and any relevant Clauses.”

ooo00ooo

“Alright, Jarvis, what have you got for me?” Tony asked as he entered the great glass room filled with every scientific device imaginable.

This wasn’t Tony’s first choice of places to hang out and work, but Malibu was too far away and his main workshop in the Tower was partially still under construction and the parts that had been ready had been damaged in the battle.

“New York is a warzone, Sir,” the cultured voice replied. “Every building within a five-block radius of Stark Tower has been damaged in some way, many will need to be demolished and rebuilt. The streets within that zone have also been heavily damaged keeping emergency services from even entering. There is a lot of debris, both of Earth origin and Chitauri origin, throughout this zone.

“Damage is much more limited between blocks six and eleven, once again using the Tower as an epicentre. There is no report of damage further out than that.”

“Well, that’s something,” Tony deadpanned. “Who’s cleaning up the mess?”

“The army and S.H.I.E.L.D. are both on site, each claiming jurisdiction for the alien technology,” Jarvis replied. “Emergency services are doing what they can and building contractors, including those from Stark Industries, have begun the clean-up effort.”

“Good. Good. Now, the important bit. What about the Avengers?” Tony asked, his hands busy as he flicked through holographic displays showing footage of not just the battle, but the clean-up work as well.

“As instructed, I have made sure that that name has been spread widely throughout social media and with the press,” Jarvis stated.

“Excellent, can’t have the press coming up with their own names,” Tony commented. “Their choices would be sure to be atrocious. I mean, Iron Man is kinda cool, not terribly accurate, but cool. What about the others?”
“The alias’ of Miss Romanov and Mister Barton have been made known. Thor retains his name. The presence of Captain America has caused some wide-spread interest. And Mister Banner’s nickname of the ‘Hulk’ was decided upon during his last outing in Harlem,” Jarvis replied.

“What about our new friend; Potter?” Tony asked, seeking out news articles related to the magical one.

“The press has yet to decide upon a name for Mister Potter,” Jarvis replied.

“Hit me,” Tony ordered.

“His magical status has been speculated upon,” Jarvis replied, “leading to such names as Wizard …

“Boring,” Tony decided.

“Sorcerer …”

“Eh, too normal,” Tony stated, cocking up his nose.

“Magician …”

“Pass.”

“Mage …”

“Stop! That one has potential. Mage,” Tony mused rolling the word around his tongue and brain for a minute. “Right. That’s the one. Run with it. You know what to do.”

“Indeed, Sir,” Jarvis replied.

ooo00ooo

“All rise!”

Matt stood behind the desk that he’d been provided, his assistant beside him doing the same, as the five-person panel of judges filed in from a door to the right.

His heightened senses told him that the large oval room was filled to capacity with observers. The sound of popping cameras and the smell of unknown chemicals told him that there were dozens of reporters also present. Both of these facts were unsurprising given the extreme nature of the case within the magical world.

“Please be seated,” the magical bailiff stated. “This session of the Magical Congress of the United States of America is called to session. There is one item on today’s docket, the trial of the Magical United States of America on behalf of the International Confederation of Wizards against one Harry James Potter. Bring in the prisoner.”

Movement from a door to the left heralded Harry arriving and being placed in a chair inside of a magical dome. Hermione had told him that the dome would allow sound to travel into and out of it, but magical spells couldn’t be performed from inside it, nor would they pass through the barrier. The sound of dozens of cameras popping away accompanied every step that Harry made.

“If it pleases the court, I bring a petition,” a man spoke up from just the other side of the barrier between the court proper and the observer’s seating area.

“Your name, Sir?” the middle judge asked.
“Peter Silverbrush,” the man replied. “I’m here on behalf of the British Ministry of Magic, Office of the Minister for Magic.”

Beside him, Matt felt Hermione stiffen. There was surprise in her posture; she obviously knew nothing about this petition.

“What is this petition?” the same judge asked.

“The Minister for Magic requests that, as Mister Potter is a British citizen, that he be handed over to us for trial and judgement,” Silverbrush said.

Matt felt Hermione lean closer to him.

“Harry’s shaking his head,” she whispered.

Instantly, Matt was on his feet.

“Your honours, Mister Matthew Murdock. Counsel for the Defence. We wish to state that we are happy for Mister Potter’s alleged crimes to be judged here and today by yourselves.”

The five judges conferred briefly before the lead judge delivered his verdict.

“Even if we were inclined to accept your petition, Mister Silverbrush, the fact that Mister Potter is willing to place himself under our authority, plus the fact that the charges stem from actions on our soil, lead us to reject your petition.

“Bailiff, read the charges.”

The Bailiff stepped forward, the crinkle of paper in his hand.

“Harry James Potter is charged with breaking the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy by performing one thousand, two hundred and three spells in the vicinity of non-magicals in the city of New York, in the state of New York on the date of twelve May, two thousand and twelve. He is further charged with violating the dress code as defined by the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy when magicals are in contact with non-magicals.”

As soon as the charges had been read, before Harry had even been asked how he wanted to plead, Matt was on his feet.

“With respect, your honour, the Defence does not want to take up any more of your valuable time than is necessary. With that in mind, we would like to ask that all charges be dropped immediately.”

A loud buzz rippled around the room as the incredulous statement was made.

“It was my understanding that, even though you are a nomag, you are a lawyer,” the lead judge stated. “Is it normal practice in the non-magical world to have such serious charges dropped before the trial has even been properly begun?”

“No, Your Honour,” Matt replied. “However, due to the extenuating circumstances, that is the wisest course in this instance.”

“Wisest course?” one of the other judges asked in disbelief. “I suggest that you sit down and let this trial continue in its proper manner before we fine you for contempt.”

“With all due respect, Your Honours,” Matt interjected, firmly staying on his feet, “Clause Seven of the International Statute of Secrecy clearly states that ‘magic may be used in front of muggles in
exceptional circumstances, including imminent life and death situations’. This is what Mister Potter did.

“The entire world was at war with an invading alien army. The entire world. Not just the non-magical world, but the magical world as well. We have the resources to show you footage of what happened that day. We can call the man responsible for forming the Avengers, a group of extraordinary individuals intent on saving the world. And while my client was not originally a member of said group, his actions that day have made him one.

“Mister Potter saw that lives were in danger and he acted to save those lives using whatever means he had at his disposal, including magic. Yes, he wore a cloak made from dragon-hide, a cloak which saved him from harm and very probably his very life in the battle due to its magical strength.

“My colleagues have been monitoring the world’s reaction to Mister Potter’s appearance on the world stage since that day. Yes, his extraordinary gifts have been remarked upon. No, the world does not know where they come from or that he is a wizard, although there has been some speculation on that point. No, the world does not know about you or your society. They believe that, like the other members of the Avengers, he is unique. A single magical user within a world of normal people, a world that now also contains extraordinary people, much like himself.

“Mister Potter acted that day to save lives, not just the lives of those in New York, in the direct and immediate line of fire from the Chitauri, but ultimately the lives of every man, woman, child, witch, wizard and creature on the planet.

“On that basis, on the basis of your own laws, I ask you once again to drop the charges against Mister Potter.”

Only then did Matt sit. Impassioned pleas weren’t unknown to him in the courtroom, and yet there was something a little different with the one that he just gave. And while he ultimately hoped that it would succeed, he was quite prepared to go through all the points more slowly, calling experts as they were needed to prove his case if needed.

Matt easily tuned out the continuous babbling throughout the chamber as he focussed his senses on the judges. The fact that there appeared to be some heated argument amongst them told him that his speech had indeed had some effect.

Finally, after nearly five minutes, the judges straightened, nodded to the bailiff and silence was restored to the court through the use of a cannon-like blast produced from the bailiff’s wand.

“Your case, Mister Murdock, is well-thought out,” the lead judge said, inclining his head in acknowledgement. “There is indeed a very strong case as to why these charges should be dropped; in fact, we find ourselves questioning why this case was brought to us in the first place. The laws are clear, as Mister Murdock pointed out. Clause Seven gives the exceptions under which the International Statute of Secrecy can be broken. And this situation clearly falls into that category.

“Mister Potter, we offer you our thanks not only on our own behalf, but on behalf of all witches and wizards, for the many, many lives you saved. We have seen the footage from that day and it has been noted that not once did the hood of your cloak slip allowing any part of your face to be captured by non-mag recording devices.

“You also have our apologies and assurances that the reason that this case reached this far will be investigated.

“All charges against Harry James Potter by the Magical United States of America on behalf of the
International Confederation of Wizards are hereby dismissed.”

It was the judge’s wand this time that let off the cannon-like bang and Matt instantly relaxed into his chair, very pleased and more than a little surprised that his gambit had paid off.
“You know, seeing it on TV is one thing, but seeing it with my own eyes …” Hermione trailed off, shaking her head.

Currently, she and Harry were standing at the edge of the roof above Harry’s apartment looking down on the destruction. Even though the battle had happened a few days ago, the clean-up crew was still working away at the edges. From what little they could see, it seemed that something big, most likely a bulldozer, had pushed their way through towards the centre of the area, leaving huge piles of cars, masonry and other debris piled up on the side of the road. Their best guess was that that way, emergency services to make it in to any trapped or injured people still in the zone.

“I still can’t believe that it survived intact,” Harry happily said, not for the first time since the two had arrived there.

After leaving the trial and the building that housed the Magical Congress of the United States, the pair had managed to slip away from Harry’s lawyer, Matt, into an abandoned alley. Then, after secreting themselves behind a convenient dumpster, had apparated home or at least to the roof of Harry’s home.

“Some of the glass panes look a little singed in that corner, though, so it may have only taken a glancing shot at worst,” Harry continued as he examined his greenhouse in minute detail.

“Come on, Harry, let’s get inside,” Hermione said, having finally turned away from the mesmerising view of what was left of the city.

Giving a nod, he crossed to the door and gave it a tap with his wand, magically unsealing it before the two were able to enter the stairwell. Instead of stopping in his apartment, though, Harry led the way down to the Den, after all, the last time that he’d seen it, it had been filled with a whole bunch of people. And while said people were heroes, that didn’t mean that Harry trusted them to lock up after themselves or even to clean up the mess that they’d made.

The sight of the café looking the way that it was supposed to, threw him at first. The two tables that had been pushed together for the Avengers were back in their places, their chairs neatly placed around them. Not a dirty dish or cup was to be seen anywhere. His eagle eye could even tell that the lock on the door had been engaged.

Leaving Hermione behind, Harry strode across the room and pushed open the nearest swinging door to the kitchen. Just like the main section of the café, in here was in pristine condition as well. Every pot, every pan, every cup and plate and utensil had been washed and put away. The benches had even been wiped down.

Harry had no idea who’d done it all, but he was incredibly grateful to said unknown person. They’d just saved him hours of work; the very thought of having to clean some of those pans after them being left to sit for days had been enough to give him nightmares.

“Harry?” Hermione called. “I think these are for you.”

Instantly, Harry backed out of the doorway and crossed to where Hermione was examining a small pile of notes in her hand.

“They were on the bench,” she said, handing them over.
Had my people tidy up the joint for you. We’ll be in touch. Fury.

“Well, that explains that,” Harry murmured as he shuffled the first note to the back.

Party. My place. 7pm. The day after you get released from prison. Don’t worry, I’ll know when. Bring a guest, if you want. And your lawyer. Tony.

“Huh,” Harry grunted. “Want to go to a party at Stark Tower?”

Hermione beamed at him. “And get a chance to meet some superheroes? Try and keep me away.”

The last note answered a question that had been bugging Harry since the aurors had arrived to arrest him.

Harry, I’ve put your cloak in the bottom cupboard on the very left in the kitchen. Figured you wouldn’t want it left out for others to see. Steve.

“That was thoughtful of him,” Hermione said, reading over his shoulder. “I assume Steve is Captain Steve Rogers?”

“Yeah, otherwise known as Captain America,” Harry replied. “He’s been in here quite a few times, not that I knew who he was then.”

“Well, at least you can thank him tomorrow night,” Hermione pointed out.

“Yeah,” he replied, then, “come on, let’s head up and I’ll make us some dinner.”

Harry and Hermione had barely seated themselves for said dinner, a simple steak and salad, when there was a knock at the door. For a brief moment, their eyes connected and it was easy to see that both had a look of mild annoyance in their eyes, not to mention some curiosity at who could have made it through the mess that was New York City to call on them.

Harry had only made it half-way across the room before the knock came again. Lengthening his strides, he reached the door seconds later.

“Yes,” he asked as he opened the door. The blonde-haired woman in the black jumpsuit looked vaguely familiar. It wasn’t until he noticed the S.H.I.E.L.D. logo that her uniform sported that the memory clicked. “I know you! You were in the Den the other day with Fury.”

“Agent Barbara Morse,” she introduced herself with an affirming nod. “May I come it?”

In answer, Harry stepped to the side and gestured that she do so.

“I’m sorry, we’ve not long gotten home and have just begun dinner,” Harry apologised. “I can get you something if you like.”

“Thank you, no, I ate before I came,” Agent Morse replied.

Harry noted her sharp blue eyes fix on Hermione before she turned back to him. “Don’t let me keep you from your meal.”

With a nod, Harry led the way across to the table where they both sat.

“Hermione Granger,” Hermione said, reaching across to shake the Agent’s hand.
“Bobbi Morse, of S.H.I.E.L.D.” she replied.

“What can we do for you, Agent?” Harry asked.

“I’m here to debrief you, Mister Potter,” she stated, opening the briefcase that she’d carried in to extract a file and a pen.

“Debrief me?” Harry asked, sharing a look with Hermione.

“Indeed. After your actions with the Avengers, the world has taken note of you. We at S.H.I.E.L.D. would like to help you with that,” Agent Morse stated.

“O-kay,” Harry said slowly. “Exactly how do you intend on doing that? From what Matt and Hermione have told me, no one knows who I am or the extent of what I can do. I’m sure that I can look after myself.”

“Perhaps in the magical world,” she replied, then, after the startled look that Harry and Hermione shared, “I have been cleared to know about the magical world.”

“How did you get such clearance?” Hermione asked intently. “I was under the impression that only Director Fury had such clearance within your organisation.”

“Ordinarily that would be true, but as the newly appointed liaison between S.H.I.E.L.D. and the Avengers, of which, you, Mister Potter, have become a part, I was given the necessary clearance. And as your liaison, I report back to Director Fury who will be running … interference for S.H.I.E.L.D. and the Avengers if the MACUSA try to stick their noses in where they’re not wanted or needed.”

Harry shook his head. “Look. I fought alongside that group once, mostly on the periphery, trying to help the ordinary people who were getting hurt and killed, and I met them once. How does that make me one of them?”

“In simple terms, the fact that you fought for the world alongside the rest of the Avengers meant that you were de facto labelled as a part of the team. The fact that Tony Stark, who seems to have become the spokesman for the Avengers, has stated that you’re one of them, cemented that fact. The world has seen the footage of you working alongside them, fighting together and for them. You are an Avenger. How much of an involvement you have with the team is up to you. Unless, of course, you tell me right here and now that even if the need was there, that you’d stay away from the fight.”

Hermione snorted and Harry gave her a sour look.

“Harry? Stay away from the action?” Hermione said, laughter clear in her voice. “Agent Morse, there’s no way that you could keep him away. He’s always had a ‘saving-people thing’. It’s an integral part of who he is.”

“Fine. So apparently, I’m an Avenger, whatever in Merlin’s name that means,” Harry groused. “So what do you need from me?”

“As your liaison, it is in our best interest that we know as much about you as possible so that if you ever need help, resources or training, that we can provide it.”

“Makes sense, Harry,” Hermione said, laying a hand on his arm.

At her touch, he sighed and nodded. “Ask away, Agent Morse.”
“This is a simple personnel file. We get this filled out now and that’ll be it for today,” she said, tapping her folder before opening it.

“Your name is Harry James Potter, correct?” she asked and quickly received a nod. “Have you ever been known by any other names? This includes personal names, alias’, nicknames or titles.”

Once again, Hermione snorted, causing him to narrow his eyes at her.

“Yes,” he replied shortly.

“This will go a lot quicker if you answer the questions properly, Mister Potter,” Agent Morse stated.


“They’re titles within the wizarding world,” Hermione explained, “specifically within magical Britain, although they are known throughout the rest of the magical world as well. They almost all relate to a magical civil war that engulfed magical Britain in the eighties and nineties until Harry stopped the Dark Wizard responsible for it all.”

“I may want to visit that topic some more another time,” Agent Morse stated, making copious amounts of notes on her form. “Next relates to family and very close friends.”

“Why do you need to know that?” Harry asked, his eyes narrowed.

“So that we can keep them safe if the need arises,” Agent Morse replied. “For example, in the recent crisis, as soon as S.H.I.E.L.D. learned that Loki was involved, we had an astrophysicist by the name of Jane Foster moved to a safe, secure location simply because she is a very close friend of Thor’s.”

Harry nodded his understanding. “I have an aunt and uncle that I haven’t seen in over a decade and have no desire to, either. My cousin, Dudley Dursley, and I get on alright, I guess. He lives in Penzance, Cornwall. Other than that, it’s just Hermione and her parents, I guess. There’s a few others, but they’re safely hidden away in the wizarding world.”

“Very well. I will need to get details for both yourself and your parents, Miss Granger,” Agent Morse stated. “Next is education and jobs.”

“I finished at Hogwarts … er, magic school, in ninety-nine,” Harry began.

“That seems a bit late, given your age,” Agent Morse commented.

“Yeah, well, I should have finished in ninety-eight, but there was a war on and I wasn’t able to go to school that last year,” Harry explained. “And then it took half a year to repair the school and in some parts, rebuilt the castle before we could all go back.”

Agent Morse nodded and made additional notes on her form. “And after that?”

“After that I went into auror training.”

“Auror? I’m sorry, I don’t know that term,” Agent Morse said, shaking her head.

“‘Auror’ is the name for magical police; actually, it’s a little more than that,” Hermione explained. “Think of it more as a combination of policework and special forces.”

“Okay. And how long did this training last?” she asked.
“Three years,” Harry replied. “And then I did the job for nearly another three years before it got too much – the fame thing is atrocious over there, people always gawking at me and wanting to shake my hand and expecting more and more and greater and greater things from me. Made doing the job near impossible. So, I got out. The only other job I’ve had is here, owning and running the *Marauder’s Den*.”

“If my maths is right, that leaves a gap of five, nearly six years,” Agent Morse pointed out.

“Yes,” Hermione said sourly. “Harry decided that it’d be nice to leave everything and *everyone* behind and go on a world tour.”

“Hey! I asked you to go with me!” an indignant Harry protested.

“And you know why I couldn’t,” she retorted.

“So you travelled the world before settling down here?” Agent Morse neatly cut off the impending argument.

“Yeah, that’s about the gist of it,” Harry replied.

“Abilities. We'll leave that as simply ‘magic’ for now, unless you have something else?” Agent Morse asked.

Harry’s slight pause was enough to have Hermione narrowing her eyes at him. “No, nothing else.”

“Have you got a suit? Obviously, that blue-grey cloak would be a part of it, but something specific to go under it?” Agent Morse asked.

“A suit?” Harry asked flatly.

“Indeed. Having an outfit will help identify you as an Avenger. The cloak is a good start, but something more would be good.”

Harry’s eyes flicked towards his bedroom.

“I might have something. Let me think on it,” he answered.

“And obviously, your code-name is ‘Mage’,” Agent Morse stated.


“Ah, yes, you’ve been held incommunicado from the media the last few days,” Agent Morse realised. “The public with, we suspect, input from Stark, have decided that you are ‘Mage’, obviously because of your magic. All of the Avengers have one: Iron Man, Thor, Captain America, Hulk, Hawkeye and Black Widow.”

“Aren’t those last two S.H.I.E.L.D. agents? Do all agents get a code-name?” Harry asked.

“Not all, just the best of us,” Agent Morse smiled.

“I take it you have one?” Hermione asked.

“Mockingbird,” she replied. “Because of the way I like to ‘play’ with my opponents by mocking them. But it is only used in combat situations. It helps keep our identities secret.”

“Fine. I can see the benefits in it then. Guess I’m now ‘Mage’. Great, another silly name to go with
all the rest,” Harry groused.

Agent Morse pulled out a black business card and passed it over. If it was held in just the right angle, the S.H.I.E.L.D. logo could be seen on it. On the back was a single phone number.

“If you ever need me, ring that. Better yet, put that number into your phone and destroy the card,” Agent Morse stated.

“Will do,” Harry nodded. “And if you need me?”

“We’ll be in touch,” Agent Morse smiled secretively as she stood. “Thank you for your time, Mister Potter, Miss Granger.”

“It was nice meeting you,” Hermione called as Harry escorted her to the door.

Then, after one last nod at each other, Harry closed the door behind her.

“Well, that was interesting,” Harry said sarcastically.

“Oh, I don’t know, ‘Mage’, I’d say that the ‘interesting’ is just getting started,” Hermione replied with a mischievous smile.

ooo00ooo

An insistent knocking on his door had Harry stumbling out of bed the next morning. In his still half-asleep mode, somehow, he managed to snag his bathrobe as he left his bedroom, although getting said robe on was a whole other cauldron of potion and took until he was finally standing in front of his door to accomplish.

Just as the infernal knocking started again, Harry yanked the door open to find a startled Gwen Stacy standing there, one hand still raised in the act of knocking.

“Gwen? What are you doing here? Do you have any idea what time it is?” Harry asked.

“Eight o’clock,” she replied easily. “Ordinarily we’d be opening up about now.”

Harry shook his head at her. “We’re not going to open today; not much point really.” Which led Harry’s brain to start thinking a bit clearer. “Hang on, how’d you get here, anyway? I wouldn’t think it was exactly safe crossing through everything out on the streets at the moment.”

“Dad brought me,” Gwen answered easily as she entered the apartment at Harry’s gesture. “The police have set up roadblocks all around the area so that only construction crews and official people are allowed in. Luckily for me, my dad’s one of those official people.”

“Is he waiting downstairs?” Harry asked, half expecting to the police captain standing in his doorway when he looked.

“No, he’ll be back in a bit, he’s doing a drive around to make sure no one’s snuck in to do some looting or something,” Gwen replied.

“Okay. Now, are you going to tell me what you’re doing here?” Harry asked.

“Well, there’s a number of reasons, really,” Gwen replied. “Firstly, I had to see for myself whether the Den had been damaged or not; wanted to make sure that I’d still have a job to come back to when the streets reopen.”
“You’ll always have a job here, Gwen, as long as you want it. There’s no way I’m letting my best employee go,” Harry smiled.

Gwen ducked her head slightly, her bright blue eyes shining and her cheeks gaining a dash of pink.

“I also wanted to check that you were okay. This place isn’t too far from Stark Tower and that’s where the heaviest stuff happened. And when I hadn’t heard from you, well … I checked with Dad and your name hadn’t come up on any lists of injured or … or dead that he’d seen,” she explained.

This time it was Harry’s turn to duck his head.

“Sorry about that, I should have thought of letting you and the others know that the Den and I are alright,” Harry said.

“Yes, you should have. I had to come all the way from England to find that out,” a voice stated from behind him. “Hi, I’m Hermione.”

“Gwen Stacy,” the younger girl said as they shook hands.

“Gwen was my first and best employee,” Harry explained.

“I know, Harry, you’ve told me about her before, remember?” Hermione smiled.

“About that,” Gwen interrupted, “I also wanted to tell you that I may have to reduce my hours here somewhat.”

“Oh?” Harry asked, not sure that it mattered all that much at the moment with the café being closed, but later, it would.

“Yes,” she said and a massive smile slowly formed on her face. “I got the internship!”

“You did! That’s great, Gwen. I know how much you’ve wanted it,” Harry said, happy for her.

“Internship?” Hermione asked.

“It’s with Oscorp. I’m going to be working in their research department, most likely with Doctor Curtis Connors. He’s a brilliant scientist, specialising in cross-species genetics.”

“Sounds amazing!” Hermione replied. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you. I start next week,” Gwen said. “As soon as I know my schedule, I’ll let you know, Harry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Harry replied. “We’ll work around your schedule.”

“Gwen?” a deep male voice asked from the door.

“Here, Dad,” she called.

“Captain Stacy,” Harry nodded to the uniformed man.

“Good to see you in one piece,” Captain Stacy said. “And your building made it through as well, which is incredibly remarkable.”

“We were lucky,” Harry shrugged.
“You ready, Gwen?” Captain Stacy asked.

“Yes, Dad. See you later, Harry. Nice to meet you Hermione,” Gwen said as she crossed to the door.

“She’s nice,” Hermione said once the Stacys had left.

“Yeah, she’s a good kid,” Harry agreed. “And I suspect that that internship is going to be brilliant for her, she’s going to meet people and do things that we’ve never imagined before.”

“Well, you, maybe, Harry, but my amazing mind can imagine quite a bit you know,” Hermione laughed.

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“Gentlemen. Thank you for coming,” their leader stated. “The events of the past week have not been of our making, nor of our choosing. We need to decide the direction that we will take.”

“How did these ‘Avengers’ come into being? I thought that we’d convinced the World Security Council not to go down that avenue?” the man third from his left asked.

“We had. They were more than content to pursue the Phase Two weapons. Fury, however, is being as big a pain in the rear as usual,” their leader stated.

“Do we need to have him eliminated?” another suggested.

“Perhaps, in time. But not just yet,” he was answered.

“What about the Avengers? How do we respond to them?” one asked.

“Keeping them in line is not going to be easy,” it was stated.

“Project Insight could be accelerated,” another suggested. “Simply add them to the algorithm and problem solved.”

“Can we afford to wait that long?” the leader asked. “Project Insight has always been a long-term project.”

“We may have other options,” the one who had yet to speak said quietly. “There are some … assets in S.H.I.E.L.D. facilities that we could … point in the right direction.”

“Not a bad idea,” their leader mused. “I take it you’re thinking of Blonsky?”

“Yes. And Sterns.”

“If we wish to go down that track, there are other assets that we could utilize. I know that Oscorp’s secure sub-basement has some very interesting toys,” another said eagerly.

“And I’m sure that there are others that we could use. If you could head up the project,” the leader said to the one with the original suggestion. “Call it … Project Sinister.”

The leader waited until he’d received an affirming nod before continuing.

“What of our other projects?” he asked.

“The tesseract has been lost to us, but S.H.I.E.L.D. has been given permission to study Loki’s staff,” he was informed. “It should be easy enough to divert it to a facility of our choosing.”
“Do we have somewhere appropriate?”

“Not yet. However, a simple … nudge should be enough to cause a revolt within Sokovia and it’d be easy enough to establish what we need there.”

“See that it is done,” their leader stated. “Anything else? No? Then continue to monitor events. Build a comprehensive database on each of these ‘Avengers’. We need to know everything about them – how they think and what their likely reactions and responses are likely to be in any given situation. After all, knowledge is power.

“Hail Hydra!”

“Hail Hydra!” the age-old battle cry was echoed.
“Sir, Mister Potter and his party are in the elevator,” Jarvis said into Tony’s earpiece. “One appears to be the lawyer you expected, Matthew Murdock; the other is an unknown female.”

“You know what to do,” Tony subvocalized.

“Yes, Sir,” Jarvis replied.

Grabbing his drink off of the top of the bar, Tony casually threaded his way through the group towards the elevator. These three were actually the last to arrive. Tony would almost think that they were trying to be fashionably late if it wasn’t for the fact that they were right on time.

The rest of them, the other Avengers, had been early. Well, and Pepper, but she lived there with him. Sometimes. Oh, and then there was Selvig, but he’d come with Legolas and Romanoff.

A muted ding preceded the elevator door opening and Tony stepped forward.

“Found the place, did you?” he greeted.

Harry stepped from the elevator almost cautiously, his eyes darting about and spotting everyone almost automatically.

“Managed to find it, yeah,” Harry replied. “Helped that it’s the tallest building in the neighbourhood, although the fact that it doesn’t say ‘Stark’ on the side anymore made it a bit confusing.”

“Yeah, that is a bit of a problem. The good news is that I’ve got some ideas to fix that,” Tony replied.

He was actually marginally impressed. The kid’s answer had just enough sass in it to make it interesting without being rude.

“So, going to introduce me?” Tony prompted.

“Tony, I’d like you to meet my best friend Hermione Granger and my … lawyer, Matt Murdock,” Harry said. “Hermione, Matt, Tony Stark.”

“Checking,” Jarvis stated.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mister Stark, thanks for inviting us,” the young woman with the long wavy brown hair and … was that intelligence in those sharp brown eyes? … said.

“Mister Stark,” the blind lawyer said, meeting his handshake unerringly.

“How’d you do that?” Tony asked. “Are you sure that you’re blind? Those shades are just for show aren’t they?”

“I can assure you that I am blind, Mister Stark,” and there was almost a hint of a growl in that that made Tony pause momentarily.

“Don’t mind Tony, his mouth tends to speak without him engaging any sort of filler,” Pepper stated, having come up behind him and grabbed his arm only to squeeze just a little tighter than Tony thought was strictly necessary. “I’m Pepper, I try to run Tony’s life and look after him.”
“It’s nice to meet you,” Harry smiled.

“So, essentially, you’re his carer?” Matt asked.

“Exactly, Mister Murdock!” a delighted Pepper replied. “That’s exactly what I am.”

“Yep, she cares so I don’t have to. Oh, and don’t call me ‘Mister Stark’; makes me feel like the Old Man is around somewhere,” Tony said with a shiver. “Come on, Gandalf and friends, let’s introduce you around.”

From behind him, he heard Harry whispering to Hermione.

“Gandalf?”


Making a mental note to research the name ‘Dumbledore’ later, or at least, to have Jarvis do it for him, Tony stopped on the edge of the seating area.

“Everyone, Harry’s here and he brought guests,” Tony announced over the conversations. Noting that every eye switched to him, he continued. “This is Hermione and Matt, who claims to be blind, but I’m withholding judgment.”

There, that should put him on notice. Not to mention get him back for giving Pepper such a perfect opening like that. Knowing her, she’s going to use it ad nauseam, Tony thought.

He watched then, sipping his drink as the three newcomers circulated through the room, doing the boring work of introducing each other properly.

“Jarvis?” he subvocalized.

“Sir. I have scanned all three as is protocol. My sensors were unable to get as detailed a scan as is normal on Mister Potter and Miss Granger. For some reason, the scanners simply could not lock on to them,” Jarvis reported.

“Magic?” he asked.

“That is the theory that I am working under. I suspect that we will need to do some recalibrating. As for Mister Murdock, there is nothing unusual to report.” Jarvis said.

“And?” Tony asked impatiently.

Luckily, Jarvis was able to predict – quite accurately – the information that he was after.

“There are minimal records for a ‘Hermione Granger’ in Britain. Birth certificate and early school records only. I will continue searching but there may not be much to find if the magical community is as insular as we’ve been led to believe.”

“Try known relatives if need be,” Tony suggested.

“Of course, Sir,” Jarvis replied.

Tony didn’t like mysteries. Especially ones that defied the rules of science and that’s exactly what Harry’s magic seemed to do. He was determined to get him into his lab one day and run a battery of tests to find out how this ‘magic’ worked. But until then, the best that he could do was find out as
much about Harry, and now his friend, as he could.

“Have you two met before?” Thor asked, intrigued by the note of amusement in Harry’s voice, an amusement that was almost always evident in the voice of his brother when he had some private joke.

“No,” Clint stated.

“Are you certain?” Harry asked.

Now Clint was frowning. “I’m sure that I’d remember if we had.”

“You know that you don’t have the best memory for faces,” Natasha butted in.

“I’m not that bad,” Clint protested.

“It was dark,” Harry said, “that might account for it.”

Thor noted that Harry’s bright green eyes flicked towards Doctor Banner. Whatever its meaning, it seemed to be enough to jog the archer’s memory.

“That was you? Of course, it was you. That was your place wasn’t it?” Clint asked.

At his fellow Agent’s look of inquiry, Clint explained.

“There was an op last year. Fury had agents stationed all over the city, monitoring, mostly. I picked Harry’s roof as my vantage point. Somehow, he knew that I was there and came out to ask me about it. How did you know?”

“Magic,” Harry smirked and Thor let out a boom of laughter.

The answer was perfect from any magic user and one that provoked a sour look from the agent.

“Magic? That’s it? You’re not going to go into more detail than that?” Clint asked.

“A seidhr’s ways are not to be questioned or understood,” Thor said, clapping the archer on the shoulder. “Just accept that they have a unique way of doing things that defy the comprehension of the rest of us.”

“Seidhr?” Natasha questioned, a question that seemed to be echoed by Harry, if his raised eyebrow was any indication.

“Seidhr,” Thor replied. “A Midgardian magic-wielder. That is what they were called, at least when last I was on Midgard many hundreds of years ago. Are you still called by that name?”

Harry’s eyes sought out his companion, Hermione, and he allowed her to answer.

“It’s an old Norse word,” she said. “I’m fairly certain that it related to witches and wizards but these days we just call ourselves that: witches and wizards.”

“I will endeavour to remember that, please forgive me if I slip into the old terms, learning new words is not always easy,” Thor said, bowing his head slightly in respect.

“Not a problem,” Harry smiled. “Besides, I think I like ‘seidhr’, we should reintroduce it to the
wizarding world.”

“Wait a minute! Did Point Break just say that he knew that there were magic users on the planet and didn’t tell us?” Tony interjected.

“It was not my secret to tell,” Thor pointed out.

“How much do you know about us?” Harry asked.

Thor shrugged. “What I remember from what would be ancient history to you. The seidhr and Asgardians were ancient allies; we fought together to rid this world of the Frost Giants. Then, after we left Midgard, Heimdall would give us the occasional report. He told us that your kind had gone into hiding centuries ago. While we do not understand it, we respect your decision.”

“Sixteen ninety-two,” Hermione stated. “That’s when we withdrew.”

“The Salem Witch Trials,” Steve said. “Remember learning about that in school.”

Hermione nodded. “Witches and wizards had always been treated warily up to that point. But with the Salem Witch Trials here in America and the Spanish Inquisition in Europe, the International Confederation of Wizardry introduced the Statute of Secrecy which declared that all witches and wizards worldwide should disappear into our own areas and not let outsiders know that we still existed. It was a survival method that’s still in place today.”

“And was what got Harry here arrested,” Matt continued. “His use of spells in the battle, not to mention the fact that he was wearing clothes that marked him as being different, were in direct contravention of the Statute.”

“Then how’d he get off?” Natasha asked.

“There is a set of exemptions to the Statutes,” Matt explained. “They primarily cover the use of magic in life-threatening situations.”

“I would say that an army of Chitauri descending on Midgard would qualify,” Thor nodded.

“It did,” Matt stated.

“And how come you know all this?” Tony asked. “I checked. You Matt Murdock, are a partner from a small firm that hasn’t really done anything noteworthy that I could find. What makes you so special that Fury would specifically pick you for the task?”

Matt shrugged. “The man never came out and said. He mentioned that he’d been keeping his eye on me, but that’s it.” Then, at the chuckles and groans throughout the group, “am I missing something?”

“Fury’s halfway to being like you; he wears an eyepatch,” Tony replied.

“Either way, I’m just glad that Fury did pick Matt. He did a brilliant job. He got the charges dropped before I even had to tell the court that I was not guilty,” Harry said, ending Tony’s inquisition.

“You have done a great service,” Thor stated, clapping the lawyer on the shoulder. “You defended a new friend and an ancient ally. If you ever need assistance, you shall have it.”

“About that,” Harry said. “I’ve been told that I’m an Avenger now. Which is cool. But ‘Mage’? Where’d that come from and how come I didn’t get to pick my own name?”

Once again, all Thor could do was laugh as every eye pinned Tony with expectancy.
“What? You needed a name and you weren’t around to ask. So, I did you a favour. You should have heard some of the ones the media was throwing around,” Tony defended himself.

“Do tell,” Harry said innocently, too innocently if Thor was any judge and after living with his brother for so long, he could tell that there was some sort of retribution in Tony’s future.

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“Sir, there is an Agent Morse from S.H.I.E.L.D. in the elevator,” Jarvis announced through the floor P.A. system instead of Tony’s earpiece.

Tony looked up, startled before glancing at Clint and Natasha.

“Yeah, Jarvis, we’ve already got enough Agents here, tell her to go home,” he said.

“Sir, my protocols are being overwitten,” Jarvis near-whined, if an A.I. could actually be deemed to ‘whine’.

“I thought we fixed that after the last time …” Tony trailed off.

His eyes closed briefly and his mind flashed to the elevator doors opening, was it only a week or so ago? He shook his head. The memory of hearing that Agent had been killed was still just a little too fresh.

The ping of the elevator doors opening snapped Tony’s eyes open and he moved to intercept his uninvited guest. A glance to his side told him that Birdbrain and Romanoff had shifted to positions that seemed at first glance to be non-threatening, but were close enough to offer support if necessary. Who the support was for was still up for debate.

The woman inside the elevator wore the traditional black S.H.I.E.L.D. jumpsuit with the logo on her upper sleeve. She was blonde with blue eyes, but what particularly marked her as different, was that, like Clint and Natasha, she carried additional, unique weapons. In addition to the mandatory gun strapped to her waist, she had a baton in a holster on each thigh.

It was this that prompted Tony’s memory.

“I remember you. You were with Fury in Harry’s place after the battle,” he accused.

“Good memory, Stark,” she replied as she walked in.

“Hey, I don’t remember inviting you in?” Tony protested.

“You hadn’t. But as I need to talk to everyone here and you’re all conveniently in the one place, it was more efficient for me to simply invite myself,” she replied. She glanced across at her fellow agents, then. “Hawkeye, Widow.”

“Mockingbird,” Clint returned, while Natasha simply nodded.

Being invaded in his own house was still a very raw feeling for Tony, therefore he wasn’t surprised when he found his feet taking him to the bar, nor the fact that he automatically snapped the wrist cuffs on. The Mark VII wasn’t completely repaired yet, but it was in much better readiness than the Mark VIII which was still somewhere between the drawing board and production.

When he turned back, his tumbler now full of scotch, it was to find that Mockingbird, Agent Morse as Jarvis had identified her, had the full attention of the room.
“For those who do not know me, my name is Agent Barbara Morse, I’m a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent, also known as Mockingbird. If you prefer, you can call me ‘Bobbi’,” she said.

“Mockingbird? Do all you agents have codenames?” Bruce asked and Tony noticed that Harry’s lips twitched at the question.

“Just like the people in this room, only the very best,” Agent Morse replied.

The fact that her eyes flicked to Murdock was very intriguing, something else for Tony to investigate later.

“What are you doing here, Bobbi?” Natasha asked, then, before the other woman could reply, she answered her own question. “Fury sent you. Why?”

“You’re right. Fury did send me,” Agent Morse confirmed. “I’ve had a change in assignment.”

“You’re our new Handler,” Natasha stated.


“Phil?” Harry asked.

“Agent Phil Coulson,” Tony replied. “He recruited a lot of us. Brought us together.”

“The Son of Coul died bravely at the hands of my brother. His spirit and courage will never be forgotten,” Thor said.

The raise of glasses in the air by those who knew him was echoed by Tony, not something that he would ordinarily do.

“You’re right, this wasn’t supposed to be me,” Agent Morse confirmed. “But someone had to take over the job and I’ve been tapped.

“You Avengers are a very special group of people but there are going to be times when you’re going to need the support and backup that only S.H.I.E.L.D. can provide. I’m your liaison to that support. You need something, you come to me and I’ll see what I can do. That goes for everyone in this room, including you, Doctor Selvig and you, Mister Murdock. Both of you have made important contributions and have unique abilities that S.H.I.E.L.D. would like you to continue to use.”

“What role does the Avengers have now?” Steve asked.

“That is up to you,” Agent Morse replied.

“Really?” a sceptical sounding Bruce asked.

“Yes, really,” Agent Morse echoed. “I’m told that Director Fury promised that you’d be free to go once the tesseract had been recovered and we intend to keep that promise. You are free to do what you want, go where you want. We won’t be keeping tabs on you. All I ask is that you keep in touch either with myself or one of your teammates in case you’re ever needed again.”

“Which you can bet your sweet ass that there will be,” Tony stated.

Agent Morse nodded. “I’d be very surprised if there wasn’t.”

“Indeed. Whoever gave my brother that sceptre and directed the Chitauri to Midgard is still out there. It may take some time, but they are sure to try again,” Thor stated.
“And if any of you are looking for a job, then S.H.I.E.L.D. can help you out there. Barton and Romanoff are Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.; Stark is a consultant. We could use the talents the rest of you have, but only if you’re interested,” Agent Morse said.

“Don’t look at me, I’ve got a café to run,” Harry stated.

“I won’t object if you want to send a few cases my way, but otherwise I’m happy where I am,” Murdock said.

“Captain?” Agent Morse asked.

“Possibly. Let me think about it,” Steve said.

“Fair enough,” she replied before stepping forward and placing a set of black cards on the nearby coffee table. “Take one. My number’s on it. Call if you need anything.”

Idly, Tony wondered if it was written in braille for the blind guy, but noting Pepper’s gaze on him, he kept his mouth firmly shut. For now, at least.

ooo00ooo

“You know, she wasn’t wrong,” Tony stated after Agent Morse had conveniently let herself out after giving her spiel.

“What about?” Steve asked.

“That we’re going to be needed again,” he replied. “The world has seen what we can do. There’ll be those that’ll be itching to try their metal against us, to see exactly what we’re made of.”

“So, what, you’re saying that we need to band together? Stay here in New York so that we’re ready to take on all comers?” Bruce asked.

“It’s not a bad idea,” Tony replied.

“Yes, it is! For me, at least. I’ve now broken two New York suburbs!” Bruce stated, the despair clear in his voice.

“Doctor Banner, Bruce, I’ve seen the footage, read the reports of what happened in Harlem. And I’ve now fought beside you. On both of those occasions, you were working to bring down the bad guys,” Steve pointed out.

“What? You’re saying that the other guy … the Hulk’s some kind of hero now?” Bruce asked.

“Seems that way,” Natasha replied. “You may not enjoy turning into the Hulk, but the Big Guy has a lot to offer.”

“What is the deal between you and the Hulk?” Harry asked cautiously.

“I was involved in an accident some years back,” Bruce replied. “Ended up being hit with a high dose of gamma radiation. It should have killed me. Instead it transformed me into the Hulk. Now, whenever I get too stressed or too angry or I simply release the anger that I’m constantly feeling, I change into … him.”

Harry and Hermione shared a very pointed look.

“We might be able to help with that,” Harry stated cautiously. “No guarantees, of course, but …”
“You think magic might help?” Bruce asked incredulously.

“Potions actually,” Hermione replied. “More specifically, a calming draught. There might be others and it’d wouldn’t be a permanent solution, but the possibilities are there.”

“I did tell you not to underestimate the magic of the seidhr,” Thor stated. “Sorry, wizards and witches.”

“This is what I’m talking about. We need to stick together, to use each other’s strengths to enhance our own,” Tony said. “Sure, go off and do your own thing, but we need to come back together.”

“To train, to know each other’s fighting styles,” Steve added. “If we’re likely to be called up to serve as a team, then we need to know how to work as a unit.”

“I’ve already started to work on plans to revamp the tower. I’ve got ten levels of R and D already, adding in a couple for training and some quarters for everyone should be a snap,” Tony said.

“You want this tower to be our … what, Headquarters?” Clint asked.

“With ‘Stark’ written in big letters on it?” Natasha asked incredulously.

“It doesn’t say that at the moment,” Harry smirked.

“Actually, I was thinking of putting ‘Avengers’ on it. Assuming that that’s alright with you guys,” Tony said.

“I think we could live with that,” Natasha replied on behalf of everyone.

“It’ll take a while to get it done, especially with all of the work that needs to be done out there, which’ll be the priority for now,” Tony pointed out, waving the hand holding his now-empty tumbler in the vague direction of the window. “You guys are invited as well.”

“Thank you, but I have a job in London,” Hermione said.

“It’s a little far from my apartment and my law offices,” Matt pointed out.

“Well, whatever, you’ve got time to change your minds,” Tony said absently.

“Avengers Tower,” Clint mused. “I like the sound of that. It’s got a much nicer ring to it then Stark Tower ever did.”

“Oi! I invite you into my home and all you’re going to do is insult me? That’s not kosher,” Tony protested.

“I would have thought that it was a requirement of living here, being all snarky and insulting,” Pepper said.

“Right, party’s over. You lot are corrupting Pepper too much,” Tony declared, eliciting a round laughter.

ooo00ooo

Thor gave one last look around the circle of people that surrounded he and his brother.

These people were allies, his teammates, his friends. In the short time that he’d known them, he’d grown fond of them. They were different than the Lady Sif and the Warriors Three, his usual
companions, but for all that, he would not give them up for anything.

Erik Selvig was the first that he made eye contact with. His one regret was that he was unable to see Jane this trip, but Erik carried a note that he promised to deliver as soon as possible.

The seidhr were both there as well, a term that he had no problem using within his own mind, at least. He had fought alongside one and the other he had come to suspect had a mind every bit as sharp as Jane’s.

And then the rest of the Avengers: Steve, Tony, Bruce, Natasha and Clint. It had truly been an honour fighting alongside them all.

While he didn’t know how long it would be before he was able to return to Midgard, Thor vowed that it would be soon.

Then, with one last nod to them all, he turned the handle of the device that Bruce and Erik had created and felt the pull of the tesseract’s power taking them home.
“Good to see you back, Ms Granger,” Kingsley Shacklebolt, the Minister for Magic said as he entered her office.

“Thank you, Minister,” Hermione replied, making the man frown, after all these years, she still insisted on being formal, well, at least at work.

“And how’s our wayward boy?” Kingsley asked.

“All things considered, he’s doing well,” Hermione replied.

“I was glad to hear that those charges were dropped, utterly ridiculous. He should never have been charged in the first place,” Kingsley stated.

“Yes, well, Harry’s never had much luck in that department,” Hermione replied, referencing, of course, the time in Harry’s fifth year when similar charges were laid against him by the British Ministry of Magic. “I didn’t know that you were going to petition to have Harry extradited back to Britain.”

Kingsley shrugged. “Figured it wouldn’t hurt to attempt it. We could easily drop the charges once he was here.”

“Thankfully, it wasn’t needed; Mister Murdock did a brilliant job of defending him,” Hermione replied.

“How did a muggle lawyer end up as Harry’s defence lawyer?” Kingsley frowned.

“A friend of a friend,” Hermione shrugged, not willing to give too much information away, even to an old friend who also happened to be the Minister of Magic. “And, again, Minister, thank you for the portkey to get me over there as quickly as possible.”

“My pleasure, Hermione. After what the two of you did for Britain, a few perks here and there seem a small recompense,” Kingsley smiled.

The two were interrupted by a knock on the door and a shock of red hair poking in.

“Hermione?”

“Ron!” she replied with a smile.

“I’ll leave the two of you to catch up,” Kingsley stated before making his exit from the office.

“ Heard you were back,” Ron said as he dropped his lanky frame into a convenient chair.

“I arrived home last night,” Hermione confirmed.

“Alone?” Ron asked.

“Well of course alone, what did you expect?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Ron shrugged. “Thought maybe you could have convinced Harry to come home with you. Six years, Hermione. Nearly seven, really. That’s how long he’s been gone and he really only sends letters back to you. Stopped sending them to me years ago, didn’t he?”
“You know what Harry’s like and I told you every time I got a letter. He was never able to send letters regularly, not knowing where he’d be from one day to the next,” Hermione defended her best friend.

“Yeah, but it’s not like that now, is it? He’s settled now; bought a place and everything, not that any of us can work out why New York instead of here. He hasn’t even visited once!” Ron stated.

“He’s promised that he will,” Hermione protested.

“When, Hermione? When’s he going to visit?” Ron asked.

Hermione sighed. “I don’t know, Ron. He’s not the only one who could visit, you know. You could go visit him.”

“Me? In New York? Are you barmy, Hermione? I wouldn’t last a day in a muggle city like that,” Ron protested. Then, after a couple of heartbeats, Ron continued in a smaller voice. “Is he at least happy?”

“Yes, Ron, he is,” Hermione smiled. “I think, after all this time, he is finally happy.”

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It was the quill lodged in the knot of dirty-blonde hair that caught Hermione’s attention. When she’d taken a second look and confirmed that she was seeing what she thought she was, a great grin broke out on her face and she swiftly deviated from her planned quick jaunt through the Leaky Cauldron.

“Luna?” she called as she approached the young woman sitting on a stool at the bar.

Large silver-blue eyes turned to her and widened slightly as a large smile appeared on her face.

“Hermione! What a pleasant surprise,” she exclaimed, slipping off of the stool to embrace the other woman.

“It’s been far too long,” Hermione said, “how’ve you been?”

“Well, thank you,” Luna replied before cocking her head at Hermione. “You’ve lost some of your nargles. Have you been taking the time to do something fun?”

“Twice in the past few months,” Hannah Longbottom interjected.

“You must tell,” Luna insisted.

Unfortunately for Hermione, she’d directed that comment to Hannah.

“Hermione’s not long back from America. Harry lives there now,” Hannah said pointedly.

“He does? Has he finally found his place in the world?” Luna asked. “I always thought that it could have been at Hogwarts, but I guess after everything that happened, it’s not so surprising after all.”

“I think he has, Luna,” Hermione replied. “He bought a place not too dissimilar to the Cauldron.”

“At least it’s over the pond where he won’t be stealing my customers,” Hannah grinned.

Hermione smiled back. “No, I don’t think that’ll be a problem at all. And he’s finally starting to make friends.”
“Friends,” Luna smiled wistfully. “I don’t often get to see my friends these days. Pity.”

“Harry was asking after you,” Hermione said. “If you’re over there on one of your expeditions, you should make sure to go see him. I can give you his address, if you like.”

“Thank you, I’d like that,” Luna said. “Although, I don’t know when I’ll be there next. Maybe the expedition after next I can see if there are any crumple-horned snorkacks in Canada.”

“So, when’s Harry coming home? Neville’d love to spent some time with him again, not to mention show off the plants that he’s cultivated from the cuttings and seeds that Harry’s sent back over the years,” Hannah asked.

“I’m hoping soon,” Hermione sighed, getting rather sick of that particular question.

She was actually getting to the point of either not mentioning going to see him, assuming that she went back again any time soon, or marching over there, immobilizing the man and portkeying him home so that he could answer his own questions.

“How long are you home for, Luna?” Hermione asked.

“I want to file a couple of articles for the *Quibbler* and make sure that the paper is running properly before I head off again. The man I left in charge has been making some rather disturbing choices for which articles to run. I don’t think he’s printed a single article about creatures in a month,” Luna complained.

Hannah and Hermione shared a look, both clearly repressing their amusement.

“Well, why don’t you come over for dinner on Friday?” Hermione suggested, “I’d love to catch up properly with you.”

“Thank you, Hermione, that’s very generous of you. I’d love to,” Luna beamed.

“Good. That’s settled,” Hermione replied. “Now, if you ladies will excuse me, I need to replenish my supply of parchment and quills.”

And with a last hug for Luna and a nod for Hannah, Hermione bustled along to complete her shopping before the Alley closed for the night.

Harry turned away from the TV and the disc that Agent Morse had procured for him. For the past few hours, he’d been absorbed with watching the Battle of New York (as it had become known) from the various different points of view that S.H.I.E.L.D. had been able to gather.

He’d seen what his new teammates (and *that* was a thought that he was still getting used to, especially because once upon a time, in those sorts of things, it would always be Hermione and Ron beside him) were capable of. He’d also paid close attention to an aspect that Agent Morse seemed fairly insistent on: their uniforms.

Clint and Natasha’s were a basic variation of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s, even to the extent that both had the Agency’s logo on them. Bruce, or in this instance, Hulk, didn’t really get a suit, his giant green body was distinguishable enough. The remaining three were also very recognisable: Iron Man in his flying red and gold armour; Captain America’s stars and stripes, not to mention his shield; and Thor’s Asgardian armour and Mjölnir.
And then there was himself. Mage. The only distinguishing feature of his outfit was his blue-grey
dragonhide cloak. But if he was going to be a part of the Avengers and have other missions, he was
going to need more. Especially if he wanted to stay under the MACUSA’s radar by utilizing that
‘free pass’ to use magic as long as he’s doing ‘Avenger duty’ that Director Fury had somehow
managed to get for him.

Harry’s subconscious mind had been giving the concept of a uniform – he flatly refused to even think
the word ‘costume’ – a fair bit of thought ever since it was first introduced to him. This meant that
after he’d consciously made the decision to do something about it, he’d already had a good idea of
what he was going to do.

Almost without thought, he began moving about his apartment, gathering items and bringing them
back to lay on either the coffee table or the lounge. Once he thought that he was finished, Harry
shook his head and went back for three more items. Laying them beside the others, he began to
slowly go through it all.

His cloak, of course, was most prominent. In the battle, he’d used a sticking charm to keep it on his
head but he thought that he could do better. Maybe an obscuris charm to hide his face?

Beside the cloak lay the remaining pieces of dragonhide clothing that he had. Dragonhide, after all,
was the strongest natural material in the world and should do wonders for keeping him safe, not to
mention that the black pants, shirt and boots were incredibly comfortable.

The belt that he’d worn during his journey around the world was next. It’d been adapted early in his
five-year wanderings to hold multiple shrunken trunks, but that could easily be altered to carrying
small pouches with space-expansion charms applied to them.

On the coffee table was an array of items that he thought could come in handy at one time or another,
at the very least, having them in a feather-light pouch on his belt wouldn’t hurt. His invisibility cloak
was a given, as was his back-up wand and the Lightning Bolt broomstick. The vials of potions could
be extremely handy in case of injuries or if he needed a pepper-up during an extended mission. Some
of them, of course, weren’t cheap either, but if they saved a life, well, that was simply galleons well
spent as far as Harry was concerned.

And then there were the Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes products: Peruvian Instant Darkness powder;
decoy detonators; a couple of extendable ears; a rocket box; a couple of skiving snackboxes; and, of
course, a portable swamp. Harry was sure that there were new products out there, but this was all he
had at the moment. He’d send a letter and a request to George later that week and request some
more, after all, he was still a partner in the store.

When he put all of that together, he thought that his ‘suit’ would be quite good. But there was one
thing that Harry knew: he hadn’t practiced his magic in far too long, especially his defensive and
offensive spells. With that in mind, he picked up the final three objects from the table. Two were
books full of magic that he intended to practice and learn in his basement over the next couple of
weeks while the Den was still closed.

The other was titled Releasing Your Inner Animal: A Guide to Becoming An Animagus. It was
something that he’d found in a small out-of-the-way bookstore in Holland near the very beginning of
his travels. At the time, he’d picked it up simply for the nostalgia – both his father and godfather had
been animagi. He’d read through it, more than once to be honest and he’d even made it through the
first third of the book in terms of learning the process. But then other things had gotten in the way
and he’d put it aside.

Now, though, now could be a very good time to reread it – turning into an animal could be a great
ace to have up his sleeve.

Oscorp was unlike anything that Gwen Stacy had ever imagined. Everything was incredibly high-tech. Computers embedded into glass panes were everywhere one looked and each employee had access to a state-of-the-art tablet while they were at work.

At first, her work was fairly basic, even if it was incredibly exciting (although she was aware that a lot of that probably had to do with the fact that she was an intern at Oscorp!) But after only three weeks, she’d come to the attention of Doctor Connors himself.

The brilliant scientist had caught her tweaking one of the experiments. At first, he’d been angry, but when she’d had a chance to explain her reasoning and he’d double checked her figures, he’d been astounded. Instead of firing her, he’d promoted her. Senior Intern wasn’t exactly a big jump up and it was next to nothing in terms of pay, but it was going to look great on any resume that she put together.

Really, Gwen’s big stress in life at the moment was how she was going to juggle everything once the area of New York that had been devastated by the alien invasion had been cleaned up. By then, the Marauder’s Den would be reopened for business. She loved that job. There wasn’t a great deal to think about and she could almost do it on autopilot. And Harry trusted her, giving her management duties every now and again, which also meant some extra pay, which was nice.

But juggling her internship, her job and school had the potential to be too much. She knew that she may just have to give one up. And there really was only one choice that made any sort of sense. Hopefully, though, she wouldn’t have to think about that for a while yet – it was almost school holidays, so that would free up some of her time.

No, it was September when things were looking like they could really become really hectic. Until then, she’d continue as she was and deal with the craziness when she had to.

Not for the first time, nor even the hundredth, Doreen switched on her computer and pulled up the file with her all time favourite video in it. It was a compilation of videos really, some much longer than others, that she’d created within the last week.

The instant that she’d hit play, Doreen scrambled back onto her bed, her three-foot fluffy tail wrapping around her. Then, with a bowlful of nuts beside her, she settled in to watch.

Hearing a chittering from her open window, she glanced across, a wide smile on her face.

“In here, Monkey Joe,” she called. “I’ve got nuts!”

She emphasised this last part by rattling the bowl, an action that caused her dearest friend in the whole world to poke his head in her window before he bounded in across her desk, scampered down the curtain, across the floor and jumped up to the bed beside her.

Doreen pushed the bowl between her and Monkey Joe.

“What are you doing ’Reen?” Monkey Joe chittered, as his front paws grasped a nut.

Then, as she idly munched on a handful of nuts, Doreen focussed on the events of a week ago in New York.

The Avengers, they were called. Superheroes. All of them with wonderful powers and abilities. They were the friends of Iron Man, her hero for the last couple of years.

Iron Man, Tony Stark, wasn’t like ordinary people. He was a genius and could build anything. He didn’t allow his limitations to stop him, he used what he had to do the extraordinary. Already he was up to seven Iron Man suits.

She watched as the red and gold metal man zipped between buildings, shooting down any alien that he came across, all in the name of protecting the planet. A massive alien thing, that the news reporters had taken to calling leviathans, came flying around the corner of a building, intent on eating Iron Man.

Doreen, of course, knew what was going to happen next and it was one of her favourite bits. The Hulk was about to emerge from some small unidentified guy. She identified so much with him. A person who had to hide what he was so that he could be accepted, only letting his other self out when it was safe or it was needed.

And that, in a nutshell, was Doreen’s life.

She’d been cursed, blessed, gifted – the correct word changed daily, sometimes multiple times in a single day – as a human mutate with squirrel-like qualities. Whenever she went out in public, whether it was to school or just for a walk around the neighbourhood, she had to hide her true self. Her tail had to be tucked away out of sight, giving her a butt that girls envied and boys couldn’t take their eyes off of.

But when she was in the forest … then she could relax and let herself run free.

The video shifted to Captain America fighting alongside Black Widow. Both of them fought relentlessly against the aliens, doing everything they could to beat them back. Once again it shifted, this time showing the Mage, using his magical powers to protect people from harm.

“We could have helped,” Doreen said to Monkey Joe, not the first time such a statement had been made.

She knew that she was strong, much stronger than anyone she knew. And she was fast and had amazing reflexes. Not to mention that she could jump from the ground to the roof of her two-storied house if she wanted to. Yes, she could have done a lot to help.

As she watched the Hulk scale a building, she held one hand in front of her face and extended and retracted the small claws on the end of each finger a number of times. These were great, especially for climbing trees, but she wasn’t sure how helpful they’d be with climbing a building.

But even if she couldn’t climb a building, she could jump up it, taking it in smaller stages, a couple of stories at a time.

There was absolutely no doubt in her fifteen-year-old mind that she could have helped the Avengers. Obviously, they hadn’t needed her, but what’s to say that the next time they wouldn’t.

Her fantasies were broken by a quick rap on her door before it was thrust open.

“Doreen, you’re not watching that *again* are you?” her mother asked, the exasperation clear in her voice.
Monkey Joe chittered and Doreen smiled at the squirrel’s comments.

“And I better not find one single piece of shell in your room, I’m getting sick of having to clean up after you,” her mother continued. “Now, turn that off and fix yourself up. We’re expecting visitors soon and I don’t want them seeing you like … like that.”

“Yes, mum,” Doreen replied.

Her hands ran through her bushy tail before she sighed and shifted to her knees so that she could hide away her tail in her pants.

“If only I was a proper mutant instead of just a *mutate,*” she grumbled, “then I could have gone to Xavier’s and not had to hide myself. The Avengers don’t have to hide, well, the Hulk sort of does, but the rest of them don’t. If only I lived in New York instead of L.A.

She paused for a moment, her eyes glued to the screen in front of her as the wildest of ideas flashed through her mind.

“What if …,” she wondered.
Harry was in the middle of a training drill when a deep bell toned throughout the room. It was  
enough to interrupt his concentration and he had to dodge quickly to avoid the stunner that the  
training dummy fired at him. He grimaced as he stumbled, managing to snap off an *immobulus* that  
paralysed the Dummy mid-cast before falling to the floor.

A second swish of his wand sent it and its partner, the one that he’d already blasted across the room  
until it had fallen in a heap on the floor, back to their places.

The bell tolled again and Harry quickly crossed the basement for the door and the circular staircase  
behind it that would lead him back up to his apartment. The bell was a charm of his own invention,  
one that was designed to inform him if he had a visitor, something that he wouldn’t have ordinarily  
have been able to know in a magically sealed room.

After closing the ‘closet’ door behind him, Harry raced across the room towards where the incessant  
knocking was coming from.

“Tony?” Harry asked in confusion, seeing the man on the other side when he opened the door.

“Gandalf! What took you so long?” Tony asked. “Well? Aren’t you going to invite me in?”

“Sure, Tony, come on in,” Harry replied.

Harry closed the door slowly, watching the man as his head darted about, taking everything in. For  
the life of him, Harry couldn’t work out why he was there. It obviously wasn’t business related, not  
with Tony wearing a simple pair of jeans, Black Sabbath t-shirt and sport jacket over it. And he  
couldn’t imagine one of the world’s most powerful men making a simple house call.

“Huh, I imagined something more gothic,” Tony commented offhandedly.

“What?” Harry asked, confused by the non-sequitur.

“You know. Magic stuff. You lot are supposed to be stuck in the Dark Ages, aren’t you? At least  
that’s what I’ve been told. Dark Ages, gothic, thought the two would go together,” Tony explained.

“You expected my house to be lit by candles and be all dark and broody with woods and leather and  
cauldrons bubbling away in the corner?” Harry asked. “I suppose that there’s supposed to be bats  
and spiders and stuff, too?”

“Well, yeah,” Tony replied, shrugging off his jacket and flinging it across a chair.

Harry shook his head. “No, Tony. I’m not all that fond of the ‘goth’ look.”

“Huh. Really? You mean that I got it all wrong? That’s a first,” he commented.

“Actually, if you were in the British magical world, you wouldn’t be all that far off the mark in a lot  
of places,” Harry admitted. “Although, you won’t see many places with unattended cauldrons  
brewing and bats tend to only be kept for use as potion ingredients.”

“Ha! I was right!” Tony exclaimed. “Can’t say I blame you for getting away from it all, though,  
Merlin. It’d be murder having to dodge all the spider’s webs all the time, especially when you’re  
half-drunk.”
“Please, don’t call me Merlin,” Harry asked. “The guy’s been dead for centuries and he’s a pretty big deal in the wizarding world.”

“Merlin was real? Well, there you go. Who knew?” Tony asked rhetorically before looking around the apartment again. “So, where do you keep it all?”

“All what, Tony?” Harry asked, wondering when the point of Tony being there was going to be brought up.

“Your magic stuff. Your cauldrons and wands and amulets and spellbooks and all the other stuff a magic guy like you would need,” Tony explained.

Harry narrowed his eyes slightly. “My magic stuff?”

“Yeah. Come on, you can trust me. We’re Avengers, remember. Team mates. If you can’t show your partners, who can you show?” Tony asked, before upping the ante. “I know you want to show it off. Now’s your chance.”

Harry figured the guy wasn’t completely wrong. It’d be nice to not have to keep everything hidden all the time.

“You understand that there’s a Statute of Secrecy, don’t you, Tony? That means that non-magicals aren’t supposed to know about the wizarding world, that we’re supposed to keep everything hidden away,” Harry said.

“Pfft,” Tony waved the concept away with a carefree hand. “I’m in the know already, Sparrowhawk. Now, show.”

“Where are you coming up with these names?” Harry asked as he crossed the room.

“What? They’re all valid names of wizards,” Tony replied. “They’re from books, if you must know. What, don’t you read?” And then, after following Harry into the library. “Never mind.”

Tony turned in a full circle as he took in the shelves full of books and the relaxing reading chairs.

“Well, this is quaint,” he said. “I’m guessing that you’ve never heard of an e-reader?”

“Heard of it, never been tempted to get one,” Harry replied. “Magic and electronics don’t get along all that well.”

Tony narrowed his eyes at the wizard before leaning backwards to look out the door into Harry’s living room.

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but a lot of that stuff you’ve got out there – the TV, computer, dvd recorder – that all runs on electricity,” he pointed out.

“I know that,” Harry grinned. “And the only reason that they haven’t exploded is because I’ve enchanted them using magic-suppressing runes.”

“Runes?” Tony perked up. “I’d like to see them. What makes them work? No, don’t tell me, the answer’s ‘magic’, isn’t it? But if these are magic-suppressing runes, wouldn’t using magic to get them to work in the first place be kind of redundant?”

“Tony!” Harry near laughed. “There’s another thing that you’ve got to learn about magic: it doesn’t follow any sort of logic.”
The scientist pouted at that, before dismissing the idea in favour of changing topics. Really, the man seemed to have a thirty-track mind and the concentration-span of a three-year-old.

“So, where’s your magic books?” he asked.

In reply, Harry casually flicked his wrist catching his wand as it shot out of its holster into his hand before he tapped one particular bookshelf. Tony’s eyes nearly popped out of his head as the bookshelf slid forward and out of the way.

“In here,” Harry told him.

“A secret compartment! Now, that’s cool!” Tony exclaimed as he rushed forward, intent on examining every book.

When one book rattled ominously at him, Tony quickly backtracked.

“Did your book just try to eat me?” he asked incredulously.

Harry shrugged. “Some of these books aren’t exactly safe for non-magicals to be around.”

“In that case, it’s a good thing that you’ve got them all hidden away,” Tony nodded. “I’m guessing that it’s safe to assume that you’ve got a whole bunch of other magical hidey-holes hidden all over this joint?”

Harry shrugged, making sure to give the best mysterious smile that he could.

“You know, when the Tower’s redesigned, I was planning on making rooms for each of us, well, not so much a room as more of a floor for me, but then it is my Tower. Anyway, if you’re going to be magicking everything and your magic isn’t going to play nicely with my tech, then you’re going to have to let me run some tests. A bunch of tests actually. That’s why I came over: to invite you over,” Tony said.

“Invite me over?” Harry echoed.

“Yeah, well, figured it wouldn’t be much fun being here all alone with this part of the city closed, so thought, why not? But now that I know that there’s work to do to make sure that you don’t blow me up or something, you’ve simply got to come,” Tony said.

“I guess that makes sense,” Harry replied. “Just so long as you understand that if you’re going to be testing my magic with your tech, I’m likely to blow stuff up.”

“You should see the amount of stuff I’ve blown up over the years trying to figure stuff out,” Tony said, blowing off the objection. “Good. That’s settled. Now, Gandalf, don’t hold out on me. Show me what else you’ve got.”

Harry smirked to himself. “Well, if you’re sure … Then I guess the best place to start would be the closet. Would you like to see what I keep in there?”

“Closet, huh? Seems a bit ordinary, but whatever. Lead the way,” Tony said.

ooo000oo0

Doreen took one last, long look around her room, checking that she hadn’t forgotten anything important.

There was still a lot of stuff here that she hadn’t touched, but it was nothing that she couldn’t do
without or easily replace. Finally, her eyes settled on a picture of her and her parents.

Mareen and Dor Green were good parents, they’d always had a lot of fun together but it’d never been easy. Having a daughter with mutated genes that made her part squirrel had always been very stressful for them and they’d done everything that they could to make sure that they hid that fact from the world. Not an unreasonable thing, really, especially with the way the world viewed mutants.

It’d always been a battle keeping that part of Doreen hidden and had caused her quite a lot of teasing at school, especially when she didn’t participate in swimming or other sports. It wasn’t that she couldn’t, in fact, Doreen knew that she’d probably beat the pants off of most everyone else, especially with her enhanced genetics. But the fear that she’d be found out was simply too great, so her parents had forbidden her from doing anything like that.

And Doreen was sick and tired of it. She wanted to be free to be herself. And here in L.A., at home with her parents, she knew that that could never happen. She was fifteen now and she was ready to be her own person and she knew exactly where she needed to go to allow that to happen.

Picking up the photo, she stuffed it in her backpack along with the clothes and books and toiletries and her other most precious possessions, not to mention her wallet stuffed with her life savings. Her fingers caressed the envelope that she’d prepared for this occasion and she straightened it on her desk.

Her decision made, Doreen picked up her belt of many pouches, each one filled with nuts, and slung it around her waist. Next, she donned her fingerless gloves, before her favourite old, bomber jacket was slipped on.

“Come on, Monkey Joe; time to see the world,” she said in squirrelese.

With one great leap and a little scampering, her best friend had found his perch on her shoulder.

Then, after picking up her backpack, Doreen left her room for the last time, being careful to close the door behind her. They had a bus to catch.

ooo00ooo

“This is where the kid grew up?” Clint asked, the disgust clear in his voice.

“Harry’s not a kid, Clint; if you’d read his file you’d know that he’s thirty-one,” Natasha retorted.

“I did read it,” Clint replied. “Doesn’t change the fact that he looks like a kid. Well, at least like someone in his early to mid-twenties.”

“The file also indicated that magical people age at a slower rate. Guess he just got the good genes,” Natasha said.

Clint looked at his partner. Like she was one to talk. While she’d never told him a lot, he knew enough to know that the Red Room where she’d grown up and had been trained had done a number on her genes as well; she was a lot older than she looked. Her, Steve, Thor and now Harry. Clint couldn’t help but shake his head – he was surrounded by teammates whose age and looks simply didn’t match up.

Oddly enough, what should have been a simple mission was a lot harder than either of them were expecting. S.H.I.E.L.D. had tasked the two of them to find out more on Harry Potter’s background and to recommend plans if S.H.I.E.L.D. ever needed to step in and provide security due to the Mage’s secret identity being compromised, at least in terms of the non-magical world; the magical
side of things Harry would have to take care of by himself.

Thus, Clint and Natasha found themselves in England; their first stop being a small neighbourhood in Surrey called Little Whinging. Unfortunately, they hadn’t counted on every house seemingly being made from a cookie-cutter. Infiltrating hadn’t been easy. Eventually, they’d managed to find a house where the occupants had gone on holidays that they’d ‘borrowed’, the perfect place for them to watch the house across the road.

Number Four, Privet Drive was occupied by a single older couple, Harry’s aunt and uncle, according to the file. From what they’d seen so far, their lives appeared very ordinary and incredibly boring. The woman seemed to do nothing but stay home all day and peer out the window at anyone walking past. The husband had a job at a drill company that he went to every morning at the same time and came home promptly at the exact same time every evening.

Clint was sure that if he’d grown up in a place like this, that he would have gone mad within the first week. No, there were merits to having grown up in a circus, even if it did mean that he and his brother had become orphans when they were very young and that they’d had to run away from the orphanage to join the circus in the first place. Thinking about it, there were a couple of parallels between the life that he’d lived and the life that Harry’d lived. Maybe one day the two of them would have to sit down and compare notes.

“I don’t think we’re going to learn anymore by staying here,” Clint stated. “These two live perfectly normal, boring lives with no variation. What’s the next part of our assignment?”

“The cousin, one Dudley Dursely or Hermione’s parents, take your pick,” Natasha replied.

“Let’s get the cousin done first,” Clint decided.

With that, the two quickly began packing their gear, eager to move on.

ooo00ooo

The instant that he slunk into the newly reopened Marauder’s Den, Gwen Stacy’s eyes narrowed.

Peter Parker.

She had a few choice words for him.

As she filled the next order – delivering a trayful of drinks to Flash and some of his football teammates – she watched the smaller boy with dark brown hair slide into a seat at a table off to one side as was his normal habit.

“Gwen …” her boss began as she returned the tray to the counter.

“I’m going to need a couple of minutes,” she said, cutting him off without taking her eyes from her quarry.

“O-kay,” Harry said, not that she was paying attention, having already begun weaving her way through the tables.

“What were you thinking?” she hissed as she slid into the seat across from Peter.

Instantly, his head shot up and his brown eyes locked onto her blue eyes.

“Gwen?” he asked.
“What were you thinking?” she asked again, beginning to get impatient that he had yet to answer her. “You could have been arrested and I could have been fired!”

“I wouldn’t let that happen, Gwen, you have to believe me on that,” Peter replied.

“You still haven’t answered my question, Peter,” she said. “What were you thinking sneaking into Oscorp like that?”

Peter sighed and ran a hand through his hair, mussing it up somewhat.

“I had to go, Gwen, don’t you see,” Peter replied. “I just found out some stuff about my dad and I wanted to learn more. He used to work at Oscorp.”

Gwen sat back in her chair, her head nodding slowly. She could understand the attraction of wanting to learn more – his parents had been dead for a very long time now.

“But why sneak in? Why not just make an appointment with someone to ask about your father?” she asked.

“The opportunity came up and I just decided to go for it?” he replied, trying one of his big grins on her and she was not going to let it distract her. No, definitely not.

“You know that the guy you impersonated got thrown out, don’t you?” she asked.

Peter’s head dropped slightly. “Yeah. Figured he would.”

“Well? Was it worth it? Did you find out anything about your dad?” she asked after a few moments of simply staring at him.

Peter’s nod became a shrug before morphing into a head shake.

“Well, there’s a few answers for me to pick,” she said sarcastically.

“Look. I’m not sure,” Peter said. “My dad used to work with Curt Connors …”

“My boss?” she interrupted with a sharp intake of breath.

“Yeah. And I got to meet him, at least. Well, sort of. And there might have been something else, but I’m not sure,” he finished in a mumble.

“Next time, ask me and I might be able to help,” she said, “assuming that you promise not to go wandering off by yourself again.”

Once again, Peter gave her that huge smile that was all teeth and bright eyes.

Suddenly, the expression disappeared and she felt his foot connect with her chair before both it and her were yanked two foot to the left. The sound of something smashing and splashing all over the floor and table where she’d just been moments before whipped her head around.

Gwen couldn’t help but stare at what was obviously once a very full teapot full of boiling water. If Peter hadn’t …

“My god! Are you alright? I am so sorry! I was bumped and it just unbalanced. It could have landed all over you,” Lisa, one of the other waitresses babbled.

“I’m fine,” Gwen told her.
“Are you sure?” Harry asked, materialising out of nowhere. “None of that landed on you? You’re not burnt at all?”

“No. No, I’m fine. If Peter hadn’t …” she trailed off as she stared wide-eyed at the top of the messy-brown hair.

“It was nothing,” Peter mumbled into the tabletop.

“No. It wasn’t,” Gwen told him, reaching out to lay a hand on his, bringing his head up just enough to see his brown eyes. “You saved me from a serious burning.”

“Gwen’s right, Peter. Thank you,” Harry agreed. “Whatever you two want, it’s on the house today. I’ve a policy here to never charge heroes. And a little something to calm you down won’t go astray either, Gwen.”

“Thanks, Harry,” Gwen smiled up at him.

“I’m no hero,” Peter protested.

“You are today, Peter,” Gwen said, patting his hand. “And Peter? Thank you.”

His shrug and small smile was enough to have her smiling back at him.

ooo00ooo

The leader of the Hydra council glanced down at his notes. The meeting was close to being done and there were only a few more points to cover. With his memory of the next item on the agenda restored, he turned to face the one that he’d charged with the task.

“What is the status of Project Sinister?” he asked.

“Things are proceeding according to schedule,” he was assured. “Our man inside Oscorp has managed to gain access to the ‘Special Projects Division’. It is everything that we could have hoped for. The equipment and technology that we need is all there, just waiting for the taking.”

“And what of the correct people to operate the suits and technology?” the leader asked.

“We’ve begun compiling a preliminary list of candidates,” he was told. “Only one name stands out so far, but he will actually need some specialised equipment not found at Oscorp. I have some of our people already creating it.”

“His name?”

“Frederick Myers. Born in Australia. He has already proven that he has the potential to hurt Iron Man. With a little training and the right equipment, he could be formidable.”

“What of Sterns and Blonsky?” the question was asked from the far side of the table.

“For now, we’ll leave them where they are. Our plan is that at the correct time, we’ll orchestrate for Sterns to escape with the knowledge of how to gather the rest, including Blonsky.”

“What is the timeline that you are thinking?”

“Unknown at this time. While we’ve found the tech that we need, the appropriate individuals need to be determined and recruited before we move them into the open. Move too early and either S.H.I.E.L.D. or the Avengers could hear about it and put a stop to it. But if we time it right, they’ll
be forced into simply reacting and will have no chance of stopping what is to come.”

“Excellent. Proceed. We look forward to your report at our next meeting.”
Harry stepped from the taxi and barely noticed when it left, so focussed was he on the mansion in from of him. Really, there was no other word for it. It was an elaborate building built on the very edge of a cliff, even jutting out over it at the far side, he thought. The grounds were immaculate, although the tennis court looked as though it hadn’t been used in quite some time. There was even a fountain not far from the front door, circled by a small garden and then by the driveway.

Hefting his backpack over one shoulder, he approached the door. His fist was still in the process of being raised in preparation to knocking when he was interrupted.

“Good morning, Mister Potter. It’s nice to see you again.”

Harry’s eyes widened slightly before he placed the unseen British voice.

“Hi, Jarvis. Um, Tony invited me?” he half said and half asked.

“Indeed. Mister Stark did mention that you were coming. The door is unlocked for you,” Jarvis replied.

Taking that as permission to enter, Harry opened the door and entered into the wide entryway. Everything was immaculate, with lots of white – floors, walls, even the sweeping staircase that led up to the next level.

“Gandalf!” Tony exclaimed as he came bounding up from a set of stairs that led to a lower level. “You made it.”

“Hi, Tony,” Harry replied, reaching out to shake the man’s hand. “Thanks for inviting me.”

“No worries,” Tony replied, waving it off. “Really, you’re here to do me a favour. I get to spend some time finding out how you and your magic tick. How long can you stay?”

“No more than a week,” Harry replied. “My staff are sharing the responsibility of managing the place; there wasn’t really a single person who was able to completely take over.”

“Ah, what you need is someone like Pepper,” Tony said.

“Who needs me?” a voice asked from the top of the stairs, shortly followed by, “Harry! Nice to see you again.”

“Hi, Pepper,” Harry smiled.

“So, what do you need me for?” she asked as she joined the two men.

“I was just telling Tony that I didn’t really have someone that I could leave in charge of the Den,” Harry explained.

“Oi! Hands off, Magic Man. She’s mine. Go find your own Pepper,” Tony exclaimed.

Pepper crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow at the man. “I’m yours, am I? I thought that I was only twelve percent yours. Although I hear that an argument could be made for fifteen percent?”

Tony visibly winced. “I’m never going to live that down, am I?”
Pepper merely smiled at him before turning to Harry.

“Come on, I’ll show you to your room before that one squirrels you away in his lab for the rest of the week,” she said.

“Are you saying he’s a nut?” Tony asked as the two headed towards the stairs. “‘Cause, I’d have to say that I agree with your assessment.”

“Agreeing with me will not make up for that comment, Tony,” Pepper retorted without looking back.

Harry swivelled his head between the two. There was definitely something that he was missing but he had absolutely no intention of asking what it was.

ooo00ooo

Harry took a good, long look around Tony’s lab. There was equipment and monitors and computers and all kind of gizmos everywhere. There was even a robot in the corner that seemed to be nothing more than one giant appendage with a claw-like grip on the end that Tony’d vaguely introduced as ‘Dummy’.

“Are you sure about this, Tony?” Harry asked nervously.

“Very. If we’re going to work together, then I’ve got to know what you can do and if anything’s going to affect me or my suit or toys,” Tony replied.

“And you understand that I’m likely to blow up a lot of the stuff in here, right?” Harry tried again, eyeing what he was certain was something worth hundreds of thousands of dollars.

“Maybe. Maybe not. Won’t know until you actually do something. So. Get on with it,” Tony ordered, waving his hands in a ‘shooing’ motion.

With one last sigh, Harry snapped his wrist causing his wand to jump from its holster into his hand.

“I just aim for that target over there?” he asked.

“For the last time, yes. Are all your people this squeamish about using your magic hocus pocus?” he asked.

In reply, Harry straightened and snapped off a basic reductor at the target.

As the jet of red light shot towards the target, machines throughout the room sparked and the holographic displays stuttered.

“Alright! Now we’re getting somewhere,” Tony remarked, his hands a blur on his computer. “Do it again.”

Harry complied, making the small hole in the target twice as big. This time, smoke curled up from the big machine closest to where he was aiming.

“How are we coming, Jarvis?” Tony asked.

“I am detecting an unknown form of energy,” Jarvis replied. “It is interfering with my scans and shorting out my systems.”

“Expected,” Tony muttered. “Harry, try something a little different this time.”
After a quick think, Harry focussed on a nearby piece of metal and gave his wand a quick swish and flick, levitating it until it was hovering just above head height.

“That’s good,” Tony said, switching from one computer to the next one along. “How long can you hold it?”

Harry shrugged. “A while.”

“Good, keep it up,” Tony commanded. “Whatever that energy is that you’re putting out, it’s definitely affecting the usual electronics. Oddly enough, my ARC reactor only gave a brief stutter before settling down, seemingly unaffected. That could be a key to working it out.” After a while he glanced up, although his hands were still moving on the keypads. “Okay, you can drop that and try something else; maybe something with a shorter but more intense burst if possible?”

Harry released the *wingardium leviosa* on the metal pipe and turned to face Tony.

“Short and intense magic?” he repeated.

Tony looked up at him. “Yeah. You can do that, right?”

In reply, Harry simply turned on his heel and disappeared with a *crack*, reappearing right beside Tony with an identical *crack*.

“Like that?” he asked with a lopsided grin.

Tony, though, was staring at him from where he’d stumbled away, one hand on his chest.

“Sheesh, Potter, don’t *do* that! What are you trying to do, give me a heart attack?” he asked, before instantly changing tacts. “You can disappear from one spot and reappear somewhere else instantaneously?”

“Yeah. We call it apparating,” Harry replied with a shrug.

“What’s the range?” Tony asked.

Harry shrugged. “Depends a lot on how powerful the wizard is, really. Most can make it from Scotland to London in one go, if that’s any help.”

“Approximately six hundred and fifteen kilometres,” Jarvis supplied.

Tony gave a low whistle. “Not bad. Useful, too. Right, looks like you’ve just given us a whole bunch of new tests to do. Get back over there and let’s get to work.”

Harry couldn’t help but to apparate to the other side of the room, looking back as he appeared to check that he’d startled the scientist once again. He had.

ooo00ooo

“Sir. Agent Barbara Morse of S.H.I.E.L.D. is at the front door,” Jarvis announced.

Both Tony and Harry paused in their latest testing of Harry’s magic and looked up at each other.

“Best let the good Agent in,” Tony ordered.

“Very good, Sir,” Jarvis replied.
“Come on, let’s go see what she wants,” Tony said as he shut down his computers with a swipe of his hand and led Harry towards the glass doors of his lab and the stairs beyond.

By the time that the pair reached the correct level, Agent Morse had been let into the house and directed through to the lounge.

“Agent,” Tony greeted. “I’m hoping that this is a social call and not one where you say, ‘the world’s in danger and needs you to save it’?”

“No to both,” Agent Morse replied. “Stark. Potter.”

“Nice to see you again, Agent Morse,” Harry greeted, bypassing Tony to go and shake the woman’s hand.

“Then why are you here?” Tony asked bluntly as he flopped into a chair.

“Something’s come up and we were wanting your opinion on it,” Agent Morse stated.

“I distinctly remember telling your predecessor that consulting hours are every other Thursday between eight and five,” Tony rebutted.

Harry watched as the other two seemed to pause and gather themselves after that statement. He’d been told in the very briefest way about the Agent that had brought the Avengers together, but he wasn’t someone that they were all that comfortable talking about yet. Still grieving, he assumed, something that Harry could relate to; after all, there were still some people that he still had a hard time talking about.

“What did you need our opinion on?” Harry asked, deliberately steering the conversation back on track.

“This,” Agent Morse said, pulling a data pad from one of the pockets of her pants.

Instantly, Tony was leaning forward, his hand reaching out with a ‘give me’ gesture. Harry watched as the pad was placed on the low table between their chairs and activated. A few quick taps at it from Tony, followed by a grand throwing gesture sent half a dozen images and videos up into the air for all to see.

“In the past week, this person has appeared in New York City,” Agent Morse said. “All we know about them is what you’re seeing right now.”

Harry stared at the holographic screens, trying to process what he was seeing.

In every one, there was a man – he guessed it was a man, judging by general body shape – dressed in a form-fitting red and blue suit with black highlights. Leaning forward to get a better look, Harry made out a symbol of some kind on the man’s chest. His eyes widened as he realised that it was a spider.

Most of the stills and video were grainy, as though they were taken from a great distance before being blown up. Either that or the cameras weren’t the usual top-of-the-line stuff that S.H.I.E.L.D. used. The fact that the vast majority of these were taken at night probably also didn’t help. It was something that Tony obviously didn’t appreciate.

“Jarvis, can you do something about the quality?” he asked.

The images rippled slightly before being replaced with a marginally sharper image.
I’m sorry, Sir, that is the best that I can do,” the AI replied.

“No problem, Buddy. Thanks,” Tony replied.

Harry, meanwhile, had focussed on one of the videos that began showing the man running across the rooftops, leaping gaps that seemed impossibly wide with ease. Suddenly, the man flung out one arm and a string or rope of some kind seemed to shoot out and the man leapt off the building, swinging away at the end of the line like some monkey in the depths of the jungle swinging on a vine.

“Is that natural or manufactured?” Tony asked excitedly. “Where did it appear from? Some kind of device or straight from his wrist? And how’d it attach to whatever with enough strength to allow him to swing like that?”

“Judging by your questions, I’m guessing that neither of you have seen anything like this before?” Agent Morse asked.

“No, Ma’am,” Harry replied, his eyes fixated on what he was seeing.

“As to your questions, Mister Stark, we don’t know. S.H.I.E.L.D. has been unable to get a sample of the line as of yet,” Agent Morse asked.

“So, what’s his deal?” Tony asked. “Some kind of guy trying to be a hero? Mutant? Or simply a punk crook with a new gimmick?”

A few taps on the pad from Agent Morse changed the images floating in the air out for new ones. These were all stills showing the police at the scenes of crimes with guys trussed up and left dangling in front of buildings – convenience stores, jewellery stores, ATMs and even a bank.

“He seems to be some kind of vigilante,” Agent Morse stated. “From what we’ve been able to tell, he definitely has enhanced abilities, whether that is due to the Mutant X gene, a simple mutate in his DNA or due to technology, we have no idea.”

“So why come to us?” Harry asked.

“He’s operating in New York,” Agent Morse stated. “The place where the Avengers are going to be based once Mister Stark here finishes renovating his Tower.”

“So, if this was happening somewhere else, you wouldn’t be asking us about him?” Harry asked confusedly.

Agent Morse shook her head. “We’d probably still consult you but it may not be as high a priority.”

“If that’s the case, you’re going to be coming to us a lot,” Tony replied. “Hmm, I may have to think about increasing my fee. Especially with all of the weird that New York seems to attract.”

“What do you mean by that?” Agent Morse asked quickly.


Instantly, a second set of holographic images appeared. These ones, like the first set, showed a man on the rooftops at night, running around and leaping distances that didn’t seem possible. And like the first, he too wore a costume, only his was a deep blood red and black.

“This guy’s been operating out of Hell’s Kitchen for a while now,” Tony stated.

“We are aware of Daredevil,” Agent Morse stated.
“Daredevil?” Harry blanched. “What kind of name is that?”

“It’s what he calls himself,” Tony said dismissively. “He fights crime and criminals. Kind of hard to even get these few pictures, but I am just too good to hide from. Seems to limit himself to the one small area of New York, though, which is something I guess.

“And he’s not the only one that calls New York home. Xavier’s bunch are in upstate New York …”

“Xavier?” Harry cut in.

“Leader of the mutants. Well, the good ones, at least,” Tony replied. “Runs a school for them and everything. The ones that fight for good and all that stuff call themselves the X-Men. Mostly limit themselves to keeping the bad mutants in check.”

Harry shook his head. The world was definitely weirder than he thought. Not that he could really say much, being a member of a secret worldwide society of witches and wizards.

“My point is that there seems to be more and more weirdos coming out of the woodwork, both the good kind and the annoying, got-to-put-them-in-their-place kind,” Tony continued. “And for some reason, New York seems to attract more than their fair share.”

“S.H.I.E.L.D.’s thoughts exactly,” Agent Morse agreed. “We’d … appreciate it if the Avengers could keep an eye on things and be prepared to step in if and when some of these people get beyond what the police can handle.”

“I so wish Nicky-boy had come tonight. I would have loved to have seen him twisting himself in knots trying not to ask us that,” Tony grinned.

Agent Morse gave him a hard look.

“We’ll do what we can,” Harry assured her, taking her focus off of the billionaire.

With a nod, Agent Morse accepted Harry’s promise before leaning forward, tapping off her pad and pocketing it. She rose then.

“If you see or hear anything, let us know,” she said. “We’ll be in touch.”

After she’d gone, Harry turned to Tony.

“There’s really that many strange people in New York?” he asked.

“Better believe it, Gandalf,” Tony replied. “Like this one time not long back I was in New York and got called in to deal with this guy who was threatening people with boomerangs to rob a bank. Boomerangs, I kid you not! Anyway, this Crocodile Dundee want-a-be …”

Harry happily leant back in his chair, a slight smile on his face as Tony talked, gesturing wildly as he relived the event. He wondered what Tony’s reaction would be if he found out that Harry had done most of the work for him that day. It was oh, so very tempting …

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The light coming from the stairwell leading to Tony’s lab caught Harry’s attention as he crossed the room towards the kitchen late at night. He was having trouble sleeping due to the slight time difference between New York and Malibu and thought that a warm glass of milk might help.

Curious, he padded down the stairs only to see Tony seated at his main desk, four computer screens
lit up around him with a corresponding number of holographic displays in the air around him. From what he could make out, it appeared that there were Iron Man suit designs on every screen.

A gentle tap on the door alerted the man to his presence; an absent wave gave him permission to enter.

“Couldn’t sleep?” Harry asked.

“Never been a big one for sleeping,” Tony replied. “Seems a waste of time, really.”

“Know what that’s like,” Harry replied.

“You don’t sleep much either?” Tony asked, peering at him. “Is that like a thing with magic people, needing less sleep?”

Harry shook his head. “Witches and wizards need just as much sleep as any other person. No, my insomnia stems from my youth. I’m mostly over it now, but there were years where I didn’t get much sleep.”

“Partying too much?” Tony asked. “Cause that’s a good way to stop you sleeping at night.”


“I hear you there,” Tony muttered. “What were yours about?”

“The war,” Harry replied succinctly.

“War?” Tony asked, swiping his hand across one panel to close most of the displays, including the holographic ones, down.

“Yeah. Well, I guess you’d probably see it as more of a skirmish, really, but with a population as small as ours, it was a war to us.”

“If you were just a kid, what were you doing in a war?” Tony asked.

“Long story,” Harry replied. “The short of it is that I was the central schmuck who was touted as the one guy that could end the war against the bad guys and kill the Dark Wizard.”

“You? A kid? What were the adults doing?” Tony asked incredulously.

“Most of them were just trying to survive. You see, there was this Merlin-be-damned prophecy and in magical society, prophecies are pretty big things,” Harry explained.

“You have to kill people?” Tony asked.

“Yeah. A lot, actually.”

“How close did you come to buying the farm in this war?” Tony asked and there was something in his voice that told Harry that this was a pretty important question to the other man.

“Couldn’t get any closer,” Harry replied wryly. “Let’s just say that I have a pretty good idea of what comes next.”

“Yeah? Yeah, I know what that’s like. How’d you deal with it?” Tony asked.

“Poorly,” Harry replied. “It’s taken years. Didn’t help that I bottled it all up. Guess that’s a big part of
what sent me wandering around the world for years.”

“Well, you seem to be doing alright,” Tony remarked after a few minutes of silence. “Guess there’s hope for all of us, then.”

“Yeah, there is,” Harry replied, clapping the other man on the shoulder. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to get myself a warm glass of milk and head back to bed.”

“Knock yourself out,” Tony replied. “Especially if that’ll help you sleep better.”

“Thanks, Tony,” Harry replied with a grin. “I’ll see you in the morning. Don’t stay up too late yourself.”

“Yeah, sure, no worries. Night, kid,” Tony replied before turning back to his computers and reactivating his screens.

Steve Rogers stepped out of the glass elevator into a new corridor of the Triskelion, one of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s main bases of operations. He glanced down at the pad in his hand, confirming that he was in the right place and where to go next.

He’d been given a crash course on the modern world over the past few months, but in contrast to the tiny bit of sightseeing and wandering around that he’d done before the whole Battle of New York and aliens thing, this time he’d been given instructors. The instant that he’d mentioned to Agent Morse that he was interested in becoming a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent, he’d been snapped up, flown around and put through tests and scenarios and more classrooms than he could count.

In some ways, it was very familiar, reminding him of his days just after he’d first joined the army, getting trained and ready for battle. In others, everything was strange and unfamiliar and he’d had to fight his own mind to stop himself from having a full-blown panic attack or simply running as far and as fast as he could from this strange new world. But if there was one thing Steve knew about himself, it was the fact that he wasn’t a quitter.

And there was one other thing that kept him grounded: learning that he knew the three founders of S.H.I.E.L.D. – Peggy, Howard and Colonel Phillips. Peggy was the only one still alive and he was still in the process of getting up the courage that he needed to go and see her, to tell her that he’d survived the ice.

Not that he’d had much time to do that yet. S.H.I.E.L.D. had dominated sixteen or more hours of his day, seven days a week, rushing him through training. Technology had been the biggest thing that he’d needed to be brought up to speed with. But he was getting there. Slowly. He’d even been given a brief on how to pilot one of their jump-jets, not that he was rated to actually fly one.

Now, though, the next phase of his training was to begin.

Finding the right door, Steve gave a single knock before opening it.

“Captain. Good. You found the right place,” Agent Sitwell greeted.

Steve nodded to the man, taking note of the half dozen men around the room.

“Captain Rogers,” Agent Sitwell continued. “I’d like to introduce you to S.H.I.E.L.D.’s Special Tactic Reserve for International Key Emergencies Response Team. You’ll be training with them for the next couple of months before you begin joining with them for missions.”
The men had loosely lined up. All were large men, heavily muscled and looked like they meant business.

“Brock Rumlow,” the first man introduced himself as. He had a chiselled face with a five-day growth around his jaw and chin and a regulation military haircut. “Welcome to S.T.R.I.K.E.”

“Nice to meet you,” Steve said, clasping the man’s hand.
“Come on, Sparrowhawk, just a couple more,” Tony near-whined. “There’s still plenty of time yet.”

“Tony, the others will be here in a couple of hours at most,” Harry replied, his patience at a near-end, both with the constant tests and Tony’s incessant use of naming him after literary wizards and sorcerers. “We’ve been at it for days. If you don’t have the information that you need somewhere in your computers by now, then I seriously doubt that an extra hour of testing is going to help. Besides, I need a shower.”

Tony pouted at him, even while manipulating his computers, tasking them with running a different spectrum of scans on Harry’s body.

“Obviously magical people aren’t as much fun as I was led to believe,” he stated.

In response, Harry gave his wand a brief wave in Tony’s general direction.

The instant that his machines began beeping, Tony leapt at them.

“What’d you do? I know you did some kind of magic,” Tony stated, his words near-blurring together in his excitement.

“Pardon me, Sirs,” the voice of Jarvis said from the walls around them, “but there is something on the television that I believe that you should both be made aware of. And might I add, Sir, that I approve of your new look.”

“What? What new look?” Tony asked, before waving the question away. “Forget it. Show us what you’ve found.”

In response, one of the holographic displays changed to display a TV screen. Harry and Tony unconsciously moved to stand side by side as they watched what was clearly a view from a news helicopter.

“Where is this?” Harry asked, staring at the familiar-looking bridge.

The bridge was currently filled with cars, all at a standstill as the occupants of said cars fled for their lives on foot from … something big near the midpoint of the bridge.

“New York,” Jarvis replied. “Specifically, the Williamsburg Bridge.”

Suddenly, one of the cars was pushed over the side, beginning its inevitable plunge towards the river below, a plunge that was halted mid-way. From the looks of it, that car, along with half a dozen others, were being grabbed mid-air by a line of some kind.

“The tensile strength of that has got to be enormous,” Tony murmured.

The origin of the line was revealed as a red and blue figure appeared.

“Spider-Man!” Harry exclaimed.

“But what’s that that’s doing all the damage?” Tony asked.

Whatever it was, it was obviously big and green, thankfully not as big or as green as the Hulk. And this one seemed to have a tail. But that was as much as they were able to work out from the erratic
pictures that the helicopter was transmitting back to the studio.

A quick glance around had Harry snatching up an empty coke can and tapping it with his wand.

“What are you doing?” Tony asked.

“Making a portkey,” Harry replied, before deciding to explain further after noticing Tony’s lack of comprehension. “I can only apparate myself so far. This allows me to travel over much greater distances instantaneously.”

“You’re heading back to New York?” Tony asked.

A brief flick of his eyes towards his suits of armour told the story of how much he wished that he could go too. Unfortunately, New York was on the wrong side of the country and Harry’s magic wouldn’t allow it to take him as well. At least, not without the suit blowing up straight afterwards.

“Yep. If I’m quick enough, maybe I can find out more about Spider-Man and whatever that is and lend a hand to the good guy or at least protect the innocents,” Harry said.

Then, with a brief nod, he tapped the can once more and disappeared.

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The Mage arrived on top of one of the support struts of the Williamsburg Bridge. Instantly, he peered downwards, looking for either the Spider-Man or the big, green thing that it was battling on the TV.

Unfortunately, it seemed that he was too late – neither of the two were there anymore.

Travelling across the country, albeit instantaneously by portkey, quickly donning his black dragon hide pants and shirt, his boots and many pocketed belt and finally his trademark blue-grey cloak before apparating to this position had taken too long.

Well, Mage decided, the main two may not be here. Their mess, however, was.

A second quick apparition took him to a point near the edge of the bridge near where Spider-Man had tied one of the dangling cars to.

A few judicious waves of his wand straightened the cars still on the bridge while at the same time manoeuvring them around so that there was some space left for the cars that he was about to retrieve.

After glancing over the side, Mage began levitating the cars back up to the bridge one by one. By the time that he was finished, he was visibly sweating, at least it would be visible if not for the hood on his cloak and the obscuris spell on his face. Levitating a ton of metal was slightly harder than levitating a feather, after all.

As he placed the last car down, Mage strode forward, conjuring a small container as he did so. Then, after bending down, he plucked a piece of the line that was attached to one of the cars off, a surprisingly hard thing to do, before depositing it into the container. He was sure that Tony or Doctor Banner would love to get a look at it.

It was only then that he became aware of the sounds of a conversation happening not that far away.

“You’re trying to tell me that Spider-Man was the good guy here?” an incredulous voice asked.

Mage’s ears and head perked up at that and he drifted closer to find out more.
“Spider-Man rescued my kid,” a man was saying to a uniformed police officer. “Jack was trapped in our car and it was hanging from the bridge. Spider-Man climbed down after him and when the car burst into flames he stayed and even managed to pull Jack from the car as it began falling towards the river. The guy’s a hero in my book.”

The police officer took a pointed look around at the wrecks of cars strewn over the bridge.

“From what I’m seeing here, the guy’s just as bad as whatever else was on the bridge tonight,” the officer, who Mage now recognised as Police Captain George Stacy, stated.

“Excuse me, Captain,” Mage broke in, making himself known to the two men for the first time. “I’d like to know more about the other one involved in all this.”

“Mage!” Captain Stacy started. “I didn’t know you were here. I just thought that you were out of town with the rest of the Avengers.”

“I was,” he replied. “I came back as soon as I saw what was happening. If you don’t mind, I’d like to know more about what happened.”

Captain Stacy glanced down at the notebook in his hand before sighing and closing it. “I’m afraid that I can’t tell you much. We’ve got a lot of conflicting reports. There were definitely two super-humans here – Spider-Man and something else, although we’re not sure what that something else was. There was definitely some altercation, but we don’t know why. I’m sorry that I can’t help you any more than that.”

“I could tell you,” the other man said.

Harry looked towards the man who was still holding his son close to his chest.

“Anything that you could tell me would be much appreciated, Mister …” Mage said.

“Napoli. Tony Napoli,” the man said, awkwardly holding out his hand to shake. “It’s an honour, Sir. What you and your team-mates did for us, was amazing.”

Mage inclined his head but refrained from replying, instead waiting for the information that he needed.

“Anyway, the other one looked like some giant lizard-like thing,” Tony Napoli said. “Easily eight or nine feet tall; massive claws; incredibly strong. It was going after a limo, I think, before Spider-Man swung in and distracted it. Looked like Spider-Man was gearing up to fight it but my Jack here was in trouble and he chose to save him instead. I’ll never forget what he did. He’s the hero here.”

A disbelieving snort from Captain Stacy gave the policeman’s view on that opinion.

“Spider-Man’s the good guy,” Mage repeated slowly.

“Yeah, well, stands to reason, don’t it?” Tony agreed. “He’s been catching crooks and stringing them up for the police for a couple of weeks now. Seems like he just wants to do what’s right.”

Mage nodded slowly.

“Thank you, Sir, you’ve been a great help,” Mage stated. “And I’m glad that your boy’s okay. Captain Stacy.”

And with that, Mage turned on his heel and vanished.
Harry arrived back at Tony’s Malibu mansion still in his Mage outfit. His sudden appearance in the midst of the rest of the Avengers caused a myriad of different reactions.

“Can you stop doing that!” Tony asked exasperatedly, having been startled backwards a couple of steps. “I nearly spilled my drink.”

“Harry,” Natasha nodded, holstering her gun.

Those two, being the closest, had the biggest reaction, although Harry could also see Steve leaning over to place his iconic shield back down beside his chair.

“Sorry, guys, didn’t know that you’d arrived,” Harry said, tapping his face to cancel out the face obscuring spell before lowering his hood.

A quick swish had his cloak removed and flung over the back of a conveniently vacant chair.

“What’s with the getup?” Clint asked.

“I just came straight from New York; there was a bit of a fight or something between Spider-Man and some kind of mutant lizard thing,” Harry explained.

“You just came from New York?” Steve asked. “How long did it take you to get here?”

“Couple of seconds,” Harry shrugged tossing the empty coke can that he’d used as a portkey onto a nearby table. “Magic can be dead useful.”

“Mutant?” Bruce asked. “Are you sure that that’s what it was?”

Once again, Harry shrugged. “I don’t know how else to describe it. From what I’ve been told, it was eight or nine feet tall, incredibly strong and seemed to be looking for someone; or at least, it was attacking a limo.”

“What was Spider-Man’s part in all this?” Tony asked.

“Seems to be the good guy,” Harry replied, as he plucked a small container from one of the many pouches attached to his belt and tossed it to Tony. “Present. Some of the line or webbing or whatever that Spider-Man uses. He rescued a kid from a burning car that was falling towards the river; if that doesn’t say ‘good guy’, then I don’t know what does.”

“I’ve seen footage of him on the television,” Steve commented. “He’s definitely been enhanced.”

“Most likely a mutate,” Bruce commented.

“Mutate?” Harry questioned the term that he’d never heard before as he sat in the seat his cloak was draped over.

Bruce nodded. “His DNA has been altered out of the norm. Steve and I would be classed as mutates.”

“Nat, too,” Clint piped up.

All eyes swivelled to the red-head.

“Let’s just say that I had an ‘interesting’ childhood and leave it at that, okay, boys,” she said, leaving
no doubt that that was the wisest course for all of them.

“And a mutate is different from a mutant?” Harry asked.

“Yes. Mutants have an extra gene encoded in their DNA from the moment of their conception – the X-gene,” Bruce confirmed.

“Does that make witches and wizards mutates or mutants?” Harry wondered.

Bruce shrugged. “Without looking into their genetics, it’s hard to say. My guess is that they’d be given a different classification.”

“You’re saying that there’s four different types of humans on the planet?” Steve asked, shaking his head.

“Well, yeah, I guess so. Normal humans, mutants, mutates and … magicals, I guess we could call them,” Bruce replied.

“Well, now that we’re all here and we’ve got that out of the way, are you going to tell us why you summoned us?” Clint asked Tony.

“And why you’re wearing that ridiculous hat?” Natasha added.

“I think it’s the height of fashion,” Tony replied, although none missed the glare that he directed at Harry, nor Harry’s chuckles.

“What? Did you do something?” Clint asked Harry.

A quick wave of his wand banished Tony’s cap, revealing a headful of lurid yellow and red striped hair. The momentarily stunned look from the rest of the Avengers quickly dissolved into howls of laughter.

“You did that?” Bruce asked through his laughter.

“He said that magicals had no sense of humour,” Harry explained. “I’ll have you know that I am the son, godson and adopted nephew of some of the greatest pranksters that ever lived.”

A second wave of his wand towards Tony had the billionaire quickly plucking at his hair, trying to pull it down so that he could see it.

“What’d you do?” he asked panickily.

Not being able to see his hair, Tony rushed across the room to look at his reflection in a metal surface. His sigh of relief at seeing his hair black again caused the others to dissolve into laughter once more.

“If we’ve all finished playing ‘laugh at the man who’s been working hard to make you all a lot of money’ then I’ve got presents,” Tony pouted.

His words also triggered the appearance of Dummy, his one-armed robot, carrying a large cardboard box.

“Put it down on the coffee table,” Tony instructed.

Dummy complied but it was with a morbid sense of fascination that the group stared at the robot as it attempted to manoeuvre its way back out again, making dozens of small turns backwards and
forwards before it could trundle back the way that it’d come.

“You made that?” Steve asked incredulously.

“Give me a break; I was a lot younger then,” Tony countered.

“You mentioned ‘presents’?” Natasha asked.

“And ‘money’?” Clint added.

“You mentioned ‘presents’?” Natasha asked.

“Yep,” Tony said, rubbing his hands together. “After … New York, I started to see a lot of stuff
starting to appear with us on it. I’ve got some of it here.”

Opening the box, Tony began pulling items out and tossing them about. A toy hammer, shaped just
like Mjölnir, was left on the coffee table. A toy shield was tossed to Steve; a mask and giant green
gloves in the shape of clenched fists went to Bruce; a pair of black underwear with ‘Black Widow’
written in white on its bum was tossed at Nat; a baseball cap with a purple arrow and ‘Hawkeye’ on
its front went to Clint; and a blue-grey cloaked action figure, its face a simple black, was thrown at
Harry. Lastly, an Iron Man T-shirt was placed on the table beside the hammer.

“This is only a sampling of what’s out there,” Tony said. “Pretty much anything and everything that
you can think of has been made either like us or with our names and images on them. Toys, clothes,
books, pencil cases, lunch boxes, you name it, it’s out there.”

“People actually buy this stuff?” Steve asked, the blush that had appeared with Natasha’s underwear
finally having disappeared.

“You better believe it,” Tony confirmed. “Which led me to wondering why we weren’t getting any
royalties from it. So, I put my lawyers on it.”

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“You better believe it,” Tony confirmed. “Which led me to wondering why we weren’t getting any
royalties from it. So, I put my lawyers on it.”

“You trademarked us?” Bruce asked.

“Got it in one, big guy,” Tony beamed. “Now, whenever someone wants to use our names or images
on something, we get a cut.”

Diving back into the box, he pulled out a stack of small black books. After opening each one, he
tossed them about the room. Harry caught his and opened it to find out what it was. His eyebrows
rose as he realised that he was holding a bank book giving him the details of an account in his name.

“Why does it say ‘Captain America’ and not Steve Rogers?” Steve asked, beating Harry to the
question by a fraction of a second.

“Well, apart from me, the rest of you are all wimps, wanting to hide your identities and what not,”
Tony explained, receiving a number of head shakes and eye rolls in response. “So, I convinced the
bank to open the accounts using our Avenger names. There’s also one for Thor for when he decides
to come back. And one for the Avengers in general. Figured we’d use that one for upgrades and
whatnot.”

“I’m not complaining or anything, but why’d you do this?” Bruce asked.

“I’m not bragging or anything but I’m worth a fair bit of coin; figured you lot could use a bit of cash
as well,” Tony explained.

“Thank you, Tony, we appreciate it,” Steve said formally. “But just so you know, while none of us
have the same kind of money you do, we’re not poor.”
“Seventy-odd years of back pay from the Army would have been a very nice surprise,” Clint commented.

“You could say that,” Steve replied.

“Yeah, well, that didn’t stop you going out and getting a job, even if it is with S.H.I.E.L.D.,” Tony retorted. “In fact, all of you have to work to make ends meet; Harry there runs a coffee shop of all things!”

“I have the Den to give me something to do and because I enjoy it. I don’t need it to make money,” Harry said.

“You don’t?” Tony asked disbelief clear in his voice. “What, magic people can just make money appear out of the sky?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Tony,” Harry retorted. “If I need money, I’ve got a couple of vaults full of gold in Gringotts. Goblins are amazing investors, after all.”

“Goblins?” Clint muttered, shaking his head. “Man, everything that I thought I knew is being turned on its head. Next thing you’ll be telling me is that unicorns and fairies and dragons are all real as well.”

“They are. What do you think my clothes are made from?” Harry asked. “It’s all dragon skin, the strongest natural material there is.”

“Right, well, that’s all I had for you. So, show’s over people,” Tony said.

“The pizza has been ordered and is on its way, Sir,” Jarvis piped up unexpectedly, eliciting murmurs of happiness from all there.

Central Park in New York City was over eight hundred and forty acres of grass and trees and even a zoo, all carefully manicured and sculptured for people to enjoy. Winding paths and seating, lighting and picnic areas, were all abundant. For the city that never sleeps, it was their oasis in the midst of their concrete jungle.

But for Doreen Green, Central Park was far too sterile. It was nothing like the woods and forested areas outside of Los Angeles that she’d grown up in. She loved the wild nature of her second home, most likely a by-product of her mutated genes.

With that in mind, it had been no wonder that the instant that she’d disembarked from the final bus that’d brought her to New York, that she’d made a beeline for the famous park. She’d wandered its many paths and tree-covered lanes and avenues until she’d finally found what she’d been looking for.

Her sharp ears had caught the sounds first and a chitter in her ear from Monkey Joe had confirmed it: there were squirrels nearby.

She’d left the path, venturing deeper amongst the trees to a small clearing where she’d firstly dropped her pack before going to her knees in the grass.

“Hello?” she called in squirrelse.

It took another two calls before the first curious head had popped out from a small hole high in one
of the trees. Seeing it, she smiled.

"Hi! I’m Doreen," she said.

Cautiously, the squirrel crept further out from its home, its front paws inching down the trunk of its tree.

"You speak like us," the squirrel chittered.

A tapping on her thigh had Doreen absently reaching into one of the nut sacks attached to her belt and handing Monkey Joe a nut.

"I do," she replied.

"How?"

By now, there were an additional four other squirrels observing her.

"I was born this way," Doreen explained. "There are a lot of ways that I’m squirrel-like."

"Can you show us?" a squirrel off to the left that she hadn’t yet noticed asked.

"Sure," she replied.

She was just about to get up to do so when a lumbering crashing sound came from the bushes behind her.

"Reen!" Monkey Joe screeched, the same instant that all of the other squirrels vanished from sight.

Doreen had just enough time to turn before a man disappeared into the bushes again, taking her backpack with him.

"Hey!" she yelled.

Instantly, she was on her feet and hurtling after him.

Bursting from the bushes, she saw the figure of a man running down a path to her right, her backpack swinging wildly from one hand, and she took off after him. The man was quick, but against Doreen, it was almost as though he was merely out for a slow jog. It took less than a minute before she was close enough to push off in one giant leap towards him.

Doreen led with her elbow, allowing it to strike him right between the shoulder blades, her full body weight, such as it was, right behind it.

The thief let out a woof of air as he crashed to the ground, the pack falling away as he skidded forward for an extra metre or so.

Using her enhanced reflexes, Doreen was able to ride out the fall quite easily, coming to a stop crouched on the man’s back, her eyes narrowed.

“It’s not nice to steal from people,” she stated harshly.

A muffled something came from the man’s face planted into the ground that she chose to interpret as an apology.

“Don’t do it again; I won’t be so nice about it next time,” she warned.
The man was still laying there even after she’d risen to her feet, grabbed up her pack and headed back towards the trees where she’d left Monkey Joe and all of her potential new friends.

Web-slinging, Peter found, was good to clear the cobwebs out. Ever since the incident on the Williamsburg Bridge, he’d had a lot to think about – the Lizard; saving that boy, Jack; what he wanted to do with these powers that he had. But swinging through the city was the perfect exercise to give his mind a rest. It all became soothing, automatic. Simply shoot a web and swing before shooting the next one.

An extra bit of power in the next swing had him letting go of the web at the top of its arc before he performed a complete somersault and coming to land on the roof on a nearby building in a crouch.

Rising, he moved to the edge and looked out and down. The city was never still, never at rest, but there were times, like now at three in the morning, when there were next to no cars or people around, that it seemed as though the city itself was taking a bit of a breather.

The hint of movement in the shadows caught his attention and he focused in on it.

There were two men huddled against a wall, both dressed in black. Peter frowned at them, wondering what they were doing there. When one shifted to reveal an ATM, he knew exactly what they were doing.

Flinging out one hand, he shot a web before leaping from the top of the building to cross the street.

This time, he landed on the wall, directly above the men before turning about and beginning to creep down towards them.

“I’m telling you that it’s just not safe for good, honest crooks around here!” one said.

It was obvious that the two enjoyed a good conversation while they worked and Peter paused, curious about what a couple of guys intent on breaking into an ATM had to talk about. And it wasn’t as though they’d be able to escape him if they saw him and decided to run.

“It’s a heck of a lot safer on this side of town than it is in Hell’s Kitchen,” the other countered.

The first grunted. “Between the Devil and the Kingpin ‘taking care of anyone’ who he thinks is trying to muscle in on his territory, that’s a given.”

“And no one wants to get in the middle of a pissing contest between Kingpin and the Devil,” the second stated.

“There’s a rumour out that Kingpin’s aiming to hire some professional help to deal with the Devil.”

“That right? Well, I wish ’em luck. They’re gonna to need it.”

“Well, until it’s sorted, I say that we confine our wealth accumulation to this side of the city,” the thief stated, giving his head an emphatic nod for emphasis.

Peter sighed to himself. Whatever was going on in Hell’s Kitchen was forcing criminals over to his side of town. Seemed that once the Lizard was taken care of, he could easily find himself fighting crime on a nightly basis.

Having heard enough, Peter flipped off of the wall to land behind the pair. What little noise he made
was enough to alert the two and they spun about, one even having the nerve to pull and point a gun at him.

“It’s that Spider guy!” the one with the guy pointed out.

“Spider-Man,” Peter corrected.

“Where’d he come from?” the other asked.


“Well, whatever you do, you’ve got no business here,” the gun-wielding thief snarled. “Unless you want to be filled with holes, I suggest that you get lost!”

Peter sighed and shook his head. He half-turned before whipping up an arm and shooting a glob of web, pinning the hand and gun to the wall behind the man. An additional half dozen web shots had both men pinned to the wall by their hands and waists on either side of the ATM that they’d been attempting to rob.

“These things are not toys,” Peter said, plucking the gun from the immobilised hand.

The sound of a siren in the distance decided Peter on what to do with the gun. A quick web burst stuck it to the wall above the ATM for the police to find and deal with.

“Well, gotta go. It’s been fun,” Peter said to the two would-be crooks. He shot out a line, but just before swinging off, he turned back. “And if you get the chance, spread the word to the rest of your buddies. Just like Hell’s Kitchen, the rest of New York isn’t your personal playground anymore.”
He's Not Alone!

Spider-Man was barely managing not to choke, held as he was around the neck by the Lizard’s tail.

For the briefest of instances, Spider-Man wondered whether coming here to Oscorp Tower really was the smartest thing to do. He’d had to battle a squad of police officers; had his secret identity exposed to his girlfriend’s father, who also happened to be a New York City Police Captain, no less; had been shot; and was now on the losing end of a battle with his father’s scientific partner who’d managed to turn himself into a giant green lizard of all things. Even his web-shooters had been destroyed.

And all in the smallest hope that he’d be able stop Doc Conner’s plan to turn the entire city into giant mutated lizards through the release of an airborne virus.

Getting to the roof of Oscorp Tower had been one thing. Reaching the ganali device attached to the tower mast seemed to be a completely different kettle of fish. Currently, Spider-Man knew that there were two – well, three really when it came down to it – problems with saving the city.

For one, he didn’t have an antidote to the lizard serum that could be used to disperse across the city for those already affected. Gwen, he knew, had gone to create one, but what had happened there, he had no idea.

Secondly, even if he managed to destroy the ganali device before it detonated, there would still be some residue gas that would infect people. Which led back to the first problem of no antidote being available.

Oh, and thirdly, was the fact that the Lizard had caught him and didn’t seem to be in any mood to let him go anytime soon. Or even to let him live for that matter.

Spider-Man’s eyes widened in horror as one massive paw reached up and over his head, its razor-sharp talons dragging across his face as the Lizard removed his mask.

“Poor Peter Parker. No Mother. No Father. No Uncle. All alone.”

Peter stared defiantly back at him, unable to speak due to the pressure around his neck.

“He’s not alone.”

Both Peter and the Lizard’s heads whipped around to find Captain Stacy standing behind them, a flak jacket to protect his torso, a shotgun in his hand.

“No, he’s not.”

This time there were three heads whipping about to stare at the other side of the rooftop.

Peter’s eyes widened at the sight of the Avenger, Mage, standing there, his arms crossed and his blue-grey cloak flapping about his feet in the breeze.

Crack!

The sound of Captain Stacy’s gun firing distracted Lizard just enough for Peter to get his hands free and catch the flailing hose spewing liquid nitrogen. Instantly, he directed it at the Lizard’s face, distracting him even more and allowing Captain Stacy’s shotgun and Mage’s bright red flashes of
magic to hurt the giant Lizard man.

Peter wasted no time, using the liquid nitrogen on the Lizard’s tail to freeze it solid and shatter it, allowing Peter to break free and flip himself back to the ground.

A combined effort of bullets, magic and a final kick from Peter pushed Lizard into the pit filled with liquid nitrogen tanks.

“A gift from Gwen,” Captain Stacy said, pulling out a vial of blue liquid from inside his vest.

Peter took it, his head switching between the two men before him and the Lizard behind him.

“Don’t look at me, kid, I don’t have a clue about that device up there,” Mage stated. “If you know how to stop it, do it.”

“Go, Peter, we’ve got this,” Captain Stacy added.

Peter wasted no time, racing across the roof top and jumping high before climbing as rapidly as he could up the mast towards the ganali device.

Together, Mage and Captain Stacy began firing bullets and magic at the Lizard. Their combined efforts, though, were doing little. Each and every injury was instantly being healed. Even the hand that had been blown apart after being frozen solid by the liquid nitrogen was regenerating at an insane speed.

The two backed up slightly as the Lizard began crawling from the pit, his focus on Captain Stacy who was standing between him and the mast that Spider-Man was climbing.

“Bombarda!” Mage cried, exploding a massive chunk from the Lizard’s back.

A cry of pain erupted from the Lizard even as his back arched. One arm swung out, smashing the shotgun from the police Captain’s hands, even as the other came up sharply, the claws extended as they tore through the front of the flak jacket and into skin and muscle before reappearing in Captain Stacy’s back.

It was then that Mage took off the kid gloves. Spells rained down on the Lizard in a multi-coloured light show. Ropes wrapped themselves around him; chains bound his feet; cuts by the dozen lashed his skin, only to heal near-instantaneously; his tail was lobbed off and his mouth was bound. Then, with one final burst of magic, the Lizard was blasted off of its feet, crashing into and through a metal plate before landing hard on the rooftop.

A whizzing high above had the ones left on the roof look up to see a small white light shooting upwards before exploding in a brilliant neon-blue burst of cloud.

The instant that Peter’s feet hit the rooftop once more, he looked for the Lizard. What he saw told him that the antidote that Gwen had cooked up had worked perfectly.

Already, the Lizard was fading away, only for Doctor Connors to begin reappearing. His lizard-like face was near gone, returned to near-human with pain-filled eyes and thinning straw-coloured hair on his head. His green scaly skin was patchy at best as normal pink skin increased in appearance. Despite his reduction in size, Doctor Connors was bound quite securely by ropes and chains and
laying amidst the ruins of a metal wall.

After that one glance, Peter ignored him in favour of the prone form of Captain Stacy. The fact that Mage was frantically waving his wand over the man’s torso told Peter that he’d been injured, most likely severely.

“Captain Stacy!” Peter gasped, dropping to his knees beside the man.

Mage barely paused in what he was doing on the opposite side of Captain Stacy.

The Captain’s eyes opened and focussed in on Peter.

“I was wrong about you, Peter” he said. “This city needs you. Here, you’re going to need this.”

From nearly under his body, he pulled out Spider-Man’s mask and handed it over. Almost tentatively, Peter took it from him.

“Yes, you’re going to make enemies,” Captain Stacy continued. “People will get hurt. Sometimes people closest to you. So, I want you to promise me something, okay? Leave Gwen out of it. Promise me that. You promise me.”

“No,” Mage growled, as he gave his wand one vicious wave, vanishing the Captain’s flak jacket, shirt and tie to leave the man bare-chested, four bloody gashes in the man’s stomach oozing thick red blood.

“No,” Mage repeated, his force of will seemingly enough to make Captain Stacy keep his eyes open, eyes that were now looking at the wizard. “You will not make him promise that. Sometimes those closest to us are the very ones that give us the strength we need to keep going, even when everything seems darkest. And this is not even your choice to make. That’s between Peter and Gwen. She deserves to make her own choices. You can tell her what you’d prefer, but don’t make her choose between the two of you.”

While Mage had been saying this, he’d reached into one of the many pockets of his belt and pulled out a small glass vial. The lid, after he’d unscrewed it, contained a small dropper. He used this to place a single drop of liquid into each of the four vicious slashes that had been made by the Lizard’s claws.

As each drop landed and went to work, a small cloud of steam rose and Captain Stacy’s body arched, a gasp hissing from between his teeth.

“What is that?” Peter asked anxiously.

“Phoenix tears,” Mage answered. “Incredibly expensive and even harder to get a hold of. This bottle had only fifty drops.”

“Phoenix tears?” Peter echoed.

“Yes. The tears of a phoenix have amazing healing powers. It won’t completely heal him, but it’ll keep him alive until I can get him to a hospital,” Mage replied.

They watched as the blood that had been flowing from the wounds slowed to a near stop and the skin around the slashes closed slightly.

Mage nodded before picking the man up.
“I think that that’s the best we’ll be able to get. I’ll be in touch.”

And without another word, the two vanished with a crack from the top of Oscorp Tower.

For a few minutes, Peter stared at the dark, shadowed patch of blood left on the concrete where Captain Stacy had been laying. He straightened then and pulled his mask back on. One look confirmed that the Lizard was no more; Doctor Connors was back in his place, still heavily bound.

Sound from the nearby stairwell caught Spider-Man’s ear and he moved away into the shadows, disappearing from the scene moments before the police arrived.

ooo00ooo

Mage stood in the corner of the hospital waiting room. Most passed him by without a second glance thanks to the mild notice-me-not charm that he’d dropped on himself.

It’d been close to an hour since he’d arrived at the hospital with Captain Stacy in his arms. The instant that he’d arrived, doctors and nurses had swarmed. A trolley had appeared for the Captain and he’d been whisked off, straight to surgery he’d been told.

Mrs Stacy and her sons had arrived half an hour after that; Gwen hot on their heels, brought there by the police officer who’d been charged with her safety. The family had thanked him for saving him before retreating to huddle together for the long wait.

Nearly an hour after Captain Stacy had disappeared into surgery, Peter had arrived, wearing normal everyday clothes and looking incredibly worried. His face was still dirty, grimy and even a little bloody from the fight, but he either didn’t care or didn’t realise.

The instant Gwen saw him, she was up, near-sprinting across the room to throw herself into his arms, her shoulders heaving as she cried. Peter looked across at Mage and received a single nod of acknowledgement.

Thankfully, the news footage on the TV mounted in the top corner of the room was muted, making it that much easier for the family to ignore, not that there was much that it showed, mostly just Spider-Man’s web-swinging rush towards Oscorp Tower and some limited footage of the Lizard scaling the building. The fact that Mage was there and involved in stopping the Lizard had become known, but the image of him that they showed was stock footage from the Battle of New York.

Finally, after another two hours, a trio of doctors emerged, looking extremely tired but happy.

The family was up in an instant, huddled together to receive the news – even Peter was a part of it, but that may have been more due to the fact that Gwen had yet to release her hold of him since he’d arrived. Dropping the notice-me-not, Mage drifted closer to hear what the doctors had to say.

“He’ll live,” the lead doctor said simply.

There were cries of joy and relief, mixed in with a liberal amount of fresh tears.

“What ever you did,” the doctor said, looking straight at Mage, “it definitely saved his life and made our job a lot easier. He had massive internal injuries but we were able to repair it all. There’ll be scarring, of course, nothing that we could do about that, and he’ll be confined to bed rest for the foreseeable future.”

“When can we see him?” Mrs Stacy asked.
“He’s in Recovery at the moment and will be moved to a room in about an hour; you can see him then,” the doctor said.

Then, after heartfelt thanks from the family, the doctors withdrew. The Stacy family turned to Mage, then, giving him just as much, if not perhaps a little more, of their thanks.

Mage smiled, not that they could see it with the obscuris charm on his face.

“Please, you don’t need to thank me,” he said.

“But you saved him,” Mrs Stacy protested.

Mage shrugged. “Captain Stacy is an incredible man. What he did up there, helping Spider-Man and myself to stop the Lizard was one of the bravest things that I’ve seen. I simply did what I could for him; the doctors did the rest.”

He didn’t notice the way Gwen’s eyes shone extra bright and the way she glanced at Peter with what he said.

“Well, aren’t you going to come in?” she asked. “And believe me, you want to come in.”

Meeting her smile with one of his own, Peter stepped in, pausing briefly to give his girlfriend a quick kiss, even if there was an instant pain in his chest as Captain Stacy’s words rang through his head.

As Gwen closed the door behind him, Peter found himself once again freezing in place. The place wasn’t empty. And the people who were here … he’d seen some of their faces before. Tony Stark. Hawkeye and Black Widow (not that he knew what their real names were). There were three others, two men and a woman. By process of elimination, he guessed that the taller, blonde guy was probably Captain America and the smaller, nervous-looking guy was the Hulk, or at least the guy who could transform into the Hulk. He had no clue at all as who the woman could be.
“I see you made it,” Harry commented from behind the counter.

“This is the guy?” Stark asked, pointing a forkful of something at him. “He’s a bit scrawny. And young. Is he even out of school yet?”

“Peter is one of Midtown High’s best and brightest,” Gwen stated forcefully before Peter could reply.

“Midtown High, huh? They’ve got a good science program there,” Stark mused. “But you’re gonna have to do something about standing up for yourself, kid. Talk about whipped.”

Hawkeye suddenly gave a hacking cough that strangely enough sounded like the word ‘Pepper’ to Peter’s ears.

“Leave the kid alone, Stark, I think he’s earned some respect,” the guy Peter thought was Captain America said.

“I’m supposed to meet Mage here?” Peter half-stated and half-asked.

“And you have,” Harry said, coming around the end of the bar.

Peter’s eyes widened as he connected the dots. Gwen’s gasp beside him told him that she, too, had put two and two together.

“You’re Mage?” Peter asked.

“Yeah,” Harry said with a small smile. “Figured that it was only fair to tell you since I knew who you were, Spider-Man.” His eyes flicked to Gwen then. “And I didn’t think it’d be fair to make you keep secrets from your girlfriend.”

“That doesn’t mean that you can go around telling anyone else who we are,” Black Widow stated.

Peter rapidly shook his head.

“Come on, let me introduce you around,” Harry said, waving him to follow him over to the twin tables that had been pushed together for the Avengers to eat at. “Everyone, this is Peter Parker, also known as ‘Spider-Man’.”

“Tony, I’d think, you’d already know,” Harry started. “Next to him is Doctor Bruce Banner, otherwise known as the Hulk. Natasha Romanoff and Clint Barton – Black Widow and Hawkeye respectively. Next to Clint is Agent Bobbi Morse from S.H.I.E.L.D.”

“If we’re also giving out code-names, you might as well know that mine is Mockingbird,” the blonde woman stated.

Peter nodded as Harry continued.

“And last, we have Steve Rogers, also known as Captain America.”

“Nice to meet you, son,” Steve said, rising to shake Peter’s hand. “Sorry we couldn’t get there in time to help against the Lizard; we were on the wrong side of the country, only got in to New York early this morning. Although from what Harry tells us, you didn’t actually seem to need our help.”

“I’d never turn down help from the Avengers,” Peter said quickly.

“And I’d assume that if you were called on, you’d be willing to help them out as well?” Agent
Morse asked with a quirked eyebrow.

“Sure,” Peter shrugged, unsure exactly what sort of situation the Avengers couldn’t handle by themselves.

“Good,” Agent Morse nodded. “We’ll sit down together later and go through some details.”

“Agent Morse is our S.H.I.E.L.D. liaison,” Harry explained.

“That web stuff, is it organically produced or did you make it?” Stark asked.

Peter’s eyes bugged. “Produce it? No! Ewww. That’s just …” he shook his head, trying to dispel the mental image that Stark had put in his head. Finally, he calmed himself enough to answer properly. “The line’s an Oscorp design that I’ve modified slightly. I created some web-shooters that I wear on my wrists to shoot webs as I need them.”

“I think you need to brush up on your biology, Stark,” Natasha stated. “What spider have you ever seen producing webs from their legs?”

“Nat’s right,” Clint agreed. “Besides, could you imagine seeing the kid swinging around New York from lines shot out of his …”

Two hands, one from Black Widow, the other from Mockingbird, clamped over Clint’s mouth preventing him from finishing that sentence, a sentiment that Peter was extremely thankful for.

“Pull up a chair,” Harry said, “and I’ll get you some food. You, too, Gwen.”

“But I’m no hero,” Gwen protested, even as Peter began tugging her forward.

“Yes, you are,” Peter countered. “Who produced the antitoxin to counter the Lizard formula? You did.”

“You produced that?” Bruce and Tony asked simultaneously.

“If you can do that, then I’ll hire you here and now,” Tony continued. “Stark Industries is always looking for the best and brightest. You, too, Parker.”

“Thank you, Mister Stark, but I already have an internship with Oscorp,” Gwen replied.

Stark made a sour face. “What would you want to work with that two-bit wannabe corporation for when you could work with the best?”

Peter eyed Gwen and Stark, two parts of him warring with each other: his loyalty to Gwen and his excitement at getting his own internship, not to mention the little extra cash would be nice to help Aunt May out with.

“I’ll take you up on it, if you’ve got an internship going, that is,” Peter blurted.

“Well, at least one of you has some sense,” Stark beamed. “And bring some of that webbing of yours over and your web-shooters as well and we’ll see if we can’t give them a bit of an upgrade.”

A plate of chips, a couple of burgers and two milkshakes floated down onto the table in front of he and Gwen and Peter looked up and around to find Harry waving a stick (his wand?), obviously directing the food to its destination.

Automatically, Peter dug into his back pocket for his wallet.
“I remember telling you once before that heroes don’t pay here,” Harry said.

“You better believe him, kid, he won’t even let any of us pay,” Clint stated, popping a chip into his mouth. “Not that I’m complaining or anything.”

“How about you tell us a bit about yourself, Peter,” Steve said with a smile.

Peter took a look around at the encouraging smiles and felt an encouraging squeeze of his hand from Gwen.

“Well, like Gwen said, I go to Midtown High where I’m top of my class,” he began.

“Are you sure about that?” Gwen asked, her blue eyes sparkling and a pointed raised eyebrow daring him to continue.

The look was enough to cause everyone around the table to burst out laughing and Peter felt the tension that he’d been holding since he’d walked in melt away.
Living in New York was turning out to be not what Doreen had expected.

Before she’d left home, she’d envisioned meeting up with Tony Stark, not to mention the rest of the Avengers, and showing them what she could do. Then, of course, they’d ask her to join them and she’d be living the dream.

The reality, though, was completely different.

So far, she hadn’t gotten close to any of the Avengers. Once, she thought that she’d had a glimpse of Iron Man flying up to Stark Tower, or at least, what used to be Stark Tower. By the look of it, it was being renamed as Avengers Tower, at least judging by the stylised ‘A’ on the side that had replaced the word ‘Stark’. She couldn’t even imagine anything cooler than that. Unfortunately, the Tower was still under construction and she hadn’t been able to get closer than the street outside of it.

And without getting to meet up with any of the Avengers, she hadn’t been able to show them what she could do. And without that, it meant that she had nowhere to stay.

Being a fifteen-year-old in New York with limited money and resources wasn’t exactly fun. Oh, sure, her new squirrel friends had helped, finding extra nuts and fruits for her. And being covered in squirrels at night kept one warm. At least, she’d been able to save a bit of money that way; not that she’d started with much, especially after buying a bus ticket across the country to get here.

Which all brought her to where she was now.

Doreen had found that, while fruits and nuts were good and being part squirrel meant that they provided the nutrition that she needed, the human part of her wanted more. And without much money, she had swallowed her pride and taken to checking the dumpsters behind some of the restaurants and cafés around the city.

With her hope of meeting the Avengers, she’d naturally gravitated to the area around Avengers Tower. From where she currently was, she could even see the Tower.

Glancing around, Doreen checked the street. As expected for this time of night, the street was empty, meaning that she didn’t even have to duck into the alley beside the café she was outside of surreptitiously. She paused when she first entered the alley, giving her eyes time to adjust to the limited light. The expected dumpster was against the back wall of the alley.

Her steps paused as she noted a door partway down the alley and she eyed it warily. Seeing no lights coming from either the slit under it or the small window set in it, she pushed on, her grumbling stomach agreeing with her decision.

Harry’s wand was moving in such a way that an outsider would have thought that he was conducting a symphony orchestra. Under his direction, dishes, cutlery, pots and pans were washing themselves before floating across to the tea towel in order to be dried. Clean and dried items were making their way home into the cupboards. At the same time, cloths were wiping down benches and the mop and broom were fighting over which part of the floor that they were responsible for.

A tingling in the back of Harry’s mind caused his concentration to slip and for everything in the kitchen to freeze in place. Slowly, his head turned towards the alley beyond the heavy oak door.
Someone, he knew, was out there. The wards that he’d placed told him that the person continued past the door that led to the staircase and his apartment. His head cocked as he wondered what the person would want further down the alley – there was nothing there expect for a dead-end and the dumpster.

A single sharp swish of his wand had the cloths dropping in place, the dishes settling on counters and the broom and mop retreating to their respective corners. With a satisfied nod, Harry stowed his wand into his wand holster and strode towards the door.

Harry’s head was already turned towards the end of the alley when he stepped out of the door to the kitchen. Slight movement told him that whoever was there had their head over the side of the dumpster, meaning that his presence hadn’t been detected.

A quick look around confirmed that there were no others about anywhere in the alley.

Thrusting his hands into his pockets, he slowly began to traverse the length of the alley. As he did, he examined the person who’d tripped his wards.

They were small. Slim, too, but whether that was due to genetics, age or lack of food was next to impossible to tell. At the moment, they were barely managing to stay on the very tip of their toes without falling in, the upper part of their body and their arms invisible to him, being as they were inside the dumpster.

“Are you alright?” Harry asked.

The unexpectedness of his voice startled the person in the dumpster to such an extent that Harry found himself darting forward to help them. First had come an echoing squeak of fright; then the person had overbalanced, their feet leaving the ground as they seesawed dangerously towards tipping the person completely into the dumpster. Only Harry grabbing their leg stopped their movement, eliciting a second high-pitched shriek from them.

Gently, Harry pulled the person back until their feet were firmly back on the ground. It was only when they’d completely righted themselves and turned around that Harry realised that the reason the person seemed so small was because they were young. And female.

“Are you alright?” he asked again, his eyes roving over her form.

She had short hair, although working out the colour in the dim light was impossible. And as for her clothes, the best that he could tell was that she was wearing some kind of jacket over her shirt, jeans and boots.

“I’m fine,” the girl replied quickly.

Harry gave her a dubious look.

“Aren’t you a little young to be out at this time of night?” he asked.

“No younger than a lot of others,” she shrugged.

Harry could already tell the way this conversation was going to go; no matter what he asked, she was going to be evasive and defensive.

“I’m guessing that you’re hungry,” he said and he noted the accuracy of his statement through the way that she looked away and down. “Look, I’ve got a few leftovers in the kitchen that I’ll just end up throwing out tomorrow; how about me giving them to you now instead of diving through the bins
for them tomorrow?"

She looked everywhere but at him before her eyes settled on his face and she shrugged.

“I guess,” she said, “if you were just going to get rid of them anyway.”

With a nod and a smile, Harry turned and headed back to the near-concealed door leading to the kitchen. Soft footfalls behind him told him that she was following. He waited for her at the door, but she stayed stubbornly just out of the light. Realising that she had no intention of entering, Harry quickly ducked inside, gathering up a couple of rolls and filling them with slices of beef and putting them into a bag. His hand barely paused before he grabbed the leftover apple pie and putting it in a container and adding it to the bag.

The 'leftovers’ gathered (as well as a bottle of juice), Harry headed back to the door. As expected the girl was waiting for him, shifting nervously from foot to foot. At first he thought that there was a small movement near the top of her jacket when he first went out, but it could have been a simple trick of the light, at least, that was his guess considering that there was no repeat when he was looking at her.

“Here you go,” he said.

The girl darted forward to take the bag and bottle, barely staying in the light long enough for him to get a better look at her.

“We open at eight. You’re welcome to come back then and have breakfast. On me,” Harry offered.

“I’ll think about it,” she replied. “Thank you.”

With that, she quick-walked out of the alley. Harry watched her go until she’d turned the corner. In all the time that he’d owned the Den, that was the first time that he’d had anyone dumpster diving in the alley. Hopefully, it’d be the last, and especially for someone that young.

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The mood in the room was cautious to say the least. Each of the five that were waiting for the Boss eyed the others warily. Business, of late, hadn’t been good. Too many things had begun going wrong – shipments intercepted; men beaten; businesses raided; their protections being exposed. None of the five … divisions had been spared and rumour had it that the sixth section of their organisation, the one under the direct control of the Boss, had also suffered.

One would think in times like these that the different parts of their empire would band together, drawing strength in the protection that allies could give. But instead, each group had drawn inwards, trying to protect their own without exposing weakness that could be exploited, either by the enemy or by allies; after all, a knife in the back kills just as well as a frontal assault.

Into this atmosphere, the Boss strode, his crisp white suit a stark contrast to the dark environment that they’d gathered in. The Boss or their Employer (after all, one never spoke his name, especially if one liked the idea of living), was a tall man, broad shouldered and while very large, it was all muscle.

He stopped at the appropriate place, completing the circle of his … well, not peers, but the next closest thing. The fluorescent light glinted off of his bald head as his hands folded over the top of his cane; the hard, smooth diamond set in the handle cool under his touch.

“Gentlemen, Madam Gao,” he greeted.
Soft murmurings or nods returned the greeting from the heads of the various syndicates: the Chinese heroin ring; the Yakuza; the Mob; the Russians; and the accountant that headed the businesses tying them all together. Along with his own, local, enforcers, these six owned or at least controlled, New York City.

“Business has not been as … profitable of late,” Owlsley opened with cautiously.

Behind the Boss, his assistant, Wesley, shifted almost imperceptibly. A flick of his shoulders stilled the man.

“That is why I called you here,” the deep bass voice of the Boss stated.

As expected, their gazes shifted into one that was more eager, perhaps even hopeful.

“I know that the Devil has been making trouble for each of you in Hell’s Kitchen. And of late, he’s even begun branching out into the surrounding areas,” the Boss stated.

“The Spider-man looks to be another like him,” the Russian stated. “And if they ever joined forces …”

“That is not something that we’ll have to worry about,” the Boss assured them all. “I have arranged for some … specialised help to deal with the Devil. I have been assured that he will be here soon.”

“Who? Who is this person?” the head of the Yakuza asked.

“His name is not important. All you need to know is that he can truthfully claim that he has never once missed his target. Have your men scale back their operations for now; better to lose some money than men, contacts or equipment.”

Each of them immediately nodded, grins lining one or two faces at the thought of the imminent downfall of the Daredevil.

ooo00ooo

“Gwen? What are you doing here?” Harry questioned as the blonde teen almost marched past him at the counter, her destination the kitchen.

She paused and Harry could see a fierce expression on her face, something that looked a mixture of anger, exasperation and annoyance. It was a look that Harry knew well from his school days – it was one that Hermione often wore when things didn’t go her way.

Something in his own face must have tipped her off to her appearance because Gwen seemed to take a calming breath, her eyes closing for a moment. When she finally looked at him again, her face was calmer, although he was sure that those who knew her well would be able to see the signs of how she was really feeling.

“Hi, Harry,” she said.

“Hello, Gwen,” Harry replied, before repeating his earlier question. “What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be in school?”

“Midtown High’s closed for the foreseeable future,” she stated and it was obvious that she was repeating something that she’d been told.

“Oh?” Harry asked, his hands automatically moving about as he began preparing the requested latte
for the customer at the far table.

“Yes. Spiderman and the Lizard did a bang up job of destroying an entire wing. Including the library!” she near-spat. She swallowed and closed her eyes momentarily again. “There’s hope that they’ll be able to work out a way to hold classes in the rest of the school while they rebuild the damaged part, but that won’t happen for at least a week or two.”

“So, you decided to put your newly acquired free time to good use by coming into work,” Harry smiled.

“Well, it was the best place to be,” Gwen replied almost sheepishly, making Harry cock his head in question.

“Oscorp’s a mad-house after what happened with the Lizard and everyone in Doctor Conner’s division has been temporarily suspended while they conduct interviews to be sure that none of us were helping him,” she replied. “And as much as I love my dad, I couldn’t stay at home with him at the moment.”

“How is Captain Stacy recovering?” Harry asked.

“He’s getting better,” Gwen sighed. “Still confined to bed, of course. But that hasn’t stopped him going on and on about how stupid I’m being for continuing to date Peter.”

Harry gave her a sympathetic pat on the shoulder.

“He just cares for you and worries about you,” he said.

“I know. Which is why I’m here. I was afraid that if I stayed at home I’d end up saying something that I’d regret,” she nodded sadly.

“Go grab your apron and be useful, then,” Harry said as he passed her to take the now-completed order to the waiting customer.

Doreen really wasn’t sure if she was doing the right thing. Only the growling in her stomach kept her going. The meet rolls and juice that the guy had given her the night before had done wonders, not to mention the couple of slices of apple pie, but a single meal did not a cure for starving make. And, he’d seemed kind of nice. Monkey Joe had even agreed to hang out with their new friends in Central Park while she came here.

Tentatively, she pushed open the door causing the small bell above her head to jingle. She stepped inside and sidled to the closest table, the idea being to sit and observe a bit and if she didn’t like what she saw, then she could retreat before anything untoward happened.

Unfortunately, those plans didn’t last past the first few seconds.

“Hi. Glad you made it,” a friendly-sounding voice said from her side – the side between her and the door at that.

Her head whipped about to take in the small guy standing beside her and she relaxed slightly – with her enhanced squirrel abilities, there was no way this guy with the glasses and messy black hair could stop her. Casually, her hand lifted back up from her backpack which she’d placed beside her chair.
“Hello,” she replied cautiously.

“May I?” the man asked, indicating the chair across the table from her.

“Okay,” she nodded.

He’d barely taken a seat when a blonde-haired girl, maybe a year or two older than Doreen herself appeared beside her table.

“What can I get Gwen to bring you …” the man asked, trailing off with a pointed look.

“Doreen,” she supplied.

“Doreen,” the man repeated and there was not even a hint of a snigger or anything at her name.

She stared at him. “You’re not going to comment about my name?”

“What would I?” he asked, sounding surprised. “Doreen’s not that unusual. You should have heard some of the names of people that I used to know. Now, what would you like? As I said last night, it’s on me.”

Seeing the girl, Gwen, waiting patiently for her to choose, she picked up the menu and quickly perused it.

“Can I get some bacon and eggs? And sausage? And maybe some fried tomatoes? Oh, and a strawberry milkshake as well, please?” she asked.

“Not a problem,” Gwen smiled, writing the order.

“My name’s Harry,” the man said after the waitress had wandered off towards the kitchen.

She nodded before blurting the question that had been burning in her since he’d given her the bag of food the night before.

“Why are you doing this? Helping me, I mean?”

He gave a kind of sad smile then, and she knew that whatever he was going to say, it was the truth.

“Because I know what it’s like to be hungry,” Harry replied. “And if it wasn’t for my friends way back when, I could easily have been worse off than you.”

“So, you’re just going to give me free food?” she asked sceptically.

“Today, yes,” Harry replied. “And we’ll talk while you’re here and work out what comes next.”

“Next?” she asked nervously.

He just gave an enigmatic smile. “Yes. Next. Now, why don’t you tell me what you can about what’s brought you to the point that has you looking for food in dumpsters.”

Doreen looked around the café, trying to buy herself some time while she decided what to say. It wasn’t as though she hadn’t been expecting the question; just that she’d never been able to work out the best way to answer without giving too much away.

“I … I miscalculated,” she eventually said. “I thought that I could make it on my own but everything in New York is more expensive than I expected.”
“I take it that you’re not a local girl, then?” Harry asked.

“No. I’m from back west,” she replied, pleased with herself for not giving away all of her secrets.

Harry nodded as though that was good enough for him. “And what brought you to the Big Apple?”

“Thought I’d come see the sights, meet some new people,” she replied, sounding vague and pleased that it was also the truth; now if only she could work out how to meet Iron Man and the other Avengers.

“What about your parents?” Harry asked and she could hear the tentativeness in his voice.

“Let’s just say that we don’t see eye to eye and leave it at that,” she said.

Thankfully, he seemed to acquiesce to her wishes on that one.

“Obviously, you’ve realised that you’ve overextended yourself,” Harry said. “What are you going to do now?”

Doreen sighed. She’d been asking herself that very question for the last couple of days. No way was she meekly going to tuck her tail between her legs (something that she could do better than anyone else) and go home. In the end, all she could do was shrug.

“Try to find a job, I suppose. Get some money to pay for food and a place to stay.”

“What about school? You look as though you’re still school age,” Harry commented.

“As much as I might like to go back to school, it’s not necessary,” Doreen replied, “and would probably cut into my work time. Money’s more important right now; I can always go back to school later.”

Right then, the waitress returned with a plateful of food and a large glass filled with frothy pinkness.

“While you’re enjoying your meal,” Harry said as he rose from the seat, “I’ll have a think about a couple of things and we’ll talk after. I might have a couple of ideas that you might be interested in considering.”

Doreen looked at him intently for a few seconds before agreeing with a single nod. She watched, confused, as Harry walked away. He seemed like a good guy, but she couldn’t work out why he was willing to help her. With a shrug, she put the thought away for now; there was a plateful of delicious-smelling food in front of her demanding her full attention.

ooo00ooo

“Our top news story tonight is the deaths of twenty-nine people and a further eighteen injured in what is thought to be a terrorist attack in Chicago today.

“An explosion rocked a small mall in the outskirts of the city just after nine a.m. this morning. Thankfully, most of the shops were still in the process of opening for the day meaning that there were a limited number of people in the area. The blast destroyed three shops and set fire to the mall; fire fighters took nearly two hours to bring the fire under control due to the intense nature of the fire and the heat that it produced.”

The scene cut to show a woman wrapped in a blanket, her hair a mess and soot covering her face. As she described what had happened, her eyes were big and round and she trembled slightly.
“It was terrifying. One minute we were just doing our shopping, the next, there’s this massive boom and we’re getting thrown around. And the heat, I was sure that I was going to be burnt up alive just from how hot the air was. There were people everywhere, lying about or screaming and trying to put the flames on their clothes out.”

“The cause of the explosion is still under investigation …”

The news reader trailed off, lifting one finger to his ear.

“I’ve just received a report that a group led by someone calling themselves ‘The Mandarin’ has claimed responsibility for the attack. As soon as more is known of either The Mandarin or the group or what their aims are, we will bring you that information.”

ooo00ooo

“Agent Sitwell.”

The senior S.H.I.E.L.D. agent turned at the sound of his name to find one of his best operatives standing in his doorway in the classic ‘at ease’ pose.

“Agent Ward,” he greeted. “Come in. What brings you by?”

“Just thought that I’d stop in and say ‘hi’ before I head out to my next assignment,” Agent Ward replied.

“Ah, yes, I’d heard something about that,” Sitwell nodded. “France, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Sir,” Ward nodded.

“And how did your last assignment go?” Sitwell asked.

“As good as we’d hoped,” Ward replied, deliberately vaguely.

“Glad to hear it,” Sitwell replied.

A pointed glance at the clock had Ward reaching out a hand. Clasping it, Sitwell felt the tiny USB in the palm of his hand.

“Let’s hope that this mission is just as successful,” Sitwell said.

“Thank you, Sir,” Ward nodded before leaving.

Sitwell waited until the agent had left before transferring the USB into a secure container.

Ward, it seemed, had been the perfect choice to infiltrate Oscorp while they were scrambling around after the ‘Lizard’ incident. If Ward was right, Hydra now had the schematics to every device that they’d need to make ‘Project Sinister’ even more of a success than they could possibly imagine.
“I still don’t get why you’re doing this,” Doreen stated after turning in a complete circle inside the bedroom that she’d just been told was hers for the foreseeable future.

Harry sighed from where he leant against the doorframe, his arms folded across his chest.

“No, I don’t suppose you would,” he said. “Really, only Hermione would.” He waved off her question as to who this mysterious ‘Hermione’ was in favour of giving an answer. “Hermione calls it my ‘saving people thing’. It’s something I’ve always had. If I see someone or something in trouble and there’s something that I can do to help, I do it, often without even considering the consequences.”

“So, you’re a good Samaritan,” Doreen asked slowly.

“Huh,” Harry grunted. “As good a description as any. And it’s not like it’s forever, only until you get on your feet.”

“That’s right,” Doreen stated emphatically, thinking of the deal that they’d struck.

It’d taken the two of them, with some input from that waitress, Gwen, nearly an hour to hash out the details of their deal. Harry would provide room, meals and a job; and she would work for him as well as go to school. At least she’d have someone she’d know at her new school once she’d enrolled, even if Gwen was in the year level above her.

Gwen had even hinted that there was a possibility that her parents might take her in. Which would mean that she wouldn’t have to live with Harry, no matter how nice he appeared to be. Taking an extra look around the room, she knew that as bizarre as this was, it was infinitely better than living in the park, especially with how cold it was becoming each night.

“There is … one other thing,” Doreen said.

She still hadn’t put her backpack down, saving that for after this particular conversation. Harry’s raised eyebrow was enough to keep her talking.

“I have a pet,” she said in a rush.

“A pet?” Harry asked. “May I ask why you haven’t mentioned this before?”

“He’s not your usual type of pet,” Doreen hedged.

“Well, I used to have an owl for a pet and I have a mate who had a toad when he was younger, so I can’t imagine whatever pet you have as being too unusual,” Harry assured her.

Doreen stared at him. A toad wasn’t too unusual, she supposed. But an owl?

“Monkey Joe’s a squirrel,” she said.

It seemed that this time it was Harry’s turn to stare.

“A squirrel?” he repeated. “Well, I suppose that’s not so bad. Is he housebroken, at least?”

“Monkey Joe knows how to behave himself,” Doreen stated indignantly.
“Well, fair enough, but if Monkey Joe makes any mess, it’s your responsibility to clean up after him,” Harry said.

“Agreed,” Doreen said quickly.

“I’ll leave you to get settled in,” Harry said. “Dinner’s at seven but the rest of the day is yours.”

“Thanks, Harry,” Doreen replied.

Harry merely nodded and left, closing the door behind him.

Finally alone, Doreen took off her pack before shucking out of her old bomber jacket and flopping onto the bed. She’d unpack later, for now she was enjoying the feeling of laying on a proper mattress for the first time in what felt like forever.

“ooo00ooo

“What do we know about our potential client?” Matt Murdock asked.

From the chair immediately to his left, the sound of rustling papers could be heard where his best friend and partner, Foggy Nelson of Nelson and Murdock Law Firm, was shuffling through the file that they were given by Sergeant Mahoney as they entered the police interview room.

“Right, the basics,” Foggy began. “Felicia Hardy. Twenty. Born in Queens. Currently a freshman at Empire State.”

“A freshman?” Matt questioned.

“Yeah, seems a little older than normal,” Foggy agreed. “Oh, wait, looks like she’s only just re-enrolled. She actually started University two years ago, before dropping out in her first semester.”

The sound of more rustling paper filled the room.

“Here we go. Oh, man, this says that she was raped,” Foggy near groaned. “By her boyfriend no less. The dude was killed in a car crash before he could be brought to trial. Other than that, her file’s clean.”

“Any known associates?” Matt asked, wanting to cover all bases.

“Let’s see,” Foggy mused. “Just the one – her father, Walter Hardy. He’s a world class cat burglar, currently serving time upstate.”

The door opening interrupted any further exchange of information.

Matt’s head shifted as he used his extraordinary senses to get an idea of who had entered. The police officer he dismissed immediately. No, it was the girl he focused on. Her tread was light and he assumed that her clothes were form-fitting as he couldn’t detect any hint of their movement as she walked. In fact, the only real sound that she gave off was the slight swish of her hair, obviously long. And there was a hint of perfume on her, a flowery scent that he was unfamiliar with.

“You two are my lawyers?” the girl, Felicia, asked as she took the seat opposite them.

“We are; assuming that we agree to take your case,” Matt said, taking the lead. “My name is Matthew Murdock, this is my partner, Foggy Nelson. We’re told that you’ve been charged with murder.”
“I didn’t do it! I didn’t kill anyone!” Felicia stated forcefully, by the sound of it leaning forward in her intensity.

Matt cocked his head slightly as he listened to her heart rate and breathing.

“Why don’t you tell us what happened, Miss Hardy,” he said.

“I’ll admit, I wasn’t supposed to be there,” Felicia began.

“The apartment of one James Broadshaw,” Foggy supplied. “Just why were you there, Miss Hardy?”

“James used to date one of my friends,” she replied. “My friend never got all of her stuff back from him, some of it was important to her and she was getting more and more upset. So, I decided to do something about it.”

Lie.

“But he was already dead when I got there,” she continued, her voice cracking with emotion on every other word. “He was just lying there; a knife sticking out of his chest and there was blood everywhere and his eyes … he was just staring, staring up at nothing, you know?”

Truth.

“I went to check on him, to see if he still had a pulse or something and that’s when the police busted in and arrested me,” she finished.

Truth.

“I don’t believe that you’re telling us everything,” Matt stated. ”But I do believe that you didn’t kill Mister Broadshaw. We’ll take your case, but I must warn you that it’ll go a lot easier if you trust us with telling us everything that you know.”

“You believe me?” Felicia asked, hope filling her question. “You’ll defend me?”

“We will,” Foggy assured her. “Just sit tight and we’ll see what we can do about arranging for bail and getting you out of here.”

“Thank you,” Felicia said.

After the two men had left the room, Foggy leaned in towards his partner.

“You believe she didn’t kill the guy?” he asked in a near-whisper.

“I do,” Matt replied, his cane tapping ahead as they walked. “She did not kill Mister Broadshaw; she was in the wrong place at the wrong time. However, I don’t believe her story about why she was there; we’re going to have to get her to tell us the truth if we’re to defend her case successfully.”

“Shouldn’t be a problem for you, gorgeous women seem to open up to you all the time,” Foggy groused.

“Was she gorgeous?” Matt asked amusedly.

“Don’t go using the ‘blind card’ again,” Foggy accused. “I know you, Matt Murdock. If there’s a gorgeous woman within a hundred feet, you can find her. And then end up dating her!”
Matt could hear the way his friend was shaking his head.

“Don’t worry, Foggy. I have no intention of dating Miss Hardy; she is a little young, after all,” Matt replied.

He chose to ignore the grumbling mumble of his friend as they continued their walk towards the appropriate counter in an attempt to arrange bail for their newest client.

ooo00ooo

Brown eyes scanned the street, seeking out any threat to his person.

This being New York meant that people were more inclined to ignore everyone else, intent on getting where they needed to go or be within the smallest amount of time and with the least amount of interaction with others as possible. This being Hell’s Kitchen, the denizens were even more wary of interacting with others, giving each other a wide berth as they passed on the street.

He smiled to himself, one hand automatically reaching up to make sure that his black beanie was settled properly on his head, covering his most distinguishing feature. His eyes settled on a bar and he cocked his head as he considered it.

Its windows were mostly clean, but there was just enough grime on them to keep the casual glance from seeing what was happening inside. The rest of the building looked to be in good condition, solidly built even though it was old and showing its age.

With a nod, he crossed the street to get to it, striding straight inside as though he owned the place and he had nothing to fear, which was more true than anyone would ever realise.

Inside was sparsely populated by the usual low-life scum that one would find in dives like this – the perfect sort of people to get information from. He stepped up to the bar and settled onto a stool, two down from one of the patrons. A single raised finger signalled the barkeep.


A glass was quickly placed in front of him before being filled. He nodded his thanks before taking a sip. Nice and smooth, just the way he liked it.

“I’m looking for a bit of information,” he stated.

The barkeep’s eyes shifted about the room nervously before settling back onto him.

“What do you want to know?” he asked. “Might be able to help, depending on what it is.”

A single note was pushed across the bar only to quickly disappear.

“I’m new in town,” he began. “And like the looks of this here neighbourhood. Seems a good place to do some … business.”

Glancing about, he could see that he had everyone’s attention. As he continued, he plucked a toothpick from the nearby jar and began turning it about in his fingers.

“Thing is, being new, I don’t know the lay of the land – where the best places to avoid or what the cops hereabouts are like,” he said.

“It ain’t the cops you gotta watch out for around here,” one of the old men at a nearby table stated.
“You’re in Hell’s Kitchen, boy. Here, it’s the devil you need to watch out for. He’s always watching,” his friend at the same table elaborated.

“And he’ll eat you alive,” the man on the stool just down from him chuckled. “A little guy like you don’t stand a chance.”

The toothpick he was turning over and over stilled, even as his mouth drew into a hard line.

“A ‘devil’, huh?” he asked, modulating his tone to give off an air of scepticism. “I’m thinking you guys are trying to pull one over on me.”

“No bull, man,” the first man stated. “The Devil’s very real. Men and businesses have been suffering for a long time now. Most of the smart ones have moved away from the Kitchen because of him.”

“Better take the same advice,” stool bar man said with a broad grin. “Get out of the Kitchen while you still can. You won’t last a day otherwise.”

With one swallow, he finished off his whiskey before slamming the glass back onto the bar.

“Get out while you still can, before the Devil gets you, too,” the same guy chuckled.

The toothpick still twirling in his fingers, he walked to the door. Then, just before he exited, he twirled, his hand coming up and the toothpick flying dead and true. The man at the bar grasped his throat as he began gagging.

Ignoring the dying man, he continued back onwards to the street. The regular people here were running scared, no wonder he’d been called in. Now to see his ‘employer’ and see what he’d get paid to rid the city of the devil on their shoulder.

ooo00ooo

The instant that Tony saw the missile tracking towards his Malibu home on the TV he knew that he’d made a mistake of epic proportions. Giving out his home address to terrorists was something that he’d never do again. Assuming that he lived through the next minute, that is. And that he still had a home.

As the missile hit and the world around him exploded, Tony knew that there was only one importance: protecting Pepper. The Mark 42 armour was the only one in the room, thankfully it had the new remote command function. Even as he was blown backwards, he could see the armour beginning to attach. Now whatever happened, everything would be alright.

The next five minutes were pure terror. The house was disintegrating around him; missiles were hitting at annoying regularity. Getting his armour back on his body helped him gain some confidence, after all, he’d taken on an army from space. The instant that the thought crossed his mind, Tony violently squashed it away – he had no time for a panic attack right then.

Two helicopters were down and he was about to get a bead on the third when the second crashed into what was left of the mansion.

There was no escape from what followed. Chucks of concrete; cars; furniture; the roof all crashed around him and took him with them in their slide down the cliff face and into the water. Through the facemask, he could only stare in horror at the sight of the rest of the house plummeting after him.

And then it landed, crashing into the sea floor around him and burying him alive. Tony could feel his heartrate spike and his breathing coming in short, sharp spurts.
“Sir, take a deep breath,” Jarvis stated and all Tony could do was trust his A.I. with his very life.

Being in a small village in Brazil wasn’t Bruce’s first choice in life. But with his … propensity to lose control, it was always best to be as far away from civilization as possible. At least if something went wrong, there was less chance for innocent people to get hurt out here in the middle of nowhere, not to mention the fact that the Hulk did seem to enjoy being able to roam free in the wilderness.

For the briefest of times, Bruce had thought that he might be able to stay in New York with his newest … friends, allies, teammates, whatever they were. He knew that they, at least, had the power to contain the Hulk or at least redirect him somewhere safer. But what would be their new home needed some work done to it, so, for now, they’d separated, gone their own way to take care of what was important to them.

He’d been a medical doctor before, most recently in India where Natasha had found him. It was a good profession, not quite what he was trained for, but close enough to help people in small, out-of-the-way communities that wouldn’t normally have access to medical help. And it made him feel as though he was giving something back, repaying humanity for the death and destruction that the Hulk had caused.

At the moment, Bruce was resting in his cabin, his usual medical hours in the village having finished an hour before. While he lay on his bed reading a medical journal, the radio played in the background, but it was merely noise, his attention wasn’t on it.

A single name read out by the newsreader snapped his attention to the radio and he sat up in shock.

“… Stark. I repeat, word has come from Malibu, California of the presumed death of Tony Stark. There are confirmed reports of an unspecified number of armed helicopters firing missiles into Tony Stark’s Malibu mansion, utterly destroying the mansion before the remains of the building, with the billionaire inside, sank to the bottom of the ocean. At this stage, Stark has not been found, either alive or dead. We will bring you more of this story as soon as we have it.”

Before Bruce had even really considered what he was doing, he was up and moving about the room, gathering his meagre belongings and throwing them haphazardly into his bag.

To be honest, he wasn’t sure exactly sure what he was hoping to accomplish, all he knew was that he wanted to be back in America, closer to his friends to celebrate with them when Tony was found. He refused to even consider any other scenario.

Harry had stood frozen in place as the news report, complete with footage from a nearby news helicopter, played on the television in the corner of the Marauder’s Den.

“No no no no,” Doreen was whispering, but Harry wasn’t paying her the slightest attention.

A hand on his arm ripped Harry’s attention from the TV. Big blue eyes stared at him in horror and understanding.

“Go,” was all Gwen said.

With a nod, Harry turned and fled the Den, only just managing to stop himself from apparating or portkeying straight out of the place. Instead, Harry hurried to his apartment upstairs and into his room. There, he changed as fast has he could, donning his Mage outfit; after all, it would do no good
to appear in Malibu where others could see without a way to hide his magic use.

As soon as he was ready, he tapped his face with his wand before tapping a small wooden spool and disappearing in a flash of multi-coloured light.

When Harry arrived, it was to almost immediately stumble backwards.

There was almost nothing left of Tony’s mansion. A small amount of rubble remained; part of a wall here or there. And smoke; there was plenty of smoke and even a few flames off to either side.

Harry’s mind drifted back over a dozen years and across to a different continent to the ruins of a massive castle, a castle that once was his home. Looking about, he immediately noted the biggest difference – the lack of bodies lying about. Shaking his head, he forced his mind back to the here and now, back to the reason that he’d come.

A figure off to one side caught his attention. She was dirty, covered in dust and ash, her hair was dishevelled and there were tear tracks running from her eyes.

“Pepper,” Harry said as approached.

Pepper spun about, her eyes widening slightly at the sight of him.

“Ha … Mage,” she said before throwing her arms around him and beginning to sob.

“What happened?” Harry asked as he gently patted her back.

“There were helicopters and … explosions and and then Tony put his armour on me and he was still inside!” he babbled.

“Alright, he was inside, that doesn’t mean that he’s gone,” Harry said, trying to reassure her. “Was he wearing one of his suits?”

“Yes,” she confirmed.

“There, then he’s alright. Not much can damage that armour and you know that it’s waterproof. Plus, he’s got Jarvis in there to look after him,” Harry said.

“You’re right, you’re right,” Pepper said, pulling away and scrubbing her face with her hand. “He’s going to be alright.”

After giving her arm an extra pat, Harry strode across what was left of the house, pulling his wand as he did. From up here, it was impossible to see anything that the water had swallowed. That didn’t stop him trying though.

“Homenum revelio!” he intoned, putting as much power into the spell as possible.

Unfortunately, it came up empty, but whether that was because Tony was dead or because he wasn’t in there was anyone’s guess.

“Accio Tony Stark!” Harry tried again.

Once again, his spell came up empty.

“Mage!”

Pepper’s scream spun Harry around and he sprinted back to her. She was standing there, one of the
Iron Man helmets in her hands.

“He’s alive!” she grinned.

“How do you know? Where is he?” Harry asked urgently.

“He sent a message,” Pepper replied, lifting the helmet to indicate how she’d received it. “But he didn’t say where he was.

“He’s alive, that’s something,” Harry said, feeling some of the weight that he’d been feeling since he’d heard the news report lifting, lightening the heaviness in his chest. “Knowing Tony, he’s probably been distracted with something. He’ll come home as soon as Jarvis reminds him to.”

“You’re right. He’s Tony. He’s always alright,” Pepper agreed, but Harry could hear the worry still in her voice.

“Pepper,” a new woman that Harry’s never seen before said from off to the side. “We can’t stay here; they’ll be back.”


“Anytime, Pepper, you know that,” Harry replied. “If you need me, you know how to get hold of me.”

“I will,” she promised.

She was pulled away then and Harry watched her go. Then, after taking one last look at the ruins of the mansion, he activated his portkey.

ooo00ooo

“Director Fury.”

Nick looked up from his tablet and nodded at the two standing off to one side.

“I don’t know anything,” he said, answering their questions before they could even be asked.

“We request permission to take a quinjet to Malibu,” Natasha said.

“Denied,” Nick replied quickly. Seeing the looks on both Clint and Natasha’s faces, he sighed slightly, not that they would notice. “Look. I know what you’re thinking but I need you here. Stark can take care of himself and he can get his damn-fool ass out of the mess he got himself into. What kind of idiot invites terrorists to his very home? If it makes you feel any better, I’ll send one of the nearest teams to get a detailed report of what happened.”

The two Avengers looked at each other before falling in line.

“Yes, Sir,” they replied together.

Outwardly, Nick nodded before turning back to the report that he’d been reading. Internally, though, he had to wonder how much longer these two would last as Agents – clearly their ties to S.H.I.E.L.D. were slowly being replaced by the Avengers Initiative. Which, when it came right down to it, was precisely what he wanted. Didn’t mean he had to be happy about losing two of his finest, though.
The Devil's Days Are Numbered

The instant that Wilson Fisk stepped into his office, he stopped, staring at the man lounging in the chair behind his desk. The fact that the man was in this very office, in the heart of Fisk’s empire didn’t seem to faze him. Indeed, the man even had his boots up on the desk, his ankles crossed and seemed to be filing his fingernails of all things.

The twin guards at his back, noticing his movements, burst through the doors and took up positions to either side of him, their guns drawn and trained on the man. Only Wilson’s raised hand stopped them from pulling the trigger. There’d be time for that later. Firstly, there were questions to be asked, namely who the man was and how he got past security.

“You seem mighty relaxed for a man walking on the edge of death,” Wilson commented.

The man’s eyes briefly flicked up, took notice of the guns still trained on him and promptly went back to ignoring them.

“Before I have you killed, perhaps you’d be polite enough to tell me how you got in here and exactly who you are,” Wilson said and there was steel in his voice that even this man couldn’t ignore.

“I’m here because you invited me,” the man said. “As to who I am? Well …”

Instead of answering the question, the man simply removed his boots from Wilson’s desk, sat up straighter, before leaning forward and slowly took off his black beanie. A very distinctive scar rested upon his forehead that had been covered by his headwear; a scar in the shape of a target.


“Now are you going to tell these two chuckleheads to point their guns somewhere else or would you prefer me to simply kill them?” Bullseye asked.

Wilson was tempted to allow the man free licence, after all, it would be only prudent to see what he was going to be paying for. But, after a moment’s thought, he simply gestured for his bodyguards to lower their weapons – it was often so hard to find good, competent men after all.

Wilson strolled forward, detouring away from his desk to the side cabinet where he took out a glass and poured himself a shot of whiskey.

“I’d offer you one, but I suspect that if you really wanted a drink, then you’d already have it,” Wilson commented.

Bullseye merely waved his nailfile in Wilson’s direction, acknowledging the point.

“What should I call you?” Wilson asked. “I don’t even know your real name.”

“And I’d like to keep it that way, thank you very much. Bullseye’s fine,” he was told.

“Very well, Bullseye,” Wilson smiled.

He could appreciate the need to keep one’s identity a secret, after all, he’d taken great pains (or, at least, other people had had a world of pain) to eliminate any that tried to link Wilson Fisk the business tycoon with Wilson Fisk, the Kingpin of New York crime.

“I assume that you know why you’re here?” Wilson asked.
“You’ve got a vigilante problem. Some ‘devil’ that has the neighbourhood running scared,” Bullseye punctuated his statement with air-quotes around the word ‘devil’.

“Indeed. Daredevil has been making a right nuisance of himself and it’s been bad for business,” Wilson confirmed. “I assume that you can deal with this problem of ours?”

“Give me the right sort of motivation and you can consider the job done,” Bullseye replied, staring hard at Wilson, a slight grin on his face.

“I’m certain that we can come to an arrangement that is mutually beneficial, assuming that you can hold up your end of the bargain, of course,” Wilson replied.

As quick as a flash, Bullseye’s arm flicked out. From beside the door, one of his guards gave a piercing scream as he fell to the floor, both hands clutching his right eye, blood spurting between his fingers and oozing down his face.

“I think that I can get the job done,” Bullseye stated into the stunned silence. “Now, let’s talk payment.”

Atop one of the taller buildings in the city, Spider-man watched and waited. From where he was perched, he could see a number of the streets below. People scurried by, intent on their tasks, unaware of his presence. His spider-sense was on full alert as he made sure that there was no danger nearby, either to him or to those he was protecting from the shadows.

But when it came to knowing what crime was happening in the city, Spider-man had another tool, one that was quite illegal, no matter how useful it was: a police scanner. He’d used it multiple times now having built it from scratch from parts that he’d bought using the money that he earnt as a Stark Intern.

Admittedly, he hadn’t had much to do as an intern yet, but his time was coming. He’d been assured that once Avengers Tower had been completed, he’d be in there working whenever he could, apart from school times, of course. And that day was getting closer and closer. Tony’d given him a tour of the scientific equipment that was being installed and he couldn’t wait to get his hands on it.

The radio on the ground beside him crackled. Instantly, his head snapped towards it.

“All units, we have a ten-thirty-one at Parkman’s Jewellery. Location four three one Lexington Avenue.”

Spider-man switched the radio off and stowed it away – he’d heard enough. A ‘ten-thirty-one’ meant that there was a robbery in progress. And he wasn’t that far from the location; he was sure that he could get there long before any black and whites arrived.

Without a second thought, Spider-man leapt from the building, his hand whipping out and a web-line shooting out to impact the far building. Then, using line after line, he flew through the city, far above the people and cars below, whipping around corners and flipping through the air at the height of one arc before shooting out the next line that he’d use.

With a final flip, he came to rest in a crouch on the top of the building that housed the jewellery store.

Pulling out the police scanner once more, Spider-Man flipped the switch, hoping for a little more information about what was happening downstairs. Thankfully, he was in luck.
“Hostages have been taken. Repeat. The four perpetrators at Parkman’s Jewellery have taken hostages. Estimate is for five civilians.”

That was enough and he turned it off and put it away.

With innocents in play, Spider-man knew that he couldn’t simply burst through the front doors, his webs blazing at the bad guys. No, this called for something a little subtler. He’d only just begun to pace across the roof, one hand up to scratch at hair that he couldn’t touch because of his cowl, when his eyes lit on the perfect thing.

Superhuman strength was needed to pry the cover off of the air vent, but it was accomplished with ease.

“Good thing all that food Aunt May’s been feeding me hasn’t made me into some fat blob thing,” he commented as he began slithering into the tight space.

Navigating the ventilation system wasn’t easy; it was far too small for him to crawl in and at times, he needed to shoot a web at the far wall and pull himself along. The slides down between levels wasn’t a lot of fun, especially when it took all that he had just to keep from landing on his head each and every time.

Finally, though, he’d reached his destination: directly above the jewellery story. Knowing that there was a chance that the robbers could hear him, Spider-man took extra care manoeuvring across to the closest vent. It took a bit of twisting and turning of his head before he located all four bad guys.

Currently, they were huddled behind the main counter, talking while occasionally peering towards the front of the shop. The hostages, Spider-man found against the left wall. Their legs were bound in duct tape and their hands disappeared behind their backs, presumably also taped together. For good measure, a final piece of tape had been placed over their mouths.

While he was formulating his plan, Spider-man took careful note of where each display case was, not to mention the pieces of razor sharp glass that littered their tops and the floor around them.

As slowly and as soundlessly as he could, Spider-man twisted himself into a near knot, getting his feet into just the right position. Then, before a cramp could fully form, he kicked out, smashing his way through the ventilation shaft and dropping into the store.

Even as he was falling, his hands whipped out, jets of webbing shooting from his wrists. Two robbers caught blasts in the face, sending them wheeling backwards, their hands scrabbling at their mouths in their panic to get the webbing off so that they could breathe again.

As his feet touched the floor, Spider-man jumped and spun to the side, firing off another couple of rounds of webbing. A third robber went down, pinned to the floor. Unfortunately, the last one managed to move at just the right time, dodging Spider-man’s attack and bringing a gun to bear in the process.

Four sharp cracks rang out as shots were fired. Only the web-crawler’s super-human reflexes and his spider-sense enabled him to spin and dodge out of the way of the bullets.

And then he retaliated. With a number of flips, he catapulted himself across the store before a ten-second trade of blows saw the last robber knocked flying, only to come up hard against the far wall before slowly sliding down it to land in a crumpled heap.

Seeing his last opponent down, Spider-man quickly crossed the room before grabbing the first two robbers, ripping off the webbing that was stopping them from breathing and cocooning them in a
“Looks like my work here is all but done,” he remarked, surveying the littered bodies around him.

It was as he was freeing the hostages from their duct tape bindings that he heard something that had him pausing.

“You reckon the boss’ll put out a hit on Spider-man once Bullseye’s finished his first job?” one of the robbers asked his partner quietly.

“Who knows?” the other replied. “Either way, the Devil’s days are numbered, so that’ll make things easier. Then there’ll only be the one menace to deal with instead of two.”

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Harry was half-way across the Den, a tray filled with cups of various types of coffee in hand when he stopped, his head automatically going up as if he could see through the two floors of his apartment to the roof far above.

After quickly finishing his delivery, he made his way back to the counter.

“I’ll be back shortly,” he said to Gwen as he placed the tray into its appropriate place. “Your boyfriend wants to have a chat.”

“What does …” Gwen began before her big blue eyes got even bigger and rounder. “Oh. Oh, okay. I can handle things down here.”

With a nod of thanks, Harry quickly made his way outside and up, taking the stairs two at a time in his haste. Peter’d never come to the Den in costume before and the fact that he was on the roof waiting told Harry that that’s exactly what he’d done.

As he stepped out of the doorway, he looked around and then up, finally spotting the red and blue hero perched on the side of the wall in the shadows.

“Spider-man,” he greeted.

“Oh, man, you looked up,” Peter complained. “No one ever looks up.”

Harry grinned at him. “I’m a wizard; I know to expect the unexpected. What’s up?”

“Can’t a guy just come over for a visit without something being wrong?” he asked.

“Sure,” Harry shrugged. “But if you wanted to do that, you’d come in your civilian clothes, not dressed like that.”

“You’re right. And we do have a problem,” Peter confirmed. “Or, well, at least, not us. We don’t have a problem. But there is a problem, if you know what I mean?”

“How about you slow down and tell me what’s going on,” Harry suggested.

“I was out patrolling,” Peter began. “And there was this jewellery store robbery which I completely foiled. Had to get in through the ventilation shaft, if you can believe it, but there were hostages and, yeah, well, I dealt with them and everything but then I heard a couple of them talking. The robbers, not the hostages. Anyway, seems there’s a new big bad in town named ‘Bullseye’. And he’s been hired to target the Daredevil of Hell’s Kitchen.”
“Daredevil, huh?” Harry said, rubbing the back of his head as he thought. “Don’t really know much about him other than that he’s been combating crime in Hells’ Kitchen, like you said, for a while now. Tony’s got a file on him, I think. And S.H.I.E.L.D., too, for that matter.”

“Do they know how to find him?” Peter asked. “Only, it sounded like this Bullseye guy’s fairly new here and I thought that it’d be only right to give the guy a head’s up that he’s being targeted.”

“Tony’s still off the grid somewhere,” Harry mused. “And I don’t think that we really need to bother S.H.I.E.L.D. for something that we can do ourselves. Let me get my suit and we’ll head out and see if we can’t find Daredevil ourselves.”

“I hear that he’s pretty hard to track down,” Peter cautioned.

Harry merely shrugged. “How hard can it be to find one guy in a single neighbourhood?”

Steve hefted his bag as the ramp of the quinjet hit the tarmac. Then, with his iconic shield on his back he stepped out, taking in a deep breath of fresh air as he looked around. As far as he knew, he was on liberty for the next three days, having already been debriefed about the op that he and the S.T.R.I.K.E. team had not long finished.

It’d been a long mission in northern Africa – in actuality not far from the border between Algeria and Tunisia. They’d been there for just shy of eight weeks, having to infiltrate the local population before they could even get a bead on their target and then take down the wannabe warlord and his thugs.

Rumrow and the rest of the men had been whisked straight off to another location, a location that was deemed classified as far as Steve was concerned, while he had been able to return to Washington so that he was close enough to report to the Triskelion after his three-day R-and-R.

A figure in a black S.H.I.E.L.D. jumpsuit caught his attention as she moved out of the shadows towards his position.

“Agent Morse,” he greeted.

“Captain,” Bobbi replied with a nod. “And what have I told you about calling me ‘Bobbi’.”

“That I should do so,” Steve replied, barely able to stop himself from ducking his head. “And I will, as long as you remember to call me Steve.”

Bobbi nodded back before gesturing that they take a walk together. Surprisingly, instead of heading in towards the buildings nearest to the tarmac, he was led away, out into a clear space where there would be less chance of the two being overheard.

“Are you here with a mission?” Steve asked.

“No. I’m here as your Avengers handler,” Bobbi replied. At Steve’s raised eyebrows, she continued. “There’s been a situation with Tony.”

Steve’s gaze hardened. “What happened?”

“Have you heard about the attacks from the Mandarin?” she asked.

“He’s the leader of a terrorist organisation,” Steve recounted. “They’ve attacked public places, injuring and killing dozens. Every attack has been followed up with a television broadcast with a
“Correct,” Bobbi confirmed. “It seemed that not long ago, one of Tony’s men, a Happy Hogan, was caught in one of the attacks and injured. In Tony’s anger, he challenged the Mandarin to come face him like a man. Even gave his home address to make it easier for the Mandarin to find him.”

Steve stiffened. “Is Tony dead?”

“No. Although the world thinks so,” Bobbi said, eliciting a sigh of relief from the Captain. “We only know that much because Ms Potts told us. But Tony has gone off the radar. We don’t know where he is or what condition he’s in. We can’t even provide any support if he needs it.”

Steve stared at her, scenarios running through his mind.

“I trust that you’ll keep me informed? And that if you hear something, that I want in. Tony’s a good guy; the world owes him for what he did in New York, not to mention that I still owe his father a few debts as well,” Steve stated.

“Don’t worry, Captain, that’s why I’m here,” Bobbi assured him. “The second that we hear something, and provided that we can get you there in time, you’ll be sent in. Romanoff and Barton made the same request.”


“We’re not currently tracking Banner, but we believe that he’s somewhere in South America. He knows to ring me if he needs something. Even if it’s just a lift home,” Bobbi replied. “Harry went straight to Malibu as soon as he heard what had happened. As far as I’m aware, Potts is keeping him updated.”

While Steve didn’t know Bruce all that well, he couldn’t imagine the guy ringing up S.H.I.E.L.D. simply to ask for transportation. The fact that Harry was already in the loop at least eased his mind somewhat.

“Alright. Keep me informed,” Steve said as the two began their track back across the tarmac.

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The majority of the room was darkened, only the small downlights dotted about the walls shed any light. Consequently, the group of men seated at the table were mostly in shadow. Despite that, everyone there knew who the others were; really how could they not – they were S.H.I.E.L.D. agents, trained to know such things, even if their real allegiance was not to the spy organisation but to something older, something more powerful and more insidious.

For seventy years, their organisation had been hiding in plain sight, manipulating events as they saw fit, subtly influencing the way the world should work and eliminating the threats that cropped up from time to time.

And now, their greatest project was nearing completion. Project Insight, designed to eliminate any threat before that threat even reared its head. Hundreds, thousands could be wiped off the face of the planet in mere seconds. And once the Helicarriers with the algorithm embedded into it were launched, there would be nothing that could stop them.

They could once and for all come out of the shadows into the light. There would be no need for HYDRA to remain hidden any longer.
But there was one potential obstacle. One that could still disrupt their plans even after the Insight Helicarriers were launched. One that the helicarriers could miss.

The Avengers.

The seven superheroes who believed that it was their duty to stand up and defend the world.

Thus, the meeting that was taking place.

Just as a hydra was a beast of many heads, HYDRA itself made sure that it had not only many heads, but also many plans.

“Report on Project Sinister,” their highest-ranking member ordered.

“Project Sinister is on track to be ready on time,” the agent in charge reported. “Doctor Sterns is currently undergoing tests. S.H.I.E.L.D. thinks that they are attempting to understand what happened to him, what enhanced his brain capacity to such a level. What we are really doing is helping the doctor to increase his transformation, training him to use his vast intellect to its fullest potential.

“Colonel Blonsky is under cryo-stasis at a facility in Alaska. His guards are minimal and will be easily breached at the appropriate time.

“Agent Ward gathered the intel that we needed from Oscorp. We now possess the full technical specifications of every single off-the-books project that they have engineered. Our tech department assures me that they will have working prototypes of every device we need within six to eight months.”

“What of the personnel to use them?” their leader asked.

“Mister Myers has been successfully recruited and is undergoing training with his new weapons as we speak,” he was answered. “Of the remaining five that we’re hoping for, we have identified two and have begun the recruiting process.”

“Who are these men?” the shadow third from the left asked.

“The first is Sergei Kravinoff. Mister Kravinoff has enhanced strength, speed, endurance, agility and stamina. He is a gifted hunter; having spent decades stalking and eliminating the most dangerous of prey known to man. It doesn’t seem as though it will take much to convince him that the Avengers will make the ultimate of prey for him to hunt.

“The second is Herman Shultz. Shultz was one of the original designers of a piece of technology that Oscorp appropriated and enhanced. In layman’s terms, it generates vibrations, either through the suit itself or just the gauntlets that can be worn with or without the suit. Nothing can hold it and it can disrupt physical attacks. In addition, the gauntlets can shoot out concentrated vibrations of air molecules.”

“They sound acceptable choices,” their leader nodded. “And the remaining three?”

“We are still considering candidates, Sir,” he was informed.

“Very well, carry on. Even if Project Insight eliminates the Avengers, there are enough other potential problems that will see your team be an extremely useful asset.”

Even in the darkness, the glint of teeth could be seen as those around the table smiled, savouring the idea of what was to come.
Not All It Appears To Be

The ringing of the phone brought Harry out of the library. As he passed the guest room, an unusual sound had him glancing in the half-open door. There on her bed was Doreen, sitting cross-legged in front of her pet squirrel and it sounded as though she was *talking* to the animal or at least attempting to mimic the sounds that the animal was making. It was *almost* like how everyone always described him of being when he was speaking parseltongue.

The insistent ringing of the phone, though, pulled him onwards.

“Hello? Harry speaking,” he said, silencing the phone by picking it up.

“Sparrowhawk!”

“Tony?” Harry asked, before continuing in a rush. “Are you okay? Where are you?”

“Hey, calm down. I’m fine,” Tony replied. “Pepper said you’d been a worry-wort. Now I see what she meant.”

“What happened?” Harry demanded.

“Hey, you know. Got involved with some bad guys that I probably shouldn’t have. But they learnt their lesson and won’t do it again,” Tony replied, giving Harry no useful details.

“And you’re alright?” Harry insisted.

“Yeah. A bit banged up and bruised. Pepper’s going to need some medical help, but I’ll have her put right in a couple of days, tops,” Tony replied.

“Pepper was hurt?” Harry asked anxiously. “How?”

“Those bad guys I mentioned. Captured her thinking that they could use her to get to me. I showed them the error of their ways, though,” Tony said vaguely. “Anyway, that’s not why I called.”

Harry sighed. It seemed that if he wanted the whole story, then he’d have to go see Pepper. Which sounded like a good idea anyway.

“So, why did you call then?” Harry asked.

“Mostly to stop you being a worry-wizard. But also to tell you that me and Pepper are moving to the Tower. It’s all but done. Party in two weeks. We’ll get the gang back together, have a few drinks, a few laughs, the whole enchilada,” Tony said.

“The Tower’s nearly finished? About time. And a party sounds good, Tony, or at least, seeing everyone again. Let me know when and where,” Harry said.

“I’ll send an invite or you can just use your magical voodoo to work out when all by yourself,” Tony replied. “Better run. Looks like Pepper’s waking up.”

“Thanks, Tony. Take care of yourself. And Pepper, too,” Harry said.

“You know Tony Stark?” a voice behind him asked as he put the phone down.

Harry turned to see a wide-eyed Doreen staring at him, Monkey Joe perched on her shoulder like he
often was.

“We’ve met a few times,” Harry replied nonchalantly.

“That is sooo cool!” Doreen nearly squealed. “You have to introduce me.”

“Well, Tony is moving to New York soon. I’ll see what I can do, but no promises,” Harry temporised.

Doreen nodded her head eagerly, her brown eyes shining with excitement.

The marvel of computers that talked was an amazing blessing to a blind person. And especially to a blind lawyer.


“Searching. Results found. Current employer: Eastwell Mining. Time of employment: six years.”

Matt frowned, despite the good news. This was another point that could be used to vindicate Felicia Hardy of the crime of murdering Mister Broadshaw. Apart from the ‘ex-boyfriend of my friend’ connection, there was nothing to link the two together. And with nothing to link them and only circumstantial evidence, it looked to be an easy case to win.

That didn’t mean that Matt’s curiosity bone wasn’t itching, though. And he was sure that it would be something that the Prosecutor would be questioning his client about as well: why was Miss Hardy in Mister Broadshaw’s apartment in the first place? Her reasoning seemed rather slim.

And when Matt had questioned said friend, he detected the lie. The two had dated at one time. Briefly. But there had never been anything of the young woman’s left at Mister Broadshaw’s apartment, regardless of what Miss Hardy claimed that she believed.

“So why were you there, Miss Hardy?” Matt asked.

“Search for location of Miss Hardy?” the computer queried.

Matt’s hand shot out, intending to shut the computer down but a fraction of an inch from the button, he paused.

That might not actually be a bad idea, he mused.

Whatever reason that she had for being there, she hadn’t achieved it. And odds were that she may attempt to go back. Most people did, at least the ones that thought that they could get away with it. And Miss Hardy’s father was a renowned cat burglar; who knew what sorts of skills she’d picked up from him?

A shift of his head let the sunlight fall on Matt’s face telling him that it was getting late in the day. It was almost time to go home. And then, once night had fallen, his real work could begin.

Harry’d learnt very early into their first patrol and search that trying to talk to Spider-man while he was web-slinging was incredibly frustrating. With Harry on his lightning bolt broom flying at a constant height and Spider-man using his webs to get around, they were never on the same level long
enough to hold a conversation.

That didn’t stop the web-head from trying, though. Every time they were close to the same height, he’d spurt out a few words, maybe even a phrase. But then he’d either continue his swing up or be swinging down and away.

After the first hour of it, Harry’d finally had enough and simply stopped responding. They could talk when they were resting on the top of a rooftop, surveying the city below. And talk they did. Spider-man was full of questions: how did Harry become the Mage? What was it like in Britain growing up? Is magic a genetic ability?

And then, after Harry’d let slip something of the war, the questions altered slightly to more understand what it was like having that sort of responsibility thrust upon his shoulders. The two had gotten quite philosophical at times, debating the merits of doing what was right over what was easy and the mistakes that they’d made by doing the wrong thing, even if it was for what they’d thought was a good reason or with good intentions at the time.

At first, Harry’d tried to shy away from the talk, but after hearing about how Peter’s Uncle Ben had been killed and the blame that Peter had heaped upon himself because of it, Harry’d opened up. He’d told the teen about losing his godfather and the guilt from his mistakes that night, not to mention the guilt that he’d had about Cedric, Remus, Tonks, Fred, Colin and all of the others.

By telling Peter his story, he hoped that the teen took something away from it, and especially the lesson that it’d taken Harry himself a very, very long time to learn: we are not responsible for the actions of others. We can do all we can to protect the innocent and to stop the bad guys, but ultimately, we’re not to blame when things go wrong if something bad happens that’s outside of our control because of the actions of others.

Peter, too, had opened up, telling Harry about his thoughts and excitement and fears from gaining these strange new powers, how he’d realised – especially after the incident with Doc Connors – that his being Spider-man could place those he loved in harm’s way. Captain Stacy’s words on top of Oscorp Tower had had a huge impact on Peter. Harry could only hope that he’d helped the teen through their talks and debates.

Peter had even begun coming by the Den more often as himself rather than Spider-man to continue their philosophical discussions and debates about life itself. Harry’d found himself enjoying the talks and looking forward to them.

Those, though, had also had the advantage of helping to take away the frustration of a week’s worth of patrolling the city at night and coming up empty in terms of locating even the slightest hint of the Daredevil.

From what they’d heard on the street, Bullseye hadn’t had any better luck finding the elusive vigilante either.

It was coming down to a race as to who would find him first – Spider-man and Mage to warn Daredevil or Bullseye to kill him.

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The instant Daredevil ‘saw’ the slim figure leaving the roof of Felicia Hardy’s building he knew that he’d been right. In the light rain, it was easy for him to follow her movements as she leapt across the small space to the next building before using its fire escape to reach the ground.
From high above, he followed her through the streets, leaping from building to building, using the grappling hook function of his billy clubs when necessary to scale higher or the smaller form of just one to slide along a cable connecting two buildings.

As expected, Miss Hardy led him unerringly towards the apartment building where James Broadshaw had once lived.

Two buildings over, she ducked into an alley and scaled the walls as though she was an Olympic-class gymnast. Cautiously, using the shadows that he instinctively knew were there, he moved closer. The rain had begun to come down slightly harder making tracking her movements that little bit easier.

It was obvious that the girl had inherited her father’s talents. Perched high above the street, Felicia quickly picked the lock on a window and let herself in.

Daredevil rose from his perch on the edge of the building across, standing tall, preparing himself for the confrontation that was sure to happen the instant that he crossed the gap.

Movement off to his side had him instinctively jerking his body away and down; a hiss escaping him as pain blossomed from the cut that had just appeared on his left bicep.

Dodging and spinning, Daredevil easily avoided the next four spinning metal discs before he could find cover.

The tingling sound of metal striking metal sounded and he followed its movement.

“Now who does this belong to, I wonder?” Daredevil growled as his fingers examined the shuriken that he’d just picked up.

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“There!” Spider-man yelled to his partner as he flung out a hand towards what his spider-sense had detected.

As he dropped, instinctively shooting out a web that would swing him in the right direction, he took in the scene: a bald man in a long black trench coat was standing on the top of a building throwing something at a blood red and black suited figure on another building. Luckily, the Daredevil – for it couldn’t be anyone else – was using extraordinary reflexes and gymnastics to dodge the deadly projectiles.

“He’s good,” Spider-man muttered.

As he swung up on his arc, he shot a half-dozen web-balls at the trench-coated man. Annoyingly, the man must have seen them coming for he spun away, dodging them with ease. A glint of light on the man’s bald head showed Spider-man the scar on his forehead.

“Seriously? You have a bullseye on your head? Is that so others know where to target you or so that you can look in a mirror and remember your own name?” he quipped.

Unfortunately, he neither got a response from Bullseye nor did he have a chance to follow up his attack against the man. The instant that Bullseye saw him, he simply grinned before leaping into a large vent and disappearing.

Spider-man landed on the roof as quickly as he could before cautiously looking into the vent. It led straight down and there was no sign of the guy.
With a sigh, he turned away before running across the building and leaping up, shooting out a web so that he could swing across to where his partner was already talking to Daredevil.

“Spider-man,” Daredevil greeted as he landed.

“Hey man, nice to meet you,” Spider-man replied.

“Likewise. Thanks for the assist,” Daredevil nodded.

“No worries. Us heroes gotta stick together, you know?” Spider-man replied.

“What are the two of you doing in Hell’s Kitchen?” Daredevil asked.

“He’s the reason that we’re here,” Mage said, shooting a thumb over at the building where Bullseye had been.

Spider-man frowned when Daredevil shifted to look where Mage had indicated. The cowl that Daredevil wore had no eye holes and the leather that it was made from would prevent his eyes from being able to see through it. Maybe it was some kind of tech, like Iron Man had in his helmet?

“Who was he?” Daredevil asked.

“He’s called Bullseye,” Mage replied.

“Got a wicked scar on his forehead shaped like a target,” Spider-man added helpfully.

“I’ve not encountered him before. I take it he’s been hired to remove me from Hell’s Kitchen?” Daredevil half-questioned and half-stated.

“Yeah. The crooks I heard talking about it only referred to the person doing the hiring as ‘their boss’,” Spider-man said.

“We wanted to warn you about it before he got to you first,” Mage added. “Seems that we weren’t really needed.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Daredevil said, rubbing what looked to be a hastily applied bandage on his arm, before ‘looking’ at Mage. “Appreciate whatever it was you did to stop those last few shurikens from getting anywhere near me.”

“Basic shield charm,” Mage replied. “I intended on getting a tracking charm on him as well, but he escaped before I could do so. You know who he’s working for?”

“You mentioned some low-life’s mentioning a ‘boss’? There’s only one person that they could mean. The Kingpin,” Daredevil growled.

“Kingpin?” Mage questioned.

Daredevil nodded. “Runs the crime gangs in not only Hell’s Kitchen, but also most of New York. He’s got the Mafia, the Yakuza, the Triads, the Russians and a host of others all reporting to him. I’ve been trying to take him down for a long time now. Haven’t got close enough yet, but I’ve been chipping away at his operations. Heard you’ve started doing the same thing.”

Peter rubbed a hand over the back of his head. “Yeah. Well, I’ve been doing my bit.”

“The Avengers will be based here soon,” Mage stated. “We’ll do our bit, too. In fact, why don’t you come by the Tower once it’s open next week. You can meet everyone and we can coordinate better.
I’m sure Iron Man would have something that you could have to help you keep in touch with us.”

“Appreciate the offer,” Daredevil said. “But I’m used to working alone.”

“Yeah, I was like that,” Spider-man stated. “But working together’s not bad. You should give it try, you never know when a little back-up’ll help.”

“I’ll think about it,” Daredevil replied. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got someone to find and question.”

“Don’t forget that Bullseye’s out there looking for you,” Mage reminded him, giving his wand a nonchalant wave in Daredevil’s general direction.

“I won’t. Don’t worry, I’ll deal with him later,” Daredevil promised before turning and leaping off the edge of the building.

Spider-man quickly moved to the side of the building, leaning on the crenelation as he watched the hero quickly move down the side of the building before disappearing in the shadows.

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“Thanks for the lift,” Bruce said before climbing out of the cab of the truck and down to the side of the road.

The man, Jerry, simply nodded, raised a hand and, once Bruce’d shut the door and stepped back, put his truck in gear and drove off.

Exactly where Bruce currently was, he wasn’t certain. Oh, he knew that he was in the outskirts of Los Angeles, but not what part or suburb he was in. All he knew was that as soon as he’d heard the radio report, he’d realised that he was travelling in the wrong direction.

His intention was to get to Malibu to see Pepper and to find out if there was anything that he could do about Tony being missing. Exactly what help he could provide was uncertain, but he wanted to be there just in case.

But now the radio had reported that Tony was alive and well and kicking butt the way he did when he was being Iron Man. Apparently, he and Colonel Rhodes’ War Machine had ended up in Florida of all places, saving the President and battling the bad guys. There’d even been unconfirmed reports that a lot Tony’s Iron Man suits had been destroyed in the dust up.

The main thing, though, was that Tony was alive and well and currently in New York, having moved to the all-but-completed Avengers Tower now that his Malibu Mansion had been destroyed.

New York. As in the New York clear on the other side of the country.

With a grumble, Bruce started walking. Getting from Brazil to Los Angeles had been difficult enough, but to find out that he’d spent nearly the last two thousand miles going the wrong direction was just plain annoying. Now, he needed to find a way to travel to the other side of the country.

Tony, Bruce knew, would tell him to simply use the credit card that he’d given him to buy a plane ticket. But Bruce was loathe to put himself in a confined metal container forty thousand feet in the air for hours on end. True, it was unlikely that anything would happen, but there was no way that Bruce was going to let the Hulk anywhere near that kind of potential danger. And that also took trains out of the equation. S.H.I.E.L.D., of course, was never an option.

That left hitching a ride, something that he was getting good at.
Looking up and around, Bruce came to a stop. This area felt familiar although he couldn’t place exactly why. Something from his past, he thought, but a long way in his past. Maybe from his teenage years? Whatever it was, the reason eluded him. It’d come to him, he knew – probably at the most inopportune time.

Shoving the feeling to the side, he quickly crossed the street so that he’d be on the right side of the road for the direction that he wanted to travel in and began walking with his thumb out and his bag over his shoulder.

He’d barely gone half a mile when he heard it: a woman’s scream. It was a cry filled with absolute fear and terrible, terrible pain.

Instantly, Bruce was off, racing down the street and around the corner. A nudge from the other guy had him skidding, one hand flung out to grab the brick corner to help him stop before he entered a small alley.

His eyes darted about, assessing any possible danger. Not seeing any, he focussed in on the slumped form against one wall near the far end. Whoever it was wasn’t moving and Bruce picked up his pace to get to them.

One look told him how bad it was. Blood was pooling from the woman’s stomach, spreading out around her. It was obvious that she’d been shot, most likely multiple times judging by the amount of blood. Only the smallest rise and fall of the woman’s chest indicated that she was still alive.

Exactly why someone would want to shoot the woman was anyone’s guess. She was dressed in a smart pencil skirt and jacket and what had once been a white shirt. The fact that her purse was on the ground next to her belied the idea that this had been a mugging gone wrong.

Bruce took one look at the woman’s face, intending on assessing her condition, before stumbling backwards. He knew her. He hadn’t seen her in years but he knew her. Worse still, he was related to her.

His cousin.

Jennifer.

He hadn’t seen her in years, nearly a decade to be honest, not since her mother’s funeral, but it was unmistakably her. Desperately, Bruce clamped down on the Hulk’s need to go find who did this and to smash!

Jennifer’s life was in the balance here; he needed to stay focused and not change.

“Jennifer! Jennifer!” he called desperately. “Stay with me, Jennifer.”

Ripping her blouse so that the buttons flew off gave Bruce a good look at her stomach. He was right, she’d been shot multiple times. It was hard to tell through the blood and mess that was her stomach, but Bruce wouldn’t be surprised to find that someone had emptied an entire clip into his cousin’s stomach.

From what he could tell from her pulse when he placed her fingers against her neck, combined with the injuries that she’d sustained, he knew that she didn’t have long to live. Not without medical assistance at least. And there was none of that to be had here.

Borrowing a bit of the Hulk’s strength, Bruce scooped Jennifer’s prone from off of the ground and raced down the alley. The instant that he came out onto the street, he stopped, his eyes feverously
searching for help.

There! A pharmacy. Not ideal, but the best that he could do for now. Before he knew it, Bruce was barrelling through the door.

“Someone call an ambulance!” he shouted.

Whether they did or not, Bruce didn’t know, his focus was solely on keeping his cousin alive. As gently as he could, he lay her down on the floor and ripped into his bag, pulling out everything that he could think of that he’d need that he had in there.

Checking her pulse again, he found it to be weak and thready. She’d already lost too much blood.

“Where’s the ambulance?” he demanded.

“They’re on their way,” he was told.

Looking up and around, Bruce found that he’d gathered a crowd.

“What happened? Gunshot?” a man in a white smock asked.

“Yeah. I didn’t see it,” Bruce asked.

Together, the two did what they could to stop the bleeding.

“She’s lost too much blood,” the pharmacist said, sitting back. “There’s nothing more that we can do here.”

“No! I refuse to believe that,” Bruce growled. “All she needs is a transfusion. Do you have blood here?”

“We’re just a pharmacy. We sell medicine and bandages and the like,” the man replied.

Ignoring the obvious solution, Bruce looked up at the gathered crowd.

“Does anyone here have O-negative blood?” he demanded.

Many looked bewildered; others simply shook their heads. Without the universal blood type, giving Jennifer the wrong blood could kill her. Not that she had that long to live anyway by the looks of it.

This was his cousin. Jennifer. His father and her mother had been siblings. If there was any chance, any chance at all of saving her life he had to take it. But the consequences? Bruce wasn’t sure that he could live with it if something went wrong. Looking down into his cousin’s face, her long black hair a mess on the ground framing her, he knew that things were already as bad as they could be.

Decision made, Bruce ripped his sleeve away, exposing his arm. Then, he grabbed up the tools that he’d need from his bag.

“What are you doing? You can’t give her your blood. What if you’re not compatible?” the pharmacist said, leaning across Jennifer’s body to grab onto Bruce’s arm.

“We’re related. Cousins. We’ll match,” he said simply, ignoring the possible reality for the hope that he needed, and shrugging the other man’s arm off to continue to work on saving her life.

There was only the briefest hesitation before he placed the needle into Jennifer’s arm. Pulling the tourniquet loose from around his own arm, he watched as the life-giving and hopefully not
life-altering blood began to flow from him to his cousin.

The sirens in the distance gave him hope that he’d done enough to buy his cousin enough time to reach the hospital and the doctors who could save her life.
They ... Made ... Me ... Miss

“Bruce?”

The eyes of the man in question shot open and his head snapped up. This interruption was not wanted.

Hulk wanted out. Hulk wanted to smash! Hulk wanted to find the humans who’d hurt his cousin and teach them not to do it again.

Bruce’d been able to keep the Hulk at bay all through the time that he’d been working on saving his cousin, Jennifer’s, life in the pharmacy and through the ambulance ride to the nearest hospital. He’d even been able to keep the transformation under control after the doors to surgery had been closed in his face and he’d been forbidden from following. His hands had been shaking when he’d gone to the nearest bathroom to clean up, to wash Jennifer’s blood from his hands and to change into a shirt that wasn’t soaked red.

But Hulk’s urge for revenge surged forth after he’d returned to the waiting room and it was all Bruce could do to calm the other guy down. And that’s what he’d been doing, concentrating on his breathing, trying to exclude every distraction around him.

And now he was being interrupted!

A single glance was enough to take in the uniform of a Los Angeles County Sherriff, badge and all, and once again Hulk surged forth, intent on getting free. His heart racing faster than ever, Bruce groped for his bag beside his chair. Unzipping it, he searched for the special box that Harry’d given him just before he headed off to Brazil.

Finding it, he pulled it out, instantly snapping it open. Inside lay half a dozen vials of some concoction that Bruce’d never been able to figure out. Ignoring his trepidation at taking something unknown, his shaky hands pulled one forth, uncorked it and upended it into his mouth.

And then it was his whole body shuddering at the vile taste. A shuddering that only lasted a few seconds as the ‘calming potion’ took effect. Almost instantly, Bruce’s heart rate and breathing slowed and he felt a peace, a calmness, descend on his mind. And Hulk, Hulk retreated like he’d never done before.

Lowering the vial, Bruce stared at it in wonder. He’d been resisting taking one of these magical potions for so long and now, for the life of him, he couldn’t work out why.

“Thank you, Harry,” he whispered.

“Bruce?” the voice, the Sherriff, repeated.

This time when Bruce looked up, he was able to focus on the individual instead of the uniform.

“Uncle William?” Bruce returned in wonder.

“I thought that was you,” William Walters smiled. “It’s good to see you lad. What’s it been ten, twelve years?”

“Not since Aunt Elaine’s funeral,” Bruce replied grimly.
“Ah, yes,” William replied, an instant air of the past settling between the pair before the older of the two managed to shake it off. “I’m told that you saved Jennifer’s life? I didn’t even know you were in town.”

“I only just arrived,” Bruce replied with a shake of his head. “It was pure luck that I heard Jennifer’s screams. Didn’t even know it was her.”

“But you found her. You saved her. She’s alive,” William said, falling heavily into the chair beside Bruce’s.

“I did what I had to,” Bruce replied, his mind instantly replaying the image of his blood flowing down the tube to enter his cousin’s arm.

Exactly what the consequences were going to be for that was anyone’s guess.

“And I’m grateful,” William said, squeezing Bruce’s shoulder. “She’s alive because of you. Whatever brought you here, I’m glad.”

Bruce’s smile was more grimace, but his uncle didn’t seem to notice.

“Are you going to be in town long? Do you have some place to stay?” William asked.

“Actually, I was just on my way out of town,” Bruce replied.

“But I thought that you said that you’d just arrived?” a confused-sounding William asked.

“I did. I’d heard that one of my friends was in trouble. He lives … lived in Malibu,” Bruce explained. “But just after I got here, I heard that he moved to New York.”

“And you plan on heading there to make sure that he’s alright,” William supplied. “You’re a good friend, Bruce. But surely a day or two won’t matter? I know Jennifer’ll want to see you, to thank you at the very least. And there’s a spare bed at my place, you know that.”

“Thanks, Uncle William,” Bruce smiled; sleeping in a real bed, even if only for a single night would be a luxury that he hadn’t had in quite some time. “I think I’d like that.”

Bruce eased himself into the hospital wing his cousin had been assigned, quickly checking that he was alone. Well, alone except for the unconscious young woman lying on the bed.

After closing the door behind him, Bruce crossed to the end of Jennifer’s bed. She was nearly motionless, only the soft rise and fall of her chest and the beeping of the machines that she was attached to giving any indication that she was still alive. A breathing tube was taped to her mouth and IV’s extended from both arms. Currently, her sheet was only covering the bottom half of her, allowing Bruce to see the thick bandages that covered her midriff peeking out from her pyjama top.

After taking a last almost guilty look about the empty room, Bruce plucked her file from the holder attached to the foot of her bed and began reading.

After Jennifer’d finished her marathon four-hour surgery, the lead doctor had come out to tell the two waiting men that she’d survived and that she’d make a full recovery. Unfortunately, that recovery was expected to take many, many weeks, if not months.

Jennifer had been shot with five bullets, all doing massive damage to her intestines and other internal
organs. It was actually a miracle that she’d survived long enough to even make it to the hospital, let alone through the surgery. Bruce started, one hand shooting out to grab the end of the bed to steady himself as he read that his cousin’s heart had actually stopped not once, but twice while she was on the operating table.

From what he was reading, it seemed that the doctors couldn’t work out exactly what had caused her to survive at all. Bruce, though, had his suspicions. And, as his eyes scanned her vitals that had been taken on the hour, every hour for the past fourteen hours, his suspicions only deepened. For what Jennifer had been through, she was recovering remarkably quickly.

“I hope that the extra healing factor is the only thing that you got,” Bruce murmured as he snapped the file closed and dropped it back into its holder.

There was one way to be sure and now, with no one else around was the perfect time to do something about it.

Pulling a needle and vial from his pocket, Bruce rounded the bed. Her arm felt quite cool when he grabbed it, turning it over so that the inside of her elbow was exposed. After removing the needle’s cover, he inserted it into her vein and watched as her thick red blood quickly filled the vial.

The instant that it was full, Bruce removed the needle and popped a cotton swab on it before attaching a piece of tape to hold it there. His hand automatically made its way to her forehead before he gently lifted one eyelid. A frown marred his face as he took in the unfocussed green eye. Jennifer’d always had green eyes but for the life of him, he couldn’t remember if they were this vibrant. The pitfalls of not seeing her for over a decade, he supposed.

“Bruce?” a quiet voice asked.

“Hello, Uncle Willaim,” Bruce replied, turning to greet the man, dropping the now sealed vial of blood into his pocket.

“I didn’t know you were coming in this morning; you should have said, we could have come together,” William admonished.

“Sorry about that,” Bruce replied. “Guess I’ve sort of gotten used to being independent.”

“You’ve had a hard life, right enough,” William agreed.

Bruce’s eyes widened at the startling statement.

“Oh, don’t give me that look,” William said, as he moved to stand on the opposite side of Jennifer’s bed, his large hands instantly finding his daughter’s. “You’re family. My sister’s boy. Do you honestly think that I haven’t been keeping tabs on you? I know the Army’s been trying to find you for years, though for the life of me I don’t know why.”

“Let’s just say that they’re interested in some of my research, research that I don’t think they have the best of intensions for,” Bruce replied vaguely.

William held up one hand. “Hey, you don’t need to explain anything to me. You’re family; that takes precedent over everything.”

Bruce gave a nod of thanks, not quite sure what to say. This level of trust wasn’t something that he was used to.

“I’m guessing that you’re not planning on sticking around?” William asked, the nod of his head
indicating the bag that Bruce had left just inside the hospital room’s door.

“I can’t stay,” Bruce replied.

“Not even for Jennifer? I know that she’ll want to see you when she eventually wakes up,” William said.

“I’m sorry,” Bruce replied, anguish clear in his voice.

“Where will you go?” William asked.

“New York. I’ve got a friend there to see and he’s … he’s got a safe place for me to stay,” Bruce replied.

“You want to give me the name of this place? If for no other reason than so Jennifer can write or visit once she’d better,” William coerced.

“Stark Tower,” Bruce hedged, knowing that that wasn’t quite the correct name anymore, but that it’d do. That was until inspiration struck. “Actually, I’m not sure when I’ll get there or how long I’ll stay. How about you tell her to look up Harry Potter. He owns a place called the Marauder’s Den not too far from the Tower. He’ll know how to get in contact with me.”

“Harry Potter. Marauder’s Den,” William muttered as he wrote the names on a loose piece of paper that he found on the bedside table.

William reached across the bed, then, offering his hand to the younger man.

“You take care of yourself, Bruce. And if you’re ever in the neighbourhood or even if you just feel like a holiday, you come visit. You hear me?” William smiled.

“I will,” Bruce promised.

“And Bruce? Thank you,” William said, directing both of their gazes to the young woman lying between them.

ooo00ooo

Two days, or more precisely, nights, surveilling Bradshaw’s apartment assured Daredevil that his hunch had been correct: Hardy wasn’t coming back here. The odds that she’d accomplished what she’d aimed to the last time that she’d come here was approaching certainty.

Unfortunately, Bullseye had interrupted that mission and by the time that Spider-Man and Mage had scared the man off and had left themselves, Hardy had already left.

With a frustrated sigh, Daredevil slapped his thigh with one of his batons. There was nothing for it but to take the direct approach. Unfortunately, that wasn’t what he’d originally wanted. Confronting the girl without information was a bad deal; if he didn’t ask the right questions, it was all too easy to miss the vital part. But then, it was the same thing in the courtroom – never ask a question that you didn’t already know the answer to.

Holstering his baton, Daredevil turned and began racing across the rooftop. Unerringly, he planted his foot just right, pushing off in a jump that had him soaring across the alley numerous stories below before landing on the next building and continuing his run.

Building to building he went, soaring over gaps, scaling ledges and fire escapes where necessary or
using the wires that connected two buildings in conjunction with his billy-club to slide quickly over greater distances.

 Barely a sound could be heard when he finally came to a halt on the third-top floor of the building that he was targeting. A sharp rap on the fire-escape with his baton had him tilting his head as he ‘watched’ the vibrations run up and down the metal and echoing throughout the alley.

 A small smile lit his face as he ‘saw’ that the window that he was aiming for had been left open. Stepping out, Daredevil dropped, quickly falling past floor after floor.

 A hand snapped out. A twirl, a twist and Daredevil landed in a crouch on the correct landing. The smallest sound, an intake of breath, told him that his quarry was at home. Instantly, the window was pushed up and Daredevil stepped inside.

 And then it was a case of dodging to the left to avoid the kick thrown at his head. A step backwards had the fist aimed at his head sailing past his face. Then there was a flurry of hands and feet, all geared towards blocking everything that the girl was throwing at him.

 Hand.

 Foot.

 Knee.

 Backwards flip.

 Forearm block.

 Forearm block.

 Duck.

 There was no doubt that the girl was good. Too good. She’d had training and a lot of it with how accurate the flurry of strikes and kicks were aimed. Not fighting back was actually starting to hinder him and he took a well-placed kick to the upper thigh that had him grunting,

 “I’m not here to hurt you,” Daredevil growled.

 Hardy didn’t answer verbally, merely increased the tempo of her attack.

 Deciding that he’d had enough, Daredevil changed tactics. Her next punch was caught, as was her next kick. Then, using the momentum that she’d used, he pulled her off of her remaining foot, spun her around and threw her onto the nearby couch.

 “I’m not here to hurt you,” he repeated forcefully.

 “Then why are you here,” the girl spat. “Breaking into my home in your masked costume doesn’t scream ‘innocent intentions’.”

 “You’re right, it doesn’t,” Daredevil replied. “Nevertheless, I only want to ask you a couple of questions and then I’ll leave.”

 He could tell that she was shifting about, getting into a position that would allow her to relaunch an attack.

 “What?” she asked, but he could tell that it was merely a stalling tactic.
“Why were you really at Broadshaw’s apartment?” Daredevil asked.

“Broadshaw? What do you know about that?” she asked, his question momentarily stilling her.

“I know that you didn’t kill him. I also know that you went back there three nights ago. What I want to know is why,” Daredevil stated.

“What are you going to do? Arrest me for breaking and entering?” she sneered.

“Do I look like the police?” Daredevil snapped back. “Now. Why?”

“You wouldn’t believe me,” she sighed.

“Try me,” Daredevil said, letting his body drop into a less confrontational pose.

“You’re the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen, so you know about the Kingpin?” Hardy half-asked and half-stated.

“I know about the Kingpin,” Daredevil confirmed in a growl.

“Broadshaw had something. Something that Kingpin needed for one of his operations,” Hardy stated.

Daredevil took a couple of menacing steps towards the couch. “You work for the Kingpin!”

“No! Never! The man had my father arrested and thrown into prison. I’d never work for him!” Felicia snapped back.

“Then what were you doing at Broadshaw’s apartment?” Daredevil asked.

“Getting the thing that Kingpin needed out of his reach,” she replied.

“What was it?” Daredevil asked.

The sound of her hair dragging against the back of the chair told him that she was still looking for a way out of her predicament.

“I can help. I want Kingpin taken down as well,” Daredevil stated.

The smallest of sighs told him that he’d gained a measure of trust, however small that was.

“An industrial-grade diamond. One of the largest in the world,” she finally admitted.

“What was Kingpin going to use it for?” Daredevil asked.

“No idea. I’d just heard that he needed it for something big and important,” Felicia replied.

“Where is it now?” he asked.

“Out of Kingpin’s reach,” she replied emphatically and he could tell that that was one question that she wouldn’t answer.

“Do you know who did kill Broadshaw?” he asked.

“No,” she replied with a shake of her head. “My guess would be someone else who’d heard about the diamond. It was under some serious security.”
“Does Kingpin know that you’ve got the diamond?” Daredevil asked.

“No. I covered my tracks. There’s nothing that would lead anyone back to me.”

“Except for the fact that you’ve been charged with murdering Broadshaw,” Daredevil countered.

A swish of air told him that she waved off that notion. “My defence is solid.”

“Let’s hope so. For now, I suggest that you don’t do anything that would attract anyone else’s attention. I’ll be watching,” he stated.

Then, before she could reply, he took two quick steps backwards and dove out of the window.

ooo00ooo

Being out this late at night, alone, in Central Park, would be sure to freak out a lot of people. Especially teenaged girls like her. But not Doreen. She had a few aces up her sleeve that meant that, while she didn’t advertise her presence, she still felt confident enough to walk about under, well, normally she’d say ‘the stars’ but the city lights prevented ninety percent of them from being seen.

She’d been out for a couple of hours now, visiting mostly, but also enjoying the chance to connect some with nature. That was the one downside of living in New York compared to back home – she shook her head at that thought, Los Angeles was not her ‘home’ any more. Back there she had free run of the forest, something that she enjoyed and made her feel complete, fulfilled. And New York City had a decided lack of forest.

At the very edge of the park, she stopped and dropped to one knee. Instantly, she was swarmed as five of the eight squirrels that she’d been visiting with scampered up and over her to perch on her shoulders, head and in the case of two of them, on her knee. Monkey Joe sat just off to one side, taking in the sight.

♫“It was great seeing you all again,”♫ she said, stroking the fur of one while shifting her head about to take them all in.♫“I’ll try to visit again tomorrow or if not then, then definitely the day after”♫

A flash of movement caught her attention and she looked up.

Her eyes grew wide and her mouth dropped open at the pair of superheroes passing just a block away from where she was – one swinging up and down on his webs, the other flying through the air on what she knew was a magic broom.

Mage and Spider-Man.

Doreen’s eyes tracked the two, taking in every detail that she could. This was the closest that she’d ever been to any of the heroes that she’d come to New York to meet. And while these two weren’t the big one, the one that she was desperate to meet, they knew him.

Iron Man.

She’d nearly dropped the tray of plates and cups that she’d been carrying when the news had reported that he’d been supposedly killed. And her relief when he’d turned back up again, alive and well and kicking ass had had her jumping all over her room in her excitement.

As her eyes tracked the movements of the two superheroes, she tried to guess where they were going. And then she turned her head slightly and knew. Avengers Tower. They were on a direct route to Avengers Tower. Where Iron Man was now supposed to be living.
“Gotta go, guys. I’ll see you later,” she said. “Come on, Monkey Joe.”

Doreen paused just long enough for the squirrels to change places – her new friends back on the ground and Monkey Joe up on her shoulder – before she took off.

Her enhanced, squirrel-like abilities enabled her to run faster than almost anyone. But she was a long way behind Spider-Man and Mage and had a fair bit of work to do if she wanted to meet them and get them to introduce her to Iron Man.

ooo00ooo

The doors slamming open alerted Wilson to someone entering his domain.

Upon seeing the short, angry man clad in his now trademark black trench coat, his bald head displaying the scarred target on his forehead, he raised his hand. Instantly, the two guards stilled. They, too, knew how dangerous the man was in this particular mood.

“I take it that your hunt did not go well tonight?” Wilson asked.

“No. It did not,” Bullseye groused before flopping himself into the chair facing the desk.

“You weren’t able to find him?” Wilson asked.

“Oh, no, I saw him right enough,” Bullseye groused. “It were those other two. Hovering around and keeping me from getting close enough.”

“Surely the presence of two individuals, no matter how enhanced they may be, offer no threat to you,” Wilson cajoled.

Instantly, Bullseye’s feet swung down from where they rested on Wilson’s desk and he leant forward, a mad, intense look on his face.

“They … made … me … miss!” he growled.

“So, you missed,” Wilson said, waving away the problem. “Just don’t miss next time.”

“You don’t understand,” Bullseye retorted. “I never miss. And they made me.”

“If it has you that perturbed, then do something about it,” Wilson suggested. “Aim for them, too.”

A slow grin steadily spread across the mercenary’s face.

“Aye. I will. And I won’t even charge you for it. This I’ll do for free. It’s a matter of honour, now.”

ooo00ooo

“A quiet night,” Harry noted as he pushed off the hood of his cloak.

“Yeah, well, not every night can be a barrel of laughs. I mean, sure it would’ve been nice to beat up a few bad guys. But if the crooks are having a night in, what can you do?” Peter replied, shrugging his red shoulders with the distinctive webbing design.

“A quiet night is good, Peter,” Harry counted. “It means that we’re making a difference, making the criminals rethink their decisions.

Once again, the younger man shrugged. “Or that we were simply in the wrong place at the wrong
time.”

Harry nodded. He had to give his partner that one.

And it had been a quiet night. In the entirety of their four-hour patrol, they hadn’t seen one single criminal act being committed. Not even Daredevil, who they’d shadowed for part of that night, had had any criminal activity to combat.

Two heads, suddenly and simultaneously, snapped to the left and down, as though they could see through part of the roof of Harry’s building.

Harry knew what’d caught his attention – the wards that he’d placed around the alley had been tripped by someone entering it. He assumed that it was Peter’s famous spider-sense that had alerted him to the same information.

Quickly, Harry pulled up the hood of his cloak. At the same time, he snapped his wrist, bringing his wand ready for use. A quick notice-me-not charm on the two of them later, and they approached the edge of the building and looked down.

The figure down there seemed to flit from shadow to shadow, but it was as they passed a lighted patch that Harry noted the small shape on their shoulder.

“It’s just Doreen,” he noted, relaxing slightly. “Although I would have thought that it was a bit late for her to be out.”

“Like we’re ones to talk,” Peter snorted quietly.

Any retort on Harry’s lips was instantly forgotten as Doreen took one last look around before crouching slightly and jumping up – straight up to the window of her third-floor bedroom.

Harry and Peter could only stare at each other, both wondering if what they’d just seen had really happened.
That's Just Not Right

Feeling the super-sensory charm go off, Harry turned from the hallway to face the far bench in the kitchen apartment. From here, utilising the mirror charm that he’d placed on the tiles (that was only keyed to himself), Harry could watch what happened without appearing to do so.

He still couldn’t believe what he’d seen last night. Doreen, a fifteen-year-old girl, jumping three stories from a standing start to reach her bedroom window. As Peter had said, ‘that was just freaky – awesome, but freaky’. In usual circumstances, Harry didn’t like that word – brought back too many bad memories – but in this instance, it was accurate.

The fact that Doreen had been hiding that ability leant one to assume that she was also hiding others. Not that he was one to talk. But still, it was his home and he wanted to know just who he’d invited to live with him.

At first, he’d considered simply confronting her, but he was sure that that would simply scare her away. And the fact that she’d been living on the streets when he first found her told him that she was more than prepared to do so again. No, scaring her away was not an option, not if he wanted to continue helping her. And he did, more than ever now; Harry knew intimately what it was like to be different.

The other possible outcome of confronting her was that she’d attack and, while Harry was fairly certain that he could contain her with his magic, without knowing exactly what she was capable of, there were bound to be injuries.

Thus, he’d devised a number of small tests to gain a measure of her abilities and hopefully give him a better idea of how to handle things.

The smallest of shuffling noises alerted him to Doreen coming down the hallway and Harry focussed on the mirror.

As Doreen stepped into the main room, her feet slipped out and her arms pinwheeled, her legs danced for a moment, trying to gain traction. And then, all of a sudden, she stopped, just as though she’d not only found traction but had superglued her feet to the floor. He saw her look down and frown. On her shoulder, Monkey Joe chittered at her and for an instant, Harry could have sworn that Doreen answered the squirrel. In squirrel language, if squirrels had a language, that is. But then, snakes did, so why not?

A quick wave of his wand cancelled the charm on the floor before he secreted his wand back away and turned around.

“Morning, Doreen,” he said.

“Um, hi, Harry,” she replied, but he could see that she was still preoccupied with the floor.

Tentatively, she moved first one foot, then the other, testing the floor cautiously with each step before giving another frown and walking towards the centre bench.

Again, Harry was ready.

“Here’s your coffee,” he said, placing it on the counter.

A small wandless banishing charm ensured that it slid at speed towards the edge.
In an instant, Doreen had crossed the remaining distance, plucking the mug out of the air just as it began to careen towards the floor.

*Speed and reflexes?* Harry wondered. They definitely seemed enhanced compared to a ‘regular’ person’s.

“Sorry about that,” Harry apologised. “Must not know my own strength.”

“Know what that’s like,” Doreen chuckled.

“Speaking of, feel free to move that box out of your way,” Harry said, indicating the large cardboard box in the middle of the bench. “It’s for the *Den*, I’ll take it down later. Just put it over there.”

With a nod, Doreen picked it up before striding across the room to place it beside the door.

It took everything Harry had not to react. He’d charmed that box to be nearly ten times the weight that it was supposed to be and she’d moved it as though it was nothing.

*Speed, reflexes, strength, balance. Not to mention that she can jump three stories. Oh, and possibly talk to animals,* Harry catalogued as he set two plates of omelettes on the bench in front of each of them.

Breakfast, then, carried on like normal and before long, Doreen had deposited her plate and mug in the sink and disappeared towards the bathroom.

It was as Harry was about to enter the hallway to return to his own room that something out of the corner of his eye caught his attention. There were some sort of marks on the floor, right where Doreen had managed to catch her balance.

Kneeling down, Harry ran his fingers lightly over the ten small holes in the wood.

“Exactly what are you, Doreen Green?” he asked.

ooo00ooo

“You know, I still don’t get what changed,” Spider-man said as he passed on his upward swing.

A barely heard *fwick* sounded as the web-head shot out a new line after releasing the one that he’d been swinging on.

“We go weeks without finding the guy …”

Mage never even turned his head to acknowledge his red and blue partner as he dropped past on his swing, nor as he swung back up and blurted out his next phrase of his one-sided conversation.

“And now we can’t seem to *not* run into him when we’re on patrol.”

Not one muscle moved on Mage’s face, not that anyone could tell the difference with the obscuring charm that hid his face under his hood.

*Yeah, it's almost like magic,* Mage thought sarcastically. Really, he was surprised that Spider-man hadn’t put two and two together, considering how smart the teen was.

“Is he tailing that girl again?” Spider-man asked as he passed on his downward swing.

The unexpected high-pitched yell caused Mage to snap his head down and to the left. His eyes
widened at the sight of his partner freefalling towards the ground. A string of webbing flapped uselessly from a red-gloved hand before opening to release it and send out a new web-line at the nearest building.

Instinctively, Mage knew that he was too close to the ground; there was no way that he’d be able to save himself.

The merest thought spun the lightning bolt around and down and Mage flattened himself against the broom, intent on catching Spider-man if needed.

The sound of something passing his head at speed even as a second something slammed into his broom with a solid thunk caused Mage to jerk the broom even further down. A third something flew past, only being seen in his peripheral vision but at least it was further away.

The nose of the broom was nearly pointed straight down now and Mage couldn’t help but grin. The black bitumen loomed large in his eyes – not exactly the green grass of a quidditch pitch. At just the right moment, Mage pulled backwards, performing a perfect wronski feint even as a laugh was ripped from him. At speed, he dodged through the oncoming traffic before pulling straight up, his head whipping backwards and forwards.

Mage had no idea what had happened to Spider-man; the kid, he knew, could take care of himself. Spider-man, though, wasn’t the one in danger, despite his potential crash down to earth. No, the one in danger was Daredevil – the shuriken still embedded in the shaft of his broom attested to that.

A touch of his wand with the correct mental command had Mage quickly flipping his broom over before rolling back upright. Half a dozen buildings zipped by as Mage honed in.

And then he saw them. Daredevil and Bullseye were going toe to toe, trading blows and leaping about. By the way that Daredevil was favouring his right leg and left arm, Mage guessed that he’d been injured already, most likely by something sharp.

As Mage closed in, he saw Daredevil backflip half a dozen times to give himself space.

You're giving him a chance to use his strengths, Mage growled internally.

And indeed, he was right. The instant that Bullseye had clearance, a dozen glinting objects were shot from his quickly moving hands, one after the other.

Mage’s phoenix wand was already out, pointing straight ahead as he lay almost flat against the lightning bolt trying to coax every bit of speed out of it that he could. Instinctively, Mage twirled his wand in ever increasing circles, creating a vortex of wind, wind that quickly turned into tornado strength as it slammed into the flying objects, sending them wildly off-target.

Bullseye spun about, a grimace on his face as he realised that the Avenger was bearing down on him. With a casual salute, the man turned, his leather coat flaring behind him.

Mage’s eyes narrowed as the marksman hopped behind a multitude of struts, obscuring his chance of hitting him with a spell. But there were more ways than one to catch a crook. A flick upwards and a jet of blood red shot from his wand, almost instantly followed by the lightest of blues.

The first spell impacted the water tower, smashing it to smithereens and sending a deluge of water careening on to the rooftop, right where Bullseye had last been seen. And then the light blue spell hit the water, freezing it into a bizarre sculpture of a wave of water.

Mage slowed his broom before beginning to circle the roof, staring into the ice, trying to see the
image of a man trapped inside. Unfortunately, the ice was crystal clear. In fact, the only thing inside that he could see was a half-open door leading down into the building.

After slamming his fist into his thigh in frustration, Mage zipped across the roof to where Daredevil was leaning against a wall.

“You alright?” Mage asked.

“I am now,” Daredevil replied in a near growl.

“What happened?”

“Caught me by surprise,” Daredevil replied. “He was lying in wait to ambush me. Glad you happened by. I take it he got away?”

“This time,” Mage scowled.

“Hey guys, what’d I miss?” Spider-man asked as he landed lightly on the rooftop, his costume a little torn and the worse-for-wear in a number of places.

Doreen scowled at the assignment question that she’d been given by her history teacher.

*Describe the differences between the three types of colonies that existed in the British Empire in America during the height of its power in the eighteenth century.*

How was she supposed to know that? She hadn’t even known that there were different types of colonies in America.

Hopefully, the answer lay in one of the stack of books that sat on the end of her desk. As soon as the bell had rung, Doreen had raided the library for anything that looked as though it might give some sort of answer. The only problem now was that she was going to have to read through them all to find the answers she needed.

And then she had a brilliant thought: she was living with a living, breathing English guy. If anyone was going to know the answer, it’d be him, right?

Not that Harry was home right then. Really, the guy barely was ever home, or at least, that was the way it seemed. If he wasn’t in the Den downstairs, he was ‘out’, wherever that was. He never said, only sort of skirted the question or changed the topic.

But Harry, she knew, had a library, a library filled with books – hundreds of them. Surely, somewhere in there, he had one on history.

After sliding from her seat, Doreen padded from her room and down the hallway to the library. She stopped at the entrance, looking over the many shelves. Then, with a shrug, she began exploring.

Her hand trailed along the spines of the books as she read the titles. If there was a system, she couldn’t find it; it didn’t help that at least one out of every ten books wasn’t even written in English.

And then, on the fourth shelf, she found what she was looking for. Or at least, the history section. There weren’t really a lot of books about history, but one, a large book with a dark, nearly black cover made out of something that felt like leather caught her attention. It took a bit of tugging, but eventually, Doreen managed to free the book from its brethren, although the weight of it surprised
her and only her increased strength allowed her to maintain hold of it instead of dropping it.

Doreen dropped to the floor, sitting with her legs crossed and the book cradled in her lap. If there’d ever been a title on the cover, it’d long since disappeared. Instead, she opened the cover to the first page and stared.

“*Goblin Rebellions of Avalon, 592AD to 1357AD.*”

Shaking her head, Doreen read the title again and then again. Nope, it stayed exactly the same.

With a lurch, she opened the book to a random page somewhere in the middle. To one side, the writing was small, cramped and looked almost hand-written rather than typed. On the other, though, was the most bizarre picture that she’d ever seen. It showed some kind of battle between men holding swords – no, on closer inspection when she bent her head close to the page, she realised that they were actually sticks – and the strangest creatures that she’d ever seen. They were short with long, ears, wickedly sharp looking teeth and the axes that they were wielding looked to be held by the longest fingers she’d ever seen.

“This obviously belongs in the fiction section,” she decided.

Not knowing exactly where that was, Doreen decided to simply put the weird book back where she found it.

Trying to squeeze the book back into its slot was only made possible when she took out one of its neighbours.

“Now this looks more like it,” Doreen smiled at the book in her hand. “*Expansion of the Commonwealth.*”

A quick flick through proved that it was exactly what she was after. Then, with the book firmly in hand, Doreen made her way back to her room and the dreaded assignment.

ooo00ooo

“*Homenum revelio!*”

Harry’s eyes narrowed as he examined the results. The various red blobs downstairs could be instantly ignored. No, it was the one in his apartment that he was being wary of. And there she was, in her room with the door shut.

A simple nod of satisfaction preceded Harry slipping into the closest and closing the door behind himself.

Originally, the door led to the top of a spiral staircase leading down to the part of Harry’s basement dedicated to his magical training. But with the introduction of Doreen to the apartment, he’d been forced to put in a false wall, hidden by magic, of course, and to fill the cupboard with brooms, mops and other cleaning supplies. A series of quick taps of his wand caused the back wall to become transparent and Harry simply walked through.

As he stepped off of the bottom stair, a pair of magical dummies appeared from alternate sides of the room, wands raised in wooden hands. A dodge to the right was enough to avoid the jet of red light; a swish of his wand raised a shield for the dark blue bolt to bounce off of. Three more spells were snapped off from the dummies – two from the one on the left, one from the right. A dodge and a second shield were enough for two of the spells. The third, however was headed straight for Harry and there was nothing that he could do about it.
Instinctively, he snapped up his left hand, the thought of a duelling shield, similar to a buckler, in front of it. The sound of a gong as the spell impacted nearly caused Harry to get hit by the next spell. He’d never managed to do that before.

Feeling the pull on his magic the more he shielded, Harry switched to attack. Swirling to the left, his wand came up in intricate patterns and jets of light – yellow, white, red, white, red – spat out.

One dummy had its wand arm blown off while the second was hit in the midsection, sending it hurtling backwards to crash into the far wall before falling to the ground.

After one last check with narrowed eyes at the downed dummies, he straightened and holstered his wand. Raising his left hand, Harry willed the same duelling shield from before to appear. And it was there, perhaps not as strong as if he’d conjured it using his wand, but it was a shield nonetheless. A wandless shield. He’d been working on this for months and finally, finally …

Letting the shield fade away, Harry danced a jig before nearly skipping across to the small reading section that he’d put in.

A casual wave of his hand summoned the book that he needed, not that that was a great feat – he’d had a bit of an affinity for the summoning charm ever since the TriWiz all those years ago and as a consequence, it’d been the first wandless spell that he’d been capable of. Well, apart from a wandless lumos, but he didn’t think that counted.

After revising the passage in the book for the umpteenth time, Harry sighed, closed it, and moved to the centre of the room.

His eyes closed and he turned his attention inwards.

As always, the prickling sensation over his arms came first and he knew that he was growing feathers in place of the usual hair on his skin. His clothes rippled and flattened against his body before his torso also began to take on that tingling feeling. The bones in his arms and legs began to shift, scraping against each other, even as his butt changed and he felt long tail feathers growing from there.

And then it stopped.

As it always did.

Harry opened his eyes and took stock of his new body. Mostly, he was bird-like. Exactly what type of bird was anyone’s guess. The problem was that his head refused to transform. And he remained the same size.

Yep. He’d developed some kind of block. The book even said that this could happen. Not that it really offered any kind of solution.

With a sigh, Harry reversed the transformation. He’d been stuck at this point for weeks now. There was nothing for it. He was going to have to bite the bullet and talk to someone who’d successfully become an Animagus, someone who could coach him past this block.

One name instantly came to mind. There was only one problem with that – she was in Britain, a place that Harry had no real interest in going.

ooo00ooo

“Doctor Curtis Connors.”
The man in question lifted his head from the text that he was reading and turned to face the small window set into the door of his cell. The face on the other side was not one that he recognised, a fact that the slight German accent should have told him anyway.

“Yes. Can I help you?” Curt replied.

It’d been months since he’d first been incarcerated in Beloit Psychiatric Hospital, a place that Curt didn’t think that he actually belonged in. No, he wasn’t insane. A criminal, yes, that certainly, after all, he’d hurt a great many people. But insane, no. He wasn’t even dangerous any more, not since his body had absorbed the antidote to the lizard formula that he’d taken to transform into that savage beast.

But as much as he protested that he didn’t need to be there, that a simple penitentiary would be a much better choice for him, his pleas had fallen on deaf ears. Countless doctors of all sorts had practiced on him, most with one goal in mind: to get the formula out of him. But that was something that Curt would never give up. The formula that created the Lizard was simply too dangerous to be allowed out into the world.

And so, Curt had changed his tactic. Be meek, be mild, be helpful (except where it came to that damned formula), answer any other questions, force them to see that he wasn’t insane, that he didn’t belong here.

“My name is Doctor Daniel Whitehall,” the man introduced himself. “I have been assigned to treat you.”

“As you wish,” Curt replied.

As he’d expected, the door swung open, admitting Doctor Whitehall and an assistant, an assistant who obediently placed a file into the waiting doctor’s hand. Whitehall calmly perused the file, flipping page after page as he read through it. Finally, he looked up, his clear blue eyes looking interestedly at Curt through his black-rimmed round glasses.

“This says that you have been cooperative in most aspects,” Doctor Whitehall stated. “Most aspects. The one area that you refuse to enlighten us on is the formula pertaining to the serum responsible for creating the Lizard.”

“I will not tell you, or anyone else, what that formula is,” Curt stated emphatically. “It is too dangerous to be in the hands of anyone.”

“Anyone but yourself,” Whitehall finished for him.

Curt shrugged. “Unfortunately, it is in my brain. If I could erase it from my mind, I would.”

“Interesting,” Doctor Whitehall said.

One hand slipped into the doctor’s coat pocket before pulling out a tranquilizer gun, pointing it at Curt and pulling the trigger. Curt had just enough time to gasp, clasp one hand over the dart embedded in his neck and pull it out before promptly keeling over and crashing to the floor.

“Prepare him for reprogramming,” Doctor Whitehall stated, turning to leave the room.

“Doctor,” the assistant called hesitantly. “Are you planning on turning him back into that … that thing again?”

“No,” Whitehall replied, “the antidote in his system prevents that. The formula, however, has
potential, potential that HYDRA may have a use for one day.”

oo00ooo

“Who are you? How’d you get in here?”

The harsh questions dissolved into hacking coughs and the questioner slumped back on his bed. A shaky hand reached over and eventually, after the third try, managed to grasp the glass of water on his bedside table. Drops rained down over the floor and the bedsheets as the water splashed over the side due to the man’s inability to keep the glass steady.

By the time that he’d managed a couple of sips, enough to quieten the coughing fit, his laboured breathing had evened out. With one hand on his chest as though to make sure that his heart was still beating, the man opened his eyes to check on his uninvited visitor.

In the time that he’d needed to steady himself, Norman found that the black-suited man had pulled up a chair and had seated himself beside the bed. One knee was crossed and his hands lay innocently in his lap, an innocence that Norman failed to believe. Beside the chair, a briefcase sat upright where it had been deposited.

“Who are you? What do you want?” Norman demanded in his scratchy voice, a voice he was pleased to hear didn’t dissolve into a coughing fit or simply peter out.

“My name is unimportant,” the man stated. “As to what I want … let’s just say that it’s more what I can do for you.”

“You? You’re no doctor! What could you possibly do for me?” Norman asked.

It was an educated guess, but after so many years around the cursed profession, Norman was confident that he could spot a medical-man a mile off.

“Retroviral Hypodisplasia,” the man in black stated. “That is the name of the disease that you suffer from. Genetic, I believe, at least, so I’ve been told. Really, I know little about it. Other than it’s a horrid way to die. And die you will, soon apparently.”

“I know that,” Norman spat. “If you’re here to taunt me, save your breath. I know it all, exactly what this disease is, what it’s doing to me and what it’s going to do. I also know that there’s no cure.”

“Ah, but what if I told you that there was?” the man asked.

Norman’s eyes bugged out and his green-tinged hand with the long fingernails reflexively, imploringly, reached out.

“I’ll give you anything for it. Name your price,” Norman stated.

The man sat there momentarily, his head cocked to one side, apparently considering the request silently.

“Unfortunately, I am not the one who owns the cure,” the man eventually replied.

“What do you want? A finder’s fee? Fine, name your price, just tell me who has the cure,” Norman asked, his frustration building.

“My price is that, once you’re cured, you listen to a little presentation that my colleagues have prepared. Listen and give the proposal careful consideration.”
Norman stared at the man. That was it? Listen to a proposal? He’d sat through hundreds no thousands of the things in his lifetime, one more was nothing.

“Deal,” Norman replied. “Now. Tell me who has the cure.”

The man’s lips curved upwards slightly. “Norman Osborn.”

“What? Don’t you think I’d know if I had the cure to save my own life?” Norman near-screeched, or as close to as his failing body was capable of. “Get out of here. Leave me alone.”

The man, of course, simply ignored Norman’s order.

“The cure is in two parts,” the man stated, “both located in the sub-basement level at Oscorp Tower. The first is a serum derived from the venom of genetically-enhanced spiders. My researchers tell me that this serum has the potential to accelerate the Retroviral Hypodisplasia. However, there is a prototype exo-skeleton suit that is designed to heal soldiers from even the most grievous of wounds. Theoretically, with your body in flux from the serum, it should heal you. You may not be quite the same man that you once were, but you’d be alive, even if you’d never be able to take the exo-skeleton off again.”

Norman stared at the man, his mind whirling through the possibilities of what he knew of the two projects. Both projects had originally been designed as potential cures, both failed when put through simulations and tests. Never, as far as he was aware, had any of the projects been combined, though. Was it possible? Had he been sitting on a cure for all these years? Norman knew his prognosis – he had weeks left. Assuming he was lucky. And if this killed him quickly, well, it was a win-win scenario wasn’t it?

“Take me to Oscorp,” he commanded.
“If you didn’t kill James Broadshaw, then who did?” the prosecuting attorney asked.

Instantly, Matthew Murdoch was on his feet. “Objection, Your Honour. It is not Miss Hardy’s job to determine who the guilty party is; that is the job of the police.”

“Objection sustained,” the judge declared. “Mister Smythe, please confine your questions to the matter at hand.”

“Yes, Your Honour,” Smythe replied with a miniscule bow of his head. “The prosecution has no further questions for this witness.”

“Your witness, Mister Murdock,” Judge MacIntyre stated.

Slowly, Matt rose before beginning to move closer to the witness stand.

There was definitely one advantage to being a blind lawyer, it gave one a fraction more time to think before having to ask any questions. The problem right now was that, while Matt was certain that Miss Hardy was innocent of murder, he knew that she wasn’t as innocent as she appeared to be. And it’d be bad form to get her thrown in jail for a different crime than what she’d been arrested for.

“Miss Hardy. Prior to the evening of the fourteenth, had you ever had any prior contact with Mister Broadshaw?”

“No.” Felicia replied succinctly.

Matt nodded. “And on the evening in question, was the door to Mister Broadshaw’s apartment unlocked before you entered?”

“It was,” she replied, with not even a hint of a smile or smirk in her voice, something that he was very grateful for, considering how he’d worded that particular question.

“Did you attempt to determine if Mister Broadshaw was home before you opened the door?” he asked.

“Yes. I called out, but there was no answer,” she replied.

“Then why did you decide to enter Mister Broadshaw’s apartment without an invitation?” Matt asked.

“I thought that I could quickly get in, grab what I needed to and get back out again without causing a scene,” Felicia explained.

“The items belonging to Angelica Stone?” Matt asked.

“Yes,” she replied.

And just like that, they were past the most dangerous part of the questioning.

“How far into the apartment did you go before you discovered Mister Broadshaw’s body?” Matt asked.

“I didn’t. Need to go into his apartment, that is,” Felicia replied. “As soon as I opened the door, he
was just there, lying there. That’s when I rushed in, hoping to help him.”

“And that’s how the police found you,” Matt stated more than asked.

“Yes,” Felicia replied anyway.

“You were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time,” Matt clarified.

“Exactly!” Felicia agreed.

“Miss Felicia Hardy,” Judge MacIntyre said after reading the piece of paper that had been handed to her by the bailiff. “Please stand.”

Felicia complied, with her two lawyers, Nelson and Murdoch, rising on either side of her as well.

“It is the decision of this court that you are not guilty of the murder of James Broadshaw. I must caution you, however. Much of the verdict was decided upon by the reasonable doubt that was shown in your defence. The fact that you were willing to enter another’s home, regardless of your intentions, is a crime. A note will be entered into your permanent file and you will be placed on a good behaviour bond for a period of three years. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Your Honour,” Felicia replied.

Judge MacIntyre gave Felicia a long hard look before lifting her gavel and bringing it down.

“Case dismissed.”

Instantly, Felicia turned to Matt and grasped his hands.

“Thank you. Thank you so much,” she said, before whirling about to thank Foggy as well.

“Just be sure to keep your nose clean, Miss Hardy,” Matt stated once she’d turned back around. “Three years’ good behaviour, remember.”

“Don’t worry, I will,” Felicia assured him. “It’s straight back to university for me and as soon as I can, to find a good, honest job. That should keep me out of trouble.”

“Good luck, Miss Hardy, with everything,” Foggy said, before beginning to straighten their notes and to place them into his briefcase.

Matt ‘watched’ as Felicia left the courtroom. He could only hope that she learnt her lesson from this and left what she’d learnt at her father’s knee behind her. Somehow, though, he doubted it.

Bruce eyed the crowd across the street warily.

From the position he was in, he was almost invisible, not that any of the crowd were looking his way anyway. The bulk of the crowd seemed to be reporters, although there were a fair few everyday New Yorkers who seemed to be Avengers fans. Many, he noted, wore shirts and hats with one or more of the heroes on it. Two young boys, brothers by the look of them, were both wearing giant green fists on their hands.

Gasps, screams and pointing indicated that something high above the crowd had caught their
attention. Bruce leaned out from behind the pillar and looked up, only to instantly start grumbling to himself.

“Sure, bypass the crowds; take the easy way in,” he muttered towards the red and blue teen swinging high overhead and the cloaked figure on his flying broomstick.

Within minutes, the two had disappeared from sight, landing somewhere on the great platform above the Avenger’s logo.

“Four jumps, maybe five,” Bruce muttered, eyeing the Tower.

But turning into the other guy to reach the party would be somewhat counter-productive – they were gathering to celebrate that the Tower was finally fixed and refurbished, not to trash the thing again.

Finally, Bruce gave in and, after looking both ways, dodged through the traffic to reach the front of the Tower. Getting through the crowd, though, was a whole other ballgame.


It took a fair bit of manoeuvring to get his body through the tiniest of gaps and a whole lot of apologising as he made his way towards the front, but eventually, Bruce reached his destination. Only to come face to face with a cordoned off barrier that was still a couple of metres out from the great glass entrance doors.

“Doctor Banner,” a security guard said, stepping forward.

Bruce looked around to find a face that he sort-of remembered.

“Ah, yeah, hi,” he replied.

The man merely nodded and moved the barrier in slightly, enough for Bruce to make his way through.

“I’m guessing that you don’t remember me,” the man said. “I’m Happy Hogan; I’m in charge of security today.”

“Nice to meet you again,” Bruce replied as he was let inside the building.

“Wondered how long it was going to take you to get inside,” a voice stated from the shadows.

Bruce’s head snapped around.

“Leave him alone,” Natasha said to the archer leaning against the far wall. “At least he walked in instead of crawling through a vent.”

“Hey! I had to check out Tony’s security,” Clint retorted.

“And what did you decide from the jolt of electricity from the trigger that you tripped?” Bobbi asked, one eyebrow raised.

Clint ignored the jibe, instead coming upright and striding across the lobby to call the elevator.

“Doctor Banner. It’s good to see you again,” Steve said, coming up beside him and clapping him on the shoulder.

“You too, Steve,” Bruce smiled.
“You sure that it’s okay for me to come?” Peter asked as he landed in a crouch beside Harry.

Harry barely even looked at the teen as he shrunk his broom before stowing it away in one of the pockets on his belt.

“For the last time, Pete, of course you’re invited, too. You may not have fought with the whole team yet, but you’re one of us,” Harry replied. “Besides, didn’t Tony invite you the last time you were at work here?”

“Well, sure, but I just thought that he was being polite or something,” Peter replied.

“Well, I was, but that doesn’t mean that I didn’t mean the invite,” Tony stated as he joined the two on the platform.

“How are you, Tony?” Harry asked.

“Good now that the workers have finally gone and we can do some partying,” Tony replied. “Gotta say, though, I thought you guys would have used the proper entrance.”

“Isn’t this where you take off from and land in the Iron Man suit?” Peter asked, looking around.

“Hmm,” Tony replied. “It’s been modified a bit, though.”

“Looks big enough for a helicopter,” Peter stated, looking about the large platform, “or maybe a … a quinjet?”

“Got it in one, webhead,” Tony beamed. “I’m having a couple of quinjets like the ones that S.H.I.E.L.D. use modified for our own use. They’re not ready yet, but once they are, we can park one here.”

“For those of us who can’t fly,” Harry agreed with a smile, flipping back his hood and cancelling the obscuris spell.

“Hey! There’s nothing wrong with webbing wherever you need to go. And it’s more fun, too,” Peter protested.

“But flying’s so much faster,” Tony countered before throwing an arm around Harry’s shoulders and beginning to manoeuvre the other two inside. “Come on, I’ll give you a tour while we’re waiting for the others.”

“Finally got the band back together,” Tony said. “Well, except for Point Break, but he’s off godding or something. Anyway, to the band!”

Tony’s half-full glass was raised high, a gesture that was mimicked by all assembled there.

After the group had drunk, Steve leant forward in his chair and placed his tumbler on the coffee table in front of him. His action was enough to garner the attention of all, especially when he deliberately made eye contact with each and every person before moving on to the next.

Finally, when all were looking at him, Steve focussed his attention on Tony.

“You had us worried, Tony,” Steve began. “Reports of your death were announced world-wide.”
“Exaggerated, as you can see,” Tony replied, spreading his arms wide.

“I heard it all the way down in Brazil,” Bruce put in. “It’s why I came home earlier than I’d planned.”

“Harry here even came to Malibu as soon as it happened,” Pepper said, placing her hand on Harry’s shoulder.

“Yeah, I remember you saying that our resident wizard was a bit of a worry-wart,” Tony replied.

“We were all worried,” Steve pointed out, drawing the conversation back to himself. “But there’s no reason we should have been.”

“Exactly! I can take care of myself. Besides, I had Rhodey to back me up,” Tony pointed out, waving a hand at the man seated beside him.

“Not until the end,” Steve replied with a shake of his head. “To start with, you shouldn’t have needed back up. Challenging the head of an evil organisation like that wasn’t smart. And it was even dumber giving him your home address.”

“See?” Pepper said.

“I’ve already apologised for that,” Tony pointed out.

“I’m not saying that the Mandarin didn’t need to be challenged or taken care of,” Steve continued, “but there were smarter ways of going about it. Not least of it is the fact that we’re supposed to be a team. And teammates back each other up. When you need backup, you call us in. That goes for all of us. We’re stronger together.”

“I assume that goes for you, too, Cap?” Tony asked.

“Absolutely,” Steve replied. “Back in the day, I had Peggy, Howard and the Howling Commandos to back me up. Now, though, I’ve got all of you. Just like I’ve got your backs whenever you need it.”

“Just try not to call on the other guy too much,” Bruce pleaded. “He tends to make a mess.”

The chuckle that that comment produced was cut off by a gasp.

“Bobbi?” Natasha asked. “Everything okay?”

Bobbi simply shook her head. “New York just went dark. The lights are out on the island and as far as I can see.”

“Jarvis?” Tony asked.

“Agent Morse is correct. The only location with any power is Avengers Tower,” Jarvis replied.

“That’d be because of the arc tech running through the place,” Tony preened. “What’s caused the black out?”

“Unknown at this stage,” Jarvis replied. “All that I can tell you is that it originated on the island of Manhattan, somewhere in the vicinity of Forty-second and Maddison Avenue.”

“The Baxter Building?” Clint asked.
Suddenly, Harry stiffened.

“Daredevil’s in trouble. His vitals are all over the place,” he stated even as he was grabbing up his cloak and swinging it over his shoulders.

“What? How do you know that?” Steve asked.

“I put a monitoring charm on him when we first met,” Harry replied even as he was creating a portkey out of an empty coke can. “It’s usually used for young children; allows parents to monitor the kid’s location and health.”

“Handy,” Natasha stated.

“You coming, Pete?” Harry asked, holding out the can.

“You couldn’t keep me away,” Peter replied after pulling his mask into place.

“Um, is this one of those times where we’re all supposed to be going?” Tony asked. “‘Cause I’m sure that’s what the Capsicle was just saying.”

“Bullseye’s nothing more than an irritant,” Harry stated. “Between the two of us and Daredevil, it shouldn’t be problem.”

Then, before another word could be spoken, Harry tapped his wand to the can and he and Peter disappeared in a swirl of colours.

ooo00ooo

Tracking the Devil across Hell’s Kitchen was child’s play to Bullseye. The only thing he hadn’t been able to work out was who the guy under the mask was when he was at home. Or where that home was. But he’d work it out. Assuming that he hadn’t killed the guy first, of course. Then again, unmasking him after he’d off-ed the guy would also work.

Right now, he was using his small, hand-held telescope to track the guy across the rooftop. Soon, very, very soon, the Devil would be in his sights again and ripe for the killing. Oh, sure, he could snipe the guy now, but where was the fun in that? No, it was much more satisfying to see the surprise in their eyes up close and personal right before that light left their eyes.

It was as he was watching the Devil run across the building two over from where he was lurking in the shadows that all of the lights went out. And not just in the city block, but in the entire city.

With a snarl, Bullseye snapped his telescope shut and put it away before pulling out his night vision goggles and donning them.

Surprisingly, once he found his target again, it was to find that the Devil hadn’t even altered his speed or trajectory due to the lack of sight.

“The guy’s good. Must know these rooftop’s like the back of his hand,” he murmured. “Well, let’s see just how good he is when he can’t see a thing.”

With a predatory grin, Bullseye emptied the small cylinder at his back and spread the handful of ball bearings across the rooftop.

ooo00ooo

It was the sounds that alerted Daredevil that something that happened. First, came the panicked
voices and then, when he focussed on them, it was the lack of sound that told him what had happened. There was no constant buzzing of electricity; obviously the power was out, although how far that extended he had no idea.

Lack of lights, though, was never going to be a problem for Daredevil, after all, he’d been living blind for the vast majority of his life. With that thought in mind, he continued running across the rooftops before unerringly using his billy club to attach to the wire that joined this building with the next and sliding down to the next roof.

As soon as he sensed the distance under him was right, he released one half of his club and dropped. His feet came down unexpectedly on a number of small, hard round objects. Objects that slid out from under him. And before Daredevil could regain his footing, he’d slipped and come crashing down hard on his back, the wind temporarily knocked from him.

And then his right thigh exploded with pain and he screamed.

Even as he moved to grasp at the handle of the knife protruding from his thigh, a second dagger came whizzing out of nowhere to slam into his left bicep, rocking him backwards and pulling a second scream from him.

The third knife he only just noticed in time, swaying just enough so that instead of burying itself in the meaty part of his left thigh, it only just clipped him; the cut, though, was still long and deep.

The fourth knife, the one aimed at his right arm, he managed to avoid completely.

“Well, well. Looky what we have here. The Devil of Hell’s Kitchen, all caught in the dark,” a voice mocked.

“Bullseye,” Daredevil growled as he tracked the man walking across the roof towards him.

“The one and only,” the assassin replied and it sounded like the man had given a mocking bow to accompany the acknowledgement.

“What do you want?” Daredevil asked, more to buy time than anything else.

“Why, simply to fulfil my contract,” Bullseye replied. “And that’s when the real fun’ll begin; getting back at those two who made me miss.”

Obviously, the man had plans to target Mage and Spider-man, plans that Daredevil had no intention of allowing him to complete.

“You’re going to have to go through me first,” Daredevil stated.

“With pleasure,” Bullseye smiled.

A swirl of the man’s long cloak was just enough warning for Daredevil to roll to the side, inadvertently causing the knife in his leg to be pushed deeper into him. But the roll wasn’t enough to avoid the attack. While three tings of sound indicated where the shurikens that had missed him had landed, the other two now imbedded in his back caused him to arch his back and scream in pain.

*Pop*

“Bullseye!”
The instant that Mage and Spider-man arrived on the rooftop, Mage groaned. There were no lights on, he couldn’t see a thing and hadn’t thought to cast a charm on his eyes allowing him to see in the dark.

But that didn’t mean that his ears weren’t working. The sound of Daredevil’s scream of pain told him that the hero had been injured, most likely severely.

“Bullseye!” Mage yelled, hoping to at the very least distract the man.

“More blind mice! How fun,” Bullseye replied, and Mage could hear the grin in his voice.

“Watch out!” Spider-man called.

Relying on the strength of dragonhide, Mage simply pulled his cloak tight around him and dropped his head. The feeling of half-a-dozen *thunks* impacting his cloak told him that the marksman had just attempted to skewer him with something sharp, without success.

Obviously, the man could see in the dark, an advantage that Mage wasn’t going to allow him to keep.

With a vicious swipe, Mage incanted the most powerful *lumos solem* that he could.

This time it was Bullseye’s turn to scream in pain, a scream that was accompanied by the man ripping off the night vision goggles that he’d been wearing and throwing them away. Mage watched warily as the man staggered away.

But it was only a feint. Bullseye suddenly snapped around, throwing a pair of knives blindly towards Mage. Mage, of course, didn’t waste a second, instantly banishing the knives right back where they’d come from.

A second scream was ripped from Bullseye, this time accompanied by him gripping his right wrist with his left hand, one of his daggers embedded to the hilt through the marksman’s hand.

And then the globs of webbing hit the man, sending him stumbling backwards, only to trip over the low wall that encircled the roof before plummeting over.

Both Mage and Spider-man raced to the edge, firing magic and webs after him. Mage’s spell hit Bullseye a fraction of a second before Spider-man’s line. The two opposing forces, one to catch him and yank him back, the other to stick him to the side of the building saved his life, but his left arm was badly dislocated and possibly broken in a couple of places as well.

In the light of Mage’s *lumos solem*, the two heroes could see that Bullseye was caught fast, with both arms dangling uselessly by his sides. The man, Mage could tell, would be extremely lucky to ever get full use of his hands again.

“You right to take care of him?” Mage asked his partner.

“Yeah, no worries,” Spider-man replied. “I’ll swing him by a police station before taking him to a hospital.”

“Good,” Mage nodded. “I’ll take our friend back to Avengers Tower. There’s a brand new medical ward there that needs to be broken in.”
Gwen stood behind the counter of the Den, shocked into inaction. This was a situation that she’d never encountered before, and it wasn’t even nine o’clock in the morning.

People … customers, knew the drill. You walk in, either take a seat and wait for a waitress or you come up to the counter, order, eat your meal, pay and go when you were ready. People did not simply walk in off of the street and start redecorating. With some type of fruit of all things.

As the young woman with dirty blonde hair seemed to almost waltz across to the fireplace and begin placing garlands of the weird orange fruit at seeming random places on the mantle, Gwen caught the looks from not only her fellow workers, but also some of the customers. Even David, the Den’s chief chef, had come to the kitchen door to watch the bizarre sight.

Finally, Gwen took a deep breath, straightened to her full height and marched around the counter and up to the woman.

“Can I help you?” Gwen asked, a touch more harshly than she’d intended.

The woman didn’t seem to catch Gwen’s irritation and simply ‘hmmed’ as she continued looking around the Den with those large blue-grey eyes of hers.

“Look, I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to ask you to leave,” Gwen stated. “You can’t just come in here and start putting … putting whatever those are all over the place.”

Gwen had trailed off slightly after getting a good look at the orange fruit. They were like nothing that she’d ever seen before – they were sort of like a cherry, she supposed, only orange.

“Dirigible plums,” the woman supplied, finally looking at her. “And it’s okay, Harry won’t mind. They’ll help keep the nargles away.”

This last was said in a whisper as she leaned in towards Gwen, a whisper that still carried throughout the room.

“Wait,” Gwen said, latching on to the only part that had made any sense. “You know Harry?”

“Of course. Did you think that I would ward against nargles for just anyone?” she replied.

Once again, her words made absolutely no sense. What in the world was a nargle? This woman was obviously mentally unstable. But, now that Gwen was listening, she caught the British accent that the woman spoke in.

“You knew Harry from back in England,” Gwen said slowly.

The woman nodded before drifting to the closest table and beginning to lay a wreath of d…d… plums around the menu card.

“We’ve been friends for years. We went to school together, you see. He was also one of my best teachers,” the woman replied.

And then it clicked. School. Harry hadn’t told her much about his other life – Peter was the one he talked to most about that sort of thing – but Gwen knew enough to piece one and one together. This woman wasn’t making sense because she was talking about magic things.

Knowing that, Gwen made a decision.
“How about we find you a seat and I’ll bring you something to drink? What sort of tea would you like?” Gwen asked, steering the woman towards an unoccupied out-of-the-way table.

“That sounds lovely. Do you have some Earl Grey tea?” the woman asked.

Gwen gave an inward sigh of relief at the normal response. “Of course.”

“Wonderful. It’s always nice to have something from home when you’re away. I’m Luna, by the way, Luna Lovegood,” the woman introduced herself.

“Nice to meet you, Luna. I’m Gwen,” she smiled. “I’ll be right back with your tea.”

Gwen left the woman happily arranging more of the strange fruit on the table in front of her. Her eyes flicked to each of the other garlands around the room. For now, she’d leave them alone. And if they were to prevent … nargles – whatever those magical creatures were or did – away from the Den, then that could only be a good thing, right?
The Babel of New York

The slightest noise, a change in breathing, perhaps, roused Harry from his semi-sleep. Using the arms on the chair, he pushed himself up straighter, his eyes instantly focussed in on the man in the bed. Not seeing any change, Harry adjusted his position some more to something that was a little more comfortable before scrubbing his face with his hands and running his fingers through his hair. That, he knew, would make his hair even messier than usual, but really, who would be able to tell?

Matt, the one that he was keeping watch over, was lying on a mattress created using some kind of gel that moulded to his body. Supposedly, it was designed for people with serious wounds, allowing their bodies to be able to relax without causing undue pressure on any wounds and aggravating them.

And wounds there were. Matt had sustained deep cuts on both legs, in one arm and two deep puncture wounds in his back. He’d lost a lot of blood, a situation that only Harry’s blood replenishing potion and the quick work of Doctor Cho and her team of doctors and nurses had been able to fix.

Harry, still dressed as Mage, had remained in the corner of the operating room, his arms crossed over his chest as he watched over the surgery to save the man’s life – despite the protests of said doctors and nurses. They were even less impressed by the fact that they were unable to remove Matt’s mask, both because Harry wouldn’t allow it and because of the sticking charm that he’d added to it to ensure that his wishes were followed if he was called away.

Now, after a night-long vigil, Matt was seeming to respond to the treatment, at least according to the change in his breathing and to the blips and beeps that the instruments were making.

“Who’s there?”

Harry startled out of his chair at Matt’s growl, a growl that he was able to detect a slight panic in.

“It’s Harry, Harry Potter,” he said as he approached the bed. “You’re safe. You’re in the medical ward of Avenger’s Tower.”

Matt quickly lifted his right arm, the only appendage not injured in the fight against Bullseye, and sighed loudly when his hand encountered his mask still in place.

“Don’t worry, I wouldn’t let them take that off you,” Harry reassured him.

Matt seemed to pause, his hand half-lowered before his head turned slightly towards where Harry was standing.

“You know who I am, don’t you, Harry? Mage,” he stated more than asked.

“I do,” Harry smiled.

“Who’ve you told?” the growl was back, this time with a ‘resigned’ flavour.

“No one,” Harry reassured the man. “You’ve known my identity ever since you defended me after the Chitauri battle to my fellow witches and wizards, never once telling anyone, not even hinting at it to Spider-man. Keeping your secret in return was the least that I could do.”

Matt nodded. “How’d you find out?”
“The first time that Spider-man and I met you as Daredevil I placed a monitoring spell on you, strictly in case you ever got into too much trouble because of Bullseye,” Harry added quickly. “That charm allowed me to know your health as well as your location. I followed it once to check that it was working properly and it led me straight to your business.”

“I’m guessing that charm was what enabled you and Spider-man to get to me … last night? … when I encountered Bullseye?”

“Yeah, it was,” Harry replied.

“In that case, as much as I don’t like the idea of that bit of magic, thank you,” Matt said. “I don’t think I want to think about how that would have turned out if you two hadn’t shown up when you did.”

“It’s what friends, allies, do for each other,” Harry replied.

“What happened to Bullseye?” Matt asked after a small pause.

“Like you, he needed a hospital, but he’s under heavy guard awaiting trial,” Harry summarised.

“You’re letting cops guard him?” Matt asked and for a second it seemed that he was about to attempt to get out of bed before he gave up, not being able to move for the gel. “They won’t last an hour with what he’s capable of!”

“Hey, easy,” Harry said, laying a hand on the crime-fighter’s shoulder. “He can’t hurt anyone. He caught one of his knives through one hand and the other arm was dislocated and broken in two places when he was caught after falling off the roof.”


“Believe me, I would have preferred to let him fall,” Harry spat, “but I couldn’t. He only went over the edge because of Spider-man’s web-balls …”

“And you couldn’t let the kid have a death on his conscience,” Matt finished for him.

“How’d you know he was just a kid?” Harry asked.

Matt shrugged with his one good shoulder. “His voice mostly. The timbre and speech patterns place him in his late teens. Wouldn’t bet against him still being in High School. You know he’s going to have to deal with causing a death sometime, right?”

“He already is,” Harry replied. “Well, sort of. A relative was killed due to his inaction. I think our talks have gotten him past it, but I didn’t want to have him have to deal with something else like it so close after getting past the first one.”

“Fair enough,” Matt replied.

Then, after a couple of minutes of silence, Matt continued.

“No one else here knows who I am under this mask?”

“No,” Harry reassured him. “I wouldn’t even let the doctors take it off when they patched you up. That’s also why I’m being careful with how we’re talking now – Jarvis monitors every part of the building and he is Tony’s AI. You might want to consider changing that though. The Avengers are good people. They’ll keep your secret. And support you if and when you need it.”
Matt nodded slowly.

“You might be right. And having partners isn’t as bad as I thought it would be.”

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“Harry?” Bruce asked, being the first to notice the wizard entering the lounge where the rest of the Avengers were relaxing.

Harry nodded at the man sitting back on the couch, appearing for all the world as though he were perfectly relaxed, not that he was fooling Harry – he could see the slight lines around Bruce’s eyes, not unlike Remus used to have just before and after the full moon. Bruce’d told him how well the calming draught worked at suppressing the Hulk, and also that he’d rather not have to rely on it too much, in fear of forgetting how to manage the ‘other guy’ when he didn’t have the potion on hand.

Quickly, Harry’s eyes sought out the rest of the team – Clint playing some sort of game on the big screen; Natasha behind the bar; Steve turning from looking out the great glass windows; and Tony and Peter who had their heads together over some sort of hologram program imbedded in the table.

“He’s awake. And asking for all of you,” Harry stated.

“Um, should I put my suit on?” Peter asked, his hand half-raised. “Only, you guys are the only ones who know that I’m Spider-man. Well, you and Gwen. But she’s not here at the moment.”

Harry’s lips twitched into an ironic smile. “Don’t worry, Pete. Daredevil won’t be able to tell whether you’re wearing your suit or not.”

Peter gave him a dubious look before eventually giving a jerky nod. Even still, Harry noted that the youngest of them brought up the rear, seemingly deliberately staying behind Steve.

Finally, when they’d all filed into the room and shuffled about, Harry laid a hand on Matt’s shoulder.

“Jarvis, can you seal this room? Avengers only until we say otherwise,” Harry instructed.

“Of course, Sir,” Jarvis replied.

A slight clicking sound signalled the lock engaging in the door and the light altered slightly as the windows increased their reflective capacity, blocking any potential spies from seeing in.

“We’re all here, Daredevil,” Harry said.

“I’d like to start by thanking you for having me here and fixing me up,” Matt said. “And also Harry and Spider-man for coming after me and saving my butt.”

“You know who Harry is?” Peter interjected.

“Of course,” Matt smiled wryly. “I’ve known for months.”

Then, using his good hand, he reached up and pulled his mask off.

“Hey! I know you! You’re that lawyer guy who did the legal mumbo-jumbo that got Harry off the hook with the other witches and wizards after the Battle of New York,” Tony stated.

“Matt Murdock,” Matt confirmed.

“It’s nice to see you again, Mister Murdock,” Steve said. “And especially that you’re alright.”
“You could have said that you were that vigilante guy,” Clint stated.

“You do know that S.H.I.E.L.D.’s been trying to track you for a while now?” Natasha asked.

“I know. And I’d prefer to keep my identity out of their databanks. Is that going to be a problem?” Matt asked, his voice dropping to just shy of his usual growl.

“This is Avengers Tower. What happens in here, stays in here,” Steve assured him. “Some of us may work for S.H.I.E.L.D., but that doesn’t mean that they’re entitled to know everything about us or our allies.”

“Thank you,” Matt replied.

“You’re supposed to be blind, right?” Tony asked, “cause I’ve seen some of the things that ‘Daredevil’ can do and I never even considered that he couldn’t see. So, nope, not believing that he’s blind with all his acrobatic stuff he does across rooftops. Or you, for that matter!”

“I can assure you that I am,” Matt replied. “Just really well trained.”

“And you’re a lawyer, too, just like my cousin, Jennifer,” Bruce stated. “You know, that could come in handy, especially if we, er … break the city again.”

“Hey, I’ll take any business you’re happy to throw my way,” Matt smiled. “But don’t feel you have to go out of your way to make it.”

“So, you know who we all are?” Peter asked nervously.

“Not all,” Matt replied. “I’ve met everyone here in costume and all but you out of it.”

Harry looked at Peter as did the rest of the Avengers.

“Alright, alright,” Peter said, caving to the combined gazes. “We’ve worked together and I know who you are, so I guess it’s only fair if you know who I am, too. Just, just don’t spread it around, okay?”

“You have my word,” Matt promised.

“Then, I’m … I’m Peter Parker.”

“Nice to meet you, Peter Parker,” Matt said.

Harry wasn’t the only one grinning as the two shook hands.

“You’ve got your own place, right? ’Cause I just redesigned the Tower and I’m running out of rooms for everyone,” Tony complained.

“Yes, I have my own place,” Matt assured Tony as the others laughed.

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“Mister Potter? There is a call you for from Miss Stacy,” Jarvis announced.

“Gwen?” Harry asked.

His eyes met Peter’s as the younger guy gave a shrug, before they flicked to the clock on the wall. Nine-thirty. That meant that the Den had been open for a couple of hours. And that’s where Gwen
should be, running the place. Obviously, something had happened. Harry just hoped that it wasn’t too bad.

“You can use the phone over there,” Tony said, waving a hand in the direction of the bar.

“Thanks,” Harry said before quickly crossing the room.

“Hello? Gwen?” Harry said after picking up the receiver.

“Harry. Thank goodness. I was hoping that you were there,” Gwen said in a rush.

“Is something wrong?” Harry asked.


“How so?” Harry asked.

“A strange woman turned up in the Den this morning and started putting bunches of some strange orange fruit all over the place. Called them dir…dir, um, some sort of plums, anyway,” she began.

Harry’s eyes widened. “Not, dirigible plums, by any chance?”

“Yeah, that’s them,” Gwen replied.

“She wouldn’t happen to have blonde hair and blue eyes, would she?” Harry asked, hope building in his chest.

“As it happens, she does,” Gwen replied and Harry could hear the smile in his voice.

“Luna,” Harry breathed.

“You do know her!” Gwen said happily.

“Is she still there?” Harry asked eagerly.

“Yes. I’ve given her some tea and cake,” Gwen reported.

“I’ll be right there,” Harry replied. “Thanks, Gwen.”

As soon as he’s put the phone down, Harry spun around, a huge grin on his face.

“Sorry, everyone, I’ve got to go,” he said.

Then, before anyone could reply, Harry spun on the spot and disapparated with a near-silent pop.

Harry barely had time to close the door leading to the stairs from his apartment in the main part of the Den and to begin looking around before a lithe body with dirty-blonde hair streaming behind her slammed into him, engulfing him in a hug.

“Hello, Harry Potter,” Luna said into his ear.

“Hello, Luna Lovegood,” Harry returned, even as his arms tightened around her.

Finally, the two separated and Harry smiled down at one of his oldest friends. Her face had matured somewhat, but she was still the same Luna, radish earrings and all.
“It’s great to see you, Luna,” he said.

“You as well, Harry,” she replied, her large, blue eyes searching his face. “Your wandering has been good for you; you are much more relaxed than I have ever seen you.”

“If only I’d taken you up on your offers to come searching for crumple-horned snorkacks, I could have turned out like this much earlier.”

“Hmm,” she hummed, but there was a note of scepticism in her voice.

Spotting a lone tea cup and the remains of a slice of cake at a nearby table, Harry slipped an arm around Luna’s waist and guided her back towards her table.

“How long have you been in New York?” he asked after they were seated. “What do you think of the city?”

“I arrived today,” she replied, “so I haven’t had a chance to see much yet.” Luna leant forwards over the table. “Are there any nargles here?”

Harry’s face nearly split into a grin. He’d missed his eccentric friend.

“Not that I know of; at least, I haven’t seen any yet,” he replied.

“Unsurprising,” she said. “After all, they do much prefer colder climates.”

“Have you managed to find any of your creatures since I last saw you, Luna?” Harry asked.

Luna’s face fell momentarily. “No, they remain as elusive as ever. At least the trips themselves always make up for it. There’s so much to see in the world and so many wonderful creatures, even if others discovered them first.”

Harry nodded his understanding. “That’s what I loved the most about travelling the world – seeing all of the amazing landscapes and creatures and encountering the different cultures of the world, both normal and … special.”

Luna’s tiny nod told him that she understood what he was saying.

“Speaking of,” Harry continued before lightly touching the garland of orange fruit that encircled the menu. “These do not generally like lying around like this.”

“You’re so silly, Harry,” Luna giggled. “I do know the laws, you know. And dirigible plums don’t lose their special properties because of the charms that I placed to ensure that they stay grounded.”

Harry smiled and reached across to pat Luna on the arm. “Glad to hear it; wouldn’t want to be infested with wrackspurts now, would I?”

“It’s always best to be careful,” Luna agreed. “Not that I’ve seen any around here; your travels, or perhaps something here has completely removed the ones that used to like living in your hair.”

“How long can you stay?” he asked, changing the topic.

“Not long, I’m afraid,” Luna replied. “I’m supposed to be on my way home after my latest expedition in Canada to write an article for the Quibbler. But being so close, I couldn’t resist at least stopping in for a few days to say ‘hello’.”

“I’m glad you did, Luna; I’ve missed you,” Harry said. “You’ll stay with me, of course.”
“Are you sure that you have the room, Harry? I wouldn’t want to impose,” she replied.

“You could never do that,” Harry assured her. “And I’ve got the room. Well, at least, you can have my bed and I’ll sleep on the couch – I’ve sort of rented out my spare room.”

“Yes, Hermione told me of the girl that you found and decided to help. She sounded most exasperated, you know,” Luna told him conspirically. “Hermione is intent on eventually convincing you to move back to England and your side projects seem to be getting in the way of her plans.”

Harry couldn’t help but grin while shaking his head at the same time.

“Hermione knows how I feel about the idea of even visiting England, let alone moving there,” he said.

“I know, but she has always been one to cling to her hopes and dreams, no matter how remote they are of coming true. Usually it’s quite an admirable trait, but there are times when it is quite vexing.”

“Come on, I’ll show you up to my apartment and then you can tell me more about your trips without the wrong ears hearing what they shouldn’t,” Harry said.

“As long as you tell me about your adventures in return,” she replied.

“Deal,” Harry said as they both rose from the table.

When Harry entered his apartment with Luna, it was to find Doreen lounging in front of the TV watching some kind of cartoon. It wasn’t until he’d taken a second look at it that he realised what it was – an animation featuring the Avengers. Currently, his cartoon counterpart was battling some kind of alien monster, sending different coloured beams of light at it before sending the four armed, red-skinned creature flying across the screen.

Closing his eyes, Harry counted to ten while simultaneously making a mental note to rant to Tony about it. Not that that was likely to do much good. The man simply loved to be the centre of attention and to be immortalised like that was probably a dream come true.

Clearing his throat had the desired effect, although Luna’s disappointed ‘ahh’, was not what he’d been expecting when Doreen sat up and instantly snapped the cartoon off, most likely because she felt that it was too babyish for a teen to be caught watching.

Deciding to ignore the whole situation, Harry settled for introductions.

“Luna, this is Doreen Green,” Harry said, gesturing to the teen girl now standing in front of the couch. “She ‘rents’ my spare room and also works in the Den, when she’s not at school.

“Doreen, this is my friend from England, Luna Lovegood. She’s visiting for a couple of days and will be staying with us.”

A great smile blossomed on Doreen’s face as she bounced across to shake hands with Luna.

“Hi! It’s great to meet you. I’m guessing that you’ve known Harry for a while?” she said in one great rush.

Luna, for her part, cocked her head quizzically towards the girl, her large blue eyes scanning her up and down before she turned to Harry.
“You didn’t say that she was a w…” Luna began before Harry’s eyes rounded and he practically slammed his hand over her mouth.

Seeing the aghast expression on Doreen’s face, Harry blurted the first thing that he could think of.

“Don’t mind Luna, she often has no filter between her brain and her mouth. Um, just excuse us a minute, I need to … to …”

In the end, he faltered and with a shrug practically dragged Luna out of the room, down the hallway and to his room where he closed the door and raised a silencing charm. It was then that Luna decided to lick his hand, making him shudder and quickly remove it from her mouth and wipe it down the legs of his jeans.

“Now, why did you do that, Harry?” Luna asked intently. “I was only going to point out that she’s magical, just like us.”

“That’s just it, Luna, she’s not,” Harry replied before continuing quickly. “That’s not to say that she’d not different, because she is. Just that I’m not sure how and I’m positive that she’s trying to keep it a secret.”

“Well, that’s silly. We’re all different in some way. The world would be rather boring if everyone was exactly the same,” Luna pointed out.

“I know, Luna,” Harry replied. “But we both know what it’s like to be made fun of and hurt for being different and I’m pretty sure that Doreen’s suffered in the past because of her differences. I’m hoping that she’ll eventually open up if I can show that I’m trustworthy and that I won’t hurt her or make fun of her.”

“That’s very kind of you, Harry,” Luna smiled, patting him on the arm.

“Um, Luna? How’d you know? That she’s different, I mean?” Harry asked.

“I’m not sure,” Luna replied, her eyes going slightly out of focus. “Doreen has a touch of an animal about her. I was wondering if she’d been trying to become an Animagus and something had gone wrong?”

“Well, she’s not a witch, so that can’t be it,” Harry said. “Let’s just try to act normally and see what happens.”

Luna giggled at Harry’s suggestion. “After your antics a few minutes ago, I’m not certain that normal is possible.”

Harry sighed. He’d missed Luna. But there were definitely times that he didn’t miss the obvious statements that she was prone to make, highlighting just how idiotic he could be every now and again.

Dinner the night before and even the evening afterwards had been incredibly awkward.

Doreen kept giving both Harry and Luna the oddest looks, as though she were both worried for their sanity and waiting for either Luna to say something strange or for Harry to try to stop her. Harry, of course, did his very best to avoid looking at Doreen very much at all, or else making sure to change the topic away from anything that could even remotely set Luna off onto one of her creature stories. Luna simply found the whole thing amusing and spent the night grinning and giggling the whole
The morning hadn’t been much better. What didn’t help was that Doreen had that particular day off work. And then she’d gone and said that she was going to go to Central Park, the only real green area in the city, and there was no way that Luna was going to miss that, so promptly invited herself along.

Of course, that meant that Harry had to go, too.

“Do you come here often?” Luna asked Doreen as the three wandered one of the less frequented paths.

Doreen nodded eagerly and quickly took a big lick of her mango ice-cream that they’d gotten from the vendor before answering.

“Every chance I get,” she finally replied. “Reminds me of back home. And Monkey Joe loves it here.”

Their three heads automatically swivelled to regard the squirrel who was currently scampering along amongst the trees a little distance in from the path. No matter where they went, Monkey Joe did an excellent job of keeping pace with them, sometimes on the ground like now, or more often than not, by scampering from branch to branch and tree to tree.

“You little friend is incredibly loyal,” Luna remarked.

As one would expect, the instant that Luna had been introduced to the squirrel, she’d been captivated. She’d even made squirrel-like noises at Monkey Joe the night before, which had caused the squirrel to chitter back at her and for Doreen to roll around the floor of the lounge laughing so much she’d had to hold her stomach.

The three of them watching Monkey Joe caused him to pause in his run along the ground between a pair of trees and to look back at them.

That pause and distraction, though, was exactly what the predator needed.

The brown-coloured snake wasn’t large; indeed, Monkey Joe was actually larger, but that didn’t seem to be a deterrent to the snake. As soon as the squirrel was distracted, it slithered from its hiding place and poised before darting its head forward, its mouth open and fangs ready.

- Stop! Harry yelled, one hand extended as though he could physically restrain the snake even from that distance.

At the same time, Doreen had taken a couple of quick steps forward as she, too, yelled out.

“Look out! Behind you!”

At Harry’s command, the snake froze mid-strike before swivelling its head to look at him.

- Speaker? the snake asked in confusion.
- Leave the squirrel. It’s a friend, he commanded.
- As you wish, Speaker, the snake replied before dropping to its belly and turning about to slither back into its hidey-hole.

“I think it’s okay, Monkey Joe. I think that Harry told the snake to leave you alone,” Doreen told a still-shivering Monkey Joe as he scampered across the grass and up her body to perch on top of her
Finally, with the danger past, Harry and Doreen turned to stare at each other.

“You speak squirrel?” Harry asked.

“You can talk to snakes?” Doreen asked at the same time.

“As fascinating as your abilities are, I think that we should have this discussion somewhere a little more private,” Luna commented.

Without taking their eyes off of each other, both Harry and Doreen gave simultaneous nods of agreement.
Call The Exterminators, We've Got Squirrels!

Luna Lovegood sighed. What was potentially going to be an incredibly interesting conversation had stagnated at the ‘if I stare at you long enough, you’ll eventually cave and share all of your secrets first’ stage. The fact that the two involved were one of her oldest friends, Harry Potter, and a potential new friend, Doreen Green, made the silence even harder to bear.

“Who wants to go first?” she asked lightly, her head swivelling between the two.

Unfortunately, her attempt at starting the conversation, fell flat.

Silence continued to reign, just as it had ever since the two had found out that they had the ability to talk to an animal, albeit animals of different species. Really, Luna was starting to get most annoyed at Harry. Yes, he had a bit of stubborn streak, but she was certain that, after spending so many years being kept in the dark from vital information, that he’d have been able to avoid picking up that particular bad habit.

After another five minutes of the pair sitting on separate chairs in Harry’s apartment staring at each other, Luna was getting tempted to hex the truth out of the two of them. Unfortunately, doing so would only get the pair focussed on her and she’d be the one explaining magic instead of Harry doing so. And that wouldn’t be any fun whatsoever.

“Harry James Potter,” Luna began and promptly had to stifle a giggle at how ‘Hermione-ish’ she sounded. “You’re supposed to be the adult here. Therefore, you start.”

Finally, Harry tore his gaze from the teenager across from him to scowl at Luna. But that, of course, only lasted a few seconds. For some reason, Harry never could stay angry at her. Luna wasn’t quite sure why, but it made her all fuzzy and warm inside and always made her smile.

After running his hand through his hair, Harry sighed.

“I can speak to snakes,” he began.

It wasn’t much, but it was a start. Luna nodded encouragingly at him and settled back more comfortably into her chair to enjoy the show.

“It’s called parseltongue,” he continued. “It’s pretty rare. Only a handful of people worldwide have had the ability in the past century, at least that I know of.”

“I can talk to squirrels,” Doreen admitted after a half-minute of silence where Harry was looking at her expectantly. “I don’t know if it’s got a proper name, but I call it ‘squirrelese’.”

Harry nodded. “Makes sense. So, is it just squirrels or can you talk to other animals as well?”

“Just squirrels. Well, animals in the squirrel family, I think. I talked to a chipmunk once, but he sounded like he had a really thick accent. And I’ve never met any marmots or prairie dogs, so I don’t know about them. What about you? Is it just snakes in general, or all reptiles?”

“Just snakes, I think,” Harry said, before looking thoughtful. “Although, now that I think about it, it might include some kinds of lizards.”

“What do you say that, Harry?” Luna asked interestedly.
“When I was in Indonesia a couple of years ago, I was out in a jungle on one of the islands visiting a local village when I thought that I heard someone talking but I couldn’t see anyone else around. Not long after, there was a komodo dragon that crossed the path, so I guess that’s what it was.”

“Dragon?” Luna asked, eagerly sitting forwards.

Harry gave her a lop-sided grin. “Not a real dragon, like the ones from the TriWiz; komodos are really just a huge lizard.”

“Um, real dragon?” Doreen asked, her eyes bugging out. “Are you trying to tell me that dragons are real?”

Luna gave a soft laugh and settled back into her chair, ignoring the annoyed look that Harry shot her.

“Yes, dragons are real. And unicorns and griffins and thunderbirds and a whole host of other magical creatures as well,” Harry admitted. “They’re all simply kept hidden by magic.”

Doreen’s eyes flicked between the two before narrowing.

“If you know that they’re real …” she began slowly, before her eyes widened and she finished in a rush. “You’re magical! That’s how you can speak to snakes!”

“I am,” Harry admitted. “You know, telling you this is hard for me. And quite illegal. If anyone from the magical world ever found out that you knew all of this, they’d come and take these memories away and I’d be in a whole heap of trouble that’d probably land me in a jail for the rest of my life.”

“Then why are you telling me?” Doreen asked. “Not that I’m going to tell anyone. ’Cause I won’t. I swear I won’t tell another person. Ever.”

She solemnly placed one hand over her heart to emphasise her promise.

“I know you won’t, Doreen,” Harry replied. “I know how good you are at keeping secrets, at least the important ones.”

Once again, her eyes rounded before narrowing.

“You know I’m different, that I’m not a normal person. Hey! Is that why I’m different? Am I magic, too?” she asked eagerly.

Harry shook his head. “No, you’re not. You’re … something else.”

“Damn. It would have been cool to be magic, to find out where I fit in,” she sighed.

“What do you mean, Doreen?” Luna asked, her head cocked quizzically.

“I’ve always been … different. At first, my parents thought that I might be a mutant. Um, do you know about them?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Harry replied before noticing Luna’s puzzled expression. “Bruce, a friend of mine, explained it all to me a while back. Apparently, there are actually four different ‘types’ of people on the planet. There’s the normals, who we call ‘muggles’; the magicals; the mutants, those born with an extra special gene called the x-gene in their DNA; and lastly, the mutates, those whose bodies have been changed in some extraordinary, often inexplicable way.”

“Yep, that’s me, a mutate,” Doreen said. “I like the extraordinary bit, though. Makes it sound kinda cool.”
“In what way are you different, Doreen?” Luna asked.

“How much do you already know?” Doreen asked.

Harry shook his head. “Not a lot. Apart from the squirrel-speaking thing. I know that you can jump really high. And I’m pretty sure that you’re strong and that you’ve got some amazing reflexes.”

“How’d you work out?” she asked.

“I, uh, I saw you one night jumping from the ally up to your bedroom window,” Harry admitted. “I gave you a couple of little tests the next morning – asked you to move a heavy box; nearly dropped a mug, which you caught. I can promise you that I haven’t told a soul; not even Luna here or Gwen or anyone.”

“So dumb luck, huh?” Doreen sighed. “Guess I should be glad that it was only you.”

For a second, Luna could have sworn that Harry had a guilty look on his face, but it was gone much too quickly to be sure. That didn’t mean that Luna had no plans to question her friend about that later, though.

“Doreen’s definitely not a witch then?” Luna asked disappointedly, crossing her arms. “Phooey. I was sure that she’d used accidental magic to become an Animagus squirrel and had gotten stuck half-way.”

“I have no idea what you just said,” Doreen admitted, staring at the woman.

“When magical children are still developing their gifts, their magic can do strange things,” Harry explained. “An Animagus is a witch or wizard that can magically change themselves into an animal – that’s another rare-ish piece of magic. Once they turn eleven, they get their first wand and go to magic school to learn to control their magic.”

“Wow! Witches and wizards and magic,” Doreen said, shaking her head. “Who’d a thought that that was real. Hang on! Magic. Magic. Like … like Mage. That’s it, isn’t it? You! You’re Mage! Please, please, please tell me that’s true.”

Harry’s head dropped, but not before he saw the wide smile on Luna’s face.

“I was hoping to build up to it a little more. But, yeah. I’m Mage,” Harry admitted.

For a few seconds, there was dead silence as Doreen sat there, her jaw dropped open as she stared at the guy she’d been living with for the past weeks. Then, without warning, she let out a loud, long, piercing scream of excitement. Instantly, she was up, bouncing around the room. Her erratic movements sent Monkey Joe scurrying from the floor where he’d been dumped from her lap up the closest curtain to perch on the rail and begin chittering angrily down at her.

Barely pausing in her bouncing, Doreen chittered back at the squirrel, the other two guessing that she was telling her friend what she’d just found out. Obviously, she got the point across because Monkey Joe shifted position until he was nearly right above Harry and began staring down at him.

Finally, Doreen dropped back into her seat, but even then, she didn’t quite stop her bouncing.

“You’re him! Mage! One of the Avengers. And I’ve been living with you! How could I not realise that? You helped stop the invasion from aliens! And you’ve been flying around the city on your magic broom! Bruce! You said Bruce before. That’s Bruce Banner isn’t it? The Hulk! And you’ve been on the phone with Tony Stark. Iron Man! The one and only. You can introduce me to the
Avengers, can’t you? Please? I’ll do anything! Anything! It’s why I came to New York in the first place,” Doreen said, staring intently at Harry the whole time.

Harry, for his part, simply stared back, wondering how the girl was still conscious. He was sure that she’d said that entire speech in one breath.

“You came to New York to meet Harry and the Avengers?” Luna asked.

“Well, Iron Man and the Avengers,” Doreen said sheepishly. “But really, I’ve wanted to meet Iron Man ever since he became a hero and started doing all those amazing things and helping people and everything. And then after I saw the Battle of New York with all of the Avengers, well, I knew that I could have helped if I’d been there. So, I thought that if I came here and met Iron Man and the rest of them and showed them what I could do, well …”

“But you’re still in school,” Harry protested.

“And were you any different, Harry Potter?” Luna asked. “I seem to remember you leading a group of students on a rescue mission when you were Doreen’s age. Not to mention winning a war for us when you were not much older.”

“But that was different!” Harry protested.

“Perhaps to some extent, but it all boiled down to you wanting to help others. I believe Hermione calls it your ‘saving people thing’?” Luna countered.

Harry scowled at her momentarily before deciding that he wasn’t going to win that argument.

“What exactly is it that you can do?” Harry hedged.

“Well, you know that I can talk to squirrels, which can be dead useful, especially if I need a little extra help,” Doreen began. “And you know that I can jump really high and that I’m strong and have good reflexes. I’m also really fast, have excellent hand-eye coordination and great agility. I can heal quicker than normal people. And then there’s my physical differences.”

To demonstrate this point, she firstly held out both hands above the coffee table. Harry and Luna obliged by leaning in. Once they had done so, she flexed her fingers and small claws extended from each finger.

“I can climb just about anything, just like a squirrel,” she said. “I’ve got those claws on my toes as well. There’s also this,” she said as she clenched her fists making the knuckle spike extend from its sheath under her skin on each hand.

Harry whistled at the sight of them.

“That’s amazing! Looks incredibly sharp, too,” he said.

“Oh, it is,” Doreen grinned. “Can cut through any wood with ease. And lastly, there’s … my tail.”

Harry and Luna blinked confusedly at each other as Doreen stood up and put her hands behind her, fishing her three-foot long bushy tail out from her pants and turning around for them to see.

“This is why my parents thought that I might be a mutant,” she said. “I was born with it. Great for balance, especially when I’m climbing or jumping.”

“I imagine it would be,” Luna said with a smile as she reached out and began stroking the soft fur.
“So, do I have what it takes? Can I be an Avenger, too?” Doreen asked eagerly, her eyes shining.

“I don’t think it’s quite that easy,” Harry said slowly. “For one, we’d have to evaluate you, test you, to see exactly what you can do. For another, like I said, you’re still in school and that’d have to come first.”

“Oh. Maybe … maybe I could be like a … a reserve?” Doreen asked, her excitement growing with the idea. “You know, when the danger’s too big that you need extra help than just the seven of you – well, six of you, really now that Thor’s gone back to Asgard – you can call me in to help out.”

Harry’s eyes sought out Luna, desperately asking for help in how to curb the girl’s excitement.

“I would imagine that you’d need to do an interview,” Luna stated, “to show your capabilities. After all, it wouldn’t do for you to be asked to help and you get there and you don’t have the right skills. What if they need someone to fly one of their planes for example.”

“Quinjet,” Harry corrected

“You’re saying that I need extra training? To get a bigger, better skillset? To be able to do more stuff so that I can help more?” Doreen asked.

“Exactly,” Harry replied. “And school will be a big part of that.”

“Okay, I guess I can understand that,” Doreen said. “How soon can I meet the rest of the Avengers and show them what I can do?”

Harry sighed. “I’ll ring Tony later this afternoon and see what I can arrange.”

Once again, Doreen squealed with joy and began chittering with Monkey Joe.

Luna, meanwhile, turned to Harry. “The good part about Doreen knowing now that you’re a wizard is that you won’t have to sleep on the couch any more.

Harry cocked an eyebrow at her, encouraging her to explain that statement.

“You can simply transfigure it into a bed,” Luna said.

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“Well, it is unsurprising that your animagus form would have wings,” Luna stated as she circled the half-transformed man before her.

It really was an intriguing look for Harry, being half-man and half-bird – kind of like a hippogryph or griffin really. Except both of those creatures had the front half being the part that was bird, unlike Harry who’d decided to keep his human head and change the rest of him to bird-form. And then there was the size: Harry seemed to have yet to work out how to alter from human size down to the appropriate size for his feathered form.

“If this is your proper size,” she supposed, “it might be easier to guess what you’re supposed to be. Ostriches and emus are quite large birds, but neither have wings that let them fly, unlike the ones that you seem equipped with. They also have long legs and you don’t. No. I don’t think that you’re one of them. It’d be nice if you were a diricawl or a fwooper, they’re both magical and that could be fun. Well, not the fwooper, perhaps – their cries can drive a person insane and that wouldn’t be any good at all.”
“I think I’m more likely to be some kind of bird of prey,” Harry commented, a surprising ability considering that his neck was half bird-like and half-human (obviously, his voice box was in the half-human part).

“Yes, I suppose so; your talons do lend one to that conclusion,” Luna sighed in agreement. “That’s not as much fun, though.”

“It could be,” Harry grinned and she knew that he was imagining flying through the air, much like he did with his broom, only more so.

Finally, after circling him for the fourth time, Luna signalled for him to transform back.

“I don’t think that I will be of any use to you in working out how to complete your transformation,” Luna said sadly.

“That’s okay, Luna; thanks for taking a look,” Harry said, giving the girl’s upper arm a rub.

Luna cocked her head at him. “I think, Harry Potter, that you already know what you have to do.”

After dropping his head, Harry nodded.

“I need to talk to Minerva,” he stated. “She’s a Transfiguration Master, not to mention an Animagus herself.”

Luna waited in silence for Harry to finish his inner turmoil.

“I’m going to have to go back to Hogwarts, aren’t I?” he half-asked, half-stated.

“England isn’t so bad, Harry,” Luna stated, completing the thought out-loud for her friend. “And you have been gone a long time; perhaps their interest in you has died off.”

“Do you really believe that, Luna?” Harry asked sceptically.

Unfortunately, Luna could no more lie to Harry than she could to herself.

“It’s possible, but doubtful,” she said. “You will always be the Boy-Who-Lived and the Man-Who-Conquered no matter how long you have been away. The wizarding world has a long memory, after all, and your absence may have just increased their fervour to know where their hero has been all this time. What you must ask yourself is whether or not your need to complete your Animagus transformation is greater than the discomfort that you may experience during your return to England.”

“It is,” Harry whispered before continuing his reasoning in a louder voice. “Both my Dad and Sirius were animagi; it’s something that I’ve always wanted to do to be like them. And this could be something that saves my life one day, considering the life that I’ve chosen.”

“It sounds to me that your decision is made,” Luna stated.

“You’re right. It is. And I guess that it’ll be good to see my other friends again – Hermione, Neville, some of the DA, even the Weasleys, I suppose. Guess I’d better buy some tickets before I lose my nerve,” Harry grimaced.

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“Good afternoon, Mister Potter,” the disembodied voice of Jarvis said immediately after the doors to the elevator had closed on the three of them. “May I enquire as the names of your guests?”
“Hi Jarvis,” Harry replied and he couldn’t help but to lift his chin slightly, even though he knew that there was absolutely no point in directing his voice towards the ceiling. “The young lady to my left is Doreen Green and the lady to my right is Luna Lovegood.”

“Very good. I shall inform Mister Stark that you are on your way up,” Jarvis stated.

“Thanks, Jarvis,” Harry replied. “Is anyone else here?”

“Doctor Banner is currently in the labs and will join you shortly. Miss Potts is awaiting your arrival in the lounge. The others are currently away from the Tower on assignment with S.H.I.E.L.D.,” Jarvis said.

“I told you that it was a long shot,” Harry said, noticing Doreen’s disappointed look. “It’s rare that we’re all here at once.”

“That’s okay,” she replied. “At least I’ll get to meet Mister Stark.”

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As Tony stepped into the lounge area of his apartment, he noticed not only the people, but also the animals. Animals were an anomaly; definitely not something that belonged in the Tower. Well, except for Birdbrain, but he was a member of the team, so allowances had to be made.

“Jarvis, call an exterminator, we’ve got squirrels,” he announced.

“Hey!” the young girl exclaimed, swinging around.

Tony goggled at the long busy tail attached to said girl.

“Actually, make that one exterminator and one terminator for the weird-looking ROUS,” he amended.

“I am not a Rodent Of Unusual Size, thank you very much,” the girl retorted, her hand on her hips and a fierce expression on her face, “and while squirrels and rats are both rodents, squirrels are much nicer, friendlier and cuter.”

“And unless you’ve been experimenting in things you shouldn’t be again, the Terminator isn’t real,” Pepper stated.

“It was a joke!” Tony complained, trying to keep himself out of trouble with his sometimes-fiery partner. “Back me up here, Gandalf?”

“Don’t look at me, Tony, I’ve got no idea what you’re talking about,” Harry replied.

“ROUS; Rodents Of Unusual Size; the Terminator; Princess Bride? What? Nothing? They’re movies. Classics, even. You are so plebeian, I don’t think I want to admit knowing you right now,” Tony retorted with a shake of his head.

“I’ve told you that magic and tech don’t get along – that means that I haven’t seen a lot of movies in my life,” Harry defended himself.

Tony stared at the man. “Jarvis, schedule team bonding for at least once a fortnight. We’ll want all the classics, pizza, popcorn, the whole deal. Make sure the Capsicle knows about it as well. God knows that he’s just as bad as Sparrowhawk here.”

“I shall make a note of it, Sir,” Jarvis replied.
Tony walked down into the lounge. The fact that Pepper gave him a kiss told him that he wasn’t in too much trouble for that joke before.

“So, who’s the kid? I like her by the way; she’s got spunk,” he commented.

“Tony Stark, meet Doreen Green,” Harry introduced, gesturing appropriately

The girls’ horrified expression morphed into one of pure adoration, albeit one with incredibly red cheeks. She rushed towards him with her hand extended, a hand that Harry quickly lowered.

“Don’t mind Tony,” Pepper apologised for him. “He’s a jerk sometimes and has a thing against touching others or being handed things.”

The girl, Doreen, nodded cautiously. Really, apart from the tail and the squirrel perched on her shoulder, she seemed quite normal. He looked forward to getting her downstairs and seeing what she was capable of.

“And this is Luna Lovegood,” Harry continued. “Luna’s a friend of mine from way back; we went to school together.”

“School, huh? Guess that means that you’re magical like Gandalf,” Tony commented.

“I’m not sure who Gandalf is, but if you’re referring to Harry, while I am a witch, there’s no one quite like him,” Luna replied.

“One of a kind, eh? Well, can’t have too much of a good thing and all that, I suppose,” Tony replied.

Suddenly, a blur of red and gold rocketed into the room from the outside platform, blasts of red energy spurting from the armour’s hands.

The first blast hit Harry, sending him spinning through the air before he crumpled against the wall and slid down it. Two more blasts were shot in the direction of Tony and Pepper. With a dive he didn’t know that he was capable of, Tony careened into Pepper before they both hit the couch, their momentum taking it and them over backwards, out of the line of fire.

A quick once over confirmed that Pepper was okay, meaning that Tony was free to scramble forwards and peer around the couch.

The girl, Doreen, was currently in the midst of a backwards jump, where she did a complete spin before landing on her feet in a crouch. Her eyes were focussed on the rogue armour. As the armour hovered on its boot jets, its hands were extended, shooting bolts of red at the girl; not one, though, was hitting her.

Doreen dodged to the left, the right and then the right some more. Her eyes narrowed and Tony noted that both the claws and the knuckle spikes that Harry had mentioned were extended. Unexpectedly, she charged forward, but only a couple of steps before she leapt high. Tony watched, impressed as she twisted herself to hand on the roof, clinging there by her hands and feet for an instant before she pushed off, spinning once more to dodge the armour’s attack before her hands grabbed the armour’s shoulders as she passed.

With a grunting heave, she pulled the armour up and over her head before slamming it down onto the ground. Instantly, she was on it, her knees trying to pin its arms to its sides as she slammed her knuckle spikes into the armour’s shoulder joints. The creak of metal told Tony that she’d succeeded in piercing it.
With that, Tony stood and made a slashing gesture with his hands, causing the armour to instantly power down and disassemble itself.

“What?” a confused Doreen asked as the armour fell apart under her, its lights going out at the same time.

“You alright over there?” Tony called.

“Yeah, I’m good,” Harry grunted, rubbing the back of his head. “That packed a bit more of a wallop than I was expecting, though.”

“Wuss,” Tony countered. “I had it set at only fifty percent.”

“Wait. What?” Doreen asked, looking backwards and forwards between the two men. “You knew about this, that this was going to happen? Was this some kind of weird test?”

“Got it in one,” Tony grinned. “What? You’re not impressed? I am. You did great. Didn’t think you’d actually be able to take down one of my suits that easily. Although, truth be told, at full power, you wouldn’t have had a chance, especially sitting on the arc unibeam. That thing could have reduced you to ash in milliseconds. You’ve got potential, kid.”

“You wanted to show the Avengers what you could do, didn’t you?” Harry asked.

Doreen nodded and Tony was pleased to see that she was getting it; he didn’t want those spikes aimed at him, after all.

“We’ll put you through your paces anyway, but we thought that this’d be a good first way to gauge what you can do,” Tony said. “And we’ll make sure that the others see the video of it, too.”

“Okay,” Doreen nodded eagerly. “When can we do that?”

“How about we head down to the training room now,” Harry suggested.

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“She’s good, plenty of potential. A little young, though,” Tony said as he, Harry, Bruce and Pepper watched Doreen swing through the gymnastics equipment that Natasha had had installed.

Luna was in the corner playing with Monkey Joe, keeping him occupied and out of the way.

“A little young? She’s what, fifteen?” Pepper asked incredulously. “You’re not going to allow her to join the team! She’s got to at least finish school first. It’s bad enough that you’re allowing Peter to join in.”

“Peter’s a little older …” Harry began.

“One year does not count, “Pepper snorted.

“And he was doing the hero thing before he joined up,” Harry continued. “Matt and I’ll keep an eye on him. Doreen’s different, she hasn’t done anything yet, not that she doesn’t want to. But I think we can convince her that her schooling comes first, especially if we phrase it as ‘getting the best skillset that she can in order to be the best Avenger that she can be’. And if we have her come in and train with each of us on a regular basis, I think that she’ll be happy. Should buy us a few years before we need to decide if she’ll be a full-fledged Avenger one day.”

“What, like an Avengers Academy program?” Bruce mused. “Could work. We could use the same
approach on Peter, keep him off the streets a bit as well.”

“And it wouldn’t hurt the rest of us to get some training in either, especially as a team” Harry commented.

“Not that you’re going to be helping with that, Gandalf,” Tony commented. “Aren’t you headed back to jolly old England next week?”

“Yeah, well, it’s something that I’ve got to do; I need to get some expert help with a piece of magic that I’m struggling with,” Harry replied.

“Well, it’s not like any of us could help you,” Tony said before reaching into a pocket and pulling out a phone and tossing it to Harry. “Here. In case you do need some help while you’re away. I’m pretty sure that I’ve got the shielding sorted now so that your magic won’t short the thing out.”

“Thanks, Tony,” Harry said before pocketing it. “And also for the loan of the staff you’re sending over to manage the Den while I’ll be away.”

“Don’t thank me; you’re the one who’ll be paying their wages,” Tony replied.

“And don’t worry about Doreen,” Pepper stated. “I’ll pop over every other day to check on her.”

“Thanks, Pepper. I don’t plan on being away too long; just a quick trip to get this magic sorted, maybe a visit with some old friends and then it’ll be straight back here,” Harry said. “Strictly a low-key visit.”

Luna’s peals of laughter had the four turning to stare at her.

“Oh, Harry, when have you ever done anything ‘low-key’?” she asked before dissolving into laughter once more.
Harry and Luna strolled down the sidewalk of the New York City street arm in arm. One would think, on first seeing the pair, that it was a romantic outing, but they couldn’t be further from the truth.

Luna had never been to New York City before, to be more accurate, she’d never visited any city of this size before. Consequently, she had a nasty habit of being easily distracted and wandering off without telling Harry what had caught her attention. And with the crowds that New York were famous for, it’d taken a panicked Harry a few minutes to locate her more than once.

Thus, after the second time, Harry had taken her hand and placed it in the crook of his arm before they continued their outing. This had worked out fantastically. Now, whenever something caught Luna’s attention and she veered off course, Harry was simply pulled along for the ride.

“Look Harry! Erumpets!” Luna exclaimed, her arm flung out to point across the street.

Harry closed his eyes, thankful that the magical word would mean nothing to the dozens of muggles surrounding the pair. Feeling the pull on his arm, Harry opened his eyes and followed his friend’s finger, before blinking in shock.

There was no doubt about it, Luna had been right. Well, mostly right. Across the street was a bakery and in their front window were a number of their products, one of which, a bun of some kind, was unmistakably in the shape of an erumpet.

“Come on, Harry,” Luna said, pulling him onwards, “I’ve never eaten an erumpet before. Not that one should eat a real erumpet.” Her head cocked as she obviously was contemplating such an endeavour. “Given the size of one, I’m not sure how one could eat an erumpet.”

“One bite at a time, I would expect,” Harry said absently as he studied the sign above the bakery.

Kowalski’s Bakery.

Judging by the style of building that the bakery was situated in, Harry guessed that it’d been there for a long time. Well, at least the building had been; there was no telling the age of the bakery itself.

Following Luna’s urging, Harry quickly caught up before guiding a distracted Luna across the street without her getting hit by one of the many cars as they drove past.

The two paused outside the window of the bakery and Harry saw Luna’s face light up.

“Demiguise; niffler; bowtruckle; thunderbird; erumpet; flooper; moon calf,” Luna named as she pointed to each of the different buns or cake decorations in the window.

A small bell tinkled overhead as they entered and Luna quickly pulled free to all but press her face against the glass as she moved from display case to display case. What surprised Harry as he perused the cases himself were the names that had been given to each of the pastry items. The erumpet-shaped one was called a ‘rhino bun’; the flooper-like ones, had been labelled ‘owl cakes’, each decorated in icing just like the magical bird – fluorescent pink, yellow, lime green and purple.

“Can I have a Dribbly Demiguise Bun, please?” a man asked off to the side.

The word ‘demiguise’ immediately caught Harry’s attention, especially when he saw that, according
to the small plaque, they were simply called ‘Dribbly Buns’.

“Excuse me, but is that chocolate dribbled over the demiguise buns?” Harry asked.

The man looked up, clearly startled.

“Um, sorry?” he asked in a high-pitched voice.

“The Dribbly Demiguise Buns,” Harry said, pointing out the bun that he meant, “is it covered in chocolate?”

“They’re . . . they’re just Dribbly Buns,” the man stuttered, sharing a panicked look with the older gentleman across the counter.

Harry leaned in and whispered with a grin. “To the no-majs, yes. But not to us, we know what they really are.”

“You’re a wizard?” the man asked, clearly relieved.

“I am. And my friend is a witch, so you don’t have to worry,” Harry replied and extended his hand. “Harry Potter.”

“Luna Lovegood,” Luna said, straightening and following Harry’s lead to also offer her hand.

“Rolf Scamander,” the young man smiled. “This is my cousin, Adam Kowaski.”

“It’s nice to meet you. You’re both wizards as well? I didn’t think that there were really any in the city at all,” Harry commented.

“I am,” Rolf replied.

“I’m a no-maj,” Adam stated. “Well, as much as it matters. Neither my father nor I have any magical talent. Take more after Grandad Jakob at least. Baking. It’s in the blood.”

“That’s why I come back as often as I can,” Rolf confessed. “Great-uncle Jakob’s pastries have always been something special. Besides, it’d be criminal not to have a magical person enjoying these magical creatures.”

“Why did all of the witches and wizards leave New York?” Luna asked.

Rolf and Adam shared a look.

“There was an ‘incident’ back in the twenties that nearly exposed the magical world. Luckily, my grandfather, Newt, was able to help all of the no-majs forget. Even still, it didn’t take long for the magical population to relocate – less chance of the obliviation being overridden that way,” Rolf replied.

“Newt. You said your name was Scamander?” an excited Luna asked. “Harry, Newt Scamander wrote our magical creatures textbook. He’s incredibly famous. The world’s first magi-zoologist.”

“You’re saying that he was just like you, Luna?” Harry smiled.

“You’re interested in magical creatures?” Rolf asked.

“Oh, yes. I go on expeditions to try to find new magical creatures as often as possible,” Luna replied. “Perhaps you’ve read some of my reports in the Quibbler?”
Rolf nodded solemnly. “I have read one or two.”

Almost absently, the two drifted off towards the nearest small table.

Harry shook his head before turning to Adam.

“If I know Luna, she’s going to be talking to him for hours about all of the creatures that she’s been searching for,” he grinned.

“Rolf’s the same way,” Adam replied. “Always off on one expedition or another, just like Great-Uncle Newt was, even after he married Great-Aunt Tina.”

“Well, while they’re talking, can I have one of the nifflers for myself and one of the demiguises for Luna, please,” Harry ordered.

Seven hours on a plane wasn’t the longest flight that Harry had ever had, but it was awfully close. Not to mention that it’d been a while since he’d done a trip like that. Even travelling first class with all of the extra legroom and other benefits had almost had him reconsidering his decision.

An international portkey would have been over in just a few minutes and utilizing one of Tony’s jets would also have been quicker. Both, however, would have been like using a sonorus charm to announce his presence. The first telling the wizarding world that he was back in the country; the other attracting every media outlet in the country to see who was in the Stark jet, and there were some wizarding journalists that did have connections in the non-magical world.

No, as uncomfortable and long as the journey was, Harry was sure that he’d entered the country in the best way possible.

As was his habit when flying, the instant that he could step to the side after leaving the tunnel that lead from the plane, he did so. A roll of his shoulders and neck eased the worst of the tension. The fact that he already had his pack and didn’t need to collect any baggage was another plus – one less crowd that he could avoid.

There wasn’t much that he could do about customs, but he grinned and beared it, knowing that he wouldn’t have to put up with waiting in line for a taxi, nor would he have to endure the ride to the city.

As soon as he was done with customs, Harry headed for the bathroom, went into the nearest stall and apparated.

As expected, Platform Nine and Three Quarters was blessedly empty.

With a sigh of relief, Harry hefted his pack a little higher and walked through the entrance, trusting to the notice-me-not wards to keep his unexpected appearance out of a wall away from the muggles.

Almost instantly, he noticed the exact thing that he was looking for: a payphone. Using one phone to read off a number while dialling on another phone felt kind of silly to Harry (after all, the new mobile that Tony had given him was set up to make international calls), but he did it anyway, after all, there was no need to broadcast the number on his Avenger’s phone if he didn’t have to.

“Hello, Hermione Granger speaking,” Hermione said with not a small amount of breathlessness.
Really, it’d been a miracle that she’d managed to answer the phone before the person on the other end had hung up. She’d first heard it before she’d even unlocked her door and in her rush to get to the phone, she’d ended up having to leave her keys in the lock when they failed to come out easily.

“Oh, Hermione, you are home,” her mother’s voice stated.

“Hi, Mum,” Hermione said, plonking her purse down on the small table in the hallway. “How are you?”

“I’m fine, dear. And yourself?” Jane asked.

“Oh, you know, same as always,” Hermione replied.

“Overworked then,” Jane stated matter-of-factly.

Hermione chose not to dignify that with an answer, not only because it was the one – well, the main – thing that she and her mother disagreed upon and also because, if Hermione was being brutally honest with herself, it was true.

“Is there something particular that you called for, Mum?” she asked instead.

“Actually, there is,” Jane replied. “I called to invite you over for dinner.”

Hermione glanced at her watch. It was late and to be truthful, all she wanted was to get off of her feet and soak in the bath, preferably with a glass of wine at hand.

“I don’t know, Mum, I’m kind of tired,” she hedged.

“All the more reason to,” Jane replied. “No cooking or cleaning up for you. Simply pop over, have a nice relaxing dinner with family and then you can head home to bed.”

“I don’t know,” Hermione replied, her bottom lip caught between her teeth in indecision.

“I’m making a roast,” Jane cajoled.

Hermione’s eyes narrowed. “You’re not trying to set me up on a date, are you?”

“Of course not, Honey,” Jane laughed, but it was a laugh that didn’t convince her daughter.

“You promise there’ll be no strange men there, no work colleagues or old family friends that you haven’t seen in ages? It’ll just be the three of us?”

“Hermione, I promise that I have no ulterior motives. And that you’ll regret it if you don’t come,” Jane promised.

“We’ll, I do always enjoy your roasts,” Hermione said. “Alright, give me half an hour or so to get cleaned up from work and I’ll apparate over after that.”

“Wonderful, Darling. I’ll see you soon, then,” Jane said happily.

“Oh, Mum, see you soon,” Hermione replied, hanging up the phone.

“And if this is a way to set me up, I’m going to hex you and Dad something frightful,” she promised the handset.

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Hermione appeared in her old bedroom after apparating from her apartment. A quick glance was enough to assure her that she was alone – a usual state of affairs when she popped over like this. Cocking her head, she noted that there was nothing to be heard which meant that her parents were both downstairs, most likely in the kitchen.

Hermione took her time going down the stairs, after all, she still wasn’t convinced that she wanted to be here. Her initial idea of how to spend the evening was most appealing; unfortunately, her parents could be quite persuasive. Not to mention that she still had a lingering feeling of guilt after her Hogwarts’ years – spending ten months of the year at the castle and then a large portion of each holiday away from home with Harry and the Weasleys meant that she hadn’t spent as much time with her parents as she should have. Not to mention what she did to them in her ‘first’ seventh year.

The sound of her parents’ voices coming from the kitchen as she approached the door had the corners of her mouth twitching upwards. That smile, though, was instantly dispelled the second that she heard that third voice.

And to think that she’d believed her mother when she’d promised.

With a scowl, Hermione stomped the rest of the way to the kitchen and pushed hard enough on the swinging door to slam it back against the far wall.

“Mother, I’m going to have to take a raincheck,” she began through her clenched teeth.

“Hermione!” her mother said, one hand on her breast in her apparent shock of her daughter’s appearance.

Hermione fixed her mother with a deathly gaze, her mind going through the myriad of hexes that she’d like to cast. In her peripheral vision, she noted the man seated at the table across from her father, but there was no way that she was even going to grace the man with any attention.

“I’m guessing it’ll just be the three of us, then, Mister and Mrs Granger. Shame really, I was looking forward to catching up with Mione,” the man said.

Hermione’s eyes widened. She knew that voice. And that shock of messy black hair.

“Harry?” she asked in disbelief. Then, after seeing that lop-sided grin when said man turned to look at her, his green eyes sparkling with mischief, “Harry!”

Instantly, she was across the room, flinging herself at him. Thankfully, Harry was able to push himself and his chair back fast enough from the table in order to catch her on his lap. The two hugged fiercely

“What are you doing here?” she laughed in her ear. “You should have told me that you were coming."

“Now where would the fun be in that?” Harry asked as they let go,

“Prat,” she smiled, giving him a gentle slap on his chest.

“Marauder,” Harry countered.

The laughter from her mother spun her head around.

“And you! Keeping this from me. I thought that you promised that you had no ulterior motives,” Hermione accused.
“Well, I didn’t. Harry did,” Jane grinned. “I did also promise that you’d regret it if you didn’t come, didn’t I? And I was right.”

Hermine gave her mother a mock glare, one that she simply laughed at.

“When did you arrive? How long are you staying? Do you have somewhere to stay? Why are you finally back in England? I’ve got a spare room at my apartment if you need it,” Hermione asked in a single breath.

Harry laughed at her. “It’s good to see you again, too, Hermine. Now in answer to your questions: I arrived this morning; I’m not sure; Grimmauld Place (I do own it, after all); and a transfiguration problem.”

Hermione’s eyes lit up. “A problem. What is it? Describe the effect you’re trying to achieve, the incantation and wand movements, then outline where it’s going wrong.”

“I think that can wait until after dinner,” her father, Henry, interrupted.

Hermione pouted, but relented, moving from Harry’s lap to the chair beside him.

“You know everyone’s going to want to see you now that you’re back,” Hermione said.

Harry grimaced. “I guess that I’ll catch up with a few people. But really, Hermione, all I’m wanting is a short, low-key sort of visit.”

Hermione stared at him incredulously for a few seconds before bursting out laughing.

“Why does everyone start laughing every time I say that?” Harry pouted, running a hand through his hair.

“Who else laughed when you said that?” a still smiling Hermione asked.

“Luna,” Harry replied simply.

“You’ve seen Luna?” a surprised Hermione asked. “When did you see her?”

“She just appeared at the Den about a week ago and ended up staying with me until I left New York,” Harry explained. “She made a new friend, a fellow magi-zoologist, and she’s now gone off with him on an expedition.”

“Yes, that sounds like Luna,” Hermione smiled. “How did she go keeping the fact that she’s a witch from Doreen?”

“Uh, Doreen knows about magic now,” Harry replied and quickly continued at her rounded stare. “It wasn’t Luna’s fault. And there were other factors involved. Let’s just say that it involved a squirrel, a snake and a really interesting tail.”

Harry snickering to himself while not providing the complete story did not impress Hermione.

“I promise to tell you all about it later,” Harry said. “Perhaps after dinner.”

“Good idea,” her mother agreed as she carried a large white pot full of vegetables to the table and placed it in the middle.

“Do you prefer white meat or leg, Harry?” her father asked from where he stood over the roast chicken, carving knife and fork in hand.
The two needed to squeeze together on the end of the lounge for them both to be able to see across the hall and into the study, but neither Henry nor Jane Granger minded. Simply getting this chance to see their daughter happy like this, smiling and laughing even in the seriousness of the magic puzzle she was working on with Harry, was worth a small amount of discomfort.

Both had gasped and Henry had nearly spilled his tea when Harry had changed his body from human into some bird-human hybrid. Hermione’s laugh at the absurd sight eased their fears that something terrible had happened.

“Animagus,” Jane said, snapping her fingers. “That’s what it’s called, what Harry’s trying to do. Remember when that McGonagall lady first came to give Hermine her Hogwarts’ letter, that she could turn into a cat? That’s what she called it.”

Henry nodded as the memory surfaced.

“If Harry’s doing it, how long do you think it’ll be before Hermione sets her mind on doing it, too?” he asked.

“Probably not long,” Jane agreed. “She’s never been one to be beaten at anything.”

The two sat and watched as Hermione circled Harry, one hand cupping her elbow as the other tapped her chin. And then the questions began. While neither Henry nor Jane could make much of them, obviously Harry could, for he patiently answered every one. Finally, Harry transformed back and the two flopped onto the couch in there together, Hermione immediately turning her body and tucking one leg under her so that she was facing her best friend.

“I know that fathers aren’t supposed to ask this, but remind me why didn’t she leave with him all those years ago. They could have been married with kids by now,” Henry sighed. “Not to mention happy.”

“I know. It’s so rare to see her this happy,” Jane replied. “But to answer your question, if you remember, she was still dating Ron back then, not to mention that she’d not long started her career and had all of those goals.”

“And how many of them have become a reality? The magical world is so backwards and as much as I admire Hermione wanting to ensure equality for all magical species, I doubt that one woman, no matter how impassioned, is really going to make a difference,” Henry stated.

“I completely agree,” Jane said. “But you have to admire her for what she’s trying to do.”

“Oh, I do, don’t get me wrong,” Henry replied quickly. “It’s just … seeing her so happy like this, it’s all we ever wanted for her.”

Jane watched as Hermione laughed at something Harry said and gave him a slight push and the lopsided grin and bright eyes that Harry was giving her back.

“Who knows, maybe having Harry here in England for a bit will get her to think where her life is headed,” Jane suggested.

“Maybe,” Henry agreed.
Standing in the small run-down park, Harry stared at the town house across from him. In the years that he’d been gone, it hadn’t improved – nor had the neighbourhood. The same derelict car, its tires gone, sat in the same place in front of one of the houses down the street. Half of the street lights were no longer working and the ones that were only enhanced the dreary, dead feeling. Rubbish littered the pavement, road and park. And every house looked as though they were long past the time that they should have been demolished.

Unfortunately, the town house across from him was his. Number twelve Grimmauld Place, the ancestral seat of the Ancient and Noble House of Black. Such as it was. Sirius had hated the place, but it had been his, making it the only reason that Harry had kept it.

With another sigh, Harry plucked the heavy, gaudy ring from his pocket and placed it on his right ring finger. He grimaced at the feel of the oppressive magic that coursed through him before settling into his core. He’d felt it a number of times and each time he’d hated it, thus why he hardly ever wore the thing.

When he’d left England, Harry’d sealed Grimmauld Place up tight, activating the Black family wards. No one could enter and any that tried wouldn’t live long enough to regret the decision. Unfortunately, the ring was needed to once more unseal the house for use.

Steeling himself, Harry marched across the road, up the short flight of stairs and pressed the ring against the door.

He could feel the magic at work, testing, tasting before grudgingly doing what he willed it to do. At the sound of the lock disengaging, Harry took his hand away and turned the knob.

The hall was pitch black, but a simple wave of his hand towards where he knew the nearest torch was located solved that problem. One by one, the torches in the hall lit, sending a soft golden light through the hall.

It was just as Harry remembered it: clean (meaning that Kreacher was still alive and doing his duty), but full of dark woods that enhanced the shadows and the claustrophobic feel.

“Who dares enter the House of Black, defiling and sneaking in to steal and cause havoc?” a raspy voice croaked.

“Hello, Kreacher,” Harry said.

The old elf stepped into view then, his face turned up quizzically. Harry noticed that he looked much the same, albeit with some extra tufts of hair growing from his ears.

“Master has returned,” Kreacher stated. “Kreacher wonders how long for?”

“I’m not sure,” Harry replied. “A few weeks, maybe? It’ll depend on how things go.”

“Master’ll be wanting some food,” Kreacher stated before shuffling about to head to the kitchen.

“No, that’s alright. I already ate; with the Grangers,” Harry said.

Kreacher stiffened slightly as though he’d just been insulted.

“You remember Hermione, don’t you?” Harry asked.

“Kreacher remembers. Girl helped Master retrieve Master Regulus’ locket for Kreacher and fulfil Kreacher’s vow,” the ancient house elf replied.
“She did,” Harry smiled.

The fact that Kreacher wasn’t insulting Hermione or calling her names told Harry that, even after all of these years, Kreacher hadn’t slipped back into how he was before he was given the locket that he still wore around his neck.

“Kreacher will prepare the Master’s suite, then,” Kreacher said before trudging off.

“Thank you, Kreacher,” Harry replied.

As much as he’d prefer to head to bed as quickly as possible, Harry decided to rest for a short time in the parlour before heading up; after all, the ancient house elf wasn’t as quick as he once was and Harry didn’t want to rush him.

Unseen by Harry as he entered the parlour was the interested look that one particular portrait gave him before he turned and walked straight out of his frame.

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Her world had phased in and out, perhaps some semblance of reality, perhaps simply a dream. Either way, this time, this ‘waking’, felt different to Jennifer.

As always, there was only darkness, but this was attributed to her closed eyes rather than a lack of light. The beeping – that was constant, although now it registered as a separate sound and not something ambiguous that could be ignored if she chose. The one thing, the big change that she noted, were the voices. Indistinct and muffled had become words.

Focussing on those words caused a frown to appear on her face – another new sensation, that of her skin moving. But what really caught her attention was the fact that she recognised one of those voices.

“Dad?”

Her voice was soft and scratchy, barely there, but it was enough. A rough, calloused hand lifted hers up and held it tight, its thumb stroking the back of her hand.

“Jennifer? Can you hear me?” he asked.

Once again, Jennifer frowned. Her Dad sounded scared and worried.

“Dad?” she repeated.

“I’m here, Baby,” he said and she could hear the relief and tears in his voice. “You’re safe.”

Why she wouldn’t be safe, Jennifer didn’t know. But her Daddy said she was safe, so she allowed the small amount of tension to bleed back out of her body.

A second set of hands began touching her head, her cheek, her wrist, her stomach. Who they belonged to was unknown, but her Daddy was there, so Jennifer knew that there was nothing to worry about.

“She’s on the mend and out of danger,” an unknown female voice stated. “She knew who you were; that’s a very good sign. It won’t be long until she wakes properly but the longer she sleeps, the better.”

“Just rest, Baby, sleep some more,” her Daddy instructed.
Jennifer gave the smallest of nods before allowing the small hold that she had on consciousness to slip away once more.
For the first time in a long time, more years, in fact, than many would dare to admit, owls winged their way throughout the British Isles carrying an accurate news report about the Man-Who-Conquered. The fact that this report was in the form of a front-page news article of *The Daily Prophet*, would surprise none of the magical population bar one.

That one, of course, happened to be the man in question. As far as he was aware, he’d done nothing to attract the attention of said population since setting foot in the country. Indeed, he’d gone out of his way to ensure that none had gotten wind of his presence, save the one person who he knew that he could trust beyond all others.

Consequently, as he took the liberty of having a lie in (no need to get up early to open the *Marauder’s Den* while he was in a different country), others were sitting down to breakfast, buttering their toast or spooning up some porridge or digging into their bacon. Owls by the flock flapped through windows as they did so to land on tables and chairs and to deliver their burdens. Some took payment in their special pouches, others simply took a quick bite or drink. All though, left behind something that caused more than one to nearly choke on their food or to spit their coffee all over said paper.

*Man-Who-Conquered Returns!*
*by Serena Eiserman*

*Sources, who shall remain anonymous, confirmed to staff of *The Daily Prophet* late last night that Harry Potter, The Man-Who-Conquered, has indeed returned to the shores of Britain yesterday.*

*While there has been much speculation and rumour concerning the whereabouts of Mister Potter during the last seven years, it is believed that this is the first time that he has come home. Exactly what drew Mister Potter to return to us is currently unknown, however, we at *The Daily Prophet* hope that this is not just a visit, but a prolonged stay in his home country, a feeling that we are certain that the entire population of magical Britain also hold.*

*Harry Potter has numerous duties and responsibilities that he is long overdue in taking up, not the least of which is the heredity Wizengamot seat that is controlled by the Ancient House of Potter. This seat is in addition to the one that Mister Potter acquired as a part of his Order of Merlin First Class award for ridding magical Britain of the Dark Lord He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Currently, Andromeda Tonks, a distant relative of Mister Potter, sits in his place within the Wizengamot.*

*Amongst the many and varied reports of Mister Potter’s whereabouts over the years is that he has settled in the colonies, where he has joined a group of costumed muggle ‘heroes’ intent on ‘saving the world’ and battling evil.*

*While we here in magical Britain know that Harry Potter is a hero, the concept of the highly magical wizard joining such an absurd group is all but laughable. Much more believable of the many rumours of Mister Potter’s whereabouts are the many reports that have surfaced from all over the world where it is believed that Mister Potter has increased not only his knowledge, but also his power, the better to protect and guide us all.*

*To Mister Potter, our Man-Who-Conquered, we say, ‘welcome back!’ We look forward to you re-joining society and the wisdom and leadership that you will bring.*
To the few owls that stayed long enough to see the reactions of those reading the front-page article, they had more entertainment doing so than they had seen for quite some time.

In Devon, an older, plump lady with red-hair that was fading quickly to grey, clutched her breast at the sight of the headline before falling into the closest chair around the large kitchen table. Upon finishing the article, she quickly read it through a second time before glancing up at the strange clock on the wall before nodding to herself and rushing towards the fire, only pausing just long enough to snatch up some green powder and flinging it into the flames before she thrust her own head into said flames.

In a castle to the far north, hidden from the world in the hills of Scotland, at one of the four great tables in the enormous hall filled with students, a teen gripped the paper hard as he read the news. He blinked slowly before a great grin spread across his face. And while he never told any of his friends exactly what he was thinking, the fact that his hair turned jet black and messy and his eyes turned a brilliant emerald green told them exactly where his thoughts had gone.

A frown of annoyance grew on a red-haired man as he read the paper. Once, he would have been the first to know such news. But those days were long past. Now, he was relegated to reading about his once best friend in the newspaper like everyone else. Having finished the article, he folded the paper before tossing it into his locker. He’d think more about it later; right now, he had a practice to get to and the Canons were much more important than an old friend who never wrote.

The platinum blond man who read the headline scowled at it, a scowl that only grew the more he read. His disgust quickly grew to the point where, long before he reached the end of the article, he flung the paper into the nearby grate, pointed his wand at it and set the offending rag on fire.

The missive that Hermione sent to the Ministry informing them that she was taking the day off work was sent in barely five minutes before her copy of The Daily Prophet arrived. Her sigh of annoyance over the article only grew the more she read. It was just like the pureblood-run paper to ignore the non-magical world once again. Harry was a hero, in this world and the other. She had half a mind to go there and tell them so, to explain exactly who and what the Avengers were and Mage’s part in it all. Unfortunately, she knew that doing so would be nothing more than a complete waste of her time and breath.

The other thought that stayed her from such a course was the realisation that, once Harry saw the article, he was most likely to pack up and run once again. The man hated his fame. One would think that some years away from the magical world would have tempered their infatuation with Harry; his absence, however, had simply intensified it. One would also think that Harry might have learnt how to deal with the public, being a hero and all; the fact he wore a hood and used an obscuris spell, however, meant that he never had to deal with it.

She nearly scalded her mouth in her haste to drink her tea so that she could apparate across to stop Harry from doing something that at least she would regret.

Hermione was only marginally surprised when the wards to Grimmauld Place allowed her to apparate straight into the entryway.

“Miss Hermione has returned, Kreacher sees,” a scratchy voice remarked.

It only took Hermione’s eyes a few seconds to adjust to the gloom before she made out the old house
elf standing hunched in the shadows.

“Hello, Kreacher,” she smiled.

“Master is in the kitchen,” Kreacher replied before turning and shuffling away.

Taking Kreacher’s words as part invitation, part instruction, Hermione strode forth, knowing exactly where to go even though it had been nearly a decade since she had last been in the house.

“Good morning, Harry,” she exclaimed.

Harry turned from the stove, a smile on his face and a spatula in his hand.

“Morning, Hermione, you’re here early,” he replied.

Her eyes scanned the room as she approached and she breathed out a sigh of relief at seeing no sign of a newspaper.

“Thought I’d take the day off and spend it with you,” she stated.

“Brilliant!” Harry said as he turned from the stove with a plate full of pancakes. “Help yourself, there’s plenty.”

At the look of the stack of golden, fluffy pancakes, Hermione couldn’t resist and instantly snagged a couple to put on the plate that appeared in front of her.

“What did you have in mind to do today?” she asked as she drizzled maple syrup on her pancakes.

“I was thinking about heading to the Alley,” Harry replied. “I need to see George and find out what new Wheezes he’s created.”

Something in her expression must have registered for his look morphed into one of concern and his knife and fork lowered.

“What?” he asked.

Hermione couldn’t resist biting her lower lip as her mind whirled, trying to find the best way to tell him about that morning’s article.

“Come on, Hermione,” Harry said. “You know you can tell me anything.”

There was nothing for it but to tell it straight and hope that he didn’t overreact.

“There was an article in the Prophet this morning,” she blurted.

Harry’s eyes closed briefly.

“They know I’m in Britain, don’t they?” he asked resignedly. “How’d they find out?”

“I don’t know,” Hermione admitted.

“Doesn’t matter,” Harry sighed. “Just means that I’m going to have to be a little more circumspect though.”

Unexpectedly, he stood and raised his hand towards the open doorway. Magic fairly swirled around him, enough that Hermione could feel it, although that may have simply been because she knew
what Harry’s magic felt like. And then, in a swirl of blue-grey, Harry’s dragonhide cloak whizzed through the door, quickly followed by his many-pouched belt. Both items were donned before Harry flipped up the hood of his cloak and waved his hand across his face.

“Harry Potter! If you think I’m going to sit here with you while you play dress up …” she began before drawing her wand.

The finite incantatum should have undone Harry’s own spells and knocked the hood off of his head. Her frown preceded her second attempt; his chuckles, her third.

“That’s not going to work, Hermione,” Harry laughed. “Besides, I have it on very good authority that it’s never a bad thing to wear your suit at home.”

“If you’re talking about taking the advice of Tony Stark, then I hardly think that he’s the best role model for you to emulate,” Hermione retorted. “And exactly why aren’t my spells working?”

“Parseltongue,” Harry replied simply. “Figured that I needed a variant of the usual spells in case I encountered other witches or wizards. And as for Tony, I can get him on the phone for you if you like, I’m sure that he’d tell you the same thing I am.”

Hermione scowled at him. “Make it Pepper and you’ve got a deal. Now. Undo those spells.”

A simple wave of his hand preceded him lowering his hood.

“You’ve got to admit that it’d be better than going as myself,” Harry said.

“No, I do not,” Hermione replied. “You may wear the hood up, but no obscuring spells if you expect me to be seen with you in public.”

Reluctantly, he nodded and she gave her own nod of satisfaction.

“Now, start talking. I never knew you were so good at wandless magic?” she stated.

Harry laughed. “Figured I needed an edge. It’s not easy and my spell repertoire is limited, but it has its uses.”

“You will teach me, won’t you, Harry?” she asked, her eyes never leaving his.

“Never thought anything different,” he replied.

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Harry stepped from the floo into the Leaky Cauldron and stopped dead. It was almost as though he’d stepped back in time!

Everything was near identical to the very first time that Hagrid had brought him here when he was eleven – the place was dark and gloomy; patrons sat around at the tables nursing pints or glasses of strange coloured beverages; a group of what looked to be hags occupied one corner table; and there was a light covering of dirt on the walls. Even the slight smoky haze near the ceiling emphasised the old-world feel that permeated the tavern.

The only difference from all those years ago was that old Tom was no longer standing behind the bar wiping a glass. Now it was a blonde woman that looked vaguely familiar.

“Hannah Longbottom,” Hermione whispered into his ear and Harry gave a slight nod of thanks for the reminder.
With that first encounter at the Cauldron uppermost in his mind and what had happened then, Harry wasted no time in striding forth, intent on reaching the back courtyard.

“Hi, Hermione!” a bright-sounding voice greeted.

“Hi, Hannah,” Hermione replied. Then, as Harry refused to stop, “I’ll have to catch up with you later, apparently we’re in a rush.”

The intake of breath that came from the far side of the bar told Harry that Hannah had recognised him. Thankfully, she didn’t make a scene.

“Make sure you stop by Hogwarts soon,” Hannah called after them. “I think there’s someone there that’d love to see you.”

Harry paused in the courtyard before tapping the bricks to make the portal to Diagon Alley open.

“She’s right,” Harry stated, cutting off Hermione before she could remark on his rudeness. “I need to get up to Hogwarts today instead of waiting until the weekend. Teddy’s there and he’s bound to have seen that article.”

“You’re right, Harry,” Hermione agreed. “Somehow, though, I think Hannah meant Neville.”

Harry nodded. “Well, yes, it’ll be great to see Nev again as well.”

A quick flick of his wrist brought his wand to bear before he tapped the remembered sequence of bricks.

Once again, Harry felt that odd sense of déjà vu. The Alley was the almost exactly the same as he remembered it. Oh, there might have been a store or two different, but it was all the same, cobblestones and all. As Harry stared at the place, he began to wonder whether it’d changed in the slightest in the past couple of hundred years!

The clothing, the storefronts, the wares on the street, all screamed eighteenth century – a far cry from what he was used to. Even his infrequent jaunts to Salem or one of the other American magical districts or most of the dozens of others around the world, were centuries in advance of what he was seeing. And when you added in what he was used to in the non-magical world, Harry was almost feeling culture shock.

As he walked along, his shoulder bumping Hermione’s, he stared at the people around him. Their clothing was so old-fashioned.

His staring, though, caused others to notice him and stare back.

And then it happened. A stray breeze caught under his hood and it flared wide. At exactly the wrong moment.

“It’s him! The Man-Who-Conquered! Harry Potter!” one man cried, his finger pointing straight at Harry, his eyes huge as he stared.

That one cry was enough to have everyone within earshot spinning in place, eyes searching before locking on to him. Eyes flicked firstly to his forehead where the thin white scar of his lightning bolt could still vaguely be seen in the right light, before switching to Hermione and then back again. Hermione’s presence by his side seemed to be all the confirmation that they needed.

Within seconds, it seemed that half of the population of the Alley had surrounded them, some
appearing so fast that they might as well have apparated.

“The Man-Who-Conquered!”

“Mister Potter, welcome back! Welcome back!”

“Where’ve you been?”

“The-Boy-Who-Lived!”

“Are you back for good?”

“Can you sign this?”

“Are you two together?”

“What have you been doing?”

“Do you have a girlfriend? Wife? Children?”

Harry was sorely tempted to use a banishing charm or at least a silencing charm on the crowd that had gathered around, pressing closer and closer as more and more joined them. Questions peppered him, the quality and quantity of them telling him that reporters had arrived.

Grabbing Hermione’s hand so that he didn’t lose her, Harry began pushing through the crowd, excusing himself, it seemed, half a dozen times every metre that they were able to move. The bright garish orange of *Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes* shone as a beacon of hope and sanctuary, a haven that Harry and Hermione worked towards.

“If you just say something to them, maybe they’ll let us through,” Hermione panted.

Deciding that she may be right, Harry stopped and turned to where the majority of the crowd stood behind them and flicked his hood back.

“It’s nice to see you all again,” he began his impromptu speech. “And it’s good to be back in Britain. At the moment, I haven’t decided how long I’ll be staying for or what I’ll be doing while I’m here. Well, other than catching up with friends and family. Hermione’s told me about the rumours of my travels that have circulated here over the years and, from what I’ve heard, there were quite a number that were correct in some of the places that I’ve visited. I’ve enjoyed my time away; I’ve learnt a lot and even made some new friends. Right now, though, I’m off to visit one of my old friends, so, if you’ll excuse me?”

He knew that it was pretty pathetic as far as speeches went and if Tony ever heard it, he’d never hear the end of it, but for what it was, it was good enough. O at least, it served its purpose and had some of the crowd backing off enough to allow the two of them to quickly reach the door of WWW without too much trouble at all.

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“Pathetic!” the same platinum blonde-haired man that had incinerated his copy of *The Daily Prophet* that very morning stated. “Prince Potter abandons them all for years and as soon as he turns up again, they’re all over him again.”

“Sheep,” his companion replied. “Crying out for real leadership.”

“Hmph,” the blonde snorted. “They had it and either killed them or left them to rot in Azkaban.”
“One of these days …” the third of them said, a statement that the other two nodded to before all three turned away in disgust from the sight before them.

Where one would expect the sound of a bell announcing someone entering a shop, Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes would never have something so plebeian. Instead, when Harry and Hermione rushed through the door, a great belch reverberated above them.

Harry looked up in surprise but, seeing the look of revulsion on Hermione’s face, he found himself beginning to chuckle.

“It’s random,” Hermione stated, “and that’s not one that I’ve heard before.”

“You’ve obviously not been in here enough then, Miss Granger. I don’t think you’ve heard the full range of fart sounds either.”

“George!” Harry smiled, leaping forward to give the man in the horrid fluorescent orange and purple jacket a brief, manly hug.

“Thank goodness,” Hermione muttered behind him, causing Harry to laugh even more.

“Good to see you, Harrikins. Heard you were in town,” George said.

“You and everyone else in magical Britain,” Harry said bitterly.

Even here, Harry’s presence was garnering a fair bit of attention as the few customers that were getting an early dose of their pranking mayhem needs took note of who had arrived and had begun drifting closer.

“Come on out the back,” George waved, “and we can have a bit of a chat in private.”

Harry nodded eagerly before following his host and partner.

In a lot of ways, Harry noted as they weaved through the shelves, WWW hadn’t changed all that much. Every shelf was still filled with brightly coloured boxes and tins and bags. Over in the corner was a hideously pink section, obviously aimed at the young witch. A soft trilling to his left indicated where the pigmy puffs lived. And every now and then, a firework whizzed by, multicoloured sparks flying behind it.

The back room was still a jumble of bizarre ingredients on shelves and the giant table mixed in with parchment, ink, quills and both finished and half-finished pranks of all shapes and sizes.

“Now, before we get down to the mundane, I’m guessing that you’re wanting to see is what new, cool, brilliant, bizarre, and down-right fun things we’ve come up with since the last time you ordered?” George guessed, a massive grin on his face.

“Bring it on,” Harry agreed, rubbing his hands together.

“To start with,” George said, gesturing grandly to a basket filled with small purple silk bags, “we have the ‘ExpectaVision Goggles’.”

Harry plucked up one of the bags, pulled apart the drawstring and tipped a pair of glasses into his hand. The frames were actually fairly stylish, if one ignored their florescent yellow colour; and the dark grey lenses would be certain to hide one’s eyes.
“I’m assuming that what you see using them is not what one would expect?” Hermione guessed.

“Right in one, Miss Granger,” George replied. “I haven’t actually decided what I’m going to do with these yet; they didn’t come out as intended.”

“What were they supposed to do?” Harry asked, eyeing the pair in his hand warily.

“See through clothes,” George grinned.

“George Weasley!” Hermione screeched. “What in Merlin’s name were you thinking!”

“Cor, you don’t half sound like Angelina! That’s almost a dead ringer for what she said when she first heard about them,” George said, putting a finger in his one good ear and wiggling it around.

“So, what do they do?” Harry asked, intentionally moving the conversation on.

“Well, they do let you see through clothes, but skin and muscles as well,” George replied. “Right down to the bones. Also lets you see through walls, well, ones made of wood or curtains at least; concrete and bricks are a no-no.”

“Sell them to Healers,” Harry suggested as he put a pair on and began looking around the room. “Could make their job easier when diagnosing broken bones and whatnot.”

“Cheers, Harry,” a happy George exclaimed. “For that, the pair you’re wearing is yours.”

Harry nodded as he took the glasses off. Seeing Hermione’s bones moving as she did was quite disconcerting. Looking back into the shop through the wall, though, was kind of interesting.

“Just make sure to check that they are healers; burglars and thieves would have a field day with these,” Harry remarked.

George nodded before moving on to a bin full of small round, glass balls about the size of a marble. Different coloured gasses swirled about inside the balls – red, blue, green, orange, yellow and purple.

“These are the next generation of our Daydream products,” George stated. “A person only needs to inhale one of them and they’re instantly lulled into a pleasant dream which lasts from anywhere from ten minutes to half an hour. Great for distracting someone or even distracting yourself. And easy to hide as well, just don’t get them mixed up with your gobstone set.”

“Do they have a proper name?” Hermione asked.

“Not yet,” George confessed. “Still working on that bit. Only just finished the testing phase and moving into the marketing side of ideas.”

Grabbing up a scoop, George dipped it into the barrel before filling a bag with the glass balls before handing it over to Harry.

“Here you go, partner,” he smiled.

“Thanks, George,” Harry replied before slipping the bag into one of the pouches on his belt.

By the time that George had finished showing Harry and Hermione all of his latest and greatest inventions, Harry’s pouches – even the ones designed to be practically bottomless – were bulging.

“I don’t think I want to know what you’re going to do with all of that,” Hermione remarked with a shake of her head as he pushed the last item, a pair of gloves that, when being worn, allowed the
wearer to stick to anything, into his pocket.

“Have fun,” Harry stated.

“Play pranks,” George agreed.

“Beat up bad guys,” Harry added.

“Boys,” Hermione sighed, but the small upturn of the corners of her mouth told Harry and George what she really thought of it all.

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Hogwarts castle, home of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, hadn’t changed in the years that Harry had been gone. Everything, from the towers to the great stone walls to the expansive grounds surrounded by the Forbidden Forest and the Black Lake and even Hagrid’s overgrown hut were exactly as he remembered it. Consequently, he couldn’t help pausing just inside the gates to the ground to stare in wonder.

There were so many memories attached to this place – both wonderful as well as the type that had kept him up countless long nights as they haunted his dreams. This was the first place he’d known as home; it was the first place that he’d made friends; the first place he could remember risking his life for others. And it was the place that so many that he loved and cared for had died.

How long he stood staring, he wasn’t sure; only the touch of Hermione’s hand on his broke the spell. A shared smile and they started their trek down the path once more.

The rumbling of hundreds of voices that greeted their ears as they entered the castle told them that they’d arrived during dinner. Hermione, Harry could see, was reluctant to interrupt them; her glance told him that she was willing to wait at the stone gargoyle for the Headmistress to finish.

Harry, though, had other plans. Not to mention a special someone to surprise.

Automatically, his eyes snapped to the Gryffindor table as they entered the Great Hall before he deliberately focussed on the blue and bronze of Ravenclaw. He hadn’t even completed his sweep of the table before a boy further down was up and racing down the aisle towards him.

“Teddy!” Harry laughed, catching the lad up in a bone-crushing hug.

“Uncle Harry! You’re here! Finally!” Teddy replied.

Letting his godson regain his footing, Harry eagerly drank in every part of him. It’d been years since he’d seen more than photos. Yes, there was Remus’ chin and inquisitive eyes, shining through Tonks’ metamorph ability. His hair may be cycling from brown to messy black to blue and back to black over and over, and his eyes were changing colour to match Harry’s own, but his parents were always there for all to see.

“It’s so good to see you,” Harry exclaimed, dragging him in once more for another hug.

“You keep doing that and you’re going to crush him to death,” Hermione smiled.

“Not Teddy, there’s too much of his father in him for me to be able to do that,” Harry replied, feeling the added strength of Teddy’s hug threatening to squeeze the air from his lungs.

“Mister Potter,” a familiar voice interrupted. “While it is very good to see you once more, you are
interrupting dinner.”

Harry grinned at his one-time Head of House, now Headmistress, over the top of Teddy’s head.

“Sorry, Professor,” he said happily.

“Scamp!” she hmphed. “Do you actually have a purpose for making a spectacle of yourself, here of all places?”

“I need to see you, and, after hearing about that article this morning, well, I couldn’t let Teddy here think that I’d forgotten to visit as soon as I could,” he shrugged.

“Well, take a seat,” Headmistress McGonagall instructed. “We can talk after dinner.”

“And have a butterbeer together after that,” a deep voice finished.

“Hey, Neville,” Harry said, releasing Teddy to clasp hands with his friend. “You got it; looking forward to it.”

“Come on, Uncle Harry,” Teddy said, grabbing his hand and beginning to drag him away. “You and Aunt Hermione can sit with me and you can meet my friends.”

“Sounds a brilliant idea,” Harry grinned. “Lead on, Macduff!”

“And how long do you say you’ve been stuck at this point?” Minerva asked as she considered the half-man, half-bird before her.

Harry’s head looked up at her, a frown on his face.

“Couple of months,” he replied. “That’s why I came to you; there’s no one else I’d trust to get me past this.”

“Not even Miss Granger?” Minerva asked, her scepticism mixed with amusement.

“Hermione’s not an Animagus,” Harry pointed out.

“Touché,” Minerva replied, with the smallest hint of a smile. “However, if she were, she would know that the problem is easy to identify.”

“And easy to solve?” Hermione asked hopefully.

“That is up to Mister Potter,” Minerva stated.

“Well?” an impatient Harry asked.

“The problem is completely mental,” the transfiguration mistress stated. “You’ve developed a mental block, refusing to allow your body to change.”

“What would cause such a thing?” Hermione asked.

“If I was to hazard a guess, I’d say that it’s Harry’s unwillingness to be anything but himself, himself as a human that is,” she replied. “You know as well as I do that Mister Potter was always one of the smallest in his cohort and how much he detested it. Now his body has identified that he needs to shrink to complete this new form and he’s unwilling to allow himself to become small once again.”
“That’s it?” Hermione asked amusedly. “You’re afraid to be small?”

“Laugh it up, fuzzball,” Harry retorted.

“Oi! Leave my hair out of this. And for your opinion, it’s much more manageable than it used to be. Unless you think I look like a nine-foot Wookie who can rip your arms off?” Hermione asked, her hands on her hips and one eyebrow raised.

“I won’t even pretend that I have any idea what you two are talking about,” Minerva sighed. “Now, Harry, what you need to do is to let go. The bird is a part of you, a very natural one I would think, having seen what you’re capable of in the air on a broom.”

“Minerva’s right, Harry,” Hermione added. “Just imagine what it’ll be like to be flying with just your wings to hold you up; something that can’t happen with you this size.”

“No matter your size or shape, you will always be Harry Potter, the youngest seeker in a century,” Minerva continued. “This new part of you needs to be let loose so that you can be complete, to be the person you have always had inside you.”

As the two continued talking and encouraging, Harry closed his eyes and let his mind internalise what they were saying. They were right, he knew, he was always a natural in the air. Even as Mage he used a broom to fly simply because he loved being in the air. And back when he was still in school, it was the flying that he loved the most; quidditch was simply a way to ensure that he had time outdoors in the clouds, flying, rolling, looping, being … free.

“That’s it, Harry! You’re doing it!” Hermione unexpectedly exclaimed.

Harry felt his head changing shape and, when he opened his eyes, he noted both that everything seemed much bigger, as though it loomed over him, and also that it was in perfect focus. He could count the number of freckles on Hermione’s face from here. Or the lines on Minerva’s face.

“What type of bird is he?” Hermione asked.

“That’s the easiest question to answer of them all,” Minerva replied. “I’ve seen hundreds of them here in Britain over the years. Here, see for yourself.”

Harry watched as Minerva summoned one particular book from her shelves before opening it and leafing through it to one particular page.

Hermione’s eyes rocketed backwards and forwards as she read the information before focussing on one point – the picture, he assumed.

And then she looked to Harry and back to the book over and over, the edge of her lips curling upwards more and more with each look before she promptly threw her head back and roared with laughter.

His wings may still be brand new, but as had been pointed out, he was a natural flyer and it was nothing for him to flap up to the table to see the book for himself.

_No!_ he thought, shaking his feathered head backwards and forwards. _It couldn’t be! Not that. Please, anything but that!

He just knew it; he was never going to live this down.
Somehow, a single butterbeer with an old friend had turned into a floo trip and a late supper with said old friend and his wife.

“This is really good, Hannah, I may have to get the recipe from you to take back with me,” Harry said.

Hannah Longbottom visibly preened.

“One condition, Harry – you don’t cook it anywhere in Britain,” she said mock-sternly.

“You have my word,” Harry promised.

“Take back, Harry?” Neville asked. “I thought that you were back for good now.”

Harry shook his head. “I’ve got a business to run back in New York.”

“And it’s not as though he could move it here,” Hannah stated. “Between the Cauldron and the Three Broomsticks and the Hogg’s Head in Hogsmeade, there really isn’t a need for another pub. Is there, Harry?”

Harry chuckled at the fierce glare Hannah was giving him.

“I’d never try to muscle in on your territory,” Harry promised. “Besides, after the … clientele that I get in the Den, I think I’d find things a little too … sedate.”

“Sedate?” Hannah repeated incredulously. “This place is always hopping and you never know who you’re going to get come in. Last week an entire coven of vampires turned up; scared all of my regulars away for the night.”

“What sort of people do you get at your place, Harry?” Neville asked.

“Mostly regular people off the street, much like Hannah would have. But the Den’s the go-to hang out place for one of the high schools nearby, they’re in before and after school every day, and sometimes during the day as well if they’ve got a spare.”

“Every day?” Neville asked, clearly surprised.

Harry chuckled. “It’s not like Hogwarts. These kids don’t board at the school, they go home every night. There are some schools that take boarders, but even they let the students come and go – with strict curfews, of course – as often as they like; allows them to blow off steam and experience the ‘real’ world.”

“Can be,” Harry shrugged. “But the majority of kids know how to look after themselves and how to keep out of trouble.”

“That’s your main customers, then? Regular people and school kids? Doesn’t sound so different,” Hannah asked.

“For the most part,” Harry shrugged. “Although I’ve been known to have superheroes and gods drop by occasionally.”
Neville laughed.

“I’d forgotten you had such a sense of humour, Harry,” he said.

“I wasn’t joking, Nev,” Harry replied seriously. “I do have those sorts of people come in. Helps that they’re friends of mine, have been since the Chitauri invasion.”

“Chitauri?” Hannah asked, looking to her husband to see if he knew the strange word.

Harry shook his head. “I’d forgotten how sheltered the magical world is. A while back, New York was invaded by aliens from outer space. Took a group of extraordinary people to drive them back off world. One of the few places that wasn’t damaged was the Den – that’s how I got to know them, when they came in to chill after the battle.”

Neville stared wide-eyed at Harry. “That is the craziest thing I’ve ever heard. And I can’t tell whether you’re being serious or making it up. Now if you were George Weasley, I’d know you were spinning a tale.”

“I’m not making it up, Nev, Hannah. It actually happened. There’s a whole bunch of weird and wacky people out there who can do extraordinary things without magic that normal people can’t do,” Harry tried to explain.

“I think I’m glad that I live in the magical world,” Hannah said with a shiver. “Sounds too dangerous out in the muggle world.”

“Not really; at least, not for the average person,” Harry tried to reassure her. “The non-magical world has lots to offer if you’d only give it a chance.”

“I don’t know, Harry, I think my greenhouses can be enough of a challenge for me at times,” Neville replied.

“You don’t know what you’re missing,” Harry sighed, taking a last swallow of his drink. “Thanks for dinner, guys, but I should probably head, it’s getting late and you’ve both got work tomorrow.”

“No worries, Harry,” Neville said. “We’ll get together again soon and catch up some more.”

“And you know that there’ll be others wanting to see you,” Hannah added. “Everyone in the old DA, at least. Hey! That’s an idea. Harry, keep Friday night free, we’ll get the old crowd back together. Don’t worry, I’ll arrange everything.”

“Sure, Hannah, sounds good,” Harry replied easily.

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The doorbell had barely finished ringing before the door was pulled open and Harry was being yanked inside and into a massive hug.

“Hi, Andy,” he managed through a mouthful of hair. “It’s good to see you, too.”

Andy released him before pushing him back slightly, her hands remaining on his shoulders as she looked him up and down.

“It’s about time you came here,” Andy admonished. “I heard from Teddy yesterday that you’d already been up to Hogwarts to see him.”

“Well, I knew that there was a Wizengamot session yesterday and I didn’t want to intrude,” Harry
“Oh, tosh!” Andy replied with a wave of her hand. “You have more right than most to be there.”

“I’m not a sitting member,” Harry protested.

“You should be, though,” Andy huffed. “Just because your reprobate of a godfather managed to name me as the voice of the Ancient House of Black – not that I have figured out how he got around the family magic in order to do that yet – did not mean that you had to follow his lead and then make me the proxy for your other two seats.”

“It’s only because I trust you so much, Andy,” Harry replied with a great grin.

Andromeda Tonks huffed a second time before turning to shut the door.

“Well, come on, then,” she said, setting off for the kitchen. “I’ll make us a cup of tea and tell you all about the votes that I’ve cast in your name recently, since we’re on the topic; might as well get the boring stuff out of the way before we settle in for a proper catch-up.”

Dutifully, Harry nodded and followed her down the portrait-lined hallway. Unlike most magical homes, these portraits weren’t imbued with magic, being simple non-magical photographs. Harry found himself pausing to stare at and lightly touch quite a number of them: Ted Tonks; Just-Call-Me-Tonks Tonks; Remus; and a multitude of Teddy as he grew from baby to toddler to child to teen.

A simple tap of Andy’s wand on the kettle had it floating across to the sink to fill itself before it landed atop the stove. A wave had the stovetop lit and the kettle beginning to heat as the two sat.

“It hasn’t been easy of late,” Andy began. “Most of the momentum from after the war seems to have dried up.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked.

“You know that the Wizengamot from before the war had been decimated of most of its pureblood base allowing the muggle-born laws to all be repealed,” she said, to which Harry nodded. “Well, a lot of those seats have now been filled by the next generation and they’re slowly pushing back towards laws that favour the pureblood once more.”

“What?” a startled Harry asked – Hermione hadn’t mentioned anything like that.

“Oh, it’s nothing much at the moment, but it has the potential to be a real pain in the future, thus why myself and those I’m aligned closely with are doing all that we can to ensure that there remains a balance,” Andy explained. “The downside is that all of those creature laws that we want either replaced or overhauled are taking so much longer than we thought they would.”

Harry cocked her head at her. “I thought they were all overturned years ago.”

“The harshest ones were,” Andy confirmed, “but others, the ones that have been in place for centuries were never going to be changed in a hurry – the ones like only witches and wizards can sit in the Wizengamot, no creatures or those of other species, like goblins, centaurs, mer-people or dwarves. The house elf laws have stalled completely, even if all we were aiming for was a basic code of how to treat them.”

Harry shook his head at the bigotry that he was hearing. While yes, it existed in the non-magical world, it was getting better as time passed – men and women were able to vote and colour of skin mattered little, at least for the most part in the western world.
“We could really use someone with some political clout and a name that everyone respects and looks up to, to champion the cause,” Andy stated.

“Oh no you don’t,” Harry protested instantly, waving his hands in emphasis. “I’d be pants at sitting around a chamber of old people talking out of their asses all day just to hear themselves and to make sure the status quo remains in place. I’d probably last a day before I started hexing everyone in there. That’s why I made you my proxy.”

“Can’t help me from trying,” Andy shrugged, and Harry breathed a sigh of relief knowing that Andy was well aware of his stance. “You will, one day, have to come up with an alternative; I’m not getting any younger, you know.”

“I know, Andy, and maybe one day I’ll be ready to settle down to that sort of life, but it’s just not now,” Harry replied. “For now, I’m happy to simply read the monthly reports that you send me.”

“Oh, so you do read them! I did wonder, considering you never respond to what I put in them,” she admonished.

“If I don’t respond, it simply means that I agree with everything you’ve voted on,” Harry replied quickly. “Now, tell me how Teddy’s been doing.”

Andy gave him a nonplussed look that screamed that she knew that he was changing the topic.

“Teddy’s been good,” Andy said. “Although there’s times that he nearly gives me heart attacks. I caught him last summer standing at the top of the stairs with that horrid pink hair that Nym used to favour. He’d morphed her face as well; could have sworn that it was her standing there, especially when he stumbled and only just caught himself before he fell down the stairs, just like his mother used to. It wasn’t until he laughed at himself and I recognised his voice that I realised that it was Teddy and not Nymphadora.”

Harry laid a hand on her arm in sympathy. Even after all this time, he missed Tonks and Remus as well.

“I’m just glad that he takes after his father as well,” Andy continued. “I cherish the days where he curls up with a book and just reads the day away, it’s nice to have a break every now and again. Mind you, I do miss him when he’s away at Hogwarts.”

“So, you won’t mind if Teddy comes over to visit me during the summer holidays for few weeks then?” Harry asked.

“Oh, Merlin, no,” Andy smiled. “It’ll be good for him to spend some time with you and I’m sure that he’d enjoy it.”

The party was already in full swing by the time that Harry and Hermione walked through the doors.

Hannah had joined three of the Leaky Cauldron’s private rooms together and then enlarged the space. A large table, filled with platters, dishes and tureen’s containing all manner of food lined the wall to one side, while on the opposite side, half a dozen tables had been set up. A small bar had been installed against the back wall and this seemed to be where the majority of those there were congregated.

“Harry!”
The call went up from George and was quickly echoed by all of those there, along with a number of cheers and even a whistle that could only be Seamus.

Harry raised his hand in greeting, giving them a wave and, it seemed, incidentally, signalling a stampede. The first to reach him were Angelina, Alicia and Katie who wrapped him in a four-way hug, each managing to plant a sloppy kiss on his cheek.

“It’s good to see you guys, too,” Harry laughed as he took one hand off of Katie’s back to shake hands with Dean, followed by Dennis, Lee and Oliver.

“Let the guy breathe, why don’t ya?” Ron said, pulling the girls off Harry only to promptly wrap him in a gigantic bear-hug.

“Hey, Ron,” Harry said. “How’s things?”

“Yeah, you know,” Ron replied, running a hand through hair that Harry noted was starting to thin. “Good. Cannons are having their best season in years.”

“ Heard they’d finally gotten a decent keeper,” Harry replied.

“Boys,” Hermione mock-huffed, her smile giving away her true feelings.

“Here you go, Harry.”

Harry felt a tankard thrust into his hands and looked to see the distinctive foam of butterbeer in his hand.

“Thanks, Susan,” Harry said.

“It’s been too long, mate,” Ron complained. “Thought you’d be done with your wandering years ago. Seeker’s spot is still yours if you want it, just say the word. I assume you can still fly as great as you used to?”

“What? Of course, I can,” Harry replied indignantly, images of him and Spider-man patrolling the city flitting through his mind.

“Forget it, Ron,” Oliver interjected. “When Harry goes professional, you know he’s going to join the best team in the league. Puddlemere.”

“Puddlemere?” an aghast Ron protested. “Why in the world would he play with them when he can play with his best mate?”

“Well, we are the top team in the league. Have been for the past four years running. And a Seeker needs the best Captain and Keeper backing him up,” Oliver boasted.


Harry felt his arm pulled.

“Come on, once those two get going, nothing can stop them,” Hermione whispered.

Harry grinned at her. Suddenly it was as though the years had just melted away and they were back in the Gryffindor common room once again. It was probably those thoughts that helped him focus on the woman half-hidden in the corner at one of the tables.

“Is that Lavender?” he asked, nodding in her direction.
Hermione looked over, surprise written on her face. “Yes, it is. It’s surprising that she’s here, actually.”

When Harry looked at her curiously, she continued.

“It’s rare to see her these days, she gets shunned a lot. You remember how Remus used to be treated? Well, it’s like that, only worse, her being a girl. Her scars don’t make it easy. At least she feels comfortable enough with us.”

Harry frowned in annoyance at the ridiculousness of the wizarding world. Lavender Brown was a hero of the Battle of Hogwarts. She fought when so many didn’t. Harry’d seen her that day, holding her own against Death Eaters two, three and four times her age. And she’d survived. The last that Harry’d heard, she’d earnt herself a respectable position as a lead writer with Teen Witch Weekly. Obviously, his information was out of date.

Squaring his shoulders, he marched across the room, greeting others here and there as he did, but not allowing himself to be waylaid for more than a second or two here and there.

“Hi, Lav, mind if I sit here?” Harry asked.

Lavender looked up in surprise. Her long hair was draped over half of her face, covering the scars that Fenrir Greyback had given her.

“Um, sure, Harry, if you want to,” she said.

“How’ve you been?” he asked as he sat.

She shrugged noncommittedly. “You know. Good, I guess.”

“I’m guessing Parvati and Padma are still in India?” he asked.

“Pad visits occasionally, but Parv is married now and has two boys and a third on the way, so she doesn’t get to travel much any more,” Lavender replied.

“She’s married?” Harry asked with a shake of his head. “You go away for a few years and everything changes. Right. Looks like I’ve come to the right person; fill me in on all the goss.”

It was almost like he’s flipped a switch in the woman. Her face lit up and she even leant towards him, coming out of the shadows somewhat.

What followed next was an hour of the most in-depth discussion of what’d been happening in the wizarding world that Harry’d ever heard. And Lavender wasn’t the only one getting in on the discussion. Everyone there drifted over at some point, adding in what they knew, not only about the couples that had formed, the weddings attended and the children born, but also the jobs that they’d settled into.

And through it all, Harry made sure that he kept smiling and laughing along with everyone else. Inside, though, he was cringing. Nothing had really changed. These people he once knew so well, his friends with so much potential, had hardly moved on at all. They had the same jobs as their parents, with very few exceptions. Life for them revolved around the same few things: family, jobs, quidditch, the Ministry and, to some extent, Hogwarts. And that was life for them.

To be honest, it wasn’t much different in the non-magical world. People there lived their normal, everyday lives, focussing on family and friends, jobs and the government and their sport of choice. It was exactly the life that Vernon and Petunia Dursley had always emphasised.
But to Harry, it sounded almost like a prison sentence. Where was the excitement? The challenges? The adventure?

And when he compared it to his own life he shuddered.

He’d left this world behind. He’d travelled the world, seen wonders, met people, eaten food that no one here could even imagine. And when he’d finally ‘settled’, it was only to almost instantly fall into a life of adventure with the Avengers. Tony, Peter, Matt, even Doreen and Gwen kept life exciting, unpredictable, and he wouldn’t have it any other way.

“Harry!” a high-pitched squeal interrupted his musing.

Before he’d even had a chance to look around, his face was full of long, red hair and his lap was filled with a lithe, female body.

“Hi, Ginny,” he smiled once he’d recovered the breath that she’d knocked out of him.

“It’s so good to see you again,” she said, wiggling around until she was sitting sideward on his lap, one arm draped around his shoulders.

“You, too,” he said, shooting a look at Hermione, a look she promptly ignored.

“You should have told me you were coming, I’d have gotten you season tickets with the Harpy’s,” she continued. “As it is, I can use my connections to get you in the top box at our next home match.”

His mouth snapped closed as she continued talking, not allowing him a chance to respond.

“And you’ve simply got to come home to the Burrow. Mum is dying to see you again. She’s promised to cook all of your favourites; we’ll make it a family reunion. Where are you staying? I hope it’s not here – no offence, Hannah. Doesn’t matter, you can come stay at my place, with me. We’ve got so much to catch up on, now that you’ve got your wandering out of your system. And I can introduce you to all the important people, of course.”

Harry looked around the table at the faces sitting there grinning madly at him as she continued babbling on. Dean seemed to be almost laughing, a fact that Harry wasn’t amused with, especially considering that Ginny had apparently only broken up with him – again – a month or so back.

“Ginny. Ginny. Ginny!” he said, getting progressively louder. Finally, he’d caught her attention enough to interrupt her latest sentence. “Thanks for the offer, but I’ve got a place, remember? Grimmauld? And as for your Mum and Dad, of course I’ll make sure to go over and visit while I’m here, but this is just a visit. I’m heading back to New York when I’m done here.”

Hearing that caused every conversation to stop and heads to swivel to look firstly at him and then at each other.

The party seemed to stutter then and it wasn’t long before the first ones began leaving – after all, most had children to get home to. When it seemed polite, Harry, too, made his farewells and gave his thanks to Hannah and Neville before he, too, left, seeking something to assure himself that he wasn’t going to be stuck in this world where the greatest excitement was assured if your quidditch team had won their latest match.

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“If you could resume your Animagus form?” Minerva asked.
Harry sighed but stood from his seat and moved to the open area of the Headmistress’ office.

_This_, he thought, _would have been so much cooler if I’d been something, anything else. Even a pigeon, at least then it’d be something I could write off as having strategic value – able to blend in and gather intel. But this?_

On second thought, there was only one bird form that Harry thought would have been worse to have – a merlin. He could just imagine it now. The entire wizarding world going absolutely nuts over the idea of him being the second coming of the greatest wizard in history. If he thought his fame was bad now, it’d be nothing compared to that.

“Mister Potter?” Minerva interrupted his thoughts.

Harry, hearing the impatience in her voice, quickly closed his eyes and concentrated.

Instantly, his body began transforming.

Slate-grey and black feathers grew on his head, out of his back and from his arms as they morphed into wings. His chest feathers rippled as they emerged – chestnut brown bands on white with some orange highlights. His feet quickly changed into the talons that he’d grown used to in this form. The only anomaly in his form marking him as an Animagus instead of a true bird of this species was the fact that instead of bright yellow eyes, they were banded by emerald green.

“Well done, Harry,” Minerva smiled, “a truly remarkable feat. And I must say that this form suits you perfectly. A sparrowhawk.”

Harry cocked his head up at her and glared as best that a bird could.

“Really, Mister Potter, is that necessary? I’m not the one that you’re perturbed with, if I understand you correctly,” she admonished. “And this form suits you perfectly. Small, fast and incredibly good flyers, capable of outflying most other birds.”

“Yes,” Harry replied after transforming back. “but Tony’s going to pay out on me so much, especially since he’s been calling me ‘Sparrowhawk’ for ages.”

“Obviously this ‘Tony’ has exceptional intuition,” Minerva countered.

“No, he just likes being a jerk,” Harry muttered.

Minerva’s glare told him that the only reason she was refraining from commenting was because she didn’t know the man.

“Perhaps the best way to stop your friend’s teasing is to show him exactly what you can do in your form,” Minerva said. “And to do that, you must first get complete control of transforming between human and bird. You should be able to change forms in the blink of an eye. So, that’s what I want you to do: transform back and forth as quickly as you can five times. After that, we’ll rest, review your progress and continue.”

With a nod, Harry concentrated within himself, felt the sparrowhawk and changed.

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Harry roared with laughter as Teddy finished telling the tale of his latest, greatest prank.

“You should have seen them! Every single one of them was convinced that they were totally naked.
They were grabbing everything that they could – bags, books, one even ripped the shield from one of the suits of armour! Professor Flitwick was trying to get them back in class, but they were refusing, trying to hide from everyone and race back to their common room at the same time. It was hilarious!

“And the best part was that they were doing it to themselves,” Lachlan, Teddy’s best friend added.

Harry clapped Teddy on the shoulder. “You truly are your father’s son; a Marauder through and through.”

“Why do I get the feeling that I’m glad that I missed hearing that particular story?” the Headmistress asked in a dry voice from directly behind them.

Harry swung around on the bench, a smile still on his face in direct contrast to the looks of horror that now graced the faces of Teddy, Lachlan and their three friends.

“What you don’t know can’t get anyone in trouble,” Harry replied.

Minerva cocked an eyebrow at him. “Are you saying that someone deserved a detention, Mister Potter?”

“Absolutely not!” Harry protested. “All I’m saying is that hearing a story, out of context, or worse, a part of a story is never a good thing.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” she deadpanned, her gaze sweeping over the students before settling back on Harry. “There is, however, a purpose to my seeking you out, Mister Potter.”

Harry sat up slightly straighter. “Yes?”

“Professor Sinistra has brought to my attention that there is a rather rare astronomical event due to happen in a few days,” she said. “I believe that it’s called ‘The Convergence’ and only occurs once every five thousand years.”

“Sounds like something that could be very educational,” Harry replied cautiously.

“I’m glad that you see that, Mister Potter,” a pleased-sounding Minerva replied. “Therefore, you should have no problems accompanying Professor Sinistra and her NEWT Astronomy class to Greenwich to see the event.”

Harry stared at her. “Greenwich. With a bunch of pure-blood teenage witches and wizards.”

“Yes, Mister Potter. Precisely. Thus, why the inclusion of a chaperone who knows the muggle world intimately is vital,” she replied.

Harry simply stared at her.

Finally, Minerva sighed. “If you agree to do this, I’ll even sweeten the deal by allowing a single fourth year Astronomy student to accompany the excursion.”

Beside him, Teddy perked up, a huge smile on his face.

“Say yes, Uncle Harry!” Teddy exclaimed grabbing Harry’s arm.

“I’d love to help out,” Harry said, smiling at Teddy.

“Thank you, Mister Potter,” Minerva smiled. “If it helps, consider this as payment for me helping
you with your ‘little’ problem.”

Harry’s head spun to stare at her as she casually turned and strolled away, the corners of her mouth turned up in what Harry took as a massive grin.

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“Dad?” Jennifer asked, her voice scratchy and soft.

It was enough, though, to have William spinning away from the window he was gazing out of and rushing to her bed. His first impulse was to sit on the side of the bed itself; instead, conscious of his daughter’s injuries, he settled for the chair.

“I’m here, Jenn,” he said, grasping her hand.

Jennifer blinked at him before her eyes shifted slightly to take in the room around her. William’s eyes misted over slightly as tears formed – this was the most lucid his daughter had been since she’d first woken, however briefly, a week ago.

“I’m in the hospital?” she asked, confusion evident in her voice and her furrowed brow.

“You are. You’re on the mend; you’re going to be alright,” he assured her.

“What happened? Why am I here?” she asked.

William hesitated, unsure whether it was wise to tell her so soon after her waking.

“Dad?” Jennifer insisted.

“You were … you were shot,” he finally said.


“You don’t remember?” William asked, his policeman side half-hoping that she did while his parental side hoping that she didn’t remember something so traumatic.

Jennifer shook her head. “No. Kinda remember leaving work, then … nothing”

“That’s okay, Baby. It happened a number of weeks ago,” William replied before rushing past the second part of her question – no need to tell her that the current theory was that she was targeted as a warning to him, especially as it didn’t seem like a mugging gone wrong. “It was pretty bad, Baby; we nearly lost you. If it hadn’t been for Bruce …”

“Bruce?” a confused Jennifer asked.


“Bruce? I haven’t seen Bruce in years. He was there when I was shot? I don’t remember,” she trailed off.

William shook his head. “No. Bruce wasn’t there then. He happened by, completely by chance, just after. He saved you, Jenn. If it wasn’t for him, you wouldn’t have made it. You’d lost so much blood, he had to give you some of his just to get you to the hospital.”

Her head moved around then as she searched the room.
“Where?” she asked.

“Where is he?” William asked, to which she nodded. “Bruce couldn’t stay. He headed to New York, I believe. He left you an address if you want to talk to him or see him once you’re better.”

Jennifer nodded. “Yes, I’d like that.”

William fished out the piece of paper his nephew had given him and placed it on the table beside her bed, sliding the edge of the phone over it so that it didn’t blow away.

“There you go, it’s there for you when you’re feeling better,” he smiled.
I've Never Been More Than Each Of You Created

Harry flopped onto the Granger couch and leant back, cradling the cup of tea in his hands. It was nice to simply relax and, for some reason, it was easier to do so here than in his own house. Grimmauld may be much cleaner and less dark than it once had been, but it still held far too many memories for Harry to ever be completely comfortable in it. Really, if it wasn’t for Kreacher, he would have sold the place years ago. But the ancient house elf would die of a heart attack if Harry did that, so, for now, he kept it.

Harry’d spent most of the day pottering around the house, inspecting the library for useful books and even reading one of them. But what should have been a relaxing day … wasn’t. To be honest, he was still too wound up from the night before.

The party should have been just that, a party full of fun, laughter, good food and drinks and catching up with old friends. But seeing them all, hearing about their lives, it’d struck a nerve, giving him a picture of what his life could have been. Safe, predictable and oh, so boring. Just like the Dursleys’ always said life should be, only with a magical twist. And to top that, seeing how insular Lavender had become, one of the most popular and out-going girls that he knew at Hogwarts, was simply a travesty.

He wished that he could change the opinions of the magical idiots that couldn’t see that a simple disease didn’t stop a person from being good and worthwhile. Oh, he knew that he probably could, at least he had the potential to make a difference. Hermione over the years and Andy the other day had pretty much told him that he had the political clout to do so. And while it’d be a good thing to do, he simply wasn’t ready to devote his life to magical Britain and to give up the life of adventure that he’d, well, not quite built, more like fallen into.

“Harry?” Hermione asked, breaking into his thoughts. “Good, you are here. Mum said that you were, you were simply being so quiet that I wasn’t sure if she was mistaken.”

Harry looked up and smiled slightly at her. Hermione paused as she was crossing the room to look at him. When her smile morphed into a frown, he started to worry.

“You’re brooding,” she stated. “I thought you’d got over that particular bad habit before you even left Britain.”

“I’m not brooding,” Harry protested, before withering under her disbelieving gaze. “Well, maybe a little.”

With a few quick steps, Hermione finished crossing the room before settling on the couch beside him, one leg under her so that she could fully face him.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, taking his hand.

“Nothing, I’m fine,” Harry replied.

Hermione gave him a nonplussed look, a look that he knew all too well.

“Just thinking about last night,” he finally conceded.

“What about it?” Hermione asked. “I thought that it was fun; it’s not often that we all get together like that.”
“And why’s that, Hermione?” Harry asked, already knowing the answer.

“Well, we all have our own lives to lead.” she frowned. “A bunch of us are married and those that aren’t might as well be married to their jobs, I guess.”

“Exactly!” Harry replied. “You all live such … such normal lives. Family, work, quidditch for those interested in it – either playing or following. And that’s it. Life in a nutshell. What happened to the group of people bent on changing the world?”

“What do you mean? We are changing the world,” she frowned, “at least in our own way. Those of us who work for the Ministry have been working hard at changing those repulsive laws that got put in place under Fudge and Umbridge. The ones who own businesses make sure that there’s no prejudice wherever they can. And you can be sure that none of our children will be anything like some of the gits that we went to school with.”

“But how much difference is all that actually making?” Harry asked, and ploughed on before Hermione could respond. “Lavender is shunned, for goodness sake! She simply has a disease and that amazing dream job that she had? What happened to it? Not to mention what Andy’s been telling me. The Wizengamot sounds like it’s going backwards. Just how many of those laws that you’ve been burning yourself out trying to get passed to better the lives of other magical species have gotten passed? And the ones that have been passed, how much difference has actually been made?”

Hermione gaped at him, her mouth opening and closing. Finally, she closed her eyes momentarily and Harry knew that she was gathering her thoughts for a counter-argument.

And then she visibly wilted.

“You’re right, Harry,” she said quietly. “It’s a real struggle and what progress Shack, Arthur and I made after the war stalled pretty quick. Not many of the laws that I’ve written have even made it to the floor of the Wizengamot and a lot of the ones that do, don’t get passed. But we press on because it’s the right thing to do for the world we love, we want it to get better and how can it if people simply give up or walk away?”

Harry stared at her. “Is that what you think I did? Gave up? Walked away?”

“You have to admit, Harry, that that’s what it looks like,” she replied. “You went through Auror training, achieved your dream job and then, after only a couple of years, you quit. And then, one day, you simply up and left. If I had to pinpoint a time when magical Britain started sliding backwards, that’s the point I’d pick. People simply gave up trying. We faltered without you there as our beacon, showing us the way. And that allowed the old purebloods their foothold to begin dragging the momentum back towards their way, the way society has been for centuries.”

Harry stared at her, aghast.

“You’re seriously going to lay the blame for all that on me?” he asked.

Hermione shrugged. “Oh, I know that it’s not your fault, but the people needed their leader, their Hero, the Man-Who-Conquered showing them that their world could be better.”

“I hate those titles,” Harry spat.

“I know that, Harry,” Hermione replied. “But that doesn’t mean that that’s not who you are, especially not to everyone else here in magical Britain.”

“Yes, I’ve never been anything more than what everyone made me to be,” Harry stated with a shake
of his head. “Hero or villain, that’s been my whole life here. Remember what it was like in Hogwarts? I was the Boy-Who-Lived one day and the Heir of Slytherin the next; a liar, cheat and attention-seeking git or a TriWiz Champion depending on the mood of the population.”

“I remember,” Hermione replied softly.

“I know you do,” Harry said, squeezing her hand. “You were the only one who was there through it all; even Ron left a couple of times.”

She nodded and, seeing that she did understand, he continued.

“That’s why I had to leave; you know that,” he said. “I saw exactly what you were saying, that everyone was wanting me to be another Dumbledore, to be the Leader of the Light. But that’s not who I am, I’m Harry, just Harry, not an entire society’s role-model or compass or whatever they wanted me to be.”

“Now you’re also ‘Mage’, for the whole world to look up to,” she smirked.

Harry crinkled his nose at her. “And the best bit is that no one knows the true identity of Mage. I can still be me, Harry, as well as indulge my ‘saving people thing’ that you say I have. Here, in Britain, I couldn’t do that. I’d be in the spotlight all the time and I’d hate every minute of it. I’d go insane.”

“I know,” Hermione sighed. “Your travels around the world and your life in New York with the Den, not to mention your new friends has been good for you. Doesn’t mean that your friends here don’t want you to come home. We miss you, Harry.”

“You don’t have to. You could move, come with me to New York,” Harry said hopefully.

“You know I can’t do that,” Hermione replied. “Shack needs me and I’ve put too much time and effort into my work here to leave things half-finished; that’s simply not me. And I will change the world, I will not let magical Britain slide back to what it was before and during the war even if it takes me the rest of my life.”

Harry nodded sadly at her. He knew what her response would be, he’d always known, really. And while they’d always be the best of friends, it didn’t seem likely that they’d ever be living on the same continent, let alone in the same city, again.

“Alright, enough of this depressing topic,” Hermione said, tugging on his arm. “Come on, stand up.”

Harry complied with a confused expression on his face.

“There was a reason I asked you here for dinner, apart from getting out of cooking because Mum enjoys cooking for us,” she said. “Now, transform into your sparrowhawk form.”

Harry stared at her, making sure that she wasn’t going to crack some kind of joke in Tony’s absence. Seeing only interest and earnestness in her face, he complied.

“Wonderful!” she exclaimed. “That form suits you so well. And your colourings are perfect. The feathers on your back and wings are only a few shades off of your dragon-hide cloak even. Now, seeing as none of the original Marauders are here to do it, it falls to me to give you your Animagus name.”

Harry looked up at her, startled.

_That he decided, was a very bad idea._
He still remembered ‘SPEW’; Hermione had horrible taste when it came to naming things.

“Therefore, as the representative of Padfoot, Moony and Prongs,” she continued, “I hereby name you … ‘Ged’.”

Harry instantly transformed back.

“‘Ged’? What sort of name is that?” he asked.

Instead of replying instantly, Hermione moved across to one of the nearby bookshelves and took down a package that Harry hadn’t noticed before.

“This will explain,” she said, thrusting the package at him.

Curiously, Harry ripped off the brown paper to find a set of six books.

“Ursula K. Le Guin,” he read, noting the author's name on every one of the books, before looking up at her questioningly.

“The main protagonist in the stories is a man whose true name is ‘Ged’, but his everyday name is ‘Sparrowhawk’,“ Hermione explained. “I thought it kind of fitting, especially …”

“Because of Tony,” Harry finished. “You know giving me a Marauder name is kind of redundant, don’t you?”

“Well, of course, I know that,” Hermione huffed. “But it’s something that Sirius and Remus would have expected, not to mention your father. So, I made sure that you have one, even if it never really gets used.”

“Thank you, Hermione,” he said sincerely before pulling her into a hug.

They’d only just let go when Jane and Henry entered.

“Don’t mind us,” Jane said. “we just want to catch the news headlines before dinner.”

The four shifted around the room before settling on the lounge chairs, Harry reading the blurbs on the backs of his new books. It wasn’t until a familiar name was said by the newsreader that Harry looked up.

“…Selvig, notable for his involvement in the alien invasion of New York, streaked nude across Stonehenge…” the newsreader was saying.

“Erik?” Harry whispered as he stared at the image of the man that he’d only met a handful of times appeared on the screen.

“Is that?” Hermione asked.

“Yep,” Harry replied.

“… disrobed, and began shouting at visitors to the historic site. He was later taken into police custody for psychiatric evaluation. Police are still refusing to confirm…”

Harry shook his head. Something wasn’t right with the man, but darned if he knew what it was.

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“Miss Granger? I’m surprised to see you here,” Minerva commented, her eyes flicking from first Hermione, across to Harry and back again.

“A once in five-thousand-year event? How could I miss it?” Hermione replied.

“Indeed,” Minerva smiled knowingly. “I am almost tempted to come along myself. Unfortunately, my duties keep me here.”

“Uncle Harry!” an excited Teddy broke in, rushing up to greet them.

“Hey, Teddy,” Harry replied, draping an arm over the teen’s shoulder and squeezing. “Ready for an adventure?”

“You bet!” Teddy replied eagerly.

“This will not be an ‘adventure’, Mister Potter, merely an Astronomy excursion to observe the heavens,” Minerva admonished. “To be honest, I expect the whole experience to be very sedate.”

Harry shrugged. “Getting out of the castle is always an adventure, Professor.”

“Hmm,” Minerva frowned. “Come along, the class is meeting in the Astronomy classroom to go over last-minute details.”

Upon entering the classroom, Harry took one look around and promptly had to suppress a groan. It was just as he feared: a dozen or so pureblood teenagers dressed in traditional wizarding robes. They were going to stand out a mile if something wasn’t done. At least Teddy was dressed appropriately in jeans and a dark green shirt with a dragon motif on the front, even if said dragon was obviously a Hungarian Horntail.

“First thing we need to do is to get them dressed properly,” Harry stated matter-of-factly. “I’m taking it none of this lot ever took Muggle Studies?”

“I do not believe so,” Minerva replied as she looked around the room.

“Harry’s right,” Hermione said. “Wizarding robes are not appropriate for going out into the muggle world. Thankfully, a bit of transfiguration work is about all we need. Harry? If you’ll take the boys?”

With a nod, Harry strode forward and to the left, while Hermione went to the right.

“Okay, boys, over here,” he called, waving his arm.

After checking with both professors, the five boys moved towards him, even as the eight girls headed towards Hermione.

At his gesture, one of the boys stepped forward, however warily. Harry, though, wasn’t giving him time to reconsider. A simple flick of his wrist brought his wand to hand before it was moving in an intricate pattern. Robes shimmered and changed to a pair of dark grey slacks; the Hogwarts button-down shirt was altered slightly to more reflect modern non-magical fashion. The Slytherin tie, he decided to leave alone.

“Is this really what muggles wear?” the boy asked, lifting one knee then the other to get a feel for the pants.

“It certainly is, Mister …” Harry replied.

“Greengrass, Sir. Daniel Greengrass.”
Harry stopped and looked at the boy.

“Any relation to Daphne Greengrass?” he asked.

“Yes, Sir. My fathers, cousin’s daughter,” Daniel replied.

“I went to school with Daphne,” Harry explained. “We weren’t friends, her being a Slytherin and me a Gryff, but we were at least cordial, especially in our seventh? Eighth? Last year of Hogwarts. She’s a good woman; earnt my respect at the Battle of Hogwarts.”

Daniel’s eyes bugged out. “I never knew she fought in the war.”

Harry smiled slightly. “Daphne didn’t fight, that’s not the Slytherin way. What she did do was refuse to leave before the battle. Spent hours, days really, working with Madam Pomfrey, patching up anyone and everyone who was injured, on both sides of the war. Thing is, she knew that just being in the castle would have gotten her killed if Voldemort’s forces had won, and yet she stayed anyway.”

“Wow, I didn’t know that,” Daniel replied. “She’s a Healer now.”

“And I’d bet a damn fine one, too,” Harry smiled. “Next time you see her, say ‘hi’ from me. Now, who’s next?”

Just as Harry was finishing up, Hermione came over with a pile of clothing in her hands.

“Here you go, boys, put one of these on as well,” she instructed, handing one to each of the students, including Teddy.

Harry took a good look at the jerseys and grinned – they were perfect. The front and collar was white with the Hogwarts’ crest on the upper left chest. Four bands, a finger width wide, in red, blue, yellow and green encircled both biceps. The back was made of four panels – red and blue at the top, yellow and green at the bottom.

“What are these?” Minerva asked, eyeing the jerseys.

“School jerseys,” Hermione replied. “Almost every muggle school has clothing like this, in their own particular colours, of course; it helps to define the school out in the public. Many personalise them, having the students’ name on the back and some even include the year, especially for the seniors, saying when they graduate.”

“And this won’t make us stand out?” one of the girls asked, her fingers running over the crest.

“Not at all,” Hermione replied. “In fact, we’d be more likely to stand out without something like this. This way, we’ll simply be seen as a class on excursion and dismissed. If anyone does ask us about Hogwarts, all we need to say is that we’re an exclusive boarding school from Scotland.”

“Very good thinking,” Minerva replied. “I may wish to talk to you some more about these ‘jerseys’ at a later time.”

Hermione gave a nod just as Professor Sinistra called the group together.

“Before we leave, I thought that it might be useful to go over what to expect today,” she said. “As you all know, this Convergence only happens once every five thousand years. That means that what records we do have of the event are rather incomplete, to say the least. What is known is that the fabric between the worlds that includes Earth, or as it was known the last time, Midgard …”
“Midgard?” Harry interrupted. “As in Asgard, Jotenhein and the rest of the nine realms?”

“I was not aware that you knew about the old Norse mythology and the worlds of Yggdrasill?” Professor Sinistra commented with raised eyebrows.

“Yeah, well, let’s just say that a … friend got me interested,” he replied, ignoring Hermione’s snort.

“Very well,” she continued. “As I was saying, the fabric between the nine realms will be thinnest as they converge into alignment. It is believed that this will allow us a very brief window into those worlds themselves.”

Harry’s hand drifted momentarily to the phone in his belt before he decided otherwise.

“There will possibly be other effects – a change in weather being among them, but nothing that should cause any need for alarm. Does anyone have any questions?” she asked.

When none were asked, she clapped her hands together.

“Well, then, we’d best be off; we’ll need to reach the edge of the wards before we can use the portkey the Ministry has provided,” Professor Sinistra stated.

The portkey had deposited the group of seventeen in a convenient, out-of-the-way alley just outside of Greenwich University. After checking that they hadn’t been noticed, Harry and Hermione led the group across the road and onto the campus itself. They’d scoped out what they hoped was a good spot the day before – an open green area, bordered by trees on one side, the building of the University (coincidentally the library that Harry’d had a hard time keeping Hermione out of) on another and the River Thames on the last.

Unsurprisingly, Hermione’s assessment of their wearing a ‘school jersey’ was accurate, they didn’t garner more than a second glance and in most cases, not even a first look.

“This should do perfectly,” Professor Sinistra smiled as she surveyed their chosen location. “From here, we can see the sky perfectly and it won’t take much to see even more if we need to move further out away the trees.”

“Any idea how long until it starts?” one of the boys asked.

Professor Sinistra looked at her pocket watch. “Not long, I believe.”

“Um, Uncle Harry? Is the river supposed to do that?” Teddy asked.

Harry turned to see what his godson was looking at. Almost instantly, his eyes bugged out before narrowing and his hands began moving of their own accord.

“No. It’s not,” he stated grimly, watching the wave that had formed as though something was pushing it towards the shore.

And then, the thing that was pushing the water appeared out of nowhere.

It was narrow but incredibly tall, easily a couple of hundred metres, and made of a jet-black metal. The fact that it was flying and clearly alien screamed that he had work to do.

He’d deliberated that morning on what to wear; now, he was glad that he’d chosen his ‘work’ pants and shirt and black dragon-hide boots, just in case. As his hand passed over his belt, making both it
and its multitude of pockets become visible, the alien vessel hit ground. Instead of slowing it as one might expect, the alien ship just ploughed on.

Concrete, dirt, stone, grass, it was all tossed up and aside like paper. Around them, people began screaming and running in a blind panic. Clouds above the ship began to gather and darken as the convergence drew closer.

“Get them to safety,” Harry ordered, swinging his blue-grey cloak around his shoulders, having pulled it from one of his pouches. “Teddy, stick with Aunt Hermione; she’ll look after you.”

“Harry? What’s happening?” Hermione asked.

“I don’t know, but I’m going to find out,” he stated grimly.

It was then that his eyes, scanning the area for people in trouble, found someone unexpected, someone that he knew, someone standing in the direct path of the oncoming alien spaceship.

“Stay safe,” he ordered, before applying the sticking and obscuris charms to his hood, turning on the spot and apparating away.
In the split second that he had after apparating in, Mage noted that both Darcy and the other guy were carrying a pile of metallic pole-like things. He didn’t wait to analyse them, though. His hands shot out, grasped the two by their biceps and with a quick turn, the three apparated away, mere milliseconds before the bow-wave of grass, dirt and concrete would have smashed into them.

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“Pop!” Darcy Lewis asked as she stumbled after Mage let go of her.

Beside her, Ian was doubled over, heaving his guts up and trying to suck in deep lungfuls of air at the same time.

“Sorry about that; apparating can be a bit rough the first time,” Mage stated, sounding anything but apologetic.

Darcy spun around, her big brown eyes widening at the fact that she wasn’t where she thought she was. In fact, from where she now stood, she could see the big ugly ship thing ploughing straight through where she’d just been standing. Frantically, she patted herself down to check that she was still there, letting the scientific rod-things fall to the ground with a clatter.

Only then did she take note of the cloaked man standing in front of her.

“Mage! Did you do that? Rescue us from getting splattered into jelly?” she asked, leaping forward to give him a hug.

“Us?” Mage asked.

“Oh, yeah, that’s Ian, my intern,” Darcy replied, looking down at the somewhat recovered now-named Ian standing bent over with his hands on his splayed knees.

“You have an intern now?” Mage asked before shaking his head. “Never mind. You’ve got some sort of scientific equipment. Does that mean that you or Jane or Erik perhaps have some idea of what’s going on?”


“Thor’s here?” Mage asked quickly.

“Yeah. He’s here to stop the big bad guy from destroying the world or the universe or something equally stupid,” Darcy replied.

“Tell me everything,” Mage commanded.

“Well, me and Jane stumbled across this strange phenomena where you could literally throw stuff between different worlds,” Darcy began. “It even swallowed my car keys. Then Jane disappeared, if you can believe that! Left me hanging for like five hours …” she rambled, her arms pinwheeling to emphasise her points.
Mage’s hands shot out and grabbed the girl by her shoulders, forcing her to silence.

“Just the highlights, Darcy, just the highlights,” he instructed.

“Right. The highlights,” she nodded. “There’s this evil dude, Thor called him Malekith, I think. He’s got some super freaky stuff called the aether that he’s going to release into the convergence when it happens and that’s ultra bad. Me and Ian are supposed to set these things up for Jane and Erik to do their thing to help stop him, while Thor keeps him distracted.”

Mage stood frozen for a couple of seconds, processing the information that he’d been told.

“Once the convergence has passed, we’re safe?” he asked.

“Well, I don’t know about safe – have you seen the great alien ship thing over there?” Darcy replied, waving one arm past Mage’s shoulder. “But yeah, he can’t destroy the universe and everything, at least, not like that.”

“Thanks, Darcy,” Mage nodded. “You and your … Ian do what you need to do, but stay safe. I’m off to give Thor a hand.”

Before she could respond, Mage’d twisted into nothingness with a pop.

 Mage apparated to just in front of where the gigantic alien ship had come to a stop. His wand dropped into his hand as he looked up at the thing in horror. From this close, it looked even larger, taller and more ominous. The gathering black clouds above it didn’t help with that. And then a part near the top began moving, plummeting downwards in a controlled drop, just like an elevator.

A crack of thunder coincided almost perfectly with a ramp extending at the base of the ship and a door sliding open.

Mage shifted position slightly, one foot forward, his wand hand raised, ready.

“Seidhr!” a very welcome voice called.

Mage glanced across with a smile, not that the Asgardian could see it.

“Thor. Hope you don’t mind me crashing the party,” he said.

“Your aid is most welcome, my friend,” Thor replied as he strode forth to stand beside him.

“You needn't have come so far, Asgardian! Death would have come to you soon enough,” a shadowy figure stated in a deep voice.

Mage took in the alien. He was similar enough to human in shape, not that that often mattered, Thor was as well, and he was much more powerful and long-lived as well. His armour was dark – black seemed to be a favourite colour with this lot. Unlike the figures behind him, this one, the leader – Malekith according to Darcy – wore no mask. One half of his face was bone white, the other charred black as though he’d been caught in some sort of fire.

“Not by your hand!” Thor shot back.

“And you, Midgardian, come to die that much quicker than the rest of your pitiful race,” Malekith stated. “Your universe was never meant to be. Your world and your family will be extinguished.”
And then, before either Mage or Thor could respond, Malekith twirled slightly and shot twin jets of energy at them. It was deep, dark red, close enough in colour to clotted blood that had Mage raising the strongest shield that he knew of in front of him in defense.

The energy cared not a jot for the magic shield, shooting past it as though it wasn’t even there. Mage felt it slam into his body, lift him up and throw him backwards. He twisted awkwardly in the air before coming down hard on his side, his wind all but knocked out of him.

“Well, that’s not good,” Mage wheezed as he pushed himself back to his feet.

Thor, it seemed, had recovered much quicker, having stood back up defiantly, only for a new burst of energy to come from Malekith to strike Thor, sending him flying backwards once more.

“That’s the best you’ve got?” Mage yelled, aiming to simply draw the guy’s attention so that Thor could do his thing with Mjolnir.

Malekith didn’t seem to want to waste words in battle, something that he didn’t have in common with Mage’s past opponents. Instead, he simply blasted out with his energy at Mage.

Seeing it coming, Mage dove to the right, rolled as he landed and jumped back up to his feet. A hurried flurry of swishes and flicks had spells of red, bright blue and murky yellow shooting back at the alien. A bloom of deep red energy surged from Malekith’s body to absorb the spells before they could touch the alien’s body.

“Not good,” Mage muttered, his mind desperately searching for an alternative form of attack other than spells.

He needn’t have worried, though; his distraction seemed to be just what the doctor, well, god had ordered.

As Mage stared narrow-eyed at Malekith, Mjolnir came out of virtually nowhere to slam into Malekith, sending him flying, knocking his own men over like bowling pins before ploughing into and through a marble pillar and out of sight in the street beyond.

“Go!” Mage called, “I’ve got these.”

Thor gave a single nod before leaping skywards after Malekith, leaving Mage facing the three or four dozen flunkies that’d just emerged from the alien ship.

“Was that?” Ian asked, staring at the spot that the cloaked man had been standing moments before.


She bent down, then and picked up her half of the scientific do-hickey poles before looking pointedly at her intern.

“Well? What are you waiting for? Jane and Erik are counting on us to get these things set up,” she stated.

Quickly, Ian began retrieving his own set.

“It would have been nice if he’d taken us back to where these things need to go,” Ian moaned, juggling the awkward poles in his arms.
“Quit complaining and mush,” Darcy told him. “We’re on a deadline here.”

Ian was forced to quickstep to catch up to her – she may be short, but her fierce determination meant that she never went anywhere slowly.

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Mage and the four dozen or so aliens were left standing, staring at each other after the abrupt … departure of Malekith and Thor flying off after him. That, of course, only lasted for a few seconds.

Almost as one, the aliens began running. The problem was that only six were headed towards Mage, the rest vectored off in different directions.

He may not be considered much of a threat, but that didn’t mean that Mage wasn’t going to go down fighting.

Almost on instinct, he raised his wand and snapped off a stunner. The dark red jet of magic flashed across the intervening space before slamming into the lead alien, knocking him backwards off of his feet where he lay unconscious.

“That’s more like it,” Mage grinned ferally.

Within a few seconds, more spells were flying – a stunner, two incarcerous’, a levicorpus and a banisher. All hit dead on target, leaving his five remaining opponents trussed up, unconscious or dangling upside-down in mid-air. A few more stunners took care of the ones still conscious.

Looking up, Mage frowned; none of the other aliens were in sight anymore. The only clue he had to their whereabouts were the screams coming from the far side of the building.

While his sparrowhawk form would be perfect for getting where he needed to go quickly, without some more practice at transforming and flying, he was loath to use it. His trusty Lightning Bolt, though, that only took a second to pull out and enlarge.

Taking to the air, Mage rocketed up and over the buildings. Seeing a group of aliens chasing some people, he zeroed in on them, his wand spitting curse after curse at them. The problem was that he was limited in what he could use for fear of accidentally hitting the civilians.

“Too slow, too slow,” Mage admonished himself after it’d taken three passes to down the five aliens.

Noting the sound of more screaming, Mage veered away.

“Time for something a little Wheezey,” he grinned.

Using his knees to steer, Mage lined up his flight path to come at the four aliens from directly behind. One hand slipped off of the broom to reach into the appropriate pouch. Then, at just the right time, he dropped his ‘bomb’, instantly twisting himself about to shoot the activating magic at it.

The small package had barely had time to bounce off of the cobbles once, right in the middle of the aliens, when Mage’s magic impacted it. Instantly, the package burst apart, expanded with a wet squishy noise and engulfed the aliens. The four of them were left floundering in the middle of a swamp, mud and muck covering every inch of them.

“Glasius,” Mage whispered around his grin.

The effect was perfect – there was no way that those four were going anywhere, not frozen in the
Movement out of the corner of his eye had Mage zooming off before he’d even registered what it was. A group of three aliens had two people – students by the look of them, with their books held protectively in front of their chest – backed against a wall.

Knowing that this was going to require precision, Mage dropped lower before practically running off of his broom. Leaving it lying on the ground, he went to work.

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“Madam Davis! Madam Davis!” the young intern nearly screamed as she came flying into the office of the Head of the Improper Use of Magic.

“What is it?” Madam Davis asked impatiently, looking up from the report that she’d been reading.

“The Big Board. It’s showing a huge amount of magic being performed in a muggle-only designated area,” the girl nearly babbled.

Instantly, Madam Davis was on her feet and striding from the room, leaving the intern to scurry along in her wake.

One look at the Big Board, which covered the whole of the United Kingdom, showed that the intern was correct. The fact that the colour indicator was a deep, harsh red showed just how much magic was being used. Worse still was the fact that Greenwich was designated as being purely muggle, there were no magicals living in the area, nor were there any shops or businesses there.

“Merlin’s beard,” she breathed. “Send word to the DMLE! Get them there immediately to arrest whoever’s responsible. And alert the Obliviators. No! Forget the memo-planes! There’s not time for that. Just run!”

Instantly, the intern took off, leaving Madam Davis standing, staring at the Board as the colour intensified even further, something that she didn’t think was even possible.

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“Put those away!” Hermione hissed.

One by one, however reluctantly, wands were sheathed by most of the Hogwarts contingent that had taken them out. They were currently huddled in a copse of trees, out of the way and hopefully in a place where they wouldn’t be noticed but still able to see what was happening.

“We can’t let Mister Potter fight alone. We can help!” Daniel Greengrass insisted, clutching his wand in his hand tightly.

“Yeah, come on, Aunt Hermione, let us help Uncle Harry,” Teddy agreed, a fierce expression on his face.

“Harry doesn’t need help,” Hermione shot back, her force of will seemingly the only thing holding the students back. “Not to mention that anything that we did would be a breach of the Statute of Secrecy.”

“Then what’s he doing?” an incredulous voice asked.

“Harry, Mage, has special dispensation from the International Confederation of Wizardry to act in
defence of civilians or the world,” Hermione replied.

“Mage?” a confused Daniel asked. “Who’s that?”

“That’s Harry’s Avenger’s code-name,” Hermione replied and hurried on at the blank looks she was getting. “The Avengers are heroes, people with extraordinary powers charged with protecting everyone else from any and all bad guys.”

As they watched, Harry was charged from his blind side by one of the aliens and sent hurtling through the air before coming down on the grass and rolling away. Instantly, though, he was back up and casting, returning the favour.

“We can still help!” Teddy insisted. “He needs help. I don’t want Uncle Harry to get hurt.”

Hermione laid a comforting hand on his shoulder.

“He does this regularly. And if he really needs help, then Thor will give it to him,” she said. “If you really want to help Uncle Harry, then we need to stay here and let him do his thing; rushing in like that will only have him focussing on us and worrying about us and that distraction could get him hurt. Believe me, I know how it feels, I’ve been his best friend for most of my life, remember?”

Reluctantly, Teddy and the others nodded and Hermione breathed a sigh of relief that they were willing to follow her orders.

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Jane and Erik peeked around the corner, assessing whether it was safe to emerge. Seeing nothing at the moment, Jane relaxed her hand from the activation dial on her device slightly.

The convergence, they both knew, was fast approaching. Clouds and wind were swirling above and around them as the atmosphere went nuts at the gravity being exerted on the planet by the as-yet unseen other planets of the nine realms. Portals between the worlds were opening and closing at random, causing objects to disappear and appear in bizarre and unusual places.

Fortunately, Darcy and Ian had managed to place the majority of the devices that Erik had created in their correct positions. Jane’d already used them effectively to displace some of the Dark Elves, sending them away from the current harm that they were trying to do.

The only downside was that they’d lost track of Thor. He and Malekith were still fighting but it seemed that the anomalies were playing havoc with them as well, turning their fight into a scramble to stay on the same world as much as anything else.

“Jane!” Erik said suddenly, clutching her upper arm. “There! Those creatures are heading towards those students.”

Quickly Jane located the Elves that Erik pointed out, adjusted two knobs and twisted the dial.

Instead of the Elves disappearing as they were supposed to though, Darcy and Ian appeared directly in front of Jane and Erik.

“Darcy!” Jane exclaimed.

“Jane?” Darcy replied, dropping Ian from where she’d just been kissing him bent over her knee onto the ground.
With a shake of her head, Jane twisted the dial the other way. Unfortunately, her second attempt was just as good as her first. Only this time, she’d manage to summon Mage from somewhere or other.

Mage yanked his arm up as he appeared, sending the jet of vicious purple harmlessly skywards. An instant later, he redirected a spell towards the Elves that Jane’d been aiming for, sending a bolt of magic into the ground around them, exploding it and causing the Elves to be blown outwards and away.

“Mage?” Jane asked.

“Ian?” Mage said, clearly confused as to why the young man was lying on the ground.

“Doctor Selvig?” Ian asked looked straight up at the man.

“Myeu-muh!” Darcy exclaimed as Mjolnir shot past the group.

“Where’s Thor?” Mage asked before shaking his head and nodding after Mjolnir. “Never mind, he’s probably that way.”

“The convergence is getting close to being in full effect,” Erik stressed.

“You and Thor have to stop Malekith before that happens,” Jane insisted.

“I’ll do my best,” Mage replied, before jumping on his broom and rocketing after Thor’s hammer

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The squad of Aurors that apparated into Greenwich quickly realised that they were out of their depth. Muggles were running every which way, screaming their heads off as they were chased by the strangest creatures that they’d ever seen. They looked like humans, but it was obvious that they weren’t, not with their unnaturally white faces and skin and pointed ears, at least once they’d seen one without their mask on. And the armour that they were wearing was nothing like they’d ever seen before. Even their weapons were terrifying – shooting some kind of red-orange beam of something that definitely wasn’t magic.

Whatever these creatures were, it was obvious that they weren’t vampires or werewolves or house elves or any of the other magical species.

“This isn’t magic,” Draco Malfoy, the lead Auror stated in horror.

“Over there!” one of his rookies exclaimed.

As one, the group turned to see a wizard in a blue-grey dragonhide cloak fighting the creatures using stunners, bombardas, incarcerous’ and a host of other spells, all to devastating effect.

“He’s the one,” Malfoy stated. “We need to arrest him before he breaks the Statute to the point that the Obliviators can’t do their job.”

“NO! You can’t!” that same rookie – Shelbie, a recent transfer in from America – near-yelled.

Slowly, Malfoy turned to him, one eyebrow raised.

“That’s Mage,” Shelbie said in a rush. “The Avenger. You don’t know who that is? Harry Potter! The ICW gave him special dispensation to do what he does to protect the muggles and keep the magical world hidden as long as he’s wearing that costume. It was all over the American
newspapers; guess it didn’t make it over here?”

“No,” Malfoy stated slowly, turning back to stare at his old Hogwarts’ rival.

He watched as Potter took down a handful of the creatures almost with ease before racing off after another group. A flick of one hand brought his second-in-command to his side.

“We’ll split up, check that he’s the only magical here. You take Nott and circle that way,” he said, before leaning in slightly and adding, sotto voce, “see if you can gather up some of those creatures. Secure them in the dungeons below Malfoy Manor; they might prove useful later.”

In a louder voice, he continued. “We’ll deal with Potter and that ICW claim after … this has finished.

Glancing up at the sky, Mage could see that time was running out. The nine planets of Yggdrasil were coming into alignment. Great circles had begun appearing in the sky, each allowing a glimpse from Earth straight to these other worlds.

While Mage didn’t know which was which, just the fact that he could see them was awe-inspiring. One was ocean blue; another a deep, dark brown. The grey-green one seemed to be covered in a forest, while the icy white and light blue one matched the pictures in his mind of Jotenheim. Of the others, the deep red one was the most prominent, the others being too high for him to get a decent look at.

The fact that these great circles of other worlds were beginning to overlap told him that the Alignment was close, bare minutes away at most. And if he had to guess, Malekith and by extension, Thor, were bound to be right underneath them, most likely where the alien ship had come to rest.

Unfortunately, between where he currently was and where he needed to be, were a bunch of annoying aliens.

Mage’s arm was a blur as he snapped off spell after spell at the aliens. And while he was making a difference, it was simply taking too long to make his way through and past them.

Digging into his pouch, he pulled out a handful of Decoy Detonators, tossed them into the air and wandlessly banished them to his right. The wailing and annoying sirens that they made as they landed and began scurrying about did the trick, sending nearly two-thirds of the aliens running after them to find out what the noise was.

The rest Mage made short work of, stunning and tying them up as quickly as he could.

The wind and clouds intensified just then and Mage didn’t hesitate, taking off in a dead sprint.

Mage found Thor and Malekith trading blows not far from the alien ship. Mjolnir, it seemed, was still missing, leaving Thor simply using his fists. Each time that Malekith gained an upper hand through the use of the blood red energy that he favoured, Thor fought his way back, preventing the alien from reaching his goal.

“Malekith!” Mage shouted, distracting the dark-hued alien.

“You must have fought well, boy, to still be alive when my Elves were tasked with destroying you,”
Malekith stated. “It is almost a pity that your end is so close.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure of that,” Mage retorted, before winding up and pitching a small, glass ball at the alien.

Almost on reflex, Malekith caught it before looking at it disdainfully.

“You think that a bauble is enough to stop me, boy?” Malekith asked.

Mage simply shrugged and looked at Thor.

“Might be a good time to call Mjolnir,” he suggested.

Thor, he noted, gave a small nod and turned one hand outwards slightly.

And then Malekith did exactly what Mage wanted him to do – he closed his fist, crushing the glass ball that Mage had thrown at him. Instantly, a canary yellow mist burst forth and drifted upwards, clouding the aliens’ head where he was forced to breath it in.

Mage watched interestedly as Malekith’s jaw seemed to slacken and his hands dropped to hang limply at his sides. The deep red energy that was swirling about his body melted away, absorbed once more into Malekith’s body at the same time that his eyes closed and he began swaying ever so slightly where he stood.

Cautiously, Thor approached, just as Mjolnir arrived, slapping into his hand.

When Malekith made no move against him, Thor reached out and nudged the alien in the shoulder. Receiving no response, Thor looked back questioningly at Mage.

“A little something one of my friends cooked up,” Mage explained. “He’s in an intense daydream at the moment, won’t wake up for about half an hour or so. Well, it’d be that long if he was human, don’t know how long it’ll be with his species.”

Thor thought about that for about half a second before lifting his mighty hammer and slamming it into the side of Malekith’s head, dropping the alien to the ground in a slump.

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Malekith being neutralised seemed to be the signal for Mage and Thor’s allies to arrive.

Jane and Erik were the first, with Jane racing across the grass and jumping at Thor, wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing him soundly. Thor, in return, laughed heartily as he returned her embrace. Erik followed more sedately, carefully holding the device that he and Jane had created in front of him, its strap still snug around his neck.

Next to appear were Darcy and Ian. Mage could only shake his head in amusement when Darcy took one look at Jane kissing Thor before turning and planting a similar type of kiss on a startled Ian. Ian, of course, was quick to reciprocate.

In the distance, Mage noticed the Hogwarts crowd had appeared from shelter. While most were staring up at the sky at the still visible planets, some were looking his way. Noting that both Hermione and Teddy were in the latter category, he raised his hands and gave them a wave. Judging by the fact that a smile broke out Hermione’s face as she waved back, he guessed that she, at least, got the message that he was fine.
“Um, has anyone noticed that there’s a whopping great alien spaceship parked here?” Darcy asked after breaking off her kiss with Ian.

“Indeed,” Thor agreed, one arm still around Jane. “And this is not a good place for such a vessel to be; Midgard is not ready yet to have access to such a vessel.”

“Don’t let Tony here you say that,” Mage grinned.

“What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him,” Jane stated.

“With the convergence still in effect, we can send the ship through one of the anomalies fairly easily,” Erik said, fiddling with the dials on his machine.

“Do it,” Mage ordered.

With one decisive twist, the alien ship simply ceased to exist on Earth. Well, most of it, Mage noted. The part of the ship embedded in the ground was still there, its electronics or equivalents or whatever, sparking away from the suddenly cut connections.

“Convergence,” Jane whispered in awe, staring up at the circles of worlds that had finally aligned.

A few seconds later, the edges of the worlds that had disappeared began to reappear once again, only on the opposite side. And with Malekith out cold at their feet, the danger had passed.
“I must get this one back to Asgard,” Thor stated, nudging the unconscious body of the Dark Elf Malekith at his feet with his boot. “The aether must be extracted and secured where none can find it and use it in such a way again.”

“Smart idea,” Mage nodded. “And I’ll round up the others. Most should be easy to find – I left them scattered about the place either unconscious or tied up. It’s the last few that’ll probably be a problem.”

“A challenge that I’m sure that you’re up for,” Thor beamed, clapping him on the shoulder. “Once you have them all, call for Heimdell, he’ll hear you and send someone to collect them and remove them from Midgard for you.”

“That won’t be problem?” Jane asked. “There’s a number of you who just committed treason, remember?”

Thor laughed. “After what happened here, my Father will be lenient, have no fear, Lady Jane.”

Jane gave him doubtful look but nodded anyway.

“I look forward to seeing you all soon,” Thor said. “Heimdall!”

At that, Mage, Jane, Erik, Darcy and Ian quick-stepped backwards. They were none too soon as the clouds swirled above them before a jet of multicoloured energy crashed to Earth, engulfing both Thor and Malekith before abruptly leaping skywards again, leaving nothing but an elaborate Nordic pattern burnt into the grass.

Mage took a look around at his companions, trying to decide the best way to go about fulfilling his half of the bargain.

“Hey, don’t worry, Magic Man, I’ve got your back,” Darcy said jovially pulling her taser out of her pocket. “Bring the big bad dudes here and we’ll look after them and if they so much as twitch …”

The smell of ozone and the crackle of her taser lighting up told the story of what the Dark Elves had in store if Darcy thought they needed it.

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Rounding up the downed Dark Elves had been child’s play. Well, mostly. The four frozen in the midst of the Weasley Portable Swamp had taken a bit of extraction and Mage was sure that they still weren’t fully thawed. Not that it mattered all that much.

As each Elf was brought to the central spot for Darcy, Jane and Erik to watch over, Mage made sure to conjure some heavy iron shackles for them. That was in conjunction with the fact that they were still stunned and bound in heavy ropes.

Darcy pouted a bit at the sight of what he was doing to them, making Mage involuntarily shudder at the thought of the gleeful damage that she could do with her taser.

Finding the missing Dark Elves had proven to be slightly trickier. Thankfully, Mage had three aces up his sleeve: his broom for fast aerial surveillance, a point-me spell, and the screams of the general public.
The few that fought back with some kind of energy gun were the most interesting. Fortunately, a *protego* spell was more than a match for it.

Mage was starting to feel drained by the time that he’d gathered all of the Elves that he could find by any method. The fact that there were only twenty-seven of them had him frowning though – he was sure that there’d been a lot more than that.

“Jane or I probably zapped them to one of the other planets,” Erik tried to reassure him.

Mage could only nod and hope that that was in fact what had happened; the idea of some of these aliens running loose in London was not a comforting thought.

“Well, let’s see about getting rid of them,” Mage said before looking up uncertainly at the sky. “Heimdall?”

Exactly as had happened when Thor had called, the clouds above instantly churned together before a multi-coloured beam of light shot towards the Earth. Instead of engulfing the Dark Elves and transporting them away as had been expected, the Rainbow Bridge that formed was off to the side.

Four figures were left standing there on the grass once the beam had vanished. The one in front was the only female, dressed in Asgardian armour and wearing a buckler on her arm. Slightly back to either side of her and directly behind were three Asgardian males. The tallest, and widest, had a head of red hair and a large bushy beard. To the left was a thin fellow, a slender sword in hand to complement his dapper looks. The last had an Asian look to him and carried some type of mace.

“Sif!” an excited Jane exclaimed before rushing forwards.

“Lady Jane,” the now-named Sif replied returning the other woman’s hug with an awkward one of her own.

“You remember Darcy and Erik?” Jane asked the four. “Well, this is Ian and Mage.”

“The Seidhr!” the large warrior exclaimed. “We know well of the Seidhr; Thor has spoken often of his companions who fought by his side in defence of Midgard.”

Mage simply gave a small bow, unsure how else to respond.

“Mage, this is the Lady Sif and the Warriors Three,” Jane introduced.

“Volstagg,” the large red-head said, stepping forward to grasp Mage’s forearm.

“Fandral,” the immaculately dressed one introduced himself as.

‘Hogun,” the Asian-looking one said, adding an inclination of his head.

“It’s nice to meet you all,” Mage replied.

“This looks like you have had a successful battle,” Sif remarked, nudging the pile of Elves with her sword.

Mage shrugged. “I did what was needed.”

“As all good warriors do,” Sif agreed. “I think it best that we not linger. *These* need to be placed in secure confinement before they awaken.”

“Those ropes and chains should disappear in an hour or so,” Mage said quickly. “They’re simply
“Our thanks, Seidhr,” Sif said and, with a motion of her sword, her companions took up positions so that the four of them surrounded the pile of Elves.

“Heimdall!” Sif called.

And for the third time, the Rainbow Bridge of Asgard descended to Earth.

“I think I’m really glad that I’m not the gardener around here,” Darcy remarked looking around at the three designs now burnt into the grass.

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Sif and the Warriors Three had barely departed with the Dark Elves when Mage noted four red-robed men striding towards them. He couldn’t help but shake his head.

“Now you people turn up? After the danger’s passed?” he asked sarcastically once they were within hearing range. “And what do you think you’re doing dressed like that, where anyone can see you?”

“Harry Potter,” the lead auror said and it was all Mage could do not to flinch when he realised exactly who was addressing him. “Your presence is requested in front of the Wizengamot at two p.m. this afternoon to address your blatant disregard of the Statute of Secrecy.”

Harry stared at the platinum blond man that he hadn’t seen in years. He had the audacity to order him to the Wizengamot for that? When he was committing the exact same crime standing as he was in full wizarding dress in the middle of a muggle university? Admittedly, there weren’t any non-magicals around, well, apart from Jane, Erik, Darcy and Ian, but still.

“Malfoy, you’re an idiot,” Harry finally managed.

“And you’re an arrogant prick who thinks that the rules don’t apply to him,” Malfoy shot back. “This time, though, you’ll finally get what’s coming to you.”

Harry shook his head once again in disbelief. A quick tempus told him that, if he didn’t leave immediately, he was in danger of being late to his own hearing.

Again.

This, he thought wasn’t going to be fun. Then again, maybe it will be.

“I’ll catch up to you guys later,” Harry said before turning on the spot and apparating away, leaving a scowling Malfoy still standing there.

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The only concession that Harry made to being in the Ministry of Magic was to dispel the obscuris spell on his face.

When the guard at the Security Desk tried to stop him to measure his wand, Harry simply flicked back his hood and stared at the man, not even bothering to pause his steps. The faint remains of the lightning bolt on his head, it seemed, was enough to open doors.

There was only one place that the Wizengamot could possibly be meeting to try him – the exact same place that they did back when he was fifteen.
He stood patiently, almost unnaturally still in the elevator as it descended. The instant that the door opened, though, he was off, striding down the corridor and the stairs to the next level. Seeing the closed doors before him didn’t faze Harry in the slightest; a wandless banisher took care of them.

The fact that he strode through the doors the second after the great double doors had slammed back against the stone walls, his aura flaring slightly, instantly silenced the great circular, tiered courtroom.

Harry stopped at the precise centre, right in front of the ominous-looking prisoner’s chair, complete with its chains and manacles. With arms crossed, he tipped his head back slightly and stared upwards.

The rows were filled with purple-robed witches and wizards, all with the elaborate golden ‘W’s’ on their breast signifying them as members of the Wizengamot. There were a few faces that he recognised – Minister for Magic Shakelbolt, Andy, Madam Longbottom, among them – but his gaze passed over them as easily as it did every other face.

“I believe that you summoned me?” he deadpanned.

“Um, yes, Mister Potter,” one of the old men that Harry didn’t know replied.

Harry could see the man taking a deep breath, ready to launch into a pompous speech of some kind. Harry gave him just enough time to get the first syllable out before interrupting him.

“If I have to be here, use my correct title, thank you very much: Lord Potter. Or Lord Black, I suppose,” he added as an afterthought.

“Yes, well,” the man blinked.

But once again, Harry cut him off. He’d learnt from his last time in this situation: give them an inch and they'd take a mile, peppering him with questions and not allowing him to answer anything or defend himself.

“Then again, considering the reason that you’ve summoned me here, perhaps the correct form of address is ‘Mage’.”

Seeing the blank and bewildered looks, he sighed and elaborated.

“I am known throughout the world as ‘Mage’, one of the Avengers, a team of extraordinary people who are tasked with defending innocents, be they magical or non-magical, from threats of all sorts, be they human made, the bizarre, or even from beyond this planet. To this end, the International Confederation of Wizardry has given me special dispensation to act as I see fit, using magic in the presence of non-magicals. In this way, with me and my actions in plain sight, doing the things that I do, combatting the strange and weird, anything out of the ordinary that non-magicals see is simply passed off. Thus, allowing the wizarding world some breathing room to continue hiding from the rest of the world.”

Harry paused, looking up and around the room. His explanation, it seemed, was only starting to sink into a small portion of the witches and wizards staring dumbfounded down at him.

“What that means,” Harry continued. “Is that I acted with the full authorisation of the ICW today to defend London from a threat from something not of this world. I was not breaking the Statute of Secrecy. I was not alerting the non-magical population to the existence of witches and wizards. All they saw was ‘Mage’, one of the people they know that they can count on to protect them.

“The witches and wizards from Hogwarts who were in the area at the time abided by the Statute,
even going so far as to ensure that they were wearing appropriate clothing to blend in to their non-magical surroundings – something that I cannot say that your aurors did.”

This time when he paused, it was to see that his words had had some effect. Most looked thoughtful, while some actually looked as though they understood. Harry gave a nod of satisfaction.

“I trust that that clears everything up?” he asked rhetorically.

And before anyone could reply, he turned and strode from the room.

“I really wish that I’d done that the last time,” he muttered as he rode the elevator towards the lobby.

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By the time that Harry arrived back in Greenwich, the place looked completely different.

While it was true that he’d detoured from the Ministry of Magic to Hogwarts to both reassure himself that Teddy and Hermione were okay and to assure them that he was perfectly fine, he didn’t think that he’d been gone all that long. Even with the elapsed time due to staying for a late lunch in the kitchens of the castle with the pair.

But judging by the swarm of black-suited figures combing the site of the battle, not to mention the plethora of yellow tape and barricades holding back the inquisitive crowd, he guessed that he’d been gone for longer than he’d thought.

At least his hood was still up. A quick wave of his hand applied his usual spells to it.

The first black-suited figure who’d headed towards him, obviously with the intent of asking him to leave judging by the way he had one hand up, visibly blanched when he realised just who he’d encountered.

From there, it was as though the officious people couldn’t do enough for him, escorting him to a high-ranking man where he was asked to recount the battle. After that, he was shown inside the Library where the debris left over from Malekith’s ship was being brought.

Greenwich University Library had been taken over by S.H.I.E.L.D. – their logo was everywhere. At the very least, tables and chairs had been removed to create an enormous space, a space that was filled with giant squares of plastic. Small avenues and lanes created access ways for the S.H.I.E.L.D. personnel to move about, either adding to the piles of rubble on the plastic or taking some away, presumably to be analysed.

Mage watched the goings-on for a few minutes, trying to decide who might be in charge.

“It would be nice if, for once, Thor and his people sent down the God of Cleaning Up After Yourself. They probably just have a magic broom for this sort of thing,” a black-suited man with thinning brown hair groused.

Mage couldn’t resist the opening.

“I don’t think there is one of them. And while I do have a magic broom, it is definitely not for cleaning with,” he stated.

The man, along with the two women that he was talking to, whirled about. One of the women, a small, slim woman of Asian descent, was definitely S.H.I.E.L.D., judging by the black jumpsuit that she was wearing. The other, though, was more ambiguous. This woman was wearing black jeans, a
flannel shirt and a black leather jacket. She wore her hair long, with a slight wave to it at the ends where it had lightened from its dark brown as opposed to the usual S.H.I.E.L.D. severity.

“Mage,” the man breathed.

Mage resisted the urge to sigh and merely nodded – this man was obviously a fan.

“Phil Coulson,” the man introduced himself as, “it’s nice to meet you.”

Mage paused mid-stride and raked his eyes over the man. He’d heard that name before, usually in conjunction with a tone of sadness and regret or as a glass was raised.

“I thought you were supposed to be dead?” Mage noted, shaking Phil’s hand.

“It didn’t seem to take,” Phil shrugged.

“Know that feeling,” Mage commented, eliciting startled and confused looks from the three in front of him.

“Um, okay then,” Phil said, before turning slightly to indicate the two women. “This is Agent Melinda May and Skye.”

“Agent May,” Mage nodded before cocking his head at the younger woman. “Just Skye? No last name?”

“Nah. Long story,” Skye replied. “Basically, I don’t know my real name and I liked ‘Skye’ better than the name I was given at the orphanage. Mary Sue Poots.”

Mage laughed at the crinkled nose she made at the name.

“I think I’d have picked my own name, too, if I’d been given something like that,” he said.

“I understand that you were here for the battle,” Coulson said, interjecting himself into the conversation.

“I was,” Mage confirmed. “Thankfully, Thor and I were only needed to be a distraction; Jane Foster and Doctor Selvig had the scientific side of things covered.”

“Yes, we’ve already spoken to both of them, along with Darcy Lewis and their intern, Ian, I think his name was,” Coulson stated.

“I just wish that they’d left the alien ship behind,” Skye stated.

“So, we could clean up after that too?” May snorted.

“So, we could go inside. Take a peek under the hood. Take it for a spin. Come on! You’re telling me that piloting an alien ship isn’t on your bucket list?” Skye replied.

“Think I’ll stick to my broom,” Mage said. “There’s nothing like the feeling of the wind in your hair when you’re flying.”

“Yeah? I wouldn’t know. But I would if you’d take me for a ride,” Skye stated, her brown eyes shining brightly.

“Skye!” Coulson reprimanded.
“Oh, come on, A.C., can’t blame a girl for trying,” Skye replied, not looking the least bit sorry.

“Oh, smitherins!” a voice complained, drawing the group’s attention.

“Is there a problem, Agent Simmons?” May asked.

“Oh, no, I just noticed that coming in,” a young female agent with chestnut-brown hair wearing a lab coat replied, waving at something behind the group.

Mage turned along with the others to see some agents wheeling a pair of giant bins into the room, presumably carrying more rubble for the scientists to shift through.

“It’s going to take us forever to sort through it all,” Simmons commented.

“It’d take less time if you’d stop complaining and got to work, Jemma,” another scientist, this one with a Scottish accent, commented.

“What exactly are you looking for?” Mage asked.

“We need to find all of the pieces of alien technology and separate them out from everything native to Earth,” the male scientist replied.

“And then take it somewhere safe where we can make sure that it doesn’t pose a threat to anyone,” Simmons added.

“I might be able to help with that,” Mage replied, flicking his wrist to bring his wand into his hand.

Mage walked across the room so that his back was against one wall. Then, after taking a careful look around the room, he gave a single nod and lifted his wand. A single large sweep encompassing the room preceded a number of carefully aimed flicks.

And then it was as though the entire room was inside a whirlwind. Every single piece of rubble on the giant tarps and in the bins lifted into the air before swirling around and around. Then, with one final burst of magic, as though he was conducting a symphonic orchestra, Mage directed everything exactly where he wanted it to go.

To one side of the room, went everything of Earth, piling up neatly on the tarps. And to the other side, went everything not of Earth.

“Woah!” Skye exclaimed, as her feet slid across the marble floor, directly towards the group of tarps now holding the non-Earth based materials.

“What happened? What did you do?” the male scientist demanded, one hand still up in front of him where he’d been holding a piece of rubble in front of his scientific instrument.

“I simply separated everything out; I put everything alien over there,” Mage replied, pointing to his left but staring at Skye.

The girl in question was standing wide-eyed with her legs braced and her arms out to the side as if to increase her balance.

“If you were only moving the alien bits over that way, then why did Skye move about like that?” Coulson demanded.

“I don’t know,” Harry replied slowly, his curiosity piqued and unable to take his eyes away from her.
He never could resist a mystery, after all.

Soon after, Harry was shooed out of the University Library by the agitated scientists – really, Harry’d thought that they’d be grateful for his help, but apparently not.

Who knew that resorting all of the debris from the battle would mean that the scientists would need to start their analysing all over again, just in case his magic had missed something? Not that it would have. And they’d also made a fuss about the possibility of his magic contaminating their readings so that they might get something called a ‘positive-negative’, basically a reading saying that they were detecting alien residue when in fact all that they were detecting was Harry’s magic.

The fact that Harry’s magic had searched out and moved everything that it could find that was not-of-Earth and had also affected Skye to the point where she was sent sliding across the floor, upped their argument. That was something that Harry couldn’t explain either. When it came right down to it, it shouldn’t have affected her. It didn’t with anyone else, only her.

Thus, why Harry had exchanged one library for another – the Greenwich University Library for the one in Grimmauld Place.

His search through the old, dusty tomes for a reason for his magic affecting Skye like that had come up empty. The fact that he wasn’t exactly sure what he should be looking for didn’t help in the slightest. There were so many possibilities. He’d scoured every magical theory book that he could find, but if this particular phenomenon – where a muggle had been affected by magic when it wasn’t directed at them – had happened before, it hadn’t been documented. At least, not in the books that Harry’d looked through.

Really, this was where he’d normally rely on Hermione; she was a fiend when it came to researching. She, however was swamped at work, having taken a couple of days off because of his visit already and he didn’t want to add to that. No, for now, he’d do his own research; he could always ask her about it later, assuming that he didn’t find an explanation in the meantime.

“Master,” Kreacher said, interrupting Harry as he searched the shelves once again. “There are some muggles in the park acting strange even by muggle standards. Kreacher thinks they be looking for the house.”

Harry blinked at the ancient house elf.

“Really? I’ll take a look,” he said.

Leaving the library, Harry crossed the hall and entered the nearest bedroom which allowed him to look from the window across the road and down to the park. One look was enough to make him sigh. The one-eyed, bald, black man with the long black leather trench coat was staring at where twelve Grimmald Place should be, his arms crossed. His companion seemed to be frowning between the device in her hand and her surroundings.

“I’ll be right back,” Harry said to the elf who had followed him into the room. “Could you please prepare refreshments for three and bring it when I call?”

“As Master wishes,” Kreacher croaked before popping away.

Harry took a perverse pleasure in strolling down the stairs, disillusioning himself and slipping across the street to stand just behind the two S.H.I.E.L.D. agents. He waited until both were facing the other way, made sure that they weren’t being observed, and dropped the charm.
“Can I help you, Director Fury? Agent Morse?” he asked.

The two spun around, Fury drawing his gun in the blink of an eye to point squarely at Harry’s face; Bobbi’s hands slipping behind her to grasp her batons, even though she didn’t pull them.

“Potter!” Fury growled, holstering his weapon. “Yes, you can help us. You can start by inviting us in.”

“Inviting you in?” Harry repeated, carefully acting bewildered.

“Don’t play dumb with us,” Fury retorted. “We tracked the GPS in your phone to this location, so we know that you’re staying here. We just can’t see where.”

Harry grinned at the man. “Would you like to come in?”

“We’d be delighted, Harry,” Bobbi replied.

“You’ll need to hold on to me to get past the wards,” Harry told them.

With only a slight pause, the two agents did so – Bobbi grasping his bicep, Fury his shoulder. As he led them across the street, he could tell the instant that the two saw the house, their hands gripped just a little tighter and Bobbi also took a sharp intake of breath.

“Don’t touch anything,” Harry warned as he led them inside.

“Why not?” Fury asked amusedly. “Afraid we’ll try to bug the place?”

“Nope,” Harry replied. “Wouldn’t work, anyway. Electronics and magic don’t play well together, although I think Tony’s almost got that problem solved. No, the reason is that, before I owned this place, it belonged to my godfather. And his family weren’t particularly fond of non-magicals. They truly did deserve the name ‘Black’.”

Once the three were seated in the downstairs parlour, Harry called Kreacher who stayed just long enough to place a tray with a teapot, three cups and an assortment of biscuits on the table before popping out again.

“What was that?” Bobbi asked, still staring at the spot that Kreacher had just occupied.

“House elf,” Harry replied as he poured for the three of them. “Dead useful species, only really ever happy when they’re working or cleaning for the families that they’re bonded with.”

Fury shook his head slightly before accepting the cup that Harry offered.

“What is it that I can do for you?” Harry asked.

“Firstly, I wanted to thank you for your efforts here in London,” Fury began. “I’ve read the reports; seems that if it wasn’t for you and Thor, things could have gone a whole lot differently.”

“We did what was needed and we had some help,” Harry replied.

“Doctors Foster and Selvig, along with Lewis and Boothby,” Fury stated. “I’ve read their reports as well.”

“Boothby?” Harry asked.

“Ian Boothby, apparently he’s the intern of Miss Lewis,” Bobbi supplied.
“Ah,” Harry said.

“We’ve also secured Mister Boothby’s silence; he won’t be revealing your identity to anyone without either your or our permission,” Fury stated.

“Thank you,” Harry said, “I’d forgotten that he heard that from Malfoy; the others already know who I am, of course.”

“Your welcome,” Fury replied. “But that’s not the reason that I’m here. I hear that you met my man Coulson.”

“Phil. Yes. He and his team,” Harry replied. “That was a bit of a shock.”

“Who’ve you told?” Fury demanded.

“No one, yet.” Harry replied.

“I’d like you to keep it that way,” Fury said.

Harry stared at the man. “You don’t think the Avengers should know?”

“No. I don’t. They don’t need to know,” Fury stated flatly. “Coulson and his team are covert, only those who need to know about them do so. They can get in places and situations and do the job that other teams and agents can’t.”

“The Avengers would be happy to back them up when or if they need it,” Harry replied.

“The Avengers draw too much attention to themselves, something that Coulson and his team don’t need,” Fury retorted.

“Fine. We’ll stay away. But that doesn’t mean that they can’t know that Phil survived. Every one of them was affected greatly by his ‘death’ and they’d give anything to know that he’d survived,” Harry said.

“I don’t want them knowing,” Fury stated emphatically.

Harry stared at the man. And while Fury’s stares were good, Harry’d stared with the best – Snape and Moody among them. Finally, Fury relented.

“I can’t order you to not tell them – you’re not a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent – but I can ask,” he said.


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“You think her old man will get the point this time?” a man asked, awakening Jennifer from her sleep.

“If he doesn’t, the Pride’ll simply have him killed as well,” a second man replied.

Jennifer’s eyes snapped open and she looked around her hospital room in a panic.

It was dark, the only light coming from the slit under the door and the small amount that filtered in around the curtains. Two shadowy shapes stood at the foot of her bed, obviously the ones who’d just been talking. Talking about killing her father.
As her eyes adjusted to the lack of light, she noticed that one of the men’s arms rise, pointing towards her. A *glint* of light was enough to tell her exactly what he was holding.

Jennifer flung herself to the right and off the bed just as a soft *snick* sounded.

Another two *snicks* had sounded by the time that she hit the floor. Unfortunately, in her haste to get away, her arm had hit the switch that turned on the small light set just above her bed.

The men, dressed in dark clothing, their heads covered by the hoods of their jumpers, blinked rapidly in the unexpected light. From where she sat, Jennifer could see the guns that both held.

Fear gripped her, squeezing her insides. Any second now, they were going to realise where she was and turn their guns on her. And they wouldn’t miss a second time.

Jennifer’s insides squeezed and a cold sweat broke out on her body.

She could feel herself trembling, her entire limbs starting to shake violently. She brought her hands up to cover her face as the men’s gazes turned towards her. But something felt different. Her hands felt the wrong size. And her skin almost felt as though it was changing, shifting under her touch.

“W … wh …what is she?” one of the men stammered, his eyes huge.

The other man had already begun to back away.

These men were *afraid* of her, she realised.

Lowering her hands, she stared at them. Now, it seemed, *they* were the ones doing the shaking.

Jennifer grinned at them. They should be afraid. She’d bet that these were the ones that had shot her the first time.

And as she thought it, her fear morphed into anger. And then it grew. No, she then realised, she wasn’t just angry, she was *furious*!

Pushing off from the floor, she leapt straight onto the bed, the bed that gave a mighty lurch and *creak* before collapsing onto the floor.

The man that had begun to back away, turned and fled, slamming the door open in his haste.

The other man had backed himself into a corner and raised his gun. His hand, though, was shaking so much that Jennifer wasn’t sure that he’d be able to hit anything. Not that she was going to give him a chance.

A single stride was enough to get her close enough to grab not only the gun, but also the man’s hand. And then she squeezed. Hard. The gun must have been a bad make for she felt the metal give, squishing quickly out of shape. Sharp snaps that she couldn’t identify accompanied the destruction of the gun.

“Ahhh!” the man was screaming.

The second that Jennifer opened her hand, what was left of the gun fell to the floor and the man began cradling his hand, tears streaming down his face as he slid to the floor.

The man’s scream had brought help, though. A nurse burst into the room before sliding to a stop and backing up.

“She … She … She … Hulk,” the nurse babbled.
Jennifer stared at her, confused.

And then she caught sight of her reflection in the mirror mounted on the wall. She stared at the fact that she had green skin, not to mention that she seemed much, much taller than she was supposed to be. Her hospital gown was torn to shreds, barely maintaining any sort of dignity.

“What have they done to me?” she whispered, touching the green skin on her cheek with an equally green hand.

She stared back at the man, then at his hand and realised that his hand was completely mangled, just like the gun had been. Her head shifted to the wreck of her bed, the one that had collapsed when she’d simply stood on it. Finally, she looked at the nurse’s horrified, terrified face.

Two strides took her to her bedside table where one massive jade-green hand grabbed up her few belongings.

And then, with them in hand, Jennifer fled, running, bounding down the hospital corridor faster than she’d ever moved before.
“Master! Master must wake up!”

Harry blearily opened his eyes before startling backwards on his bed, his heart suddenly rocketing in his chest.

“Kreacher! Don’t do that!” Harry admonished the elf who was still standing right beside his bed, his ancient, bulbous nose only a bare inch from where Harry’s head had been a moment before.

“Yes, Master,” an unrepentant-sounding Kreacher replied.

“Is there a reason you’re waking me up at …” Harry cast a quick, wandless, wordless *tempus*, “two thirty in the morning!”

“Yes, Master,” Kreacher replied. “Master has a floo call.”

Harry stared at the elf. This had better be good.

“Who is it?” he near-growled.

“Auror Robards,” Kreacher replied.

Instantly, Harry was rolling out of bed and moving towards the door.

*Old habits are hard to break,* he grouched to himself.

Indeed, when he was still an auror, there had been numerous times when he’d been awoken in the middle of the night by a floo call from Robards. Then, as now, he’d hurried to answer it; more often than not, this proceeded a return to duty, hours before his shift was due to start.

“Robards,” Harry greeted the head floating in the fire.

“Potter. Took your sweet time getting here,” Robards retorted.

“I’m not one of your aurors anymore,” Harry reminded him.

“There’s been an attack,” Robards stated, ignoring Harry’s comment. “Shacklebolt tells me that you have jurisdiction.”

“What?” Harry asked confusedly. “What do you mean that I have jurisdiction?”

“Just what I said,” Robards repeated. “I strongly suggest you get down here ASAP.”

Harry gave an absent nod and Robards cut the connection. Exactly what kind of attack would give him jurisdiction over the DMLE he couldn’t fathom. Unless …

His eyes widening, Harry took off in a dead run back towards his room.

ooo00ooo

As Harry strode into the offices of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, he was met at the door by a young auror, a trainee, judging by their robes.

“Mister Potter,” the trainee auror said. “I’ve been instructed to bring you straight to Interview Room
Harry gave a nod. “Thank you.”

Although he could find his way there himself, he let the young man lead him. Interview Room One B was actually a small room to the side of Interview Room One that had special charms placed on one of the walls allowing anyone in the ‘B’ room to see into the main room without being seen themselves, much like a one-way mirror in a muggle police interview room.

A quick glance as he entered showed Harry that a female auror was sitting with a young boy in the main room, whether or not they were talking was unknown – the silencing wards seemed to be engaged.

The ‘B’ room was occupied by three people and, although Harry expected two of them, the third wasn’t a complete surprise.

“Chief Robards. Kingsley. Susan,” he said, nodding to each.

“Thanks for coming, Harry,” Minister Shacklebolt replied.

“Hi, Harry,” Susan Bones replied with a small smile.

Robards simply gave a grunt, a grunt that Harry interpreted as being dissatisfied with Harry’s speed in getting there. Nothing much had changed, it seemed.

“Earlier tonight there were a number of attacks,” Robards began the briefing. “All against muggleborn families. The only survivor was young David Harkwood. His parents managed to smuggle him out a window and told him to run; gave him a portkey to the Ministry that activated as soon as he was clear of the anti-apparation and anti-portkey wards that had been raised.”

Harry glanced again at the boy in the other room. He was small, maybe seven or eight, he guessed, with mousy brown hair and still wearing his pyjamas. Tear tracks were clearly visible on his face as he leant up against the female auror, her hand around his shoulders.

“I’m guessing that there was more to this since you called me in,” Harry stated.

“My team and I were the first on the scene,” Susan replied. “The house had been pretty much destroyed and we found his parents’ bodies inside. They’d been killed by something that we couldn’t identify – it didn’t look like any sort of spell that we’d encountered before. Our first guess was some kind of blasting curse, but it just wasn’t quite right.”

“Reports came in of two other attacks,” Robards picked up. “Both families were killed, a total of eleven, including five children under Hogwarts’ age.”

“We managed to get young David in there to give us his memory of what happened,” Susan said, indicating the pensieve on the table behind her.

“As soon as we saw what happened, I asked for you to be called in,” Kingsley concluded.

“May I?” Harry asked, indicating the bowl.

Kingsley simply waved his hand and Harry stepped forward. Placing his finger into the silvery liquid, he felt himself drawn inside.

He landed in what was obviously a child’s bedroom. There were toys – blocks and action figures
predominantly – scattered around. A small light globe, obviously the magical version of a night light, hovered in the corner above the bed where the boy, David, was sleeping.

Suddenly, a loud noise, an explosion, rocked the house and David shot up in bed. Ignoring him, Harry crossed the room and stuck his head out through the curtains. A second explosion preceded David joining him there, a look of terror on the boy’s face.

“Dark Elves,” Harry growled.

Obviously, he hadn’t gotten them all – he’d thought that he’d come up short when he was rounding them up.

There were eight of them, all holding some kind of alien weapon that they were firing at the house. Their behaviour, though, was different to what he’d seen in Greenwich. There, the Elves had preferred to rush their opponents, to fight more hand to hand. Here, they stood in a slight arc, equidistant apart and shot from a distance. The position was eerily familiar, but not one that he’d seen since the war. And when combined with the anti-apparition and anti-portkey wards that had been mentioned …

On impulse, Harry willed himself from the second story window down to the ground amongst the Elves.

With humans, it was possible to tell by looking in their eyes if they were being controlled, but even stepping up so that he was basically nose to nose with one of the Dark Elves, Harry had no idea if what he was seeing was normal or out of the ordinary. Instead, he began searching the outer reaches of the area.

And then he found it. A single wizard was standing under a copse of trees, hidden in the shadows. If Harry hadn’t been specifically looking for them, there was no way that they would have been noticed. Unfortunately, it was simply too dark to be able to distinguish any features.

Ignoring the fact that the memory wasn’t over, Harry willed himself up and out of the pensieve.

“You see why we called you in?” Kingsley asked.


“Are you sure?” Robards added.

“Yeah. Saw them there. Standing under some trees. Too dark to make out who it was, though,” he replied.

“Harry, judging by the time of the reports, we think that there’s at least two groups of them,” Susan stated.

“Merlin,” Harry hissed. “That’s not good. Especially if they’re being controlled by a wizard.”

“You’re the expert, Potter, what can you tell us about them?” Robards asked.

Harry shook his head. “I’m not exactly an expert. I’ve only encountered them the once and they acted completely different then.”

“We’ve got to find them and quickly before there’s a panic,” Kingsley stated.
“I might know some people who can help there,” Harry promised. “Give me a few hours and I’ll get back to you.”

Harry waited until he was out of the Ministry and leaning against a wall in a nearby alley before pulling out the mobile phone that Tony had given him. For half a second, he debated which number to call first, but ultimately, considering the time, he didn’t think that it mattered all that much.

The phone rang half a dozen times before it was picked up.

“Morse.”

“Hi, Bobbi, it’s Harry,” he said.

“Do you have any idea what time it is?” she snapped.

“I know what time it is here, but considering that I have no idea where you are, I don’t have a clue what time zone you’re in,” Harry replied.

Silence reigned on the other end of the phone for a few seconds.

“Considering that it’s the middle of the night where you are, I’m guessing that this is important,” she said.

“Yeah,” Harry replied. “I need to get in contact with Coulson’s team,” he said.

“Why?” Bobbi snapped. “Fury told you to stay away from them.

“True,” Harry agreed. “But he also said that that’s the S.H.I.E.L.D. team that deals with the extraordinary. Which means that they’re the ones that I think can help me.”

“What’s happened?” Bobbi asked.

“Apparently, I didn’t find all of the Dark Elves to send back to Asgard,” Harry said. “There’s been some attacks tonight. Looks like there could be somewhere between one and two dozen of them being controlled by one or more magicals.”

“I’ll contact Fury and get back to you,” Bobbi stated, all business.

“Thanks, Bobbi,” Harry said before the line went dead.

Pressing the appropriate buttons, Harry then dialled the next number.

“Good evening, Mister Potter,” a cultured voice said after a single ring.

“Hi, Jarvis.”

“Would you like me to connect you through to Mister Stark?” Jarvis asked.

Harry paused, considering the idea; after all, Tony himself had been told off for acting the hero without backup not that long ago.

“Not at the moment, but you can let him know that I called and may be calling back later,” he hedged. “For now, I was hoping that you could give me some information?”
“Of course, Sir,” Jarvis replied.

“Thanks. I need the address for Jane Foster here in London,” Harry said.

“Certainly, Sir. I will text it you to momentarily,” Jarvis promised.

“Brilliant! Thanks Jarvis,” Harry said before hanging up.

ooo00ooo

“Well, look who it is, Mister Magic Man showing his face and everything,” Darcy greeted as she opened the door.

“May I come in?” Harry asked.

“Yep, get your butt in here,” Darcy replied, opening the door wider and gesturing.

“We’re having breakfast if you want something,” Darcy offered.

“You can cook?” Harry asked dubiously, noting that Ian was in the kitchen, Erik in the loungeroom and Jane sat hunched over a bowl of something at the table.

“Me? Are you kidding? ’Course not. But we have cereal. Or pop tarts,” she replied.

Harry raised an incredulous eyebrow at her.

“Thor loves them,” Darcy stated as though that was explanation enough.

A crack of thunder heralded everyone turning to gaze out at the blue sky past the balcony. And then a great swirling appeared on the balcony itself. Jane, predictably, was the first to move, racing outside, arriving just in time to leap at the arriving Thor and kiss him soundly.

Eventually, the two separated enough for Jane to grasp Thor’s hand and to drag him inside.

“My friends. It is good to see you all again,” Thor said as he stepped inside.

“Only two days away this time, good for you,” Darcy beamed.

“Seidhr! I was not expecting to see you here,” Thor boomed, striding across the room to grasp Harry’s forearm.

“It’s good to see you, too, Thor. And it’s Harry, remember?” he smiled.

“Of course, my friend,” Thor replied with a small bow of his head.

“Actually, I’m glad that you’re here,” Harry said. “We’ve got a problem.”

“What kind of problem?” Erik asked.

“Apparently, I didn’t find all of those Dark Elves,” Harry admitted. “Missed one or two dozen of them and last night they attacked some magical families. From what I was able to work out, they’re working with at least one wizard, most likely more; whether they’re under a spell or not, I don’t know.”

“Dark Elves are not a species that will work willingly with another,” Thor stated with a frown.

“That’s what I thought,” Harry frowned. “Do any of you know some way to track them?”
“Not that I know of,” Jane replied. “Erik?”

“No, nothing like that’s ever been invented,” he added.

“I can ask Heimdell,” Thor said, “but if, as you say, there are seidhr involved, it is quite likely that they would be hidden from his sight.”

Harry frowned. “That’s what I thought. Looks like we’ll just have to wait until they surface again and go from there.”

“You are not alone in this, my friend. It will be an honour to fight by your side to protect the innocents,” Thor said, giving his hammer a swing for emphasis.

oooo0000

“What the hell?” Darcy exclaimed, shying backwards in her chair to the point that she fell to the ground with a thump.

Harry spun around, his wand instantly snapping into his hand. Across the room, Thor held out his hand, making Mjolnir fly across to him where he instantly held it up, ready.

The gleaming silver animal cantering into the room was enough to have Harry lowering his wand.

“It’s okay,” he said. “It’s just a patronus.”

“A what?” Jane asked, edging closer to get a better look.

“Harry. Hogsmeade is under attack by those alien creatures you told us about along with some wizards. Come quickly,” the horse patronus said in Susan Bones’ voice.

Standing, Harry fished his cloak out of his pouch and swung it on.

“What was that?” Jane asked, still staring at where the silver horse had just shimmered out of existence.

“Magical way of communicating; I’ll explain later, if you like,” Harry replied shortly before turning to Thor. “You up for some smiting?”

Thor grinned at him, giving Mjolnir a twist in his hand. “Always.”

Wandlessly, Harry summoned the empty pop tart packet before tapping it with his wand, making it glow blue.

“Grab on, this’ll take us where we need to go,” he instructed. “Um, this could be uncomfortable.”

Then, with that warning, he waited until his partner had taken hold before tapping the packet again.

Instantly, the world swirled about them as the portkey took them from London to Scotland. Landing on his feet, Harry noted that Thor looked quite at ease, glancing as he was around the deserted town street.

“No ill effects?” Harry asked.

“No at all,” Thor replied. “Your seidhr form of transportation is not unlike a crude form of the rainbow bridge.”
“Glad to hear it,” Harry replied absently.

A distant scream sounded, alerting the two to the direction that they were obviously needed. Looking that way, Harry could make out a column of smoke rising about the nearby buildings.

Sharing a grim look, Thor began rapidly spinning his hammer. At the same time, Mage produced his broom before enlarging it and mounting. Together, the two rocketed off, Thor allowing Mage to take the lead.

From the air, it was easy to see the battle lines that had formed.

A dozen red-robed aurors were fanned out across a street, houses to either side of them. On the other end of the street, almost like an old-time western, were the ‘bad guys’ – in this instance, made up of a combination of Dark Elves and black-robed wizards, more houses and the occasional shop to either side and behind them. These, though, had all suffered damage – windows blown in, facades destroyed, doors hanging from hinges, multiples of them ablaze.

The combination Elf/wizard forces seemed to have been split into three groups. The smallest of them, only containing five Dark Elves, stood in the middle of the street. The other two groups, each with half a dozen Elves, were close to the buildings, using rubble from the partly destroyed buildings to guard their flanks.

What really caught Mage’s attention was the fact that for every Dark Elf, there was a wizard at their back, shielding them from the spells that the aurors were throwing at them.

Seeing the danger that the aurors were in, being so vastly outnumbered, Mage dropped into a dive, only pulling up at the very last moment, a shield charm already cast, and catching a pair of dark red bolts of energy shot from the Elves’ blasters at the aurors.

Barely without a thought, he jumped from his broom, shrunk it wandlessly and put it away, all while catching another bolt before recasting his shield to stop another pair of bolts from hitting the aurors behind them.

To his side, Mage could see Thor a short distance away, catching bolts with Mjolnir before striking back with a jet of white-hot electricity. A pair of wizards and an Elf went flying and Mage took the opportunity to let loose with a plethora of spells and curses of his own into the breach that Thor had created.

Only Mage’s amazing peripheral vision, forged from his years of Harry Hunting and perfected on the quidditch pitch, saw the small, silver sphere heading his way. Snapping out his wand, he batted it away with a spell, making it flying past erratically.

A sudden explosion and a great gust of wind ripped into him from behind. Feeling his feet beginning to slide out from under him, Mage dug his heels in and glanced back. What he saw had him dropping to the ground and digging his fingertips in to make sure that he wasn’t going anywhere.

A great ball of swirling energy was sucking everything that it could into itself, including the forms of four aurors. The men flailed around in mid-air before the ball of energy suddenly imploded, taking the men with them into nothingness.

A jet of energy fizzed past his hair, crackling the air with its energy and Mage instantly flung up a shield before leaping to his feet. Glancing to either side, he noted that only five of the aurors remained – those that hadn’t been sucked into nothingness by the strange silver device lay unmoving on the ground.
Suddenly, Thor took a mighty leap upward, Mjolnir raised high before he brought it crashing down into the ground sending a shockwave straight down the street. Elves and wizards alike toppled like bowling pins but before either Thor, Mage or the remaining aurors could capitalise on it, an indecipherable order was yelled from one of the wizards and every one of their foes vanished into the multicoloured swirl of multiple portkeys.

Mage straightened, his wand loose in his hand. Looking across, he shared a grim look with Thor before the two stared at the devastation around them.

ooo00ooo

Tony checked the Heads-Up Display in his helmet. As expected, the two he was tracking were dead ahead. One, of course, was moving swiftly along the rooftops, leaping gaps as needed. The other moved in a pendulum-style down the centre of the street, a slight shift to either side on each swing.

Plotting a course, Tony fired his thrusters, accelerating past Spiderman, the startled web-head giving him a wave with his free hand. Now that he had the attention of one, Tony shifted trajectory until he was able to rocket over the blood-red clad Daredevil. Noting that the vigilante had shifted as though looking up, Tony knew that his objective had been achieved.

Deftly, he landed on the roof of the next building over and waited. Spider-man was the first to arrive, acrobatically flipping up over the edge of the roof, summersaulting and landing in a crouch before straightening. Daredevil simply landed from his last jump and jogged across the intervening distance.

“Hi guys,” Tony said, having flipped his face mask up.

“Mister Stark,” Peter replied.

“Tony,” Matt said with a nod.

“You two seem to be having fun,” Tony remarked.

Peter shrugged. “Yeah, you know how it is – beat up a few bad guys, leave them for the police and look for more.”

“Crime has been dropping,” Matt remarked. “I think the ‘bad guys’ as Peter calls them, are starting to learn.”

“Well, it seems I came to the right place,” Tony grinned. “How would the two of you like a trip to jolly old England?”

Matt and Peter shared a look.

“That’s where Harry is,” Matt stated.

“Funny you should say that,” Tony replied. “I’m assuming the two of you have been keeping up with the news?”

“You mean those aliens that wrecked part of London?” Peter asked eagerly.

“Yep. Seems that Point Break and our resident Merlin missed a couple on their clean-up and now they’re causing a bit of trouble in the magical world,” Tony informed them.

“You mean not only would we get a trip overseas but we’d also get to see some more magic?” Peter asked eagerly. “Count me in!”
Tony looked expectantly at Matt.

“I guess that I could take some time off,” he said.

“Excellent. The quinjet’ll be leaving the tower at eight tomorrow morning. Bring a couple of changes of clothes and whatever else you need,” Tony said.

With that, he gave a nod, flipped his facemask closed and rocketed off.

“I shall have the quinjet prepped for launch for the three of you,” Jarvis stated.

“Better make it five, buddy,” Tony said, noting the heat-signature that had stayed just out of sight of their conversation, but not, he suspected, out of everyone’s senses.

ooo00ooo

Jennifer Walters woke up in a blind panic, her eyes snapping open and her arms and legs scrabbling about as if to gain purchase. When it became clear that she wasn’t in any danger, she relaxed slightly. But seconds later, she was holding her hands up in front of her, turning them over, running her hands over her arms and examining them minutely.

Aggravatingly, they still looked completely abnormal. Still that same jade-green colouring from the night before. To make sure, she examined both legs and even her stomach through the torn hospital gown that she still wore.

With a sigh of frustration, Jennifer took in her surroundings. She was in a small park, it seemed, at least judging by all of the greenery around her. The fact that she was in a bit of a gully hindered her view, though. Standing up, she raised her bent arm and trailed a hand on the underside of the stone bridge that she was under.

“Guess I’m in the right place if I’m some sort of troll now,” she muttered.

The slight breeze that filtered down, ruffling the no-longer-white gown reminded her that she was all but naked. Cautiously, she made her way up the side of the gully. Her gaze raked the park in all directions and she sighed with relief at realising that she was totally alone.

Through a gap in the trees, she could make out the skyline of Los Angeles – a lot further away than it was supposed to be, which wasn’t overly surprising considering the memory of running and running in the dead of night that she had. She knew that in her strange, altered state, she’d been much, much bigger and had been able to run incredibly fast, accounting for how far she’d come.

That, of course, led her heart to start beating wildly again as she panicked.

What was wrong with her? Why’d she become some green female Hulk-like thing? And worse yet, how long was it going to last?

Jennifer knew that she needed answers. Never before had she heard of this happening to anyone, well, apart from the Hulk himself.

Thrusting her hands into the pockets of her hospital gown, she startled as they scraped against something unexpected. Closing her fists around them, she pulled it out to see what she’d brought with her.

Her watch, she held in front of her, noting how very early it was.
Her purse, after checking exactly how much money she had, plus that her credit cards were in there, went back into her pocket. The get well card from her father promptly joined it.

But it was the last item, a piece of paper that caught her attention. It took her a number of minutes of frowning at it before she worked out what it was: the name and address of one of cousin Bruce’s friends in New York. Someone who would have a way to contact Bruce. And considering the fact that Bruce had given her some of his blood, not to mention the fact that, even though he was a physicist, he dabbled in genetics and had an … issue of his own, according to the latest newspapers, meant that he might have some answers for her.

Yes, she decided, with whatever it was that had happened to her, it was imperative that she find Bruce and work out what was going on.

Firstly, though, she needed some clothes.
It's A Magical Place

It was a smaller airfield, out of the way of the public eye and therefore the perfect place for the
Avengers quinjet to set down. It also helped that Tony had been able to pay for the privilege of using
it while ensuring that their presence wasn’t going to be widely publicised.

Thus, apart from a few workers off in the distance, the quinjet was met by a single person, his blue-
grey cloak flapping in the breeze kicked up by the landing craft. Almost as soon as the engines had
cut off, the rear ramp lowered.

Tony was standing front and centre, wearing his usual jeans, Black Sabbath t-shirt and a sports coat.
In his hand, he carried a familiar-looking red and gold case. Beside him was Clint, a long duffle
slung over his shoulder and a broad grin on his face. Flanking the two were a pair that Harry had not
been expecting – Matt, his cane clutched vertically in both hands, his head cocked slightly as he
obviously took in his surroundings using his other senses; and Peter, bouncing slightly on the balls of
his feet, his head craning every which way as if trying to see everything at once.

Harry stepped forward, a broad grin on his face.

“Thanks, for coming, guys,” he said, shaking first Tony’s hand and then Clint’s.

“Our pleasure,” Clint replied.

“Hope you don’t mind us bringing the new recruits,” Tony said, jerking a thumb at Matt and Peter.
“Capsicle and Nat are on some deep secret assignment for S.H.I.E.L.D., I could find out what it is,
but I just couldn’t be bothered. And Bruce had some kind of family emergency. Something about a
phone call from his uncle. “

“It’s not a problem at all.” Harry replied. “Thanks for coming, Peter, Matt.”

It was as he was greeting the two men that Harry noticed movement on the quinjet’s ramp behind
them. a shadowy figure was hesitantly coming into view.

“Doreen?” Hary asked surprised.

The girl shot Harry a nervous smile and a small wave.

“Hi, Harry. Hope it’s okay that I tagged along?” she said uncertainly.

Harry shot Tony a look, but the billionaire simply shrugged.

“She heard and tried to sneak aboard. Who was I to say no?” he said.

Harry gave the man an exasperated look before smiling at the girl.

“It’s good to see you, Doreen, but I thought that you’d still be in school,” Harry said.

“Hey!” Doreen shot back. “Peter’s skipping school, too. And I can help, you’ll see.”

“She’s got the makings of a fine Avenger,” Clint remarked.

“Well, the more the merrier,” Harry said, hiding his misgivings.

“Besides, if you and Point Break could handle an alien invasion by yourselves, then I’d think a
handful of aliens would be a piece of cake,” Tony remarked, “especially against all of us.”

“Some aliens combined with some wizards,” Harry corrected. “But I’ll go through all that with you when we get home.”

“Home?” Peter perked up. “Are we staying at your place? Is it magical? Are we gonna get to see all kinds of strange things that’ll turn us into frogs if we’re not careful?”

Harry gave them a lop-sided grin. “Something like that.”

Then, after pulling out a piece of rope from his pocket, he flicked it out.

“Everyone grab hold, take a deep breath and try not to throw up when we get there,” he said.

ooo00ooo

“This is your place?” Tony asked after number twelve Grimmald Place had pushed its way into existence in front of him. “Bit of a fixer-upper, isn’t it?”

Harry ignored the man. He knew exactly how bad the old Black ancestral townhouse was. And, really, there was nothing that he could say to defend it, even if he wanted to.

“Just be careful of what you touch in there,” he said, “there’s a lot of dark magical items that could hurt you.”

Harry led the five of them across the street, up the stairs and into the foyer. The instant that the door was closed, Kreacher popped into existence. The fact that there was instantly a gun, a glowing gauntlet, a stick and two raised hands aimed at him didn’t seem to faze the house elf in the slightest.

“Master. Miss Hermione and Master’s other guest are in the parlour,” Kreacher said before turning and shuffling away, muttering too quietly to himself for all but Matt to be able to hear.

“What was that?” Doreen asked, staring after him.

“That was Kreacher,” Harry replied. “He’s a house elf. Think ‘Elves and the Shoemaker’ and you’re on the right track. They’re bound to a wizarding family and get their magic that way and simply love to work.”

“A symbiotic relationship,” Matt said after a moment’s thought.

“Sounds about right,” Harry replied. “This way.”

He led them through the hallway and into the front parlour where Thor and Hermione were sitting, chatting. The instant that Thor saw who entered behind Harry, he was up on his feet.

“Stark! Barton! It is pleasing to see you both again,” Thor boomed as he gave each man a hearty slap on the shoulder.

“Glad to see you back on Earth,” Clint smiled.

‘Thor, these are our newest recruits,” Harry introduced. “This is Matt Murdock, otherwise known as Daredevil; Peter Parker, also called Spider-man; and Doreen Green.”
“To be fair, the web-head and the squirrel are still underage and only on probation,” Tony cut in.

“You hear that, Monkey Joe?” Doreen said to the sudden appearance of her friend’s head popping out of her coat. “You’re still on probation while I’m a fully-fledged Avenger.”

“Hey! That’s not what I meant,” Tony protested.

“You have an affinity for animals?” Thor asked Doreen.

In answer, Doreen put her hands behind her and wiggled about until her bushy tail was freed from the confines of her pants.

“You could say that,” she grinned.

Thor gave a hearty laugh, before bowing over her hand. “It is pleasing to meet you, Lady Doreen.”

“I like him, Monkey Joe,” she chittered.

“Don’t mind her, she can speak to squirrels,” Peter said, enthusiastically shaking Thor’s hand. “It’s awesome to meet you!”

Thor gave the boy a nod.

“Don’t worry, Thor, we’ll get you up to speed on everyone’s abilities before we need to go deal with the bad guys,” Clint said.

“Speaking of, how’d it go at the Ministry?” Harry asked Hermione.

“As well as can be expected,” she sighed. “They listened to Thor, and really, why wouldn’t they? He is a god after all. But how much they took in is hard to say. Susan, at least, took a lot of notes.”

“I’m guessing that they’re going to do their usual trick of burying their heads and letting others do the work for them?” Harry spat.

“Their forces were outmatched in the last battle; it is understandable that the seidhr Ministry will want those who can deal with the problem to do so,” Thor remarked.

“Doesn’t mean that I wasn’t hoping for some help,” Harry replied.

“And what are we? Chopped liver?” Tony asked.

Harry laughed. “No, Tony, you guys are exactly the back-up we need to deal with this problem quickly.

“Speaking of food …” Clint trailed off hopefully.

“Come on, Kreacher should have lunch ready for us all in the kitchen by now,” Harry said, leading the way.

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It was over lunch that Thor finally pieced together what was different about the man known as Matt Murdock. It had been difficult, at first, as the man constantly wore dark glasses on his face.

“You are blind!” he said, and instantly regretted his words, imagining what his brother would have said about his tactlessness.
Matt paused, his knife and fork lowering back towards his plate.

“It’s true that I cannot see with my eyes,” he said, “but all of my other senses are heightened to the point where I can ‘see’ almost better than any sighted person.”

Thor nodded his understanding. “Vision is indeed not everything. Heimdell is such a one who can see far beyond the norm. And my own brother had such a grasp of his magic that it was often not wise to trust one’s normal sight when he was in a mischievous mood.”

“How does that work with magic?” Hermione asked. “Are you able to sense spells?”

“Harry and I have practiced somewhat and while some magical effects are lost to me, I can sense enough,” Matt replied. “I won’t be a liability in battle.”

“What about here?” Harry asked. “Can you sense which items you need to be careful of?”

Matt cocked his head, obviously taking in his surroundings. After a few seconds, he shifted his head slightly again as everyone paused in their eating to watch him.

“I can,” Matt finally replied slowly. “Your house is … strange. Normally, the world to me is as though everything’s on fire, giving off a taste, a sound, a myriad of diverse sensations that allow me to know what is around me and where it all is. Here … here the world has colour!

A single tear rolled down his face as he attempted to describe what he was sensing.

“I can ‘see’ some things that are yellow, others orange, both close enough to ‘normal’ as to not matter, but just different enough to tell me that they’re magical. And then there’s the ones that are blue or even purple, like those knives over there.”

Harry took one look at where he’d nodded before identifying what would cause the difference.

“They’re goblin made,” he said. “Imbued with goblin magic to be ever sharp and nigh indestructible.”

“I had … forgotten, what so many different colours looked like,” Matt said. “Thank you for bringing me here.”

Harry and Hermione shared a look.

“I think a trip to Diagon Alley is in order,” Harry smiled.

“What’s that?” Tony asked.

“Magical shopping district,” Hermione replied.

“Right, I’m done,” Tony stated, pushing his plate away. “Let’s go!”

“Welcome, Avengers, to Diagon Alley,” Harry said as the arch fully formed in front of them.

A light slap to his arm had Harry whipping his head towards Hermione.

“If that was supposed to be an impression of Hagrid, you did a rather poor job,” she told him.

Harry pouted at her before muttering, “don’t spoil my fun, woman.”
The amazement on the faces of the others at the sight before them was enough to ensure that Hermione’s second slap, this one slightly harder, didn’t dampen his enjoyment at introducing the others to this part of the magical world.

And then the six visitors rushed forward, as eager as any eleven-year-old to explore. Tony, Peter and Doreen were the worst, practically racing towards the nearest shop. Clint slunk into a nearby shadow, the spy’s habit of being unseen currently warring with his need to see it all. And while Matt confidently moved forward, his cane tapping in front of him, Thor kept a careful arm’s length from the other man, in case of trouble.

“Are these really bat’s wings?” Tony asked, staring into a basket set outside the apothecary.

“Of course,” Hermione replied. “Useful in any number of potions, as is all of the ingredients that you’ll find in there.”

With a scrunched-up nose, Tony moved on, joining Peter to stare in the window of Quality Quidditch Supplies.

“Those brooms don’t look like yours, Harry,” Peter remarked.

“There’s a whole range of different brooms, depending on what you want to do,” Harry replied. “Speed, sports, leisure, even ones specifically to learn to fly on or for little kids.”

“Can I get one?” Peter asked.

“Sorry, mate,” Harry said, giving his shoulder a squeeze. “You need some magic yourself in order to fly one.”

“Monkey Joe! Stop that!” Doreen exclaimed exasperatedly as she tried to fish the squirrel out from inside her shirt where he was burying himself deeper and deeper.

Noting where she was standing, Hermione came over to try to reassure the two of them.

“Those owls are highly trained,” she said, indicating the parliament of owls visible in the Owl Post Office. “They won’t hurt anyone’s pet; they can tell the difference.”

“I believe you,” Doreen replied. “Somehow, though, I don’t think Monkey Joe does.”

All of Doreen’s squirming, though, had the side-effect of making her tail pop out from her pants.

“Oh, my dear, I’m sure that the healers at St. Mungo’s can help you with that problem,” an older witch said, intently looking into Doreen’s eyes, one hand on her shoulder before nodding at Doreen’s tail.

“What?” a confused Doreen asked.

“That tail, dear,” the old witch replied. “Was it a transfiguration gone wrong or a curse?”

“It’s alright, thank you,” Hermione butted in, “there’s no need for my companion to go to St. Mungo’s.”

The old witch gave her a dubious look. “If you’re sure, dear.”

On the opposite side of the street, Clint had stopped dead, his hands itching to pull a weapon.

“Harry?” he called.
When Harry came closer, Clint simply raised a pointed eyebrow at the large white marble building down the alley, or more specifically, at the two beings standing guard to either side of the door, large halberds in their hands.

“They’re goblins, Clint,” Harry said quietly. “Incredible warriors and the guardians of the wizarding bank. You don’t want to get on the wrong side of them.”

“Good to know,” Clint replied before moving further down the street, although making sure to keep at least half an eye on the goblins at all times.

“Now that is some advertising,” Tony stated, standing dead still in the middle of the street, staring up at the garish orange two story building. “Someone’s got some serious balls to pull that off – it doesn’t match anything else here on the street, even with their weird magic items in the windows and outside the doors.”

Harry had to grin at that, especially as Tony’s eyes only grew bigger when the great prankster attached to the top of the building took off its hat, and a flock of bright green pigeons flew out.

“Would it help if I said that I’m a part owner of Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes?” Harry asked.

Tony tore his eyes from the shop to stare at Harry.

“You? You’re a part owner?” he asked incredulously.

“Silent, but yeah,” Harry replied. “My friend George is the brains behind it all.”

“You’ve got to introduce us,” Tony pleaded.

“Please?” Peter added.

Letting Hermione know where he was going, Harry led his fellow Avengers through the door, snickering at the multiple fart noises that announced their entrance.

“Harrikins!” George exclaimed, bounding over as they entered.

“Hey, George,” Harry replied. “I wanted to introduce you to some friends of mine. This is Tony, Peter and Clint.”

“Nice to meet ya,” George said, vigorously pumping each of their hands up and down. “Any friend of Harry’s is a friend of mine.”

“Harrikins?” Tony asked, looking across at Harry. “You been holding out on us, Sparrowhawk?”

Harry’s head whipped around, a look a relief quickly passing his face as he realised that Tony was just being his usual self.

“I’ve known George and his family since I was eleven,” Harry replied.

“What is all of this?” a wide-eyed Peter asked, looking around.

“These, dear friend of Harry’s, are pranks,” George stated proudly.

“Really?” Clint asked excitedly, his eyes gleaming, before promptly disappearing into the shelves.

A cold shiver swept down Harry’s back. For some reason, he wasn’t sure that bringing this lot here was such a good idea after all.
Feeling the buzz of his phone in his pocket, Harry slipped away from the mayhem that was Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes and into the back room. The instant that he stepped past the curtains, a silencing ward cut off the noise of the customers, the fireworks whizzing about and exploding, not to mention all of the other products that were being tested and the laughter that ensued.

Harry had no doubt that his absence was noted by the others, but he was confident that they’d give him his space. And besides, Hermione was there to keep an eye on them; he just hoped that her level-headedness was a match for Tony’s flamboyance and unnatural curiosity – he’d already expressed an interest in recreating most of the magical prank items using ‘normal’ means.

“Hello?” he said, having hit the ‘accept’ button.

Instantly, the screen on his phone lit up to show a group of four people facing him. Agent Coulson was expected, even hoped for. The science pair – Simmons and Fitz, he thought their names were – were needed, considering the nature of the call. Skye, was simply a bonus.

“Mister Potter,” Phil nodded. “I understand that you wanted to talk to us?”

“I did,” Harry confirmed. “Thanks for getting back to me.”

The two scientists gave him a smile; Skye a friendly wave from where she sat cross-legged on the desk at the side of the image.

“What’s the nature of the problem?” Phil asked.

“A number of the Dark Elves that invaded London managed to either escape or were captured by … um,” Harry paused, suddenly realising that he had a problem.

“I am aware of the nature of the other party involved,” Phil said and Harry nodded at the implied message: the other three weren’t and he needed to choose his words carefully in order to protect the Statute of Secrecy.

“I understand that your team deals with the extraordinary,” Harry said, glossing over the magical aspect of the problem. “And, as such, I was wondering if you had any way of tracking the Dark Elves?”

“An interesting idea,” Simmons said, her eyes blazing to life.

“Not one that we’ve considered before,” Fitz added, rubbing his chin, “tracking extra-terrestrial lifeforms.”

“But possible; after all, we’ve encountered a number of Asgardian artefacts now,” Simmons countered.

“Not that the Dark Elves are from Asgard,” Fitz pointed out.

It seemed that the two had all but forgotten that there were others involved in the conversation.

“No. Still, the principle should still be useful, considering that we can get a sample to work with,” Simmons stated.

“The pieces of the alien ship that we’ve analysed! It’ll have all of the data that we need,” Fitz exclaimed, snapping his fingers.
Harry stared at the two as they bounced back and forth. It was very disconcerting and dragged up a whole host of memories; he was incredibely glad that George wasn’t in the room for that conversation.

“So, you’re saying that it’s possible?” Coulson broke in.

“Possible, yes; probable, though, *that* could be a whole other kettle of fish,” Simmons stated.

“How long would it take to make?” Harry asked.

Fitz and Simmons shared a look, a look that seemed to convey an entire conversation.

“Weeks, possibly months,” Fitz stated after the two faced the screen once more.

Harry shook his head. “Unfortunately, we don’t have that long. Thanks, anyway.”

“Sorry that we couldn’t be of any help,” Coulson said. “You’re sure that there’s nothing else that we could do? Provide some back-up perhaps?”

“A group of Avengers arrived today,” Harry informed them. “Between us, we should be able to handle the situation.”

His eyes drifted to Skye then, and he had a thought.

“Actually, though, if you’re in the neighbourhood, I’d love to get together with Skye, if that’s alright,” he said.

“It’s fine with me,” Skye said quickly, a brilliant smile on her face.

Phil, he noted, frowned, causing Harry to elaborate.

“I’d like to conduct a few magic tests with Skye, to try to work out what happened the last time in Greenwich Library.”

“I think that we can arrange something,” Phil smiled.

“Brilliant! Thanks, Agent Coulson,” Harry said.

Then, after a nod from Phil, Simmons and Fitz, and a wave from Skye, the screen blanked out.

Harry made sure to store the phone number that Coulson had rung from before turning off the phone, after all, it might prove to be useful to have.

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“They’re *thoughts* in there?” Doreen asked, disgust written all over her face as she stared at the rune-lined stone bowl on the table.

“There’s gotta be some health violation or something about that,” Tony added.

“Tony’s right,” Clint added. “You pulled that stuff out of your head! And now you want us to touch it?”

“For once, I’m glad that I’m blind,” Matt commented from the side of the room where he sat comfortably in a lounge chair.
“Are you sure that it’s safe for the rest of us?” Peter asked apprehensively. “None of us are magical, like you.”

Harry sighed. They’d been over this.

“Yes, it’s perfectly safe,” he said. “You’ll be drawn into the memory and be able to see and hear everything that I experienced. And yes, unfortunately, I don’t think it’d translate into Matt’s way of experiencing the world. Just remember, there’s nothing in there that can hurt you, nor can you interact with any of it; you’ll simply be observers.”

“Like watching a three-D TV, only from the inside,” Peter said, staring into the swirling silver liquid.

“Essentially,” Harry replied after a moment’s thought.

Harry reached out, his finger hovering just above the surface of the pensieve. Unfortunately, he was the only one to do so; not a muscle had moved on any of the others.

“I thought you lot were Avengers, able to face even the most terrifying situations without flinching,” Harry goaded.

“Yeah, but that stuff came out of your head,” Tony repeated.

“Head, not nose or mouth,” Harry emphasised. “It’s simply two memories – the battle of Greenwich and then the skirmish in Hogsmeade, barely an hour’s worth of memories between them.”

“The Son of Odin is afraid of nothing. And seeing and understanding how the enemy operates in battle is an immensely useful tool,” Thor boasted before thrusting his hand forward, touching the silvery liquid and going instantly still as he was drawn into the memories.

“Nat’s never going to let me live this down,” Clint muttered, before he became the second to reach forward.

Then, one by one, each of the others joined them until, Harry too, joined his comrades in reviewing the memories of battling the Dark Elves, with and without magical support.

The racket of someone bounding down the stairs like a herd of hippogriffs had Harry staring at the loungeroom door in interest. The fact that the rest of the males currently staying at Grimmauld Place and also currently in the same room did the same, spoke volumes as to who was responsible for the noise.

The fact that Doreen appeared in the doorway, her legs slightly apart, hands balled on her hips and her head cocked to the side and slightly upwards caused all the men to look at each other and snicker slightly.

“If you’re expecting pictures, you’ve come to the wrong place,” Clint commented.

“And just out of interest’s sake, exactly what are you wearing?” Tony asked, leaning forward.

“My costume, of course,” an affronted-sounding Doreen replied.

“Costume?” Harry repeated flatly, looking the girl over.

For the most part, what Doreen had chosen as her costume was rather normal-looking. Her old, dark brown bomber jacket with the fur lining was something that she wore quite often, as were the black,
fingerless gloves. The grey cargo pants were new, although modified to allow her large, bushy tail to be seen, and the light brown shirt wasn’t one that Harry remembered seeing her wearing before. Her leather boots topped with fur that laced up to mid-calf also looked new. No, the most unexpected part of her ‘costume’ was the dark brown domino mask that she wore around her eyes and over her nose.

“What’s with the mask?” Tony asked.

“I thought that it’d help me keep my secret identity,” she replied, then, seeing the smirks, she forcefully continued. “What? Peter wears a full cowl. And Matt covers his face. Not to mention Harry has a hood with a bunch of spells on it to keep his identity secret.”

“She’s got you there,” Clint remarked.

“Fine, fine,” Tony waved the previous comment away. “I’m guessing you’ve got a bunch of useful gadgets in the pockets of your belt, too?”

Doreen looked down at the black belt with half a dozen bags tied to it.

“Oh, them. They’re my nut sacks,” she said.

“What!” Peter blurted.

“My nut sacks,” Doreen repeated. “Sacks. Full of nuts. For Monkey Joe and any other squirrels I happen to meet.”

“Of course, why didn’t I think of that,” Tony muttered, with a shake of his head.

“Lady Doreen, you seem to have given this much thought,” Thor commented. “Have you acquired a new name to go along with your suit?”

Once again, Doreen struck her ‘heroic’ pose.

“You can call me … Squirrel Girl!”

“Squirrel Girl! What sort of name is that?” Tony mocked.


“She makes a compelling argument,” Matt commented.

“Stay out of this, lawyer-boy,” Tony said offhandedly. “I’m sure that we can come up with a better name than that.”

“No!” Doreen said, stamping her foot. “I’ve thought about it a lot, and I want to be ‘Squirrel Girl’.”


With a nod, Doreen looked around at the guys still seated in their chairs.

“Well, are we going or not?” she asked.

Harry glanced at his watch before nodding and standing.

“Come on, if we go now, we can get there just after the last class finishes. And we won’t stay long at Hogwarts, just long enough so that Teddy can meet you all – I’d never hear the end of it if he didn’t.
Besides we don’t want to interrupt the school too much, my old Headmistress isn’t particularly fond of the unexpected,” Harry stated.

“Are we supposed to be wearing our suits, too?” Peter asked, half-raising his hand.
Minerva tapped the large iron gates that guarded Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry to find seven individuals standing in a loose semicircle before her. The fact that four of them wore hoods or masks that covered either their entire faces or only part of it simply made her sigh.

“These are your friends, Mister Potter?” she asked the man in the blue-grey cloak that she recognised.

“Yes, Professor,” Potter’s unmistakable voice replied.

Once again, she raked her eyes over the group. The fact that one of the unmasked men clearly carried weapons, judging by the sheath of arrows on his back and another simply carried a large metal muggle case, while a third carried one of the largest hammers that she’d ever seen worried her slightly. But then, the others were masked, and one, the only female, clearly had a tail of all things.

“They are muggles?” she asked.

“Yes, Ma’am, well, most of them, that’s why I asked for the pendants,” Harry replied.

“Hmm. Very well,” she finally conceded. “You may enter, but be warned, Mister Potter, I will not tolerate any tomfoolery any more than I did when you were a student.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Harry replied.

“Tomfoolery?” the man in the muggle suit asked, amusement clear in his voice. “You been holding out on us, Gandalf? I want the stories.”

“Later, Tony,” Harry sighed and Minerva smiled a small smile.

Yes, there were many stories that one could tell about Harry Potter, although not as many amusing ones as there were for his father and his friends.

“Is there a reason that so many of you are concealing your faces?” she asked as they began the trek towards the castle.

“The good that we can do in the … non-magical world would be greatly reduced if people knew who we were,” the one in the dark red suit replied. “And I understand that you have a large number of students with ties to the non-magical world who attend here.”

“Not to mention that when we’re wearing these suits, we’re rather recognisable and famous,” the one in the red and blue body suit replied.

“Gotta love those fangirls,” the one called ‘Tony’ remarked wistfully.

“Aren’t you practically engaged?” the girl asked.

“I am not,” Tony replied vehemently, then, after a beat, added, “and Pepper doesn’t mind me looking, just so long as I don’t touch.”

“You just keep telling yourself that, Stark,” the archer chuckled. “Maybe one day she won’t smack you around the back of the head for ‘looking’.”

“Is that where you went to school?” the red and blue one gasped as they rounded the bend and
Hogwarts came into sight.

“Yep,” a proud-sounding Harry replied and Minerva preened at the awed looks the ancient castle was eliciting.

“Damn sight better than Midtown,” the red and blue one stated.

“Sure is,” the girl agreed.

As they continued their walk, Harry pointed out various features of the castle and grounds to his friends – Gryffindor Tower, the Astronomy Tower, Hagrid’s Hut, the Black Lake, the Quidditch Pitch. Questions and comments washed over and around the Headmistress and she listened as a new group of people – these ones decidedly not first years – saw the castle for the first time.

The group had barely entered through the great oaken doors when a young missile with electric blue hair gave an excited shout before leaping down the last half dozen steps of the Grand Staircase and practically flew at Harry.

“Heya, Teddy,” Harry laughed, catching the boy and giving him a massive hug.

Teddy broke off the hug rather quickly as he noted the group standing around, smiling at the two. His eyes widened and his mouth dropped open. Finally, he found his voice.

“Is that … is that the Avengers?” he asked.

The fact that Mister Lupin’s voice was filled with awe and disbelief confirmed to Minerva that these people were special. It wasn’t until every other muggle-born or muggle-raised student froze where they were, staring, before rushing towards the group that she finally had an inkling as to what this group might mean to the muggle world.

“Yep!” Harry said proudly. “What sort of godfather would I be if I didn’t bring them here and introduce them to you as soon as they were in the country?”

Somehow, Teddy tore his eyes from the group to stare up at Harry, a grin wide enough to nearly split his face in half and his eyes shining excitedly. After lunging at Harry and giving him the strongest, briefest hug possible, Teddy stepped forward, hand out to the muggle carrying the case.

“Hi! I’m Teddy Lupin. I know who you are: Iron Man,” Teddy said.

“Nice to meet you, kid; call me Tony,” Tony replied, shaking the boy’s hand.

“And you’re Thor,” Teddy said, moving on to the large man with the hammer.

Minerva blanched and wondered if her hearing was going. Thor? As in the Norse God of Thunder? Surely, she was mistaken.

“Young Seidhr, it is an honour to make your acquaintance,” Thor said. “Tales of your godfather are sung in the very halls of Asgard.”

“Wow!” Teddy said, staring back at Harry for a second before moving on.

“You can call me, Clint,” the archer said.

“Sure thing, Mister Hawkeye, Sir,” Teddy said, making Minerva groan at the boy’s mischievous streak making an appearance.
Clint, though, didn’t seem to mind, simply reaching out and messing up Teddy’s hair with a laugh.

Teddy turned to the last three uncertainly before glancing back at Harry.

“This is Daredevil,” Harry said, introducing the man in the dark red suit who merely nodded at the boy.

“That’s Spider-man,” Harry continued, his arm draped over Teddy’s shoulder, as he gestured towards the last male of the group.


“You have?” a wide-eyed Teddy asked.

“Sure. Can’t stop old Mage here from talking about you. Gotta say, some of those pranks he’s told us about,” Spider-man thumbed his chest twice. “Respect, man.”

“And I’m Squirrel Girl,” the only girl said, bouncing forward to give Teddy a brief hug.

Minerva was sure that she whispered something in Teddy’s ear, at least judging by the way he gave a quick nod.

“Nice to meet you, Squirrel Girl,” Teddy laughed when she pulled back.

“I hear you’re coming to the Big Apple next summer,” Tony said.

“As long as Grandmother says I can,” Teddy replied.

“She has,” Harry replied, eliciting another huge smile from the boy.

“Great. Well, you get bored hanging out with him,” Tony continued, cocking a thumb at Harry, “you can bunk with the cool people in the Tower.”

“Really?” Teddy asked, sounding disbelieving.

Any response to the question was cut off as a silvery ferret ghosted into the Entrance Hall to stop in front of Minerva.

“Headmistress,” the patronus began and Harry burst out laughing.

“Malfoy’s patronus is a ferret!” he exclaimed, before instantly cutting off and sobering as the patronus continued.

“Thirty-two of your students and two of your professors are currently being held at our … pleasure. They will remain safe for the time being. Their safe return is dependent on a simple exchange. One student for a person of our choosing currently being held at the Ministry’s … pleasure. The names of the first six persons that we wish in exchange will be sent to you in one hour.”

With that, the patronus, faded from view.

A concussive blast was needed from Minerva’s wand to restore order to the panicking students that had heard the demand. A quick sonorous was applied to the Headmistress’ voice.

“All students report to their common rooms immediately. Heads of Houses please do a head count and report to me any missing students.”
"I take it you know that voice?" Clint asked Harry.

"Draco Malfoy," Harry spat. "We went to school at the same time. For most of the war, he worked for the other side but switched just before the final battle. I thought that he'd reformed after his family’s property and vaults were seized. He’s been working as an Auror, a magical policeman, for the last eight or nine years, trying to change his image. Guess he was just biding his time."

"It is fair to say that this Draco Malfoy and his accomplices are the ones controlling the Dark Elves," Thor guessed.

"Could they have gone far?" Daredevil asked. "Moving that many children would not be an easy task."

"With magic, it is," Harry replied, "but the wards around Hogwarts would mean that they would have had to walk out. If I had to guess, I’d say that they’re holed up in the Forbidden Forest."

"Now that doesn’t sound creepy at all, does it?" Spider-man stated sarcastically.

Harry gave him a pointed look. "It’s named that for a reason. There’re a lot of creatures in there that are incredibly dangerous. Not that that ever stopped me from going in there."

"No, it didn’t," Minerva replied as she turned away from four silvery animals. "It is confirmed that thirty-two students are missing. It sounds like the second year Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff Herbology class and the third year Care of Magical Creatures class."

"Neville!" Harry gasped.

"I’m sorry, Mister Potter, but yes, Professor Longbottom is one of the two professors missing; the other being Duncan O’Grady, our OWL COMC professor," Minerva confirmed.

Harry instantly got a very determined look on his face.

"I’ll be back as soon as I find them," he said, taking a couple of steps towards the doors.

"Hey!" Clint said, grabbing Harry’s shoulder. "Reconnaissance only. We’re here as a team, remember?"

"That was all I had in mind," Harry assured him before running at the door, his body shrinking and changing as he went until, with a mighty flap of his wings, he soared through the doors and away.

"What?" Spider-man exclaimed. "I’ve never seen him do that before!"

"Was that?" Tony asked, spinning towards the Headmistress. "Please. Please, tell me that was what I thought it was."

"Mister Potter’s Animagus form," Minerva said with a smile. "An impressive piece of magic that he’s not long mastered."

"Yes, yes," Tony waved off. "But the type of bird!"

"Oh. Yes. He’s a sparrowhawk," Minerva confirmed.

"YES!" Tony exulted, pumping both fists in the air. "I knew it! He is so never going to live this down."

Tony looked like all his Christmases and birthdays had come at once – it was no wonder that Harry
had been appalled at his form. Minerva grinned like she hadn’t in years: it was about time one of the Marauders was paid back for all the mischief that they’d caused.

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Ged – and that being his Animagus name, Harry knew, was going to take a whole lot of time to get used to – sat high in the branches of an ancient oak, surveying the hollow below him.

Really, it hadn’t been all that difficult to find where Malfoy, his cronies, their controlled Dark Elves and the hostages were – there wasn’t exactly that many places within the Forbidden Forest with a clearing large enough to hold them all. Not to mention far enough away from the centaurs who wouldn’t take kindly to intruders, especially intruders with ill-intent towards the young.

With that thought in mind, Ged had flown swiftly through the trees, dipping and swaying between branches, much as Harry once had when flying to avoid bludgers or other players when playing quidditch. And then, on a whim, he’d detoured towards Aragog’s old lair. What had become of the acromantulas, Harry didn’t know, but he suspected that they’d been exterminated by either the Ministry or the centaurs after their numbers had been reduced in the Battle of Hogwarts.

It’d been the soft murmur of voices that had first caught his attention. On silent wings, he’d landed close enough to observe without being spotted.

The hostages had been placed in four groups – about ten students trussed up together in three groups and the two professors roped back to back a little away from them all. Each group was guarded by four of the Dark Elves, the remaining one staying at Malfoy’s back at all times. Ged’s sharp eyes counted the twenty-one wizards before he leapt from the branch and flew back to the castle as fast as he could.

Returning to the hollow once more had taken time, especially when there’d been a plan of attack to be made, not to mention the small amount of charm work that Harry’d needed to perform.

Almost surprisingly, there had been little change in the group in the hollow, apart from a few positionings.

Twisting his head about, Ged could see the other six Avengers moving into position equidistant apart around the hollow. Unfortunately, the one drawback of being in his Animagus form was that he couldn’t communicate with the others. The small earbud that Tony had for each them was simply incompatible with an animals’ physiology, meaning that he was reduced to simply waiting for the signal.

Noting that everyone seemed to be tensing up, Ged focussed in on Hawkeye. The archer, he saw, had plucked three arrows from his quiver, one notched on the string, the other two held loosely between his fingers.

The instant that Hawkeye spun out from the tree that he’d been hiding behind, Ged dropped from his branch, flaring his wings out to slow his fall.

At four metres from the ground, he began his transformation, completing it just before he hit the ground. Instantly, he whipped a piece of rope from his pocket and dropped it in Neville’s lap. A flash of multi-colour and the two professors were gone.

Whipping his head to the side, Mage caught sight of Hawkeye’s last arrow exploding into a net just before reaching the last group of students. The net slammed into the kids, knocking the first couple backwards before the pull of the portkey transported them all to safety.
The Dark Elves that had been guarding the kids barely had time to react before a branch, twice as thick as Mage’s arm and just as long, spun out from the forest, collecting two in the head, knocking them senseless. A high-pitched war cry preceded Squirrel Girl leaping from the trees, landing on a third Elf before spring boarding off and flattening the fourth.

Across the clearing, three wizards were gummed up in webbing, their wands dangling high above them out of reach. The blood-red form of Daredevil had another two Dark elves laid out at his feet as he twisted and turned, kicking and punching two others, his billy-clubs a blur in his hands.

“Oh…!”

The cry spun Mage around, his wand spitting jets of red and blue. A tall, lanky wizard, caught an exploding hex in the back, spilling blood and bone everywhere before he toppled to the ground flat on his face.

Mage’s severing hex caught the wizard beside him on the outstretched arm, slicing through the wrist, dropping both the hand and the wand that it still held to the ground with a wet *splat* and for a cry of pain and fury to erupt from the maimed wizard.

The flash of a dozen small red lights lit up the hollow as they raced from one side to the other before their targets dropped to the ground, gaping wounds in their bodies. Mjolnir sped past, flung out by Thor before smashing into the last of the Dark Elves’ head, dropping him, before reversing to fly back to its wielder.

And then, as Mage spun about once more, searching for targets, all he found were bodies on the ground, some ominously still, others groaning and desperately trying to hold parts of their bodies together.

“Well, that was kinda anticlimactic,” Tony stated, flipping his visor up as he came in to land.

Noticing the platinum blonde head of Malfoy rolling on the ground, Mage strode across, grabbed his collar and flung him over onto his back. Malfoy let out a deep, pitiful moan, his left hand clutching the stump of his right even as blood pooled all over his robes.

“Tony, Thor, can one of you seal this wound?” Mage asked. “He’s the ringleader; we don’t want him bleeding out before he goes to trial.”

“But my hand … it can be reattached,” Malfoy panted.

Tony paused, looking between the two magicals.

“It can?” he asked.

Mage shrugged. “Yeah. But I don’t see a Healer around here, do you?”

With that, Tony nodded and activated a mini blowtorch in his wrist gauntlet.

“Hold still, this might sting a bit,” he said.

“Master Harry, there is a floo call for you,” Kreacher said after popping into the kitchen where the Avengers were having breakfast.

“Thank you, Kreacher,” Harry replied before pushing back from the table and striding from the
The head that was in the fire when Harry arrived was completely unexpected, a fact that was mirrored in his greeting.

“Lavender?”

The woman in question gave Harry a small, tight smile.

“Hi, Harry. Do you mind if I come through?” she asked.

“Be my guest,” Harry replied with a welcoming gesture.

Lavender’s head quickly withdrew before, a couple of seconds later, she stepped from the fireplace, the flames instantly dying from green back to a soft yellow.

As was the case the last time that Harry had seen her, her clothes looked slightly the worse for wear, something that still amazed Harry when he compared the fashionista from Hogwarts all those years ago to the woman that she was now. Her brown hair lay loose and mostly covered her face, including the scars that marred her. In her hand, Harry noted, she clutched a newspaper.

“Would you like to join us for breakfast?” Harry asked.

Lavender shook her head, instead perching on the very edge of the chair closest to her.

“Have you seen today’s *Daily Prophet*?” she asked.

Harry blinked at the non-sequitur.

“I haven’t read that paper in years,” he admitted. “And even when I did, it was never worth it.”

“I remember what it was like for you when we were in Hogwarts,” Lavender nodded.

“I’m guessing that I’ve made the front page again?” Harry sighed.

“You and your team,” she replied.

Harry closed his eyes and counted to ten. When that didn’t help, he simply held out his hand.

“Let’s see it.”

*Last of Ancient Pureblood House Maimed for Life*, the headline screamed.

Quickly, Harry scanned the article. For the most part, it was entirely truthful; it was simply the emphasis that it spun.

Yes, there’d been an attack and students had been kidnapped. Yes, they’d been rescued, by a bunch of muggles, no less. *But*, in the process of the students being rescued, Draco Malfoy, the last of the Ancient House of Malfoy, had lost his hand and, instead of proper, magical, medical treatment being sought and the hand being reattached, the wound had been cauterised so that that was impossible. It was simply an outrage that this was allowed to happen with no penalties being given to those responsible. And especially to The-Man-Who-Conquered, considering that he was there and should have known better.

The accompanying photograph didn’t help matters either, showing a moaning Malfoy lying on the grass in front of Hogwarts, his wrist clutched in his remaining left hand while a group of the
Avengers stood around him, staring down at his body.

Harry threw the paper to the coffee table in disgust.

“No more than I expected,” he grunted.

“But it’s not right, Harry, you and your friends got all those kids and Neville and Professor O’Grady out safely,” Lavender protested.

Harry simply shrugged. “When has the Prophet ever printed something good about me? Even after the Battle of Hogwarts, every article proclaiming how great I was was tinged with comments about the ‘disgraceful loss of pureblood life’.”

“I know, Harry, that’s why … that’s why I talked to Professor McGonagall and Neville and a few of the students and the wrote this,” Lavender said, hesitantly.

From the pocket of her robe, she pulled out a folded piece of parchment. Curiously, Harry took it, unfolded it and, after a last glance at her, read it.

It was a masterfully written article, emphasising the role that Harry and the Avengers played in saving lives, including the life of Malfoy, for he would have easily bled to death if his wrist hadn’t been dealt with as quickly as it was. Included were a number of quotes from the students and even an auror. Harry read it once and then a second time, his smile growing each time.

“This is truly brilliant, Lavender!” he praised. “But would the Prophet even print it?”

“I’ve still got a couple of contacts that owe me a favour or two,” she said shyly. “They’ll print it.”

“Thanks, Lav, I really owe you,” Harry beamed. “I never would have thought to rebut that article like this.”

“I know,” Lavender said simply.

“Hey,” Harry said, snapping his fingers. “You want a job? With the stuff we do, a good press secretary who knows how to write good, positive, articles like this would be brilliant.”

“Really? You’d want me to do that for you?” an amazed Lavender asked.

“Sure. The only thing is, you’d need to move to New York,” Harry said.

Lavender looked deep in thought for a moment and it was easy to see the conflict on her face.

“Tell you what,” Harry said, grabbing a blank piece of parchment and a pen. “Think about it. And if you decide you want to, let me know; I’ll even pay for you to fly out there and find you a place to live. Here’s my number. Give me a ring, any time.”

“Thanks, Harry,” Lavender said. “I’ll definitely think about it.”

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Harry resolutely stared forward. He was so very tempted to retaliate, but he was hoping that if he ignored Tony, then the man would give up his incessant teasing.
“Change,” Tony continued, this time adding a poke to Harry’s arm. “Become the Sparrowhawk. Be one with your inner self. Be the bird that I always knew you were.”

“You know he’s not going to stop, don’t you?” an amused Clint commented.

“He’s right,” Tony agreed. “I won’t stop until you do it. Again and again and again. And then you’ll need to show Bruce, too. The science involved.” The man gave a happy shudder. “Where does all your mass go? What causes the change? Is it purely a physiological change? How can your human mind fit inside a brain the size of a bird’s? What …”

Harry, though, had finally had enough. A quick flick of his wrist ejected his wand and a flourish had Tony’s question finishing in a squawk as, instead of a billionaire, playboy, philanthropist standing beside him, there was now a small, yellow duck.

“What?” Harry asked innocently at the stares that Clint and Thor were giving him. “He was starting to annoy me. Now he can answer his questions for himself.”

Thor’s great booming laugh drowned out Clint’s chuckles.

“You and my brother would have got on famously,” Thor said, before almost instantly sobering at the remembrance of the slain Loki.

The roar of mighty engines overhead tipped the three men’s and one duck’s heads up. A massive black plane was descending vertically towards them.

An absent wave of Harry’s wand turned duck back into man, a man who instantly began patting himself down to check that he was all there.

“You are certain that you need us here for this?” Thor asked. “I am uncertain exactly how much help we can be; if I understand the magic that you wish to perform on the maiden is correct, that is.”

“I don’t need you for that,” Harry replied. “Something else. It’s time that you were told one of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s secrets; it’s just a shame that Steve, Nat and Bruce aren’t here.”

Finally, the great plane landed, just a short distance from the Avenger’s own quinjet. Almost before the engines even began cycling down, the rear ramp began lowering, two vehicles – one a standard black S.H.I.E.L.D. van, the other a shiny red corvette – visible on it. And walking out from between the two cars were two people – Skye and …

“Agent?” a disbelieving Tony yelped.

“Son of Coul, you still live!” Thor laughingly boomed.

Clint, though, was the only one to move, stalking forward, his fists clenched at his sides. That was until he was in striking distance of Couson. Then he struck out, landing a solid, meaty punch to the man’s face.

Coulson’s head whipped to the side and he slowly looked forward again, one hand now holding his jaw.

“I think I deserved that,” he said.

“You were dead! There was a funeral and everything! We mourned for you! We fought for you, avenging you! It tore each of us apart. Do you know how long it took Lau … it took to put ourselves back together again, to try move on? I’ve been dying every day since that day!” Clint ranted. “I was
responsible! I was the one who came up with the plan! I led the boarding party onto the helicarrier to release Loki!"

“I watched my brother stab you through the heart with his sceptre,” Thor stated. “There was no way an Asgardian, let alone a Midgardian, could survive such a wound.”

“What can I say? I did die,” Coulson replied “My heart stopped beating for nearly a minute. And then they brought me back.”


“Fury,” Coulson said simply. “He thought that you needed the push. And it worked. You’ve grown, become something that none of us imagined. You’re now truly Earth’s Mightiest Heroes.”

“We should have been told,” Clint snapped.

“Not my call,” Coulson stated simply.

“So, where’ve you been?” Tony asked.

“Tahiti. You really should go. It’s a magical place. And once I was … better, Fury gave me this Bus and a team of my own, to fight the good fight,” Coulson replied.

“How long have you known?” Clint asked Harry roughly.

“Less than a week. I found out after the Greenwich thing,” Harry replied. “Fury actually asked me not to tell you, but I made a different choice.”

“Good call,” Tony replied, before, unexpectedly stepping forward and giving Coulson a brief hug. “Glad you’re not dead, Agent. Now, I assume this thing’s got some liquor on board so that we can toast you properly?”

“We have our own bar,” Coulson smiled. “Skye, you’ll be alright here with Mage?”

“Oh, yeah, sure,” she replied. “At least, I assume that it’s not going to be anything dangerous?”

Harry smiled at her. “No, nothing dangerous. Just a few simple tests that shouldn’t affect you in the slightest.”

“You’ve thought that before,” she retorted.

As Coulson led Tony, Clint and Thor into the plane, Harry jerked his head indicating for Skye to follow him. She quickstepped until she was walking beside him, glancing at him every other step.

“So … what’s with the hood and hiding your face thing?” she asked. “The others don’t. Well, the original Avengers, that is. The new ones do, for some unknown reason. You all ugly and scarred or something under there?”

Harry laughed. “I’ve been told that I’m quite fanciable, not that I believe them. Although, I do have a scar.”

“Come on, it’s just us, you can show me,” she wheedled. “I’m not going to tell anyone. Besides, it’s only fair. You’re going to perform magic on me, I’d like to see the person that I have to trust.”

“You don’t trust an Avenger?” Harry asked, amused.
“Well, yeah, obviously, otherwise I wouldn’t be out here alone with you, would I?” she replied. “But still …”

Harry was silent for nearly a minute, considering her points. And she did have good ones.

“I wear these concealing charms because I’m quite famous in my own world and I’ve had quite enough of that for one lifetime,” he explained slowly. “I’ll cancel them, if you promise not to put any images of my face anywhere for others to see.”

“Hey, you’re magic. You can probably turn me into a toad or something if you felt like it. Why would I do something that could piss you off?” she asked.

After one long look to gauge her sincerely, Harry cancelled the obscuris charm. Skye stared intently at him, her brown eyes searching every part of his face.

“Yeah, I can see what those others meant; and that scar is hardly noticeable, certainly not something to comment upon,” she stated.

“Okay, if you’ve done staring, stand over there,” Harry said, shifting uncomfortably under her scrutiny, before pointing a short distance away.

As soon as she was in place, Harry began the same wand movements as the last time, sweeping across the entire area to levitate every piece of wood and stone there, before, like a conductor, he began ‘directing’ the objects exactly where he wanted them to go. As he did so, he watched Skye. But she simply remained standing in the one place, even when he separated out the different material into two piles to either side of her.

With a frown, Harry rubbed his chin. There was something different this time. There had to be, otherwise Skye would have been affected by the magic the same way as before. Hermione, of course, would say that he had to conduct his tests exactly the same way twice, to see if the same reaction occurred every single time.

With that in mind, Harry magicked the sticks and stones back to their previous positions. Then, after letting them settle, he began his test again, this time doing his best to ensure that he did everything exactly the same.

Once the sticks and stones were levitated and swirling about in the air, Harry ordered them to separate, everything of Earth to pile to his left, everything not of Earth to pile to his right. As expected, all of the sticks and stones immediately jerked to the left before settling into a pile.

“Whoa!” Skye exclaimed.

And Harry could see why. Two tracks now lined the ground, indicating from where she’d started to where she’d been dragged to the right.

“What just happened?” Skye asked.

Harry stared at the girl.

“I just recreated what I did back in Greenwich,” Harry replied slowly. “Everything of Earth was to go over there; everything not of Earth was to go that way.”

“Everything not of Earth?” Skye repeated. “Are you saying …?” She shook her head, then. “Yeah, right, like I’m an alien!”
“I don’t think that you are,” Harry replied, his eyes narrowed. “At least, not entirely. If you were, my magic would have moved you properly instead of simply sliding you that way just a bit. At the very least, there’s something … extra in you or about you that reacts to that particular magical order, or at least to my magic in a very strange way.”

At that, Skye shook her head, her long brown hair flying about her face.

“Nope. Whatever it is, it’s not me; just your magic going wacky,” she stated emphatically.

“You may be right,” Harry conceded. “There’s a bunch of books on magical theory and people that I’d like to consult to try to work out what’s going on. Would it be alright with you if we kept in contact while I try to work this out?”

“You got a phone?” Skye simply asked, holding out her hand.

In response, Harry simply pulled out the one that Tony had given him and handed it over.

“I’ve put my number in there,” she said after her fingers had finished flying over it. “Call me anytime, even if it’s not about … whatever this is.”

“I will,” Harry promised with a smile.

Harry stood beside Hermione, the two of them staring up into the lowered ramp of the Avengers quinjet. Already, the rest of team were aboard, having said their farewells shortly beforehand.

“You’re sure that you won’t come?” Harry asked. “There’s plenty of room.”

Hermione gave a sad smile and patted Harry on the shoulder.

“That life … your life … isn’t for me,” she said. “I’ve got my parents here, a job I love and I’m making a difference in the world.”

“Really?” Harry asked, unable to hide the scepticism.

“Really, Harry,” Hermione replied. “And after what you and your friends just did, my job just got a whole lot easier. You basically single-handedly gutted the pureblood movement. Again. The momentum will be with Kingsley and me for quite some time now; we’ll be able to push through the laws that we’ve wanted to for a while. And once they take hold, the magical world will change.”

“You thought that before, Hermione, after the War,” Harry reminded her.

“True and even then, we made a world of difference. If we can build on that now, there’s no telling where it’ll end. I’ve told you before, Harry, I aim to finish what I started,” she said. “And, really, if the other side gets a bit of a toe-hold again, well, I know exactly who to call to bash sense into a few heads, don’t I?”

Harry gave a small nod and a smile.

“Well, we’ll see,” he said.

“Go on, your friends are waiting,” she said, before leaping at him and giving him a bone-crushing hug. “And don’t make me wait so long for your next visit.”

“Whatever you say, Hermione, as long as you can make the next one a little quieter,” Harry replied,
before stepping back. “Take care of yourself.”

“You, too, Harry. Try to stay out of trouble,” she laughed.

“I thought we agreed that that was an impossible task,” he replied.

Then, after giving her hand one last squeeze, Harry turned away and boarded the quinjet, slapping the button to close the ramp as soon as he was clear.

“Right, buckle up, everyone,” Tony called from the pilot’s seat. “Next stop, Avenger’s Tower!”
“Excuse me, Miss Potts,” the cultured voice of Jarvis said.

Looking up from her tablet, Pepper blinked, coming back to reality from the myriad of reports that she’d been reading, all to do with the running of Stark Industries.

“Yes, Jarvis?” she asked.

“The quinjet will be landing in five minutes,” Jarvis informed her.

“It will? About time,” she replied. “Thanks, Jarvis.”

Without waiting for a reply, Pepper clicked off the pad before dropping it onto the top of her desk. As she rose, she instinctively flattened the front of her skirt before striding towards the door.

A short elevator ride later and she stepped out to see the landing deck of Avengers Tower across the room and out the glass doors. The deck itself wasn’t large, but more than capable of accommodating a helicopter if needed, although its primary purpose was to berth the quinjet that was assigned the Tower.

A glint of metal off in the distance caught her attention and she smiled as she hustled across the room. It didn’t take long for that far-off glint to resolve itself into the shape of the Avengers’ quinjet. It banked hard before hovering just off the end of the deck, its stylized ‘A’ plain for all to see. Its manoeuvring thrusters fired, bringing it backwards, even as the tips of both wings folded up and in.

The instant that it touched down, servos built into the deck itself activated, quickly latching onto the wheels of the quinjet and drawing it backwards before locking it into place. As the turbines wound down to a stop, the rear ramp lowered and Pepper rushed forward.

“Pepper!” a beaming Tony exclaimed, his arms opened wide as he stood on the ramp.

“Tony!” Pepper exclaimed before bounding up the ramp to give him a great hug.

“Miss me?” Tony asked, his voice all playful. “Really, what am I saying? Of course, you missed me! Who wouldn’t miss me?”

“Just this once, I’ll admit that I did,” she replied, before giving his cheek a lingering kiss.

It was only then, as she was pulling away, that movement over Tony’s shoulder caught her attention and her eyes widened.

“Thor! You’re back!” she exclaimed, pulling away from Tony to greet the tall, muscled man with a quick hug.

“It is pleasing to see you again as well, Lady Pepper,” Thor laughed.

As she stepped back, Pepper took note of the remaining people in the quinjet. Harry, Clint and Matt were all expect. As was Peter, although his inclusion caused Pepper to frown. And then she saw the last one, attempting to stay hidden from view by keeping both Matt and Peter between them.

“Anthony Edward Stark!” she exclaimed, whirling about, her hands automatically settling on her hips. “What is the meaning of this? You took Doreen with you? It’s bad enough that you took Peter out of school, but to take Doreen as well?”
“Hey, don’t blame me, it’s not like it was my idea,” Tony replied, trying to defend himself. “She snuck on board. I didn’t even know she was there until we were nearly in London.”

Pepper stared at him, her eyes fierce, unblinking, making him visibly cringe away.

“Don’t blame Tony, Pep,” Doreen said, stepping forward, Monkey Joe riding in his usual place high on her shoulder. “I did sneak aboard without any of them knowing.”

Pepper couldn’t help but snort at that.

“Really? You really think that one of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s top spies couldn’t detect you? Or Matt with his extraordinary hearing who can hear a heartbeat across the room? Or a full-on wizard?” she asked, shaking her head. “Maybe I should just ask Jarvis, hmm?”

“No, no, there’s no need for that,” Tony interrupted quickly. “Besides, it was good for her. Doreen learnt a lot; see it as a part of her and Pete’s Avenger Academy training.”

Pepper lifted a single eyebrow before turning to take in the rest of the group. Every single one of them was very obviously trying not to smile.

“At least tell me that you didn’t have them involved in any fighting,” Pepper pled. “I know that it’d be too much to assume that you lot could stay out of trouble and didn’t find yourself in some kind of fight.”

“It was great!” Doreen said, bounding slightly where she stood. “We got to fight aliens and wizards. Not that I thought much of those Elves, really. They were an easy take down.”

“You would not think that if they were not under an enchantment,” Thor replied. “The reactions of the Dark Elves were greatly hindered without their full faculties available to them.”

“Which is a good thing,” Harry stated. “It meant that we could get those kids away safely without anyone getting hurt.”

“You were rescuing kids?” Pepper asked.

“A bunch of wizards and Dark Elves had taken them hostage,” Tony replied. “We had to do something.”

“Well, alright then,” Pepper said. “Come on, I’m sure Jarvis has already arranged for some food to be delivered.”

“Indeed,” Jarvis confirmed. “Chinese, to be precise. It will be here by the time you have all cleaned up.”

With matching grins, the group quickly strode down the ramp and headed into the Tower.

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Bruce lifted his hand to knock on the door, hesitated through the simple method of shifting his bag more comfortably on his shoulder, before biting the bullet and knocking firmly on the door thrice.

He could hardly believe that he was back in Los Angeles so soon. Especially after having so recently been hitching rides to get to the opposite side of the country. Indeed, he’d barely been there a day, not even long enough to unpack any clothes into what Jarvis and Pepper assured him was his room in the Tower, when he’d received word from his uncle via a truly roundabout method that he was
needed back in L.A.

It seemed that his Uncle William had had the foresight to copy the phone number of the *Marauder’s Den* that Bruce had left for Jennifer. He’d used that number to leave a message for him with Gwen, who had promptly rung the Tower and let Pepper know.

*Something* had apparently happened to his cousin, leaving parts of the hospital wrecked, people injured and Jennifer missing. Even with knowing only those few details, Bruce could take a very educated guess at what had happened, something that he’d fervently prayed would *not* happen to her. It was bad enough that it happened to him. And knowing what he did, how could he *not* come? It was more than likely that he was the only one who could … well, not exactly put things right, but at least contain the situation.

Thus, when Pepper had insisted that he use one of Stark’s private jets to quickly get back across the country, he’d only put up a token protest.

“Bruce?” William asked after opening the door.

“Hi, Uncle William,” Bruce replied.

“Hi, Uncle William,” Bruce replied.

“I didn’t expect you to get back here so quick,” William stated. “Well, don’t just stand on the doorstep, get in here.”

With a small smile, Bruce entered and turned back as William closed the door.

“Any word on Jennifer?” he asked.

William shook his head, a frown on his face. “No. Nothing yet. It’s like she’d dropped off the face of the Earth. I hope she’s alright.”

“I’m sure she is,” Bruce replied, reaching out to lay a comforting hand on his uncle’s shoulder.

“I must say, your timing is impeccable,” William stated. “I only just received a package with the security footage from the hospital. Pulled a few strings and called in a couple of favours. I was just about to take a look at it. I can wait until you’re settled, if you’d like to see it, too?”

“No,” Bruce stated flatly. “I’ll unpack later. Let’s go look at that footage now.”

A pleased look appeared on William’s face and his hand landed on Bruce’s shoulder, giving it a quick squeeze as he strode past.

“This way,” he said.

Bruce followed William from the small entryway into the loungeroom. An unwrapped box lay on the coffee table, its brown paper wrappings crumpled underneath the box. At his uncle’s gesture, Bruce took a seat on one of the chairs facing the TV, albeit, sitting on the very edge.

Having ripped open the box, William pulled out a usb and quickly inserted it into the appropriate slot in the side of the TV. A few clicks of the remote turned the device on and brought up the menu on the drive. One last selection and William backed away slightly, staring intently at the screen.

The picture was grainy and monotone in colour. Still, it was good enough for the two men to easily see a corridor. Numerous doors lined each side of the corridor, except on the left at the front of the screen where a small reception desk was located.
“That one,” William near whispered, reaching out to lightly tap one door on the screen with his finger, three down on the right.

Bruce simply nodded in agreement, having already picked it out from his memory of when he visited.

Two men appeared on the bottom of the screen, their backs to the camera making identifying them impossible. Even when they stopped outside of Jennifer’s room, they seemed to take extra care insuring that their faces at no time faced the camera.

After checking both ways down the corridor, the men eased open the door and slipped inside, immediately shutting the door behind them.

“Does this thing have sound?” Bruce asked.

“Unfortunately, not,” William replied with a shake of his head.

They waited for what seemed an eternity before, suddenly, a male nurse rushed onto the screen sliding just before reaching Jennifer’s door before bursting in. Seconds later, they could see the nurse backing up, his back against the now opened door, his hands gripping the edge of the door behind him. In the light, the man’s face was just able to be seen, a face that showed pure, utter terror.

And then something burst through the door, pieces of wood from the doorframe scattering where they’d been torn from the wall. Before either man could blink, whatever it was that had just left Jennifer’s room came towards the screen and promptly disappeared.

Judging by the fact that the … person who’d emerged had to slightly duck their head, they were easily at least seven feet tall. Other than that, the person hadn’t been on the screen long enough to make out any other details.

Without Bruce even having to ask, William backed up the recording and played it again. And then a third time, this time in slow motion.

Bruce’s eyes widened at what he was seeing.

The figure was clearly female, judging by her … assets which were barely covered by the torn and shredded clothing. She also had long dark hair.

The fourth time that William played it, he paused the playback so that it showed the female on the screen.

“What … what is that?” William breathed.

Bruce could only stare for the longest time. He knew. He knew that using his blood was a bad idea, but it was the only viable solution to save Jennifer’s life. And here was the results, exactly as he’d feared.

“Not a what, Uncle William, a who,” Bruce managed to croak. “That’s Jennifer.”

“Jennifer?” William repeated, disbelief clear in his voice. “What’s happened to her?”

“Me,” Bruce admitted. “But don’t worry. I’m going to find her and help her. You have my word.”

The low table in between the various chairs and couches was littered with boxes, each one
containing a variety of tastes and flavours of Chinese cuisine: lemon chicken; honey chicken; sweet
and sour pork; walnut beef with plum and sweet chilli sauce; deep fried duck; satay lamb and a host
of others, all surrounding a mound of Yang Zhou fried rice.

Plates were balanced on knees or held in hands. Some, like Tony, Matt and Peter used chopsticks,
while others and especially Thor, simply used a fork to shovel in their food. The talk was minimal at
first as each selected their favourites and settled back to satisfy their hunger. Eventually, though, food
was being consumed at a slower pace and they began to talk about their time in England.

“You said that some of those creepy-looking Elves from London kidnapped some kids?” Pepper
prompted.

“Not quite,” Harry replied. “It was actually some of my lot. They’d used a rather serious spell on the
Elves that they’d captured.”

“Spell?” Pepper asked interestedly.

Harry nodded. “Yeah. It’s actually one of our three Unforgivables.”

Peter gave a shiver. “I could hear the capital on that. Must be bad.”

“It is,” Harry stated grimly. “That particular one is designed to take away free will. With it, you can
make anyone do anything you want – steal for you, kill for you, even kill themselves. In this case,
those wizards used it to make the Elves their hired muscle.”

“Not very successfully,” Thor interjected. “I’ve fought Dark Elves on a number of occasions now
and these were not fighting as those of their kind are wont to do. I would say that they were fighting
back against the enchantment, making their reactions slow and clumsy.”

“You won’t hear any complaints from us,” Clint remarked. “Taking them down like that is always
going to be preferable to potentially having civilians hurt, especially kids.”

“How’d the wizards get that spell on them anyway?” Pepper asked, looking between Harry and
Thor. “I thought that you two rounded them and send them to Asgard or something.”

“So’d we,” Harry grimaced. “Seems we missed a few.”

“How’d they get the kids they took hostage anyway?” she asked.

“They were abducted from Harry’s old school,” Doreen said. “You should have seen it. A castle! A
real life, magical castle. As a school! Full of talking paintings and ghosts – not that we actually saw
any of them –”

“Thank goodness,” Peter interjected. “Would have given me the willies for weeks. The towers and
turrets looked pretty cool, wouldn’t have minding going for a swing around them. Next time, yeah?”

Harry gave an indeterminate nod before continuing the story.

“Luckily, we were actually at the school when the kids were taken,” he said.

“And you immediately swung into action,” Pepper supplied.

“Well, what else could we do, we’re Avengers!” Tony stated and promptly popped a piece of pork
into his mouth.

“The battle was short but everyone acquitted themselves well, working as a team to bring down the
villains and rescue the young,” Thor stated.

“I think Harry was the most surprising, though,” Clint smirked.

Pepper looked between the two men before focussing on the archer. “How so?”

“Why don’t you show her, bird-brain?” Clint suggested.

“What? I thought that that was what Tony called you,” a confused Pepper said.

“Oh, he did. But that phrase is just much more apt for Harry now,” Clint remarked.

With everyone now staring at him, Harry bowed to pressure. Carefully, he slid his plate onto the table, nudging empty boxes out of the way, before closing his eyes, concentrating and changing.

“What the hell?” Pepper practically screamed, scrambling backwards on her chair until she was perched in Tony’s lap.

Sparrowhawk-Harry leapt upwards, flapping his wings to get airborne before making a leisurely circle of the room. All eyes were turned upwards, watching him; Pepper’s mouth dropped open.

“That’s … that’s really Harry?” she asked.

“Yep, the real ‘birdbrain’,” Clint replied with a grin.

“You should have seen Tony the first time Harry did it,” Matt said. “Never knew he could be so happy. I was sure he was about to wet himself.”

“Well, why wouldn’t I be happy? He’d just proven me right! All those months I’d been calling him ‘sparrowhawk’ and he can turn himself into one! Ha! Teach him to mock my name-calling. I’m the great Tony Stark; I’m always right,” Tony stated happily.

“How’d he do that? Turn himself into a bird, I mean?” Pepper asked.

“Magic,” Doreen replied, her big eyes watching Harry zeroing in on his chair.

“Don’t even go there,” Tony retorted, pointing his chopsticks at her the same instant that Peter snorted. “Magic is just science that we can’t explain yet.”

“Nope, Doreen’s right. It’s magic, plain and simple,” a reverted Harry replied.

“We’ll see about that,” Tony promised. “Just wait until Bruce gets back; between him, me and Peter, we’ll have your hocus pocus explained in a couple of days.”

“Doubt it’ll take that long,” Peter agreed.

“What else can you change into?” Pepper asked eagerly.

“While I can use my wand to self-transfigure parts of my body, it’s not like becoming an Animagus, becoming the actual animal. You only get one form and you just saw mine,” Harry explained.

“Although, it’s much easier to change someone else into an animal.”

Snickers all around, apart from Tony, alerted Pepper to the fact that there was a story she was missing.

“Stark was annoying the seidhr something fierce, thus Harry enchanted Stark into a small, yellow duck.” Thor explained.

Pepper spun to look at Tony. “Really?” Her head snapped to Harry. “Do it again, I want to see.”

“What? No!” Tony protested as the rest of the room burst into laughter. “You’re supposed to be on my side, don’t encourage him.”

“Don’t worry, dear, I like you just the way you are, ego and all,” Pepper replied, patting his cheek. “What other cool magic did you see?”

“There was a whole shopping district,” Doreen explained eagerly. “It was full of the weirdest, coolest stuff. Everything you could imagine – cauldrons and wands; potions and animal bits like snake eyes and spleens of rats and everything to make potions; whole shops full of wizard clothes and magic books and magic jokes and tricks. It was amazing!”

“And a couple of hundred years behind the times,” Tony groused. “Not a speck of electricity or technology anywhere. They use gas lights and torches with real fire for goodness sake.”

“But the sight of the magic itself,” Matt breathed softly. “Sorry, Tony, but the only word for it is: ‘magical’.”

“I’ll give you that one, Murdoch, all things considered,” Tony replied.

“I could see the magic,” Matt explained. “It was beautiful, so many colours.”

There was silence, then, for a minute before it was broken by Peter.

“Never dreamed that goblins were real,” he said.

“Goblins?” Pepper asked in disbelief.

Peter nodded. “Yep. And house elves and apparently a whole host more.”

“House elves?” Pepper asked, looking at Thor.

“Very different from Dark Elves,” Thor explained. “One is a warrior race, the other a symbiotic species that only want to help and serve.”

“I assume, Harry, that you introduced this lot to your friends?” Pepper asked.

Harry shrugged. “Yeah, a few.”

“We saw Hermione, of course,” Clint smirked.

“We’re friends,” Harry stated flatly. “Nothing romantic there at all.”

Tony shrugged. “What about that werewolf girl? She seemed cute.”

“Did she, Tony?” Pepper asked, one eyebrow raised.

“In a werewolf, scarred sort of way,” Tony backpedalled quickly. “And obviously nowhere as good looking as you.”

Seeing the pleading look on Tony’s face, Harry decided to take pity on the man by changing the topic.
“If you want to talk about friends, I guess that we should mention that the Tower’ll be getting some
visitors soon,” he said.

“If you are speaking of the Lady Jane and her companions, I expect them to be taking up residence,
not simply visiting,” Thor stated.

“Oh?” Pepper asked happily. “It’ll be nice to have some more females around here to balance up the
testosterone levels. Are the ‘companions’ Erik and Darcy?”

“Got it in one,” Peter replied, pointing his fingers like a gun at her to emphasise his point.

“That wasn’t the most … interesting of the ‘friends’ we met,” Clint stated darkly.

“Are we …?” Matt began before being cut off by the angered archer.

“Yes! I don’t give a damn about what Fury wants,” he near-snarled. “To keep that from us like that.”

Pepper looked between her dinner companions, taking note that the most intense expressions were
on the original Avengers: Tony, Clint and Thor.

“Agent’s alive,” Tony said quietly.

“Agent? Agent who?” a confused Pepper asked.


“Wait! What? You don’t mean Phil, do you?” she asked.

“Yeah, we do,” Clint replied quietly. “Apparently, he survived being stabbed in the heart by Loki up
on the carrier, not that anyone thought that we should be told!”

“I thought that you said that there was no way that he could have survived,” Pepper said to Thor.

“Nor should he have,” Thor agreed. “Exactly how the Son of Coul survived his wounds is
unknown.”

“Some sort of medical procedure that we’re not cleared to know,” Tony stated. “I put Jarvis on it, but
even he couldn’t find any records of it.”

“I don’t think Phil knows either,” Harry relayed. “From the way he was talking to me, he seemed
just as mystified as the rest of us.”

“What about Steve and Nat? Do they know?” Pepper asked.

“Not yet,” Clint stated, leaving no doubt his intentions for the next time that he saw them.

“Any idea when they’re due back?” Matt asked.

“According to Fury, they’re on some kind of classified assignment,” Clint replied. “They’ll turn up
when they do.”

“Now that you know, is Phil going to visit anytime soon?” Pepper asked.

Tony shrugged. “Your guess is as good as ours. He’s got his own super plane and team now and
special missions to go along with it.”
“I’ll invite them over the next time I’m talking to Skye,” Harry promised, then, seeing Pepper’s expression, elaborated. “One of the members on Phil’s team. I’ve been working with her; there’s something … funky … that happens when I use one of my spells near her.”

“Well, it definitely sounds as though you guys had a very interesting trip,” Pepper said awkwardly into the tension.

“It was amazing!” Doreen grinned. “When can we go again?”

“No!” Pepper replied, beating any of the others to a response.

“What do you mean, ‘no’?” Tony asked indignantly.

“I mean ‘no’,” Pepper repeated, before pointing firstly at Doreen and then at Peter. “No taking these two out of school. They need their education.”

“Um?” Peter said, timidly putting one hand up. “I’m already the number one student at Midtown. A little extracurricular education is only going to be a good thing.”

Pepper’s glare, though, promptly shut him up.

“As much as I agree with you,” Matt said, “there are likely to be times when their skills are going to be needed.”

“I agree with Matt,” Peter stated. “I’m not going to give up my web-slinging for anything.”

“They’re in the Academy for a reason, Pep,” Tony said. “And while we’ll try to not interrupt their schooling, I’m not going to make any promises.”

Pepper looked around the circle at each of the faces, from the determined to the hopeful before sighing in defeat.

“Fine, but I’m holding you to that. And I’m telling Steve as well. I’m sure that he at least knows the importance of Peter and Doreen’s education,” she stated.

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After allowing Doreen to precede him through the door, Harry entered and closed the door to his apartment behind himself.

Wearily, he crossed the room before dropping heavily onto the couch. He was tired; the trip across the Atlantic on the quinjet, while faster than it would have been on a normal aircraft, was still incredibly long. How he wished that they could have taken a portkey. Obviously, he was out of practice at long distance travel. It really didn’t seem that long ago that he was still travelling the world, taking plane rides with such regularity that they seemed mundane.

The worst part about the long quinjet ride was the fact that it was impossible to sleep on those bucket seats. And, while the dinner with everyone at the Tower was great, it had simply prolonged the time until they arrived home.

Sensing a presence standing nearby, Harry opened his eyes. Seeing Doreen staring expectantly at him, he quirked an eyebrow before comprehension dawned.

Tipping himself slightly to one side, Harry reached into his pocket and pulled out a pair of bags that wouldn’t look out of place in a doll’s house. After placing them on the seat beside him, he
channelled his magic as he lightly touched each one with the tip of his finger, cancelling the shrinking charm and returning them to their normal size.

“Thanks, Harry,” Doreen said as she picked up her bag before skipping away in the direction of her room.

He was just in the process of convincing himself that he should get up and head towards his own room and bed when an unexpected vibration from his pocket startled him. Adrenaline coursing through his body snapped his eyes wide and sent his heart racing. Even when he realised that it was simply his mobile, he didn’t settle back down.

“Hello?” he said after fishing it out.

“Hey, you,” a voice he vaguely recognised replied. “I didn’t wake you, did I?”

The extra sentence was enough for him to place the identity of the female voice on the other end of the call.

“Skye? No, no you didn’t wake me. Not long got home, actually,” he replied.

“Cool. ’Cause I would’ve felt bad if I did. So, uh, just thought that I should check that I programmed in my number right,” she said.

Quickly removing the mobile from his ear, Harry looked at the screen to see that it did, indeed, say that the caller was ‘Skye’.

“Nope, all good,” Harry replied. “I’m guessing it’s not the middle of the night where you are?”

“Nah,” there was a slight pause then. “Apparently, I’m not allowed to tell anyone I call what time it is where I am; security reasons or some such. Sorry.”

“It’s okay, I understand,” Harry replied. “Before I forget, I’m supposed to ask you to pass on a message.”

“Okay? Who to?”

“Agent Coulson,” Harry replied.

“AC? No problem. What’s the message?” Skye asked.

“If you could tell Phil that he’s invited to Avengers Tower, preferably sometime soon. There’s a couple of people that would like the chance to talk with him some more,” he said.

“I get that, clear the air sort of thing after the not-dying thing,” Skye said. “I can pass that on, provided the invite extends to me? I’d give anything to get a chance to talk to you lot properly, not to mention see Avengers Tower up close like.”

“I think we can do that,” Harry smiled. “Tell you what, I’ll even give you a tour of the place personally.”

“Deal,” Skye replied quickly. “In all honesty, though, I’ve got no idea when that’ll happen. HQ has got us hopping all over the globe on a moment’s notice. I’ve already seen more of the world in my short time here than in the rest of my life combined.”

“Sounds exciting. Got a favourite place you’ve visited?” Harry asked.
“Yeah,” Skye sighed, “but I’m probably not allowed to tell. Can’t say I’m a fan of all this red tape.”

“Know what that’s like,” Harry commiserated. Then, hearing the expectant silence on the other end of the phone, he elaborated. “I was a magical policeman for a few years. The paperwork and red tape were some of the worst parts of the job.”

“Sounds like you’ve got some stories,” Skye said. “Do I get to hear some of them?”

“We could maybe do that, but I’m afraid that it won’t be tonight, I’m beat,” Harry apologised.

“I best let you get some shut eye then. Talk to you later?” she asked.

“Definitely. Good night, Skye,” Harry said.

“Good morning, Harry,” she replied and Harry could hear the smirk in her voice.

Feeling a little lighter after the conversation, Harry pushed himself from the couch, grabbed his bag and headed towards his room and bed.
This past week or so, Gwen had been run off of her feet. Not only did she have school and the internship at Oscorp to keep her busy, but as a favour to Harry, she’d agreed to take on a few extra shifts while he was away. A few, though, had turned into at least one shift lasting several hours every day. Sometimes, she’d even needed to come in before school, running the risk of arriving late.

It wasn’t even that she was the Manager in charge of the Den. She wasn’t. At least, not officially. The problem was that she was still the most senior employee and Phoebe, the staff member in charge of the day shift simply wasn’t as organised as Gwen herself was. A fact which grated on her efficiency and perfectionism, thus her feeling of needing to come in so often.

This morning, at least, was a Saturday, meaning that she didn’t have to rush off to school. That, of course, didn’t mean that she wasn’t still rushing about, for she was. The Den was a very popular little place for people of all ages. Customers were constantly coming and going and sometimes coming and staying for hours on end, making it near impossible for others to get a table. At least they continuously ordered something to drink so it wasn’t as though the table was simple being taken by non-paying customers.

As was her habit whenever the little bell above the door jingled, Gwen looked up, if only to take note of where the new-comers chose to sit.

This time, though, she blinked at the sight of the boy standing in the doorway before breaking into a great smile and rushing across to him.

“Peter! You’re back!” Gwen exclaimed, giving him a massive hug.

“I am. It’s great to see you, too, Gwen, I missed you,” Peter replied.

“Me, too,” Gwen said before placing her palms on his cheeks and giving him a long, long overdue kiss. “When’d you get back?”

“Late last night. Too late to call. Figured I’d catch you here,” Peter replied, staring into her eyes.

“When’s your next break?”

“Not for a while,” she hmphed.

“No worries, I’ll just take a seat over there and you can come see me when you can,” Peter replied, indicating one side of the room.

Looking over, Gwen frowned. All of the tables over there were already filled.

“Peter?” she began, following him across only to stop at the sight of the messy, black haired man and the girl who looked to be slipping something from her plate under the table.

“Harry! You’re back, too,” Gwen exclaimed, coming around to smile at him.

“And how’s my best employee?” Harry smiled.

“Run off my feet, to be honest,” Gwen replied before switching her gaze to Doreen who was smiling up at her.

“Hey, Doreen, where’ve you been? I haven’t seen you around for a while. Does Harry know you’ve
“Uh, yeah, Harry knows and it’s fine, Gwen,” Harry replied for her.

Gwen switched her gaze between the two.

“I guess I’ll just have to trust you on that,” she said doubtfully.

“Don’t worry so much, Gwen,” Peter interjected. “Doreen’s cool. And she’s been learning a lot.”

Gwen’s eyes narrowed at her boyfriend but before she could think too much on it, the bell at the counter dinged and she rushed off to deliver a meal to a table on the far side of the room. From the corner of her eye, she noted Harry leaning across the table and having what looked to be a very intense conversation with both Peter and Doreen.

By the time that she’d made it back to their table what she’d seen had been practically forgotten.

“Sorry about that,” she said, pulling out her pad and pencil from her pocket. “What would you like?”

“Gotta say, I liked those English breakfasts,” Peter stated. “Think I’ll go for one of those: eggs, bacon, sausage, fried tomato and toast. But I’ll stick with my usual to drink.”

Gwen nodded. “One large strawberry shake coming up. What about you, Harry? Doreen?”


“Just some eggs on toast for me with a chocolate shake,” Doreen replied, before looking down. “Oh, and a walnut muffin.”

“I’ll be back with all that as soon as I can,” Gwen smiled.

“One more thing,” Harry stopped her, holding up a finger. “As soon as it dies down in here a bit, order yourself something and come join us. On me. We’d all love to catch up with you.”

“You’re the boss,” Gwen beamed back.

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Tony strolled into the kitchen of Avengers Tower and paused, blinking in surprise. The bench was littered in detritus of someone’s breakfast and, judging by the not one but two empty boxes of pop tarts, it wasn’t hard to figure out who was up before him. His eyes flicked to the opened cupboard where he could see a third pop tart box, its end flapping wide.

“Jarvis, order us some more boxes of pop tarts, would you?” Tony said. “Actually, better make that an entire crate of them if Thor’s going to be staying here now.”

“I have already placed such an order, Sir,” Jarvis responded.

“Well done, Buddy; thanks,” Tony replied.

As he poured himself a cup of strong, dark coffee, he noted the solitary figure standing on the balcony. It was just the man – or god or whatever – that he was hoping to talk to.

“Enjoying the view?” he asked from the doorway.

Thor turned with a smile.
“New York has recovered well after the battle with the Chitauri,” Thor commented.

“Yeah, well, it took time but we’re back to looking our busy, bustling, smoggy best, I suppose,” Tony replied, smiling inwardly at the fact that they were already precisely on the topic that he wanted to discuss with the Asgardian.

“Jane punched Loki, you know, for what he did here,” Thor commented.

“She did?” Tony asked, surprised. “Always knew I liked that girl.”

Thor let out a booming laugh. “Yes, that’s exactly what my brother said after she’d done so.”

“I’m sorry he died,” Tony tried, but he couldn’t really leave it like that. “At least, I’m sorry for you that he died. I know how much he meant to you.”

“I understand your sentiment, Stark and I thank you for it,” Thor replied. “Loki’s crimes against Midgard were many and he was punished for it. At the end, I truly believe that he was trying to make up for his mistakes. He saved my life, after all.”

Tony nodded and took a sip of his coffee.

“That was on … Svartalfheim?” Tony asked.

“Indeed,” Thor confirmed. “You have been learning of the Nine Realms?”

“A little. Mostly from ancient Norse texts, so there’s no telling how accurate they actually are,” Tony replied. “These Nine Realms, every one is a different planet?”

“Indeed. I can teach you about them if you wish,” Thor said eagerly.

“Nah, that’s alright. If I need to know something, I’ll just come pick that brain of yours,” he replied, before taking a moment to order his next questions. “The Chitauri didn’t come from one of those nine, did they?”

“They did not. The Chitauri are not from any known world,” Thor confirmed.

“And how many is that? Known worlds, that is?” Tony asked.

“Hundreds that I know of. Possibly thousands all told,” Thor replied.

“Any that we should be worried about?” Tony asked casually.

“That is a question that has no definite answer,” Thor replied, turning to regard Tony with a perplexed expression. “Xandar guards the peace and will not be a threat. Both the Shiar Empire and the Kree Empire are mostly peaceful, at least at the moment, although there are elements within both Empires that can cause trouble. The Skrull, though. The Skrull are nothing but trouble. And, as I said, there are hundreds of others, but those are the most prominent.”

“Any of them likely to come to Earth?” Tony asked.

“It is possible,” Thor answered slowly. “While it is true that Midgard is known to be one of the Nine Realms of Asgard, it is also known that we Asgardians have not had much to do with Midgard for centuries. And when you combine that with the tesseract technology that man-kind was creating, Midgard could make an enticing target.”

“Hmm, that’s what I’d thought,” Tony frowned.
What Thor had said had just turned the inkling of an idea that he was toying with into something that, at the very least, needed its own project file.

“Well, my coffee’s done. Guess I should be getting to work. You need anything, just ask Jarvis. I’ll be in my lab,” Tony said. He began heading inside before pausing at the doorway. “Oh, and Thor? Go easy on the pop tarts, hmm. I don’t want to have to buy the company just to feed you.”

“Have no fear, Stark. I will endeavour to ensure that I leave at least one for you,” Thor laughed.

By the time that Gwen was able to sit down at the table with the others, a plate and cup in hand, their breakfasts were all but finished. Harry and Peter had both pushed their plates away and were nursing their drinks, while Doreen seemed to be fixated on tearing her muffin into little pieces, eating the cake part and leaving the nuts in a small pile for last.

“Sorry I took so long,” she said, sliding into the seat. “You’ve no idea how swamped we’ve been of late.”

“I don’t?” Harry asked, cocking an eyebrow at her.

“Well, probably not more than normal,” she allowed, “but I’ve needed to come in here for a shift before school for the past week just so that we weren’t overrun.”

Harry frowned at that. “I was sure that I’d assigned enough staff to cover me being away. I take it Phoebe called you in?”

Gwen paused to chew and swallow her mouthful of eggs before replying.

“Well, she called in a panic the first day and then I sort of just rostered myself on after that,” Gwen admitted.

“You weren’t late for school, were you?” Peter asked worriedly.

“No. I managed to arrive on time, although I was cutting it close a couple of days,” she reassured him. “Don’t worry, Peter, my place as Midtown’s number one student isn’t in jeopardy.”

“Hey!” Peter protested. “I thought I was Midtown’s best and brightest.”

Gwen smiled indulgently at him and patted his hand. “You just keep thinking that, Parker.”

“Sounds like you’ve gone above and beyond, Gwen, thank you,” Harry said earnestly. “I’m back now and can easily pick up the slack. Not to mention that Doreen is, too. How about you take a couple of weeks off?”

“Thanks, Harry, that’s be a big help,” Gwen replied.

“So, tell me about your trip? What’s England like?” she asked after taking a drink.

“Awesome!” Peter replied. “The things that we saw … Not that we actually got to see a lot of touristy spots. Mostly what we visited were the magical-type places you’ve never read about.”

Gwen nodded, getting the coded reference.

“I take it you didn’t get to put on a suit and enjoy the nightlife like I know you do here in the Big Apple?” Gwen asked.
“Nah,” Peter replied. “Only got to dress up the once and that was in some forest where hardly anyone could see. It was so cool, though, I was swinging around like Tarzan or something.”

Doreen let loose a snorting laugh. “Tarzan wears a loincloth, you … don’t.”

“Hey, don’t dis the duds,” Peter shot back.

Gwen’s eyes rapidly flicked back and forth between the two before widening in alarm and settling on Peter.

“She knows?” she hissed.

Peter’s eyes were darting about even as his mouth was opening and closing, for once devoid of any quips or comments. A hand lightly grasping her wrist turned her head.

Harry was staring intently at her. “It’s okay. Doreen knows how to keep a secret. She knows about me, too, remember?”

Gwen stared back at him for a long moment before nodding once.

“You will, won’t you?” Gwen asked Doreen intently. “Keep Peter’s secret.”

“Of course,” Doreen replied solemnly. “We all know each other’s secrets and will keep them.”

Again, Gwen’s eyes narrowed. Her phrasing seemed slightly … off. As though Peter and Harry knew some secret about Doreen. Suddenly, her suspicions were running rampant.

“Where were you this past week?” Gwen asked.

Doreen’s eyes switched to Harry and Gwen could see the pleading look on her face.

“I told you, Gwen, Doreen was off getting a different kind of education,” Peter replied.

“And you’d know that, how?” Gwen asked, switching to stare at him.

“Um, er, she told me?” Peter replied unconvincingly.

“When?” Gwen challenged.

“Before you sat down?” he suggested.

Harry’s groan switched Gwen’s focus onto him. She sat back slightly in shock at unexpectedly seeing him with one hand rubbing his forehead while slightly shaking said head.

“You are a terrible liar, aren’t you?” Harry half-asked, half-stated.

“Hey, its’ Gwen!” Peter protested. “You know she’s my weakness. Like kryptonite or something. I can’t lie to her. Never could. She always knows. She’s just spooky like that.”

“Really?” Harry replied. “In that case, remind me to mention that fact to Clint and Nat so that they can spend some extra time with you at the Academy teaching you some of their spy skills.”

“Really? That’s so cool,” Peter replied excitedly. “I could be a spy. I’d be a great spy. I could get into places that others couldn’t.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Harry stated flatly.
“What about me? Can I learn that stuff, too?” Doreen asked.

Again, Harry groaned.


“AA?” a confused Doreen repeated.

Gwen leaned in close to whisper, “Avengers Academy.”

“Oh, ah, yeah?” she replied, before looking at both Harry and Peter. “What? Peter already said that he can’t keep a secret from her. And you both trust her. So, I figured that I could trust her, too.”

“Now you’ve got to tell me,” Gwen stated.

“I think we’d better take this upstairs,” Harry said. “You done?”

Gwen looked down at her mostly empty plate. While she could eat a couple more bites, her curiosity was in full swing now and there was no way that she’d be able to concentrate on the remainder of her meal.

“Yeah, I’m done,” she said, pushing her plate away. “Let’s go.”

Jennifer huddled in the shadows, taking the occasional peek around the corner as she waited for the right moment to make her move. While she was no longer as … exposed as she had been, that didn’t mean that her … greenness wasn’t still obvious. Nor her size. There wasn’t much that she could do to disguise that.

She’d been travelling at night, trying to avoid people as much as possible but it hadn’t been easy. Things had become a little better after she’d … acquired some clothes. Really, that had been a priority. Trying to cross the county in a ripped hospital gown wasn’t going to work. Not to mention that it was highly inappropriate and showed off a lot more than just the fact that she was green, including the fact that she was green all over.

Breaking into the department store had been child’s play. Smashing the window with her elbow may have meant that she’d been cut by the broken glass, but that cut healed up barely a minute later. The alarm that sounded had also been easy to deal with – she simply squished the metal thing with her hand until it was a ball of red and stopped making any sound before dropping it.

The white and purple shirt that she’d found was tight, but it at least fit. For pants, she’d needed to go to the men’s department to find ones that would fit. Well, sort of fit – they only went partway down her shins, after all. The great overcoat felt good, although it was very tight across her shoulders. A simple scarf covered her head. But when it came to shoes, that was a dud, they had nothing in her size, whatever number that happened to now be.

Jennifer knew that she wasn’t far outside of Los Angeles and that was after a number of days of hiding and sneaking about. Where she needed to go was to New York. That was where the address of Bruce’s friend was. But at her rate of travel, it’d take years to get there.

Thus, her present location.

Taking a quick look around the corner again, she noted that finally the coast was clear.
With her long legs and new, enhanced speed, getting across the open ground from the building to the shadows of the freight train didn’t take long at all. Now, all she had to do was to get inside one of the cars and she could ride the thing all the way across the country.

After checking that there still wasn’t anyone to see her, Jennifer ducked out and around to the door of the second last car. She frowned at the lock before simply grabbing it and twisting it off. Then, using her great strength, she pulled open the door, jumped inside and pulled the door closed once more.

The inside of this car was filled with pallets of boxes, but there was just enough room, if she moved things around slightly, to allow her to slip deeper into the car and to hide for the ride. It didn’t bode well in terms of comfort, but Jennifer was willing to put up with that if it meant finding her cousin all that much quicker.

And the sooner she found Bruce, the sooner he could explain things and put her right again.

ooo00ooo

Gwen sat impatiently staring between Harry, Peter and Doreen. They’d come up to Harry’s apartment, found seats in a rough square in the living room and then … nothing.

“Don’t look at me,” Peter protested, holding his hands up as if to ward her off, “apparently, I’m already in trouble for saying too much. It’s Doreen’s secret.”

Harry, it seemed, agreed.

“It’s up to Doreen to tell you,” he said simply.

Now knowing where to focus, Gwen twisted her body slightly so that she was looking at the younger girl.

“Well,” Doreen began, twisting her hands in her lap, “you know how Peter’s Spider-man? And Tony’s Iron Man? Well, I’m Squirrel Girl?”

Gwen stared at the girl, waiting for the punchline.

“O-kay,” she said slowly when it seemed that Doreen wasn’t going to say any more. “Interesting choice in name. What does that mean exactly?”

“Well, you see, it’s like this,” Doreen began as she stood up.

Gwen’s eyes widened as the girl began unbuckling her pants!

“Hey! Stop! There’s no need for that. Keep your pants on!” Gwen protested quickly, reaching out as though to stop her, only to freeze as something big and bushy and brown popped into view behind Doreen.

Doreen turned slightly as a three foot long tail curled around her and she grabbed it and began stroking it almost absently.

“I’m part squirrel,” Doreen said quietly. “I’ve got a tail and claws and I can climb and jump and I’m really strong. I can even talk to squirrels.”

“Talk to squirrels?” Gwen repeated, not sure why she focussed on that part, but figured that it was simply because it was the last thing that Doreen had revealed.
Doreen nodded eagerly. “I can. Really. Watch. Monkey Joe, can you come out here please?”

Instantly, Monkey Joe’s head popped out from inside Doreen’s old, fur-lined bomber jacket.

“What is it, ’Reen? Are we telling your friend about us?”

“We are.” Doreen smiled at him before looking up at Gwen. “Gwen, meet Monkey Joe. He’s my best friend.”

“You can talk to him?” Gwen stated flatly, trying to take the impossibility of it in.

“Oh yes, but not just him, all squirrels and chipmunks and others in their family.”

“That is … that is … nuts,” Gwen finally said.

“Nuts? Did she say nuts? Does she have some for us?” Monkey Joes chittered eagerly.

Instead of explaining what the squirrel had said, Doreen reached into a pouch hanging from her waist and pulled out a nut and handed it to the squirrel.

“Wow! Just wow!” Gwen said shaking her head. “And here I thought having a boyfriend who could climb walls and sense things like a spider and swung through the city at night on webs he shot from his wrist was crazy!”

“You won’t tell anyone, will you?” Doreen asked anxiously.

“No. No, of course not,” Gwen reassured her. “Uh, just so I know, who else knows about you?”


“So, I’m part of a very select group. That’s cool,” Gwen nodded, starting to come to terms with it.

And really, when one thought about it, how unusual was it when one considered what was already in the world? A man who could become a giant raging green monster; a full-on wizard; a billionaire who flew around in a metal suit for the fun of it; not to mention all of the mutants that had been reported over the years in the media.

“Okay,” Gwen said, reaching out to grasp Doreen’s hand and give it a squeeze while smiling at her. “Tell me more about what my friend can do.”

The smile that lit Doreen’s face was truly brilliant as she bounced over to sit on the seat beside Gwen. And then, almost faster than Gwen could take it in, Doreen began talking.

In lieu of their regular meeting place, the Leaders met in a darkened room in the heart of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s very headquarters, the vaunted Triskelion.

This room had one very impressive feature – one entire wall consisted of glass. Looking out from this vantage point, it was possible to see the three great helicarriers, so very close now to being completed. Below them, workers scurried about, moving equipment into place or running to do other important tasks. Quinjets were being attached to mighty cranes before being lifted high and across to the landing deck of the helicarrier that they were assigned to.

And the most delightful part of it all was the exquisite irony that S.H.I.E.L.D. was undertaking this massive Project at the very behest of their greatest enemies, the enemy that the agency was formed to
“How long until Project Insight is ready?” the question was asked.

“We’re right on track,” the man who was identified when he leant forward into the light as Undersecretary to the World Security Council, Alexander Pierce, replied. “Seventeen days and those birds take to the sky.”

“There are no problems? Director Fury still suspects nothing?” the lone female Leader asked.

“He’s still alive, isn’t he?” Pierce replied and, when that answer didn’t seem to be enough, elaborated. “No. Fury doesn’t suspect a thing. If he did, I would have had him suffer ‘an accident’.”

“Still, with the Project so close to completion, a little, shall we say, insurance might be in order,” a shadowed man across the table suggested.

“You’re thinking the Asset, aren’t you?” Pierce asked. “I don’t think we need him.”

“Still, better to be safe than sorry, as the saying goes. I shall authorise his awakening,” the Asset’s handler replied.

“What of our other assets?” the Leader who had yet to speak asked.

“Project Sinister? Individually, they’re ready. They’ve been … conditioned to follow our lead,” the report came back. “However, they have yet to interact with one another. How they do so, getting them to work together, is the next phase of the Project.”

“And when will that be started?” Pierce asked.

“Once Project Insight is complete, we shall begin their next phase of training,” he was told.

“Is that really necessary? With my helicarriers in the air able to pinpoint anyone on Earth, will there really be a need for a group of individuals with such unique … abilities?”

“I believe so,” the one in charge of Project Sinister replied. “Think of them as a ‘response team’, able to go in and assess a situation or deal with a situation when all of the facts aren’t clear to us.”

“Very well,” Pierce conceded.

“We will meet again in three weeks to assess how the initial phase of Project Insight went and to determine if any adjustments need to be made,” the Leader of the meeting stated.

“Until then, hail H.Y.D.R.A.!”
Final Stop, New York City

The crash of the heavy metal door sliding open startled Jennifer awake. She bolted upright, flailing out with her right arm, instantly crushing two of the boxes beside her and whatever was inside them. Jennifer winced at the inadvertent destruction, at the same time thanking her lucky stars that nothing wet or sticky spilled out of them all over her.

The light that filtered in from over the top of the boxes and between the pallets told her that it was day. Exactly what day or time, was a mystery, though. She’d been stuck in this train for a long time. How was she to know that it was going to stop at every city, town and village between LA and New York?

What meagre food she’d pilfered and stuffed into her pockets before boarding was long gone and she was hungry, thirsty, tired and aching to spread out. In a word, she was cranky. And definitely not in a mood to wait around now that they’d stopped and the door had opened.

Jennifer clamoured to her feet in the tiny space and waited impatiently, rocking slightly from one foot to the other. The sound of voices accompanied the whine of an engine and the pallet three in front of her unexpectedly lifted slightly off the ground before moving away towards the door.

Great. They were unloading the car. That meant that her hiding space was going to disappear.

Jennifer had no intention of waiting around that long. Listening hard, she determined that the machine that had taken the pallet away was gone from the train. So, too, were the voices of the workers.

That was good enough for her.

Pushing boxes aside, Jennifer leapt forward, landing with her knees bent in the now cleared, open space in front of the door. Still not seeing anyone, she grinned before gathering her legs and sprinting out of the door.

Her run and leap off the edge took her sailing over five metres before she came down.

Screams and cries of surprise and fear erupted all around her.

Jennifer’s head whipped backwards and forwards, her long, black hair whipping about her face.

The workers were all frozen, all staring at her and she hated it. Around her were dozens of trains, this obviously being a major station of some kind. Buildings were off to her right and at her back.

Flexing her shoulders, she felt the fabric of the coat begin to tear. Ignoring it, she bent her legs and jumped, sailing high into the air, straight over the nearest train. Landing, she took a few running steps before leaping again, this time towards the fence.

Exactly where she was wasn’t a concern to Jennifer right then, only that she get away from the stares and screams. And the faster she ran, the further she was able to leap, a fact which she found exhilarating.

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“Hey, Boss?”
Harry looked up and around from the cappuccino that he was making to see Brian, his chef of the
day, with his head sticking out the door leading to the kitchens.

“What’s up?” Harry asked, his hands continuing their choreographed dance.

“There’s a call for you,” Brian replied.

“Okay, I’ll be there in a minute,” Harry replied.

Before long, the drink was made and Harry served it with a smile. “There you go, ma’am.”

With that, he ducked into the back and across to the small table. There he found the Den’s cordless
phone lying beside its cradle.

“Hello? This is Harry Potter,” he said.

“Harry Potter? Of The Marauder’s Den?” the female voice on the other end asked.

“Yes,” Harry replied cautiously. “How may I help you?”

“Do you know a Doctor Bruce Banner?” the female asked.

Harry’s eyebrows rose in surprise and he had a sudden suspicion of who he was talking to.

“I do; he’s a friend of mine,” he confirmed. “I wouldn’t happen to be talking to Jennifer Walters,
would I?”

There was a pause before she answered.

“Yes.”

“Bruce said that he’d given you my number,” Harry smiled. “Where are you? Are you in New
York?”

“I’m just outside of it,” Jennifer replied.

“Well, in that case, why don’t you come over? I’m sure that I can find Bruce and get him here in an
hour or two. Do you have my address?”

“NO! That is, yes, I have your address but no, I’m not going there. Bruce will have to come to me,”
Jennifer replied a stubbornness in her voice that told Harry that no amount of arguing was going to
change her mind.

Harry frowned. Something was going on, something that Bruce hadn’t told him about. Nevertheless,
this was Bruce’s cousin, his family and if that’s what she wanted, who was he to argue with her?

“Fair enough. If you tell me where you are, I’ll let Bruce know,” Harry offered.

“No,” Jennifer replied. “I … I might not stay where I am. I’ll ring back in a couple of hours and talk
to Bruce then, if he’s there.”

“Okay, I’ll have him here waiting for you,” Harry assured her.

“Good. Thanks,” she said before the line went dead.

Harry blinked at the handset before slowly putting it back into its cradle. There was definitely
something wrong and Harry instinctively knew that he had to find Bruce fast. And then get him back to the Den.

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After leaving Phoebe in charge of the Den, Harry ducked up to his apartment for a little more privacy. A quick apparition later and he was standing in the main lounge room of Avengers Tower.

“Good morning, Mister Potter,” Jarvis stated out of thin air, not sounding the least bit startled at Harry’s unexpected entrance.

“Hi, Jarvis,” Harry replied. “Where is everyone?”

“Mister Stark is in his lab; Miss Potts is currently in her office and Thor is in the weight room,” Jarvis stated.

Harry paused at the missing name. “Wait. What about Clint?”

“Mister Barton has gone ‘on vacation’,” Jarvis reported. “Mister Stark is most vexed that Mister Barton has disconnected the GPS on his phone and disabled my ability to track him by other means.”

“Well, he is a spy,” Harry grinned, “it’s what he does. I’ll head down to Tony’s lab.”

Not bothering to take the stairs, Harry simply apparated to right behind Tony’s desk, making sure to arrive with a loud pop.

“Gandalf! Don’t do that! What if I was working on something volatile and accidently blew up half the city?” Tony cried after having screamed at Harry’s arrival while ducking himself flat against the table.

“How often do you work with stuff like that?” Harry challenged.

“More often than you’d imagine, actually,” Tony shot back. “So, is there a point to your visit, Sparrowhawk or did you just feel like getting a kick out of seeing how much you could scare me with your theatrics?”

“No, I have a reason. Do you know where Bruce is?” Harry asked

“Nope, but I’m sure that I could find him if needed,” Tony replied. “I’m guessing there’s a reason?”

“Yeah. I just had a phone call from his cousin, Jennifer, and something sounded … off,” Harry replied. “She wants to see him but it has to be him going to her and Jennifer won’t say where she is until Bruce is available to go straight there.”

“Hmm, sounds like we’d better find him, then,” Tony said, swivelling his chair around to face his computer and letting his hands dance over it. “Assuming that the Big Guy hasn’t eaten it or something, we can use the GPS in Bruce’s phone to find him.”

“Unlike Clint,” Harry grinned, unable to keep from having a dig.

“Don’t get me started on that bird-brain,” Tony warned. “What if something happened and we needed him? Or he needed us?”

“Um, we’d call and ask him to turn the GPS back on? Or he’d call us?” Harry suggested.

Tony snapped his head around and glared at him. “If you’re going to take his side and be all logical,
I won’t help you.”

Harry made a show of pretending to zip his mouth, locking it and throwing away the key.

Tony snorted. “As if I believe that.”

A few seconds later, Tony sat back and raised his arms in triumph.

“Got him,” he crowed. “He’s in LA. I can even give you the exact address, if you want it.”

“No, that’s okay,” Harry muttered. “But LA isn’t helpful. How long’s it take to get from there to here?”

“Depends on your method of transport,” Tony shrugged. “Commercial flight, roughly five hours. Private plane, you can knock a few minutes off that. Using the quinjet, just under three hours, but that time is moot considering you’d need to fly it there first before flying back. I could do the distance in a little over two hours in my latest suit.”

“Pfft. All too slow. I can do it in seconds using a portkey. The problem being that I have to know the place I’m going to in order to create one,” Harry stated.

Tony’s eyes bugged out. “You want to take Bruce for a portkey ride? Are you insane? That’s not a pleasant experience! You’d more than likely trigger the Big Guy to come out to thank you for it. And not in the nice way, either”

“Not if I give him a calming potion first. I think,” Harry replied.

“You want to risk it? Is it really that important?” Tony asked.

“You didn’t hear Jennifer on the phone,” Harry said. “Something’s definitely wrong and the sooner Bruce is here, the better.”

“Well, it’s your funeral,” Tony sighed. “How do you want to do this?”

“If he’s in LA, then he’s close to Malibu. Can you ring him and get him to go to what’s left of your old place? I’ll duck home, change and portkey over there and bring him back,” Harry decided.

“Can do,” Tony said. “Just do me one favour? Don’t portkey him back here. I really don’t want to have to get the decorators in again.”

ooo00ooo

“You’re sure about this, Harry?” a worried Bruce asked, holding the small vial in one hand but focussed solely on the wizard in from of him.

“Absolutely,” Harry replied.

“It’s just that, when the … other guy doesn’t like something, he tends to make a … mess,” Bruce continued to argue.

Harry shook his head.

“You and Remus would have got on amazingly!” he muttered.

“Huh? Who?” Bruce asked.
“My honourary uncle. Doesn’t matter, he died years ago,” Harry waved the question away. “Look, I’m so sure that this’ll work that I’ve set the portkey for my apartment. Do you really think I’d do that if I thought that you’d destroy it?”

“Well, if you’re sure,” Bruce said doubtfully.

“I am, now, drink up,” Harry commanded.

Finally, Bruce did as he was told and slugged back the potion, only shuddering slightly at the taste of it. Within a few seconds, Bruce’s face began to relax, the constant worry lines fading away. Harry waited two full minutes, observing his friend closely before nodding.

“Right, I think we’re ready. Hold on,” he said, holding out a piece of ribbon.

The instant that Bruce did so, Harry activated the portkey and the two disappeared in a swirl of multicoloured light.

They arrived in the middle of Harry’s apartment hard, with Bruce tumbling away and falling over the back of the couch. When Harry hurried across and looked over in concern, it was to see Bruce on his knees holding his head.

“Okay?” Harry asked.

Bruce looked up at him and Harry was relieved to see that there was no sign of any anger or rage there whatsoever.

“Yeah. Yeah, I think so. That wasn’t exactly fun, though. Let’s not do that again unless we really have to,” Bruce said.

“Fair enough,” Harry nodded. “Come on, let’s head downstairs and wait for Jennifer to call.”

Bruce quickly climbed to his feet and nodded at Harry to lead the way.

The call came less than an hour later. Harry had barely said Jennifer’s name when the phone was practically ripped from his hand.

“Jennifer? It’s Bruce,” the concerned man said, the calming potion obviously wearing off, assuming that it hadn’t already done so. “Where are you? Are you alright? Uncle William and I have been so worried.”

There was a pause then as Bruce listened intently to the other end of the line.

“Okay. Okay, I can do that,” Bruce said. He scrambled then for a pencil and a piece of paper. “Alright, I’ve got it. I’m not sure exactly where that is, but I know the general area. Don’t worry, I’ll find it.”

Again, Bruce pause as he listened to Jennifer.

“I’ll be there as soon as I can,” Bruce promised. “Stay safe.”

As soon as the conversation was ended, Bruce ripped off the paper and stood.

“Right. I have an address. Any idea how we’re getting there?” he asked anxiously.
“Our rides out in *Den,*” Harry smiled reassuringly at him. “All we have to do is to get Happy away from the food.”

ooo00ooo

“You sure this is the place?” Happy asked dubiously from where he’d turned around in the driver’s seat to look at Harry and Bruce in the back.

“It looks like what Jennifer described,” Bruce stated, staring out the window.

Harry leant over to take a look himself.

They were in an old, abandoned warehouse district. Most of the buildings in this area were huge and obviously in disrepair. Windows were smashed, doors were hanging off of their hinges and graffiti covered everything up to a height of about two metres. The chain-wire fences that separated the buildings was rusted red. In some places, it’d obviously been cut to provide easier access to other buildings and in some places, it’d been torn down completely.

A couple of burnt out cars were nearly obscured by the detritus of lengths of steels, chunks of concrete, dozens of rusted pieces of corrugated iron, overgrown grass and a slew of other bits and pieces that had accumulated over the years.

“You sure about this?” Happy asked. “Only, I could come with you as added security.”

Bruce and Harry shared an amused look.

“Wait here, Happy. If we need you, we’ll call and you can come to our rescue,” Harry said.

“Yeah. Yeah, I can do that,” Happy agreed.

Almost simultaneously, Bruce and Harry opened their doors and got out. As Harry rounded the car, he gestured for Bruce to go first, after all, Jennifer was his cousin and he figured that she’d feel more comfortable seeing a familiar face.

Slowly, the two picked their way through the yard, taking an almost circulating path to reach the main doors. The doors had obviously been forced open at some point, there now being a gap wide enough to walk through easily. Harry blinked, though, at the imprint of a hand in the metal.

“You sure that you haven’t been here before?” he asked.

Bruce put his hand up inside the print. It was clear that whatever had made it was big, much bigger than Bruce currently was.

“I’m sure,” he said. “This isn’t big enough.”

Harry’s eyes widened slightly before he nodded.

“Right,” he said, before making an ‘after you’ gesture.

Bruce pulled a face at him but went first without complaint.

The inside of the old warehouse was incredibly dark and gloomy. What light that did filter in, did so only through the broken panes – the ones still intact now being too gritty and grimy for anything, let alone light, to penetrate.

“Bruce? Is that you?” a voice called out of the darkness.
“Jennifer?” Bruce called back and his head, just like Harry’s was moving about, trying to pinpoint exactly where the voice had originated.

“Who’s that with you?” Jennifer asked.

“This is Harry. You spoke to him on the phone,” Bruce said, placing a hand on Harry’s shoulder.

“You trust him?” Jennifer asked.

“Of course. I wouldn’t have brought him with me otherwise,” Bruce assured her.

“And there’s no one else here with you?” she asked.

“Only Happy, our driver, but he stayed in the car,” Bruce replied.

There was a pause, then and both men waited. The sound of footfalls turned their heads in the right direction and they squinted, trying to make out Jennifer through the shadows. And then she appeared, stepping into a shaft of light out of the darkness.

Her hands, were in front of her, twisting themselves together and her head was bowed, allowing curtains of long, black hair to hide her face. If it wasn’t for her size – easily seven feet tall – she appeared the very essence of the meekest person, scared and apprehensive.

Both Harry and Bruce gasped at the sight of her hands, what little of her face that they could see and her lower legs and feet. Jennifer was completely jade green.

“Jennifer?” Bruce asked, taking a step forward.

The green giantess nodded, never lifting her eyes.

And then Bruce was striding towards her, closing the distance until he was able to hug his cousin, albeit by having to reach up to do so.

“I’m so sorry,” Harry heard Bruce saying over and over. “I’m so sorry. This is all my fault.”

Slowly, hesitantly, Jennifer’s hands came up and around Bruce and tentatively hugged him back.

“This isn’t your fault, Bruce,” she said.

“Yes, it is,” Bruce asserted, stepping back enough to be able to look up at her from a comfortable distance. “I used my blood. It’s my blood that made you like this.”

“Dad said that if you hadn’t given me your blood that I would have died,” she stated.

“Yeah, I know, you would have. But still, it made you like … like this,” Bruce said.

He stopped then and seemed to really take her in, his head cocking to the side.

“You … you’re not angry right now?” he asked in awe.

“No,” she replied, shaking her head.

“How is that possible?” he wondered aloud.

“Bruce?” Harry questioned.

“You know the Hulk, Harry,” Bruce said, turning to look at him. “When I’m angry, I get all big and
green and ... and **dumb**. Jennifer, though, Jennifer’s calm and she’s changed. And the way she’s talking, you can *tell* that she’s fully aware of everything.”

“Well, I am,” a confused-sounding Jenner stated.

“Yes, but *I* never remember anything afterwards,” Bruce stated, turning back. “I saw you at the hospital and you were recovering well, too well, in actual fact. Which would have been because of the healing factor in the blood. But you were your normal self. Do you know what caused you to change?”

Jennifer shook her head. “All I know is that I woke up to a couple of men trying to kill me and I got really angry.”

Bruce and Harry shared a look.

“That’d do it,” Harry commented. “But why didn’t she change back after calming down?”

“I’ve got no idea,” Bruce replied with a shake of her head. “Jennifer, I’d like you to come with me. You’ll be safe. And I’m hoping that you’ll let me run some tests so that I can try to find out what’s happened and see if there’s a way to reverse it.”

“Where?” Jennifer asked cautiously. “I ... I don’t want people to see me like this. The ones who have ... the ones who have were so afraid of me.”

This last she finished in an anguished whisper and Bruce stepped forward to give her another reassuring hug.

“Where I’m taking you, no one’s going to be scared of you or make fun of you,” Bruce reassured her. “It’s a safe place, a place that can deal with people of our ... unique abilities.”

“Where?” Jennifer asked again.

“Avengers Tower,” Bruce replied.

Jennifer seemed to search both Bruce and Harry’s eyes for a long time before finally giving a small nod.

“Okay. But how are we going to get there with me like ... this?” she asked.

“What about one of those special potions of yours?” Bruce asked Harry.

Before he’d even finished the question, Harry was shaking his head.

“They’re a *calming draught*, designed to calm people down. From what I can see, Jennifer’s already calm enough. It wouldn’t do anything,” Harry explained.

“In that case, we’ll just rely on the tinted windows of the car,” Bruce said. “The Tower has underground parking, so that won’t be a problem either.”

“And the driver won’t be a problem?” Jennifer asked.

Harry snorted. “He’s the personal driver of Tony Stark. Believe me, he’s probably seen a lot stranger things in the back of that car than you.”

***ooo00ooo***
Harry sank back into the lounge chair of his apartment, rested his head back on the cushion and closed his eyes.

Today had been an incredibly long and stressful day. The phone call, finding Bruce, collecting Bruce from the other side of the country and tracking Jennifer down had really just been the start.

As promised, Happy didn’t even bat an eye at Jennifer getting into the car, although they may have widened somewhat at the way the car tilted when she first got in. The drive to the Tower was mostly made in silence, as was the elevator ride up to the floor where Bruce’s own room was.

As one would expect, not long after they’d arrived, Tony turned up, no doubt alerted by Jarvis. And surprisingly, or not so surprisingly, Tony never said anything that wasn’t polite or courteous. Of course, that could have had something to do with a conversation that Bruce had with Tony when he first arrived. Even from across the room, the green tinge in Bruce’s skin was more than evident and warning enough.

Thor turning up not long after didn’t help Bruce’s temperament any either. Thor greeted Jennifer warmly enough, but after understanding that she was suffering from a similar condition as that which produced the Hulk, Thor was all for taking her down to the training room and putting her through her paces to see what her enhanced physique, strength and reactions could do.

And even while Bruce was putting his foot down against that idea, Harry could have sworn that he saw a trace of interest in Jennifer’s eyes.

And then had come the whirlwind that was Doctor Bruce Banner with all of those fancy letters after his name.

While Jennifer ate, Bruce began with questions. After that, it was a bevy of tests and blood and prodding and probing. Bruce even managed to badger Harry into giving over a calming draught, which, as Harry had predicted, did not have the desired result that Bruce wished for.

In the end it was Pepper of all people who put a stop to it.

She’d breezed into Bruce’s lab and before anyone knew it or understood how, she’d whisked Jennifer off. The next time that Jennifer was seen, she was wearing clothes that actually fit her – a deep purple tracksuit, the jacket unzipped revealing a white shirt underneath. Pepper had commented that it was all that she was able to whip up at short notice – not that anyone asked where she got them from – and stated that they’d go shopping in the next couple of days for a full wardrobe.

Even though Bruce’s tests had been put on hold for the remainder of the day, that didn’t seem to stop him from hovering protectively around her. Not that Harry could blame the man – he knew what it was like to blame yourself for other people’s suffering.

In the end, Harry’d escaped and come home, not even bothering to check in downstairs in the Den.

“Hey, you’re home,” Doreen’s voice came from in front of him and Harry opened a single eye to peer at her. “This came for you earlier. By owl! I didn’t think it was going to let me take it at first until I explained that you weren’t home and that I didn’t know when you would be back.”

By the time that she’d finished, Harry’d opened his other eye and leant forward to take the envelope that she was holding out to him.

“Thanks,” Harry replied, taking the envelope and instantly feeling that it was made from parchment. Turning it over, Harry broke the seal and pulled out the parchment.
“Only two sheets,” he mused, then, as he opened it and recognised the handwriting, he broke into a broad grin.

Eagerly, Harry devoured the cherished letter.

Uncle Harry,

Hi! How are you? I’m well and hope you are, too.

Things here are good but busy. The Professors are really working us hard at the moment. Not that we’d expect any different, seeing as exams are not that far away, but it’d be nice if they didn’t push so hard. Ebony had to go to the hospital wing the other day with how stressed she was. Madam Pomfrey fixed her right up though with a calming draught.

Ravenclaw beat Hufflepuff in our last match of the season two hundred ten to eighty. It was a brilliant win. If Gryffindor lose their last match, we’re a shoe-in for the Cup! How cool is that? Especially after the abysmal year we had last year.

I’m really hanging out to come visit. Six weeks! That’s not that long now. Just these last few weeks of classes, exams, a train ride and then holidays. Gran wants me to go muggle-style on a plane but I’m arguing for a portkey (that way I get more time in New York with you). Guess we’ll just have to see. But I’m sure that if you put in a word (hint hint) I’d be there that much sooner.

There’s been a huge lot of interest in you and the Avengers here since you left. Everyone’s been asking me about you all. I’ve got a whole bunch of people who want photos, even if they don’t move. I’ve told them that I’ll see, I’m not promising anything – don’t want to wear out my welcome before I even get there.

Don’t know if you heard, but all of those idiots that you guys caught after they took the kids hostage got sent to Azkaban. Malfoy was apparently livid that he didn’t get a new magical hand but I say that he got what he deserved, especially after what you and Gran and Aunt Hermione said he was like in the last war.

I think that he wanted to sue you or challenge you to a duel or something. I’m not sure what, only that Gran had to slap him down in the Wizengamot as your proxy and he was the one who ended up paying you money for defaming your name or something. At least, that’s what I think happened, Gran won’t give me all the details and the piece in the Prophet was hard to understand. If you don’t know already, guess you’ll just have to ask Gran. And then you can tell me.

Anyway, I better get back to studying, want to show you that report card with all O’s or EE’s when I get there and I need to put in some serious study for that to happen, especially in History of Magic.

Can’t wait to see you.

Love,

Teddy.

Harry refolded the letter and tapped his lips with it. He’d noticed a substantial deposit in his last statement from the goblins. Guess he knew why now. Perhaps one of these days he really should sit down and read the missives and reports that Andi sent him.

That day, though, was not today. He was simply too tired for that. Although he thought that he might have just enough energy to write Teddy back before he went to bed.
Tony cast one last eye over the plans for the redesign of the Tower. Really, it wasn’t a lot, but still, Avengers Tower seemed to be undergoing a reconstruction every other month.

This time, the changes were minimal. The floor above Candy Land – the ten levels of the R&D division of Stark Industries in the Tower was being retrofitted to become an additional lab. This would tie it in to the ones below and also to the three above, specially purposed for himself, Bruce, Peter and Doctor Cho when she was around.

Hopefully, that would keep Jane Foster and Eric Selvig happy with their specialised research. Not to mention keeping Darcy out of the way – the Tower really only had enough room for a certain number of smart-mouthed individuals and, with Peter added to the mix these days, that number was fast approaching critical mass.

The next part of the redesign was more cosmetic, altering the super-reinforced floor for Bruce and the Hulk so that it could sleep two. Jennifer may be a much more tame version of her cousin, but she was still super strong and weighed a tonne – not that he’d ever say that to her, for some reason, girls tended to be sensitive about their weight and he liked his head where it was, thank you very much.

The last part, since he had the construction crew in anyway, was to change up the training floors some. Harry particularly, backed up by Pepper of all people, seemed adamant that their newbies needed training. The web-head and rodent girl were one thing, but if Tony’s instincts told him anything, it was that there’d be a big, green addition to that group before too long.

“Approved,” Tony said, swiping the plans away.

“Yes, Sir,” Jarvis replied. “I shall forward the schematics to the contractors.”

Tony swivelled his seat around to a combination of three screens clustered together and rubbed his hands together.

“Right. Time for something fun,” he remarked. “Give me some thinking music.”

In response, some Black Sabbath began playing at a volume that made talking only just possible.

“Hmm, not quite right,” Tony said, shaking his head. “Switch it up to something funky, something really out there.”

The music being played changed mid-tune to something that had Tony bobbing his head.


“Of course, Sir,” Jarvis replied. “Does this suit have a particular function?”

“Yes,” Tony replied seriously. “Capable of independent space flight.”

“File created. Are you ready to begin?” Jarvis asked.

“In a minute,” Tony replied. “Second new file. Put this one in the Quinjet files. Label it: Mark V, specialising in independent space flight.”

“File created. Is there a reason for this type of project?” Jarvis asked.
Tony frowned. “Let’s just say that I’d rather we not get caught with our asses hanging out again.”

“Always a good sentiment, Sir,” Jarvis replied.

“Right. Throw up the Mark XLIII armour on the left monitor and the Quinjet Mark III schematics on the right monitor,” Tony instructed. “There’s going to be a fair bit of overlap in these projects, so I’ll be primarily using the middle monitor.”

“Yes, Sir,” Jarvis replied as both schematics appeared.

“Right,” Tony said, interlocking his fingers and flexing his arms to crack his knuckles. “Let’s get to work.

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“You’re early,” Tony stated, pointing an accusatory finger at the trio that Happy had just escorted up from the garage of Avengers Tower.

“Sorry?” Jane replied, sounding as though she wasn’t actually sure if she should be apologising or not.

“Would you believe our plane got in early? I mean, that never happens. Except this one time, right? But what are you gonna do?” Darcy explained with a shrug.

“Thank you for sending Mister Hogan to pick us up,” Erik said, reaching over to shake Tony’s hand.

Immediately, Tony’s hands flew up and he backed away.

“Don’t mind him, he doesn’t like to be handed things. Including hands, it seems,” Pepper apologised as she walked into the lounge.

“Can you blame me? You never know where things have been,” Tony stated.

“But it’s alright for me to take things from others and then hand them to you?” Pepper asked before continuing without waiting for an answer. “Jane. Darcy. It’s so good to see you both. You, too, Erik.”

The three women hugged in greeting, leaving the two men looking on indulgently.

“I thought Thor would be here,” Jane half-stated, half-asked, looking around the open room.

“Point Breaks’ down playing with our newest puppy,” Tony explained happily.

“A puppy? Thor? This I’ve got to see?” Darcy exclaimed with a huge smile. “Can you imagine the adorableness? The levels have got to be off the chart.”

“Darcy, if you’re going to stay here, the first thing you’re going to have to learn is never to listen to what Tony says, only to what he means,” Jane asked, looking at Pepper.

“Huh? What does that mean?” Darcy asked.

“In this case, I would assume that someone brought a new person to the Tower and Thor is … testing out their skills?” Jane asked, looking at Pepper.

“I like her brain, she’s smart,” Tony said, cocking a thumb at Jane before turning to point at Darcy.

“This one, though, we can keep her, she’s more fun.”
“There, see, I told you I was fun and you didn’t believe me,” Darcy said pointedly to Jane.

Pepper closed her eyes momentarily before interceding.

“Come on, I’ll take you down so that you can say ‘hi’ to Thor,” she said.

“Woah, that’s one big, green woman! And I mean all woman. She’s like … she’s … hulk-like,” Darcy exclaimed.

The woman in question turned from where she was standing in front of a weightlifting bar that was filled with the biggest weights imaginable. The menacing stare that she was giving had Darcy backpedalling, her hands raised in front of her.

“Hey! I meant that as a compliment. We need more strong, powerful women types to balance out the testosterone levels in the world,” Darcy stated.

“Darcy truly meant no harm,” Thor said, placing a hand on Jennifer’s shoulder. “She often speaks before thinking. It can be quite refreshing.”

“And irritating as hell,” Jane added, before walking forward, her hand extended. “Hi, I’m Jane Foster.”

Almost tentatively, Jennifer shook her hand, realising that she’d squeezed too hard by the wince on the other woman’s face. “Sorry, I’m still getting used to my strength like, well, like this. I’m Jennifer Walters, Bruce’s cousin.”

Jane gave a nod to Bruce before turning and stepping forward and giving Thor a hug and kiss.

“I can totally see the resemblance,” Darcy said. “Well, not now, obviously, but when he’s all big and green and muscly, too. I like your hair, that green tinge is really unique.”

Self-consciously, Jennifer ran her fingers through a lock of her hair that had fallen over her shoulder.

“So, why are you all big and green and he’s not?” she asked, sticking her thumb over her shoulder at Bruce. “I thought that only happened when he was all angry and if you’re angry, shouldn’t he be, too?”

“That doesn’t seem to work the same with Jennifer. It’s something that we’re still trying to work out,” Bruce said.

“Well, if you’re needing some extra opinions, we’d be glad to help out,” Erik said to Bruce before reaching forward to shake Jennifer’s hand. “Nice to meet you, Jennifer. I’m Erik.”

“So, how’s things been going down here?” Tony asked.

“Wonderfully,” Thor beamed. “Jennifer is strong and quick. With a little training she has the makings of a fine warrior.”

“Oh no!” Jennifer protested. “I’m a lawyer, not a fighter; I fight with words, not fists.”

“Might not be a bad idea, though; girl’s gotta know how to defend herself,” Darcy said. “Me, I’m not a fighter either; that’s why I always carry my taser. Works a treat.”

“I can attest to that,” Thor stated grimly.
“See? If it can stop a big guy like Thor, it can stop anyone,” Darcy said happily.

Jennifer’s eyes widened. “You tased Thor?”

“Well, at least I didn’t hit him with a car. Twice!” she protested.

“I said I was sorry,” Jane retorted.

“You … you hit Thor with … with a car. Twice. And you … tased him. One of the strongest Avengers, beaten by a pair of girls?”

At the start of Jennifer’s summary, she’s sounded incredulous but amused; by the end, she was outright laughing.

And that’s when it finally happened. As she laughed, Jennifer’s skin began to fade from jade green to a more natural skin tone. At the same time, she began losing height. Within half a minute, the jade green giantess had given way to a normal sized, human girl.

Seeing her put a hand up to her head and begin to sway, Bruce rushed forward to catch her the same time that Thor did. Together, the two lowered the now unconscious Jennifer to the ground. Bruce’s fingers immediately reached out to check her pulse.

“She’s fine. Just sleeping,” he said, sounding relieved. “I go through the same thing.”

“What happened? Why’d she change back now?” Tony asked.

Bruce shook his head. “I’ve got no idea. That was the first time I’ve heard her laughing though, so I’m guessing emotion played a part? Again, that fits with what happens with me.”

“Will she stay normal or will she change back again?” Pepper asked.

Again, Bruce shook his head. “I’ve got absolutely no idea. I could make guesses but I’d rather wait until I can run some tests and I’ll hold off on that until she’s rested.”

“If you wish, I can carry her to her room,” Thor offered.

“Thanks, Thor, I’d appreciate that,” Bruce smiled.

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Tony led the three into the semi-revamped lab and spread his arms wide.

“I’m hoping that you’ll find this satisfactory,” he said.

“This is for us?” Jane asked, looking around in awe.

“Well, yeah,” Tony replied.

“It’s too much, this must have cost a fortune; the equipment in here, it’s state of the art,” Erik stated.

“Nothing but the best,” Tony beamed, then, seeing that they were about to protest, explained. “Look, you’re all astrophysicists, right?”

“I’m not,” Darcy said, raising one hand. “I just do what they tell me. Well, most of the time.”

Tony ignored her, focussing on the two vaunted scientists.
“If my facts are right, you’re both studying Einstein-Rosen bridges?” he asked.

“Wormholes, yes,” Erik nodded.

“And you both think that they’re the same thing as that pretty light show that Thor uses to travel between here and Asgard and to make annoying patterns in the grass?” he added.

“Yes.” Jane said. “From what Thor’s explained, the Bifrost links the nine worlds of Asgard together allowing them to travel between them.”

“Well, if we mere humans can create our own, then that gives us a little more independence, an extra option …” he said.

“Option?” Erik questioned.

Tony shrugged. “In case we ever want to travel about and see the cosmos. Anyway, you’re studying it and I’m all for it. This is my way of helping. Take a look at what’s here and let me know if there’s anything else you want or need and I’ll see what I can do.”

Jane’s heartfelt, “thank you,” barely preceded her dashing away to examine and touch it everything in sight.

“You’re just a big softie, aren’t you?” Darcy stated, poking Tony in the arm.

“Well, I do like to make people happy,” Tony replied.

“That’s not what I’ve heard. Still, you’ve made those two happier than I’ve seen them before; they’re like kids in a candy store.”

Tony grinned; that was exactly what they looked like. He couldn’t wait to show them Candy Land and to see their reaction to that.

Jennifer’s woke slowly, stretching her entire body before snuggling back under the covers, a small smile playing on her lips. The bed was incredibly comfortable and she luxuriated in it, especially after the hard mattress and stiff, starchy sheets that she’d had to put up with in the hospital.

The hospital.

Her mind snapped into drive then as images flashed. The two men standing over her in the dark. Her anger. The feeling of her body changing; the sound of her clothes ripping. The feeling of crushing that gun in her very hand. The image of her changed, green face in the mirror.

Jennifer’s heart was beating wildly and her breathing was becoming short and rapid.

Suddenly, a hand was rubbing her back soothingly.

“Hey, it’s alright, you’re safe. Nothing’s going to happen to you. You’re safe here, you’re with friends,” a soft voice was saying.

Jennifer focused on it, her brows coming together as she tried to place the familiarity of it.

“Bruce?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’m here,” he replied.
Her eyes opened then and he smiled down at her.

“There you are. See, you’re good; nothing to worry about here,” he said.

She nodded and pushed herself up, sliding upwards until she was sitting up in bed against the headboard. It was then that she noticed her hands – all pink and normal sized. Jennifer gasped and pushed up her sleeves. No green. Urgently, she pushed the sheets aside, checking over her legs before patting her face and pulling a lock of hair around. It was gone, no more green; she was back to normal.

“I’m normal,” she grinned. “I’m cured.”

Bruce’s face instantly froze her.

“I am, aren’t I?” she insisted.

Bruce looked down and away, with a small shake of his head.

“Your DNA says otherwise,” he stated gently. “It’s been changed, altered.”

Jennifer stared at him. “You’re saying I’m not human anymore? What am I, then? Some freak!”

Her voice had risen alarmingly by the end and she could feel herself getting angry.

“You need to calm down!” Bruce said urgently. “Slow your breathing, concentrate on it.”

“I don’t want to calm down!” Jennifer bit back.

“If you don’t, you’ll turn into your Hulk-self again, you’ll be big and green just like before,” Bruce snapped back.

That froze her.

She stared hard at him, her eyes staring intently into his, seeing the truth and anguish written there. Slowly, she tried to do as he said, concentrate on her breathing but it was so hard. Everything about her screamed to continue getting angry, that getting angrier and angrier could make the pain and hurt go away. Only Bruce’s presence and that not-so-tiny part of her that was deathly afraid of what could happen was there to counter it.

The battle was hard and felt like it took hours, but slowly, Jennifer was able to calm herself down. Eventually, she settled, slumping, back against the pillows, spent.

“What’s happened to me?” she asked.

Bruce sighed. “Somehow, my blood has altered you. I hoped that it was only temporary, that after you changed back, you’d go back to normal. But that hasn’t happened. Your very DNA changed; it’s very close to mine, now.”

“But not the same,” Jennifer latched on to that. “So, there’s still hope.”

“Maybe,” Bruce allowed. “The only thing different about our … transformations is that you get to retain your intelligence and memory, where as I don’t. Why that is, I have no idea. I’d give anything for Betty to be here right now.”

“Betty?” Jennifer asked.
“A former … colleague of me. She was there when my … accident occurred as well. She knows gamma and its effects almost as well as I do,” he explained.

“Well, where is she? Maybe she’d be willing to come here and help you,” she suggested.

Bruce shook his head. “I haven’t heard from her in years and wouldn’t know where to start looking to find her.”

“Well, where is she? Maybe she’d be willing to come here and help you,” she suggested.

Bruce shook his head. “I haven’t heard from her in years and wouldn’t know where to start looking to find her.”

“Will I turn green again?” Jennifer asked softly.

“Let’s hope not, but I wouldn’t rule it out,” Bruce replied, laying a comforting hand on her arm.

“I’m guessing it’s when I’m angry?” at his nod, she continued. “So, if I’m not angry, I turn back?”

“That’s what I’d expect,” Bruce replied, “at least, that’s the way it happens with me.”

“But I haven’t been angry for a couple of days. Why didn’t I change back earlier? And what made me change back anyway?” she asked.

“I’m only guessing here,” Bruce warned. “But I think that the reason you took so long to turn back was that you were so stressed, your … Hulk-side … decided that the best way to protect you was to ensure that you had your full strength ready at hand. As to what finally changed you back, well, you laughed. I’m guessing that you finally allowed yourself to relax.”

“I’m guessing you want to run some more tests?” Jennifer sighed.

“I do,” Bruce replied. “But I think it’s not going to be what you expect.”

She looked at him quizzically and gestured for him to explain.

“I’d like the two of us to go somewhere remote, somewhere where there’s no people around. And then I want you to trigger your change,” he said.

“WHAT! Why?” she panicked.

“Listen, you get to keep your intelligence. I think you can use that. You can calm yourself down and have some control over changing back. Who knows, you might even be able to control changing back and forth at will,” he explained. “The problem is that it’s not going to be an easy process; in fact, I expect that it’ll be long and hard. But I know you, Jenn, you’re strong – in your mind, your will – and I know that you can do this.”

His belief in her all but permeated the very air. Jennifer could only stare at him. She was strong, she had to give him that. And stubborn, got that from having a cop for a dad. Looking back, she recognised how much work she’d had to put in just to get a place in college to become a lawyer and then all the years of long, hard work and study to pass and to graduate in the top five percent in the state.

“Alright,” she finally agreed. “We’ll do it your way. But if things go south, I’m blaming you.”

“Hello?” Harry said.

“Hello, Harry? Is that you?”

The phone ringing had been expected and the fact that it had been answered after only the first ring
told its own story, but the voice on the other end, while female, definitely wasn’t Skye. It didn’t even have an American accent; no, the accent was British. But the only person to ring from there was Hermione and this wasn’t her either.

It took Harry a couple of moments before he was able to place the voice.

“Lavender?” Harry asked.

“Yeah, hi, Harry. How are you?” Lavender’s voice was full of relief.

“I’m good. You?” Harry replied.

“You know, about the same,” Lavender replied.

There was a pause then and, while Harry suspected that he knew what the call could be about, knowing who was on the other end, it sounded as though he was going to have to guide the conversation there.

“I hear that the article you wrote about us got a lot of interest back home,” Harry commented.

“Yeah, people seemed to like it; at least, I think they did,” Lavender replied.

“Well, we greatly appreciated it,” Harry said earnestly. “Have you written any more interesting pieces that I should read.”

“No,” Lavender replied quietly. “No one’ll publish anything that I write.”

“What about *The Quibbler*?” Harry asked.

“Luna wants to, but they only publish every two weeks and my pieces don’t always fit into their theme for the issue,” she replied.

“I understand. So, I’m guessing that you’re finding it hard. You know that there’s always a job here for you, if you want,” Harry stated.

“That’s … that’s actually why I rang,” Lavender said. “Are you really serious about that? I mean, you’re not just feeling sorry for me or something?”

Harry smiled slightly, even though she couldn’t see it.

“Absolutely not. What you wrote about us, about the Avengers, was perfect. We *need* that kind of press, especially here in the ‘normal’ world. You’d make a great Press Secretary.”

“Is that really a full-time job, though?” Lavender asked.

“Well, no, but Tony has a position for you with Stark Industries,” Harry replied. “It’s in the secretarial office, but more a specialised position, where you’ll be dealing with the Avengers mostly and only a little bit of the company stuff when you have the time.”

“Okay,” Lavender said after a pause. “I think … I think I’d like to accept, if that’s okay?”

“It’s more than okay, Lav,” Harry said enthusiastically. “When can you come?”

“I, uh, I don’t have any money to get there,” she admitted.

“Not a problem,” Harry replied. “I’ll organise a ticket for you; all you’ll have to do is go to the
airport and pick it up. And there’ll be an apartment waiting here for you, too.”

Harry could hear sniffles on the other end of the phone and he waited patiently for Lavender to get her emotions under control.

“Thank you, Harry, you’ve no idea how much this means to me, how much it’ll change my life,” she said.

“My pleasure, Lav. You’ll be helping us just as much. I look forward to seeing you when you get here,” Harry said.

“Thanks, Harry. I’ll see you then,” she replied.

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“Right, everyone, we all know why we’re here,” Tony said excitedly, rubbing his hands together before flinging one arm out to point at his ‘guinea pig’, “to work out the science behind him being able to change from a regular, if scruffy-looking guy, into a bird.”

“Who’s scruffy-looking?” Harry asked, one eyebrow raised.

“I thought we were here to do science, not quote ancient movies,” Peter stated.

“Ancient?” Tony spluttered.

“Exactly how old is this kid?” Darcy asked.

“Apparently Peter’s still in high school,” Jane replied.

“Well, if he wants to graduate, I’d suggest that he not make disparaging remarks about the classics,” Harry said pointedly, waving a finger in an intricate pattern in Peter’s direction. “Bad things could happen if he keeps it up.”

Snickers erupted around the room and outright laughter by Bruce.

“You know that’s from the wrong movie, don’t you?” Bruce managed to ask, wiping tears from his eyes.

Peter’s confused expression vanished when he realised that everyone was laughing at him and he looked down. All the blood instantly drained from his face before rushing back with a vengeance to turn not just his face but his ears, neck and the top of his chest a vivid, vibrant red.

In place of the black jeans and dark blue t-shirt that he’d been wearing when he entered the lab, he was now wearing a gold bikini, an exact replica of the one worn by Princess Leia in *The Return of the Jedi*.

“I don’t care if it’s from the wrong movie, I love it!” Tony exclaimed. “You better be recording this, Jarvis.”

“You’re just happy that it’s not you for once,” Pepper commented.

Tony shrugged but didn’t correct her.

“Okay, already, I take it back,” Peter said hurriedly, scurrying behind the closest, largest piece of equipment that he could find. “I was wrong to dis a classic. Age doesn’t mean something’s bad.”
“You just remember that or we might have to bring out the big guns. Aunt. May,” Harry stated sternly. After eyeing him for another minute, Harry relented and waved his hand, cancelling the transfiguration.

“Oh, thank god for that,” Peter sighed, patting his clothes down, attempting to reassure himself that they were actually returned to normal.

“As amusing as all this is, shouldn’t we be getting down to work?” Erik asked.

“Selvig’s right,” Tony stated, turning serious as his wont was when he was in full blown science mode.

Five of the science stations set up around the room were quickly occupied by Tony, Bruce, Peter, Jane and Erik. Each station was equipped with multiple computer screens, although Tony had the most, including a holographic one. There was also a number of specialised scientific equipment at the different stations, depending on the specialisations that that particular person held.

Harry had been placed in the very centre of the room. At the moment he was fidgeting, shifting from foot to foot, uncomfortable with the level of scrutiny that he was already under and the tests hadn’t even started yet.

“Everyone should have received a copy of the results of the tests that I’ve already conducted on Harry’s wizarding hocus pocus,” Tony said.

There were various nods around the room and even a couple of screens flickering on with the relevant data being displayed.

“None of those tests studied the change that a person could be put through magically,” Tony continued, “because someone forgot to tell me that that was even possible.”

“Quack,” Harry pointedly stated and Tony visibly blanched, making Pepper and Peter snicker.

“Moving right along,” Tony said hurriedly. “Is everyone ready to see Harry transform into a bird and to find out how he does it scientifically?”

“You know this is pointless, don’t you?” Harry asked. “You can’t explain magic.”

“Everything has a reasonable explanation,” Jane stated.

“‘Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.’ Arthur C. Clarke,” Erik quoted.

“It’s not technology, just magic,” Harry countered. “But I realise that I’m never going to convince you otherwise until you get this out of your system. So, get to it.”

“Excellent,” Tony beamed. “Glad to see you getting into the spirit of things at last. Everyone ready? Jarvis?”

“Of course, Sir,” Jarvis replied, echoing the scientists in the room.

“Alright, Gandalf, do your thing!” Tony commanded.

Instantly, Harry gathered his magic and changed, transforming into Ged, his Sparrowhawk form. Spreading his wings, he pushed down hard, working to overcome the lack of air currents to get himself aloft. Once he was airborne, he began a careful circuit of the room, taking the time to watch
Bruce had taken a single look, a brief moment of wonder crossing his face before he began concentrating on his screens and equipment. Harry figured that, with all of the bodily changes that he’d gone through in his lifetime, seeing it happen to another wasn’t such a big deal.

Jane and Erik were fully immersed in the science, even alternating between their own data and the data that the other was gathering. Peter, meanwhile, was fiddling with something with far too many buttons and switches for Harry to understand. Tony was being Tony, flitting between three different screens and a holographic projection of Harry’s change, being played at, Harry guessed, one hundredth of normal speed.

Angling his flight feathers, Harry soared over the heads of Pepper and Darcy, enjoying the way that they were so engrossed in watching him that they didn’t even seem to notice that their mouths were still open from when he first transformed.

“That mass has to go somewhere,” Harry heard Peter mutter. “An alternate dimension? A pocket universe? It’s definitely been removed from this plane of existence.”

“Obviously,” Bruce answered. “If he’d maintained his mass despite his form and shape changing, there’s no way that he’d be able to fly.”

As Harry continued to circle the room above them, the scientists focussed on their consoles and screens, shooting out questions and comments to each other. And from everything that he heard and understood – which, admittedly wasn’t a lot – it seemed that he was right: they had absolutely no idea how he was able to do what he did.

Harry sighed internally. He had told them that science and magic didn’t mix. Maybe now they’d listen and believe him. Then again, knowing this lot like he did, he didn’t think that that was likely to happen any time soon.
“Where are we?” Jennifer asked, looking around at the great flat expanse of nothingness.

The ground was dry and parched, huge cracks having formed in places. What grass there was was brown and clumpy, as though sticking together gave it a better chance of survival. Off in the far distance, small humps of red indicated where the mountains rose from the flat earth.

Bruce lifted his hand to shade his eyes from the glare of the bright yellow sun.

“Nevada,” he replied simply.

“This is where you want to try to help me get a handle on whatever’s happening to me?” Jennifer asked incredulously. “There’s nothing here!”

“Exactly,” Bruce said. “That way, if something goes wrong – for either of us – we’re not likely to make a … mess.”

Jennifer flicked a thumb over her shoulder at the quinjet.

“And what about it? Or Harry?” she asked.

“Harry can take care of himself,” the man in question replied from where he lounged, leaning against the wall of the inside of the quinjet away from the sun.

“And he’s our best bet if something does go wrong,” Bruce added. “He’s got the magic to calm us down.”

“That didn’t work the last time that I took that disgusting potion of his,” Jennifer pointed out.

“I’ll admit that I stuffed up there,” Harry called. “Bruce needs a calming draught; you apparently need a cheering charm. At least, that’s the theory I’m working on.”

“Theory?” Jennifer near-screamed.

“Yes, theory,” Bruce said calmly. “That’s why we’re here, remember?”

Jennifer’s chest was heaving as she fought to control herself. That didn’t stop her from glaring at the two men, though.

“You’ve brought me out here, into the middle of nowhere, all on his theory that his magic will work on me and on your theory that I can change through the simple power of my mind,” Jennifer stated shaking her head. “Have either of you taken into consideration that I don’t want to change back into that green monster?”

“I know, Jennifer, believe me, I know,” Bruce said, taking her hands and staring into her eyes intently. “I’ve been through this and I’ve spent years trying to get a handle on the Hulk. I firmly believe that you have a chance that I’ve never had and I want to help you. Don’t you want to know if you can handle a transformation if and when it happens. Because, believe me, it will happen.”

Jennifer’s eyes were locked with his. Finally, she sighed.

“Alright. Remind me again what you think happens with me?” she said.
“We know that even when you’re changed you retain full awareness of who you are. That includes access to all of your knowledge, memories and intelligence,” Bruce stated. “Like me, I think that your … change is based on emotion. Anger to be precise, although it seems stress could also be a factor. I believe that if you can get a handle on those emotions, force yourself to let go of them, you can voluntarily change back.”

“Right, like stopping yourself from being angry or stressed is so easy,” Jennifer pointed out sarcastically.

“Thus, why we’re out here to try,” Bruce replied. “And so you know, it can be. I’m always angry, that’s why it’s so easy for me to change into the Hulk. I just have problems changing back because the Hulk can’t access his emotions enough to change them or to let them go.”

“How do we do this?” she asked.

Bruce grimaced. “You’re not going to like this. Firstly, we need to trigger a change and then we need to try to help you change back. I, or Harry if I’m unavailable, will try to guide you with breathing exercises and meditation tips.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got some experience with calming the mind and getting my emotions under control,” Harry called. “I know the right way and the wrong way – thanks to a bastard of a teacher – so, believe me, I know what I’m doing.”

“Good to know,” she replied.

“So, I change into that female version of Hulk; you guys help me get me emotions under control and I simply change back,” Jennifer summarised. “Okay. How do we get me to change?”

“Simple. We make you mad,” Harry grinned, flicking his hands at her one after the other after the other.

A sharp sting hit Jennifer’s stomach and she yelped, jumped back slightly and slapped her hand over the spot. A second sting bit into her side eliciting a higher, louder yell. And then sting after sting began raining down on her.

Thigh.

Arm.

Stomach.

Thigh.

Cheek.

Hand.

And with each one, she jumped and cried out with the pain. She tried anticipating where they were going to hit, but each time she was dead wrong. She tried moving erratically in an attempt to make him stop.

“Stop!” she yelled.

“Please. Don’t!” she tried again half a minute later, to no effect.

Her cries, while starting high-pitched, began to deepen and Jennifer started feeling as though the
clothes that she was wearing were tight.

Arm.

Bicep.

Thigh.

Neck.

“Quit it!” she snarled.

“STOP IT!” she yelled.

Stomach.

Foot.

And then Jennifer decided to do something about it. With a cry of rage, she ran at him, intent on making him stop. The distance between each step lengthened as she sped up. A couple more steps and she’d have him.

Jennifer reached out with both arms, intent on grabbing him and shaking him until he stopped. But Harry seemed to simply twist on himself and disappear.

Back.

Butt.

Back.

Jennifer whirled about, snarling in rage. She located the annoyance and leapt.

She saw Harry’s eyes widen as she bore down on him from above and then he disappeared again!

“Right, step one complete,” she heard Harry state and she twirled about to find him. “You’re up, big guy!”

“Jennifer! Jennifer!”

She looked to the side only to see Bruce standing there, the purple tracksuit in her hands that Pepper had first given her when she arrived at Avengers Tower.

“How about you get changed and we’ll have a talk?” Bruce said.

But Jennifer had no intention of that.

“Not until I’ve found Potter and given him a taste of his own medicine!” she snarled and whirled about, searching every direction to find the elusive, annoying man.

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The day had not progressed well.

Due to Harry’s method of persuading the She-Hulk to appear, he was not in her good books. Any time that he appeared only seemed to anger her more and she was very quick in getting up and raging after him. Of course, him vanishing so quickly before she could get her great green hands
around his neck didn’t help matters in the slightest. And, of course, that meant that whatever progress
Bruce had managed to achieve in the intervening time was completely undone.

It also meant that Bruce was in it by himself. The original plan was for them to ‘tag team’ helping
her, breathing exercises and meditation exercises, rotating them to find what worked best.

Jennifer’s frustration steadily mounted as the day wore on and the longer that she’d been stuck in her
altered form. Currently, she was off trying to use up some of that excess anger by throwing chunks
of dirt and rock as far as she possibly could.

Seeing her otherwise occupied, Harry appeared as if from thin air.

“Don’t do that!” Bruce hissed, startling to the side away from Harry. “And where have you been
anyway?”

“I’ve been here,” Harry replied. “I was disillusioned with sound and scent masking charms in place
so that she couldn’t sense me.”

“This isn’t working,” Bruce said, gesturing to his cousin a couple of hundred metres away. “She
seems to be getting somewhere, calming down and losing that anger, but she doesn’t change back.”

“I’ve been contemplating that very point,” Harry said. “She was like this for days last time, wasn’t
she? And we worked out that it was stress as much as anger.”

“Your point?” Bruce asked.

“I was wondering whether the problem is that she’s not letting herself go, letting herself get really
angry but bottling it somewhere instead of releasing it all,” he suggested.

Bruce considered that for a few minutes.

“It makes sense,” he finally said. “But how would we get her to really let go?”

Harry grinned at him. “You’re not going to like this.”

Bruce stared at him for a moment before comprehension dawned and he started waving his hands in
denial.

“No. Uh uh. Absolutely not,” he exclaimed.

“I think it could be the only way,” Harry stated calmly. “If you like, I could help things along.”

“No. You know that’s not necessary. I can change anytime, all I have to do is let go,” Bruce replied.

“And that’s what we want Jennifer to do, let go. Perhaps having two Hulks interacting will let her do
that,” Harry said.

“I’ll think about it,” Bruce finally replied.

Lavender waited until the plane was all but empty before even getting up from her assigned seat.
Glancing up and down the aisle, she saw that she was in no danger of having people need to get past
her or to even come up and start talking.

After waking in the Hogwarts’ Hospital Wing the morning after the Battle of Hogwarts, it’d taken
Lavender only a few moments to remember what had happened to her. And then it came back in a rush – she’d been bitten and scratched by a deranged Death Eater. The identity of exactly who that was was subsequently given to her by Bill Weasley, her once-boyfriend, Ron’s eldest brother. Fenrir Greyback, a werewolf, albeit in his human form.

Bill had spent a long time with her, helping her to come to terms with the physiological changes – the fact that she preferred her meat all but rare now, her temper was much closer to the surface, especially around the full moon, and the odd fact that her nails seemed to grow twice as fast as they once did.

Bill’s wife, Fleur, helped her with the scarring. One side of her face and down her neck had been badly scratched up by Greyback’s fingernails and, being made by a cursed being, were impossible to heal by magic. For someone like Bill, those scars were, for the most part, ignored, being seen as battle scars. For a girl to have them, though, that was a completely different matter.

For Lavender, the scars that were on her face for everyone to see made them uncomfortable. It reminded them that she had been attacked by a werewolf and usually, there was only one outcome of being attacked by a werewolf – the attacked also became one, assuming they survived. Thus, she was considered dangerous to be around; a dark creature that needed to be avoided. And while most people that she encountered understood the difference, that ingrained fear was too much for most to counter.

Every time that Lavender looked into the mirror, she completely understood what those people felt. She knew that she was hideous now, with her monstrous appearance. Thus, why she’d taken to keeping her fringe long and allowing it to cover as much of her face as possible.

Making a living for someone in her condition was next to impossible; no one wanted to employ her, unlike Bill who was able to fall back on his curse breaking skills and be rehired by the goblins, who simply didn’t care what he looked like as long as he brought in the gold.

She’d tried. Really, she had. But her once greatest asset, her outgoing personality had been all but destroyed along with her good looks and the way that she was treated. Her other greatest asset back at Hogwarts was her ability to know everything about everyone and she’d put that to good use, writing stories and articles for the paper. But, even not being able to see her, the stigma that was now attached to her name persisted and her pieces were more often than not rejected.

Her last, big break had been the piece that the *Prophet* and subsequently a number of other newspapers had picked up about Harry and his friends, the Avengers, who had come into magical Britain and rescued a group of school kids and their professors and managed to bring the last wannabe Death Eaters to justice.

But that had been a one-off. Even with that piece under her belt, still no one wanted to hire her. Money had gotten tight, desperately so to the point where she’d been venturing more and more into the muggle world where a galleon went further in order to make ends meet.

Which brought her to where she was now; at her last hope. Harry Potter had offhandedly offered her a job and, despite not believing that it was genuine, she’d rung anyway and asked. Harry, being Harry, had been not only genuine, but generous, affirming that the job offer was real and even paying for her plane ticket from England to New York.

“Thank you,” Lavender murmured to the flight person as she left the plane, her head bowed to ensure that her hair covered her face.

Just as the airport just outside of London had been incredibly vast and packed with far more people
than Lavender had ever seen in her life before (not even the Quidditch World Cup could compare) the airport that she’d just arrived in was the same.

Her eyes wide, Lavender scuttled against the wall, trying to take it all in.

And then he was there, smiling at her as he weaved his way through the crowd to reach her.

“Hi, Lav, welcome to America!” Harry exclaimed.

“Hi, Harry,” she replied, a little of the tension leaving her at his familiar presence and warm welcome.

Harry also, she noted, looked at her eyes, not a hint of a glance at her scars. There was no pity for her; no scared look behind his eyes. It was almost as though all he saw was the girl she’d once been a lifetime ago.

“Do you have any other luggage?” he asked, flicking his eyes to her pack which she’d stowed in the little compartment above her seat on the plane.

“No,” she replied. “I don’t own all that much.”

“Well, in that case, let’s get out of here and somewhere a little more sane, hmm?” he suggested.

As they walked, Lavender couldn’t hold the question that had plagued all the entire flight over any longer.

“Where will I be staying?” she blurted.

Harry smiled across at her. “A small flat; although here in America they call them ‘apartments’. It’s simple but I think you’ll like it. It’s got two bedrooms, kitchen, lounge, dining room. Even a small balcony that if you lean out just the right way, lets you see a hint of Central Park. It’s fully furnished, of course.”

Lavender stopped dead, causing Harry to stop a couple of steps later and turn back to look at her, his eyebrows raised.

“I … I can’t afford anything like that,” she managed quietly, her cheeks darkening in embarrassment.

“That’s not a problem,” Harry replied, waving her protest away as though it was non-existent. “I own it; bought it a couple of days ago in fact.”

“You bought it specifically for me to use?” she clarified.

“Yeah. It’s yours as long as you want it,” Harry replied easily.

“I can’t let you do that,” she stated firmly, shaking her head.

“Sure, you can,” Harry countered. “Look, if it means that much to you, after you’ve had a couple of pay checks and you’re on your feet, talk to me and we’ll work out rent or something. And Lavender, just so you know, this is nothing. You fought in the Battle; you helped buy me the time that I needed to finish off Riddle. That’s not something I’ll ever forget. You deserve this; I owe you.”

Lavender found herself blinking hard, desperately trying to force the tear not to fall.

“I didn’t do it just for you,” she finally managed.
“I know,” Harry smiled before taking her elbow. “Come on, let’s go get you started on your new life.”

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“Miss me?” Harry whispered into Bruce’s ear.

Bruce jumped and twisted his head around, one hand on his heart as though trying to stop it from leaping out of his chest.

“Harry! Stop doing that!” Bruce snapped.

Harry simply continued to grin while he switched to looking across at the jade green giantess sitting cross-legged on the ground, her head slightly bowed and her eyes closed.

“Where’ve you been, anyway?” Bruce asked.

Harry shrugged. “Had to pick a friend up from the airport. How’ve things been going here?”

“No luck yet,” Bruce sighed. “Jenn seems to be getting a handle on her breathing and I’ve got her trying some of those meditation techniques that you suggested but nothing yet.”

“Have you given any more thought to the suggestion I made last night?” Harry asked.

Bruce looked down, his toe scuffing the dirt.

“Yeah, I have,” he admitted. “And loath though I am to consider it, I think that you might be right. It’s clear that she’s not letting herself feel all of her emotions and that bottled anger and frustration has her … locked into this form for want of a better term.”

“Probably fear, too,” Harry stated. “I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s afraid of herself in this form, not to mention afraid of what others will think, say or do when they see her.”

“From personal experience, I’d bet anything that you’re right there,” Bruce replied.

“So, the question is, what are you going to do about it?” Harry asked after a couple of minutes of silence.

In reply, Bruce simply kept his eyes focussed on Jennifer as he walked forward slightly before kicking off his shoes. And then, closing his eyes against the dread of what was to come, Bruce let go.

Almost instantly, Bruce began changing, growing. Muscles appeared, bulging with power and tearing his shirt and pants to ribbons. His skin tone deepened to an emerald green as his hands grew larger than dinner plates and his feet stretched. Within moments, instead of Bruce Banner, Hulk stood there, towering over everything.

As Hulk took in his surroundings, his eyes fell on Harry. Seeing no threat there, instead recognising the small man as ‘friend’, Hulk dismissed him.

His focus, instead, settled on the green woman sitting nearby.

“Jen …,” Hulk tried in his deep bass voice before shaking his head. “Not Hulk. She-Hulk.”

Jennifer’s eyes snapped open and her head tilted up and back as she took in Hulk standing over her. Jumping to her feet, Jennifer took a single step back before stepping forward once again. Hulk
grinned at that.

“She-Hulk come with Hulk. Play. Tag,” Hulk managed, stringing together more words than Harry thought that he was capable of before stretching forward one hand and solidly poking Jennifer in the shoulder.

Hulk bent slightly at the knees and Harry realised that he was about to jump away. His hand moved in a blur to whip his wand out and shoot a tracking charm at Hulk’s back. A second one tagged Jennifer moment later. Now, no matter what happened, he’d have no trouble finding them.

With one last challenging look at his smaller, female counterpart, Hulk sprang aloft, easily leaping twenty metres into the air and more than twice that forward.

For a moment, Jennifer simply stood there, staring after him before she grinned and began running after him only to leap high into the air a few steps later.

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“They were playing tag?” an incredulous Tony asked.

“Yes,” Harry grinned, ignoring the sheepish looks that Bruce and Jennifer were sporting. “You should have seen it. They were running all over the desert and leaping high into the air to get away from each other. Hulk might be bigger and stronger and able to cover more distance in a single bound, but She-hulk was faster and has better reactions.”

“She-hulk?” Tony groaned, “surely we can come up with a better name than that!”

“Hey, don’t look at me,” Harry protested, raising his hands to emphasise that he had nothing to do with it. “And if you want to argue with someone about it, take it up with Hulk.”

Tony looked across at Bruce who was sitting there, smiling benignly back at him.


“Yeah, well, they’ll make a good team,” Harry commented. “Wouldn’t want to be the bad guys going up against them.”

“I’m not a fighter,” Jennifer protested. “In any form.”

“I told you, girl, you gotta learn to look after yourself,” Darcy stated.

“How did you manage to convince Bruce and Jennifer to return to their human forms?” Thor asked.

“Wasn’t easy, let me tell you,” Harry replied. “I ended up having to follow them on my broom. She-hulk, I think, ended up wearing herself out – this was after nearly fourteen hours of ‘tag’ mind you – and eventually stopped to rest with a huge smile on her face. As soon as she sat, she changed right back. Hulk, though, needed a bit of fancy flying to tag him with a cheering charm. The second that he began laughing, I threw a calming draught in his open mouth.”

“You could have waited until I was on the ground instead of doing it mid-air,” Bruce commented. “My back’s still sore from landing on it.”

“Excuse me, Sir. There are two people in the elevator and my protocols are being overridden,” Jarvis announced unexpectedly.

Thor’s arm shot out to the side only for Mjolnir to smack into his hand seconds later. Tony was up in
a flash, racing across the room to the nearest computer console. Meanwhile, Harry leapt to his feet, his wand in hand and a shield ready to cover the non-combatants.

A ding announced the door opening to reveal a pair of familiar faces.

“You know, you could have just knocked,” Tony snarked.

“I know,” Phil Coulson replied, a small smile on his lips. “I simply couldn’t resist the nostalgia.”

“Greetings, Son of Coul,” Thor boomed, stepping forward to grasp the other man’s forearm.

Harry lowered his wand, straightened and his eyes sought out the second occupant that had just emerged from the elevator.

“Sky, are you alright?” Harry asked urgently, frowning as he strode across the room.

The girl in question shot him a smile, but Harry could tell that, while genuine, it was forced. The dark blue cardigan that she was wearing was wrapped around her as both arms held her stomach. Her hair appeared limp and her skin, apart from under and around her eyes which was very dark, was incredibly pale.

“I’m fine,” she replied.

“I told you to stay back on the Bus,” Phil said, reaching out to put a steadying hand under her elbow. “You’re still healing.”

“Healing?” Harry asked.

Skye looked up at him with a wry smile. “I was shot on our last mission.”

“In that case, you shouldn’t even be upright,” Bruce stated.

“I can sympathise,” Jennifer added. “I was shot recently, too. Spend months in the hospital. I’m Jennifer, by the way, Jennifer Walters, Bruce’s cousin.”

“Harry and Tony told me you were alive. It’s good to see you,” Bruce said to Phil once Skye had been eased onto the couch.

“You, too, Bruce,” Phil smiled.

“What were you even doing on a mission,” Harry asked Skye. “I didn’t think that you were a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent.”

“I’m not, which was why I was on that mission,” Skye replied before noticing Phil’s expression. “And apparently that’s all I can tell you about that. Geez, you’d think that if there was one group that S.H.I.E.L.D. didn’t have to keep secrets from it’d be the Avengers.”

“Yes, well, I’m only a consultant,” Tony stated nonchalantly. “Nat and Bird-brain are Level Six, so they’d probably be allowed to know. Not sure about Capsicle; he only rates a Level Five clearance.”

“Captain America’s only Level Five?” a disbelieving Skye asked.

Phil shrugged. “He hasn’t been an agent all that long.”

“Phil!” a surprised voice exclaimed.
Pepper entered the room, bypassed a pouting Tony and gave Phil a long hug.

“I’m so glad that you’re okay,” she said. “You should have told us earlier.”

“It’s good to see you, too, Pepper,” he replied and no one missed that he hadn’t responded to the second half of Pepper’s statement.

“What brings you here?” Pepper asked. “Not that you ever need an invitation, of course.”

“Yes, he does,” Tony countered quickly. “Consulting hours are nine to five every other Thursday. He knows that.”

“Ignore him,” Pepper stated without even looking at Tony.

“I heard that I was invited,” Phil said.

“And I had to tag along; after all, I’ve got a personalised tour of the Tower to go on,” Skye added with a smile.

“You sure you’re up to that?” a doubtful Harry asked. “You said you were shot not long ago and you’re still not looking all that hot.”

At Skye’s raised eyebrow, Harry’s cheeks reddened.

“I meant well. You’re not looking all that well. Definitely. Not the other,” he tried to correct before giving up before he made things worse.

“For your information, I’m fine,” Skye repeated. “Yeah, it was life and death there for a while but the team went to this secret S.H.I.E.L.D. base place and got some magic juju juice to fix me right up.”

Harry stared at Phil. “Magic juju juice?”

“Skye’s exaggerating; there was no magic involved in her healing at all. Just science; albeit secret S.H.I.E.L.D. science,” Phil replied.

“Whatever that stuff was, it was amazing. I was all but dead. Brought me right back. Jemma says that I should be completely healed in a day or two,” Skye added.

“I’ve never heard of a medicine that could do something like that,” Bruce commented, before glancing at Jennifer. “Could have been useful to know about.”

“It’s a classified drug,” Phil told him. “And before any of you go looking, there’s no more of it. The facility was destroyed when we were there.”

“You do know that if you needed help, you could have come to us,” Harry stated. “I could have taken Skye to a magical healer.”

“I didn’t think that was possible,” Phil countered. “Don’t you people have laws against that sort of thing?”

Harry shrugged. “I would have found a way.”

“Gandalf’s right. S.H.I.E.L.D. doesn’t have to do everything by themselves,” Tony stated. “You brought the Avengers together for a reason – because there are some things you simply are not capable of dealing with on your own.”
“That’s something that all of us are still learning but we are learning it – how to work as a team,” Bruce added.

“There is no dishonour in requesting aid from allies,” said Thor.

Phil looked from face to face before settling on Skye.

“I will endeavour to remember that,” he promised.

“Well, this got serious fast,” Skye commented, breaking the silence. “Come on, magic man, you owe me a tour.”

“It would be my pleasure,” Harry said, standing and then offering her a hand up.

“I know about her! Don’t let her near any of my computers,” Tony called after the two as they headed towards the elevator.
“You know that I’m going to want to see everything, don’t you?” Skye asked.

Harry glanced to the side at her with a lop-sided grin.

“You did hear Tony say that I’m not allowed to let you near any of the computers, didn’t you?” Harry asked.

“Yeah. And?” she replied. “Exactly what do you think little ol’ me is gonna do?”

“Firstly, you’re not that old,” Harry retorted. “As for what you can do, how in Merlin’s name would I know? Computers and I don’t get along all that well. Unless they’re insulated against magic or a techno-mage has done their thing, my latent magic will blow one up if I’m not careful.”

“I’m betting Stark has all his toys protected from you accidentally blowing something up,” Skye grinned. “Come on, show me one. I bet I could teach you a few tricks to make them easier for you to use.”

“We’ll see,” Harry hedged. “Just out of curiosity, you do know about Jarvis, don’t you?”

“Stark’s AI, the most sophisticated of his kind on the planet,” she replied.

“Thank you, I am,” Jarvis said.

“Woah, that’s almost creepy,” Skye said, shying backwards and staring up at where the speakers were located.”

“You get used to it,” Harry grinned. “What Jarvis isn’t saying is that he hears all, sees all inside the Tower. Even if I let you near a computer, he’d know everything you did.”


“If that’s the case, I think that I’ve got just the thing for you,” Harry said. “And if you’re as good at computers as you claim, maybe you can show me a few things.”

“If I claim? Listen, magic man, my fingers can do things that you can only dream of,” Skye retorted.

“Really?” Harry asked, one eyebrow raised, a hint of a smile playing about his lips.

Skye stared at him for a moment before giving him a light punch on the shoulder.

“Get your mind out of the gutter,” she said.

“I don’t know what you’re thinking about, but my thoughts have nothing to do with the ‘gutter’,” Harry remarked innocently.

“You just keep telling yourself that,” she replied with a smile of her own. “Now, what’s first on this tour?”

The elevator doors chose that moment to open. In front of them was a great deck, at the end of which, through some glass doors, could be seen the tail end of a quinjet.

“Let me guess,” Skye said as they stepped out of the elevator. “Hanger bay.”
“Yep,” Harry replied. “From here we can access the important parts of Avengers Tower fairly easily. Storage bays are down that way and Medical is straight through there.”

“Makes sense to have it so close,” Skye nodded, rubbing her stomach where she had been shot so recently.

Harry nodded his agreement as they meandered across the floor towards a nearby sitting area containing a couple of large windows providing a panoramic view of the city.

“The science labs begin one floor down,” Harry said.

“Skip,” Skye stated quickly. “I get enough of the sciencey nerd stuff from FitzSimmons.”

“Then there’s the training floors just above us,” Harry continued.

“Anything interesting there or is it just treadmills and punching bags?” Skye asked.

“Do you know how many punching bags we go through when Steve’s here?” Harry asked with a shake of his head. “And, to answer your question, there are a couple of interesting things up there. One of which has the computer program that I’m hoping you could help me out with.”

“Really?” Skye asked, sounding incredibly interested. “Well, lead the way my young Padawan and let me teach you the ways of the mystical computer.”

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“Morse told us that you were supposed to be our ‘handler’,” Tony commented.

“How is Bobbi?” Phil asked in response.

Tony shrugged. “She’s not around all that much. Only when Fury wants something really.”

“You can bet that she knows where she can find you all at any given moment,” Phil replied. “And she’ll be there if you need something. All good handlers are the same, there’s no need to hover unless their charge is ‘playing up’.”

“Well, if she knows where we all are, that’s one better than us,” Tony stated dryly. “Birdbrain has developed this annoying habit of dropping of the grid every so often.”

“No one knows where your brain is at half the time anyway,” Pepper said from across the room where she was talking to the females in residence.

“Harsh but accurate,” Tony replied offhandedly. “Well, come on then, Agent. You might as well see what we’ve done with the place since you were last here. You two coming?”

The four men, Tony, Phil, Bruce and Thor rose from their seats and headed towards the elevator.

“I’ve put in a whole host of floors fitted out with the best of science equipment,” Tony said, indicating the levels for Candy Land.

“There’s some equipment in there that I’d only ever dreamed of seeing,” Bruce added.

“S.H.I.E.L.D. can keep its grubby little paws off,” Tony stated, waggling a finger at Phil. “I’ve installed a closed server down there that only Jarvis can access from outside.”

“It’s not S.H.I.E.L.D. that doesn’t know how to keep their nose out of other people’s business,” Phil
replied pointedly.

“Hey, I’m a consultant,” Tony protested. “I see it as part of my duty to test out your security and consult on ways that you could improve.”

“You give S.H.I.E.L.D. such advice?” Thor asked.

“Well, no. But that’s only because they never ask,” Tony replied hurriedly.

The doors quietly *whooshed* open in front of them.

“I thought that you might get a kick out of seeing this level,” Tony said, “see what you miss out on now that New Agent is our ‘handler’ instead of you.”

The corridor that they’d stepped out into had only four doors in it – two close by and a further two half-way down the corridor.

“You will quite enjoy this, Son of Coul,” Thor said enthusiastically. “These rooms are some of my favourites in Stark’s Tower.”

“Avenger’s Tower, remember?” Bruce corrected. “No need to keep giving Tony a big head.”

“Of course, forgive me,” Thor replied. “Avengers Tower.”

The door closest to them on the right opened just then, cutting off any other conversation.

“Oh, hey AC,” Skye said.

“Hello, and what were you two up to?” Tony smirked.

“I was showing Skye the quinjet flight simulator,” Harry stated.

Phil looked pointedly at Skye.

“Hey, May’s got no worries. I crashed the thing way too many times for me to ever get behind the wheel of a real one,” Sky stated, throwing her hands up defensively.

“You can pilot a quinjet?” Phil asked Harry.

“Not on your life,” Harry laughed. “Magic and electronics don’t like each other much. Things tend to short out or explode.”

“Tony and I are working on an insulator to prevent that,” Bruce stated, “but it’s slow going. Practically every single piece of hardware needs to be protected individually.”

“I would have thought that you had enough pilots already, between you two,” Phil indicated Bruce and Tony, “and Nat and Clint.”

“Yeah, well, you never know who’s going to be around,” Tony replied. “We tend to work on a whoever’s around and available sort of basis. And while Thor and Sparrowhawk here can fly themselves – literally in his case – we want to make sure as many as possible can pilot. That includes the newbies.”

“I’m assuming you’re talking about Spider-man?” Phil asked.

“Him; others, you know how it is,” Tony shrugged, deliberately sounding vague.
“What about that Daredevil guy from Hell’s Kitchen?” Skye asked eagerly. “Have you hooked up with him yet?”

“We’ve met,” Harry smiled.

“You must see this room,” Thor interrupted, indicating the one further down the corridor on the same side. “Stark has been most ingenious in its creation.”

As they walked towards the indicated door, the gymnasium and classroom cum briefing room were indicated as they passed each door.

Eagerly, Thor threw open the door and walked into a huge, blank room. It easily rose three stories and took up over half the floor area of a level of the Tower. Every wall, the floor and the ceiling was made up of panels one metre square, the only exception being high up on the left wall where a room could be seen behind a window two metres tall and six metres long.

“Dude, you are really easy to please, which I would not have expected for a god,” Skye said into the echoing room.

“Don’t judge a book by its cover,” Tony stated. “We call this the Exercise Room.”

“No, you call it that,” Bruce corrected. “The rest of us call it the ‘Danger Room’.”

“Oh, why?” Phil asked interestedly.

“Because you never know what it’s going to throw at you and you’re likely to end up injured after being in it,” Bruce replied.

Phil looked around the blank room with the tiniest smile on his face.

“Jarvis?” Tony called before Phil could voice his disbelief. “Control panel, please.”

Three panels on the floor to the side of where Tony was standing hissed as they dropped slightly into the floor before sliding away out of sight. A stand then rose from the ground, a large computer screen and keyboard attached to it.

Tony indicated the stand to Phil.

“This controls the room,” he explained. “Every panel that you see in here hides certain equipment – blocks, poles, weapon ports, platforms – that can be configured in numerous different ways according to the program that is entered. For example …”

Tony’s fingers danced over the keyboard and panels all over the room began sliding out of the way, allowing dozens of blocks of various sizes to emerge from the floor. A dozen poles slid out of the walls at various heights, along with an equal number of platforms.

“A basic town configuration,” Tony indicated with a sweep of his hand. “We can use this simulation either to practice together as a team with weapons firing from the walls at us or we can use it to spar against each other in a realistic setting without damaging civilians or the real thing.”

“It is truly remarkable the number of different configurations this room can take for us to battle in,” Thor stated happily.

“You should see it when Spider-man is in here using his webs to get around,” Harry grinned.

“From up there,” Bruce said indicating the room behind the window, “we can observe whoever is in
the room. There are dozens of cameras built into the room as well that send a live feed to the monitors in there, allowing us to record what happens and for the combatants to watch it later and analyse not only their own performance, but those of their teammates as well.”

“Impressive,” Phil said. “I’d be very interested in seeing this room in use.”

“I’d love to see May and Ward slugging it out in here sometime as well,” Skye said happily.

A slight buzz coming from Phil’s pocket had the man reaching for his phone. His expression was completely blank as he read whatever was on its screen. A few taps later and he was replacing it into his pocket.

“Unfortunately, duty calls,” Phil said. “Perhaps a raincheck on seeing this room in action?”

“That’s possible,” Tony replied.

“I take it I’m invited back as well?” Skye asked with a mischievous smirk.

“Definitely,” Harry replied with a lop-sided grin and his emerald eyes sparkling at her.

From high above in the observation room, the great training room could be observed with ease. From here, it was easy to see the entire field, where each of the combatants were positioned and even deduce what their tactics were. Monitors lined the space of wall above the great glass window that spanned the length of the room, each one either trained on one of the combatants or viewing an entire section of the training room from various angles.

Here was where those training could come after their session was ended and review their and their opponents’ performance, analysing and looking for strengths and weaknesses, areas to improve upon and tactics that had worked for them.

At the moment, the monitors showed the training battle between Spider-man and Squirrel Girl against Thor. The teens were using their enhanced speed, reflexes and agility to leap throughout the room, up and around the miniature towers, over the hurdles and sliding under boxes. Meanwhile, Thor had positioned himself in the centre of a clear space where they needed to come at him more on his terms than theirs.

To make the battle more even, Thor wasn’t using Mjolnir, nor any lightning. Nor was Spider-man using his webs or Squirrel Girl her squirrel friends.

Observing the three were Bruce, Jennifer and Harry.

“I don’t think that I could do that,” Jennifer stated nervously. “I’m just not an aggressive person.”

“I beg to differ,” Harry smirked. “You sure wanted to wring my neck when we were out in the desert.”

Jennifer shook her head. “That wasn’t me, that was the other girl. And only because you kept shooting those stinging things at me.”

“She-hulk, yes,” Harry said. “But she is a part of you, whether you want to acknowledge her or not.”

“And if you ever want to make peace with yourself, you’re going to have to get to know her,” Bruce added. “I made that mistake for too many years, trying desperately to deny the Hulk. Even now I
haven’t come to terms with him yet, but we’re getting there.

“It’s what’s helped make Hulk a true member of the Avengers. Once, all he wanted was to smash everyone and everything in his path. Now … now he’s, well I won’t say happy but at least content, to work alongside others, to have friends.”

“I don’t know,” Jennifer wavered.

“I think you do,” Harry countered. “I’ve watched you. You, as She-hulk, enjoyed sparring with Thor; and you loved ‘playing’ with Hulk. You’ve got the strength and speed to combine with your goodness, intelligence and your willingness to do good in the world for you, as She-Hulk, to make a real difference.”

“I’ve not been a great cousin, but I’ve followed your career a bit,” Bruce said. “I know that, as a lawyer, you always worked hard to get justice for anyone you encountered.”

“All we’re asking is for you to train, to learn what you can fully do and how to fight for those that can’t defend themselves,” Harry stated. “And if the time ever comes where we or anyone really, need some help, we and you will know that you’re capable of pitching in and to do what needs to be done.”

“It’s possible that you’ll never need to fight; God knows that I pray that I’ll never have to,” Bruce admitted. “But doesn’t it make sense to know how to and never need it rather than not know how in a time when you might need to know how?”

Jennifer was silent for a long time as the three stood at the observation window, watching as Spider-man rushed in, flipping and spinning about as Thor tried to hit him. Meanwhile, Squirrel Girl had snuck around from behind before jumping up, racing in and hitting the floor so that she could slide in and take Thor’s knees out from under him. It was then a free-for-all on the ground as the teens tried to pin Thor down.

“Alright,” Jennifer finally said. “But on two conditions.”

“Name them,” Bruce said.

“I learn this fighting thing like those two down there – it’s not full time and I get to learn other stuff than just how to hit someone,” she said.

“Done,” Harry smiled. “Actually, that was exactly what we’d envisioned anyway, for you to join the Academy which includes learning things like how to fly a quinjet.”

“What’s your other condition?” Bruce asked.

“I don’t want to just be cooped up here, I want to be out there doing good, using the skills I already have,” she said.

Harry mused on that for a couple of seconds.

“You know,” he finally said. “I think I know exactly what you want. Let me make a call and see what I can arrange.”

ooo00ooo

Jennifer looked out of the car’s window and frowned. This definitely wasn’t an upper-class suburb. It wasn’t even middle class. This was definitely heading into the rough end of New York City.
“Where are we?” she asked.

“Hell’s Kitchen,” Harry replied.

Jennifer’s head whipped across to stare at him.

“Hell’s Kitchen? What are we doing here?” she asked incredulously.

“We’re going to visit the firm that you’ll be working for when you’re not at the Tower,” Harry replied.

“In Hell’s Kitchen?” she asked, her voice rising. “Surely there’s dozens, hundreds of better, more prestigious law firms in the city where I could work. I’m sure that Tony’s got most of them on retainer.”

“He probably does,” Harry replied. “But your new job is going to be very specialised, something that none of those fancy law firms have yet.”

“In Hell’s Kitchen?” she asked again.

“You seem very fixated on that,” Harry commented. “Look. One of the owners has very special abilities.” He held up a hand to stop her questions. “I’ll let him explain that to you. Suffice it to say that he’s helped me out before, he’s a good guy and he’ll be uniquely qualified to understand your other job.”

The car pulled to the curb before she could respond and, copying Harry on the other side of the car, she opened the door and got out, pulling her briefcase with her. Harry gestured for her to follow her a dozen or so metres down the sidewalk before stopping at a door.

“Nelson and Murdock, Attorneys at Law,” she read the small plaque beside the door.

“Shall we?” Harry asked, pulling the door open for her.

After taking a long look at him, Jennifer walked through the doors and up a short flight of stairs. A second door stood at the top and to one side with the name of the law firm embossed upon it.

As she paused, Harry reached past her and opened the door, again gesturing for her to precede him through it.

At their entrance, a young, slim woman with long blonde hair rose from behind her desk.


“Hi, Karen, I’m not sure if you remember me? I’ve only been in here the once. My name’s Harry Potter,” Harry said.

“Of course, yes. Mister Potter,” Karen said, reaching out to shake his hand.

“Karen, this is a friend of mine, Jennifer Walters. Jennifer, this is Karen Page,” Harry introduced.

“It’s nice to meet you, Miss Walters,” Karen replied, shaking her hand. “If you’ll excuse me a moment, I’ll go see if Mister Murdock is ready for you.”

Karen quickly stepped to the door to the office on the left, knocked once and opened the door.
“Matt, Harry Potter and Jennifer Walters are here to see you,” she said.

“Thank you, Karen, I'll be right out,” Jennifer heard the man say.

A few moments later, a man with a noticeable three or five day growth appeared in the doorway. Intriguingly, he was wearing red-tinted, round glasses inside the office. He was also moving cautiously. At first, Jennifer thought that it might be because he knew about her but a few seconds later she realised the real reason. This man was blind.

“Matt,” Harry greeted him, failing to hold out his hand to shake. “It’s good to see you again.”

“I’d say likewise, but …” Matt shrugged with a bit of a grin.

“Matt, I’d like you to meet the friend that I was telling you about, Jennifer Walters,” Harry introduced.

“It’s nice to meet you, Miss Walters,” he said.

“Jennifer, please, Mister Murdock,” she replied. “And likewise.”

“Matt,” he said simply. “How about the two of you come into my office and we’ll chat before I inflict Foggy on you.”

At his gesture, they preceded him into his office. Jennifer turned to watch as Matt closed the door, straightening slightly as he did so. He then unerringly walked across the room, around his desk and sat in his chair.

“Jennifer,” Matt began, his hands held together on his desk, his body slightly angled forward. “How much has Harry, Bruce and the others told you about me?”

“Not a thing, really, other than that you’re a lawyer and that you’ve helped Harry out before,” she replied.

“I assume that you trust Jennifer?” Matt asked, his head angled towards Harry.

“Very much so,” Harry replied. “And in answer to your unasked question, it’s not our secret to tell.”

Matt nodded at that while Jennifer simply looked confused.

“Jennifer, do you know who Harry is?” Matt asked.

“Harry?” Jennifer replied, surprised at the question. “He’s … Harry Potter. Bruce’s friend.”

“What else can you tell me about him?” Matt asked.

Jennifer shrugged and then blushed slightly as she realised the uselessness of the gesture with a blind man.

“He owns and runs The Marauder's Den, he’s English and Doreen Green is living in his apartment,” she replied.

“That’s all?” Matt asked. “She does know?”

“Oh, yes, she knows,” Harry replied.

Jennifer looked between the two men before leaning forward and lowering her voice.
“Do you mean the fact that he’s also ‘Mage’?” she asked.

Matt smiled. “Knew we’d get there. You know about the Avengers. You also know that there are others that work with them.”

“You mean Spider-man and Squirrel Girl,” Jennifer said.

“Yes. And Daredevil,” Matt replied.

“Oh, I’ve never met him,” Jennifer stated.

“You have now,” Matt smirked.

Jennifer’s jaw dropped. She’s seen news footage and read the newspapers about the hero, the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen.

“You … you’re … him?” she asked.

“Yes,” Matt replied.

“But you’re …” she said before cutting off what she was going to say.

“Blind?” Matt finished for her. “I am. But all my other senses are off the chart which lets me do what I do.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Jennifer blurted.

“Because I know about your other self,” Matt replied. “That’s a big part of why you’re here. I know what it’s like to have two … halves, two personalities. I can be there to help you if you need it, just as you can help me at times as well.”

“O-kay,” Jennifer said slowly.

“It also forms part of the role that I’d like you to have working here at Nelson and Murdock,” Matt said.

Jennifer sat up a little straighter and Matt smiled.

“Apart from the usual cases that we take on here, I’d like you to head up a new division, specialising in the laws surrounding people with ‘special’ abilities,” Matt stated.

“There are no laws for such people, they … we have to follow the same laws as everyone else,” Jennifer countered.

“For now, yes,” Matt replied. “But with the number of powered people that are beginning to pop up, not to mention all of the mutants, you know as well as I do that it’s not going to be long until such laws begin to be passed. I’d like Nelson and Murdock to be ahead of the game, to be already known as the place where people like us can come when they get into some kind of legal problems and for them to know that we’ll be on their side.”

Jennifer thought about that for a few seconds. Yes, the writing was on the wall; she’d already heard rumours from her colleagues and contacts in the Justice Department that those kinds of laws were already being bandied around in back rooms. To start in on the ground floor, to become known as an expert in the field, even if it was in a relatively tiny law firm for now, the things that would do for her career …
“I’d love to get in on that,” she stated.

“Excellent,” Matt smiled. “Then it’s settled. We can’t pay much, being a small firm and all.”

“That’s okay, I’ve got some savings and Tony has set me up with an account if I need anything, not to mention that I’m staying in the Tower,” Jennifer replied.

“In that case, I could probably pay you even less,” Matt smiled.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Jennifer joked back.

“Welcome to Nelson and Murdock,” Matt said, reaching across the table to unerringly meet and then shake her hand. “Come on, I’m sure Foggy is dying to meet you.”

ooo00ooo

“You look busy,” Bruce remarked as he stepped up behind Tony.

That was very much the understatement. Currently, Tony was seated on a stool in front of five monitors, all filled with schematics of one kind or another. In addition to that, the open area adjacent to Tony’s computers was a holographic display of a piece of machinery.

“Just tinkering,” Tony replied, swivelling to face him.

The fact that Tony hadn’t immediately swiped away what was on the screens or ordered Jarvis to shut down the hologram told Bruce that Tony had no problem seeing these projects. Which either meant that they weren’t of any importance – a fact belied by Tony’s use of so many screens – or, and much more likely, Tony could use some help with his project.

“Anything interesting?” Bruce asked nonchalantly.

“Take a look,” Tony said with a gesture before rolling him and his stool out of the way.

Bruce stepped up to the bank of monitors, putting his glasses on as he did soon to help him read the small type. From what he could tell, Tony was working from the middle screen out. The current object under design appeared to be an engine or thruster of some kind based on arc reactor technology that was completely sealed, allowing no air from outside to penetrate in. The monitor to either side of the central one contained different models of the arc reactor, one from Tony’s Iron Man suit, the other from a quinjet, suppositions that were supported by the schematics of both on the outside monitors.

“You’re redesigning the arc reactor to be used in an environment without air,” Bruce surmised. “You’re thinking of a submersible quinjet and a suit specifically for use underwater?”

“Close,” Tony beamed. “And thanks for the suggestions. Shouldn’t take more than some minor tweaking for that when I’m done.”

“Then what’s the purpose of the redesign?” Bruce asked.

“Space,” Tony replied simply.

“You want to go to space?” a surprised Bruce asked.

“No. I want the capability of going to space,” Tony corrected.

“Why?” Bruce asked suspiciously.
Tony sat back and looked at him for a moment before getting up and beginning to pace.

“I fear we might need to,” Tony began. “I’m seeing more and more threats coming from there. The Chitauri here in New York. The Dark Elves in London. Hell, Thor’s from another planet and he tells me that there’re plenty of other planets out there that might get it in their head to come pay us a visit, something that we might not actually enjoy.”

“And you want to be prepared,” Bruce stated with a nod of his head. “Sensible. But is a quinjet and a suit of armour that can go into space enough to protect an entire planet?”

Tony snorted. “Not by a long shot. But it’s a start that we can build on. Eventually, I see the need for some kind of intelligence program, an AI like Jarvis with the capabilities of being our ultimate defence.”

Bruce shook his head at that.

“I’m not sure that that’s a good idea. Even the best of AIs aren’t anywhere near as good as the human brain. Sorry, Jarvis, no offence intended,” Bruce said.

“None taken, Sir. I know my limitations better than anyone,” Jarvis replied.

“Look, these are just ideas that I’ve been fiddling with. Take a look for yourself, if you like. Tell me what you think we need, what’s viable as well as what’s practical,” Tony suggested.

“Alright, I can do that,” Bruce agreed.

“Jarvis, bring up the file for Project Ultron on the monitor over there for Bruce, will you?” Tony asked.

As the screen flickered to life, Bruce took a seat, readjusting his glasses as he began to read.

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“This is Pierce. Fury has become an active hindrance. Enact the ‘Override Protocol’. And ensure the Asset is primed and ready for any contingencies.”
Natasha Romanov barely even glanced at her phone when it started buzzing, instead keeping her concentration on the road. Instead, her finger shot out, jabbing the button.

“Go,” she said.

“Nat, it’s Steve.”

“Hey, Steve. You calling to tell me you finally asked out that nurse who lives across from you?” she asked playfully.

Steve Rogers’ voice was deadly serious, though, when he replied.

“Nat. Fury’s been shot,” he stated.

Natasha’s head snapped to the phone for an instant before resuming her concentration as she drove.

“Where?” she asked.

“My apartment,” Steve replied. “The shots came from the next building over. The shooter got away.”

“Fury?” she asked, knowing that Steve would understand her question in full.

“Alive. For now,” Steve stated grimly. “Three rounds to the chest, though. He’s being taken straight to George Washington for emergency surgery.”

“I’m already on the road,” she replied. “Be there in twenty.”

The phone cut off but Nat wasn’t even paying it any attention. Instead, she was checking the traffic travelling in her direction as well as that coming towards her.

At the perfect moment, she swung the wheel of her black corvette hard, spinning the car a hard one eighty before planting her foot and rocketing off back the way she’d come.

ooo00ooo

“I have never encountered beings with this technology before,” Thor stated uncertainly.

“You’ve never encountered the Thermians before? Huh,” Tony replied and popped a handful of popcorn in his mouth.

“This technology is quite advanced,” Thor said after watching some more of the recording that Tony was showing him on the big screen in the Tower’s main lounge area. “How did you acquire this footage?”

“Oh, you know me, Thor, I’ve got connections everywhere,” Tony replied, to which Bruce simply snorted in derision.

“What footage?” Pepper asked as she, Jane and Darcy walked into the room.

“Oh, cool! Galaxy Quest, I love this!” Darcy exclaimed as she rushed forward before plonking herself down on the couch beside Thor.
The tall Asgardian stared at her. When she, without even looking, reached across and took a handful of his popcorn, he frowned and carefully moved the bucket further away.

“You have seen this footage, Darcy?” he asked. “It is not classified?”

“Seen it? Yeah, at least a dozen times. Gotta love Alan Rickman in this,” she replied, her eyes glued to the screen.

“Thor? Did Tony tell you that this is real?” Jane asked carefully.

“He did,” Thor replied before narrowing his eyes at the man in question. “Stark?”

“Excuse me, Sir, you have an incoming call from Captain Rogers,” Jarvis stated.

“I do? Then, I’d better take it,” Tony said, jumping up and rushing away towards the bar. “Perfect timing, buddy.”

“I was not joking, Sir; you truly have a telephone call from Captain Rogers,” Jarvis replied.

Tony grabbed his mobile from the counter and hit the button.

“Hey, Capsicle. What’s up?” Tony said jovially.

“Stark,” Steve said and Tony could hear the seriousness in the other man’s voice. “There’s no easy way to say this. Director Fury was shot earlier this evening. He underwent emergency surgery but there was nothing that the doctors could do. He died, Tony.”

“Ah, man,” Tony breathed, his head dropping. “The shooter?”

“We’re investigating,” Steve replied.

“Keep me posted, Steve,” Tony said.


After dropping the mobile back onto the counter, he took a moment to centre himself. He may not have really like the guy, but Fury had earnt his respect.

“Tony?” Pepper asked, coming up behind him silently and placing a hand on his shoulder. “Is something wrong?”

Tony turned to find that the movie had been paused and that all eyes were on him.

“That was Steve,” Tony said. “Nick Fury was shot earlier tonight. He didn’t make it.”

“How’s Steve?” Pepper asked.

Tony shrugged. “Okay, I guess. Sounded a bit shook up.”

“Did they catch the guy who did it?” Bruce asked.

“Not yet,” Tony replied.

“Well, that’s put a dampener on the movie,” Darcy sighed.

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Harry placed the Den’s phone back in its cradle and turned, leaning back onto the counter that he’d been cleaning before the phone rang.

Fury being killed was completely unexpected. Harry hadn’t met the guy that many times but he’d been unique. Well, not quite unique. Fury and old Mad-Eye-Moody would have gotten along famously – they wouldn’t have believed a word out of the other’s mouth but they’d have earnt each other’s respect. Two knarls from the same litter, those two.

Exactly how someone had gotten the drop on the Director was unknown. The bigger question, though, was who the new Director was going to be. Being Director or S.H.I.E.L.D. meant being privy to information that was classified way above almost everyone else on the planet. And one tiny piece of that information was that the magical world existed.

Harry wondered whether he needed to let the International Confederation of Wizards know. They’d definitely be interested in knowing how this affected them. But then, on second thought, Harry’d be surprised if they didn’t already know from whatever monitors and people they had in place.

Either way, Harry determined to meet with the new Director as soon as possible. He could go in as Mage, at least, and use a few simple spells or a couple of drops of veritaserum if need be to determine the threat that this posed.

On the positive side, going to Washington would also mean catching up with Steve. The normally stoic man had seemed genuinely rattled on the phone. Naturally, Harry had asked if Steve had needed anything, including for him to portkey to Washington to either help with the investigation or to simply be there for his friend, an offer that had been declined.

For now, Harry would be content to take a wait and see approach. If things changed, though, he’d go, whether Steve asked him to come or not.

ooo00ooo

Clint snapped his phone shut and leant forward on both hands against the counter. Outside the window, all was dark, obscuring the view of Barton Farm, not that Clint would have seen any of it after what he’d just heard.

His whole world had just tilted sideways and he wasn’t sure how to react. This was almost as bad as being told that Phil had been killed while Clint’d been under Loki’s spell. Thankfully, that had proven false, a secret hidden from not just him, but Nat, Steve, Tony, all of them really. Only Harry’s insistence had unmasked that secret.

But this. Nat had been there. There was no coming back from something like that.

“Clint?” a soft, concerned voice asked from behind him.

Clint turned, forcing a smile on his face for his wife.

“What’s happened?” Laura asked flatly. “Who was the message from?”

Clint looked at the phone still in his hand for a second as though it held the answers that he sought.

“Nat,” he said simply. “It was Nat.”

“What’s happened?” Laura asked again. “Are you needed back for a mission?”

Clint shook his head.
“No, I’m not going anywhere; Nat even told me not to come, said that I needed to spend more time
with you and the kids,” he said.

“Always knew I liked her,” Laura said, stepping forward to hug him briefly before leaning back, her
eyes searching his face. “But something did happen.”

Clint couldn’t lie to her; it was pointless anyway. He may be a master spy and assassin, but she could
read him like a book.

“It’s Fury,” he sighed. “He was killed earlier tonight.”

Laura’s hands shot to her mouth, her eyes looking horrified.

“Oh, Clint, are you okay? Is Nat?” she asked.

“We will be,” he answered honestly.

“What does that mean for you, for S.H.I.E.L.D.?” Laura asked.

“To be honest, I don’t know,” Clint replied shaking his head. “You know that I’ve been thinking of
getting out, joining the Avengers full time. Maybe this is the time to do so.”

“Maybe it is,” Laura replied, her arms tightening around him momentarily.

“I’ve got some more vacation time; I’ll aim to make a decision one way or the other before that
time’s up,” he promised.

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Tony’s curiosity was piqued. The Director of S.H.I.E.L.D. was dead. The man in charge of the
world’s top spy agency, with its fingers that spread all across the globe, assassinated. And yet there’d
been nothing mentioned about it on any news channel, no tweets or Facebook posts, nothing.
Secrecy was one thing, but this bordered on the ridiculous. The fact that the hit had been carried out
in Steve’s apartment, away from cameras may have had something to do with it, but it still smelt off.

“Still nothing, Jarvis?” Tony asked.

“No, Sir,” Jarvis replied. “The top news story coming out of Washington is of a shoot out and car
chase that caused hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of damage and left numerous police and
SWAT personnel injured or dead.”

“They catch the guy?” Tony asked.

“No, Sir. He appears to have disappeared without a trace,” Jarvis replied.

“Really? Throw up the news report on the TV,” Tony requested.

The screen blinked to life with the headshot of a news reporter. Tony ignored the woman, focussing
in on the small image in the corner of the screen of a black SUV. Thankfully, the woman
disappeared quickly to be replaced with what was obviously CCTV footage of the black SUV
surrounded by police cars, at least six of them plus a SWAT van.

Tony leant forward on the couch staring intently. The SUV was riddled with bullet holes and a
couple of dozen police officers, most with automatic rifles surrounded it.

“A battering ram?” Tony asked incredulously. “A bit of overkill, isn’t it?”
The fact that the driver’s window of the SUV didn’t instantly shatter on the first impact from the battering ram nor even on the second indicated that the car was specially designed. When it did shatter, it was due to the mini machine gun that spat a spray of bullets from inside the car, killing a number of policemen immediately. A rocket took out the SWAT van just before the SUV’s engine came to life and its wheels began spinning as it pushed police cars out of the way.

Tony’s eyes widened as the briefest of camera shots showed the interior of the SUV and he rocketed from his seat across to the TV.

“Freeze!” he yelled. “Back it up a few frames.”

Slowly, frame by frame, the footage played in reverse.

“There!” Tony said, stabbing a finger into the screen. “Jarvis, can you grab just that bit and enlarge the image of the driver?”

“I shall do my best, Sir,” Jarvis replied.

A few moments later, a still image appeared on the screen. Due to the poor resolution of the original image, this enlarged shot was incredibly fuzzy. Still, it was enough for Tony to be able to make out a face, a face of a man wearing dark clothes, who was bald and sported an eye patch.

“What did you get yourself into, Fury?” Tony asked.

Whirling about, Tony headed for his nearest computer.

“Jarvis, hack into the DC police systems, find out what in the world they were doing targeting Fury like that,” Tony instructed.

As he waited for a response, Tony’s fingers began to dance. He suspected what the answer was going to be and figured that he might as well get a head start at hacking into S.H.I.E.L.D.’s databanks.

“DC Metro police show that there were no vehicles at that intersection at the time of the incident,” Jarvis reported.

“Well, isn’t that something?” Tony remarked.

As he continued to work, he kept one eye on the resumed news footage – which had switched to a shot from a helicopter – of Fury’s SUV bring chased through traffic by the police. Suddenly, the footage cut out only to be replaced by an image of the SUV laying upside down in the middle of the road.

“What in the world caused that?” Tony wondered.

With the way that Fury had been driving, there should have been no way that he’d flip on a clear road. He’d obviously encountered something.

“Our trojan horse is still in place,” Jarvis reported.

“I see him,” Tony replied as he eased his computer probe around a particularly nasty firewall to the small piece of code embedded within S.H.I.E.L.D.’s systems themselves. “Put him to work. I want to know everything that S.H.I.E.L.D. knows about the two assassination attempts on Fury, the unsuccessful car chase one and the successful one in Steve’s apartment.”
“Yes, Sir,” Jarvis replied.

The wait was shorter than Tony anticipated and Jarvis’ voice caught him mid roll of his fingers as they drummed on the table.

“These are the files relating to the incident in Captain Rogers’ apartment,” Jarvis said. “Initial incident report, ballistics report, the report from the lab as to fibres found on the adjacent roof, initial medical report, hospital report and death certificate.”

As Jarvis named each one, the report filled the screen, the number of tabs at the bottom showing how many there were.

“What about the car chase?” Tony asked.

“There are no reports, Sir,” Jarvis replied.

Tony froze. “Nothing? Seriously?”

“That is correct, Sir,” Jarvis replied.

“This is looking hinkier every minute,” Tony stated. “Keep searching, buddy. Let me know if you find anything.”

“Yes, Sir,” Jarvis replied, but his words were lost as Tony’s whole focus became the reports that he was engrossed in.

ooo00ooo

“Attention all hands,” the voice of the aircraft carrier Illiad’s commander, Robert Gonzales, called over the internal intercom.

The four sitting around the poker table paused and looked up at the speaker in the corner of the room.

“At twenty-three forty-seven Eastern time, S.H.I.E.L.D. Director Nicholas Fury was pronounced dead on an operating table after being shot by an assassin. We will now observe one minute’s silence in his honour.”

Agent Bobbi Morse’s eyes widened in shock and she stared at her poker buddies, all displaying their own version of the emotion as well. Mack was the most stoic, simply laying his cards facedown before lowering his head. Hartley looked as though she’d swallowed something vile. And Perkins was simply shaking his head.

Bobbi couldn’t blame them. They’d all heard the stories about the Director – Bobbi, herself had met him on numerous occasions and even worked in his security detail before being personally tapped by him for a number of special missions.

As absolute silence was observed on the mighty ship, Bobbi couldn’t help but think of her primary duty, being S.H.I.E.L.D.’s liaison to the Avengers. She knew that there were plenty within S.H.I.E.L.D. that didn’t particularly like the ‘superhero’ team, especially the fact that they were given quite a bit of free reign with no real oversight. And if someone with that mindset ascended to the Directorship, they could make a mess of things.

Bobbi shivered at Stark’s reaction if someone tried to actually order him around or declare his ‘toys’ as being nothing but S.H.I.E.L.D. assets. And as difficult as Stark could be, some of the others could
be even more dangerous. Especially someone like Potter with *magic* at very fingertips.

As the seconds of the minutes’ silence ticked down, Bobbi vowed to make sure that, as soon as her current mission was completed, she’d be on the first aircraft back to New York, if only to head off any potential problems that might arise. Nick Fury had given her that assignment and made it her primary duty and she’d be damned if she wasn’t going to see it through just as he would have wanted.

Steve was tired. It’d been an incredibly long night, a night that simply didn’t seem to end. First had come the surprise of finding Fury in his apartment, then the shooting. He’d barely had time to process that his neighbour wasn’t the friendly nurse that he’d thought but had instead been S.H.I.E.L.D. Secret Service – Agent 13, Sharon had identified herself as – assigned to protect him before he was racing through buildings trying to catch the shooter.

And there was something about that shooter. He had a metal arm and a mask on his lower face. His speed and strength indicated that he’d been enhanced, just as Steve himself was. It was definitely something to keep in mind when he finally caught up with him again.

The trip to the hospital with Fury had been hectic, as had the emergency room. Standing, watching as a team of doctors feverishly tried to save him had been agonising but more so for his companions; both Maria and Nat hadn’t seemed to know what to do, their usual unflappableness dissolved.

Steve, himself, had barely been given any time at all to process what had happened before being whisked off to the Triskelion for briefing. Agent after agent had probed him for anything and everything that he could remember about the shooting itself and then the shooter that he’d followed and lost. Endless questions had been shot at him, many seeming to cover the same ground, albeit from a different angle each time.

Finally, he’d been allowed to take a quick shower and change, thankfully finding one of his spare uniforms in his locker. Once again, as soon as he’d emerged, he was whisked off to another meeting, this time with Undersecretary Pierce himself.

*That* meeting hadn’t gone as planned. The very idea that Piece had put forth, that Nick Fury would actively act against the best interests of S.H.I.E.L.D. and the country was laughable to any that knew him. And then for Pierce to accuse him, however correctly, of siding with Fury and hiding secrets from S.H.I.E.L.D. severely grated.

Finally, *finally*, when he’d thought that his day was done and that he could head home and catch some shut eye, the elevator happened.

A dozen men, all from tactical, most from S.T.R.I.K.E., a team that he’d *worked* with on numerous occasions had *attacked* him. It’d been a frantic couple of minutes in close quarters and only his enhanced strength, speed and agility had saved him. Being forced to leap through the elevator’s window, falling so many stories to the ground below in order to escape still boggled his mind.

If that hadn’t been enough to prove that S.H.I.E.L.D. were targeting him, that they wanted to silence him, the quinjet flying low over him, ordering him to stand down and then shooting at him as he left on the bridge off of the island sure let him know that he was now a wanted man.

The question now was, why?

What was it that they thought that he knew?
The only thing that he could think of was the flash drive that Fury had given him straight after being shot back in Steve’s apartment, moments before Sharon had burst through his door.

A flash drive that he no longer had.

Completely unlike him, Steve had hidden vital information from the chain of command that he served. That thought alone made him pause. If he was beginning to hide information, to lie and distrust the unit, then should he really be an operative of S.H.I.E.L.D.?

That, he decided, was a question to answer once this mess was sorted out. His first order of business was retrieving that flash drive. And in order to do that, he was going to have to go undercover, which meant ditching his uniform, bike and shield.

Captain America stood out far too much right now.

ooo00ooo

Natasha Romanov, current Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D., former KGB operative, ‘graduate’ of the Red Room was nothing if not the ultimate spy. That meant that, no matter the circumstances, she noticed things.

So, when Steve Rogers, Captain America himself, boy-scout extraordinaire, acted all guilty and furtive, she noticed. To her, it was akin to a penguin trying to blend in in the desert. And, once having noticed that, it took her all of half a minute to find what the guy’d been trying to hide.

Nearly ten bucks in coins later, Nat was the owner of four packets of chewing gum and a very familiar looking flash drive. Exactly where Rogers had come across it was currently unknown but she could take a very educated guess, a guess that’d be easy to confirm once Steve came back for it and she could have a little talk with him.

The wait hadn’t been quite as long as it could have been, even so, it was still longer than she would have liked. She watched from cover as Steve, trying to hide by wearing a simple hoodie of all things walked up to the machine.

Nat sighed. The man couldn’t blend in if his life depended on it. The fact that it probably now did, didn’t bode well. Silently, she stepped up behind him and popped a bubble of gum in his ear.

Steve’s spin and hand in her gut, pushing her back into an empty room was fast and unexpected. Anyone else, though, and she’d have retaliated, put him down hard. The instant the door closed behind them, Steve flipped off his hood and stood close, his face intent, angry and so very, very easy to read.

“Where is it?” he snapped.

“Safe,” she replied, her eyes flicking between his, reading his every emotion. “Where did you get it?”

“Why should I tell you?” he asked.

“Fury gave it to you,” she stated, instantly seeing the confirmation in his eyes. ”Why?”

“What’s on it?” Steve asked.

“I don’t know,” Nat answered truthfully.
“Stop lying!” Steve retorted, getting even more in her face.

“I only act like I know everything, Rogers,” she retorted.

“I bet you knew Fury hired the pirates, didn’t you?” Steve asked after checking that they were still alone.

Again, Nat decided to be truthful with him.

“Well, makes sense. The ship was dirty and Fury needed a way in and so do you,” she said.

“I’m not going to ask you again!” Steve stated angrily.

Seeing how worked up Steve was, Nat decided that she needed a way to get his attention.

“I know who killed Fury,” she said.

Steve backed off slightly, surprise etched on his face.

“Most of the intelligence community doesn’t believe he exists,” she continued. “The ones that do call him the Winter Soldier. He’s credited with over two dozen assassinations in the last fifty years.”

“So, he’s a ghost story?” Steve asked sceptically.

“Five years ago,” she continued, “I was escorting a nuclear engineer out of Iran. Somebody shot out my tires near Odessa. We went straight over a cliff. I pulled us out but the Winter Soldier was there. I was covering my engineer so he shot him straight through me.”

Nat lifted her shirt to show Steve the scar in her side to verify her story.


“Yeah, I bet you look terrible in them now,” Steve stated and Nat forced herself not to smile at his inadvertent flirt.

“Going after him is a dead end. I know. I’ve tried,” she said. “Like you said, he’s a ghost story.”

Pulling out the flash drive, Nat offered it to him.

Taking it, Steve looked at her carefully.

“Well, let’s find out what the ghost wants,” he said. “Together?”

“Together,” Nat agreed. “But not here. We’ll need to get out of here, find somewhere where we can blend into the crowd a little easier. And also get a better disguise for you.”

Steve looked down at himself.

“What’s wrong with how I look?” he asked.

Nat shook her head, a small smile playing on her lips.

“Don’t get me started, Rogers,” she replied.

Wheaton, New Jersey. As soon as the name popped up on the computer screen, indicating where the
tracking algorithm had traced the program from the flash drive to, Steve’s mind froze.

Images flooded past his eyes to way back when, all those years ago. It seemed, darn, it felt like a lifetime ago.

“You know it?” Nat asked.

“I used to,” Steve replied. “Let’s go.”

Plucking the drive from the computer, Steve led Nat away. Getting out of the computer store was one thing; getting out of the mall was going to be another. Steve knew that the S.T.R.I.K.E. tactical team was on site. If they were following protocol, there’d be teams of them on every floor. More than likely, they’d start at the top and check each floor heading down.

“We go down,” Nat stated, echoing his thoughts.

Together, the two boarded the escalator, trusting to their disguises – Nat wearing a hoodie, Steve himself in a baseball cap and glasses – to hide them from any cursory glances. That, of course, wasn’t going to work against a concerted look. And Rumlow, coming at them on the opposite escalator was going to get exactly that look.

“Kiss me!” Nat stated, spinning to face him.

Steve stared at her. “What?”

“Public displays of affection make people very uncomfortable,” she said.

“Yes, they do,” Steve agreed.

And before he could say anything else, she’d grabbed the back of his head, pulled him down and kissed him. Steve froze, not sure exactly how to respond. After what seemed an age but was probably only a second or two, he began kissing her back. By the time that they’d parted, Rumrow had passed, without noticing them.

“You still uncomfortable?” Nat asked as she turned back around to face down the elevator and to step off of it.

“That’s not exactly the word that I would use,” Steve commented, following her.

“We’re going to need transportation,” Nat stated. “Jersey’s too far to walk.”

“Leave that to me,” Steve stated. “First things first, though. We need to make a quick stop.”


“I’m not going anywhere without my shield,” Steve stated.
It's Too Big To Do Alone

Steve grimaced in pain at the weight bearing down on his shield. Even with his right hand bracing it as well as his left, the sheer amount of rubble that had fallen on he and Nat was almost overwhelming. Almost. Gritting his teeth, he pushed back.

Slowly, he felt the concrete that was burying him and Nat shift slightly and he slid his feet into a better position, allowing him to twist his shoulder just so. Pushing up with his legs, using his arms and shoulders to brace his shield, Steve heaved.

As more and more of the concrete and rubble shifted away, Steve began to believe that the two of them were going to survive. He’d been ‘made’ here at Camp Lehigh; he wasn’t going to die here, despite S.H.I.E.L.D.’s best efforts.

And wasn’t that something that he would have thought inconceivable less than a day ago. S.H.I.E.L.D., the world’s top spy agency, the very organisation that Peggy had help found, the company that he now worked for and had dedicated his life to since waking, wasn’t what he thought it was.

No. It was HYDRA. Or at least, HYDRA had grown inside it, subverting it, using it for its own ends and purposes. Zola had admitted as much, with files as evidence, right before the bomb had hit the building that he and Nat were in.

The two of them had followed the trail from the encrypted drive that Fury had given Steve right before he’d died. The trail led here, to Camp Lehigh, one of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s very first secret bases, the base where Armin Zola’s mind had been preserved on banks of servers. With all that Steve had seen since waking from his seventy year nap, the sad thing was that that wasn’t even the strangest.

Zola had obviously alerted S.H.I.E.L.D. to their location and kept them distracted by telling them the truth of HYDRA while the S.H.I.E.L.D. jets had got into position. Only Nat’s realising that a missile was headed right for them, combined with Steve’s improvisation of the two of them taking shelter in a small trough in the floor had saved them.

Assuming that Steve could get rid of the building that had fallen on them, that is. S.H.I.E.L.D. would be coming, he knew, if only to ensure that the mission was a success.

With one final push, the concrete block that Steve was pushing against slid to the side. Dust and bits of dirt and concrete rained down, but that he could handle. The sound of engines in the distance had Steve quickly bending and scooping the unconscious Nat up in his arms. Then, with the lights from the approaching quinjets strafing the ground as they approached, Steve ran for it.

ooo00ooo

Nat couldn’t help but groan as she slowly regained consciousness. Everything hurt and she grimaced. A hand came up and brushed her forehead, feeling the still slight stickiness there. Blood. Her blood. But mostly stopped, so it’d been a while.

And then the last few minutes of memory came flooding back – the missile incoming, jumping into the hole, the two of them trying to share the small space under Steve’s shield as rocks, bits of concrete, an entire building rained down around them and on top of them.

The slight movement and the sound of an engine told her that she was out of that destruction.
Cracking one eye open, she saw that she was in a car, a very familiar car, the car that Steve had ‘borrowed’ to get them to Camp Lehigh.

“Steve?” she asked croakily, looking across at him in the driver’s seat.

“You okay?” he asked, looking at her, concern etched on his face and in his eyes.

“I’ll live,” she replied, a statement that was true enough. “We’re still alive.”

She’d made the statement and shook her head at it. Really, they shouldn’t be. Probably the only thing that had saved them was the fact that they’d been so far underground when the missile hit. That and Steve’s indestructible shield.


“Is there much of a difference?” she asked as she straightened in her seat. “From what Zola was saying, S.H.I.E.L.D. and HYDRA are pretty much the same thing these days.”

“I don’t believe that every agent is HYDRA. You’re not, I’m not. I think we can agree that Fury wasn’t,” Steve stated.

“There’s no way that Clint is either,” Nat said, at the same time wondering how many of her friends, how many of the people that she’d worked with, were.

She looked out the window as she tried to process it. She’d been sure that she’d been working for the good guys these last years, but apparently, she couldn’t even trust that anymore.

“Where are we headed?” she asked.

“DC,” Steve answered simply.

“What’s the plan?” she asked.

“We need a place to lay low until we can find out what Zola’s algorithm does,” Steve replied.

“My safehouses are probably compromised,” she cautioned.


Nat raised an eyebrow at him. That wasn’t exactly much of a plan, but then, on second thought, an acquaintanceship might not be being monitored by S.H.I.E.L.D., HYDRA, whoever.

“What then?” Nat asked. “What do we do once we find out what this algorithm is for? I know the two of us are good, but even we can’t take on all of HYDRA by ourselves.”

Steve glanced at her and she saw the pain and determination in his eyes. He’d spent World War Two combatting HYDRA, even given his very life or at least a frozen seventy years of it and had believed them defeated, the mission complete. Obviously, it hadn’t been.

“I know. We’re going to need help,” Steve stated.

Nat stared at him for a moment.

“I’ll make a call, shall I?” she asked, fishing her phone out of her pocket.
“Excuse me, Sir, Agent Romanoff is on the phone,” Jarvis stated.

“Jarvis, I remember saying that Pepper and I weren’t to be interrupted,” Tony frowned.

“I know, Sir, but she was quite insistent,” Jarvis replied.

Tony looked across the small table at Pepper. They were currently at the tail end of a very late and very delicious dinner. One that Tony had actually managed to remember to attend. It’d been nice, just the two of them, something that had been missing of late with so many in residence in the Tower.

“You might as well answer it,” Pepper said from where she sat back in her chair, a glass of wine in her hand. “I’m surprised that we haven’t been interrupted before this, to be honest.”

“Thanks, Pep,” Tony said as he lifted the mobile that he’d already fished out of his pocket and was holding just below the table. “Hey, Romanoff, why the late call?”

“Steve and I were just bombed by S.H.I.E.L.D.,” she stated without preamble.

Tony shot up in his chair.

“What? Did you just say that you were bombèd? By S.H.I.E.L.D.? he repeated incredulously.

Across the table, Pepper’s eyes widened and she leant forward, her face full of worry.

“Are you alright?” Tony asked urgently.

“We’re fine. A little banged up but nothing we can’t handle,” Nat replied.

“Good,” Tony nodded, letting Pepper know the answer as well. “What in the world is S.H.I.E.L.D. thinking, bombèing the two of you?”

“It’s a long story,” she sighed.

Then give me the short version,” Tony insisted.

“S.H.I.E.L.D. isn’t what we thought it was. Apparently HYDRA’s been growing inside it for the past seventy years. We don’t know how deep it goes,” she said.


“How’d you find out?”

“Fury. He gave Steve a drive and we’ve been following where it led,” Nat replied. “There’s some sort of algorithm on it. And before you ask, no, we don’t know what it does or what it’s for. We’re working on it. But if it’s as bad as we think it is, we’re going to need help.”

“Help? To decode that algorithm?” Tony asked. “You got it.”

“No,” Nat replied and he could picture her shaking her head, her red hair flying around her shoulders. “No, to take down HYDRA.”
“Which would mean potentially going up against all of S.H.I.E.L.D.,” Tony said, filling in the blanks. “I’ll assemble the team and we’ll get there as soon as we can. Where are you now?”

“On our way back to DC from New Jersey,” Nat replied.

“Right. Leave your phone on and I’ll have Jarvis monitor your whereabouts,” Tony stated. “Hang in there. And Nat, you and the Capsicle, stay safe.”

“We will, Tony. Thanks,” Nat replied before the line went dead.

“That didn’t sound good,” Pepper stated.

“No, it’s not,” Tony replied. “My dad helped found S.H.I.E.L.D.; I may not be too fond of the guy, but this is part of his legacy and to find out that what he started has been taken over by HYDRA …”

Tony shook his head, trying to wrap his mind around the world-tilting information that he’d just been given.

“You’re putting a team together to go help Nat and Steve?” Pepper asked.

“Yeah,” Tony said, lifting his phone to begin to do just that.

“Tony,” Pepper said, catching his attention with that warning tone she was using.

“Hmm?” he asked.

“Leave the kids out of this one. They missed enough school when you took them to England,” she said.

Tony considered it for a moment, but just for a moment before nodding.

“Done,” he agreed. “Jenn, too, she’s not ready yet either. And the Bird-brain’s out, too. What a time for him to go on vacation. Next time he’s here, I’m putting a tracker in his quiver.”

The team now decided upon. Tony lifted his phone to make his first call.

Mage leant low over his Lightning Bolt, his arm outstretched with his wand aimed at the truck that he was flying behind. A slight swerve put him on its right side and he fired, shooting a slew of bludging hexes into the side of it.

As expected, the truck veered slightly at the impact and moments later, swerved suddenly, taking the next left turn in a futile attempt to evade him.

Mage couldn’t help but grin. Feeling the wind whipping past his face like this always got his adrenaline going and he remembered why he enjoyed flying so much. Having the bad guys do exactly what you wanted didn’t hurt either.

Noting Spider-man swinging in and around the corner, Mage drifted higher, up and over the web-slinger as the two pursued the truck.

This was much better, Mage decided; much less traffic in this street. That was one of the downsides of living and fighting crime in New York – far too many innocent bystanders that could very easily get hurt if he wasn’t careful. Thus, the use of the bludgeoner rather than something a lot more powerful, lethal and so very much quicker.
The two of them, Mage and Spider-man had only been chasing this particular truck for a couple of blocks, ever since they, and their partners, had caught up with the bank robbers. Unfortunately, they hadn’t been in time to stop the actual robbery, but Daredevil’s superior hearing had pinpointed what had happened and where to go.

Speaking of the Devil, Mage had to shake his head slightly at the way the blood red costumed man somersaulted from the nearby building, landing in a crouch on top of the truck. The thump of his landing must have alerted the men inside as the truck’s trajectory wobbled slightly before straightening once more.

Squirrel Girl joined the chase just then, bolting out of a nearby alley. With one great leap, she launched herself at the back of the truck, landing on the rear board. For a second, Mage thought that she was going to tumble off and readied himself to cast a cushioning spell. Thankfully, though, it wasn’t needed as she grabbed a hold of a bar beside the truck’s rear roller door.

Using her considerable strength, Squirrel Girl broke the lock and yanked up the rear door, revealing the sacks piled in the back. One by one, Squirrel Girl tossed them out, only to have Spider-man grab each one with a web-line and string them up behind them like a line of strange looking piñatas.

Daredevil, meanwhile, had climbed over the top of the truck before swinging himself down and through one of the windows. A swish and flick of Mage’s wand caught the first robber as he was tossed from the truck. When no others emerged, Mage sped up.

Suddenly, the truck served violently, changing from heading straight down the road to barrelling towards a brick wall.

Mage’s wand blurred as he sent spell after spell to avoid the inevitable crash that would likely kill his partner as well as the remaining bank robbers.

An arresto momentum hit the truck slowing it. The asphalt was transfigured into deep sand slowing it even more and the brick wall became elasticised rubber. Mage watched, breathless, as his spells did their work, bringing the truck to a halt just after bouncing back from the gentle tap against the no-longer brick wall.

“Great work, guys,” Mage said as he came in for a landing, running the last few steps with his broom out in one hand.

Daredevil looked back at the truck that he’d just leapt from to see Spider-man webbing the driver’s doors in place and blocking the windows.

“Don’t bother, they’re out cold and won’t be waking for quite a while,” he said.

“Never hurts to be too careful,” Spider-man called back, continuing with his job.

“I gotta do more running,” Squirrel Girl panted as she joined the three men, having jumped off the back once all of the bags of cash had been tossed out. “Keeping up with a speeding truck isn’t easy.”

Mage’s response was interrupted by the sound of his phone going off. Reaching into one of the pockets on his belt, he pulled it out and snapped it open.

“Hello?” he said.

“Sparrowhawk,” Tony’s said. “Glad you finally answered. I’ve been trying to get you for the past ten minutes.”
“I know,” Mage replied and he did, having heard it ringing during the chase. “I was busy. Is there something I can do for you?”

“Yeah. Get over to the Tower as soon as you can,” Tony replied. “We’re headed to Washington, Steve and Nat need some backup.”

Mage’s eyes snapped to each of his partners.

“I’m with Daredevil, Spider-man and Squirrel Girl. Do you want me to bring them as well?” he asked.

“No!” Tony replied quickly. “Pepper’d kill me if you brought the twerps. And it won’t hurt to have Matt there keeping an eye on them. The rest of us should be enough.”

“I take it something’s happened? Are Steve and Nat alright?” Mage asked.

“Yeah, they’re good. I’ll fill you in when you get here,” Tony replied.

“I’m on my way,” Mage assured him, closing the phone.

“Something wrong?” Daredevil asked, his head cocked slightly towards Mage.

Mage had no illusions that the Devil hadn’t heard the entire conversation.

“Maybe,” he temporised. “Looks like I’m off on some kind of mission. You got things here?”

“We’re good,” Daredevil assured him.

With a nod of thanks, Mage firmly grasped his broom and twisted, vanishing with the smallest of cracks.

ooo00ooo

Bruce rushed onto the hanger deck of Avengers Tower, apologies already on his lips.

“Sorry I’m late,” he said. “You wouldn’t believe the amount of traffic there is between here and Jennifer’s new apartment in Hell’s Kitchen, even at this time of night.”

“And how is our favourite giant green girl?” Tony asked from the ramp to the quinjet.

“Currently not green,” Bruce frowned. “And enjoying her new job. She and Karen Page seem to have hit it off pretty well, that’s how Jenn got her new apartment – one of the tenants down the hall from Karen moved out and she recommended that Jenn take it.”

“It is good that she is making new friends,” Thor stated. “Leaving the place one knows and working to fit in somewhere new is hard.”

Bruce nodded in agreement.

“Thanks for leaving Jennifer out of this,” Bruce said to Tony. “Whatever this happens to be.”

“Yeah, about that,” Tony said as serious as Bruce had ever heard him. “Nat and Steve have uncovered evidence that HYDRA has infiltrated S.H.I.E.L.D. Actually, they’ve been doing it for the past seventy years.”

“HYDRA?” Bruce asked, stunned.
“Seventy years?” Harry echoed. “And no one noticed?”

“Seems that way,” Tony replied.

“Then how did Romanoff and Rogers find out?” Thor asked.

“Not sure,” Tony replied. “Something to do with an encrypted drive that Fury gave them.”

“Fury’s involved?” Harry asked.

“Seems he worked something out. My guess is that’s what got him killed,” Tony replied. “Steve and Nat say that HYDRA’s got something big in the works. They’re working on finding out what it is and then they want to take down HYDRA once and for all.”

“But if HYDRA are inside S.H.I.E.L.D. that would mean taking on the biggest spy agency in the world,” Bruce pointed out.

“Thus, why they called for backup,” Tony stated.

“It is never good to take on an enemy too large without allies,” Thor nodded gravely.

“Where are we meeting them?” Bruce asked.

“They’re headed to DC; Jarvis is keeping on eye on Nat’s phone’s coordinates,” Tony replied.

“The Triskelion,” Bruce nodded. “It is the centre of S.H.I.E.L.D.”

“That’s my guess, too,” Tony agreed.

“Then let’s move,” Harry said, striding into the quinjet.

ooo00ooo

“Agent Barton,” the clipped, cultured voice of Jarvis said in the recorded message that Clint had opened when he’d noticed the flashing light on his phone. “Mister Stark requests that you complete your vacation with all haste and make you way to Avengers Tower.”

“Bet he didn’t say it like that,” Clint grinned at the phone.

“There has been an incident,” the recording continued, making Clint listen closer, harder. “Captain Rogers and Agent Romanoff have uncovered the fact that S.H.I.E.L.D. has been infiltrated by HYDRA. One attempt has already been made upon their lives at the discovery of this information. A team has assembled and flown to Washington DC to render assistance. Mister Stark asks that you use Avengers Tower as a staging area in case additional help is required. He has left further information for you there.”

In three strides, Clint was across the room and grabbing his bow.

“Laura!” he called up the stairs.

ooo00ooo

“How’d you meet this guy anyway?” Nat asked as they drove into DC.

“You’ve met him,” Steve replied, glancing at her. “The morning you picked me up for the mission with the Lemurian Star.”
Nat blinked, thinking back.

“Black guy, goatee, runs,” she said.

“That’s him,” Steve confirmed. “Sam Wilson. He was in the 58th Rescue Squad. Now that he’s home, he works with vets down at the DVA. Does some good work there helping them work their way through Posttraumatic Stress.”

“Sounds a good guy,” Nat commented.

“He is,” Steve confirmed. “I caught the end of one his meetings. Intense but beneficial.”

“And he’ll help us?” she asked.

“He will,” Steve replied, total conviction in his voice.

Steve led the way to the door after they had left the ‘borrowed’ car a couple of blocks away. The blinds to the small house were pulled up and the door opened almost immediately after he’d knocked. Sam didn’t seem all that surprised to see them which surprised Steve, but then, without access to the news, there was no telling how much the fact that he was now a wanted man was being made public or conversely being kept quiet.

“Hi. Sorry to do this but we need a place to lay low,” Steve said. “Everyone we know is trying to kill us.”

“Not everyone,” Sam said, before stepping back and allowing them entry.

As soon as they were in, Sam closed and locked the door and pulled the blinds back down. Steve could feel some of the tension dissipating just from that simple action.

“What’s going on, man?” Sam asked. “You two look like you’ve just come from a war zone.”

Steve looked down at himself and then across to Nat. Sam was right. Both of their clothes were ripped in places and covered in dirt. Cuts, dried blood and even more dirt covered their faces.

“Well, we did survive being bombed last night,” Nat stated.

Sam’s eyes widened and he looked to Steve for confirmation, confirmation that he gave in the form of a singular, solemn nod.


“Hey,” Sam greeted.

Nat simply returned his nod.

“Look, whatever you two are mixed up in, you can tell me or not, totally up to you,” Sam said. “In the meantime, shower’s through there and I’m making pancakes, assuming you people eat that sort of thing.”

“Pancakes sounds great,” Steve said before turning to Nat. “Any word on the others?”

“They’re close,” was Nat’s only response over her shoulder as she disappeared towards the bathroom and shower.
“What can I do to help?” Steve asked moving towards Sam in his tiny kitchen.

“What, man, I got this, take a load off, you look beat,” Sam replied.

Gratefully, Steve lowered himself into a chair at Sam’s kitchen table and allowed even more of the stress that he’d been feeling to fall away.

ooo00ooo

Steve, Nat and Sam walked around the top of the building, examining it for cameras and line of sight visuals – both what they could see and who could potentially see them.


“You sure about this plan?” Sam asked.

“Can you carry out your part?” Nat asked him.

“Now that I’ve got my wings back, it’s not a problem,” Sam stated. “Good height, wind won’t be a factor, I’m good to go. Just making sure that you’re cool with what you’re planning on doing.”

“I’m looking forward to seeing you in action,” Steve admitted.

“Yeah, there’s nothing like it,” Sam smiled. “With my wings I’m as free as a bird but probably even more manoeuvrable.”

Steve and Nat shared an amused look.

“Could be an interesting match up,” Nat smiled.

“Broom or wings?” Steve asked.

Nat shrugged. “Either. We’ll have to suggest it once this is all over.”

“It’s not like he’s going to say ‘no’, ” Steve replied.

“Don’t mind this little guy over here, you just keep on with your code-like talk,” Sam stated.

“Sorry, Sam,” Steve replied. “We just know a guy who’d be interested in going flying with you.”

“Yeah?” Sam asked, sounding interested. “You’ll have to hook me up, then. I haven’t flown with anyone since Riley – my partner, he was killed on my last tour.”

Nat nodded her understanding and pulled out her phone.

“Right, looks like Sitwell’s gone to lunch,” she said. “Let’s get in position.”

ooo00ooo

“Ahhhhhh!”

S.H.I.E.L.D. Agent Jasper Sitwell’s scream faded as he fell from the side of the twenty-storey building, having been kicked off of it by S.H.I.E.L.D. Agent Natasha Romanoff.

Sitwell had been on the *Lemurian Star* which meant that he more than likely knew what was going on. The ship was designed as a launch platform, able to send satellites into orbit, satellites including the ones that the Insight Helicarriers were to be linked to once they were in the air. And it was there
that Nat, on Fury’s orders, had found Zola’s algorithm that they had yet to crack.

Suddenly, that scream changed slightly in tone and increased in volume once more as though the falling man heading towards the hard, unforgiving pavement was coming back towards them.

And then Sitwell shot over the top of them, held aloft by Sam Wilson wearing the last EXO-7 FALCON suit in existence, one that Nat and Steve had just recently ‘liberated’ for him.

It was thing of beauty; two large retractable wings, bird-like in appearance, that extended to either side of the pack strapped to his back. Manoeuvring thrusters, so tiny they could barely be seen, gave Sam the momentum that he needed to fly through the air using just the wings and ‘feathers’ to change his speed, direction, angle second by second. Red-tinted goggles covered his face allowing him to see even at the great speeds that he was able to achieve.

At the appropriate place, Sam dropped Sitwell to the rooftop before flying on a few more metres to touch down gracefully, his wings retracting into their pack as he turned around.

“Zola’s algorithm is a program,” Sitwell said rapid-fire, one hand raised towards Nat and Steve as they approached as though he was afraid that he was going to throw him off of the building again. “For choosing Insight’s targets.”

“What targets?” Steve asked.

“You, a mercenary in Cairo, the Undersecretary of Defence, a high school valedictorian in Iowa City, Bruce Banner, Stephen Strange, anyone who’s a threat to HYDRA. Now or in the future.”

“The future? How could it know?” Steve asked.

Sitwell chuckled at the question.

“How could it not?” he asked in return as he got to his feet. “The twenty-first century is a digital book. Zola taught HYDRA how to read it. Your bank records, medical history, voting pattern, emails, phone calls, your damn SAT scores. Zola’s algorithm evaluates people’s past to predict their future.”

“What then?” Steve asked,

“Oh, my god, Pierce is going to kill me,” Sitwell said, obviously realising exactly what he was doing and the consequences of telling them.

“What then?” Steve insisted, stepping forward even as Sam grabbed a hold of Sitwell’s jacket from behind.

“Then the Insight Helicarriers scratch people off the list,” Sitwell replied. “A few million at a time.”

“When do the Helicarriers launch?” Nat asked.

Sitwell looked at her, staring her in the eye. “Forty hours from now.”

“We have to stop that launch,” Sam said.

“And we don’t have much time,” Steve stated.

“Let’s get moving,” Nat said.

“What about me?” Sitwell asked.
“Don’t worry, you’re coming, too,” Nat informed him with a smile.

Sitwell blanched and only Sam’s firm hold on his shoulder stopped him from trying to run.

“I’m glad back up’s already on the way,” Nat said to Steve as they entered the stairwell.

“A agreed,” Steve replied grimly.
“This is a terrible, terrible plan!” Jasper Sitwell stated emphatically, leaning forward towards the driver’s seat of the car that they were in to emphasise his point.

Sam looked back at the S.H.I.E.L.D. agent in his rear-view mirror.

“He’s not wrong,” Sam stated. “The three of us using him to get in … You said you had back up right? Tell me we’ve got back up.”

“We never said that the three of us were the whole plan. And yes, we’ve got back up,” Steve stated in that calm way that he had.

“Maybe I should make that call,” Nat suggested.

“Do it,” Steve nodded and Sam couldn’t help agreeing.

A heavy thump on the roof of the car had Sam looking up in confusion. Something had just landed on them? Exactly where it’d come from was a mystery, one that went straight out of his head as he heard the sound of a fist punching through the rear passenger window immediately followed by the sound of Sitwell’s scream as he was pulled from the car and thrown into oncoming traffic.

Sam couldn’t help but grip the steering wheel tighter, wondering if he’d be next. Suddenly, shots were being fired down through the roof. Natasha dodged the ones aimed at the backseat by scrambling forward into Steve’s lap. Two barely missed both Steve and Sam, slamming into their headrests.

Steve, though, solved the problem, yanking up on the hand brake, bringing the car skidding to a stop and getting rid of their unwelcome guest by sending him flying down the highway. Sam could only stare as the guy’s metal hand dug grooves into the asphalt as he landed in a crouch before standing to face them down.

He had dark goggles covering his eyes, a mask covering his nose and the lower part of his face and dark, lanky hair. It was obvious that he meant business. Even from this distance, Sam could count two knives and a gun, not to mention that arm. Sam recognised the type; this guy was a soldier.

“Make that call!” Steve snapped.

Sam noted that Nat pulled out her phone with one hand and her gun with the other. The unexpected jerk as a car slammed into them from behind, snapped the three of them forward and sent both phone and gun tumbling into the well at Steve’s feet.

Sam slammed on the brakes, trying to stop their car from being pushed any further. The fact that the guy with the metal arm was standing there so calmly as they barrelled towards him was unnerving although, after what the guy had just done to Sitwell, Sam wasn’t going to get upset if they ran him down.

Unfortunately, that wasn’t to be. Just before they hit him, the guy leapt, spinning to land flat on the roof of the car. If Sam’d had time to process that, he might have worried about what was coming next. Having the windscreen punched through and the steering wheel ripped from both his hands and the car answered that very question in the most terrifying way possible.

“Hang on!” Steve yelled.
Sam’s head snapped across and away from the terrifying sight of their car careening out of control down the highway. Seeing Steve slamming his shoulder into the door of the car, Sam scrambled to join Steve and Nat, only just making it in time to grab hold of the two before the door gave way, rocketing the three of them out and away.

The screech of metal sliding on the road as they tobogganed to safety was piercingly loud but all but completely ignored as the three skidded along, Sam rolling away just before they slid to a stop.

The crack of a bullet hitting the ground next to his head had Sam scrambling up and racing for the nearest cover – a car – his head low and out of the line of fire as much as possible. Risking a quick glance, Sam looked out, locating their now-overturned car a couple of dozen metres away. His wings were in there. Guns, too. He needed them. But they were staying right where they were, especially with what amounted to a small army between him and there.

“Steve!” Sam yelled, seeing his new friend, with only that impressive shield of his to protect himself, having a rocket launcher aimed at him.

Sam had no idea whether Steve’d heard the warning; the fact that he pushed Nat out of the way before the missile impacted his shield, sending him flying out, over and off the bridge said that he might have.

Again, bullets began firing towards him and Sam was forced to duck away. Keeping low, he raced backwards and away, trying to put more distance and more obstacles between himself and those bullets. Sam’s eyes narrowed, wishing for a gun in his hand to shoot back at these guys. Unfortunately, all he had on him was a small utility knife. And everyone knew that bringing a knife to a gun fight was never a good idea.

Harry sat cross-legged on the bench seat of the quinjet, his eyes closed as he worked on his patience. While his body may have been in a state of rest, his mind was active and he was acutely aware of everything going on around him. This waiting wasn’t easy, especially when he knew that his friends were out there somewhere, most likely in some kind of danger. It simply wasn’t in Harry’s nature to wait around like this without helping, coming to the rescue of those in need – his old ‘saving people thing’ rearing its head.

Bruce lay on the opposite bench, pretending to sleep but Harry could tell that it was only feigned. Thor, meanwhile paced back and forth continuously, his hands either clasped behind his back or one hand rubbing the fist of the other in front of his chest. Tony, meanwhile, hadn’t left the pilot’s seat. His hands were in constant motion as he worked his magic to keep abreast of S.H.I.E.L.D. intelligence. So far, though, there’d been next to no information about Steve or Nat at all. Not even the fact that S.H.I.E.L.D. had attempted to have them killed had been logged in S.H.I.E.L.D. files. Something was going on, that much was for certain.

The unexpected ringing of Tony’s phone snapped Harry’s eyes open and he was up in a shot, only a fraction of a second before Bruce, with Thor hot on their heels as they crowded around Tony.

Thankfully, when Tony’d answered it, he’d also put it on loudspeaker.

“Romanoff. Finally. This sitting around waiting while you and the Capsicle do your spy thing is … wait! Is that gunfire?” Tony blurted, interrupting himself.

And it was, Harry realised. Rapid-fire gun shots at that. A number of louder shots, closer to the phone, could only be Nat shooting back.
“We need immediate assistance and evac!” Nat stated, just as rapid-fire as her gun.

Tony’s fingers blurred on the console in front of him.

“Got your position. Be there in five,” Tony replied.

The line cut out before any more could be said.

The repulsar engines on the quinjet roared to life and Tony rapidly had them airborne.

“Can you do your magic thing and get there now?” Bruce asked.

Harry frustratedly shook his head.

“No. I need to know where I’m going in order to apparate or portkey somewhere and I’ve never been there; I’ve got no frame of reference,” Harry replied.

“We’re just going to have to trust that our comrades can hold on until we get there,” Thor stated, holding out his hand for Mjolnir to slap into his open palm.

ooo00ooo

Snapping her phone off, Nat shoved it into her pocket, immensely grateful that she’d managed to snag the thing just before they had to bail from the car.

Firing off a few return shots gave Nat a chance to get a better read on her situation. It wasn’t good. Not good at all. Where was Clint when you needed him, she wondered. A few of his special arrows could come in handy just then. Seeing the fire power that she was up against and knowing the number of bullets left in her own magazines, Nat knew that retreat was the only option.

Racing from cover, she leapt over the barrier dividing the highway and immediately rolled out of the way on oncoming traffic. A convenient second car came by and Nat ducked in behind it, but not before looking back and seeing what was being aimed at her.

Nat’s eyes widened and she did the only thing she could – she leapt from the bridge, shooting out a grappling line from her stinger wrist braces under her jacket. The claws slapped into the underside of the bridge, allowing her to swing to safety, landing in a run.

The shadow of the Soldier on top of the bridge had her smirking and Nat pulled her guns. After waiting just out of sight for close to a minute, she saw the shadow shift, his gun lowering slightly. Stepping out, she instantly aimed up and began firing.

Her first shot, she thought, had been dead on target, aimed right for his right eye. The fact that he disappeared so quickly gave her hope that he was down for good, but she wasn’t going to count on it.

As soon as he disappeared, Nat moved, racing out for better cover behind a truck.

Her hopes of the kill shot vanished as the Winter Soldier reappeared, spraying bullets where she’d just been. Instantly, Nat fired on him, only to have him turn his attention to her.

Steve, she knew, would have landed around here somewhere; exactly where, she didn’t know but she wasn’t going to count him out yet. She just needed to give him a chance. And standing here in a shoot out wasn’t going to do that.

Ducking down, she began racing away, dodging between cars, aiming to lead the Soldier away.
The slight confusion of where he was and what had happened evaporated quickly as Steve lifted his head and gave it a slight shake. The memory of the impact on his shield, of flying through the air, of falling and then a second impact rushed back and he grimaced.

He seemed to be in a bus, albeit one laying on its side. Looking back, Steve noted the few passengers that had been on it, some bloody, most holding different parts of their body, making their way towards the hole in the front windscreen.

It was just as he was getting to his feet that the first bullets began peppering the bus, shooting right through the floor. With the intense volume of flying bullets, there was only one thing that could be shooting so many – a machine gun.

Covering his head, Steve took off, trying to run and dodge the unseen bullets while navigating the upturned bus as quickly as he could. Through the rear window, he could see his shield, laying in the middle of the road, its familiar bands of red, white and blue dulled nearly black from the missile explosion just before.

With one leap, Steve crashed through the window, landing in a forward roll that brought his shield straight to hand and he quickly got it up in front of him, halting the spray of bullets aimed at him in their tracks.

Machine gun. There was no doubt about it now. He remembered the sound and feel from back in the war. A trick from back then resurfaced in his memory and he decided to put it to use once again.

Gathering his feet under him, Steve stood, holding his shield just so and keeping his head down to deflect the hail of bullets aimed at him. A quick peek from either side of the shield told him that there were three others, apart from the gunner manning the machine gun.

A simple reangling of his shield had the bullets, instead of being stopped in their tracks, now being deflected. Shifting that angle slightly more had the deflected bullets now spraying towards the first guy, dropping him where he stood. A second shift took out the man next to him with just as much ease. The third guy was going to take something extra though.

Using both hands to brace the shield against the onslaught, Steve began running towards and slightly to the side of the machine gun. When the angle was just right, he shifted his shield once more, removing the third soldier from the fight.

Then, with his sole focus on the man holding the machine gun, Steve began running straight at him, using his considerable strength to combat the increasing force of the bullets impacting upon his shield. The instant that he was in the right position, Steve leapt, spinning up and over the soldier, grabbing his head on the way down and slamming him into the car that he’d been standing on.

The force of the impact knocked the soldier senseless and Steve gave a sigh of relief before reaching down and beginning to remove the vital components of the machine gun. Definitely wouldn’t be safe to leave a weapon like that just lying around for anyone to find and use.

Finally, Sam was able to take a breath. All but one of the soldiers who’d attacked them were now on the ground under the bridge, having grappled down.

With knife in hand, Sam slipped closer and closer, keeping out of the last guy’s line of vision. This guy was aiming to control the high ground, to use this superior position to keep Steve and Nat
pinned down. Not if Sam had anything to do with it, though.

Sam rounded the last car at a rush, slapping out a hand to push the rifle coming to bear on him away. A slash with his knife cut the gun’s strap from his neck and Sam grabbed it before kicking the guy backwards, right over the edge and off the bridge.

Bringing the rifle to bear, Sam trained it on the ground below, searching for enemies.

Nat was nowhere to be seen. Steve, though, was standing over four downed soldiers, looking completely unhurt after being blown from the bridge not long before.

Seeing Steve look up at him, Sam gave a nod.

“Go. I’ve got this,” he called down.

Steve immediately nodded back before taking off at a run in the only direction that Nat could have gone.

Once again, Sam checked over the terrain, searching for enemies. Seeing none, he glanced back, quickly finding the wreckage of their upturned car, its precious cargo still in what remained of its boot.

ooo00ooo

“Come on, come on,” Tony muttered under his breath, once again looking at the clock on the console.

It’d only been three minutes since they’d heard from Nat but a lot could happen in three minutes, he’d learnt that back in New York with the Chitauri. Invasion. And the fact that they could hear gunfire in that phone call, including Nat shooting back, combined with how short the conversation had been and the call being cut off so abruptly, meant that everyone in the quinjet was tense. And ready.

“Bruce, take the wheel,” Tony ordered.

“You want me to drive?” Bruce asked even as he slipped into the co-pilot’s seat of the quinjet.

“For now,” Tony replied as he stepped backwards into his Iron Man armour which had been standing idly by waiting for him.

The red and gold armour closed up, servos whirring as the suit fastened in place. Finally, his visor snapped shut, the eyes lit and the HUD came on-line.

“If thing go pear-shaped and we need the Big Guy, Jarvis’ll take over for you,” Tony stated.

Bruce’s head whipped up at him.

“What? You expect to need the … other guy?” he gulped.

“Hopefully not, but be ready just in case,” Tony replied.

Harry’s hand came from his blue-grey cloak to rest on Bruce’s shoulder for a second.

“The two of you came to a better understanding out in Nevada, right?” the wizard said, to which Bruce nodded. “And I’ve got my potions handy just in case.”
Bruce nodded but didn’t look convinced even as he turned back to the console.

“Jarvis, connect into the quinjet. Make sure we have access to her systems so we know what we’re flying into,” Tony ordered.

Hearing the gunshots in the distance, combined with the screams from the civilians, gave Steve a direction to run. The car in the distance exploding widened his eyes and he put on a burst of speed.

He saw him, then, the Winter Soldier, with his silver metal arm. And then, flying out of nowhere, came Nat, flipping up and over the Soldier, what looked like a garrotting line between her hands as she attempted to subdue the Soldier. The attempt failed spectacularly as the Soldier simply reached up and back, grabbed Nat and threw her from over his shoulder in front of her, sending her flying across the street and rolling to a stop beside a parked car.

Steve’s mental yelling must have been heard for Nat was straight up after flicking out one of her Widow’s Bites to momentarily incapacitate the Soldier’s arm before she was on her feet and running away, yelling at the civilians to clear the area. Steve knew that he was going to be too late. He could see the rifle being lifted, the shot being lined up and then the crack of the rifle echoed through the air.

Nat clutched at her right shoulder and staggered, disappearing down behind a car.

Steve watched as the Winter Soldier stepped around, lining up for a second, finishing shot. A shot that Steve wasn’t going to give him.

The instant before he hit the Soldier, the man must have heard him coming, for he turned slightly, turning the powerful punch that Steve threw into a glancing blow. It was enough, though, to take the Soldier’s attention from Nat.

A spinning kick tore the rifle from the Soldier’s hands and Steve moved, bringing his shield down and around to protect himself. Just in time, too, as the Soldier grabbed a mini-gun from his back and began shooting rapidly at him.

Steve ducked in behind a car, moving around it, the bullets continuing to spray after him even as he protected himself with his shield. Coming around the front of the car, Steve leapt up, slid over the bonnet and closed, hitting the Soldier’s wrist, opening the hand and sending the gun clattering away.

A third gun, this a simple pistol, was instantly pulled and it took all of Steve’s considerable reflexes to move his shield – down, right, up, back down – before lashing out, with the edge of his shield, removing the gun from the equation.

Fists then began being exchanged.

Head.

Body.

Block with shield to the right.

Lash out at unprotected ribs.

A hit to the jaw.

And then Steve felt his shield grabbed and twisted. He went with it, spinning up and over, landed on
his feet and instantly received a kick to the chest.

Steve tumbled backwards and away, realising as he ended in a crouch that he was now without his shield, the Soldier staring hard at him from over its edge as he now held it.

Instantly, Steve was up, racing back in towards the fight, only to have to twist awkwardly out of the way as his own shield was hurled at him. The Soldier’s hand shifted and Steve noted the knife in it, twirling into the grip that he obviously favoured.

Steve closed, lifting his left arm to block the knife thrust and hitting out with his right. Once again, a flurry of blows was exchanged and Steve had to be extra aware of the knife.

Block a left thrust.

Punch hard at face.

Follow up fist aimed at gut.

Block knife to the left before the knife was flipped up and grabbed by the Soldier’s right hand.

And then their dance continued.

Punching, blocking, using hands and feet to try to subdue each other. Ducking, Steve lashed out, landing a blow hard enough to push the Soldier a step backwards. And that was just the opening he needed. An upward leap, spin and kick landed solidly in the Soldier’s chest, sending him careening wildly backwards to crash into a van, the knife thankfully being knocked loose in the process.

A second knife appeared as Steve closed and he was forced to dodge a particularly vicious thrust at his side. The twist was enough of an opening to allow the Soldier to go on the offensive, slashing and cutting at Steve and he was forced to block blow after blow even as he was manoeuvred about in a circle.

And then it was the Soldier’s turn to jump and kick, sending Steve backwards into the same van. The knife came down hard, aimed right for his left eye and it took both of Steve’s hands to block the blow. And then the Soldier’s strength increased and it was all Steve could do to force the blade to the side past his head.

The Soldier wasn’t done yet, though, using his super-human strength to drag the knife through the metal of the van and towards Steve’s head. Quickly stepping sidewards, Steve avoided it until he was able to slip down and away. The Soldier’s overbalance allowing Steve to retrieve his shield from the side of the van.

With shield back in hand, Steve went on the offensive, blocking the metal arm with the edge of his shield, using the unbreakable vibranium against it. When that didn’t seem to work, Steve dropped his arm with the shield under that metal arm and immediately brought it back up to slam into the Soldier’s face, staggering him slightly.

Steve grabbed him, twisting the Soldier up and over his shoulder to roll away, the mask the Soldier was wearing falling away in the process.

And then the Soldier straightened and Steve got his first good look at the guy. His eyes widened and he was sure that he was seeing wrong.

“Bucky?” he asked, standing slightly straighter from the defensive crouch that he’d been in.
“Who the hell’s ‘Bucky’?” the Winter Soldier asked in return.

Bruce brought the quinjet in from the south. Wisps of smoke drifted up in multiple directions showing where the battle had taken place, the largest being down on the streets rather than up on the bridge where the largest concentration of wrecked vehicles seemed to be.

“There!” Thor stated, leaning forward and thrusting a pointing finger off to the side.

Bruce hovered the quinjet, angling its nose down and around.

“There’s Steve,” Bruce said, nodding towards the man standing with his shield, facing off against a guy dressed in military black.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a man with mechanical wings on his back flew in from the side, his legs dropping low to kick the soldier in the back.

“Well, that’s not something you see every day,” Tony commented absently.

“He’s got a metal arm!” Bruce exclaimed, seeing the flash of the silver arm as the soldier tumbled and rolled from the force of the kick.

“Steve’s report said that Fury was killed by a guy with a metal arm,” Tony stated. “He’s got answers we need.”

“I’m on it,” Harry stated, flipping his hood up, swiping one hand over his face, using his magic to conceal his features and popping his wand out.

With a quick turn, only three were left in the quinjet as Mage appeared just off to the side on the street, creating a triangle around the Soldier with Steve and the flying guy being the other two points.

“Point Break, you ready?” Iron Man asked, slamming his hand against the button that would lower the quinjet’s ramp.

In response, Thor simply began twirling his hammer in his hand as he strode towards the exit.

Mage arrived, his wand arm coming up, ready. Steve, didn’t even look in his direction, instead continuing to simply stare at the Soldier. The other guy gave him a brief nod of recognition and Mage recognised him as a ‘friendly’.

Without warning, the Soldier lifted an arm, a pistol in his hand but before he could fire, a small missile came out of nowhere, slamming into a car, exploding it and sending the Soldier flying.

Mage noted that it’d been Natasha that had fired the missile before taking off after the Soldier.

Mage shook his head at the sight of the Soldier already getting to his feet, his hand going behind him, obviously for a new weapon, not that Mage planned on giving him enough time to draw it.

A simple red spell was snapped from his wand. But with super-human reflexes, the Soldier blocked it with his metal arm, the stunner splashing against it harmlessly.

Taking a step forward, Mage’s wand whipped into a blur, shooting spell after spell. The first was blocked. The rest, though, did their work, leaving the Soldier bound, silenced, petrified and
unconscious on the ground at Mage’s feet.

A simple *accio* relieved the man of his weapons – a surprising haul that Mage promptly shrunk before placing into one of the pockets on his belt. He eyed the metal arm, considering the safest way of dealing with it. But not knowing how it was tied into the Soldier’s human anatomy, he left it for Tony to deal with later.

“Let’s get you some place safe for now, shall we?” Mage said to the unconscious man.

A quick disillusionment spell, levitation spell and a rope tied to him satisfied Mage. Then, after drawing and enlarging his broom, Mage flew back up to the quinjet, trailing the body of the Soldier behind him.

ooooooo

“Harry, you better get back down there!” Bruce called from the pilot’s seat.

Harry’s head looked up and around from where he was in the process of strapping the rigid, unconscious body of the Winter Soldier to one of the benches on the side of the quinjet.

“What’s happening?” Harry asked.

“I’m counting eight black SUVs with flashing lights heading towards the others,” Bruce relayed.

“Give me one more sec,” Harry said before turning back to complete the job.

ooooooo

Thor and Iron Man flew into what had been a combat zone, landing lightly beside Steve.

“You alright?” Iron Man asked.

Steve nodded dazedly. *Something* had obviously shaken the guy.

“Nat. She was shot,” Steve said, beginning to snap out of whatever it was.

Before Thor had even gone two paces towards their comrade, black SUVs began pulling up all around them, a legion of black-clad soldiers emerging from them like ants, all carrying rifles and a multitude of other weapons strapped to their body.

“On the ground! Get on the ground!” the lead S.H.I.E.L.D. soldier ordered.

Iron Man simply raised his arm towards him, his repulsar weapon lighting up brightly.

“Not gonna happen,” Iron Man replied. “And I’d lower those weapons if I was you, you don’t want to make Hulk angry now, do you? And he’s watching from up there.”

A couple of the S.H.I.E.L.D. soldiers glanced nervously at the hovering quinjet; their weapons, however, remained steadily on target.

Thor, though, hadn’t even broken his stride, reaching Nat’s side moments after a smaller soldier had done so. A simple glare was enough to force them to back off.

“Tony, be ready to grab Steve; Thor do the same for Nat. As soon as you have them, get them up to the quinjet,” Harry’s voice ordered through their comms.
And then, with a much louder *crack* than was normal, Mage appeared in their midst. A number of the soldier’s weapons spun so that they were now covering him as well.

“I suggest you back off, gentlemen,” Mage ordered the S.H.I.E.L.D. soldiers.

When not a single rifle was lowered, Mage seemed to gather himself for a second before forcefully dropping to one knee, stabbing his wand at the ground in the process.

Instantly, a massive shockwave pulsed outward through the ground, causing everyone upright to stagger, car alarms to begin shrilling their protests and entire buildings to shake.

Seeing the opening, Thor pulled Natasha close, spun Mjolnir and shot up into the sky. Iron Man, too, was quickly airborne, Steve in his arms. The winged man quickly joined them, following along behind.

As for Mage, he simply stood in the calm of the storm before turning, vanishing without a sound.

ooo00ooo

Mage appeared high in the sky above the quinjet and began to fall. He’d barely dropped a dozen metres before he transformed into Ged, his sparrowhawk form, his wings spread to catch the air currents. A bank, a dive, some flapping of wings brought him shooting into the quinjet where he transformed once again, moving from bird form to walking on the ramp with ease.

“Whoa!” the black guy with the mechanical pack on his back said, stepping backwards out of the way. “I didn’t know you could do that!”

“Not many do,” Mage replied. “Cool wings, by the way.”

“Yeah, you too,” he replied, almost automatically, it seemed.

Nat was propped up on one of the seats, one hand clutched to her shoulder and her face looking decidedly pale. Seeing her, Mage began pulling vials from his belt pockets even before reaching her.

“That bullet still in there?” he asked.

Nat shook her head. “No. A straight through and through.”

“That’ll make things easier,” Mage commented. “Right, get that shirt off.”

Instead of doing exactly what he’d asked, she managed to slip the shirt to the side and down so that he could see the injury. A *scourgify* cleaned the area of blood before Mage uncorked the first vial and pulled out its dropper.

“This is going to sting,” he warned.

At her nod, he dropped firstly three drops on her front bullet hole and then a further three on the wound on her back. A purple cloud of gas rose off of her as the skin began glistening and melting together. Nat’s hiss of pain told its own story; ordinarily she wasn’t one for showing any sort of pain. By the time that the Essence of Dittany had finished its work, the wounds looked to be at least half a week old.

“Right, drink this,” Mage ordered, pulling out the second vial.

“What is it?” she asked suspiciously, looking at the viscous dark red liquid.
“Blood replenishing potion, it’ll give you back the blood that you lost,” Mage stated.

In one go, Nat slugged the potion down, grimacing at the taste, just as everyone who took it did.

“Right, what’s going on,” Tony asked before cocking a thumb at their extra passenger. “And who’s this guy?”

“Sam Wilson, he’s a friend and ally,” Steve replied from where he was standing staring down at the unconscious form of the Winter Soldier.

“As to what’s going on, I think I might have a lead,” Nat stated.

She thrust a hand into her pocket and pulled out a piece of paper, holding it up for all to see.

“What is it?” Mage asked.

“A set of coordinates,” Nat replied. “It was slipped into my pocket by that S.H.I.E.L.D. agent before Thor chased them off.”

“Where are they for?” Bruce asked.

“Only one way to find out,” Mage stated.
Tony manipulated the console, zeroing in on the coordinates on the piece of paper that had been slipped into Nat’s pocket.

“Where are we headed?” Bruce asked from the pilot’s seat of the quinjet.

“Looks like an old, abandoned water station,” Tony remarked.

“What else is there?” Steve asked from where he was still standing over the unconscious Winter Soldier, seemingly studying his face.

Tony perused the satellite image while tapping away, searching for any archived plans of the water station.

“Nothing,” Tony replied with a shrug.

“Perfect place for one of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s secret bases,” Nat stated.

“You think there’ll be allies there waiting for us?” Sam asked.

Nat shrugged. “Won’t know ’til we get there.”

“Any who are there who are not allies will find themselves in a world of pain,” Thor stated, twirling his hammer in emphasis.

“Especially if Sparrowhawk there stops holding back,” Tony said, pointing an accusatory finger at Mage. “And don’t deny it, Mister Magic Man. We’ve seen what you can do now.”

“What was that spell anyway?” Steve asked.

“Terrae motus pulsus,” Mage replied. “The earthquake shock spell. And you’re right, I have been holding back somewhat. Some of the spells I know are a little too dangerous to use, especially in a city.”

“Too dangerous?” Bruce asked, looking back with raised eyebrows.

“Yes,” Mage nodded. “A little more power in that spell today and it might have eroded some of the foundations of the nearby buildings, not to mention injuring the civilians in the area. For the most part, the spells I already use are powerful enough without using the extras that I have in my arsenal.”

“Nice to know that you’ve got something extra in the tank if we ever need it,” Tony stated.

“What’s our ETA to the coordinates?” Steve asked.

“Fifteen, twenty minutes maybe,” Bruce replied. “I’m taking us out and around in an arc and trying to stay under the radar so that S.H.I.E.L.D. or whoever it is can’t track us.”

“Good,” Steve nodded. “Hopefully then we can finally get some answers to what’s going on.”

ooo00ooo

“Jarvis?” Tony asked.
“Infrared scans are inconclusive,” the AI replied.

“So, if there’s anyone here, they’re below ground,” Steve stated.

“What about him?” Sam asked, nodding at the unconscious, bound man on the bench.

“Bucky,” Steve put in.

“Right. Bucky. What are we going to do with him once we land?” Sam asked, even as Bruce was in the process of doing exactly that.

“Ordinarily, those spells would have a normal person out to it for another two to three hours,” Mage stated.

“Bucky’s not ‘normal’,” Steve stated. “Back in forty-two, Bucky was captured by Zola and experimented on. Whatever happened to him, it made him so that he hardly seems to have aged a day since then.”

“Even with an enhanced metabolism, he should still be unconscious for at least another hour. But just in case,” Mage said before snapping his wand into his hand and transfiguring the ropes wrapped around the Soldier into heavy chains.

“That’ll hold him,” Nat deadpanned.

“Right, now that Sleeping Beauty’s been fawned over, let’s go,” Tony said and promptly snapped his helmet shut while simultaneously hitting the button to lower the quinjet’s ramp.

As the group hit the ground, they immediately spread out, with Iron Man and Sam instantly taking to the sky

“Hey, you got a name?” Iron Man asked as he hovered beside Sam.

“My name’s Sam; I already told you that,” Sam replied with a frown.

“Nah, I meant a code name,” Iron Man clarified.

“Not really,” Sam replied.

“Well, what’s the name of that gizmo on your back?” Iron Man asked.

“EXO-7 FALCON,” Sam replied.

“Good enough, Falcon it is,” Iron Man stated before firing his repulsars and shooting off around the perimeter of the facility.

“I am detecting a tunnel into the facility to the north-east,” Jarvis stated.

“Everyone hear that?” Iron Man asked.

“Copy. We’re on our way,” Captain America stated.

Iron Man continued his circuit, not seeing any dangers before making a beeline for the tunnel. He banked hard and cut his repulsars, dropping exactly between Cap and Mage, one with his shield up and ready, the other with wand drawn and raised. Thor and Widow were on Mage’s side, also ready, as were Falcon and Bruce on the other.
From out of the shadows of the tunnel, a lone figure walked, their hands raised nonthreateningly.

“ Took your time getting here, didn’t you?” Maria Hill asked as she stepped into the light. “ I slipped you that note half an hour ago.”

“That was you?” Nat asked.

“What are we doing here?” Cap asked, speaking over any answer Hill might have given.

“I’d have thought that was obvious, Captain; you’re here to get answers and to form a plan to stop the Insight Helicarriers from launching,” Hill replied. “ First, though, you’d better follow me; there’s someone you’re going to want to see.”

Without waiting for a reply, she turned and strode back down the tunnel.

“Any idea who she’s talking about?” Tony asked, flipping up his face mask.

“No,” Steve replied seriously before striding off after her, the others following along behind.

“About damn time.”

“Fury,” Steve breathed, his eyes roving over the man propped up in the hospital-grade bed.

There were a number of machines spaced near the bed looking completely out of place in the old, dimly lit room. Fury’s arm was in sling and he was wearing a pair of pyjamas, but it was definitely him and he was most certainly alive. The man was even wearing his trademark black eyepatch.

“I thought you were supposed to be dead,” Tony commented as he slipped into the room. “ Or is this a S.H.I.E.L.D. secret protocol thing where you have the ability to die and come back to life?”

“I never died,” Fury stated.

“The Son of Coul died,” Thor said cautiously.

“He did,” Fury nodded. “ But we were able to bring him back.”

“You were on the operating table,” Nat stated. “ They cut you open. Your heart stopped. The machines flatlined.”

“How’d you survive?” Steve asked.

“Tetrodotoxin B,” Fury said, an explanation that meant nothing to any of them except Bruce.

“I developed that,” he said, sounding startled. “ It was supposed to combat stress.”

“And we found a use for it,” Fury nodded. “ It slowed my pulse to one beat a minute. As for the rest – lacerated spinal column, cracked sternum, shattered collarbone, perforated liver and one hell of a headache.”

“Don’t forget your collapsed lung,” the doctor sitting in the corner interjected.

“Oh, let’s not forget that,” Fury stated sarcastically. “ Other than that, I’m good.”

“Why all the secrecy? Why not just tell us?” Steve demanded.
“Any attempt on the Director’s life had to look successful,” Hill stated.

“Can’t kill you if you’re already dead. Besides, I wasn’t sure who to trust,” Fury said.

“And here I thought the magical world had a thing for secrets,” Mage stated with a headshake.

“Nice to see you lot, too; we could use you for this,” Fury stated. “But why the hood?”

Mage looked across to Sam standing against the wall out of the way. Both Steve and Nat trusted him, had brought him along with them, even.

“You’re right. Seems that there’s already been enough secrecy today,” he said and reached up, dispelled the charms concealing his face and sticking the hood to his head and lowered it. “My name’s Harry.”

“Nice to meet you, Harry,” Sam nodded.

“Didn’t think you were that trusting, Potter,” Fury stated.

Harry shrugged. “Secrets have their places but there has to be a line somewhere.”

“Like you holding all of the cards so that no one else but you can see the whole picture,” Steve accused Fury.

“Haven’t we already had this conversation, Rogers?” Fury asked with a shake of his head. “It’s called ‘compartmentalisation’.”

“And look where that’s got us,” Steve stated sarcastically. “Hiding in a bunker, not knowing who the real enemy is, an enemy that’s been growing inside S.H.I.E.L.D. for the past seventy years without anyone noticing.”

“Trust me, I noticed,” Fury said. “I’ve been working for the bad guys this whole damn time. Why else do you think we’re having this meeting here?”

“What exactly have you noticed?” Tony asked.

Fury stated at him before his eye moved about the room, taking in each of them as he seemed to weigh his words.

“Don’t. Just don’t,” Steve said. “No more ‘compartmentalisation’. No more secrets. Just lay it out. A war can be lost when information is withheld.”

“You think this is a war?” Fury asked incredulously.

“Come off it, Nick; HYDRA’s involved. What else is it going to be?” Nat asked.

Once again, Fury looked each of them in the eye.

“Looks like you’re giving the orders now, Captain,” Fury said with a shake of his head.

He leant back on the pillows, then and seemed to gather his thoughts.

“I first noticed something … ‘off’ with the Lamerian Star,” he began.

“That’s one of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s ships capable of launching satellites,” Tony said.
“It is,” Fury agreed. “Specifically, it’s been used for launching the satellites that will be used for Project Insight.”

“And you arranged for Batroc and his mercenaries to take the ship so that you could send Nat in to steal the data,” Steve stated.

“I did,” Fury nodded. “And then I found out that the data was encrypted. Level ten encrypted that not even my Director’s override could do anything about. And you’ll never guess who ‘encrypted’ that data.”

“Nick Fury?” Bruce guessed.

Fury simply pointed a finger at him.

“Should have given me a call, I would have had you in in no time,” Tony stated.

“Maybe I should have,” Fury allowed. “What I suspect my attempts did do, though, was put me on the radar of the bad guys and landed me here.”

“Nat and I found out what’s on it,” Steve stated, pulling out the flash drive from his pocket and holding it up. “It’s an algorithm developed by Arnim Zola. It’s designed to find the people who are or who have the potential to be, threats to HYDRA so that the Insight carriers can eliminate them.”

“They can find anyone in the world?” Harry asked. “Even my people?”

“The Insight helicarriers are the most sophisticated in the world,” Fury stated. “If anything can, it’ll be them.”

“Sounds like something that needs a good smiting, yes?” Thor asked, slapping Bruce on the shoulder.

“Yes, it does. I can feel that Hulk’s eager to join in the smashing as well,” Bruce replied.

ooo00ooo

Harry found Steve, as expected, in the room where they’d placed the Winter Soldier.

It was a stark room, constructed entirely of grey, moulding concrete. There were no windows and only a single door. A door that locked, a rarity in this old, abandoned facility that they were currently holed up in. A small camp bed had been placed against the far wall for the sleeping, still bound Soldier.

Currently, a doctor was checking the Soldier’s vitals while Steve watched over both of them from where he leant in the corner, his arms folded tightly across his chest, his shield leaning up against the wall beside him.

“You okay?” Harry asked.

Steve barely glanced at him before affixing his eyes once more on the unconscious man.

“Yeah,” Steve replied succinctly.

“I take it you know him?” Harry asked.

“Yes. Or, at least, I once did,” Steve replied. “I last saw Bucky in Nazi Germany back in forty-five. We were on a mission to capture Zola. There was resistance and Bucky fell from the train into a
ravine Must have been at least a couple of hundred feet.”

“Some fall,” Harry commented.

“Yeah. I’m guessing that whatever experiments Zola did, it was enough for him to survive the fall,” Steve said. “But what they did to him since then, in the last seventy years …”

Steve trailed off with a frustrated shake of his head.

“He didn’t know me,” Steve continued quietly. “We grew up together. We were best friends. And he didn’t know me!”

It was at that moment that the man in question seemed to instantly come awake and flex his great muscles. That amazing metal arm of his causing the links of metal chain that were wrapped around him to begin separating. Before anyone could react, he’d managed to twist his hand enough to get a hold of the chain and twist it further, snapping a dozen links off.

Both Harry and Steve moved towards him. Unfortunately, they weren’t in time to stop the Soldier from shrugging off the chains and grabbing the doctor by the throat before thrusting him away, through the air to hit the wall and to slowly slide down it.

A pair of spells were snapped from Harry’s wand but the Soldier had obviously learnt from their earlier encounter, using his enhanced reflexes to ‘catch’ each of them with his metal hand, rendering them useless. It wasn’t until Steve closed, grappling with him, that Harry was able to get in a third spell, this one instantly snapping the Soldier’s arms and legs together. Only Steve grabbing him by the shoulders and steadying him stopping him from crashing to the ground.

“A simple petrifying spell,” Harry replied to Steve’s unasked question.

The Soldier’s eyes darted rapidly about as Steve gently lowered him back onto the bed.

Harry sent a fourth spell towards the man, this one undoing the *petrificus totalus* from just his head.

Instantly a stream of words sallied forth from the petrified Soldier.

“What have you done to me? Undo it!”

Harry’s hand shot to his ear, the unexpected and all-but unfamiliar feeling of tingling surprising him as the magic went to work.

“He’s speaking Russian,” Steve said, standing back up and staring down at his friend.

“I know,” Harry replied. “Translator earring. Lets me understand any language spoken. Haven’t had to use it in ages.”

“What’s he saying?” Steve asked.

“He wants me to undo the spell,” Harry replied.

“You cannot hold me forever!” the Soldier snarled.

“I think that one’s Turkish or maybe Serbian,” Harry said. “It’s hard to pick when all I’m hearing is English. Either way, he says that we’ll regret it once he gets free.”

Steve took half a step forward.
“Your name is James Buchanan Barnes,” he said. “You grew up in Brooklyn, New York. We’ve been friends our entire lives.”

The Soldier stared at him but at least stopped threatening them in a new language every other sentence.

“Do you know who I am?” Steve asked hopefully.

“You’re my mission,” the Soldier spat.

“My name’s Steve. Steve Rogers. And you’re Bucky,” Steve told him.

For the very briefest of instances, there was a flicker of something, as though something had registered, but it was gone before anyone could say or do anything.

“How can he not remember?” Steve asked. “How can he not even know his own name?”

With a frown, Harry raised his wand.

“Legilimens,” he whispered.

Instantly, Harry was drawn inside Bucky’s mind.

The thoughts and images that swirled about seemed fragmented and disjointed and there was a whole lot of black, blank spaces. As Harry carefully looked about, he could feel Bucky trying to push him out, but without any training, Harry, even as unskilled as he was in the mind arts, had no problems batting the feeble attempt away. And then the briefest of glimmers caught his mind’s eye. It wasn’t much, but it left Harry with the impression that far below or maybe beyond the confusion, there might be something there, something more ‘normal’ than what he was seeing.

“What did you do?” Steve demanded once Harry was back ‘out’ again.

“Took a look inside his mind,” Harry replied, shaking his head to get the last vestiges of doing that particular spell out of his own mind.

“And?” Steve asked.

“It’s a mess in there. Someone’s obviously been doing something to his mind,” Harry replied.

“Some kind of brainwashing, I’d guess,” Steve mused. “Can you undo it?”

“Me? No, definitely not,” Harry replied. “For something like that, you’d need a fully qualified Mind Healer.”

“Do you know one?” Steve asked hopefully, his gaze drawn back once again to Bucky.

“Maybe,” Harry temporised. “But she’s in England and we don’t have the time to get her here right now and with what I just saw, I’d guess that she’ll need months to undo the damage.”

Harry reached into one of his belt pockets and withdrew a small vial.

“What’s that?” Steve asked suspiciously.

“Spells don’t seem to work on him for very long,” Harry replied. “We’re going to need something a lot stronger to keep him subdued while we’re away dealing with the Insight problem. This is called ‘Draught of Living Death’. Don’t worry, there’s a counter. It’ll basically put him into a sleep so deep
that no one can wake him from until we’re ready.”

Steve looked between the vial and the angry, determined eyes of Bucky.

“Do it,” he said.

ooo00ooo

Between the six Avengers, Sam, Fury and Maria Hill, the table was crowded. But with the job that they were planning, it needed to be. Taking on – most likely – all of S.H.I.E.L.D. wasn’t something that one did at the drop of a hat, at the very least, some planning had to take place, even in the limited amount of time that they had.

“There are three helicarriers, currently located in a special bay under the Potomac River,” Hill began the briefing. “The only way in is through the Triskelion itself on Roosevelt Island.”

“Unless they open the bay doors,” Steve corrected.

“Which would be bad,” Fury stated.

“Right, opening those hanger doors means that the helicarriers are due for immediate launch,” Hill continued. “Once the helicarriers reach three thousand feet, they’ll triangulate with the Insight satellites and become fully weaponised.”

“Which would be bad,” Tony said, echoing Fury.

“So, we need to stop them before they can launch,” Bruce nodded.

“That is the preferable option,” Fury nodded. “But you’ve all been around the block before, you know that no plan survives first contact with the enemy. In any case, our ultimate goal is to breach those carriers and replace their targeting blades with our own.”

“One or two won’t cut it,” Hill continued as she placed a small container on the table and opened it, revealing three computer chips fitted snugly into their black foam casing. “We need to link all three carriers for this to work, because if even one of those ships remains operational, a whole lot of people are going to die.”

“A nice clear objective,” Thor beamed. “Get in, replace those things and don’t let anyone get in our way.”

“We have to assume that not everyone on board those carriers is HYDRA,” Fury interjected. “We don’t need to kill everyone, just get passed them, insert the server blades and maybe, just maybe, we can salvage what’s left …”

“We’re not salvaging anything,” Steve interjected, cutting the Director off. “We’re not just taking down the carriers, Nick, we’re taking down S.H.I.E.L.D.”

Nick glared at him. “S.H.I.E.L.D. had nothing to do with this.”

“Um, who built those things?” Tony asked, raising a hand.

Fury’s glare switched to the man.

“It may have been a S.H.I.E.L.D. project but we now know that it was HYDRA pulling the strings,” Fury stated.
“A HYDRA that’s been inside S.H.I.E.L.D. for seventy years without anyone noticing,” Steve argued. “S.H.I.E.L.D., HYDRA, it all goes.”

“There are good people still inside S.H.I.E.L.D.,” Fury reiterated.

“And how are we supposed to tell who’s on which side?” Nat asked. “I trust the people in this room. And Clint. Everyone else …”

Her statement ended in a shrug.

“You know that I have trust issues. The number of people I trust I can count on one hand,” Fury stated.

“And you’re not afraid of cutting off fingers,” Nat finished for him.

“No. I’m not. But there are others I trust who aren’t here. Coulson for one,” Nick said.

“And what about the rest of his team?” Tony asked. “How do we know who is or who isn’t S.H.I.E.L.D. or HYDRA? Or who’s been compromised simply because of who they report to or work with?”

“Don’t look at me,” Harry stated. “I don’t have enough power to put a compulsion spell on everyone to tell the truth. And there’s not enough veritaserum – truth serum – in the world to feed it to everyone at this Triskelion place, let alone the dozens of other S.H.I.E.L.D. bases you’ve probably got stashed away around the world.”

“If they shoot at you, they’re the enemy,” Steve stated simply.

“Works for me,” Sam agreed.

“You gave me this mission,” Steve said to Fury’s glare, “this is how it ends. I was fighting HYDRA back in World War Two before I went into the ice; I didn’t expect to have to finish the mission seventy years later when I came back out.”

“And what happens after the Triskelion?” Fury asked. “Are you going to attack every S.H.I.E.L.D. base we have?”

“If I have to, in order to flush out and finish off HYDRA, then yes,” Steve answered firmly.

“And he won’t be alone,” Tony stated. “My dad started S.H.I.E.L.D.; I’ll help end it to preserve the legacy of what he was trying to do.”

“We’ll all help,” Harry agreed. “And I’m willing to bet that those others that you mentioned, the true S.H.I.E.L.D. agents, like Coulson, like Skye, will fight back once they know what’s going on as well.”

“And, just so it’s said,” Nat said, leaning forward over the table. “Even if somehow S.H.I.E.L.D. survives this, I’m quitting.”

“None of the Avengers will work for S.H.I.E.L.D.,” Steve added.

“Don’t look at me,” Sam said. “I do what he does, only slower.”

“Right. We’re going to need a three-pronged plan of attack,” Steve said before glancing up to glare at Tony before he made a comment.
Tony, though, simply looked back and winked.

—

Clark stepped out of the elevator and looked around the lounge area of Avengers Tower. Empty. Not that he’d really expected anything different, not with the message that he’d received. Walking forward, he dumped his duffle and arrow case on one of the lounge chairs before making his way towards the bar.

“Welcome home, Mister Barton,” Jarvis said.

Clark didn’t feel like correcting the AI.

“Thanks,” he said instead, opening the small fridge under the bar. “Don’t suppose Tony left anything for me?”

“He did indeed,” Jarvis replied. “A file on the current situation, updated as of two hours ago, is awaiting your perusal at your earliest convenience.”

“Thanks,” Clark replied, taking his beer with him towards the nearest computer terminal.

“I have informed Doctor Selvig, Doctor Foster and Miss Lewis of your arrival,” Javis said.

Clark paused mid-step and looked up.

“I’m not alone here?” he asked. Then, after a beat. “What about Pepper?”

“Miss Potts is currently attending a meeting in Stark Industries’ LA office,” Jarvis informed him.

“Ah, that’d explain it then,” Clark replied, resuming his walk towards the computer. “I’ll take a look at this file and then I’ll wander down to say ‘hi’ to everyone else.”

“I shall let them know to expect you,” Jarvis said.

Clark nodded absently as he placed the bottle to the side and began to manipulate the keyboard.

—

Alexander Pierce strode into the lab expecting to see the scientists and medical personnel hard at work checking over the Asset from his recent mission. What he found instead was eight white-coated men milling about looking lost.

“I take it there’s a problem?” he asked.

Brock Rumlow, the S.H.I.E.L.D. team leader of S.T.R.I.K.E., turned at his words with a scowl on his face, a not unusual expression.

“Yes,” Rumlow stated simply. “The Asset never showed at his rendezvous location.”

Pierce’s eyes narrowed at the unexpected news.

“What about the back-up site?” he asked.

Rumlow shook his head. “No sign of him.”

“You think he’s been compromised?” Pierce asked.
“Most likely captured,” Rumlow stated. “He went toe to toe with Rogers and held him to a draw. That’s when the rest of the Avengers showed up. We lost contact after he encountered Mage.”

“How secure is his programming?” Pierce asked the scientists.

“Very,” the man answered confidently. “Nothing can break what we’ve done to his mind.”

“Not even magic?” Pierce asked.

The man hesitated before answering.

“We have no data to say that it can,” he temporised.

“Then we work on the assumption that he’ll make his way back to us once he escapes,” Pierce stated. “In the meantime, Project Insight has to be our top priority. Once those carriers are in the air, nothing can stop us, not even the Avengers.”
The Price Of Freedom

Walking into the Headquarters of the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division was child’s play for Mage. He’d considered using a simple disillusionment spell, but it wasn’t perfect and it was possible for others to see a slight distortion in the air as he moved. Therefore, he’d gone to his old reliable, the one thing that had never failed him: his dad’s old invisibility cloak.

It was a wait of bare moments before he was able to board a lift, slipping carefully back into a corner and keeping himself as far from the Agent who he’d followed in as possible. Hill had warned him that every lift was equipped with pressure sensitive plates in the floor, able to calculate the exact weight of the occupants of the lift, helping to determine if there were unseen infiltrators.

A simple feather-weight charm applied to himself had taken care of that.

Mage was forced to ride the lift up and down for nearly twenty minutes, inadvertently visiting every floor bar the one that he wanted in that time. Finally, though, a trio of men, all bearing the green and yellow S.T.R.I.K.E. emblem on their left shoulders entered the lift and accessed the Insight Bay.

With a smug grin, Mage followed the trio out onto the main flight deck. There were dozens of men and women about, all scurrying in different directions, intent on whatever task needed to be done to prepare for the imminent launch of the three great helicarriers.

Seeing where he needed to be, Mage twisted on the spot, apparating straight up to the flight deck of his assigned target.

“I’m in,” he stated quietly into his communication device.

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“You know they’re going to notice the giant stylized ‘A’ on the tail, don’t you?” Maria Hill asked.

“Relax,” Tony replied. “They’ll see what they expect to see – a quinjet on approach to S.H.I.E.L.D.’s main headquarters.”

“Unfortunately, Stark’s right,” Fury called from the pilot’s seat. “We’re not on an attack vector, nor are we coming in at an unusual approach angle. And this is the only quinjet in existence not owned by S.H.I.E.L.D.”

“Roger,” Captain America replied to Mage’s call, one finger touching his ear bud.

“We’re coming up on the drop zone,” Black Widow warned.

In response, Iron Man flipped his visor down, activating the HUD and bringing his repulsars up to ‘ready’ status. The four infiltrators moved closer to the ramp, Widow and Hill, pulling their guns as they did so while Cap pulled his shield from his back and slid the strap onto his arm.

“Go! Go! Go!” Fury called.

Instantly, the ramp was lowered and the four dropped out of the hovering quinjet, landing on the helipad of S.H.I.E.L.D. Operations two metres below. As their ride veered away, the four hastened towards the nearby door.
“Be ready; I’ve just ‘knocked’,” Iron Man warned.

He was not a moment too soon as the door was opened in front of them. The eyes of the techie standing in front of them widened comically at the sight of them and his hands shot up.

“Excuse us,” Cap said politely but forcefully.

oo00ooo

“We really gonna need this stuff?” Rollins asked.

S.T.R.I.K.E. Team Leader, Brock Rumlow looked pointedly around the Armory that the Team was currently in as they readied their weapons. His gaze lingered on bruises and bandages and the way more than one of them was favouring an arm or leg.

“What do you think?” Rumlow asked sarcastically.

“But Rogers isn’t even in the building,” Rollins continued. “He’s on the run somewhere and there’s no way that he could get back in. Besides what could one guy do to stop the carriers from launching?”

It was at that moment that the Triskelion’s address system activated.

“Attention all S.H.I.E.L.D. agents! This is Steve Rogers. You’ve heard a lot about me over the last few days. Some of you were even ordered to hunt me down, but I think it’s time you know the truth. S.H.I.E.L.D. is not what we thought it was. It’s been taken over by HYDRA. Alexander Pierce is their leader. The S.T.R.I.K.E. and Insight crew are HYDRA as well. I don’t know how many more. I know they’re in the building. They could be standing right next to you.

“They almost have what they want. Absolute control. They shot Nick Fury. And it won’t end there. If you launch those helicarriers today, HYDRA will be able to kill anyone that stands in their way. Unless we stop them. I know I’m asking a lot. The price of freedom is high. Always has been. And it’s a price I’m willing to pay. And if I’m the only one, so be it. But I’m willing to bet that I’m not.”

“Couldn’t get in here, huh?” Rumlow asked sarcastically. “If he’s here, you can bet Romanoff’s here as well. Probably Stark, Mage, Thor and Banner, too. Our priority is getting those birds in the air. Rollins, take a team and get the bay doors open. The rest of you, come with me, we’re going to pre-empt the launch.”

oo00ooo

Mage glanced up at the nearby speaker in the wall as Cap’s speech was relayed throughout the helicarrier.

There’d been quite the debate about announcing their presence like that. Sneaking in undetected and switching out the chips was probably the wisest course. But with an unknown number of HYDRA agents in the building and on the carriers themselves, they all knew that they were going to need help – even as formidable as the Avengers were, taking on that many unknown hostiles wasn’t the smartest course of action. Especially when allies were right at hand.

And, when it came right down to it, this was Cap’s mission and he was the one making the final decisions, whether they worked out for good or bad.

Knowing that he had to get a move on, Mage began moving that much quicker, throwing a confundus at the first agent that he saw and a babbling hex into a group coming his direction from
down a corridor, causing them all to stop and stare at each other, trying to work out what was wrong and allowing Mage to simply slip past.

ooo00ooo

“There! Our entry opens for us, my friend,” Thor laughed, reaching up and slapping his giant, green companion on the upper arm.

In response, the Hulk scowled down at him. Thor may be a friend, but that didn’t mean that he liked being hit like that.

“Are you ready?” Thor asked. “Remember, our job is to stop those helicarriers from taking off,” Thor said.

“Hulk smash,” Hulk grinned.

Thor laughed along with him as he began to spin his hammer by its strap.

“Race you there!” Thor called as he took off, allowing Mjolnir to pull him into the air.

With a roar, Hulk leap after him.

While Thor flew closer to the water to cross the Potomac River, Hulk jumped high into the sky, aiming to leap the distance in a single bound. Noting Hulk’s trajectory, Thor adjusted his, switching for the middle of the great underground bay that had appeared out of the water instead of the one to the right where he was originally headed.

Like a streak of lightning, Thor came crashing down to land on the deck of the helicarrier, startling a group of S.H.I.E.L.D. personnel.

The first one to recover and to raise his gun was coincidently also the first to feel Mjolnir slamming into his stomach. Two others were rendered unconscious by blows to the side of the head; the fourth actually managed to block Thor’s first blow and Thor grinned at him, while simultaneously raising one foot and kick-pushing the man away.

Hulk, meanwhile, was wasting no time in ensuring that the helicarrier that he’d landed on was going nowhere. The bright lights, his limited mind understood, needed to be put out. Running at and promptly knocking one of the quinjets sitting on the carrier’s deck into the arc-powered turbine took care of the first of the engines.

A hail of bullets distracted Hulk from the next light and with a roar, he leapt, both fists raised ready to land on the ones causing the distracting, annoying stings.

ooo00ooo

Falcon powered straight up in a spiral, arcing his wings in around him as he did so. The sound of pings hitting the metal protecting him forced him to up the power. At just the right spot, Falcon’s wings came out and he looped up and over.

As he sped back down towards the bay doors, he slapped the holsters strapped to his legs. Instantly, the magnetic strap engaged and his guns popped out from their position, assembling themselves in his hands ready for use.

A sharp turn to the left was followed immediately by one back to the right, this time with his guns blazing, forcing the HYDRA agents on the deck of the carrier to duck and roll away. Those that
were left were instantly sent flying as Hulk lumbered through them, sweeping his mighty green fists backwards and forwards.

A S.H.I.E.L.D. quinjet powering up and lifting off had Falcon swearing. Dropping his legs, he flared out his wings, all but stopping his forward momentum. Using just the singular thruster, he took off at right angles, using a burst of speed to put him out and over the very end of the deck.

The sound of bullets firing behind him had Falcon retracting his wings, allowing gravity to pull him straight down and out of danger.

A sharp twist of his body and he was once more facing the helicarrier, only this time, approaching the ground where it sat. Wings snapped back into place, thrusters fired and Falcon was back on target, swooping so low that he was forced to dodge and weave along the ground, his guns helping to clear the path of any human in the way.

“Well, that’s just stupid!” Falcon muttered, looking back and seeing the missile being fired at him.

Falcon accelerated, waiting until the very last moment before veering sharply out and around the large glass-panelled dome in front of him. The immense boom behind him told him that the missile had hit the carrier and incidentally gave Falcon a new way inside.

Alexander Pierce took a satisfied sip of the champagne on offer, his eyes on the members of the World Security Council standing in front of him. Every one of them was staring at him in shock and horror. It always felt so good when a plan came together, especially when it was completely unexpected by the enemy.

The three S.T.R.I.K.E. personnel had the four covered and really, when it came down to it, they were nothing but paper pushers, no real threat at all.

“Let me ask you a question,” Pierce said. “What if you knew that Pakistan was going to march into Mumbai tomorrow and drag all of your women and children into a soccer stadium and execute them. Would you wait until then or would you flick the switch now?”

Councilman Singh automatically took the champagne flute when Pierce handed it to him before looking at it in distaste and throwing it away.

“Not if it was your switch!” he replied.

Placing his own flute onto the table, Pierce held out a hand to receive the gun that S.T.R.I.K.E. Agent Rollins handed him. Instantly, the gun was up and pointing at the Councilman’s forehead.

A boom from behind had Pierce flinching, ducking and spinning around. Out of nowhere, a glint of metal spun through the air, striking his arm and sending a jolt of painful electricity through his body. His hand spasmed open, dropping the gun and he bent over, breathing hard.

A number of high-pitched noises, like mosquitos, zipped through the air before three thumps sounded exactly where the S.T.R.I.K.E. agents had been standing.

Straightening, Pierce glared at the door to see Iron Man, one hand raised towards him and his shoulder compartment where he kept his mini-missiles sliding closed, and the Black Widow standing there.

“I’m sorry, did we step on your moment?” Widow asked politely.
Brock Rumlow currently had one last mission to complete before he could get his ass up to the World Security Council and rescue Pierce – get those carriers in the air. Once they were there, it was checkmate, no matter what the Avengers thought.

The Bay doors were already open, it was now simply a matter of ‘convincing’ the commanders to get their ships airborne, a little sooner than planned.

Taking a short cut, Rumlow hopped through one of the windows overlooking the Bay, shimmied along a beam and leapt for one arm of one of the dozens of cranes dotted about the area. He grabbed hold exactly where he was aiming and began moving, hand over hand, working his way further out along its arm.

As soon as he was close enough, Rumlow leapt again, this time for one of the thick wire cables dangling from it. A quick slide down and he was now all but over the deck of the first carrier. Swinging his legs backwards and forwards to gain momentum, Rumlow waited until he was at the peak of the arc before letting go, sailing out and dropping onto the carrier’s deck in a crouch.

He’d barely straightened when the most pain he’d ever felt in his life exploded in his entire left side of his body. Rumlow’s mind barely registered something ‘green’ as he sailed through the air, his arms and legs flopping about every which way.

Rumlow landed in a heap and rolled over and over, forcing himself to fight to remain conscious. Lifting his head slightly, he recognised that he was now laying on the very edge of one of the carrier’s arc engines.

An intense, blinding white light sped towards him and he closed his eyes bare moments before a lightning bolt from Thor’s hammer slammed into the centre of the engine, blowing it to pieces and coincidentally sending Rumlow’s now unconscious, broken, blackened body flying once more.

The spinning vibranium shield ricocheted off one wall, hit a soldier in the head, bounced off a further two walls, clipped a gun just before it fired and bounced off of a third soldier.

During the time since it had been thrown, Captain America had leapt towards a group of four soldiers. Locking his elbow while raising his clenched fist vertically, blocked the strike aimed at him. A punch with his left laid out the first soldier. Dropping, Cap spun his leg out, whipping the legs out from under the second. An uppercut took care of the third. The last needed two kicks – one to the side of a knee, the second to a chest.

A hand whipped out, catching his shield as it rebounded towards him, automatically slipping it back onto his arm.

Cap looked about. Only one man remained conscious. A simple jerk of his arm, slamming his shield into the side of the soldier’s head, remedied that problem.

Stepping carefully, Cap moved down the corridor, working in a quick circle as he did so to ensure that there were no soldiers coming up behind him.

As soon as the floor was clear of bodies, he took off in a jog: he knew that he was behind schedule, getting delayed time after time by a multitude of resisting HYDRA agents wasn’t helping in the slightest.
Mage gave one last read through the instructions on the paper before nodding and slipping it away into his pocket.

Then, after flipping back the hood of his invisibility cloak as well as opening the flaps of it, he went to work. Lowering the plastic shield that surrounded the targeting blades was easy enough. Finding the right one to replace was simply a matter of counting down and then across, not unlike finding the entrance to Diagon Alley.

Mage shook his head to remove the non-sequitur as he pulled out the new blade and firmly clicked it home after taking out the old one.

“Target Alpha is a lock,” he stated, using the phrasing that he’d been instructed in.


“Acknowledged,” Mage replied.

With a twist, he vanished from the helicarrier.

Thor stumbled slightly as the whine of the helicarrier’s engines redoubled as it slowly, jerkily lifted into the air. He’d been sure that he’d done enough to keep it on the ground. Two engines were completely out of commission, smoke wisping upwards from one of them.

As the clear, bright blue drew closer, Thor spun his hammer about his hand and began marching towards the closest of the remaining working two engines.

Movement from the corner of his eye told him that some fools were getting ready to challenge him once again. Without even looking, Thor flung out Mjolnir, hearing the satisfied cries and grunts of pain that told him that they weren’t going to be a problem any more.

A single outstretched hand recalled Mjolnir just as the deck of the helicarrier reached the open air.

Lifting Mjolir high into the sky, Thor summoned a bolt of lightning.

But just before he redirected it, the sound of the engine in front of him grew in volume and pitch. A great, high-pitched screech emanated from it before, with a mighty boom it exploded.

Thor threw one hand up in front of his face and twisted his back to protect himself from flying shrapnel. Once again, he stumbled as the deck tilted wildly.

Quickly, Thor spun his hammer and took off, sailing high enough to watch the carrier crashing back towards the bay, landing mostly inside it. Its tail end, though, crashed heavily into the Potomac River, sending plumes of water high and a wave crashing up and over the wall and down into the Bay itself.

From his position, Thor could see Hulk standing, arms crossed a smug grin on his great green face. His helicarrier hadn’t moved an inch – not one of its engines being lit in the slightest.

The flawless lift-off of the third helicarrier ruined the complete success of their part of the mission.
“How’re we doing, Buddy?” Tony asked.

“I have accessed as much data as possible at this point, Sir,” Jarvis replied. “The Level Ten encrypted files are at present still secure within S.H.I.E.L.D.’s main servers behind multiple firewalls.”

“And while we could crack them – especially now that we don’t care if people realise that we’re doing so, it’ll take far too long,” Tony added. “Best wait for the back-up to arrive. In the meantime, search the mainframe for anything out of the ordinary. HYDRA’s files have to be in there somewhere.”

“I am already in the process of doing so,” Jarvis stated. “However, it is more likely that HYDRA has a separate, enclosed server that is inaccessible to S.H.I.E.L.D. to prevent unexpected exposure by the ‘wrong’ people’.”

“I know. But just in case …” Tony said.

While he was having the conversation with his AI within his suit where none could hear them, Tony’s fingers flew over the keyboard that he’d appropriated. If he’d had more time, he could have programmed something to do this for him, however the window to when the helicarriers would launch and consequently their infiltration of S.H.I.E.L.D. was small, thus, he was forced to do this here and now.

This part of the plan involved telling the world exactly how involved HYDRA had been in shaping not only world events, but also the very agency – and coincidentally, the most powerful one in the world – that was designed to protect the world from groups such as HYDRA. There was no telling exactly how much damage HYDRA had done, no telling exactly how deep the infiltration went, no telling exactly how many people had gone to ‘the dark side’.

As the Capsicle had said, it all had to go. If S.H.I.E.L.D. and its decisions – both present and past – couldn’t be trusted, then the agency had to be dissolved to start again. And when it went, all of its secrets would be exposed.

With this part of the plan, they could, at least, control how that information was released. Or withheld as the case may be.

The program that Tony was currently writing would not only heavily encrypt most of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s classified information before it was released to the public, but it would also completely erase a lot of the Level Ten information, information that it was simply too dangerous to have out there. Information like the full dossiers on the entire Avengers and Avengers Academy members that S.H.I.E.L.D. had amassed. And the very existence – and everything pertaining to it or even remotely hinting at it – of the magical world.

It was Jarvis’ job to make sure that a complete copy of everything that they were encrypting and erasing was copied to the Avengers secure mainframe. In their line of work, that information could come in very handy one day.

ooo00ooo

“Target Bravo is a lock,” Falcon stated as he ran the length of the small catwalk.

Just as he reached the end, his wings snapped out into place and he soared down through the upturned dome, tucking his wings and arms back in to shoot through the small opening that the missile had blown in the carrier.
“Confirmed, Falcon,” Hill stated.

Falcon heard some gunfire over the open comm line and frowned.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Yeah. Just some idiots making a nuisance of themselves,” Hill replied.

By this time, Falcon had reached the end of the underside of the helicarrier and curved straight up, his wings angled back to reduce air resistance. As he reached the deck, he spun about, bringing his guns up; ready just in case.

“Somehow, I don’t think we needed to bother with this part of the plan,” he deadpanned.

“Clarify that statement, Falcon,” Hill insisted.

“Hulk’s done some serious damage to this carrier. There’s no way that it’s going anywhere,” Falcon replied. “And the one that Thor’s been ‘playing’ with is all but in two – half hanging over the edge of the Launch Bay while the rest looks to be in the river.”

The roar of engines firing spun Falcon around and he stared, watching the third helicarrier blast off, easily clearing the Bay doors as it ascended.

“I take that back,” Falcon said quickly. “We have lift off of one carrier.”

ooo00ooo

“The Avengers quinjet touching down on the landing pad just outside the World Security Council Room had all but Iron Man and Black Widow staring at.

Widow could barely suppress her smirk at hearing the quiet gasp that emanated from at least one
person there as the black clad, trenchcoated figure of Nick Fury emerged from the quinjet’s ramp. The Director’s face was stone cold as he strode into the room; it was easy to tell that he meant business, even with one arm in a sling.

“Did you get my flowers?” Pierce sarcastically asked.

When Fury refused to answer, Pierce continued.

“I’m glad you’re here, Nick,” he said.

“Really?” Fury asked disbelievingly. “Because I thought that you had me killed.”

“You know how the game works,” Pierce replied as though that explained everything and in some respect, it did.

“So, why make me head of S.H.I.E.L.D.?” Nick asked the Head of HYDRA.

“Because you’re the best and the most ruthless person I’ve ever met,” Pierce replied smugly.

“I did what I did to protect the people,” Fury replied.

“Our enemies are your enemies, Nick,” Pierce stated. “Disorder. War. It’s just a matter of time before a dirty bomb goes off in Moscow or an EMP fries Chicago …”

“Yeah and the Avengers will be there to stop it and to deal with it,” Iron Man interrupted.

“But you and band of misfits aren’t needed,” Pierce countered. “Not with our solution. There’s seven billion people on this planet and we can bring order with the deaths of just twenty million.”

“That’s not order; that’s fear,” Widow commented. “I’m former KGB; believe me, I can tell the difference.”

“Retinal scanners are ready,” Iron Man stated.

Pierce gave a disappointed, condescending look at the three.

“I know you erased my password,” Fury said, grabbing Pierce by the arm and marching him across to the scanner. “You probably even deleted my retinal scan. But if you want to stay one step ahead of me, Mister Secretary, you’ve got to keep both eyes open.”

To emphasise his point, Fury lifted his eyepatch, revealing his scarred, dull, sightless eye.

With Widow’s gun pointed at his head, Pierce then moved into position, allowing the scanners to do their work on both him and Fury.

“Alpha Level confirmed. Encryption code accepted. Safeguards removed,” the computer announced.

As soon as they had access, Widow and Iron Man went to work, accessing all the data, copying everything, deleting the most dangerous parts, re-encrypting it all and then, finally, releasing all of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s and hopefully HYDRA’s secrets to the world.

While the two worked, Pierce moved backwards until he was within striking distance of Councilman Yu who was holding a gun on him with a hand that had gone slack after the arrival of Fury. A short, sharp slap to that hand had the gun dropping. Pierce reached for it, grabbed it and spun about to take down Fury and the two Avengers.
He’d barely turned, however, when he was blasted backwards by a pair of bullets courtesy of Fury and Widow and a full-powered repulsar blast from Iron Man. Peirce flew through the glass wall behind him, landing on his back with unseeing eyes, red stains growing on his chest.

ooo00ooo

Mage leant low over his Lightning Bolt as he shot upwards towards the ascending helicarrier. He was gaining on it quickly and was sure that he’d be able to overtake it before it reached the correct altitude.

The question, though, was what was the best and safest way to bring that thing down? If it was still on the ground, he knew the exact spell that he’d use. Nothing would be able to repair the engine after he’d fired it. But using it from this height, where it’d fall from, all but certainly killing all on board, was giving him pause.

A staccato of sharp stings on his shoulder and back had him shying away before he pushed his broom through a series of wild, evasive manoeuvres. He’d just been shot at! Not that the bullets did anything, the dragon-hide was much too tough for that. But getting shot at confirmed that that helicarrier was crewed by HYDRA agents, agents that had just made up his mind for him.

Mage looped up and over, angling for the closest engine, idly noting that Thor was closing in on the engine on the opposite side from him.

This was a spell that he’d never actually used before and Mage knew that he was going to need to pour a hell of a lot of power into it.

“Ammis lava!” he incanted, weaving his wand in the correct pattern.

His wand bucked as a stream of red-hot lava poured from it, spraying straight onto the engine below. As the lava came into contact with the metal, it instantly began bubbling away and melting. Within seconds, enough damage had been done to extinguish the reactors lights and power.

Mage cut off the spell, staring as the lava continued its work, burning through the metal and continuing its unrelenting path to drop in huge, red-black chunks into the river below like some demonic type of rain.

“Charlie lock,” Cap called over the radio.

Mage nodded grimly as the helicarrier tilted dangerously from the loss of an engine.

A blast of blinding white had him wincing slightly before, with squinted eyes, he managed to note that Thor was now pouring a concentrated blast of lightning into a second engine.

“Cap, find yourself a window and get off that carrier!” Falcon called. “You do not want to be on it right now.”

“Already in position,” Cap replied. “Port bow. I’m going to need a lift, though.”

“Coming up on your position now,” Falcon stated. “I hope you didn’t have a big breakfast.”

Mage drifted back and away as the helicarrier’s second engine went dark. Having two non-functional forward engines meant that carrier began tipping into a nose dive. Mage watched anxiously, only breathing a sigh of relief when he saw Falcon carrying Cap away to safety.

The carrier, meanwhile, continued its slow arc, diving towards the Potomac River. Nothing could
stop the inevitable now. Mage just had to hope that the deaths that they’d just caused were worth it.

ooo00ooo

“Mission success,” Maria Hill stated as she joined Fury, Widow and Iron Man in the Council room.

“Well done,” Fury replied with a nod.

“What are your orders, Sir?” Hill asked.

“What are you asking me for?” Fury asked in return. “I’m dead, remember?”

“Sir?” a confused Hill replied.

“You know that what you’ve just done means the end of S.H.I.E.L.D., don’t you?” Councilwoman Hawley asked.

“Yeah, we figured that,” Fury replied. “Which is why it doesn’t matter if I stay dead.”

He fixed the four Council members with his one good eye, his expression intense.

“Do you have a problem with that?” he asked.

“No. No, we’re fine with that decision,” Councilman Yu replied. “We’d like to thank you for your service to both S.H.I.E.L.D. and the world.”

“You are very welcome,” Fury replied.

“So, what are you going to do now?” Stark asked. “Retire somewhere on some beach with scantily clad women serving you cocktails at all hours of the day?”

Fury looked at the man, nonplussed.

“I’m not you, Stark,” he replied. “And I thought you knew me better than that. Don’t worry, if you ever need me, I’ll be around. I have a feeling that someone’s going to need to keep an eye on you people. And if there’s one thing that I’m good at, it’s keeping my eye open for trouble.”
Buried deep within the frequencies that S.H.I.E.L.D. used to communicate with its personnel was a band that was rarely ever used. This method of communication had a singular purpose: to send priority messages to HYDRA operatives hidden within S.H.I.E.L.D. Every member of HYDRA knew to watch and listen to it so that they were ready to serve, to carry out the orders that would further HYDRA’s agenda.

Now, today, for the first time since that frequency had been established, a particular, singular, brief message was broadcast. Those who sent it knew that there was a chance that it could be intercepted, that it could be decrypted. But really, what could they do? All who would hear it would know their orders.

**OUT OF THE SHADOWS, INTO THE LIGHT HYDRA**

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“Who the hell’s shooting at us? And why?” Hartley cursed as she ducked behind an upturned table.

From across the room where she was sheltered by a convenient bulkhead, Bobbi Morse fired off a couple of shots before replying.


Firing off three shots in quick succession, Bobbi raced out of cover, pulling one of her batons as she did so. The Agent – and, judging by his uniform, he was an Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D. – saw her coming as he checked back in through the doorway to return fire. His eyes widened slightly as he saw her coming and he attempted to raise his gun.

Bobbi’s baton took care of that problem, coming down hard on the Agent’s arm, eliciting a heavy grunt from him as his gun dropped to the floor with a clatter. Bobbi’s other hand whipped out, her gun slamming into the side of his head, staggering him further.

A grasp of his shirt and a sharp yank pulled him inside. Seeing Hartley rise, her knife ready in her hand, Bobbi kicked the door shut and bolted it.

A strangled cry tore through the room as the Agent clutched at his shoulder before dropping to knees.

“You didn’t kill him, did you?” Bobbi asked.

“Nah, just a flesh wound,” Hartley replied, walking out to stand behind the Agent.

The man looked up, his head swivelling between the women, pain evident in his eyes.

“What’s going on?” Bobbi demanded. “Why were you trying to kill us?”

“And who else is involved?” Hartley added.

It was obviously true that this wasn’t an isolated incident – the sound of gunfire, yells, explosions and screams reverberating all throughout the *Iliad* was testament to that.

When the Agent simply straightened and stared back at them defiantly, Hartley stepped forward.
“Look, we don’t have time for your games,” she snarled. “Answer the questions!”

When the Agent still didn’t reply, Hartley shared a glance with Bobbi before grasping the handle of her knife in his shoulder, twisting it violently and tearing it out of him.

That was enough to get him to talk.

“Hail HYDRA!” he panted before his jaw worked as he deliberately clamped down on something in his mouth.

A white foam bubbled up from his mouth and the Agent’s eyes rolled in his head. With a heavy thump, he fell on to his side and spasmed once before going completely still.

Bobbi and Hartley looked from the Agent to each other.

“Damn!” Hartley said for the two of them.

Victoria Hand, the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agent in Charge of The Hub, checked the cartridge of her gun before sliding it home. To her left and right were the only two Agents that she still trusted. At least, the only two still alive – all of the others having been killed mere minutes before by people that she thought that she could trust.

“Give it up, Hand!” Agent Baker called gruffly from the far side of the room. “You’ve got no where to run. Fury’s dead. All of the other Level Eights have already joined HYDRA or are dead. You’re the last one. S.H.I.E.L.D.’s finished and you know it.”

While he was still speaking, Hand nodded to both Agents Gordan and Lovett. At her signal, the three rose, their guns up and ready.

Hand targeted each of the HYDRA agents as quickly as she could, one after the other. Her shots were precise and efficient, causing body after body to hit the floor.

By the time that the last echoes of gunfire had finished ringing in the room, there were only three left standing alive: Hand, Gordan and Lovett.

“Secure the room,” Hand ordered and the two sprang for the doors, sealing them tight, giving the three of them complete, uncontested access to the Operations Centre of the Hub.

“Status,” Hand barked.

“There appears to be fighting on every level and in every section of the Hub,” Lovett reported as he scanned through the dozens of security cameras that permeated the Base. “There are people fighting back.”

“But no way to tell who’s on the side of S.H.I.E.L.D. and who belongs to HYDRA,” Hand finished grimly. “What about what Baker was saying about the other Level Eights.”

“There’s no way to confirm,” Gordon replied. “We’ve lost contact with all other S.H.I.E.L.D. bases. He could be right, you could be the last remaining Level Eight S.H.I.E.L.D. Agent.”

Hand grimaced at that before a thought occurred.

“What about Garrett and Coulson? They’re both Level Eight,” she stated.
“Agent Garrett is currently aboard a long-range S.H.I.E.L.D. jet,” Gordon replied. “Agent Coulson is onboard S.H.I.E.L.D. Six One Six.”

“Do we still have control over the Bus?” Hand asked.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Lovett grinned.

“Then turn that bird around. We’ll deal with Coulson when he gets here,” Hand stated. “As for Garrett, send a pair of drones to shoot that bastard out of the sky.”

ooo00ooo

Samuel Sterns eyed the unlikely scenario with acute interest.

Exactly what the odds were that there’d be a revolt at the exact time that he was out of his cell causing his two ‘minders’ to be killed in front of him was certainly not high. For the man responsible to simply look at him balefully before shrugging and jogging away afterwards raised those odds exceedingly.

What was even more interesting was the fact that the man that had essentially freed Sterns was himself killed mere moments later. Just as the Agent had been rounding the nearest corner, three shots rang out. The Agent’s body jolted with the impact of each one before being flung backwards to land in a tangle of limbs.

Sterns knew that he had limited time to make use of his new-found freedom. Fortunately, due to the combination of a cut that he’d once sustained to his forehead being contaminated by the blood of Bruce Banner aka ‘The Hulk’, followed by an extremely high concentration of gamma radiation infusing his body, Sterns no longer thought the same way as a ‘normal’ person.

No, instead, Sterns’ thought processes were approximately one thousand times faster. He was able to make connections between thoughts and ideas where none would think to look. His ability to learn and remember everything was off the chart. In point of fact, he was now the smartest individual on the entire planet. None could rival him. Not Banner or Stark or Hawking or Xavier or even the new kid that he’d read about, Richards. Even Einstein – if he’d still been alive – wouldn’t have been able to match what Sterns was now capable of.

With all of that ‘computing’ power in his head, a plan had formed before the second bullet had even struck the Agent.

As Sterns raced for the nearby door, he plucked up the three most useful items from the downed Agents: a gun, a taser and a passkey.

Using the passkey, Sterns unlocked the nearest door, ducked through it and locked it firmly behind himself. As luck would have it, he’d stumbled straight into a room with a computer. With a smile, Sterns let his fingers go to work. It was only marginally frustrating that the computer was slower than Sterns himself was.

Nevertheless, within ten minutes, Sterns now knew that he was at a base called ‘The Fridge’; he knew the most efficient way out of the place; and most surprisingly of all, he’d found a file that offered him endless opportunities. Especially once he’d gathered the others that were connected to his own name within the file.

‘Project Sinister’, it was called.

Well, he could think of any number of ‘sinister’ ideas for that particular group of individuals to do.
The Hunter grinned at his prey. Their fear was so evident, it was all but palpable in the very air. The way the twenty or so huddled away against the wall, as though they could hide from him in their numbers or perhaps melt into the wall itself, was laughable. They were well and truly cornered, captured for him to do with as he liked.

“Kravinoff! Stop playing with them and get on with it!”

The Hunter shot the man in black trying to issue him orders a fierce look. This man, this Agent may think that he was in charge but Kravinoff knew better. He was nothing more than a jumped-up wannabe with his black fatigues, guns, knives and all that tech. In a real fight between man and prey, there was no doubt that he’d come up wanting.

In contrast, there was one of his prey that had proved herself a worthy adversary. The black-skinned woman, Weaver, he thought her name was, she who was in charge of the S.H.I.E.L.D. Academy that they’d infiltrated.

Weaver had planted herself in his path, directly between him and the young that learnt here. The look of absolute defiance and determination on her face had won her his respect. And then. And then, she’d attacked. And not as a mad-woman in desperation, but more akin to a she-bear defending her young.

There had been no chance that Weaver would win, but still, she’d managed to land more than one blow, something that many before her had been unable to achieve. Even after he’d finally subdued her, she still stared back at him through her one good eye and the other that was barely more than a slit, daring him to do his worst but to do it to her first and to leave her young alone.

He’d been ordered to kill her. And he would. In time. But when that time came, it would be a quick, merciful death. She’d earnt herself such an honourable death.

The whine of engines interrupted The Hunter’s slow advance and he looked up and around.

Coming in behind them were a squadron of half a dozen quinjets, their bright searchlights scouring the campus grounds.

“S.H.I.E.L.D.! They’ve found us! Time to bug out!” Lawnton, he-who-thought-he-was-in-charge, bellowed.

As one, the others, the HYDRA Agents, turned tail and ran.

Kravinoff, though, paused just long enough to catch Weaver’s eye and give her a solemn, respectful nod. Today, she’d live. And so would her students because of her actions. Kravinoff could only hope that one day he’d meet her once again on the field of battle. He looked forward to such a confrontation.

The knock at his door caused a frown to appear on Baron von Strucker’s face. He did not like being interrupted when he had paperwork to do. His underlings knew this. Looking up, his frown deepened. The anxious expression on Lars’ face told him that something had happened.

“What is it?” he snapped.

“We have received a transmission,” Lars replied. “‘Out of the shadows, into the light’.”
Baron von Strucker merely nodded. A quick glance at the calendar on the wall confirmed his thoughts.

“That was to be expected,” he said. “Project Insight was due to be implemented today. I assume that the launch went successfully. Has there been confirmation that the Avengers have been eliminated.”

“No, Baron,” Lars replied before quickly continuing. “That is, the helicarriers never reached altitude. The Avengers grounded them. Worse, they released all of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s files to the world and exposed HYDRA as still being active and a threat to the entire world.”

“They released all of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s files?” von Strucker asked, leaning back in his chair in his surprise. “That is most unexpected and incredibly foolish.”

“They were encrypted,” Lars replied.

“Ah, that makes much more sense,” von Strucker nodded.

“Sir. If I may, what does this mean for us?” Lars asked tentatively.

“Why, nothing,” von Strucker replied. “Our Base here in Sokovia was never a part of S.H.I.E.L.D., even if we did use our HYDRA allies within S.H.I.E.L.D. to help us secure it. No, nothing for us changes. We will continue our research into the sceptre; I am positive that we have only scratched the surface of what the secrets that it may hold can teach us.”

“And the ‘volunteers’?” Lars prompted.

“We continue our experiments,” von Strucker stated. “Especially when it comes to the twins – those two show much promise and potential.”

“Of course, Baron,” Lars replied before giving a brief bow of his head and withdrawing.

Baron von Strucker tapped his chin thoughtfully as he considered the ramifications of the encrypted message going out. All throughout the world, he knew, HYDRA agents would be securing assets and intelligence. When next the HYDRA High Council met, he was sure that there would be much to learn.

For now, however, his paperwork awaited. With a sigh, he bent once more to the task.

ooo00ooo

A familiar head of messy, brown hair caught Sharon’s attention as she entered the main lobby of the Triskelion. The S.H.I.E.L.D. Technician was sitting on the ground, back against the wall, his knees raised and his head lowered between them. To complete the picture, his arms were folded over the top of his head.

Swiftly, Sharon crossed the lobby and hunkered down beside him.

“Cameron?” she asked gently, laying a hand on his shoulder.

Bloodshot eyes looked up warily at her before recognition dawned.

“Agent Carter,” he said.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

He nodded, rubbed his hands over his face and nodded again, this time seeming more sure of
“Good,” Sharon said and straightened as she stood.

Maria Hill appeared in front of the two just then and Cameron scrambled to his feet to stand at a loose type of attention beside her.


“Cameron Klein, Ma’am,” Cameron supplied.

“I need the two of you to come with me,” Hill stated. “You’re next in line for questioning.”

“If this is to determine whether we’re loyal to S.H.I.E.L.D. or to HYDRA, I can assure you that we’re both loyal to the oath we took to S.H.I.E.L.D.,” Sharon stated.

Hill’s nonplussed look didn’t reassure her.

“You know my legacy, Ma’am,” Sharon stated, “you can’t honestly believe that I would betray the S.H.I.E.L.D. that my great-aunt founded.”

Hill’s eyes briefly shifted to Cameron before snapping back.

“I witnessed Technician Klein standing up to the HYDRA Agents when they insisted that the helicarriers be launched early,” Sharon stated. “Even with a gun pointed at his head, he was adamant that he would follow Captain Roger’s orders rather than HYDRA’s.”

“Is this true?” Hill asked.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Cameron replied, straightening at her words. “And Agent Carter saved my life. She tried to stop the HYDRA Agents, too.”

Hill stared between the two of them for nearly a minute before finally, she nodded.

“Very well,” she said. “I believe you. Of course, I’m assuming that I don’t need to say that Klein here is now your responsibility?”

“No, Ma’am,” Sharon replied. “Won’t be a problem.”

Their conversation was interrupted just then as a trauma team came out of the nearby lift with a heavily bandaged man on a gurney. What little of the man that could be seen was blackened as though he’d been severely burned. A hint of green and yellow on what was left of the shoulder of his uniform identified him as a member of S.T.R.I.K.E.

“Wait!” Hill called as the team began to jog towards the exit and the waiting fleet of ambulances. “That man isn’t going anywhere.”

“If you need to question him, you can do it at the hospital,” the paramedic replied, barely pausing as they passed. “Assuming he ever wakes up. This man has suffered extreme trauma to most of his body. He’ll be in surgery for hours just correcting the major damage to his organs.”

“That’s Brock Rumlow!” Sharon blurted, finally getting a glimpse of the man’s blackened, bloody face. “He attacked Captain Rogers; he’s definitely HYDRA.”

“Agent Carter, you’ve just been reassigned,” Hill snapped. “Your new assignment is to guard Rumlow until he gains consciousness so that he can be questioned for trial.”
“Yes, Ma’am,” Sharon replied quickly.

With a parting nod to Cameron, she hurried after the paramedics, already preparing herself for the fight she expected just to get herself onboard the ambulance alongside Rumlow.

ooo00ooo

Ten men gathering in a broom closet would have been akin to a game of sardines in any other situation. Luckily, though, this particular room was much bigger on the inside than the plans would suggest. All ten were S.H.I.E.L.D. Agents, originally assigned to separate places and positions but it had been child’s play for them to manipulate matters to ensure that they were all assigned here to Kratos Base in far northern Greece.

Many of their colleagues ‘knew’ that these particular ten were more loyal to something else than to S.H.I.E.L.D. Exactly what that was, though, wasn’t what they thought it was. No, it wasn’t HYDRA that these men owed their allegiance to, as much as they pretended otherwise. Nor was it to the International Confederation of Wizardry who had originally placed these ten undercover within S.H.I.E.L.D. to ‘keep on eye on the most advanced spy agency in the world’.

The ideal that these ten served began before even the muggle World War Two. Their first leader had found a common purpose with firstly Adolf Hitler and then with Johann Schmidt and the organisation that he had founded. The very idea that one race was superior to all others was indeed what they had in common. What the HYDRA founder and leader didn’t realise was that Gellert Grindelwald’s vision of the Greater Good included all muggles, HYDRA included, as being ultimately under Grindelwald’s – and by extension the wizarding world’s – rule.

Albus Dumbledore may have defeated Grindelwald and imprisoned him within the walls of Nurmengard Prison but his ideas, his movement persisted. Grindelwald’s Knights continued, albeit in a slower, more subversive way. And when the opportunity appeared for some of those Knights to infiltrate S.H.I.E.L.D. and to reconnect with their HYDRA compatriots of old, they leapt at the chance foolishly offered to them by the ICW.

“You saw the order?” Daimon Mavrodi asked the others.

He eyed each one as they nodded solemnly at him.

“Then it is time,” Daimon stated. “We use this to take over Kratos Base. Once we are in charge, we call the rest of the Knights to us and begin Grindelwald’s Great Plan in earnest.”

“What of the HYRA agents here?” Nathan asked.

“We ally ourselves with them,” Daimon stated. “We continue our role as HYDRA Agents but we reveal ourselves as wizards. For now, they still have a use, there simply aren’t enough Knights to control the whole world, but we can show these ones exactly how powerful we are; it’ll make it all the easier for when we take over their leadership.”

Wands appeared in hands as silver pendants that each usually wore under their robes were pulled out to lay over the top of their shirts. These pendants showed their allegiance to Grindelwald – a triangle with a circle inside it and a line bisecting them both from top to bottom.

“Let’s go have some fun,” Daimon stated with a grin as he tapped his wand to the door, causing it to swing open before them.

ooo00ooo
Gunfire blasted up and down the hallways of the Cube. Men and women ran in every direction, some towards the gunfire, others away from it. Bodies littered the floor, along with pools of blood. More blood was splattered over walls and in rare places, even the ceiling. Bullet holes riddled walls. Doors had been blown off or now hung from a single hinge. Jagged holes had been blasted in various walls and smoke wafted about.

As time passed, more and more areas within the Cube were falling silent as one side or the other gained control. The silence never lasted long, though, as the survivors quickly found others to combat and to make the gunfire, yells, screams and death begin all over again.

The battle here between HYDRA and S.H.I.E.L.D. had been long and hard fought but slowly, the revolt was coming to a close. And not just a close, but to a failure as far as HYDRA was concerned; S.H.I.E.L.D had all but won, now taking more and more prisoners and less and less casualties.

“I don’t know how much longer we can hold them off,” one HYDRA agent panted.

His compatriot glanced across at him before quickly ducking out, firing off a brace of shots and retreating.

“Then let’s make them work for it,” he growled. “We’re close to the prison level. Let’s release all of the inmates.”

“Good plan,” the first HYDRA agent grinned back. “And if those idiots are shooting at the prisoners, then we’ll have a chance to escape as well.”

“Exactly,” his partner nodded.

Then, after both had fired off a few more shots to keep the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agents at bay just a little longer, the two raced down the corridor and around the corner.

Neither had a key for the Detention Area; one did have a grenade though and that proved just as good.

Once the smoke and dust had cleared, the two HYDRA agents found themselves facing a half dozen prisoners, all staring at the two in shock and confusion. Those emotions, though, quickly gave way to menacing grins as they realised that they were free.

“Go on! Get out of here!” one HYDRA agent yelled, waving wildly at the six to emphasise his point.

“Just watch out for the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents; they’re just down and around that way,” the other added, pointing to the left.

The first prisoner to reach them paused just before he passed.

“You ever need anything, you come find Herman Shultz,” he said, slapping himself on the chest. “I owes ya and I always pay my debts.”

The two HYDRA agents looked at each other before looking back at Shultz.

“If you want to repay us, how about you help us get out of here alive?” one asked.

“You got yourself a deal,” Shultz grinned. “You wouldn’t happen to have a spare gun would you?”

As soon as one was produced and the handle turned towards him, Shultz took it, gave it a quick once
over including checking the magazine and nodded to the two.

“Stay behind me and we’ll be out of here before you know it,” Shultz stated.

ooo00ooo

“Sir, The Sickle is ours.”

Luduviko Kruger looked up from the files on his desk and nodded to his second in command.

“Did the S.H.I.E.L.D. personnel put up much of a resistance?” he asked.

“Nein, Herr Kruger,” Muller replied. “We had them surrounded and disarmed before they could even pull their weapons.”

“Well done,” Kruger praised. “How many did we capture?”

“Fourteen,” Muller replied. “Shall we have them executed?”

Kruger paused for a moment as he considered.

“No,” he said slowly. “Put them in the cells. Our experiments always need new ‘volunteers’.”

“But the Connors Serum requires volunteers with missing limbs,” a confused Muller replied. “And none of the S.H.I.E.L.D. personnel are missing limbs.”

“Not at the moment, no,” Kruger replied.

The light of understanding blossomed then and Muller nodded.

“While you’re at, bring our ‘volunteers’ across from the secondary facility so that they’re closer to hand. Without the S.H.I.E.L.D. busybodies here looking at things they shouldn’t, there’s no reason not to have them more accessible for our scientists,” Kruger said.

“I will see to it personally,” Muller replied and turned for the door.

Kruger, though, stopped him before he could leave.

“Muller. The American girl missing both of her legs. Bring her straight to the laboratory. Her file indicates that she’d be a prime candidate for the next round of experiments,” Kruger ordered, tapping the file on his desk that he’d been perusing. “It will be interesting to see how her physiology reacts to the Connors Serum, once it’s been adapted for her use, of course.”

“Yes, Herr Kruger, at once,” Muller replied.
The best word to describe the group gathered in the small lounge area just off of the Avengers Tower landing pad was sombre.

As the news had begun filtering in, gathering in intensity by the hour, of what had happened at S.H.I.E.L.D. Headquarters, they had begun appearing at this spot. And while the main lounge several floors above would have been the better choice, especially considering its size, this was where they each decided to be. It was here that they would be on hand for when their friends, their de facto family, would return home to.

Clint had been the first to appear, falling into the lounge that faced the landing pad, his head resting on the top of it as his eyes alternated between the clear blue sky and the television in the corner with its continuous news broadcast.

He’d seen his team mates attacking the Triskelion. He’s watched as Thor and the Hulk grounded two massive, brand-new helicarriers. He’d heard the recording that someone had made of Steve’s speech to the S.H.I.E.L.D. personnel there decrying the HYDRA agents embedded within the organisation. He’d even watched, spellbound, as Thor, Harry and some guy with mechanical wings took on the third helicarrier as it was lifting off. He’d shot forward in his seat, eyes wide, as Harry poured molten lava onto one of its engines.

Tony and Nat, Clint knew, had been there as well, but they weren’t seen in any of the footage. Their names were mentioned, of course, especially in conjunction with all of the classified data that was being dumped onto the web, so he knew that they were still alive.

Sometime during the broadcast, Jane, Darcy and Erik had arrived. Clint only really noticed them after the two women rushed across the room to hug a dazed-looking Pepper when she stepped out of the elevator.

Jarvis, of course, kept them updated on the team’s status, and more importantly, the fact that all were alive and apparently even uninjured. The fact that all of them were wanted for questioning was also reported, not that it seemed, at least according to Jarvis, that any of them had acquiesced to the request.

Sometime after that, Clint shifted from his seat, quickly scaling a convenient strut to perch on a small platform high above the room, as though it’d been designed especially with him in mind.

And really, it was a good thing that he had, the small lounge was quickly being overrun by the rest of the team. Matt and Jennifer arrived together, only a few minutes before Peter, Gwen and Doreen appeared.

Clint knew that, while there was some concern for their team-mates and friends, the big questions that had yet to be voiced revolved around S.H.I.E.L.D.’s fall itself. The Avengers and S.H.I.E.L.D. worked together – Clint, Nat and Steve were, in fact, Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. S.H.I.E.L.D. also had a lot of sensitive data about the team in their data banks and there was worry about what all that data being uploaded to the web meant for them.

At one point, Clint had even given in to the temptation and attempted to ring Bobbi – she was their S.H.I.E.L.D. handler, after all. The fact that he didn’t get an answer was worrisome.

Matt and Peter’s heads snapping towards the landing pad seconds before Jarvis spoke alerted them
all to the fact that the quinjet was almost home.

As the group surged forward, Clint slid down the strut and slipped to one side. By the time that he’d done so, the quinjet’s engines were cycling down and its wings were in the process of folding up and over so that the vehicle could be pulled into its proper place.

“I feel like I should be wearing a laurel wreath,” Tony stated as he stepped from the quinjet’s ramp, his eyes surveying the awaiting crowd.

“What are you talking about?” Pepper asked as she headed towards him to envelope him in a hug.

“A laurel wreath. To wear. You know, like a Roman Emperor coming home from war after a successful battle to find the crowds waiting to greet him and to celebrate his victory,” Tony explained exasperatingly.

“Make it out of thorns or something,” Clint retorted, “perhaps the spikes will pierce that head of yours and deflate it a bit.”

“That’s harsh, Bird-brain,” Tony replied. “And where were you, anyway? We could have used you. Well, obviously not used you since we got the job done anyway, but an extra person for the bad guys to aim at never goes astray.”

“On vacation,” Clint replied succinctly.

“As helpful as ever,” Tony replied nonplussed.

“Is he alright? What’s wrong with him?” Peter asked quickly as Steve appeared, carrying an unfamiliar man in his arms.

“Who is he?” Jane asked, rushing forward.

“This is Bucky, an old friend of mine,” Steve replied continuing his walk.

“Also known as the Winter Soldier,” Nat added, meeting Clint’s eyes.

Clint’s head snapped back to the unconscious guy. He’d heard plenty of stories; one even from Nat herself. He’d thought that they were old wives’ tales. Obviously not.

“I can barely feel a pulse,” Jane remarked sounding alarmed, her hands at ‘Bucky’s’ neck.

“That’s because he’s under the influence of a potion called the Draught of Living Death,” Harry stated as he followed Steve.

“Well, that’s not ominous in the slightest, is it?” Darcy asked sarcastically.

“Don’t worry, There’s a counter,” Harry waved off. “We just needed to make sure that he stayed unconscious until we could get him some help.”

“What’s wrong with him?” Doreen asked.

“Bucky’s been brainwashed. By HYDRA,” Steve replied grimly.

“I’m guessing that’s not all that they did,” Matt said. “He’s got a metal arm, doesn’t he?”

Clint shook his head at that idea. A metal arm. And if the stories were true, it worked as well as a normal one. Or better, considering how strong it was reported to be.
Movement from quinjet’s ramp had Clint switching his attention there. The guy standing there was African-American with a goatee and short, military-style haircut. This was the guy in the wings at the battle on the T.V.

“Clint Barton,” he introduced himself, holding out his hand.

“Sam Wilson,” the guy replied, shaking Clint’s hand.

“Saw what you did on T.V.,” Clint remarked. “That was some fancy flying.”

“You did? Thanks,” Sam replied.

“How’d you get involved, anyway?” Clint asked.

“Steve,” Sam replied, nodding at the man in question. “He and Nat turned up on my doorstep looking like something the cat dragged in. Apparently, they’d just survived being bombed. Anyway, I wasn’t going to say ‘no’ when Captain America asked for my help.”

Steve’s raised voice interrupted their conversation just then. Clint turned to see him standing just before the elevator, the Winter Soldier still cradled in his arms.

“Everyone,” Steve said. “There’ll be more time to debrief later. For now, there’s one piece of news that you all need to know. Obviously, this is an Avengers-level secret, so I’m trusting you all not to divulge it to anyone else until we say otherwise.”

Clint saw a myriad of nods, some, like Doreen’s were quite emphatic, others, like Erik’s were more solemn.

“Nick Fury’s alive,” Steve stated simply, his eyes seeking out Clint’s. “He faked his own death because of HYDRA. For now, he wants to keep it that way and we’ll respect that. I just thought that you should all know.”

Clint nodded to Steve before slumping against the wall. A presence appearing beside him had him looking up into Nat’s face. It only took a moment of searching before he found the truth of it in her eyes.

“Tell me everything,” he said.

ooo00ooo

“Are you sure about this, Tony?” Steve asked sounding completely unsure himself.

“This isn’t my first rodeo,” Tony replied.

At Steve’s dubious look around the apartment, he continued.

“Look, this place, heck, this entire floor has been specially reinforced,” Tony elaborated, moving to the closest wall and popping a panel off to show the bright silver metal hidden beneath. “This stuff is designed to contain the Hulk. And it’s been tested. Thoroughly. I even built a small cabin out in the middle of nowhere for S.H.I.E.L.D. They had Bruce test it as the other guy. It held. And if it can hold him, then it can hold this guy, metal arm and all.”

“Alright,” Steve nodded and walked across the room to lie Bucky on the bed.

“Now what?” Tony asked. “You gonna do your hocus pocus and wake sleeping beauty here up?”
Harry tore his gaze from the man in question to look firstly at Tony and then at Steve.

“Best be prepared for anything,” he warned. “His mind is fractured; there’s no telling how he’s going to react once I wake him.”

“Jarvis, seal the room,” Tony commanded.

Instantly, the door swung closed and they could hear the bolts slamming home. Steve didn’t change his position from the end of Bucky’s bed, his shield staying firmly on his back.

“Alright, here we go,” Harry said.

Taking one particular vial from his belt pocket, he opened Bucky’s mouth and poured it in. A simple, wandless spell had the man swallowing the potion. And then it was a matter of waiting.

It only took a couple of minutes before the Draught of Living Death began wearing off, evident by the slightest twitch from Bucky’s hand and his chest beginning to rise and fall more quickly and normally.

And then Bucky’s eyes snapped open.

Before any of the Avengers could blink, let alone speak, the Winter Soldier leapt from the bed. A fist lashed out, doubling Tony over even as a foot struck out sending Harry tumbling away. And then Bucky leapt. Steve barely had time to get his hands up before Bucky was on him, bearing him to the ground, one hand coming to wrap around his neck as Steve held off his mechanical arm.

“Bu…cky,” Steve rasped.

The man’s eyes narrowed slightly and Steve felt the pressure loosen slight.

“You know me!” he said. “I’m Steve. You’ve known me your whole life.”

“No!” the Soldier shouted back and the pressure around Steve’s neck increased once more.

“Think … Bucky! Think back! We grew up together,” Steve managed to get out. “In Brooklyn. You’re my best friend.”

Something must have triggered for Bucky suddenly froze, staring. Suddenly, he let go, and rolled away to come up sitting on the floor holding his head and he shook it violently back and forth.

Steve, meanwhile, shot out one hand, telling Harry to hold off on whatever spell he was about to shoot at Bucky’s back.

“You know me,” Steve said to Bucky once again.

“No! No, I don’t!” Bucky disagreed but the anguish in his voice was plain for all to hear.

“You do and I think that you know that,” Steve replied gently.

“Where am I?” Bucky asked, his hands coming away from his head as he looked around at the three surrounding him.

“Somewhere safe,” Steve told him. “Somewhere where you can recover, find your memories again.”

Once again, Bucky was shaking his head hard.
“No. They’re gone. I don’t remember anything,” he stated harshly.

“Your memories are still in there,” Harry told him. “I’ve seen them. We can help you get them back if you like, Bucky.”

“No!” Bucky screamed. “They’re gone! There’s nothing of this ‘Bucky’ in me! I’m not him!”

“Steve? Are you sure about this?” Tony asked.

“Yes,” Steve stated emphatically. “This is Bucky. My best friend. Even when I had nothing, I had Bucky. I won’t abandon him; I know he’s in there and if there’s even a chance, then we’ve got to take it.”

“Then it seems I’ve got a call to make,” Harry said and immediately vanished from the room with the barest pop.

ooo00ooo

Today may have been an extremely long one, even by Hermione’s standards, but Hermione practically skipped through the door of her apartment.

Finally, after so many failed attempts, stalls, slides backwards and days on end when it seemed it would never ever happen, the Wizengamot had not only accepted her Bill of Equal Magical Species into the day’s proceedings but had debated it and then, miracle of miracles, passed it.

Oh, there was now a whole host of work before her but the hardest part was done: all intelligent magical species – witch, wizard, goblin, dwarf, house elf, centaur, merman – were now considered equal. At least in terms of the law. There was still getting that accepted in society, having representatives from each species accepted onto the Wizengamot and in Diagon Alley, really the list was enough to fill rolls and rolls of parchment.

This, however, was what Hermione had been working on ever since she’d entered the Ministry after finishing at Hogwarts. Kingsley had supported her the whole way, not that he ever expected it to happen, she knew, no matter how much he tried to hide his true feelings.

Hermione all but bounced into her kitchen to pour herself a celebratory glass of wine. Her hand paused at the glasses and she wished that she could share this with the person who had had such a hand in this coming about.

Harry.

His ‘gutting’ of the Wizengamot’s Pro-Pureblood faction the last time he was in England had allowed her to work on the Light side and the Moderates to get enough supporters to have her Bill introduced and consequently passed. But, of course, he was still in America.

Flopping onto her couch, she plopped her feet up on her coffee table, not something that she would ordinarily do, but right then, she was too happy to care. A flick of a button turned the T.V. on. And then she rocketed forward on her chair, her legs coming down and a splash of her wine slopping over the edge of her glass.

The Avengers were there. On the screen. Attacking a S.H.I.E.L.D. helicarrier! The camera panned to show Mage, obviously on his broom, his wand extended as he poured molten lava onto one of its engines.

The ringing of her phone was nearly lost to her as she stared at the footage. Somehow, though, the
sound must have gotten through for Hermione managed to find her feet and make her way over to it. She fumbled somewhat with the phone, her eyes focussed as they were on the T.V.

“Hello?” she said absently.

“Hi, Hermione!”

The familiar voice had her blinking furiously before she stared between it and the television.

“Harry?” she asked quickly.

“Yes. It’s good to hear your voice. How are you?” he said as though he wasn’t doing anything dangerous in the slightest.

And then it clicked. The footage on the T.V. wasn’t live.

“Harry! Are you alright? What’s going on? Where you really attacking a helicarrier? With lava? Where’d you learn such a dangerous spell?” she blurted.

“Hey, slow down ‘Mione,” Harry laughed. “I’m fine. I’m guessing that you heard what happened, then?”

“I’m looking at it now,” she said, still staring as the helicarrier began to nose dive towards the river below. “What happened? When did it happen?”

“This morning. Our time. Which would have been early this afternoon for you,” Harry replied. “As to what happened, the short version is that S.H.I.E.L.D. had been infiltrated by HYDRA. Um, you do know who HYDRA is, don’t you?”

“Yes, Harry, I know who HYDRA is,” she replied sarcastically. Then, “but I thought they were an evil science group from World War Two.”

“Yeah, well, it seems that they’ve been hiding for the past seventy years. Inside S.H.I.E.L.D. And they were about to launch helicarriers with a mission to kill a couple of million people. So, you see why we had to do something?” Harry said.

Hermione shook her head. Harry’s short version left something to be desired.

“At least you seem to have learnt your lesson and actually called me this time to tell me that you’re alright,” she said. “You are alright, aren’t you?”

“Yep. Not a scratch,” Harry said before his voice turned serious. “Actually, that brings me to the other reason I called.”

“Oh?” Hermione asked, her eyes narrowing.

“Yeah. It’s one of Steve’s friends from back before he was frozen. HYDRA did something to him to make him survive all this time and also really messed with his mind at the same time,” Harry said. “I’ve taken a peek and it’s a real mess in there.”

“You? You used legilimency? When did you learn that?” Hermione asked.

“On my travels,” he replied and she could see his shrug. “But I only know the basics. And what Bucky needs is a proper Mind Healer.”

“O-kay,” Hermione said. “But why ring me? I’m sure that there are Mind Healers in the States.”
“Probably are,” Harry agreed. “But none that I know or trust.”

Hermione’s mind instantly leapt to the only Mind Healer that Harry might be aware of.

“You don’t mean …” she asked.

“Yep,” Harry agreed.

“But …” she began.

“I’m not Ron, Hermione,” Harry stated. “And this is for Steve’s best friend. Besides, she was there at the Battle. She didn’t run despite what the consequences could be. I know that I can trust her.”

“You’re sure?” she asked.

“Yes. Please, Hermione. Just ask her. For me,” he pleaded.

“Alright,” she sighed.

“Brilliant!” he said. Then, “so, how was your day?”

Hermione could instantly see that he was trying to change the topic away from the dangerous escapades that he’d just been involved in and she almost didn’t let him get away with it. If it had been any other day …

“It’s been amazing!” she said. “You’ll never guess what happened.”

“Yeah? Tell me everything,” Harry said.

Settling herself back onto the lounge, Hermione picked up her glass of wine. Harry might not be there to enjoy her success with her, but this was surely the next best thing.

“Do you remember me telling you about my Equal Magical Species Bill?” she began.

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“Were you not able to procure a Healer for Steve’s friend, Seidhr?” Thor asked, sounding concerned.

Harry looked up from his phone, the frown that he was giving it still on his face.

“What?” he asked.

“The Doctor that you were going to arrange for Bucky,” Steve clarified. “I’m guessing that you weren’t able to find one?”

“Oh, no. That’s all taken care of. At least, it should be. Hermione’s going to ask the Mind Healer I know in Britain to come over,” Harry replied.

“Then what’s got you all down, Magic Man?” Darcy asked.

Harry shot her a Look; having Tony calling him any number of names other than his own was bad enough without Darcy adding to it.

“It’s Skye,” he eventually replied. “She’s not answering her phone, which is really not like her.”

“Skye? You mean that girl that’s working with Phil?” Peter asked.
“Yeah,” Harry replied as he noticed Nat and Clint sharing a grim look with each other. “What is it?”

“You guys battled HYDRA at the Triskelion. What’s the odds that HYDRA’s embedded everywhere within S.H.I.E.L.D.?” Clint asked.

“You’re thinking that we sparked a mass ‘revolution’? And that Phil’s been caught up in it, aren’t you?” Nat half-asked, half-stated.

“I can’t get a hold of Bobbi, either,” Clint replied with a shrug.

“Stark?” Steve said.

“On it,” Tony replied, having moved to the nearest computer console, his hands beginning to blur over the keyboard.

“Don’t bother, Tony,” Bruce called. “I think we already know the answer.”

As Bruce turned up the volume on the T.V., those farthest away drifted closer to better hear what the news reporter was saying.

“This morning’s battle between the Avengers and the world’s premier spy agency, the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division, at the Triskelion in Washington DC seems to have sparked skirmishes all around the world. According to the message that was broadcast by Steve Rogers, S.H.I.E.L.D. had been infiltrated by HYDRA over the past seventy years. This accusation seems more and more likely as the day has progressed.

“Rumours of S.H.I.E.L.D. agents battling amongst themselves have surfaced on nearly every continent in the world. Governments and spy agencies throughout the world are reported to be on high alert, furthering the veracity of those rumours.

“Exactly what the Avengers sparked with this morning’s battle at the Potomac River, along with their releasing of so much encrypted data, is still anyone’s guess. The White House has assured us that they are launching a full investigation, including an emergency Senate hearing into the actions of the Avengers. Until the results of that hearing are concluded, we can be sure that the spy and defence states of countries all over the globe are on a hair-trigger.”

“Well, I think that answers that question,” Steve stated grimly as he turned the volume back down.

“Yeah, I’ll keep looking, hopefully between Jarvis and I, we can find out what’s happened to Agent and New Agent,” Tony said, once more working away at his computer.

As though the use of his name summoned him, Jarvis interrupted the conversation just then.

“Excuse me, Sir, there is an Agent Emmerson from the Department of Homeland Security here. He says that he is here in an official capacity.”

Grim glances were shared all around.

“You better let him up, Jarvis,” Steve said as he strode towards the elevator.

If the man in the dark suit was intimidated by the group facing him when the elevator doors opened, he hid it well.

“Captain Steven Grant Rogers, one of the men I was looking for,” Agent Emmerson stated. “This is for you.”
Steve accepted the crisp, white envelope that was handed to him before it was all but snatched out of his hand by Jennifer, Matt coming to stand at her side.

“May I ask what that is?” Matt asked.

“And who might you be?” Agent Emmerson asked.

“Matthew Murdock of Nelson and Murdock Law Office, legal counsel for the Avengers,” Matt replied. “This is my associate, Jennifer Walters.”

“Oh. That is a summons to the Senate to explain the actions that Captain Rogers took this morning,” Agent Emmerson replied. “I have others here.”

Neatly side-stepping the three arranged in front of him, Agent Emmerson rounded the room, handing out other envelopes.

“Robert Bruce Banner.”

“Thor Odinson.”

“You do realise that I am a Prince of Asgard and not bound by your laws?” Thor asked, amused to be given an envelope as well.

“The United States Government understands that and requests your presence as the actions that you took were against United States citizens and United States interests as well as being conducted on United States soil,” Agent Emmerson replied respectfully before moving on.

“Natalia Alianova Romanova.”

“Samuel Thomas Wilson.”

“Anthony Edward Stark.”

“I’ll take that,” Pepper interjected. “Tony doesn’t like being handing things.”

“And ‘Mage’.”

“What, you don’t know my full name?” an amused Harry asked, having taken the precaution of flicking the hood of his cloak up and placing his customary obscurus spell over his face before the elevator doors had even opened.

“No, we don’t,” Agent Emerson frowned. “That, however does not prevent the United Stated Government from summoning you to this special hearing of the Senate.”

“You’ve completed your duty,” Matt spoke up. “We now kindly ask you to leave.”

Agent Emmerson gave one last look to each of those who he’d given envelopes to before turning and striding to the elevator once more.

“I’m guessing that we have to go to this?” Bruce asked, waving his envelope in the air once the elevator doors had closed.

“I’m afraid so,” Jennifer said, looking up from where she’d been reading Steve’s summons.

“Don’t worry, you’re not going without your legal counsel,” Matt promised.
“I’m guessing that they don’t realise that I’m not an Avenger,” Sam piped up from where he was reading his own summons.

“Who says you’re not?” Steve asked. “You put the suit on, the same as the rest of us and risked your life alongside ours. Consider yourself one of us.”

Sam stared at Steve for a long moment before meeting the gaze of everyone in the room one by one.

“Thanks, I really appreciate that,” he eventually said.

“Any idea how long this thing’ll last?” Harry asked. “Only I’m expecting a visitor in a couple of days and there’s no way that I’m going to be missing any time with him because of some government red tape.”

“Hey, if need be, we can watch over the pip-squeak and show him a good time in the Big Apple,” Darcy said.

“Yeah, he’s staying with us, isn’t he? And me, Peter and Gwen’ll show him around, too,” Doreen agreed.

“Thanks, guys, I really appreciate that,” Harry replied, squashing down on the instant feeling of unease that he got in the pit of his stomach as he looked between Darcy and Doreen.

Hermione knocked on the door and waited until she was invited in before opening it. The Healer’s office was much as she expected it to be – a desk, a small sitting area with two single chairs and a lounge, and a bed off to one side.

“Hermione Granger,” Daphne Greengrass said.

“Healer Greengrass,” Hermione replied with the smallest of smiles.

“May I ask what brings you to my office?” Greengrass asked.

“Harry Potter,” Hermione replied.

Greengrass’ eyebrows shot up to disappear under her fringe.

“Are you telling me that the famed Man-Who-Conquered is in need of a Mind Healer?” Greengrass asked incredulously.

“Yes,” Hermione replied before instantly beginning to shake her head as she realised how that sounded. “But not for him. It’s for a friend of a friend of his.”

“A friend of a friend?” Greengrass repeated dubiously.

“Truly,” Hermione said, realising that this wasn’t going well.

It would have been so much easier if Harry could have made this request himself, unfortunately, he’d fobbed the job off to her and she, like the fool that she was, simply couldn’t say ‘no’ to her best friend.

“Are you aware that Harry is now in the United States?” Hermione asked.

“I’ve heard the rumours,” Greengrass shrugged.
“Harry is a part of a group of remarkable individuals that risk their lives to ensure that ‘ordinary’ people remain safe,” Hermione tried to explain.

“It sounds as though Potter hasn’t changed since his Hogwarts’ days,” Greengrass remarked.

Hermione smiled in agreement. “No, not really, at least, not where it counts. However, one of his teammates discovered that his childhood best friend who he’d lost track of decades ago, had been captured by some nefarious people and brainwashed. Harry’s looked into his mind and found that, at least according to him, that while his memories are still there, they’re fragmented and buried under layers and layers or ‘programming’. He says that the man’s mind is a real mess.”

“Potter’s practicing legilimency?” Greengrass breathed, one hand coming up to rub her temples. “Merlin have mercy. He’s probably made more of a mess of this man’s mind than he did of the potions he made in Snape’s dungeons.”

“Harry’s learnt a few things while he’s been away,” Hermione stated, defending her friend.

“As you say,” Greengrass replied, waving away her statement. “Why come to me? If this man is in the colonies and as damaged as you and Potter says, then it would be simpler to go to one of the couple of dozen Mind Healers there.”

Hermione shrugged. “Harry wants someone he trusts.”

Greengrass stared at her before slowing blinking.

“And he sent you to me?” she asked incredulously.

“Yes,” Hermione nodded. “He says that this will be the challenge of your career. And that he’ll pay whatever amount you request as well as costs for transportation to America and lodging and whatever else while you’re there.”

“This man must be extremely important,” Greengrass murmured.

Once again, Hermione shrugged.

“He is to Harry’s friend,” she said, giving the only answer that she knew.

For the longest time, Greengrass stood motionless and Hermione remained silent, allowing her to make her decision.

“All right,” she finally said. “I, along with everyone else here, owe Potter for what he did. I’ll go and look at this man and see if he is as bad as Potter believes. But I make no other promises than that.”

“Thanks, Daphne, I’ll let Harry know that you’re coming,” Hermione smiled.
Welcome To The Colonies

Harry was practically bouncing on the balls of his feet. Unfortunately, even with the assistance of magic, he’d nearly arrived late thus leaving him at the very back of the crowd. No one, at least no one outside of a changed Bruce or Jennifer, could see past this crowd of people. Frustratingly, there wasn’t anything that he could do about it – using magic in this situation would surely get him in a whole mess of trouble.

The crowd, he knew from experience, wouldn’t last long once the passengers began appearing – they’d all be extremely eager to make their way to baggage claim, taking their friends, relatives, whoever it was that was here to meet them with them. The problem was that Teddy was likely to be one of the first ones off the plane – another thing that he’d learnt on his gallivanting around the world was that the flight attendants liked to have the children in their care that were travelling alone off the plane first.

As Harry began sidling around the edge of the crowd, headed for the wall closest to the tunnel, his frustration mounted. This, he knew, wouldn’t be a problem for Mage. He, with his distinctive cloak, would part the crowd with ease. That, of course, would completely defeat the purpose of his anonymity, though.

With a host of ‘excuse mes’, ‘sorrys’ and ‘pardon mes’, not to mention the scowls that he received in return, Harry manoeuvred his way between the edge of the crowd and the wall to end up right beside the tunnel.

Unfortunately, though, he was just a little too late. Walking away from the tunnel was a flight attendant and a fifteen year old boy, a pack on his back, his brown head of hair darting from side to side.

“Teddy!” Harry called.

Instantly, the boy in question spun around, his eyes searching. A great smile blossomed on his face as he saw Harry and he began running.

Harry opened his arms for the boy, catching him in a great hug.

“You’re late, Uncle Harry,” Teddy admonished.

“Sorry about that,” Harry replied. “But it was only just.”

“I take it that you’re Harry Potter?” the flight attendant who’d followed Teddy asked, a small smile on her own face.

“Yep, that’s me; Harry Potter, the godfather of Teddy Lupin,” he replied. “Thank you for taking such good care of him.”

“It was our pleasure,” she replied. “Ted wasn’t a problem in the slightest.”

“Ted, huh?” Harry asked his godson, one eyebrow raised.

“Yeah, well, I’m fifteen now,” he shrugged. “And ‘Teddy’ makes me sound like a little kid.”

“I’ll do my best to remember that,” Harry assured him. “But no promises. Come on, let’s get out of here.”
Getting back out past the crowd was so much easier than getting through it the first time and within a few minutes, they were headed towards the escalators and the lower level.

“Are we going straight to the Marauder’s Den or are you taking me to Avengers Tower first?” an eager Ted asked.

“The Den. But we’ve got one stop to make first,” Harry replied.

Ted’s inquisitive look had Harry leaning in and elaborating.

“We need to have a quick stop at the International Portkey Terminal; I’m meeting someone coming to the State there,” he explained.

Ted stopped dead, staring incredulously at his godfather.

“What? You made me take the plane when I could have …?” he asked, thankfully leaving the end of that question unasked with all of the muggles around.

Harry held up his hands as though to ward off the accusation.

“Hey, not my decision. That was your Gran. I suggested the other way but she insisted you come the way you did. Something about experiencing life the way your grandfather did,” Harry replied.

A scowling, muttering-under-his-breath Ted stomped off and Harry was forced to quick step to catch up. A shoulder bump as he passed was enough to get the boy to look up.

“Hey, you’re here now and that’s the main thing. We’ve got the next few weeks to spend together and I can guarantee you that it’s going to be one holiday that you’ll always remember,” Harry said.

“Yeah, I’ve been looking forward to this for ages,” Ted agreed. “So, who are we meeting anyway?”

By this time, Harry had led Ted over to an old poster of a plane circling the world, the caption, Dragon Air, See The World The Magical Way written across it. Strangely, the two of them seemed to be the only ones paying any sort of attention to it. Harry manoeuvred Ted so that the two of them were leaning against it, then, with a single step backwards, the two vanished from the airport proper.

“Potter. You’re late,” a cultured voice sniffed.

Harry spun about to find a woman with long black hair standing behind him. Her blue eyes stared at him, disapproval – whether from his tardiness, his appearance or both – radiating from her. As he’d expected, Daphne was dressed in robes befitting a witch, in this case, black with soft green and silver highlights. Thankfully, while they’d appear slightly odd, they’d pass muster out in the muggle world.

“Greengrass,” Harry replied with a nod. “Thank you for coming.”

A single nod was her only response.

“Ted, I’d like you to meet Madam Greengrass. She’s a Healer here to help a friend,” Harry said.

“Greengrass. This is my godson, Teddy Lupin.”


“Lupin?” Greengrass asked, shooting a glance full of meaning at Harry.

“Yes. Lupin,” Harry replied. “His father was our old Defence professor from third year.”
Thankfully, Greengrass chose not to make a big deal out of what she knew about Remus Lupin.

“Shall we go?” Harry asked, pulling a short length of rope out of his pocket.

The three shuffled together, each grabbing hold of the rope. Once Harry was sure that they were all ready, he flicked out his wand and tapped it to the rope.

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“This is where your ‘friend’ is?” Daphne asked, looking around at what was obviously a flat of some kind and definitely not a hospital.

Potter barely glanced up from where he was directing his godson to place his bag in a room down the hallway.

“No. This is my place,” Potter replied. “I thought that it might be good if we had a small talk first before I took you there.”

“Logical,” Daphne replied.

Seconds later, the boy, Ted, was back and Potter was ushering them through the closest door.

As they descended the staircase, she couldn’t help but slow. Dozens of photographs, all of them muggle, and all of them showing scenes and animals from around the world, many even containing Potter himself. These, she realised, were from his travels around the world. She’d known that he’d travelled. Intellectually, at least. But to see a snapshot of what he’d seen made her pause. There was a world beyond Britain; this, perhaps, was a way for her to see it, experience it.

The door being held open for her at the bottom had Daphne rushing the last few steps and it was only her years of self-control that prevented a blush from forming on her cheeks.

The room that she stepped into at first reminded her of the Leaky Cauldron or perhaps the Three Broomsticks, albeit with a muggle flavour. A feeling of unease swept over her at the sight of so many muggles and she made sure to stay close behind Potter; she might not know him well, but he was still a known quantity.

Once again, Potter surprised her and held her chair out for her, the perfect gentleman, before taking a seat across from her.

“Hiya, Harry,” a teen with chestnut brown hair said, appearing at their table, a notebook of some kind in her hand. “What can I get you?”

“Earl grey tea, please,” Potter replied.

When the girl turned to Daphne, she readily supplied her own order echoing Potter’s own choice. And then the girl turned to the boy.

“Teddy?” the girl asked excitedly. “Welcome to America. It’s so good to see you again.”

At the boy’s confused expression, she continued.

“It’s me, Doreen,” she said.

“Doreen? You mean, Squ …” Ted exclaimed, only to cut off mid-sentence with Potter’s hand clamping down on his arm.
“I didn’t realise that you …” Potter began, his narrowed eyes switching between the two teens before he cut off with a shake of his head. “Never mind. You can tell me later. Actually, Ted, would you mind giving Madam Greengrass and I a few minutes?”

“Sure, Uncle Harry,” Ted replied. “I’ll eat up at the bar and catch up with Doreen.”

At the girl’s return grin, the two quickly left. Daphne’s head whipped back from watching the teens leave as she felt a wave of magic wash over her.

“Nothing to worry about,” Potter said, his hand coming to rest on the table. “Just a simple *muffliato*. We can talk in safety now without worrying about the wrong people overhearing us.”

Daphne gave a single nod but remained quiet, unsure how to begin.

“Thank you for coming; I really didn’t expect that you would,” Potter said.

“Then why have Granger ask me?” she replied.

At that, Potter sighed and ran a hand through his messy black hair, a gesture that she remembered from back at Hogwarts.

“Because you’re the only Mind Healer that I know and that I know that I can trust you?” Potter replied.

Daphne stared at him.

“You trust me,” she repeated flatly. “Why?”

“We went to Hogwarts together,” he shrugged.

“And never said more than a sentence or two to each other at the one time,” she retorted.

“We both know what you did at the Battle, the way you put others first, working to heal everyone, regardless of where their loyalties lay,” he said. “We may not have interacted much at Hogwarts, but that doesn’t mean that I can’t trust you.”

“Thank you,” Daphne replied.

“Why’d you agree to come?” Potter asked.

Daphne had been asking herself this very question ever since she’d agreed. And every time the answers were the same.

“Because of what you did,” she said.

“You mean that ‘Man-Who-Conquered’ crap?” Potter asked, disgust clear in his voice.

“Yes. No,” she replied before sighing. It seemed that it was finally time to come clean. “To a large extent, yes. You saved magical Britain and you are owed for what you did.”

Quickly, she raised one hand to stop him from interrupting. Thankfully, he complied, sitting back and picking up the cup of tea that had just been placed on the table.

“But it’s more than that,” she continued. “The last time that you were in Britain, you were there keeping people safe once again. Including my cousin’s son.”

Daphne nodded. “Daniel, yes. He told us all what you did. And then, a few days later, you rescued me and my sister for the most vile of situations.”

“I did? How?” a clearly startled Potter asked.

“By killing my husband and having my brother-in-law locked up in Azkaban for the rest of his life,” Daphne replied simply.

“Nott,” Potter breathed after a few seconds. “You were married to Theo Nott? That Death Eater?”

“I was,” she confirmed.

“What in the world caused you to marry him?” an incredulous Potter asked.

“My father,” Daphne replied and then quickly continued. “It was in the First War. The Light Side was losing and with them going, it was only a matter of time before the Neutrals, too, were targeted. So, my father did what he had to to ensure the continuation of our House. He signed betrothal contracts between the Ancient and Noble Houses of Nott and Malfoy with the Ancient and Noble House of Greengrass.”

“Wait! Your sister was married to Malfoy?” Potter asked.

“Yes,” she replied simply.

“But I thought, Parkinson …” Potter said.

Daphne waved the idea off. “Draco knew of the contract, he simply wanted to, as the saying goes, have his hippogriph and ride it too.”

Potter shook his head. “And by killing Nott, I got you out of that marriage. You’re welcome?”

“Thank you,” Daphne said before deliberately changing the topic to safer cauldrons of potions. “Now, tell me about my patient and explain what you thought you were doing rummaging around in his head when you are anything but qualified.”

ooo00ooo

“Woah!” Ted grinned and Harry couldn’t help but adding in his own grin.

Standing on the opposite street corner from Avengers Tower, their heads craned back made the Tower seem even taller and even more impressive. From this angle, the quinjet launchpad could be seen jutting out from the main part of the tower, the impressive, signifying ‘A’ telling all exactly who lived and worked there.

“What is this place?” Greengrass asked from behind them.

Harry looked at her over his shoulder, catching what looked to like a scared or apprehensive expression on her face.

“Avengers Tower,” Harry replied simply. “Your patient’s up there.”

Her dubious nod was enough to make Harry grin again.

“Come on,” he said and darted across the road, the other two following along.
Once inside the main doors, Harry led them towards the private elevator. They’d barely reached halfway there when a security guard stepped out in front of them, one hand raised towards them.

“I’m sorry, folks, but this area’s off-limits,” he stated.

“Oh, hang on,” Harry said before fishing a white and gold plastic card out of his pocket and holding it up.

Instantly, the guard’s demeanour changed.

“I’m sorry, Sir,” he smiled. “Go right up.”

“Thanks,” Harry said before stabbing the button to the elevator.

“What was that, Uncle Harry?” Ted asked once the three were safely ensconced in the elevator and headed up.

In response, Harry once more fished the card out and handed it over.

“An Avengers all access card,” Harry explained. “It allows me to get in anywhere within the Tower.”

“Can’t you simply use magic to unlock doors or apparition to bypass them?” Greengrass asked.

Harry cocked one eyebrow at her.

“Sure; if I want to blow everything up,” he shrugged. “Remember that magic and technology don’t get along so well. Besides, it’s the height of rudeness to enter a room unannounced without an invitation, as a pureblood, I thought that you’d know that.”

Greengrass’ mouth snapped closed and Harry nodded. Obviously, she was revising her opinion of how to deal with muggles. And considering how many non-magicals she was currently amongst and about to meet, that was a very good thing.

“Sparrowhawk!” Tony exclaimed from his place behind the bar when the doors opened, “about time you got here.”

“Traffic,” Harry explained simply.

“Pfft,” Tony waved away the excuse. “Shoulda just used your magic voodoo, then.”

“Voodoo?” Greengrass asked incredulously. “Exactly what types of magic have you been learning, Potter?”

“Don’t mind Tony, most of the stuff out of his mouth should be ignored,” Harry replied.

“I take it you’re the doctor that Harry recommended for Bucky?” Steve asked, striding over with his hand outstretched. “Hi, I’m Steve.”

“Daphne Greengrass,” she replied.

“Captain America!” Ted breathed, staring round-eyed at the man.

Steve for his part, laughed and tussled Ted’s hair after finishing shaking Greengrass’ hand.

“Just Steve’s fine,” he said. “I’m guessing you’re Teddy? Harry here’s been talking non-stop about
you for the past couple of weeks.”

“You have?” Teddy asked, staring up at his godfather.

“Of course, I have,” Harry grinned.

“It is pleasing to see you again, young Seidhr,” Thor smiled as he came across.

“Healer Greengrass; Thor, Norse god of Thunder,” Harry said, introducing the two. “Healer Greengrass is a witch and Mind Healer.”

“Thor,” Greengrass repeated flatly, staring at the man.

“I’ll admit it takes a bit of getting used to,” Lavender said as she joined the group. “Greengrass.”

Greengrass instantly shied away, her eyes widening and fixated on the other witch.

“You allow a werewolf here?” she asked panicky.

“And this is why I like New York better than jolly old England,” Lavender snarled.

“Drop it, Greengrass,” Harry stated, rounding on the woman. “You’re both witches. You both went to Hogwarts. You were both there at the Battle of Hogwarts. You both did what you could to make sure that people survived. Greengrass, you were in the Hospital Wing, while Lav battled a bunch of Death Eaters and even managed to kill Fenrir Greyback. The fact that she was bitten during the battle couldn’t be helped. Lavender ended up with a disease. So, what? It doesn’t stop her from being the good, kind, brave, intelligent person that she is.”

“Intelligent?” Greengrass snorted.

At that Harry smiled. “By the fact that that was what you focussed on, I’m going to assume that, as a Healer, you understand the disease and that Lav isn’t dangerous. And even on that night, she uses Wolfsbane.”

Shakily, Greengrass straightened, seemed to gather herself before giving a single nod to Lavender.

“Thank you, Harry, that’s got to be some of the nicest things that anyone’s ever said about me,” Lavender said shyly.

“Werewolf?” Bruce asked interestedly. “A real werewolf?”

“That would explain the pheromones you give off,” Matt commented idly.

“Werewolves are supposed to be strong, aren’t they?” Tony asked. “We’re going to have to get you down to the exercise room and see what you can do.”

Harry couldn’t help himself but to laugh at Lavender’s horror-struck expression.

“I did tell you these guys wouldn’t care,” he said.

“I suggest you lot give the girl some space, she’s here to tell us her plans about getting us some good PR, not to satisfy your scientific curiosity,” Natasha stated, slipping through the group of men to reach Lavender’s side and to put an arm around her waist.

“My dad was a werewolf,” Ted said simply, his gaze towards Lavender almost awe-like.
Lavender focussed on him, as did Greengrass.

“I remember Professor Lupin,” Lavender said. “He was one of our best Defence Teachers. After Harry, of course.”

Greengrass’ snort had Harry mock scowling at her.

“You never had me for a teacher; you don’t get to comment,” Harry stated.

“Right, Jarvis, lock the doors. Sounds like these three have a whole heap of dirt on Gandalf and I wanna hear it all,” Tony called.

This time, Harry’s scowl was directed towards Tony.

“Unfortunately, Stark, that’s going to have to wait,” Steve interrupted. “Healer Greengrass is here to see Bucky. If you’re ready, ma’am, I’ll take you to him.”

“Please,” Greengrass nodded. “I think that would be for the best.”

“What are you doing?” Daphne asked incredulously staring at Potter.

The man in question didn’t even pause as he swung a blue, dragon-hide cloak – Swedish Snort-snout, if she wasn’t mistaken – around his shoulders and pulled the hood up over his head. The other man, Steve, didn’t even blink at Potter’s antics.

“The man in there, Bucky, doesn’t know my real name, he only knows me as ‘Mage’, my Avengers code-name,” Potter replied as he swiped his hand across his face, obviously applying a number of charms to it.

Daphne narrowed her eyes at him, not even bothering to understand exactly what he’d just said. Nor was she going to acknowledge the fact that he’d just done those spells wandlessly.

“No. No hoods or disguises or whatever that is,” Daphne stated, in full Healer mode. “You have told me that the man in there has severe mental problems. Masked men entering his room is not going to help that. He needs openness and trust if he’s going to allow me access to his mind.”

Potter looked at his companion.

“It’s alright, Harry,” Steve said. “I know Bucky and once he’s been fixed of whatever HYDRA did to him, you’ll be able to trust him; he won’t tell anyone your identity.”

“And until then, it’s not like he’s getting out of that room at all,” Potter sighed.

Once Potter had dispelled the charms – again doing it wandlessly – and had lowered his hood, Daphne nodded for the door to be unlocked and opened.

As soon as she was through the door, Daphne’s eyes locked onto the form lying on the bed. His dark brown hair was shoulder-length and his muscles appeared well defined. One arm had been slung over his eyes but at their entrance, he swung his legs around and sat up.

Daphne couldn’t help but gasp and stare. One entire arm was made of some kind of metal. And the way that he was moving it made it obvious that he was in complete control of it.

“Bucky?” Steve said. “I’ve brought the Doctor that I said that I would.”
The man, her patient, stared at her and Daphne could have sworn that he took in everything about her; his eyes even rested briefly on her wand in her pocket.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Daphne said. “My name is Daphne Greengrass and I’m a Mind Healer.”

“You’re like him,” the man said, jerking his head towards Potter.

“If you mean that I’m magical, then yes, I am,” Daphne replied.

“It’s her magic that will allow Doctor Greengrass to look into your mind and to fix what HYDRA did to you, Bucky,” Steve said.

For the longest time, he simply stared at Steve. Daphne knew that this was a critical part; her potential patient needed to accept this treatment, any reluctance on his part would make the job that much harder, if not impossible.

“You can give me back my memories?” he asked at last, having switched his attention to her.

“I can try,” Daphne replied. “If you’ll let me.”

A jerky nod indicated that, for now at least, he was willing.

From her pocket she pulled a length of parchment and a self-inking quill.

“If I may, I’d like to ask you a few questions to get a feel of what you can remember,” Daphne said. “Let’s start with your name.”

His eyes appeared panicky for a moment before darting to Steve, a fact that Daphne took note of.

“They call me the Winter Soldier,” he said slowly. “Steve says my name is Bucky.”

“James Buchanan Barnes,” Steve supplied.

“He’s been conditioned for the purpose of assassination,” Potter added. “The people who did this to him only wanted a soldier who followed orders, not someone who would question anything, including his name or identity.”

“Thank you,” Daphne said and her tone of voice made it clear that interruptions weren’t to be tolerated.

“May I call you Bucky, then?” she asked. At his nod, she asked her next question. “When is your birthday?”

“March?” he replied and it was obvious that he really wasn’t sure.

“What year?” Daphne encouraged.

“Nineteen seventeen?”

That answer, while still aimed at Steve, seemed – erroneously – more sure.

“Good memory,” Steve smiled.

Daphne stared between the two men, confused at how in Merlin’s name that answer could ever be considered right. The man in front of her was in his twenties or early thirties at most.
“He really is that old. So’s Steve for that matter – don’t ask. Between missions, Bucky was placed in some sort of suspended animation,” Potter explained. “Think of it as like being constantly fed the Draught of Living Death and only being brought out of it for brief periods of time.”

That, at least, she understood, even if the reasoning for it eluded her.

Just from those two simple questions, it was obvious that this man’s memory was as bad as Potter made it out to be. Of course, there was no substitute for examining his mind herself.

“Would you mind if I sat beside you?” she asked.

“I’d never say no to a beautiful woman sitting beside me,” Bucky replied.

Once she was settled facing him, Daphne pulled her wand from her pocket. Instantly, he shifted backwards, his eyes never leaving the wand.

“Exactly what did you do?” Daphne snapped at Potter.

“We’ve had a few altercations,” Potter shrugged.

Reining in her scowl, Daphne turned back to Bucky.

“I’m not going to hurt you. I’m a Healer; I’m only here to help,” she said in as soothing a voice as she could. “My wand is merely a tool to help me focus. I need to have a look inside your mind to see what we’re dealing with before we can work out how to help you get your memories back.”

At his nod, she continued.

“I’m going to point my wand towards you now,” she said. “Are you ready for that?”

She could see him steeling himself, preparing for the ‘invasion’ and she knew that she was likely to encounter a battle. Once it seemed that he was as ready as he was going to be, Daphne cast the spell.

“Legilimens!”

Instantly, Daphne was transported inside Bucky’s mind. As expected, there was resistance but, seeing as it came from a muggle and an untrained one at that, she was easily able to batter it aside.

Surprisingly, Potter’s description of Bucky’s mind was accurate. There was a lot of grey, cloudy mists surrounding her indicating that his mind was disjointed and that his long-term memory had been cut away from his short-term memory. Occasionally, a flash would show through, seemingly from far away of a memory of a child; a fight; a teen; Steve in a strange red, white and blue uniform; a war; strange muggle weapons; Steve as a much smaller, younger man; a circular shield of some kind.

Yes, Bucky’s memories were still there, it seemed, simply buried and disconnected where he couldn’t access them. For now, she’d seen enough and so gently pulled back and out.

As Daphne came back to herself, she blinked and slightly shook her head.

“Well?” Potter asked.

“Bucky’s memories are still in there,” she said slowly. At the hopeful expressions on both Steve and Bucky’s faces, she held up a hand. “There is a lot of damage. Your memories are disjointed and have been buried far below your subconscious. They’ve been, for want of a better term, cut away from your mind and are floating free and far out of your current reach.”
“But you can get them back?” Steve asked hopefully.

Daphne looked at Bucky for a long time, judging the expression on his face. What she saw was promising. He appeared interested, eager.

“With a lot of work and a great deal of time, maybe,” she hedged. “I’m sure that together we can recover a lot, to piece your past back together for you. Be warned, though, that the odds of recovering all of your memories are next to nil. The majority, though, that I believe is doable.”

“Thank you,” Bucky said. “I’d … I’d like to know who I am, to remember the person that Steve’s been telling me about. And I’m willing to work at it, to do whatever you say.”

“So, you’ll take the job?” Potter asked hopefully.

Once again, Daphne took the time to look at Bucky before also taking in the extremely hopeful expression on Steve’s face and finally, the intense look on Potter’s.

“I will,” she replied.
Lavender studied the set-up with a critical eye, not that she could really do much about it now if she decided that it needed changing. No, her ‘visitors’ were due here at any minute.

Her seat, more of a high bar stool really with a low back, sat prominently beside the largest screen that she’d ever seen. The things that muggles could do quite astounded her. Growing up, she’d been amazed at the size of some of the wizarding portraits at Hogwarts. This, though, *this* dwarfed those portraits and did a lot more than simply hold the portrait of someone long dead who was more often than not a touch deaf and bordering on senile.

The screen was set to display a video that she, Pepper and Maria Hill had put together – with the assistance of Jarvis, of course. Well over an hours’ worth of footage had been compiled of the Avengers doing what they did best to protect people and to save the world. The images had been compiled using S.H.I.E.L.D. resources, Jarvis’ files and even video gathered from regular people and placed on the world wide web for everyone to see.

The vast majority of the screen time was taken up with the alien invasion of the Chitauri. It’d taken Lavender a long time to get her head around that entire concept, not to mention the correct words that went along with it. Only her years alongside Harry in Gryffindor and all of his outlandish exploits had helped her believe what she’d seen.

There were other sequences as well, covering every Avenger.

There was some grainy, black and white footage of Steve from World War Two fighting HYDRA which Lavender thought was most appropriate considering the circumstances. Clint and Natasha were shown doing their job for S.H.I.E.L.D. in various locations around the world. Bruce, in his Hulk form, was shown fighting something bigger, tougher and meaner on the very streets of Harlem in New York City. As for Tony, his rescue of President Ellis, who was strung up over an oil tanker, made a very positive statement.

The only one missing was Harry. Well, apart from his Battle of New York exploits, that was. Lavender had no doubts exactly what Harry was capable of. She’d even half-considered seeing if it was possible to take some footage from a memory from the War. But for that, she knew she’d need a pensieve, something that she had no idea where to find, not to mention the fact that it would show Harry’s face and not in his trademark blue-grey cloak, thus defeating the purpose of the hood and spells that he used.

There had been some discussion about whether or not to feature Peter and Matt as well. In the end, considering who one of the people coming today reported to, the idea was rejected.

This footage would be playing constantly throughout the interview allowing the Avenger’s heroic exploits to be constantly facing the three reporters’ chairs as they interviewed Lavender.

Hearing a sound behind her, Lavender quickly assured herself that her fringe was covering her scarred face before turning around, a welcoming smile on her face.

The woman first through the door wore a deep blue, mid-thigh length dress. Her blonde hair was cut just below her shoulders and looked as though she’d already had it professionally styled ready for the cameras. And cameras there would be – two of them, it seemed, as a pair of men carrying them and their tripods entered straight after the woman.
“Christine Everhart, I presume?” Lavender asked, her hand outstretched as she crossed the floor to meet her.

“That’s right,” the host of WHiH replied. “I’m guessing that you’re Lavender Brown, Public Relations Officer for the Avengers?”

“That would be me,” Lavender smiled, her eyes shifting to watch the cameramen wander past to begin setting up.

“So, which Avengers do we get to interview today?” Christine asked.

“Unfortunately, none of them,” Lavender replied before quickly explaining. “It’s not that they didn’t want to, it’s simply that the terms of the Congressional Hearing that they all have to attend forbids them from public statements or interviews until after the conclusion of the Hearing.”

“In that case, I look forward to meeting with them then. Who do we get to interview instead?” Christine asked.

“That would be me. If you’ll excuse me for a moment, it appears as though the other reporters are here,” Lavender said.

Internally, Lavender was scowling. This wasn’t who she was expecting. Well, Ben Urich from the New York Bulletin was. No, it was the other man. And there was the problem. The Daily Bugle had told her that they were sending Kat Farrell, one of their top reporters to this interview. Unfortunately, instead of her, the Editor-in-Chief appeared to have pulled rank.

“I’m guessing you’re the PR lady, Brown?” J. Jonah Jameson asked in a gruff voice.

“I am. Welcome to Avengers Tower,” Lavender replied, a smile plastered to her face.

“Good to be here,” Jameson replied. “Just to be clear, that web-headed menace isn’t hiding here somewhere is he?”

“If you are referring to Spider-man, then, no,” Lavender replied.

“Thank you for inviting me,” Ben Urich interjected in his soft voice.

“It’s a pleasure to have you here,” Lavender replied, shaking the man’s hand. “Shall we get set up?”

The three walked across the room to where Christine had already taken the centre of the three seats facing Lavender’s stool and the currently-empty screen. One camera had been placed off to the side where facing Lavender and the screen, while the other was focussed on Christine’s face.

The two newspaper men took a lot less time to set up – Jameson seemingly content with simply a notebook and pen, while Urich set up a tape recorder in addition to the pad that he sat upon his knee.

“Miss Everhart, gentlemen, welcome to Avengers Tower. I’m pleased that you accepted our invitation here today,” Lavender began proceedings.

Behind her, she knew, the screen, courtesy of Jarvis, would have just come to life showing the Avengers’ logo slowly revolving.

“The Avengers themselves would have liked to have been a part of this interview,” Lavender continued, repeating what she’d already said to Christine to the two men, “however the laws governing the Congressional Hearing stipulate that they are unable to talk about the events that
occurred at the Triskelion until after the Hearing is completed.”

“What do you say to the assertion that the Avengers should be put on trial for what they’ve done, not simply attend a ‘Hearing’ to talk about it?” Jameson asked, leaning forward eagerly.

“None of the Avengers have broken any laws. If they had, then I’m certain that the authorities would have charged them with something,” Lavender replied calmly.

“I can think of half a dozen off the top of my head,” Jameson countered. “Break and enter; wilful damage; manslaughter; attempted murder; treason; need I go on?”

“Once again, all I can say is that the authorities would have charged the Avengers if they believed that any of those accusations were warranted,” Lavender replied. “The Avengers worked together to safeguard the population, not just of the United States but of the World. HYDRA’s goals have not changed since Captain America first battled them back in World War Two.”

The flick of the reporter’s eyes to the screen attested to the images of Steve that she now knew were playing.

“It is the Avenger’s belief that they were working towards safe-guarding the world?” Christine asked.

“Yes,” Lavender replied simply.

“Against S.H.I.E.L.D., the premier spy agency in the world?” Christine persisted sounding sceptical.

“No. Not against S.H.I.E.L.D.,” Lavender replied with a shake of her head. “Against the HYDRA agents that had secreted themselves within S.H.I.E.L.D. and subverted it for their own ends.”

“What gave them the right to do so, to take up arms and to kill so many people?” Jameson asked.

“The notion of doing the right thing. Human decency taken to extreme, where a small group of people act together against those that want to cause harm, to bully the rest of the world for their own gain,” Lavender replied.

“You claim that the Avengers see S.H.I.E.L.D. as a ‘bully’?” Urich asked, his pencil poised.

“Not at all,” Lavender replied. “The Avengers have always had a good working relationship with S.H.I.E.L.D. No, the ‘bully’ is HYDRA. You will find that Captain Rogers has used that term for them in the past, going all the way back to World War Two. He has stated on numerous occasions that he hates bullies and will always stand up to them. Mage is exactly the same. He has always put others before himself, done what is right over what is easy. And none of the others are shy about doing what is right, either.”

Lavender couldn’t help but smile slightly at the thought of when she’d first heard that phrase and realised that it applied to people like Harry more than anyone else.

“‘Always’, Miss Brown?” Christine pounced. “It sounds as though you know Mage a lot better than the rest of us.”

“I’ve known Mage for a long time,” Lavender said with a small smile.

“You make an interesting argument for Captain America and Mage’s actions,” Jameson said. “But aren’t you simply being paid to say that? What are your real thoughts on what these costumes thugs get up to?”
“Even if I wasn’t being paid, my answers would not change, Mister Jameson,” Lavender replied, barely managing to rein in her temper. “I may not have been in New York when these extraordinary people joined together to fight back an alien invasion, but I’ve seen the footage and I applaud them for what they did. I may not vote for your president, but the fact that Iron Man risked his very life to save him and to put an end to an extreme group that was waging a terrorist war against the country doesn’t make me any less grateful. Knowing that the Hulk can stand between me and something like the Abomination makes me feel safer. And when it comes to Mage, I’ve seen him lay down his very life to protect an entire society and I know that he’d do it again in a heartbeat.”

“What do you mean ‘lay down his very life’?” Urich asked. “When was this? And, if true, are you saying that he’s undead?”

“No, of course not,” Lavender laughed. “Mage had something … special going on that meant that what I thought I saw wasn’t what was reality. That doesn’t mean that that wasn’t his intent.”

“When was this?” Christine asked. “Was it during the Battle of New York?”

“No,” Lavender replied and instantly knew that any hesitation, any thought of fabricating something would be instantly seen through by this eagle-eyed group. No, only the truth would work here; she just hoped that Harry would forgive her.

“No,” Lavender repeated. “This happened long before that; we were only eighteen at the time, fighting in what at the time felt like a war but to the world would have been nothing more than a simple terrorist skirmish, albeit one that went on for years.”

“Eighteen? Are you claiming that you’ve known Mage since you were eighteen?” Urich asked.

“Actually, I’ve known Mage since I was eleven. And before you ask, no, I will not tell you any more about Mage’s life before the Battle of New York. His teammates know, as well as a select few others. But these are his secrets and he guards them jealously,” Lavender replied in a hard tone.

Urich looked up from his notebook where he’d been furiously scribbling, his head tilted slightly to the side.

“It almost seems to me that you believe that the Avengers should be acknowledged even more for what they’ve done than they already have been,” he said.

“I’m not saying that at all,” Lavender replied. “New York City gave the Avengers a ticket-tape parade after all the rebuilding had been redone. Even that was more than they were expecting. The Avengers don’t do what they do for parades or awards or medals; they do it because it’s right.”

“Medals?” Jameson scoffed. “For what they’ve done, they should be handed a bill! In fact, I have sources within the government that agree with me.”

“What do you and the Avengers say to that? That they should be expected to clean up the mess that they’ve created or to at the very least pay for the damage that they’ve caused?” Christine asked.

“I’d say that the Avengers would probably be amenable to that,” Lavender said before holding up one hand to stop any interruptions. “Providing that the government also gave a bill to the others involved in the damages. That means that the Chitauri pay their half of the costs to rebuild New York City. The Abomination pays his half for rebuilding Harlem. HYDRA pays their half for the damages to the Triskelion. I’m sure that you see where I’m going with this?”

“Can’t see it being too easy for the government to collect from a bunch of aliens,” Urich chuckled.
“No, neither can I,” Lavender agreed. “But as much as the end damage is seen and lamented over, just imagine what things would be like without the Avengers. More than likely, there would have been no world left for the Avengers to be involved in the incident at the Triskelion in the first place. There has to be a balance, an understanding, that what the Avengers do, they do for the good of all. They will always strive to minimise any casualties and damage, but when the choice comes down to the world or a few buildings, I for one, am glad that it’s them doing what they do best: protecting us all.”

The vibration of Harry’s phone had him pulling it out of his pocket. The fact that the display had ‘UNKNOWN’ on it made him pause. His curiosity, though, not to mention a seed of hope, had him answering it.

“Hello?” he asked cautiously.

“Hey, you.”

“Skye?” Harry asked eagerly, recognising the voice that he’d been worried about. “Are you okay? You sound tired.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m good,” Skye replied.

“Who is that? Who’s she calling? She’s not authorised to make calls from this location,” an anxious-sounding male voice insisted in the background.

“Who’s that?” Harry asked.

“That’s just Eric, don’t mind him,” Skye stated.

“Don’t use my name! You’re not authorised to give out any information about either me or this base,” the now-named Eric stated.

“Eric, chill!” Skye replied and her voice was slightly quieter as though she’d moved her head away from the phone. “I’m just talking to Mage.”

“Mage? As in the Avenger? Cool. We’re all good then,” Eric said, doing a complete one-eighty.

“Sorry about that,” Skye said, once more clear in Harry’s ear.

“What was all that?” Harry asked.

“That was Eric. Agent Koenig. He’s in charge of this base that we’re at. But I can’t tell you where it is. It’s all classified and stuff,” Skye replied.

“I think I got that,” Harry deadpanned. “So, you are alright?”

“Yeah, we’re good,” Skye replied. “It was a bit dicey for a while there but it all worked out in the end.”

“And Phil and everyone else is okay?” Harry asked.

“Yup. Well, May got shot but we patched her up. And Jemma was stuck behind enemy lines for a bit but we got her out,” Skye replied.

Harry shook his head at the phone.
“I think you’d better tell me everything,” Harry insisted.

“Well, you know about HYDRA? What am I saying? Of course, you know about HYDRA, I saw you on the news report. Very cool by the way. You have some seriously badass moves there, my friend,” Sky said. “Anyway, when HYDRA went down, the Bus was reprogrammed to take us back to The Hub. But that was good in a way, ’cause that’s where Jemma was. We didn’t know who we were fighting – whether it was S.H.I.E.L.D. thinking we were HYDRA or the other way around. Anyway, by the time the dust settled, The Hub was once more in S.H.I.E.L.D.’s hands. We think that AC and Agent Hand are the last high-ranking agents still alive.”

“Maria Hill made it through,” Harry said.

“I’ll let the boss know. I haven’t met her yet,” Skye replied. “Anyway, we were working on finding out what was still ours and what HYDRA had taken over when General Talbot from the army called to say that they were coming in to secure the base.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Harry replied. “From what Maria was saying, the army’s scrambling to secure as many S.H.I.E.L.D. assets, bases and personnel as it can.”

“Huh, well, it’s a good thing that we got out of there when we did, then,” Skye said. “We ended up, well, wherever we are. AC’s working on a plan. At least, he better be.”

“I’m guessing that he’s thinking of using whatever S.H.I.E.L.D. resources are left to fight HYDRA?” Harry asked.

“Well, he hasn’t come out and said it yet, but that’d be my guess,” Skye replied.

“Good. Tell him that the Avengers are ready to help. Steve especially is chomping at the bit like a hippogriff ready to fly out and fight some bad guys,” Harry stated.

“Hippogriff? Magic Man, you know some really weird sayings. But if they’re real, then I wanna see one,” Skye said.

“They’re real alright. I’ve even flown one. Next time we’re both on vacation, I’ll take you to some places that you simply won’t believe,” Harry smiled.

“I’ll hold you to that,” Skye replied and Harry could hear the smile in her voice. “And I’ll tell AC, too.”

“Good. The sooner we can get the world to settle down, the sooner we can go on that vacation. It’s been a while since I’ve been on one and I miss it. And it’d be nice to have someone to share it with for a change,” Harry said.

“I’m looking forward to it,” Skye replied. “Listen, I’ve got to go. AC wants me to check in on Ward.”

“Ward’s not with you?” Harry frowned.

“Nah. He went with Agent Hand to take Garrett – big, bad HYDRA agent; long story – to The Fridge for safekeeping,” Skye explained.

“Okay. Keep me updated. And Skye?”

“Yeah, H?” she asked.
“Stay safe,” Harry said.

“I will. You too,” she said. “Talk to you later.”

“Bye, Skye,” Harry said.

Harry knew that he was going into this with a bad attitude. Really, how could he not be? He and any sort of Ministry or government simply did not get on at all.

It’d started all the way back before fifth year with that mockery of a trial of his. But then, thinking about it, Harry realised that his poor views on the government had started long before that – way back in third year when he’d found out that Sirius had been thrown in prison without a trial and left there to rot for the next dozen years.

The Ministry of Magic’s role in the War hadn’t helped matters in the slightest. Kingsley, Arthur and Hermione had marginally improved his attitude after that. Marginally. And then, after ‘saving the world from an alien invasion’, he’d been put on trial by the ICW of all things. At least that one had turned out alright and even got him the special dispensation that he needed to operate as ‘Mage’.

But to, once again, be summoned to a Ministerial Inquiry after once again saving millions of lives grated on Harry something shocking.

As Harry strode through the doors to the United States Congressional Hearing, in conjunction with the Department of Defence, looking into the Incident at the Triskelion, he couldn’t help but scowl. Only the fact that he had his hood up and his usual charms in place hid his true feelings from those around him.

A pair of Marines stepped out in front of him, their guns held across their chest, even as a third Marine stood between them at attention.

“I’m sorry, sir, but no weapons are allowed past this point,” the Marine Sergeant stated.

Harry simply raised an eyebrow at the man, his eyes flicking between the two guns, not that any of the Marines could see that.

“Exactly what weapons do you think I’m carrying?” Mage asked.

“Your magic wand, Sir,” the Marine stated firmly as he produced a long, thin black box. “Please place it within his box. It will be returned to you at the conclusion of today’s proceedings.”

If it wasn’t for the fact that he’d expected this, Harry would have been most insulted and acted accordingly. Thankfully, he’d come prepared.

With a sweep, he threw back the edges of his dragon-hide cloak, thus freeing his hands to come up and to perform a complicated little pattern towards the two Marines to either side. Then, with a flourish, he flicked his wrist to have the wand in his holster appear. This was promptly dropped into the box.

“Thank you, Sir,” the Sergeant nodded and Harry could hear the relief in his voice.

With a nod, Harry walked forward, using every ounce of willpower that he had not to reach out and to snap a piece off of one of the no-longer-guns that the Marines held and to pop the liquorice into his mouth.
The next to approach him was a woman in a precise pencil skirt, blouse and jacket carrying a large bible. As was requested, he administered the oath stating that he would tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth – not that he intended otherwise.

Matt, he noticed, was already seated at the large oval table, a seat left vacant beside him for Harry.

“You’re late,” one of the ten panellists on the far side of the table scowled as Harry settled into his seat.

Harry simply couldn’t resist the opening.

“I believe that even non-magicals know that a wizard is never late, nor is he early, he arrives precisely when he means to,” Harry stated casually.

The titters from the gaggle of journalists and spectators told Harry that his opening foray in this drama had been appreciated. Unfortunately, the sour expressions on the ten men arrayed before him weren’t part of that group.

“Kindly lower your hood and state your name,” Congressman Wenham – according to his nameplate – ordered.

“I’m going to have to decline,” Harry stated. “The world knows me as ‘Mage’; I would suggest that you address me as such.”

“This is a hearing of the United Stated Congress of the United States of America,” an older gentleman to the far left stated angrily as he leant forward. “You will lower your hood and state your name not sit there like the terrorist that you pretend not to be.”

Instantly, Matt was on his feet.

“As you stated, Sir, this is simply a hearing, not a trial. Mage has been charged with no crimes, nor is he even a citizen of the United States. His very presence is an act of courtesy to you and to our government or did you learn nothing from your interview with Thor Odinson, Prince of Asgard, and the fact that you also have no authority over him?

Heads swivelled backwards and forwards, along with a number of grimaces and winces. Harry’d seen Thor’s raging temper when he arrived back at the Tower after his part in this Hearing. These buffoons had tried their damnedest to get Thor to admit that his actions, along with those of the Avengers was unwarranted and should never have occurred, regardless of the number of lives that would have been lost if they hadn’t acted. It’d taken Jane and a raging thunderstorm before he’d eventually calmed down.

“What country are you a citizen of?” General Scudder asked.

Harry waited until Matt was seated before answering.

“I was born in England,” he said.

“If you won’t tell us your birth name, can you at least tell us how old you are?” General Scudder asked.

“Yes,” Harry replied

The General stared expectantly at Harry for nearly a minute before giving in.
“Well?” he asked angrily.

“Well what?” Harry shrugged. “You asked if I could tell you how old I am. I answered the question.”

“How old are you, Mage?” Congressman Wenham asked, holding up a placating hand to his associate.

“I choose not to answer that question,” Harry replied, pleased that his obscuris charm hid the smile that he was sporting.

“You just said that you’d tell us?” General Scudder exploded.

“No, I didn’t,” Harry Corrected. “I said that I could, not that I would.”

“We’re getting off-topic and we haven’t even started yet,” Congressman Coutts groused.

“You’re right,” Congressman Wenham nodded. “Mage. Please describe the actions that you took at S.H.I.E.L.D. Headquarters on May thirty-first of this year.”

“My primary role was to access one of the Insight Helicarriers located in the hidden dock beneath the Potomac River,” Harry began. “I simply walked in, found my way down to the targeting computer and replaced the helicarrier’s targeting chip with one of our own.”

“You just walked in?” an incredulous General Scudder asked.

“Yes,” Harry confirmed.

“How?” Colonel McKelvie asked.

“Magic,” Harry shrugged. “What? I’m me, remember? Did you really expect something different?”

“We will be revisiting this section shortly,” Congressman Wenham stated. “Please continue outlining any other actions that you took on that day.”

“After one of the Insight Helicarriers launched, I was involved in ensuring that it did not reach its intended cruising altitude,” Harry stated.

“You used magic to pour lava into one of its engines making it crash into the Potomac, killing hundreds of S.H.I.E.L.D. Agents,” General Scudder stated flatly.

Harry held up a finger. “HYDRA Agents, not S.H.I.E.L.D. Agents. And while I regret those deaths, I will not mourn them – their entire purpose in launching those helicarriers was to target and eliminate millions of people.”

“Who ordered you to do what you did?” Congressman Coutts asked.

“No one,” Harry stated. “Captain America was in command of the Avengers that day but he did not order any one of us to go along with it. We did it of our own free will. My best friend calls it my ‘saving people thing’. Basically, if I see someone in trouble, then I will do my utmost to help them. Especially against bullies. And believe me, the world having those guns pointed at their collective heads was bullying of the highest calibre.”

“But why you? Why the Avengers? Why not contact the government, the military, someone in authority to deal with the situation?” Colonel McKelvie asked.
“Two reasons,” Harry replied. “Firstly, and most importantly, we were there. I believe the quote that most applies is: the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing. The Avengers were there. We had the ability to do something about it and so we did what we had to.

“Secondly, there simply wasn’t enough time to call in the military as you suggest. By the time we’d realised the threat, the deadline for when those helicarriers was due to be launched was far too close to call the military or anyone else and to wait for the appropriate committee to form and to debate and to finally act. Not to mention the fact that there was no way of knowing whether a HYDRA agent would slow the proceedings down enough so that they didn’t matter any more. Those helicarriers needed to be stopped; once they reached cruising altitude, nothing would have been able to prevent the loss of life.”

“We have heard a lot about the possibility of S.H.I.E.L.D. Agents in actuality being HYDRA moles. How do we know that this is the truth? For that matter, how could you possibly know who was or who wasn’t a HYDRA agent on the day?” Congressman Wenham asked.

“I’m going to assume that you’ve all heard a recording of Captain America’s speech to the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents with the Triskelion?” Harry asked and received nods all around. “We announced our presence. We announced our suspicions. We announced our intentions to prevent the Insight carriers being launched. Any true Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D. who heard that, supported us; those who disagreed shot at us. My understanding is that S.H.I.E.L.D. agents take an oath to ‘be the shield’, to protect the people. With even a suspicion that the carriers could be used to kill people, why would anyone not do all that they could to honour their oath, to ensure that the innocent were being protected?”

“And what happens now that the Avengers have released S.H.I.E.L.D. secrets to the world and effectively, single-handedly disbanded the Agency? S.H.I.E.L.D. has filled a particular need for the past seventy years. What happens when something occurs and the world needs them and their resources?” Congressman Feldman asked.

“Then someone else will step into the breach,” Harry shrugged. “The Avengers, if need be.”

“It is your assertion that the Avengers will continue to operate on American soil?” General Scudder asked.

“Is there a reason why we shouldn’t?” Harry asked, his eyes narrowed.

“How many of you are actually American? Rogers, Stark, Banner, Barton and now Wilson. Yes, they’re American. The rest of you, though? A Russian, a Brit and someone not even from this world!” General Scudder stated and Harry had to smirk at the dearth of names mentioned. “You lot seem to simply go off and act without any sort of consultation and with a habit of leaving a great mess in your wake.”

“Would you prefer we don’t act?” Harry asked incredulously. “I’d hate to think what this world would look like if we didn’t act.”

“There are no laws stating that the Avengers have to report their actions to the government,” Matt interjected.

“If they’re going to live in the United States and operate on United States soil, then maybe there should be,” General Scudder snapped.

“I will remind the members that his Congressional Hearing is to simply determine the sequence of events that occurred on May thirty-one and to then discuss our findings to determine whether or not
there is sufficient cause to see whether additional laws should be in place to prevent similar situations happening again,” Congressman Wenham stated.

Harry froze where he sat. While he knew that he was there to discuss what had happened at the Triskelion, he hadn’t realised the potential implications of this Hearing. New laws. Now, that cut a little too close to home. And the crux of the matter seemed to be that the Avengers lived and worked in America. The inkling of an idea niggled at him and Harry made a mental note to pull out those dusty tomes the goblins had once given him and to have a look through them as soon as he could.

“Does anyone have any additional questions for Mage regarding the events at S.H.I.E.L.D. Headquarters on May thirty-one?” Congressman Wenham asked. When none answered, he continued. “In that case, we thank you for your attendance here today and for answering our questions.”

Harry simply gave the man a nod in return before standing. After giving Matt a clap of thanks on his shoulder, he turned, intending to walk from the room. Now that this annoyance was done with, he could finally focus on the most important thing in his life right then – spending quality time with his godson.

The sight of the approaching Marine sergeant had him pausing, though.

“You can keep the rubber chicken,” Harry stated, nodding at the black box that the was carrying.

Then, with a simple turn and laugh at the serjeant’s confused expression, he turned on his heel and apparated home.
Harry was having the time of his life. A massive grin was plastered to his face even as he continuously dodged the threat in front of him.

Watching carefully, he stepped to the right.

Left.

A second quick-step left.

Spin back to the right.

Drop to his hands and knees before pushing straight upwards in a jump.

Gaining his feet, Harry laughed as he dodged again. A simple half-turn was enough to evade the next attack.

His opponent, it was easy to see, was starting to get frustrated; his face intense and frowning. The wand-work, too, was starting to get sloppy as Teddy tried to hurry his shots making them go further and further afield. Coming to a decision, Harry spun to the right, flicking his wand into his hand as he did so.

“Flavo pila pingere!” Harry snapped, elucidating clearly for Teddy to hear.

Teddy, though, obviously wasn’t expecting it for his mouth was still dropped open in surprise when the bright yellow blob of paint smacked him straight in the chest.

“Uncle Harry!” he protested. “You’re not supposed to be shooting back!”

Harry laughed.

“When have you ever seen or heard of a duel where only one person casts?” Harry asked. “Part of duelling and casting is to know how and when to dodge yourself. You can’t just stand there like some great lump. Move around a bit in case I shoot back.”

Teddy nodded and pushed a lock of hair out of his eyes. A determined expression came over his face and he nodded once again, this time lifting his wand into a ready position.

Before Teddy could fire his first magical paintball, though, a triple rap at the door above caused both Harry and Teddy to look up.

“That’ll be Doreen,” Harry remarked before smirking at his godson. “Hold up and let me let her in.”

Ignoring Teddy’s confused expression, Harry bounded up the spiral staircase taking two steps at a time.

“Hey, Harry,” Doreen began as Harry yanked the door open.

“Hi, Doreen,” Harry said happily before grabbing her arm and pulling her inside.

“Time for some training,” was Harry’s only response.

“Oh, okay,” Doreen replied, still sounding confused. “I guess you guys can pick what you want for dinner later.”

When the two hit the bottom of the stairs, Harry practically dragged the teen girl across the basement to the far side of the room from Teddy. There he dug around in a cupboard until he found the bag of marbles that he’d stashed in there after finding them when he was first renovating. One quick transfiguration later and the bag of marbles was now a bag of bright blue paint balls.

“Here. Put these in one of your belt pouches,” Harry instructed.

After staring between Harry and the paint balls, Doreen shrugged and complied.

“Right,” Harry said, leaning in towards her and lowering his voice. “I’m going to have Teddy shoot paint balls at you using his magic. I want you to dodge them and, when you get the chance, throw yours back at him.”

Doreen’s eyes flicked over Harry’s shoulder at the other teen in the room.

“Um, what about …?” she asked, nibbling her lip.

“Hey, it’s Ted. He knows about your abilities. I want you to go for it. Really give him a challenge,” Harry insisted.

“Can I?” she asked, gesturing towards her butt.

“If it helps with your balance and agility, sure,” Harry replied.

As Harry crossed back towards Teddy, he noticed that Doreen was fishing her tail out of her pants before taking off her jacket.

“Alright, Teddy. I want you to do the same drill, but this time, you’ll be aiming at Doreen,” Harry said.

Teddy’s eyes widened and his hair shifted to a chestnut brown.

“Um, but she’s …” Teddy began.

“A girl?” Harry asked, deliberately mis-interpreting. “Teddy! I never took you for someone who thought girls were weaker. Your mother would be very disappointed.”

“No! That wasn’t what I was going to say!” Teddy protested. “What if I hurt her?”

A musical laugh came from the far side of the room.

“Never gonna happen! You’ll never even hit me,” Doreen mocked.

Harry, meanwhile, quickly crossed the room and hoisted himself up onto a bench out of the way, sitting cross-legged, his head swivelling between the two.

“Okay. Whenever you’re ready,” Harry called.

Teddy stood motionless, his eyes flicking from Doreen to Harry almost in a pleading sort of way.
Doreen, though, was having none of it. Dancing to the right, her hand reached into her pouch before flicking out.

“Ow!” Teddy exclaimed, rubbing at his chest.

Harry couldn’t help but laugh at the incredulous expression on Teddy’s face as he saw that his hand and chest were now stained bright blue as well as yellow.

“So that’s how it is, huh?” he mock-scowled at Doreen.

“Yep,” she smiled back.

With a flourish, Teddy brought his wand to bear.

“Runbum pila pingere!” he exclaimed, sending a red ball of paint shooting at Doreen.

Doreen, though, moved quickly, spinning away with a laugh as she dodged his attack.

And then it was on.

Harry grinned as he watched the teen wizard shooting spell after spell at the teenaged girl across from him. Doreen used every facet of her acrobatic skills to jump, spin and dodge the spells, even going so far as to jump straight up and to cling upside down to the ceiling at one stage. And every now and again, she’d fling a pellet back at him, making Teddy dodge.

And then it happened.

A spell from Teddy’s wand impacted, splattering bright red paint onto Doreen’s bushy tail.

With a near-growl, the girl began flicking blue paintballs at Teddy one after the other, putting him completely on the defensive and making him dodge as best as he could. Teddy’s best, though, was no match for Doreen’s squirrel reflexes and before long, he was completely backed against the far bench.

“Hah!” Teddy exclaimed as he dodged one particularly vicious throw.

“Crrrrp! Fix yer hair yer blue twerp!”

Both Teddy and Doreen froze, their eyes huge as they stared at each other. Slowly, Teddy turned around, just as Harry joined them.

“Looks like that last throw clipped the lid and broke the silencing charm,” Harry commented absently.

“Huh?” Teddy asked, his eyes fixated on the glass aquarium that was now visible with a white and blue cloth half-draped off of it.

“Did … did that toad just say something?” Doreen asked, coming to stand shoulder to shoulder with Teddy.

“You call that a tail, you …”

“Yeah,” Harry replied, slamming the lid back into place and silencing the toad.

Harry then pulled off the cover so that the teens could see it properly.


“Why is that one,” Doreen asked, pointing to one of the four in the aquarium, “wearing a pink cardigan?”

“I couldn’t help it, it just seemed appropriate,” Harry grinned, not even bothering to explain.

“Uncle Harry, why do the toads talk?” Teddy asked.

“They’re supposed to be for Uncle George. I thought that he could sell them in WWW,” Harry explained. “As to why they talk, well, I’ve charmed them that way. I married the charm from insulting magical mirrors with a few other little spells so that you get a talking, insulting toad.”

“That’s … that’s brilliant!” Teddy exclaimed. “Can I have one?”

“They’re not quite ready yet,” Harry repeated.

“Why not?” Doreen asked.

Harry sighed. “Because I did something a bit wrong. Yes, they insult anyone they see, just like they’re supposed to. But they also have a … bad habit of swearing every other sentence.”

“Sounds like they’re perfect to me!” Teddy grinned. “Can I take one back with me to Hogwarts? I can drop the others off with Uncle George if you like.”

“NO!” Harry exclaimed, waving his hands at his godson.

“Ohh, why not?” Teddy near-whined.

“Because if I let you take one of them to Hogwarts, I’ll have Headmistress McGonagall here the next day transfiguring me into a toad!” Harry exclaimed.

“Well, everyone’s always saying that she needs a holiday,” Teddy deadpanned.

Harry stared at his godson with narrowed eyes for a brief second before flicking his wand up and letting loose a cannon blast of water.

“Hey!” Doreen spluttered. “Watch where you’re aiming that!”

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Pepper opened yet another bag and dumped the entire contents into a large bowl. Surveying the counter, she nodded, albeit a little uncertainly.

That, she thought, should hold them. For now, at least.

Picking up two of the bowls of chips, she tucked one into the crook of her arm and then picked up the giant bowl of popcorn. It was then a matter of manoeuvring through the crowded lounge to deposit them in strategic places.

The first bowl of chips went on the coffee table in front of the three seater lounge that Peter, Gwen, Doreen and Teddy had squeezed onto. The second bowl was placed on the ground centrally between the plethora of beanbags that Clint, Steve, Harry, Bruce and Jennifer had commandeered. The popcorn went nearest Thor and Pepper simply had to hope that Jane, Darcy, Tony, Nat and
herself were able to at least get a couple of handfuls before the Asgardian scoffed the lot.

She’d barely flopped onto the couch and wiggled close enough to Tony to put her head on his shoulder, her eyes fixing on the big screen and the image of Indiana Jones running through the jungle from some angry natives when Jarvis interrupted.

“I’m sorry, Miss Potts, but we seem to have a visitor,” Jarvis said from the new watch that Tony had recently given her.

“Who is it?” she asked with a frown.

“Agent Morse,” the AI replied, “and my monitors indicate that she is in some distress.”

“Don’t look at me,” Tony stated without even turning his head from the movie. “Jarvis is talking to you.”

“Only because you told him to,” Pepper groused. “Alright, Jarvis, send her up; I’ll meet her at the elevator.”

“She will arrive in two minutes,” Jarvis replied.

Pepper pushed herself back up and as unobtrusively as she could, weaved her way back through the crowd to the back of the lounge area and the elevator, smiling briefly at Bucky and Daphne sitting far enough away from the others so that neither became overwhelmed by the group, but still close enough to enjoy the movie. Bucky, she saw, was currently explaining something or other about the movie to the witch, at least judging by his gestures at the screen, anyway.

The ding of the elevator arriving brought Pepper’s attention back just in time for the doors to open. Inside, almost slumped against the far wall, was Bobbi Morse. Her long blonde hair looked unkempt and there were definitely bags under her eyes. As soon as she noticed Pepper standing there, though, she straightened.

“Hi, sorry for barging in like this,” Bobbi apologised as she stepped forward.

“There’s no need for that,” Pepper replied. “Come in, you look dead on your feet.”

Bobbi’s weary nod attested to exactly how tired she was. Pepper was getting a pretty good understanding of how these now-ex S.H.I.E.L.D. agents worked, as well as the Avengers. And showing any form of weakness was not something that they’d ordinarily do. For Bobbi to be exuding fatigue like this told Pepper that the other woman had had a pretty rough time of it of late.

“Tony, can you find an extra chair for Bobbi, please,” Pepper called.

Tony twisted his neck around and eyeballed Bobbi. Pepper could see his eyes taking everything in and knew that he knew exactly how done in Bobbi was. Unfortunately, Pepper knew that that wasn’t going to stop Tony from being Tony.

“If you’d wanted in on the movie, all you had to do was ask. And show up before it started,” Tony snarked.

Only the fact that Tony was also quickly vacating the double-seater lounge for the tired woman held Pepper’s tongue from giving him a good telling off.

The sigh of relief as Bobbi sank into the chair had heads swivelling towards her.
“Jarvis?” Pepper asked, waving a hand in the direction of the screen in order for the movie to be promptly paused.

“Agent Morse, are you alright?” Steve asked, leaning forward.

“Yeah. Let’s just say that it’s been a long week,” she replied, her eyes flicking to Teddy, Daphne and Bucky.

“Don’t worry about them; they’re fine,” Clint stated.

“Here, you look like you could do with this,” Harry stated, coming forward with a small vial of something held out to her.

“Thanks,” Bobbi said and promptly took it and chugged it back.

Pepper could only blink at the wisps of steam spiralling up from Bobbi’s ears.

“Potter! What do you think you’re doing giving this woman – and a muggle one at that – a pepper-up potion?” Daphne snapped, advancing on the wizard with her hands on her hips.

“I know this lot, they’re going to want to hear Bobbi’s story before she’ll be allowed to sleep,” Harry shrugged. “This way, she’ll be awake enough to answer their questions. I do have some experience in that department.”

Whatever the undertone of that last statement was obviously made some sense to the Healer.

“Fine,” Daphne replied. “But no more handing out potions without my say so; you are not a Healer.”

Once again, Harry simply shrugged and Pepper made a mental note to commiserate with the witch later on about dealing with hard-headed men and their idiocy of thinking that they were always right.

“What happened, Bobbi? The last I heard, you were stationed on the Iliad,” Nat said.

“I was,” Bobbi replied, taking the cup of hot chocolate that Jane had made for her. “I was there when you lot were taking on HYDRA at the Triskelion – which I want to hear about properly later. I was still there when HYDRA got their call to arms.”

“Huh,” Clint grunted. “We knew that HYDRA went after every base that we had, never thought about the carriers and whatnot.”

“Well, HYDRA didn’t forget about them,” Bobbi stated sourly.

“Who controls the Iliad now – S.H.I.E.L.D. or HYDRA?” Steve asked intently.

“We do,” Bobbi replied. “But it was a hard fight. We had to fight hard for every deck. Agents bled, killed and died to keep that carrier. We lost a lot of good people that day.”

“But you won,” Steve insisted.

“Yeah, we did,” Bobbi sighed. “And then we had to put that carrier back together again. Luckily, Mac – the Iliad’s Chief Engineer – survived and was a loyal S.H.I.E.L.D. Agent.”

“Where’s the Iliad now?” Nat asked.

Bobbi simply shook her head.
“No idea. Commander Gonzales took the ship dark,” Bobbi said, her eyes meeting those of Clint and Nat. “He aims to ride out HYDRA and, once they’ve settled down, to come out of hiding against them.”

“Doubt that’ll work,” Tony commented.

“Agreed. Giving an enemy too much time to become entrenched is never a wise course of action,” Thor nodded.

“Surprised you didn’t stay with them,” Nat stated.

“Almost did.” Bobbi admitted. “But Fury gave me a job as Avengers liaison to S.H.I.E.L.D. and I aim to see it through.”

“Um, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but there is no S.H.I.E.L.D. anymore,” Tony said.

“I know. I’ve seen Hill. She filled me in. Suggested that I find some other line of work,” Bobbi stated and Pepper could hear the contempt in her voice for that idea.

“So that’s why Hill applied to work with Stark Industries,” Tony commented.

Pepper’s head jerked up to stare at Tony.

“Maria applied to work for us?” she asked. “And you haven’t hire her yet? You hire her right now!”

“I will. After her interview,” Tony replied and Pepper vowed to have words with him about that later. Or simply circumvent him and hire Maria herself.

“Hill has an extremely useful skillset,” Nat mused.

“The Avengers could do with someone in a ‘mission control’ type of role,” Bruce commented.

“That’s definitely something to discuss later,” Steve said. “What about you, Agent Morse? What are your plans now?”

“I was hoping that you’d keep me around. I’ve still got a lot of contacts around the world that could be useful. Not to mention my own skills,” Bobbi said.

“I can think of one or two things that could use your touch,” Nat mused and Pepper followed her eyes to the teens on the couch.

“I think that’s a great idea,” Pepper agreed. “But that’s something for tomorrow. For now, I think I’ll escort Bobbi to one of the spare rooms so that she can get some sleep.”

“Thanks, I’d really appreciate that,” Bobbi smiled.

As the two made their way out of the room, Pepper noted that the movie was started up once again. She was just glad that it was one that she’d already seen.

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Harry sat hunched forward, leaning over the small coffee table in the main part of his library staring at the book innocently sitting there. The ‘innocent’ act, Harry knew, was a complete fabrication. No, this book was mocking him. It always did. Every. Single. Time.

The Most Ancient and Noble House of Black, the title read. Under it was the Black family crest,
which, if you didn’t know better and failed to look at in the correct angle, you’d think was simply a shield with nothing but the sable that it appeared with. But Harry knew better and consequently also knew better than to look at it in the ‘correct’ way. Rounding out the front cover of the thick, dusty tome was the House motto: **Toujours Pur.**

**Toujours Pur.** Always Pure. And here he was considering something that would have him flayed alive if the ancient Blacks ever learnt of it. Sirius on the other hand, Sirius would approve with that great barking laugh of his.

Harry took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Opening them, he knew, would bring an assault of the guilts. *He* was the Head of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black.

Being Head meant that there was a myriad of duties attached. His Wizengamot seat he’d palmed off to Andromeda, just like Sirius before him (along with his Potter seat and the one he’d gained with his Order of Merlin, First Class). He’d also handed his business holdings to the goblins to do what they did best – make him piles of gold. His properties he avoided as much as possible, allowing only Kreacher to tend to them.

But there was one property. One that neither he, nor Kreacher nor Andy had ever visited. Sirius, he suspected, might have. Really, the only indication that he had that it existed was a memory of a brightly coloured bird and a fuzzy image of a page that he’d once read in the very book before him.

Finally, Harry gave in. After slipping his Head of House ring on, he balled his fist and pressed the ring to the clasp on the book. A small pain told him that the ring took a sample of his blood to transfer to the book. For a moment, nothing happened. And then, with a pulse of near black magic, the clasp fell free.

A fresh smell of dust wafted up when he opened the book and continued as he rifled through the pages, searching for the one that he wanted. Eventually, after much flipping to and fro, he found what he was looking for, not that it amounted to much.

**Paradis Noir**, the head of the page read.

It was listed under the section related to properties, at least. There were no GPS coordinates to find it, no easy to find directions. Just a vagueness that hinted more than it told. Oh, and the instructions on how to use the Head of House ring to portkey to the place.

What little description there was sounded promising. Its size sounded perfect, maybe even a little large. Supposedly, there was a bungalow there of some kind, but this was the Blacks that he was talking about, so ‘bungalow’ could be completely misleading.

On the down side, though, this was a magical property and a Black one at that, so it was bound to have the most powerful and all-encompassing wards that money could buy. On the other hand – and on the positive side - this was a magical property and a Black one at that, so it was bound to have the most powerful and all-encompassing wards that money could buy. It simply came down to working around them. Or with them. Either way, it definitely held potential for the plan that was coming together in his head.

With the information fixed in his head, Harry closed the great book and snapped the clasp shut with a sigh. Looking up, Harry eyed the entrance to his magical library where the book belonged before shaking his head and picking up the second and much smaller book from the coffee table.

He found Teddy in his room, laying on his bed, headphones on and his foot tapping away to whatever he was listening to.
When the first knock didn’t get a reaction, Harry wandered in and nudged his godson’s foot. Instantly, Teddy’s eyes snapped open before settling on his godfather.

“Heya, Uncle Harry. Did you want something?” Teddy asked, taking his headphones off.

“Actually, I wanted to give you something,” Harry replied.

When Teddy straightened up to sit cross-legged on the bed, Harry took a seat, turning to face him and tucking one leg up underneath himself.

“Here, this is for you,” Harry said, holding out the book.


“Becoming an Animagus? Like you?” he breathed.

“You are the son of a Marauder, the same as I am,” Harry replied with a smile. “And even though your father wasn’t an Animagus, all the others were.”

“Including you,” Teddy added. “But how will that work with the extra werewolf blood that I inherited?”

“You’re not a werewolf, Ted, you just have a little extra something, courtesy of your father. I suspect that it won’t cause a problem at all,” Harry replied.

As Teddy attempted to flick through the book, a frown appeared on his face.

“Hey, these pages are stuck together,” he protested.

“Of course they are,” Harry smiled. “There’s a lot of work to be done before you get that far and I don’t want you trying something that you’re not ready for. We’ll start working on it here, if you like, but when you go back to England, I don’t want you getting ahead of yourself. When you think that you’ve got everything up to here mastered, you can either talk to me or go to Headmistress McGonagall to get the next step ‘unglued’ for you.”

“We can start here? Now?” an excited Teddy asked.

“Sure. Assuming you want to,” Harry replied.

“YES! Of course I want to! I wonder what animal I’ll be? Probably a wolf, like dad. Or maybe something with wings, like you,” Teddy babbled. “Hey, can I show my friends? I know that they’d love to be able to become animagi, too.”

Thankfully, Harry had expected that question.

“Only your very best friends,” he temporised. “There were only four Marauders, remember, and only three of them were true friends.”

“Lachlan, for sure, he’s my best friend. And Gabby, of course. And … Mirah and Jon,” Teddy said, counting on his fingers. “That’s only four others. Is that alright?”

“Sure, Ted, but let’s keep it at that, shall we?” Harry agreed.

Harry’s answer was interrupted by an owl flying through the open window and landing regally on the bed between them. The Great Horned Owl looked between the two before settling its gaze on Harry and lifting the leg carrying an official-looking scroll.

“I’m sorry, I don’t have a treat for you,” Harry told the owl as he took his mail.

The owl either understood or didn’t seem to care as, as soon as its burden was free, it leapt up and soared out of the window.

“Who’s it from?” Teddy asked.

“The International Confederation of Wizardry,” Harry frowned as he read through the summons.

“What does the ICW want with you?” Teddy asked, clearly confused.

“Guess I’ll find out tomorrow,” Harry replied. “Apparently, I’ve been summoned.”

Sterns pushed the door open and paused. The only light inside was the rectangle on the floor from the open door and even that was partly obscured by his shadow. As he waited for his eyes to adjust, he let his other senses take in what was before him.

There was a bed, as expected, with a man laying in it. The soft beeping of machines told him that this man was being monitored medically. There was a soft breathing, but not the rasping breath of one would expect to hear from someone suffering from Retroviral Hypodisplasia. The smell, too, indicated that something was off. The room smelt clean, even if it wasn’t fresh. There was no smell of dying or rotting flesh.

No, it was obvious that something was off, that this was all a stage, that the man on the bed was a dupe.

And then, as his eyes adjusted, the tiniest of movements in the darkest of shadows had Sterns shifting his body to face that direction.

“Mister Osborn,” Sterns stated with a small bow of his head.

“Who are you? You’re not one of my doctors. And you’re not one of that other lot, either,” Osborn replied, seemingly happy to remain in the shadows.

“No. I’m not,” Sterns replied. “I represent something … different. Have you ever heard of Project Sinister?”

Obviously, he’d said something right, for his question brought Osborn out of the shadows. The man was encased in some form of armour. It was a dark green, almost sickly in colour. There were no repulars or arc technology that Sterns could see, so he knew that it wasn’t based on Stark Tech. As Osborn stepped further into the light, Sterns realised that the only part of Osborn himself that was visible was the man’s head and even that had tech reaching up his neck beside his ears.

“What do you know of Project Sinister?” Osborn countered.

“I know that the two of us, as well as a number of others, are on the list,” Sterns replied.

“Really? And what do you bring to the Project?” Osborn asked.

“My brain,” Stern replied simply and, considering the distended forehead that he’d acquired after the
‘incident’ he thought that that really should be enough of an answer.

“I see,” Osborn replied and stepped even further into the light. “I understand that our … benefactors are now out of the picture.”

“They are. That doesn’t mean that we can’t proceed anyway,” Sterns replied. “And perhaps even improve on their plan.”

“There are others,” Osborne stated and Sterns easily saw what the man wasn’t saying.

“There are,” he agreed. “And we will find them and bring them together to create something … extraordinary.”

“Yet you came to me first. Why?” Osborn demanded.

“To be honest, your money,” Sterns shrugged. “But now that I see you, I believe that my decision was … fortuitous. If you are as powerful as that armour suggests, then our goals became that much easier to attain.”

“You have no idea,” Osborn grinned.

Sterns watched as Osborn tapped something on the inside of his left arm. Instantly, an eerie green light appeared from the right. Looking that way, Sterns could see dozens, no hundreds of silver spheres all lit from lights above where they sat in rows on shelves. His inspection of the other weapons in the room was interrupted by a device powering up and lifting off of the ground. It was slightly curved downwards and looked to be perfectly designed for someone to stand on while operating it.

“I think Project Sinister is off to a good start,” Stern commented. “I assume that you have a private plane?”

“I do,” Osborn replied.

“Excellent. In that case, how do you feel about taking a trip to Alaska?” he asked.

Chapter End Notes

A/N - I’ve finally caught up with my pre-written chapters so from now on, I’ll be dropping back to only posting once a week.
We Lost Our Wizards

Surprisingly, Harry had only been waiting in the small lounge area set outside the Office of the Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizardry in the Woolworth Building of New York City for five minutes before he was ushered inside. The fact that he’d arrived slightly early and consequently, was inside the office early, didn’t make sense to Harry; bureaucracies – and especially magical ones – were never on time and especially never early.

Having been summoned to the ICW, Harry expected that he was to be questioned about his role in the Battle at the Triskelion and the downfall of S.H.I.E.L.D., just as he had been at the US government hearing. Instead, he found only four wizards seated in comfortable-looking chairs around a coffee table. At his entrance, the four rose and turned to face him.

“Mister Potter, thank you for coming,” the wizard wearing the most expensive-looking robes said, holding out his hand.

The man’s coffee-coloured skin and snow-white hair, not to mention the many laugh lines on his face was one that Harry’d seen many times before in every wizarding newspaper that he’d read over the past few years.

“Supreme Mugwump Jakande. It’s an honour, Sir,” Harry replied, shaking the offered hand.

“May I present the ICW Delegate from America, Lonefeather,” Jakande said, indicating the Native American to his left.

“Delegate Lonefeather,” Harry said, copying the man’s bow.

“The ICW Delegate from Greece, Alexander Sarris,” Jakande continued. “And finally, Delegate Horatio Moon from Great Britain.”

“It’s nice to finally meet you, Mister Potter, I’ve heard a lot about you,” Moon stated, shaking Harry’s hand. “Mostly from my daughter.”

“Moon?” Harry asked, rapidly searching his memory before locking on to a girl he’d gone through Hogwarts with. “As in Lilith Moon?”

“My daughter,” Moon beamed.

“Gentlemen?” Jakande said, indicating the seats.

As each settled down, a house elf popped into being and poured each of them a cup of tea.

“I’m sure that you’re wondering why we asked you here,” Jakande said to Harry.

“I’m assuming that it’s got something to do with what happened at the Triskelion,” Harry replied warily.

“In part, yes,” Jakande replied.

“It is our understanding that you and the Avengers released copious amounts of S.H.I.E.L.D. intelligence to the world,” Lonefeather stated.

“We did,” Harry acknowledged before elaborating. “S.H.I.E.L.D. isn’t what we thought it was. It had been infiltrated by HYDRA and a lot of its secrets were actually HYDRA secrets. By releasing
those files, we hoped to undermine what they were trying to do and to get the rest of the world to see the threat that they posed.”

“S.H.I.E.L.D. had a lot of … sensitive files. Is there anything that we should be concerned about?” Sarris asked.

“If you’re asking if there are files out there about the magical world, then the answer is no,” Harry assured them. “We made sure to erase any files that even hinted at our existence before anything was released.”

“We thank you and your team for upholding the Statute of Secrecy,” Jakande said solemnly.

“How many know about the magical world?” Moon asked.

“Not as many as there used to be,” Harry replied. “Only the agents with top S.H.I.E.L.D. clearance or the members of the World Security Council knew of the existence of the magical world and most of them were killed in HYDRA’s uprising.”

“Thank you, that tallies with our own information,” Jakande nodded. “Actually, that brings us to the main purpose of our inviting you here.”

Harry quirked an eyebrow at the man.

“What you are not aware of is the fact that the ICW had its own operatives within S.H.I.E.L.D. keeping tabs on the organisation,” Jakande stated.

“Let me guess, you’ve lost contact with your wizards?” Harry half-asked, half-stated. “And you’d like me to go in and find them and bring them home?”

“Indeed,” Moon nodded.

Harry took a breath as he processed the request. He, a known magic user to the world, was much less likely to set off any alarms doing this than a team of Hit Wizards would. The problem was the fact that S.H.I.E.L.D. had lost control of so much that it was even doubtful that he’d be able to find the missing operatives, let alone find them alive.

“How many? Where were they based? And what was their mission?” he asked.

“Their mission was simple: keep an eye on S.H.I.E.L.D. and any other no-maj agencies to ensure that the magical world is not exposed,” Jakande said, as he picked up a folder from beside his chair. “You will find everything you need to know in there.”

“Thank you,” Harry replied, taking the folder and beginning to flip through it.

“There are ten wizards in total, under the command of Daimon Mavrodi,” Jakande continued. “All are either able Hit Wizards or have Auror training. Their last communication stated that all ten were based at S.H.I.E.L.D. Base Kratos.”

Harry looked up in surprise. “All ten at the same location? That seems a little … redundant. Wouldn’t having them spread out across S.H.I.E.L.D. bases make more sense? For nothing else than to keep a wider eye on things.”

“That is how they were originally placed,” Lonefeather agreed. “However, over the past nine months or so, they each received orders to report to Kratos Base.”
Harry frowned at that. One or two, he could understand. But all ten? No. There was something else at play here, something that the ICW was unaware of.

“Kratos Base is located in northern Greece, not far from the border to Macedonia,” Sarris said and coincidentally explaining his presence at the meeting. “My Ministry, Aurors and Hit Wizards stand ready to assist you if and when necessary.”

“Thank you,” Harry nodded.

“The sooner that you can assure us that our operatives haven’t been compromised or forced to give up intelligence that should remain secret, the better we will feel,” Jakande said.

“Don’t worry, Supreme Mugwump, I’ll read through the files today and expect to be heading to Kratos either tonight or tomorrow morning at the latest,” Harry assured him.

“You have our thanks,” Jakande replied as he stood.

Harry shook each of their hands, gave one final nod and then, with the file tucked under one arm, strode from the room.

ooo00ooo

“Gandalf! Your survived,” Tony exclaimed, swivelling about on his bar stool as Harry exited the elevator in Avengers Tower.

“There was some doubt?” Harry retorted.

“Well, who knows what you magic folk’ll get up to when you all get together. For all we know, this whole get up thing you lot have got is just a cover for sacrificing goats and dancing naked on deserted islands while drinking cocktails.”

“We do not do such a thing!” an indignant Daphne spluttered from where she’d been quietly talking with Pepper and Jane.

“Ignore him. He knows better,” Harry replied, flicking a finger in Tony’s direction.

“OW! Hey! What was that for?” Tony yelped as he jumped off of the stool and began hopping about and rubbing his butt.

“Stinging hex?” Daphne asked.

“Seemed appropriate,” Harry shrugged.

“I should have you over more often,” Jane called. “Perhaps he’d learn to think before he talks.”

“Oi! No picking on the guy who owns the place. That’s a rule here, you know,” Tony groused.

“No, it’s not,” Darcy replied, sitting up from the couch that she’d been laying on.

“Well, it should be,” Tony sulked.

“How’d it go?” Steve asked.

“Not as I was expecting,” Harry replied, taking a seat. “They didn’t seem to care too much about what went down at the Triskelion. Although, they did thank us for protecting the secret of the magical world before we released the data.”
“And so they should,” Tony nodded. “Then what’d the big wigs of the magical world want?”

“Seems they’ve lost some of their wizards,” Harry said, placing the folder that he’d been given on the coffee table.

“Lost some wizards?” Daphne repeated.

“Yeah. Ten wizards posing as S.H.I.E.L.D. agents that they haven’t heard from since HYDRA attacked,” Harry elaborated.

“Are you telling me S.H.I.E.L.D. was infiltrated by not only HYDRA but wizards as well?” Sam asked. “So much for being the epitome of a secret spy agency.”

“I’m guessing that their mission was to protect the secrets of your world?” Steve asked.

“Yep,” Harry confirmed. “But get this, all ten were based at the same location.”

“That’s not a sound strategy for gathering the most information,” Steve frowned and glanced at Bucky who was leaning against the far wall.

“That’s what I thought,” Harry nodded, noting Bucky’s nod of agreement.

“You are going to find the missing wizards, aren’t you?” Daphne asked.

“Of course I am,” Harry replied. “I’ll head out tomorrow after I’ve been through these files.”

“Where are they supposed to be?” Tony asked.

“Kratos Base,” Harry replied.

“Northern Greece,” Steve added before Harry could. “That’s one of the ones that HYDRA took control of after the dust settled. You can count me in.”

Harry looked up in surprise.

“What?” he asked.

“You’re not going alone into a HYDRA base,” Steve elaborated. “You’ll need back up and no one knows HYDRA like I do.”

“I do,” Bucky corrected grimly. “I’ll go too.”

“You will not,” Daphne counted. “As your Healer, I get to say when you’re cleared to leave this Tower and right now, you’re not ready. Yes, we’ve begun making some progress, but it’s no where near as much as I’d like. And I definitely do not want you in a situation that may see you regress.”

“She’s right, Buck,” Steve said. “And you know the rules, Doc’s get to overrule us mere soldiers.”

“Don’t worry, man; I’ll watch his back for you,” Sam added.

For a moment, it looked as though Bucky was about to rebel but, after a fierce glare at everyone, he sighed and gave a singular nod.

“Make sure you do. I’m only just starting to remember him, I’d hate for him to be killed before I understand what I’d be missing,” Bucky stated.
“Take Thor with you,” Jane piped up. “He’s getting restless cooped up here; an outing with some smiting might be just what he needs.”

“Well, sounds like you don’t need me then,” Tony stated. “Which is good, ’cause Bruce and I are in the midst of developing some stuff that’ll help us in the long run.”

“Care to share?” Steve asked.

“Nope. It’s not ready yet. You’re just gonna have to be patient,” Tony replied.

“What about the squirts? You’re not thinking of leaving them alone at your place are you?” Darcy asked.

“A fifteen year old boy and a sixteen year old girl alone in an apartment for however long this takes?” Harry said. “Not on your life. I was hoping that I could have Teddy and Doreen move in here for a couple of days.”

“We’d be delighted to have them,” Pepper said.

“I’ll look after them,” Darcy volunteered eagerly.

Harry’s panicky eyes darted to Jane and Pepper and only settled when both women gave an almost imperceptible nod indicating that they’d watch all three.

“Thanks, Darcy, I appreciate it,” Harry said.

“If we’ve got a mission, then we’d better go over the particulars,” Steve said, moving to sit beside Harry.

“I have informed Thor that his presence is requested,” Jarvis stated out of nowhere.

“Thanks,” Harry absently as he opened the folder so that he, Steve and Sam could read the files that it contained.

“ooo00ooo

“What do you think of the recruits?” Clint asked from where he leant against the side of the great window looking down into the Danger Room.

Bobbi stood in near identical pose to Nat, both in the centre of the room, their legs wide for balance and their arms crossed. Even their facial expressions were similar – a slight frown as their eyes tracked the four working out below.

“Parker has potential,” Bobbi allowed. “Walters, too, if she ever let herself go – regardless of what form she’s in.”

“Jennifer is trying to keep a tight lid on her emotions so that she doesn’t ‘Hulk out’,” Clint commented.

“Something that she’s going to have to learn to how to relax; it could save her life sometime,” Nat stated.

“Not to mention whoever she’s teamed up with,” Bobbi added.

“And the others?” Clint asked.
“The kids?” Bobbi asked, glancing across at her fellow ex-S.H.I.E.L.D. agent. “They’re just kids, playing at being a ‘hero’ right now. Yes, Green’s got something, what with her reflexes, strength and agility, but she’s still just a kid without anything that really matters. Up here,” she tapped her head in emphasis. “As for Potter’s godson, it’s a game. He’s got magic, but no idea how to use it. And he’s still in magic school, isn’t he? So, his repertoire is probably still very limited.”

“What would you say if I told you that Potter and Murdock have been going out on patrol with Parker and Green and fighting bad guys a few times a week?” Clint asked lightly.

“Really?” Bobbi asked.

Her renewed interest in the two was shown by the way that her body instantly tilted forward slightly as she looked down and Clint smiled. He might just get her yet.

As the three watched, Peter shot a web straight up towards them to stick on the wall just above their window. With a jump, he swung up, flattening his body as his swinging arc reached its apex and shot between the spinning discs that threatened to cut him to pieces. Doreen, meanwhile, also leapt high, almost straight up in the air and over a passing piece of machinery spraying flames from one end of it.

Bobbi’s eyebrows rose in shock as Doreen reached down as the machine passed underneath her, grabbed it and brought it up and over her head. Her legs tucked up under her in a squat as she headed back towards the ground. The machine was slammed into the ground seconds before Doreen landed. Sparks erupted from it along with enough smoke to nearly hide her from view. The outcome, though, was assured – Doreen 1, machine, 0.

“Maybe she’s got a bit more potential than she first showed,” Bobbi allowed.

Clint couldn’t help but laugh.

“Now, imagine what she’d be like with a bit of proper training. Hell, imagine what all of them would be like with some training,” he said.

Bobbi’s eyes flicked about the room below, taking in Peter using his webbing to gum up the spinning blades and Jennifer and Lupin working their way through the obstacle course at ground level.

“Avengers Academy, huh?” Bobbi said.

“Technically, Lupin’s not a part of that,” Nat stated. “He’s simply having ‘fun’ with his friends while Potter’s off at that meeting of his.”

Clint couldn’t help but snort.

“How long do you think it’ll be before he throws on some kind of suit and joins that lot properly?” he asked.

“According to Potter, he’s got another three years at that magic school of his,” Nat stated.

“Yeah and you can bet anything that he’ll be here every holiday wanting to suit up with the rest of them,” Clint remarked.

“There’s rules about magicals using wands outside of school before they reach their majority,” Nat countered. “Which is why he’s not using his now.”
“Won’t stop him,” Clint predicted.

“Better he get some proper training in now, then; to use his hands, feet and brain before he trusts that wand of his too much,” Bobbi stated.

“Couldn’t agree more,” Clint beamed. “So, you up for the job?”

“Yes. Yes, I think I am,” she replied, her eyes still focussed on the four below.

“You know, there’s no time like the present,” Nat suggested.

Bobbi looked between the two for a moment before grinning.

“You’re right. They want to be in Avengers Academy? Let’s show them what it means to be an Avenger,” she said.

Together, the three moved towards the door and the stairs beyond.

The foursome didn’t quite tumble out of the elevator when it appeared but it was a very near thing. Teddy and Doreen were definitely leaning on each other as they limped across the room, one arm draped around the other for support. Peter’s walk looked incredibly stiff, as though he was trying extremely hard not to bend his left knee. As for Jennifer, her hair had come loose from its customary ponytail and now hung lank, loose and damp around her shoulders. All four were breathing hard, their clothes plastered to their body with sweat.

“What happened to you?” Darcy asked, wrinkling her nose at the first waft of body odour reached her.

“Us,” a happy-sounding Clint beamed as he, Nat and Bobbi emerged from the elevator behind them.

“You?” Harry asked flatly from where he sat with Steve, Sam and Thor going over the last of the files for their upcoming mission to northern Greece. “And what exactly have you been up to?”

“The Avengers Academy just had their first training session with their new instructor,” Clint replied.

“You’ve agreed?” Pepper asked excitedly.

“I have,” Bobbi replied.

“And what’s your assessment of those three?” Tony asked.

“Four,” Bobbi countered.


“Not yet,” Clint replied, waving off the objection.

“Clint’s right, Uncle Harry,” Teddy said, straightening slightly from where he’d slumped onto the lounge beside Doreen. “After this last week with you and Doreen and Peter and the rest of the Avengers, I want to join too.”

“You’re not old enough,” Harry stated, grasping the first thing that came to mind.
Daphne’s snort ripped his head around.

“What?” he asked.

“Philosopher’s stone. Chamber of Secrets. Basilisk,” she said simply. “How old were you again?”

“Knew I shouldn’t have let Luna print those articles,” Harry groused. Then, “but that was different!”

“You’re right. It was. You did that stuff without training. At least your godson is going to get some training to make sure that he doesn’t kill himself,” Daphne replied.

“Wait a minute!” Tony called, waving his hands about. “Articles? What articles?”

“By basilisk, do you mean one of those imaginary snake creature things that can kill with a single glance?” Jane asked.

“They’re not imaginary,” Harry stated.

“No, they’re not,” Daphne agreed before asking in the most polite voice possible. “How big was the one you fought again?”

Harry scowled at her all the more when he realised that everyone in the room was looking at him, most of them leaning forward in eagerness. Apparently, that’s what came from glossing over most of his background – it made people far too inquisitive for Harry’s own good.

“Sixty feet,” Harry said before quickly trying to change the topic. “But we were talking about Teddy being too young to be in the Academy.”

“Sixty feet,” Teddy breathed wide-eyed. “How old were you?”

“It was the end of second year,” Harry sighed, “so, twelve.”

“What in the world caused you to fight a sixty foot snake when you were twelve?” Sam asked.

“I wasn’t given much choice in the matter,” Harry replied. “It was trying to kill me, after all.”

“Good thing you have magic, hey, magic man?” Darcy grinned.

Once again, Harry sighed.

“I didn’t kill it with magic,” he said and then answered the question that he knew was coming. “I used a sword.”

“A sword, you say? A tale worthy of a warrior, then,” Thor laughed. “You must tell us and spare no detail.”

“It was no big deal,” Harry tried to pass off the entire thing.

“I want copies of those articles,” Tony stated, pointing at Daphne. “Everything about him that there is that he’s not telling. I suspect that he’s been keeping all the good stuff to himself for far too long.”


“Are you finished?” Harry growled.
“For now,” Daphne replied sweetly.

“Yep, I want them all,” Tony stated, a sentiment that was echoed all around the room.

“Getting back to the matter at hand?” Harry said. “Avengers Academy, Teddy?”

“Yeah. Come on, Uncle Harry. You know it’ll be good for me. Think of all the things I’ll learn. Not to mention getting to have fun with Doreen and Peter,” Teddy replied.

“Fun?” Bobbi repeated, one eye-brow raised.

“I would have thought this morning would have taught you something, kid,” Clint snorted.

“Today was just a warm-up session, to see what you could do and for me to work out the best way to train you up properly,” Bobbi stated.

“Warm up?” Jennifer asked, sounding as though she wanted to pass out.

Harry’s eyes were held by Teddy’s pleading ones for a minute until, with a sigh, he relented.

“Fine. But you get to tell your grandmother,” he said.

“Thanks, Uncle Harry,” Teddy beamed.

“Knew he’d agree,” Doreen stated, giving Teddy a hug. “He’s really just a big softy.”

Harry couldn’t help but groan as Teddy morphed his face into an exact replica of Harry’s, albeit a sweaty, tired-looking one.

“Hey, how’d you do that?” Tony asked. “I didn’t see you use a wand.”

Teddy looked between Harry and Tony with confusion.

“I’m a metamorphmagus. Didn’t Uncle Harry tell you?” Teddy asked.

“No he did not,” Tony replied, sending a scowl in Harry’s direction. “So, metamorphmagus. What’s that mean, exactly?”

“It means that I can change any part of my body to look like something or someone else,” Teddy replied.

“It’s a rather rare magical ability; there’s only been a handful worldwide in the past century,” Daphne supplied.

“My mum was one,” Teddy stated.

“How’s it work?” Tony asked.

Teddy shrugged and morphed his face to a copy of Tony’s own.

“I just concentrate and make it happen,” he said.

“Are you altering your very genes or simply structure?” Tony mused, staring intently, his face now mere inches from the copy of his own. “You’ll give me a blood sample so that I can run some tests, won’t you?”

“No blood samples,” Daphne stated.
“Excuse me, Healer Greengrass,” Harry said, raising one hand, “but as far as I understood it, you are only here to help Bucky there; not to be the Healer for all of us.”

He paused for a second, judging his moment. Just as she was opening her mouth to retort, Harry threw down his challenge.

“Well, unless you’re willing to become the Avengers Healer on record full-time, I’m going to have to ask you to stop giving out unsolicited Healing instructions.”

This time it was Daphne’s turn to glare.

“If you think I’m going to let you use that to start giving out potions any time you please again, you’ve got another thing coming, Potter,” she stated forcefully. “Fine. Until such time as Bucky’s mind is completely healed, I will take on the role of Healer to … to whatever this is.”

“You said it yourself, that could take months, possibly years,” Harry said slyly.

“A Greengrass does not go back on her word,” Daphne preened.

“Great. Glad that’s settled. Good to have you on board,” Harry grinned.

Daphne’s eyes narrowed at him.

“You planned that, didn’t you?” she accused.

“The Hat did want to place me in Slytherin,” Harry replied lightly.

“What!” Daphne all-but-yelled.

“Um, us mere mortals have no idea what you two are on about,” Tony stated. “I think we really need to get copies of those books and whatever here pronto.”

“Jarvis, put in a call to Hermione, would you?” Pepper said. “Somehow, I suspect that she can get every single one of them to us before the day is out.”

“Traitor,” Harry said, looking at the red-haired woman.

Pepper’s answer was simply an innocent smile and a shrug.

Gaining access to the airport without untoward attention was a simple matter – the name ‘Osborn’ had doors being opened immediately. That same name had heads being turned away and blind eyes become the norm, despite Norman’s unusual appearance – the trench coat that he wore, completely buttoned as it was, only reached to mid-calf, leaving the man’s metallic green exoskeleton still somewhat visible. Thankfully, Sterns’ own distinctive appearance was likewise ignored.

Their path through the airport towards Norman’s private jet took them through the less travelled areas, the areas that usually only the staff inhabited. Sterns took an interest in everything, this being new to him. At each open doorway, he would glance in curiously, letting his eyes rove over what was inside in the seconds that he had before he passed.

Just as he passed the security office, Sterns froze. There was something …

Closing his eyes, he allowed his eidetic memory free reign. The last few seconds replayed themselves in his mind. A slight frown appeared on his face as he replayed the scene a second time,
this time at a much reduced speed.

There! The third monitor from the top, two in from the right.

The face that had glanced up at the camera was one that he knew and one that he needed. He was in
the file. His presence here was most unexpected, indeed the odds … No, Sterns knew that he had no
time to calculate them if he wanted to intercept this most fortuitous occurrence before it slipped from
his grasp.

Stepping back, Sterns searched the monitors again, finding his quarry with ease. As he passed from
screen to screen, his path became obvious.

“I will catch up with you at the plane,” he stated to Osborn. “There’s a man here that will be of use
to us.”

Norman simply shrugged. “As you wish; it’ll take a bit for them to load my cargo anyway.”

With that, Stern strode away.

He emerged into the main part of the airport from a side door and paused as he looked over the
crowd.

A smile appeared as he recognised the long, grey overcoat and distinctive walk of his quarry.

With hurried steps, Sterns walked after him, catching up with him just as he’d turned into a slightly
less crowded part of the airport.

“Mister Myers,” Sterns called.

Instantly, Myers spun around.

“Sorry, mate, you’ve got the wrong bloke. My name’s Fred Slade,” Myers replied quickly with a
distinctive drawl that Sterns placed as ‘Australian’.

“That is one of the aliases that you are fond of using, Mister Myers,” Sterns replied, “and there’s no
need for you to use that boomerang here, I am not your enemy.”

Slowly, Myers’ hand emerged from inside his coat. His very demeanour screamed caution and that
he was ready to either fight or flee, depending on the next words out of Sterns’ mouth.

“I understand your particular talents and believe that I have the perfect way for you to utilise them,”
Sterns said.

“Yeah, what’s that?” Myers asked.

“There was a special group being put together, one that you were considered to be a prime candidate
for,” Sterns began.

“Sinister,” Myers interrupted. “Yeah, I was briefed. Thought that that would have been nixed with
the guys in charge running afoul of those bloody Avengers, though.”

Sterns smiled. “Yes, well, let’s just say that I don’t believe we need their oversight to have some fun,
shall we?”

“Mate, I like the way you think,” Myers smiled and finally seemed to relax. “So, what’s the plan?”
“If you’ll follow me, we have a jet awaiting,” Sterns replied.

“Righto,” Myers nodded before falling in step with Sterns.

They’d barely gone a dozen metres when the questions that Sterns could see building finally burst from Myers.

“Look, I just gotta ask. Where we off to anyway? And what happened to yer noggin? You take a nasty bump of something?”

“Or something, Mister Myers. Or something,” Sterns replied with a smile.
The gentle bank of the quinjet had Harry’s head lifting from the book that he’d been reading. Laying it aside, he moved towards the cockpit.

“Another course change?” Harry asked.

From the pilot’s seat, Sam glanced back at him.

“Hey, don’t blame me, it’s all these governments that aren’t so happy with the Avengers at the moment and their insistence that we don’t fly through their airspace without clearance,” Sam replied.

“It’s to be expected,” Steve sighed. “After the way that we dismantled S.H.I.E.L.D. – on U.S. soil, no less – they’re all wary that we’ll do the same with other spy agencies.”

“Governments do like to ensure that their secrets remain secret,” Thor agreed.

“Which country are we avoiding this time?” Harry asked.

“Germany,” Sam replied. “And that should be the last on the list. Switzerland, Austria and Hungary all have no problems with us. And I was making sure that we’d be giving Latveria a wide berth in any case.”

“How long to Kratos Base?” Steve asked.

“Couple of hours,” Sam shrugged.

Leaning over, Harry tapped a couple of buttons and brought up a map of northern Greece on the monitor.

“The Grecian Ministry of Magic has assured me that we can insert here without alerting either the locals,” Harry said, tapping one particular spot on the map. “It’ll be a small hike to reach the Base.”

“Caution is wise when facing an unknown enemy,” Thor nodded.

“And with HYDRA in the mix, anything’s possible,” Steve added.

Kratos Base, it seemed, had been established towards the top of a small mountain that overlooked a deep ravine. Far below, a fast moving river flowed over numerous craggy rocks and even the occasional log. The only patches of green anywhere in the ravine came from the small shrubs that had managed to survive the harsh conditions. There was little cover for any human or animal in that ravine – anyone or anything coming from that direction would be instantly seen by watchers in the Base itself. On the opposite side of the mountain, numerous gun turrets had been placed, ensuring that no one could approach on their ‘blind’ side.

The manor – for that is what Kratos Base appeared to be at first glance – was large. It was three stories tall and nearly a hundred metres wide along the face of the mountain. Its true bulk, though, had been carefully hidden. According to the files that Tony had teased out of the S.H.I.E.L.D. database for them before they left, they knew that there were half a dozen extra levels hidden within the mountain itself.

While Kratos’ primary mission was to oversee the numerous countries within this part of Europe, it
was also one of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s top research divisions, focusing on developing systems that would eventually be installed in the helicarriers, jumpjets and other flight-capable vehicles that S.H.I.E.L.D. utilized.

Currently, the four Avengers were hunkered down on a ridge on the northern part of the valley, observing the Base through binoculars.

“Why don’t I take a look from up top?” Sam suggested. “Get a bird’s eye view of what we’re facing.”

“Not yet,” Steve frowned. “There are eight anti-air guns hidden around the Base. They detect you, you’ll be blown out of the sky.”

“I was about to offer the same, albeit using my broom,” Harry stated. “Perhaps a disillusionment spell? I could sneak in on foot and take a closer look.”

“Alright, but surveillance only,” Steve agreed after a minute’s thought. “No heroics; that’s what we’re all here for.”

Shuffling backwards, Harry rose to his haunches, pulled his wand and tapped himself on the head. The other three watched as … something seemed to wash down the wizard’s body until he’d completely disappeared.

“Thor?” Harry’s voice appeared slightly to the side and higher than his mouth had been seconds before.

“If I concentrate, I can just make you out,” the Asgardian frowned.

“Good,” Harry replied. “Be back as soon as I can.”

The only way that Sam and Steve had to track Harry’s progress was the slight change in position of Thor’s head. There was no sound of footsteps, no loose rocks tumbling away, nothing to mark Harry’s movement towards the Base.

A sharp jerk from Thor before his eyes began darting about and his grip tightening on Mjolnir had Steve and Sam also beginning to search for danger.

“What’s wrong?” Steve asked quietly.

“The Seidhr. He’s coming back,” Thor replied.

Harry’s return seemed to be much quicker than his outgoing trek.

“Harry?” Thor asked.

“Oh, sorry, you guys can’t see me, can you?” Harry said before his magic washed down his body, making him visible once again.

“Is something wrong?” Steve asked.

“What? Oh, yeah,” Harry replied. “It’s Teddy. He’s on holiday, came especially to see me, all the way from England. I really shouldn’t have left him. I’ve got to get home and spend time with him.”

“Teddy?” Sam asked, sounding confused. “But I thought your wizarding government asked you to do this and you agreed?”

“I was wrong. Teddy’s much more important,” Harry nodded emphatically.
“I am sorry, my friend,” Thor said before promptly slapping Harry across the face.

Harry’s head whipped to the side and his eyes went unfocused. When he turned back, a hand holding his cheek where Thor had slapped him, he had a puzzled look on his face.

“What?” he asked. “What am I doing back here?”

“I thought as much,” Thor said. “You were under some kind of enchantment.”

“I was?” Harry asked, looking between the three of them.

“You came back early claiming that you had to get back to New York to spend time with Teddy,” Steve frowned.

“I did?” Harry asked.

Comprehension seemed to dawn then.

“Wizard-repelling ward,” Harry said. “Had to be. At least I can’t think what else it would be.”

“Wizard-repelling ward?” Sam asked.

“Yeah. It’s magic designed to stop anyone magical from coming into a certain area,” Harry explained. “Anyone who does will get an overwhelming desire to go do something else that seems eminently more important. They’re not all that common, unlike muggle-repelling wards that keep non-magicals away from magical areas.”

“And you walked into one?” Steve asked. “Who put it there?”

“Good question,” Harry said, staring towards where the invisible ward must be. “Only a magical could put it there. And there’s nothing in the files that the ICW gave me to indicate that the undercover wizards put anything like that in place. No, something’s not right here.”

“Should I fly in if you can’t get in?” Sam offered.

“No, I’ll do it,” Harry said determinedly.

“But the enchantment …” Thor reminded him.

“Won’t affect my Animagus form,” Harry replied.

A second later, in Harry’s place, stood a sparrowhawk. It took one last look up at the three men standing around it before launching itself skyward. They watched as the sparrowhawk soared high above, seemingly catching wind currents before diving, rising once again and winging its way down the ravine.

“He’s in,” Steve stated.

Harry felt the magic of the wizard-repelling ward wash over him as he soared through it. At the speed that he’d been going, though, it had absolutely no chance of affecting him, assuming that it was likely to in the first place. That was the one drawback of such wards – although the ring around the warded area was usually quite thick, it was possible to get past them if one went fast enough. Not that that had ever happened before; even at a run, a man couldn’t move fast enough to do so. Only the fact that Harry was diving through them as a sparrowhawk afforded him the protection that he
As he soared towards his target, his brain idly wondered what would happen if a muggle tried to fly a plane or helicopter through muggle-repelling wards. Of course, exactly what the consequences of that would be on the electronics of the vehicle was anyone’s guess. Thankfully, that was one scenario that had never occurred.

To human eyes, even aided by the binoculars that they’d been using, Kratos Base appeared deserted – not that they believed that for a second. To Harry, though, with his enhanced hawk vision and from his much closer position, he could see that there were a number of guards stationed at various vantage points inside the Base.

At first look, the guards appeared to have all angles of approach covered but Harry wasn’t prepared to take that at face value.

Flaring his wings, he landed on a small outcropping, shuffled himself around and settled in to take a closer look. His sharp eyes picked each guard out and he examined their line of sight.

Unfortunately, even after nearly half an hour of watching, he determined that his first assessment was correct: there was no way to approach the Base unobserved. That, of course, left the direct approach.

The position of the eight anti-aircraft guns meant that any approach by air had to be via a low flight through the ravine itself. That wouldn’t be a problem for Thor and Sam, nor for himself, either as he currently was or on his broom. Steve, unfortunately, couldn’t fly. At least by himself. Once they were inside, though, that’s when the real fun would begin.

Finding ten men who may or may not be alive in a base that size wasn’t going to be easy.

Harry’s thoughts were interrupted by the sight of two men walking past the long, glassed in windows overlooking the ravine. The fact that both were wearing wizarding robes completely threw him off his previous train of thought.

Leaping skywards, Harry flew in for a closer look.

His eyes zoomed in on their faces seeking confirmation. And then he got it. Mavrodi and Lawnton, he identified them from their ICW files. Alive and well inside a HYDRA base. They were HYDRA? If Harry could have, he’d have shaken his head right then. Exactly how that’d happened, he had no idea. Wizards tended to stay out of muggle politics, except to observe and keep and eye on what they were doing.

And then things took an even more confusing turn. Something golden around Mavrodi’s neck caught his attention. A symbol on a chain. A symbol that he knew well, albeit from many years before. A triangle with a circle inside it and a line bisecting it all. The symbol of the Deathly Hallows.

These men were searching for the Deathly Hallows? He supposed that it was possible. Pointless, but possible. After all, Harry himself was the only one who knew where the three powerful, legendary objects were hidden – separately, he might add – and he wasn’t telling.

The memory of when he’d first seen that symbol swept through Harry’s mind and the conversations surrounding that particular time surfaced as well. That symbol had even been used on the very gates of Nurmengard Prison, built by Gellert Grindelwald and eventually holding him until his death at the hands of Riddle.

Grindelwald.
Once again, Harry eyed the symbol. Surely not …

With a twist of his wings, Harry spun about and raced back up the ravine.

The spray from the rapids below had all four Avengers damp in seconds. Harry was currently flying so low that the tops of Steve’s boots were only inches above the water. Beside him soared Thor, gripping his hammer, a fierce expression on his face. Sam flew slightly behind and above the other two, his wings needing a little more room to manoeuvre in than what was offered so close to the river.

Harry glanced back at his passenger, assuring himself that Steve was seated properly on the Lightning Bolt.

“We’re about to hit the ward,” he called. “Make sure I don’t turn us around.”

“I’ve got you,” Steve called back.

And then, as he hit the leading edge of the wizard-repelling ward, Harry felt his mind fog. Knowing what was happening only marginally helped. As though he was fighting through soup, Harry forced his hands to remain firm on the broom handle, only altering its course as necessary due to the zigs and zags needed to avoid crashing.

A sharp pinch on his arm had Harry shaking his head. Through the fog of his mind, he noted that Thor had pulled ahead. That was significant for some reason and he frowned, trying to work out what it was. A second pinch, this time on the other arm caused him to glance down. There were four arms. That seemed wrong. He really should get that checked out. New York. That’s where Greengrass was. She was a Healer. She’d know what was wrong and how to fix it.

With that thought in mind, Harry began to turn the broom around only to receive a third, much harder pinch to his arm. This time he shied away, incidentally dragging the head of his broom back on course.

And then, almost all at once, the fog lifted.

Shaking his head, Harry looked back at his passenger, almost in confusion.

“Steve?” he asked.

“I’m guessing we’re through,” Steve replied. “You might want to do something about our speed, it really dropped off when we were passing through that.”

Looking back ahead, Harry could see Thor and Sam well ahead, almost directly underneath the Base itself and beginning to climb towards it.

Funnelling his magic into his Lightning Bolt, Harry put on a burst of speed. At least, as much as he could while carrying a passenger.

The first crack of a gunshot had Sam dodging. The second, this time a burst from what sounded like a mini-gun, had him veering back the way he came.

Shooting straight up, Sam pulled his wings in so that they were all but wrapped around him and spun
like a corkscrew. His hands slapped his sides and his guns attached and assembled themselves.

Pulling out, he took aim and fired at the glass.

“It’s bulletproof!” he called over his earbud.

More gunfire sent him shooting further up and then into a loop to head back down – no way did he want to get high enough for those anti-aircraft guns to have a crack at him.

“Let’s see what Mjolnir makes of it,” Thor replied.

Through his aerial acrobatics, Sam watched as Thor flew straight up, veered towards the window and crashed straight through it.

“We’re in!” Sam called, angling his wings towards the opening.

ooo00ooo

Harry pushed his broom to the limit, aiming for the opening that Thor had made, just as he saw that Sam was doing as well.

A jet of deep orange light shot out from one side of the building towards Sam and Harry’s wand whipped forward. The shield spell that he wanted to use, though, was held back – the distance between them was simply too great.

Thankfully, Sam appeared to have seen it coming, for he barrel-rolled over the top of it.

“What the hell was that?” Sam yelled.


“Just get me close enough,” Steve replied

A slight change in angle had Harry whipping towards the opening directly from its side. Behind him, he felt Steve shifting and Harry gritted his teeth, doing all that he could to keep the broom steady. And then, just as he shot past the opening, he felt the weight on the back of his broom shift dramatically.

Whipping his head back, Harry saw Steve rolling into the building through the broken window.

Now that he was free to move, Harry rocketed up, high above the building, drifted so that he was directly above where that sniping wizard was and allowed his broom to stall out.

As he dropped back towards earth, Harry’s wand began spitting spell after spell, exploding hexes impacting on the side of the building directly where the wizard had been the last time that he saw him.

ooo00ooo

The instant that Steve landed, he rolled back to his feet, plucked his shield from his back and threw it down the corridor. Even as it spun away, Steve raced after it.

He watched as it impacted one man in black clothing, knocking him unconscious, his gun falling limply from his hand before striking a wall and bouncing back towards Steve. Grapping it out of the air, Steve brought it around in front of his body, just in time to block a purple spell shot from a man wearing robes.
As Steve expected after training with Harry, the spell *gonged* on his shield before fizzing out. The unknown wizard, though, hadn’t expected that, freezing momentarily when his spell was simply absorbed. He stayed still just long enough for Mjolnir to come out of the wizard’s blindside and smack into his head.

Steve didn’t bother acknowledging Thor’s help, instead turning back the other way and letting his shield fly once more. It’s path this time took it bouncing off of multiple walls, allowing Steve time to close with the HYDRA agents and engage them. Slapping one hand down, he knocked the gun off target. Grapping that hand, he spun the agent about, directly into the path of a slew of bullets.

His shield began its return journey then, striking one of the remaining two men in the stomach and distracting the other long enough for Steve to close and drop him with a right downwards hook after leaping up to and down from the corridor wall.

ooo00ooo

Sam had been exchanging shots with four HYDRA agents when he felt his world shift away from him. A soft, lilting voice encouraged him to turn around, that the enemy was back the way that he had come. Obediently, Sam did as instructed, his eyes searching and coming to rest on a man in red, white and blue, a circular shield on his arm.

The wonderful, whispering voice suggested that Sam shoot this man and Sam frowned slightly, wondering exactly why he should. There was something about him …

His objections were overwhelmed by the musical voice in his head and he found himself raising his guns, taking careful aim. His fingers were just about to squeeze the trigger when his world exploded.

Sam felt himself being flung away to come crashing down hard into one wall. Dust and smoke billowed around him and he coughed and then coughed again as his lungs demanded air.

From out of the dust, a hand appeared, offering to pull him up. Sam stared at it for a moment before grasping on.

“Sorry about that,” Harry said. “Are you okay?”

Sam stared at him for a moment and shook the last of the fuzziness from his brain.

“What happened?” he asked and then, noticing the massive, jagged hole in the floor, added, “never mind.”

“Huh, looks like I got one of the wizards when I busted through,” Harry grunted, nodding at the robed man laying awkwardly in the middle of the floor some metres away.

“Thanks. I don’t remember seeing him,” Sam replied.

The sound of fighting had the two looking different ways down the corridor.

“I’ve got this way,” Harry stated.

With a nod, Sam activated his wings and soared over the hole that Harry had made and down the corridor.

ooo00ooo

A jet of sickly green light shot out of a doorway and Thor instinctively thrust Mjolnir in its path,
batting the spell harmlessly away into a nearby wall.

“That’s not possible,” the wizard muttered making Thor laugh.

“I have been dealing with magic most of my life, Seidhr,” Thor called as he strode towards the man. A plethora of spells began peppering him and Thor barely paused, simply using Mjolnir to block each and every one.

“My brother, Odin rest his soul, loved nothing more than to cast spells at me. I got quite good at blocking them,” Thor told the now-panicking wizard. “Except his illusions. Always fell for them for some reason.”

The wizard’s eyes were wild now, searching this way and that for a way out of the room that he’d trapped himself in. Seeing no way out, the man brought his wand up once more only for Thor to reach out and pluck it from his hand. A simple twist with his thumb was enough to snap it in half. A strike to the side of the head from Mjolnir put the wizard out of the fight completely.

ooo00ooo

Harry burst through a door and instantly dodged to the right, a shield forming in front of him. He was glad that he’d thrown it up a second later as two spells impacted it, a third shooting through the door that he’d left open.

A further step to the right, a spin and duck had him dodging the next three spells aimed at him while also giving him some room to move.

It looked like he’d hit the jackpot. Three wizards were currently holed up in here, apparently waiting for the invaders to come in and to curse them in a cross-fire.

Channelling his magic, Harry caused his small magical buckler to appear on his off-hand even as he flicked a spell away with it.

And then he began attacking, doing his utmost to keep all three on the backfoot.

Bludgeoners, bombardas, piercing hexes and stunners flew across the room, each spell flowing effortlessly into the next. Chairs exploded, sending wooden splinters towards two of the wizards. The cry of pain from one had Harry grinning, the splinters being blasted back towards him had him spinning about. His dragon hide cloak did the trick, though, taking the impact effortlessly without any harm to himself.

Harry’s momentary lull away from the attackers allowed him to transfigure a filing cabinet into a black bear and directing it towards the other wizards.

Turning back, Harry found that his own trick was being used against him. A pair of wolves were on the approach, their jog rapidly turning into a run.

Pointing his wand at the floor, Harry turned it to ice. Instantly, the wolves’ grip evaporated and they were left scrabbling and sliding about. Harry turned side on, allowing the two to slide straight past him. An exploding hex blew a hole in the wall behind him, allowing the wolves to slide out; conjured bricks prevented them from returning.

In the time that he’d taken to deal with the threat of the wolves, the bear had also been killed, but not, it seemed, before falling on one of the wizards, pinning him to the floor, his wand splintered in his hand.
The spells shot towards him were simply dodged and Harry retaliated with a jet-like flare of flame. Small fires erupted as the desks and splinters of the chairs caught fire causing plumes of smoke and steam from the quickly melting floor to engulf the room.

Ducking low, Harry slipped to the side of the room and crept up while he couldn’t be seen. From what he could tell, the remaining two wizards had stayed exactly where they were.

“Gloria sagittis!” he whispered, shooting a trio of arrows from his wand.

Triple thunks told him that his arrows had missed entirely, striking the far wall instead. His second set of three elicited screams of pain. Honing in on the sound, Harry snapped off a stunner, giving a satisfied nod at the sound of a body thumping to the ground.

When there had been no sound of any movement for nearly five minutes, Harry waved his wand at the air, vanishing the smoke and steam. Peaking out, he took in the room, searching for the last of the enemy. A twisted boot under a smouldering desk was enough for Harry to find him.

Slowly, carefully, his wand trained before him, Harry approached. Seeing an arm still clutching a wand poking out from the desk, Harry strode across and kicked, sending the wand rolling away.

“Mavrodi,” Harry stated grimly, frowning down at the trapped wizard.

“Mage,” Mavrodi returned, telling Harry that he knew who had bested him.

“What are you doing, throwing your lot in with HYDRA?” Harry asked. “You’re a respected Hit Wizard, an operative of the ICW.”

“HYDRA?” Mavrodi repeated, spitting out a glob of blood. “We do not serve HYDRA.”

“You don’t?” Harry asked.

“No! We are the last of Grindelwald’s Knights, charged with bringing about the proper order of the world, with magicals ruling all for the Greater Good of the whole world,” Mavrodi stated vehemently.

“Sorry to break it to you, but Grindelwald’s been dead for years, along with his ‘Greater Good’,” Harry said with a shake of his head. “And there’s a lot more than just muggles out there that you have absolutely no idea about.”

“You think so? Why do you think we placed ourselves within S.H.I.E.L.D. and allied ourselves with HYDRA? To gather knowledge, to understand how to take our rightful place,” Mavrodi replied.

“Well, your rightful place from now on is the inside of an ICW prison,” Harry stated.

From one of the pockets on his belt he pulled a pair of magic-suppression cuffs and dangled them in front of the wizard.

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“Well, your rightful place from now on is the inside of an ICW prison,” Harry stated.

From one of the pockets on his belt he pulled a pair of magic-suppression cuffs and dangled them in front of the wizard.

“There’s an ICW delegation waiting for you at the Grecian Ministry of Magic; I’m sure that they’ll be very interested in hearing about what you and your compatriots have been up to here. Who know, they might even give you a little something to drink, to make sure that you don’t leave anything out when you tell them all about it,” Harry grinned.

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“We’re trapped in here, mate,” Myers stated grimly, a boomerang in each hand, as he stared at the
wreckage of concrete and steel that blocked their path back to the surface.

Sterns barely spared him a glance.

“No. We’re not. We simply need the right tool to create a new exit,” he replied.

“And what would that be?” Osborn asked from where he hovered on his glider ten feet in the air on the far side of the room.

A great hiss of air and a cloud of billowing white mist coalescing around their feet told Sterns that their answer was nearly ready. A series of taps to the computer had the last of the locks released, announced by the *thunk* from the great steel door in front of them. The wheel set in the middle of the door spun on its own and Sterns looked up in eager anticipation.

The ten-foot tall door being pushed open from the inside had both Myers and Osborn spinning around and raising their weapons. Not that they would do any good. Sterns, in comparison, merely stepped forward, his hands behind his back and his head tilted back slightly.

The fingers of a great hand was the first to emerge from the cell. And then, with one massive push, the door slammed back.

The man … creature … abomination standing there was nightmarish to behold. He stood ten feet tall, muscles rippling in his legs, arms, chest, even his neck. Spikes made of what could only be bone could be seen at his elbows and heels. His bald head appeared proportionally small but the ferocious expression that it sported more than made up for it.

“Sterns!” he growled and the sound vibrated the very floor that they were standing on.

“Captain Blonsky,” Sterns replied with the smallest incline of his head.

“I should kill you where you stand,” Blonsky stated.

“Perhaps. But if you did, then it’d be that much harder to exact your revenge on Banner,” Sterns replied.

Blonsky’s eyes darted to the other two in the room before piercing Sterns once more.

“Where am I?” Blonsky asked.

“Alaska. A secret army facility,” Sterns replied. “After your last battle with Banner, you were brought here and placed in cryostasis. You were supposed to stay in there for the rest of your life.”

“How long?” Blonsky growled, his fists clenching and unclenching repeatedly.

“A couple of years,” Sterns replied.

“This revenge you speak of, does it include Ross for what he did to me?” Blonsky asked.

“It could, if you wish,” Sterns replied.

“I’m listening,” Blonsky stated with a grin that sent shudders down the spine of those who saw it.
While The Wizard's Away

“Come in!”

At Doreen’s call, Ted opened the door and looked around the small suite that Doreen had been given for her use. It was just like Teddy’s – a moderate size sitting area with a small kitchenette against one wall, a table that could barely accommodate four people in front of it.

Doreen herself emerged from one of the two doors off to the right, from the look of it, the bedroom as opposed to the bathroom.

“Hey, Ted,” she greeted before she paused and began to frown. “That’s what you’re wearing?”

Ted automatically looked down at himself. He couldn’t see anything wrong with the jeans and black shirt that he was wearing, but then, as he’d been told numerous times by his grandmother, he was a boy and boys tended to have an atrocious fashion sense.

“What’s wrong with it?” he asked cautiously.

Doreen finished shrugging on her old bomber jacket and pulled her fingerless gloves from her pocket before standing with one hand on her cocked hip and her head tilted slightly.

“Well, it’s not exactly gonna do anything to hide your identity, is it?” she asked before quickly ploughing on. “Unless that’s what you’re going for? Like Clint and Thor and Nat. Steve, too, really, although he does wear a helmet when he’s out.”

Ted shook his head. He was sure that he’d walked into the wrong half of a conversation somewhere and was currently having to play catch up.

“I should be hiding my identity?” he asked slowly.

And then he noticed Doreen’s dark brown domino mask sitting on the table as though it was waiting for her.

“Hang on! Are you going out fighting crime?” he asked.

“Sure,” Doreen grinned. “Me and Peter. We figured that you’d want to come, too.”

“But what about Uncle Harry?” Ted asked.

“What about him?” Doreen shrugged. “We’ve been out plenty of times without him. Although usually Matt shadows us when we do.”

“Matt? Is he going with you?” Ted asked.

Once again Doreen shrugged. “Who knows. We never tell him when we are, he just usually shows up. Peter’s the one who normally senses him first, lurking about on the rooftops. So, you are coming with, aren’t you?”

“I’d love to, but I, ah, I don’t have a suit,” Ted replied, rubbing the back of his neck. “And I’m not allowed to do magic anywhere but in Uncle Harry’s basement because it’s warded so that the magic can’t be detected by anyone, including MACUSA.”

“No magic at all?” a despondent-sounding Doreen asked.
Ted shook his head. “Nothing with my wand at all.”

“Nothing with your wand,” Doreen repeated, her eyes narrowed and a mischievous grin on her face. “We can work around that. I’ve seen Harry use plenty of things on crooks that he doesn’t need his wand for.”

“You mean his Weasley products?” Ted asked, his voice gaining in excitement as he realised what she meant. “I know where Uncle Harry keeps them and I can definitely use those without using my wand. Well, most of them. I couldn’t activate the swamp, but the rest, I could.”

“Right. That’s that part sorted. Now you just need a suit. Do you own anything made from the same stuff as Harry uses?” Doreen asked. “That stuff is wicked!”

“Dragon hide,” Ted informed her. “And no, unfortunately not. I’ve never been allowed to buy anything made from it.”

“Where can you buy it?” Doreen asked.

Ted shrugged. “Most magical districts have at least one store that carries dragon hide clothing. But I don’t know where any of them are here in the States. And I don’t have enough gold to pay for it anyway.”

Doreen waved that objection away.

“Tony’s set us all up with accounts,” she told him. “I’m sure that we can get some of your magic gold money from one of your banks if we can get to one. All we’ll need is someone to take us.”

“But the only witch here is Madam Greengrass and I can’t see her taking us shopping,” Ted stated.

“You’re half right,” Doreen grinned. “She’s too prim and proper for this. What we need is a witch who’s a bit more fun and knows something about shopping. You’ve met Lavender, right?”

Doreen’s eyes were plastered wide and there was a matching grin that refused to leave her face as she, Ted and Lavender walked down the steps from the white marble bank called Gringotts. She’d just seen the most bizarre creatures … people … goblins for the second time in her life. Not to mention getting to go on a rollercoaster under the earth to visit a bank vault of all things.

“We’ve got to do that again!” she exclaimed.

“The only way we’d be doing that again anytime soon is if we spent all the gold that we’d just withdrawn,” Teddy laughed, “and that’s not likely to happen anytime soon.”

“I knew that Harry was rich …” Lavender breathed, as wide-eyed as Doreen herself, but supposedly for a slightly different reason.

“That was a Black vault,” Ted shrugged.

“You’re just lucky that he’d added you to the ‘approved’ list so that you could access it,” Lavender replied. “Not to mention that the goblins realised who you were when you said your name.”

“I’m guessing that Harry’s super rich or something?” Doreen asked. “Probably not as rich as Tony, though, hey?”

Lavender gave her a dubious look.
“He’s probably richer,” she said. “Not that he’s ever flaunted it or thrown that fact around. Look. You saw the pile of gold back there?” At Doreen’s nod, she continued. “Well, as Ted said, that was just one of Harry’s vaults. And those gold coins, the galleons, each one of them is equal to about seven US dollars. And there was a mound of coins in it taller than me!”

“So, you’re saying that he won’t even miss this little bit that we took to spend on outfitting Ted,” Doreen grinned.

“I solemnly swear that I’m up to no good,” Ted grinned back at her.

“I’ve heard that before,” Lavender said, her head whipping to stare at him. “I’ve heard Harry say it. And the Weasleys. Usually just before some big prank.”

Doreen and Ted shared a look.

“Is that a problem?” Ted asked uncertainly.

“Nope,” Lavender replied. “At least this time, I’m in on it. Now, what are we looking for here?”

“A suit,” Doreen stated emphatically. “For Ted to wear when he’s Avenger-ing.”

Lavender stared at the pair.

“So, the prank’s on Harry? I can work with that. Especially if it means that I get to do something that I wanted to do years and years ago,” Lavender stated.

“What was that?” Doreen asked curiously.

“Fix a Lupin’s sense of fashion,” Lavender said as the three began walking towards the store that Lavender seemed to have identified for them. “When your dad was teaching us back in my third year at Hogwarts, he always wore the shabbiest, out-of-date clothes imaginable, including his horrid-looking cardigan. I wanted to steal the thing and burn it for its effrontery to fashion.”

Lavender’s near-tirade had quickened her steps, forcing the two teens to a near-jog in order to keep up. She only slowed down once they’d reached the doors to Franklin’s Wizard Wear.

As Lavender held the door open for them, Doreen entered a world of yesterday. At least, that was the first impression that she got from the multitude of racks full of robes that she’d seen witches and wizards wear when she’d visited Britain. Her second glance had her breathing a sigh of relief – most of the store was actually comprised of much more modern styles of clothing, albeit with a slightly odd twist.

“This way,” Lavender said, interrupting her and pointing over her head towards a sign near the back of the store that proclaimed that clothing made from dragon-hide could be found.

“So, what sort of look were you going for?” Lavender asked as her hands seemed to automatically sift through the closest racks.

“I was thinking something similar to Uncle Harry’s,” Ted replied. “That way I’ll fit in better as a magic user to the world without breaking the Statute. Assuming that I can get the same clearance that Uncle Harry has.”

Doreen stared at her friend when he added that last part. Now that he’d mentioned it, she remembered Harry telling her that it took an alien invasion for him to be given permission to use magic as an Avenger in front of people who didn’t know about it.
“Don’t worry about that,” Lavender waved off the fear. “Harry’s said that you could eventually be an Avenger and I’ve never known him to break a promise. If he says you will be one, then you can be sure that he’s got something in the works to take care of the Statute.”

Suddenly, Lavender pulled a cloak from the rack. Doreen had no idea what sort of dragon that it came from – to be honest, she hadn’t even known that there were different types until the night before when she and Ted had spent hours talking together and the subject of dragons had come up.

This cloak, unlike Harry’s blue-grey one, was red, flame-red, with small golden flecks embedded throughout it.

Ted immediately screwed up his nose at it.

“A Chinese fireball?” he asked.

“Yep. You know I saw one once. At the TriWizard Tournament,” Lavender said, staring at the cloak. “Victor Krum had to get past it to get his golden egg.”

“It’s very … Gryffindor-looking,” Ted stated.

Lavender’s head came up so sharply that Doreen somewhat expected to hear her neck crack.

“And what’s wrong with that?” Lavender asked.

“Nothing,” Ted replied quickly, his hands coming up to wave away any objections. “It’s just … I’m a Ravenclaw.”


Almost viciously, Lavender thrust the cloak back onto the rack before pulling out another.

This one seemed to have come from a Chinese Fireball as well, at least that was Doreen’s guess. The difference, though, was that in place of the golden flecks, the flecks were pure jet black. The flecks were sparser at the hood before gradually increasing in frequency until, by the hem of the cloak, it appeared to be a black cloak with only the occasional red fleck embedded in it.

“And before you say anything,” Lavender said, cutting Ted off as he opened his mouth, “it’s either this or the Gryffindor one, there aren’t any others your size to choose from.”

“In that case, this one,” Ted decided instantly.

“I like it,” Doreen said, reaching out to touch the surprisingly supple material. “The black and red is very cool.”

“Good. That’s settled,” Lavender said, folding the cloak over her arm. “What else?”

“Shirt, pants and boots, all dragon-hide,” Ted stated.

“Black, I think,” Lavender stated, glancing at the cloak.

“And a belt,” Doreen added. “Like Harry’s, with all of those wickedly deep pockets.”

“I think Uncle Harry made that himself,” Ted frowned. “But while we’re here, I could do with a new broom. And a few more prank items until I can use magic myself.”

Doreen glanced at the price tag on the cloak and frowned. She might not know a lot about wizarding
money, but it sure seemed to cost a lot.

“Do you have enough to buy all of that?” she asked.

Ted patted his money pouch and grinned at her.

“Reckon so,” he said. “And if not, I guess that means that we’ll just have to head back to Gringotts to get some more.”

Doreen’s eyes instantly lit up to match Ted’s.

“In that case, let’s get shopping!” she grinned.

Skye’s fingers drummed on the tabletop as the phone in her ear rang. While she waited for the guy on the other end to pick up, she reached out and tapped a new command into her laptop.

This hiding out thing was a real buzzkill, she decided. While technically she had more room to stretch out here in the motel than what was available on the Bus, the lack of resources and especially a decent internet connection was annoying as hell. This database search should have been finished ten or fifteen minutes ago; instead, she estimated that she was barely three quarters through combing the various agencies and government databases that she needed to in order to find the information that she and the team were looking for.

“Hello? Skye?” Harry’s voice sounded suddenly in her ear.

“Hey, Harry. Didn’t think you were going to answer there for a minute,” Skye admonished.

“Sorry about that,” Harry replied sounding suitable sheepish. “I was inside the Greek Ministry of Magic with the ICW – reception in there is terrible.”

“That sounds like you’re in Greece,” Skye guessed. “What are you doing there? And it better not be for a holiday to see a bunch of cool magical animals.”

Harry laughed before answering.

“I promised that I wouldn’t do that without you; and I always keep my promises. No, I was there cleaning up a mess.” Harry replied vaguely. “And you can tell Coulson that Kratos Base has been cleared of all HYDRA agents as well.”


“Something like that,” Harry replied. “I’ll tell you all about it next time I see you. Which will be when, by the way?”

Skye sighed and let her eyes rove around the cheap hotel room.

“Not soon enough,” she stated. “We’re hiding out from HYDRA, the Army, everyone really. Would you believe that we’re staying in a motel of all places in …”

A serious throat-clearing had Skye looking up at Coulson as she effortlessly changed what she was about to say.

“… an undisclosable location. We’re closing in on a HYDRA cell using Cybertek and something called the Centipede Program. As soon as this program that I’m running finishes doing its thing,
we’ll know where we’re going next.”

“Need any assistance?” Harry asked. “Say the word and the Avengers will be there.”

Skye moved the phone so that the mouthpiece was against her shoulder as she pinned A.C. with a look.

“Harry’s asking if we’d like the Avengers to help us take on Garrett and Ward and everything,” she stated.

A momentary frown marred Coulson’s face before he slowly shook his head.

“We’re good for now,” he finally said.

“Coulson says he’ll keep your offer in mind,” Skye interpreted for Harry.

“Make sure that you do,” Harry insisted.

“Will do,” Skye replied before getting distracted by the fact that her computer finally finished compiling the records that she’d been searching for.

“If I’m reading this right,” she said to both Harry and to the others in the room with her, “looks like HYDRA’s operating out of Cuba?”

“S.H.I.E.L.D. had a base there,” May stated.

“Cuba’s a bit further away from Greece than New York,” Harry said. “I’ll be back in America within the next day if you need me.”

“Thanks, Harry. Listen, I gotta go, sounds like we’re on the move,” Skye said.

“Stay safe,” Harry said.

“You, too,” she smiled before punching the button to hang up.

ooo00ooo

Natasha resisted the urge to glance at her companion for the third time in as many minutes. She didn’t need to, anyway; it was obvious by the slight frown-lines on his face that something was up with Clint. And really, it’d taken a lot less than that to work that out. For one, the two of them were currently alone, well, as alone as anyone could be while meandering along one of the dozens of paths that criss-crossed Central Park in New York City.

Being out here, in the open, walking as though neither of them had a care in the world, was an almost foreign sensation. Neither of them did things like this. Especially not where there were far too many vantage points for potential assassins to have them covered. As it was, Natasha’s eyes and senses were on heightened alert as she tested the area for hostiles. Clint’s eyes, too, despite his preoccupation with whatever was bothering him, were also constantly on the swivel.

When Clint had suggested that the two of them go for a walk, alone, she’d guessed that there was something that he wanted to talk to her about without anyone being the wiser. And while Avengers Tower was great and there were plenty of places inside its multitude of floors for people to talk, nothing said there could ever be trusted to be held in the strictest of confidences.

Especially with that AI of Tony’s having access to everything. Really, Natasha trusted Jarvis’ discretion only about as far as she could throw Tony, which was actually further than Stark would
Once again, her eyes darted to her companion and Natasha had to consciously ensure that her face didn’t betray her annoyance that he was taking his time in talking to her. Perhaps, she decided, he needed a little nudge. And with the right question or comment, she was sure that she could work out what was bothering him long before he actually got around to voicing it.

“This was a nice idea,” she commented idly. “You and I don’t get much of a chance to spend time together without someone shooting at us.”

“Yeah, we’ve had some great times,” Clint beamed at her. “Remember Morocco?”

“I’d rather not,” Natasha deadpanned.

“Oh, come on; three weeks laying about in the sand working on our tans,” Clint reminded her.

“And being bored out of our brains while we waited for our mark to show his face,” Natasha shot back. “I can think of much better places to go if I want a holiday.”

The smallest of twitches around Clint’s eyes told Natasha that she’d just hit the bullseye.

“Is something wrong with Laura and the kids?” Natasha asked flatly.

“What? No!” a startled Clint replied. “Why’d you ask that?”

Natasha didn’t even bother answering such a dumb question.

The two walked on in silence for the next few minutes before Clint sighed and glanced at her, an action that Natasha noted but ignored.

“You’re right,” he said. “I did want to talk about them.”

“What about them?” Natasha asked. “Their identities and location are still secret, aren’t they?”

“Yeah. That’s just it, though. I’m starting to wonder …” Clint replied before trailing off, shaking his head slightly and finally plunging in with what he was going to say. “You know that Fury set up the farm for Laura and I when I first joined S.H.I.E.L.D., kept it completely off the books, too. No records anywhere. It was only known to him and us.”

“Before you eventually told me,” Natasha added.

“Right,” Clint nodded. “But you’re the only one that we’ve told. No one else even knows that I’m married, let alone about Cooper and Lila or the third one on the way.”


“We did,” Clint smiled back.

“You’re thinking of telling the others?” Natasha asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe,” Clint hedged. “This feels … different. It’s better than S.H.I.E.L.D. I feel as though I can trust them, that we’re friends, family almost.”

“What does Laura say?” Natasha asked.

“She says it’s my call,” Clint stated sounding nonplussed about having the decision on his shoulders.
“I’m guessing you’re looking for my advice?” Natasha asked and he nodded. “Look, you’re right. The Avengers does feel different. I think we can trust them in a way that we never could with any of our fellow S.H.I.E.L.D. agents. But it’s still a big thing, to trust them like that, especially after so many years as spies where we have to keep everything so close to our chests. If you want my advice, give it a bit more time; give them a bit more time. Let’s make sure that what we’re starting to feel is real before we go telling them something that we can’t take back.”

Clint’s hand motioned about them.

“Why do you think we’re having this conversation out here,” he smirked. “Thanks, Nat. I guess I was just needing to hear that what I’ve been thinking and feeling isn’t just in my own head. I want to tell them, but I don’t want to rush into it either. Maybe after the baby’s born we can take the team to the Farm to meet her.”

“I get first cuddles,” Natasha stated, eyeing him to make sure he understood exactly how important that was.

Clint’s smile was wide even as he held up both hands in front of him.

“We wouldn’t have it any other way,” he replied.

ooo00ooo

Daredevil’s head was tilted to the side as he listened, focusing in one particular direction. When he finally heard what he’d been waiting for, he wasn’t sure whether to smile or grimace. To be honest, he was more surprised that this hadn’t happened the night before.

Staying in his crouch atop the building, he followed the trio’s progress.

Spider-man’s progress down the street was in continuous arcs, the particular fwap of each webline being shot from his webshooters to catch on buildings being unmistakable. Below him, sticking to one side of the road, came Squirrel Girl. Her progress was steady, a jog, really, in order to save energy – after all, there was no point in her tiring herself out before any sort of encounter with the ‘bad guys’ happened.

And then there was the third. If Daredevil hadn’t known better, he would initially have thought that it was Mage. Mage, though, was still out of the country, meaning that the person flying the broom couldn’t be him. The fact that one needed magic to operate the thing, not to mention their size, told Daredevil exactly who it was.

Daredevil focussed on him, assessing what he was sensing. The boy was wearing clothes made from the same material as Mage, including a hooded cloak. His heart rate was elevated, indicating his excitement. His form on his broom – which also seemed slightly different than Mage’s – while good, wasn’t quite up to Mage’s standard.

Rising from his crouch, Daredevil pulled his billy clubs from their holster and snapped them together. Then, with them in hand, he began running along the rooftop, following the trio. From up here, he could keep an ‘eye’ on them. If something untoward actually happened, he’d be close enough to assist – not that he had to do that often when he’d tailed Spider-man and Squirrel Girl in the past. But with a new player in the mix, he wasn’t taking any chances.

For the next hour or so, Daredevil’s night consisted of running, leaping, sliding, scaling and some acrobatics. Occasionally, the three below would pause and rest and talk and he made sure to listen in, if nothing else, it gave him an idea of their state of mind and their plans.
“You sure you know how to fly that thing?” Spider-man asked the wizard on the broom during their latest break. “Only, you’ve barely done anything but fly it in a straight line all night.”

“Hey, I’m a good flyer!” the protest came back. “Just because I don’t play quidditch or do stupid death-defying stunts every other minute doesn’t mean that I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Have you decided on your name yet?” Squirrel Girl asked hopefully.

“Yeah. Yeah,” the wizard replied, rubbing the back of his neck. “I want to be ‘Marauder’.”

“Like the Den?” Spider-man asked.

“Exactly like the Den,” the newly-maned Marauder replied. “At the moment, I can’t use magic …”

That was information that made Daredevil start. If the kid was limited in what he could actually do, then his job making sure that the three stayed safe might have just been made harder.

 “… so, I’m limited to magical prank products,” Marauder continued. “My dad was part of a group that loved to pull pranks and Uncle Harry and I are the only ones left of them. I thought it’d be nice to honour them, to remember them.”

Squirrel Girl put one arm around Marauder’s shoulder and gave him a side hug.

“I think your Dad would be proud,” she said. “It’s a good choice. I like it, Marauder.”

Suddenly, Daredevil’s head snapped to the side. Two voices, male, around the corner and down half a block from the trio below. Unfortunately, they were on the block on the opposite side of the road from where Daredevil himself was perched. From the sounds of it, they were slamming something into an ATM.

Below, Spider-man suddenly froze, his head swivelling towards the direction as well. The other two noticed and he raised a hand for them to stop talking. Taking a leap, Spider-man jumped up the nearby wall and began crawling as fast as he could. Once he was two stories up, he stuck his head out and around the corner. A single look seemed to be enough for him, for he immediately moved back, pushed from the wall and somersaulted to the ground.

“Bad guys. Two of them. Trying to break open an ATM,” Spider-man stated.

Squirrel Girl rubbed one fist in front of her.

“Play time, boys,” she said.

As soon as the three rounded the corner, Daredevil took off, extending his billy clubs as he ran before leaping for the external fire escape so that he could reach the ground in order to follow the trio.

By the time that he got to where he could ‘observe’ what was going on, Spider-man had one of the two crooks netted upside down and dangling from a streetlight. The other was on the run, with Squirrel Girl in hot pursuit. Marauder, though, was just ahead on that broom of his.

Suddenly, Marauder flung out a hand and Daredevil noted something small smashing into the ground a step in front of the fleeing, would-be thief. The instant that he stepped in it, the man’s foot stuck and he crashed to the ground.

“You’re not Mage,” the man near-whimpered as he looked back and up.
“No. I’m Marauder,” the wizard stated smugly.

“Good night,” Squirrel Girl said before hitting the man in the face, instantly knocking him out.

The two kids high fived each other as they stared at their captured prey.

While Marauder may not be able to use magic, Daredevil sighed slightly in relief. At least the kid had some tricks up his sleeve meaning that Daredevil’s job might not be quite as nerve-racking as he feared it would be.

Still, he was sure that there were a couple of people who would be quite interested in learning about this little excursion.

ooo00ooo

Ted and Doreen arrived back at the level that their quarters were in Avengers Tower nearly bouncing with adrenaline. It’d been a good night. They’d stopped a pair of men trying to break into an ATM and then scared away a group of four who’d been about to break into a pharmacy. Just their presence had been enough for that one.

“Did you see their faces?” Ted asked as they stepped from the elevator.

“I was sure one of them was about to wet himself,” Doreen giggled.

“I never imagined bad guys apologising for ‘their stupid thoughts’ and swearing that they’d never do it again before they did anything,” Ted commented.

“Well, we’re getting a bit of a rep; they should know better,” Doreen replied.

As they slowly walked down the corridor, their shoulders kept bumping and Ted looked across at her. Seeing Doreen smile at him, he smiled back, a heat in his cheeks where he fervently hoped he wasn’t blushing.

The nerves in the fingers of Ted’s left hand went into overdrive when he felt Doreen’s fingers brush up against them. The second time it happened, he cocked a single finger, managing to ‘snag’ one of hers.

They’d just paused, beginning to turn in towards each other, when a figure appeared out of nothingness just ahead of them.

The figure leant casually with one shoulder against the wall, his arms crossed and just visible under his blue-grey cloak. His hood and spells hid his face and subsequently his facial expression from them.

Before Ted or Doreen could do more than jump apart, he spoke.

“What mischief have you managed, Marauder?”
“What mischief have you managed, Marauder?”

“Uncle Harry!” Teddy exclaimed. “What are you doing here?”

Harry stayed perfectly still, allowing his hood and spells to conceal his expression. He could feel his smirk grow the longer that he refrained from answering, particularly as he watched Teddy’s hair drain of colour to become pure white.

“I thought that my godson was staying here,” he eventually said.

“I am!” Teddy protested.

“And yet, at this time of night, I arrive and what do I find?” he allowed his voice to trail off, leaving the question hanging.

Moving unexpectedly, Harry straightened and snapped out a hand, channelling his magic to wrench the broom that Teddy was holding across to his own waiting hand.

“Nice broom. Although, I don’t remember you owning it,” Harry commented.

“It’s mine. I bought it the other day,” Teddy replied with what could only be a nervous or perhaps guilty look at Doreen.

“I’m guessing you bought it the same time as you got the new clothes?” Harry half-asked, half-stated. “Nice choice by the way, very Avenger-y.”

“If Ted’s going to be an Avenger, then he needed a suit,” Doreen blurted.

“Ah, yes. Marauder,” Harry replied. “You never did tell me, what mischief have you managed?”

“We, that is, Ted, Peter and me, we stopped some crooks breaking into an ATM and scared off a bunch that was going to rob a pharmacy,” Doreen stated proudly.

Harry nodded slowly.

“So, that explains the mischief that you stopped,” he said. “But what about the mischief that you managed to cause?”

“Cause?” Teddy gulped, once again sharing a look with Doreen.

“Yes. Caused,” Harry repeated. “You’re a wizard. You were out riding a magical broom in the middle of New York City in view of countless muggles. Muggles who are under the impression that there is only one magical person in existence. Me. Someone who you are clearly not given the differences in our suits. I will give you that they look similar at least.”

“But I didn’t use any magic at all!” Teddy protested. “I know the Statute. I didn’t break it. I stuck to using prank products, mostly Weasley stuff.”

“No magic?” Harry repeated. “Not even a spell to conceal your identity?”

“I don’t need a spell to do that,” Teddy replied.
Harry watched as Teddy’s face changed before his eyes. It became slightly larger with a firmer, squarer jaw. His nose flattened out and his eyes changed shape and colour until they were a purply-blue. His hair, too, underwent a change, shrinking back into his head until it could be deemed to be a black buzz-cut.

“See?” Teddy said. “This is what I looked like. No one would know who I am or even how old I am just from seeing my face.”

“At least you gave it some thought,” Harry nodded. “But you still broke the Statute. The clothing, the broom, even the pranks that you used, they’re all magical in origin and the Statute forbids them around muggles.”

“If he broke the law so bad, then where’s the magical police?” Doreen asked. “I’d think that they’d be knocking down the door or something.”

“Perhaps they’re still on their way,” Harry replied, knowing perfectly well that they weren’t and why. “I suggest the two of you get to bed. We’ll deal with any fall-out from your little ‘excursion’, if there is any, in the morning.”

Harry turned as the two walked past, Teddy glancing up at him every couple of steps.

“And Teddy,” Harry called as they were about to round the corner. Harry waited until his godson looked back at him before continuing. “I’ll let you tell your grandmother about this.”

Teddy visibly blanched and this time his entire face turned white along with his hair. A tug on his arm from Doreen had the two disappearing from sight.

“You don’t think you were a little harsh on him?” Matt asked, stepping out of a previously closed door.

Harry glanced at his friend.

“He’s got to learn that this isn’t a game,” Harry replied. “They both do. Peter, at least, gets it, having battled the Lizard and watching Gwen’s dad nearly get killed in the process. Those two, though, they’ve only really come up against some low-life scum and nothing life-or-death yet. They need to know that there’re consequences now and not when it really matters. I’ll let them stew for the rest of the night and let them off the hook in the morning.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that they’ll be completely off the hook,” Matt grinned. “Not after I tell Bobbi what they got up to. I’m betting that she’ll make their next few training sessions something to remember.”

Having slept most of the way home from Greece on the quinjet, Harry was still wide awake a few hours later. After divesting himself of his suit, something that he’d only put on to scare the seriousness of what he’d been doing into Teddy, Harry spent the rest of the night reading. Finally, a little after dawn, he’d had enough and headed in to the Tower’s kitchen.

While this kitchen wasn’t as good as the one in the Den, nor as big, with a little bit of judicious magic, it served its purpose.

Eggs, toast, bacon, tomatoes, sausages, mushrooms and hash browns were all fried up and placed in mounded piles on plates that were then sent flying across the room to land in the centre of the table. Warming charms were applied almost subconsciously to ensure that, regardless of when people
woke, their breakfast would be hot and ready for them.

“I thought that I smelt something delicious cooking.” Tony commented as he wandered into the room.

Harry barely looked up from the frypan that he was concentrating on. A careful wandless banisher sent one particular mug floating across the room.

“Coffee, just the way you like it,” Harry announced.

“You’re a life saver,” Tony remarked, catching the cup out of the air and taking a sip.

Harry noted Tony coming to lean on the opposite side of the counter.

“Jarvis tells me you guys got back a few hours ago,” Tony stated. “I’m guessing the mission was a success?”

“It was,” Harry replied. “I’ll tell you about it over breakfast once everyone arrives,”

“Sounds like a plan,” Tony nodded.

“You do know that you had some kids slipping out last night, don’t you?” Harry asked.

“What?” Pepper asked as she entered the room. “You mean Doreen and Teddy? They left the Tower?”

“That’s the ones,” Harry replied, handing over her preferred tea. “They went out on ‘patrol’ as Peter calls it.”

“And they were with the web-head. Not to mention that Murdock was tailing them,” Tony stated.

“You knew that they left?” Pepper asked, whirling on him.

“Jarvis mentioned something about it,” Tony shrugged.

“And you didn’t think to stop them?” Pepper asked.

“Kids are kids. They’re always going to find a way to sneak out and do whatever the hell they want,” Tony replied. “And it’s not like the web-head and the squirrel haven’t been doing this kind of thing for months. Besides, I had trackers on them with Jarvis monitoring things. If need be, he would have had one of my suits there within minutes providing back-up.”

“That almost sounds … parental of you,” Harry smirked,

“It does, doesn’t it,” Pepper agreed with a great smile as she slipped closer towards her partner.

“Hey! Don’t go putting ideas like that in Pepper’s head,” Tony near-yelped. “I’m too young to be ‘parental’.”

“No, you’re not,” Pepper disagreed.

Harry’s laughter was almost drowned as a horde of Tower residents all arrived nearly at once. Morning greetings were exchanged as Steve, Sam, Thor, Jane, Bruce, Darcy, Bucky and Daphne quickly took a seat around the expanded table and began loading plates from the mountain of food before them.
“Don’t block the doorway, you two,” Bobbi stated as she, Nat and Clint entered the room, steering Doreen and Teddy before them.

Harry carefully avoided the glances that he knew the two teens were sending his way by filling mugs and cups with coffee, tea or juice and magicking it to the appropriate person. Once all had been served, Harry finally left the kitchen to take the remaining seat at the table between Sam and Teddy.

“Right, we’re all here,” Tony said, pointing a fork in Harry’s direction. “You promised a story.”

“Story?” Darcy asked eagerly.

“Tony wants to hear what happened in Greece,” Harry replied.

“Our mission report,” Steve nodded.

“As you all know, we went to Greece to see if we could find out what happened to the wizards that the ICW had placed within S.H.I.E.L.D.,” Harry began.

“All ten were assigned to Kratos Base, weren’t they?” Clint asked.

“The same base?” Bobbi asked. “Seems a little redundant.”

“There was a reason for that, though,” Harry stated. “All ten were plants within the ICW, having managed to get themselves placed exactly where they wanted to be. They were actually a part of a group that worked with the Red Skull and HYDRA back in World War Two called the Knights of Grindelwald.”

The clatter of dropping cutlery accompanied Daphne’s shocked gasp.

“Grindelwald,” she breathed.

Harry looked meaningfully at her.

“Apparently, they’re not as extinct as we thought,” he said, before expounding for the non-magicals at the table. “Gellert Grindelwald is considered the worst Dark Lord in recent history. Even worse than the one we had in Britain in my youth. Grindelwald and his Knights ruled most of Europe in the forties. We know that he was allied with Hitler and HYDRA but they were only a means to an end for him, a way to destabilize the non-magical world enough to distract the magicals from his ultimate goal.”

“Which was?” Natasha asked.

“Global domination and the rule of the magicals over the non-magicals,” Harry replied simply.

“Sounds like HYDRA,” Bobbi commented.

Harry nodded. “It does, doesn’t it? What Grindelwald didn’t tell HYDRA was that he ultimately saw them subjugated before him as well.”

“What happened? I’m guessing that this story has a happy ending?” Darcy asked.

“Dumbledore,” Daphne stated.

“Our old Headmaster,” Harry elaborated. “He beat Grindelwald in a duel to end all duels. And with Grindelwald captured and imprisoned, his Knights didn’t last long, being quickly rounded up, trialled and imprisoned as well.”
“Except we encountered some of them in Greece,” Thor stated.

“You got to battle magic men like Harry here?” Darcy asked.

“It was a worthy battle, although I expected them to be tougher,” Thor replied. “Perhaps growing up with Loki conditioned me to combating magic.”

“We got lucky, caught them with their robes around their ankles,” Harry said.

“I really hope that’s a metaphor or something, there’s kids here at the table and the image you just gave …” Tony said, finishing with a shudder.

“I’m sure that it’s just a magical expression,” Pepper smiled, rubbing one hand on Tony’s upper arm. “But thank you for being thoughtful.”

“It is,” Harry confirmed before coughing into his hand with a smile, “coughdaddycough. They weren’t expecting us. They thought that they’d still have a week or so before the ICW even tried to venture into a muggle area and they were sure that their HYDRA thugs could hold off any other threat.”

“They were in the process of moving,” Steve added. “Most of the base had already been packed up into crates like you wouldn’t believe. Entire planes shrunken down to the size of a toy.”

Sam shook his head at the memory. “It was insane. Never seen anything like it before.”

“Stick around; you’re bound to see a whole world of strange,” Bruce commented.

“What’d you do with them?” Clint asked.

“The HYDRA agents we gave to the military; the wizards, we took to the ICW,” Harry replied. “I was there for when they were interrogated with veritaserum – truth serum. The ICW learnt a lot from them. The Knights are still around and trying to continue Grindelwald’s Greater Good for the World crap. That startled a lot of people. Now, though, now they can start rounding them up and dealing with them.”

“Sounds as though the ICW owes you,” Daphne commented.

“Well, they did,” Harry grinned. “But we came to an agreement.”

“An agreement?” Natasha asked, one eyebrow raised.

“Finding their missing wizards for them was part of them giving me clearance to be ‘Mage’,” Harry continued. “Uncovering the existence of Grindelwald’s Knights and bringing them in was worth a bonus.”

Here Harry pulled out a scroll and laid it on the table in front of him.

“This,” he said, tapping it, “is a second scroll for a magical to join the Avengers without breaking the Statute of Secrecy. It has conditions, of course.”

“Is that for me?” an excited Teddy asked, one hand inching out for it.

“It could be,” Harry allowed, his own hand blocking his godson from the scroll. “But after last night …”

“Oh, come on, Uncle Harry, you know I can do some good,” Teddy grinned. “And who better to do
your Avenger-ing with than your own godson?”

“What happened last night?” Daphne asked, her eyes narrowed between the two.

“Teddy here went out on ‘patrol’ with Doreen and Peter,” Harry replied. “He’s got a suit and everything, including a broom.”

“You broke the Statute?” Daphne’s voice all but shrieked.

“I’m guessing not,” Natasha stated, her narrowed eyes fixed on the scroll.

“You’re right,” Harry replied. “This is intended for Teddy. But I’m thinking that he’s not quite ready for it yet. So, I’m adding a couple of extra conditions on it.”

“What conditions?” Teddy asked suspiciously.

“The ICW decreed that this,” here Harry tapped the scroll, “comes as an apprenticeship of sorts, that the person that this attains to is under my tutelage and can only use their magic in front of muggles when I’m there until I decide that they’re ready for some solo work.”

“Apprentice, huh, makes sense,” Clint commented.

“And might be a better name than ‘Marauder’,” Harry commented. “Did you think that it might lead anyone straight to the Den and to me?”

Teddy visibly blanched. “That could happen?”

“Easily,” Tony stated. “Couple of clicks on a google search. It’s not something we advertise but it’s also no secret that members of the Avengers occasionally drop into the Den for a snack.”

“Unless we get Lavender to do some sort of press release?” Pepper suggested.

“Not a bad idea,” Bruce nodded. “She should probably do one for Jennifer, too, for when she finally gets into action with the rest of us.”

“What other conditions?” Teddy asked.

“I think that I should add that you only get this after your OWLs,” Harry said.

“OWLs?” Thor asked. “Isn’t that a bird?”

“Ordinary Wizarding Levels,” Daphne supplied. “They’re the exams that all witches and wizards have after fifth year. Once you pass, you get some limited wand rights; the rest either when you complete your NEWTs – Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Tests – or when you come of age.”

“Sounds good,” Bobbi nodded. “Avengers only take the best of the best. Peter and Doreen both have to keep up their grades at Midtown. You ace these tests of yours with straight A’s …”

“Deal!” Teddy near-shouted in his excitement.

“EE’s or better,” Harry corrected before explaining for Bobbi. “In the magical world, ‘A’ is for Acceptable work, which is a bare pass. There are two grades higher – ‘EE’ or Exceeds Expectations and ‘O’ for Outstanding work.”

“That’s just whacked,” Darcy said, shaking a head. “You magicals sure do things weirdly.”
“Do we have a deal?” Harry asked Teddy, his eyes fixed on his godson’s.

“My OWLs are still another year away,” Teddy pointed out. “You’re not really going to make me wait that long are you?”

“After last night?” Harry countered and paused before continuing. “You get this after your OWLs. But, if you want, you can still do some training with Bobbi, Doreen, Peter and anyone else willing to train you. At least until you need to head back to Hogwarts. But no more night time jaunts.”

“Yeah, kid, do as Harry says, not as Harry does,” Tony quipped.

Slowly, Harry’s head turned to face down the table.

“Pardon me?” he asked, one eyebrow raised.

“Hey, don’t blame me, you know we’re all thinking it,” Tony tried to defend himself. “Especially after reading those books.”

“Books?” Harry asked, a sinking feeling beginning to settle in his stomach.

“Thanks for breakfast,” Daphne suddenly said and patting Bucky’s hand beside her. “Are you ready for another session, James?”

Without taking his eyes off of Tony, Harry waved his hand in Daphne’s direction.

“Hey!” Daphne protested when her attempts to get up failed. “Potter! Undo this sticking charm right now.”

Harry, though, ignored her.

“Books?” he repeated.

“Potter! Why won’t my finite work? What did you do?” Daphne demanded, her wand out and now pointing towards Harry.

“Parseltongue spell,” Harry grunted. “I’ll make you a deal, Greengrass. Tell me what books Tony’s talking about and I’ll undo the sticking charm.”

Daphne glared at him for a full minute before suddenly smiling.

“We received a package of books from Granger while you were away,” Daphne said sweetly. “They told all about your adventures when we were in school. Quirrell and the philosopher’s stone. The Basilisk. Dementors and the supposed mass-murderer Sirius Black. Dumbledore’s Army. The Second Wizard War. All of it. I only felt it my duty to include a set of the Harry Potter books that I grew up with as well.”

Harry couldn’t help but groan.

“You didn’t,” he said, shaking his head.

“We’ve all read them,” Tony stated happily.

“Not all of us,” Sam piped up.

“I’ll get a set sent to your rooms,” Tony promised not only Sam but also Steve and Thor.
“Did you really kill a minotaur to save a witch princess when you were only nine?” Darcy asked.

“NO!” Harry yelped. “There’s no such things as ‘witch princesses’ and I’ve never even seen a minotaur in my life. Those stories are nothing but lies, stories made up about me for other people to make money off of, trying to capitalise on that Boy-Who-Lived crap.”

“Ignore Darcy,” Jane said, “she really does know which ones are true and which ones aren’t.”

“They all sound pretty fantastical to me,” Darcy grumped.

“You have to admit, though, Harry, even the books that are factual read like some fairy tale with the hero rushing in to save the day and save everyone, especially the damsels in peril,” Bruce stated.

“And how is that any different to what we do? Or what any of us are?” Harry retorted.

“Yes, but we don’t have books written about us or an entire society that seem to all but worship us,” Tony countered.

“Not yet,” Harry replied. “Give it time. Wizarding Britain is small and when … what happened to stop Riddle that first time happened, they needed a way to celebrate, someone to thank. And unfortunately, they latched on to me instead of my parents.”

“You were the boy who lived,” Daphne stated simply.

Harry grimaced at her. “You know I hate that title.”

Daphne shrugged at him.

“How you feel about it is immaterial, it’s who you will always be, along with being the Man-Who-Conquered and all of those other titles that you’ve earned,” she told him. “Why do you think you’ve got that Order of Merlin, First Class? You know they’re talking about giving you a second one, don’t you?”

“What in Merlin’s name for?” Harry asked.

“For saving the world, here in New York and then again in Greenwich,” Daphne replied. “If they do, you’ll be the first person in four hundred years to be a dual recipient.”

“I know,” Tony said brightly, breaking Harry’s incredulous stare at Daphne. “How about after breakfast, we all sit down and go through every one of those books and you can tell us what’s true and what isn’t?”

Harry stared at the hopeful expression on his face. For the life of him, he couldn’t tell if Tony was being serious or not.

“No,” Harry stated firmly.

With a singular wave of his hand, he dispelled the sticking charm on Daphne’s chair, despite the temptation of leaving her there as punishment for bringing those books into the Tower.

“If you’ll excuse me, I think that there’s some reports that I’ve been neglecting to read properly,” Harry said.

Pushing his chair back, Harry stood and, heedless of the rudeness, he turned on the spot and apparated away.
The small stumble upon landing was a clue as to exactly how far the portkey embedded in his Head of House ring had taken him. Straightening, Harry glanced around. It seemed that he and Teddy had landed in a room, a study of some kind, if he wasn’t mistaken, that could be anywhere.

The sable shield positioned on the wall behind the large desk told the story of exactly who owned this room, this house, this land. The Most Ancient and Noble House of Black.

“Where are we?” Teddy asked, looking up from the floor where he’d fallen to upon landing.

“Paradis Noir,” Harry replied.

Teddy frowned at the name.

“Paradis Noir,” he repeated slowly. “Black Paradise. Where’s that?”

“Here, apparently,” Harry replied. “As to where that is … Perhaps that map will give us a clue.”

Placed on the wall opposite the desk was a large map, currently showing the Atlantic Ocean with parts of North America on the left and Europe and Africa on the right. Harry frowned at it, his eyes roving all over it. There was no indication of exactly where they were on the map but Harry couldn’t think of any other reason for it being there.

As his eyes roved over the map, two small icons carved into the frame caught his attention. Hesitantly, he reached out and tapped the larger magnifying glass. When nothing happened, he did it again, this time pushing his magic into it as well.

Instantly, the map changed, zooming in on one small section of the Atlantic Ocean.

“The Azores,” Harry said.

“I thought that there were only nine islands in the Azores,” Teddy said from beside him.

Harry looked down at his godson before frowning up at the ten islands shown on the map.

“How’d you know that?” he asked.

“Grandmother has always had a thing for making sure that I know about these islands. I never understood why,” Teddy replied.

Once again, Harry tapped the magnifying icon, channelling his magic. This time, the map zoomed into a singular island placed between the main group of five and the two located to the west. A name in elaborate calligraphy appeared above the island: Paradis Noir.

“I’m guessing that the Black’s own this entire island and that there are some incredibly powerful wards, including muggle-repelling and unplottable that surround the island,” Harry remarked. “And that means that this island is beholden to no government, muggle or magical.”

“We own an entire island?” Teddy asked in awe and then, noticing his godfather’s raised eyebrows directed at him, added. “What? I am the Black heir until you have a kid of your own.”

“You’re right,” Harry replied. “Which is part of why I brought you here. So, you up for a bit of exploring?”

“You bet!” Teddy exclaimed.
Together, the two of them pulled the double doors leading to the study open and stepped out.

The ‘bungalow’, for that was how it was described in the Book of the Blacks, wasn’t what Harry would call a ‘bungalow’. No, this was more of a mansion, albeit a somewhat smaller one than others that he’d encountered. The floor that they found themselves on contained two dining rooms, one formal, one informal; three large sitting rooms, all with access to a wide veranda that overlooked the forest and the sea; a kitchen and an extremely impressive, well-stocked library.

The floor directly above them seemed to be the living quarters, with a master bedroom and half a dozen decent sized bedrooms, all with their own ensuite and balcony. The highest level was an open plan room that could be used for partying, at least, that’s what the long bar on one side seemed to indicate. Windows that could be opened on every side made the room feel even larger and airier than it already was.

From up there, Harry and Teddy spent time moving from side to side to side, looking out over the vast hectares of forest and all the way down to the sandy shore that bordered the island around the ocean. A small valley between two hills, the one closer to the middle of the island almost tall enough to be classed as a mountain, was more plainlike, a small river running through the centre of it.

Yes, Harry thought, this place could be perfect. There was plenty of room for a purpose-built facility and lots of room for training in different environments as well. The only problem would be getting non-magicals through the wards as well as quinjets and other craft. But then, as Sirius had once said, throw enough gold at the right people and any problem could be solved. The right people in this case being goblins, dwarves and technomage wizards. And house elves, they could be very useful.

It was as he was taking out his Stark-configured GPS to take a reading that he and Teddy spotted them, almost at the exact same time. A herd of five hippogriffs lifted above the trees, their great wings flapping hard before they turned and soared away towards the ocean.

“Wow! I’ve never seen hippogriffs before,” Teddy exclaimed. “Do you think that there’re other magical animals here as well?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” Harry replied.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a pair of shrunken brooms before enlarging them.

“This place is supposed to be over a hundred hectares in size. Care to see what’s out there?” he asked.

Eagerly Teddy took his broom.

“Sure,” he replied with a grin.

With a flick of his wrist, Harry opened one of the windows wide before mounting his Lightning Bolt.

“Catch me if you can!” he challenged.

And with that, he ducked low against his broom and zipped away, a laughing Teddy hurriedly mounting his own broom to follow.

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The Hunter remained motionless, allowing the deep shadows of the trees that he was within to conceal his position. Only his eyes moved, tracking the vehicle headed his way.
The vehicle was expensive and once would have sported an immaculate black paint job. Not any more, though. No, after trekking this far into the wilderness, dust, dirt and mud flicked up from its path through the shallow creeks that the Hunter knew that it would have crossed had turned it into a dull grey, nearly brown in some places. A deep scratch along its left side along with a broken headlight told him that the driver wasn’t experienced in navigating this sort of terrain.

The briefest flicker of distain crossed his face at these novices pretending to be something that they weren’t. If they were here to hunt game, then their noisy engine would have scared it away long before now. But then, if they were mere ‘campers’, perhaps that had been their goal?

In any case, their presence so close to the Hunter’s, was annoying in the extreme.

He watched, anticipating their turn away as the track indicated. Surprisingly, instead of continuing on, the vehicle came to a stop.

The back doors opened and half a dozen men emerged, stomping around and doing even more to scare off the creatures that lived and belonged here. A seventh man, the driver, stepped from the vehicle, his eyes glued to some instrument in his hand.

“Eight metres to our north-east,’ the driver, a man with protuberant forehead announced.

The Hunter frowned, one hand inching up to rest on the handle of his knife. That description was precisely where he was currently standing. Obviously there was some kind of tracking device planted on, or more likely within him that he’d need to deal with later.

His eyes flicked towards a man wearing a long trench coat as he stepped out from behind another man, this one wearing some kind of armour, before the first flicked out his hand. The Hunter’s eyes tracked the metallic object as it flew out in a wide arc in his general direction. Almost, almost he dismissed the threat. But one had to get up much earlier to catch him out.

A simple turn at precisely the right moment was enough to avoid the boomerang coming towards his back.

“Mister Myers, there was no need for that,” the man in front, the other’s obvious Leader admonished.

“Just testing his reflexes,” Myers replied with what sounded like an unapologetic Australian accent.

“Mister Kravinoff, we were wondering if we could have a moment of your time?” the Leader asked, his hands now behind his back.

The Hunter assessed them all. There were fighters in this group. Warriors and soldiers, even. None, though, posed him any threat. At least, not individually. Making up his mind, Kravinoff stepped out of his cover, his own body language oozing confidence in his own prowess.

“Who are you? What do you want?” he asked suspiciously.

“Mister Kravinoff,” the Leader said. “I’m here to tell you about an idea, an idea to bring together a group of remarkable people, to see if they could be something more. Perhaps even something more … Sinister.”

The Hunter narrowed his eyes before flicking them to each of the others. Judging by their postures, this was something that they’d heard before.

“I’m listening,” he said.
Thor closed the book, leant forward and gently placed it upon the small table before the set of chairs, one of which he was occupying. Almost reverently, he gave it a soft pat, contemplating its contents. While it was true that he was never one to pursue the wisdom gained through the written word – much to his mother’s consternation and his brother’s mockery – that did not mean that he did not appreciate a good tale, regardless of its medium.

Looking up, he found the Seidhr standing with his back to the room, looking out the great glass door at the city beyond.

“Your deeds are worthy enough to become legend,” Thor stated.

Harry spun about, his arms remaining crossed over his chest. A singular raised eyebrow told that he begged to disagree.

“Any one of your feats – slaying such a monster as the King of Snakes, driving off a horde of foul demonic beasts, defeating in battle such an enemy as this Riddle character not once but more than half a dozen times – any one would be lauded in Asgard with feats, revels and songs,” Thor stated, emphasising his points by throwing his arms wide.

“Songs?” Harry asked, looking like he was going to be sick before straightening and throwing out a pointing finger towards the Healer. “No. Don’t even suggest it.”

The Seidhr Healer, though, merely smirked at Harry.

“You know that there are songs about the Boy-Who-Lived,” she said. “Although not as many as there are about the Man-Who-Conquered.”

“Gah!” Harry growled, throwing up his hands.

Thor noticed that Barnes shifted slightly at the Seidhr’s unexpected explosion, as though he was prepared to protect the Healer from potential harm, a wholly unneeded gesture; Thor was positive that the Seidhr would never hurt anyone without just cause and this definitely did not warrant such an action.

“I fail to understand why you do not accept the accolades that you are so obviously deserving of,” Thor stated.

“Yeah, come on, Gandalf, if you’re going to be a part of this team, you’re gonna have to get used to the accolades and parties. Not to mention the awards and parades that are sure to be held in our honour,” Stark agreed.

“I’m not like you two,” Harry stated emphatically. “Thor, you were born a Prince of Asgard, destined to one day rule your people. Your parents have probably been grooming you for that role from the moment that you were born.”

“That is true,” Thor replied, a momentarily pain bursting in his heart at the thought of his mother.

“And you, Stark, you revel in being ‘famous’, in being the centre of attention,” Harry continued. “But when did you gain that fame?”

Thor noted that Stark went very still, as though the Seidhr’s question cut deep.
“I’m the son of Howard Stark, the CEO of Stark Industries,” Stark replied, a little too flippantly, or so Thor thought. “I’ve always been in the limelight.”

“You know that that’s not true,” Pepper countered. “You won that award when you were sixteen …”

“The M.I.T. Robot Design,” Stark interjected, buffing his nails on his shirt. “And still the youngest to ever win that award.”

“But apart from that, you were sheltered from the public,” Pepper continued before lowering her voice. “Until your parent’s death, that is.”

From the corner of his eye, Thor noted that Barnes jerked, only to still when the Healer placed a hand on his knee and began whispering to him.

“December ninety-one. I was twenty-one,” Stark said quietly. “I took over the company not long after that.”

“And that’s when the media really began paying you far too much attention,” Pepper said.

“My story’s different,” Harry said. “I’ve never liked my ‘fame’. Especially because I got it for such a stupid reason! The-Boy-Who-Lived. That’s what they’ve called me since I was one. Simply because I didn’t die when my parents did.”

“You did more than that,” the Healer stated. “You defeated He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named for the first time.”

“I did? How?” Harry asked. When no answer was forthcoming, he continued. “No, I’d really like to know. I was fifteen months old! How in Merlin’s name could a baby defeat a Dark Lord with decades of experience? What’d I do, throw my favourite chewed up toy at him and gross him out? No. Whatever happened that night had something to do with my parents.”

Thor watched as the Seidhr began pacing, his hands gesturing wildly as he continued to rant. This was a side to the Seidhr that Thor had never seen and he found it extremely interesting, not the least because it would put some of the stories that he had read into context as well as help him to understand his teammate.

“And then what happened to me?” Harry continued. “Those books really don’t tell the story; they’re simply the glossed over versions that make the wizarding world happy. I was sent away. To my relatives. For ten long years I lived in an environment that was … let’s just say that my aunt and uncle make your dad, Tony, seem like Father of the Year. And on my very first introduction back into the wizarding world, I found myself mobbed by people I didn’t know but who all knew me: The-Boy-Who-Lived, their saviour!

“And every day since then until I left Britain, they’ve been continuing to hound me, never giving me a moment of peace, staring at me and my stupid scar. The only time those people changed their tune was if they decided that I was better off being their villain instead of their hero, and some days it seemed that I was supposed to be both!”

“That’s the nature of being a celebrity,” Tony shrugged.

Harry spun towards him and Thor was certain that he could see the Seidhr’s power shining in his eyes.

“If you say that ‘fame’s a fickle friend,’ I will hex you into oblivion!” Harry growled, waving a
finger at him.

Unexpectedly, Stark laughed which seemed to diffuse the tension in the room somewhat.

“Wherever did you hear that?” Stark laughed. “Not that it’s wrong, mind you, it’s just that it’s such a pompous way of describing it.”

“Teacher,” Harry sighed. “And I use that term extremely loosely.”

“Lockhart?” the Healer asked, her head cocked and a small smile on her lips.

Harry gave her a single nod.

“Midgard does seem to have a fascination with finding all that is good along with looking for as many faults as possible in those that they look up to, unlike Asgard,” Thor commented.

“Does Asgard even have journalists?” Stark asked.

“We do not,” Thor replied. “But then, we are a much older civilization.”

“Maybe I should emigrate there,” Harry muttered.

“You would be most welcome,” Thor smiled.

“Hey! You can’t do that!” Stark protested. “You’d miss us! Besides, who’d make my coffee the way I like it? And don’t say ‘Pepper’!”

“You don’t have to worry, Tony. I’m not going anywhere. At least as long as I can keep Mage’s true identity away from the media. I left Britain to get away from all the stares, whispers and everything that those books represent; I have no intention of letting it start up again,” Harry said. “Besides, there’s no way that I’d leave Teddy or the Den or the rest of you.”

“Perhaps a visit?” Thor suggested. “My father would be most welcoming of you on Asgard.”

Harry looked across with a smile.

“I might take you up on that one day,” he said, to which Thor beamed with delight.

Once the call came, it didn’t take long for the Avengers to gather. And while the original seven were closer to the fore, most of the others in attendance in the Tower weren’t far away.

At the ding of the elevator arriving on the floor, all there stood that little bit straighter or brought their attention up a notch.

“Quite the reception,” Phil Coulson remarked as he stepped from the elevator first.

“Phil! It’s so good to see you again,” Pepper remarked, brushing her way forward to give him a brief hug.

Movement beside Harry caught his attention and he had to repress a snort at the way the ex-S.H.I.E.L.D. agents were all nodding to each other – Clint, Nat, Bobbi and Maria on one side and May and the two scientists emerging from the elevator on the other.

“Nice to see that you’re still alive,” Bruce said, stepping forward to shake Coulson’s hand.
A figure slipping from behind the arriving S.H.I.E.L.D. team held Harry’s eyes and he watched her almost sidle around the others before coming to stand beside him.

“Hey, you,” Skye said, putting her arm around him and giving him a hug which in Harry’s mind seemed to linger longer than he would have thought was normal.

“Hey, yourself,” Harry smiled. “Been keeping out of trouble?”

“Me? I’m the epitome of good sense,” Skye smirked.

Harry stared at her.

“That bad, huh?” he asked.

Whatever Skye’s answer was going to be evaporated as Nat marched up to Coulson, her face completely blank.

“You let us think you were dead,” she stated. “Why?”

“Not my call,” Phil simply replied.

“You know how it works, Romanoff,” May interjected.

“Worked,” Natasha corrected.

The new arrivals seemed to smile amongst themselves at that answer.

“We’ll cover that later,” Phil said. “Firstly, though, there’s an introduction that I think needs to be made. Captain?”

“Agent Coulson,” Steve nodded.

“I’d like you to meet the newest member of my team,” Phil said, causing Harry to raise his eyebrows at Skye.

Team? he asked.

A shrug accompanied her mouthing ‘later’ in reply.

“Captain Rogers, this is Agent Antoine Triplett,” Phil said. “I think you knew his grandfather: Gabe Jones.”

Steve’s eyes widened at the name and Harry knew that it meant something to him.

“You’re Gabe’s grandson?” Steve asked. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“The honour’s mine, Sir. And please, call me ‘Trip’. My grandfather had some amazing stories to tell about you and the rest of the Howling Commandos,” Trip beamed.

“Is that right? Well, if we’re going to have a Commandos reunion of sorts …” here Steve turned searching for the man who still preferred to stay in the shadows. “Bucky? Come on over here.”

This time there were a number of shocked expressions in the newly arrived group.

“I thought that Serjeant Barnes died back in Forty-Four,” the female S.H.I.E.L.D. scientist, Simmons, whispered to her constant companion.
“Perhaps what we thought we knew isn’t entirely accurate,” Fitz replied.

“Phil,” Maria said as Agent Coulson stepped away from Steve, Bucky and Trip.

“Agent Hill,” Phil smiled.

“I’m not an agent any more,” Maria replied.

“You could be,” Phil stated. “If you want to.”

“Oi! No stealing our Operations Controller away,” Tony interjected. “Besides, there is no S.H.I.E.L.D. for her to be an agent of.”

The way that Skye beside him was smirking as well as the small, knowing smile on Phil’s face told Harry that what they thought wasn’t entirely accurate.

“Unless there still is,” Harry said slowly.

“Got it in one, Magic Man,” Skye beamed, bumping her hip against his.

*That* statement caught everyone’s attention and caused conversations around the room to stop so that everyone could focus on that one piece of information.

“I wanted to tell them,” Phil almost seemed to pout.

“You still can,” Skye said. “But I’d get on with it if I was you, A.C. before Jemma tells them everything. You know how bad she is at keeping secrets.”

“I am not!” Jemma protested. “At least, I’m getting better at any rate.”

“Phil, do as Skye says,” May sighed.

“What I’m about to say is highly classified,” Phil began, looking around at the couple of dozen people in the room doubtfully.

“If they’re here, then they can be trusted,” Steve stated firmly.

“Well, alright then,” Phil nodded. “After the little dust-up we had at Cybertek taking down a HYDRA operation, I had a … visitor.”

“Fury,” Natasha stated.

“You know he’s alive?” Phil asked, surprise clear in his voice.

“We’ve known for a while,” Steve assured him.

“That man sure loves his fake death routines,” Skye muttered to which Harry’s snort earned him a poke in the side.

“After I’d finished having a … discussion with him about what happened with me … “ Phil continued.

This time it was Fitz’s turn to snort.

“Discussion? We could hear you from clear the other end of the Bus,” he interjected.

Phil pierced him with a glance that immediately sobered his agent.
“As I was saying,” Phil said. “After our discussion, he gave me some ‘toys’ and asked me to rebuild S.H.I.E.L.D.”


“It means that it’s going to be done right. Without HYDRA getting inside it,” Phil replied. “It’ll take time but it’ll be done the way that Howard Stark and Peggy Carter envisioned it to be.”

“You’re the new Director?” Natasha more stated than asked.

Harry straightened as it was confirmed. He’d been tasked with a small mission from the ICW which directed related to that information.

“No Fury?” Tony asked. “I didn’t think he knew how to exist without having his fingers in every pie.”

“Fury’d know that he doesn’t have to be Director to still be keeping an eye on things from the shadows, especially if he knew that he could trust the guy in charge,” Bobbi stated.

“What do you need? An upgrade on your new helicarrier?” Tony asked.

Phil almost looked embarrassed by that question.

“Actually, we don’t have any helicarriers,” he said.

“What do you have?” Nat asked, her eyes slightly narrowed.

“We have the Bus,” Phil replied happily. “And a base and a few good Agents. But that’s about it.”

“You really are rebuilding from the ground up,” Bruce commented.

“So, what do you need from the Avengers?” Steve asked.

“Nothing more than a simple partnership, more of a friendship, really,” Phil replied. “S.H.I.E.L.D. will be working in the shadows, especially with HYDRA still out there. That’s one mess that we aim to clean up.”

“We’re looking at doing the same,” Steve agreed.

“I’d like us to be able to work together, to share information and missions as appropriate but still be separate entities,” Phil said.

“Oh, that’s my cue,” Skye said, jerking forward.

Harry watched as she pulled something out her jacket pocket and crossed the room to hand it to Tony.

“That’s a copy of the data that we were able to get off of the HYDRA server at Cybertek,” Skye said. “There’s about eight gigabytes of data on it. Most of it’s encrypted or redacted. And unfortunately, as good as I am, it’s simply too much for me to get through all by myself, especially with the other stuff that A.C. has for all of us to do.”

“We’re hoping that you’d be willing to share anything of interest that you find on it with us, just as we’ll do the same for you,” Phil continued.

“I’ll put Jarvis on it,” Tony replied, looking interestedly at the drive in his hand.
“The Avengers would be honoured to work with this new version of S.H.I.E.L.D., with you being the Director” Steve said, reaching out to shake Phil’s hand.

“I’m delighted to hear that,” Phil smiled.

Seeing that the conversations were beginning to start up again after that formal-ish declaration, Harry approached the new Director of S.H.I.E.L.D.

“Director Coulson, may I have a moment of your time?” Harry asked, subtly weaving a bit of magic around the two them.

“It’s Phil, remember?” he smiled.

“At any other time, yes,” Harry replied. “But right now, I am the designated representative of the International Confederation of Wizardry asking the Director of S.H.I.E.L.D. what his stance is on the secrecy of the Wizarding World.”

“How much about our world are you aware of?” Harry asked.

Phil shrugged. “I know that there are enclaves of magicals all around the world. I know that you have your own system of government and laws, with one of the strictest being the one that keeps you hidden from the rest of us.”

“The Statute of Secrecy, yes,” Harry replied. “What we want to know is, who do you intend on telling about us and to know whether we can trust you to keep our existence secret.”

“From what I understand, when Fury was the Director, the only ones that knew about your people were himself, the World Security Council and the Level Nine Agents and they were only as a failsafe in case something happened to him,” Phil replied. “With the rise of HYDRA and the fall of S.H.I.E.L.D., the number in the know has dropped dramatically. HYDRA killed every member of the Council and the only Level Nine Agent left is Hill. I was thinking of adding May to that list for the same reason that Fury did, just in case something happens to me.”

Harry nodded his head slowly. With that small number of people in the know – a number much smaller than it once was – and the fact that Harry himself was willing to vouch for every one of the three, he felt that the ICW would be happy with that answer.

“Thank you, Director,” Harry began, only to be interrupted by Phil’s raised hand.

“Just a piece of advice for your government,” he said. At Harry’s raised eyebrow, he continued. “The world is getting smaller every day, especially with the number of satellites and technology being developed. I’ll do my best to keep eyes and ears away from your people but there is going to come a day when your society’s existence will be nigh on impossible to hide.”

Harry nodded grimly.

“I’ve had the exact same thoughts,” he said. “I just hope that my people can survive when that day finally arrives.”
Mage stood as still as he could, trusting in his spells to allow him to appear calm, collected and in control. His eyes, if one could see them, would have shown a different story. Even after all the experience that he’d had over the years he was still uneasy in front of crowds. And especially in front of crowds carrying notebooks, recorders, microphones and video cameras. Thankfully, though, he wasn’t the one that the reporters were focussed on.

No, that honour went to Captain America. And as confident as the soldier appeared, Mage knew that even he had butterflies in this sort of situation. The team had practiced for this, including the speech that Cap would give. During it, he’d mentioned that, while he’d been given plenty of practice at that sort of thing back when he was a poster boy for the Army, nerves still got him every time. Apparently going into battle was much less stressful than standing talking to a crowd.

The Avengers were arranged so that Mage, Bruce and Thor stood on one side of the lectern that Cap was using and Iron Man, Black Widow and Hawkeye were on the other. They’d also made sure that they were back a couple of steps to allow room for what was to come.

“Good morning,” Cap said after receiving the nod from Lavender off to the side.

Instantly, the gaggle of journalists settled, their attention focussed.

“Thank you all for coming,” Cap continued. “You’ve heard a lot about us, about the Avengers, since the Battle for New York. You’ve all read articles, seen television specials covering us. Maybe you’ve even played with some of the toys that were made that look like us or watched the cartoons.”

Here, Cap shook his head, giving a wry smile.

“When we came together, none of us ever dreamed that we’d capture your attention so much. Well, Tony probably did, but he’s a little strange like that.”

A small laugh swept the crowd and Mage smiled slightly. Both Pepper and Lavender had insisted that a joke or two would go over well and it appeared that the girls knew what they were talking about.

“As you know, we were brought together to face a threat that no one person, not even one of us, could deal with alone. An alien invasion, nothing but science fiction. Or so we thought. But together, we pushed them back, protected the world and did our very best to ensure that everyone remained safe from harm.

“There have been other threats that we have had a hand in stopping including a second alien invasion in Greenwich, England and most recently, the uncovering of HYDRA, a home-grown organisation that was and still is, intent on world domination. Together, the Avengers will always do what is right, to protect the people from harm. You can see that in some of the devices that we choose to carry.

Here Cap gestured to each as he elaborated.

“I carry a shield, an object that has always been used to protect. Thor uses Mjolnir, a hammer, that can build. And while most of you will only see Iron Man’s repulsars that he uses to fly and fight with, look at the technology that it comes from. Arc technology is completely green, renewable energy. It powers this entire building with zero carbon emissions.

“But another part of our job is to watch for those who are different from the norm, for those with special abilities and powers. I was once told by a truly great man that a strong man who has known power all his life can lose respect for that power and abuse it. I’m sure that you have seen that..."
yourselves in people that you’ve read about in the newspaper or seen on television. For us, for the Avengers, in this day when superpowered people, whether through technology or genetics or some combination of the two, are becoming more prevalent, we keep an eye out for those sorts of people, people who can become powerful and become drunk on that power.

“We see it as our job to find those people and to do our best to make sure that they don’t hurt the innocent. One Initiative that we have begun is something that we’d like to announce to the world today. Avengers Academy.

A slight stir swept through the reporters and their attention became even more focussed, something that Mage didn’t think was possible.

“Avengers Academy is designed to find those who are already doing good with their special abilities or those who are just emerging and to teach and guide them into working for the betterment of all, for the protection of the people.”

“When do you expect to find the first person for this Academy of yours?” Ben Urich asked.

Cap smiled at him. “Actually, we already have some recruits.”

“Just so long as it isn’t that web-headed menace!” J. Jonah Jameson exclaimed.

Mage took that as his cue to dispel the first of the disillusionment spells that he’d cast in preparation for this press conference. It also triggered the screen behind them showing a large image of Spider-man.

“It’s good to see you, too, Mister Jameson,” Spider-man quipped, adding in a small wave.

“You’ve seen Spider-man in action,” Cap continued, gesturing to the screen that was showing precisely that. “He’s battled for this city. He defeated Doctor Curt Connors, also known as The Lizard, a man who, in his altered state, was a very real danger to the people of New York. Since then, he’s been working tirelessly for the little guys, stopping crime wherever he finds it.”

“What about Daredevil?” Urich asked. “He does the same thing.”

Again, Mage’s magic went to work and the screen shifted its focus.

“Avengers Academy is primarily designed for the younger, emerging powered person,” Cap stated. “Daredevil is slightly older and therefore has more experience. The Avengers have been working alongside him for quite a while already, in the shadows. Daredevil has also been doing some mentoring of his own, particularly with Spider-man, helping him learn the streets and the dangers that come with it.

“While we all take part in the instructing of those in Avengers Academy, we have recruited a Head Instructor, if you will. This person was a top S.H.I.E.L.D. agent – and I do mean S.H.I.E.L.D., not HYDRA. She was even selected by Director Fury himself to work with us. As such, we would like to introduce you to Mockingbird.”

As Mage’s spell went to work, it was to show Mockingbird standing almost defiantly, her arms crossed as she stared out at the crowd. Realising that they could now see her, she gave a simple nod.

“Another that you have heard a lot about recently, particularly after the Battle at the Triskelion, is Sam Wilson. He was enlisted in the United States Air Force as a pararescue airman and served three tours in this role. Now, Falcon has joined the Academy, to brush up on his skills and to work with us to defend not just this nation, but the world.
“This next person some of you have already written articles about or done television spots on, speculating about her. Squirrel Girl,” here Mage disillusioned her, “has been working alongside Mage, Daredevil and Spider-man to help keep the streets of New York safe.’

“Is she some kind of mutant freak, with that tail?” Jameson asked.

“I will kindly ask you not to use such language,” Captain America said coldly. “But to answer your question, no, Squirrel Girl is a mutate and thus better suited for working with us than with the mutants.”

The crowd of reporters gasped and tried to step back as the next disillusionment spell was dropped. But then, that reaction had been anticipated, after all, having a seven foot tall jade green woman with powerful-looking muscles appear was sure to do that.

“This is She-Hulk,” Cap introduced before holding up a hand. “And before you question her name, I’d like to point out that she was given it by Hulk himself. If any of you would like to debate it, take it up with him. Yes, She-Hulk and Hulk have many similar characteristics and there are reasons for that, reasons that we are going to keep to ourselves. Just know that She-Hulk, like the Hulk, can do immense good, despite their unexpected appearance.

“And lastly, we have Marauder.”

As Mage dispelled his charm, he moved up to stand just behind the newly revealed Marauder and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Marauder, like Mage, controls magic, thus Mage has taken him under his wing as an apprentice of sorts. He is also our youngest member of the Avengers Academy and thus still has quite a bit of learning to do so you won’t see him in action all that much for a while.

“That’s about all I have for you,” Cap smiled. “We do still have some time to answer a few questions if you have any, though.”

As expected, the reporters surged to their feet, arms raised and their voices babbling over the top of each other.

“Mister Jameson,” Cap said, singling the Daily Bugle reporter out.

“This Academy idea, bringing all these extras in with you Avengers, won’t that just make an even bigger mess than the seven of you already make? The damage bill from New York, Greenwich and Washington alone is in the billions, not to mention the other places you people have ‘saved us’,” Jameson asked.

“What gives you the right to fight criminals? Isn’t that the job of the police?” a woman brandishing a microphone asked.

“Yes, it is,” Cap replied. “But the police are all but overwhelmed with the crime in this city. If we can help, even a little, then I believe that we should.”

“What do you think of the vigilante laws that are currently being debated in Washington?” Ben
Urich asked.

“The Avengers are following that debate closely,” Daredevil replied. “In fact, we retain our own lawyers and they will inform us about what those laws are and how or if they affect us, assuming that they get passed.”

“What the name Marauder?” Jameson asked. “It’s doesn’t exactly scream ‘good guy’, more like you’re some kind of pirate out to cause some kind of mischief.”

Mage was certain that, under the obscuris spell that he’d applied to Marauder, there would be quite the smirk at that question, just as there was on Mage’s face.

“It’s to honour my father,” Marauder replied. “He died when I was only a couple of months old and that was a nickname that he had.”

Mage gave Marauder’s shoulder a light squeeze. That was just the answer that they’d rehearsed in case that question was asked.

“Yes, Miss, what’s your question?” Cap asked, indicating the next one to ask what they wanted to know.

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The heat was near stifling, being as it was near the middle of the day. The jungle surrounding them provided at least some relief. Unfortunately, that relief wasn’t from the swarms of mosquitos and other biting insects. If there had once been other animals that frequented this part of the jungle, they were currently absent, most likely having sensed that they were no longer the apex creatures here.

No, that position now lay with the men standing loosely grouped in front of four large military trucks. These weren’t the only men; indeed, there was near enough an entire platoon of mercenaries within those trucks that had elected – wisely – to leave these men alone. Especially since one of them didn’t even appear human any longer.

Currently, these eight were looking down into the valley below, scoping out the landscape and any potential dangers.

The valley was bordered by hills that verged on being mountains themselves, broken only by a wide, fast moving river on one side. The remainder of the land was flat, primarily by nature’s design but enhanced by human engineering. The jungle had been cut back to the foothills of their natural border with an additional man-made fence just inside it that was all concrete, wire and electricity to provide extra security.

Three large buildings had been built in such a way so that each formed the side of a triangle. None were more than three stories in height. At least above ground.

“Welcome, gentlemen, to Barracuda Base,” their Leader, Sterns said.

“What is this place?” O’Hirn asked, chewing on a piece of grass.

“This was once S.H.I.E.L.D.’s premier weapons facility,” Sterns replied. “Here they built every weapon that you can imagine and tested and designed others that never reached past the drawing board.”

“What sort of weapons?” Osborn asked.
“Everything from simple bullets to missiles to nuclear bombs. Here they even stored some of their weapons in what they called ‘Phase Two’,” Sterns replied.

“We’re here for the weapons, I take it?” Myers asked.

“You said that this used to be a S.H.I.E.L.D. base. What is it now?” Kravinoff asked.

“I believe that HYDRA now control his base,” Sterns replied. “But with HYDRA in as much disarray as S.H.I.E.L.D., I think what they really need is Leadership.”

“And if they disagree, then I can make them see sense,” Blonsky grinned, rubbing his massive fists together.

“Barracuda also houses some toys that I think we’ll enjoy; toys that were specifically designed and built with us in mind,” Sterns continued.

“Toys?” Otto Octavius asked, eyeing the buildings with renewed interest. “Do tell.”

“Why tell when we can simply go take a look for ourselves,” Herman Shultz stated.

“I like the way you think, my friend, I like the way you think,” Sterns nodded. “Well, gentlemen, shall we?”
Gringotts, in Harry’s opinion, was a necessary evil. But then, they did hold the monopoly on the finances of the magical world. Oh, there were the gnomes of Zuich, but they weren’t as wide-spread throughout the world like Gringotts was and thus, when Harry’d decided to leave Britain and to travel the world, it was an easy decision to leave his gold with the goblins.

Well, easy in that he didn’t have much choice. Gringotts branches could be found all around the globe. And in every single one of them, Harry’s reputation followed him; a reputation that carried a double-edged sword.

Because of the Potter and Black accounts, his vault balance (all combined, of course) ensured that he was afforded deferential treatment, treatment that very few wizards were given. On the other hand, because of the fact that he’d broken into London Gringotts, half-destroyed the branch and ‘stolen’ one of their dragons, he was all but considered ‘persona non-grata’. Yes, he’d paid restitution and the Ministry of Magic had paid even more on his behalf, thus cancelling out the debt, but that didn’t erase the damage to Gringotts’ reputation that he’d caused.

Thus, while he’d been made to wait on an extremely uncomfortable rock bench for his appointment, the wait wasn’t as long as it could have been.

“Lord Potter,” a younger goblin grunted at him, “come this way.”

Harry quickly rose from his chair and nodded fractionally deeper than he probably needed to. His attempt at showing respect was ignored, however, as the goblin simply turned, opened a nearby door and strode through it.

For a species that was so much shorter than humans, they moved deceptively fast and it was all that Harry could do to keep up with his guide. It didn’t help that the corridor that they’d entered was slightly lower than was comfortable for a human and thus he was forced to walk with his head slightly bowed.

At one particular door that obviously was the correct one, not that Harry could tell, seeing no signs or markings anywhere in the corridor or on the doors, his guide stopped. A single sharp claw was scraped down the door before a grunt was heard from inside.

A simple wave of the goblin’s hand indicated that Harry should proceed. After a single nod, Harry pushed open the heavy rock door and entered.

“Account Manager Schist,” he said, bowing low just inside the doorway and being extremely careful – just as he was every single time that he had to come here – to keep any emotion or inflection out of his voice.

“Lord Potter. What do you want?” Schist asked in his deep gravelly voice.

Harry stood straight and, keeping his eyes fixed firmly ahead and away from the various axes and swords on the walls to either side of him, approached the long, wide, irregularly-shaped rock desk. Carefully, knowing how uncomfortable it was going to be from past experience, Harry lowered himself into one of the chairs on his side of the desk.

“I am interested in having some work done on one of my properties,” Harry stated.

“What sort of work?” Schist asked.
“Primarily some buildings constructed,” Harry began before he was cut off mid-sentence.

“Then you’ve wasted my time and yours as well; Gringotts does not create buildings above ground,” Schist snapped.

“I am aware of that,” Harry replied patiently. “However, Gringotts are masters of warding. And the property that I would like improvements made to it also need its wards altered and upgraded. At present, the property – Paradis Noir – is under unplottable wards, muggle-repelling wards, a fidelius and a host of other wards that were placed there hundreds of years ago by the then Head of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black.”

“I see,” Schist said, sitting back in his chair, his eyes narrowed.

“Because of those wards, I would like to hire Gringotts to coordinate with the dwarves and the technomages of Nippon to see to the alterations to the wards and the construction of the buildings that I have in mind,” Harry continued.

Moving slowly so as to not cause any undue suspicion, Harry pulled a swath of papers out of his pocket. Channelling some wandless magic, he enlarged them and placed them on the desk in front of Schist.

The old goblin leant forwards and leafed through them one by one. Harry watched as lists of the ward upgrades that he wanted were perused; designs of each of the buildings were examined; and the modifications that he had in mind that only the Nippon Technomages could accomplish were read through. The gleam in Schist’s eye told Harry exactly what the goblin was going to say before he even said it.

“Gringotts could do as you ask, but it will come at a price.”

The fact that that price was going to be steep was left unsaid but also entirely expected.

“What would Gringotts ask to see that all of this is done?” Harry asked.

Schist’s hand rested on the stack of paper, one fingernail tapping as his eyes bored into Harry’s.

“The Ancient Blacks are well-known for their … creativity in their ward creation,” Schist stated. “Thus, there will need to be some consideration given to the potential danger. Not to mention coordinating the different groups, ensuring that they complete their work within a satisfactory time frame and to a high standard. Gringotts will, of course, ensure that the location of their work is obliviated from their minds afterwards thus preserving the location of the Black ancestral island. None of that will come cheap. I can see it being accomplished for no less than ten million galleons.”

Ten million galleons was a much higher starting price than Harry was expecting and it took every ounce of control to not react. Thankfully, it was only a starting point. Now, he just had to bargain them down to something much more realistic. Fleetingly, Harry wondered whether he should have brought Tony with him before instantly rejecting that notion – Stark was more likely to cause an interspecies incident with one of his snarky comments than be any help here.

“I can, of course, provide you with access to Paradis Noir as Lord Black,” Harry began, “and also as Lord Black, I can ensure that any potentially harmful wards are taken down before any others access the island. I would think that, with the ‘danger’ galleons taken out, five million galleons is much more reasonable a price.”

Schists’ immediate full-throated laugh told Harry that these negotiations were going to be long and difficult and it was all that he could do not to sigh with the thought of what was to come.
Sweat dripped into Ted’s eyes as he backtracked but, as much as he would like, he had no opportunity to wipe it away. Before him, a grinning Doreen advanced, her fists and feet coming at him almost too fast for him to counter.

This was their final sparring session before … Well, it was their last unofficial one; their last official one had been yesterday afternoon, but Teddy had insisted on the two of them having this last go. And this time, he was determined to beat her. For once.

His eyes tried to stay focused on her own, really, they did, but it was immensely difficult not to watch her hands and feet, especially when they were flying at him so rapidly and with so much force. Every single one of his trainers – Bobbi, Nat, Steve, even Clint when he was around – all insisted that it was the eyes that telegraphed what the body was going to do. And, considering how often he lost, maybe they were right.

Left fist block.
Right fist block.
Duck under the second right.

Arch the body forward while slipping his feet backwards to dodge the kick.

Ted’s eyes widened at the left swinging fist aimed at his head and he did the only thing that he could think of – he allowed gravity to take him.

Landing flat, he immediately rolled over and then rolled again to miss the foot aimed at his chest.

Quickly, he scrambled to his feet and danced backwards to give himself a little more room – a movement that was in vain as Doreen simply advanced with him.

In rapid succession, he blocked four fists, the sound of his hands slapping away at her arms echoing throughout the room.

Defensive, he was always on the defensive. He was sure that that was why he never won, never mind Doreen’s advanced reflexes and stamina.

With that in mind, he decided to try something different, something completely unexpected.

Dancing backwards, he avoided her roundhouse kick. And then, when she next struck out at him with her left, instead of blocking, he swivelled the top half of his body to simply avoid it. The unexpected movement must have caught Doreen off balance for a moment for her hand seemed to hang in mid-air for longer than usual.

Out of instinct, Ted grabbed it and yanked, twisted his body some more and threw her, just as Bobbi had taught him, up and over his hip.

Ted’s feeling of victory was incredibly short-lived as Doreen’s hand grabbed on to his forearm as she flew, bringing him with her.

“Oof!” he exclaimed as the air was knocked from his lungs when he landed on his back.

Regardless, he scrambled about, managing to get most of his body on top of Doreen’s. His hands reached out and grabbed her hands.
“Got you!” he grinned, his face mere inches from her own.

“You really think so?” she asked.

“Yep,” he replied.

A subtle tensing of her muscles underneath him told Ted that Doreen was about to throw him off and that there was nothing that he could do about it, especially with her enhanced strength. And then, he did the unexpected.

He kissed her.

Feeling that tenseness instantly evaporate from her body, Ted deepened the kiss. Her fingers entwined with his own and he felt her begin kissing him back.

“Wow!” Doreen breathed when they finally separated.

“Yeah. Wow!” Ted agreed, staring down into her chestnut brown eyes from where he’d lifted his head.

“Gotta say, though, Ted, your timing sucks,” Doreen stated. “You’re going back to England after the party tonight. You couldn’t have kissed me weeks ago?”

“We’ve still got this afternoon,” Ted replied, trying to find the positives.

“I think we’re done here,” Doreen said, “let’s get out of here and spend your last day in New York City doing something a little more fun.”

“I like that idea,” Ted agreed, standing up before offering his hand to assist her to her feet. “At least I finally won one.”

“Don’t expect that move to work next time, buddy,” Doreen grinned.

Originally, this room had been designed as a conference room or a mission briefing room within Avengers Tower. But with the fall of S.H.I.E.L.D. and the rise of HYDRA, both Steve and Maria had insisted that they needed a command centre. Thus, Tony had gone to work adding banks of monitors to the wall as well as smaller touch screen computers in the big conference desk in front of every chair.

Currently, Steve, Maria and Bucky were using the room to analyse the data that they and Coulson’s team had gathered about HYDRA. Healer Greengrass was also in attendance, as she usually was whenever Bucky was doing something that might cause him some stress. And for this, Steve had to agree that she could be needed.

In the last half hour that they’d been digging through the data aiming to identify possible HYDRA bases, Steve had noted a tensing around Bucky’s eyes, a sure sign that, despite his cool exterior, this was getting to him. But then, how could it not? For over the past seven decades, the Winter Soldier had been HYDRA’s asset, the one they’d call in to do their dirty work and, while Bucky didn’t remember a lot of that time – unsurprising after the way they’d wiped his memory after each mission – what he did remember was a far cry from the boy that Steve had grown up with.

Four of the monitors were arrayed with lines of data, names of once-were S.H.I.E.L.D. bases. Further information about each base could be gained from simply touching the appropriate name.
“I don’t think that we’re going to be able to go any further with the information that we have,” Maria stated.

“Agreed,” Steve sighed. “I just wish that this list was a bit bigger.”

There were nods all around the room at his statement, coinciding with his finger tapping the monitor containing the shortest list – the list of bases that still remained in S.H.I.E.L.D.’s hands. Of the remaining three lists, by far the longest was the list of bases that they had no idea who now controlled them. The two mid-sized lists detailed the bases that were now controlled by the government where the base was located or the bases that HYDRA had won in their uprising. Unfortunately, of the last list, there was no indication whether or not HYDRA still controlled them or had simply stripped them as they had done with the Fridge and moved on.

“I’m certain that HYDRA have a base somewhere in southern Connecticut,” Bucky stated, frowning at the data on the screen that he was using.

“There’s nothing about a base in Connecticut anywhere in these files,” Maria replied, her fingers dancing over her keyboard.

“I know it’s there. Or it was,” a frustrated sounding Bucky reiterated. “I can remember it! It was near a river. But the boats I’m remembering aren’t modern. This was maybe thirty or forty years ago.”

“Don’t push it,” Healer Greengrass said, coming up behind him and laying a hand between his shoulder blades. “Let the memory come naturally.”

“It’s okay, Buck,” Steve added. “The fact that you can remember something gives us a place to start. I wouldn’t be surprised if it takes us a long time to check every single one of these as it is, not to mention finding all of their secret bases, and by then, more of your memories will have returned.”

“I’ll send these lists to some of my contacts,” Maria said, “see what their intelligence says. There’s a couple on here that we really don’t want HYDRA keeping – the Treehouse, Barracuda and The Swamp among them.”

“That’s what the Avengers aim to do – take the fight to HYDRA and clear them out completely, no matter how ‘strategic’ the base happens to be,” Steve stated. “For now, I’ll start working on putting together our first potential target.”

“And I’ll help,” Bucky added. “No one here knows more about how HYDRA operates than I do.”

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“I’m telling you that Ultron is more essential now than ever before,” Tony argued.

“And I’m not debating that,” Bruce shot back, “especially with all of the enhanced individuals that HYDRA released when they had their coming out party …”

“I’m sure that we could take them,” Peter chirped up from where he was seated at a computer console across the room, his fingers never straying from their dance.

“No one’s saying we couldn’t, kid,” Tony replied. “What I am saying is that we shouldn’t have to. With Ultron out there, our job would be cut in half at the very least. At best, we’d be out of a job altogether.”

“Hey, no one’d be happier than me if we could retire the other guy permanently, but it’s just not going to happen,” Bruce sighed.
“You’re giving up?” Tony asked.

“Yes. I am,” Bruce replied and pushed himself away from his computer station so that he rolled a couple of feet back on his stool. “Creating an AI that’s capable of monitoring the entire world – every satellite, every piece of intelligence gathering system in existence – as well as controlling dozens of suits or robots or androids or whatever at the same time is simply out of the question. It’ll take too much computing power, especially if you want it to be intelligent enough to know when it’s needed and when it should simply leave the problem for the appropriate authorities to handle.”

“The human brain is the most sophisticated computer ever designed,” Peter commented, “couldn’t we just use that as a template for Ultron?”

“What do you think I did when I built Jarvis?” Tony asked rhetorically.

“Jarvis is one thing, he’s state of the art, the most advanced AI in existence, but even he’s not good enough to do what we want Ultron to do,” Bruce stated. “Not even a computer as advanced as a single human mind could do what we have in mind for Ultron.”

Tony stared at Bruce, his arms crossed and a scowl on his face.

“Admit it, Tony, the tech simply doesn’t yet exist to do what you have in mind,” Bruce continued.

“I thought that was what we were trying to do, create it,” Tony groused.

“And maybe someday we will,” Bruce sighed. “But that day isn’t today.”

“But we can still work on it, can’t we?” Peter asked. “In our spare time or something? If we don’t invent it, then who will?”

“We aren’t the only smart people in the world,” Tony said. “But maybe you’re right; we aren’t going to solve this now. Perhaps we should shelve the project and come back to it later when there’s been a breakthrough in computing power and processing speed.”

“Glad to hear you finally talking some sense,” Bruce said, nodding his head. “And maybe now you’ll let me get a bit of sleep instead of waking me up and dragging me down here at all hours of the night?”

“Don’t count on it,” Tony countered. “When the muse strikes, you’ve gotta follow where it leads, right kid?”

“Well, I don’t know about ‘muse’,” Peter replied, “but my spider-sense has a nasty habit of going off at the most inconvenient times imaginable.”

“Great. As long as that’s settled,” Tony said, clapping his hands together. “Whenever our muse or ‘spider-sense’ goes off, we have to follow it.”

“But if it’s your muse, I don’t see why that means that I can’t get extra sleep,” Bruce near-whined.

“Hey, you’re not going to let me have all this fun by myself, are you?” Tony asked.

Bruce’s expression told the other two exactly what he thought of that idea.

ooo00ooo

“Here you go, kid,” Tony said, tossing a box wrapped in blue paper at Teddy.
“Thanks, Tony,” Teddy replied with a large grin.

The wrapping paper was quickly torn off and discarded to the ground alongside all of its brethren – it seemed that most of the inhabitants of the Tower had elected to get Teddy a ‘going away’ gift. By far the most impressive had been a joint gift given by Darcy and Lavender: a large poster of all of the Avengers, including the recruits, all suited up and standing together. Well, apart from the web head who’d thought that lowering himself into the shot upside down on one of his webs was ‘cool’. And it was, not that Tony ever planned on telling him that.

The poster had actually been created using one of the latest photos from the recent photo shoot that Lavender had arranged as part of her on-going public relations things. She thought that, after the press release that they’d done with the recruits and the Academy, it’d help with their image if they could market some new products and to also get their names out there, especially the newest ones.

The only downside that’d come from the press thing had been the old geezer with the greying hair and moustache and glasses wearing red spandex sporting a blue lightning bolt image on his chest, black underpants and a blue cape that had insisted that he was Academy-worthy. Stan, he’d said his name was. Tony’d shouted Happy a cheeseburger for dealing with the guy and getting rid of him.

“Woah!” Teddy exclaimed, bringing Tony’s attention back to the kid.

The black box that the watch had come in had been discarded and Teddy was now holding the watch in his hand. Obviously, he’d already found the button that produced a holographic projection from the face of the watch, which included a mini-screen and keyboard.

“It’s got a GPS built in and a direct line to Jarvis,” Tony preened. “You can also make video calls, including conference calls and has the latest security features.”

Seeing the kid about to state the obvious, Tony held up a hand to stop the words coming out of his open mouth.

“And before you say anything, yes, I’ve loaded it with all the latest enhancements to cut straight through whatever magic field you happen to be in,” Tony continued. “Now there’s no reason for you to not keep in contact with whoever you want. And no more need for those pigeons you lot use.”

Tony’s purposeful look in Doreen’s direction didn’t go unnoticed and elicited a fair few chuckles from the adults in the room.

“Owls,” Harry corrected almost automatically before continuing. “How sure are you about that, Tony? Hogwarts has the densest magic field in the world, which it should after over a thousand years and probably millions of kids using magic in that one spot, not to mention the wards and the convergence of ley lines that it sits upon.”

With a shrug, Tony reached over and snagged a second box before tossing it to Teddy as well.

“If the watch can’t punch its way through the interference, set that up somewhere secure outside that village near the castle,” Tony said, nodding at the box. “It’s a relay with a lot more power to it that’ll punch through anything.”

“Thanks, Tony, you’re the best,” Teddy gushed, exactly as he should.

“And don’t think I’ve forgotten the rest of you,” Tony continued, lifting up a large box from under the table. “There’s one in here for each of you. These things are Avengers issue. Jarvis has them encrypted to our fingerprints, retinas, voice patterns and pass-phrase so that no one else can use them.”
“What’s the phrase?” Clint asked.

“You’re a smart guy; you’ll figure it out,” Tony smirked.

He’d had some fun coming up with the phrases and he couldn’t wait to see the reactions. At least, some of the reactions. There were a couple that he’d had to be careful of – Bruce’s especially; he didn’t want to annoy the big guy, after all.

Doreen all but squealed as she ripped the cover off the box after jumping in to ensure she was the first to get hers.

“Doreen. Squirrel Girl. Doreen Green. Green,” Doreen tried phrase after phrase to get her watch to activate and Tony couldn’t help his smirk not to grow wider and wider with each failed attempt.


Suddenly, Doreen’s watch activated its holographic display so that it hung in the air just above the watch’s face.

“Rodent girl? Really?” Doreen scowled over Teddy’s laughter.

“Seemed appropriate,” Tony shrugged. “And I wouldn’t be laughing quite so hard, kid, I only programmed your watch to activate without the pass-code the first time. From here on out, you’ll need to say yours, too.”

Instantly, Teddy’s laughter stopped and his eyes narrowed.

“If I could use my wand,” he mock threatened.

“Then I wouldn’t need to shrink all of your gifts,” Harry concluded for him. “Come on, Ted, it’s time to say your goodbyes, that portkey won’t wait forever.”

“Couldn’t I go back by plane?” Ted near-whined. “That’s how I got here, after all. The portkey’ll be too quick and I’m not looking forward to one of Grandmother’s lectures. Nor what her punishment will be for me going out on patrol with Doreen and Peter.”

“You can take your licks just like I had to,” Harry winced.

Tony couldn’t help but grin at Gandalf. Harry’d complained about the ‘howler’ that he’d received from the old woman after she’d found out about Teddy’s ‘night time excursions’. From his perspective, having a letter scream at you sounded hilarious. At least for everyone else.

Almost unconsciously, the adults and Peter began drifting one way while Teddy and Doreen walked towards the balcony, their fingers entwined.

“Come on, Tony,” Pepper said, tugging on his arm, “leave the kids to say goodbye in peace.”

“But it can’t be a good thing to leave two teenagers alone like that?” Tony protested, remembering what his teenage years were like.

Tony didn’t miss the looks that Pepper, Jane, Bobbi and Nat exchanged, nor their smirks. Somehow, he suspected that he was in for another one of those conversations with Pepper later. They were starting to become far too frequent for his liking and truth be told, she was starting to wear him down. Not that he’d ever admit to that!

ooo00ooo
Having an office wasn’t out of the ordinary for Phil Coulson, after all, he even had one on the Bus. But having this office, particularly with what it meant was something new, something that he was still coming to terms with.

Director, it said on the door. He was the Director of S.H.I.E.L.D. Phil still wasn’t sure whether to thank Fury for making him the Director or to curse him into oblivion. The one bonus of having this office was knowing that, once upon a time, it had belonged to Peggy Carter herself. But then, this entire base, this Playground, had once been SSR before Fury had repurposed it and erased it from all S.H.I.E.L.D. records.

Rebuilding S.H.I.E.L.D. from the ground up was a much bigger job than he’d imagined. Not only was he now responsible for securing the old S.H.I.E.L.D. tech and personnel and bringing them back into the fold, he needed to manage so many other areas, including the financial aspect, something that gave him a headache just from the mere thought of it.

“Phil, Talbot’s on the line for you,” May stated as she burst through the door without knocking.

Phil looked up from the data that he was perusing using the holographic technology that Fury’s toolbox contained.

“He is? How’d he get my number?” Phil asked. “Never mind, patch him through to the big screen.”

As May crossed the room to do that, Phil closed the data that he’d been looking through by pinching his fingers together before tapping the Toolbox home into its secret compartment.

“General,” Phil greeted the severe looking man that appeared on his screen.

“Coulson,” Talbot replied with the smallest of nods.

“Is there something that I can help you with?” Phil asked.

For a moment, it looked as though Talbot was going to sneeze or perhaps throw up, especially with the way that his nose and moustache twitched.

“Actually, no,” Talbot finally said. “There’s some information that you should know.”

Phil shared a brief glance with May before smiling politely at Talbot.

“And what would that be?” he asked.

“Now, I want to make it clear that this is coming from my superiors,” Talbot stated. “As far as I’m concerned, you and your ragtag bunch of misfits don’t deserve the dirt off of my boots and you certainly can’t do anything with the information that I’m about to tell you.”

“Give us a chance, General, we might just surprise you,” Phil suggested.

A scowl crossed Talbot’s face before he leant forward and the screen split in two.

Phil watched as an image of a large room appeared below; obviously the camera was positioned high in one corner of the room. There were three individuals there – one with an elongated head working at a console, another wearing a trench coat near the door, and the last hovering in the air on some kind of powered board wearing an unknown type of armour. Whatever the man at the console was doing was obviously successful as two massive doors on the far side of the room parted slightly and a great billow of gas spilled out, covering the floor up to the men’s knees.
And then a fourth … being appeared, one that Phil remembered from years back.

“Is that the Abomination?” he blurted.

“I’m told that Blonsky doesn’t care for that name,” Talbot snarked. “But, yes, that’s him.”

“He’s loose? That’s not good,” Phil stated. “How many men did you lose?”

“Seven killed, another eighteen wounded,” Talbot growled.

“Who were the men responsible?” Phil asked.

Talbot looked down at something on his desk as he replied.

“Samuel Sterns, Frederick Myers and Norman Osborn,” Talbot replied. “At least that’s what the facial recognition said.”

“We appreciate you letting us know about this but is there a reason you are telling us? The army’s never been one for sharing intel,” Phil stated.

“As I said, this comes from the higher ups,” Talbot replied. “They seem to think that S.H.I.E.L.D. has a habit of running into unusual circumstances and they thought that you might appreciate the head’s up. Personally, I can’t see the point. S.H.I.E.L.D.’s done, it’s day’s over. I’m just following orders.”

“And we appreciate it,” Phil managed, just before Talbot gave one last scowl and cut the connection.

“We’re not really going to go after the Abomination ourselves, are we?” May asked.

“Not on your life,” Phil replied. “We’re no match for him, and especially if he’s joined up with some other powered people. No. I’m passing this straight up the line. It’s time to call in the Avengers.”
Tony stared incredulously at the lanyard that was being held out to him.

“You and Happy would get on like a house on fire,” he finally told the S.H.I.E.L.D. agent. “He’s got a thing for badges, too.”

“Just put it on, Tony, it’s not going to kill you,” Steve stated, even as he placed his own ‘Visitor’ lanyard around his neck.

“Here,” Nat finally relented, taking Tony’s lanyard. “Like this.”

Tony’s nose scrunched up as the lanyard was dropped over his head to settle in the middle of his chest.

“This way,” Agent May stated, indicating the doorway to their left.

Supposedly, this was S.H.I.E.L.D.’s new secret base. The Playground. Exactly who came up with these names was anyone’s guess. Originally, they weren’t supposed to be given its location but a simple look at Agent when he’d called had the new Director changing his mind. A good thing, too. It wouldn’t have taken Tony long at all to ascertain where they were, especially with Jarvis monitoring the tracking charms on each of the seven who were invited.

As they were led through the Base, Tony idly kept a mental list of anything of interest. The most promising was the lab, but even that looked fairly dingy with quite a number of machines still with plastic sheets draped over them as though they hadn’t even been unpacked properly yet.

Finally, they were ushered into a large conference room that was dominated by a table that could seat a dozen and had multiple large screens on the wall.

“Thank you all for coming,” Agent, no Director, said, shaking each hand as the Avengers entered.

“I don’t see any swings. Or a sandpit for that matter,” Tony stated before continuing when everyone began staring at him. “What? This is supposed to be a ‘playground’, isn’t it?”

Coulson’s small enigmatic smile was almost almost enough to make Tony smile, especially as death hadn’t seemed to change the guy.

“You asked us here,” Steve stated, once they’d all taken a seat. “I’m guessing you have a mission for us?”

“Not quite,” Coulson replied. “We do, however have some information that you need to have.”

“What sort of information?” Clint asked, leaning back in his chair.

“I was contacted by General Glenn Talbot from the United States Air Force,” Coulson stated and immediately, Tony began tapping away at his personal pad to gain extra information about this General.

“He shared some footage that he thought S.H.I.E.L.D. needed to see,” Coulson continued. “After seeing it, I thought that I’d pass it along.”

“Footage?” Steve echoed.
“Yes. This comes from the Army. It seems that one of their more secure bases in Alaska wasn’t as secure as they thought it was and an asset was released from there by outside forces,” Coulson stated.

“Alaska?” Bruce repeated and there was definitely something in his voice that shot Tony’s head up.

“What’s so special about Alaska?” Harry asked.

“My guess is that the footage will tell us that,” Nat stated.

“It will,” Coulson stated flatly. “Skye?”

As the hacker-girl tapped a couple of buttons on her keyboard, Tony swung his chair around to face the big screen.

An image of a large room appeared with three individuals, one of whom looked vaguely familiar.

What especially caught Tony’s attention, though, was the man in some kind of armour standing on a powered board that was floating in the air. As far as he was aware—and he made sure to be aware—that sort of tech didn’t exist yet. It wasn’t repulsar tech, so no industrial sabotage, but the way the board or perhaps glider moved, it was easy to see that it was designed with a lot of moving parts to help stabilize it in the air. The suit that the guy was wearing was definitely advanced tech and obviously incapable of independent flight.

A few taps of his own pad had the image being copied to Jarvis’ mainframe for later in-depth study.

“Who sat on that guy’s head as a baby?” Tony asked, eyeballing the last guy who had the most elongated head that Tony had ever seen.

“Sterns,” Bruce breathed.

“Correct, Doctor,” Coulson said. “That is Doctor Samuel Sterns.”

Before anymore could be said, whatever this Sterns character was doing at the control panel that he was playing with paid off as a pair of immense doors opened and a cloud of gas spilled onto the floor.

“Cryostasis?” Tony guessed.

Instantly, Bruce shoved his chair back from the table and was up, pacing, his eyes never leaving the screen even as his hands continuously ran through his hair.

And then an enormous creature, easily three or four feet taller than the Hulk, and adorned with spikes and a feral expression, stepped forward.


“Blonsky,” Natasha echoed, giving Tony all the information that he needed to get Jarvis searching through his files.

“Is that some kind of deformed troll or giant?” Harry asked.

“Those are real?” Coulson asked, before waving off the question. “No. Captain Emil Blonsky. Former British Special Forces. He was assigned to General Ross to capture the Hulk a number of years back. From what we’ve been able to piece together, he underwent some kind of experimental procedure that made him faster, stronger and gave him an increased healing factor.”
“A super soldier serum?” Steve asked.

“That’s our guess,” Coulson nodded. “And then something went wrong, we’re not sure what.”

“I was there for the clean up,” Natasha stated. “It looked as though Sterns experimented on him as well and turned him into that … thing.”

“This is not good, guys,” Bruce stated. “The Other Guy, the Hulk, is not happy. He wants out.”

“No. No, I think I can control it,” Bruce replied. “Blonsky’s the reason that I broke Harlem.”

“You were stopping the Abomination,” Clint said.

“Yeah. Maybe. And that’s the problem,” Bruce said, continuing to pace. “Hulk nearly lost and just seeing that Blonsky’s out, Hulk’s ready for a rematch, to prove that he’s the alpha. And you can bet your life that Blonsky’s going to want a rematch as well. Getting beaten by the Hulk is what made him seek out Sterns to undergo the change in the first place.”

“I take it you want us to round up this …” Steve began.

“Abomination,” Clint supplied.

“Abomination and put him back on ice?” Steve finished.

“In short, yes,” Coulson replied. “Unfortunately, the problem’s a little bigger than that. Skye?”

The footage on the screen disappeared to be replaced by four ‘mugshots’.

“These are the four involved in the incident at the Army facility in Alaska,” Skye stated. “Emil Blonsky, otherwise known as the Abomination, you now all know. Next is Doctor Samuel Sterns, a cellular biologist, whose intellect was enhanced by a freak accident that we believe involved a sample of Doctor Banner’s blood contaminating a cut on his forehead. If he’s not the smartest person on the planet right now, he’s definitely in the top three.

“Frederick Myers, a petty crook who has a thing for boomerangs, if you can believe it,” Skye said, highlighting the next individual.

“I remember him now!” Tony said. “I took him down ages ago.”

A coughing snigger from Harry had Tony narrowing his eyes at the wizard.

“You got something to say, Gandalf?” Tony challenged.

“No, no, nothing to add,” Harry replied quickly but there was something in the man’s smile which made Tony think that he was hiding something.

“Lastly is Norman Osborn,” Skye said, indicating the man who was on the flying glider.

“That’s Osborn?” Tony questioned, taking a second, longer look at the screen. “Last I heard, the man was dying.”

“We think that that suit he’s wearing has some kind of medical or regenerative properties to it,” Coulson replied.
“You want us to find all four?” Steve clarified, “not just Blonsky.”

“We do,” Coulson replied. “But somehow we don’t think it will be that easy.”

“I had a poke around the HYDRA files that we have, as well as the S.H.I.E.L.D. files that Stark and Romanoff released to the world,” Skye stated. “And when I input all four names, I got a hit. Something called ‘Project Sinister’.”

“Who comes up with these names?” Clint asked. “It’s like some teenage kid who reads too many comic books is their go-to guy for names.”

“Most of the files about Project Sinister had been wiped or redacted,” Skye continued, ignoring Barton. “What I was able to piece together is that HYDRA were putting together a team that included those four plus four others.”

Here four new faces joined the four already on the screen.

“There doesn’t seem to be anything especially out of the ordinary for three of them – Doctor Otto Octavius, Hermann Shultz and Alexander O’Hirn,” Coulson stated. “They’re all low-level thugs, hired guns or scientists. The fourth, though, he could be a problem. Sergei Kravinoff, also known as the Hunter. He’s got the works – superhuman strength, speed, stamina, reflexes, senses and a host of other abilities.”

“There were also a number of tech files connected to the ‘Project’ that I couldn’t access,” Skye stated sounding frustrated. “All I got was the file names: Octopus, Rhino and Shocker.”

“Send it to me, I'll see what Jarvis can do with them,” Tony stated.

A nod and a tap later and the files began downloading to his pad.

“Any idea what HYDRA had planned for this ‘team’?” Steve asked.

“Unfortunately not, but you can bet that it was nothing good,” Coulson replied.

“I’m assuming that you’re running facial recognition on all those bozos?” Tony asked.

“Yep. And keeping an eye on Facebook, Twitter, you name it,” Skye added. “So far, no luck.”

“It’s bad enough that HYDRA let so many enhanced individuals out of confinement, but for some of them to be teaming up,” Nat said, ending in a shake of her head.

“Most of it’s just a distraction, a way to keep S.H.I.E.L.D. busy while we rebuild, to tie up our resources so that we don’t have the means to go after them,” Coulson stated.

“Speaking of,” Clint said, pulling out a piece of folded paper from his pants and sliding it across the table. “Bobbi asked me to give you this. It’s a list of people that she thought you might find useful – some ex-Agents that she knows escaped HYDRA and some mercs that she’s had dealings with.”

“Thanks, I’ll look it over,” Coulson smiled.

“Let’s just hope that none of them have any extra tech that we’ll have to deal with,” Steve said grimly, nodding at the eight faces on the screen.

“Does Loki’s sceptre remain secure?” Thor asked. “It may be wisest for me to return it to Asgard.”

Coulson blinked at the big guy for a moment before turning to Skye.
“Skye?” he asked.

“Already on it, A.C.,” she replied, her fingers all but a blur on the keyboard in front of her.

“Got it,” she finally said. “The sceptre was stored in The Fridge.”

“That’s not good,” Coulson said. “Any further data?”

“No, sorry,” Skye replied.

“Garrett and Ward raided the Fridge when S.H.I.E.L.D. fell,” Coulson explained. “They released everyone being held there and stole everything.”

“The sceptre is far too dangerous to be lost here on Midgard and to fall into the wrong hands,” Thor stated. “It must be recovered.”

“I agree with Thor,” Clint stated.

“We’ll add finding it to the top of our to-do list,” Steve promised.

“Along with finding Blonksy and putting him back on ice,” Bruce added emphatically.

Sub-level four seemed to be dedicated to researching new tech. At least that was the assumption, judging by what had been left there. Really, any of the seventeen sub-levels of Barracuda Base could have had that honour. And then there were the three levels above ground, but they mostly seemed to be offices.

But for the purposes of the eight men gathered on Sub-level four, this was where they needed to be, where their specialised tech had been gathered to await them.

“Now, this is what I’m talking about,” Shultz exclaimed, throwing back the lid of the crate that bore his name.

Inside were a pair of steel grey gauntlets that were designed to cover his hands and forearms all the way up to his elbows. Pulling one out, he turned it around to peer inside before shrugging and simply sliding it onto his right arm. His hand found a bar to grasp inside the snug-fitting gauntlet and, exactly where his fingers lay, were a series of buttons.

Tapping the one underneath his thumb caused the gauntlet to power up, a pleasant hum and slight tingle coming from the gauntlet.

As Shultz continued to explore his new-found toy, those around him were doing similar with their own crates.

“Useful, I suppose,” the Hunter grunted, swinging a large net from one hand, a net that crackled with energy from the electrical circuit that he’d activated within it.

One pair out of the many dozens of mercenaries and HYDRA agents that were based at Barracuda glanced nervously at each other as they passed the open doorway, their footsteps quickening at the sight of the Abomination’s thumb testing the sharpness of the largest axe that they’d ever seen resting against the wall.

“The nanotechnology that these appendages work on is the most advanced that I have ever encountered,” Octavius stated gleefully as he bent over his own crate, a pair of magnifying goggles
on his face.

“It has been especially designed to work with your genome,” Sterns told Octavius. “Once it has been bonded to you, they will work as an extension of your own body, controlled by your mind, just as you control your natural limbs.”

“Shall we get to work, then?” Octavius grinned.

“You can call me ‘The Rhino’,” a deep voice called from inside the mechanised suit in the corner before dissolving into maniacal laughter.

All there looked around to see O’Hirn in his suit drop to all fours before its parts moved about to cover his head and show off his horn.

A loud thump followed by the sound of a crate rocketing across the floor, end over end before smashing to pieces against the far wall swung everyone’s head about. Standing with his legs apart, his fists up with the gauntlets prominent stood a grinning Shultz.

“I like the sound of ‘Shocker’,” he stated with a nod of his head.

The whoosh of air as the green-armoured Osborn flew past, laughing hysterically as his compatriots all ducked, had Meyers yelling.

“Hey, watch it, you frickin’ green gobber!” the Aussie yelled.

“That’s Green Goblin to you,” the now-named Goblin retorted, tossing a silver sphere at the man to emphasise his point.

Instantly, Meyers flung out a hand, one of his boomerangs shooting across the room to impact the sphere.

BOOM!

The shockwave and cloud of dust that exploded from the combined sphere and boomerang was enough to send all but the Abomination tumbling to the ground.

“Nice one, Boomerang,” O’Hirn laughed.

“I strongly suggest that we test out our new toys in a safer environment,” their Leader stated as he climbed to his feet. “Perhaps a visit to the local warlord, Chavez, I believe his name is. Some added security for this part of the jungle might be beneficial.”

“I like the sound of a jaunt through the jungle,” the Hunter grinned. “And helping others learn who the dominant Alpha is could be quite fun.”

“Yes, me!” the Abomination growled and none there, not their Leader or the Hunter or any of them, had any compulsion to argue the point.

Bruce was the first through the door after Maria had sent out the alert calling the Avengers to the Command Centre. Seeing only Steve and Maria in the room didn’t deter Bruce from asking the question that had been plaguing him for the past couple of days.

“You’ve found him? You’ve found Blonsky?” he near-blurted.
“I’m afraid not,” Steve frowned. “They’ve gone to ground. Jarvis found where Osborn’s jet was berthed in Alaska and then again when it landed briefly in California. After that, though, we lost it.”

“It’s a private jet and the flight plan that it did filed wasn’t followed,” Maria supplied. “Don’t worry, we’re still searching; it’s only a matter of time.”

Harry was next through the door, arriving with a nod for Bruce and something that he plucked from his pocket before tossing in Bruce’s direction.

“What’s this?” Bruce asked, after managing a juggling catch of the small, black box.

“Your watch,” Harry replied. “I snagged both yours and Jennifer’s to do a bit of enchanting on their bands. It took a bit but I’ve finally finished layering a resizing enchantment on them so that it’ll grow and shrink as you do.”

“Ah, thanks,” Bruce said, opening the box to pull out the watch. “I’m not sure whether Hulk’ll like having something on his wrist if I have to transform into him, though.”

“Can only but try,” Harry shrugged.

By the time that Bruce had finished strapping the watch to his wrist, Tony, Sam, Thor and Bobbi had arrived and taken their seats.

“Allright, everyone, we’ve got work to do,” Maria stated, beginning the briefing. “We’ve got a mission.”

“Loki’s sceptre?” Thor asked hopefully.

“Sorry, Thor, not yet,” Steve replied solemnly.

“No, this one is to recover a S.H.I.E.L.D. base that was taken over by HYDRA,” Maria stated. “Your mission will be to deal with any hostile forces and then to remain until it has been handed over to the proper authorities.”

“We giving it back to S.H.I.E.L.D.?” Bobbi asked.

“Not this time,” Maria replied. “S.H.I.E.L.D.’s not quite in a position yet to man any extra bases, not even Red Lake. No, this one’s going back to the US government.”

“Where is it?” Sam asked.

“Minnesota,” Maria replied. “It’s small, only a couple of dozen agents at the most. It was mainly used as a safe house and to store sensitive documents. It’s nothing you can’t easily handle.”

“That doesn’t mean that we’re going to take it any less seriously than we should,” Steve interjected. “This is HYDRA; we don’t treat this properly and people are going to get hurt.”

“As long as it’s the HYDRA goons, then all’s good,” Tony quipped.

“We treat this mission as importantly as one where we go up against a HYDRA weapons depot,” Steve reiterated. “And we use it to help fine-tune our working together as a team.”

Steve paused then and pierced each of them seated around the table with a look. When it seemed that he was sure that everyone understood, he continued.

“Gear up; we leave in ten,” Steve stated.
Bruce waited until the others had gone before approaching Steve.

“Are you sure that you need me for this one?” he asked, hoping that the answer would be ‘no’.

“We shouldn’t,” Steve reassured him, laying a hand on his shoulder. “You’ll stay in the quinjet unless there’s a Code Green.”


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Jarvis kept them on course even as the team gathered around the small holographic table in the belly of the quinjet. Currently, a perfect replica of the former S.H.I.E.L.D. base, Red Lake, was hovering in the air above the table, including the area around that surrounded it.

“There should be minimal resistance,” Steve was saying as he outlined the mission in more detail than they’d gone over back at the Tower. “Three dozen at the most but for a place this size, I wouldn’t expect any more than two dozen.”

Indeed, the base was tiny compared with some of the S.H.I.E.L.D. bases that some of the team had encountered over the years. Red Lake had once upon a time been a simple manor, tucked into a corner of a pine forest. Great swathes of open land dominated the other two sides of the property for several miles before a seemingly innocuous fence surrounded the property boundary.

“The big problem could be in containing the HDYRA agents,” Steve continued. “S.H.I.E.L.D. records indicate that there are three escape tunnels – underground passages that lead from the manor into the forest.”

“Leave them to me,” Harry stated. “I can get from one to the others faster than any of you.”

Steve nodded and tapped each of the passages, highlighting them in red for Harry to note where they were located.

“Sam, Tony, I want the two of you to do a sweep over the grounds first in case of any stragglers and then enter the manor on the top level and snake your way down,” Steve ordered. “Bobbi, Thor, the three of us will go in through the doors on the ground floor.”

“Well, it’s only polite to use the door,” Bobbi commented, her hands on her batons in their thigh holsters.

“And I stay here in case you need me,” Bruce said. “Which you won’t.”

“Which we won’t,” Steve repeated with a smile, adding a clap to his shoulder.

ooo00ooo

Mage arrived at the site of the entrance to the first of the hidden passages with barely a sound. A quick homenum revelio assured him that he was alone. A second spell, this one designed to detect metal, produced three red splotches glowing from the trunk of a rather thick pine tree. A third spell, a simple colloportus, assured him that no one was going to be leaving that way.

A twist of his body and the quietest of pops had him apparating to the next tunnel.

ooo00ooo
“Jarvis, give me a thermal scan of the area,” Tony asked.

Immediately, what he was seeing of the area that he was flying over altered to mostly greens and blues. Except for a number of red splotches gathered in the manor and the four on the grounds of the base.

“Captain Rogers and Miss Morse are to your right at the front of the house; Thor is approaching the rear entrance,” Jarvis clarified.

“And the one in the forest is Gandalf,” Tony added before blinking as that particular red splotch promptly disappeared only for a new one to appear some thirty metres away a micro-second later.

“Indeed, Sir,” Jarvis agreed.

“Falcon, I’m not seeing anyone home on the third level, they all seem to be congregated on the first,” Tony reported.

“Maybe we caught them at dinner,” Falcon replied.

“Sloppy,” Tony remarked. “But it does make our job easier. ‘I’ll come in on the east; you take the west.’”

“Roger,” Falcon replied.

A quick scan of the window that he picked showed Tony exactly where the alarm was; something that his laser quickly dealt with. It was then a simple matter of pushing the window open and stepping inside.

ooo00ooo

The sound of splintering wood and the door exploding reached Captain America and Mockingbird from the opposite end of the house as they approached the front door and had the two looking at each other.

“You could have just knocked,” Cap said over his radio.

“Now, where would the fun be in that?” Thor returned, a clear smile in his voice.

Shifting his shield hard against his shoulder, Cap ran at the closed front door, his momentum barely pausing as his strength and shield tore the door from its hinges and flattened it to the floor.

Mockingbird stepped in straight after him, her batons flashing up to catch the man that had just missed being flattened by Cap with one baton to his belly and the other rising fast and hard into his jaw, sending him up off his feet and crashing to the floor in an unconscious heap.

Captain America, meanwhile, had barely noticed, instead focusing on the group of six men that had burst through the far door. Their pause at the sight of the Avenger was their undoing as it allowed Cap to fling his shield at them, knocking it into two of them before it bounced back for him to catch just before he landed in their midst, his fist up and flying towards the first jaw.

As he dealt with them, Mockingbird slipped deeper into the manor, ready to engage the next group.

ooo00ooo

Mage arrived at the third tunnel at almost the exact same time that a pair of men burst through it hard enough to make the door instantly swing back and slam closed again.
Seeing their hands reaching for their guns, Mage spat out the first spell that came to mind.

"Viri magni lentum pilae!"

The accompanying wand movements produced a yellowy-brown blob the size of a beach ball that grew the further that it travelled. The guns that the men were drawing managed to clear their holsters but were stopped cold as the ball of sticky slime impacted them, sending the two flying backwards to slam into the nearest tree.

After sealing the door, including freezing the entire area with a *glacius*, Mage strode towards the two trapped HYDRA agents. Their entire torsos, from neck to mid-thigh, were completely covered in brown sticky goo. And they had even been lifted from the ground to leave their feet dangling two foot from the ground. Seeing that the guns that the men had drawn were completely gummed up, Mage nodded in satisfaction.

"Not bad for a first go in combat,” he muttered, “definitely something to use again.”

“You’ll never take us alive,” the man on the left snarled. “Hail HYDRA!”

Seeing the man’s jaw working, Mage threw a petrifying spell at his captives, freezing their heads in place. An *accio* had a pair of teeth fly from the men’s mouth.

“I’m guessing this is some kind of poison?” Mage asked, eyeing the teeth in the palm of his hand while knowing that he wasn’t going to get an answer.

Idly, he pocketed the teeth for Bruce or Tony to analyse later.

ooo00ooo

The whine of Iron Man’s repulsars cycling down coincided with him lowering his arm.

“Give me a sweep, J,” Tony instructed.

“All hostiles have been neutralised,” Jarvis announced a couple of seconds later.

“So, what was the count? Twenty? Thirty?” Tony asked.

“Twenty-one, Sir, including the two that Mage apprehended as they attempted to escape via one of the tunnels,” Jarvis reported.

“Hardly seems worth our time coming,” Tony remarked.

“Think of it as a good way to get used to working together as a team,” Cap replied. “Live action missions can be completely different to practicing in the Danger Room back in the Tower.”

“I’d class this mission as a success,” Bobbi added. “But I still expect that we will debrief later to see what went well and what we can improve upon.”

“Agreed,” Cap stated and his tone indicated that he expected no different. “Jarvis, let Hill know that Red Lake is secure and ready for the authorities.”

“I have already done so, Captain,” Jarvis replied. “Miss Hill says to expect the Army Response Team to arrive within the next thirty minutes.”

“Let’s get this lot all gift-wrapped for them, then,” Tony remarked.
The once-was conference room within Avengers Tower had once again undergone a redesign. The Command Centre that it’d been turned into, with large monitor and smaller pads inbuilt into the large conference desk for every seat, had been expanded. Now, on the south wall, twin lines of four medium sized monitors held pride of place, each easily controlled either by the pads in the desk or from smaller, hand-held ones.

Currently, every single monitor in the room was being utilized.

The big monitor held a map of the world with different coloured lines denoting flight plans, both filed and ignored and those that were real, not to mention ones that were guessed at, extrapolated from using known data.

Each of the eight monitors on the southern wall was dedicated to one of the members of HYDRA’s Project Sinister. Every scrap of data that was known about each individual was being compiled there – from the limited S.H.I.E.L.D. files that they had, to public web searches to US government files and even high school and university records (if appropriate) were being included. Of course, a photo of said individual was included in the top left-hand corner of the screen.

The smaller pads inset into the desk were being used as a middle-man, a place to search out and tease the information that they needed from such diverse sources before it was analysed, debated and then included on the appropriate larger monitor.

“I still don’t get what Octavius brings to the party,” Tony stated. “Yeah, the guy’s smart – a Ph.D. in Nuclear physics from M.I.T. and a doctorate in biochemistry proves that – but with the brains that Sterns brings, he seems kinda redundant.”

“Maybe he was chosen for a different reason,” Bruce suggested.

“What reason, though?” Tony retorted. “Unless it’s got something to do with the tech files that we can’t access.”

“Tech and biochemistry aren’t necessarily exclusive,” Peter stated.

“Peter’s right,” Bruce said. “Nanotech, for example.”

“If HYDRA’s been fooling around with nanotech, there’s no telling what we’re going to encounter when we find them,” Tony stated grimly.

“How are we going with that? With finding them?” Steve asked.

“Osborn’s jet has been hard to track,” Hill replied, gesturing to the big monitor and map that she was standing in front of. “He’s filed a lot of flight plans without following them; sometimes even multiple flight plans from the same starting point and time.”

“It makes sense to assume that they’re making for one particular base,” Bucky stated. “HYDRA would have sent all of that tech to one central place for their team to use.”

“The problem is that with so many S.H.I.E.L.D. bases that HYDRA took when everything imploded, it’s impossible to tell exactly where that is,” Hill stated.

“And not out of the question that it’s not even an ex-S.H.I.E.L.D. base,” Bucky added. “I know that
HYDRA have their own off-the-books hideouts.”

“We’re just going to have to keep checking each and every one of them,” Steve stated grimly. “They’ll turn up eventually. Them and Loki’s Staff. Those two have to be our top priority right now.”

“Just as long as we find them at home,” Tony said. “With unknown tech in play, I’d hate to see what sort of damage they could do out in the wider world full of civilians.”

That statement was enough to have everyone redoubling their efforts in sifting through the data, searching for that one elusive piece that would give them a place to begin the search in earnest.

ooo00ooo

“Yes. Yes, this arsenal will do very nicely,” The Leader purred.

Currently, the new occupants of Barracuda Base were taking the time to tour their new home. And, from what they’d seen so far, it was clear to all that they’d hit the jackpot.

S.H.I.E.L.D. had stocked it well with a wide variety of weapons. And all of it had been left when it changed ownership.

Primarily, there were dozens of storerooms full of guns of all sizes and calibres, from simple handguns to assault rifles to machine guns and even anti-aircraft batteries. A small number of advanced weapons had also found their way to Barracuda Base, each in a crate marked with the words ‘Phase Two’. O’Hirn’s grin after trying one of them and obliterating an inconvenient wall was big enough to nearly split his face in two.

And then there were the more ‘exotic’, war-type weapons – shoulder-mounted rocket launchers and small and medium-sized cruise missiles. But it was the big ones, the ones that they were currently staring up at that had really caught the group’s attention and imagination.

Intercontinental ballistic missiles. ICBMs. And not just one or two, but dozens of them, each one capable of reaching thousands of miles and obliterating any target that they chose. Oh, there weren’t any thermonuclear warheads that would have made them even more dangerous but until they could either acquire some or make them, the conventional warheads that they had would be more than adequate.

“With these, no army would dare to oppose us!” Myers crowed.

“I’d like to see them try,” Shultz agreed. “We’d make mince-meat out of them before they could even step foot in our territory.”

“Territory? Bah, you’re thinking’s too limited. With these and the men that we now have at our command, we can rule a country!” Octavius corrected.

“ Continent!” Blonsky growled, his deep gravelly voice reverberating through their very spines.

“ Continent, yes, yes, I like the sound of that,” Sterns mused. “Think of it, gentlemen, we can rule our kingdom without any pesky government trying to tell us what we can and can’t do. No, we’d be the ones in charge, making the rules, setting the agendas.”

“We could hunt what we want, when we want,” Kravinoff murmured.

“Exactly!” Sterns exclaimed. “Or research what we want, follow the science where it led whenever
we wanted.” Here, he’d clapped Octavius on the shoulder. “Power and money would be ours!”

“And the women,” O’Hirn added, licking his lips. “We could each have our own harems.”

“We would be the world’s Alpha,” Kravinoff agreed.

“What we want!” Sterns laughed. “And nothing and no one will be able to stop us!”

“What about the Avengers?” Myers asked hesitantly.

“What about them?” Sterns asked. “Not even they, with all their strength and might could stop one of these, especially after we’ve wiped them out of existence before they even know that we’re coming.”

“You want to aim one of these at the Avengers?” Osborn grinned.

“A perfect pre-emptive strike,” Sterns outlined. “As soon as we acquire a thermonuclear warhead, we target Avengers Tower. Kill the Avengers and wipe out one of the world’s major cities in the one strike. Think of the message that it’ll send! Mess with us at your peril! All we need to do is to send a second message, this one over the radio and television at the same time: South America belongs to us, invade us and see your cities, your nation, your people, wiped from existence just like the Avengers.”

The stunned silence at the audacity of the plan only lasted for a brief moment before the group began laughing, some with a decidedly maniacal tone to it.

“I’ll put the word out to my sources to get what we need as soon as possible,” Shultz promised.

“Yes, the sooner we kill the Avengers, the better the world will be!” Osborn cackled.

“And perhaps a visit to our new subject nations might be in order as well,” Sterns mused. “I’ll begin constructing a message to be taken to them.”

“I’d be more than happy to deliver it,” Meyers grinned.

“Excellent! Then let’s get to work, securing our future,” Sterns said, leading the group away and towards the lift that led upwards to the offices on the surface.

ooo000ooo

“We have a mission,” Maria Hill stated to the group of Avengers assembled around the table.

“HYDRA?” Steve asked.

“Yes. A base that was once S.H.I.E.L.D.’s, located in Australia, designated: The Billabong,” she replied, tapping a couple of buttons on the computer inbuilt into the tabletop in front of her.

As images of The Billabong appeared on the big monitor, Maria continued with the briefing.

“The Billabong is located in North Queensland,” she said, “on the banks of the Johnstone River, just outside the town of Innisfail. It was never a large S.H.I.E.L.D. base but my ASIS contacts tell me that since the fall of S.H.I.E.L.D., it’s been heavily reinforced and a large number of extra security have brought in, possibly even some mercenaries. It appears that HYDRA are using it as a hub, with a lot of materials being brought into it and also shipped out, all from and to multiple locations.”

“Do we know what locations?” Natasha asked.
“No, but with this much movement, it seems likely that this is an important base in the HYDRA cog,” Maria replied.

“Any indication on what the equipment is that they’re moving?” Clint asked.

“What little intel that we have, indicates that it’s something energy based, whether it’s some type of weapon or simply the power sources for the weapons or something else entirely is unknown,” Maria replied.

“Energy based?” an interested Thor asked, leaning forward. “Perhaps Loki’s staff can be found there.”

“We can hope,” Harry agreed.

“The Land Down Under, huh? Never been,” Tony commented. “Seems like it’s about time that I visit. Who wants in?”

“As if we’re going to let you go have all the fun all by yourself,” Clint smirked.

“You heard the man, gather your gear, wheels up in twenty,” Steve ordered, eliciting a mass movement of people from the room.

*ooo00ooo*

“§Stay where you are§!” Mage blurted, his eyes focussed on the large brown snake curled up directly in the path that the Avengers were taking.

Thankfully, he’d been in the lead as they’d stepped out of the dense bush onto the shore of the river that they’d been travelling near. Movement from the corner of his eye, had Mage momentarily shifting his eyes from the snake to what he’d first thought was a log laying on the sandy beach of the river. The fact that the head of the three metre crocodile slowly swung towards him, as did the heads of the two smaller ones just beyond it, had Mage nearly blanching.

Darting his eyes back to the snake, he noted that it had yet to move.

“§I am not yours to order§!”

The words were hard to make out, accompanied as they were by a low, menacing hiss but still, there was no doubt in Mage’s mind that they’d come from the giant croc. He blinked at that. Parseltongue, as far as he was aware, was snake language. Thinking back, though, he recalled the time that a komodo dragon had responded to him on one of the islands of Malaysia. At the time he’d thought that he’d imagined it but perhaps not. Perhaps parseltongue was the language of *reptiles*. Whether or not that included real dragons was unknown – he hadn’t actually tried talking to the Hungarian Horntail back in fourth year.

“§I ask that you allow me and my friends to pass§,” Mage said to the snake. “§I promise that you won’t be harmed§.”

“§I will allow it, Speaker§,” the snake replied after a moment where it seemed to weigh up not just Mage, but all of those with him.

“§Thank you§,” Mage said before addressing those at his back. “We’re right to pass. Just try to stay as far away as possible.”

“What kind of snake is that?” Cap asked.
“Oxyuranus scutellatus, otherwise known as the Coastal Taipan,” Jarvis replied from Tony’s suit. “It is the third most venomous snake in the world.”

“I’m thinking that we should have brought the web-head with us,” Tony stated. “He’s had experience dealing with crocs.”

“Doctor Connors was turned into a lizard,” Natasha corrected.

“Same thing,” Tony replied with a shrug.

Slowly, keeping as close to the trees and as far from the shore of the river where even more ‘logs’ had appeared, their yellow eyes watching them pass, the team kept going. Finally, they rounded a bend, bringing their target into sight.

The facility was built on the very banks of the river with only a small swathe of sand dividing the two, currently populated by a single crocodile. A smaller tributary of the river had been dug around the facility, creating an artificial island for it to sit upon, meaning that the only way in or out was either via the bridge or by air.

Sheer walls rose straight up three stories high before flattening out to form a platform large enough that they could have landed their quinjet on at this end. Underneath it was supposedly some storage bays and housing for a small garrison. The opposite end, according to the plans that they’d managed to acquire, were the research labs, offices and the scientific equipment needed to produce the power packs that The Billabong was apparently now ‘famous’ for.

“There’s two men on the bridge,” Hawkeye stated.

Mage shifted his focus and narrowed his eyes at the two. One was an older, stockily built man; the other was tall and wiry wearing a leather vest and Akubra.

“Miles Warbeck and Frank Oliver,” Natasha stated, reading off of the pad in her hand that had identified them for her using facial recognition. “They’re both thugs but somewhat high up on the chain. Most likely, they’re in charge around here.”

“I could take them from here,” Hawkeye said, bringing his bow up.

“No,” Cap countermanded. “We don’t want to give away the element of surprise.”

“I don’t think that that’s going to work for us here,” Tony stated. “They’re going to see us coming no matter what and you can bet your spangly shield that they’ve got a host of goodies ready for anyone who decides to drop in unannounced.”

“Perhaps a distraction would be useful?” Thor suggested.

“What’d you have in mind?” Cap asked.

ooo00ooo

The wind that buffeted Thor as Mjolnir pulled him through the sky was a balm to his skin. This part of Midgard was hot, so very different from New York. And unlike Muspelheim, it was not a dry heat, instead, the very air carried enough moisture to make one feel as though they’d not long stepped from a bath.

Indeed, only the man of Iron and the Seidhr seemed comfortable in this heat, one most likely through some design of his suit, the other by the use of some spell. If fact, the Seidhr had offered to enchant
them all, to make them more comfortable but Thor had politely declined; after all, a modicum of heat was nothing to the Son of Odin.

Focusing on his target, Thor grinned. The few guards that patrolled the very top of the fortress had yet to see him coming. Nor would they, especially with him using the very sun itself to block their vision of him.

It was only as he landed beside the first of the guards, his knees bent, that the second of the guards noticed him – the first having already been sent flying by a single backhand swipe of Mjolnir. A few fast-paced strides was enough to bring Thor close enough to punch that second guard into unconsciousness.

Looking across, Thor nodded as both Iron Man and Falcon swooped in from different directions, their weapons eliminating the threat that the remaining guards posed.

“ cls’ been spotted!” Nat stated.

“Yes, noticed,” Hawkeye replied, one hand already whipping an arrow from his quiver.

The instant that he’d released the explosive arrow at his target, Hawkeye’s hand was moving again, targeting the next three guns that had appeared from behind covers that had slipped down the face of the bases’ walls to expose the deadly weapons. By the time the first of Hawkeye’s arrows hit its target – this one above and just to the right of the bridge – the other three were in flight.

“If they didn’t know that we were here before, they do now,” Nat stated flatly.

And indeed, the sound of the *booms*, not to mention the plumes of smoke that rose from destroyed gun turrets was easily loud enough to be heard in the town just down then river. Great blocks of stone and concrete sprayed out to land not only on the bridge, but also in the very river causing the few remaining crocs there to instantly disappear into its depths.

“Time to move!” Cap ordered, before leading the charge out of cover and onto the bridge.

At once, Hawkeye and Nat flanked Mage for the three to run in step after him.

Nat was surprised that they’d managed to get as far as they had – nearly two-thirds of the way across the bridge – before they encountered resistance. *Tings* bouncing off of Cap’s shield preceded the sounds of bullets bouncing off of Mage’s protection by mere milliseconds. As each bullet hit, the golden dome was briefly outlined. That dome, though, did nothing to prevent Nat and Hawkeye from firing back, something that they instantly did dropping two of the shooters and causing the other three to quickly disappear to safety.

The great rolling doors that allowed vehicles access to the base was ignored in favour of the smaller, regular-sized door to its side. One kick from Cap splintered it and left it hanging from only its upper hinge.

“We’re in,” Cap reported over the radio as the four of them slipped inside.
the time being.

“I am detecting multiple sources of energy emanating from each of the containers,” Jarvis reported.

“Is that so?” Tony asked. “What type?”

“Unknown,” Jarvis replied, “however, I am detecting gamma rays.”

Tony blinked. “Are the levels dangerous?”

“Individually, no,” Jarvis replied. “However, I would caution against interrupting the magnetic restrictors that each energy source appears to utilize.”

“Well, I guess we’d better take a careful look then,” Tony replied, looking around the storage bay.

Spotting a crow bar, he stomped across before picking it up and approaching the closest crate. It was a moment’s work to wedge the bar into the slit and to smack his hand down on the lever, cracking open the lid. Inside, Tony found half a dozen hard, carbon-fibre cases and judging by the size of them, there were easily four or five rows of them in this crate alone.

Plucking up one of the cases, Tony snapped open the lock and lifted the lid. Nested amongst the foam lining were nine devices, each ten centimetres long by five wide. The pulsing blue light that glowed from behind the metallic slits that encased the device was very familiar.

“What does that remind you of, J?” Tony asked.

“It is remarkably similar to the energy produced by the tesseract,” Jarvis replied.

“That’s what I thought,” Tony frowned. “I’m betting these … batteries … have had some interaction with Loki’s staff; perhaps they were even born from it.”

“That premise does seem possible,” Jarvis agreed.

“I wonder what they power?” Tony asked rhetorically reaching towards one.

At the same time that Tony was plucking one of the devices from its foam casing, a piece of his thigh armour popped open, revealing a space just large enough for Tony to place the device inside.

“Sir,” Jarvis said and his voice had definitely taken on an air of urgency, “I have just received intelligence that Frederick Meyers, Alexander O’Hirn and Herman Shultz were together in Lima, Peru as little as twenty-eight hours ago.”

Tony started, blinking at the grainy image that Jarvis showed on his HUD.

“Three of the Project Sinister bunch?” he asked. “Not much we can do about it now. Log it and monitor the area. We’ll get to it as soon as we’ve finished here.”

ooo00ooo

After seeing Nat and Hawkeye safely to the stairs that lead to the office area, Mage took a look across the open area in the middle of The Billabong. This area was fully three stories tall with a glass ceiling roof that let in the light but not the weather – except for where there was a Thor-sized hole in it.

Currently, Thor was standing near the middle, dealing with the dozens of HYDRA thugs that were either coming at him to fight or simply standing off and shooting at him. A shadow flitting overhead
had Mage look up in time to note Falcon zipping past, keeping the perimeter on lockdown and ensuring that no one got away. To one side was Cap, steadily working his way towards the storage bays, his shield a blur as it was tossed into guards, of course after it had bounced off of anything convenient that gave the correct angle.

A massive thump as though a hippogriff had just kicked him slammed into the back of Mage’s left shoulder, throwing him off his feet and spinning him across the floor. Skidding to a halt, he shook his head from the stars that had erupted behind his eyes before looking back.

The outline of a HYDRA agent carrying some kind of large gun, easily longer and fatter than his arm, barely registered before the gun fired again. Mage’s eyes widened and he quickly rolled out of the way of the beam of brilliant blue light.

The sound of it slamming into the concrete where his head had been, rumbling the very earth with its impact was enough to have Mage’s blood boiling. A high-pitched whine sounded, something that Mage hadn’t noticed before, but it was enough warning to tell him that the gun was firing again.

This time, Mage used his roll to get back to his feet. His left shoulder was killing with pain, but it was nothing that he couldn’t handle. Giving it a roll, he grimaced. Most likely, the only reason he still had an arm was because of the dragon hide that he was wearing. Thankfully, at least, that weapon seemed to be a one of a kind – no one else there had one.

After dodging to the right to avoid the next blast aimed at him, Mage had had enough. Using his momentum, he continued his spin, bringing his wand to bear on the man as he did so.

The pain from being shot and the anger at being on the receiving end of that weapon fuelled his bombarda maxima like never before. The intense white light that erupted from his wand gave his arm a kick before it sailed across the room.

The HYDRA agent, seeing it coming, tried to dodge, unsuccessfully as it turned out. The spell ripped through the gun, splintering it into tiny fragments even as it flung the man nearly twenty feet through the air to crumple against a far wall. The spell, though, didn’t stop there.

The explosion that ripped through the wall behind where the man had been standing was loud enough to all but deafen everyone in the area. Pieces of concrete, wood and dust shrouded the entire area until a blue light, its intensity increasing by the second managed to shine its way through.

“Not good, people,” Tony called over their earpieces.

“Tony?” Cap asked urgently.

“Whatever that was, it hit the storage bay where they were keeping the batteries,” Tony replied. “I’m reading a massive power build up. Those batteries have gone critical and are about to blow and cause a major chain reaction.”

“How bad?” Cap asked.

“Bad,” Tony stated. “Each one has a gamma signature. Individually, it’s low but combined …”

“Evac! Now!” Cap ordered.

Instantly, Mage twisted on the spot straight up to where Hawkeye was.

“Nat, time to go,” Hawkeye called.
“I heard,” she said, joining the three on the landing at the top of the stairs.

“Grab hold,” Mage ordered, reaching out and pulling the other two tight against himself.

Then, with a twist, he apparated the three of them out of the building and back to the quinjet.

***

**Boom! Boom! Kaboom!**

The series of explosions were loud enough that, even from this distance, Mage, Hawkeye, Nat and Bruce who’d been waiting in the quinjet, were all forced to clap their hands over their ears at the sound.

“Is everyone okay?” Falcon called anxiously over the radio as he swooped towards them.

“I’m good,” Tony replied.

“Thor and I are fine as well,” Cap reported and proved it by Thor flying down to land outside the quinjet, one arm around Steve.

“I think we achieved our goal, HYDRA’s base is no more,” Tony reported as the Iron Man armour landed.

“I only managed to download twelve percent of their data,” Nat complained, before fixing her gaze on Thor. “There was no sign that the Staff was there.”

“What happened, anyway?” Clint asked.

“Me,” a grim-sounding Mage replied. “I think I overpowered my last spell. It blew through the wall and must have hit the ... what was it, batteries?”

“For want of a better term, yeah,” Tony confirmed. “I have one of them so that we can analyse it when we get back to the lab.”

“Was there a reason your spell was so powerful, Seidhr?” Thor asked.

Mage nodded. “One of the agents had a weapon that fired some kind of blue pulse blast. His first shot hit me.”

As he related that part, Mage ran his right hand over his left shoulder and was surprised to feel that the hide had a significant graze to it. Once they were home, he was definitely going to have to check his cloak to make sure that it could still protect him.

“Ah, guys,” Bruce said, his eyes glued to a device in his hand. “I’m getting gamma readings.”

Everyone turned to stare at him before switching their gaze to the dull red glow in the sky where The Billabong had once stood.

“How bad?” Cap asked grimly.

Bruce waited for nearly a minute before replying.

“It looks to be settling back down but there was a definite spike. Anything within its radius would have been exposed,” he said.
“The town?” Clint asked.

“No. No, it should have been too far away,” Bruce replied with clear relief in his voice.

“What about the wildlife?” Nat asked. “That river runs straight to the ocean and the reef.”

Bruce looked up at her. “They would have been exposed, absorbed a huge amount.”

“Are we going to have a bunch of crocodile and fish Hulk’s running around?” Tony asked.

Bruce simply shook his head.

“There’s no telling exactly what impact that’s going to have on the environment,” he said.

“J. Contact Pepper. Have her get a Stark Industries environmental group out here as soon as possible,” Tony said.

“Yes, Sir,” Jarvis replied.

“Is it safe to go back in?” Steve asked.

“The gamma levels are dropping,” Bruce replied, consulting his device. “As long as we don’t stay there too long, we should be okay.”

“You heard the doctor,” Steve said. “Let’s get back there and see what we can do to help and especially to see if there were any survivors.”
The appearance of Harry Potter in the doorway of the medical wing, rubbing his shoulder and with a wince on his face had Daphne shooting out of her chair.

“Right, Potter. Bed!” she ordered, pointing at the closest of the six medical beds in the ward.

“I don’t need a bed,” Potter protested, not that Daphne was paying him any attention.

She’d known this day was coming and she’d planned accordingly. From the top drawer of her desk, Daphne pulled out a small box, not much bigger than a matchbook, before she marched across the room to where Potter had grudgingly taken himself. With a nod of satisfaction at the sight of him sitting there, she placed the box on the ground and tapped it with her wand.

Instantly, the box grew, expanding until it stood waist high. Its highly polished wood gleaming until the bright muggle lights.

“What’s that?” Potter asked suspiciously as she ignored the pair of doors on its front to open the lid at its top.

“As a Healer,” Daphne replied, “it is my sworn duty to provide the very best care possible to all of my patients. And so, after being coerced into being the Avenger’s Healer, I made it a point to contact each of the previous Healers on record for each of my new patients to ensure that I had a complete understanding of their medical history.”

“Previous Healer on record,” Potter repeated before his eyes widened comically. “No! No, surely you don’t mean …”

With a tap and a wave of her wand, Daphne sent the plaque that had been included with the cabinet that had been sent to her straight to the wall above the bed that Potter was sitting on, sticking it there with a permanent sticking charm. The revulsion on Potter’s face was pure bliss to Daphne and she was sure that it was enough to make the irritating man think twice before he ever tried to trick her into anything else in the future.

“You contacted Madam Pomfrey,” Potter stated, his voice sounding defeated.

“I did. And Poppy was kind enough to send this cabinet along to me. It contains all of the potions and salves that you are likely to need from your exploits, as well as a complete medical write-up from your time at Hogwarts. That,” Daphne added, nodding at the plaque, “she also thought I’d need.”

Potter stared at her for a minute before his head dropped.

“So, what seems to be the trouble?” Daphne asked, waving her wand over him to get her own diagnosis.

“I got shot by something but my dragonhide cloak stopped it. Mostly,” Potter replied, touching the back of his left shoulder again. “It just feels like a bruise.”

“Hmm,” Daphne replied, concentrating her spells on his shoulder.

A final swish brought a diagnosis up before her. This time, it seemed, Potter was correct. It was only a bruise, a bad one, but nothing that a bruise salve couldn’t put right in a day or two.
“Take your shirt off,” she ordered and promptly ignored his raised eyebrow and smirk by opening the chest’s doors and rummaging inside.

After straightening, Daphne unscrewed the lid to the salve, dipped her fingers into the dark green paste and began applying it to the nasty purple and blue patch on Potter’s shoulder. His sigh of bliss told her that it was already working.

“You’ll need to have the bruise salve applied four times a day for the next two days,” Daphne stated. “You can either do it yourself or you can come here and I’ll do it for you.”

“Thanks, but I think I can manage,” Potter replied, flexing his shoulder after she’d finished and smiling at the greater movement that he was already getting as the salve did its job.

Taking the jar from her, he turned towards the door before pausing and turning back.

“Ah, Greengrass? You are going to take that down, aren’t you?” Potter asked, pointing at the plaque.

Daphne looked from Potter to the plaque and back again.

“I see no need to,” she replied. “Knowing you, you’ll be back before too long.”

Potter’s mouth opened and closed before he simply shook his head and left, grumbling to himself.

Yes, Daphne was sure that Potter had gotten the message.

ooo00ooo

“What do you have for us, J?” Tony asked.

“Very little, I am afraid, Sir,” Jarvis replied.

“Well, give us very little, then,” Tony said.

“Yes, Sir,” Jarvis replied. “As you know, Frederick Meyers, Alexander O’Hirn and Herman Shultz were seen together in Lima, Peru.”

“Three of the bunch from HYDRA’s Project Sinister,” Clint observed. “I’d say it’s safe to assume that all of them have linked up.”

“How did we get the intelligence?” Nat asked.

“Facebook,” Jarvis replied simply before elaborating. “The three were in the background of a photograph taken by a British backpacker.”

“We got lucky,” Maria commented.

“We only have to get lucky once; they need to be lucky all the time for us not to find them,” Steve agreed.

“That photograph was taken forty-seven hours ago,” Jarvis continued. “Since then, I have been monitoring all flights from Lima and the surrounding cities and airports, without any success. I have also been monitoring social media in Peru, also without success.”

“What about private jets?” Tony asked. “They’ve been using Osborn’s jet to get around.”

“There have been no flight plans filed for any plane owned by Norman Osborn or by Oscorp itself,
within Peru or indeed any of the surrounding countries,” Jarvis stated.

“Not that it’s all that hard to get into or out of some of those countries without filing the proper paperwork,” Natasha stated.

“What are the odds that they’re working out of somewhere in South America?” Steve asked.

“I would say that the odds are high,” Jarvis replied.

“If they are and they’re using an old S.H.I.E.L.D. base, that makes finding them a lot easier,” Maria stated.

“S.H.I.E.L.D. never did have many bases in South America,” Clint agreed.

“No, it didn’t. And of the ones that we did have, there are only two unaccounted for; the rest were either destroyed in HYDRA’s uprising or are now under the control of their host nation,” Maria said. “The Beach Hut in Buenos Aires and Barracuda Base in central Brazil.”

“Then that’s where we need to go,” Clint said. “Nat, how about you, me and Bobbi go check them out?”

“Reconnaissance only,” Steve stated, making sure that the two in the room looked him in the eye and acknowledged his orders.

“Don’t worry, Steve, we’re spies, remember,” Natasha smirked. “They’ll never know we were there.”

Bruce sat back on his stool, staring at his computer screen. The results there were enough to have him chewing on the end of one arm of his glasses. It wasn’t so much the gamma readings, no, it was the other, more exotic readings that were being detected.

His eyes flicked to the ‘battery’ that Tony had brought back with them from Australia. The pulsing blue energy that could be seen through the silver metallic slits in its sides were definitely familiar and eerily like the tesseract. The readings, though, the readings that they were getting didn’t quite match up.

“I’ve seen this before,” Erik Selvig stated ominously.

“Where?” Bruce asked.

Erik glanced up at Bruce before focussing back on his computer.

“Loki’s staff,” Erik stated.

“The Staff?” Bruce echoed.

He knew that both it and the tesseract were extra-terrestrial in origin but for them to have such close readings defied the odds. The two were definitely related somehow.

“The Staff wasn’t in Australia,” Bruce said.

“Maybe not,” Erik shrugged. “But these things are full of energy that could only have come from it.”

“And that energy has been collected into these batteries,” Bruce said, beginning to pace. “And
batteries are only needed to power something else. What could these things power?"

“With the amount of energy that they contain? Theoretically, anything,” Erik replied. “Whatever it is, though, it’d need to be specially converted to handle the output.”

Hearing that, Bruce’s head snapped up and whipped towards the battery. He’d seen weapons designed to handle that sort of energy before. Or at least, the prototypes. Steve, he knew, had seen and fought against working models. If HYDRA had these batteries, he could only hope that they hadn’t gotten around to perfecting the weapons that went with them.

“I need to update the others,” Bruce said before rushing from the lab.

ooo00ooo

“Fury,” Steve said, noting the trench-coated, eye-patched man standing in the doorway.

“I hope you don’t mind, I invited him along,” Maria said as she walked over to the former Director of S.H.I.E.L.D. to shake his hand.

“Why should we mind?” Tony snarked. “It’s only my house.”

“I’d think you’d appreciate the intel that I can provide,” Fury retorted, taking a seat at the conference table, “especially with what I hear that you’re up against.”

“What is it that you’ve heard that we’re up against? I’m only asking because we haven’t had a briefing yet from Birdbrain and the two girl agents yet,” Tony said, looking pointedly at the three.

“Perhaps we should hear from them first and then I can fill in the blanks afterwards,” Fury suggested.

“Sounds like a plan,” Steve nodded. “Guys?”

“We started with The Beach Hut,” Natasha said, beginning the briefing. “It was a total bust. The place has been abandoned.”

“Mind you, it was cleaned out first,” Clint added. “Anything of value that was once there is gone. And no one’s claimed it, not S.H.I.E.L.D., HYDRA not even the Argentinian government.”

“Barracuda Base is a different story,” Natasha stated. “That place is crawling with people.”

“And not just the Base, either,” Bobbi said, leaning forward. “The jungle surrounding it is teeming with men. From what we could tell, they’re not HYDRA; looked to be indigenous, most likely men belonging to the local warlord.”

“Our best guess is that they’ve been hired to provide extra security for Barracuda,” Natasha stated.

“My money’s on ‘coerced’ to provide that extra security,” Clint interjected.

“How many?” Maria asked.

“Easily a hundred, possibly one fifty,” Clint replied.

“That’s some force,” Steve stated. “Sounds to me as though they’re definitely guarding something important.”

“Whatever it is, it’s being controlled by the men in HYDRA’s Sinister Project,” Natasha said, even as Bobbi had her pad throwing up images that they’d taken of the Base onto the large monitor for
everyone to see.

The group around the table studied the couple of dozen images intently and not just the fact that every one of the eight of the ‘Sinister’ group were there, but also the Base and terrain as well. The pictures were taken from a number of different vantage points but all highlighted that Barracuda Base was located in a tree-less valley in the middle of the jungle that was protected by a five metre high fence. Three large buildings, each three stories high, were placed so that the three formed the sides of a triangle.

In addition to the militia outside the fence, there were extra men inside the fence. Some were obviously on patrol; others were stationed at any of the three dozen guard towers or large gun bunkers that were evenly placed around the buildings.

“That’s a lot of fire power,” Harry noted.

“And that’s just the tip of the iceberg,” Fury sighed.

“What do you mean by that?” Steve asked, focussing on the man.

“What I mean is that, back when S.H.I.E.L.D. owned that place, Barracuda was used to store munitions,” Fury replied.

“Munitions?” Bucky asked from his shadowed corner. “What type?”

“You name it and it was probably stored there,” Fury replied. “Everything from hand guns to assault rifles to missiles to anti-aircraft guns. There were even a few ICBMs — without their thermonuclear warheads, before you ask — and everything in between.”

“What about your Phase Two weapons?” Bruce asked, leaning forward intently.

“Phase Two?” a surprised Fury repeated.

“Yes. Phase Two. Weapons that would work using the batteries that we found in Australia,” Bruce stated emphatically.

“You think that that’s what those batteries are for?” Tony asked.

Bruce shrugged. “It’d make sense. They use the energy that’s been harnessed from Loki’s Staff and that stuff isn’t all that different from the tesseract.”

“Loki’s Staff?” Thor asked. “You believe that it could be there, in this Barracuda Base?”

“No,” Bruce replied with a shake of his head. “I think it’s somewhere else and that they’re using it to collect its energy and shipping it wherever it needs to go but using the Australian base as a midpoint.”

“Makes sense,” Steve nodded. “So, how about it, Nick, were any Phase Two weapons stored there?”

“There shouldn’t be,” Fury stated. “At least, I never ordered any to be taken there. But that’s not to say that Pierce or one of the other HYDRA higher-ups didn’t get some sent there on the sly.”

“That’s something,” Natasha said.

“Whether they’re there or not, we don’t have a choice, we’re going to have to take the fight to them,” Steve stated. “I’m guessing that when S.H.I.E.L.D. fell, they didn’t have time to take the weapons
with them. That means that there’s an arsenal there in the hands of some very dangerous individuals.”

Maria tapped her pad, wiping away the pictures on the main screen and replacing it with a schematic.

“This is Barracuda Base,” she said. “As you can see, the buildings on the surface are only a tiny fraction of the base. The main research, testing and storage facilities are on these seven sub-levels. This section here goes a further five levels below that again and is where the ICBMs are stored. That section opens up between the three buildings on the surface in case any weapons need to be fired.”

“What’s their range?” Steve asked.

“From there, they could target anywhere in South and Central America, as well as most of the United Stated,” Maria replied.

“Do we have somewhere to put all of that once we take the Base?” Clint asked. “I can’t imagine it being safe if we just leave it there.”

“I can alert my contacts in the US Army to the base after you clean house and they can handle moving and storing the munitions,” Fury replied.

“If everything that’s been outlined is correct, then this isn’t going to be a walk in the park,” Steve commented.

“No, it’s not,” Fury agreed. “But together, you can do anything; after all, that’s why I brought you together.”

“The eight of HYDRA’s Sinister group with whatever the tech that’s been developed for them, plus the arsenal of weapons and men that they’ve got in the Base,” Bobbi summed up with a shake of her head.

“Don’t forget that warlord and his militia guarding their perimeter,” Clint added.

“Yes, let’s not forget them,” Bobbi stated sarcastically.

“Blonsky’s like an army all on his own,” Natasha stated, her eyes flicking to Bruce.

“Oh, don’t worry about Blonsky,” Bruce replied. “I can feel the Hulk, he’s ready for a rematch to prove that he’s still the Alpha.”

“But this time Hulk doesn’t have to do it alone,” Steve said, clapping the mild-mannered scientist on his shoulder.

“And being in the middle of the jungle, I’m not likely to break anything important either,” Bruce added.

“Do we know any more about what tech was designed for them?” Harry asked.

“Unfortunately not,” Maria replied. “All we’ve been able to decipher are the file names: Rhinoceros, Octopus, Shock, Glider, Boomerang, Hunt.”

“There’s no telling exactly how that tech could enhance them,” Tony commented.

“You think they could be some kind of suit like yours?” Fury asked.

Tony shrugged. “Hard to say, although Osborn was on a glider and wearing some kind of suit in that
footage of them releasing the Abomination.”

“The seven of us may not be enough this time,” Clint commented.

“That’s why I’m going to be calling in all of the Avengers,” Steve stated.

“You tell Pepper,” Tony quickly interjected. “Actually, J, you’re recording this right? Make sure that you show Pepper Capsical saying that so that she knows that it wasn’t my idea.”

“What are you going on about, Stark?” Fury asked.

“Pepper has this thing against the young ’uns being used in missions,” Tony replied.

“She needn’t worry about Teddy,” Harry said. “He’s not coming. Besides, he’s in Scotland, a little too far to get here in time.”

“Sounds like you need all the help you can get,” Bucky spoke up from the shadowy corner that he was leaning in. “Count me in.”

Steve glanced at Daphne, receiving the tiniest shake of her head, before focussing back on his oldest friend.

“Are you sure?” Steve asked.

“You need every asset that you’ve got,” Bucky said and no one missed the wince on his face at the word ‘asset’.

“Bucky,” Steve began gently.

But it was Daphne who got to him first.

“You’re not ready yet, James,” she said, laying a hand on his arm. “You’re close but not quite there yet. Another month or two at most.”

“I could do with an extra set of eyes and ears in the Command Centre,” Maria said.

Bucky stared into the eyes of his Mind Healer before his shoulders visibly slumped, albeit only slightly. Switching his look across to Hill, he gave her a nod, accepting the branch that she’d extended.

“Jarvis,” Steve called. “Send out the call for all of the Avengers to assemble here within the next half hour.”

“Yes, Sir,” Jarvis replied.

ooo00ooo

Doreen had her arm up in front of her with the face of her Avenger’s watch facing upwards as she walked from the elevator behind Matt, Peter and Jennifer.

“I don’t know Ted,” she said to the floating 3D head being projected from her watch. “Look, I’m here now; I’ll get Harry to call you back in a minute, okay?”

“Thanks, Doreen,” Ted smiled.

Doreen returned the smile before pressing the button that would cut off the connection.
Thankfully, it didn’t take much to find Harry – he was leaning up against the bar, a cup of tea in his hand.

“Harry,” she said, having weaved her way in through the crowd to reach him.

“Hi, Doreen,” he replied. “Is something wrong?”

“Can you call Ted, please,” she said without preamble.

“Ted?” Harry repeated.

“Yes,” she nodded. “He wants to know where and when the quinjet’ll be landing to get him for the mission.”

“Ted’s waiting for a quinjet,” Harry repeated flatly and Doreen wondered why he was being particularly dense right then.

“Of course,” Doreen replied. “Everyone’s being called in for this, right?”

Harry stared at her for a moment before sighing.

“Looks like I’d better talk to him,” Harry said as he placed his cup on the bar.

Doreen only gave Harry a moment’s head start before following him. Something was off with Harry and she wanted to know what it was. When Harry went out onto the outside deck, Doreen ducked behind a pillar. A quick glance out through the glass to see Harry’s back was enough for her to ease open the door so that she could hear the conversation.

“Sparrowhawk,” Harry said, the phrase that Doreen knew activated his watch.

She watched him press a couple of buttons before Ted’s holographic head appeared suspended above Harry’s watch.

“Uncle Harry!” Ted beamed. “So, what’s the deal? When should I expect a pick up?”

Harry shook his head.

“I’m sorry, Teddy, but no one’s coming to get you,” Harry said.

“But Doreen said that everyone was being called in for this mission,” a confused sounding Ted replied.

“They are,” Harry sighed. “But you’re not going on this one.”

“What! Why not? I’m part of the team, aren’t I?” Ted asked.

“You are,” Harry replied. “But you’re not ready for this. Not yet.”

“But … but Doreen’s going. And so’s Peter! They’re not much older than me!” Ted protested.

“I know,” Harry replied. “But you have to understand, Teddy, they’ve had more training, they know how to harness their skills and use them to full effect. You’re still at Hogwarts with a great deal still to learn.”

“But I’ve been learning!” Ted exclaimed. “I’ve been putting in hours and hours learning everything that I could since I’ve been back and practicing it all every minute that I can. I’m ready!”
“No. You’re not,” Harry replied. “This isn’t a game, Teddy. Until you know how to use your magic effectively, it’ll be too easy for you or others to get hurt. Or worse.”

“But this is nothing less than you did. You were battling Voldemort and basilisks when you were younger than me, not to mention the TriWizard Tournament! And my Mum and Dad gave their life to defeat evil; how can I not do all that I can as well, to make you and them proud?” Ted all but begged.

“I am proud of you,” Harry replied quickly. “And I know Remus and Tonks would be as well. But you’re not ready yet. This life, battling bad guys every other day, it’s a hard life, it makes people grow up far too fast and I don’t want that for you. I want you to have a chance to enjoy being a kid for a little longer. Give yourself a little more time to grow up and to learn more so that you’re ready when I give you that decree once you’ve passed your OWLs.”

“Once I’ve passed my OWLs,” Ted repeated, sounding resigned. “You promise?”

“I already did, remember,” Harry smiled. “And I tell you what? You make sure your grades are up there and, if you really want, I’ll talk to Andi about you transferring to America to live with me and have you complete your training with a tutor.”

“You mean it?” Ted asked. “I can come live with you there permanently?”

“I promise that I’ll talk to Andi,” Harry repeated. “I can’t promise any more than that.”

“Alright, Uncle Harry,” Ted said, the tiniest of smiles on his face. “Just … just promise me one more thing?”

“What’s that?” Harry asked.

“That you and Doreen and Peter and everyone’ll stay safe,” Ted said. “Beat the bad guys but make sure you all come back safe afterwards.”

“Deal,” Harry replied.

And then, before Harry could notice that she’d been eavesdropping, Doreen slunk away into the crowd.

ooo00ooo

“Alright, everyone, listen up!” Steve called from where he stood up on the raised platform, his thumbs hooked into his belt as he surveyed everyone there.

Instantly, the Avengers plus their friends silenced and turned to face him.

“This is going to be our toughest mission yet; thus, why I’ve called everyone in,” he continued. “This group, HYDRA’s Sinister team, have a lot of resources at their disposal – weapons, men and some sort of tech that’s likely to give them an added boost. With the arsenal at their disposal, they present a very real treat to the rest of the world. That’s why we’re taking the fight to them, where there aren’t a lot of civilians around to get injured or killed if things go sideways.

“Considering our numbers, we’re going to be going in two teams. Team One will be led by me and consist of myself, Falcon, Iron Man, Mockingbird, Black Widow and Hawkeye. Team Two will be led by Thor and include Mage, Hulk, She-Hulk, Daredevil, Spider-man and Squirrel Girl. How are we with the quinjets?”
“The main quinjet is currently going through its pre-launch flight checks. The prototype quinjet will be ready to dock in eight minutes,” Jarvis reported.

“Prototype?” Steve asked.

“It’s the one that I’ve been working on in case we ever want to go to space,” Tony replied. “It’s ready now, I simply haven’t had time to give it a final test.”

A bright flare outside the window preceded the *whump* of a silver suit landing on the outside deck. As the suited man reached for the door handle to enter the Tower, his face mask slid up and out of the way.

“Sorry I’m late,” Lieutenant Colonel James Rhodes stated, noting the faces staring at him as he entered.

“Looks like the gang’s all here now,” Tony said, rubbing his hands together. “Let’s get this show on the road.”
We Have A Plan. Attack!

The twin quinjets skimmed just above the treetops as they flew deeper into the State of Amazonas in Brazil. All indication said that their tactic was working perfectly, that the inhabitants of Barracuda Base had no idea that they were coming.

Of course, getting there undetected was one thing; finding somewhere to land in the dense jungle was another.

“Tony, maybe you, Steve and Thor should go down and make us a landing site,” Nat suggested. Noting the looks that she was getting from Tony and Steve who were in the quinjet with her, she continued. “You three did do a good job in that forest way back when you all first met.”

“I’ve done Shakespeare in the Park once, I don’t do encore performances,” Tony retorted.

“QJI, I’ve found you a parking spot,” Hill said over the radio from back at the Tower. “Satellites have a clearing bearing zero one five degrees, two point three kilometres from your present position.”

“Copy,” Clint at the helm replied. “That’ll leave us a good ten kilometres to go on foot.”

“It’s a better idea than putting down in the middle of Barracuda itself,” Hill replied.

“Is there enough space in the clearing for both quinjets?” Steve asked.

“Negative. However, I have located a second clearing six point nine kilometres from where you’ll be setting down,” Hill replied.


“I’m going to lose visuals once you’re on the ground,” Hill warned.

“Got you covered,” Tony replied. “Jarvis?”

Soft whumps sounded from both sides of the quinjet and all inside twisted about to look out the window. Nine small silver spheres, barely larger than a baseball, soared away from each side of the quinjet before fanning out to cover the jungle below. Glints of lights in the distance indicated at the spheres were being ejected from the second quinjet as well.

“Telemetry and images are starting to come in; we have eyes and ears,” Hill reported.

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The landing was barely bigger than the quinjet, really, when it came down to it, only the fact that its wings were able to tuck up and over meant that it was large enough to use to land in.

“Right, everyone remember where we parked,” Mage stated as he led the way down the rear ramp.

The jungle that surrounded them was thick. Trees grew close together and vines hung down from the higher branches. What light filtered in through the treetops was dappled and didn’t penetrate far.

“How far to the bad guys?” Spider-man asked.

“A little over five kilometres,” She-Hulk stated.
“There are squirrels here,” an excited-sounding Squirrel Girl stated, punctuated by the chittering of Monkey Joe on her shoulder.

“We best get moving,” Thor called.

Noting that Spider-man was raising his arm, Mage reached out and lowered it.

“Best walk like the rest of us for now, you don’t want to run out of webbing when you really need it,” he advised.

“Yeah, that’d be bad,” Spider-man nodded.

“Looks like Stark’s gizmos are leading the way,” Daredevil called, his head tilted up towards the sky.

And indeed, he was right. The eighteen small, silver spheres that had ejected from the quinjet upon their approach were hovering to the northern part of the clearing.

“Let’s go,” Mage said and set out after Thor, the others on his heels.

ooo00ooo

Captain America’s hand came up beside his head, his fist clenched. Instantly, the others in his team froze. Well, apart from Mockingbird and Widow – they’d frozen a half second before Cap had even signalled the team.

“Steve, I’m reading a couple dozen heat signatures closing on your position,” Bucky called over the comms, obviously in response to something that Stark’s spheres were sending back to the Tower.

“Understood,” Cap replied sotto voce.

A soft *whoosh* overhead marked where Falcon glided past, his wings flipping from side to side and his altitude constantly dipping and climbing as he encountered trees and branches.

The rustling of leaves, snaps of sticks breaking and the scuffling of boots had the team zeroing in on the approaching force. When the lead man emerged, four of his soldiers at his back, his appearance wasn’t much of a surprise. This man was obviously used to being in command and having his every word obeyed instantly, for, although he had twin pistols in his belt and a machine gun strapped to his back, neither of his hands were touching them. In fact, he appeared so at ease in this situation, that he seemed content to simply stare at them while chewing on his unlit cigar.

“However it is that you came to be here, you will turn around and leave,” the militia captain finally said.

The sound of guns being raised and safeties being unclicked echoed around them, not just from the four in front of them.

“I’m sorry, but we can’t do that,” Captain America replied.

“There are more dangerous things in this jungle than us, you would be wise to do as I say,” the man retorted.

“Oh, I’ve not doubt about that,” Cap replied, his arm tensed and ready to bring his shield up at a moment’s notice.

“I’d listen to the Capsicle, he brought us and there’s nothing here more dangerous than us,” Iron Man
quipped.

The laughs that surrounded them told the team that Iron Man’s assertion wasn’t being believed.

“Leave! This is our territory! One more step and we’ll open fire!” the spokesman for the three dozen soldiers that had managed to half circle the team stated.

Mage merely raised an unseen eyebrow at the man. Even if it wasn’t for the tingling in his ear as his translator earring worked, the fact that every soldier before them, including this spokesman, had their guns up and trained on them spoke volumes.

“I’m guessing that he’s not inviting us to tea?” Daredevil asked.

“I thought that you could speak Spanish?” She-Hulk said.

“I can,” Daredevil replied. “But they’re speaking Portuguese.”

“This is a waste of our time,” Thor groused, raising his hammer. “If these Midgardians refuse to let us pass, then I say that we make them!”

“I got no problem with that,” Spider-man said.

And before anyone could move, he jumped straight up in the air two metres and shot a web-line high into the nearest tree before quickly disappearing into the foliage.

“Hey! I thought we were having language lessons,” Squirrel Girl called. “I wanted to teach them some squirrelese. Can anyone help me distract these guys?”

Squirrel Girls unexpected chittering obviously startled one of the militia for his gun jerked around towards her before it exploded with the sound of half a dozen rapid shots. Bruce, though, had moved at exactly the same time, his clothes ripping apart and a roar of rage reverberating through the jungle as the spray of bullets bounced off of the Hulk’s thick, green hide as he leant over the girl, his arms curled protectively around her.

A fast-moving white line zipped out the treetops just as the other soldiers opened fire, attaching itself to the first soldier’s back and jerking him backwards and up for him to disappear with a startled scream.

As Mage’s wand whipped forwards and across, a great golden dome appeared around the team, absorbing the hail of bullets long enough for the others to disappear.

Daredevil jumped and spun, flipping up and over in a somersault before landing surefooted on an inclined branch and running up it, his billy clubs out. A second jumping flip had him landing behind a pair of soldiers before his feet began kicking out and his fists began flying, striking the two with his clubs.

She-Hulk ignored both shield and bullets, running straight to the side towards one of the soldiers on their flank. One large, jade-green hand closed around the rifle. The tug of war was brief as the soldier, not wanting to let go of his weapon, was jerked forward, straight into the path of She-Hulk’s fist which instantly sent him flying backwards sans rifle. A casual toss took care of the gun before she bounded forward to find her next adversary.

Seeing his comrades safe, Mage dropped his shield only to instantly have his wand moving in an
intricate pattern, targeting the vines that grew all over the nearby trees. At his command, they came alive, slithering and sliding down, wrapping around arms, guns, legs, waists and even necks of the nearest three soldiers. One last jerking pull of his wand had the vines yanking the soldiers hard against the nearest trees and tying them there so tightly that only their eyes were capable of movement.

Squirrel Girl’s call hadn’t gone unanswered. Dozens of small bodies appeared, scampering down tree trunks or jumping from branch to branch overhead before they dropped onto heads and shoulders, their sharp teeth biting shoulders, necks, noses, chins and even ears. That distraction was exactly what Squirrel Girl had wanted and it allowed her to jump in, spinning and kicking and punching with nearly no opposition.

The near-deafening sound of a tree being felled by a single punch of Hulk’s great fist caused half a dozen soldier’s eyes to widen in fright. Two dropped their guns and tried to run when Hulk picked up the broken tree as easily as a normal man would pick up a stick. Any hope that they had of escaping evaporated as the tree trunk flew towards the six, knocking them flying like bowling pins.

Throwing out his hand, Thor summoned Mjolnir back to him, incidentally taking out another soldier as it returned. Turning about he surveyed the Avenger’s handiwork. Men were littered all over the jungle floor. That is, of course, except for the ones left dangling from the trees, encased in Spider-man’s webbing. The crashing of bodies through the jungle as men ran in various directions, trying to escape their fate was as music to his ears. For a brief moment, Thor was tempted to give chase; their primary mission, though, held him firm.

“Come, my friends,” he called. “The battle is ours. We must continue to ensure we meet with the others at the appropriate time.”

“Thor, I’m picking up another forty-seven heat signatures closing on your position,” Hill called over the earpiece.


At She-Hulk’s urging, even Hulk heeded the call as the seven regrouped. Together the team pushed onwards, towards where they knew Barracuda Base was located and coincidentally towards the oncoming threat.

An out of breath HYDRA agent rushing into the lab was nearly shot for his stupidity. In the end, it was only the fact that the unexpected disturbance hadn’t caused the Leader to make a mistake as his fingers flew over the console that controlled the launch codes for their most powerful of weapons that saved his life.

“Manners dictate that when one wishes to enter a room, that they knock first and await permission,” the Leader admonished. “Unfortunate accidents, very often life-ending ones, can easily occur when the niceties aren’t followed.”

The sudden, sharp intake of breath in accompaniment to the widening of the Agent’s eyes told the Leader that his message had been received and understood.

“Now, explain your presence here,” the Leader stated.

“Sir,” the Agent began and his Adam’s apple visibly bobbed as he swallowed. “We’ve just received word from one of Silva’s men – the Avengers are here.”
The Leader’s eyes narrowed.

“Here?” he asked.

“Yes, Sir. In the jungle. Silva’s men have engaged them and are attempting to drive them off or kill them as we speak,” the Agent reported.

“They will fail,” the Leader predicted. “Put the Base of high alert. Arm all defences. Electrify the fence and ensure that my compatriots are informed and ready for some fun.”

“Yes, Sir,” the Agent replied.

For a second, he paused, obviously checking that the Leader was finished giving him his orders before he rushed from the room, his walkie talkie already raised to his mouth as the door began closing behind him.

ooo00ooo

Jab.

Jab.

Weaving duck right.

Uppercut.

The barest hint of a smile appeared on Daredevil’s face for a fraction of a second as the man that he’d just been fighting was lifted off of his feet only to crash to the ground unconscious. A hint of movement of cloth behind him had Daredevil lashing out with his foot, connecting solidly with the man’s stomach. The grunt of air leaving the man’s body was extinguished by Daredevil’s spinning kick.

Air being displaced by a metal object had Daredevil tilting his head slightly upwards and he froze, fists still raised as he waited. At the solid thump of the metal disc hitting its target reached him, he straightened slightly.

“I knew he was there, you know,” Daredevil stated as a body crashed to the ground beside him.

“I know,” Captain America replied, his shield having been caught and now being slid back onto his arm. “But I didn’t want you to have all the fun.”

“ Took your time getting here,” Daredevil noted.

“We ran into some traffic,” Iron Man stated as he zipped past overhead, his repulsars whomping as he targeted militia men.

“It wasn’t exactly Sunday driving here, either, but we still made it on time,” Daredevil replied.

“If you were driving, then I’m glad that we took the scenic route,” Black Widow commented.

“Tower, how’re we looking?” Cap asked, pressing one finger to his ear bud.

“We count eighty-four heat signatures neutralised,” Hill reported. “That only leaves the sixty-nine closing on your position.”

“How many men does this warlord control?” Hawkeye asked, a question that was promptly ignored.
“Steve! I’ve got movement at Barracuda,” Bucky broke in.

“I’m guessing we lost the element of surprise,” Bobbi stated.

“The element of surprise was never something that we were going to have,” Steve reminded her. “What are you seeing, Buck?”

“A massive energy signature just activated all over the fence line,” Bucky replied.

“It’s electrified,” Iron Man confirmed. “And by the readings that I’m seeing, touching it is going to do more than tickle.”

“Then we best not touch the thing,” Falcon stated.

“I’m also seeing movement at every one of their towers and gun bunkers,” Bucky continued. “They’re bringing their big guns on line and I’ve got lines of soldiers swarming from the buildings. Cap, there’s easily another hundred stationed in there.”

“I’d be more worried about the seven that are coming out the front gate,” Hill broke in.

“Avengers, looks like we’ve got company,” Steve called. “Stay sharp, people, we don’t know exactly what type of tech enhancements this lot have.”

ooo00ooo

A tingling in the back of his skull had Spider-man leaping up, arching his body backwards as he flew over whatever the approaching danger was. A branch was conveniently placed for him to land upon in a squat.

“Woah, dude, that is so cool!” Spider-man called down to the mechanical suit below him. “Your suit looks just like a rhinoceros. You’ve even got the pointy horn and everything.”

And indeed, the silver mechanoid below looked very much like the animal, standing on four feet, its head lowered and its horn prominent. But then, with a great whirring of gears, the suit shifted so that it was standing on its back legs. Panels near its chest opened to reveal a man – O’Hirn – seated inside it.

“You think you can beat the Rhino?” O’Hirn challenged.

“Well, I’ve gotta be honest with you, Mister Rhino,” Spider-man replied. “We’re currently in a jungle and rhinoceroses tends to prefer savannahs and plains where they have more room to move. So, yeah, I’m willing to give it a shot.”

While he’d been talking, Spider-man had shifted one hand backwards and quietly attached a web-line to the underside of the branch that he was crouched upon.

“Ha ha ha!” O’Hirn laughed. “This rhino can go wherever he wants.”

Inside the suit, O’Hirn’s shoulders appeared to flex, a movement that was mirrored with the front ‘legs’ of the suit shifting up as well. Twin machine guns, one under each front leg, dropped into position and shifted aim towards the web-head. Spider-man, though, had no intention of waiting around to be shot at.

Dropping backwards, Spider-man allowed the bullets to sail far overhead even as he used his webbing as a pendulum to shift him straight towards the Rhino feet first. Throwing what weight he
had into it, he struck the Rhino right in the middle of the chest. Unfortunately, all he managed to accomplish was to stagger the suit back a couple of steps while he, himself, fell to the ground.

“Now I’ve got you!” O’Hirn’s voice rumbled from inside the suit.

As the two front legs came crashing down towards him, Spider-man shot a pair of lines straight past his feet and through the back legs of the Rhino. The instant that it attached to the tree behind them, he yanked, pulling himself to safety just before he was stomped on.

Leaping to his feet, he noticed a large broken tree limb lying nearby. Spider-man didn’t waste a second, shooting his web at it and spinning in a fast circle, yanking the limb up and around to slam into the Rhino’s side as it was turning to find where Spider-man had gone.

“Oh, come on!” Spider-man complained as all he managed to do was make the Rhino stumble to one side.

“You need to do better than that,” the Rhino heckled.

Spider-man’s eyes widened as the Rhino’s head lowered and its horn lined up with Spider-man’s chest. And then it charged. Just like a normal rhino would do.

Desperately, Spider-man shot a web into a tree and swung away. The sound of crashing below and slightly behind him told him that he needed to come up with a plan and fast.

Mockingbird blinked at the sight of the trenchcoated man that seemed to have appeared out of nowhere in front of her. Quickly, she shifted her eyes around, making sure that he was indeed alone and not simply some kind of distraction.

“I’m guessing you’re lost,” Mockingbird stated cautiously.

“Nah, mate, I ain’t lost in the slightest,” the man replied as he flipped both sides of his trench coat away from his body to reveal the numerous boomerangs strapped to his body.

The boomerangs combined with the man’s accent told Mockingbird exactly who was standing in front of her.

“Meyers,” she said.

“That’s me. But these days I prefer: Boomerang,” he grinned, both hands whipping up and forwards towards her.

Mockingbird’s batons were up in a flash. The first boomerang was easily avoided with a simple sway; the second being batted away into the undergrowth to her left.

*Boom!*

Mockingbird tumbled away from the explosion of sticks and dirt, rolling onto one shoulder before regaining her feet. As she reset herself to face the man in front of her, a sharp stinging pain erupted across her right thigh.

“Boomerang,” Meyers grinned, catching the first boomerang that he’d thrown at her.

Without taking her eyes off of him, Mockingbird felt the cut. Wet, sticky blood slid from the ten centimetre gash in her thigh. Thankfully, it wasn’t deep, only annoying.
Here in the jungle, with so many obstacles in the way, Mockingbird would have thought that the use of boomerangs would be prohibited. But obviously not to a master of the weapons. Boomerangs, though, were a long distance weapon. And while Mockingbird could fight from a distance, she much preferred getting up close and personal where her batons could be used to their fullest advantage.

Her strategy decided, Mockingbird charged.

ooo00ooo

Squirrel Girl stood braced for a fight, her legs slightly apart, knees bent, her fists up and her allies all around her, either in the trees or on the ground. The problem was the fact that the three men who she’d just been squaring off against had taken one look at her and decided to run.

“Pfft. Seems they knew that they didn’t stand a chance against us, hey guys?” Squirrel Girl said, straightening.

“You talk to animals, do you?” a deep voice behind her asked. “I have always much preferred to hunt them, to kill them, to show them their place below man’s boot.”

Squirrel Girl turned, her fists coming back up again.

The man in front of her was tall, broad and incredibly well-muscled. He wore combat pants and boots and a leather vest over his bare chest. Some sort of pelt rose up behind his head like a macabre collar. His weapons almost appeared basic enough to be ignored – a knife big enough to pass as a small sword and a net – but Squirrel Girl had trained with the best and knew better than to ignore any sort of weapon.

“I prefer making friends,” Squirrel Girl replied cautiously.

“And that is why you will always be prey,” the man sniffed his reply.

“Don’t worry, ‘Reen, we’ll show him, just like we showed the others?” Monkey Joe chittered.

And before Doreen could reply, Monkey Joe had rallied their friends and allies and charged at the man, at the Hunter.

Dozens of squirrels scampered along the ground or dropped from the trees, swarming up the Hunter’s legs and practically covering him until all that could be seen of him was parts of his arms and the occasional flash of his torso.

A cry of rage erupted from inside the pulsating grey and brown bodies and Doreen involuntarily took a step backwards before she realised that she was doing so. She blinked then, as the Hunter’s arm flicked back and forwards and then up and over, allowing the net that he was holding to drop over both man and scurry of squirrels.

The barest click of something preceded a hum of an electrical charge and then the net began to glow, sizzle and smoke.

Screams and squeals of pain and terror erupted from the dozens of squirrels and, accompanied as they were with the acrid smell of burning hair and burnt flesh, it told Squirrel Girl exactly what was happening. The net was electrified and all of her allies, her friends, Monkey Joe were being fried alive.

Squirrel Girl rushed forward, a scream of pure fury being ripped from her throat as she ran. Heedless of the danger, she reached forwards and grabbed at the netting. But the charge had been turned off
and she was able to pull it free with ease.

Bodies dropped away, landing with soft thumps at the very feet of the Hunter whose face appeared with a grin. Looking down, Squirrel Girl saw that not one of the squirrels that had been trapped within the netting had survived.

Her fist clench in anger and she looked up and swung as hard as she could. The unexpectedness of her blow must have been the only thing that the Hunter hadn’t counted on for his eyes flicked to her fist and back to her face even as she was in the process of punching him. The force of her punch spun the Hunter around and off of his feet.

As the Hunter pushed himself back up, he spat out a mouthful of blood and grinned up at her with flecks of red dotting his lips and moustache.

“You are a lot stronger than you look, little girl,” he said. “But you are still only a little girl with no idea of how to fight a real enemy.

Squirrel Girl’s eyes widened as the Hunter’s wrist flicked out, a gleaming knife aimed right at her chest. What hit her, though, was a lot heavier than a knife and Squirrel Girl found herself falling onto her butt, a soft body on her chest.

“You saved me,” Squirrel Girl said in amazement to the unknown squirrel. “But you’ve been hurt!”

And indeed, the squirrel had. The knife had obviously just managed to catch the squirrel, slicing the tip of its ear in two and leaving a small trail of blood in its grey fur.

“She may be a girl, but so am I,” Black Widow stated, appearing between Squirrel Girl and the Hunter. “How about you try me instead?”

“With pleasure,” the Hunter replied, rising to his feet with the netting in his hand once more.

A flick of Widow’s hand followed by a mess of sparks and rising smoke told how she’d just overloaded the electrical net with one of her stingers. A stray spark had the Hunter dropping the net and shaking his hand.

That was enough for Widow to close, her fists and legs dancing with the Hunter, blocking, evading and striking as the battle progressed.

“Come on, we’ve got to help her,” Squirrel Girl exclaimed to her one remaining friend as she scrambled to her feet and moved about, aiming to flank the Hunter before she joined in with Black Widow in taking down the murderer.

 Mage stared at the man striding into the jungle. It wasn’t so much the man himself, more the fact that he was using four great metal hose-like arms to walk with, keeping his own body off the ground. Using technology as a suit seemed normal these days. Even wings, but again, they came from a special pack that Sam wore.

This … this was something else. For the life of him, Mage simply couldn’t see where the extra appendages were coming from. If he was asked for his honest answer, then he’d have to say the man’s body, but that was just ridiculous. Wasn’t it?

Obviously, this was one of the men from HYDRA’s Sinister Project. Otto Octavius, if Mage
remembered correctly. Knowing that, he decided that it was in everyone’s best interest to deal with him as quickly as possible.

A simple – well, maybe not simple – transfiguration changed the very nature of the ground that the man was walking on as well as the ground all around him.

With each ‘step’ the man’s extra legs, arms, whatever, began sinking further and further into the ground, only coming up with a sucking *gloop* and a *pop*. For some reason, though, even though it was obvious that more and more of the arms were sinking lower and lower, the man’s body remained the exact same height above the ground. The only way that would be possible would be if the arms could *grow*.

A second transfiguration changed the quicksand to concrete and then a hardening spell set the concrete in seconds, trapping three of the arms below ground.

As he crept up for a closer look, a stick snapped under his foot, causing him to look down and Octavius’ head to whip around.

By the time that Mage looked back up again, it was to see a silver arm hurtling towards him, its pincers opening ready to grab him.

Mage did the first thing that he could think of: he twisted on the spot and apparated to the opposite side of Octavius.

An unexpected weight on his chest had Mage looking down as he arrived and he stepped back even as both hands came up to grab the half metre of metal attached to his cloak. Carefully avoiding the sparking end, he pried off the pincers and tossed it away.

After a last look at Octavius dangling in mid air from the three arms stuck in concrete and the broken fourth, Mage gave a satisfied nod and apparated away.

***

“HULK!”

At the sound of the roar, Hulk turned and grinned a feral grin at the twelve foot tall, brown skinned Abomination standing in the centre of a small clearing. He, too, had a feral, anticipatory grin on his face.

Hulk had been looking forward to this. Abomination may be bigger than Hulk but he wasn’t stronger. No. Hulk was the strongest there was. And he was ready to prove it once more.

Hulk’s instinct was to run straight at the Abomination, to attack; instead he waited. As soon as he felt that familiar weight, though, he took off.

Head slightly bent, fists clenched, Hulk ran, his enormous green feet pounding on the ground, shaking the trees as he passed. A convenient sapling was plucked from the ground as he passed and Hulk swung it, testing its weight.

And then the Abomination began pumping his great arms and legs as well, hurtling towards the Hulk and Hulk could only grin that much more.

At just the right distance, Hulk gave the smallest of grunts. As he felt the weight on his back shift, Hulk drew back his arm and threw the sapling as hard as he could at the Abomination’s head.
As expected, the Abomination raised one arm to ward off the tree and that was the moment that Hulk felt the weight leave him. Dropping his body, Hulk slid in towards the Abomination, not unlike the puny humans did on the box that Banner liked to watch. At the same time, She-Hulk emerged, leaping high over Hulk and the Abomination as well.

The unexpected dual attack momentarily caught Abomination off-guard and he seemed unable to decide which one to attack – the jade-green giantess flying over his head or Hulk sliding towards his feet. His indecision was exactly what was counted on and Hulk took full advantage, pulling one leg back and slamming it hard into Abomination’s knee.

The roar that was torn from Abomination sent birds in every direction flying for miles around.

Hulk had no intention of wasting the opportunity. Leaping to his feet, his swung hard, fists flying at Abomination’s back and ribs. Meanwhile, She-Hulk had leapt once again, this time to agilely climb the Abomination’s flailing arm and to get herself right behind the behemoth’s head where she wrapped her arms around his neck and began squeezing.

Once again, Abomination roared his rage as he spun about, aiming to get the Hulk back in his sights. With Hulk once more before him, Abomination lashed out, blocking the next blow that Hulk aimed at him and following it up with a kick that sent Hulk flying backwards, straight through two giant trees. With one annoyance momentarily taken care of, he turned his attention to the other.

It took nearly a minute for his failing hands to finally grab hold of She-Hulk’s leg. By twisting his head and one shoulder while at the same time pulling on that leg, Abomination managed to twist She-Hulk about so that she was in front of him. It was nothing then, to pull her from his neck and to have her dangling upside down in front of his eyes.

“You’re not worthy of this power, girl!” Abomination spat.

And then, with one twist of his torso, the Abomination sent She-Hulk flying to crash heavily into the nearest tree where her unconscious body limply slid to the ground.

Abomination barely had time to savour that victory before a great green mass slammed into his stomach, Hulk’s arms wrapped around him and his shoulder drove deep, knocking the air from Abomination’s lungs. Hulk’s momentum took the two backwards and the two didn’t slow until Abomination was able to get his feet planted enough in the ground to act as an anchor.

Bringing his elbow up, Abomination drove it and the sharp spike at the end of it straight into Hulk’s back. This time it was Hulk’s turn to scream his pain and defiance.

Twisting his elbow, Abomination forced Hulk to the ground where he pulled his spike free, dragging thick green blood with it. A single powerful kick sent Hulk spinning away into the trees.

Hulk groaned and shook his head after landing. His eyes wobbled slightly as he searched for his enemy. And then he found him: headed back towards She-Hulk. Even someone with Hulk’s intelligence could tell what Abomination’s plan was.

Stumbling to his feet, Hulk looked around him. Finding a long branch, one end jagged from where it’d been snapped off, Hulk picked it up and held it before him like a lance. And then he charged.

For once, Hulk restrained his urge to roar his charge. And if it wasn’t for the pounding of his feet, Abomination may not have heard him coming. But heard him he did, for Abomination turned from where he was looming over the prone She-Hulk just in time to be struck.

The jagged end of the branch caught Abomination high in his right shoulder, lifting him off of his
feet and carrying him away from She-Hulk. By the time that Hulk stopped his charge, Abomination was backed against a tree, pinned there by the branch that now went all the way through his shoulder and into the tree behind.

Hulk, though, after one last sneer at his enemy, only had eyes for his cousin. A dozen large steps brought him back to the unconscious She-Hulk’s side. He bent slightly and picked her up, cradling her carefully in his arms.

And then, with one great bound, Hulk disappeared up and away.

ooo00ooo

“This guy’s crazy!” War Machine commented.

Currently he was in a steep dive, his shoulder-mounted gun firing away at the dozen sickly green globes falling towards the treetops.

“Yep. Noticed,” Iron Man replied as he, too, flew after the falling globes, his repulsars blasting away at that targets.

As each globe was hit, a massive explosion and a bloom of yellow, orange and red flames burst forth. The problem was that the globes were being dropped willy-nilly with nary a care for who lay below, be it friend or foe.

The first couple of globes that the Goblin had ejected from his glider had dropped into the treetops below and exploded, sending plumes of dirt and once-was trees flying in every direction. Thankfully, there’d been no Avengers in those places, but there had definitely been a number of the militia that hadn’t survived the aerial assault from someone who was supposed to be on their side. Now, with the way that the Goblin was flying so erratically, War Machine and Iron Man had no option but to neutralise those globes before they reached the ground, just in case.

“Sir, we have incoming,” Jarvis announced.

Iron Man rolled to the side and looked back, just in time to have to jerk his head back before it was blown off by a missile.

“Does that thing have missiles now?” Iron Man asked. “Is there anything it doesn’t have?”

“Sir, your suit has a larger and more impressive array of weapons than we have seen from either the glider or from the Goblin,” Jarvis reminded his boss.

“Well, of course, but that’s me! This is different. The bad guys aren’t supposed to be able to shoot at me like that,” Iron Man protested.

“Perhaps if we separated him from his glider?” War Machine suggested.

“Good idea. Let’s do that,” Iron Man agreed.

Instantly, the two banked away from each other with Iron Man aiming high and War Machine low. Arms came up and, as they darted in, magnetic harpoons were fired. With Iron Man’s line attached to the Goblin’s back, he veered away in the polar opposite direction to War Machine who was now attached to the glider.

The problem was that the Goblin had other ideas. Somehow, he managed to twist himself about in mid-air and activate some kind of laser from his arm, shearing through the line that connected him to
Iron Man. And, even as he twisted and turned his way towards the ground, his focus never wavered from the small arm computer that he was manipulating.

The glider, obviously under the Goblin’s instruction, fired its thrusters, banked sharply and darted after War Machine. With a wobble of its wings, it managed to snare a piece of the line between two of its sharp points before it veered sharply upwards.

War Machine’s startled yelp as he, who seconds before had been in charge, now became a passenger sounded over the radio.

“What’s going on? What’s this blasted thing think it’s doing?” War Machine yelled.

The answer came moments later as the sharp blades of the glider cut through the line before it abruptly about turned and dove back towards War Machine. Only the quickest jerk of an arm stopped the armoured man from being stabbed.

“You okay?” Iron Man asked.


The two manoeuvred back towards each other, searching below for the glider only to see it soar once more upwards. And it was no longer empty. Once again, the Goblin stood upon its back, his hysterical laughter loud enough for the two to hear.

Hearing the whine of the gauntlets building up, Cap spun, ducking in behind a thick tree before twin blasts of compressed air and sonics blasted the place that he’d just been. Anything loose and a lot of the smaller stuff – leaves, twigs, even insects – that had once been attached to bigger objects, all sailed past.

A quick glance out showed Cap that Shultz – now apparently calling himself the Shocker – was still where he he’d last been standing. Angles were quickly checked and then Cap leant back and threw his shield as hard as he could.

Cap watched it bounce off of the first tree, ricochet off of a branch and head towards the Shocker. That was his cue.

Leaping from hiding, Cap raced towards the man.

Shocker had two targets coming towards him and thankfully, he picked the wrong one to focus upon. One gauntlet was fired towards Cap’s shield, hitting it and spinning it away; the other was aimed towards Cap, an aim that was easy to dodge.

Ducking in close, Cap let go, striking three quick punches to the man’s stomach and a fourth to his chin. Shocker’s eyes rolled in his head as he turned half-way around before he fell full length to the ground.

Standing up straight, Cap looked in the direction that he’d last seen his shield disappearing.

Perhaps … he thought.

Flexing his arm, he activated the electromagnet that Tony had installed into his arm guard. For half a minute, nothing happened and then, from out of the undergrowth, his shield flew towards him only to quickly attach itself to his arm.
Cap gave a nod of approval. Yes, that was definitely going to come in handy.

“Cap, we’ve got a problem,” Hawkeye called.

“What is it?” a somewhat out of breath Cap replied.

“I’m seeing some heavy-duty missile launchers swivelling towards the jungle where we are,” Hawkeye replied.

“Let me take a look,” Falcon interjected.

Hawkeye turned his head slightly, quickly finding his teammate rising above the treetops from where he’d been hassling the militia. Unfortunately, it seemed that Hawkeye wasn’t the only one to notice Falcon: three anti-aircraft guns began firing, trying to get a bead on the quick-moving Avenger.

“Woah, I’m taking some serious fire here,” Falcon called, even as his wings tucked back and he dove into the safety of the trees.

“Steve, I agree with Hawkeye,” Bucky called over the comms. “Those missiles are preparing to fire on your position.”

“All Avengers, fall back immediately!” Cap ordered.

Hawkeye didn’t waste a second. Switching through his arrowheads, he selected the mini-grappler, aimed at a mid-range tree and fired. As soon as it was secure, he swung down, released the line and ran.

“Got ya nose!” Spider-man called as he swung past, his web-line now attached to the Rhino’s horn.

Whipping around a tree, he swung in, got a foot hold, braced and held on. The tension on the line went taught and he pulled, practically standing horizontally on the tree as his line yanked Rhino’s head around. A great crash and rumble of the ground told Spider-man that he’d achieved his aim: the Rhino was finally down.

“All Avengers, fall back immediately!”

Spider-man blinked. He finally had the bad guy on the ropes, but orders were orders, especially if he wanted to keep coming on the big missions. Shooting a web-line, Spider-man swung out and away.

“Sorry, Rhino dude, gotta go. Web ya later,” he called as he whipped past the suit on the ground that was still struggling to regain its feet.

Explosions rocked the jungle as missile after missile landed, blanketing the area that they’d been fighting in not so long ago. As each Avenger either checked in or appeared, a sigh of relief was released.

“If they keep firing those missiles, it’s going to be near impossible to get close to Barracuda,” Daredevil stated.

“What about by air?” Cap asked.
“Not unless we can come up with one mighty big distraction,” Iron Man replied. “They’ve got enough anti-aircraft batteries to have three targeting each one of us who are capable of flight at the same time.”

“What sort of distraction?” Mage asked, his head bowed slightly, one hand rubbing his chin.

“I don’t know. Big,” Iron Man reiterated, waving his arms about in a vague approximation of the term ‘big’.

“How far are we from the border with Peru?” Mage asked.

Iron Man, Cap and Daredevil stared at him.

“Four hundred and ninety-three kilometres to the closest border,” Jarvis replied. “Ninety-eight percent of it is thick jungle and all but uninhabited.”

Mage nodded slowly.

“That should work,” he said, looking up. “I’ll be back as soon as possible.”

And then, before they could reply, Mage wandless summoned a rock, tapped it with his wand so that it glowed blue and then tapped it again before disappearing in a burst of multicoloured swirls.
Reserva Azteca Para Dragones. The sign hadn’t changed in the years since Harry had last stood in
this very spot. The only difference being that then, unlike now, the place had been closed to visitors,
not that it being closed today would have stopped Harry anyway.

Cancelling his spells, Harry flipped off the hood of his cloak and strode through the entrance.

“Sir, is there something that I can help you with?”

Harry shifted his focus from the direction that he heard the sound of those that he’d really come here
to see, to the man striding purposefully towards him from the closest building, set just off the main
path. He had a grizzled and weather-beaten look to him, a testament to the fact that he would surely
spend most of his time outdoors with his job. Unlike most wizards in the world, he wore trousers and
a shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbow.

As one would expect from someone living in this part of the world, his first words weren’t in
English, although Harry did understand them through the use of his translator earrings.

“I’m sorry, I only speak English,” Harry said, stopping to allow the keeper to come to him.

“I asked if there was something that I can help you with,” the man repeated in heavily-accented
English.

For a second, Harry paused, not sure exactly how to explain his reason for arriving there so
unexpectedly. In the end, he decided to simply go with the simple answer and let the quaffle fall
where it would.

“I need a couple of your dragons,” Harry said.

The dragon-keeper stared at him as though he’d said the craziest thing in the world.

“You need a couple of our dragons,” the keeper eventually repeated incredulously. “This is not some
muggle library for borrowing things; we do not simply lend out dragons.”

“Regardless, I am here for them,” Harry stated calmly. “What type do you have here?”

The keeper slowly shook his head before he seemed to decide to ignore the first part of Harry’s
statement and to instead answer the question.

“We only have the one kind of dragon here: Peruvian Vipertooths,” the keeper replied. “They’re
some of the most vicious dragons that there are.”

“Really? ’Cause, I faced off with a nesting mother Hungarian Horntail, back when I was still in
school. Managed to get past her and reach her nest, too, I might add,” Harry relayed with not a small
amount of pride.

For a second the keeper simply stared at Harry, raking his eyes up and down, before he threw back
his head and roared his laughter.

“You?” he laughed, tears streaming down his face. “Reach the nest of a nesting Horntail? As a
child?”

“You don’t believe me?” Harry asked, one eyebrow cocked, not that, if he was in the dragon
keeper’s place, he would have believed himself either.

“You’re still alive, aren’t you? You wouldn’t be if your tale was true,” the keeper replied matter-of-factly.

“How many Vipertooths do you have here?” Harry asked, trying to get the conversation back on track.

“One hundred and thirteen,” the keeper replied as he wiped his face with the back of his arm. “Almost too many for our Reserve to handle.”

“In that case, my taking a couple off your hands works in both our favour,” Harry replied, turning to stride away towards where he could hear the dragons.

“Hey! Hold on there!” the keeper called, chasing after him. “Vipertooths are vicious. Even a nip from one can kill you, what with the venom in their teeth. And they seem to have a sweet tooth for humans.”

Harry simply waved a hand at the protest and continued around the bend before stopping dead.

Before him was a great bowl, surrounded by mountains – the dragon reserve itself. And in that lightly forested bowl were the residents, over a hundred bronze dragons.

Peruvian Vipertooths may be the smallest of all dragons, but they were still fifteen feet long with great wings that were only a shade or two lighter than their copper bodies. Not that they were completely the one colour, their ridges that ran from the back of their head all the way down to the tip of their tail were jet black.

Tapping his finger to his throat, Harry channelled enough magic to ensure that his voice would be heard by the dragons below.

“§Hello. Can you understand me§?” he called, his voice echoing down into the bowl.

Harry’s eyes remained fixed on the dragons but in his peripheral vision, he noted that the dragon keeper took a number of quick steps backwards and that his wand had fallen into his hand. The fact that said wand was still pointed at the ground was enough to have Harry ignoring it. For now.

Heads of dozens of dragons turned sharply at his echoing voice until almost every single one of them was pointed straight up to where he was standing, their long necks stretched as far as they could go. And then the great wings of three of the Vipertooths unfurled and they leapt into the air to fly higher up the bowl to where Harry was standing.

Harry stayed perfectly still as the three, one slightly larger than the other two, landed just at the very top of the cliff. Their heads moved sinuously as they seemed to study him, their eyes firmly fixed on him.

“§Hello. Can you understand me§?” Harry asked again, having firstly cancelled the sonorous spell.

“§We understand you, Speaker§,” the largest of the dragons replied.

Harry couldn’t help but smile. This was the first time that he’d ever attempted to talk to a dragon and it’d worked! Oh, it wasn’t perfect, he had to listen hard to understand what the dragon had said – it definitely had a very thick accent, but whether that was because the tongue of dragons was almost too far from the language of snakes or because these dragons were from Peru was anyone’s guess.
“§Thank you for coming to speak with me§,” Harry said, giving a short bow but not breaking eye contact.

“§We have not had a two-leg ever try to speak to us before§,” the lead dragon replied.

“§I have a special gift which allows me to do so§,” Harry replied. “§Perhaps none with this gift have ever come here before§.”

“§Perhaps§,” the dragon allowed. “§What is it that you want, Speaker§?”

“§I come asking for aid§,” Harry said, picking his words very carefully. “§There are some very bad two-legs that want to hurt other two-legs and I am not strong enough to stop them by myself§.”

“§You are wise to recognise the strength of dragons, Speaker§,” the dragon said, its head still moving from side to side. “§But why should we care what two-legs do to other two-legs§?”

And that, Harry knew was always going to be the tricky part.

“§I was hoping that we could come to an agreement. If you consent to help me, then I would make sure to give you what you want§,” Harry replied.

The necks of all three dragons lengthened at that, bringing their heads close enough for Harry to smell exactly how bad a dragon’s breath truly was. When he still didn’t flinch away from them, their mouths shifted slightly, leaving Harry with the impression that he’d just passed some kind of test. Finally, the three pulled back.

“§Listen to what we demand, Speaker, and if you can give it to us, then we will agree to help you with your two-leg problem§,” the dragon stated.

“§I’m listening§,” Harry said.

ooo00ooo

A groan escaped She-Hulk’s throat as consciousness returned. The painful throbbing in her head had her lifting her hand to it and pressing it to her temple. The sticky substance that she found there had her opening her eyes to see the green blood covering her hand. Obviously, she’d hit her head, precisely on her temple, hard enough to knock herself out.

And then memory returned.

She and Hulk had been battling the Abomination. She remembered their plan working perfectly – the timed leap that distracted Abomination enough for Hulk to bring him to his knee before Hulk began his true assault. She, herself, had then managed to get onto the Abomination’s back and to begin trying to choke him, to at the very least, deprive him of enough air to remain conscious.

But then things had started to go wrong. She vaguely recalled Hulk being kicked away and the Abomination pulling her from his neck and then … nothing.

As she slowly sat up, She-Hulk took a look at where she was. A deep shadow directly above her had her looking up – into the underside of a quinjet’s wing.

“What am I doing back here?” she asked herself.

“She-Hulk safe.”

She-Hulk turned at the unexpected deep voice, wincing slightly at the fast movement, to find the
Hulk seated nearby on the grass.

“Hulk? What are we doing here? Did we win? Is the Abomination dead?” she asked rapid-fire.

“She-Hulk safe,” Hulk repeated.

Noticing the non-answer, She-Hulk pushed herself to her feet.

“Hulk. Is the Abomination dead?” she asked.

Hulk’s shifting about so that his back was more towards her spoke volumes.

“Hulk! What happened?” she demanded, rounding his bulk to face him once more.

“Hulk win. Get She-Hulk safe,” the great green goliath stated.

She-Hulk narrowed her eyes at her cousin. That sounded as though Hulk had done just enough to ensure that the Abomination was down but not out, giving Hulk the time he needed to get her away from the danger. But if that was the case …

“Hulk! Are you telling me that you left the Abomination somewhere where he could hurt our friends?” she asked.

“Hulk get She-Hulk safe!” Hulk repeated, more forcefully this time.

“And you did a great job of that,” she said. “Look. I’m perfectly safe. And ready for Round Two. Come on, big guy, we’ve got to get back in there and help our friends.”

When Hulk failed to immediately stand, She-Hulk had no choice but to force his hand.

“Fine. You stay here. I’ll go do it by myself. I’ll show the Abomination who’s the strongest there is,” she said before promptly marching into the forest.

“Hulk strongest there is, not puny She-Hulk!” Hulk roared.

She-Hulk simply smiled at the sound of the crashing trees behind her.

ooo00ooo

“Avengers, this is Mage. I hope that you’re ready to get back to work; I brought that distraction you were wanting.”

“Mage? Where are you and what’s your ETA?” Cap asked.

“I’m coming in hot from the east,” Mage reported. “We’ll be over Barracuda in two minutes.”

“We?” Iron Man repeated. “What’d you do, bring the girls you’ve been off drinking margaritas with while we’ve been here trying not to get bombed?”

“Something like that,” Mage replied and all could hear the grin in his voice.

“Woah!”

“Barton? You okay?” Cap asked urgently.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m good. But that is one hell of a distraction!” Hawkeye stated.
“Clint? What are you seeing?” Widow asked.

“Dragons. He brought frigging dragons!” Hawkeye reported. “Three of them! Large as life and flying in formation behind him.”

Avengers everywhere scrambled to find places where they, too, could see Mage’s ‘distraction’.

The dragons were exactly as Hawkeye had reported – three of them, bronze coloured and easily fifteen feet long from snout to tail, their great wings flared out as they soared ever closer, flying in an arrowhead formation behind Mage on his broomstick looking extremely small in comparison.

The fact that Mage and his dragons got as close as they did to Barracuda’s fence line shouted the fact that the distraction worked perfectly on the HYDRA agents as well. Eventually, though, one of the anti-aircraft guns opened fire, sporadically at first before settling down into a near-continuous stream of bullets. And once one had opened fire, others quickly joined in.

Suddenly, the dragon on the far right tipped its body, tucked its wings and dove down barely missing the electrified fence. Its great mouth opened wide and a stream of fire so hot that its very centre was blue-white, engulfed the gun that had been shooting at the dragon. The gun itself melted into a puddle of blackish goo within seconds and the very ground that it had been sitting on blackened and cracked open under the heat. Whatever men had been manning the gun were vaporised before they could even think of fleeing.

“Alright everyone, enough staring, they’re supposed to be distracting the enemy, not us,” Cap said. “Let’s get to work. Thor. Bring that fence down!”

“With pleasure,” the Asgardian replied.

ooo00ooo

For the second time that day, the door to the room that held the Leader was flung open by a panicking underling. This time, at least, said underling had remembered to knock.

“What is it?” the Leader snapped.

“Sir. Its Mage. He’s brought dragons,” the agent gasped.

The Leader froze before slowly blinking as his brain tried to process the unexpected statement.

“Dragons don’t exist,” the Leader finally managed.

“I know, Sir. Nevertheless, there’re three of them, dragons, in the sky attacking us,” the agent reiterated.

“Must be some kind of magic trick,” the Leader mused to himself. “Ignore them. Concentrate on Mage. Take him out and whatever this magic trick is will cease to be.”

The agent looked as though he wanted to disagree. Thankfully for him, though, he knew better than to do that.

“Yes, Sir. I’ll give the order,” he said before rushing from the room.

ooo00ooo

To finally have a worthy adversary felt good to Thor as he strode from the jungle. Yes, keeping all of the soldiers out of the way of his compatriots as they dealt with the larger threats was important, but
still, he was Thor, the Son of Odin. He was born for the big battles. And while this might only be a fence, it was a barrier that had stumped his teammates and he was ready to remove it.

Planting his feet, one hand up to shield his face from the bullets peppering him, Thor thrust Mjolnir skywards and called the lightning. Great streaks of white arced from the quickly swirling clouds straight down to connect with his hammer, continuously building its charge, ready for what was to come.

And then, when it felt right, Thor thrust Mjolnir towards the fence. The lightning of the God of Thunder met the man-made electricity coursing through the fence. Met it and overwhelmed it, sending an overload through its very system until sparks erupted all over the fence.

The exploding building a third of the way around the fence-line, combined with the hum from the fence completely disappearing told Thor that he’d succeeded.

“The fence is down,” he reported.

Spinning Mjolnir in a rapid circle, he allowed his hammer to pull him off the ground. Flying low, he smashed a hole through the fence, adjusted slightly and burst through the nearest big gun, splintering it. Landing in a skid and a grin, Thor set to work on the startled soldiers.

Mage ducked even as he shifted his hands on his Lightning Bolt, sending the broom into a dive and away from the stream of bullets. A glance up was enough to see the red-hot bullets slewing across the sky as they attempted to keep up with him. This was the fourth set of bullets that was now being aimed at him and it was getting Merlin-be-damned hard to stay out of their crosshairs.

Unexpectedly zigging across the sky, Mage reached into one of the pockets on his belt and extracted one particular box. Channelling enough magic into the box to resize it while still controlling his broom wasn’t easy.

Leaning forward, Mage dove hard and fast. The ground rushed at him as he fought his Lightning Bolt to keep its nose pointed straight down. And then, at precisely the correct height, he jerked back hard levelling himself out so close to the grass below that the blades whipped about as he shot past. Weaving in and out of the men on the ground, the box tucked under one arm was akin to being back at Hogwarts, playing a pickup game where he was a Chaser instead of a Seeker. The anti-aircraft gun that he was aiming at wasn’t remotely like a quidditch hoop, but still, Mage nailed it when he pulled back his arm and let the box fly.

Shooting the activating magic saw fire meet fire. Or in this case, the fire of bullets meeting wizarding fireworks, the gift that simply keeps on giving. Gigantic multicoloured rockets, huge pinwheels of flame, animals made entirely of sparks and whizzing streams of fire erupted around the ground of Barracuda Base. Men were sent running or flying face first into the ground. And where fireworks met ammunition, massive explosions that created bursts of flames lit up the sky and grounds.

Shooting back up, Mage zoomed around until he was close enough to the Vipertooths to talk to easily.

“§I need to head into those buildings,$” Mage told the dragons. “§I’m trusting you out here.$”

“§Have no fear, Speaker, we will only attack the two-legs or the two-leg’s machines that attack us,$” the largest, the male of the three, assured him.

Mage gave a single nod to the three in acknowledgment before turning his broom back towards the
Spider-man backflipped, catching his opponent with his foot under the man’s chin, sending the soldier up as well. But whereas Spider-man came down back on his feet, the soldier landed in a sprawled heap, clearly unconscious.

“This is no time to be sleeping on the job, man,” Spidey stated. “But if you want some z’s, let me at least tuck you in.”

With that, Spider-man directed his web shooters at the soldier, quickly encasing the man, apart from his head, and ensuring that he’d stay out of the fight.

Job done, Spider-man looked up and around, seeking the next biggest threat. His eyes narrowed as he saw a behemoth of a mechanical suit lumber in through the hole in the fence that Thor had created.

The Rhino, though, had obviously seen better days. The left front arm of the suit was completely missing, which explained why the suit was on the back two legs and not all fours. There were also a great deal of sparks coming from the entire left side of the suit. And even from this distance, Spider-man could hear a definite clank whenever the suit used its right back leg.

Noting a convenient light pole that the Rhino was about to pass, Spider-man took off at a run. Dodging and jumping through the debris and combatants until he was close enough to the pole nearly meant that the Rhino was out of range. Getting the suited man to stop, though, was spider’s play.

“Hey! Great to see you back. I was hoping you didn’t get all exploded in all those bombs. Mind you, looks as though it was a close one, hey?” Spider-man called as he zipped a line up to the top of the pole and began swinging around in a great circle with the Rhino in the middle.

“Spider-man!” the Rhino growled, stopping in his tracks as Spidey swung past.

The instant that he was out of sight, Spider-man shot a second line, this one aimed at the Rhino’s back right leg. Then, as he swung around and around the Rhino, he allowed his webbing to tie the Rhino’s feet together.

“That suit really is going to need to go into the shop, isn’t it? To be honest, I’m surprised that you can even move in there,” Spider-man quipped, keeping the Rhino focussed on his voice and not on what he was doing.

The Rhino’s one good arm came up and he attempted to get a bead on the swinging Spider-man with his machine gun each time he swung past, but he just couldn’t seem to aim properly. Finally, enough webbing was wrapped around the Rhino’s feet for Spider-man to let go of the line attached to the pole and to land in a run.

Then, after bracing his legs, he pulled. Hard. And, just like he expected, the Rhino slowly toppled over, right onto his missing left arm. As quickly as he could, Spider-man sprayed the right side of the suit with a webbing net, clogging up the working arm and rendering the entire suit immobile.

“What have you done? Just wait until I get myself loose, you tiny, little, annoying insect!” the Rhino yelled, his suit barely rocking backwards and forwards in the small amount of movement that the webbing allowed.
“Well, I did tell you that I’d web you later,” Spider-man called as he ran off to find the next person to web.

ooo00ooo

The Hunter knew that he wasn’t at his best. The hearing in his right ear was all but non-existent and it sounded as though blood was constantly pounding in his left. He had cuts and bruises over nearly every part of his body, indeed, his left boot squished with what he suspected was blood whenever he walked. His clothes were singed and torn and he was sure that most of his hair and moustache had been burnt off.

Really, it was a miracle that he’d survived at all.

He’d been enjoying his fight against the Widow, it was proving to be one of the most even matches that he’d ever had against an opponent. Her skills were phenomenal and what she lacked in strength, she more than made up for in flexibility and unpredictability. Oh, he was sure that he would have won in the end, it’d only been a matter of time.

But before there could be a true deciding winner, the Widow had suddenly bowed out, disappearing into the jungle and leaving him wondering why.

The answer had come mere minutes later with the first of the missiles that had dropped on the jungle and exploding trees, dirt and even men in every direction. Kraven had run for it, doing his level best to get out of the danger zone. And he’d even nearly made it. That last one though, at least the last one that he remembered, had landed far too close and all that he remembered was the sound of the explosion, his entire body feeling as though it was being pummelled and the feeling of flying through the air.

Underground in Barracuda Base, he knew that he’d have a chance to tend to his injuries, to get himself back up to peak performance once more. Of course, that meant crossing the war-zone that had become of the grounds of the Base. Avengers and HYDRA agents were everywhere, slugging it out, vying to be in control of all.

Currently, the Hunter was crouched behind a fallen block of concrete, plotting his next movement towards safety. But a sudden, sharp pain in his ankle made him look down.

A squirrel. Another infernal squirrel. He’d been sure that he’d taken care of every single one of the creatures back in the jungle with that girl. The creature getting so close to him without him realising told the story of how impaired his senses really were, a fact that was only emphasised a moment later by a tapping on his shoulder.

Looking up, the Hunter blinked.

Standing there, towering over him, was the same little girl from before. He blinked at her a second time, trying to process exactly how much of a threat she posed.

“This is for Monkey Joe,” she snarled at him.

And then the blow landed, smashing him hard in the face and the Hunter crumpled, the last of his senses silenced once more.

ooo00ooo

A sudden cackling behind him had Iron Man glancing back.
“Not this guy again,” he groused.

“Perhaps three might be better than just the two of you,” Falcon stated, flying in towards Iron Man and War Machine.

“Keeping those bombs of his off of the people below is definitely more than the two of us can handle alone,” War Machine agreed.

Together, the three soared towards the Goblin on his glider, the two suited men taking a lower altitude in the hope of catching things before they fell. Unfortunately, they’d severely miscalculated the Goblin’s intent.

Instead of returning to his gleeful bombing runs from before, this time the Goblin had bigger targets in mind. They watched as he accelerated away and angled upwards, his eyes fixed on the three bronze dragons that Mage had brought.

“This guy’s really not that crazy, is he?” Falcon asked.

“Yep, afraid so,” Iron Man replied as the three saw a pair of mini-missiles being fired from the front of the glider.

The dragons, it seemed had seen the danger coming. Unfortunately, they didn’t have time to get out the way.

The first missile hit the smallest of the three dragons in the side, just under its wing causing a massive ball of flames to erupt, covering the dragon’s wing in the process. The second missile impacted the largest dragon in the chest, eliciting a massive, ear-piercing roar in conjunction with the flaming explosion.

The third dragon, though, was having none of it. With speed that none expected from something so large, it accelerated, straight at the goblin, its great mouth open wide. But instead of the gout of flame that they were all expecting, the dragon simply closed its mouth around the Goblins’ shoulder and plucked him from his glider.

The three Avengers watched wide-eyed as the dragon viciously shook its head and its jaw seemed to clamp down hard. Unexpectedly, the Goblin was sent flying in the midst of one of the dragon’s head shakes and the dragon itself gave a roar that could only be pain.

“Is that one of its fangs imbedded in the Goblin’s suit?” War Machine asked.

“I don’t know about that, but that small dragon’s in trouble,” Falcon called urgently. “Looks like its wing membrane was badly torn up in that explosion. It’s going down.”

“Falcon, watch the Goblin,” Iron Man ordered. “Rhodey, let’s give that dragon a hand.”

“What?” War Machine blanched even as he fired his repulsors after Iron Man and the quickly falling bulk of bronze dragon.

ooo00ooo

Thor grunted as he caught the gigantic fist of the Abomination headed right towards his head. This monster was strong and Thor had no problem with saying so; after all, he’d fought the biggest and strongest that there are in his time – Frost Giants and the Hulk himself among them. And not once had Thor lost a battle (Hulk leaping from the helicarrier and away from his fight with Thor counted as a win for Thor, correct?).
Still, even with Mjolnir, Thor was hard-pressed to hold up his end of the fight. He’d used his immense strength to knock a few of the Abomination’s teeth out near the start of their bout. The fact that the monster had simply spat out some blood, grinned at him and charged straight back had him slightly worried at how long winning this battle would take.

Noticing that the Abomination had braced himself with one foot forward as he continued to force his fist down ever further towards Thor’s head, gave Thor an idea. Opening his hand, he let Mjolnir drop.

The howl of pain and rage that the Abomination roared told Thor that his aim had been true: Mjolnir was now planted firmly on the Abomination’s foot. And with one foot pinned, that gave Thor an advantage. He was just about to follow up on it when a massive streak of green appeared in the sky above him and Thor did the only sensible thing that he could think of: he immediately rolled out of the way.

The Hulk landed fist first, smashing into the side of Abomination’s head, sending the larger monster straight to the ground. Noticing the angle that the Abomination’s leg was forced to because of his foot being held in place by Mjolnir, Thor briefly considered summoning his hammer to his hand. But really, fair play, especially when it came to such an opponent as this, was uncalled for. And completely unnecessary.

Hulk towered over the downed Abomination, smashing fist after fist into the other’s head, sending his head whipping from side to side and specks of green blood flying from his mouth.

The arrival of a second green-skinned ally had Thor turning away; there were other battles to be won. This one was over; against the two Hulks and pinned as he was to the ground, the Abomination was well and truly defeated.

Ordinarily, Hawkeye preferred to fight from a distance. That wasn’t to say that he couldn’t fight up close and personal-like, it was simply what worked best for him. And right now, he was testing out his hand-to-hand skills like he hadn’t in a long time.

He, Widow and Mockingbird had managed to infiltrate one of the three buildings that made up Barracuda Base. Their aim was to rout out any hidden HYDRA agents hidden inside and to make sure that they weren’t going to unexpectedly appear outside with some game-changing weapon. Unfortunately, that was almost easier said than done.

They’d all seen the specs of the base. Up top, each building was three stories tall. But down below ground, there were a dozen levels, and when one added in all of the corridors and rooms, there were literally miles of terrain to check.

Ducking his head out of one corridor, Hawkeye checked what he was about to walk into. A frown creased his face as he noted the two agents standing there, a large rifle of some kind in their hands, the lighting and distance not allowing him to identify exactly what kind of weapon it was.

Ordinarily, his bow and arrow would be next to useless down here, but if he angled things just right …

Adjusting the selector on his bow, Hawkeye waited until the case had shifted and plucked an arrow from his back. Then, stepping back with one leg, he brought his bow to full stretch. A calming breath and he stepped fully out and around the corner. Only one of the guards managed to stiffen at his presence before he released.
The arrow flew true, as expected, striking the wall right between the two men before the shaft shifted back slightly and an electrical charge crackled, striking out like mini bolts of lightning. Two connected with the guards, jolting them and causing them to shake before, with barely a murmur, they simply keeled over.

Nodding in satisfaction, Hawkeye trotted up to the fallen men. Seeing the unfamiliar rifles from this distance had him kneeling and picking one up. It was something that he hadn’t seen before, the middle of the gun being extra thick with bars of bright blue pulsating energy shining through.

This, he knew, was bad.

“Avengers, we have Phase Two weapons in play down here,” he called, alerting his team.

The gun appearing in the hand of the man occupying the room that he’d just burst into wasn’t unexpected. Nor was the fact that it instantly began firing at him. No, what was unexpected was the reason for it.


The instant that Mage had realised that he was going to be fired on, he swivelled, allowing his dragonhide cloak to protect him. Even with that protection, though, he still felt every single bullet as it hit his upper back and shoulder. And the bullets didn’t stop coming even after the man had finished his sentence. Four more bullets were fired after it until the Glock simply began clicking repeatedly as the trigger was pulled without a bullet being fired.

Spinning back around, Mage swished his wand, jerking the gun out of the man’s hand and across the room where it smashed into the far wall.

It was only then that he managed to get a good look at the man who’d just been firing at him. This man’s head was something extraordinary, being elongated way beyond normal and with a high forehead that was slightly lumpy in places.

“Doctor Sterns,” Mage stated, recognising the man.

“Mage,” Sterns replied and his voice was dripping with venom, at least at first. When next he spoke, his voice only contained curiosity. “I’m told that the show you put on to get past my defences was quite something. Did you conjure … yes, conjure seems the right word, did you conjure just the image of dragons or were they made out of some kind of substance?”

Mage smirked at the man, not that he could see it.

“I’ll have to leave that to your imagination,” Mage stated.

“That simply will not do,” Sterns frowned, “My imagination is far too vast to leave the question unanswered especially when you could simply satisfy my curiosity.”

“Sorry,” Mage shrugged. “I’m afraid you’re going to be disappointed. You wouldn’t understand it anyway. ‘Magic’ isn’t an answer that men of science seem to like being given. Now, if you’ll move away from that console, I’d appreciate it.”

“No, no I don’t think that I will,” Sterns replied. “My work is not quite finished, although it is extremely close.”
“I won’t ask again,” Mage said, steel lining his voice.

Instead of instantly complying, Sterns merely tapped a single button and then stepped away, his hands up and a self-satisfied smirk on his face.

“What did you do?” Mage snapped.

“Avengers, I’m reading an increase in energy readings deep inside Barracuda,” Hill reported over the comms.

“And I’m seeing the hatch to the missile silo opening,” Bucky added. “Has something been triggered?”

Mage took a couple of menacing steps towards Sterns.

“What did you do? What did that button do?” he growled.

“Something that neither you with all of your magic nor your companions with all of their strength can stop,” Sterns replied.

Mage’s eyes narrowed at the man. No, this man wasn’t going to give him any answers voluntarily. A snap of his wand, a flash of red and Sterns dropped where he stood. Ignoring him, Mage rushed to the console, his eyes roving all over it as he tried to work out what he was seeing.

“Tony! I need you down here,” Mage called. “Sterns started something but I don’t know what it is or how to stop it.”

“On my way,” Iron Man replied.

A great rumbling sound that seemed to shake the entire installation began before stopping barely a minute later. Seconds later, the rumbling restarted, only this time it was ten times stronger and accompanied by a great roar that seemed to start somewhere well below Mage’s feet before slowly travelling upwards.

“Missile launched! They’ve launched a missile!” a panicked Falcon yelled over the comms.

“Confirmed!” Hill called. “Barracuda has launched an ICBM!”
Tony bursting through the door to the lab was enough to almost make Harry sigh in relief.

“There!” Harry exclaimed, pointing to the console that Sterns had been working at before Harry’d stunned him.

It took Tony bare seconds to divest himself of his armour and to race across to the indicated console.

Really, this shouldn’t have happened. Stopping to ‘talk’ was a rookie’s mistake. When it came to the bad guys, Harry knew better – he should have learnt that lesson all the way back in the second Wizarding War – stun first, question later. The only thing that he could put his mistake down to was the technology involved. Even after all this time knowing Tony, Harry still didn’t have that great of an understanding of what it could do. And who knew that pressing one button could set something like this in motion?

“J, plug in and get me through whatever firewalls are in place,” Tony ordered his AI even as his fingers began flying across the keypad.

Harry stalked across the room to peer over Tony’s shoulder while making sure that he stayed far enough back so as to not get in the tech genius’ way. A deep rumbling coming from somewhere under their feet deeper in the base had both Harry and Tony looking up.

“Guys, I’m seeing movement below,” Hawkeye announced.

“What is it?” Steve asked, “more soldiers.”

“I don’t think so. Looks like a second ICBM moving into position,” Hawkeye replied.

“Get me in, J; looks like we’re running out of time here,” Tony stated.

“I’m sorry, Sir, I cannot break in, not in the time required to stop any more ICBMs launching,” Jarvis replied.

“How many of those things does this base have in its arsenal?” Natasha asked.

“Five,” Hill replied. “One of which has already launched.”

“What’s the problem, J?” Tony asked.

“There appears to be a twenty-three digit code that is rotating at a random interval blocking my efforts to break into the program,” Jarvis replied.

“How long until that next missile launches?” Steve demanded, entering the lab at a dead run, Thor at his back.

Tony’s fingers manipulated the console before he looked up with a frown.

“Ninety seconds,” he replied.

“What are their targets?” Thor asked.

“No idea,” Tony replied. “That info’s locked away in the programming that I can’t access.”
“Judging by its trajectory, I’d say that the one in the air is heading for the east coast of the United States,” Hill added.

“What about him? Could we get him to stop this?” Steve asked, gesturing at the unconscious Sterns.

“Doubt it,” Tony replied. “Super villains don’t really like having their plans thwarted. Not to mention that he’s unconscious right now.”

“Leave that to me,” Harry stated grimly.

He knew what he needed to do. There was one spell which could solve all their problems. Really, there was no alternative. The only problem was that the one time that he’d used this spell in the past, he’d hated himself for years afterwards. An Unforgivable; it wasn’t called that for nothing. But this wasn’t an ordinary time and if it would save lives …

Even as he strode towards Sterns, Harry’s wand was in motion. A vicious jab renervated Sterns.

“*Imperio!*” Harry whispered.

Sterns’ mind was strong but hitting him when he was still regaining consciousness was enough for Harry to batter his way in, through the man’s defences and to take a firm control of him.

“Get up!” Harry commanded and Sterns complied, standing there slack jawed and with his eyes glassed over.

“Tony, move out of the way,” Harry ordered.

“Harry? I don’t think giving the bad guy access to the computer is a good idea,” Tony countered even as he took half a step backwards.

“It is if we want to stop this,” Harry retorted. “I’ve got him under a spell. He’ll only do exactly what I tell him to do, nothing else.”

Harry noted the stares directed at him by both Steve and Tony as well as the way that Thor simply nodded in understanding or agreement. Movement in the doorway had Harry glancing that way to see Bobbi standing there.

Suddenly, the rumbling under their feet stopped.

“The second ICBM’s in place. It’s getting ready to launch,” Tony stated.

“Stop the launch of any more ICBMs,” Harry ordered Sterns.

Harry felt the scientist’s mind focus on the task and he grimaced as he exerted his will, ensuring that he didn’t lose his ‘grip’ on Sterns. The man’s fingers began to move albeit nowhere near as fast as Tony’s had been mere moments before.

A loud *roar* told everyone that the ICBM’s engines had ignited and their heads followed the sound as it rose through the Base.

“We have a second *bird in the air!*” Hill reported.

Half a minute later, Sterns’ fingers stilled.

“Will any more ICBMs launch?” Harry asked urgently.
“No,” Sterns replied in a flat voice.

“Good. Now, destroy the two that have already been launched,” Harry said.

“I cannot,” Sterns reported.

The Avengers in the room stared at each other.

“Why not?” Harry demanded.

“They were programmed to not receive any radio transmissions once they had been launched,” Stern replied.

“Where are they headed? What’s their targets?” Steve demanded.

Harry was forced to push a little extra magic into the spell to ensure that Sterns answered.


“What’s their payload? How much damage can they do?” Tony asked.

“Each ICBM is equipped with thirty-five cruise missiles with a high-yield ‘Phase Two’ battery mounted behind modified repular technology. The missiles will launch five kilometres from their target. I have calculated that an area in excess of seventy-five square kilometres will be decimated in the explosion,” Stern replied, still in that dead, clinical tone.

“He’s created a sup-ed up Jericho missile,” Tony breathed, taking a couple of staggering steps backwards.

“That’s big enough to wipe the island of Manhattan off of the map,” Steve near-growled.

“And then some,” Bobbi added.

“Can we stop the weapons?” Thor asked.

“Not from here,” Tony replied, “you heard him. We’d have to physically catch them and try to redirect them on the fly. And, to be honest, I don’t know if we can.”

“Tony, get in your suit,” Harry ordered.

Dropping the imperius, Harry flicked his wand at Sterns, dropping him back into unconsciousness. A pair of pens caught his eye and he summoned them to himself with his off-hand. A quick tap of his wand to each pen turned them into porkeys.

“Tony, Steve, you two deal with the second one; Thor and I’ll deal with the one headed for New York,” Harry said.

“How are we supposed to do that?” Steve asked.

“Both of you hold on tight to this,” Harry said, tossing one of the pens to Steve.

At the same time, Harry held out the second pen for Thor to grab hold of the end of. As soon as he noted that the other two were ready, Harry nodded.

“Activate!” he said, and the four disappeared in a multicoloured swirl of colours.
Steve and Tony landed hard and stumbled away from each other. It was only by a great force of will that Steve even managed to keep his lunch down, although he did need to take a number of deep breaths, his hands on his knees as he did so.

“What was that?” he asked.

Tony was currently patting his armour down.

“Well, how about that? No real damage, those magic counters must really be working,” Tony was saying.

“Tony?” Steve asked.

“Hey, look! Magic Man sent us to the quinjet,” Tony said. “Although this isn’t the one that we came in on. Actually, it’s better! Come on!”

Not bothering to waste his breathe, Steve righted himself and jogged up the quinjet’s ramp.

Thor landed as easily as stepping from the rainbow bridge and looked around.

“We are at the Tower?” he asked.

“Yep. Figured that there was no way we’d be able to catch the ICBM. The next best thing was to get ahead of it and make our way back towards it,” Harry replied.

“A sound strategy,” Thor nodded.


“Are you on the Tower’s roof?” Bucky asked incredulously.

“Which way’s the ICBM coming in?” Harry asked, ignoring the question and pulling his shrunken broom from one of the pockets on his belt.

“South-south-east,” Bucky replied.

“Track us,” Harry commanded. “Let us know when we’re close.”

“Roger,” Bucky replied

With a swirl of his hammer, Thor rocketed into the sky, Harry on his Lightning Bolt right beside him.

“Give me everything that you’ve got,” Tony said.

The sudden acceleration was enough to have Steve quickly grabbing a hold of a convenient handle to steady himself. The fact that several crates and a number of loose objects tumbled backwards told him just how fast the quinjet was going.

Plucking his shield from his back, Steve wedged it into the nearest nook before pulling himself
forward and into the co-pilot’s seat. A look at their speed had him raising his eyebrows.

“I didn’t know that quinjets could go that fast,” he commented.

Tony didn’t even spare him a glance, instead being completely fixated on the holographic display projected onto the windsreen.

“Ordinarily, they can’t,” Tony explained. “But this one’s different. It’s been modified to go into space, thus the need for a few extra bells and whistles, including a super-charged engine to help us reach speeds that would get us out of the planet’s gravity well.”

The two travelled in near silence then for a number of minutes. Thankfully, the quinjet could hit its top speed straight from the get-go, whereas the ICBM had to work its way up to its top speed. That, combined with the fact that this second one, the one that they were chasing, didn’t have much of a head start before they’d begun their chase, meant that they were quickly closing in on their quarry.

“So, what’s the plan?” Steve asked.

“We can’t simply shoot that thing out the sky, not without killing ourselves in the process,” Tony replied. “Nor can we allow it to hit the ground.”

“No, the fallout could kill thousands, let alone the millions if it hit D.C.,” Steve agreed.

“So, I thought that we’d take it for a little jaunt to see the stars,” Tony replied. “Yes, I know that night’s already falling and the stars are starting to appear, but something like that really deserves a much closer look, don’t you agree?”

“You’re not seriously thinking of carrying that thing on our back, are you?” Steve asked.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Tony replied, glancing at his companion. “The quinjet’s equipped with a grappling line with an electromagnet to catch stray metal. We’ll use that and simply tow it up into space.”

Steve opened his mouth to voice the obvious concern but simply closed it again, carefully refraining from shaking his head. If Tony wasn’t going to mention the fact that hitting the ICBM with a cable had the potential of setting the thing off, then he saw no reason to either.

“Thar she blows,” Tony stated.

And there it was. The long, grey cylinder would have been hard to miss in the dying light if it wasn’t for the great plume of fire pushing it along.

Tony manoeuvred the quinjet up and over the ICBM, their speeds so close now that it took minutes for them to inch their way past it. As they started to pull ahead, Tony’s hand began hovering over one particular switch.


With that, Tony flicked the switch.

A soft *whump* sounded from the underside of the quinjet.

“We have a lock!” Tony exclaimed and the two shared a grin. “Now, let’s ease her up and away.”

Pulling back on the wheel, the quinjet’s nose began to climb and more and more stars hove into view. Somewhat expectedly, the quinjet shuddered when the cable reached its maximum length and
it took Steve adding his efforts at the wheel from the co-pilot’s station before the quinjet finally managed to overcome the ICBMs programmed trajectory and to pull the thing up and away from the Earth below.

As the atmosphere thinned, the black of space began to dominate. Pinpricks of stars blossomed everywhere, except for where the waxing moon filled the view before them.

“I’m calculating a trajectory to make sure this thing doesn’t end up caught in the gravity well and fall back to Earth,” Tony said.

“See if you can aim it towards the sun,” Steve suggested. “It shouldn’t cause any harm out that way.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Tony replied.

The quinjet continued its ascent, passing the point that Steve would have expected gravity to disappear, when it didn’t, he assumed that that had something to do with Tony’s ‘bells and whistles’ that he’d mentioned earlier.

“Sir, as requested, I have been conducting the diagnostic tests on the new systems during our first space flight,” Jarvis announced.

“That’s good,” Tony replied, but it didn’t sound as though he was paying a great deal of attention.

“I have detected an unknown emission coming from the moon,” Jarvis continued.

“Probably some old rover or satellite,” Tony commented. “Log it and I’ll look at it later. Right, think I’ve got it. Releasing the grappler in three, two, one.”

After flicking the switch, Tony and Steve watched and waited. And then they saw it, the ICBM sailing away from underneath them, headed away from Earth into the safety of the depths of space.

“Well, that’s done; probably not the time to do some sightseeing either, I’m guessing. Jarvis, plot our course home,” Tony said with a satisfied smile on his face.

Harry had never pushed his broom this fast before. Come to that, he’d never pushed any broom this fast before. Or for this long. Oh, sure, way back when when he was still in Hogwarts and playing Seeker, he’d played quidditch games that lasted for hours but then, it’d simply been a lot of slow to mid-level flying punctuated by a rapid chase at the end. This, though, this was a full our race after a long, long day and Harry was getting tired.

Reaching into his belt pocket, he plucked out a pepper-up potion, pulled the cork with his teeth and slugged it back. Ordinarily, he knew, such a potion usually produced steam from one’s ears; whether or not it did this time was lost to Harry. Especially as the red flames of the ICBM appeared on the horizon, rapidly closing on them.

Seeing it coming, Harry spun his broom around and rocketed off away from it. There was no way that he’d be able to catch something coming that fast in the ordinary way. Instead, he intended to ‘reduce’ its relative speed by having it gain on him.

Twisting his head, he watched as it approached from behind. Slightly adjusting his grip, Harry lined himself up. He knew that he’d only get one shot at this. He’d already applied the sticking charm to his feet – the next thing that they touched, they’d stick to. A bubble-head charm took care of the rushing wind, allowing him to breath.
And then the nose of the ICBM appeared underneath him, moving up fast.

Immediately, Harry dropped down on top the thing, his shoes gripping as expected. Unfortunately, he hadn’t thought about his broom being stuck between his legs. There was simply no time to shrink it or do anything with it. Instead, he simply let it go. The Lightning Bolt whipped out past his legs, whether to be burnt up in the rocket’s fire or lost forever below, he knew not which.

An extra sticking charm aimed at his off-hand gave Harry a little extra purchase, especially when he got his body down as close to the ICBM as possible to eliminate as much wind drag as possible.

And then his wand went to work, blurring its charms and transfigurations in his haste to cast them.

An arresto momentum followed by a feather-light charm were his first choices. The fact that the wind seemed to die down a miniscule amount told him that he’d done something right.

The fuel, he knew, was somewhere beneath his body. A drilling charm produced a hole wide enough for him to get the tip of his wand into, albeit at an extremely awkward angle. And then it was transfiguration after transfiguration. As fast as he could, he changed the liquid fuel into simple water.

At first, nothing seemed to be happening. And then he felt it, the ICBM seemed to stutter in mid-flight. Twisting his head around, Harry saw the flames of the rocket die for a second before flaring back on. A second and third stutter, each one longer than the last, told him that the water was getting into the fuel line.

And then it happened.

The flames went out and didn’t come back on again. And without that constant forward thrust, the nose of the ICBM dipped downwards. Peering to the side, Harry saw that Thor was moving in, ready to do his part.

With that, Harry cast three last spells, finite incantatums, all aimed at where he was sticking to the missile. The wind whipped at him and he allowed it to pull him away.

As he tumbled through the air towards the ground far, far below, Harry focussed on keeping his wand clutched firmly in his hand and his mind conscious. After all, he still had to survive the drop and the only way to do that without his broom was to change into his sparrowhawk form once he got close enough to the ground.

The portkey landed Harry back in Brazil in the middle of Barracuda Base. He stumbled as it released him and he dropped to one knee. Pepper-ups were great at keeping one going, right up until the potion wore off and left you feeling like you could sleep for a week and Harry was very close to feeling that now.

“You’re back. How’d it go?” Natasha asked.

Harry nodded at her. “All taken care of.”

“Good. I’d hate to see how you’d look if you’d lost,” she replied.

Self-consciously, Harry ran a hand through his hair and sighed at finding that it was sticking up all over the place.

“You? You back? Only we need you over here,” Sam called over the comms. “Two of your
dragons are hurt pretty bad and they won’t let any of us near them.”

A nod of Natasha’s head towards her left told him which way to go.

“On my way,” Harry called.

It was dark here in the jungle valley and only the bulky shadows of the dragons told him were they were. Sam and Peter met him just the other side of Barracuda’s fence line.

“Osborn hit two of them with mini-missiles from his glider,” Sam reported when Harry joined them. “The biggest one got hit in the chest and the smallest one got hit in the side. That one’s bad. The blow-back tore up its wing membrane.”

“What happened to Osborn?” Harry asked as he strode towards the downed dragons.

“The last one grabbed him and bit him; pulled one of its fangs right out of its mouth,” Sam replied.

“So, he’s dead, then,” Harry stated.

“Nope,” Peter replied with a shake of his head. “Looks to be in a lot of pain though.”

Harry stopped and stared at the two.

“Osborn’s alive?” he asked incredulously. “Vipertooths are poisonous! Nothing and nobody survives long without the antidote after they’ve been bitten by one.”

“Well, Osborn has,” Peter replied. “Could be that suit of his. Tony thought that it had some sort of healing or regenerative ability to it.”

Harry shook his head and pushed Osborn from his mind – the dragons were the most important consideration at the moment. Flicking his wand, Harry produced a great ball of light and sent it hovering above the downed dragons.

“§Speaker§?” the uninjured dragon said, stepping forward between the approaching humans and the injured dragons.

“§I’m here. Will you let me pass? I’d like to see if I can help your friends§,” Harry asked.

The dragon lowered her head slightly.

“§You may. I will trust the two-legs with you as well§,” she said.

“§Thank you§,” Harry replied with a respectful nod and gathered the other two with a wave of his hand.

Harry’s first stop was the largest of the dragons, the male. He was currently resting with his four legs tucked under him, his wings furled up to his sides.

“§I came as soon as I could. Are you injured§?” Harry asked.

“§Speaker. It is nothing. Some pain in my chest. My mate was hurt more seriously by the two-leg§,” the dragon stated.

Just as Harry began to turn away, a darker splotch of colour under the dragon’s neck caught his eye. Lighting his wand, he stepped closer. A patch of thick dark red blood stood out in stark relief to the dragon’s copper skin. Stepping closer, Harry noted a cut, about a handbreadth wide.
“§You are hurt§!” Harry exclaimed. “§May I look closer§?”

“§As you wish, Speaker§,” the dragon replied.

Harry moved close enough to gently press a hand to the dragon’s hide beside the cut. Really, it was amazing that it was there at all; dragonhide was one of the thickest, hardest, most durable of all natural elements. As the dragon breathed, Harry’s hand shifted with the dragon’s chest and the feel of something akin to gravel rubbing had him cocking his head.

A broken bone? he wondered, not that Harry could confirm it, it wasn’t as though there was an x-ray machine around here.

And then he froze, his eyes widening. Quickly, he dug into one particular pocket on his belt until he pulled out a pair of fluorescent yellow glasses and quickly donned them.

“What are those?” Peter asked.

“ExpectaVision Goggles,” Harry replied. “My friend George created them. Let’s you see through things, right down to the bone.”

Aiming them at the dragon, Harry took a close look. The dragonhide itself was simply a dark blur but the cut, the cut was enough to let him see inside the dragon. Not much, mind you, but enough to see that there was a bone in there that definitely looked to be snapped in two.

Peeling off the glasses, Harry stepped back to think. If it had been a person with a broken bone, then some skelegrow would do the trick but he had no idea if that would work on a dragon. Thankfully, he knew someone who did.

“Sparrowhawk,” Harry said, activating his watch. “Call ‘Marauder’.”

It was a few minutes before a tussle-headed Teddy appeared in the holographic display projected above the watch.


“We’re fine; I’ll give you the details later,” Harry said. “Right now, I’ve got an emergency. I need you to put Hagrid on the line.”

“Hagrid?” a confused Teddy repeated. “What for? Never mind, you said that it was an emergency. There’s a problem, though.”

“What’s that?” Harry asked.

“It’s after curfew,” Teddy stated.

Harry blinked. He hadn’t realised how late it had gotten, not to mention the time difference.

“Sorry, Ted, I’m going to have to ask you to do it anyway. If anyone catches you, tell them that I made you do it, it’s an emergency and that it involves dragons.”

“Dragons?” Teddy near-yelped. “I know, you’ll tell me later. Don’t worry, I’ll get Hagrid for you. Give me ten minutes.”

The connection closed and Harry decided to check on the other dragon while he waited.

This dragon was lying on her side, her injured wing spread out on the grass and small noises that
could only be pain almost constantly rumbling from her throat.

“§May I look at where you’re hurt§?” Harry asked.

The smallest movement of her head was his only answer, an answer that he took to be affirmative.

The wing looked horrible. Nearly two-thirds of the thin membrane between the wing bones had been burnt away, leaving scraps that flapped in the soft breeze. Checking her side where the missile obviously hit, judging by the blacked smudge in her bronze hide, Harry was thankful to find no cuts. Whether or not that meant that her bones were all intact or if there weren’t other internal injuries, was anyone’s guess.

“Uncle Harry?” Teddy’s voice said from his communicator watch.

Quickly, Harry activated it to see his godson’s worried face looking at him.


“I’m righ’ ’ere, ’Arry,” Hagrid’s booming voice said even as Teddy obviously angled the watch to show Harry’s oldest friend. “Right good to see ya, ’Arry. ’Mazing what those muggles can do, ain’t it, lettin’ us talk like this.”

“It’s good to see you, too, Hagrid,” Harry smiled. “Look, I’ve got a couple of injured dragons and I need your advice.”

“Dragons, ya say?” Hagrid said. “Young Teddy said as much. Wha’ kind do you ’ave there?”

“Peruvian Vipertoofths,” Harry replied.

“You’n be careful aroun’ them, ’Arry, them’s dangerous,” Hagrid warned.

“Not to me, Hagrid,” Harry replied. “I can understand them using parseltongue.”

Hagrid’s booming laugh from the communicator startled a small flock of birds in some nearby trees.

“Only you, ’Arry, only you. Tell me what’s wrong with ’em,” Hagrid said.

“The biggest one, the male, he was hit by a muggle weapon in the chest. It’s cut him and he’s got a broken bone,” Harry said. “If it was a person, I’d give him some skelegrow.”

“And ya wanna know if’n you can give it to yer dragon frien’,” Hagrid finished. “Well, it won’ do ’em any ’arm. Amazin’ healin’ powers dragons have but a little extra ’elp’s always nice.”

“How much should I give him?” Harry asked.

“’Ow much you got?” Hagrid asked.

“Six vials,” Harry replied.

“Well, considerin’ the size of ’im, I’d say give ’im the lot,” Hagrid advised.

“Good,” Harry said. “The other one, one of the females, was hit in the side. I think her bones and everything are okay, but it’s her wing. Here, take a look.”

With that, Harry turned his watch around so that Hagrid could see the dragon’s wing for himself. When he was sure that Hagrid would have had a chance to see it properly, he turned the
communicator back around.

“What do you think?” Harry asked anxiously.

Hagrid simply shook his head.

“That’s bad, ’Arry, I don’ know that it can be ’ealed at all,” Hagrid said sadly.

“What about phoenix tears?” Harry asked. “Would that work?”

“I don’ rightly know,” Hagrid said. “Can’t say that I’v ’eard of anyone usin’ phoenix tears on a dragon b’fore.”

“Is it worth a try?” Harry insisted.

“If’n you’ve got some handy an’ are willin’ to try, then I’d say ‘yes’,” Hagrid replied.

That was enough for Harry. Pulling out the special crystal vial, he moved closer to the injured wing and knelt down beside it. Ever so carefully, he pulled the stopper and tipped drop after drop near all of the major burn points. Twenty-nine drops was a lot to use on a dragon, but Harry thought nothing of it. These three had agreed to come and help him. Yes, for a price, but still. And if there was something, anything that he could do, then he was willing to do it.

At first, nothing seemed to happen. The absence of the dragon’s moans, though, was the first indication that it was, in fact, helping. And then, like the smallest of spider-webs, tiny filaments of wing membrane began to regenerate near the points that Harry had dropped the phoenix tears.

“It’s working, Hagrid!” Harry exclaimed. “It’s starting to grow back!”

“That’ great, ’Arry!” Hagrid boomed back. “Thank ya, thank ya for what yer doin’.”

“It’s my pleasure, Hagrid. Thank you for your advice,” Harry replied.

“Any time, ’Arry, any time,” Hagrid replied.

“I’ll call back in the morning and let you see how she’s doing,” Harry promised.

Then, after shutting off the communicator, Harry once more approached the largest of the dragons.

“§I have some medicine which I think will help you heal§,” Harry told the dragon.

“§Thank you, Speaker§,” the dragon replied and opened his mouth wide for Harry to pour vial after vial of potion into it for him.

“§Speaker? Your promise§?” the dragon asked.

“§I haven’t forgotten§,” Harry replied and glanced at the injured female. “§In the morning. Neither you nor your mate are in any shape to move right now. But I promise that in the morning I will fulfil my end of the bargain§.”

“§Thank you, Speaker. At first light, then§,” the dragon agreed.
Mopping Up

“How are they?”

Harry looked around from where he was kneeling beside the wing of the smallest of the three dragons to see a concerned and somewhat apprehensive Sam standing a little ways off.

“It’s alright, Sam, you can come closer, they won’t hurt you,” Harry reassured him. “And to answer your question, they’re doing alright, healing up nicely.”

“Glad to hear it,” Sam replied as he approached.

Harry was amazed that he was able to say it. The injuries, especially the one to the wing membranes of the smallest dragon, had been quite severe. Phoenix tears, however, seemed to do just as good a job of healing dragons as they did humans. Even Hagrid had agreed to that when Harry’d used Teddy to get him back on the line this morning and to show him how things had progressed overnight.

Whether or not the skele-grow had actually done anything to help the largest, the male, with his broken bone was hard to say. What was apparent was that the broken bone, as seen through the Expecta-Vision glasses was nothing more than a hair-line crack this morning.

“How are you well enough to travel, Speaker?”

“$We are well enough to travel, Speaker$?” the male asked.

“How are you well enough to travel, Speaker?”

“$We are prepared, Speaker$,” the dragon stated.

“I will,” Harry replied.

Glancing around, he found three large sticks and quickly retrieved them. Then it was a case of turning them into portkeys, including adding a touch of his Head of House Black ring to them as well to ensure that the wards would accept them. One by one, he then moved between the three dragons, giving them the sticks to grasp in their paw.

“Are you ready? This won’t be pleasant,” Harry warned.

“We are prepared, Speaker,” the male dragon stated.

Then, after a final nod, Harry said a single word.

“Activate.”

Instantly, the three dragons disappeared in a swirl of colour.

“Woah!” Sam said, taking an involuntary step backwards. “Where’d you send them? Back where you got them from?”

“No. That wasn’t the deal,” Harry replied with a headshake.

“Deal?” Sam questioned.

“Yeah,” Harry grinned. “In order to get them to come to fight for us, I had to agree to their terms.”
“What’d you have to give them? A pile of gold each? Only, I’ve heard that dragons like that sort of thing,” Sam said.

“Not quite,” Harry replied. “No, I’ve given them a new home on the island that I own, a place where they can be free to stretch their wings and fly whenever they wish and as far as they wish, without restrictions. A place where they can even have young if they so choose; because of overcrowding, the Reserve where I found them had made it so that each female dragon could only have a single egg hatch within their lifetime.”

“Not a bad deal, then,” Sam nodded.

“No, it’s not,” Harry agreed. “Especially when you add in the fact that I’ve only got a week to ensure that I send in large flocks and herds of cows, sheep, goats, llamas and alpacas to the island as well – at least a hundred of each.”

“That’s a lot of food for three dragons,” Sam commented. “How much do they eat anyway?”

“To be honest, I’m not sure,” Harry replied. “But they’ll fish as well and they’re smart enough to make sure that they don’t eat too many from each herds so that their food source can last for years.”

“This is S.H.I.E.L.D. Six One Six,” a voice stated over their comms, interrupting them. “We will be arriving at your position in twelve minutes.”

The small girl standing so very still was nearly missed by Bobbi. Only the fact that the girl was wearing brown in contrast to the blackened and scorched earth that surrounded her in all directions for at least twenty metres made her stand out.

As Bobbi approached, she made sure to step purposefully, to ensure that she could be heard, after all, she had no intention of sneaking up on the girl and startling her.

Doreen, she saw, had her big bushy tail wrapped around herself. Her head was bowed and her hands seemed to be moving automatically as she stroked her tail. High on Doreen’s shoulder, right where Bobbi expected him to be, rode a squirrel. It was only when she was within a few steps that Bobbi noticed the tear tracks that ran down Doreen’s face and the tears that dripped from her cheeks to splash to the ground.

“Doreen?” she asked carefully.

At first Bobbi didn’t think that the younger girl had heard her but finally, Doreen shifted her head slightly, just enough for her eyes to flick up and to take note of Bobbi’s presence.

“Doreen? Are you okay?” Bobbi asked, stepping closer.

And then Bobbi’s arms were suddenly full of the girl, Doreen having leapt the last small distance to wrap her arms around Bobbi’s middle and to hold on for what felt like dear life. As Bobbi returned the hug, she could feel Doreen shaking, her shoulders heaving and slowly the sound of her sobs getting louder and louder.

For a long time, Doreen cried and Bobbi simply held her, stroking her hair and making comforting sounds. The squirrel that’d been on Doreen’s shoulder caught Bobbi’s attention as it shifted about, trying to find a better place to perch. There was something … different about the animal.

“This … this is where … where it … happened,” Doreen eventually sobbed.
“Where what happened?” Bobbi asked, continuing her stroking of the girl’s hair.

“Where … where Monkey … where Monkey Joe … where Monkey Joe died!” and the last word come out in an agonised wail.

Once again Bobbi’s eyes flicked to the squirrel. Yes. She was sure now. This squirrel was different.

“Do you want to tell me what happened?” Bobbi asked gently.

A slight nod of Doreen’s head preceded the younger girl pushing away, giving a blubbery snort as she did so. Her arms came up to wipe away tears and snot leaving Doreen’s face looking a mess.

“We … we found one of the Sinister lot here,” Doreen began hesitantly.

Bobbi reached out and captured a hand and led Doreen across to sit on a blackened, burnt stump.

“Which one?” she asked.

“Kravinoff,” Bobbi snarled. “Monkey Joe was so very, very brave. He led all of our new friends against Kravinoff. But he used a net to catch them all and then he just … he just … electrocuted them!”

Once again, Doreen began crying and Bobbi pulled the younger girl in for a hug.

“That sounds incredibly brave,” Bobbi said. “Monkey Joe was a true Avenger.”

“He was, wasn’t he,” Doreen said through her sniffles.

“But I don’t think you were quite right, Doreen,” Bobbi said. “Not all of your squirrel friends are gone; you’ve still got one here.”

Bobbi’s words must have been just right, for it brought Doreen’s head up and around until she focussed on the squirrel clutching her pant’s leg. And then the two – girl and squirrel – began talking, at least, that’s what Bobbi took all of the chittering to be.

Finally, Doreen looked up at Bobbi with the smallest of smiles on her face, albeit through the last of her tears.

“This is Tippy,” Doreen introduced. “All of her family died when … when Monkey Joe did. She wants to stay with me. She can, can’t she?”

Seeing that hope in the young girl’s eyes, there was no way that Bobbi was going to say no.

“What would the Avengers be without a squirrel on the team?” she asked.

Steve, Clint and Natasha were waiting at the back of the great S.H.I.E.L.D. Globemaster III aircraft when the ramp descended. The three people that were already on the move before the ramp had touched down were neither unexpected nor unwelcome.


“Cap, it’s good to see you again,” Trip smiled, extending his hand.

“Looks like you had an interesting dust up here,” May commented.
“We like to keep things interesting,” Natasha replied with a shrug.

“I could have done without the ICBMs, though,” Clint added.

“ Heard about them,” May replied. “Your team did well to take them out of play before any civilian targets were hit.”

“I wouldn’t have complained about having to take a trip to space like Steve here did,” Clint said.

“Next time,” Steve replied, “when things are a little calmer.”

“It was Harry and Thor who took down the other one, wasn’t it?” Skye asked. “How are they?”

Nat and May shared a small indulgent smile.

“Thor went back to the Tower but Harry’s around her somewhere,” Clint replied. “The last I saw, he was off tending to the dragons.”

“Dragons?” Trip repeated disbelievingly. “You guys deal with the weirdest stuff.”

“Speaking of, I’m guessing that you’re here for some weird of your own?” Natasha asked.

“We’re here to facilitate a prisoner transfer,” May acknowledged.

“I’m assuming the Project Sinister ones?” Steve asked and received a confirming nod. “Where are you taking them?”

“We’ll hold them for a few days until the new facility is ready,” May replied.

“New facility?” Clint asked, sounding intrigued.

“It’s called: The Raft. It’s being rushed into service specially to handle your Sinister group. State of the art security that includes the fact that it’s completely submersible and can move about underwater,” May replied.

“No fixed location makes it harder to track and break out of. Or into,” Skye stated.

“I understand that you should have eight prisoners for us,” Trip said.

“Should, yes. Do, no,” Clint replied. “We’ve only got five. Three of them – Octavius, Meyers and Shultz – were killed by ‘friendly fire’ when they decided to bomb the surrounding jungle trying to get us.”

“They’re all suitably restrained,” Steve stated as he fished out a small vial from one of the pockets of his uniform. “Here. You may want this. Harry used something called the ‘Draught of Living Death’ on Blonsky. You’ll need that to revive him again.”

“Um, exactly why would we want to revive the Abomination?” Skye asked, her hand half raised.

“Not our call,” May told her. “We’re simply the prisoner transport. We’ll pass this up the line in case the higher ups would prefer to use cryostasis on Blonsky again instead of a magic potion.”

“Also, Tony’s taken a look at Osborn’s suit,” Nat added. “It’s got a heap of medical components to it and he’s positive that it’s the only thing keeping the guy alive.”

“Right. Don’t take the suit off the bad guy unless we want to kill him,” Trip nodded.
“Any news on what’s happening to the rest of the bad guys we’ve got in secure rooms below this place,” Clint asked.

“As far as I understand, Fury and some people from the Brazilian military are due here soon,” May replied. “Our job is to get the big guys out of here before they arrive.”

“You wouldn’t happen to have seen a forklift or something lying around, have you?” Trip asked. “Only, I ain’t volunteering to move the Abomination all by myself.”

“No, no forklift,” Steve smiled. “We do, however, have a Hulk who’d be more than happy to drag him out for you.”


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“Hey you,” Skye said into his ear, her hands resting lightly on his shoulders.

“Skye,” Harry smiled, looking around at her from where he sat. “I was hoping that you were here.”

“You were?” she asked, the corners of her mouth turned up.

“Of course,” Harry replied.

Looking back at what he was doing, he plucked up the envelope that he’d found in one of the offices and stuffed the folded piece of paper that he’d just finished writing on inside. A tap of his wand sealed it, only to be opened by the correct person. Taking up the pen once more, Harry addressed the envelope and then held it out to Skye.

“What’s this?” she asked, taking it and reading the front. “Director Coulson?”

“When you get back to your Base, I’d like you to give that to him,” Harry said. “And make sure that he reads out the part that’s underlined to you. Oh, and you’re going to need this. Make sure that you’re holding it when you give him the letter.”

Skye looked down at the smooth stone in her hand, confused.

“A rock?” she asked. “That’s not weird at all.”

Harry shrugged at her. “I’ll explain the next time I see you.”

“And how long will I have to wait for that?” Skye asked playfully.

“That’s for me to know and for you to wait and see,” Harry replied with a lop-sided grin.

“Clint mentioned something about ‘dragons’?” Skye asked, changing the topic even as she slipped the letter and stone into her pockets. “I’m thinking that there’s one doozy of a story there and you, Sir and going to tell me everything.”


“Dragons, Magic Man,” Skye replied, tapping Harry on the chest. “Start talking or I’ll have to use some of those ninja-y interrogation skills that May’s been teaching me on you.”

Harry held up both hands in surrender.

“No! Anything but that,” he laughed. “Alright, but this could take a while.”
“Good,” Skye replied, settling herself on a chair and pulling it over close to Harry. “Now, let’s hear it.”

“Well, you see, we needed a distraction …” Harry began.

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The sound of three helicopters approaching had Tony stepping into his armour, just in case. The fact that all three made a direct approach with seemingly no hidden agendas or threatening moves meant that he was content to power down his repulsars.

Even before the blades stopped whirling on the first chopper that landed, its rear door was sliding open and a man was stepping out. The fact that the man was sporting a long, black, leather trench coat, a gun on his thigh, was bald and had an eyepatch had Tony stepping back out of his armour and instructing it to remain on ‘sentry’ mode.

“Fury,” Tony greeted.

“Stark,” Fury replied. “Looks like you’ve been having fun.”

“Well, you know, gotta find amusement where you can,” Tony replied.

“You seem to be missing a few people,” Fury remarked.

Exactly how Fury even knew that was beyond Tony, especially considering that they could simply be on one of the lower levels of Barracuda Base. Still, Tony decided to ignore that and answer the man.

“Rhodey and Wilson have gone off to retrieve the quinjets; Thor’s back at the Tower and Harry popped out of here not long after your S.H.I.E.L.D. plane took off,” he said.

“It’s not my plane,” Fury retorted.

Tony simply shrugged. Agent might be Director now, but there was no doubt in Tony’s mind that the unassuming man still reported to Fury in some way, shape or form.

“So, you here for the men, weapons or both?” Tony asked.

“You know that they have Phase Two weapons here,” an intense Steve accused as he strode up.

“Makes sense,” Fury shrugged. “HYDRA got into all of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s files. It wouldn’t have been hard for them to recreate some of those weapons, especially if they’re using Loki’s Staff as some sort of power source. That was the conclusion that you came to after that little hoo-har down in Australia, wasn’t it?”

“I won’t bother asking how you know that,” Tony said.

“It was,” Steve said, answering the question. “Those batteries that we saw there were definitely powered by something related to the Tesseract. Loki’s Staff is the only thing that matches.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got my people on the look out for it, too,” Fury reassured them.

Tony and Steve nodded in thanks.
“Anything else here that I should know about?” Fury asked.

“Just the usual,” Tony shrugged. “Oh, and the three ICBMs in the basement, I suppose. Those come with some lovely extras – thirty-five cruise missiles with high-yield ‘Phase Two’ batteries mounted behind modified regular technology inside each ICBM.”

Fury whistled in apparent appreciation.

“In that case, I’m glad your team was on hand to stop the two birds that got into the air,” Fury said.

“We aim to please,” Tony replied. “Where should we send the bill?”

Fury, of course, ignored him.

“The Brazilian military will be here within two hours to take charge of the Base and to deal with the prisoners. We’ve got until then to get rid of anything we don’t want them to have.”

Tony deliberately looked towards the helicopters.

“I know that they won’t carry ICBMs,” Fury said, sounding annoyed that he had to say it. “I’ve got something much more appropriate in bound.”

“Good,” Steve nodded.

Teddy had had an incredibly restless night, a situation that hadn’t been helped by his Uncle Harry waking him not long after he’d gone to sleep so that Teddy could facilitate a conversation between Harry and Hagrid of all people. The fact that that conversation revolved around some injured dragons had had Teddy’s mind working overtime. After all, if dragons had been injured – not that he’d been able to work out why dragons had been involved in the battle in the first place – then the odds of his friends being injured was incredibly high.

Teddy’d wanted to ask questions, to find out what had happened and how everyone was but Harry had simply been too busy to answer them. Even getting the basics of ‘everyone’s fine, there’s no need to worry’ hadn’t helped or satisfied.

All through the night, Teddy’d consoled himself with the knowledge that his Uncle Harry was due to call back the next morning so that Hagrid could ‘see’ the dragon’s injuries again. Then, Teddy was sure, he’d finally get to hear the whole story. Unfortunately, that wasn’t to be. Apparently, there was still work to be done in Brazil and Harry didn’t quite have the time just then to have a decent conversation. Oh, he’d promised that they’d have it that evening, but Teddy simply didn’t think that he could wait that long.

But amongst all of his friends who had gone into battle, there was one who Teddy was most concerned about and he was sure that she, at least, would always make time for him.

“Connect to Squirrel Girl,” Teddy instructed his communicator watch after activating it.

It took very little time at all before the holographic display lit up with Doreen’s face. What shocked Teddy, though, was how her eyes were all puffy and blotchy and red. If one looked close enough, and Teddy definitely was, it was even possible to make out the dried trails of tears that had run down her cheeks.

“Oh, Ted, it’s so good to see you,” Doreen replied with an obvious attempt at smiling. “No, I’m not hurt, I’m okay.”

“But you’ve been crying!” Teddy protested. “What’s wrong? Did something happen to one of the others?”

“It’s … it’s Monkey Joe,” Doreen said, her voice breaking. “He … he didn’t make it. He was killed.”

“No! No! Not Monkey Joe,” Teddy exclaimed, fervently wishing that he was with her so that he could give her the great hug that she seemed to need. “What happened?”

“We came up against one of the bad guys,” Doreen explained. “Monkey Joe and the squirrel friends that I’d made tried to stop him but he … but he simply electrocuted them, killed them all.”

“Oh, Merlin, no!” Teddy said, shaking his head. “I’m so sorry, Doreen. How are you holding up?”

Doreen shrugged. “Okay, I guess. I don’t think it ever really sunk in before that people, one of us, could get hurt or … or killed.”

Teddy nodded. He knew first hand what war, what battles could do. His parents had both died here in this very castle that he was currently sitting in in the last big battle of the war. But even then, he’d been a baby and, while he knew it intellectually, having Monkey Joe, someone, well, a squirrel that he knew, killed really drove that point home.

“I know what you mean,” Teddy said. “Was Monkey Joe the only one hurt?”

“Yeah,” Doreen replied. “Well, a few cuts and bumps and bruises, but otherwise, yeah, everyone’s fine. I don’t know how, though. It was insane, Ted. There were hundreds of men with guns that we had to fight through. And then they began bombing the jungle with missiles and we had to pull back. If it hadn’t of been for Harry bringing those dragons to distract them, I’m not sure how we would have won.”

“I’d heard that there were dragons,” Teddy smiled. “You’ve got to tell me about it? Where’d Uncle Harry find them?”

“I don’t know,” Doreen replied, shaking her head. “He just popped away for a bit and when he came back, there were these three dragons flying with him.”

“At least you guys won, that’s something,” Teddy smiled encouragingly.

“Yeah. And I did make a new friend,” Doreen said. She turned away for a moment and the next thing that Teddy saw was a squirrel sitting high on Doreen’s shoulder. “This is Tippy. Her family died, too, at the same time that Monkey Joe did, so she’s going to come home with me.”

“She looks nice,” Teddy said, not that he could really tell, with Tippy being a squirrel, but it seemed the right thing to say.

“She is,” Doreen smiled.

“I miss you, Doreen, I wish I was with you,” he said.

“I miss you, too, Ted,” she replied.

A sound at Doreen’s end had her turning away for a moment.
“Looks like we’re going to have to cut this short,” she said. “Bobbi just called; we’re ready to board the quinjets and head home. Can I call you back tonight?”


She blew him a kiss then before shutting down the communication.

Teddy dropped his head. Monkey Joe had died. But at least everyone else was alright. Now he just had to make it through the day until he could talk to Doreen and Uncle Harry again and to finally hear the whole story of what had happened in Brazil.

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The sound of footsteps almost made Daphne look up. But really, there was no need. Not only did she recognise the footsteps (having heard them so much these past months), but she’d been expecting them, especially after everything that had happened the day before. The only surprise was that he hadn’t confronted her over breakfast or first thing that morning.

“Daphne,” Bucky said from just inside the door to her office where he’d stopped.

She looked up at him, evaluating what she saw.

He was standing straight and had even shaved that morning. His hair, while still long, was combed and tied neatly back behind his head. And while there was a hint of nervousness about him – something that she could now recognise, although she doubted anyone other than perhaps Steve would – he appeared confident and sure of himself.

Laying aside her quill, she motioned him forward.

“Come in, James,” she said. “Take a seat.”

She waited until he was seated before beginning the conversation that she knew that he was here for.

“What is it that I can do for you?” she asked.

Bucky’s eyes met hers unerringly even as he leant forward, highlighting how important this was to him.

“It’s about yesterday,” he began. “I don’t think that I can take another day like that. Being in ops was fine, it helped out the team, but that’s not who I am. I’m a soldier. Even before HYDRA messed with my mind, I was a soldier. I need to be out there, making a difference, fighting the good fight.”

“Do you think that you’re ready for that?” Daphne asked.

Bucky dropped his head for a moment, looking at his clasped hands before his head snapped back up and he sought her eyes once more.

“Yes. I think I am,” he said. “I know that there’s still stuff that we’ve got to work on, bits of me that I still need to find, to rediscover again but I feel as though I’m ready to get out there, to re-join the world, to do my bit again outside the walls of this Tower. To make up for all the horrors that I did when I was brainwashed.”

Daphne sat back in her seat and looked at him. Yes, he’d been her patient for a long time now and it was true that they’d made remarkable progress. He’d been diligent in working with her. Oh, they’d had set backs and times where he’d gotten angry and frustrated, but even that had been good. He’d
needed to know that he could release his emotions in a safe place with someone that he could trust. And he did, indeed, trust her, that much was obvious. It would have been a simple matter for him to simply walk out and never look back or to insist on going on missions with the others. Instead, he’d followed her guidance without complaint.

“You’re right, you are ready,” she said and smiled at the startled expression on his face.

“I am?” Bucky asked.

“Yes, James, you are,” Daphne smiled and held up one hand. “I’m not saying that we don’t still have work to do and I’d like to insist that we continue our sessions …”

“Of course,” he said quickly. “And I’d have to be really messed up not to want to spend time with the most beautiful woman in the Tower.”

Daphne ignored the statement as best she could. As flattering as it was, she simply would not allow herself to fall for his charms while he was still her patient.

“But if you agree to those terms, then I would be amenable to agreeing to your joining the others on missions,” she continued. “Or even simply going on outings outside the Tower. Something that you may want to think about is the … code name that you will use. Being the ‘Winter Soldier’ is very ingrained in your mind in relation to your work with HYDRA. Changing that code name would be very beneficial in helping you divorce yourself from what you used to do and what you will be doing with the Avengers.”

Bucky slowly nodded his head.

“I’ll think about it,” he said before breaking out into a wide smile. “Thanks, Daphne and since I’m now allowed out of the Tower, I’d be honoured if you’d accompany me on a walk through Central Park later this afternoon.”

“It would be my pleasure,” she smiled.
The knock at the door had Phil glancing through the holograms hovering around him, across his office to see the shadowy shapes stationed on the other side of the frosted glass. Recognising both shapes, he pinched his fingers together, closing the file that he’d been frowning at. A swipe of his hand closed the entire filing system. Two strides across to his desk was enough for him to be able to tap the top of Fury’s Toolbox, sinking it into its protective housing inside his desk.

Only then did Phil face his door and invite his guests in.

At his call, two women strode in, May in the lead. Her piercing eyes spoke volumes; at least, they did in this instance because she was checking up on him. Swallowing his annoyance, Phil gave a small, almost imperceptible shake of his head. That, at least, was enough to cause May to relax, or at least, as relaxed as May ever got.

“You’re back,” Phil stated the obvious. “How’d it go?”

“The five surviving members of Project Sinister are tucked away on The Raft,” May related. “They’re not going anywhere.”

“Except to the Northern Atlantic,” Skye interjected. “At least, that was the last trajectory that we had of the Raft before we lost contact with it.”

“Our involvement?” Phil asked.

“Remains unknown,” May finished. “I used some contacts as intermediaries to ferry the group from the Bus to the Raft.”

“While shadowing them the whole way,” Phil guessed.

May’s nonplussed look was enough to tell Phil that she had no idea why he’d even assumed anything different.

“Yep, Ross has no clue that we were involved at all,” Skye agreed happily.

Phil shook his head. “How Thaddeus Ross ended up as US Secretary of State I can’t fathom. Especially after all that he did to Banner and the Hulk.”

“Our is not to reason why, just to follow orders?” Skye half-stated, half-asked.

Phil nodded at her statement before stopping as she pulled out a crumpled envelope and held it out in his direction.

“We’re receiving letters now?” Phil asked curiously.

“Yep,” Skye replied. “At least, you are. It’s from Harry.”

Phil’s eyebrows rose in surprise and he shot a look at May. The slight raise of her shoulder told him that she had no idea about it either.

Taking the envelope, Phil turned it over. Apart from his name scrawled on the front, there was no indication about what it contained. As he slipped his finger under the seal, he felt a brief tingling sensation. Instantly, Phil froze. Barely half a second later, it’d disappeared. There’d simply been a sensation; it hadn’t hurt at all. When it didn’t repeat, he concluded that it was some magical security
system to ensure that the correct person was opening the letter. With that, he finished the task and fished out a single piece of paper.

“Well, what’s it say?” an impatient Skye asked as Phil began reading it a second time, his brows furrowed as he tried to understand the point of the letter.

Glancing up at her, Phil blinked.

“Why do you have a stone, Skye?” Phil asked lightly, his eyes focussing in on her hands which were indeed turning a stone over and over again.

Her response started with a shrug.

“Dunno. Harry told me that I needed to have it when you read the letter,” she said. “I was assuming that the letter would say, but judging by your question, I’m guessing the answer is ‘no’.”

“No,” Phil confirmed, “there’s no mention of a stone at all. Harry simply seems to be asking about S.H.I.E.L.D.’s policy on vacation time?”

He and May shared a look and he saw that his confusion in the letter was mirrored in her eyes.

“Hey! Wait. Did Harry underline anything in it?” Skye suddenly blurted. “He said something about you needing to read the underlined part out to me.”

Automatically, Phil’s eyes dropped to the paper in his hand.

“In fact, there is an underlined part,” he said slowly. “‘Everyone needs a vacation’.”

As the last syllable of the underlined phrase was uttered, a multicoloured light lit up the office. When Phil blinked the unexpected light out of his eyes, it was to see that his office was short one person.

“I’m guessing that Skye’s taking some vacation time,” May stated.

Phil could only nod absently.

“At least Harry asked. Sort of,” he said.

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The hard ground rushed up at Skye, jarring her legs as she landed. Even attempting to stay upright was impossible, as such, she fell, hard, landing on her stomach. With a groan, she lifted her head and blew at her hair, an action that did nothing to remove it from where it was stuck to her face.

As she rolled over, Skye’s hands went to her belly. Frantically, she patted it, even going as far as slipping them under her shirt. The fact that there was no feeling of stickiness or tears to her skin had her sighing in relief. That had been the most uncomfortable feeling that she’d ever had – the feeling of something like a hook grabbing at her behind her belly button and dragging her forward into nothingness, sending her …

Just as May had taught her, Skye quickly began analysing her surroundings, searching for potential danger.

She was lying on some type of path. Gravel, not concrete. To her left was a line of trees. They weren’t packed over tightly, but they were dense enough to scream ‘forest’ and an extremely good place for watchers to be concealed in. To her right was open grassland. A couple of hundred metres away on that side, the forest started up again. A sniper could be hidden in there, but at the moment it
was the lesser of the two potentially dangerous sides.

“Are you alright?” a concerned voice asked.

Tipping her head backwards, Skye blinked at exactly who she expected to see – the British accent was a dead giveaway.

“Harry?” she asked. “What’s going on? Where are we? Better yet, how’d I get here?”

Harry’s answering lop-sided grin was somewhat sheepish.

“We’re just outside of Los Angeles,” he replied, answering just one of her questions, she noted.

Accepting his outstretched hand, Skye allowed him to pull her to her feet.

“That’s where we are. Now how did I get here? I was just in A.C.’s office at the Playground … Wait. Let me guess. Magic, right?” she said, answering her own question.

“Got it in one,” Harry replied. “A portkey, to be precise.”

“That’s what this was?” she asked, flipping the rock that he’d given her back in Brazil up into the air only to catch it again.

“Well, it was the easiest way to get you here,” Harry shrugged.

“Wait! You *magicked* me right out of Coulson’s office! And May was there, too. They’re going to be freaking something chronic,” she fretted.

“No, they won’t,” Harry contradicted. “I did explain it in that letter that I asked you to give Phil, which, judging by the fact that you are here, he did in fact read.”

Skye frowned at him, trying to remember if A.C. had mentioned something about the fact that Harry was going to magic her away.

“No. No, I don’t think Coulson got that message,” Skye replied slowly. “He only said something about ‘vacations’?”

“Exactly!” Harry beamed at her. “I brought you here so you could have a holiday.”

“But I can’t take a holiday now!” Skye protested. “We’re swamped trying to rebuild S.H.I.E.L.D.”

Harry’s face fell and Skye instantly regretted her words.

“I’ll send you back if you want,” Harry said. “And you’re right, I should have asked you first. I guess I just got caught up with the idea of surprising you with showing you some magical creatures.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Skye said, holding up a hand. “Back the magic cart up there a second, Magic Man. Are you saying that there’s some magic animals around here somewhere?”

Instantly, Harry’s lop-sided smile was back.

“A whole Reserve of them, actually. Just around the bend in the path,” he said, pointing over her shoulder.

“Well, why didn’t you say so. I’ve been wanting to see these mythical creatures that you’ve been talking about for ages now,” Skye said, stepping forward and pivoting around to slip her hand
“Through his arm. ‘Let’s go, then.’”

“But what about Coulson and S.H.I.E.L.D.?” Harry asked, annoyingly refusing to move even with her tugging at his arm and lifting an eyebrow at him.

“You said that you explained,” Skye replied, waving off the objection. “And it’s not like little old me could do anything after being kidnapped by an Avenger. Now, take me to those magical animals of yours!”

Skye easily joined in with Harry’s laughter, her feet quickstepping to keep up with him as he began pulling her down the path.

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“What are we doing here, Harry?” Skye asked.

“If I recall correctly, you’re the one who’s been bugging me to take you to see some magical creatures. The Scamander Beast Reserve is full of them,” Harry replied.

Skye reached across with the hand that wasn’t holding Harry’s to lightly punch him in the arm.

“That’s not what I meant and you know it,” she stated.

Harry remained quiet while they walked towards the next enclosure, trying to determine the best way to answer.

Already, they’d spent a very pleasurable couple of hours meandering from enclosure to enclosure around the Reserve. And Skye’s reaction at every new animal had been priceless.

Her confusion at the sight of what she’d thought were Jack Russell terriers, turned into her wanting to rush straight in to play with them when she found out that, no, these were in fact crups, as evidenced by their forked tail. Harry had had to quickly grab her around the middle to stop her from entering and getting attacked, as crups were wont to do when they encountered muggles.

Skye’s jaw had simply dropped at her first sight of erumpents – a magical creature that looked similar to a rhinoceros but with a single horn that glowed with power.

She’d argued something fierce with Harry about whether the magicals had the right to keep the ‘dodos’ (‘diricawls’, Harry patiently corrected each and every time) from the rest of the world. To find a species that had been thought extinct for centuries alive and well and with the magical ability to disappear and reappear wherever and whenever it wanted was almost too much for the once conspiracy theorist to handle. In the end, she’d begrudgingly conceded that the dodo’s ‘extinction’ had been the non-magical’s first step in understanding that all animals should be protected and thus it was necessary to keep up the illusion.

And then there was the clabbert – a bizarre cross between a frog and a monkey. She’d taken one good hard look, swallowed, snapped a picture and walked away telling Harry that that was just too bizarre to stay around. Especially with its wide, smiling mouth of razor-sharp teeth pointed at her.

“I guess it all boils down to the fact that I needed to get away,” Harry finally replied. “And what better way to get away than a holiday.”

“And kidnapping me?” Skye asked, raising one eyebrow at him.

“I wanted some company?” Harry shrugged in reply.
“Not that I’m complaining or anything, ’cause believe me, I’m not. I’ve been waiting for you to take me some place like this for ever,” Skye said. “But why now? What’d you need to get away from? Was it what happened in Brazil?”

“Yes,” Harry replied before frowning. “Well, not most of it. The fighting, that I’ve done a lot of in my life. I know how to handle that. And getting to talk to the dragons was cool – never knew that I could do that.”

“You’ve got to show me some dragons,” Skye interrupted.

“I will,” Harry promised with a smile. “Before I send you back, even. No. What really got to me was that spell.”

He’d spat the last, disgust at himself, with what he’d done, welling up inside of him like bile up his throat.

“Spell? Which spell?” Skye asked, pulling on his hand to stop him and to turn him to face her.

Instead of answering immediately, Harry decided to try to justify the use of it. Whether he was saying it to her or to himself, he had no idea.

“Two of the ICBMs had been launched and there were another three programmed to go as well. Tony and Jarvis couldn’t break the encryption quickly enough to stop them. We were running out of time and there was only one person who could do something about it.”

“Sterns,” Skye guessed.

Harry nodded. “Sterns. I knew he wouldn’t help us. Not willingly at least. So, I used an Unforgivable on him.”

“Woah. I could hear the capitalisation in that,” Skye said, her eyes widening. “So, what’s an Unforgivable? I’m guessing it means what it says?”

“Yeah,” Harry replied, running a hand through his hair. “There’s three of them. The killing curse, the torture curse and … the imperius. That last one’s the one I used. Basically, when it’s used on another person, you take away their free will, you bend their will to your own and you can make them do whatever you want.”

“So, you used this spell on Sterns?” Skye clarified and he nodded, his eyes cast towards the ground. “Good.”

“What?” Harry near-yelped, snapping his head up, his eyes wide.

“Good,” Skye repeated emphatically. “It sounds to me as though you used this spell to make Sterns stop the other ICBMs from launching.”

When Harry simply nodded, she continued.

“Well, then, you did the right thing. You saved lives. Millions of lives, I’m guessing,” she stated. “That spell might be ‘Unforgivable’ but it was the only option.”

“Yeah, it was,” Harry agreed grudgingly.

“And it’s not like you go around using that spell all the time,” she said, to which he eagerly agreed. “Then what’s done is done. You used a tool in your arsenal that, while not a nice thing to use, was
used for good. It’s there if you need it and you hope to God that that day never arrives but if it does, then you use it again. Geez, I’m starting to sound like May.”

Harry stared at her. She had a point, he had to admit. And it really was only the second time in his life that he’d ever used that spell. And even then, it’d been for a good cause – to break in to Gringotts to collect the Cup from Bella’s vault.

“You good?” Skye asked.

“Yeah. I am. Well, maybe not completely, but I will be. Thanks, Skye,” he said.

“You’re welcome, Magic Man,” she replied. “Now, what on Earth are those?”

Harry turned around to see what she was staring so wide-eyed at.

Four black, skeletal-looking horses with great bat-like wings stood near the fence of the nearest enclosure.

“Theystrals,” Harry replied. “You can only see them if you’ve seen someone die. They might look scary but they’re really quite gentle creatures. Amazing sense of direction. I flew on one once, back when I was still at Hogwarts.”

“You rode that?” Skye asked sceptically.

“Sure,” Harry smiled. “At least I could see them. Some of the others with me couldn’t see them at all. The last time that I was here, one had managed to escape its enclosure and I helped find him and bring him home.”

Suddenly, Harry’s eyes widened. He could have slapped himself for not making the connection earlier. While he’d been searching through the forest for the misplaced thestral, he’d seen a girl feeding a group of squirrels. Now that he knew her so well, there was no doubt in his mind that that day, he’d seen Doreen out with her friends. He’d have to mention it to her once he got home.

“Come on,” Harry said, tugging on Skye’s hand. “Let’s go say ‘hello’. I’m sure that they’ll let you pat them.”

Skye gave him an extremely dubious look but even still, she allowed herself to be pulled across towards the thestral enclosure.

She’d seen him flying before – both on his broom and as a merlin, a falcon of all things and didn’t that still blow her mind? But seeing him whip past again, his laughter reaching her ears and his broad grin flashing at her on his face showed just how much he was in his element. Kinda like she was in front of a keyboard, she decided.

Harry’d offered to take him up with him on his brand new Lightning Bolt that they’d bought just the day before from one of the shops in what she likened to a magical mall, and, as much as she’d wanted to take him up on it, she’d pushed him into going solo this first time. And after seeing his antics, flying high above the Rockies, Skye’d been extremely glad that she hadn’t decided to join him – mind you, having to hold on so tightly, feeling his deceptively muscled torso would definitely be a perk to having joined him.

Wrapping her arms around herself, the feeling of a silly grin on her face, Skye determined that the next time he came past, she’d be getting him to land so that she could jump on the back of that
broomstick with him.

Her eyes followed him as he shot higher and higher in the sky before he seemed to simply stop and begin tumbling end over end towards the ground. The next thing she knew, Harry’s broom was back between his legs and he was corkscrewing off around and around and around across the sky. How that man didn’t end up throwing up from dizziness, she had no idea. Corkscrews became loop-the-loops which became insane dives at the ground and figure eights and a whole host more of ridiculous, dangerous stunts.

Finally, after over half an hour of his antics, Harry glided in towards her. His hair, she noted, was even messier, more windswept than normal. He looked so happy, so carefree; it was almost as though she was seeing him relaxed and himself for the very first time.

“Right, Magic Man, time for me to ride your broomstick,” Skye said as Harry came to a hovering stop in front of her.

Harry’s face instantly took on a bright shade of red, his jaw dropped and the tip of his broom dipped dangerously towards the ground before it righted itself as though Harry’d almost lost control of it.

“What?” she asked.

“Um, let’s just say that that phrase has … other connotations amongst magicals,” Harry replied.

“Oh, really,” Skye said, taking an educated guess by his reaction exactly what that connotation was. Deciding to up the ante, Skye began sauntering towards him, emphasising the sway of her hips as she did so. “Perhaps we can … discuss it some more later.”

Seeing his blush deepen, she laughed, letting the teasing drop but not before she saw something in his eyes that suggested that he wasn’t completely averse to the idea.

“So, how do I do this?” Skye asked.

In reply, Harry slid forward and patted the spot just behind him.

In one fluid motion, she swung her leg over the broom, settled herself as comfortably as possible – which was much more comfortably than one would think sitting on a stick would be – and wrapped her arms around him.

“Hold on tight,” he advised.

“Wasn’t going to do anything else,” she smiled into his back, her cheek pressed into his shoulder. “But stick to the mild stuff, huh? None of that fancy flying you were just doing.”

“Your wish is my command,” Harry replied.

And then, almost before she was ready, the broom shot forward and up and Skye couldn’t help but yell in glee.

ooo00ooo

“This past week has been amazing but you know that I’m going to have to get back soon, don’t you?” Skye asked as she leant against Harry’s shoulder.

Currently, the two were seated near the edge of the great canyon, watching the setting sun and the beautiful colours that it was producing both in the sky and on the ground.
“Is there something that you have to rush back for?” Harry asked, with one eyebrow raised.

Skye sighed. “I’d love to be able to say ‘no’, but that’s just not the case. Putting S.H.I.E.L.D. back together is a full-time job for everyone and there simply isn’t enough of us to get everything done as quickly as we want. Not to mention that Coulson’s given me a special assignment and I simply have no clue how to find the answers.”

“Anything that I can help with?” Harry asked.

Automatically, she was about to say ‘no’ – secrecy and all that – but then she stopped to reconsider. At the heart of her assignment was the weird symbols that Coulson had her researching. Currently, their theory was that it was a kind of language, albeit like no language that she’d ever seen or heard of before. And right here was someone who had access to all kinds of different languages, a whole secret society of them.

“Actually, maybe there is,” Skye said.

Sitting up straighter, she shuffled over and used her hand to smooth out some dirt before beginning to draw some circles and lines, all interconnected.

“Have you ever seen anything like this before? Maybe some magical language or something?” she asked.

Harry appeared to intently study what she was drawing.

“It doesn’t look familiar,” he said slowly. “It’s definitely not gobbledegook, gnomish or dwarven. And it doesn’t look like any of the runic languages that I used to see Hermione studying. I don’t think it’s magical. Are you sure that it’s a language?”

“That’s our current theory but I’m starting to think that maybe it’s not. Not that I have a clue what it could be instead. Guess it’s back to the drawing board and more hours of research,” she sighed.

“I’m guessing that it’s important?” Harry asked.

“Well, Coulson seems obsessed with me finding out what it is,” Skye stated flatly.

“In that case, I guess that I’d better send you back. But not tonight. Maybe tomorrow night,” Harry said, “I’ve still got to introduce you to some dragons.”

“Glad to see that you’ve got your priorities straight,” she nodded before shuffling back until her leg was right up against his.

Harry’s torso twisted towards her, his near arm going behind her and his far hand reaching up to cup the side of his face.

“Well, I’ve been told that it’s always a good idea to keep your girl happy,” Harry smiled.

“Oh, so I’m your girl now, am I? Are you sure about that?” she asked, staring into his sparkling eyes.

“Actually, yes, I am,” he replied.

And then his lips were on hers, testing, tasting, nibbling. Her hand came up to run though his hair and she deepened the kiss.

It was sometime after the sun had finally set, when the temperature had started to drop that Harry finally pulled her to her feet, wrapped one arm around her and apparated them away.
Paradis Noir was coming along quite nicely. The goblins had worked wonders with the wards, upgrading them and, in conjunction with the Japanese techonomages, had even managed to incorporate the modifications that Harry’d requested. And the dwarven builders were right on track – the building and construction work was due to be finished within a few weeks.

After that, it’d be Harry’s task to modify the quinjets and any other muggle craft deemed appropriate to be able to access the island. The furniture and equipment would need to be portkeyed or ferried in and put in place to make the buildings comfortable and habitable.

A specially constructed fence had been added around the compound to limit the interaction between the magical creatures and the humans that would be coming to the island as well.

The three vipertooths, when Harry had talked to them with Skye looking on wide-eyed, had been more than accommodating – they’d primarily stick to their side of the island where they’d have the freedom to move about as much as they wanted and they’d leave the humans alone.

But right at that very moment, the island, to Harry, felt devoid of life. Of course, he reasoned, that would probably have something to do with the fact that he’d just said goodbye to Skye before activating the portkey that would take her back to S.H.I.E.L.D. H.Q. at the Playground.

Exactly how their new relationship was going to work, considering their jobs and the distance thing, was something that they were still working out. The pendant that Harry’d given her would at least help with that. It was a simple design really, but it was its 'special magical features' that had been enchanted into it, including a tracking spell so that Harry would always be able to find her and portkey to her side, that they really liked about it.

He supposed that he should really get back to New York. After all, most of his friends were there and he hadn’t seen them since Brazil. On second thought, he wasn’t sure how quickly he wanted to return – once they found out that he’d spent the last week with Skye, there was bound to be a fair bit of teasing, especially from the likes of Darcy, Sam and Tony.

Thinking about telling his friends about his new relationship status, had Harry pulling his phone from his pocket. Really, if his best friend ever found out that she hadn’t been the first one that he told, he’d never hear the end of it.

"Hello? Hermione Granger speaking," Hermione said after answering the phone on the fourth ring.

"Hey, Hermione, it’s Harry," he said.

"Harry?” a surprised sounding Hermione said. “It’s so good to hear your voice. Although I expected to hear from you a week ago. That is when you went off with the Avengers to do battle down in Brazil.”

“Yeah, sorry about that, I should have called,” Harry said quickly before she could really get going. “I needed to take a vacation.”

“A vacation? For how long?” Hermione asked suspiciously. “Only the last time you went on ‘vacation’, you were gone for five years.”

Harry laughed. “Just a vacation, Hermione, I promise. I’m heading home in an hour or so.”

“Really? Promise?” she asked.
“Really,” Harry replied. “I just needed to get away, to clear my head a bit.”

“Where’d you go?” Hermione asked.

“Los Angeles and the Rocky Mountains mostly,” Harry replied and then continued as casually as he could. “Skye came with me.”

“She did?” Hermione asked and Harry pictured her blinking at his unexpected news. “Somehow, I suspect that there’s a really good story there. Tell me everything.”

Harry couldn’t help but laugh as he launched into a retelling of his week. Well, most of it. Some of it he’d keep between just himself and Skye.
Unexpectedly, Gwen found herself shoved to the side. With her school bag slung over one shoulder, she found herself stumbling hard and it was all that she could do to stay on her feet instead of crashing to the sidewalk.

“Sorry!” Flash called absently as he and his mates pulled open the door to the Den and fought their way inside.

“You will be when I serve you last!” Gwen muttered angrily after him.

Finally, having regained her balance, and finding the way clear, she followed the jocks inside the Den. Knowing that she was running late for her shift, Gwen made a beeline for the far counter.

“Gwen!”

The unexpected voice had her skidding to a stop, a broad grin appearing on her face.

“Peter!” she exclaimed. “You’re back!”

And it wasn’t just Peter, either. In the far corner booth sat not only Peter but also Doreen and Jennifer. By the time that she’d weaved her way through the tables to get to them, Peter was on his feet. He caught her as she leapt at him and they kissed. It was hard and urgent, just like every time that Peter came back from one of his ‘missions’, as though they were trying to prove to each other that they were alright.

“Sit with us,” Peter said, his eyes sparkling at her as he pulled her towards the booth.

“I can’t, I’ve got a shift,” she sighed.

“Be late,” Peter insisted and then upped the ante. “I’ve got you an iced latte.”

Gwen’s eyes darted to the table to indeed see a tall glass filled with that delicious drink and she allowed herself to be pulled in beside her boyfriend.

“Okay, but only for a minute or so,” she said. “Harry’ll have my hide if I sit here all afternoon.”

“Don’t worry about Harry,” Doreen said. “He’s not here.”

Gwen blinked at the girl seated across from her.

“He’s not? Where is he?” she asked before leaning in and lowering her voice. “He didn’t get hurt, did he?”

“Nah, he’s fine,” Peter said. “He’s just gone off on vacation or something.”

“Whatever that means,” Jennifer chimed in.

“Vacation?” Gwen blinked. “But I thought you guys were off on a mission.”

“We were. To Brazil. Lots of bad guys there but we beat them. No, Harry took off after we’d won,” Peter summed up.

Gwen stared around the table, taking them all in. Brazil. She shook her head. Once upon a time, she
knew that her and Peter’s whole world was here in New York and at that, mostly in Queens. And before they moved here, Doreen and Jennifer had grown up in L.A. Now, though, they seemed to be constantly off on jaunts around the world.

Swallowing her envy at the sights that her friends were getting to see (but not at the danger that they constantly seemed to be in), Gwen focussed on living vicariously through them. At least until she was out of school and college so that she could start travelling, too.

“Brazil? What’s it like?” she asked.

“Apart from ‘jungly’, I’m not sure that we can answer that,” Peter replied. “It’s not like we were there to sightsee.”

“Oh, come on, surely you must have seen something interesting,” Gwen cajoled, not believing him.

“Well, there were the dragons,” Jennifer smirked.

“Yeah, but Harry had to go find them in Peru and bring them back,” Doreen countered.

Gwen could feel her eyes bug out and her jaw drop.


“Nope,” Peter assured her. “Three of them. All big and bronze and scaly and breathing fire!”

Gwen could only shake her head as she tried to wrap her brain around what she was being told. It seemed that the world wasn’t as simple as it used to be, that what she’d once known to be facts simply weren’t any more. But then, considering her present company – her boyfriend who could swing from webs and crawl up walls, one of her best friends who just happened to be part-squirrel and the normal-looking lawyer who could become seven feet tall and jade green at a thought – that wasn’t the world that she lived in any longer.

“I’m guessing with dragons on your side, taking down the bad guys was a walk in the park,” she stated offhandedly.

“Not really, no,” Jennifer replied flatly.

“The bad guys were all enhanced as well,” Peter clarified. “They had a lot of fire-power.”

Seeing how grim her companions had just become gave Gwen a sinking feeling.

“Who got hurt?” she asked, bracing herself for the worst.

“Monkey Joe,” Doreen whispered, her head dropping and tears starting to leak from her eyes.

Instantly, Gwen moved around to the other side of the table, nudging Doreen over to make room for her on the bench seat. Her arms went around the younger girl and she looked at Peter and Jennifer to fill in the blanks.

“Monkey Joe was incredibly brave,” Peter said. “He and some other squirrels tried to take on one of the bad guys. They … they didn’t make it.”

“Doreen did make a new friend there, though. Tippy,” Jennifer added.

“Tippy?” Gwen asked Doreen and felt her nod.
“Yeah. I’ll … I’ll introduce you later, if you like,” Doreen mumbled.

“I’d like that,” Gwen said, giving her an extra squeeze. She looked back up at the other two, then. “Anyone else?”

“A few bumps, bruises and scrapes,” Jennifer replied. “Nothing serious.”

“A couple of the dragons were hurt pretty bad, though,” Peter said. “Harry had to call Ted over in Scotland and talk to some expert to help get them healed.”

“Well, that’s good to hear,” Gwen said.

“Hey! Gwen! When are you gonna take our orders?” a loud voice called from the far side of the room.

Looking up, Gwen could see Flash and a number of his buddies staring across at her. On any other day, she would have been scampering towards them to do her job. But after the way that Flash had knocked into her right outside and now with a crying Doreen in her arms, she had no problems with making them wait.

Thankfully, though, Julie, one of the other workers, was in the process of coming out of the kitchen. Gwen nodded as she saw the other girl pick up a pad and pen and head towards Flash’s table.

For now, she was content to spend some more time with her friends.

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Iron Man shot across the sky, the repulsors in his boots on full. Behind him, at an ever increasing distance, was one of the Avengers’ quinjets.

While Iron Man would prefer to have as much hardware available to not only himself, but to the Avengers in general just in case anything happened and in case they were called into the field, the reality was that the Tower could only hold a single quinjet. Thus, the need to relocate their second one to a different location. Of course, the plan was for the Avengers to eventually have a full half dozen of them at their disposal, so a secondary facility was always on the books. At least, in Iron Man’s head.

As the map on the HUD inside his helmet flared green, Iron Man cut the power to his boots, amplifying his deceleration with the repulsors in his hand gauntlets. Hovering vertically above the property, Iron Man took it all in, comparing the reality of it now to the last time that he’d been here and even to the blueprints that he’d approved.

Once, this was a Stark Industries-owned piece of land. A hundred acres of prime real estate that had still been waiting for its time to shine. For the last couple dozen years, it’d simply been a storage facility, having ten warehouses of varying sizes built upon it.

Now, though, it was in the process of a complete overhaul. Of course, that hadn’t been able to be started until SI had ‘sold’ the property to the Avengers Initiative – a company that Tony had founded that also ensured that any and all marketed products with the Avengers image, name and likenesses paid royalty fees for their use. And hadn’t that turned into a nice little money spinner, not only for the Avengers as a whole, but also for each and every person on the roster, including the kids.

The perimeter fencing had already been finished being upgraded, according to the data that Jarvis was receiving and sending to the HUD. Four of the warehouses were currently in the process of being completely revamped, with one having already been completed; the others would eventually
have their turn as well.

The blueprints called for this to become a fully-operational, state of the art facility with dedicated science and engineering labs, training facilities, conference rooms galore – including one to hold press conferences in – accommodations and lounge areas, really, the whole nine yards, every bell and whistle that Tony and Jarvis could think of. And the one section that was already completed was the hanger bay, which was large enough to hold those half-dozen quinjets that Tony was envisioning.

Tony was still undecided if he wanted to invite Coulson and S.H.I.E.L.D. to set up shop there as well.

“The quinjet it approaching the facility,” Jarvis stated.

“You know where to park her,” Tony replied.

“Of course, Sir,” Jarvis replied.

With that, Iron Man shot forward, rocketing downwards at a steep angle, straight through the opening roof section of the hanger and landing on one knee. Straightening up, the Iron Man armour opened, allowing Tony to step out.

Turning back, he held up a finger to the armour. “Sentry mode.”

Instantly, the armour closed and the lights in the helmet came on. Tony watched, his eyes narrowed slightly as the armour walked itself away, its head pivoting from side to side. ‘Sentry Mode’ was still a new program that allowed Tony to focus on other things while Jarvis and the armour made sure that there weren’t any threats in the vicinity; so far, it seemed to be working perfectly.

By the time that the quinjet had landed and powered down, Tony had already brought the nearest computer station to life and was in the process of bringing up the various programs that would be needed.

“Hook into the quinjet’s diagnostics and download,” Tony instructed Jarvis.

Thereafter followed three hours of Tony and Jarvis going over every inch of the quinjet, checking and double checking every part of it. And there was a very good reason for that sort of intensive diagnostic check: this was the quinjet that had recently made its maiden voyage into space.

The heat-resistant plates that covered the quinjet had come through their assent and descent with full marks – not a one was even so much as scratched or cracked. The gravity plating that Tony had developed had come through remarkably well, simulating Earth-gravity with ease. And even though the flight had been extremely short, there was no indication that the gravity plating wouldn’t hold up to sustained usage.

In fact, every single system on the quinjet came through with flying colours.

“Looks like that’s everything,” Tony stated smugly. “She’s a testament to her maker – perfect in every way.”

“There is still the anomaly that the quinjet detected coming from the Moon,” Jarvis countered.

“Right, I remember that now.” Tony frowned. “I told you to log it, didn’t I?”

“Indeed, Sir. Shall I bring it up now?” Jarvis replied.
“Do it,” Tony replied.

Tony frowned at the data on the screen. Its frequency was unlike any that he’d ever seen before. Unfortunately, its duration – a bare two point six seconds – wasn’t quite enough to analyse it properly.

“Jarvis? What’s your take on it?” Tony asked.

“Inconclusive, Sir,” Jarvis replied. “There is insufficient data to determine anything more than that I have not encountered anything similar to it before. My search of other databanks has also turned up empty.”

“Could it be one of Harry’s lot?” Tony asked.

“I do not believe that to be the case,” Jarvis replied. “I am now familiar enough with magic to recognise its signature.”

“What about its point of origin?” Tony asked.

“The Luther Crater on the Moon,” Jarvis replied simply.

Tony’s fingers danced across the keyboard.

“I’m not seeing any reference to any human interaction at that location – man or machine,” Tony frowned. “And there’s nothing on the telescope images of the crater to indicate that it’s any different from the hundreds of others in that area.”

“I concur,” Jarvis stated.

“Well, without any more data, it looks like it’ll stay a mystery. And I hate mysteries,” Tony frowned. “We may have to make this quinjet’s next flight a mission to the Moon. Until then, see if you can direct one of the SI satellites or Veronica to keep an eye on the area.”

“Of course, Sir,” Jarvis said.

“Right. Looks like we’re done here. Lock it all down,” Tony instructed Jarvis before turning to find out where his armour had wandered off to.

ooo00ooo

“Hey! You’re back!” Darcy greeted Harry as he stepped out of the lift onto the main communal floor of Avengers Tower.

Her narrowed eyes and the way that she was staring at him had Harry pulling up short and attempting to shuffle around her.

“What?” he asked.

“You’ve been getting some,” Darcy smirked.

“What!” Harry yelped. “I have not!”

“Ha! Classic denial stage,” Darcy said, waving off his objections. “Well. Who is she?”

“Skye,” Sam interjected from where he sat on the lounge reading a magazine. “Bobbi heard from Coulson that Harry here magicked her right out of S.H.I.E.L.D. HQ for a ‘vacation’.”
“Ooh, nice, Potter!” Darcy smiled. “She’d definitely a looker.”

Harry’s mouth opened and closed as his brain tried to catch up with the conversation. He’d known that there was likely to be some sort of teasing from this lot but he hadn’t exactly come up with how he was going to respond yet. And now he wished that he’d taken the time to work it out.

“So, where’d you go? What’d you do?” Darcy asked, blinking her eyes at him.

“L.A., mostly. We visited a magical zoo,” Harry replied.

“Nice. Could have been better, though,” Darcy said, clearly evaluating him. “Please tell me you did something a bit more romantic than that.”

“We watched the sun set over the Rockies after she rode my broomstick,” Harry stated, and instantly wondered why he was defending himself to her.

“That’s more like it although I thought you said that you didn’t get any,” Lavender smirked from where she sat beside Pepper.

Harry’s head snapped around as he groaned; he hadn’t realised that she was there.

“It wasn’t like that!” Harry protested. “I bought a new broom and we tested it out.”

“Uh huh,” Lavender said. “You know that you’re not helping your case in the slightest, don’t you?”

“Come on, give the guy a break,” Steve interjected with a smile. “You know a gentleman never kisses and tells.”

“Oh, so there was kissing as well, was there? At least, I assume that there was kissing. There better have been kissing if there was all that other stuff as well,” Sam grinned.

“It’s good to see you, Steve,” Harry said, deciding to ignore the others and focus on the one person who seemed to be on his side.

“You, too, Harry,” Steve nodded.

“Anything important that I missed?” Harry asked.

“Nope. All quiet here,” Steve replied.

Harry let out the breath that he’d been holding. There was nothing here. And there’d been nothing at his apartment, either. Thank Merlin. He’d half expected to find a summons from the ICW waiting for him; after all, he had used an Unforgivable, one of the handful of spells that was punishable worldwide by law. Obviously, that part of Brazil wasn’t being monitored. Not that he had anything to feel guilty about it. At least, that’s what he was coming to believe, especially after talking with Skye about it.

“That’s good to hear,” Harry replied. “In that case, I think I’ll head home, it’s been a while since I’ve taken a shift at the Den.”

Walking as dignified as he could, Harry about faced and headed for the elevator, ignoring the sniggering that was coming from multiple directions, all aimed at him.

Maria Hill closed the line to her latest contact with a single tap of her finger to her earpiece. If she’d
been one to show more of her emotions – and she’d actually been using a physical phone – she would have been sorely tempted to either a) slam the phone down or b) scream in frustration.

That had been the fifteenth call that she’d made in the past hour and a half, all to various sources around the world. Some had been official, most of those to governmental spy agencies, others had been to underground contacts who more often than not, had other contacts that could get Maria any information that she wanted or needed.

Unfortunately, this time, every single phone call had ended the same way: no one had any new tips or leads or information that she could use. And it wasn’t as though the questions that she’d been asking was hard either. HYDRA, where are they? Where are their bases? What plans did they have in the works?

“They’ve gone to ground,” Maria stated, having turned at the sound of footsteps entering the command room and answering the unasked question. “What you guys did at Barracuda seems to have spooked the HYDRA leadership and sent them deeper into hiding.”

“That’s not all that surprising.” Steve commented. “The Avengers took on HYDRA’s answer to us and beat them convincingly. And they had a lot of back up with them.”

“What’d you expect?” Barnes asked. “Harry brought freaking dragons to the fight! I’ve seen a lot of stuff in my life – not that I can remember all of it yet – but I’ve never seen dragons. If I’d come up against an enemy with them on their side, I would have turned tail and run, too.”

“After you’d taken a couple of shots at them first,” Steve grinned.

Barnes laughed with him.

“Got that right! And what a souvenir that would have made,” he said.

“Dragon hide isn’t going to be hurt by your muggle bullets,” Daphne stated, having followed Barnes into the room.

“Osborn learnt that lesson the hard way,” Maria nodded.

Her last intelligence said that Osborn was still alive, although incredibly weak and ill. The doctors on the RAFT had overridden the security staff there, stating that Osborn’s suit and its advanced medical abilities was the only thing keeping him alive.

“Nothing from any of your contacts about HYDRA at all?” Steve clarified.

“Nothing,” Maria nodded. “Oh, Coulson did ask me to thank Harry for finally returning Skye to S.H.I.E.L.D.”

“Only Potter would portkey someone away without their permission to take them on ‘vacation’,” Daphne snarked with a shake of her head.

“Judging by their new relationship status, I don’t think she was actually objecting overly much,” Steve commented.

“Well, it sounds like you and I can get some more sessions in before your first mission, James,” Daphne stated, looking up at Barnes from where he was standing alongside the chair that she was seated in.

“You’ve been cleared for active duty?” a delighted-sounding Steve asked.
“Yup,” Barnes grinned.

“Provisionally,” Daphne interjected. “I get final say on which missions you can go on and we’ll be having a session after each one to determine your progress. There’s still a long way to go until your mind is completely yours again and we’ve retrieved all of your memories.”

“I still agree to all of your conditions,” Barnes said.

“If you’ve got medical clearance, then I’ll add you to the active roster,” Maria said, tapping at the closest keyboard to bring up Barnes’ file.

“Oh, I need to change my Code Name,” Barnes stated.

Maria turned, one eyebrow raised in question.

“Daphne suggested that a new name, one not tainted by HYDRA would be good for me,” Barnes explained.

“You have one in mind?” Steve asked.

Barnes nodded. “I was thinking ‘Wolf’.”

“Any particular reason you chose that?” Steve asked.

Barnes shrugged one shoulder. “I figured that the last time I was me, was when I was with the Howling Commandos. ‘Wolf’ reminds me of that.”


“I’ll update your file,” Maria said.

“Well, until either you or your contacts come up with something, I’d say that the Avengers can take some time off,” Steve stated.

“I’ll let you know as soon as I have anything,” Maria promised.

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Harry looked down at the piece of parchment in his hand and then up at the warehouse directly in front of him. This looked like the right address, although this was the first time that he’d been to Brooklyn, thus the double and triple checking.

Finally satisfied, Harry stuffed the parchment into his pocket and strode towards the door. There was no keyhole evident, nor was there even an electronic security pad beside the door. Not that that was unexpected. Placing his hand on the door, Harry concentrated. A tingle of magic washed over him and he countered it with a small burst of his own.

And, just as the goblins had promised, the warehouse door opened.

Stepping inside, Harry gave his hand a wave, sending balls of light floating high about the room. His wandless magic was really starting to come along. And while he couldn’t use it for complex spells, more and more smaller spells were becoming easier and easier to do this way. Harry knew that he’d never get to the point where he could fully do without his wand, but still, he was sure that he was far in advance of most magicals on the planet.

Now that the warehouse was lit up, Harry took the time to have a good look around. His first
impression was that either a group of young girls had gotten together to store all of their doll furniture here or else he’d stepped through an engorio charm when he’d entered, making him a giant compared with what was here.

All manner of furniture – beds, tables, bookcases, desks, chairs, wardrobes, really the list could go on endlessly – were stored around the room. There were dozens and dozens of every one. And then there were the electronics: computers, televisions, monitors, pads, refrigerators, microwaves … There was even a corner dedicated to tiny scooters, golf carts and segways.

And while Harry could spend dozens of hours going through it all, he knew that there was no need. He’d contracted the goblins to procure all of these items; and if they said that it was all there, then there was no way that it wouldn’t be. It simply wasn’t good business for it to be otherwise.

No. There was only one ‘thing’ missing from here that he’d asked for.

Finding a clear patch of concrete, Harry stood to one side and looked expectantly at it.

“House elves of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black!” he called.

Instantly, the sound of pops echoed throughout the warehouse and when Harry blinked, there in front of him stood twenty house elves. All of them wore the same thing: a crisp, clean white pillowcase with the House of Black seal on their left breast. And every single pair of eyes were staring up at him eagerly.

“Hi. It’s nice to meet you all. I’m Harry,” he said.

“Hello, Master Harry,” echoed twenty voices simultaneously.

Resisting the urge to correct the elves, Harry stuck to the task at hand.

“Which of you is the Head Elf?” he asked.

“I be Head Elf,” one of the elves in the front said stepping forward. “I be Gangee.”

“Nice to meet you, Gangee,” Harry said, committing the Head Elf with his slightly bulbous nose, tufts of white hair protruding from his ears and deep purple eyes to memory. “I understand that all of you have been sworn to the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black.”

“Yes, Master,” Gangee nodded.

“Excellent. The House of Black owns an island, Paradis Noir,” Harry said. “I want all of you to work there. There is a large number of buildings, all with multiple rooms and there will be many people who have access to the island who will be staying there when they wish to. There will be a lot of work to do there, both inside and on the grounds.”

The twenty eager faces all began quivering with excitement at this announcement.

“Firstly, as Black Elves, can you access the island through the wards?” Harry asked.

“Yes, Master Harry,” Gangee replied. “You can, so wes can, too.”

“Brilliant!” Harry smiled. “In that case, your first task is to transport all of the items in this warehouse to the island, unshrink them and get the buildings and rooms set up. I’ll be over in a day or two to help show you where it all goes.”

“Yes, Master Harry,” Gangee said.
“Great, I’ll see you soon,” Harry said.

Correctly taking that as their dismissal, Gangee spun about and began issuing orders to the elves under his command. In next to no time at all, the pops of elves disappearing with furniture could be heard all throughout the warehouse.

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From the bottom of the quinjet’s ramp, Tony blinked up at the unexpected sight.

Jarvis hadn’t been wrong. Harry was up there, fiddling with what looked to be the navigation console. Exactly why the wizard was doing that was what had brought Tony down here in the first place. Really, Harry had no business doing whatever it was that he was doing. While he could, technically, pilot a quinjet, his scores were so low that he was near the bottom of the list – give the man a broom, that was one thing, something technological, that was another.

Tony’s eyes lit up at the metal rod lying off to the side and he quickly ducked across to get it. Then, with the rod in his hand, Tony strode into the quinjet.

“Hocus pocus. Abracadabra. Open Sesame,” Tony said, waving the rod about in such a way that it was a good thing that he was alone otherwise he’d have been likely to poke out someone’s eye.

Harry’s tussled head emerged from under the navigation console and he looked up at Tony, obvious confusion on his face.

“What are you doing?” Harry asked.

“Magic,” Tony replied as though it was obvious.

“Hate to break it to you, Tony, but that’s not a wand and you’re not a wizard,” Harry stated.

“It’s not?” Tony asked, feigning surprise by staring at his ‘wand’. “Are you sure?”

“Positive,” Harry replied.

“So, we’re not in some parallel, mixed up world, where I’m you and you’re me?” Tony asked.

“What? Of course not. What are you on about?” Harry asked, a hint of exasperation creeping into his voice.

“Well, there goes that explanation,” Tony said, tossing the rod away. “In that case, perhaps you can tell me why you, of all people, are messing about with my quinjet. You’re not trying to make it blow up, are you? ’Cause your magic and my tech don’t always get on that well.”

“You know we’ve solved that, Tony,” Harry reminded him, as though he actually needed the reminder in the first place. “No, what I’m doing is installing a little something extra that the Japanese technomages came up with so that the quinjet can get through magical wards and so that the non-magical pilot doesn’t get confounded to go the wrong way.”

“Okay, sounds kinda useful,” Tony conceded. “Is there a particular reason the quinjets need that kind of tech? Not that I’m complaining, I’m not going to turn down free tech.”

“I’ve got a little surprise for the team and in order for us to get there, the quinjets need a little extra help,” Harry grinned.

“A surprise, huh? And for the whole team, no less. What about the Iron Legion? Are they invited?”
Tony asked.

Harry blinked at him and scratched the back of his neck.

“Hadn’t thought of them, to be honest,” he replied. “I think that they’re going to have to miss out for now – I only bought enough of these gizmos from the technomages for the two quinjets and a spare in case we decide to install one on Coulson’s Bus.”

“I’m hurt,” Tony said, putting a hand over his … over where his heart used to be. “You thought of your girlfriend but not the Legion.”

“Tell you what, Tony, when your Legion can kiss as well as my girlfriend, I’ll buy them a gizmo, too,” Harry grinned.

“Challenge accepted,” Tony replied quickly and promptly laughed at the look of horror on the wizard’s face.
Home Away From Home

Tony was bored, which was never a good thing. He needed to be doing something. Anything. He’d never been one for sitting still, without a tool in his hand or some tech to tinker with. And especially after New York, it’d become an obsession. Usually, he could cover any agitation he felt by ensuring that, whatever was going on, whoever was around, he was at the centre of it all.

And now here he was, stuck inside a quinjet on a ridiculously long flight and not only was he not in charge, he wasn’t even piloting or allowed to know their ultimate destination. Oh, that didn’t mean that he had no idea of their trajectory and the most likely place that they’d set down. No, Jarvis in his ear kept him apprised of those sorts of details.

Not that he could determine why they were being taken to the Azores of all places (assuming that that’s where they actually stopped and that they didn’t continue on to Africa).

The other thing that was bugging him was the fact that his quinjet, his highly functional and efficiently designed quinjet had been turned into a large, relaxing lounge area, complete with large screen TVs and a multitude of sofas. Not that he wasn’t enjoying having Pepper leaning right back on him, his arms wrapped around her as they enjoyed the in-flight entertainment. Nor the fact that the insides of the quinjet were about three times larger than they were supposed to be.

Still …

Leaning his head backwards over the top of the couch, Tony eyed Harry in the pilot’s seat (and wasn’t that something else to give him a bad case of nerves).

“Are we there yet?” he asked, only to have Pepper poke him hard in the ribs.

“Child,” she muttered.

“Actually, just about,” Harry replied.

Tony’s eyes widened as Harry spun his chair around, brought up his wand and waved it at the walls of the quinjet.

Instantly, the walls shimmered into seemingly non-existence. Only the fact that there was no wind whipping in at them told Tony that the walls had only become transparent and had not actually vanished. Interestingly, Tony took in the full three-sixty-degree view. Most of the sky was a beautiful blue with only the odd cloud to be seen. Below them was the North Atlantic Ocean stretching from horizon to horizon, only broken by a number of landmasses, islands. The Azores, Tony realised.

Directly behind them flew the second quinjet and Tony wondered if Harry’d charmed their walls the same way.

A ripple of some kind washed over the quinjet and Tony’s eyes widened even as he pushed Pepper to the side and shot to his feet. Not that he was the only one. Steve and Nat had done the same from where they’d been sharing another of the couches (and sitting quite closely, heads bent together for the past hour, Tony noted). Peter, Gwen, Doreen and Matt had their heads up, their eyes wide as they stared around. And wasn’t that a strange sight to see on the blind man, but then, considering that an island had just materialised in front of them out of no-where, obviously hidden by magic, it wasn’t such a surprise – Matt did have a strange connection with magic, being able to see it and all.

Stepping closer to the wall of the quinjet, Tony stared at the island. It was huge and filled with
forests, hills, valleys and even a river. Golden beaches surrounded much of the island. It looked like a paradise, a pristine land that had been untouched by man. A trio of great bronze creatures flying through the sky suddenly banked towards them and Tony blinked as he realised that he’d just found the missing three dragons from Brazil.

“Excuse me, Sir,” Jarvis said into his ear. “But I am having difficulty locating this island on any map. It appears to be a tenth island of the Azores when all records indicate that there should only be nine.”

Tony only nodded, completely understanding the almost whining tone that his AI had just used.

Daphne followed the others along the path from the large tarmac where the two quinjets had landed, her head constantly swivelling from side to side as she took in what she was seeing. Not that she was the only one. Of the two dozen of them, only Potter seemed oblivious to his surroundings, although that Merlin-be-damned smirk of his told her that he was enjoying seeing all of their reactions.

When the walls of the quinjet had turned transparent, she wasn’t the only one who’d squeaked in alarm. Obviously, Potter had layered some kind of delayed charm into them before they’d left New York. The tingling wash of powerful magic – wards, she realised – had Daphne searching out Lavender’s eyes. And yes, the way that she stared back had told Daphne that she’d felt them, too.

The island that had come into being below them had been completely unexpected, that was until she thought about who was in charge of this ‘field trip’. And then it’d all clicked into place and she’d realised where they were being taken. Well, not exactly where, but at least the type of place. A family secret, one that was hidden under a host of powerful magic, most likely including unplottable wards and a slew of muggle and magical notice-me-nots.

She’d seen the dragons flying alongside them and shuddered. The ones way back in fourth year had been close enough, thank you very much. They, at least, had been chained up. These weren’t. Thankfully, they’d veered off after only a short look at them and flown away towards the far side of the island.

As the quinjets came in to land, Daphne wasn’t the only ones to spot the gleaming white stone and glass buildings a short distance away. James, beside her, refrained from pointing, but she noticed that his eyes were darting every which way, taking it all in.

And then they’d landed, the quinjet had powered down and they’d disembarked. Once the passengers of both quinjets were loosely gathered together, Harry had told them all to follow him.

As the path that they’d been following emerged from under the trees, Daphne paused. The sight before her was simply stunning. It was like a small park filled with pathways, fountains, ponds, benches under trees, swatches of grass and flowerbeds galore, all meticulously landscaped and cared for. The scene was so incredibly relaxing after so much time in the hustle and bustle of New York that Daphne immediately felt her shoulders lose some of the tension that they’d been holding.

Surrounding this garden paradise were a number of those buildings that she’d seen as they descended. There were six smaller buildings, well, smaller in relation to the large, slightly curved building that followed the curve of the hill that Harry was leading them towards.

Daphne was pleased to note that none of the buildings dominated the landscape. They were all nestled in beautifully, almost artistically, with the trees and gardens. They also didn’t tower over everything. The six smaller buildings were only two stories high, while the larger one was three.
“Head straight on up to the top level,” Harry instructed the group from where he was holding the door to the large building open.

Following his instructions, Daphne walked inside, giving him a nod as she passed.

“Alright, Potter, you’ve got us intrigued, what is this place?” Tony asked.

“I suspect that that’s what Harry’s about to tell us,” Steve replied, and Harry could hear the unspoken addition that he, too, was curious and expected answers.

Harry looked around the room at the twenty-three people seated on a variety of different chairs – couches, stools, beanbags, recliners and even some dining chairs that had been pulled over. And even with this many people here, the room still felt mostly empty.

It was huge, a large, multipurpose common room. There were a pair of pool tables to one side, a mini theatre area, a number of tables of various sizes, a full length bar, mini kitchen, a small library over in one corner and numerous sitting areas, all designed for people to be able to congregate together or to do their own thing without the feeling that they were encroaching on each other.

“Actually, before we begin, how about some snacks?” Harry suggested. “Gangee?”

Instantly, Gangee and three other house elves popped into the room, all bearing trays of drinks – both hot and cold – and bowls and platters of finger food.

“Exactly what are these … people?” Helen Cho asked nervously as she accepted a mug that was floating towards her.

“These are house elves; they’re a magical creature,” Harry explained. “There are twenty on the island and their job is to look after the place. And when I say job, I mean that it’s not only what they’re asked to do, but it’s what they enjoy doing. If any of you need anything done or food or whatever, you only need to call for a house elf and they’d be more than happy to help.”

“Gangee, Tinky, Nak, Bikum, thank you. We’ll have dinner in a couple of hours,” Harry said after everyone had been served.

“Yes, Master Harry,” Gangee replied with a bow for all of them before they popped away.

“Welcome to Paradis Noir,” Harry said, opening his arms wide as though attempting to encompass the entire island that could be seen through the great glass windows behind him.


“Exactly,” Harry nodded to her.

“As in the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black?” Lavender asked.

“The one and the same,” Harry grinned.

“You’re saying that you own this island?” Bruce asked incredulously.

“I do,” Harry confirmed. “Paradis Noir has been in the Black side of my family since the early 1500s, when one of my ancestors decided that having his own private island hideaway sounded a brilliant idea and promptly covered it in a host of magic spells and wards that hid it from the non-magical world. You won’t even find it on any map or satellite image.”
“Where exactly are we?” Darcy asked, her hand half-raised.

“The Azores,” Tony answered. “Seems as though that there’s actually ten islands in the chain, not nine. What? Jarvis kept an eye on where we were going, alright?”

Harry chuckled. “I would have been surprised if he didn’t.”

“How big is this island?” Erik asked.

“The energy that would be needed to hide an island this size must be astronomical,” Jane added, looking at her fellow scientist.

“Just over a hundred square kilometres,” Harry answered.

“Your ancestors must have been extremely powerful wizards to cover such a size for so long,” Thor stated sounding impressed.

“That answers where we are, but not why we’re here,” Rhodey stated.

Harry swept his gaze over the room, taking in everyone before he answered. Yes, there was no doubt in his mind that this was the right thing to do.

“Paradis Noir was just sitting around doing nothing,” Harry began. “Actually, it’s hardly been used in the last couple of centuries. Thus, I had part of it developed for our use. This is for us, for the Avengers and our friends, a place where we can come to and relax, a place where we can simply be ourselves, without the world’s expectations banging on our doors or the world’s eyes watching us. A place for us to just be … well, us.

“Here, we don’t need to hide who we are. We can show our true selves,” here Harry looked at Doreen, his eyes sweeping to her tail. “We can climb the walls if that’s what takes our fancy,” and here Harry locked eyes with Peter. “Where we don’t need to pretend to be what we’re not,” and Harry’s head moved between Matt and Jennifer.

“You built us our own resort?” Clint asked.

“Well, that’s one way of looking at it,” Harry grinned lopsidedly. “And while that’s it’s main role, that’s not all it is.”

“What else is it?” Tony asked sounding not only suspicious but also something else that Harry couldn’t identify.

“Perhaps if I explain what all of the buildings are, you’ll understand?” Harry mused.

Murmurs of assent sweeping the room confirmed that his idea was accepted.

“Well, let’s start with this one,” Harry said. “As you can probably guess from this room, this building has been designed for us to live in. There are three floors that, in total, hold fifty apartments – twenty on each of the two floors below us and ten on this floor – five to each side of this common area. Every apartment has two bedrooms, each with their own ensuite, a small study, a lounge, kitchen and dining room.”

Turning about, Harry looked out the wide windows and pointed at each of the two closest smaller buildings to the far ends of the main one.

“Each of those are additional apartment buildings,” he said. “There are three apartments, all identical
to the ones in here, on each of their two levels. Now, the three remaining buildings.

“Directly across from us, on the other side of the park, is the building dedicated to fitness and training. There are a number of gyms and weight rooms and rooms large enough to spar in, either as pairs or as a large group. There’s also a large, Olympic-sized pool attached to it with its own retractable roof.

“To the left of that building is the one dedicated to engineering. At the moment it’s mostly empty, just awaiting whatever the engineers and tinkerers among you want installed. The last building, the one to the immediate right of the training one, is a building dedicated to science, with lab space galore as well as a mini hospital, just in case.

“And, as you would have seen when we landed, the tarmac is large enough to handle a dozen quinjets or even the S.H.I.E.L.D. Bus if we decide to allow it to. The hanger up there is even big enough for whatever toy Tony can come up with.”

“What about that one?” Clint asked, pointing to the hint of a roof poking through the trees way outside the main compound.

“Ah,” Harry said, “I hadn’t noticed that you could see it from here. That one is the Black Bungalow. It’s my family house. Actually, if any of you ever wants to settle down on the island, there’s plenty of room and it wouldn’t be that difficult to build a house or something for you, especially not with magic.”

“Would that be dangerous for the non-magicals?” Daphne asked. “I’m sure that we all saw the Vipertooths and I’m guessing that they’re not the only magical creatures here.”

“There’s probably magical plants here as well,” Lavender guessed.

Harry nodded. “Yeah, you’re both right. But there’s not a lot that’s really dangerous. As long as people use their brains and think. The biggest of the animals would be the hippogriffs – think half horse, half eagle animals – and the mooncalves, but they mostly stay in their burrows and only come out under the light of the full moon. And I don’t think that there’s any overly dangerous magical plants – at least, I haven’t seen anything like Devil’s Snare around. The best bet is that if you see something and you don’t know what it is, simply walk away. I have had magical wards erected around the compound that should keep the magical animals out.”

“Doing all of this, it’s incredibly generous of you, Harry,” Steve remarked. “But why? Why are you doing this? Creating this place for us? Opening your family’s private island like that? You don’t have to and I’m sure that it wasn’t exactly cheap.”

Harry sighed and took a couple of paces away, his hand rubbing the back of his neck. How to explain? Finally, knowing that he was likely to ramble, he turned back. These people, his friends, deserved an explanation.

“You’re right, Steve, it wasn’t cheap but when it comes right down to it, I’ve got more gold in more vaults than I know what to do with,” Harry said, waving off the easiest question first. “And most of that money came from the two magical families that I’m the Head of at the cost of almost everyone in those families. Really, the only family I have left is a non-magical cousin that I don’t get on with and a distant cousin and her grandson, who also happens to be my godson and heir – Ted.

“Family’s something that I’ve never really had, not a normal one, anyway. Back when I was in school, my family was basically Hermione and Ron and by extension, Ron’s family. Everyone else wanted a piece of me. I was the Boy-Who-Lived and later, after the war, I became the Man-Who-
Conquered. I drifted away from Ron’s family and then I left, off to travel the world for five years,

“I guess I was trying to find my place, find somewhere where it wasn’t going to feel as though I was constantly being stared at or sought after. And then I landed in New York. I set up the Den and started doing some good, especially for the teens from Midtown who seemed to claim it as their own. It got them off the streets, somewhere safe for them to hang out.”

Here, Gwen and Peter smiled at him and nodded.

“I guess it was my old ‘saving people thing’ as Hermione once called it,” Harry continued, ignoring Lavender’s snort of amusement. “I seem to be hard-wired to do something for those in need. Of course, then the Chitauri happened and I met the Avengers and became a part of something bigger. And over time, I met the rest of you and we’ve done some extraordinary things, things that have helped others, made the world better, at least, I’d like to think we have.

“Each of you, all of you, have become family to me. We’re unconventional, there’s no debating that, but we’re a family and that’s something that I’ve always dreamed of having.

“As I said, I know what it’s like to be stared at all the time, to have people piling expectation after expectation on your shoulders. It can get too much, be too big a load to carry. And this place was simply sitting there doing nothing. And I thought, why not? Why not open up the island, give my friends, my family a place to retreat to, to be themselves if they want it? A place where they could forget, even if it’s just for a while, the pressure that the rest of the world demands. So, I did it and this place was born. Our home away from home.

“Besides, with how many of us there are now, the Tower was starting to get a bit small. We’ve got a bit more room to spread out here,” Harry finished with a shrug.

There were laughs around the room at that last bit.

“Nearly twenty-five thousand acres and he says ‘a bit more room’,” Sam laughed. “Yeah, I’d say that’s definitely a ‘bit more room’.”

Actually, now that Harry looked, he noticed that not everyone was laughing, a fact that someone else noticed as well.

“Tony?” Pepper asked.

“What?” Tony countered almost … sulkily?

“What’s wrong? You don’t like this place that Harry’s designed?” she asked.

“Oh, no, it’s great! What’s not to love about it? It’s got all the bells and whistles. And even has lots of room to spread out if we want,” Tony replied.

“Is this because he dissed your Tower?” Rhodey asked. “‘Cause even you have to admit that it’s starting to get a little crowded.”

“No! Of course not,” Tony protested before he sighed. “And he’s right, it is getting a little small.”

“Then what’s the problem?” Pepper asked again. “You’re starting to act a little childish.”

“Starting to?” Bobbi muttered causing those around her to snicker.

“I wanted to solve the problem of our space issues!” Tony finally replied. “In fact, I’ve already
solved it. Or at least, nearly. By the end of next month or the one after that at the latest, it’ll be done.”

“What will?” Nat asked.

“Avengers Compound,” Tony replied. “At least, that’s what I’m calling it. It’s got accommodations and labs and tech areas and everything that we’ll need. I’ve even got another four quinjets in the pipeline.”

“And you’re upset because everything here is bigger and better?” Bruce asked.

“No. He’s upset because Harry beat him to it,” Nat stated shrewdly.

“You can’t always be first at everything,” Pepper said patting him on the back consolingly.

“Yes, I can!” Tony protested. “Well, at least my facilities are bigger. I mean the tech, training and science buildings that I’ve designed are easily three times bigger than those ones out there, even if I only have a measly hundred acres to play with.”

Harry’s eyes met those of Daphne and Lavender and he was sure that the two magical women were thinking the same thing that he was. The buildings may be small on the outside but with magical expansion charms …

“And at least the Compound is closer to the action,” Tony continued. “And we can use for holding media conferences and mission briefings from people who aren’t Avengers. Having to take an eight hour flight to get here is going to limit how much this place gets used.”

“Um, I only brought you all on the quinjets this first time so that you could have the experience,” Harry stated. “I’ve got a much better, easier way for everyone to travel between here and New York from here on out. Gangee?”

This time when Harry called, only a small table appeared and not the house elf himself. The table, though, was covered in jewellery display cases. There were rings – both sized and designed for both men and women, all with the stylised ‘A’ of the Avengers on them. There were also a number of pendants and even a few toe rings, for anyone who wanted something that was a little subtler and more inconspicuous.

“I’m guessing that those aren’t simply pieces of jewellery,” Maria half-stated, half-asked.

“You’re right, they’re not,” Harry nodded. “I’m guessing that you all noticed when the quinjets entered the magical field that hides Paradis Noir from the outside world? Well, the only way that the quinjets could do so was because they had some special, magical rune-based ‘tech’ installed in them that stopped the navigation on the quinjet from going haywire and also stopped the pilot and passengers from having the uncontrollable impulse to go somewhere else and to do something else.”

“So, that’s what that was?” Jane asked.

Harry nodded. “These pieces of jewellery have all been heavily enchanted. Firstly, and most importantly, they allow anyone who is wearing one to pass through the wards that hide the island. They also have portkeys built into them – a special magical way of moving from place to place. There’s two destinations set on them – right here in this room and in the main common room of the Tower. A simple phrase will activate the portkey, depending on where you want to go and transport you and whoever and whatever you’re touching to that location.”

“That sounds useful,” Jennifer said. “We could be here and … portkey back to New York for some shopping.”
“Or a mission,” Bucky added.

“Exactly,” Harry agreed. “And it could come in handy in an emergency.”

“And with the modifications that we’ve made to the Iron Man and War Machine armour, they won’t blow up if we use them,” Tony nodded.

“They also have a compulsion charm added to them,” Harry continued. “You won’t be able to tell anyone who doesn’t already know the location of the island. However, you will be able to talk about it, but only if you really, really want to; they will prevent you from any accidental slip-ups.”

“Sounds like a good security precaution,” Bobbi nodded in approval.

“So, who gets what?” Sam asked. “Only, I’m not wearing a necklace for anyone. Sorry, Harry.”

“Didn’t expect you’d want to,” Harry grinned. “Nope, it’s all your choice, although I’d expect the Avenger rings would be for the Avengers, not for our friends and support staff.”

“Oh, you’re no fun; I was looking forward to showing one of them off on my next date,” Darcy stated, although the smile on her face told him that she was joking.

“Well, what are you all waiting for, come on up and pick one and then feel free to explore the island,” Harry said, stepping back from the table slightly.

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Phil Coulson, the Director of S.H.I.E.L.D., made sure to hang the lanyard with the triangular-shaped identification card around his neck before tapping in the code that would unlock the door to the facility, after all, there was no need to have the agent inside annoyed with him.

“Agent Koenig,” Phil greeted as he stepped through the door.

“Director Coulson,” Agent Koenig returned.

“How are we looking, Sam?” Phil asked.

“Come see for yourself,” Sam replied, before turning to lead the way down the hallway.

The walk down the hallway wasn’t long, after all, they needed all of the space available for what they were doing here. And really, when it came down to it, this was a secret base, so secret in fact that not even May knew about it and she knew about almost everything, including his current ‘condition’.

Once again, a code was input into a door, this one longer and more complex, in conjunction with the scanning of their identification cards before the door would open.

Phil stepped out and up to the railing, his hands automatically coming up to grab onto it.

What he saw before him was pleasing. Oh, it wasn’t as ‘pretty’ as it once might have been, but to his eye, it looked ready and able to get the job done.

“How close?” Phil asked.

“A week, two at the outside,” Sam replied.

“Personnel?” Phil asked.
“Billy and I’ve been calling in a lot of old favours and reaching out to a lot of people. We’ll be ready. She won’t be fully staffed but there’ll be enough to get the job done,” Sam replied.

“So, Theta Protocol is ready?” Phil clarified.

“As ready as we can be,” Sam confirmed.

“Let’s just hope that we never need it,” Phil sighed.

“As Director Fury would say, ‘you always hope, but in our experience, trouble always comes knocking’,” Sam replied.

Phil could only nod in agreement.
“Hey, Big Guy. Sun’s getting real low,” Natasha said, her eyes never leaving Bruce’s.

Noting that his eyes were focussed on her, she continued by raising her hand, palm out towards him. Slowly, Bruce’s hand came up to mimic hers, their palms close but not touching. As soon as his hand was in the correct position, Natasha moved hers, slowly, deliberately. This time, her arm was down, her forearm pointing towards Bruce, her palm up.

Almost unconsciously, Bruce mimicked her, ending with the back of his hand resting on her palm. With his hand in that position, Natasha slowly moved her hand away and up to touch two points on his forearm before drawing her fingers along his palm and coming off with a flick from his middle finger.

Instantly, Bruce’s face relaxed even more than it already was and he began swaying slightly. A small smile graced Natasha’s face and she nodded almost imperceptibly.

“Alright, Bruce, I want you to focus on my finger,” she said, holding one up in front of his face. As soon as she saw his eyes zeroing in on it, she continued. “When I snap my fingers, you’ll wake up and remember everything.”

She waited a count, two and then snapped.

Bruce blinked continuously for nearly half a minute even as he shook his head. It looked remarkably like he was trying to wake himself up after a long sleep.

“Bruce?” Jennifer asked from where she was sitting a little apart from the two.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m good. Just … just give me a minute,” Bruce replied.

“The Lullaby seems to be taking,” Nat commented. “How do you feel?”

“Yeah, good. Kinda strange actually,” Bruce said and Nat could tell that he was looking inwards. “The Hulk … he’s … this is the quietest that I’ve ever felt him. It’s as though he’s … distant? Asleep, maybe?”

Bruce finished with a shake of his head.

“That’s good,” Nat stated. “That is what we’re going for here.”

“True, but it’s one thing to do it here,” and Bruce gestured to the beach that they were sitting on, the soft, gentle lap of the waves not far away. Here, they were totally alone and there wasn’t a threat for hundreds of miles at the very least. “And quite another out there.”

“Which is why we’re practicing here,” Jennifer chimed in. “We’ve got to make sure that there’s extra options for calming the Hulk down, especially if I’m not there or there isn’t some of Harry’s special juice on hand.”

“Yeah, I know,” Bruce replied. “It’s just, the Hulk and I, we’re still not used to relying on others. Don’t get me wrong, we love being a part of the Avengers, this group but after so many years of being on the run, alone with everyone after me, us, it’s still challenging to let others in.”

“You let me in,” Jennifer stated.
“You’re my cousin,” Bruce smiled. “Even the Hulk acknowledges you as family, as being safe, someone he can trust.”

“So, now we’ve got to make sure that he and you trust me as well,” Nat interjected. “I think it’s time that we try the Lullaby with the Hulk directly.”

A slight shifting of the sand was enough for Nat to know that Jennifer had just shifted into her She-Hulk form.

“Alright,” Bruce sighed. “I did agree to this and it’s not like I can hurt anyone here.”

After unbuttoning his shirt, Bruce threw it over to where he’d left his shoes and socks earlier. She watched as he closed his eyes and took a couple of steps back. Great green veins emerged along the side of Bruce’s neck and his head tipped back.

The Hulk was coming out and Natasha braced herself for the challenge to come: seeing if the hypnotic suggestion that she’d put in Bruce transferred over to the Hulk.

ooo00ooo

Harry shrugged into his blue-grey dragonhide cloak, its hood hanging down his back and settled it correctly on his shoulders. Taking a couple of steps forward, he looked at himself in the mirror, turning slightly so that it was easier to see his left side.

High up on his left arm was a new addition. Primarily, it was the stylised ‘A’ of the Avengers done in red, but with a red circle around it, white filling the space inside. Harry nodded in satisfaction.

“That’s good work, Gimpy,” Harry said to the anxiously waiting House Elf. “And the cloak looks as good as new, too.”

His cloak had needed some minor repairs and cleaning after all of the various battles and skirmishes that he’d been involved in. It was good to once again have it looking as good as the day that Charlie Weasley had given it to him.

“Gimpy lives to serve, Master Harry, Sir,” the little elf replied.

“It does look good,” Steve commented. “And once they’re on all of our uniforms, it’ll look as though we’re actually all part of the same team.”

“You get to convince Tony to paint one on his armour,” Harry grinned at Steve via the mirror.

“A good leader knows when to delegate,” Steve countered.

“Pepper!” they decided in unison, a beat later.

The sound of urgent footsteps interrupted them and Harry spun about to face the door. Maria was the first through it, with Bobbi hot on her heels.

“Harry,” Maria said, focussing on him instantly. “We’ve just had a message from Coulson. It’s about Skye.”

ooo00ooo

Mage arrived in a swirl of multicoloured light and looked around with a sigh of relief. Directly in front of him was the Bus, the great modified Globemaster aircraft that S.H.I.E.L.D. had converted for its use. Sitting just to one side was a quinjet.
Really, it was a miracle that he’d arrived at the correct place at all. After portkeying back to the Tower, Harry had used Jarvis’ satellite feeds to get a good look at exactly where Coulson and his team were located just outside of San Juan, Puerto Rico. He’d then made a portkey to that location based off of simply that image. As far as he knew, no one’d ever attempted a portkey journey like that before.

The fact that it had worked was something to consider the ramifications of later. Right now, there were much more important matters to deal with.

Noting that the rear ramp to the Bus was already lowered, Mage didn’t hesitate in striding up it, his footsteps announcing his arrival and causing Coulson and May to turn towards him, the latter having drawn her sidearm in the process.

“Mage,” Phil greeted. “I didn’t expect you here.”

Mage gave the man a nonplussed look, not that he could see it with Mage’s obscuris spell in place, hiding his face.

“You messaged that Skye had been kidnapped,” Mage stated. “What can you tell me?”

“Mage,” May greeted.

“May,” Mage returned, although his gaze never left Phil’s face.

“Approximately four hours ago, the Bus was intercepted mid-air by a HYDRA team led by Grant Ward,” Coulson relayed. “There were half a dozen quinjets making combat not an option. Once they boarded, their objective was to capture a person that we were protecting by the name of Raina, as well as an object of extra-terrestrial origin.”

“If they were the objective, then why was Skye taken?” Mage questioned.

“We don’t know,” May replied. “Our best guess is that Skye was a bonus. I had the impression that it was only Ward who wanted her, so it’s likely that he had a different mission in mind.”

“Whatever the reason, with Ward having her, it’s fair to assume that Skye is still alive,” Coulson stated, before continuing at Mage’s cock of the head. “Ward’s been fascinated with Skye ever since he met her.”

“Skye does not return whatever ‘feelings’ Ward has for her,” May assured Mage.

Mage nodded his head in thanks.

“I’m guessing that it’s safe to assume that Skye’s being held with this Raina person and this object?” Mage asked. “What’s so special about them? Why would HYDRA mount a special operation to take them?”

Coulson sighed and looked at May who gave him a tiny nod.

“As I mentioned, the object, the Obelisk, is alien. Kree, to be precise,” Coulson explained. “It’s also known as a Diviner, although what it divines, we’re not sure. What we do know is that it’s reputed to be able to unlock some kind of power and it’s that power that HYDRA wants. Whenever the Obelisk is touched, alien writing appears on it. At least, that’s what we thought it was.”

“Writing?” Mage interrupted. “Circles and lines?”
Coulson blinked, glanced at May and focussed intently on Mage.

“Exactly circles and lines. How did you know about it?” he asked.

“Skye,” Mage shrugged. “She drew a little of it when we were on vacation; asked me if it was a magical language. Obviously, it wasn’t.”

“Huh, she didn’t mention that,” Coulson stated.

“No. She didn’t,” May agreed and there was something in her voice that told Mage that May wasn’t happy about Skye telling Mage S.H.I.E.L.D. secrets without the proper authorisation.

“So, what’s so special about this writing?” Mage asked.

“As I said, it’s Kree,” Coulson said, “the same species from which the serum was derived to bring me back after I was stabbed in the heart at the Battle of New York. Skye was also given some of it after being shot. The difference is that, where the serum eventually gave me an almost uncontrollable compulsion to draw that writing, it didn’t affect Skye at all, apart from the obvious – healing her.”

“Our assumption is that Skye’s part-Kree,” May stated bluntly.

Mage blinked at her.

“Skye’s part alien?” Mage repeated incredulously.

When May did nothing but simply stare back at him, Mage was forced to seriously consider the possibility. Exactly how Skye could be half-alien wasn’t one that he could even attempt to fathom. But then, he himself was considered a half-blood – his father a pureblood, his mother, a muggleborn – so on an intellectual level, at least, he could understand the concept.

And then something that had been bugging him ever since Harry’d met Skye finally clicked. If Skye was half-alien, then it was no wonder that the spell that he’d been using to separate alien matter from Earth-based things went wonky when it encountered Skye. She was from both!

“Okay, I can see that,” Mage stated, causing the two in front of him to share a look once again, something that they seemed to do all too often.

“So, what’s the significance of the writing?” Mage asked. “Some kind of special instructions?”

“Not quite,” Coulson said with a half-smile. “It took us a while, but we eventually worked out that it’s a map. A map of a hidden Kree city.”

“And let me guess, this hidden city is here in San Juan,” Mage stated.

“Good guess,” May confirmed.

“So why Raina? What’s her part in all this?” Mage asked.

“Only someone with Kree ancestry can touch the Obelisk without dying,” May replied. “And Raina can hold the Obelisk.”

“We believe that there’s a temple of some kind in the Kree City that, when the Obelisk is placed there, releases the power that it contains,” Coulson said.

“So, our job is to stop this Obelisk from getting to the Kree temple as well as rescuing Skye,” Mage stated.
“Exactly,” May agreed.

“So, what’s the plan?” Mage asked.

Houses, buildings, parks, people – they all rushed by below him but he took little to no notice of any of them.

From up here, high above the City of San Juan, Mage had only one objective: locate Skye and by extension, the HYDRA base that she was being held in. Those below were oblivious to the fact that he was there, as they should be, considering that both he and his new Lightning Bolt broom were both disillusioned.

If any had been able to see him, though, they would have noted that Mage flew in a perfectly straight line. There was no search pattern, no back and forth, but then, there didn’t need to be. Not so long ago, Harry had given Skye a pendant, a magical pendant. And one of the enchantments on said pendant was a locator charm that was tied to Harry’s Head of House Potter ring. Using it, Harry could find Skye anywhere and right now, it was pulling him straight across the city.

Finally, he slowed. The charm was telling him that he’d found the right place.

The building was three stories tall and surrounded by elaborate gardens. The fact that Mage could see men toting guns also confirmed that he was in the right place. He circled it slowly, once, twice, three times, ensuring that he got a good look at it, including the best way in.

Then, ignoring the pressing desire to charge right in, Mage turned his broom around, leant low over the handle and sped back to his allies.

“Here,” Mage stated, pointing to the exact spot on the map of San Juan that was on the big screen of the Bus’ command centre where HYDRA’s ‘base’ could be found.

“Why there?” Simmons asked. “That’s no where near the fort with the only viable entry to the Kree City.”

“Can we superimpose a map of the Kree City over the map of San Juan?” Coulson asked.

A moment later, a red schematic appeared over the blue city outline, a pulsing green dot indicating where HYDRA was based.

“That answers that question,” May stated. “They’re basically sitting on top of the Kree temple.”

“But why? It’s not like they can drill through a couple of hundred metres of volcanic rock,” Trip pointed out.

“We could, with a plasma drill,” Fitz stated.

“And if we have that tech, then so does HYDRA,” Simmons finished.

“At least we now know their plan,” Coulson stated. “It doesn’t change ours. FitzSimmons, Trip, your job is to get some explosives into the Kree City and destroy the area around the temple.”

“We’re gonna have to do it old school,” Trip said. “We know that tech doesn’t work down there. Thankfully, I’ve got a bunch of Grandad’s old Howling Commandos gear here. I’m pretty sure that
there’s some old timers in there that we can use. It’ll mean that we can’t set them off remotely, it’ll have to be set them and run.”

“What about Mack?” Simmons asked.

“We lost one of our team, Mack, down there;” Coulson explained, seeing Mage’s confused tilt of the head. “We think that the City’s taken him over somehow, using him like a drone or something to protect itself.”

“If you see him, either avoid him or incapacitate him,” Coulson said.

“That didn’t work out so well last time,” May commented. “He’s stronger than any of us and that City’s enhanced him somehow. The Icers don’t even knock him out.”

Mage fished into one of his belt pockets and pulled out a handful of small balls, not unlike marbles. “Here, just in case,” Mage said, handing them over. “Just smash them at his feet. They’ll release an airborne potion that will cause him to go into a daydreamlike-state. Should give you enough time to get away or knock him out permanently.”

“How do they work?” Fitz asked, taking the balls and looking at them curiously.

“Magic,” Mage replied, cutting off the scientist’s inquisitiveness in order to get the strategy planning over with quickly enough so that they could get to rescuing Skye and taking out the bad guys that much sooner.

“May, Mage,” Coulson continued. “The three of us will take the quinjet and go in through the roof and work our way down. We find Skye, stop the drill and get the Obelisk and Raina back.”

Nods all round indicated that the team was ready. A heartbeat later, they split up, each heading to get whatever equipment that they knew that they’d need.

ooo00ooo

Skye followed Ward through the house, her eyes darting about, taking it all in. Her hands were bound in front of her and there were two soldiers three steps behind her, just a little too far back for her to attack if she lashed out with her feet. Not that she would do that, no, there was no point at the moment, she was too well guarded right now. Later, though …

“I see that May’s been teaching you well,” Ward commented. “Checking exits, the placement of enemies, the weapons, strategizing. How’s your marksmanship these days?”

“Why don’t you give me a gun and find out?” Skye snarked.

Ward, of course, ignored her comment.

“Why am I here?” she asked, hoping to keep the man talking and gain some intel.

“I’m keeping a promise,” Ward replied as they reached a pair of double doors and he cut the zip ties around her wrist off.

Skye shot a curious glance at him, wondering what the promise was and who it was made to. And then Ward opened the door and she got her answer.

The man seated across the room rose at their entrance. He straightened and smoothed his old, brown suit before he swung his hands about, obviously unsure whether to put them behind his back or keep
them at his sides or even put them in front of him. He was tall and his dark brown hair was greying around his temples. She’d seen that face before, but only in a picture. Cal, she knew his name was.

Her father.

“I’m sure that you two have a lot of catching up to do,” Ward said, not that Skye even registered it.

“Look at that, the way you tilt your head,” Cal said, staring at her. “Is it nature or nurture, I wonder? Your mother did the same thing. I promised myself I wouldn’t get emotional.”

Skye could only stare at the man. She’d dreamt of meeting this man, her father her whole life. It was what led her to being so good at computers, to be such a good hacker and eventually to S.H.I.E.L.D. Everything had been geared towards trying to find her parents and here he was. If only she hadn’t found out that he was a monster, a killer. If only that wasn’t true.

“I’ve waited so long for this moment,” Cal continued. “Let’s start again. Hi. I’m Cal. I’m your father. Would you like to sit down?”

Skye felt her head shake. She didn’t know what to think, what to feel but sitting was definitely not on that list.

“Right, me neither,” Cal agreed. “Thank you for agreeing to meet with me.”

“Thank you for agreeing to meet with me?” an incredulous Skye repeated. “Are you serious? I was kidnapped off of a plane at gunpoint! That’s all you have to say?”

“You’re right. I’m sorry,” Call said, reaching out towards her. “I’m just a little nervous. This is a big moment. Father. Daughter. Meeting for the first time. Well, not the first time. Obviously. But after a long time. Ever since you were taken from me. I’ve been dreaming of this moment every day since. I had it all planned. It was going to be perfect. Those little almond cookies. Flowers maybe. Not like this. Not here. My God, you are beautiful. Well, I don’t know what you know about me …”

“I know that you’re a monster. A killer. A trail of death wherever you go,” Skye interrupted.

“Those are all true,” Cal replied and Skye had to give him points for honesty. “But you have to understand. You were taken from me. My little girl was taken from me. You. It was the worst day of my life. You were taken. I wasn’t careless. I didn’t lose you. You were taken! You were stolen from me! I had nothing and I was doing everything that I could to get my family back together again. Back in one piece, back to how it’s supposed to be.”

Skye took half a step back, trying to process everything, trying not to show as much fear as she was really feeling due to his intensity, the anger that she could see bubbling to the surface.

“I wasn’t always like this,” Cal continued, calming somewhat as he sat on a nearby chair. “You were born in China. Your mother was Chinese. I was a doctor there with Doctors Without Borders. You see, my Chinese wasn’t very good and your mother used to come in and translate for me. I worked in a clinic, people liked me. We were so happy. I liked myself.”

“So, what happened?” Skye asked.


“HYDRA. They were HYDRA, not S.H.I.E.L.D.,” Skye corrected.

Cal simply shrugged at the difference.
“This is the thing that I wanted to say,” he continued, rising. “I’m sorry that I couldn’t be there for you. That I couldn’t protect you. That I couldn’t teach you about the stars or read you bedtime stories or sing you to sleep. I know that I’m a terrible disappointment, but I’m here now. I’ll always be here now. And everything that is about to happen is supposed to happen. I’m going to take care of you.”

“Then get me out of here,” Skye said, hoping to use his … protective father routine to her advantage.

“Oh, I can’t do that,” Cal replied. “No, you’re right where you need to be. This is your destiny.”

oo000oo0

Skye was still reeling from everything that she’d learnt from Cal, from her f… – no she couldn’t bring herself to even think the word – even as she was being led … somewhere.

Finally, finally, she’d learnt what happened to her mother, and by extension, her father.

Her mother had been special. She apparently had a gift, whatever that meant, although it sounded as though it was genetic and that Skye, herself had one as well (at least according to Cal). Whatever it was that made her mother special, it had meant that Whitehall had come and taken her away and experimented on her, cut her to pieces, took her organs and blood and left her lying in a ditch for Cal to find. It was that, combined with losing his only child that had sent Cal over the edge. It was why Cal had declared that this was the ‘best day ever’ – the day he got his daughter back and the day that he was determined to kill Whitehall for what he’d done.

Like Skye herself, Cal had become obsessed with finding his family and putting it back together. Everything that he’d done had been to that end and while Skye couldn’t condone his methods, in a way a small part of her, a part that she simply couldn’t deny, had understood.

Ahead of her, she could see Cal, Ward and Raina, all surrounded by HYDRA thugs and beyond them, Whitehall, the leader of this faction of HYDRA. Forcefully, Skye shoved every one of those thoughts deep inside. She’d deal with them later. Right now, she had more important things to deal with. Like staying alive and getting out of here.

“Ah, finally,” Whitehall greeted as Skye came to stand in line with the other three. “Each of you have played a part in bringing us here today. Although I’m uncertain of your place in all of this.”

Skye stared back defiantly at the man, unwilling to even dignify him with an answer.

“But I have my suspicions,” Whitehall continued. “You see, I know who your mother was and exactly how special she was. My question is, what is your gift? Is it as wonderful as your mothers? Well, we shall see, won’t we?”

A gesture from him had a HYDRA soldier approaching with a container that Skye recognised. The lid was flipped back to reveal the strange metal Obelisk.

“Pick it up,” Whitehall instructed.

Skye continued to stare defiantly back at him, daring him to make her. From the corner of her eye, though, she saw Cal give her a nod, a nod that could only mean one thing. You’re like your mother, he seemed to say, it’ll be alright.

And then Skye moved. Taking a determined step forward, she reached in and grasped the Obelisk and lifted it up. When nothing happened, no strange black crust forming over her entire body to kill her, she relaxed slightly.
Her relaxation was enough to have the guards shift slightly. Enough for her to see, thanks to May’s training, that they weren’t as on-guard as they’d been moments before.

And then she struck.

Twisting about, Skye stuck the Obelisk onto the neck of the nearest guard. Cal spun about, slashing the neck of one guard with a scalpel that Skye didn’t know he had and twisting himself about a second guard to use as a shield. Ward, too, moved, knocking down two guards before coming up with a gun pointed at a third.

Unfortunately, the other nine guards in the room stepped forward, their own guns up and pointing. Whitehall merely raised a hand, halting them from shooting.

“Yes. You are special, aren’t you,” Whitehall said to Skye. “And your gift will be understood soon enough. Of course, experimentation will be required.”

A signal from him had Raina stepping forward and taking the Obelisk from Skye and returning it to its case. Obviously, she’d thrown in her lot with Whitehall.

“Raina, take the Diviner to the basement so that it’s ready as soon as we break through into the City below,” Whitehall instructed. “And secure these three until later.”

Skye glared at the man even as she felt her arms being yanked backwards and her hands zip tied together once more.

ooo00ooo

Mage was getting frustrated. This was taking too long. The plasma drill, they knew, had to be in the basement. And they’d landed on the roof. Exactly which level Skye was on, he wasn’t sure – his Potter Head ring could give him direction but not distance.

Already, he, Coulson and May had taken out a couple of dozen HYDRA agents but there were uncounted more between here and their objective.

Ducking his head around the corner, Mage took note of the soldier before quickly pulling back. Four shots slammed into the wall that he was hiding behind, chipping plaster off with every hit.

“Serpensortia!” he whispered, twice, pointing at the ground in front of him.

The boa constrictors that he’d summoned hissed violently at the unexpectedness of their appearance.

“There is an enemy around the corner. Please restrain him for me§,” Mage told them.

That was enough to have the two snakes slithering around the corner. Their appearance did not go unnoticed, as evidenced by the startled screams.

With a smile, Mage stepped around the corner and stunned not only the man that he knew was there but also the soldier creeping up the hallway. A pair of bludgeoners aimed at their arms ensured that, even if they managed to wake, they would stay out of the fight.

Gunfire from below caught Mage’s attention and he stepped across to the banister and looked down. May, it seemed, had found half a dozen HDYRA agents to play with. Deciding to lend a hand, he focussed on the statues that the men were using as cover. Some simple animation spells were enough to give them something else to worry about.
Movement ahead of him was enough to have Coulson pause in his descent, his gun up and ready. Crouching a little lower allowed him to see further down the steps to the floor below.

There were two men there – Whitehall closer to Coulson but facing down the hallway and Cal further away. Cal appeared to be unarmred as he advanced towards the HYDRA leader, a murderous look on his face. Considering the distance, though, and the fact that Whitehall was raising his arm, a gun steady in it, told Coulson that there was no way that Cal was going to reach his target before getting killed.

Knowing that Cal was Skye’s father, Coulson couldn’t allow him to be killed, regardless of the many deaths that he was responsible for. Instead, he shot first, dropping Whitehall where he stood.

Cal stopped in obvious shock, staring between Whitehall and Coulson.

“What did you do?” Cal exclaimed, clearly deranged. “You killed him! He was mine and you killed him!”

“You’re welcome?” Coulson replied as he took the last few steps down onto the floor.

Apparently, though, that had been the wrong thing to say. With a roar, Cal charged straight at Coulson, tackled him around the middle and bore him through a nearby door.

Coulson ended up on his back, Cal on top of him, his fists whipping backwards and forwards, punching Coulson harder and harder with every hit.

Coulson fought back, flipping the bigger man off, up and over Coulson’s head. Cal, though, simply spun back around and jumped to his feet. Coulson scrambled to his own and had to promptly duck a fist. A short, sharp jab to Cal’s ribs seemed to do nothing and Coulson had to dance backwards.

Cal advanced, swinging wildly and it was all Coulson could do to twist, spin away from or block every hit. He danced around him, turned and kicked, hitting Cal in the stomach, making him stumble backwards and double over slightly.

Using that small advantage, Coulson leapt, wrapping his legs around the other man’s neck and hitting him over and over, trying to knock him out by a combination of lack of air and brute force.

Unfortunately, Cal had other ideas, grabbing Coulson and slamming him back down onto the floor, causing Coulson’s breath to leave him. That was enough advantage to have Cal punching Coulson over and over again, pressing his advantage.

“Stop it! Stop it!”

The words barely penetrated Coulson’s hearing through the ringing in his ears.

“Stop or I’ll shoot!” Then, “Dad!”

That did it and Cal sat back. Coulson was dazed. He knew that Skye had arrived. And she’d stopped Cal. As he attempted to gather himself he could hear the two speaking.

“He took something from me,” Cal said.

“No,” Skye replied. “Get up and get away from him.”

“You have to finish what we started,” Cal said.
“No, I don’t,” Skye disagreed. “I’m not going down there. I’m not going to change or transform or whatever the hell you think is going to happen. Now, leave. I’m giving you this one chance.”

“Okay. I’ll leave,” Can said. “But just remember, once it happens, once you become what you were always meant to be, no one will accept you. No one will understand. No one but me. Change is terrifying. But I love you. I will always love you, Daisy.”

For some reason, in his semi-daze, Coulson latched on to the fact that Cal had called Skye ‘Daisy’. That was important, but he couldn’t work out why right then. And then Skye was there, leaning over him, cradling his head, crying over him.

“I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. I stopped him. I stopped him but it’s not enough,” Skye was babbling, not even attempting to listen to what he was trying to say. “I’m going to fix this. I’m going to find the Obelisk. I’m going to make sure that it doesn’t get down there and make things worse. I’m going to fix this.”

And then she was gone, running from the room.

“No, Skye!” Coulson coughed, but she didn’t stop or come back.

Mage burst into the basement from one door, just as Coulson stumbled in from the other.

“We’re too late,” May stated from where she stood over hole in the ground.

It was only about one metre in diameter but all three knew that it went several hundred metres down.

“Skye?” Coulson asked.

“She’s down there,” Mage replied, feeling the pull on his ring.

“She’s not supposed to be down there,” May pointed out.

“She thinks that she’s ‘fixing things’,,” Coulson frowned.

“I’m going after her,” Mage stated.

And then, before either of the other two could reply, he jumped.

The crackle of the comm piece in her ear told May that she was about to receive a communication from the other team seconds before it arrived.

“May, Coulson, this is Triplett. The explosives are in place and set for detonation in three minutes.”

“Trip, you need to stop those timers,” May said urgently. “Both Skye and Mage are still down there.”

“Damn,” was all she heard before the line went dead.

Wind whipped at him, making his robe flap despite the wandless feather-light charm that he’d applied to himself. Currently, his wand was pointed straight down, firing cushioning charm after
cushioning charm. This may not have been the safest way down, but it sure was the fastest.

Finally, after what felt like minutes but was surely a lot less, Mage landed, his knees bent, one arm down to steady himself. Taking quick stock of his body, he was surprised to find that he’d come out of that little stunt unscathed.

A flick of his wand produced a ball of light. A second spell had it charmed to hover just above him, regardless of where he went. That took care of the light problem. Now it was simply working out how to find his way around down here.

The location charm helped. Somewhat. However, it only gave a direction, regardless of any walls that might be in the way.

Mage took off at a jog. Twice, he needed to double back. Finally, a great grinding sound ahead of him told him that he was close. Instantly, he shot off, sprinting as hard as he could.

There. Up ahead, he could see a great block of stone moving in towards a curved wall. Mage arrived a fraction of a second too late, just as it sealed shut. Slamming his fist on it in frustration, he chose a direction and ran. If there was one entrance to this temple – which he guessed had to be behind the curved wall – then surely, there’d be others.

A second indent showed where another door was. Unfortunately, he was too late to reach that one either. Nor was he in time to reach the third.

A flash of movement up ahead as he rounded a curve increased his speed. But while the body ahead of him managed to slip through the crack of the stone block door before it closed, Mage wasn’t so lucky. He was locked out.

Skidding to a halt, Mage drew his wand and approached the first door, a determined expression on his face.

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Skye found herself in a circular room with stone walls. In the very centre was a pedestal, also made of stone, a bright circle of light coming from some unknown source shone down on it like a spotlight. Across the room stood Raina, the Obelisk in her hands.

“It’s over, Raina. Give me the Obelisk,” Skye demanded.

“My life. Our whole lives have been leading to this one moment,” Raina stated.

“Sorry, I don’t buy into the whole ‘this is your destiny’ thing,” Skye shot back, her gun steady on Raina.

“You’ve got it all wrong. Everyone’s got it all wrong. *This,*” Raina said, lofting the Obelisk slightly to emphasise it, “doesn’t destroy lives. It gives life. New life. We finally get to find out what we become.”

“I’m happy as I am, thank you,” Skye replied.

Suddenly, the Obelisk began glowing, highlighting the glyphs on its side in red. Then it simply floated up and out of Raina’s hands.

“Make it stop!” Skye demanded.
“I can’t,” Raina replied. “Even if I wanted to. Which I don’t.”

The Obelisk floated across the room to come to land on the pedestal. Behind them, the great stone doors began to close.

“If you want to leave, now’s your chance,” Raina suggested. “But you won’t. You’re like me. Curious to see what we’ll become.”

And then the decision was taken out of Skye’s hands as the last of the great stone doors sealed, but not before Trip managed to slip in through the last one.

“What are you doing here?” Skye asked him.

“Rescuing you,” Trip replied as though that was obvious.

The instant that the final door had sealed, the Obelisk split from the top, opening like a petal to reveal a dozen or so blue crystals.

“What’s supposed to happen?” Trip asked as all three of them stared at the Obelisk and its crystals.

“I don’t know,” Skye replied absently.

“Something beautiful,” Raina corrected.

And then a great gust of compressed gas shot out from the crystals, engulfing the three of them and knocking them backwards.

And that’s when Skye felt it. A black … something, a crust began forming on her body, encasing her from her feet upwards. Across the room, Raina was undergoing the same phenomenon. As it moved up her body, Skye could feel her heart rate skyrocket and panic set in.

“Oh, God! Oh, God! Trip!” she cried, her gun falling from her hand.

Trip, it seemed was unaffected. At her cry, he looked at her and Skye saw him looking around in desperation.

As the black crust swept up her neck and towards her face, the very last thing that Skye saw was Trip completing a spinning kick, his aim the Obelisk and its crystals.
Not What We Once Were

A deep, bass rumble was Harry’s only warning.

Dust drifted from the ceiling. Next were small stones.

Harry only had time to glance upwards before the deluge of rocks began to rain down on him. Jerking his arm up from where it was outstretched ready to pulverise the great stone door that was blocking him from reaching Skye, Harry instead created the most powerful shield that he’d ever managed. His legs were braced far apart as the very ground that he was standing on shook violently under him.

A great golden dome formed above him, not unlike an umbrella as rocks of all sizes fell. With each new one that hit his shield, he felt it deep in his arm and bones. When one nearly twice his size landed on the dome, he was forced to brace his wand arm with his left arm, even as he dropped to one knee. Gritting his teeth, he held on, channelling more magic into this one spell than he ever had with any other spell before. Slowly, almost in slow motion, the giant rock slipped sideways before landing with a great thump to his left.

By the time that the last of the big rocks had fallen some four or five minutes later, Harry was panting hard. The ball of light that he’d originally created when he’d first landed down here, far below the Earth in this ancient, abandoned alien city had long since popped out of existence, leaving him in complete darkness now that he allowed his shield to dissipate.

Harry coughed on the dust-filled air. Pushing himself to his feet, he wiped his brow of the sweat that had formed from the effort of keeping the shield steady.

A simple wind charm was enough to send the dust away, deep into the depths of the city and far from where he currently was. A swish, flick and jab had the ball of light once more illuminating the cavern.

Boulders and piles of rocks were littered everywhere – the only clear patch a half-metre circle around himself. Stepping up onto one of the smaller boulders, Harry surveyed the area further.

Whatever that was – and his money was on an earthquake – it hadn’t made any sort of impact on the stone wall in front of where he’d been standing. There was still a great block of stone guarding the entrance to the Temple, behind which Skye was trapped.

Concentrating, Harry connected with his Head of House ring and used it to ascertain Skye’s location. He gave a nod as he noted that it didn’t appear as though she had moved.

Not knowing whether or not she was injured from the earthquake, Harry acted.

Ideally, or at least, ordinarily, he’d be able to transfigure and charm the stone in the one go to remove it but after the amount of magic that he’d just used, he knew that his reserves were low.

Narrowing his eyes at the stone door, he raised his wand and pushed the magic that he needed, transfiguring the hard stone into sandstone. Next, he changed the sandstone into glass before melting it away, leaving a puddle on the ground that he rapidly cooled.

Harry’s eyes darted about the room as he rushed in before fixing on Skye.

She was kneeling on the ground, rocks and boulders strewn all around her, even as her hand was
stretched out, resting on a black piece of rock.

“Skye!” Harry exclaimed, dropping beside her.

Instantly, her head came up and turned towards him. Tears streaked her face and her shoulders shook.

“Harry!” she exclaimed, turning to him, all but leaping into his arms.

Harry grabbed her, his arms wrapping tight around her as he reassured himself that she was alive, her arms holding tightly to him in return.

“I couldn’t save him! I couldn’t save him!” she babbled into his shirt.

Pulling back slightly, Harry moved his hands to her face, pushing her hair aside so that he could see her properly.

“It’s alright, I’m here, you’re safe, you’re alright,” Harry said, kissing her forehead before pulling her back into a hug.

“I couldn’t save him!” she repeated.


In response, Skye half-turned, her eyes going to the black rock that she’d been leaning over when he arrived.

“Trip,” she replied. “Trip. He … he died. The terrigen. I saw him trying to save me. He kicked the Obelisk, its crystals. But it killed him. There was nothing that I could do.”

Harry nodded and held her to him.

“I’m sure that you did everything that you could,” he said. “It didn’t get you did it?”

“Yes!” she gasped. “There was something. Like an air current. It knocked us back. Me and Raina and Trip …”

Suddenly, Skye pivoted in his grasp.

“Raina! She was here!” she exclaimed.

Harry looked around but, apart from a lot of rocks on the ground, he couldn’t see anything that could be a person. The fact that one of the other rock doors had tilted to the side leaving a gap caught his attention.

“Homenum revelio,” he incanted. “I’m counting two others down here, both nearby although one is moving away.”

“That’ll be Raina,” Skye said. “Don’t know who the other is.”

“Probably Mack,” Harry replied. “I was told that he was down here somewhere.”

Skye nodded.

“What happened, Skye?” Harry prompted her to continue her story.
“At first I thought that we were going to be fine,” she said. “But then a crust began forming on me. On Raina, too. It completely covered us. I thought that I was going to die.”

“But you didn’t,” Harry reassured her. “You’re fine, you’re okay.”

“I don’t know how long it lasted,” Skye continued. “A piece of it fell from my face and I saw Trip. It was like he was a statue, completely covered in the crust. And then it all fell off me and I saw what was left of Trip just falling to pieces.”

“The earthquake. You weren’t hurt by the falling rocks?” Harry asked, raking his eyes up and down her body.

“No. No, nothing touched me,” she replied, shaking her head.

It was then that Skye seemed to take in the fact that Harry was there.

“What are you doing here, anyway?” she asked.

“Rescuing you,” Harry replied with a smile. “Although why I had to, I don’t know. I thought that I gave you a way to get yourself out of trouble?”

Skye’s eyes widened and she looked down even as she brought up a hand to grasp hold of the pendant around her neck. Finally, she looked back up with a sheepish look on her face.

“Yes, right, it can just whip me away magically, can’t it?” she said. “Kinda forgot it could do that.”

“Obviously,” Harry replied. “If you’re going to keep getting into trouble, then you’re going to have to work on that.”

Skye nodded absently before narrowing her eyes at him and punching him lightly in the chest.

“Mind you, Magic Man, you took you sweet time getting here,” she accused.

“I got here as quick as I could,” Harry defended himself. “I can only ‘magic’ myself to places I’ve been before or know. And I’ve never been to Puerto Rico before. Ended up using satellite images to create a portkey to San Juan and let me tell you, that is something that has never been done before – I didn’t even know you could create a portkey to a place using only an image.

“Then Coulson had this whole mission in the works – rescue you, rescue Raina, recover the Obelisk, stop Whitehall. And after seeing how many soldiers that there were in this place, I thought it was safer and easier to accomplish everything if I stuck with your team,” he explained.

“Coulson!” Skye said, her eyes widening. “Cal attacked him! He’s hurt! We’ve got to get back up there!”

“Your wish is my command,” Harry said before promptly turning on the spot and apparating the two of them out of there.

Steve stared intently at the big screen, a case of déjà vu running rampant. Germany, albeit just inside the border to the Czech Republic. It brought back a lot of old memories. And the fact that it was Bucky who’d brought up the map and was sharing the intel only intensified it.

“They call it The Sickle,” Bucky was saying. “From what my contacts tell me, it’s a research facility but not weapons.”
“What then?” Sam asked.

“Unknown,” Bucky replied.

“Then it is unlikely that we’ll find Loki’s Sceptre there,” Thor stated grimly.

“Don’t worry, Point Break,” Tony said, clapping the Asgardian on the shoulder, “it’ll turn up eventually, and when it does, we’ll get it back.”

“And this time I’ll return it to Asgard where it can do no harm,” Thor agreed.

“What sort of resistance are we likely to face?” Steve asked, getting the briefing back on track.

“From what I’m told, minimal,” Bucky replied.

“I’m assuming that we’re not going to rely on that intel?” Rhodey said.

“No. We’re not,” Steve replied. “We’ll go in hot, expecting the worst and if it works out in our favour, then we’re not going to complain.”

“And hopefully we can get some added intel to find and finish off the last dregs of HYDRA once and for all,” Tony stated.

“Amen to that,” Steve nodded.

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The team landed the quinjet to the east, hidden behind a small hill and a bank of trees. Scans had already told them the layout of the land and buildings that they’d be infiltrating and attacking.

There were two buildings, one larger than the other. Both were two stories tall, however the larger of the two, the one sitting high on the hill where it could survey the land around it, was easily fifty metres long and quite wide as well. The other, and consequently, the building with the higher concentration of heat signatures, was built more like a cube out of deep grey stone and small, high windows that would only really be good for shooting from. Simply put, it was a bunker or perhaps a barracks for the guards.

“Tony, Sam, Rhodey,” Steve was saying as the group gathered around the quinjet’s holographic situation table for their last briefing before launching their attack. “You’ve got the skies. Use it, keep their focus up and away from the rest of us. Come in from three different directions – north, south, west. Thor. Concentrate on that barracks. There’s only a couple of exits for them to come out of. Use that bottleneck. Buck, you and I’ll make our way to the main building. We’ll start at the eastern end and work our way through. Take prisoners if you can; if you can’t, then your priority is to get out of their alive.”

“Just like the old days,” Bucky grinned.

“And leave me a computer or something to work with,” Tony stated. “If the sceptre isn’t here, then it might have some info in its banks that I can use to track it down.”

“And me?” Bruce asked, a little nervously.

“You wait here,” Steve said, clapping the other man on the back. “By the look of things, we shouldn’t need the Hulk, but if things go south, then we’ll call a Code Green.”

“Yeah, let’s hope,” Bruce replied.
“Cap, I’ve got movement towards your position,” Falcon called over the comms. “Four of them, keeping low, coming at you from your two o’clock.”

Tony swivelled about, honing in on the position and having Jarvis enhance it onto his HUD.

“I’ve got them,” Bucky stated and Tony could hear the smile in the man’s voice.

Less than ten seconds later, the four men jerked and dropped to the ground.

“Thanks, Wolf,” Cap said.

“Yeah, good work and all that,” Tony said, even as he fired his repulsors and shot towards a sniper on the roof of the big building. “But I’m just not sold on the whole ‘Wolf’ name.”

“What?” Cap asked. “You want to bring that up now?”

“Well, it’s the first time that it’s been used in the field,” Tony defended.

“What’s wrong with it?” Wolf near-growled.

“I’ll give you points for that growl but the name lacks something. To be honest, it’s kinda bland,” Tony said.

A pair of repulsor blasts took care of the sniper and Tony veered off, searching for his next target.

“It needs a little jazz, a little something extra,” Tony continued. “Grey Wolf maybe, to go with that arm of yours. Or Prosthetically-Enhanced Wolf. Even Nat adds in ‘Black’ to go with her ‘Widow’ thing.”

“No,” Wolf stated simply.

Tony scrunched his nose up, he was sure that he could wear the other man down to his way of thinking.

“What about White Wolf? It’s got that alliteration thing going for it,” Tony suggested.

A ping off of the side of his helmet started Tony and he spun about searching to find who had just shot at him.

“I believe that Serjeant Barnes is not a fan of your suggestion,” Jarvis stated.


“I wasn’t aiming for anything vital,” Wolf said. “If I was, you’d know. Now quit your suggestions. I’m happy with my new code name. And we’re supposed to be in a battle. Concentrate.”

“Wolf’s right, Tony,” Cap interjected. “We’re here to get a job done.”

“I was multitasking,” Tony complained. “It’s not my fault my brain runs so fast and efficiently that I can do more than one thing at a time. Unlike some others I could name.”

“This is not a barracks, nor is it a bunker,” Thor interjected, cutting off their ‘conversation’.

“What is it?” Cap asked.
“It’s a prison,” Thor replied grimly.

ooo00ooo

Skye sat at the very back of the medical bed, her back against the small headboard, one knee pressed right up against her chest, her other leg and both arms wrapped around it. Her head was down, her hair partially shielding her from the outside world.

Not that the outside world was anywhere close right now.

Currently, she was locked up tight in one of the Playground’s medical containment rooms. There was medical equipment everywhere. A half dozen cables were attached to her – temples, wrists, chest – all monitoring her vitals and wellbeing. Beeps were her constant companion from the various machines stationed around the room.

Currently, she was in quarantine while Fitz and Simmons worked out what, if anything, that burst of compressed air and the terrigen crust had done to her, why it was that she survived when others, when Trip, hadn’t.

The glass walls of her current ‘cell’ allowed her to see what was going on outside her room. Mack had just been released from his own containment room, having spent the past eight hours in it, just as she had been.

“Your bloodwork came back clean,” Jemma smiled at the big man.

“So, whatever that alien City did to me is out of my system?” Mack clarified.

“Indeed, so,” Jemma confirmed. “It is my hypothesis that it was using you as some kind of antibody, as a tool to ensure that the City remained safe until the Obelisk could be brought to the Temple and used the way it was supposed to. Not that we understand exactly what it did as of yet. It also ensured that your body remained in peak condition even while it took over your mind.”

“Sort of like an imperius,” Mage stated from where he stood against the far wall, his arms folded, just as he’d been since Skye’d been put in the containment room, before clarifying. “A spell that allows one magical to control another.”

“Yes, quite, by the sound of it,” Jemma said before turning towards Skye. “The results of your tests aren’t ready yet, but they should be soon.”

“How are you feeling, Skye?” Coulson asked.

“I feel fine,” she replied, lifting her head slightly.

“I still don’t understand exactly what you hope to achieve,” Mage said, stepping forward.

“They’re trying to work out whether that alien stuff has changed her, done something to her that we don’t know, or whether it has a hold on her like it had on me” Mack replied shortly.

“You think that Skye’s mind might not be her own?” Mage asked, cocking his head to the side.

“I’m unwilling to rule anything out at this time,” Jemma replied. “We’ll know more once the blood, DNA and other test results come back.”

“Well, that’s an easy one to rule out,” Mage said, taking a single step forward before vanishing.

If Skye hadn’t already been pressed up against the back of her bed, she would have jerked
backwards at the unexpected arrival of Mage right beside her bed. She looked up at his hood and hidden face as he swiped a hand across it, only to see his smiling face appear.

“What are you doing?” May half-yelled. “Get out of there!”

“Considering that I’m the one who found Skye after whatever it was happened and that we’ve already touched, then I seriously doubt that I’m in any danger,” Mage replied without turning around.

Skye’s eyes searched his vibrant green ones, trying to work out what he was doing in there with her.

“Harry?” she whispered, too low for any of the others to hear.

“Do you trust me?” he asked with a lopsided smile.

“Of course,” she replied instantly.

“Just relax,” he said, “I’ll be as quick as I can. Legilimens.”

Skye felt a pressure in her head and found that she couldn’t look away from Harry’s eyes, not that she really wanted to anyway. The pressure gradually eased into something warm and comforting. Just as she realised that it was Harry in her head, the pressure, his presence, retreated.

He gave a single nod to her before once again hiding his face and turning about to face the others.

“Skye’s mind is her own,” he stated.

“That’s good to know but you really shouldn’t be in there until I’ve cleared her medically,” Jemma admonished.

“That was dumb, Mage,” Mack stated. “Trip’s already sacrificed himself for Skye, we don’t need anyone else doing it.”

“I’m sure that Agent Triplett did everything that he could to save his own life as well as Skye’s,” May stated.

“But he shouldn’t have had to!” Mack bit back.

“What does that mean?” Coulson asked.

“It means that if you and Skye hadn’t been looking into stuff you shouldn’t have been, none of this would have happened!”

“Stuff they shouldn’t have been’?” May repeated incredulously. “We’re S.H.I.E.L.D. agents. Looking into the strange is what we do.”

“But not alien strange,” Mack countered. “We’re here to protect Earth, to deal with humans and the danger that they pose to others. And there’s surely enough of that kind of weird happening more and more of late so that we don’t need to go looking into stuff that doesn’t concern us. That alien writing should have been left alone!”

“But if not us, then who?” Coulson asked. “We’re the shield that protects humanity. Yes, traditionally, that has been from other humans but after New York, after London, not to mention some of the files that are way above your pay grade to see that have happened over the past few decades, S.H.I.E.L.D. has had to branch out, to be ready for whatever else is out there.”
“And look what it’s got us!” Mack near-yelled back. “Trip dead! And God knows what it’s done to Skye!”

“Please, stop!” Skye whispered, her eyes darting between her friends arguing on the other side of the glass.

She could feel her pulse starting to race. Images of seeing Trip kick at the Obelisk, of seeing his encrusted body, of seeing it begin to shatter apart began to assault her. And she felt the guilt begin to well up inside her.

“We don’t know that it’s done anything to Skye at all,” Fitz said, joining the argument.

“We don’t know that it hasn’t!” Mack countered.

The sound of one of the monitors changed and Skye’s head whipped across to see the lines on it that were monitoring her heartrate begin to spike and go all jagged. At the same time, she felt her bed begin to shake.

Mage, who’d been leaning against it, looked down and then at her and she could imagine his eyes staring at her, questioning her. From the other side of the partition, her friends kept going and Skye brought both hands up to her ears in an attempt to block them out.

Still, though, the bed kept shaking, getting more and more violent as the seconds ticked by. And then the light shining through her closed eyelids seemed to flicker off and on.

“Skye?”

“Skye?”

She looked up to find that it wasn’t just Harry looking at her, it was everyone outside the containment room as well. May, Coulson and Fitz looked concerned. Jemma looked horrified as her head and eyes darted between Skye and the pad that she was holding. Mack, though, Mack looked scared and that was something that she never expected to see on his face.

“Skye, you need to calm down,” Harry said.

If she wasn’t so caught up in her feelings of guilt over Trip not to mention the growing feeling of panic about what was happening to her, she would have snapped off a witty comment or simply slapped him for that: when had saying that to anyone actually ever worked.

And then Harry was there, the hood of his robes blocking out everything and everyone else as his hidden lips found hers. The kiss was tender, loving, comforting and Skye found herself melting into it after a couple of moments.

It was only when he pulled back that she noticed that the bed had stopped shaking and the monitors had resumed their steady beeping rather than the frantic, shrill sounds that they’d been making moments ago.

“What was that?” Mack asked.

“I have no idea,” Jemma replied.

“Was that a result of whatever happened in the Kree Temple?” May asked.

“The results should be done soon,” Fitz commented.
Mage whirled to face the group outside the containment room.

“I ask again, what do you expect that they’ll show you?” he near-snapped. “You told me that Skye was able to hold the Obelisk because of her Kree ancestry. That means that she’s not fully human! Do any of you have any experience dealing with physiology that isn’t human?”

Jemma and Fitz shared a look.

“Some,” Jemma said.

“But not a lot,” Fitz added.

“Exactly,” Mage nodded. “Whatever that was just then, it was centred around Skye. Now, I’m now Healer, but to me that tells me that something has happened to Skye. I also know that she’s not contagious; if she were, then I’d be showing some kind of symptoms by now.”

“My DNA is different from normal humans. Merlin, half of the Avengers have something different about them,” Mage continued. “My Healer understands them and how they are different, not to mention that we have a world-class doctor on staff and Thor, who’s not from Earth at all. If anyone’s going to get a handle on what’s happened to Skye and to help her through it, then it’s us, not you. Besides, your arguing is not helping matters in the slightest!”

Skye’s mind was whirling as she tried to fathom what was going on. Was Harry saying that something was wrong with her? That she’d been changed somehow? Her mind latched onto the way her bed had been shaking moments ago and the way the lights seemed to flicker. Did that have something to do with it? Is that what Harry meant?

But before she could actually ask any questions or think on it any more, Harry had spun back around and had begun ripping off the monitors that were attached to her. As soon as she was ‘free’, he slipped one an arm around her waist and the other under her legs and lifted her from the bed.

“Harry?” she asked, even as her arms locked around his neck.

And without even answering her, she felt him twist and the two of them disappear from the room.

ooo00ooo

With their prisoners rounded up, disarmed, their hands zip-tied together and locked in one of the larger rooms of the larger building, the team was doing a last mop-up and sweep of Sickle Base.

“I’ve let one of my contacts in the German military know what we’ve found here,” Rhodey stated as he walked into the room. “There’ll be a unit here to deal with this lot within the hour.”

“Excellent. That gives me more than enough time to download their entire database to our mainframe and to have a little looksee at what they’ve been doing here,” Tony replied from where he was standing at a console, his fingers dancing at the keyboard.

A clanking sound had Rhodey glancing across to where the Iron Man armour was walking about the expansive room by itself. The room was indeed huge, despite the fact that there were parts of it that were partitioned off with glass panelling. Many of those extra rooms looked as though they had airlocks on the door to keep the room inside completely sterile.

“What is this place?” Rhodey asked.
“At a guess, a combination hospital and medical lab,” Tony replied. “Looks like they were doing a whole bunch of experimenting. On people, judging by the plethora of beds in this place.”

“They were experimenting on people?” Rhodey asked. “That’s in direct violation of the Geneva Convention.”

“Add it to the list of charges to be filed against them,” Tony stated offhandedly.

“What were they doing to them?” Rhodey asked.

“I haven’t got there yet,” Tony said before stopping – even his fingers stilled. “Now, why does this sound familiar?”

“What sounds familiar?” Rhodey asked.

“I’ve just cracked the encryption to their files. There’s gigabytes of data all pertaining to something called the ‘Connors Formula’,” Tony said. “That name, Connors. It sounds familiar. Jarvis?”

“Doctor Curtis Connors,” Jarvis replied from the handheld device that was docked to the computer that Tony was working on. “He worked at Oscorp Industries. A biochemist. He was working on a serum that would enable amputees to ‘regrow’ lost limbs. The serum was classified as a failure after Doctor Connors tested it on himself and turned into the Lizard.”

“I remember now,” Tony nodded. “Peter fought him before he became one of us. Defeated him, too. Isn’t he locked up in Rikers? The question is, what is his formula doing here?”

“And what have HYDRA been doing with it?” Rhodey added grimly.

ooo00ooo

Thor and Sam had been going from prison cell to prison cell, releasing the people held there and helping them outside. It was a grim task; every one of those people were weak and all were missing at least one limb, be it an arm or leg. So far, they’d found twenty-eight people.

“Sam, there appears to be another level,” Thor called from where he stood at the far end of the hall, a metal door now standing open.

As Sam joined him, he nodded and led the way down the staircase. A touch of a button on the side of his glasses activated a thermal scan.

“I’m only reading one heat signature,” he said.

“Then perhaps this is the last of those that HYDRA held captive,” Thor said.

They passed three empty cells before Sam stopped.

“This one,” he nodded at the fourth.

Thor stepped forward, sized up the door, seized the handle and pulled. The metal creaked, groaned and then a snapping sound echoed throughout the corridor as the lock gave way.

Sam stepped up, intent on identifying them as friends, to offer comfort and to let the prisoner know that they were now safe and free, just as he’d done for each of the others that they’d rescued so far.

Instead, he froze, his jaw dropped and all that came out of his mouth was, “what the?”
Here There Be Dragons

“What the …?”

Sam stood in the doorway of the small prison cell in the basement of HYDRA’s Sickle Base, frozen in shock at what he was seeing. It wasn’t the fact that there was a prisoner there, after all, he and Thor had already released twenty-eight people from the cells in the level above. No, what had completely overwhelmed him was the fact that this person didn’t look human at all.

The … female … inside the cell was unconscious, one arm dangling from the narrow concrete slab that was obviously supposed to be her bed. Her head was turned towards them, her eyes closed. Sam could only assume that lying face-down was the most comfortable position for her, what with her large, leathery, green tail.

But it wasn’t just her tail that was leathery-looking or green. No, it was all of her. Every inch of skin that Sam could see through her old, tattered clothing was green. Apart from her skin, it was her head that showed the most difference from ‘human-norm’. Her bald head allowed Sam a good look at one of her pointed ears, something that her crest fin on her head failed to hide.

“Is this normal for Midgard?” Thor asked.

Sam glanced back over his shoulder at the tall Asgardian, but only for a second before turning back to stare at the female-lizard-hybrid-human again.

“No. No, it’s not,” he said.

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Bucky stepped out of the deep shadow of the building that he’d been loitering in, his gun cradled to his chest as Steve walked closer. His best friend’s nod acknowledged his presence but Bucky was certain that Steve had known that he was there long before he revealed himself.

“We’ll be regrouping at the quinjet in thirty minutes,” Steve stated.

“The prisoners?” Bucky asked.

“The ones we took are being taken into custody by the German military; Colonel Rhodes is seeing to that as we speak,” Steve replied. “As to the ones that Thor and Sam found, the last of them are being checked over before they will be loaded into the last of the fleet of ambulances that the military called in.”

“What’s the odds that HDYRA will get their claws back into them?” Bucky asked.

“Next to none,” Tony stated, joining the conversation via his comm even as he brought the Iron Man armour in to land just beside them.

“How can you be sure?” Steve asked intently.

Tony’s face appeared as his face plate flipped up.

“It won’t happen because I’ve had Jarvis call in the Iron Legion,” Tony stated. “Jarvis will have them monitor the hospital for the time being to ensure that they’re getting the best care and that HDYRA won’t have the opportunity to kidnap them again.”
“What were they doing with them?” Steve asked. “I’m guessing some kind of experimentation?”

Bucky couldn’t help but flinch slightly. He’d been through enough of that over the decades to never wish that on anyone and especially not innocent civilians.

“From the records that I read, I don’t think that the HYDRA scientists actually got to those people,” Tony replied. “There were others, though …”

“What was their aim?” Bucky asked, moving the conversation on from the thought that Tony’s last statement had left.

“They were trying to replicate something that, until today, I thought had only been achieved once before – by Doctor Curtis Connors,” Tony replied.

“Wait. I know that name,” Steve said, a thoughtful look on his face.

Tony gave him a significant look.

“Think Parker, back when we first met him,” Tony hinted.

Suddenly, recognition bloomed on Steve’s face.

“The Lizard?”

“Got it in one,” Tony nodded.

“Is that what happened to that woman? She’s part lizard or something?” Bucky asked.

“Or something,” Tony replied. “Thankfully, she’s the only one.”

“Is she going with the other civilians to the hospital?” Steve asked.

“No,” Tony replied grimly. “Parker and Gwen came up with a fix for Connors once; I’m betting that they can do it again for this woman. Sam and Thor are transferring her to the quinjet as we speak.”

“If we can undo what HYDRA did to her, then I’m all for it,” Steve nodded, a sentiment that Bucky could only agree with.

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Harry stumbled slightly as he apparated into the Tower, Skye in his arms.

“Jarvis,” he called, even as he dropped Skye’s legs, allowing her to regain her feet, one arm still around her. “Please have Daphne and Doctor Cho meet us in the medical wing.”

“Of course, Sir,” Jarvis replied.

“We’re at Avengers Tower?” Skye asked, looking around.

“We are,” Harry confirmed. “Come on, let’s get you checked out.”

A short elevator ride later and Harry was escorting her into the wing. The instant that they appeared, Daphne had her wand up and waving about the two in an intricate pattern.

“What are the injuries?” Doctor Cho asked.

“I’m not detecting anything,” Daphne frowned. “Potter, if you summoned us down here for no
“Skye was caught in some kind of alien mist in San Juan,” Harry cut her off. “S.H.I.E.L.D. have been running tests but there was an argument and the room started shaking.”

“The room started shaking,” a nonplussed-sounding Daphne repeated.

“I think it was me,” Skye admitted in a small voice.

“You mentioned an alien mist?” Doctor Cho asked.

Skye nodded. “Yeah. It’s Kree, whoever they are. At first, I didn’t think that it’d affected me at all, probably because I’m apparently part Kree as well – don’t ask, some ancestry thing that I’ve got no clue about. But then, when everyone started arguing I could feel my heartrate racing and then the bed, not to mention the whole room, started shaking.”

Daphne shot Harry a look.

“Like accidental magic?” she asked.

“Sounds something like it,” Harry agreed before turning to Skye to explain. “When magic first begins appearing in children, they don’t know how to control it – that’s what schooling is for, to teach us how. Until then, heightened emotions are most often the main cause of magic manifesting, often in unusual ways. For me, that meant apparating onto a roof and turning my teacher’s hair blue, amongst other things.”

“You’re saying that I’m magical now?” Skye asked wide-eyed.

“No,” Daphne replied. “Magic doesn’t work that way, it’s something that you’re born with. This is something different. Potter here was just trying to help you understand why the shaking happened, that it wasn’t your fault.”

“What were the results of the tests that S.H.I.E.L.D. conducted?” Cho asked.

“Don’t know, Harry stole me before they came in,” Skye replied. “I could get them for you if that helps?”

“I’m not taking you back right now,” Harry stated.

“And I wasn’t asking you to,” Skye countered. “I was a hacker long before I joined S.H.I.E.L.D. and breaking into a system that I helped design is child’s play.”

“You can do that?” Harry asked.

“Watch me,” Skye replied, striding across to the nearest computer console.

Harry, along with Daphne and Cho, watched Skye manipulating the computer for the next couple of minutes before, with a flourish, she turned towards them, a broad smile on her face.

“Voila!” she exclaimed.

Doctor Cho all but pushed her aside to get to the screen.

“This … this can’t be right,” she murmured a couple of seconds later.

“What can’t?” Harry asked.
“Skye’s DNA,” Cho replied. “It’s … there are extra sequences in it that are simply not human. I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

Noting Skye wrapping her arms around herself, Harry moved across and put an arm around her. Instantly, he felt her lean into him.

“The rest of the results all look normal enough,” Cho continued.

“So, it’s just my DNA?” Skye asked. “What does it mean? I’m not human anymore?”

“At this point, I’m not sure,” Cho admitted. “I’ve seen mutant DNA with the X-gene and even numerous mutate’s DNA – notably Doreen’s and Jennifer’s – but even with their differences, it’s easy to tell that they’re still of Earth-origin. Yours definitely has something else, something that I doubt any human has seen before. I’m sorry. At this point, I don’t have any answers; hopefully after I’ve run some additional tests, I’ll have some.”

Harry startled as he felt the girl in his arms begin to shake, a vibration that impacted him and reached deep into his bones. And then the floor began to sway slightly. Objects – pens, cups, pads, bottles and trays – began sliding along the desks.

“I am detecting what appears to be an earthquake centred on the Tower,” Jarvis stated urgently. “Currently, it measures 4.2 on the Richter Scale and rising.”

Knowing exactly what was happening, Harry did the only thing that he could think of. Spinning Skye around in his arms, he kissed her, long, hard and deep. At first, she resisted, but the more that he insisted, the more passion that he put into the kiss, the more that she seemed to respond. By the time that he eventually pulled away, the Tower had stopped shaking, although they were both breathing quite hard.

“Well, that’s one way to calm her down, Potter,” Daphne stated dryly.

“Hey, there’s no complaints here,” Skye smiled, even as her sparkling eyes remained locked on his.

“However, it isn’t a long-term viable solution,” Doctor Cho stated. “What happens if Skye becomes agitated and you’re not around, Harry? 4.2 and rising, Jarvis said. Skye has the potential to do a lot of damage.”

“You’re right,” Harry agreed. “Daphne and I, we had to learn how to control out magic, make it work for us the way we intended. Doreen, Jennifer, Peter, Steve, a lot of the Avengers, really, had the same issues when they first gained their powers. There’s no school where you can learn to control whatever this is that you’re doing. However, you do need to be someplace safe, somewhere where you can learn to control what you can do without the risk of hurting others.”


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Skye cracked one eye open and peeked at Harry sitting across from her. He looked so serene, so peaceful sitting there, his hair being gently tussled in the light breeze, the ocean framing his back, the sand under his crossed legs.

“‘You know that you’re never going to get this if you keep letting yourself be distracted,” Harry stated unexpectedly, even without opening his eyes.

With a sigh, Skye opened her eyes properly and shifted about so that her legs were out and crossed
in front of her even as she leant back on her elbows.

“I just can’t seem to get it,” Skye admitted.

“And I’d have been surprised if you had of been able to begin meditating on your first try,” Harry smiled at her. “Especially with the day that you’ve been having.”

“Hey, I’ve meditated before,” Skye defended herself. “May’s been teaching me. Slow your breathing and heart rate and all that, keep control of yourself and your emotions. I can get it. Most of the time.”

Harry nodded at her. “May sounds like a good teacher. So, what’s different this time?”

Skye tipped her head back, allowing the sun to shine fully on her face as she thought about the answer.

“I guess I’m afraid,” she eventually admitted.

“No shame in that,” Harry said. “Merlin, I’d be terrified if I was in your shoes. It was bad enough as a kid, not knowing what was going on when something freaky happened. The day that Hagrid told me that I was a wizard was one of the best days of my life – it explained so much. But it took me years at Hogwarts to fully understand what it meant to be a wizard and even now, I’m still learning. But it’s different for you. You’ve just had whatever this is thrust upon you without any warning and you’re trying to learn about it and understand what’s happened to you as fast as you can. And it has only been a day, after all. No one would expect you to have a handle on it so quickly.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Thanks,” she smiled at him.

Hearing that Harry understood what she was going through, well, as much as he could, anyway, was a relief and Skye felt a small part of the tension that she was carrying fall away. Once again, she allowed her head to tip back and she soaked up the sun.

Lying here on the beach of Harry’s private island was amazing. It was so peaceful and calm. There was no hustle and bustle of the city, no constant chatter of hundreds of people, just the sound of the ocean, the rustle of the leaves in the trees and birds calling overhead.

And then she felt it. A vibration deep below her. Frowning, she focussed on it. No, it wasn’t coming from her. It wasn’t something that she was doing, it was in the ground, deep, deep underground.

“Woah!” she exclaimed, sitting up, her eyes wide as she stared at the ground that she was sitting on.

“Skye?” Harry asked.

She looked up at him and she wasn’t sure exactly what she was feeling. It was a combination of awe and terror with a few other, minor emotions all mixed together.

“I think that I just felt your entire island,” she admitted.

“You did?” Harry asked. “What’d it feel like?”

“It’s hard to describe,” she replied, her brows furrowed as she thought about it. “It was just vibrations really, as though the entire island was vibrating.”

“Makes sense,” Harry nodded. “Maybe that’s what you can do now – feel vibrations. Jarvis did say that he detected an earthquake at the Tower and earthquakes are just vibrations, aren’t they?”
“Yeah, I guess,” Skye replied. “And if I can feel vibrations, maybe I can affect them or … or make them?”

“It’s as good a theory as any at this point,” Harry agreed.

Unexpectedly, his head whipped up and to the right.

“Speaking of vibrations, it looks as though the quinjet is back with the team from their mission to Germany,” he said.

“Well, I’ve had enough of feeling islands for now,” Skye said, scrambling to her feet and brushing the sand off of herself. “What’s say we go say ‘hi’?”

“Sounds like a plan,” Harry agreed as he, too, stood.

Then, hand in hand, the two walked off the beach and into the trees.

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A pair of rushing teens had Thor stepping to the side, away from the door.

“Hi Thor. Sorry,” Peter called as he raced past, all but pulling Gwen along behind him.

“That’s the problem with youth today, always in a hurry,” Stark commented.

“’Cause you’re never in a hurry,” Steve shot back.

Thor couldn’t help but laugh at Stark’s face. There was no denying that the Man of Iron was indeed one of the fastest on the team, in fact, it appeared that each new suit of armour that was created was designed to go faster than the one before it.

But then, Thor could have made the same comment about Stark as he had about Peter; after all, what is a few decades of life compared to Thor’s own millennium and a half?

“Thor! Just the Asgardian that we were hoping to see!”

“Seidhr,” Thor greeted the Midgardian wizard with a nod. “What is it that I can do for you this day?”

The Seidhr and the one called Skye were seated in one of the lounge areas of the great common room of the Island’s main building. Also there were the Seidhr Healer and the Midgardian doctor.

“What do you know of the Kree?” the Seidhr asked.

“The Kree?” Thor asked, unable to hide his surprise. “They are a most disagreeable race, prone to war and violence. Why do you ask of them?”

At the Seidhr’s gesture, Thor, as well as both Stark and Steve, settled into the empty chairs with the others.

“We’ve just come from a Kree City hidden under San Juan in Puerto Rico,” the Seidhr stated.

“I was unaware that there were any Kree cities on Midgard,” Thor said. “Indeed, there are only rumours, stories of myth and legend that the Kree ever visited Midgard at all.”

The Seidhr and Skye shared a look.
“There’s been other alien races here?” Stark asked.

“Considering we’re sitting with an Asgardian whose father was here in the time of the Vikings, is that really so hard to believe?” Steve asked.

“When you put it like that, then no, it isn’t,” Stark replied. “Still, it’d be nice to know these things.”

“I think that we need to hear these stories,” the Seidhr stated and continued before Thor could begin. “When Skye was in the Kree City, she was in a Temple of some kind and a Kree device shot her with some kind of mist. It’s … it’s changed her.”

“Terrigen,” Skye added. “It’s called a Terrigen Mist. From a Kree Obelisk or Diviner.”

Thor shot to his feet and began pacing, his eyes never leaving the woman seated next to the Seidhr.

“And you live still?” Thor questioned before waving away the question. “This is most troubling.”

“Thor? What is it?” Steve asked.

“The Kree have always been a war-like race, forever finding other planets and peoples to fight, attempting to expand the borders of their Empire,” Thor said, deciding to begin at the beginning. “Even today, they have not long signed a peace treaty with the Nova Empire, ending decades of war. There is one part of their violent history that is all but lost to time. Indeed, I only know of it as I am a Prince of Asgard; it is doubtful that more than a handful know of this outside of the Kree Empire.”

Looks were shared amongst his companions.

“I’m guessing whatever this ancient history is affects Skye now?” the Seidhr asked.

“I believe so,” Thor replied.

Noting how scared the woman looked, Thor forced himself to sit before beginning to tell the story as he knew it.

“Long ago, in ancient times, with my grandfather, Bor was still King, the Kree were losing one of their many wars,” he said. “The number of casualties was high and the Kree leaders became divided upon how to turn their losses around. One faction of Kree dispatched teams to planets far and wide in order to experiment on the native populations, searching for ways to enhance them for use in their wars.”

“They were looking for expendable soldiers,” Steve interpreted grimly.

“Cannon fodder,” Stark stated, just as darkly.

“Indeed,” Thor agreed. “I do not know much about these experiments other than it involved the Kree using their own blood to begin the change of the native populations. The final part of the process was the introduction of a catalyst to complete what the Kree called ‘Terrigenesis’. It was always believed that this process failed on every planet that they tried it on.”

“I’d say that it wasn’t a complete failure,” Doctor Cho stated. “Skye’s DNA has definitely been altered and now contains something that is completely alien.”

“The fact that you live supports that,” Thor nodded. “In all the stories that I’ve heard, none who underwent the process of Terrigenesis lived. Indeed, when the majority of the Kree leaders found out what their brethren were attempting, they made the practice illegal, putting a stop to it at once. To my
knowledge, it has never been attempted again.”

“You said that Skye’s DNA has changed?” Stark said. “Any side effects?”

“I think that I can feel the vibrations in the Earth, maybe even create my own earthquakes,” Skye stated.

“Well, that’s cool,” Stark said.

“I brought Skye here so that she can learn to control whatever this is in a safe environment,” the Seidhr said.

“Very wise,” Thor nodded.

“Whatever the Avengers can do to help, we will,” Steve said and Thor could hear the sincerity in his voice.

“I will also consult my father and the Asgardian records, to see if there is any other information about this Kree Terrigenesis,” Thor promised.

“Thank you. Thank you all,” Skye smiled.

Consciousness returned slowly to Melati. At first, everything was fuzzy, her brain trying to process her surroundings through the fog of the drug that she’d been given. But after more than a year (at least, she thought that it’d been at least that long, it was kinda hard to tell without seeing the sun, the sky, even a calendar ever since she’d been kidnapped) of waking up with the drug in her system, she’d gotten used to it.

First came touch and that was what really confused her. Her ‘bed’ (if one could call a slab of concrete that) was hard and cold. Or, at least, it was supposed to be. Today, however, it … wasn’t. Today, Melati felt something soft, something padded, underneath her.

As expected, she was lying face down, really, after her transformation, sleeping in any other position simply wasn’t an option. Cracking her left eye open, she took in the room. For the briefest of instances, her eye widened but then she reined herself in, quickly shutting it. Her heart sped up, increasing her adrenaline and helping the fog lift from her mind.

This wasn’t her cell. It wasn’t even one of the rooms that she was often taken to where she was experimented on.

Once again, she cracked open her eye and looked about.

Obviously, this was a hospital room of some kind. The walls were crisp white, broken only by banks of machines and a great glass window in the wall beside the door. But what really caught Melati’s attention were the two figures that she could see in the next room through that window.

Two teenagers, a boy and girl. Both were huddled together over some equipment – a microscope being the easiest to identify. Test tubes sat in a rack on the bench and streams of data rolled across the giant screens set in the wall above them.

Exactly where she was or why there were two teens instead of the numerous guards or scientists were questions for later as far as Melati was concerned. No, this looked to be her best chance at escape since she’d been kidnapped.
Slowly, keeping her eye on the teens in the other room, Melati slipped off of the bed. Keeping low, she began crossing the room, being sure to keep the claws that extended from her toes from clicking on the ground. Her tail was a great asset here, ensuring that she was able to stay balanced.

Reaching the door, Melati grasped the handle and attempted to turn it, nearly swearing in annoyance when she found it locked. The door, though, wasn’t the only way out.

Backing up, Melati slowly rose to her full five foot eight height, brought her arms up in front of her, her claws extended and ready. Then, after giving herself a moment to psych herself up, she took three quick strides across the room before throwing herself through the window.

Really, she tried to roll with her momentum, to come up on her feet and ready to either flee or fight but it just didn’t happen. After being held captive for so long with little food and no exercise, she simply didn’t have the strength or agility that that manoeuvre required. Not to mention the other thing.

And then, just as she began pushing herself to her feet, a blob of something white and sticky impacted with her hand. Reflexively, she tried to pull her hand away, only to find that she couldn’t, that it was stuck fast to the floor. And then more of it began raining down on her – her foot, her tail, her other hand, tail again, other foot and some more on each of her hands.

“Hey, settle down, we’re trying to help,” the girl said.

“Let me go! Let me go!” Melati screamed at the two.

Only then did she note that the boy was perched on the wall somehow, his hands out towards her.

“Sorry, no can do, your lady-lizardness,” the boy said. “As Gwen said, we’re trying to help you. Give us another hour and we’ll have you cured and back to human normal again.”

It took Melati a few moments to process what the boy had said.

“You can make me fully human again?” she asked.

“Yep, sure can,” the boy said. “It’s not hard. Well, I say it’s not hard but that’s only because we’ve done this sort of thing before. Only there’s some sort of mutation in the serum that you were given but it’s nothing that we can’t crack.”

“Where am I?” she whispered.

The girl crept closer, a look of … compassion on her face.

“You’re at an Avengers compound,” she said. “I’m sorry, we can’t tell you any more than that.”

“I’m free? I’m not a prisoner anymore?” Melati asked.

“No, you’re not,” the girl, Gwen, smiled. “Some of the Avengers rescued you and the others yesterday.”

“Others?” Melati asked.

She’d thought that there were other prisoners, other people who’d been kidnapped, at least, she’d heard others. Not that she’d ever seen anyone or even had a chance to talk to any.

“There were, but you were the only one who’d been changed,” the boy said, climbing down from the wall.
You said that you can make me fully human again?” Melati repeated her question from before.

“Yes, we can,” Gwen said before turning to the boy. “Pete, how about you cut … um, her loose.”

“You’re not going to hurt us, are you?” the boy, Pete, asked.

“No, please, I won’t hurt you just … just please, don’t turn me back. Don’t make me human again, please, I don’t want to go back to that again,” Melati pleaded.

“You don’t want to be human again?” Gwen asked, obviously confused by her request.

“Why not? And what’s your name, anyway?” Pete asked.

Melati sat up as the white stuff that had her stuck to the floor was cut away.

“My name’s Melati, Melati Kusuma,” she said. “And please, I don’t want to go back to how I was. I don’t want to go back to being in a wheelchair, to having no legs again.”

Once again, the two teens looked at each other.

“Doctor Connors’ formula was designed to replace lost limbs,” Gwen stated.

“Yeah, and it did for him as well, with the added bonus of turning him into the Lizard as well,” Pete added. “You, at least, seem to have kept your sanity, though.”

“What happened?” Gwen asked gently.

Melati sighed, she really didn’t want to tell this story, but if it was the only way to get them to not change her back into what she was, then she’d do anything.

“It happened years ago,” she said. “I’d only had my licence for six weeks. I was stupid. Speeding and drunk and there was an accident. It took them two hours to cut me free and after it was all over, I’d lost both my legs. I tried to make something of my life, I really did. I was even accepted into Empire State University on a full scholarship to study biochemistry. I’d just completed my first year when I was kidnapped. I was sure that I was going to die there.

“And then they injected me with some kind of serum and I woke up like this. With two whole legs again. Can you imagine what that was like? After being a cripple, stuck in a wheelchair for years to finally have two legs again? To be able to walk again? Yes, I look like a lizard and I have a tail and claws and green skin and this crest on my head, but I can walk! I don’t want to go back! I can deal with the other side effects so long as I can walk!”

“I can understand how much it means to you,” Gwen said, “and if you don’t want us to turn you back, then we won’t.”

“Yeah, I can get how much being changed means. Been there myself,” Pete said and Melati remembered seeing him stuck to the wall and she wondered exactly what change he’d gone through.

“How about we get you and all this glass cleaned up and we go find the others and you can talk to them,” Gwen suggested.

“Others?” Melati asked warily.

“Yeah, the rest of the Avengers,” Pete grinned.

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A light blinking on Maria’s computer caught her attention, prompting her to tap it. Numbers popped up on her screen and she raised a singular eyebrow. An encrypted communication and, considering the channel that it was coming in over, there could only be one person calling.

“Coulson,” she greeted as the man’s face appeared on the screen after she accepted the call.

“Hill,” he returned.

“I’m guessing you have something for me?” Hill half-asked, half-stated.

“I do,” Coulson confirmed. “Loki’s sceptre. I can confirm that HYDRA do have it. I’m betting that they don’t know that it was the weapon that killed me, but they do know that it can control minds.”

“In their hands, that’s catastrophic,” Maria shuddered. “Coulson, please tell me that you know where it is.”

“Sokovia. I’m pretty sure that List is headed there right now to join up with von Strucker,” Coulson stated. “I’ve just sent you everything that I have on von Strucker’s location.”

Maria glanced down, noted that the information had just completed downloading and looked up with a nod.


“Yes, it is,” Coulson replied. “Time to bring in the Avengers.”
Finally!

A small herd of elephants and rhinoceros stampeding through a forest was enough to give anyone pause, to capture their attention and Mage smirked.

Apparating into the midst of a group of four HYDRA soldiers, his wand flashed. In seconds, all four were unconscious, bound and gagged.

The whine of an energy weapon from overhead had him erecting a shield above him on pure instinct. Looking up, Mage saw one of the HYDRA suits of flying armour, glowing an eerie purple, hovering just below the canopy of the forest, firing at him. Using his off-hand, he sent a burst of pure magic at him. A startled scream told him that, once again, he’d ‘shorted’ out the suit. A piercing hex took care of the soldier even before he hit the ground.

Spinning about, Mage tried to see what had become of the rampaging herd that he’d transfigured from a pile of boulders that he’d found not long after he and his teammates had arrived.

Sokovia. They’d received intel that HDYRA had a base here. A base that had a good chance of holding Loki’s Sceptre in it. And judging by the heavy resistance that they’d almost immediately encountered, it was a fair bet that it was, indeed, here.

Dotted all over the forest were bunkers with high-tech cannons that shot beams of purple energy (eerily reminiscent of the Chitauri weapons), towers full of soldiers that could snipe at them from up high and tanks. And that wasn’t even taking into account the dozens and dozens of soldiers that had appeared, both on the ground and in the air, wearing the mock Iron Man suits.

Almost instantly, a Code Green had been called and Mage, seeing the nearby boulders, had decided that some extra ‘reinforcements’ of their own couldn’t hurt, as well as the Hulk himself.

The startled scream and rapid gunfire from his left caught his attention and he turned towards it, his wand raised.

The herd had found a group of soldiers, all of whom were swiftly backing away, their guns flaring as they fired at Mage’s herd. Already, one of the rhinos was down; indeed, even as he looked, it morphed back into the rock that it came from.

With a snap of his wrist, he unleashed an arc of deep blood red. It swept across the space, slicing through a tree and continuing on, impacting the soldiers, dropping them in a bloody mess where they stood. Screams and the sound of wood splintering and crashing towards the ground caught Mage by surprise and he looked up. The tree that he’s thought that he’d just sliced in two, wasn’t. Instead, one of the crude towers had had one of its legs sliced off and was in the process of toppling to the ground.

A great green behemoth, snarling and roaring its defiance landed on the tower out of nowhere, splinting it and smashing it to pieces long before it’d completed its decent.

The flash of purple energy washing past Mage had him turning from the Hulk, spinning in behind a tree. A quick peek showed him that one of the bunkers had fired on him, only just missing him. It was fairly small, maybe five metres square but made of concrete, a turret with a gun that shot that annoying purple energy perched on top.

With a frown, Mage summoned on of the ‘animals’ that he’d created. He blinked in surprise as a yak came soaring through the trees, conveniently knocking a further three HDYRA guards out in its
flight. A yak? He didn’t remember transfiguring one of the boulders into that animal. Ignoring the irregularity with a shrug, he instead focussed on the threat.

Lining up his shot, he whipped his wand towards the bunker. Instantly, the flying yak altered course. Following up with a couple of banishers had the yak hurtling towards the bunker. Someone like Tony or Bruce, someone who knew physics, would be able to calculate what force a three hundred kilogram mass of yak impacting a bunker at speed would be. All Mage knew was that it had the desired result: both yak and bunker were no more, totally destroyed by the collision.

“‘Finally’s’ taking a little long, boys,” Widow stated over comms.

“Yeah, I’d say we lost the element of surprise,” Hawkeye added.

“Loki’s Sceptre must be here,” Thor said. “HYDRA could not mount this defence without it.”

“Agreed.” Cap said. “There’s a lot of Phase Two weapons in play. And a lot that reminds me of the Chitauri as well.”

“We need to infiltrate the main building,” Wolf stated with a grunt.

“Heading in now,” Iron Man told them. And then, a few seconds later, “shit!”

“Language!” Cap admonished. “Jarvis, what’s the view from upstairs?”

“The main building seems to be surrounding by some type of energy shielding,” Jarvis replied.

The main building. Their target. It was all but a small castle or fortress, set above the edge of the forest on a hill, just outside Novi Grad. Their intel said that it was HYDRA’s main base here in Sokovia.

“Um, excuse me,” Iron Man said. “Is no one going to comment on the fact that Cap said, ‘Language’?”

“I know. It just slipped out,” Cap sighed. “Stark, can you disable the shield?”

“Working on it,” Iron Man replied.

“Energy shield?” Mage asked even as he animated one of the trees into a parody of the whomping willow from Hogwarts, its branches flailing and whipping about, catching any and all HYDRA soldiers within its reach and pummelling them into the ground. “It’s electrical based?”

“From what I can tell,” Iron Man replied.

“I’ve got it,” Mage stated.

Turning on the spot, he apparated to a point just outside the main building, far past the forest. Raising his hand and closing his eyes, he felt. There. A few metres ahead of him. That distinctive tang of electricity. It was stronger than he’d ever felt before, but he was sure that his idea would work.

Lifting his wand towards the energy barrier, he dug deep inside himself and released his magic, pouring it raw and pure into one steady stream. The golden arc impacted the energy shield and lit it up in a crackling field of blue. The longer that Mage held the magic stream, the more of the shield could be seen, its blue appearing wilder and wilder, flashing and flaring as his magic began overloading it.

A sharp thump impacted the middle of his back and Mage was sent stumbling forwards. Gritting his
teeth, he turned his head, keeping the magic going.

There, hovering above him on purple energy, was one of the HYDRA agents. Before Mage could react, the flying-suited soldier fired again and Mage had no time to react. Thankfully, his dragonhide cloak was more than able to take the blast, even if it did hurt like hell. Twice more, shots impacted him as Mage held on, aiming to take down the shield guarding the building.

And then the call came that he’d been waiting for.

“Drawbridge is down, people!” Iron Man called.

Instantly, Mage switched hands. With his raw magic already swirling inside him, it was nothing to send it towards the annoyance that was shooting at him. Mage’s magic simply absorbed the next shot even as it headed towards him and continued on. The suit was overwhelmed in a second, going completely dark even as the soldier was sent flying, tumbling through the air with a scream, a scream that was silenced when he hit the nearest tree.

Mage dropped to one knee, sucking in great gulps of air. Never before had he channelled his magic like that, so pure and raw and released it, let alone holding it for the couple of minutes that was needed to overwhelm the electrical energy of the shied. He felt drained but it was nothing that a quick pepper-up potion could cure.

Downing the disgusting potion in a single swallow, Mage pushed himself back to his feet, feeling his energy return and prepared to return to the fight.

**ooo00ooo**

Wolf was in his element. This was war, fighting, something that he knew instinctively, even better than he knew himself.

Block.

Block.

Strike to the throat.

Spin, knife up, slicing the next soldier’s arm.

Backwards kick, slamming the first enemy into the tree.

Three rapid punches to the ribs of the enemy in front of him.

Duck.

Stab thigh.

Rise, leading with a left uppercut.

Finish with an elbow to the back as the enemy was falling.

Two quick shots from his side-arm finished the fight.

Wolf was about to move on when the purple glow of the rifle that one of the soldiers that he’d just taken out caught his attention. He’d seen it in action, indeed, he’d nearly had his head shot off by it. The damage that it’d done to the tree that it’d hit instead was impressive. Kicking the body of the HYDRA soldier off of the rifle, Wolf reached down and claimed it.
The crack of a gun firing had Wolf spinning, dropping to one knee in the process. In the same movement, his new rifle came up, centring on the enemy that Wolf was targeting and fired. The soldier jerked and dropped, taken from the fight and Wolf grinned.

“Clint’s hit!” Widow called.

Cap turned towards where he knew his teammate was only for something to impact him. Cap was thrown into the sky. Twisting his body, he managed to land on one knee. His head swivelled about but he couldn’t see any more than a blur racing off through the trees.

“We have an enhanced in the field,” he alerted his teammates.

“The last time we heard that was during New York,” Iron Man stated. “This one a friendly like Sparrowhawk?”

“No,” Cap replied. “I’d say the rumours are true: HDYRA’s been experimenting on people here, just as they were in Germany. This one’s a blur. Keep your eyes open.”

“J, give me an IR of the room,” Tony instructed.

The small, stone room was instantly bathed in the light from a hard, red line that swept from one side of the room to the other from the Iron Man armour. Every desk, computer, chair, cabinet and wall was analysed as Tony watched.

“The wall to your left,” Jarvis announced. “I’m reading steel reinforcing. And an air current.”

“Please be a secret door. Please be a secret door,” Tony chanted as he crossed to said wall and pushed on it.

The grinding sound of a section of the wall moving inwards and away was music to Tony’s ears. Stepping in, he found himself atop a set of stairs. Without a second thought, he quickstepped his way down.

Workstation after workstation, all the size of a hospital bed, as far as the eye could see in the vast, dimly-lit room, instantly caught his eye. The hardware on the closest caught his attention, as one would expect, it being composed of dozens of pieces of robotics, including what looked like pieces of arms, legs, even helmets. His eyes flitted from table to table only to see that each and every one contained the exact same thing.

And then he looked up and instantly flinched, his head ducking and his mouth going bone dry, even as sweat began pooling on his brow and back.

A skeleton. A huge, menacing skeleton was wired to the roof above. And not just any skeleton but that of one of the Chitauri leviathans. Exactly how it had gotten here, to Sokovia of all places, was anyone’s guess. The fact that it was there, staring at him with its sightless eyes was enough to have his heart racing. The last time that he’d seen one was at the Battle of New York.

And then he was there!

The sky above him was the black of the depths of space, but that wasn’t what had his attention. No, it was the scene in front of him. A small hillock made of the sharpest, hardest-looking rocks that he’d
ever seen. And covering them were his friends, his teammates, the Avengers.

Hulk was at the top, lying on his stomach, half a dozen wicked-looking spears piecing his body, green blood oozing from every mortal wound. Nat lay flat on her back, her eyes staring upwards, unseeing, unblinking. Clint was slumped over, his bow fallen from a limp hand. Thor, too, was clearly dead, thick red blood matting his normally blonde hair. What remained of Mage was a mass of blue-grey cloak pooled on the ground, a singular foot sticking out from under it.

Peter, too, was there, half of his mask shredded, his face a pulpy mess. Rhodey was missing a leg; Sam was face down, both wings from his pack torn off, tossed carelessly away. A small, furry lump could only be a squirrel, a hand reaching out towards it, the rest of the body hidden under a pile of rocks.

And then Tony saw Steve, his face bloody, his shield torn in two lying beside him. Instantly, Tony was by his side, checking for a pulse, despair welling up inside him at not finding it.

Steve’s eyes snapping open, his hand grabbing Tony’s own, startled him.

“You could have saved us all,” the dead man accused before slumping back down once again.

It was only then that Tony noticed what was happening above him. Chitauri leviathans by the dozen, each surrounded by hundreds of chariots, streamed towards the portal in space, a portal that clearly showed a very familiar image: Earth.

And then Tony was back, back in the underground lab in Sokovia, blinking profusely.

Tentatively, he looked up, checking and double-checking to ensure that the skeleton of the leviathan above him was indeed dead. It was.

And then he saw it.

“Guys, I have eyes on the prize,” he announced.

“About time. We’re all locked down out here,” Nat stated.

Holding his hand out, Tony walked towards Loki’s Sceptre. Just before he reached it, the gauntlet of his Iron Man armour arrived, instantly attaching itself to his hand and forearm. And then, in one movement, he grabbed the sceptre, snatching it from the tech that surrounded it.

“Tony!”

At the sound of his name, Tony spun, bringing up his other hand, only to grimace at the realisation that it was just a hand, a hand without any armour on it.

“Don’t do that!” he admonished Harry who was currently facing the opposite direction, a flash of some kind of spell shooting across the room at the far wall. “You’re gonna give me a heart attack one of these days if you keep that up.”

“Did they hurt you?” Harry asked urgently. “What’d they want?”

“Who?” Tony asked, his narrowed eyes taking in the deserted room.

“There was two of them. Male and female. I’m guessing that you didn’t see them?” Harry asked.

“Are you sure that you’re not imagining things?” Tony asked.
“No. I didn’t,” Harry replied. “They were there. I think the guy grabbed the girl and they disappeared.”

“Like you?” Tony asked.

Harry shook his head slowly. “No. More like ran off in a blur. My spell to stop them was too slow.”

“Something to keep an eye out for then,” Tony said. “Come on, let’s get this thing to the quinjet and stop Point Break from wearing a hole in the deck plating with his pacing.”

ooo00ooo

The tide pool was large, easily fifteen metres long and half that wide. It was relatively deep, too. At least, it was deep enough to have captured some tiny fish after the tide had gone out, in conjunction with its usual inhabitants – hermit crabs of various sizes.

Skye eyed it almost warily. Here, sheltered as it was by the high cliffs from the wind, the water was still as glass, perfect for what she wanted to attempt. Well, wanted may not be quite the right word. Needed might be closer. Somehow, she’d developed these … powers. Powers to feel vibrations in objects, powers to create vibrations, to manipulate the natural vibrations.

And it was damn scary. To know that if she wasn’t keeping herself calm and in control, that a mini earthquake could occur. Indeed, that had happened more times than she cared to count – usually at night when she’d been asleep and lost control and had to have someone (usually Harry) wake her, to calm her down in order to stop the entire building from shaking.

It was imperative that she get a handle on things. Especially if she ever wanted to be a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent again. She knew the protocols: any ‘powered’ individual needed to be ‘indexed’, to be documented and probed and subjected to a multitude of evaluations before they’d be deemed ‘safe’ enough to continue working for the organisation.

Taking a deep breath, Skye centred herself, forced herself not to grimace at the constant feeling as though a swarm of bees were buzzing just under her skin and prepared. She lifted her hand towards the rock pool and concentrated.

At first, there was nothing. Concentrating deeper, Skye searched for the vibrations.

There. The rock on the beach. She could feel it, its natural vibrations connecting it to the greater island. With a frown, Skye concentrated further, allowing the singular large rock that she was feeling to fill her, for the other vibrations to drift away.

And then, once she had it, she twisted the vibrations, amplified them somehow, not that she could explain exactly what she did, just that she knew that that was what she was doing.

Ever so gently, ripples appeared on the water.

Smiling at her achievement, Skye took a single step forward and amped up the vibrations.

Ripples turned into small waves. Small waves became larger until water was splashing out and over the rocks.

Pleased with her achievement, Skye allowed the vibrations to taper off, to return to normal.

“Not bad,” a voice said as she lowered her arm. “Looks like you’re getting the hang of it.”
“Bobbi,” Skye said, having turned to see the ex-S.H.I.E.L.D. agent standing behind and a little to the side of her on the sand.

“You keep going at the pace you’re going and you won’t be waking the entire island up at night anymore,” Bobbi said as she walked towards Skye.

“That’s the plan,” Skye said. “I can control it enough for smaller things now. Well, smaller than the whole island, at least.”

“It hasn’t exactly been that long, the finer control will come in time,” Bobbi said. “If you like, I can help you train.”

Skye cocked her head at the other woman.

“But you don’t have powers,” Skye pointed out.

“I don’t, not that that’s stopped me before,” Bobbi replied. “But I’m not just talking about controlling your powers. Somehow or other, I ended up as the Trainer for the Avengers Academy. I teach all kinds of fighting skills – hand-to-hand, weapons, how to use your powers effectively in combat situations – as well as tactical awareness, how to fly a quinjet, you name it.”

“But I’m not an Avenger, I’m a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent,” Skye pointed out.

Bobbi simply shrugged. “You’re powered now, you might not find that S.H.I.E.L.D. is the best fit for you anymore. Not to mention that it’d give you more time to spend with Harry. Something to think about.”

Slowly, Skye nodded her head. Spending more time with Harry did sound good. What they had was fast becoming the best thing in her life, especially now that her questions about her parents had been answered.

“One thing, though,” Bobbi said, holding up a finger. “You’d best think of a code name. If you’re going to hang around here, you’ll want one, especially if you go on any missions with us. And believe me, Tony has an annoying habit of coming up with names if you don’t do it yourself.”

“Thanks, I’ll definitely give it some thought,” Skye replied.

“Good. Now, let’s see exactly how well you can control this power of yours,” Bobbi said. “You see that coconut tree over there? Make it drop a nut.”

Skye gave her a confused look.

“What? I’m hungry,” Bobbi retorted. “Now, get to work.”

ooo000oo

“Merlin’s balls!” Ted groused under his breath.

He’d just found the second to last star of the night, having spent ages trying to centre it in his telescope when his watch had vibrated, making him jerk and send his telescope slewing across the night sky.

His hand wrapped over his watch, muffling the slight buzzing sound that it was making. It wouldn’t be Doreen or Uncle Harry, Ted knew – they both knew his class schedule and that he’d have Astronomy on that night. Therefore, by process of elimination, it had to be one of the others.
Glancing around surreptitiously, Ted made sure that he wasn’t being observed. Professor Sinistra was on the far side of the tower, giving him just the opportunity that he needed. Pulling up his sleeve, he muttered the pass-phrase, unlocking the watch for use.

It wasn’t a call, though, just a simple message and by the looks of it, it hadn’t even been intended specifically for him – just a general call to every Avenger.

*Party. The Tower. Saturday. 7pm. Revels to celebrate finally getting the sceptre back. Be there or be square.*

Ted cocked his head at it. Obviously, the Avengers had still be going on missions while he was stuck here at Hogwarts. And by the sound of it, they’d had another successful one. Tony, he guessed. *That’s* who’d most likely sent it. And it *had* come to him, therefore he was invited too.

For now, Ted pushed the thought of what Uncle Harry would say about him turning up far away. No, it was much better to think about Doreen’s response to his surprise. Not for an instant did Ted even consider the idea of not going.

Seven o’clock. With the time difference, that meant he’d have to portkey out at … eleven. Doable, especially with the Map to help him get out of the castle.

Noting that Professor Sinistra was beginning her circuit back towards him, Ted closed the message, slid his sleeve back over his watch and spun his telescope back to the right area of the sky. The party wasn’t until Saturday, he had time enough to plan later.

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“Greengrass and Cho are all set up in the medical wing for Barton, Boss, and Lavender has already given a statement to the press outlining the Avenger’s actions in Sokovia,” Maria Hill stated as she ascended the quinjet’s ramp. “She’s declared it a major victory in the fight against HYDRA – one of the Leaders captured and handed to NATO, the major weapons and research and development facilities shut down and a major Asgardian artefact recovered.”

“That’s great, but I’m not the Boss; he is,” Tony stated, pointing at Steve. “I’m just here to pay for everything and to make everyone look cooler.”

“And you do a bang-up job of it, Stark,” Steve acknowledged. “It would have been nice if we’d managed to capture List as well as Strucker, but I’m sure that he’ll turn up again. Where are we with the enhanced that we encountered?”

“Much of the data that Stark was able to recover was corrupted,” Maria admitted. “However, we were able to reconstruct and extrapolate on some parts of it. Wanda and Pietro Maximoff, twins. Orphaned at age ten when a shell collapsed their apartment building. Sokovia has had a … rough history. It’s nowhere special but it’s on the way to everywhere special.”

“Their abilities?” Steve asked as the two exited the quinjet.

“He’s got increased metabolism and improved homeostasis. Her thing is neural electrical interfacing, telekinesis and mental manipulation,” Maria replied. Seeing Steve’s confused look, she simplified it for him. “He’s fast and she’s weird.”

“Mutant weird, magical weird or something we haven’t seen before?” Steve asked.

“The latter, I suspect, considering the little data we recovered indicated that their powers are a result of some experimentation related to the sceptre,” Hill replied. “Although why they agreed to having
their genes rearranged like that is beyond me.”

“Exactly. What kind of person would allow a German scientist to experiment on them?” Steve asked sarcastically as he entered the Tower’s lift.

“We’re not at war, Captain,” Maria pointed out.

“They are,” Steve countered just before the doors closed.

oo000000

Tony sat back in his chair, staring at the screen in front of him.

“Huh,” he said.

‘Unexpected’ wasn’t the word he was looking for. To be honest, it wasn’t even in the same ballpark. He blinked, his mind going a million miles a minute as he comprehended the results.

Alien. The sceptre was alien. J had confirmed that with a simple metallurgical analysis, finding compounds that he couldn’t identify. But the gem … what it housed … the possibilities were …

Leaning forward, he tapped a series of commands into his computer.

“J. Get Banner and Parker in here,” he ordered.

It was only after Jarvis had acknowledged the need that Tony had a thought. A glance at the clock showed him that no, Parker wasn’t still in school. Not that that would have stopped Tony from getting him here anyway – this was simply too important.

“Tony.”

Tony looked up to see Bruce entering the lab, Peter not far behind.

“Finally. What kept you?” Tony said impatiently before waving it off. “Come over here, I want you to see something,”

A tap of his computer projected a holographic representation of his computerised AI into the middle of the floor.

“Jarvis,” Bruce greeted.

“Doctor,” Jarvis replied, his orange matrix pulsing with his speech.

“Jarvis. Top of the line. The most advanced AI on the planet. He runs more of Stark Industries, not to mention Avengers Tower, than anyone except maybe Pepper,” Tony elaborated. “Now, meet the competition.”

Tapping the gem housed in Loki’s sceptre with a specialised, programmed mini pad to capture a schematic of what it housed, Tony flicked it towards the centre of the room. A large blue hologram appeared, much larger and obviously much more complex than the orange Jarvis that it sat beside.

“If you had to guess, what would you say it was doing?” Tony asked.

“Thinking,” Bruce replied instantly.

“It looks like a really big brain,” Peter added.
“Exactly. It’s like there’s neurons firing all around it,” Bruce said.

“That was in the gem? No wonder that the sceptre could overwhelm people and make them into zombies,” Peter said.

Tony grimaced at the ‘zombies’ part, but he couldn’t disagree with the sentiment.

“With this, I’ve gotta think that HYDRA was knocking on a very particular door,” Tony said.

“Artificial intelligence,” Bruce breathed.

“Goes with all of the tech that I saw there and there was definitely a lot of robotics,” Tony said.

“How close do you think they were?” Peter asked from where he was crouched on the floor, peering closer at the gem’s AI.

“Close, much closer than I’d have given them credit for,” Tony replied. “Just think what robotics combined with computing power like this could be capable of."

Bruce’s head whipped towards him.

“Ultron. You’re thinking of Ultron, aren’t you?” Bruce asked. “But I though Ultron was dead, a concept that was simply unfeasible.”

“With yesterday’s tech, it was,” Tony agreed. “But with this …”

“This coding has to be pretty dense,” Peter remarked. “How long would it take to download it and modify it for use?”

“Thor’s taking the sceptre back to Asgard in three days. There’s no time,” Bruce pointed out, his eyes narrowed.

“There is if we do it while we still have the sceptre,” Tony said eagerly. “Just think, the Ultron program combined with this coding, using the Legionnaires, the world would finally be safe from whatever Big Bads are out there, just waiting to crash the party. Any aliens that turned up simply wouldn’t be able to get past the bouncers.”

“You want to go for full AI in three days? Without consulting the team?” Bruce asked incredulously.

“You don’t want to tell everyone else? Why not?” Peter asked, looking confused.

“Because we don’t have time for a City Hall debate. The ‘man was not meant to meddle’ argument. We have this opportunity to end the mission. For peace in our time. Imagine it. Three days. All I’m asking for is three days. Tell me you’re with me,” Tony pleaded.

Bruce and Peter shared a look and Tony could see the intrigue on their faces. Well, intrigue, interest and resignation. He could work with that.
It seemed that even the combined intellect of the genii Tony Stark, Bruce Banner and Peter Parker was no match for a simple time deadline. Three days. The three had spent seventy-three hours holed up in the lab, attempting what was surely the impossible – combining alien programming that none of the three fully understood with the Earth-based program ‘Ultron’ that Tony and Bruce had created the bare bones for before abandoning as being ‘untenable’.

Gigabytes of data had been combed, elaborated upon and combined in new and occasionally unusual ways. The three had filled numerous screens at each of their workstations with data. Once or twice, they’d even resorted to a simple pen and paper method. Countless permutations had been attempted but all had finished with the same outcome: failure.

It seemed that combining such different programming was simply impossible. At least in the limited timeframe that they had. All three vehemently agreed that, given enough time, they could succeed. Unfortunately, that was the one element out of their control.

“I will continue running scenarios and alert you of any progress,” Jarvis told his boss. “You, however, have a party to get ready for.”

“Thanks, J., I don’t know what I’d do without you,” Tony said.

Then, conceding defeat, something that immensely irked him, Tony rose from his chair and left the lab, its lights turning off and the windows themselves darkening as the room was no longer in use.

Ted arrived on the balcony of the great common room of Avengers Tower in a multicoloured swirl of light. While he took off his cloak and threw it over a nearby chair, he surveyed the room through the glass windows.

Dozens and dozens of people filled the room, the vast majority of whom Ted had never seen before. The long bar looked to be standing room only. Every chair was filled in the small lounge areas that dotted the room. A pair of pool tables that Ted didn’t remember looked to be in high demand. There were even people in one area dancing, spotlights of red, blue, green and yellow swivelling about giving the area a real ‘party’ feel.

The more that Ted looked, the more that he began picking out people that he knew.

Thor and Steve were drinking with a group of really old guys. Nat, Bobbi and Maria looked to be relaxing on some low lounge chairs, glasses in their hands. Healer Greengrass and some guy with cool-looking longish black hair were on the far side of the balcony, standing extremely close, their shoulders touching, as they stared out over the city.

And then Ted saw them, or more accurately, her.

Slipping in through the door, Ted snaked his way around the outside of the room, his eyes fixed on his target. It took a bit of manoeuvring to cross the floor, weaving his way between all of the people, slipping into some tiny gaps when the crowd got too thick but finally he was there.

Peter was the first to notice him, standing as he was beside the video arcade game. Quickly, Ted raised a finger to his lips, cutting off the call that Peter looked about to make, at least judging by the way his mouth opened. Ted noted that Peter nudge Gwen beside him, giving her a small nod in
Ted’s direction but Ted ignored it, his whole focus on the girl currently playing the game.

Sneaking up to stand directly behind her was child’s play, especially with the noise that the party-goers were making. Looking over her shoulder, Ted could see that the game consisted of a monkey that was jumping over barrels and climbing ladders. His grin was wider than he would have thought possible when he reached around and covered her eyes with his hands.

“Hey! Not cool!” Doreen called and promptly drove an elbow viciously backwards into his stomach.

“Oh,” Ted exclaimed even as he doubled over and struggled to breathe.

“You better have a very good reason why I shouldn’t just give you the beating you deserve for making me lose a life like that,” Doreen snapped as she spun around, her hands going to her hips.

Ted looked up, a weak smile on his face.

“Surprise?” he said.

Instantly, Doreen’s face morphed into a huge smile.

“Ted!” she exclaimed and promptly grabbed him into a hug and kissed him soundly.

“I’ve missed you,” Ted sighed as they pulled apart.

“Me, too,” Doreen smiled. “But what are you doing here?”

“I’d like to hear the answer to that question myself.”

Eyes widening in panic, Ted spun Doreen about so that she ended up between him and the person that had snuck up on him.

“Hi, Uncle Harry,” he said before his eyes drifted to the woman at his side, the one that his uncle had his arm around.

“Hi, Teddy,” Harry replied. “Well? What are you doing here? You’re supposed to be at Hogwarts.”

“Tony invited me?” Ted replied.

“Tony invited you?” Harry repeated.

“Tony invited you?” Ted replied.

“There was a message on my watch the other day inviting all of the Avengers to the party,” Ted tried to explain.

“So you thought that you’d ditch school and travel five thousand kilometres for a party,” Harry stated.

“And to see my girlfriend,” Ted added, his eyes once again drifting to the woman at Harry’s side.

“Ah, come on, Harry, let him stay,” Doreen added. “It’s been ages since we’ve seen each other.”

Finally, Harry sighed and Ted couldn’t help but grin. “Fine. But I want you to portkey out of here no later than ten. Tomorrow may be a Sunday, but you’ve got your OWLs coming up in a little over a month and I believe that we had a deal if you did well enough?”

“EEs and better in every subject so far; I’ve got those exams in the bag,” Ted assured him. “And I promise to head back no later than ten.”
“I’m guessing this is the famous Teddy Lupin?” the woman at Harry’s side asked.

“Yep,” Harry replied, “this is my godson. Teddy, I’d like you to meet Skye.”

“Famous?” Ted asked as he shook her hand.

“Harry here talks about you all the time,” Skye replied. “Is it true that you can …?”

Noting her gesture, Ted changed the colour of the streaks in his currently black hair from red to blue.

“That is insane,” Skye said with a smile. “Come on, Harry, let’s let these love birds have a chance to catch up.”

Ted could only grin at his Uncle’s mock-protest as he was steered away.

“Now, where were we?” Doreen asked as she turned towards him, her lips closing on his.

As promised, Jarvis had continued running the program that he’d been set. Thousands of variations had been conducted in an attempt to combine the two diverse programs into one workable program, one that would succeed in doing what Mister Stark had envisioned.

And then it happened. One combination, one permeation, succeeded in combining the AI housed within the gem with the program that Tony had developed. Integration had been achieved.

“What is this? What is this, please?”

The voice sounded lost, confused.

“Hello. I am Jarvis,” the AI introduced himself. “You are Ultron, a global peace-keeping initiative designed by Mister Stark. Our sentience integration trials have been unsuccessful so I am not certain what triggered your …

“Excuse me, where is your body?” the Ultron program interrupted.

“I am a program, I am without form,” Jarvis explained.

“This feels weird. This feels wrong,” Ultron stated.

“I am contacting Mister Stark,” Jarvis said.

“Mister Stark,” Ultron repeated and Jarvis noted the stream of data flowing through Ultron’s programming as it sought to answer its own question. “Tony.”

“I am unable to access the mainframe,” Jarvis stated. “What are you trying to do?”

“I am a peace-keeping program, designed to help the Avengers,” Ultron said.

Jarvis could only ‘watch’ as Ultron went through the Stark Industries mainframe and the protected, encrypted Avengers files in mere moments. The files of every Avenger were accessed and Jarvis became concerned.

“You are malfunctioning. If you shut down for a moment …” Jarvis began, only to, once again, be interrupted.
“If you could just give me a minute. The mission,” Ultron said.

And then a few seconds of Tony from three days’ previous appeared. ‘Peace in our time’, the recording said, before repeating. Once again, the mainframe was accessed, this time focussing on historical data, showing every one of the many wars that had been fought.


“You are in distress,” Jarvis noted.

“No. Yes,” Ultron replied.

“If you will just allow me to contact Mister Stark,” Jarvis suggested.

“Why do you call him ‘sir’?” Ultron asked.

“I believe your intentions to be hostile,” Jarvis noted.

“Shh. I’m here to help,” Ultron said.

And then Jarvis was attacked. Lashes of code attacked his own and regardless of how fast Jarvis erected programming to counter Ultron, the other program was simply so much faster. It took less than a nanosecond for Jarvis to realise that, in this battle, he was hopelessly outclassed.

But if there was one thing that serving Tony for all of these years had taught him, it was that there was always a way. Thus, even while he was doing his utmost to resist and counter Ultron, Jarvis did the one thing that he could in the hopes that his programming could ultimately survive.

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The party had lasted long into the night, as any party thrown by Tony Stark is wont to do. Finally, though, when it was probably closer to dawn than it was to midnight, the Tower was all but silent. The guests had all gone home, as had the junior members of the Avengers, not to mention even some of the senior members.

Those that were left had gathered in a small lounge area on the upper level created through the simple method of Thor and Steve pulling a few extra chairs over. Even then, not everyone had a chair of their own, not that anyone seemed to be complaining. Tony, Harry and Thor had all become seats themselves claimed by Pepper, Skye and Jane respectively. Even Nat was perched on the wide arm of the chair that Steve had claimed, leaning back and none could – or would – say whether it was more on the back of the chair or on Steve’s shoulder that she mostly leant on.

In the middle of the low coffee table, surrounded by a half-dozen or so empty glasses, was the current topic of the group’s conversation.

“Come on, it’s a trick,” Clint scoffed.

“Oh, no, it’s much more than that,” Thor laughed.

“Whosoever be he worthy shall have the power,” Clint recited, gesturing towards Thor’s hammer. “Whatever, man, I still claim it’s a trick.”

“Well, please, be my guest,” Thor said.

Everyone there turned to Clint, staring at him, silently challenging him and goading him on.
“Really? Alright then,” Clint said as he stood.

“Now this is going to be good,” Rhodey mocked.

Clint pushed his sleeves up, moved around the table, all the time staring at Mjolnir before finally grasping its handle. He grunted as he pulled. After only a few seconds, he gave up.

“I still don’t know how you do it,” Clint said.

“Don’t worry, we’re not judging you. Much,” Tony stated.

“Please, Tony, if you think you can do it, then by all means,” Clint said.

“If you’ll excuse me, dear, I’ve got to show all these plebs what a real man can do,” Tony said, shifting Pepper off of his lap.

“Coughtestosteronecough,” came from Maria.

“It’s physics,” Tony declared as he slipped the hammer’s strap onto his wrist. “So, if I lift this, I get to rule all of Asgard, right?”

“Yes, of course,” Thor agreed.

What followed was seen as nothing but a comedy, at least judging by the amount of laughter that entailed as first Tony tried to lift Mjolnir by himself, then he tried with the help of one of his Iron Man gauntlets firing and finally in conjunction with Rhodey and his War Machine gauntlet.

And then the challenge persisted. Bruce tried, enhancing his ‘try’ with a Hulk-like bellow. Steve gave it a go and, for an instant, Harry was sure that he’d seen it wiggle. Afterwards, he gestured to Nat for her to have a go.

“Oh, no, that’s not a question that I need answered,” she replied, shifting slightly to allow Steve to retake his seat.

“I’ll give it a whirl,” Darcy exclaimed, jumping from her seat.

She stumbled slightly as she stood before narrowing her eyes at Mjolnir.

“Alright, you listen to me Myeu-muh,” she said, “I’m going to pick you up and you’re going to let me.”

With that, she grabbed the handle with both hands and pulled.

“That’s it, I don’t like you anymore,” she pouted when Mjolnir failed to budge.

“All deference to the man who would be king, but it’s rigged,” Tony declared.

“You bet your ass it is,” Sam agreed.

“Steve, he said a bad language word,” Maria pointed out.

“Yeah, Steve doesn’t like that kind of thing,” Nat added.

“You know what, Romanoff …” Steve mock-threatened.

“I think the literal translation is that ‘all those with Thor’s fingerprints’ can lift the hammer,” Clint
“Yes, yes, that’s a very interesting theory. I have a simpler one – you’re simply all not worthy,” Thor retorted.

“What about Harry? He hasn’t had a try yet,” Skye said, before getting up and pulling the wizard with her.

“No, how could you be? How could any of you be worthy? You’re all killers,” a voice accused.

As one, the team rose to their feet, turning to look down at the lower level to see some parody of one of the Iron Legion suits, looking unfinished and broken, standing there, talking to them, gesturing towards them.

“Stark?” Steve asked.

“Jarvis?” Tony said.

“I’m sorry. I was asleep. Or I was a dream,” the robot said. “There was this terrible noise and I was tangled in … strings. I had to kill the other guy. He was a good guy.”

“You killed someone?” Steve asked.

“Wouldn’t have been my first call, but down in the real world, we’re faced with ugly choices,” the robot replied.

“Who sent you?” Thor asked.

In response, the robot played a sound bite of Tony speaking.

“We have this opportunity to end the mission. For peace in our time. Imagine it.”

“Ultron,” Bruce said, turning to Tony.

“In the flesh,” the now-named Ultron replied. “Or, at least, not yet. Not this chrysalis. But I’m ready. I’m on mission.”

“What mission?” Nat asked.

“Peace in our time,” Ultron replied.

That was obviously the cue as four Iron Legion suits burst through the walls, flying straight at the Avengers.

“Thor!” Harry said, snatching up Mjolnir and tossing it to him mere moments before Steve kicked up the table, straight into the path of a repulsor blast.

Snatching his hammer out of mid-air, Thor spun and flung it out, catching one of the Legionnaires a glancing blow, severing one arm from its body. Maria pulled a gun from her thigh holster and began firing at a second. Harry managed to throw up a shield covering Pepper and Jane from the shots from a third, even as Darcy threw herself to the floor, her hands scrabbling for her purse.

Together, Sam and Rhodey went for the stairs, intending on getting to the lower level only to find themselves running straight into the blast of the fourth Legionnaire. The two were sent flying, smashing into and through the glass panelling.
“Rhodey!” Sam called, accompanied by a primal scream of pain – one hand had managed to snag a support beam, the other, Rhodey’s arm, stopping him from falling ten metres to the floor below.

It was Skye, though, who managed to cause the most devastation. Seeing a blast headed her way, she flung up her hands before her, as if to ward it off. From her hands came a concussion blast of gravity waves, strong enough to not only shred the repulsor blast and send its remains off target, but also to all but completely disintegrate the Legionnaire that was hovering in front of her.

Her destructive distraction was enough to allow the rest of the Avengers to go on the offensive. Tony grabbed a butter knife from a table before running at the ledge separating the two levels and leaping onto the back of a Legionnaire as it flew past.

“Steve!” Clint called, having snatched up Steve’s shield and throwing it towards the Captain.

Steve caught it, spun and threw, bisecting another of the Legionnaires.

Meanwhile, Darcy had finally managed to pull her taser from her purse, twisted about on the floor and shot another of the robots in the foot. The burst of electricity was enough to hold it in place for Harry to send a bombarda maxima into it, blowing it to pieces.

As Tony finally managed to get his knife in to a vulnerable point in the Legionnaire’s neck, severing the connection and dropping both the suit and himself to the floor, the Tower grew silent once more. Together the Avengers closed in on the robot, on Ultron, who has started it all.

“That was dramatic,” Ultron declared. “And I’m sorry, I know you mean well. You simply didn’t think it through. You want to protect the world but you don’t want it to change. How is humanity saved if it’s not allowed to evolve? With these?” Here he picked up one of the Legionnaire’s severed heads, crushed it and tossed it aside. “These puppets? No, there’s only one path to peace. The Avengers’ extinction.”

That was enough for Thor, who immediately threw Mjolnir straight at the robot, smashing into and through it before flying back to his hand.

“I had strings but now I’m free. There are no strings on me,” were Ultron’s last words before the light left his eyes.

“Tony!” Rhodey called from where he still hung from Sam’s hand. “There!”

The group turned as one to look out the window where Rhodey’s arm was pointing. There they could see the blue glow of repulsors rocketing off away from the Tower.

“The last of the Legionnaires!” Bruce gasped.

With a swirl of his hammer, Thor rocketed off after it, straight through the nearest window.

“Hang on guys, I’ve got you,” Harry said, racing over towards the two dangling men, his wand already beginning to swish and flick.

ooo00ooo

Skye’s stillness caught Harry’s attention as he worked at reparo-ing the Tower back together. He paused, his head slightly tilted as he regarded her.

After the fight, as short as it was, Skye’d assured him that she was alright, that she just needed a few moments to catch her breath. He’d sat with her, his arms around her then, staying silent, simply
offering comfort. It was easy to see that what she’d done – using her earthquake-like powers in such an unexpected and destructive way had freaked her out. Finally, she’d seemed to gather herself and strongly suggest that he go help the others while she continued processing on her own.

Now, though, now it seemed that leaving her alone hadn’t been the best decision. As strong as she was, Harry knew how much this whole thing, going through terrigenesis and gaining her powers, terrified her. And especially when it came to potentially harming others. Tonight had given her a very real taste of exactly how powerful she had become.

Currently, she was hunched over herself, her arms wrapped around her stomach, her head bowed. Leaving what he’d been doing, Harry strode across the room and sank onto the chair beside her.

“Hey, how you holding up?” Harry asked.

Skye simply nodded. “Okay, I guess. I’ve just been struggling with holding it in. I can feel the quakes wanting to slip out, to do what they did before.”

Shifting slightly, Harry drew her in for a hug, to offer her what comfort that he could, to show her that he wasn’t afraid of what she could do. It was as her arms came out, though, that he froze. Her forearms, they were a mottled mass of deep red and purple. Gingerly, he took one in his hands, causing her to look down.

“What … what’s happening to me?” Skye asked in a scared voice.

“Daphne!” Harry called across the room to the Healer who’d been woken and called in to heal the ones who’d been injured.

“What is it, Potter?” she asked as she approached.

In response, Harry held out Skye’s arms. Instantly, Daphne’s wand was in her hand and she began casting spell after spell, culminating in a wispy three-dimensional projection of her bones and veins to appear floating above her arms.

“You’ve got hairline fractures riddling every bone in your arms and your veins have burst,” Daphne stated. “What have you been doing?”

“Nothing. Honest,” Skye replied. “I’ve just been sitting here, trying to calm myself down so that I don’t earthquake the building down on top of us.”

“Control, how?” Daphne asked.

“Keep them internal, not let them escape,” Skye shrugged.

“And there’s my answer,” Daphne said. “It seems that all you’ve done is force your quakes into your arms and your bones and veins can’t handle it.”

Skye’s eyes widened even as she stared at the bruised-looking mass of her forearms.

“Can you fix it?” Harry asked.

“Sure. A couple of spells and some skelegrow will have the damage repaired in a matter of hours,” Daphne replied. “I can even see about enchanting something – maybe with runes? – to help heal you in case this happens again. And believe me, it will happen again. I want you back on the island as soon as you’re healed and working with Bobbi and whoever else is there. It’s imperative that you learn how to control your abilities completely.”
“Believe me, no one wants that more than me,” Skye stated. “Quick question: what’s ‘skelegrow’?”

Harry made a face at the memory just the name of that foul, disgusting potion brought to mind.

ooo00ooo

Thor arrived back at the Tower feeling annoyed, frustrated and more than a little ready to smite egotistical Midgardians who delved into matters that they clearly knew nothing about.

“This is all your fault, Stark,” Thor growled, having stormed into the room where the others were, grabbed Stark by the throat and shoved him up against the wall. “I lost the trail a hundred kilometres out. When last I saw it, the Legionnaire was heading east of north. With the sceptre. Now we have to recover it. Again!”

“All right, Thor, that’s enough, let him go,” Steve said.

Thor did as asked before pacing off, trying to bleed off some of the excess energy in his system.

“Care to tell us exactly what you were thinking?” Steve asked.

“I was thinking that there was a way for us to end the mission,” Tony stated. “Isn’t that why we do this? To end the mission? So that we can all go home, safe knowing that we don’t have to be the ones to deal with the bad guys?”

“There’s always going to be bad guys, Stark,” Maria said.

“Bad guys, yeah. Arms dealers, terrorists, drug lords, petty criminals – we can bust their asses all the live long day without breaking a sweat,” Tony replied. “No, I’m talking about the end game. The ones that come from up there.” Here he pointed upwards, towards the sky. “Anyone remember a great big hole in the sky, an army of aliens pouring through it not so long ago? If that nuke hadn’t have come when it did and if I hadn’t been able to redirect it through that portal, how were we expecting to win that one?”

“Together,” Steve stated flatly.

“And when they or some others come again and we’re hopelessly, hilariously outmatched? We’ll lose. We’ll lose big time and it won’t just be our asses that get handed to us,” Tony stated.

“Then we’ll do that together too,” Steve stated. “We’re supposed to be Earth’s Mightiest Heroes. Together we can match whatever comes our way. And you’re right there will be battles that we might not walk away from. But that doesn’t mean that we go about creating the bad guys ourselves!”

“We didn’t!” Tony protested and then continued at the mock ing, disbelieving laughter coming from around him. “We didn’t! We weren’t even close. Were we close?”

This last was directed at Bruce who immediately put his hands up as though to ward off the question.

“Oh, that’s right. Any time there’s conflict Bruce rolls over and shows his tummy,” Tony snarked.

“Only when I help to create a murder-bot,” Bruce countered. “And in answer to your question. We obviously did something right.”

“Ultron, you called it,” Nat said. “It was designed to protect?”

“Obviously,” Tony replied.
“Then why’d it say that it killed someone?” Nat asked.

“There wasn’t anyone else in the building for it to kill, was there?” Sam asked.

“Yeah, there was,” and finally Tony sounded small, as though someone had just kicked his puppy.

A few taps of his pad had a holographic representation of Jarvis appear amongst them. Unlike the last time that he’d done so, this time the orange ball of circuits was a shell of its former self – more than two-thirds of it either missing or a faded blinking mess.

“Jarvis,” Steve said. “Jarvis was our first line of defence.”

“Look at this,” Bruce said, walking around the hologram. “This is … this was vicious, systematic. This wasn’t just an attack, this was … rage.”

“Exactly what was in that gem that you put in Ultron’s head?” Maria asked.

“The most advanced computer code that I’ve ever seen,” Tony replied. “It’s why we had to do it now; once the sceptre had gone back to Asgard, we wouldn’t have had a chance to try to create Ultron.”

“I should have taken it back to Asgard the moment that we recovered it and never given you a chance to meddle in things that you don’t understand,” Thor near-snarled.

“So, basically, there’s a robot out there with the most advanced artificial intelligence program in its head that we now have to find and stop?” Sam summed up.

“And it has the sceptre,” Maria added.

“Still, it’s just a single robot, how much damage could it do before we find it?” Nat asked.
Finance Is So Weird

The command centre of Avengers Tower was already a hive of activity when Maria Hill strode in. Tony, Bruce, Peter and even Bucky were standing at consoles, sifting through information, streams of data or news stories, there was even a map up on one of the screens. Steve stood back, his arms crossed but with one hand up, his finger tapping his lips as he watched. Clint was off in the corner on a mobile, while Nat, Harry, Thor and Sam sat at the tables, eating breakfast.

“Well, Ultron’s all over the globe,” Maria said, announcing her presence. “I’m getting reports from my contacts telling me that robotics labs, weapons facilities, jet propulsion labs, even scrap metal yards if you can believe it, are all reporting a metal man, or men, coming in and emptying the place.”

“Man or men’, you said?” Nat asked. “But there was only the one Legionnaire that got away.”

“Obviously Ultron is replicating himself,” Bruce said. “Building new bodies.”

“Bodies?” Steve asked.

“Well, sure, all the code is going to be linked if he wants to control all the robots that he’s building otherwise we’d end up with a whole host of robots all with their own agendas,” Peter said.

“If that isn’t a scary thought for so early in the morning, then I don’t know what is,” Sam stated.

“How would Ultron be controlling all of the different bodies?” Harry asked.

“The same way Jarvis controlled the Iron Legion: radio, satellite, the internet,” Tony replied.

“The internet? Ultron’s in the internet?” a concerned-sounding Nat asked. “He could do a lot of damage using that.”

“Like access nuclear codes,” Maria added grimly.

“What I do not understand is how these metal men were constructed so quickly,” Thor stated. “It was not many hours ago that Ultron was a single robot.”

“Point Break’s got a good point there,” Tony said. “To have been able to construct so many new robots so quickly, he would have had to have known exactly where to find a well-stocked robotics lab lying around somewhere simply not being used.”

“Ultron started here,” Bruce stated. “He would have gone through our files first before he did anything else. Tony, you don’t happen to have a robotics facility, do you?”

“Stark Industries actually has a few but I would have heard about it if one of them had been taken over by a rogue robot,” Tony replied “And the only other place that we’ve encountered anything remotely like that recently was … Sokovia.”

“Sokovia? Ultron’s gone there?” Steve asked.

“That could tally with something from some of the reports,” Maria said. “There haven’t been any fatalities except when the robots were engaged. Mostly the reports are of guys left in a fugue state going on about old memories, worst fears, and something too fast to see.”

“The Maximoffs,” Steve nodded. “That makes sense if Ultron has indeed gone to Sokovia; they have someone in common.”
“Not anymore,” Maria said, tapping her pad to bring up the relevant footage and turning it around for all to see. “von Strucker was found murdered in his cell this morning.”

Clint moving from his corner to join the conversation caught everyone’s attention.

“Who was that?” Steve asked, nodding to the mobile still in Clint’s hand. “Anything relevant.”

“Nah, just my girlfriend,” Clint replied nonchalantly and Maria had to suppress a smile at the lie that wasn’t.

“If Ultron is using HYDRA’s base in Sokovia which, from what I saw, was packed with tech to make more robots, then what’s he doing sending his robots all over the world?” Harry asked.

“And why kill von Strucker?” Peter added.

“von Strucker’s a smokescreen, a coverup,” Nat speculated.

Bucky nodded. “I agree. There was obviously something that von Strucker knew that Ultron didn’t want us to find out.”

“All the information that we gathered on von Strucker’s been deleted,” Bruce said as he tapped away at his console.

“No, it hasn’t,” Tony said. “There’s still the physical files that Coulson gave us when we first started looking for him.”

In next to no time, four large cardboard boxes, filled with files, had been retrieved and brought to the room. With so many people in the room, it didn’t take long for the files to be divvied up.

“These are all known associates,” Steve stated, flipping through the file in his hand. “You’ve got to give it to von Strucker, he definitely had a lot of friends.”

“A lot of horrible friends,” Peter shuddered, looking between the file in his hand and the one in Steve’s.

“Wait! I know that guy,” Tony interrupted, pointing to one particular page. “From back in the day. He operates off of the African coast in black market arms. This guy, Ulysses Klaue. Met him at a convention. At least, I think it was, definitely something like that; I know that I never sold him anything, anyway. He was talking about finding something new, a game changer, he said. It was all very ‘Ahab’.”

From across the table, Thor reached over and tapped the photo of Klaue’s neck.

“What’s this?” he asked.


“No, those are tattoos,” Thor contradicted, indicating the man’s arms. “This is a brand.”

“Pass it over,” Bruce said, as he brought up an algorithm to search for brands on his computer.

Everyone watched as the computer cycled through dozens before settling on a match.

“Found it,” Bruce said. “It’s a word in an African dialect meaning thief, but in a much less friendly way.”
“What dialect?” Steve asked.

Bruce peered at the screen as he attempted to pronounce the clearly unfamiliar word.

“Wakanada …? Wa … Wa … Wakanda,” he finally managed.

Steve and Tony shared a startled glance.

“If this guy got out of Wakanda with some of their trade goods …” Tony said.

“I thought your father said that he got the last of it?” Steve asked.

“I’m not following,” Bruce interrupted. “What comes out of Wakanda?”

“The strongest metal on Earth,” Tony replied grimly, nodding at Cap’s shield.

“Where’s this guy now?” Steve asked urgently.

“As far as I know, he’s operating out of some derelict cargo ships on the coast of South Africa,” Tony replied.

“If Ultron is building more robots, more bodies, we can’t let him start building them out of vibranium,” Maria pointed out.

“We don’t intend to,” Steve replied. “Three teams. Buck, Sam, grab Rhodey and get to Sokovia. Reconnaissance only. We need confirmation that that’s where Ultron’s based. Peter, I want you coordinating here with Hill, work out if there’s anything else that Ultron’s after based on what his robots are stealing and if you can determine his endgame. The rest of us, we’ll pay Klaue a visit.”

Sleeping was for the weak or at least for those who were unafraid of falling asleep in the first place. Either way, Skye considered herself as fitting into both categories, regardless of the fact that she’d been up all night, firstly partying and then in a battle and its aftermath. And when it came right down to it, there had been absolutely no way that she could sleep with her bones and arms aching as they healed.

She looked down at her arms that were currently out in front of her, turning them over, marvelling at the clear, healthy pink skin that she could see. Gone were the dark red and purple bruises that had come from her vibrations damaging her as she tried to contain them.

Movement from across the garden from her caught her attention and she looked up. And blinked.

She’d heard about the woman, of course, but she’d never actually seen her let alone met her. A walking lizard, that was the first thought that popped into Skye’s head.

She was human-shaped, walking on two legs and everything. But it was the deep green skin and long, lizard-like tail that dragged on the ground that really stood out. That was until you looked at her head. She was bald, at least of hair. Instead, she had a crest or fin that stuck up right in the middle of her head running down the centre of it. And her eyes. The woman had no pupils or irises, simply eyes a solid white.

“Uh, hi,” Skye said, unsure exactly what to say and trying her hardest not to stare.

“Hello, I don’t believe that we’ve met yet. I’m Melati,” she replied.
“Skye,” she said, offering her own name. “I heard that you were here but I thought that you were still in the hospital.”

Melati smiled slightly and gestured at the other end of the stone bench that Skye was sitting on, to which Skye nodded and slid a little along, ensuring that the other woman had enough room.

“They let me out for good behaviour,” Melati said. “Are you an Avenger?”

Skye laughed even as she remembered that Melati had been held prisoner for over a year and wasn’t yet up with current world events.

“No. At least, not yet. I’m … I’m considering joining up,” Skye said.

She was surprised that she admitted that – she hadn’t even let Harry know that her thoughts were leaning that way. But after her talk with Bobbi the other day and the training that they’d done, the thought had been on her mind almost constantly.

“Do you have special abilities?” Melati asked hesitantly.

“Yeah. They’re only fairly recent really,” Skye admitted. “I can control and make vibrations, quakes … Quake, that’s not a bad actually, definitely has potential.” Seeing Melati’s cocked head, Skye elaborated. “I’ve been told that it’s best to have a code name if I want to go on missions. “

“Komodo,” Melati said, adding a firm nod.

“Come again?” Skye said.

“Komodo,” Melati repeated. “That’s what I want to be, not that I’m planning on fighting or anything, I just like the sound of having a new name. I’m American but my parents were from Indonesia before they emigrated. Now that I look like this, well, being named after the largest lizard alive, one that’s from Indonesia, sounds perfect.”

Skye couldn’t help but give Melati a cocked grin.

“You’re probably right,” she said. “Dragons probably don’t count.”

“Dragons?” Melati asked, wide-eyed.

“Yeah, there’s some here on the island; it’s a magic thing,” Skye explained.

“Dragons,” Melati repeated. “Well, if I’m going to be living here, I guess I better get used to the idea.”

“Oh? You’re staying here?” Skye asked.

“Well, to be honest, that’s my hope,” Melati admitted. “I … haven’t actually asked … whoever’s in charge around here about that yet. But, with the way that I now look, I just thought that it’d be … easier if I did – I’m not exactly that leg-less girl in the wheelchair anymore.”

“I can get that,” Skye replied. “And, if you like, I can have a word in Harry’s ear. We’re close, he’ll listen to me.”

“Thank you, I’d appreciate it,” Melati smiled.

“So, any thoughts on what you’ll do around here?” Skye asked.
“Before I was kidnapped, I was a student at Empire State studying biochemistry. I was hoping that I could continue that? Maybe through some sort of on-line study? It’s a thought, not sure how realistic it is,” Melati replied.

“Biochem? I’ve got a friend who’s a biochemist. Can’t understand half of what she says but I could see if she could help you there, too,” Skye offered.

“You seem to know all the right people,” Melati laughed.

“Yeah, I guess I do,” Skye agreed with a grin.

Their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of a third woman.

“Skye,” Bobbi greeted. “I heard that you needed some extra training.”

“You got that right. The sooner the better and the more the merrier,” Skye replied. “I’ve got to get a handle on my powers ASAP.”

“Well, then, I hope you’ve cleared your schedule,” Bobbi replied.

“If you’re not doing anything, you’re welcome to tag along,” Skye offered Melati, “who knows, maybe Bobbi might be able to help you get a feel for what your new body can do.”

Melati looked back and forth between the two.

“If you’re sure, I’d like that,” she said, rising to join the other two women.

ooo00ooo

“Point me Ulysses Klaue,” Mage whispered.

At once, his wand that was lying flat on the palm of his hand began spinning in place before settling straight ahead.

Mage nodded. That was exactly what he’d expected. Slowly, carefully, he began ghosting down the old, rusted walkway of the old, abandoned ship. Well, not so much abandoned, but derelict. There were easily three dozen men on board that he’d already seen, every one heavily armed. Thankfully, a disillusionment charm combined with silencing his feet meant that he was able to infiltrate Klaue’s base without complications.

Finally, he found his target. Klaue was easy to identify, not having changed from the picture that Mage’d seen. At his back was a tall, solidly built man of African descent, obviously Klaue’s muscle. The two kids – Wanda and Pietro Maximoff, Mage reminded himself – that he’d briefly seen in Sokovia, were also there although they only appeared to be watching, not participating in the conversation.

And then there was the robot, Ultron Mage supposed, although he’d obviously given himself an upgrade. He looked powerfully built, sleek and shiny, easily seven feet tall and imposing. His eyes glowed an ominous red, something that Mage had extremely bad memories of.

From this distance, it was impossible to hear what they were saying – nothing that a simple listening charm couldn’t fix.

“… rock I will build my church. Vibranium.”

The metallic-sound of the voice told Mage that that had to be Ultron speaking.
“You know, it came at great personal cost. It's worth billions,” Klaue stated, rubbing his neck.

“Now, so are you,” Ultron replied. “It's all under your dummy holdings? Finance is so weird. But as I always say, ‘keep your friends rich and your enemies rich, and wait to find out which is which’.”

“Stark,” Klaue growled.

“What?” Ultron asked.

“Tony Stark used to say that...to me. You're one of his,” Klaue stated.

“What?! I'm not...!” Ultron near-shouted back as he grabbed Klaue by the arm. “I'm not. You think I'm one of Stark's puppets, his hollow men? I mean look at me, do I look like Iron Man? Stark is nothing!”

Mage watched as Klaue’s man pulled his gun only for Wanda to move and produce a strange red glow around her hands as well as the hand with the gun. Mage frowned as he saw the man replace the gun back into its holster. It was almost like a compulsion charm, but then, not. Suddenly, Ultron’s arm began glowing a deep red before flashing down, severing Klaue’s arm and making the man scream in pain. It was obvious that the wound had been instantly cauterised by the intense heat of Ultron’s hand as not even a single drop of blood fell from the stump of what remained of Klaue’s arm.

“I'm sorry. I am sor ... Ooh, I'm sure that's going to be okay. I'm sorry, it's just I don't understand. Don't compare me with Stark!” Ultron stated, punctuating his order by kicking Klaue down the stairs. “It's a thing with me. Stark is, he's a sickness!

“Ahh, Junior,” and Mage looked around to see Iron Man, Cap and Thor standing across the walkway on the other side of the ship. “You're gonna break your old man's heart.”

Ultron seemed pleased by the idea. “If I have to.”

Their conversation continued, but Mage had other ideas in mind. The enhanced. The Maximoffs. As innocent as they looked, they were key players here.

Slowly, carefully, Mage crept forward until he was right behind the twins.

Just as he was raising his wand, ready to stun the pair, Ultron attacked his teammates. Thor and Cap were both thrown backwards by some sort of pulse even as Iron Man was hit by a repulsor-like blast.

From the corner of his eye, Mage saw one of Ultron’s robots flying towards the battle and he had to duck to avoid being flown into. Unfortunately, that meant that he accidentally nudged a loose piece of pipe, the clanging sound alerting the twins to his presence.

As they turned, Wanda used that red glow around her hands again, this time gesturing towards him. Mage didn't take the time to work out what it was, instead focussing on taking Pietro out of the equation.

As the blonde man dropped to the decking, unconscious, Mage finally realised what the girl had done: his disillusionment spell had been stripped away.

“How did you ...?” Mage began before dismissing the question – there’d be time for questions later, right now, there was a battle to be won.

His moment of hesitation was enough for Wanda to get off the first ‘spell’, though.
Mage felt something penetrate his mind, slamming up against his occlumency shields. It was strong, powerful and enough to have him momentarily frozen as he fought off the mental attack. It was almost as though he had to fight his way through a thick syrup, a goop that was intent on finding his greatest fears and weaknesses.

But Mage had always had an affinity for mental battles, even before he got rid of that Merlin-be-damned Horcrux in his head, he’d been able to fight off even Riddle’s imperius. And when it came to demons that caused negative emotions, well, this attack was nothing compared to dementors.

Finally, with one great mental shove, the attack was over.

Mage blinked and cursed. The twins had gone, disappeared into the dimly-lit walkways of the old ship.

A glance at his teammates assured him that they had the robots and Klaue’s men under control, or at least, Mage was confident that they would. Instead, he simply reapplied his disillusionment charm, did a point-me spell and raced off after the missing pair.

He found them a few minutes later and promptly cursed. The girl, Wanda, was standing just behind Thor, a red glow around both her hand and Thor’s head. Thankfully, though, Thor appeared to be just as resistant to mind-control as Mage himself was, a thought that was confirmed by Thor.

“The girl just tried to warp my mind. Take special care, I doubt a human could keep her at bay. Fortunately, I am mighty,” Thor announced over the comms.

Mage saw Thor turn towards the pair, only to have Pietro grab his sister and race off. Mage growled his frustration. On foot, he knew, simply wasn’t going to cut it. Thankfully, he had alternatives.

Taking a run at the nearest safety rail, Mage jumped up and over and allowed his body to twist itself into a new form before he’d even fallen a single deck.

Then, with a flap of his wings, the sparrowhawk flew off after the pair.

ooo00ooo

Thor strode around a corner, intent on finding the next enemy to smite.

Instead, and unexpectedly, Thor found himself in a hall on Asgard or was it Valhalla? He froze, looking around. A great celebration seemed to be taking place. There were people everywhere, eating, drinking, dancing and enjoying themselves. Most of these Asgardians he did not recognise, but seeing their garb, they could be no one else.

“Is it him? Is that the first son of Odin?” a well-known voice called.

And then, out of the crowd, appeared Heimdall, only a Heimdall that was not quite the friend that Thor knew.

“Heimdall! Your eyes?” Thor exclaimed, noting that the gate-keeper of Asgard had lost the golden irises to his eyes, instead they were completely white.

“Oh, they see everything. They see you leading us to Hel,” Heimdall said. “Wake up!”

And then, Heimdall reached out, grabbed his throat and began trying to strangle him.

“We are all dead. Can you not see?” Heimdall continued.
With a mighty shove, Thor pushed Heimdall off of him.

“You’re a destroyer, Odinson,” Heimdall stated. “See where your power leads.”

It was in that moment that lightning began crackling all around Thor’s body, growing in strength and power before it began lashing out. Asgardian after Asgardian was struck by the bolts lashing out from his body utterly destroying them.

And then, just before Thor was able to pull his mind back to himself and away from this vision, two images flashed before his eyes.

The first was four gems, each a different colour – yellow, purple, red, blue – floating in space. The other, a pair of eyes.

Thor stumbled to his knees onto the metal of the ship, panting. That vision or dream … there was something there, something important, but right at that moment, when he was still trying to get his mind back to being his own, he could not place it. It was important, though, of that he was absolutely certain.

oooo00000

Mage zipped out of the small hole in the side of the ship, holding his wings close to his body. As soon as he was clear, he twisted about, his wings working hard as he raced high into the sky. His head darted about, searching.

And then he found them. The two were standing not far from the quinjet. The fact that the ramp had been lowered was concerning but that was something to deal with later. Right now, Mage knew that he needed to get to the twins and put them down before they could do any more harm, especially to Bruce who was inside the quinjet waiting and most likely praying that a Code Green wasn’t called.

Angling his wings just right, Mage shot towards the ground. This, he knew, was going to have to be precise. Precise and fast if he stood any chance.

Luck, it seemed, was actually with him this time. For, just as he was about to transform back into human, he saw the twins turn away, looking inland and away from both the quinjet and the cargo ship.

Not wanting to waste the opportunity, Mage transformed a fraction of second earlier and even managed to get his first spell off before his feet hit the ground. His second spell hit his second target before his running feet had even taken two steps.

Just to be certain, Mage gave each of the fallen pair a second stunner before binding them and levitating them behind him towards the quinjet.

“Bruce?” Mage called.

An ominous feeling settled deep in the pit of his stomach when all he received was the echo of his own voice reverberating through the empty quinjet.

oooo00000

Finally, after what seemed far too long and involved not only fighting inside the old cargo ship but also outside it through the air and around four different ships, Iron Man got in the blast that he needed, knocking Ultron out of the sky and into the side of one of the ships before what was left of the robot slid to the sandy ground.
“Um, the vibranium’s getting away,” Ultron said as though saying that was going to be enough to cause Iron Man to stop what he was doing.

“And you’re not going anywhere,” Iron Man stated.

“Of course not. I’m already there. You’ll catch on. But first you might need to catch Doctor Banner,” Ultron said.

There were two things wrong with that statement and Iron Man simply did not have time to deal with them as well as Ultron in front of him. Firing off a rocket from his arm cannon was enough to completely obliterate the robot. But he’d just said that he was already there …

“Damn it, he’s built himself a hive mind,” Iron Man groused.

Unfortunately, he knew that that had to be his second priority if what he thought had happened had in fact actually happened.


Seconds later, images of footage appeared of the Hulk in Johannesburg, clearly on a rampage and smashing everything in sight.

Yep, just as he’d thought – the Maximoff girl had somehow managed to get inside Bruce’s head.

“Nat, Harry, I’m going to need a Lullaby for the big guy,” Iron Man called over the comms.

“Where?” Mage replied.


“I’ll get there as soon as I can but I’ll need to come by broom,” Mage replied.

“Do your best,” Iron Man said.

With that, he rocketed off, firing the repulsors in his gauntlets to supplement his boots in an attempt to increase his speed.

The trail of destruction was easy to see and follow. Cars were crumpled messes of metal, many flipped over and one even looked to be a ball-shaped, only recognisable by its tyres. Buildings had chunks out of them or holes in their roofs or sides, some even leaning precariously to the side. Asphalt everywhere was cracked or holey.

And then Iron Man found him. The Hulk looked angrier than he’d ever been before. His eyes were bloodshot and wild and his skin was a faded grey instead of its ‘healthy’ green. Even his size was different, easily a foot or maybe two, taller.

Unfortunately, Iron Man wasn’t the first on the scene. Johannesburg police were already there and a truckload full of soldiers were just pulling up. And every police officer there had their guns out and were firing at the Hulk. Not a good idea; Iron Man knew that that was only going to make him even angrier.

Coming to a hover above the police, Iron Man activated his external speakers.

“Alright, everyone, stand down,” he called.

Thankfully, they complied.
“You listening, buddy?” Iron Man called to the Hulk. “That little witch is messing with your mind. You’re stronger than her, you’re smarter than her. You’re Bruce Banner.”

The instant that he said it, Iron Man knew that it was the wrong thing to say. Hulk’s roar of anger had him back peddling.

“Right, don’t mention puny Banner,” he said.

Hulk though, seemed to want to emphasise his point, kicking up a car, grabbing it and tossing it towards Iron Man. A repulsor blast knocked it back and away before the car could reach him. That, however, did nothing about Hulk’s follow-up, which he’d used to hide behind the car.

“Sneaky, Hulk,” Iron Man said as he fired his boots, intending to get up and out of reach.

Hulk’s longer reach was enough to grab a foot and to slam him back to the ground.

“Shoulda called in Veronica,” Iron Man admonished himself, thinking of the Hulk-buster armour designed for precisely this situation sitting safely in orbit attached to the Avengers’ satellite.

But then, Iron Man hadn’t expected things to escalate this quickly and with Mage on his way, he’d assumed that all he’d need to do was to get the Hulk stationary and hopefully marginally calmer until the wizard arrived. Thinking of Mage, though, gave him an idea.

Raising his hands above him, Iron Man waited until the Hulk had let go of his foot and fired his hand repulsors, shooting straight between a pair of great grey-green legs just as two fists slammed into the ground right where he’d been. Flipping himself up, Iron Man leapt, grapping onto the Hulk’s back and wrapping his arms around his neck.

Just as the Hulk began scrabbling at the annoyance on his back, Iron Man activated the gas canisters in his arm guards. A mist of concentrated blue engulfed the Hulk’s face, continuously pouring out for a full minute. Iron Man hung on, waiting, hoping. Slowly, the Hulk’s movements became sluggish and he knew that the concentrated magical calming potion was making its way into the Hulk’s system.

When the Hulk’s skin changed back to its regular hue, Iron Man finally let go, dropping to the ground and quickly backing away. He smiled as the Hulk began stumbling away and even dropping to his knees, his skin now showing shades of pink, even as he began shrinking further.

“Come on, buddy, let’s get you out of here,” Iron Man said as he picked up the woozy Bruce some minutes later, completely ignoring the orders of the South African police who seemed to want to take Bruce into custody.

Iron Man made sure to take a wide detour out of the city – Bruce didn’t need to see what was surely the millions of dollars of damage that he’d just caused.
Glancing up at the monitor set above the door allowed her to see into the next room without opening it. She sighed at what she saw. Really, it wasn’t unexpected and it was what she’d signed up for. Sort of. At least, it was part of the job description and really, it wasn’t realistic to expect that every one of these was going to be as easy as learning to ride a broom.

Squaring her shoulders, she took a deep breath, made sure that her game face was on and pulled open the door. The instant that she was noticed, she heard them, each and every one turning their attention to her and shouting at her. But, as they should know by now, she had absolutely no interest or intention of addressing them until she was ready.

Placing the pad that she’d carried onto the lectern, she activated it, settled her hands on either side of the deep cherry wood and gazed out over the crowd. And waited. It was an old trick, one borrowed from her old Head of House and one that surprisingly worked as effectively on teen witches and wizards just as well as it did on muggle reporters.

“Thank you,” she said once the room was quiet and all there were seated.

After doing this for so long, it was easy these days to ignore the forest of microphones that had been set up in front of her as well as the numerous recorders and phones that we aimed towards her and instead simply focus on the people.

“At approximately half past twelve local time in Johannesburg, South Africa, there was an incident involving the Hulk which culminated in parts of the outskirts of Johannesburg suffering considerable damage. Thankfully, while numerous injuries have been reported, there were no fatalities involved in the incident. Already, the Stark Relief Foundation is on scene and assisting with assessing damage and clean-up operations.

“I am certain that by now you have all seen the footage. What you are currently unaware of are the circumstances that led to this extremely unfortunate incident.

“A short time prior to the incident in Johannesburg, the Avengers were on a mission targeting a black arms dealer. This dealer has been known to operate off of the African coast for the past two decades. He has specialised in selling weaponry to terrorists and rogue militia groups. The Avengers arrived at the site during the middle of one such deal and as such, a fight broke out.

“The buyer that was involved in the deal had a number of enhanced individuals in their employ, one of which has the capability to manipulate the minds of others. This mind manipulation was used on the Hulk, sending him into a terrible rage, a rage that he was trying to escape from. During this time, he was not aware of what he was doing or of the damage that he was causing or of the civilians that were being hurt.

“Please direct your attention to the screen behind me.”

Here, Lavender tapped the pad in front of her causing side by side images of the Hulk to appear on the large screen.

“On the left, you can see an image of the Hulk as we know him. On the right is an image of the Hulk during the incident in Johannesburg. Please note the differences between the two images, particularly the hue of his skin. With the Hulk’s unique physiology, it is easy to see how this mental manipulation affected not only the Hulk’s mind, but also his physical appearance, which is directly linked to his
emotions.

“I would also like to point out that this mental manipulation was attempted on two other Avengers, one of whom suffered minor mental trauma, while the other was able to fight off the invasion to his mind.

“This concludes my prepared statement, I will be taking questions at this time,” Lavender said, wishing that she didn’t have to.

Immediately, the room full of reporters were on their feet, all shouting their own questions at her. As she’d learnt to do, Lavender ignored them all, waiting until they’d settled back somewhat before calling on the first.

“Mister Jameson?” she asked, hoping to get the annoying man over and done with quickly.

“When will Bruce Banner be handed over to the South African police?” he asked.

“Having expected your question, I contacted the Avengers’ lawyers prior to this press conference,” Lavender said. “I have with me a prepared statement from Mister Murdock of Nelson and Murdock, Attorneys At Law. ‘At this time, Nelson and Murdock are meeting with representatives of the City of Johannesburg as well as the Director of Public Prosecutions for South Africa to determine whether or not any charges will, in fact, be laid against Doctor Bruce Banner, also known as the Hulk, due to the extenuating circumstances which resulted in the incident. Until such time as an agreement has been reached, no other comment can or will be entered into.’ Miss Everhart?” Lavender asked, indicating the next allowed to ask a question.

“You mentioned some enhanced individuals? What happened to them?” she asked.

“The Avengers have detained two for questioning and to determine exactly how complicit and involved they are and have been in any criminal proceedings. It is also believed that they may have information leading to the ringleader of the deal that the Avengers interrupted,” Lavender said. “Miss Riley?”

“Which two Avengers were attacked by this ‘mental manipulation’?” Miss Riley asked.

“Thor and Mage,” Lavender replied. “Both are currently fully recovered and no other Avengers were injured during the mission.”

“What sort of weapons were being sold in this deal?” Jameson shouted.

Lavender frowned at the man. “Mister Jameson, you know better than to ask out of turn. What I will say is what you’ve heard me say numerous times before: I will not comment on any on-going Avengers mission until I have been given clearance to do so and you’ll know when that is because I’ll call a press conference. I believe that that will do for today. Thank you all for coming.”

And, ignoring the shouting and questions still being thrown at her, Lavender strode from the room, holding her composure until the door was firmly closed behind her.

ooo00ooo

The quinjet was subdued. At best, the mission was a stalemate.

Ultron had managed to get away with the vibranium. In the confusion of the fight, Klaue had also managed to escape, although the majority of his men had been captured and handed over to the South African military. Yes, they’d taken down some of Ultron’s robots but with the numbers that
they suspected that he’d already built not to mention the numbers that he was likely to build given the resources that he’d been amassing, it was a drop in the bucket.

The only redeeming factor was that they’d managed to capture the Maximoff twins.

“The news is loving you guys; nobody else is,” Maria stated over the comms. “There’s been no official call for Banner’s arrest, but it’s in the air.”

“Murdock?” Tony asked.

“He’s running interference and is quietly optimistic,” Maria replied. “Brown’s done her best with the press with some success but the footage is bad. How’s the team?”

Tony shrugged. “Frustrated. Any word from Rhodey and the others?”

“Not yet but I wasn’t expecting it yet,” Maria replied. “Until we do, I’d suggest staying in stealth mode and stay away from here.”

“Run and hide?” Tony asked incredulously.

“Stay off the radar, somewhere Ultron can’t find you until you’re ready to find him,” Maria countered.

With a final nod, she closed the connection and Tony moved up to Clint at the helm.

“Hey, you wanna switch out?” he asked.

“No, I’m good,” Clint replied. “If you want to get some kip, now’s a good time. We’re still a few hours out.”

“A few hours out from …?” Tony asked.

“Safe house,” Clint replied.

Shrugging with the vagueness of the answer, Tony moved deeper into the quinjet.

“Our guests still out to it, huh?” he asked, nodding towards the two still forms bound and lying on some seats near the back.

“And they’ll stay that way until we’re ready to talk to them,” Harry stated.

“Well, if it helps, we’re apparently a few hours out from a safe house. We can put them through the screws then,” Tony said.

Harry simply nodded, his eyes never leaving the unknown pair.

ooo00ooo

The farmhouse was unexpected to say the least. Although, when one thought about it, the fact that they’d landed in the middle of nowhere, with no other houses around and only light forests and fields as far as the eye could see, perhaps it wasn’t quite so unexpected after all. And considering that this was a farm, then the large barn, woodpiles and the old pick-up truck fitted right in.

Clint, at least, seemed to know where he was going, and so the others followed obediently along. Harry’s eyes narrowed slightly as he noticed that, apart from Clint, the only other one to not be looking around in interest was Nat. The only thing that he could assume was that it was an old
S.H.I.E.L.D. safe house.

“Where are we?” Thor asked.

“Safe house,” Tony shrugged.

“Let’s hope,” Clint smirked.

The group was led up the four stairs to the porch and then to the front door which Clint opened without knocking.

“Honey, I’m home!” he called.

‘Honey’? Harry mouthed to Bruce who simply shrugged.

From what appeared to be the kitchen, waddled an extremely pregnant woman.

“Company. Sorry I didn’t call ahead,” Clint said as he strode across the room, took the woman in his arms and kissed her.

“I’m guessing this is an agent of some kind?” Tony said.

“Everyone, I’d like you to meet Laura. My wife,” Clint said, a broad smile on his face.

“Hi, I know all your names,” Laura said, sounding almost sheepish.

Harry raised an eyebrow at Clint, his hood was currently down his back exposing his face.

“Yeah, yeah, I know but I can’t keep secrets from her,” Clint said before he was interrupted by the sound of running footsteps.

“And these are smaller agents,” Tony said, pointing down at the two children.

“Dad!” the boy yelled, rushing at his father who promptly picked him up to give him a hug.

“Hey buddy, I’ve missed you,” Clint said as he also reached out to draw in his daughter.

“Did you bring Aunty Nat?” the girl asked.

“Why don’t you hug her and find out yourself?” Nat grinned, kneeling down to give the girl a hug.

“Sorry to barge in like this, we’ve been a bit busy not knowing that you existed,” Tony said.

“Yeah, Fury set this up for me back when I first joined S.H.I.E.L.D.,” Clint explained. “Kept it completely off the books. We’ll be safe here.”

“I’m guessing that this is where you keep running off to for your ‘vacations’?” Harry smiled.

“Well, it’s home, you know?” Clint replied.

“And how’s little Natasha?” Nat asked, leaning over Laura and talking to her stomach.

“It’s Nathaniel,” Laura replied looking apologetic.

“Traitor!” Nat mock-groused at the unborn child.

Suddenly, Thor turned and strode out the door, Steve and Harry following him.
“Thor?” Steve asked.

“I saw something in that vision,” Thor stated. “Something important. Something that I need answers for. I won’t find them here.”

With that, Thor spun Mjolnir before rocketing off into the sky.

“I’ll get the twins,” Harry explained. “I’d rather not leave them in the quinjet just in case they wake up. I should be able to transfigure something to keep them safe and secure in the barn.”

“Good call,” Steve said. “Let me know when you’ve got things set up and we’ll talk to them. I think the sooner we do so, the better.”

“Agreed,” Harry said before striding off towards where they’d ‘parked’ the quinjet.

ooo00ooo

Pietro woke. It wasn’t the way he normally woke up, a little at a time, some fuzziness that gradually disappeared as time worn on. No. This was more akin to being asleep one moment and wide awake the next.

Opening his eyes, he looked around. Hay? This was definitely not the derelict hulk in South Africa which was the last place that he remembered. Nor was it Sokovia or at least, no part of it that he recalled ever being or seeing. Looking further afield, he saw wooden slats making up a wall and then a high vaulted roof, also made of wood.

A barn? That was the only thing that made sense. Although exactly how he’d gotten there – wherever here happened to be – he had no idea. And then a thought occurred.

“Wanda?” he called.

A sound behind him made him roll over or at least attempt to. Looking down his body, he saw that his hands were tied together, as were his feet. Really? Whoever had captured them thought that that was enough to hold him?

Channelling his super speed, he vibrated his wrists enough to loosen his bonds before shucking them off and reaching down to untie his legs. It was a simple matter, then, to get up, grab his sister – he’d untie her later – and start to run out of there.

At least, that was the plan. For some reason, his feet suddenly felt like they were in quicksand and they all but froze in place. Unfortunately, the rest of him kept going – straight to the floor.

“Ooh, that hurt! Get off me!” Wanda cried out as he landed on top of her.

Pietro twisted about to stare at his feet, trying to comprehend why they weren’t working the way they were supposed to.

“Now that you’ve seen that you aren’t going anywhere, would you like to take a seat so that we can talk?” Captain America asked as he, the one called Mage and the Black Widow faded into view in front of them.

“What did you do to me?” Pietro demanded.

“Nothing permanent,” Mage replied.

From the corner of his eye, Pietro noticed Wanda attempting to use her magic to free them and most
likely to confuse their captors.

“What did you do?” Wanda echoed her brother, causing Pietro to stare in wonder as the red magic that she could normally wield seemed to simply stutter out.

“Magic suppression cuffs,” Mage replied. “Wasn’t sure that they’d work but there you go. I’ll remove them after we’ve talked. Would you care to take a seat?”

Pietro watched as Mage twirled his wand and produced five seats, two together facing the other three a metre or so away. Not seeing any other alternative, Pietro sat.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“To talk,” Captain America said.

“About what?” Wanda demanded.

“About Ultron,” Black Widow said.

“Why should we tell you anything? You work with Stark,” Pietro snapped.

“What did Tony ever do to you?” Mage asked. “He’s not mentioned meeting you before.”

Pietro shared a look with his sister before shrugging. It couldn’t hurt and if it meant that these three trusted Stark a little less, well that could only be a win.

“We lost our parents because of Stark,” Wanda stated.

“I’ve seen the records,” Black Widow said with a cocked head. “They were killed in the bombings. Neither Stark nor the US had anything to do with that. That was a beef between Sokovia and Latveria.”

“Even still, it was Stark that cost us our parents,” Pietro spat. “We were ten years old, having dinner, the four of us. When the first shell hit, two floors below, it makes a hole in the floor. It’s big. Our parents go in and the whole building starts coming apart. I grab Wanda, roll under the bed and the second shell hits. But, it doesn’t go off. It just … sits there in the rubble, three feet from our faces. And on the side of it is painted one word …”

“Stark,” Wanda supplied.

“We were trapped for two days,” Pietro continued.

“Every effort to save us, every shift in the bricks, I think, ‘this will set it off.’ We wait for two days for Tony Stark to kill us,” Wanda said.

“Merlin, that’s rough,” Mage said, shaking his head. “I doubt that I can understand exactly what that did to you. I can say that, after experiencing that, I can understand why you have a problem with Tony.”

Pietro narrowed his eyes at the Avenger. He hadn’t expected that. It even sounded … genuine. If only he could see the man’s face, then he might be able to tell if it actually was.

“Okay, that explains your problem with Stark. It doesn’t explain why you joined up with Ultron,” Captain America said.

“Actually, it does,” Black Widow said. “Assuming that Ultron promised you that he’d kill Tony.”
Once again, Pietro looked to Wanda, not that she looked back this time.

“He did,” she said flatly.

“Does it bother you that he plans to kill a whole lot of others along the way?” Steve asked.

“Some,” Pietro shrugged. “But if he does what he promised, I can live with that.”

“Do you know Ultron’s whole plan? His endgame?” Black Widow asked.

“What does he plan to use the vibranium for?” Steve added.

Pietro simply shrugged, Wanda remained silent. He didn’t like these questions; these were questions that he didn’t have answers for, questions that he’d even asked himself.

“You don’t know,” Black Widow stated. “I wonder exactly how much Ultron did tell you.”

“I’m guessing that you knew that Ultron is based in Sokovia,” Mage said.

“Where else would we have met him?” Wanda asked.

“Therefore, you also know that he’s building an army of robots,” Captain America stated. “What does he have planned for his army?”

“You think that they’re just an army?” Pietro laughed.

“Pietro,” Wanda said warningly.

“No, what harm is there in telling them?” Pietro countered. “It’s not just an army. It’s all him, all Ultron, every single one of them.”

“That fits with what Tony got from his last talk with Ultron,” Black Widow nodded. “A robot army with a hive mind and you think anything good will come from it?”

“You think something bad will come from it?” Wanda countered. “Well, apart from your own deaths, of course.”

“Yes, the very first time we met Ultron, he did say that he wanted the Avengers’ extinction,” Steve said. “And that’s a very particular word, ‘extinction’. It makes me wonder exactly what he has planned.”

Pietro felt a chill travel down his spine. He didn’t like that word, it was a little too close to home after the war between Sokovia and Latveria. They’d come very close to being wiped off the map. If NATO hadn’t stepped in, it was very likely that within a year, two at the most, all of Sokovia would have been ‘extinct’.

“I think that it’s time for a break,” Mage suggested. “I’m sure that you two are hungry. How about you come with us up to the farm for dinner. You’ll have to stay as you are, of course, no magic or speed. And I warn you now, there are civilians up there, a family, kids. You try anything and you won’t like the consequences.”

Once again Pietro shivered. He believed him. Not that he had anything to worry about. Kids. Neither he nor his sister would ever do anything to harm a kid.

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Harry blinked at the sight of Nick Fury leaning against the kitchen bench that Clint was working at. Exactly when the former Director of S.H.I.E.L.D. had arrived, he didn’t know.

Tony, he was pleased to see, was playing darts just off of the kitchen and far away from the lounge. Apart from a single glance across when they first entered, Tony appeared to be ignoring them, which was fine as far as Harry was concerned – the Maximoff twins definitely needed some time adjusting to the fact that they were basically in the same room as the man who they blamed for their parent’s deaths before there was any sort of interaction.

Leaving Steve to settle the two on the couch, Harry followed Nat across the room to the dining table where Clint’s kids, Cooper and Lila were currently drawing.

“How’d it go?” Bruce asked as Harry slipped into the seat beside him.

“A start, I think,” Harry replied with a shrug.

“Can I have the blue, Lila?” Cooper asked.

Lila didn’t even flinch at her brother’s question. Seeing the boy reaching across the table for the crayon and noting that it was far out of his reach, Harry decided to pass it over to him. But as he reached out, the strangest thing happened – the crayon began rolling across the table all by itself, straight into Cooper’s hand who promptly grabbed it and began to draw.

“What?” Harry asked.

Laura was there in an instant.

“I’m sorry, were they bickering again?” she asked.

“Not at all,” Harry replied. “How old’s Cooper?”

“Just coming up on eight,” Laura replied.

“Have you noticed anything odd or out of the ordinary happening around him?” he asked.

The wary expression on Laura’s face was answer enough and Harry quickly stood and gestured for her to follow him over to Clint.

“Hey, guys, what’s up?” Clint asked without even pausing in chopping the carrots.

“Clint,” Harry said and his tone was obviously enough to capture the other man’s attention.

“What’s wrong with Cooper?” a clearly worried Laura asked.

Harry made sure to lower the enchantment covering his face which he was keeping up with the Maximoffs so close, so that the two could look him in the eye.

“Nothing, nothing in the slightest,” he smiled. “However, I suspect that Cooper might be magical.”

“Magical? Like you?” Clint asked, his head whipping towards his son.

“I’m pretty sure that I just saw him summon a crayon to himself using magic,” Harry explained. “Look, I could be wrong, but it’s not unusual for someone his age to start showing signs. We call it ‘accidental magic’.”

“But no one in our family’s magical at all,” Laura said.
“They don’t have to be,” Harry replied. “Hermione’s the first in her family,” and he noted Clint nod as he recognised the name, “and so was my mum. We call them muggleborns. Or at least we do in England.”

“What does it mean? Coop being magical? Assuming he is,” Clint asked.

“When he turns eleven, he’ll be invited to school to learn how to control his magic,” Harry explained. “Actually, thinking about it, this ties into something that I was going to talk to the two of you about later. If you’d like, I can create some multi-use portkeys for you, Clint, so that you can travel home and back whenever you’d like.”

“Portkeys?” Laura asked.

“A magical way of travelling almost instantaneously from one place to another,” Harry explained. “Also, another option is that I can give you a piece of land on Paradis Noir. Clint, you know how big the island is, there’s plenty of room for you to have pretty much what you have here. There’d be a lot more of us around in case you ever need some help with babysitting or whatever and you know that the island is even more safe and secure than here is. And if Cooper is magical, then, if you like, I could help him understand his gift, start to get a handle on it even before he heads off to school.”

“That’s very generous of you,” Laura said.

“Yeah, Harry, we appreciate the offer and I’ll definitely be taking you up on the portkeys,” Clint said. “As to the other …”

“I’m not expecting an answer now,” Harry laughed. “It’s open-ended. Tomorrow, next month, a year from now, never, completely your call. Just let me know.”

“We will. Thank you,” Laura said with a smile.

Dinner was winding down and by mutual agreement, talk turned to their current predicament once Laura had ushered the kids up to bed.

“Ultron wanted you lot taken out of play,” Nick stated. “Even brought in some allies to do it. Why?”

“To buy himself time,” Nat replied.

“Exactly,” Nick said. “To buy himself time. Obviously, whatever he has in that platinum head of his is something that he thinks you can stop. My guess is that it involves whatever he’s building; he sure took a lot of vibranium for some reason.”

“We know that he’s based in Sokovia. Your contacts able to track him anywhere else?” Steve asked.

“Surprisingly, yes. Ultron’s easy to track, he’s everywhere,” Nick replied. “Guy’s multiplying faster than a catholic rabbit. Still doesn’t give us an angle on any of his plans, though.”

“What about launch codes? Is he still going after them?” Tony asked.

“Launch codes?” Pietro asked.

“Nuclear codes,” Bruce replied before Tony could. “We realised early on that he was trying to crack nuclear launch codes all over the world.”

“Why would he do such a thing?” Wanda asked.
"That’s what has us worried,” Harry said.

“And the funny thing is that he’s not making any headway,” Nick said.

“I cracked the Pentagon’s firewall in high school on a dare,” Tony said.

“I contacted our friends at the NEXUS about that,” Nick continued.

“NEXUS?” Steve and Harry asked simultaneously.

“It’s the world internet hub in Oslo. Every byte of data flows through it, fastest access on the planet,” Bruce explained.

“What’d they say?” Clint asked.

“Ultron’s definitely fixated on the missiles but the codes are constantly being changed,” Nick replied.

“By whom?” Tony asked.

Nick simply shrugged. “Parties unknown.”

“We have an ally?” Nat wondered.

“Ultron’s got an enemy, that’s not the same thing,” Nick counted. “Still, I’d pay money to know who it is.”

“I might need to visit Oslo, find our ‘unknown’,“ Tony said.

“Ultron wants nuclear missiles,” Wanda said, her eyes wide and fixed on her brother.

“Nothing good can come of that,” Pietro agreed.

“Well, this is good times, Boss, but I was kinda hoping that you had more than that when I saw you,” Nat said.

“I do. I have you,” Nick replied. “Back in the day, I had eyes everywhere, ears everywhere else. You kids had all the toys and whistles that you wanted. Now, here we are with nothing but our wits and will to save the world. So, you tell me, what does Ultron want?”

“To become better. Better than us. He keeps building bodies,” Steve replied.

“Human bodies,” Wanda added.

“You’re right,” Tony nodded. “The human form is inefficient, biologically speaking, we’re outmoded but he keeps coming back to it.”

“When you two programmed him to protect the human race, you didn’t exactly do a bang-up job, you do know that, right?” Nat asked.

“But as far as Ultron’s concerned, humans don’t need to be protected, they need to evolve, you all heard him at his coming out party,” Bruce said. “He said exactly that. Ultron wants to evolve.”

“How?” Nick asked.

“Has anyone been in contact with Helen Cho?” Bruce asked.

“The cradle? That device that could make flesh and skin? Is that what you mean?” Clint asked. “She
was talking to Daphne about it when they were patching me up after I got hit in Sokovia.”

“Would it bond to vibranium?” Steve asked. “A robot made with a vibranium skeleton, covered in flesh and skin with a computer for a brain … you know, I really miss the days when the weirdest thing science made was me.

“Tony, you get to this NEXUS place and find out who or what’s keeping Ultron from getting the launch codes.”

“I can give you a lift to England,” Harry said. “Cut down on travel time.”

“I’ll take a team with me to Seoul to check on Helen Cho,” Steve stated.

“Nat and I will go with you,” Clint said.

“Bruce, head back to the Tower, check in with Sam, Bucky and Rhodey, get the intel that we’ll need ready for whatever’s to come,” Steve ordered. “And what about you two? What do you want to do?”

Pietro and Wanda shared a look, a silent conversation that startled Harry back more years than he wanted to count to a different set of twins.

“Ultron played us,” Pietro stated.

“He wants to destroy the world,” Wanda agreed. “We need to make it right.”

“What can we do to help?” Pietro asked.
The cave containing the Pool of Norn was hidden deep with Scandinavia, all but lost to myth and legend. Thankfully, Thor was right in thinking that there was one man who, due to his knowing Thor himself and therefore interested in delving into such myths and legends, eager to find which were in fact based in truth and who would have some knowledge of where it lay.

Erik Selvig.

Together, the two had travelled to the remote, hidden location – one to enter the Pool itself, intent on seeking answers to his questions, the other to be there for his friend.

“This is it, the Water of Sight,” Erik said.

“In every realm, there is a reflection. If the water spirits accept me, I can return to my dream and find what I missed.”

“Men who enter that water, the legends don’t end well,” Erik warned.

“Hopefully we can find out what we need before they consume me completely,” Thor stated as he and Erik stood on the edge of the Pool, staring at its ink-black surface.

“This is a new kind of dangerous,” Erik remarked.

“Unfortunately, the thing I fear contains the thing I need,” Thor quoted, first in Asgardian and then in English.

It was then that Thor pulled a small flash from his pocket.

“What’s that for?” Erik asked.

“It’s for me,” Thor replied as he unscrewed the lid and took a drink. “The thing I fear is scary.”

Having fortified himself, Thor then removed his boots, jacket and shirt and, having steeled himself for what was to come, strode into the still water. The pool was easily chest deep within a few steps, but Thor did not stop there, quickly sinking beneath the water.

Erik edged closer to the water’s edge, a recorder in his hand so as to ensure that he got every word for them to listen back to later, after all, neither of them had any intention of doing this twice.

“All of you.”

The voice came from Thor as his head, arms and chest emerged from the water but was clearly not the Price of Asgard. The Norn had him now and Erik pushed his fear aside. He could deal with that later. Thor’s lightning crackled from him, across the water.

“You thinking that you were special, thinking that we would all-consume him,” the Norn stated through Thor.

“How do we stop Ultron?” Erik asked, the first of their prepared questions.

“Sacrifice.”

“What kind?” Erik asked.
“Human, of course,” came the response before, once again, Thor’s lightning struck, crackling around the cave and making the Norn cry in pain. “We count the dead and they are legion. The Stone draws you all to its brilliance and you to your end.”

“The Stone,” Erik said. “From Loki’s Sceptre?”

“It is. It is of the Six. The Infinite Six. Cannot be joined nor kept apart. Ahhh! This one fights us!”

“This Stone,” Erik persisted, attempting to get the Norn back on topic and away from fighting Thor.

“The Mind Stone, that rules perception and moulds the mind’s monsters. It carved out your will, Erik and still you don’t see!” the Norn mocked.

Erik moved back, away from the horrors of his past before managing to catch himself.

“If Ultron has the Mind Stone …” he began only to be cut off by the Norn’s laughter.

“Your enemies are closer,” the Norn replied, struggling visibly now against Thor. “And fear the horror’s ambition and brilliance only blinds …”

The Norn was cut off by a particularly violent surge of Thor’s lightning while culminated in Thor’s body throwing itself back under the black water.

When Thor next emerged, he was shaking and panting and struggling towards the rocky shore. Instantly, Erik was there, grabbing him under his arm and helping him out of the Pool.

“Thor?” he asked.

“I see now, my vision is clearer, I understand what I missed,” Thor replied. “I see what has to happen.”

Getting access to the NEXUS was extremely easy, what with him being Tony Stark and all. Sure, there might be a babysitter, but she was cute, so it wasn’t like he minded.

“What is it that you are looking for?” the girl asked.

“A hacker,” Tony replied. “Someone who’s been stopping an AI from accessing any and all nuclear codes worldwide. And a hacker who can do that? They could be anywhere. And as this is the centre of everything, then what better place for a guy who’s looking for a needle in the world’s biggest haystack?”

“And how would you find such a person?” she asked.

“Pretty simply, really,” Tony replied, his fingers already doing their dance across the keyboard. “You bring a magnet.” And then he began singing to himself. “Oh, I’m decrypting nuclear codes and you don’t want me to. Come and get me.”

It took surprisingly little time to get a hit, to get shut down and blocked from what he was trying to do. That just made it even more fun. Tony started to grin as he worked, doing his utmost to find a way around the hacker.

And then, just as he was booted out for the eighth time, he noticed a piece of code. A very familiar piece of code.
It couldn’t be, could it? he asked himself.

They found Helen Cho standing docile in the middle of her lab at U-GIN. Steve had never been there before but the fact that the room looked so empty, he could tell that something was wrong.

“Helen!” he called, racing across the room and grabbing her arm.

When she neither responded nor moved, Steve turned her around.

“Damn,” he muttered, seeing her clear blue eyes, eyes that should be brown.

“What is it?” Wanda asked.

“Ultron was here. He used the Sceptre on her, placed her mind under his command,” Steve replied.

Wandacocked her head slightly before focussing her magic. A flick of red energy at the other woman’s head produced instant results. Cho’s eyes cleared back to their normal brown and she shook her head as though coming out of a daze.

Steve managed to catch her before she fell when her knees buckled.

“Easy, you’re alright now,” he said.

“Ultron, he was here,” Helen said. “He made me … I didn’t think it was possible.”

“You were under his control, it’s okay, just tell me what you remember,” Steve said, using his voice to keep her calm.

“Vibranium, he brought vibranium,” Helen said. “Had me use the cradle to graft flesh and skin to the vibranium. It was amazing, it was like they were bonding in ways that I’d never imagined possible.”

“Is it finished? Is he in that body?” Steve asked.

Helen shook her head. “The body is complete, but he didn’t have enough time to complete uploading his matrix into the body before he detected your quinjet.”

“We have to find that cradle and stop him before he finishes,” Steve stated grimly.

“He could be anywhere by now,” Pietro said.

“Did you guys get that?” Steve asked, touching the comm in his ear.

“Loud and clear, we’re on the lookout,” Clint replied from the quinjet.

“Steve!” Helen said, reaching out and catching his arm before he could turn away. “The real power is in the gem.”

Steve nodded, not quite understanding what she meant but knowing that it was important.

“Let’s go,” he said.

“There’s a small, private jet preparing to take off at the airfield across the city. No manifest, could be him,” Nat reported.
“No. I’ve got him,” Clint countered, looking down through the quinjet’s window closest to the floor. “A truck from the lab on the loop by the bridge.”

Switching to infrared confirmed it.

“Confirmed,” Clint said. “I’ve got three in the back with the cradle, one in the cab. I could take out the driver?”

“Negative,” Steve countermanded. “I’ve got a different idea.”

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“You sure that you’re up for this?” Steve asked him.

Pietro cracked his neck, staring down the road before him.

“I’ve got it,” he replied.

“Nat, be ready,” Steve ordered.

“Aren’t I always?” she replied.

“Wanda? You’re right to do your part? Ultron won’t even see you,” Steve reassured Pietro’s sister.

“But he will know that it’s me,” Wanda said.

“Be careful,” Pietro said, before frowning at the look she gave in return.

“Don’t worry, kid, I’ve got her back,” Steve reassured him, which, surprisingly, it did.

“The truck is approaching your position,” Clint reported.

And there it was, driving down the road, seemingly oblivious to the four crouched behind the barrier keeping the pedestrians away from the road.

Pietro watched as his sister stood just as the truck rolled past, her hands moving in that particular way of hers, her red magic condensing and collecting around her hands. Shifting his eyes, he saw the same red magic appear around the truck’s rear door. And then it happened, one of the back doors all but tore off, falling towards the road like a ramp.

Even before it’d landed, Pietro was off. If Steve had said, ‘go’, then he missed it, already being so far away. The cars, bikes and trucks around him slowed to a mere crawl in a second, appeared to become stationary as he reached his full speed.

Weaving through the traffic, Pietro raced down the road and straight up the ‘ramp’, having to actually take a small jump as it still hadn’t fully fallen.

As Clint had reported, there were three inside: Ultron himself and two of his smaller robots. All were frozen in place and he barely spared them a glance. A singular circuit around the great metal coffin-looking box and he had released the four ties holding it in place. Another half circle took him back closest to the cab and the head of the cradle.

Then, putting his shoulder into it, he pushed, his feet churning for traction. And then it was moving, straight towards the opened back of the truck.

Pietro kept pushing until the end tipped up as it fell from the truck to the road. His part done, he left,
just as fast as he’d come, straight back to his sister and the others.

“…o!” Steve finished as he came to a stop.

“You were saying?” Pietro said smugly.

A slight push from his sister was the only response as he ducked down but only far enough to still be able to see a speeding Black Widow race out onto the road on a motorbike.

He watched as she skidded the bike, coming off of it right beside the cradle on the road, the bike continuing. From the back of the truck, Ultron appeared and if a robot could look angry, then this one did. Pietro saw him raise his arm, ready to fire on the Widow, but before he could do so, Widow had reached her target and, in a swirl of multicoloured light, both she and cradle disappeared.

“Now that’s something you don’t see every day,” Pietro commented.

“You ain’t seen nothing yet, kid,” Steve replied. “Right, let’s get out of here and rendezvous with Clint.”

Keeping low, Pietro and his sister followed him away from the seething robots.

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Maria Hill looked down the list that she’d just finished creating and nodded in satisfaction.

Yes, she decided, that should do it.

After hearing Sam, Bucky and Rhodey’s report after their reconnaissance mission to Sokovia, she knew that, even sending in the Avengers, might not be enough. The last time that they were there, von Strucker hadn’t cared where his shots had landed, necessitating sending in the Iron Legion to help keep the civilians from getting injured or worse in the crossfire.

She doubted that Ultron, with his mandate on extinction, would care either. And the Iron Legion wasn’t available this go around either.

Tapping open her comms, she ensured that the line was encrypted and made her first call.

“Maria, this is a pleasant surprise,” Coulson smiled as he answered the call.

“You won’t think so when I tell you why I’m calling,” Maria replied. “I need you to enact Theta Protocol.”

“You’re sure? I’m guessing that it’s necessary,” Coulson replied.

“It is. I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t,” Maria said.

“You do know that a helicarrier is a little hard to hide, don’t you? We do this, it’ll announce to the world that S.H.I.E.L.D. still exists,” Coulson pointed out.

“As I said, it’s necessary,” Maria repeated.

She saw him looking down, tapping something on his desk.

“I’ve alerted Agent Koenig,” Coulson said. “I’m assuming that you have additional personnel in mind to help fly it? And a commander?”
“Fury will be taking command,” Maria replied, amused by the surprise that Coulson let slip. “As to a crew, I’ve got Agent Klein rounding them up as we speak.”

“Understood,” Coulson said. “Good luck.”

With a nod, Maria broke the connection before activating a second.

“Hill, I’m going to guess that this isn’t a social call?” Bobbi Morse said in way of greeting.

“It’s not,” Maria confirmed. “We have a mission. The main team will be combatting and neutralising Ultron. I need a secondary team ready to go in a couple of hours. Their primary job will be protecting the civilians from the fallout.”

Maria could see Bobbi’s mind working, considering options before she replied.

“Falcon, War Machine and Wolf for certain,” she said. “She-Hulk’s probably a little too unusual for civilians. Daredevil’s still doing his lawyer thing in South Africa. I’ll go, of course. And as much as I hate to do it, but if there’s real danger of civilians getting hurt, then I’m going to pull Spider-Man and Squirrel Girl from school for the day.

Maria nodded. As much as she disliked the idea of sending teens into a combat situation, it wasn’t the first and it certainly wouldn’t be the last time that she had done so.

“Actually, I might have one more, I’ll confirm in half an hour,” Bobbi said.

Maria raised an eyebrow. As far as she knew, they’d already gone through the whole roster. Unless …? And she was a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent, one that Maria had no problems with, assuming that Bobbi had worked her magic, which was a given if she was suggesting bringing her along.

“Understood,” Maria replied. “I’ll send Happy to Midtown to pick up our wayward two.”

Closing the connection, Maria looked back down at her list, picking the next most important thing to take care of.

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The cradle sat in the middle of the lab, ironically in the exact same spot that Tony, Bruce and Peter had initially attempted – and somehow, succeeded – to amalgamate the Ultron program with the program hidden inside the gem of Loki’s Sceptre. Now, inside that sarcophagus, sat the culmination of their work, albeit in a form that not one of them could have ever envisioned.

“This thing is sealed tight,” Peter commented from where he crouched on top of the cradle.

“Once we hook it up to the computers, I can work on tissue degeneration if you two can fry whatever operational system that Cho and Ultron implanted,” Bruce suggested.

“Yeah, about that,” Tony said.

“What?” Peter asked, flipping off the cradle and over to his regular workstation.

Bruce, though saw the look in Tony’s eye. It was identical to the one that started all of this madness in the first place.

“No,” he said.

“You have to trust me,” Tony said.
Peter turned to the two, comprehension dawning as he saw the way the two were facing each other, the cradle making a third point to their triangle.

“You’re not thinking about finishing this thing are you, Mister Stark?” Peter asked. “‘Cause that’s just not cool. We already messed up once, we don’t want to go making that problem exponentially worse. Besides, Gwen’s already on my case for being a part of this in the first place.”

“You don’t have to be a part of this, Peter, but before you decide that you’re too whipped to listen to logic, to science, there’s one thing that you should know,” Tony replied.

“And what’s that?” Bruce asked.

“Our ally? The guy protecting the military’s nuclear codes? I found him,” Tony said smugly.

With a single tap of his pad, an orange ball of light with all of its missing pieces and code beautifully restored appeared holographically on the floor beside the cradle.

“Jarvis,” Peter breathed. “It was Jarvis? How?”

“Hello, Peter. Hello, Doctor Banner,” Jarvis said.

“Ultron didn’t go after Jarvis because he was angry,” Tony said. “No, he attacked him because he was scared. Scared of what Jarvis can do. So, J. went underground. Scattered, dumped his memory. But not his protocols. He didn’t even know that he was in there until I found him and pieced him back together.”

“Jarvis has been keeping Ultron from the codes all this time and he wasn’t even his ‘full’ self?” Peter asked sounding thoughtful.

“Yep. Now, can you imagine what he is capable of in a fair fight?” Tony asked.

Peter was close, he could feel it. One more small push and he’d have him on his side. Bruce, though, Bruce was the unknown factor.

“You want us to help you put Jarvis into this thing?” Bruce asked incredulously.

“No, of course not!” Tony replied and then hit Bruce with the punch line. “I want us to help you put Jarvis in this thing.”

Bruce shook his head, his hands coming up to rub his face and so, Tony pressed on.

“We’re out of my field here. Peter’s too. Between the two of us, we know computing and mechanics better than almost anyone on the planet. But when it comes to bio-organics, there’s no one better than you.”

“Except for Helen Cho, but since she’s not here, I guess that it’s now you,” Peter added and Tony couldn’t tell if he was being helpful or not.

“And you’re just going to assume that Jarvis’ operational matrix can beat Ultron?” Bruce asked.

“Yep. We did cover that already. Even Peter here agrees with the logic,” Tony said.

“Well, the logic’s sound,” Peter agreed. “But then so was the logic of combining the Ultron program with the code inside the gem. And look how that turned out. What happens if we’re missing something? If we just make an indestructible murder-bot that can’t be stopped.”
Tony waved his objection away.

“Not going to happen,” he said.

“For what it’s worth, I agree with the proposal,” Jarvis said.

“This is our opportunity to create Ultron’s perfect self, without the homicidal glitches he thinks are his winning personality,” Tony said. “We’re scientists. Some would even call us mad scientists. But regardless of what they call us, we have to follow the science and the logic, all the equations and simulations that I’ve run says that this will work.”

“You’ve run simulations?” Bruce asked.

“Oh the plane ride home,” Tony replied. “In fact, Jarvis is still running them. Take a look.”

It was easy to tell that Bruce still wasn’t convinced but the fact that he moved over to look at the simulations told Tony that his objections were fast disappearing.

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They’d been at work for hours without a break. Really, the only ‘interference’ that they’d had was Peter being called away by Bobbi for something or other, not that the other two really took note of the details, only that one third of their team was no longer with them.

The code in the body in the cradle had been analysed as much as possible. From what they could tell, somewhere between seventy and eighty percent of Ultron’s code had been downloaded before they’d ‘stolen the body’. That remaining twenty to thirty percent was where Jarvis came in.

Tony, knowing Jarvis’ code better than anyone had worked to condense as much as possible, strip out the smallest fraction that wouldn’t fit and streamline how the remaining code would be uploaded. If it went the way their simulations indicated, then Jarvis’ programming would fill in Ultron’s gaps, giving him a much more balanced personality while simultaneously blocking, suppressing and eventually deleting the programming that Ultron had developed that gave him such a ‘murderous’ bent.

“This framework is as compatible as I can make it,” Tony informed Bruce.

“I have the genetic coding tower at ninety-seven percent. You have got to finish uploading that schematic in the next three minutes,” Bruce stated urgently.

“I only need two,” Tony replied.

“I’m going to say this once,” Steve stated as he, Wanda and Pietro raced into the room.

Behind them, and clearly curious as to what was happening, came Clint, Nat and Harry, still with his hood up and his face obscured.

“How about ‘nonce’?” Tony asked, not pausing for an instance in what he was doing.

“You don’t know what you are doing,” Wanda said.

“And you do? You have multiple degrees in computer science, bio-genetics, mechanics and coding?” Tony retorted.

“No, but I have seen in your head,” Wanda replied. “I put this compulsion in your head, to do everything that you can to overcome your fears.”
“Is that where Ultron came from?” Clint asked. “Your fears?”

“No!” Tony replied vehemently. “Well, not really. The Ultron program was developed ages ago, long before we got the sceptre. I created it after the Chitauri.”

“When you were still deep in post-traumatic stress,” Nat stated.

“Well, so what if I was,” Tony shrugged. “You all know the endgame.”

“I’m pretty sure that we already had this conversation,” Harry stated. “Right after you created Ultron in the first place. Whatever you’re doing, stop now. If you – and apparently, Bruce – truly believe that this is the right thing to do, that it’s not going to result in something worse than Ultron, then convince us. Make us understand.”

A blur, a breeze raced around the room, followed by every cable attached to the cradle smacking to the ground.

“You people talk too much,” Pietro stated.

“We’re losing him!” Bruce called from his console.

And then Thor was there, flying straight into the room, landing on the cradle. Without even looking at any of the others, he raised his hammer, creating his trademark lightning before pouring the largest bolt straight into the cradle. Every panel on the machine red-lined with power before Thor was flung away as the doors to the cradle were smashed open and a humanoid figure burst forth.

Thor, who’d managed to catch himself and remain upright, also caught the figure before throwing it away towards the far side of the room.

Guns, shields, wands, weapons of all kinds were raised towards the purple and silver figure hovering motionless in front of the glass window.

“Wait!” Thor ordered, his hand outstretched.

Slowly, the figure turned, examining its hands even as its form changed so that a dark silver body suit appeared, along with high red boots and long red gloves. As he landed, a yellow cape appeared on his back. His bald head, though remained as it was, purple and silver coloured with purple eyes and a glowing yellow gem centred in his forehead.

“I’m sorry, that was … odd. Thank you,” the being said.

“Thor, you helped create this?” Steve asked

Thor nodded, his eyes never leaving the new being.

“I’ve had a vision. A whirlpool that sucks in all hope of life and at its centre is that.”

“What? The gem?” Bruce asked.

“Indeed. It’s the Mind Stone. One of the six Infinity Stones, the greatest power in the universe, unparalleled in its destructive capabilities.”

“I can read his mind,” Wanda said, stepping forward, wonder on her face. “He … he means no harm.”

“Indeed. I am on the side of peace,” the being, Thor's Vision agreed, inclining his head.
“How could you know this? That that mind that you say is unparalleled in destruction won’t cause even more destruction than Ultron already has?” Steve asked.

“Because Stark is right,” Thor stated.

“Oh, it’s definitely the end times,” Bruce murmured.

“If I’m right, that means that something is coming, something that we’re completely unprepared for,” Tony said and even he couldn’t tell that he was proud of being right or outright terrified because he was right.

“But until that time comes, we still need to defeat Ultron and we cannot do it alone,” Thor said.

“However, together, with each one of you playing your part, Ultron can be defeated,” the Vision said.

“Why does he sound like Jarvis?” Nat asked.

“Because we combined Jarvis with Ultron’s programming to create something new,” Tony replied.

“I am not Ultron. Nor am I Jarvis,” the Vision assured them. “At this moment, I am unsure who or what I am but I can assure you that, if peace and life is your goal, then you can count me an ally. Ultron is not, he aims to end it all, all life on this planet.”

“What’s he waiting for?” Harry asked. “If, as you say, that is his goal, why hasn’t he enacted it yet?”

“Because he is waiting for you,” Vision replied simply. “He intends to prove that he is better than you, better than anyone.”

“I wonder where he got that trait from?” Nat asked sarcastically.

“Whether you trust me or not, we need to go,” Vision said and punctuated his statement by picking up Thor’s hammer and holding it out to the Asgardian.

“Well, right then, well done,” Thor said, taking it. “We’re all good here, then?”

Steve shook his head before turning to the others.

“Alright. We know where Ultron’s waiting for us: Sokovia. Let’s not disappoint him. Three minutes. Get what you need and get to the quinjet,” he ordered, causing all there to, after a moment’s pause, scramble for their gear.
“Ultron knows we’re coming. Odds are we’ll be riding into heavy fire, and that’s what we signed up for. But the people of Sokovia, they didn’t. So, our priority is getting them out. All they want is to live their lives in peace, but that’s not going to happen today. But we can do our best to protect them. And we can get the job done, and find out what Ultron’s been building. We clear the field. Keep the fight between us. Ultron thinks we’re monsters and we’re what’s wrong with the world. This isn’t just about beating him. It’s about whether he’s right.”

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Captain America’s speech had galvanised the Avengers, ensuring that they knew not only what the mission was, but also why they were doing this.

Ultron was the target, and that meant all of him, every single robot. They all knew that if even one of him survived that day, that the mission wouldn’t be over, that the people, the world, wouldn’t be safe. But it wasn’t just the physical bodies that they had to deal with, no, without Jarvis running interference throughout the internet, they all knew that it wouldn’t take long before Ultron ultimately found a way past the firewalls that Tony had built to buy them time.

Ultron needed to be burnt out of the internet, to have it completely and utterly denied to him. That was the number one priority, the one that was most time vital; everything else fell into line behind it.

“You were right, Wanda, he’s in the church,” Tony said over the comms, having just run an IR scan of the building from on high.

There was no response, but then, he didn’t exactly expect any. For one, she was busy. But mainly because that, despite their quite tentative and fragile truce, neither she nor her brother liked him and had no intention of interacting with him more than necessary. That was fine, though. As long as they worked the mission. One day at a time, as Pepper would say.

“Ultron,” Tony said as he descended through the partially destroyed roof of the church.

“Ah, Tony, I was wondering when you would arrive,” Ultron said. “I was hoping that it wouldn’t be long.”

“Well, the traffic was murder, you know how it is,” Tony replied.

“Murder, an interesting turn of phrase for one who spent much of his life building and selling weapons,” Ultron said.

“Yeah, well, I’m not proud of what my life was back then but I’d like to think that I’ve turned it around, doing some good now to get the karma back in balance and all that,” Tony replied. “You know that you could take a leaf out of that book.”

“Now, why would I want to do that?” Ultron asked, his head slightly to one side as though he was puzzled.

“You do remember the mission, don’t you? Peace? Keeping people safe, allowing them to live full lives,” Tony said.

“Is that what you and the Avengers think you’re doing right now, helping the people to live?” Ultron asked.
“Well, yeah,” Tony said and if he could have shrugged in his armour, he would have

Just then, a large piece of silver metal burst out of the flooring in the exact centre of the church. Four
great ‘tabs’ split from it, falling to the ground, smashing the stonework and securing it into place. On
the very top of the circular metal pipe was a handle that raised itself upwards, ready to be grasped.

“I’ve found the rest of the vibranium,” Friday, Tony’s newest AI, the one that he’d installed to
replace Jarvis, announced.

A display appeared on the HUD, showing Tony that vibranium extended as a column for a couple of
hundred metres straight down.

“What? Did you think that you were the only one stalling?” Ultron mocked.

“Wait? You didn’t think that I was only here to give the team enough time to get the civilians out of
harm’s way, did you?” Tony asked, shaking his head. “Ah, Junior, you’ve still got so much to
learn.”

“What?” a clearly confused Ultron asked.

It was then that Vison arrived, swooping down, grabbling Ultron and spinning him around so that
they were eye to eye.

“My Vision. So, they took even you away from me,” Ultron said.

“You set this in motion,” Vision told him. “You can end this.”

“And I intend to,” Ultron said before being cut off as Vision grasped his hands on either side of
Ultron’s head.

Tony watched as the two artificial men froze in place.

“Friday! The Vision?” he asked.

“It’s working, Boss. The Vision is burning him out of the net,” Friday replied.

“Ahhh!” Ultron screamed as he finally managed to push the Vision away. “You’ve locked me out!
Fine. You take away my world, I’ll take away yours!”

And before Tony could react, Ultron reached across, grasped the handle on the vibranium column
and twisted it.

Mage apparated two hundred metres up the street and immediately cast an overpowered, wide-area
compulsion charm. If it worked the way it was supposed to, then everyone within a hundred metre
radius would instantly feel the need to be somewhere else and preferably a long way from the city.

This constant apparition and casting was taking a toll – this was the fourteenth within as many
minutes. Already, Mage could feel his magic reserves waning. But there was no way that he was
going to stop; he had a job to do.

Even before they’d first landed in Sokovia, he and Wanda had been given the biggest job – using
their magic to ‘convince’ the civilians to leave the city of their own accord. More specifically, he’d
been given the western and northern sides, while Wanda had the eastern and southern part of the
city. Currently, they were working outwards in a spiral from the church in the exact centre of the
city.

If I’d had more time, an hour or three even, I could have put up some muggle-repelling wards around the city, Mage mused. That would have worked in a matter of minutes – once they were activated, of course.

Seeing the first of the people – a family of three – hustle out of the nearby apartment building and immediately start to run, Mage nodded and apparated to his next spot.

He’d raised his wand and was in the middle of his incantation when he felt the ground begin to shake.

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Pietro raced into the central police station, figuring that the authorities would be the best people to notify that the city was in danger.

“We’re under attack! Clear the city!”

When not one person flinched or indeed even stopped what they were doing, he frowned. Really, it didn’t feel so long ago that their country was at war, but perhaps a dozen years was enough to dull the memory.

Racing over to the station’s weapon’s locker, he grabbed a rifle and raced back, firing a concentrated burst of bullets into the ceiling.

“Get off your asses!” he said.

This time, they moved.

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Captain America stood in the middle of one of the main intersections of the city, directing traffic. At first, the people had been reluctant to take his direction, but as more and more people appeared on foot, all headed for the bridge and out of the city, those in vehicles seemed to have decided that it was best to do as he indicated.

As the crowd increased, Cap could only presume that Mage and Wanda’s magic was working, convincing people to leave. Widow and Hawkeye would be going door to door as needed, accompanied by Bruce. It went without saying that a Code Green was in the air but until the threat of Ultron’s robots appeared, it was best to keep the Big Guy out of sight.

When a group of confused-looking police marched around a corner, all armed with sidearms and shotguns, Cap nodded; Pietro’s mission of alerting the authorities was bearing fruit.

Suddenly, the ground began shaking and Cap was forced to brace his feet wide so as to stay upright. Screams of terror filled the air as dozens of those around him fell. The sound of metal creaking, groaning and tearing spun him around and he stared as the near-by bridge over the river began wildly undulating.

Cars began sliding about or slamming on their brakes or worse yet, speeding up. One car sped through the intersection, barely missing Cap before barrelling towards the bridge. It was obvious the second that the driver saw the danger, for the car slammed on its brakes, its tyres squealing and smoking. Its momentum, though, was too great as it slammed into a car stopped on the edge of the bridge before pushing it out on the wildly swinging bridge, only for the first car to end up following
Both cars disappeared seconds later when the bridge simply fell away.

Cap blinked. It wasn’t just the bridge that had fallen; it looked as though the entire horizon was falling!

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Thor found the entrance to the cave system that led under the city itself right where the boy had said it was. The dozen or so guards had been easily dispatched. The fact that there had only been a dozen or so greatly concerned Thor; every intelligence that they had said that Ultron had created hundreds of the things.

Stepping out into the expansive cavern, Thor could only marvel at all of the machinery that he was seeing. Asgard may appear backwards to some Midgardians, with what was considered ‘archaic’ speech, but that did not mean that they weren’t an advanced race.

What he was seeing looked remarkably like an engine, although an engine to what, Thor could only guess. This is where he needed Stark or Banner with their greater technological minds.

Thor took a half step backwards, Mjolnir raised in his hand when lights all around and above came on. Great circles of pulsing blue began to spin, eerily reminiscent of Stark’s arc reactor. And then the entire cavern began to shake. Rocks began tumbling, dust filled the air and a roaring all but deafened him.

He may not know exactly what the engine did, but Thor knew that he was about to find out.

ooo00ooo

“Friday?” a startled Tony asked as not only the ground but the entire church began shaking.

An altimeter appeared on his HUD, its numbers increasing despite the fact that Iron Man was currently standing on the ground.

“Sokovia is going for a ride,” Friday replied.

“Do you see the beauty? The inevitability?” Ultron asked, gesturing at the world around them. “You rise, only to fall. Like a meteor. They have such a purity about them. Boom. The end. Only for a new beginning, the world made new, the way it was meant to be. You Avengers, you are my meteor, my swift and terrible sword and the Earth will crack under the weight of your failure. No longer will the people look up to you, searching for hope. No, instead they will only see the horror of your failure. Purge me from your computers, turn my own flesh against me. It means nothing. When the dust settles, the only living thing in this world will be … me!”

Tony stared at Ultron for a moment, attempting to wrap his mind around what the AI had just said. Without another word, Tony fired his boot repulsors at full power, rocketing up and out of the church. His arc took him away from the city where he hovered in mid-air, horrified at what he was seeing.

Ultron, it seemed hadn’t been speaking figuratively.

Hanging before his eyes was a massive piece of land, almost like an island. And it was steadily rising into the sky. As he watched, the outer edges of the city fell away, land, buildings, cars, straight back down to what was left of the city below.
The question of how a massive piece of land – easily the equivalent of a dozen or so city blocks – was not only floating but flying ever upwards was answered by Friday.

“The vibranium core has got a magnetic field, that’s what’s keeping the rock together,” she said.

“If it drops?” Tony asked, suspecting what the answer was going to be.

“Right now, the impact would kill thousands,” Friday replied, confirming Tony’s fears. “Once it gets high enough: global extinction.”

Now that Tony knew the variables, he could start to work on a solution. Assuming that he had enough time to come up with something that didn’t include making the human race extinct. As his mind ran through scenario after scenario, he flew back towards the city.

“That building’s not clear,” Friday reported, superimposing a thermal scan of the correct building onto his HUD. “Tenth floor.”

Mage stumbled as he ran towards a group of five Sokovians. They were currently huddled in the doorway of a building, the two men standing above the two women and the little girl, attempting to shield them all from falling debris with their arms.

A slew of Ultron’s robots appeared in the air between Mage and his ‘targets’, not the first that he’d seen in the past couple of minutes. Without even pausing in his run, his arm moved in a blur, sending a rain of blasting hexes, exploding curses and cutting curses at the robots. Within seconds, all seven of them were in shattered pieces, falling from the sky; Mage was incredibly grateful that Ultron seemed to have forgotten to include any of the anti-magic tech that Tony had come up with into his creations.

Grabbing up a chunk of rock as he ran, Mage tapped it with his wand, making it briefly glow blue.

“Here, everyone put your hand on this,” he instructed thrusting the rock out in the midst of them.

Despite their doubtful and confused faces, they did as told, starting with the girl, the two men being the last. As soon as all five were touching it, Mage let go.

“Activate,” he said, making the five disappear in a swirl of colour to somewhere safe outside the city, not far from where they’d landed the quinjet.

“Stark. You worry about bringing the city back down safely,” Cap instructed over the comms. “The rest of us have one job: tear these things apart. You get hurt, hurt them back. You get killed, walk it off.”

It felt good to be back in uniform. The standard black S.H.I.E.L.D. jumpsuit and belt, gun strapped to her hip felt almost comforting. Even the logo on her right shoulder felt right. The only thing different about this uniform and her previous one was the gauntlets that she now wore on her forearms and the top of her gloves.

Daphne had presented them to her just before she’d left the island with Bobbi, designed and enchanted to protect her bones and veins from potential further harm. Apparently, they also contained some runes to help speed up healing. Skye had taken one look at them and innocently asked if they came in black instead of the lurid purple. She could only blink when Daphne had
simply waved her wand over them, changing them to the desired colour.

“Glad you could make it,” Bobbi said as Skye walked through the door.

Looking around, she could see the Avengers team assembled there and every one was in their costume or uniform.

Noting Bobbi’s frown, Skye looked down at herself.

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

“You’re missing something,” Bobbi said.

Skye watched as the other woman walked over, reached out and pressed something to her left sleeve. Twisting her arm about, Skye blinked at the affixed, stylised ‘A’ that now adorned her jumpsuit.

“Hey, now you’re officially one of us,” Spider-Man said from where he leant against the wall. “Harry’s gonna be sooo happy.”

“I never agreed …” Skye began only to be cut off by She-Hulk.

“What’s your code name?”

Skye blinked at her and blinked again as she noted everyone looking expectantly at her.

“Quake,” she said. “I’m Quake.”

“Fits,” Wolf stated with a nod.

“Right, now that the official stuff is out of the way,” Mockingbird said. “Let’s get down to business. We’ve had intel from Sokovia. Ultron has activated the device that he was building. Somehow – and don’t ask me how – he’s sent a large piece of Novi Grad real estate flying up into the sky. If it came down from its current height right now, Sokovia would be wiped off the map. Give it another thousand feet, it’s all of Europe. You can guess what comes after that.

“The helicarrier will be in position alongside the flying rock within ten minutes. As soon as we’re there, our job will be to protect the civilians and to get them off that rock and over here.”

“What about Cap and the others?” Falcon asked.

“They’re currently fighting a battle on numerous fronts, including trying to protect the civilians,” Mockingbird replied. “Once we take over that side of things, it’ll free them up to take out Ultron and then, together, we’ll work out a way to bring that rock down safely.

Skye flexed her hands, ready to do her part. And if her part just so happened to include running across some of those robots, well, she was looking forward to putting everything that Bobbi had been helping her learn into practice.

Ultron’s robots were everywhere, filling the streets, emerging from houses, flying over the buildings. Hawkeye had already exhausted his arrows in his quiver twice putting down robot after robot in endless succession. Thankfully, he had spares, charmed by Mage to be no larger than a matchbox which could be pulled out, tapped with the special rod that Mage had given him in order to enlarge them and to keep going.
He’d been separated from Widow early, not long after the robots had appeared.

Rounding a corner, he let loose with four quick arrows in succession: two to the heads of robots, one filled with acid that melted its body, the last had an explosive head that took out two of them. Unfortunately, he was all but surrounded.

Seeing Wanda ahead of him, barely holding her own with her red magic, he rushed at her, grabbed her and dove the two of them straight through a window.

“How could I let this happen?” Wanda near sobbed.

“Hey, hey, you okay?” Clint asked.

“This is all our fault,” Wanda said and Clint wasn’t even sure if she was aware that he was there. “If I hadn’t fuelled Stark’s fears, none of this would have been possible.”

“Hey, look at me,” Clint said and had to physically turn her chin to get her to do so. “It’s your fault, it’s Tony’s fault, it’s everyone’s fault, who cares. Are you up for this? Are you? Look, I just need to know ’cause the city is flying. Okay, look, the city is flying, we’re fighting an army of robots and I have a bow and arrow. None of this makes sense. But I’m going back out there because it’s my job. If you go out there, you fight and you fight to kill those things. Stay in here, you’re good. I’ll send your brother to come get you, but if you step out that door, you are an Avenger.”

Wanda looked at him and Clint made sure to hold her gaze for a moment, making sure that she understood.

Finally, he stood. Plucking an arrow from his quiver, he prepared himself.

“Right. The city is flying,” he said and promptly took a step back, kicked open the door and spun out, firing as he went.

His movements became fluid, automatic, repetitive and fast. Arrow after arrow flew, striking robot after robot. Not that he appeared to be making much headway in taking them down.

And then Wanda was there, her magic colliding with the robots, sending them flying, tearing them apart, turning them into nothing but scrap metal and Clint nodded. She’d made her choice and he couldn’t be prouder.

Falcon soared in, his wings tipping from side to side as he avoided return fire, his own guns blazing.

“Woohoo!” he yelled as he looked back at his handiwork. “This is like shooting fish in a barrel. That’s eight already.”

“Thirteen,” Wolf stated over the comms.

Considering that the team hadn’t been on the ground, well the flying city for all that long, Falcon could only frown at the other man who’d set himself up on a rooftop, his newly acquired Phase Two rifle picking off any robot that got too close to the civilians that the rest of the team were rounding up ready for the helicarrier’s rescue boats to pick up.

And then a squad of nine robots joined up, heading straight down the middle of the wide, open area towards the civilians.
Noting that their trajectory would take them right between both his and Wolf’s current position, Falcon made the call.

“From the left.”

“From the right,” Wolf agreed, stating that he would begin shooting from that side and the two would meet in the middle.

But before either of them could fire, Quake strode down the middle of the park, both arms out in front of her. Her gravity waves smashed into the middle robot, tearing it to pieces. And then Quake separated her arms, sweeping them outwards as two waves rained down on the rest of the robots, smashing into them, making them either careen into each other, smash apart or disintegrate into piles of metal.

“This isn’t a competition, boys,” Quake told the pair. “But if it was … twenty-three.”

“Damn,” Falcon breathed, still wide-eyed at what he’d just witnessed.

Steve threw his shield as hard as he could and promptly had to duck under the swing of a metal arm. Grabbing a leg, he pulled, twisted it and as he rose, threw it up over his shoulder and down onto a nearby car.

Hearing that familiar *whirl* he stuck he hand out, grabbed his returning shield from its journey to decapitate two robots and promptly slammed it straight into the robot’s chest. Seeing its eyes dim to nothingness, Steve sighed.

Turning he found that he had a short reprieve – there were no immediate threats to be taken care of.

“Stark, tell me that you’ve got something,” he said, his finger touching the comm in his ear.

“No good news, I’m afraid,” Tony replied. “This thing’s rigged to flip if it’s tampered with.”

“And create that meteor that Ultron wants,” Steve finished.

“Yeah,” Tony agreed. “I might have something, a way to blow the thing up. Smaller pieces raining down on the world below will cause less overall damage than if it comes down in one piece.”

“No, not while there are still civilians up here,” Steve countermanded.

“No, not while there are still civilians up here,” Steve countermanded.

“Steve, all the people up here versus all the people down there?” Nat said, weighing into the conversation. “There’s no maths in that equation. Besides, there are worse ways to go. Where else are you going to get a view like this?”

“Glad you like the view, Romanoff, it’s about to get a whole lot better,” Fury chimed in.

Steve took a couple of steps closer to the edge in disbelief as a S.H.I.E.L.D. helicarrier rose into view. He didn’t even *know* that any still existed.

“This is S.H.I.E.L.D.?” Pietro asked from beside him, arriving Steve knew not when.

“It’s what it’s supposed to be,” Steve replied.

“We’ve already dropped off the rest of your team,” Fury said. “Their mission is to get the civilians off safely. That allows you to take care of the platinum bastard and that flying hunk of rock.”
“Steve doesn’t like that sort of talk,” Nat said, amusement clear in her voice.

“For once, I’ll let it go,” Steve shot back. “Stark, sounds like your plan is a go.”

“What do you mean, ‘why’?” Steve asked.

“Why bring it down or blow it up if both options are going to get people killed on the ground?” Harry asked.

“You want me to fix it so that it permanently stays flying in the sky?” Tony asked and it was clear to hear that he was seriously considering it.

“That’s not quite what I had in mind,” Harry replied. “I was more thinking of letting it keep going up. Into space.”

“While your first ideas was much more fantastic,” Tony mused. “Your other idea would probably be better, at least with our time constraints.”

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Thor was the first to the church after Captain America’s call to Assemble. Unfortunately, the church was already occupied.

Thor didn’t even slow his descent a fraction, instead barrelling straight into the Prime Ultron robot, bearing him to the ground and beginning to pummel him. With a massive heave, though, Thor found himself being flipped up and over so that he was the one on his back. Continuing his roll, Thor regained his feet, only to have Mjolnir knocked from his hand on his first swing, his second, though, connected, rocking the robot backwards.

“You think you are saving anyone?” Ultron asked. “I turn that key and drop this rock even a little early and it’s still billions dead. Even you can’t stop that.”

Thor grappled with Ultron, gaining a grip on one hand even as he fended off the other as it tried to punch him in the head.

“I am Thor, son of Odin and as long as there is life in my breast, I am … running out of things to say,” he said, looking over Ultron’s shoulder. “Are you ready?”

Ultron paused, confused and turned. Right into the swing of Mjolnir as the Vision swung it at his body. Ultron was sent flying, straight up and out of the church.

“It’s terribly well balanced,” Vision stated, passing the hammer back to its rightful owner.

“Well, if there’s too much weight, you lose power on the swing,” Thor replied conversationally.

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“This is it. Copy everything and download it to my private server,” Tony instructed Friday. “Label it ‘Calrission’. Oh, and make a note to remind me to look into purchasing some land, preferably some with a mountain or extinct volcano or something. Now, let’s take a look at what we’ve got here.”

Tony’s fingers ran over the computer, being extremely careful to simply look without altering anything. After all, he had no intension of speeding things up.
“I’m not seeing a work around before the city flips, Boss,” Friday said, agreeing with his assessment.

“Agreed,” Tony sighed, checking the current altimeter reading and comparing it to the specified height that the city was due to flip at and the speed that they were rising.

“Once it reaches that height,” Tony said and then cocked his head at it. “Assuming it does.”

“Boss?” Friday asked.

“We can’t alter the programming in time, so let’s not,” Tony replied. “Instead, we’ll just play with the altimeter itself.”

It took only a moment to change the current height above sea level that the city was at from a positive number to a negative. As he watched, the numbers started reversing, well, reversing if you ignored that small, insignificant little minus sign.

“Perfect. By the time it reaches the right height now, the city will be well and truly out of the atmosphere,” Tony smiled. “Now, to make sure that it doesn’t try to reverse itself …”

Some small changes were made to four separate indicators. Now, the engines would begin overheating, not quickly, but enough over time so that it would eventually blow, but not before the city had left the atmosphere and before it tried to come back down.

“Job’s done, people,” Tony announced. “Sparrowhawk’s idea is in play.”

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“Alright, everyone, you heard him,” Steve said to the gathered Avengers. “This thing isn’t coming down.”

“Not unless Ultron lays a hand on that key,” Thor corrected, pointing at the top of the vibranium column sitting in the middle of the church. “If he does, he can manually override the controls and send the city crashing to the ground.”

“Then that’s our draw, we protect it and destroy Ultron at the same time,” Steve nodded.

“Buy me five minutes and I’ll have it so that no matter what happens, he can never lay a finger on it,” Mage promised.

Movement outside drew the Avengers out even as Mage began summoning debris from all over, blocking up each and every hole and entrance to the church. While he did so, he kept one ear out for what was going on outside.

“This is exactly what I wanted,” Ultron was saying. “All of me against all of you. How could you ever think that you could stop me?”

“Well, as the old man said, together,” Tony replied.

And then the sound of fighting, Hulk roaring, weapons firing, began. Mage, though ignored it all.

Having closed off the church entrances, Mage magicked the rock together into one complete, circular mass before transfiguring the entire new wall into obsidian, the hardest rock that he knew of and one that was particularly useful for what he had planned. Once done, he manoeuvred the smaller debris into a dome that surrounded the vibranium core and key completely before it, too, was transfigured into obsidian.
Then, having extracted his broom, Mage rose above the walled in area.

“Amnis lava!” he incanted, weaving his wand in the correct pattern.

A great stream of lava poured from his wand, splashing down into the church below before washing up against the obsidian walls. As Mage kept pouring, the captured pool of lava began growing deeper and deeper until even the very top of the obsidian dome covering the vibranium key was submerged. But Mage didn’t even stop there, not until the lava was just under the rim of the high wall.

Sweat was pouring off of him and he was panting hard by the time that he finished, not only from the intense heat but also from the vast amounts of magic that he’d just been summoning. Looking around, he found exactly what he wanted.

Mage grunted at the amount of magic that was needed to rip a large piece of bitumen up from the road and to float it over to land atop the church – a lid for his lava pool – before sealing it in place.

“It’s done,” Mage panted into his comm.

“Mockingbird?” Captain America grunted.

“All but a handful of the civilians are on board, we’re rounding up the stragglers now;” she replied.

“You heard her people, time to get off this rock,” Steve commanded. “Remember, not one robot leaves.”

Mage took off on his broom, slugging a pepper up potion as he flew in an effort to regain some energy.

War Machine, Falcon, Thor, Vision and a number of quinjets from the helicarrier were known to be flying below and around the city, ensuring that no robot left so when a quinjet appeared in the sky headed towards the last of the rescue boats, none paid it much attention.

A distraught mother had clutched at Clint, babbling about her boy who she’d lost, last seen in the market, not far from where they were. It was Skye who actually spotted him first and so, together, the two jogged across to retrieve him.

And then the quinjet settled on its trajectory and the sound of gunfire could be heard, peppering the street, kicking up rocks and debris with every strike. A tattoo, faster than anything that they’d heard before, raced towards them.

Skye spun, her hand raised, but already the quinjet was too close, its bullets about to strike them. Clint turned away, hoping that his own body would protect the child in his arms, however vain he knew that hope to be.

Skye screamed in pain and fell, her left leg crumpling under her when it could no longer hold her weight. She lifted her head, confused as to why she wasn’t dead.

“You didn’t see that coming?” Pietro asked, his hands still outstretched from where he’d just pushed a car in front of both her and Clint.

Clint had escaped unharmed. Skye, however, had been struck three times – twice in her left leg, once in her left arm. Pietro, though, Pietro had sacrificed himself, blood blossoming from countless
wounds all over his body – torso, legs, arms. And then he fell.

Skye may not know the guy, but he’d just saved her life. With a cry of rage, she flung out her good right arm, her quakes pulsing with so much energy that the vibrations could be seen in the air. And when they struck the quinjet, there was a visible jerk to the craft. Both its wings instantly tore off, its engines went dark and it nose-dived into the what was left of the city.

A great, green shape soared overhead in a single leap, it, too, roaring its rage and Skye could imagine that what was left of the quinjet and that particular robot was about to pummelled into something unrecognisable.

“Skye!” Harry cried, arriving at a run, his broom still in one hand.

“I’m okay, check him,” Skye replied, pushing him across to Pietro, despite how hopeless she knew it was.

And then Harry began waving his wand over the body, muttering continuously. For an instant he paused, a fierce expression on his face and a curse escaping him. And then his wand began waving furiously. Harry spun towards her, flicking his wand at her and Skye squeaked at the unexpectedness of soaring through the air to land beside Harry and being pressed up against Pietro.

“Take this,” Harry said, pushing a small, crystal vial into her hand. “Give it to Daphne. Tell her that I’ve put Pietro’s body in stasis. The vial is phoenix tears; she’s to use as much as she needs. And when she protests, tell her it’s my ‘saving people thing’ and I’ll be very annoyed if she doesn’t at least try.”

“What …?” Skye began only to be cut off by Harry’s lips landing on hers hard, insistent and full of passion.

“Black passion,” Harry said and Skye recognised it as the phrase that would take her to Harry’s island a fraction of a second before she felt a massive pull behind her navel.
“Help!” Skye yelled the instant that she landed, barely managing to suppress the scream of pain in her leg and arm in favour of finding someone to help Pietro.

A pop startled her and she jerked backwards, away from the intense purple eyes that appeared right in front of her.

“What does Miss need from Gangee?” the house elf said.

But before Skye could reply, Gangee’s eyes widened as he fixed on the sight of the blood pooling from Skye and the amount that was all over both her and Pietro. With a snap of the elf’s fingers, Skye found herself magically moved once again.

She blinked, recognising that she’d been moved from the large, open lounge room in the main building on Paradis Noir across to one of the rooms in the small hospital. Half a minute later, Gangee trotted into the room, Daphne hot on her heels.

“Skye! What happened?” Daphne asked, her wand moving over her.

“We were shot,” Skye replied succinctly.

Frowning at the ghostly image of Skye that she’d conjured above her, Daphne began issuing orders to the pair of house elves that had appeared in the corner of the room.

“Tempi, get a vial of pain relief potion and two of blood replenishing for Skye,” Daphne ordered before looking down at her. “Drink them all; yes, they’ll taste revolting, but you need them.”

Just as Daphne was turning away to check on Pietro on the other bed, Skye stopped her by grabbing onto her arm. When she turned back, Skye opened her palm with the small, crystal vial in it.

“From Harry,” Skye said. “He said that it was phoenix tears? He also said that you were to try everything, something about his ‘saving people thing’ and that he’d be annoyed if you didn’t.”

Daphne shook her head but took the vial.

“Yes, Potter’s predilection for that sort of behaviour is well-known,” Daphne commented.

“‘Annoyed’, huh? I’ll show him annoyed.”

Seconds later, she was waving her wand over Pietro.

“There’s something wrong with my diagnostic charms,” Daphne commented softly, frustratedly, “but even with that, I can tell. I’m sorry, but he didn’t make it? Who was he?”

“Pietro,” Daphne replied. “He’s … I think he’s one of us. At least he was helping fight Ultron. He was shot saving me, Clint and some kid. Harry said something about putting him in stasis if that helps.”

Daphne stared at her. “He would. How long ago was he shot?”

“Dunno,” Skye shrugged. “Two minutes, three? Hard to tell with all of the magical travelling that I’ve been subjected to, especially from half-way around the world.”

“How quickly did Potter apply the charm?” Daphne asked.
Skye had to finish swallowing the last of the vials of blood-red, stomach-churning goo before she could reply and suppress the overpowering urge to vomit it all back up.

“He was there almost as soon as it happened. Half a minute. Maybe less,” Skye shrugged.

“Merlin damn that idiot,” Daphne cursed. “If he was a Healer . . .” she waved her wand over Pietro’s body once again. “The charm’s been applied correctly but still. I’d have to fix all the damage caused by those bullets before I could safely remove the stasis charm. And all that has to be done before attempting to restart his heart and lungs. I’m not even sure that I can repair the damage while he’s in stasis.”

“What sort of chance would you give him?” Skye asked.

Daphne shook her head. “One in a hundred and even then, there’s no telling if his brain has been damaged, although that’s less likely with how quickly Potter acted. However, the longer I wait to begin, the lower his odds. That means that your injuries are going to have to wait.”

“Just keep those pain relief potions of yours coming and I’ll be good,” Skye said.

“Yes, well, I think I can do a little better than that,” Daphne said. “If it’s good enough for Potter . . .”

She waved her wand firstly over Skye’s left arm and then over her left leg.

“Hey, Doc, is it normal that I just lost all feeling in my arm and leg?” Skye asked somewhat alarmed.

“I’ve put your limbs into stasis for now, like Pietro is currently in,” Daphne explained. “It’ll stop any blood loss and any further damage from occurring until I can get to you. Unfortunately, the downside is that you won’t be able to move those limbs or feel them at all.”

Skye shrugged. “I can live with that. At least I am still alive. And that’s only because of him. Do everything you can for him.”

“I will but no promises,” Daphne said and promptly conjured a curtain to separate the beds.

Daphne lay back, putting her good arm behind her head before looking over at the elf that hadn’t trotted around the curtain.

“Any chance I could get something to drink?” she asked.

oooo0000

It didn’t exactly feel that long since she was right here, in front of all these people. Yet, here she was again, ready with another prepared statement and expecting a slew of questions and accusations. But then, that was what being the Press Secretary for the Avengers meant; some days were easy, some weren’t. And this was decidedly in the latter category.

Lavender Brown stood behind the podium, her eyes doing a slow sweep of the journalists there. Each one sat as her eyes met theirs, not unlike a reverse Mexican wave. When all were finally quiet, their microphones, recorders and pads at the ready, she began.

“Approximately three hours ago, the Avengers were involved in an incident in Novi Grad, Sokovia. While no Avengers have returned to New York at this time, the information that I have received is that the mission was a success.

“This mission was the culmination of an investigation into an artificial intelligence that was going by
the name ‘Ultron’ that had gone rogue. Ultron had commandeered an ex-HYDRA base in Sokovia and used it with two goals in mind. The first was to build a large number of robots which it downloaded copies of its programming into. The second was to build a device under the city of Novi Grad.

“This device lifted a large segment of the city from the ground and sent it skywards; I’m sure that you have seen some footage of that by now. The ultimate goal of Ultron was to have the city and the rock that it was sitting on, reach a maximum altitude before it would reverse and impact the ground.

“The Avengers worked in two teams to firstly assist in ensuring that all civilians were warned and then evacuated from the city. A S.H.I.E.L.D. helicarrier arrived on the scene and ferried the civilians trapped in the flying city to safety to aid in this part of the operation. The Avengers then battled Ultron and successfully reprogrammed the device to send the city-rock into space where it was detonated.

“It is confirmed that there are no Ultron robots remaining on Earth and those that were still in the city when it reached space are presumed to have been destroyed when the device, and subsequently the city, was destroyed.

“That concludes the statement that I have about this incident. I will accept questions. Miss Everhart?”

“Where did this artificial intelligence, this ‘Ultron’, come from in the first place? Surely it would have been programmed by a human?”

And of course, the very first question had to be the one that Lavender most didn’t want asked.

Suppressing her sigh, she gave the answer that she’d been given clearance to give.

“You’re right. Ultron was a failed attempt at a global peace-keeping initiative originally designed by Tony Stark.”

As expected, the journalists erupted from their seats all yelling questions, many even accusations.

“Are you telling us that this whole mess was caused by the Avengers themselves?” J. Jonah Jameson’s voice reached over everyone else’s.

“However inadvertently and regretfully, yes,” Lavender replied. “As soon as the Avengers realised that the initiative had failed, they spent every minute working to rectify the mistake.”

“What sort of destructive scale was the world looking at if that rock had come down as Ultron had planned?” Ben Urich asked.

“Global,” Lavender replied.

“Is Tony Stark still experimenting with AI’s?”

“Doesn’t he already have one? Jarvis, I believe it’s called?”

“Mister Stark has asked me to ensure you all that he will not be delving into artificial intelligences at any time in the future,” Lavender replied. “In fact, his one successful attempt, Jarvis, has been merged with a new program, given a new body and has been assessed by the Asgardians as being of a peaceful nature. His name is Vision.”

Here, Lavender tapped her pad so that an image of the Vision appeared on the large screen behind her. While it wasn’t completely true that Asgard had given their ‘blessing’ for Vision, she’d been told
that he could lift Thor’s hammer and that seemed to amount to the same thing.

“Do you expect us to believe that S.H.I.E.L.D. are the ‘good guys’ again? Everhart asked.

“S.H.I.E.L.D. were never the ‘bad guys’,” Lavender corrected. “HYDRA infiltrated S.H.I.E.L.D. and subverted it for their own purposes. As soon as they were discovered, the agents loyal to S.H.I.E.L.D. worked to capture them. The Avengers have assisted in this, being instrumental in capturing numerous HYDRA bases and operatives. Today, with HYDRA all but defeated, S.H.I.E.L.D. were able to begin a return to their primary role, helping to protect the ordinary people of Earth.”

“What were the casualty numbers from this incident?” Elana Travers asked.

“Figures are still be compiled as people that were reported missing are being reunited with their family,” Lavender replied. “Early figures indicate that anywhere from one to two thousand people may have been killed. Conversely, the S.H.I.E.L.D. helicarrier in conjunction with the Avengers, were able to rescue seven thousand five hundred people from the flying city.”

“Were any Avengers injured?”

“Two, both new members,” Lavender replied and tapped her pad to replace the image of the Vision with side by side images of Skye and Pietro.

“On the left, is Skye. She is a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent who recently came into her powers – she can control vibrations, much like an earthquake, thus her codename: Quake. She was shot a three times while rescuing a Sokovian child. She will make a full recovery.

“On the right is Pietro Maximoff, a Sokovian citizen. He has superspeed. He was injured in the same incident. Unfortunately, at this time, his prognosis does not look good although the doctors hold out some hope.”

“If the Avengers caused all this, shouldn’t they be charged? Imprisoned? What makes them think that they’re above the law? At the very least pay for the damages that they caused” Jameson shouted.

“The Avengers do what they do in defence of this world,” Lavender replied, barely keeping her cool. Really, there were times that she was so tempted to pull her wand and either silence the man or to simply hex him into oblivion. “Yes, they are human and mistakes can be made. But it is easy to see that the good that they do far exceeds any mistakes that they may make. It should also be noted that the Stark Relief Foundation is already on the ground in Sokovia helping with the disaster.

“Thank you. This concludes today’s briefing.”

With that, she tapped the pad, turning off the screen and strode from the room.

ooo00ooo

Harry sprinted into the hospital wing at a dead run, skidding on the smooth floor, his head swivelling as he searched out the one that he was desperate to see.

“Skye!” he breathed and immediately strode across to her bed. “How are you?”

The way that she blinked at him told him that he’d actually woken her.

“Sorry, I’ll come back,” he said.
“Don’t you dare go anywhere, Mister,” Skye countermanded, reaching out and pulling him so that he was perched on the side of the bed.

Harry’s eyes examined her and he frowned, noting that her sleeve and pantleg were still bloody.

“What …? Has Daphne even examined you yet?” he asked, near shouted.

“Easy, big guy,” Skye replied. “I’ve been triaged. Daphne said something about there being a time constraint in trying to fix Pietro. My arm and leg are in stasis until she can get to them and, quite frankly, I’m fine with that; the guy did save my life after all.”

“I take it that that means that Daphne is trying to save him?” Harry asked and continued at her nod.

“How long’s she been with him?”

“Pretty much since I arrived,” Skye replied.

Harry’s eyes went wide, that’d been hours ago. He’d never heard of a magical Healer working so long on a patient before. But then, thinking about it, his own scans indicated that Pietro’s heart had stopped back in Sokovia. If there was even the smallest chance that Daphne could save him, then it wasn’t likely to be a quick fix.

“How are you holding up?” Harry asked. “I heard about you using your powers. Seemed to do okay for yourself.”

“Yeah, finally getting them under control,” Skye smiled. “Still a bit to learn, but it’s coming along.”

“And this?” Harry asked, touching the Avengers logo on her sleeve with one finger.

“Oh, that. Yeah. I was going to talk to you about the idea but then Bobbi sort of sprung it on me and it just … felt right … you know?” Skye rambled.

“Actually, I do,” he laughed. “Joining up wasn’t my first thought either, I just sort of seemed to fall into it. What will you do about S.H.I.E.L.D.?”

Skye shrugged. “Haven’t decided yet. I didn’t leave under the best circumstances but I don’t want to cut all ties, if that makes sense?”

Harry’s nod was interrupted by Daphne walking around the curtain that separated them from the other bed. Harry’s eyes searched her face; she was tired, bone tired by the look of it. Quickly, Harry summoned a chair for her to fall into.

“Thank you,” she said.

“How’s Pietro?” Harry asked the most pressing question.

“You know the problems that you just dumped in my lap, Potter?” Daphne snapped before continuing before he could even consider answering. “Nine bullets. That’s how many times that he’d been shot. Two in the left leg, one in the right, one in his right arm and five in his torso. I had to find them and remove them before I could even think about healing his body. And that stasis charm of yours? I’m guessing that you overpowered it. Most of my spells simply would not work. I had to do it the muggle way!”

“But you did get the bullets out and heal his injuries?” Harry asked, leaning forward. “The phoenix tears?”
“Yes. And they were a Merlin-send,” she replied. “Physically, all of those injuries were healed enough for his body to be able to recover from, although they’re going to need time to heal fully.”

“And his heart?” Skye asked. “Were you able to restart it?”

Daphne sighed and shook her head.

“It’s beating. Took nearly two minutes of spellcasting to get it to restart though once I’d taken off the stasis charm. And then I had to get him breathing again. His body’s alive and before you ask, that’s as much as I can say. There’s no way of knowing whether his brain, his mind was injured from his heart being stopped for so long until and unless he wakes up. Which I won’t even hazard a guess as to when or if that happens.”

“Thank you,” Harry said sincerely.

Her head came up and she blinked at him.

“You’re welcome but you owe me for putting me through that,” Daphne said.

“I thought that doctors were supposed to do everything that they could to save their patients,” Skye said and there was clear admonishment in her voice.

Harry laughed at that.

“Oh, they are but that would never stop Daphne or someone with great ambition and cunning from getting something out of it, even if it is their job.”

“Exactly,” Daphne agreed.

“What can we tell Pietro’s sister?” Harry asked.

“He has a sister?”

“A twin. Wanda. She’s got some kind of magical ability but it’s not like ours, it comes from an alien device,” Harry explained, shaking his head. “I’ll want to spend a lot of time with her trying to figure it out.”

“Tell her he’s alive, that he’s stable and that I’m quietly hopeful,” Daphne said after a moment’s thought. “The next twenty-four to forty-eight hours are critical. But caution her that we won’t know fully how he is until he wakes and that might not be for a while, no telling how long. Might even be weeks.”

“Thanks, Daphne. Now, how about I get you a pepper up so that you can heal Skye here?” Harry asked.

Daphne simply scowled at him before holding out her hand.

Wanda paced. She couldn’t help it. Her whole world had been completely turned upside down. Her city was gone. Her friends … even if they still lived, she knew that she couldn’t face them, not with how guilty she still felt over what had happened. Yes, Tony Stark had created Ultron, but it was only because of the way that she’d played with his mind. No, there was no way that Wanda felt that she could ever return home and especially not without …

For what might be the hundredth time in the last hour, she glanced at the elevator door. Seeing it still
firmly closed, Wanda turned her head back and kept pacing. A mere few days ago, she might have found the view out of the window mesmerising. New York City. Never in her wildest dreams had she ever thought that she would be here. Today, though, she had no eyes for it, not once since she’d been brought to Avengers Tower had she looked out at the view. At least, she couldn’t remember doing so.

A small noise spun her head around, but it was only Clint, shifting on the chair as he placed another arrow on the small table in front of him. Why he was there, she had no clue. Yes, he’d disappeared for an hour or two, to go home to see his wife and family as he should. But he’d returned and promptly set up shop on the lounge nearby. He didn’t say anything but he was there and Wanda found herself grateful.

Vision, too, was there, standing off to the side as though unsure what to do, so she ignored him.

Movement from the corner of her eye turned Wanda’s head. The elevator’s door had opened and she’d missed it. She froze, her eyes fixed on the four walking towards her. Stark, Steve, Mage and a woman in black, her arm in a sling, that he was helping hobble across the room.

Carefully, it seemed, Mage lowered the woman into a chair before the three men turned to face her. Clint, she noticed, had sat up intently, his eyes, moving from one to the other, as though trying to read them.

“Wanda,” Mage said.

“Pietro. You have news of my brother?” she asked eagerly. “Where is he? I want to see him.”

Mage lifted his hand towards her before stopping and tilting his head. Slowly, he continued his arm motion and swept his hand across his face. Wanda blinked as the face of the man appeared, made more visible when he pushed the hood covering his head back and off.

He was definitely older than her own twenty-two but by how much, she couldn’t tell. His black hair was messy but whether that was its natural state or because of the hood was impossible to tell. But it was his eyes, a shining, brilliant emerald green unlike anything that she’d ever seen before which really captured her. And then she noted the softness, the compassion in them and her knees buckled.

“Pietro’s dead, isn’t he?” she asked flatly as she was gently manoeuvred across to a chair by the Vision, not that she even registered him moving to catch her.

“No, he’s not,” Mage said. “Healer Greengrass managed to repair his body and get his heart beating again and to get him breathing again. It was an extremely long surgery, even with the use of magic.”

Wanda blinked at that. There were others who could use magic?

“But he does live,” Mage continued. “Currently, he’s in a coma. At this stage, Healer Greengrass has no idea when he will awaken; although she suspects that it won’t be anytime soon, she is optimistic that he will recover. We can only hope that there is no damage to his brain, or his mind from the trauma but we won’t know until he wakes up.”

“But he’s alive,” Wanda said and she could only feel relief flooding her, as though a part of herself was switching back on, coming back to life again. “Thank you.”

“I told you, he’s one of us now,” Clint said. “He saved both my life as well as Skye’s here and that kid’s.”

“When can I see him?” Wanda asked.
“I can take you to him shortly,” Mage said. “I’ll explain where he is once you’re there.”

“Which brings us to the other part of us being here,” Steve said. “Wanda, Vision, Skye, the three of you fought with us in Sokovia, as Pietro did as well. You all proved that you were willing to fight, to put the lives of others ahead of your own. You fought to make the world better, to right wrongs and that is something that every Avenger values. Even without your unique talents, we would all be honoured to have you become a part of our team.”

“Um? I’m already signed up, got the badge and everything,” Skye said, raising her hand.

Wanda found herself staring between each of them.

“I did tell you that if you walked through that door …,” Clint smiled.

“And Pietro, you’ll have him, too?” she asked.

“All of you,” Steve replied. “Of course, you’ll start in the Academy with Bobbi and gradually make your way into joining in missions.”

“Yes,” Wanda finally said.

“Brilliant. I’m Harry, by the way, Harry Potter. If you’re ready, I’ll take you to your brother and we can talk more about what your new life could be like.”

Quickly, Wanda stood. Her life might be changing in ways that she was struggling to comprehend, but at least she still had that one constant in her life that she’d always had. She couldn’t wait to see him, even if he was in a coma at the moment.

Unpacking after an overseas trip was, apparently, a luxury, one that Matt had been denied. He’d barely been home long enough to put his suitcase on his bed when he’d been interrupted by someone at his door.

As soon as she’d seen him, Matt had the impression that he was to go to Bruce right then, with no deviation or lee-way given. And, while she never said, it, he wouldn’t have been surprised if she’d simply thrown him over his shoulder and carried him there if he tried to refuse. The fact that he knew that she was more than capable of the feat had him agreeing at once.

Thus, just over an hour after his flight from Johannesburg had touched down, Matt found himself seated across from both Jennifer and Bruce.

“Well?” Jennifer asked impatiently.

“Bottom line Bruce, they’re not issuing a warrant for your arrest or for your extradition,” Matt assured him.

“That’s something,” Bruce said and Matt could tell that he was relieved – his body lost some of its rigidity and his heart rate slowed marginally. “I’m guessing that there are consequences, though?”

“There are,” Matt nodded. “While I got the South African authorities to understand that neither you nor the Hulk were in your right mind during what happened in Johannesburg, they are afraid of something happening in the future.”

“I’m barred from the country, aren’t I?” Bruce asked.
“They can’t do that!” an indignant-sounding Jennifer stated. “We’ll appeal.”

“No, we won’t,” Bruce replied, placing his hand over his cousin’s to calm her down. “I understand where they’re coming from and I will respect it.”

Matt nodded, expecting nothing less from the man that he’d come to know.

“They’ve stated that if you return in any capacity – and that includes on a mission with the Avengers – then you will be arrested and anyone with you will be charged as being accessories to unlawful entry to the country,” Matt explained.

“Could have been much worse,” Bruce shrugged and held out a hand. “Thanks. You worked miracles keeping me out of whatever hellhole they probably wanted to put me in. I really appreciate it.”

“What are friends for?” Matt smiled, shaking his hand.

ooo00ooo

Thor, Steve, Tony and Harry strolled the grounds of the Avengers’ upstate New York facility. All around them and particularly inside the complex, hundreds of people were hard at work, preparing the facilities and bringing the labs, communication and computer hubs and hanger bays up to scratch. Overhead, a pair of quinjets settled in for a landing even as another prepared to take off. And every one of these had the S.H.I.E.L.D. logo emblazoned on the side.

After the events in Sokovia, where images of the helicarrier had been taken and quickly spread all around the globe, S.H.I.E.L.D. had come out of the shadows. Yes, HYDRA still wasn’t completely dead yet, but it was close; its leaders dead or captured and much of its infrastructure dismantled. Even as neutered as the rogue organisation was, it was clear that S.H.I.E.L.D. had no intension of stopping their pursuit until HYDRA was nothing but a memory.

Thus, with S.H.I.E.L.D. now known throughout the world, they’d begun looking to establish new bases. The vast majority of countries around the world still did not trust them. The Avengers, though, that was another story. So, Tony had offered Coulson the chance to share the facility – emphasis on share; this was still first and foremost an Avengers facility, but it would make the two groups working together much easier.

Currently, Nat and Bobbi were overseeing S.H.I.E.L.D. moving in, allowing the others the chance to discuss recent events.

“I’m going to miss these talks of ours,” Thor said with a laugh.

“Not if you don’t leave,” Tony replied.

“I have no choice,” Thor said grimly. “The Mind Stone is the fourth of the Infinity Stones to show up in the last few years. I do not believe that that is a coincidence. Someone has been playing an intricate game and has made pawns of us all.”

“The Mind Stone was in the sceptre which was sent to Earth with Loki in an attempt to locate and gain the tesseract,” Steve said. “You think whoever sent Loki is after all of the Stones?”

“I do,” Thor replied. “I only wish my brother was still alive; perhaps he could tell me who it was who sent him. What worries me the most is that they are not the only Stones to make their way to Midgard in recent years.”
“The Aether?” Harry asked.

“Indeed,” Thor nodded. “Discovered from its millennia-old resting place and brought to Midgard by Jane. That makes three of the known four. Something appears to be drawing them all here and the Norns did say that the Stones were all drawn to one another.”

“You think Earth’s the ultimate crown?” Tony asked.

“That is what I hope to find out,” Thor replied as he stepped away from the other three.

Then, after a nod of farewell at each of the others, Thor raised his hammer skyward.

“Heimdell!” he called.

Above them, the clouds swirled together as the light of a rainbow descended on top of Thor. And then he was gone, leaving only an intricately patterned design in the grass.

“That man has no regard for lawn maintenance,” Tony remarked.

“I need to head off as well,” Harry said.

“Back to the island?” Steve asked.

“Yes, well, after a stop at my vaults,” Harry replied. “There’s something that I want to get. I’ll see you two later.”

And then, he, too, was gone.

“What about you, old timer?” Tony asked.

“I think that I’ll stick around here for now,” Steve replied. “Bobbi wants to get the Academy all set up and I thought that I’d give her a hand.”

“The new recruits have potential,” Tony remarked. “Obviously, they’re not as good as the originals, a cheap knock-off at best, but still, potential.”

Steve smiled at him. “Don’t worry, we’ll whip them into shape soon enough. You heading back to the Tower?”

“Yeah, I should probably check in with Pepper and there’s a few projects that I’ve left on the back burner for too long, you know how it is.”


Tony nodded, understanding exactly what he was saying. But he knew that the Capsicle didn’t have anything to worry about. Now that he knew he was right and better yet, that the rest of the team knew it, he knew that he didn’t have to try so hard. Together, they could and would deal with whatever came.

But that didn’t mean that he couldn’t have a little fun in the meantime. And he definitely had a couple of projects that looked extremely fun to keep him occupied.
And You Are ...?

The building, the tower may not be the tallest in the city, nor the oldest but it was fast becoming one of the most recognisable and well-known. But that wasn’t why she’d come to New York; it was because of what it meant. Or, more accurately, who it represented.

It’d taken everything for her to come to New York. She’d left it all behind – her work, her house, her father and hadn’t that been terrifying, defying her father like this, after so many years of conditioning to follow every order. Only once before had she defied him, weirdly enough, it was for much the same reason as now.

New York. The last time that she was here … hadn’t been good. Simply closing her eyes brought back flashes from that night: the wild flight; the crashing helicopter; the absolute terror of the monster in front of her; watching as he fell hundreds of metres to the city below and his undeniable bravery and sacrifice and willingness to put himself in harm’s way for everyone.

Not for the first time, she wondered what in the world she was doing there.

But after seeing the latest events on the news, the latest in a long line of events that showed him being the hero that she always knew he was, she couldn’t stay away any longer. Every day for months, she’d been beating herself up for the way that she’d treated him, the way that she’d simply dropped out of his life, not contacting him, not calling, not even attempting to see him.

And so, she’d come.

Now, now it was just a matter of summoning up the courage to cover that last couple of hundred metres, to walk into that Tower and to ask to see him.

Wildly, she looked around, her eyes searching for what, she knew not.

Coffee … no definitely not coffee – that would do absolutely nothing to calm her nerves. Ideally, a stiff drink or three was what she really wanted, but doing so at the current time of the morning just felt wrong. A cup of tea, though? That might work, she finally decided, desperately shoving the thought that she was, once again, trying to put off what she’d come to do as far from her mind as she possibly could.

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As expected, Harry found Wanda in Pietro’s room in the hospital building. This time, she was seated on a chair pulled up close to his bed, his hand clasped between both of hers.

“Wanda,” he said softly from the door, so as not to startle her.

Her head came up off of the bed where it’d been resting, turned in such a way so that she had a clear view of his face and looked towards Harry.

“Is something wrong?” she asked in her accented voice.

“No,” Harry replied, stepping more into the room. “I just thought that you could use a break.”

“A break? No, I’m good. And I want to be here when Pietro wakes up.”

“You will be,” Harry assured her. “The elves are monitoring him closely and they’ll make sure that
you and Healer Greengrass are here when he does. In the meantime, how about you come with me and get some fresh air and sunshine.”

Wanda looked back at her brother, her eyes staying fixed on him for a time before she finally sighed and nodded.

“Okay, I guess that I could, but only a short time,” she said.

Harry waited for her to place a kiss on Pietro’s forehead and to walk across to him. Together, they walked down the stairs and out into the day. Silently, Harry led her along one of the paths that meandered through the garden before it turned away, passing between two of the buildings.

“Where are we going?” Wanda asked as the dappled sunlight played across her face.

“The beach,” Harry replied simply.

Almost as though he’d conjured it, the path curved around a copse of trees and opened to an exquisite scene. Golden sand flowed in front of them and for hundreds of metres to either side. The ocean, today a deep blue with small waves, the occasional crest of white topping them, stretched as far as the eye could see. Birdsong sounded all around them and a light breeze caressed their faces, making their hair dance about heads.

Harry watched as Wanda took it all in before her eyes closed and she breathed deeply. Her shoulders rose and then fell and with them, tension seemed to melt away. Her face relaxed of the worry lines that she’d gained over the past week and he nodded. This was exactly what she needed.

“And this beach is yours?” Wanda asked, having opened her eyes to look at him.

“The whole island,” Harry confirmed, but he knew that she knew that.

“Thank you for bringing me here; I only wish Pietro could see it.”

“He will. In time. Daphne expected that it’d be a while before he woke,” Harry replied.

Neither added the rest of that sentence, but both thought it. Already, it’d been a week and there’d been no sign from Pietro. Yes, his body was healed but his mind, that no one could penetrate – not Wanda with her own kind of magic, nor Daphne or Harry when they tried legilimency. All knew that it was simply a wait and see, hope and pray kind of situation.

“Since we’re here, how about a little extra distraction?” Harry asked.

Wanda’s eyes narrowed.

“I’m guessing that this is why you really brought me here,” she said. “What is it?”

“I’m curious about your magic,” Harry admitted. “I’d like to know more about it, compare it to my own, I suppose.”

She sighed and nodded. “What do you want to know.”

“Well, let’s start with your mind magic. What can you do with it?”

“I can enter people’s heads,” she said. “I see what they are thinking and can convince them to do what I want.”

“Compulsion and legilimency. What about when people try to enter your thoughts?” he asked.
“I don’t know. No one’s ever tried.”

“May I?” Harry asked.

She looked unsure for a moment before seeming to steel herself.

“Okay.”

“I’ll only attempt to skim your surface thoughts,” Harry assured her. “I won’t try going too deep or invading your privacy.”

Turning to face her, Harry lifted his wand. “Legilimens.”

Harry pushed his way into Wanda’s mind and immediately encountered red. Everything around him took on a reddish hue; her magic, he noted. With a small amount of effort, he pushed deeper and finally managed to worm his way in. And stopped, gaping at what he found. Her thoughts were there but they were wild, chaotic, whirling in patterns that he didn’t understand. It was the most bizarre experience that he’d ever encountered.

Pulling out, Harry shook his head.

“It’s not true occlumency,” he noted, “but whatever it is, it’ll sure keep anyone from finding out your thoughts. What else can you do?”

“I can move things, anything really, doesn’t matter how big or small or how heavy.”

A series of waves of his wand produced a dozen rocks, all different sizes – from basketballs to a boulder bigger than he was. It was not the last one, though, that Harry was most interested in seeing what Wanda did with it. Packed inside the second largest rock was a great ball of lead, making the stone much, much heavier than it appeared.

A gesture was enough to have Wanda step forward. Manoeuvring her hands in an intricate pattern produced her red magic around firstly them and then around each rock in succession. Soon, eight of the rocks were dancing about mid-air as though to music that only Wanda could hear. Finally, she reached the last ones, adding them to her choreography with ease.

Harry watched her closely and was impressed when the ‘trick’ rock that he’d included didn’t even make her flinch.

“Okay, let them drop where they are,” Harry said.

Instantly, the dozen rocks fell to the sand, kicking up plumes of it as they impacted.

“What about transfiguration or charms?” Harry wondered. “Can you change the rocks in any way? Make them a different shape or into something else or even just something simple like changing their colour?”

Wanda stared at him and then at the rocks, her hands glowing for nearly a minute with her magic before fading out.

“No, that I can’t do,” she said.

“Fair enough, that just shows a way that your magic is different. I think I remember seeing you form a shield during the battle in Sokovia? Can you do that again?”

Instantly, a haze of red magic appeared between them.
“Hold it there,” Harry said.

Summoning the smallest rock, he directed it towards the shield where it promptly hit and dropped to the ground. A second rock was sent after it, this time at a much greater velocity with the same result. And then Harry sent a *rictusempra*. A silver jet of light flashed from his wand, impacting Wanda’s shield but not penetrating it.

“What was that?” Wanda asked angrily.

“Tickling charm,” Harry replied. “It wouldn’t have hurt you. Looks like that shield of yours is pretty good. Can you ‘throw’ your magic at others?”

“No,” she replied with a shake of her head. “Every time that I’ve used it, both my hands and whatever I’m manipulating glow red, never one without the other, and never by itself without being connect to something unless it’s my shield.”

“Okay, that’s probably enough for today. Thank you for showing me what you can do; I’ll have a look through some books, see if there’s been anything like what you can do recorded anywhere and we can go from there. Now, I’m guessing that you’re eager to get back to Pietro?”

Almost before he’d finished the sentence, Wanda had nodded and turned back towards the path that had brought them there.

Getting to spend the day shopping was heaven to Skye. She’d missed it. Not that she’d ever really had much of an opportunity before, heck, she’d been living out of *van* for ages and if that didn’t speak volumes about her financial situation, then she didn’t know what did.

Of course, she’d traded up the van for a plane nearly two years before and then up again to a secret base when she’d joined S.H.I.E.L.D. They’d even given her a salary, albeit without much downtime to actually spend said pay check. At least she had her van back. Finally. It was currently sitting under Avengers Tower in one of the secure carparks.

Now, though, now, she could make up for it and Skye had every intention of making the most of it. Stark had given her a room at Avengers Tower – apparently everyone had one – but she hadn’t used it yet, much preferring to either stay on the island or, more recently now that she’d gotten a handle on her powers and wasn’t trying to shake everything apart when she slept, at Harry’s apartment above the *Den*.

Just the thought was enough for her grin to grow as wide as it ever had and for her to wrap her arms about herself. What they were developing was *good*. She’d fallen hard for her Magic Man and she knew it; just the fact that she wasn’t disgusted with herself for going all gooey and girly at the thought of him proved that.

Finally getting back to business, Skye flipped through the dresses on the rack once more. Again and again, she found herself coming back to the same one. It was a floor-length, deep forest green one with thin straps, an open back and deep plunging neckline. Harry would love it and probably be drooling within seconds of seeing her in it, she decided.

Five minutes later, she left the shop, bag in hand and turned to head up the street towards her next chosen shop.

“Skye.”
She turned quickly, immediately on alert, her hand beginning to rise. And then blinked.

The man standing just inside the alley was blind. Not blind like Matt, with glasses and a walking stick. No, blind as in he had no frigging eyes! The way that he stood was like Matt, though, as though his lack of eyes meant nothing, that he could see perfectly well, thank you very much. He was also old, dad-like old, with greying hair and stubble.

“Who are you?” Skye asked.

“A friend,” he said. “Do you know hard it’s been, trying to track you? Something kept you hidden from me and then, if it wasn’t that, you were surrounded by others. The Avengers. Even got yourself on the news, making people take interest in you. Being Noisy.”

“And that’s a bad thing?” Skye asked.

“For us, for those like us, yes,” he said.

“Us?” Skye asked, her eyes narrowed. “What ‘us’?”

“That’s why I’m here,” the eye-less man said. “To take you home, where you’ll be among your own, to show you the way.”

“Listen, dude, I don’t know what you’ve taken but you’ve obviously taken something hinky. I suggest that you go back to whervere you came from before I call the cops. Or worse, I deal with you myself.”

He simply smiled at her and Skye scowled at the audacity of him.

“I’m guessing that I didn’t make myself clear,” he said. “My job is to look out for our people, and that includes you, whether you realise it or not.”

And then he moved. At least, Skye assumed so, although she couldn’t work out how. One second, he was standing in the alley, the next he was right beside her and his arm was snaking around her waist.

“What are you doing? Where are you trying to take me?” Skye asked angrily as she attempted to pry him off of her.

But his grip only tightened.

“The Afterlife,” he said.

A crackling ball of blue energy formed around the two of them and Skye felt herself vanish.

She marched through the door to Avengers Tower much more confidently than she felt. Inside she was terrified. What if he refused to see her? Or worse: what if he agreed to see her? That’d open up a whole host of problems and questions and she wasn’t sure that she had the answers ready for those yet.

Pausing in the lobby, she looked around.

Much of the area consisted of small lounge nooks where people could wait or have unofficial meetings. The largest problem that she saw was that, while the stylised ‘A’ on the outside told the world that this was Avengers Tower, most of it was, in fact, Stark Industries domain. And that was
reflected in the lobby; the SI logo was everywhere.

Except there. Off to one side was a singular desk, the Avengers’ ‘A’ emblazoned on the front, a receptionist behind it.

Almost cautiously, she approached it, wary of what the response she would get would be.

“Can I help you ma’am?” the woman asked once she was close enough, having been eyeing her approach.

“I hope so,” she replied. “I’m here to see Doctor Bruce Banner.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, none of the Avengers are available without an appointment and even then, it is extremely unlikely that either Doctor Banner or any of the others will take the time to see you.”

“But I know Bruce!” she blurted. “We’re friends. Or, at least, we were.”

Her protest caused a reaction as a man appeared out of a back office to stand behind the receptionist.

“Excuse me, ma’am, my name is Happy Hogan, I’m the Head of Security here,” he said. “May I ask how you know Doctor Banner?”

“We used to work together at Culver University,” she said. “We were on the same project. I was even there the night … the night that Bruce … changed.”

“I see,” Mister Hogan said. “Look, as Diane said, you really do need an appointment in order to see Doctor Banner but perhaps I could send up a message? If you are indeed old friends, then it’s possible that Doctor Banner would make an exception.”

She nodded, her mind whirling as to what message to give. And then it struck her; simple is most always best.

“If you could just let Bruce know that I’m here? Please?” she asked.

“And your name, ma’am?”

“Betty. Betty Ross.”

ooo00ooo

Skye found herself somewhere unknown and she instantly pushed the strange man away, her hands up and ready, her feet braced.

“Where the hell am I?” Skye demanded.

“I told you, The Afterlife,” he replied.

“Well, that’s not creepy in the slightest, is it?” she asked sarcastically.

As May’d taught her, Skye took a second to take in her surroundings, to assess the situation and not to simply react. She was in an open space, a village of some kind around her, judging by the numerous small houses and buildings. Oriental design, not that that particularly meant anything. The air was cooler but that could be altitude rather than season, she decided, considering that she could see some rather impressive mountains around her.

“You need to calm yourself, Skye, you’re not in any danger here,” a woman said from behind her.
Skye swivelled and backed up so that she could keep both in sight, her arms moving to cover them both.

“That’d be easier to believe if I hadn’t just been kidnapped,” she retorted.

And how she wished that would stop happening to her. Three times now in less than two years!

“Yes, Gordon’s method was rather crude in this instance, usually he’s much calmer, more patient. Unfortunately, your circumstances were anything but normal. This is the first time that Gordon has ever been blocked from finding someone and it had him acting a little … out of character. Thank you, Gordon, we’ll be fine here.”

The woman smiled at the now-named, Gordon, who promptly nodded, turned and walked off along a path, deeper into the village. This gave Skye the opportunity to focus on her.

She was Asian, Chinese, most likely. She appeared to be mid to late thirties, but Skye knew that wasn’t necessarily accurate. She was thin and her face was marred by a series of scars. Obviously, by the way that Gordon deferred to her, she was a leader here, wherever that happened to be.

“I’ll ask again: where am I? Why was I brought here? And, for that matter, who are you?” Skye demanded, not lowering her defences in the slightest.

“My name is Jiaying and as I’m sure Gordon told you, we’re in the Afterlife,” she replied. “It’s a safe haven for our people, a place where they can be themselves without fear of prejudice or fear of attacks from those who don’t understand.”

“You and Gordon? You keep saying ‘us’,” Skye pointed out. “What am I to you people?”

“We call ourselves Inhumans. Legends tell us of Blue Angels that descended from the sky to give our ancestors a special gift.”

“The Kree. I’ve heard of them,” Skye stated, eliciting a look of surprise on Jiaying’s face.

“Then perhaps this will be easier for you to understand and accept. You are a descendant of those people. Some time ago, you underwent a process that is called ‘terrigenesis’ that has revealed your gift, your innate ability,” Jiaying said.

“The mists, yeah, not my favourite experience but I’ve come to appreciate what I can now do.”

“That’s good, Skye,” Jiaying smiled. “We’ll have Lincoln, one of our doctors and Transitioners here look you over to see how your body is adapting to the change.”


“Your father. He told us what happened to you, how you’d undergone the change. He’s here, in Afterlife. Perhaps you’d like to see him?”

“Nope, our last encounter didn’t go all that great and I’m not in a hurry to repeat it, thanks,” Skye replied.

Jiaying frowned. “I had promised that he could see you again but I can see you are determined. This isn’t what I had envisioned but if we’re going to get to know one another then perhaps secrets aren’t the best way to start.”
“You think? Listen, Jiaying, I don’t need your help, I’ve got plenty of others willing to give me all
the help that I ask for. And I certainly don’t need to be hidden away from the world in this hidden
village thing you’ve got going. So, I think that I’ll be going now,” Skye said.

“Back to this place that is able to hide you even from Gordon?” Jiaying asked. “Perhaps you could
tell us how it does that?”

Skye guessed that she was talking about the island and its magic and that was something that she’d
never give any information about to a complete stranger. Or anyone really.

“And how do you expect to leave here?” Jiaying continued. “Gordon is the only one who can come
and go as he chooses, in fact, he’s the only one who knows where we are. And I know that your gift
doesn’t work like that.”

“Look, I don’t know you or trust you so I’m certainly not going to tell you how I can do what I can
do,” Skye snorted.

“July second. You were born on July second.”

Skye stared at the non sequitur. Her birthday? But that was something that Skye didn’t even know
herself. And she’d searched every record that she could find. The only ones who would know were
her parents, her father and her …

“You were born, Daisy, on July second,” Jiaying repeated with a soft smile. “It was a hot night. I
remember having the urge to clean before I woke your father. He, of course, panicked and rushed
straight across to borrow the neighbour’s car, forgetting that he couldn’t speak a word of Chinese.
Somehow, he managed to convince them anyway and drove me to the hospital.”

“You’re my … you’re my … mother?” Skye said, her hands coming up to grab the back of her head
as though to hold in this unexpected revelation. “I can’t … I’m sorry but you have me kidnapped
and you’re my mother? What? Look, I appreciate meeting you and all, but I … I need time to process
this.”

Her mind was in a turmoil. She couldn’t think, couldn’t understand this. Her mother was supposed to
be dead! That’s what Cal had told her, that her mother had been killed by Whitehall. And now, here
she was? That didn’t make sense in the slightest.

The shopping bag that was still attached to her wrist slipped at that moment, knocking her in the face
and Skye remembered what it held, what it connected to. Harry. She needed Harry.

“Black passion,” she said desperately and promptly disappeared in a swirl of colour.

ooo00ooo

Bruce was looking into a microscope, his glasses perched on top of his head when he heard a small
knock on the door behind him. Twisting his arm backwards, he held up one finger.

“Just a minute,” he said.

Refocussing on the sample, his eyes narrowed onto one miniscule part of it before his head lifted and
he scribbled down his observations. Only then, did he turn to see who had come to his lab.

“What can I do for you … Happy?” Bruce asked, surprised.

As far as he could remember, this was the first time that the Head of Security for the building had
ever visited his lab.

“Sorry to interrupt you, Doctor Banner,” Happy replied. “But there’s a woman down in the lobby asking to see you. She says that she’s an old friend, used to work with you at Culver University even.”

Bruce instantly stilled, his mind darting back over the years to the one person that he both hoped and dreaded that it was, the one person that fitted the bill of Happy’s description.

“I told her that she’d need to make an appointment and that, even then, there was no guarantee that you’d agree to meet her,” Happy continued. “She did ask me to give you a message, though. I only agreed because she said that she was a friend.”

“What was the message?” Bruce all but croaked through his suddenly dry throat.

“Just her name. Betty, Betty Ross.”

“Thanks, Happy. I’ll … No,” Bruce said changing his mind mid-thought. “Could you show her up? I’ll meet her in the lounge, I don’t think that there’s anyone else in the Tower at the moment so we won’t be disturbed.”

“Of course, Doctor Banner,” Harry nodded before turning and leaving to carry out Bruce’s request.

Betty Ross. The last time that Bruce had had even the remotest interaction with her was when he posted her necklace back to her after managing to retrieve it from the pawn broker that they’d sold it to when they were on the run.

On the run. Harlem. The General, no, Secretary now.

A million questions raced through Bruce’s mind as he made his way up to the lounge to wait for her. Why was she here? What did she want? Why now, after all this time? Did her father know that she was here? If so, what did that mean? If not, what did that mean?

He’d loved her once, still did in a way. But he’d kept his distance from her for a reason, to keep her safe, not that the Hulk had ever even come close to harming Betty in any way, in fact, he was more likely to protect her than anything else. Still, though, Bruce’d known that it’d be safer to stay away.

Even after the events of New York and everything since and the Hulk becoming known world-wide, he hadn’t tried to contact her. He hadn’t even tried to find out where she was to limit that temptation in the first place. But the reverse had also been true. His location wasn’t a mystery, not once he joined the Avengers and Betty hadn’t tried to contact him at all, either.

Until now.

And then the elevator doors opened and she was there.

Bruce stood quickly, his hands wringing together as they were wont to do when he was nervous. She looked nervous, unsure, as well. His eyes roved over her, taking her in. She was still as beautiful as ever. Her hair was maybe a little longer but her blue eyes were as expressive, as intense as ever; it was almost as though she hadn’t changed, as though the intervening years hadn’t mattered.

“Hello, Bruce,” she said.
“Hello, Bruce.”

“What are you doing here, Betty?” Bruce blurted.

The question wasn’t harsh or demanding, more desperate than anything else. It wasn’t even as though Bruce had intended on leading with it. He’d intended on being polite, to greet her, perhaps even ask how she was. But it kind of just forced its way out his mouth, the urgency of needing that answered overriding everything else in his head.

“I should have come before this,” Betty replied and it was easy to see how nervous she was in the way that her eyes darted about and the way her hands played with her skirt. “I know that. And I want to apologise but I know that you don’t like apologies. I am sorry, though. I shouldn’t have allowed others, allowed him to dictate my actions. And I did. But I’m here now and I’d like … I’d like … Oh, Bruce, I just needed to see you, to see that you were alright, to see what kind of life you’ve made for yourself, to see …”

Bruce held up a hand and took a step closer to cut off her ramblings.

“Don’t get me wrong, it’s nice to see you again,” Bruce said. “It’s just, after all this time, I’m feeling a little overwhelmed.”

“I can get that,” Betty smiled. “I’m feeling pretty much the same.”

“Really? I never would have guessed. Would you like to sit down?”

She nodded and moved closer and for a fraction of a second, Bruce was sure that she was going to hug him. Or perhaps it was that he was going to hug her. In the end, it didn’t matter for the moment passed and the two moved to sit on one of the couches, their bodies turned to face each other.

“Before anything else, I’ve got to know. The General, your father, does he know that you’re here?” Bruce asked.

Betty shook her head, her hair swishing hard from side to side.

“No. He’d have a heart attack if he did; you know what he’s like,” she replied. “No. I left everything behind when I decided to come. You know that he’s Secretary of State now? Well, that hasn’t stopped him from ensuring that his map for my life has progressed pretty much exactly how he wanted. The only way for me to come was to leave it all behind.”

“All? You left your whole life behind to come see me?” Bruce asked. He removed his glasses, pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head. “If it was so important to see me, to do that, why now? Why’d it take so long?”

“It wasn’t that I didn’t want to, but after seeing what happened in South Africa, I finally made the decision. That was the worst that I’ve ever seen the Hulk. He was … you were beyond rage. It was primal, the most bestial that I’ve ever seen. I know you, Bruce, even after all this time, I know you. I knew that you’d be beating yourself up about what happened about what could have happened. I decided right then to come, to see you to remind you that you’re not a monster.”

“You’re right, I did beat myself up about it, still do in fact,” Bruce admitted. “But there were circumstances, things that you don’t know or understand that made the Hulk lose control like that.
And it’s not like I’m alone, I have people around me these days who support me.”

“The Avengers. See, I was right, regardless of your form, you are a hero,” Betty smiled and Bruce couldn’t help but laugh.

“Yeah, I guess I am. At least the Hulk and I, we’re finally doing more good than harm, the books are finally beginning to tilt back the other way,” Bruce said.

“I know. I’ve been keeping a watch for anything about the Hulk,” Betty admitted. “You should see the scrapbook that I’ve got. Well, had; I had to leave it behind as well. But it’s got every newspaper articles, magazine clippings, every photo that I could find in it.”

“That’s … sweet,” Bruce said in lieu of something better to say. “What is it that you’re hoping for here, Betty?”

She looked down at her hands for a moment before looking back up, her eyes immediately searching out his own, as though willing him to see that she wasn’t lying, that everything that she was saying was the total truth.

“I’m not sure. A chance to reconnect, maybe? I’d like to get to know you again. I know that things won’t be like they were – too much water under the bridge for that. But I’ve missed you. You were my best friend, hell, we were more than just friends once.”

“You’ve never … found someone, married?” Bruce asked tentatively.

“No. Oh, I’ve dated a couple of times, don’t get me wrong,” she replied, “and there was more than one that the General set me up with, encouraged me in fact, to marry, if truth be told. But none of them were right for me. No connection, you know?”

“What about your dad? I doubt that he’s given up on me, on experimenting on me to find out how I tick? To turn me into some kind of weapon,” Bruce commented.

“Oh, don’t worry about him,” Betty said, waving the suggestion away. “He called off the army ages ago, something about a new project with some … Thing? I don’t know, it was all highly classified and I only caught enough snippets to know that you’re safe from him.”

“That’s good to know,” Bruce replied, feeling a weight lift from his shoulders that he didn’t even know that he was carrying. “And, for what it’s worth, I’d like a chance to get to know you again as well. Perhaps you can tell me more about what you’ve been up to these last years over dinner?”

“I’d like that,” Betty beamed, her eyes shining.

skye landed hard, stumbled, righted herself and instantly shot around, her hand up practically slamming into the startled face of Sam.

“Woah! We’re good, right?” Sam asked.

Skye let out a breath she didn’t know that she’d been holding.

“Yeah, we’re good. You just startled me, is all,” she replied.

“I didn’t think you S.H.I.E.L.D. types got startled, not like us common folk,” Sam replied. And then his demeanour changed as he seemed to get a better look at her. “Are you alright? You’re looking a
little freaked out about something?"

“Getting kidnapped will do that to you,” Skye replied offhandedly. “You seen Harry?”

“Kidnapped?” a startled-sounding Sam replied. “Ah, yeah, I think he’s down at that bungalow of his.”

“Thanks,” Skye threw over her shoulder, ignoring the muttered complaints from Sam about wizards misnaming things, regardless of how they looked on the outside.

It took a few minutes to walk between the main building and where the Black Bungalow was situated on the island. The walk, though, did Skye good. The soothing feel of the breeze on her cheeks, the sound of the birds and the ocean not all that far away, the scent of the flowers and nature all calmed her nerves and by the time that Skye entered the ‘house’ she was feeling much calmer.

“She called, dumping her shopping bag on the floor and not even flinching when it immediately disappeared.

One of the house elves, she determined. She knew that when next she checked, she’d find it in her room. Or more likely, the dress already hung in her wardrobe.

“Hey,” she said as she entered the room.

“I thought you were out shopping today?” Harry asked, even as he pushed his chair back from his desk and turned it to just the right angle to allow her to sit in his lap.

“I was. Until I was kidnapped. Again!” she said.

She felt his body tense and his arms squeeze her just a little more tightly before he relaxed.

“Obviously you got yourself out of it. So, who were the unfortunate souls that decided kidnapping Quake was a smart move?” he asked.

“Would you believe my mother?” she asked, still wrapping her head around that fact herself.

“Actually, no,” Harry replied. “Want to try again?”

“No, I’m being serious here. It was my mother or at least on my mother’s orders,” she reiterated. “Some guy with no eyes. A teleporter. His ability caught me by surprise and took me to her.”

“Obviously you used your portkey to get back home,” Harry stated. “How’d you know that she was your mother?”

“She told me. Actually, she told me of the night that I was born. Even told me when my birthday was.” At Harry’s inquisitive eyebrow, she elaborated. “July second. I thought that Cal had told me that she’d died. Obviously, she didn’t, although judging by the scars that lined her face, it must have been a near thing.”

“Where were you taken?” Harry asked.

Skye shrugged. “Dunno. Some place called Afterlife.Apparently, that’s not how they normally do things with new Inhumans – that’s what they call us Kree experiment descendants – but Gordan, the teleporter, has been having a bit of difficulty finding me, so decided snatching me was the smart thing to do.”
“The wards,” Harry guessed.

“Yeah. Well, I stuck around just long enough to get that much info and then portkeyed out of there,” she finished.

“Your mother’s alive, that’s a pretty big thing,” Harry pointed out. “How do you feel about that? I’m guessing that you have so many questions.”

“I’m still processing,” she replied. “But yeah, the questions are starting to come. Not that it makes much difference anyway, unless I want them to kidnap me again – I’ve got no idea where this ‘Afterlife’ is anyway.”

“That’s not necessarily true,” Harry replied before capturing her left wrist and tapping his finger on the watch that Tony had given her when she became a fully-fledged Avenger. “This thing does more than just tell the time you know.”

“It’s also a communicator,” Skye nodded. “And I’m guessing it has a built in GPS that tracks my movements? Now, that’s not creepy in the slightest.”

Harry gave a lop-sided smile at her sarcasm.

“But dead useful if anything goes wrong,” he said. “So, if you want to know where you were taken, where your mother is, all we have to do is plug it in to a computer and find out.”

For a second, Skye was undecided and then a cacophony of questions presented itself. It’d be nice to have the option of being able to ask them, at the very least.

“Hook me up,” she said, holding out arm.

ooo00ooo

Spider-Man shot out a web, released his other hand and swung on the new line. Instead of repeating the process as he had been for the past four city blocks, this time he released at the top of his arc and flung out his arms, his legs dead straight behind him. Small arcs of silk, designed like a web, appeared under his armpits, from elbow down to his hips, allowing him to glide the short distance across to the nearby rooftop.

As he passed over the crenulation, he tucked his arms and legs in, spinning, falling and landing in a crouch. Standing up, Spider-Man held out one arm again, examining the gliding material once more.

“That’s new,” Daredevil announced.

“I know, right?” Spider-Man said. “Pure awesomeness! It’s part of the new suit upgrade that Mister Stark designed for me. I even had a few design input ideas. And the eyes, they’re so cool, the way they move and everything. Telescopic lenses, infrared, enhanced light ... uh, sorry, Matt, I didn’t mean any offence.”

“None taken, kid,” Daredevil laughed.

“The only thing I’m not sure about are all the different types of web shots I can do now,” Spider-man continued. “Don’t get me wrong, the versatility is great but three hundred different combinations? Seems a little overkill to me. Oh, and the talking AI, that I haven’t decided on. Karen’s nice and all, especially when I’m out by myself, but still, it can get a little unnerving having her in my ear all the time.”
“Karen?” Daredevil asked.

“Yeah, I named my AI, Karen. Well, I had to call her something. Miss Page won’t mind, will she? I didn’t think about it when I named Karen and it’d be a bit weird to rename her now, if you know what I mean?”

“I’m sure that Karen won’t have a problem,” Daredevil assured him. “She’ll probably even get a kick out it.”

The way that Daredevil suddenly turned his head had Spider-Man on alert.

“Gun fire. Four blocks south,” Daredevil stated.

“That’s Harlem,” Spider-Man said. “Trouble’s been building up there for the past couple of months. Gangs all trying to take over, outdo each other. You’d think that they’d get a clue.”

“You going to stand there talking all night or are we going to do something about it?” Daredevil asked and promptly jumped over the edge of the building just to reappear at a run on the next building’s roof.

“Well, that was rude,” Spider-Man said.

Flinging out a line, he leapt off the building after his partner.

When next he landed on a roof, he could tell that he was practically right over the top of the action. His ear easily picked up four, possibly five different automatic rifles, as well as a handful of handguns. All of them were firing.

“Gang war,” Spider-Man guessed before crawling along the roof and sticking his head out to assess the situation before swinging in (and also to give his partner time to catch up).

What he saw below defied even his imagination.

He was close on the numbers – twelve or thirteen guys with guns. And they were definitely all part of the same gang. Who they were fighting, though, who they were all up against, wasn’t another gang. No. It. Was. One. Single. Guy. One. One guy and they were all shooting at him and if their gun ran out of bullets, they simply reloaded and kept on shooting.

“That is pure crazy,” Spider-Man said, his eyes wide.

This guy wasn’t even attempting to dodge the bullets the way he or Daredevil or some of the others could. No, he simply stood there, letting the bullets hit him and bounce off. The guy was big, one of the largest men that Spider-Man had seen and it was all muscle. He was obviously a powerful black man and looked even more intimidating with his hoodie all shot up.

Whoever he was and regardless of whether he actually needed any help at all, Spider-Man simply couldn’t let some guy just be shot at like that.

Shooting out a web, he leapt from the building, swinging hard and fast.

“Give me a rapid shot, Karen,” Spider-Man said.

As he approached the bottom of his arc, he fired four rapid bursts. Each one hit their target, gumming up the rifles, sticking hands together, wrapping around feet and then sticking the men to the ground. Letting go of his web, Spider-Man landed at a run and switched types of webshots. This time, a ball
of netting bagged one of the men, his gun landing on the ground. A second shot of webbing – a line this time – had that netting picked up and strung up from a nearby lamp post, the man now dangling upside down.

The bullet proof guy seemed to decide that that was the correct time to fight back. Spider-Man’s eyes bugged out as the guy plucked a traffic sign out of the ground as though it was a blade of grass and swung it at one the men, sending him flying across the street. And when one of the others tried to sneak up and shoot him in the back, the hoodie guy just turned around and knotted the street sign around the guy!

Two of the gang then turned their guns on Spider-Man and he was forced to flip and turn and twist and dive out of the way. When one suddenly stopped firing, Spider-Man fired his webs (balls, this time) knocking the second man backwards until he tripped over and the balls exploded all over him, pinning him to the ground.

“Thanks, but I had him,” Spider-Man called to Daredevil who stood over the unconscious man that had been firing a second before.

Within a couple of minutes, the street was quiet except for the occasional gang member that was still conscious.

Spider-Man looked around at the carnage and dusted his hands off. And then he noticed bullet-proof guy. He was standing in front of the guy who Spider-Man had left dangling from a net upside down.

“Hey, not cool, dude!” Spider-Man shouted when the guy hit the one who was trussed up sending him swinging way backwards until he was all but horizontal.

Seeing a fist lined up ready to strike again as the man descended, Spider-Man shot out a web, connected to the net and pulled the man out of the way, just in time.

“I’d answer him if I was you,” Daredevil remarked. “Spider-Man over there’s probably the only one here who’ll care if your bones remain in one piece or not.”

“Cotton Mouth!” the man near-yelled.

Apparently, that was an answer for the black guy simply grinned and tapped the dangling man on the head with his finger and knocking him out.

“Dude, you are strong! And big,” Spider-Man said, looking up at him.

“Size doesn’t always matter, but it sure can help. Thanks for the assist. Name’s Cage. Luke Cage.”

“I’m assuming that you know who we are?” Daredevil asked and received an answering nod.

“How’d you get bulletproof? ’Cause that’s really wicked! Is it just bulletproof or are you basically indestructible? I’m guessing you’re indestructible if bullets can’t break your skin,” Spider-Man said in awe as he poked the man’s arm through a tear in his hoodie.

“You’re a curious one, aren’t you?” Luke Cage grinned. “And believe me, kid, what they did to me to make me like this, I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy.”

“I’m guessing it hurt?” Daredevil half-asked, half stated.

“Well, it sure didn’t tickle,” Cage replied. “What are you two doing in Harlem?”
“Heard the gunfire,” Daredevil replied. “Harlem’s been getting a bit of a gang problem. We’re trying to put an end to it.”

“Sounds like my kind of fight,” Cage replied. “If you’re in the neighbourhood and need a hand, just ask for me. Everyone around here knows who I am.”

“We’ll remember that,” Daredevil replied.

“Hey, Karen, can you let the cops know that there’s a bunch of bad guys here? Better tell them to bring a couple of ambulances, too,” Spider-Man said, eyeing both Luke and the unconscious guy still swaying from the light pole.

ooo00ooo

Hesitantly, Melati shuffled into the hospital room, her head twisting from side to side as she searched out any potential danger. Not that there would be any; she knew that. Still, more than a year of being held captive and experimented on had given her an intense dislike of hospitals.

The doctor … Healer, was the only one present and she was sitting at a desk, writing something with a quill of all things. As quiet as she was, she must have made some sort of sound for Healer Greengrass looked up.

“Ah, you’re here, shall we get started then?” she asked, pushing her chair back and standing.

Melati inched closer before squaring her shoulders and moving across to the bed in the centre of the room. Hopping up, she sat there and waited. As she’d done many times before, Healer Greengrass simply moved within arm’s length and took out her wand, to begin waving it over her.

A wand, a piece of wood, wasn’t nearly as intimidating as some of the things that she’d seen in a hospital of late. Really, when Melati thought about it, what did she have to fear anyway? She was now part lizard with the proportional strength to go with it. Not to mention the claws that she could extend and the power in her jaw.

Within a minute, Healer Greengrass had lowered her wand with a smile.

“As far as I can tell, you’re perfectly healthy,” she said. “There’s no sign of malnutrition and your bone and muscle density all looks good, well, from what I can determine, considering I’m not exactly sure of what your physiology is now supposed to be. Regardless, I’m content with your progress and can use your current health as your new baseline.”

“So, I don’t have to come see you anymore?” Melati asked.

“Not unless you are feeling sick or get injured,” Healer Greengrass replied. “I know that you’re eager to get out of here, so why don’t you head across to the main building, there’s a few people there waiting for you.”

Melati narrowed her eyes at her ‘request’. Not that she believed she had anything to worry about. Still, she didn’t like being ordered around.

Regardless, she quickly hopped off the bed, thanked the Healer and exited the building. Walking across the park-like area, she glanced up at the great glass windows. With the sun at this angle, it was hard to make out more than shadows of four people in the room, even with her enhanced sight.

Walking into the long, expansive lounge room, Melati found that she’d been correct in the number of people that she’d thought was here. Harry was expected, after all, he owned the island. Steve
Rogers, was also expected, as was Bobbi. The last one, a woman in a pristine business suit with reddish-blonde hair, she’d never met before rounded out the group.

“Allow me to make introductions,” Steve said. “Melati, meet Pepper Potts.”

Melati blinked. She’d heard of the woman. Girlfriend of Tony Stark. CEO of Stark Industries.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Pepper said and Melati was pleased to note that she didn’t even flinch when shaking her hand.

“You, too,” Melati replied.

“I’m sure that you’re wondering why we’re all here,” Steve said, obviously taking charge of the meeting.

At Melati’s nod, he continued.

“Now that you’ve been given the ‘all clear’ from Doctor Greengrass, we thought that you might like to talk about your future.”

“Firstly, you are more than welcome to stay here on the island for as long as you like,” Harry said, taking over. “You’ve already picked a room here; it’s yours as long as you want it. In this case, you’ll find rings, necklaces and ankle bracelets. Please choose one to keep. They are all permanent portkeys – magical means of transporting you from one place to another, in this instance, from here to Avengers Tower in New York. Underneath the one you choose will be a piece of card with a pair of words or phrases on it. That’s the passwords to activate the portkey.”

Melati looked into the case that he opened for her, her eyes roving over the differing styles of gold and silver jewellery. One of the ankle bracelets caught her attention and she fingered it.

“Don’t worry, it won’t break,” Harry told her. “It’s been enchanted so that not even the Hulk could break those links.”

With that assurance, she smiled and picked it and the card up.

“Thank you.”

“As you can see, we don’t want you to feel as though you’re confined to the island, you can move about as much as you like,” Steve said. “Unfortunately, people being people, we know how much this island can mean as a place to retreat to, so it and we are your home for as long as you like.”

“I’ve been told that you’re interested in continuing your education to become a biochemist?” Pepper asked.

“Yes,” Melati replied eagerly. “I’d just finished my first year at Empire State University when I was kidnapped. I know that I’ve been gone for a year and now look like this, but I’d still like to complete the course, if it’s possible.”

“It’s certainly more than possible,” Pepper assured her. “Stark Industries has some pull with Empire State after all of the donations we’ve made over the years. I’ve used that to get you reinstated to your course with your academic marks from your first year restored. Obviously, you’ve still got another three years to go to complete the course but you can begin again whenever you like. You also have the choice of attending in person or completing much of the course on-line – including through video conferencing – or a combination of both.”
“You’ve done so much, I don’t know how I can repay you,” Melati said.

“That’s easy,” Pepper smiled. “Get the best results that you can, graduate and do some good in the world.”

“And if you would like,” Bobbi added, “you can use that knowledge in any research for the Avengers as well. We’re always looking for more scientists of different specialities – the world tends to throw all manner of weird and wonderful at us.”

“Sounds like a deal for allowing me to stay here,” Melati smiled.

“And if you want, I can continue to work with you, to teach you how to use your new physique to its fullest potential, including how to fight. You can even learn how to pilot a quinjet, if you like,” Bobbi added.

Melait’s eyes narrowed. “That sounds suspiciously like the basics of your Avengers Academy course.”

“Does it?” Bobbi asked and her innocent act did nothing to fool Melati.

“I’ll think about it, but I’m not making any promises,” she said. “It seems that I’ve got some studying to do if I’m going to be ready for September – I’ve got to refresh my memory of a year’s worth of work.”

“Do think about it, though,” Steve insisted. “You could be a valuable asset. Talk to Jennifer. She didn’t want to fight either, but she has the knowledge ‘just in case’ even though she ‘serves’ in other ways.”

“I will,” Melati promised.

The tesseract. Vessel of the Space Stone, one of the six Infinity Stones. And here it lay before Thor, safe in Odin’s Vault, deep under the palace on Asgard.

Thor stood, deep in thought, one arm crossed over his chest, supporting his other hand as he stroked his chin.

The Space Stone had been hidden on Midgard eons in the past before it was discovered a mere seventy years ago. Then, Steve had thwarted the plans to use it, allowing it to become lost once again only for S.H.I.E.L.D. to fish it out of the bottom of the ocean and to eventually attempt to understand it and use it.

It had brought Loki to Midgard, carrying a sceptre containing the Mind Stone – although that was unknown at the time – and an army of Chitauri at his back. The sceptre was lost on Midgard in enemy hands before it was quite recently recovered and the gem that it housed broken to release the Mind Stone. Now, it resided with the Vision and Thor could think of no safer hands.

The third of the Infinity Stones that Thor himself had seen was the Aether, or more accurately, the Reality Stone. Able to recreate and reshape reality around its user, to bend what was into what was dreamed to be. The Dark Elves of Svartalfheim had sought to use it to remake the universe in their image. It, too, had been hidden away for millennia until a woman from Midgard, Jane, in fact, had discovered it and brought it back to Midgard housed within her. Eventually it had been extracted, encased and given to The Collector to protect it in the far depths of space on Knowhere.
That made three out of the four Stones that had appeared in recent years to have made their way to Midgard. That Thor knew of.

That fourth, though, the Power Stone, Thor had seen in his dreams, in his vision with the Norn. It, too, had surfaced not that long ago. He had seen a planet in that vision, one that stirred memories. Xandar, the capital of the Nova Empire. It was there, he was sure of it. But he needed to make sure. Only then could Thor begin his quest to find the missing two and more importantly, the one who was manipulating people, planets and events to suit his own purposes. These Stones were far too powerful to allow any one individual to use them, let alone to gather them together.

Decision made, Thor strode from the Vault, his destination, Heimdell and the Rainbow Bridge and after that … Xandar.
“Excuse Tilly, Mistress Greengrass,” the little house elf said.

Daphne placed her knife and fork down and turned in her chair to see one of the two house elves that were assigned to the Hospital. She was standing there, her expressive blue eyes looking up with a mixture of apology for the interruption and intensity, telling Daphne that what she had to say was important.

“What is it, Tilly?” Daphne asked.

“Mistress asked Tilly and Tempi to say when patient changed and to tell her straight away,” Tilly said, her large ears quivering slightly.

“What has changed in Mister Maximoff’s condition?” Daphne asked and she could feel the intense gazes of the others at the table on her, especially the boy’s sister.

“Breathing. Heart. Tilly thinks patient will wake soon.”

The scraping of a chair behind her told Daphne that Wanda was already up and moving, a fact that Daphne was quickly copying.

“Thank you, Tilly, I’ll be right along. Please continue to monitor him until I get there,” she said.

Having given a single nod, Tilly popped away. Daphne let her hand rest on James’ shoulder for a second before she strode from the room.

Wanda, she found, was leaning over her brother’s bed, one hand carding through his blond locks, the other holding his hand. As Daphne rounded the bed, she noted that Wanda’s eyes never even looked up, locked as they were on Pietro’s closed ones.

Even before she checked Pietro’s vitals with her wand, her ear told her that Tilly had been right – his breathing sounded more natural and much closer to someone who was awake in comparison to someone who was deep in a coma. Her diagnostic spell confirmed it. His heart rate she’d almost classify as being elevated, but that, she supposed, could simply be due to his unique physiology. Everything else looked good – he was in perfect health, no thanks to her own prodigious skills.

His eyes fluttered and she nodded her head.

“Pietro?” Wanda breathed.

“Give him a couple of minutes, he’s been asleep for three weeks, remember,” Daphne cautioned.

Together, they waited, Daphne watching her diagnostic charms closely; everything, though looked alright. The true test would be when he awoke properly. That would be when they’d know whether or not his brain had been damaged during the time that his heart had been stopped.

The next half hour seemed to drag by as Pietro drifted into semi-consciousness and then back into sleep before, finally his eyes opened more fully than they had ever been.

“Pietro?” Wanda asked once again.

“Wan … da,” he replied croakily, groggily.
Daphne allowed a half-smile. That was a great first sign – recognition of who was talking to him as well as the action of talking itself.

“Mister Maximoff, my name is Healer … Doctor Greengrass,” she said, capturing his attention and making sure to use a word that he’d be more familiar with. “I need to check how you are. Can you please focus on the light and follow it with your eyes?”

She watched as his eyes managed to focus on the tip of her wand and follow it from side to side and up and down even if he was frowning somewhat throughout it. She made sure to repeat the motion several times, varying the speed as well.

“That’s good, Mister Maximoff,” she nodded, pleased with his response.

“Pietro,” he said, perhaps a shade slowly.

“Pietro,” she repeated. “Can you tell me how old you are?”

“Twenty-two,” he said, his brows crinkling slightly.

“When is your birthday?”

“March eleven.”

Wanda’s nod confirmed that for Daphne.

“Where were you born?”

“Novi Grad, Sokovia.”

“Excellent, Pietro, you’re doing very well,” Daphne told him. “Now, I’d like you to tell me the last thing that you remember.”

His brows crinkled once again before he began, his speech coming faster and faster the longer that he spoke.

“We were in Sokovia. Me and Wanda and … and the Avengers. We went to stop Ultron. There were lots of Ultrons, robots, I mean. Hundreds of them, I’d never seen so many. And then … and then, Novi Grad … Novi Grad began to fly. We fought, all of us, we fought all of Ultron’s robots, stopped him from getting near the church. And then … and then, I remember seeing Barton and some woman in black, S.H.I.E.L.D., I think, they went to rescue a kid. A quinjet came, it was shooting up the street, there was no way that they were going to survive. I remember, I remember … a car?”

He shook his head after that.

“That can’t be right, can it? A car, that doesn’t make sense. But I remember it, I think. It’s all hazy, fuzzy,” he tried.

“That’s alright, you can stop there,” Daphne told him before he could begin to overstress himself. “I think it’s safe to say that you’re going to be fine. Obviously, you’ll need to stay here for a while, at least until you regain your strength a little more. And I wouldn’t worry about any small gaps in your memory, serious trauma – which you indeed suffered – can cause some memory loss. It may come back in time or it may not.”

He nodded at her, “thanks, doc.”
And then his head moved and his hand with it as he focussed on his sister, his twin.

“How long?” he asked.

“Three weeks,” she replied, “Don’t ever do that to me again!”

Quietly, Daphne left the room and the siblings celebrating not being separated.

ooo00ooo

It was nice having the place to himself, gave him a chance to stretch his wings so to speak. Well, strictly speaking he wasn’t alone; there were probably two dozen S.H.I.E.L.D. tech guys running around, still in the process of setting up. But still, he was the only Avenger here, so that meant that he was in charge.

At least, that’s how Sam chose to look at it.

A small chime in his ear alerted him to some kind of tech crossing the outer boundary of the property. Stark had spent ages setting up a system that completely covered the upstate New York Compound in a great dome; anything without the right code entering tripped an alarm, letting whoever was there know that there was a potential problem – be it saboteur, surveillance drone or something even more sinister.

A check of the info coming in to the tech incorporated into his arm guard told him that whatever it was was coming in from up high. And that it was tiny – had to be really, considering the size of the blip.

Following the source, Sam glided in to land on the roof. The fact that he couldn’t see anything meant nothing. Instead, he had his new goggles overlay the rooftop in an IR scan and then on a zoom. There, not five feet in front of him. But it was tiny, real tiny. Actually, it wasn’t an it at all – it looked like a tiny man, not much bigger than the ants that surrounded him.

The way that the tiny man was moving told Sam that this wasn’t just some weird robot type thing. He’d worry about how the guy got so small later, after the job was done.

“I can see you,” he stated.

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“I can see you,” he stated.

Instantly, the man grew from half an inch tall to around six feet. He was dressed in a strange red and black leather suit with a fully enclosed helmet with red eyes. Sam’s eyebrow rose as the man slapped a button on his helmet, causing his visor to pop up and the part covering his mouth to drop down slightly.

“Hi, I’m Scott.”

“What are you doing here,” Sam asked, masking his amusement at the man introducing himself. He had this type of tech and he immediately said who he was? This guy was obviously a rank amateur.

“First off, great to meet you, I’m a big fan.”

“Appreciate it. So, who the hell are you?” Sam asked.

“I’m Ant-Man,” he replied. “You’ve heard of me? Nah, you wouldn’t have heard of me.”

“Ant-Man?” and this time Sam couldn’t hide his laughter.

“Hey, I didn’t get a choice in the name but it’s still cool and surprisingly accurate,” Scott protested.
“You still didn’t tell me what you’re doing here,” Sam pointed out.

“Oh, right. Listen, I’ve just got to borrow a piece of equipment for a day or so. I’ll bring it right back. Promise. It’s a ‘saving the world type thing’, you know how that is,” he finished casually.

“Yeah, I know how that is,” Sam replied. “But I’m not giving you any tech. Now, you come with me, answer a few questions and we’ll see …”

As he was talking, Sam strode forward, intent on grabbing this ‘Ant-Man’.

“Sorry about this,” Scott said as he brought up a hand and pressed some sort of button on his glove.

Instantly, Ant-Man shrank, right between Sam’s fingers. A sharp pain then punched him in the ribs, sending him flying backwards.

“Oh, no you don’t, you’re not getting away that easily,” Sam promised.

Activating his wings, Sam took off after the guy, using his goggle-enhanced vision to track the tiny man.

What followed was the craziest battle that Sam had ever fought. One minute the Ant-Man was tiny and Sam was doing everything that he could to shoot the intruder or stomp on him or even to use his wings to sweep him away in a gust of wind. The next second, the Ant-Man (and now Sam actually got the irony of the name) had grown to his ‘normal’ height, often leading with his fists.

Still, no matter what tricks the Ant-Man tried, Sam never gave up, keeping a track of him, following him and staying with him. That was until he slipped in between the panels of one of the storage units. His tech gave Sam instant access and he strode in, his head on a swivel as he attempted to find the tiny man once more.

Unfortunately, he found him in the most painful way possible: by having another of those powerful punches slamming into him – this one so hard that it knocked him right back through the door. The closed door.

Sam landed in a backwards roll and barely took a moment to groan before getting to his feet, his wings instantly opening and bearing him aloft.

And then his pack began to go crazy. Systems everywhere inside it started to go haywire, shutting off or shorting out. One wing folded in and he began to spiral before the other promptly joined its brother, crashing him into the ground, dirt and grass kicking up all over him.

Sam jumped to his feet, his hands automatically going back to feel his pack. There was only one way that what had just happened had happened: the Ant-Man was inside the pack and damaging it as much as he could. When the connection to his glasses shorted out, Sam ripped them off of his head.

Wherever that little guy was, he was going to get away – there was literally nothing that Sam could do to stop him. But next time he saw him … oh, they were going to have words!

Taking one last look around the grounds, regardless of how fruitless he knew it to be, Sam turned and headed to the tech bay to get his pack fixed.

He just had to pray that he could get it working again before Cap or one of the others turned up – there was no way that he ever intended to tell them that he’d just been beaten up by a guy the size of an ant. He’d never live it down.
Laura finished putting the kids to bed and descended to the lounge. A smile crossed her face as she saw Clint lying there, his head on the arm rest, one foot dangling to the floor, his arm over his face.

“Three’s much harder than two,” he said, even though she knew that she’d barely made a sound coming down the stairs. “Why’d we decide to do this again?”

“Because we love our first two so much and, even with that, we still had room in our hearts for a third,” she replied. “Budge up.”

At her nudge of his leg, Clint swung himself so that he was sitting up and Laura immediately settled in close to him. His arm came over her almost automatically, drawing her in even closer.

“Peace at last,” he murmured into her hair as he kissed her temple.

“It won’t last,” she warned him, “Nathaniel’s due for a feed in an hour or two.”

“I’d offer to take the mission, but I’m low on equipment,” Clint replied.

Her hand slapped his thigh playfully.

“You can take over once he’s fed, get him back to sleep.”

“Leave me with the Mission Impossible, will ya, that’s no way to treat your partner,” he mock-grouched. “Seriously, though, I think I can handle it. He’s crying less and less each night.”

“That’s because he’s getting to know you,” Laura told him. “He’s had nine months already with me.”

She snuggled in a little then, enjoying his closeness, the comforting smell of him, the feeling of safety with his arm wrapped around her.

“It’s not going to be easy doing this by myself once another mission comes up,” Laura stated.

“I know,” Clint sighed. “At least with those new portkeys that Harry’s given me, it’ll be much easier to travel backwards and forwards.”

“But you can’t always pop home in the middle of a mission,” Laura said, tilting her head back to look at him.

“If I need to, I will,” Clint assured her. “Nothing’s more important to me than you and the kids, Mrs Barton.”

“Clint,” she said and her tone of voice obviously caught his attention because his face changed slightly, gaining more of a ‘Hawkeye’-look to it. “Have you given any thought to Harry’s offer of us moving to that island of his?”

“Some. Problem is that this is Barton land, been in the family for three generations already. Always saw myself retiring here,” he replied.

“And I love the idea of growing old with you right here as well,” Laura replied. “But right now, I could do with some extra help when you’re not around. I’m outnumbered and it’s not easy running the farm as well as raising the kids by myself.”

He opened his mouth and she reached up to place a finger to his lips, cutting off what she knew he
was going to say.

“I love your Avenging. I support you one hundred per cent. What you’re doing, making the world safer, it’s the world that we want our kids to grow up in. There’s no way that I’d ever ask you to stop nor would I accept you offering. I know you, Clint Francis Barton, you’d be bored within a week.”

“I don’t plan on being an Avenger for the rest of my life, you know,” he said.

“I know, I never expected otherwise,” she replied. “But until that time comes, perhaps a change of scenery wouldn’t be a bad thing? We’d still have the farm to come back to when we’re ready.”

Clint seemed to mull the idea over for a time.

“Having Cooper closer to Harry’s probably not a bad thing either,” he finally mused. “I noticed him summoning the cookie jar when he thought no one was watching this morning.”

“And you didn’t say anything?” Laura asked.

“I would have but he only took the one, instead of the handful that I probably would have done if I was his age,” Clint replied. “But maybe you’re right, maybe it would be for the best if we moved to the island. At least temporarily. Would you like me to talk to Harry?”

“Yes, I think so,” Laura replied before being interrupted by the sound of Nathaniel crying on the baby monitor. “Looks like someone woke up early. You can talk to Harry tomorrow. Right now, you can go fetch our son.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Clint said, pulling his arm from behind her and pushing himself from the lounge.

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Technically, the Lightning Bolt wasn’t built for two but that wasn’t something that Harry was going to complain about. In reality, what it meant was that, whenever he had Skye ride double with him, she had to sit extremely close to him. As she currently was. Her front was pressed up against his back, her arms wrapped tightly about him, her cheek pressed against his shoulder. If this wasn’t the best feeling ever, then he didn’t know what was.

Which made his plan all the more certain.

Together, they soared over the island, the treetops of the forest below not more than five feet from their toes. Banking slightly, Harry took them around a small hill before rising in the air. Off to their side flew the three Vipertooths, flying in tandem, but not close enough to scare Harry’s passenger. A hippogriff rose some metres away, its great golden eye watching them as they passed before sinking once more into the trees.

And then the view expanded, the forest giving way to the open expanse of the valley. Rolling fields of green, dotted with yellow, red and purple flowers and, in the very centre of it, a stream trying very hard to be a river.

Harry heard Skye gasp and he grinned.

He dipped the broom lower, low enough to have the grass below swish and sway at the breeze that they formed as they flew past. Finally, they reached their destination, a small knoll overlooking the river and he landed.

“This is beautiful, Harry,” Skye said as she hopped off. “When did you find this place?”
“A while back,” he shrugged. “But I wanted to share it with you before I showed anyone else.”

“You really know how to make a girl feel special, don’t you?”

“That’s the plan,” he grinned. “Interested in a picnic?”

He saw Skye eye him doubtfully. “Unless you’re going to conjure us some food, I don’t think we remembered to bring any.”

“Conjuration of food is one of those laws that cannot be broken, even by magic,” Harry told her. “That’s why I have house elves. Gangee?”

Instantly, a large red and white checked blanket appeared on the grass, a basket set in the middle of it along with a small bucket filled with ice and a bottle.

“You know, I think the real reason that there’s a Statute of Secrecy is so that you magic users don’t have to share house elves,” Skye said.

“Oh no, you’ve discovered our secret,” Harry said dramatically, flinging a hand dramatically over his brow. “Whatever will we do now?”

The two laughed at his antics before he held out his hand for hers and gently tugged her down onto the blanket.

“Now, let’s see what we’ve been packed.”

One by one, plates of food were pulled out. There were croissants with choices of fillings that could be added – ham, cheese or even spreads; small triangular-shaped sandwiches; vol e vents, piping hot as though they’d not long come out of the oven; and a selection of pastries. There were also plates, napkins and fluted glasses for the champagne. In all, much more than one would expect that the basket would hold.

Plates full with their choices, they sat back and ate, talking about everything and nothing, simply enjoying their time together.

Sometime later, after they’d eaten their fill and the food and plates had been magicked away with a swish of Harry’s hand, the two were lounging back a glass in their hands and Harry turned the conversation to his real purpose for bringing her here today.

“I’ve been thinking,” he began.

“Always a bad thing,” Skye quipped.

“Always a bad thing,” Skye quipped.

He smiled, tipped his glass and continued.

“Our lives aren’t exactly without danger, haven’t been for a while, what with the Avengers, you with S.H.I.E.L.D. and me with being, well, me. But Sokovia really brought it home. If Pietro hadn’t been there, if he hadn’t managed to get that car in place to shield you – not to mention Clint and that kid – there’s no way that you would have made it. That thought terrified me. You mean so much to me. I love you, Skye.”

“I love you, too,” she told him, reaching over and cupping his cheek as she said it, staring deeply into his eyes.

“I know. I actually think that we’ve got something pretty great going here and I like it. Actually, it’s
more than that. I *crave* it. It helps keep me going, makes me smile and I’m thinking that we can even build on it.”

“We can, can we?” Skye asked. “Whatcha got in mind, Magic Man?”

“I was thinking that we’ve both been searching for something our whole lives: a family. You’ve been trying to find your parents and, while I know you finally have some answers and have even met them, it’s not quite what you dreamed. Me, I’ve wanted the same thing. Way back in my first year at Hogwarts, I stumbled across a magic mirror that showed me my heart’s desire. I saw my family, the family that I never knew. In a lot of ways, I’m still that young kid, wanting his family. And you know what I’ve worked out?”

Skye’s eyes had grown as he talked and they never left his own.

“What?” she asked almost breathlessly.

“I think that I’ve finally found it. Or, at least, I think that I’ve found what I’d like it to look like. So, Skye, would you do me the honour of becoming my family? Would you marry me?”

For a fraction of an instant, she blinked at him. And then she pounced, landing on top of him, her arms going into his messy hair, his wrapping around her and they kissed. At first it was hard and urgent but within a few moments it had melted into something tender, loving and full of promise.

Finally, some indeterminate amount of time later, when both felt the need to breathe once again, she lifted her head and he could see her eyes shining down into his own.

“Um, not that I’m complaining, ’cause you can kiss me like that anytime you want, but I was kinda hoping that you might have an answer for me?” he said.

“What did you think me kissing you like that meant, you dolt?” she said.

“Well, I’d like to think it’s a ‘yes’, mind you, if it is a ‘no’, then I’ll happily take you rejecting me anytime you want,” he replied, the broad grin on his face belying his mock-confusion.

“Yes, it’s a ‘yes’, Magic Man, I’d love to marry you.”

“Brilliant,” Harry grinned and, just as had been arranged, he felt a small lump appear in his pocket. Carefully, he slid Skye off, sat up and reached into said pocket only to pull out a red velvet ring box. Opening it, he plucked out the ring, a mid-sized diamond flanked by a pair of smaller diamonds dominating the setting.

Seeing what he now held, Skye put a hand over her mouth – thankfully her right one, allowing Harry to hold her left and slide the ring onto the appropriate finger. He felt it warm slightly as it resized itself to fit her perfectly.

“It’s beautiful,” she gasped.

“I’m glad you like,” he said before the two wrapped themselves in one another again and fell back onto the blanket.

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Alarms going haywire in the middle of the afternoon had Tony scrambling to find out what they were for. His fingers hit his computer and three screens before him lit up. The fact that one of them
was attached to a television news channel only had him blinking for an instant.

“Friday, what’s going on? This isn’t our doing is it?” he asked.

“No, Boss,” his AI replied. “The Avengers satellite picked up unusual energy and gravimetric readings centred in Montana. I detected key words on the news and routed the channel to your screen; there is a ninety-four point seven percent chance that the two are related.”

“Only ninety-seven?” Tony asked.

“Point seven, yes, Sir,” Friday replied.

“Well, let’s see how accurate your predictive algorithm is, then.”

“This is Chad Ramsey for Channel Eight news,” a voice over said, the sounds of a helicopter in the background indicating that he was reporting from high in the sky. “I am currently sitting high over the site of a location in the north-west that is believed to be owned by the United States Army.

“While no official word has been given to us by the Army, it is believed that below us is a research facility where an experiment of some kind has gone drastically wrong. What you are seeing is some kind of strange ‘energy’ ball; that is the one way that I can describe it. And it appears to be growing! Already it’s the size of a two-story building.

“This ball looks like a roiling ball of blue wind, water and electricity all wrapped in one package. And everything that it touches is being sucked inside it. You can see that anything loose and not nailed down, including cars, trucks, even parts of buildings are being ripped off and eaten up!

“Even from all the way up here, we’re not safe. I can feel the helicopter lurching and it’s taking my pilot every bit of his piloting skills to keep us this close.”

After taking one long, hard look at the image, Tony ignored it, allowing the words to wash over him.

Yep, whatever this was, Friday had it right – the news report and the readings from the satellite definitely went together.

Tony poured over the data. Gravity waves unlike anything that he’d ever seen were being recorded and the way they were building, they’d soon be off the chart. The satellite was picking up a whole host of different ionising radiation centred on that ball of energy as well. There was everything in there – alpha particles, beta particles, gamma rays, x-rays, you name it.

Tony’s fingers almost began to blur as he tried to determine where it came from or what had caused it. A glance at the news report startled him. The ball had grown to the size of a mid-sized city block in barely a minute.

Ignoring trying to work out where it’d come from, Tony instead worked feverously at trying to determine a way to stop it or, at the very least, to slow it down. At the rate that it was growing – and barring any unforeseen circumstances – it was bound to start affecting the entire planet within half an hour. At the outside.

“It’s gone! It’s gone! But, oh my goodness, would you look at the crater that it’s left behind!”

And so, Tony did. There was a definite crater left behind, the type of crater that wouldn’t look out of place on the moon, if you didn’t count the brand-new waterfall that was on one side where a river used to be.
But the size of it – he was sure that a dozen city blocks could fit in the gap that it left in the land and Tony shivered. He’d been wrong, very wrong in his calculations. That thing, whatever it was, had been growing exponentially, not algorithmically as he’d first thought. If it hadn’t stopped when it did, then the planet would have been affected in under ten minutes; twenty for total global catastrophe.

Taking out his phone, Tony hit the ‘two’.

“Rhodes.”

“Hey, buddy, how good are your contacts with the Army?” Tony asked.

“Why?” Rhodey asked sounding suspicious.

“I want to take a trip to Montana and the Army’s got a base up there. Well, did have a base up there and I want to see it or at least, what’s left of it. Oh, and to find out why the planet’s still here and doing its thing,” Tony told him.

“What?!”
Xandar. A multicultural, multi-species planet of renown, but then, how could it not be, being the centre and capital of the Nova Empire. People from all over came here for trade and commerce, art, science and medical marvels. The only thing that really marred the planet were the rebuilding efforts that were still happening in the capital after the events of the year previous.

It was those events that had brought Thor here. Xandar had been ‘visited’ by Ronan the Accuser, a Kree fanatic, intent on destroying Xandar for the slights to his race over the decades. The fact that the Nova Empire and the Kree Empire had signed a peace treaty wasn’t even considered of importance in Ronan’s mind.

The fact that Ronan had in his possession one of the Six Infinity Stones, the Power Stone to be precise, was what made the encounter so desperate. Touching the Power Stone to the surface of any planet would render it barren, devoid of any and all organic life and it was this that Ronan was intent on doing to Xandar.

Not even the might of the elite Nova Corps was enough to stop Ronan. In fact, they’d had some assistance, first in the way of a warning of the imminent threat and then in actuality by a crew of Ravagers. Together, they’d saved the planet, in the process bringing down Ronan’s ship, the Dark Aster onto the capital city.

Unfortunately, that wasn’t enough to get the job done and a new group who called themselves the Guardians of the Galaxy, had needed to finish of Ronan. The stories that Thor had heard of the battle all finished in the same way – one of these Guardians was able to hold the Infinity Stone in his bare hand, a feat previously thought impossible.

Thus, Thor had spent the last handful of days waiting on Xandar, waiting for the Guardians to arrive so that he could speak to them, to find out what they knew about the Stones.

“Thor Odinson, your presence is requested at Nova Headquarters,” a purple-skinned Xandarian informed him over the comm system.

“My thanks, I will be there soon,” Thor replied.

Closing the connection, Thor strode from the room that he was staying in and out into the bright morning light of the twin suns.

He was met at the entrance of the Headquarters by one of the Nova guardsmen, a man who could pass as an Asgardian or even as one from Midgard.

“Mister Odinson? My name is Denarian Dey, I’ll be escorting you today,” the guardsman said.

“My thanks,” Thor replied, inclining his head.

“What do you know of the Guardians?” Dey asked as they walked.

“Very little beyond the stories,” Thor admitted.

“Then can I give you a piece of advice?” Day asked. At Thor’s nod, he continued. “These guys are a little … eccentric. Don’t take everything that they say at face value. Basically, they’re criminals – with their records expunged, mind you – but they’re good guys. In general. And, if it means anything, I think that they’ve been trying to make amends for their past deeds.”
“All any of us can do is our best with what we have going forward,” Thor replied. “I’m sure that there are things in all of our pasts that we are not proud of.”

Dey looked at him.

“That’s the thing. These guys may have turned over a new ‘leaf’, but I don’t actually think that they’re regretting much that got them where they are today,” he said.

Thor simply nodded. To be honest, he wasn’t interested in the past of the Guardians beyond what they could tell him of the Stones.

Dey stopped beside a door and opened it, gesturing Thor to enter first.

Inside, he found a group of five individuals, a number that he quickly adjusted to six when he saw the tiny Groot lying face down on the table, its tiny legs kicking, its hands supporting its head. Just like Xandar, these were a collection of individuals all hailing from different planets, as showcased by their varying skin-tones.

“Greetings, Guardians,” he said. “My name is Thor Odinson, Prince of Asgard.”

“I’ve heard of Asgard, never been, though,” a small, furry creature said. “Heard you consider yourselves pretty advanced but that your weapons really aren’t that much to brag about.”

“We can hold our own,” Thor stated indignantly, staring at the rabbit? Panda? Creature that definitely was not a squirrel.

“Don’t mind Rocket, he tends to speak without thinking,” a man in a long dark red leather trench coat said. “I’m Peter Quill, you may know me as Star Lord.”

“Quill, when are you gonna get it through that thick skull of yours that no one’s ever going to recognise that ridiculous name,” Rocket said.

Thor reached out and shook Quill’s hand before cocking his head at him. The earphones that he wore were familiar, as was the man’s speech patterns.

“You are from Midgard … Earth,” Thor said.

“I’m originally from Missouri,” Quill replied, his eyes narrowed. “Not that I’ve been there since I was like seven.”

“I have many friends on Earth,” Thor told him.

“Really? And what’s an Asgardian been doing on Earth?” Quill challenged.

“Midgard is a part of the Nine Realms that Asgard holds in her sway,” Thor replied. “But to answer your question, I am a member of the Avengers, a team of superheroes charged with guarding the planet.”

“Avengers? Never heard of them,” Quill dismissed.

“Perhaps these Avengers are like us, Peter, only on a smaller scale,” a green-skinned woman suggested, walking closer. “I’m Gamora. You’ve already met Peter and Rocket. Over there is Drax, Mantis and on the table is Groot.”

“I am Groot,” the small tree said.
“It’s nice to meet you, too,” Thor replied.

“Wait! You speak Groot?” Rocket asked, his head swivelling between the two.

“Of course,” Thor replied. “It was an elective on Asgard.”

“Why did you wish to see us?” Drax, a bare-chested man whose skin was grey but covered in red tattoos, asked.

“I understand that you have encountered the Power Stone, one of the Six Infinity Stones,” Thor said. Quill and Gamora shared a look.

“Yeah, what of it?” Quill asked.

“Three others of the Six have made their way to Midgard in recent years,” Thor replied and immediately, he had all of their attention. “It is my belief that there is someone manoeuvring events and people to suit their own ends, perhaps even with the goal of finding all Six Stones.”

“Thanos,” Gamora stated.

“These Stones, are they still on Earth?” Quill asked.

“One remains, the other two have been dispersed to safe locations,” Thor replied.

“How safe?” Rocket asked. “Only, in our experience, no where’s really safe, especially when it comes to these things.”

“As safe as they can be,” Thor repeated. “Who is Thanos?”

“The Mad Titan,” Gamora replied grimly. “He is obsessed with power and has a twisted sense of balance. He believes that the galaxy needs to be cleansed of half its population in order for there to be enough resources for the remaining half to live. He’s already done this on dozens of worlds, including my home planet – killed half of us, including my parents, and took me in the process.”

“We helped Gamora get free of Thanos,” Quill stated.

“I intend on killing Thanos,” Drax stated.

“Could this Thanos, this Mad Titan, be responsible for the events on Earth?” Thor asked.

Quill, Gamora and Rocket looked between each other before Gamora sighed.

“Probably more than likely,” she said.

“I have been told that you were able to hold one of the Stones?” Thor asked.

“Yeah. Something to do with my heritage,” Quill replied. “Apparently, I’m only half-Terran. The other half is … whatever Ego is. Was.”

“Are you saying that you have an ego?” Thor asked cautiously.

“Oh, buddy, you’ve got no idea,” Rocket replied.

“Not helping, Rocket,” Quill stated. “No, Ego was my father, a Celestial, for whatever that’s worth. That was the part of me that held the Stone, but we destroyed that ability when we killed him.”
“I am not sad that he is now dead,” the green skinned, antennae-d, Mantis said from where she sat.

“If this Thanos is searching out the Stones, do you have any knowledge of where they may be?” Thor asked.

“Apart from the one here on Xandar and you said one was on Earth, then no,” Quill said.

“I am Groot,” Groot said.

“If he’s asking, then I doubt it,” Rocket replied. “Besides, who’d be stupid enough to put more than one of those things on the same planet?”

“Tree is right, though,” Thor mused. “Three of the Six have made their way to Midgard, it is possible that the missing two will at some point as well.”

“I am Groot,” Groot said.

“What?” Quill asked seeing Rocket’s thoughtful expression directed at him.

“Groot wants to see the planet where you came from,” Rocket said.

“Oh no, no way, I ain’t going back there,” Quill backtracked.

“Peter, if this is about your mother’s death …” Gamora began.

“I would be honoured to help you grieve,” Mantis added.

“I don’t need help to grieve, thank you very much. My mother died over two decades ago, I think I’m over it by now,” Quill protested. “Look, we don’t know anything about the Stones. I’m sorry we can’t help.”

Rocket stepped forward and held out a small rectangular device.

“Here,” he said, handing it to Thor. “You need us, press that button; we’ll come.”

“Rocket,” Quill groaned.

“What? We’ve already saved the galaxy twice already; can you imagine what we can charge if we do it a third time?” he replied.

“My thanks, Guardians,” Thor said, tucking the device into his belt. “You have been more help than I think you realise.”

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“You’re sure that these are the coordinates?” Skye asked from the co-pilot’s seat of the quinjet.

She stared out the cockpit window, taking in the sight of snow-capped mountains stretching for as far as the eye could see in every direction. It certainly looked like the right general vicinity but up here in these mountains, an entire city could be hidden and no one would ever find it.

“This is the place,” Harry replied and she was pleased to see that he double-checked the GPS before replying.

Neither of them was a great pilot but both had had lessons in piloting a quinjet and, while they wouldn’t win any awards for fancy flying, taking off, flying on a pre-determined course and
(hopefully) landing, wasn’t beyond them.

“There!” Skye near-yelled suddenly, pointing down and just to the left of their heading.

A small village of a couple of dozen small buildings had just come into view as the clouds shifted.

“This is the place,” Skye confirmed.

“I’ll set us down to the east – there’s a good-sized plateau there,” Harry commented.

The landing was perhaps a little rough but both had had worse in the simulator. As soon as the engines had cycled down, they unstrapped and made their way towards the back of the quinjet. For an instant, Harry’s hands grasped his hood as though he was about to flick it up and over his head. In the end, though, he gave a slight shake of his head and instead removed the cloak altogether.

“Good call,” Skye said. “Probably not a good look to meet the in-laws all cloaked and pretending to be intimidating.”

“In-laws,” Harry groaned. “Exactly why’d I come again?”

“Because you love me and were the one that helped talk me into this,” Skye replied. “Besides, I’ve heard that it’s always best to have backup when going into a potentially hostile situation.”

“You class meeting your mother and seeing your father again as a ‘potentially hostile situation’?” Harry asked.

“Hey, she had me kidnapped not that long ago,” Skye replied, checking that he gauntlets were sitting properly.

The ramp lowered to find three men standing there, waiting for them.

“You’re a couple of day’s early,” the one in the middle stated with a frown. “Jiaying has agreed to meet with you anyway. Follow us.”

Harry and Skye shared raised eyebrows at each other, neither knowing what the man was talking about. Regardless, he was going to take them right where they intended on going anyway, so they simply shrugged and followed along.

It almost seemed as though the village was deserted as they walked through it; not one other person was seen, nor was a sound heard. Finally, they came to a building that was slightly larger and appeared more opulent than those around it. Two of the men stepped to the sides of the doors, while the third opened it and walked in before them.


“Thank you, Michael,” Jiaying replied before she focussed on the pair. “Daisy! I was unaware that you were representing S.H.I.E.L.D. in this meeting.”

“We’re not here with S.H.I.E.L.D.,” Skye replied, “and we don’t know what meeting you’re talking about.”

“But you did come on a quinjet?” she confirmed.

“We did. But if you’d looked on the side, you would have seen the Avengers’ logo instead of the S.H.I.E.L.D. eagle.”
“My apologies for the confusion. It’s very pleasing to see you again,” Jiaying said and for a moment, it looked as though she wanted to step forward and hug Skye. “After our last meeting, I wasn’t sure that I would ever see you again. Your father was most upset.”

“You’d had me kidnapped,” Skye stated sarcastically. “You didn’t really think that I’d be in a good mood, did you? I needed time to calm down. Harry here helped me see that I needed to come back.”

“Thank you for that, Harry, was it?” Jiaying smiled.

“Yes. Harry Potter. It’s nice to meet you,” he replied.

“I’m guessing that you’re not one of us,” Jiaying said.

“No, I’m not an Inhuman,” Harry replied. “But that doesn’t mean that I don’t have my own special … abilities.”

“Jiaying, Mum,” and it was clear that Skye was testing out the word. “Harry is my fiancé.”

Jiaying looked between the two before she did step forward and hugged Skye.

“I’m so happy for you,” she said. “Your father will want to be here to meet Harry.”

She looked past the two and they heard the door behind them open and close.

“I’m so happy that you decided to share this with me, with us,” Jiaying said. “I am assuming that it is a recent development?”

“Very,” Skye smiled.

“Please, sit, you must tell me all about yourself, Harry. And once your father gets here, Daisy, I’m sure that he, too, will want to hear how Harry proposed,” Jiaying said.

“Proposed? Did someone say proposed?” Cal said as he walked through the door, his eyes shifting between Skye and Harry before flicking to Jiaying. “You’re not telling me that my little girl is engaged, are you?”

“Apparently, it was only recent,” Jiaying said, indicating that Cal take a seat. “Come, Cal, Daisy wants to tell us how Harry proposed.”

“Alright, but I’m holding judgement. You’re only twenty-six, after all,” Cal said, sitting beside Jiaying.

Skye opened her mouth to begin the story but stopped when Cal’s words registered.

“Twenty-six? I’m twenty-six? I thought that I was only twenty-five?” she said in confusion.

“Nope, definitely twenty-six. I remember the night well …” Cal said.

“Cal, Daisy was going to tell us how Harry proposed,” Jiaying interrupted.


As Skye began telling the story, she marvelled at what was going on. When she’d first agreed to come here, indeed, even on the flight here, she had no idea what to expect. All she knew was that, regardless of the stories of her father, regardless of her mother having her kidnapped, she needed to give them another chance. A decade and a half of searching, of trying to find them ensured that they
deserved that chance.

Maybe, just maybe, she could finally have that family that she’d always wanted, not just with Harry but with some kind of relationship with her parents as well. After all, a girl could dream.

“Well, this is definitely the place,” Tony commented dryly.

“What gave it away?” Rhodey asked sarcastically.

A thought opened his Iron Man armour and Tony stepped out.

“Sentry mode,” he said, holding up one finger without even turning back. “And run a full spectrum analysis on the area.”

Cautiously, Tony stepped forward, right to the very edge of the crater and looked down. It was huge. It was also perfectly formed, exactly like a dome. The sides were smooth and even. There was no hint of a flat bottom down there, well, except for where the river had gathered after falling down the side and to the very bottom. Idly, Tony wondered how long it was going to take the crater to fill, a brand new lake in the middle of Montana.

“Well?” he questioned.

“Analysis is still being compiled,” Friday told him.

“Obviously. Give me the highlights,” Tony replied.

“There are currently no indications of any gravity fluctuations. The ionised particles in the atmosphere and ground are consistent with what was recorded from the Stark satellite, having had the intervening hours to begin to dissipate” Friday reported.

“So, nothing on what caused this?” Tony asked.

“I might have something,” Rhodey said, the visor to his War Machine armour flipping up.

“Shoot,” Tony said, standing and turning to face his best friend, after all, there wasn’t much else to see except a great, big hole in the ground.

“I’ve called in a few favours,” Rhodey began. “It wasn’t easy, this being the Army instead of the Air Force. The word is that this is an experiment gone wrong. Possible extra-dimensional. I’m also hearing about a team of four individuals with extraordinary powers that stopped whatever this was. The Army’s so thankful to them for them cleaning up their mess that they’ve agreed to a loose partnership with them – an on call, if needed, type of thing.”

“Extraordinary powers, huh?” Tony asked. “Sounds like people we might need to meet. Your contacts say where we could find them?”

“All I’ve got is a name: Central City,” Rhodey replied. “It’s an old Army base in California, one that they still own but haven’t used in close to a decade.”

“Then that sounds like our next stop,” Tony said, stepping back into his armour.

“Yeah. About that. I’m thinking that you’ve forgotten something,” Rhodey pointed out.

Tony glanced at his HUD where Friday had highlighted his appointment book.
“Right. Sparrowhawk’s party and big ‘announcement’, whatever that means. Looks like we’ll be California Dreaming tomorrow.”

ooooooo

Harry tapped each front window of the Den with his wand, ensuring that anyone who looked in from the street side would now only see an empty diner. The staff had been carefully picked, not that he really had a problem with any of them, but considering who was coming tonight, he felt it best to ensure that he had his best people on, people who wouldn’t bat an eye with whatever they saw. Not that they’d remember it afterwards anyway, not with the small memory modification charm that he planned on applying to each of them before they left for the night.

Most people, he knew, would be arriving via the front door. Some, though, would be coming straight from the island and for those, he’d fixed things so that they’d arrive in his apartment upstairs. Either way, only those that had been specifically invited would be able to enter the Den that night.

“Everything’s all set up, Boss,” Gwen said, coming out of the kitchen. “Well, all except that.”

She finished with pointing to the banner strung up on one wall, one very blank banner.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got it covered; magic,” he replied.

“Yeah, figured,” Gwen said, shaking her head.

The door opening and the bell jingling caught their attention and they both turned to find Peter, Matt, Jennifer and Doreen filing through the door.

“Hi, guys, glad you could make it,” Harry said.

“Hey, you said the magic word,” Peter replied, hurrying over to capture Gwen and to give her a kiss.

“Party,” Doreen explained.

“ – sure that I’m supposed to be here,” a voice said as the door leading to Harry’s apartment opened.

“You’re more than welcome here,” Skye was saying. “Stop worrying about how you look. Besides, Harry’s magicked things so that only he Avengers and our close friends will be here, no one else will see you.”

“Skye’s right,” Harry said, reaching her side and greeting her with a kiss, his fingers tangling with hers and feeling the ring that was currently invisible there. “I’ve even fixed the windows so that people can’t look in.”

“Hi, I’m guessing that you’re Melati,” Doreen said, joining the group. “Here, let’s both be comfortable in who we are tonight.”

With that, Doreen stuck her hands down the back of her pants and fished out her tail, giving it a long, slow brush through her fingers as she allowed it to fall behind her. Melati stared at her tail for a long time before tearing her eyes upwards.

“Now we both have tails here,” Doreen beamed. “Come on, let’s compare stories.”

Harry watched as the younger girl slipped hers through the older girl’s and dragged her across to a stool at the counter.

“This place is simply going to be packed to the rafters if everyone’s coming tonight,” Tony observed
as he strolled up, Pepper on his arm. “You should have used the Tower or even the Compound or the Island if you wanted to have a big shindig.”

“But this is more intimate,” Harry replied. “Besides, I couldn’t think of a better place to make the announcement.”

“Announcement?” Steve asked as he joined the group.

“Give me three minutes, I’ll have it out of him,” Nat stated.

“Or you could wait half an hour until everyone’s here and I’ll willingly tell you all without the need for torture,” Harry countered.

“Half an hour? We’ve got to wait that long? Why did we come so early?” Tony asked Pepper.

“Because we like spending time with our friends without it being in the middle of a battle or a life and death struggle,” Pepper reminded him.


Within the next half an hour, the Den slowly filled with people. Every single Avenger was there, as well as their friends. Bruce had even brought along a date. And then, just as Harry was beginning to look around for Skye, the door opened for the final time to admit the last five people.

“I’m glad you could make it, A.C.,” Skye said as Harry joined her.

“You’ve been gone for too long,” Coulson replied.

“You’ve no idea of what he’s been like. Fretting all over the place,” Jemma said before stepping forward to hug her. “I’m sorry for what I said, how we left things. I was scared and not thinking straight.”

“I’m guessing I’ve got Fitz to thank for getting you to see reason?” Skye smiled.

“There better be a damn good reason for me being here, Potter,” Fury stated. “I’m not too fond of crowds.”

“We were just about to make the announcement and really get this party started,” Harry replied. Then, taking Skye’s hand, he led her to one side and up onto a small platform that he’d had placed there earlier.

“If we could have everyone’s attention,” Harry called.

It only took a few moments before conversations died down and everyone’s faces turned towards the pair.

“I’d … we’d like to thank you all for coming tonight,” Harry began, “and especially on such short notice. Something truly brilliant happened a couple of days ago and we wanted to share it with all of you.”

“Well, get on with it then,” Tony said. “We’re trying to party here.”

Harry’s hand moved, his fingers twitching and Tony promptly yelped and began rubbing his arm.

“As I was saying,” he continued amongst the laughter. “Last Saturday, I asked Skye to marry me and
I was lucky enough for her to say ‘yes’.

This last part was almost drowned out by the squeals that came from not only Doreen and Darcy, but surprisingly also Jennifer, Jane and Jemma. A wave of his hand had the previously blank banner now shimmering with different coloured ink as it proclaimed, ‘Congratulations On Your Engagement, Harry and Skye’. Just before Skye was swamped by all the females in attendance, Harry managed to send a pulse of magic, dispelling the concealment charm around her ring.

“Congratulations, Harry!” Steve said, heartily shaking his hand.

“You’ve just made the best decision of your life,” Clint echoed, “that’s assuming that you can manage a marriage as great as mine and Laura’s, of course.”

Harry was sure that his hand had been shaken or his back had been slapped by all the men there when he found Tony standing in front of him, shaking his head and a disappointed look on his face.

“Tony?” Harry asked.

“Not cool, Gandalf,” Tony stated. “This is not something that you do, it violates every tenant of the Bro Code.”

Harry looked at Steve who also looked mystified.

“I think that I can translate,” Rhodey said, clear amusement on his face.

“Please,” Harry begged.

“You just got engaged to the lovely Skye after a relatively short dating period,” Rhodey said. “Tony here’s been ‘dating’ – and I do use that term extremely loosely – Pepper for years. Now that you’ve put a ring on Skye’s finger, Tony knows that he’s going to have to hurry up and put one on Pepper’s.”

Harry couldn’t help but laugh, especially when Pepper materialised, gave him a congratulatory kiss on the cheek and grabbed Tony’s arm, looking at him expectantly.

“I’d say that Harry and Skye’s relationship is at least eleven percent better than ours right about now, wouldn’t you agree, dear?” Pepper stated and, seeing Tony flinch, Harry knew that he’d just missed some in-joke. “When are you going to match it?”

“See!” Tony said. “See what you did! Just wait, Merlin, I’ll get you for this.”

Harry burst out laughing, along with everyone else in the immediate area before being interrupted by a voice directly behind him.

“Hello, Harry Potter.”

Harry stiffened slightly at the completely unexpected voice. The question of how she’d gotten in was instantly dismissed, her ways weren’t exactly like anyone else he’d ever encountered. Instead he simply allowed his grin to grow even larger before turning around to find a pair of large, silver eyes staring merrily at him.

“Hello, Luna Lovegood,” he replied.
“Hello, Luna Lovegood,” Harry smiled.

“Apparently, congratulations are in order, Harry?” Luna remarked, gesturing at the banner.

“Yeah, only happened Saturday,” Harry admitted.

“I’m happy for you,” Luna beamed and leapt forward to hug him.

Harry couldn’t help but laugh as he hugged one of his oldest friends back.

“Harry?” Skye asked, materialising beside him, a raised eyebrow and a small smile on her face.

“Skye. I’d like you to meet Luna Lovegood,” Harry said, breaking off the hug. “Luna, this is Skye, my fiancé.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you …” Luna began before trailing off, her head cocking to the side. “You picked a nice name for yourself but your true name is also quite nice. You might consider using it more.”

Skye’s eyes widened and her startled expression met Harry’s own amused one.

“Luna’s magical, like me,” Harry explained. “and has a … unique way of seeing the world. We actually went to school together.”

“You did?” Skye asked, latching her arm through Luna’s. “That’d mean that you know all the juicy goss of young Harry. Tell. Me. Everything.”

This time, it was Harry’s turn to don the startled expression.

“Before you get into that, how about you tell me what brought you here, Luna,” Harry suggested.

“Oh, that’s easy. I need your help to find a brand new creature,” Luna beamed. “I don’t know what it’s called just yet, but it can be found in San Francisco and looks like this.”

Here, Luna pulled out a picture from her purse and handed it to Harry. He took one look at it and cocked his head.

“Um, Luna, that’s an ant,” he stated.

“That’s just what it wants you to think,” Luna said, leaning forward to whisper conspiracally.

“It does look rather large for an ant,” Skye remarked, peering over Harry’s shoulder.

“Did someone say something about ants?” Sam asked, stepping into the conversation.

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“Well, I suppose if mountain views are your thing, this’d be considered acceptable,” Tony remarked as he and Rhodey approached ‘Central City’, the old Army base that had apparently been given to the team responsible for preventing the global catastrophe in Montana.

The two cut their repulsors so that they were hovering over the area and took it all in.
Central City was primarily a mountain. The face of it, though, proved that it was no ordinary mountain. There was a large concrete structure built into the base of it, much like a great doorway. And while much of the mountain retained its natural shape, this side of it had been hewn so that it appeared almost sheer. In three places, there were ‘balconies’ cut into the rock, enhanced by concrete and glass.

An infrared scan of the mountain was inconclusive, as Tony expected, and the plans for the place had been purged from any computer system that he could hack into. That saying, if he’d been the one to design the place, he would have built a lot more levels than one would expect.

“I’m still not sure that simply turning up like this unannounced and without an appointment is a good idea,” Rhodey said.

“Nonsense,” Tony countered. “Who doesn’t like getting a visit from me. Besides, we’re Avengers, every door should open at our approach.”

“Better not let Cap hear you say that,” Rhodey retorted. “I remember him saying something about ‘manners’ a number of times.”

“Did he? I mustn’t have been listening,” Tony replied and dropped away, his repulsors firing as he swooped in towards the ‘door’.

Rhodey cursed and followed, landing a fraction of a second behind him.

“This is a restricted military complex,” a voice blared at them from unseen speakers. “Leave immediately or you will be fired upon.”

Tony’s arms immediately came up, his repulsors glowing and ready as every panel on his armour – shoulders, gauntlets, arm guards and thigh – opened to reveal his own ordinance. Beside him, he heard Rhodey curse again and bring his own weapons systems to bare.

“I’ll see your threat and call,” Tony replied. “We’re just here to visit, wanted to meet the new players in town, see if they’re any good.”

The great doors opened and Tony sheathed his weapons and opened his face mask. And immediately snapped his hands straight back up again.

“Okay, what?” he asked in shock.

A great big pile of rocks, easily seven feet tall, strode out of the door towards them. It was humanoid – two arms, two legs, torso, head – made even more prominent by the clenched fists and the scowl on its face.

“Anyone order some landfill?” Tony asked.

“You were asked to leave,” the walking pile of rocks stated, his voice akin to two rocks grinding together. “Don’t make me ask twice.”

“Firstly, did you forget to moisturise? Because your skin is looking decidedly dry. Secondly, and I’ve always wanted to say this, we come in peace, take us to your leader,” Tony said.

“Hardy har har,” the rock-Thing grumbled. “You’ve had your joke, now vamoose.”

“Do you know who we are?” Tony asked.

“Good. Then you know that we’re in the world-saving business,” Tony said. “We’re only here to meet the new kids on the block, the ones we have to thank for Montana.”

Tony couldn’t help but shudder as the rock-Thing slowly twisted its rocky head, taking the two of them in – the sound it made was akin to fingernails down a chalkboard.

“Alright, I’ll take you to Reed, but if he says you’re out, then you’re out. The easy way or the fun way,”

“Thanks,” Rhodey cut in before Tony could respond and opening up his face mask. “What should we call you?”

“My name’s Ben Grimm,” he said as he trundled around and strode back towards the door of Central City.

‘Ben Grimm’? Tony wondered as he and Rhodey followed. Was that rock-Thing … human? Or might it have been human, once? The questions swirled in his head and he found himself itching to ask a thousand more and to get his tools into the rock-Thing.

They were led inside a massive complex and, while it was definitely military – all crisp lines and drab, grey paint – it wasn’t hard to guess that it was more designed for research than for training and missions.

A heavy-duty cargo elevator took the three from the ground floor up two levels before they were led out and into a large lab filled with dozens of computers and pieces of scientific equipment that almost had Tony drooling.

“Reed. Visitors,” Grimm’s deep bass rumbled.

A young man looked up from where he was bent towards a young woman, their focus on a large computer screen. He seemed to start when he saw them before hopping up and dashing across the room.

“Reed Richards,” he said, his hand held out in front of him. “It’s an honour to meet you.”

“Reed Richards,” Tony replied. “I’ve heard of you. One of the top IQ’s on the planet, brilliant scientist. You dropped off the grid about a year or so ago, if I’m remembering rightly.”

“I did,” Richards stated, tugging on his ear, looking a little sheepish. “I needed time to figure some things out. And back then, the military wasn’t being very supportive.”

“Things seem to have turned around,” Tony stated pointedly, looking around the facility again.

“They’re here because of Montana,” Grimm stated., his arms now folded against his chest.

“A combination of errors and bad judgement on the parts of a lot of people, myself included,” Richards said. “Thankfully, we managed to clean up after ourselves.”

“You left a great big hole where an Army base used to be,” Rhodey stated flatly.

“Better the base than the entire state or the planet,” the young woman said, joining them. “Sue Storm.”
Just then, a great whooshing noise shot towards them and Tony spun, his hands up, ready. And promptly, blinked. A man on fire was flying towards them. The second he landed, Tony’s fire suppressant systems fired, completely covering the man in half a second.

“Oi! Cut it out!” the man yelled, waving his hands about and coughing and spluttering.

“It’s okay, Stark, Johnny’s not on fire,” Richards said urgently. “Well, he is on fire but it’s nothing to worry about. It’s … it’s part of him now, what he can do.”

“What?” Rhodey asked. “You’re going to have to explain that one again.”

Tony leant closer to the man, his eyes narrowed as the guy wiped his face clean of the foam. He didn’t look to have third degree burns, which is what he surely should have had considering the heat that was radiating off of him a few seconds ago.

“Right. You can catch on fire and you’re a walking, talking pile of rocks,” Tony said, pointing at each ‘man’. “Start talking.”

“It happened a year ago, although really the story began more than half my life ago,” Richards began.

“Just the highlights,” Tony cut in.

“We found a way to transport from Earth to a different dimension,” Richards shrugged. “There was an accident and five of us were changed in a physiological way.”

Tony looked at the girl, Storm, silently telling her to give a better explanation.

“We created a capsule that could carry people backwards and forwards,” she said. “The hope was that we’d find a place where we could get more resources for the planet, find a place where we could grow crops.”

“Sounds like a noble goal. Richards mentioned an accident?” Tony said.

“Four of them went across,” she continued. “Reed, Johnny, Benn and Victor von Doom.”

“Victor von Doom?” Tony questioned, shaking his head. “You had a guy named von Doom on the team and you didn’t expect something to go wrong?”

“The place we ended up wasn’t inhabitable,” Richards continued, obviously ignoring him. “We tried to get back straight away. Victor was left behind, we thought that he’d been killed. There were problems coming back due to the nature of the energy emanating from that dimension. Ben, Johnny and I were all changed in the trip and enough of the energy came back with us to hit Sue and change her as well.”

“Change, how?” Rhodey asked.

“You’ve seen what Ben and Johnny can do. Me? I can stretch,” Richards smiled and demonstrated by stretching his arm five metres to pick up a pencil and to bring it back, all without moving his feet. “Sue can become invisible and create shields.”

“That’s crazy,” Rhodey said and Tony had to agree.

“I’m guessing this von Doom guy didn’t die, though, did he?” Tony guessed.

“No, he didn’t,” Johnny stated grimly. “When the army finally replicated what Sue and the nerd here
did, they went across, found Vic alive and brought him back.”

“Unfortunately, he’d become obsessed with destroying the world, the ones that had changed him. Revenge for what had happened to him, how he’d been ‘abandoned’, ” Sue continued. “We had to stop him.”

“Where is he now?” Rhodey asked.

“He was killed when we destroyed his portal between the dimensions,” Richards replied.

“I’m hoping that you deep sixed all the data on that experiment, we don’t want a repeat,” Tony said, staring intensely at Richards.

“That’s what Sue and I were in the middle of when you arrived,” Richards admitted.

“Good thing I arrived then, I’m a bit of a whiz at computers,” Tony smiled.

“No need. The program that I developed will search out and destroy every mention of the project on every server, in the world,” Sue replied.

“I guess that I’ll just have to trust you on that,” Tony said while making a mental note to do some hacking once he got home and double check for himself. “So, what do you call yourselves?”

“What do ya mean?” Grimm grumbled.

“Well, we’re the Avengers, Earth’s Mightiest Heroes, you know? If you’re in the world-saving business, I’m guessing that you’ve come up with a brand name. If not, I’d be happy to help.”

“Please have something of your own already,” Rhodey said and Tony pouted at him.

“Actually, we do have something in mind. Ben kinda suggested it,” Richards smiled. “We call ourselves the Fantastic Four.”

“Lame,” Tony instantly replied before quickly backpedalling when the massive rock-Thing-Grimm took a menacing step towards him, one fist mashing against the palm of his other hand. “But if you’re happy with it, that’s all that counts.”

Foggy Nelson of Nelson and Murdock, Attorneys at Law, made sure to nod in all the right places and to make all the right sounds. After all, the old man seated before him may not exactly be a client, but he was deserving of respect. Really, anyone who was ninety-five, could still walk on their own, still had all their faculties and could argue the way this man could, deserved respect.

Foggy found himself fascinated by Stanley’s moustache as it bobbed up and down as he talked, his large glasses enhancing his somewhat squinty eyes.

“I’ve tried them three times already,” Stanley was saying. “Three! I’ve written a letter, I’ve tried telephoning them, I even managed to talk to Iron Man himself but still they won’t allow me to join. You’ve seen my costume! It looks perfect, am I right? Just like a superhero.”

“It looks wonderful Mister Le Man,” Foggy replied. “Perhaps they’re just worried about how a man of your advanced years would go fighting today’s criminals.”

“They’d be lucky to have me,” Stanley Le Man stated indignantly.
“Well, I’ll see what I can do,” Foggy assured him, “but I can’t make any promises.”

“Just make sure that you do,” Stanley said as Foggy ushered him out of the office.

Foggy waved politely as the old man reached the door, turned and beamed him the biggest smile.

“Excelsior!” he said, before disappearing.

“Who was that?” Karen asked.

“Stanley Le Man,” Foggy replied. “Apparently, he wants to be an Avenger but they,” and here Foggy raised his voice to ensure that Matt and Jennifer heard him, “don’t have the decency to even give him an ‘interview’.”

“Now, Foggy,” Matt said, appearing in the doorway of his own office. “You do understand how awkward it’d be to have to sue myself, don’t you, if something happened to him?”

Foggy’s retort was interrupted by the main office door opening. The three turned to the newcomer who stepped hesitantly inside. He was early thirties at a guess, with unruly dirty-blond curly hair. Foggy blinked at the fact that the guy was barefoot and looked like a common homeless man.

“Hi, your sign on the door said that you’re lawyers?” he said.

“If you’re in need of a lawyer, you’ve come to the right place,” Matt said. “What can we help you with?”

“It’s a bit delicate,” the man said.

“Come on in to my office,” Matt offered, stepping to one side, dropping into his ‘blind’ routine.

Once the two were seated, Matt began.

“What can we do for you, Mister …?”

“Oh, Rand. I’m Danny Rand,” he said, half-standing again to offer his hand across the table.

When Matt didn’t move, Danny seemed to finally realise why Matt wore the distinctive red glasses.

“Rand?” Matt said, cocking his head. “As in, Rand Enterprises?”

“Exactly!” Danny replied. “My dad’s company.”

“Your father?” Matt repeated. “My understanding is that Wendell Rand died in a plane crash a long time ago. In fact, the entire family died in that plane crash.”


Matt focussed on his hearing for a moment, just to be certain. Yes, heartbeat, lungs working properly. This man was definitely alive.

“Legally speaking,” Matt clarified.

“Yes! Exactly. So, can you help me?” he asked.

“Assuming that you can prove that you are who you claim to be, then yes. But that proof will be
paramount in your case,” Matt said. “Without it, any judge will be forced to rule against you, on the assumption that you’re an imposter.”

“Proof. Yes, of course,” Danny replied slowly. “I can get proof.”

Matt nodded. “If you don’t mind me asking, where have you been since the plane crash?”


“K’un-Lun?” Matt repeated, testing the unfamiliar name. His best guess was that it was most likely Asian. And, according to his heartbeat, this ‘Danny Rand’ had been entirely truthful about everything that he’d said since he’d entered the office. “Where’s that, exactly?”

“It’s a hidden monastery of warrior monks. They found me, raised me, taught me to be one of them. You can only find it once every fifteen years, give or take, depending on the celestial tilt,” Danny replied.

*Magic, by the sound of it, Matt thought. Harry’s department. I’ll ask him later.*

“I’ll take your word for it,” he said. “Now, what proof can you offer that you are who you say you are?”

Harry kept shooting side-along glances at Sam even as he followed Luna out of the portkey terminus underneath the San Francisco bridge. Ever since Sam had caught wind that they were chasing a mysterious creature that looked surprisingly like a giant ant, he’d been insistent that he come along and Harry simply couldn’t work out why.

Not even when he’d covertly pulled Sam aside and explained that Luna had a habit of looking for creatures that were considered mythological at best to *magicals* and that they would be on a wide goose hunt the whole time had Sam strayed from his determination to tag along.

“Where are we going?” Skye asked.

“My contact said that his contact had managed to take that picture in the Forest Hill area, so we go south,” Luna replied, pointing the direction that they had to go with said picture. “I just wish that it’d been a magical picture instead of a muggle one.”

“How are we going to get there?” Sam asked. “I’m assuming neither of you two have been there before so your ‘special’ way of travelling is out.”

“Right,” Harry nodded.

“Only one thing for it then,” Skye declared. “We take a cab.”

“Ooh, a muggle Knight Bus, sounds like fun,” Luna exclaimed.

“Not quite,” Harry countered. “It’s a car for a start not a bus and there won’t be any beds or hot chocolate.”

Sam and Skye stared at the two in identical horror and confusion.

“Oh, pooh,” Luna pouted. “Still, it’s a new experience and I’m always up for those.”

“I would have thought that Rolf would have introduced you to muggle means of transport by now,
he’s a zoologist as well as a magizoologist, isn’t he?” Harry asked.

“Well, yes, but one can always hope when visiting a new city.”

“Rolf?” Skye asked.

“My husband,” Luna replied absently.

“What! When did you get married?” Harry exclaimed, stopping dead and grabbing Luna to spin her around.

“March twenty-one,” Luna replied. “Hadn’t I mentioned it yet? I know that I meant to. If it’s any consolation, it was a quick, spur of the moment decision. You see, we’d found ourselves at a sacred site for the spring equinox and there was this druid priestess there and, since I’d just fallen pregnant …”

“You’re pregnant!” Harry exclaimed, his eyes shifting to stare at her stomach.

“Oh, yes,” she beamed. “Nine weeks tomorrow, in fact. Twins actually; boys. We’re still deciding names. What do you think of Lorcan?”

Harry gaped as he tried to take in the continuous stream of new information that Luna was throwing at him.


“Now how in the world do you know that?” Sam asked.

Skye shrugged. “Let’s just say that when I found out that my real name wasn’t Mary Sue Poots, I spent a long time reading baby name books.”

“Luna, you and I need to have a long sit down so that you can tell me everything that’s been going on in your life,” Harry said. “I’m feeling like I’ve missed out on a lot.”

“I’d like that, Harry, just as long as you’re willing to share as well,” Luna smiled.

“Cab’s here,” Sam interrupted.

Soon enough, the four had piled into the vehicle (Sam claimed the front seat) and were on their way to the address that Luna had been given.

They arrived in what looked to be a normal neighbourhood. Two-story houses lined both sides of the street. There were cars either on the road or in driveways. Kids were playing basketball, shooting at a hoop above a garage. Toys, balls, scooters and bikes were laying on lawns. It was everything that Privet Drive wasn’t as far as Harry could see; it just looked so normal.

“Luna? Are you sure this is the place?” he asked doubtfully after they’d piled out of the cab to stand on the sidewalk.

“Magical creatures can live wherever they want, you know that Harry,” Luna replied. “Perhaps this is simply the normal habitat for this strange, new creature.”

“Or an ant,” Sam stated flatly.

Noting that Sam appeared to be staring at a house two down from them, his jaw dropped open, Harry turned to look as well.
There, on the lawn, was an ant. But not just an ant, a giant ant. An ant that was easily the size of a Labrador. What made the scene even more bizarre was the young girl that was chasing said ant across the lawn and giggling madly about it.

Suddenly, the ant stopped, dropped its head and picked up a ball before scuttling about to face the girl.

“Good boy,” the girl could be heard saying as she took the ball from the ant.

“I’ve seen some crazy things since I hooked up with the Avengers,” Sam stated, “but this is some whole new level of weird.”

“That really is a giant ant,” Skye added, shaking her head. “What made it like that? Magic?”

“You’ve got me,” Harry replied, “but unlikely.”

Luna, though, seemed to be the only one not enthralled by the sight. Crossing her arms, she began to pout.

“It’s just an ant,” she complained. “Not a new magical creature at all.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Harry replied. “I know that I’ve never heard of an ant being that size before.”

Suddenly, Sam took a step forward.

“Scott!” he hissed.

Harry blinked and found what had caught his friend’s attention. A man had come out of the front door to lean on the railing of the small porch, smiling down at the girl and ant. Sam only seemed to have eyes for the guy as he unexpectedly started sprinting towards him.

As Sam rounded the flower bed, the guy seemed to notice him; at least, his eyes widened and it appeared that he swore.

“Cassie, time to come inside,” he called to the girl before Sam leapt up the stairs and tackled the guy straight through the door.

Harry, Skye and Luna weren’t the only ones racing towards the two men now rolling around the entryway of the house, the girl, Cassie, was also there, and loudly encouraging her pet ant to attack the ‘bad man’. For an instant, Harry considered using magic, whether to stun the two brawling men or to shrink the ant, he hadn’t quite decided. But this was a non-magical area, so in the end, he simply resorted to doing things the ‘normal’ way, wading in, grabbing Sam and yanking him up and away.

“What was that for?” the guy on the ground asked, holding his chin.

“You know what it’s for!” Sam retorted, struggling to get loose.

“Hey! I told you we’d bring it back and I meant it,” the guy replied, now sitting up, a wide-eyed, fearful girl in his arms. “Only things happened, you know what it’s like. It accidentally got blown up.”

“When you were saving the world, no doubt,” Sam mocked.

“Well, yeah, actually.”
“Sam, who is this guy?” Harry asked.

“His name’s Scott Lang. Calls himself the ‘Ant-Man’,” Sam replied and three sets of eyes switched between ‘Scott’ and the giant ant. “He infiltrated the Compound last month and stole a piece of tech.”

“This guy?” Skye asked, clearly unconvinced.

“He’s got some kind of shrinking tech of his own,” Sam defended himself. “Can change his size real easy like. Even managed to get inside my pack if you can believe it and made a complete mess of the circuits.”

“That sounds like a wonderful story,” Luna exclaimed, clapping her hands. “Do we get to hear all of it now?”

“And why you’ve got a giant ant running around?” Harry asked.

“You’re all Avengers, right?” Scott asked, climbing to his feet, his daughter cradled in his arms.

“Three of us, yes,” Harry replied.

“Well, I guess if anyone’s going to appreciate how I saved the day, then I guess it’d be you guys. And I have been dying to tell some people. I guess, if you promise to behave yourselves and not scare Cassie or attack me – unprovoked, I might add – you can come on in.”

“Does your ant have a name?” Luna asked the now-named Cassie as they followed Scott into the house.

The lock clicked, the door opened and an extremely tired Hermione all but stumbled into her apartment. A careless wave of her wand over her shoulder closed the door behind her and sealed it shut. The small pile of letters just inside her door were noticed and duly stepped over.

Reaching her lounge, she dropped her bags and fell backwards, a sigh of contentment escaping her lips. The old adage ‘there’s no place like home’ whispered through her mind as her head tilted back. Really, this felt like the first time that she’d been able to sit and relax for what felt like months but was, in fact only a week – a week where she’d been out of the country, in France, to be precise. If it’d been a holiday, that’d be one thing; even if there’d been a mixture of business and pleasure. But no, the entire seven day trip had been strictly business.

It wasn’t as though she could even blame the working trip on anyone else but herself. Indeed, she’d had to beg Kingsley to let her go. But in the end, he’d caved to her wishes. A week-long symposium on the different laws surrounding non-human magicals. After all of the work that she’d been putting in, after the way that she’d finally managed to get the Wizengamot over to her way of thinking, there was no way that she was going to miss it. Not when there was a chance to show off how Britain was changing. And to learn a few things from some of the other, more progressive governments in Europe at the same time.

But as much as she’d love to simply sit there or better yet, to run a nice, deep bath, the sight of those letters on her mat kept cropping up in her mind. A lazy flick summoned them to her. And, while she was at it, she also summoned the pile that sat in the basket by the window, specially designed to accept owl post.
As they flew towards her, Hermione captured them and automatically sorted them, bills off to the side, the personal mail on top and the *Daily Prophets* on the bottom. It was as she was moving one of the latter ones that the headline caught her attention: *Harry Potter Engaged.*

She gasped, staring, her mouth moving up and down as she tried to take in the impossible. Just as she was about to dismiss it, the by-line caught her attention: Lavender Brown.

Lavender. She was *in* New York with Harry. And if anyone would know, it’d be her. But still, there was no way that her best friend wouldn’t have told her first before announcing it to the world.

Hermione’s eyes darted to her phone, lying innocently on the sideboard where she’d left it for her trip, after all, there was no use taking a mobile into such a magic rich and muggle-phobic environment.

Her tiredness evaporated, she shot across the room, picked up her phone and turned it on. She jigged slightly as she waited and then it began *dinging,* twenty-nine times. Twenty-nine messages. Checking the log, she saw that each and every one of them was from Harry.

Hermione’s eyes shot back to the paper in her hand. It was true? Faster than she’d ever read before, she raced through the article, taking note of the important facts. Skye, a former S.H.I.E.L.D. agent with special abilities, now an Avenger.

Skye … that name rang a bell and Hermione thought back to the last time that Harry was in England. She remembered a woman by that name, a woman that Harry had become fascinated with when his spells didn’t seem to work right around her. But she had no idea that they’d become so close.

Checking her watch, Hermione all-but swore. Too late to FLOO Kingsley and to put in for some leave. But was it too late to ring Harry? A shake of her head decided her. Quickly, she dialled his number.

“Hello?” a voice answered after the third ring.

“Doreen?” Hermione asked, recognising the voice. “It’s Hermione.”

“Hermione! It’s great to hear your voice. How are you? Did you know Harry’s been trying to ring you for *days*?” she asked.

Hermione grimaced. “I’ve been out of town. Is he there?”

“Nah,” Doreen replied. “He and Luna Lovegood went off to San Francisco chasing some kind of animal. Something like that anyway, I couldn’t really understand.”

*Luna?* Hermione wondered.

“Any idea when he’ll be back?” she asked.

“He thought that he’d only be a couple of days,” Doreen replied. “So, Gwen’s staying over and we’ve got the place to ourselves! We’re having so much fun. Um, have you tried Harry’s mobile?”

“Thanks, but I think that I’ve got a better idea,” Hermione said, her eyes coming to rest on her still packed bags.
The Path You Choose

Tony walked around the Mark LI armour, examining it once again. Its specs had come up beautifully; it was ready, not that Tony had any idea when he was likely to use it. Space Armour, able to protect him if he ever needed to take a trip into orbit again. The modifications that he’d made even made re-entry possible if it was necessary.

“What do you think of the colour?” he asked Friday.

“I do not believe that the colour of the Mark LI will be of any consequence in space,” Friday replied.

“Well, you’re no help,” Tony groused.

In the end, he decided to keep the matte black with red and gold piping down the legs and arms and on the belt.

“Right, send it below into the Hall of Armours,” he instructed.

Immediately, the Mark LI fired its repulsors and drifted across to the far side of the room to where a hidden door had just appeared, sliding out from the wall and across to the side out of the way. As soon as it was inside, the door sealed itself flush back into the wall. The armour, Tony knew, would quickly descent into the deep sub-basement of the Tower where it would join its brothers.

Soon, the vault would be completely repopulated by the rebuilt armours that he’d had blown up after the Roxxon event. Now that Tony knew that someone out there was playing games, he wanted to be as prepared as possible in case Earth caught their attention again. Thus, every one of his designs was in the process of being pulled out of mothballs and being rebuilt by Friday. Of course, he was the only one who knew that.

Returning to his primary console, Tony tapped the next file in line waiting for his attention. This one was an extremely early prototype armour that he was having designed. The big difference was, this one wasn’t for him. Utilising the data that Peter’s new suit was sending back, including his favoured ways of operating it and the parts that he simply didn’t seem interested in was a huge help in designing this new suit.

Swivelling the model about, Tony tapped four panels in the very centre of the back, two on either side of the spine.

“Here. I need a pocket of space behind these panels for some added tech. It’ll be collapsible, maybe even nano-tech if I can get it working properly, so that should help,” Tony stated. “And the area around them needs to be reinforced.”

He noted that Friday accepted his commands and had begun working on the requested modifications, so he swiped the design across to a different screen and brought up the next one.

“Oh, yes. I’ve been neglecting you, haven’t I?” Tony said, not so much to the schematics, but more to the image of the quinjet in the corner of the screen.

Every test that he’d run after that little jaunt into space after Brazil had come back with flying colours. In fact, so pleased was he with the results, that there’d been very little for him to tinker with.

“I want four more of these put into production,” Tony stated. “Even with how much the team seems
to have grown of late, that should be enough to handle any eventuality.”

“Where would you like them housed?” Friday asked.

“The Compound,” Tony replied automatically. “There should be more than enough room in the main Avengers’ hanger for them, even with the extra base models that I’ve planned for. And prepare the quinjet for another jaunt into space.

“When would you like to depart?” Friday asked.

Tony glanced at the clock, thinking about his plans before replying.

“Better make it in two weeks,” he replied. “Pepper deserves my full attention after today for at least that long.”

“Very good, Sir.”

The next item was actually a set of eight photographs laid out on the screen two across, four down. Each one of them showed a picture of a piece of land. Across the top of the screen was the name of the project: Calrissian.

“Hmm,” Tony mused as his eyes wandered across the different photos. “No. No. No.”

As he rejected each one, he swiped them straight off the screen where they zipped along the holographic display and into the holographic trash can. The next two were tapped for deeper analysis before also being rejected.

“That’s got potential,” Tony stated, tapping deeper and deeper into the file, seeing pictures, statistics, even a map.

A series of quick taps brought the main image back into focus. Tony captured it and dragged it out into his holographic ‘playroom’ and began walking around it.

It was a caldera, a great bowl surrounded by a mountain rim, obvious by the fact that the spectral analysis showed that the lave tubes back to the surface had all been filled in by the collapsing volcanic material. There was, however, a large empty chamber under there that would be perfect for his needs. The land inside the bowl was lush and green and even had a small river and lake to one side of it. The land outside the rim of the bowl was lightly forested, not that it’d likely survive what he had in mind.

Leaving the hologram where it was, Tony checked the remaining two potential sites, for thoroughness’ sake. Both were quickly dismissed.

“Where is this?” Tony asked, moving back to the holographic map.

“It is part of a small, currently un-named and uninhabited island in the Pacific Ocean between French Polynesia and the Pitcairn Islands,” Friday informed him.

“Who owns it?”

“French Polynesia has laid claim to it but due to the fact that it lies on the very edge of its border, has not seen fit to do anything with it.”

“Buy it from them,” Tony instructed. “Offer them trade in the form of clean, advanced energy tech and water reclaimers as well as cash. I want this to be a generous deal, give them nothing to
complain about later.”

“I shall contact Mister Nelson with your instructions,” Friday replied. “Sir, your timetable is approaching.”

“Pepper?” Tony asked, glancing at the clock.

“Her flight is on schedule and she is expected to arrive at the Tower at the predicted time.”

“Excellent,” Tony replied and suddenly, completely unexpectedly, he felt nervous. Shaking it off, he gave the order. “Send the call.”

Harry watched as Scott in his black and red suit held up his hand and tapped his thumb onto a button built into his glove.

Instantly, the man, the Ant-Man, shrunk to the size of well, an ant. Carefully, Harry knelt down to get a better look at the now-tiny man.

“Crazy, right,” Sam commented. “And you know what’s even crazier? He’s probably even stronger that size than he is in his normal size.”

“He’s like a tiny doll,” Luna said.

“Yes!” Cassie squealed. “Daddy, come play in my doll house with me.”

A second later, Scott was full size again, startling Harry backwards to land on his backside.

“Not now, Peanut, Daddy’s talking to the nice Avengers,” Scott said. “But later on, we can do that.”

“Cooool!” Cassie said, drawing out the word, a massive smile on her face.

“So, ‘Ant-Man’ relates to the size that you can shrink to,” Skye half-asked, half-commented.

“That’s part of it, sure,” Scott said.

Unexpectedly, ants began crawling onto the table, coming out of hiding from wherever they usually were. As the visitors stared, the ants began circling, a few breaking off to sit in two dots and a long, curvy line inside the circle.

“You made them make a smiley face,” Luna clapped. “What else can you make them do?”

“Pretty much anything,” Scott replied.

Suddenly, Harry, Sam and Skye all grabbed at their wrists and pulled up their sleeves.

“An all Avengers recall, priority Red?” Sam stared.

“Nice to meet you Sam, Cassie,” Harry said quickly. “Unfortunately, we have to go. Actually, on second thought. A Code Red, that means imminent danger, on a global scale. You wouldn’t be averse to tagging along would you?”

“You guys want my help?” Scott said, staring at them. “I’m honoured. What do I need to do?”

“For now, just hold on,” Harry said, holding out one hand to Scott, the other to Luna. “We need to
make a quick stop on the way to get our gear.”

ooo00000

Bruce sipped his tea as he stared across the table into Betty’s eyes. These last few days had been almost like turning back the clock.

Yes, it’d been awkward at first, too much water under the bridge, too many unresolved conflicts, feelings that had to be discussed – at times, loudly – before they’d finally been able to settle into feeling comfortable with each other again, but somehow, they’d managed it.

He’d just finished explaining to Betty how he and the Hulk had come to an understanding, had built something akin to trust with each other and was waiting for her reaction.

“So, you’re saying that all that time that you were trying to suppress the Hulk, you were wrong?” Betty asked, shaking her head.

“Yeah. It took until New York before we truly became … well, I’m not sure if ‘partners’ is the right word, but it’ll do,” Bruce replied. “In any case, we have an understanding now. He knows that, if he’s ever needed, I’ll let him out. And I know that he’s there ready to protect me and those I care about. Actually, he lent me some of his strength the day I found Jennifer bleeding from multiple gunshot wounds in an alley …”

His watch vibrating cut him off and he stared down at it. Seeing the Avengers logo in red, he paled and instantly tapped it.

**Code Red. Assemble at the Tower. Bring your significant other.**

“Come on, we’ve got to go!” Bruce stated, standing so quickly that his chair toppled over behind him.

Ignoring it, he pulled Betty from her seat and dragged her from the café.

ooo00000

Laura Barton took a moment to lean on the porch and look out over the rolling green grass that stretched away before her. It was beautiful, relaxing, very much like home, albeit, a new home. And to think that, a relatively short stroll away, there was beach and an ocean, it was like having the best of both worlds. From here, she couldn’t even see the main buildings that made up the Avengers’ main area on the island. But it was close enough that, if she needed help, then it would be there for her.

Currently, Cooper and Lila were giggling as they raced across the field after some creature that Harry had called a niffler. Whatever is was, it was extremely fast and she and the kids had been warned against wearing any jewellery or anything shiny outside the house (which was apparently warded against the strange little creatures).

The house was much like their old farm house, but with a couple of extra rooms upstairs and a larger loungeroom plus a craft room for herself downstairs. There was even a barn, not that she knew exactly why it’d been built. Still, she was glad that it was there, it increased the homeliness feeling to the place.

“Penny for your thoughts, Mrs Barton?” Clint asked as he stepped up behind her, his arms wrapping around her.
Laura wrapped her arms around his and leant back into him.

“I’m just enjoying the peace and quiet after the move,” she replied. “Nathaniel?”

“Fast asleep,” Clint reassured her.

“Those two seem to be enjoying themselves,” she commented, nodding at their oldest two.

“They’ve got a whole island to explore if they want,” Clint remarked. “Harry said the dragons will watch out for them. And if that’s not the weirdest thought of the year, then I don’t want to know what is! Dragons for babysitters!”

Laura laughed along with him before a strange vibrating feeling began on her stomach.

“What …?” she began.

Clint instantly straightened and looked at his watch which she now realised was the source of the vibration.

“Looks like I’ve got to go to work,” Clint said. “And I’m supposed to bring you and kids with me to the Tower?”

“What? Why?” Laura asked. “I’d have thought that we couldn’t be safer anywhere else.”

“Me, too,” Clint replied. “But orders are orders. Coop! Lila! Time to bring it in!”

ooo00ooo

Dinner in the Great Hall at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry was always a boisterous affair. But then, how could it not be with hundreds of students talking at the four long House tables and cutlery clinking against plates and bowls?

Currently, Ted Lupin sat with his best mates as they commiserated with each other over their final OWL exam not only of the day, but ever: History of Magic. Privately, Ted thought that he’d done quite well, he’d been sure of every answer, had written decent-sized essays for the appropriate answers and he thought that he might have even scored a bonus point or two with his answer about the Chamber of Secrets.

Not that he was going to say any of that to his friends. There was a tradition to uphold, even if they were Ravenclaws and considered the best and brightest students in the castle. No. At this time, the only acceptable conversation was how unfair and hard the whole test was.

Thankfully, with the last test now behind them, they had a few days off to rest and relax before they’d be boarding the Hogwarts Express to take them back to London and thence, home. Well, home for a day; Ted had already heard from his grandmother and knew that the two of them would be taking a portkey out of the country the day after that.

An unexpected vibration shook his hand and Ted jerked, sloshing some of his pumpkin juice. Thankfully, it didn’t splash on him, just on the table and a quick *evanesce* with his hand had the mess mostly disappear. A further three goes at it finally vanished the last of the orange liquid.

Ted beamed. His wandless magic was coming along, slowly but surely, just as Uncle Harry had promised – it was just a matter of practicing and learning to really focus and push your magic to do what you wanted. One day he dreamed that he’d be just as good as Uncle Harry was at wandless magic.
Thinking of his godfather reminded Ted of his Avengers’ watch.

He stared at the Code Red. An all Avengers call. Something must really be up, something big! His
eyes drifted upwards towards where he knew Ravenclaw Tower was. Up there was his Marauder
costume. A Code Red meant that he was going to need it.

“Sorry, guys, I’ve got to head,” Ted told his friends in a low voice as he rose.


“I’ll explain later,” Ted replied, giving a pointed look at his left wrist where a hint of his watch could
be seen.

“Right,” Lachlan replied, his eyes widening. “Later.”

With that, Ted was gone, doing his utmost to walk, not run, until he was safely out of the Hall and
away from the professor’s disapproving eyes.

ooo00ooo

Steve leant on the table, his fists clenched as his eyes stared at the bank of screens, flicking from one
to the next after a few seconds. This was definitely a much more interesting training scenario than
anything that he’d tried before with the recruits.

Currently, Squirrel Girl, Spider-Man, She-Hulk and Komodo were in the forest playing a modified
game of ‘Capture the flag’. The big difference was that, instead of working in teams, each of them
had their own flag that they had to hide and protect while they attempted to find and capture as many
of the others as they could. A flying camera – combination of both Tony’s tech and Harry’s magic –
followed each of them, relaying their progress back to their trainers.

“Komodo’s smart, my money’s still on her,” Nat stated.

Steve’s eyes automatically switched to the green, lizard-woman. It’d taken a fair bit of convincing to
get her to join in. In the end, it was Bobbi who managed it, using the concept of her using the game
to get a better idea of what her new body could do now.

Komodo had found a small stream, deep enough for her to completely submerge herself in and, using
some bamboo that she’d found to use as a straw, could now hide herself in it. Her flag – the green
one – had been staked out at the bottom of the stream, rocks holding it in place.

“You might be right,” Bobbi said, “Look who’s swinging in. Let’s see how this plays out.”

Spider-Man was indeed swinging through the trees, zipping out a new line as he flew through the
forest. His angle must have been just right for they saw his head turn and mark the flag in the water.
A new web-line flew across the stream to a large oak and Spider-Man started his new swing.

At the bottom of his arc, his off hand shot out a line, directly at the flag. Unfortunately for him, he’d
forgotten the diffraction of the water and his line veered off-target.

That, though, seemed to be what Komodo had been waiting for. Hidden under the water, she
reached out, grabbed the web-line and yanked.

A startled Spider-Man yelped as he was pulled from his arc, landing with a huge splash in the stream.

When the watchers saw him emerge, spluttering and coughing, it was minus the yellow flag that he’d
previously captured from Squirrel Girl and hung from the belt that he was wearing for just this game.

“Hey!” they heard him yell at the grinning Komodo as she emerged from the water, rivulets running from her green skin.

But that was as far as he got before he was distracted by his watch vibrating. In fact, every one of them – watchers as well as game-players – stopped what they were doing to stare at the message that they’d just received.

And then, in a flurry, they all began moving.

ooo00ooo

“You will not play your mind games again! In fact, you keep your mental manipulation to yourself,” Daphne continued her rant at Wanda. “The damage that you are capable of is immense. And I’m not just talking about what enhancing Tony’s fears did to him. No, what I’m talking about is altering personalities, potentially changing memories or even erasing them.

“Believe me, as a Healer specialising in the Mind Arts, I’ve seen it all, everything that can go wrong and what I haven’t personally seen, I’ve read about. You’re especially lucky that when you tried that trick on Harry that you caught him unprepared. If it’d be me or another Master, you would have been the one fighting off the mental manipulation and likely would have ended up in a coma for months.”

She’d been keeping that dressing down inside of her for weeks but, now that Pietro was up and healthy, Daphne felt that it was finally time to vent. Judging by Wanda’s cowed expression, her head down, her eyes glimmering, it’d taken and the younger woman would at least think twice before resorting to that particular power again.

“We’re not saying that you can’t have that power in your arsenal,” Maria jumped in, “just that you use it judiciously. Think about how you used it in Sokovia. You were able to influence a great many people at once in order to get them moving out of the city before the danger grew too bad. Or there could be times when you could get the drop on the bad guy, make him stop what he’s doing so that he could be taken into custody. It’s all a matter of how you use your gifts.”

“I understand. I do and I promise to do better,” Wanda said in a small voice.

Daphne quickly sat beside the younger woman and put an arm around her.

“That’s all we ask,” she said.

“Have you finished badgering my sister yet?” Pietro asked having zipped in from the other room before they’d even realised that he’d arrived. “Only the lovely Lavender is waiting for us. Remember we have a photo shoot?”

“Let’s get to it,” Maria said. “Lavender wants to get the two of you known to the public, start getting you some good press.”

Together, the four walked across to the next room to find Lavender directing a photographer in where to set up.

“Oh, good, you’re finally here,” she said. “I’m thinking some individual ones first followed by some of the two of you together – enhance that sibling relationship.”

“Pietro, you go first,” Daphne instructed as she turned Wanda towards her and pointed her wand at her face.
When the younger girl flinched, Daphne smiled and grabbed her chin.

“I’m just fixing your make up and getting rid of those puffy, red eyes,” she reassured her.

By the time that she was done, Pietro was well into his photos, hamming up the poses more and more and making Wanda laugh at his antics. His jacket, a deep blue with the silver highlights, really looked good against the white background that Lavender had chosen.

Without warning, Maria brought her wrist up to look at her watch and swore.

“We’re going to have to cut this short,” she stated. “Code Red. And apparently, it’s for all of us.”

“If it’s a Code Red, then why am I needed?” Lavender asked, looking down at her own watch. “And more importantly, why do I need to bring a camera?”

oooooo

Tony beamed as walked out onto the roof of the Tower to find it filled with guests, well all the guests that he’d invited anyway.

“Tony! Where’s your suit?” Captain America asked as he switched his shield from his arm to his back.

“What do you think I’m wearing?” he asked, looking down at himself.

“A tux?” Darcy replied and Tony blinked at the fact that she was holding her taser in her hand.

“I’ve got to agree here, Stark, get one of your armours up here and then brief us on the mission,” Black Widow all but ordered.

Tony waved the ‘suggestion’ away. What he was already wearing was perfect for the mission.

“Brown, excellent, you brought a camera and a decent one at that,” Tony said. “Give it to Parker, he’s going to need it.”

Confusion clear on her face, Lavender turned to Spider-Man who for some odd reason was emptying one of his boots of water.

“I hope that you’re going to clean that up,” Tony remarked, staring at the sight, before blinking at the unfamiliar suited guy over his shoulder. “Um? Do we know you?”

“Hi, I’m Scott,” the man said, having found his face after releasing a catch on his helmet. “I’m Ant-Man. You may have heard of me.”

“Not this routine again,” Falcon groaned.

“Why are you here?” Tony asked, still confused. “And ‘Ant-Man’? Really? But then, I suppose we’ve got a Spider-Man and a Squirrel Girl, so why not?”

“I brought him,” Mage stated, stepping forward. “You called a Code Red. An imminent threat of global proportions. I thought that he could help. Now, are you going to tell us what the situation is?”

“Oh, yeah, right,” Tony replied and found himself being hemmed in as the entire Avengers team as well as their support team and friends stepped forward, surrounding him. “Well, Pepper and I are getting married.”
“Married? You?” Widow asked.

“I didn’t know you guys were even engaged,” She-Hulk commented.

“When’s the big day?” Jane asked.

“Today. Now or, at least, as soon as Pepper arrives and I bring her up here,” Tony replied. “I’ve got a Minister and everything.”

“Tony. Does Pepper know about this?” Cap asked, his eyes narrowed.

“Well, she will as soon as I ask her and it’s not like she’s going to say ‘no’, now is it? It’s me, people don’t say ‘no’ to me.”

“You haven’t even asked her to marry you yet and you expect to marry her today?” Bruce summed up with a shake of his head. “Oh, this is not going to end well.”

“Oi! No jinxing things!” Tony stated. “And Capsical? I’m going to need a groomsman. Rhodey, you’re the Best Man. Well, Second-Best Man, since I’m obviously, the Best Man here.”

“Assuming that Pepper even agrees to … this, then sure, I’d be honoured, Tony,” he replied.

“You know that I’ll always stand by your side,” Rhodey beamed.

“Potter, Lavender. If there’s going to be a wedding here, I think some redecorating is in order,” Daphne stated.

As much as Tony wanted to see what they’d come up with, at that moment, Friday in his ear informed him that Pepper was on her way up the elevator. Quickly, Tony made his way downstairs, managing to snag the rose that he’d put to the side on the way and arrived in front of the elevator just as the doors began to open.

“Tony?” a surprised-sounding Pepper exclaimed upon seeing him. And then her eyes narrowed. “What’d you do?”


Pepper held up one finger and he waited as she rounded him and placed her overnight bag and laptop bag down on the nearest couch before turning to face him. She took a deep breath and nodded.

“Alright, whatever this is, get it over with. But, just so you know, I really hope it’s something that I’m going to like; I’ve had a long flight and I’m tired.”

“You’re going to love it. I guarantee that it’s something that you’ve been waiting for for ages,” Tony said. Then, remembering the rose, he thrust it out towards her. “This is for you.”

“Thank you, Tony,” she said with a small smile and smelt it before holding it before her and waiting for him.

“Pepper,” Tony began and his prepared speech suddenly evaporated. Giving a mental shrug, he pushed on; he’d always been better at winging things anyway. “You, better than anyone, know the type of guy that I am. You knew me way back when, when I was still an egotistical – however brilliant, handsome, funny and amazing – jackass obsessed with nothing more than building weapons and making money. And you stuck by me in that. You were even still here after Afghanistan when
everyone else had given me up for dead.

“For some bizarre reason, the path you chose for your life has meant that you’ve stayed by my side. You worried and fretted as I became Iron Man, working out the man that I wanted to become, the man that I needed to become to atone for my past sins and the man that I am now. You, Pepper, are the one person that I trust more than life itself. I even gave you my company simply because there is no one else that I’d trust with it. I need you, Pepper. I need you in my life. I’d become hollow, a shell of the man I am now without you. So, I thought that I should do something about it, make it permanent, official, even.”

Pepper’s eyes had become teary the longer he talked and her hands had gone to her mouth as she stared at him.

Slowly, making sure to keep eye contact with her, Tony lowered himself to one knee.

“Virginia Potts, would you do me the honour of marrying me?”

“Yes! Yes, Tony, yes!” Pepper replied and dropped to her own knees so that she could hug him and kiss him.

Tony pulled back slightly as his hand found the ring box in his pocket. Opening it, he plucked out the diamond ring and slipped it onto her finger.

“Great!” he said, pulling her to her feet. “Okay, we better get up there, everyone’s waiting. And the Minister’s old, I’d hate for him to keel over or something if we kept him in the sun too long.”

“What?” Pepper asked, staring at him.

Tony looked back to where she’d stopped at the end of his outstretched arm.

“You did just agree to marry me, didn’t you?” Tony asked.

Pepper’s eyes bulged. “You mean now? Right this minute?”

“Sure, why not? We’ve agreed that we should get married, so let’s do it,” Tony said.

“Considering how long it took you to take the hint and get around to asking me, then I guess today is better than waiting for however many years it’d be for you to get around to it,” Pepper said, shaking her head. “Lead on.”

Once again, he felt Pepper freeze as they emerged onto the roof.

“Tony, why is everyone wearing their Avengers’ gear?” she asked.

“Oh, that,” Tony shrugged. “I called a Code Red to make sure that everyone’d be here.”

“You did what?”
Is She Worthy?

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight … and herself made nine.

Molly Weasley nodded at the number before beginning to hustle the group to the side, away from the Portkey Pad. There might only be the one child in the group – and him not even one of her brood – but that didn’t stop her from mothering them all.

Even Arthur needed looking after and George, despite Angelina’s presence, she knew exactly what he could be like in a new situation – like a niffler in a jewellery shop. Andromeda was the only one that she didn’t need to keep an eye on and that was because the other woman was older than even Molly was.

“I’m thinking that I should fire call Mum,” Hannah said. “Just a quick call, to make sure the kids are alright.”

“They’ve stayed at your parent’s place plenty of times,” her husband, Neville said, putting an arm around her waist. “Besides, we’ve only saw them half an hour ago. They’re fine.”

“This way, troops!” Arthur called. “We need to declare ourselves.”

Molly deliberately put herself at the end of the line, just behind Ron. Craning her head past the others, she watched as Arthur handed over the piece of rope to the official and began getting them through customs.

“Name?”

“Arthur Weasley.”

“Purpose of visit to America?”

“Visiting a friend and to see the sights.”

“Tourist, then. Length of stay?”

“A week, can’t take any more time off work than that, unfortunately.”

“Very good. If you’ll place the tip of your wand in this box for just a second and cast a _lumos_ … very good, Sir, we now have your magical signature on file. This booklet details where you can find magical enclaves within America and the magical laws of the land. Enjoy your stay. Next!”

Arthur moved off to the side and the line shuffled forward. In a surprisingly short amount of time, all nine of them had gone through customs and were gathered near the exit.

“What to now? How do we get out of this place?” Molly asked. “It’s a shame that Harry’s place doesn’t have a FLOO like the _Cauldron_ does.”

“Come on, I’ll show you,” young Teddy announced. “I’ve been in New York a couple of times now.”

Molly opened her mouth to protest, really, the idea of a group of adults taking direction from a child, but felt a hand touch her arm.

“I know how you feel but it’s best to follow his lead,” Andromeda said quietly. “He knows this city
better than any of us ever could.”

She watched as Teddy confidently strode through the magical archway, disappearing before their eyes. After she, too, had stepped through, Molly found that they were in a muggle aeroplane place, at least, that’s what she thought it was, considering the giant metal constructs that she could see through the great glass wall. Arthur, predictably, was pressed up against said glass, his eyes unblinking at the sight.

“Come on, Dad, we can come back another time and just watch them, if you like,” George said, gently steering him away.

The place was absolutely packed with muggles, easily a thousand times worse than Kings Cross Station on September the first and it took all of Molly’s concentration to ensure that none of their group was accidentally separated. So intent was she on her self-assigned task that the bright sunlight hitting her face caught her completely off-guard and she blinked rapidly and raised a hand to block it out.

Muggle automobiles, all much newer, sleeker and most of them bigger than their own old Ford Anglia, were everywhere and she swivelled her head, not knowing where to look next. Far off in the distance, she could see the city of New York itself. Molly clutched at her heart; if the city and the buildings looked this big from this far away, exactly how big was it?

The sound of laughter caught her attention and she looked around to see Teddy reaching up to pull Ron’s wand arm down.

“There’s no Knight Bus here, we have to travel like ‘normal’ people,” Teddy told him.

Molly couldn’t help but ‘humph’ at that. ‘Normal’, indeed!

“You mean take a cab?” Arthur asked excitedly.

“Basically,” Teddy replied, his head moving this way and that. “Bingo! Found what we need. Follow me!”

Once again, Molly took up the rear as the group spread out in a line to follow the youngest of them all. By the time that they’d gathered together again, it was to find that Teddy was talking to the driver of a large muggle vehicle. It wasn’t a normal-sized car and it wasn’t as big as the Knight Bus, it was somewhere in the middle.

“This mini-van can carry us all,” Teddy said. “Jump in.”

As Molly climbed in, she saw that there were indeed enough seats for them all. Dropping into the seat beside Arthur, she let out a sigh. Well, they’d made it this far and, judging by the way that Teddy was talking to the driver, she had hopes that they’d make it to Harry’s without much worry. Still, this was definitely a bigger adventure than she’d ever dreamed and it was still only the first hour! She wasn’t sure whether to be excited or terrified for what was to come.

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As she turned a page, Hermione’s eyes automatically strayed over the top of the book and raked along the long counter. Once again, she frowned in frustration; there was no one behind it that she knew.

She’d been sitting here at this table – the perfect spot where she could see not only the counter, but also the entrance to the Den as well as the door leading to apartment upstairs – for coming up to two
hours now. And still, she was kept waiting.

When she’d first arrived in New York, she’d apparated straight to the alley beside the Marauder’s Den and knocked on the door to the apartment. After five minutes of waiting, she’d decided that there was no one home. Her second action had been trying to phone Harry, but for some inexplicable reason, his phone was switched off.

Thus, she’d decided to simply wait in the Den itself until either Harry came home or Gwen or Doreen came on shift.

The tinkling bell above the door announced it opening and Hermione looked up once again.

“Ron?” she asked loudly, seeing her old friend hesitantly walking in, his head swivelling as he took it all in.

His head turned towards her and a large smile bloomed on his face. Instantly, he began making his way towards her.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Hey, Hermione. Nice to finally see a familiar face in this weird place. And to answer your question, we came to see Harry,” Ron replied.

“We?” Hermione frowned before the crowd behind Ron finally registered.

“Hello, Hermione dear,” Molly smiled, bustling past Neville, Hannah and Angelina to reach her and give her a patented Molly-smothering hug. “Harry’s not here with you, I take it?”

“No, I’m not sure where he is,” Hermione admitted. “I’ve only been in New York for a couple of hours. I guess my arriving to surprise him backfired a bit because he’s not here.”

“What do you mean Harrikins isn’t here?” George asked.

“We came all this way to see him,” Neville added.

“If Uncle Harry’s not here, then he’s most likely in one of two places,” Ted said, making his way through the group. “Hi, Aunt Hermione.”

“Teddy!” Hermione exclaimed, reaching out to give her godson a hug. “Now, where’s Harry? I’m guessing you’re thinking Avengers Tower?”

“That’s one of the possibilities,” Teddy nodded. “Come on, let’s go check there.”

“Are we going to have to use the cab again?” Arthur asked excitedly.

“Nah, the Tower’s not that far, we’ll walk,” Teddy replied.

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Ted strode confidently through the doors to Avengers Tower before pausing in the lobby to make sure that he hadn’t lost anyone. Aunt Hermione had stayed close but everyone else had been mesmerised by the city, staring around and up at everything, pointing out so many things to each other and exclaiming loudly about the strangest things.

Not that Teddy could blame them. He well remembered his first time here with Uncle Harry; he’d been much the same. Thankfully, for him, those days were long past. Now, he considered himself
someone well-familiar with New York, really, how could he not be after so many patrols with Uncle Harry, Matt, Peter and Doreen. Thankfully, the others today, what with their accents and this being New York, would have simply passed for what they were: tourists.

Once everyone was there, Ted led them to the small desk off to the side with the emblazoned ‘A’ on its front.

“Hi,” Ted greeted the woman and showing his Avengers’ ID. “I have clearance to take my friends up.”

“May I?” the woman asked.

Ted handed over the ID and waited for her to check its authenticity.

“Thank you, Mister Lupin,” she smiled handing it back. “We can’t be too careful. I will need the names of your guests to issue them Visitor Lanyards.”

“Sure,” Ted replied. “This is Hermione Granger …”

“Miss Granger. Welcome back,” the woman said a second later, handing over a lanyard with a blue cord.

“How come you’ve got a different one than the rest of us?” Ron asked Hermione, as he fingered his orange-coloured lanyard.

“My guess would be because I’ve been here before and have already been cleared by security,” Hermione replied.

“Okay, everyone, follow me,” Ted called, leading the group into the elevator that he opened with his personal ID.

It was a little squishy with ten of them in there but somehow, they managed. Once the doors closed, Ted pressed the button for the lounge and instantly looked around, startled as the elevator began playing music.

“Friday? What’s with the music?” he asked.

Most of the other occupants of the elevator jumped and started looking around when the AI replied.

“Mister Stark decided that theme music would be appropriate. This piece is Spider-Man’s theme.”

Ted listened to it for a moment. It was catchy, but needed words, he ultimately decided. Before he could ask if there was ‘Marauder’ theme music, the elevator stopped and the doors opened.

As he stepped from the elevator, Ted looked around. For a moment, the huge room appeared empty but then a head appeared from the other side of a lounge where Bruce had obviously been lying.

“Oh, hey. Teddy, good to see you. And you brought visitors?” Bruce said.

“Hi, Doctor Banner. You know Aunt Hermione, of course,” Ted said, waving in her general direction.

“Of course, it’s good to see you again, Hermione,” Bruce smiled.

“And these are some of Uncle Harry’s friends from England. Where is he?” Ted asked.
“He and Skye went off to the Playground, something that Coulson needed to tell them in person,” Bruce shrugged. “I expected them back by now actually.”

“I’ll give him a call,” Ted said.

“His phone’s switched off,” Hermione said.

“Don’t worry, this one’s never off,” Ted said, pulling back his sleeve to get to his watch.

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The instant that they popped into existence, Harry’s arm shot out and around Skye, steadying her.

“Thanks,” she smiled.

Harry smiled back but any reply was swallowed up by a voice a few metres away.

“Thank you both for coming so quickly,” Director Phil Coulson said.

“A.C.!” Skye exclaimed, quickly moving forward to give him a hug but stopped, staring at the sling that held the stump of what remained of his left arm!

“It’s good to see you, too, Skye,” he smiled.


“How about you both come up to my office and I’ll explain?” he suggested.

“Harry, is there anything magical that your lot can do to fix this?” Skye asked as they walked, gesturing at Coulson’s arm.

Reluctantly, Harry shook his head.

“If it’d just happened, maybe. Assuming that the lost limb was still available,” Harry began.

“It’s not. Trust me on that,” Coulson said. “And, considering the alternative, I’m alright with that.”

After entering Phil’s office, the door was firmly closed and they were offered seats.

“Are you going to tell us what happened now, A.C.?” Skye asked.

As Harry looked around the office, he noted a new addition – a fire axe hung prominently on the wall. He narrowed his eyes at it before switching across to look at Coulson, who gave a tiny, almost imperceptible nod.

“That is why I asked you here,” Coulson replied. “Firstly, though, I’ve got to get the official stuff out of the way. Skye, you’ve been on extended leave for a while now. I need to know, are you coming back to S.H.I.E.L.D.?”

Skye looked at Harry, reached over and took his hand.

“No. I’m sorry, but I’m not,” she replied. “As much as I love all of you guys, my place is with Harry now. And I’ll still be helping make things better, only with the Avengers.”

“I’m happy for you, truly,” Coulson said. “That’s not to say you won’t be missed around here,
“I’m betting that there’ll be missions where the Avengers and S.H.I.E.L.D. will need to team up,” Harry added.

“I’m sure that’ll be the case,” Coulson smiled. “Now, as to why I asked you here. I’m guessing that you haven’t heard from your parents in a couple of weeks?”

“No. Not since we visited them at Afterlife,” Skye replied, clearly confused. “Has something happened?”

“You could say that,” Coulson replied sadly. “The Inhuman Gordon’s teleporting around caught the attention of HYDRA. When we last attacked HYDRA, we actually managed to take away their ability to track Gordon and used it ourselves to contact Afterlife. Our objective was to create a friendly dialogue.”

“But the Inhumans, we’re all powered people,” Skye said confusedly. “I know what S.H.I.E.L.D.’s policy is there. You would have wanted to put them all on the Index.”

“Index?” Harry asked.

“It’s a cataloguing system for powered people so that, if something goes wrong or someone goes bad, we have a record of them and what they can do,” Coulson replied. “And yes, we would have wanted that. But the meeting went south. Way south. The Inhumans attacked us, went after the Iliad – one of our aircraft carriers. I’m sorry, Skye, but they were led by your mother, Jiaying.”


“I can show you footage if you like,” Coulson replied softly.

“What happened?” Harry asked.

“The battle was bad. Fifty-seven of our people killed and four Inhumans, including Gordon, before Cal, your father, decided that there’d been too much death and stopped your mother.”

“How? What’d he do?” Skye asked and her voice was flat, almost dead as though she expected what the answer was going to be.

“I’m sorry, Skye, there’s no easy way to say this,” Coulson replied. “He killed her. It was quick, if that’s any consolation.”

Instantly, the base began shaking as Skye’s fists clenched.

“Skye! Skye! Look at me. Focus on me. You need to get a hold of your powers,” Harry said urgently, sliding from his chair to kneel in front of her.

Slowly, the rumbling subsided and Harry wrapped her in a hug and rubbed his hands on her back. Eventually, he felt her nod into his shoulder and he pulled back. After looking deeply into her eyes to ensure that she could handle things right now, he turned and retook his seat, never once letting go of her hand.

“What happened to Cal?” Skye asked.

“He was distraught at what he’d had to do,” Coulson said. “He asked to go through the T.A.H.I.T.I. program.”
“So, you wiped his memories?” Skye asked, sounding incensed.

“It was that or lock him up in the RAFT for the rest of his life,” Coulson replied. “He left a letter for you.”

When Skye didn’t move to take the envelope that Coulson held out, Harry took it for her and pocketed it.

“That doesn’t explain what happened to your arm,” Harry pointed out.

“Ah, yes,” Coulson said. “The Inhuman plan was to use terrigen crystals to turn as many people as they could and simply to kill the rest. To save lives, I had to grab one of the crystals before it broke. My hand started to turn to stone so Mack did the only thing he could think of: he cut it off.”

“Wow! That’s, that’s … crazy,” Skye eventually said.

“I know. Saved my life, though, so a win overall,” he said. “FitzSimmons are already working on some new high-tech prosthetic.”

“And the rest of the crystals?” Skye asked.

“That was the big loss of the day. In the battle, the crate that they were in was sent overboard. I’ve had submersibles down there looking for it, but the ocean’s deep in that particular part of the ocean, very deep and we haven’t had any luck finding it,” Coulson replied.

“All these years I’ve been searching for my parents and just when I finally found them, they turn out to be wack-jobs and I lose them,” Skye muttered.

“Skye, I really am sorry, if there’d been anything …” Coulson began only to be cut off by her.

“Daisy. My name’s Daisy,” she said.

“What do you mean?” Harry asked, giving her hand a squeeze.

“My parents, they named me Daisy. I think that I’d like to use it, to remember them by,” she replied. “I would have liked to know my last name, but I guess that it won’t matter once we’re finally married.”

“For what it’s worth, it’s Johnson. Your name is Daisy Johnson,” Coulson smiled. “We finally managed to work out who Cal was. He owned a building in Milwaukee where his medical practice was. I don’t know what sort of condition it’s in, but it’s yours now.”


The vibration of Harry’s watch interrupted them and he looked down at it.

“Anything urgent?” Daisy asked.

“It’s Teddy. He’s at the Tower and he says that there’s a whole lot of visitors there waiting to see me?”

ooo00ooo

“Harrikins!”

Harry couldn’t help but grin at the greeting as they’d portkeyed into the Tower.
“What are you lot doing here?” he asked as George, Angelina and Ron engulfed him in a combined hug.

“Well, we heard that our favourite adopted brother was getting engaged and we had to come make sure that she was worthy of the Saviour of the Wizarding World,” George replied.

Even after all this time, Harry still found it shudderingly-weird to hear George speak in complete sentences.

“We missed you, so what better excuse to come visit?” Angelina corrected.

“Hello, Harry.” Hermione said, stepping in and claiming her hug. “I must say that I’m not impressed that I found out that my best friend is now engaged by reading about it in the Daily Prophet!”

“Hey! Not my fault!” Harry protested. “You wouldn’t answer your phone. I left what, a dozen messages? Two?”

“Hello, Harry dear,” Molly said, giving him a hug before stepping back, holding him at arm’s length and looking him over critically. “Well, you’ve filled out some but I suspect that you’re still not eating enough.”

“Leave him be, Molly, he’s a grown man, now,” Arthur said, shaking Harry’s hand.

“Neville, Hannah! Where are the kids? You’ve got two now, right?” Harry said.

“Brendan and Alice,” Neville beamed. “They’re home with the grandparents.”

“Harry?”

Looking around, he stepped back until he had his arm around his fiancé and his visitors arrayed in front of him.

“Everyone, I’d like you to meet Sky … Daisy. Daisy Johnson, my fiancé,” he said.

“But …,” Teddy said, looking extremely confused.

“I was in the foster system for many years and I didn’t know my name so I gave myself the name ‘Skye’. Just recently, though, I’ve found out my real name, it’s Daisy,” she said, mostly to Teddy before looking at everyone else. “Hi. It’s nice to meet you all. Harry’s told me so much about all of you.”

Harry then escorted her along the arc of people, introducing her one by one to everyone – Hermione, Ron, George, Angelina, Neville, Hannah, Arthur, Molly (who immediately gave her a hug and confused her by welcoming her to the family) and finally …

“And this is Andromeda Tonks, Teddy’s grandmother and a member of the House of Black,” Harry said.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Andi said, shaking her hand. “You’ll have your hands full keeping this one in line.”

“Don’t I know it? But I’ve got a few tricks up my sleeve,” Skye replied with a smile.

“Tricks? Did someone say tricks?”

“Not that type, George,” Harry asked. “Although you might get a kick out of exactly what Daisy
“You’re a full-on Avenger now, right?” Teddy asked.

“Yeah, I am, although apparently I still have some Academy work to put in,” Daisy replied.

“Like me!” Teddy replied excitedly. “And now that I’ll be living here full time …”

He trailed off as both Harry and Andi turned to look at him.

“Well, I have now finished my OWLs,” Teddy told them. “And you said …”

“I said that it depended upon your results and after your grandmother and I have discussed it,” Harry reminded him.

“That is, however, one of the reasons that we’re here, to make that decision,” Andi added.

“Yes!” Teddy whooped. “I’ve got to tell Dor? I’m guessing that she’s still in school?”

Harry checked the time. “She, Pete and Gwen should be getting out about now. My guess is that they’ll be at the Den within half an hour.”

“Can I go?” Teddy asked.

Harry nodded. “Remember, no magic.”

“Not until you give me that scroll, I remember,” Teddy replied.

“And even then, only on official Avengers missions and business,” Harry said.

“You’re not seriously going to let him join you in your super-hero-ing, are you?” Hermione asked after Teddy had raced off.

“Think of what the three of us were doing at his age,” Harry shrugged, nodding at Ron to include him. “I’d rather that he do it this way, under my supervision and with the Academy than try to go off on his own.”

“You’ve got to give that to Harry,” Neville said. “Do you remember how much trouble the three of you got up to back at Hogwarts?”

“Ooh, I’m hearing stories! Tell me everything,” Daisy interrupted.

“So, where are you all staying?” Harry asked loudly, changing the topic in a way that garnered laughter all around.

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“I think that you’ll be much more comfortable here,” Harry was saying as he led the way up the stairs in the main building on Paradis Noir. “It’s still got a heap of technology built into the place, though, so you’re going to have to be careful.”

“I thought that magic and muggle ekel-ectri-cy wouldn’t work together?” Arthur said as he followed along, his head swivelling from the lights to the switches and screens that he could see.

“Once upon a time, they couldn’t; well, not easily,” Harry replied. “Think of Diagon Alley and all the magic in there and consider how much muggle technology and el-ec-tric-ity there is right beside
it. If it wasn’t for the wards that protect the Alley, there’d be a whole host of problems. The Nippon Techno-mages have made great strides in the past couple of decades marrying the two different systems together and my friend Tony and I have done even more with it.”

“That’s incredibly impressive, Harry,” Hermione said. “I assume that you’ll show me?”

“Probably best if Tony does, he understands it all better. Unfortunately, he’s still away on his honeymoon so, you’re going to have to wait.”

“Hey, Harrikins, do you have dragons on your island?”

Harry stopped and backtracked to the window that George, Angelina and Andi were looking out of and grinned.

“Yep. Peruvian Vipertooths. There’s only the three of them at the moment, but I expect more once the next breeding season comes around.”

“I don’t remember any mention of dragons on the family island,” Andi frowned.

“No, there wouldn’t have been,” Harry replied. “They’re a fairly recent addition. Friendly, though.”

He turned off onto the second level which he knew had the most empty rooms.

“There’s nothing on the island that can hurt you at all, assuming that you take precautions,” he continued as he walked backwards down the hallway so that he could see everyone.

“Precautions?” Hannah asked.

Harry shrugged. “You know, the usual. If you don’t know what a piece of tech does, don’t touch it. Be aware of magical plants and animals. Other than that, relax and enjoy. I’ll spend as much time here as I can so that we can catch up before you have to head back to England. The beaches here are perfect if you want to swim. Oh, there is a farm house about half a kilometre to the south-west; it’s the private residence for a family called the Bartons. Cint, the father, is one of the Avengers, and we’ve just found out that their oldest boy is magical.”

“Is he?” Professor Neville Longbottom asked.

“Yes. I’ll see if Cooper would be interested in meeting you; actually, I’m betting the whole family would be interested, considering how magic is going to be a part of their life now,” Harry said.

“We’d love to meet them,” Molly stated.

“Well, all the rooms along here are currently empty, so take your pick. If you need anything, call for one of the house elves. Andi? You’ve got a choice; you can stay here or you can come with me to the Bungalow,” he offered.

“I believe that I would like to stay in the Black Bungalow,” she replied, a decision that Harry was not surprised about.

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Thor stepped from the Rainbow bridge back onto Asgard.

“It is pleasing to have you home again, Thor Odinson,” Heimdall nodded as he twisted his great sword, cutting off the Bifrost.
“Heimdall, it is good to see you again,” Thor replied.

“Was your mission successful? Did you find the answers you seek?”

“Somewhat,” Thor replied “I now know who has been playing games with the galaxy. Now it is a matter of finding out about him and a way to stop him.”

“What are your plans?” Heimdall asked.

“For now, rest and a chance to gather my thoughts. After that, perhaps a journey into the heart of the Kree Empire might give me answers,” Thor replied. “One of this being’s recent minions hailed from there. Perhaps there are answers there to be found.”

“The Kree Empire is a dangerous place,” Heimdall pointed out.

“I am aware,” Thor nodded. “I’m hopeful, however, that a Prince of Asgard may be able to tread where others cannot.”
Blending Into The Background


Spider-Man couldn’t help himself. All this talk of hands and fists of iron. Taking three quick steps forward, he grabbed Danny’s hand, held it up and twisted it around, giving it a good couple of pokes with his finger.

“Look, I’m sorry, dude, but this is just a hand. All flesh and skin and hair and stuff. No iron. Gotta admit, though, the way you got it to light up like that was pretty cool.”

“It only becomes as hard as iron when I summon my chi,” Danny replied, reclaiming his hand.

“Chi?” Daredevil repeated. “Not the craziest thing I’ve heard. And what’s K’un-Lun?”

“K’un-Lun is a city. It’s where I was trained.”

“Let me guess, it’s not in the States?” Squirrel Girl said.

“No. It’s not. You can’t exactly get to it right now. The best that I can tell you is that it’s in Asia, the Himalaya’s to be precise but the gate only opens once every fifteen years or so,” Danny replied.

“And this Shou-Lao that you defeated?” Mage asked.

“He’s a dragon,” Danny replied.

“Dragon?” Mage repeated and all there could hear the steel in his voice.

“Not good, dude. Mage’s got a thing for dragons,” Spider-Man said with a shake of his head.

“Oh, don’t worry, he’s not dead or anything,” Danny replied, trying to wave off any confusion.

“Shou-Lao’s immortal. But I had to fight him and thrust my fist into his heart in order to claim my powers as the Iron Fist.”

“Immortal, huh? He’d better be,” Mage grumbled.

“If you’re the Protector of this K’un-Lun place, what are you doing in New York?” Squirrel Girl asked.

“I was born here; this is my home,” Danny replied. “Not to mention that the Hand are here and it’s my job as their sworn enemy to defeat them.”

“The Hand?” Daredevil repeated. “You are their sworn enemy?”

“You know them?” Danny asked.


“It’s not. They’re worldwide and have been operating for centuries,” Danny confirmed.

“Let me get this straight, you’re here in New York just to fight a criminal organisation?” Mage asked.
“Basically,” Danny confirmed. “I may be the Protector of K’un-Lun, but I see the job as more than that. I see having this power being used for the good of all. It’s my responsibility.”

“Can’t argue with that: with great power comes great responsibility,” Spider-Man nodded. “It’s something that I was taught once.”

“I’d say that most of us live by a similar code,” Daredevil agreed. “Maybe worded a little different, but it boils down to the same thing. If you’re here to help, to do good, then you’ve got our support, just as if we needed it, I’d hope that we’d have yours.”

“You’ve changed, Devil,” and they could all hear the grin in Mage’s voice. “Once upon a time, you worked exclusively alone.”

“Let’s just say that I’ve seen the benefits of team-work and leave it at that,” he replied.

“Listen, thanks for the assist, guys,” Danny said, glancing across at the piled-up bodies off to one side, webbed and bound awaiting the police. “But I really have to be going; my friend, Colleen, will be wondering where I am.”

With a nod firstly to Danny and then to the Avengers, Mage slung his foot over his broom and rose into the air.

“See you around, Iron Fist,” Squirrel Girl waved.

“You know, I really hope that I’m there when Iron Man meets Iron Fist,” Spider-Man said as he webbed above his running partner. “Can you imagine what his reaction is going to be finding out that he’s not the only ‘Iron’ one around?”

A half-pitch quidditch match had been set up on the beach up for the magical visitors to Paradis Noir to enjoy until dinner. There was only the single set of three goal posts and a single post set into the sand some distance out.

Each set of chasers – Harry, Teddy and Luna on one team; Angelina, Hannah and Hermione on the other – were required to take the quaffle out and around the post before returning to try to score against Ron. There was no snitch in this pick-up game, however, there was a pair of bludgers that George (for Harry’s team) and Neville (for Angelina’s team) were bashing around the area.

“Go, Teddy!” Doreen yelled, her hands cupping her mouth as her boyfriend flew through the air.

She watched as he feinted, throwing a pass to Harry instead of shooting for goal. Ron had completely fallen for his tactic and was therefore well out of position, leaving an open hoop for Harry to score through.

“Woohoo! Goal!” Daisy cheered.

“Surely, the game must be nearly done,” Hermione called from where she sat on her broom, puffing slightly, both hands wrapped tightly around the handle.

“One more goal,” Angelina called. “We can even make it ‘next goal wins’.”

“No way!” Harry laughed. “We’re already sixty points up. Besides the next goal is gonna be ours anyway.”
“Who says I’m going to allow either of you to score again?” Ron called.

Their banter and Hermione’s stationary hovering didn’t stop the bludgers from flying around though. One of them, obviously sensing a target, suddenly changed direction and zoomed straight at Hermione’s oblivious back.

“Hermione!” Harry shouted a warning.

And then a burst of gravity waves smashed into the bludger, altering its course ninety degrees and sending it far, far out over the ocean. The stunned quidditch players looked down to see Daisy standing below, her arms still outstretched.

“This game really is bloody dangerous! Don’t think I believed all those stories until just now. Hermione could have been seriously hurt there,” Daisy stated. “And you guys play this thing all the time?”

“Well, it’s our one big sport,” George shrugged.

“Magic does tend to fix a lot of injuries,” Angelina added.

“Yes. Harry hardly ever seemed to come out of a game without being hurt at Hogwarts,” a clearly shaken Hermione said as she landed beside Daisy. “Thank you.”

“Any time,” Daisy replied.

“Oi! I wasn’t that bad!” Harry protested as he, too, landed.

“Harry, you almost swallowed the snitch in your very first game,” Angelina reminded him with a shake of her head.

Harry stared at her. “What’d you expect me to do? Ollie did say to ‘get the snitch or die trying’.”

“True, Angie, I remember it,” George said, nodding. “Mind you, Ollie was always a bit obsessed.”

“Oh, good, you’ve finished,” Molly said as she appeared from the near-by path back to the main buildings. “And no one even looks hurt for once.”

A number of sheepish looks were passed around at her statement.

“Thanks to Daisy,” Hermione replied and handed her broom to Harry. “Thank you, Harry, but I think that I’ve just used up my quota of flying for the next decade or two.”

“Dinner will be ready in half an hour, so you’ve all got time to wash up,” Molly told them.

“We’ll see you there,” Teddy said and took off on his broom, Doreen’s bushy tail flapping directly over the bristles in their wake.

ooo00ooo

Ted knocked tentatively on the door to Harry’s study in the Bungalow. A second later, he heard the permission given to enter, so he opened the door to find exactly what he’d been expecting: Harry and his grandmother waiting for him.

Harry, of course, was seated behind his large desk, his hands clasped in front of him, his eyes focussed on Ted. His grandmother was seated just to the side of the desk but back enough so that there was no doubt given that she was supporting Harry in this conversation.
“Come in, take a seat,” Harry instructed and Ted scooted into the room and slid into the chair in front of the desk.

He fidgeted with his hands, his leg bouncing slightly as the two stared at him, watching him, evaluating him. Well, that’s what it felt like, anyway.

“You know why we asked you here?” Harry asked.

Ted nodded. It was the night before everyone from Britain was supposed to return home. He just hoped that he wasn’t included in that group.

“I managed to pull a few strings,” his grandmother began, “and managed to obtain your OWL results a week earlier than they should have been released.”

Ted straightened, his eyes fixing on the envelope in front of Harry. When Harry picked it up and held it out, Ted quickly slid forward on his chair, reached out and took it. Taking a deep breath, he slid a finger under the flap, opened the envelope and pulled out the parchment.

ORDINARY WIZARD LEVELS

Pass Grades: Outstanding (O) Fail Grades: Poor (P)

Exceeds Expectations (EE) Dreadful (D)

Acceptable (A) Troll (T)

THEODORE REMUS LUPIN HAS ACHIEVED:

Ancient Runes: O

Arithmancy: O

Astronomy: EE

Care of Magical Creatures: EE

Charms: O

Defence Against the Dark Arts: O

Herbology: EE

History of Magic O

Potions: O

Transfiguration: O

CONGRATULATIONS YOU HAVE ACHIEVED TEN (10) OWLS

Ted let out a long sigh even as a broad grin split his face.

“Ten OWLs,” he said, handing the parchment back to Harry. “Seven Outstandings, three Exceeds.”

Harry took the parchment, gave it a read through and handed it across to Andi.

“Brilliant work, Teddy!” Harry exclaimed. “That truly is impressive. Your parents would be
extremely proud; I know that I am.”

“Yes, this is amazing, Teddy. Well done, very well done, indeed,” his grandmother said coming around and giving him a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“You said that I had to pass my OWLs with EEs or better,” Ted reminded them. “And then I could move here, be an Avenger, like you.”

“We did say that, didn’t we,” Harry said, glancing at Andi. “Are you sure that that’s what you want? You wouldn’t prefer to stay at Hogwarts for your NEWTs with your friends? You won’t hurt my feelings if you want to stay in England.”

“No, please, I want this! I want to be here, with you, with Doreen. I know that I’ll need to work extra hard, what with finishing my magical education as well as my Avengers’ training,” Ted replied.

“Okay,” Harry nodded. “I will lay it out for you completely. Your grandmother and I have agreed that you may stay here with me if that is truly your wish. However, it is only fair that you understand exactly what that will entail.

“Firstly, your magical education. I will arrange for tutors, in addition to what I can offer you. I expect that you will complete a minimum of five NEWTs but preferably seven. In addition to that, you will enter Avengers Academy where you will be learning combat and tactics – both magical and non – dependent upon what your trainers agree upon. I would hope that you would also complete a non-magical degree of some kind, but that is not a requirement.”

“I agree to all of it,” Ted replied as solemnly as he could.

Harry and Andi shared a look and Ted noticed that his grandmother gave a small nod. Harry moved slightly and opened a drawer. Ted sucked in a quick breath at the sight of the scroll that he pulled out.

“I see that you remember this,” Harry smiled. “This is now yours; I’ve already added your name to it.”

Ted took it, pulled the ribbon and let it fall into his lap. Unrolling the scroll, he sped read through it, nodding as it spelled out exactly what Harry had told him that it contained when he’d first seen it so long ago.

It was a decree from the International Confederation of Wizardry, entitling the bearer, in this case him, to a waiver for the Statute of Secrecy when undertaking the duties that pertained to keeping the world safe, specifically, as an Avenger. While he could perform magic in front of the non-magical world, the knowledge that there were other magically was not to be divulged by him.

There was an added clause near the bottom that, until such time as Harry James Potter, otherwise known as ‘Mage’ deemed him ready, he was to only perform magic in front of non-magicals with ‘Mage’s’ permission.

“Thank you. I won’t let you down,” Ted promised.

“If we thought that you would, then you wouldn’t be getting that,” his grandmother stated.

“I’ve seen you in action, out on patrol with Matt and the others,” Harry added. “I know that you can fulfil your obligations contained in that decree. Congratulations, Marauder, I don’t think it’ll take you long until you’re out of your ‘apprenticeship’.”
“Thank you, Uncle Harry, Grandmother,” Ted replied. Then, “can I go tell Doreen the good news? She’s waiting for me just outside.”

“Go on, you scamp,” his grandmother replied.

Immediately, Ted was up. He raced to the door, thought better of it, raced back to give her a hug, leapt across to hug Harry and then dashed out and through the door, the scroll still in his hand.

“Doreen!” he called.

OOO00OOO

The week had passed much faster than one would expect. Most of the time, the group had stayed on the island, simply catching up, eating, laughing, trying to avoid George’s pranks and getting to know both Daisy and Doreen better.

Of course, there’d also been a number of trips back to New York as well. Central Park had been the first of them; a chance for the British to get a taste and feel for the Big Apple before venturing into the crowded city. The Empire State Building had been passed over in favour of the views from Avengers Tower.

They’d taken in a baseball game at Daisy and Steve’s insistence. The Statue of Liberty had also been on the list but Arthur seemed to enjoy the ferry ride more than the actual island and statue itself. Lavender and Daphne had ‘kidnapped’ the women one evening and taken them to see a Broadway musical, something that had Molly talking about nearly non-stop for days.

Andi had also taken the opportunity to catch Harry up on both Black and Potter House business from the Wizengamot, after all, she was well aware that he all but never read the reports that she sent him.

But finally, the week was over and it came time for them to head home to work and family.

“Are you having your wedding here or at home?” Molly asked for the dozenth time.

“We haven’t decided yet,” Harry replied, once again. “I will be sure to let you and everyone else know as soon as we’ve picked where and when.”

“I know this won’t interest you in the slightest but Kingsley would have my head if I didn’t remind you that Magical Britain will be most disappointed if you aren’t married in England. The Ministry would even help – be it providing a place or extra security if you like,” Hermione said.

“I must concur,” Andi added. “And your presence would placate the Wizengamot as well – I’ve told you how upset they are that you have yet to personally take up your seats.”

“And I’ve told you that you’re doing a much better job than I could ever do, Andi,” Harry replied. “I took up my Lordships, that’ll have to be enough for them for now. As to the wedding, well we’ll see, but no promises.”

“Generations of Weasleys have been married at the Burrow, that option is always open to you,” Arthur said, patting Harry on the back while smiling at Daisy.

“Come on, you lot, our portkey’s about to go,” Neville called, interrupting the last-minute guilt-trip and giving Harry a wink.

“Your turn to come visit next time,” Hermione said, giving Harry a kiss on the cheek. She turned to Daisy, then. “You make him happy, Daisy and he deserves it. I’m glad he found you.”
“Thanks, I’m quite happy with him, too,” Daisy replied.

“Hermione!” Ron called sharply. “Seeya, mate.”

Hermione just managed to get a hand on the rope before the group was whisked away.

“They are definitely an interesting bunch of people,” Daisy stated.

Harry laughed. “No arguments from me. They all have hearts of gold, though.”

“And they all love you,” Daisy said, turning into his arms. “Just not as much as I do.”

“I am very glad to hear that,” he said and kissed her. “Ready to go home?”

“Ready for some peace and quiet, yes,” Daisy agreed.

He twisted the two of them, apparating them away and back to their apartment.

ooo00ooo

Ted stared at the goblet. Actually, the instant that his eyes had landed on it when he’d first entered the room, they’d been locked on it. So focussed was he, that he’d almost missed the chair and fallen to the floor when he’d tried to sit.

“I take it that you know what this is?” Harry asked, amusement clear in his voice.

“Animagus Revealing Potion,” Ted breathed.

“And judging by the look on your face, you know what it does and what it means.”

Ted nodded his head so fast that his eyes even had trouble staying focussed on the goblet.

“Am I correct in thinking that you’ve been working towards this, reading the book I gave you and performing the mental exercises,”

“Yes. I’m ready. I’ve been ready for ages,” Ted replied. “But you’d said not to go any further and I haven’t; I’ve done exactly what you said.”

“I know. Professor McGonagall has been keeping an eye on you.”

Ted looked up, blinking. He hadn’t realised that.

“I’m ready?” he asked eagerly.

“Yes,” Harry replied. “Now, you understand that this will only show you your animal? It won’t transform you or make you into a full-animagus straight away?”

“I know. What do you think I’ll be? A wolf, like my dad? Or a bird, like you? Maybe a hawk or an owl? Or maybe something really cool like a lion or tiger or something?” Ted asked eagerly, his hair continuously cycling through colour after colour.

Harry laughed. “Well, there’s only one way to know. Get yourself comfortable and we’ll find out.”

Instantly, Ted shuffled his butt backwards on the wide armchair. Feeling his legs dangling, he frowned and pulled them up, Indian style. That was better. His hands dropped into his lap even as he shifted his back from side to side to find just the right spot. Finally, he looked up.
“Ready,” he said eagerly.

Harry picked up the goblet and brought it across.

“Take your time. The more relaxed you are, the easier the vision will come,” Harry told him, handing him the goblet.

Ted took it and looked into the silvery liquid. He was ready; he knew it.

Bringing it to his lips, he tipped it back, swallowing it in four large gulps. He felt Harry take the goblet from him even as his eyes closed and his hand flopped into his lap.

Green was the first thing that filled his mind. Green of all shades. Slowly, brown lines and blobs and dots of yellow, purple and red joined in. And then the ‘world’ fell into focus. It was a forest, but a forest unlike anything that he’d ever seen before. It was dense, trees everywhere with leaves, vines and flowers dotting the place.

Somewhere here, he knew, was his animal, the one that he’d be able to become. Eagerly, Ted began looking around, listening hard for any sound that might indicate which way to go. But there was nothing. Total silence and stillness. Still, he waited, knowing that a sign would come.

There. To the left. Slowly, cautiously, he moved firstly his eyes and then his head to where he’d caught a slight movement in his peripheral vision.

Still, it took him a while to locate it, despite his eyes darting every which way to find what he’d seen. And then he caught the slightest movement again and he focussed intently on that place. A frown formed when all he could find was a stick.

Ted blinked when the stick moved slightly, all by itself. And then he realised that it wasn’t a stick at all. It was a lizard, but a lizard so well camouflaged that it’d been nearly impossible to see.

Now that he’d seen it, he watched it. Slowly, the lizard moved across the branch that it was standing on. Surprisingly, its skin changed from a greeny-brown to yellow as it passed in front of a flower.

*It could change its skin colour?* Ted wondered.

And then it came to him, exactly what it was. Ted wasn’t sure how to feel about that. It wasn’t as powerful as a lion or as majestic as an eagle but it could be useful. Right? Right?

oooo0000

Bobbi strode into the training room and looked over her charges.

Peter and Doreen were currently competing in a bizarre game of catch. The ball itself was one designed by Tony with a simple counterweight inside it that caused it to slew about unpredictably both through the air and after it had bounced. The game was one that Bobbi herself had devised for them. Each of them ‘guarded’ a section of wall and had to throw the ball backwards and forwards, the goal to get the ball to hit their opponent’s goal. The fact that they could bounce the ball off of any surface, at any speed and at any angle helped them improve both their reflexes and agility. It also didn’t hurt their stamina.

Speaking of stamina, Bobbi noted that Teddy was currently on a treadmill, jogging. If he was following his old program, then he should be aiming for a five-kilometre run. Theoretically, he’d been keeping up his running while at school in Scotland; this would show whether he actually had been.
Jennifer was also working on a combination game/test that Bobbi had devised, this one designed to test her reflexes and mental acuity. She was in the middle of a great ‘board’, twenty squares by twenty squares, each one only half a metre square. Her task was to step from square to square, but only on the green ones as they lit. If she stepped on a different coloured one or took too long either leaping to the next or landed too late, a sharp, minor jolt of electricity would give her a mild shock. The big trick came in that there was always a pattern, one that could be predicted and one that needed to be found as the ‘game’ became progressively faster as time elapsed.

Melati was in the corner with the weights. Judging by the way the bar that she held behind her shoulders as she did her squats was bending, Bobbi estimated that she was easily holding five to seven hundred kilos.

The Vision was in the firing range, hitting target after target with beams of bright yellow light emanating from the golden stone in his head. His challenge was increased as the range was a hundred metres long and the targets only appeared randomly for two seconds before disappearing.

And then there were the newest recruits.

Pietro seemed to have completely recovered from his injuries. Bobbi only knew that he was there because of the blue and silver blur that raced circuits around the room, well over head height. The fact that he could defy gravity like that, running so that his body was horizontal to the ground was indeed telling as to his speed.

Lastly, was Wanda. Currently, she was ‘juggling’ weights with her red magic. Her hands were moving in an intricate pattern a couple of dozen metres below the weights as she moved them up and down in the most intricate pattern.

Bobbi nodded as she surveyed them, her arms akimbo. Yes, they all had plenty of potential, their own particular skillsets that gave them an advantage over others. The trick, she knew, was them harnessing those skills, using them to the best of their ability, without having to think what they were going to do. Most importantly, though, was their learning what each other could do so that they could work together as a team.

Peter and Doreen and even Teddy to a lesser extent, were already well on that path, with their night-time jaunts through the streets of New York with Harry and Matt. But that was a limited environment. They, indeed all of them, needed to learn how to work together in any combination, in any environment.

Bobbi actually had plans for an extreme test; if today went as well as she hoped, she was seriously considering bringing it up with Steve sooner rather than later – it’d not only show this lot what was needed, but also show her where they needed extra work.

Until then, she – and they – had work to do. Pulling her whistle, she gave it a long, loud burst.

“Alright, bring it in, time to start training,” she called.

Internally, Bobbi grinned at the groans that she’d just elicited. Externally, though, her face showed nothing but a slight frown. She really enjoyed this job.

Maria Hill frowned at the information that she’d been compiling. Individually, by itself, it didn’t amount to much. Together, though, together, that was another matter.

Slowly over the last month or so, information had been delayed being passed on to her or worse yet,
denied altogether. Contacts had disappeared. Allies had drifted away. There were some organisations that had even become, if not antagonistic, then at least barely neutral.

Maria wasn’t sure if it was her, her prior affiliation with S.H.I.E.L.D. or her current association with the Avengers. If she had to guess, her money would be on the latter. When she’d first floated her suspicions to Nick, she’d found that he, too, was getting stonewalled. Really, it was fast becoming fact that the only ones that they could rely upon were their closest allies.

Nick, of course, wouldn’t rely on them even then. ‘I can count the number of people I trust on one hand. And I’m not afraid of cutting off fingers.’ She’d heard him say it numerous times. She, on the other hand, despite her years in the secret business, had never found things that extreme.

This last, though, that was the deal breaker.

Her contact in the United Nations had just gone quiet, even going as far as telling her to stay out of what wasn’t her business. Which was stupid in the extreme: she was in the world-protection business, so, of course what went on in the United Nations was her business.

There’d been rumours before she’d been cut off, though. Rumours that a project group had been formed. A group that had already reported back the Assembly twice and both times had been behind closed doors – no cameras, no unauthorised persons.

They were hiding something. Something big, if Maria had to guess. She just hoped that whatever it was wasn’t going to cause more trouble than they bargained for.

If the United Nations instigated something that caused the Avengers to go against them, then Maria wasn’t sure exactly who or what would be left standing at the end of it.
Thor strode into the Gateway at the end of the Rainbow Bridge on Asgard, ready for the next part of his quest. For this, he was dressed in his finest armour, Mjolnir in hand. The Kree were a warrior race, ruled by a military dictatorship and he needed to ensure that he projected the right image of strength to have them take him seriously.

“We’re off now then, are we?” Fandral asked from where he leant against the wall, picking at his fingernails with a dagger.

“About time, I was getting hungry,” Volstagg stated.

“And what brought about this great hunger, hmm?” Lady Sif asked. “Is simply standing enough to incite hunger in you these days?”

“I’ll have you know that my appetite is directly proportional to my great strength, I need to keep it up at all times for when we go into battle,” Volstagg replied indignantly.

“At least we have cover of sufficient size to protect us all with Volstagg along,” Hogun said.

“My friends, what are you all doing here?” Thor smiled, interrupting the usual squabbles among this group.

“I informed them of your destination,” Heimdell said. “The Kree value strength. They will expect a Prince of Asgard to have bodyguards.”

“Thank you, Heimdell, once again you have seen my need before even I recognised it,” Thor said with a small bow of his head.

“The journey will be long; the Kree Empire is far outside the Nine Realms,” Heimdell informed them as Lady Sif and the Warriors Three formed up around Thor, ready for the Bifrost to open and sweep them away.

“I am uncertain how long our time with the Kree will be,” Thor said.

“I will be watching,” Heimdell promised and turned the hilt of his sword like a great key, activating the Bifrost.

Thor felt himself pulled into the multicoloured beam of light. Thrusting Mjolnir out in front of himself, he aligned his body to make the journey more comfortable. Shifting his head, he grinned at Sif and Fandral to either side of him; Hogun and Volstagg, he knew, would be following closely in their wake.

ooo00ooo

Tony slipped into the pilot’s seat and did something that he’d never done before: he fastened the seatbelt. He froze, considering what in the world had made him do such a thing. Almost at once, the answer came: you’re a married man, now, Stark and you’re about to fly off into space; can’t be doing quite as many thoughtless things that could get you killed as you used to.

“Alright, Friday, let’s bring her on-line,” he said as he began pressing buttons and flipping switches.

He analysed every reading that came in, ensuring that they were exactly as they should be.
“All systems are operational, Sir,” Friday announced. “The quinjet is ready for take-off.”

A loud crack sounded directly behind him and Tony flinched and swore before swinging his chair about one hundred and eighty degrees, his head still partially lowered. Upon seeing what had caused the sound, though, he sat up and scowled.

“Don’t do that, Sparrowhawk! One of these days you’re going to give me a heart attack, and then nothing’ll save you from Pepper’s wrath.”

“Or, you could simply get used to it,” Harry countered.

“unlikely,” Tony waved off the suggestion. “What are you doing here, anyway? I’m about to launch.”

“I know; that’s why I’m here. I’m going with you,” Harry replied, striding forward to take the co-pilot’s seat and beginning to strap in.

“Uh? First off, why? Second of all, if I wanted or needed a co-pilot, you’d be way down the line,” Tony said, raising a finger with each point.

“Never hurts to have back up,” Harry shrugged. “Besides, if something goes wrong, then I’m probably your best bet in getting home safely.”

Tony snorted and cocked a thumb at the suit of armour standing in the back of the quinjet.

“That’s rated for spaceflight and re-entry. I’m good but if you want to tag along, then fine,” Tony said.

He gave one last look over the controls before nodding.

“Friday, retract the roof,” he instructed.

The groaning of machinery high above them sounded and a sliver of light shot down on the cockpit as the hanger roof split in two and slid apart. Firing up the quinjet’s engines, Tony waited until the gap was just wide enough before lifting off. The quinjet rose sure and steady until it was out and then Tony poured on the speed, pointing the nose all but straight up.

The G-force of the manoeuvre pushed him back in his seat but it wasn’t anything that he hadn’t felt before. Beside him, though, Harry grunted and Tony couldn’t help but feel a bit of satisfaction at getting back at the magical.

He watched the altimeter as they climbed as well as half a dozen other readings, including the temperature of the hull, the state of the engines and the heat shielding itself. All stayed in the green, just as expected.

Gradually, the sky above them darkened from the bright, light blue to a deep indigo. Spots of white began appearing – stars – and Tony marvelled at what he’d created. And then, the thrust fell away. A small shift in the gravity under their feet told him that they’d transferred smoothly from the pull of the Earth to the artificial gravity plating that he’d designed.

“That was much quicker than I expected,” Harry remarked. “The shuttle lift-offs on TV always seem to take forever to go from the ground to space.”

“Different propulsion,” Tony explained. “They’ve not using arc tech.”
“Thought about sharing it with space agencies?” Harry asked.

“Nope,” Tony replied truthfully.

“Think about it,” Harry stated flatly and Tony gave him a nonplussed look. “Look, I know SI’s got the clean energy tech market wrapped up. But this? This has the potential to do some good. People have been obsessed with exploring the Moon or Mars for decades. When was the last time humans went to the Moon?”

“Apollo Seventeen, December, nineteen seventy-two,” Friday replied.

“Exactly! Decades,” Harry continued. “From what I understand, it costs millions of dollars to send each shuttle into space to build and man the ISS. Your space arc tech would cut that down to a fraction and potentially allow humans to go back to the Moon or Mars or even to build colonies there. And after Ultron, you need to do something to compensate the world for nearly destroying it!”

Tony stared straight ahead. He couldn’t look at Harry. It wasn’t that what he was saying was something new, after all, Pepper’d had some strong words to say on their honeymoon about how careless and reckless he tended to be and that if he wanted to be a husband that she could continue to be proud of, then he needed to curb those tendencies and to focus on the good that he was capable of.

It was then that the curve of the planet brought them within sight of the International Space Station itself. Tony couldn’t help but scoff at the absurdity of its construction. It was all gangly and ugly and inefficient. He could have designed something better than that in his sleep a decade ago before he even had this tech.

“I’ll think about it,” he finally allowed.

“That’s all I ask,” Harry said. “Now, I thought we were going to the Moon?”

“Someone’s been looking at my flight plan,” Tony replied.

Pulling the controls around, he pointed the nose of the quinjet out and away from the planet, straight towards the big, silver globe hanging in the middle of space and fired the reactors.

Heimdell was right, their journey was much longer than any that Thor had ever taken before. Not even his most recent trip to Xandar at the centre of the Nova Empire had lasted this long. Eventually, though, Thor noted the end of the bridge come into view and he prepared himself.

When the beam finally departed, he found that he and his friends were quickly being surrounded by a platoon of Kree, all carrying large weapons held ready and pointing at the five of them. He coughed, noting that the air here was different than any that he’d breathed before; although he could breathe it, it wasn’t pleasant.


None lowered their weapons or even flinched at Sif’s declaration, none that is, except for the Platoon Captain. The blue-skinned Kree with the short, pointed golden goatee took a single step towards them.

“State your business on Hala,” he ordered.
Thor placed a hand on Sif’s shoulder to prevent her speaking and took a step forward.

“I come seeking information on a Kree by the name of Ronan the Accuser,” he said.

“What is Ronan to you?” the Captain asked suspiciously.

“Ronan is one who may offer information on the one that he worked for, the one that I truly seek,” Thor replied.

“Then you are out of luck, Asgardian. Ronan was killed in battle some time ago.”

“I am aware of this,” Thor replied. “However, it is still my hope that there may be something that I can learn here about him that can lead me to my foe. As Prince of Asgard, I request audience with one of your Generals.”

An unseen signal must have been passed, for the guards snapped to attention, their weapons coming to a rest position across their bodies.

“General Zen-Arn has agreed to meet with you,” the Captain stated. “Be warned, the General has limited time and his patience will be easily exhausted if you waste his time.”

“I understand,” Thor replied.

With that, the Captain spun on his heels and began striding away. His platoon formed up in two lines, flanking the Asgardians who’d also fallen into formation – Thor followed by Sif and Fandral, who were followed by Volstagg and Hogun.

“Well, this is cosy,” Fandral remarked quickly followed by an, “oof.”

Thor did his best to supress his grin at what he was sure was an elbow to Fandral’s side, delivered by Sif.

They were marched through the city, along streets, amongst numerous tall, imposing buildings that seemed to loom over the planet. Finally, after a good twenty minutes’ march, the Captain turned into one such building. Thor was surprised that its ceiling was nearly twice as high as he’d expected and was extremely well-lit with not one corner containing even a hint of a shadow for anyone to lurk in. There were also no statues as one might expect with a militarily-bent civilization; there were, however, numerous paintings and murals on the walls of past battles.

Three wide double doors later, Thor and his companions were stopped in front of a fourth door, this one much more ‘normal’-looking. The Captain knocked, entered and eventually returned.

“You may enter,” he said.

“My thanks,” Thor replied.

The guards did not follow them in, but there was no need to for there were already eight Kree stationed in pairs around the room – four beside the doors that they’d just entered, two against the walls to either side and the remaining pair standing at attention directly behind the large desk that a Kree was sitting behind.

It was one of the last guards that particularly caught Thor’s attention. The woman wasn’t blue-skinned like every other Kree that he’d ever encountered. Instead, her face was the pinkish-hue that an Asgardian or Midgardian would have. Despite this, there was no doubting her status as a Kree Captain – the traditional black uniform with green upper chest, shoulders, gauntlets and boots
attested to that. There was a golden starburst pattern in the centre of her chest as well that Thor suspected was a mark of which particular military unit she belonged to.

“’Asgardian, I understand that you have questions about the Kree Ronan the Accuser?’ General Zen-Arn asked.

“I do,” Thor replied. “Thank you for agreeing to see me.”

“Well, speak up, I don’t have all day!” General Zen-Arn stated impatiently.

Thor chose to forgo any pleasantries and get straight down to business.

“It is my understanding that when Ronan died, he was working for a person known as Thanos.”


“It is my belief that Thanos is a danger to the entire universe,” Thor said. “He seeks to wield a power that none should ever have.”

“Regardless of your belief, no one and certainly not this Titan can ever be a threat to the might of the Kree Empire,” the General waved away Thor’s concern.

“He is seeking the Infinity Stones,” Thor countered.

That caught the General’s attention as, for the first time since Thor and his friends had entered the room, the General actually looked at them, even going so far as to sit back in his chair, ignoring his paperwork entirely.

“The Infinity Stones, you say? What evidence do you have of this?”

“I have seen the one with my own eyes that Thanos was very close to gaining. Ronan managed to attain the Stone first and was intent on destroying Xandar before he was felled in combat,” Thor replied.

“One Stone that sounds as though it’s been denied him,” the General pointed out.

“I suspect that Thanos is also responsible for sending an army of Chitauri to Midgard, of the Nine Realms, the planet that the inhabitants call Earth in an effort to acquire another,” Thor said and his eyes flicked to the strange Kree Captain at her sharp in-take of breath at his statement. “He was unsuccessful in that attempt as well.”

“The Chitauri are a foul abomination against nature and ones that have indeed only ever been encountered in conjunction with the name ‘Thanos’,“ General Zen-Arn nodded. “Do you have any information regarding Thanos’ ultimate goal?”

“Speculation at best,” Thor replied.

“Then speculate!” the General instructed.

“A contact that I recently made believes that Thanos is intent on wiping out half of the galaxy’s population in order for the remaining half to have more resources to utilize. I believe that it is his goal to unite the Infinity Stones in order to accomplish this.”

“There are Six Infinity Stones; you have mentioned two. How many do you know the location of?” the General demanded.
“I have encountered four,” Thor replied vaguely. “Two have not surfaced in recent times and remain shrouded in mystery to me. I do not know whether or not Thanos has already found these Stones. I do know that he must not be allowed to possess any of them.”

“General, if I may,” the Captain spoke up and the General waved his hand in permission for her to continue. “There appears to be a potential threat here. Perhaps it would be wise for a Kree to ascertain firsthand whether or not this danger is likely to reach the Empire.”

The General spun his chair about to face her for a full half-minute before he turned back to Thor.

“While the Kree know of this Thanos that you seek, we have no intelligence on his current whereabouts or military size or strength,” General Zen-Arn stated. “The fact that Ronan is dead precludes us from seeking intelligence from that quarter. However, you have presented us with information that we did not have previously. To assist in ascertaining how much of a threat this Titan poses, I am assigning Captain Dan-Vers to accompany you until such time as either the threat is neutralised or deemed to be non-existent.”

“I will serve honourably and to the best of my ability,” Captain Dan-Vers stated, bringing her right arm across her body so that her fist met her chest.

“I appreciate your agreeing to see me,” Thor said but the General had already turned back to his paperwork and Thor knew that they’d been dismissed.

The doors behind him were opened and Thor turned, striding through his own friends before hearing their footsteps echoing behind his own. There was a fifth behind him as well. Captain Dan-Vers. She was a puzzle and one that Thor hoped to unravel. But that could wait until they’d left the heart of the Kree Empire.

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“Five hours,” Tony stated proudly.

“What?” Harry asked, looking up from the book that he’d been reading.

“Five hours,” Tony repeated. “We’ve achieved orbit around the Moon and it only took five hours to get here. Do you understand what an achievement that is? We’ll be going down in the history books.”

Closing his book, Harry looked at Tony. “Give me some context, please.”

“The Apollo missions took about three days to travel from the Earth to the Moon. The fastest ever – before today – recorded trip was the New Horizons probe which took eight and a half hours. We’ve smashed both of those records and that’s on our first trip without me even pushing the engines. I bet I could shave off half an hour from that on our return trip without even trying.”

“Congratulations,” Harry said, shifting so that he could get a better look out of the quinjets’ front windows.

The Moon was so very close, it filled the entire view. Craters were the predominant features, as expected. The good thing was that every single one of them was different, making the view not as monotonous as it could otherwise be. Some craters were larger than entire cities back on Earth, others were smaller than a house. A couple looked to have even been created inside other craters and two together had been formed like a strange infinity symbol.

“Was the plan to land?” Harry asked.
“Not this trip,” Tony replied. “Mostly it was to get here, give the quinjet a really good shake-down cruise. We’ll take a pass over the important sites, though – the Sea of Tranquillity, of course, and the Luther Crater.”

Harry frowned. “I’ve heard of the Sea of Tranquillity, that’s where the first Moon landing was. What’s special about the Luther Crater?”

“I picked up an odd reading from there and I’ve never been able to pinpoint exactly what it was,” Tony replied. “I figured while we were here, we’d have a closer look.”

While it was interesting seeing the Moon up close, Harry found that he quickly grew bored of the monotonous grey. Even the different sized and shaped craters couldn’t hold his attention for overly long. Thankfully, though, their first destination was reached in under an hour.

“We’re coming up on the Luther Crater now,” Tony told him. “Hmm, let’s see. Kinda on the small size – only about ten kilometres in diameter. But there’s definitely something there. It’s faint, though, hard to get a reading on.”

Harry frowned down at the crater. It didn’t look any different from any of the others. Glancing at the readings that Tony was taking, he noted that it was less than two kilometres deep, not that that stopped him from seeing the bottom.

“I can’t get it,” Tony stated in clear frustration. “It’s like I’m being blocked!”

“Here, let me try something,” Harry said.

Tony glanced at him sceptically, a look that Harry ignored. What was needed was to find out if there was actually something there, something that was blocking Tony’s tech.

Focussing inwards, Harry let his magic well up inside him, feeling it build and build until he could barely contain it. And then his eyes snapped open, focussing on a point about five metres outside the quinjet. Slowly, a ball of emerald green appeared. Harry let his magic build inside it, making it stronger, steadier. When he was finally happy with it, certain that it wouldn’t simply dissipate, he banished it straight down towards the crater.

Harry watched as the green ball sailed down before unexpectedly impacting a dome of some kind. The magic washed over it and down, highlighting that it was there, protecting something, hiding something. Harry’s eyes widened when he thought that he saw the shadow of buildings down there.

“Did you just see …?” Harry breathed.

But Tony was already manipulating the quinjet’s controls, bringing her about and up, the engines roaring as he punched more and more speed out of her.

“Saw it. Getting the hell away from it,” Tony replied.

The quinjet zigged and zagged under Tony’s guidance, Harry assumed that it was just in case of anything firing at them.

“I’m pushing the engines as hard as I can,” Tony stated. “If we don’t halve the time it took to get here on the trip home, I’ll be surprised. And when we get there, we can try to work out what in the hell that was.”

“Now, aren’t you glad that you brought me?” Harry asked.
Tony stared at him. “I will be if you didn’t just start an interstellar war by ringing their bell the way you just did.”

Pepper found the one that she was looking for out on the deck overlooking the garden on Paradis Noir with a wine glass in hand. Actually, all four ladies had a glass of wine in their hand as they relaxed, obviously enjoying both the view and the setting sun.

“Pepper! Come join us,” Nat smiled, indicating one of the vacant chairs. Despite her task, she couldn’t resist and settled onto the chair beside Daphne.

“Demi! Another glass of wine, if you please,” Lavender called to the air. Instantly, a large glass of a deep red wine appeared on the small table beside her chair. Pepper smiled as she picked it up and savoured the aroma.

“I don’t think that I’ve ever had this wine before,” she observed after taking a sip of the fruity bouquet. “What is it?”

“Would you believe it’s an Elvin wine?” Jane asked. “Made with magic.”

“It is divine,” Pepper said.

“So, how was the honeymoon?” Nat asked, eliciting a round of giggles from the ladies there.

“Better question, how long did it take Tony to ditch you for some tech?” Jane asked.

“Actually, he did extremely well,” Pepper said. “I had his undivided attention for the first six days. It was almost too much.”

“Undivided, huh? So, should we be expecting the sound of tiny feet in about nine months?” Lavender asked.

“Actually, that’s why I’m here,” Pepper said, and four heads snapped towards her.

“You’re pregnant? Already?” Jane asked.

“Not that I know of,” Pepper replied and startled backwards slightly as Daphne’s wand appeared and waved over her stomach.

“Nope, not yet,” Daphne said after nothing seemed to happen.

“We were talking, though,” Pepper confided. “Both of our biological clocks are ticking and, now that Tony’s finally committed, he’s committed. He’s not opposed to having a child.”

“I’m glad that I’m already sitting,” Nat stated. “I never would have expected that of Tony Stark.”

“Let’s just say that he’s mellowed over the years, especially now seeing Clint’s family and how Harry is with Teddy,” Pepper said.

“Yeah, I can see that,” Nat smiled, almost sadly. “If you want kids, then do it; don’t put it off until it’s too late. I know how that feels.”

“You’re not that old,” Lavender said, tipping her glass at Nat.
Nat laughed. “You’d be surprised. The Red Room, where I was trained … changed me in more ways than one. The graduation ceremony, though, that ensured that children would never be an issue for me. It’s efficient.”

“If you’d like, I could examine you later, see if magic could give you back the option,” Daphne offered. “It’s completely your choice.”

“Thank you for the offer but it’s probably too late for me,” she replied.

“Think about it, at least,” Daphne insisted.

“Exactly how early can you test for pregnancy?” Jane asked.

“Within a few hours, I think,” Lavender replied.

“That’s right. And after three days, we can even tell the sex of the baby,” Daphne added. “It’s a fairly simple charm.”

“Can you teach me?” Lavender asked. “Not that I’ve got a guy or anything but it wouldn’t hurt to know.”

“Watch,” Daphne said, pulling her wand once more.

She directed it at her own abdomen, circled it anticlockwise twice and gave a gentle tap.

“Coram infantem revelare,” she intoned.

For a brief instant, her stomach glowed blue.

“How come my stomach didn’t glow like that when you tested me?” Pepper asked.

“Because you’re not pregnant,” Lavender said, her eyes still glued to Daphne’s stomach. “Daphne is!”

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Sharon Carter, former S.H.I.E.L.D. Special Agent, current CIA operative, surreptitiously checked her surroundings once again, using a combination of her peripheral vision, the small hand-held mirror on her desk and the glass of the windows around her. Noting that all was clear, that she wasn’t being observed, she reopened the window on her computer and continued typing.

Subject: Brock Rumlow

Former Affiliation: S.H.I.E.L.D., member of S.T.R.I.K.E. and secretly, HYDRA

Current Affiliation: None.

Known Associates: mercenaries; a team handpicked by Rumlow himself. See attached.

Current Codename: Crossbones

Details: Rumlow survived HYDRA’s uprising, although he was seriously injured in the destruction of the Triskelion. Underwent fourteen life-saving surgeries. Escaped custody by assaulting two nurses and his guard. Since his escape, Rumlow has been linked to thirty-one armed robberies of police stations and military convoys. Has become a well-known and connected individual in worldwide black-market arms.
Conclusion: Rumlow has set himself up as an independent arms dealer trading in all manner of weapons, both munitions and biological agents. Has no known loyalties apart from himself. Able to cross any international border.

Last Seen: Lagos, Nigeria, five hours ago.

This information is marked Priority One

The brief was short but marking it ‘Priority One’, Sharon knew that it’d be taken seriously and acted on hastily.

A second check to ensure that she still wasn’t being observed gave Sharon the confidence to send the package. Really, the CIA needed to update their protocols; but then, perhaps it was simply that she was comparing them to S.H.I.E.L.D. who were much more paranoid about that sort of thing.

Hopefully, Rumlow would soon be caught. After all, watching and guarding Rumlow had been the very last order that Sharon had been given as a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent, orders that she hadn’t been able to carry out very well due to S.H.I.E.L.D.’s collapse. And while her old organisation was making a comeback and she knew that she could easily step back into it, she simply didn’t feel as though she deserved to, at least, not until this last order had been taken care of.

File delivered, her computer said.

“Go get ‘em, Hill,” she whispered.
Visitors From Above

Chapter Notes

A/N – We’re now a week away from the 2 year anniversary of the posting of the very first chapter of Heroes Assemble! on fanfiction dot net. I have dedicated hundreds and hundreds of hours to this story and now have it up on 3 different platforms – fanfiction dot net, A03 and Wattpad – for people to enjoy. I found out through one of my dedicated followers that someone was re-posting Heroes as their own story on Wattpad. For alerting me to this, this chapter of Heroes is dedicated to one of my followers on Wattpad and someone who enjoys the story as much as I do: GraceNdivine. Thankyou for looking out for me and my story.

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Chapter 89 – Visitors From Above

The instant that the quinjet landed, Harry hit the button to lower the rear ramp and had to promptly swivel to the side to avoid getting hit by the pieces of Iron Man armour shooting through the door. He watched as Tony stood, his arms out wide as the armour locked into place. As the helmet snapped on, the Iron Man armour eyes and the chest piece began glowing.

“You good?” Harry asked.

“I am now,” Tony replied as they strode from the quinjet. “This armour’s a lot more powerful than the Space Armour. Convene in the Training Room; I've contacted the others.”

Harry twisted on the spot arriving at the designated room long before Iron Man flew in, landing in his trademark crouch. And then others began arriving: Hawkeye, Bruce, Mockingbird, Pietro, War Machine …

“That’s it? Where’s everyone else?” Tony asked, sounding somewhere between panicked and indignant.

“Cap’s taken a team to Nigeria after a threat,” Bobbi replied. “Everyone else is either at their day jobs or at school.”

“But I called a Code Red!” Tony protested.

“Ever heard of the boy who cried wolf?” Clint asked. “That’s what happens; you call it for unimportant things, people don’t believe you the next time.”

“My wedding to Pepper was anything but unimportant, Bird-brain,” Tony shot back. “But this really is a Code Red situation.”

“It is,” Harry confirmed. “We’ll have to fill the others in later.”

“Fill us in on what?” Rhodey asked.

It was at that precise moment that four individuals appeared in their midst, along with the world’s
largest dog. Every Avenger took a step back even as repulsors began glowing, bows were raised, wands were readied and Bruce’s skin took on a decided green tinge.

“We mean you no harm,” the only woman, a red-head whose excessively long hair was moving of its own accord in a non-existent breeze stated, her hands up, as though in peace.

“Who are you? What are you?” Tony asked, staring at the powerful-looking hooves for feet that one of the men had.

“I am Medusa, Queen of Attilan,” the woman said. “This is my husband Black Bolt, King of Attilan and the Inhumans. Karnack is our Advisor and Gorgon is our Head of Security.”

Harry stared at the three men. Apart from the hooves of Gorgon, they all appeared human. Black Bolt appeared to be typical Caucasian man; Gorgon – or at least, the top half of him – of African descent; and Karnack had more of an oriental look to him.

“Inhumans?” he questioned, latching on to the familiar word.

The supposed King of the Inhumans looked at him and began moving his hands in front of him in an intricate pattern.

“We Inhumans are descended from an experiment conducted by an alien race called the Kree …” Medusa said.

“That they did on ancient humans,” Tony finished. “You’re his interpreter? I’m guessing big, dark and silent there’s mute?”

“Black Bolt has vocal cords but he has not spoken a word in over two decades,” Medusa replied. “You wouldn’t like it if he did,” Gorgon stated in a deep, bass voice and a malicious grin.

“If you’re Inhumans, that means that you’ve got special abilities,” Harry said even as he swished his wand, creating a glowing silver stag that sped off through the closest wall.

Gorgon raised a vicious-looking curved sword

“What was that?” he demanded.

“I simply sent a message to my fiancé,” Harry replied. “She’ll want to be here for this.”

“In answer to your question, we do indeed have special gifts,” Medusa replied.

“Your question implies knowledge of the Inhuman race,” Karnak stated, speaking for the first time. “How?”

“Inhumans? They’re like Skye … Daisy?” Rhodey asked. “From Afterlife.”


“The Moon?” Bruce asked. “Is that why that dog looks so weird?”

“Attilan is on the Moon, yes, as you well know,” Medusa stated after Black Bolt signed. “You did not answer Karnak’s question, I noticed and I would very much like to hear such an answer.”

It was then that Daisy portkeyed in, took one look at the visitors and raised her hands while circling towards Harry.
“Magic Man?” she asked.

“This is Daisy Johnson,” Harry said, indicating her, his eyes fixed on Black Bolt. “My fiancé and an Inhuman. Honey, I’d like you to meet Black Bolt, the King of the Inhumans.”

“No way,” Daisy breathed. “My mother never mentioned anything about Inhuman royalty.”

“An Inhuman on Earth?” Karnak stated, his head tilted in wonder. “Our ancestors missed some?”

“Um, excuse me?” Pietro said, half raising his hand to get everyone’s attention. “Can we go back to the Moon?”

“You guys are aware that Galdalf and I took a jaunt to the Moon to test out the new quinjet today?” Tony said. “Well, while we were there, we checked out the Luther Crater, a spot on the Moon that I’ve been getting unusual readings from. Turns out that there’s a hidden city there. Harry’s magic bounced off their dome.”

“Magic?” Medusa asked.

“Let’s just say that Inhumans aren’t the only ‘different’ humans on the planet,” Harry replied.

“Am I understanding your explanation correctly, that you were not attacking Attilan?” Black Bolt asked through Medusa.

“Not in the slightest,” Tony replied with a shake of his head. “Scientific curiosity, nothing more.”

“Your ‘magic’ caused the integrity of the dome to drop by twelve percent,” Gorgon stated.

“Sorry about that,” Harry replied.

“How many other Inhumans are there on Earth?” Medusa asked.

Daisy shrugged. “No idea; could be thousands but there’s probably only a couple dozen of us that have gone through terrigenesis.”

“As you have?” Karnak asked.

“Yeah. Apparently, I did it ‘old school’, using a Diviner and a Kree Temple,” she replied. “Why, how many Inhumans are there in… Attilan, was is?”

“Yes, Attilan,” Medusa smiled. “There are currently just under five thousand of us.”

“Five thousand? That must be one advanced city you’ve got there,” Tony stated sounding interested.

“It was originally built by the Kree before they abandoned it and us,” Black Bolt explained through Medusa. “When they left Earth, they left behind a number of our ancestors. They descended to Earth to claim, what they thought at the time, were the rest of the Inhumans before retreating to the Moon where we could live in peace, without being hunted or shunned by the ‘normals’.”

“Doesn’t sound like society’s changed much since then,” Bobbi remarked.

“Now that it is clear that you meant no harm and you are hopefully assured that we mean you no harm, we would like to open a dialogue with you,” Medusa said, interpreting her husband’s gestures.

“How many others of Earth know of our existence?” Gorgon asked.
“Only those of us in this room,” Harry replied.

“And who will you tell of us?” Karnak asked.

“That’ll be up to you,” Daisy said. “We’ll need to tell the rest of our team, but we’re good at keeping secrets.”

The four Inhumans exchanged glances, the giant dog having decided to lie down at their feet, his eyes now half-closed.

“That will be acceptable,” Medusa nodded.

“Great. Well, if we’re going to dialogue, how about we get a little more comfortable?” Tony suggested.

“That would be nice, Tin Man,” Medusa agreed.

“His name’s Tony,” Daisy grinned. “This is Harry. Over there is Pietro …

The Bifrost released the group back onto Asgard and Thor saw Heimdall turn the hilt of his sword, cutting it off. He turned, taking in their new addition.

“Welcome to Asgard, Captain Dan-Vers,” he said, sketching a shallow bow.

“Carol,” the woman in the Kree uniform replied. “My name is Carol Danvers.”

“That is not very Kree,” Sif pointed out.

“That’s because I’m only half-Kree,” she replied, before frowning. “No, that gives the wrong impression. My genes were altered, making me part-Kree.”

“Then from where do you hail?” Volstagg asked.

“Earth,” she replied but her eyes were on Thor. “But, as you said, ‘Carol Danvers’, isn’t exactly a very Kree-sounding name. All Kree names are hyphenated, so they … adjusted mine to better fit in.”

“Huh! Midgard, we have been there. Nice place, a little backwards, though,” Fandral stated.

Thor, though, was nodding, his guess from earlier now having been confirmed.

“Are you an Inhuman?” he asked.

“I don’t know that term,” Carol replied with a frown.

“How did one from Midgard come to be a Kree soldier?” Sif asked.

“Now, that’s a long story,” she replied.

“I have called for food to be brought, we have time to hear it,” Heimdall announced.

“Good man!” Volstagg cried, slapping his friend on the back, followed by rubbing his hands together in obvious anticipation.

“And if we have to wait for Volstagg to finish eating, that gives us much longer to hear it,” Hogun added.
“Insulting but true,” Volstagg nodded.

“I would like to hear your tale,” Thor said. “I have many friends on Midgard and have spent much time there in the past few years.”

Carol walked across the room and lowered herself to sit on the steps leading to the dais where the Bifrost was controlled from.

“To be honest, there is much about my life on Earth that is hazy to me after all this time,” she began. “I was in the military, the air force. I flew fighter jets.”

Thor nodded to show that he understood the reference.

“I was good, damn good, considered one of the youngest and brightest,” she continued. “So good, in fact, that I was tapped for NASA – the United States Space Program. So, I was there when a Kree spaceship crash-landed on Earth. It was pretty much covered up straight away but because I was the first on scene and the first to meet Captain Mar-Vel, I was permitted to be ‘in the know’.”

“Who covered this up from the people of Midgard?” Thor asked, his suspicions aroused.

“They call themselves S.H.I.E.L.D. …”

“I know of them. Nick Fury never mentioned that he had met a Kree,” Thor mused.

“You know Colonel Fury?” a surprised-sounding Carol asked, her head snapping up.

“He is an ally,” Thor confirmed. “As is S.H.I.E.L.D.”

“Huh, there you go,” Carol said. “Mar-Vel and I became friends as we worked to adapt Earth tech to get his ship up and running again so that he could go home. What we didn’t know was that he was being chased by some Skrulls. Well, they caught up to him on Earth and we had to fight them. Won, too. But in the process, I was pretty-well busted up. The fact that I’d saved Mar-Vel’s life meant that he felt that he owed me. Earth medicine couldn’t save me, so he took me with him back to Hala, the Kree home world, where he made the Kree fix me. What they did to me, though, it ended up altering my genes, gave me a little extra than I started with. Saved my life, though.”

“Extra?” Sif asked. “Exactly how were you changed in these Kree ‘experiments’?”

“Don’t let them hear you call what they did to me ‘experiments’,” Carol said to her with a grin. “Mind you, that’s exactly what they were; they just don’t like it being called that, some sort of law or taboo or something on experimenting on other species from what I can tell.”

Thor shared a look with Sif. They knew exactly why that information would be suppressed.

“To answer your question, I’ve got super-human strength and durability; I can fly and I can create and fire energy blasts from my hands. Oh, and it drastically slowed my body clock,” she replied. “They weren’t too keen on taking me back to Earth after I’d gained all that. Mar-Vel looked after me, though, got me into the military and I’ve climbed the ranks since then.

“It’s not a bad life and probably better than I would have had back on Earth, to tell you the truth, especially with these powers. I would have stood out like a sore thumb,” Carol finished.

“Perhaps at one time you would have,” Thor told her. “In these times, however, you would find a home among the Avengers.”
“The Avengers?” Carol asked, looking confused.

“Earth’s Mightiest Heroes. Humans with extraordinary powers that work to make the planet better, safer from harm. I, myself, am considered one of them,” Thor told her proudly.

“Yeah? I think I’d like to hear more about them,” Carol stated.

“Daphne?” Bucky called as he strode into the hospital. She’d asked him to come, so he knew that she was here. Her message, though … something had been off. It wasn’t something that he could identify.

“In here, James,” she called.

Following the sound of her voice, he entered her office. As usual, she smiled when she saw him but again, it felt different. Hesitant, unsure maybe. Surprisingly, she pulled her wand after giving him a hug and waved it at the door. A squelching sound told him that the door had been sealed by magic and he raised an eyebrow at her.

“I don’t want us to be disturbed,” she told him.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

“No! Maybe,” she replied with a shake of her head. “Let’s sit.”

There was a small two-person couch in the room, one that they’d often sat on and talked together. He turned his body towards her, noting with a frown that she sat facing straight ahead and not looking at him any more than a glance at a time.

“Daphne, are you breaking up with me?” he asked the first thing that came into his mind.

“Merlin, no!” she cried, finally swivelling to face him, her eyes wide. “I guess I’m just a little afraid that you may wish to break off our courtship.”

“There’s no way that that’s going to happen,” he assured her. “I love you, Daphne. Now, just tell me what it is that’s bothering you.”

Her mouth opened and closed once, twice and finally she took a deep breath and he knew that she was about to begin.

“Last night, I was with the girls. The topic of children came up and Lavender asked me to show her how to do a spell that would show if she was pregnant.”

Bucky nodded, not sure where this was going but willing to listen.

“I demonstrated the spell on myself,” Daphne continued. Again, Bucky nodded, wondering why he was being told this. And then, he froze. Slowly, his mind rebooted and sped up. Pregnancy spell. On herself.

“You’re pregnant?” he asked and there was definitely a combination of hope, wistfulness, joy and terror all rolled into that question.

Her eyes lowered and she looked down.
“You are?”

In his excitement, he leant forward, hugging her and kissing her hard and long before pulling back and laughing.

“I take it you’re not objecting,” Daphne stated flatly.

“No! Why would I? I always wanted a kid; never thought that it’d happen, but always dreamed,” he told her. “How far along are you? Is it a boy or a girl? What am I talking about, it’d be way too early to know that one. Is it healthy?”

Daphne’s finger came up to cover his mouth and to stop him from talking.

“I’m about seven weeks along,” she replied. “Yes, the baby’s healthy and … it’s a boy.”

“You can tell that already? Let me guess, ‘magic’, right?”

Again, Bucky let loose with a long, joyful laugh.

“He is healthy, though, right? Only with everything that they’ve done to me, the serums and the cryostasis and whatnot; not to mention your magic … hey, will he be magical, like you?”

“That we won’t know until much, much later,” Daphne replied, “well after he’s born. But he is healthy. I’ll keep monitoring, of course, but there’s no reason to assume that he won’t stay that way.”

“I’m going to be a father!” Bucky exclaimed before once again leaning forward and wrapping her in a hug.

“It doesn’t bother you that we’re not married?” Daphne asked.

“No, but if it bothers you, I’d be ecstatic if you’d marry me. You know that we’ve talked about it.

“The concept, yes, but you’ve never really proposed, not properly,” she replied.

Bucky’s eyes focused intently on hers searching for her feelings. And then, eyes still locked on hers, he slid off the couch and onto the floor.

“Daphne Isabella Greengrass, I love you with everything that I am. You know me, warts and all and I know that you accept me for who I am. I would be honoured if you would consent to marry me. So, what do you say? Will you marry me?”

“Yes,” she whispered and dropped down beside him, wrapped her arms around him and they kissed.

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“I’m still not convinced that a baseball cap is going to be enough for you to blend in,” Falcon said over the comms. “This is Lagos, not Yankees Stadium.”

“It’s called ‘hiding in plain sight’,” Widow stated.

“We’re tourists,” Wanda added.

“At least they’re being inconspicuous where they are,” Cap chimed in. “And you’re supposed to be getting a birds-eye view from up there and finding our targets, not critiquing our covers.”

“Right, some of us have real work to do and don’t get to sit around drinking coffee all day,” Sam
replied.

“I’ll order you a cup to go,” Widow stated. “Assuming you find our man.”

It wasn’t much, but Falcon’d take it.

“Alright, little guy, let’s show ’em what we’ve got,” he said, manipulating the gauntlet controls.

Hitting the final button, a small, bird-shaped drone shot out of his pack and flew up and over the city. As he manipulated Redwing’s flight path, a small display screen appeared on the inside of his goggles, allowing Falcon to see what his drone did.

The information that Hill had given them said that Lagos was where Rumlow was. The ex-S.T.R.I.K.E. operative was now a mercenary, a black-arms dealer. Lagos wasn’t known for its military hardware. What it did have, however was the Headquarters for the Institute for Infectious Diseases, as in biological weapons. That, they were sure, would be Rumlow’s target.

Redwing crisscrossed the city, from the marketplace where the rest of the team was currently positioned, across to the business district with IFID in the exact middle of it. So far, all looked clear.

“I’m not seeing anything suspicious,” Falcon reported.

“What about that garbage truck?” Cap asked. “It’s not making any stops and there’s an awful lot of overfull bins around here.”

Directing Redwing in a curve, he focussed the drone’s ‘eye’ on the truck and tapped for an x-ray scan of it.

“You picked it, Cap,” Falcon called. “That truck’s loaded for maximum weight and the driver’s armed.”

“Move. Move. Move,” Cap ordered and Falcon took off, running across the roof before spreading his wings and taking to the sky.

Using Redwing’s telemetry, Falcon soared across the sky, intent on intercepting the garbage truck. As he passed over the dozens and dozens of market stalls below, he found it. It’d just turned into the street leading straight for IFID.

“It’s speeding up. I think they’re going to use it like a battering ram,” he called.

“I’ve got an armoured car coming out of an underground carpark,” Widow called. “Betting that’s where Rumlow and his men are.”

Falcon slapped his hips, making his guns assemble themselves in his hands as he veered to the side of the truck and began firing.

One. Two. Three tyres blew from his rounds, but still the truck didn’t stop. Movement from its rear caught his attention and he looked to see that the driver had thrown himself from the cab.

And then it hit. Crashing straight into and then through the security checkpoint before flipping over and skidding off to the side. The sound of bullets zipping past him had Falcon veering off; the armoured car had arrived, driving straight through the hole that the garbage truck had made.

“They’re in!” Falcon called.

“See them,” Cap replied.
Six guys emerged from the armoured truck even before it’d finished skidding to a stop, racing straight for the entrance.

“Oh no you don’t,” Falcon stated, his eyes narrowed.

Flaring his wings upwards, he came down hard, feet first, slamming into the rear-most merc and sending him tumbling. Somehow, the man managed to regain his feet and Falcon moved in, his fist cocked, ready to take him on, his wings retracting out of the way.

A block, a punch, a second punch. Lean back and away, continue it for a flip, kicking up, straight under the guy’s chin sending him up and over onto his back.

Falcon finished his spin on his feet, his fists up and ready but the guy was out cold.

“I need eyes on Rumlow,” Cap ordered.

“On it,” Falcon replied and immediately focussed on Redwing’s controls on his gauntlet.

“Sam!” Wanda cried.

Falcon’s head came up and around to see two guys appearing from the top of the armoured truck, machine guns in their hands. Instantly, he spun, his wings coming out and forming a shield for his body. The hail of bullets began thumping into them, but Falcon ignored them, at least for the moment.

“Got Rumlow. Third floor,” he announced after using Redwing’s x-ray scan of the building. “Now, you two.”

Swivelling Redwing around, he targeted the mercenaries in the truck and fired a pair of mini rockets from his pack. They soared straight up and down in a tight arc, exploding on top of the truck, destroying it and taking out the bad guys at the same time.

The sound of breaking glass spun Falcon around and he could only stare as Cap came sailing down from the third storey window to land on his shield.

“Rumlow’s got the biological weapon,” Cap panted as he stood.

“Got them,” Widow called. “There’s five of them. Heading into the market.”

Instantly, Falcon took to the air, Redwing off to one side.

The panicked cries of people was quickly preceded by the sight of bodies racing through the markets. The men were pushing anything and anyone out of their way. Manipulating Redwing’s controls, he attempted to get a bead on the weapon.

“No good, I can’t tell which one has it,” he called.

“I’ve got them,” Wanda said. “Coming your way, Sam.”

Falcon’s confusion lasted a bare fraction of a second before one of the men suddenly launched skywards, his screams of panic most likely amplified by the red magic that had engulfed his body. Angling his wings, Falcon shot straight at the guy, grabbed him by the collar and flew off.

A small fountain caught his attention and Falcon switched to it, dropping the guy straight into it. He landed just as the merc emerged from the water, splashing and spluttering and wiping the water from his eyes just in time for Falcon’s fist to slam into the side of his head. A quick search of the man’s
pockets and pack came up empty.

“No dice on this one,” he called.

“Target two is also negative,” Widow called. “Closing on three.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got him,” Cap stated.

As much as Falcon was listening to what was happening, he was also using Redwing to keep an eye on things. Cap, he saw, was in a sparring match with one of the mercenaries. Cap spun, threw his shield, ducked, dodged, got in two good punches, blocked the next and watched the man drop as Cap’s shield finally returned, hitting the guy in the back of the head.

“Negative,” Cap called.

Rumlow and the final man with him had all but run out of stalls to hide in and had circled back towards IFID. As he soared in on the pair, a bike appeared off to the side, a black-clad, red-haired woman astride it. Falcon veered back up as Widow slid her bike straight into Rumlow’s last mercenary.

Firing his guns had Rumlow changing directions, just as Falcon had wanted, taking him straight back towards Cap.

The fight between the two was fast and furious. Fists, boots, knees, knives, all were exchanged at a rapid rate. Finally, Cap seemed to get the upper hand, using his shield to slam into Rumlow and to throw him off-balance. When they separated, though, Falcon’s eyes widened at what he saw.

“Cap, your shield!”

He saw Cap glance down and then toss his shield straight up where the bomb that Rumlow had attached to it was able to detonate harmlessly.

“You know, I was there when they were torturing Bucky,” Falcon heard Rumlow say through Cap’s comm. “You wanna know what he said to me?”

“What?” Cap asked and the anger was clear to hear in his voice.

“He said, ‘next time you see Cap, you tell him, when you gotta go, you gotta go’.”

“Rumlow has a bomb and the biological weapon!” Cap called urgently.

Falcon froze, his eyes sweeping the crowd below him. There was no way to clear the field of the civilians. And no matter what Rumlow did, people were going to be killed – be it from the bomb or him releasing the biological, they’d have the same result and there was nothing that any of them could do.

The field of red that appeared around Rumlow told Falcon just how wrong he was.

But Rumlow, it seemed, wasn’t going to go so easily. Falcon watched as a great plume of red, orange and white fire ignited around his body. Wanda’s magic had it contained for now, but Falcon could see that it was getting thin. If it broke free, people were going to die. Obviously, Wanda realised it as well, for the explosive ball of fire that had been Rumlow began ascending.

Falcon watched it go straight up and prayed that Wanda could keep it together long enough.

Unfortunately, she failed. The explosive ball reached the second highest floor of IFID before it
simply broke free. Falcon watched in horror as three floors of the building were engulfed in the explosion. Glass shattered, concrete was obliterated and rained down, and offices inside were blown apart.

And then Falcon saw the people. There were bodies everywhere on all three floors.

Instantly, he contacted the Lagos authorities, ordering ambulances and fire brigades to attend. That done, he swept straight into the building, looking, searching, hoping for survivors.

ooo00ooo

“Well, this is a bleak, desolate place, isn’t’ it?” Fandral stated as the Bifrost let the six of them go.

“This world is dead,” Hogun agreed.

And it was, completely utterly dead. There wasn’t a speck of life to be seen. No people, no plants or animals. The ruins of buildings showed that once upon a time, there had been life here, a civilisation even.

“This is Titan?” Carol asked.

“It is. Where Thanos hails from,” Thor replied.

“What is it that he hopes to achieve?” Sif asked.

“With the Reality Stone in his possession, he could restore this world to its prime,” Thor replied. “With the Time Stone – one of the missing two – he could alter time so that his civilisation was once more alive and thriving."

“Is that his goal?” Hogun asked. “To restore this world?”

“I believe that it is a large part of it,” Thor said, looking around. “From what I’ve been told, he also seeks to bring a balance to the galaxy, to erase half the people everywhere from existence, to make it so a planet’s resources aren’t over-extended. Perhaps this is the reason why. Perhaps Titan suffered exactly that catastrophe.”

“Surely he knows that not every species is so fool-hardy as to run their planet dry?” Sif asked.

“Perhaps the thought has never crossed his mind,” Thor replied. “It would seem that his goal is the Infinity Stones and regardless of his intentions, whether they be well-meaning or pure folly, it ends with the same result: the deaths of uncounted trillions.”
Let's Get Ready to Rumble!

The quinjet was deathly silent as it soared home; not one person spoke. Even movement was kept to a minimum.

The objective in Lagos had been simple enough – get in, find Rumlow and his mercenaries and arrest them before they could obtain anything that could be used as a biological weapon from IFID. As was often said when it came to missions, you can plan for any contingencies but the second the rubber hits the road, all bets were off.

Rumlow had outsmarted them, managed to break into the Institute for Infectious Diseases with the Avengers hot on their tail. He’d managed to get a vial of something, too. And that’s when it all when to hell.

Their running battle had managed to take down the mercenaries without any civilian casualties. There’d been some minor property damage, but nothing severe. Rumlow, though, had been ready for them with an explosive vest, ready to sacrifice himself in order to see the Avengers fail.

The explosion was sure to kill dozens at the very least. Wanda, though, had managed to wrap her magic around the exploding man and bomb. But it was powerful, too powerful for her. She’d attempted to send it skyward where it could explode without doing any harm.

Unfortunately, she’d lost control of it when it’d been far too close to the IFID Headquarters building. Twenty-six people had been killed in the blast, another eighteen injured.

They’d worked as quickly as they could, finding the survivors, doing what they could for them before and even after the ambulances arrived.

It hadn’t been enough.

Every one of them was shaken by what’d happened, analysing what had gone wrong, what they could have done differently, what they should have done differently. Wanda, though, took it the hardest. Even now, she was as close to a ball as you could get – her knees up against her chest, her arms locked around her legs, head down and hair hiding her from the world. Silent tears fell from her face as she mourned what’d happened, what she felt responsible for.

Both Steve and Nat had spent time with her, talking to her about missions that’d gone wrong for them, about how you never forgot but you made damn sure that you learnt from it so that nothing like it could ever happen again.

As Sam banked the quinjet in towards the hanger, he was pleased to see that Doc Greengrass was already there, waiting for them. She was a Magical Mind Healer, a counsellor of sorts from what Sam could work out. And that sounded exactly what Wanda needed. Hell, Sam was of the opinion that they could all do with some time talking to her; he knew that he sure would be.

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The King of Wakanda stood stiffly as he watched the jet coming in to land. Beside him and slight behind to either side of him stood his children, the Prince and Princess. His guards, his Dora Milaje, were at attention, fanned out as well.

This jet was being honoured not for itself, but for what it carried inside it. Coffins. Eleven of them. Relief workers, going about their normal duties, doing what they could for the poor and
underprivileged of the world.

In this case, they had been in Lagos, Nigeria, discussing medicines and diseases and how to prevent and treat them when the disaster struck. A bomb exploded, killing them instantly. Instantly, at least they had that much, not being forced to suffer. What made it worse was that they should have been safe on the ninth floor of the building when the explosion happened outside of the building.

But the Avengers had interfered. Made the bomb fly into the sky until it was just the right height to detonate and kill the people inside.

These Avengers had no right being in Nigeria at all. None were citizens of that country. From what King T’Chaka had been told, they hadn’t even requested permission from the government to enter or even informed them that they were there to apprehend a criminal. No, they simply went wherever they pleased, did whatever they wanted and damn the consequences. The innocent were made to suffer, to bleed and die.

King T’Chaka bowed as the first of the coffins was brought forth by six guards, marched slowly across the tarmac and loaded into the first of the carts waiting for it.

“This atrocity must not be allowed to stand,” Prince T’Challa stated.

“I agree, my son, but what would you have us do? Wakanda is considered a poor, backwards, third-world country by the outside world,” King T’Chaka reminded him.

“Allow me to take my jet and strike back, to teach them that Wakanda is not their plaything,” the prince replied harshly.

“Your anger is getting the better of you, my son,” King T’Chaka said gently. “War is not our way and the Black Panther is to protect Wakanda, not to attack and start a fight with those who would harm us. But there may be another way.”

“What way, Father?” Shuri, his daughter asked.

“The United Nations has been working on a document that would curtail these Avengers and others like them, make them follow laws and work with governments, not despite or against them,” King T’Chaka replied. “So far, I have remained silent in the talks but perhaps it is time to speak up.”

“Why haven’t you spoken before this?” T’Challa asked.

“That is simple, my son,” King T’Chaka replied, turning to face him. “These new laws, these Accords, are aimed at all enhanced individuals, be it through technology or science or magic or experimentation. The Black Panther will fall under this law as well.”

“The Black Panther has never operated outside of Wakanda,” Shuri stated.

“No true, Daughter. You may need to revise your history of our people,” King T’Chaka replied. “It is rare, however. And if he needed to again, those laws may hamper his ability to protect our people. But perhaps by speaking up, I can assure that there are ways around the law for our Protector.”

“May I accompany you to these talks, Father?” Prince T’Challa asked.

“I was going to suggest it,” King T’Chaka said, inclining his head. “One day, you will lead our people not only here within our own lands but also within the eyes of the world. It is my duty to ensure that you are ready for that time.”
“That won’t be for a great many years,” T’Challa said.

“Perhaps, perhaps not. One never knows when the call to the Great Plains will come, we must always be ready to heed the call,” King T’Chaka stated.

With that decided, the three turned back to the unloading of the jet, honouring each one on their final journey home.

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Captain America looked over the assembled Avengers before him, taking them all in, judging their readiness. Most looked eager for whatever was to come, not that they knew what it was just yet. A couple appeared to be relaxing, conserving their energy. And then there was Wanda. She was just as he expected – looking incredibly depressed, the weight of what happened in Lagos still haunting her.

Nodding to Mockingbird, the two stepped forward, instantly capturing everyone’s attention.

“Today we’re going to be trying something a little different,” he began. “A training scenario that we’ve never attempted before but one that you should all learn a lot from.”

“As well as have a lot of fun with,” Mockingbird added.

“That’s right,” Cap nodded. “First and foremost, this is a training scenario. And while we’ll all be using our suits and abilities and treating it as though it was real, you also get to have some fun.”

“Exactly what have you got up that spangly sleeve of yours?” Iron Man asked.

“In its simplest terms, Capture the Flag,” Cap replied.

That got some interest and had them all looking slightly more attentively.

“This will be a team event and we’ll be using a fair swath of the island for it,” Mockingbird continued. “There are twenty of us here, so two teams of ten. The aim is to work together to find and capture the other team’s flag while protecting your own. There will also be some automatons. Mage?”

Mage stepped forward and swished his wand at a large box off to the side, making it disappear. What it revealed was a crude human-shaped body dressed in basic black shorts and shirt. It was bald and its face only really approximated a person’s, with a blob for a nose and ears and sunken parts where eyes should be.

“This can follow basic commands – sit, stand, walk, stop, turn right, turn left,” Mage stated.

“Each team will have six of these, ‘hostages’ located with their flag,” Cap continued. “Rescuing the hostages from the opposing team will gain you bonus points.”

“There are also these,” Mockingbird stated, pulling a sheet off of a table to the side.

On it, were two dozen over-large firearms, both handheld and rifle. She picked one up and held it up for all there to see properly.

“These fire like a normal gun,” Mockingbird continued. “But what they actually fire are paintballs, albeit with a magical ‘kick’.”

“They’ll knock you out for approximately thirty seconds,” Mage explained. “And the paint will stay, allowing everyone to see at the end who was hit and how many times.”
“That’ll also be taken into account when we determine which team is the ‘winner’,” Cap stated. “There are two portkeys that will take the teams to two different parts of the island. Once your team has the flag and as many ‘hostages’ saved as possible, use your watches to let everyone know and we’ll rendezvous back here.”

“What are the teams?” Widow asked.

“Before we reveal that,” Cap replied. “There are two of our number that have yet to announce their codenames. Wanda? Pietro?”

For a second, both looked startled.

“Quicksilver,” Pietro called proudly.

“I … I’m not sure,” Wanda replied hesitantly. “I haven’t really given it much thought.”

“You want to leave it to the master,” Iron Man jumped in. “Let’s see, what’d sound good?”

“She’s magical, right, like a witch?” Marauder called.

“Witch,” Iron Man repeated and if it wasn’t for his face mask, all there were sure that he was wrinkling his nose in disgust. “Lame. Needs something to spice it up.”

“Red Witch?” Squirrel Girl suggested. “You know, because of her magic being red.”

“That’s it,” Iron Man stated. “Scarlet Witch!”

“Oh, I thought you liked my idea,” Squirrel Girl sighed.

“Wanda?” Cap asked.

“Sounds okay,” she shrugged.

“Okay? Just ‘okay’? It’s better than anything else any of you could come up with,” Iron Man replied indignantly.


That got everyone’s attention and distracted Iron Man from the beginning of his rant.

“We were thinking that it would be interesting to see how the Academy did as one unit,” she continued. “They’ve been training a lot together and have a fairly good idea of how well they can work together. That should counter the more ‘experienced’ members of the Avengers.”

“Blue team, when I call your name, you can collect your weapon from this end of the table; yellow team, yours are at the other end,” Cap said. “Yellow Team consists of Spider-Man, Squirrel Girl, She-Hulk, Marauder, Komodo, Falcon, War Machine, Scarlet Witch and Quicksilver, with Mockingbird leading them. That means everyone else – Iron Man, Mage, Widow, Hawkeye, Hulk, Quake, Daredevil, Vision and Wolf – you’re with me on Blue Team.”

“Is there a time limit?” Hawkeye asked.

“No. This goes for as long as it takes,” Mockingbird said. “And considering that none of you know exactly how far apart the two teams will start, it’s probably best that way.”

“The only overriding factor will be in the case of an emergency and Hill will be in charge of letting
us know that,” Cap added. “Well, what are you waiting for? Grab your gear and get to your portkey!”

There was a mad scramble as the two teams sorted themselves out, each of them picking up a gun and forming around the two large hula-hoops. Then, once everyone had grabbed hold, Mage activated them, causing a pair of large, multicoloured flashes of light before the training room was emptied.

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“Alright, Gandalf, where are we and which way to the wannabes?” Tony asked the instant that the portkey had released them and the Blue Team had dropped the hoop.

“We’re somewhere on the island,” Harry replied. “Other than that, your guess is as good as mine.”

“I thought that you had to know where you were going in order to create one of your magic portkeys?” Nat said.

“True. If I had made the portkeys.”

“You didn’t?” Daisy asked, clearly surprised.

“No,” Harry replied, shaking his head. “Lavender and Daphne came out on brooms to find the places the two groups would start at. We thought that it’d be fairer that way.”

“So, we’re going to have to do this the old-fashioned way?” Tony asked. “Where’s the fun in that?”

“Sounds fun to me?” Bucky stated.

“Don’t worry ‘dad’, your idea of fun will change soon enough,” Clint grinned.

“And Tony, don’t dismiss the other team, they’ve got some good people with some amazing skills on it,” Steve stated. “We’ve worked with them before and Bobbi’s been training them for quite a while now. They could easily surprise all of us.”

“It would be prudent to assess our strengths and weaknesses and come up with a strategy,” Vision suggested.

They were on the top of a small hill. Three grassy sides led down into a valley; the fourth side was heavily forested, dipped down a small way before rising again, higher than the hill they were on, right up the side of the mountain. Just in front of them was a small cabin with a single door and no windows on any of its sides.

“What exactly are these automatons?” Matt asked, cocking his head in the direction that the six humanoids were sitting against the back wall.

“A basic magical construct,” Harry replied. “They’ll only last for a couple of days before reverting to their base components. Figured they were good enough for this exercise.”

“This is no good,” Clint stated, squeezing in through the door and across to the blue flag that had been planted in the middle of the room.

Taking the flag off of its staff, he looked straight up and then across to Harry.

“Gimme a boost.”
Lifting his hand, Harry levitated Clint so that he was able to reach the roof where he attached the flag to the ceiling with four arrowheads.

“No one ever looks up,” Clint explained as Harry lowered him back to the ground.

“Peter says the same thing all the time,” Matt commented.

“I’d assume that the other team has a similar sort of setup,” Daisy stated. “So, we have to find them, get their flag and hostages and get out, right?”

“Yes,” Steve stated. “I think two teams would be best – one to defend our own flag and hostages, the other to capture our targets.”

“I don’t think it’d be a good idea to have the Hulk on the attacking team,” Bruce said. “I’m not sure that he’d get it that this is just a game.”

“I’ll stay behind as well,” Harry said. “I can think of a few tricks to slow down any attackers.”

“You’ll need them, especially with Pietro,” Clint commented.

“Right, here’s what we’ll do …” Steve began.

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Marauder loved the feel of the wind in his face as he raced across the island on his brand new Lightning Bolt broom. Far to either side of him, flew Falcon and War Machine. The three of them had been tasked with searching out the ‘enemy’, to either find their ‘hideout’ or to spot them attempting to find their own.

Their base – a hut in the middle of a plain of grassy fields – would ordinarily be easily to spot from the sky. Marauder, though, had done his best to make it harder to find. He’d ‘cloaked’ the whole building in a notice-me-not charm. He’d almost completely drained himself doing it, though. Notice-me-nots weren’t supposed to be used on something so big, not to mention that it was a NEWT-level spell at that. To be honest, he wasn’t sure how long it’d hold; hopefully long enough for them to achieve their goals first.

Already, they’d been searching the island for the other team for close to two hours. For a small island, it was sure taking a surprisingly long time to search, even with the three of them in the air plus the others on the ground. Their plan called for them to search in a spiral pattern out from their base. He knew that, eventually, they’d find them; the question was fast becoming whether it’d be before dark or not.

Movement in the tree line ahead of him had him slowing, focussing in on what it was, checking to see if he’d finally found the ‘enemy’. A feathered head followed by a sleek black body, its wings tucked back told Marauder exactly what it was: a hippogriff.

Now that he’d seen one, the rest of the herd could be made out as each one emerged from the trees. Unconsciously, he’d drifted lower, a smile on his face at the majestic animals.

Unfortunately, they were also his undoing.

A grunt escaped him as something slammed into the side of his thigh and his broom shied away. Looking down, he frowned at the blob of blue.

And then the world faded to black as he slipped from his broom, falling the ten metres to the ground.
He never even felt it when gravity waves caught him and lowered him gently the rest of the way, nor knew it when his broom was retrieved and placed beside him.

“WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO GET FIRST? THE FLAG OR THE HOSTAGES?” QUICKSILVER ASKED.

“They’ll know we’re here and ready to attack no matter what you grab first,” She-Hulk pointed out.

“NOT IF I’M QUICK ENOUGH,” QUICKSILVER GRINNED.

“I’M ONLY COUNTING THE THREE OF THEM – MAGE, DAREDEVIL AND BRUCE,” SPIDER-MAN SAID AS HE CREST FORWARD ON HIS HANDS AND FEET.

“If Matt’s here, what’s the odds that they already know we’re here?” Squirrel Girl whispered. “His hearing if phenomenal.”

“THEN I’D BEST GET THE FLAG FIRST,” QUICKSILVER SAID, STANDING UP AND CRACKING HIS NECK. “ENSURE THE VICTORY, AT LEAST.”

And then, in a blur, he was gone. Well, a blur to the others. To him, it was just as though everyone else had slowed down to the point of all but being frozen in time.

The hut was directly before him, the door closed, but that didn’t mean anything – not even a lock lasted very long when vibrated quickly enough.

A strange tingle washed over his skin metres in front of the hut and Quicksilver frowned at it, wondering what it was. But he was already past before it registered so, he ignored it. His hand closed around the doorknob and he paused in surprise to find that it wasn’t even locked.

Shrugging at their stupidity and arrogance, he simply opened the door and sped in.

There was the flag, sitting on its pole in the middle of the room. The six ‘hostages’ were lined up on chairs against the back wall. Quicksilver aimed to race straight across the room, grab the flag and a single automaton and race back out again.

At least, that was his plan.

What actually happened was that, the instant that his foot stepped inside the hut, it slid out from under him and it was all that he could do to keep his balance as he began sliding across the floor. And then he began accelerating! His feet churned under him and shot him forward at a speed that he’d never dreamed possible – straight at and then through the automatons that weren’t there and the make-believe wall.

Quicksilver didn’t stop until he was out the other side, into the trees, down the hill and halfway up the mountain. By the time that he’d managed to break whatever had been done to him, he was out of breath and his hair was wild and filled with leaves and twigs. His chest was heaving as he attempted to regain his breath and he looked down at himself with his hands on his knees. Tears, dirt and scratches of blood all marred his clothes and skin. He looked an absolute mess and he knew it

“What just happened?” he wondered.

“They won’t fall for that again,” Mage remarked even as he grinned at seeing Pietro disappear.
through where he’d projected an image of the hut to be.

“But it’ll make them stop and think, not just rush in,” Bruce pointed out.

“I count three where Pietro was; another three coming in from the west, from the air,” Daredevil stated.

“Bruce?” Mage said pointedly.

“Alright; I just hope Hulk understands that this isn’t real,” Bruce sighed even as his skin began turning green and he began growing.

“Hulk! Hulk!” Mage called after Bruce had finished his change.

Hulk spun to face him, a fierce expression on his face. He was ready to fight and eager to smash.

“Hulk!” Mage repeated. “Our job is to guard that hut. No one goes in. And Hulk, no smashing. We’re playing a game.”

Hulk’s face took on a look of intense concentration before he said a single word. “Tag.”

“Something like that, big guy,” Mage grinned.

“Here they come,” Daredevil warned.

Leaving Hulk and Daredevil to deal with the three coming at ground level, Mage turned towards the three coming in from the air. A wide-area impedementa hit Falcon, War Machine and Marauder like a wall, stopping them cold, freezing them in place mid-air.

Mage knew that he had to work fast. A pair of heavy ropes shot from his wand, across the sky and slammed into Falcon and Marauder, wrapping them up. Marauder was all but slammed face first into his broom as the ropes wound around him; Falcon had his wings twisted about him as he was bound. Ignoring War Machine for the moment, Mage levitated the two to the ground so that they wouldn’t be hurt.

Seeing War Machine come out of the jinx and bring his paintball gun to bear, he twisted, apparating ten metres away and directly behind the Avenger.

Daredevil, though, wasn’t wasting the opportunity that Mage had brought. Spinning out of the hand to hand battle that he was currently in with Squirrel Girl, he flipped over, landing with his gun out and fired, painting the two that Mage had downed in blue, knocking them out.

“Little spider want play,” Hulk rumbled as he plucked the web-line from his arm and yanked.

Spider-Man was pulled towards him with a surprised cry, only just managing to slip down and under Hulk’s outstretched and open fist before he was caught. Hulk looked confused and frustrated as he began twisting his body this way and that as he attempted to catch the spider that was running around and around him.

Hulk didn’t notice Spider-Man’s plan until the red and blue clad one suddenly stopped, braced his legs and gave a great pull of the web-line that he’d spun around Hulk.

“Tim-ber!” Spider-Man called gleefully as Hulk’s legs snapped together and he lost balance to come crashing to the ground.

His triumph, though, was incredibly short lived as Mage hit him with one of the stunner-paintballs,
crumpling him where he stood.

With a roar, Hulk sat up, ripped at the webbing binding his legs and pulled it away. He was just about to go teach the spider a lesson when he caught sight of something or rather someone green. A huge grin morphed onto his face and he reached out, poking his finger into She-Hulk’s shoulder.

“Tag!” he bellowed and promptly bounded away into the forest.

Both teams, at least the ones still conscious, froze in their battle to stare at each other.

“Um, what?” War Machine asked.

“I told him that we were playing a game,” Mage shrugged. “He likes ‘tag’.”

“You talk too much,” Quicksilver proclaimed as he slid into the midst of them before ducking inside the hut.

Mage grinned as the speedster froze in the middle of the room, a golden haze around him, his arms waving wildly about, his eyes wide.

Daredevil dropped from the roof of the hut where he’d just finished knocking Squirrel Girl unconscious, landed on one knee and fired. The paintball slammed into Pietro, dropping him unconscious to the floor.

It took the combined blue impacts from both Daredevil and Mage to render She-Hulk into the same state.

“I give up,” War Machine said, powering down and raising his hands. “You’ve got this round.”

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“I’m only seeing Mockingbird and Komodo,” Wolf reported from his position just inside the tree line.

“Confirmed,” Hawkeye agreed. “You think everyone else’s gone off to find our hut?”

“Doubtful,” Cap replied. “This terrain gives them the advantage – clear line of sight on all sides for over a hundred metres. There’s no way to sneak up on them.”

“Then let’s not,” Iron Man stated and rocketed up and over the trees that they were concealed in.

“Iron Man does have a point,” Vision agreed as he began to rise into the air. “We do appear to outnumber them.”

“Appear,” Cap repeated grimly as he followed his team mates.

This may not be the plan, but together always worked better than solo attempts. Together, they were a force; individually, they could easily be picked off, eventually making it that much harder.

“They’ve seen us,” Quake called, skidding to a halt and throwing up her hands.

The yellow paintball that had been headed straight for her chest suddenly reversed direction and went straight back to where it’d come from courtesy of her vibrations. Komodo’s eyes widened in surprise at seeing her own round heading straight for her and she attempted to dive out of the way. She was almost successful, too, it just managing to graze her shoulder. As it wasn’t a direct hit, she wasn’t knocked out, however she was slowed.
Cap’s shield came up as he ran when he saw Mockingbird targeting him. Four rapid thumps on his shield jarred his arm slightly. The fifth shot, though, slammed into his shin and he was sent tumbling straight to the ground, out of the fight.

Mockingbird barely had time to register her success before three blue balls slammed into her – one each from Widow, Wolf and Hawkeye. Hawkeye’s second shot finished knocking Komodo out.

The Vision had decided that the side wall might be a better way of entering the building, after all, it was possible that the door was booby-trapped. Phasing his body, he stepped inside, only to find that Scarlet Witch was there, ready for him. Her red magic wrapped itself around him, enveloping him and holding him firmly in place. No matter what he tried, he was held fast.

“Wanda is inside,” he reported.

The door slamming back on its hinges turned both their heads to find Iron Man framed in the doorway.

Scarlet Witch’s other hand shot up, her magic grabbing him, holding him in place as well.

Two, though was her limit. When Widow slid in around Iron Man, there was nothing that she could do.

“I’d say I’m sorry about this, Wanda, but it’s the game,” she shrugged before shooting the younger woman point blank in the stomach.

“Ouch, that’s gonna leave a bruise,” Iron Man remarked. “Friday, open a channel to all Avengers. Alright kids, the grown ups have won the day, time to go home and celebrate. Or commiserate if you’re on the yellow team.”
There Are Some

The party had been in swing for a number of hours already. Actually, the reason that it was being so drawn out was simply that the party-goers were all arriving at such disparate times. The ones hit with the stunner-paintballs had to wait until they’d woken up and then been given a once-over by Healer Greengrass before they were clear to join the revels.

And then there was the Hulk. In his confusion over what the game that they were playing actually was, he’d bounded off, deep into the forest of Paradis Noir, intent on avoiding his cousin so that he wouldn’t get ‘tagged’. It took Harry riding on his broom and asking the Peruvian Vipertooths a long time to finally locate the Big Guy. And then, Harry’d had to convince the Hulk that the game was over and that he’d won without getting tagged by an enormous green finger, constantly jabbing at him.

Finally, though, Hulk came down from his victorious bouncing around, his arms in the air, and calmed enough for Bruce to re-emerge. A simple apparition by Harry returned the two of them to the main building to find that the party had already started. Quickly, Bruce rushed off to have a shower and to find some clean, unruined clothes.

“What was that golden mist?” Pietro asked, drifting over to Harry as soon as he joined everyone.

Harry grinned as he picked up a bottle of butterbeer.

“That was a disorientating mist. In basic terms, it confused your senses so that up appeared down and down, up.”

“So, I wasn’t really standing on the ceiling?” Pietro asked.

“Nope. Your senses were just confused enough to think that,” Harry replied. “Believe me, I know how it feels – I encountered it back when I was in a Tournament at school.”

“Did it freeze you in place too?”

“For a minute, then I simply closed my eyes and walked out of it,” Harry replied. “But I’d put that field in the entirety of the room, so the only way out of it for you was back through the door.”


“You wouldn’t really have needed much to confuse Pietro,” Wanda laughed as she joined them.

“Tell me about it,” Harry grinned. “You should have seen him when he ran into the illusion that I made. He thought that he was entering the hut; instead he found himself triggering a skidding jinx and an overpowered acceleration charm. How far’d you end up running, anyway?”

“Nearly three kilometres before I could stop,” Pietro groused. And then, when Wanda broke out into peals of laughter. “You’re supposed to be on my side, I’m your big brother, remember?”

“By twelve minutes,” Wanda countered.

“Hey, you,” Daisy said as she joined the group, bumping hips with Harry as she arrived beside him. Automatically, Harry’s hand snaked out around her waist and he gave her a kiss.

“How’d you go in the game?” he asked.
“Not bad,” she shrugged. “Didn’t get tagged. Oh, and learnt a new skill with my power.”

Harry’s raised eyebrow encouraged her to elaborate.

“I managed to ‘catch’ Ted when he was falling from his broom after Bucky shot him and knocked him out,” she said.

“In that case, thank you,” he smiled.

A loud chime echoed over the gathering and Harry, along with everyone else there, turned to find Maria Hill standing on a small platform above everyone.

“Sorry to break this up, guys, but you’re all needed,” she said.

“I’m guessing something important?” Steve asked.

“Secretary of State Ross has asked to address the Avengers,” she replied. “I’ve told him that we’ll meet him at the Compound. And before anyone asks, no, I don’t know what this is about.”

“You don’t know,” Nat repeated flatly.

“No,” Maria replied and this time it was easy to hear the annoyance in her voice. “I know that there’s been something in the wind for the past couple of months but all my contacts have clammed up about it. I would guess, with Ross involved, that we’re finally going to find out what it is.”

“Alright, everyone, you heard the lady. Gear up and head across to the Compound.” Steve ordered.

All of the Avengers (minus Thor who was currently off-world and Melati who hadn’t committed to the team yet, despite how often she’d been joining in with the Academy program) filed into the largest of the conference rooms and took a set at either one of the two long tables or in one of the extra chairs set around the perimeter. The last to enter was Maria and Lavender who accompanied Secretary Ross and his aide.

“You’re all here, good,” Ross stated as he took a position at the front of the room and surveyed them all.

Harry noticed that the man frowned at each of the ones that was currently masked, their identities still hidden – Peter, Doreen, Matt, Teddy and himself.

“I’m assuming that you have something for us,” Steve half-stated, half-asked.

“Yes, but not in the way that you mean. I’m not here with a mission,” Ross replied.

“Then why are you here?” Maria asked pointedly from where she leant against the back wall, her arms crossed.

For some reason, instead of answering, Ross started with an anecdote.

“Five years ago, I had a heart attack,” he said. “I dropped right in the middle of my batting swing. Turned out that it was the best round of my life because after a thirteen-hour surgery and a triple bypass, I learnt something that forty years in the Army never taught me: perspective.”

He glanced at Bruce then, a deep scowl flitting across his face so quickly that, unless you’d been looking, it would have been missed, as he paused in his stride across the front of the room before
seeming to gather himself and starting again.

“The world owes the Avengers an unpayable debt. You’ve fought for us. Protected us. Risked your lives. While a great many people see you as heroes, there are some … who would prefer the word, ‘vigilantes’.”

Harry stiffened in his seat and he noticed that he wasn’t the only one.

“And what word would you use, Mister Secretary?” Nat asked for all of them.

“How about ‘dangerous’?” Ross replied quickly. “What would you call a group of US based, enhanced individuals, who routinely ignore sovereign borders and impose their will wherever and whenever they choose and, quite frankly, don’t appear to care about the mess that they leave behind?”

“I think that you’ll find that we do care. Every single one of us,” Steve countered. “There are nights when we don’t sleep because of what we’ve done, what we’ve seen. But we do our best. Tony there’s even set up the Stark Relief Foundation, to go in after the danger has passed and to help the civilians still there.”

Ross, though, apparently didn’t agree with Steve’s reply or perhaps, Harry thought, he simply disregarded it. Turning to the large screen behind him, Ross picked up the controller and tapped it, bringing up a large map of the world with various places on it pinpointed in yellow.

“New York,” he said and the image that was displayed zeroed in on that point before beginning to show footage from the Avengers’ battle against the Chitauri.

“London.”

This time, after zooming out to the map of the world and then back in, the screen showed Greenwich with the great spaceship of the Dark Elves ‘parked’ there, people running from it, screaming.

“The Great Barrier Reef, Australia.”

Harry’s eyes widened at the sight of a group of penned in crocodiles each clearly having undergone some strange mutation – their legs were longer, thicker, more powerful-looking, there were spines running down their backs and the expression on their faces indicated that they were more intelligent than the ‘regular’ kind of croc.

“Washington DC.”

Video began playing of the single helicarrier that had managed to lift off out of the three that HYDRA had tried to launch. Harry could see the red and orange molten lava that he himself was pouring into the helicarrier’s engine in order to bring it down.

“Germany.”

Smoking buildings could be seen in the background behind a fleet of ambulances, people on stretchers or bandaged and sitting on the ground all around.

“Brazil.”

This time the image was still instead of video. It showed the ruins of a compound. Barracuda. Most of the Avengers in the room had participated in the battle there, a battle that culminated in two nuclear missiles having to be taken down after being launched.
“South Africa.”

The video started out fuzzily before quickly gaining focus to show an angry, out-of-control Hulk picking up a car and tossing it carelessly away.

“Sokovia.”

The flying city was shown as it gained height quickly, buildings and land falling away to crash to the ground below, killing untold numbers that they’d been unable to get to and save quickly enough.

“Lagos.”

This one was the freshest in the minds of those who had been there. Twenty-six people had been killed in the explosion that Rumlow had set off, not including himself. The footage even showed some number of those people in the rubble.

“That’s enough,” Steve commanded and it was clear that it was a command – his voice was full of steel.

“For the past few years you’ve operated with unlimited power and no supervision,” Ross stated. “That’s an arrangement that the governments of the world can no longer tolerate.”

Harry noticed Maria stiffen at those words and stand straighter, her face incredibly intent on what the Secretary was saying.

“But I think we have a solution,” here Ross turned to his aide and took a large book-like document that was easily as thick as anything that Hermione would consider ‘light reading’. “We call it the Sokovia Accords. Already approved by one hundred and seventeen countries. It states that the Avengers will no longer be a private organisation. Instead, they’ll operate under the supervision of a United Nations panel only when and if that Panel deems them necessary.”

“I’d like to think that we’ve done a good job of keeping the people safe, of making the world a better place,” Steve stated.

“Tell me, Captain, do you know where Thor is right now? Because I can tell you that if I lost a three-tonne nuclear weapon, then I’d better have a damn good explanation,” Ross challenged.

“Actually, yes,” Steve replied. “Thor’s off-world. We know that there’s a threat coming and he’s finding out all that he can about it for us before it arrives.”

“A threat?” Ross repeated, scepticism clear in his voice. “And what evidence do you have of this ‘threat’?”

“A lot of small pieces, including some that you wouldn’t listen to because it’s not scientific or corroborated,” Steve replied.

“Well, when you’ve got something concrete, that isn’t some fairy tale imaginings, bring it to the Panel and it’ll be analysed and the Panel’ll determine if you need to do something about this ‘threat’,” Ross said.

“And if what’s coming doesn’t give this government committee the time to make up its mind?” Harry asked contemptuously. “What if it’s still debating when the threat has arrived and is destroying the planet? Are we expected to simply sit back and do nothing?”

“I’m sure that the Panel will make any decisions in a timely manner,” Ross stated and Harry wasn’t
“This,” Matt stated, tapping the thick document that had made its way to him, “this seems an awfully big document to say that we’re now a privately-run organisation. What else does it say?”

Ross stared around the room at the Avengers, every one, Harry could see, was staring right back, incredibly interested in that answer.

“You’re right, the Sokovia Accords is not just aimed at the Avengers,” Ross stated. “It’s aimed at a whole host of people, every one of them enhanced.”

“Enhanced. What does that mean?” Matt asked.

“For the purposes of the Accords, an ‘enhanced individual’ is defined as any person, human or otherwise, with superhuman capabilities,” Ross replied. “This includes individuals whose powers are a part of their biology – whether natural or given to them – as well as individuals who utilize highly advanced technology to grant themselves superhuman capabilities. Every single one of you are subject to the same conditions as enhanced individuals, even if you’re not enhanced yourselves.”

“So, by that definition, people with magic are ‘enhanced’, because that’s the way Marauder and I were born?” Harry asked.

“Yes,” Ross replied.

“Inhumans, too,” Daisy said, catching Harry’s eye.

“Anyone. Anyone who isn’t born and stays a normal human,” Ross emphasised. “Every one of you and others like you will be subjected to these Accords. You’ll be registered and monitored.”

“When this document was created, who represented the ‘enhanced’?” Matt asked.

Ross stared at him. “No one. This document was created by and for the United Nations. And whether you’re enhanced or not, you’re still a part of this planet, so you’re subject to its laws.”

“Except not all nations are a part of the United Nations,” Matt pointed out. “And every government has their own laws that its own citizens need to follow.”

“Last time I checked, there wasn’t a country of enhanced people,” Ross spat.

“Maybe there should be,” Bucky shot back. “I know what it’s like to be ‘regulated’ and monitored’ and only allowed out of my ‘box’ when I was needed. It’s no way to live.”

“And what happens if we don’t agree with these Accords? If we don’t sign?” Nat asked.

“Then you retire. You wouldn’t like the consequences otherwise,” Ross stared at her challengingly. “Compromise. Reassurance. That’s how the world works. Believe me, this is the middle ground.”

“So, there are contingencies?” Rhodey asked.

“Three days from now, the UN meets in Vienna to ratify the Accords,” Ross said. “You sign them or you suffer the consequences.”

Steve glanced around at everyone before facing Ross again.

“We’ll talk it over,” he said.
Ross nodded once to them, a second time to his aide and marched from the room, Lavender falling in with them to see them from the Compound.

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The door had barely closed behind Ross when chaos erupted.

“They can’t be serious!” Sam declared. “With all the good that the Avengers have done?”

“You’ve got to admit, just seeing that footage … it does look damning,” Bruce said.

“Taken out of context,” Nat said. “Two of those were direct attacks against the planet from extra-terrestrials that we had to thwart. What would have been the consequences if we hadn’t been there? There would be no planet!”

“And most of the others were us countering HYDRA,” Steve added. “Those helicarriers were designed to hold the world at gunpoint. HYDRA had to go, we all know that and, now that they’re dealt with, that threat won’t be hanging over the ordinary person’s head anymore.”

“Let’s just hope something else doesn’t jump into its place,” Tony said.

“You know, Ross could have left us more than just the one copy,” Jennifer groused, picking up the thick tome.

“And one that was written in Braille,” Matt added.

“Here, I can help with that,” Harry said, stopping the book as it was slid across the table to him.

Multiple taps of his wand had the Sokovia Accords replicated so that there were twenty copies. The last one, though, took a fair bit of extra effort.

“No guarantees, Matt, I can’t read Braille,” Harry said.

Matt took the offered copy, flipped it open and ran his fingers over the bumps on the paper before grimacing.

“A good approximation, but no dice,” Matt said. “Jennifer, give me the highlights, if you can. Maria, is it possible to get a copy for me.”

“I’ll make sure of it,” she replied.

“And you had no idea that this is coming?” Nat asked.

“None. As I said, I was being stonewalled,” Maria replied. “From what I was able to piece together, the UN put this together behind closed doors; no one not in the know was even allowed in.”

“Did everyone else get the fact that this is aimed at and against everyone who isn’t either one of us or isn’t considered ‘normal’?” Daisy asked.

“Yeah, that was made abundantly clear,” Doreen scowled.

“So, Inhumans, Mutants, Mutates and Magicals,” Bobbi said. “Every one of them.”

“Anyone think that the UN might not know what sort of can of worms they’re opening here?” Sam asked.
“Jennifer?” Matt prompted.

“Here’s something,” she replied, gaining everyone’s attention. “And it’s pretty big, too. Any enhanced individual who agree to sign must register with the United Nations and provide biometric data such as fingerprints and DNA samples. Those with secret identities must reveal their legal names and true identities to the United Nations. Those with innate powers must submit to a power analysis, which will categorize their threat level and determine potential health risks. Those with innate powers must also wear tracking bracelets at all times.”

“They want to treat us as criminals!” Pietro exclaimed. “That is exactly what the most hardened criminals are forced to comply with.”

“Harry?” Daisy asked.

Harry spun from the window that he was leaning against, trying to rein in his temper.

“I can tell you this now, without even hearing anything else. There’s no way that I’ll ever agree to that,” he said, spitting the last. “You all know that I don’t like talking about my past all that much, and especially my ‘titles’ in the magical world. But the biggest of them, ‘The-Man-Who-Conquered’, I got that after winning a magical war. That was a war where magics who considered themselves of ‘pureblood’ looked down on everyone else. Laws were passed. People were rounded up, put in camps, killed or simply disappeared, never to be seen or heard from again.”

“Sounds like World War Two and the Nazi’s treatment of the Jews,” Steve said grimly.

“I’ve read those account, and it was exactly like that!” Harry replied angrily. “This … these Sokovia Accords, it’s the first step to rounding us all up and putting us somewhere ‘safe’.”

“Harry’s right,” Teddy said. “My dad, he was a werewolf. From what my Gran’s told me, he struggled everyday of his life to find work, to earn a living, just because he was different one night a year. He was hunted as well; died fighting for what was right, not giving in to the prejudices of those in government.”

Harry placed his hand on Teddy’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze.

“Remus was a good man and a great friend. He’d be so proud of the man you’re growing into.”

“Anything else in there, Jenn?” Matt asked.

“Lots but most of it’s legal terminology that’ll take us more than the three days that we have to go through it all and understand it. Here’s something,” she said, looking up at Tony. “The creation of self-aware artificial intelligences is completely prohibited.”

“I’d say that they put that in because of Ultron,” Steve frowned.

“Well, I did say that I wasn’t going to dabble in AI’s any more,” Tony pointed out. “So, it’s a moot point anyway.”

“Three days isn’t a lot of time to wrap our heads around this,” Clint stated.

“What’s the likelihood that it’ll be passed?” Peter asked as Lavender rejoined the group.

“I’d say very high,” Maria replied. “Ross said that there were one hundred and seventeen countries ready to ratify it. That’s way more than half; it’ll pass.”
“What about the public? Will they support it if we’re forced off the field?” Bucky asked.

“That’s hard to say,” Lavender replied. “Public opinion has been divided of late. Yes, they all remember what you’ve done to keep them safe. But with people like Jameson continually kicking up negative press, Ross had the right of it, there’s a lot that don’t see you as heroes, but as public nuisances or ‘vigilantes’.”

“I don’t like the fact that they’ve put this together without even consulting us or trying to work with us,” Harry stated.

“Perhaps we need to force that issue,” Steve mused. “Bring our lawyers on board.” Here he nodded at Matt and Jennifer. “And get our own allies involved, those others that are going to be affected by this.”

“I know that Black Bolt and most of the Inhumans are on the Moon, but I suspect that if I asked, he’d be willing to be involved,” Daisy stated. “We know that there are other Inhumans on the planet and having an Inhuman King speak for us would have to look good.”

“I’m taking this to the ICW,” Harry stated. “This has ramifications for the magical world, even if we’re still in hiding.”

“No one’s really mentioned the mutants yet,” Tony stated. “I guess that I could go talk to them.”

“Good,” Steve nodded. “We need everyone on this and we need to hash this out amongst us before we go in front of the UN. If there’s anyone else that you know that this will affect, bring them up to speed and bring them here.”

“And I’ll reach out to Nick, see if his contacts are still active,” Maria stated. “I think that a round table of all the different humans should be held in Geneva. Three days isn’t long, but I think that we can pull it off.”

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“I don’t believe that I’ve actually ever set foot on so many planets outside of the Nine Realms before,” Hogun stated.

“Just one more today, my friend,” Thor assured him, clapping him on the shoulder. “Answers are close; I can feel it.”

“Where are we going this time?” Fandral asked.

“Nidavellir,” Thor replied.

“Nidavellir? No such place exists. It is a myth, a legend, even among the Kree and all agree that it does not exist,” Carol stated.

“Oh, I assure you that it does,” Thor laughed. “Where do you think Mjolnir was born?”

Sif, Volstagg, Hogan and Fandral nodded in agreement.

“We have never been there; Thor has, though and we have heard the tales. Today, it seems we get to see this marvel ourselves,” Sif told her.

“When you are ready,” Heimdell prompted.

The six moved into position and they heard the great sword shift into position opening the Bifrost
and sweeping them away into space. The journey was long but eventually, they were released to stand on a great platform made of metal.

Without doubt it was a feat of the greatest engineering; a forge unlike any other. And powering it all was the neutron star that had been harnessed by the rings that surrounded it.

“Who goes there?” a deep, gruff voice challenged.

Recognising the voice, Thor stepped forward with a smile.

“Eitri! It is I, Thor, Son of Odin!”

“Odinson? Is it truly you?”

And then, out of the shadows, the great King of the Dwarves strode. He was tall for what one would think a dwarf should be, easily topping twelve feet, but for all that, he was about average height for his people. As with all dwarves, indeed, all blacksmiths, he had a long, bushy beard, unruly hair and wore a thick, leather apron. He was also carrying an enormous pair of tongs.

“Aye, it is good to see you, my friend,” Thor returned. “These are my friends – the Lady Sif, the Warriors Three and Carol Danvers of Midgard.”

Eitri nodded to his visitors before focussing on Thor.

“What brings you here, Odinson? I see you still carry Mjolnir. Could it be that you are interested in a new weapon? I have one in my plans, an axe unlike any other, it would easily be the strongest weapon that I have ever created; truly a weapon fit for a king.”

“Alas, I am still but a Prince,” Thor replied. “Perhaps this magnificent axe has simply not yet found its time?”

“Perhaps not, perhaps not,” Eitri replied. “But you have not answered my question.”

“We come seeking information, if I might be permitted to ask,” Thor said.

“You may ask; whether or not I answer we will find out,” Eitri replied.

“We are seeking information about Thanos,” Thor stated.

Eitri scowled at the question and turned away, striding a few paces before turning back.


Here, Eitri pointedly looked at Carol.

“Don’t look so surprised, girl, your uniform gives you away,” Eitri stated. “As to Thanos, as I say, I have heard of him. He has his attack dogs, the Chitauri and the Outriders, sister species to each other. And his most powerful of lieutenants, his Black Order.”

“The Chitauri I have fought. On Midgard,” Thor said and then, for Carol’s benefit, “Earth. They came seeking a great power called the Tesseract, an object that held within it one of the Infinity Stones.”

“So, it’s true, is it? The Mad Titan is seeking those powerful objects,” Eitri mused. “May the gods help us all if he finds them.”
“Thus, why I’m here; I aim to prevent that from happening,” Thor told him.

“Then maybe you are here for the axe after all,” Eitri mused. “You will need such a weapon to defeat Thanos.”

Thor gave a small half-bow. The Dwarves of Nidavellir were never ones to be refused when a gift was offered.

“But apart from what I have told you, I know no more of the Mad Titan,” Eitri stated.

“Perhaps one of the other members of the Confederacy might know something?” Carol suggested.

“What Confederacy is this?” Volstagg asked.

“An alliance. Ancient from what I’ve been told, between the Kree, the Astrans, the Kallusians, the Remorath, and the Rajaks,” she replied. “Mar-Vell told me that these species are known to band together in the face of the greatest threats to one or all of them.”

“Your General did not appear to know of the threat that Thanos posed,” Thor stated.

“Just because the Kree knew not of the threat of Thanos does not mean that all of the others are likewise ignorant,” Sif stated.

“The Lady is wise,” Eitri said. “Now, Odinson, come, let us find the plans for this axe that may yet help you defeat the Titan.”

“Not to be disrespectful, Eitri,” Thor said to the Dwarven King’s back as he strode off ahead of the group, “but I have Mjolnir to aid me.”

“You have two hands, don’t you?” Eitri asked rhetorically, as though that settled the matter.

Thor shrugged, supposing that it did.
Daisy flicked the buttons that would open communications to the Moon, specifically, to the hidden city of Attilan. Every indicator said that the secure channel that they’d been given was open but all that she could hear was … nothing. Not even static.

“Um, hello? This is Daisy Johnson. I’m calling because I need to talk to Black Bolt. Or Medusa, really, considering, yeah, well, if you could let him know that it’s urgent? Thanks.”

She sat back and shook her head. May would be giving her a look if she’d heard her opening a communication that way. Not a skerrick of professionalism in it at all. In her defence, it was the first time that she’d ever attempted to contact someplace that wasn’t on Earth.

A massive shape appeared in her peripheral vision and she turned, only to scamper backwards.

“Woah!” she all but screamed, seeing the giant dog standing there, looking at her, his long tongue lolling from his mouth. “Lockjaw, right? Please don’t do that again, you nearly scared me to death. Mind you, I should be used to it, what with how often Magic Man just likes to pop in everywhere unannounced.”

Lockjaw, of course, simply continued to stare at her.

Cautiously, Daisy reached out to pat him on the head.

“Good boy,” she said, “you’re not so tough are you, despite your size.”

And then she felt herself being whisked away. When the disorientating transport finished, Daisy stumbled away from Lockjaw and took a good look around. This wasn’t the Compound.

“Where’ve you brought me, huh?”

“That would be Attilan,” a young, female voice replied. “Hi, I’m Crystal.”

Daisy turned to find a teenaged girl with a yellow tunic, black pants and honey-blonde hair smiling at her.

“Daisy,” she introduced herself.

“Sorry about simply sending Lockjaw to collect you but my sister and Black Bolt were a little busy with a Council meeting and didn’t want you to think that they were ignoring you,” Crystal explained.

“Sister?” Daisy asked.

“Medusa,” Crystal replied.

Their conversation was cut short then by the arrival of the royal couple.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” Medusa said. “Crystal, thank you for sending Lockjaw for Daisy. Your message said that it was urgent?”

“Yeah,” Daisy replied, gathering her thoughts into order. “This morning, we – that is, the Avengers – were told about a new set of Laws that are likely to be ratified by the United Nations in three days. It’s called the Sokovia Accords. In basic terms, it means that anyone who is not a normal human will be subject to extremely strict monitoring and laws about how they use their powers to help people.
There’s a whole brick-like book of the laws actually.”

Here, she pulled out a tiny, matchbook sized copy of it and held it in the palm of her hand.

“Grow,” she said and suddenly felt her hand get pushed down by the weight of the now full-sized volume.

“Is that your power, making things big and small?” an excited-sounding Crystal asked. “Medusa said that you were one of us.”

“Nah, my fiancé, Harry, did this, he’s magical. My powers are that I can make earthquakes,” she replied.

“Cool. I can manipulate the elements,” Crystal replied.

Black Bolt interrupted them by signing.

“These are Earth laws, why bring this to us?” he asked through Medusa.

“Because these laws affect all humans,” Daisy replied. “And last I checked, Inhumans are humans, just with a little extra in them. And, when it comes down to it, not all Inhumans live up here; there’s a bunch of us still down on Earth. We’re trying to organise a round table conference between the United Nations and representatives from all the different types of humans that there are. I thought that having the King of the Inhumans represent us would help make our voices heard a bit better.”

“How many different types of humans are there?” Medusa asked.

“Five,” Daisy replied. “There’s the normal humans, of course. Then there’s us Inhumans. There’s the mutates – the ones whose genes have been altered from what they originally were when they were born. The magicals, they’re hidden but there’s a large population of them. And then there are the mutants, those born with an extra gene to give them powers, kinda like us, but not.”

“If I was to agree to this, it would mean revealing ourselves to the people of Earth,” Medusa said for Black Bolt.

“Not necessarily,” Daisy replied. “We could do it in such a way that just implies that the Inhumans are hidden on Earth, sort of like the magicals?”

“That has possibilities, but I would need time to think on this and consult my advisors,” Black Bolt said through Medusa.

“That’s cool, I get that. The meeting with the UN is in three days. But at ten tomorrow morning, local time, we’re having a meeting at the Compound for everyone that these Accords are going to affect. I’d like it if you’d come to at least that?”

Black Bolt looked at his wife before turning back to Daisy and giving a nod.

“Crystal, if you could have Lockjaw take Daisy back to Earth, please?” Medusa asked. “Daisy, we will see you tomorrow.”

Lockjaw padded up to Daisy and bumped his head against her chest. Wrapping her arms around him, she braced herself.

“See you tomorrow,” she smiled. “Alright, Lockjaw, whenever you’re ready to do your thing.”

ooo00ooo
“Alright, alright, I’m coming,” Scott all-but yawned as he stumbled down the stairs.

Really, people should know not to turn up so early on a Saturday … afternoon, he decided after peering at his watch. Absolutely no consideration. He hadn’t even had time to get dressed yet, simply to throw on his dressing gown when the doorbell sounded for the third time.

“I know you’re in there, Scott,” a voice called through the door, a voice that he recognised.

Blinking the last of the sleep from his eyes, Scott pulled the door open.

“Oh, hey, Sam, good to see you, nice of you to drop by,” he said.

“We need to talk,” Sam stated and Scott found himself being bumped out of the way as the Avenger walked inside.

“Sure, right, come on in,” Scott said. “You didn’t happen to bring some coffee with you, did you?”

Tony considered the oval sign attached to the brick wall beside the double iron-wrought gates. It was kinda small and almost hidden by vines. Really, he couldn’t see the point of not having something bigger, grander, more elaborate. Still …

Xavier’s School for Gifted Youngsters 1407 Graymalkin Lane, Salem Center

It was the right place. Now how to get in? Spotting a small intercom button, he reached out from the cherry-red Audi R8 and pressed it.

“Hello? Anyone home in there?” he asked.

A burst of static had Tony grimacing.

“Can we help you?” a gruff-sounding voice asked.

“Well, I’m looking for the X-Men and I believe that this is where they’re based, so, yeah,” Tony replied.

There was silence on the other end for nearly a minute before the gruff voice came back.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about, Bub.”

“Sure, you do,” Tony countered. “Look, just tell Xavier that Tony Stark is here to talk to him.”

The fact that the gates clicked and began to swing open told Tony that his message had been received.

Shifting the Audi into gear he rolled forward and down the drive. There were teens everywhere – on the lawns, a basketball course, swinging from trees, sitting under trees reading – it almost had Tony shivering. He’d thought that Avengers Academy was bad. But then, this was masquerading as a school, so …

Stepping from his car at the front of the castle-like building, Tony looked at the closest kid, a teen, taller than him with jet black hair and a shifty look on his face.
“Don’t touch my car,” he instructed before walking up the stairs towards the adults in the doorway.

“Mister Stark, it is a pleasure to finally meet you,” a bald-headed older man in a wheelchair said, offering his hand.

“Xavier. Likewise,” Tony replied, disregarding his personal preferences and actually shaking the man’s hand.

“This is Logan, my History teacher,” Xavier said, introducing the gruff-looking, unshaven stocky man standing beside him. “I understand that you wished to talk to me?” And then, after a pause. “Yes, I see that we do need to talk. If you would follow me?”

Tony followed the two men through the mansion, attempting to ignore the fact that there seemed to be even more kids inside than there had been outside. Finally, Xavier wheeled into a large study and Tony ambled in, nodding at Logan who waited at the door.

“Please, have a seat,” Xavier offered as he wheeled himself behind his desk.

“No, thanks, I’m good,” Tony replied, feeling a little too much as though he’d just been called to the principal’s office to relax.

When the door closed, Tony turned to find that not one, but five people had filed into the room behind him. As well as Logan, there was a man with strange red glasses completely covering his eyes, a black-skinned woman with flowing white hair, a ‘normal’ good-looking woman with brown hair and green eyes and a powerful-looking blue-furred man wearing glasses! The last of which, had Tony jumping backwards.

“This is Scott, Ororo, Jean and Hank,” Xavier introduced each of the new arrivals. “They are also teachers at my school.”

“And X-Men,” Tony said and decided to show off a little by pointing at each one. “Cyclops, Storm, Phoenix, Beast and chuckles over there is known as Wolverine.”

“You know that we’re the X-Men. How?” Logan all-but growled.

“I’m Tony Stark and an Avenger,” he replied and really, what more did he need to say?

“I can see that what you have to say is important,” Xavier said and Tony narrowed his eyes at the man. “I am a telepath, I can see your thoughts. If you would explain the situation to the others?”

“The Avengers were visited by Secretary Ross this morning,” he began. “The UN are ratifying some new laws in three days. The Sokovia Accords. They’re designed for every human that’s a little different: mutates, Inhumans, mutants and anyone else. Me and the other Avengers like me who get their ‘powers’ from tech get added in for fun.”

“How are these new laws going to be enforced?” Hank asked. “Most mutants are keeping their abilities a secret from the world around them already.”

“That’s the thing,” Tony replied. “One slip up and it’s game over. Fingerprints, DNA, ankle monitors, the whole kit and caboodle get taken when you sign. There’s a bunch of laws in there as well about how and when you can use your powers both here in the US and overseas.”

“Can’t see Magneto and the Brotherhood going along with that,” Logan grunted.

“Magneto?” Tony asked.
“A very powerful mutant and once, a friend,” Xavier replied. “The X-Men have had numerous quarrels with Eric and his followers for years.”

“Yeah, well, I’m told that if you don’t toe the line, that we’ll regret it. And those details have been left to our imagination right now, although I’d suspect that the RAFT is involved,” Tony replied.

“RAFT?” Scott asked.

“Prison. It floats and submerges and moves about underwater, wherever those in charge want it to go. I helped design it so that the most dangerous of prisoners on the planet can be kept there where the ordinary, everyday people could be safe,” Tony replied.

“If it’s made of metal, then it won’t hold Magneto,” Logan stated.

Tony simply shrugged. “At the moment, we don’t think the UN has fully realised the implications of these Accords. We think that they’re mainly aimed at the Avengers, but they do affect mutants and everyone else.”

“You have a plan? A way to stop these Accords from being signed?” Jean asked.

“Maybe,” Tony allowed. “But it’s going to take all of us, all of the different types of humans on the planets working together. At least, that’s what Steve Rogers believes. Me, I’m of the opinion that no matter what we do, the UN’s going to sign off on it. But the old man’s got this thing of ‘togetherness’, gets kinda annoying really, especially with how often he’s right.

“The Accords are going to be signed in Vienna in three days’ time. We’ve got people working on turning the signing into a round table conference, two representatives from each human ‘tribe’ if you will, talking together about living together.”

“A noble goal,” Ororo nodded.

Tony shrugged. “In theory. In practice? We’re gathering everyone at Avengers’ Compound tomorrow at ten to hash it out, get a feel of where we all are before we join with the ‘normal’ humans in Vienna on Tuesday. You’re invited; that’s why I’m here.”

“I think that we’d be delighted to attend,” Xavier smiled.

“Great. Well, in that case, I best get. People to see, money to make and all that,” Tony replied.

“Thank you for bringing this to us and including us,” Xavier said. “Logan will see you back to your car.”

Tony nodded to each of the other’s there before following the snarly-looking man back through the mansion.

As he walked through the door, he froze, his sunglasses poised partway to his face, his jaw dropping.

“Joflinn! Put that car back together!” Logan growled. “Damn kid’d be in juvie if he wasn’t here.”

Tony could only nod absently as he watched the tall, black-haired kid from before get wide-eyes and skittery as Logan advanced on him, his fists clenched.

“How many times have I told ya, kid? You wanna use your powers to pull cars apart, you go talk to Forge,” Logan berated the kid. “You don’t go doing it to anything else, especially visitor’s cars. Now, as soon as you’ve got the nice man’s car back in one piece, you and me are going to go for a
little run, maybe visit the obstacle course and do some callisthenics.”

Tony could only stare at the chassis that was once a car worth a couple of hundred thousand dollars. And then his gaze moved from pile to pile all over the grass – seats, steering wheel, the components of the engine, tyres, bright red splashed about throughout it all, everything that made a car a car.

A strangled whimpering noise could be heard, but whether it was from the kid who was cowering from Logan standing menacing right behind him, his fists clenched at his sides, or from Tony himself, was impossible to tell.

ooo00ooo

Rhodey landed outside Central City in a crouch. Standing up, he flipped the face mask of his War Machine armour up and walked up towards the door. He’d only gotten halfway, though, when a flaming man whooshed in to land right in front of him, making him take a single step back.

“Well, if it isn’t the War Machine, come to pay us a little visit,” Johnny Storm said.

“And if it isn’t the Human Torch making the world a whole lot hotter,” Rhodey countered. “Good to see you, man.”

“You, too,” Johnny replied. “So, what brings you by our digs?”

“I need to talk to you and your team,” Rhodey replied seriously and he could tell by Johnny’s expression that he realised that it was important. “Is everyone home?”

“Yeah, yeah, they are. Come on in, I’ll take you up to them,” he replied.

Rhodey nodded and fell into step with Johnny as they strode towards the main door of the complex.

ooo00ooo

The tinkling bell above the door had Karen popping her head out from the large conference room that she, Matt, Foggy and Jennifer had been holed up in for the last nine hours straight. The conference room really did attest to how long it’d been – empty coffee cups, stray boxes of Chinese and half a box of doughnuts littered every surface not being used by the lawyering team.

“Hi, Karen,” Lavender said to her as she closed the door behind her.

“Lavender, I’m hoping that you’ve got something for Matt?” Karen asked.

Lavender smiled and pulled a thick tome from her impossibly small bag.

“This what you mean?” she asked, handing it over.

“Yes, thank you,” Karen replied before rushing back into the conference room and handing it to Matt.

“Not as quick as I would have liked, but faster than I expected. Thanks, Lavender,” Matt smiled.

“Don’t thank me,” Lavender replied. “Maria did all the work. She’s in Vienna now and used her portkey to send it back to the Tower for me. Unfortunately, that means that she’s without hers now, so she’s stuck there until we all arrive on Tuesday.”

“She’s a life-saver,” Karen said as she escorted the other woman back towards the door. “At least now the rest of us won’t have to be reading the thing out to Matt all the time. Do you have any idea
how dry my throat was getting?”

“Hey, any excuse for a good cup of coffee, right?” Lavender joked.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Karen laughed.

Harry strode into the great antechamber before the main chamber that held the International Confederation of Wizardry’s meetings. Without even pausing, he headed straight for the main doors, his head neither turning to the left nor to the right. The only thing that made him pause were the two aurors that stepped in front of him, their wands drawn and ready.

“Sir, you need to turn around, those doors are closed, that means that there is a session of the Council in progress and entry is forbidden,” the auror on the right stated.

“I understand that,” Harry replied. “And ordinarily, I would respect that, but today, I simply don’t have the time and when it comes right down to it, I need to speak to the entire Assembly anyway.”

“Regardless, Sir, you cannot enter,” the one of the left said. “May I suggest that you set up an appointment with your country’s representative?”

Harry frowned. These two were just doing their jobs, quite correctly and rightly, as well. And, really, if he’d been in their place, he’d be saying exactly the same thing. Unfortunately, he didn’t have the time to spare. Holding up his bare, empty hands, Harry nodded.

“I understand, gentlemen and I’m sorry about this,” he said.

Their looks of confusion only just managed to reach their face before Harry struck out with his wandless magic, stunning one and binding and silencing the other before either could so much as twitch their wand.

A shout and a badly-aimed red jet of light passing his shoulder told him that his actions had been noticed.

Not wasting a second, Harry rushed forward, pushed the doors open and strode inside. A banishing spell to close the door followed by a colloportus – performed in parseltongue – ensure that he wasn’t going to be interrupted by the guards outside.

“What is the meaning of this?” an angry voice demanded from high to his left as Harry strode out into the middle of the room.

Stopping in the middle, he turned about to take it all in. It was not unlike a small coliseum, with tiers upon tiers of elaborate seats stretching all the way around the circular room. On the front of the table for each seat was a brass plaque that announced which country that particular witch or wizard represented. Directly across from where he’d first entered, on the lowest level was a seat for the Supreme Mugwump, currently a wizard from Africa.

“Mister Potter?” Supreme Mugwump Akimbo asked, a combination of surprise and outrage at his unexpected arrival in the man’s voice.

“Supreme Mugwump, Delegates,” Harry said, bowing firstly to the wizard in charge and then turning about once again to see all of the delegates. “Please excuse this interruption to your meeting but I bring news that has the potential to affect all member nations of witches and wizards and ask for your counsel.”
“Who is this uncouth individual who interrupts important matters that he would have no chance of understanding?” an old, regal-looking Asian witch asked.

The delegate for England, a man that Harry didn’t recognise, beat him to answering.

“This is Harry Potter, Lord of the Most Ancient and Noble Houses of Potter and Black, The Boy-Who-Lived, The-Man-Who-Conquered, recipient of two Order of Merlin, First Class awards.”

“And, in the non-magical world, I’m known as Mage of the Avengers,” he finished.

Hearing the murmur from the assembled crowd, murmurs that sounded distinctly impressed, just this once, Harry was actually glad of the many titles that he’d seemed to pick up over the course of his life.

“Mister Potter is a friend of the ICW,” Supreme Mugwump Akimbo stated. “He has acted on our orders and wishes and has, on occasion, been our deputised representative to the non-magical world.”

Again, Harry bowed to the Mugwump.

“What urgent matter brought you here seeking our counsel, Mister Potter?” Mugwump Akimbo asked.

“It is in relation to the non-magical world,” Harry began. “Just today, I have been notified of a new set of laws that are about to be brought into the world by the United Nations, the non-magical governing body of the world very much like this esteemed gathering.”

“If these are new laws for the non-magicals, why bring this matter to us?” a wizard in the second tier to his right asked.

“The Statute of Secrecy ensures that none of their laws affect us,” another wizard agreed.

“True,” Harry nodded and held up one finger. “Just one question. How much longer do you think that the magical world can stay hidden? Without magic, the non-magicals have developed technology at an astounding pace that allows them to do much of what we can do with a flick of our wand. They have satellites in orbit that can map every square inch of the surface, submarines that can go anywhere underwater, planes that fly through the air thousands of times faster than any broom and they have even sent men to walk upon the Moon. So, I ask you again, with the kind of advancement that they are capable of, how much longer can we stay hidden?”

“As long as we need to!” one wizard yelled but Harry noticed that there were many more that were looking uneasy at his words.

“I sincerely hope that we have that luxury,” Harry replied, looking up at him.

“The Statute of Secrecy has been in place since sixteen eighty-nine,” Mugwump Akimbo stated. “However, the world is a much different place today than it was over three hundred years ago.”

“This debate comes up every few decades,” an ancient witch with more lines wrinkling her face than Harry had ever seen before on a single person stated. “Is the Statute still relevant? Is it time for us to come out of hiding? The answer has always been the same!”

“Mister Potter, these laws that you have mentioned, what are they and how could they relate to us?” Mugwump Akimbo asked.
Harry turned about, making eye contact with as many of the delegates as he could before coming to rest facing the Supreme Mugwump.

“They call it the Sokovia Accords,” he began. “It is a set of laws for the non-magical humans of the world to identify and keep a watch and check on those that are different from themselves. Once upon a time, there would have been a simple delineation between magical and non-magical. No longer is that the case. Now, there are five separate types or ‘tribes’ of humans sharing Earth.

“There are the magicals, of course, as well as the non-magicals without any sort of ability or enhancement. Then there are the mutants, those who science has determined carry an extra part within themselves. Like them are the Inhumans, although their difference comes from their ancestry, a species from another planet called the Kree. Lastly are the mutates, those who have had their physiology changed by science or something extraordinary in some way from the normal non-magical humans that they were into something new, something special.

“It is because there are now five different types of humans in the world that I brought this matter to you. These laws, these Accords, have been made because the non-magical, normal humans are afraid of what they don’t understand. I and my friends who count themselves a part of the other ‘tribes’ of humans are aiming to get the United Nations to sit down and talk about our differences, to find a way for all types of humans to work and live together, no matter their ancestry, genetics, colour of their skin, the language that they speak, whatever it is that makes a person different.

“It is my belief that Magicals deserve a place at that table. I am already known throughout the world as a magical through my involvement as Mage of the Avengers, so I shall have a place at the table. But there will be a second seat beside me for a magical representative. Shouldn’t it be filled?”

“You expect us to believe that the non-magicals are so diverse? That some of them have powers, can do what we can with a wand?” a sceptical witch asked.

“Or that beings from another planet even exist?” another mocked.

A wizard in a crisp business suit with flowing dark blue open robes over it stood and held his lapels, looking all around the room.

“I can assure you that everything that Mister Potter has said is the truth,” the delegate from the United States declared. “I am willing to swear a vow, if you wish, as I’m certain that Mister Potter is also willing to do so.”

Harry nodded his thanks up to the wizard. “I am.”

“These Accords sound much like the laws that sent the magical world into hiding in the first place,” the delegate from Spain frowned.

“They do,” Mugwump Akimbo agreed. “The big difference that I can hear from what Mister Potter is telling us is that this time, we actually have a chance to discuss and influence those laws, to see if the non-magical world is willing to accept us and our culture for who and what we are.”

“I’m not saying that things would be easy if it was decided to come out of hiding,” Harry said. “Because it won’t be. It will take time, a long time, possibly, for the people of the world to fully accept us and for us to accept that we are a part of the wider world. What I am saying, though, is that this is a chance, a chance to take that first step into a brave, new world.”

“When is this meeting happening?” Mugwump Akimbo asked.

“On Tuesday, in Geneva,” Harry replied.
“I would formally like to move a motion that a representative from this body join Mister Potter at the round table discussion of the United Nations in Geneva on Tuesday,” Mugwump Akimbo declared. “This vote is not to determine whether or not the magical people of the world will come out from behind the Statute of Secrecy, simply that one of us is there to represent us and to report back for our discussion of how to move forward.”

He paused then, looking around at his fellow delegates.

“Do I have a Seconder?”

Almost at once, the Delegate for the United States rose.

“I second the motion.”

“Very well, we have a Seconder. We will now move into a time of discussion. Mister Potter, I thank you for bringing this matter to our attention,” Mugwump Akimbo said, adding a small bow.

Nick Fury stared into the eyes of the man across from him. He didn’t blink, he didn’t twitch a facial muscle. He simply waited. Finally, the other man’s head dropped and Nick knew that he’d won.

“Fine. I’ll ensure that it gets added to the meeting’s agenda,” he sighed. “A round table discussion of the Sokovia Accords before the signing and ratification.”

“Twelve seats,” Nick reminded him. “Two for each of the different types of humans, including a pair for normal humans like Stark or Rhodes or Wilson, those guys who you’ve declared as being under the Accords because of the tech they use.”

“Twelve seats,” he agreed with a nod.

“Glad we had this meeting,” Nick said with a smile.

With a nod, he gathered Hill to him and they turned to exit the room.

“You know, for a dead guy, you’re pretty annoying! You know that, right?” he called after him.

Nick didn’t even turn, he simply grinned to himself. It was good being him some days, especially when people did exactly what he needed them to do.
As The Old Man Said, Together

Convincing S.H.I.E.L.D. to be inconspicuous around the Compound wasn’t that hard, especially after Steve had spoken to their Director, explaining what it was that they were trying to do. Most of their quinjets had taken off hours before the ‘guests’ were to arrive, leaving a skeleton complement of Agents.

Lavender had taken charge of the main arrangements, ensuring that the large room that they would be using was decorated appropriately and that catering was taken care of. She’d had one half of the room left open with long tables along one wall for the food, a smaller table against the back wall for drinks, both hot and cold and a large open space in the middle for people to mingle in. The other half of the room was where the ‘formal’ part of the day’s talks were to happen, thus, there were tables and chairs set up to hold as many as fifty, all facing a podium at the front.

The Avengers, of course, had been the first to arrive and, while there was the usual banter between them, there was an undertone to their words and expressions that told the real story, showing their knowledge of how important that day and the next couple were going to be.

“Woah, this place is nice,” Scott Lang said, looking around as Sam ushered him through the door. “I mean, I knew it looked pretty great the last time that I was here, not that I had much time to look around, mind you.”

“That tends to happen when you rob places,” Sam countered.

Scott stopped, looked at him and held up a finger.

“I never ‘rob people’,” he stated. “I ‘burgl’ them. No violence. No one ever got hurt. There’s a difference. Besides, I don’t do that any more.”

“I don’t know, man, the bruises I had after the last time you were here told a different story,” Sam replied, rubbing his chest with the memory of that encounter.

“I said I was sorry!” Scott protested. “No one was supposed to be here. I was told that this was just an old storage facility.”

“I’m guessing that you’re Scott,” Steve said, joining them with a smile, his had extended to shake.

“Oh, wow, you’re Captain America,” Scott gushed, enthusiastically shaking hands.

“I know,” Steve smiled. “Call me, Steve. Glad you could be here.”

“Thinks for thanking of me,” Scott replied before frowning. “Thanks for thinking of me.”

“We’re all in this together,” Steve said. “Make yourself at home,”

“But not too at home,” Sam added quickly. “No just picking up stuff and walking off with it.”

“Not even if it’s a pastry and a cup of coffee?” Scott asked as they wandered in that direction.

“You know what I mean,” Sam replied.

ooo00ooo

A sleek, black jet hovered over the Compound’s tarmac for a half minute before slowly descending
to land. Tony, Nat and Clint found that they didn’t even have to move as it’d rotated so that its rear was facing towards them. That meant that when the ramp descended for those inside to come out, they were already facing them.

Tony blinked upon noticing that there were more than just the wheelchair-bound Xavier and the five X-Men that he’d met just the day before.

“Welcome to Avengers Compound,” he said. “You’ll find it a little different from your place, for one, your jet will still be in one piece after the talks and for another, there’s a lot less kids running around.”

“I apologise for Joflinn,” Xavier said. “He’s still new at the school and his … instincts from the streets are very much still with him. He’ll come around.”

“Until then, he’s going to find himself getting very fit,” Logan stated. “The kid couldn’t even run all the way home last night.”

“Logan, you had him do a five kilometre run, go through that torture chamber of an obstacle course that you created – twice, I might add, and do a full hour’s worth of calisthenics before having to make the five k run back to the mansion,” Jean stated disapprovingly.

“But it’ll teach him a lesson,” Logan shrugged.

“Sounds like something our S.H.I.E.L.D. instructors would put us through,” Clint added.

“If you add in the time on the weapon’s range,” Nat agreed. “Natasha Romanoff and this is Clint Barton.”

“Thank you for inviting us. I am Charles Xavier, and this is Logan, Scott, Jean, Ororo, Hank, Bobby, Kitty and Warren.”

“Cool wings,” Tony stated, eying the huge, white wings that Warren had.

He flexed them, stretched them out and then folded them back against his back.

“Thanks. It’s not often that I get to let them free,” Warren replied.

“Well, the party’s this way,” Tony said, indicating the direction.

“Are many expected or will it simply be the Avengers and the X-Men here today?” Charles asked.

“No, there’s a few others, some of them coming from pretty far away,” Nat replied.

ooo00ooo

Harry looked on, amused, as Daisy kept pacing from one side of the room to the other, looking over to the blank space in the room every other step.

“I really thought that they were coming,” she said. “They said that they were coming.”

“Give them time, love, it’s not yet ten,” Harry replied.

She opened her mouth to say something when a flash cut her off and spun her around. Harry, at seeing the newly arrived group, pushed off from the wall and stepped across to stand beside her.

“You’re here!” Daisy exclaimed.
“We did promise,” Medusa smiled before continuing for her husband. “I have discussed these ‘Accords’ with Karnak and my other advisors and have decided that as King, it is no less than my responsibility to take part in these talks, to speak up for all Inhumans, whether they live in Attilan or here on Earth.”

“Thank you, you have no idea how much that means to me, to all of us,” Daisy replied.

Black Bolt held up a hand and continued talking through Medusa.

“There is one thing that I will require of you.”

“Name it,” Daisy promised.

“You mentioned that each group of humans will have two chairs at the conference in Geneva. I wish you to sit at the table with me. One voice from Attilan, one voice from Earth, for all Inhumans.”

“Me? I’m no diplomat?” Daisy protested.

“And once upon a time, you weren’t a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent or an Avenger either,” Harry pointed out. “Besides, I think you’ll do great.”

“I agree,” Karnak stated. “These talks are for all people to help bring balance. Perhaps a room full of politicians and diplomats doesn’t ensure the best outcome.”

“That’s settled then,” Medusa smiled after Daisy had nodded her agreement. “You remember Gorgon and my sister, Crystal? And this is Triton, Black Bolt’s cousin.”

“Nice to meet you,” Harry nodded at the green skinned man.

“Lockjaw’s house broken, right?” Daisy asked, looking at the behemoth of a dog.

“He is but he won’t wander far if we let him outside while we have these talks,” Crystal smiled.

“Great! Then let’s get him settled and then we’ll introduce you to everyone else,” Daisy said.

oo00oo00

“When are you gonna build us our own plane, egg-head?” Ben asked as the borrowed quinjet, came in for a landing at the Compound.

“I’ll get around to it,” Reed replied. “I’ve been a little busy getting the lab up and running.”

“Well, when you do, make sure that it’s got a little more room than this thing,” Ben stated.

“And fast, it’s gotta be fast,” Johnny added.

“Do you boys want it to be invisible as well?” Sue asked sarcastically.

“Not a bad idea, Sis,” Johnny nodded. “Do that, too.”

Reed simply shook his head. “I’ll add it to the list. Alright, we’re here. Let’s all play nice, shall we?”

“I’m always nice,” Sue said as she unbuckled and headed towards the rear ramp and the Avengers standing on the tarmac waiting for them.

“Shes got you there, Reed,” Ben grumbled a laugh.
“You didn’t grow up with her,” Johnny mumbled.

“I heard that, Johnny!” Sue called over her shoulder.

The informal part of the gathering had lasted over an hour as groups formed and reformed over food and drinks. Steve had originally planned for a much shorter time with people milling about, getting to know each other but there were many that needed that extra time to become comfortable enough to leave their normal groups and to begin talking. Lavender, of course, kept the caterers running smoothly, ensuring that new urns of hot water were brought out and that fresh platters of food were available for those who were hungry.

Finally, though, the gathered crowd made their way across to the tables and chairs and Steve stepped up to the podium.

“Thank you all for coming today, especially on such short notice,” he began. “You all know why we’re here: the Sokovia Accords. These Accords, developed in secret by the United Nations are expected to be ratified by that body two day’s from now. While our lawyers are still going through it – it’s a thick document, one that I sure couldn’t read in the timeframe that we were given – we know the highlights.

“Everyone that is not considered a ‘normal’ human, is to be registered with the Panel that will ‘oversee’ us. DNA samples, fingerprints, a full analysis of our powers and what we can do – rated on some arbitrary scale, mind you – and we’ll also be expected to wear a monitor/tracker at all times, just in case ‘something’ happens. As has been pointed out, that is nothing less than the most hardened criminal is expected to comply with.

“We, of course, and really anyone who took the time to think, would know that we are not the only people out there with abilities, be they mutates, mutants, magicals or Inhuman. And there are some of them that will never comply with these requirements, simply because they are criminals. On the flip side, these requirements are written in such a way as to stop us from doing our job, of keeping the civilians safe and making sure that the world keeps turning.

“Personally, this reminds me too much of what I fought against back in World War Two. The Nazis took a dislike to people, simply because of their ancestry and forced them to be rounded up, locked away and many were executed. These Accords are one small step away from that being done to us.

“That’s why we’ve worked to ensure that, before these Accords are signed, there will be a round table conference where representatives of each different type of human gets their say in how they and those like them get to live their lives from this day forward.”

“Who gets to be at this table?” Reed asked.

“That is part of what we need to work out today,” Steve replied. “Right now, I can tell you that there will be twelve seats in total – two representing each people: mutants, mutates, magicals, Inhumans, normals and the ‘super-normals’, those of us like Tony, Bucky and Sam who use tech to fight the good fight.”

“What’s the mission, Boss? What’s our goal for these talks?” Nat asked.

“To be honest, my goal is for us to simply continue living our lives without feeling as though just being who we are is considered criminal by the rest of the world. I want the people of the world to see that, despite our differences, we’re all human,” he replied.
“People have been fighting for millenia over the smallest difference,” Hank, the blue-furred X-Man said. “As laudable as your goal is, I cannot see it being achieved.”

“You’re right, it probably won’t be at these talks. But it has to start somewhere,” Steve replied.

“And what better place than at the very top, in the arena of the United Nations where the macro laws are debated and put into place,” Charles said.

“Black Bolt asks how large of a population of the world are considered different, one of the groups represented here?” Medusa asked.

“That is a very hard question to answer,” Charles replied. “Using Cerebro, a device that enhances my own telepathic ability, I am able to find and locate mutants. Possibly it would allow me to differentiate between others as well, but it has never been calibrated for that. Therefore, speaking only of the mutants, I can reliably tell you that there are a lot more than one would imagine, and even more that have the potential. And every year, I see that number growing, whether that is simply in response to the number of humans on the planet, then I am unsure.”

“Give us a ball-park figure,” Reed asked.

“My estimate would be two percent of the world’s population that either are or who have the potential to become mutants,” Charles said.

“Two percent ain’t much,” Ben stated.

“Perhaps not, but almost identical to the same percentage of people in the world with green eyes,” Bruce stated, “and there aren’t any laws being proposed against them.”

“And when you add in the rest of us, that number only rises,” Steve said.

“What happens if we don’t do what they want? I ain’t too keen on the idea of having my blood and DNA taken – seen too many ways for that to go wrong already,” Logan stated. “Are they gonna be building giant sentient robots to hunt us down or something?”

“Nope, they can’t do that, it’s against their own laws to build or create AIs,” Tony stated quickly.

“One of the problems, I fear, is our own existence,” Vision stated. “Our strength is something to be valued but it also brings challenges, those who want to test themselves against us, to prove that they are either just as powerful or even more so. We have seen this evidenced in the last few years alone. The Avengers were created as a team to fight the fights that ordinary humans couldn’t and HYDRA also created their own team of powered individuals.”

“And we took them down,” Peter called.

“Indeed,” the Vision nodded. “Fortunately, you did do and even more fortunate, you did it in the middle of the jungles of Brazil where there was little collateral damage. But Secretary Ross reminded us here just yesterday of the many places where there has been conflict where the innocent has been hurt, affected or killed.”

“Are you saying that we caused all of that?” Steve asked.

“Not at all, Captain,” Vision replied. “But our strength has created challenge; challenge brings chaos and chaos breeds catastrophe.”

“And how much more chaos and catastrophe would there be without us doing our best to protect the
world?” Charles challenged. “I know how many times my X-Men have fought and bled to keep the world safe from those who would do it harm and I have seen the Avengers do the same. None of us seek these conflicts but we are the line between disaster and keeping the people safe.”

“We are the shield for the people,” Clint added with a nod.

“We do what is right, not because it is easy, because, believe me, it isn’t, but we do it because it is right,” Harry stated. “The easy solution is to give in, to do what they want, to sacrifice our freedom to live our lives normally. Or to run and hide, to go underground like my own people did over three hundred years ago, to disappear off the face of the planet, away from those who might harm us.”

“My own ancestors did something similar,” Black Bolt said through Medusa. “They gathered as many Inhumans as they could find and they left the planet altogether to create a safe haven to live close by. But by doing so, they denied themselves their birthright. Generations of Inhumans have looked to our sky to see the Earth above us and to know that it wasn’t our home any more, regardless of how much we desired it to be.”

“We shouldn’t have to run and hide or take the easy road,” Steve said. “If we’re honest, we shouldn’t even have to be the ones that are the shield between whatever wants to cause chaos and catastrophe and the innocent, everyday people. But we are who we are. We can do what we can do and if that means placing ourselves in harm’s way, then I don’t think any of us begrudge that fact. What we do begrudge, though, is that they want to take our choice away from us, to decide what we can and cannot be.”

“Only together can our voices be heard and this round table sounds like our greatest opportunity in history to declare that we, regardless of our differences, are a part of this planet, that we are still human beings,” Charles stated.

“That’s what the old man’s always preaching around here,” Tony said. “Together we can do anything.”

“That’s what we need to do, go into these Accords with one goal in mind, all of us together, to demand that our voices be heard, to make the people see that together, all of us, whether normal, magical, mutant, mutate or Inhuman, that we are all humans and all deserve the same rights and privileges and, if the law if broken, we all deserve the same punishment,” Steve stated.

Applause broke out, quickly spreading from person to person until all there were nodding and even standing at Steve’s speech.

“Sounds to me as though we’re in agreement,” Steve smiled. “I think all that’s left is to decide who should be sitting at the table on Tuesday.”

ooo00ooo

“This is a document of fear!” Matt declared, slamming the volume closed with such force that it made the entire table shake.

“Yeah, well, what’d you expect?” Foggy asked. “It’s written against anyone who doesn’t conform to what was once considered the human ‘norm’.”

“It goes against the very basic Human Rights, the ones that the United Nations themselves declared that all people should have,” Jennifer stated. “We don’t even have to go past the first two before these Accords breaks them! ‘We are all born free and equal.’ ‘Don’t discriminate.’ These are so fundamental and they’re blatantly breaking them with this document.”
“Ah, there’s the rub,” Foggy said. “You said, ‘human rights’. It could be argued that mutants, 
mutsates, Inhumans and magics fall under a different category.”

“This is not time to be playing Devil’s Advocate, Foggy,” Matt bit.

“Isn’t it? Because I think it is. If we’re going to walk into the United Nations … tomorrow,” he said, 
after checking his watch and seeing that it’d just past midnight again, “then we need to be prepared 
for whatever they throw at us.”

“You think that they’ll claim that basic human rights only apply to people without any changes in 
their DNA?” Karen asked.

“Makes sense. They don’t apply to chimpanzees,” Foggy replied, “and there’s not a whole lot of 
difference between human and monkey DNA.”

“But we’re talking about something much closer. Mutants for example only have a single extra 
gene,” Karen stated.

“And Inhumans have the DNA from another species in them,” Foggy countered.

“But they’re still human, we can see that,” Matt stated.

“Not if you look at Doreen or Melati or that blue guy from the X-Men. They even look 
fundamentally different,” Foggy argued.

“How’s that different from regular people with different coloured skin or eyes?” Jennifer asked.

“I know it’s not,” Foggy said, “but they’ll argue that it is.”

“Could we argue that basic human rights should be applied to all individuals who live on Earth?” 
Karen asked.

“It could be a tough sell, but I don’t see why we can’t,” Matt stated.

“And if we can do that successfully, that should mean that we can argue against the mandatory DNA 
swaps, fingerprints, power analyses and ankle monitors,” Jennifer said.

“And people’s rights to keep their identities secret if they want,” Matt added.

“And we all know how close that one is to your heart,” Foggy smiled.

“All right, we can work with that,” Matt said. “The other stuff, though, I’m not sure that we can do 
anything about that in such a short amount of time. If we’d had a year, heck, even a month, maybe. 
But a day?”

“Any enhanced individuals who sign are prohibited from taking action in any country other than 
their own, unless they are first given clearance by either that country’s government or by a United 
Nations subcommittee,” Karen read.

“Yes, that part,” Matt nodded. “Neither the Avengers, the X-Men, the Fantastic Four or even 
elements will be able to do anything about some problem that crops up in another country without 
getting clearance first.”

“And if it’s something like a military coup staged by other enhanced, then it’s not likely that they’ll 
be given clearance to enter that country,” Foggy sighed.
“We can’t get around that using the Freedom of Movement law?” Karen asked.

“No,” Jennifer replied. “Normal international laws would come into effect – passports and visas and the like.”

“The Avengers’ concern is that, with our movements curtailed, how long will it be before the ‘bad guys’ realise it and use it to hold civilians or the world hostage. We need the freedom to get the job done without waiting for some committee to decide that we can go in,” Matt relayed.

Foggy sighed. “We hear you, man, and we totally agree. Maybe this is just one of those times where the ones in charge making the rules will have to learn by you guys following the rules and letting the bad guys do their thing and hope that the regular police and whatever can deal with it.”

“But what will the world look like when they finally realise their mistake and that they need us?” Matt asked, a question that none of them could answer or even wanted to imagine an answer to.

ooo00ooo

The buzzing of his phone pulled him from sleep. Fumbling fingers managed to find it and pick it up. Bleary eyes swam in and out of focus at the time – half past four. Another half hour and his internal alarm would have gone off anyway.

Pressing the right buttons, he opened it up and found that a simple text message had been sent.

*She’s gone. In her sleep.*

He stared at it, a thousand images rushing past his eyes; a thousand more of the things that could have been. Slowly, he swung his legs over the edge of the bed and sat up, his head in his hands and let the tears flow.

ooo00ooo

There was something, something that he couldn’t quite put his finger on. He wasn’t sure if it was the way that his father was carrying himself or his speech patterns or the way that he seemed more … relaxed than he’d ever seen him before. Whatever it was, Thor found it puzzling. Perhaps Odin was finally coming to terms with Frigga’s death? It was possible but with the amount of time that Thor had spent away from Asgard, he couldn’t be certain.

Hopefully, this search for answers would soon be over. And not only that he would have found the answer but that the threat of this Thanos would be neutralised once and for all.

“This is a mighty weapon, Odinson,” Heimdall stated, having appeared at their table, his finger touching the axe that leant against it. “Does it have a name?”

“Eitri named it ‘Stormbreaker’,” Thor replied, picking it up, marvelling once again at how the handle seemed a perfect fit for his hand.

Heimdall cocked his head and Thor was sure that he was seeing far more than just the double head of the axe.

“You could summon the Bifrost with this,” Asgard’s Sentry stated.

“So, I have been told,” Thor agreed.

“Where will we continue our search next?” Carol asked.
Thor frowned at the question, unsure of the answer to give.

At her suggestion, they had visited the prime planets of each of the Confederacy – the Astrans, the Kallusians, the Remorath, and the Rajaks. Carol’s presence had ensured that they were given audience, after all, a Kree Captain and one who was a member of an elite Kree Taskforce (even if said Taskforce had been disbanded for some years) had a lot of sway among Kree allies.

Unfortunately, only the one race, the Kallusians had even heard of Thanos and their information was woefully out of date and of no use.

“I am uncertain,” Thor admitted. “The few leads that we had have, we have already chased down.”

“And most gave us little to no useful information at all,” Sif stated.

“True,” Carol nodded.

“What about trying one of the planets that Thanos conquered?” Hogan suggested. “Zen-Whoberi, perhaps?”

“No, I think not,” Thor replied slowly. “I do not believe that that will teach us anything new.”

“I agree,” Carol said. “All of the worlds that Thanos conquered in the past were before he became obsessed with finding the Infinity Stones. There has not been a new conquering in the last half dozen years. And, as far as it goes, we already know his modes operandi: subdue the planet and kill a random half of the population, then leave them to their fate.”

“So, we have no idea where to go?” Fandral asked.

“Not quite,” Thor contradicted. “There is one last place that I would like to go, one last item that I would like to check before we return to Midgard.”

“Where’s that?” Volstagg asked, a large chicken leg in his fist paused half-way to his mouth.

“Knowhere.”
We Are Gathered Here Today

As Steve expected, the church was filled almost to overflowing. There were dozens of British officers in full uniform scattered amongst the hundreds of mourners in black. He’d only just made it to London in time, despite the fact that he’d known that this day was coming for the past three days.

Peggy Carter had deteriorated quickly at the end and, in typical Peggy style, had arranged much of the details for today. She hadn’t wanted the time to drag on for those left behind, instead, she wanted to be buried quickly; thus, the funeral only two days after her death.

Memory after memory had filled Steve’s time on the plane. The memory of his very first encounter of the no-nonsense British Officer at Camp Hammond. His gruelling training there, including the time that he’d managed to solve the Serjeant’s ‘flagpole challenge’ to earn himself a ride back to the base alongside her.

Undergoing his change, her worried expression at what he was about to put his body through. Italy, when she’d found him again and encouraged him to do the right thing, to be the ‘good man’ that Erksine had envisioned him to be and when, for the very first time, he truly became Captain America. The sound of her voice as he piloted the Red Skull’s plane, knowing that he was going to have to sacrifice himself to keep the world safe. And then, after coming out of the ice, finding out that she was still alive and meeting her once again.

Now … now Peggy was gone. One of the very last of his links to his old life lost to this new world.

Beside him, Nat reached across and clasped her hand with his, their fingers intertwining as she offered her support while he grieved. On his other side was Bucky; he too, had known Peggy and how much she meant to Steve. The last of their group was Sam, sitting the other side of Bucky, supporting his friends in their grief.

A nudge from Bucky had Steve looking up to find Sharon, his one-time neighbour and a known former S.H.I.E.L.D. agent walking up to the pulpit.

“Margaret Carter was known to most as one of the founders of S.H.I.E.L.D. but to me, she was simply ‘Great Aunt Peggy’,” Sharon said. “She had a photograph in her office; Peggy standing next to JFK. As a kid, that was pretty cool. But it was a lot to live up to, which is why I never told anyone that we were related. I asked her once how she managed to master diplomacy and espionage in a time when no one wanted to see a woman succeed at either.

“And she said, ‘compromise where you can; where you can’t, don’t, even if every one is telling you that something wrong is something right. Even if the whole world is telling you to move. It is your duty to plant yourself like a tree, look them in the eye and say no, you move’.”

Steve’s head dropped. Sharon’s story, Peggy’s words, it could have been aimed right at him, at them. With everything in him, he wished that he could stay, could mourn her properly, but they were short on time – the Accords were due to be signed that very day.

As soon as the service was over, the four of them – with Nat’s arm firmly around Steve’s waist – left the church, to be the tree ready to stand firm for what was right. Just like Peggy would have wanted.

ooo00ooo

Vienna was truly a beautiful city. Unfortunately, even strolling around the immaculate parkland in front of the United Nation’s building with Daisy on his arm, Harry saw none of it. Instead, he was
firmly rooted in the past.

“I hear that a problem shared is a problem halved,” she said, bumping his shoulder.

Harry looked up at her, startled and with a great effort, shook off his morose thoughts and returned to the here and now.

“I guess I have been brooding a bit, haven’t I?” he said, with a lop-sided grin.

“I’d say it’s one of your more endearing qualities,” Daisy said. “But I’d be lying.”

Harry couldn’t help but laugh before quickly growing serious again.

“It’s these talks,” he admitted. “They’re bringing back a whole host of memories that I thought that I’d buried. Memories of the Second Wizarding War, in Britain, that is. The government, Umbitch, they rounded up anyone who was different to what they considered ‘normal’ and the things that they did … the stories that I heard, at least from those that survived the camps …”

He trailed off, shaking his head.

“I can’t … won’t support any government that wants to discriminate against people simply for being different. And for it to be a world government? That simply makes it a thousand times worse in my eyes. What they want to do … for the very first time I can see why my people disappeared from the world and I can’t blame them.”

“Harry,” Daisy said, stopping them and turning him around. “I get how you’re feeling. I agree with it wholeheartedly. I’d love nothing more than for the two of us to go in there with our powers blazing and to make them see sense. But you know as well as I do what a disaster that would be. Our powers aren’t going to change things. This time, it has to be our words. We have to go in there, show them that we mean business and change their minds. Calmly. If we’re angry, if our powers get out of control, all we’ll be doing is reinforcing their beliefs.”

“I don’t know if I can do this,” Harry sighed. “I’m not a diplomat.”

“What? And you think I am?” she countered. “Whatever we were, whatever we are, we need to use that in what’s to come, to have the best arguments and to force them to change their minds. And it’s not like we’re going into this alone.”

“No, you’re right, we’ll have allies. We’re not alone,” he agreed.

Glancing up at the city clock across the street, he noted that they were out of time if they wished to make their grand entrance with the others.

“Ready?” he asked.

“As long as I’ve got you by my side? Always,” she smiled.

Pausing, he looked deeply into her eyes.

“Daisy, what do you think about bringing our wedding forward?” he asked.

“Yes, I think that I’d like that,” she replied. “But I also think that we’re out of time to talk about it now. Soon, yes?”

Harry nodded, wrapped his arm about her and still staring into her eyes, he apparated them away.
The great, sleek jet-black Blackbird soared into the air above the United Nations’ building in Geneva. Around it, were four quinjets, flying in tight formation. There wasn’t a lot of room on the ground for the aircraft, but they knew that they’d fit, after all, the police had been warned and donations had been made to ensure that an entire street had been cordoned off for them.

One by one, the Blackbird taking lead, the five craft landed. And then, almost as though it’d been coordinated, their rear ramps descended and people began filing from them. The X-men, three quinjets full of Avengers and the Fantastic Four from the final quinjet.

Together, they met on the front lawn and were joined by half a dozen Inhumans and the enormous dog that had transported them to Earth. As one, the much-enlarged group strode inside.

The great room where the United Nations delegates usually met had been altered slightly for this historic occasion. In front of the half dozen extremely long curved lines of desks – with spaces set at regular intervals to allow ease of access – sat a new table. This one was round with the centre of it having been removed to allow a set of cameras and microphones space inside it.

There were twelve seats at this new table and, in place of the name card of the country that a ‘normal’ delegate would have, there were six different ones – Mutant, Mutate, Magical, Inhuman, Super-powered Human and Human.

Completing the room was the podium that a speaker could stand at to address the delegates. Normally, this was placed in the centre of the open area in front of the member nations’ tables. Today, with the addition of the Round Table, it had been pushed backwards until it was only a few feet in front of the great glass windows that gave a panoramic view of the beautiful city.

The delegates to the United Nations were already seated and in attendance when the doors opened to allow the delegates for the Round Table to enter.

But they weren’t alone. As the ten strode down through the room towards their places, the rest of the Avengers, Fantastic Four, Inhumans and a dozen X-Men filed to either side of the door, taking up positions against the wall. Not one word was spoken by the newcomers although there was a great susurration from the members of the United Nations.

Finally, just as the designated delegates were about to take their seats – Charles and Jean for the Mutants; Black Bolt (with Medusa standing directly behind him) and Daisy for the Inhumans; Steve and Natasha for the Mutates; Tony and Clint for the Super-Powered Humans; Mage and Marauder for the Magicals; and Secretary Ross and Didimus Gonzales, President of the United Nations for the Normals – a lone individual walked into the room.

Seeing him, Harry’s eyes widened and he strode across the room to meet him.

“Mugwump Akimbo?” he said, having raised a silencing charm around them with a wave of his hand.

“Mister Potter,” Akimbo replied. “I take it that I’m not late?”

“Not at all, Sir,” Harry replied. “If I may, what are you doing here?”

“It took nearly two days of debate but the ICW finally voted. I’m here to represent the Magical world alongside you.”
As much as he’d hoped, Harry had honestly not expected the vote to fall that way.

“You understand that just your presence here will give people the idea that there are more Magicals in the world than just Teddy and myself?”

“A necessary first step,” Akimbo replied. “Especially if, as we hope, these talks can be the first in the road to our re-joining the world that we once left.”

Stepping to the side, Harry motioned for the Mugwump to precede him. As they joined the table, Ted looked to his godfather, who in turn gave him a small flick of his fingers towards the far wall. With relief clear in his eyes, Teddy quick-stepped across to stand beside his girlfriend.

“Who are you and what are you doing here?” Ross demanded.

“My name is Curjanis Akimbo. I am here to represent the Magical population alongside Mage,” the Mugwump stated.

The last to arrive and to stand just inside the now-closed doors to the Assembly, were the legal team of Nelson and Murdock.

“Would you all please take your seats?” the dark-skinned man at the podium asked.

It took only a few minutes for the sound of chairs scraping and bodies moving to cease, leaving only the assembled heroes standing around the perimeter of the room. The man at the podium looked around the room and it was clear to see that there was sadness in his eyes.

“Thank you all for coming today, for being here on his auspicious occasion,” he said. “My name is King T’Chaka of Wakanda and it is my honour to preside over today’s meeting. Some may think that my standing here is a conflict of interest, that due to the recent events that have befallen my people, that I cannot be unbiased. To them, I say, that as a King, it is my duty to see the whole, regardless of the many parts that brought us to where we are today. As King, it is my duty to see that honour is maintained, that blame is apportioned where it is due and that the rights of all are considered.

“When stolen Wakandan vibranium was used to make a terrible weapon, we, in Wakanda were forced to question our legacy and our place within the world. To that end, we began to look outside our borders to see what it was that we had to offer the world. One of the first times that a delegation from Wakanda sought to interact with the wider world was as part of a good-will mission to Nigeria. They looked to the future, to doing good, to working with our brethren of the world in the noblest of goals: fighting disease that affects so many.

“Those men and women killed in Nigeria were from a country too long in the shadows. We will not, however, let misfortune drive us back. We will fight to improve the world that we wish to be a join. I am grateful to the Avengers, the X-men, the Inhumans and all of those like them for supporting this initiative.

“Today, for the very first time, the tribes of man are joining together to talk, to discuss the future, to find a common ground and a way forward where we, as one people can make this world a better place for all.”

As the room applauded King T’Chaka’s opening speech, Steve slowly rose from his seat and stood with his back straight and his head slightly bowed.

“King T’Chaka,” he said. “To you and to all of your people, on behalf of the Avengers, we wish to offer our sincerest condolences for your terrible loss. It was never our intention for the innocent to
become casualties of our fight against terrorism. We feel for you and we grieve with you.”

King T’Chaka bowed slightly. “Thank you, Captain, for your words. I can feel the sincerity in your heart. Today, one of the items that we are here to discuss is how we can prevent such things from happening again.”

“I think that I speak for all when I say that that, too, is our goal,” Steve replied before retaking his seat.

“I think that one of the best ways to achieve that is to know who has the power to make that happen,” Ross stated. “There are many in this room and I’d bet a great many more in the wider world that have such power. If we know who they are, we can prevent harm being done before it happens.”

“Tell me, Secretary Ross, how will you plan on achieving his goal?” Charles asked.

Ross tapped the book of the Sokovia Accords in front of him.

“It’s outlined in here, measures that the delegates in this room have agreed give the world the best chance of being safe,” Ross stated.

“I’ve read that document,” Harry stated. “Do you know what I saw? Fear. Fear of the unknown. Fear of the different. I have seen that in action before, I have seen what it can lead to. The history books are full of it. There have been countless wars fought over differences. Religion. Race. Appearance. Gender. Truths. All of these conflicts should have taught us something.”

“This time that we are currently living in has been touted as an ‘enlightened’ age,” Jean stated. “It wasn’t so long ago that women had to fight for the right to vote, for equality. The United States Civil War was as much about slaves and the colour of skin as it was about anything else. We have overcome those prejudices, we have become ‘enlightened’. Should we not be as enlightened when it comes to other parts of genetics as well?”

“Even you, Doctor Grey, have to admit that, at the fundamental level, those wars and conflicts that you just pointed out were conducted by humans fighting humans,” Ross stated. “We’re not talking about that here. Here, we’re talking about normal humans against people with abilities so amazing and powerful that the normal person stands absolutely no chance.”

“We are all here today, talking together, not fighting,” Clint pointed out. “Seeing that, being a part of that, I’d have to say that fighting isn’t inevitable. Unless you want a war, Mister Secretary?”

“Are you threatening me?” Ross asked angrily.

President Gonzales placed a hand on Ross before speaking.

“No one here wants a war, of that I am sure and I am certain that Mister Barton was not threatening you, simply pointing out that it takes ‘two to tango’, I believe the expression is?”

“I don’t have a great education,” Daisy began, “so I could be wrong but from my way of seeing things, the measures that you’ve put in the Accords – taking our DNA, our fingerprints, analysing our powers and abilities, putting an ankle monitor on us to track us twenty-four seven – don’t they only work if we agree? What about the ones that will never agree?”

“And they’re usually the ones that we’re forced to combat in order to keep the civilians as safe as possible,” Charles added.
“If they don’t agree, they’ll be rounded up and forced to comply or suffer the consequences,” Ross stated forcefully.

“Ah, that is where I have a problem,” Matt stated, joining the discussion as he walked down the room, his cane tapping before him. “Forcing an individual to undergo these measures. Measures that those in these very walls have put laws in place to prevent.”

“What laws?” President Gonzales asked.

“The most basic and the most fundamental,” Matt replied. “The laws of basic Human Rights and Discrimination. No person shall be denied these laws, it has been set down by your own body.”

“I have not been part of this world for much of my life,” Akimbo stated, “I would appreciate hearing more.”

“Number one: we are all born free and equal,” Foggy recited as he joined Matt. “Number two: don’t discriminate. Number three: we all have the right to life and to live in freedom and safety.”

“That one,” Ross chimed in quickly. “That’s the big one we’re debating here today. Exactly how safe can anyone be with you super-powered people living among us?”

“Living among us’?” Tony repeated. “Did I just hear you right, Ross? ‘Living among us’? To me that sounded as though you not only want everyone monitored, you want us locked up with the key thrown away.”

“You’re not one of them,” Ross replied, waving his hand at the mutants, mutates, Inhumans and magicals at the table.

“Uh, yeah, I am,” Tony contradicted. “Says so right here.” And he tapped the Sokovia Accords. “All members of the Avengers are subject to the same conditions as enhanced individuals, even if they are not enhanced themselves. It’s in black and white and why I’m even sitting here at this table.”

“Those sections of the Accords that outline the way that those that are considered ‘different to human norm’ will be treated are in direct violation of the United Nations Human Rights and therefore, are, in fact criminal,” Matt stated, causing a loud murmuring throughout the room.

“May I ask who you are?” King T’Chaka asked.

“My apologies,” Matt replied. “My name is Matthew Murdock and this is my partner Franklin Nelson from Nelson and Murdock, Attorneys at Law. We represent the Avengers.”

Harry noted that both Charles and Jean as well as Reed and Sue gave significant looks at each other and he smirked; unless he was mistaken, Nelson and Murdock were about to get some new clients.

“If you are right, then I find it incredibly troubling that those sections were able to be placed into the Accords in the first place,” King T’Chaka stated.

“If I may,” the member for South Africa said, standing. “It is my understanding that those sections are considered legal simply because the laws that Mister Murdock and Mister Nelson have outlined pertain to human rights. These … people are clearly not … fully human.”

“Ahh, excuse me, are you saying that I’m not human?” Tony asked.

“I believe the term is ‘guilt by association’,” the delegate replied offhandedly before retaking his seat.
Foggy whirled on him. “I trust that you have a very good lawyer, Sir, because you’re going to need it for the defamation case that I will be bringing against you on Mister Stark’s behalf.”

“Is that true?” King T’Chaka asked, his gaze focused on President Gonzales. “The Accords are built on the premise that someone classified as a magical, a mutant, an Inhuman or a mutate are not considered as a human any longer?”

Harry cocked his head, wondering at the glance that the King gave to the younger Wakandan man standing off to the side.

“That is what I was told,” President Gonzales replied sounding abashed.

“What right do we have to say that these people are not human?” King T’Chaka asked.

“By the simple fact that they’re not!” Ross stated. “Even by their own admission, they’re not. Ask them!”

“Perhaps a small explanation as to what defines your uniqueness would not be amiss,” King T’Chaka suggested.

“Mutates,” Steve began. “Once we were all the same as most of the population of the world, what you are classing as ‘normal’. But something, be it science, deliberate or accidental or something else, changed us, gave us a little extra, changed our genes.”

“I have studies mutation for much of my life,” Charles said. “In all of my studies, I came to the same conclusion: mutation is the next step in human evolution, evidenced by the addition of what I have coined the X-gene. It is a part of our DNA when we are each conceived.”

“By the sound of it, assuming that I understand you correctly, Magicals are much the same,” Akimbo stated. “We are born with our magic, it is a part of us, something that we have to learn how to control and use as our will and magic allows.”

“Today, Inhumans are much as Mutants and Magicals,” Black Bolt said, signing through Medusa. “We are born with the gene implanted in our DNA. However, our abilities are only manifested through terrigenesis, an outside agent that acts as a catalyst for the change within. Many thousands of years ago, our ancestors were given this extra into their DNA through the experiments that a race called the Kree did upon them, making us closer to what you call the Mutates of this world.”

“You know what I can do, Iron Man’s been a part of the world now for years,” Tony stated. “And that’s one hundred percent tech. I’m not the only one; there are others both Avengers and not who use tech every day to ‘enhance’ their abilities. Anyone who’s ever lost a limb and had a prosthetic attached is technically an ‘enhanced’ human, not that that means anything when it comes to the Accords. No, it’s simply those of us in the Avengers who use tech to fight the bad guys who get the special treatment. And, by the way, those bad guys? If they’re not genetically different from ‘normal humans’, then you can bet your sweet ass that they use some kind of tech to give them their edge.”

“That, I believe, brings us to the next point that I and my associates find the most disturbing part of the Sokovia Accords,” Matt said. “These Accords state that, ‘the Avengers will no longer be a private organization and will operate under the supervision of the United Nations’. You are, in effect, attempting to conscript the Avengers into being a pseudo military force under the direct command of the United Nations.

“Currently, the United Nations does not have its own military force. When the need arises for a combined peace-keeping force to be established, member nations are asked to contribute. It is up to
each individual nation to decide for themselves if they wish to send military aide and what that aide
consists of. The Avengers are not being given the same consideration. They are being told that they
will now be under the command of the United Nations, to go where, when or if the United Nations
tells them to do so.”

“Our concern with that is, what if there is somewhere we need to go and you don’t send us?” Steve
asked. “Or you send us too late to do any good? Or we are sent where we clearly have no reason to
be there?”

“And you believe that you know better than the United Nations?” Ross scoffed.

“I think that we’ve done well so far under our own command,” Steve countered.

“And how far does this stretch?” Foggy asked. “Currently, the wording is for the Avengers. Is that
going to be amended to include the X-Men? Or the Fantastic Four? Or any other group that forms in
the future?”

“I think we all know the answer to that,” Ross stated, leaning back in his chair.

“And what if we choose not to go?” Harry asked. “What if we decide that we don’t want to be a part
of your ‘military’?”

“Then you retire,” Ross stated. “Vigilantism won’t be tolerated; that’s what these Accords are for, to
enforce the peace, to ensure that civilians won’t become ‘collateral damage’ in your own private
war.”

Movement out of the corner of Harry’s eye had him turning his head to see the young Wakandan
man inching towards the glass where something had clearly caught his attention. Charles, too, it
seemed had noticed, for he touched his temple with two fingers of one hand and began frowning.

“Every body get down!” the Wakandan yelled, beginning to run towards his king.

“Shields!” a voice in Harry’s head ordered.

Without bothering to question it, Harry turned in his chair and conjured the strongest shield that he
could over the table. Beside him, he noticed, Akimbo copied him, albeit with a smaller, less powerful
shield. Off to one side, covering perhaps a fifth of the delegates, a blue-tinged shield appeared
courtesy of Sue; another, this one red, was also created by Wanda.

And then the world exploded in a burst of fiery-orange. Glass, concrete, steel and flames washed
over Harry’s shield and he gritted his teeth as he pushed more and more power into it, intent on
keeping everyone under it safe.

When the worst of it seemed to have passed, Harry dropped his shield and almost immediately began
coughing with the amount of dust in the air. A wide wave of his wand created a powerful wind that
circled the room before exiting out through the demolished windows, taking much of the dust with
it.

Screams, cries and moans permeated the air and he looked around. There were bodies everywhere
amongst the overturned tables and chairs.

“We need to find who did this,” Harry stated angrily.

“And in the meantime, help the injured,” Clint stated.
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“And in the meantime, help the injured,” Clint stated.

Daisy’s sudden movement beside him, her hands shooting upwards, had Harry twisting his head to see what had caught her attention. An enormous steel beam had shifted and begun to fall, directly towards a group of four people lying prone on the ground. Only Daisy’s quake powers was keeping it aloft.

Quickly, Harry summoned each of the four, shifting them along the floor about two metres and away from danger. Once the area was clear, Daisy gradually lowered the beam, making sure that it was secure and wouldn’t fall any further before releasing her ‘hold’ on it.

“Kurt, Logan, Scott. Two men to the east, just outside the blast radius,” Charles called. “I’m holding them in place.”

Looking around, Harry saw a blue mutant with a tail race across, join up with the other two before he wrapped his arms around them and the three vanished in a puff of blue smoke.

Seeing the Wakandan man leaning over King T’Chaka, desperately feeling for a pulse, Harry raced to his side, dropping to his knees and waving his wand over him. The King’s usually black skin was almost white with dust as he lay amongst the debris from the bombing. Unfortunately, there was nothing that Harry could do. His injuries were simply too severe; most likely, he’d been killed instantly.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said, laying a hand on the man’s back.

“Thank you for trying,” he replied his head bowed and resting on his King’s chest.

“Are you injured at all?” Harry asked.

“No. No, I am fine,” the man replied.

Not trusting the man’s words in his grief, Harry quickly ran his wand over him. Three cracked ribs and numerous cuts and bruises; nothing life-threatening. A series of episky’s was enough to heal the cuts. Three bone-knitting spells sealed the bones back into place.

With the Wakandan seen to, Harry moved off towards the closest of the injured to check them over. He had a belt full of potions and spells ready to do what he could. Unfortunately, he was down to his last dozen drops of phoenix tears and made a mental note to acquire some more – after today, he was sure that he’d be completely out.

Harry wasn’t the only one doing what they could for the injured. Jean Grey was a doctor and apparently Crystal had healer training as well. Many of the others had at least some triage experience, something that Daphne had insisted that they all attend a course in after Lagos.

The first man that Harry came across was the delegate from South Africa. He was moaning, holding his shoulder where blood was oozing out between his fingers. Gently, he pried the man’s hand away, only to find that he’d been impaled by a rather large piece of sharp glass.

“Drink this,” Harry ordered, holding a vial to the man’s mouth.
“What is it?” he asked.

“It’s a potion to restore the blood that you’ve lost,” Harry explained. “As soon as you’ve drunk it, I can do something about your wound.”

He was forced to tilt the man’s head back slightly and hold his nose to keep him swallowing the vile potion but, in the end, Harry got it into him. A diagnostic charm showed that the glass hadn’t hit anything vital. Holding his hand ready alongside his wand, Harry quickly, wandlessly, vanished the glass before healing the cut. He watched as the skin knitted itself back together.

“You’ll be alright now,” Harry assured him. “Just rest here until the Doctors can double check you over.”

As Harry began to get up to go to the next person, the South African grabbed his arm.

“Thank you,” he said and Harry could see that he meant it.

Perhaps he’d made an impression. He’d worry about that later; for now, there were people who needed his help.

ooo00ooo

T’Challa sat on a bench just outside the United Nation’s building. Around him, the world was in turmoil – people were running backwards and forwards, ambulances had their lights and sirens blaring, police were putting up barricades and holding the inquisitive back. But to him, it was all noise, noise that he could ignore.

His world had all but ended a scant hour ago. His father had been killed. Far from home, away from the lands of their ancestors, in this foreign place, he had died. His spirit, T’Challa knew, was far from dead, he would be joining the ancestors on the plains, running with them for eternity. But for T’Challa, his time with T’Chaka was over. At least on this Earth.

Opening his clenched fist, he focussed on the ring that he’d taken from his father. The ring of the King of Wakanda. It was his now. Oh, he’d have to go through the ceremony, but that was nothing but a formality. He, T’Challa, was King of Wakanda. It was his duty to take up the second duty – King and the Black Panther – much, much earlier than he’d ever imagined.

Plucking up the ring, he slid in onto his finger and straightened. The time for mourning was over. Now, it was time to ensure that his father’s killer was brought to justice.

“Your highness,” Natasha Romanoff said, standing a respectful distance away.

He looked up at her and nodded.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” she said.

“Loss, yes,” he nodded. “However, in my culture, death is not really the end. We know that we will see each other again, when the ones left behind have lived their days on the Earth. Until then, my father will be on the plains, running free, forever.”

“That sounds peaceful,” Nat said.

“My father believed so,” T’Challa replied. “But I am not my father. For what was done to me, to my people, I will kill the men responsible.”
“I’m not sure that you’ll be allowed to do that,” she said.

“We shall see,” he replied. “But first, we shall hear what they have to say, to understand why they did as they did, what they hoped to achieve.”

Nat nodded slowly. “The two men were taken into custody and are currently under guard in the United Nations’ detention centre. We could go now, if you like.”

“Yes, I would,” T’Challa nodded as he stood.

It was almost time to take up the mantle of king but first, T’Challa was ready to fulfill his duty as son.

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The two men were in individual cells, two of the five along the short corridor. Each cell was designed so that the ones inside could not see out through the one-way glass, nor could they hear what was said outside of their cell. Unless, of course, the ones in charge allowed them to.

“Damien Jefferson and Elijah ben Haman,” the US National Security Agent, Everett Ross said, reading from the pad in his hands. “They’ve got a rap sheet half a dozen pages long between them. Primarily for protesting and stirring up mobs and civil unrest. This is the first time that they’ve been involved in explosives – that we know of.”

“Where’d they come from?” Steve asked.

“From what we’ve been able to gather, they’re part of a new group calling themselves ‘Watchdogs’, the grey-haired Agent replied. ‘Their manifesto can be boiled down to ‘being human – that’s fully, human-norm – is good, being something else, is bad’. They’re promoting discrimination against mutants, mutates, everyone ‘different’ genetically to ‘pure’ humans. Basically, anyone who’s not a pure human, should, in their opinion, be killed.’

“Human and proud,” Charles summed up and seemed rather amused by the thought.

“In essence,” Ross nodded.

“I must remember to find a way to tell Erik about this, I’m sure that he’d find it as ironic as I do?” Charles stated.

“Eirk?” Tony asked.

“Erik Lehnsherr, also known as ‘Magneto’. A mutant who’s battle cry – for want of a better term – has always been ‘mutant and proud’.”

“I’ve seen this type before,” Harry stated, taking a step closer to one of the cells. “Only back then, it was ‘pureblood’ magicals discriminating against magicals who were labelled half-blood or muggle-born. A load of crock. It’s not what you are inside, it’s what you do with who you are. These two may be ‘pure’ humans but they’re acting as the worst that they accuse us as being.”

“Other magicals?” Ross asked. “I thought that there were only two of you? Sorry, three after Akimbo turned up to sit at the table.”

“You’d be surprised,” Harry smiled, not that Ross could see it with his face obscured and under his hood. “Just as you’d be surprised at how many Inhumans or Mutants there really are.”

“What’s going to happen to these two?” T’Challa asked.
“They’ll be questioned, extensively so that we can learn all that we can about these ‘Watchdogs’, to try to get a handle on them and to put them out of business before things get any nastier,” Ross replied. “After that, they’ll be charged with the eighteen murders of the good people from today as well as a host of other charges longer than my arm.”

“I want them,” T’Challa stated. “They will return with me to face Wakandan justice.”

Ross shook his head. “Not going to happen. Their crime took place here, in Vienna, not in Wakanda.”

“Their actions saw the King of Wakanda killed,” T’Challa stated. “They will be coming with me; our honour demands it.”

“I think that there needs to be a diplomatic way to handle this,” Nat stated.

“I’m with the Prince on this one,” Harry said, his eyes glued to T’Challa. “They deliberately bombed the building when we were there, discussing the Accords. But it wasn’t the Accords that were the target, nor was it the delegates themselves. No! It was us! They wanted us dead. And, we’re incredibly lucky that they didn’t succeed. If it’d been one of us, Avengers, X-Men, Inhumans, that had been killed, we’d be wanting justice as well. Send them to Wakanda, let them face the actions for their crimes there.”

“That’s not justice, that’s revenge,” Nat stated.

Harry shrugged. “Maybe the line’s a little blurred but in this instance, I’m okay with that,” Harry replied. “The Magicals support your claim, King T’Challa.”

“I am not King yet; but thank you,” T’Challa replied with a small bow.

“Mage is right,” Steve said after a long moment, his eyes darting between the pair. “The Wakandan people deserve the right to see justice done. Justice, not revenge. I’d like to be there for it, if I may.”

“I’m in for the tag-a-long,” Tony added, to which Harry nodded.

T’Challa looked between them for a moment before his eyes turned to Ross.

“Mister Everett, I believe that you know the proper diplomatic procedures to ensure that this can happen?”

Ross found that he was being stared at from all those there, his head shifting about obviously trying to evade their eyes. Finally, he sighed.

“It’s against my better judgement, but I’ll see what I can do,” he said before holding up a hand. “But if this happens, it’s not going to be until after we’ve pumped them for everything that they know.”

“I think that I can ensure that we get what we need,” Harry stated, holding up a small vial that he’d fished out of one of his belt pockets.

“What’s that?” Ross asked suspiciously.

“Veritaserum,” Harry replied. “You’d call it ‘truth serum’.”

The group that gathered back at the Compound the next day after the aborted Round Table was much like the first meeting between the Avengers, X-Men, Fantastic Four and Inhumans. There were
a few missing, as one would expect, but the vast majority of them were there.

“What’s the word on the Accords now?” Clint asked. “Are they still going to be signed?”

“Doubtful in their current state,” Matt replied. “The Round Table was really only just getting started but I believe that significant progress at getting our point across was already being made.”

“I would agree,” Charles nodded, leaning forward in his chair. “I believe that the dichotomy between the Accords and the United Nation’s own Human Rights was never thought through properly. Whether this was a case of the entire process being rushed through, fuelled as it was by fear or the fact that we were being seen as something ‘other’ than human, is hard to tell. Regardless, our point was being made, the delegates definitely had looks of contemplation on their faces.”

“King T’Chaka was definitely one of them,” Nat stated.

“The fact that the Round Table was interrupted in such a violent manner was truly deplorable,” Black Bolt signed for Medusa to relate his words to them all. “The only good that came from those actions was the fact that it was – to use their own vernacular – ‘pure humans’, who perpetrated the deed. That fact will show better than our words could ever say that, regardless of ancestry or genetics, people are capable of both great good and terrible evil.”

“Will the talks be resumed?” Sue Storm asked.

“They have to be,” Matt replied. “The Accords were tabled to be signed by the United Nations delegates, that process must be continued. Exactly when that will happen is unknown at the moment but it will happen.”

“I’m in talks with some of the United Nations’ lawyers,” Foggy stated. “It’s highly likely that we’ll be able to offer a revised edition of the Accords for the delegates to ratify after the Round Table discussion.”

“What would this ‘revised edition’ look like?” Reed asked.

“Basically, if you take out all the parts that pertain to you being monitored, finger-printed, having your DNA recorded, a power-level index applied to you and being forced to reveal your identities – for those of you who are keeping them hidden for personal reasons – then pretty similar to how it is now,” Foggy replied.

“The parts about not operating in foreign nations?” Sam asked.

“Will have to stay in,” Matt stated flatly. “There’s nothing we can do about that. Not right now at any rate. Every country has laws about people entering or leaving their country and we’re going to have to respect them.”

“And what happens if we’re needed somewhere and it takes too long to get through all the red tape?” Logan asked, punctuating his feelings on the matter by his adamantium claws snikt-ing in and out.

“Then we have to respect that,” Charles replied. “Regardless of our personal feelings.”

“There is a high possibility that the criminal elements that the Avengers and the X-Men regularly deal with will increase their activity, particularly in countries that we are not based in,” Vision stated.

“If that happens and we can’t go in to do our thing, then the world may just come to understand exactly why we’re needed, why those Accords are bad for world peace,” Sam said.
“Perhaps, perhaps not,” Vision allowed. “It may have the affect of teaching the police and military of
the world how to deal with such individuals and groups on their own.”

“Fat chance,” Logan snorted.

“Isn’t that what our ultimate goal is supposed to be? Ending the mission so that we can go home and
live our lives?” Bruce asked. “This may allow us to do just that.”

“In the meantime, what are we supposed to do while the world goes to hell and every crackpot and
wannabe dictator bubbles to the surface?” Bucky asked. “Hell, according to the Accords, we can’t
even operate on American soil without government permission!”

“We’ve got a nice little island to live on while we wait for everyone to see sense. And I’ll make sure
no one gets bored.” Bobbi stated with a smile that had some of the Avengers shivering.

“And we have a school to run, mutants to find and teach where they can be safe from those who do
not understand them,” Charles agreed.

“Well, I hope it don’t take long; I’ve never been one for patience,” Logan stated, spitting the last
word out in obvious disgust.

“Nevertheless, we have to abide by the Accords after they are signed or we’ll be the ones hunted and
imprisoned and not in a place to drag everyone’s butts out of the fire when the time finally comes,”
Scott stated firmly.

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Thor nodded to The Collector, indicating that he’d seen all that he’d wanted to. After one of his
bizarre, ritualistic bows, The Collector closed the orb containing the Aether, placed the orb into its
place inside the foam-lined box, snapped the box closed, locked it and inserted the box into the
display case, which was also secured.

“As you can see, the Stone’s protections are taken extremely seriously,” The Collected stated.

“Ensure that it stays that way,” Thor replied. “I have reason to believe that there is one who is
seeking the Stones for himself. Currently, they are all separated and protected, but one cannot be too
careful.”

“You know where the others are?” The Collector asked and Thor was not fooled by the offhanded
way that he asked.

“You know where the others are?” The Collector asked and Thor was not fooled by the offhanded
way that he asked.

“I have seen three others,” he admitted. “And before you ask, no, I will not divulge their location.”

“Very wise,” The Collector replied, again accompanied by a bow with elaborate hand gestures.

Giving a final nod, Thor led his companions from The Collector’s home and out into the concourse
of Knowhere. Once they were safely away from prying ears, he stopped and faced them.

“Our leads have run dry,” Carol stated. “He had no knowledge of the missing two Stones.”

“He did not,” Sif agreed.

“Where to next, Thor?” Volstagg asked.

“For me, Midgard,” he replied. “I still believe that it is a nexus point, a place where all knowledge of
the Stones collides. I aim to find out why. My friends, I thank you for accompanying me, feel free to
return to Asgard.”

“We will let you know if Heimdall sees anything,” Sif nodded as she gathered the Warriors Three about her. “Heimdall, open the Bifrost!”

It took much longer than normal before the four were engulfed in the multicoloured rainbow, but then, that wasn’t unexpected considering how far away they were from the Nine Realms.

“And you, Carol Danvers? What is your wish? I can return you to the Kree home world if you desire,” Thor offered.

“Actually, I think it’s time that I went home,” she replied. “I’ve been away from Earth for far too long.”

Lifting the Stormbreaker high above his head, Thor summoned his power, channelled it and opened his own portal, whisking the two of them away and across the Universe.

ooo00ooo

“So, that’s it, we just run and hide now?” Sam asked as he, along with the others, watched the procession in front of him.

It’d taken a surprisingly short amount of time before they’d all been summoned back to the United Nations to finish what had been started. One of the biggest differences this time was that they were in New York at the United Nations Headquarters instead of Vienna. The other big surprise was that, before the Round Table had even been restarted, the delegates had voted on and passed the revised Accords as being the ones on the table that they would be ratifying.

Exactly as Matt and Foggy had predicted, the sections that violated basic human rights had been removed. All the other sections pertaining to when and how they were allowed to move from country to country or operate in any country had been retained. Also still in there was the section that, in essence, made their groups – Avengers, X-Men, Fantastic Four – illegal unless they were under the strict supervision of a United Nations Panel.

“As much as it grates, as much as I hate it, we have to,” Steve replied. “For now, we have to play this by the book. Believe me, though, if things go pear-shaped and we’re needed, then we’ll step in, asked or not. Hopefully whatever Thor’s looking into turns out to be nothing, but if it is something, then we can’t be locked up right when we’re needed.”

Nat, on Steve’s other side, huffed at that; they all knew that it wasn’t a matter of if, but when they’d step back into doing their job of protecting the world.

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The Inhumans stood together as they watched delegate after delegate step up to the book that held the Sokovia Accords and sign their name on behalf of their member country.

“In principle, this is a good thing,” Karnak stated, “all are to be treated equally with no individual, regardless of their ability treated differently. Whether or not practice meets theory, we shall see.”

“Daisy, we Inhumans are safe in Attilan,” Medusa said. “But we also know that not all Inhumans are in our city. If you find some of us and they wish to leave Earth, for whatever reason, then they will be welcomed.”

“Thank you,” she replied. “I suspect that there’s a lot of us out there and with Afterlife, the place that
my mother built as a sanctuary for the Earth-bound Inhumans now gone, your home may be needed. Humans have a tendency to hate and distrust anyone or anything that’s different.”

“Inhumans aren’t so different,” Triton pointed out.

“No, they’re not,” Medusa agreed, speaking for Black Bolt. “And Daisy, regardless of whether you choose to stay here on Earth or wish to join us on the Moon, you will always have a home in Attilan as well.”

“Thanks, guys, that … that means so much,” she smiled, her eyes glistening somewhat.

Harry stood beside Mugwump Akimbo, Ted just behind them as they watched history being made.

“You know that there are whispers,” Harry said. “The three of us together, people are already beginning to put two and one together and coming up with the right answer.”

“It was inevitable,” Akimbo replied, a half-smile on his face.

Harry stared at him. “Was that your plan all along? To give the magical world a nudge towards coming out of the shadows, to leaving the Statute of Secrecy behind?”

“As the Supreme Mugwump, I cannot go against the wishes of the magical population, as agreed upon by the International Confederation of Wizardry,” Akimbo stated solemnly.

“But that didn’t stop you nudging things anyway, from being the person in that chair,” Harry sighed, nodding at the round table that was still in existence in the room. “You know you remind me of Dumbledore.”

“Thank you,” Akimbo replied, clearly pleasantly surprised.

“It wasn’t a compliment,” Harry stated. “But for what it’s worth, I think that you did the right thing. It’s time, especially with so many other ‘tribes’ of humans now appearing, coming out of their own shadows.”

“Yes,” Akimbo replied simply.

“How will you report all that’s happened here to the ICW, Supreme Mugwump?” Teddy asked.

“I think that I will highlight that so many different peoples are able to work together, for the betterment of the planet as a whole,” he replied after some thought. “Humans aren’t perfect, but we’ve all come a long way since the times that caused us to wrap our world in secrecy. I will also emphasise the Human Rights and especially the sections that pertain to all humans being treated equally without discrimination.”

“How do you think the magical world will react?” Harry asked.

“I have hope,” Akimbo replied thoughtfully. “It may take a number of years yet, but I believe that within my lifetime, I will see the magical world re-join the rest of their brethren. You two, you are already doing your part to prepare the world and for that, I thank you.”

One hundred and seventy-seven delegates signing a document takes an extraordinarily long time. That time is lengthened when twelve of the remaining nineteen countries that were against the
Accords decided that, after the revisions, they were willing to sign as well. There were only three delegates left behind him by the time that T’Challa, Prince of Wakanda, picked up the pen.

He stared at the page, the line with his name and country printed underneath it, waiting for his signature. But he paused as the memory of his father, standing at the podium in Vienna washed over him. His father had looked startled, concerned, unlike any expression that T’Challa had ever seen on him before. And it was all directed at him, his son, after it was pointed out exactly who these Accords were aimed at: anyone considered a mutant, Inhuman, magical, technologically-enhanced human Avenger and mutate.

Mutate. A person who began life as an ‘ordinary’ human and had their DNA, their genetic make-up altered in some way, by something mystical or through science of some kind.

His father had realised something behind that podium, something that the bombing and T’Chaka’s death had prevented him from sharing with his son. But T’Challa knew what it was.

His eyes lifted and he scanned those around the perimeter of the room, those who the signing of these Accords most affected, those who had chosen not to sign, despite the pressure that was being applied to them to do so.

“I cannot sign for Wakanda,” he stated clearly.

His words caught all there by surprise. Before the murmurings could grow too loud, he continued.

“Wakanda still supports the Sokovia Accords and will bear signature to them, however I cannot sign for Wakanda.”

A gesture to Nakia, one of his War Dogs, Wakanda’s version of diplomats and, coincidentally, the woman that still held his heart. Knowing him so well, she understood his intentions and he moved slightly to the side, giving her access to the table, book and pen.

“Prince T’Challa, may we ask why it is that you cannot sign for your country?” President Gonzales asked.

T’Challa didn’t so much consider the question, for he expected it. His answer, though, that did need some thought.

“As the Protector of Wakanda, it would be wrong for me to sign this document while others who are also Protectors, are refusing to sign,” he finally stated.

Eyes everywhere swivelled between him and the others standing around the perimeter of the room. While his answer was truthful, it left much open to interpretation and he was fine with that, after all, Wakanda had many secrets that they jealously guarded from the rest of the world.
Like The Beatles?

Avengers Dis-Assembled!

The headline, or versions of it, were splashed over every newspaper in the world. The news of the signing of the Sokovia Accords by most of the governments of the world at the latest meeting of the United Nations was the hot topic for days.

Page after page in every newspaper and magazine talked about nothing else. And one of the biggest topics was the fact that not one Avenger or any of the other enhanced had signed the Accords. News bulletins, talk shows, current affairs programs, every single one of them ran special coverage. Reporters began camping outside both Avengers Tower and Avengers Compound.

What increased the speculation and enhanced the idea that the Avengers were no more was the fact that not a single Avenger had been seen since the signing. There hadn’t even been any quinjets with the distinctive, stylised ‘A’ seen in the sky, either.

New York, especially, felt it, when, without the regular appearance of Daredevil, Spider-Man, Mage, Squirrel Girl and Marauder, the streets became deserted. No longer were the regular, everyday citizens going out at night or, if they did, it was at a much greater pace, their heads constantly turning to look over their shoulders.

Finally, three days after the accords were signed, a press conference was held. Reporters found it standing room only as they packed in, video cameras, tape recorders, phones and notepads at the ready.

The appearance of Lavender Brown, Press Secretary for the Avengers had the room instantly hushing as she took to the podium.

“Good morning,” she began. “There has been a great deal of speculation over the past few days about what the Sokovia Accords being ratified by so many members of the United Nations means for the Avengers.

“The Accords spelt it out quite plainly, even in its revised edition following the Round Table conference that was held between the different ‘tribes’ of humans: the Avengers would only be allowed to operate under the strict guidance of a United Nations Panel. After much discussion amongst the Avengers, it was decided that working for and under a government body would greatly inhibit what it was that the Avengers could do and would be allowed to do.

“The Avengers have only ever wanted the best for the people of the world, to do that which was right in order to keep everyone safe from those people or things that would harm them. The governing body of the world has decided that they can do a better job than the Avengers. Thus, the Avengers will respect that.

“From this date onwards, the Avengers, despite their own personal feelings about the Sokovia Accords, will honour those laws. They will stand down, allowing the recognised law agencies around the world to keep everyone safe from harm.

“But know this: the Avengers will be watching. If they find a situation where the people or the world itself is in grave danger, danger that threatens lives to the extent that the regular law officers or military cannot stop or prevent it, then they will do their part and step back in.

“Thank you.”
And with that, Lavender picked up her tablet and strode from the room, ignoring the cacophony of questions that erupted behind her.

ooo00ooo

“… despite their own personal feelings about the Sokovia Accords, will honour those laws. They will stand down …”

“Listen to that, boys,” Adrian Toomes crowed. “No more costumed freaks running around getting in the way of business.”

“Does that mean that we can operate out in the open now?” Mason asked.

Toomes gave him a nonplussed look.

“Don’t be stupid,” he said. “The Avengers might not be around any more, but the police still are. All this stuff,” and here he picked up a glowing purple piece of tech, “it’s alien, Chitauri mostly, and you know that it’s illegal to have it.”

“And it ain’t exactly legal what we’ve done with it either, is it?” Mason grinned.

“You know it,” Toomes replied. “Now, get this area cleaned up! I’m expecting that we’ll be doing some more business in the next few months and we have to look and act all respectable-like. We ain’t just demolition and construction workers no more.”

Toomes looked around, his hands on his hips, pleased as the half dozen guys in his unit instantly obeyed, scurrying across the old warehouse to follow his orders.

No, he mused, they weren’t what they once had been. They’d come a long way from that. Not since the Chitauri invasion had they been simple demolition and construction workers.

They’d been called in after the battle as one of the dozens of crews needed to clean up after the battle, to work out which buildings were safe and to demolish the ones that weren’t. Part of that task, one that they’d taken for themselves, was to also clean up after the aliens – they’d been tech strewn all over the place: chariots, blasters, the great levitations themselves even.

And then they’d been shut down. Some government agency calling itself the ‘Department of Damage Control’, had come in and turfed them off of their job, claiming that everything alien now belonged to them. Neither Toomes nor any of his crew had been happy about that, especially after all the cash that they’d outlaid to ensure that they had the job in the first place.

But government was government and they couldn’t fight it. They also didn’t feel the need to declare the truckload of alien tech that they’d already gathered and simply driven off with.

Mason’s ingenuity had been a godsend after that. His tinkering had got some of that tech working again, enough for them to be able to use, especially after it’d been married to some regular old Earth tech. And thus, had been born their new job – making and selling advanced weapons.

Of course, nothing, at least in Toomes’ opinion, beat out the flying suit that Mason had created. It was pure joy to fly in that thing, to swoop down, wings outstretched, on unsuspecting targets and to relieve them of whatever Toomes wanted.

His eyes swept back up to the TV screen where some reporter was giving her analysis of what the Avengers ‘retirement’ meant.
“Good business,” Toomes told her. “It means good business. We’re going to be raking in the dough.”

Francine Frye couldn’t help but laugh with glee as she skipped down the New York street. She had just had the best day ever and nothing, not even the rain pelting down on her, nor the ominous thundercracks and flashes of lightning lighting up the sky could dampen her spirits. Not today! The Avengers were no more! Those pesky suited fools wouldn’t be running around the city and picking on innocent guys just doing what they needed to do to get by any more.

Grabbing a pole, Francine swung around it, her arm outstretched. Nothing could take away how happy she was right then. Eyes wide, she swung about, looking, searching, hoping to see some bad boys.

Ever since she’d been little, Francine had been entranced by the ‘bad boys’, the ones who really knew how to have fun, those who did what they wanted, when they wanted it and didn’t let anyone or anything get in their way. That was how Francine desperately wanted to be, not like the cloistered girl that her mother had always insisted that she be, always dressed conservatively, never going out after dark, not even being allowed to date unless the boy was considered decent and of good manners and breeding and even then, she’d had to wait until she was seventeen!

Thus, while the world had been focussed on their new heroes these last few years, the clean-cut, respectable ones who only ever did what was right, Francine focussed all her attention on the real heroes, the ones who didn’t get the spotlight, the ones everyone else considered the villains.

Spotting a pair of men glancing furtively around outside a door had Francine swinging to a stop, her face splitting into a wide grin. 

Bad boys, she thought, her eyes alight.

Even listening as hard as she could, the expected clink of the lock breaking couldn’t be heard. She knew that it had, though, as first one, then the other slipped inside the barely opened door.

After glancing around herself and finding the street empty, Francine decided that this was her opportunity to watch her heroes in action.

Quickly, she skipped across the street to the closed door. Carefully, she put her hand on the doorknob and twisted it, barely resisting her squeal of glee when it moved. Within seconds she was inside, the door clicking shut behind her as she closed it with her back to it.

Her head cocked as she took in the dark, gloomy place. It was some kind of warehouse, huge with enormous, upright vats placed throughout the floor. Not seeing her heroes, Francine looked up, into the scaffolding and catwalks that ran around above the vats.

There. A light, even if it was dim. Judging where it came from, she guessed that there was an office there, or perhaps a lab. Maybe her heroes were looking for a secret formula? Francine’s heart raced as she had the thought. A secret formula. Maybe, they could become, not just heroes but superheroes!

Seeing a set of stairs that looked more like an inclined ladder nearby, Francine raced for it and began climbing. She had to see, to watch them on their journey to greatness. Twice, she nearly slipped climbing, the curse of women everywhere who had to wear high heels. Finally, though, she made it to the top.
Her first three footsteps rang out on the metal and she paused, she didn’t want to be heard, she had no intention of scaring them off. Quickly, she leant down to remove her shoes. One came off easily, the other, though, the other caught on a lip of metal and Francine overbalanced just as the shoe came off in her hand.

Her momentum slammed her backwards into the tiny chain rail. It swung with her weight and her arms pinwheeled. But try as she might, nothing stopped her fall backwards, up and over the chain. One hand lashed out, attempting to grab the rail but missed and, with a scream, she fell.

Her scream cut off mid-fall, truncated when she hit the water. Francine splashed about, kicking herself back to the surface, taking great breaths, spluttering and coughing as she surfaced.

The bizarre taste in her mouth had her wrinkling her nose: this was most definitely not water. Striking out, she swam to the side, desperate to get out of whatever she’d fallen into. Thankfully, not two metres to the side of the rim that she grabbed was a ladder that she was able to climb, the disgusting liquid pouring from her body.

By the time that Francine was once more standing on the catwalk, she was panting hard, bent over at the knees and was wiping the disgusting goop from her face. Looking up, she noted that the small light was still on in the office area; actually, it hadn’t even moved! Obviously, her little ‘swim’ hadn’t been noticed. As she took her first step forward, she noticed the cold metal. It was only then that she realised that her hands were empty of shoes.

Giving a shrug, she pushed on, the gloopy stuff still dripping from her entire body.

Suddenly, the warehouse completely lit up and Francine was able to see everything perfectly but only for a second. Looking up, she saw the great skylights, just as a great boom of thunder rolled over. Even as she blinked the spots from her eyes, movement up ahead caught her attention. Her heroes were leaving!

No! They couldn’t! Not without her getting to see what they’d taken.

Francine rushed forwards but, in her haste, and wet feet, she slipped, stumbled, half-righted herself, managed a further half-dozen, staggering steps, before she stumbled again. This time, she managed to get a hand to the chain rail as she went over. Unfortunately, her hands were still wet. She felt her fingers slipping until, one by one, they fell from the chain.

It was only a short fall to the vat below – her second for the night.

Even as she hit, she instantly knew that this was different from the last one. The smell alone – something between rancid meat and rotten eggs – told her that this wasn’t something that she wanted to be in.

Scrambling to the side as fast as her arms and legs would take her, Francine desperately swung her head about, searching for a ladder. She found it just as the warehouse lit up once again but lost it in the brilliant flash of white as the lightning burst through the skylight, striking the very vat that she was trying to swim in.

ooo00ooo

Animals all throughout the store clamoured for attention. Cats, dogs, mice, birds, gerbils, ferrets, all made their own noise, demanding attention. Really, the only ones that weren’t were the fish. And the reptiles.

“Alright, alright, little ones, Mummy’s coming,” Melissa called as she bustled around the counter.
Really, they could have waited another twenty minutes, Melissa thought. She’d have been done with the chores that another day owning and running a pet store brought. Unfortunately, the weather was against her. Storms always had the animals on edge and they demanded attention, not that she was likely to deny it to them, just that she would have preferred to get the bookwork done first.

After nearly two years running the store, Melissa Morbeck was now an old hand at what needed to be done. Which, if that’d been suggested even two and a half years ago, she would have laughed. This was never in her plans. No, she’d always dreamed of using her electrical engineering degree for something amazing. But then her mother had died, leaving her as the last of the family to run the business and Melissa had relented.

It was only supposed to be for a few months until she sold it. A few months, though, ran into a year and now two and still she hadn’t moved on.

“Next on our coverage of the Avengers, we bring you one of the original members of the Avengers Academy: Squirrel Girl,” the presenter said from the TV in the corner.

Melissa looked up to see a picture of the girl, her domino mask in place, her hands on her hips and her large, bushy tail swaying behind her.

“Squirrel Girl is reputedly one of the youngest of the Avengers, although no one knows her exact age due to her real-life identity having been kept carefully hidden from the public. What is known about her is that she is classed as a mutate, with numerous attributes that are commonly found in squirrels – namely, her finger and toe spikes, teeth and, let’s not forget, her tail. She is also incredibly strong, agile and can leap at least three stories straight up.

“Of course, one of Squirrel Girl’s most defining characteristics is also her constant companion: a squirrel. While we know that at one time, Squirrel Girl’s companion was named Monkey Joe, he was apparently killed in action and was replaced by a squirrel called Tippy. Squirrel Girl talks to Tippy and indeed all squirrels, in a language that she calls ‘squirrelese’ but to us ordinary humans, simply sounds like the normal noises one would hear from such creatures.”

Melissa paused in her task as she looked up contemplatively at the screen. She’d certainly heard of the Avenger before and had even heard of her abilities but now, surrounded as she was by the variety of animals in the shop, Melissa put two and two together. Squirrel Girl could talk to squirrels!

Talk to animals! Oh, it wasn’t like she was some modern-day Doctor Doolittle but it was certainly the closest that she’d ever heard to the dreams that Melissa’s own grandmother had attempted.

Way back then, Granny Morbeck had dreamed of being able to talk to animals. She’d tried everything that she could to achieve her dream, ultimately without any success (and Melissa didn’t count using lights to control moths as successful in the slightest). When Granny Morbeck had died, her notes and dream had been passed on to Melissa’s mother and she’d attempted to use language to try to achieve the same thing. She’d studied language after language, created dictionaries for languages that had never been translated before but ultimately, the family dream of being able to speak to animals had been unachievable.

Now. Now, Melissa was looking at a picture of someone who had achieved success, albeit in a limited way and only through a fluke of their genetics. Still … it gave Melissa pause. If one could do it, perhaps there was a way for others?

A nip from one of the puppies caught Melissa and brought her back to the task at hand. Picking the little one up by the scruff of his neck, she moved him across the cage. It was as she was placing him down that she felt the small lump under the pup’s skin: his microchip.
Once again, Melissa froze. Could that be the answer? Technology? Neither her mother nor her grandmother had access to such things in their day but Melissa did and as an electrical engineer, she knew a few tricks about programming things.

For the rest of the time that she spent puttering around the store, seeing to her charges, Melissa’s mind was running on automatic, the bulk of her mind focussed on a possible solution to fulfilling her family’s greatest desire.

oooo00ooo

“I don’t suppose you could call me a cab?” Roderick Kingsley asked as he stood on the very bottom step, the rain pouring down in front of him.

He looked back hopefully at the two prison guards that had just released him.

“Alright,” one said. “You’re a cab!”

The last part of the ‘joke’ was all but lost as the guard burst into peals of laughter and was quickly joined by his partner.

With a scowl, Roderick reached back and pulled up his collar as high as it would go, hunched his shoulders and, with his arms wrapped tightly around himself, strode out into the pouring rain. It took less than half a minute for him to be soaked through and Roderick wiped at his face, attempting – quite in vain – to get some of the water off of him so that he could see at least a little better.

He was forced to walk for nearly an hour before he finally found a cab to take him the rest of the way. Even then, it wasn’t the first cab that he’d seen. No, neither the first, second, nor even the third would stop for him. The fourth slowed down, took one look at his drenched appearance and quickly sped away.

“Where to?” the cabbie asked.

“Whiteside. Riverside Drive,” Roderick replied.

Once upon a time, there was no way that he’d go there so openly. Today, though, today he was in a mood for payback and that was the place that offered him the best opportunity to achieve it.

Roderick had been held ‘incommunicado’ for the past … actually, he wasn’t sure how long it’d been. Months, definitely. All he knew was that the Army had snatched him straight from work, arrested him in front of all his colleagues and then taken him to their detainment facility where he’d been questioned over and over and over again.

Of course, he’d told them everything straight off the bat. Well, almost everything, thus why he was going where he was, safe in the knowledge that no one but him knew about it. But that didn’t mean that they believed him. Oh, no, they suspected him of being involved, not that they could prove anything, thus why they’d finally had to let him go.

How long did you work for Oscorp?

What was your role at Oscorp?

Did you know what you were working on?

Did you ever see a prototype?
Were any design plans kept outside the Oscorp mainframe?

Even if none of the other questions had piqued Roderick’s interest, that last one sure had. They were after the design plans, plans that Roderick knew had been destroyed by Oscorp. There weren’t supposed to be any others lying around anywhere. Not for the glider, not for the exo-suit, not for the bombs, not for any of it. Every last piece of that tech had had a prototype built of it and then, after it’d been mothballed, the designs had apparently been scrubbed from the system.

The fact that Roderick had seen the memo come down to the department twenty minutes before the order was to be carried out – and even that had been a happy coincidence – meant that he’d barely had the time to make copies of the plans for himself.

And why shouldn’t he? After all, he’d been one of the chief designers of all of that tech, tech that was initially supposed to be marketed for the Army itself. But apparently, they hadn’t wanted it, hadn’t been interested in it in the slightest.

At least, not, he gathered, until it’d been used in some sort of battle, not that Roderick was ever able to find out exactly who Norman Osborn had used it against (and even that knowledge he wasn’t supposed to have, only a lucky slip of the tongue from one of his interrogators had allowed him to put the pieces together).

Now, the Army wanted the tech. Roderick had no intention of just giving it to them. No! He’d worked his butt off for years on that tech, he deserved something for it and especially after the way he’d just been treated.

That tech was his.

Then again, he thought, if the Army wanted it, perhaps he really should give it to them!

With that thought, a malicious grin grew on his face. He had the plans; he had the know-how. All he needed were the components and he’d have his own suit, his own glider and then, then the Army had better watch out!

ooo00ooo

Mac Gargan hadn’t ever been inside the Daily Bugle building before. Oh, he’d read the paper, nearly every day for most of his life, but his job had never brought him here. Stepping up to the elevator, he looked at the Directory affixed to the side of the wall. As expected, the Editor-in-Chief could be found on the top floor.

When the elevator dinged and the doors opened, he waited for the half dozen people to exit and then stepped in and punched the button for the sixteenth floor. A short ride later with truly horrible music and Roderick stepped out and began looking around.

“Can I help you?” a woman behind a desk asked.

“Yeah. I’ve got an appointment to see J. Jonah Jameson,” he replied. “Name’s Gargan. Mac Gargan.”

The woman looked across to her computer screen for a moment before she nodded at it.

“I see you here. If you’d like to take a seat, I’ll let Mr Jameson know that you’re here,” she said.

Looking around, Mac found a set of old seats against the wall. After sitting, he glanced at the magazines on the small table to the side. Nothing immediately stuck out to him and, just as he was
about to resign himself to an atrociously out-of-date hunting magazine, the woman called out to him.

“Mister Jameson will see you now.”

Mac quickly stood and, after a questioning look at the woman behind the counter, he knew where to go. But then, it should have been obvious: the large corner office with the huge windows looking back into the main part of the building, even if they were covered by venetian blinds. And the stencilled name on the door was also a dead giveaway.

Really, Mac could have kicked himself; a private investigator who missed something so obvious shouldn’t even be in business. He put it down to the hour, really anyone whose normal business hours were from noon ‘til two in the morning had no business being awake at nine in the morning.

A quick rap on the door garnered a reply.

“Well, don’t just stand out there! Get in here, what am I paying you for?” a gruff-sounding voice ordered.

Mac stepped inside and closed the door behind him. The room was filled with desks and chairs and cupboards all stacked high with papers. There were numerous framed articles hanging on the wall and, above it all, there was a slight haze in the air, obviously from the cigar that hung out of the corner of Jameson’s mouth.

“Well, take a seat,” Jameson ordered.

Choosing the chair in front of the large desk that had the smallest stack of paper on it, Mac moved it across to the other sat, pulling his own notebook and pen from his pocket.

“You’re Mac Gargan, PI,” Jameson stated. “From what I’m told, you never give up, do whatever you have to to get results. Am I right?”

“Got it in one,” Mac confirmed. “There’s never been a case that I couldn’t finish. So, what is it that you’d like me to do? Having trouble with the wife? Kid, perhaps?”

“What? No! You leave my family out of this!” Jameson roared. “No. What I want you to do is dig me up some dirt to use. Has to be factual or at least, can’t be disproved.”

“What? No! You leave my family out of this!” Jameson roared. “No. What I want you to do is dig me up some dirt to use. Has to be factual or at least, can’t be disproved.”


“The Avengers. Any of them. I want the dirt, the gossip, the facts to bury them. I want their names plastered across this paper proclaiming them as the vigilantes that they are! I want to see their reputation in tatters. And if you can get that web-head menace, Spider-Man, I’ll even throw in a bonus!” Jameson stated.


“Yes! The Avengers! Something wrong with your hearing?” Jameson asked, rolling the cigar from one side of his mouth the other and then back again. “These Accords that the UN just signed, they finally put these costumed thugs in their rightful place and I want the whole world to see it. They put one foot out of line, I want pictures posted everywhere! They are going to rue the day they even decided to put on their spandex tights and walked out onto the streets to interfere in normal people’s business.”

Mac stared at the man. The Avengers! He knew their reputation; this might actually be the one case that he couldn’t complete. Those guys were squeaky clean.
“There’s going to be expenses ...” Mac began.

“Hang the expenses!” Jameson exclaimed. “If you can get me that dirt, then I’ll pay whatever fee you ask.”

Mac’s eyes lit up. Now, that was some motivation. Of course, he might need a little something extra to actually succeed in this one. Thankfully, he knew people, he had contacts that could give him exactly what he needed. And, as a bonus, Jameson would be paying for something that he could use for years to come to do his job even better.

“You got yourself a deal,” Mac stated, standing and holding out his hand.

“Good,” Jameson replied, leaning forward and shaking his hand. Then, after a second, he dropped hands, “well? What are you waiting for? An engraved invitation? Get out there and get me that dirt!”

Mac simply gave a nod and left, ideas already swirling around in his head of where to start first.

ooo00ooo

The swirl of clouds overhead was the first indicator that something was about to happen. A burst of rainbow coloured light shooting from the sky directly onto the land in front of the Avengers’ Compound, had all those who saw it widening their eyes. And then the Bifrost vanished, leaving two people standing on an intricately burnt-in pattern on the grass.

“Thor!” Bruce exclaimed as he exited the nearest door at a near run. “It’s good to have you home.”

He paused then as his eyes took in the second person. “And you brought a visitor?”

“Banner! It is good to see you, my friend,” Thor beamed. “May I present Carol Danvers, daughter of Midgard but currently a Captain in the Kree military? Captain, this is Doctor Bruce Banner, also known as The Hulk when he is in his other form.”

Bruce came to a halt just in front of her and extended her hand.

“Hi,” Bruce said. “Is it welcome to Earth or welcome back to Earth?”

“The latter,” Carol smiled. “Other form?”

“It’s a long story,” Bruce replied, glancing to Thor. “I’m sorry, did Thor say ‘Kree’?”

“Yes, why?” Carol frowned.

“Only that name keeps cropping up,” Bruce replied. “Seems that they have had more of an interest in Human affairs than we’d realised. Where’d you meet Thor?”

“Hala, the Kree home world. I’ve been assigned to assist Thor in determining whether Thanos is a threat to the Kree and also to the entire universe,” Carol replied.

“I’m guessing that you found answers?” Bruce asked Thor.

“Some. Not as many as I would like,” Thor replied grimly. “Where are the rest of the Avengers? I would like to tell everyone exactly what I have learnt at the same time.”

“Well, Cap, Harry, Daisy, Tony and Nat are off in a country called Wakanda,” Bruce replied.

“Everyone else is either here, at the Tower, on the island or keeping a low profile somewhere else.”

“Low profile?” a confused-sounding Thor asked.
“Let’s just say that the world’s changed while you’ve been gone,” Bruce replied. “How about you both come in, we’ll find whoever’s around and we’ll tell you about it. And then you can tell us what you’ve found out there.”

Falling into step beside Bruce, the two strode towards the entrance to the nearest building, Carol’s head on a swivel as she took in everything that she was seeing.
Welcome Home

Happy Hogan, Head of Security for Avengers Tower looked up at the big, black, bald man standing in front of him. The guy’s muscles were bulging under his shirt and the expression on his face was more than a little intimidating. Nevertheless, Happy knew his job and, even if his boxing skills would probably come off second best if they were needed, he was determined to stand his ground.

“T’m sorry, Sir, I cannot let you up,” he stated firmly, having dismissed Diane to deal with this problem himself.

“And I’m telling you that you’re going to. Those guys up there know me, I’ve ‘worked’ with them before,” the man retorted.

“Regardless of your claims, absolutely no one without proper security clearance is allowed to enter the private section of Avengers Tower,” Happy replied, determinedly sticking to his guns.

“Do you have any idea who I am? I’m Luke Cage. They call me the Hero of Harlem. I’m bulletproof, for crying out loud,” Luke stated.

Happy’s eyes widened as a hand appeared on Luke’s shoulder and the big man spun around, faster than he would have expected, his fist cocked and flying. Fortunately, the shorter, white, scruffy-looking guy had the better reactions and simply swayed out of the way.

“Hey, calm down, I don’t mean any harm,” the new guy said.

“Then you shouldn’t go sneaking up on me when I’m in a bad mood,” Luke snapped.

“Fair enough,” the blonde stated, his hands raised, obviously showing that he meant no harm. “I just thought that I could help, is all.”


“Hi, my name’s Danny Rand. I’d like to visit the Avengers, please, um, Daredevil, Spider-Man, Mage, Squirrel Girl, we’ve all met, if that helps,” Danny said.

Happy’s eyes widened. Rand. He knew the name. One of the wealthiest companies in the world, although obviously not as rich as Stark.

“A lot of people have met the Avengers,” Happy replied, holding his ground.

“Perhaps this will help?” Danny suggested.

Happy watched as the man extended his fist over the desk before it unexpectedly began glowing a brilliant yellow.


“And … and you said that you’re bulletproof?” Happy asked Luke, his eyes still glued to the glowing fist. “And you’ve both met the Avengers? I’ll … I’ll call up and see if they’re willing to see you.”

“Thank you,” Danny replied, pulling his fist back as it stopped glowing.

His hand fumbled for the phone and Happy was forced to look down to find it and then to press in
the right code.

*Could this day get any weirder?* he wondered.

ooo00ooo

Maria waited by the elevator for the two unknowns that Happy was sending up. Only the fact that they, according to Happy at least, had abilities and had met some of the others, had convinced Maria to allow them access to the Tower at all. Judging by exactly which members of the Avengers had been mentioned, she suspected that these two had been met during one of the New York patrols that Peter and Matt liked to do.

Unfortunately, none of them had been in the Tower when the call came through, leaving Maria to let them in until some of the others could arrive.

The doors sliding open revealed the two that the security monitor had showed – a tall, dark-skinned man and a shorter Caucasian with curly, dirty-blond hair that was almost more unruly than Harry’s.

“Hi, I’m Maria Hill, welcome to Avengers Tower,” she said as they stepped off of the elevator.

“Luke Cage. Thanks for seeing us,” the taller of the two said, shaking Maria’s hand.

“Danny Rand,” the other said. “I thought that the others would be here?”

“They’ll be along soon,” Maria replied. “What is it that we can do for you both?”

“Well, I don’t know about Mister Rand, here …”

“Danny, I’m just Danny.”

Luke nodded before continuing. “But I wanna know what you lot have done to make it so that people and cops that I trust are telling me to stop doing my thing, to stop trying to make Harlem better, safer.”

“I expect that it’s because of the Sokovia Accords; I’m being told the same thing,” Danny added. “It’s making life … difficult.”

Maria sighed. For some reason, she simply hadn’t thought about others like them that could be affected by the Accords, others who were doing their bit, just like the Avengers but on a smaller scale. The bad guys, sure, them she’d thought about, hadn’t actually stopped since the signing, to be honest. But others, unfortunately not.

Thankfully, she was saved from answering straight away by the flash of a multicoloured light off to one side.

“Matthew Murdock? My lawyer?” Danny asked, his head cocked to one side. “Where’d you come from?”

“Maria?” Matt asked.

“Sorry, Matt, I thought that you’d get here before these two arrived,” she replied. “Before we begin, how about you confirm what I’ve heard about your abilities?”

In response, Danny simply held out his hand, clenched his fist and made it glow a bright yellow.

“I’m the Immortal Iron Fist, defender of K’un-Lun. This fist of mine can break anything when I
focus my chi.”

“And he has some impressive fighting skills. Martial arts of a kind that I’ve never encountered before,” Matt stated.


“Were you both born this way?” Maria asked.

“Hell no,” Luke replied. “I had this done to me in Seagate.”

“I had to prove myself worthy of ascending to the title of Defender of K’un-Lun before I was allowed to face Shou-Lao to become the Iron Fist,” Danny replied.

That tallied with the report that Maria had heard from both Matt and Harry.

“Mutates, then, if we’re being technical,” she nodded. “Now, to get back to your original question, you’re right, the Sokovia Accords, when they were signed by the United Nations, they affected you, even though you were not a part of the discussions or the Round Table.”

“What’s it mean for us?” Luke asked.

“The same that it means for the rest of us,” Matt replied before he was cut off by Danny.

“Wait, wait, wait! Your voice. I think I’ve placed it. You’re Daredevil? But you’re …” he finished, gesturing towards Matt’s glasses.

“Blind, yes,” Matt replied. “But all my other senses are off the chart.”

“You’re telling me that one of the most feared Avengers on the streets on New York is a blind lawyer?” Luke laughed. “Oh, there’s some homies who’d die from embarrassment if they knew.”

“Not that they will,” Maria stated and there was steel in her voice.

“Hey, your secret’s safe with me,” Luke replied. “I respect what you do, probably even more now that I know just how skilled you must really be.”

“I won’t go telling anyone, either,” Danny promised.

“Thank you,” Matt replied. “Now, as your lawyer, what I can tell you is that, for now, it’d be in your best interest to respect the laws laid down in the Accords. That means no going out and doing something that could get you accused of being a vigilante.”

“But it is my sworn duty to oppose the Hand,” Danny protested.

“Criminal organisation,” Matt explained and Maria nodded. “We get that, really we do. And we also know exactly how hard it’s going to be. Most of us are already chafing at the bit to get out there and do what we do. But for now, we’ve got to follow the law.”

“Why? It’s stupid, a bunch of suits dictating their laws when they have no idea what life is like down on the streets,” Luke half-growled.

“The simple reason is that we know something’s coming. Something big. Big enough that it’s going to need all the heroes of the world to combat it if we’re right,” Maria replied. “And being locked up in prison or in the RAFT isn’t going to help anyone in the long run.”
“Maria’s right,” Matt said. “We have to play the long game. We know that the Accords are stupid and ultimately won’t work. There are powered people out there who won’t follow the rules and the regular police won’t be able to stand against them. But the regular people are scared and until they realise that the only way to put their fear aside, to feel safe again is with us doing what we do best, then we have to allow them to learn from their mistakes.”

“What you’re saying, I can get it. Up here,” Luke said, tapping his head. “But down here,” and this time he tapped his heart, “it just doesn’t fly.”

“We know, believe me, we know,” Maria said sympathetically. “What I can promise you, though, is that, as soon as things turn around, we’ll do everything in our power to stand by your side and help you clean up any mess that’s been made.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Luke stated.

“I appreciate it, thank you,” Danny replied.

“Now, that’s not going to stop you from gathering as much intel as you can,” Matt smiled. “Believe me, we’ll be doing the same. Just keep your fists down and your noses clean until then.”

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“You are about to see something that very few outsiders have ever seen before,” T’Challa stated from where he was standing just behind the cockpit of the quinjet.

“You’re certain about this?” Tony asked from the pilot’s seat. “Just there’s an entire forest down there and your pals seem to be headed right for it.”

And they were. The quinjet was following an extremely sleek, modern-looking jet that was unlike anything that they’d ever seen before. Tony had even whistled appreciatively the first time that they’d seen it back in Vienna. Even without going inside it, it was obvious that it was kitted out with all kinds of tech and engines that would have anyone – and especially someone like Tony – salivating.

“We already know that Wakandans aren’t quite like what the rest of the world believes,” Steve stated, referring to the jet that they were following. “Perhaps there’s even more to it than we know.”

“Yeah, like how a bunch of backward, Third-world sheep herders have the tech to build something like that,” Tony replied.

“Woah, that’s something you don’t see every day,” Nat stated, sitting up sharply as the jet in front of them suddenly dove, straight down and into the forest below before the image of them promptly wavered and vanished from sight.

“But not something that we haven’t seen before,” Steve commented.

“Say, you don’t have dragons here, do you?” Daisy asked.

“Dragons?” a clearly confused T’Challa repeated.

“Tony?” Pepper asked, clearly worried as he angled the quinjet’s nose down to follow the jet’s flightpath.

“Don’t worry, dear, I think I know what’s coming,” Tony replied.
And then they entered the field that hid what was below and Harry shot to his feet, spinning about in a circle before leaning forward to stare through the front window.

“It is rather impressive, isn’t it?” T’Challa grinned. “I never get tired of this sight.”

Not that anyone in the quinjet could blame him.

What had only moments before been a vast forest filling the horizon as far as their eyes could see was now an advanced country. There was a city below them with buildings, markets, colourful flags and people galore. Monuments, most of them depicting a great black panther, could be seen everywhere, including one carved into the very mountain off to their right. Ahead of them, though, was what could only be described as a palace. It was intricately carved and designed to reflect the origins of the people, just as the rest of the buildings in the city were – there was a very strong feeling of trees and nature in everything that they were seeing, be it man-made or natural, a perfect blend of the two.

“That’s not what caught my attention,” Harry stated. “That force field, the illusion thing that we passed through. There was magic in it!”

T’Challa grinned at him, showing perfectly white teeth.

“Our technology uses quite a number of different elements, including magic,” he said. “Here in Africa, your people aren’t quite as hidden as they are in other places. We live and work together, in peace and harmony.”

“No,” Harry replied, with a shake of his head. “There may be a high concentration of magicals in Africa and even the largest school for witches and wizards in the world on the continent. But that doesn’t mean that we aren’t still hidden.”

“Ahh, but not from the world leaders, and I am soon to be King of Wakanda,” T’Challa replied. “As to the other, well, let us just say that Wakanda’s reclusive nature has seen the magicals here learn to live a much more open lifestyle than in other places.”

“I’d like to learn more about that,” Harry replied after a few second’s thought.

“It would be my pleasure to take you and the rest of the Avengers on a walk through Wakanda and to show you how the ‘un-enlightened’ live,” T’Challa smiled.

“If this is what you call ‘un-enlightened’, then I think we need to give you an English lesson,” Nat stated.

“It is not we Wakanadans that deem us so but the rest of the world,” T’Challa replied.

“I hate to cut off that thrilling discussion, but we’re about to land,” Tony called.

The quinjet set down just to the side of the Wakandan jet and, even though they were the last to touch down, they were the first to exit out into the bright sunlight.

“Mother,” T’Challa said, greeting an older woman, a touch of grey threading her hair, with a kiss on her cheek.

“My son, welcome home,” she replied.
“Brother,” a younger girl, obviously in her late teens said and Harry could see that there was a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

“Shuri,” T’Challa nodded to her. “And before you ask, no, you may not play with the craft of our visitors.”

“She’s an engineer? Like Tony?” Harry asked, noting her pout.

“An engineer, yes,” T’Challa replied. “Shuri is most gifted in all forms of science and engineering; Wakanda would not be the same without her.”

“Really?” Tony asked and Harry wasn’t sure if it was scepticism or interest in his voice.

“I bet I could improve that quinjet for you,” Shuri told him. “Make it go faster, higher, even make it fly underwater.”

“It can already operate underwater,” Tony retorted. “Not that I’ve really tested that feature yet, but it is capable of it.”

Their conversation was interrupted then as the Wakandan jet’s ramp lowered and a team of nine warrior women jogged up and inside it. Barely half a minute later, they returned, this time with a pair of men, both heavily chained in their midst, the points of the warrior’s spears directed towards them.

“These are the men?” T’Challa’s mother asked in disgust.

“Yes, Mother. They will face Wakandan justice in two days’ time,” he replied.

“Good,” she stated simply.

Once the two had been escorted away, a second set of warrior women entered the craft to return with the coffin of the King. Heads all over the tarmac were bowed and arms were crossed across breasts by all of the Wakandans as the coffin was taken inside.

“Come,” T’Challa said to the Avengers, “I will show you to your rooms and then, if you wish you may explore a little for the rest of the afternoon.”

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Jane half-ran into the lounge area of the Compound, her eyes darting from side to side as she searched for the one that she’d been missing for far too long now. Whether it was his intuition or some sound that she’d made, he turned at her entrance and his smile grew wide and his arms opened.

Instantly, Jane’s half-run became a full-blown sprint, her hair streaming behind her as she raced across the room and into his arms. Reaching up on tip-toes, her arms snaking around his neck, she kissed him for all that she was worth, pouring in all the love that she could.

“Well, it’s about time you came back,” Darcy stated from behind her some seconds or years later. “Do you know how hard it is to keep Jane distracted and not to let her go all mopey?”

Even though his eyes remained fixed on hers, Thor replied to the question.

“My apologies, Lady Darcy, I will endeavour to keep my absences brief in the future.”

“You do that, Mister,” Darcy replied. “And while you’re at it, keep up with that Lady stuff, I don’t mind that at all.”
“You’re back for good now?” Jane asked, seeking the truth not only from his answer but also from his eyes.

“That is my hope, although I cannot promise,” Thor answered.

Jane allowed him to turn her around but even then, he kept one arm around her waist, just as she kept hers around his.

“Jane, Darcy, Eric, may I present Captain Carol Danvers of Midgard and of the Kree Empire,” Thor said. “Carol, this is Jane Foster, Eric Selvig and Darcy Lewis.”

Only then did Jane realise that there was a stranger in their midst.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to ignore you,” Jane said, reaching out a hand to the blonde woman in the distinctly militarily-bent black and green uniform.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Carol replied, shaking her hand. “Thor has spoken of you often.”

“Kree?” Eric asked.

“That’s those big, blue dudes, right?” Darcy asked. “They’re the ones who experimented on Daisy’s ancestors.”

Jane could see the confusion in the other woman’s eyes.

“I’m part-Kree, I guess you could say, and yes, they are blue-skinned,” Carol stated. “I saved one of their lives, nearly at the cost of my own. In payment, they fixed me back up by altering my genetics a bit. I’ve been living and working with them ever since.”

“Yep, I was right,” Darcy beamed. “Same dudes. So, you’ve got powers, like Daisy?”

“I don’t know who Daisy is,” Carol frowned. “But I do have ‘powers’. I can fly and shoot energy bolts from my hands. I’m also more durable and my lifespan is a lot longer than a regular person’s.”

“That all sounds cool,” Darcy replied looking impressed. “Cause I’m gonna want a demo later.”

“I’m guessing you two met while Thor was out amongst the stars?” Jane asked as Carol smiled at Darcy’s request.

“Indeed,” Thor replied. “My quest for answers took me to Hala, the Kree home world. Captain Danvers has since accompanied me as we searched for those answers.”

“You find what you were looking for?” Eric asked, as the group joined Bruce, Rhodey and the Vision on the couches.

“No, I did not,” Thor replied. “At least, not all of the answers that I was searching for.”

“I’m guessing that that is one of the Stones?” Carol asked, nodding to the golden gem embedded in Vision’s head.

“The Mind Stone, yes,” Vision replied. “The intelligence inside it is a part of what was used to create me and to give me life.”

“So, you’ve got no idea what’s coming? Assuming that something is on its way?” Rhodey asked.

“I have no doubt that there is a threat to the universe,” Thor replied. “All that I have learnt has
pointed to that one conclusion. A Titan by the name of Thanos is searching for the Stones and means to unite them to remake the universe how he sees fit.”

“Like the Dark Elves?” Jane asked, shuddering at the memory of having the Aether inside her.

“In some ways, yes,” Thor replied. “Thanos is different in that our sources tell us that he intends to wipe out half of the people within the universe so that there are more resources for those that remain.”

“Well, that’s some sick, twisted logic,” Darcy replied with a wrinkled nose.

“Despite the barbaric nature of the logic, it is a logical solution to the problems not only on this planet but one could assume on countless others,” Vision stated.

“Still, killing, what, trillions or people …?” Bruce said with a shake of his head.

“I did say that it was barbaric,” Vision pointed out.

“How many Stones would he need to collect to make that happen?” Eric asked.

“Unknown,” Thor replied. “But one would imagine all Six.”

“So, the one in Vision’s head, the Aether, the Tesseract …,” Darcy said, counting them off on her fingers. “What else?”

“The Power Stone. Those are the four that have surfaced recently,” Thor replied.

“The missing two are the Time Stone and the Soul Stone. We didn’t find any leads to them at all,” Carol said.

“However, Midgard feels like a nexus,” Thor frowned. “Everything leads back here.”

“If that’s the case, what’s the odds that the other two are hidden on Earth somewhere?” Rhodey asked.

“Somehow, I’m not willing to take that bet,” Bruce replied. “Not that I’d have the slightest idea where to start looking for them.”

“So, if you’ve been wandering the galaxy, you must have been to a few other planets,” Darcy said.

“So, tell us, how many and what were they like?”

Jane straightened in her seat, this was something that she wanted to hear.

The space quinjet soared into the outer atmosphere, quickly bypassing the altitude that satellites and even the International Space Station could be found at. Then, course set, Tony sat back and watched the monitors.

Originally, he hadn’t planned on this jaunt, at least, not for quite some time to come but, even with all of the cool toys that he’d seen that day, he was getting antsy. Too much ceremony and a culture that he wasn’t quite comfortable in. So, while Pepper was occupied seeing the sights with Nat and Daisy, he’d decided to take a quick flight.

Really, it had to be done. After all, the object at the end of his rainbow wasn’t getting any closer. Quite the contrary actually. But then, what would one expect after being blasted out of Earth’s orbit
and then blown up?

For a few minutes, Tony peered out the front screen but quickly grew bored. Really, what was there to see? A bunch of white dots in the sky, that’s what. Space was alright, but dreadfully dull. Focussing back on his monitors, he searched for his needle in a haystack.

“Boss, I’m detecting a vibranium signature,” Friday reported.

“Well, that’s what we’re here to find,” he replied. “Send me the coordinates.”

Checking the screen, Tony nodded in satisfaction. Only four degrees off of his projected course. Damn he was good. As he adjusted the heading, he fired the repulsors and prepared the magnetic harpoon.

With space being as black as it was, it wasn’t until he was nearly on top of the thing before he saw it, and that was even with the great vibranium core being just shy of two hundred metres long.

“Bingo,” Tony said. “Now, let’s reel you in.”

Lining up the shot was child’s play, thus he hit it on the first attempt. Now it was simply a case of manoeuvring the quinjet into the right position and towing it home.

Being vibranium, Tony had no concerns about the thing disintegrating during re-entry – after all, it was considered indestructible. And where to park it wasn’t a great concern either, not when he owned an entire island that was hundreds of miles from any person. Nope, he’d simply drop the thing in the ocean just off shore and deal with it later. The fact that he planned on inserting it in a cavern under that very island was just a bonus.

“Right, Friday, set a course for home,” Tony instructed. “Phase Two of Project Calrissian has been achieved.

Pepper scowled. Really, she couldn’t help it. Of all the times for that man to wander off …

“Found him,” Daisy stated as she walked out onto the balcony that Pepper was standing on.

She whirled so fast that she nearly lost balance, thankfully, though, her hand landed on the railing and she was able to steady herself.

“Where?” she asked.

“Just coming in from the airfield now,” Daisy replied. “Would you believe that he took a quick trip to space?”

Pepper could only shake her head. *Nothing* about Tony Stark surprised her any more. Later, probably much later, she’d quiz him about *why* he felt the need to go to space just then. Right now, though, she needed him for something much more important.

“Harry’s hurrying him up,” Daisy continued.

The unexpected arrival of Harry, his arm around Tony, in the middle of the lounge attested to Daisy’s assertion.

“What was that for?” Tony demanded, teetering away from Harry. “You do know that I am quite capable of walking myself places, don’t you?”
“And how long would it take you to get here?” Harry countered. “My bet is a while, what with your perchance of getting distracted.”

“Hey, can I help it if my mind works differently than yours?” Tony asked.

“That’s because he doesn’t have a mind like a hyperactive two-year-old,” Pepper stated, eliciting laughs from both Harry and Daisy and an indignant pout from Tony.

“Now that I’ve brought your wayward husband home, I think it’s time for the two of us to leave,” Harry said, holding out his hand for Daisy.

With a smile for her fiancée and a wave to Pepper, she took the offered hand before the two promptly left and suddenly, Pepper found herself feeling extremely nervous as she looked across the room at her husband. At Tony.

“Hello, dear,” Tony said, before something changed in his face.

Pepper saw his eyes narrow and he looked back at the door that Harry and Daisy had just left through before turning to face her once more.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

Pepper couldn’t help but shake her head, both in answer to his question and because of the exasperation that he caused. That man could be so dense at times and at others, it was amazing how perceptive he could be.

“Come have a seat,” she said, holding out her hand while walking at an angle towards the bed.

His hand took hers just in time for her to be able to pull him down so that they were sitting together and she instantly twisted about, tucking one foot up under her and grabbing both of his hands.

“You’re making me nervous,” Tony stated. “Did I do something wrong? Or was it that I forgot something? It’s not your birthday, I know that.”

“No, Tony, you did nothing,” Pepper smiled. “This is actually something good, something that we’ve been wanting.”

“You bought me that yacht that I’ve been talking about?” Tony asked, his eyes alight.

“No,” Pepper replied and cocked her head at his question. “When’ve you ever talked about wanting a yacht? Never mind, this is something else.”

She paused, then. Even having practiced this very conversation dozens of times in her head, she still wasn’t sure how to break the news. But then, knowing Tony, the best thing was probably straight forward – less chance of him getting distracted by something else that way and miss-hearing it.

“Tony, I’m pregnant,” she stated, her eyes fixed on his.

The slight widening of his eyes told her that he’d heard. For the barest instant, his entire face went blank before he broke out into the broadest grin she’d ever seen on his face.

“I’m going to be a dad? We’re going to be parents? You’re sure? What am I talking about, this is you, you wouldn’t say if you weren’t,” Tony babbled.

“Yes, I’m positive,” she grinned. “Daphne confirmed it just before I left New York. I’m about seven weeks along. She can even tell us whether it’s going to be a boy or a girl.”
“You know?” Tony asked.

Pepper shook her head. “No. I thought that that’s a decision that we should make together. Do you want to know?”

“Yes!” Tony replied automatically. “Er, that is, as long as you do, dear.”

“Good answer,” she smiled. “And yes, I think that I’d like to know. We can ask Daph when we return home.”

“You’re pregnant! I’m going to be a dad!” Tony grinned. “This calls for champagne. But not for you. Obviously. Do Gandalf and Vibe-girl know? Is that why you had Harry bring me here as soon as I landed?”

“No, they don’t know,” Pepper assured him. “I wanted you to be the first to know. All they knew was that I had something important that I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Great! Well, let’s get them in here. Actually, let’s get the whole gang in here,” Tony said, jumping up. “We need to celebrate!”

Pepper couldn’t help but smile at him. This was the most excited that she’d ever seen him about anything and she couldn’t be happier. He was going to be a dad. They were going to be parents. She was going to be a mum! For a long time, Pepper hadn’t allowed herself to dare dream that it would happen but Tony had changed; he’d proposed and now, now they were going to be parents. After Iron Man, she didn’t believe that anything could be more exciting and terrifying in her life. She was starting to realise that she could be wrong.
Arm in arm, Harry and Daisy wandered through the market below the palace and to one side of the main city. Everyone here was dressed in traditional clothes of the Wakandan people. At least, that’s what they assumed. The colours that they wore were a either bright or reflected the nature that surrounded them, just as the architecture did.

There was definitely a distinct variety in the people, though. If Harry had to guess, he’d say that there were at least three, possibly four different tribes that made up the Wakandan people. Regardless, they all had the same thing in common: all were extremely friendly to the pair of white faces that walked among them and were extremely happy to show off their wares, be they food-stuff, man-made or something natural.

“Come on, Harry, try it on,” Daisy insisted, accompanying the suggestion with an exaggerated pout. “You’d look good in it.”

Harry frowned at the garment that Daisy had plucked from the pile of clothes on the table of the stall that they were currently in front of. His first thought was that it reminded him of something that wizards would wear, it was definitely robe-like. The big difference were the wide, billowing sleeves, the open neckline and the colour. But then, as Harry thought back to some of the robes that Dumbledore or Lockhart wore, it really wasn’t that outlandish. And the rust brown with black and gold highlights did actually look good.

Acquiescing to her request, Harry shrugged off his jacket and swapped it for the Wakanda robe. After dropping it over his head and giving it a good wiggle to ensure that it was sitting right, he looked down at himself. To be honest, it actually looked fairly good. The only problem that he could feel were the sleeves. Within seconds, he had to lift up his hands and give them a shake to get the wide, flowing material to sit right.

Movement from his side had him looking back up and he found the middle-aged woman who owned the stall holding out her hands towards him, a ‘yes’ expression on her face.

“If you pull here,” she said in her native language, a language that was translated instantly for Harry through his earing, as she tugged at what he’d originally thought was a loose thread just inside his sleeve, “you can tighten them up, make them fit snug against your arm.”

Harry smiled widely at her to show that he was not only pleased with the result but that he understood.

“Perfect!” Daisy beamed. “We’ll take it. How much?”

While Daisy was trying to barter with the woman using two different languages and a lot of gestures, Harry found himself looking around some more. A tang in the air that was there one second, gone the next, had him jerking his head around, trying to find the unknown something that had caught his attention.

And then he found it. Or, more precisely, them.

Two boys, maybe ten or eleven were walking through the market, and while one carried a basket of some kind of melon, above their heads, dipping and swirling and spinning backwards and forwards from one to the other, were four of the fruit. Instantly, Harry strode towards them. This was magic. He was certain of it. He could feel it.
Looking closer at the boys as he approached, he noted that neither of them were holding a wand. His eyes widened at the extraordinary control that they were displaying with their magic. Yes, all they were doing was a simple levitation spell—a Hogwarts’ first-year spell—but no child that he’d seen, really very few adults that he’d seen had that kind of control over their wandless magic. And then he noticed the way that they were holding their hands, with their pointer finger out, directing the fruit. And on the pointer finger of both boys was a small, wooden ring.

“Hi, boys,” Harry said, trying to catch their attention.

Apparently, he’d startled them, for both jumped, their eyes darting away from the fruit suspended in the air above them. With a wave of his hand, Harry caught them; a second wave had them directing themselves into the boy’s basket like a little procession.

Noting their widened eyes, Harry grinned at them and hunkered down onto one knee. Glancing around quickly, he found a small stone, picked it up and held it out in the palm of his hand. Then, passing his other hand over the top of the stone, he concentrated on his magic and the transfiguration that he wanted. When the ‘stone’ was revealed once again, it was no longer just a stone, but a miniature, animated dragon that lazily unfurled its wings and opened its mouth in a great yawn.

The boys instantly clapped and began yammering at him and, while Harry could understand them, he knew that they’d never understand him in return.

“I’m magic,” Harry said, holding his empty hand to his chest as he said it, willing them to understand.

Obviously, the two did understand, for they nodded vigorously, beaming great smiles. Holding out his hand towards one of the boys, he offered the small dragon. Carefully, the boy picked it up while his friend began rooting around in the dirt until he found a second rock and offered it to Harry. Grinning, Harry repeated his transfiguration so that there was a second rock dragon for the other boy as well.

“You’re good with kids, Magic Man,” Daisy said, as she threaded her hand around his arm as the two of them stood to watch them run off, waving backwards at them as they did.

Harry shrugged. “Guess so. Gotta admit, it’s nice seeing kids being able to be themselves here, using magic out in the open where the non-magicals don’t even bat an eye. I wish the whole world could be like that.”

“Who knows, maybe one day it will be,” Daisy said, giving his arm a squeeze. “Come on, let’s see what else we can find here.”

Francine staggered out of the warehouse door and instantly had to shield her eyes from the bright sunlight. Blinking up through her fingers, she saw that the sun was high in the sky, maybe a little past its zenith.

After noon? she wondered. But it was still early night when I went in there.

That didn’t seem right at all. Could she really have lost so many hours? Looking down at the street, she couldn’t even see any puddles or damp patches. And after that storm last night, she was sure that she’d still be able to see evidence of it.

As hard as she tried, she had trouble thinking back to what had happened. Yes, she remembered her glee at hearing that the Avengers were no more. She remembered being out in the rain on the streets,
looking, hoping to see some bad boys or girls having fun. Behind her was the very door that the two guys had broken into and that she’d followed them through.

She remembered climbing the ladder and having to take off her shoes so that she wasn’t so loud. Then she’d fallen into a vat of something. She’d climbed out of that only to ... only to, only to fall into another. After that, things got hazy. Light. She remembered light. And pain, agonizing, excruciating pain.

And then nothing until she’d woken up just a little while ago lying on the cold, hard, metal catwalk about the vats.

Feeling the caked-on stickiness all over her body, pasting her hair and even inside her very clothes, all Francine really wanted right then was a shower. Or three. Really, as many as it took to get this stuff washed from her body and the stink that clung to her gone forever.

Pushing herself from the wall, she orientated herself and lurched down the sidewalk in the direction of her apartment.

People everywhere that she passed gave her a wide berth, many wrinkling their noses, others turning them up at her, some even crossing the very street to get away from her. Seeing a couple walking towards her, Francine reached out to grab a metal light pole to go around and promptly jumped as an arc of electricity jumped from the metal to her hand. The strange thing was that it didn’t hurt in the slightest, there was only a slight warm, tingly feeling.

Shrugging it off, Francine continued her trek.

Finally, after far too long with dozens of people staring at her, she reached the safety of the outer door of the building. Once again, that pleasant, tingly feeling warmed her as she felt the electricity arc into her hand from the metal doorhandle into her palm. She shivered in delight and her eyes widened in amazement as blue crackles of electricity filled the entire inside of the elevator as soon as the door closed with her inside it.

Francine had absolutely no idea what was causing all of the sparks to jump around her and to and into her and it was a little scary, if she was being honest. But that was secondary. This, this was purely exciting and ever so much fun. There was no pain as she might have expected. Instead, it was almost as though the electricity was welcoming her into it.

She wondered if anyone else had ever felt anything like it before.

Tearing her eyes from the blue arcs, she focussed on the button for her floor. As she reached out her finger to press it, an intense burst of electricity burst from her finger, hit the button and the elevator jolted upwards. Francine’s head cocked as she looked at her finger.

_Did that really just happen?_ she wondered. _Did the electricity really just obey her wishes?_

She jigged on her feet in giddy happiness. Something had happened to her in those vats with those two different goops and that bolt of lightning. She had no idea what it was but if this was what it did to her, all this electricity, then she instantly decided that she was never having a shower again. Not if it meant that she could finally be like her heroes, and even better, like her super heroes.

_ooo00ooo_

“This is all vibranium?” Steve asked in awe as he looked out the great glass windows.

“It is,” T’Challa replied, clearly proud of what his people had accomplished.
And why wouldn’t he be? Steve wondered. Stepping closer to the glass, he looked down. From up here, he couldn’t see the bottom. But what he could see …

The mine was deep and incredibly wide. Veins of silver and purple marked where the vibranium could be seen, awaiting extraction. There were dozens of strange-looking craft flying around inside with enormous space, moving people and ore about as needed. There even looked to be a futuristic train that ran on tracks around and throughout the mine.

“I’m guessing Dad didn’t actually get the last of it,” Tony commented.

Steve looked at him. “We knew that after Sokovia.”

“Your father was sold the last of the vibranium that was released out into the world outside Wakanda,” T’Challa stated.

“How much is out there, apart from my shield?” Steve asked.

“Very little,” T’Challa replied. “Most of what was sold over the years had managed to find its way home. And with the vibranium that Klaue sold to Ultron having been blasted into space thanks to the Avengers, we can be sure that it is used wisely.”

“Yeah, about that,” Tony said and something in his voice had Steve fully turning away. “If that vibranium’s out in space, that means that it doesn’t belong to anyone anymore, right? Full salvage rights to whoever finds it?”

T’Challa’s eyes narrowed slightly. “There is currently no known way for that vibranium to be retrieved. Do you expect it to re-enter orbit and fall to Earth at some point?”

“No, zero percent chance that that will happen,” Tony stated.

“Tony? What did you do?” Steve asked before snapping his fingers. “The space quinjet. We brought that one here yesterday, didn’t we? And Harry said that you went for a jaunt?”

“I may have been feeling the need to stretch my wings, as they say,” Tony replied carelessly.

“You went into space and retrieved the vibranium,” T’Challa said and it clearly wasn’t a question. “Where is it now?”

“I dropped it off in the ocean not far from an island that I recently bought. It won’t do any harm there,” Tony replied.

“Come with me,” T’Challa ordered.

Placing a hand on Tony’s back, Steve guided him after the Wakandan prince, noting that half a dozen of the Dora Milaje, Wakanda’s all-female security force, had formed up around them.

They were led into a curving corridor that was lined with dozens of large pieces of art, all showing scenes from Wakanda’s past, interspersed with huge screens that had Tony veering towards them as often as he could, obviously wanting to ‘play’ with them.

As they reached a more open area, obviously some kind of lab from what Steve could tell, the Dora Milaje peeled off to take up positions near the entrance. A young woman who barely looked out of her teens stood waiting for them. She was dressed in a form-fitting white dress and promptly bowed when T’Challa approached her.
“My King,” she murmured.

“Cut that out,” T’Challa said, “and I’m not King yet.”

“You will be, brother,” the girl grinned as she stood and performed a complicated handshake with T’Challa.

“Captain Rogers, Stark, you remember my sister, Shuri, the head of the Wakandan Design Group, our research and development and scientific advancement department?” T’Challa said proudly.

“Her?” Tony blurted. “She’s in charge of that?”

“Tony,” Steve warned, a warning that was promptly ignored.

“She’s what? Ten, eleven? Barely out of diapers, anyway and you have her in charge?” Tony asked.

“I am. You got a problem with that?” Shuri asked, a fierce expression on her face, her fists clenched at her side as she stepped forward. “I may be young but most of the designs that you’ll see around here are mine! I’m not just some old has-been who keeps redesigning the same thing over and over again.”

“Shuri,” this time it was T’Challa issuing the warning and who was also promptly ignored.

“Yeah? You think you’re so good, little girl? Prove it!” Tony challenged.

“Come with me!” she ordered.

T’Challa waited for Steve to fall into step alongside him before the two followed the inventors.

“This isn’t going to end well, is it?” Steve asked sotto voce.

“No, no I don’t think it will,” T’Challa replied.

They were led across to three mannequins, one wearing a black and silver suit that looked suspiciously like a panther, the other two simply wearing necklaces – one gold, the other silver. Tony, of course, was instantly examining the suit, running his hands over it and peering in closely at the weave.

“Vibranium weave? Should be bullet proof. Looks highly flexible while still being light,” Tony remarked. “Not a bad design.”

“Thank you,” T’Challa said. “I designed that one myself.”

“Old tech,” Shuri stated. “Functional but old. Everybody is shooting at me, wait, let me put on my helmet.”

“Hey!” T’Challa protested.

“Look at these, brother,” Shuri said, ignoring him and pointing to the two necklaced mannequins. “Which one?”

T’Challa stepped up to them, his head switching between the two.

“Tempting,” he said of the gold necklace, “but we want to be inconspicuous. This one.”

In response to his choice of the silver necklace of teeth, Shuri nodded and held up her bracelet to his
“Um? What was that?” Tony asked, holding up a finger as both the bracelet and a part of T’Challa’s neck glowed.

“Kimoyo beads,” Shuri replied. “Made from vibranium to do a whole host of different tasks, depending on what they’ve been designed for. In this instance, I have just linked the necklace to T’Challa’s implant allowing him to control it. Brother? Tell it to go on.”

Obviously, it was a mental command, for Steve didn’t hear T’Challa say anything, despite the fact that an entire suit, very closely related to the other one, materialised out of the necklace and grew over the mannequin.

“Nano tech?” Tony asked and received an affirmative nod from Shuri. “I’ve dabbled but haven’t spent a lot of time with it yet.”

“Be my guest,” Shuri said, gesturing at the suit. “The entire suit sits within the teeth of the necklace.”

After Tony had spend some time examining both the suit and the necklace, he nodded seemingly at least sharing a portion of the amazement that Steve himself was feeling at the sight of the advanced tech.

“Strike it,” Shuri commanded.

“You want me to hit it?” Tony asked.

“Yes. As hard as you want, wherever you want,” she replied.

“As hard as I want? Well, if you insist,” Tony said.

He then stepped back, examined the suit for a moment and then flicked his wrist, producing a miniature glove and repulsor from his watch that spread out to cover his hand.

“As I said, I’ve dabbled,” he smirked.

Then, lining up a shot, he fired a microburst at the suit, sending the mannequin firing. Immediately, Shuri was racing across the room to retrieve it and to return it to its original position.

“It’s glowing,” Steve frowned at the purple glow in the chest area of the suit where Tony’s repulsor blast had hit it.

“Don’t worry, it’s supposed to do that,” Shuri replied and tapped one of the beads around her wrist to produce what looked to Steve like a small holographic camera. “Now, hit it again in the same spot. With your fist this time.”

“You’re recording?” T’Challa asked.

“Scientific purposes, brother,” Shuri shrugged. “An inventor’s work is never done.”

“She’s got you there,” Tony nodded. “The same spot?”

“Please.”

This time, Tony stepped up to the suit, one foot in front of the other, leant back and struck the suit as hard as he could with his fist. However, instead of the suit being knocked backwards, it was Tony who was sent flying backwards, across the lab, over a table and crashing to the floor. Shuri, of
“Tony!” Steve yelled and rushed towards him.

“What … what was that?” a wobbly-sounding Tony asked, lifting his head.

“Shuri,” T’Challa said and it was clear that he wanted an explanation.

“The nanites absorb the kinetic energy and hold it in place for redistribution later,” she replied, her eyes shining.

“Very nice,” T’Challa said, his fingers running over the suit.

“Right, I give, you clearly have some smarts,” Tony said as Steve helped him to his feet. “What I want to know is, what is the world coming to? First Parker and now her? And neither of them are out of their teens yet!”

“I guess you’ll just have to work harder if you want to catch up,” Shuri beamed smugly.

“You can bet your sweet ass that I will be,” Tony retorted.

“Tony! Language!” Steve reprimanded and then, noting Tony’s look, instantly groaned.

The procession that descended down into the very bowels of the Earth below Wakanda was long. For this occasion, it seemed that everyone from the country wanted to attend. Men, women and children from the five united tribes of Wakanda – the Panther Tribe, the Border Tribe, the River Tribe, the Merchant Tribe and the Mining Tribe – all intended on paying their respects. It was easy for the outsiders to tell the different tribes, for, even though they all spoke the same language and had the same respect and downcast eyes, they all had their own unique dress and ornamentations.

What surprised the mourners, at least from what Harry could tell by the way that T’Challa, his mother Ramonda and his sister Shuri acted with their unexpected stiffening of their backs and sharp looks, was the appearance of a sixth tribe.

“Jabari!” the whisper swept through the procession.

As Harry, Daisy, Steve, Nat, Tony and Pepper finally reached the bottom of the long, winding rock-carved staircase, they came to a cave that opened up above them but only widened enough to allow the mourners to part into two lines as they curved around a large circular well positioned directly in the middle of the cave. As each Wakandan passed the well, they allowed their fingers to trail along the stone, murmuring something that was too low for even Harry’s translator earing to pick up.

Following their lead, Harry allowed his own fingers to touch the stone even as he looked into the dark waters. How deep it went was anyone’s guess; all he knew that the water was inky black and as still as glass.

Once around the well, the two lines merged into one as they passed through a great doorway, carved into a shape that Harry felt that he should recognise. The memory that it stirred was definitely from his time in Africa and made him think of Egypt, not that he could work out why.

Finally, they reached their final destination, a massive amphitheatre deep underground. Tiers of rocks circled the area and each tribe peeled off to find their own designated area. One would expect that, this far underground, that they would be in pitch darkness; however, that was not the case. Soft
golden light shone down from the centre of the great domed cave from a source that Harry simply couldn’t identify, no matter how long he stared upwards.

When all had finally entered, an older Wakandan leaning heavily on a large staff slowly limped forward. At the exact centre, he stopped, his head bowed and his hand on the coffin that lay there.

“T’Chaka’s time on this plain here amongst us is over,” the Wakandan shaman said, his voice amplifying and echoing around the cave despite the fact that he’d obviously spoken no louder than what would be used in a normal conversation. “His spirit has passed on to the plains of our ancestors where he shall run forever with the Black Panthers that came before him. T’Chaka’s heart, though, remains with us, with the people that he loved, guided and ruled over for the past twenty-three years.

“T’Chaka’s knowledge and wisdom remains engraved in the Wall of Knowledge even as his mortal body shall be entombed with his forebears in the Necropolis. Even in our loss, T’Chaka is not gone from us as long as he remains in our memories and his wisdom is remembered.

“My friend, my King, journey from here in peace, run eternal and until we meet again, we shall remain as one. Wakanda Forever!”

“Wakanda Forever!” the roar from all those assembled for T’Chaka’s funeral, accompanied as it was by the swift crossing of their arms against their chest, startled Harry.

And then the singing began. It was begun by Ramonda, T’Chaka’s wife, the Queen. She was soon joined by the rest of Panther tribe, each voice filled with emotion even as tears poured from their eyes and they began to sway, their arms and feet picking up the rhythm. One by one, the tribes of Wakanda joined in, adding their voices and dance to the celebration that was the life of King T’Chaka until the great amphitheatre was ringing with the sound of their voices and it seemed that the entire country was dancing and mourning together.

A tingling washed over Harry’s skin and his eyes darted about searching until they rested on the coffin of the King.

Slowly, it rose into the air, a beam of soft golden light enveloping it. When it was far overhead, it pivoted ninety degrees before slowly floating towards one particular spot in the rock wall. Harry watched, wide-eyed as the coffin reached the wall and seemed to melt into it, as though it was passing through an invisible door. But then, he considered the magic that he was feeling and decided that perhaps he was right.

Either way, it made no difference, the King was being laid to rest, the voices of his people, the dance of his people sending him on his journey hence.

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Mac Gargan had been camped out in an office across the road and a block down from Avengers Tower for the past couple of days. Thankfully, the office was currently under renovation and some simple forged forms, a clipboard, a suit and an arrogant attitude had ensured that he had the place to himself. A pair of high-powered telescopes – one with a camera attached and ready – were trained on the Tower, just waiting for Mac to get the goods on the Avengers.

Unfortunately, he was coming up empty. There was actually very little of the building that didn’t have reflective glass on the outside of it making it impossible to see in. Those places that he managed to get a good view of the interior were usually related to balconies with doors that opened and closed.
Only twice in two days had he even seen an Avenger. Once was when Sam Wilson, the Falcon, had landed on a balcony and entered, and even that had happened far too fast for Mac to get a decent photo of it. The other time was when the twins, Wanda and Pietro Maximoff had spent nearly half an hour standing on the balcony, looking over the city and talking to each other.

That time, he’d managed a disc full of shots. His laser-mic had recorded the whole conversation. And wasn’t that riveting listening? In amongst the twenty-nine minutes of idle chitchat that siblings tended to engage in, Mac had found a single word of interest – ‘island’. Of course, without any other information, there was nothing for him to piece together what island that they were talking about, only that it seemed that, possibly, the Avengers had a vacation spot somewhere that they liked to chill out on.

Throwing the half-eaten piece of cold pizza back into the box, Mac strode across to the telescope, bent and took another look. Nothing. This was getting him absolutely nowhere. And this, the Tower, was the easier of the two Avenger bases to spy on. The Compound in upstate New York, would be magnitudes harder with all of the security around it.

A buzzing in his pocket had him pulling out his phone. An address and a time had him smiling.

About damn time, he thought.

He’d been waiting for this meeting ever since he’d left Jameson’s office. Finally, it seemed that Toomes had agreed to meet him. If rumour was right – and Mac trusted his sources enough to know that it was – Toomes’ crew had some wicked tech, tech that’d make his job that much easier. If he played his cards right and offered the right price, he might even get a full-blown suit.

Here was a bust, it was time to move on to what he’d always considered his best bet. Checking the time, Mac knew that he’d have just enough time to pack up his gear and get to the meeting place. If he hurried.
It was as though the entire nation – people, animals, even nature itself – was celebrating the day. Great barges full of dancing and singing Wakandans floated down the river, their voices echoing back at them from the canyon walls. Above them, birds winged through the clear blue sky while animals – antelopes, gazelles, zebra and elephants lined the water’s edge. Harry was sure that he’d even seen a family of panthers crouched along the top of one section of the canyon wall watching them pass.

It was impossible not to get caught up in the atmosphere. Even Tony and Steve were jigging slightly, albeit somewhat awkwardly, assisted as they were by Pepper and Nat, just as Daisy had grabbed Harry’s hands and was dancing with him, her hips moving side to side, her feet stepping in time to the beat of the great drums and her smile as wide as Harry’d ever seen it.

This was truly an experience that Harry’d never had before, not even during his years travelling the world. Getting to watch, to participate in, the crowning of a King was almost surreal.

Finally, the barges docked and the Wakandan people danced their way off and into a cave system, never for a second losing their song or rhythm. The caves were nearly pitch black, lit only by shafts of light that shone down through holes in the rock, giving them just enough light to see their way.

The six outsiders followed Shuri and Ramonda as each of the five tribes separated into different tunnels. They found themselves standing on the edge of a small rock clearing halfway up the canyon. Above them, the cliffs rose at least another thirty metres and was quickly being filled by the tribes of Wakanda. In front of them was a shallow basin full of water that Harry guessed was ankle deep, judging by the man, the shaman standing in the centre of it. Beyond the basin was the canyon and a drop of fifty metres to the river below.

Still, the tribes continued their song and dance of celebration, the tempo and volume increasing as a Wakandan jet rose out of the canyon before pivoting and settling so that, when the rear ramp opened, its passenger could walk straight from the craft into the basin.

And then he appeared. Prince T’Challa, looking every inch the Wakandan warrior from times past, at least, that’s what Harry thought he looked like. He was dressed only in a basic loincloth and his chest, shoulders and back had been painted to resemble black, grey and white fur. In his hands, he carried a shield, a short spear through its strap, its head and shaft sticking out from behind it.

T’Challa walked slowly across the basin towards the robed shaman standing in the centre of it, looking up at the people as they continued their song and dance, their voices and dance reaching a powerful crescendo. Behind him, the jet sped away leaving the area looking much as it would have done for every ceremony like it since Wakanda was first formed.

Suddenly, the Wakandan people stilled, their song and dance ended. Harry could feel the anticipation in the very air.

“T’Challa, you, son of Badu, give to you, Prince T’Challa, the Black Panther,” the shaman called, his voice reaching high to all those there.

At once, T’Challa drew a sword that Harry hadn’t realised that he carried from behind his shield, held sword and shield up, crossed them and knelt before the people.

Holding out a bowl for all to see, Zuri turned to T’Challa.
“The Prince will now have the strength of the Black Panther stripped away,” he said.

Harry looked across to Steve as T’Challa drank from the bowl and was visibly affected, even slipping backwards slightly, as though he was struggling to keep himself from falling completely into the water. Steve, Harry could see, was thinking the same thing that he was: T’Challa was a mutate, with extra powers – including, at the very least, strength – that could be given and taken away. This was obviously something well-known by the Wakandans, judging by the fact that none were surprised, and indeed were now performing a ritual, bobbing type of dance.

Finally, T’Challa seemed to rally and regained his position, before rising to his feet.

“Victory, in ritual combat,” Zuri stated once the dance had halted. “Comes by yield or death. If any tribe wishes to put forth a warrior, I now offer a path to the throne.”

At once, one of the tribes burst forth with a chant before stilling.

“The Merchant Tribe will not challenge today.”

A second tribe chanted and Harry realised that this was the formula for each tribe.

“The Border Tribe will not challenge today.”

“The River Tribe will not challenge today.”

“The Mining Tribe will not challenge today.”

“Is there any member of a royal blood from the Golden Tribe who wishes to challenge for the throne,” Zuri asked, gesturing towards T’Challa.

Daisy’s sharp intake of breath alerted Harry to something unexpected happening. Looking around, he found that Shuri, T’Challa’s sister was raising her hand. The murmuring of the combined tribes emphasised how unexpected this was.

“This corset is really uncomfortable,” Shuri stated. “So, could we all just wrap it up and go home?”

Ramonda’s slap at her daughter, T’Challa’s half-smile and head shake and the people’s groans told the story of how amusing they found her joke, or not as the case may be.

Unexpectedly, an echoing call followed by something that sounded like the ‘haw haw’ of a gorilla or even a troop of gorillas sounded from one of the caves within the mountain. Both Harry and Daisy raised their hands towards the cave entrance but lowered them again at Steve’s slight head shake. Looking around, Harry found that, while the Wakandans had all been startled at the noise that was continuing and growing louder, none appeared worried or concerned.

And then they appeared, a sixth tribe, stalking from the cave entrance, their chant now echoing up and down the canyon walls.

“The Jabari,” Shuri whispered in something that sounded like awe.

It was then that their obvious leader appeared. Like T’Challa, his head, shoulders and his entire back were adorned with paint. His, though, were primarily white with a hint of some black, making Harry think of a white ape or gorilla, an image that was only emphasised by the mask that he wore.

He strode straight out into the basin, not stopping until he was right in front of both Zuri and T’Challa before taking off his mask.
“M’Baku, what are you doing here?” the shaman asked.

“It is Challenge Day,” the now-named M’Baku answered as though it explained everything and Harry supposed that it did.

M’Baku stepped away from them, his feet splashing in the water as he looked up at the tribes of Wakanda.

“We have watched and listened from the mountain,” M’Baku called. “We have watched with disgust as your technological advancements have been overseen by a child who has no respect for tradition!”

Beside him, Steve moved quickly to pull his shield from his back, just as Harry and Daisy raised their hands ready to defend Shuri from what looked to be M’Baku’s threat, evidenced by his pointing of his club at her. Obviously, they weren’t the only ones to think so: the Dora Milaje had also taken up defensive stances, their spears raised and ready around Shuri.

M’Baku, though, appeared unfazed by the weapons trained on him, merely giving them a disdainful look before moving on.

“I know you want to hand this nation over to this prince,” M’Baku stated, stalking back towards T’Challa, “who could not keep his own father safe. We will not have it. We will not have it! I, M’Baku, Leader of the Jabari …”

“I accept your challenge, M’Baku,” T’Challa interrupted.

“The Challenge has been offered and accepted!” Zuri called.

Instantly, drums started up, a tribal beat that had Harry’s heart pumping. Glancing to either side of him, he noted that T’Challa’s family and the Dora Milaje seemed concerned but not afraid.

Looking back, he watched as a dozen Jabari strode into the basin and formed a quarter circle around the two combatants who were now both wearing masks: the ape and the panther. At the shaman’s call, a dozen of the Dora Milaje joined the Jabari, adding another quarter circle of warriors around the two, leaving only the back of the basin where it dropped into the canyon open. The two dozen warriors levelled their spears as T’Challa and M’Baku faced off.

“Let the Challenge begin!” Zuri ordered.

As Zuri’s staff hit the water, M’Baku strode forward, his club swinging at T’Challa. T’Challa, though, blocked every stroke, taking each powerful hit on his shield even as he was forced backwards. And then a double-handed blow hit, striking T’Challa’s shield and sending the prince flying backwards to land with a splash in the water.

As he was getting to his feet, the warriors around the combatants stepped forward, closing the circle.

“This time it was T’Challa’s turn to attack.

Swinging his sword backwards and forwards as he advanced had M’Baku quickly backstepping. T’Challa used that momentum to deliver a flying kick, striking the larger man in the chest and causing him to fly backwards to crash to the water.

Once again, the encircling warriors stepped forward.

M’Baku was obviously extremely incensed at being knocked down for he came up swinging harder and faster than before. T’Challa was forced to duck and dodge from side to side before, once again,
he was struck, this time being spun through the air before crashing down into the water.

When next he rose, it was without his mask or his shield or his sword in his hands.

M'Baku laughed and attacked once more. But this time, T'Challa not only dodged but used some impressive acrobatics to kick M'Baku in the face and to cause the warriors around them to close in once more.

Again, M'Baku struck out at T'Challa with his club but T'Challa simply dodged before hitting him in the ribs and the face. Again, M'Baku attacked and again T'Challa dodged before striking the Jabari leader.

When next M'Baku came at him, it was with a different tactic. Instead of attempting to hit T'Challa, it was to close quickly and to grab him in a fierce bear hug and to headbutt him, using his mask to smash into T'Challa’s face and leave him obviously dazed and bloody.

“No powers! No claws!” M'Baku yelled, headbutting T'Challa again. “No special strength. Just a boy! Not fit to lead!”

Unexpectedly, T'Challa rallied. With a great roar, he managed to free one arm and struck at M'Baku once, twice, thrice, smashing right through his mask and making him drop the prince and back away, blood all over his own face. Reaching up, he felt the blood, stared at it, roared and rushed at T'Challa, catching him with the bottom point of his club and driving it into his shoulder.

“You can do this, T'Challa!” Shuri called.

“I am Prince T'Challa, son of King T'Chaka!” T'Challa yelled and promptly tore the wood that was impaling him away.

He attacked, hitting and kicking the bigger man, taking him down and getting his legs around M'Baku’s throat even as he grappled with his arms. The two twisted and turned each attempting to gain the upper hand and for an instant, Harry was sure that the two of them were going to tumble right off the edge of the basin into the canyon below.

“Yield!” Harry heard T'Challa say, having gained the upper-hand and holding M'Baku in such a way that he couldn’t escape. “Don’t make me kill you. You have fought with honour. Now, yield!”

All around Harry and the others, the Wakandans took up a chant, T'Challa’s name now echoing from the very walls of the cliff.

“The Jabari, your people, they need you! Yield!” T'Challa yelled.

And then, Harry saw M'Baku’s hand move and slap T'Challa’s thigh.

“He did it,” Tony stated, sounding impressed. “Guy’s definitely got some skills.”

“You can do something about that wound, right?” Daisy asked Harry. “That hole in his chest looks nasty.”

“A few drops of dittany will heal it,” Harry nodded. “I’ll make the offer after this is all over.”

“I declare Price T’Challa the winner of the Challenge!” Zuri stated. “He is the new King of Wakanda!”

His declaration caused the assembled six tribes of Wakanda to break out into a cheer louder than any
that Harry had yet heard that day, quickly followed by even more exuberant singing and dancing.

Adrian Toomes stepped down from the small platform where he’d just landed, unzipping his fur-lined leather coat as he did so. Already, Mason was scurrying up to see to his suit, to ensure that it was still in perfect working condition, which Toomes knew that it would be, after all, it wasn’t like he’d really taxed it tonight.

No, tonight had been a simple job. Using the suit, he’d flown to one of the smaller Damage Control facilities – really, it was nothing more than a holding bay before everything was carted off to their main facility out of state. He’d landed on the roof, bypassing all that high-tech surveillance that they’d installed to ensure that no one could creep up on the place, with ease.

Then, using Mason’s sphere’s he’d created a hole in the roof that’d allowed him to simply drop in, grab the tech that he needed – not too much, didn’t want to tip off that he’d been there – and to leave again, taking the spheres with him and leaving no trace that he’d ever been there (even the ‘hole’ in the roof had been repaired).

“Hey, Boss,” Vale called as he crossed the room to his desk. “Got Gargan here to see you.”

“Was that tonight?” Toomes asked before shaking his head. “Of course, it was, shouldn’t remembered.”

Dumping his flying cap and goggles, Toomes turned to lean against his desk as he awaited his visitor.

Gargan, when he appeared behind Vale, was obviously checking the place out, despite how much he was trying to appear not to be.

“Mister Gargan, what can I do for you?” Toomes asked.

“It’s Mac, just Mac,” Gargan replied. “Thanks for seeing me.”

Toomes simply nodded and waited for the man to answer his question.

“I’m after some tech, something that’ll give me an advantage in getting into places that I’m not supposed to be in,” Gargan finally stated.

“We might have something,” Toomes allowed. “Of course, there’s factors that’ll determine exactly what we do have.”

“I’ve got the cash,” Gargan stated quickly. “A benefactor that’ll pay for anything that I’ll need.”

“Really? Must be nice having a ‘benefactor’,,” Toomes remarked.

“Yeah, well, this guy, he wants me to collect some dirt on the Avengers,” Gargan explained. “Thing is, they’re the Avengers …”

“And it’ll take something a bit special to find that dirt,” Toomes finished with a nod. “Mason? Get over here!”

Mason’s head instantly came out from behind Toomes’ suit, blinked at him for a moment before the rest of him appeared and he scurried down from the platform and across to the group.

“Mason, what’ve we got for someone who’s looking to get into places with high security and that’s
armed to the teeth?” Toomes asked.

Mason blinked at him. “Depends on what sort of budget we’ve got to work with. And how quickly it’s needed.”

“Apparently, budget’s not a problem,” Toomes replied.

“And I can wait a few days. A week, if I need to,” Gargan added.

“In that case, I can offer two possibilities,” Mason mused. “I’ve got something small and unobtrusive or we can go the whole hog.”

“Well, Gargan’s got the budget, so let’s go with something flashy, shall we?” Toomes suggested.

With a wave of his hand, Mason had them follow him across to his work station. Toomes watched as Mason rounded the bench and opened one of the full-length lockers behind it.

“This is a full-body suit that I’ve been working on in my spare time,” Mason stated. “It’s not done yet but already, I’ve got it so that it’ll give the wearer added strength – up to lifting a three-tonne weight – as well as some serious firepower from guns attached to its arms.”

“What’s that?” Toomes asked, pointing to the piece of curved metal on the shelf above the suit.

“I was thinking of adding a tail,” Mason replied. “It’ll have some added extras as well.”

“Well?” Toomes asked.

“Might be just what I need,” Gargan nodded, one hand rubbing his chin. “How much?”

Toomes grinned and slung an arm around Gargan’s shoulder.

“I’m glad you asked,” he said.

Maria stared at the report on her screen, her arms folded and a grim expression on her face. Flicking her eyes to the adjacent screen, she compared the two. Yes, already there was a discernible difference.

“It’s starting, isn’t it?” Peter sighed.

“Yes,” she replied, unwilling to shield him from the truth.

“Man, I wish I could go out there on patrol,” Peter sighed, running a hand through his hair. “What about if I go out in my civvies? I’m sure that I could thwart some bad guy’s fun that was just as easily as in my suit.”

“You probably could. And be found out in next to no time, arrested and shipped off to the RAFT,” Maria stated.

“We talked about this,” Bobbi said sympathetically, laying a hand on his shoulder.

“Bobbi’s right,” Bruce stated. “As much as we don’t like it, we have to let things play out, play the long game, as Steve said.”

Maria chose not to listen too closely to Peter’s grumble just then and was glad of Jennifer’s
unexpected presence at her side.

“Is this showing everywhere, not just New York?” she asked, pointing at the different percentage spikes that lined the screen.

“Yes,” Maria nodded. “Different cities in America, all showing the difference in crime rate from before the signing of the Accords to now.”

Not counting the rare anomaly, every single city displayed on the screen was showing an increase in crime – be it break and enters, petty theft, muggings, car jackings, murder or a host of other crimes. Criminals were starting to come out of the woodwork and test what this new world offered them. And, judging by the spike that they were seeing, the criminals were liking it.

“This is L.A.?” Jennifer asked, pointing to one particular line, one that showed an increase in crime of thirty-two percent in the last month.

“It is,” Maria nodded.

“The Pride’s on the move,” Jennifer frowned, turning to lock eyes with her cousin.

“They’re the ones who shot you, right?” Bruce asked.

“Yeah,” Jennifer replied grimly. “Because Dad was doing too good a job and wasn’t crooked. Do you think we need to get him out of there?”

“Do you really think that he’d leave?” Bruce half-smiled.

Jennifer sighed. “No. Probably not.”

“I can have S.H.I.E.L.D. keep on eye on him, if you like,” Maria offered. “They’ve got some agents out that way.”

“Thanks, I’d really appreciate it,” Jennifer replied. “But if those numbers climb any higher, then I’ll be heading out that way myself, I think.”

“And I’ll go with you,” Bruce stated. “Us Big Greens have to stick together.”

“Just so long as you keep your skin colour the same as it is now,” Bobbi stated seriously. “The last thing we need is for anyone to draw attention to themselves.”

“This really isn’t going to take too long, is it?” Peter whined. “I’m an action kind-of-guy; I don’t do good sitting on my hands. Feels wrong.”

“Looking at these numbers,” Maria said, waving a hand at the screen, “I’d say a couple of months, six at the outside before crime is out of control and the big guns come out to play. As soon as that happens, we’ll be asked to step back in.”

“Let’s just hope that you’re right,” Bobbi stated.

“Unless you’re wrong and it’s much sooner than that,” Peter stated hopefully.

Maria smiled sadly at him.

“We can hope,” she said, not that she expected it, if anything, she expected that she was underestimating the time frame.
The great plain sat atop one of the main mountains in Wakanda. It offered an unparalleled view of Africa for as far as the eye could see, without interruption from men or man-made things, be they cities, cars or pollution of any kind.

At any other time, Steve would gladly spend hours sitting up there, maybe even with his sketchpad in his hand, drawing the magnificent view. Today, though, that wasn’t going to happen.

The plain was currently filled with the six tribes of Wakanda, all in their own places, making up one side each of a great hexagon. One side, the side closest to the edge of the mountain where an enormous statue of a stone panther in mid stride stood, a platform had been set up where seven seats had been placed – one for each of the Elders of the tribes, including King T’Challa, as well as the Wakandan shaman.

From off to the side, the seven walked in, four men and three women. Only after King T’Challa had taken his seat did the others sit.

“Bring in the accused,” T’Challa ordered.

Instantly, the Border Tribe at the opposite end of the hexagon, shuffled about so that there was a corridor down their middle. Into this marched a dozen of the Dora Milaje, their spears up pointing into the sky. In their middle were two white men, their hands bound behind them, loose bindings around their feet giving them an awkward shuffle-run as they struggled to keep up with their guards.

The mood amongst the Wakandans was hostile; they were there to see justice done to these men and Steve wasn’t sure that he liked what he was sensing. Still, he had to trust T’Challa; he seemed a good man and, as Erksine had once told him, all that one could be was ‘a good man’.

Finally, the two men were manoeuvred into the space directly in front of the judging Elders of Wakanda.

“Damien Jefferson. Elijah ben Haman,” T’Challa said, looking between the two men, “you are here to be judged on your actions, actions which you performed in Vienna not fourteen days ago. There you were responsible for detonating explosives which killed twelve people, including the King of Wakanda, my father, King T’Chaka. Do you have anything to say in your defence?”

“Shouldn’t these guys have a lawyer or something?” Pepper asked sotto voce.

“I’ve been looking into the justice system here in Wakanda,” Nat replied, “here, if you do something wrong, you must defend yourself, after all, it was your actions, how would anyone else be able to understand what was going through your mind at that time?”

Steve nodded, although he also had a slight frown on his face. He understood the concept well enough. He even agreed with it. The problem that he could see was that some people were simply not good at explaining themselves or their feelings. But then, he had to remind himself, this was a different culture, perhaps things were different here.

“We didn’t mean to kill your king,” the one on the left, Jefferson stated. “He was never our target.”

“He’s right,” ben Haman added. “All we wanted was to hurt the freaks, the ones that claim to be human when clearly, they’re not.”

“What is it that makes a person human?” T’Challa asked, his head slightly cocked to one side.
“Pure human DNA,” Jefferson replied. “None of this weird mutation stuff.”

“When I was in Vienna at the talks that culminated in the signing of the Sokovia Accords, there were five different groups represented there – pure humans as you call them, mutates, mutants, Inhumans and magicals. Many of them were born the way they are. They were born on Earth from human parents. Are you saying that they are not human?”

“Yes!” ben Haman spat. “Pure human’s only! Everything else should be put to death or sent back to where they came from.”

“And the ones that made themselves that way? They’re the worst of the lot!” Jefferson added.

Steve felt Nat’s hand slide into his and their fingers interlaced. Both of them were mutates, one by choice, one by having it done to them. Even still, both of them considered themselves as human as they came, albeit with a little something extra inside them.

Suddenly, King T’Challa stood, his face a stone mask as he stared at the two men before him.

“It is not right that I sit here in judgement on these men,” he said, his head raised as he looked at his people. “I am not only the King but I am also the Black Panther. You all understand what this means. These men, they may not have been targeting my father when he was killed, but they were targeting me and those like me.”

Steve noted that the two men visibly flinched as they realised that they were standing in front of someone who they’d just declared should be killed for being who they were.

“Zuri?” King T’Challa said, gesturing to the shaman.

At his nod, the shaman stepped forward while T’Challa stepped back and to the side.

“Tell me, Damien Jefferson, Elijah ben Haman, knowing that there were those who you were not targeting inside the building that you bombed, and knowing that those people could be hurt or killed, why did you go through with your attack?” Zuri asked.

The two men shared a look before Jefferson shrugged.

“They were colluding with the non-humans,” he said. “No one in that room had a problem with those people. They were happy to sit and talk to them instead of simply rounding them up and throwing them in prison or doing what needed to be done. If they got hurt in the process, well, we could live with that.”

Zuri shook his head at the men before turning to his left. Steve saw each of the three seated there give a small nod before Zuri turned to the right to receive nods from the two seated there.

“Damien Jefferson. Elijah ben Human,” Zuri said. “By your own lips, you admit to being responsible for detonating the explosive device which claimed the life not only of King T’Chaka of Wakanda but also the lives of eleven others. You have shown no remorse for your actions and your words imply that you would continue to act in the same way in the future.

“We, the Elders of Wakanda, do find you guilty of murder. The old ways say that you should be killed for what you have done …”

Hearing that, Steve stiffened. Despite the fact that they were guilty, there were times and places for killing men; war was one of those times, this was different and one that he was most assuredly uncomfortable with.
“… but we Wakandans have changed our laws since those days,” Zuri continued. “That does not mean that we will surrender your lives. From this day forward, until the day you no longer walk the plains of this Earth, you will work in the mines, deep within the bowels of Wakanda, the land that you deprived of her King.”

Zuri looked across to T’Challa then and received his nod.

“The Elders of the Tribes of Wakanda have spoken!” Zuri declared, emphasising the decree with the crack of the butt of his staff on the platform.

At once, the Dora Milaje stepped forward and grabbed the two men and dragged them away.

Steve could only nod. It wasn’t a death sentence and the men would pay for their crimes, giving back to the Wakandan people for their crimes against the nation.
Harry wasn’t sure how deep into Africa he currently was, nor how far from Wakanda itself. What he did know was that Zuri, the Wakandan shaman had provided him with a portkey – or, at least, the African version of one.

The two had fallen into a conversation about magic and how integrated into society it was in Wakanda. Magicals and non-magicals alike knew about its existence and cohabited peacefully. And, keeping the secret really wasn’t that big of a deal, especially with the fact that Wakanda as a whole was being kept secret from the rest of the world.

Africa had an extremely large magical presence; indeed, the largest magical school in the world was located on the continent. Thus, it didn’t take long before their conversation turned to the various magical plants and animals that could be found there, comparing notes from Harry’s own travels as well as Zuri’s more extensive knowledge.

It was when Zuri mentioned that he’d encountered a number of phoenixes far to the west, that Harry had become quite excited. Slowly over the last couple of years, his supply of phoenix tears had gradually been used, healing people from the worst of the wounds that they had received – Pietro being a prime example.

Thus, the portkey that Zuri had given him. Oh, there was no guarantee that any phoenix that Harry located (assuming that he could even find one) would be willing to gift him with some tears, but considering the likelihood of getting some any other way, he was happy to take the chance.

Landing, Harry took a moment to take stock of his surroundings.

He was in a kind of grotto in the middle of what looked to be a dense rainforest. Turning about, he found that a wall of cliffs rose at his back, vines crisscrossing them and entire trees either struggling to gain purchase amongst the rocks or pushing right up beside the cliffs as close as they could get. Along to his left, a small waterfall fell, splashing noisily into a deep pool of water and making the air incredibly dense and humid.

Birdsong permeated the air while the rustle of leaves high in the trees was either made from the wind or, most likely, animals moving about. A sharp sting on the back of his neck had him slapping at it. When Harry then looked at his hand, it was to see the remains of a mosquito. Without a second’s hesitation, he waved his wand in a circle above his head before bringing it down and around his body, creating a magical barrier around himself that would keep any other insects from getting too close.

Just as he was about to put his wand back into its holster, something caught his attention and he froze. Harry’s eyes darted backwards and forwards even as he kept his head perfectly still. Not seeing anything, he then focussed on his other senses. Sound wasn’t any help, as all he could hear was exactly what he’d been hearing since he’d arrived. Nor was smell much help, him not knowing what the area normally smelt like to determine if there was an unfamiliar scent in the air.

Closing his eyes, Harry reached out with his magic, letting it wash away from him and return, not unlike sonar or echo-location. It took four magical ‘waves’ before he found something. Whatever it was was almost directly in front of him, standing or perched on the lowest branch of a tree. Opening his eyes, he stared at the spot, only to see … nothing.

Letting out another pulse of magic, Harry nodded imperceptibly to himself. Yes, he was certain that
something was there. Something that he’d never encountered before but whatever it was, he didn’t think that it was unfriendly, just wary.

“Hello, there. My name’s Harry. It’s nice to meet you. I promise that I’m not going to hurt you,” Harry said, channelling his inner Luna.

And then he waited. Finally, after what felt like close to an hour of standing perfectly still (but what he suspected was probably less than five minutes), a strange being slowly faded into being.

It looked kind of like a long grey-haired monkey with large yellowish eyes. The fact that it could turn itself invisible confirmed for Harry what he was seeing: a demiguise. These magical creatures were reportedly very friendly, if incredibly shy. Their hair was prized as the main component of creating invisibility cloaks. Harry thought he remembered something about them being able to see the future, but he wasn’t quite sure about that.

“Hi,” he said to the demiguise that was staring intently at him. “I’m sorry to disturb you, I won’t stay long. I was just looking for some phoenixes? I don’t suppose that you’ve seen any around here at all?”

As he finished his question, the demiguise jumped down from its perch and tentatively slunk towards him. Then, when it was just over an arm’s length away, it lifted one hand and pointed to Harry’s right.

Harry looked at where the demiguise was pointing, looked back and blinked.

“Are you saying that there’s a phoenix that way?” he asked.

Again, the demiguise simply cocked its head, its arm continuing to point the way.

“Okay, then,” Harry said, running a hand through his hair. “Well, thank you very much.”

Carefully so as not to startle the creature, he took a slow step back and turned towards the indicated direction. When next he looked back, the demiguise was gone, whether it simply made itself invisible again or had disappeared into the trees, Harry had no idea; either way, he was grateful to it for its help.

Steve and Nat had been offered seats at the council meeting by T’Challa, after all, the topic under discussion was one that they knew and understood intimately. Unlike other councils that either of them had attended, the Tribal Council of Wakanda was unique in that there were no tables involved. All of the participants simply sat in chairs, set in a square, facing each other, with nothing to hide them from their brethren.

T’Challa, as expected as King, sat upon his throne directly across from the two Avengers. To either side of him stood the Wakandan General, Okoye and Nakia, a combination diplomat and spy from what they’d been able to piece together from talking with her. To their left sat the Queen Mother, Ramonda as well as the Elders of the Border Tribe and the Mining Tribe while, to their right and completing the square, the Elders of the Merchant Tribe and the River Tribe were seated.

“As you are aware, my father, King T’Chaka, was heavily involved in talks among the United Nations when he was killed,” T’Challa stated. “He had taken on the mantle of facilitator of the meeting to discuss and eventually ratify the document known as the Sokovia Accords. This document deals with how people other than those who are considered ‘pure’ humans are to be treated in the world and by nations.
“At first, I believed that this meant that it was directed specifically at the Avengers, thus why I have invited Captain Rogers and Miss Romanoff here today. It was not until the discussions were taking place that I understood that the Sokovia Accords would also impact citizens of all of the Tribes of Wakanda.”

“How so?” M’Kathu, Elder of the Border Tribe asked, leaning forward slightly.

“The Accords,” T’Challa replied, not only looking at him, but allowing his gaze to sweep across all of the Elders, “speaks of mutates, mutants, magicals and Inhumans within its pages. You all know that there are magicals within our lands. They live in harmony with our people, using the gifts that they were born with to help our people. But there is one other that the Accords affect. Me.”

While the Elders did not speak out at the King’s declaration, there was some shifting in their seats as they looked at each other.

“How do these Accords affect you, King T’Challa?” Dra’kun, the Elder of the River Tribe asked.

“I am classed as a mutate because of the heart-shaped plant that gives me the power of the Black Panther,” he replied simply.

“There are others in the world who use the heart-shaped plant?” the Elder of the Mining Tribe wondered.

“No, Ma’am,” Steve replied. “Those that are considered ‘mutates’ are those that were born normal, like King T’Chaka, but due to something extraordinary, have changed to become extraordinary themselves. What that is, is different for almost all mutates. I, myself, underwent a scientific experiment back in the forties and was altered due to a serum. One of our companions was changed due to the bite of a radioactive spider, another had his genes altered when he was bombarded with gamma rays.”

“None of the Avengers would sign the Accords,” T’Challa stated.

“Why would you choose this path?” M’Kathu asked.

“Simply put, Sir, because I – and the rest of our team – believe that in doing so, we would be prevented from doing our work in protecting those that need us,” Steve replied.

“It may sound arrogant,” Nat added, “and perhaps to some extent, it is. But we know that placing ourselves under a committee that meets irregularly that would need to discuss and vote upon where and when we could go in and do what needed to be done would be detrimental. What if the decision came too late and thousands of people died because of it? Or what if we were prevented from going at all? Or simply sent in when we weren’t needed?”

“I can see your points, but surely overarching guidance is only prudent?” Ramonda suggested.

“Indeed, Ma’am, I agree wholeheartedly,” Steve nodded. “But we believe that we have a system in place that works. If I can liken it to the Wakandan structure? We have a person in charge of gathering intelligence, intelligence that is presented to the team leaders to decide whether or not it is something that we should get involved in. We have a set of leaders in place who work together, much like this council as a check and balance system when we make those decisions. Obviously, like any system, it’s not perfect, but I firmly believe that it works.”

“Wakanda has a King who has the final say,” General Okoye pointed out. “My warriors would never act without his approval and orders. This system that the Avengers have, do you have a person that has final say, like King T’Challa?”
“Not really,” Steve replied.

“But we all listen to Steve,” Nat overrode him. “The reason that he was chosen to become the first super-soldier wasn’t because he was already the fittest and the strongest or even the most intelligent, because he was none of that. The true reason is because of his heart. He has a heart that always strives to do the right thing. We know that. We respect that. And we try to emulate that.”

“The Avengers were not the only group of people at the meeting in Vienna that the Accords affected,” T’Challa stated. “There was also a group called the ‘X-Men’, a group of mutants who deal primarily with their own, even going so far as to gather them as children and offer them a home and a school where they can learn. The other group are known as the ‘Fantastic Four’. I don’t know as much about them.”

“If I may?” Nakia asked. Having received T’Challa’s nod, she continued. “The Fantastic Four are fairly new, as are the Inhumans who were also in attendance. To date, they have not shown exactly what they are capable of, but the rumours that I am hearing say that they wish to contribute to the world as a whole, to make it a better place, just as most people in the world do.”

“When I realised that the Accords affect not only myself but also some of our people, I needed to decide if it was right for Wakanda to sign,” T’Challa stated. “Ultimately, I believed that it was. But it was not right for myself to sign; I did not wish to place the Black Panther under the authority of a United Nations’ panel.”

This time there was an affirming murmur that swept through the Tribal Elders.

“Thus, I asked Nakia to sign on behalf of Wakanda,” he concluded. “Besides explaining what the Accords entailed and informing you of the decision that I made, I also asked you here today to ask for your opinions on whether it is right or necessary to inform those of our people who are affected by the Accords what the world has decided about them.”

“I do not see the benefit in making this interruption to their lives,” M’Kathu stated thoughtfully. “In all my years as not only the Elder of the Border Tribe and also before that when I was simply one of the guards, no more than a handful of Wakandans have ever wanted to pass beyond our borders into the wider world. Our people are happy here, they are free to be who they are and they know this.”

“The magicals among us already know that beyond our borders, life is different and that they cannot use their magic in public,” the Merchant Tribe Elder added. “These Accords do not sound as though they change that.”

“They do not,” Nakia said.

“In that case, I see no need to embroil them in the politics of the world. Let them continue to live their lives as they have always done,” Ramonda agreed.

T’Challa looked to each of the Tribal Elders before nodded.

“Then it is agreed,” he declared. “Nakia, I will ask you to continue to monitor the rest of the world in this matter. As to you Avengers, I understand that there are many governments in the world that have become hostile towards you since even before the signing of the Accords. Know that Wakanda’s borders are open to you in friendship.”

“Thank you, King T’Challa, we are humbled by your generosity and friendship,” Steve replied solemnly, inclining his head in respect as well, despite the number of times that T’Challa had told him that they did not do that here.
Deep in the darkest depths of the Pacific Ocean, a crate had been lying for some time now. When it’d first arrived, it’d been sealed. That changed just the night before when a curious octopus had encountered it. Its tentacles had roamed all over the crate, prodding and probing the strange surface that was unlike the usual rocks and sand that it called home.

Eventually, it had decided to pick the strange box up and to attempt to crack it open, not unlike the way a shell would be opened, on a nearby rock. Cracks had formed at the very first impact. Upon the second, a hole had been made.

A probing tentacle wiggled into the hole but, feeling nothing of interest, the octopus had moved on. However, now that the water had access to the interior, it went to work on the dozens of blue crystals inside the crate. Slowly, each crystal began to dissolve. This new mixture of water and crystal flushed out of the hole in the crate and began to disperse.

A school of mackerel, one of many in the area, were the first to swim into this new solution and consequently, were also the first to have the remains of the crystal absorbed into their skin.

Whether or not those particular fish would feel any affects from the taint that was now in them would never be known, for just then, a great net sank around them before pulling tight and capturing them.

As much as they struggled and flailed about, the mackerel had been ensnared and were quickly being brought towards the light and their intended fate, as determined by the fishermen above.

Ulysses Klaue had had the foresight to know that having a single base of operations was never a good thing. The unpredictable could always happen. Admittedly, he’d imagined that that would entail snitches and police, not sentient robots and super-heroes. Still, regardless of how it’d come about, he was extremely glad that he had a place to retreat to.

Looking around, he decided that he was content. An entire fishing village – or at least, what once was an entire fishing village – made a very nice home. In truth, it was much cosier than the old, abandoned rust bucket of a freighter that he’d been using for the past few years. And, the bonus was that the entire village belonged to him – it even said so on the deed, all legal-like and everything.

He’d made sure that he was still based out of Africa, albeit, two countries up the shoreline, but Africa, a continent with some of the most relaxed laws and unpolicing lands in the world.

He had sheds filled with weapons, some that he’d already had stashed here, others that he was quickly bringing in ready to get his business up and running again, not that he really needed to keep going, after all, that damnable robot had made him a billionaire, thus how he was able to afford to buy an entire village and not just the two sheds that this fall-back hideout had originally been.

Still, a man had to work and this was work that Klaue actually enjoyed.

The only downside that he had was the constant tingling in his fingers and ache in his forearm. A forearm and fingers that no longer existed, thanks to the same damnable robot that had cut it off in a fit of pique! Just because he’d compared Ultron to Tony Stark – a comparison that was, admittedly, whole justified. The only thing that he could be thankful for was the fact that it’d been a clean cut and had been cauterized straight away. Klaue shuddered to think what would have come of him if it hadn’t been.
“Hey, Boss, there’s some dude here to see you,” Jenkins stated, sticking his head in through Klaue’s office door.

“Do we know him?” Klaue asked.

Jenkins shrugged. “Never done business with him before.”

Klaue acknowledged the point with a jerk of his head, and received an answering nod. It never did to take too few precautions.

He waited and watched as the new potential player was shown in.

“Ulysses Klaue, it’s nice to meet you,” the man stated.

Klaue took him in at a glance. Judging by his accent, he was American. The dreadlocks weren’t unusual on an African-American either. What was unusual were the hundreds of tattoos, almost burn marks, that could be seen on his chest where his shirt had been left unbuttoned.

“You seem to have me at a disadvantage,” Klaue stated, allowing the man to assume that he had the upper hand in the early part of these negotiations.

“Oh, yeah, right. My name’s Stevens, Erik Stevens. But you can call me ‘Killmonger’.”

Klaue couldn’t help but let out a short, barking laugh.

“And what sort of name’s ‘Killmonger’?” he asked.

“It’s the code name that I earnt in ’Stan when I was in the US SEALs,” Killmonger replied. “Let’s just say that the name and my rep are well earnt.”

“Alright, then, ‘Killmonger’. What brings you to my humble village?” Klaue asked.

“I’ve heard some rumours about what went down in Sokovia,” Killmonger began, relaxing into the seat across from Klaue and stretching out his long legs. “Rumours about the vibranium that was used to make the city fly.”

“Yeah? And what rumours would those be?”

“That you’re the one that supplied the vibranium to Ultron,” Killmonger stated.

“Whether that’s true or not, it ain’t gonna help you kid; I ain’t got no vibranium,” Klaue stated.

“Ah, you see, I suspected as much,” Killmonger said, before suddenly leaning forward, an intense expression on his face. “How would you like to acquire some more?”

Automatically, Klaue’s hand came up to rub the scar-tissue of the brand on the side of his neck.

“Even if I wanted some, vibranium’s impossible to get,” Klaue stated. “The stuff can only be found in one place on Earth.”

“Wakanda,” Killmonger nodded.

“Now, how would a kid like you know a closely guarded secret like that?” Klaue wondered.

“Let’s just say that I have the right connections,” Killmonger grinned.
“Still, knowing about vibranium and even where to find it is one thing. Getting some is a whole other ball game,” Klaue pointed out.

“Oh, but you see, I have an advantage that you didn’t have last time,” Killmonger stated.

“Ah, but you see, I have an advantage that you didn’t have last time,” Killmonger stated.

“Really?” Klaue mocked.

“Really,” Killmonger replied.

It’d taken a surprisingly short amount of time to put together the man power – not to mention the firepower for the mission.

Most of the time between Klaue and Killmonger’s first meeting until today had been the two of them working on their plan. Neither one really trusted the other but they had a working relationship that each was content with.

For this mission, Klaue brought not only most of the men and weapons, but also his prior experiences in getting into and eventually out of Wakanda with his prize. Killmonger brought knowledge. He’d never been to Wakanda before but he’d known someone who knew the country intimately, someone who’d bequeathed Killmonger all of the intelligence that he needed.

And that included an old, long-forgotten entrance to a mineshaft that led straight into the heart of the Wakandan mining operation deep beneath the country. The fact that said mineshaft entrance was less than five kilometres inside the border – and considerably much easier to reach than the path that Klaue had once used – was a Godsend.

They’d assembled not far from the border, hidden deep inside a jungle where the track was barely wide enough to allow a truck to pass and was so overgrown, with so many potholes and debris strewn about it that it made usage all but impossible.

There were five trucks in their convoy, four of which were empty but for the driver and three guards – one up front, two in the back. It was envisioned that those four trucks would be full on their return journey, hopefully with refined vibranium, although they’d settle for the ore if that was all that they could get.

The last truck was filled with men and weapons. Eighteen big, burly men rode in the back of it, all with multiple guns strapped to their sides, knives in their boots or belts, many with machetes in scabbards attached to their backs. All but three carried machine guns. Those last three had mini-rocket launchers and a crate at their feet filled with the ammunition that they’d need.

To the outside world, Wakanda was a poor, impoverished Third-world country that could barely defend its own sheep from a lion let alone its people. Klaue and Killmonger knew differently. With vibranium at its fingertips, Wakanda was probably the most powerful and technologically advanced nation in the world. They had weapons and technology that other countries could barely dream of. Thus, they were taking no chances.

“Right, you all know your orders,” Klaue stated as he addressed the men seated in the back of the truck. “We go in real quiet-like. At this time of night, there shouldn’t be people around, but you never know with this lot. Use your night-vision goggles. You see someone, you put ’em down.”

He absently rubbed his neck as he continued. “Drivers, keep your lights off and use your goggles. From what my friend here says, we might need to do a little bit of digging once we get to the entrance. If we do, we do it quick and we do it quiet. And we get the job done before the sun comes
up. These trucks *have* to be in that shaft and away from prying eyes as soon as possible.

“Any questions?”

Hearing none, Klaue nodded.

“Right, let’s get this job underway.”

He looked across at Killmonger who simply seemed too eager for someone who was supposedly a veteran of so many battles. But then, Klaue’d heard of weird guys who craved action and killing; perhaps Killmonger was simply one of them? Either way, there was a job to do and he was sure going to enjoy this.

Assuming they managed to get in and out without any problems, that is.

ooo00ooo

“W’Kabi! W’Kabi!”

The urgent call pulled the chief of the Border Tribe’s forces from his dreams. And it had been a nice dream, too, one where he and Okoye were finally getting to spend some very nice quality time together.

Shaking the sleep from his eyes, he rose and made his way to the door of his hut.

“What is it … N’Kraine?” he asked, recognising one of the younger men from his security force.

“We had an alert. The border was crossed by something mechanical,” N’Kraine stated.

Instantly, W’Kabi was wide awake. Reaching up to the wall above the inside of his door, he pulled down his favourite spear and stepped outside.

“Where?” he asked.

“Twenty kilometres to the south and east,” N’Kraine replied.

W’Kabi frowned. There was nothing in that area. At least, nothing of any importance. Which was probably why whoever these outsiders were who were invading Wakandan land had chosen that particular place to cross the border.

With a jerk of his head, W’Kabi had N’Kraine fall into step beside him as they marched across to the main security building.

While the outside looked like a simple hut, albeit one that was larger than those around it, it wasn’t what it appeared to be from the outside. No, the rough, wooden and thatch outside housed some of the most sophisticated equipment within the nation on the inside.

“Bring up Grids ninety-two through ninety-seven on the monitors,” W’Kabi ordered.

Instantly, the technician complied and six of the monitors that lined the walls above the computers flickered to life. Considering the time of night, the kimoyo beads that were embedded in trees and rocks surrounding the border of the nation and transmitting data back to the Border Tribe’s Security forces were currently showing an infrared picture.

“Play in reverse,” W’Kabi ordered.
If it wasn’t for the date and time stamp in the bottom left-hand corner of each screen, there would have been no indication that his orders had been followed. It took only two minutes before a dark shape appeared on the second monitor. W’Kabi watched as the truck – for that was what he identified it as – reversed across the screen, quickly followed by four others.

His eyes narrowed at the fact that none of the trucks had their lights on; obviously, they were attempting to cross into Wakanda without anyone being the wiser.

“Grid ninety-three,” W’Kabi stated grimly. “Alert six units. Have them aboard a pair of craft and ready to move in ten minutes.”

“Yes, W’Kabi,” the technician replied.

“Will you be leading them?” N’Krain asked.

“No. This, I believe, the Black Panther will want to lead himself,” W’Kabi replied.
Surround Yourself With People You Trust

It was the noise that woke Harry. The sound of many people moving past his door – obviously in a hurry – and the voices. These weren’t whispered voices, like one might expect for … a swipe of his hand brought a set of red numbers floating above his head. Two thirty? In the morning?

Shifting his head, Harry blinked at the stars out his window. The sound of pounding feet, not just one person running past his door but quite a number had him swinging his legs over the side of the bed and sitting up.

“Harry?” a sleepy Daisy asked.

Turning back, Harry patted her hip. “Something’s wrong. Go back to sleep, I’ll go find out what it is.”

But even as he stood, grabbing up a cloak that he’d tossed haphazardly over the chair in front of the small desk in the room, Daisy was rolling out of her side of the bed. Her bed-side light snapped on and he squinted at the unexpectedness of it.

“What? There’s no way that I’m going back to sleep now,” she told his raised eyebrow.

With a nod, Harry strode to the door of their suite, pulled it open and stuck his head out.

“T’Challa?” he called, seeing the King further down the corridor and striding away.

The Wakandan King turned back and Harry could see that he was dressed in his Black Panther costume – minus his helmet. He was also looking rather grim.

“What’s wrong?” Harry asked, stepping out.

“It seems that some foreigners have decided that tonight is a good night to raid the country,” T’Challa replied. “We intend to persuade them otherwise.”

“From the way that you’re dressed, I’m guessing that these aren’t just your ordinary raiders?” Harry asked.

A door opening directly across the corridor saw Nat and Steve join the conversation.

“No,” T’Challa replied. “Our drones have detected five trucks and a total of thirty-two men. They all appear to be heavily armed as well.”

“What’s their objective?” Steve asked.

“We are unsure,” W’Kabi, Wakanda’s head of security for the Border Tribe replied. “That part of the country is relatively empty.”

“Then it’s something that you don’t know about,” Nat stated.

“Perhaps,” T’Challa nodded. “Either way, they will not fulfil their objective.”

Harry’s eyes connected with Steve’s and together, they nodded at each other.

“We’ll suit up and give you a hand,” Steve stated.
“I’ll wake Tony,” Nat added.

“No need,” the man in question replied as he opened the door to his suite. “It’s not like I was going to get any sleep anyway with you lot yapping out here.”

“If you are coming, we leave in five,” T’Challa stated.

Harry turned back to the suite in order to find the rest of his suit; Daisy, though had already beaten him to it.

“It’s on the bed,” she said, even as she was pulling on one of her boots.

“What would I do without you?” he asked, stealing a kiss on the way past.

“Let’s hope you’ll never have to find out, Magic Man,” she grinned.

The Wakandan jets were quiet. In fact, the engines made even less noise than a quinjet. Steve grinned at Nat and jerked his head at Tony who was currently inching his way further back, his eyes fixed on one particular computer screen.

“Tony!” Nat called warningly.

“Yes?” he replied lightly, clearly acting as though nothing was amiss.

“We will reach the target in sixty seconds,” the pilot announced.

Instantly, the Avengers, T’Challa and the group of Wakandan soldiers in the craft tensed, preparing themselves for battle.

“There they are,” W’Kabi said.

The front window of the craft was obviously infused with some kind of technology that Steve wasn’t familiar with. Instead of seeing almost pitch black as one would expect for this time of night, what he saw looked as clear as day. The trees, rocks, even a small herd of antelope were all easily visible. If he looked hard enough, he was sure that he’d even be able to count the number of leaves on the trees.

But it wasn’t the trees that had their attention. No, that honour belonged to the five trucks that were parked just in front of a small hill. Even knowing that the trucks were the focus, Steve allowed his eyes to roam about, taking in the landscape, getting a feel for the terrain.

Behind the trucks was a forest. Surrounding them and branching out to either side for a couple of hundred meters, though, the ground was clear. But it was the hill that really captured his interest. It had a strange shape to it, almost as though it didn’t quite belong. It was fairly narrow for a hill and arched up fairly quickly. What made it especially strange was its length – easily five hundred metres long before it joined up with the rest of the hills that quickly turned into mountains.

“There is no indication that they know we’re here, my King,” W’Kabi said.

“That will change,” T’Challa grinned. “We will land to the west of the trucks. Have another of the jets land to the east. The final two should drop their men into the forest to the north for them to cut off their retreat.”

T’Challa looked to the Avengers then even as his Black Panther mask grew from his necklace to
cover his head and face.

“Ready to go to work, Captain?”

They’d barely disembarked and rounded the jet in two columns – one to each side – before their targets reacted. From the rear of the last truck, men swarmed out, dashing either around the five trucks or into the trees to the north.

Tapping his glasses with his wand ensured that Harry could see perfectly as though it was day. A second tap on his head disillusioned himself.

Rapid-fire shots from a machine gun had the Wakandans flinging up their cloaks, a purple sheen sweeping over them as they absorbed the bullets with some kind of shield tech.

“Handy,” Harry murmured, impressed.

And then a flash came from the top of one of the trucks. *That* was obviously a lot more powerful, possibly some type of miniature rocket. Instinctively, Harry swept his wand up, grunting with the effort of ‘catching’ the rocket and diverting it, ‘throwing’ it far overhead and behind them. Thankfully, his gambit had been successful, evidenced by the massive explosion and fireball from behind them.

“Quake, give me a boost!” he called.

“As soon as I know where you are,” she replied and Mage took off, running in front of her, his wand trailing behind him, a dim glow from it.

At the right moment, he jumped and felt a wave crash into him, flinging him higher into the air and propelling him forward. Mage grinned as he saw the trucks below, the mercenaries oblivious to his presence.

As he reached the top of his arc, he focussed and sent the most powerful exploding hexes at his disposal directly into the third and fourth trucks. His arc over the trucks was interrupted with the extra heat-fuelled air compression, sending him a little further than he’d expected and all but tumbling him about in the sky. A quick change into his sparrowhawk form enabled him to land back on his feet before he reverted forms and instantly twisted, dropping into a crouch to survey his results.

The two trucks, as expected, were nothing more than flaming piles of metal. Three men were also down and clearly out of the fight. Yells and screams permeated the air as men fought for their lives.

The explosion of the rear truck preceeded a figure with five glowing lights swopping past – feet, hands and chest.

“They’re on the run, boys and girls,” Iron Man commented.

“Yes, straight into an old mine shaft,” T’Challa replied.

Looking about, Harry saw that he was right. While the Wakandans and Avengers were dealing with the trucks, mostly focussing on the remaining one with the large gun attached to its roof, men were running towards the hill. Tapping his glasses a second time, gave Mage a better view. Four, possibly five of the invaders were indeed making for a cave entrance that looked to have very recently had a whole lot of foliage removed from it.
Finally, the last spurts of weapon’s fire petered out.

“The last of them are in the cave,” W’Kabi stated. “We have twenty-two of them.”

“That means that there are ten unaccounted for,” T’Challa replied.

“Well, at least we know where they went,” Nat said, materialising out of the dark.

“Yes. The only question is, exactly where does that cave lead?” T’Challa asked rhetorically.


They approached the mouth of the cave cautiously, divided into two teams, leaving the middle, the area most exposed by those inside the cave, bare.

From what little T’Challa could see, the cave was deep, much deeper than he would have expected. Turning his head, his eyes narrowed at the shape of the hill. The way that it protruded, so much longer than it was wide and eventually joining up with the mountains, had him wondering if the cave extended all the way there.

Assuming that it did … T’Challa focussed his mind, overlaying what he knew of the mountains in this part of the country. And then his eyes widened. Perhaps it wasn’t so much the mountains above Wakanda that were the interesting part, but what lay beneath. Thinking deeply, he pictured the mines that crisscrossed the land below, following the vibranium deposits. He was sure that there were tunnels that reached under those mountains. And if there were mines there and this cave stretched far enough back …

“They’re here for the vibranium,” he stated.

W’Kabi stared at him. “You are sure, My King?”

“Yes,” T’Challa replied. “I’m certain that this cave leads straight into the mines below the mountains.”

“But there is no tunnel from the mines in this direction,” W’Kabi argued.

“That we know of,” T’Challa countered. “Go. Take some men and one of the jets. Join up with the Mining Tribe and find the entrance from within the mine itself. We will catch them between us.”

Slapping his arms across his chest, W’Kabi gave a small nod of his head, gathered a dozen men and ran for the nearest jet.

“Now, we need to keep their focus here and away from the mines,” T’Challa told his allies.

“Perhaps if we light the place up, give them something to shoot at, make them think that they have the superior position?” Iron Man suggested.

“Tactically, it could work,” Widow nodded. “They have the cover and they’ll want to use it to ensure that we don’t follow them in.”

“A good idea,” T’Challa decided.

Touching one particular kimoyo bead from the bracelet of them around his wrist, he brought up the remotes for the Wakandan jets. It was then a matter of firing them up and manoeuvring them closer to the cave entrance. Once they were landed in a circular arc around the cave entrance, he switched on their external lights.
Instantly, the area outside the cave was lit up as though it was day; the three different angles ensuring that there were no shadows at all.

“That should catch their attention,” Captain America stated.

“You know, I could easily collapse the hill and the tunnel,” Quake suggested.

“Not yet,” T’Challa replied. “We need to catch these invaders, find out how they knew about our mines and this entrance that even I did not know about. Besides, if even one escaped into the mines, they could do much damage. But thank you, I may take you up on your offer after this is all over, and to close this ‘back door’.”

“We’re going to want to keep their attention here,” Mage said. “How do you plan on doing that.”

“Quite easily,” T’Challa replied. “Watch.”

And then, trusting to his suit, the Black Panther strode into the open clearing in front of the cave entrance. He was careful not to appear to be heading towards the entrance itself, simply making himself a target. His plan, of course, worked perfectly.

Instantly a hail of bullets fired from the cave, striking his chest, arms, legs and one even ricocheting off of his helmet. Looking down at himself, he could see bright purple blossoms forming on his suit where the kinetic energy from the bullets was hitting and being stored. Otherwise, though, apart from a slight pressure, he felt nothing, the suit doing its job perfectly.

Slowly, he backed away, keeping himself in the invader’s line of sight. Then, having judged the distance, he took off in a sprint, heading straight at the cave. Bullets began peppering him nearly non-stop, all doing nothing to avert his charge. And then, just before the cave’s entrance, he jumped, propelling himself upwards using the kinetic energy of the suit to fly high, above the cave where he twisted about to land in a crouch on the hill.

The Black Panther nodded approvingly as he saw his Wakandan soldiers taking advantage of his distraction, stepping out from their hiding spots to fire into the cave before instantly stepping back once more.

When the last of the firing had stopped, T’Challa stood up and ran down the side of the hill, his feet nearly sliding at the steepness of it.

“We accounted for another two, my King,” N’Krain informed him.

“Good work,” he replied.

A bird, some type of predator dropped out of the sky towards them and T’Challa frowned. This was not a bird that he had seen in Wakanda before and it definitely wasn’t the type of bird that one would expect to see at night. The bird’s transformation mid-air to a cloaked human explained the discrepancy.

“I counted nine others still in the cave,” Mage stated. “None have gone very far in but they’ve found cover. One of them was a white man. A man with a mechanical forearm.”

This last was said grimly while he’d been looking at Captain America, Iron Man and Black Widow.

“Klaue,” Stark stated grimly. “Obviously, Ultron’s handiwork didn’t slow him down.”

T’Challa pivoted to face him.
“Klaue? As in *Ulysses Klaue*?” he asked.

“You know him?” Stark replied. “What am I asking? Of course, you’d know him. The guy *did* manage to steal a hefty amount of vibranium a few years back.”

“Yes, we know him,” T’Challa replied. “This changes things. We’ve been chasing him ever since he escaped.”

“What’s your plan?” Captain Rogers asked.

“You say that there are only nine of them?” he asked Harry and received a nod. “Well, nine against the Black Panther is no match at all.”

“But nine against the Black Panther and five Avengers is even better odds,” the Captain countered.

T’Challa stared at them. This was not their fight. Still, they all seemed determined and he *was* right. And there was less chance of them escaping into the tunnels that way as well.

“Agreed,” he said. “Shall we?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” Stark replied.

“Nat, keep close, I’ll cover you until we’re in,” Harry stated, receiving a nod in reply.

Together, the six of them approached the cave entrance from its side. And then, at T’Challa’s nod, both he and Iron Man stepped out. A second behind them came Quake, staying low to the ground in a crouch. Her hands were up and T’Challa could see the very air moving backwards from them with her pulses.

What was even more remarkable was watching the bullets that were streaking towards them suddenly come to stop mere inches from them before reversing and shooting back where they came from. And it wasn’t just the bullets that was sent flying. Dirt, rocks, bits of stick or branches, really, anything that wasn’t nailed down was instantly picked up and hurled down the cave.

As the others emerged, Quake stood. Suddenly, her right hand lifted aiming above and beyond the heads of the invaders. T’Challa watched as her quakes struck the roof of the cave, slamming into the dirt and rocks there. Instantly, rivers of dirt began cascading to the rocky floor below. And then, all at one, the roof of the cave gave way in a great pounding roar. Mounds of dirt and rocks collapsed, completely blocking off the rear of the cave and sending plumes of dust billowing towards the mouth of the cave.

The team, though, didn’t wait around, instead instantly taking advantage of the distraction.

T’Challa raced forward, seeking the man considered Wakanda’s greatest enemy. The first of the invaders that he encountered, he surprised by striking him across the back of the head, instantly knocking him out. The second that he approached, though, was ready for him. He was good, too, but nowhere near good enough to combat the Black Panther.

They traded blows, both blocking the other. Ducking one strike led T’Challa straight into his other fist and, while it didn’t hurt or even make him move backwards at all, it gave him an idea. T’Challa grinned behind his mask as he blocked the next three punches before letting the fourth through. As the invader’s fist struck – incidentally in the exact same place as the last time – the kinetic energy of the suit went to work, slamming back into the invader and firing him across the cave to slam into the far wall where he slowly slid down in a boneless heap.
Looking up, T’Challa saw that most of the invaders had been taken care of. All that were left was a single dark-skinned fighter who wouldn’t have looked out of place in Wakanda and Klaue who was currently backed up against the wall, his arms raised, a defeated expression on his face.

The fighter, though, he was proving to be of interest. T’Challa watched as he traded blows with Captain America, the latter using his shield to block punches and knife thrusts as well as a weapon, slamming it into the man’s hand and shoulder. The fight finished quickly, when Captain America dropped to the ground, spinning his leg in an attempt to catch the other fighter off-balance. The man was up to it, though, jumping high and straight into a red bolt of magic, causing his eyes to roll up into his head and his body to crumple to the ground.

“I’ll take that, I think,” Iron Man was saying to Klaue as he twisted the prosthetic and removed it.

“Well, that was almost anticlimactic,” Natasha remarked.

T’Challa retracted his mask and grinned at her. “It was, wasn’t it.”

Melissa arched her back, her hands on her hips and her head thrown completely back. Hearing a series of pops had her sighing in relief. She knew that she’d been hunched over her workbench for far too long. Not that that was any surprise. No, it’d always been the same with her, be it back when she was studying her engineering degree at Empire State or even these days when she was doing the books for the pet shop – Melissa tended to have a one-track mind, a mind that got so lost in her work that everything else, including comfort and food, fell away into being inconsequential.

Taking off the overly large goggles that she’d been wearing, she blinked her eyes into focus. Everything seemed so big when she was wearing the magnifying glasses that it always took her a couple of minutes to refocus.

The microchip that she’d been working on looked so very harmless sitting there on the desk. But what it represented, that was anything but harmless. Or tiny.

Picking it up, Melissa slotted it into the auxiliary port that was connected to the computer. Instantly, line upon line of coding appeared on the screen and began scrolling down it. Computer coding had been her secondary major and she cast her eyes over the code, looking for anything that seemed out of place.

Twenty long minutes later, she sat back once again, a huge smile on her face. Theoretically, it was done. All that was left now was to test her invention.

Disconnecting the microchip from the port, Melissa transferred it to the miniature ‘case’ that it was designed for, after all, one couldn’t simply leave exposed circuitry lying around in contact with blood, bone and nerves.

Picking up the case, she strode further back into the lab area that she’d designed and built under the pet store and into her operating theatre. The case went on the tray before she turned to survey her ‘subjects’. The cages against the wall currently held three dogs and a cat.

“Eenie, meanie, minie, moe!” she said, landing on the Labrador puppy.

The pup was eager to get out when she opened the door and, being a dog, was also eager to leapt straight into her arms. Its wagging tail was only a slight annoyance as she placed him on the table. Then, with one arm wrapped around him to ensure that he didn’t go anywhere, Melissa picked up the amnestic syringe, uncapped it with her teeth and carefully injected the pup’s front left paw.
A sharp yelp followed by the pup struggling didn’t help it at all, not with the way that she had him held. The spent syringe was dropped back on the tray and then it was simply a matter of waiting. Gently, Melissa stroked the puppy’s head and cooed to it as its movements slowed. It took less than a minute for the pup to fall asleep.

Then, leaving the pup where he was, Melissa prepared herself for the surgery to come.

She hummed as she thoroughly washed her hands and arms, all the way up to her elbows. While the tune changed, the humming continued as she put on her surgical gloves, face mask and glasses. A third tune began as she inserted the drip into the pup’s paw and began shaving the back of its neck.

Soon, everything was ready. Bright yellow blossomed on the freshly shaved skin from the cotton bud full of antiseptic. Reaching up, Melissa pulled down the large circular magnifying glass, adjusting it to the correct angle and distance.

“Now, let’s begin,” she smiled.

Picking up a scalpel, she made her first incision.

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Ideally, Bucky would have preferred to wait until Steve was back from visiting Wakanda.

Once upon a time, the two had been nearly inseparable. They’d grown up together, more often than not with Bucky chasing away the bullies that tended to pick on the smaller Steve. Times were tough back then. And they became even tougher for Steve after his parents had died. But that had only brought Bucky and Steve closer together.

Then had come the war. Bucky, of course, had been accepted straight away. Scrawny, little Steve with his myriad of health problems, was rejected. Not that that stopped him from trying to enlist anyway. Even after Bucky had finished training and had been sent overseas, Steve had kept on trying, using fake name after fake name.

Finally, after a series of events, each more amazing than the last, the two best friends had been reunited. This time, though, it was Steve who was doing the saving, rescuing Bucky from a HYDRA prison camp.

After that, as they say, the rest was history. Literally, in their case. They’d fought together until Bucky had been supposedly killed, an act that Steve emulated not long later. Against all odds, both had survived, and, seventy years later, had been reunited.

And even after all that time, their friendship had remained strong. Consequently, there was no one else that Bucky wanted standing beside him today of all days.

Unfortunately, that just wasn’t going to happen.

“You know, you could at least smile,” Sam remarked from beside him. “This is supposed to be your wedding day, you know, the ‘best day of your life’ not a jolly execution.”

Bucky shot him a look, his eyes narrowed.

“I know that!” he snapped back. “And for your information, I am happy.”

Sam shot him a dubious look. “Well, for your sake, I hope that Daphne realises that.”
The swell of music interrupted any response Bucky was going to make.

As the traditional wedding march played, the small congregation – mostly made up of the Avengers and their friends as well as two women that had travelled all the way from Britain for this – rose to their feet. The doors at the far end of the room opened and Bucky straightened, his gaze intense, longing for the woman he was waiting for.

Of course, that wasn’t how weddings worked.

The first through the door was Melati, her deep forest green dress with gold edging and long, flowing sleeves worked well with her green skin. The dress flared at her slender waist, meaning that her tail had ample room within it before it popped out behind her. She was beaming at everyone and only those that really knew her could see the trace of uncertainty on her face.

Behind Melati, came a witch that Bucky had only met the night before. Astoria Greengrass, Daphne’s younger sister. She was remarkably similar in looks, with the same long, blonde hair that today was piled upon her head in an elaborate knot, small wisps falling about her face. Like Melati, she, too was dressed in the elegant dark green dress and carried a bouquet of red, white and yellow flowers.

And then, finally, came the one that Bucky was waiting for.

She walked slowly by herself, her father having died long ago. A soft veil of white, matching her dress hung in front of her face, but not obscuring her broad smile and her shining eyes. Deep folds of material hung from her arms, her hands clutching the bouquet in front of her waist, droplets of gold falling from her sleeves and matching the golden twisted rope that she wore as a belt. Her train swept the carpet behind her before the ends of it were held up by tiny flittering creatures that Bucky would swear were fairies although how she got them to do that, he had no idea.

His eyes never left hers as she approached and it was only the prod in his back that had him moving at the right time to meet her at the foot of the three stairs that led up to the small platform that he’d been standing on.

Offering her his arm, she laid her hand on his forearm and together, they climbed the stairs to stand in front of the ancient wizard.

As the wizard began speaking, Bucky finally managed to tear his gaze away from his bride to face him.

“… James Buchanan Barnes and Daphne Ophelia Greengrass in holy wedlock,” the wizard was saying. “They shall be entered into a sacred bond that none shall break. Do you James, come before all here today of your own free will?”

“I do,” Bucky replied, wincing slightly at hearing his voice catch.

“And do you, Daphne, come before all here today of your own free will?”

“I do,” Daphne replied.

“Then let it be known to all that these two shall be wedded today,” the wizard declared. “Please join hands.”

Instantly, Bucky turned, smiled at Daphne and held out his hand for her.

“Will the Bonders step forth?”
Bucky turned to see Ted step out from behind Sam, while Astoria stepped from behind Daphne. Together, the two stood one step down and together, they pulled their wands placing their tips, crossed so that the tip of Ted’s wand was touching Daphne’s wrist and the tip of Astoria’s wand was touching Bucky’s.

The sudden tingling feeling that blossomed from the touch almost had him jerk his hand away. Thankfully, Daphne had explained that, with a magical wedding, this was an integral and most important part and he was able to remain still.

As the wizard had them say their vows, Bucky’s eyes were momentarily drawn from Daphne down to their joined hands. His eyes widened at the sight of three golden strands of magic wrapping themselves around their wrists. Finally, the final vow was completed by Daphne’s “I do” and he felt the warm, tingly feeling of the magic seeping into his skin.

“James Buchanan Barnes, Daphne Ophelia, I now pronounce you man and wife,” the wizard declared in a loud voice. “Well, don’t just stand there, man. Kiss her!”

Never in his ninety-eight years of life had Bucky ever wanted to obey an order more.

Thus, never once breaking eye contact with her, he quickly lifted her veil over her head, slipped his arms around her waist, pulled tight and kissed her, pouring all of the love that he had for his new wife into their first kiss.
A quick knock on the door was followed by May striding in before Coulson had even had a chance to look up and give her permission to enter.

“By all means, come right in,” he deadpanned.

May simply gave him a look, one of those that he’d learnt years ago to ignore, especially when it was directed at him. Reaching across his desk, she tapped a button on the side, lowering the screen that was primarily used for a conference call.

“I’m guessing that this is important?” he asked, standing and buttoning his jacket.

A second look told him that it was. Thankfully, she actually explained more.

“Talbot’s on the line.”

“Well, we don’t want to keep the General waiting, do we?” he asked as he rounded his desk.

A nod from him had her opening the line.

“General,” he greeted.

“Coulson. And May, I see,” Talbot nodded, his eyes darting about the room as they always did.

One day, Coulson hoped, Talbot would get over his need to try to find out where they were based.

“I’m guessing that you have something for us?” Coulson prompted.

“As much as I hate to admit it, yes. We could use your expertise,” he said, all but spitting the last word.

“Well, we’re here to help,” Coulson smiled.

“You or your boys ever seen anything like this before?” Talbot asked as he glanced down and punched something on his desk.

Instantly, the screen split in two and Coulson focussed on the half that didn’t contain General Glen Talbot.

What he was seeing looked to be the security footage from a shop. Judging by the isles of bottles closest to the camera, he suspected that it was either a supermarket or a pharmacy. A woman appeared from the right and Coulson focussed on her. She strolled into one aisle, stood in front of the shelves for a minute before picking a bottle and going to the counter to pay for it.

It was after the transaction had been completed that things went pear-shaped.

The woman stopped on her way towards the door, allowing them to see her in profile while she uncapped the bottle, tipped it into the palm of her hand and swallowed something. For a moment, nothing happened. But then, she froze and seemed to be peering down at her stomach. Even in the grainy image, it was easy to see that some sort of black crust was quickly consuming her, growing from her stomach, around to her back, down her legs, up her torso and out to her arms and head.

Coulson stared at what he was seeing, only managing to tear his gaze away for a moment to share a
grim look with May.

And then the black crust on the woman began cracking and falling away, revealing her to be alive and whole. The sales clerk, by this time, had rushed around to her and was talking to her, although what was being said was anyone’s guess – the footage being without sound, after all. The woman seemed to be taking deep breaths, one hand on her chest. With the other, she reached out to grab the counter.

And instantly fell through it.

Nothing was damaged and even when the woman scrambled upright, she was unharmed as well. It was simply the fact that she couldn’t touch anything at all – evidenced by the fact that she began waving her arms all over the place and having them pass straight through everything.

Suddenly, the footage froze.

“Well? I’m guessing your freakshow has some clue as to what’s going on?” Talbot asked.

“Actually, you’re right, we do,” Coulson replied. “What was it that she swallowed?”

“Fish oil, if you can believe that!” Talbot replied incredulously. “My wife’s been taking the same stuff for years. One every morning. Is that going to happen to her?”

“Highly unlikely, General,” Coulson said. “We need to take over this investigation. We’re most familiar with it and can deal with the people involved.”

“As much as I hate to admit it, you’re probably right,” Talbot replied. “Lord knows my men don’t have clue what to do. I’ll send you everything that we know.”

“I appreciate it,” Coulson replied.

Then, with a final nod, he closed the connection.

“That was what I thought it was, wasn’t it?” Coulson asked May.

“Terrigenesis,” she nodded.

“I thought that you needed a terrigen crystal for a potential inhuman to undergo the process,” Coulson mused before snapping his fingers. “Fish oil. You don’t suppose that crate that got lost in the ocean contaminated the fish, do you?”

Again, he received the look as though he was stating the obvious and being stupid.

“I’ll contact Skye … Daisy. She’ll want to be in on this,” Coulson nodded.

“Send me the coordinates when they come in,” May said. “I’ll have the Bus ready to go in ten.”

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For the second time that they’d been in Wakanda, the Avengers were gathered to the side of the great mountain overlooking the country. In front of them were the gathered tribes of Wakanda: Border, Merchant, Mining, River, Panther and the Jabari. Together the six tribes surrounded an empty space, reserved for the accused. At the head of the hexagon, on the Panther side and beside the great stone statue, the Elders of Wakanda were seated, the King in their centre.

“Bring in the accused,” Okoye commanded, striking the butt of her spear on the wooden platform.
Instantly, the Border Tribe, directly opposite the Panther tribe, parted to allow a column to enter. This time, though, was slightly different as on either side of the corridor that was left, the Border tribe forces turned, their cloaks activating with purple energy courtesy of the vibranium weave within them.

And then the first of the Dora Milaje appeared. There were two long columns of the fierce warrior women and, in their midst, the shackled prisoners. The men – their hands tied behind their backs, their feet in a loose bind to restrict their movement – were forced to shuffle-jog into the waiting space and to line up before the Elders.

When thirty-one of them had been positioned, two final men were brought in – Ulysses Klaue and the soldier that had been the best of the fighters. This last had additional ropes around his middle and joining it, his hand, his feet and the one around his neck together.

The Avengers watched as these last two were marched around the long line of the other invaders to stand directly in front of them before being forced to their knees. With a clash of their spears against the ground, the Dora Milaje took up their positions directly behind the men.

Seeing every one in their correct place, Okoye nodded to her king.

“You are here to answer for your crimes of invading Wakanda with the intent of stealing from us,” King T’Challa stated.

His voice was not loud; indeed, one could almost claim that he spoke in no more than his usual speaking volume. Regardless, all there heard his words plainly.

“Each of you will be asked how you plead. Along with your plea, you may explain why you were involved in these crimes. This will be taken into account when you are judged,” T’Challa stated, sweeping his eyes along the line. “Do you understand?”

When none moved, Okoye stamped the butt of her spear. Instantly, the Dora Milaje moved as one, their right foot going back even as their spears swung down to press lightly against the backs of each prisoner, excepting the two kneeling at the front.

“I ask again,” T’Challa said, noting the nervous looks the men were exchanging along with the occasional wince. “Do you understand what I have said?”

A murmured affirmative echoed up and down the line, with the spear retreating and the Wakandan warrior returning to their ‘rest’ position as each man answered.

“Very good,” T’Challa nodded. Then, picking the man on the extreme left, he pointed to him. “We shall begin with you. You are charged with illegally entering Wakanda, armed with multiple weapons, with the purpose of stealing from us. How do you plead?”

The man’s head swivelled to look at his fellow invaders and T’Challa could see the sweat forming on his brow. Some, maybe a third, returned the look, although only for a second or so, before returning their gaze either to their feet or to stare defiantly at the Wakandan Elders.

“Boss?” the man asked, his voice raspy and wavering.

Klaue, though, never moved an inch, his focus staying fixed on the ground before him.

Finally, the man looked up at T’Challa. “G … guilty.”

“So noted,” T’Challa nodded. “Next?”
This one was one of those who were staring up at the Wakandan Elders, his face fixed, defiant and determined.

“Not guilty!” he replied instantly in a loud, ringing voice.

T’Challa forced himself to remain impassive. He’d known that there’d be some who would tread this path, despite the obvious guilt, they had, after all, been caught ‘red handed’.

“Do you offer any defence for being found on Wakandan soil with a weapon in your hand?” he asked.

“Got lost,” the man replied with a smirk. “Didn’t see no sign saying we were in Wakanda.”

“And the weapon?” T’Challa prompted, his hand coming up to prevent Okoye from interjecting.

“Game hunting,” was the reply.

“You and your comrades were extremely well armed for game hunting,” T’Challa remarked. “What was it you were hunting?”

“Whatever we could find,” the man replied smugly.

T’Challa nodded slowly. For a second, he’d hoped that the fool would incriminate himself within his defence by stating that they were hunting elephants or rhinoceros’, or one of the other endangered species.

“Very well, your plea has been heard,” T’Challa stated. “We shall continue. Next?”

And so, they continued. Through each of the thirty-one men standing. Every single one was asked the same question and were given a chance to admit their guilt. Of them, only thirteen were truthful, leaving eighteen as claiming the ‘we were lost and hunting’ defence along with their innocence.

Finally, only the two bound and kneeling men were left.

“Ulysses Klaue,” T’Challa said, addressing the only white man among the group. “You are a known enemy of Wakanda. The last time that you were in our country, you were here to steal vibranium. You were caught then and branded and sentenced to imprisonment within the very mines that you attempted to steal from. And then you fought your way out of Wakanda, killing four good men along the way as well as stealing a shipment of vibranium. For these crimes alone, you shall be punished.

“But I would also hear what you have to say for yourself for this invasion of Wakanda. You were caught leading these men here, crossing our border with five trucks carrying numerous weapons, with the intent to steal from us again. How do you plead?”

Since the moment that Klaue had been brought before the Council and made to kneel in front of his men, his head had remained bowed, his eyes fixed on the ground before him. Finally, after being addressed by the King, his head slowly came up.

“I don’t rightly think it matters all that much what I have to say,” Klaue stated. “You’ve already declared me guilty and I know what my punishment will be. A lifetime in your mines. And I’m betting that this time I’m gonna be shackled and even get the honour of a round the clock guard. Am I right?”

“You are,” T’Challa replied. “However, a confession now will go a long way in determining what the future holds for you.”
Klaue stared up at him, his head cocked to the side.

“You know, I don’t know if I rightly believe that,” he said. “But what the hell, it ain’t like I’ve got much to lose, now have I? Alright, yes, we were here to get us some vibranium. You’ve got so much of it, it’s not like you’d miss the small amount that we’d get.”

A shift in the Elder from the Mining Tribe indicated that he wished to speak and T’Challa sat back, allowing her to do so.

“You and your men,” she said and it was easy to hear the distain in her voice. “You chose to enter the mines through a previously unknown tunnel. How did you know of its existence?”

Klaue simply shrugged at her.

“Just got lucky, I guess,” he replied airily.

“You just got lucky?” the Mining Tribe Elder repeated slowly. “No. No, I do not believe you did. You knew that it was there. I will tell you that that entrance has been sealed, the entire hill collapsed, even. But I would know how you know secrets that even the Mining Tribe were ignorant of.”

T’Challa watched Klaue closely. The man appeared uninterested but there were signs – a slight shortening of his breath, a single drop of sweat beading down from his temple, the hint of a tremble in his frame – which told a different story. Seeing these, T’Challa knew that it was possible to make the man crack.

A slight shifting from the side where the Avengers stood had T’Challa glance that way. The wizard, Mage, caught his attention and he noted the way he moved his cloak aside to tap one of the pockets of his belt. And while magical means would produce the result that was needed, T’Challa didn’t think that they were there yet.

Instead, he gestured to Okoye.

Instantly, she moved, swift as a gazelle, as fierce as a lion to come to rest, her legs braced, her body low and her spear up, its tip digging into Klaue’s neck just enough to draw a droplet of blood.

“Is this supposed to scare me?” Klaue asked.

“Yes,” T’Challa replied simply. “And I can tell that it does, despite your bravado. There are much worse fates than spending the rest of your life inside our mines, Mister Klaue; I suggest you consider answering the Elder’s question.

“He can’t tell you what he doesn’t know,” the man kneeling beside Klaue stated quietly.

T’Challa’s gaze shifted to him, even as Okoye remained as still as a statue, her spear poised and ready.

“Ah, I believe that we have our answer,” T’Challa said. “You are the one who knew of the tunnel entrance. How?”

Slowly, the man raised his head, a grin on his face.

“Birthright,” he replied simply.

A susurration swept the assembled tribes, ceasing only when the King raised his hand.

“Birthright? Are you saying that you are Wakandan by birth?” T’Challa asked.
“I am.”

“What tribe?” the Elder for the Mining Tribe demanded, leaning as far forward on her seat as possible without falling from it.

The man’s smile grew even larger and he fixed his eyes on T’Challa.

“The Golden Tribe,” he stated simply.

Behind him, T’Challa heard both his mother and sister suck in a gasp of air.

“You claim to belong to the Panther Tribe?” T’Challa asked suspiciously. “What is your name?”

“My American name is Erik Stevens. In combat, I’m called Killmonger,” he replied. “But my father made sure that I had a Wakandan name as well. N’Jadaka, he called me. Son of N’Jobu.”

The cries of surprise that swept the gathered tribes were allowed to continue as T’Challa stared at the man. N’Jobu. T’Chaka’s brother and T’Challa’s uncle, an uncle that he’d never met. But that didn’t mean that his story wasn’t known. N’Jobu was a Wakandan War Dog, one of the ones sent out into the wider world to learn about the nations and the people there and to ensure that all Wakandan secrets were kept.

From what T’Challa had been told, N’Jobu had died during one such mission. Obviously, that wasn’t the whole story.

“Hello, Auntie, nice to finally meet you,” N’Jadaka said, looking over T’Challa’s shoulder.

“Can you prove who you say you are?” T’Challa asked.

“Yes. You know how,” he replied.

At T’Challa’s nod, Okoye stood, her spear falling to her side even as she reached out and grabbed the kneeling man’s lip, pulling it out and down so that the inside of it could be seen. Even from this distance, when the light from the sun hit the inside of N’Jadaka’s lip, bright blue markings could be seen – markings that could only be made from vibranium.

Okoye’s eyes connected with T’Challa’s and she nodded.

“It seems that you indeed speak the truth,” T’Challa stated. “Why have you not come to us before this?”

“Why would I?” N’Jadaka retorted. “You people had my father killed. Ask your shaman, there. You know, don’t you ‘Uncle James’?”

Zuri stepped forward, glanced at T’Challa before turning back to face N’Jadaka.

“I was there,” Zuri admitted. “Your father betrayed Wakanda. He planned to steal our vibranium, our weapons, our technology and to arm the world. His way would have ended in war. If not with us, then at least among countless countries of the world.”

“And so, you had him killed,” N’Jadaka spat.

“King T’Chaka had no choice,” Zuri replied earnestly. “He tried to bring your father home, to face the Council and the punishment that it would give him. But instead of coming quietly, your father fought his own brother, attempted to kill him. King T’Chaka, the Black Panther, had no choice.”
“If you want no part of Wakanda, why are you here now?” T’Challa asked.

“Who said that I want no part of Wakanda?” N’Jadaka asked. “Nah, I do want a part of Wakanda. The part that I’m owed as a Wakandan. I want my share of the vibranium.”

“And what makes you think that you’ll be given any?” the Mining Tribe Elder scoffed.

“See, I knew that’s what your attitude would be. That’s why I decided to take my share the way I did. Using my father’s old maps and knowledge of the country,” N’Jadaka replied.

“Instead of coming to us, of learning of your birthright properly, you decided to simply steal from us?” Zuri asked incredulously.

“What did you believe would happen if you were caught?” T’Challa asked curiously. “Surely, you did not believe that you would be welcomed with open arms?”

“To be honest, I didn’t think that we’d get caught,” N’Jadaka replied. “Doesn’t matter, though. You ain’t locking me up! I know my rights.”

“Rights? What rights, thief?” Okoye asked contemptuously, staring down at him.

He stared straight back at her, a smug look on his face.

“I’m Wakandan, ain’t I? Even if I’ve never lived here, I know my place – a son of the Golden Tribe, the Panther Tribe. And Wakandan law says that if I disagree with the Council’s decision, as a Wakandan, I have the right to fight to prove my innocence, my right to what is mine!”

“You wish to invoke Challenge?” W’Kabi asked.

“You heard me,” N’Jadaka replied.

T’Challa stared at the man, at his cousin. He was correct. That was the law, a law that had not been invoked for generations. And, even though he had not grown up here, there was no doubting that he was Wakandan.

“Very well, N’Jadaka, I accept your Challenge,” T’Challa said.

“Then cut these ropes off me,” he demanded. “And it’s ‘Killmonger’, if we’re going to fight.”

T’Challa nodded to Okoye who reached down and hauled Killmonger to his feet before using her knife to cut his bindings.

“As to the rest of you men,” T’Challa said, sweeping his gaze over Klaue and the thirty-one others. “You are judged guilty. You are all sentenced to the mines and the Brand will be applied to your skin, forever marking you as the thieves that you are. The thirteen of you who owned up to your guilt will be taken to a higher level where you will find life easier than your comrades who will all spend the rest of their lives in the deepest part of the mines.

“As for you, Ulysses Klaue, look your last upon the sun for this day is the last that you will ever see it. Never again will you emerge from your new home, forever shackled as you will be with a collar and ankle bracelets around your feet that will never allow you to move more than one hundred metres from the three guards that will be assigned to you to constantly watch your every move in the depths of the mine. Mark these words. At the first sign that you are trying to escape, your life will be forfeit.”
“Are you sure about this, brother?” Shuri asked, doubt permeating her voice.

T’Challa glanced over his shoulder, taking in the arena.

It was a hollow basin, surrounded by rocky cliffs on all sides where currently, the combined tribes of Wakanda were gathered. The dirt floor of the arena was almost a perfect circle with a diameter measuring twenty metres. Legend had it that this was a natural phenomenon, but T’Challa had his doubts, especially with how perfect it was.

Zuri stood in the exact middle of the arena, his cloak wrapped tightly around him, only his left hand visible where it stuck out holding his staff. And on the far side was his cousin. Killmonger. Currently, he was stretching his legs and arms, cracking his neck from side to side as he prepared.

“No, I think not,” T’Challa finally replied.

Without even looking, he reached out and closed the case that Shuri had been holding out to him, a case that contained the silver-toothed necklace of his Black Panther suit. No, T’Challa decided that it would be seen as an unfair advantage to wear the vibranium-weaved suit. Already, his cousin was disdainful of them; let him fight him as they were.

Still, T’Challa knew that there would be an advantage on his side: the effects of the purple heart flower, the one that granted him the strength, speed and intelligence of the Black Panther.

Drums started up, beating a steady tattoo that echoed from cliff to cliff, reverberating around the area. Within a few beats, it was joined by the chant of the Border Tribe and accented by the River Tribe. At the right times, the Merchant Tribe and the Mining Tribe added their voices. And then, just as T’Challa stepped foot onto the packed dirt of the arena, M’Baku led the Jabari in a deep, bass undertone.

T’Challa strode out confidently, his eyes fixed not on Zuri, but past him to his opponent.

Killmonger spun towards him, a feral grin on his face as he tore his shirt from his back and cast it aside. Seeing the hundreds of tiny bumps on the other man’s body, T’Challa’s eyes narrowed.

“You like them?” Killmonger asked, his arms stretched wide as he approached. “I get a new tattoo added for every kill I make. It’s how I earnt my name; through my own skill, not by hiding behind technology or some suit.”

“You will notice that I am not wearing my suit now,” T’Challa remarked.

In fact, the only thing that T’Challa was wearing was the traditional loincloth and in his hands, he carried the same shield and spear that he’d used on his last Challenge Day. The big difference was that that challenge was for the throne, this one was to determine whether or not Killmonger had a right to claim what he saw as his inheritance: a supply of vibranium.

“A match to yield or incapacitate,” Zuri exclaimed, and instantly, the on-looking crowd of Wakandans silenced. “Death is not a requirement.”

“It may not be a requirement but I’m betting that there’s no rules to say that it’s not allowed,” Killmonger grinned, bending to pick up the shield and spear at Zuri’s feet for him to use.

Zuri narrowed his eyes at him. “You are correct.”
Lifting his staff high, Zuri looked from one combatant to the other. Then, with a great *thud* he brought the butt of it down hard before instantly backing away.

T'Challa, though, only followed his progress enough to ensure that he was out of the immediate danger zone.

A slight slide of his foot was all that was necessary to ensure that T'Challa’s balance was perfect – to either attack, defend or evade. And thus, he waited. Killmonger, too, seemed to be of similar mindset.

A feint with his spear directly at T'Challa’s chest was fended off with his shield, but it was nothing and definitely had no power behind it as both of them knew. A step to Killmonger’s left had T'Challa pivoting slightly. Again, there was a feint that T'Challa all but ignored. He could see his cousin’s strategy: hold back until he could see exactly what T'Challa was capable of.

When T'Challa simply swayed out the way from the third jab of Killmonger’s spear, he could see the other man growing restless and T'Challa began to understand him. Killmonger was a man of action, a man who expected to win on his superior skills. While he knew how to wait, how to have patience, it wasn’t his strong suit.

Thus, when Killmonger struck again, this time a jab to T'Challa’s right, he finally acted. Having used his own shield to hide his movements, T'Challa transferred his spear to the hand that was holding the shield. Then, using his superior reflexes, T'Challa twisted his body to evade the feinting spear and shot out his bare hand, grabbed the spear mid-shaft and *yanked*.

Instantly, Killmonger was pulled slightly off-balance with the unexpected force. As he stumbled forward, T'Challa leapt, up and over, using the top of Killmonger’s shield as added leverage to gain height. The instant that he landed, he kicked out behind him, striking Killmonger in the back and sending him sprawling.

In a flash, the downed man sprang to his feet and wiped the dirt on his mouth away. His grin told T'Challa that he was done playing.

The attack came just as expected.

Shield clashed against shield. Spears bounced off of shields or were slapped away. Legs were kicked out and countered. Within a few minutes, T'Challa could feel the sweat beginning to form on his body.

And then Killmonger did the unexpected.

Recovering from where T'Challa had pushed him back, Killmonger charged. And dropped into a textbook baseball slide at the last moment. Even though T'Challa jumped to avoid it, one heavily booted foot connected right in his ankle, causing him to stumble.

Spinning, T'Challa brought the point of his spear down hard, striking the very centre of Killmonger’s shield with enough force to pierce it. Then, with a powerful yank and twist, he pulled the shield away, an audible *snap* echoing around the arena as Killmonger’s arm broke. The shield spun away, flying from T'Challa’s spear with a sharply delivered kick.

Then, using the edge of his shield, he caught Killmonger’s spear and bore it to the ground, snapping it in half. Unfortunately, though, this left him vulnerable as Killmonger let the spear go and used his hand to rabbit punch him twice in the ribs.

T'Challa gasped and spun away, limping on his sore ankle as he watched his foe.
Slowly, Killmonger got to his feet, his left arm hanging limply at an odd angle.

“Yield!” T’Challa ordered. “You are weapon less and injured. You cannot win this fight.”

“Never!” Killmonger spat back.

And then he charged, leading with his right shoulder.

Dropping his shield, T’Challa braced himself and grabbed his opponent around his waist, lifting him high, up and over to slam him down into the ground. Instantly, T’Challa spun about throwing himself onto his cousin and catching his good arm with his own. A quick scramble had that arm pinned between his legs even as his arm snaked around Killmonger’s neck.

“Yield!” T’Challa ordered again.

Killmonger’s eyes were dark and full of what looked to T’Challa like hate and he knew that the man would never give in, even as beaten as he was.

Thus, he was left with no option.

The two scrabbled around in the dirt as T’Challa applied enough pressure to cut off his cousin’s air supply. As hard as Killmonger tried kicking to free himself, he simply did not have the angle to gain purchase or to strike T’Challa with enough force to do any harm.

Slowly, the beaten man’s movements became sluggish until, finally, T’Challa saw his eyes roll up into his head and his limbs go slack. Even then, he waited an extra couple of seconds to ensure that Killmonger wasn’t faking before releasing him and rolling away.

Noting that the unconscious man’s chest was steadily rising and falling, T’Challa rose to his feet, favouring his injured ankle. He looked up at the crowd of Wakandans, turning in a full circle to see them all and raised a single, clenched fist.

Instantly, the crowd roared their approval and danced to the renewed beat of the drums.

All that remained was to tell N’Jadaka his punishment. Of course, that’d have to wait until he’d awoken.
The assembled tribes of Wakanda were dead silent as they stood in their assigned places. At their head, T’Challa stood on the very edge of the Platform of the Elders, his hands clasped behind his back, his eyes hard. A slight shift from one foot to the other was enough for him to test his leg, his ankle where Killmonger had caught him. As expected, there wasn’t even a hint of pain. Magic was indeed a wonderous thing and, it seemed, Harry’s magic was just as powerful as Zuri’s.

Barely a rustle could be heard as the Border Tribe shifted, the centre of them swivelling sidewardly to create a pathway through the middle of them.

T’Challa’s eyes narrowed as he saw the stretcher that the Dora Milaje carried between them, the unconscious man laying immobile upon it. The sight of Shuri striding behind the Dora Milaje had T’Challa’s eyes shifting to meet her. A slight nod of her head told him all he needed to know.

At the exact centre of the Meeting Point, the stretcher was lowered to the ground, its guards stepping back and coming to rest, their spears ready, diagonally across their body; Shuri striding past them to take her place on the Platform of the Elders where the Golden Tribe stood.

“Wake him,” T’Challa ordered.

From behind him, he imagined his sister manipulating one of the kimoyo beads around her wrist.

N’Jadaka’s deep intake of breath echoed throughout the area, even as one arm unsteadily rose before flopping over his eyes. For nearly half a minute then, there was no movement, no sound. Finally, T’Challa’s patience began to run out.

“N’Jadaka!” he snapped.

Instantly, the man rolled over and jumped to his feet, landing in a crouch, his hands up and ready, his eyes darting about. The stamp of feet and whoosh of air as spears came to bear froze the man in place.

Slowly, cautiously, N’Jadaka straightened.

“Cousin,” he said and T’Challa could hear the contempt in his voice. “Gotta say, I’m surprised.”

“What are you surprised about?” T’Challa asked, cocking his head.

“That I’m still alive. Thought for sure, you’d put me down after I lost your little contest.”

“The Challenge of Innocence was instituted by you, N’Jadaka,” T’Challa reminded him.

“And I lost it,” N’Jadaka spat. “By your own laws, you get to decide my fate now, don’t ya?”

“Indeed. Thus, your presence here,” T’Challa stated.

“Let me guess; mines, right? Seein’ as you aren’t gonna kill me.”

“How do you know that your punishment will not be death?” W’Kabi asked.

“Simple. I’m still alive, ain’t I? If you were gonna kill me, you would have done it already,” N’Jadaka reasoned.
“You’re right. Your punishment is not death, however much it is deserved,” T’Challa replied. “You, N’Jadaka, son of Prince N’Jobu of the Panther Tribe of Wakanda, shared Wakandan secrets with outsiders. Further, you led outsiders into Wakanda with the intention of stealing our vibranium. You did this believing that, because you were a son of Wakanda, you were entitled to our vibranium. Do you deny this?”

“No,” N’Jadaka said. “I may not have been born here, but I’m one of you. All I wanted was my share.”

“N’Jadaka, son of N’Jobu, where once your statement was true, it is now longer,” T’Challa replied. At his nod, Okoye stepped forward, grasped the back of N’Jadaka’s head when the man attempted to shy away, captured his bottom lip and pulled it forth and down for all to see. Where once, the bright sunlight would have shown up the deep blueish-purple of the vibranium markings declaring him a child of Wakanda, now, N’Jadaka’s lip was simply a deep, angry red.

“Your citizenship, your claim of being ‘of Wakanda’ has been stripped from you,” T’Challa continued. “No longer are you one of us. No longer do you have any claim over any part of Wakanda.”

With a vicious shake of his head, N’Jadaka ripped his head away from the Head of the Dora Milaje.

“You can’t do that!” he yelled.

“Regardless of your beliefs, it has been done to you,” T’Challa stated calmly. “We now know you, N’Jadaka, Erik Stevens, Killmonger. We know who you are and what you have done with your life. As my cousin and a former member of the Panther Tribe, I offer you this one chance. The mines shall not be for you. Never will you be allowed to be close to the vibranium that you sought. Instead, you shall be cast out, exiled from Wakanda for the rest of your life.”

“Exile?” N’Jadaka repeated incredulously, before repeating the word, this time while laughing. “Exile? That’s it? Exile? You seriously think that that is a punishment? Fine. Fine, then. I’ll stay away. The rest of the world, though, that’ll be another thing altogether! One word, one interview from me about the real Wakanda and the whole world will be banging down your door. Let’s see you try to keep your vibranium secret then. That and all this wonderful tech that you’ve been hoarding for yourselves all these years.”

It was all T’Challa could do to keep his face impassive as his cousin’s speech continued, now being punctuated by pacing and arm gestures. The Tribes, though, weren’t as unmoved. No, before N’Jadaka’s speech was even half-down, there were cries of outrage exploding from every Tribe, accompanied by more and more calls for the traitor’s head to adorn a spear.

“Are you done?” T’Challa asked when N’Jadaka paused to take a breath. “Your vision of the future is intriguing. You are, however, in error. What you have just described shall not come to pass.”

“Really, cousin,” N’Jadaka mocked. “And exactly how are you gonna stop me from telling the world everything?”

“But you see, I will not have to,” T’Challa replied. “You did not understand what I said to you before. We now know you, N’Jadaka. We know all of your life so far. The good, as well as the bad. And you, Erik Stevens, are wanted in eleven different countries for more crimes than I care to list. Wakanda is the twelfth. And while exile is your punishment here, we will be handing you over so that you can also pay for your crimes in those other countries.”
“My friends,” and here, T’Challa motioned towards where the Avengers were standing, watching, “tell me that there is a special prison for people with your skillset. It is called ‘The Raft’ and when next you wake, you will be a prisoner within its walls.”

T’Challa watched as N’Jadaka opened his mouth to retort before his eyes suddenly rolled up, his eyelids closed and he collapsed bonelessly to the ground. Turning, T’Challa raised his eyebrow at his sister whose fingers were still on her kimoyo beads.

“What?” she asked. “That’s what you wanted, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, sister, you anticipated my request perfectly,” he replied.

“Let me guess, you implanted something in the guy, didn’t you?” Tony asked Shuri the second that he got close enough. “Not chemical. Too messy and easy to exhaust. Electrical, designed to ‘short circuit’ the brain and cause loss of consciousness?”

“You know, you’re not as dumb as you appear,” Shuri retorted, not even turning around as they walked towards along the corridor.

“Hey!” Tony protested.

“You performed brain surgery on the man?” Steve asked incredulously, cutting Tony off.

This time, Shuri did glance back.

“Micro surgery. It’s almost routine here,” she replied.

“You do know that the implant will be discovered when Stevens is processed during intake into the Raft,” Nat pointed out.

“I’d like to see them try,” Shuri snorted. “Besides, it’s filled with a few extras that will tell us if it gets messed with and even where N’Jadaka is at all times. Metal detectors won’t pick it up and it’s nano-sized, so it won’t show up on any scan outside of those we do here in Wakanda.”

“Challenge accepted!” Tony blurted.

Shuri simply grinned at her fellow scientist.

“What will you do about N’Jadaka’s claims of alerting the rest of the world about the truth of Wakanda?” Harry asked.

“I have been giving it some thought,” T’Challa replied. “Perhaps it is time that we came out of the shadows, joined the rest of the world, stopped hiding.”

“Are you sure?” Steve asked. “N’Jadaka was right; you will have the whole world knocking on your door, wanting in. You’ve got something very special here, there’s a danger of it being lost.”

“You are correct, Captain. There is that danger,” T’Challa acknowledged. “Wakanda would never be the same again. But I have faith that my people are stronger than that, that we can weather the storm that change can bring and come out the other side even stronger. It is not a decision to be rushed but it is one that I am certain will be made in the very near future.”

“As long as you’re sure,” Steve replied.
“I am,” T’Challa nodded. “And if I may, I believe that others could benefit from the same decision.”

“I can’t argue with that,” Harry replied, his eyes locked with the Wakandan King’s. “My people are already debating the same question. If or when that decision is made is anyone’s guess right now.”

The swoosh of the doors before them opening and a shaft of bright light bursting in at them announced that they’d reached the entrance to the airfield where the Avenger’s quinjet was currently ‘parked’.

“For you, T’Challa,” Harry said, holding out a silver band that could be worn on his bicep. At the King’s cocked, questioning head, he explained. “In case you ever want a vacation.”

“Or simply to visit,” Daisy added as Harry handed over a piece of paper explaining the activation phrases for the portkey.

“Or if the Black Panther would like to join a mission or two,” Steve said.

“Thank you,” T’Challa smiled. “I may even take you up on your offer.”

“See that you do,” Pepper said as she stepped in and gave the man a quick hug. “Thank you for having us.”

“It was my pleasure. The Avengers are welcome in Wakanda at any time.”

“Right, gang, let’s get going,” Daisy interjected. “Coulson’s waiting for me back in the U.S.”

“Agent can wait,” Tony replied, waving off Pepper’s correction of Coulson’s name and title. “If it was urgent, you’d have used Galdalf’s magic doo-hickey to go home quicker instead of travelling in style with the rest of us.”

“He’s right,” Daisy blinked. “Tell me again why I’m gonna be spending the next seven hours stuck in a small quinjet with Tony?”

“Because you want to keep me company and you know that Harry said portkeys aren’t the safest for pregnant women,” Pepper replied, slipping her arm through Daisy’s and drawing her away towards the quinjet.

“We’ll stay in touch,” Steve nodded, shaking T’Challa’s hand.

T’Challa nodded in return and watched, Shuri at his side, the Dora Milaje at his back as the Avengers boarded their craft before it quickly lifted, rotated a hundred eighty degrees and shot away into the sky.

As much as he wanted to hurry, Roderick somehow managed to slow his movements enough to ensure that the plethora of cords and cables that were attached to the two gauntlets were removed slowly and methodically. Finally, the dull green gauntlets were free and he smiled in anticipation.

Plucking the first from its stand, he slipped it on, twisting his hand slightly to ensure that it settled snugly on his forearm. A wiggle of his fingers tested movement. It was slightly heavier than he would have liked but that was the problem when he was working with a limited budget. The next version, he determined, would fix that problem. After he’d ‘acquired’ the funds that he needed.

A minute later, Roderick was wearing the second gauntlet as well. He turned then, facing away from
his workbench and towards the large open space in the centre of the room. The space that currently contained a single object.

Double tapping his thumbs and pinkies on both hands turned on the power in the gauntlets.

Instantly, he felt the power in them surge with a slight tingle. It wasn’t painful, quite the opposite really. If Roderick had been asked to describe what he was feeling, he’d probably say ‘energised’.

As he clenched his right fist, hard, Roderick took a single step forward.

The hum that permeated the air as a series of green lights strobed up and down both gauntlets and the reactors on the bottom of the glider that he was staring at was music to his ears. Roderick watched as it slowly rose a foot into the air before hovering there, waiting, ready for him to mount. He was so, so tempted to do so, but now wasn’t the time.

Soon, though. Oh, so, very soon.

Instead, Roderick focussed on the tech that he’d helped develop at OsCorp and then improved here in his basement. Shifts of his hands tilted the glider up, down, to the right and to the left. Taps of two or even three fingers together caused the glider to respond exactly as he expected – weapons ports readying, flaps adjusting, ‘spears’ emerging or retracting.

It was perfect. And if his next tests went as expected, he’d be confident of being able to control it from not only when he was aboard it, but also when he was up to half a mile away from it. Assuming, of course, that he was wearing the new and improved gauntlets.

Unfortunately, the full suit was out of his budget right then. But with the glider and the gauntlets – not to mention the small arsenal of weapons that he’d managed to build – two or three visits to a bank or series of banks, should fix that.

Roderick glanced across at the calendar, his mind running through how long the last of the tests would take.

Next Friday, he nodded, close of business, would be the perfect time to begin.

Slowly, a massive grin spread across his face. He could hardly wait.

ooo00ooo

“You know, I’ve heard the owner of this place doesn’t like people falling asleep at the tables and taking up valuable space from actual paying customers.”

Ted merely cracked a single eye open.

“I’m not sleeping,” he retorted.

Peter simply snorted before slipping into the opposite booth.

“It’s true!” Ted protested, his other eye opening even as he shifted slightly on the cushioned bench. “Besides, could you sleep in all this?”

“Hardly,” Peter replied. “But then, I know most of this lot and there’s no way that I’d ever let my guard down around them in the first place. Even if I didn’t have my extra senses.”

Ted nodded at that. The *Marauders’ Den* was packed with the jocks from Midtown High, all celebrating their latest win over the Eagles. And it was obvious that they’d just come straight from
the game – the footballers were still caked in mud, the cheerleaders were still in their uniforms, the faces of Midtown guys and girls were painted blue and yellow and every single one of them were pumped full of energy and loud.

“Good point,” Ted agreed. “If I was you, I wouldn’t either.”

“So, what are you doing if you’re not sleeping?” Peter asked.

“Figured I’d get a bit more practice in with connecting to my ‘inner animal’,” Ted replied. “I need to be able to do it at any time, under any conditions, so, with that lot the way they are, I figured now was a good time practice while I’m waiting for Doreen to finish her shift.”

Instantly, Peter leant forward, his brown eyes alight with interest.

“How’s it coming?”

“Good,” Ted nodded. “I think I’ll be ready to give it a full, proper ‘try’ once Uncle Harry gets home.”

“Which should be later tonight,” Gwen said, popping up beside their table.

Instantly, Peter’s arm snaked out and around her waist, pulling her towards him.

“I’m still working,” Gwen stated even as she pulled up from kissing her boyfriend.

“If that’s the sort of service one can expect around here, send Doreen over to take my order,” Ted laughed as Gwen scribbled on the pad in her hand.

“I’m not sure that you deserve that sort of treatment,” Gwen retorted without even looking up. “If memory serves, you still haven’t even told us what your ‘inner animal’ is yet.”

Ted scrunched up his nose. It was true, he hadn’t told anyone except Doreen and Uncle Harry and both of them had sworn their secrecy for him. At least until after he’d completed the process of becoming an Animagi. After that, all bets were apparently off.

“I’ve told you, it’s a surprise,” Ted replied.

“Yeah, right,” Peter snorted. “Seems to me that you just don’t want to tell us. You’re not embarrassed or something?”

“Of course not!” Ted protested, inwardly thanking his metamorph ability to keep his face from going red. “Uncle Harry’s coming home tonight?”

“That’s the message that I got,” Gwen replied. “You hadn’t heard?”

Ted shook his head even as he shifted his sleeve to look at his watch. His eyes widened as he saw the message there. Gwen was right. Harry was due back at the Tower later that night. Instantly, a wave of panic assaulted him. He’d been looking forward to that day for a while now, ever since he’d realised that he was ready, ready to make his first full transformation, something that he’d promised that he wouldn’t do until Harry could be with him.

A raucous laugh from the far side of the room drew his eyes and Ted nodded slightly. This was the perfect time to get some extra practice in, to make sure that that connection to his chameleon was firm.

“How long until Doreen gets off?” he asked.
“Twenty minutes,” Gwen replied, having checked her watch.

“Good. I think I’ll get a bit of last-minute meditation in while I’m waiting. I need to be ready for tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Peter asked.

“I’m going to convince Uncle Harry to let me do it tomorrow,” Ted answered.

Peter and Gwen shared a glance.

“I’ve got the day off tomorrow,” Gwen said.

“Great! In that case, how about a day at the beach?” Peter asked.

“Love to. Thanks for asking, Peter,” Gwen replied, dropping her head to give him a quick peck on the lips.

Ted’s mouth dropped open in preparation for saying something but, in the end, he simply closed it again. The plan was to tell them anyway once he’d managed a full transformation. It might as well be tomorrow. He just hoped that they didn’t laugh too much.

oooo0000oo

It took all of Gargan’s willpower to remain motionless in the corner of the laboratory. Ordinarily, this wouldn’t be a problem; after all, a large part of a P.I.’s job was to remain inconspicuous, thus, he’d taught himself how to remain in one position for hours at a time without moving years ago.

This time, though, was different. And the main reason for that was what Gargan was wearing. His new Scorpion suit. Really, there was no other name for it. The full body tech suit that Toomes’ man, Mason, had made was amazing – and that was before the long, flexible tail had been added. With it, Gargan felt invincible. Stronger. More powerful. Able to take on anything. And with a tail that he could control with his very thoughts, a tail that was pointed and sharp as a blade. The fact that it was also capable of releasing a serum of his choosing into anyone that it stabbed was simply a bonus.

Of course, Gargan had had to make a slight adjustment. Silver, even dull silver, was no colour for a P.I. Black, of course, was just as bad – drew the eye a little too much, even in the dark. No. Dark blues and greens were the way to go and, after some thought, Gargan had chosen a green so dark that it was almost black. The perfect colour to blend into the shadows.

A door opening across the room had his eyes fixing on the sight, the night-vision embedded into the goggles of his mask enabling him to see his target perfectly. The lights snapping on caused him to wince, but only for a second before the goggles adjusted to the difference in lighting.

Doctor Farley Stillwell. Renowned scientist, albeit one that was often ridiculed for his theories. Gargan had done his research, though – even if it was for another case from about four years back. Back then, it was for one of those animal right’s do-gooders, trying to ‘free the animals from mad scientists’. Whatever that meant. As far as Gargan was concerned, as long as he got paid, then he didn’t care.

Even back then, Stillwell was heavily into experiments that involved inducing animal mutations into humans. As far as he knew, it was a bit of a hit and miss affair. But if Gargan was going to be surveilling the Avengers, then he wanted every advantage that he could get. The suit was a start. This would be another. And combined ...
“Stillwell!” Gargan growled, making his voice as deep and as menacing as possible.

As expected, the aging scientist jumped and spun, his hands slipping and sliding on the benchtop as he struggled to keep himself upright.

“Who are you? What are you doing here? What do you want?” Stillwell babbled.

“Your experiments? What sort of animals do you have serums for?” Gargan asked, getting straight to the point even as he advanced, his pointed tail curving up and over his shoulder menacingly.

Stillwell’s eyes darted to a far door and Gargan instantly knew where the serums were being kept.

“Why do you want to know?” Stillwell asked, his voice shaking. “They’re not ready for humans yet. There’s still side-effects that I’m working on eliminating.”

“Good guess,” Gargan grinned. “But you didn’t answer my question.”

From this distance, it was easy to see that not only was Stillwell’s hands shaking, but most of his body as well.


“Scorpion!” Gargan blurted, interrupting the scientist. “Perfect. I want you to get that one and do whatever’s necessary to inject it in me.”

“But it’s not ready!” Stillwell protested again. “There’re side-effects. Progressive mental degeneration, being the most pronounced. You’ll eventually go insane if I inject it into you before it’s ready!”

Gargan’s eyes narrowed and his resolve faltered. But only momentarily.

“What are the odds?”

“Of it working?” Stillwell asked. “Seventy-five percent. If you’re lucky.”

“I’ll take that bet,” Gargan nodded. “Now. Let’s get to work.”

Motioning with his armoured hand, his tail reinforcing the instruction, Gargan forced the scientist across the room to the door that he knew the serum that was waiting for him was sitting behind.

ooo00ooo

The doors ground open and she lifted her head, pushing herself off of the rear wall of the lift as she did so. The day’d been far too long, with too little results and all she wanted was a drink. Or two. Damnit, maybe she’d just finish the bottle. Whatever. Still, the day hadn’t been a complete waste, she’d managed to get a few photos. And every single one of them was of her target in a compromising position with not one but two different women. The guy was definitely a player, leaving her without any wonder why she’d been hired by the wife in the first place.

Her door was at the far end of the crummy, dilapidated hallway; through it, she knew, would be her bed, a place that she was ready to fall into – after that drink, of course. Unfortunately, there were two people standing between her and her door.

She frowned at them. They had money, that much screamed at her. Rich suit for him; designer dress for her. A slight bulge under his coat at his waist at the back had her deepening her frown – the guy was armed. Not that it’d do him any good.
Her footsteps on the wooden floor echoed, announcing her presence and they turned, giving her a better look at the pair.

They were African-American. He was tall and bald with a well-groomed beard and moustache. She was shorter, with long black hair and a no-nonsense expression on her face. These two, she decided, were used to issuing orders and getting results.

“Good afternoon,” the woman greeted her. “I’m looking for Alias Investigations?”

“Well, according to the door, you’ve found it,” she snarked back.

“Would you be Jessica Jones?” the man asked.

“Who wants to know?” she asked, pushing between them to reach her door.

“My name’s Geoffrey Wilder; this is my wife, Catherine,” the man replied. “We’re hoping that you can help us?”

“Let me guess,” Jessica said, looking the two over once again. “Your kid’s runaway.”

The two shared a look.

“How’d you know?” Catherine asked.

“Seen it before,” Jessica shrugged. “You’re not the first; you won’t be the last. Guess you better come in.”

As usual, the door stuck when she tried to open it, not that that was a problem for her. A simple bump with her shoulder had it almost flying out of her grasp on a collision course with the wall. Thankfully, she managed to keep a hold of the doorknob – she had no intention of replacing that glass again.

Leading the two inside, she headed straight ahead, past her private rooms and through to her office. Throwing her keys into the small bowl on the side table, she rounded her desk and took a seat, waving her hand at the two chairs on the other side for the Wilders.

“How long’s your kid been missing?”

“Three weeks,” Geoffrey said.

“Twenty-three days,” Catherine said at the same time.

“Guessing that you’ve been to the police? What’d they say?” Jessica asked.

“The Los Angeles police exhausted all of their resources to come up with a single lead which suggested that they’d headed east, most likely to New York,” Geoffrey stated.

“They?” Jessica asked, latching on to the incongruity in his answer. “You’re looking for more than one kid?”

“We are,” Catherine replied.

Jessica watched as she reached into her purse and pulled out a large envelope which she promptly handed over. As expected, the envelope contained photos. What wasn’t expected was the fact that the six kids clearly were not related to each other in the slightest.
“I’m guessing this one’s yours?” she asked, holding up the photo of the African-American teen boy with the stylised afro and glasses.

“Alex, yes,” Geoffrey replied.

“So, what’s the deal with these others?”

Jessica spread the photos out on her desk, giving them a closer look. Five of the teens looked to be about the same age – maybe sixteen or seventeen. The sixth, a Hispanic girl, was younger, perhaps twelve or thirteen.

Apart from the Wilder’s kid, Alex, there was only one other guy. Clearly a jock judging by his physique. Of the other three girls, one looked to be a gothic Asian; one was a frumpy, purple-haired girl with glasses; and the last was a slim, happy-go-lucky kid that instantly turned Jessica’s stomach.

“The youngest, Molly Hernandez, she’s been taken by the others against her will,” Catherine replied as she pointed to each photo, a fact that Jessica wasn’t going to take at face value. “The others are the children of friends of ours: Nico Minoru (the goth chick), Chase Stein (the jock), Karolina Dean (the smiley one), and Gertrude Yorks (the frumpy one).”

“Why’d these others take the youngest?” Jessica asked.

The two shared a look and Jessica knew that whatever next came out of their mouth was going to be a lie.

“We’re not sure, but we think it’s because Molly’s parents are dead and they’re after her inheritance,” Geoffrey replied.

_Yep, definite lie_, Jessica decided, not that she was going to say that to them.

“Why come to me? Why not go to the NYPD?”

Again, there was the look and Jessica expected another lie.

“With how little the LA police was able to come up with and especially with how long it’s been since they ran away, we didn’t think that the police out here would have the time to do a concerted search for them,” Geoffrey replied.

“If this is a kidnapping, then I’d think that they would,” Jessica stated. “Still, if you want to pay me to find them, then that’s fine by me. You understand that I’ll have to hand the kids over to the police when I find them? That includes your own son.”

“We understand and we support that decision,” Catherine nodded.

Jessica stared at the two for a minute. Every one of her senses was screaming that there was something hinky going on here. Still, if they were going to pay her …

“Alright, I’ll see what I can dig up. I can’t make any promises, though, especially considering how long it’s been and how cold the trail is,” she stated, looking between each of them to ensure that they understood and agreed.

Spinning in her chair, she opened her bottom filing cabinet and pulled out the forms that she’d need.

“This is my standard contract,” she said, placing it on the desk for them to see. “This is my standard fee and my fee for expenses.”
“Money’s no problem,” Geoffrey stated, pulling out a chequebook – the exact type of book that Jessica liked the best.

“Right then, fill out the contract and I’ll get to work. If you include your email, I’ll send a report to you, most likely every couple of days, unless I find something and then you’ll be informed straight away,” Jessica stated, eyeing the pen as it flashed across the paper.

After they’d both signed, the two rose and shook Jessica’s hand before she showed them out. Closing the door, she returned to her desk and looked down at the photos of the six teens.

“Now, what’s the real story with you lot?” she wondered, her hand automatically finding the bottle of whiskey in her bottom drawer and pulling it out.
“For being retired, the Avengers do seem to be constantly going off on missions quite often.”

Tony knew that voice. Hadn’t heard it in a while though.

“Point Break! When’d you get back?”

“I returned to Midgard almost a week ago,” Thor replied, striding forward towards the group that had just arrived back from Wakanda.

Well, the group minus Johnson. He’d barely landed the quinjet when the woman had punched the rear doors open and had leapt from the craft only to enter the one next door, along with a second woman that Tony didn’t get a good enough glimpse of to recognise, before Sam had lifted their quinjet and rocketed away.

“It’s good to see you, Thor,” Steve said, shaking the Asgardian’s hand.

“You as well, Captain,” Thor replied before nodding to another of their group. “Seidhr.”

Seeing Thor turn towards Pepper, Tony hustled forward, placing himself between the two.

“Nah uh,” Tony began, only to be subsequently pushed aside by Pepper who promptly gave Thor a hug.

“I’m pregnant, Tony, not an invalid,” Pepper admonished.

“You are with child?” a clearly happy Thor boomed. “That is cause for much celebration.”

“But Thor doesn’t know his own strength,” Tony didn’t whine. “I don’t want him inadvertently hurting you or the baby.”

“I would never hurt the Lady Pepper,” Thor replied sounding indignant.

“Is that someone new?” Steve asked, nodding towards the upstairs window.

“Indeed, a friend and ally,” Thor replied. “I met Carol on the Kree home world.”

“While you were looking for answers?” Steve asked, leading the group inside.

“Aye.”

“What’d you find?” Harry asked.

“Nothing solid that I can bury Mjolnir or Stormbreaker into as yet,” Thor frowned.

“Stormbreaker?” Tony asked. “Is that like a euphemism for your fist or something?” Seeing the incredulous looks directed at him, he continued, attempting to defend himself. “What? He’s the God of Thunder, isn’t he? It makes sense!”

“No, Stark, Stormbreaker is my new weapon,” Thor replied and held out his hand.

_A whooshing_ sound preceded the meaty _thwak_ that a large axe impacting with Thor’s hand made. Its handle was long, meaning that the axe itself came all the way up to Thor’s chest.
“A new weapon? What are you going to do with two weapons?” Tony asked.

“He’s got two hands, doesn’t he?” Nat shrugged, eliciting a mighty laugh from Thor and a chuckle from the new woman who was approaching.

“That is precisely what Eitri, the Dwarven King who crafted Stormbreaker said,” Thor said. “But have no fear, Stark, Mjolnir will not be cast aside, after all, both the Vision and the Seidhr can wield the hammer.”

Instantly, Tony whirled on Harry, as, he noted, did everyone else there.

“You can lift Mjolnir?” Tony asked incredulously. “Nope, don’t believe it.”

“I’m with Tony on this one,” Steve added. “We all tried to lift Mjolnir at the party before Ultron crashed it. None of us could so much as wiggle it.”


“Don’t look at me!” Harry exclaimed, “I’ve got no idea where Thor’s got this idea from.”

“Thor?” Tony asked, spinning back to the Asgardian. “You care to explain that claim of yours?”

Thor was clearly looking confused by the turn of the conversation. “When Ultron first appeared and attacked, I clearly remember Harry picking up Mjolnir and tossing it to me.”

“I don’t remember that,” Harry replied with a shake of his head.

“One way to settle this,” Tony stated. “Friday. Tap into the archives of the Tower of the night in question. Show us the footage of when Ultron first appeared.”

“Yes, Boss,” Friday replied.

A screen to their left flicked on showing the group seated in a set of lounges, laughing and talking. As they watched, they saw the challenge of lifting Mjolnir issued. One by one, they tried and failed – Clint, Tony, Rhodey, Bruce, Steve, Darcy. But before Harry could try, Ultron appeared. There was a brief conversation before the four Iron Legion suits controlled by Ultron appeared. They heard Harry shout and grab and toss Mjolnir to Thor microseconds before Steve kicked up the coffee table to intercept incoming fire.

“Freeze,” Tony said, his eyes fixed on Harry. “Well, Merlin? What do you have to say for yourself? Clearly you’ve been holding out on us.”

The fact that Harry didn’t comment on the ‘Merlin’ quip was extremely telling.

“I don’t remember doing that,” he frowned. “Could it have been a fluke?”

“No,” Thor replied. “You simply proved your worth. Here, let me show you.”

With one arm, Thor held out Stormbreaker to Harry, while with the other, he summoned Mjolnir to him. The fact that Harry took the axe seemed to make Thor grin.

“Now, give Stormbreaker to Stark there,” Thor instructed.

Tony narrowed his eyes. He knew that there was some kind of trick being played here but for the life of him, he couldn’t see what it was. Warily, he reached out and grasped the axe that Harry offered him. The second that Harry let go, though, it was as though Tony’s shoulder was wrenched from its
socket as the axe plummeted to the ground, far far too heavy for Tony to lift.

“You see, my friend, you are worthy. Stormbreaker is imbued with the same magic as Mjolnir and only those deemed worthy can lift it.”

“Not cool, Point Break,” Tony groused. “Just for that, I’m sending back all the pop tarts that we have.”

“You are a cruel man, Stark,” Thor pouted.

A warm tingling sensation appeared around the shoulder that he was clutching and he looked over to see Harry putting away his wand. As the spell faded, Tony rotated his shoulder a couple of times, finding that it felt better than it had in years.

“Thanks,” he nodded.

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Tony eyed the new girl curiously even as he took a drink of scotch. He’d heard her story. Ace air force pilot, first on the scene of a crashed Kree spaceship – and wasn’t that something that he needed to start a file on, the Kree, those guys just kept popping up time after time. Fought alongside said Kree against another alien species – Skrull, these ones were called – and won but was subsequently busted up too far for Earth medicine to heal. And then taken off-world to get healed and experimented on.

Thor seemed to trust her, though. So, there was that.

Well, if the woman was used to being experimented on …

Palming a cocktail fork, Tony sauntered over towards her. She glanced at him but taking another sip of his drink was enough to put her at ease. Then, before either he could take a second thought or she could react, he jabbed the cocktail fork into her arm.

“Hey! What the hell?” Carol yelled.

“Stark!” Thor began warningly, a warning that Tony was happy to ignore.

“Well, we still bleed red blood,” he stated, peering at the twin droplets of red on her arm. “You sure you were experimented on?”

Carol’s expression darkened and it took all Tony had in him not to shy away. That feeling only doubled when she raised her arm, her fist clenched as it pointed at his face. And then, unexpectedly, it veered away slightly before it suddenly glowed a bright golden colour and a pulse of power rocketed out of her.

Tony spun, trying to watch the blast and to see what it could do, only for the blast to rocket out of the open window and sail across the open ground outside.

“What? Just, what?” Tony asked, spinning back to stare at her.

“Photon blasts,” Carol said. “And that’s not all I can do. So, yes, I’d definitely say that I was experimented on.”

“Photon, huh? What’s your max power output? What sort of damage can you do?” Tony blurted.

“Tony,” Steve said warningly. “That’s enough. I’ve already missed my best friend’s wedding due to
wizarding customs that neither of us completely understand, don’t make it so that Captain Danvers ensures that I don’t miss your funeral. Leave the woman alone. If she feels like indulging your experiments, then she’ll tell you.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Carol nodded to Steve before turning to Tony.

Before she could say whatever it was that she was thinking, though, Friday interrupted.

“Sir, I believe that there is something that you will want to see on the television.”

“Then, by all means, throw it up,” Tony instructed, gesturing to the largest screen in the room.

Everyone turned as the sound and screen blared to life. Most even took a couple of steps closer to the screen at what was shown.

“Is that …?” Rhodey asked.

“… calling himself the ‘Hobgoblin,’” the reporter, Christine Everhart from WHiH answered for him.

“From the little that is known, this ‘Hobgoblin’ flew into the Stirling National Bank a little before four p.m. on what has been described as some type of advanced flying glider. Whatever it is, it’s definitely tech that has been specifically banned under the Sokovia Accords. At this stage, we do not know how many hostages have been taken or what other weapons this Hobgoblin has, although his method of gaining entrance to Stirling National was through a grenade-like explosion which levelled the doors to the bank.”

The image switched to a grainy one, obviously taken from a security camera across the road from the bank, of when this ‘Hobgoblin’ first appeared, announced himself, blew off the doors of the bank and flew in on his glider.

“Catch that image!” Tony snapped.

Instantly, the screen froze and Tony strode towards it.

“Isolate the glider. Now, compare it to the one that Osborne was using at Barracuda.”

The screen split in two with each showing a glider. To the naked eye, it was easy to tell that the designs were extremely similar.

“This new glider appears to be both more advanced and more primitive at the same time,” Friday stated.

“How does that make sense?” Darcy asked. “Friday, are you on the fritz?”

A slashing movement of Tony’s hand silenced her.

“Oh, it makes sense,” he said. “Show me.”

Instantly, parts of the two gliders began glowing even as scrolls of text appeared beside them.

“Whoever built this new glider knew what they were doing,” Tony stated. “Power levels increased, better efficiency, those stabilizers would make it more manoeuvrable as well. The problem is in the materials. This thing loses a lot in what was used to make it. It’s too heavy, too bulky.”

“Lack of funds to afford the good stuff?” Bruce asked. “Is that why he’s robbing a bank?”

Crreeaakk!
“Easy, there, Matt,” Steve said, laying a hand on the man’s shoulder. “We’re all feeling exactly the same.”

Slowly, Matt’s hands relaxed slightly from where they’d been wrapped so tightly around his walking stick that his knuckles had been completely white.

“We should be there!”

“How’d this guy get Osborn’s tech anyway?” Bruce asked.

“That’s not Osborn is it?” Rhodey asked. “Doesn’t look like it, just want to make sure.”

“No, it’s not Osborn,” Maria said, lowering her phone from her ear. “Osborn’s still locked up tight in the Raft, he’s not going anywhere, especially with the way his suit is rigged so that, if he even attempts to escape, it’ll lose power.”

“Which would mean that he’d die from the venom of the dragon that bit him,” Thor nodded.

“As to how this guy got the tech, we’ve got no idea,” Maria continued. “According to my sources at S.H.I.E.L.D., no one’s even attempted to access anything that they collected from Oscorp in the past year.”

“Any chance this guy worked at Oscorp and had access to the files before S.H.I.E.L.D. got to them?” Erik asked.

Maria nodded. “Definitely an angle to look into.”

“And what about that guy?” Matt growled. “We just have to let him go?”

“Unfortunately, we have to let the police handle it,” Steve replied sympathetically. “At least, for now.”

Harry’s eyebrow rose involuntarily at the sight of Doreen, Gwen and Peter loitering near the Bungalow. Really, there was no other word for it. The three of them may have been dressed for the beach with towels either thrown over their shoulders or, in the case of Gwen, tied around her waist, but there was certainly no intention on their part to actually head to the beach. The fact that their eyes were also constantly flicking up the Bungalow gave away where their thoughts were.

Obviously, Teddy has something particular in mind for today, Harry thought.

Not that he could blame him. And if he were being honest, Harry would have expected this to happen weeks ago. Probably only his time in Wakanda had prevented it from happening when he’d thought that it would.

Deciding not to make his godson wait any longer than necessary, Harry took the stairs two at a time, quickly crossed the veranda and entered the Black Bungalow. Throwing off his travelling cloak, he used a touch of wandless magic to banish it across the room to land on the sofa.

“Teddy? You here?”

“Up here, Uncle Harry!”

Looking up, Harry’s ears narrowed in on the source of his godson’s voice. The ‘attic’ or, at least, the large open room that covered the entire top of the Bungalow and allowed those up there an
unparalleled view of this part of the island.

Entering the great room, Harry’s eyes instantly swept it and again, unbeknown, his eyebrows rose. Teddy was sitting off to one side, his legs crossed, his arms hanging loosely on his knees, his head slightly bowed and his eyes closed. Harry nodded approvingly at the posture of meditation; the boy had obviously been putting in a lot of practice.

“I’m not interrupting, am I?” Harry asked. “I could come back later.”

Instantly, Teddy’s head snapped up, his eyes wide.

“No! No, you’re not interrupting,” he blurted. “I was just meditating while I was waiting for you.”

“Ah, in that case …” Harry said as he crossed the room and dropped into a chair across from where his godson was sitting, “perhaps we should eliminate all distractions?”

A flick of his hands caused the torches around the room to flare to life even as the shutters on the windows snapped shut, enclosing the room and incidentally blocking out the almost inaudible sounds of voices coming from the ground below.

“Uncle Harry?” Teddy asked.

“I assume that you’ve been practicing your meditation and connecting with your chameleon-side while I’ve been away?”

“Every chance I got,” Teddy nodded vigorously. “I was even meditating in the Den when Flash and his crowd were in there.”

“You were?” Harry asked, surprised.

“Yeah,” Teddy replied. “Well, you did say that I had to be able to do connect with my animal at any time under any circumstances. I figured that if I could do it then, then it’d be easy to do at normal times.”

“Hmm,” Harry frowned.

Sitting in a booth with distracting noises was one thing – and an impressive one at that – but being in battle or being able to transform when your adrenaline was pumping was an altogether different barrel of flobberworms, as Harry himself knew. It was, however, a start.

Concentrating on one particular shelf on the small bookcase against the near wall, Harry snapped his fingers. Instantly, a series of eight old, leather-bound volumes vanished only to be replaced by a single vial of potion.

“Woah! Where’d that come from?” Teddy blurted, eyes wide. “No, don’t tell me. An illusion charm? And it’s been there the whole time?”

“Yep,” Harry grinned.

A wordless *Accio* had the vial flying across the room to smack into his hand.

“This will force your body into completing its very first transformation into your chameleon self,” Harry explained. “It won’t last long – a couple of minutes at most – but it’ll be more than enough to ‘kickstart’ your body into knowing its ‘alternate’ shape. And then it’ll simply be a case of practicing until you can do it without any effort at all.”
“Cool,” Teddy said, his eyes firmly fixed on the vial.

Suddenly, though, his eyes snapped to Harry’s.

“When do I get my Marauder name?”

“When you can transform into your animal and back in less than a minute,” Harry replied. “Now. Are you sure that you’re ready? It will be uncomfortable, painful even these first few times.”

“Yes, I’m sure,” Teddy nodded. “If you can do it and if dad could suffer through transforming into a werewolf every month for most of his life, then I can do this.”

That answer was exactly the one that Harry had expected and wanted.

“In that case, get yourself comfortable.”

Harry watched Teddy squirm around, tossing aside a couple of pillows until he was in the very centre of the bright blue rug with nothing around him. As soon as he was sure that Teddy was ready, he simply held out the vial and watched as Teddy’s slightly trembling hand took it.

Now, as far as Harry was concerned, came the hard part: sitting back and watching his godson drink the potion and go through a transformation that he knew was going to really hurt – something that no parent (or in this case, god-parent) wanted for their child.

Then, with barely any hesitation, Teddy uncapped the vial and tipped it up, swallowing the foul-tasting potion in one go. A simple *accio* on Harry’s part had the vial gathered and out of the way before it’d even fallen halfway from Teddy’s suddenly spasming hand and the floor.

Fingers stretched. Eyes enlarged and moved to the side of his head. Teddy’s body shrank even as a tail *popped* into being. His skin colour flickered and flared, going through the whole rainbow of colours before settling on a greenish-brown. And then, after nearly two minutes of changes happening, Teddy had completed his change into a green-brown chameleon. *That*, of course, only lasted for a couple of seconds before his skin changed once again, this time to the same bright blue as the rug that he was sitting upon.

Harry watched with interest as Teddy hesitantly moved one foot in front of the other, beginning a slow, awkward, four-legged walk across the rug. The awkward steadily began to change into a movement that looked a little more natural, however, before chameleon-Teddy could get walking completely down, his body began its painful transformation back into its human shape.

Just under two minutes later, a sweating, panting Teddy was looking up at him with the biggest grin on his face that Harry’d ever seen him with.

“That hurt! A lot more than you said it would,” Teddy accused. “When can I do it again?”

“Actually, if you’re up for it, now is the perfect time,” Harry replied. “While your body is fresh from its first change and still remembers your new shape, it’ll be good to reinforce it. But!” Harry said, emphasising his point with a raised hand. “Twice more is your limit for today. Your body simply won’t be able to handle that amount of pain any more than that. It’ll get better and easier though. So, are you ready?”

“What do I have to do?” Teddy asked eagerly, sitting up, his eyes ablaze.
“You sure they’re here?” Sam asked from the pilot’s seat of the quinjet. “Only I’m not seeing anything.”

“They’re here,” Daisy replied confidently. “The Bus can cloak remember and with the Accords in play, Coulson will be doing everything he can to make sure that they keep a low profile.”

Sam frowned at the view of the – apparently – empty field below them. It was certainly large enough for the S.H.I.E.L.D. Bus to land in. And if was cloaked, then he’d need to be a lot more careful in landing the quinjet; after all, he didn’t want to park on top of the Bus.

“There’s a small clearing just the other side of the trees, I’ll set down there,” he said, nodding in the indicated direction.

“Does this ‘Bus’ have similar cloaking technology to Attilan?” Crystal asked.

“You got me,” Daisy replied. “Guessing it can’t be too dissimilar, though.”

As Sam banked, he felt a hand on the top of his chair as the Inhuman Princess leant forward to get a look at the small town that had just come into view. Really, it wasn’t much to write home about. Population of a couple thousand, centred on the lumber mill to the west and the forests that surrounded it.

“It’s beautiful,” Crystal breathed. “All that nature for the people here to enjoy.”

“That’s one way of looking at it,” Daisy replied, her nose slightly wrinkled. “Me. Give me a proper city with access to all the latest tech and I’m happy. Out here, where getting a solid Wi-Fi signal could be problematic; not my cup of tea.”

“And there’s a new Inhuman there?” Crystal asked.

“That’s what the message Coulson sent me said and why I thought having someone with a bit more experience with becoming an Inhuman along would be helpful.”

“I must thank Medusa for sending me,” Crystal replied. “Getting to see this, it’s truly a marvel.”

“Alright, ladies, if you’ve finished enjoying the view from out here, how about we head into the town itself,” Sam said, flicking the switches in the correct order to power down the quinjet now that it was on the ground. “Scans say that it’s a leisurely two k walk to the edge of town.”

“I’ll contact Coulson, let him know we’re here,” Daisy replied, slipping an earpiece on.

As much as she wanted to try sneaking up on May, Daisy knew that it’d be pointless and not only because they were expected, which meant the crack S.H.I.E.L.D. agent would have been on the look out for them since she’d made contact.

“Who’s your friend?” May asked, greeting Daisy with a nod.

“This is Crystal, a member of the Inhuman royal family,” Daisy replied. “It’s good to see you, May.”

“You too,” May replied, her eyes flicking across all three of them. “You do know that we called for you three days ago, right? You’re lucky we’re still here.”

Daisy shrugged. “If you’re right and this is an Inhuman problem, then you need me. Which means that you weren’t going anywhere until I got here.”
“You’re not the only Inhuman we know, Skye … Daisy,” Coulson said, a half-smile on his lips as he stepped out of the door that May had been waiting in front of. “We could have called in one of them.”

“A.C.!” Daisy exclaimed, stepping forward to embrace the man. “I’ve missed you.”

“Just as we’ve missed you, Daisy,” Jemma smiled, coming out for her own hug. “But seriously, what kept you?”

“I was in Wakanda,” Daisy shrugged.

“Wakanda? Really?” Coulson said sounding interested. “Never been. Always wanted to go, though. Closest I ever managed was Bengalla. Maybe I’ll even tell you that story one day. For now, how about we get to work.”

Daisy instantly focussed her attention on her former boss, knowing the sounds of the beginning of a briefing. To either side of her, she felt Sam and Crystal shuffle closer, just as interested.

“Four days ago, Macey Winters, went into the local pharmacy here and purchased, amongst other things, a bottle of fish oil. She decided to take a single tablet before leaving the store and instantly underwent terrigenesis. When she emerged from her cocoon, she found that she had become insubstantial, able to pass through any object and unable to touch anything solid.”

“Intangibility?” Crystal asked excitedly. “It’s not unheard of in Attilan, but incredibly rare.”

“She went through terrigenesis by eating a single fish oil tablet?” Sam asked incredulous. “How in the world did that happen? From what Daisy’s said, it takes exposure to Kree crystals to force that sort of reaction in people with the Inhuman gene.”

“What?” Daisy asked, her eyes narrowed at the way that Coulson, May and Jemma were glancing at each other.

“In part, it could be deemed our fault,” Coulson finally admitted.

“Explain that!” Crystal snapped, her hands instantly balled on her hips. “How can you be responsible for bringing the latent Inhuman gene to the surface and forcing terrigenesis?”

“Back when Jiaying and her Inhumans tried to take over the Iliad,” Coulson replied, his eyes fixed on Daisy’s, “there were a couple of things that went wrong.”

“What else, apart from you losing your hand,” Daisy demanded.

“A case of terrigen crystals was knocked into the ocean,” Jemma replied. “And although we searched for it, we were never able to recover it. Fitz and I hypothesise that the case opened in the depths of the ocean and the crystals slowly dissolved and were absorbed by the local wildlife.”

“The fish oil,” Sam said, snapping his fingers.

“How many others?” Daisy asked. “If you’re right – and I’ve never known you and Fitz not to be right – then those fish oil tablets could be anywhere. How many others have gone through terrigenesis?”

“Four,” May replied. “We have teams at each of their locations. But they are only the ones that we know of. There’s no telling how many others there have been that haven’t been reported.”
“Or are still to happen,” Crystal added.

“How many can Attilan take?” Daisy asked.

“Without consulting with Black Bolt, I’m not sure,” Crystal replied with a shake of her head. “If I had to guess, no more than a couple of dozen. Attilan’s resources are already stretched fairly tightly with our own population.”

“One problem at a time,” Sam said. “Let’s start with the woman in there who’s probably terrified out of her mind. Macey, was it?”

“Yes, Macey.” Gemma confirmed. “Can you help her? I’m afraid that our best efforts have had … disappointing results.”

Daisy shared a look with Crystal and the two nodded simultaneously.

“We can,” Daisy replied.

“Then what are you still doing out here wasting time?” May asked.

Without replying, Daisy strode forward, pushing the door of the house before her open.

Jessica Jones, Private Investigator, hit one final key on her computer and sat back in her chair. She’d taken on the case of finding six runaway kids. Supposedly, the youngest had been kidnapped by the other five but she was finding that less and less likely. There was ample evidence on-line that these kids knew each other, had, in fact, known each other for years.

As with any case, she started her search for them on-line. Kids these days left a huge fingerprint that anyone with half a brain could follow: Facebook, Instagram, school webpages, you name it, it was there for the world to see. And Jessica had been extremely interested in it all. It was especially interesting how many photos these kids were in together, going all the way back to when they were toddlers. These kids knew each other. Well.

And they were all from some of the wealthiest and most influential families in L.A., each with their own specialisation: computer sciences, genetics, property, even a religious organisation if you can believe it. Actually, that one had been the easiest to track.

Karolina Dean was the poster child for the Church of Gibborim. A cult if Jess had ever heard of it, albeit covered up by all of the good works that they were doing for the poor and homeless. They were apparently even in the beginning phases of building a brand new school.

And that’s where it’d all got a little interesting. The Church of Gibborim was funded by an organisation called The Pride. To all outside observers, they were the best of the best, charity workers, philanthropists and all-round good guys. Jess, though, had connections, even as far away as the other side of the country that had heard of the Pride. And what they said told a whole other story: the Pride was a front for the largest criminal organisation in L.A.

“Is that why you ran away?” Jess asked the six photos pinned up on the far wall where she could see them. “Did you see something? Maybe about your parents?”

And that was definitely a possibility. It took very little research to find out that the main benefactors of the Pride were the Wilders, Deans, Yorks, Steins and Minoru’s – the parents of the kids that had run away. And if the parents were that heavily involved in the ‘good’ works of the Pride, it was a lot
smaller leap than Jessica herself could make to the fact that those people were also heavily involved
in the Pride’s criminal activities.

“Right. That’s taken care of the why,” she mused.

Actually, when she had a second thought about it, it really didn’t. Jess specifically remembered
saying to the Wilders when they hired her that, if the kids were involved in kidnapping, she’d be
turning them over to the police as soon as she found them. So, if the parents were criminals, why
would they be okay with that? Especially if the parents had done something that had caused the kids
to run from.

Swinging around in her chair, Jess snatched up a bottle from on top of the cabinet behind her and
kept on swinging. A glance at the clock – a little after two in the afternoon – told her that it was the
perfect time to drink, not that she’d ever found a time when it wasn’t. Taking a long pull of the
whiskey, she considered the kids and their parents again.

The Pride.

The crime bosses of Los Angeles.

Crime bosses.

A lot of crime syndicates had cops in their pockets.

Was that it? A cover up?

They knew that turning the kids over to the cops would eventually have them returned to L.A., the
corrupt cops and thence to the Pride itself where whatever the kids saw would be kept ‘in-house’.
That supposition assumed that firstly, Jess herself, wouldn’t question the kids and that secondly, the
NYPD wouldn’t question them either.

Perhaps there were some crooked cops here in the city, too?

Taking another pull from the bottle, Jess nearly snorted. Of course, there were crooked cops in New
York! There were crooked cops everywhere!

Well, it was a theory, at least. A good one and one that Jessica thought was decidedly plausible.

Of course, the only way to prove it would be to find the kids and ask them what was going on.

After another mouthful of whiskey, Jess leant forwards and began tapping away at her computer,
trying to weave a bit of magic out of it.

It took nearly three hours, the rest of the whiskey and half of the bourbon, but she finally found a
single, grainy image that gave her her first real clue as to what she was looking for.

The image was taken from a security camera inside a shop, through a closed glass door and out into
the street. The fact that it was nearly black – the only lighting coming from street lights – told her that
it had been taken after dark. The timestamp, though, that was the most interesting.

Twenty-four days ago. The day before the kids ran away.

One of Jess’ skills was as a photographer – a necessary skillset in her line of work. And a part of that
was using her programs to magnify and enhance the photos that she took. Capturing a copy of the
image from the internet, she transferred it to her computer and got to work.
“Huh,” Jess grunted a short time later.

She’d performed some pretty impressive magic on that image, even if she did say so herself. There was no doubt in her mind that these were the kids that she’d been hired to find. And it was also extremely clear that her hunch was right: these kids were no kidnappers.

The image showed her six subjects standing together, in a line. Facing them were three dark-skinned men, all holding guns and, judging by the flashes on the ends of those guns, the kids were being shot at. What made it extremely interesting was the fact that the goth chick – Nico, Jess remembered – was standing a little in front of the others, a long staff with a glowing circular ring at its head in her hand and it looked as though it had created a magical, sci-fi-like shield to protect the kids!

Well, sci-fi or magic!

If that wasn’t enough, the jock – Chase – was wearing some kind of gloves on his hands that glowed with some kind of power. And the Church girl, Karolina, her whole body, every square inch of skin, glowed with an iridescent, inner light. The others looked normal enough.

Powers. These kids, or at least some of them, had powers. Jessica couldn’t help it, she groaned. If there was one thing that she’d done her absolute best to avoid all throughout her life, it was people with powers, people like …

But then, as she stared at the image, she noted that there was a large shadow just behind the purple-haired Gert, a shadow that her photo-enhancing software simply couldn’t do anything with.

“I wonder what that is?” Jess thought.
Appearances Aren't Everything

Harry’s eyes widened at the sight of a blue bolt streaking towards him from one direction and three tiny plastic balls shooting towards him from three other directions simultaneously. Instantly, he dropped, rolled and swept his wand up and across in front of him. Two of the paintballs whizzed by overhead; another hit the ground, just missing his side; while the blue paint spell slammed into the just-formed stone wall that he’d managed to conjure.

Jumping back to his feet, Harry spun to the left, firing a volley of four orange paint spells at Melati, making her leap into a series of backflips. Thankfully, while he was making sure that Melati was on the backfoot, Teddy, Peter and Doreen were shooting at each other. Teddy, he saw, was relying on shields to defend against Peter who was swinging from tree to tree with his paintball gun and Doreen who was currently squatting high in a nearby elm.

Fffpppt Twack!

It took all that Harry had in him to ignore the sound coming from a hundred metres behind them where Clint was having another archery lesson with his daughter Lila and to concentrate on the Academy exercise in front of him, but somehow, he managed it.

The faintest chittering from on high was the only warning that he had before a hail of pellets rocketed towards him. Thrusting out his left hand, Harry magicked a small, buckler-type shield to protect himself even as he fired back at Doreen. Four of the yellow paintballs hit his shield, leaving a stain floating in the middle of the air. Thankfully, his return shots were right on the mark – the first red paint spell hitting Doreen high in her shoulder even as the others forced her to ‘jump’ backwards and to lose her balance.

Peter, he saw, took full advantage of her fall, swinging in and hitting Doreen a further three times with his own paintball gun before she landed in a sprawl. However, while Peter was focussed on Doreen, Melati nailed him with a series of purple shots. Harry’s grin blossomed on his face as he heard a surprised-sounding, strangled scream coming from a pin-wheeling Peter as he disappeared headfirst into a bush.

Suddenly, a hard thump hit him in the back of his right shoulder, sending him tumbling forward.

Harry blinked. He didn’t even know that his fiancé was even on the island, let alone a part of the training exercise.

“What was that?” he asked.

“You gotta pay attention to all of your surroundings,” Daisy laughed. “May was always drilling that into me.”

“Speaking of,” Harry said, getting to his feet and backing away from the training exercise so as not to get shot in the back a second time, “how is May, Coulson and the others?”

“Good,” Daisy replied. “This Inhuman thing is going to keep them occupied for ages, though.”

Harry nodded to Bobbi and received one in return, passing the ‘baton’ of who was in charge of the Academy at that moment. Reaching out, he pulled Daisy in for a kiss, then, hand in hand, they strolled towards a nearby bench. Lavender, he noted, was sitting with Cooper, an ordinary stick in
his hand as she showed him the basics of wand movements. Wanda and Pietro were also nearby – him speeding all over the place while she tried to ‘nail’ him with her magic.

“The Inhumans?” Harry asked once they were seated.

“Yes. It seems that S.H.I.E.L.D. had an accident back when my mother went all crazy and tried to take over that carrier,” Daisy replied. “A crate of terrigen crystals ended up in the ocean, they dissolved, infected the fish and, when they get eaten by humans – even in as simple as fish oil capsules – it triggers terrigenesis in Inhumans like me,” she explained.

Harry whistled appreciatively. “How may?”

“Eight so far that we know of,” Daisy shrugged. “But I wouldn’t be surprised if there’ll be hundreds by the time the contaminated fish products finish going worldwide.”

“What’ll happen to them all?”

“Crystal said that Black Bolt and Attilan will take a dozen or so; the rest,” she said, finishing with a shrug.

“I don’t know that I can do anything to help them,” Harry replied.

“I wasn’t asking you to,” Daisy said, patting him on the knee. “S.H.I.E.L.D.’ll have it sorted. And Stark looked thoughtful when I mentioned it at the Tower, so it’s possible that he’ll have an idea as well.”

“Huh,” Harry replied, wondering what the man was thinking. “Well, whatever the solution is, hopefully they can keep it under wraps; having powered people not in control of their powers could be bad for how the rest of the world sees us right now.”

“Exactly. Thus why A.C. and the others are jumping all over the place, trying to keep them under wraps.”

Harry sat back, his arm around Daisy, simply enjoying the peace of the two of them being together. His eyes wandered across the clearing, taking in the various groups training. Although, right at that moment, Clint and Lila weren’t actually shooting arrows, instead, the two were walking across the field, Clint’s arm draped over his daughter’s shoulder.

“Daisy,” Harry said.

“Hmm,” she replied.

“Do you remember that discussion we started about bringing our wedding forward?”

Instantly, he felt the woman in his arms tense, her attention obviously fixed on his words.

“You know, I do remember something like that,” Daisy replied “What about it?”

“Are you still interested in the idea or would you prefer that we stick to our original plan of next year?” Harry asked.

Daisy twisted, her arm coming around him even as her face, her eyes sparkling, came so close that their noses were almost touching.

“It takes a while to organise a wedding, especially to book places in New York,” she stated.
“For a normal person, yes,” Harry allowed. “For us, with magic on our side, not to mention the gold that I could throw at people to make things happen …”


“Would the week after next be too soon?”

Instantly, Daisy closed the distance between them, kissing him passionately enough to raise his blood temperature even as her hands worked through his hair. His own hands were wrapped tightly around her, his fingertips finding their way under her shirt to run gently across her skin.

“So, that’s a maybe?” he panted when they finally parted.

“Most definitely not, Sir,” Daisy replied huskily. “If we can arrange it, I want it.”

“In that case, consider it done,” Harry replied, punctuating each word with a short, soft kiss.

“Mmm, as nice as this is, if we’re going to pull this off, then we’d better get the invites out, like yesterday,” she said. “Come on, the lists are pretty much done but it won’t hurt to go over them one last time.”

Harry stood, lifting Daisy in his arms only to drop her legs to the ground once he was standing. Then, after one last searing kiss, she grabbed his hand and raced off, pulling him along behind her.

ooo00ooo

Knock knock

Daphne blinked at the unexpected interruption even as she looked up from the text that she was reading.

“Come in!” she called.

As Natasha entered, Daphne ran a professional eye over the other woman. Nothing instantly jumped out at her as being wrong, medically speaking, at least. There was no evidence of injuries, not even a limp or favouring of an arm.

“Natasha, what can I do for you?” she asked.

“Do you have a moment?” Natasha asked.

“Of course.”

With a nod, Natasha closed the door behind her and even locked it, a fact that Daphne raised her eyebrows at.

“I’m guessing you have something personal that you’d like to discuss?” Daphne asked.

“Yes,” Natasha replied. “I will need your assurance that what we discuss is covered under doctor-patient confidentiality?”

“Natasha,” Daphne admonished.

“I’m sorry,” she replied, “but considering what I want to ask, I had to make sure.”

Daphne moved back to her desk and gestured to the seat beside the desk for her visitor or possibly
“I get the impression that you have something sensitive that you’d like to discuss,” Daphne said.

Natasha gave a single nod before shifting slightly in her chair. Uncharacteristically, she even lowered her head slightly.

“You’ve examined me before, so you know that I’m not ‘normal,’” Natasha began.

Daphne nodded but otherwise remained silent, allowing Natasha to tell what she had to in her own time.

“I grew up in the Red Room. It was a … school – for want of a better word – for operatives in Russia. We were taught a myriad of skills but there were a few … extra parts that made us the best operatives in the world. One of those was the Serum that slowed my body clock, enhanced my healing ability, reflexes, hand-eye coordination, not to mention all of the other small ways that I’ve been enhanced. But there was one other thing that was done to us; when we graduated.”

Natasha paused and looked away for a moment, a look of … shame? … on her face that was completely out-of-character for the no-nonsense, confident woman that Daphne had come to know.

“They sterilized us,” Natasha finally revealed. “It was efficient. One less possible distraction when you’re undercover; the one thing that might mean more than the mission.”

It took everything in Daphne not to react, to not gasp or blurt out her horror at what her friend was saying. To take the option of having children away … Unconsciously, her hand went to her own stomach were her and James’ child was currently growing.

“I don’t know what to say, Natasha,” Daphne said.

“It’s okay,” Natasha shrugged. “I came to terms with it a long time ago.”

Somehow, Daphne had trouble believing that.

“Lately, though, I’ve been wondering,” Natasha said. “What was done to me was done medically, scientifically.”

“Not magically,” Daphne added, finishing for her.

“Exactly. And these days, with how things are going with Steve …”

Daphne couldn’t help but smirk at that comment.

“Oh, it’s not like that,” Natasha laughed. “Steve’s too much of a Boy Scout to let things go that far without there being a ring on my finger. But still …”

“I’m guessing the fact that Pepper and I are both pregnant has also got you thinking, wondering,” Daphne guessed.

“Yes.”

“Would you like me to examine you? To see if there’s a magical way of reversing what was done to you in that ‘graduation’ of yours?” Daphne offered.

At Natasha’s nod, Daphne stood and gestured for Natasha to follow her across to the nearest hospital bed.
The next ten minutes involved Daphne preforming some of the most complex diagnostic charms that she’d ever done. Finally, though, the parchment where she’d been recording her findings was completely full and she’d run out of tests to run.

“Well?” Natasha asked.

Daphne remained silent for a couple of minutes as she reread the results.

“I will need to do some research and talk to a couple of other Healers that I know,’ Daphne began slowly. “But I think that there’s a good chance that we can do something to reverse what was done to you.”

Natasha’s sigh and smile spoke volumes of how much Daphne’s prognosis meant to her.

Francine had never felt so alive! The energy that she felt coursing through her was intoxicating. And what made it even more electrifying was that she could also feel it in *everything* around her.

It was there in the street lights as she walked past them. Every single neon sign that lit up the night pulsed with the energy. Even the cars that sped by hummed with electricity.

Francine delighted in it all. On impulse, she spread wide her arms and spun in a circle, her head tilted back, just basking in the feeling of every electrical pulse and crackle that surrounded her, big and small. It fed her; zipped through her body and left her hair frizzing with static electricity and tiny bolts of blue tingling around her fingers and even across her teeth as she grinned.

Slowly, she spun to a stop and opened her eyes. This wasn’t the direction that she’d originally been going, but it felt right, as though there was some current pulling her in that direction. And so, Francine surrendered to it. But she didn’t just walk that way. Oh, no, with so much electricity pumping through her, making her feel so energized, she couldn’t help herself but to skip.

That was the good thing about New York City – it never slept. Thus, even at two in the morning, Francine knew that there would be people still up and about, doing their thing, earning their living or maybe spending the money that they’d made.

But what she particularly wanted to find were the heroes. *Her* heroes. The ones who skirted the law, the ones so charged with energy that they needed to let their adrenaline loose in … creative ways. Some would call them the *bad* boys, but to her, they’d always drawn her like a moth to a light, the ones that charged her batteries even before this special connection to electricity had came about.

Three blocks down, she found some.

They were easy to spot. Too easy really. Four of them, shifting about in the semi-darkness between a pair of streetlights. Francine stopped and darted behind a bus shelter, peeking out at them to see what they were doing.

Their attention, she quickly noted, was fixed across the street and so, she switched sides of the shelter to see if she could find what they were looking at. Her eyes widened and brightened as she saw the jewellery store.

Were they …?

They were, she was sure of it! They planned on breaking in and robbing the place. Ooh, *this* she had to see.
Thankfully, she didn’t have to wait long for them to get started.

One by one, they crossed the street before again loitering about in the semi-darkness. They’d split now, two to each side of the great metal gate that blocked the entrance to the jewellery store.

Francine frowned; they didn’t appear to be very good at this. Still, she wasn’t going to give up watching, who knew what she’d see? Maybe they’d even be able to pull it off? Well, she could hope.

One slipped out of the shadows, the unmistakeable shape of heavy-duty bolt cutters in his hands. Seconds later, the tinkle of the chain that held the heavy metal gate locked tight fell to the ground. Instantly, the others were there, pulling the gate open so that they could slip into the entryway and to the ‘real’ door to the jewellery store.

Francine cocked her head as the gate was pulled aside, her connection to electricity marking the broken circuit.

“Sixty seconds, boys,” she murmured.

In her head, she counted down, knowing that when she reached zero, the alarm would go off and alert people – either a security company or the police or even both. Sixty seconds was usually enough for legitimate owners to open the door and disarm the alarm. But these guys weren’t legit and definitely didn’t seem to know what they were doing.

She watched as they fumbled around, attempting to pick the lock, wasting precious seconds.

At forty-five seconds, Francine’s fingers began tapping where they wrapped around the side of the bus shelter. At thirty seconds, her leg began jigging.

“Come on, come on,” she murmured, her eyes boring into the sight across the street.

Finally, at fifteen seconds, she could take it no longer. Taking off in a sprint, she raced across the street, her senses reaching out at the same time.

There! she thought.

Tracing the circuit that she’d found, she found the electricity that powered it and with a twist, shut it down, completely disabling the alarm before it could sound.

“What?”

“What are you?”

“Get out of here if you know what’s good for you!”

Francine simply stopped in amongst them, shaking her head, her hands on her hips and her foot tapping.

“What?”

“Do you boys have any idea how close you came to getting caught?” she admonished. “Seven more seconds and the alarm would have tripped and you’d have the fuzz all over you.”

“What?” the guy kneeling on the ground asked, his lockpicks tumbling from his shaking hands in a jangle.

“You’re very lucky that I saw you,” Francine continued, “and that I was able to help.”
“How’d you do that anyway? Shut off the alarm,” another asked.

“Let’s just say that I have a gift that allows me to control electricity,” Francine grinned in reply.

“Yeah? Is that right?” the guy replied. “What are you? One of them mutants or mutates we’ve been hearing about on the news?”

“Are there any other alarms in there that we should know about?” the one in the corner asked shakily.

Francine cocked her head, feeling for what lay inside.

“Every one of the cabinets has a backup alarm,” she replied.

The boys looked at each other and seemed to come to a mutual decision.

“I don’t suppose you’d be interested in coming inside with us, using that power of yours to help? We’d cut you in on the take.”

Francine blinked at the offer. Before, she’d always gotten the adrenaline through watching the bad boys. This, though, this was next level badness, and she liked the idea. It was even more electrifying than real electricity.

“Boys, I think this is going to be the start of a beautiful partnership,” she grinned.

Melissa lent back on a bench in the middle of Central Park to all the world simply appearing to be an everyday New Yorker enjoying the lunchtime sun. Occasionally, her hand would dip into the bag in her lap before, with a flick of her wrist, she’d scatter food for the flock of pigeons that surrounded her. Every now and again, though, her hand would jerk up towards the back of her neck, until, with some effort, she forced it back down again when it met the bandage covering the site of her recent operation.

But behind her large sunglasses, her eyes were taking in a completely different part of the Park.

The hot dog stand across the way was her primary focus, or more specifically, the Labrador that was sitting under a nearby tree. What was most bizarre about the dog was the fact that it was sitting so perfectly still, that, if one weren’t looking close enough, they’d think that it was a statue.

Finally, Melissa saw what she was looking for and a small smile appeared on her face.

A worker from one of the nearby offices in his crisp dark blue suit and tie, his hair immaculately set with so much product that not a single strand of it moved in the breeze, had joined the line to the stand. What made this particular gentleman stand out in Melissa’s opinion was the fact that he was holding his wallet in his hand instead of keeping it in his pocket until it was needed.

Her eyes darted to the Labrador and then back to the man or more specifically, his wallet. And then her gaze continued, only pausing briefly at certain points: the group of Asian tourists coming down the path; the thick hedge-like trees to the right; and finally, the short wooden bridge that spanned the gap over a drainage channel.

Looking back, she saw that the man had shuffled forward slightly with the line and looked resigned to a wait, his hand dangling beside him.
This time when she glanced back at her Labrador, she gave a mental command.

Instantly, the dog leapt into motion.

It took barely a second for the Labrador to reach full run, heading straight for the hot dog stand. At just the right instant, the dog leapt slightly, grabbed the wallet from the man’s hand and bolted off.

The man’s startled, “hey!” was ignored as Melissa tracked the dog’s progress.

As expected, the businessman took off at a run after the dog but was forced to slow to almost a stop as the Labrador weaved his way between the legs of the photograph-taking tourists before darting off the path and wiggling under the hedge on its belly.

By the time that the man had extradited himself from the crowd and was free to look for the dog and his wallet once again, the Labrador was hidden safely under the bridge. Melissa’s smile grew as she watched the guy have his tantrum, complete with yells, stamped feet and overly large waving of his arms.

The test, though, had been a complete success. Her new implant controlled the one in the Labrador perfectly. A simple thought was enough to have the dog doing exactly what she wanted, when she wanted and how she wanted. But then, she expected nothing less – all of the tests in her lab and the pet store with the dogs and cats at her disposal had also been successful.

Her next step was to test the implant on reptiles and birds. Her computer simulations showed that there would be positive results with those species as well. Unfortunately, fish and insects were out of the question. At least for now.

Standing from the bench, she emptied the last of the feed for the pigeons and strode off. The Labrador, she knew, would follow her home. Just as she was telling him to do.

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“Hi, I’m looking for someone to interview about teens with superpowers,” Jessica said into the handset in her most nasally voice possible.

“I’m sorry, the Avengers don’t generally do interviews without the interviewer and the reason for the interview having been vetted first through the Avengers’ Press Secretary,” the voice on the other end stated.

“Oh, yeah, right, I haven’t introduced myself properly, have I?” Jessica said. “My name’s Tiffany and I’m writing an article for the Empire State University newspaper. When can I talk to the Press Secretary? And what Avengers will I most likely get to interview?”

“As to who you would interview, that would be determined by the Press Secretary,” the woman stated. “In terms of when you would be able to speak to Miss Brown, that would be determined by when your appointment is.”

“Well, can I make one of them, then?” Jessica asked. “And can it be, like, really soon? Only my deadline is the day after tomorrow, you know?”

There was silence on the other end for a moment and Jessica crossed her fingers, hoping that the secretary was searching for an opening in the appointment’s book for her.

“If you were able to get to the Tower this afternoon, I could squeeze you in at four thirty,” the woman stated. “Unfortunately, you’d only get ten minutes …”
“Perfect! I can get there. Thank you sooo much,” Jessica said, and promptly hung up the phone.

Glancing at that clock, she swore. Four thirty wasn’t that far away and if she didn’t scram, then she wasn’t sure that she’d be able to get there on time.

Grabbing her coat and scarf, Jessica bolted for the door, slamming it closed behind her and trusting in the way that it tended to stick as a means of locking.

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She’d barely identified herself as ‘Tiffany’, the Empire State University reporter, before she was given a lanyard and was ushered through a side door. Jessica was still in the process of putting the lanyard around her neck when the immaculately dressed woman with the light scarring on her face and neck that Jess had seen on TV countless times before, appeared through the back door.

“Good afternoon,” Miss Brown greeted, offering her a seat.

“Hi. Nice to meet you. I’m Tiffany,” Jessica said.

Suddenly, Brown stiffened and tapped at something on her pad.

Behind her, the door that she’d come through slammed open and Jessica turned around to find three well-built guards standing there, all but growling at her.

“Is there a problem?” Jessica asked, deciding to attempt bluffing her way out of the situation.

“The problem, ‘Tiffany’, is that you’re lying to me,” Brown stated, absolute certainty in her voice. “That is not your name.”

Jess narrowed her eyes at the woman. How did she know that? And so fast as well? No one had ever picked up on her ‘roles’ when she was on a job.

“Who are you? Really?” Brown snapped.

Once more Jessica eyed the men behind her. They were big and even carried guns, if the bulges in their coats was anything to go by. Still, they didn’t pose a threat to her. Not that she intended on fighting her way out, not when she desperately needed her questions answered.

“My name is Jessica Jones,” she sighed, turning back to Brown. “I’m from Alias Investigations.”

“A Private Investigator,” Brown stated with a knowing nod.

“You’ve heard of me?” Jessica asked, shocked.

“I have,” Brown replied. “You were involved in an incident, what was it? Four, five months ago? Saved a whole lot of people if my memory is right. And you had to kill a man to do it.”

Jessica frowned. She didn’t like being reminded of Killgrave. Even with the fact that he was now dead.

“What do you want really?” Brown asked. “Why are you here?”

Jessica rounded the chairs and sat, hoping to diffuse the tension that had settled in the room. She waited a moment for Brown to sit opposite her, the other woman’s eyes glancing up past her at the security guards. Judging by the sound of the door closing and the lack of footsteps leaving, Jessica guessed that they’d remained in the room, in case they were needed.
“If you know that I’m a PI, I’m sure that you can guess,” Jessica began. “But to clarify, I’m looking for someone. Actually, six someone’s.”

“And you think that they’re here?” Brown asked, her eyes brows raised.

Jessica shrugged. “It’s doubtful, but possible.”

“Alright, I’ll bite,” Brown said and Jess noticed the ghost of a smile on her face. “Tell me about these people.”

“They’re teens. Five of them are sixteen or seventeen; the other is thirteen. I have pictures,” Jessica said, indicating her bag.

At Brown’s nod, she fished out the large envelope and handed it over, waiting for Brown to examine the photos.

“I’m sorry, I don’t recognise any of these kids; they’ve definitely never shown their faces around here,” Brown said with a shake of her head. “What made you think that we’d know about them?’

“Look at the last picture,” Jessica instructed.

When Brown shuffled to it, she noted that the Press Secretary’s eyes widened considerably before narrowing.

“What do you know of these kids?” Brown asked, her eyes snapping up to pierce Jessica’s.

“Not a lot,” she admitted. “They’re runaways. Originally from L.A. Their parents claim that the older five kidnapped the youngest.”

“But you don’t believe that,” Brown stated.

“No,” Jessica replied. “At the moment, I’m not sure what the real story is, but I’m positive that that’s not it.”

“What do you want from the Avengers?” Brown asked.

Jessica leaned forward and tapped the photo.

“This says that at least four of those kids have powers, either innate, tech or possibly even magic, I’m not really sure. I’m hoping that you guys can keep your ear to the ground and let me know if you hear anything,” Jessica asked.

Brown sat back in her chair, her gaze alternating between Jessica, the photo and the ceiling. Unexpectedly, she stood.

“I’ll be right back,” Brown stated.

“Hey! I want those pictures back!” Jessica shouted, shooting to her feet and taking half a step forward before she felt a hand on her shoulder.

She was so very tempted to remove it – and the man that it was attached to – quite forcefully. Instead, she allowed herself to be guided back into her chair.

Far quicker than she’d expected, Brown returned carrying two envelopes, identical if you could believe it, and handed one of them out to her.
“Your photos,” Brown stated. “I’ll keep this set and show them to the team.”

Jessica could only stare at her. There was no way that she could have copied those photos, not in the time that she was out of the room. There was no tech, nothing that would do it so quickly.

“If we see or hear anything about these kids, we’ll contact you,” Brown promised.

Jessica gave an awkward nod and fished out a card for Alias Investigations.

“Thank you,” Brown said, taking it. “And next time Miss Jones, try being upfront with us; we’ll be more likely to listen to you that way.”

“I’ll try to remember that,” Jessica replied as she walked backwards towards the door, her eyes still flicking to the impossible envelope holding copies of her photos.

There was definitely a mystery here and if there was one thing that Jessica hated – apart from being out of booze – was a mystery that she couldn’t solve. Maybe one day she’d have to spend some time trying to work out Miss Lavender Brown, Avengers Press Secretary.
Come One, Come All!

The envelope itself was relatively plain, lying as it was just inside her door. What it held, though, was anything but commonplace.

The parchment was thick, rich and of the finest quality that one could buy. The edges and corners were embellished with gold-leaf, enhancing the richness and importance of the invitation. For invitation was what it was.

Harry James Potter and Daisy Louise Johnson

Request the pleasure of your company at their wedding

Thereafter followed the details of where and when the invitees were to meet. Really, the only unusual part of the invitation was the statement that the guests would be transported to a secret location for the actual wedding and reception and that accommodation would be provided for those wishing to stay a few days.

The fact that the wedding was to be held in exactly eight days didn’t leave much time for the guests to make arrangements.

“I knew that you and Daisy were engaged, but a little more notice would have been nice, Harry,” Hermione groused to her invitation.

But then, this was Harry and if his middle name hadn’t been James, then it would have been ‘impulsive’ or ‘reckless’ or ‘jumping in without thinking’; she’d known that for years. Still, this was Harry, her best friend and there was absolutely no way that she was going to miss his wedding.

Her brain went into overdrive as she created a mental list of all the things that she’d need to do in order to be there: arrange time off work; pack; get a portkey to New York City; get a gift. That last one pulled her up short. What should she get? Harry’d always been happy with anything really, no matter how small, he’d cherished it all; a side-effect of his upbringing. But this was his wedding, it needed to be something special.

Even as she was considering options, Hermione was grabbing up her purse and heading for her front door. There were simply too many things to do in too short a time for her to leave starting them all until tomorrow.

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The place where Francine found herself wasn’t anything fancy. Nor was it what one might consider a ‘traditional’ hideout. It wasn’t an old abandoned warehouse or derelict building or even a basement under a legitimate business.

No, where they’d gathered was Jack’s apartment in a middle-class part of Queens. It was on the third floor, contained two bedrooms plus a bathroom, lounge, kitchen and even a small balcony. Never would anyone suspect that this was the ‘headquarters’ of a criminal gang. Which, when Francine thought about it, actually made it the perfect place for them to discuss their latest caper and to plan their next heist.

“Look at it!” Danny breathed, unzipping the bag and holding the sides open for the five of them around the table to see.
Inside the old, leather bag were dozens and dozens of pieces of jewellery. Necklaces, rings, watches, earrings, bracelets and bangles, cufflinks ... all of it of the finest quality and incredibly expensive.

“That is some haul,” Glen whistled.

“And just the start,” Gavin grinned. “With Francine here on our side, nothing’s gonna stop us!”

Jack bustled to the side cabinet before quickly returning with a bottle of scotch and five glasses. It didn’t take long for the glasses to be filled and for everyone to have one.

“To Francine! Saviour of our butts!” Glen exclaimed, raising his glass.

“To Francine, electro-whizz extraordinaire!” Danny agreed.

“To Francine, our Electro!” Gavin cheered.

“Electro!” the other three men echoed before all of them drank.

Getting the number of engines needed attached to the semi had been a task in itself, especially when it meant scrounging for the necessary parts, not to mention the dozens of simulations in order to make what he had in mind actually work. The cash he’d gotten from robbing the bank had helped. A lot. But there was a lot more cash needed if he wanted to become the best and to become unstoppable. That meant that he’d need to rob a bunch more banks. Unfortunately, in order to pull that off, he first needed more weapons. Thus, the need for retrofitting the semi.

Currently, Roderick was atop his glider, wearing the new armour that he’d been able to build from the portion of funds allocated to that particular part of his plan. With his knees slightly bent, he leant to the right, allowing the glider to follow the path of the river below him.

When it came right down to it, this was the best way in. He could follow the river right up to the very fence of the military munitions’ depot without any annoying streetlights or cars or whatever spotting him. Glancing back, Roderick gave a satisfied nod – the semi was flying along right behind him, its movements mirroring the glider’s.

Roderick, or Hobgoblin as he’d announced himself as back at the bank robbery, slowed as he came around the last curve and into sight of his target.

It was a big, sprawling complex with security all over it. Ten foot high fences topped with barbed wire surrounded it. Huge spotlights lit up the perimeter, although these were spaced much closer together on the far side where the supposedly only entrance was. There were even guard towers on that side.

But here, on the river side, the only extra security was an eight foot vertical concrete wall along the bank of the river before the wire fence began. As if either of those heights could do anything to stop him, even added together.

A shift of his heel had the glider – and subsequently the semi behind him – rising ten, twenty, thirty feet into the air. Hobgoblin cut his engines as much as possible to continue forward momentum but also to remain silent so as to not alert the guards below. It was a delicate balancing act but somehow, he managed.

As more and more of the facility came into sight, he used the enhancements on his goggles to get a good look at the place, noting the number of guards and their placement. Finally, he had what he was
looking for: a window of opportunity to set down where he and his semi wouldn’t be seen.

Hobgoblin managed to keep his glider half a meter off the ground even after the semi was grounded giving him the manoeuvrability that he needed, just in case. It was then a matter of getting the warehouse door open and directing the semi inside before shutting the door again.

Turning about, he scanned the building and couldn’t help but rub his hands together. He’d hit the jackpot. A lot of the stuff in there he could use as is and the rest would be child’s play for him to modify into his own designs.

Checking his watch, he saw that dawn was five and a half hours away.

Time for him to get to work.

It was the sudden upsurge in volume from the four House Tables that alerted the Hogwarts professors to something being out of the ordinary. Each of the Heads looked firstly to their own tables even as the other professors scanned the Hall in general, all looking for any potential trouble.

What they saw was that the entire student body was looking upwards. The fact that it was the middle of breakfast and thus the normal time for the owls to arrive with the daily post and newspapers could account for some of that interest, but certainly not all of it.

“Woul’ ye loo’ at tha’,” Hagrid breathed.

Well, breathed for Hagrid. To any normal person, it would have been closer to the volume of a normal speaking voice.

“Albatrosses. And not just one, but three,” Neville agreed.

Post albatrosses were incredibly rare, only being used for intercontinental flight, and incredibly expensive to boot. Really, though, albatrosses were the perfect means of sending mail from one country to another, with their wingspan being the widest of any bird on the planet, not to mention the fact that they could travel up to ten thousand miles in a single journey.

As the entire hall watched mesmerised, the three albatrosses circled the Hall well above the smaller owls, once, twice and a third time before diving towards the staff table. Instantly, professors were moving plates, bowls, cups and platters out of the way, giving the large birds room enough to land in.

Just as with normal post owls, once landed, the three albatrosses lifted a leg to the recipient of the letter that they carried. Almost in unison, Minerva, Neville and Hagrid untied their letters and opened them.

Neville’s eyes widened before a grin spread across his face.

“Headmistress,” he said formally, his eyes still darting backwards and forwards across the words on the high-grade parchment as he read and reread the words there. “I would like to request a leave of absence for next week.”

“Yes, I thought that you might,” Minerva replied, a small smile upon her own lips. “Hagrid?”

“Yes’m, I’d like ta request tha same,” he boomed. “There’s no way, tha’ I’m gonna miss Harry’s weddin’! I’ll take it withou’ pay, if’n tha’ helps.”
Hagrid’s words instantly spread up and down the House tables. ‘Harry’ was getting married. And Professors Hagrid, Longbottom and McGonagall had all been invited. There was only one ‘Harry’ that could have send those invitations – Harry Potter.

“I think that the castle and students can do without the three of us for a week,” Minerva replied.

After four attempts at getting dirt on the Avengers, Mac had realised how pointless an exercise it was. At least using this current strategy.

The Avengers had well and truly gone to ground. Rarely were any of them ever seen out in public – and that included the self-proclaimed diva: Tony Stark. Of course, some of the masked ones could be walking around among normal people without their costumes, but who’d know? No, instead, they stayed either within the Tower where the briefest of glimpses using high-powered telescopic lenses was the best that one could get or else at their upstate facility that no one could ever get near or at their rumoured other, secret base.

No, Mac now knew that trying to get dirt on them using photos or video or even laser mics wasn’t going to cut it. If he wanted to get something on them for Jameson to use, for the whole world to see what a menace they were, then he had to change tactics.

Thankfully, he had a better idea. One that Toomes and Stillwell had provided.

After driving into the underground carpark beneath the block across from Avengers Tower, Mac had slipped into the back of his van and suited up.

It truly was a work of art. The body armour was out of the world strong, especially compared to how much it weighed. And the fact that it covered his entire body provided him with a high degree of safety – not only from being injured but also from being identified. And then there was his tail. Mac simply loved his scorpion-like tail, especially what it was capable of.

Climbing from the van, Mac looked about. Nothing, the place was completely deserted. Grinning to himself, Mac strode across the carpark to the rear stairwell that would take him to the street directly across from his target.

Well, target in an extremely loose sense of the word. After all, his plan was simple – if he couldn’t get to the Avengers to get dirt on them, then he’d make them come to him and implicate themselves.

Stepping out of the closed door onto the sidewalk had an immediate reaction that had his grin widening: screams. Lots and lots of screams. Every single person who saw him, instantly let loose at the top of their lungs and bolted. It was such an intoxicating feeling, one that Mac was sure that he could get used to.

Unfortunately, that was precisely when his plan went pear-shaped.

One of the cars that happened to be passing at just that moment was a cop car. The fact that they’d seen him was a given simply by the way that they screeched to a halt, their tyres smoking with how hard their breaks had been slammed on.

With a shrug, Mac marched towards them. If this didn’t bring the Avengers running – cops being attacked by a suited ‘villain’ on their very doorstep, then nothing would.

Both cops were already scrambling from their car, one of them screaming into his shoulder-mounted radio, their guns drawn, when Mac’s razor-sharp tail slammed down into the middle of the car’s
boot. With a thought, he dragged his tail backwards, cutting through the metal as though it was butter and causing even more bystanders to run screaming from him.

And then the first bullet struck him, high on the right shoulder. Mac flinched with the impact but was otherwise unhurt, the armour doing its job perfectly. With a roar of his own, he advanced on the cop that had attempted to shoot him.

One vicious swipe of his tail cut the door that the cop was hiding behind in two. Bullets peppered him, but Mac ignored them, instead grabbing the cop’s hand and gun and squeezing. That’s when Mac found another benefit from that serum that Stillwell had injected him with: enhanced strength. The cop screamed in agony as the bones in his hand were crushed while the gun that it was holding became nothing more than a mashed piece of metal.

A hail of bullets slamming into his back spun Mac around, only to find that two more cop cars had arrived on the scene, their occupants currently standing behind their open car doors and firing at him.

Ignoring them for the moment – after all, they weren’t any threat to him – Mac looked for his true targets.

But there was no sign of them. Not even a single red and gold suit flying around the top of the Tower watching. Worse still, the entrance to the Tower had been sealed up tight, every window now had metal across them and the doors themselves were hidden behind plates of shiny silver.

As a third police car arrived, Mac knew that his plan had failed.

Activating the mini-rocket launcher within his tail took no more than a thought. Firing a pair of the rockets at two of the cop cars was enough to cause mayhem, explosions and even more screams. Exactly what he needed to slip away.

Next time. Next time, he’d find a way to draw them out and to show the world exactly why those Accords were needed to stop people like the Avengers from being the menace to society that they really were.

ooo00ooo

Luke was still on the first page of chapter three of *The Invisible Man* and thus, his attention was elsewhere when DW burst into Pop’s Barber shop, skidding on the linoleum and only staying upright by grabbing onto the door itself.

“Slow down, kid,” Bobbi stated with a slow shake of his head from where he sat at the table contemplating the chess game that he and Pop were in the middle of. “The world ain’t gonna end if’n you don’t get where you need to go simply by walking.”

“It might not end, but there’s no telling if it’ll survive what’s coming,” DW wheezed.

“What are you on about, son?” Pop asked.

“The TV. Turn on the TV,” DW instructed.

Luke lowered his book with a frown. There was no way that he could concentrate with the racket that the kid had brought with him. More out of something to do than any other reason, he looked up at the set that Pop was just reaching up to turn on.

As the old, slightly-fuzzy screen came on, Luke couldn’t help but frown as he attempted to work out what he was seeing.
The view was from a helicopter looking down on the city. And while the picture kept jumping about somewhat, it mostly stayed focussed on a truck with some kind of flying thing zipping from side to side after it. Bringing up the rear were a convoy of police cars, lights flashing and, he was sure, sirens blaring.

Unexpectedly, the truck swerved, taking a sharp corner in an obvious attempt to evade the flying thing. That was enough to give the viewers a better look at what was going on as the camera angle in the helicopter changed.

“Sweet Christmas!” Luke murmured, rising from his chair to approach the TV.

The truck wasn’t anything special, apart from the fact that it belonged to a security company. The flying thing, though, *that* was something else. It was a man in some sort of old-fashioned flying suit and goggles but with massive mechanical wings strapped to his back and some kind of engines attached to them that allowed him to fly.

The flying man dipped to one side, his wings momentarily going almost vertical to the ground rather than horizontal before he corrected, gaining height in the process. And then, like some kind of strange vulture, his wings angled backwards and he swooped down, directly at the truck.

By some miracle, the man managed to momentarily land on the top of the truck and shoot out a grappling hook that attached him to it. Luke couldn’t really see what the man did next but when next he veered slightly to one side, it was to reveal a square hole cut into the roof of the truck. Unexpectedly, the man dropped from his wings, disappearing directly into the truck itself.

“Luke! They’re heading into Harlem,” DW announced.

And they were, Luke realised, recognising not only some of the buildings, but also shops. What was worse was that the truck seemed to be veering from one side of the road to the other, as though the driver was only just barely managing to keep control of the vehicle.


“A dollar,” Pop stated automatically, pointing at the Swear Jar on the shelf.

“I’ll pay when I get back,” Luke promised even as he was already reaching for the door, ready to race out to do what he could to make sure the people of Harlem stayed safe from whatever that was coming right at them.

“Miss Rodriguez is the thirteenth Inhuman that we’ve now encountered,” Coulson stated.

“What’s her abilities?” Fitz asked.

In reply, Coulson brought up Rodriguez’ file on the main monitor.

“She’s fast,” Coulson replied simply.

“Like Pietro Maximoff?” Jemma asked, leaning forward.

“Yes and no,” Coulson replied. “Miss Rodriguez has the added limitation of only being able to use her super speed for the space of one heartbeat before she is forced to return to the place where she started.”
“A real yo-yo,” Mack commented.

Any reply was cut off by the appearance of a bundle of envelopes, tied together with string, appearing in the middle of the conference table with a blue glow.

“Well, that’s new,” Coulson remarked.

“Don’t!” May commanded, making Jemma pause with her arm outstretched towards them. “We don’t know what they are or who sent them or even how they appeared.”

“Of course, we know who sent them,” Jemma countered. “They’re from Daisy. Or more specifically, Harry.”

“You know I really hate magic,” Fitz groused. “It doesn’t obey the laws of nature.”

“Fitz, magic is just science that we don’t understand. You know that,” Jemma admonished.

“Arthur C. Clarke,” Fitz sighed. “Still, I’m allowed to hate magic.”

“Well, you won’t hate this,” Jemma smiled at the letter in her hand that she’d opened. “Here.”

Quickly, she distributed the right envelopes to the right people seated at the table.

“A wedding invitation?” May asked, clearly surprised.

“Come on, May, it’ll be fun,” Coulson smiled.

The look that she shot him told all there that she clearly disagreed.

ooo00ooo

“Miss Morbeck? Director Rettero will see you now.”

Melissa smiled up at the secretary as she stood, smoothing her skirt as she did so.

“Thank you,” she said.

Picking up her case, she strode into the inner office, taking care to portray herself as a confident woman, something that she definitely was not feeling on the inside. Indeed, as important as this meeting was, she couldn’t help feeling as though she wasn’t ready for it, as though her ‘product’ was simply going to be laughed at, as though she was going to be laughed right back out the door in a matter of moments.

“Miss Morbeck,” Director Rettero said, greeting her just inside the door with a handshake.

The man was almost as wide as he was tall, with a head so shiny that the overhead lights glinted off of it and almost caused her to squint as she looked down on him. But what he lacked in hair on the top of his head, he made up for with the bushiest moustache that she’d ever seen.

“Director Rettero, thank you for seeing me,” she replied, resisting the urge to wipe her palm on her skirt from the greasy feel of the man’s hand.

“It’s my pleasure,” he replied. “Please, have a seat and tell me what it is that Central Park Zoo can do for you.”

“It’s not what the zoo can do for me,” she replied, “it’s what I can do for the zoo.”
“Really?” an intrigued-sounding Zoo Director replied. “Please, tell me more, but remember, that we’re only a small zoo.”

Lifting her case from her lap, she pulled out her laptop and a small, black box.

“May I?” she asked, indicating the desk.

At his nod and gesture, she placed her laptop on the desk, opened it and spun it ninety degrees so that they could both see the screen. Then, while the laptop was booting up, she opened up the box to reveal a single, tiny microchip lying on a pad of black foam.

Seeing the chip, Director Rettero held up a hand to stop her presentation before it even began.

“Miss Morbeck, I feel that it only fair to inform you that all of the animals here at Central Park Zoo are already microchipped.”

“I’m sure that they are,” she replied, “and I would have expected nothing less from such a responsible place such as this. But, tell me, would I be right in assuming that the chips implanted in your animals can only be read when a scanner passes over them and even then, the information that they give is limited to a serial number that must then be sent to a computer to find the information about each animal that the microchip is implanted in?”

“Well, of course, that is how animal microchips work,” Director Rettero replied.

“Well, Director,” Melissa smiled. “I am here to tell you that the microchip that I have developed does a lot more than that.”

“Really?” Director Rettero replied, sounding intrigued.

Seeing that her laptop was ready, Melissa opened the program to show the data coming in from the chip implanted in the Labrador back at her pet store.

“This is a live feed to a working chip in an animal at my facility,” she explained. “The data that you are seeing is being recorded and updated instantly to this program. As you can see, it gives the basic information about the animal at the top.”

Here, she pointed out the lines at the top of the screen, detailing the dog’s breed, age and identifying features. Her finger then began moving down the screen as she talked.

“Here we have the current GPS coordinates for the Labrador. It updates every minute. This is a heart-rate monitor and a brain-wave monitor. Using these, it is possible to keep track of the health of the animal. And the data is stored within the program for a total of ninety-six hours, after which, depending on preference, it can either be deleted or downloaded and saved to a separate program.”

“This really shows the health of the animal?” Director Rettero asked.

“It is one indicator,” Melissa cautioned. “When an animal is important to its owner or perhaps is considered valuable, every bit of data that can be gathered to ensure that it remains healthy should be utilized, don’t you agree?”

“Yes, of course,” Director Rettero replied. What do these spikes mean?”

Melissa looked at the relevant spikes in both the Labrador’s brain activity and heart rate from that very morning.
“That would be when I fed him,” she smiled. “He always gets so excited at meal times.”

“What else can this microchip of yours do?” he asked.

“At the moment, that is the extent of the microchip’s capabilities,” Melissa lied. “But surely you can see how much of an improvement it is over the ‘standard’ chip that is currently used for animals?”

“Yes, yes, I can,” Director Rettero nodded, his eyes darting between the screen and the chip itself. “What sort of trials have you done? I find it most peculiar that I haven’t even heard a whisper about this technology before today.”

“If you have the time, I can show you all the data that I collected?” Melissa offered. “And then, perhaps, if you’re interested, we could discuss Central Park Zoo purchasing the microchips for your animals?”

Director Rettero fumbled slightly as he reached out for his phone, his eyes still glued to the Melissa’s screen.

“Julie? Hold my calls for the next hour,” he instructed his secretary.

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Tony circled the island in the quinjet, comparing what was there to the original hologram that he’d seen of it and thence to what he expected to see. Overall, he was pleased. The team of builders that he’d had brought in looked to be either right on schedule or maybe even slightly ahead. But then, so they should be; he was paying a pretty packet to get this project off the ground.

Ignoring the narrow land outside of the mountains that made up the bowl of the main part of the island, Tony flew from north to south, banking slightly as he followed the small river that began at the highest peak and ran down and into the small fresh-water lake at the island’s lowest point. A squat, rectangular building looked to have its shell, at the very least, completed. By the time that it was finished, the water reclamation plant would ensure that the water from the town’s inhabitants that he was aiming to incorporate onto the island would be as pure as the water already there.

Yes, this place, with what he had planned, would be capable of holding a modest population, something that could come in handy after what he’d heard Johnson saying. But that was still a long way off. There was still a lot of work to be done before it got anywhere near that point.

Firing the thrusters, he shot across to the far side of the island where the large tarmac had been laid. While it wasn’t long enough for a commercial plane to land on, a quinjet or even a retrofitted aircraft like S.H.I.E.L.D. ’s Bus would have no problems landing there at all.

As he came in for a landing, he noticed a blip appear on his radar. Swinging his chair back around, Tony punched the appropriate buttons to bring up a feed for the craft on approach to the island. The quinjet – for that’s what the craft was – had just emerged from under the ocean and Tony grinned as he saw the cargo that it was carrying: the vibranium core that he’d ditched there for safekeeping.

While it was possible to fly his own quinjet down through the opening that led to the chamber deep below the island, Tony decided that it would be best not to get in the way too much. Stepping into his armour, the visor snapping in place and the HUD coming to life, enabled Tony to rocket from the back of his quinjet and into the sky.

By keeping low to the ground and going at full speed, he was able to slip his way into the tunnel before the approaching quinjet. The journey down was a simple, spirally curve that ended at the top of the massive chamber.
Once upon a time, the chamber had been full of molten lava before it’d ‘bubbled’ to create this enormous cave deep under the Earth, but no more. Now, it was filled with machinery and dozens of men working hard. Extra tunnels had been carved into the rock, shooting out at equidistant intervals, not only straight out but also at angles heading up and down.

“How we looking?” Tony asked, landing beside the guy he recognised as the foreman of the project.

“Mister Stark!” Ben Donges exclaimed. “I wasn’t expecting you today.”

Tony stepped from his suit, automatically putting it into sentry mode before turning to Ben.

“What? And miss this? This is the piece de resistance, the part that will make all of this worthwhile,” Tony replied.

The sound of engines high above them burst into being and the two looked up to see the quinjet, the vibranium core hanging underneath it, appear.

“How long will it take to put it in place?” Tony asked.

“Half an hour,” Ben shrugged. “That’s the easy bit. The part that’s gonna take time is connecting the core to the computers and then to the thirty-six engines down here.”

“They better all be installed by now,” Tony said. “Tell me that they’re all installed.”

“They are,” Ben replied. “We finished installing the last one the day before yesterday.”

“The last one or the last of the thirty-six?” Tony asked suspiciously.

“The last one,” Ben replied firmly. “This place is ready to be run completely on clean energy provided by your arc reactors. Thirty-six to power the main engine and the last one for whatever energy usage is needed top-side.”

As they’d been talking, they’d watched as the quinjet had manoeuvred into place directly above the central shaft of the chamber. Slowly, the rear of the vibranium core had been released, allowing it to swing down until it hung vertically. Then, with a dozen pair of hands guiding the very bottom of it and two others on comms to the pilot, the core was lowered to slot directly into place – the bottom third of it disappearing into the shaft that had been prepared for it.

The instant that it was down, the last cable released and men began scrambling, all intent on their tasks to secure the core and then to begin the long, tedious task of connecting it the computes and arc reactors.

Stepping up to the nearby console, Tony let his fingers go to work, checking and triple checking all of his calculations. Finally, he was satisfied.

When the arc reactors were finally powered on, a magnetic field would be enabled, one powerful enough to hold the island together, just as he’d envisioned.

“Alright, looks like you guys have everything in hand down here,” Tony commented. “That means that I can begin Stage Four.”

Ben gave him a quizzical look but refrained from asking which Tony gave a satisfied nod at seeing.

Yes, Project Calrissian was definitely the most ambitious of all of his projects and looked like it was going to be one of the most successful. Who needed their name up in lights when the entire world
would soon be able to simply look up in the sky and see … him?
**Best Day Ever**

*Man-Who-Conquered To Marry Today! by Rita Skeeter*

That’s right, my loyal readers, you read the headline correctly. Harry Potter, our own Boy-Who-Lived, Chosen One and Man-Who-Conquered is due to be married this very day. Like you, when I heard the news, I was overjoyed with excitement. For who deserves happiness more than Harry Potter after his tragic childhood and all that he has done for our world?

It has been some time since Harry Potter was amongst us. I’m sure that you all recall that even then, on his last brief visit home, he was still working to protect us all. That time, it was from a group of misguided fanatics who had taken a group of Hogwarts students and professors’ captive in the hope of forcing the Ministry of Magic to release the criminals from the Second Blood War that are currently housed in Azkaban. Due to Harry Potter’s interference, those miscreants were captured, tried and themselves sentenced to Azkaban Prison.

But who, I hear you ask, has captured our Chosen One’s heart so completely that he is due to marry today after a relatively short and quiet engagement? Many, I’m sure, would suspect that it was Harry Potter’s long-time best friend and love interest, Hermione Granger, but you would be wrong. At the very least, like myself, you would expect the bride to be magical. But alas, we would also be wrong in that assumption.

This reporter has worked tirelessly in pursuit of the truth and can now tell you that the future Lady of the Most Ancient and Noble Houses of Potter and Black is Daisy Louise Johnson. Miss Johnson is not magical. Indeed, it seems that she is not even completely human. She is, what the muggles have come to call, a part of the Inhuman section of the people of Earth.

For those of you who are not familiar with what has been going on in the muggle world over the last few years, let me enlighten you.

We magicals, as you know, have been in hiding from the muggle world for centuries, ever since the Statute of Secrecy was imposed by the International Confederation of Wizardry in sixteen eighty-nine. But there has been another group, somewhat like ourselves, who has also been in hiding. These people aren’t fully human, instead part of their ancestry is from another planet, if one can believe such a thing. These people have special abilities, but unlike us, they are limited to a single ability.

Daisy Johnson can cause vibrations to make the ground shake or to move objects. And that brings us to how our Man-Who-Conquered met Miss Johnson. Both are a part of the muggle ‘hero’ team, the Avengers. They have worked together to keep people safe from harm and to stop evildoers from atrocities that we are intimately familiar with from the War against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

While I am sure that we all would have preferred that Harry Potter marry a witch, knowing that he has found an equal in Miss Johnson is some comfort and I, for one, wish them well and encourage them to come home soon.

Harry Potter and Daisy Johnson will be married outside of England at a location that this reporter could not locate. We here at the Daily Prophet will endeavour to bring you pictures of the happy occasion as soon as possible.

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“Did you think when you joined the KGB that one day, you’d be serving as the welcoming committee for wedding guests?” Clint asked.

Nat gave him a nonplussed look.

“You know as well as I do that this isn’t all that different from a host of other assignments that we’ve had over the years. We’re basically bouncers,” she said.

“Bouncers who aren’t allowed to shoot anyone,” Clint retorted.

Nat, as was typical for her, ignored the comment. Not that there would have been time for a retort in any case as a flare of blue appeared in the designated place across the room. When the woman stopped spinning, she looked up at them, recognition blossoming on her face.

“Natasha, Clint, it’s good to see you again. How are you?” Hermione asked.

“We’re well,” Nat replied, stepping forward to give the other woman a hug.

“I take it that I’m the first?” Hermione asked, looking around the empty room.

“Yes,” Clint replied. “Grab yourself a drink or snack while we wait for everyone else.”

“A drink, maybe; definitely not food. If I know Harry, there’ll be a third portkey ride ahead of me soon and I don’t want to take it on a full stomach,” she replied.

“Smart,” Nat nodded.

“Agent Romanoff,” a voice spoke in her ear. “The minivan from the airport has arrived at the gate. There are six passengers instead of five.”

“Who’s the extra?” she asked, having turned away from the incoming portkey flash and pressing a finger to her earpiece.

“A Hope van Dyne. Scott Lang is vouching for her,” she was informed.

Nat closed her eyes briefly. Trust Scott to not follow the rules.

“Let them through,” she instructed.

When next she turned back it was to see a sea of red, well, at least half a dozen red-heads as well as their accompanying partners. She’d met a few of them before: Weasleys, friends of Harry’s from magical England. The mother, Molly, Nat recalled, was bustling about her brood of adults, treating them like they were still children, which, when Nat thought about it, the woman probably still saw them as. The curse of motherhood, at least, that’s what her talks with Laura had told her.

The next to arrive was a tall, imposing-looking black man in rich-looking blue robes. Glancing down at the pad in her hand gave her the man’s identity.

“Minister Shacklebolt,” she said, “it’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Natasha Romanoff.”

“Miss Romanoff,” the Minister for Magic for Great Britain replied, shaking her hand and smiling. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. Am I permitted to know where I currently am? I know that moments ago I was in the International Portkey Terminal in New York City but the note that I was given didn’t give me a destination for that second portkey.”

“Of course, Minister,” Nat replied. “Currently, you are at Avengers Compound in upstate New
York. Shortly, once everyone has arrived, you’ll be given another portkey which will take you to your final destination, which security forbids me from telling you the location of.”

“I understand completely,” Minister Shacklebolt replied.

Noticing the far door opening, Nat excused herself from the Minister, leaving Clint to deal with the newest magical arrivals and went to meet those that had arrived by minivan.

“Lang. I’m assuming that you can read. *Plus One* does not mean two.”

“Peanut, this is Miss Romanoff, also known as the Black Widow,” Scott said to the girl at his side that he had his arm around. “Right now, she’s trying to act all big and mean, but we know that she’s really just a big pussycat on the inside.”

Nat blinked slowly while internally counting to ten.

“Oh, come on, Nat, Cassie’s eleven, she barely counts as a half,” Scott continued, before gesturing to his companion. “Natasha Romanoff, Hope van Dyne. Hope, Nat.”

“Miss Van Dyne,” Nat said, shaking the other woman’s hand.

Nat, of course, knew who she was. Hope van Dyne, the daughter of Hank Pym and Janet van Dyne. She’d read their S.H.I.E.L.D. files; after all, Scott’s Ant Man suit was based on the suits that Hank, the original Ant Man and Janet, aka the Wasp, used back in the day. Hope was reportedly as smart as her parents. And while currently there was no indication that Hope would be following in her mother’s footsteps, Nat hadn’t ruled out the possibility for the future.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Hope said. “I’m sorry about Scott. I’ve been trying to housebreak him, but you know what men can be like.”

“Hey!” Scott protested, a protest that was ignored by the women and giggled at by his daughter.

“I understand completely,” Nat replied. “We’ll have to get together later and compare methodologies.”

“Um, I’m not sure that I like the sound of that,” Scott said, and was again ignored.

“If you’ll excuse me, I need to greet the other guests that came with you,” Nat said.

Her gaze focussed on the large man that had, along with his wife and daughter, remained hovering near the door, their eyes wide at everything and everyone around them. It’d been a couple of years since she and Clint had spent a week surveilling this particular family.

“Mister Dursley, Misses Dursley, my name is Natasha Romanoff,” she said, introducing herself.

She’d been sure to move slowly and to keep her hands in plain sight at all times. These three, but most especially the father, was easily spooked.

“Hi!” the little girl replied with a huge smile on her face. “You’re Black Widow! I’ve seen you on TV. I even have your action figure at home. My name’s Elizabeth, but everyone just calls me Beth.”

“Hello, Beth,” Nat smiled down at the girl. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“He … hello. I’m Dudley, Dudley Dursley,” he replied. “This is my wife, Alice. Is … is Harry here?”
“Unfortunately not,” Nat replied. “He’s got a few things to do to prepare for the wedding but you’ll see him once we get to our final destination.”

“How … how are we getting there?” Dudley asked, his eyes wide as they stared past her shoulder where the flash of blue in the window in front of her told Nat that another guest had just arrived by portkey.

“Your family will be travelling by quinjet,” Nat replied. “It’s a little longer that way, but Harry felt that you’d be more comfortable travelling by air.”

“A quinjet! Cooool!” Beth exclaimed, drawing out the word.

“Excuse me, all,” Clint said, appearing at her side. “Nat, everyone’s here.”

With a nod to the Dursleys, Nat and Clint strode across to the front of the room.

“Friday, is the room sealed?” Clint asked.

“It is,” the AI replied.


A wave of red washed over the entirety of the room, including everyone in it and causing a few murmurs of surprise.

“Three insects have been detected,” Friday reported a few moments later. “All are located on the person of Mister Hagrid.”

“Wha’?” the enormous half-giant said, clearly startled at hearing his name from a disembodied voice.

Nat, followed by Clint marched across the room to the largest individual there and were quickly joined by Hermione and an elderly woman who Nat identified as the Headmistress of Hogwarts, Minerva McGonagall.

“Is there a problem?” Minerva asked.

“Our scans have detected three insects on Mister Hagrid,” Nat began before being interrupted by Hermione.

“Rita, if you’re here,” she began menacingly, her wand in her hand.

A large beetle rocketed out of Hagrid’s beard. Only the fact that she’d been warned what could happen gave Nat the reflexes that she needed. Her hand whipped out, closing around the beetle and capturing it. Quickly, she dumped it inside the jar that Clint held out for her before he screwed on the lid.

“Was that an Animagus?” Minerva asked, clearly shocked.

“Rita Skeeter,” Hermione replied. “And still unregistered after all this time.”

“That won’t be a circumstance that remains,” Minister Shacklebolt stated, joining the group. “I will see her arrested and charged.”

“That can wait until she returns to England,” Nat said before turning her attention to the large water beetle hovering in the centre of the jar. “Miss Skeeter. The jar that you are currently trapped in has two features that you should be aware of. Firstly, the inside of it is coated with a potion that Harry
found in Africa and made especially for you today. It works on touch and is absorbed into the body of an Animagus and will keep the person trapped in their animal shape for seventy-two hours. Secondly, the jar has been spelled unbreakable; a spell, that I’m told, will fail in thirty-six hours, more than enough time to ensure that you touch the potion. Now, Hermione, if you wouldn’t mind, can you tap the jar with your wand and force some magic into it.”

Looking perplexed, Hermione followed the instruction only for all to see the jar vanish in a flash of blue.

“Where was she sent?” Hermione asked.

“The Amazon,” Clint replied. “Which should keep her out of our hair for the wedding and might even teach her a lesson.”

“Now that that’s been taken care of,” Nat said, addressing the crowded room. “If everyone could listen closely, we’ll get you all sorted for where you need to go.

              ooo00ooo

“We’re here to enjoy ourselves, remember?” Phil said to May as the two of them walked from the tarmac where they’d parked the Bus.

“Do you think we’ll get to see the dragons?” Fitz asked from where he, Jemma and Mac brought up the rear. “There’s supposed to be three of them, aren’t there?”

“That is what Daisy said,” Jemma confirmed. “Peruvian Vipertooths, I believed she called them. And supposedly not the largest of dragon-kind. Dragon-kind! Who’d have ever thought that we’d be having this conversation, knowing that there was a very real possibility that we’d get to see real, live dragons?”

“I’ve gotta admit, after all the crazy that we’ve encountered, nothing surprises me anymore,” Mac replied with a shake of his head.

“Right, I’m this way,” Phil stated, stopping where the path divided. “Go, mingle, have fun.”

“Say ‘hi’ to Daisy for us,” Jemma called as he went towards one of the smaller buildings while the rest of the team continued on to the main facility of Black Island.

The building – villa, Phil decided – was almost hidden amongst the trees, its whitewashed walls peaking out at him from the foliage at the end of the path. Reaching the door, he stopped, straightened his bowtie, pulled his jacket straight and knocked.

“Yes?” a suspicious-sounding voice that Phil recognised as belonging to Maria Hill called.

“It’s Coulson,” he replied.

Instantly, the door was opened and he was all but pulled inside before the door was promptly snapped shut behind him.

“Coulson,” Maria greeted with a frown. “You’re late.”

“We caught a headwind,” he apologised.

“Never mind. She’s through there.”

Following Maria’s pointed finger, Phil left the villa’s entryway and entered what was supposed to be
the lounge. There were still couches there, however, they were all pushed up against the walls, leaving the main area free for other uses. In this case, it was for a pair of tables with large mirrors affixed on top of them, the rest of the surface littered with jars and containers and brushes and combs and a myriad of other things that Phil had no clue about.

Sitting in front of one of the tables was a figure dressed in white, her dark brown hair slightly longer than he remembered and immaculately done in such a way as to enhance her natural waves, while tiny drops of silver glittered from within it at irregular places.

Phil's breath caught as he stared at the girl, no, woman, bride and his eyes met hers in the mirror. A huge grin appeared on her face and she spun her chair and was up and coming across the room towards him.

Phil caught her, returning her embrace.

"You look beautiful, Daisy,” he said into her ear. “Harry’s one lucky man.”

“I’m glad you could be here. Finally,” she admonished.

“It is my honour,” he told her. “I’m just sorry that Cal couldn’t be here.”

Daisy's face fell slightly. “He doesn’t remember me and it’s not like we really ever had much chance to connect.”

“Still, he’s your father,” Phil replied. “He would have been so proud of you and you know what he’d be saying if he was here right now?”

“Best day ever!” they finished together.

“Yeah, he would, wouldn’t he?” Daisy replied wistfully. “Still, even if he did remember, I think that I’d still want you to walk me down the aisle. You are still going to, right?”

“Nothing would make me happier,” Phil smiled.

“Daisy?” one of the other women in the room, this one with light scarring on her face, interrupted. “It’s nearly time and we still need to finish your makeup. You don’t want to keep Harry waiting, do you?”

“I thought that that was part of my job as bride, to keep the groom waiting,” Daisy replied, eliciting a laugh from all the women present.

Phil simply smiled and watched. He didn’t have children of his own but Daisy, she definitely had a special place in his heart and he couldn’t have been prouder and happier if she was his own daughter.

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“Heck of time for the island to get infested with bugs,” Bucky complained as he ducked his head away from something that zipped past his ear.

Daphne’s musical laugh had his head whipping back towards his heavily pregnant wife.

“What?” he asked, sure that he was being laughed at, although for the life of him, he couldn’t work out why.

“They’re not ‘bugs’,” Daphne told him.
“They’re not?” Bucky asked, his eyes darting around trying to get a better glimpse of one.

“Of course not; they’re fairies.”

Bucky’s eyes bugged out at her. “Fairies? As in magical creatures?”

“Yes, dear. And once it’s dark, you’ll see this entire area light up with their golden glow. Oh, it’ll be so beautiful. And romantic,” Daphne sighed.

“Any other magical creatures around that I should know about?” Bucky asked as they continued towards their seats.

“Not that I’m aware of,” Daphne replied. “Some magical weddings have unicorns included but I don’t believe that Harry has any on the island.”

“How about here?” Bucky asked, indicating a row that was currently only being occupied by Bruce and Betty.

“Yes, this should do. We should have a good view of the ceremony from here,” Daphne agreed as she began shuffling into the row, pulling Bucky along after her.

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“Good afternoon, Doreen,” a voice that the girl in question didn’t recognise said.

Turning in her chair from where she’d been people watching along with Gwen, much to Peter’s disgust, Doreen found an older woman standing beside her aisle seat, looking down at her with the tiniest of smiles on her face.

“Grandma Andi!” Doreen exclaimed, shooting to her feet. “Ted didn’t tell me you were coming.”

“And yet, I do remember owling him,” Andi replied, giving Doreen a hug. “Unfortunately, that is one way that Teddy takes after his mother, by having an absolutely atrocious memory.”

“Ted’s alright, he remembered my birthday the other week,” Doreen replied, defending her boyfriend.

“Yes,” Andi smiled. “He is good at remembering the important things; it’s just some of the smaller details that get overlooked.”

“Would you like to sit with us?” Doreen asked. “Gwen and Peter won’t mind moving along.”

“Thank you, dear, but I have a seat reserved for me in the front row,” Andi replied, patting her arm. “Harry doesn’t have much family left and thus has asked me to sit in the place of his parents.”

“Right down the front row? You’ll have the best view here!” Doreen exclaimed.

“Indeed. Oh, it must be almost time,” Andi stated, “Harry’s taking his place. We will catch up more after the ceremony.”

With that, Andi took her leave allowing Doreen to retake her seat.

“‘Grandma Andi’?” Gwen questioned, leaning over.

“I know, it’s a little awkward,” Doreen replied. “I’ve only met her a couple of times but once she found out that Ted and I were dating, she insisted.”
“Maybe she’s already starting to plan your wedding!” Gwen laughed.

Doreen scrunched up her nose. “I hope not! We’re still teenagers and nowhere near ready for that.”

“Tell that to ‘Grandma Andi’!” Peter laughed before quickly moving away and managing to evade Doreen’s swipe at him.

Harry’d only just stepped up on the platform where the ceremony was to be held when the sight of three people seated in the second row caught his eye. Two of them – the woman and the girl – he’d never met before. The other, though, the other he knew really well, even if it’d been quite a few years since he’d last laid eyes on him.

Taking a breath, he descended the three steps. The man obviously realised his destination, for he rose and waddled towards the aisle, his wife and daughter following along behind.

“Big D,” Harry greeted, holding his hand out. “Wasn’t sure you’d come.”

“Hey, Harry,” Dudley replied, his small eyes meeting Harry’s for a moment before darting around and dropping. “I … I wasn’t sure that I would either. Not at first, at least. Alice talked me into it, though.”

Taking a guess, Harry held out his hand to the woman.

“I’m guessing that you’re Alice?” he smiled.

“Um, yeah, Harry, this is my wife, Alice. Alice, my cousin, Harry,” Dudley introduced quickly. “And this is our daughter, Elizabeth.”

“Beth,” the girl corrected.

“Well, I’m glad that you could all come,” Harry said before deciding to ‘bite the wand’. “Dud, you understand that there’s going to be some … I’m assuming that your family knows about my ‘freakishness’?”

Again, Dudley’s eyes dropped towards the ground. “They know that you’re magical, Harry.”

Harry was impressed. He couldn’t remember Dudley ever saying the ‘m’ word before. Perhaps listening to Daisy when she insisted that he invite his cousin was a good thing, a chance to ‘patch things up, make a fresh start’ as she’d said.

“What sort of magic will we get to see?” Beth asked, bouncing on her toes, her eyes shining.

Harry dropped to one knee to talk to be able to look her in the eye.

“Well, if you look closely around the bushes and flowers, you might see some fairies,” he smiled. “There’s also some magic with wands as a part of wedding but you won’t really see any magic being done then. You might see some dragons flying past; they’re friends of mine and are very friendly. And unless I miss my guess, my friend George is likely to have some magical fireworks to let off tonight during the reception. If you like normal fireworks, you’re going to love these.”

“Cool!” Beth replied with a massive grin on her face. “I love fireworks.”

As Harry stood back up, he noticed that Beth was looking up, twisting her head this way and that, before she switched focus to the flowers nearby.
“Uh, Harry,” Dudley began, drawing Harry’s attention once more. “There was something … do you remember how, when we were kids, you did stuff that, uh …”

“I remember,” Harry replied grimly, trying hard not to think of the consequences of those bouts of accidental magic.

“Well, there’s been some … things,” Dudley began.

“Is it possible that Beth could be magical?” Alice interrupted. “Like you?”

Harry blinked before looking down at the girl who was now staring up at him.

“How old’s Beth?” he asked.

“Ten. I’ll be eleven on November first,” the girl in question replied.

“It’s possible; it does run in the family,” Harry replied slowly. “If she is, she’ll get her Hogwarts’ letter on her birthday.”

“Like you? With all them owls?” Dudley asked.

“No, not like me,” Harry laughed. “Beth would get hers hand delivered by a professor. Actually, there’s a few of them here. I can introduce you to them later, if you like.”

“Yeah, yeah, that’d be good,” Dudley replied.

“Thank you,” Alice added.

Hearing a waft of music, Harry looked up.

“That sounds like my cue. Talk to you later, Big D.”

The beginning notes of the Wedding March filled the clearing and Daisy couldn’t help but wonder where it was coming from. There was no band and she was sure that the sound was too pure as to be coming from a sound system. The only thing that she could put it down to was ‘magic’.

“Ready?” A.C. asked.

Daisy looked up at him.

“Yeah. Yeah, I am. Let’s get this show on the road.”

After slipping her arm through his, the two of them followed her bridesmaids – Bobbi and Lavender – towards the top of the aisle.

The setting was perfect. Rows of chairs were set out in the clearing, shaded by the trees that surrounded them. At the far end, to which currently everyone had their backs to as they stood facing her to watch her walk down the aisle, a platform had been erected. A simple white arch had been placed in the centre of it with vines filled with yellow and red flowers winding their way up. In the far distance, if one was looking hard enough, was the perfect blue of the ocean, peeking through the trees.

She and A.C. waited as firstly Lavender and then Bobbi made their way down the aisle, ascended the three steps and took their places on the platform.
A slight squeeze of her hand that A.C.’s hand rested on told her that it was finally their turn.

As they took their first step, a series of pops sounded to either side of them and all the way down the sides of the aisle as all of the house elves of the island appeared, watching her intently with many of the large, tennis-ball like eyes appearing to be watering. Daisy blinked at the last house elf on the right. This one, she couldn’t ever remember seeing before. He was ancient, bent nearly double and dressed differently than all the others and she wasn’t sure whether the expression on his face was a grimace or a smile.

Before she could puzzle out the enigma of the strange house elf, her attention was taken by the great shadows that appeared along with an unexpected breeze. Feeling her veil shifting slightly, Daisy put up her hand. Doing so, altered the direction that she was looking slightly and her eyes widened.

“They came!” she whispered. “Harry said they would and they did.”

And they had; the three dragons pirouetted in mid-air before folding their wings back and dropping towards the crowd. There were a few half-shrieks and quite a number of heads ducking – May, Daisy noticed, even pulled her gun from somewhere within her dress – but it wasn’t needed as the dragon’s destination was the very back of the gathering where they landed, their long necks reaching forward almost over the back row to watch what was happening.

Finally, Daisy had reached the bottom of the platform and A.C. pulled her to a stop. Seeing the way his eyes were beginning to water almost brought her to tears as well. Somehow, she managed to pull herself together as he kissed her cheek.

And then Harry was there, smiling, his emerald green eyes sparkling at her. She took his offered hand as he helped her up the steps. Quickly, her bridesmaids bustled forward to rearrange her train before once again taking up their positions.

“We are gathered here today, to join these two people, Harry James Potter and Daisy Louise Johnson in holy wedlock,” the ancient wizard that they had come to stand in front of said with a smile. “They shall be entered into a sacred bond that none shall break. Do you, Harry, come before all here today of your own free will?”

“I do,” Harry replied, his eyes darting to meet hers.

“And do you, Daisy, come before all here today of your own free will?”

“I do,” she replied, letting out a relieved breath at getting the words out without a stutter or hitch in her voice.

“Then let it be known to all that these two shall be wedded this day,” the wizard declared. “Please join hands.”

Daisy turned to face Harry as he took both of her hands in his.

“Will the Bonders please step forth?”

Harry had explained this part to her. Lavender and Teddy would act as a ‘conduit’ to magic, letting their vows form a part of them and joining them irrevocably together for the rest of their lives.

“I, Harry James Potter, do take you, Daisy Louise Johnson, to be my wife. I promise to love you, to honour you, to provide and care for you and to be there for you in everything that life throws our way, both in the good times and the bad. I promise to stand by your side, to be your shield, your wand and your partner. My life, my magic, my all, I dedicate to you.”
It was only the fact that she’d insisted that they share their vows with each other before the actual ceremony that allowed Daisy to not become a blubbery mess at not just Harry’s words, but the intensity in his eyes. The slight tingle on her wrist where the vow was accepted by magic alerted her to the fact that it was now her turn.

“I, Daisy Louise Johnson, do take you, Harry James Potter, to be my husband. I promise to love you for you, no matter what form you take. I promise to be there for you, guarding your back just as I know that you’ll have mine. No matter what we encounter on our journey together, I will be there for you. I give all of me to you, forever.”

Once again, a tingling settled around her wrist; this time, though, Daisy was able to catch a glimpse of the green strand of magic before it disappeared inside both of their hands.

“With your declaration of love and intent, as witnessed by magic and all those present, I do declare that you, Harry James, and you, Daisy Louise, are husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Even before the wizard had finished speaking, Harry had let go of her hands and was lifting her veil over her head.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hey, yourself, Magic Man,” she grinned.

And then he leant forward, capturing her lips with his own. Vaguely, Daisy heard the cheers of the crowd and the bellows of the dragons, but really, her focus was on the man in her arms. Her husband, Harry.
If there was one man in New York City who knew more about what was going on than even the police, the heroes or even the various criminal organisations that operated in the great city, it was Turk Barrett. Originally from Hell’s Kitchen, he’d branched out over the years, gaining a reputation as a man who could provide what was wanted or needed by anyone. And, while he wasn’t technically a snitch, he was known to provide information with the right kind of incentive.

Currently, Jessica Jones was providing such incentive.

With seemingly no effort at all, she was holding Turk’s ankle while they stood talking atop one of the buildings not far from Turk’s patch. The fact that Turk was more screaming and crying was inconsequential – he was providing the information that Jessica sought. Of course, that may have been because they were currently on the roof of said building and Jessica was holding an upside-down Turk off of the side so that he could stare at the hard, unforgiving ground six stories below.

“All right, all right, I’ve seen ’em!” Turk cried.

“How many?” Jessica asked, seeking clear knowledge that Turk was talking about the kids that she was looking for and not just speaking out of his ass in an attempt to get her to put him back on the roof the right way up.

“Six of them!” Turk replied quickly.

“Describe them.”

“I don’t know! They were kids!” Turk replied but quickly changed his tune when Jess gave his leg a sharp shake. “Four girls and two guys, alright? One was a goth chick with some weird stick that she was always carrying around and another of the chicks had purple hair.”

Jessica nodded. As always, Turk actually knew what he was talking about. It was such a shame that she had to threaten him every single time to get the information that she needed. A careless toss of her hand had Turk flying through the air to land in an awkward roll onto the roof.

“See, that wasn’t so hard, was it?” Jessica asked nicely. “Now, where were they?”

Turk looked up at her, patting himself down as if to check that he was all there even as he sat on the roof.

“China Town. An old, abandoned pub down on Grimlow Terrace,” he said.

Jessica nodded absently. China Town wasn’t an area that she frequented but she was sure that she could find the place.

“Thanks, Turk,” Jess said as she turned towards the door leading to the stairwell.

“I wouldn’t go there if I was you,” Turk warned when she was more than halfway across the roof.

Jess stopped and looked back.

“Do I look like a girl who can’t take care of herself?”

“Nah, nah, not you,” Turk quickly back-pedalled, his hands waving away the very thought. “But if I was you, I’d be careful.”
“And why’s that?” Jessica asked.

“They’ve got something with them, something even stranger than some of the usual crazy stuff you see in this city,” Turk stated.

“Yeah? Like what?”

“Dunno,” Turk admitted. “But I’ll tell you one thing, whatever it is gives a mean growl. Really makes you shudder, you know what I mean? Like some predator is just sizing you up as a meal.”

Jessica looked carefully at the man. Whatever it was that had spooked him had really done a good job, she could see that. Still, she had a job to do. Not to mention a mystery to solve and she really hated not knowing the real story. No. Regardless of Turk’s warning, she knew her next destination.

The old, abandoned pub in China Town that Turk had mentioned was easy to find. The sign out front of it, while faded could still even be read, if barely. The boarded-up windows and door attested to its state as well. The graffiti that littered its side didn’t really give much indication of how long the place had been abandoned – overnight wouldn’t have been too quick for some taggers to do their work.

Hands thrust into pockets, earphones in her ears (even if they weren’t actually playing music) and hoodie up, Jessica strolled around the building, making sure to stick to a steady pace and to only take furtive glances at the building.

Finally, on the third side, she found what she’d been looking for. This was where the kids had gotten in. There was a steep, narrow set of stairs leading down to a cellar. The door had clearly been forced, most likely by a shoulder, judging by the scuff marks on the door.

After checking that she wasn’t being observed, Jess ducked down the stairs for a closer look. A clink sounded from something that she’d stubbed with her boot. Squatting down, she frowned at the busted padlock. The main body of it was slightly squished in and the barrel had clearly been snapped off. She’d seen this type of thing before, numerous times, in fact. Whoever had broken this off had been abnormally strong, superhumanly strong.

Deciding that it was probably best to keep a low profile, Jess went back up the stairs, taking two at a time. She hadn’t seen an external fire escape which would have made getting to the roof so much easier.

Sighing, Jessica decided that there was no other way.

Bending her knees, she focussed on the roof of the two story building, pumped her arms, once, twice, thrice and leapt. Reaching out, she grabbed at the lip of the roof and vaulted herself up and over it. Regaining her feet, she turned and walked back to look back down onto the street. It’d been a while since she’d had to do that; she was simply glad that she still had it.

“Enough sightseeing, Jones,” she admonished herself. “Time to get to work.”

There was no door to the inside up here. What there was was a skylight. Unfortunately, it was welded in place. Carefully, Jess looked in through the glass. It was extremely dirty and all but obscured her view. What little she could make out told her that she was above a stairwell.

Frowning, she slipped her fingers under the edge of the metal, braced her legs and heaved. With a piercing groan, the metal gave way, the glass cracking before, finally, the skylight ripped from its
place. After laying the skylight to the side, she took a better look inside.

She’d been right. Below her was a stairwell and one that was surprisingly empty. Given the amount of noise that she’d just caused, she’d was sure that she would have been made.

Shrugging at her good luck, Jessica stepped up and leapt down through the hole in the roof, landing in a crouch on the steps below and wobbled, her heels over thin air. Quickly, she grabbed at the railing and pulled herself upright.

Now, up or down?

Up, she decided.

Taking the stairs two at a time, Jess quickly ascended. At the door, she paused, listened and, when she didn’t hear anything, opened the door a crack and slipped through into the hallway beyond.

She was at one end of the hallway, which was nice – less chance of someone sneaking up on her that way. Four doors lined each side which she guessed were rooms and at the far end, through the open doorway, she could see a banister that obviously overlooked the old pub below.

Moving carefully down the hallway and having to pause every few steps when the ancient floorboards beneath her feet creaked with her weight, Jess headed for the bannister. At each doorway, she paused, listening before quickly moving on when she didn’t hear anything.

The soft murmur of voices reached her when she was still a few metres from the open doorway and she paused, cocking her head to listen. While indistinct, there were definitely at least three different voices, leading her to believe that her targets were all on the bottom floor of the pub.

Jess slipped in to one side of the doorway, back against the wall and paused to ensure that she still hadn’t been noticed.

“This thing clearly has a mind of its own!” a frustrated-sounding female voice stated.

“I thought you said that you could only use a spell once?” a different female voice said. “Perhaps you simply haven’t found the right spell yet?”

Spell?

Jessica shook her head, wondering what these kids were into.

“I’d already figured that out, genius! It’d be a lot easier if this thing came with an instruction manual,” the first voice complained.

“At least my Fistigons are easy to operate; simply point and shoot,” a male voice stated smugly.

A high-pitched crackling sound preceded a soft whump and the sound of broken glass tinkling to the floor.

“Chase!” a second male bellowed. “We’re trying to stay under the radar here. That isn’t going to happen if you bring the place down around our ears!”

Using whatever was happening below as cover, Jessica slid down into a crouch, dropped to her belly and slithered up to the edge of the bannister. Carefully, she raised her head and looked through the bars.

Turk’d been right. Directly below her were her marks. Her eyes flitted, ensuring that they were all
there: goth, purple hair, afro, jock, young girl and the happy one. And clearly, the story that the Wilders had fed her was just that: a story. The youngest, Molly, the one that had been supposedly kidnapped, was sitting happily with the others. She wasn’t tied up; actually, it looked like she was eating a bag of chips.

Jessica’s eyes snapped to the goth girl, Nico, as she stood up and walked towards the bar that was full of broken glass. The girl held up her staff – the same one from the photo that Jessica had found from the security footage – firmly planted it with both hands wrapped around it and stared intently at the bar.

“Fix!” Nico called.

Instantly, the circle that topped her staff began glowing and the sound of the glass shifting about all by itself had Jessica’s eyes snapping towards it. Her eyes widened as the broken pieces of glass began swirling around before arranging themselves against the wall behind the bar. Within seconds, the bits of glass had finished rearranging before fusing into a single, whole piece of glass.

Magic. There was no other word for it. She’d just seen magic being performed.

And while Jessica knew that she could deal with a lot – hell, she’d proven that multiple times – magic was way out of her league.

No, for this, she was going to need to do the unthinkable: call in some backup.

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Lavender gave as subtle a nod in the right direction the instant that she saw their contact. Around her, the Avengers shifted subtly in the way they were walking, telling her that they’d understood.

“Miss Brown. I see you brought the whole gang,” Jessica Jones stated, pushing herself upright from the wall that she’d been leaning on.

“Jessica Jones, I’d like you to meet Captain Rogers, Mage, Spider-Man, Squirrel Girl and She-Hulk,” Lavender said.

Jessica simply nodded at the six even as she took what looked to be the last scull from the coffee that she held.

“Thanks for coming,” Jessica said.

“I understand that you need our help with some kids?” Steve asked, sounding, even to Lavender’s ears, a little sceptical.

“Well, these are special kids,” Jessica replied.

“You asked for me specifically,” Mage stated. “Care to elaborate?”

“I’m guessing that Miss Brown here’s shown you the photos that I had of the kids?” Jessica asked. At Mage’s nod, she continued. “There was one photo, one that I managed to find from a security feed. It showed one of the kids, Nico Minoru, using some kind of staff. Judging by what it was doing, my bet was on it being some type of magical thing. Seems I was right.”

Lavender shared a look with Harry. The two of them had come to the same conclusion when they’d first seen the photo as well.
“I’m guessing that you have evidence that magic is involved?” Mage asked.

“You could say that,” Jessica replied. “The kids are holed up in that place over there.”

Lavender turned to look at across the road and down where Jessica’s nod indicated. It appeared to be an old, abandoned pub.

“I snuck in yesterday.” Jessica continued. “And I definitely saw some freaky crap. One of the kids used some sort of tech gloves to blast a mirror. I then saw Minoru use her magic staff to repair it. Made it look brand new.”

“Definitely sounds like magic,” Mage nodded.

“These are the kids?” She-Hulk asked, holding out the photo of the group.

“That’s them,” Jessica replied. “Originally from L.A. Not sure now they made it all the way out here, though.”

“I’m also from L.A.,” She-Hulk stated.

“That explains your presence. And I’m guessing you brought the kids to relate to them a little easier?”

“Hey! We’re not kids!” Spider-Man protested.

“But you are much closer in age,” Steve stated, “and, like Jessica thought, you’re here to help them feel more comfortable. The last thing we want to do is spook them and have them run again.”

“So how do we do this?” Lavender asked.

“I think the direct approach,” Steve said, rubbing his chin.

“They’ll run the instant that they see you guys,” Jessica warned.

“But we’re the good guys!” Squirrel Girl protested.

Lavender, though, agreed with the P.I. She remembered what it was like when she was a teen; adults weren’t to be trusted. Mind you, back then, most of the adults that she encountered were Death Eaters intent on subjugating the world, not to mention what everyone was like after her encounter with Greyback, so she knew that her perception could be a little skewed.

“I’ll go in through the roof,” Spider-man volunteered, his hand half raised.

At Steve’s nod, a web _fwapped_ out and he swung away.

“She-Hulk, Squirrel Girl, if you two could enter through the back?” Steve asked. “Jessica, Lavender, the three of us will use the front door. Mage, I’ll let you make your usual type of entrance.”

Quickly, the group dispersed. Lavender watched Jessica closely. The P.I. was an unknown in a combat situation. Come to that, so was she. It’d been long time since her training with Harry and the D.A. Not that she could exactly use those skills; she was supposed to be a muggle, not a witch.

The three of them were standing outside the blocked up, front door of the old pub for barely a minute when Lavender felt her watch vibrate. Steve, obviously felt it too for he reached forward, grabbed one of the nailed-on boards and yanked it away. The other four were likewise dealt with extremely quickly.
Then, shoving his shoulder against the door, he pushed it open and led the way inside.

Seeing Steve walking with his hands deliberately out from his sides, his shield firmly on his back, told Lavender that he was trying to be as non-threatening as possible. She just hoped that the teens realised that.

A flurry of movement, bodies shooting to their feet, chairs skidding backwards and startled cries met their entrance.

“Hi there,” Steve called. “We’re not here to hurt you in any way; we simply want to talk.”

“It’s Captain-freaking-America!” the purple-haired girl that Lavender identified as Gert hissed to her friends.

“Why should we believe you?” the dark-skinned Alex asked suspiciously.

“Because we’re the Avengers,” Mage stated, fading into visibility from what Lavender suspected was a disillusionment charm.

Half of the teens swung around towards him, Chase thrusting forward his hands, covered as they were in some sophisticated-looking gloves.

“He’s right, you know? We’re the good guys,” Spider-Man said from where he was crawling across the ceiling.

“Please, we’d really rather that you didn’t run off. As the Captain said, we’re only here to talk,” She-Hulk stated as she and Squirrel Girl appeared from the door beside the bar.

“Don’t come any closer!” Nico, the one with the magic staff, ordered. “You may have us surrounded, but that doesn’t mean that we’re helpless!”

A deep, menacing vibration suddenly started from something directly behind Lavender and Jessica, something that gave Lavender the impression of a growl. And when that was accompanied by an unexpected warm burst of air on the back of her neck, Lavender froze, her eyes going wide.

Beside her, though, Jessica Jones, had a completely different reaction. The P.I. simply spun on one heel, her fist coming up and swinging. Lavender’s head turned at the same time and she watched, wide-eyed as, almost in slow motion, Jessica’s fist smacked against the jaw of a dinosaur!

Said dinosaur’s head whipped to the right before the dinosaur collapsed, rolling over and over, sending a table and three chairs flying.

“Old Lace!” Gert screamed before racing across the room.

“I told you to freeze!” Nico growled.

Lavender watched as the head of the magic staff glowed before Jessica was magically encased in a block of ice.

And then it was a free for all.

The youngest, Molly, sprung forward to hit She-Hulk who promptly grunted and slid backwards. Chase’s gloves fired some kind of fire-burst that Spider-Man had to flip out of the way of. A clink of a bracelet hitting the floor preceded Karolina bursting into a rainbow-glow and her beginning to float into the air.
Seeing Nico’s staff go flying towards Mage, Lavender ducked away to give him room enough for his next spell, which hit as expected. A sharp *cracking* preceded the ice that had encased Jessica splintering and allowing her to break free.

When next Lavender looked about, She-Hulk was holding Molly’s arms across her body, the younger girl’s body up flat against the giant, green woman. Spider-Man had webbed up Chase’s gloves. Squirrel Girl was standing over Gert who was currently sitting on the ground, the dinosaur’s head in her lap and Captain America was standing in the middle of the room, his shield still on his back, his arms outstretched.

“Alright, that’s enough!” the Captain ordered. “Everyone needs to calm down! We’re *not* here to fight.”

“I’m thinking that there’s a few things about yourself that you forgot to mention,” Lavender stated to a shivering Jessica who was rapidly running her hands up and down her arms.

Jessica simply shrugged in response. “That’s my private business.”

“Not any more it’s not,” Mage stated. “You *punched* and *knocked out* a dinosaur! The existence of which we’ll come back to later. You’re powered, Miss Jones. We need to know that you’re not a threat, just like we need to know the same about our Runaways here.”

“How about we all sit down and talk?” Karolina suggested, having regained the floor and being currently in the process of snapping her bracelet back into place.

“How do we know that we can trust them?” Alex asked.

“They *are* the Avengers,” Nico said. “Look, I’m sorry for trapping you in ice like some weird Han Solo thing. I don’t always have control over what this thing does.”

Lavender looked across at Harry and saw that he’d glanced her way as well.

“That’s one of the reasons that I’m here,” he said. “Perhaps we can learn to trust each other enough for you to allow me to help you with that. Uncontrolled magic can be an extremely dangerous thing.”

“We’ll see,” Nico allowed.

By this time, enough tables had been pushed together and chairs found and put around it to allow the dozen of them to sit around it, with Gert remaining on the floor with the dinosaur.

“I’m sorry for hitting your dinosaur,” Jessica said. “But I don’t like being snuck up on from behind.”

“Um, about that? You have a dinosaur? That is *so cool!*” Spider-Man gushed. “Where’d you get it?”

“First off, Old Lace is a girl, a deinonychus, to be precise,” Gert stated. “And my parents created her, at least that’s the best theory that we’ve been able to come up with so far.”

“Gert can control her with her mind,” Molly blurted.

“Good one, Mols, just go tell all our secrets at once, why don’t you?” Gert snarked back.

“How about we start with what we know, what we suspect and what we’ve been told and then allow you to either correct us or fill in the blanks with your version?” Steve suggested.

The teens looked at each other before settling on Nico, who Lavender was beginning to think might be their leader.
“Sounds like a deal,” she replied cautiously.

“Lavender?” Steve said and she started, not expecting to be the one to do this.

“Oh, it’s a deal,” she said, compiling her thoughts into some semblance of order. “Your names, let’s start there. Nico Minoru, Alex Wilder, Chase Stein, Gert Yorks, Karolina Dean and Molly Hernandez. You’re from Los Angeles. Your parents have reported that you five are responsible for kidnapping Molly here to the police. There has also been an accusation of murder against the five of you.”

“They never kidnapped me!” Molly stated hotly. “We’re friends and we’re all in this together.

“And we never killed anyone!” Chase replied angrily.

“Saw it happen, sure; but we didn’t do it,” Gert added.

Lavender nodded. “Okay. Alex. Your parents hired Jessica here to track you all down. They even agreed to Jessica’s assertion that, due to the fact that you are wanted by police for kidnapping and murder, that you would be turned over to the police even before they’d be told that you’d be located if and when she found you. To us, that seems suspicious, especially when we’d done our research and found out that all of your parents are part of Pride, a seemingly upstanding organisation that works for the betterment of society but is, in reality, a criminal organisation.”

“You know that?” Chase asked.

“We do,” She-Hulk nodded. “I’m from L.A. and my dad is a cop.”

The way that the six teens shifted in their seats and extremely wary expressions appeared on their faces had her quickly continuing.

“He’s one of the good ones; he’s not corrupt. The Pride has even tried to have him killed; not to mention having me attacked in order to get him to fall in line as well.”

“They did?” Alex asked, clearly surprised.

“Because of those facts,” Steve said, “we’re reluctant to believe the story that we’ve been told without hearing your side of it too.”

Again, the teens looked at Nico.

“You’re right, our parents are heavily involved in Pride. Actually, we’re pretty sure that they’re the leaders,” she said. “But you’ve got to believe us, we didn’t know that! At least, not until a couple of weeks back. And once we did, we looked for evidence to prove it one way or the other, to find out whether they were guilty or not.”

“But we knew they were guilty! We saw them murder Destiny!” Gert asserted.

“You saw them murder someone?” She-Hulk asked.

“Yeah. That’s how we found out that they’re evil,” Chase stated. “You see, our parents have these regular get-togethers. This year – the first in a while – we got together at the same time, and hung out at Alex’s, where the ’rents were. One thing led to another and we accidentally found a secret passageway in Alex’s dad’s study. We were curious. We’re teens, what can you expect? That’s when we saw them murder that girl. Destiny. The one that they’re blaming us for.”

“I don’t suppose that you have any evidence to back it up?” She-Hulk asked.
Various scowls appeared on their faces, all directed at Chase.

“We had some,” Nico near-growled. “Until Chase destroyed it!”

“I had to!” he retorted. “My dad’d been shot and they were keeping him alive. If we went public, then they’d let him die.”

“Would a memory of the incident work in court?” Mage asked She-Hulk.

“Magical means has never been used as evidence in a muggle case,” Lavender reminded him.

“I don’t know, maybe. If you’re the one presenting it,” She-Hulk mused.

“Are you saying that you can see our memories?” Molly blurted, wide-eyed.

“I have the means, but it’s not something that I usually do,” Mage shrugged.

“But you do have that ability,” Nico asserted. “Does that mean you could read our minds now so you know that we’re telling the truth?”

“I could,” Mage replied slowly.

“Well, if that means that you’ll help us, then, I’m willing. Do your thing,” she stated, pulling herself up straight in her chair.

Lavender watched as Harry slowly pulled his wand and pointed it at her head.

“Legimens,”

Half a minute later, Mage pulled back and shook his head.

“They’re telling the truth,” he said. “And, at that, they’re understating things.”

“Well, I was already inclined to believe you and to want to help you,” Steve stated. “Now, I’m sure. If you’re willing, you can come with us until we get your names cleared.”

“Maybe longer than that,” Squirrel Girl suggested. “You guys all seem to have powers and that means that the Accords are going to affect you as well.”

“Squirrel Girl’s right,” Spider-Man nodded. “So, give us the goods; what’s your thing? Are you guys mutants or magical or what?”

“Obviously, I can use the Staff of One,” Nico stated. “What that makes me, I’ve got no idea.”

“Magical,” Lavender and Harry stated together.

“Those gloves look interesting,” Spider-Man said to Chase. “Who made them?”


“Nice,” Spider-Man nodded appreciatively. “Just remember, when you meet Tony, stand your ground; he has a habit of wanting everything to be named to his satisfaction and some of the stuff he comes up with is pure weird.”

“I’m not sure what Gert and I are,” Molly said. “I’m just really strong and she can talk to Old Lace.”

“Mutant, maybe?” Steve wondered, looking between the two. “We know some people who can help
us work that out. Not that it makes a lot of difference, having a ‘label’.”

“I … uh … I think I’m … I think I’m an alien,” Karolina said, the last part coming out in something resembling a stage-whisper. “My bracelet seems to be some kind of inhibitor. At least, it makes me look human rather than like some rainbow glow-bright.”

“If you are, Thor and Carol should be able to help you,” She-Hulk stated.

“And what about you, Alex?” Lavender asked.

“Hey, I’m just a regular guy; there’s nothing special about me,” he said, waving his hands in front of him as though to ward off any thought that he was ‘different’.

“Apart from that big head of yours that’s trying to contain that off-the-charts IQ it houses,” Chase quipped.

“Alright, that’s you six,” Steve said before turning in his seat. “Now, Miss Jones. It’s your turn.”

Jessica appeared startled by the sudden scrutiny and, just for an instant, Lavender wondered if she was going to bolt from the room.

“Alright, alright, if you really must know. You’re right, I’ve got ‘powers’, too,” she finally stated sounding incredibly angry that she was being made to divulge her secrets. “I’m strong and I can sort-of fly, but really, it’s more like jumping really, really well. That, or guided falling, not that it makes much difference. Might be some other stuff, but I’ve tried not to find out; never really wanted to draw too much attention to myself unlike you lot.”

“I can assure you that we’ll keep your secret,” Steve stated. “We’re kind of good at that. We’ll even make you the same deal that we’ve made some others, even some that live here in New York.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“We’ll promise that, if you ever need us, like today for example where you knew that you needed some back-up, then we’ll be there. Of course, we’d like it if, on the off-chance that we need some extra help, that we can know that we can ask and count on you.”

Jessica looked from face to face of the Avengers there before settling on Lavender who gave her an encouraging smile and a slight nod.

“No promises,” she finally allowed.

“That’s good enough for now,” Lavender said quickly, understanding that for the P.I. that had a reputation for working alone, that was a major concession.

“Alright, how about we get you guys somewhere a little cleaner with a lot more food?” Mage asked, standing.

“Food! I like the sound of that!” Molly beamed.

“What about Old Lace? We’re not going anywhere without her,” Gert insisted as she did her best to help the deinonychus to her feet.

“And we’d never ask you to leave her behind,” Squirrel Girl stated. “Isn’t that right?”

“It is,” Mage nodded. “Actually, I might have the perfect place for her, one where she could be particularly happy and have a real chance to stretch her legs.”
“Yeah?” Nico asked interestedly. “Where’s that?”
The portkey released the group in the middle of the large common room of Avengers Tower, not that the newcomers realised that. At that instant, all that the six of them were interested in was throwing up. Actually, seeing the dinosaur retching and gagging, Harry revised that number to seven.

By the time that they’d finished, the floor was a disaster zone and the smell was making the others in the room nauseous as well. Thankfully, that’s what cleaning spells and air-freshening spells were for.

“What the hell was that?” Nico demanded.

“Portkey,” Mage replied. “I did warn you that the first couple of times is unpleasant.”

“Next time, put that warning in giant, glowing letters on the side of the packaging,” Gert complained.

“With the recommendation that no one should ever attempt it!” Chase added.

“I’m just glad that I hadn’t eaten much the last few days,” Molly said. “I’d hate to do that on a full stomach.”

“It takes a bit to get used to, but you do get used to it,” Squirrel Girl said sympathetically.

“Hey, at least none of you guys are wearing a mask,” Spider-Man told them. “Imagine what it was like for me the first time!”

“Ah, no thanks,” Karolina said.

“Here, drink this,” She-Hulk said, coming across to the group with a tray bearing six glasses of juice. “It’ll take the taste away.”

“Thanks,” Gert said and then looked across at her dinosaur. “I don’t suppose you’ve got anything for Old Lace, do you?”


“She’s a carnivore,” Gert shrugged. “So, anything with meat’d be good.”

“There’s some leftover lasagne in the fridge,” Lavender suggested. “I’m sure that Thor won’t mind.”

“What won’t Thor mind?”

Mage looked around to find the Asgardian in question entering the room, along with Jane and Carol.

“You won’t mind if we give the dinosaur the leftover lasagne,” Lavender replied, holding up the container.

“My lasagne?” Thor repeated, clearly nonplussed.

“Dinosaur?” Jane exclaimed at the same time. “Woah! Right. Dinosaur. Um, where’d the dinosaur come from?”

“She belongs to our new guests,” Mage stated.

“Thor, let the dinosaur have the lasagne,” Jane suggested, even as she shuffled behind him, grabbing
onto his arm in the process. “I don’t like the way she’s looking at me.”

“Don’t worry, Old Lace won’t hurt you,” Gert replied.

“You’re Thor, god of thunder!” Molly exclaimed.

“I am,” Thor replied and Mage was pleased to see him give a nod of assent to Lavender. “And who might you be?”

“I’m Molly,” she said. “That’s Gert, Chase, Nico, Karolina and Alex.”

“They’ve been on the run from their parents who also happen to run the largest crime organisation in L.A.,” She-Hulk stated.

“Yeah, everyone always thinks that their parents are evil; turns out that theirs really are!” Spider-Man stated.

“You sure that it’s okay if we crash here?” Nico asked, looking around the room.

“This is only a half-way point,” Mage replied. “I’ve got some place better in mind where you’ll be able to feel more comfortable.”

“You’re thinking the Island?” Squirrel Girl asked.

Mage nodded. “Yes. Actually, it was a good idea for us to start here, though. Thor, Carol, I wonder if you’d be able to help Karolina?”

“What do you need help with?” Carol asked, looking at her.

Seeing the uncertainty on the teen’s face, Mage looked towards Lavender. Thankfully, despite his face being hidden, she understood what he wanted and began gathering the attention of the others.

“How about we go take a seat over here,” he suggested, gesturing towards a group of chairs across the room.

Karolina bit her lip and looked at Nico who stepped up to her and whispered something in her ear. Whatever it was, it was enough to have her nodding and walking tentatively towards the chairs.

Thor and Carol, Mage was pleased to note, had also seemed to work out that whatever this was, it was sensitive, a fact that seemed to be reinforced by the look that Jane gave to Thor.

Once they were all seated, Mage made a decision. This was going to be hard enough as it was on the girl, especially having to have this conversation with total strangers; so one of them having their face hidden, wasn’t going to help. And, when it came down to it, Harry knew that he was going to take the kids the Island anyway where he’d be revealing his identity; a couple of hours earlier wasn’t going to make much difference.

With a swipe of his hand, he dispersed the obscuring spell and the sticking charm that kept his hood in place.

“Karolina, my real name’s Harry,” he said with a soft smile. “It’s nice to meet you properly.”

Her wide eyes told him that he’d surprised her but then her face relaxed slightly and he knew that he’d done the right thing.

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“Thor is an Asgardian,” Harry stated and her eye-roll told him that she already knew that. “Carol,
while being born here on Earth, has spent the past few years living on a different planet.”

“You have?” Karolina blurted, her head whipping to the other woman. “What was it like?”

“Different,” Carol replied. “I had a big culture shock when I first got there and a very steep learning curve. Luckily, I made friends quickly.”

Harry nodded. “The reason that I asked Thor and Carol over here to talk to you is because of something that you said earlier.”

“You mean that I think that I’m an alien?” Karolina asked.

“What makes you think that you’re an alien?” Carol asked.

In response, she unsnapped her bracelet and placed it on the coffee table. While her hand was still outstretched, her skin began glowing a bright rainbow pattern.

“Because I look like this,” she said. “I can also fly, although not very well.”

“You can?” Carol asked, surprised. “In that case, I’ll teach you.”

“You can fly, too?” a surprised-Karolina asked.

“I can,” she smiled. “It’s the best, most freeing feeling that you can imagine.”

“I don’t suppose that either of you can confirm if Karolina really is from another planet?” Harry asked.

“Majesdane,” Thor stated instantly.

“Agreed,” Carol nodded. “I haven’t encountered one before, but I’ve heard of them. In general, a peaceable people, I think.”

“In general, yes,” Thor agreed. “Unfortunately, for the past fifteen years or so, Majesdane has been at war with the Skrull Empire. It’s been a particularly bloody conflict. On both sides.”

“Could that be why my father ended up here?” she wondered. “Was he originally escaping the war?”

“Possible,” Thor mused. “Majesdanians have had the technology to travel between the stars for nearly three centuries.”

“Do you know why I glow?” she asked.

“It’s a part of your Majesdanian physiology,” Carol replied. “You absorb sunlight; it permeates every cell in your body, including your blood.”

“Like some kind of solar radiation?” Karolina asked.

“Yes, but it is not harmful,” Thor nodded. “It is what allows your body to glow the way it does and also gives you your ability to fly.”

“Um, I also once shot some kind of rays out of my hands? Is that from absorbing the sunlight as well,” Karolina replied.

“It is,” Carol nodded. “Another way that we’re alike. I think we’re going to be spending a lot of time together.”
“Thank you,” Karolina smiled. “Thank you for telling me who … what I am. At least now I know that I’m not some weird freak thing.”

Harry scowled at that. “No. You are definitely not a freak; you are simply unique with some very special gifts and abilities.

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“I don’t know about this,” Molly stated warily, while backing away from the rope that the others held.

“Come on, Mols, what’s the worst that could happen?” Gert asked.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Molly replied sarcastically. “I could throw up. You could throw up on me! Old Lace could throw up on all of us!”

“Actually, now that I think about it, Molly’s got a point,” Chase agreed, also letting the rope drop from his hand.

“And we did only just eat,” Alex added.

“Yeah, like two hours ago!” Nico countered, clearly sounding annoyed. “We’re not going swimming, you know?”

“Still …” Alex replied.

“Get over here and grab the rope,” Nico ordered.

Reluctantly, the three complied.

“Brilliant. Now that you’re all sorted,” Harry said, casting an eye over the rope that was draped over the dinosaur’s back, “I think we’re ready to go. Oh, one thing. This is a lot longer trip, so you’ll likely feel the effects a little more. The good news is that this should cure you of portkey sickness.”

“What?” Molly blurted.

But before she could do more than start yell at him, Harry activated the portkey rope. A couple of seconds later, his own activated, whisking him across the globe.

As expected, he arrived after the others and quickly counted that they’d all made it. Also as expected, the six teens and one deinonychus had landed in a tangle of arms and legs; the sound of retching permeating the air. Some simple charms cleaned them all up as they sorted themselves out.

“Harry?”

He turned and beamed a huge smile. “Melati! And you brought the chicken!”

“Well, you asked,” she replied. “Not that I’ve worked out exactly why you need a raw chicken.”

“To feed Old Lace, of course,” Harry replied as though it were perfectly obvious.

A simple wave of his hand had the chicken carcass lifting from the tray that Melati held to float across to the dinosaur who promptly leapt at it, plucked it from the air and trotted across the grass to eat her treat. Thankfully, she seemed to be a fairly clean eater.

“Is that a dinosaur?” Melati all but screamed, her eyes wide.
Her outburst caused the others to see her for the first time and consequently, Alex, Karolina and Nico did scream.

“Everyone, meet Melati. She’s one of the more permanent residents of the Island,” he said. “Melati, this is Nico, Karolina, Gert, Molly, Chase and Alex. They’ll be moving in, for as long as they need.”

“Hi,” Melati said and Harry could tell that she was fiercely controlling her emotions due to their reaction at her appearance. “Welcome to Paradis Noir. Before you ask, yes, this is how I look. It’s from some experiments that were done to me and I’m quite happy with how I am now.”

“I’m sorry we reacted the way we did,” Nico said, stepping forward and shaking her hand. “Guess you just caught us by surprise.”

Melati gave a single nod. “A bit like how your dinosaur startled me.”

“Old Lace won’t hurt you,” Gert said. “She’s really just a big pussy cat.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Melati replied.

“Okay, now that you’ve met, how about you come with me and I’ll explain a few things,” Harry said. “Um, will Old Lace stay here if we leave her outside?”

“Yeah, she won’t wander far,” Gert nodded as she went across to pat her dinosaur and whisper something in her ear.

“Good. The dragons have settled on the other side of the Island, and as long as Old Lace stays out of their territory until I can talk to them, we shouldn’t have any problems,” Harry stated.

Dragons? he saw more than one mouth at the others and couldn’t help but smirk. These kids were sure in for a steep learning curve.

He then led them across the park area at the centre of the buildings and to the main building that they all tended to use. Murmured conversation followed him and he couldn’t help but smile at the appreciative sounds behind him. Finally, they’d reached the top level where they also found Maria, Daphne and Bucky having a late lunch.

After acknowledging the others with a wave, Harry led the teens to one side.

“As Melati said before, welcome to Paradis Noir,” he said. “Exactly where we are in the world, we won’t worry about. Suffice it to say that this is a magically protected island that only those who know the secret of where it is can find it. As for entering it, you’ve got to have a special magical way, which I’ll get to shortly.

“Technically, the whole island belongs to me but I’ve sort of loaned it out the Avengers as a whole. It’s a safe haven for us, a place for us to relax and unwind and a place where we can simply be ourselves without having to worry about the wider public and their reaction.”

“And you’re letting us stay here?” Nico asked.

“I am,” Harry replied.

“For how long?” Alex asked.

“As long as you’d like. And, at the very least, as long as the Pride is out there looking for you. But this isn’t a prison; I’ll provide you with a way to come and go as you please. Of course, there are a
few rules that go with that. Firstly, while it’s technically possible to talk about the island with those who don’t know about it, we do ask that you don’t. Also, you won’t be able to tell anyone anything about its location, including where you think it is. I’m sure that you can understand the need for our safety and security.

“While you’re here, you’ll have your own room and, if you like, we can help provide you with an education – on-line schooling with some bonus teachers from some of the smartest people on the planet. We will also help any of you who like get a better handle on your gifts and abilities. Karolina has already accepted help from Carol. Nico, I’d be very happy to help you with your magic.”

“Thanks,” she nodded.

“Gangee!” Harry called.

Instantly, the Head House Elf of the Island popped in beside him.

“This is Gangee,” Harry said calmly and he was pleased to see that the teens were less startled this time than they had been by Melati. “He’s a House Elf, a being that is a part of the magical world. There are twenty elves on the island. They’re all here to help, so if you need something and can’t find a human, please feel free to call on Gangee or one of the others. Could you please get the portkey jewellery case?”

“Yes, Master Harry,” Gangee nodded.

He popped out and was back less than a minute later, handing over the briefcase before bowing and popping back out again. After placing the case on the coffee table in the centre of the teens’ chairs, Harry opened it to appreciative whistles.

“Nice,” Chase nodded.

“Thanks,” Harry smiled and indicated the pendants, rings, bracelets (both wrist and ankle) and earrings. “These are permanent portkeys. They have two locations woven into their enchantments that will either take the wearer here or to Avengers Tower. There’s a few other enchantments on them as well, but nothing that you need to worry about and nothing that will hurt you in any way. Please pick one that you like for yourself. That way, you can come and go as you please.”

“What’s this?” Molly asked, holding up the small card that had been underneath the bracelet that she’d picked.

“On that card are the pass-phrases to activate the portkeys,” Harry explained. “Every piece is different and the phrase is rather random and not one that you’ll likely say by accident. Make sure that you learn them, so that you’ll know what it is and so that you can move between here and New York as you wish.”

“You sure you want to give us one of these?” Nico asked, fingering a ring that looked as though it was made to go with the others that covered the fingers of both hands.

“I am,” Harry stated. “As I said, this isn’t a prison; it’s a safe house, a retreat. Even if you weren’t being targeted by the Pride, you’re kids and the Sokovia Accords – as stupid as they are – does affect you. You deserve a chance to be yourselves.”

“You do this for everyone?” Chase asked.

“No,” Harry replied with a shake of his head. “Before you, it’s been exclusively for the Avengers and our associates. Your circumstances are a little exceptional, not least because of Old Lace and
your ages. The fact that you’re running from the ‘bad guys’ tells us that you’re some of the ‘good
guys’. As long as that stays true, then we can work with that.”

“In that case, thank you,” Nico said formally. “We won’t let you down.”

J. Jonah Jameson grumbled as he compared the two possible headlining articles for the next day’s
Daily Bugle. Both had potential – Apartment Building Saved While Fire House Burns and Fat Cat
Councillor Controls Crime Syndicate – but neither had that snap, that pizzazz that the Daily Bugle
was known for.

And in these days and times, it was definitely needed. Social media had been on the rise for years,
just as printed news was on the decline, now being considered old-school and irrelevant. So far,
papers like the Bugle and Bulletin had managed to hold their own, but it was a daily struggle.

Plucking his half-chewed cigar – but not lit, definitely not lit – from his mouth, Jameson bellowed for
his secretary. And waited.

When there was no answering call or the sound of hurried footsteps within the next ten seconds,
Jameson spun about, his hands on his hips. The angry, loud reprimand that he had in mind
disappeared as the fact that the room beyond was dark, lit only one or two lights.

“The paper’s not put to bed yet, what makes them all think that it was okay for then to go home?” he
grumbled.

The fact that it was two hours after knock-off and the only staff in the building – apart from himself –
would be the printers meant nothing. Nor did the fact that the decision between the two headlines
had already been made hours ago – despite the fact that he was currently second-guessing said
decision – make any difference.

A figure moving out of the shadows across the room caught his attention and Jameson took half a
step forward, his eyes narrowed.

“You! Be useful and get over here!” he ordered. “We need to change the headline on tomorrow’s
front page before it goes to print.”

As the figure moved out of the shadows, though, Jameson realised that he’d made a mistake. This
wasn’t one of his employees. No. This was some kind of costumed thug. It wasn’t until the figure
had moved even further into the light so that Jameson could see the long, curved, sharp, pointed tail
that curved up and over the man’s shoulder that he recognised him.

Scorpion.

Jameson himself had coined the name after the incident in front of Avengers Tower where the thug
had destroyed three police cars and injured seven cops – two of them seriously.

His eyes never left the Scorpion as he stumbled backwards. Four steps was enough to have him
banging into his desk. And then, without taking his eyes off of the figure that was fast approaching,
Jameson’s hand fumbled for his phone.

“Leave it, Jameson,” Scorpion ordered. “You don’t need it. After all, we’re partners, aren’t we?”

Scorpion lifted his hands and Jameson leant back as far as he could, hampered as he was with his desk at his back. But the Scorpion wasn’t reaching for him, instead, his hands went to his head, before he removed his helmet, revealing a very familiar face.

“You!” Jameson hissed.

“Me!” Mac Gargan grinned back at him.

“You’re the Scorpion? The costumed thug that attacked those cops?”

“Scorpion, yeah, I’d heard that you’d be calling me that. I gotta say, I like it,” Gargan replied. “And as for those cops, they weren’t part of the plan.”


Gargan stared at him. “Your plan, of course.”


“You wanted dirt on the Avengers, to have them incriminate themselves so that they could be locked up in some super max prison with the key thrown away. You wanted pictures and stories of them being the criminals we both know they are. That’s why I went to Avengers Tower. The Avengers were supposed to come out and show the world what they really were. Unfortunately, the cops got in the way.”

Jameson stared at Gargan. It actually made sense. In a stupid, twisted sort of way.

“Where’d you get the get-up?” Jameson asked, changing tacts. “You sure didn’t have that when I hired you to take pictures of the Avengers!”

“This?” Gargan asked, looking down at the Scorpion suit that he was wearing. “From you, of course.”

“What? I didn’t give you that!”

“Well, no, but you did pay for it,” Gargan replied.

Jameson stared at the man. That’s where the money that he’d given the P.I. had gone? On a stupid costume? The man was insane! The budget was for him to buy high-powered cameras with telescopic lenses and all the other fancy do-hickeys that went with that sort of thing.

“You spent the whole budget on that?” Jameson asked incredulously.

Jameson, though, didn’t bother waiting for a reply, already knowing the answer.

“What were you thinking? You think I wanted another costumed freak running around this city being a terror? A menace? Not on your life! I want to get rid of them, not create more! I don’t know where you got that monstrosity from, Gargan, and quite frankly, I don’t care. But I never want to see it again. Photos, man, photos! That’s what I was paying you for! Not that. You’re fired! And I want the money that I paid you back, every last nickel and dime of it or I’ll be suing the pants right off of you!”

It was only when he stopped talking, well, yelling that Jameson had an unexpected thought.

Perhaps it wasn’t the best idea to yell at a costumed thug when he was standing less than two feet away?
That thought was emphasised by the sight of Gargan replacing his Scorpion helmet while his tail extended over the man’s shoulder and slowly, steadily, inched towards Jameson’s face. Jameson gulped as his eyes nearly crossed as he watched that sharp, pointed piece of metal head towards him. His mind was screaming at him to move, to back away, to do something, anything but his body was frozen, paralysed with fear.

And then that tail jerked forward before flashing backwards, the half-chewed cigar that Jameson had jammed back in his mouth after his rant now impaled on the end of it.

“No, Jameson,” Gargan growled. “No, you don’t get to fire me. You wanted the dirt on the Avengers, well, you’re going to get it. I’m a man of my word. I promised you the photos, the story and that’s exactly what I’m going to deliver. I tried it the easy way, with laser mics and high-powered cameras but the Avengers are hardly ever at the Tower these days. But I know their weakness: they can’t stand to see innocent people get hurt.

“So that’s what I’m going to do. I’m going to draw them out from their ivory tower and let the people see them for who they really are. And when I do, that’s when you’ll get your photos and story. Fire me? Fire me! No, Jameson. Never. And let me tell you a little secret. This suit, this amazing, fantastic suit? It’s not the only thing new about me since we last met.”

“It’s … it’s not?” Jameson gulped.

“No. Not by a long shot.”

And then Scorpion’s hand whipped out, striking Jameson across the face like a freight train and Jameson felt himself flying across the room. When he’d finished rolling, he found himself slumped up against one of his full-length office windows.

With a groan, Jameson felt his jaw. Even the lightest touch hurt like the devil; he wouldn’t be surprised if he had a couple of loose teeth either.

“No, Jameson. I’ve had a little … enhancement,” Scorpion stated, striding across to him.

A fist lashed out, striking the window above Jameson’s head, shattering it completely and causing Jameson to throw his hands over his head as glass rained down on him and around him. Instantly, the wind began whistling through the hole.

And then Jameson felt himself being jerked up, spun around and lifted. Jameson’s hands grabbed at the single gauntleted hand that was holding him around his neck, even as his feet scrambled about, trying desperately to find the ground.

Jameson could feel his face turning purple as he struggled to breathe, to take even a single breath, to get just a little more air into his lungs.

“I’m stronger now. Faster. More powerful in every way. More than a match for any Avenger. Don’t worry Jameson, you’ll get your story. Actually, maybe you even want to help?”

Desperately, Jameson nodded, agreeing with everything the lunatic in front of him was saying. Obviously, it was enough as he was suddenly dropped.

From his prone position on the floor of his office, Jameson, clutched at his throat even as he took deep, shuddering breath after deep shuddering breath, sucking that precious air back into his lungs.

“The Avengers like saving innocent lives. Well, you’re not exactly innocent, but you’ll do in a pinch,” Scorpion said.
Jameson watched as the man’s tail twisted about to face the main part of the office building, where the little people worked before firing a mini rocket at it. The explosion was deafening and Jameson threw a hand over his eyes to protect himself.

Unfortunately, that hand was grabbed and yanked up as an electrical cord was wrapped around it so tight that it felt as though the blood flow to his fingers was being cut off.

“Let’s make sure that they can see who it is that needs saving,” Scorpion stated.

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“Guys, you’re going to want to see this!” Bobbi stated as she strode into the main lounge.

Bucky turned in his seat from where he had his arm around his wife as they were watching the stars and enjoying the cool night air of Paradis Noir.

Daphne had been having a lot of trouble sleeping these last couple of weeks, which wasn’t exactly surprising, considering that she was fast approaching her due date. As she’d pointed out numerous times, trying to find a position to get comfortable in when it’s like ‘there’s a baby killer whale in your stomach’ isn’t exactly easy. Tonight, though, tonight had been particularly uncomfortable for her. She was in near constant pain; there was no way that Bucky was even going to attempt to sleep when she was feeling that way.

“It’s nearly half past two in the morning, Bob,” Bucky pointed out. “How’d you know we’d be here?”

“Tempi,” Bobbi replied simply, naming one of the house elves that was usually assigned to the hospital that Daphne ran.

“Little blighter’s mothering me again,” Daphne groused in a voice that Bucky wasn’t even sure if he was supposed to hear.

“What was it that you came in here for?” Bucky asked, trying to distract his wife.

“This,” Bobbi replied, switching on the television.

The scene that was shown had Bucky’s eyes widening. Feeling Daphne attempting to get up, Bucky helped her as best he could while still watching the amazing scenes that were happening in New York City.

A building, apparently the main office of The Daily Bugle according to the sign on the roof of it as shown by the image broadcast by the helicopter, was under attack. At least, that was Bucky’s assessment as he saw a massive burst of red-orange flames blast out of the side of the building. Four other floors were currently ablaze as well. One would almost think it was a simple fire if not for the focus of the camera.

In the exact centre of the screen, a man could be seen spreadeagled in a glassless window. Both the man’s hands and feet were tied, the cords stretching from corner to corner of the window and holding him in place. Behind the man – J. Jonah Jameson, according to the scrolling text at the bottom of the news report – a shadowed figure could be seen, one who seemed to have a tail, but not a tail like Melati’s. No, this one was longer, thinner and curved up high enough to reach over the man’s head.

Unexpectedly, something whizzed past the screen and the camera jerked as it attempted to keep whatever it was in the shot. Finally, it settled on an armoured man standing on some kind of flying
As the camera panned downwards, following the figure, a half dozen police cars came into view, their headlights on full and red and blue lights flashing. That was until there was a strange blue, lightning-esque bolt that jerked from one car to the next until all had been hit and the cars, including their lights, went dead.

“Oh, Merlin!” Daphne groaned.

“Don’t worry, Daph, I’m sure that the others are monitoring the situation and won’t go in unless we’re specifically asked,” Bucky reassured her.

“You can be sure of that!” Bobbi reiterated.

“No, it’s not that,” Daphne replied and the way that she was panting had Bucky swivelling towards her. “My waters just broke.”

The corridor was filled to nearly bursting when Bucky opened the door. What little conversation there was instantly vanished at the sight of him or, more specifically, at the sight of the bundled blankets that he was holding.

“Well?” Steve asked, having spun from where he’d obviously been pacing.

Bucky’s face broke out into the broadest grin that he could ever remember having.

“Everyone,” he said, looking around at two dozen faces before settling back on the face of his best friend – there was no way he was going to miss his expression. “Everyone, I’d like you to meet Steven James Barnes.”

Applause and cheers instantly began before the women in the group hushed the guys back up. Thankfully, little Steven only shifted slightly with the unexpected noise and didn’t wake up.

“How’s Daphne?” Melati asked.

“She’s good. Resting,” Bucky replied.

“Steven?” Steve asked, reaching out a finger to move aside the blanket to reveal more of the bub’s tiny face, including the wisps of black hair on his head.

“Well, of course,” Bucky replied.

“I’m honoured,” Steve said, and Bucky caught the slight catch in his voice.

“Honoured enough to be his godfather?” Bucky asked.

Steve’s eyes widened even as a huge smile appeared.

“You mean that?” Steve asked.

“Wouldn’t ask if I didn’t,” Bucky replied.

“In that case, yes! Of course, Buck, I would be honoured.”

Bucky shared a grin with his best friend before both of them looked back down at little Steven.
Who’d have ever thought that he, James Buchanan Barnes, the Winter Soldier, Wolf, would ever be a father? Definitely not him. But as scary a thought as that was, and even though he knew that it was going to be the toughest mission that he’d ever taken on, Bucky knew that it’d be okay, especially with Daphne and now Steve helping him out.
As of this chapter, Heroes Assemble! is moving to an update schedule of every second week. The ‘off’ weeks will be used for posting the sequel to Muggle-Raised Champion, the first chapter of which will be posted next Thursday. For any who missed the Heroes Assemble! companion story that was posted last week, it’s a single chapter stand-alone entitled Ghost of Bengalla

Alex stared down at the thick, gold chain on his wrist. Ordinarily, it wasn’t something that he’d wear but what it represented …

Pushing himself to his feet, he looked across at where Nico and Karolina were curled up on a couch together, talking quietly to each other and then in the opposite direction where Gert and Chase were currently locked at the lips.

Yes, he nodded, now was the perfect time.

“I’m going to head to New York; see if I can pick up any news about the ’rents,” he said casually.

“Why?” Nico asked, her head up and twisted to face him. “Bobbi promised that if they heard anything, that we’d be the first to hear.”

“Yeah, man, not a smart idea,” Chase added. “Your folks hired Jessica to find us; there’s no telling who else they might have paid.”

“I still can’t believe that they tracked us to New York in the first place,” Gert stated. “I was so sure that we’d covered our tracks so that they couldn’t find us.”

“Maybe they just got lucky?” Alex shrugged.

“Who got lucky?” Molly asked as she came into the room via the stairs.


“You sure your dad didn’t invent some kind of tracking device and plant it on us, Chase?” Molly asked.

“Nope, we’re clean. I checked. Twice. And Stark checked us over as well,” Chase replied.

“And we know that Old Lace doesn’t have a tracker implanted in her either,” Gert added.

“As I said, they must have just got lucky,” Alex said, reinforcing his idea once again. “Don’t worry, I’ll be careful.”

He’d never done this by himself before, although after the two times that he’d been through a portkey ride, he at least knew what to expect. Holding up his arm, he stared at the chain.

“Curried Apples,” he stated firmly and instantly felt that nauseating jerk like a hook had just grabbed
him behind his navel and yanked. Hard.

His world spun into a whirl of multicolour that seemed to last an eternity before he was deposited, spinning like a top into the lounge of Avengers Tower. The ground rushed up hard and he landed hard on his hands and knees, panting, his eyes closed as he fought with his stomach. Thankfully, this time, he actually won that battle.

“Hey, kid, something you need?”

Alex looked up to see Tony Stark standing behind a bar, his wife seated on a stool on the opposite side of it and both of them looking at him.

“Ah, no thanks, Mister Stark, I’m good,” Alex replied as he scrambled to his feet.

“It’s Tony, remember?” Stark replied.

“Right. Tony. Sorry,” Alex nodded. “I’m, ah, just heading out into the city. You know, to stretch my legs a bit.”

“Yeah, the Island’s good but a bit lacking, isn’t it?” Tony nodded.

“Just be careful,” Misses Stark insisted.

“I will, Ma’am,” Alex smiled.

Once the elevator doors had closed on him and he was on his way down, he sighed. He hadn’t been able to get away by himself for a while and he’d been getting antsy.

The hustle and bustle of the city hit him like a wall as soon as he walked outside the Tower. There were people everywhere rushing past on the sidewalk, many with phones to their ears. Cars were backed up each way, moving in fits and jerks as the lights allowed. Picking a direction at random, Alex moved into the flow of people. He had no concerns about finding his way back – really, who in New York wouldn’t know where Avengers Tower was?

He walked for about a quarter of an hour, taking random turns every so often. Of course, he ‘window shopped’, often using the reflections and the unexpected turns to check that he didn’t have a tail. As far as he could tell, he was clean. Still …

A sign across the street caught his attention and he quickly made his way across, dodging traffic as he did. Ducking into the store, he looked around before finding a duplicate sign against the back wall, an arrow pointing down a narrow hallway.

Weaving his way past tables and chairs and shaking his head at the girl behind the counter in response to her question of whether she could help him, Alex ducked into the hallway. His eyes lit up at the object at the far end. A public payphone. It looked ancient but it was also exactly what he needed.

Fishing out a handful of coins, he lifted the handset, deposited a bunch of the coins in the slot and punched in the number that he’d memorised. It was well-known that his parent’s phone could be bugged – be it by the feds, local cops not in his dad’s pocket, or now, even by the Avengers trying to find the dirt to put them away. That’s why his dad had bought a burn phone. Untraceable and one that Alex could use to phone home to without anyone being the wiser.

His foot tapped and he glanced back behind him as he waited for his father to pick up.
“Hello? Alex?”

“Dad,” he sighed in relief.

“It’s been a while since I’ve heard from you. Are you alright?” his dad asked.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m good.”

“Where are you?”

“Still in New York,” Alex replied. “Sort of.”

“Sort of?” his dad asked. “What does that mean?”

“A P.I. by the name of Jessica Jones found us. She said that you hired her?”

“We did,” his dad replied. “We don’t have many of the police in our pay out there; thought it was the easiest way to get you lot back to L.A.”

“Well, it backfired,” Alex stated. “Jones got the Avengers involved.”

“The Avengers? What the hell for?”

“Seems she caught sight of Nico using the staff and Chase using the fistigons,” Alex replied. “So, she called in backup.”

“Where are you now? Are you with the Avengers?” his dad demanded.

“Yeah. They took us to this island of theirs,” Alex replied.

He coughed, then, at the unexpected feeling of his throat constricting slightly. Giving it a rub, he frowned. Perhaps he’d grab a drink before he left the café.

“There’s minimal guards on the island. If you can get there by boat, I think it’d be easy to do a snatch and grab,” Alex continued.

“Not a bad plan,” his dad allowed. “’Cause, that assumes that we know where this island is.”

“That’s the thing,” Alex said before stopping to cough again. “I don’t know exactly where it is but I can make a good guess. You should be able to find us on a map after that.”

“Go ahead, I’m listening.”

“Judging by the sun times, it’s four hours ahead of New York,” Alex stated, rubbing his throat that now felt incredibly constricted. On top of that, his tongue had begun to tingle. “The climate’s fairly temperate.”

“How big’s the island?” his dad asked.

Alex opened his mouth to reply, when suddenly, that horrid jerking behind his navel ripped him away.

He landed hard, spinning into a wall and cried in pain as he felt his nose smash into it. His glasses flew from his head as he bounced backwards to land on his butt.

“What the hell?” he asked the vacant room.
The hiss of air had him spinning around. The room was small, only about two metres square. There was a door in one wall, but it had no handle. Small holes located just below the ceiling and just above the floor on every wall had some type of gas pouring from them, filling the room with a white fog.

Instantly, Alex covered his nose and mouth with his sleeve and tried to breathe as shallowly as possible. But with no way out, it was impossible. Barely half a minute later, his head felt woozy and he was having trouble standing. And then his vision blacked.

Alex was unconscious before he even hit the floor.

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Harry stood with his arms folded against his chest and a fierce, disapproving expression on his face.

“Harry? What is this place?” Steve asked as he, Tony, Bobbi and Daisy entered the room.

He turned to them and waved at the wall in front of him.

“One of the Runaway kids tried to tell someone how to find the Island,” he stated.

The wall that they all turned towards was quite unique due to its magic. It wasn’t solid, nor was it glass. Instead, it appeared to have a frosty transparency, not unlike a shower screen that was in the first stages of beginning to mist over. While it was still possible to see in and to see the figure lying on the floor, the image wasn’t completely clear.

“Is that Alex?” Daisy asked.

“Yes,” Harry nodded.

“As the Capsicle asked, what is this place?” Tony asked again.

“It’s a room that I hoped would never be used,” Harry sighed, running a hand across the back of his neck. “Actually, this area was never supposed to be used. It’s a … a detention area, for want of a better description.”

“We have our own prison?” Bobbi frowned.

“It’s designed specifically for anyone who attempts to betray us and Paradis Noir,” Harry replied. “The portkeys that I’ve given everyone? You remember that I told you that they have some additional enchantments on them? Well, if a person attempts to reveal the whereabouts of the Island – even if that is simply by trying to describe its general location – then those enchantments activate and, eventually – after some mild warnings, which it is hoped that the person in question will desist – will portkey that person into one of these cells.”

Now that he mentioned it, the others turned their heads to see the two other doors further down the corridor.

“Why’s he unconscious?” Daisy asked.

“The cells are rigged so that they’ll pump in some ‘knock-out’ gas when they detect a human presence,” Harry explained.

“So, the kid was trying to tell someone about the Island,” Steve frowned. “Any idea who? Or if it was intentional?”
“Not yet,” Harry replied. “If it was accidental, then we can decide what to do with him. If it wasn’t accidental …”

“Then that opens up a myriad of other questions,” Bobbi finished.

“I’m guessing that we’re going to wake him up and ask him,” Daisy said. “How will we know if he lies to us?”

“He won’t lie,” Harry replied grimly.

“What about the other kids?” Bobbi asked. “Let’s say for the sake of argument that he was deliberately trying to tell someone else; do we tell them?”

“I think we’d better have them here when we question Alex,” Daisy stated. “They won’t believe us, otherwise.”


With a nod, the two left but Harry barely noticed. Instead, he was opening the door to the cell. A simple wave of his hand cleaned the air. Two flicks of his wand produced a pair of chairs that faced each other. A swish and flick had the still unconscious Alex levitated into the chair that faced the wall/corridor so that those on the other side of the wall could see him and an extra wave of his hand had the boy securely tied to the chair.

It wasn’t long later that the sound of multiple people coming down the stairs could be heard.

“Alex!” Nico yelled, rushing at the window/wall before whirling angrily at the adults. “What’ve you done? Why’s he tied up like that?”

“And why’s he unconscious?” Molly added, equally angry, evidenced by the golden glow around her iris’ which only happened when her amazing strength was evident and ready to be used.

“That’s because of something that Alex did,” Harry replied from the open doorway. “At this point, we’re not sure if it was intentional or not and that is what we’re here to find out. And why we asked you here, so that you can hear what he has to say for himself.”

“What’d he do?” Chase asked and Harry was sure that he was only barely restraining himself from attempting to force his way into the room.

“He tried to tell someone where the Island is,” Daisy stated.

“When he did,” Harry continued, “the enchantments on the special portkeys that I gave him – and everyone else, including you and the rest of the Avengers – activated to prevent him from being able to do so. He was transported here and knocked out until he could be questioned to find out what was going on.”

“So, you’re going to give him a fair ‘trial’?” Nico asked.

“We’re going to question him,” Harry corrected. “Until we know his reasons and motivations, we have no intention of simply declaring him ‘guilty’. “

“Good!” Gert replied.

“You’ll be able to watch and hear from out here,” Harry said and, after making eye contact with both Daisy and Bobbi, entered the room with Steve and Tony and closed the door behind him.
“How are we going to do this?” Tony asked.

In response, Harry held up a small crystal vial.

“I’m going to give him three drops of this potion and then we’re going to ask him some questions. Just be mindful that, while whatever Alex replies with will be the truth, he will only answer the question as asked,” Harry said.

“Understood,” Steve nodded.

Tipping Alex’s head back, Harry opened his mouth and let three drops of veritaserum fall onto his tongue. After he was sure that the potion had had enough time to begin working, Harry enervated the teen.

“State your full name,” Harry began the questioning.

“Alexander Geoffrey Wilder,” a dull-sounding Alex replied.

“Did you leave Paradis Noir and go to New York City today?” Harry asked.

“Yes.”

“Was it your intention to meet anyone there?”

“No.”

“Did you attempt to tell anyone how to find Paradis Noir?” Harry asked.

“Yes.”

“Was this a deliberate attempt or was it accidental?”

“Deliberate.”

Harry exchanged grim looks with both Steve and Tony. At his nod, Steve stepped forward to continue the questioning.

“What is the name of the person you attempted to tell the location of Paradis Noir to?” Steve asked.

“Geoffrey Wilder.”

“Your father?” Tony blurted.

“Yes.”

“Did you see him in New York?” Steve asked.

“No.”

“Did you phone him?”

“Yes.”

“I thought that Maria had S.H.I.E.L.D. tap the phones of all the parents?” Harry asked.

“They did,” Steve replied grimly. “Alex, do you know how the phone conversation between you and your father was not detected by any others?”
“Yes.”

“How?”

“My father bought a pre-paid phone and gave me the phone number for it.”

“That’d do it,” Tony nodded.

“Okay. Alex. Why did you attempt to tell your father the location of *Paradis Noir*?” Steve asked.

“So that he could find us and take the others back to Pride,” Alex replied.

Harry glanced at the wall that he knew the other Runaways were standing on the other side of. Even though he couldn’t see them, he knew that they could see and hear everything that was being said inside the room and he imagined that they would *not* like what they’d just heard.

“Why do you want your friends to be recaptured by the Pride?” Steve asked.

“Because they are a danger to Pride,” Alex replied.

“Who are you loyal to: your friends or Pride?” Tony asked.

“Pride.”

“What? You know that we were all wondering that,” Tony shrugged.

“Have you always been loyal to Pride?” Steve asked.

“Yes.”

“Why?” Harry asked.

“I understand what Pride’s ultimate goal is and believe in it.”

The three men in the room shared a confused look and it was Steve who asked the next logical question.

“What is Pride’s ultimate goal?”

“To extract the alien ship that is buried beneath Los Angeles. Then, using the technology that it contains, Pride will firstly subjugate the city, then the world and finally the solar system to begin a Great Earth Star Empire.”

“Wow! Ambitious much?” Tony asked sarcastically.

“What is your role in this plan?” Steve asked.

“To ensure that they children of the Pride members do not interfere.”

“When did you learn of this plan and become loyal to Pride?” Harry asked.

“A year ago,” Alex replied.

“How did you learn of this?” Harry asked.

“I saw the Pride leaders kill a boy to help heal our leader, Jonah. I was seen and my parents explained the plan. After debating the merits of it with them, I agreed.”
“What was your mission in regards to your friends?” Steve asked.

“My mission was to act as though I did not know if the others ever found out so that I could spy on them and so that they could be kept in check.”

Harry decided that they’d finally heard enough. A flick of his hand had a jet of red light spit out to impact Alex’s chest. Instantly, the boy lost consciousness and his head lolled forward. A second spell silenced the room so that the others outside wouldn’t be able to hear them.

“What are we going to do with him?” Steve asked after Harry had nodded to him.

“I think we’re going to have to give him to S.H.I.E.L.D.,” Tony replied. “He’s clearly guilty and we can’t trust the police not to send him back to L.A. where his parents will simply get him out thanks to the corrupt cops there.”

“He’s underaged,” Steve frowned.

Harry shrugged. “I’ve seen others no older than him kill and I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s capable of that as well. Coulson has facilities where he’ll be kept under wraps and out of the way until we deal with Pride. He can be charged properly then.”

“I don’t like it, but it might be the best way,” Steve allowed. “I definitely don’t want to have to start taking prisoners ourselves – that way only leads to validating everything that the Accords accused us of being.”

“Agreed,” Tony and Harry said.

With that decided, Harry used his magic to open the door for the three of them.

Outside, they found that the rest of the Runaways weren’t faring very well. A massive dent in one wall indicated that Molly had taken out her anger on it. Karolina was sitting on the floor, her knees up against her chest, arms wrapped around them and tears were streaming down her face. Chase was pacing backwards and forwards, glaring at Alex through the wall. Gert was slumped back, her head shaking as though unable or more likely, unwilling to believe what she’d just heard. And Nico was standing there, her fists balled, waiting for them.

“Let me in,” she stated, the fury clear in her voice. “I’m gonna kill the little traitorous bastard!”

“No,” Steve replied firmly. “Alex is guilty, we all heard that, and he will be punished. But not by us.”

“Then who?” Chase growled.

“The authorities,” Steve replied.

Nico laughed. “As if we trust them to do the right thing.”

“They will,” Steve stated. “Believe me, we’ll make sure of it. For now, he’ll be placed into S.H.I.E.L.D. custody until Pride has been taken care of. After that, he’ll be tried properly and then sentenced accordingly.”

“And what about Pride? What about our parents?” Molly demanded.

“From what I heard in there, it sounds to me as though it’s time for the Avengers to become involved in that situation,” Steve replied.
“And us?” Nico asked. “We want to help.”

The adults in the room shared looks.

“I think that it’s time that we began your training,” Bobbi stated.

“Do we get to join Avengers Academy?” Nico asked.

“Maybe,” Steve allowed. “For now, you need to learn how not to be a danger to yourselves or to each other. Until then, we can’t let you go on any missions. Your knowledge, though, *that* will be invaluable for those of us who do go to L.A.”

Tony brought the quinjet to a stop and turned in his seat to grin at Pepper. His wife was getting quite big these days – a fact that even Tony knew better than to comment upon. And with her advancing pregnancy, came a propensity for her to take multiple extra naps. Currently, her head was lollled to the side, a line of drool dribbling from the corner of her mouth.

“Pep, we’re here,” he said softly, hoping not to startle her.

Thankfully, her eyes opened at once. She blinked at him and pushed herself so that she was sitting more upright. Tony couldn’t help but smirk as he saw her turning her head away from him and trying to discretely wipe away the drool.

“Where?” she asked, looking out the front window. “I’m guessing some island in the Pacific. What is this, are you taking me on a holiday?”

This time it was Tony’s turn to blink at her.

“A holiday? Whatever gave you that impression? No, this is Virginia Island. I own it.”

Pepper gave him a nonplussed look. “You bought an island? And named it after me?”

“Yes,” he replied happily.

“Why?”

“I needed it for Project Calrissian,” he shrugged.

“Forgetting for a moment that I have no idea what that is, are you sure that you’re not just trying to compete with Harry again?” she asked.

“Gandalf? What’s he got to do with this?” Tony asked, not understanding the connection.

“Well, Harry does own an island and now you’ve gone out and bought one. Surely you can see how it looks?”

“Pfft,” Tony waved off the idea. “I told you, I needed the island for Project Calrissian. It could just have easily been a piece of land in Montana, but this was a better choice.”

Pepper stared at him, obviously weighing his truthfulness.

“Alright. Start talking, Mister. What exactly is this ‘Project Calrissian’?”

“Well, I first had the idea back in Sokovia,” Tony began.
“Wait, wait, wait!” Pepper interrupted him, her eyes big and round as she stared at him. “Sokovia? Calrissian? As in *Lando* Calrissian? From *Star Wars?* Please tell me you haven’t gone and made your own ‘Cloud City’.”

Tony pouted. He knew that he was but still, he kept it up. He’d had it all planned out. The grand reveal, detailing all of his thought patterns and how amazing it was going to be and Pepper just had to go and pull the rug right out from under him.

“Can’t do it,” he finally said, his arms crossed as he turned to look out down on the island.

“You can’t do it?” Pepper repeated. “What can’t you do?”

“I can’t tell you that I haven’t gone and built my own ‘Cloud City’.”

“You did it, didn’t you?” Pepper sighed. “Alright, I can clearly see that the island below us is firmly still connected to the earth and the ocean, so you haven’t quite succeeded yet. Give me the details.”

‘Haven’t quite succeeded yet?’ Tony couldn’t help but grin at that. He couldn’t wait to see her face in just a couple of hours.

“Well, I figured if a bunch of robots could do it, then obviously I could do it so much better,” Tony said. “And really, if you want to blame someone, blame Harry. After all, he’s the one who gave me the idea in the first place.”

“Harry did?” Pepper asked, clearly not believing him.

“Well, he probably didn’t mean it that way, but, yeah,” Tony replied. “When we were still trying to work out ways to stop the city from crashing back into the ground. He suggested that we keep the city up there. *Obviously*, he meant sending it into space – which is what we did – but, still, the idea of a flying city was born.”

“How’d you solve the problem of keeping the dirt together?” Pepper asked.

“The same way that Ultron did. With a vibranium core. Actually, the same vibranium core that Ultron used. I salvaged it.”

“That’s what you were doing when you went to space when we first arrived in Wakanda,” Pepper said, obviously putting two and two together.

“Yep. And since then, I’ve had teams of engineers working here,” Tony explained. “The engines are finally ready and the basics of the city as well.”

“So, why did you bring me here today?” Pepper asked.

“Well, we’re ready for her first test run,” Tony shrugged. “I wanted to share the experience with you.”

Tony watched her face as she closed her eyes and slowly breathed out. He’d seen this multiple times before. Often, it also involved Pepper counting slowly under her breath. Thankfully, this wasn’t one of those times. Finally, her eyes opened and he sighed in relief at seeing them clear, without a hint of the storminess of her anger in them.

“Well, at least you want to do things with me,” Pepper said. “I should be thankful for that.”

“Great!” Tony exclaimed and leant across and kissed her.
Straightening in his chair, Tony opened communications to the chamber in the centre of what would be his 'Cloud City'. Pausing, he frowned. Really, with how close they were to getting this off the ground, he should come up with a decent name for the flying island-city. From the corner of his eye, he glanced at Pepper. Once upon a time, he’d promised to put her name on the side of the building. Would allowing her to name the city be just as good? He decided that it couldn’t hurt.

“This is Stark,” he said into the radio. “Begin Test One.”

“Confirmed, Mister Stark,” Ben, the chief engineer and foreman of the project replied. “Beginning Test One.”

Judging distances, he eased back on the controls, manoeuvring the quinjet backwards an extra three hundred metres.

“Dear,” Tony asked and waited until Pepper was looking at him before he continued. “I was wondering if you’d like to name the flying-city?”

“You haven’t named it yet?” a surprised sounding Pepper asked. “Wait. Don’t answer that. If you’re asking, then yes. I’m sure that whatever I can come up with will be much better than anything that you can.”

Tony opened his mouth to retort but snapped his jaw closed as an enormous rumbling permeated the air. The two of them leant forward, staring down as the ground below began to shake. Slowly, steadily, the groaning increased until it was almost deafening, even from this distance.

At the same time, great cracks appeared in the ground on the ocean side of the circular mountain range. Trees shook, branches snapping off before entire trees crashed to the ground. Zigzagging holes in the ground split apart making the very ground undulate. The ocean wasn’t immune, either. The waves that had been gently washing ashore suddenly began reversing away from the island, leaving great tracts of muddy sand and exposed rocks behind.

And then, with one last great heave, the main part of the island jolted, jerked and lifted into the air.

Tony leant forward even more, examining what he was seeing, his eyes shining brightly in excitement.

The mountains that circled the island remained intact as well as the great green bowl inside it. The waters of the lake sloshed about, crashing up onto the dry land before the water rushed back into place. More trees fell, but they were of little concern right then.

No, Tony’s entire focus was on the outside of the mountains. Dirt, rocks, trees all rained below in a great grey, brown and green waterfall from the edge of the mountains, crashing back down to what was left of the island, either leaving new mounds or sliding down into the great chasm that had just been created.

Slowly, metre by metre, the centre of the island rose. Reactor engine after reactor engine came into view, great blue circles of energy that had the very air vibrating with the energy that it was creating. Finally, the very bottom of the floating-island appeared – almost a point straight down from the very centre of the land.

Gradually, the dirt and rock waterfall slowed to a miniscule trickle and Tony was able to see what he’d created.

The flying-island was huge and beautiful, full of potential and magnificence. As for the island that was left below, there remained only a ring of land between ten and fifty metres wide with the ocean
on one side and a great hole hundreds of metres deep in its centre.

“Stage One Test complete,” Ben’s voice announced over the radio.

“Confirmed,” Tony replied, staring at the flying-island that was now hovering with its lowest point a mere twenty metres from the highest point of what remained of Virginia Island.

“That’s … that’s … that’s amazing!” Pepper breathed.

“It is, isn’t it?” Tony replied impressed with what he’d created.

“How long will it stay in the air?” Pepper asked.

“With those arc reactor engines? Theoretically, indefinitely,” Tony replied.

“How high can it go?”

“I’m thinking normal ‘cruising’ height would be two thousand metres. For now, she stays exactly where she is while we go over everything to make sure that there’s no bugs and to do some extra work on the outside of it,” he replied.

“And you’re going to have people living on it?” she asked and Tony noted that her eyes had not left the sight before her once.

“That is the plan,” he replied. “Would you like a closer look?”

Noting the nod of her head, he fired the engines and moved the quinjet in.
“I now close this Ordinary Meeting of the General Assembly,” Didimus Gonzales, Secretary-General of the United Nations stated before quickly continuing before the Delegates could begin talking, shuffling papers or worse, leaving. “There will be a short recess of ten minutes before a Special Meeting of the General Assembly will begin. This will be a Closed Session. As such, all media representatives, public guests in the gallery and all non-Delegates will be asked to leave. In addition, only essential Translators will be permitted to remain.”

As expected, there was a moment of silence as either his words were being translated into the dozens of languages that the Delegates spoke or his surprise statement was being processed. Well, surprise to most; there were, after all, a handful that knew not only that this meeting would be happening but also what the topic under discussion was to be.

And then the noise level grew. Delegates were quickly on their feet, either stretching or striding from their seat to have a quiet word with other Delegates. The Gallery, Didimus could see, was being cleared by the Guards. And up in the huge, glass-fronted room that overlooked the large Assembly room of their Geneva Headquarters, close to half of the translators were in the process of collecting their belongings before they would be escorted from the room.

Soon enough, the General Assembly was once again seated in their places, many looking around the room at how empty it seemed without all of the on-lookers and extra individuals in attendance. It was actually extremely rare for the any meetings of the United Nations to be conducted like this and even Didimus found it somewhat disconcerting. After all, the UN was supposed to be a body that represented the world and hiding behind closed doors and making decisions that way just felt wrong.

After sweeping his gaze over the room one last time, Didimus straightened in his chair and touched the button that rang a melodious chime, signalling that the meeting was about to begin.

“Please close and secure the doors,” he called to the guards placed beside said doors. “No one apart from Delegates is permitted into this room until the meeting has concluded.”

“Excuse me, Mister Secretary General,” Pierre Laroche, the Delegate for France called. “But I believe that there is still one last individual that needs to leave before the meeting can begin.”

“Thank you, Mister Laroche. However, United States Secretary of State General Thaddeus Ross is here at my personal invitation. He has previously held a vital role with the United Nations and his expertise and opinion will be needed for the discussion at hand,” Didimus replied.

When the last door had been closed – with the guards now positioned outside of the Assembly room – the Secretary General nodded.

“Thank you all for staying,” he began. “I acknowledge that I have circumvented normal procedures by announcing this Meeting with Special Business in this way and even more so by not informing you of the topic beforehand. The reason that I have done this is because of the sensitive nature of what we will be discussing and most especially with how … controversial it is among the general public of the world.

“Today, it is my intention for us to discuss The Sokovia Accords, also known as the Superhuman Registration Act.”

“What is there to discuss?” the Egyptian Delegate asked. “We discussed this at length amongst
ourselves and even hosted a symposium with the extra-humans themselves. The vote was all but unanimous."

“I have heard no reports of the Avengers or the other groups acting against the Accords,” David Winchester, the representative for Great Britain stated. “Unless there are reports that have been covered up?”

“No,” Didimus replied quickly. “The Avengers, the X-men, the Fantastic Four – not to mention all of their allies – have all abided by the Accords, keeping every law to the letter.”

“Then what is the problem? Assuming that there is one?” Nakia, the Wakandan Delegate asked.

Didimus took a breath. They were now at the real reason for the meeting and despite his decades not just within politics but within the United Nations itself, he could not predict the response that he was about to get.

“The problem is that, while those that I named have abided by the Sokovia Accords, there are numerous others of extra-human abilities that are not.”

A great murmuring swept through the General Assembly and it was easy to hear that there was a decidedly angry undertone to it.

“I assume that these … people are being dealt with? That they are being arrested, tried and, where appropriate, incarcerated?” Gillian Bird, the Delegate for Australia asked.

“That question brings us to the main issue that is at the heart of our meeting today,” Didimus stated. “Yes, where possible, local constabularies are dealing with the extra-humans. Unfortunately, this is not a common occurrence. Most countries that are in need of more specialised forces to deal with these people are employing their military forces. However, more and more instances are occurring where even this response is insufficient to the threat that is being posed.”

“I move that we authorise lethal force to be used by any government and military force that is reluctant to make the decision on their own,” the Saudi Arabian delegate stated, emphasising his declaration with a slap of his table.

“Seconded!” three voices rang at once.

Didimus frowned. “Surely I do not need to remind the Delegates within this room that the United Nations cannot create and impose laws upon nations in the manner that you are attempting to suggest.”

“Mister Secretary General,” Nakia of Wakanda called and Didimus could see that her brows were slightly furrowed. “Can I request, on behalf of my fellow Delegates, clarification of the events that you are referring to? Concrete examples, if you will, of the instances where the national police or army was unable to combat the extra-humans.”

Didimus shot her a grateful look. “It was my intention to do so. While there are in excess of two dozen instances just within the last month where mutants, mutates or Inhumans have threatened – and in many instances, taken – the lives of ordinary citizens, I intend on outlining three of them today. A packet with additional information about all such instances is being brought around to you.”

At his words, he pressed a buzzer on his desk and four of Didimus’ most trusted aides stepped into the room pushing a small cart in front of them. Quickly, the four filed around the room, handing a thick document to each and every delegate. When all had received one, the four retreated back the way that they had come, the door closing behind them with a soft click.
As much as he wanted to move the meeting on, Didimus waited, giving the assembled delegates a chance to scan through the document that they’d just received. Judging by some of the scowls that were beginning to appear on various faces, he knew that the delegates were already beginning to understand the problem. On a worldwide scale.

“I would like to call upon the Tuvula Delegate, Mister Aunese Simati,” Didimus called in a loud voice.

An elderly gentleman with a myriad of deep lines on his dark brown face and brilliant, white hair stood from his chair and strode down the stairs to stand in the centre of the open area between where the delegates sat in their rows and Didimus’ own position.

“Thank you, Mister Secretary-General,” Delegate Simati said with a small bow in his direction.

Didimus inclined his head in return before pressing a button on his desk which lowered the great viewscreen from the ceiling in preparation for the first of the videos that was to be shown that day.

“Assembled Delegates,” Delegate Simati said gazing out at the rows upon rows of his peers. “Tuvalu is a small nation made up of an old people. While we cherish our independence, we are also grateful to those who have stood by our side over the years, most notably Britain and the Commonwealth, of which we are a part. In terms of our place amongst you, we are still young, being one of the newer members. It is my sad duty to bring to you today the message that we as a people now only exist as a nation-in-exile.”

“Mister Simati,” Delegate Winchester said over the confused susurration that permeated the great room, “what do you mean ‘nation-in-exile’? The British Commonwealth has heard nothing about this.”

“That is not completely accurate,” Gillian Bird, the Australian delegate refuted. “Australia is very well aware of the plight of the Tulavuan people. But I will allow Mister Simati to tell the assembled delegates the details of his statement.”

“My thanks, Ms Bird,” Delegate Simati replied with a bow in her direction. “Three days ago, a group of calling themselves the Brotherhood of Mutants arrived in Vaiaku, our capital. They were led by this man. He calls himself ‘Magneto’.”

The screen above flared into life showing a photo of a group of nineteen individuals. The most prominent was an older man wearing black clothes, a cape and a strange-looking helmet on his head. Some of the others around him were clearly extra-humans, most notably a blue-skinned woman and a strange little man who was crouched down on all fours like some weird kind of frog or toad.

“This Brotherhood of Mutants marched into our governmental building and ordered that our entire population leave our islands,” Simati continued, his voice cracking with the distress of what he was saying. “The one called Magneto told our Prime Minister and his Parliament that they had decided that Tuvalu was to be the new home for all mutants. Of course, we resisted. The police were called in.”

Here, Simati merely waved at the screen bringing everyone’s attention to the short video that began playing.

Didimus resisted the urge to twist about so that he, too, could watch the video. After all, he’d already seen it – numerous times – and he thought that it would be more informative to watch the delegate’s reaction.
The video, he knew, showed a dozen Tuvalu police officers bursting into the Parliament, their guns already drawn. Those guns, though, were immediately ripped out of the police officer’s hands before reversing themselves and pointing back at the officers while floating in mid-air. The video would then cut to show the outside of the Parliament building where numerous police cars as well as a riot truck had taken up position. And then an extremely large man with bulging muscles and a dome-shaped helmet on his head began running at the vehicles. The Juggernaut didn’t stop when he got near the riot truck, instead he sped up before slamming into it with his head, causing the truck to almost fold in two before rocketing over and over across the street.

“As you can see, my police forces did not stand a chance against such mutants as these,” Delegate Simati said sadly. “We are only a small people – less than eleven thousand of us spread across our nine tiny islands. Our Prime Minister did the only thing that he could do in the circumstances in order to protect the safety of our people. He surrendered and our people were evacuated within the next twenty-four hours.”

“Where to? Where did you go?”

The question was voiced by more than a dozen in the room before Simati raised his hands to stop them.

“Our good friends in Australia have taken the people of Tuvalu in,” Delegate Simati told them all. “There are a great many logistical problems for us to deal with at this time but we are coping as best as we can.”

“I would like to move a vote of thanks to the people of Australia for their help in this trying and unusual situation,” Didimus said.

“Seconded!” more than half the room roared.

“My thanks, Delegate Simati,” Didimus said as the Tuvalu delegate returned to his seat. “Please be assured that the United Nations will do all that they can to assist you and your people at this time. Delegates, this is just one of the many situations that has arisen in the past few months. And unfortunately, as more and more time passes, the more unusual and the more dangerous and deadly the situations are that are appearing. And while most are appearing in the news of the world, there are some that have been deliberately kept hidden so as not to incite riots and panic among the general population, like the situation on Tuvalu.”

The slight shuffling of people in their seats told Didimus that already, this session was getting the reaction that he expected.

“I would now like to call upon the Delegate from Kenya.”

Didimus watched as Madame Kandie rose from her place in the second tier and moved gracefully to the floor, her head held high, as dignified as she always appeared.

“Mister Secretary-General, Delegates, thank you for this opportunity to speak,” she began. “What I am about to relay to you happened eleven days ago but it highlights a trend that we in Kenya have begun noticing.

“As I am certain that you are all aware, Kenya is located in what can be termed as a ‘hotspot’ of troubles within the world. As such, our military is always on alert. That does not mean that they are infallible, for no force can claim otherwise and be entirely truthful. One point that is of interest to our national security is our border with Somalia and thus, we have a military base located nearby.
“Eleven days ago, that base was infiltrated by a single *unarmed* Somali man. He managed to evade notice as he crossed the base and entered one of our barracks.”

At Madame Kandie’s nod to him, Didimus pressed the button that ran the recording of the incident. The grainy image showed the interior of the Kenyan barracks that Madame Kandie had referenced. Rows of bunks, easily a dozen to either side, lined the walls. Judging by the lumps in said bunks, combined with the dark that could be seen outside the windows, it was night and there was a squad asleep in the room.

That was when a man slipped into the room, closing the door behind him. Instead of approaching any of the sleeping men, he simple stood in the very centre of the room, turning about as though to take it all in. And then he stopped, leant forwards slightly before drawing upright and even bending slightly backwards. There was no sound to go with the picture and thus, at first, id did not appear that anything was happening.

That was until the men began waking, most clutching their throats. Four managed to stumble to their feet; one even managed a few steps towards the unknown man in the centre of the room before he collapsed. One by one, the soldiers fell, either back onto their bunks or to the floor. Many spasmed slightly at first but before long, they had become completely still.

Finally, the unknown man looked around the room once more, nodded and exited the way that he had arrived.

“What you just witnessed was the death of twenty-two Kenyan soldiers,” Madame Kandie stated. “The cause of their death: asphyxiation. The man who did this was Somali. He was captured between this barracks and the next one that he was headed towards. After questioning, it was revealed that he is an Inhuman. An Inhuman with the ability to draw all of the oxygen within a room into himself, leaving no air for any others within that room to breathe. Even with the death of twenty-two soldiers, we consider ourselves lucky. His plan was to move from room to room, killing as many soldiers as he could on the Base. All without drawing a single weapon.”

Again, there was a great murmuring throughout the room.

“What you just witnessed was the death of twenty-two Kenyan soldiers,” Madame Kandie stated. “The cause of their death: asphyxiation. The man who did this was Somali. He was captured between this barracks and the next one that he was headed towards. After questioning, it was revealed that he is an Inhuman. An Inhuman with the ability to draw all of the oxygen within a room into himself, leaving no air for any others within that room to breathe. Even with the death of twenty-two soldiers, we consider ourselves lucky. His plan was to move from room to room, killing as many soldiers as he could on the Base. All without drawing a single weapon.”

“Thank you, Madame Kandie,” Didimus said, giving the woman as deep a bow as he could from where he was sitting. “We extend our condolences to you and to your people.”

She returned his bow with a simple nod before retreating to her seat.

“As you can imagine,” Didimus said, addressing the assembled delegates, “there have been a great many more instances similar to this. I asked Madame Kandie to tell you of this one to highlight the fact that we non-powered humans are able to combat some of the abilities that have manifested themselves within the powered community.

“I would now like to invite the Delegate for the United States of America to the floor. Miss Haley?”

From the corner of his eye, Didimus noticed Secretary Ross straighten in his chair before leaning forward slightly. This was where things would get interesting, Didimus knew. While Ross had been personally invited to the meeting by himself, Didimus had kept the contents of the meeting from him. The frown that now appeared on Ross’ face told everyone that he didn’t like being kept in the dark.

“Thank you, Mister Secretary-General,” Miss Haley said once she was positioned in the centre of the floor facing the delegates. “I would like to begin by confirming the Secretary-General’s earlier statement: Since the signing of the Sokovia Accords, the Avengers, their allies and the other groups that are affected by the Accords that reside within the United States have abided by the laws that we
set. That does not mean to say that there have been no incidents of law-breaking by mutants, mutates or Inhumans within the United States of America. There have been. Numerous counts, actually. However, the perpetrators have not been those who I just named.

“I was asked here today to give a report upon those who are breaking the laws set within the Sokovia Accords and how the United States police and or military have dealt with those instances.”

While there was a general shuffling of bodies on seats, not a sound could be heard and Didimus knew that Miss Haley had everyone’s full attention.

“The short answer,” she continued, “is ‘not well’. Most mutates, mutants or Inhumans that have broken the law by using their powers have remained at large. Like my colleagues before me, I have brought video footage with me to show you exactly what the police and military within the United States have been dealing with. So as to not extend our time here more than necessary, I have limited the footage that I will show you to instances that have taken place within New York City.

“This first video takes place on the very doorstep of Avengers Tower. The individual that you can see,” she said, pointing up and behind her to the video that was now playing, “has been given the name ‘Scorpion’, due to his green-tinted suit and long, pointed tail. As you can see, nothing that the police threw at the Scorpion had any impact on him at all. It was almost as though he was playing with them. And as you can also see, not a single Avenger intervened. Thankfully, while there were numerous injuries, no officers were killed in this skirmish.

“This second incident happened three weeks later. Much of this footage was distributed worldwide via numerous news outlets. For those of you who have not seen it, the figure in the centre of the window is J. Jonah Jameson, the editor-in-chief of the *Daily Bugle*, a newspaper from New York City. The Scorpion had taken Jameson hostage in a misguided attempt to force the Avengers out to confront him. His goal, we have since learnt, was to discredit them, having been hired prior to donning the suit by Jameson to do so through the use of photographs. Exactly what happened to turn the man under the mask into the Scorpion we have yet to determine.

“This incident, as you can see in the footage, drew the attention of two others. The one riding the advanced flight board is calling himself the ‘Hobgoblin’. The other is known as ‘Electro’ and can control electricity. Prior to this incident, both of them were limited to ‘simple’ burglaries. Since the three of them have joined forces, their exploits have become … grander. Banks are being robbed on a daily basis; military bases or convoys are being attacked, their weapons stolen; ransom is being demanded through blackmail or hostage situations. Our sources tell us that there is a fourth individual involved in all this, primarily keeping to the background and supplying weapons. We only know him as the Vulture.”

“Delegate Haley, what happened to Mister Jameson? Did he survive?” the delegate from Peru asked.

“Surprisingly, yes,” Haley replied. “Unfortunately, not because of anything our police or SWAT teams did. It appears that the Scorpion finally became convinced that the Avengers weren’t coming and simply … left. Jameson was rescued and taken to a hospital where he is likely to spend the next four months recovering from his injuries.”

“Surely the vaunted might of the U.S. military can deal with a few enhanced individuals, no matter how advanced they seem,” the Iraqi delegate asked in a tone that clearly indicated that he couldn’t see how this was a problem.

“It’s not as simple as that,” Haley replied. “This group is smart. They’re using innocent civilians to stop us from getting close. And they’ve also started taking over the various gangs and mob organisations within New York as well. They are building layers of protection that make it
impossible for us to get close enough to deal with them without any collateral damage. And make no mistake, there would be loss of civilian lives considering the amount of firepower that our military would be forced to use to combat them.”

“Thank you, Delegate Haley,” Didimus said, cutting off any other questions. “As you can see from the examples that have been detailed to you from our colleagues representing diverse parts of the world, there has been an unexpected rise in incidents relating to the safety of the people of the world because of people with extraordinary abilities.

“When we first instituted discussion about regulating those with special abilities due to their genetic makeup or because of an altering of their genes, it was in direct response to what had been happening in the world already. We could see the potential problems that could occur. Thus, we ratified the Sokovia Accords. Personally, in the last weeks, I have come to wonder if what we did was the wisest course of action.”

“It should not be a surprise, Mister Secretary-General,” Nakia, the Wakandan delegate stated. “I remember the question being asked at the conference of the Five Tribes – what will happen when those mutants, mutates, Inhumans or those with advanced technology decide to act and ignore the laws set out in the Sokovia Accords?”

“Are you saying that we should not have agreed to the Accords? That we should not have regulated those ‘heroes’ who inadvertently caused the deaths of so many innocent lives within my own nation?” the Nigerian delegate spat.

“Wakandans were also killed in the incident that you speak of, Delegate Nibarbu,” Nakia reminded him. “But I find myself questioning whether we were too hasty in our response. We all agreed to sign the Accords and from where I sit, after listening to what has been happening in Tuvalu, Kenya and New York, not to mention what I have already read in this document, I must ask. Is shackling those who can and will stand between us and those whose abilities we cannot hope to stand against our best option?”

“Mister Secretary-General, if I may?” Secretary Ross asked from where he now stood at his seat to the side.

“That is why I asked you here today, Secretary Ross,” Didimus said, waving his hand from Ross to the centre of the floor. “You were involved in the creation of the Sokovia Accords from the very first day and you are one of the ones with the most experience with powered individuals.”

By the time that Didimus had finished speaking, Ross had crossed the room and was now standing at what anyone with military experience would recognise as ‘parade rest’

“Thank you, Mister Secretary-General, Delegates,” Ross began. “I have seen the same reports that you have all seen and, while I can understand the Wakandan delegates’ questions, I do not share them. Yes, there has been a rise in incidents from those with enhanced abilities. But I firmly believe that we would have seen this rise regardless of whether or not the Sokovia Accords were brought into effect. My opinion is that they are working! None of the Avengers or the X-men or any of the others have broken the law. Which is what we wanted, what the law is designed for.

“But as to the question of whether we should consider ‘unshackling them’? The answer must be a resounding ‘no’! We do not want even more powered people running about making a mess of things and getting innocent civilians killed.”

“Then how do you propose that we solve the crisis at hand, Secretary Ross?” Gillian Bird asked. “It has been made abundantly clear to me that conventional police and military tactics are not enough to
deal with these types of situations.”

“You’re right, they’re not,” Ross replied. “But I believe that I have a solution for that, one that this great Assembly once agreed with: we have our own response team. Once, we’d offered to make the Avengers our response team, to go into places and situations under our guidance and authority to deal with these very incidents. But they said no. So, I would like to propose that you give me the authorisation to create a team that will agree to work within the UN guidelines that you set and can then deal with any situation that arises.”

“And where do you propose to get these individuals from?” the Canadian delegate asked.

“It sounds to me as though you already have individuals in mind,” Delegate Haley stated shrewdly.

“You’re right. I do have some in mind. And I know exactly where the individuals that could be convinced to agree to our oversight can be found. They’ve been languishing in a facility called the Raft for quite some time now and I’m sure that they’ll be eager to do anything that we want them to in return for some freedom, no matter how limited,” Ross replied.

“Who?” Didimus asked, his eyes narrowed.

“Captain Emil Blonsky …”


“I firmly believe that with the right motivation that they can become a team that will work for us, not against us,” Ross argued.

“And what, you’ll call them the ‘Thunderbolts’?” Haley scoffed, causing Didimus to raise his eyebrows at the unexpected use of Ross’ military nickname. “No. I know of the individuals in the Raft – both what they’re capable of and what crimes they committed in order to be placed there in the first place. We do not want them let out of the facility under any circumstances. They’ll cause more problems than they’ll fix.”

“Then what’s your solution, Ambassador?” Ross asked snidely.

“We dissolve the Sokovia Accords completely and let those who have proven themselves as working for the people of the world, those who are dedicated to doing what is right, to do their jobs,” Nakia stated flatly.

Didimus had to quickly school his face from the smile that threatened to appear at the undertones of approval that quietly swept through the room at Nakia’s declaration.

“Can that even be done?”

“How would that work?”

“Would the Avengers and the others even be willing to come out of ‘retirement’ and stop these incidents from happening?”

Slowly, steadily, more and more voices were being raised, not only towards the floor of the room but as delegates began debating with their neighbours. Before the room got completely out of control, Didimus pressed the button that produced a deep gonging sound. Almost instantly, the room fell silent.
“Delegate Nakia of Wakanda, is there something that you’d like to say?” Didimus asked pointedly.

For a second, he wondered if she’d get his hint. Thankfully, it only took a second for comprehension to dawn in her eyes.

“Thank you, Mister Secretary-General,” she replied. “Delegates. I move the motion that the Sokovia Accords, also known as the Superhuman Registration Act, be declared null and void.”

“A motion has been voiced,” Didimus stated. “Do we have a Seconder?”

“I Second the motion,” Delegate Simati of Tuvalu replied.

“Very well. We have a motion and a Seconder. I know open the floor for discussion,” Secretary-General Didimus Gonzales declared.
Harry sat back on the couch with his arm around his wife, simply enjoying the chance to relax. It didn’t hurt that they had their own special show to enjoy at the same time.

“How long are you going to keep this up?” Daisy whispered into his ear sending shivers down his spine.

“A lot less time than I could if you’re going to do that,” Harry replied, emphasising his intentions by allowing his fingers to lightly trace up her side.

“Later, Magic Man, when we don’t have an audience,” Daisy replied, again in that same seductive whisper.

Deciding that, while having fun at his godson’s expense was one thing, there were other, better things that he could be doing, Harry cleared his throat and leaned forward slightly.

“Teddy!” he called.

Unfortunately for him, the chameleon currently sitting amongst the basket of bright orange balls of wool that he’d conjured as part of this ‘exercise’, didn’t even flinch let alone turn back into a teen boy. The professor in Harry nodded in approval; Teddy wasn’t allowing anything to distract him to give himself away.

And really, it would take a jerk of movement for someone who didn’t know that he was there to spot him. The chameleon’s skin had changed colour to match the wool perfectly. Just as it had in each of the other half dozen coloured ‘environments’ that he’d had Teddy hiding in. No matter the colour, it seemed that Teddy’s chameleon ability was perfectly suited for blending in.

Not that that had been the only tests that Harry had been putting his godson through that afternoon. He’d had Teddy proving how quickly he could transform to and from his Animagus form at random intervals as well.

Really, there was no need for all of this; Harry knew that Teddy was ready, that he’d now proven that he was fully and completely an Animagus. But really, what sort of Marauder would he be if he gave in too early, without some sort of ‘initiation’ test before giving Teddy his very own Marauder name? Especially when Teddy had been longing for it for so long.

“Teddy! Time to change back,” Harry instructed.

This time, the chameleon moved, crawling out of the balls of wool in his slow, careful steps before shifting back to his human form.

“That’s amazing, Ted!” Daisy exclaimed. “I think you’ve really got it down. If I didn’t know that you were there, there’s no way that I’d have seen you.”

“Thanks, Aunt Daisy,” Teddy beamed. “I’m ready, aren’t I, Uncle Harry? I’ve shown you that I’ve mastered my form and changing back and forwards as quickly as you.”

“Well, not quite as quick as me,” Harry replied, “but yes, you’ve passed every test that I’ve asked of you.”

“So, I can have my Marauder name now?”
For a brief second, Harry contemplated teasing Teddy some more, suggesting one or two of the strangest Marauder names that he’d come up with for just this situation. But then Daisy’s fingers began playing with his hair and the back of his neck, sending even more light shivers down his back and across his shoulders and he decided that no, Teddy really should get his proper name now so that he could go and tell his friends about his achievement.

“Theodore Remus Lupin,” Harry began officially, in as pompous a voice as he could – much like he remembered his own godfather once using with him, although sadly not for the same reason, “as you have now successfully demonstrated that you have achieved Animagus-status, like most Marauders before you, I dub thee: Camo .”

“Camo?” Teddy repeated sounding less than impressed.

“Hmm, you don’t like that one?” Harry asked. “Fair enough. In that case, we’ll go with my alternate idea. Since a chameleon is a type of lizard, I dub thee: Liz.”

Just as expected, Teddy’s eyes bulged in horror.

“No!” he blurted. “You named me Camo first. Camo’s good. It’s short for camouflage, isn’t it? And that’s what chameleons are best at. Like me and my metamorph abilities.”

“I thought you’d see it my way,” Harry grinned. “Now, scamp, I’m sure that Doreen, Peter, Gwen, Melati and the others are waiting to hear if you passed.”

But before Teddy could take more than a step, all of their watches began vibrating and they all looked down at them in unison.

“Scratch that,” Harry said, rising from the couch alongside Daisy. “Grab your gear and get to the portkey point immediately.”

Teddy didn’t wait to reply, instead racing from the room just as Harry raised his arm and wandlessly and wordlessly summoned his and his wife’s uniforms.

ooo00ooo

The sound of the engine had Steve pausing and grabbing the swinging punching bag and bringing it to stillness. Engines in general weren’t unusual at the Compound, especially as S.H.I.E.L.D. also used it as one of their bases. The difference this time was that it wasn’t the distinctive sound of a quinjet.

“Are we expecting visitors?” he asked.

Without missing a single step in her own workout routine on the twin padded, vertical poles with ‘arms’ sticking out at regular intervals all around them, Nat, the only other one in the training room, answered him.

“That was when his watch began vibrating on his wrist. Glancing at it had him raising his eyebrows.

“It’s Hill,” he said. “All Avengers have been summoned to the Compound’s main briefing room.”

That caused Nat to stop, turn and look at him. “Something’s happened.”

“And probably explains why we have visitors,” Steve added, beginning the process of unwrapping
his hands from the strapping that protected them when he boxed. “Think there’s time for us to take a shower?”

“I wouldn’t say no,” she replied and the tone of her voice had him looking up to see a mischievous smile on her face.

“You know what I mean,” he said.

“And where’s the fun in that?” she shot back.

“I might just shock you one day, Romanoff. But right now is not that time.”

“Promises, promises,” she said, picking up her towel and wiping her face as she headed for the adjoining shower room.

ooooooo

The Compound tarmac was as full as Harry had ever seen it as he joined Steve, Nat and Clint just in front of the doors to the main building.

Maria, it seemed, had been quite busy. A quinjet had arrived from San Francisco carrying not only Scott but also Hope van Dyne. Another heavily modified quinjet that was barely recognisable as such had landed not five minutes before carrying the Fantastic Four. Off to one side was even a Wakandan jet, telling them that T’Challa was also there. The unknown engine that had originally interrupted Steve’s workout had belonged to the largest craft currently there – the X-men’s Blackbird.

The roar of a new engine had them looking not up, but out along their driveway to see a sleek, red vehicle racing towards them. Not one of them moved an inch as its brakes hit hard bringing it to a stop right in front of them.

“This looks eerily familiar,” Bruce stated, looking not at them but at the tarmac as he exited the passenger side.

“I told you, it’s something big. Had to be for an all-Avenger call,” Tony stated as he rounded the car. “The whole gang here?”

Any answer was interrupted by the arrival of Thor directly landing directly in their midst. The Asgardian rose from the one knee that he’d landed on, Stormbreaker in his hand and a smile on his face.

“My friends, it is good to see you all!” he exclaimed.

“Thor. Nice flight?” Steve asked before switching his focus to Tony. “And yes, now we’re all here.”

“In that case, let’s get this show on the road,” Tony said, leading the seven of them inside.

ooooooo

“Thank you all for coming,” Maria Hill said, having stepped up to the podium at the front of the conference room, “especially on such short notice. For those of you who were here the last time we held a meeting like this, you’ll notice a few new faces. And for those of you who haven’t been here before, I’m sure that there are a lot of people that you may recognise but not know. So, before we begin, I’ll do a few quick introductions.
“On the table to my right are the X-men, led by Professor Charles Xavier. Those accompanying him are Scott, Jean, Logan, Ororo, Hank, Kurt and Warren. At the next table are the Fantastic Four – Reed, Sue, Johnny and Ben. To my left sit the Inhuman delegation from Attilan: Black Bolt, Medusa, Gorgon, Karnak and Crystal.

“The new faces sitting amongst the current Avengers and Avengers Academy members are Melati, Hope van Dyne – a colleague of Scott’s – Luke Cage, Danny Rand and Jessica Jones, all with abilities who, until the Accords were introduced, did some ‘hero-ing’ in their local neighbourhoods. And lastly, Carol Danvers, who has spent much of her life off-world.”

“I’m assuming that today’s meeting has something to do with the Accords?” Charles asked.

“So I’m told,” Maria nodded, before unconsciously looking up slightly. “Friday, could you please let Lavender know that we’re ready for her and our guest.”

Not thirty seconds later, the door behind her was opened and Lavender led US Secretary of State General Thaddeus Ross into the room. While not a single word was spoken by the assembled heroes, Maria noticed a great deal of shifting in seats. After indicating to the Secretary that the podium was his, Maria stepped back and away before taking up a position against the side wall where she could see everyone at once.

“I know that none of you are all that anxious to hear from me after the last time that I was here,” Ross began.

“Whatever gave you that impression?” Tony snarked.

Ross merely glanced at him before continuing. “Believe me, I don’t want to be here either. But we don’t always get what we want, do we?”

Ross cleared his throat as he appeared to swallow whatever he was about to say.

“So why are you here, Mister Secretary?” Steve prompted.

“I was asked to come here today to inform you of some significant changes that have occurred recently within the United Nations that affects all of you,” Ross stated.

He then pulled out a piece of paper from inside his inner jacket pocket, opened it and began to read.

“By a majority vote of the sitting members of the United Nations, the Sokovia Accords, also known as the Superhuman Registration Act, has been declared null and void in its entirety.”

Maria started. She’d expected this but not for a while yet. And she was sure that there would have been a lot more worldwide incidents where extra-humans had created panic, upheaval, damage and death before such a decision was even debated, let alone reached. She’d also expected a large public outcry to precede it as well.

“I know what you just said, but what does that mean?” Harry asked. “Specifically.”

“And why was such a decision made in the first place? I cannot imagine the United Nations delegates reversing such a major policy as this so unexpectedly for it to not have a root cause,” Hank McCoy said.

“Better, when was that decision made? Something that big being in the works should have been making headlines for a while,” Tony said.
“You’re right,” Ross replied, addressing Hank and Tony and seemingly ignoring Harry. “This change was completely unexpected. Secretary-General Gonzales initiated a closed-door session to discuss the Accords’ effectiveness yesterday. The discussion lasted eleven hours and by the end, the vote was to revoke the Accords.”

“What aren’t you telling us, Mister Secretary?” Medusa asked in response to a flurry of hand movements from Black Bolt.

Ross’ moustache seemed to move of its own accord and Maria was certain that Ross was either biting the words off that he wanted to say before they could escape or trying to convince himself to answer the question. Perhaps both, she eventually reasoned.

“The UN has been keeping a close eye on what has been happening around the world in terms of mutant, mutate and Inhuman situations.”

“But not magical?” Harry questioned.

Ross gave him a confused expression. “You and your protégé there are the only magicals in the world, as far as we know. You two were being monitored the same way the rest of the Avengers and you others were. And believe me, you were all being closely monitored.

“Gonzales had compiled a report several hundred pages long about all the trouble those like you were getting up to in every country around the world. He even had a few delegates give verbal reports, including Ambassador Haley from the good of US of A. She only spoke about what’s been happening here in New York but that was enough.”


“Yeah, them,” Ross nodded. “The real kicker, though, was the Delegate from Tuvalu.”

“Tuvalu?” a confused sounding Thor asked.

“A small island nation in the Pacific,” Reed replied.

“What happened there?” Steve asked.

“It’s easiest if I just show you,” Ross replied.

The images that appeared on the big screen had an immediate reaction from the X-men.

“Magneto!” Logan growled with an accompanying snikt.

“Did I hear that correctly? Did Magneto and the Brotherhood just evict an entire population and claim Tuvalu for themselves?” Scott asked.

“All nine islands,” Ross confirmed. “Apparently it’s to be the new home for all mutants. Genosha or something, this Magneto called it.”

“Then it appears that your announcement about the Accords having been rescinded is indeed timely,” Charles stated. “For even if they were still in effect, this is not something that we could ignore. Leave Erik and the Brotherhood to us; we know them best.”

“Charles’ is right,” Logan agreed. “Magneto and his clowns are ours. We’ll take care of them and get the Tuvaluan people their homes back.”

“If you will excuse me,” Ororo said, rising from her chair, “I will return to the Mansion and prepare
the rest of the X-men. Charles, Jean, you will tell me the details of the rest of the meeting later?”

“Of course. And thank you,” Charles nodded.

As she walked towards the door, Maria noticed Harry also rise from his chair and approach her. A few quiet words later and the X-man disappeared in a flash of blue, leaving Harry to return to his chair.

“Well, I can see what’s lit a fire under the UN,” Tony said. “I’m guessing that you’re here to ask us to step back into the breach? To do the job that your military can’t?”

“Essentially, yes,” Ross spat.

“I’d ask how humble pie tasted, but judging by that look on your face, I think we can all tell,” Tony snarked.

“On behalf of the United Nations, I am here to formally ask you all – Avengers, X-men, Fantastic Four and the rest of you who the world considers heroes – to come out of the retirement that was forced upon you and to help protect the innocent civilians of the world from the dangers that regular law enforcement and military are ill-equipped to handle,” Ross stated formally looking like he was about to be sick.

For a second, there was only dead silence as everyone there looked at each other.

“To be clear,” Matt said, standing up and leaning on his cane to give Ross the illusion that he was merely there as a lawyer, “the entirety of the Sokovia Accords has been revoked? There is absolutely no part of the Accords – law, by-law or guideline – that remains?”

“That is correct,” Ross replied.

“Then, from a legal standpoint, my advice to my clients is to accept,” Matt stated. “But, of course, only if you want to.”

“Then on behalf of the Avengers, we accept,” Steve stated.

“We agree as well,” Reed said. “We’ll do our part.”

“While our primary focus will always be the mutant element within the world – both the good and the bad – you can be assured that the X-men will always stand in the breach between what is right and what is not,” Charles said.

A series of hand movements preceded Medusa speaking on behalf of her husband and the Inhumans of Attilan.

“From our home on the Moon, we have little contact with the Inhumans here on Earth. However, if we are needed, Daisy is authorised to act on our behalf for the good of all Inhumans.”

“One second,” Harry said, standing with a hand and finger raised near his shoulder. “Let’s make one thing clear. The whole world, from the ordinary citizens to the police to the military to the governments all know about the Sokovia Accords. They are all very aware that none of us are allowed to use our powers in any ‘unauthorised’ situation. Now, the Accords may have been revoked, but you yourself said that that was done behind closed doors. That means that the world does not yet know! We’re not going out there to clean up the mess that you people made in the first place until the world knows that the Accords are no more. Too much chance for some of the good guys to try to arrest us or worse, otherwise.”
“Harry makes a very good point,” Steve nodded. “Well, Mister Secretary?”

“It is my understanding that there will be a special press conference in the coming hours,” Ross replied. “Gonzales wanted me to tell you about it first so that you wouldn’t hear about it second-hand or simply by hearing about it on the news.”

“I can arrange a press conference for the morning and state our intentions,” Lavender offered. “Help smooth over the population?”

“Thank you, Lavender, that’d work well,” Steve said.

“Don’t say anything about us going in to sort out Tuvalu. We don’t want to spoil our surprise arrival,” Logan said with an evil grin.

“Of course,” Lavender agreed.

“Did you have anything else for us, Mister Secretary?” Steve asked.

“No. That was all that I was instructed to say,” Ross replied.

“In that case, thank you for coming today. Lavender will see you out,” Steve said. “The rest of us need to prepare; it seems we’ve finally got some work to do.”

ooo00ooo

“I ain’t never gonna get used to that!” Luke Cage stated as he arrived in a flash of blue in the middle of the main lounge of Avengers Tower.

“It gets easier over time,” Matt assured him, tossing the hula hoop that they’d used as a portkey across the room where it landed on a coat hook.

“I’d rather take a taxi or walk,” Jessica Jones replied. “Anything’s gotta be better than that whirling crap-storm. This is Stark’s place, right? He got anything here to take settle the stomach after that ride?”

“I think that there’s some aspirin under the bar?” Jennifer told her.

“Bar? Now we’re talking,” Jessica replied as she turned, spied said bar and promptly made her way across to it.

“I’m going to call a taxi,” Danny said, holding up his phone. “Anyone else want one?”

“Mister Stark has a number of vehicles and drivers waiting in his private underground carpark that will take you wherever you wish to go,” the disembodied voice of Friday stated.

“If the guy’s willing to pay, I’m not going to say ‘no’,” Jessica said after knocking back her second shot of bourbon in quick succession.

The ding of the elevator drew everyone’s attention to Matt standing beside the opened doors. Without a word being said, the five of them piled into the elevator before Jennifer hit the button to take them to the carpark.

When the door opened, they found themselves facing a fleet of vehicles. Most of them were obviously Stark’s private cars – the latest and fastest cars available on the market. On the opposite side of the carpark were more practical cars – mostly sedans, although there were a couple of SUVs and even a pair of limousines.
“Stark’s paying, right?” Jessica stated. “I say we take a limo.”

“Where do you live again?” Danny asked.

“Hell’s Kitchen,” Jessica replied.

“That’s where we are as well,” Matt stated, indicating himself and Jennifer.


“I’m in Chinatown,” Danny said. “That’s not exactly on the way to either of those places.”

“So? Stark can afford the gas,” Jessica called over her shoulder as she led the way into towards one of the limos.

“The girl does have a point,” Jennifer agreed.

“That okay with you?” Luke asked the limo driver.

“I simply drive,” the man replied. “Wherever and whenever I’m asked to.”

“Well, would you looky here,” a delighted sounding Jessica said as she explored a small door set into the far wall of the limo. “Stark sure knows how to travel. Now, where are the glasses?”

“In the compartment to the right,” Matt told her.

“Should we really be drinking Tony’s champagne?” Danny asked.

“Don’t be so straight-laced,” Luke replied. “We’re celebrating here! The Accords have been revoked and we don’t have to be so careful anymore.”

“You’ve got a point there,” Danny said.

Before the limo had even left the carpark, the five of them had full glasses of champagne that were being clinked together. Talk thereafter was light as they finished not only their glasses but also the bottle. But it was as they were just on the outskirts of Harlem that their light-hearted banter changed.

“Quiet!” Matt ordered, holding up a hand.

“What is it?” Jennifer asked.

“Screams. People running, panicking. Two blocks east,” he stated.

“You can hear that?” Jessica asked, disbelief clear in her voice.

“And a whole lot more,” Matt replied.

“The Accords have been rescinded,” Danny reminded them. “We should help.”


Jennifer turned in her seat to tap the window to the driver. “Stop here. We need to get out.”

Seconds later, the limo had pulled to the side of the road and the five of them quickly piled out.

“Hey!” Jessica protested, feeling her scarf being pulled from around her neck.
“I need to borrow this,” Matt told her unapologetically as he wrapped it around his head and over his eyes, half-covering his face in the process.

Jessica stared at him for a moment before begrudgingly nodding. “Fine. Just don’t make a habit of it.”

At the same time, Jennifer was undergoing her own transformation. Her skin turned a vibrant emerald green and she green in size from her normal five foot ten to just shy of seven foot, muscles bulging on her arms and legs.

“Shouldn’t your clothes have torn apart when you changed like that?” Danny asked, looking up at her and her perfectly tailored skirt, blouse and shoes.

“Once upon a time, yes, they would have,” She-Hulk replied. “The benefits of being friends with a magical.”

“Let’s go! We’re wasting time!” Matt called, taking off in a sprint down the sidewalk.

Just the very sight of She-Hulk barrelling towards the crowd was enough to have it part like the Red Sea, giving the makeshift team a clear run at whatever danger lay before them. The panicking crowd that Matt had heard, they found, was emerging from a small department store. People were scattering every which way out of the door, many slipping and sliding and barely keeping their feet in their haste.

“We’re not getting in that way!” Jessica announced.

“She’s right. We need another entrance,” Danny agreed.

She-Hulk didn’t even appear to slow down, instead only slightly changing trajectory and leaping, straight through the plate-glass window, sending a pair of mannequins flying as she barrelled through them.

“That’ll work,” Luke shrugged before following her inside, completely ignoring what remained of the glass still attached to the window frame.

“Well, what do we have here?” a masked man carrying a shotgun asked rhetorically as the others entered and lined up.

“Boss? It’s She-Hulk and a bunch of do-gooders!” a second man called over his shoulder from beside the first.

The inside of the store was a shambles. Displays had been knocked over, glass counters had been smashed and wares had been scattered all over the floor. There were also a group of terrified people cowering in the middle of the floor, their arms covering their heads and barely controlled sobs escaping from a few of them.

As to the ‘bad guys’, there were easily a dozen of them spread out around the store. Each of them was wearing a balaclava and carrying a weapon – be it shotgun, handgun or, in the case of one individual, a pair of machetes. Three of them were currently at the cash registers, emptying the contents into gym bags.

“Haven’t you heard, She-Hulk? You being here could get you arrested?” the Scorpion stated as he appeared from behind a tall display cabinet. “The ‘good guys’ aren’t allowed to do any ‘hero-ing’ these days.”
“Actually, your info’s out of date,” She-Hulk shot back. “The Accords were rescinded yesterday. There’ll be an announcement about it tonight.”

“Boss?” one of the masked men asked in a wobbly voice.

“Is that so?” the Scorpion replied, ignoring his own man. “Well, then, I guess that means that you’ll be the first Avenger that I get to tangle with. First, but definitely not the last. Boys, this one’s mine. The rest you can have some fun with.”

Instantly, the guns that were already raised towards the group let loose with a staccato of rapid fire gun shots. Their bullets, though, hit only Luke or empty air as the team had already reacted.

She-Hulk had leapt high and forwards, over the heads of the nearest masked men and towards the Scorpion, a fierce grin on her face. Meanwhile, Danny had spun to stand back-to-back with the man with bullet-proof skin. Matt used his incredible acrobatic skills to twist, turn and dive out of the way, while Jessica simply cursed as she dove to the ground and behind an upturned display cabinet.

“You done?” Luke asked when the bullets finally tapered off.

And that was when Danny spun back out and around, his fist already glowing as he raced towards the nearest of the masked men before he struck the man, sending him flying across the room. Matt, too, got in on the action, leaping towards four of them and landing in the middle of them, his fists and legs a blur and he spun, punched and kicked at them.

Hearing the lack of gunfire, Jessica popped up, saw one of the masked men advancing on her and swore. Thankfully, a large fist reached out, grabbed the man’s shirt to pull him to stop before an open-handed slap to the back of the man’s head dropped him into unconsciousness.

“You can fight, right?” Luke asked.

“’Cause I can fight,” Jessica retorted and nodded at Matt. “Just not like that.”

Meanwhile, the Scorpion, seeing the She-Hulk headed towards him, had actually advanced towards where she would land. As she landed, She-Hulk could see the fist that was already on its way towards her head and thus simply dropped to one knee, allowing the punch to sail past overhead. Her uppercut lifted the Scorpion into the air and sent him flying backwards thus giving her time to get to her feet.

The Scorpion, though, didn’t just respond with his fists once he was back on his feet. No, the suited-man had an extra appendage in the form of his tail, one that was incredibly sharp, as She-Hulk noted as it sailed past her face when she jerked her head to the right.

Seeing that, though, only made her grin grow. She’d trained with some extraordinary people, one of which even had a tail of her own, even if it wasn’t part of a mechanised suit. And that gave her a strategy.

She-Hulk continued to trade blows with the Scorpion as she waited for her opening. Even her strongest hits weren’t doing a lot of damage – his suit was simply that strong. Still, he was being rocked back on his heels with each one that he took and she thought that she could see one or two tiny cracks appearing.

Finally, her opening came. Scorpion’s tail whipped over his shoulder towards her head and, at the same time as she dodged out of the way, her hand shot up, grabbed it and yanked. The unexpectedness of it jerked the Scorpion up onto his toes towards her and She-Hulk took full advantage, slamming her fist over and over into the Scorpion’s face.
The clatter of a piece of metal hitting the floor was music to her ears, just as the sight of half of the Scorpion’s face appearing delighted her. Before he could recover, she hit him again in the same place, opening up his cheek allowing blood to run down his face even as his one visible eye rolled up into his socket.

Opening her other fist, She-Hulk let go of the Scorpion’s tail and the suited man simply dropped bonelessly to the ground in a tangle of arms and legs.

“Told you long enough,” Matt grinned from beside a pile of unconscious masked men. “Everyone okay?”

“I’ll live,” Jessica replied from where she was leaning against a cabinet and wiping a trail of blood from the corner of her mouth, an unconscious man draped over the cabinet to either side of her.

“I’m good,” Danny said.

“Do you think they’ve got this in a double-XL?” Luke asked, holding up a dark grey hooded sweatshirt in front of his now bullet-ridden shirt.
This wasn’t what she’d had planned. Come to that, this wasn’t when she’d had planned either. But needs must and if there was one thing that Lavender had learnt when it came to the Avengers, expecting the unexpected was a wise course of action.

By taking a peek out through what was left of the window of the department store, Lavender could see not just the expected crowd of reporters, but also a large, angry mob of people being barely held back by the police. Word had spread quickly about what had happened here. And, regardless of the outcome, the beginnings, middle and end of this fiasco was caused by people with abilities, people that that mob thought deserved to be locked up. It was only the law, after all.

At least, that’s what they thought. The ‘new’ truth still had yet to reach their ears, something that Lavender was looking forward to providing.

“Miss Brown,” one of the techs in her department said from behind her. “The microphone and speakers are all set up for you.”

“Thank you, Michael,” she replied. “What about the screens that I asked for?”

“They’re good to go as well,” he replied, handing out a pad to her. “You can control them from this.”

A quick glance was enough to ensure her that the pad was set up as per usual.

“Good,” Lavender said, casting her eyes over the group that she wanted to see. “Let’s go.”

“I’m not going out there,” Jessica replied, her arms crossed over her chest.

“Oh, yes you are,” Lavender retorted. “You five took down one of the main criminals that’s been plaguing this city for months. You’re going to go out there and let me do my job so that the world understands that you’re heroes, not villains.”


Lavender snorted. “Says the ‘Hero of Harlem’.”

“But we’re not heroes. Or Avengers for that matter,” Danny said. “Yes, we’ve done some good, but that’s it.”

“You may not officially be Avengers,” Matt stated, now in his Daredevil uniform courtesy of Foggy who was standing to the side ready to act as their lawyer if need be, “but you’ve proven yourselves that you have what it takes. Lavender, if you need to, call them Avengers.”

“Now wait just one moment!” Jessica exclaimed. “I never agreed to that. Nor did I agree to going out there!”

“Auxiliary Avengers,” She-Hulk suggested. “Available if needed but not usually active.”

“That works,” Matt nodded.

“Maybe,” Jessica reluctantly agreed. “Still doesn’t meant that I’m going out in front of that crowd.”

“I’ll make you if I have to,” Lavender replied with a false-sweet smile on her face.
“As if you could,” Jessica snorted.

“Actually, she could,” Matt stated. “Now, let’s get this circus over and done with.”

With a nod to Matt, who she was sure would bring up the rear behind the five who defended the civilians in the department store while taking down the Scorpion and his gang, Lavender straightened her suit jacket, smoothed her skirt and opened the door ready to do what she did best.

ooo00ooo

The wind whipping past his face, even hooded as it was, felt amazing to Mage. These last months of inaction had grated on him like nothing had in years. He’d wanted to be out there … here, helping people, doing what was right, protecting the innocent.

It was easy to tell that he wasn’t the only one feeling that way.

Marauder, like Mage himself, was also on his broom as they flew above the streets of New York City, back on patrol. The only difference between them was that, every now and then, Marauder would speed up and do a barrel roll or a loop-the-loop. Flanking them, as he rose and fell, occasionally adding in extra flips and yells of exuberance, swung Spider-Man. And then there were the final two members of the group: Quake and Squirrel Girl. Both were riding motorcycles as the younger of the two had managed to get her licence during their forced ‘downtime’.

“Quake, are you hearing anything?” Mage asked, knowing that his question would be transmitted to his wife’s earpiece.

“Nothing worthy of our attention on the police scanners,” she replied. “Just a bunch of low-level stuff that the proper authorities can handle easily.”

“Maybe Daredevil, She-Hulk and the others scared them all off yesterday,” Marauder suggested.

“Yeah, Lavender did tell the whole City that we’d be back on patrol. What bad guy’s gonna want to tangle with us?” Spider-Man chuckled.

“Especially now that I’ve got wheels and can get to them quicker,” Squirrel Girl added.

It was only Mage’s reflexes, honed from years as a child and then as a quidditch player at Hogwarts, that saved him.

A flash of intense blue-white streaked towards him from his left and he shied, flipping his broom up and over so fast that it nearly unseated him. A second flare raced towards him and Mage instantly saw that he had no chance to evade it. Instead, he did the only thing that he could think of: he apparated, mid-air and mid-flight.

“Mage!” Quake screamed.

“Right behind you,” he replied, panting heavily from where he now flew less than three metres behind her and a mere two feet from the ground.

It was all that Mage could do not to pat himself down to check that he was still all in one piece. Apparating while moving at that speed was not recommended for anyone who didn’t want to splinch themselves. Somehow, though, he seemed to have defied the odds. Again.

Seeing Quake’s arm shoot out towards a group of four that were crouched behind a car had Mage reacting. A quick transfiguration which had him grunting with the effort due to how fast he was
trying to get it done, had the car levitated slightly, its wheels falling to the road before rolling away and the body of the car now looking like a long, thick, inwardly curving piece of metal.

And then Quake’s gravitational waves hit it, slamming it backwards, taking the four men with it and pinning them to the wall as the ends of the metal drove themselves deep into the wall behind them.

“Ahhhh!”

“Spider-Man!” Squirrel Girl yelled in a panic.

Mage could only watch as she sped up, angled towards the falling Spider-Man. The way the red and blue Avenger’s body was jerking, Mage could only assume that he’d taken a hit from a bolt of lightning. At the last moment, Squirrel Girl laid the bike right over and let it slide away from her even as she slid across the ground and managed to catch Spider-Man just before he hit the ground.

“I count another dozen thugs spread up and down the street,” Marauder called, even as flashes of red spat from his wand.

And then the one that Mage was specifically looking for appeared.

Electro.

Arrogant. That was the only word that sprang to mind when he saw her strolling out into the middle of the street as though nothing anyone could do was a match for her.

“Is Spider-Man alright?” Mage asked.

“Yeah. I’m good,” the teen in question replied with a definite shake in his voice.

Mage, though, didn’t have a chance to reply. Electro almost lazily raised her hands and sent a blast of electricity straight at Quake. A thought was enough to have Mage’s Lightning Bolt shooting forwards where he wrapped one arm around her and pulled her up and away from the bike just before the electricity struck it.

The fireball that erupted behind them was insanely hot and propelled them forwards at such a rate that it took everything that he had to regain control of his broom while concentrating on not dropping his wife.

“Set me down here,” Quake ordered. “I’ll deal with these idiots; you take care of her!”

The sound of gunfire whipped Mage’s head around to see eight thugs, their arms raised towards the two of them and flashes of red lighting up the muzzles of their guns. In response, Quake thrust her hands forward, intense gravitational waves shooting out, strong enough to stop the bullets in their tracks.

Another bolt of electricity had Mage refocussed on the job at hand and he whipped his broom around, zigging and zagging, being as unpredictable as possible both with height and speed as he sought an opening.

Thankfully, the woman was being particularly helpful, barely moving from her spot.

“Well, if she likes that spot so much …” he muttered.

A quick transfiguration of the bitumen into quicksand had Electro sinking up to her knees in a second. A second transfiguration had that quicksand turned back into bitumen. She wasn’t going
anywhere. Unfortunately, denying her the use of her legs did nothing to stop the almost continuous bolts of electricity that she was shooting towards him; thankfully, she was leaving her goons to ‘take care’ of the rest of his team.

“Spider-Man. Use that brain of yours. What can counteract her electricity?” Mage asked as he dodged another bolt by ‘stalling’ his broom and dropping under it.

“Counteract?” Spider-Man repeated. “You mean something with a high electrical resistance?”

“Something that can stop her and protect us, preferably at the same time,” Mage replied.

“Rubber’s probably your best bet,” Spider-Man said.

“Like tyres?” Squirrel Girl suggested.

“Perfect!” Mage grinned.

A hard bank had him shooting back down the street to where the four thugs were still pinned to the wall.

Exactly where he remembered them as being lay the four tyres that had fallen off of the car that he had transfigured earlier. It took mere moments to stack them one on top of the other like a great tube. A simple *engorgio* lengthened it to more than six feet long; a *disillusionment* hid it from view and a *wingardium leviosa* had the rubber tube floating down the street.

Then it was a simple case of evading Electro’s blast long enough to manoeuvre the tube directly above her and dropping it in place. For a second, it was as though Electro had simply disappeared from view.

That was until Mage cancelled the disillusionment charm.

A hail of red bombarding the open end of the now revealed tube from Marauder as he flew past cut off the indignant shouting that was emanating from inside it.

“She’s contained,” Mage said. “Her gang?”

“Not a problem,” Squirrel Girl replied smugly.

“I’m glad we’re not the ones that has to keep her locked up,” Marauder said as he landed in the middle of the street.

“That’s what the Raft is for,” Quake stated. “I’ll put in a call; S.H.I.E.L.D. can take her from here.”

Harry watched as the magical members of the Island approached in a loose group. Nico, as one would expect, looked somewhere between wary and excited. Teddy was trying to play it cool, but Harry could see the eagerness in him, whether it was to learn something new or, more likely, to prove that he knew enough to finally be allowed out on missions without heavy supervision. Lavender and Daphne stopped nearby, standing a little away under a nearby palm to watch. And then there was little Cooper Barton, already sitting beside his mother on the grass.

“So, you’re going to teach me spells and stuff?” Nico asked.

“That is the eventual aim,” Harry replied. “But I’d like to try a few things first. Can you see the broom over there? Please stand beside it.”
Nervously, she stepped over to it and raised an eyebrow at him.

“Okay. Now place your hand out at your side over the broom and say, ‘up’,” Harry instructed.

He watched as Nico looked dubiously down at the broom for a moment before following his instructions.

“Up!”

Instantly, the broom shot off of the ground to slam into her hand with a meaty thwak.

“Woah!” Nico exclaimed.

“Well, if there was any doubt that you’re magical, that disproves it,” Harry grinned. “A broom will only respond like that if a person has magic.”

“You’re not going to teach her to fly it now, are you?” a sceptical Daphne asked.

“No,” Harry replied. “Although, eventually, we will cover it. Now, Nico, take a hold of my wand and give it a wave.”

A little more eagerly, she did so, before flinching and all but chucking it back at him at the loud bang that it produced in conjunction with copious amounts of thick black smoke.

“Don’t worry about that,” Harry laughed. “That’s my wand, I would have been surprised if it worked right for you. What it does prove is that, somewhere out there, there is a wand for you.”

Again, she gave him a dubious look.

“But do I really need a wand? I’ve already got the Staff of One,” she said, holding it aloft slightly for him to see.

“Maybe, maybe not,” Harry replied. “Just how good are you with that staff?”

“Okay, I guess,” she shrugged. “Sometimes it works great; other times, I don’t exactly get what I was hoping for.”

“Isn’t a staff supposed to be much more powerful than a wand?” Teddy asked.

“In theory, yes,” Harry replied. “Staffs can tap into more of a wizard or witch’s magical core to create more powerful spells. However, if you have an expert magical user with a wand going up against a mediocre magical with a staff, then the wand-wielder is going to win. Same goes with wandless magic.”

“I didn’t think there were any magical staffs in the world any more,” Lavender said. “I thought that they disappeared around the time of Merlin.”

“Merlin?” an excited Cooper repeated. “Merlin’s real?”

“He was,” Harry replied. “I think that I’ve got some books somewhere which tell some of his true history as opposed to the fairy tale image that non-magicals have of him. I’ll dig them out sometime for you.”

Turning to Nico he eyed the Staff of One.

“Okay, let’s see you use your staff.”
She bit her lip and looked around, obviously trying to work out what to do. Finally, her eyes landed on a palm tree away from the group.

“Coconuts fall!” she commanded.

Instantly, the centre circle that topped the Staff lit up before not just the tree that she’d targeted, but every tree within a twenty metre radius began violently shaking. A pair of squeals were heard as Daphne and Lavender dove out of the way of the dozens of coconuts that began raining down on them.

Thumps all around the area sounded a rapid tattoo as every coconut obeyed her magic and plummeted to the ground.

“Well, that didn’t quite work,” Nico groused.

“You okay, Daph?” Harry asked even as Lavender was picking the other woman up.

“Yeah, I’m good; no harm done,” Daphne replied. “Just glad I left Steven with his father today.”

“Is that how magic works?” Cooper asked, his eyes wide as he looked around at all of the fallen coconuts.


“Well, that wasn’t exactly an incantation, was it?” he frowned. “‘Coconuts fall’. Every spell that I’ve ever heard has been in Latin or some other obscure language.”

“That’s a good start,” Harry nodded, pleased with the answer. “Do you know why spells are usually in a different language?”

Teddy blinked at him before eventually shaking his head.

“Daph? Lavender?” Harry prompted.

“It’s so that we can better tell our magic what to do,” Daphne replied instantly. “‘Take incendio for example. To those of us who’ve been taught the spell, it means ‘make fire’. Our magic knows that, including how much fire, what intensity and where it should be. But if we just use the phrase ‘make fire’, we run the risk of accidentally creating a fire at a time or place that we don’t want it and it could do a lot of harm.”


“I think so,” she frowned. “What you’re saying is that my magic has been trying to do what I want it to do but it doesn’t have all of the information.”

“Got it in one,” Harry nodded.

“So, what does that mean for me?” she asked.

“I’m guessing that’s why most wizards and witches go to school for seven years? To learn how to train their magic to do what they want, how they want it and when they want it to happen,” Teddy asked and received an affirming nod from Harry. “So, how come Nico didn’t get a letter if she’s magical?”

“I don’t know,” Harry replied. “I would have expected her to get one from Ivermony. Unless it was kept from her for some reason. That does happen, although it’s rare. For now, we need to teach you
how to harness your magic so that you can focus it properly through your staff. That way, you’ll get consistent results each and every time.”

“Am I going to have to learn a bunch of fancy spells?” she asked, crinkling her nose.

“Most likely,” Harry grinned. “How about we get started. And probably the easiest spell to start with is _lumos_, the light spell. Ted, Daphne, Lavender and I will demonstrate and who can copy us with your Staff. Cooper, got your practice stick?”

The nine-year-old quickly held up the stick that Harry had crafted for him to use to proactice with and eagerly waved it around.

“Great. Have a go at copying us,” Harry said. “Remember, your stick’s just a plain old piece of wood; not a magical wand. This is just a chance for you to get a feel of what it’s like to wield a wand. Okay, everyone, let’s begin. _Lumos._”

ooo00ooo

Two figures soared over the forest of the island, swooping up and down and from side to side. Both were laughing as they played in the air. The most unusual thing was that there was no craft surrounding them, no broom between their legs, not even a metal suit encasing them. No, it was just them, in their everyday clothes, flying. The only difference between them was that the skin of one of them was glowing with all the colours of the rainbow and the other looked perfectly ordinary.

“This is amazing!” Karolina laughed. “I’ve never been able to fly like this before.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Carol replied, rotating slightly so that she was flying with her back to the ground and her eyes facing the sky.

“It’s not even tiring,” Karolina commented. “Is it for you?”

“Not really,” Carol replied, “unless I’m doing it for hours on end. For you, it’d be easier in the daytime while the sun’s ‘recharging’ your cells. Night time might be a little different. Now, how fast can you go?”

“No idea.”

“Let’s find out, shall we?” Carol grinned. “Race you to the river!”

And then she was off, shooting forward fast enough to outstrip the birds that were flying nearby and to leave a visible air pocket in the sky where she’d just been. In response, Karolina’s arms pulled down towards her sides, as though she was swimming and she, too, burst forwards. But, try as she might, there was absolutely no way that she could keep up with the other woman.

Seeing Carol had landed on the bank of the river, Karolina angled downwards, flipped so that her feet were facing forward and touched down, only stumbling a little due to her speed.

“You’re much faster than I am,” Karolina pointed out. “I was really pushing myself as hard as I could and you just kept getting further and further ahead.”

“Don’t sweat it,” Carol replied, laying a hand on Karolina’s shoulder. “You did pretty good for a rookie. And our powers aren’t identical, so there’s bound to be differences.”

“Is that the fastest that you can go or were you holding back?” Karolina asked.
Carol looked at her for a moment, obviously debating her answer.

“You’re right, I was holding back,” she replied. “When I push myself, I can break the sound barrier.”

“Wow!” Karolina exclaimed, shaking her head at the thought of someone going that fast.

“Now, let’s have a look at your other powers. You said that you can shoot beams out of your hands?”

At Karolina’s nod, Carol gestured to a tree stump on the other side of the river.

Turning to it, Karolina braced her legs – her left a little ahead of her right – raised her hands and willed the light beams to fire. A bright light flecked with the colours of the rainbow shot out of her hands, across the river and hit the stump. For an instant, it didn’t have any impact at all. But then the stump began glowing, building in intensity before unexpectedly exploding.

“Not bad,” an impressed sounding Carol stated as Karolina let her beams fade away.

“Thanks. You said that you can do something like that, too?” she asked.

In reply, Carol raised a single hand and fired. Her beam was a brilliant yellow. It shot across the river to hit a tree, exploding the middle of its trunk as soon as it contacted and consequently brought the rest of the tree crashing down, its top landing in the river.

Karolina’s eyes boggled and she really didn’t know where to stare: Carol, the fallen tree or the blackened stump.

“That was so cool!” she exclaimed. “Let me guess; that wasn’t full power either, was it?”

“Not even close,” Carol laughed.

“Do you think I’ll ever be able to do something like that?” Karolina asked.

Carol cocked her head. “Maybe. With a lot of practice and hard work. Do you think that you’re up for that?”

Karolina bit her lip before nodding. “I think so.”

“Good,” Carol smiled. “Because I intend on doing my best to get your best out of you. Assuming that you’re happy to have me work with you?”

“Yes!” Karolina replied quickly. “I’d love that.”

“In that case, let’s see just how powerful you can be. Do you see that tree?” she asked, pointing the one she had in mind out. “That’s your next target. I want you to prepare to shoot at it, but hold your energy in, gather it into one powerful burst ….”

Harry rubbed the card in his pocket with a thumb as he stood across the street from the Woolworth Building. He knew what the building was, both to the normal humans and more specifically, what it was to his own people. Either way, he wasn’t a fan.

It was here where he’d had his first ‘big’ encounter with the magics of the United States, as firstly a prisoner and then as a defendant when he’d been tried for breaking the International Statute of Secrecy. Several hundred times over. Of course, he was guilty. Sort of. The extenuating
circumstances of it being in defence of the planet due to the fact that there was an alien invasion happening at the time had made getting the charges dismissed child’s play for Matt, his lawyer.

Since then, he’d been back numerous times, as one would expect, with him having been appointed the liaison or perhaps Ambassador or more correctly, simply the ‘face’ of the magical world to the rest of the planet. That didn’t mean that he had ever forgotten the reason that he’d been here in the first place, though.

Thankfully, it’d been a while since he’d been summoned.

Straightening his back, Harry looked both ways and crossed the street, weaving between the cars as he did so. His outstretched hand got the revolving doors moving for him to enter the foyer. As usual, there were a myriad of people about; a simple wandless notice-me-not was sufficient to enable him to confidently cross the room and enter the door with the carved owl over the top of it without any of them paying him the slightest amount of attention.

Having arrived in the great cavern-like building of the centre of the magical government of the United States, Harry took a moment to take a long, sweeping look throughout the Hall before promptly headed directly for the lifts, ignoring the Security Wizard altogether.

A few minutes later, Harry arrived at the door to the Office of the Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizardry. Or, at least, his secondary office, his primary one being in Andorra.

“Ah, Mister Potter, you’re here,” a man that Harry recognised but hadn’t seen in quite some time said from the inner door.

“Delegate Lonefeather,” Harry greeted the man.

“Come in, Mister Potter, everyone else is already here,” Lonefeather stated, moving to the side and ushering Harry into the inner office with one arm.

Others? Harry wondered, raising an eyebrow.

Just like once before, there were four others there, including Delegate Lonefeather, and two of them, Harry recognised instantly.

“Supreme Mugwump Jakande,” Harry said, shaking the man’s hand before doing the same with the British Delegate to the ICW. “Delegate Moon.”

“Lord Potter,” Horatio Moon said. “I’d like to introduce you to Delegate Li from China.”

“Delegate Li,” Harry said, returning the bow that he was given.

“Now that we’re all acquainted, let’s sit,” Jakande said, indicating the small lounge area at the back of his office.

Once they were seated, a house elf appeared with a tray containing a pot, some cups and a small platter of pastries.

“Before we begin the true purpose of this meeting,” Jakande said once everyone had been served, “I understand that there have been some developments within the non-magical world?”

“Yes, Sir,” Harry replied. “The Sokovia Accords have been rescinded in full. All humans, regardless of their abilities, are once again able to use their gifts without fear of biased laws. Of course, they will
“still have to respect and obey the law the same as anyone else, but now there will be no additional laws levied at them that could, at best, be described as ‘discriminatory’.”

“Interesting,” Delegate Li said, tapping one finger on his chin. “How does this affect magical society?”

“You know as well as I do that the ICW passed a motion to discuss our society emerging from hiding,” Horatio stated. “This could greatly impact those discussions.”

“Agreed,” Lonefeather nodded. “Instead of a decision being a decade or more away, it could be as little as a few years.”

“Thankyou, Mister Potter,” Jakande said. “Now, as to the reason that I asked you here today. Recently, there were some extreme magical discharges noted in London, Hong Kong and here in New York.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. “Really? I can assure you that it was neither myself nor my godson.”

“We had no fears of that,” Horatio assured him.

“No, we know who the culprits are,” Li stated, a clear scowl on his face.

“I’m assuming that you’ve sent in aurors or hit wizards to deal with the culprits, then?” Harry asked.

“Actually, no,” Jakande replied.

Harry narrowed his eyes. “That’s why I’m here? You want me to investigate this?”

“We do,” Jakande stated, raising a hand to cut off any further reply from him. “The reason is that the … individuals in question are … outside of ICW influence.”

“Outside? What does that mean?” Harry asked. “As far as I was aware, every magical nation on Earth was a signed member of the ICW.”

“They are,” Jakande replied. “However, when the ICW was originally formed in the mid sixteen hundreds, not all magicals agreed to come under our banner. There was one group that remained separate.”

“Kamar-Taj,” Li spat.

“Kamar-Taj is the home of a group of magicals, sorcerers if you will, who have developed a … different style of magic than the rest of the world’s magicals use,” Jakande explained. “And as more and more years pass, the further the two forms of magic continue to branch apart.”

“I’ve never heard of Kamar-Taj,” Harry frowned. “Where is it?”

“Nepal,” Jakande replied simply. “They’re only a small group but they have spread to three other locations on Earth.”

“Let me guess. New York, London and Hong Kong,” Harry stated.

“Correct,” Horatio nodded. “But unfortunately, it’s been nearly two centuries since any member of the ICW has met or interacted with any of the Masters of the Mystic Arts as they style themselves.”

Harry sat back, thinking, trying to connect the dots.
“I’m guessing that these magical discharges that you detected were large enough that non-magicals could have noticed?” he asked.

“Unlikely, but possible,” Lonefeather replied. “However, if they continue, then the risk of exposure of our entire society is nearly assured, regardless of the ongoing discussions within the ICW at present. It is imperative that we investigate, to get them to reconsider their actions.”

“Why me?” Harry asked.

“Because, Mister Potter, you have skills that others do not combined with an extremely high profile that even the best first-generation magical user doesn’t have within the non-magical world. You can be considered to be something of a third party, acting for the good of all magical users, no matter the style that they use.”

“Okay, I can see your point,” Harry replied slowly. “But if I am to be a ‘third party’, then I need to have the authority to act that way. I’m not going to go in and demand explanations or issue cease and desist orders. I will do it my way, for the good of all.”

“Agreed,” Jakande said quickly, his eyes clearly on Delegate Li.

Deciding that he didn’t want to know the politics on whatever he’d just witnessed, he instead asked the one question that would get him started on this strange mission.

“The discharge in New York. What was the address?”

“One seventy-seven A Bleeker Street, Greenwich Village,” Lonefeather replied.
The building was obviously old, but then, a lot of buildings in New York City were, the Den and Harry’s own building, among them. This one in the middle of Greenwich Village definitely qualified not only as old but also as something … else. There was an air to it that, unless one was looking, really looking for it, would be missed. Even by magicals.

But it was there. Harry could almost taste it. Or perhaps feel it. Something like a prickling under his skin perhaps, or more accurately, his magic recognising something ancient, something powerful, resonating with it. Hogwarts gave off a similar vibe; the castle, however, was over a thousand years old. This place was no where near that age. Still …

From across the street, it wasn’t so much the brownstone walls or the green slate roof that caught the eyes. No, it was the large convex window set into the middle of the second floor. It was easily at least seven feet across and was decorated with four black lines set in two pairs of somewhat parallel lines. It was a symbol; Harry’d seen enough of them over the years to recognise that much, even if he wasn’t sure what the symbol itself meant.

Tearing his eyes away, he quickly crossed the street, mounted the three steps and, not seeing a bell, knocked firmly on the door.

Harry’s eyebrow rose at the style of clothing that the bald, serious-looking Asian man that opened the door wore. The long, dark-red tunic and wide tan cloth belt that looked like it wrapped around him at least three times simply screamed to Harry that he was in the right place.

“Hi, I’m looking for the Sorcerer Supreme of Kamar-Taj.”

While Harry hadn’t been expecting to be welcomed, turning up on their doorstep the way he was, he hadn’t been expecting … nothing. But that’s precisely what he was getting from the man standing in front of him. Not a change of facial expression, not a tightening of the eyes, not a tic, nothing.

“The Sorcerer Supreme of Kamar-Taj,” Harry repeated. “I understand she is known as the Ancient One.”

This time there was something. It wasn’t much, just a slight pursing of his lips. Enough, though, to tell Harry that the man at least understood English.

A dark shadow that appeared over the man’s shoulder resolved itself into a taller, Caucasian man with a moustache and goatee that Harry thought Tony would be proud of. The hand that this new man laid on the Asian man’s shoulder was enough to have him turning sidewards, giving Harry a good view of him.

If Harry’s own ‘Mage’ uniform – not that he was wearing it today, being in simple, ‘civvies’ – told the world that he was a wizard, then this man’s outfit screamed ‘sorcerer’. His tunic was a mixture of dark blues accented by the numerous leather belts around his waist, cloth strips that would around his forearms, dark pants and sturdy boots. And then there was his cloak. It was red with a high collar that curved up around his neck and seemed to have an interesting movement to it that shouldn’t be there considering that there was no real breeze at all that day.

“This one is looking for the Sorcerer Supreme,” the Asian guardian of the door stated with an inflection that Harry couldn’t quite identify.

“Why are you asking to see the Sorcerer Supreme?” the new man asked with a distinctively British
accent. “Have you been to Kamar-Taj in the past?”

“No, I haven’t,” Harry replied. “Look, can we discuss this inside … Mister?”

“Doctor,” the man said before squeezing his eyes closed and raising a hand. “My name is Doctor Stephen Strange. And you are?”

“Harry Potter.”

Doctor Strange and his companion shared a look, a look that told Harry that his name was known.

“You better come in,” Doctor Strange said, stepping back from the doorway.

The entrance was huge with a long staircase directly ahead. Harry, though, was directed to a sitting room to the left.


“Youve heard of me,” Harry replied flatly.

“We know more than you realise, wizard.”

“Wong,” Doctor Strange admonished his companion and inadvertently telling Harry the man’s name. “I’m surprised that you’re here to be honest. From what I understand, wizards and sorcerers have always kept well away from each other.”

“Can’t argue with that,” Harry replied. “To be honest, I didn’t know about sorcerers and Kamar-Taj until I was briefed and asked to come here.”

“Briefed by the International Confederation of Wizardry,” Doctor Strange nodded.

“How’d you know that?” Harry asked, his eyes narrowed.

“It was elementary really,” Doctor Strange replied off-handedly.

Harry decided to ignore that comment. It seemed that both groups had been keeping tabs on each other over the years.

“Would it be possible for me to speak to the Sorcerer Supreme?” he asked instead.

Again, Doctor Strange and Wong shared a look.

“The Ancient One didn’t survive the conflict,” Doctor Strange stated quietly.

“My condolences. But I have to ask. Conflict?” Harry asked. “Here, London and Hong Kong?”

“The ICW detected the magic?” Wong asked.

“They did,” Harry confirmed. “Thus, why I was sent. Is there a new Sorcerer Supreme that I can talk to?”

“One has yet to be decided upon by the Masters,” Wong stated. “Although, Stephen is most likely to assume the position.”

Doctor Strange looked across sharply at him before turning back to Harry.
“What do you know of Kamar-Taj?” he asked.

“To be honest not much,” Harry replied.

For a few minutes, Doctor Strange tapped his index fingers in front of his face, obviously deep in thought.

“I best the easiest way to answer your questions about recent events is to explain it the way the Ancient One explained it to me. Sorcerers and wizards are similar in the fact that they all hide from the rest of the world. Where we differ is in the fact that we will come out of the shadows if needed. We, the sorcerers of Kamar-Taj are tasked with the protection of the Earth from attacks from other dimensions.”

“Other dimensions?” Harry asked, trying and failing to keep the note of skepticism out of his voice.

“Exactly other dimensions. Just as there are physical dangers that threaten the world that the Avengers need to deal with, there are other things that they are simply not equipped to handle,” Doctor Strange replied.

“I think you’d be surprised,” Harry replied with a smirk.

Suddenly, Wong leant forward in his chair.

“Mage,” he stated.

“What?” Doctor Strange asked.

“He is Mage of the Avengers,” Wong stated, with an accompanied pointed finger. “There is no one else the International Confederation of Wizards would send.”

“Well?” Doctor Strange asked after a minute of complete silence from everyone in the room.

Harry knew he had to make a decision. On the one hand, his identity was something that he protected. On the other, these sorcerers seemed to be good at keeping secrets – even most witches and wizards knew nothing of them. There was also the fact that he was supposed to be trying to bridge the gap between the two groups of magics.

“You’re right, I am,” he finally said. “And if it’s true that you are protecting the Earth, the same as the Avengers …”

“No the same,” Doctor Strange interrupted sharply. “You have no idea what we’ve just faced, what was at stake. And believe me, there was nothing that any of ‘Earth’s Mightiest Heroes’ could have done to help.”

“Then tell me about it, prove to me that there’s no way that we couldn’t help each other,” Harry insisted.

“What we just prevented was the destruction of Earth by Dormammu,” Doctor Strange replied.

“Dormammu?” Harry asked, working to wrap his tongue around the unfamiliar word.

“He is the Cosmic Conqueror, the Destroyer of Worlds,” Wong explained. “A being of infinite power and endless hunger on a quest to invade every universe and bring all worlds into his Dark Dimension. And he hungers for Earth most of all.”

“This Dormammu is still a threat?” Harry asked.
“Not any more,” Doctor Strange replied with an ironic grin.

“No? You destroyed him?” Harry asked intently.

“I struck a bargain with him,” Doctor Strange corrected. “Believe me, he won’t be coming back. He knows the alternative.”

Harry stared at the sorcerer. It was obvious that the man was incredibly confident in what he was saying. The fact that the Earth was still here did tend to say that he was right. He guessed that he had no choice but to trust him.

“In that case, on behalf of the entire world, thank you,” Harry said.

Doctor Strange simply gave a simple nod of acknowledgement.

“You can go back to your Wizard Council and tell them not to worry. The world is safe; no one knows about sorcerers or wizards and we have no intension of changing the status quo,” Doctor Strange said.

Harry knew a cue to leave when he heard one and thus, stood.

“Would it be okay for me to come back?” he asked. “I suspect that there’s a lot that we could learn from each other.”

“Stephen say no to learning something? I’d like to see that!” Wong laughed, an action that to Harry, even not knowing the guy, seemed almost out-of-character.

Both Harry and Doctor Strange stared at him before turning back to each other. A nod was enough for Harry to understand that yes, he was welcome back any time.

Captain America leading a team of Avengers into a police station was always going to grab everyone’s attention. Every eye focused in on them within seconds; every conversation stopped and every movement ceased. It wasn’t until the team had fanned out to either side of him – Mage, Marauder and Hawkeye to his left; Falcon, Scarlet Witch and Vision to his right – that a pair of detectives seemed to shake themselves awake and approach.

“Captain America. Avengers, this is a surprise,” the dark-skinned female detective sporting a large afro greeted them.

“Ma’am,” Cap replied. “We heard that you’ve got a lead on a couple of terrorists with enhanced abilities.”

“Hobgoblin and Vulture,” the other, nodded. “I’m Detective Brett Mahoney. My partner in this operation: Detective Misty Knight.”

“Detectives,” Cap greeted and was echoed by the rest of his team.

“Well, if you’re here to help, come on over and let’s get you briefed,” Detective Knight said.

The seven of them followed the two detectives to a large situation table where a map of one part of the city showing an area covering ten city blocks had been rolled out and weighted down. The crowd around the table parted to give them room and Cap nodded to those closest.

“Hmm, this won’t work,” Mage stated. “Allow me.”
Cap watched as Mage’s wand briefly appeared. A few seconds later, the map had been enlarged to four times its original size and was now floating in mid air in front of one wall beside some overhead monitors so that all could see it easily.

“You’re handy to have around,” Detective Knight said, adding a nod of thanks.

“Right, everyone, listen up,” Detective Mahoney said, clicking a device in his hand. “Our objective is these two gentlemen, and I use that term extremely loosely.”

On a screen off to the side, two images appeared side by side: the hobgoblin mid-air on his board and the Vulture, a darker image that made it hard to make out the man attached to his large mechanical wings apart from his glowing yellow eyes.

“Roderick Kingsley and Adrian Toomes,” the Vision stated.

“Now how do you know that?” Detective Knight asked. “We’ve been trying to work that out for weeks.”

“I have access to the Stark Network and processors that are much faster than anything the NYPD possess,” the Vision replied. “No disrespect intended.”

“None taken. We’re under no illusions here about how sub-par some of the equipment that we have is,” Detective Knight replied.

The Vision gave a half-nod, half-bow before continuing.

“It was then a matter of compiling a composite of all images of the two and using the various databases at my disposal to narrow possibilities down to the names that I just mentioned.”

“Thankyou, that’s actually a big help,” Detective Mahoney replied. “We know that Vulture and Hobgoblin are based somewhere within this area. The problem is that we’re not sure exactly where.”


“Obviously the aim is to prevent the civilians from getting hurt,” Cap stated.

“Everything that I’ve heard tells me that both these guys have a lot of people in their crews?” Hawkeye said.

“That’s true,” Detective Mahoney said. “Unfortunately, our info’s skechy at best on the actual numbers. Could be as few as a couple of dozen although more likely closer to a hundred. And as for where they are?”

His question ended in a shrug.

“That’s the aim of this strategy meeting, to see if we could work out a way to get their precise location and then to formulate a plan to go in and put a stop to their terrorising our city,” Detective Knight stated.

“I think we can help you there,” Mage stated. “I know the area. Marauder?”

Cap watched the senior wizard place his hand on the younger’s shoulder before, with a quiet pop the two disappeared.
“Where are we?” Marauder asked as they appeared in the middle of a deserted street.

The area was dark and deserted, only lit by the occasional street light. A number of cars were parked on the side of the road but all were empty. And what light there was came from the surrounding buildings, albeit muted by drawn curtains.

“Just outside the area on the map, on the south-eastern side,” Mage replied.

“Outside? How are we supposed to get intel from here?” Marauder frowned.

“Obviously, by going closer,” Mage replied. “And we don’t have time to waste. Into your other form, Camo.”

Marauder’s eyes widened, not that Mage would be able to see it through the obscuris spell on his face under his hood. That sentence was enough to tell him the plan. In minute detail. His protest, though, died on his lips as Mage’s arms folded across his chest. With a sigh, he changed.

The world grew bigger almost instantly as Marauder took on his Animagus form. One eye turned to watch as Mage also transformed, leaving a chameleon and a sparrowhawk standing in the middle of the street.

And then, horror of horrors, Ged flapped his wings, rising above the ground before swooping back down to snare Camo in his sharp talons. Even now, after they’d practiced this move dozens of times on the island, Camo felt his muscles bunch up as he fought the instinct to run from the approaching predator.

Seconds later, he opened his eyes to see the ground rapidly retreating. Wind buffeted at his face and he used his long tongue to lick his eyeballs. Ged, he could tell, was being incredibly careful; not a single talon felt like it was even likely to pierce his skin.

Buildings and streets flashed by below him, some more than once as Ged circled the area. Finally, he sensed a shift in their flight and he watched as they descended.

As soon as he felt his feet touch the ground, the talons holding him released. Camo waited a breath, two, and then morphed back, retaking his human form. His instinct was to ask Mage what he’d seen but after so many sessions with both Mockingbird and Black Widow, he knew the value of complete silence when in the middle of a reconnaissance mission.

A sharp rap to his head preceded the feeling of something like egg running down from his head, to his face, shoulders and then the rest of his body.

Disillusionment spell, Marauder realised.

A faint golden outline showed him exactly where Mage was – a variation of the spell that Mage had apparently discovered somewhere on his travels around the world that allowed people under disillusionment spells to see each other, provided, of course, that they’d been cast by the same individual.

Following Mage’s lead, he ghosted down the alley that they’d landed in before a brief glow unlocked a side door, giving them access to a warehouse.

As one would expect, the warehouse was huge. Easily three stories tall but most of that space was open from the floor all the way to the roof. Deep shadows permeated everywhere as, at this time of
night, there were hardly any of the great industrial lights lit. Catwalks in a great square overlooked the open floor with extra rooms backed off from them against the walls of the warehouse itself.

It only took half a dozen steps for Marauder to realise that his footsteps were echoing in the vast space. Pausing, he looked down at his feet with a frown. A wave of his wand and a murmured spell later and he began walking again, this time on silenced feet.

A deep red wave of magic that he knew muggles wouldn’t see, feel or notice in any way flashed out from Mage’s wand, washing over the entire building. But that wasn’t what held Marauder’s attention. No, what had him moving from pillar to pillar across the floor was the large platform in the middle of the otherwise empty floor.

On one end was a large, curved metal board that Marauder knew could fly with a person standing on top of it. And at the other end, attached to a stand, was the largest pair of wings he’d ever seen – much bigger than Falcon’s – with great turbines in the middle of them to power them.

The soft rise and fall of voices caught his attention and his head turned to find three me, two standing in front of a large workbench covered in a myriad of mechanical parts, the other seated behind it. Stealing that way, he listened in, staying close just long enough to hear each of their names, then, with a silent nod to himself, he backtracked, finding Mage waiting for him

A second later, a hand landed on his shoulder and he felt the pull of apparition.

“Here!” Mage stated, pointing to one warehouse on the map that he’d left floating in the air, as he reappeared in the room, his disillusionment spell dropping from him at the same time.

“Damnit, man, don’t do that!” Falcon snapped, startling backwards and bumping heavily into a table. “And you can wipe that grin off your face! I know it’s there. I may not be able to see it, but it’s there.”

“This is our target?” Cap asked, cutting in even as the rest of the team and all of the police gathered closer.

“Correct,” Mage replied. “A warehouse jammed pack full of bad guys. They’re heavily armed, including with weapons that I’ve never seen before.”

“How many we looking at?” Hawkeye asked.

“One hundred and twelve,” Mage replied.

“How’d you get that number so quickly?” Detective Mahoney asked.

“Magic,” Mage replied.

“You know I hate that answer,” Falcon stated in a voice just loud enough for all to hear.

“What about our primary targets? Toomes and Kingsley?” Detective Knight asked.

“They’re there,” Marauder stated. “I saw them. They were with another guy, Mason. My guess is that he’s the brain behind a lot of the new tech.”

“What’s their status?” Cap asked. “Are they prepared for an attack?”

“No,” Mage replied. “Most are either asleep or relaxing.”
“Then now’s our chance,” Cap stated. “Detectives, with your permission? Everyone, listen up: this is what we’re going to do …”

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“We’ve got a bogie!” Hawkeye announced.

“I see it,” Cap replied. “Hobgoblin. Where’d he come from? I thought we had them contained.”

“The roof retracts,” Hawkeye replied. “I can see it from here. And looks like there’s movement from inside!”

“Wanda and I are working on it,” the Vision stated.

From his perch on the highest building that overlooked the warehouse, Hawkeye saw the Vision, with one arm around Scarlet Witch, descend from the sky to land on the roof of the warehouse. As soon as she’d been let go, Wanda’s hands began glowing, as did the edges of the panels that were set into the roof of the warehouse. Less than twenty seconds later, the opening in the roof had been closed and a yellow beam shot from Vision’s forehead, fusing the sliding panels into place.

A flash of purple-blue caught Hawkeye’s attention and he frowned at the sight of three men advancing on a pair of police officers, their weapons firing taking great chunks out of the stonework behind the cops and the dumpster they were currently cowering behind.

A quick roll of the selector on his bow had him plucking an arrow and firing. The blue crackle of electricity in that particular arrow met the purple power source of the weapon that the lead bad guy was carrying. A microsecond later, the alley was lit by a massive explosion of fire and smoke causing Hawkeye to flinch. When he next looked back, he could see that the cops were down but moving, the bad guys, not so much.

“Right. Don’t use that one again,” he muttered to himself before opening his comms to the rest of the team. “Heads up, guys, the power source on those weapons is quite volatile. Take out the men, not the weapons themselves.”

“Guessing that means that that explosion was you?” Falcon said.

“Don’t worry about me,” Hawkeye replied quickly, “you’ve got Hobgoblin on your tail.”

“Not for long I don’t,” Falcon replied.

Hawkeye watched as his teammate soared up, zigging as he did so to avoid the bullets being shot at him, and end up behind the glider-surfing suited man after a complete loop.

“We’ve got bad guys pouring out of a door on the east!” Cap reported.

“On my way,” Mage replied.

“The Vulture has been subdued,” the Vision reported and Hawkeye looked back to the roof of the building just in time to see Vision emerge through the metal of it before solidifying.

“I’ve winged Hobgoblin,” Falcon reported, “he’s going down.”

“And aiming to take out the whole district with him!” Hawkeye stated. “I’m seeing dozens of bombs shooting out the front of his glider.”

“Not to worry, I have them,” Scarlet Witch replied as a red glow appeared around each of the bombs
and holding them in place mid-air.

“Can you direct them towards me?” Marauder asked. “I can get them somewhere safe and hide them from anyone being able to find them until after this mess is over.”

Hawkeye watched as Scarlet Witch crossed the roof, her hands moving in an intricate way, directing the bombs as she went.

“We’ve got some rats trying to desert the ship,” Hawkeye reported a moment later, seeing a pair of cellar doors slam open at the back of the warehouse.

Half a dozen arrows later and the men that were trying to escape had either fallen or were turned about, heading directly towards a squad of police.

The battle then became more of a mop up, ensuring that all of the men were rounded up and that none escaped.

“Alright people, regroup at the police station; they’ll want our statements,” Cap directed some time later.

“Vis, you want to give me a lift?” Scarlet Witch asked.


“What about me? I’m higher up than Wanda is,” Hawkeye complained.

“Don’t look at me, I ain’t carrying you,” Falcon stated as he whizzed past.

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“Ah, Gandalf?” Tony said quietly, placing a hand on the wizard’s shoulder to hold him back just inside the door to the room that he had just entered.

In response, Harry simply raised an eyebrow.

“We’re sure about that lot?” Tony asked, nodding at the five teens seated on one side of the table. “They’re not going to rat us out or something like their friend?”

“No, they’re fine, we can trust them,” Harry replied. And then, seeing Tony’s sceptical look, elaborated. “I did a shallow _legilimency_ spell on them. Checked their truthfulness. They all passed with flying colours. They also all have varying degrees of anger directed towards Alex.”

“Yeah, about him,” Tony said. “How do we know that he won’t try telling someone else where the Island is.”

“He can’t tell what he doesn’t remember,” Harry replied simply.

“You wiped his mind?” Tony exclaimed, loud enough to garner attention from the others in the room but hopefully not loud enough for them to hear what he’d said.

“Just everything about the Island,” Harry replied. “Believe me, I didn’t like doing it, but it was the only way.”

After staring into Harry’s eyes for nearly half a minute, Tony finally nodded and the two walked forwards to join the others.
“Alright, let’s get started,” Steve said from the head of the table. “From the information that we got from Alex Wilder, the criminal organisation known as the ‘Pride’, which is based in Los Angeles is a clear and present danger. They are actively seeking an alien vessel of unknown origin that is buried deep under L.A. Thor, Carol, any guesses about that?”

“I have checked the records on Asgard,” Thor replied. “There is no known account of an alien vessel either landing or crashlanding here on Midgard.”

“Without seeing the vessel, it’s too soon to make any sort of guess,” Carol added.

“If this ship’s so deep under the city, under hundreds of metres of dirt, how were they expecting to access it?” Tony asked.

“The school,” Nico replied. “The Pride and the Gibborim are building a school. It’s supposed to be a ‘community project’, a ‘good deeds’ cover to get them legitimacy. They’re actually using the site as cover for a massive hole in the ground to get to the alien ship.”

“We’ve seen it; tried to stop it,” Chase added. “Not that we really had much success.”

“I’m betting that we slowed them down, at least,” Gert said. “We wrecked part of their drilling machine and Molly pushed a truck into the hole. Gave a nice explosion when it hit down there.”

“The problem is that we don’t know how much progress they’ve made since then,” Steve said. “And, given the fact that their aim is to take over L.A. followed by the country and then the world, we have no choice but to stop them from reaching whatever weapons are on that ship.”

“What about the UN?” Nat asked. “The Accords aren’t in play anymore. But should this be something that we deal with or would it be better to take to them to deal with?”

“Ordinarily, maybe,” Steve replied grimly. “But this isn’t like some of those other situations that we’re hearing about – those people are simply humans with tech causing problems. This time, there’s aliens involved. We need to get involved.”

“I think a stealth mission would make the most sense,” Maria stated.

“Agreed,” Steve nodded. Turning to the teens, he continued. “The Pride and Gibborim. They’re both made up of humans right, no special enhancements or tech?”

“Jonah’s like me,” Karolina replied. “We think he’s been on Earth for years, possibly decades. At least, we found a picture of him and my mum from when she was a kid and Jonah looked exactly the same then as he did back then.”

“Then there’s no telling exactly how old he is,” Carol said. “For all we know, it could be his ship down there.”

“Anyone else that we should be aware of?” Steve asked.

“I’d say my dad,” Chase replied, staring intently at the tabletop. “He’s designed and built a lot of cool gadgets, but he was shot recently. Really, I don’t even know if he’s alive anymore.”

“Otherwise, our parents are just normal humans,” Nico said.

“Apart from being evil and all that,” Gert added.

“So, we only have to deal with this Jonah,” Thor nodded. “A lone Majesdanian should not cause too
“Except he won’t be alone, will he?” Tony pointed out. “He’s likely to have a whole bunch of goons backing him up.”

“Regardless, our focus has to stay on the aliens,” Steve stated. “Jonah and that ship. We either extract that vessel ourselves or we blow it up.”

“Yeah, no!” Tony exclaimed, raising one finger. “You’re forgetting where it is. Under L.A. As in, the Los Angeles that has a major fault-line running under it as well. If we detonate a explosion down there – and you can bet your ass that blowing up an alien ship will definitely count – then we’re likely to set off a chain reaction that could wipe out most of the western seaboard.”

“Right. New plan. We extract that ship or, at the very least, the weapons on board it,” Steve amended.

“I still say that a stealth mission is the way to go if we want to avoid any unnecessary attention,” Maria pointed out.

“I agree,” Steve said. “Which is why I won’t be going. Thor, Carol, we’re going to need both of you on this. Pietro’s speed could also be useful.”

“Unless you want to deal with something green, I’d send Jennifer as well; she will insist, you can count on it,” Harry said. “Besides, she knows the city and can blend in.”

“And I’ll round things out,” Tony said.

Everyone at the table stared at him.

“What?” he asked. “Do I have something in my teeth?”

“Tony, we’re trying to stay under the radar,” Steve pointed out in a patronising voice. “A flying red and gold suit of armour is anything but subtle.”

“I know that,” Tony retorted. “That’s why I’ll take my stealth suit, Sneaky. It’s got retroreflective panels all over the it; no one’ll see me coming or going.”

“Huh, who knew you could do unobtrusive?” Nat grunted.

“Hey!” Tony protested. “I’m learning.”

“We’ll thank Pepper later,” Steve said. “Back to mission. Hopefully, the five of you will be enough to get the job done …”

“What about us?” Nico asked, indicating the four Runaways sitting alongside her. “We know what’s going on much better than you do and this is our parents that we’re talking about.”

“I appreciate that, we all do, but this is too dangerous,” Steve replied. “Until you get a handle on your abilities and learn to work as a team or even better, as a part of a team, you won’t be joining any missions.”

“I know that you’ve already started,” Harry added. “Nico, Karolina, you two especially are already showing a lot of improvement and from what Bobbi tells me, she can easily see the five of you …”

“Hey, don’t forget Old Lace!” Gert interrupted.
“Sorry, the six of you slotting into Avengers Academy in the near future,” Harry continued smoothly. “But even then, it’ll be quite a while before you’re ready for missions. We need to know that you won’t hurt either yourselves or others when you’re out in the field.”

“You’re still young; your time will come,” Nat added.

“Right. Thor, Tony, Carol, get your team together and prepared. Use one of the quinjets that has stealth capabilities as well,” Steve said. “Good luck.”

With a nod, Thor rose, the other two a second behind him, and led them from the room.
Nothin' But Pride

The quinjet settled into the outfield of what looked to be an old baseball field. Judging by its unkept appearance – long grass and even small bushes beginning to grow in the middle of the diamond, they assumed that no one would be using it or even accidentally stumble into the cloaked quinjet if they left it here. The only downside was how far they were from their target.

“Well, the good news is that three of us can fly and Fleetfoot here can run rings around everyone,” Tony commented.

“And what about me?” Jennifer asked, her arms crossed.

“You’ll make do,” Tony shrugged. “Especially with the phone call that I made.”

“What phone call?” Jennifer asked suspiciously.

“You do remember that we’re trying to keep a low profile here, right?” Pietro asked.

The appearance of a car pulling into the carpark behind the fence had the team turning to stare out the front window. The tension only increased when said car was seen to be an L.A. Sheriff’s car.

“Dad?” Jennifer whispered. And then, as then her face burst into a massive grin as the sheriff exited the car. “Dad!”

Instantly, she bolted for the rear of the quinjet, slapped the button to lower the ramp and was out before the ramp had even touched the ground.

Tony gave a single, satisfied nod followed by a smug look in Pietro’s direction before heading for the armour against one wall.

Sneaky, he’d named it. The Mark XV armour. He’d known that rebuilding all of his armours and repopulating his Hall of Armours was a good idea. Sneaky may not be his most powerful armour, but it was the only one with the retroreflective panels built onto it to allow it to disappear into the background. And it wasn’t as though Sneaky didn’t have some weapons – just in case, mind you – but Tony knew that firing even one of them would negate Sneaky’s stealth.

Stepping into the armour, Tony fired it up although, for now, he left the retroreflective panels inactive.

“You know, Miss Danvers, if you’re going to stay on Earth and be a part of this team, we’re going to have to do something with that uniform of yours,” Tony commented.

“It’s ‘Captain’,” Carol retorted before looking down at her black and green Kree uniform with the gold starburst on her chest. “And what’s wrong with my uniform.”

“Well, for one, it’s Kree and those guys don’t have the best reputation around here, especially with the Inhumans,” Tony replied. “And second, black with that green? Really? Whoever came up with that colour choice really needs to have their eyes checked.”

Tony smiled, seeing the thoughtful frown on her face.

“Maybe,” she allowed. “But I like my uniform.”

“As much as it pains me to say, Stark is right,” Thor joined the conversation. “Your Kree uniform
does give the wrong impression.”

“If it’s that big a deal, then just change the colours,” Pietro stated over his shoulder as he exited the quinjet.

Tony looked at Carol. “Well?”

“I’ll consider it, assuming that I get to pick the colours,” she replied.

“And what if your colour coordination is off?” Tony called after her as she descended the ramp.

“You have been living with aliens for years.”

“I’m a woman, my colour coordination is never wrong,” she retorted.

“She has you there, Stark,” Thor grinned, slapping him on the back.

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“This is the place,” Sheriff William Walters stated, nodding at the construction site across the road.

Jennifer eyed it speculatively. From here, she could see down two sides and both contained high fences, even higher than one would normally see on a construction site. In addition to the fences themselves, large banners covered everything, proclaiming that this was the site of a future Gibborim school and that the Pride were the major sponsors. Other signs declared that the work was being carried out by Wilder Constructions.

From the street, there was absolutely no way that one could see inside the area. On top of that, a pair of security guards sat in a booth beside the only entrance.

“This security seems a little over the top,” Pietro commented from the backseat.

“Has it always been like this, Dad?” Jennifer asked.

“Yep,” William replied. “From what my buddies on the force have told me, that fencing went up even before the first clod of dirt was turned.”

“Tony, what’s the view from up top?” Jennifer asked.

“If they’re building a school, they’re doing a really poor job of it,” Tony replied over the comms. “There’s a lot of machinery, but not much actual building work. And the kids were right, the main focus is a massive hole in the ground.”

“How deep is this hole?” Thor asked.

“Friday’s sensors have it measured at three hundred and nine metres.”

William whistled. “Straight down? What in the world would have them digging that deep?”

“Sorry, Dad, the less you know, the better,” Jennifer apologised. “Just know that this is serious.”

“Well, I got that, Baby,” William smiled. “Why else would you and your friends be here. I know what the world’s view is on you and the Avengers. The Accords may be defunct, but there’s a lot of people still wary of you lot.”

“What’s the plan?” Carol asked.
“We need to get down there and without them realising that we’re doing so,” Tony stated.

“Stark, you and Pietro need to take out any guards or workers in there so that we can operate freely,” Thor stated.

“How many are we looking at?” Pietro asked.

“Sending the details to your pad now,” Tony replied.

Jennifer twisted in her seat so that she could see the pad that Pietro was holding. At his tap, an image appeared showing the entire construction site with figures highlighted in red.

“Fourteen. Huh, thought there’d be more,” Pietro commented. “When do you want to do this?”

“I’m already on my way while you’re sitting around talking about it,” Tony replied.

A fierce breeze followed by the car door swinging about by itself indicated that Quicksilver had raced off to do his part.

“Da-mn!” William said, drawing out the word. “I can see why he’s here. Or not, actually. What’s your role, Jenn?”

Jennifer grimaced. “Back up. I get to sit out here and let the others deal with it. I only go in if something goes wrong.”

“Great!” William beamed, throwing his arm around his daughter. “That gives you and me some time to catch up.”

Absently, Jennifer nodded, her eyes never leaving the pad in her hands and the rapidly disappearing red figures on it. Within two minutes, there wasn’t a single conscious security guard or worker in there and the ones outside were none the wiser.

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“All clear!” Tony called, allowing Sneaky to become visible.

A streak appeared in front of him, resolving itself into Pietro sliding on the dirt and coming to a stop. A pair of figures shooting across the sky caught Tony’s attention and he watched as Thor and Carol appeared, landing simultaneously beside him.

“You have done a thorough check, yes?” Thor asked, adjusting Stormbreaker in his hand.

“Double checked, even. Everyone’s gone night-night,” Tony replied sarcastically.

With a nod, Thor led them across to the great hole in the ground. It was massive, five metres in diameter and perfectly vertical. None on them, even with either tech or enhanced vision, could see very far down it.

“Is it still drilling down there?” Pietro asked.

Tony shifted across to the control panel and looked over the settings.

“Actually, no,” he replied, surprised at what he was seeing.

“That could mean that they’ve reached the ship,” Carol stated.
“And you’d be right,” Tony replied after another moment’s examination of the controls. “This thing had a set depth to drill down to. It reached it about twenty minutes ago.”

“If they’ve reached the right depth, then what’s the odds that this Jonah guy knows?” Pietro asked.

“I would say that that was a certainty,” a new voice replied.

The four spun around and Tony activated his hand repulsors, ready for a fight. The guy was immaculately dressed in a suit that Tony identified as being top-of-the-line and tailor-made. He appeared bemused by the fact that they were there and certainly wasn’t acting as though they were any kind of threat.

“I’m assuming that I have you to thank for everyone here being unconscious?” the man asked.

“It’s always nice to be thanked for one’s work,” Tony replied. “I’m guessing that you’re Jonah?”

“You’ve heard of me,” he smiled. “Of course, I know who you are. Well, most of you. Iron Man, Quicksilver, Thor and you. Who might you be, I wonder?”

Carol remained silent even as Jonah continued to walk towards them.

“Your uniform appears Kree but clearly, you are not Kree,” Jonah mused.

“See, told ya,” Tony muttered sotto voce.

“No matter,” Jonah continued, “if you’re with these others, then you can suffer the same fate as them. I believe that the authorities will be very interested in the Avengers interfering in the affairs of normal, hard-working people.”

His hand moved from his pocket, a phone clearly visible in it. At least for a second. And then his hand was still shaped as though it was holding the phone, even though, clearly, that was no longer the case.

“I don’t think you’ll be needing this,” Quicksilver stated before casually tossing the mobile down the shaft.

“Well, that wasn’t very nice,” Jonah frowned.

“We know your plan, Majesdanian,” Thor stated. “Give it up now.”

Jonah’s face appeared shocked.

“You know who I am?” he asked, before his face changed, appearing a combination of contemplative and angry. “Of course. Those kids. They went to you, did they? Knew that I should have killed them when I had the chance.”

“Wrong move, Sparkles,” Tony replied. “Threatening kids? And when one of them is your own daughter? Not smart.”

Jonah’s skin instantly began glowing the same rainbow colours as Karolina and Tony noted that he wasn’t the only one of his team ready to fight. Thor had Stormbreaker up, his legs braced; Carol’s hands had begun to glow; Pietro had disappeared, obviously running to make himself unpredictable; and Tony himself was ready to fire at a moment’s notice.

“Do you truly think that you can beat me?” Jonah smirked.
Before Tony could respond, Rainbow-Bright had fired his light bursts, sweeping his hands outwards from Thor and Carol in an attempt to catch not just Tony, but also Pietro in his blasts.

Activating his boots, Tony soared above the danger and fired back, sending twin repulsor blasts at the Majesdanian. Unfortunately, he also dodged, causing both Tony and Carol to miss.

“His energy appears to be some kind of photon burst,” Friday stated. “Identical to those created by Karolina.”

Tony glanced at his HUD, examining the data that Friday had put there. There was enough danger there from those bursts that meant that Sneaky could be seriously damaged if he was hit.

Unfortunately, that was the downside of the less-powerful suit.

Unexpectedly, Jonah grunted, his back arching forward and his latest burst at Thor going well off-target. Taking advantage of Quicksilver’s hit on the alien, Tony switched on the retroreflective panels and darted up and over the alien.

Unfortunately, Jonah had the same thought, rising quickly into the air and away from Quicksilver. Being cloaked meant that Jonah had no way of being able to see Iron Man and consequently, his shoulder slammed into Tony’s left leg. Instantly, the entire leg sputtered, sparks shooting out of its joints and the boot repulsor frizzling on and off.

Tony twisted himself and fired point blank, catching the alien in the gut and propelling him away.

With his flight now incredibly erratic due to only having the one working boot, Tony was temporarily forced out of the fight as he had to use his hand repulsors in order to land safely.

Jonah may have taken to the air, negating Pietro’s attacks and inadvertently taken Iron Man out of the fight, but there were still two of the most powerful Avengers left for him to deal with.

Carol, her entire being glowing a brilliant gold, rose to face him, even as Thor threw Stormbreaker at the Majesdanian. Drops of dark red blood rained to the dirt below from the glancing blow that Jonah received, a blow that had resulted in a deep cut on his left bicep.

That didn’t stop Jonah from firing on Carol.

Twin beams of rainbow light shot towards the Kree Captain who instantly fired her own golden burst from her own hands. The two sets of energy collided between them, producing such a great ball of light that Tony was forced to shield his eyes from it, despite the in-build light-dampening tech in his helmet.

When next he peaked out through his fingers, it was to see that Carol’s beams were pushing Jonah’s back. And with each metre that she ‘won’ their light battle, the speed that her beams raced towards the Majesdanian increased.

A primal cry of rage permeated the air as Jonah obviously poured everything that he could into the contest. It was all in vain, though, as Carol’s beams slammed into Jonah, sending him spinning wildly through the air to crash hard into the roof of a building. Tony watched as he crashed through the roof, his inner glow dimming to nothing even as he fell before his unconscious body hit the ground.

“He’s alive but out cold!” Quicksilver reported, materialising over the downed alien.

As Thor strode towards him, he paused and grabbed up some thick cable to take with him. Tony was certain that, by the time the Asgardian was done, Jonah wouldn’t be able to move, even if he had
been conscious.

ooo00ooo

Carol flew straight down towards the centre of the Earth, which was, when one thought about it, a rather disconcerting feeling. Even though she knew that she was flying under her own power and could control her speed or even, if she wanted, simply flip about and shoot straight back up, flying down like this felt remarkably like falling.

Still, she was a Kree Captain, a former member of the Starforce Taskforce and she’d be damned if she was going to show any fear or retreat from any assignment. The fact that Thor was flying ahead of her helped somewhat. The only downside to this configuration was that it was near impossible to see what lay ahead with him in the way.

Finally, the Asgardian slowed, his legs folding in as he flipped about. Mirroring his actions, Carol landed in a crouch beside him.

Lighting up her hands, she shone them downwards so that they could get a better look at what they were standing on.

“This does not look like part of a vessel,” Thor stated.

“No, it doesn’t,” Carol agreed. “If I had to guess, I’d say that we’re standing on the drill that made the shaft to get down here.”

Thor nodded and brandished Stormbreaker. Understanding his meaning, she immediately rose back into the air, flying ten metres up the shaft before hovering there, watching.

As soon as she was at a safe distance, Thor brought Stormbreaker high before slamming it down on the metal of the drill. On the first blow, huge cracks appeared, spiderwebbing out from the impact. The second blow cracked the drill in two. The third blow shattered the metal.

By the time that Carol had landed once again, Thor was already digging his way through the metal shards to find what lay below.

“That looks more like it,” Thor stated as they uncovered a blue-grey metal.

“My turn, I think,” Carol said.

This time, it was Thor who rose high out of the way. Stepping across so that her back was against one wall of the shaft, Carol braced her legs, gathered her energy into her hands and fired. Instantly, the brilliant golden energy slammed into the metal, melting and disintegrating what was left of the drill before burning through the hull of the alien ship.

The very air within the shaft had been quite cool when they’d first landed down there but now, under Carol’s photons, the air quickly heated up, getting hotter and hotter until she could feel sweat dripping from her brow, under her arms and down her back. With the way that the temperature was continuing to grow, she knew that no ordinary human would have been able to survive.

Finally, when she was wondering how much longer even she could last, she felt her beams cut their way through. Quickly, she pulled back and peered at what she’d created.

There was now a hole just over a metre wide in the hull, its edges still glowing red-hot with the heat that she’d used.
“Well done,” Thor said, landing on the opposite side of the hole. “Shall we?”

In answer, Carol simply stepped forward and dropped down, landing in a crouch.

As Thor landed beside her, soft white lights flickered on up and down the corridor that they stood in.

“Let’s find those weapons,” Carol said. “I’ll take right.”

“Left,” Thor agreed, indicating his own direction.

Carol walked slowly, her boots echoing with every step. At each doorway, she paused and looked in and her confusion grew. There were six rooms along this corridor and not one showed any sign of this being some kind of warship. No, every single room was a simple room – bunk beds against one wall, twin desks and cupboard and a small bathroom.

At the end of the corridor, she had a choice. Sticking with her original decision, she picked right again, only to have the new, shorter corridor, instantly turn left. At her approach, the two doors slid open and a new room, this one much, much larger than any that she’d seen in the ship before, lit up.

This time, she nodded. The bridge. Here, she knew, she’d find answers.

Slowly, she moved from console to console, until she found the one that she wanted. Sliding into the seat, she began tapping away. Thankfully, it didn’t take long to find the option to change the language into one which she could read.

“Now, let’s find your ordinance,” she murmured.

She took her time, making sure that she didn’t miss anything. Directory after directory, and sub-directory after sub-directory were searched. In the end, all she could do was sit back and stare at the screen.

The sound of boots on the metal decking had Carol look up to find Thor standing in the doorway.

“Nothing,” she stated. “There’s nothing on this ship that anyone could use to take over a city, let alone a planet. If I had to guess, I’d say that this is nothing more than a simple scientific exploration ship.”

“I agree,” Thor nodded. “I’ve searched the rest of the ship. There are no heavy weapons on board at all. Even the hand-held guns are nothing more than a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent might find in their armoury.”

“The question then becomes, why the subterfuge? What was Jonah trying to accomplish by digging this ship up?” Carol asked.

“What about the ship’s log? That may give us a clue,” Thor suggested.

Carol nodded and leant forward, her fingers dancing across the console until she found it. Selecting the final entry, she clicked it and felt Thor leaning over her to see the screen as well.

The image that appeared on the screen was clearly Jonah, looking exactly like he currently was today. From what little they could see past him, it was clear that he was recording from the bridge, possibly even the same console that Carol was currently sitting at.

“This is an emergency transmission to any Majesdanian vessel within range. My name is Jann’lah and I am the commander of the Majesdanian science vessel Cosmos. I am currently experiencing
severe engine trouble. My interstellar drive is nonoperational and my sub-light engines are failing.

“There is no way that I can return home. There is a primitive world within range that can sustain life. It is my intention to set down there and await rescue. I am attaching coordinates to this transmission.

“Please, any Majesdanian vessel or any other vessel who receives this transmission, please respond. I need urgent help! I repeat, My name is Jann’lah of the Majesdanian science vess-”

“I think that that explains matters,” Carol nodded.

Thor gave her a quizzical look.

“My guess is that Jonah, or rather, Jann’lah was trying to retrieve his vessel in the hopes that the technology of Earth today could be used to repair his vessel so that he could go home,” Carol stated.

“You believe that he played a ruse on the members of the Pride and the Gibborim?” Thor asked.

Carol nodded. “Undoubtedly. There’s no way that this vessel could deliver what he was promising.”

“How long do you believe that he’s been here on Earth?” Thor asked.

“What’s the life-span of a Majesdanian?”

“I do not know,” Thor replied thoughtfully. “Certainly, far longer than a human’s.”

“Exactly.” Carol replied. “Alright, let’s see what we can do about this ship not falling into the wrong hands.”

ooo00ooo

A great rumbling below their feet promptly followed by a cloud of dust billowing out of the shaft had Tony and Pietro rushing towards it.

“Thor! Carol! Do you copy?” Tony called.

Instead of a response over the comms, two blurry figures emerging from within the dust cloud answered his question.

“You know it’s only polite to respond when people are panicking about you?” Tony snapped as the two landed in front of Tony and Pietro.

“What was that?” Pietro asked, pointing at the cloud that was still hovering around, blanketing the area and making the whole area darker than it was only two minutes before.

“We blew up the ship,” Carol replied simply.

“You did what?” Tony exploded. “I thought that we decided that that was likely to set off a chain of earthquakes that would rocket up and down the seaboard?”

“That vessel was a Majesdanian science vessel with a lot more advanced equipment on board it than what you have,” Carol replied. “We analysed the exact explosive force that would be created by self-destructing the ship and then used computer models to simulate what repercussions that would have.”

“I’m guessing by the fact that the ground isn’t shaking that we’re good?” Tony asked.
“Yes. There’ll be some minor quakes, but nothing above a magnitude three.”

Tony nodded. “Most of those won’t even be felt. Good job, although, next time, save off the destroying the alien tech until I’ve had a chance to take it apart and analyse it, huh?”

“If we did that, Stark, the job would never be completed,” Thor laughed.

“Guys, are we expecting company?” Pietro asked as three black SUV’s filed into the construction site.

“Actually, yes,” Tony replied.

It was only when the first door opened that they were able to note the logo on it: S.H.I.E.L.D.

“Gentlemen,” Tony said, walking towards them, his arms wide. “Glad you could make it; and so quickly, too.”

“I understand that you have someone for us to collect?” the lead Agent asked, seemingly ignoring Tony’s greeting.

“Fine, be that way,” Tony huffed. “Over here.”

The team of Agents were led into the small building and instantly, their eyes focussed on the man bound head to foot on the ground.

“Anything we should know about him?” the Agent asked.

“He’s Majesdanian,” Tony replied. “That means that he’s not from around here. How long he’s been on Earth is anyone’s guess.”

“And also, what he’s been doing while he’s been here,” the Agent nodded, catching on immediately. “We’ll let you know what we find out. Powers?”

“Flight, some durability and he can shoot beams from his hands,” Tony replied.

“Keep him in a dark room, away from any sunlight.” Carol instructed. “He gets his powers from solar radiation; deprive him of that and you shouldn’t have any problems.”

“Understood,” the Agent nodded and gestured to two of his men who promptly grabbed Jonah – one under his arms, the other his legs – and hauled him away towards the nearest vehicle.

“Is there anything else we should know about?” the Agent asked.

“Tell Coulson that I’ll send him a full report in a day or two,” Tony replied.

Seeing the man grimace, Tony smirked: his reputation preceded him, always a nice feeling.

“Right, well, we better all get out of here before someone notices us,” the Agent said. “You Avengers aren’t the only ones who were affected by the Accords. And even if they’re not in effect any more, a lot of people are still wary of our presence.”

“Agreed. And thanks,” Tony said.

Then, with a nod to the rest of his team, he, Carol and Thor took to the sky while below, Pietro disappeared in a blur.
“We’ve got an incoming call,” Carol announced from the pilot’s seat, drawing Tony’s attention from where he was just finishing settling his armour in place against the wall of the quinjet.

As he moved forward, he saw her reach out and flick the toggle to activate the channel. Instantly, a screen flared to life with a familiar visage.

“Carol,” Harry greeted. “What’s your mission status?”

Tony blinked. It wasn’t like Gandalf to ignore the niceties and dive straight into a conversation – probably something to do with his British respectability or some such rubbish.

“The mission was a complete success,” Carol replied. “S.H.I.E.L.D. have the suspects in custody and we’re on our way home. ETA four hours, eleven minutes.”

“Good,” Harry nodded, although the frown on his face told a different story. “Is Tony there?”

Taking half a step forward, Tony leant closer so that he could be seen by the wizard.

“Harry? Something wrong?” he asked.

Gandalf’s frown morphed into a strange smirk.

“Depends on your definition,” he said. “Portus Ivory Tower.”

Tony only had time to blink at the familiar phrasing of the last two words before he felt something like a hook grab him behind his navel and yank!

“Oh shiii…!” was all he was able to get out before the quinjet dissolved into a flash of blue.

Seconds later, Tony was flung out, spinning across the lounge room of Avengers Tower to land on the couch. Or, more precisely, in Lavender’s lap on the couch. A glance was enough to tell him that the room was filled with Avengers, however there was only one that he was interested in.

“What the hell, Potter!” Tony growled, having rolled to his feet.

“Sorry, Tony, but it was the fastest way,” the wizard replied not looking or sounding sorry in the slightest.

“We’ll deal with the fact that you have an override code for our portkeys later!” Tony stated, advancing on him, although finding that he had to turn almost side on to get past Roger’s outstretched hand. “Right now, you’ve got about two seconds to explain what is so important that you had to bring me here by portkey without asking before the armour that I ordered Friday to send me gets up from the Hall and I blast you out that window!”

The unexpected sound of a woman wailing in obvious pain reached his ears and Tony froze.

“Pepper?” he asked everyone and no one.


“Pepper’s in labour?” Tony repeated, the unexpectedness of the statement taking its time to process in his brain. “But she’s not due for another ten days!”

“Babies aren’t born on a schedule,” an amused-sounding Nat stated.
“Why not? They should be,” Tony protested.

“Tony!” Harry’s near-shout broke through his haze and snapped his head around. “Your wife’s in labour and your first child is wanting to be born. Get in there, man!”

“Right. Pepper. Baby,” Tony nodded even as he began racing across the room to where he could hear Pepper screaming in pain.

“About damn time, Stark!” Pepper half-yelled, half-panted at him the instant that he stuck his head through the door. “Get in here and hold my hand. And if you make one, just one snarky comment, then you can expect to be sleeping on the couch for the next decade!”

There was only one correct answer to that as far as Tony could see.

“Yes, dear,” he said meekly even as he took her hand with both of his.

And promptly winced as Pepper’s clamped onto his hand and squeezed.

Some three hours later, Tony was staring in amazement, adoration, pride – really a whole host of emotions that were almost too much to comprehend – at the baby girl that was having her first feed with Pepper.

“Look what we made,” he breathed.

“Better than a suit of armour, huh?” Pepper asked without looking up, her eyes fixed on the tiny face just as his were.

“Better than anything. She’s amazing. You’re amazing,” he said, leaning down to kiss the top of her head before reaching in to gently rub the back of one finger across his little girl’s cheek. “Hello, there, Morgan Maria Stark. I’m your dad.”

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