Warden

by Tahrovinlaat_Hi_Neh_Koraav

Summary

Tony was left alone in a bunker in Siberia, and it was only a matter of hours before Death came for him. Just... not in the way he expected. When offered a chance to become a part of something bigger and better than the Avengers could have ever been, he jumps at the chance.

With the backing of his new family, new teammates, and old friends, Tony will rise to face the threat that drew the Master of Death's attention to his home world to begin with.

And if they get into hijinks along the way... Even better.

Notes

Follow the Tumblr, Twitter, and Discord for updates, news, and a chance to ask your favorite characters a question or two!!

https://wardennews.tumblr.com/
https://twitter.com/NexusPatronus
https://discord.gg/vRSuK5Y

See the end of the work for more notes
“Minowa! We have a potential brother to pick up!”

Slit-pupiled eyes the color of hot embers flicked open and glanced over at the woman who stood beside her. “Vahzah— Truly?” Minowa pushed off of the wall, turning to face her. She took note of her partner’s thunderous look, and the fact that she was carrying her medical supplies with her. “Let’s head to the Relay, then. I take it he’s not in good shape?”

The woman fell into step only slightly behind Minowa and reported, “Understatement of the millennia. His own teammates… They hurt him to a point where he needs urgent medical attention. And instead of calling the proper authorities… they left him to die!”

Minowa huffed in annoyance, shaking her head in disgust. “They cannot truly be his grah-zeymahzine if they left him in such a state. Is Ulysses meeting us at the Relay, Bridget?”

Bridget nodded and replied, “He said he would go through before us, to make sure the area is truly secure.”

“Pruzah. Hopefully, he’ll be able to lead us right to our destination.” Minowa stopped beside a computer, typing in their destination as Bridget stepped up onto the Relay pad. “You’re sure you’ve got what you need, fahdoni?” Getting a nod, the ebony haired woman joined the other on the pad, and they only had to wait for a second or two before they were enveloped in shadows. After a moment, the shadows fell away to reveal a decrepit looking base of some kind. “Bridget, does this look correct?”
The blond woman nodded and replied, “Definitely. Can you locate our target for us? Maybe find ‘Ses while you’re at it.”

Minowa nodded, looking forward and taking a breath. As she exhaled, she murmured “Laas Yah Nir!” under her breath in a hiss. A moment later, her eyes were covered in a lightly glowing blue film, and she looked around briefly. “This way-- I believe Ulysses and our target are in the same room.”

Nodding, Bridget allowed Minowa to take point, being the better fighter of the duo. It took only a few minutes to reach their destination, and they entered the room together. It took only a moment for the medic to realize the shape the man was in. “Shit.” She gasped, striding forward and dropping to the man’s side. “Mara’s mercy, they did a number on him.” She quickly called upon her restoration abilities, waving a glowing hand over the man’s body. “Damn. I need to get this armor off of him. It’s interfering with my magic.” She looked up as Minowa joined her, as well as Ulysses. “Any hostiles, Ulysses?”

“No.” The black man’s deep voice came from behind a breathing mask securely attached to his face, dark brown eyes scanning the armor. “Life is absent from this place-- recent departure.” A moment of silence passed before he managed to find a button on the armor that manually released the armor. He pulled several pieces away before sitting back to allow their healer to move in.

Nodding briefly to Ulysses in thanks, Minowa turned her attention back to Bridget. “How does it look?”

A tich had formed in the jaw of the woman in question as she focused as much healing magic as she could into his body. “Not gonna lie-- it’s bad. His sternum is little more than shrapnel, most of his ribs are broken… Looks like he has head trauma too. He’s lucky we found him, he wouldn’t have survived much longer like this.” A few minutes later, she sat back, sighing before she reached for her bag and pulled out several vials. “I can’t fix some of the damage here-- it’s too severe. I can stabilize him so we can bring him back, though.” She looked to Minowa, who nodded her consent. Bridget wasted no more time administering the liquids. “Okay, he should be safe to move now. Minowa, would you mind taking him?”

Minowa held up a hand, shaking her head. “Ro laan, Bridget.” She took a deep breath, and on the exhaled words “Mul Qah Diiv!”, she began to glow, transparent armor and leathery wings forming around her. She looked up and gave a sharp nod. “Let’s go.” She slid her arms under the man’s form, standing with no strain. “Bridget, keep watching his vitals. Ulysses, open the Relay.”

The black man nodded, dreadlocks gently swinging as he raised his hand, before flicking his hand and wrist out. “I’ll have one of the youngers bring over the armor.” He spared a glance at the shield before dismissing it.

“Kogaan, Ulysses.” A moment passed before shadows once again engulfed the group, and when they dispersed, there was no indication that they had been there in the first place.

Chapter End Notes

Dovahzul Translations

Vahzah -- Truly
Grah-Zeymahzine -- Shield Brothers
Pruzah -- Good
Fahdoni -- My Friend
Laas Yah Nir -- Life Seek Hunt, Aura Whisper Shout
Ro Laan -- I understand
Mul Qah Diiv -- Strength Armor Wyrm, Dragon Aspect Shout
Kogaan -- Thanks

Positive criticism is always welcome! No flames please-- I learn nothing from unmitigated and unwarranted vitriol.
Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Tony wakes up in an unfamiliar place and meets the team that saved him along with their leader: Hadrian Black, the Master of Death.

Chapter Notes

Chapter one, and we're just getting started!

I still don't own anything! If I did, there'd be a lot more IronStrange in the world...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first thing Tony noticed as he came back to himself was that he was warm. His brow furrowed gently, confused-- he had fallen unconscious in Siberia, a place historically known to be the exact opposite of warm. He let out a small hum, letting his eyes slide open. His vision remained blurry for a moment before sharpening. He realized he was staring at a ceiling decorated with a far too realistic moon and stars. He only had a moment to contemplate his surroundings when he heard movement to his right. “Who-” He started to ask, before coughing overtook him, his throat feeling as though he had gargled sand. A gentle hand rested on his arm, and a woman’s face came into view.

“Easy, Dr. Stark. Don't try moving just yet. Let me check your injuries.” She raised her hand, and Tony startled when it began to glow a golden color. She lowered it, and after a moment Tony felt a comforting warmth filling him. “Okay, it looks like your ribs and sternum are fully healed now. I’m going to raise the bed and let you sit up, okay? No sudden movements, though.” A moment passed before the bed tilted so Tony was sitting up and could observe the room around him. His eyes immediately found the blond woman. He noted her sparkling amethyst eyes and heart-shaped face, long blue robes with tan accents snug against her body. She smiled gently as she reached to a nearby table, grabbing a glass of water. “Welcome back, Anthony. You've been unconscious for a few days now. Take a few sips of this while I grab a few things, ok?”

Tony nodded, taking the water from her and taking a mouthful cautiously as he watched as the woman stepped through a side door. The water did wonders for his dry throat and mouth though, so by the time she returned with a file folder in hand, the glass was empty. “So who are you? How did you find me?” He asked, setting the cup to one side.

Bridget smiled charmingly, dipping her head to the older man as she set the folder down on the end table. “My name is Bridget Ivorsen, sir. I've been tending to you and your injuries while you’ve been here. As for how we found you... well, I should probably wait until the others have joined us. In the meantime, can I get you something to eat? How about coffee?”

“Coffee. Definitely coffee.”

Nodding, Bridget flicked her fingers out, and a blue-tinged white light burst from them, forming a
transparent blue hawk which turned to look at its summoner. “Hello, Savos. I need you to carry a message to the kitchens.” The hawk nodded, and Bridget continued. “Our guest has awoken. Please prepare coffee and drinks for five. Also, prepare a bowl of broth-based soup to send up later-- Whatever is fresh.” Savos nodded again before taking off again, passing through the open door.

Tony watched the display in awe, but before he could ask about it, another animal of the same light came through the door. It stopped in front of Bridget, and Tony gave a small gasp. The animal was a dragon.

Bridget smiled at the being, dipping her head. “Hello, Odahviing. Do you have a message from Minowa?”

The dragon nodded once before a powerful male voice emanated from it. “Message received, fahdoni. We are coming. The dinokthur will be along momentarily.”

“Thank you, Odahviing.” Bridget turned back to Tony as the dragon dissolved into mist before fading away. “I’m pulling in the rest of the team that helped retrieve you. Our leader will also be coming.”

Tony nodded, swallowing lightly. “Are all of the animals here different?” He asked after a moment, mind on the corporeal hawk and dragon that had appeared not too long ago.

Bridget chuckled softly, shaking her head. “Those aren’t animals, Tony. It’s... oh, how to explain it…? It’s a physical manifestation of our joy and love. It takes on a different shape depending on our strongest traits and personal history. Take Savos, for instance. Hawks are symbolic of healing of the body and soul, astral traveling, and understanding of the magical arts. My job in this place is to act as a healer for those under our Master’s employ.”

“And the dragon?”

“He would be mine.” A new voice cut in, and Tony turned his gaze to the doorway to see a woman step through. She wore black leather armor that sat tight against her body, decorated with red and silver accents. A razor-sharp dagger rested against her hip, and the handle of another peeked out behind her back. Ebon black hair was cut short in spiky layers, a pair of obsidian black horns arching from her head and ending in wicked points. Slit pupiled eyes the color of burning flames seemed to drill a hole straight into his soul. “Odahviing’s case is special. He served me in laas, and continues to do so in dinok by taking the form he does. Dovah, where I am from, are ancient powers-- bormahukiin, The children of Akatosh. They are sahlonid-- loost suleykunslaad.”

Tony blinked, staring at the woman. “Yeah, I’m gonna need you to repeat that in a language I understand.”

A deep chuckle came from the side as a man stepped in behind the woman. “You’re slipping into the dragon tongue again. Try English.”

Minowa sighed deeply through her nose. “Krosis, apologies… Dovah, Dragons in your language, are an old and powerful race. They are the sons of our chief Divine, Akatosh. They are eternal, immortal-- beings of great strength and tenacity.”

Tony sighed, running his fingers through his hair. “Okay, let’s put the notion that dragons are real to the side for a second. Who are you people and what do you want with me?”

Bridget gave him a sympathetic smile. “Master Hadrian will be along in a few moments, then we’ll try to answer any questions you have.”
“I apologize for the wait, everyone.” The group turned as one to the other side of the room to see a swirling vortex of black appear, and a moment later another figure stepped through, the vortex blinking out moments later. The man held a tray with several varieties of beverages upon it. “I figured I would grab the drinks on the way up.”

“Oh thank you, Master Hadrian! You didn't have to do that!” Bridget stood and pulled over a small table for him.

Tony observed the man as he set the tray down. His appearance was youthful, 24 years at most, standing at a height of about 6’1”. He carried himself as if he had seen and experienced many more years and trials than his age portrayed. His black hair was just long enough to pull back in a ponytail and was held back with a strip of black leather. Calm, striking emerald eyes framed by rectangular silver glasses swept around the room in a quick assessment. His skin was pale, though not as much as Minowa’s. He wore a green button-up shirt of the finest silk and charcoal dress pants. A translucent cloak was clasped around his neck by a silver pin in the shape of a triangle with a circle in the middle, a line running straight down through both. The cloak rippled and flowed almost like a liquid around him, giving it the perception of it of being both there, yet not there.

“Ah, and this must be Anthony Stark.” The man smiled kindly at Tony, dipping his head to the man. “It’s a pleasure to meet you at last.”

The genius’ brow furrowed in confusion. “The pleasure’s mine, Mr…?”

“Hadrian Black, Master of Death.” Harry turned his attention to Minowa for a moment to allow that information to sink in with Tony. “I brought you a bottle of Black-Briar Reserve, Minowa. Figured you’d appreciate it.”

Minowa’s lips parted in a grin, revealing razor sharp fangs. “Kogaan, Dinokthur. You’re very kind.” She replied, uncorking the bottle to take a swig.

Hadrian nodded before turning his eyes to Ulysses. “I brought firewhiskey for you, my friend. One of the Reapers found it stashed in a storage room while doing inventory.” He held up the bottle, shaking it slightly as the man eyed it. “It’s the good stuff-- 1984.”

A sigh passed the man’s lips from underneath the mask. “Trying to get the mask off for this meeting… well played, Dominus.” He reached behind his head, and after a soft ‘click’, the mask was slid away from his strong jaw and chin, his mouth set in a slight frown. His lips pulled up slightly as a shot of the alcohol was set in front of him.

“As for you, Bridget… Cecilia in the Acquisitions Department brought back something very special about a week ago.” Grinning knowingly, Hadrian passed the woman a glass of what looked like red wine.

Bridget smiled and dipped her head in thanks before taking a tentative sip. She stopped dead for a moment, before lowing the glass to looking knowingly at a beaming Hadrian. “Domaine de la Romanee-Conti, 1990?”

Hadrian nodded and added, “And that’s just one bottle-- the crate had eight.”

The blond woman chuckled lightly, shaking her head. “Trust Cici to spend an exorbitant amount of money on something she KNOWS others will enjoy more.”

Hadrian laughed along with her before turning to Tony. “Your coffee, Dr. Stark.” He placed the mug into the man’s hands before moving around to the foot of the bed. “Now, I’m sure you have
Tony’s eyes moved from person to person as he tried desperately to get his thoughts in order. After a moment or two, he took a deep breath. “You introduced yourself as Hadrian Black, Master of Death.”

A soft snort escaped Minowa. “Always the most difficult question first.”

“How Minowa. He’s well within his right to be doubtful.” Hadrian waved his hand and conjured several plush chairs, and the people surrounding the bed sat and made themselves comfortable. “Tony, let me tell you a story--‘The Tale of Three Brothers’.”

Chapter End Notes

Dovahzul Translations

Fahdoni -- My Friend
Dinokthur -- Death Lord, Master of Death
Laas -- Life
Dinok -- Death
Dovah -- Dragons
Bormahukiin -- Children of Akatosh
Sahlonid -- Without Weakness
Loost -- To Possess
Suleykunslaad -- Limitless Power
Krosis -- Apologies
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Hadrian offers Tony a choice and gives him a chance to get some needed closure. A decision is made, and new characters are introduced.

Chapter Notes

Having issues with this chapter... not sure why my one note at the bottom is showing up-- it's from two chapters ago! Well, it's 4 in the morning... I'll sleep on it, figure it out tomorrow.

Same thing as before-- I OWN NOTHING!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony stared at the people in front of him, dead silent. The past hours had been filled with explanations, demonstrations, stories, and a myriad of other things that were making his head spin from the implications. The small break in the middle for food gave him a reprieve to process a bit before jumping right back into the deep end of the information pool. He took a moment to get his head on straight and file away all of the information he had been inundated with before turning his attention back to Hadrian. “There’s still something I want to know.” Getting a nod from the man, he asked, “Why did you save me?”

For the first time since the conversation had started, he was met with silence. After a moment or two, Hadrian sighed and stood gracefully from his seat. He turned his attention to the others briefly. “You all know the drill-- out you go.” Nodding, the trio stood and calmly exited the room. Seeing the confusion and sudden wariness on Tony’s face Hadrian explained, “I have a choice for you, Mr. Stark. I had them leave because I want you to make the decision of your own free will, without outside influences. They left as a courtesy, as a sign of respect for your right to choose.”

Tony relaxed and nodded, prompting Hadrian to continue. “As the Master of Death, I don’t often get involved in individual worlds. There are so many out there, I would never be able to get to them all. However, if certain conditions are met within a universe, I am obligated to intervene in some way. There are powers no mortal should ever be able to wield. There are lines that should never be crossed.” Hadrian closed his eyes for a moment. “One of these conditions caused your universe in particular to light up like a dwarf star amongst fluorescent light bulbs. In our investigation into it… We found you quite by coincidence.” His eyes flicked open, a smile gracing his face. “It is rare we discover one with my mark upon their soul without being alerted to it having happened.”

Tony’s brow furrowed in confusion. “What do you mean?”

Hadrian waved his hand seemingly absentmindedly. “The mark is where your arc reactor used to be.” Tony blanched and quickly pulled his shirt up to see. Indeed, hovering over the scar was the same symbol that adorned Hadrian’s cloak pin glowing the same color that his arc reactor used to.
“That symbol is not one you’re born with-- it has to be earned. It’s a sign to me and my constituents that you are a person of incredible strength in all the ways that count. Every person who aids me in this place has that mark. They are the best existence has to offer.”

Taking a deep breath, Tony looked back up to Hadrian. “What do you want from me, then?”

Hadrian’s brow furrowed as he adjusted his glasses. “What I would like is for you to agree to become one of my Reapers. You would be working with me to keep people safe, to protect life at its’ most fundamental level. You would not have to be here all the time-- you would be free to move to and from your own world whenever you wish, and to others with a native of that world. You would have access to technology and worlds you could only dream of. In return, you would be helping me and the other Reapers protect your world, and others like it from mortals who would try to play with powers that are beyond them.” He paused and allowed that to sink in. “However, I will not force you to say yes. If you agree, I want it to be because you want this. This isn’t a small decision.”

Tony stared at Hadrian for a long time, his mind working lightning fast at weighing the pros and cons. Even so, it took a minute before he replied. “I’m… gonna need some time to process this.”

Hadrian nodded, a smile on his face. “Of course. Time flows differently in this place, so you can take all the time you need.” He stood and banished the chair with a flick of his wrist. “If you need someone to talk to about it though, I can provide that.”

“I thought you wanted this to be my decision alone?”

“Indeed it is.” Hadrian lifted his hand and slid a ring from his finger before grinning at Tony. “However, I think you’ll appreciate this. You always took his words to heart, after all.” He lifted the ring and began to turn it in his fingers, murmuring something under his breath. On the third turn, a sudden chill swept through the room and the lights flickered for a moment. “I’ll leave you to talk.”

Tony watched Hadrian sweep from the room, a look of supreme confusion on his face. “Talk?? Talk to who??”

“Anthony!”

Tony’s head whipped around to the other side of the bed where a softly glowing blue specter now stood. His heart jumped into his throat, and any lingering doubt about Hadrian being who he was died a very sudden death.

“Jarvis!”

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“Do you think he’ll accept?”

Hadrian let his emerald eyes flick over to where Minowa was sitting in her special window seat, one enchanted to show a view of her homeworld from the tallest peak in Skyrim. “I hope so.” He finally replied, lowering the teacup he had been drinking from. “Ultimately it’s his choice, as you know… should he choose to stay with us though, I’m confident we can be the family and support he needs.”

Letting out a soft breath, the ebony-haired woman pulled her eyes away from the window and looked in his direction. “His previous grah-zeymahzin were… folaas in their assumptions of him. His soul burns as bright as a dovahsil. He gave them much, and they gave him tahrovin in return.
Rok ofaal beyunslaad... Ruth strun bah! Kren sosaal!” Her eyes began to glow like red-hot coals and she slipped fully into her native tongue without realizing it. Her voice had gradually taken on an echo of another’s, deep and powerful and full of righteous anger. The addition of the new voice seemed to rattle the furniture with the force of the sound. It seemed Minowa’s passenger agreed with her assessment and mirrored her ire.

Hadrian nodded in agreement, sending a tendril of his deathly aura to wrap around her comfortingly. “We cannot change what has happened. We can only hope to help him going forward. Drem, Minowa.” The power continued to blanket her until she had sufficiently settled, then pulled back to rest around Hadrian.

The sound of a throat being cleared caught their attention, and the duo turned to see Bridget standing in the doorway. She nodded to Minowa for a moment before turning her attention to Hadrian. “Tony is asking for you.”

“Thank you, Bridget.” He replied as he stood gracefully from his seat. He flicked his wrist and a portal opened in front of him. “I’ll let you all know, alright?” Getting nods from the duo, he confidently stepped into the vortex, coming out the other side after a few seconds. He found himself in Tony’s unofficial room again, and he smiled at the man. “Hello, Tony. Bridget told me you were asking for me.”

Tony nodded, a small smile quirking his lips. “Yeah. I… I want to thank you, first of all.” For a moment, he looked away, taking deep breaths to try and get his emotions under control. “Getting to talk to Jarvis… The man was like a father to me, and he died so suddenly…”

Hadrian nodded, slowly moving towards the bed. “Of course. I figured you would appreciate it.”

“I do, more than anything.” There was a moment of silence before Tony began to speak again. “He and I talked about your offer, too. Weighed the pros and cons… And I’ve come to a decision.” Hadrian nodded, a look of calm anticipation on his face. “I want to join the Reapers. I want to make lives better. I want to protect people.” Here he looked up at Hadrian, a look of determination on his face. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted to do-- protect the innocent.”

A brilliant smile appeared on Hadrian’s face as he nodded. “And you will have countless chances to do so. I will not lie Anthony-- I’m glad you decided to join us.”

Tony nodded, shifting to swing his legs over the bed and stand. He straightened and turned to Hadrian. “So, how do I go about joining your big, deadly family?”

“Well, first we need to grab one of the others. They’ll act as your Center. He or she will be the foci for the Claiming-- that’s how we’ll bring you into the family. They’ll also show you around the rest of the Nexus and give you a rundown of the basics.” He led the other male to the room from before, where Minowa and Bridget had been joined by Ulysses. The trio looked up as they entered, as if waiting for news. “Anthony has decided to join our family.” He informed them. He smiled as they all offered Tony congratulations and welcomes. “That being said, he’ll need a Center.”

Before anyone could speak, Minowa rose to her feet. “I volunteer.” She looked over at the stunned man in question. “His heart and soul burn with the intensity of a dovahsil. It would be an honor and a privilege to aid him, and show him the true meaning and role of grah-zeymahzin-- shield sibling.”

Hadrian nodded, a bright smile on his face. “Anthony, are you in agreement with this?” He asked softly as he looked over.
Swallowing down the overwhelmed feeling from the show of support, Tony nodded and the trio left the room. Bridget smiled and stood from her own place, declaring she was going to prepare Tony’s room so he would always have a home. As she left, Ulysses stayed sitting, gazing at the door where Hadrian, Minowa, and Tony had exited. After a few moments of silence, he dipped his head and asked, “You saw it, right... The look in his eyes.”

A soft sigh came from next to him as a new figure flickered into existence. The man had light brown hair cropped in a short military cut and sharp, almost piercing light forest green eyes hidden behind dark aviator sunglasses. A red beret sat perched on his head that contrasted with his black shirt and tan cargo pants. A black sleeveless duster hugged his body, the hem of which sat only two inches off the ground. “Yeah. I saw it.” He replied, his soft and dry tenor a sharp contrast to Ulysses’ deep gravelly bass. “He’s not used to people helping him without asking for something in return. He’s a loner, but not by choice.” Craig Boone closed his eyes, memories from his past assaulting him for a moment.

Ulysses reached up to pull Craig down into the seat next to him and put his arm around him. “He’ll have a place here now. Family. Support will be in no short supply.” Hearing Craig hum distractedly, he looked down at one of his two consorts. “Something troubles you?”

“His old teammates. They have to answer for what they did, but death would be a release for them--too easy.” There was a moment of silence from Craig before he turned his eyes to ‘Ses, a tiny yet wicked smirk on his face. “I think our siren would enjoy helping us plan to even the score, don’t you?”

The edges of Ulysses’ eyes crinkled, a sure sign he was grinning beneath his mask. “Your mind is devious. Beautiful in its’ cunning.” He stood gracefully, pulling Craig to his feet as well. “I’ll meet you in our rooms-- need to grab some information.” He removed his mask for a moment to press his lips to Craig’s before replacing it and entering a portal he created that closed behind him.

Craig’s small smirk never left his face even as he opened his own portal, allowing it to carry him to a new location. As he stepped out, he called “Aria? Are you here?”

“Aria? Are you here?”

“In the workshop, Craig! Come on in, I’ll be done in a moment!” A lyrical voice called from the next room. Boone strode into the room and leaned on the doorframe, observing the woman as she expertly cleaned and modified her trusted .44 magnum revolver. After taking a moment to reassemble it she turned to him with a bright smile as she slid the sidearm into the holster on her thigh. Her chocolate brown hair normally hung straight all the way down to her lower back, but it was pulled up in a ponytail away from her face. Halfway down her hair, it took on an ombre appearance as it changed to an electric blue color. That was a recent change-- Craig blamed it on her discovery of a new clothing style that she adopted… something about ‘rave style’. Not that he was complaining, especially when she could pull it off so well. Her armor had long ago been replaced by a deep dive, lace-up halter top that was black with electric blue trim that left her smooth, toned stomach exposed. She wore deep dive lace up leggings to match, the main material being electric blue with black laces up the sides. They hugged her body, showing off every curve and dip of her slim, yet slightly muscled thighs and calves. Her black platform boots had silver zippers up the back and three silver buckles down the front. Craig couldn’t help but bite the inside of his lip appreciatively when he saw the electric blue o-ring choker around her neck with a silver triquetra hanging from it.

Aria saw the gesture and her smile morphed into a smirk. It was nice to know the two most important men in her life still thought she was sexy, even after all these years. “Hey darlin’. Where’s Ulysses?”
That snapped Craig back to why he had come to find her in the first place and he quickly filled the 
brunette in on the latest developments involving Tony. By the time he was done Aria was pacing 
up and down the room, her face thunderous as she cursed a streak so blue it would make a 
seasoned sailor blush. “Yeah, they’re real bastards. But ‘Ses and I have a plan for when we go 
down there eventually… and we need our Siren for it.”

This caused Aria to stop pacing, and she turned to Craig with a wicked gleam in her eyes that 
danced like the northern lights and a vicious smirk on her lips. “Tell me more.”

Chapter End Notes

Dovahzul Translations

Grah-Zeymahzine -- Shield Brothers
Folaas -- Wrong
Dovahsil -- Dragon Soul
Tahrovin -- Betrayal
Rok ofaal beynuslaad -- He received endless scorn
Ruth strun bah -- Rage Storm Wrath (an expression of frustration, anger, or hatred)
Kren sosaal -- Break and bleed (A curse or threat)
Drem -- Peace

Again, positive criticism is always welcome! I'm putting more up tomorrow, so stay 
tuned!
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Hadrian and Death have a chat and foreshadowing abounds. Tony draws strength from his new family.

Chapter Notes

So I went to bed at 4:00 in the morning EST... woke up at 9:30 to find this story has gotten six kudos, been bookmarked four times, been viewed over 300 times, and has received an encouraging comment.

OH MY GOD, you guys!! It's barely been five hours!! YOU ALL ARE AMAZING!!

I suppose it's a good thing I've got several chapters written... ONWARD!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hadrian sighed as he closed the door quietly to Tony’s new room where the man was sleeping after the ritual he had gone through. He had left Minowa there to watch over him, and he knew she would do so with all of the protective instinct of a nesting dragon. Knowing she wouldn’t move from his side until he awoke both exasperated him and made him chuckle. Bridget had already checked over him and deemed him simply exhausted, and that a good rest would have him back up in no time. With the knowledge that his newest Reaper would be safe and fiercely protected, he began the walk to his office as his mind whirled with plans. Tony would be well cared for and loved at the Nexus, of that he was certain. That alone would help mitigate some of the damage his life had caused. Hadrian was well aware that the genius would need aid in overcoming certain challenges. He had full confidence that every Reaper under his command would help him if the need arose. After all, they were family now, brothers and sisters in all but blood.

As he stepped into his office, the Master of Death took notice of a chill in the air and a pressure that would affect anyone but him and his chosen. A smile quirked at his lips as he commented, “It’s been a while since you last came to visit me, Mortis.” He strode to his sleek office desk, willing the resurrection stone into visibility on his middle finger. He pressed it to a small indentation in the dead center of the surface, and within moments the desk began to shift and expand. A few seconds later, the desk itself had folded out and changed to a futuristic style u-shaped desk. He lowered himself into his modified office chair, and the chair began to morph and curve up and over his head to display five separate holographic monitors in front of him. The desk slid towards him, allowing him to reach the various things on it.

As all of this was happening, a rich voice chuckled as the physical personification of death slid out of the shadows in the room. A head of inky black hair with short sides was hidden by a black fedora decorated with two feathers— one from a large raven, the other from a snowy owl. (‘Mortis’ would never admit it openly to anyone, but the snowy owl feather was meant as a nod to his master’s dearly departed and terribly missed familiar.) One eye was a swirl of purple and blue with
flecks of silver thrown in. Hadrian compared it to the colors of a vibrant galaxy, and Mortis agreed with this and further expanded by saying death reaches across all distances, no matter how wide and far it may seem. The other was comparable to a color wheel, the hues surrounding his pupil spinning lazily. According to Mortis, the colors symbolized the constant flow of life, and how it can change in an instant. His face could best be described as ‘aristocratic’, with flawless ivory skin and Greek nose. His lips were curved up in a smile as if he were seeing a good friend after a long journey. His outfit was cultured and sophisticated, a pristine white shirt with a waistcoat over the top with peaked lapels-- a stunning silk piece that shimmered with a vibrant ‘avada’ color. Tied around his neck and tucked beneath the waistcoat was a necktie, hanging in such a way that the knot clearly displayed the symbol of the deathly hallows. Over all of that was a black sportcoat with two buttons fastened in the front. The coat seemed to be made of darkness and shadows, giving off the feeling of looking into the abyss if one gazed for too long. A pair of black dress pants covered his long legs, ending with sharp black dress shoes on his feet. In his hand he lightly grasped a cane with a silver orb on the top, the symbol of the Hallows etched into it for all to see.

“I apologize, my Master.” The dashing man replied, striding over to the desk with ethereal grace coupled with predatory confidence. “You seemed to have things well in hand here, I was curious how you would fare without my constant presence for a while.”

Hadrian cracked a smile as he looked past the screen to the personification of Death across his desk. “Is that so? Because I recently received a rather in depth, irate, and exasperated report from one of our Local World Departments about a sudden rise in confrontations between their department and another group in their world. A Mr. William T. Spears-- sound familiar?”

Mortis couldn’t stop the shark-like smile from crossing his face. It was always so much fun to rile up the Demons and the local Grim Reapers. Honestly, he didn’t even need to work that hard! A few well placed pranks, a few fingers pointed, and voila! Endless chaos for the amused mastermind behind it all. And really, it was his Master’s fault for the mischievous streak. He couldn’t help but take on some of Hadrian’s traits-- part of the package deal and all that. He had no use for the self sacrificing streak or hero complex, but the mischief he had in his blood that ran back generations… with that, the possibilities were endless.

Admittedly, so was Hadrian’s paperwork in the aftermath of each incident.

Seeing the shit-eating grin on Death’s face Hadrian sighed and shook his head, even as a small smile of his own appeared. “Mortis, could you at least keep your escapades to worlds that don’t already have factions that loathe the existence of each other? Maybe take it to a world where the population is less likely to have a sudden decline because of your antics.” There was a moment of silence before he poked his head around the screen in front of him and barked, “And no, you may not bother the Brotherhood of Steel again! That whole planet causes enough paperwork without you meddling. Eight minutes-- eight!-- Is all it took them to wipe out most of the population of their world! We don’t need to be unnecessarily adding to that!” He started to pull away before pausing and peeking around again. “And don’t even THINK about causing another confrontation with the Altmeri Dominion! Not only do they already despise anyone who isn’t them, Akatosh would be several different kinds of displeased and I would take the flack from it. You’ll also be on Arkay’s shit list by proxy if you do. I don’t like dealing with Arkay even on a good day. And then, then, Merlin forbid anyone who dies has a contract out on them; you would then be dealing with Sithis, who is conceivably older than both Akatosh and Arkay and more terrifying that both of them combined.” He looked over his glasses at Mortis with a stern look. “And if that isn’t enough to deter you, I would remind you that on top of having to deal with the Dragon God of Time, the Father of the Cycle, and the Dread Lord, you would also have to answer to the Dovahkiin. You know, Akatosh’s pseudo daughter, thus Arkay’s niece by proxy, Sithis’ chosen champion AND granddaughter through Akatosh, AND the most powerful Reaper under my employ.”
“Minowa is quite the force to contend with, even without the additional passengers with her.” Mortis agreed, inwardly deciding to scrap the plans he had to enchant every Altmer on Summerset Isle into copulating with any race EXCEPT Altmer, with a side plan of turning every piece of meat in Valenwood into a vegetarian equivalent. Oh he knew Minowa would get a laugh out of such a prank on the Altmer, but the copious death that would follow would not be worth it in her mind. Come to think of it, she also would have been against targeting the Wood Elves too. The Altmer chose to be uptight, all high and mighty and our-race-is-better-than-yours. The Bosmer chose not to eat plant life as a matter of principle and personal choice. If there was one thing Minowa respected in terms of rights, the right to choose how you live your life was one of the most important.

Inversely, those who tried to force their opinions and lifestyles on others pissed her off to no end. If they were foolish enough to confront her with them, they tended not to remain in the world of the living for much longer. Though it was completely coincidental, always in tragic accidents. No connection to Minowa whatsoever-- well, not one they would ever find.

Pulling himself out of his thought process, Mortis turned his attention back to his master. “I find it curious, Master-- you say that the Dragonborn is the most powerful amongst your ranks. How can you tell?”

Hadrian had turned back to his screens to work on some of the forms that Mortis’ recent havoc had caused in the period it had taken the being to think. “Don’t be facetious, Mort-- you know damn well why I say that. The results from when she was tested were clear as day. I know you’ve seen them for yourself, so why you’re asking is beyond me.” There was silence for a good 15 seconds before the Master of Death registered that Mortis hadn’t replied. His hands stilled over the keyboard as he looked up at the other. The being had a coy half smile on his face, his head cocked innocently to the side. “... Death.” Hadrian began with a deceptively calm and quiet voice as he banished the screens with a wave of his hand before standing from the chair. His vivid emerald eyes were hard, and had taken on an ethereal glow as he stared down the man in front of him. “You know something that I don’t. What aren’t you telling me? Because if there is a threat to my people here…”

Death was quick to raise his hand, hoping to ease his master’s worries. “No, there is no danger to you or yours.” He lifted the hat from his head to run his fingers through his ebon locks-- another habit taken from Hadrian. “It’s about the most recent addition to your family.”

“Anthony?” Getting a nod from Mortis, emerald green eyes narrowed. “There’s not a problem with him being here, correct?” The tone of his voice on the last word clearly projected how protective the Master of Death was already. The black smoke that began creeping from the corner of his eyes was also a good indicator.

The physical manifestation of Death proceeded to backpedal like it was an artform. “No, not at all. That wasn’t what I was trying to insinuate.” He waited as Hadrian settled himself again before continuing. “During the Claiming to bring him into the fold… I got a feeling of his potential power.” Getting a nod to continue, Mortis’ face slid into the most serious look Hadrian had ever seen on his face. “When he wakes, have him tested as soon as possible.”

Eyes still locked on Mortis, Hadrian sat back in his seat for a moment. After a moment of observation he calmly remarked, “You wouldn’t have brought such a thing to my attention normally. You sensed an anomaly, didn’t you?”

Mortis nodded, still serious. “More than one. I do not wish to say anything quite yet though-- I’m not completely certain, and I don’t want to bring anything up if I’m wrong. Rest assured, my Master. Anthony is not a threat to you or yours. In fact, I think he will finally begin to heal what is
hurt while residing here.”

Hadrian allowed a compassionate smile to cross his lips as he turned back to the screens. “Indeed. Hopefully we can help him recover from his many hurts.”

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“I am certain we will be a far better grah-zeymahzin that the other meyjoore he was allied with.”

“You know we will. We won’t use and betray him like they did.”

“Geh, hi vahzah. We will treat him as he should have been-- voth zin.”

Tony’s brow scrunched as the voices washed over his consciousness, bringing him back to the waking world. He stayed still for a moment, taking stock of his body and the fact that several aches and pains he had been living with for years were suddenly gone. He let out a sigh, letting his eyes slide open. It took him a moment to realize he didn’t recognize either person in the room with him, bringing his mind fully online and alert. He immediately sat up in the bed, ignoring the subtle twinges of pain from his body. The two turned to look at him, and he was met with the sight of a woman with corn silk blonde hair and kind eyes, the color reminiscent of tropical seas. She wore the same armor as Minowa, completely identical in fact. The man standing a few feet from her had pitch black hair styled into long spikes, with two horns atop his head. His clothing was more like heavy armor, adorned with spikes and gauntlets that came to pointed tips at the fingers. His back supported an enormous pair of leathery wings, black as night with jagged edges and spikes. He locked eyes with Tony, and the genius inhaled sharply when he found himself looking into slit pupilled, burning ember eyes that he had come to associate with someone else.

Before he could speak, the man turned to the brunette. “Our grah-zeymahzin has awoken. I will allow you to tend to him.”

The woman dipped her head, and a familiar voice replied “Thank you, Alduin. We will speak face to face once again soon.”

The man, Alduin, nodded sharply with a reply of ‘Lok, Thu’um, dovahkiin.’ A moment later, his entire form dissolved into yellow and blue light which was quickly absorbed into the woman’s body. Once the glow faded, Minowa was sitting where the other woman used to be. She stood and stretched wide as she turned her eyes back to Tony. “Welcome back, Anthony. I hope your rest was peaceful.”

Tony nodded distractedly before blurting out, “Did that guy just get absorbed into you??”

Minowa blinked for a moment before a rumbling laugh escaped her. “The answer is more complicated than that. To understand, we would have to delve deeply into the history of my world, Nirn. Specifically Skyrim, my home.” She held up a hand as he prepared to bombard her with questions. “Now is not the time, for the history is long and detailed. We should focus instead on your health. While the Claiming went off without problems, we do not know what was unlocked because of it. I will summon Bridget to assure you are fully recovered. If you are, we will then go see Zevrael and Dorian. They will be able to tell you what gifts you have gained.”

Nodding in agreement, Tony sat back against the headboard to wait. He watched as she summoned the same dragon from before, using her voice instead of her hand as Bridget had done. As he waited, he thought about the other people he had met and couldn’t help but wonder what their animals would be.
He was still lost in his wondering when Bridget stepped through the door. Her voice snapped him out of it. “Hello, Tony! I’m glad to see you’re awake!” She grinned widely at him as she stopped next to the bed. “I’m going to cast a diagnostic spell on you, just to make sure you’re ready to head to testing, alright?”

Despite the flash of trepidation he felt at the mention of magic, Tony nodded his agreement. So far, the only active magic use he had witnessed in this place had been to heal him, and the summoning and banishing of chairs. The ritual also came to mind, but… the magic had felt… right; like coming home after years away, like the hug of a loved one happy to see you. It felt like a higher force was bringing you into the fold of something bigger and more powerful than yourself. Tony was willing to admit it had been a little… overwhelming, at first.

The rush of healing magic against his skin brought him back to the present, and he watched the golden glow surround him for a moment. He looked up when he heard a soft pop and saw Bridget grab a piece of paper that hung suspended in the air. She read through it quickly, her eyebrows arching into her hairline. “This is… much better than I originally anticipated. The magic during the Claiming healed most of, if not all of the damage your body had. In fact, it seems to have put you at the peak physical condition of a 40 year old.” There was a moment of silence before she looked up with a smile. “Well, according to this you’re in perfect shape. However, there is a note here about the scar on your chest. May I take a look?”

Nodding, Tony pulled down the neckline of the hospital gown to show his sternum. His mouth fell open when he saw that instead of a scar marring the skin, the symbol of the Hallows had taken its’ place on the smooth, unscarred skin. The symbol was blue, like the glow from the arc reactor-- in fact, it was glowing slightly. He ran his fingertips over the mark, and a feeling of home and belonging surged through him. Tony’s breath caught in his throat at the intensity of the sensation.

“Every Reaper carries the symbol of the Hallows in some way.” Minowa explained, drawing his attention to her. “On clothes, weapons, jewelry… to have a physical mark is more uncommon, but not unheard of.”

Bridget nodded, continuing the thought. “Physical marks are usually gifted to those who need them, need the reminder that they are no longer alone and that they have people who would jump to their aid at a moment’s notice.” She sat on the edge of Tony’s bed and put her hand on his shoulder. “You are one of us now, Tony. We’ll stand beside you to fight with you, to support you.”

Nodding, Minowa added “We’ll stand in front of you to defend you, to shield you from those who would try to hurt and break you.”

“And we’ll stand behind you.” The trio looked over as Ulysses entered the room, pinning Tony with intense brown eyes. “You stumble, we’ll steady you. You fall, we’ll help you back up.”

Tony closed his eyes, unconsciously leaning into Bridget’s grip. Damn it, these people were about to make him cry. He tensed for a moment when another person joined them on the bed, and was startled when he looked up to find Minowa. The woman pulled his head against her chest and wrapped her wings around him.

… Hold on. Wings?

Bridget noticed his poleaxed expression and she laughed softly. “That’s a feature she doesn’t show often. Her wings are completely impenetrable.” She fixed Minowa with a knowing look.

Minowa nodded to confirm this as Tony looked back over his shoulder at her. He was floored by the fiercely protective look on her face and determination in her eyes. “There is no force in the
multiverse that could pierce them.”

The meaning of the gesture hit Tony like a ton of bricks. The fact that she didn’t show her wings to just anyone, along with the position she had taken to surround them with the appendages, combined with their indestructibility…

‘We will not let anyone hurt you again.’

Howard had always told Tony, ‘Stark men don’t cry, never show weakness.’ It was a fact his father had drilled into his head. But in that moment, the show of solidarity, the feeling of being broken and made whole again simultaneously, the flood of support from these people who accepted him and helped him despite barely knowing him… Tony felt that notion shattering, just like the iron control he had on his emotions. His hand rose to cover his mouth as tears began to roll down his face, his breath hitching as he tried to quiet himself. He felt Bridget join in on Minowa’s hug, and felt the bed dip again as a hand covered his knee. He managed to crack his eyes open briefly to see Ulysses watching him with the corners of his eyes crinkled-- the man was smiling under his mask.

Minowa rested her chin on his head and tightened her grip on him. As Bridget shifted closer, she spoke to him in a soothing voice. “Let it go, Anthony. We’re right here, We won’t abandon you.”

And as they sat there huddled together, comforting their newest member, Tony finally felt some of the emotional pain fall away, felt the spark of hope rekindle itself in his heart. He felt himself begin to heal.

Chapter End Notes

Dovahzul Tranlations

Grah-zeymahzin -- Shield Brother
Meyjoore -- Foolish mortals
Geh, hi vahzah -- Yes, you are right.
Voth zin -- With honor
Lok, Thu'um -- Sky, Voice (Should be read as 'Sky above, voice within', expression of farewell)
Dovahkiin -- Dragonborn

I feel like some people may perceive Tony's reactions as being out of character. In writing these scenes I imagine Tony's mental state to be rocky at best-- He's dealing with the events of the 'civil war' and the abandonment and betrayal of most of his team. To go from being left to die to having a family willing to support him no matter what... well, Tony's emotions being all over the place isn't too far of a stretch.

The bond the Reapers share is a truly intimate thing. Hadrian designed it in such a way that those he claimed would never have to worry about being alone or abandoned again. None of his Reapers would have to worry about not having a safe and supportive place to come back to.

Black Butler is only mentioned in passing in this story. There will be several references like that.
Stay tuned for the next installment!
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Introducing Dorian and Zevrael Pavus, and the unanticipated side effects of having a Center who didn't take into account what kind of soul she has... or how MANY.

Chapter Notes

Chapter four, Hell yeah! This story has been up less than 12 hours and is gaining love I never expected! You all are amazing, and I look forward to getting everything I have written so far up!!

This chapter also comes with an up in rating. There are... hints of sexual activities, though nothing is explicitly said. Just to be on the safe side, ya know!

New characters in this one!! Also, new languages. Translations will be provided for these as well.

Dorian uses Tevene, Zevrael speaks Elven.

Dorian Pavus felt ready to ignite something out of sheer indignation. He sat back from the report on his desk, rubbing a hand over his eyes. “Vishante kaffas, I never thought people could be as thick-skulled and ignorant as the southern Chantry in Thedas, but this… this has taken that notion, burned it, tossed the remains into the privy, and then pissed on them for good measure.” He glared at the report again before standing from his seat and striding into the lab his office was attached to. “Amatus!” He called out as he entered. “Is the testing equipment ready yet?”

“Almost!” A subtly-accented voice called back. “I’m adjusting the settings now!”

“Good! Bridget said she’d send over Savos when they were on their way.”

A soft, distracted hum answered him, accompanied by the whirring of machinery starting up. “There! It’s all ready.” A figure stepped out from around a piece of complicated-looking tech, a satisfied look on his face. Zevrael Pavus was a beautiful man with long silver hair that was tightly braided and fell just past his shoulder blades, the pulled back strands allowing his pointed elven ears to be on full display. Laughter filled icy-blue eyes gazed at Dorian with love and adoration, his plush lips pulled into a elated grin. His body was lean and lithe, but in no way weak. The swimmer’s build allowed him to move and attack at near lightning speeds. The outfit he wore still held elements of Dalish design, but had been upgraded with far superior materials and capabilities.

Dorian’s eyes eventually traveled to Zevrael’s left arm. “How does your prosthesis feel? Is it bothering you at all?”

Zevrael laughed good-naturedly, reaching out to cup Dorian’s face with both the flesh hand and the
metal one. He smiled brightly when Dorian leaned into the metal one, a silent show of support and acceptance. “Vhenan, it’s fine. It was a bit of an adjustment at first, but honestly there are days I completely forget I lost the limb to begin with! It moves and perceives touch like a real arm, and I can function perfectly well.” He planted a gentle kiss on Dorian’s nose. “I’ll let you know if it bothers me, ok?”

Dorian sighed and closed his eyes. “Alright, Amatus. Forgive me for fretting.”

The elf’s smile turned into a seductive smirk as he pressed himself against the Magister. “Hm… I know a way you can earn my forgiveness…”

The mage leered at him, wrapping his arms around his waist. “Oh do you now? Well, if I must work for it, I might as well enjoy it.”

The two met halfway in a positively filthy kiss, full of teeth and tongue. A kiss that was abruptly interrupted by the arrival of Savos and Bridget’s accompanying voice. “Dorian, Zevrael, we’re on our way, and if you two aren’t presentable by the time we get there I swear to Mara I will beat you two senseless. You have five minutes.”

Dorian groaned as his forehead met his lover’s shoulder, even as the silver haired elf laughed at the timing. His laugh was cut off by a moan as Dorian used his position to nip and suck on his neck. The mage kissed his way up to Zev’s ear and growled, “I bet I can get you off by then.”

Zevrael smirked as his hands found Dorian’s waist and he dug his fingers into his hips. “Let’s see what kind of credit your tongue gets you.” He purred in reply. Dorian grinned at the challenge as he slid to his knees.

Exactly four minutes and forty-seven seconds later, the duo was waiting by the computer equipment as Minowa, Bridget, Ulysses, and Tony walked through the door. Bridget eyed Dorian’s ruffled hair and smug grin before switching to Zevrael’s neck, which sported a fresh hickey. His flushed face was plastered with a slightly dazed look that was quickly becoming more aware. “Really?” She deadpanned at them.

Dorian arched and eyebrow at her, the grin still firmly on his face. “You said we had to be presentable by the time you got here. You’re here, we’re presentable. Conditions met!”

A sharp laugh from Minowa cut off any retort from the healer. “You did say that.”

Ulysses himself snorted. “Loopholes. Check your wording next time.”

“I am going to throttle both of you later.” Bridget growled, fixing the duo with a glare that would kill ten times over. A soft cough pulled her attention back to the reason they were there. “Tony, the absolutely infuriating duo in front of you are Dorian Pavus,” The dark haired man waved at him, “And his husband, Zevrael.” The elf in question wiggled his fingers in Tony’s direction.

Tony nodded to both of them before his eyes locked for a moment on the elf’s metal arm. It went up and over his shoulder, and the metal was a shiny onyx color. For a moment, his memories flashed to a similar metal arm, and the pain associated with it. His memories were suddenly calmed and pushed away when he felt a hand on his back, and he turned to see Bridget watching him from the corner of her eye. He nodded to her, and she pulled back. Tony briefly noted the fading golden glow over her hand. He focused back on the two in front of him, and it was then he noticed Zevrael’s ears. “What’s with the ears there, Tyrande Whisperwind?”

Instead of looking offended, the person in question burst out laughing. “You know, I’ll take that
name over ‘knife-ear’ any day of the week. But to answer your question, I’m an elf.” Seeing the incredulous look on the genius’ face, he explained. “Dorian and I, we’re from a different world, a different part of the multiverse. Elves are a pretty common sight there.”

Dorian nodded in agreement. “Yes, Thedas’ population consists of four different people. Humans, like me, are what you’re most likely to see. Elves,” Here he gestured to Zev, “are relatively numerous, and are either found in cities in alienages or in separate clans. Those in clans are called the Dalish. Then there are dwarves. You won’t find many of them above ground-- They stick to their cities underground.” Here Dorian frowned slightly. “If a dwarf catches even a glimpse of the sky, they end up banished above ground. Dwarves that end up above ground, whether by banishment or birth, are forbidden from entering Dwarven cities again.” Seeing the outraged look on Tony’s face he nodded grimly. “Yes, it’s not a practice I endorse. The last race are called the Qunari.” Here Dorian paused, as if struggling. “The Qunari are normally tall and bulky, with grey skin and horns. The horns come in a variety of different sizes and shapes.”

A laugh erupted from Zevrael suddenly. “Iron Bull is a perfect example of that. His rack is quite impressive.”

Dorian snorted. “It’s more impressive that he’s managed not to gouge out doorframes on a daily basis or bang them on walls and hallways.”

“Yes, but…” Zev fought down his giggles for a moment. “The door to the war room.”

The mage choked before breaking into laughter. “They had to replace the beams around the door! He was so embarrassed!” Dorian managed to collect himself after a few seconds. “We still tease him relentlessly about it…”

Watching the two interact, Tony couldn’t help but smile at their relationship. It was obvious the two adored each other-- even a blind person would be able to see it. Suddenly, something they had said caught his attention. “You’re speaking about him in the present tense.” He said, though it was almost a question.

Dorian nodded in affirmation. “Oh yes, Bull is very much still alive. He’s one of our best friends back in Thedas. He keeps an eye on the goings on in the world while we’re not there.”

“We go back every once in a while to check in and make sure everything is running smoothly. Andraste forbid if something burned down… or blew up.”

“Again.”

The conversation was cut short by another voice. “I’m glad to see you’re all getting along so well!” They turned to see Hadrian striding through the door, his cloak billowing behind him almost dramatically. He first turned his attention to Tony. “Anthony, I’m glad you’re feeling well. You’re not in pain, correct? The Claiming put you through a bit of a physical ringer.”

“No, I’m fine. Actually I feel better than I have in years.”

The Master of Death nodded, a pleased smile crossing his face. “I’m glad to see you’re all getting along so well!” He gestured to Dorian and Zevrael, who stood straighter at the gesture. “Dorian, Zevrael, can you get things started?”

Zev casually saluted and chirped “Right away, Lethanavir!” He quickly bounced over to a screen and began to tap on it.

The elf’s mage counterpart stepped up to the group. “Ser, would you like me to explain what’s
going to happen?” Getting a nod from Hadrian, he guided Tony to the center of the room and onto a strange platform with foreign symbols carved into it. Wires snaked away from it, leading to several more machines which were then connected to the screen in front of Zevrael. “So that ritual you took part in, the Claiming? It doesn’t just bring you into our chaotic, tight-knit family. I mean, that’s the main purpose, but a nifty side benefit is the unlocking/bestowing of powers befitting a Reaper. We are the hands of Ser Hadrian, and he is quite protective of us. He wants us to be able to defend ourselves, so this was integrated into the process. Very complicated magic combined with a heaping dose of technological know how, add in a dash of runes to get it all going and presto! We’ll get readings on the person standing on the platform involving any and all abilities along with recommendations for further training.”

Tony nodded in equal parts fascination at the complexity of the machinery around him and wariness of the magical aspects. “This isn’t going to hurt me or cause me to spontaneously combust, right?”

The Magister barked out a laugh as he backed away. “No, it won’t do either of those. Well, admittedly it did for one person-- me.” He held up his hands as Tony looked at him with wide, panicked eyes. “BUT, that’s because my power is this.” He held his hand outstretched, palm up, and a ball of black fire flashed into existence in his hand. A moment later, the fire shifted into the shape of a snake, and now sat calmly in his hand. “Absolute pyrokinesis. I was always skilled with fire magic back home, but this power grants a level of control and finesse over fire and anything involving it that would normally be impossible. Case in point, this particular flame.” he held up the snake, who now was looking at a transfixed Tony, “This is fiendfyre. A normal mage couldn’t even hope to control this-- it’s too wild, actually possessing a mind and will of its’ own.” He looked down as the snake began to slither up his arm, yet the Magister remained unburned. “Fiendfyre will burn through anything-- literally. The only way to stop it is for the person controlling it to kill the flame.” He looked up as the snake reached his shoulder, resting its’ head on his shoulder. “Until then… It will consume anything it touches.”

Silence met his explanation. Tony’s eyes were still locked on the flaming reptile. Finally, he asked “If you have complete control over it, could you stop it from burning something or someone if you willed it?”

Dorian smiled at the question as he reached up a hand to stroke the head of the construct on his shoulder. “All fire bends to my will. So yes, if I didn’t want something to be burned, it wouldn’t.” He flicked his wrist, and the snake fizzled out of existence. “But I digress. As for your original question, it won’t hurt. At most, you’ll feel a pleasant tingling sensation, maybe a slight buzz.”

Swallowing his fear, he nodded in understanding. The mage strode over to the silver-haired elf who was finishing up preparations. They spoke for a few seconds before turning their eyes to the platform. “Tony, we’re ready to begin. Just stand still and relax. Remember, this process will not hurt you. Ready?” Zevrael called out.

Tony nodded, forcing himself to take deep breaths. After a few moments, the runes around the edge of the platform began to light up one by one, moving around the rim in a circle. They glowed with a bright blue light, pulsing with each new rune that lit up. Once they were all lit up, they flared brightly before straight lines branched away from each symbol towards Tony. Once there, an intricate circle lit beneath his feet. The brunette gasped as a blissful feeling washed over him. It was a high not unlike when he flew in his suit for the first time-- the thrill of the act coupled with the giddiness of total freedom. He felt as if he had been plunged headfirst into an ocean of euphoria, lost in the sensation.

He wasn’t aware of the light dying away, nor the way he collapsed once it was gone. He barely
registered the voices around him nor the fabric he was gently wrapped in. He let his mind float for a while, riding out the last waves of ecstasy before beginning to slowly come back to himself. Tony felt the haze in his mind lifting slowly, and after a while he was able to bring his mind back online. He slid his eyes open, not aware he had closed them to begin with.

Hadrian smiled when Tony open his eyes and saw recognition return to them. “There you are. You’ve been out of it for about five minutes. Are you alright?”

The genius blinked, silent for a moment before he finally declared, “I haven’t had a high that intense since MIT. Another hit please.”

Various laughs erupted from the group, and Hadrian couldn’t help but grin. “Yep, he’s fine.” He helped Tony sit up, and Bridget handed him a cup of water. “I must applaud you, though. You actually managed to shake Ulysses’ legendary control over his emotions.”

Ulysses sighed deeply before looking over to Tony, who had turned his head towards him. “Seen this done a few times. First time I’ve witnessed something like that. I…” He turned his gaze away. “I worried.”

“I’m sorry if I scared you guys.” Tony looked down at his lap, finally noticing the fabric pooled in it—Ulysses’ duster. He silently held it out to the sniper, and he dipped his head in thanks as he took it back. From the gratitude in his eyes, he could tell the masked man was glad that he hadn’t brought unnecessary attention to the gesture. He let Hadrian help him to his feet, leaning on Minowa for support briefly. “How long until we know the results?”

Minowa looked towards where Dorian and Zevrael were watching two separate screens. “Only a minute or two more. Once Dorian and Zev were sure you were alright, they started analyzing what they found. Apparently, they were caught completely off guard by what occurred.”

Tony’s mouth pulled into a small frown as he looked at Minowa. “I just noticed the lack of Klingon in your speech. Care to explain?”

For a moment Minowa looked slightly offended. “Klingon?! I spoke in the ancient and noble tongue of Dragons!” She huffed through her nose for a moment as she collected her thoughts. “When Alduin and I become separate entities for any length of time, I return to a fully human body. Upon reabsorption, it takes a while for the language to return to me in its’ full capacity, even though my body changes immediately. I can still use my Thu’um, but everyday usage is a bit scrambled.”

The man’s brow furrowed for a moment. “Your Thu’um? What’s that?”

The question gained him a slightly toothy smile. “Later, Anthony. I wouldn’t want to destroy the room.”

“Fasta vass!”

The shocked cry from Dorian snapped everyone’s attention to him, and they watched as Dorian waved over Zevrael with a shocked look on his face. The elf frowned in confusion as he joined his husband to read the screen. Moments later his own eyebrows rocketed into his hairline. “Fenedhis…” He breathed for a moment before looking towards the group. “Lethanavir, you need to see this.”

The Master of Death wasted no time in rushing over to them, worry creasing his face. Once he reached them, he waved his hand in an arch to cast a privacy barrier. “What is it? Is something
“Wrong?” He asked once it was up.

Dorian drummed his fingers on his crossed arms nervously. “Not wrong, per se… more like ‘unprecedented’, maybe ‘unbelievable’.” Seeing the confused look on Hadrian’s face the mage sighed and gestured to the screen he had been at. “You should see for yourself.”

Hadrian nodded and stepped up to it as Zevrael shifted away. His eyes quickly scanned the data. After moment he looked towards Zev, confused. “That’s not so bad. We’ve seen variations of that.”

The silver haired elf shook his head slowly, his face pale and eyes wide. “Not that, Lethanavir. On the next page.”

That caught the emerald-eyed man’s attention and he turned back to the screen. Thirty seconds later he inhaled sharply, shock lancing through him. His gaze shot to both Zevrael and Dorian, who had come to stand next to his husband. “Is this accurate? One hundred percent?”

Dorian nodded in affirmation. “The equipment, runes, and systems were checked before the test, as protocol dictates.”

“Which means there is an infinitesimally slim chance it’s wrong.” Zevrael finished solemnly.

Hadrian ran his fingers through his hair while stealing a glance towards the group he had left. They were all watching him intensely, but none more so than Tony. The poor man looked worried and anxious, bordering on fear. After taking a moment to compose himself and compartmentalize the new information he turned his gaze to the married couple. “Come, we should rejoin the group. It would be cruel to leave them waiting.” The duo nodded and Hadrian waved his hand again, dismantling the ward. He approached the group with a measured gait, and they stood to meet him. “I apologize for the wait. However, before we discuss the results I wish to summon one more person. They may have some answers regarding what we found.”

Minowa was watching the man suspiciously. She had Tony pressed closely to her, and she could feel the man trembling. “Who do you plan on calling on?”

The Master of Death heaved out a long breath. “I suggest you brace yourselves.” He turned around with his back to them and looked towards the ceiling. “Mortis! I require your presence!”

Immediately a chill swept through the room and the lights and machinery flickered. The shadows seemed to stretch and darken as a smooth, cultured voice echoed through the space. “Well now, it’s rare you directly call upon me.”

“Mortis, I am in absolutely no mood for your shenanigans.” Hadrian barked, his emerald eyes beginning to glow again. “Front and center now.”

The voice sighed before the shadows twisted and warped slightly before the Master of Death, pulling back after a moment to reveal Mortis. “Greetings, my master.” He bowed low to Hadrian. “You found the anomaly, I assume?”

Hadrian’s glare intensified. “I don’t think the word ‘anomaly’ is quite strong enough for this, Death.”

Tony’s eyes snapped to the well dressed man. When he imagined death, he always visualized a being draped in a black hood and robe, skeletal hands gripping a scythe engraved with bodies and skulls. Something surrounded by smoke and shadows and souls of the damned… The last thing he would have pictured was this aristocratic gentleman. Unable to stay silent any longer he blurted out
“Would someone please explain to me what the hell is going on and why Death is a well-dressed dandy instead of all doom, gloom, and scythe?”

Absolute silence met the question as everyone turned to look at him with various degrees of shock, amazement, or amusement on their faces. Zev in particular was shaking and biting his lip in an effort to not lose his composure. Mortis beat him to that though when he laughed heartily. “I like him, Master. We’re keeping him.” He declared with a grin.

A sigh escaped Hadrian as he pinched the bridge of his nose under his glasses. “I’m glad you approve Mortis, but that doesn’t explain the current situation.”

Mortis calmed himself, and a more serious look crossed his face. “No, it doesn’t. I take it you haven’t told him yet?” Getting a shake of the head from Hadrian, he turned to Tony. “First, I would like to personally welcome you to the Reapers. My Master is quite picky about candidates, so you should count yourself among the best.” He took a moment to gather himself. He wasn’t used to dealing with Hadrian’s inner circle directly, or anything living for that matter. The physical manifestation of death knew he had to approach this carefully, and after a second or two he continued. “You came into some rather… unique powers, Anthony. First, you’ve gained something called technopathy. It’s a unique form of electrical/telekinetic manipulation that allows for physical interaction with machines. However, in your case you have the capability to mentally interface with computer data. Think Doctor Who and the Sonic Screwdriver, only… you’re the Doctor and the screwdriver. Simultaneously.”

The new Reaper could only blink and gape at Death for a few seconds. “…So I’m Neo from the Matrix now?” He finally managed to ask.

“That’s an accurate comparison.” Death paused again before slowly starting again. “However, that isn’t what caused the shock.” He looked towards Dorian and Zevrael, who approached them with a physical copy of the results and handed them to Hadrian. “The moment you were brought to this place, we experienced what can only be described as a pulse. Something that passed over the threshold between the physical realm and the realm of the dead was powerful enough that the entire Nexus felt it in one way or another.” He turned his gaze back to Tony, who was beginning to pale. “Imagine my surprise when that something was actually a someone. Namely, you.”

“But I don’t-- I didn’t--”

Mortis held up a hand to stop his babbling. “I’m well aware, Anthony. It was not meant as an accusation. When I checked in to see what had happened, I realized the force that caused it was dormant, couldn’t be tapped into. The realm still felt and acknowledged it, which I’m not surprised by. It would have stayed that way, except for the fact that there was a variable that was unintentionally overlooked during your Claiming.” For a moment, he shifted his gaze to Minowa.

“Minowa, you were Anthony’s Center during the process, correct?”

The ebon-haired woman’s brow furrowed as she nodded. “That is true. Why do you ask?”

“The Claiming draws on both my Master’s power and the soul of another Reaper to bring another into the fold. However, you failed to take something into account-- the value of the aforementioned variable.” He proceeded to fix Minowa with a knowing look. “Minowa, how many souls did the Claiming draw from?”

The ebon-haired woman’s brow furrowed as she nodded. “That is true. Why do you ask?”

“The Claiming draws on both my Master’s power and the soul of another Reaper to bring another into the fold. However, you failed to take something into account-- the value of the aforementioned variable.” He proceeded to fix Minowa with a knowing look. “Minowa, how many souls did the Claiming draw from?”

The blank look on Minowa’s face was instantly replaced by shocked realization. “Fuck…” She whispered, absentmindedly running her fingers through Tony’s hair. “…I didn’t even think about that.” Seeing the confused look on Tony’s face she quickly elaborated. “When a person acts as a Center during the Claiming, their soul provides the necessary boost and anchor to complete it. I’ve
never acted as a Center for anyone before you, so I didn’t even consider that my rather… unique circumstances would cause a problem. To put it simply, I’m not the only inhabitant in my body. Long story there, details later. The main point Mortis brought up just now is that the Claiming didn’t just pull from my soul-- It pulled from the other tenants linked to me; And there are, quite frankly, hundreds of them. Not only that, but every single one of them is a dragon soul, which are several times more powerful than a human soul.”

Seeing Tony attempting to put that into quantifiable terms, Hadrian finally said “The normal power from the Claiming is like a Nova from a white dwarf star.” The genius whirled around to stare at him. “But because of Minowa’s involvement and those other souls…” He held up the papers he had taken from Dorian earlier, “Yours was more like a hypernova.” He waved his hand and summoned several plush chairs and couches, and everyone seated themselves. Before he could move to a separate one, Tony felt himself being tugged down beside Hadrian. “The power you came into is not one we’ve seen before. It’s called Transcendent Thaumaturgy.”

Ulysses’ eyes widened before narrowing at Hadrian. “Dominus, don’t beat around the bush. Call it what it is.” He sat back as everyone turned their attention to him, his own eyes still locked on Hadrian’s. “Meta-magic; mastery of any and all magical, mystical, and supernatural forces. No laws, no restrictions, no limits.” He looked over at Tony now. “Your will is your reality.”

“But if that’s the case…” Bridget turned wide eyes to Tony. “Then wouldn’t that make him practically a--”

“No.” Mortis cut her train of thought off with a shake of his head. “Anthony is not suddenly a God. The term we would use is ‘Warden’, someone capable of defending and protecting the power in question along with the people and places they care about while utilizing said power to its’ fullest potential.” He looked towards Tony, who seemed like he was about to start protesting about having such power. “You would not have such a thing within you, dormant or otherwise, if you did not have the capability to wield it responsibly and the desire to do good things.” He said plainly, cutting off any arguments he may have had.

Tony sat back, his face drawn tight with worry and every muscle in his body tense. He nearly jumped out of his skin when someone put their hand on his shoulder, and a quick glance up revealed Minowa. “I know you’re worried and doubting yourself. You feel unworthy.” She pulled Tony to his feet, planting herself in front of him with her eyes boring into his. They flared and glowed as if lit by fire from within. “Hi mul, fahdoni. Hi fen zind, neh faas.” The subtle use of her Thu’um washed over him and every hair on his body stood on end from the rush of power.

Bridget grinned brightly as she stepped up next to the Dragonborn. “You can do it, and we’ll be there every step of the way!”

Ulysses joined the group, nodding as well. “Got your back, Amicus.”

“Us too!” Zevrael bounced over with a wide smile, Dorian following behind at a more sedated pace. “You’re one of us now, Lethallin! Can’t get rid of us that easily!”

Tony looked to each person individually, uplifted by the show of support and belief. He looked over at Hadrian and Mortis, the former smiling brightly at the group and the latter with a knowing smile. He reached up almost absentmindedly to touch the mark on his chest, reveling in the swell of home and family that filled him. Finally, a smile crossed his face as he looked up at them with a determined glint in his whiskey brown eyes. “Well, when have I ever backed down from an insane idea? Let’s turn me into Gandalf!”
Dovahzul Translations

Hi mul, fahdoni. Hi fen zind, neh faas-- You are strong, my friend. You will triumph, never fear.

Tevene Translations

Vishante kaffas -- (Literally) You shit on my tongue
Amatus -- Love
Fasta vass -- (Basically) Holy shit

Elven

Vhenan -- Heart (basically calling someone 'love')
Lethanaviri-- Friend to the Dead
Fenedhis -- (Basically) Damn
Lethallin -- A casual reference to one claimed as clan.

Latin

Dominus -- Master
Amicus -- Friend
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

A year passes in the Nexus (But not outside of it-- Don't ask, even Hadrian can't explain it fully) and Tony makes the decision to return home when a certain Norse goddess of death makes an appearance to beg for help regarding her father. That's fine, Hadrian has a mission for him anyway...

Chapter Notes

I forgot to put it in the tags, but I will do that momentarily-- Hela is Loki's DAUGHTER in this fic, not his 'sister'.

Corbin and Ravyn are cameos at best-- they probably won't show up again.

Moving on!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Hello Tony-”
“-master of magic-”
“-creator of chaos-”
“-emperor of elements-”
“-Just letting you know-”
“-Master Hadrian wants to see you.”

Despite the fact that his concentration had been thoroughly shattered, Tony couldn’t help but snort with laughter as he cracked one eye open. “Don’t you two know better than to interrupt my meditation?”

The male with emerald eyes and blond undercut hair grinned at this. “You did indeed, oh great and powerful magician-”

“-but did you really expect us to listen?” His sister finished, her silver eyes filled with laughter and ebony ponytail swaying merrily at her mid-back.

Anthony rolled his eyes in mock exasperation as he flipped himself right-side up and lowered himself from the ceiling of the training room. “I suppose I should know better by now... Or I could make it so the door handles shock you every time you enter without knocking.” He smirked at Corbin and Ravyn, the twin managers of the training room.

Ravyn gasped dramatically, clinging to her brother. “He would lock us out of our domain!”
Corbin threw his arm over his eyes, wailing loudly, “Oh the cruelty, the humanity!”

Flicking his wrist Tony doused the two with a jet of water from above them. “You two are ridiculous.”

The two jumped to salute him, still dripping wet and grinning like loons. “Guilty as charged!” They chimed with no shame in their tone.

“Good thing I don’t need to remind you. I’ll go see the Chief and leave your domain in peace.” He brushed by them, absentmindedly drying them as he did so.

As he walked, Tony thought back on his time with his new family. Hadrian had said from the very beginning that time didn’t follow the same rules in the Nexus, but it was still unsettling when the Chief had approached him and told him he’d had a productive year. Upon seeing his worry Hadrian had quickly explained that the Nexus existed in a kind of ‘dead zone’. It didn’t matter how long he spent with the Reapers, because time barely flowed at all here. He could potentially leave a world, spend what equated to a thousand years in the Nexus, and still come back seemingly only a few days after he had left. The knowledge went a long way to soothe his fears, and if he was being honest he wouldn’t have traded his time with his fellow Reapers for anything. He had formed strong relationships within the ranks, and could definitively say they would stand with him no matter what. They had helped him heal, supported him unconditionally, and cheered for him when he made progress. No matter if the progress was in his powers or his mental health, they were happy for him.

He could say, with absolute certainty, that the Reapers were his family. And he wouldn’t trade them or what they had done for him for anything.

~

Minowa had taken him under her wing from the very beginning-- literally some days. She usually had a relaxed state of mind, an aura that calmed anyone who was in her presence. Everytime he came to her with heightened emotions, she wouldn’t speak at first-- she’d simply pull him down next to her before resting his head in her lap, threading her fingers through his hair. He found it therapeutic to just sit there and let his emotions level out in the presence of someone so tranquil in being. She would always ask if he wanted to talk about it after a while. Most of the time he agreed; Minowa was the first and oldest Reaper under Hadrian’s command, and that plus several lifetimes worth of knowledge and experience made her a good source of wisdom. However, if he responded with a negative she wouldn’t push. She was content to sit there and help anchor him if that was what he needed.

He also found himself enchanted by the tales of her homeworld, Nirn. He would often seek her out to listen to her recount the history of the place, to learn of the people and places and lands she loved so dearly. The Dragonborn told him of her destiny, and the battle in the land of the honored Norse dead against the world eater, and her victory over him. She was capable of reality manipulation due to her Claiming-gift, and she often utilized this while speaking by warping the area around her to mimic her memories and provide visuals. However, a time came when he asked about things that happened before she had been born. After only a few minutes of hesitation, Minowa had introduced him to Alduin. The dragon had mellowed greatly in the years he had been bound to the Dragonborn, and was more than willing to add his own input to the tales and history.

Tony thought that was how she always was-- serene and full of the wisdom of several lifetimes experienced vicariously through the memories of hundreds of souls. That notion was shattered when she came back from a mission in her homeworld that had gone horribly wrong, in the worst way possible. That was when he learned that the calm persona that was so normal for her was
actually the eye of a storm akin to the red spot on Jupiter. Minowa didn’t get angry often, and when Tony learned of what had happened, about the countless children who had been so carelessly slaughtered for simply not being a specific race, and the near catastrophic destruction and gargantuan death toll left in the wake of her resulting anguish and fury… he understood why.

She didn’t get angry often because she couldn’t afford to.

This realization didn’t stop him from seeking her out immediately after. He had found her in the training room, ripping into a hellish landscape riddled with practice dummies. He wasted no time in appearing in front of her and parrying the next blow. Minowa had stopped dead, her glowing crimson eyes focusing on him. Tony had stared right back, and after a moment he said “I heard about what happened.” He looked deeper as if he weren’t just talking to her anymore. “Give me everything you’ve got.”

What followed was a fight that shook the Nexus with the intensity of the blows being traded and the raw emotion behind every attack. Tony never fought with intention to hurt, staying mostly on the defensive to allow Minowa to burn away the anger and pain that was coursing through her mind and blood. Only once he knew she had worked through her energy and emotions had Tony allowed himself to collapse to his knees, heaving in breaths from the exertion. He had only been training with his powers for just over two months-- he was actually impressed he had managed to hold out for as long as he did. He recovered his stamina quickly and pulled himself to his feet, striding over to where Minowa stood stock still, pulling in deep breaths of her own. She had looked up at him as he stopped and observed her silently-- words weren’t needed to know he was asking if she felt better. Minowa had responded by straightening her own stance and reaching to pull him into her arms, silently conveying her gratitude and relief.

Spars between the duo were far more common after that. Neither was afraid to hold back.

~

Tony always compared Bridget to a school nurse, flitting here and there and everywhere to make sure the people under her care were well taken care of, reassuring them when it was called for and scolding them when they were being stubborn. Tony had once been lucky enough to witness the latter while not being on the receiving end. He had been sitting in the large communal lounge after a day of training, chatting amicably with another Reaper when the blond woman had stalked into the room with a thunderous expression on her face. Her eyes had found Ulysses, whose back was to her and didn’t realize she was on the warpath until she was grabbing him by his ear and yanking him out of his seat. As she dragged him away she ranted at him about ‘untreated bullet wounds’ and ‘the dangers of infection in the post-apocalyptic Mojave’ along with ‘you may be a Reaper but infection is still a risk you dumbass’. A few seconds after they exited the room everyone then heard her indignant shriek of, “WHAT DO YOU MEAN ‘THE BULLET IS STILL IN THERE’?!”

Blinking, Tony had turned his attention back to the Reaper who was casually sipping from his bottle of sparkling water. He had simply waved his hand and said “You’d think he’d have learned his lesson after the last dozen times. Ulysses is a stubborn fuck, though. You have to be, living in a place like the Mojave wasteland. Still, you’d think he’d learn after 50000 years... ” Tony hadn’t asked any further questions and returned to his own drink.

He had been on the receiving end of her rants too. After the first few times though, she began to suspect there was more going on than just him being stubborn. The next time she dragged him in she sat him down on the bed as usual, but instead of reprimanding him once she was done treating him she sat down on the bed next to his and had a calm discussion with him. The change in demeanor helped him lower his guard enough that he was able to admit that he was so used to
looking after himself because the people he trusted to help him before had all left him in one way or another. It was practically second nature to him, but Bridget worked with him on learning to trust again.

Progress was initially slow-- Tony’s behaviors were deeply ingrained into his psyche, and breaking the habits ended up becoming a team effort. It helped that Bridget was willing to speak with him on topics that didn’t involve his health-- a potential crack in his armor showed up when the genius learned she and Minowa were from the same world, albeit different cycles. Minowa was from an iteration where the Dov were present in the world, but Bridget’s variation lacked the race entirely. He learned that Bridget was the current Archmage of the College of Winterhold-- basically the Headmaster of Skyrim’s school of magic. Her Masteries focused on Restoration, Alteration, and Conjuration, though she mostly focused on her White Arts. She further explained that she had Alteration and Conjuration as backups in case she was attacked-- Skyrim was a beautiful, but harsh mistress after all.

Four months in, they finally had a breakthrough. Bridget had been restocking her potion cabinets when Tony came through the door, holding his wrist close to his chest with a grimace on his face and eyes on the floor. Bridget had stopped short, eyes locked on Tony. He hesitated for only a moment before looking up at her and softly saying “I think I might have fucked up my wrist.”

The healer hadn’t said anything at first, instead walking over to him and holding out her hands so she could check it. For a moment, Tony’s eyes flickered between her hands and her face as if he expected her to rescind the silent offer. Finally, he had slowly pulled his wrist from his chest and held it out for the amethyst-eyed woman to check. She gently grasped his hand and cast a diagnostic spell, revealing several broken bones. She had him sit as she summoned a numbing potion and gave it to him to drink. He did so, even though his hand shook slightly with anxiety. She set the bones and mended them once she was sure it wouldn’t cause him pain. She finally sat back so Tony could test the limb, waiting on the verdict. At first, he seemed almost blindsided, like he had expected a different result. He turned and rotated his wrist every which way, and as he did a look of wonder and hope spread over his face. When he finally looked up at her, Bridget had felt tears well up in her eyes when she saw something in his eyes that hadn’t been there before-- trust.

Tony didn’t have to be coerced into visiting her after that. He was more than willing to walk there himself.

~

Ulysses had discovered Tony drunk off his ass and barely coherent during one of his rough days a few weeks after he had arrived at the Nexus. The sniper hadn’t said anything, instead effortlessly lifting Tony into a fireman’s carry and taking him to a bed. Tony was confused when he woke up and found himself not in his own room, and when he went to investigate he was accosted by a woman with long brown and blue hair, eyes that shifted between several different colors, and clothes that looked like they belonged more at a nightclub involving glow sticks and pounding bass. She had handed him a drink that completely removed the symptoms of his hangover before pulling him into a comfy living room, where he found Ulysses and another man he didn’t recognize eating breakfast. A plate had been pressed into his hands as Ulysses introduced the others as Aria and Craig, his lovers. Admittedly, Tony had been confused how he ended up in a bed in their living quarters, and enquired about it as he ate the breakfast handed to him. Craig informed him that Ulysses had found him ‘shit-faced’ and brought him back so they could watch over him.

The trio had then sat down with him to talk about the habit. Instead of the scolding and consternation the genius had come to expect, they had offered compassion and understanding. As it happened, all three of them had dealt with inner demons or vices at one time or another. Aria had
become addicted to a drug from their world-- something called Med-X. When Tony enquired, the woman told him that it was a pain reliever of sorts, and that she had needed to take it at first to recover from being shot in the head. The scar in the middle of her forehead that she revealed booked no room for argument whether she was serious about the kind of injury. However, after the wound had fully healed and no longer caused her pain, Aria found it almost impossible to stop taking the drug. She had been afraid of the pain returning and comfortable with the lack thereof. Craig, after a bit of gentle encouragement from his lovers, told Tony about the massacre at Bitter Springs, the death of his wife Carla, and his part in both. The drinking that sprung up in the wake of such trauma was something Tony could definitely sympathise with. Ulysses had committed some pretty heinous acts before he met Aria or Craig, things that still weighed slightly on him no matter how much time had passed. Unlike the other two, he didn’t elaborate, nor did Tony press for information. The momentary haunted and hollow look in the sniper’s eyes was enough to deter any questions.

The genius had sat in a kind of somber attentiveness as they spoke, and when they were done he had asked why they had divulged their stories. Craig was the first to speak. “Because if we can overcome those things, no matter how hard it was, so can you.”

Aria had nodded at his words before turning her attention back to Tony. “We want to help you. No one should have to suffer like we did-- like you do. You deserve to be free of that pain, just like us.”

Ulysses had added, “Don’t need to fall back on drinking. Family will catch you before then.”

The conversation resulted in weekly meet-ups with the trio for what equated to therapy sessions. Though initially slow to open up to them, Tony began to form a fellowship with the group over shared understanding of pain, struggle, and recovery. Craig became a close confident in regard to pain-- guilt had been a primary theme of his life for a long time before he was found by Aria. He told the genius, “Aria and Ulysses finally helped me understand that holding onto my guilt wouldn’t erase the things that happened. I needed to accept them, take the lessons I learned, and move forward. Carrying around the emotional baggage was only hurting me. I keep the good times I had with Carla close to my heart, but I needed to let it go-- let her go. I’m grateful ‘Ses and Aria were there for me.”

Ulysses was more of a quiet support, a stable presence against the turbulence of Tony’s emotions and memories. Whenever Tony happened to backslide, the sniper never judged or snapped or degraded his previous efforts. Instead, he would sit with Tony and help the man to parse through what had caused the stumble. His willingness to actively listen and work with the genius instead of lecturing him like so many others had done encouraged Tony to pull away from the bottle as a means of coping, slips becoming less and less frequent. Ulysses still remained supportive and calm each time it happened, and on the day Tony sought him out before he started drinking, the dark-skinned man had pulled the genius into a rare hug. Considering it was ‘Ses the gesture came from, Tony was content and happy with that-- It spoke volumes that words could never match.

Aria provided a far different service-- she gave Tony a coping mechanism and the space to use it. During one of their weekly meetings she brought up her Claiming-gift-- sonokinesis. She had offhandedly mentioned using her gift to augment her music before stopping mid-thought. The sudden cheshire like grin that crossed her face had initially made Tony nervous, especially when she grabbed his hand and pulled him to a part of the suite he had never been in with Ulysses and Craig following behind. That trepidation had swiftly turned to shock and awe when she threw a set of double doors open to reveal a room with wall-to-wall instruments of all kinds. She had commanded him to pick an instrument and she would teach him. Tony had wandered the room in a haze before stopping at the strings section in front of a violin. He admitted to them that some of the
best memories he had of Anna Jarvis involved her playing violin for him. Aria had proceeded to take the violin from its' place on the wall and pass it to him. He was then immediately thrown into his first impromptu lesson, which proceeded to become an every-other-day activity. To his own wonderment, the lessons became a therapy all their own. He could channel all the emotion into the strings of the instrument, expressing them in a manner far more positive and meaningful than drinking. Aria herself was also thrilled and exuberant when he began channeling his omni-magic into his playing to produce visual effects. Aria’s lovers would often join them and bring their own flair with their Claiming-gifts. The combination of ‘Ses’s umbrakinesis and Craig’s photokinesis resulted in stunning illusions and shadowy effects that coupled spectacularly with Tony’s magic.

Several months into this arrangement Hadrian had walked in while they were doing so, stopping their practice inadvertently. The Master of Death had blinked in shock for a moment before a brilliant grin had split his face before asking Tony if he wanted to try something new. Tony had agreed and the ebon-haired man instructed him to close his eyes and begin playing by himself. The genius did so and after a few seconds Hadrian then instructed him to think of his happiest memory and use it to fuel his magic. A minute into him doing so he felt something pull from his very being, and Aria’s gasp prompted him to stop and open his eyes. A thirty-foot-long transparent serpent sat in front of him, head turned in his direction and cocked curiously. Despite the shock from the sudden appearance of the snake, Tony couldn’t help but reach out towards the glowing blue figure in a kind of awed reverence. The snake pushed its’ head against his hand shocking the man with the solid feeling of scales.

The feeling of a surge of magic drew his gaze to the others in the room. Three more animals burst into existence in front of Aria, Ulysses, and Craig. He learned later that they were creatures from their homeworld. Craig had a creature called a nightstalker-- a terrifying hybrid of the spliced DNA of a coyote and a rattlesnake. The creature Ulysses had was a humanoid being known as a tunneler, small parts of the blue taking on a teal color-- apparently it had a form of bioluminescence in real life. Aria’s looked like a tarantula hawk spider wasp, only several times bigger with red eyes and a stinger that looked more like a dagger. Aria explained later that it was a ‘Cazador’ and proceeded to describe it as ‘the result of an unholy night of debauchery between Satan, a demon entomologist, and a harem of angry hornets’. Tony decided not to probe further, especially when he saw her lovers nod in agreement.

Looking over to Hadrian for an explanation, the man had simply smiled and said, “That’s your patronus, Tony-- like Bridget’s Savos. You summoned that with you happiness.”

Aria jumped to him and wrapped her arms around his neck as she rambled with elation, joined by a much calmer Craig who also hugged him. Ulysses stepped behind him and put his hand on his shoulder with a smile on his face. The enormous serpent coiled around them protectively and Tony felt tears roll down his cheeks as he reveled in the feeling of family and home.

Once again, he pulled on the memory of their celebration of him being sober for three months and a smile stretched across his face. No one cared to point out how the serpent glowed just a little brighter in that moment.

~

Walking in on Dorian and Zevrael during a moment of intimacy was bound to happen eventually. Tony had heard many, many accounts of it happening to various Reapers, so he had been expecting it… That didn’t make it any less jarring when it finally occurred. He had walked into their lab to enquire about a result of the scans from right after his Claiming. He was not at all prepared to find the duo skyclad, Zev bent over a table with Dorian behind him. Tony had apologized and beat a hasty retreat, but not just because of the embarrassment. Seeing the duo together had brought
feelings to the surface that Howard had… ‘trained’ out of him. When the two came to find him later to find out what he needed they found the man in the middle of a panic attack. The conditioning from his father was warring hard against his own needs and desires, and the ensuing identity crisis left his room a wreck from his magic lashing out. When Dorian found out about what Tony’s father had done, he had gone visibly white with rage. When tendrils of fiendfyre began to curl around his body Zevrael had summoned a torrent of ice water and dumped it on the mage’s head. As the Vint spluttered and shook the liquid out of his face and hair, the elf had turned to Tony and informed him that Dorian had experience in what Tony had described.

Tony helped dry Dorian with his magic as the brunette expanded on that tidbit. The genius had gotten physically ill when the mage explained the blood magic ritual Magister Halward had considered using and the possible implications of what would have happened if it had gone wrong. Zevrael had further added to that when he explained that his clan had issued him an ultimatum: ‘leave the shemlan or don’t bother coming back’. Zevrael had refused to give up his love for the man, and Clan Lavellan had carried through with the threat-- if he was ever seen near their camp, he would be shot on sight.

Upon being inquired how they dealt, Dorian had at first snarked, “I left-- I enjoyed the allure of pariahood.” He quickly grew serious though and answered, “In truth, it was hard. But I knew forcing myself to be something I wasn’t, to be someone I didn’t want to be… It would have festered inside of me, like poison. I wasn’t going to let my father dictate my life, my choices. I refused to sacrifice my happiness for his ideal plan, his legacy.”

Zevrael nodded at that. “At first, the loss of my clan was devastating. I didn’t understand why they couldn’t be happy for me, for the fact that I found ma vhenan, my heart. It floored me that they were so willing to force me to choose between my love for Dorian and them. It was never my intention to betray them, yet that’s what they saw it as. As time went on though, I realized they had no right to try and dictate what made me happy. They weren’t living my life, they weren’t feeling my emotions. So why was I letting them control me like that? They had made their choice-- that was on them. But I wasn’t going to let their views, their misguided beliefs, their hatred keep me from someone that brought me so much joy.”

“In summation, Fratris” Dorian looked Tony in the eye and in an uncharacteristically serious voice asked “Why are you letting a man over two decades dead keep you from your happiness? Why are you continuing to give control to someone who doesn’t have the ability to hold your leash anymore?”

Zevrael drew the genius’s gaze after his husband spoke. “You are Tony Fucking Stark. You are a billionaire, a genius, a philanthropist, and one of the most selfless and caring people I have ever had the honor of knowing. Whose business is it regarding who you love, what gender you prefer? They aren’t living your life! You be you, be happy, and love whoever you want and to the Fade what the bigots think!”

Dorian reached forward and put his hands on Tony’s shoulders. “Be who you want to be, not someone others want you to be.” His face suddenly scrunched up for a moment before he added on “Unless you want to be a dragon. That might be pushing it a bit far.”

“Don’t let Minowa hear you say that!”

Despite the seriousness of the past few minutes, Tony couldn’t help but laugh along with the duo. It took a few more talks with them to fully accept the part of him he had been forced to lock away. He considered it a victory when, a few months later, he found several magazines with… questionable content laying on his bed and didn’t feel the least bit ashamed about the fact that no
one saw him for the rest of that night.

He didn’t have to ask who left them when he finally emerged. The knowing and gentle smiles on the faces of the Pavus men told him all he needed to know.

~

Tony managed to pull himself from his memories just as he was approaching the door to Hadrian’s office. He pushed them open without much thought before stopping short at the scene in front of him. The Master of Death was on one knee with his hands on the shoulders of a young girl, no older than eight or nine. His face was drawn with worry, and he was speaking in gentle tones trying to calm the girl down. The child had black hair covering half of her face, her one visible silver eye filled with tears, frustration and fear clear in every line of her face. She was wearing a simple white dress that brushed the floor and long sleeves that covered her arms and part of her hands. She was speaking very quickly, and it took Tony a few seconds to be able to catch up with what she was saying.

“-- they keep hurting him and he doesn’t deserve it and what they’re doing is wrong and I want to stop them but I can’t!” The girl was sobbing, her arms wrapped tight around herself as if trying to provide herself with comfort.

The emerald-eyed man hushed her gently, rubbing her arms. “Calm yourself, child. I need you to take a deep breath, okay sweetie?” The young girl hiccuped quietly and nodded.

Tony’s heart broke at the sight of the child so obviously distressed. “Chief, what’s going on? Is she okay?” He asked, drawing the attention of the duo.

Hadrian’s eyes softened and filled with relief. “Anthony, your timing is perfect. Come in and close the door behind you.” Tony did so before he conjured up a pair of comfortable chairs. “Thank you Anthony, much appreciated.” He picked up the girl and set her in his lap as they sat. “Anthony, I’d like you to meet Hela. She’s the Goddess of Death in your home world.”

The genius’s eyebrows rocketed into his hair as he gazed at the deity. “She’s-- This kid can’t be more than nine! Why would she be saddled with such a thing??”

Hela sniffed and looked toward him, the hair shifting away from the other half of her face. This revealed that half of her face was naught but bone and decayed flesh, her eye replaced by a single pinprick of glowing emerald light in the socket. “Odin banished me to the realm of the dead because he thought I was a monster, and because of who my father is.” She answered softly, the pain on her face too poignant not to be seen despite the state of the skin.

Tony’s mouth fell open in shock. “He what?!” He snarled, his magic surging in reaction to his righteous indignation. He immediately felt a tendril of Hadrian’s aura embrace him, helping him reign his power in.

The Goddess looked on in awe and trepidation as the brunette wrestled his emotions back under control. “I know who you are…” She whispered, catching the man’s attention. “Lord Hadrian, are you sure…?”

“I’m certain, Hela. Let’s explain what’s going on, okay?” Hela nodded and the Master of Death looked back at Tony. “Anthony, think back to when Loki attempted to take over Earth. Did you notice anything strange during that time involving the god of mischief?” Seeing the confusion on his Reaper’s face Hadrian elaborated. “Think back to when he threw you out the window. Do you see it clearly in your mind?” Tony closed his eyes and nodded after a moment. “Good. Now think
back to after the invasion, when you found him beaten into the floor of the penthouse.” The genius nodded again. “Compare those two versions of Loki. Notice anything?”

It only took a few seconds for Tony to realize what Hadrian was referencing. “Son of a bitch…” He whispered in shock as his eyes snapped open. “His eyes were blue when he threw me, but when we found him after the battle, they were green. He was mind whammied just as much as Barton. Someone, something else was using him as a puppet.”

“And a scapegoat.” Hela confirmed, drawing his gaze again. “Asgard was so willing to place the blame on him for what happened. They didn’t question him, they didn’t give him a trial or a chance to defend himself. Then after Thor got his help with the Dark Elves Odin was happy to throw him back in his cell! He doesn’t even care that the guards are hurting him!”

Tony leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands. “That is fucked up in so many different ways… Shit, they’re torturing an innocent man.” There was a moment of silence before he looked back up staring into the middle distance. “I don’t understand, though… why are you so concerned about one person?” Suddenly he sat straight, eyes locked unerringly on Hela. “... Unless he means something to you.” He said after a moment as the pieces all clicked into place. “And given the fact that your magic looks and feels so similar to his…” He stood slowly from the chair to move to Hadrian’s and knelt down so he wasn’t looming over the girl. “You’re Loki’s kid, aren’t you?” He asked softly.

Hela nodded, eyes watching Tony warily. “His only daughter.” She rubbed the tear tracks from her face. “Papa has done some bad things, but he’s always been loving to us-- to me. Even after Odin banished me he came to visit when he could.” She looked up at the genius with desperation in her eye. “He just wants to be acknowledged and told he’s worth something despite living in Thor’s shadow. He didn’t want the throne, he never wanted to rule-- He just wanted to be accepted and appreciated! Asgard barely tolerated him-- they mocked his magic claiming it was a woman’s tool, and scorned his intelligence simply because he felt that not every battle was won with strength!” She squirmed in Hadrian’s arms so she was looking Tony straight in the eye. “They’re hurting him, and he’s done nothing wrong but ask for kindness! He doesn’t deserve their hate!”

For a moment the only sound that was heard was Hela’s rapid breaths hitched with tears. Finally Tony’s voice cut through the quiet. “You’re right. He doesn’t deserve that.” The genius rose to his feet, steel in his eyes. “Chief. I was considering talking to you about finally going back.” He cast his gaze to the Master of Death who rose with Hela on his hip. “It looks like I need to make a detour to Asgard’s prison cells first, though.”

Hadrian dipped his head in agreement. “I had a feeling you would say that. I won’t lie, Anthony-- I’ve been expecting you to bring this up for a few weeks now.” The smile that pulled at his lips was full of love and pride. “You’ve healed the wounds in your soul, and the Reapers and I are so, so proud of the strides you’ve made. Make sure you never forget that, and that you always have a home and family to come back to.” He swept to his desk and picked up a tablet. “It looks like I need to make a detour to Asgard’s prison cells first, though.”

“His what drew you to my world to begin with.”

The Master of Death nodded as his face became grim. “Indeed. He is a threat that has the potential to cause a catastrophic amount of damage and death, and he must be dealt with before he can carry out his plans.” He turned back to Tony. “Normally I wouldn’t even entertain the notion of doing this… But I have full confidence in you.” He took a deep breath to steady himself. “Anthony, I need you to be my Right Hand in this matter.”
Tony inhaled sharply at the statement. When Hadrian was forced to intervene in a world, he would send a Reaper to actively carry out his will and spearhead any plans to eliminate the threat— that person was known as the ‘Right Hand of Death’. Under normal circumstances, the ‘Right Hand’ would be a High Reaper, someone who had been working with Hadrian for many years. Minowa would be one of those people, along with one or two whose names he’d only ever heard in passing. There were a few others, but they were rarely around. Pulling himself from these thoughts the brunette had to ask “Why me? It’s not that I’m not grateful for your confidence, and I know I’m in a much better place than I was before… But why not Minowa or someone with more experience?”

“This is not a mission I would even consider putting Minowa in charge of. Your world and Tamriel are vastly different, and she would be inefficient trying to lead in such a situation. You know the people, the culture… You know what you’re walking into. However, she will be on a team with you. I am not sending you into this alone. Minowa is being assigned as your Second in Command; she’ll be good for strategic advice against the likes of Thanos as well as an additional heavy hitter. Bridget will be monitoring the health of the team— no need to bring back germs to the Nexus. It can get into other worlds that way… which was a nightmare the first time it happened. There are some mistakes you only have to make once.” He scrolled down the tablet in his hand after setting Hela down on the floor. “Craig and Ulysses are your scouts. With their abilities, they can easily get in and out of places to bring you intel. Aria’s omnilingual skills will be invaluable if this conflict extends to other realms. Dorian and Zevrael will be staying with you most of the time— They’re your security detail.” His eyes snapped to Tony as the man made to protest. “You’re the only one who has the ability to go toe-to-toe against the Mad Titan and come out victorious. That can’t happen if you get hurt. Humor me.”

A sigh escaped the genius as he conceded Hadrian’s point. He could see where the Chief was coming from. And honestly, it wasn’t that much of a struggle— the Pavus couple were good company and capable of matching his level of sass. “Alright Chief. When do we plan to pull this jailbreak?”

The Master of Death placed his hand atop Hela’s head of ebon hair as he replied, “As soon as possible, preferably. I’ll summon you all to the briefing room when you’re ready.”

The Reaper cast his eyes to Hela for a moment before looking back to Hadrian. “Call them now, I can have someone bring my stuff to the compound, but if what I’m hearing is any indication, we need to break reindeer games out ASAP.” He staggered when Hela surged forward to fling her arms around him in a desperate hug. She babbled out ‘thank you’ several times and Tony reciprocated the hug after a moment of shock. A few seconds later the genius suddenly went stiff before pulling away, looking over the girl with an odd look. “Hela, you said Odin banished you to your current residence.”

The girl nodded with a sad look in her eye. “Helheim, yes.”

Tony’s brow furrowed as he reached out to her arm, but didn’t touch it. He could see magic at work there wrapped tight around her wrists like handcuffs, and it only took him a moment to work out the purpose. “That son of a bitch bound you there.” Hela’s defeated nod caused a fire to light in his heart. He looked over at Hadrian, who was watching with interest. “Chief, do you think it’s possible for me to…”?

“You are magic’s warden. It will yield to you, no matter the source.”

“Good.” Tony turned his eyes back to Hela, determination clear in his eyes. He took Hela’s wrists into his hands, allowing the magic within him to surge and seek out the binding magic cast on the girl. Upon locating it, his magic broke the spells, and Tony saw the magic fall away from her a
moment later.

Hela gasped in shock and pulled her hands away, staring at them. “You… did you just…?”

“Call the others, Chief.” The brunette gently swept Hela into his arms before turning to Hadrian. “It’s time to go home.”

Chapter End Notes

Elven Translations

Shemlan -- Slur for ‘human’
Ma vhenan -- My heart

Tevene Translations

Fratris -- Brother

Take cover, Midgard! Tony Stark is coming home, and he’s bringing the cavalry with him!
Chapter Summary

Tony and team return to where it all began and our favorite mechanic has no patience for idiot Asgardians torturing the innocent. Loki is reunited with his daughter, the waiting game begins.

Chapter Notes

This story... the last chapter was good.

ANOTHER!! *crash*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So you all have the story straight?”

Bridget nodded as she swung her pack onto her shoulder. “We’ve gone over it several times, don’t worry.”

“And we’re set to return 24 hours after I left, right?”

The healer straightened and took a moment to pull the genius into a hug. “Tony, relax. Everything is going to be fine, you’ll see.”

Tony sighed and nodded. “I’m sorry, it’s just... I just don’t know who’s going to show up once we get there. Depending on who it is, they’ll realize something has changed within a second or two of seeing me.”

“Considering we’ve chosen to go with the idea of ‘honesty is the best policy’, I’m sure we’ll be fine if one of your allies finds us.” Aria put a hand on Tony’s shoulder while using the other to shift the strap of the bag resting on her hip.

“And if it’s not an ally?”

“Then we find out if they’re an enemy or if it’s just a coincidence. If it’s the latter, we send them on their way.” Minowa replied distractedly while checking the blade of her favorite dagger. “And in the unlikely event that it’s an enemy...”

Craig and Ulysses, who had been standing to one side simultaneously deadpanned, “We shoot them.”

The sound of two sets of feet hitting the floor at a run caused the group to turn. Zevrael and Dorian came careening around the corner, both wearing messenger bags. “Ir abelas, Lethallin!” Zevrael skidded to a halt in front of Tony with a grin. “We forgot something in the workshop and had to run back for it.”
Dorian approached Tony and pressed a box into his hands. Arching an eyebrow he opened it to reveal a thin metallic black disk with the symbol of the hallows carved into it, two inches in diameter and thin as a dime. Tony looked up at the duo in confusion. “Press it against your bare chest with the engraving facing out, right over your mark.” Dorian urged him.

Tony shucked his shirt off and took the disk into his hand. It was lightweight and held no other decorations other than the engraving. Giving Zevrael and Dorian one last confused look he did as instructed. The befuddlement shifted to shock when the symbol lit up white-blue. He let go of the piece, but it remained on his chest.

The elf was grinning ear to ear. “Okay, now for the best part. Give it a double tap.”

Slightly apprehensive, the genius did so. Moments later the glow from the symbol began to expand across his body, engulfing him after a few seconds. It finally died away to reveal a sleek, streamlined version of the Iron Man armor he had taken to Siberia with the arc reactor replaced by the engraved disk. Several sections of the armor were now black, and odd grooves were carved into places along his arms and legs. The HUD finally lit up and the genius found himself face to face with the grinning faces Dorian and Zevrael.

“What, did you think we were going to let you go back without your greatest invention?” Dorian snorted as if the very idea itself was distasteful. “Perish the thought!”

The elf was practically bouncing on his feed. “How is it? Dori’ and I have been working on it since Ulysses brought us the pieces of your old armor. It doesn’t pull power from an arc reactor anymore-- it’s pulling from your magic! It's just a basic model for now, but it's a project we can work on together!”

Tony was silent as he pressed the disk and retracted the armor. Before Dorian or Zevrael could react the man threw himself at them and hugged them as tight as he could. The couple wasted no time in returning the gesture. “We weren’t anticipating going with you when you finally went back, and we wanted you to be as safe as possible,” Dorian reassured him in a soft voice when the man finally pulled away.

“We’re glad we get the chance to, though.” Zevrael bumped against Tony’s shoulder. “After all, someone needs to balance the broody scale!”

The brunette laughed wetly at the sentiment while he wiped the tears from his face. “It’s amazing you two. Thank you.” He took a few deep breaths to center himself before turning back to the group. “Okay, everyone ready to get this train to crazytown a-rollin’?”

Aria grinned and replied for all of them: “Choo choo!”

They all quickly stepped up on the platform amidst chuckles of amusement. Minowa input the coordinates before joining them and a moment later they were swept away in a surge of darkness and shadows. A moment later they fell away to reveal the bunker in Siberia. Tony wasted no time in casting warming charms on his family. As the group took a moment to acclimate themselves, he looked towards where he had been found barely alive. He slowly stepped towards the indent in the snow, kneeling when he reached it. He looked towards the shield, briefly remembering the pain at having it slammed into his chest. He reached for it, lifting it with him as he stood.

The group had finally noticed their leader’s actions and were watching him curiously. Tony remained still for a few seconds before he reached to the right and drew a vertical line through the air. A glowing white light followed his finger, and the genius wasted no time in stashing the shield in the pocket dimension he had opened up. He closed it and turned to face his family, and they
smiled at seeing the content and calm look on his face. “Rogers was a piss poor leader and even worse friend. I hope I do a better job than his half-assed attempts.”

Minowa smiled at him, her crimson eyes flaring with power. “Wherever you lead us, Zeymahi.” She told him, her voice resonating with Alduin’s. The others nodded along with their words.

“Then let’s get to work. I’m activating my homing beacon soon, and we have a few things we need to accomplish before then. Bullseye and Deadshot, I need you both to keep an eye out for anything living, let me know if people show up.” Craig rolled his eyes at the nickname and Ulysses arched his eyebrow in his direction before they walked away. “Firecracker, these bodies need to be disposed of. I have no doubt that if the wrong people found out about these failed super soldiers they wouldn’t hesitate to swoop in and take them.” Despite the seriousness of the request Dorian couldn’t help but grin at the spin on the nickname he had in Thedas. “Cryo, help him get them outside… burning flesh is not a pleasant smell.” Zev saluted him with a smile before he followed his husband. “Songbird, get into those computers and see if there’s anything still on them. If there is, use your judgment about whether it should be saved or destroyed and act accordingly.” Aria nodded with a grim look before striding off.

Bridget looked at him when they were finally alone. “What about Minowa and I?”

Tony turned to the duo. “Boomer, I’d like for you to stay here and watch over everything for a few minutes. Medic, you need to be on standby to do some serious healing. I’m breaking our resident God of Mischief out of the slammer.” He gave an errant wave of his hand, and a hospital bed and table were quickly conjured. Bridget nodded sharply and began to lay potion bottles and medical supplies on the table. Minowa nodded to him and jerked her head to one side, indicating for him to go. The genius waved a hand over himself to shift his clothes to the long sleeved black coat that Hadrian issued for missions. The Hallows symbol stitched in gold on the back marked him as the leader, and the hood could conceal his face from any light. His black pants were tucked into black military style boots that were enchanted to make no sound. The black fingerless gloves on his hands had the golden hallows stitched into the fabric. The coat was unzipped enough so he could easily get to his chest piece in case of an emergency. He turned to Minowa and Bridget, eyes serious. “I’ll be back. You know how to reach me.” He quickly flipped the hood up before reaching for his magic. It surged to meet him, and he directed it to find Loki. It took only a few seconds before he felt it lock onto the God. He cloaked himself from detection and allowed the magic to pull him to his destination. The darkness surged around him for a moment before he silently landed in a dark and damp stone prison. He briefly cast his eyes around the place before striding towards the pull.

The sound of cries of pain made him break into a run, and when he found the cell his entire being froze for a moment. Loki was chained to the wall, his back to the door and completely naked. He looked gaunt and pale, his hair greasy and limp. His back was striped with whip marks that bled terribly. The three guards in the cell laughing drew his attention, and a cold fury swept through him when he saw the spiked whip one was holding. Unable to simply observe any longer, Tony phased through the wall itself completely bypassing any protections on the door. He subtly cast several spells of his own to prevent outside notice and keep his magic from being discovered or lingering. The moment he was done, he unleashed the deathly aura that all Reapers shared, holding nothing back.

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The temperature immediately dropped to near freezing, a feeling of dread and terror sweeping through the room. It stole the breath and chuckles from the lungs of the guards, the whip clattering to the floor. They turned to find the source of the disturbance and came face to face with Anthony, his glowing, fury filled amber eyes the only thing visible from the darkness of the hood. Black smoke surrounded him, adding to the effectiveness of the image. There was a moment of absolute
silence before Tony’s cold voice shot through the room. “The Master of Death sends his regards.” Without giving them a chance to reply, Tony’s magic washed over the guards and plunged them into a sleep that would take days to awaken from.

Loki had grown still as the powerful and intoxicating magic slammed the room. Strangely enough, the magic that seemed to terrify the guards wrapped around him and soothed the agony his body was in, caressing him gently. The voice that spoke was vaguely familiar, but he couldn’t muster the mental energy to identify it. A few seconds later, the power pulled away, causing the injured god to whimper as the pain returned.

Tony heard the sound and stepped past the guards to unlock the shackles around Loki’s wrists. As he did, white hot rage flashed through him when he felt the blocks on Loki’s magic. “That bastard.” He hissed in a trembling voice. Taking a deep breath to reign himself in he spoke quietly to the shaking God. “I’m going to remove the shackles. I’ll help you sit down, then I’ll see what I can do about the blocks.”

Loki nodded, numb from the emotional shock he was beginning to feel. He felt his wrists being freed and began to collapse before a pair of gentle hands caught him. He was gently maneuvered into a sitting position facing his savior and blinked in confusion at what he found. Finding his voice for a moment he managed to croak out “Odin bound me… can’t be removed… except by him…”

“Like Hell they can’t.” Tony growled, his magic rising to meet his needs. “Odin may have powerful magic, but that won’t stop me.” The power rushed to Loki and found the source of the blocks. It wrapped around them and after a moment shattered them entirely. Loki choked out a cry of shock as he was reconnected with his magic and didn’t notice his illusion flicker for a few seconds, revealing his Jotun form before shifting back.

The Reaper was barely phased by this and continued to strip away the curses Odin had placed upon the god. He channeled a bit into closing the whip marks on Loki’s back, halting the bleeding, and once he was satisfied he sat back. “Alright, that will have to do until we get you to Medic.” Loki blinked in confusion before yelping as Tony swept the God into his arms. “Hold tight, this can be a bit disorienting at first and I don’t want you passing out on the way.” A moment later the darkness surged up to surround them again, falling away a moment later to deposit them in the bunker again.

Bridget had been standing by waiting for him to get back. She strode forward as the duo appeared, grabbing a blanket to cover Loki while Tony gently set the emaciated and pale man on the bed. “Good evening, your Worship. My name is Bridget, I’m the team healer here. I’d like to take a look at your wounds and see if I can heal some of them. Would you be alright with that?” She smiled charmingly as she covered him, giving off an air of gentleness and compassion. Loki nodded, staring at her with wide eyes. “Thank you your Worship. I’ll try to make this as painless as possible.” She raised her hands and allowed her healing magic to surround him to diagnose the damage.

As she did that, Minowa came up to Tony. “Zeymahi, how bad was it?” She asked, turning her burning ember eyes to Loki for a moment.

Tony was silent for a moment. Finally, he growled “Those guards are lucky to have their lives. I was so, so tempted Boomer. It was…” His hands clenched into fists so tight his knuckles were white.

Loki looked over in shock at the sheer rage in his voice. Finally he managed to ask in a raspy voice that caught the duo’s attention, “Why… why did you save me?”
Though the God couldn’t see it, Tony’s eyes softened at the look on his face. “You’re an innocent man who didn’t get the chance to defend himself before being judged. You were being tortured, and that will never be okay in my book.”

“How do you know of my innocence?”

Tony didn’t reply verbally. Instead, he reached out his hand and summoned a relay corridor in front of him. “Chief, we’ve got him. Send over the kid.” He called into it, waiting until he felt the magic within before allowing it to drop.

Hela blinked at her surrounding before turning to see her father on the bed. “Papa!” She shrieked with joy, sprinting over to him to fling herself into his arms. “I knew it, I knew he could save you!”

Loki had reached out reflexively to catch his daughter, even as shock lanced through him. It took him a moment or two to process what was happening even as Hela continued to babble away--Then he was wrapping his arms around her small frame, burying his nose in her hair and sobbing with joy. Tony looked towards Minowa and jerked his head in an indication to leave. The woman nodded and strode through a nearby door to give them some privacy.

They sat there for several minutes before their attention was drawn to Bridget, who had cleared her throat. “Hela sweetie, I need to give Loki some medicine and heal his ribs. Can you hop down for a minute?” Loki seemed reluctant to let go of his daughter and reassured him. “Don’t worry, Hela isn’t going anywhere. She’s no longer bound to Helheim.”

The goddess of death nodded enthusiastically with a grin on her face. “Yep! He broke Odin’s enchantments!” She pointed towards Tony, who had been watching the scene silently.

The ebony haired god looked over at him in shock and allowed his daughter to slide from the bed and run over to him. “... You saved her?” Tony nodded sharply, running his fingers gently through Hela’s hair. “... Who are you?”

A sharp laugh escaped Tony before he flicked his wrist outwards, allowing the coat he wore to melt away. As the hood fell away he locked eyes with Loki and smirked. “Hey there, Rock of Ages.” He snarked, waving casually to the gaping man. “Bet you weren’t expecting me.”

“Fratris, don’t be so dramatic. Leave it to the professionals.” Dorian sniped at him as he casually sauntered through the door with Zevrael a step behind him. “The bodies have been taken care of.” He informed them, his face becoming solemn.

The brown eyed man nodded at this, his expression grim. “Good. Where’s Songbird?”

“Still working on her job, Lethallin.” Zevrael piped in. “She’s going over everything with a fine tooth comb.”

A smile crossed Tony’s face as he nodded. “Good to know she’s being thorough. Is everyone ready for me to activate the beacon?”

Minowa stepped back into the room. “Craig and Ulysses are in position. Whenever you’re ready, Zeymahi.”

Tony nodded and pressed his palm against the disk in his chest. He held it there until he felt the pings. His eyes flared and glowed blue as he activated his technopathic abilities to keep track of the signal, watching for the moment someone picked it up.

As he did so Bridget turned back to the God of Mischief. “While he’s doing that, let’s see what we
can do about your injuries. I should be able to heal most of the damage myself, but I’ll need to give you a potion for your organ damage. Organs are tricky business, and that’s not a risk I’m willing to take unless in dire circumstances.” She rested her hands over his body and they lit up gold again.

Loki felt the breath stall in his lungs as the full strength of her healing magic surged through him, not as potent or wild as Tony’s but filled with a soothing gentleness that swept away the pain. He looked up at the healer to observe her, the golden blond hair that was tied back in a ponytail and the striking amethyst eyes that watched the progression of the healing like a hawk. Looking deeper for a moment he saw her magic shining from within her, violet and gold swirling together and rising up willingly to meet her needs. He didn’t realize he had been staring until she was withdrawing the magic with a sigh, and he quickly looked away.

“That’s a good start.” She chirped with a smile before reaching for the table and scooping up a few vials. “Alright, your Worship. I need you to take these. This,” she handed him the first, “Is a nutrient potion. This will help begin to mitigate the effects of not being able to eat properly. God or no, your body won’t be capable of handling too much food right now. You’ll get one of these at every meal for a while, but that one will help start the process.”

The ebony-haired man eyed the liquid for a moment before removing the cork and knocking it back like a shot. He was pleasantly surprised by the fact that the taste wasn’t terrible.

“Good, now this one is skele-gro, and you only need a sip.” She poured a small amount into a cup from her pouch. “This will take care of your bones and make sure there’s no residual damage that could cause injuries later on.”

Loki took the cup without hesitation and did the same as before. He choked when the taste hit him, but forced himself to swallow.

Bridget cringed and nodded. “Yeah, that one’s unpleasant. I’ve tried everything I could think of to make it better, but nothing seems to work without altering the effects in some way.” She pressed a bottle of water into his hands and allowed him to drink. “Okay, this one will help with the internal damage to your organs. No name for this one yet, we’ll think of one. Take the whole thing.” She waited until he was done before picking up the last vial. “This one is optional. This is Dreamless Sleep. It allows your body to sleep deeply without the worry of nightmares or memories. Considering the condition Tony found you in, I would suggest it. I would only give you enough for a full eight hours, no more.”

“There’s a reason for that. It can be addicting.” The duo turned to see Dorian forming small orbs of white fire and positioning them in the room to provide light. “Fratris almost had that happen.”

Zevrael had been stacking their bags to one side and looked up at that. “Can you blame him? With all of the trauma he experienced and the lack of support for dealing with it…” He let out a soft huff and threw his silver braid behind his head again as he straightened. “I’m glad we were able to help him in that regard.”

“Nonsequiturs aside, you really do need the rest, your Worship,” Bridget told Loki, pulling his attention back to him. “You’ve been through a terrible ordeal, and I’d wager you haven’t slept well in some time. Or slept at all. Sleeping will also give the potions the chance to work better. The skele-gro has the potential to cause some discomfort as it heals your bones.”

The God eyed the bottle warily, nervousness in his eyes. He jolted when a body sat in his lap and he looked down to see Hela curling against his chest. “Don’t worry, Papa. They won’t hurt you, and they won’t let anyone hurt you again.”
The conviction in his daughter’s voice went a long way to soothe the God, and he allowed Bridget to give him a dose. His eyes immediately began to droop, and within a few minutes had fallen asleep completely. The healer smiled kindly at the small family and helped Hela settle in beside her father, draping another blanket over them both.

That was the scene Aria walked in on, and she smiled at the picture they made. “Will he be alright?” She asked softly as she came up beside the healer.

“He’ll be on nutrient potions for a while, but that’s about it in terms of physically.” The blond woman rubbed her face. “Emotionally and mentally however? That’s a different story. He’s been tortured for a long time, and that will need some serious therapy to help him overcome.”

The brunette nodded, a solemn look on her face. “Makes sense.”

“Got it.” The group turned as Tony’s eyes faded back to brown. “Someone found the signal. I’m not sure who, and I don’t want to dig too deep just in case. We’ve got an hour, maybe two before they show up.” He flicked his wrist to summon his patronus, and the basilisk sprang into existence in front of him. He turned towards Tony, cocking his head curiously. “Yinsen, take a message to Deadshot and Bullseye. ‘Signal found, ETA one or two hours. Stay sharp.’” The serpent nodded and shot off towards the message’s recipients. “We need to keep Loki hidden until I’ve had a chance to explain why he’s here. According to what everyone knows, the last time he was on Earth he tried to conquer it. We need to explain that he was having his strings pulled just as much as Barton and Selvig.”

Bridget nodded sharply. “Understood. We won’t say a word.”

Aria dipped her head as well before looking up towards the ceiling. “I suppose all we can do now is wait.”

Chapter End Notes

Dovahzul Translations
Zeymah -- Brother

Elven Translations
Ir abelas, Lethallin -- I'm sorry, friend
Lethallin -- Friend

Tevene Translations
Fratris -- Brother

This chapter introduces code names that will pop up in the future. I'll list them here for y'all.

Minowa -- Boomer
Bridget -- Medic
Craig -- Bullseye
Ulysses -- Deadshot
Dorian -- Firecracker
Zevrael -- Cryo

YES. Tony DID name is patronus 'Yinesn'. What about it?

More to come!
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Help arrives in the form of Pepper Potts and Bruce Banner. Tony explains what happened and the arrival of HYDRA prompts the group to get the hell out of dodge.

Chapter Notes

Here’s the next installment of ‘Warden’ everyone! Bruce never left Earth in this fic, and the absence of Hela means no Ragnarok. This story has diverted majorly from canon, but that makes it more fun.

Craig and Ulysses stood on opposite sides of the entrance to the bunker, motionless as statues with their eyes sweeping the landscape. It was nearing the two hour mark since Tony had sent his message, and the two snipers were on high alert for anyone or anything approaching the bunker. Their rifles sat within arm's reach, ready to be pulled at a moment’s notice. Neither was taking chances-- they wouldn’t let anyone hurt their new brother.

Craig was the first to notice the deviation from the scene they had been observing. He looked towards Ulysses who nodded, signaling he had noticed it too-- the sound of a jet engine. Craig quickly summoned his nightstalker, Kimball. “Take a message to Glitch. ‘Company’s here’.” Kimball bounded away and the man turned to his partner. “I’ll take care of them. Go deeper, cover me just in case.” Ulysses nodded and strode deeper into the bunker, cloaking himself in shadows and positioning himself so he still had a clear line of sight with his gun.

The jade-eyed sniper turned his attention back to the landscape in front of him just in time for a quinjet to come into view. He positioned himself so he could be seen, leaning casually against the wall with loosely crossed arms to appear as non-threatening as possible. The jet landed and the hatch opened to reveal a redheaded woman followed by a man with dark, curly hair and glasses perched on his nose. Craig recognized the woman from Tony’s descriptions-- Virginia ‘Pepper’ Potts, one of his most trusted confidants and current CEO of Stark Industries. The second was a bit of a surprise. Bruce Banner was toting a bag with what Craig could only assume was medical supplies. Thinking back, the sniper remembered that Tony had told him Bruce had dropped off the grid after what happened with Ultron, but had recently reestablished a minimal line of communication with his fellow ‘science bro’. The duo approached swiftly but stopped dead upon seeing the sniper. The man dipped his head towards them. “Looking for Tony?” His dry tenor carrying easily to the duo.

Pepper’s eyes narrowed at the strange man. “And if we are?”

Craig straightened his stance, motioning for them to follow. “He’s further in. Bridget’s probably doing one last scan on him to make sure he’s okay.” He strode into the bunker, his sharp hearing picking up on the duo following him. “Not gonna lie-- he was in pretty piss-poor shape when we
“What do you mean?” Bruce asked, taking a mental inventory of his bag in preparation to help his friend.

“Rogers and Barnes abandoned him.” Ulysses’ deep voice caused Pepper and Bruce to jump. He stepped from the shadows, pinning them with his brown eyes. “They hurt him-- didn’t just leave physical wounds.” He rumbled as he fell in step beside Craig.

The group fell into silence as they continued. Finally, they reached a doorway, and Craig motioned for Pepper and Bruce to enter. “In there. ‘Ses and I need to get back topside.”

The duo disappeared a moment later, and Pepper was the first to enter the room. Her eyes immediately locked on the blond woman approaching her with a gentle smile. “Good evening, Ms. Potts. I’m Bridget Ivorsen, I’ve been helping Tony recover from what happened. He had to leave for a moment, but in the meantime I’d like to go over the damage we noted when we found him, along with his current condition. Would that be acceptable to you?”

Pepper immediately liked the woman’s no-nonsense attitude, especially regarding her friend’s health. “I would appreciate that, yes. Would Dr. Banner be welcome as well?”

The amethyst eyed woman smiled widely and dipped her head. “Of course. Tony has spoken very fondly of you, Dr. Banner. I know he’ll be happy you’re here.” She reached for a clipboard next to her and began to flip through the pages. “We found Tony about 24 hours ago, and he had already been exposed to the elements for a few hours. His armor was in very poor shape, several shards embedded in his chest. Most of his ribs were broken, and his sternum was in several pieces. He had the beginning stages of hypothermia, serious bruising in multiple places, a concussion… To speak plainly, he’s lucky we showed up when we did-- he would never have survived those injuries otherwise.”

Even as his eyes flickered green Bruce was moving to support Pepper, who was trembling. “How did he, then? That would need surgery to fix, several of them.”

“You would be correct that under normal circumstances that would be required. Because of the severity of his injuries though, we opted to take him back to our home-- We had the necessary facilities there.” She shifted her weight to one foot and fixed the duo with a look. “In the essence of full disclosure, we did use magic, a healing branch of it. I understand you both have reservations about such, but he would have died otherwise.” Before they could protest Bridget pulled out a picture of an X-ray done of Tony’s chest from the clipboard and passed it to Bruce.

The doctor’s eyes roamed the picture, studying it with a clinical eye. After a moment he sighed and shook his head. “She’s right, Pepper. Healing from this normally, if at all, would have needed a miracle.”

The redhead took a deep breath and locked eyes with Bridget, her gaze steely. “Where is he, then? How do we know you're telling the truth?”

As if summoned, Tony stepped into the room from a nearby doorway while wiping his hands with a towel. He had changed into a Black Sabbath t-shirt and clean jeans, his black combat boots still on his feet to keep out the cold. He had a black sweatshirt on, unzipped so the t-shirt underneath could be seen. Sounds of shock from both Pepper and Bruce caused him to look up with wide eyes and blink in shock. Bridget simply smiled and jerked her thumb towards him. “How’s that for proof?”
Pepper was already across the floor and throwing herself into his arms, hugging the man with all her strength. Tony hugged her back, reveling in her presence after having been gone for a year. Until that moment, he hadn’t been aware of just how much he had missed them. He looked over Pepper’s shoulder to look at Bruce, who was approaching at a far more sedated pace. As soon as he got close enough Tony pulled him into the hug as well, ignoring the yelp of surprise the Doctor gave.

They stayed in the hug for a minute before finally pulling away, and Pepper looked him over as if checking for any additional hurt. “Tony, what happened? FRIDAY said your tracker went offline, we were so worried--”

“Easy, Pepper.” He said softly, grabbing her hands to still her. She looked up at his face, and he smiled in a way she’d never seen before. “I’m okay. There’s a lot I have to tell you, but I have people I want you to meet first.” He looked over his shoulder and called out, “Coast is clear guys, get in here!”

“Finally!” Dorian was the first to saunter through the door, a roguish grin on his face. His husband was a step behind him. “I thought the syrupy reunion would go on forever!”

Zevrael reached over and smacked his love, a disapproving frown on his face. “Vhenan! Be nice!”

The dark haired man chuckled as he sauntered up next to Tony. “Sorry, Amatus.”

Aria bounced through the doorway with a bright grin. “Is this them, Tony? Wow, her hair really is like strands of solidified fire! I thought you were being dramatic!”

Pepper shot a look at Tony who in turn groaned and glared at Aria. “Really, Ari’? I said it once, and you remembered?”

“But it’s so true!”

Tony snorted and shook his head. “Where’s Minowa?”

The group paused and looked at each other. “She… seemed nervous about coming in.” Zevrael said softly, fixing the man with a knowing look.

Understanding dawned on Tony and he sighed. “I’ll be right back.” He turned and walked through the door the others had come out of, finding Minowa leaning on the far wall with a stony look on her face. “What’s going on, Minowa? I’d like you to meet the people who came.”

The Dragonborn looked up at Tony with worry in her red eyes that she couldn’t quite fully hide. “I am… unsure if that would be wise.” She reached up to touch one horn as if to emphasise the point.

“Hey, none of that.” The man strode over to her and put his hands on her shoulders. “You led the team that saved my life. That will earn you some brownie points right out the gate.” Seeing her still hesitating he added “One of the people out there is my science bro, Bruce. I told you about him, remember?”

Minowa perked up, curiosity in her eyes. “Yes, I remember. He is here?” Tony nodded and the woman let out a slow breath. “I… I will follow you, then. I will admit my curiosity towards your fahdon.”

“That’s the spirit!” Tony grinned and turned on his heel to re-enter the room, the ebony haired woman following a few steps behind.
Bruce had been talking with Dorian and Zevrael when the Hulk suddenly perked up in his mind. The doctor tensed for a moment, waiting for any anger. He was shocked when the feeling of calm curiosity came across instead, and he turned to find what had elicited such a reaction. Tony was striding from the doorway with another figure behind him looking somewhat wary. His breath caught sharply when he saw her onyx horns and slit pupiled eyes the color of hot coals. The Hulk stirred again, the curiosity now laced with excitement.

The duo approached the scientist, and Tony swept a hand towards Minowa. “Brucie-bear, this is Minowa. She led the team that saved my life. Minowa, this is my fellow science bro Bruce Banner.”

Minowa cleared her throat and looked up at the man, her crimson eyes pinning him. “Drem yol lok, Bruce.” She said, dipping her head deeply. “Zeymahi speaks fondly of you and your krifsilruth.”

Tony couldn’t help but chuckle at the flummoxed look on Bruce’s face. “To translate, that first part was a traditional greeting. Zeymahi means ‘my brother’, and krifsilruth is a combination of the words krif, battle, sil, soul, and ruth, rage. She’s basically talking about the Hulk.”

“Geh, zu’u.” She turned her attention back to the doctor. “You are strong to be able to balance both sides within yourself. It is no small thing.”

Bruce gave a small huffed laugh, running his fingers through his hair. “More than you know.”

Minowa laughed that time, drawing his attention back to her as she shook her head and closed her eyes for a moment. They opened again, glowing brightly as if lit from within. She grinned, showing off one of her fangs before her voice, resonating with Alduin’s, replied. “We would understand far better than you believe.”

Unbeknownst to the scientist, his eyes flickered green for a moment as the Hulk pressed against his conscience. “I guess so.” He murmured.

“Tony, did I hear that right?” The group turned to see Pepper approaching them. “She led the team?” The redhead gestured to Minowa.

The ebony haired woman nodded, eyeing the other warily. “I did, but it was not just me-- Ulysses, who you met briefly, and Bridget were with me as well.” A moment later she found herself being pulled into an enormous hug by Pepper. The Dragonborn blinked, feeling clotheslined from the sudden display of affection and gratitude.

“Thank you.” Pepper murmured into her ebony locks. “Tony is precious to me, and you all saved him. Thank you.”

Minowa didn’t hesitate to hug her back after that. “He is grah-zeymahzini. He is precious to all of us.”

Tony smiled at the crimson-eyed woman as they pulled away. “That term means ‘my shield brother’.”

Bruce watched the interaction curiously. “You all speak like you’ve known him for longer than a day.”

The group stopped entirely, looking at each other. Eventually they all looked at Tony who sighed with a small note of defeat. “Because they have. The place they took me for healing… Time doesn’t flow the same there.” He gestured for the others to pull over the chairs he had conjured earlier. “You should probably sit. This explanation could take a while.”
“Wait a second-- you said he called himself ‘Master of Death’??”

“Yeah, that was my reaction too.”

“And he has magic?”

“You don’t know the half of it.”

“Tony, you realize this confirms the existence of the multiverse, right?”

“I’m well aware, Bruce. Did you think these guys are from Earth??”

“Well, I thought it might just be a mutation… Especially with your horns, Minowa.”

“No. More like battle trophies.”

“I’d take this Earth over ours any day.”

“Aria, your Earth is a post-apocalyptic wasteland brought on by nuclear war. Of COURSE you would.”

“Wait, so this ‘Claiming’ thing basically gave you magic powers.”

“Yes.”

“Oh terrific. Any other surprises we should be aware of?

“Would this be a bad time to bring up I can connect to the internet with my mind now?”

“... What.”

“You’ve met DEATH??”

“Yep. His name is Mortis.”

“Death has a name??”

“I was more shocked at his outfit! No black robes, no scythe, no bones… He was wearing a fedora, Pep! He carried a cane!”

“You can’t deny he pulls it off smashingly, Fratris.”

“He does, and it annoys me to no end! How can death look so good?!!”

“A mystery for the ages, Lethallin.”

“Wait. You’re bisexual? Since when??”
“I always have been. Howard… heavily discouraged that side of me.”

“It’s a damn good thing your father is dead.”

“Why do you say that, Bruce? Because you’d kill him yourself?”

“No. Because I’d sic Hulk on him.”

“I like him more and more, Zeymahi. We’re keeping him.”

- 

“Holy shit!”

“Yeah, that was my reaction too.”

“That is a very big snake.”

“Dirty!”

“DORIAN I WILL KILL YOU.”

“Healer’s Oath, Bridget! Healer’s Oath!!”

- 

“I just realized I’ve been clean for six months. Someone remind me to tell FRIDAY to get rid of the alcohol at the Tower and the Compound when we get back.”

“We could have Cici bring it back to the Nexus. I’m sure they would appreciate it.”

“That’s fine. Just as long as it’s away from my sobriety… Pepper, what-- OOF!”

“Wow, she knocked him right off the chair!”

“Bridget, please make sure he doesn’t have a concussion from that flying hug.”

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Pepper sat back in her chair, observing the man in front of her with a critical eye. It sounded insane, all of it. Yet she’d seen the truth with her own eyes, the power the group around her wielded at the tips of their fingers. She could also see the love and loyalty they had for her friend, the fierce protectiveness in the way they positioned themselves around him. And she could see the joy in Tony’s eyes, the lack of tension in his shoulders and face that had always been present before. A small smile quirked at her lips when she realized they were a better team than the Avengers had ever been. His old team had constantly used him and berated him and blamed him for so much. These people around him rallied to him and supported him as much as he did for them.

“I know it feels like free falling down the rabbit hole, but I swear everything we’ve told you is true.” Tony said after a few seconds of silence had passed.

That pulled the redhead’s attention to him and she wasted no time in standing and pulling Tony into a tight hug. “Tony, this is the happiest and most alive I’ve ever seen you. I’d have to be a fool not to be grateful for what they’ve done for you.”

Tony laughed quietly and tugged a strand of the woman’s hair. “And you’re no fool, Ms. Potts.”
He cleared his throat and stepped back. “There IS one more thing.”

Bruce nodded towards him. “It can’t be any more shocking that what we’ve seen so far.”

“Be careful what you wish for, Dr. Banner.” Bridget warned him. “Just before we came back, Master Hadrian was visited by Hela, this world’s Goddess of Death. As the Master of Death, Hadrian is basically the boss of all deities with death as their domain. She was extremely distraught, and we found out her father was imprisoned for crimes with extenuating circumstances surrounding them.”

Minowa nodded as well, eyes flaring again. “They gave him no chance to defend himself or even speak. His guilt was assumed.”

Pepper’s blue eyes narrowed at them. “But that’s against the law no matter where you are.”

Tony snorted and replied bitterly, “Well for as magically and technologically advance they are, Asgard sure has a pretty shoddy justice department.” He ignored the looks of shocked realization as he began to pace, his nails digging into his palms hard enough to draw blood. “They gave the guards free reign to hurt him! They were torturing an innocent man!”

A moment later Minowa was next to him, gently coaxing his hands into relaxing. “Drem, Zeymahi.” She murmured gently to him, allowing Bridget to heal his hands as she spoke. “Your friends do not know the circumstances.”

Tony took several deep breaths as the healer took care of the crescent marks in his flesh. “Barton was having his strings pulled by Loki, but no one seemed to notice Loki was having his pulled too. For claiming to love his brother so much, Thor doesn’t seem to know Loki’s eye color!”

Bruce sat up straight in his chair when a memory was pushed to the forefront of his mind-- Hulk being confronted by Loki before the God had been beaten into the ground. “Oh my God.” He breathed, drawing their attention. “He’s right. His eyes were blue when Hulk fought him at the tower, but green after the battle was over.”

“Loki was not the puppet master here.” Tony confirmed. “The one who was really behind it all is actually the entire reason the Chief took notice of our world to begin with. His name is Thanos, and he’s more dangerous than reindeer games ever was.”

Zevrael snorted at that. “Considering he wants to wipe out all life in the universe to please his ‘Lady Death’, I’d say that’s an understatement.”

Pepper closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “So Loki has been innocent the whole time. That’s… a bit of a shock.”

A sheepish grin crossed Tony’s face as he added, “This would probably be a good time to mention I broke him out and brought him here and he’s currently passed out in a room 30 feet that way.” He pointed towards the doorway he’d come through a few hours prior.

“... I’m sorry, what?”

Before any more could be said a soft voice called out to Tony and they turned to see Hela standing in the doorway, looking curious and wary at the same time. “Hey, come on in. Did you sleep okay?” Tony opened his arms to the girl, and she wasted no time in moving over to him and allowing him to situate her on his lap with her head against his chest. “Pepper, Bruce, meet Hela Lokidottir, the Goddess of Death. Hela, this is one of my best friends, Pepper, and my science bro, Bruce.” The dark haired child looked over at the duo and waved while giving a soft ‘hello’. 
Pepper had been ready to go off on a rant about the age of the girl, but her heart melted at the scene Tony and Hela made. A soft smile of her own crossed her lips as she greeted the child. “Hello, Hela. It’s nice to meet you.” The young girl smiled at her and Pepper had to fight down the urge to coo at the adorable scene.

Any further conversation was suddenly cut off by Ulysses’s tunneler popping out of the doorway. Bruce and Pepper yelped, but Tony ignored them as he stood with Hela on his hip. “Glory? Does Ulysses have a message?”

The tunneler nodded before the man’s voice came through. “New group on the approach. Unsure of motive, extraction recommended.”

“Shit.” Tony turned to his group, who had already risen from their seats. “Bridget, get Loki ready to move. Aria and Zevrael, grab our bags and take Pepper and Bruce topside, have the jet ready to go. Have Craig and ‘Ses cover for you, then make sure they board.” Seeing the reluctant look on Pepper’s face he quickly soothed her. “I have people with me, they’ll make damn sure I get out. My team wouldn’t let anything happen to me.” He gently passes Hela to her, who proceeded to grip the woman’s shoulder. “Take Hela with you. Get her on the jet.” Getting a nod the man waited until they were gone before turning to Minowa and Dorian. “Minowa, cover Bridget as she moves Loki. Dorian and I will follow behind you.” Minowa nodded, eyes glowing like embers. Bridget came through the door a moment later with Loki’s bed and Tony waved his hand over it so the wheels disappeared, allowing the bed to float freely. The Dragonborn took one end and helped the medic guide it through the doorway, leaving Dorian and Tony left. Tony took a deep breath before turning to Dorian, who was watching him curiously. “Dorian, take a count of ten, then torch it. Leave nothing behind.”

The grin that split the mage’s face was simultaneously maniacal and delighted as he summoned his fiendfyre snake into his hand. “Fratris, it would be my absolute pleasure.” The duo backed up to the door was as Dorian pushed more power into the fiendfyre serpent, increasing its’ size. Getting a nod from Tony, he counted down the allotted time before he tossed the flame into the center of the room. They didn’t wait to see it start consuming the bunker before they turned and ran like hell.

They burst out of the entrance as Bridget and Minowa were securing Loki. The two men sprinted up the ramp and Tony barked “Get this bird off the ground! We don’t want to get caught in this!” The hatch closed a moment later, the engines whirring to life. As they lifted off, the genius breathed a sigh of relief. “Ulysses, Craig, did you happen to see who showed up?”

“Yeah, we caught a glimpse of the pilot’s uniform.” Craig confirmed, setting his rifle to one side. “Looked like the symbol for that group you were talking about before, HYDRA.”

Instead of getting upset like Bruce and Pepper thought he would, Tony simply smirked. “Oh, THIS I have to see. Can we get a visual below?” A moment later, a window cover opened on the jet so they could see outside. As they watched, the HYDRA agents approached the bunker with weapons drawn. One peeked into the darkness of the entrance and was met with a face full of black flames in the shape of a snake. The fire from the creature continued to consume the bunker as the agents either ran for their lives or tried to confront the beast, only to be burned to less than ash. “Not gonna lie, that is VERY satisfying to watch.” The genius turned his attention to the pyromancer next to him, who looked undeniably smug. “Let it go for a few more minutes then cut it.” The mage nodded as Tony moved away from the window to take Hela from Pepper again. “Let’s head back to the compound. We’ve got a lot of work ahead of us.” He turned to take the controls to the quinjet before pausing and turning back to Pepper. “First, though… where is Rhodey?”
Translations for common phrases will no longer be provided-- I'm debating about just creating a separate piece for languages alone...

Dovahzul Translations

Drem Yol Lok -- Peace fire sky (A formal greeting)
Krifsilruth -- battle soul rage (Minowa's title for the Hulk)

Adorable Hela is adorable. Tony's codename is revealed-- Glitch!
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Bridget and Rhodey discuss potential healing and are interrupted by the arrival of Earth's resident Sorcerer Supreme. Plans are set into motion, and Rhodey learns just how chaotic his best friend's life has gotten.

Chapter Notes

UH, so when I went to bed at 4:30 this morning, I expected to have MAYBE 50 or 100 hits on this story, maybe one or two comments by the time I checked back in at 8:30 PM.

What I absolutely was NOT expecting in any way shape or form were numbers I was ACTUALLY presented with-- over 1100 hits and 8 comments, not to mention unexpected bookmarks and kudos!

Guys, you have NO idea what this means to me. My previously published stories were one-shots, and not very good ones either. To have garnered THIS level of support in less than 24 hours is... humbling. That my writing has garnered this level of support and interest after only a few hours brings me a level of joy that I have NEVER experienced before. Thank you ALL so much, and I hope to continue to live up to your desires and expectations.

Here's to many chapters to come!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes? You have a visitor.”

Bridget smiled and nodded her thanks as the nurse walked away. She turned that smile to Rhodey as she stepped through the door. “Hello, Lieutenant Colonel! My name is Bridget Ivorsen. Tony has told me quite a lot about you.”

The man in the hospital bed eyed the blond woman with suspicion. “Tony’s never mentioned a friend with the name ‘Bridget’.”

“No, I would imagine not.” The woman in question closed the door behind her as she pulled out the phone Tony had given her. “It’s a long story, but he had me bring you this so you could call and verify it with him yourself.” She passed the phone over to him before sitting down in a chair in the corner of the room.

The man in question immediately dialed Tony’s number, and it was answered after only two rings. “Bridget, did you find Rhody?”

A breath exploded out of Rhodey in a relieved laugh. “Yeah, she found me.”
“Rhodey! Fuck, it’s good to hear your voice. I was so worried...” Tony’s voice on the other end of the line trailed off with a slight hitch. There was shuffling in the background and a male voice the black man didn’t recognize was heard. “Yeah, I’m okay. So I take it you have a lot of questions, platypus.”

“The list just keeps growing, it seems. First and foremost, who is this woman who brought me the phone?”

“Her name is Bridget. She’s... a doctor. But she uses magic to fix things.” There was a pause as Tony gathered his thoughts. “I wouldn’t be here without her, Jim-- she saved my life.”

Hearing his name caused the paralyzed man to sit straighter. Tony rarely used his real name-- hearing it meant the conversation had just taken a turn for the deathly serious. “She saved your life? When?”

“Can you put me on speakerphone?” Rhodey did so, and Tony called out to Bridget. “Hey Bri’, you have the papers, right?”

The amethyst-eyed woman pulled the folder in question from her coat. “Of course, Tony. I wouldn’t forget them. It concerns your health, and his, after all.”

Tony’s sigh of relief could be clearly heard. “Sorry, just making sure. Jim, the papers Bridget’s about to give you detail the damage she found on and in my body when she and her colleagues found me.”

“Found you?”

Bridget nodded, passing the folder off to Rhodey. “In Siberia, yes. They’re very comprehensive, they’ll tell you most of what you want to know.”

There was silence for a few minutes as the man flipped through the pages, eyes taking in every detail and mind cataloging every scrap of information. Finally, he threw the folder onto the bed in front of him. “Steven Grant Rogers, you son of a bitch.”

“Rogers is on several people's shit list right now, don’t worry,” Tony told him, only to be cut off by a female voice in the background. “No Aria, you cannot rupture his eardrums.” A disappointed ‘aww’ was heard even as Tony turned his attention back to them. “Look, the point is that all of that damage? The woman standing in front of you healed it, all of it. I’m hoping she can take a look at your spine...”

There was a pause as Rhodey turned to consider the woman who was standing to the side, hands behind her back with a soft smile on her face. “... You trust her, Tones?”

“With my life, Jim.”

“Alright Tony, but you owe me an explanation when I see you.”

Tony sighed with relief. “Absolutely. Whatever you want, Sour Patch.”

They spoke for a few more minutes before hanging up, and Bridget took a step closer to the bed. “Before we get started, I need to know if you consent to me using my magic on you. Tony didn’t have the option when I first found him-- it was literally ‘do or die’. You have the option of saying no.”

Rhodey felt some of the tension brought on by the idea of magic fall away. That this woman was...
willing to ask before starting did a lot to put his mind at ease. “You have my consent.”

Bridget smiled and dipped her head. “Thank you, Lieutenant Colonel. Let’s see what I can do.” She stepped closer to the bed and the comforting gold glow surrounded her hands again. She held them over Rhodey’s body, allowing the diagnostic magic to sweep through him. She allowed it to continue for 30 seconds before cutting it. “It looks like I can fix it, but not here. It would require a place where we’ll be uninterrupted for a while, and one other person.” She looked up at the black man, a grin on her face. “But it can be fixed.”

Rhodey nodded, elation written all over his face. It fell after a moment though. “How do I get out of the hospital, though? I doubt the nurses would let me leave after being admitted so soon.”

Bridget hummed for a moment, thinking. Suddenly she snapped her fingers with a ‘got it’. She turned to a corner of the room and raised her hand, and a relay corridor opened up. She stuck her head through, ignoring Rhodey’s sound of shock for a moment. “Craig! I need you for a second!” After a few moments, she pulled back and another man stepped through the corridor. Craig had ditched his armor in favor of a black t-shirt and camouflage cargo pants tucked into black combat boots. His signature shades and red beret remained firmly in their places; the sniper refused to part with them. “Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes, this is Craig Boone, a friend of mine.”

Craig immediately snapped out a smart military-style salute, falling into old habits from his time in the NCR. “It’s an honor to meet you, sir.”

“At ease.” Rhodey blinked at the exchange once he realized what had transpired. “You a military man?”

“Yeah. Was a sniper, honorable discharge. I doubt Bridget brought me here to talk, though.” He turned his attention to the woman.

Bridget nodded in affirmation. “I can help heal his spine, but getting him out of the hospital would be a pain.”

The sniper snorted, rolling his eyes behind his shades. “Lots of red tape, endless bureaucracy, not to mention his involvement during the events in the ‘civil war’... calling it a pain would be an understatement.” He thought for a moment, brow furrowed. “We have a few options. We could make it seem like he was never here to begin with, that he got taken to another hospital. We could… compel a discharge, say something about treatment elsewhere. We could leave an illusion, but that runs the risk of being discovered for what it is.”

There was a moment of silence as everyone thought. It was suddenly interrupted by a flux of energy, followed by the opening of a gold portal rimmed by sparks. Craig quickly rendered himself invisible moments before a man in blue robes and a red cape stepped through, brow furrowed in worry. Bridget’s mouth dropped open as the portal closed. “By the Nine, you have the same facial hair as Tony!”

The man blinked at her for a moment. “You mean Tony Stark?”

“Yeah! Wow, that is uncanny! Tony would have a damn field day.” She cleared her throat after a few seconds, embarrassed by her outburst. “Sorry about that. I’m Bridget Ivorsen, I was talking about treatment options with Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes.” She held her hand out the man to shake.

He took it, and their eyes widened when they both felt magic surge within each other. The man eyed her and spoke again after a moment of consideration. “I’m Dr. Stephen Strange, Sorcerer Supreme and Master of the Mystic Arts. I detected several surges of foreign magic recently and
decided to investigate.”

“I’m guessing Bridget’s was most recent,” Craig asked, dropping his illusion. A moment later he found himself pinned to the wall by a line of eldritch magic. He grunted in pain but forced his body to relax, trusting the healer to be able to de-escalate the situation.

“Dr. Strange, I apologize if Craig startled you.” Bridget pulled Stephen’s attention to her. “We’re here on behalf of Tony. I specialize in restoration magic, and he wanted to see if I could do something for Rhodey’s spine. Craig is my ally and friend-- we were discussing how to get Rhodey out of the hospital and back to the compound. He has previous experience in the military and the bureaucracy surrounding it.”

Rhodey nodded as well. “I can vouch for that.”

Stephen eyed her for a moment before turning his attention back to Craig. “Do you two know something about the other magic fluxes?”

“We do, but can we discuss that once we have Rhodey out of the hospital?” Bridget asked. “Tony is eager to have his friend walking around again. I promise we’ll explain what we can, but this isn’t the place to do it.”

There was a moment of silence before the line dropped from Craig, allowing him to move freely again. “I can recommend he be taken elsewhere for treatment. I may not practice anymore, but my word still carries weight in the medical world.”

“We’d greatly appreciate that,” Rhodey said softly, grabbing the folder from before back. He replaced all of the papers before handing it back to Bridget, who tucked it into her coat again. “Let’s get out of here. I hate hospitals.”

“I don’t blame you, sir.” Craig dipped his head to the man. “I’ll head back to the others and let them know you’re coming.” Craig opened the corridor before turning back to them. “Bridget, let me know when you’re on your way. See you all soon.” He stepped through and allowed the gate to close behind him. He took a moment to take a few deep breaths before tilting his head up. “FRIDAY, where’s Tony?”

“Boss is with Aria right now. She’s discovered the wonders of online shopping and the joys of having anything she might need right at her fingertips.”

Despite the current situation, Craig couldn’t help but snort with laughter. “Sounds like her alright.” He closed his eyes to think for a moment. “Is there a room somewhere I could use? Something with open space?”

“There’s a conference room two floors down that’s unoccupied.”

“Thanks, FRIDAY.” He quickly took the elevator down and the AI directed him to the room in question. Once inside, he fished a combat knife out of one of his boots and nicked his finger. Moving to the center of the room he drew the symbol of the hallows with the blood that welled up from the cut on the floor. He stepped back a few steps as the symbol lit up and began to glow white.

A moment later, the spectral form of Hadrian stood over it, brow creased with worry. “Craig, is everything alright? Is Tony doing okay?”

“He’s fine, boss. We might have a situation though. Seems we inadvertently caught the attention of Dr. Stephen Strange.”
Hadrian’s brow rose. “The Sorcerer Supreme? Interesting…” He thought for a moment, eyes distant. “It could be advantageous to make him aware of the threat Thanos poses. He would be an extremely strong ally for Tony and yourselves.” He closed his eyes for a moment before they popped back open. “Wait a moment, it just occurred to me. The Reapers have encountered the practitioners of the Mystic Arts before. In the 90’s there was an alien war that happened on Earth that was kept very hush hush. I sent a small team of Reapers down-- the Skrull posed a unique kind of threat I wanted to keep an eye on. They weren’t doing more than scouting, but they ended up working with the Sanctum in New York. If we’re lucky, they’ll recognize my symbol.”

Boone sighed softly and nodded. “Neither Bridget nor myself were displaying our symbol when we met Doctor Strange. Should we display when he arrives?”

“That would be preferable. In fact, could you summon Tony here for a moment?”

The sniper wasted no time calling up Kimball and sending him off. It was only two minutes later when a corridor opened and Tony stepped through. “Chief, hey!” He grinned at the Master of Death, stepping up next to Craig. “It’s good to see you again!”

Hadrian smiled brilliantly at the man, dipping his head. “It’s good to see you as well, Tony. Are you settling in alright?”

“Yeah, I’m doing fine. It’s a bit of an adjustment, but I’ll be fine.”

A snort escaped Craig as he bumped his shoulder against Tony’s. “And on the off chance you have a bad day, don’t forget you have us.”

Tony grinned and bumped him back. “I know that. That’s why I’ll be fine.”

“I’m glad you’re doing well. Don’t forget you can contact me if you need to ask me anything, or even just to talk.” The man pulled over a chair and sat down. “Tony, Craig has brought something to my attention.” He quickly filled the Right Hand in on what had transpired.

Tony nodded along and asked questions for clarification when needed. Finally, he said, “If he’s working on helping get Rhodey out of the hospital, he’s golden in my book. And hey, the Avengers are kind of short members right now. Maybe I can get Merlin to join us.”

The Master of Death began to laugh, much to the other two men’s confusion. “I apologize. Merlin was actually a real figure from my original home, and the comparison was amusing.”

The genius snorted as well before becoming grim. “Chief, Pepper brought something up on the flight back. I was badly injured in my encounter with Rogers and Barnes, but came back even better than when I left for Siberia. There’s going to be a lot of talk and a lot of questions.”

The emerald-eyed man nodded and sat back. “I’ve actually thought about that. Your world has already encountered magic before, so it would not be so far fetched to tell the press you utilized a healing branch to treat your wounds. Perhaps stress the fact that without it, you would have died. If you’re feeling brave, release the pictures of your injuries and the video of the fight.”

Tony took a deep breath and nodded, reaching up to rub his chest. The flare of love and comfort from his mark helped center him. “I think that might be for the best.”

“Whatever you decide Tony, we’ve got you.” The sniper next to him said softly, grasping his shoulder gently in his hand.

“We’re all right behind you, Tony,” Hadrian affirmed, reaching his deathly aura out to him.
Despite being in two separate places in reality, the genius still felt the energy embrace him.

The man in question nodded, reveling in the feeling of home and protection and support surrounding him. After a minute or two they pulled apart. “FRIDAY,” Tony called up to the ceiling. “Contact Pepper and have her schedule a press conference regarding the events of Siberia and the Accords a few weeks from now.” He grimaced suddenly. “The Accords need to be revised and revisited. It was a good idea but needs tweaking. But to do that…” He closed his eyes for a moment. “Thaddeus Ross needs to be out of the picture.”

Hadrian nodded in agreement. “You’ve accumulated enough blackmail on him that it would put him away for a long, long time. If it reaches the hands of the right people… say, the other representatives on the council and the president himself… That would go a long way.”

“That’s what we’ll do then. Craig,” Tony turned to the sniper. “Could Ulysses plant the information?”

“Absolutely. He’d relish the challenge.”

“I’ll have him do that then… And I actually have a job for you, if you’re up for it-- not immediately, mind you-- but I need to keep an eye on Rogers and the rest of the rogues, make sure they don’t continue causing an inordinate amount of damage.”

Craig nodded, a smirk quirking his lips. “I can do that. Let me know when you want to start that.”

Tony’s mouth twisted into a smirk of its own. “Can do. For now, could you let the others know we’re going to have company soon?”

“Of course.” The man nodded and bade Hadrian goodbye before leaving his team leader and the Master of Death alone in the room.

Hadrian smiled at Tony as the man turned towards him. “You’re a natural at leading people. That will serve you well as you rebuild the Avengers.” He stood and banished his chair. “How are your resident God of Mischief and Goddess of Death?”

“Loki is recovering well. Still sleeping, even though the potion wore off a while ago. Bridget thinks it’s because he hasn’t slept well in so long that his body is compensating for it now. Hela woke for about an hour and had something to eat before going back to her dad.” He tilted his head up. “Speak of which, FRIDAY, do we have a floor ready for them?”

“Ms. Potts made me aware they were coming and I arranged accordingly, Boss.”

“That’s my girl.” He turned his attention back to Hadrian. “I should probably make sure everything is moving along as scheduled.”

The Master of Death nodded. “Of course. Don’t forget, I’m only a summon away.”

Tony smiled brilliantly at the man and nodded. “Thanks, Chief.” The specter of Hadrian nodded before flickering out, the symbol on the floor fading into nothingness. Tony immediately made his way to the elevator. “FRIDAY, gather all of the material we’ve accumulated on one Thaddeus Ross and have it ready in both physical and digital format to give to ‘Ses.”

“Two steps ahead of ya, Boss.”

“Atta girl!”
“So you know what you have to do?”

Rhodey blinked at the scene he rolled in on. Tony stood in front of a black man dressed in a sleeveless duster and a strange mask on his face, several thick folders being pressed into his hands as well as a small unassuming metal case. He had a massive rifle strapped to his back, and Rhodey was stunned when he realized it was an AMR of exceptional quality. Tony looked damn good as if he had lost several years worth of age from his body. His face was grim as he stepped back to regard the man, his eyes filled with determination.

“So of course, Amicus.” Ulysses replied, tucking the folder into his coat. “Everything will find its’ place… leaders, figureheads-- they’ll have the truth.” He glanced over in the direction of Rhodey and Bridget. “Your friend is here-- I’ll take my leave.” He turned and swept from the room as Tony turned to see them.

“Rhodey!” Tony’s eyes and face lit up with a brilliant smile as he strode over to the man, leaning over to embrace him. “It’s good to see you, platypus. You have no idea…”

The paralyzed man didn’t hesitate to return the hug. “I’m glad you’re okay, Tones.” He said softly, pulling away after a while.

Tony nodded and wiped his eyes, trying to stave off the relieved tears threatening to fall. “Me too, Rhodey. Bridget, did you find out if you can help him?” He asked, turning his eyes to the blond.

“It can be done, Tony.” She replied, nodding. “I’ll need Minowa’s help though. The energy required…”

“No problem. First thing, though, I owe Rhodey an explanation.” He turned his eyes upward.

“FRIDAY, is everyone gathered?”

“They’re all there, Boss.”

Tony nodded as he took the handles of Rhodey’s wheelchair. “Perfect. Let them know we’re on our way up.” He pushed the wheelchair to the elevator FRIDAY had ready for them, and as they began to ascend he turned his attention to his best friend again. “I thought Dr. Strange would be with you.”

Bridget piped in, “He had to run back to the Sanctum for a while, but he said he’d meet us later tonight. I’ll join you all in a few minutes, I want to change into something more comfortable.”

The genius nodded at that. “That should give us enough time to get through a chunk of explanation. Don’t take too long changing.” The elevator dinged and Bridget stayed in the elevator as the other two exited.

Zevrael was the first to approach him. “Welcome back, Lethallin!” Zevrael greeted Tony with a grin. “Pepper ordered pizza, that should be delivered in an hour or so.”

“That sounds perfect, thanks, guys.” The group in the common area was spread out in a loose circle, and Tony positioned Rhodes so he could see everyone as Zev flopped down next to Dorian. “So, introductions first. Guys, this is Rhodey, my best friend since MIT.” Greetings were called out with a wave or two thrown in. “Rhodey, from the right and going around, this is Minowa, she led the team that saved my life.” The Dragonborn looked over from her place on the floor and gave a respectful dip of her head before leaning back and allowing Bruce, who was sitting behind her on the couch, to play with her hair and horns again. She had switched her armor out for a red tank top top
and black mid-thigh length shorts. Her feet were bare, giving her the appearance of wearing as little clothing as possible while still remaining tasteful. Around her neck was a black velvet choker with the symbol of the Hallows dangling from it. “You’ve met Craig, and next to him is one of his lovers, Aria.” The woman grinned and waved while Craig gave him a salute again. The woman refused to change out of her raver clothes until she found a style that caught her eye, but she had ditched her shoes. Her forehead was covered by a piece of black cloth with the Hallows embroidered in shimmering blue on it, hiding her scar from view. The male was dressed in the same clothes as earlier with the addition of dog tags stamped with the Hallows. “You briefly caught a glance of the other one earlier, Ulysses. He’s doing a task for me, he’ll be back in a few hours. And next to them are Dorian and Zevrael Pavus.” Zev grinned and wiggled his metal fingers towards Rhodey from his place next to his husband and Dorian smirked and gave a lazy wave. Dorian had wasted no time changing out his robes for other clothes when he realized the kind of variety there was on Earth. He was now proudly sporting a black t-shirt with the words ‘let’s get one thing straight’ in bold white letters, and under that were even bigger rainbow letters stating ‘I’m not’. A pair of sinfully tight skinny jeans hugged his hips, ass, and legs, and a pair of gold and black high-tops covered his feet which were resting on the ottoman in front of him. An ear cuff in the shape of a snake was twined around his right ear, and the man was bound and determined to add to his collection once he got some piercings. Around his right wrist was a gold cuff with the symbol of the Hallows again. Zev had on a long-sleeved white shirt with the words ‘elf lives matter’ on it in a font that seemed to come straight out of ‘Lord of the Rings’ and a pair of plain black pants. Over the shirt was a sleeveless cardigan of swirling blues, and a pair of black fingerless gloves adorned his hands. A simple silver ring on his right middle finger sported the symbol of the Hallows, the left ring finger taken up by a wedding band that matched the one on Dorian.

Rhodey blinked at the ragtag group, trying to sort his thoughts out. He finally turned his gaze to Minowa. “Tony said you saved his life?”

Minowa cracked one crimson eye open to look at her shield brother. “Anthony, you know it was more Bridget’s doing than mine.”

“You led the team. Give yourself some credit.”

The woman snorted, shaking her head as she closed her eye. “That is not the same.”

Rhodey shot her a look. “Like hell it isn’t.” He barked, causing Minowa’s eyes to shoot open fully and snap to him as she sat straight. “You helped save my best friend’s life. I don’t care how small a role you think you had, Tony is still standing here because of you. That deserves as much credit as anyone else’s part.”

Minowa looked completely stunned, blinking at the man for a few seconds. Finally, she relaxed back against Bruce again. “I… will think on your words.” She said, dipping her head towards the man.

The conversation stopped for a moment as a corridor opened up and Bridget stepped through. She was now dressed in a flowing blue sundress with a white lace trim, a white wide-brimmed beach hat sitting on her head as her blond hair fell loose in waves around her head. On a delicate silver chain around her neck was a pendant of the Hallows. A pair of simple white sandals sat on her feet. She had several folders held against her chest, and she smiled at the group as the corridor closed. “Sorry I’m late, everyone! I hope I didn’t miss anything.” She chirped.

“No, you’re right on time. We were just about to start explaining.” The group rearranged themselves so Tony sat on a plush armchair surrounded by his family, either sitting or standing.
Dorian and Zevrael stood at his right while Minowa stood at his left, Bridget sitting next to her on her left. Aria sat to the right of the Pavus men with Craig standing behind her. The sight was almost awe-inspiring and Rhodey couldn’t help but draw parallels to a king flanked by his most trusted, his court. As he, Pepper, and Bruce situated themselves in front of them Tony took a deep breath. “Better settle in, Platypus. You’re in for a wild ride.”

Chapter End Notes

So, as of this chapter, there's going to be a change to one aspect of the story. It was brought to my attention that having to scroll up and down for translations to dialogue was a little tedious, so my use of languages is going to be minimized to names and titles. I hope this helps the story flow a little better.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

The Reapers take a moment to relax between talking to Rhodey and Pepper and greeting the Sorcerer Supreme. Unusual anomalies begin to pop up, and Hadrian is forced to make a house call. Suddenly... Soulmates. How about that?

Death is a softie as well... But don't let anyone know!

((Too late.))

Chapter Notes

Once again, I must reiterate-- YOU READERS ARE AMAZING!!

Thank you, please continue.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“‘You don’t do anything by half, do you Tony?’”

The man in question snorted as he looked over the rim of his glass of sparkling water at his best friend. “Not really my MO. You know that by now.”

The Lieutenant Colonel chuckled and shook his head in exasperation. “Yes, but this is taking it to an entirely new level. Still,” he cast his gaze to the room and the people within it. “These people are obviously good for you. I haven’t seen you this happy since early MIT, and even that’s debatable.”

Tony let a small smile quirk at his lips as he looked to his team as well. The explanation had taken at least five hours, and the pizza had been quickly devoured as the time rolled by. They were now waiting on the Chinese takeout that had been ordered, and the group was working out a cooking schedule. Ordering out would get old very quickly, and most of the Reapers actually enjoyed cooking or baking to some extent. Craig, Aria, and Zev were damn good cooks in a variety of different cuisines, and no one would touch a grill if Ulysses was on hand for fear of losing their fingers-- he was very possessive of his title as grill master. Bridget and Dorian were both well known in the Nexus for their baking skills. Tony himself had a very serious weakness for the cheesecake brownies Dorian made. Minowa was the outlier of the group-- turns out cooking wasn’t a skill dragons really needed to know or learn. She was willing to retrieve ingredients, but left the creation to her teammates. They were content with that arrangement and were grateful for her willingness to even go to other worlds to retrieve what they needed. “They’ve been good to me. For the first time in recent memory, I feel like I’m part of the group and not just…” Tony waved his hand, struggling for a moment. “…an outsider.”

A soft chuckle caused the duo to turn their gaze to the person on the other end of the couch Tony was sitting on. “Your old team has no idea what they’ve lost.” Loki said softly, looking over at
them. “Fools, all of them. You are much better off with these people anyway. Their love for you is 
very real and very strong.” The god and goddess had come looking for Tony an hour ago, and it 
took some coaxing from them all to get him to join them. Pepper had offered to help Hela find 
some better clothes and Hela’s exuberance at the idea had been impossible to say no to.

“Even a blind man could see that.” Rhodey agreed, dipping his head to the trickster god. It had 
been shocking to hear about Loki and the situation surrounding him, and he had been admittedly 
suspicious at first. Watching the man interact with his daughter (Loki had a daughter, who would 
have thought?) helped put those fears to rest. Loki absolutely doted on her, and Hela was always 
happiest when near her ‘papa’. His attitude was also quite different than before. This Loki was 
quiet, content to sit and observe the goings on around him as he recovered. He was full of razor 
sharp wit and incredible intelligence, but lacked any of the former malice he used to have.

The elevator suddenly dinged and the doors slid open to admit Pepper and Hela, the latter 
immediately running over to Loki and Tony to curl up between them. She was now wearing a 
green t-shirt depicting Loki’s signature horned helmet and the words ‘I do what I want’ and a pair 
of black leggings with simple black sneakers. A soft emerald green beanie was perched on her 
head, helping hold her hair in place. Loki relaxed into the seat as he rubbed her back, content to 
have his daughter close to him.

“Hey kiddo, did you have a good time with Pepper?” The genius grinned as he leaned over and 
gave her knee a gentle squeeze.

“Yep! Pepper is really nice! She helped me pick out lots of clothes!”

Pepper smiled indulgently down at the young goddess. “It was my pleasure, sweetheart. Tony, can 
I talk to you for a moment?” She lead them to a corner away from the rest of the group. “Tony, 
Hela has been around for a very long time, but she has the mentality and mannerisms of a nine year 
old… How is that possible?”

His whiskey-brown eyes became somber as he sighed. “Odin banished Hela to Helheim, unable to 
leave or interact with anyone outside of that realm unless they came to her, and the only ones able 
to enter freely were the dead. Loki could get to her, but he couldn’t stay long before he would have 
to leave. From the spells I found and broke on her, when Odin bound her he added something to 
stop her from aging normally, physically or otherwise-- maybe in an attempt to keep her from 
growing more powerful and eventually escaping. She’s been trapped at nine years old and isolated 
for centuries. Hopefully my breaking that hoodoo will allow her to grow a bit.”

Their conversation was interrupted by a corridor opening in the room and Ulysses stepping into the 
room. “It’s done. Should be hearing about it soon-- news travels fast.” The man rumbled, sliding 
his mask off to allow his lovers to kiss him when they approached him.

“Any complications?” Tony asked, turning to fully address the man.

The sniper shook his head as he set his rifle and mask to one side. “No problems-- they never knew 
I was there... Picked up some information, though. Might be useful, might not. Came from Ross.”

He tossed a thumb drive to Tony, who snatched it out of the air with his magic.

“Great job, ‘Ses. Knew you were the right person for this.” He stashed the drive in his pocket for 
perusal later. “Anyone know where Bruce and Minowa are?”

Dorian and Zevrael popped their heads up from the paper they were scribbling on as they tried to 
sort out menus. “Our resident Dragonborn is in the meditation room with him. They asked that they 
not be disturbed for a while. They should be up soon, it’s almost 6:30.”
Sure enough a corridor opened moments after the Chinese arrived ten minutes later. Minowa stepped through with Bruce following behind her at a leisurely pace. “Good evening, everyone.” The dragonborn greeted them as she retrieved a plate. “Are we still waiting on the arrival of the Sorcerer Supreme?”

“Dr. Strange? Yeah, he said he’d be here around this time. Give it another few minutes.” Tony replied with a smile.

Bridget smiled as she waved her chopsticks in the air blithely. “Well, if he shows up soon he can have some Chinese—Mara knows we ordered enough!”

Laughter echoed around the room before everyone fell into their own conversations. Tony sat back for a few minutes observing, his heart swelling with joy at the easy camaraderie between everyone. Even Loki was being included, having been pulled into a conversation with Minowa and Bruce. He seemed unusually comfortable around the Dragonborn, but Tony chalked it up to the aura of calm that surrounded her. Bruce was also surprisingly kind to the God of Mischief—mutual respect, maybe. Loki regularly glanced over at Hela, who was sitting with Bridget and Aria as they helped her pick out things for her new room from the internet. Craig and Ulysses were leaning against a wall not far from them, silently taking in the proceedings. Tony caught Craig glancing at his female lover with Hela on her lap, a strange look of longing on his face. He made a note to talk to the NCR sniper later before looking towards Dorian and Zev. Zev was engaged in a lively discussion with Rhodry, who was bent nearly double in his wheelchair from laughing so hard, tears streaming down his face. The elf looked absolutely delighted at the reaction and Tony had to smile when he realized Zev was actively trying to make his best friend happy. Dorian stood not too far away, his own posture relaxed as he spoke to Pepper. From what he could hear the two were engaged in a friendly conversation comparing fashion trends between Earth and the Tevinter Imperium. Tony had a suspicion his wallet was about to take a serious hit, but the fact that he had the support of one of his best friends was well worth the cost.

The room went quiet when FRIDAY alerted Tony to Stephen's arrival. “Send him up, FRI.” Tony told her before turning to his group. “Marks showing, everyone?” His team nodded, pointing to their various body parts or jewelry. Loki tilted his head in curiosity at the symbol. “Long story, Reindeer Games. Do you and Hela want to be here when we're explaining?”

Loki allowed Hela to curl up in his arms as he thought. His attention was drawn to Bridget as she sat next to him on the couch. “We won't let anyone hurt you, you know that right? You and your daughter will be safe if you stay.”

The God nodded as he held his daughter tighter. “I... I would like to be here to listen.” He admitted.

“That's fine. This is a safe haven, and I won't allow anyone to attack us here.” The genius' eyes filled with a determined light and seemed to flicker to a glowing orange color before becoming brown again. From the corner they were sitting in, Ulysses’ eyes narrowed and Craig tilted his head in curiosity. “Brucie-bear, you good?” The brunette turned his attention to his friend who once again had the Dragonborn seated between his legs on the floor.

The scientist looked down at Minowa, absentmindedly running his fingers through her hair. “I'm fine right here.” He finally said. The Dragonborn gave a small smile and a rumbling hum of pleasure at the answer.

Tony nodded at that, biting back a grin. He would have to interrogate his science bro and the Dragonborn about their behavior later. After a second or two he turned to Pepper and Rhodry. “Guys?”
Rhodey shook his head. “I'm beat, Tones. It's been a long day, I need to get some sleep.”

Pepper smiled sweetly at Tony. “I have some paperwork to get done-- Stark Industries won't run itself.” She hugged the man tightly. “I'll be in my office downstairs. I'm only a call away.”

Tony hugged her back. “Thanks, Pepper. Sour Patch, let me know if you need anything.”

The duo nodded before moving to the second elevator. As they left the Reapers of the group quickly arranged themselves as to appear as non-threatening as possible while still being able to leap into action at the first sign of trouble. Loki and Hela took a seat close to Tony, trusting the Right Hand to protect them. And wasn't that ironic-- the God of Mischief trusting an Avenger to protect himself and his daughter. Tony couldn't fault him for it, though-- he had managed to break through enchantments cast on both Loki and Hela with incredible ease, despite the ones on the Goddess of Death having been around for several centuries at least. His attention was pulled towards the elevator as it opened, admitting the Sorcerer Supreme.

Stephen took two step into the room before freezing, caught off guard by the number of people waiting there. His eyes found Loki and he visibly tensed. The sound of a throat being cleared drew his attention and he was pinned by the amethyst eyes of the healer from earlier.

Bridget rose to her feet and dipped her head to the Sorcerer Supreme. “Stay your hand, Sorcerer Supreme. You do not have all the information. Loki and his daughter have called for Right of Asylum, thus any attack on them will be considered an attack on us.” A tense silence passed before Stephen nodded his concession.

“Wow Bridget, I didn't know you had it in you!” Tony grinned at Bridget as he stood to greet Dr. Strange.

The blond woman smiled as she buffed her nails on her dress. “As an impartial healer, it was necessary to know. Some people in Skyrim didn't like that I was willing to heal anyone who came to me for aid.”

Minowa snorted from her seat between Dr. Banner's legs. “It became less common when people found out you had the backing of the Dark Brotherhood.”

Bridget laughed at that. “I think they were more terrified of the fact that the Dark Brotherhood member hanging around the College was also capable of killing people by shouting at them.” The Dragonborn simply shot the restoration master a grin that contained far too many teeth in response to that.

The conversation was cut off when a flurry of red launched at Tony. He flailed for a moment before he realized what he was being accosted by. “Strange!” He yelped as the Cloak of Levitation wrapped around him, almost as if cuddling him. “Call off your enchanted Snuggie! Dammit Dorian, stop laughing!!” He proceeded to yell the last part at the pyromancer, who had fallen out of his chair cackling.

Stephen's eyes had gone impossibly wide at the Cloak's behavior. “I've never seen it act like that.” He finally admitted as he moved forward to try and help the genius.

Tony suddenly went very still. “Wait, what?” He twisted his head to look down at the Cloak. “You have a name??” The laughter that had started up around the room stopped as the Cloak wiggled. “Wait, hold on. You don't have a name, per se, but you have a... preference??” Another pause. “...Levi? Why Levi?”
The Sorcerer Supreme's breath exploded into a shocked noise, catching the room's attention. “That's the Cloak of Levitation, it's an ancient and powerful artifact. You can understand it?”

The genius blinked at the question. “I... guess?” He turned his attention to Aria. “Songbird, you're the language expert here. Can you understand it?”

Aria's eyes narrowed as she shook her head. “Tony, I didn't hear the Cloak make any noise indicative of any language.”

“Neither could I Anthony, and I have the Allspeak.” Loki looked down at Hela, who also shook her head with a 'me neither'.

The blood began to drain from Tony's face. He turned to the Sorcerer Supreme, eyes impossibly wide. “Wait, can't you understand it?”

Stephen shook his head, brow furrowed with confusion. “I receive... feelings, I suppose. I'm able to deduce what it's trying to communicate from those.” Levi left Tony to curl around the sorcerer again. The blue-eyed male stroked its' collar, brow furrowing after a moment. “He thinks you’re... familiar?” Stephen looked over to the genius confused.

Tony shook his head, running his hand through his hair. “Don't look at me, I wouldn't know why I would feel familiar to it.”

Ulysses' eyes studied his brother as the genius sat slowly in the seat behind him. “Amicus, a suggestion. We need answers-- won't find them here, too many unknowns. Should call Dominus, he may know.”

“I agree with Ulysses.” Minowa said gently, moving from her spot with Bruce to stand behind Tony, rubbing his shoulders. “The Dinokthur may have the answers we need.”

Tony's brown eyes shifted to Stephen, still unsure. “Does the Chief even make house-calls?”

“If the need is great enough.” Craig looked towards Dorian and Zevrael. “Dorian, could you send the signal? Zev, if you have some of that calming tea on hand, now would be a good time for a pot.”

Zev immediately moved to the kitchen, and Dorian held his hand out expectantly. Craig immediately pulled the knife from his boot and passed it to him. The mage moved to a blank wall before scoring his palm. He drew the symbol of the Hallows on the wall before pressing his palm to it-- the hand print signified the need for the physical presence of the Master of Death. He held his hand out for Bridget to heal as the mark lit up white, pulsing rhythmically.

Stephen inhaled sharply at the symbol when he saw it. “I know that mark. It was in one of the books in the Sanctum. There was very little written about it, but it was implied that those who knew the mark and carried it on their person were allied with a powerful force.” His eyes snapped to the group as a whole. Minowa smirked and tapped the choker around her neck. Bridget fingered the pendant on her chest with a grin. Aria fixed her headband-- the symbol had managed to get flipped to the inside somehow. Craig held up his dog tags, and Ulysses turned so the back of his duster was showing the symbol stitched into it with military green colored thread. Dorian flashed his wrist, and Zev peeked in long enough to show off his ring. “Amazing... Anthony, you have some very interesting allies.”

“Allies? Dear sir, you are mistaken!” Dorian arched an eyebrow before turning to the genius.

Tony calmly tapped the plate against his chest once, just so it lit up and shone from under his shirt.
As the Sorcerer Supreme stared in shock Tony sat back and said, “I wouldn’t call them my allies... I'd call them my family.”

Whatever would have been said next was cut off as the mark on the wall suddenly flared brilliantly. The center expanded into a black, swirling vortex, and a moment later Hadrian stepped out of it. He looked around at the scene, his gaze drawn for a moment to the God of Mischief who bowed his head in respect for the Master of Death. Giving his own brief nod he turned his eyes to Tony. “Anthony, what’s going on? You wouldn't have physically called me here if the need were not great.”

The genius nodded, smiling at the Master of Death despite the emotional turmoil he felt. “Chief, thanks for coming. We've had some weird things come up... We don't know how to explain it...”

Stephen had his eyes locked firmly on the new figure. For some reason the man was setting off every magical red flag he had. The level of power he was giving off was sending chills up and down his spine, and his aura was inky black like the void with smatterings of green sparks dispersed throughout. Levi appeared curious about the newcomer but was also giving off a mix of awed and terrified vibes. Something about this man was mind-blowingly dangerous, doubly so if Levi’s reaction was anything to go by.

“Do any of those anomalies have to do with our new friend?” Hadrian's words drew the attention of the Sorcerer Supreme. “It's a pleasure and an honor to meet you, Dr. Strange.” Hadrian gave the man a respectful bow. “I am Hadrian Black, the Master of Death.”

Strange had encountered many powerful forces in his life, Dormammu and the Ancient one being the most obvious. This man had just beaten them both, hands down, in a matter of moments. And Stephen didn’t doubt Black could back up the claim. One simply didn't make statements like that without being able to prove it. “The honor is mine, Master Black.” The Sorcerer bowed back to the man.

Zev came back into the room a moment later holding a tray with several cups on it along with two bowls with wrapped sugar cubes and travel creamers. “Good evening, Lethanavir!” He chirped as he set the tray down on the counter. “Two lumps and a dash of cream in your tea, yes?”

Hadrian smiled brightly and nodded. “That would be perfect. Thank you Zevrael.”

The silver-haired elf smiled as he prepared the Master of Death's drink. “Everyone come get your tea! Dr. Strange, would you care for a cup?”

The sorcerer gave the cup a wary look as the others reached for their mugs. “I'm not sure that would be wise...” He held up his hands which were covered by his gloves yet still visibly trembling.

Bridget sat down her own mug as she moved in front of the man. “May I? She asked, holding her own hands out. The sorcerer paused before removing the articles and allowing the Restoration Master to take his hands. The healer's brow furrowed as she examined them. “I see...” she murmured after a moment. “Tony, could you grab Dr. Strange's mug? Half full, please.”

The genius nodded, also grabbing two lumps of sugar and a travel-sized creamer. He also discreetly cast a spell over the mug to keep it from spilling at all. “There, you should be fine. You won't regret it-- Zev's tea is the best.”

Stephen gave the genius a thankful smile as he reached for the drink. The moment their hands met, a powerful wave of magic surged through the room, bringing with it a bright kaleidoscope of colors
and light. Hadrian's head snapped towards the duo, eyes wide behind his silver-framed glasses at the sudden flux of energy. Several varying noises escaped the Reapers as the bond between them all flared with power, Minowa's voice resonating with several others' for a moment. Tony and Stephen had frozen, eyes wide in shock as they felt their auras reach for each other and touch briefly, bringing with it another flash of colors and light. The phenomenon lasted only a few second before it died away. The mug shattered on the floor as Tony collapsed to his knees, heaving great breaths at the sudden sensory overload. Stephen himself wobbled a bit before also falling. Levi fluttered in a panic between them, strangely distressed for a supposedly inanimate object.

Hadrian was on his feet and at their sides in a matter of milliseconds. “Bridget!” He barked to the blond who had backed away for a moment. She was by his side in a moment, seemingly knowing what her Master needed as she helped Tony rise long enough to help him sit back. She gently removed the shards of porcelain that had managed to end up in his knees when the mug had broken before his own fall. As she channeled healing magic into the gashes to close them Hadrian turned to Stephen. “Dr. Strange, are you with us?” He asked, snapping his fingers in front of the sorcerer's face.

It took a moment before Stephen blinked, seeming to come back to himself. “What... just happened?” He asked as he looked up at the ebony-haired man.

“Loathe as I am to say, I'm not entirely sure.” The Master of Death admitted, absentmindedly beginning test of the Sorcerer's awareness. Strange followed along, still reeling from what had happened.

“I might have an idea, Lord Hadrian.” Several eyes turned to Loki, who had stood with Hela on his hip. “I've not seen such a display in several hundred years, but... That looked remarkably like a soulmate recognition.”

Craig inhaled sharply as Ulysses' eyes widened. Aria looked towards the group with wide eyes. “I don't understand-- Ours was nothing like that! I don't think we even had a clue until we were Claimed!”

Hadrian sat back on his heels as he thought. “Because it's not the same. You three share a Triquetra Bond-- a single soul split between three people. What Loki is suggesting is the meeting of two souls who are completely compatible with each other.” He turned his attention to Tony, who looked torn between listening to Hadrian and looking towards the Sorcerer Supreme. “This isn't something I would have picked up on. I deal with souls, yes, but I'm not in charge of their creation. If I had known, I would have made you aware. You know that, correct?”

Tony nodded, his heartbeat finally starting to settle after the event. “I know, Chief. You don't need to tell me.” He finally turned his attention to the Sorcerer who was staring at him unabashedly. There was a moment or two of silence before he announced, “I think we need to extend the timetable of this pow-wow. Zev... we're gonna need more tea. A LOT more.”

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Tony stood on a patio overlooking the compound, staring up at the stars as he tried to organize his thoughts. They were taking a break from explaining things for a few minutes to allow everyone to regroup. He had entertained the notion of going down to his workshop to tinker a bit, but waved it off after a moment. Right now what he needed was a chance to organize his thoughts and feelings. Three days-- he had been back from the Nexus for three fucking days, and already things were getting crazy. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes to think. There was so much that needed to be accomplished, and despite the time that he now had all the time in the world to do them the genius could still feel the stress beginning to build in his mind. Then to top it all off was what had
happened with Stephen.

“Anthony?”

‘Speak of the devil…’ The genius turned to see the Sorcerer halfway through the door, looking at him. “Hey.” He greeted the man quietly, dipping his head.

“Do you mind if I join you?” Stephen asked, his voice soft and hesitant. The Reaper tilted his head in a jerking motion to come out, and he stepped out fully onto the patio area closing the door behind him. “I wanted to see if you were well.” He told the brunette, moving to stand beside him. After a moment he realized he could feel Tony’s magic hesitantly reaching for his, but the genius stopped it before it could get too far. And boy, wasn’t that a shock to find out-- Tony Stark, technological genius, had access to magic now. He wordlessly reached out his own aura in a silent invitation and gave a small smile when the brown-eyed man allowed his own to mingle.

Tony stayed silent for a few seconds before turning to face the Sorcerer. “I almost said 'I'm fine'... Three days back and I'm already falling back on old habits.” He ran his fingers through his hair with a grimace. “This is a lot to take in.” He finally admitted.

Stephen nodded, his heart constricting at the lost look on the man's face. “From what I’ve heard so far, that’s an understatement.” He finally said, his blue-green eyes locking with Tony's amber as he looked up.

The Reaper searched the Sorcerer Supreme's face, inwardly debating with himself. Finally he swallowed and said, “This whole soulmate thing... what do you think about that?” He averted his eyes, mentally preparing himself for the rejection he felt was coming.

“Honestly? I never thought such a thing existed before. Never really crossed my mind.” Stephen told him as he gazed at Tony. After a moment he slowly continued. “Knowing what I know now though... It has an appeal to it.” He looked across the complex, missing the stunned look Tony gave him.

There was another moment of silence before Tony spoke again. “I’m not very good at relationships...” His voice was just above a whisper, drawing Stephen's attention again.

Strange couldn't help but give the genius a smile. “Neither am I.” He paused again, debating. Finally, he turned and slowly held out his hands to Tony. The genius stared at them in shock for a moment before looking back up at his face. “We could work on it together, though...” He offered, the gentle smile still on his face now laced with hope.

For a moment Tony was frozen to the spot. He felt torn between wanting to accept the man in front of him and take a chance and refusing out of fear of being hurt again. He suddenly felt a brush of something against his conscience-- something akin to Hadrian's aura, but more primal. Words echoed in his head, barely more than a whisper.

'You stand on the precipice of something amazing, Anthony. Do not be afraid to leap.”

Tony swallowed and looked down at Stephen's hands again. Finally, he slowly reached his own hands for the Doctor's, letting the man grasp them gently. He felt his magic swell with something akin to joy and a small but genuine smile crossed his face as Stephen's lit up. “Yeah. I'd like that.” The smile then widen a bit. “And hey, at least we'll have fun on the way.” He snarked, trying to diffuse the serious atmosphere a bit.

The Doctor laughed at that, the tension from before falling away. “Yes, I daresay we will.”
The duo chuckled at that, unaware that a dapper, ebony-haired figure with two feathers in his hat stood watching them from the roof. He smiled as he watched the duo conjure a pair of chairs to sit and talk. Honestly, Mortis had a tiny soft spot for his Master's newest Reaper. After all the struggles he had been through in his life, he deserved some happiness of his own. Casting one last look at the two, whose hands were still linked, the physical form of Death returned to the Nexus in a swirl of darkness and shadows.

Not far from the spot where Mortis had been there was a ripple of light before Hadrian came into view, grinning like a loon. “I always knew he was a softy.” Chuckling under his breath, the Master of Death cast a pleased look towards Stephen and Tony before silently slipping away.

Chapter End Notes

Maybe I should slow down on how many chapters I'm posting...

Nah.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

The arrival of a half-assed apology letter and antiquated flip phone leads Tony to put the Reapers to work. A piece of distressing information recovered from Thaddeus Ross leads to an impromptu rescue of the Barton family.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was ready to be posted, then for reasons beyond me, the site crashed. I have to put this in ALL OVER AGAIN.

Oh well. Anything for you, my dear readers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The residents of the Compound quickly fell into a comfortable, if not chaotic, routine. Each Reaper seemed to claim a space as their own, being found there more often than not. In the wake of Roger's actions, Minowa had completely remodeled the gym and training room with help from Tony to better suit their needs in both the physical and magical aspects of their lives. She took a great deal of vindictive pleasure in incinerating the multitude of punching bags Steve had accumulated while in the process of doing so. When not there she was with Bruce down in his lab, or in the meditation room. Tony had yet to ask if there was something going on between them, but he would get around to it eventually. Bridget could also sometimes be found in Bruce’s clinic discussing biology and modern medical practices. She had also claimed the clinic as her domain, and before long it was stocked to the gills with her own remedies. A lab down the hall had been repurposed for experimenting with and brewing potions so said clinic would always be stocked. Another room had been commandeered by Aria and outfitted with sound dampening acoustic panels and turned into a music room. Tony was dragged there the day after the remodeling was finished and presented with an electric violin. Now whenever Tony wasn't in his workshop or the common area, the best bet would be the 'music hall'. Ulysses and Craig had taken one look at the shooting range that had been set up for Clint before commandeering the room and renovating it beyond what Tony had set up. When not there, the men could be found speaking while working on various screens, pinpointing potential threats and designing new defenses for the compound. Tony trusted their judgment enough to let them work on the project without too much oversight. Zev had taken it upon himself to act as a kind of Secretary to Tony. Because of his experience with Dorian and, by extension, the politics of the Tevinter Imperium, he was an excellent wordsmith and could write speeches and memos of exceptional quality even under pressure. The job also acted as a cover so people wouldn't know he was acting as the man's bodyguard. Despite the fact that she had gone back to the Tower, Pepper found herself working with Dorian planning for the upcoming press conference while he was also working through the politics surrounding the amendments to the Accords. The mage admitted to Tony at one point that he had popped back to Thedas for a while to discuss the subject with a good friend, Josephine. After reading through what they had created, Tony was considering asking Dorian to set up a meeting between himself and the ambassador. The thought of both her and Pepper working together was enough to give him pause.
for a while. If the two ever met, the world would be under their control in a matter of days in a bloodless coup.

Loki and Hela had also settled in at the Compound, fitting in surprisingly well with the rest of their dysfunctional family. All of the women adored Hela and she thrived from the positive attention she received. When she started calling Aria, Bridget, and Minowa 'aunt', they had varying reactions. Aria had cooed at the young Goddess and given her a hug. She was thrilled to act as a positive female influence to the 'young' girl. Bridget had blinked at the title for a moment before she smiled at her and placed a kiss on her forehead. The blond had really grown to love her, watching her progress with pride as she recovered from her time in Helheim. (The fact that her pride also extended to Loki was also obvious, but no one wanted to risk their neck enough to mention it.) Minowa, on the other hand, had frozen for a moment before looking over at Loki as if seeking his permission. Loki had simply smiled and nodded-- the Dragonborn was a patient and calm presence, but he knew she had protective instincts that would drive her to kill anyone who threatened her 'nestmates'. Finally, Minowa had turned back to Hela and gave her a hug and a kiss on her forehead. She approached Loki later and announced that she had claimed Hela as 'nestmate'. The woman had essentially placed Hela under her protection and, by extension, the protection of the Dov. Loki was over the moon with relief, secure in the knowledge that his daughter would be safe no matter what.

A rather calm morning a day or two later was interrupted with the return of Vision, who managed to accidentally scare the shit out of Dorian. After calming down the duo and putting out the resulting accidental fire, Tony sat down with the Android and had him watch the footage of his talk with Rhodey. After watching it he had immediately floated off to talk to Loki. For a brief moment, Tony was afraid they would come to blows over the events of New York. Upon finding the duo baking in the kitchen talking like old friends those fears were put to rest. They were quickly replaced by fears of getting fat-- who knew the God of Mischief could bake so well??

Rhodey had been healed up a day or two after the official meeting between himself and the Reapers. The man was thrilled to be able to walk again as was Tony. The genius himself had been working tirelessly to improve War Machine, the lingering memories of the airport driving him to protect his best friend from any further harm. The two had shared a long hug and a few tears when Rhodey walked down to the workshop, spine completely healed and movement restored-- the tears were summarily ignored in favor of allowing the duo to work through the emotions they were feeling. He, Craig, and Ulysses got along quite well, bonding over their time in the military, or at least military-style groups.

Stephen was also a common figure seen in the Compound, mostly in the company of Tony. They constantly snarked, sniped, and ribbed at each other, confident in the knowledge it was all in good fun. Stephen was content to hang around Tony's workshop and talk with him as the genius worked on his various projects. The conversation topics ranged from 'getting to know you' style questions to friendly philosophical debates. They had yet to delve into deeper, more personal topics, knowing there would be ample time to do so later. Stephen noticed early on how touch starved the genius was because of his childhood and began making subtle moves to mitigate the damage. When Tony was simply sitting working on a tablet or computer screen, the Sorcerer would come up behind or beside him and casually touch him in a gentle, non-threatening way-- A brush against his shoulder, a gentle rub of his neck or back, a touch against his hand. Levi enthusiastically helped in that regard, often floating over to drape off of the man as he worked and keep him warm. Although initially wary, Tony very quickly grew to appreciate the gestures. He had observed that Stephen often had trouble using a fork, and on days he was over for dinner the Sorcerer would find the food on his plate being cut up before being given to him. It was a gesture that meant more to Stephen than Tony could possibly know.
For a few weeks, things were relatively calm. However, the Reapers were well aware that it wouldn't last for one reason or another. The arrival of a letter to the Compound finally shattered the peace and brought everyone back to reality.

The sound of a phone buzzing while playing a short clip of ‘Back in Black’ brought Stephen out of the book he had been nose deep in. He looked towards the StarkPhone Tony had given him in case of emergencies with confusion clear on his face. He pushed his chair slightly away from the table as he answered it. “Tony? Is everything okay?”

"Stephen, this is Rhodey." The Sorcerer Supreme sat straight in his chair, apprehension lancing through him. “Look, we need you here. Tony got some kind of package, and whatever was in it... He's pissed. Or upset, or maybe some combination of both. I'm wondering if you might be able to talk to him, find out what's going on.”

Stephen had surged to his feet the moment he heard he was needed, almost knocking over his chair. The motion attracted the attention of Wong who looked up startled. “Where is he? Should I just portal straight to him?” Strange asked, completely focused on the phone call.

“He's in his lab, but I'm not sure if a portal is a good idea. Maybe do it just outside the lab then knock.”

The Sorcerer Supreme pulled on his sling ring as Levi settled around his shoulders. “I'll be there in a moment or two.” He hung up the phone and held up his hand to open the portal.

“Stephen!” The call from Wong caused him to pause and look over at the Librarian. “What is going on? Is there a problem?”

The Sorcerer paused, staring at the librarian whom he considered a close friend. After a moment he said “In a way, but it's a personal matter. I'll explain everything when I get back.”

Wong nodded, eyeing the man in front of him. “Does this have something to do with your frequent trips away from the Sanctum recently?” Stephen nodded and Wong hummed. “Very well. No portals in the library, though.” With that said the man sat back down with the tomb he had been perusing. Stephen sighed and rushed out of the library, barely waiting until he was past the door before opening his portal and stepping through.

Rhodey was waiting on the other side for him. “Strange, thank you for coming so quickly.”

“Of course. Where's Tony?” The man gestured to the door leading to the lab. It was shut and locked tight, the shutters on the viewing windows shut as well. Stephen approached the door cautiously. “FRIDAY, could you pipe me through to the lab?” He called up to the ceiling. A moment later it clicked on. “Tony? It's Stephen.” He called, keeping his voice gentle. “Can I come in? Or can I at least send in Levi? I know you're upset, even if I don't know why, and I just want to make sure you're okay.”

A few moments of silence followed before the door to the lab clicked and slid open. Stephen gestured for Levi to go in and the Cloak did so, making a beeline for where Tony must have been sitting. After a second his voice quietly called “You can come in, Stephen.”

The sorcerer looked towards Rhodey and the man jerked his head in a 'go on' motion with a relieved smile before walking away. Stephen slowly entered the lab, letting the door close behind him. His eyes quickly found Tony curled up on his couch in the far corner of the lab with Levi...
around his shoulders. He calmly approached the genius who looked up at him with a mixture of hurt, anger, and relief in his brown eyes. “Hey.” Stephen greeted him, lowering himself onto the couch. After a moment of hesitation, he opened his arms, an open invitation that gave Tony the right to choose the comfort offered.

Tony barely hesitated before shifting so he was pressed against the sorcerer's chest with Levi still around his shoulders. Stephen's arms wrapped around him and he felt the man rest his chin on his head with his nose buried in his brunette locks. Tony was content to stay like that for a few minutes, thankful that his soulmate didn't try to push him to talk about what was going on. Finally, after ten minutes he spoke. “I got a letter.”

“From who?” Strange asked as he held Tony's head against his chest, allowing the sound of his heartbeat to soothe the genius.

“Rogers.”

Silence reigned for a few seconds. “I see. Are you willing to share this letter?” Stephen asked, his voice still calm. There was a nod against his chest before Tony gestured to the floor a few feet away. A moment later a paper floated into his hand which he then passed over to Stephen. The Sorcerer sat back to read while still running his fingers through Tony's brown locks. The silence that fell over them was broken after a minute or two when Stephen's icy voice cut the room. “Is he serious?” The level of disbelief, disgust, and venom in his tone was both terrifying and awe-inspiring. “This has to be the biggest load of shit I've ever read. The Avengers are yours, maybe more so than mine? He seems to have forgotten that he took most of the Avengers with him to become international fugitives! Not to mention this line-- 'I know I hurt you'. That man left you to die in a bunker in Siberia after turning your chest to shrapnel and disabling your suit!” His arms tightened around Tony at the mention of it. He had seen the x-rays taken of his soulmate's chest, and they were nothing short of chilling. If Minowa, Bridget, and Ulysses hadn't found him he would have died in that bunker completely alone, freezing and in absolute agony the entire time.

Tony felt Stephen's magic flare with agitation and he reached out his own to calm him. “Hey. I'm still here.” He pulled the sorcerer's attention back to him as he pulled away to look him in the eye. “I don't need them-- I have the Reapers, my family. I have Pepper and Rhodey, and anyone else I'll pull together for the new Avengers.”

Stephen nodded before reaching up to brush his fingers against Tony's cheeks, rubbing his trembling thumbs along his cheekbones. “And you have me.” He said with a finality that brought a smile to Tony's face.

The moment was interrupted when FRIDAY spoke. “Boss, President Ellis is on the line. Should I patch him through?”

Casting a confused glance at Stephen the genius replied. “Go ahead, FRI. Audio only, please.”

A moment of silence passes before a new voice came through. “Dr. Stark?”

“President Ellis, always a pleasure to hear from you.” Tony smiled at the use of his title. Most people seemed to forget he had several PhD's... not Matthew, though. It was why he used the President's title-- respect was a two-way street, after all.

“Likewise, Dr. Stark. I hope you're doing well this morning.” There was the sound of papers being shuffled around. “I have news you may wish to hear. Secretary Ross is being arrested for several violations of human rights, war crimes, blackmail, and a whole host of other charges. I wanted to inform you of his removal from the Accords Committee as well as his inevitable removal from his
position as Secretary of State.”

Tony shared a knowing and gleeful smirk with Stephen. “I appreciate the update, President Ellis. I'm sure whoever is hired in his stead will be able to pick up the slack with no problem.”

“I'm certain they will.” The tone of voice from Matthew Ellis was full of sarcastic humor. “There is something else I wished to bring to your attention. The Avengers that were imprisoned on the Raft have escaped.”

Tony froze for a moment. It was only when he felt Stephen's arms wrap around him from behind that he spoke again. “I see. You have my thanks for bringing this to my attention, President Ellis.”

“They were your teammates-- I believe you have a right to know.” More shuffling papers. “I apologize, Dr. Stark, but I'm going to have to cut this short. The sudden vacancy left by Ross requires my attention.”

“Of course, I would imagine so.” The two quickly bade each other goodbye before the line cut out. There was a moment of ringing silence before Tony spoke again. “FRIDAY, call everyone to the common room, Bruce and Loki included. After that, start cracking the encryption on the USB Ulysses brought back. I've been putting it off, but it's high time I start setting things in motion.”

Stephen gave Tony a gentle squeeze before pulling away to allow the Genius to begin striding around the room, gathering various papers, tablets, and boxes on a nearby cart. “Do you need me to do anything, Tony?”

“I do, actually. I'll cover it when we get upstairs, but right now I just need to grab things.”

The sorcerer immediately moved to help him, and before long they were in the elevator headed up. It finally opened to admit them into the Common Room. The Reapers were waiting for the duo, all of them focused and ready for anything. “I've just been contacted by President Ellis on two matters.” The genius announced as he started organizing the cart full of things on the counter. “First, Secretary Ross is being arrested on at least two dozen different charges and has been ousted from the Accords Committee and, soon, his position as Secretary of State.” He glanced over at Ulysses. “Bravo, Ulysses. You did your job very well.” The sniper dipped his head in thanks before Tony continued. “The second matter-- The rogue Avengers have escaped the Raft.” He held up his hand to stall any outbursts. “Yelling about it won't help anything. Instead, it's time we start focusing on several different jobs that need to be accomplished. Spring break is over, everyone-- back to the grind.”

“What do you need us to do, Zeymahi?” Minowa asked, eyes shining with anticipation and determination.

“I have individual and group assignments for you all. Minowa, I want you to go through the list of potential recruits and select the most promising. We need to start filling out our ranks again, we're a little short right now. Once you've done that, have FRIDAY locate their most frequently visited spots.” He passed her a tablet that she took with a sharp nod. “Bridget, I want you to figure out a way to test any recruits that come through on their physical and mental well-being. We don't need another repeat of Avengers 1.0 happening. Physical shouldn't be too hard, mental and emotional will be. I trust your judgment on this, though. You've been at this a long time.”

“I'd certainly say over several thousand years is a long time...” Bridget arched an eyebrow at Tony as she took the tablet offered. “Dr. Banner, would you be willing to help me?” The doctor nodded with an 'of course'.

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“Dorian, I need you to get in contact with Pepper, get an update on the status of the press conference with her. I need to know if we should use the footage from Siberia and the x-rays. Did you finalize the amendments to the accords? Good, send those over to Zev. On that note, I need you to play secretary for a while Zev. I need emails written to several people about various things—I had a list made, FRIDAY can send that to you.” A StarkPad was handed to them both. “Craig, Ulysses, figure out where the Rogues went and watch them— one at a time, figure out shifts. I don't trust them as far as I can throw them, and I don't want to be caught off guard. Report anything out of the ordinary or any unusual movement.” The snipers nodded grimly as they made to move away. “Ah-ah! Wait a second, I have presents to hand out in a moment. Before that, though...” He turned his gaze to Loki who was watching him with head tilted. “Loki, I’m not forcing you to help us, but I'd like it if you could work with Stephen on something. The Reapers have protection against any mental voodoo that might be used on us, but everyone else who is going to be working with us— you, Stephen, Bruce, any new Avengers— they're not. I need something that can protect against most mind-altering magic. Maximoff has that capability, and I refuse to allow anyone to be defenseless against it.”

“The God of Mischief and the Sorcerer Supreme working together?” Loki grinned over at Stephen, eyes glittering from the prospect of a challenge.

Stephen smirked as well. “I'm sure we can come up with something.”

“Glad to hear it.” Tony paused for a moment. “Loki, would you be willing to let Aria watch Hela?”

The ebony-haired God paused before looking down at his daughter. The Goddess smiled up at Loki in return. “I'll be okay, Papa! Auntie Ari’ and I will have fun together!”

Aria smiled at the girl before turning her gaze to Loki. “You have my word-- I will not let anyone touch a single hair on her head. I will kill them before it happens.”

Maybe it was his daughter's trust for the woman, maybe it was the conviction in her voice— the result was the same. Loki took a deep breath before looking at his daughter again. “You know how to call me if you need me?” The young girl nodded before jumping down from the couch and wrapping her hand around Aria's. “She is my only daughter, one of my precious children. Keep her safe.” He told her, his eyes filled with a light that was both threatening and desperate.

Aria paused for a moment. “ONE of your children?”

Tony stopped dead at her words and his gaze snapped to Loki. The God nodded, his eyes filled with sorrow. He pointed at the God and said with finality, “You and I are having a chat about that later. If what I found on you and Hela was any indication, Odin has probably done some serious damage to your kids, and I'll be damned if I let it continue. FRIDAY!” He yelled to the ceiling, missing the stunned look on Loki's face. “Put that on the list, make it a high priority.” He turned his eyes to Aria again. “That's your job, by the way-- you guard that girl with your life. See if you can figure out where Reindeer Games' other kids might be.”

“Two are on Asgard.” Loki blurted out, drawing their attention. “Sleipnir and Fenrir. Jörmungandr is here, on Midgard. Where I don't know. He was hidden from my sight.”

“Duly noted. Songbird, you know what to do.” He turned back around to the counter for the boxes. “I've been tinkering with these for a few days. Let me know if they work out.”

The boxes turned out to have gear in them. Bridget's was a storage device with a copy of every accurate medical journal that had been released to date, compiled in the hope that it would be helpful in her work. Dorian and Zev had received what looked like wireless earpieces that ended up
being full heads-up displays--‘google glasses done right’ Tony called them. It would allow them to communicate effectively with others and each other while keeping their hands free. Craig and Ulysses received beautiful, custom-made sniper rifles. Tony was quick to point out a setting on them that changed the ammo type. Enchantments on the guns conjured whatever round the setting was on and immediately reloaded once fired. The spells negated the need to carry ammunition, and the two men were visibly impressed by the work. Loki was stunned when he too was handed a package. He was confused by the pendant strung on a leather cord. It was a silver disk with the symbol of the Hallows superimposed on an intricate runic array. “Not only does that declare you under our protection, it will also hide you from anyone looking for you while you're out of the Compound. They're also enchanted to drop you at a panic room in the Compound if the correct passphrase is said.” A similar pendant was gently placed around Hela's neck. “These can't be removed by anyone but you, and only of your own free will. So whatever you do, don't take them off. I’ll have more made for your other kids as well.”

Loki looked at his daughter's pendant, then to his own, then back to Tony. “I... Thank you, Anthony. I don't know how to repay you for your kindness towards myself and my children.” He was quick to place it around his neck, fingering the disk with a kind of stunned reverence.

“I didn't do it so you'd be in my debt, but I appreciate the sentiment. The passphrase is on a paper in the box. Both of you memorize it, then destroy the paper.” Tony turned his gaze to Minowa. “Yours is still being tweaked, Boomer. Rest assured though, it's going to be awesome.”

“I've no doubt, Zeymahi.”

The genius smirked and nodded. “Alright, you all have your jobs! Come on, chop chop!” There was a flurry of movement as people either took the elevators or opened corridors. As the room quieted again Tony turned to his soulmate, pulling one last box from his pocket and enlarging it. He paused for a moment before passing it to Stephen. “I made this while at the Nexus... something to keep my skills sharp.” He looked up and locked his eyes with Stephen's blue-green orbs. “The Chief has already given me permission to give it to you. You’ll understand when you see it.”

Stephen blinked curiously as he looked down at the box. He gently removed the top to reveal a 12-inch tablet unlike any he’d seen before. The screen reminded him of one of Tony’s holo screens, but the frame around it was covered in shrunken, yet deeply complicated runic arrays and symbols. He gently brushed his fingers over the screen and the display rippled before displaying a search box. “Tony, is this a new tablet model?” The sorcerer asked, looking up at Tony curiously.

A brilliant smile crossed Tony’s face. “That’s the only one of its kind. Do a search for a spell you’d like to know about.”

The sorcerer nodded and quickly typed in ‘healing’ for the hell of it. To his shock, a list populated the screen with an enormous scroll bar indicated many other entries. He picked a random one and the cover of a book popped up. Stephen quickly realized he could open the cover and read through the pages like a digital book. “Tony, what is this?” He asked, eyes wide.

Tony grinned with excitement. “It’s an e-reader that’s linked to every book on magic the Chief has ever collected.”

Loki choked in shock. “Anthony, you just gave him what equates to the grimoire of the Master of Death! Do you have any idea how valuable such a thing is??”

“I said the Chief gave me permission...”

Stephen was frozen, staring at the tablet in his hands. Hadrian Black had been alive and traveling
through the multiverse for countless years, and this tablet was linked to the magical knowledge accumulated from such. Not only was it a priceless resource, but it was also a sign of trust from the Master of Death himself. “Tony... this is...” He struggled to find the words to express the overwhelming gratitude. He gently set the tablet on the counter next to him before taking Tony's face in his hands again, staring at him as though he had just pulled the moon from the sky for him.

Tony swallowed at the intensity of the look he was getting. Stephen was looking at him like he was the most incredible thing he’d ever seen, his striking blue-green eyes full of an emotion the genius couldn't quite pinpoint. Unable to help it he found his eyes dropping to the sorcerer's semi-parted lips. 'It would be so easy to just--'

“Boss!” FRIDAY’S urgent voice caused the two to jump and pull apart, the moment broken. “I finished with the thumb drive-- You need to see this.”

A screen flickered to life above the table to the right and Tony cast one last look at Stephen before heading to it. Stephen looked after him, unable to take his eyes off the genius.

Loki looked over at the man, an enormous shit-eating grin on his face. “You, Sorcerer Supreme, have got it bad.” Stephen didn't even look over when he waved a hand and opened a portal beneath Loki's feet. The god gave a yelp of shock as he fell and the portal closed behind him.

A second or two later Tony reeled back from the monitor. “Fucking shit!” He whipped around and threw his hand out to open a corridor. He stuck his head through and shouted, “Bullseye, Deadshot, change of plans, I need you both front and center NOW!”

Hearing the urgency in Tony's voice the Sorcerer strode forward to rub his shoulders as he pulled away from the corridor. “Tony, what's going on?”

Moments later the two snipers burst from the corridor, uniforms swirling into existence as they did so. “Stephen, I need you to open up a portal to this address.” He tapped the screen so the Sorcerer could read it. “Bullseye, Deadshot, rifles out, look alive.”

Numbly Stephen looked at the address then did as he asked. “Tony, what's the goal here?”

Tony looked through the portal at the small farm on the other side. “Barton's sister and her kids live in that house. Ross had a hit taken out on them, though I don’t know how he found out about where they live...” He double tapped his chest plate and the glow enveloped him again. Moments later, his new armor had surrounded him and the glow died away. “I need you two to go ahead, make sure the area is secure. We'll be right behind you.” The two snipers nodded and vanished through the portal, cloaking themselves as they stepped through. “Stephen, are you with me?” He asked looking over his shoulder at the Sorcerer, who was storing the grimoire in a pocket dimension.

“Always.” The duo stepped through, Tony absentmindedly waving his hand to cloak them from detection. He led them to the edge of the treeline and stilled, every muscle in his body coiled to leap into action at a moment’s notice. Stephen allowed his eyes to search the property, feeling for any magical presence as they waited.

It was a very tense few minutes before Kimball came bounding over to them. “Area is secure, four people inside the house-- one woman, three children.”

Tony flicked his wrist and Yinsen sprang into existence. “Deadshot and Bullseye-- Keep an eye out, we’re moving in for extraction.” The basilisk shot off, and Tony flew towards the house with Stephen hot on his heels. He landed on the porch and knocked urgently on the door as he willed his
helmet away.

There was a tense moment before the lock clicked open and the door was swung open. Laura took one look at the man on the other side of the door and her eyes went wide. Tony cut off any words about to be said with a wave of his hand. “Miss Barton there's a lot to explain, but right now you and your family are in grave and immediate danger. I have people watching the property right now, but I don't know how long we have.”

Laura was a smart woman, knew how to look for lies and deception. Right now, Tony Stark was absolutely serious about his words. “I'll get the kids.” She murmured, nodding. “How are we getting out?”

Stephen had been standing in the background and finally stepped forward, raising his hand in greeting. “I'm going to open a portal back to the Avengers Compound so there's less chance of being attacked in the open.”

The woman nodded before calling for Cooper and Lila. They came running but stopped when they saw Tony and Stephen. “Cooper, Lila, I need you to grab your emergency bags.”

Cooper's jaw clenched and his face went hard. Lila's eyes filled with fear and tears. “Are we in danger, mom?” She whimpered.

Tony's heart broke and before he knew it he had slid to his knee in front of the girl. “It's gonna be okay. I won't let anything happen to you, your siblings, or your mom.” He looked at Cooper as well, his eyes alight with conviction. Just before the boy looked over, Tony's eyes flickered burning orange before fading back to brown.

Cooper stared hard at him for a second before nodding sharply, pulling his sister's hand to lead her up the stairs. Laura gave a tiny smile as Tony got back to his feet. “I didn't think you liked kids, Mr. Stark.”

The genius quirked his lips up in a smile of his own. “Eh, I decided the little hellions aren’t so bad after all.” He quickly became serious again. “How can I help? Do you need to get stuff together?”

“I just need Nate and his bag, as well as mine.” She started to move forward but a hand on her shoulder stopped her.

“Stephen and I’ve got this. Stay here, stay away from the windows, keep an ear out for anything unusual. Where is your bag?” Getting the location from the woman he led Stephen upstairs and pointed out Laura’s room. Stephen entered it and Tony swept into Nate's room and quickly scooped the child into his arm before levitating his diaper bag into his other hand. He heard his soulmate come in behind him and turned to the sorcerer. “Got the bag?” He asked as he rested the child on his hip. Stephen nodded as he held it up. “Okay, let’s find the other chicks and get out of here.” They quickly located Lila and Cooper, herding them to their mother.

As they were doing one last check Kimball phased through the door, prompting a gasp from Laura. “Glitch!” Craig's voice called, “You've got a jet inbound-- F22 from what we can tell. You need to get out now!”

Stephen was already waving his hand and opening a portal. “Go, go!” Tony ordered and the family raced through. Tony summoned Yinsen again as he stepped through with Stephen and Nate. “We're clear, get out of there!” Stephen slammed the portal closed, and Tony let out a sigh of relief, unconsciously holding Nate closer.
Laura and the older two children were staring at Tony shocked, which then was redirected as a corridor opened and Craig and Ulysses ran through. “Made it!” Ulysses grunted as Craig shut the corridor.

“And not a moment too soon.” Craig nodded, straightening the beret on his head. “Dunno what kind of payload they were using, but they sure as hell weren’t looking to take prisoners.”

Tony heaved a sigh of relief as he turned to Laura. Seeing her knees shaking he subtly conjured a chair behind her before motioning for one of the men to help her sit. They did so as Stephen summoned chairs for the rest of the family to relax in. Laura sat with a stunned look on her face, only snapping out of it when Nate began to fuss. Wordlessly Tony handed the toddler back to his mother. “Ulysses, Craig, good job.” He said seriously as he turned to the snipers who stepped around the seats to face him. “Without you both there, this could have ended very poorly.”

That caught Laura's attention and her eyes snapped to the two men she had barely noticed before. “You were the ones watching the property?” She asked, drawing their attention.

Craig nodded and tilted his beret. “Yes, ma'am. Craig Boone, it's a pleasure to meet you.”

“Ulysses.” The other sniper dipped his head but didn't say anything more.

Laura looked ready to burst into tears, and her kids looked no better. “Miss Barton, if you'd like I can have someone show you to a room. Once you've had a chance to rest and recuperate we can discuss where to go from here.” The woman agreed and the two snipers agreed to show the way. Once they were gone Tony slumped into a chair after dismissing his armor. A deep sigh escaped him as he felt the adrenaline starting to wear off.

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“Tony? Are you alright?” Stephen knelt in front of his soulmate, worry lining his face. Levi fluttered over to rest on Tony’s shoulder and pet his head.

It was a second or two before the genius replied. “I don’t know. I’m trying to figure out how to incorporate Laura and her kids into life here-- The chicks might get along well with Hela, so that’s a plus...” The genius cracked open an eye for a moment. “Speaking of, wasn't Rock of Ages with us before this started? Wonder where he ran off to...” Strange suddenly coughed, looking away. Getting an odd look from Tony he stood and waved his hand. After a second a horizontal portal opened up a few feet above the floor.

A moment later, Loki fell through and his shouting was cut off as he connected with the carpet. After a moment the rumpled god lifted his head, flipping his horribly windswept hair back. He glared with incredulous outrage at the Sorcerer Supreme and screeched, “I have been falling for thirty minutes!!”

A few moments later, Bruce paused what he was doing in his lab several floors down to look over at Minowa. “Do you hear laughter?”

Chapter End Notes

What? Just because this story isn't Thor: Ragnarok compliant doesn't mean I didn't thoroughly enjoy certain parts.

Maybe don't goad and tease the Sorcerer Supreme, Loki.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Tony and Loki set out to free the God of Mischief’s children, Stephen taking Loki’s place to help find Jörmungandr. The results from the press conference are in, and Tony manages to break the internet without even being there.

Also, Minowa is never taking her armor off, EVER.

Chapter Notes

And here’s the next installment of Warden! Loki’s kids are here, and they will be getting ALL the love in the future!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Loki, Boss needs to see you for a second.”

The god of mischief paused in his conversation with the woman in front of him and looked up to the ceiling. “I’ll be right there, thank you FRIDAY.”

“Duty calls, hm?”

His green eyes slid back down to Laura Barton. After the woman had been caught up on the most recent events she began to integrate herself into life around the Compound. When she finally got a hold of Loki she slapped him once before considering the matter closed. The duo now had a tendency to sit together for tea and gossip when time allowed. “It would seem so.” He set his mug down before standing. “Do let me know if you hear anything about the press conference today. I’m curious to know how these mortals will react to the knowledge that their dear Captain is not as righteous as they had first believed.”

Laura gave a tinkling laugh even as her eyes lit with malicious glee. “Of course. I’m going to enjoy watching it.”

Loki gave his signature smirk before striding away, following the directions FRIDAY gave him to locate Tony. He was led down to the lab, and he gave a gentle knock on the door before striding in.

Inside, Tony was standing behind Minowa helping her attach something to her head. “Dammit Boomer, stop squirming! I need to make sure this won’t restrict your horns!”

The woman in question huffed and stilled. “I still do not understand the point of this armor, Zeymahi.”

“You’ll find out. Just give me a second.” He fiddled with the piece a bit more before nodding sharply and stepping back. “Alright, let’s take a look.”

The woman stood, and Loki’s eyebrows shot into his hairline at the imposing figure she made. She
was now wearing a tight fitted suit of armor with a similar feel to the Iron Man suit. The look of the armor was vastly different, though—black and gray plates covered the body, spikes and ridges giving the metal a sharp, intimidating appearance. The random jagged lines of glowing red and orange gave it the appearance of being cracked to reveal fire within. The suit included an impressive and intricate helmet shaped like a dragon’s skull, her horns accenting the intimidating piece perfectly. “Most impressive, Anthony.” He said, drawing the duo’s attention.

The genius grinned. “I haven’t even shown you the best part.” He waved his hand and opened a corridor. “Come on.” He led them through it and they emerged on the grounds of the compound, blinking at the sudden change in light. “Minowa, you always bemoaned the fact that you can’t fly without showing your wings. Well… I might have a solution for that. FRIDAY, if you wouldn’t mind...?”

Minowa tilted her head in confusion but was distracted when something in the suit shifted and wing-like appendages extended from her back. They clearly functioned on a repulsor mechanic, like Tony’s suit. He’d figure out how to incorporate flapping into the next iteration, but for now, he hoped this would work. She gawked at the addition, realization beginning to light in her eyes. “I know it’s not like you’re real wings, but I hope this will help for now…” Tony stepped forward to teach her how to use the new additions but stopped dead when they fired up and she took to the sky with a loud whoop of joy. He stood gawking after her, watching her flip and dive around with a grace he had come to associate with flying using her real wings. Finally, he let out a chuckle, shaking his head. “I should have known. Flying comes as naturally to dragons as breathing or speaking.”

Loki was smiling widely as he watched the woman. “You’ve given her a great gift, Anthony.” He watched as she rocketed up high before the repulsors cut, and she began to freefall. He put his hand on the genius’ shoulder to stop him from activating his own armor. The instinct was proven right when they flared back to life and she pulled out of the dive with an elated cry. “Being unable to express that part of herself… it can be hard. You’ve taken those bindings off of her with this. She will be much happier from now on, I guarantee you.”

Tony was grinning widely as he watched the Dragonborn zip around like there was nowhere she’d rather be at that moment than up in the air. After a moment his eyes flickered blue as he linked to her armor. “Hey Minowa, I know you can hear me. We can go over the details of the suit later—you enjoy yourself for right now. Got something to discuss with Loki anyway. Let FRIDAY know when you’re done, she’ll help you learn the basic ins and outs.” The woman paused her flight for a moment to wave to the duo on the ground before racing away. He smiled after her for a moment before turning to the god of mischief. “So, two things. First I wanted to check in with you on the progress you and Stephen have made on protection against mind-whammy.” He began, leading them on a walk around the grounds.

The god of mischief snorted at the choice of terminology. “Stephen and I have agreed that a glyph or rune of some kind would be best. We’re still debating on the matter of how to incorporate said protection-- I believe a tattoo of sorts would be best, but Stephen has reservations about such. He believes something wearable would be more advantageous, but a piece of jewelry or clothing could be forgotten or removed. A tattoo or mark would be much more difficult to circumvent.”

“Well let me know what you two decide and we’ll go about making it happen.” They continued in silence for a minute or two before Tony spoke again. “So, the other day you mentioned having more than one kid.”

Loki’s smile fell and he sighed. “Yes. I have four children. Sleipnir is my oldest. He can take the
form of an eight-legged horse, and currently resides in Asgard. Odin is currently using him as his steed.”

Upon hearing that the brown-haired man tripped over his own feet, and it was only Loki’s quick reflexes that kept him from ending up on his face. “He what?? Damn, that is fucked up. I thought Howard was an awful person, but this… wow. This is an entirely new level of disturbing and degrading.”

A warm feeling filled Loki at the genius’ reaction. He cleared his throat to continue. “The other on Asgard is Fenrir, my third born. He prefers to take the shape of an enormous wolf. He…” The god swallowed, closing his eyes to fight back tears. “He is bound on an island by dwarven made chains- Gleipnir. They are supposedly impossible to break. They also…” A tear ran down Loki’s face despite trying to bite back the emotion. “They pinned his jaw to the ground… by shoving a sword through it.”

The surge of magic that followed that sentence froze Loki in his tracks. Tony turned to him with fury written all over his face and his irises glowing a burning orange. “Do you know where he is?” Tony asked, his magic crackling around him with the force of his ire. Loki nodded, stunned at the imposing figure he made. “Good. We’re going to retrieve him.”

“Now?” Loki breathed with hope.

“Abso-fucking-lutely.” The genius replied before waving his hand, summoning his uniform. He held out his arm for the God and the ebony haired man didn’t hesitate to wrap his hand around the bicep. “I need you to get an image in your mind of your kid… got it? Good, hold onto it.” His magic rose within him, and the duo was swept away in a flurry of darkness and shadows. A moment later, they found themselves on an island sparsely decorated with trees. Not far from them was a clearing, and they entered it to find the massive wolf pinned and chained to the ground. Tony snarled in rage at the condition of the animal, not to mention the obvious signs of starvation. “I swear if I ever come face-to-face with Odin, I will kick his ass to the Nexus and back.”

The words alerted Fenrir to the presence of others and he growled weakly in warning. Loki was quick to move into his sight, and the growling ceased instantly only to be replaced by soft whines. “Oh my son…” He whispered, placing a tender kiss on the wolf’s head. “I’m so sorry…”

Despite the situation, the affection between the duo brought a tiny smile to Tony’s face. “Loki, can you try and keep him calm? I’ll see what I can do about the sword and chains.” The god nodded and spoke in soothing tones to Fenrir. Tony circled them, noting the magic woven into the pieces. He felt his stomach lurch violently at the sight of the weapon shoved through Fenrir’s jaw. “Reindeer games, are you good at healing?” He asked when he’d managed to swallow down the nauseous feeling.

The man in question nodded. “Indeed. I learned much about healing from Frigga and Lady Eir.”

“Alright, I’m going to get rid of this sword. I need you to be waiting to heal, just in case it starts bleeding.” The god nodded and repositioned himself by his son’s jaw. Tony wrapped his hands around the grip of the weapon and focused on the enchantments, breaking them one by one as not to overwhelm Fenrir. Finally, when it was only the sword left, he began to disintegrate the metal from the grip down. He did so slowly just in case the removal caused pain or bleeding. As the blade disappeared completely, Loki channeled his own magic into the wound to stop the brief well-up of blood, and Fenrir was soon barking weakly at his father, already relieved by the freedom. Tony quickly moved onto the chains, observing them for a few more minutes. Finally, he spoke again. “They enchanted them against breaking, but those douches only limited it to physical weapons and magic.” He held out his hand, and suddenly his glove was replaced by
gauntlet of his armor. “Let's see how well it holds up to this.” The repulsor whined before Tony unleashed a blast at full strength at the chains. The links it came in direct contact with disintegrated, and the ones surrounding them were reduced to molten slag.

Loki wasted no time in helping the genius remove what remained of the chains, and with a relieved howl Fenrir began to glow brightly and shrink in on himself. A moment later Loki was cradling a naked 14-year-old teen in his arms, tears of relief running down his face. Fenrir cracked open one bright yellow eye and gave them a weak smile. “Hello, dad.” He whispered.

That just made the god cry harder, and Tony summoned a water bottle and helped Fenrir take a drink before also summoning a blanket to wrap around him. “Hey Fenrir, good to meet you. I'm Tony, but we can save full introductions for later.” He caught Loki’s attention with a gentle tap on his shoulder. He handed the blanket to him and as the god wrapped his son Tony opened a corridor. “Loki, take him back to Bridget. He needs urgent medical treatment. He may be resilient, but this…” He gestured to Fenrir’s emaciated body trailing off. The god of mischief nodded and stood with his son in his arms. He opened his mouth to thank Tony but the genius shook his head. “You can thank me when we have all of your kids safe in hand. I’ve warded him against detection, get going.” Loki gave him a nod and rushed through with Fenrir held tight to his chest.

Remembering what Loki had told him about Sleipnir, Tony spread his magic out to find the steed. He quickly locked onto the magical signature and allowed the darkness to sweep him to the location as he had done for Loki. He found himself in a well kept stable and wasted no time in following the gentle pulses of his magic. Sleipnir’s stall was easy enough to navigate to, and the Reaper wasted no time phasing right through the door. Sleipnir stood in a corner looking weary and dejected, a bridle strapped tight to his head and the bit stuffed in his mouth. “Well, that’s just rude.” Tony snorted, dropping the detection spells for Sleipnir alone, and the horse immediately turned its’ head to stare at him. He lowered the hood so the stallion could see his face. “Hello, Sleipnir. Your father sent me to break you out.”

<My father?>

Tony froze for a moment, eyes going wide. “So we’re just going to ignore the fact that I’m hearing you in my head for a minute here. But yeah, I’m helping Loki break all of his munchkins out.” He reached for the bridle again. “We can discuss it later. Let’s get the hell out of this place before I either kill Odin or cause mass chaos by summoning the most random and destructive things I can conceive.”

<l would enjoy both of those immensely.> Sleipnir replied as he placed his head in Tony’s outstretched hands.

It only took a moment to break the spells and enchantments. Tony quickly but gently pulled the bit and bridle off of the stallion and he whinnied with elation. He began to glow and shrink, and a moment later Tony was helping to support the now 18-year-old man with black hair and soulful brown eyes. A flicker of color drew his eyes to Sleipnir’s hands and he belatedly noticed the rainbow hue of his fingernails. “Good to meet you, Sleipnir.” Tony grinned at the man as he focused on his face again. ‘Damn, even hunched over he has to be taller than me.’ Without much thought, he waved his hand to dress the man in a basic t-shirt and sweatpants.

The male smiled back brilliantly. “Well met, friend. Thank you for your assistance, and for the clothes. But I should probably inform you that Loki is not my father.” Seeing the confused look on the genius’ face Sleii’s grin turned mischievous as he managed to stand straight. (Shit, yep, he wasn’t just taller than Tony-- he was taller than Loki by at least a few inches.) “He’s my mother. Shapeshifter and all that.”
Tony felt his brain blue screen for a moment before shaking his head in a soft reboot. “Okay, yeah, I’m not going to think about the implications of that right now. We should get going before someone comes to find you.” He waved his hand and conjured a corridor. He made to step forward before pausing and glancing at the door to the stall. A grin of his own lit his face before he waved his hand, a message scrawling itself into the wood. The laughter from the duo echoed as they stepped into the corridor and it shut behind them.

‘Odin:

I don’t know if Asgard has something like contraceptives, but if so, I suggest using them in the future.

Yours truly,

A better parent than you’

---

Tony sighed as he watched Bridget tend to a sleeping Fenrir, her brow pinched with concentration as she worked to mitigate the damage his imprisonment had caused. Bruce was monitoring his vitals, relaying what he was seeing to the woman as she worked. Loki stood nearby, his arms wrapped around Sleipnir in a desperate hug. A small smile crossed Tony’s face when he saw the nearby door fly open to admit Hela who sprinted across the room to Sleipnir who pulled away from Loki and knelt to catch the young girl in a tight hug. Loki joined them a moment later, tears of joy running down his face. The scene was both heartbreaking and touching-- Loki had been separated from his children for countless years, and the way he held tight to his family clearly showed that. One more and his family would be complete. And Tony was absolutely determined to see it happen. His eyes flared orange for a moment as he watched the family-- he would not let them be broken apart again.

He only turned from the window when he heard a portal open behind him, and he turned to see Stephen stepping out of it. The sorcerer didn’t even wait for it to close fully before he was pulling the genius into his arms. “I thought you had work to do at the Sanctum today?” Tony asked softly, smiling slightly as he felt Levi join in on the hug.

“Dr. Banner asked me to come by as soon as I had a moment,” Stephen replied softly as Tony melted into his arms. He buried his nose in Tony’s hair, content to hold the man close for the moment. His eyes flicked up to the viewing window. “Which ones are they?” He asked Tony without pulling away from him.

“Sleipnir is the one with Loki. Fenrir is on the bed...” Tony buried his face in Stephen’s midnight blue robes. “It was... Stephen, he had a SWORD through his jaw. He looks like he hasn’t eaten a good meal in his life.”

The sorcerer’s arms tightened around Tony as he gazed at the ‘young’ man. “He’ll have love and support in spades here. It will be easier with his family around him as well.”

A sigh escaped the genius. “They’re still one short. Jörmungandr is somewhere on Earth, but Loki couldn’t find him. Odin’s work again, I’ll bet.”

“Do you need help?” Strange pulled away to pin Tony with his blue-green eyes. “I know you won’t rest until they’re all reunited. You’re not one to abandon a project.” He added with a knowing smile.
“I would appreciate that. Jör could be anywhere on Earth, and I don’t know what I could be walking into.”

Stephen nodded. “Whenever you’re ready.”

“Alright, I’ll pull up the location and we can see where it ends up.” Tony took a deep breath and extended his magic again. He felt it lock on after a second or two and reached for Stephen’s hand. The sorcerer slipped off his gloves and linked his hand with Tony’s. A moment later Stephen let out a snort. “Is it bad?” Tony asked, glancing at his soulmate.

“It appears our Midgard serpent is at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean. Not in the water-- looks like a cave system dug into the Mariana trench.”

Tony gave a choked laugh. “So, good thing we didn’t just portal there.”

Stephen nodded in agreement. “If I open a portal into the caves, the pressure difference would cause havoc on both our bodies and the environment here.”

Tony hummed in thought. “What about an airlock mechanic of sorts? I use my magic to create an air pocket and gradually increase the pressure to what would normally be found at that depth. You open a portal while we’re still in the pocket and I keep it up while we get Jörmungandr. We re-enter the portal, close it, then we adjust the pressure again.”

The sorcerer blinked in shock before he grinned with delight. “That’s absolutely brilliant. Your genius knows no bounds, does it?”

“Any scientist worth their degree would have thought of that.” Tony tried to deflect the praise. Without waiting for an answer he led them to an empty room with a wide open space not far from the clinic. He closed and sealed the door before raising the pocket. “Alright, increasing the pressure now.”

There were a few minutes of silence as Tony focused on increasing the pressure at a slow but steady pace. As much as Stephen wanted to reach out to his soulmate, he knew doing so could cause the genius to lose his concentration. But that small furrow that formed between his eyebrows, the way he bit his lower lip in concentration, the flicker of movement beneath his closed eyelids... by the Vishanti, Stephen wanted to reach out and just--

Tony sighed, pulling the sorcerer back from his thoughts. “Alright, we’re at the right pressure. Could you open up the portal? I don’t want to try and use a corridor and risk screwing up the airlock.”

“Of course.” The spinning orange portal opened moments later to reveal a large, nearly pitch black cave. The duo stepped through and Stephen conjured a ball of light in his hand. “Tony, where to?” He gestured to the split in the tunnel.

The genius reached for the link again. “This way.” He conjured his own light and made it float over his shoulder before leading deeper into the dark. Five minutes later he stopped when he came to a drop off into a very wide pit. He peered over the edge and cringed at the perceived depth. “The beacon leads here, but…” He backed away from the edge and turned to Stephen. “Any ideas, Stephanie?”

The sorcerer barked out a laugh. “Stephanie?? I think we need to think up a new nickname. You know, something like…” He suddenly trailed off, eyes growing very wide and paling as he looked past the genius. “…Tony.”
“I’m flattered you want to use my name, but that would make things awkward in the bedroom.” The genius snarked before noticing the look on his soulmate’s face. He swallowed hard as the realization set in, and he turned around very slowly. He found himself staring into a pair of enormous slit-pupilled green eyes with black sclera. There was a moment of absolute silence as Tony utilized every breathing exercise he could think of to keep himself from freaking the actual fuck out. From the size of the head alone, the dark green snake had to be a hundred feet long at least. Finally, he was able to take a steady breath, plaster on a media grin and say, “Jörmungandr Lokison, I presume.” The massive snake stared at him for a moment before dipping his head in a nod. “Oh good. I’d never go in the ocean again if there were other snakes in the water as big as you.”

<Ha! I like you, little human. It’s not that interesting down here anyway.>

“Okay, yeah, this is nuts.” Tony threw his hands in the air to the confusion of Jörmungandr and Stephen. “Stephen, did you just hear him speak?”

The sorcerer’s brow furrowed. “I heard him hiss, but no speech.”

Tony ran his fingers through his hair in agitation as he began to pace. “First Levi, then Sleipnir, now Jör. I haven’t cast any magic on myself to help me understand languages, nor am I reading minds. Levi doesn’t even have a mind I could conceivably read with any magic I know!”

Stephen reached out and caught Tony’s hands. “Hey, we can figure it out together once we get back. Right now we need to get Jör out of this place.”

<That’s not going to be easy to do.> Jörmungandr lowered his head so the tip of his nose rested on the ledge in front of them. <The spells that keep me bound and hidden here were cast by the Allfather. That’s magic not many could ever hope to match.>

“Well, then it’s a damn good thing you’re in the presence of the Sorcerer Supreme and someone who’s already pissed on Odin’s parlor tricks multiple times. Hold still, let’s see what I can do.” Tony rested his hands on Jörmungandr’s snout and set about breaking the spells. He shredded them like paper within a matter of seconds and stepped back with a triumphant grin. “I rest my case. Rest nothin’, my case is in a watery grave.”

Jörmungandr slid forward a bit onto the ledge before he began to twist and shrink. It wasn’t long before a human knelt where the snake’s nose had been. He appeared 16 years old with long seaweed-green hair fell in front of his eyes, the appearance of which had been taken from his snake form. He attempted to rise to his feet but only succeeded in falling over. “Walking may be a problem.” He admitted, looking up. “It’s been a very long time since I have had the luxury of legs... Or any appendages, for that matter.”

“Wow, you actually admitted you need help. Loki has issues with that.” Tony chuckled as he clothed the teen with a wave of his hand. He wasted no time in scooping Jör into his arms, casting a weightlessness charm on the teen as he did so.

Jörmungandr chuckled as he settled into Tony’s arms. “Yeah, father was always rather stubborn in that regard.” His face soon fell and his tone became solemn. “I can’t blame him, though. Oftentimes his requests for help were met with suspicion and consternation.”

Stephen shared a look with Tony. It sounded like Loki’s and his entire family had gotten the short end of the stick. “Well, he won’t have that problem with us,” Stephen reassured the teen as they began to make for the portal again. “Most of us know what it’s like to experience that to some extent.”
Jörmungandr hummed as they walked towards the portal. Once they had passed through he looked to Tony again as Stephen closed the portal behind them. “Did I hear you right, earlier? Is… is my older brother here?” He asked softly, looking vulnerable and hopeful.

Tony gave the body in his arms a gentle squeeze. “Not just him-- Fenrir and Hela as well.” He shook his head to halt any questions. “Let me concentrate on my spell for a second. I don’t want to mess this up and end up getting someone hurt.” He concentrated for a few minutes before he finally dropped the spell in the room. “You ready to see your family again, Jör?” The teen nodded eagerly and Tony led them out of the room, Stephen bringing up the rear. No one noticed when they entered the clinic and Tony grinned at the opportunity. “Somebody order a second born?” He called, catching the attention of Loki, Hela, and Sleipnir. He heard Jörmungandr snort in laughter and Stephen sigh with fond exasperation behind him.

They were immediately surrounded by the trio, crying and relieved and happy to be reunited. Tony lowered Jör into a bed next to Fenrir’s then stepped back to allow them some space. He smiled at the picture they made, glad to have reunited them at last. A tap on his shoulder had him following Stephen out of the clinic, and he soon found himself wrapped in the arms of the Sorcerer Supreme. “Loki has his hellions back… I’d say it’s been a productive day.” He murmured more to himself than anyone else.

A soft laugh escaped Stephen at that. “You reunited a family long separated. You should be proud of yourself, Tony.” The genius nodded against his chest. “Tony, I have a theory regarding being able to understand Jör.” His soulmate pulled back to look up at him. “It would require a trip to Kamar-Taj to confirm, though. It’s the home and training ground for the practitioners of the Mystic Arts.”

Tony sighed softly and nodded. “Later. I want to talk to Pepper about the press conference and check in with the rest of my team first.”

“Oh course. When do you expect to hear from Ms. Potts?”

Half a second later Tony’s pocket began to vibrate and play ‘Run the World’ by Beyonce. Stephen tried to muffle his chuckles as the genius calmly routed the call to his head. Hooray for technopathy! “How’d it go, Pep?”

“Brilliantly. The public is infuriated at Rogers. It helps that there were several doctors and surgeons that came forward after the x-rays were shown and confirmed their validity and the seriousness of the injuries. Any doubt about the story very quickly died after that. Social media is practically exploding with the calls for blood-- In fact, #JusticeforTony is currently the number one trending tag, the second being #TeamIronMan.”

Tony couldn’t help but smile a bit at that. “Good to know we have the backing of the public. Did anything about the Accords come up?”

“Only briefly. I made it clear that there would be a conference later regarding the Accords and the amendments made to them, but now was not the time.”

“Brilliantly done, Pep. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Pepper laughed on the other end. “Honestly, Dorian was a great deal of help as well. He recommended using all of the evidence we had-- better for the public to have all of the facts from the beginning.”

The genius gave a soft sigh and closed his eyes for a moment. "So the video from the bunker..."
"While the public now knows about the truth of Howard and Maria's deaths, we only showed footage from the fight. Dorian refused to even consider showing their deaths-- that's a choice for you and you alone to make."

That caused Tony to pause. “Was he at the conference?”

“Only in the capacity of the 'Avengers PR Manager in training'. It's not a bad idea, though-- I swear Tony, that man could be standing on the sidelines of a crowded social function not doing anything and still draw attention.”

Tony laughed out loud at that. “That certainly sounds like Firecracker.”

Stephen smiled brilliantly as he watched his soulmate speaking with Pepper. From what he could hear on his end, things had gone well at the conference. He couldn’t help but adore the way Tony's eyes sparkled with laughter and joy, appreciate the way his lips pulled into a bright smile as the tension melted from his features… again, he found himself having to restrain himself from reaching for the genius.

“Alright, keep me posted. Will that be all, Ms. Potts?”

“That will be all, Mr. Stark.” Pepper replied in a fond tone of voice before ending the call.

Tony smiled brilliantly as he turned to Stephen. “I managed to break the internet without being present at the press conference.” He announced with an undeniably smug aura.

Stephen laughed at that. “You manage to do that at least once a year.”

The duo chuckled for a moment at that. There was a moment of quiet before FRIDAY called out to them. “Boss, Minowa just sent me the completed list of potential recruits. Did you want to look over that?”

“Later, baby girl. I’m taking my wizard out to dinner to celebrate tonight.” He turned to Stephen and held out his hand. “Shall we, Dr. Strange?”

The sorcerer stripped off his gloves and wrapped his hand around Tony’s. “Lead the way, Dr. Stark.”

Chapter End Notes

I have one more chapter pre-written after this one, but I'm thinking of slipping one in between that focuses on the rogues' reaction to the press conference and fallout.
King T’Challa of Wakanda was angry. No, he was absolutely LIVID. His steps were hard and purposeful as he swept down the hall in search of the rogue Avengers. A mere step behind him was his sister, Shuri, the two royals flanked by eight members of the Dora Milaje. “Shuri, you brought a copy of the footage, correct?” He asked, not bothering to look over at her or slow his gait.

“I did. What are you planning, brother?” Shuri sped up so she was beside him, fiddling with her kimoyo beads for a moment.

“I must get answers first. Rogers assured me that Dr. Stark’s condition was good and I took him at his word. Clearly I was wrong to do so.” A moment of silence passed before he spoke again. “Afterwards, I would like to try to get in contact with Dr. Stark. I owe him an apology if nothing else.”

The Princess smiled widely at that. “I would like to be there when you do so. I believe an exchange of information and ideas would go a long way to smooth over tensions.”

Despite the grim atmosphere, T’Challa couldn’t help but smile at his sister’s enthusiasm. “Of course. I believe he would appreciate the chance to pick your brain, and you his.” His face became solemn again as he looked forward. “Later, though. There are more pressing matters at hand now.”

It was only a few minutes later when the group entered the common area of the suite that the rogues were housed in. Steve was sitting on a couch with Natasha chatting amicably with Sam, Clint and Wanda curled up on another not far away from them. Scott was leaning against a wall staring out the window, eyes thoughtful and far away. Their attention snapped to the king as he and his entourage entered the room. “Your Highness.” Steve stood to greet them, a smile on his face. It quickly fell when he saw the looks he was getting. “Is something the matter?”

“Indeed there is. Stark Industries aired a press release you need to see.” T’Challa jerked his head towards the nearby T.V., and Shuri stepped forward to pull the footage up. The T.V. flared to life a
"... Thank you Garrett. We’re here live at Stark Industries awaiting the arrival of Virginia Potts, Stark Industries CEO, who has an update on the status of Tony Stark. Mr. Stark has been missing from the public eye since the events surrounding the split of the Avengers, and many have been worried about his health and well being. Today’s press release promises answers for many questions that have been posed by the public.”

It was less than thirty seconds later before Pepper Potts stepped onto the dias, followed by a man that the Rogues didn’t recognize. His dark hair was styled impeccably, hazel eyes lined with just enough kohl to make them pop and shine. the Armani suit he wore was black with a gold pocket square tucked into it and he carried himself with the grace and poise of one raised in high society. He moved to one side as Pepper stepped up to the podium, the noise that had erupted at their arrival quieting as she did so. “Thank you all for coming.” She began, her voice carrying over the group of journalists and reporters. “There has been speculation regarding the wellbeing of Tony Stark, and I will be providing answers for several questions that have come up in the wake of his absence.” Behind her, the man was setting up two hologram projectors, one on each side of the podium. His face was carefully blank as he did so, revealing nothing of what was about to be discussed and shown. “In the aftermath of the fight at Leipzig Airport, Mr. Stark pursued Steve Rogers and James Barnes to an undisclosed location in Siberia, Russia in an effort to resolve things without further confrontation. A fight ensued and Mr. Stark was grievously injured. The injuries he sustained would have been fatal were it not for the intervention of an ally who, at this time, will remain nameless. They and Mr. Stark have agreed to release the medical report that was compiled, and it will be posted on the Stark Industries website after the conference is done. For the moment, we are going to give you a brief look at the x-rays taken.”

The holographic displays on either side of Pepper flared to life, and the scans taken of Tony’s chest were displayed a moment later. Several gasps were heard, one person dry heaving for a moment. They certainly painted a grim picture and the implications were clear to everyone.

“As you can see, Mr. Stark’s sternum was shattered almost beyond repair and most of his ribs were broken or cracked in some way. He also suffered head trauma and internal bleeding in multiple locations. Fortunately, Mr. Stark is on the mend and should be back in the public eye after a period of recovery.” She turned to the man and held out her hand, and he pressed a folded piece of paper into it. As she unfolded it she announced, “The person who has been taking care of his recovery has also requested I say a few words on their behalf.” She cleared her throat and began to read.

‘While Dr. Stark’s injuries were most grievous and life threatening, I would like to assure everyone that he is on the mend and will make a full recovery. He is eager to return to serving the public and would like to thank everyone for their understanding in this matter. He is receiving the best treatment possible and his progress will be monitored closely. Thank you all for your continued support, and we will keep the world informed of his progress.’

Pepper folded the paper again, placing it on the podium. “In the wake of these most recent events, Stark Industries has decided to open a new branch of our research division dedicated to medical technology. More information will be available at a later date as details are still being discussed.” She looked over the crowd with sharp blue eyes. “I would personally like to assure the public that I have seen Mr. Stark recently, and that his recovery is going well. I would like to open the floor for questions now.”

The crowd of reporters and journalists immediately erupted, shouting over each other and
clamoring for attention. This kept up for a full ten seconds before a piercing whistle brought them to a standstill. The man who had entered with Pepper stepped up beside the podium, lowering his hand from his mouth. “My, but you all are so eager for answers.” He drawled, drawing the attention of the entire room within moments. “Now then, here’s how this is going to work. I’m going to choose those who have their hand up quietly, and you will stand and ask your question. Miss Potts reserves the right not to answer, and security will remove any troublemakers.”

Pepper smiled at the man thankfully and dipped her head. “Thank you, Dorian.” She turned to the group in front of her once more. “I would like to introduce Dorian Pavus, future PR Manager of the Avengers. Questions about the future of the Avengers should be kept to a minimum, as there will be a conference about the topic later on. Dorian, if you would…”

“Alright everyone, hands up!” He waited a moment before pointing to a woman towards the front. “You, in the red cashmere scarf.”

The woman stood and dipped her head towards him in thanks. “Pauline Anderson, CNN. What is the projected time period for Mr. Stark’s recovery?”

“Because of the quality of treatment he’s been receiving, we believe it should take no more than two months. We are not at liberty to discuss what that treatment entails, but rest assured, he will make a full recovery.” Pepper replied. The woman nodded with a relieved smile and sat.

“The man in the middle with the black suede gloves.”

“Felix Elizondo, BBC World News. Has Mr. Stark had a hand in the recent amendments we’ve seen to the Accords?”

“I can tell you that he has been working to make sure the Accords are fair to all parties involved. There is a conference in the works regarding the Accords, so questions about them should be saved for that time.” The man sat with a thoughtful look on his face as he scribbled something on a small pad.

More questions were fielded, ranging from the future of the Avengers to how Tony’s injuries would affect the running of Stark Industries. There were also inquiries about reparations towards the countries directly affected by the Civil War. Each question was handled with grace and eloquence, and when Dorian was called upon to answer a few questions, his wit, charm, and charisma had the press wrapped around his finger in a matter of minutes. Finally, the man pointed to a blond woman in the front.

“Christine Everhart, WHiH. I would first like to personally express my relief that Mr. Stark will recover from his injuries, and I look forward to the day he comes back into the public eye.” She paused for a moment to gather her thoughts. “However, the nature of Mr. Stark’s injuries, not to mention the severity, raise very serious questions about what transpired after the battle at Leipzig Airport. Why is it that the United States government was so quick to condemn Steve Rogers for what happened?” One could hear a pin drop in the silence that fell over the room as she took a small step forward.

“What exactly happened in Siberia?”

For a moment, neither Dorian nor Pepper answered, instead looking at each other as if having a silent conversation. Finally, Pepper looked forward again with a stony, cold expression on her face. “When Mr. Stark followed Rogers and Barnes to Siberia, they were presented with a video taken during the events of December 16th, 1991-- the deaths of Howard and Maria Stark. This video will not be shown, but I have been given leave to disclose the contents.” She took a deep breath to
center herself. “Howard and Maria Stark’s deaths were ruled as accidental; the result of a car crash. In truth, they were targeted and assassinated that night by James Barnes, who was a POW under HYDRA control.” The room once again exploded into noise that was quickly silenced by Dorian. “The footage we’re about to put up is not for the faint of heart, and we recommend all underage audiences abstain from watching. Viewer discretion is heavily advised.” She turned to Dorian and gave him a sharp nod. He pulled a phone from the inside of his suit and tapped it a few times, and the screens flared to life again.

The press watched with trepidation as Tony demanded answers from Steve, and felt their hearts break for the genius when Steve admitted to knowing. They watched as the man, overwhelmed with grief after witnessing the murder of his parents, lashed out at the Captain and was then beaten within an inch of his life. The footage taken from the Iron Man armor switched to a recording taken by what could have been a security camera, and they watched as a national hero left Tony behind, badly injured and alone, without a single look back.

The clip finally stopped, the lights came back on, and it was several seconds before the room exploded with deafening noise. Pepper and Dorian stood silent, waiting for the room to settle enough to be heard. It took well over two minutes for that to happen, and Pepper was finally able to speak again. “Along with the various charges being made against him regarding the events surrounding the media dubbed ‘Civil War’, Stark Industries will also be pressing charges upon Steven Grant Rogers for obstruction of justice regarding the events surrounding the deaths of Maria and Howard Stark, and the attempted murder of Anthony Edward Stark.”

In the hubbub that followed, one person silently raised their hand. Dorian whistled to silence everyone before pointing to the man in question. “Josiah McCormick, MSNBC. Given James Buchanan Barnes’ status as a prisoner of war, will charges be pressed against him for the murder of Mr. and Mrs. Stark?”

“The short answer is no. James Barnes will not be held responsible for their murder on account of lack of criminal responsibility. As a prisoner of war for over 70 years, he cannot be held accountable for his actions due to the brainwashing he experienced at the hands of HYDRA. The same holds true for James’ response to the events surrounding the ‘Civil War’. Instead, Stark Industries will be discussing possible treatment for Sergeant Barnes with the Accords Committee and the UN.” Pepper gave the room a once over before announcing, “That concludes today’s press conference. Thank you all for coming, and look for an announcement from Stark Industries regarding the date and time of our next conference.”

The volume in the room skyrocketed again as Pepper gracefully moved from the podium, striding away with Dorian hot on her heels. The feed cut to a newsroom with a man and a woman sitting behind a table.

“I don’t even know where to begin with this release. What do you think, Alice?” The man leaned forward in his chair, casting his eyes to his co-anchor.

The brunette took a deep breath as she gathered her thoughts. “Well, I’d start with the actions of Steve Rogers. What did he stand to gain by injuring Tony Stark in such a brutal manner, and why would he leave him to die? Even if Rogers didn’t think the injuries he inflicted were that serious, Stark had no way of contacting anyone for help. That behavior doesn’t seem befitting of Captain America, right Garrett?”

“Right you are, Alice. Steve Rogers was a member of the United States Army, and even 70 years ago they encouraged the idea of ‘no man left behind’. The fact that he did so raises serious questions about the quality of his character. Along that same vein is his denial regarding his
knowledge of Howard and Maria’s deaths. Rogers only admitted his deception when Stark called him out on it, and if his reaction is any indication, Rogers knew for quite some time.”

Alice nodded at that. “Then there was Roger’s reaction to Stark lashing out. I mean, Stark just watched his parents being murdered by a man who was less than ten feet from him. Given the circumstances, I don’t blame him for trying to hurt the person who knew his parents had been killed and lied about it to his face. I can’t imagine what Stark was feeling in that moment, and the intensity of the grief he must have been feeling makes what Rogers and Barnes did worse. Then there’s the fact that Rogers is Enhanced, so he’s noticeably stronger than a baseline human. Yet that didn’t stop him from attacking Stark, and with the very shield Howard Stark made.”

Garrett’s eyes narrowed as something else occurred to him. “Actually, let’s focus on that for a second. Rogers slammed that shield into the arc reactor until it died. What if that reactor had still been in Stark’s chest? Remember, he had it removed late December of 2012, but what if it had still been there? That thing sat six inches deep in his chest and weakened the stability of his sternum and ribs. If the reactor had still been in his chest, Roger’s attack would have killed him.”

The brunette anchor started to speak again, but something seemed to catch their attention. “Hold on folks, it seems we have breaking news coming in. Let’s go to commercial while we get the details. We’ll be right back, everyone.”

“WHAT THE FUCK, STEVE!”

The super soldier had no time to react before Sam’s fist was colliding with his face. He reeled back as his hands flew to his nose as it began gushing blood. Sam stood over him, shaking his hand out with a thunderous expression. “You told us that he attacked you and Barnes! You said he was fine when you left! You assured us he would be able to get out!” He flung his hand towards the TV in a wide, angry motion. “And if THAT wasn’t enough, you left him behind! I don’t care what kind of argument you have with someone, you never leave a man behind!”

Wanda snorted from her place next to Clint. “What does it matter? Stark is a murderer. It’s no less than he deserves.”

Sam whipped around to her, snarling slightly. “Zip it, buttercup! It’s not about whether you think he’s a murderer, or whatever bullshit you can come up with! One of the most important things you’re taught in the military is ‘no man left behind’! I guess that’s something HYDRA never taught you, huh?!”

“Hey, don’t talk to her like that! She’s just a kid!” Clint rose from his seat, moving over to block Sam’s view of Wanda.

“Bullshit! She’s 25 years old! I don’t know how you all got it in your heads that she is a helpless little girl, but I’ve had enough of it!” Sam stormed from the room without saying another word or even glancing in Steve’s direction. A moment later he was followed by Scott, who had a lost but horrified look on his distinctly pale face.

Before Steve could recover from that shock, he found an irate redhead in his face as he held his nose, looking up at Natasha Romanoff. “You said you’d tell him. You promised me you wouldn’t keep it from him.”

“He was trying to kill Bucky! I couldn’t let Stark hurt him!”
Natasha’s glare was nothing short of deadly. “He took that suit--an earlier version of it--through a wormhole. He’s faced down aliens, robots, and GODS in that suit. If he wanted you dead--either of you--you would have never walked out of that bunker.”

Wanda huffed and stood from her own seat. “Well now Stark knows how it feels. Serves him right after he’s killed so many people.”

Clint nodded in agreement. “At least with Stark laid up we don’t have to worry about him snitching to Ross about our location. Seems like a fair trade to me.”

Before anything else could be said, their attention was drawn by the TV again as the commercials ended and the news team came back on the screen.

“Welcome back everyone,” Garrett greeted the audience, a few papers spread before him on the desk. “We have an update on the destruction of a small farmstead in Waverly, Iowa. A week ago we reported on the sudden and violent destruction of a family home in Waverly, though we had no further details at that time. We’ve just received new information that alludes to this having been a deliberate attack. The analysis of the debris left behind by the explosion hint at this having been the work of a high-grade military weapon, a hypothesis that is further supported by this video shot near the scene.”

A clip taken from a cell phone was shown on the screen, the lens focusing on a swift moving aircraft passing over the house. The clip stayed on the plane until a violent explosion rocked the area, the phone being turned in time to see a fireball erupt into the sky. The footage shook and wobbled as the owner began to run in the opposite direction, cutting out a moment later.

“While the plane has not been identified yet, many have noticed its’ resemblance to a United States fighter jet. The search continues for the family that was known to be living there, however it is believed they perished in the attack. Anyone who has information regarding the ongoing investigation is encouraged to come forward.”

Whatever would have been said next went unheard as the room descended into chaos. Clint let out a wounded, wordless cry of shock and pain, throwing himself towards the TV. Natasha intercepted him halfway there, tackling and pinning him to the ground as the archer began thrashing and screaming obscenities and denials. Looking up at the screen as she kept Clint from escaping, a whisper of Laura’s name formed on Natasha’s, followed lips by a string of something in Russian. Steve had risen partly out of his own seat, caught between trying to comfort the archer or taking control to try and restore order of some kind. Wanda was looking between them all, one of her hands covering her mouth in what appeared to be shock.

T’Challa blinked at the sudden outburst of emotion from the archer, looking between him and the TV. A subtle prod from Shuri shifted his attention to the witch. Though she appeared to be upset by the news, the king could read people well enough to see the subtle nuances between her expression and posture. She might look upset but she wasn’t truly, she held herself too relaxed and calm for that.

After a few seconds, the fight seemed to completely drain out of Clint and he began to sob brokenly. Natasha quickly shifted from pinning him to holding him against her chest, whispering to him in Russian as he continued to cry. Steve looked between them and T’Challa, an uncertain look on his face while continuing to hold his hand to his broken nose. Taking the initiative the king swept forward, catching the attention of the Black Widow when he did so. “Take him to his room. Stay with him.” He said to her, compassion shining in his brown eyes. The woman nodded and stood slowly, carefully helping Clint to his feet and bracing his taller frame against hers protectively. Two members of the Dora Milaje followed the pair silently to make sure they made it
there without any problems.

“Why does she get to go with him? He needs me!” Wanda protested, a pout appearing on her lips as she looked from Steve to the other two still in the room, crossing her arms slightly against her stomach.

T’Challa turned his attention to her, his face maintaining a mask of blank neutrality despite his suspicions towards the witch. “If Mr. Barton requests your presence once he has calmed down, you will be allowed to see him. Until then, I would suggest you both return to your designated bedrooms. That the confrontation between yourself and Mr. Wilson resulted in you getting punched is worrying, Mr. Rogers, and I would ask that you and your team stay in your rooms until such time comes that things have calmed to an appropriate level.”

Wanda huffed indignantly and turned on her heel, storming out of the room when she saw that the Wakandan king wouldn’t be dissuaded. Steve moved to follow her immediately but he found his path was blocked by two of the Dora Milaje. “She shouldn’t be alone right now, she’s just a kid!” He protested strongly, turning back to face T’Challa and Shuri with a slight frown.

“I’m sure Ms. Maximoff will be alright until things cool down. Now please return to your own room, Mr. Rogers,” T’Challa replied politely but firmly.

Steve opened his mouth for a moment as if to argue, then paused and finally he shook his head with a sigh. He left the room a few moments later, another member of the royal guard in pursuit. A silence fell briefly over the room for a blissful moment before Shuri turned to her brother. “What now?”

T’Challa remained silent for a moment, organizing his thoughts before he turned to the remaining guards. “Have someone posted outside each of their rooms and make sure they’re not detected, not even a whisper. I do not trust them to not try and disobey my request for them to stay separated within their rooms, all save for Romanoff and Barton. Make sure Lang and Wilson are made aware of my decision as well.” The group saluted him and all but one departed to carry out his orders.

Shuri fell in step beside her brother as they left the room. “Perhaps we should call Dr. Stark and show him the recording I took. It would also give you a chance to apologize to him.” The last part was emphasized as the princess gave T’Challa a pointed look.

A deep sigh escaped the man. “Yes, Shuri, I am aware that I owe Dr. Stark an apology, now more than ever. I believe it would be best to admit my involvement in Siberia and of my impulsive offer to Barnes and, to a lesser extent, Rogers. I took Rogers at his word, and Dr. Stark almost died for it. I am beginning to realize that he is not the man everyone believes him to be.”

Shuri turned her head to look at T’Challa. “Are you talking about Dr. Stark or Mr. Rogers?”

“Both of them.”

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The clicking of heels upon tile brought the conversation in the communal lounge to a halt and the Reapers and other residents of the Compound looked up to see Pepper enter the room with a worried and exasperated look on her face. “Tony, Laura, we have a situation.”

Laura, who had been holding Hela on her lap and reading to her, handed the little girl over to her father and moved immediately to join Pepper and Tony. “What’s wrong?” She questioned, keeping her voice low, not wanting to alert the kids if something was wrong.
Pepper didn’t verbally reply, instead setting her tablet on the table and sliding it over to them. Tony didn’t even have to read it, the picture saying more than enough. He groaned and ran a hand down his face.

“Shit. I knew we forgot about something.”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Laura and Tony reassure the public of the Barton’s survival, and Tony and friends check in on a suspiciously silent spider.

Leave comments and suggestions down below-- I love hearing people's ideas for the story going forward!!
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Laura finds the press obnoxious. Tony receives a call from a distressed Peter, and he and Zevrael rush to his aid to try and find his missing family.

Chapter Notes

My fellow vassals of our Lord and master AO3, I present to you, the long anticipated chapter 13! Thank you all for your patience, and I hope it lives up to your expectations!

Gotta warn you guys, though. Peter whump in this chapter. You'll see.

“Welcome back, Tony, Laura. How did it go?”

Laura merely groaned in reply, reaching down to pull her heels off and flinging them into a corner of the common room. “The press asked a lot of questions that I didn’t want to answer, and they didn’t want to hear ‘no’. So, about normal, I’d say. At least, I think it was since that’s the first time I’ve ever spoken to the press.” Sinking into the nearest chair, she relaxed into it in relief.

“Oh trust me, they can be a lot worse.” Tony flopped into his own seat, a lazy grin on his face. “You handled yourself like a champ out there, though.”

Loki laughed slightly as he carried over a full cup of coffee for Tony and an iced tea for Laura. “Of that, I have no doubt. Though judging by your children, you are a strong woman in your own right.”

A startled laugh left Laura and she impishly blew a raspberry in his direction. The action was so unexpected that Loki couldn’t stifle a full, deep laugh at the sight. “Flatterer. Where are the kids right now anyway?”

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“I believe Lila and Hela are still in the midst of ‘a very important lesson about tea parties’ and that they were not to be bothered,” Zevrael answered while stepping out of the elevator, a grin on his face. “Sleipnir is sitting with Jor and Fen reading stories to them. They seem to have taken a shine to Brian Jacques.” Thinking for a moment, the elf’s grin grew before he continued. “Bridget has Nate with her since he went down for a nap while you were out. Cooper is actually spending time with Dorian-- he saw Vhenan summon ‘Dora and asked to see more magic.” Seeing the confused look on Laura’s face, he elaborated. “‘Dora, whose actual name is Pandora, is Dorian’s Patronus. The Reapers use them as messengers, and they take on different shapes for each person. Though sometimes I think that peacock is as vain as he is considering how much time she spends arranging her tail feathers.”

Tony smirked at the elf and arched an eyebrow. “Come off it, Zev, you love that man to death.”
Zevrael sighed longingly at that, knowing it was true and smiling softly. “That I do, Lethallin.”

Before anything else could be said, FRIDAY’S voice cut in without warning. “Boss, you have an incoming call from Peter.”

“Go ahead and patch Underoos through, FRI.” A moment later Tony’s eyes began glowing with a bluish tint. “Hey, Pete! What’s swingin’?” A moment later, the relaxed smile began fading from his face as it took on a more worried look. “Whoa, slow down, Peter. What’s wrong?... What do you mean ‘May’s gone’?” There was a long pause before Tony spoke again. “Okay Peter, where are you now? The apartment? Good. Now I need you to listen to me, Peter. Lock the apartment door, then go to your room and stay there. Do not come out unless I call you from my number and tell you I’m standing outside. I’ll be there as soon as possible. Take a few deep breaths, I’m on my way.”

Zevrael stepped into Tony’s line of sight as the blue faded from his eyes. “Do you need me with you, Tony?” Concern made his piercing blue eyes appear wider than normal, the silverette absently biting the left side of his lower lip.

The genius nodded sharply in reply, waving his hand to summon his basic Reaper gear, and the elf did the same. “I’ll open a corridor near the building. I’m gonna cloak both of us-- whatever’s going on, we don’t want to alert anyone who might be watching.” Zevrael nodded and stepped up beside Tony in preparation. “Loki, Laura, please humor me and go find the kids. Get them all in one room and keep them together until we get back. Call me paranoid, but something about this feels off.”

Loki offered a hand to Laura, and she allowed the god to help her to her feet, worry in her own eyes as she stood. “Stay safe, Anthony, Zevrael.” He told the duo before swiftly leading the woman from the room to find their children. At least most of them were in groups, his boys being together in one room with Sleipnir reading to them while Lila and Hela were playing tea party with each other.

It was a matter of moments before the corridor surged up around Tony and Zev, depositing them moments later into a darkened alley in Forest Hills, NYC. Tony waved his hand to apply the cloaking spell before leading the elf into the building. They swiftly ascended the stairs and strode down the hall, stopping outside the door to the Parker’s apartment. “Hold on a second. I need to check something…” Tony’s eyes flared blue, a frown appearing on his face moments later. “Thought so. The building’s bugged. FRIDAY, loop the feed first, then find out where all of these are broadcasting to… Thanks, baby girl. Call Peter for me please.” There was a brief silence. “Pete, I’m outside. Come to the front door and unlock it, but don’t open it.”

A few seconds later, they heard movement and the sound of the door’s lock being turned. Once Tony was sure FRIDAY was looping the feed, he pushed the door open on his own, dropping the cloaking spell on himself and Zev as soon as they were inside. The moment the door was closed, Tony found himself being tackled in a hug by Peter. “Easy Pete, I’ve got you. You’re okay.” He murmured as he held the slightly shaking teen close to himself, rubbing his back gently. He looked up at Zevrael for a moment to say, “Zev, search the place for anything that might tell us what’s going on. Be as thorough as possible.” The elf nodded sharply and stalked away to complete the task. The genius held Peter close for another few minutes before pulling away to get a good look at his face. “Okay Pete, start from the top. When was the last time you saw May?”

The young teen sniffed and wiped his eyes with the cuff of his sweater. “About four days ago. I got a text from her saying the hospital was keeping her late that day, and I didn’t think anything of it. I went to Ned’s house this morning, and when I came back...” He choked and his doe-brown eyes filled with tears again. “She… Everything of hers was…” Tony pulled the chestnut-haired boy
against him again and Peter burst into tears, unable to articulate the problem.

Fortunately, Zevrael came down the hall a few minutes later with the answer. “Tony, this place shows no other signs of occupation besides Peter. It’s like her very presence was erased.” After a moment of hesitation, the elf approached the duo and gently began to run his fingers through Peter’s hair, trying to provide some measure of comfort.

Tony gave Peter another squeeze before gently pulling away from him. “Pete, let me go talk to FRIDAY and see what I can find out.” He gestured for Zevrael to come into the teen’s line of sight. “Zev, stay with Peter while I’m doing this, do not let him out of your sight.”

The elf nodded and gestured for Peter to join him on the couch as Tony slipped down the hall. After a few moments hesitation the teen sank down next to him, small tremors still wracking his body. “Don’t worry, Peter.” Zev reassured him with a gentle smile, opening his arms in silent invitation. Sniffing hard, Peter allowed himself to snuggle against the older male that Tony obviously trusted, letting the comforting touch ground him, soothing some of the rawness that he felt since this had begun. “Tony will do everything in his power to figure this out.”

From his place in the hallway, Tony smiled softly for a moment as he heard his fellow Reaper reassured Peter. A moment later, he was all business again, his eyes once more glowing with blue-tinted light. The world fell away and the genius found himself face-to-face with the glowing green ball of light and code that made up FRIDAY’s core programming. “OK baby girl. Let’s start with a facial recognition scan across all of the security cameras within the city.”

FRIDAY’s core hummed for a moment before her voice rang out again. “Boss, there was a woman matching May’s features on security footage at John F. Kennedy airport yesterday.” Several windows seemed to form around the two showing the various shots mentioned.

Tony nodded after only a moment. “That’s her alright. What was she doing at JFK?” More importantly, he wondered why she would go to an airport without saying a word to Peter. It made no sense to him, considering how much she loved him.

“It looks like she boarded a plane headed to London, Boss.”

“What the hell? Why would she do that?” Tony tilted his head with a worried yet thoughtful look on his face.

FRIDAY answered that for him. “I did a search regarding Ms. Parker, her most frequently visited locations, and her workplace. Boss, I found this in the servers at the hospital.” The AI spoke hesitantly, a reminder of how young she truly was compared to JARVIS.

An email opened in front of Tony, and he quickly skimmed through the message. “Let’s see… May Parker will no longer be working with us… job offer… sad to see her go… we wish her all the luck in the world…” Then he paused as one part in particular stood out at him. “Her new employer will be sending men to pick her stuff up sometime during the day. We ask that you not disturb them or ask any questions regarding May’s new position or company.” Tony flicked his fingers and the email flickered away. “FRI, pull up the surveillance footage of the hospital, highlight anyone that isn’t a regular employee or patient.” The AI did as he asked, and he observed the windows for a few minutes. A man came into view that caused Tony to suddenly pause the feed. “I know that guy-- he’s a SHIELD agent.”

“The bugs around the building are broadcasting to a location I have tagged as a SHIELD safehouse.”
Tony growled in anger and he thrust his hand out to banish the windows around him. “If SHIELD is involved in this, then you can bet your ass Fury had something to do with it. Give me the coordinates of the safehouse, FRIDAY. We’re going to get some answers.” Once he had an affirmative answer from FRIDAY, Tony allowed himself to return to reality. He blinked a few times to reorient himself before moving back to the living room. “Look alive, gents.” He called, drawing the attention of the duo curled up on the couch. “I don’t have a full idea of what’s going on, but I can tell you SHIELD is involved somehow. We’re gonna go pay them a visit and get some answers. Sound good?”

Peter nodded and stood with Zevrael. “Mr. Stark, do you know if May is okay?” he questioned, his voice wavering slightly.

The genius took a deep breath to steel himself. “Pete, I found footage of your aunt boarding a plane to London from two days ago. A note from her workplace said she took a new job, but didn’t say where.” The heartbroken, agonized look from the teen compelled Tony to pull him into a hug. “We’re going to figure out what the hell’s going on, I promise.” He looked up as Zevrael approached them. “Zev, if I give you the coordinates to the safehouse, could you get us there?”

The silverette nodded in reply, rubbing Peter’s shoulder in a comforting gesture. “Of course, Lethallin.” Tony swiftly sent FRIDAY a message to send the elf the information. Zevrael activated his heads up display, and after a moment he nodded. “Alright, I’ll need to cloak us first.” He shot the genius a meaningful look-- ‘you’re the one with the magic here.’

Tony shot him back his own look-- ‘I know.’ He pulled away from Peter, using his thumbs to wipe the tears from Peter’s face. “Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths, kid.” He ordered him softly. As Peter did that, the genius motioned for Zevrael to call up the corridor. The darkness surged up around them and Tony used the moment of darkness and confusion to hide them from detection. The corridor fell away a moment later to an unassuming two-story building among lush green foliage. “You okay, Pete?” He asked, giving the teen a quick once-over.

The teen was looking around with wide eyes, his jaw hanging open. “That-- what... What was that?!”

Zevrael smiled indulgently at the young teen, running his fingers through his hair again. “Later, Pete.”

“Zev’s right, kid. Let’s go find Director Spy and play interrogator. Cryo, let’s take the cloak down. I want these guys to know we’re coming.” Tony stood, giving an inconspicuous twist of his wrist to make them visible. He nudged Peter in Zevrael’s direction and waited until they were standing shoulder to shoulder before striding up to the door and letting himself in, bold as brass. “Nick-y, I’m ho-ome!” He shouted into the house as the elf and teen joined him.

Less than thirty seconds passed before they found themselves surrounded by SHIELD agents with weapons pointed in their direction. “Stark.” Fury himself stepped forward, his eye trailing over his companions, lingering for a moment on Peter. “It seems rumors of your recovery time were inaccurate.”

Tony gave the man a sharp smile at that. “And rumors of your death were greatly exaggerated. But that’s neither here nor there.” He turned his head to Zev for a moment and gave him a sharp nod. “Cryo, if you would…” The elf nodded in reply and raised his hand, clenching it into a fist. Moments later, the temperature of the room plunged and the agents found themselves encased in ice up to their shoulders. As they cried out in shock, Fury drew his own gun and pointed it at Zevrael, only to have to drop it as the metal turned blisteringly cold. “I think you know why we’re here, Fury.” The tone of the genius’s voice was just as cold as the ice around them as he turned his
attention back to Nick.

The director was looking at the trio with an unreadable expression on his face. He stayed silent for a few seconds before giving a deep sigh of resignation. “You’re here about May Parker.”

“What did you do to her?!” Peter moved so he was standing next to Tony. “She wouldn’t have just left without saying goodbye! She wouldn’t have just abandoned me!”

“We know your aunt found out about you being Spiderman.” Peter’s face went white with fear, but the director continued. “Our intention was to have the memory of such removed from her mind in an effort to keep her, and you, safe.” His eye slid shut for a moment. “Something went wrong, though. Instead of just forgetting Spiderman, her memory was irrevocably altered in such a way that she doesn’t remember Peter.”

Tony wrapped his arm around Peter’s shoulders as the teen began to shake. Whether it was from fear, anger, or something else he didn’t know. “So you, what— decided to send her away?! Did you even think about what this would do to Peter?!”

“She’s alive, and at least she’ll be out of harm’s way. Being Spiderman doesn’t exactly allow for familial security. She’ll be able to lead a normal life without the dangers of your enemies coming after her.” Nick spoke calmly, as if he hadn’t just ripped Peter’s world out from under him.

An anger unlike anything Tony had ever felt rose up within the genius. He knew what Fury was trying to do— trying to deflect the blame of his mistake in such a way that it could be seen as an advantage, then manipulating the reason for the decision so it rested solely on Peter. He was seriously considering decking the director. Peter had no such reservations though, and a ‘crack’ echoed in the room as the teen’s fist collided with Nick’s face. The force of the hit sent the man sprawling on the floor, clutching his now broken jaw. Tony lunged forward and grabbed the teen, pulling him into a tight embrace. Fortunately, the young man seemed to have only one good punch in him before the emotional roller coaster of the past few days caught up with him. He collapsed against Tony, sobbing brokenly in agony and grief.

“You are a fool, Nicholas Fury.” The icy voice that cut the room caused Tony to look up. Zevrael was stepping around Tony and Peter to stand in front of them both, righteous anger in every line of his body. The genius was confused for a moment before it clicked.

Zevrael Pavus was one of the most compassionate and positive people Tony had the pleasure of knowing. He could light up a room with his mere presence and could bring a smile to the face of the most somber of men. However, there was one thing he didn’t tolerate, under any circumstances whatsoever.

He was not, and would never be okay with the tampering of an unwilling person’s memories. Especially not when he knew what it was like.

Fury wasn’t facing Zevrael Pavus, now. He was being confronted by the Inquisitor, and Inquisitor Zevrael Lavellan had never pulled his punches. He sure as Hell wasn’t going to start now if the ice creeping up his right hand and the frost forming over his left was any indication.

The elf’s eyes were like chips of ice as he stood over the director, spikes of ice beginning to form around his feet from the strength of his ire. “Who are you to make a decision such as that? What authority do you have to decide a person’s fate in such a way? Did you not think of the consequences of such a thing if it had worked? Did you not consider the possible repercussions when it went wrong? Yes, May Parker is alive and well. But what of the nephew she left behind?” Zevrael gestured behind him to Peter, who was watching the elf in shock from his place in Tony’s
arms. “Your actions have rendered him without a guardian and have cost him the only family he had left! And for what, Director?” Zevrael drew himself to full height, the temperature of the room dropping even lower. “You’ve done grievous harm in your misguided effort to make things ‘better’. Did you not consider that, perhaps, your way is not always the best? You could have had her relocated to the Avengers Compound, or Stark Tower. You could have asked her to join you, offered protection in return for her help. There are thousands of other things you could have done, but you just had to do it your way. I hate to inform you, Fury, but your way cost a teen his remaining family, and that you tried to cover it up does not shine a flattering light on you or your associates.” He looked around at the agents, still encased in ice. “I would recommend you all look carefully at where your allegiances lay. Nicholas Fury was willing to do this to a woman he’s never met. Is it too much of a stretch to think he wouldn’t do the same to you or your families?”

“Cryo.” Tony’s soft voice drew the elf’s gaze to him. “I’ll take it from here. Take Peter back to compound, I’ll join you guys soon.”

Something in the genius’ eyes gave Zev pause, and after a moment he nodded his agreement. He helped Tony maneuver the teen into a standing position before pulling Peter into his arms. Peter unconsciously clung tight to the elf and allowed his presence and warmth to ground him. The silverette nodded to Tony before the darkness of a corridor surged up around them and swept them away.

Tony ignored the gasps from the agents around him as he turned his eyes back to Fury, who was struggling to stand. “You fucked up, Fury.” He started, his hard voice drawing everyone’s attention. “Here’s what is going to happen going forward. You left that kid without a guardian, so I will be taking custody of him. Not you, not some random member of your not so secret boyband—me. He’ll be safer with us than anywhere else, and he’ll have a support system to help him cope with what you did to him. You and your SHIELD roadies are going to stay the fuck away from us. If I catch wind of you doing something like this again, if I hear even a whisper of you skulking around me or mine, you won’t be dealing with Tony Stark. You’ll be dealing with the Merchant of Death.” Tony turned on his heel and strode towards the door. “Oh, and that ice should be gone in a few hours. Hope none of you need a bathroom before then.”

As Tony closed the door to the house behind him he heard one man groan, “Dammit, why did he have to say that?!”

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Stephen stepped through the portal into the compound, a small smile on his face at the feeling of coming home. “Good evening, FRIDAY.” He called up to the ceiling in greeting. “Can you tell me where Tony is right now?”

“Good evening, Dr. Strange. Boss is in the music hall.” She remained quiet for a few seconds as the sorcerer began the trek down the hall. “Doctor, I’ve been authorized to make you aware that Peter Parker will be staying at the Compound indefinitely as of this afternoon. Boss can tell you more.”

The doctor sped up his steps as confusion and worry tugged at his heart. It was a matter of minutes before he was pushing the doors to the hall open, Levi shooting inside before he could stop him. The violin music that had been playing immediately stopped with a yelp that had Stephen laughing as he approached his soulmate.

Tony was wrapped up in the artifact, his violin floating in the air beside them after having almost dropped it. He pat the collar of the cloak with a grin on his face. “Hey Levi! How’s my favorite enchanted snuggie?” The cloak squeezed around him and the genius laughed. “That’s good! You
“He’s doing a fantastic job.” The Sorcerer Supreme declared as he finally got within reaching distance of the man. Levi unraveled from the genius so Stephen could pull Tony into his arms, resting his chin on top of the shorter man’s head. “FRIDAY told me we have a new resident.”

The brunette nodded at that, letting the beat of Stephen’s heart soothe his agitated nerves. “Yeah. It’s a mess and a half, Stephen. The poor kid…” He sighed and stood, summoning a corridor to the patio where they had talked before and leading Stephen through. They sat and Tony began recounting the events of the day, thankful when his soulmate took his hand and began rubbing gentle circles on the knuckles to help ground him.

For the most part, the Sorcerer Supreme stayed quiet, only speaking up to ask clarifying questions. At the end the blue-eyed man pulled Tony into his arms in a comforting hug. “How is Peter right now?” He finally asked.

“Honestly? I’m not sure. He told me he’s at least happy she’ll be safe, but I know it’s hurting him a lot more than he’s letting on. I admit I’m a little out of my league here-- the Reapers have all agreed to help and take care of him, and the guardianship papers should be pushed through in a day or two… but I don’t know how else to help him.”

Stephen hummed in contemplation. “Well, the Reapers are all adults. Having Sleipnir, Jörmungandr, and Fenrir might help, seeing as they’re all his age, or at least close to it.” He felt Tony suddenly go still in his arms, and the sorcerer pulled away to see a grin slowly forming on the genius’ face.

“That gives me an idea.”

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“Hello, Keener residence! This is Holly speaking!”

“Holly, it’s Tony. Listen, I have a favor to ask of you…”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter-- Enter the Keeners, spider meets wizard, and a certain Hawk and Spy realize not everything is as it seems.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

The Keeners come to the compound, and Peter meets the resident Sorcerer who could potentially fix what happened to May. But is the price worth it?

Meanwhile, Natasha and Clint hear the news about the fate of Laura and her chicks. A certain witch has ended up on another shit-list.

Chapter Notes

ARGH. Alright, so it seems I can't rag on ALL of Team Cap. CURSE ME AND MY INABILITY TO CONDEMN CHARACTERS ENTIRELY.

Not you, Rogers. You're still WAY the fuck up on my list. Go to your corner until it's time for your reckoning.

There is a poll going on now, please vote and let me know your opinions!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony smiled brightly at the sight of the quinjet coming in for a landing not far from him, very glad that the Keeners had been able to fly here. Holly had agreed to come out to the Avengers Compound for the weekend with Harley and Hannah, especially after she had heard the reason why he wanted them there so suddenly. The genius planned on offering the single mom a job at either Stark Industries or the Avengers Compound-- now that he had a second chance at life, he planned on keeping his family and those he held precious in his heart close at hand. One of his most precious was…

“Tony!!”

A laugh escaped Tony as he caught 15-year-old Harley midway through his flying tackle hug, squeezing him in return while smiling down at him. “It’s good to see you too, Harley! How have things at school been going?” Tony had his doubts that the bullying had gotten better despite Harley’s previous claims that things were ‘fine’, though he didn’t want to push him too hard. The teen didn’t reply, instead burying his face in Tony’s chest and clinging to him like his life depended on it. “Harl? What’s wrong?” The curly-haired blond shook his head, refusing to answer verbally. Tony looked up as Holly approached them with Hannah in her arms.

Holly smiled sadly at the sight. “He saw the SI press conference on TV,” she explained softly,
shifting her daughter on her hip a little.

Tony let out a huffed breath and held the teen in his arms tighter for a few seconds. “Harley, please look at me,” he finally said, pulling away just enough so the teen could do so. Harley reluctantly pulled back to show his pale face and his blue eyes that were a little watery with tears. Tony smiled reassuringly down at the teen. “I’m okay, Harl’. I’m actually better than I’ve been in years. I’m safe and I’m not going anywhere anytime soon.” He pulled Harley back into his arms, smiling wider when the teen hugged him again and just as tightly.

“I am a little curious, Tony. The press conference said you’d be out of commission for another two months.” Holly looked the genius over as she set down Hannah, watching with a smile as she ran over to her brother to join the hug.

Without missing a beat, Tony easily scooped the 7-year-old into his arm and perched her on his right hip, Harley moving to the other side. “The press only got part of the information,” he explained softly. “I’ve been healed up for a while now, but it had to be done with magic.” He closed his eyes for a moment. “It was… Holly, it was bad.”

Understanding lit in the woman’s soft brown eyes. The genius was saying it was bad, but what wasn’t being said for the sake of her kids was that it would have been fatal. “I’m just really glad that you’re better now. That’s what matters.”

Tony nodded in agreement, relieved that the woman understood the subtle message. “Yep, I’m at 125% capacity now!” He gestured for Holly and Harley to follow him, keeping a giggling Hannah on his hip as they did. “Let me give you guys a quick tour of the Compound. It’s early enough in the morning that the other residents will either be sleeping or in the middle of their morning routines.”

Tony took them through the building, pointing out the various areas and rooms to the delighted family. The family as a whole had jumped when introduced to FRIDAY, but the AI had quickly won them over with her gentle Irish lilt and dry humor. The music hall prompted a squeal from Hannah and she asked to learn to play piano from her mom. The genius made a mental note to bring it up with Aria when he saw her next. Harley pouted when he was told he would get a chance to see the labs later, but brightened when Tony told him there was a project he wanted to work on with him. The genius was glad the family liked the compound so far, and he was hopeful that it would be a selling point for Holly taking a position closer by.

They were entering the communal common room when a portal of gold sparks opened in the middle and Stephen stepped through, carrying two travel mugs of coffee. The portal closed as he called out, “Good morning, Tony. I brought coffee.” A moment later he noticed the small family with his soulmate. “Hello, you must be the Keeners.”
Tony set Hannah down so he could take his mug. “Yep, this is Holly, Harley, and Hannah.” He pointed to each person individually before taking a sip of his drink, enjoying his favorite drink of all time. He didn’t know how he would function if there was a sudden shortage of coffee in the world.

The sorcerer nodded and gave them a small bow. “A pleasure to meet you all. I’m Dr. Stephen Strange, Sorcerer Supreme, Master of the Mystic Arts…”

“...And my undoubtedly better half.” Tony chimed in, slipping his unoccupied hand into Stephen’s with a grin.

The sorcerer snorted at that with a fond smile and shake of his head. “You flatter me, Tony. Ms. Keener, how do you take your coffee?” Stephen arched his eyebrow at the woman. Upon being told ‘sugar with a splash of milk’ he waved his hand over the beverage before levitating it over to her. To her credit, the woman didn’t even balk at the floating cup and simply snagged it out of the air and took a sip. “Have you checked in on Peter yet?” He asked the genius who was now pressed against his side, gazing at his mug in worship.

Tony took another sip and nodded. “Still sleeping when I peeked in on him at 7:30. He slept most of yesterday though, so I would imagine he’ll be up soon.”

“I’ll check in on him while you finish your tour. Want to take Levi with you?” The collar of said cloak seemed to perk up, and upon getting a nod from Tony fluttered over to settle around the genius’ shoulders. “I’ll let you know how he is. Enjoy your tour, guys.” Without thinking about it, Stephen bent down and brushed a kiss against his soulmate’s head before leaving the room, unaware of how Tony had frozen and blushed at the sudden touch. “FRIDAY, is Peter still in his room?”

“He is, but his vitals indicate he’ll be awake soon,” FRIDAY cheerfully reported.

Stephen hummed as he used his sling ring to open a portal directly to Tony’s suite. Peter had chosen to stay close to the genius, and the sorcerer couldn’t blame him after what had happened with May. After inquiring about the teen’s culinary preferences, he set about preparing breakfast for them-- no doubt Peter would be ravenous once he woke up fully. Tony had mentioned to him about Peter’s need to eat a lot due to his metabolism being enhanced after the spider bite. Sure enough, the brown-haired teen stumbled into the common room just as Stephen was setting the plates on the table. “Good morning, Peter,” he quietly greeted the younger, feeling a little guilty when Peter jumped a foot in the air despite Stephen’s soft voice. “I have some breakfast here if you want some.”
“Who are you?” Peter asked, eyeing the sorcerer cautiously, though he did notice that the other had the same facial hair as Tony. Just because his spidey-senses weren’t going off didn’t mean that this stranger was harmless or had good intentions. After all, despite what had been done to Aunt May, his senses hadn’t responded to Nick Fury. In his mind, the man was no better than Captain America with how he believed he had the right to disrupt people’s lives as long as it suited his purpose.

The sorcerer lowered himself into his own chair, waving a hand so Peter’s was pulled out as well. “I’m Stephen Strange, Tony’s SO. He’s in the middle of giving a tour right now, so I figured I would check in on you and keep you company.” He gestured for the teen to sit again, and after a few seconds of consideration, Peter cautiously lowered himself into the chair. The first bite was slow and wary but once the teen realized how good the food was, he began eating more rapidly, having not had much of an appetite since May had disappeared. The sorcerer hid a smile behind a mug of tea, pleased that the teen was at least well enough to enjoy a meal. “So while Tony is finishing his business, is there anything you want to do today?” He asked as the dishes were levitated to the sink.

The brunette remained quiet for a bit, eyes far away as he thought. “I… don’t know.” He finally admitted, bowing his head slightly as he spoke. “I know my whole life was just turned upside down, and I feel like I should be upset, angry, sad… I should be feeling something, but right now…”

“It feels like a bad dream.” Stephen stood and gestured for the teen to follow him, and he brought them to the nearby couches where they could relax.

Peter nodded as he sank into the seat of one of the couches, Stephen sitting on the opposite side. “Yeah. I just… I’m hoping I’ll wake up and everything will be back to the way it was, but I know it’s not possible, and my head is having a hard time wrapping around that…” He looked over at Stephen after a moment, eyes haunted and sad. “Do you know what it’s like to just… have the world fall out from under you?”

For a few seconds, Stephen closed his eyes and just breathed. Finally, he opened his eyes, his blue eyes locked on Peter’s. “Do you know what my job was up until May of 2013?” The teen looked confused at the sudden line of questioning but shook his head. “I was a neurosurgeon, one of the best in the world. It was rewarding to save lives, and I loved the fame that came with being the best. Doctor Stephen Strange was one that everyone in the medical field knew.”

“If you were the best, why did you stop?” Peter asked, his head tilted in slight confusion.
Stephen didn’t reply verbally, not at first. Instead, he lifted his hands and gently pulled off the gloves. He observed them for a moment before replying. “I was in a car accident, a bad one. My hands were badly injured, and I still struggle with nerve damage to this day.” He held up his hands so the teen could see the way they shook and trembled despite him not manipulating a single digit. Peter’s eyes widened at the implications even as the Sorcerer continued. “Having that taken away from me… Losing it in the way I did? The only way I can describe it is ‘traumatizing’.” He slipped the gloves back on before sitting forward, his blue-green eyes full of an understanding that could only be shared between kindred souls. “So yes, Peter. I know what that feels like.”

Peter was silent for a few seconds before tears started to well up in his eyes again. “I just…” He curled in on himself and his voice began to tremble and hitch. “I miss May. She was the only family I had, and she was always so supportive of me-- even if my activities as Spiderman scared her.”

There was a full minute of silence cut only by small sniffs from the teen. When the sorcerer spoke next, the question caught Peter off-guard. “Would you change it if you could?” The teen looked towards him with a stunned look on his face. Stephen sat forward, eyes piercing and intense and expression deathly serious. “If you had the option, or a way to undo it, would you?”

“It doesn’t matter regardless. Fury said it couldn’t be fixed,” Peter replied tremulously, his eyes full of pain and sadness.

“Not by any means SHIELD has.” Stephen reached within his robes and tugged on the cord around his neck to bring the Eye of Agamotto forward. “This is the Eye of Agamotto-- it’s a relic capable of turning back time, be it relative to the world or an individual person or thing. It could be used to undo what was done to your aunt by doing just that.” For a few minutes, Peter looked between the Eye and Stephen, face rapidly flipping through expressions. The sorcerer could tell that there was a war going on in his mind and that the teen needed a chance to process everything before making a decision. Stephen was content to sit and wait for him to do so, understanding that such a choice needed this kind of consideration. After all, it wasn’t something to decide lightly or on a whim.

Finally the teen took a deep breath and looked into Stephen’s eyes. “Could you… is it possible for you to find her first? I want to see…” Peter paused for a moment before also adding, “And I know that Mr. Stark is busy, but… I…”

“It’s okay, Peter. I understand. FRIDAY, if you would…” Once he got confirmation that the genius was on his way up the sorcerer began to murmur under his breath as he waved his hand in a figure eight pattern, a silver, mirror-like disk beginning to form in front of them.

By the time Tony arrived, the silver ‘window’ had formed completely and Stephen was in the middle of locking on to May’s location. “The Keeners are with Laura and her chicks, so we’ll be
okay for a while.” Tony gently tugged Peter into his arms for a brief hug as Levi rejoined his sorcerer. “Stephen, are we almost ready?” The genius asked as they pulled apart to face him.

After a moment, the blue-eyed male nodded and waved his hand. The smoke in the window clearing away to show May sitting at a desk in what appeared to be a hospital, chatting with a coworker, a smile on her face. Peter choked and reached out for the surface, but Stephen’s hand on his arm stopped him. “If you disturb the surface, the spell will break.” He explained softly, and the teen nodded in understanding before continuing to watch. They saw a man approach May and ask her a question, and she blushed and nodded with an enormous grin. He held his hand out to her and she took it, allowing him to help her stand. The man smiled and kissed her cheek, prompting a giggle out of her.

Peter swallowed hard around the lump in his throat and croaked, “She looks so happy… I haven’t seen her like that in a long time…” Neither adult responded, not wanting to influence the young man one way or another. After a moment, he continued, his words hesitant but still audible. “If you turn back time, I’ll have her back… but she’ll always be in danger, and she’ll always be worried…” The teen closed his eyes. “Right now… she’s happy. She’s safe.” After a moment, he looked over at Stephen. “Is it possible to see her future if… if she stays like this?” A murmured word and another wave shifted the image again. May was again sitting behind the desk, but the man from before was standing behind her rubbing her shoulders and speaking softly in her ear. After a moment May nodded and he helped her stand, revealing she was at least a few months pregnant, looking radiant as she smiled joyfully. A wedding ring glinted in the light when she raised her hand to twine it with her presumed husband’s lovingly. “Oh May…” Peter choked, a tiny smile crossing his lips even as tears began to roll down his face. “You found love again…” The smile fell from his face, and both Tony and Stephen could see when the teen made his decision. “I can’t take that from her… I can’t-- won’t-- be that selfish.”

Tony came up behind Peter and rested his hand on his shoulder. “Are you sure, Pete?”

Tear-filled brown eyes were turned back to the scene, Peter hurting deeply inside but knowing what he had to do. “I’ve never seen Aunt May that happy… and after what happened to Uncle Ben… No.” He closed his eyes, steeling himself to the decision he was about to make. “She deserves the chance to love again, to have a family, and be safe. If the price is her memory of me…” After a few moments, he raised his shaky fingers to his lips and kissed the tips. “So be it. I’m not worth her losing this future… Her husband a-and her baby.” He looked at the figure of his aunt walking towards the exit of the building hand-in-hand with the man. He reached towards the spell again. “I love you, May.” He choked out, then with a finally whispered ‘goodbye’ ran his fingers over the surface, dispelling the spell in a shower of silver sparks.

Tony immediately moved to hug the teen who proceeded to collapse against him, sobbing heartbrokenly. Stephen tucked the Eye beneath his robes again before joining them, wrapping his arms around both Peter and Tony at the same time. They were content to stay there for a while, the two adults providing the comfort and security that the grieving teen so desperately needed. When the tears finally started to slow and the sobs quieted to snifflces, Tony spoke again. “Peter, I want
you to know something.” The teen pulled away to look at him, wiping tears from his face. “No matter how we got here, I’d rather have you in my life more now that anything else I might have had without you in it.” A smile tugged at the genius’ lips as he ruffled Peter’s hair. “You’re stuck with us, Pete. And we’re not going anywhere.”

Stephen nodded in agreement, pulling the teen into his own arms and Levi wrapping around them both. “You’re not alone, Peter. Whatever you need, we’ll always be here.”

As Peter was pulled back into the arms of the two men, he realized the pain he was feeling didn’t hurt quite as bad as it had before.

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Natasha sat on Clint’s bed by the archer’s side, silently running her fingers through the short blond hair on his head as he lay still, dried tears upon his face and pillows. The man had barely moved during the past several days, nor had he said a word. Given the news they had received, the assassin couldn’t blame him-- the prospect of Laura and the kids being killed was horrifying, and becoming more and more likely as the days went by. She hadn’t heard anything from or about her fellow rogues either, and she was beginning to grow anxious, not to admit a little angry with Steve. He knew that farm and who lived there, yet he had not said so much as a single word of sympathy to Clint since they’d been asked to stay away from each other after the fight. Part of the spy couldn’t help but feel that if it were Barnes who was missing and presumed dead, Steve would have actually done something about it, just as he had back during the war when he had gone to rescue Barnes the first time after hearing that his squad was taken prisoner. As long as Clint needed her, though, Natasha would stay where she was.

A sudden knock on the door prompted her to look up, yet Clint barely reacted to the sound. The handle turned and T’Challa entered the room quietly. “Your Highness.” She greeted him, dipping her head respectfully.

“Ms. Romanoff, Mr. Barton.” The king greeted them with a nod. “I have news of your family-- they are alive.”

It was a matter of moments before the spy was shooting from the bed, Clint not far behind her, afraid to hope but desperately wanting it to be true. “A-Alive? How? Are you sure?”

T’Challa nodded and gestured to the monitor in the room which flickered to life, showing a clip of Laura speaking to a member of the press without the sound. Clint reached towards the screen with a look of profound joy and relief on his face, visibly relaxing at the sight. Natasha covered her
mouth with one hand, her carefully crafted mask cracking for a moment at the sight of Laura alive and well. “According to your sister, Mr. Barton, they were rescued by members of the New Avengers at the behest of Tony Stark.”

Clint’s head snapped towards T’Challa, blue eyes wide in shock. “Stark? He saved them… saved my family?”

“Indeed. Your sister was adamant that if it had not been for the information he and his allies found, they would not have survived. The hit was taken out by now ex-Secretary of State Thaddeus Ross, who was recently incarcerated on several charges involving violations of human rights, war crimes, human experimentation, and he will be facing attempted murder charges from this.” T’Challa fell silent for a moment, thinking. “Though it hasn’t been confirmed, many believe that Dr. Stark is the one who provided all of the information that led to Ross’s downfall.” The king crossed his arms loosely over his chest, fixing them with a pointed look. “I find it curious that your team was so convinced Dr. Stark was working with Thaddeus Ross. The evidence gathered so far clearly speaks to the contrary.”

Natasha and Clint looked at each other, silently conversing in a way that only the long-time partners could. Finally, Clint turned his eyes back to the king. “Thank you, your Majesty, for letting me know about my sister.”

T’Challa nodded and left the room with a murmured farewell. Once the door was closed, the duo turned to face each other again. “What do we do, ‘Tasha?” Clint finally asked softly. “I feel like I’m coming out of a fog... How were we so wrong about Stark-- Tony?”

The redhead shook her head, her eyes far away. “It doesn’t matter, at least not for me or Steve.” She finally replied with resignation in her tone. “We both betrayed and lied to Stark, and those are things he doesn’t forgive. That I trusted Steve to tell him is irrelevant because I never checked to see if he actually had told Stark.” She lapsed into silence for a moment before continuing. “There’s a chance Rogers decided against telling Stark at all. Maybe he was being a coward, maybe out of fear for Barnes’ life… Hell, Maximoff might have convinced him that Stark couldn’t be trusted to not attack Barnes.” She let out a huff of air and sat with Clint on the bed again. “She’s been getting unbearable with how she’s always whining about not being able to see you.” The redhead closed her eyes and leaned back against the headboard. “I’m honestly surprised Steve hasn’t demanded that we all cater to her every wish because she’s ‘just a kid’. It’s beyond ludicrous at this point, especially since Wanda has ‘perfect’ control of her powers until she conveniently doesn’t.”

Clint blinked at his partner and tilted his head in genuine confusion. “I don’t understand-- why would I want to see Wanda? I only knew her for two weeks at most before I retired; we’re barely acquaintances.”
Natasha opened her mouth to reply before she froze, a look of dawning horror and realization crossing her face. A moment later, the former assassin snarled a long string of Russian and surged to her feet.

Maximoff had been messing around in Clint’s head, her Clint—her everything. The only one who knew everything about her and still believed in her, who had fought to bring her into SHIELD instead of ending her life as he had been sent to do. He saw beyond how her ledger dripped with red, saw past the body count her actions left behind. He was the only one who showed her how to live beyond what the Red Room made of her and she would be damned if she allowed this to continue.

“I am going to kill that Scarlet Bitch!”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter-- The resident sorcerer turns around for TWO SECONDS and Tony gets kidnapped, and a certain adversary of the Sorcerer Supreme is about to find out EXACTLY why that is a poor decision.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Stephen leaves for a minor mission, and of course that is the exact time Tony gets abducted. Watch out world, the Reapers are preparing for war, and the Sorcerer Supreme will be leading the charge!

Chapter Notes

Huh. This chapter is already 10 pages long, and we're only about halfway through... -quickly tacks on a Pt. 1 and Pt. 2 to chapter titles- Perfect.

Don't forget to follow Warden News on tumblr for story updates and a chance to ask the Reapers questions!!

https://wardennews.tumblr.com/

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Whiskey brown eyes watched as Stephen carefully opened a portal in the common room, trying in vain to calm the anxiety that had made a home within his chest. “Please be careful, Stephen...” He said softly, reaching out and taking his soulmate’s hand for a second.

The sorcerer snorted, affectionately brushing his lips against Tony’s head. He had taken to doing so more frequently after the first time, and the way the genius blushed each time would never get old in his opinion. “I’ll be fine, Tony. It’s just a minor threat from a neighboring dimension. I should be there and back in time for dinner.”

Tony swallowed hard, trying to will the heat in his cheeks away. He shifted his gaze to Levi, who was settled around his soulmate’s shoulders. “You keep him safe, alright?” The cloak fluttered and puffed up, wrapping one corner around the genius’ hand. “Thanks, Levi. I know he’s in good hands with you.” The relic ruffled his hair and the genius yelped in indignation. “That you don’t have hands is besides the point, you crazy enchanted snuggie!”

A laugh escaped from Stephen as he pulled Tony into his arms, holding him close for a few moments. “Enough, you two. We’ll never get out of here at this rate.” He dropped another kiss on Tony’s dark curls before pulling away. “I’ll be back soon, I promise.” He stepped through the portal and waved to the genius as it closed.
Tony sighed despondently, already feeling the absence of his soulmate. FRIDAY spoke up after a moment of the inventor not moving. “Cheer up, boss. Since Stephen’s gone, you have a chance to work on that project for him,” she reminded him in a happy tone.

“That’s a good point, baby girl. Alright, to the lab!” He bounced over to the now open elevator with a grin, his good mood restored at the reminder. “Where are the others right now, FRIDAY?” He asked as it began to descend.

“Would you like a rundown of the full list starting with non-Reapers?” Tony nodded so she continued. “Pepper is at the Stark Industries office in New York City-- she’s in the middle of a meeting with the board, discussing the details of the new R&D department. Rhodey is meeting with Craig, they’re brainstorming defence ideas for both the tower and the compound. They’ll be sending you their notes later. Loki and his family are getting one last check up from Bridget and Bruce. Loki is almost back at perfect health, same with his magic. Fenrir will need to take it easy for another week but is no longer confined to a bed, and Jörmungandr will need a few more sessions of physical therapy. Laura is with them as well. Cooper and Lila are with the Keeners in the kid-friendly media room. Peter is helping to supervise them, they’re in the middle of watching ‘Big Hero 6’ at the moment. Vision sent word that he’ll be visiting within the next week-- his classes at Harvard are going very well, he said.”

The genius grinned brightly at the last update. “I wondered how he was doing! Has he told you what he’s majoring in?”

“He has, but he asked me to keep it a secret for now.”

Tony sighed as if put out, but the smile never faded from his face. “Fine, let him have his secrets. What about the Reapers?” he questioned curiously.

“Bridget’s in medical, like I said. Minowa is in the training room with Aria-- it appears they’re trying to make it so Minowa’s attacks don’t accidently blow out a wall again.”

Tony barked with laughter as he entered his workshop, the lights fully turning on and various monitors coming to life the moment he stepped inside. “Let them know that I’ll get with them later to figure out a solution. Actually… FRIDAY, make a new project for me, title it ‘Outdoor Training Field’.”

There was a pause for a few seconds before the AI responded. “Done boss-- they said ‘thank you’ and that they’ll come find you later. Ulysses is doing his shift watching over the Rogues. He said he has something to report to you directly when his week is done. Zevrael and Dorian are in Zev’s
office, they’re looking into schooling for the kids. Peter has opted to commute to school from the compound, but Laura and Holly are still on the fence. They’re also drawing up a contract for Holly’s work at the Compound.”

“Good. Have them send it to me when they’re done. I want to make sure housing is included in whatever they write.” The genius flicked his wrist, bringing up a screen with his most recent project. “How do the numbers look on this, FRI?”

Several portions of the screen lit up as she replied. “With the current setup, the gloves should help reduce the shaking in Stephen’s hands by up to 87%.”

Tony smiled brilliantly and reached out to spin the display slowly. “Alright, let’s get these bad boys built and we’ll see how they hold up to stress tests. If we get good results, I’ll see about spelling them with the charms I had in mind.”

After that, time seemed to melt away in the wake of building the gloves and managing the other projects he had going at the same time. He wasn’t sure how many hours had passed by when he heard the sound of a portal opening behind him. He smiled and stood to greet his soulmate happily.

“Boss, wait—!”

Something collided with the back of his head, and the genius staggered for a moment before something wrapped around his waist and pulled him backwards through a portal. The last thing Tony saw before his vision went dark was an unknown dark-skinned figure looming over him, a smirk of triumph on his face.

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“Minowa, Boss just got taken!”

The head of the Dragonborn snapped upwards at the AI’s words as they brought her out of her thoughts, shock showing clearly upon her face. A moment later she surged to her feet, sheathing the dagger she had been sharpening and calling her armor to her. “Sound the alarm, get everyone to the common room now. Was anyone else targeted?”

“No, it was only the Boss.”
The ebony-haired woman nodded sharply at that. “Small mercies, then.” She summoned a corridor as alarms began to blare throughout the Compound. She found herself in the room as everyone else’s corridors were springing into existence, and she pulled up a screen as the other residents began to appear. Loki popped in with the Bartons and Keeners a moment later, Bruce sprinting into the room a few seconds behind him. “Loki, have your kids been sent to the panic room? Do they have their pendants?” Loki nodded at both questions.

Holly looked around, brow furrowing. “Where’s Tony? Didn’t he hear the alarm?”

“No. He wouldn’t have. FRIDAY, bring up what footage you have.” The screen next to her flickered to life, displaying the security footage of the workshop. The assembled group gasped as Tony was struck over the head and dragged through the portal. “This happened less than five minutes ago. The abductor’s magic is similar to Stephen’s, so it is safe to assume whoever took Tony is affiliated with them in some way. Whoever it is, they’ve made a serious mistake in taking him for more than one reason.”

The other Reapers nodded at that. “Tony’s smart and he’s resourceful.” Bridget kept her words vague so those not in the know wouldn’t be tipped off. “He’ll be able to hold on until we get to him.”

Minowa nodded in agreement before turning to the group again. “As Tony’s second in command, it falls to me to issue orders for now. Laura and Holly.” She turned to the two mothers. “I want you and your kids to join Loki’s brood in the panic room. It’s heavily warded, and it would take a miracle of the nine Divines for anything to get in there without our say so. Peter.” She paused for a second, seeing the pallor on the teen’s face and knowing why he had a look of fear in his eyes. “Peter, I want you to go with the other kids. Zeymahi would send me to the Soul Cairn if I let you come with us. Loki, Bruce, stay with them. We would take you with, but we don’t know what kind of space we’re going into, and I’d be FAR more comfortable if they had someone capable of bolstering the magical defences if need be.” Loki nodded quickly in agreement, Bruce quickly working to round up the people in question. “Reapers, full armor. I’m not taking chances with our brother’s health and safety, we’re hitting with everything we’ve got. Bridget, get your portable med kit just in case. Aria, Craig, contact Ulysses and get him back here. I don’t care that he’s watching the Rogues right now, I doubt they’re going to cause any major problems before we get back. Zevrael, Dorian, one of you needs to figure out how to contact Stephen. If you have to call his phone every 20 seconds to get his attention, do it. The other one needs to get a lock on Tony’s location. Do you all understand?” The group as a whole nodded. “Good. In that case--”

“Minowa!” FRIDAY’S voice cut in before she could finish. “This video just showed up on youtube as a live stream!” The screen flashed again, a video beginning to play on the screen.
The group gasped as a whole when they saw Tony kneeling on the ground, bound with faintly glowing chains. His head was dipped low, blood trickling down the side from where it had been impacted. A strange glowing glyph was set into the floor beneath him, the light pulsing an ominous red. After a few seconds a new figure came into view-- green robes similar to Stephen’s fit snugly upon his body, his lips crooked into a malicious smirk. “To think,” He purred, stepping into the genius’ personal space and grabbing his chin to force him to look up. “The thing that will draw my target out the easiest is nothing more than a jumped up boytoy. I honestly thought he had higher standards than this.” His voice was barely more than a whisper, but the sentiment was still heard by the Reapers of the group.

Tony’s eyes flashed in fury, but he made no move to escape the grip or even struggle. The man’s grin became almost gleeful with his inward animosity. “You can’t even defend yourself. Recovery time can be such a pain, isn’t that right Stark?” This time the words were fully and clearly picked up by the camera. Without waiting for an answer he pushed the genius’ face away and turned to address the camera. “Ladies and gentlemen, this is not a demand for ransom, nor is it a political stunt. This video is for one person-- you know who you are. If you want Mr. Stark back, you’ll come find me. You will do so alone. If anyone is with you, or if you fail to come…” The dark-skinned male moved behind Tony and pulled a dagger from his belt, pressing it to Tony’s neck directly over the jugular. It was a clear threat, and it made everyone in the room stiffen. “Oh, and in case that isn’t incentive enough for you…” He waved his other hand, and several numbers flickered into existence above them before beginning to tick down. “You have twenty four hours to comply.” He waved his hand, and the feed abruptly cut out.

You could hear a pin drop in the absolute silence that followed. It was finally broken by Minowa, who’s voice reverberated with at least three others.

“Get. Stephen. Here. NOW.”

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A sigh escaped the sorcerer as he finished closing the rift in front of him, Stephen somewhat unsure why such a small thing had required the aid of the Sorcerer Supreme. It was finally done, though, and he could head back to Kamar-Taj for a few minutes to talk to Wong before returning to be with his soulmate. With a pleased smile on his face, Stephen quickly opened a portal and stepped through, giving his body a few seconds to adjust to the thinner air in Kathmandu as it closed behind him. “Wong?” He finally called, sweeping through the halls towards the library. He stepped inside and immediately had to duck back as something went flying past his head before thumping onto the carpet.

“That infernal thing hasn’t stopped ringing for the past three hours, Stephen!” Wong snapped as he approached the Sorcerer Supreme, who had moved to retrieve the phone that was playing ‘Ice Ice Baby’. “I don’t know who’s been so desperate to call you, but if I hear that song or ‘Insomniac’ one
more time, I will throw that thing in a hell dimension!”

Stephen’s eyebrows rocketed into his hairline. “Those are Zevrael and Dorian’s ringtones but why would—” A moment later ‘Insomniac’ began to play, and the sorcerer was quick to pick it up before Wong could carry through with his threat. “Dorian?”

“Thank the Maker! We’ve been trying to reach you for hours!” Dorian’s voice sounded torn between hysteria and relief.

The blue-eyed man snorted in amusement. “So I heard. Wong was about to have an aneurysm if he--”

“Stephen, Tony’s gone.”

The words died in the sorcerer’s throat as liquid nitrogen surged through his veins, all traces of amusement fading immediately. “What the hell do you mean he’s gone?” Wong, who had been walking away, stopped dead at the words and tone, turning back to face his best friend.

“He was taken right out of his workshop. Whoever it was uses the same kind of magic you do, and whatever he’s doing… You need to come back now, Stephen, because we can’t find him.”

The phone hit the carpet again, and Wong moved so he could support the now violently trembling sorcerer. “Stephen, breathe. What’s going on?”

Stephen didn’t reply at first, instead fighting to calm the sudden fear in his heart. “We need to go to the Compound.” He finally managed after a few seconds. “Someone abducted Tony.” Wong immediately grabbed up Stephen’s phone and open a portal to the destination. They both passed through and the Sorcerer Supreme smiled gratefully at the librarian. “FRIDAY, where is everyone right now?”

“They’re in the common room, Stephen.”

“Thank you, FRI. I’ll explain later, Wong.” The blue-eyed man immediately opened a portal to the common room. “What’s going on?” He barked out as they stepped through. A sudden shocked noise came from Wong and he turned to find Ulysses with a pistol aimed at the man. “Easy, Ulysses. This is the Kamar-Taj librarian and my best friend, Wong.” The sniper grunted and stored
his pistol at his words.

The duo were approached by Minowa as he walked away. “My apologies for that, Master Wong. The abduction of one of our own has put us on edge, as you can tell.” She held out her hand to the man. “Minowa Norddahl, Field Commander of the New Avengers.”

Wong took it and inhaled sharply when he felt her aura. “You’re a Reaper.”

The woman blinked twice in bewilderment before nodding sharply. “Indeed. We must concentrate on the matter at hand, though.” She gestured for the duo to follow her, and she led them to a holographic screen. “FRIDAY, if you would?”

The video began playing, and Stephen immediately growled when he saw his soulmate bound. “That’s a magic suppression spell combined with a magic scrambling spell under him. No wonder you can’t find him.” A moment later the man came into view and Stephen outright gasped. “Mordo??”

Burning crimson eyes snapped to him. “You know that man?”

Wong nodded and gave those present a quick rundown on everything that had occurred with Dormammu, the Dark Dimension, and the Ancient One. “After everything was done, Mordo disappeared. This is the first we’ve heard from him since.”

The Sorcerer Supreme had to swallow down the bile rising in his throat. “And you’ve had trouble locating them?” He aimed the question at Minowa without looking away from the screen, stomach lurching violently at the sight of the knife against his soulmate’s neck.

“Indeed. Of everyone here, I am second only to Zeymahi in terms of magical prowess. Yet I am still having difficulty pinpointing his location.”

Stephen began to pace, completely ignoring the other Reapers joining them in the room and speaking in hushed tones. He stopped when Levi suddenly tugged on him, drawing him out of his thoughts. “Not now, Levi.” Instead of settling, the cloak pulled on him harder, causing him to stumble over to a nearby counter. He opened his mouth to reprimand the cloak when he noticed the abandoned tablet on the counter. Levi began to gesture from the tablet to Stephen and then to the Reapers. It was a matter of seconds for the sorcerer to realize what the relic was trying to say. “Levi, you’re a genius!” His exclamation brought the room to a halt and he quickly opened a portal
to his pocket dimension and retrieved the spell compendium Tony had gifted him.

Dorian’s eyes widened at the sight. “Hel-lo, that’s the Grimoire! I wondered what Tony did with it after it was completed.”

“He gave it to me with the blessings of Lord Hadrian. Maybe something in here can help us find Tony.” The man muttered under his breath as he tapped and swiped the screen, eyes flying over the text there. After a few minutes he spoke again. “I found a scrying spell that seems like it would work. The only caveat is that it’s accuracy isn’t very good at first, but the longer you hold the spell, the more it can zero in on the person in question.” He showed the tablet to Wong, who quickly read through it as well.

The Reapers looked at each other for a moment, debating. “It’s the best idea we have right now. How long would it take?” Minowa asked, turning her attention back to them.

Stephen read through the spell once more. “The setup should only take a few minutes and it says we need something important to the person you’re trying to find as a focus, something deeply connected with them. The stronger the connection with the focus, the faster the spell can pinpoint the location.” After a moment the sorcerer’s eyes lit up. “Wong, could you get this set up? I have an idea about what to use.”

Wong nodded and gently took the tablet from him. “Of course. Would you happen to have a room I could use?” He posed the question to the rest of the room. Aria waved for him to follow her, and he fell into step slightly behind her as they left.

“Levi, would you mind going with one of the others?” The cloak bobbed before floating over to Dorian. The pyro looked at the cloak with an appraising eye before engaging the relic in a one-sided discussion about Tevinter fashion and the similarities between the Cloak and something he had seen a fellow magister wear once. Stephen smiled at that, knowing the mage was only running his mouth in such a way because he was worried, probably even scared. The way he was talking so fast and changing the type of fashion every few seconds put him in mind of a full Peter Parker ramble. After a moment of observing everyone in the room, Stephen swept out, asking for FRIDAY to light a path to where Wong and Aria had disappeared to. He entered the room to find the duo waiting for him. “Are we almost ready?”

Aria nodded and tilted her head. “What are we using as a focus?” she questioned, blinking her eyes once as she looked at the two men.

Stephen took a deep breath before pinning them with his sharp blue eyes. “Me, actually,” he stated
firmly, knowing that Wong wouldn’t like it but also believing that it was the best choice.

Sure enough, the librarian opened his mouth to tell him to stop fooling around. Fortunately, Aria raised her hand to stop him. “That just might work! I’m no expert on magic, but you would have the deepest connection out of any of us because you are his soulmate!” She quickly ushered him into the center of the room before moving out of Wong’s way.

The man approached Stephen and fixed him with a look. “We are talking about this later.” He swore, the tone of voice indicating that it was not a suggestion. Stephen simply nodded in reply. “I’m serious, Stephen. Not just about the soulmate thing, but about who exactly your soulmate is and how important he is.” Before the Sorcerer Supreme could ask Wong what he was referring to, the magic flared within the librarian’s hands and Stephen slipped into a peaceful daze.

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“It’s been three hours. How much longer do you think this will take?”

Ulysses looked over at Craig as the man paced the length of the common room. “Hard to say… trying to fill the hole of one magic with a peg from another… Something needs to change-- peg or hole. Takes time.”

His partner groaned, flopping down next to him. “I know, I know. But we’re kind of on a time limit here…” His eyes went far away as he gazed out the large windows of the common room. “Do you think Glitch will be okay?” He finally asked, his voice smaller than Ulysses had ever heard it before.

“Yes.” The brown eyed man replied with conviction, pulling his fellow sniper against his side in a comforting hug. “Amicus is strong-- we know it. No need to worry.”

There was a few minutes of silence as everyone waited for an update. The silence was broken again a few minutes later by FRIDAY. “Guys, Pepper is on the phone.”

Minowa looked up from where she had been sharpening her second dagger. “Patch her through, FRIDAY.”

A few seconds later, the woman’s deceptively calm voice filtered over the system. “I just got out of
a meeting with the board and was immediately assaulted by the most interesting video. Would any of you care to explain?”

Minowa didn’t even flinch as she continued to tend to her weapon. “Good afternoon, Pepper. I assure you that it was never our intention to leave you out of the loop. We have Stephen and one of his friends scrying for Tony’s location as we speak, and we’ve been making preparations to go in and rescue him once we know where to go.”

Pepper hummed for a moment before replying, “I can accept that. Have you had any luck yet?”

“Indeed we have.” Wong’s voice interrupted anything that might have been said, and the group turned as one to where he and Aria were supporting a loopy looking Stephen. “He’ll be fine, he just needs a drink and a chance to come back to himself. Give it about ten minutes or so.” He helped the Sorcerer Supreme sit before turning back to the group. “We tracked Tony to Epirus, in northwestern Greece.”

“Epirus? That’s the site of the Necromanteion.” Pepper paused before realizing they didn’t know what she was talking about and elaborated, “The Necromanteion is-- was-- a temple dedicated to Hades, the Greek god of the underworld. From what I’ve seen of this guy who took Tony, I wouldn’t put it past him to be there.”

The Reapers all rose to gather in the center of the room. “Pepper, the Accords Committee needs to be made aware of what’s going on.” Minowa suddenly said, brow furrowing in consideration.

“I’ve put in a notice with the Committee already-- I did it before calling you. It shouldn’t take more than an hour to receive word back.”

The Dragonborn nodded sharply before turning to the group as a whole. “Everyone gather your gear. The moment we get the all clear, we’re going after Mordo and getting Tony back.” She watched as everyone departed before letting out a small huff of breath. ‘Hold on just a little longer, Zeymahi. We’re coming for you.’

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Tony grunted in discomfort as he was manhandled to the center of the chamber and forced onto his knees again. If his body hadn’t been in peak physical condition because of his Claiming, the action would have been extremely painful on several different parts of his body. As it was, the stone
floors only caused a mild twinge of discomfort. So far, the man who had introduced himself as Mordo seemed slightly unhinged and not a little bit infuriating. The genius watched as the sorcerer moved around the chamber, reading from an open book in his hand and muttering under his breath, considering it a slight improvement since it wasn’t aimed at him this time. He had ranted at Tony for at least two hours about how magic was a dwindling resource, how there were too many sorcerers in the world, all the stereotypical villain-style monologuing. The genius was so, so done by the end of it, and if he had been able to talk he would have taken a leaf out of Zevrael’s book—‘blah blah blah, my plan is more evil than your plan… I’ve heard it a thousand times’). Too bad the silencing spell was still in effect. The sorcerer hadn’t even lasted 10 minutes with his sass before hitting him with it.

Maybe telling the sorcerer he was ‘as intelligent as Saruman was pretty, with only 12% of the badass villain charm’ was a bad idea. Oh well.

Mordo turned to rant at him again and Tony tuned the sorcerer out out almost instantly. He thought about his family at home, whether they knew where he was and if they were on their way. He felt a pang in his heart as he thought about Stephen— did his soulmate even know he was gone? Was he still on his mission? Was he safe?

A sudden surge of magical energy brought him back to the present in an instant. Mordo was casting some kind of spell, but it didn’t feel like anything Stephen had ever cast. Tony associated Stephen’s magic with warmth and light, something that blanketed and protected you. Whatever Mordo was doing felt extremely corrupted and twisted, the exact opposite of how Stephen’s felt to Tony. It was like the magic was fighting against being forced to do something it didn’t want to do, being made to take a shape it was never meant to. He watched in sick fascination as a portal formed in front of Mordo, the dark swirling colors a far cry from the golden sparks Tony had seen before. Within the portal a face formed, rippling and shifting as if made from a liquified form of the darkness surrounding it. The sorcerer gave the being a grim smile.

“Dormammu, I’ve come to bargain.”

‘Make that 9% of the villain charm. At least Saruman never summoned demons.’

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter-- The Reapers and Stephen stage a rescue, and a failed spell proves there's more going on than originally anticipated. Then, finally, the moment you IronStrange shippers have been waiting for!!

Also, cruel irony there at the end. Mordo thinks he's so witty and dramatic. (He's really not.)
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

The Reapers stage a rescue operation, and a serious scare leads to a moment that is probably meant to be had OFF the battlefield. It's a good thing no one's judging.

(They actually are, but not in a bad way.)

((Trying to mind-control the Dragonborn is a truly terrible idea-- 0/10, do not repeat))

Chapter Notes

The second part of the chapter, my dear readers! Thank you for your patience!! Hope you all enjoy this one!!

Don't forget to follow Warden News on tumblr for story updates and a chance to ask the Reapers questions!!

https://wardennews.tumblr.com/

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The atmosphere amongst the members of the Grecian security personnel was nothing less than tense as they lingered outside the ruins of an old monastery. Their eyes kept shifting around, watching for the arrival of any of the members of the ‘New Avengers’. The Prime Minister had initially harbored misgivings about the team but his concerns had been eased by the knowledge that the new members had no affiliation with the old ones, that they had signed the Accords and would follow them to the letter to the best of their abilities. Knowing that the group was on a strict time limit to rescue their ally and friend, he had granted them entry and sent his own men to back them up if need be.

The sun had just set a few minutes prior when the humming sound of unique engines replaced the silence that had settled around those gathered, the group gasping as one when a single suit of armor shot overhead, circling back around after a moment and landing in an empty space. The wings of the armor folded inward as the lone person straightened and the helmet melted backward to reveal Minowa. “Greetings. I am Dragoon, the Field Commander of the New Avengers.” She swept forward to observe the ruins in front of her, tilting her head to the side consideringly. She turned to the man who approached her, curiosity shining in her eyes. “This is a place of historical significance, is it not?”
The man dipped his head in affirmation, showing no outward reaction at Minowa’s odd appearance. “This monastery sits atop a ruin believed to be the Necromanteion. Do you know of it?”

Minowa nodded sharply in reply. “A place of worship to the god Hades, where the living would call upon the spirits of the dead. A charming notion, I must say.” The sarcasm caused the official to snort slightly in amusement. “Nevertheless, my colleagues and I will endeavor to make certain that it remains undamaged.”

Another man approached her, though he moved slower than his superior had. “There is only one of you, though…”

“Indeed. They are awaiting my signal. By your leave, then?” The older male nodded, and the woman turned away for a moment. “FRIDAY, you have my location? Good, have them come through.” A moment later a golden portal sparked into existence, causing several people to step back in shock. The Reapers quickly passed through before Stephen closed it behind him. “I will introduce everyone briefly, then we must get to work. This is Sentinel.” Bridget waved with a small smile. “The trio there are Silent Shot, Sonic Boom, and Voidstrike.” Craig, Aria, and Ulysses gestured at each of their names. “Those two gentlemen are Fiendfyre and Shatterfrost.” Dorian and Zevrael called out greetings and waved. “And this would be our acting leader, Doctor Strange.”

Stephen stepped forward at his name to shake the hand of the Grecian official. “You and your superiors have my thanks for your timely response to our request.” He told them, the Greek flowing easily from his lips.

The official blinked in shock at that. “Your Greek is flawless, Doctor, but also unneeded. What can we do to help?” He asked, switching back to English for the other Avengers.

“Due to the nature of the one holding Dr. Stark hostage, the best and, truthfully, safest thing for you to do would be to set up a perimeter around the area. Don’t let anyone get within 500 feet of the entrance.” The officer nodded and began to instruct his people to move out to keep any civilians from any potential harm. Stephen turned back to the Reapers with a grim look on his face. “Let’s get going. I don’t know what Mordo is planning but it can’t be anything good.”

Minowa dipped her head and turned to her family. “Masking on, everyone. We don’t want to give ourselves away and risk getting Zeymahi hurt.” They all nodded and did as she ordered.

As they began to descend into the ruins, Bridget spoke up. “This place feels… familiar. You feel the energy, right?”
The Sorcerer Supreme never paused in his steps as he allowed his aura to reach out. “You’re right. It feels like Master Hadrian’s aura, which is confusing in its’ own right. Auras don’t really have a feeling, so I’m not sure why...” He trailed off, brow furrowed.

“*Dominus*’ connection with death.” Everyone’s gaze turned to Ulysses whose eyes were scanning the area, taking in every detail even as he spoke. “Leaks into worlds, connects them. Battlefields, sites of tragedies, temples to death deities-- all touched by death, and Hadrian by proxy.”

Craig nodded at his lover’s words. “That makes sense. And most Auras *don’t* have a particular feeling. I think you can feel Hadrian’s because you’re Tony’s soulmate.” Seeing the curious look he was getting from Stephen he elaborated. “You remember what happened that day you met Hadrian? That flux of power when you and Glitch connected?” He got a nod. “Thing is, you weren’t the only one who felt it. Every Reaper in that room felt it, and every other Reaper in existence felt an echo of it. I’m no expert, but maybe the reason you can feel Hadrian’s aura now is because you yourself are now connected to him. Not to the same extent as the Reapers themselves, but still connected.”

Stephen nodded at that, thinking deeply. It would make sense if that were the case. Thinking back, he did recall how the other Reapers in the room had simultaneously felt a change in the bond they shared. It was something he would have to talk to Tony about when they had him back.

“Tony??”

Everyone’s head snapped towards Zevrael, who had a stunned expression as his hand rested on the head piece on his head. “Alright *Lethallin*, hold on.” Zev quickly tapped something, and a moment later the genius’ voice filtered through.

“Man, am I glad to hear from you guys. I haven’t been able to get through whatever hoodoo Mordo’s got going in here. It’s blocking my magic almost entirely, and my technopathy has been reduced to one bar at most. You guys must be close if I’m able to reach through and interface with the ear piece, though the magic ward is holding strong.”

Stephen looked ready to cry in joy at hearing his soulmate’s voice. “We’re on our way babe, just hold tight. Where is Mordo right now, what’s he doing?”

There was a moment of silence before Tony answered. “He’s talking to some sort of... demon thing he summoned. I have no idea what it is, but I heard a name of some kind-- Dormammu, I
“He summoned Dormammu?! The combination of outrage, horror, and fear in the sorcerer’s voice alarmed everyone. “Is he out of his mind?! Tony, can you hear what they’re talking about?”

“Barely... Something about making a deal… Demon dude leaves Earth alone, in exchange for-- Oh shi--!” There was a crackle of static as the connection suddenly cut.

Stephen swore viciously in Mandarin before turning to the others. “Dormammu is the ruler of the Dark Dimension. He and I have a history, and he would have no qualm about hurting Tony to get to me.”

Several varieties of curses erupted from the group as a whole before Minowa took charge again. “Time is of the essence now, so let’s get to work. We need to find the greatest concentration of energy in this place, that’s where they’ll be. I’ve no doubt Mordo will have warded it in some way so we can’t get in-- Firecracker and Cryo, it will be your job to get them down and then incapacitate Mordo once we get inside. I don’t care how you do it as long as it doesn’t kill him. Medic, be on standby to help Glitch-- we don’t know what state he’ll be in. Songbird, you need to keep a watch over Tony and Bridget once we get him clear. Bullseye and Deadshot, weapons hot when we get in there. Our aim is to capture Mordo, but if it looks like he’s going to escape, if you think for even one second that he might make a run for it, take the shot. Merlin, stay with Medic. Tony will want you with him once we get in there, and I am more than capable of dealing with Dormammu.” She held up her had when Stephen looked ready to debate that. “Stephen Vincent Strange, you would do well to remember that while I may look only 24 years old, I am the first Reaper the Dinokthur ever Claimed. I am well over a megaannum old and have the knowledge and power to go toe-to-toe with a being like Dormammu and come out on top.”

The jaw of the Sorcerer Supreme snapped shut and he nodded after a moment. He often forgot that all of the Reapers were much older than they looked, especially Minowa. The Dragonborn had been physically 24 when she stopped aging, and that was before she was Claimed. “You’re right. I apologize, I often forget…”

Minowa let a small smirk slide across her face. “You are not the first to do so, and you will not be the last. Come, there’s work to be done.”

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“So, you say this mortal is precious to the Sorcerer Supreme?”
Mordo nodded calmly, resolutely ignoring the genius thrashing fiercely against Dormammu’s hold. “Yes, they appear to be in a relationship of some kind. Just think of it-- the partner of the one who defeated you, yours to do with as you please, in return for leaving our world be. With so many other out there, surely ours pales in comparison.” Regardless of the fact that Tony Stark had no part in the duty of the sorcerers keeping the Earth safe from Dormammu and could technically be considered an innocent bystander, the sacrifice of one innocent man to save the entire world from an unspeakable fate was worth it in Mordo’s eyes. One life in exchange for billions.

Dormammu hummed thoughtfully, turning his gaze to Tony for a moment. “A most tempting offer… What say you, little mortal? Will you be one of mine, then?” After a few seconds of silent flailing and glares shot in Mordo’s direction, the sorcerer rolled his eyes and waved his hand to dispel the silencing spell.

“Thank you! First of all,” Tony turned his eyes to Mordo. “You are in for an ass-kicking. Did you think I was alone in that building? Did you not even consider that I have allies other than Stephen?? You are currently aboard the pain train with a one-way ticket to hell, and it’s moving full steam ahead. As for you, Sauron,” The genius switched his attention to Dormammu, “You can take your power and this deal and shove them in your ever watchful Eye of Mordor!”

“I see now why you had this one silenced.” The comment was directed at Mordo, who nodded in agreement. “So quick to refuse… perhaps you simply need… convincing.”

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Dorian huffed as he hit the ward in front of him again with a fireball. “You holding up alright, Amatus?” He asked his husband, shooting a brief glance in his direction.

The elf nodded as he channeled a constant stream of ice and super-chilled air at the barrier. “I’m fine, Vhenan! I think it’s about ready to come down. One last hit, at the same time.” He looked behind him at the others who were all waiting with nervous anticipation. “Be ready for anything. We don’t know what’s behind that ward, and that last flux of magic felt anything but good.” Zev turned his attention back to Dorian. “On the count of three.” The duo counted before simultaneously hurling their attacks, and the barrier finally shattered inwardly.

Stephen didn’t hesitate to push past the pair the moment the magical shield was broken, leading the way breathlessly. Stepping into the chamber, he had only a second or two to observe the scene in front of him-- Tony being enveloped by a thread of Dormammu’s sinister magical energy stemming from the nearby portal-- before it dissipated, leaving his soulmate limp for a few
moments, his kneeling body unmoving and barely responsive. The sorcerer’s heart sank, a cold chill sweeping through his body at the implication of what Dormammmu had done.

“Ah, Strange, you’re late.” Mordo smiled at the Sorcerer Supreme, seeming to have no care for what had been done to the genius nearby, though his eyes had left the genius once Dormammmu had begun. “And here I thought you would never show up. As it turns out, you’re just in time.”

Stephen swallowed hard around the bile building in the back of his throat. “What have you done to Tony, Mordo?” He finally managed to choke out, a shiver running through him as he looked from his motionless soulmate to his former instructor.

The other sorcerer’s face fell a bit, a spark of remorse flickering in his eyes. “I did what had to be done, Stephen. Would you tell me that the life of one is worth more than the billions I have saved by striking this deal?”

“You chose him, though! There are seven billion people in the world, Mordo, and you chose Tony, my partner, the man I love!” A ringing silence filled the room at his shout, even as Stephen took a few steps forward with unbridled fury flashing in his blue-green eyes. “You left the sorcerers because of the breaking of the rules of magic, yet your willingness to sacrifice an innocent to the likes of Dormammmu, whom you summoned willingly, speaks volumes about your hypocrisy!” The Sorcerer Supreme’s magic was flowing around him slightly, a testament to the strength of the emotions that he was feeling.

Mordo looked torn for a moment, but Dormammmu’s voice cut off anything that might have been said. “As entertaining as this is for me, your confession comes too late. Your partner serves a new Master now. Isn’t that right, mortal?”

For a moment there was nothing but silence before Tony hesitantly stood, somewhat wobbly at first but quickly becoming steadier. At the same time, Stephen felt a sudden warmth beneath his robes, looking down to see the Eye of Agamotto glowing between the folds, a low pitched hum vibrating against his chest. Hope surged in his heart and his eyes snapped back up just in time to see Tony’s eyelashes slowly part, the irises within his normally whiskey-brown eyes glowing a brilliant, burning orange. The genius smirked, crossed his arms and replied with finality, “No thanks, I’ve never been good at serving anyone as ugly as you.”

Mordo’s mouth fell open in shock and the ruler of the Dark Dimension sputtered in sheer incomprehension. The Reapers seized the opportunity and surged forward-- there would be no mercy for the duo who had tried to take their brother and turn him evil. The one called ‘Mordo’ might harbor some sort of regret now but regardless, he had kidnapped Tony and offered him up to a demon that he summoned, an extremely evil one judging by the words that Doctor Strange had
spoken. With demons, it wasn’t such a surprise that he had accepted Mordo’s offer. Even if not all
demons were dark and inhumane, as Zevrael had experienced during his time leading the
Inquisition, they seemed to be the majority.

Tony yelped when a portal opened next to him and he was pulled through to safety on the other
side of the chamber. Finding himself in the protective arms of his soulmate who was shaking
slightly as he held him close, the genius basked in the warmth of the concern and love pouring
from the sorcerer, his sorcerer for several long moments. After exhaling slowly, Tony pulled back
just enough to look Stephen directly in the eyes, one of his hands unconsciously holding onto his
robe, and the Sorcerer Supreme met his intense gaze unwaveringly. One lone hand raised, his
fingers brushing tenderly against Tony’s cheek since he could not cup it with his crippled fingers,
silent words passing between the pair as time seemed to slow down to just the two of them. A
moment later, the two moved simultaneously, pressing against each other more as their lips locked
in a desperate, tender kiss. The world around them fell away as they surrendered to the heat
gulping their bodies while they remained so close together, uncaring of the chaos and fighting in
the wake of the shared love between them. Stephen tugged at the genius’ bottom lip gently with
his teeth, prompting a soft whine from Tony as he parted his lips to allow his soulmate further
access.

A loud cough brought them back to the present and the duo reluctantly parted after Tony pressed
just one more kiss to Stephen’s lips. They looked over to see Bridget standing a few feet away, her
arms crossed and lips quirked in an indulgent smile. “Save it for later, guys. I still need to check
Tony for injuries and residual effects from Dormammu’s magic.” Stephen nodded and allowed
Tony to pull away while still keeping one hand wrapped around his. The healer began casting all
manner of diagnostic spells on her brother, asking him questions and noting the answers as she did
so.

From where they were engaged in a mostly one sided battle with Mordo, Dorian and Zevrael
shared a wide, knowing grin. “I think Lethallin forgot about the rousing battle happening not 30
feet from him, what do you think Vhenan?” Zevrael called out to his husband, raising another ice
shield to block a half-hearted attack from the sorcerer.

“Hush, Amatus! Let them have their moment! Would you begrudge them their joyful, passionate
reunion?” Dorian gasped dramatically even as he was hurling fireballs towards Mordo, who was
hard pressed to avoid the sudden barrage that flew directly at his person.

Zevrael laughed out loud at that. “I suppose not, my love! After all, ours was very similar after the
Inquisition was dissolved!”

The pyro nodded in reply, completely unbothered by the magical whip he ducked under. “I seem to
recall you coming back from that whole fiasco down an arm and with the most sorrowful look I
have ever seen on your face and in your eyes! It was my duty to remove such sadness from you, my
“Darling, beloved Amatus!” Despite their somewhat playful mood, there was an expression of sincerity within Dorian’s eyes as he glanced at his husband.

“Fair enough! Shall we finish this while they’re celebrating, then?” Zevrael began to charge ice magic into his hands, Dorian doing the same with his fire from Mordo’s other side. After a few seconds, the elf released a combined stream of ice and snow that quickly formed itself into a large, icy construct in the shape of a deer with twisted antlers that reared up on its’ hind legs before charging at Mordo. Dorian simultaneously called forth his fiendfyre, the snake shape replaced by an enormous phoenix born of flames that shrieked once before diving towards the dark sorcerer as well. The combined attacks landed with pinpoint accuracy, the resulting ‘boom’ catching the attention of everyone in the room for a moment. The dust settled to reveal the badly burnt form of Mordo encased in a thick layer of ice, still alive despite the severity of the attack. Dorian and Zevrael were quick to sweep forward and secure him to make sure he wouldn’t escape.

A sudden infuriated roar made everyone jump in surprise and look over to where Dormammu was retreating back to his dimension, an incensed Minowa shouting obscenities in Dovahzul in front of the portal as it practically slammed shut in her face. She snorted furiously, fire and smoke curling in front of her mouth for a moment before she turned back to the others who were watching her in shock. “The fool tried to get into our head.” She growled, Alduin’s voice clearly reverberating with hers.

Tony blinked for a moment before a bemused look crossed his face. “Hm, I wonder what would happen if Maximoff tried…” he murmured, not completely serious but not entirely joking, considering what she had done to him.

“Tony, no.” Stephen gave a chuckle before he kissed him again. “No setting people up for death.”

“Ruin all my fun, will you.”

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter-- Tony returns to the Compound and deals with the press after his abduction. Our resident science bros have a LONG overdue conversation. An alliance is formed between unlikely comrades, all united towards a common goal: protect Tony Stark and raise hell against his enemies!
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

The Reapers return triumphant from their rescue mission, Tony has to deal with the press and masses AGAIN. Peter, Harley, and Loki and his brood form an alliance for the sole intent and purpose of keeping Tony safe by means of chaos. Science bros have a heart-to-heart, and it turns out Bruce has been keeping secrets of his own...

(The Reapers now owe Tony a lot of money.)

((Enter the Marauders 2.0 - Harbingers of Havoc in the house!!))

Chapter Notes

-Crashes through door- WE'RE ALIVE!! Loki preserve us, this took much longer than it should have, and for that I apologize! The Christmas season is kicking our asses, but work is still being done on this story!! Thank you all for your continued patience!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Mechanic!”

“Mr. Stark!!”

The Reaper opened his arms quickly to catch the two 15-year-olds who managed to tackle him in a hug simultaneously, holding each teen close. They were joined a moment later by Hannah, Cooper, Lila, and Hela, Tony taking the time to hug each of them and press a kiss to their heads. He murmured soft reassurances to each of them and they finally started to pull away, leaving only Peter and Harley standing close. Pete remained pressed to Tony’s side, unwilling to be separated at all. Harley stood at his other side, shoulders touching and much calmer than before. Tony pulled Peter a little tighter against himself. He could feel the fear radiating from the teen, and he could understand why-- after having lost May, the prospect of losing another guardian so soon would be traumatizing at best.

Laura, Loki, and Holly approached him as well and the women each kissed him upon the cheek. “We’re glad to see you’re okay,” Laura told him as the other woman scooped her daughter back into her arms.

“Indeed,” Loki confirmed quietly. “It’s good that you came out of it relatively unscathed. We were all worried about you.” The green-eyed trickster subtly looked the man over as if reassuring himself that his own words were the truth.

Tony noticed the god’s motion and smiled at him in reassurance. “Mordo didn’t really do much besides a little manhandling and ridiculous speeches, and Dormammu didn’t physically touch me.” He gestured for the group to follow him as he began to make his way towards the meeting room.
"You can listen in on the debrief, but I assure you it's nothing really that exciting."

The sound of a completely unamused and unexpected voice made the genius pause. "The public begs to differ, Tony." Turning as one to see Pepper striding towards them down a side hallway, the small group could hear her heels clicking sharply against the tile. "Your abduction was caught live on camera and the world is in a tizzy over it. After the recent conference regarding your injuries gained in Siberia, it would be beneficial to let them know you're alright." She finally reached the group and immediately pulled Tony into a tight hug, glad to see that he was truly okay.

Tony moved around slightly so he could hug Pepper while still keeping an arm around Peter. "I am, I promise. To be fair though, I didn't exactly ask to be yanked right out of my workshop. Speaking of that, though, please remind me later that we need to ward the workshop against further unwanted intrusion, Stephen. There are some mistakes you only have to make one."

"I completely agree, love." The sorcerer agreed, stepping into the space that Pepper vacated and giving his soulmate a brief yet tender kiss.

A sharp bark of laughter caused them to jump apart as Rhodey walked up to them with an enormous grin. "It's about damn time! The UST between you two was suffocating!" He pulled Tony closer to give him a hug of his own. "How do you keep getting yourself into these situations, Tones? It's like you can't stay out of trouble for more than a week without someone having to come in and rescue you!"

Tony gasped in mock offense and put a hand over his heart dramatically. "Are you calling me a damsel in distress, Platypus? I'm wounded, absolutely gutted! To be compared to a Disney princess, why I never!"

"Whatever you say, Cinderella."

Pepper couldn't help but laugh at the indignant squawk that escaped Tony, then became grim again. "We do have to talk about what to tell the public. You know they'll want answers as to why you were taken in the first place, not to that mention Mordo called Stephen out specifically even if his name was never actually said."

"That is something we can go over during the debriefing." Minowa approached them from the direction of the meeting room, Dorian and Zevrael flanking her on either side. "We should also take into consideration that his old teammates will receive word of what has transpired. I would recommend that Ulysses be sent back to his post as soon as we have concluded our business here."

Tony nodded in agreement, his brow furrowed in thought as his own team fell in step behind him. As they reached the door to the meeting room, he turned and gave Peter another protective hug. "Peter, let me do this debriefing and I'll come to find you in a few minutes. If you want to meet me in the workshop, I have ideas for a few projects I was planning on starting and now have the motivation to do so. Harley, you can join him if you so desire."

The duo nodded reluctantly and each gave the genius one more hug before departing. Before they could reach the elevators however, Harley steered them both into a side room before closing the door behind him. "The Mechanic was taken right out of his workshop," he bluntly stated with a serious but concerned look on his face, one that was mirrored by Peter, "and we couldn't do a damn thing. We need to make sure nothing like this happens again."

Peter's eyes lit up in understanding and he nodded sharply. "I can't lose Mr. Stark, not after
everything else that's happened. What did you have in mind?"

Harley began to pace, stroking an invisible beard. "We can't fight like the adults do-- being Spider-Man doesn't count-- so we have to go about it a little differently." After a moment, a mischievous grin began to slide across his face. "Maybe we don't need to disable threats... We just need to distract them."

It took a moment for the brunette to understand before a look of unholy glee lit up his face. "Do you know what the best part is in that plan?" Seeing Harley shake his head he continued, "We have the best teacher in the world to call on. Hey FRIDAY," He called up to the ceiling to get the AI's attention, "is Loki done with the debrief yet?"

"Not yet, unfortunately," she replied, "but if you so desire I can have his kids sent in."

"That would be brilliant, thank you."

A few minutes later the group entered, Sleipnir at the front with a huge grin on his face after the brief conversation with Friday. "I hear you two are planning trouble. How can we help?"

Harley gestured for them all to sit around the table and they quickly rearranged themselves to see each other better. "Mr. Stark has a lot of enemies and they clearly won't wait for him to leave to attack him. We need to plan for that possibility so we can defend ourselves and him."

Hela nodded in agreement as she scrambled to climb into Harley's lap. "Uncle Tony is really strong, but he needs someone to protect him, too!" she murmured, looking at the others while cuddling a worn unicorn plushie in her arms.

"Hela is right," Fenrir announced with a dip of his head, his golden yellow eyes piercing through them. "He rescued our family and provided us with a loving and supportive environment, and I have never seen our father happier. It's the least we can do to make sure his home is safe for both him and the residents here."

From his place beside Peter, Jörmungandr smirked and steepled his fingers as he leaned back in his own chair. "And we are the best ones to do that for more than one reason. We are the children of the god of mischief himself--chaos is in our blood."

Sleipnir nodded in agreement from Peter’s other side. “There are different levels of chaos, though. Lady FRIDAY, could you bring up a list of people in residence at the compound as well as Stark Tower, then a separate list of known enemies of Uncle Tony?” A moment later, two holographic screens flickered into existence with the requested information. “Thank you. These people,” he gestured to the one with the residents. “We consider allies, acquaintances, loved ones, or shield-siblings. Thus, any mischief against them should be kept to a minimum. If anything, we would use them as targets for potential ideas. Nothing harmful, damaging, or unable to be easily fixed.” He shifted his attention to the second list. “The people on this list, on the other hand, are your main targets. You don’t want to go straight into pranking them, though. Do you know why?” He turned his attention to Harley and Peter, a patient smile on his face.

The duo thought for a moment, looking between each other and the lists above the table. Finally, Peter spoke again. “Because what may bother one person may not affect another?"

Jör grinned and ruffled Peter’s hair good naturedly, prompting a squeak from the teen. “That’s right! Pranks need to be tailored specifically to cause the greatest amount of carnage possible. If
you’re targeting one person, you’d pay attention to their likes, dislikes, schedule, and habits. That way you can combine certain elements to cause the maximum amount of carnage.”

“Mass pranks need their own research as well.” Fenrir picked up. “The space the prank is occurring in, possible response, how the group interacts as a whole, bystanders… There’s a lot of work that goes into something like this.”

A grin stretched across Slei’s face again. “Let’s do a little exercise. Pick one of the people on each of these lists and take thirty minutes to list out their likes, dislikes, and habits. Lady FRIDAY, would you bring up any footage they ask for?”

“Of course, Sleipnir.”

---

Loki sighed as he rapped his knuckles against the door to the room FRIDAY said his children were in. Getting a reply of ‘come on in!’, he pushed the door open and blinked in shock at what he found. His children, Peter, and Harley were in various spots around the room surrounded by a plethora of screens lit up with various lists, pictures, writing, and diagrams. “What are you all up to?” He asked, fully stepping in and closing the door behind him.

“Planning to rain fiery vengeance upon the Mechanic’s enemies.” Harley replied blithely as Hela wiggled out of his lap to run to her father, carrying her plushie happily.

Sleipnir laughed at the confused look his father shot him, even as he bent down to scoop his sister into his arms. “And by that he means we’re planning pranks against Uncle Anthony’s aggressors.”

There was a moment of silence from the god before a shark-like smile crossed his face, eyes lighting up with promises of chaos to come. “Is that so? Would you welcome the god of mischief into your midsts for such planning?”

Peter jumped to his feet from where he had been sitting with Jörmungandr, prompting a chuckle from the world serpent. “Would we ever! We were going to ask you first, but you were in the middle of the debriefing, so FRIDAY asked your kids to help us, and they’ve been really helpful so far! They’ve been teaching us to look for habits and note people’s likes and dislikes, and we have a bunch of ideas so far!”

He was cut off when a laughing Sleipnir pulled him back into his seat between himself and Jör. “Take a breath, little spider!” He ruffled Peter’s hair as he spoke, ignoring the squeak and blush it caused. “We would appreciate any wisdom you would be willing to give, Father.”

“Very well, budge up you lot.” The group shifted so Loki could sit with Hela in his lap, unconsciously taking the head of the table so he could see them all. “So, tell me what you’ve come up with so far.”

---
“Recording in three, two…” Pepper waved her hand to indicate the camera what rolling a moment later.

Tony smiled at the lense, a bandage wrapped around his head and an illusion applied to make it look like he had a black eye and a shallow cut on one cheek. “Good evening, everyone. Tony Stark here to let you all know I’m alive and well. I would have attended the press conference myself, but my CEO insists I stay where I am for the rest of my recovery. Fear not, though! I will be up and about before long, but in the meantime, I want to clear up a few questions that are being asked. Namely, the reason for my abduction.” He gestured to someone off-screen for a moment, and Stephen stepped into the shot to stand next to Tony’s chair. “Joining me is Dr. Stephen Strange, who was directly involved in my rescue and has insight into the reason behind my abduction.”

Stephen smiled and dipped his head to the camera. “The man who took Dr. Stark was a former instructor of mine who is now being held in a secure facility to await trial and judgement. He intended to use Dr. Stark as bait to draw me into a fight, knowing I would never leave a team member in his grasp. I was joined by other members of the New Avengers roster and as you can see, we succeeded in rescuing Dr. Stark with minimal fuss and injury.”

The genius gave the man a smile, slightly miffed that they had to hide their relationship for a little while longer. “Yes, and I know you all have questions about the New Avengers and the lineup we keep hinting at. I promise that one of the first things I’ll be doing is scheduling a press release regarding these members… right after I get a cheeseburger.” He grinned for a moment at the callback to when he had been rescued from Afghanistan. “Until then, I assure you that these new members have been thoroughly vetted and have signed the Accords. Once I’m back on my feet you’ll get the chance to meet them all.” He sat back in the chair he was sitting in. “I’ll leave you all with this— I’m looking forward to working with our new teammates and announcing the future of the medical research division of SI R&D. Ciao, guys!” He made a motion and Pepper cut the feed. “Finally!” He waved his hand and dispelled the illusion, ripping the bandage off his head once done.

“It’s a necessary evil, love.” Stephen helped the genius to his feet and kissed him gently.

Pepper smiled indulgently at the duo as she gathered up the equipment. “Stephen’s right, Tony. This will help put the public at ease, not to mention show that you’re recovering despite what you went through.”

The brunette nodded and grinned hopefully at his CEO. “Since I filled out the paperwork you also brought over, am I free to go now?”

In response, the redhead smiled at him and dipped her head. “Will that be all, Mr. Stark?”

“That will be all, Ms. Potts.” Tony gave the woman another hug before leading Stephen out of the room.

Stephen fell in step with his soulmate and gently took his hand while they walked. “Now that you’re free from Pepper, what do you have planned?” He asked as he looked at Tony from the corner of his eye.

The smile faded from Tony’s face as the genius sighed softly. “There’s something I’ve been putting off that I should take care of now that things have calmed down a bit.” He paused for a moment, unsure how to tell his soulmate that it was something he needed to do alone.

The sorcerer smiled gently, pressing a kiss to Tony’s head lovingly. “It’s something you need to do yourself. I understand. I need to check in at the Sanctum anyway and make sure it’s still standing.”
Tony sighed with relief and pulled his soulmate in for a tender kiss. “I don’t know what I did to deserve you,” he breathlessly whispered once their kiss ended. “I’ll shoot you a text when I’m free, okay?” Getting a nod from the sorcerer, he waved as Stephen opened a portal and stepped through, finally continuing on once it was closed. “FRIDAY, where’s Bruce right now?”

“Down in his lab. Would you like me to tell him you’d like to see him?”

“No, I’ll go to him.” The genius stepped into the elevator and closed his eyes in thought as it descended slowly. He’d been putting off this conversation for way too long and now that he had a quiet moment, he was going to take full advantage of it and clear the air between himself and his science bro. He heard the elevator ‘ding’ and stepped out as the doors opened. “Brucie-bear? Where are you at?”

There was a soft shuffling sound and the scientist in question came around a corner, wiping his hands carefully on a towel. “What’s up, Tony?”

Tony waved his hand and conjured up two plush chairs, sinking into one and gesturing to the other. “I wanted to talk to you about something that’s been on my mind.” He waited until Bruce took a seat as well before leaning forward slightly and resting his elbows on his knees. “Bruce, you’ve been avoiding me.” He held his hand up when the scientist opened his mouth to reply. “I don’t know if it’s something I did, but if it is I want to know. You’re my friend Bruce, and I’m worried I’ve messed something up, or I said or did something--”

“Tony, stop!” The emotion within Bruce’s tremulous voice when he spoke brought Tony up short, the billionaire blinking in shock at the pained and heartbroken look on the man’s face. Bruce pulled his glasses off and rubbed his face before he continued in a soft, hesitant voice. “You didn’t do anything wrong. In fact, it was just the opposite. No, let me finish!” He raised his voice only slightly when the Reaper made to respond. “I don’t know if it’s something I did, but if it is I want to know. You’re my friend Bruce, and I’m worried I’ve messed something up, or I said or did something--”

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Whatever he might have said next was cut off when Tony surged to his feet and pulled Bruce into a tight hug. Bruce tensed for a few seconds, unsure how to react before finally relaxing and hugging the genius back. “Bruce, I never, never blamed you. And don’t you ever let me hear you compare yourself to Rogers or any of them again, because what they did was a real offence.” Tony pulled away and held him at arms-length to look him in the eye. “I know why you left-- Maximoff. Why do you think I went back to the Tower once everything was said and done?” He pulled Bruce close again, trying to convey the sincerity of his feelings through touch alone. “You’re my science bro, Bruce, and one of my best friends. Of course I want you around! And if anyone ever tells you otherwise I’ll turn them into a Hulk-sized stress ball!” Bruce broke into laughter at the mental image, and after a few seconds Tony realized the laughter had changed to more crying. “It’s okay, Bruce. I don’t blame you, no one does. You are wanted here.” He murmured reassurances to him, rubbing his back as the scientist clung to him and sobbed with relief.

Finally after a few minutes, Bruce pulled away and wiped his eyes with a sleeve. He gave a watery chuckle when Tony conjured a tissue and handed it to him. “Thank you, Tony. I think I needed to hear that.”
Tony nodded in understanding and summoned his chair to himself so he could stay close to the
scientist. “Bruce, do you want to be an active member of the Avengers? You were kind of forced
into the role during the battle of New York, but I’m giving you the choice here. You don’t have to
fight if you don’t want to, it’s completely up to you.”

For a moment Bruce simply observed him, thinking deeply and searching his fellow genius’ face
for any sign of deception. Finally, he took a deep breath and rested his elbows on his knees, a
tension seeming to fall away from him. “No. I don’t want to be an active member. I would be
willing to be a reserve, be available for extreme situations… but I never wanted to fight to begin
with.”

The Reaper nodded calmly, a knowing smile on his face. “And that’s absolutely fine. On that note,
though… I have a job offer for you.” Seeing the curious look on his fellow science bro’s face he
continued. “During the press conference two weeks ago, Pepper mentioned that SI is opening a
new branch of research and development for medical technology. Would you like to be the director
of it?” Bruce’s eyes widened even as Tony continued. “You’re one of the smartest men I know, not
to mention the most honest. With you as the director, I would be absolutely certain that the
department would flourish and grow exponentially.” He looked up with hope in his eyes. “I
wouldn’t trust anyone else as much as I would trust you with this, Bruce.”

There was a full minute of silence before Bruce softly cleared his throat. “I… If you’re absolutely
sure, Tony.” Getting an enthusiastic nod from the Reaper, a small but brilliant smile finally crossed
the scientist’s face. “I would be honored, then.”

“Great!” Tony crowed, jumping to his feet and pulling Bruce up with him. “I’ll have Pepper write
you up a contract and get the ball rolling! Brucie-bear, you have no idea how glad I am that you
accepted-- I know the department will be in good hands with you!”

FRIDAY chimed in at that moment, bringing the duo up short. “Boss, Bruce, Minowa is requesting
access to the lab.”

The smile on Bruce’s face widened at that. “Go ahead and send her in, FRI.”

Tony nodded and gave his science bro one more hug. “I’ll leave you to it. If I’m lucky, Pep hasn’t
left the Compound yet-- for once I’m hoping Dorian pulled her into another discussion about
Tevinter fashion.” Bruce’s laughter followed him out of the lab, and he heard the first elevator
open as he stepped into the second. “FRIDAY, is Pepper still on the premise?”

“Indeed she is, Boss. I took the liberty of telling her about your offer to Dr. Banner, and she seems
to be pleased with the choice.”

“I knew she would be.” The Reaper replied, a grin plastered on his face as the doors of the elevator
opened again.

“She also wants to know if you asked him about potential salary and benefits.”

Tony paused, face blanking for a second before cursing in Italian and turning back to the elevator.
He ran numbers in his head on the ride down again, and once the doors opened he stepped back
into the lab without hesitation. He opened his mouth to call out to Bruce before stopping dead in
his tracks, eyes widening in shock at the sight before him. Bruce was back in the chair he had
summoned, only with the addition of Minowa straddling his lap, the two kissing slowly and
tenderly. A grin appeared on Tony’s face as he cleared his throat, Bruce and Minowa springing
apart and their heads whipping towards him in shock. “So, Pepper wanted me to ask about salary
and stuff, but more importantly… FRIDAY, please inform Zevrael and Dorian that they both owe
me $100 a piece, and the Boone trio need to retrieve those power armor specs for me-- I fucking called it!"

A moment later he was fleeing the lab cackling madly as a dagger was hurled in his direction along with several curses in dovahzul.

Chapter End Notes

From hereon out, 'Next Chapter' will not be a thing, because this story is dynamic and the chapter content tends to change, even during the writing process. Y'all are just gonna have to wait to see what each chapter entails! ^_^
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Desperate times call for desperate measures, and the arrival of a certain mercenary proves that point. A retrieval from the Antarctic provides WAY more questions than answers, but hope appears in the form of an unannounced house call.

(Since when does the Master of Death drop in on a whim??)

((He DOESN'T.))

Chapter Notes

Whoever said that Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year OBVIOUSLY never worked a seasonal retail job!! Here's the next chapter for my lovely readers!! Things are going to be kicking up from here on... Read away, my fellow vassals!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was very little that escaped a sniper’s gaze in life. Every movement was observed, cataloged, and assessed for potential threat and acted upon accordingly. It was because of those very skills and the thousands of years he had to hone said skills that Ulysses caught the intruder that had somehow managed to evade his Amicus’ security.

He had just come off his week of watching the Rogues and had been enjoying some time in the well-hidden tower that had been constructed for him. The ‘Spire’ was warded against detection and acted as a major point of defense for the Compound. Tony had been kind enough to install a few amenities as well, even if the sniper had told him it wasn’t necessary. He had been leaning against the outer wall with a chilled bottle of beer in one hand, casually observing the group on the outdoor training grounds below him. The kids had begun using the space for testing various inventions and chemicals. The frequently volatile results usually brought a tiny smile to his lips, though that smile was nowhere to be found at the moment. The male gracefully knelt and pulled his rifle from his back, lining the sights up with the figure he had spotted stealthily moving towards the quinjet, brown eyes narrowed in complete focus. It took a few moments for the figure to move again, but that was all the time the ex-Legionnaire needed. The bullet tore through the air with barely a sound and found a home directly in the man’s chest, the figure collapsing as he clutched his sternum and flailed dramatically. Ulysses made to target the man’s head before he froze. Black and red suit, two katanas on his back, pistol on each hip…

The sniper surged to his feet, opening a corridor as he shouldered his gun again and drew a pistol instead. Keeping it at the ready while he stepped through it and unwilling to take any chances with his own life or the lives of his family in the Compound, Ulysses could hear a male cursing...
profusely as he moved closer. His eyebrows shot into his hairline when he finally saw the man in question. “ Wilson ??”

Wade stopped squirming as the bullet wound healed, looking up from his place on the ground to the sniper towering over him. “Sessie!!” He was on his feet in a moment, hugging the sniper and planting kisses on his cheek through his mask, regardless of the ventilator on ‘Ses’. “I should have known it was you! Your bullets always feel tingly!”

It took a moment for Ulysses to regain his bearings before pushing the crazy merc away. “Immunity to Cazador venom-- should have known. Haven’t seen you in a while… avoiding death for once?”

“Hmm, I’ll have to change that soon! I do so miss Harry-kins and Morty!”

Ulysses snorted at the names and shook his head in mild exasperation. “Why are you here, Wade?” he questioned, unable to think of any reason for him to be here.

The mercenary’s body posture changed and it took the sniper a moment to realize Deadpool was serious in whatever it was he was about to say. Whatever would have been said was stopped when a portal opened up next to them, however, Stephen and Tony stepping through with armor and magic at the ready. Deadpool was momentarily distracted by the display and gasped comically with delight. “Ooh, nifty! You could make a killing in transportation with that!”

Tony shot his fellow Reaper a confused look and the sniper rolled his eyes deeply. “ Amicus , Wade Wilson-- One of Dominus ’ Champions.”

The genius allowed his helmet to retract completely as he looked between them. “Champion? I’ve heard that term once or twice around the Nexus, but didn’t bother to ask.”

Ulysses jerked his head to the Merc in question. “Reapers are chosen-- end up being closer to Hadrian. Champions… immortal, without the intention of becoming so. Sometimes linked to death in other ways-- titles, mantles.”

A snort escaped Stephen for a moment. “Sounds like Reapers and Champions are like cousins.”

The sniper thought for a moment before shrugging. “Close, I suppose.” He turned his attention
back to Wade. “The previous question still stands.”

Again, Wade became serious. After a moment of thought, he reached for his mask to pull it off. His hazel eyes were filled with worry, fear, and anxiety that was too intense to be fake. “One of my closest friends was abandoned and he is dying. I have to try and save him-- I’m all he has now.”

Tony froze for a moment, feeling something in his chest still for a moment. “How bad?” He finally managed to ask, and the grim look on Wade’s face and the way his eyes dropped caused the brunette to curse viciously. He thrust his hand out, willing Yinsen into existence. “Yinsen, take a message to Bridget, double time-- ‘Medic, got an emergency, grab your kit and meet us asap. Drop anything else you're doing’.”

The serpent immediately sped away, and it was barely thirty seconds later that another corridor opened and admitted Bridget who was carrying her emergency medical bag. “I’m here, Tony. What’s going on?”

The brunette held up a hand, signaling her to wait. “Wade, do you know where your friend is?”

Wade grimaced and sighed. “I don’t know the exact location, but he said something about Antarctica…”

A sudden surge of deathly aura lanced through the area, and all eyes turned to Tony who had an icy yet murderous expression on his face and fury in his glowing orange eyes. “He was left alone…” Wade nodded. “In Antarctica…” Another nod. “Without a way back.” One last nod. Without wasting another moment, Tony sent forth a strong pulse of his own magic, the force multiplied by the strength of his emotions. It took less than a second for him to lock onto the location, and he turned his gaze to Stephen and Bridget. “Found him. Follow behind me.” Without waiting for a reply, Tony’s corridor surged into existence and a moment later he was stepping out onto a frozen plain of pure white snow that seemed to extend in almost every direction. The lack of any other color meant the genius’ eyes were immediately drawn to the lone splash of red, black, and brown sprawled out a few meters from his location. Moving towards it quickly, Tony ignored the portal that opened behind him in favor of dropping to his knees by the still, nearly frozen body in front of him. He began rapidly casting heating charms on the man directly and around them all as Bridget knelt by the unconscious redhead’s other side.

Wade stuck next to the Sorcerer Supreme, eyes darting from the medic to Tony, then to his friend. “Is Remy going to be okay?” He asked after several seconds, voice uncharacteristically soft and hesitant.
Bridget looked up at Tony, her eyes sad and full of grief. “I… I don’t think we can save him, Wade.” She said softly, continuing to pour healing magic into the chilled body despite her words. “He’s been exposed to the elements for too long, he’s barely clinging to life…”

A soft choked noise escaped the merc and he dropped next to Tony, grabbing Remy’s stiff hand. “I told him this would happen, that they would do this eventually! I told him to leave while he had the chance!” He closed his eyes, squeezing the man’s hand hard in the hope of getting a response of some sort from his friend. “Come on, Gambit, you’re stronger than this!”

**Gambit**. The name struck a chord with Tony and brought several memories forward at the same time. Gambit was a mutant, a member of the X-Men whose team had been founded by Charles Xavier. All at once, several pieces clicked into place for the genius. Wade had been encouraging Remy to leave ‘them’, and Gambit was a known member of the X-Men. If his deduction was right, and it always was… Remy had been left alone in the middle of the Antarctic tundra by his team to **die**.

Flashbacks to an abandoned bunker deep in Siberia, to pain and ice and blood, betrayal and pain sprung to the front of the genius’ mind, and something deep within Tony **snapped**.

Without realizing it, the glow in his eyes had intensified and now shone brilliantly, a glowing aura forming around Tony that held the same glittering orange shade that shifted like fire, different hues of the orange swirling within it. He failed to notice the sounds of shock and awe that escaped the others present as he pressed his palms above Remy’s heart, the fiery glow rushing down his arms to envelop the nearly dead mutant. Moments later he was plunged into a maelstrom of images, and it took him a second to realize they weren’t images— they were **memories**. He was continuously assaulted by feelings of desperation, despair, hopelessness, betrayal, and what few happy memories and emotions there were had been smothered beneath the dark cloud of pain and sadness that hung over his entire life. ‘I thought my childhood was shit, but this… no child deserves this. No one does.’

The light around the two males pulsed just once before suddenly exploding into a blinding white that had everyone else covering their eyes for a moment. A few seconds later the aura seemed to shatter outwards as if pushed away from the inside, rushing over the others before dispersing into the surrounding air. It took a few seconds for Tony to blink the spots out of his eyes and his vision came fully back into focus as he heard Bridget gasp in shock. Casting his eyes down, the genius’ mouth dropped open in shock at what he found. The mutant was warm, breathing deeply, alive… and couldn’t be more than 17 years old. Tony staggered to his feet, only for the world to tilt as his vision greyed out. His knees buckled, and the last thing he felt was his soulmate catching him in his arms before everything faded into darkness.
The sound of a door sliding open pulled Tony back to the waking world, and it took him a moment to realize he was in the medical wing of the Compound. As his memories slowly began to come back to him, he heard Peter softly call out to someone.

“Hi, Wade! Mr. Stark isn’t up yet if you wanted to know.”

The merc snorted out a laugh and Tony connected himself to the Compound’s cameras to see the two without making himself known. Wade was standing over the teen, arms crossed and an unamused look on his face. “Nah, the hot Irish chick in the ceiling let me know. I’m here about you.” Peter yelped as the male pulled him into a sudden headlock, giving him a noogie as he continued. “Would you care to explain to me why I’m only just now finding out about May?”

Peter froze for a moment before going limp in the man’s hold. “I… I knew you were trying to help Remy, and I didn’t want to bother you while you were on your mission…” he confessed, his brown eyes growing big as he met Wade’s gaze sincerely.

“Don’t be a dumbass, Petey.” The words were spoken gently as Wade released the brunette to sit next to him and pull him against his side, softening at the look the younger gave him. “I knew something was going down, but just because I was helping out Rem’ doesn’t mean I wouldn’t have made time for you.” He pulled off a glove and began to run his scarred fingers through Peter’s hair. “I’m sorry about what happened to her, though… Have you been holding up okay? Are they treating you well here?”

The teen smiled and nodded, blushing under the attention from the merc. “Yeah, everyone here has been really nice and supportive… Mr. Stark and Dr. Stephen are always willing to talk and listen, so that helps a lot.”

“Good. Remember, I’m always here to listen, too. I’d offer to unalive Fury for you, but I feel like you wouldn’t want that.”

That prompted a sudden, sharp laugh from the teen. “No, Wade, I don’t want you to kill Fury!”

Wade pouted, but his eyes sparkled with an emotion Tony couldn’t identify. “You know I’d totally do it if you asked… Can I maim him a little, at least?” The teen smacked him in the chest in reply, prompting the merc to gasp and clutch at it dramatically as if he’d been stabbed. “I yield! No maiming!”
The duo laughed together for a moment before growing quiet again. “I’m glad Remy’s okay, though… Even if he is younger than before.” Peter stated softly, eyes shifting to another bed where Tony could see the mutant laid out, sleeping soundly. “What’s gonna happen now, though?”

The merc sighed deeply, his own hazel eyes shifting to his friend. “I have my apartment on 183rd…”

“Wade, isn’t that the apartment near where you not only insisted on walking me to the bus stop, but riding with me on it because that one guy was trying to ask me how much I cost?”

“Yeah, Pete.” Seeing the incredulous look on the teen’s face, Wade groaned and ran a hand over his face. “Spiderling, I can take care of myself, you know that.”

Peter pulled away from the arm around his shoulders. “I know you can, Wade-- at least, usually.” He gestured in the direction of Remy’s bed. “What about Remy, though?”

Wade looked over at the unconscious redhead as well, his brow furrowed in thought. “As far as sleeping goes, he can have the couch and I’ll use the floor. Wouldn’t be the first time…” He cast a pointed look in Peter’s direction.

The teen huffed in reply, settling against Wade again and allowing the merc’s arm to slip around his shoulders once more. “Yeah yeah, I know. I still owe you for that, by the way.”

“Pete, you don’t--”

“Wade, if it wasn’t for you I would have bled out!” Wade held the spiderling closer even as Peter continued, “You didn’t have to help, but you did! You dragged me out of that alley, patched me up, let me crash on your couch, and made sure I would make it home safely!” He hid his face in the merc’s chest, drawing comfort from the steadily beating heart beneath his ear. “You didn’t even know me, but you helped anyway.”

The merc sighed softly, squeezing Peter a little tighter for a moment. “I didn’t do it so you would owe me anything. I’d do it again in a heartbeat, you know that.” He looked towards Remy’s bed again after a moment. “As for Remy, my place on 183rd will have to do for now until we figure something else out. Whatever hoodoo Stark did managed to magic Remy back to 17 years old, so him staying on his own isn’t an option. Not to mention that if the other members of the ‘super-
secret-boy-band’ find out he’s alive and underage, chances are they’ll try to ‘reform’ him… whether he wants it or not.”

“B-But Remy didn’t do anything wrong… I mean, you said he was tricked, right? I think you mentioned that when you were telling me about him earlier…”

Wade nodded sharply, his hazel eyes hardening instantly. “That’s the understatement of the millenia, Pete. The thing is, Cyclops and his cronies don’t exactly see it that way. If the good professor was still there, this wouldn’t have happened the way it did. Most of the other mutants at the Institute barely tolerated Remy and they definitely looked down on him being a thief. Never mind that Remy saved Storm despite not even knowing her, just that she was a kid in trouble… then whatever team he was with that brought him to Antarctica found out about the Massacre and they…” Wade leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees, and Peter shifted closer to rub the merc’s back comfortingly. “They’re a bunch of hypocrites… they don’t exactly have clean pasts themselves.”

Peter pressed himself to Wade’s side again, a troubled look on his face. “But if Remy doesn’t want to be reformed, they can’t just… force him to be. I mean, doesn’t he get a say in it? He’s not exactly a child, even if he’s a teenager again.”

A tense silence filled the room for a moment before Wilson spoke again. “Yes. They actually can.” He rubbed his face with his hand, a worried glint in his eyes. “One of the residents of the Institute, Jean Grey, is a telepath. She could potentially reach into Remy’s mind and… well, ‘reprogram’ him into someone that they approve of.”

“Fuck that shit.” The sudden outburst from Tony caused the two to jump in shock, and the genius sat up in bed and threw the blankets off of himself. “It was bad enough when Maximoff was fucking around in people’s heads and bringing their worst fears to life. But I’m not going to just stand by and be complacent when someone is in danger of being fucking unmade.”

Peter squealed and ran over to Tony as he swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood. “Mr. Stark, you’re okay!!” He flung his arms around the genius, relief flooding through the teenager as he gave him a wide smile.

Wade approached the duo at a more sedated pace with a smile of his own. “Good to see you up finally. We were pretty worried when you passed out after your little light show.” His face became completely serious a moment later. “Whatever it was you did, though, it saved Remy’s life. So… thank you.”
“Alright, let’s get this started,” said Stark, standing up with his arms folded. He gave the redhead a
sad look. “He’s been beaten down and belittled for so long that he just accepts whatever is thrown at him, even when he doesn’t deserve it.”

Wade was by his friend’s side in an instant, holding his hand and rubbing his thumb along the back. “Rem?” He called softly, eyes locked on the young man in the bed. After a few moments, the redhead’s eyes fluttered open, squinting against the light of the medical wing. “Son of a bitch.” Wade hissed when he caught sight of the color, an icy blue instead of his normal red with black sclera. “Rogue drained him—his powers—before she abandoned him… that explains a lot.” The sound of Wade’s voice drew the young man’s attention. “You’re okay, Rem. You’re safe here.” The merc reassured him, giving his hand a gentle, reassuring squeeze. Tony swore softly under his breath before striding off to one side to speak with FRIDAY. Peter heard Bridget being mentioned as he shuffled over to join Wade and Remy.

Remy blinked a few times, trying to get his head to quit spinning long enough to respond. “It’s alright, mon ami.” He finally replied in a quiet tone, only to stop at the sound of his own voice. An extremely confused look crossed his face as he began taking stock of his own body, especially the way his clothes seemed to loosely drape over his body, much too big for him now with his hands being covered by the ends of his sleeves. “Merde! What happened to me??” He yelped, looking back to Wade with shock in his newly widened eyes.
The merc huffed out a long breath. “You want the long version or the short version?”

Remy thought for a second. “Yes.”

“Okay…” Wade began slowly, seeing that the redhead was still a little groggy “Right after I got your call, I tried to ‘borrow’ a jet from a local group of heroes but... That ended up with me getting a bullet shot through my chest. Luckily for me, it was an old friend who shot me and he recognized me before he could pop one in my head. Turns out he’s buddy-buddy with the Tony Stark and the Wizard of Oz. Gandalf portaled us to you, but for a second it looked really... really bad. Then Stark turned into a glow stick and somehow did the same to you, and his glow stick powers gave you the blessings of the fountain of youth.”

Remy blinked in complete incomprehension for a moment before starting as Peter popped into view. “TL;DR, when they went to get you, they saved you, but they’re not exactly sure how. We’re working on figuring that out.” He smiled brightly as he plopped down next to Wade. “Hi, I’m Peter. It’s nice to finally meet you!”

The mutant’s eyes went wide with recognition. “Peter? As in Peter Parker?” The young teen’s eyes became sad even as he nodded. “Remy is happy to finally meet you, mon ami! Wade rarely shuts up about you.”

Peter grinned brightly even as Wade feigned nonchalance, though the quirk of his lips betrayed him. “Really? Whenever we talk you always seem to come up too!” He shifted forward a bit to gently squeeze Remy’s free hand. “He was really worried about you-- we all were. I’m happy that you’re okay now.”

“We’re all glad to see you awake, too.” Tony stepped into Remy’s line of vision, a kind smile stretched across his face. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Remy. I’m Tony Stark, but that’s probably obvious.” He sat on the bed next to the redhead’s, keeping his posture relaxed and his facial expression calm. “I know you probably have a lot of questions-- trust me, you’re not the only one. We’re still trying to figure things out, but I promise that you’ll be kept in the loop about anything we find. For now, I want you to focus on your recovery. What you went through is unquantifiably horrific, and your body needs a chance to readjust as much as your mind.”

Remy had initially been wary of the genius, but the promise to be kept up to date about his health and the genuine concern for his well-being helped him to relax a little. “Remy will take it easy, Mr. Stark. Thank you for your hospitality.”

The genius snorted and shook his head. “Please call me Tony. Mr. Stark was my father, and I’d
rather not be referred to by any title related to him.” He leaned forward for a moment, pinning Remy with his gaze. “You and Wade are going to be staying here. You’re safer here than anywhere else in the world for more than one reason, and if the X-Men even begin to attempt to step foot on these grounds, we will know, and we will retaliate.”

“Let them try-- wouldn’t make it past the Spire.” All eyes turned to see Ulysses leaning in the doorway. “Good to see you awake… was worried you weren’t going to survive.” He said to Remy, dipping his head to the mutant for a moment.

Wade squealed and jumped from his seat. “Sessie! You came to visit us!” He made to hug the sniper and found a .44 pistol aimed between his eyes. A gasp from Remy drew their attention again and the merc grinned widely. “Rem, this is Sessie, he’s the friend who shot me!”

The sniper in question rolled his eyes deeply at the introduction as he holstered the gun again. “Ulysses Boone. Work colleague.” He turned his gaze to Tony. “Amicus, we’re needed upstairs in the common room.” His eyes shifted back to Remy, Peter, and Wade for a moment. “All of us.”

The genius’ eyebrows rose significantly as he stood from the bed. “Well that’s not ominous at all. There’s no danger, right?” The man shook his head in reply to the question. “Okay, let’s find out what’s going on.” He turned his attention back to the mutant. “Rem, no matter who you meet upstairs, you are in absolutely no danger here, alright?”

“Oui, Remy understands.” He made to stand on his own before yelping as Wade scooped him up into his arms bridal style.

“No a chance, buttercup. You’re still recovering, and I’m more than capable of carrying you.”

The mutant flailed somewhat frantically in response and managed to escape the merc’s arms, landing on the ground in a rather undignified heap with a wince. “Remy is not some damsel in distress!” He snapped, glaring up at the merc as he tried to calm his pounding heart from being grabbed so suddenly with no warning.

Peter stepped in front of him and knelt down. “We know that, Remy. You’re a strong person-- you’ve been through a lot of tough stuff recently that no one should ever have to deal with. We’re not trying to make you feel weak. We want to help because we care about you-- Wade tried to steal a jet from the Avengers to go save you. Needing help doesn’t make you weak, Rem.” He held his hands out in invitation to the young man, who was watching him with an unreadable expression.
After a tense moment, Remy slowly reached forward and allowed Peter to gently grasp his own. The brunette smiled brilliantly and carefully pulled him into his arms for a gentle hug. After a few seconds he pulled away and maneuvered the redhead slightly as if to lift Remy in the same way Wade had, and the mutant started to tell him he wouldn’t be strong enough to. The protest instantly died when Peter stood with absolutely no effort with the 17-year-old secure in his arms.

Wade chuckled for a moment at the vibrant blush that crossed his friend’s face before becoming serious again. “Sorry about that, Rem.” He said softly, drawing the redhead’s attention.

Remy gave the man a smile and slight nod, realizing then that his auburn hair was no longer tied back. “No worries, Wade. Remy understands.”

Tony grinned brilliantly at the trio for a moment. “FRIDAY, would you be a dear and alert my better half that we need a portal to the common room?”

“Right away, boss!” The AI cheerfully chirped, causing Remy to jump in shock and look around wildly before Peter explained about FRIDAY in a soft voice.

A moment later, a sparking orange portal opened in the medical bay and Stephen wasted no time in stepping through. He didn’t give anyone a chance to speak before he was pulling Tony close and kissing him until they were both breathless. He ignored the wolf whistle from Wade and reluctantly pulled away a few seconds later, resting his forehead against Tony’s. “I know you don’t know what happened or what you did my love, but please don’t ever scare me like that again.” He breathed, trying and failing to fully mask the anxiety swimming in his eyes.

The genius nodded and kissed Stephen gently in response, flushing slightly. “I’m sorry I worried you.” He softly replied, not pulling away once he had gotten a nod from his soulmate. “Remy, this is Dr. Stephen Strange, my S.O. and undoubtedly better half.”

Stephen smiled kindly at the wide-eyed redhead and dipped his head in greeting. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.” He waved for them all to enter the portal, and they wasted no time in stepping through to the other side.

Tony blinked at the sight he was greeted with as Stephen closed the portal behind them. The Reapers were all spread out throughout the room, as well as the Bartons, Keeners, and Loki with his kids. The Reapers seemed almost agitated and the others seemed curious about the summons, doubly so at the behavior of the Reapers. “Whoa, what’s the occasion? I’m pretty sure that I didn’t miss a birthday, or did I?”
From the far side of the room came a calm, matter of fact reply. “No, Anthony, you didn’t.”

The genius jumped a foot in the air before he spun to face the speaker, whiskey brown eyes widening in shock. “Chief?!”

Hadrian smiled brightly at Tony, dipping his head to his Claimed. “Good evening to you too, Tony.” He held his hand up to stop anything that might have been said next. “Unfortunately, I’m not here for a social call. Have a seat. We all need to have a little chat.”

Chapter End Notes

There's a lot of things that were referenced in this chapter that may not make sense right now. Fear not, they will be explained later!!
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

The arrival of the Master of Death himself prompts truths finally being shared and one HELL of an identity crisis. Remy learns it's okay to need help and that the New Avengers do NOT have the same mentality as the X-Men. Also, cute Hela is cute.

(Also, beware mother-hen Wade Wilson.)

((Because he is a stab-happy, shoot-first-ask-questions-later mother-hen.))

Chapter Notes

This one is a BIG chapter in terms of plot, y'all. Jen and I have been working hard on this one, and I hope some things start to make sense. Enjoy this one, my fellow vassals of our lord and master, AO3!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Thank you all for coming so promptly.” Hadrian addressed the group as a whole as everyone found a seat. He smiled at the way Wade Wilson gently took Remington LeBeau from Peter’s arms and settled the redhead next to him on the couch, Dorian occupying the other seat calmly with Zevrael perched on the armrest beside his husband. “I know you all have several questions, especially for those who don’t know who I am. Rest assured, I will do my best to explain things as they come up.”

Tony suddenly held up his hand while looking around, noticing that a few members of their family weren’t there. He wasn’t surprised about the Barton chicks and Harley’s sister not being there considering their ages, though he wondered where his science bro was. “Hold on Chief, I just realized-- where’s Bruce?”

The Master of Death smiled at Tony and inclined his head towards the elevators. “Dr. Banner is with the children in the theater room watching a movie. No need to potentially frighten them, after all.” Tony nodded in agreement and Hadrian swept forward to the center of the room so everyone could see him. “Allow me to introduce myself first. My name is Hadrian Black, and I am the Master of Death.” He raised a hand to forestall any panic that might have occurred, knowing that his title tended to invoke both fear and a little awe. “Now, I’m not here to kill anyone. My job entails protecting the multiverse from threats that could potentially cause an enormous amount of unbalanced death and stop people who would seek to wield power that they have no business handling. When I find a world being threatened by something of this nature, I send in a team to take care of the problem. If my Reapers could make themselves known…”
All at once several hands went in the air, many eyes turning to Tony in shock and surprise when his hand was among them. He gave them a grim smile as he turned his attention to Holly Keener for a moment. “Like I said, Holly… the damage done in Siberia was bad.”

“Yes, it’s true. Anthony is one of my Reapers, and the leader of the team I sent to take care of a problem I detected in your world.”

Wade snorted loudly from his place next to Rem before snarking, “You mean besides Captain Tightass being alive?”

This prompted several snickers and smirks from the teenagers in the room with Loki’s kids in particular looking at the newcomer with respect and glee. Sleipnir called back with a dark smirk, “Maybe we should help pull the flagpole from his ass.”

“I don’t know, brother…” Jörmungandr drawled, a shark-like grin of his own stretched across his face. “For all we know, his brand of stupid could be contagious.”

Harley gasped in mock horror. “Maybe that’s why none of the Rogues have tried to help pull it out. They caught the stupid bug!”

Peter grinned and proceeded to announce, “The Rogues have cooties!!” Hearing more of the snickers, he shifted slightly in his seat and met Harley’s gaze, giving him a thumbs up.

“But where did the cooties come from?” Hela asked innocently, tilting her head as she cuddled into her father, sitting on his lap and clutching his shirt with one of her small hands as the other held her plushie close. “Maybe someone gave them the cooties from somewhere outside!”

Tony gave a soft laugh and shook his head. “That’s a conversation for another day, okay sweetheart?” Getting a nod from the young girl, he turned his attention back to Hadrian, who had been watching the byplay with a slightly nostalgic smile. “Back to the topic at hand, though… It’s rare for you to make an unannounced visit, Chief.”

The smile fell from the man’s face and he nodded. “Indeed, I rarely feel the need to visit my Reapers on the job site. However, I’ve come into the possession of knowledge that concerns you in particular, Tony.”
The genius blinked in shock. “Me? Why me?”

“During your Claiming, I was made aware that there was... an anomaly from the usual results—more than one, actually. I initially thought that Mortis was referring to the abilities you gained during it, but that was only part of what he sensed. Recently, several things have happened that gave us vague hints as to what was going on, but it wasn’t until a few hours ago that we had a definitive answer.” Getting a nod from the genius he continued. “Tony, how much do you know about the Infinity Stones?”

Tony blinked in confusion at the question, briefly turning his gaze to Stephen and Loki. “I know Stephen has the Time Stone—saved the world with it and everything—and Rock of Ages over there had access to the Mind Stone that’s now in Vision, and... you said the Space Stone was in the Tesseract, right?” The god nodded in affirmation, and the genius turned his attention back to Hadrian. “So, I know about one off hand, and the extensive research I did on the Tesseract and creating Vision means I have some experience handling two.” He took a moment to think before continuing. “From what you mentioned in your debriefing before I came back, there are six stones—the three mentioned above, along with... Reality, Power, and Soul. Let’s see... they can’t be handled with your bare hands—they’re always in a container of some kind. You know, glow stick of destiny, cosmic cube, fancy bling... don’t know about the others, but I’d guess they’re the same.”

“Indeed. For those of you who are still lost, the Infinity Stones are the solidified form of the energies from the singularities of the universe. They are objects of incredible power and very very dangerous in the wrong hands.” He heard Wade cough to cover up Roger’s name and his emerald eyes narrowed in annoyance.

Wade shrugged, unrepentant. “What? Considering he claims that the safest hands are their own, I’d be pretty worried if he somehow got his red, white, and blue gloves on one.”

“The problem is that someone is looking to collect all of them.” Attention was turned to Tony who stood to see everyone better. “Someone whose end goal is to wipe out life entirely.”

Loki swallowed hard and held Hela tighter, guilt swimming in his green eyes. “Thanos.” he hoarsely whispered, unable to look at anyone else in the room for the moment.

Laura’s eyes immediately focused the God at the tone of his voice and she quickly stood, moving so that she was kneeling in front of him. “Hey, none of that self-blame, mister,” She said softly, cupping his pale cheek and tilting his head up so he was looking her in the eye. “You were as much of a victim as everyone else. No one here is blaming you, okay?”
Cooper hopped off the couch to join his mom, wedging himself between Loki and the armrest to give the god a hug. “Mom’s right, Mr. Loki. I don’t blame you, Lila doesn’t blame you… We all think you’re a pretty cool guy.”

The male laughed wetly in reply, moving to hug Cooper back after a moment. Laura sat on Loki’s other side to join them, prompting a giggle from Hela who was still seated on her father’s lap. The stuffed wolf she’d been cuddling fell to the floor as she twisted so she could join the hug too.

Several soft ‘aw’s were heard around the room and Wade mimed taking pictures of the scene. Peter quickly whipped out his phone and actually took pictures, and Tony subtly motioned for FRIDAY to do the same, smiling at the sight. From their spot a few meters away, Sleipnir and Jörmungandr looked at each other with wide, knowing eyes, and identical grins slid across their faces simultaneously a few seconds later.

Hadrian waited patiently for everyone to settle again, casting his eyes over the others as he did so. He smiled brightly when he saw Rem dozing with his head resting against Dorian’s shoulder, the mage gently running his fingers through the teen’s long auburn hair. Zev was leaning over and whispering something in his husband’s ear, and the pyro nodded and smiled at whatever was said. The Master of Death grinned and cleared his throat after a moment or two, drawing everyone’s attention again. Everyone quickly settled down again and he picked up from where the genius had left off. “What Tony said is true-- Thanos desires to wipe out life entirely in an effort to court his ‘Lady Death’.” The declaration prompted a squeal of ‘EW!’ from Hela, which garnered a number of confused looks from all but her immediate family. “As this world’s Goddess of Death, that would mean Hela.”

“Oh Hell no!” Laura barked furiously when she saw how the little girl had scrunched her face up in disgust and even a little fear at the very thought of her would-be suitor, prompting a shocked and somewhat awestruck look from Loki. “First of all, she is nine-years-old! This Thanos character has no business trying to ‘woo’ anyone that age! Secondly, it’s pretty clear to me-- and all of you, I believe-- that Hela has absolutely no interest in such matters at this time, so he can take his pursuits and shove them! Third, I’m pretty sure grand gestures of love and devotion do not include wiping out all existence no matter where in the galaxy you come from!”

“I never claimed Thanos was smart, Ms. Barton.” Hadrian drawled with an arched eyebrow and a slight smirk on his face at her immediate defense of the little Goddess of Death. “Nevertheless, his efforts put the universe in danger, so I sent a team down to mitigate the problem.” He paused for a moment as if to gather his thoughts. “I knew the location of most of the stones to a certain degree. However, there was one I couldn’t find, couldn’t even discern the location of… not until recently, when someone tapped into its’ power, that one being the Soul Stone.”
“Do we need to go after it, Chief?” Tony asked, already mentally preparing himself and making a list of gear they would need.

The ebony haired man took a deep breath and slowly released it. “Tony, the person who tapped into it was you.”

A ringing silence filled the room as Tony stared at him for several seconds, unable to comprehend Hadrian’s words for several seconds. His eyes drifted to the side and eventually fell on the sleeping Rem. Realization suddenly hit the genius like a lightning bolt as he remembered how Bridget had clearly said the man wouldn’t make it-- Bridget, whose Claiming gift was total mastery of the White Arts, who had tens of thousands of years worth of experience in healing, and who knew when a case was lost. And yet… he was still here, and at least a decade younger to boot. “I… I don’t…” He finally looked back to Hadrian, face pale and eyes filled with worry at the implications of the Master of Death’s words. “How?” He finally croaked. “I’ve never even seen the Soul Stone!”

“You wouldn’t have, Anthony, because the Stone itself was… for lack of a better term, fused to your very being.” Hadrian gave a soft huff as he ran his fingers through his hair in a nervous gesture. “I don’t know how, when, why, or who, but the end result is undeniable. Essentially, you are the Soul Stone, Tony.”

A moment of absolutely stunned silence passed before Tony reacted in the same way anyone else would when faced with such shocking, life changing news-- he fainted. Stephen surged to catch him, almost being pulled over by his soulmate’s deadweight as the room erupted into chaos. The sudden increase in volume startled Rem awake, the couch beneath his hand beginning to take on a brilliant magenta glow as the mutant blinked in sleepy confusion. Wade quickly yanked the teen’s hand away from the furniture to keep it from exploding. Narrowing his eyes, the merc snorted before pulling one of the guns from his belt and firing a round into the ceiling, effectively silencing the room. “I get that this is kind of a shocker, but you guys need to shut the hell up for a second.” He snapped, holstering his pistol easily without looking before turning back to Rem. “Easy, Rem. Reign it in a little. You’re safe here, I promise.” He spoke soothingly to the trembling mutant, noticing his previously blue eyes had returned to their usual red with black sclera. Dorian and Zevrael both rose from their place beside the teen and Wade glanced at them with a slightly worried look. “Rem can charge things with kinetic energy, and that tends to have rather explosive results. He had his powers suppressed so they could be controlled, but I’m guessing that whatever Stark did healed that surgery.” Going uncharacteristically silent for a few moments, the mercenary knew that regardless of his friend’s powers being uncontrollable again, there was no chance he’d let Rem walk back to the one who was really responsible for the massacre. There had to be another way than letting that mad scientist cut into the redhead’s brain again. About to speak again to the abnormally quiet mutant, Wade paused when he saw the pair that had been sitting on Rem’s other side looking at him with concern and compassion.

The Pavus men looked at each other and nodded before Zevrael moved into the man’s line of sight, drawing Rem’s attention immediately. “Hey there. I’m Zevrael Pavus, and this is my husband,
Dorian.” He gestured to the mage next to him, who smiled charmingly and waved. “I might have a temporary solution to your problem.” He gestured with his hands for a moment, forming a tennis ball-sized sphere of ice in them. “Hold onto this. While you’re charging it, I can use my cryokinetic abilities to disperse the buildup of kinetic energy. It will work until we can come up with a more permanent solution, okay?”

Rem looked between the ball and Zev for a few seconds, internally debating. Finally, he reached forward slowly to take the ice sphere, and the duo’s eyes were immediately drawn to how the sleeves of the brown coat fully covered his hands. Seeing the redhead clearly hesitating for a moment as his gaze dropped to said appendages, Dorian slowly reached forward, not wanting to spook the shaken teenager. “Need some help?” He asked softly, hovering above them and waiting for permission. Remy flushed and nodded, and the mage gently took the cuff of the sleeve and rolled it back so his hand was free to take the ice ball without the possibility of charging and exploding the worn trench coat.

The mutant blinked in shock as he took it before looking up to the elf. “It isn’t cold… how?” he questioned curiously, having expected it to be chilly considering that it was ice, after all.

Zev smiled and winked as Dorian moved to his other side to help with the other sleeve. “Cryokinesis, which I have, isn’t a mutation. It’s an absolute control, meaning if I don’t want that ice to be cold, it won’t be.”

His husband nodded in affirmation as he pulled away from rolling the sleeve up to cast a critical eye over Rem’s young and much too skinny form. “Maker’s breath, those clothes are quite big on you now…” Seeing the younger male flush in embarrassment he quickly smiled brightly to reassure him. “No matter, now we have a reason to get you a wardrobe that’s to your tastes and fits.” Seeing the teen’s stunned look, Dorian’s eyes narrowed as he tilted his head. “Is something wrong?”

Red and black eyes were cast to the floor as Rem softly replied, “It’s just… Remy isn’t used to… the kindness or generosity.” The teenager could feel his power seeping out of his fingertips into the ball held, relieved that it was contained so he wouldn’t blow anything up by accident.

Dorian and Zevrael glanced at each other once more, sorrow in the elf’s eyes and righteous indignation in the mage’s. “Well! You don’t have to worry about either of those things being in short supply here.” Dorian announced as he stood gracefully and sat next to Rem again, Zev joining him a moment later as he reclaimed his perch on the armrest. After a few tense moments, Rem inched a bit closer and leaned into the mage slightly, though ready to pull away at any sign of him not being comfortable with it. He was surprised when Dorian instead wrapped an arm around his thin shoulders and gave him a gentle squeeze. A moment later, he felt Zev’s fingers gently running through his hair in a soothing gesture and he leaned into the gentle touch unconsciously. Actions meant more to the redhead, especially after a lifetime of empty words and broken promises
that were often accompanied by less than pleasant physical things. The pair’s silent comfort felt good and soothed Rem’s need for physical affection, something that far too many in the past took for an agreement for something else.

There were a few seconds of silence as everyone observed the group, the Reapers all shooting the Pavus husbands knowing grins. The quiet was cut when Tony’s voice croaked from the floor, “Why the hell is there a bullet hole in my ceiling?”

Wade lifted his gaze from making sure that Rem was okay and grinned sheepishly at the genius as Stephen helped his soulmate off the floor and back into his seat. “Yeah, that was me. Sorry not sorry. I’ll pay for the damage.”

Tony blinked at the merc before sighing and waving his hand. “Don’t worry about it.” Seeing Wade about to protest the genius smirked and pointed to the ceiling again. “No, really. Don’t worry about it.”

Hazel eyes snapped back to the ceiling to see the hole had already repaired itself. “Huh. Nifty. So you have glow stick fountain of youth powers, portals, snake summons, and construction voodoo. Any other cool tricks we should know about?”

Almost simultaneously, every other Reaper laughed or snorted. “In for a penny, in for a pound, Glitch.” Craig said with a smirk, Aria nodding along with a grin.

The genius glanced over at Hadrian, and the Master of Death dipped his head with a smile. “They’re your family, Anthony. They’d follow you to Hell and back.”

“Damn right, we would!” Harley nodded, a determined light in his eye as he resolutely ignored the half-hearted reproach of ‘Harley!’ from Holly behind him.

Peter gave Tony a hug from his place at his side. “We’re with you no matter what, Mr. Stark!”

Whiskey brown eyes closed for a moment as Tony tried desperately to hold back the tide of emotion he was suddenly feeling. The feeling of Stephen’s hand settling against his shoulder helped ground him, and he clutched at it gently as he looked up into the blue-green eyes of his soulmate. The soft, adoring smile on the sorcerer’s face gave him courage, and he took a deep breath as he faced forward again. He thought for a moment before a smirk quirked at his lips, his eyes lighting up blue for a moment.
Wade gave a gasp of delight. “Oooh, more colors! What’s that one do?”

A few seconds later Peter’s Starkphone began buzzing, playing ‘Back in Black’ as the ringtone. The spiderling pulled it out with a perplexed look on his face, glancing between Tony and the phone for a second before finally answering it. “Hello?” There was a moment’s quiet before Peter’s mouth dropped open and his eyes widened. Silently, he pulled it away from his ear and put it on speakerphone, setting it on the table.

The group was confused at the action until Tony’s voice filtered through it. “You tell me what it does, Wade.”

The merc was at a loss for words for a moment, looking between the phone and Tony, who hadn’t moved an inch since his eyes had lit up. It was Harley who understood first, however. “Holy crap, Mechanic! Are you interfacing with his phone from your mind?!”

“Not just the phone.” This time the genius’ voice came from the speakers overhead, prompting several gasps. “If it counts as tech in any way, I can interface with it. I could, in fact, remote pilot one of my suits like this.”

A brilliant grin split Peter’s face at that as he stared at his mentor in fascination and surprise. “Technopathy! Wow! So you can access the internet with your mind? Do you watch netflix like that? You can make phone calls, but how far does it reach? Could you call Japan from here? Could you access systems in Japan from here? What about satellites?!”

The blue faded from Tony’s eyes and he began laughing at Peter’s enthusiasm. “Easy, spiderkid! Gotta remember to breathe, you know!” He thought for a moment as the teen did so. “To be honest, I’ve never tried reaching a satellite. As for the other questions-- Yes I can access the internet, I’ve never used it for Netflix but I’ll have to remember to try that, and I can make phone calls to anywhere and access any system I’ve encountered so far.”

Laura gave a soft chuckle, amazement shining clearly in her eyes at the display. “I’m looking forward to the day someone attempts to challenge the New Avengers using technology now that you have such a useful card close in hand.”

“Oh yes, that’s the card in my hand …” He smirked towards Loki and his kids, and they all perked up in realization. “But the best card is the one you keep in your boot.”
Remy grinned from his place under Dorian’s arm and nodded in agreement. “Remy knows that for a fact.”

“So then, Stark. What’s your hidden card, then?” Wade asked with a grin. “Cuz I’m pretty sure it can’t get much better than that.”

That prompted another round of laughter from the Reapers, Hadrian himself chuckling along with them. Tony simply smiled and closed his eyes, brow furrowing slightly. A moment later, the ceiling above them began to twist and shift, the same happening to the walls a moment later. Within moments the group was seemingly seated in a moon-lit grassy field, and Tony held one hand up, palm facing upwards. Several tiny specks of colored light formed in them before suddenly shooting upwards, exploding into brilliant fireworks that took on various shapes. The non-Reapers gasped in awe and delight, and Hadrian himself felt a curl of nostalgia in his chest as a distant memory of redhead twins flickered to the forefront of his mind. Hela squealed with delight as she leapt off her father’s lap, running around and trying to catch the lights in her hands. One firework exploded into the shape of a fierce looking dragon, but unlike the others didn’t disappear after a few second. Instead it landed in front of them, lifting its’ head to unleash a roar before bursting into several smaller lights that faded after a few seconds.

The silence that followed was deafening. Finally, Wade turned back to Tony with a huge grin on his face. “Okay, I stand corrected-- that was amazing. Do it again!”

A resounding cheer met his request, and Tony grinned brightly as he summoned his magic forth again, the genius’ heart warm with the love and acceptance from the people he had come to care for so much. Hadrian smiled brightly at the obvious joy radiating from the Reaper and made to slip away before pausing, his gaze having fallen on the wolf plushie Hela had dropped earlier. He scooped it up and moved over to the girl, drawing the attention of a few people.

He knelt in front of her, and for a moment they didn’t speak. Finally, Hadrian gave a small quirk of his lips. “Are you happy now, Hela?” he questioned gently.

The little goddess nodded rapidly, looking up at the Master of Death with unbridled joy on her face and devotion in her eyes. “I am.” She replied with absolute certainty.

The ebony haired man smiled, leaning forward to kiss her forehead for a moment. “Good.” He murmured, knowing nothing else needed to be said on the matter. He waved his hand over the wolf in his arms for a moment before handing the now animated toy back to her, prompting a delighted gasp from the girl. “You know I’m only a call away, dear heart.” He gracefully stood again and after giving the child one last pat on her head, slipped away silently. Unbeknownst to him, several
eyes followed his movements before a pair of mothers looked back to each other, smiles appearing on their faces and a shared thought between them.

‘For being the Master of Death, he’s such a softie!’

Chapter End Notes

Okay, show of comments, how many of you saw that coming? I've been dropping hints for several chapters... Hope you guys enjoyed this one!!
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Sightings of a wayward thunder god prompt familial feels for the Compound's resident trickster god and his family. Rem cooks and bonds with Aria over music and not knowing where you come from. Good Italian food prompts Tony feels, and revelations regarding Rem's education (or lack thereof) then causes Tony and Remy feels.

(Did I mention there are feels in this chapter?)

((Also backstory on Aria. And mentions of Minowa's extracurricular activities in Tamriel.))

Chapter Notes

I don't know HOW we did it, but this chapter is over 6,000 words long!! And it was completely EFFORTLESS!!

And somehow, while we're writing and editing, at least twice a chapter our document will be half story, half notes on some plot point or one shot we're planning that has very little to do with the chapter actually being written. Oi vey.

Enjoy the chapter, everyone!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If it weren’t for the seriousness of the situation, the spit take that had just occurred in the common room of the New Avengers would have been hilarious. “I’m sorry,” Tony gasped out as he attempted to dislodge the hot coffee he’d been drinking from his lungs, “but did you just say that Thor has been spotted, baby girl?”

“That’s right, Boss. Several news stations have reported different sightings of Mr. Odinson, though they seem to be mainly concentrated in Japan of all places.” The holographic screen closest to them lit up to show somewhat blurry footage of the blond, muscular God of Thunder standing in front of what appeared to be the famous Tokyo Tower. Several teenagers, mostly female, were squealing and chattering to each other excitedly in Japanese as they took several pictures of him with their cellphones. Judging from the half frustrated, half puzzled look on Thor’s face, they must have been saying some very bizarre things. Either that or Thor’s All-Speak wasn’t translating correctly.

Aria let out a cackle at one point and exclaimed, “Oh my God, that girl with the bleached hair just asked him if she could have his baby!!”
This prompted a bout of laughter around the table for several moments that was cut off suddenly when Hela whimpered, jumped up from her seat and bolted behind Laura, hiding behind her and shaking while clutching tightly onto her leg. “No, he shouldn’t be here! Make him go away! He’ll send me back!” She sobbed, pressing herself against the woman and shaking her head back and forth frantically.

The second he heard the whimper, Loki surged to his feet as Laura knelt and pulled the young girl into a tight hug, murmuring comfortingly in her ear. The God quickly joined them and upon seeing that he was trembling as fearfully as his daughter was, Laura pulled him into her arms as well. “It’s okay,” she breathed, dividing her attention between the clearly terrified and pale pair, a hand on each as she tried to ease the fear that the very sight of Thor had invoked, despite the God of Thunder not being physically present. “I’m here; we’re all here, Loki… Nothing will happen to any of you, I promise.”

Tony looked over at Stephen, his jovial nature gone and replaced by fierce determination and not a little anger towards Thor at how frightened Hela and even Loki himself were of him. The genius had seen a glimpse of Thor’s darker nature when he’d been manhandled by the God himself; what in the world had Thor done to Loki and his kids to make them so scared of him? It hadn’t escaped Tony’s notice that Loki’s sons were just as shaken as both their little sister and their parent. Thinking furiously for a moment, Tony nodded mentally before he began speaking.

“Babe, please strengthen the wards around the compound to make certain that no one outside of this place can get a read on the magic from Loki or any of his kids. Reinforce the panic room and make it so that it would take the power of three Reapers COMBINED to forcefully get through the wards. Craig,” He turned to the sniper, who stood from his seat with his back ramrod straight and his attention focused solely on the genius. “Make sure Ulysses gets the same instructions I’m about to give you-- the moment you get to the Spire, initiate the ‘Pillow Fort’ Protocol. That will put the defenses in the Compound on standby. On the slim possibility that Thor shows up here asking for help, up the level to ‘Blanket Fort’. The defenses will immediately come online and start revving up, but they won’t actively engage. Should he leave peacefully, knock it back down to ‘Pillow Fort’. However, if the situation turns hostile on his end in any way, I want you to immediately initiate the ‘Containment Bubble’ protocol. Every defense mechanism in this place with come online, and that includes the new additions you, ‘Ses, and Rhodoy agreed on the other day. FRIDAY will send the activation codes to your tablets for all three-- do NOT hesitate to use them.” The sniper gave a sharp nod, grabbed up his mug of coffee and summoned a corridor to the Spire.

Sleipnir, Jörmungandr, and Fenrir were in their own little huddle, the two elder brothers holding the younger close as he shook and cried as well. Slei and Jör looked at each other, fighting back their own fear and anxiety at the prospect of their ‘uncle’ being so close for the sake of their little brother, though they were genuinely afraid as well. Knowing that their parent was as frightened did not make their fears any less. The trio was startled when they were suddenly joined by several others-- Peter, Wade, and even Rem surrounded them to provide their own comfort.
“Don’t worry, we won’t let him take you guys away.” Peter declared resolutely, impulsively hugging the nearest body to him, which ended up being Jör. The brown-eyed teenager nuzzled him reassuringly, giving him a gentle squeeze, determination in his eyes.

“And on the off chance that he dares to try, I can always see if it’s possible to kill a god,” Wade added, a dark glint in his eye at the thought of anyone hurting the frightened teens in front of him. The fact that Sleí and Jör were actually much older than him was quickly shut down and completely ignored. Seeing their fear invoked his protective nature, the mercenary’s mind already jumping to potential ways to end Thor even as he reached out, giving each a quick hug.

Rem nodded in agreement, the protective instincts within the mutant screaming at him to keep them safe and protected from any sort of harm. Ignoring the pressing emotions of fear, pain, and anger that hammered on his mental shields, the redhead instead focused on helping to soothe the fright that flowed so strongly through his friends. These were part of the ones who had taken him in, nurtured him, encouraged him, and loved him without asking for anything in return. Over the past two weeks, he had gotten a chance to meet and interact with everyone living in the Compound, and a few others as well.

Despite his initial reservations and fears, they had been nothing but kind and compassionate, and the outpouring of support from them all had thrown the mutant off balance for a while. For the first time in his life, Rem found himself being truly accepted as he was, no ridicule or debasing because of his past as a thief. In fact, when he had told Minowa, the Dragonborn had arched an eyebrow and replied with, “I am the **Guildmaster** of the Thieves’ Guild in my world, not to mention the Listener of the Dark Brotherhood, the most feared group of assassins on Nirn. I killed the Emperor of the Imperial Empire on his own ship and managed to remain completely undetected the entire time. Not a single one of the Reapers are innocent, and you should not feel any guilt for being the same.”

It was equally amazing to him to not be labeled as a ‘whore’ or ‘slut’ as Warren had so frequently called him due to his tendency to seek out physical comfort. Never mind that it was less about sex and more about keeping nightmares away, the winged mutant had made his opinion on how dirty and slutty the redhead was known quite well, few in the X-Men coming to his defense since they already believed the worst of him without even knowing him. If it hadn’t been for Logan, Rem didn’t know how long he would have remained there being belittled and shamed for things beyond his control. With getting to know both the New Avengers, along with the Bartons, the Keeners, and Peter, along with Bruce Banner, he could now confidently call each and every one of them a friend. However, the Pavus husbands, in particular, ended up with a special place in the redhead’s heart.

Rem was not surprised that his nightmares returned with a vengeance after Wade left for a few days to tie up some loose ends before moving to the Compound permanently. His sleep was disturbed night after night, though when a particularly bad dream had him screaming while he thrashed about on the bed, he had been awoken by voices calling his name. Seeing Dorian and Zevrael there in
their nightclothes, Rem had stammered out a quick apology for waking them, wiping his eyes hurriedly with the back of his hand. He hoped that they wouldn’t be angry as some of his former team had been when he woke them during his night terrors. Finding himself embraced tightly by Dorian while Zevrael stroked his back and hair, the teen had been grateful and relieved when the pair encouraged him to talk about what had terrified him in his sleep instead of telling him to shut up as Bobby and Warren had told him to so many times. They listened without censure, staying there until Rem was fully calmed down. The most amazing thing was that when he hesitated after Zevrael asked him gently if he was able to go back to sleep now and Rem shook his head before admitting to the older men that his nightmares generally were worse when he slept alone, Dorian and Zevrael had invited him to sleep in their bed if he wanted, both now and in the future. Unlike Warren, the duo didn’t even bat an eye at his need for physical comfort, already knowing Rem well enough to know that it was by no means a sexual thing that had him seeking out someone to share a bed with but the need to feel safe and cared about. For the first time in longer than Rem could remember since his time as an X-Men, he had slept with no nightmares, waking to find himself curled up against Dorian and using him as a pillow with Zevrael nestled beside his husband peacefully.

They had been the ones to sit with and comfort him as Stephen and Tony applied their solution to help with his mutation. The soulmates had explained the entire process in detail beforehand to alleviate his fears— they would layer several smaller binding spells one on top of another, only stopping once Rem gave them the okay. They would then weave another enchantment around the binding spells that would lock the whole thing in place. Unlocking it would take the combined magic of both Tony and Stephen, and a failsafe was built in so it had to be done without any kind of outside coercion. The teenager had agreed wholeheartedly with the plan, making an off-handed comment about how it was better than what he’d had before. The remark had sparked another conversation with Dorian and Zev later, and Rem felt safe enough to open up to them fully about what he had lived through and experienced. It was only the presence of Zevrael that kept the pyromancer from torching something in his ire, though the fact that Rem needed their comfort at the moment also helped a great deal. When Remy told them about his abduction by the evil mutant known as Magneto and the trial that Magneto had organized for him in Antarctica, his gaze had dropped and his lower lip had quivered, his lean arms wrapping around himself as he continued speaking. The memory of how those who were supposed to be his team had acted during that farce of a trial and their subsequent abandonment of Rem in the frozen tundra brought forth silent tears that flowed down the teen’s face, a sight which broke the hearts of both men as they listened. When they enquired further about the massacre, he had told them about being tricked, and how he had tried desperately to stop the mass murdering that was being carried out only to be stabbed deeply by Sabertooth, brutally and sadistically violated by the much stronger, larger, and older mutant, and then left to die. The pain on Rem’s face made it clear that even though he truly was not to blame, he harbored guilt and shame over the whole ordeal. Not just for being tricked into leading nearly all of the Morlocks to their deaths but also because of what Sabertooth had done to him when he wasn’t able to defend himself from the violent man. Neither Dorian nor Zavrael missed how Rem’s voice had wavered when he mentioned that Sabertooth showed up every once in a while or his lowered gaze as the teen shuddered, tightening his grip on himself when asked if Sabertooth had hurt him more than just that one time in the tunnel before he slowly nodded.

What Rem didn’t realize at the moment though was that while the duo had been calm and supportive about the whole thing on the outside, in truth both Dorian and Zevrael were practically incandescent with white-hot rage. Rem had been given no chance to defend himself, despite having
been a victim in the whole massacre as well. The actions of the X-Men had left them stunned and disgusted; the knowledge that a sadistic, feral mutant had been sexually assaulting Rem for years enraged the bonded pair. A single glance to each other over the head of the silently weeping teen they were holding close was all the communication that was needed to come to a decision. No one was going to hurt the young man in their arms again. He had been denied justice and closure for so long… and both men were absolutely willing to play judge, jury, and executioner if it meant Rem would finally have some peace of mind.

As the redhead pressed himself against Sleipnir to comfort him with a gentle embrace, Rem was suddenly struck with the realization that he was able to reach out to comfort someone without fear of being pushed away, mocked, or belittled. A breath of relief rushed past his lips and his entire being felt like a great weight had been lifted from it. Their strength and love had made him strong in turn. Now he could be strong for the ones that had come to mean so much to him.

Tony shot a brilliant, relieved smile towards the supportive group hug before turning back to the other adults. His gaze found Minowa and the genius was alarmed when he saw the black beginning to bleed into her sclera. “Minowa!” He barked, causing the other adults to jump at the suddenness of his tone. The Dragonborn’s eyes snapped towards him, barely contained fury in every line of her body. Tony summoned up a corridor and pointed to it. “Outside training yard-- go work it off.” The woman nodded sharply and stalked through the corridor without a word, something Tony was infinitely grateful for. There was no guarantee that Minowa was currently in full control of her Thu’um, and a single word had the potential to send a grown adult flying.

Bridget let out a long breath of relief as the corridor closed, a modicum of tension falling away from her. “I think we should take a little while to decompress and meet back here before the press conference at three,” she suggested, seeing the tension in everyone as she glanced around the room.

“I agree with Bridget-- and don’t be late getting back here! Pepper will have our heads if we keep her waiting!” Tony reminded them before leading Stephen away towards his lab.

Zevrael and Dorian made to leave as well but paused when Rem didn’t make a move to do the same, the teen’s eyes closed as he briefly winced at the strong emotions pressing against his mental shields. “Rem? You okay?” The elf approached him with worry in his eyes, his husband hot on his heels.

The genuine concern from the two adults brought a smile to the redhead’s face. “Rem-- I mean, I’m okay. I just need a few minutes,” he assured them sincerely.

The Pavus men nodded and pulled the teen into a brief hug. “You know where to find us if you need us, okay?” Dorian gently tugged a lock of Rem’s fiery hair.
Despite the feeling of fear still lurking in the corners of his mind, Rem smiled at the affection from the two men and nodded. He watched as they departed as well before leaning against the counter and closing his red and black eyes again to organize his thoughts. After ten minutes they opened again and the teen glanced over at the clock built into the oven. His brow furrowed as he considered something. “Miss FRIDAY,” He finally called to the ceiling, “Could you please pull up a list of ingredients we have in stock for cooking?”

The AI chirped an affirmative and a screen above the counter turned on to display the information Rem had requested. He browsed the list for a few minutes before turning his attention back to FRIDAY. “Miss FRIDAY, could you narrow this list down to just the ingredients necessary to make a meat lasagna and garlic bread?”

“Would you like a recipe as well?”

Rem smiled and shook his head in reply. “I’ll be fine with just the ingredients, ma’am. Could you help me find them please?” he requested softly.

The AI happily agreed and within a few minutes, the mutant had everything he needed to make the lasagna laid out before him. He quickly fell into the rhythm of prepping the food and spreading sauce along the bottom of the pan. Without realizing it, Rem began to hum softly as he moved from one counter to the next, completely focused on the task at hand. The humming soon became singing as the teenager indulged in one of his favorite drinking songs that never failed to get a laugh out of people. Halfway through he realized someone was singing the harmony during the chorus and he glanced over to see Aria sitting at the counter watching him, a bright grin on her face as she sang along. Despite his initial embarrassment at being caught unaware, he could easily admit to himself that the woman had an amazing voice that seemed to blend well with his.

As they finished the song together, Aria laughed with delight and clapped her hands. “Bravo, Rem! Oh, I’m so glad that song exists here as well!” Seeing the curious look the redhead was giving her the brunette quickly explained with a sad smile, “The world my husbands and I come from... It has limited music to choose from... It has limited music to choose from. One of the reasons I’m so grateful to be a Reaper is being able to go to different worlds and experience the selection they have to offer.” She closed her eyes for a moment. “The abundance of green is also a plus...” She murmured under her breath, just loud enough for the mutant to hear. “Enough about that though. You have a wonderful voice, hon.” Rem blushed in reply as he layered the noodles in the dish in front of him. Aria tilted her head in consideration before smiling again. “You know there’s a music room here, right?” The mutant perked up in curiosity and the woman continued. “Oh yes, and if you want a particular instrument I could bring it from the Nexus. I, admittedly, am a bit of a collector.”

The mutant arched an eyebrow in amusement. “You plan on moving an entire grand piano?” he questioned with a grin.
That caused the woman to break out in bell-like laughter. “Fortunately, the Hall has one of those already. Apparently, it belonged to Maria Stark.” Seeing the doubtful look on Rem’s face she quickly reassured him. “Trust me hon, Tony wouldn’t mind if you used it. Did you know he actually can play two instruments? Piano and violin. Sometimes he goes in there to play when he gets really stressed out. He realized that music is a much better coping mechanism than drinking one’s self under the table.” She gracefully rose from her seat to come around the other side of the counter. “Would you like help with prep? I’ll leave putting everything together in your hands, but I can prep ingredients.”

Rem paused for a moment, thinking and mentally matching timetables. “Actually, do you know how to make garlic bread?” The woman nodded with an excited spark in her eyes. She started on that, and the two engaged in easy chatter about music preferences. In the lull that occurred while waiting to take the pasta out so the bread could be put in, Remy softly asked, “Mrs. Boone, what’s your world like?”

The brunette turned her purple-blue eyes to him, a sad, faraway look in them. She was quiet for a few seconds before answering. “You know how Stark Industries used to have a weapons division that Tony shut down?” Getting a nod, she told him with absolute certainty in her voice, “Our world is what this one would have become eventually if he hadn’t done that.” She looked straight ahead again as she continued to speak. “Keep in mind, timelines don’t line up between worlds. Remember that while I’m telling you this. In the aftermath of World War 2, our worlds took very different paths. In mine, scientists began utilizing nuclear energy to create and power amazing things. What wasn’t invented until at least 2023 was the transistor.” Seeing the realization flash across Rem’s face she nodded. “Our world had nuclear energy powering most of our devices. At least… it did.” She took a moment to straighten the timeline in her head before continuing. “Dwindling resources caused global tension and in winter of 2066, a Communist-controlled China invaded Anchorage, Alaska to try and commandeer the oil pipeline. The USA drove them back… but the peace didn’t last long. On October 23rd, 2077… The Great War happened.” Her eyes took on a thousand-yard stare for a few seconds. “No one is sure who hit the button first-- not even now-- but the result was undeniable. On October 23rd, the population of the world was about 10 billion people.” She took a deep breath to steady herself. “By that same date, the year following… it was 2 million at most. The entire Northern hemisphere was reduced to an irradiated, fiery, post-apocalyptic hellscape.”

The red and black eyes of the mutant were wide and filled with horror at the thought of the cataclysmic destruction and gargantuan death toll. Over 9 billion people dead almost all at once… “Then… how did you survive?” He asked softly, on the edge of his metaphorical seat.

The woman shot Rem a soft smile. “Because I was born sometime in 2246-- it’s been about 200 years since the bombs dropped. Most of the radiation has dispersed, although there’s still danger.” A frown split her face for a moment. “There’s an area outside of Boston that you wouldn’t dare go into without protective gear if you don’t want to be cooked from the inside within the hour.” She waved her hand dismissively. “My husbands and I are from the other end of the country though. The Mojave Wasteland, just outside of Vegas.” She paused for a moment before continuing slowly.
“At least, they are. Me? I’m… not sure. Don’t remember.”

Rem looked over at Aria and was taken aback by the look of sadness on her face. “You don’t know where you’re from? Why not?”

“I was a Courier, someone who ran messages and packages back and forth from places. I was assigned to bring a package to New Vegas— that’s what Las Vegas became after the war, but I was waylaid by someone who was working against the intended recipient. He… he took more than that package from me that night.” She raised a surprisingly steady hand to the headband that was a constant in her outfit and slowly pulled it off, revealing a vicious, circular scar on her forehead. “He meant to take my life that night, but what he ended up taking was infinitely more precious… The 9mm bullet he popped in my head at almost point-blank range took my memories.” Seeing the pale face Rem was sporting she quickly covered the scar again. “I’m damn lucky I survived that night, and while I wish I knew who I was back then, I’m grateful to have at least walked away still breathing.”

“I don’t know who I am, either.” Rem blurted out, then he blushed when Aria looked over at him, startled. “I was stolen from a hospital as a newborn. I don’t know who my parents were, or if they’re even still around.” He swallowed and dropped his eyes to the floor. “I don’t even know if I was born or created.”

There was a moment of silence before Aria moved and pulled the redhead into a comforting hug, resting his head on her shoulder. “No matter your origins, you’re here now, and we love you just the way you are.” She gave him a squeeze before pulling away and gently tugging a lock of his fiery tresses. “Never forget that, okay hon?”

Rem nodded, swallowing around the lump in his throat. It still stunned him sometimes how accepting and unconditionally supportive the people at the Compound were. They fell into an easy silence for a few minutes before Aria started singing again, and this time, Rem was more than willing to join in. Maybe it was the fact that they shared similar experiences, maybe it was the woman’s calm, yet no less positive presence that put him at ease enough to do so. Whatever the reason, the mutant was happy to have someone he could share this side of himself with without fear of criticism.

Before too long, the counter had two large pans of meat lasagna and a basket full of slices of garlic bread sitting on them, filling the common room kitchen with a heavenly smell. Aria quickly retrieved plates, silverware, and napkins while Remy gathered a variety of drinks. Rem asked for FRIDAY to call everyone to the Common room while the duo set the table and arranged the drinks on the counter.

After 15 seconds, a corridor opened up and admitted Craig and Ulysses. They blinked at the spread
and looked to Aria, knowing she had a fondness for cooking. Their wife gave them a massive grin and shook her head negative before pointing to Rem. Craig blinked in shock again before giving the teen a smile and pulling him into a one-armed hug and a heartfelt thanks. ‘Ses removed his mask and set it on the counter before shooting a thankful smile at Rem as well, grabbing his shoulder gently with a ‘thank you’ of his own. Rem had been around the man long enough to know that physical affection from the quiet man was rare, so the action made him smile widely. The elevator opened to admit the Bartons and the kids squealed with delight, running to give Rem a hug once told he was responsible. Laura pressed a kiss to the top of his head as the Keeners entered, and as she sat Holly repeated the action as Hannah hugged him as well. Harley grinned with delight and fist bumped the teen. A loud and enthusiastic whoop announced the arrival of Wade, Peter, Slei, and Jör, and the merc skipped over to the table loudly proclaiming how good Rem’s food was and how excited he was to be able to enjoy it. Peter made a quick detour to snuggle against the redhead and thank him before he sat next to Sleipnir and Jör, who also expressed their appreciation. Loki popped into being with Hela and Fenrir, his son making an immediate beeline for the table at the smell of good food while the little girl immediately tackled Rem in a hug, babbling her thanks. Loki gave the teen a brief hug and a whispered thank you before sitting with his two youngest. Bruce and Minowa showed up hand-in-hand (which prompted several grins and knowing looks), and the scientist nodded his thanks with a smile while the Dragonborn said something in Dovahzul that was quickly translated to something akin to ‘your offering is most appreciated and will be enjoyed immensely’.

Dorian and Zevrael exited from a corridor a minute later and pulled the teen into an enormous hug. “You know you didn’t need to do this for us, right?” Zevrael asked him, a tiny amount of worry in his eyes. He and Dorian knew that one behavior that popped up in cases like this was the person in question feeling like they needed to earn their keep or repay the person or people who helped them for their aid. They wanted to make sure that Rem hadn’t fallen into the same mentality, especially since they were still learning some of the ingrained behaviors in the teenager.

The mutant smiled at the husbands and squeezed them back before replying. “I find cooking relaxing, and I’m apparently good at it. I wanted to do this for everyone,” he assured them sincerely.

His words helped the Pavus men relax and they both planted a kiss on his head before thanking him and sitting as well, seeing how Rem blushed, though his smile grew. Rem and Aria began serving the food as they waited for the last two people to show up, and they were passing the garlic bread around when a portal opened up to admit Tony and Stephen.

The genius took two steps into the room before stopping so suddenly that Stephen nearly ran into him as Tony stood there breathing in the scent of the lasagna, frozen for a moment as a memory rushed over him suddenly of himself as a child with his mother as she made him his favorite for his 5th birthday. He looked towards Aria, who shook her head slowly before she then proceeded to point to Rem again.

Rem gave the soulmates a smile, but he was then confused when tears welled up in Tony’s eyes.
and the genius had to bury his face in Stephen’s chest for a few seconds. Stephen looked just as lost until Tony mumbled something to him that made a look of understanding and sadness cross his face. He gave the now worried mutant a gentle smile and explained, “He said it smells just like the lasagna Maria used to make when he was young.”

Seeing the confused look on the teen’s face, Loki stood from his seat close to the redhead and leaned in to explain, speaking softly. “Maria was his mother. His father, Howard, was an unmitigated bastard through and through, but from what I’ve heard of Maria she was a woman of exceptional caliber, someone I would have been happy to have as a parent. Anthony loved her very much.”

Rem was silent for a moment as he thought before approaching Tony and Stephen slowly. The genius pulled himself away from Stephen and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand before turning a brilliant smile to the redhead, one the mutant returned a little shyly before hugging Tony, one of the handful of adults that he completely trusted not to hurt him. Tony quickly reciprocated and murmured ‘grazie’ in his ear, getting another, wider smile from the teen.

“Prego, Mr... I mean, Tony,” Rem replied in an equally soft voice, Italian being as easy for him to speak as English due to the many languages he had been instructed in during his training as a thief.

Tony smiled brilliantly and the trio finally moved to the table, sitting with the others who all had knowing, happy smiles of their own. Spirits were high as they dug into their meal, and more than one person expressed their awe at how delicious the food was. At one point as the meal was winding down, Laura asked for the recipe so she could try to make it herself one day. Rem blinked and tilted his head in thought. “It’s not written down. It’s in my head, I just…” he flapped his wrist for a moment dismissively. “I find it easier than trying to figure out the weird numbers are with a slash between them are supposed to be.”

The conversation Tony and Stephen had been having came to a sudden, grinding halt as Tony turned his attention to Rem, a completely stunned look on his face. “Do you mean fractions??”

“Is that what they’re called?” The mutant shrugged, completely unconcerned as he took a bite of lasagna and chewed it before swallowing. “They were never covered in my training.”

A feeling of unease began to settle in Tony. “Do you mean school??” The genius’ mind was whirling a mile a minute trying to figure out what the hell kind of school didn’t teach such a simple mathematical concept.

Rem shook his head as he reached for his drink, completely unaware of Tony’s conundrum. “No,
“lessons”. Jean Luc had me learning the skills involved in thievery from the moment I came to stay with him. My first assigned theft was only two weeks later and if I didn’t pass, I’d have been punished-- maybe even kicked out.”

Stephen shot his soulmate an extremely concerned look before looking back at the redhead. “But what about school? Subjects like science, math, English, history…?”

“Jean Luc never sent me to a school of any kind. I had to earn my keep, after all, and if I wasn’t doing assignments I was training. It’s why I never learned those board games that the X-Men liked to play- uh, like Monopoly and stuff like that. I owed Jean Luc for getting me off the street so I had to be useful.”

There were a few moments of absolute silence. Then Tony was on his feet, stalking towards the elevator while yelling to FRIDAY to ‘find the fuckwad responsible for this bullshit and get me his name, date of birth, social security number, and any banking information you can find’. Stephen surged to his feet to catch up with the brunette, yelling all the while ‘Tony, no’, and the man yelled back ‘Tony YES’.

Rem looked at the others around the table, complete confusion in his red and black eyes. “Was it something I said? I was at the top of my class when I graduated in the Guild.”

Wade quickly positioned himself behind the mutant and rubbed his shoulders as he soothed the redhead. “You did indeed, and you should be very proud of that.” The merc shot the rest of the table a sharp look that clearly conveyed his displeasure at their reactions and demanded silence further on. “Rem, go up to my room and take a breather. I’m gonna go talk to Tony and keep him from attempting to financially ruin the entirety of the Thieves’ Guild in one fell swoop.”

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The sudden knock on Wade’s door pulled Rem’s attention away from the window he’d been staring out of, and he turned to see Tony standing in the doorway. The man looked sheepish and apologetic, and he gave the teen a hesitant smile. ‘Hey. Can I come in?’ The teen gave a nod and the brunette entered, leaning against the wall near Rem, but not approaching immediately. “Wade made me aware that my behavior earlier upset you.” He paused for a moment, dropping his eyes to the floor. “It was never my intention, I promise. I’m sorry that I worried you and made you think I was angry at you. I swear, I wasn’t then, and I’m not now.” Tony took a moment to organize his thoughts before continuing. “Making sure kids are educated… I’ve always believed that’s one of the most important things in the world. Finding out that someone I care about has had such a vital thing kept from them? It… It may not seem rational, but it feels like I failed, somehow. Like I’m not trying hard enough if such a thing has escaped my notice for so long.” He looked out the window and across the ground of the Compound, missing the look Rem was giving him. “It also
bothers me that… Rem, you were with the X-Men for years. How did none of them pick up on it?"

“Because they didn’t bother talking to Rem-- to me, beyond giving me mission details, complaining about my nightmares, and the snide remarks from Warren.” The mutant admitted in a small voice. “‘M not a whore, no matter what he thinks…” He whispered under his breath, but still loud enough that Tony caught it.

The genius had to pause to take a few deep breaths before replying. “No, Rem. You absolutely are not.” He told the teen with such conviction that it stunned the redhead. Without wasting a second, he straightened and approached Rem, pulling him into a comforting hug once he was close enough. “And don’t worry about the schooling thing-- we’ll get something worked out, I promise. Whether you want to do home-schooling, go to a public or even a private school-- whatever you decide, we’ll make it happen, okay? We’re not going to throw you to the wolves like they did.” Tony’s heart swelled when he felt the teen return the hug and nod against him, and after a few seconds, he moved back a bit to tousle the fiery locks on Rem’s head, earning himself a small smile at the gesture. ‘It’s amazing,’ Tony thought to himself as they turned back to the window, his arm slung over Rem’s shoulders with the mutant leaning into the touch, ‘despite everything life has thrown at him, all the hurt, pain, and betrayal, Rem has such a big heart and capacity for love. I’m glad he has a second chance at life-- it’s time for someone to be in his corner, for once.’

Chapter End Notes

CHOO CHOO, all aboard the feels train!! Next stop, plotsville! No, seriously, this chapter was SO MUCH FEELS. I promise interesting stuff will happen next chapter with slightly less fluff, feels, and whump.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Tony takes to the stage for the first time since Siberia, and the New Avengers make their first press appearance! Peter is feeling a little neglected, but Tony and Stephen are here to help him feel better! Rem realizes he doesn't need vices if his support base is good.

(Also an inside look into the life of former Inquisitor Zevrael Lavellan)

((Foreshadowing for the one-shot as well.))

Chapter Notes

FINALLY! We're done! We did it! A new chapter for you all, 8,500 words!! Longest chapter to date! Thank you all so much for your time and patience!! We hope you enjoy this one, and the one-shot will be posted hot on its' heels!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony smiled as he cast his eyes around the group in front of him, seeing how they were all standing and watching him with eager anticipation. “Alright, this is it, guys-- the New Avengers are finally making an appearance! Is everyone ready?”

Minowa nodded sharply, casting her eyes briefly to the door leading to the stage set up beyond it. They had all decided that an outdoors open panel style conference would be preferable to any other conference method. The stage had been placed directly next to the outside training field so they would be able to showcase their skills if anyone asked for a demonstration. The area they were waiting in was essentially a large, luxurious trailer that had been firmly attached to the stage. “We’re just waiting on Dorian and Rem. The Boone trio are currently making sure the defenses are on standby, just in case-- they'll be back momentarily. Did you complete Rem's mask, Zeymahi ?” She turned her face back towards him, the light catching the metal plates of her armor and making them gleam slightly. She had dubbed the suit the ‘Obsidian Dragoon’ armor, and several variations were being considered between herself and Tony. The current one was meant to be taken into battle primarily, decked out with several features of an offensive nature. The mask covering her face would also help focus and direct her Thu’um so any potential collateral damage would be minimized.

Tony nodded and held his hands out, a metal case materializing out of nowhere and dropping into his hands. “Right before we got called to lunch, actually.”
“It has all the spells he requested, plus a few more.” Stephen continued from his place at Tony’s side. He was dressed in his robes with Levi hung over his shoulders. The cloak was visibly quivering with excitement, and the sorcerer was trying to soothe the relic by rubbing the collar. “It will change his appearance enough so he’ll look like a different person, especially his eyes, and will scramble his voice so it sounds almost synthetic. It’s also enchanted so it can be taken off only by certain people, like the Reapers, and only if there’s no outside coercion involved.”

“I added something of my own to it.” The group turned to look at Loki, who was leaning against the wall with a small smile of his own. “On the off chance he gets separated from us and is unable to contact us, he has a tracker he can activate with a word. If the enchantment detects that he’s unconscious or injured badly enough that he can’t do it himself, it will turn on automatically.”

A relieved sigh escaped Zevrael at the news. “That’s comforting to know. Thank you for thinking of that, Loki.” The god of mischief dipped his head with a dismissive wave, even as his cheeks flushed from the thanks.

Bridget nodded with a big smile while making her staff, a beautiful twining length of polished elder wood with a perfectly circular sphere of unblemished moonstone encased at the top, was securely strapped to her back as she spoke. “You all did a good job! I was worried about him being recognized, but I see now my fear was unfounded.” The restoration master had a set of white robes draped around her body that transitioned from knee-length in the front to ankle-length behind her. The piece was covered in gold and purple accents, the purple parts containing runes stitched into them in a thread just a shade or two darker. A hood covered her head as well, and the inside had enchantments woven into it that would help her spot magical wounds as well as physical.

The sound of footsteps pulled their attention to the door, and Dorian led Rem through a moment later. The teen was now dressed in a tight black bodysuit, a black coat similar to his original tan one draped around his body. The sleeves had been cut short and a slit ran up the center of the back to allow for freedom of movement. A pair of black fingerless gloves covered his hands to just above his wrists to allow for free use of his fingers to throw things. A pair of black pants hung slightly loose around his legs, tucked into mid-thigh heavy black boots. Two pouches sat on his thighs, enchanted to refill the contents so they were never-ending. One held emergency potions, the other containing several shurikens.

The issue regarding Rem’s weapon of choice, playing cards charged with kinetic energy, lay in how recognizable his style was. It was easily solved when they figured out that the mutant could use practically any throwing weapon. The other issue was the magenta glow that accompanied the charge. After serious brainstorming between Stephen, Tony, and Loki, it was Tony that came up with a rather inventive solution. The result-- shurikens enchanted so that magenta glow that normally accompanied his powers would be changed to glow a specific color depending on the secondary effect that would be set off. So far the teen had shurikens that could explode, freeze, electrocute, poison, release smoke, and set fire to things.
Whiskey brown eyes sparkled with delight as Tony stepped up to the duo. “Hey Rem, looking good! I know it’s not the best outfit, but your real one is still in the works, so this will have to do for now. Is that okay?”

Rem smiled gratefully at the man and nodded. “It’s fine, Tony. I would be happy with just this… but my hair and eyes are still…” He trailed off, absentmindedly reaching up to play with a strand of his fiery red tresses.

“We’ve got that covered,” Tony announced and handed the case out to Rem, who took it with an intrigued look on his face. He lifted the lid and pulled out a mask, not unlike the one the Winter Soldier had seemed to favor. Seeing the confused look he was getting, the genius gestured for the teen to put it on.

Still slightly befuddled, Rem did so and he felt a tingling sensation pass over him. Whatever had happened prompted a startled noise to escape the group, and he looked to the genius for an explanation. The Reaper waved his hand to summon a mirror, and Rem gasped at what he saw. His normally red hair was now a deep brown and pulled back in a short ponytail, and startled icy blue eyes stared back from his reflection. His facial features had also been altered slightly, but it was enough that the mutant didn’t recognize the person in the mirror. He quickly pulled the mask off, and the features immediately changed back. “Incredible…” He murmured in awe at the mask before quickly pulling it back on. “Thank you, Tony.” He directed the words to the genius, who banished the mirror away. He was momentarily startled to hear the smooth, deep synthetic voice that escaped him, but he quickly chalked it up to another feature of the mask.

Tony waved his hand and opened his mouth as if to dismiss the thanks before pausing, which caught the attention of the Reapers. After a second or two, Tony slowly lowered his hand, gave the teen a smile and replied sincerely, “You’re welcome, Rem.”

Stephen was confused at the looks of pride and joy the Reapers graced his soulmate with but before he could ask, Pepper pushed the door of the large trailer they were in open, stepping inside and shutting it firmly. “Alright, the equipment is set up and the press is here. We’ll go on in two minutes, alright Tony?” She turned to Tony with a smile, briefly looking around at all of them.

“Ah, there they are! Looking good, guys!”

Aria was now dressed in a brown leather bodice and mid-thigh-length skirt, a short-sleeved duster draped around her body that ended midway down her calves. A decorative belt sat snugly around her waist, her twin pistols holstered to it. A pair of leather boots were laced up to just above her knees with only the barest hint of a heel. The brown gloves on her hands had several runic circles engraved into the palms that would allow for control of her sonokinesis that would bring about
new applications. Craig was wearing the most normal looking thing out of all of them, very similar to his original outfit in style but with a few upgrades. The red beret still sat perched on his head, but the shades he was wearing had been upgraded to zoom in on further targets and granted almost pinpoint accuracy. He could also flip through several variations of sight including heat, night, and magnetic fields. Tony and Stephen had also engraved runes into the arms to allow for detection of magical signatures. His rifle remained strapped tightly to his back but two combat knives had also been sheathed to his thighs. Ulysses’ duster had been exchanged for a sleeveless jacket and black scarf. Not an inch of his skin could be seen past the black shirt, pants, boots, and gloves that he wore. Only his eyes and the top of his head were visible, his nose and mouth still covered by a mask, though it was far more advanced than the one he had worn before. A special helmet could be activated at any time that would mold itself over his head and was equipped with the same features as Craig’s glasses.

The trio approached Tony, Aria with an enormous grin, Craig with a small smile, and Ulysses with the corners of his eyes crinkled to indicate a smile of his own. “Thanks, Tony! The defenses are armed, we’re ready to go!”

The genius nodded before turning back to Pepper, who was watching them with an aura of calm confidence. “After you, Ms. Potts!” He gestured dramatically to the door to the stage, and the woman gave a soft chuckle as she brushed past him. Tony started to follow before pausing and turning back to the team, an excited grin on his face. “Let’s make an entrance, guys.” The team grinned in reply, giving him a thumbs up. They were going to be entering one by one, or in groups in the case of the Pavus men and the Boone trio. Tony had just given them carte-blanche permission to enter in any way they saw fit, and ideas were already running in a few of their heads. Tony turned and left the trailer, closing the door behind him with the grin still stretched across his face.

Pepper glanced over at him with a pleased smile on her face. “They’re really good for you, you know.” She said softly, drawing the genius’ attention. “I always had misgivings about your old team-- they used you as a scapegoat and Rogers… well, no need to rehash that now.” She stopped right before the entrance to the stage and turned to give him a hug. “I’m glad you’re happy now.” She murmured before pulling away.

Whiskey brown eyes sparkled with joy as Tony nodded. “Yeah, Pep. I am happy.” It was said with conviction and confidence, and the genius could say with absolute certainty that it was the truth.

The redhead smiled and turned to the flap leading towards the stage. “I know you are.” Without another word, she pushed it open and stepped onto the stage outside.

Upon seeing her the various members of the press rose to their feet and began calling out questions, cameras flashing as the woman stepped up to the podium. The stage also had a long table with several microphones set up for the panel style interview that would occur. There was a
large area set up in front of the podium as well, although the press wasn’t sure what it was for yet. Pepper gazed out at the reporters before holding up her hand to call for silence, and the people quickly quieted. “Good afternoon everyone,” she began, her voice easily carrying over the group. “Thank you all for joining us. I know you’ve all been eagerly anticipating this event for some time, and Stark Industries is appreciative of your willingness to wait and allow Mr. Stark time to recover from his injuries. Your patience is rewarded today. Ladies and gentlemen, for the first time in three months, I give you Tony Stark.”

The flap was thrown open and Tony strode out, a grin on his face as the press exploded in a cacophony of noise, flashes, and cheers. Tony waved to them all as he reached the podium, Pepper easily stepping back to allow for the genius to take her place. “Hello, world!” He called out as the noise finally died down. “I know you all have several questions regarding the events of the last few months, my recovery, the future of the accords, Stark Industries, and the Avengers, and whatever else your minds have conjured up. Rest assured, we’ll do our best to answer any and all questions that pop up! We do reserve the right to not answer though, so keep that in mind.”

He looked out at the sea of cameras and reporters, a smile quirking at his lips. “First, I want to assure you all, and the world, that I’ve recovered completely from my injuries and will be resuming my duties as Iron Man in short order. However, there are those from the original roster--while not being of the Rogues-- who will not be joining us on the field. First and foremost, Lieutenant Colonel James Rhodes has decided to stay to the sidelines as a reserve member in a fighting capacity. Instead, he will be in charge of missions that involve rescue operations and disaster relief.” Honestly, it had come as a shock when Rhodey had requested such. When asked why, the man had explained that ‘this way, you can focus on protecting the world from threats and preparing for what’s coming, and I can help you not spread yourself too thin.’ Tony had agreed with his reasoning but made his best friend promise to call on them if needed, a stipulation the man had wholeheartedly agreed to. “Secondly, Doctor Bruce Banner will be a reserve Avenger only, and will instead be taking on the role of Director of the new Medical Technology R&D department of Stark Industries. Along that same note, Vision has also stepped down to a reserve only. He will be assisting Dr. Banner in his research at SI, and we look forward to having both of them on our staff.”

Vision had shown up three days before the conference with his decision, along with a Ph.D. in bioengineering from Harvard. He had admitted to Tony that he had been in need of some distance and time to himself after what Maximoff had done to him, although he didn’t want to pull away from the Avengers entirely. By working with Bruce, he could stay close by and put his new degree to good use. When Tony asked him how he had managed to achieve his Ph.D. so quickly, the android had simply given him a mysterious smile and floated off. Tony didn’t think about it too hard, especially after finding out he had ‘graduated’ with the highest honors. Even if he wasn’t fighting alongside them, Vision was staying close. The genius could easily accept that.

“With that being said, I’m sure you all are wondering about the future of the Avengers.” Several nods came from the crowd along with a few murmurs of agreement. “Well, wonder no longer. After a long and extremely thorough vetting process, a new team has been assembled. Every member has signed the Accords and has sworn to uphold them to the fullest extent possible. Now,
I’m sure you’re all eager to meet these new members!” A rousing ‘yes’ escaped the press, causing the genius to grin with excitement. “First, I would like to announce that I will be sharing joint leadership of the new team with two others. The first is Dr. Stephen Strange, Sorcerer Supreme, and Master of the Mystic Arts.” A glowing orange portal opened to Tony’s right, prompting gasps from the reporters as Stephen stepped through, Levi billowing dramatically behind him. Tony had to suppress a smirk, and Stephen didn’t even bother hiding his as he turned and bowed to the reporters. “Questions regarding the Mystic Arts themselves or anything related to them should be directed to him during the panel interview.” The press quieted and Tony continued. He was looking forward to the next person. Knowing her, the woman’s entrance was bound to be dramatic. “Joining Stephen and myself is a woman that you’ve never met before, but I consider a trusted friend and ally.” The sound of repulsors caught his attention, and the genius grinned with delight. “Please welcome to the stage Field Commander Dragoon.”

A moment later, the Obsidian Dragoon armor shot overhead, causing the reporters to look up in shock. The Dragonborn quickly circled around to hover above the stage, the ‘wings’ of the armor flared out dramatically before landing gracefully to Tony’s left. The wings retracted before the helmet melted away, and Tony had to bite his lip when he saw the glow in the woman’s slit-pupiled eyes and the sun reflecting off her horns. She wasn’t hiding her features, proud to stand before the world as a dovah should. She placed a clawed gauntlet over her heart and bowed to them, ignoring the murmurs of shock her appearance caused. “Greetings to you all.” She called, and Tony registered the subtle use of her Thu’um to silence the group in front of her. “I am Minowa Norddahl, and I am both ecstatic and honored to be a part of the team that Anthony has gathered for the sake of protecting the world.” Her calm yet no less commanding voice washed over them, bringing with it a sense of power and pride.

Tony couldn’t help the smile that crossed his face as he turned back to the media. “Along with the two beside me, several other members have been added to the Avengers core team. First, I call to the stage Bridget Ivorsen, code-named Sentinel.” The Restoration Master swept onstage from the same entrance they had come out of, foregoing a flashy entrance of any kind. She smiled brilliantly and waved at the media, the genuine joy she radiated immediately putting the press at ease. She moved to Minowa’s left and stood relaxed at her side, the smile never leaving her face. “Now, the next group comes as a trio, their partnership making for an effective team dynamic even on their own. First, Ulysses Boone, code-named Voidstrike.” Several shadows seemed to pull away from the various points around the stage and leap to the left of Bridget, coalescing into a humanoid form. After a moment the darkness solidified into Ulysses, who stood completely still except for a brief dip of his head towards the press, who were whispering about the silent, looming figure. “A man of few words, but his talents are unparalleled… well, except by one person. Craig Boone, code-named Silent Shot.” Out of nowhere, Craig flickered into existence next to Ulysses, lips twitching for a moment at the way the reporters gasped in surprise. He gave a minimalist wave with a soft ‘hey’. Tony smirked at the two men before continuing. “Completing the trio is their lovely partner, Aria Boone, code-named Sonic Boom.” The woman in question swept on to stage from the opposite direction from where her husbands were standing and twirled before giving the press a bow, causing a ripple of laughter from the group. She planted herself next to Stephen, but a moment later Craig moved around the group and pulled her toward where he and ‘Ses were standing, planting her firmly between them.
Tony rolled his eyes. “You did that on purpose, Aria, don’t even try to deny it.”

“Guilty!”

This caused another ripple of laughter before Tony continued. “I would now like to call to the stage Dorian and Zevrael Pavus, code-named Fiendfyre and Shatterfrost.” The cry of a bird was heard and everyone looked up to see a phoenix of black fire dive towards the stage from the sky before landing next to Stephen, a moment later being joined by an icy stag with twined antlers that seemed to form from nowhere. A moment later, the fire expanded before dying off at the same time as the Halla exploded outwards into snowflakes, revealing the husbands with matching grins on their faces. “Most of you will recognize Dorian Pavus as the Avengers PR manager-in-training. Don’t worry, he’ll be able to balance both jobs well enough.”

“I should say so! Maker knows you’d be lost without me!” Dorian snarked playfully, only to yelp when Zev cuffed him.

The elf turned his head and arched an eyebrow at his husband, completely ignoring the murmurs that erupted at the sight of his pointed ears. “Behave, Vhenan .”

Dorian chuckled and grinned lovingly at the silverette. “Sorry, Amatus .”

Tony snorted in amusement at the duo, inwardly gleeful that the duo didn’t even try to hide their relationship. “I managed to wrangle up a certain merc with a mouth, or as you all might know him, Deadpool. I also happen to know he’s almost vibrating through the floor to get up here, so yes Wade, you can come up now.”

The merc immediately skipped on stage and immediately grabbed Tony, twirling him around a few times before dipping him so the genius was almost upside down vertically. “Finally! I was worried you would keep me waiting forever!” Stephen arched an eyebrow at the mercenary, and as he straightened them and let go of Tony, he sent a subtle spark at the man that made him yelp as it hit his ass. “Alright, alright! No need to get sparky, Merlin!”

Outright laughter escaped the press at the byplay, and Tony was able to continue once they quieted again. “Our last member of the New Avengers active roster is a man who, for his safety, has chosen to remain anonymous, and will only be referred to by his codename. Maelstrom, if you would?”
A shuriken with a glowing gray aura flew out of nowhere, embedding itself in the stage next to Dorian and Zevrael, who barely reacted except to grin. A moment later, the shuriken burst into smoke, and after a second or two dissipated to reveal Rem, who tucked the weapon back into his pouch while distracting the audience with a deep bow.

“There you have it, ladies and gentlemen! The active roster of the New Avengers!” Tony spread his arms and spun with a dramatic flourish that had several of the New Avengers snorting with laughter. “Give us a second to get settled, and we’ll get this interview rolling!”

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“Well, I don’t think that could have gone any better,” Pepper announced as she smiled at the New Avengers, who were spread out over the furniture in various states of relaxation. “From what I’ve seen so far, the only ones showing any kind of active disapproval are those who are against Dorian and Zevrael for their relationship.”

The elf snorted from his place in Dorian’s lap. “I have only one thing to say to those people--fenhedis lasa.”

The water Bridget had been drinking was immediately shot out her nose as she choked and laughed. “Zevrael Pavus!”

“Do I want to know?” Craig asked as he ran his fingers through Aria’s hair. They had all shed their armor, all three of them now dressed in sweatpants and t-shirts. The woman’s head was resting in his lap as she dozed, Ulysses sitting at her feet giving her a massage. It made everyone smile at the love between them. Unlike Zevrael and Dorian’s more open and passionate flaunting of their relationship, the Boone trio was softer, subtler, yet no less devoted in their adoration of each other.

Minowa was finally disengaging the Obsidian Dragoon armor, though she kept part of the gauntlets activated as well as the pieces along her back. Ever since Tony had gifted her with the suit, she was rarely seen without at least part of it engaged. The genius chalked it up to the flight capabilities--now that she had access to them, it would be nigh-on impossible to separate her from them. “I don’t believe we need to know what he said when the intent was clear enough.” The Dragonborn replied blithely as she moved to lean against a wall to observe the room.

Stephen and Tony were curled up together on one of the loveseats, the genius practically sitting in his soulmate’s lap. “What about the public, Pepper? What are they saying about us?” Stephen
asked, running his fingers through the hair of his unusually silent soulmate.

Pepper pulled up her tablet and scrolled through it for a moment. “Right now, #NewAvengersFTW is the top trending tag. From what I can see, we have 94% of the populace approval. Those who are expressing negativity are either Captain America fans, against same-sex relationships, or just looking to troll everyone else.”

“So, the standard reaction for literally anything ever!” Wade sang out as he sat on the backrest of a chair, tossing a knife in the air and deftly catching it before tossing it again.

Rem sat on a barstool not far from the main group, a furrow in his brow as he unclasped his mask and let it fall away, his features immediately shifting back to normal. Leaning on the nearby counter slightly, the mutant felt his long, red locks fall freely down his back, the teen exhaling audibly as he reached up to rub his temples where a tension headache was building. Not realizing that he was being watched, Rem grimaced slightly, knowing he needed to use his kinetic powers soon, though there was something else that needed to be taken care of first. “Si ce n’est pas une chose, c’est une autre,” he murmured, laying his forehead down on the cool wood. It was a good thing that Zevrael and Dorian were facing the other way, along with Wade, or he’d have pretty much all of the New Avengers focused on him and fussing over him-- at the moment, that was part of what was bothering Peter.

Glancing over when he saw the teenager resting his head on the counter, Tony’s brow furrowed slightly in concern when he heard Rem’s quiet words that if it wasn’t one thing, it was another. His cheeks looked a little flushed, Rem’s eyes closed as he winced again. The motion wasn’t lost on Tony, who immediately became more alert. “Rem? Is everything okay?” he questioned quietly, leaning over to look at the redhead more closely.

It took a moment for the redhead to gather himself enough to raise his head and gesture silently for Tony to join him. The genius quickly did so, Stephen hot on his heels. “Tony, do you know where Peter is right now?” He softly asked once they were close enough, his head tilted towards the pair while not looking directly at them.

“No, and it’s actually worrying me,” Tony admitted, resting his hip against the counter with a frown on his face. “He wasn’t with us in the trailer at the conference, and he wasn’t hanging towards the back watching while we were doing the interviews.” The genius did wonder briefly why Rem was talking about Peter when something seemed to be off with him, his eyes remaining on the redhead.

Rem inclined his head at Tony’s observations before continuing, smiling faintly at hearing that he was worried about Peter. “Tony… I know you and the others know that I have small empathic abilities that are entirely subconscious,” the mutant murmured, opening his eyes to peer at the
soulmates. “Peter… he’s sad, lonely, and a little jealous… Tony, I know that things have been busy recently, but I… I think he really needs to spend time with you.”

Tony’s face went completely pale and he let out a breath as if he’d been gut-punched. “Fuck, I never meant… I didn’t…”

Stephen moved to support the genius as his knees started to shake a little. “Easy, love. Deep breaths. Why don’t we go find Peter now that things have calmed down? I think we’re overdue for some time together, don’t you?”

It took Tony a moment to speak around the lump in his throat that had formed from the upwelling of guilt and pain in his heart. “FRIDAY,” He finally managed to croak, “Where’s Peter right now?”

“He’s in his room, Boss. Should I tell him you’re on your way?”

“No thank you, FRIDAY. Tony and I will portal in.” The sorcerer dipped his head in thanks to Rem before gently taking Tony’s hand and leading him out of the room. They quickly relocated to a room off the main hall and Stephen closed and locked the door behind them. “Tony, hey,” He turned and pulled his soulmate into his arms, tucking his head under his chin. He felt the genius shudder before he began softly crying. “Tony, it’s okay. We had no way of knowing, but we do now, and we can fix it. You can’t fix a problem you didn’t know you had, so don’t beat yourself up. Take a deep breath, you know Peter will freak out if he sees you crying.” He planted a kiss to the top of Tony’s head and held him close as the brunette tried to get his breathing under control.

Finally, after a minute or two, Tony let out one more long, shuddering breath before pulling away. He waved his hand to clean the mess from his face and Stephen’s robes before leaning in for one more hug. “Would you mind…?” He trailed off, knowing Stephen would pick up on his request.

Sure enough, the sorcerer opened a portal to the suite they shared with the teen. They wasted no time in stepping through to make their way to Peter’s room. They found the door closed, and Tony gently knocked on the door to alert Peter to their presence. “Pete? It’s me and Stephen. Can we come in?”

There was the sound of shuffling from the other side of the door before a soft voice called ‘come in.’ The duo wasted no time in pushing the door open to reveal Peter sitting on the bed, back pressed against the headboard with his knees pulled to his chest. A blanket was draped around his body, and Tony’s heart broke when he saw the teen was wearing one of his ACDC shirts. Without missing a beat he swept towards the bed and sat next to the teen, pulling him into his arms in an
enormous hug. “Fuck Peter, I’m so sorry.” He said softly as Stephen joined them, sitting on the teen’s other side.

Peter felt poleaxed for a moment before burrowing himself between the two men, feeling the dark cloud that had been hanging over him for the past week start dispersing. “How did you know…?” He started to ask before he choked up, tears welling up in his eyes as the ache in his chest made way for relief.

Stephen began to run his fingers through Peter’s soft, brown hair as he grabbed Tony’s other hand that was on the teen’s shoulder. “Rem has empathic abilities, Peter. Why didn’t you tell us how you were feeling?” He asked softly, his voice compassionate and lacking any accusatory or negative tone.

It took a moment for the teen to respond, guilt stirring within Peter when he realized that the individual he had been resenting was the very person who had been the one to say something to Tony and Stephen about how he was feeling. None of this was Rem’s fault and deep down, Peter knew it. After all, Wade wouldn’t care so much about the mutant if Rem wasn’t deserving of it. “I didn’t want to bother you. You’ve been really busy lately, and I… I really thought I would be okay, but I… I just… I’ve missed you-- both of you.”

“No, Peter, no ,” Tony breathed, pulling the teen even tighter to himself and not letting go. Thank goodness Rem had said something to them about Peter-- the last thing that the genius had ever wanted was for Peter to feel sad and alone, especially since what had happened to May. Hearing how quiet the normally exuberant teenager was made Tony feel horrible for not having noticed on his own that something was wrong with Peter. “You will never be a bother, do you hear me? Yes, things have been chaotic for the last few days and we’ve all been dealing with a lot of separate issues all popping up at once. But if you’re feeling sad and lonely, spiderling, don’t be afraid to say something! Day or night, if you need me-- or--me-- or both of us,” Tony cut in again, giving a loving smile to both his soulmate and the teenager he thought of as his son, “you tell us. We’ll always have time for you, Peter…” He took a moment to think before continuing. “Tell you what-- you’re going back to school in a week. We’ll take a few of the days between now and then to do something fun together, and we’ll have alternating Saturdays and Sunday for just you, me, and Stephen. Does that sound good?”

Peter nodded and smiled brilliantly at the two men flanking him, glad to feel the depression that had been churning in his chest flee in the face of the love of his two father figures. He relaxed into their arms and remained there as they continued to speak into the night.
Rem let out a long, relieved sigh as the oppressive portion of Peter’s negative emotions finally faded, his mental clarity now mostly dulled by the scotch he had been drinking. The bottle was held loosely in his hand, his eyes wandering the empty shooting range he was perched above nonchalantly. The past few hours had been taxing in several ways, and the alcohol had been the easiest way to take the edge off, if not the most healthy. It wouldn’t reduce his need to charge and explode something soon but at least his headache had lessened somewhat. The mutant did vaguely register the fact that he was, in fact, underage now, but at the moment he couldn’t muster up the desire to really care. And it wasn’t as if anyone else had cared before-- at least, aside from Wade. Jean Luc had actively encouraged the behavior, and the X-Men hadn’t cared as long as he could get the job done.

The redhead sighed and closed his eyes, resting his head against the wall beneath his back. He had found the small perch hidden behind a vent grate, fully supplied with cushions, blankets, and a few other things. He had settled into the space with a bottle of Tony’s scotch that had been hidden in one of the targets on the range-- why a $60,000 bottle of scotch was there of all places was beyond Rem, but the mutant wasn’t looking a gift horse in the mouth. Lost as he was in his musing, the redhead failed to hear two people quietly enter the room, nor the soft voices that accompanied them. After a minute, he took a deep breath and opened his eyes--

And yelped as he came face-to-face with a glowing blue peacock inches from his face. He surged to his feet, the sudden change causing the normally graceful teen to stagger, trip, and fall through the grate in front of the vent.

When Pandora had entered the vent upon being asked to find Rem, Dorian hadn’t thought too hard about it, merely shifting his position in anticipation of her popping out the same way. What he absolutely was not expecting was the shocked cry from the vent itself before the partially open grate swung open fully and Rem came toppling out. Without missing a beat the mage lunged to catch the teen, Zevrael catching the items that fell out with him. “Well!” He huffed in amusement as he straightened, steadying the teen on his own feet. “I must say I wasn’t expecting that. You’re normally not one to be taken by surprise, Rem.”

“Yeah, maybe normally…” Zevrael hummed as he held up the bottle in his hand, eyeing it critically before pulling the stopper off and taking a sniff. “But I would imagine this would impede anyone.” The elf held up the bottle so his husband could see it.

Dorian blinked in shock, barely registering how Rem leaned into him, grabbing his sleeve. He opened his mouth to say something but went quiet when Zevrael looked at the other thing in his hand and his icy blue eyes narrowed. He held it up, revealing it to be an open package of cigarettes.
For a second, the brunette had to close his eyes and just breathe, finally aware of how tightly the redhead was clinging to him, the teen slightly unstable on his feet. “Amatus, please run to the medical wing and retrieve a sobering solution from Bridget. I don’t think this is a conversation to be had while he’s…”

“Three sheets to the wind? Yeah, no problem. Take him to our rooms, Vhenan, I’ll be up there soon.” Zevrael opened a corridor and allowed it to sweep him away.

Dorian wasted no time in swinging the teen into a fireman’s carry, resolutely ignoring the way the teen gave a giggle at the sudden change in position. He opened a corridor of his own and carried Rem through before depositing him on the bed with a sigh of exasperation. It made his heart ache, seeing the inebriated state the teen was in. It hit a little too close to home, reminding him of the fiery burn of betrayal, and the emotional agony that could only be dulled by burning of a different kind. Thank the Maker he had found Zevrael, and that the elf had been able to help rid him of those destructive habits.

Zevrael stepped through his own corridor a minute later, eyes softening at the conflicted look on his husband’s face. “Dori’, he called, drawing the brunette’s gaze to him. “We’ll help him, okay? He doesn’t have to go through this alone.” The silverette rubbed his back as he passed the bottle over.

“I know, my love. If you could convince one of the most willful men in Thedas to give up his own vices, I’m sure the two of us together can help him.” It took one moment to wrestle the cork out of the bottle and another to coax the drink into Rem. They took up a position sitting on either side of the bed, knowing it would only be a matter of minutes before the potion would purge the alcohol from the teenager. Sure enough, the haze in the redhead’s eyes cleared and he sat up slowly, a somewhat confused look on his face. “There you are,” Dorian hummed, drawing the teen’s attention to him.

A moment later, the mage registered that the comforter on the bed beginning to glow a fierce magenta as the mutant’s kinetic power escaped his control. Dorian quickly reached out and lifted Rem’s hands from the fabric immediately just like Wade had the very first time they’d met Rem. Zevrael noticed the telltale glow at the same time as his husband and quickly formed a sphere of ice, offering it to Rem immediately. The teen gratefully took it and promptly began channeling his charging power into the ice ball, fully releasing what he’d kept pent up for too long. Rem knew from the last time they’d done this that Zevrael could keep the ice stable despite his powers being used on it, the teen’s shoulders slumping as he relaxed completely, the headache that had been bothering him completely gone now. “That was much brighter than normal, Rem.” The elf mused, bringing his attention back to the husbands.

“The kinetic energy… I haven’t used my charging power enough recently, and it built up inside me, especially in my head. It builds until I let it out or until I can’t… contain it anymore.” Rem
ducked his head, unable to look them in the eye for the next part. He’d been accused of
exaggerating how strong his unbound abilities were by certain members of his former team even
though he’d been telling the truth and nothing more. “It’s one of the reasons I need-- want -- my
kinetic powers bound... If I lost control of my full power… it would level the Compound, and quite
possibly the grounds around it.” The redhead wrapped his arms around himself, missing the look
Zevrael and Dorian shot at each other. “I hate having powers so strong,” he softly confessed.
“Pretty much everyone who finds out uses me as a weapon to point at things, even if I don’t want
it to be that way. And it brings me unwanted attention..”

“I know how that feels.” Rem blinked in shock and looked up to see Zevrael pulling his outer shirt
off, leaving him with only a thin white undershirt. “Rem, do you know how I lost this arm?” The
elf held up his left arm and hand, the fading sunlight reflecting off the onyx plates. Getting a shake
of the teen’s head, the elf continued, “I was, for lack of a better term, infected with magic that
began to eat away at my body. It was contained to my hand for a while and it granted me abilities
that no one else had-- abilities that a lot of people were both afraid and envious of. Several people
tried killing me for it-- to keep me from becoming too powerful in their eyes, to prove a point, to
take back a power they claimed I ‘stole’; basically, any number of reasons that they could come up
with. The rest of the world looked to me to fix everything, from the political climate to a giant
fucking hole in the sky. And even then, I didn’t get a lot of respect because I’m an elf.” A sardonic
smirk quirked at the silverette’s lips as he traced the edge of one of his pointed ears. “Humans saw
my ears and immediately labelled me as being less than them, that I wasn’t worthy of their time
and attention and that I didn’t deserve the power that I had because of my species. They failed to
remember that I never asked for any of it to begin with… but that’s besides the point. Long story
short, my power made me valuable, and most people outside the organization I led only saw me for
what I could do for them, the influence I had, and the way they could climb the social ladder by
being associated with me.”

Rem slowly reached out towards the limb before pausing, looking nervously between the arm and
his own fingers. Zev smiled and met him halfway, allowing Rem to run his fingers over the metal
plates. “So… how did you…” The redhead asked softly, the question trailing off at the end.

Zevrael gave him a soft smile and spoke as Dorian moved to take his other hand. “The magic was
contained for a while, but... the kind of magic it was-- it was never meant to be handled by
someone mortal. The limb had to be amputated to keep it from straight up killing me.” He took
Rem’s hand in the prosthetic one and gave it a small squeeze. “You’re not alone in this, Rem. I
know exactly where you’re coming from.”

Rem swallowed and nodded, gratitude shining clearly in his eyes. Dorian cleared his throat,
drawing the duo’s attention to him. “Rem, is that why we found you with this?” He held up the
bottle of scotch so the mutant could see.

There was a tense moment of silence before the redhead sighed and dropped his gaze to the bed
again. “I… It’s Peter.” He suddenly blurted out, causing the adults to blink in shock. “He’s been
sad and jealous because Tony has been spending so much time with the New Avengers and taking
care of me, and he was afraid of being replaced... He thought Tony wanted to adopt me, but I know Tony has been discussing the possibility of adopting Peter with Stephen.”

The Pavus husbands looked at each other in shock. Tony had been contemplating the idea of adoption, and had discussed it with the Reapers and Stephen on occasion, but never in a public setting. “How did you know about that?” Dorian asked, curiosity and surprise in his voice, but not a single trace of malice or anger.

The redhead gave them a tiny grin and a shrug. “I’m good at blending into the shadows and not being seen. I was studying sheet music in the Music Hall and Tony mentioned it to Aria... they didn’t realize I was in the corner. And I don’t spread information around because it’s not my business.” Rem took a moment to collect his thoughts before continuing. “And it’s not like I don’t like Tony-- far from it, he’s been amazing and supportive... but he’s dealing with so much right now. He doesn’t need to be handling my problems on top of all that. I’m used to taking care of my problems myself anyway.” He dropped his gaze again, ignoring the tightness in his chest as he continued. “Until I came to the compound it didn’t matter what I did, where I was, or if I was hurt in any way... only Wade cared-- well, one other person too, but they weren’t around all that much. As long as I did what they expected of me, the rest didn’t matter.”

“So the drinking... It’s a coping mechanism?”

The smile Rem gave them held only sadness as he answered, “Jean Luc gave me my first drink when I was 15. It was training of its’ own-- to learn to control my kinetic charge while under the influence, and to dull down the empathic abilities.” He sighed softly, the memories of those years playing in his head. “Looking back, I know he was conditioning me to become dependent on the alcohol. I’m just grateful I didn’t have my full powers at that point...”

Dorian and Zevrael nodded at that before the mage spoke again. “Rem, you know you don’t have to do it alone now, right? Everyone in the compound cares about you, so much. We want to see you happy and healthy.” He reached forward and took one of Rem’s hands, Zevrael taking the other. “Will you let us help you? Please?”

The question was barely more than a murmur, but Rem heard it loud and clear. He swallowed hard, tears building up in his eyes as he nodded. He wanted to do better, wanted to make them proud of him. “Okay.” He finally managed to whisper, and was immediately surrounded by the two men holding him in a supportive hug. He knew it wouldn’t be easy going forward-- hell, Wade had attempted to get him to quit with little to no success-- but here, in the supportive environment provided by Tony, the Reapers, and the other residents, the redhead finally felt like he had a fighting chance.
“He found my bottle of Macallan 1926 where ?!”

“It was stashed inside one of the targets on the shooting range, Boss.”

Tony flopped on the couch beside his soulmate and groaned loudly, shaking his head in disbelief. He, Stephen, and Peter had talked for a long time before being interrupted hours later by Harley, Slei, Jör, and Wade looking for the teen, wanting him to come test some new chemicals with them. Something about the unholy glee that lit in the teen’s eyes, as well as the evil grins everyone else sported told Tony one important thing-- he really didn’t want to know what they were doing. And not even ten minutes after Peter had scampered off happily and he and Stephen had made their way to his lab, FRIDAY had alerted him to a Problem - with a capital P. “How did it even-- no, nevermind. It’s not important at this point…” Burrowing himself into Stephen’s chest, Tony closed his eyes as he felt familiar arms wrapping around him to hold him close. “We have to sit Rem down tomorrow and give him a list of rules to obey. He might have been 34 before, but he’s in a 17-year-old body now. The last thing I want is for him to be falling back on the same shitty coping mechanisms I used to have.”

Stephen nodded and kissed the top of Tony’s head tenderly. “We’ll get it worked out, don’t worry love. Though I have the distinct impression that what might be a normal rule by our standards won’t match his, especially considering what we do already know about Rem not being allowed to attend school.” The two sat quietly for a few minutes, basking in the quiet and each other’s presence. The silence was suddenly broken by the genius gasping and sitting straight up in his seat. “Tony? What’s wrong?”

The whiskey brown eyes of his soulmate snapped to him. “It’s Rem. He has no legal identity, no birth certificate, and he’s seventeen. He doesn’t even have a legal guardian.” His brow furrowed as his mind flashed through various scenarios. “What happens if the X-Men come knocking?”

“Well, first I’d portal Rem to Kamar-Taj before telling them to kindly get the fuck off our property.” The quip had the intended effect of startling a laugh out of Tony, and Stephen began to run his fingers through his soulmate’s hair again. “Don’t worry, love. If they want Rem, they won’t get him back without one hell of a fight from our entire family.” The sorcerer pressed another kiss to the top of Tony’s head. “Though it would probably be in our best interests to solve these issues sooner rather than later. What do you think, my love?” The sorcerer knew that none of those who lived in the Compound were overly impressed or happy with what the X-Men had done to Rem-- a few of them might even be inclined to use bullets and magic to get their points across should that team of so-called heroes come knocking.

Tony nodded in agreement before calling up to the ceiling, “FRIDAY, what does my schedule for this week look like?” The holographic screen in front of him flickered to life and displayed a
calendar. “Hm… alright, tell the adult residents of the Compound that they have a meeting with me in three days at 5 in the evening. That will give me a chance to lay down the ground rules for Rem and put together a couple of plans. Oh, and send Wade to me tomorrow when he has a minute. I have an idea...”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter leads right into the one-shot "Finding Family", which has been added to the series now dubbed "Tales From the Nexus"!
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

The Rogues get a reality check via the New Avengers interview, and T’Challa gets a chance to tender an apology to the leader of them. Bruce and Minowa are adorable, intellectual, and murderous all within the course of a few minutes. The Harbingers of Havoc's first victim suffers from a slick and sudsy situation, and Wade needs reminding that he's part of a family now, and families take care of each other.

(Also, Tony's been leaving out details.)

((He honestly didn't mean to this time.))

Chapter Notes

HELLO, my loyal vassals to our Lord and Master AO3! Here we have another chapter for you all! This one has a combination of different things happening, and there are things referenced that happened in the one-shot! If you haven't read it, GO DO THAT NOW!

For those of you who wanted to see the prank on Wanda-- TA DAAA! And this is one we'll check in on in future chapters!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Calling the current atmosphere ‘tense’ would certainly be considered a massive understatement in Natasha’s opinion, although ‘thick enough to cut with a knife’ also fell a little short. Her sharp green eyes swept over the other occupants of the common room, cataloging their individual body languages and facial expressions as they sat in relative silence, something that had become commonplace since the events of four weeks ago. With the press release just a month ago regarding exactly what Steve had done to Tony, the rift had never really healed between them. The feelings of anger and betrayal still surged strongly within Scott and Sam while Wanda was still indifferent and Steve remained adamant that he’d only done what he’d had to because Tony would have killed Bucky. Knowing what she had learned about Tony’s character since their arrival in Wakanda, something she had been completely blind to in all the years that she had fought by his side, Natasha knew in her heart that it wasn’t true. If Tony had wanted Bucky dead, he’d be dead and Tony would not have been the one left laying there in that freezing Bunker.

Sam was still furious at Steve, though his anger had progressed to the ‘not talking to you’ stage. This was especially true after Sam found out about the deal Steve had refused to sign to keep them out of jail for the events in Lagos. Scott was at that point as well, but the engineer was very quiet in general. He seemed to be doing a lot of thinking, and more often than not both he and Sam were seen together, heads bent together and speaking in hushed whispers. At this point, the assassin wouldn’t be surprised if the two approached T’Challa to discuss a way to make reparations.
Even though he knew his family was safe, Clint had decided to keep up the act that they had been killed in an effort to keep Maximoff out of his head. He was curled up against Nat’s side, eyes dull and empty and body practically motionless. His proximity to her also had the added benefit of making Wanda wary of approaching him out of her fear of the Black Widow. The archer had almost had to physically restrain his partner to keep her from murdering the witch the instant she figured out that she had been messing around in his head. He knew that if Wanda had any idea that they knew about what she had been doing, there was a possibility of her making an impulsive, drastic move. They also knew that bringing it to Steve’s attention would accomplish nothing— he would simply wave them off with the excuse of ‘she’s just a kid, she doesn’t know what she’s doing’. Knowing they couldn’t risk it at that point, they had settled into a routine of Clint seemingly mourning the loss of his family and Natasha being the supportive partner.

Natasha’s eyes found the Witch in question, feeling her internal hackles raise at the mere sight of her. She was sitting next to Steve, casually filing her nails as if she didn’t notice the atmosphere of the room around her. She was still adamant that Tony had gotten what he deserved, and Nat noticed that Steve never tried to dissuade her of that fact. She seemed shockingly indifferent about the death of Clint’s family, something that inwardly enraged the female assassin to no end. In the absence of the archer, Wanda had latched onto Steve with her fake pout and innocent child act. The super soldier had fallen for it hook, line, and sinker.

Steve was stuck in a state of limbo with all but one of his teammates refusing to talk to him for one reason or another. It hadn’t been so bad at first, but then he had tried to ‘bolster team spirit’ by promising to relegate Tony strictly to funding and upgrades once they were pardoned. The statement had backfired spectacularly, with Sam getting into Steve’s face and snapping that the fact that he was still blaming Tony for everything proved that he’d learned nothing before storming away, Scott close on his heels. Natasha had hissed something in Russian before spinning around and stalking back to Clint’s room with the archer keeping close to her, who was shaking the whole time. The instant the doors had closed Clint had broken into howls of laughter. Apparently, ‘you can take the flagpole you have your banner of righteousness hung on and fuck yourself with it’ was hilarious no matter what language it was said in.

From then on, Steve found himself blocked at every attempt to engage his ‘teammates’. Anytime he tried to strike up a conversation with any of them, he was met with icy silence, death glares, or people just getting up and leaving without saying a word. Efforts to initiate team bonding were ceased after a week when everyone but Wanda failed to show up three times in a row. ‘Tasha had heard him complaining numerous times that if Tony hadn’t tried to attack Bucky, Steve wouldn’t have had to stop him. She couldn’t help but draw parallels between the super soldier and a broken CD that got stuck on certain tracks. It had gotten so tedious that the spy was ready to smother the man in his sleep.

Her attention was drawn to the news report playing on the TV nearby, and she sat straighter when she saw that the stage being shown was set up outside the Avengers Compound. She subtly got Clint’s attention and gestured towards the program in a way that only he could see. She felt him subtly nod against her shoulder, signaling that he had seen it. ‘Tasha reached for the controls and
turned the volume up, drawing the attention of the other Rogues.

They watched in silence as Pepper spoke before Tony took the stage, his appearance garnering a myriad of different reactions. “He looks healthier…” Natasha murmured, noting the lack of bags under his eyes along with the newly acquired muscle and proper weight. Clint tapped his finger once on her lower back to signal his agreement.

“Especially after being kidnapped, what was it, three weeks ago?” Sam mused, tilting his head as he watched with an intrigued light in his eyes.

Scott watched the genius take the stage with a grin on his face and couldn’t help the small smile that resulted. “He looks happier too. Like, he’s in a better place mentally than before. You can tell he’s been sleeping better.”

“If he’s doing so much better, then he needs to stop being so petty and let us come home.” Steve announced, failing to notice the glares and eye rolls the statement received. They continued to watch until Tony announced the formation of the ‘New Avengers’. “What?! He can’t do that!” The super soldier jumped to his feet with his hand out as if he could reach through the screen to grab the genius.

“Actually, he can.” Natasha’s voice drew their attention for a moment, her green eyes cold as she gazed at Steve. “After the fall of SHIELD, he snapped up the rights to the Avengers name and merchandising before anyone else could purchase them. To that end, Tony has every right to use the name because he owns it.”

From her seat next to Steve, Wanda sniffed in distaste. “Well, at least they’re called the ‘New Avengers’. Once we get home, Steve can get rid of Stark’s so-called team because he’s our leader.”

Anything that would have been said in response to that was cut off as Tony began to introduce the new members. Several shocked noises were heard from the group as Stephen opened a portal and stepped on stage with a smirk and a bow. The assassin took a quick glance at Wanda, taking a measure of satisfaction from the suddenly unsure look on her face. The sound of repulsors drew their attention, and outright gasps were heard when Minowa revealed herself to the press.

“What is she?” Scott murmured under his breath, but there was no fear or disgust present in his tone. Instead, there was awe mixed with excitement at the imposing figure the woman made. She reminded him of a figure straight out of a fantasy novel with dragons and magic and epic battles.
Sam took a glance at him. “I dunno, but I don’t think I ever want to be on her bad side. The armor is scary enough, but… I’m pretty sure those aren’t contacts or special effects.”

They were cut off again as Tony began to introduce the other members. Bridget prompted an appreciative hum from a few, the grace and gentle charm of the woman immediately warming most of the Rogues to her. The sudden dramatic appearance of Ulysses followed by Craig caught the attention of Nat and Clint especially. Right off the bat, they could tell these weren’t just random fighters—these were soldiers, extremely effective ones. The imposing figure they presented was then shattered as their third member came on stage from the other direction and was promptly dragged between them so the men were flanking her protectively.

“Wait, they all have the same last name.” Steve suddenly spoke up, a strange look crossing his face.

The group looked back at the trio. “They’re too close in age to be siblings… and their features don’t speak of any kind of familial relation.” Nat mused softly, thinking for a moment.

Any further debate was cut off by the flashy arrival of Zevrael and Dorian, and the resulting banter between them. “Dude, Zevrael’s got pointed ears!” Scott was grinning ear to ear at that—first a dragon lady, now an elf! Stark’s new team was getting pretty badass!

Sam snorted at the engineer’s enthusiasm, a tiny smirk quirking at his lips. “Wonder what part of Mirkwood they pulled him from?”

The arrival of Wade on the stage prompted an outraged cry from Steve. “Is he really so desperate as to hire a mercenary? He’s killed people for money!”

His statement prompted an extremely unamused look from Natasha who replied in a deadpan voice, “Steve, you are sitting in a room at a table with the Black Widow, Hawkeye, and a former US Military member. You killed people in Germany. Wanda killed people with HYDRA. Judging him for having killed people for any reason is a completely moot point.”

Scott tuned them out for a moment as he observed Strange’s reaction to the mercenary’s actions. Though it had been quickly covered up, there had been a momentary flash of something like possessiveness in the sorcerer’s face before sending that shock at Deadpool. The engineer filed the information away in his mind for later—maybe Sam would see the same thing he had when they rewatched the footage.
The Rogues watched as a shuriken hit the stage and Maelstrom appeared from the smoke. The male gracefully bowed and Nat’s eyes narrowed in contemplation. The way the man moved so fluidly and held himself-- he’d been through some kind of intense training that brought to mind the years she had spent in the Red Room honing her own skills. From the way Clint subtly tensed against her, he had noticed the same thing she had.

“What the hell is Tony playing at?!” Steve cried out indignantly, shooting to his feet again. “He’s trying to make Bucky look bad with that mask! How low can he stoop?!”

Sam sent the man a severely unimpressed look. “He’s trying to remain anonymous. That’d be pretty pointless if the world could see his face.”

The assassin of the group nodded in agreement before adding, “That’s likely not even his real face- the mask may be modifying his appearance for further security.”

The super soldier huffed as he watched the New Avengers take their places at the table. “Doesn’t matter anyway. Once we’ve been pardoned and back in the USA, we won’t need this… new team. They’ll be dismissed, and things will go back to the way they were before.” he stated with confidence, unable to imagine anything else happening. What Tony had done-- this was why he needed to be kept in check.

“They might have,” Sam finally snapped, standing from his seat and turning briefly to the blonde. “Except you seem to have forgotten the small detail that involves you leaving the Avenger’s financial backer to die. Given that Stark seems to have had no problem establishing a new team, what the hell makes you think he’ll accept us back with open arms?!” Without waiting for an answer, the man spun away and stalked from the room, Scott rising to follow a moment later without saying a word to Steve or even looking in his direction.

Nat rose as well, Clint pressed against her side. “Face it, Rogers.” She declared coldly, eyes hard and posture unyielding. “Even if we’re pardoned, things will never go back to the way they were. You personally set fire to all of those bridges when you kept the truth of his parents’ death from him, lied about it, then left him for dead.” The assassin gestured in the direction of the TV. “At the end of the day, he doesn’t need us-- not when he has them.”

“He has to keep funding us! He has an obligation!” Steve shouted, eyes flashing with anger at the display of insubordination from his team.
“Stark doesn’t have to do anything.” ‘Tasha shot back, crossing her arms loosely over her chest. “At no point in time did he sign a contract. He was helping us because he wanted to. Now, any desire he had to do that is probably dead in the bunker where you left him.” Having said her piece, the assassin led Clint from the room, leaving Steve and Wanda alone with the TV still broadcasting the New Avengers in the background.

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“It seems Dr. Stark has been busy.”

Shuri looked over at her brother, who had a contemplative look on his face. “His new team is impressive. They obviously get along much better than the original team ever did.” Her eyes went to a screen to her left, where the interview was being played again. “They’re also obviously not all… locals, shall we say.” She pulled up two different screens, one with a close shot of Minowa without her helmet, the other focused on Zevrael with his head turned.

T’Challa nodded in agreement, eyes sweeping over the duo for a moment. “Whether they are or not, Dr. Stark seems to trust them enough to allow them close.” He turned to a screen on his right, which was replaying footage taken from the common room the Rogues had been in. “It seems our guests are quite divided by the news, though.”

“They were divided even before that, brother.” The crown princess corrected him, stepping around him so she could view the screen as well. “I feel that making contact with Dr. Stark is more important than ever now. Not only because of this, but…” She trailed off for a moment, brow furrowing.

T’Challa gave his sister a grim smile. “Because of James Barnes.” the woman nodded, prompting a hum from the king. “When I offered him sanctuary here, I was not expecting Rogers and his team to follow as well. In my effort to save him from a potentially cruel and unfair fate, I have done wrong to Wakanda, and to Tony Stark.” He rubbed the side of his face with a weary sigh, exhaustion showing clearly on his features for a moment. “I am not sure how to even go about extending my apology to Dr. Stark when I cannot get through to him to extend it. It would be wrong of me to do so in any other way than a face-to-face manner. And yet…”

“And you cannot exactly go to him. If the Captain caught wind of it, he would accuse you of betraying them. I cannot guarantee that he would not attack us if he thought such a thing.” Shuri mused softly.

The king nodded in agreement and sat heavily in a chair, head hung as he stared at his hands. “I am
He finally said in a soft, hesitant voice. "How do I apologize for the wrongs I have committed? I would not do so in a simple message-- Dr. Stark deserves nothing less than to hear it from my own mouth." Shuri hummed non-committedly, fiddling with her Kimoyo beads for a moment. After a few seconds, she sat down on the seat next to her brother, leaning against him in a comforting gesture. There were a few moments of silence as the two thought, lost in their own worlds.

A sudden beeping sound caused them both to look up in confusion, their eyes landing on a screen that was glitching and distorting strangely. As they stood, the screen suddenly settled on a picture of a silver and red ‘A’, the hole of the letter outlined in black with a black circle in the middle, the entire thing cut through with a single vertical line. A female, Irish voice filtered through the speakers. “Well, that’s a good start in the right direction.”

Shuri’s eyes widened when she saw the logo. “That’s the symbol of the New Avengers.” She breathed.

“That it is, Princess. My name is FRIDAY, I’m Dr. Stark’s personal AI. I’m the one who’s been keeping you from getting through to the Boss.” Before either sibling could speak, the voice became almost hostile. “Beggin’ yer pardon, of course, but after what was done to the Boss I had to be sure your attempts to apologize were genuine.”

T’Challa stepped in front of Shuri so he was in front of the monitor. “They are, and if Dr. Stark means so much to you that you would do this for him, then I would extend my apologies to you as well.” He dipped his head to the screen, unphased by the idea of speaking to a machine. Clearly, Dr. Stark had given his AI a life of her own, and he would do everything in his power to respect that. “I failed to check that Rogers’ words were true when he said Dr. Stark was alright, and he suffered unnecessarily for it. In doing so, I have also caused you and his friends, his allies, undue distress. I cannot take back my actions, only apologize for my oversight and attempt to make reparations.” He bowed to the screen in a smooth motion. “You have my deepest apologies, Lady FRIDAY, for the grief I have caused you.”

There was a moment of silence before the AI spoke again. “And the Boss?”

T’Challa didn’t raise from his position, but his lips quirked into a smile. “As I said, Lady FRIDAY, I would prefer to tender my apologies to Dr. Stark face-to-face. He deserves to hear them from me directly.”

A few seconds passed before FRIDAY spoke again. “Good answer. I accept your apology, your Majesty.” The screen flickered again before the word ‘transferring’ appeared on the screen. T’Challa straightened with surprise in his eyes, and after several seconds the screen changed again to a camera feed of Tony sitting in a chair, all but two of the New Avengers flanking him.
protectively. Stephen in particular was positioned in such a way that the relationship between them was more than clear.

The genius smiled, dipping his head to the king in greeting. “King T’Challa. My darling FRIDAY told me you have something to say.”

Though T’Challa nodded, his mind was instantly on alert the moment he saw the positions the New Avengers had taken around Tony. Everything about their stances, body language, and facial expression spoke of a fierce protectiveness and unwavering loyalty. That the genius seemed unbothered by their actions showed he had no complaints about this, their need to watch out for him. The king knew he was being watched, measured, and observed closely for any sign that his words were false or half-baked, which also meant he had to tread very carefully. “Indeed, Dr. Stark.” The king swept into a deep bow, keeping his eyes firmly on the floor as he spoke. “I have done you grievous harm in my actions. I took Rogers at his word when he said you were alright, when you were grievously injured instead. I am deeply sorry for my negligence in this, and would like to make amends in whatever way I am able to.”

There was silence from the screen, but the monarch stayed in his low bow. Finally, a soft shuffling was heard before Minowa’s voice rumbled through the speakers. “We would hear why you have allowed the Rogues into your home before we continue.” Her tone was hard, unyielding in the face of her request.

Something about the woman and her voice raised the hairs on the back of T’Challa’s neck. He swallowed for a moment before speaking, never straightening his stance. “It started as offering asylum for James Barnes only. I was unsure that he would be tried and judged fairly, and whether it would even be safe to carry out. His mind is fragmented at best, and his trigger words are still present. He asked to be put back in cryostasis until a permanent solution could be found.” He took a deep breath to gather his thoughts. “I was not aware of Roger’s plans involving the other members of the Rogues until they were at my doorstep. The invitation was never extended to them, or even to Rogers himself. My decision to keep them here was a matter of keeping them close so that the damage they caused in Europe would not be repeated elsewhere.”

Minowa’s voice hummed for a moment. “Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer. Pray tell, then-- what have they been doing recently?”

“I have footage of their reactions to the press conferences at both the beginning of August and a few days ago. May I send them to you?”

After a moment the Dragonborn spoke again, her voice a few degrees warmer than before. “We would appreciate that. And you’ve no need to continue to genuflect.”
T'Challa rose from his position as Shuri approached, toying with her Kimoyo beads to send the footage. A moment later, the footage flickered into existence on the screen with the New Avengers, and they watched in silence as the two played back to back. Having seen the video already, the king took a moment to observe each member of the team in front of him. Minowa seemed smug at Scott’s reaction, practically preening under her calm mask. Craig and Ulysses seemed focused on Nat and Clint’s reactions to them, and Aria was grinning madly at the speculation about them sharing the same last name. Sam’s comment on Zevrael prompted a choked laugh out of the Pavus duo and a muttered ‘So Thedas is really Mirkwood now’ from a highly amused Bridget. The comment on Wade caused an explosion of laughter from the group, several eyes glancing towards Minowa in particular. The ebony haired woman had a massive, shark-like smile on her face that contained far too many teeth. Steve’s explosive reaction to Rem caused several confused looks to be passed between them along with a deep eye roll from Tony. The declaration from Steve that he would ‘dismiss them’ prompted a few barks of laughter and several incredulous looks at the audacity of the statement. The Reapers all applauded when Romanoff stood up to Rogers, and for Tony in her own way. That she had the presence of mind to realize that the Rogues were no longer needed and admitted it intrigued them-- every single one of them had seen the brief flash of pain and regret in her eyes before it was immediately covered back up. A glance at Tony showed a hint of conflict on his own face-- Romanoff had betrayed him, twice actually, but it was clear he saw something in her worth trying to salvage. They silently agreed to bring it up with him later before lapsing back into quiet as she and Barton left the room and the footage cut.

After a few moments of silence, Tony turned his attention to the New Avengers. “What do you think, guys?”

Craig was the one who ended up speaking first. “It’s pretty clear there’s a rift in the team now-- Wilson, Lang, and Romanoff all seem to be on Tony’s side. Rogers and Maximoff are still pretty set in their opinions, and Barton…”

“Different.” Ulysses picked up. “He’s acting the part-- grieving the loss of his family, but knows they’re alive.” He tilted his head in T’Challa’s direction, question in his eyes.

T’Challa nodded at that, fiddling with his own beads. “The cameras we have in Romanoff’s room picked up footage of when he learned of their survival. Perhaps it can tell us something.” New film appeared on the screen, and the New Avengers watched Clint and Natasha’s reactions to the survival of his family. The sudden exclamation from Natasha caused more than a few eyebrows to raise in shock. After a few seconds, Minowa suddenly straightened and turned to Tony, barking something in Dovahzul.

Tony surged from his seat with a curse. “Maximoff has been in his head. He just said he felt like he was coming out of a fog, and I had that same kind of experience when she hit me with her powers.”
“Excuse me?” The sudden infuriated exclamation froze the genius, and he turned back to see Stephen come around the chair with an absolutely livid look on his face. “Did I just hear you say that Maximoff had her slimy magic in your mind?”

There was silence from the man, his whiskey-brown eyes wide and startled. After a moment he got out, “I… never told you? I could have sworn—”

“You didn’t tell any of us this information!” Bridget stomped over to him and grabbed him by the ear, prompting a yelp from the man. “Please excuse us for a moment, your highness. I need to do a check to make sure there were no residual effects from Maximoff’s powers, then I need to verbally beat some sense into this dunderhead!” She stormed away with Tony, ignoring his protests.

Stephen watched them in shock, his righteous indignation fleeing in the face of the resident Restoration Master’s ire. He opened his mouth to say something before he was cut off by T’Challa on the other side of the screen.

“Forgive me for asking, but does she happen to intimidate any of you as much as she does me?”

All heads turned towards him as they simultaneously responded with a resounding “Yes.”

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From where Rem had been in the midst of a paper war downstairs in Tony’s lab, the redhead vigorously nodded at the question of if Bridget intimidated them even though the man couldn’t see him, the teenager’s red and black eyes widening slightly. While waiting for the genius to return so his punishment as a gofer could continue, Rem had engaged in throwing paper balls back and forth with Wade who was currently hiding in a nearby vent, the surrounding area giving clear evidence as to what they had been doing. A hastily constructed trebuchet crafted from the various pieces scattered around had given him the edge in their fight though he had paused at the revelation about what had happened to Tony.

In the background, footage of the conversation upstairs had been playing and Rem had dropped the paper ball he’d been holding when he’d heard the mention of the— as he’d privately dubbed her— Scarlet Bitch— using her powers for evil things. It was a little too much for the redhead, who darted over to the vent, jumping up to join the merc who made room immediately, settling the teen in his arms comfortingly. “Want me to go kill her?” he offered nonchalantly, knowing that Rem’s emotions since his de-aging were genuinely that of a teenager and the best way to flip him into a different mood swing.
So full of emotion right now—angry that Tony had been hurt and violated like that and upset with himself for how uncertain and afraid it made him feel, Rem choked out a laugh that also resembled a partial sob, fully relaxing against Wade as he began to giggle uncontrollably. Only the mercenary would offer to kill her to make him feel better.

Wade smiled at the genuine laugh that bubbled up from Rem. If Rem was happy, he was happy—right now, that was what mattered most.

He could think of all the ways he would unalive the bitch later.

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Bruce adored Minowa to the moon and back. She was a steady presence against the tumultuous nature of his own anger, her calm able to anchor him to the present. The iron control she had over her emotions provided a link to ground his own, and she never got scared or angry if he lost control a little.

Right now though, those roles were being reversed, because the field commander of the New Avengers was absolutely *incensed*.

“Let me see if I have this right.” The Dragonborn hissed, pacing from one end of the medical wing to the other, body thrumming with fury and agitation. “Not only has that little *folaaskiin* been in *Zeymahi*’s head, dredging up his worst fears and dragging his mind into turmoil, she has also done the same to *my* love??”

The doctor nodded but didn’t try to approach her. “It’s why I left. Between *that*, along with her not being held accountable for her part in the creation of Ultron, for what happened in Johannesburg, for her willingness to aid Ultron as long as it resulted in the death of Tony, and the fact that Steve brought her to the Tower and went after Tony strictly on only her word after everything she had done to us, even when he knew she became a HYDRA volunteer strictly to gain power to murder Tony, and even for what befell her own country of Sokovia because of what she did... Steve and his foolish, moronic ‘she’s just a *kid*!’ and not wanting her to face any consequences for her past! And knowing that Steve was going to add her to the team no matter what Tony and I said... I couldn’t stay. She...” He pulled his glasses off, a stab of guilt piercing his heart and causing his face to twist into a grimace, “She didn’t just pull my fears to the surface--she made them a reality, a living *nightmare*. ” He swallowed hard, not noticing that his ebony haired lover had paused her own movements to observe him. “And Tony, Gods, he took every ounce of flak for what happened. Rogers made damn sure of that, conveniently leaving out any part that that... *bitch* played in it!”
Minowa turned on her heel and crossed the room in a few long strides, pressing herself against the scientist’s back and nuzzling his neck. Bruce shuddered once before allowing himself to relax fully into her hold, the abnormally warm puffs of air against his skin helping to ground his emotions again. “You have every right to be angry at her, Diisu’um, after everything she’s done. You have my word, she will not come within a mile of this place or our nestmates.” Her eyes flashed brilliantly for a moment as she growled, “We would kill her before she could.”

Green flashed in Bruce’s eyes as he reached for her hands that were wrapped around his waist. The thought of the witch anywhere around the compound, possibly getting even remotely near any of the kids living here—whether they were as young as Nathaniel, who was a little over 1, or as old as Rem at 17—was sending his—and the Hulk’s by proxy—protective instincts skyrocketing. “If she touches anyone here, I’ll kill her.” He snarled, the green brightening for a moment.

“And I will help you, my love.” Minowa rumbled, rubbing her nose behind Bruce’s ear in an intimate gesture. “For now, still your rage. We must turn our minds to matters elsewhere. The King of Wakanda has called for our aid, and Tony has decided to answer it.”

Bruce nodded and took a few deep breaths to settle himself before pulling away from Minowa and grabbing her hand to pull her over to a chair. He sat down, pulling the Dragonborn down so she was sprawled sideways across his lap. “Alright. Just to make sure I have the details right—Tony agreed to help with Barnes’ trigger words and brainwashing, but only if he does it stateside?”

Minowa nodded and rested her head against her lover’s shoulder. “Zeymahi has agreed to the use of the B.A.R.F. tech, but he is the only one who knows how to use it properly at this time. If it were sent to Wakanda, Tony would have to go there as well, and if Rogers found out, he would never allow either of them near Barnes. Yet the technology is James’ only hope of having a normal life again, free of HYDRA’s conditioning and the fear it brings with it. His memories will remain untampered with, but he will be free of any future incidents.”

The scientist nodded slowly, reaching up to absentmindedly play with the woman’s short ebony locks. “I understand him not wanting the risk of being triggered or the fear of it. That he chose to willingly go back into cryo rather than risk hurting anyone else… he’s a braver man than me, that’s for certain.” He yelped suddenly when Minowa shifted so she could nip at his neck.

“Such foolish words are not befitting a man of your intelligence, Diisu’um.” Minowa chided him, nosing the bite. “You are as brave as he, let no one tell you otherwise.” She kissed the spot tenderly before pulling away. “Once his pardon is complete and has been processed, T’Challa will awaken him without alerting Rogers and explain this all to him.” She shifted so she was looking into Bruce’s eyes, a gleeful smirk twisting her lips. “James Barnes is an adult and can make his own decisions. Without Rogers trying to act as his false keeper, I’m sure such an arrangement...
would be appealing to him.”

“Pretty sure at this point anything having to do with escaping Rogers is appealing.” Bruce snorted, his deep brown eyes sparkling with mirth. The Dragonborn gave him an amused grin that, to anyone else, would have been slightly demented-- full of sharp lines and too many teeth. For him, though, it was a reassurance that, while the woman shifting her position on his lap wasn’t necessarily human, she was a perfect match for him-- a jagged beauty with a strength of body and spirit to match his own. She straddled his lap and pressed forward to kiss him, and he was unafraid to meet her halfway.

“Hey guys, King Kitty just sent us the most awesome-- Oh for fuck’s sake, really?!”

Minowa growled in frustration as she pulled away and turned to level a glare at Tony and Stephen, the former of whom was grinning at her unrepentantly from his place in the doorway leading to a private room. “If you try to tell me you only just now finished your examination of his mind, Stephen, I will ‘Unrelenting Force’ you through that wall behind you.”

The Sorcerer held up his hands, his lips quirking into a smile. “I swear, this was an accident. Tony and I were talking for a while about what I found, and T’Challa sent us a video that I think you’d appreciate. Neither of us knew what was going on out here.”

Bruce gave a soft laugh and rubbed Minowa’s lower back soothingly as she huffed and shifted so she was in his lap again. “Later, love.” He whispered to her, prompting an appreciative rumble from the woman. “What’s this video he sent you?”

Tony grinned and bounded over to them, tapping on his tablet to pull a video up on the screen before projecting it in front of him. “Check it out!”

The group watched as the Rogues sat around a table for what must have been a meal, everyone present but Wanda. Sam and Scott sat as a pair on one side of the table near Clint and Natasha, Steve noticeably isolated at the other end. There were only a few seconds of silence before Wanda suddenly came storming in, hair greasy and skin oily from some kind of residue. She began screeching about how her bathroom had been filled with slippery bubbles when she went to run the shower, and that they’d faded away when she grabbed her shampoo, conditioner, and body wash and escaped the bathroom. She’d then showered in one of the guest rooms, but it only seemed to have made the oily film worse. Steve quickly reassured her that she’d probably picked the wrong shampoo for her hair, that they’d get her a new one. Wanda sniffed and nodded, the duo completely missing the looks the rest sent each other-- confusion, amusement, and in Scott’s case, outright glee. Even ‘Tasha’s lip twitched up in amusement for a moment before her mask slid seamlessly back into place.
Minowa was grinning ear to ear, showing off her fangs with the gesture. “Why, how inconvenient for the witch.”

“Indeed, it’s such a shame.” Bruce nodded in agreement with a smile of his own. “It would be such a travesty if they couldn’t find soap that doesn’t leave a residue like that.”

The group laughed uproariously, completely missing the slit-pupiled green eyes watching them from the ceiling vent. After a moment of observation, they disappeared as a large green and black snake slid silently towards the other end of the wing, dropping down easily once he reached another open grate.

“You’re back!” Peter squealed, jumping to his feet as the snake rippled and glowed, changing back to Loki. “Did it work? What did they think??”

Loki grinned and gently pat the teen’s head. “It went perfectly. You all did very well.” He looked up as his sons and Harley approached as well with massive grins of their own. “What happens if she uses someone else’s?”

“The potion was slipped into every bottle they own.” Slei replied.

“It will affect them all then?”

“Nope! The potion is keyed specifically to her!” Jör fired back.

“And if she brings a bottle from the outside?”

“Runes around the bathrooms in the wing will summon potion to the new bottle upon being brought in.” Fenrir replied.

“What if the residue wears off?”

“Unless she feels like taking an acid bath, not a chance.” Harley snarked, a grin on his face. “That
stuff would outlast HER.”

“And if it builds up in her hair too much?”

“Then the Scarlet Witch will then be the ‘Balding Bitch’!” Peter crowed in triumph.

Loki nodded sharply, a fierce grin on his face. “Well, my Harbingers of Havoc, I’d say your first prank is a complete success.” The kids cheered and hugged, bouncing around for a moment before falling quiet again. “That’s just the first one, though. Have you thought about your next prank?”

Peter nodded enthusiastically. “We have, and we already got FRIDAY to order what we need!” He gestured behind himself to a large box, grinning as the God of Mischief approached it.

Loki lifted the lid of the box and looked inside. After a moment of silence he replaced the lid and turned back to them. “Dare I ask how many are in this box?”

All five boys simultaneously replied “A thousand.”

The god lifted the lid of the box again briefly. “Are they all different?” The boys nodded again, and Loki grinned widely. “Oh, I love the way your mischievous little minds think. Let’s get to work.”

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“Hey Dorian, Zevrael, do you know if Rem is still in the lab with Tony?”

The Pavus husbands looked up from where they were sitting on the couch to see Wade standing in front of them shifting from foot to foot. “Rem will be free from his gofer duties tomorrow, Wade. Why?” Dorian replied, setting the tablet in his hands down.

The merc sighed with a sardonic grin and shrugged. “The next time you see him, could you tell him that I need my credit card back? I don’t mind if he takes it and doesn’t tell me, but I kinda need it back when he’s done so I can trade out my couch for a bed...”
The men stared at him for several seconds in stunned silence before Zev slowly put his book into his lap. “Alright, I have several questions regarding that statement. One, why does he take your credit card to begin with, two, how often does he do this that it seems to be a regular thing, and three, are you telling me you’ve been sleeping on a couch for over two weeks??”

Wade stared back, not entirely sure of what the problem was and deciding to answer the questions in the order they were asked. “Um… The first one, Rem doesn’t have any money,” he explained matter-of-factly. “Jean Luc didn’t give him much when he left the Guild and with Sabertooth lurking around, Rem wasn’t able to do many jobs. I’m guessing he took my card for whatever he wanted to get for the two of you and I know it wouldn’t be something frivolous. And considering what you know of the X-Men, do you really think Warren would give him money like he did the others? Especially when he openly called Rem a whore to his face and suggested he start getting paid for being a slut?” Exhaling slowly to quell his urge to go kill the winged bastard, the merc calmed down enough to continue. “Until you two bought him his clothes after his deaging, I’ve been paying for pretty much anything he’s needed but I’m not always around so I told him he could take my and get what he needs- where did you think his bed here came from and those warm blankets? Rem disliked the cold before Antarctica and that just made it a hell of a lot worse.” Shaking his head, Wade grimaced slightly. “I was going to replace his motorcycle but he has a point about my couch, been sleeping on it for years now. And anytime I had company over, I just slept on the floor and let them have it… Ain’t easy for either Rem or me when he comes in after a nightmare, crawls onto the couch, and then winds up sleeping on top of me, gives me a crick in my back.” Pausing for a moment, he then added, “Been meaning to tell you two that Rem needs to add stuff to his room to make it actually feel like his and lived in. That’s one reason I got him the bed and stuff- to help him cement the idea in his little red head that it’s his room. Maybe a picture, some decks of cards, they’re his favorite things to have on hand. My card will be limited after the bed but once it’s back up—”

“Alright, I’m going to have to stop you there for a second.” Dorian got up from the couch, Zevrael hot on his heels. “First of all, you are not paying for a bed-- let Zevrael and I take care of it. In fact, if you bring us a list of things you’d like for your room, we’ll take care of all of it. Do not fight us on this, Wade Wilson,” The mage’s voice took on a stern tone when the merc opened his mouth to protest, “You’ve been taking care of our son for years at your own expense, and this is the least we can do to pay back some of that kindness.”

Wade was silent for a moment, his hazel eyes bouncing between the duo. Finally, he lowered his gaze to the floor and mumbled, “Someone had to take care of Rem… I was the only one he had, and he never deserved the shit he got from everyone.”

Icy blue eyes softened at his words and Zev reached forward to grab Wade’s hands in his own. “Well, now you don’t have to do it alone, and you have someone to take care of you too.” He tugged the merc towards him and wrapped him in a tight hug, Dorian joining in a moment later. “You’re one of us now, Wade, and we take care of our family.”
It took a moment for the man to work past the shock enough to return the hug. “If you insist.” He finally managed to get out, trying to cover up the various emotions within his voice with nonchalance.

“And if you wouldn’t mind making us a full list of what Rem might like in his room, that would also be greatly appreciated.” Dorian added as they finally broke away from the hug. “I mean, I would have you simply tell me, but I wouldn’t want to risk leaving anything out, and I don’t want you to have to keep anything off of it.” He turned to pull up a holographic screen before pausing. “You were with Rem earlier… why didn’t you ask for it then?”

The merc blinked before snorting with laughter. “I was going to, but Tony came back down…”

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“… That is a trebuchet on my desk.”

Rem blinked and looked up from where he was trying to wrestle a ream of paper from out of a box so the paper war could continue. “Um… yes?” He replied, straightening to see the genius.

Tony circled the construct, looking it over with a critical eye. “Where did you get a trebuchet?”

“Uh… I built it.” The redhead replied, brow furrowing in confusion at the way the brunette was acting.

The genius paused, eyes snapping towards Rem. “Are you telling me you could build a working miniature siege engine on my desk with nothing but the scraps scattered around my workshop with absolutely no prior engineering knowledge??”

The mutant’s eyes flicked between the machine and the mechanic. “Uh… I... yes?”

A look of absolute delight crossed the Reaper’s face along with a maniacal gleam in his eye, and Rem distantly heard the sound of Wade clamoring through the vents as he beat a hasty retreat from the mad science he could just hear about to happen.
Wade wasn’t sticking around for that madness, doubly so when he heard Tony asking FRIDAY to summon Peter.

“... and he got this look on his face when he saw something Rem built… I just want to say that Tony Stark in mad scientist mode is a scary thing to witness.”

“Oh good. I’m glad we’re not the only ones who think that.”

Chapter End Notes

I know I said I wouldn't do anymore Dovahzul, but I promise it's just one or two words! Please don't murder me!

Folaaskiin -- To quote Minowa if asked, "It is a word to describe one whose parents forgot to use protection the night of their conception."

Diisu'um -- My breath (Min's term of endearment for Bruce)

Huh. It just occurred to me this chapter is over 7,800 words long. Y'all have been getting longer chapters recently. Lucky you!
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Barnes' pardon goes through, but any progress on bringing him back stateside has to be put on hold when Rem receives a letter from an old enemy, one who has haunted his nightmares his whole life. His new family rallies around him, rising to put a stop to the terror once and for all.

(Also, Bridget seems like a sweetheart. It's a trick. Don't piss her off.)

((Alduin is also fucking terrifying.))

Chapter Notes

This next chapter is actually being split up into several parts. By the time we were done with it, we had about 4,600 words, and weren't even through HALF of what we wanted to include! Stay tuned for the next parts, coming soon!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“It’s only been a few weeks and it already went through?” T’Challa was a little surprised but quite pleased at how quickly Dr. Stark had managed to finagle the pardon. He had thought it would be at least two months, possibly more.

Tony nodded from the other side of the monitor, a satisfied smile on his face. It had taken a lot of speaking in front of the Council but everything had come around the way they had needed it. “Well... At first, the Accords Council seemed reluctant to even consider such a thing. However, after it was pointed out that James Barnes had essentially been a prisoner of war for well over 70 years, almost everyone was quick to change their stance.”

T’Challa nodded in agreement with that-- being a POW was definitely something that made a huge difference for James Barnes to get a pardon, especially since the very man who’d fought for it had lost his parents due to their mind control of the man during his imprisonment. “Given it was HYDRA holding him prisoner and brainwashing him, I would imagine so.”

Stepping up beside the genius, Minowa fixed the Wakandan king with a fierce, unyielding look. “Does Rogers know about these recent developments?” She asked though it was obvious to everyone she wouldn’t take a vague answer of any kind.
A smugly grinning Shuri answered the Field Commander’s question. “Nope! It seems the television signal regarding anything about James’ pardon is having difficulty getting through to any of the screens in their wing. They have no idea what’s going on.” She suddenly laughed in amusement. “I think their attention is elsewhere these days anyway...” Seeing the intrigued looks she was getting, the princess pulled up a certain video on the screen being shared.

The screen showed Steve sleeping soundly in his bed, but the quiet only lasted for about five seconds before a piercing alarm blasted through the room. The super soldier surged from his bed, a furious curse on his lips that made Tony gasp as if scandalized. After a full minute, the alarm shut off, and the blond huffed in aggravation before climbing back into bed. The footage fast forwarded to about two hours later and the alarm blared again, this time sounding like an air horn. Rogers yelled a string of profanities before slamming a pillow over his face and head.

Tony gasped again before shouting, “LANGUAGE!”

From his space at Tony’s side, Stephen bent double, laughing so hard he needed Tony’s shoulder to stay upright. Minowa had a fierce, vindictive grin of amusement on her face. Tony was grinning and laughing as well, doing his best to support his taller soulmate so he didn’t fall face first into the carpet. T’Challa smiled at the trio, Shuri cackling along with them at his side.

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In a room several floors below, the Harbingers of Havoc cheered and high fived each other at another successful prank. Loki smirked over at them, the God chuckling in deep amusement, and after a few moments he cleared his throat to catch their attention. “Are the alarms all in different places?”

“Yep. They’re scattered throughout the room so the alarm is coming from a different part of the room throughout the night!” Harley replied.

Loki nodded and continued. “And if he finds one and destroys it?”

Peter smirked at that. "IF he manages to find an alarm that’s about the size of a button, there are runes under each one that will summon a new one within 12 hours.”

“And will they run out at any point?”
Sleipnir shook his head negative. “Lord Hadrian taught us a duplication charm that will create a new one the instant one is summoned.”

“Will the noise be heard by anyone else?”

“Nope! The sound is confined to Roger’s room alone!” Jörmungandr replied.

“What if he puts in earplugs?”

This caused the Harbingers to pause and look at each other. “Uh… we didn’t think about that.” Fenrir admitted, blushing brightly.

Loki waved a hand dismissively, an indulgent smile on his face. “Worry not, there are ways to work around such a thing. Come, let’s see what we can do to fix this.”

-  

It took a few minutes for everyone to calm down before returning to the conversation at hand. “So, Barnes’ pardon has gone through. Would you prefer for him to be awoken sooner rather than later?”

Tony took a deep breath and nodded, drawing strength from the gloved hand resting against his lower back. “Yeah. The B.A.R.F tech is ready to go, and… I’m not angry anymore.” He felt Minowa shift so she was pressed against his shoulder. “I’ve had time to think and process, and I realize Barnes… James was HYDRA’s weapon for a long damn time. They were the ones pulling the trigger-- they’re the ones who killed Mom and Howard. He didn’t deserve what happened to him, and he doesn’t deserve my anger and consternation.” A small smirk quirked at the genius’ lips as he continued. “The biggest ‘fuck you’ I can give HYDRA is giving their weapon his life back.”

There was a second or two of silence before T’Challa let a small but brilliant smile appear upon his face. “For all that Rogers and Maximoff speak of your selfishness and stubbornness, so far I have seen only a man of great compassion and strength. You are a good man, Tony Stark-- let no one tell you otherwise.” He turned his attention to his sister for a moment, the teen grinning at Tony as well. “Shuri, have the staff at the lab prepare to pull James out of cryostasis.” The teenage princess saluted her brother before running off. “Dr. Stark, I’ll let you know when we have a decision from Barnes.”
Tony nodded and bid the monarch goodbye before the screen went dark. He sighed and leaned back into the waiting arms of his sorcerer who kissed the top of his head. “Well, now all we can do is wait.” He murmured, eyes sliding over to Minowa, who nodded in agreement.

“Wait for what, Uncle Tony?” The group turned to see Rem pad into the room with a curious look in his eyes.

The genius smiled at the teen, allowing Stephen to turn them while not letting go of him. “The pardon for Barnes went through. T’Challa is going to wake him up and present the options to him and we’ll decide where to go from there. Did you just get done with your tutoring?”

Black and red eyes narrowed as Rem’s face scrunched up in frustration. “Yeah, I’m getting better in math… I still don’t have a clue why we need fractions, though,” he pouted playfully.

“At least you know the term now.” Tony snorted with good-natured laughter.

Rem huffed and stuck his tongue out at the genius. “Yeah, but I bet I could still break into your lab!”

“Rem, the last time you did that, Dum-E got you with the fire extinguisher.” Stephen gave the teen a deadpan look.

This time, the redhead shot him a cheeky grin. “Hey, at least I know better than to borrow a certain sorcerer uncle’s fancy bling.” He waved away any reply they might have given him. “Do you know if the mail’s been brought in yet?”

Right on cue, a voice rang out, “Mail call, bitches!” Wade skipped into the room with several bundles of envelopes in his arms. “Let’s see, one for the Gundam pilot, one for Merlin, one for Smaugette, and one for the cutest redhead in the world!”

“What did you just call me?!”

Blushing but smiling warmly at Wade’s words, Rem grabbed the envelope with his name on it and beat a hasty retreat as Wade ‘eeped’ and began desperately trying to dodge the now irate Dragonborn. A moment after he left, he heard the sound of a booming Thu’um, a screech from the merc, and the sound of shattering glass accompanied by Tony’s indignant cry of ‘My window!!’
The redhead giggled softly at the byplay before turning his attention to the envelope in his hands, studying it for a few moments. He quickly ripped it open and pulled the single sheet of paper out, blinking in confusion at the pictures that fell out as well. Giving a sigh of annoyance, Rem bent to pick them up, before he froze in shocked horror. A moment later he scooped them up in a trembling hand, turning his attention to the letter. There was only one person who would have these kinds of photos, and as he read through the words the teen’s face paled dramatically as his fears were confirmed. There was no signature, but there also wasn’t any need for one-- after so long, the man responsible for at least half of his nightmares was back.

Rem was frozen completely solid for a moment, thoughts whirling by at a thousand miles an hour and nearly hyperventilating. How had he been found?? The only way he would have gotten that information was if Tony’s systems had been compromised in some way. The thought brought his brain back online a moment later, realization hitting him. He had a family now, a dad and papa and more than a dozen extended relatives who loved him and wouldn’t let anything happen to him. He took a few deep breaths before straightening. It was time he told his family everything he knew about the man the majority of the world knew as genius Doctor Nathaniel Essex, or as Rem knew him, the terrifying Mr. Sinister.

A quick inquiry to FRIDAY sent him running in the direction of the sparring room, the teen barely noticing the trek. He shoved open the door with a shaky hand, his eyes immediately finding Zevrael sheathing a set of knives after a sparring session. The elf looked up and smiled at Rem, only for that smile to fall the instant he saw the state his son was in. “Rem? What’s wrong?” he questioned in deep concern. The silverette crossed the room in a few long strides and pulled the teen into a tight hug.

Rem burrowed tightly against his dad, listening to his heartbeat for several moments as Zevrael’s strong arms held him protectively. “D-Dad… I need your help, and Papa’s… And probably the New Avengers,” he softly said, managing to keep his voice steady when he spoke, the redhead silently handing over the pictures to his father, one by one.

The elf was torn between pride that Rem had come asking for help yet concern that his son had had the urgent need to do so, wondering if this was it; if the last of the redhead’s painful secrets were about to be revealed at last. He and Dorian had noticed that though Rem had spoken of his time with the X-Men, the Thieves Guild, and some of his childhood while he was on the streets after escaping from someone or something known as the Antiquary, he was strangely silent on the mention of his time before that. Not releasing his hold on his, Zevrael kept him close with his right arm while he took the first photograph, his eyes widening immediately at the sight.

There, sitting in the corner of a dim, clearly empty room was a tiny child clad in a dingy nightshirt, involuntary tears stinging at Zevrael’s eyes when he recognized the red hair and that unique eye color- crimson and black, belonging to none other than his beloved son. That boy was holding himself, as Rem still did sometimes when something was bothering him, a forlorn expression with sad eyes that seemed focused on the floor, a bracelet of some sort around his right wrist. More than anything right now, the silverette wanted to travel back in time and give that sad little Rem a
cuddle and shelter him in his arms forever, no matter the traces of dirt he could see on his much too thin arms, hands, and feet.

Swallowing hard, Zevrael took the second picture and instantly had to fight back the urge to be sick. It was the same Rem, a tiny, helpless child that was no doubt in the hands of monsters -- for who else could do such a thing to a little boy whose eyes were wide with fear and terror, his small wrists and ankles shackled to the table with a whole tray full of needles, several having already been used. Two were in the process of being injected into the tiny version of Rem and Zev could see how much it hurt, the pain in those crimson eyes that were so brilliant in the photo that they seemed to almost be a supernova. “Andraste have mercy…” he choked out, unable to stop the tears that time as he squeezed his son hard, aching so badly inside for him. “Da’len, how I wish… I wish we could have found you sooner, my son…”

Taking the final picture, Zev could feel his heart breaking at the sight of the tiny figure sleeping on the no doubt cold, hard floor in that same gray shirt, curled up on himself with nothing, not even a blanket for warmth. There was no bed or mattress, no small stuffed animal to bring comfort in the night if need be, not even a damned nightlight. Instead, a little boy lay all alone in a corner away from the door, his thumb in his mouth, clearly cold since there were goosebumps along his bared skin as he slept.

Inwardly, Zevrael thanked Wade for gifting Rem with the warm, velvety blankets that he’d purchased their son when he’d gotten him his bed, understanding now why Rem had a stuffed animal of some sort hidden in his blankets and his deep rooted love of soft blankets. His tactile need for comfort-- after what was most likely *years* of that treatment, it was a miracle that the teen hadn’t simply shut down and become catatonic.

It took a few seconds for the silverette to reign his emotions in enough to take the letter Rem held out to him. His eyes scanned over the words quickly, and the aching grief and pain he had been feeling was very rapidly replaced by righteous indignation. His grip on his son tightened to an almost painful point before he spoke in an icy cold voice filled with rage. “FRIDAY, have the New Avengers gather in the meeting room nearest to here. Tell them it’s urgent.” The AI agreed and Zev turned his full attention to Rem for a moment, pulling the redhead close and pressing a loving kiss to his forehead. “I’m so glad you brought this to our attention, Rem. Don’t worry-- your Papa and I and the rest of our family are going to take care of this, okay?”

Rem nodded, but grabbed his father’s hand as he made to pull away. “Not Peter.” He pleaded softly, red and black eyes wide and shiny with tears. “He’s… the stuff in the lab… it would scar him mentally. He’s too innocent… he shouldn’t have to…” He struggled for a moment, choking on the lump that developed in his throat. The thought of Peter losing that naivety, that joy that came from having a happy life and childhood because of what they would find in the lab…

Zev quickly pulled the teen back into a hug, gently stroking the fiery locks on his son’s head.
“Okay, Rem. We’ll make sure Peter stays behind.” Rem nodded against his chest with a relieved, shaky sigh. “Come on, let’s go.” He kept one arm around Rem as they left, the letter from before clutched tightly in the other hand. Even without looking at it, the words seemed to be burned into the elf’s mind.

‘I can find you anywhere, Remington. There is no escape from me. Be smart and come back by your own choice, my Gambit, so no one else has to get hurt.’

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Tony was pacing back and forth in the meeting room, fury stretched tight across his face. “FRIDAY, do a full system diagnostic. I want to know how the fuck this… bastard found out about Rem being here. Increase firewall strength as much as you can, I want you to make sure nothing can come within a mile of your systems without us knowing.” He tugged on his hair as the AI agreed.

Rem watched the brunette with sad, resigned crimson eyes. “He already knows where I am, Uncle Tony. No matter where I go, he always manages to find me.” He curled his arms around himself in a protective, somewhat defensive motion. “To Sinister, I’m his greatest creation and proof of his success in genetic engineering— he’ll never let me go. Even if I died, he’d probably clone me to bring me back…” The teen couldn’t stifle a shudder at the idea, though he knew it was true. He was considered too valuable by the mad Doctor to be allowed to stay dead. “It’s not even really me he wants; just his creation— my blood and to add new things to it and see if he can tweak my powers and create new ones.” The redhead pressed himself into his fathers, closing his eyes for a few moments.

“Then we have to take him out of the equation entirely.” Craig announced, jade eyes sharp with anger and determination. “If he’s willing to go to these lengths for one person— threatening and blackmail— then I’d bet he wouldn’t hesitate to attack us here if he got desperate enough.”

Stephen had one of the pictures in his hand, which was trembling far worse than normal. “He was conducting human experimentation. And on a kid, no less!”

“Oui ,” Rem confirmed softly. “Don’t know if there were others besides me or how many, but I remember it. My earliest memories have the Doctor in them…” He peered at his papa and clarified, “He’s the Doctor that I have nightmares about, Papa… “ The mutant then looked back at Stephen. “The injections were a near daily thing, I don’t know what he was trying to do with them or if it was related to how strong my charging powers became later, though that was the room I was in until I was eventually sent to the Antiquary. The Doctor didn’t have need of me again until I became a teenager and my powers were so out of control…”
Tony let out a growl before striding over and pulling Rem into a tight hug. “I swear we’re gonna take care of this, okay? No way in hell are you ever going back there.”

Rem swallowed hard, embracing Tony back. “I-I can’t go back,” he confessed to the genius. “I can’t ever do that again, Uncle Tony… And as I asked Dad, please don’t take Peter! Because… because things are there that even adults will flinch at, let alone someone with such a kind heart. Peter-- I would not have him lose that over me…” Tears flowed down the teen’s face as his crimson eyes met Tony’s orange-tinted whiskey brown ones. “This is one mission I can’t go on; I’m not strong enough to face him…”

Bridget stood gracefully from her seat and held her arms for the weeping teen, and Tony passed him off to the Restoration Master. She wrapped her arms around the redhead, gently stroking his hair as she tucked his head under her chin. “Rem, that’s perfectly fine. What you went through in that place is unquantifiably traumatic, and going back wouldn’t do you any good. Come, let’s go find Peter and the others, maybe watch a funny movie. Sound good?”

The teen nodded and pulled away from the blond, only to be engulfed in a group hug from several people. “Don’t worry Rem, we’re gonna take care of this.” Aria murmured comfortingly to the teen, pressing a kiss to his forehead.

“We’ll make sure Sinister gets what’s coming to him.” Craig agreed, ruffling the teen’s fiery locks.

Rem let out a watery chuckle at that. “Not even Scott-the-Dick could kill Sinister.”

“Sinister has never faced the fury of the agents of the Dinokthur.” Minowa rumbled, eyes glowing brightly and voice resonating with Alduin’s from the strength of their combined anger.

The group pulled away one by one until only Wade was left, and the merc gave Rem a squeeze before pulling away just enough to look the teen in the eye. “No matter what happens, Sinister isn’t leaving that lab alive. You won’t have to worry about him after that, okay?” The teen nodded, and Wade leaned forward to press a brief kiss to his forehead before finally pulling away, pulling his mask over his face.

Dorian and Zevrael took a moment to sandwich their son between them, holding him tight. “We love you, little firefly. We’re going to make sure Sinister can’t hurt you again, no matter what.” Dorian promised, Zevrael nodding in agreement. Rem nodded against Dorian’s chest, relishing in the loving contact from his fathers. Finally the trio pulled apart and Dorian turned to Bridget, who was waiting by the door. “You’ll take care of him?”
Bridget smiled kindly at the mage. She understood that he wasn’t asking out of doubt of her abilities, but out of love and worry for his son. “Of course, Dorian. Mara have mercy on anyone who tries anything here…” She tilted her head forward, and for a brief moment there was a flash of something undeniably violent in her eyes. “…Because I will not.”

Behind his husband, Zevrael couldn’t help but swallow hard. Most people had a tendency to underestimate the blond woman, thinking her a simple healer. What they failed to realize or remember was that, while Bridget’s primary magical strength was in the healing arts, she also had her mastery in Alteration and Conjuration. And those that came against the woman’s summoned thralls tended not to live very long afterwards.

Dorian nodded at the mage before gently pushing his beloved son in her direction. Bridget smiled gently as she put an arm around Rem, leading him from the room. The instant the door was closed, the Pavus duo turned back the rest of the team, faces grim. “Let’s go get this son of a bitch.” The mage announced.

The group as a whole nodded, and Tony took the letter from the table and closed his eyes. His magic surged around him, rising to his call to seek out the origins of the note. After a few seconds, the genius’ eyes opened, a small flicker of orange shining in them. “Got it. Stephen?” He held his hand out and the sorcerer took it to lock onto the location as well. Once he had done so Tony waved a hand to summon his armor before opening a corridor.

It was only a matter of a few seconds for everyone to step through the corridor or through the portal Stephen opened. There were a few seconds of observation before someone finally spoke.

Ulysses swallowed hard, an uncharacteristic look in his eyes. The sniper was disturbed. “Just like Vault-Tec… Worse.” He murmured, squeezing Aria’s hand when the woman took it. Craig leaned against him, face tinted green at the sight.

Stephen wandered towards what looked like an operating table outfitted with restraints. His eyes drifted towards a nearby table with a variety of needles and medical tools. His hands clenched into fists, uncaring of the pain it caused him. The doctor in him was disgusted, horrified by the prospect of the depravity of the experiments performed on that table.

Dorian and Zevrael approached a wall stocked with various bottles, and the silverette plucked one down and glanced at the label. “I don’t recognize this… Um… Gandalf?” He called the sorcerer over, and the man was quick to join them.
Stephen took one look at the bottle and gasped in horror. “That’s a high grade tranquilizer—something that should never be used on humans.” He took the drug from Zevrael, checking it over quickly. “It’s out of date, though.”

“Maybe that one is…” Dorian held up another bottle, one that looked much newer and unopened. “…But this one is brand new.”

The sorcerer quickly accepted the bottle from Dorian, turning it over as well before freezing. “This… this has Rem’s name on it—his old codename- Gambit.” He choked, a look of horrified realization crossing his face a moment later. “Sinister was planning on using this on him when he showed up.”

A choked sound drew their gaze to Tony, who was standing by a box next to an old TV. The screen was on, a video flickering on the screen. The footage showed a familiar feral mutant entering Rem’s room, coming back out a few seconds later with the younger mutant on his hip. He carried him down the hall, uncaring of the way Rem squirmed slightly, weakly protesting against it and the way the blonde, muscular mutant snapped something that made the tiny redhead cringe and shrink in on himself. It only took a moment for them to realize the Sabertooth in the footage looked exactly the same as the one they had encountered a few weeks prior.

Wade swallowed down the bile rising in his throat and croaked, “His healing factor must keep him from aging, just like Wolverine’s…” Studying Rem’s lips and what Sabertooth said in response, the merc’s eyes narrowed behind his mask. “Rem said he didn’t want to go there because it hurts; Sabertooth said that if he didn’t stay still and be quiet that he’d learn what pain truly was…” Exhaling slowly, he looked over at Dorian and Zevrael, hoping to give them some small comfort in one thing he did know for certain. “Victor never… *touched* him like that before that night in the Morlock Tunnels. I hadn’t met Rem at that point, but I wish I could’ve killed him before he ever entered Rem’s life again…”

Hearing the pain in Wade’s voice, the Pavus duo moved over to the merc, each placing a hand on his back and nodding solemnly. That tiny version of their son had been through something so horrific that he hardly needed to add anything more traumatic to it, especially since he’d gone through so much. Rem was so strong, to be able to smile and laugh after everything he’d been through and neither Dorian nor Zevrael had any issues killing someone who’d hurt their son. Especially if it meant that Rem never had to worry about the sadistic man ever coming after him again and treating him as if he were something less than human.

Tony didn’t say a word. He simply ejected the tape from the player, placing it into the box with the others. He didn’t think about how many tapes were in the box-- couldn’t think about the possible contents. A flash of metal drew his attention, and he slowly reached for the silver bracelet sitting next to the box. He turned over the I.D. tag and he swallowed as he read ‘Project: GAMBIT’ on one side and Name: REMINGTON on the other. He looked back down at the dull cloth it had been
sitting on, and his stomach lurched horribly when he recognized the color and material from the video that had been playing not a few seconds ago, as well as the pictures Rem had received. “No wonder he didn’t want Pete here…” He whispered, closing the box after placing the bracelet and shirt inside and handing it off to Stephen, who immediately stored it in a pocket dimension.

“Alright,” he addressed the group as a whole, “Let’s do what we came here to do-- Fiendfyre and Shatterfrost, you’re with me. Let’s go find this… fucking bastard, and make sure he can never do this to anyone ever again.” The husbands nodded sharply, eyes filled with promises of pain.

“Deadpool, get me every physical document you can find on Rem. Scratch that, every physical document and hard drive. I don’t care if you have to destroy anything else to get to them. I want everything. Dragoon, go with--” He turned to the Dragonborn and froze for a moment when he was met with burning crimson eyes with black sclera.

“She was too close to a Fracture.” Alduin explained, eyes flitting around the lab. “It brought back memories… the Thalmor.” He sighed and crossed his gauntlets over his chest. “This place is a den of evil and depravity-- that one would so willingly torture a child for their own gain…” He huffed, a flame curling from his mouth with a puff of smoke.

The genius nodded in understanding, inwardly relieved that Alduin had taken control briefly. Minowa experiencing a Fracture at this point would be catastrophic, especially since he wasn’t sure of exactly where they were. If she had lost control, there was the potential for collateral damage in the form of human life. “I get that. I’ve heard stories about what happened with them… Go with ‘Pool, watch his back.” The dovah nodded sharply before joining the mercenary. “Deadpool, this is Alduin. He’s one of the tenants in Dragoon’s head. If you thought her Thu’um was dangerous, then you’d better hope you’re never on the receiving end of his.”

Wade looked over at the being, who grinned maniacally at him, teeth sharp and eyes full of piercing darkness. He swallowed hard and squeaked, “Heard and understood, loud and clear.” He shrunk down on himself a little more when Alduin’s smile only widened more.

“Alduin, stop scaring him.” Tony arched an eyebrow at the ebony haired being, who simply nodded. “Merlin, I want a list of everything medical in this room-- meds, tools, all of it.”

The sorcerer nodded sharply and moved to do as his soulmate asked before pausing. “Rem said he didn’t know if he was the only one this was happening to… if he was Sinister’s only victim.”

“We’ll take a look around, Glitch.” Aria spoke up, getting nods from her own lovers. “Go, make sure that asshat suffers.”

Tony nodded sharply and he led Dorian and Zevrael from the room. Wade quickly bounced to the nearest computer to dismantle it, Alduin moving to the nearby filing cabinet. Stephen began
summoning the bottles from the wall, lining them up on the operating table, and the Boone trio quickly left the room and split up to take different paths and cover as much area as possible.

No way were they going to fail on this mission, not with the safety of one of their own at stake.

Chapter End Notes

Boy howdy, the New Avengers are on the hunt!! Stay tuned for more!!

Minowa's 'Fractures' will be covered in an upcoming backstory one-shot.
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Wade has been blaming himself for being unable to protect Rem for a long time--fortunately, his new team is there to set the record straight. Stephen needs to think before he speaks, and nearly has a heart attack over the cancer Wade barely even thinks about anymore. Meanwhile, the Boone trio discovers that being parents comes naturally to all of them.

(No one ever told Wade that the 'Doctor' part of Stephen's name isn't ACTUALLY just a code name.)

((The New Avengers therapists aren't getting paid nearly enough.))

Chapter Notes

I know y'all are hoping to see the confrontation with Sinister this chapter, BUT YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO WAIT FOR IT!! -Maniacal laughter-

No, really. Important stuff happens in this chapter. Be patient, the next one is coming soon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

- Alduin, Stephen, and Wade

Listening as Tony and the Pavus duo departed, Alduin waited until he could no longer hear their footsteps before focusing fully on his task. He turned his glowing eyes on Wade again, jerking his head towards a nearby computer system. "You are far more familiar with these systems than us. I will search elsewhere for what Zeymahu desires."

Wade swallowed again and nodded, quickly moving to the first tower. Holy shit, that guy had been living in the woman’s head?! How was she so calm and composed all the time?! Wade was admittedly curious but not enough so that he considered ignoring Tony’s warning. After all, if the genius was giving one, it was usually for a good reason. Pushing the thought to the back of his head, the merc quickly moved to dismantle the computer. He soon found the hard drives in question, and his brows rose in shock once he got a closer look at them. He whistled in shock, drawing Alduin’s attention again. “I’m actually wondering what the hell Sinister’s been up to that he needed four 16 terabyte hard drives in this machine alone …” He hummed, pulling them free of the cords and holding them up for the dovah to see.
“Judging by your reaction, that is unusual for such a system to have?”

Wade hummed as he put the drives to one side. “From what I’ve learned about Mister Sinister, he’s definitely been alive since 1859, right when his true identity, Dr. Nathaniel Exxus, was ostracized for his theories on human evolution and genetic mutation. Of course, he was actually correct but he was considered… strange, pardon the pun, Gandalf, for his beliefs. At some point he became immortal, but computers and such have only been around since about 1974. So whatever he’s got on these drives, there’s a large amount of data considering it’s only from the last forty-something years…” Wade paused for a moment, staring down at the hard drives. Part of him dreaded learning what was on those; seeing that video Tony had pulled up with Sabertooth carrying Rem and the photos from the redhead’s childhood earlier had been hard. It wouldn’t surprise him if a great portion of the information contained inside was about Rem alone.

Alduin snorted, tilting his head in the mercenary’s direction. “Immortal? Unlikely. Perhaps he has found some way to increase his lifespan significantly, but nothing that lives can ever be truly immortal.” For a moment, the red and black eyes became distant, as if remembering something from a long time ago. “It is one thing to be ageless… but it means nothing if one can still be struck down.”

“I did kill him!” Wade suddenly snapped, causing both Stephen and Alduin to whip their heads towards him in shock at the deep emotion within the merc’s voice. The hazel-eyed man swung his arm in an arc, knocking the tower clean off the desk and crashing to the floor. “I tried blowing him up, stabbing him, shooting him, decapitating him— all it got me was a vivisection with no anesthesia! Somehow, that fucking bastard keeps coming back! So if that doesn’t make him immortal, then what the hell does?” He whipped around away from the tower, beginning to pace back and forth, agitation in every line of his body. “It’s different for Sabertooth because I knew he could be killed, and fuck knows I tried, but I couldn’t do it because his healing factor worked faster than mine! I lost count of how many times I got my neck broken for trying! Rem got assaulted over and over again by that asshole, and all I could do was put him back together after every time because I wasn’t good enough to kill him and be done with it!” He finally stopped, throwing his fist at the wall, uncaring of the feeling of his bones cracking under the force of the hit. “I could hold him, let him cry, and wipe his tears away… but I couldn’t make them stop.” The last part was said in little more than a whisper.

The mercenary had his eyes closed, trying to block out the images that assaulted his mind, so he didn’t register the fact that someone was in front of him until his hand was being pulled away from the wall. His eyes snapped open to see Alduin in front of him, holding a gauntlet over his broken hand and channeling a restoration spell through it. “That you tried and failed, yet still kept trying, speaks volumes on the quality of your character, and the love you have for your friend. Each time he was broken, you were there for him when others were so willing to turn a blind eye to his pain.” The black and red eyes of the dovah caught and pinned Wade’s hazel ones as he cut the spell, letting go of his hand. “You are loyal to him— it is good. However, you are no longer the only ones looking out for Rem. He has his team, his family, and any who dare harm a hair on his head…” The eyes suddenly glowed, flashing as if burning with an inner
We will send them to Sithis, allow the Dread Father to pass his judgment.”

“Or I’ll send them to a Hell dimension, whichever one is easiest.” Stephen quipped, turning from the bottles in front of him for a moment to address the mercenary as well. “Seriously, DP. You don’t have to do it alone anymore. We’ll all protect Rem with everything we have. And you need to stop blaming yourself for what happened. Nope, don’t interrupt me.” He held one shaking hand out to stop whatever the man had been about to say. “You didn’t make the choice to keep hurting Rem with human experimentation. You didn’t decide to sexually assault Rem over and over again. We know where the blame for those things falls, and it sure as hell isn’t on you. Do you think Rem blames you for what happened to him?”

Wade swallowed and his eyes fell to the floor. “Sometimes I wonder why he doesn’t.”

“And I wonder how fast Rem would kick your ass if he heard you talking like that.” The sorcerer shot back, crossing over to where the duo was standing. “No one in the Compound blames you. Not his dads, not the other New Avengers, and definitely not Rem himself, so put the blame where blame is due and take comfort in the fact that you did everything you possibly could to help him.”

The man in question looked between the sorcerer and the dovah, something unidentifiable in his expression as he stared at them with wide eyes. Alduin finally sighed and put a hand on the man’s shoulder, drawing his attention. “If it is absolution you seek, then know that you already have it from us, though it was never needed to begin with as you have done no wrong. If you desire it from Rem, I would suggest you sit down and talk with him. He cannot give you what he doesn’t know you need.”

Stephen nodded at the words. “We forgive you, even though we don’t think you did anything wrong.” He then gave the merc a quick once-over. “Although, if you want to make amends, you can stand still for a few minutes while I do a check over on your health.”

“But my healing factor--”

The sorcerer shot the man a look and deadpanned, “You mentioned being vivisected at least once, and having your neck broken multiple times. I don’t care what kind of healing factor you have, those aren’t the sorts of injuries one recovers from without leaving some kind of mark.”

Wade stared at him for a moment, brow furrowed. “Are you qualified to do that? Like, do you know how to examine a human body?”
Aria peeked into another room before sighing softly, shaking her head. So far, she hadn’t found anyone who seemed to be a victim or creation of Sinister’s experiments like Rem had been. For once though, she was glad to have not found anything yet. The idea of a child being treated the way Rem had been made her stomach churn a bit, though she was quick to force the feeling down as she continued down the hall to the next room. “Craig, Ulysses, found anybody yet?” She asked quietly into her coms as she peeked into another room.

“Nothing on my end,” Craig replied, the sound of rustling papers picked up by the microphone. “Though not for lack of trying, it looks like.”

“And failing,” Ulysses spoke up as well. “Found several lists-- genetic combinations, all failed… Only success he ever had was Rem-- would explain why he keeps kidnapping him periodically… looks like he’s been cloning people as well.”

A violent shudder ran through Aria at the mention of cloning, a distant echo of ‘Gary!’ ringing in her ears. Thankfully, a snort from Craig pulled her attention back. “You’d think that the failures would be an indicator for him to maybe stop.”

The deep rumbling chuckle that Ulysses responded with was slightly bitter. “Men like that only understand one thing… Amicus is going to deliver the message-- make it loud and clear, so he gets it.” There was a pause before the man hummed again. “Found something-- Sinister was planning to experiment on him again, try and add a new ability… didn’t note what kind, though.”

Aria growled quietly under her breath. “He comes anywhere near our little redhead, I’ll stuff my foot so far up his ass that my toes will pop out his mouth.” The declaration prompted a choked laugh from Craig and a snort from Ulysses who also muttered ‘would pay to see that’. It made the woman grin at the fact that despite the current mission and the environment they were in, she could still bring light into the hearts of the two most important men in her life.

An odd sound caused the brunette to pause, stilling herself completely so she could better hear and pinpoint the noise. It took a few seconds for her to realize exactly what she was hearing, her eyes widening as dread built within her. It couldn’t be, could it? The woman exploded into movement immediately, her sharp hearing helping to guide her to a lone room at the end of a side hall. She burst through the door and immediately skidded to a stop, her heart lurching in horror at what she found.
Within the cool room, an infant with small tufts of blond hair lay inside a plastic tub against the far wall, resting upon what appeared to be a fabric sheet. Clad in nothing more than a diaper and wearing a small metal bracelet with the label Project: CHANGELING, the baby’s little arms and feet moved slightly, the tiny, bared body covered in goosebumps, a faint, tiny whimper of hunger sounding again. On the right heel of the infant’s foot was a visible needle prick, the mark inflamed and red with a deep bruise, and near the tub was a tray full of syringes with different liquids inside of them. Set upon the counter near the clear, plastic tub, there was also a container of infant formula with a bottle, along with a lab book detailing feeding and changing times, along with the progress on training the baby to not cry.

Aria felt as though the breath had been knocked clean from her lungs, even as she was sweeping forward towards the infant. She wasted no time in gathering the child into her arms, holding the baby against her chest. The baby wasted no time in trying to snuggle further into the woman’s warmth, and tears welled up in Aria’s eyes at the action, feeling just how cold the little one was. Without even realizing it, she moved so she could lean against a wall, sliding down so she was curled with her knees close, trying to provide the baby with some measure of warmth even as she was reaching for her coms. “Craig, ‘Ses, are you there?” She croaked into it, hoping they would answer sooner rather than later.

Instantly, both men were on the line. “Aria, love, what’s wrong?” Craig’s voice came over the earpiece, sounding worried.

“I need you both here, ASAP.” She managed to get out before her throat closed up, turning her attention back to the infant even as her husbands were reassuring her they were on the way. Less than ten seconds later, a pair of corridors opened almost simultaneously, the men stepping through with weapons at the ready. Their eyes quickly located Aria, and she smiled tremulously at them and uncurled herself a bit so they could see the infant that was seemingly trying to burrow its way into her.

“Oh my God.” Craig gasped in shock, immediately making his way to his wife’s side. “Christ, he’s gonna freeze like that.” He quickly ripped the shirt from his body, holding his arms out for the infant. Aria quickly passed the child, and the sniper wasted no time in bundling the baby in the shirt and cradling the infant so the neck was supported. “‘Ses, can you get a bottle? When was the last time he ate? Or had his diaper changed for that matter??”

Ulysses took a deep breath to calm himself down before moving towards the items in question, glancing down at the noted on the table next to the bottle and formula. An unholy fire lit in his eyes as he told them, “Hasn’t been fed in eight hours-- was training him to not cry in the event of cold, heat, hunger…”
“That’s disgusting!” Aria hissed, tears in her eyes as she got to her feet to stand next to Craig. “He’s barely more than two months old! How could anyone…” She trailed off, blinking at the infant in surprise. “Craig, did you see that? His eye color just changed.”

The sniper blinked and looked down at the baby, who was staring up at him with brown eyes. The infant repeated the action and Craig choked in shock when his own jade coloring was reflected in the baby’s wide eyes. “Yeah, I see.” He whispered, shifting so he could tenderly run a calloused hand over the soft downy blond hair on his head.

Something lit in Aria’s heart as she watched her husband being so careful with the infant. She gave a soft, watery chuckle as she reached forward to mimic the motion. “We should probably change him, just in case.” Craig nodded, and they moved back to the tub Aria had found the child in. “‘Ses, is the bottle almost ready?” The brunette called as they set the child down.

“Should be done by the time you are.”

Aria called over her thanks before turning back to the baby, gently tugging at the diaper on the tiny hips. “Craig, can you get that infernal bracelet off?” She asked as she did so.

Craig nodded and gently took the infant’s arm, unhooked the clasp, and pulled the offending metal away. “Looks just like the one we found for Rem…” He looked closer at the tag, even as he rubbed the tiny hand of the child. “Project: CHANGELING, huh? Guess that explains your eye color, huh little guy?”

Aria suddenly gave a soft laugh, drawing his attention. “Craig… it’s not a little guy.” She gently caressed the child’s stomach in a loving gesture. “It’s a little girl.”

The sniper’s mouth dropped, but before he could say anything he was drawn to the feeling of tiny fingers wrapping around one of his, and he looked back at the face of the infant. The baby gave him an open-mouthed smile and soft gurgle, and something in the man crumbled as silent tears welled up in his eyes. He barely noticed as Aria replaced the diaper, but did look up when Ulysses approached with a bottle. “‘Ses, it’s a girl.” He whispered, pulling off his shades so he could wipe the tears that didn’t seem to want to stop falling.

The piercing brown eyes of the man in question softened into a look neither Aria nor Craig had ever seen before, and he nodded before holding his arms out for the little girl. His wife wasted no time in settling the infant into his arms, and Ulysses offered the bottle to the baby who immediately latched on and started eating. He watched her for a minute or so as his husband and wife snuggled up beside him to observe her too. Finally, once she was finished, Ulysses easily maneuvered her to
gently pat at her back, a small smile crossing his face once she burped. He returned her to his arms, and she snuggled against him and fell into an easy sleep. The sniper looked up at Craig and Aria, who both had adoring smiles on their faces and simply declared, “She’s ours.” The duo simply nodded their agreement, knowing nothing more needed to be said.

- Alduin, Stephen, and Wade

“You were introduced as ‘Doctor Stephen Strange, Sorcerer Supreme’! Nobody told me that you used to be a neurosurgeon!”

Stephen huffed in annoyance as he prepared to cast a diagnostic spell for the mercenary sitting in the chair in front of him, looking sheepish. “Well, why didn’t you look it up??”

Wade gave the sorcerer an incredulous look. “Merlin, I was sleeping on a couch until recently. The hell makes you think I have a computer or T.V.??”

The man blanched for a second, a look of utter horror on his face. “Wait, that couch that Tony incinerated a week and a half ago-- you were sleeping on that ?!”

“Yeeees?”

The blue-green eyed man threw his hands in the air. “That thing had Stachybotrys in every nook and cranny! Considering the amount we found, how are you not coughing up blood?!”

Wade blinked, tilting his head. “It had what now?”

“It had black mold in it, you imbecile! An obscene amount!” Stephen almost continued, but a flash of hurt in the merc’s eyes made him stop and take a deep breath. “I… that was unworthy of me. I’m sorry. I’ve… been told I don’t have the best bedside manner, and… You’re my teammate. Healing factor or no, the doctor in me worries greatly about the health of those I care about.”

Stilling in the chair, Wade leaned forward, his elbows resting upon his knees with his focus on the floor, feeling the iciness of his Deadpool personality warring with the deep, deep hurt he was feeling right now. Doctor Strange was a man that he truly respected and considered to be a friend--and then to be called an imbecile by him, basically meaning that he was ‘stupid’. Just because he hadn’t understood what the man had said? Never mind the fact that said doctor was a genius just
like Tony Stark. Once he trusted his voice enough to speak, Wade kept it low enough to try to keep the pain out of it, a lone tear running. “I accept your apology,” he replied, though his gaze never lifted, “and I also pray to God you never call Rem an imbecile because he wouldn’t have understood that word either, he would have most likely wound up in tears from shame, and then you could explain to his dads exactly how you made him cry. He never had the chance to go to college because of Jean Luc, Sinister, and Sabertooth, and I personally couldn’t afford to go, Doctor. So if you don’t mind, please remember that not everyone has been so fortunate to get a full education nor are they geniuses who have learned scientific terms for things.” His voice cracked a little towards the end, indicating his level of upset, the hazel-eyed man’s mask damp with a few more tears.

Though Stephen wasn’t one to give out random hugs, he found himself pulling Wade into a tight embrace, heart aching at the fact that he’d hurt Wade to such an extent that the mercenary had actually shed tears. “Wade, I’m so sorry I upset you like that. I never meant to insinuate you were stupid– I’ve never thought you were, to begin with. What I said, no matter how heightened my emotions, was cruel and callous, and I’ll endeavor to watch myself in the future.”

Wade sniffed softly and started to reach for his mask, pausing when he realized it could be seen as a security risk. A moment later, the crackling sound of electricity drew his attention to the side, where Alduin had a fist full of lightning magic in his clawed gauntlet as he eyed the various cameras around the room, which were all sparking and smoking. The dovah looked back to the mercenary and dipped his head with a smirk. Wade nodded and pulled his mask off, shooting the being a grateful smile before turning his attention back to Stephen.

Rising from the chair, the merc returned the hug, seeing the pain on the sorcerer’s face and the genuine regret that he held within his eyes. “Thank you, Stephen,” he softly said, giving him a small smile, the remnants of his tears still on his scarred face. “Now… Are you ready to do the scan or whatever, Merlin?”

Stephen tightened his grip for a moment before letting the man go, nodding. “Have a seat, this shouldn’t take long.” Wade did as he asked, and the sorcerer allowed the diagnostic spell to wash over him. “Okay, let’s see… remarkably, your bone structure seems to be in perfect condition-- which is incredible, I must say. Let’s take a look at tissue and organs--” The doctor suddenly stopped dead, face paling beyond what would be considered medically safe. “Wade… You…” The man struggled for a moment, eyes flying across the mercenary’s body.

Wade tilted his head in confusion before realization lanced through him. “Oh… I take it you found the cancer in my liver, lungs, prostate, and brain? Yeah, I know about it. Healing factor holds it back. It might work a lot faster if not for that.”

The sorcerer’s mouth opened and closed multiple times, eye twitching noticeably as he tried to find something to say to that revelation. Before he could, though, a corridor opened up, admitting the
Boone trio. Before turning to face them, Stephen grabbed Wade’s shoulder, looking him in the eye. “Bridget, Tony, and I will look at it later-- we will find a solution, I swear.” He turned back to the partners, completely missing the hazel-eyed man’s stunned and hopeful look. “Welcome back, guys. What did you--?”

Alduin suddenly growled in fury, drawing his attention. The being swept forward, holding his arms out as the chest plate of the Obsidian Dragoon armor retreated. “Here. Our dovahsos means we run hotter than normal.”

Ulysses nodded at the being, passing a small bundle to him. Stephen gasped and Wade let loose a string of expletives when the being turned towards them with a baby pressed to his chest. “By the Vishanti, he can’t be more than a few months old!” The sorcerer swept forward to look over the child. “Here, put him on the table, let me check him over-- Levi, would you mind providing some cushioning?” The cloak immediately spread itself over the table so the baby wouldn’t be exposed to the cold metal of the table. “Did you find that on him?” He gestured to the bracelet Craig had clutched in his hand.

“Yeah, and it’s a little girl, Merlin.” He said softly, nervously hovering close to the table and holding out a finger to the baby as Alduin set her down.

Aria nodded at that. “We found these with her-- only this one was empty.” She passed over a series of syringes, gesturing to the only used one to clarify. “We don’t recognize the technical mumbo-jumbo on it…”

The blue-green eyes of the man flew over the writing before Stephen gave a huge sigh of relief. “It’s vaccinations, the first round that children get.” He quickly removed the shirt from the infant, giving her a check. “The bruise on her foot is from the shot, it will heal up just fine. She’s a little skinny, and has a mild case of diaper rash… but other than that, she’s okay.” The Boone trio sighed with relief, and Stephen reached for the shirt to re-wrap the infant. He paused when Levi wrapped himself around the baby, prompting a gurgle of delight from the baby and a smile. “You going to stay with her, Levi?” Stephen asked the relic with a smile, getting a nod from the cloak’s collar while the other corner gently stroked the baby’s head. “Alright, just be careful with her.”

The byplay prompted a soft laugh from Aria, who took Levi and the baby back into her arms. “I have no doubt he will.”

“Where did you find the little one?” Alduin asked, black and red eyes never leaving the girl even as the Obsidian Dragoon chest-plate re-engaged.
“Further into the lab. Was alone, didn’t find any other victims.” Ulysses replied, holding out a finger for the baby to try and catch. “Had papers with her-- details of something called Project: CHANGELING. Likely refers to her.”

Stephen couldn’t help the small smile that quirked at his lips as the baby gurgled happily again and gripped the sniper’s finger. “Wonder why they chose ‘Changeling’...” He trailed off when the baby blinked, the blue eyes from before now a dark brown and her hair shifting from blond to black. “Ah. I suppose that would explain it.”

A snort from the dovah in the room prompted them to turn towards him. “Now that we know the child is healthy and safe, we may want to turn our attention to a new problem we have acquired.” Seeing the odd looks he was getting, the being gestured to the open doorway. “Namely, the fact that Wade just went charging down the hall with his swords in hand.”

“What-- shit! WADE!!”

Chapter End Notes

Another new word from Alduin-- Dovahsos means dragon blood.

For those who are unfamiliar with the 'Gary' bit, look up Vault 108 from Fallout 3. TL;DR, cloning gone VERY VERY WRONG.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Taking possession of the body of one of the New Avengers was a bad idea-- attempting to take possession of a body currently inhabited by an entire race of dragons was a WORSE one. Alduin is simply amused by the puny mortal trying to do so. Tony refuses to put up with Sinister's shit, and then proceeds to find out that tapping into power you have no real experience with can sometimes backfire.

(Whether she's in control or not, Minowa is NOT amused by Wade's antics.)

((Tony thought it was funny and ironic when he named his scythe 'Soul Render'. Turns out the joke's on him.))

Chapter Notes

Got the chapter done, was falling asleep in my chair and decided I would get it up in the morning. Stood up to pee, and by the time I got back I was like, "I have my second wind, I have 20 minutes to get this posted before I crash!! GO GO GO!!"

Aren't you all lucky!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

- Wade

Wade barely paused his stride down the hallway as he deftly took the head off another unfortunate henchman that got in his way. Pure rage was written within every line of the mercenary’s body, fury flashing in his eyes as he drew his gun and shot a man that came down from the intersection to his left. His body joined the trail he already had growing behind him, victims missing limbs, heads, full of bullet holes, and one rather unfortunate bastard crushed under a storage cabinet.

It was bad enough when Sinister had been torturing and experimenting on Rem. Rem was an adult and had a chance at fighting back, slim though it may be. But the Boone trio hadn’t had an adult with them-- they’d had a child, a fucking infant. A snarl ripped its’ way from Wade’s throat as he sliced another man clean in half, leaving him to scream in pain and bleed out on the floor behind him. When he got his hands on the mad scientist, he was going to find a way to kill the fucker once and for all-- He’d call on Hadrian if he had to, but he wouldn’t let another kid be fucked up by Sinister-- not again. Never again.
Something prickled at the man’s senses suddenly, and he whipped around holding his pistol out and ready. “Who the fuck’s there?! Get out here so I can unalive you good and proper!”

A smokey cloud rose up behind him, and Wade had only enough time to turn back before it surrounded him completely.

- Alduin and Stephen

“What the hell was he thinking, charging off like that?!” Stephen snapped, fear on his face as he summoned his magic into his hands. “Deadshot, Bullseye, Sonic, you and the kid stay here-- Levi, protect them like your existence depends on it!” The corner of the cloak waved in agreement and the Sorcerer wasted no time in sprinting down the hall alongside Alduin. “I don’t care how old that man is, when I get my hands on him he’ll be grounded until Rem is done with school!”

Alduin barked out a deep, harsh laugh as the talons in the Obsidian Dragoon boots dug into the floor to allow for a sharp turn. “I am of a similar mind-- unkillable or not, it is not simply unwise but outright foolish to rush ahead without a grah-zeymahzin to back him up. Minowa lost a mentor that way. She is most unhappy with Wade at the moment…”

Stephen gave a small jump to avoid a limbless corpse in his path. “Wait, is she seeing and hearing all of this??”

“No, I have been keeping her informed. She is still aware, even if she isn’t in control. ” The dovah clarified, easily skirting around a gutted man. After having to perform his own jump to avoid another body, the being growled in aggravation. “Cover your ears if you cherish your hearing. ” He commanded Stephen, who immediately did as he was told. The mouthpiece of the armor folded up over his face, and Alduin took a deep breath. “Fus Ro Dah! ” He roared, the power and magic ripping down the hall and hurling the bodies to the far end, landing all in a pile that almost reached the ceiling. “Better. Come, let’s find our wayward teammate.” He gestured for Stephen to follow him again, and the sorcerer did while pulling on one ear to alleviate some of the ringing in it that he hadn’t managed to completely avoid.

The duo finally burst into a large chamber, spotting Wade taking the top of someone’s head off, the body falling to the floor in a spray of blood. Stephen stepped forward to call out to him when he froze. Wade could be a little violent in his killings-- that much was clear from the trail of bodies he’d left behind that they’d been following. But this… the state of the other bodies in the room spoke to a level of cruelty and sadistic pleasure that he honestly didn’t think the mercenary was capable of. The fact that said man was humming a jaunty tune with a psychotic smile on his face was also a pretty big indicator that something wasn’t quite right.
Beside him, Alduin suddenly stood up completely straight. “Stephen, look out--!”

Wade whipped out a gun, and it was only his teammate’s warning that gave Stephen enough time to dive to the side to avoid the bullet that would have hit him in the chest. “Wade, what the Hell are you doing?!” The sorcerer shouted as he threw up a barrier, another bullet ricocheting off it a second later.

The merc tilted his head to one side, the psychotic grin spreading. “I’m sorry, I’m afraid Wade isn’t available at the moment. Please try your call again later.” The voice that came from the man’s mouth was female, chipper, and completely deranged while the hazel eyes held more than a hint of glee.

Alduin snarled in fury, sinking into a battle stance. “**His mind is not his own, fahdoni. Someone has latched onto him, forcefully taking control of his body.**” The being glanced over at Stephen. “Defend yourself-- I will free him of their control.”

Stephen nodded, strengthening his barrier while also wrapping a defensive spell around Alduin. He wasn’t going to argue this time-- as Minowa had brought up before, she was in fact much older than him. However, Alduin was the first dragon, so he was older than ALL of them. If he said he could free Wade’s mind from whoever had their grip on him, the sorcerer would put his faith in that.

The **dovah** turned his gaze back Wade, who cackled and leaped towards him, katanas in hand. Alduin simply took a deep breath, the mouthpiece flowing over his face again. “**Gol Hah Dov!**” The Shout slammed into Wade, staggering him for a moment. Alduin seized the opportunity and snapped, “**Kneel!**” The man’s knees hit the ground, and Stephen inhaled sharply at the display even as the dragon was stalking over to the figure. **“I do not know who you are, or what your purpose is, but you have made the mistake of attempting to dominate the mind of grah-zeymahzinu, our shield-brother. So, I will give this order only once.”**

The dragon’s eyes flashed like red hot embers, a furious roar ripping from his mouth.

“**GET OUT OF HIS BODY!!**”

The effect was instantaneous. A dark, smokey cloud ripped itself away from Wade, the mercenary collapsing on his side a moment later. There was a second of silence before the smoke lunged for
Alduin, surrounding him. The *dovah* simply grinned, eyes glowing brighter. “*If you are so eager for death, who am I to deny you?*” The being closed his eyes, the smirk remaining as the smoke sank into him.

Stephen allowed his shield to drop, ears ringing from the force of the last shout. He quickly made his way over to Wade, who was shakily getting back up, clutching his head. “Hey, no, don’t get up. I don’t know what that Shout was, and I don’t know what kind of residual effects it may have had. Sit against the wall, let me check you.”

Wade nodded, still looking dazed as he let the sorcerer settle him against the wall. “Fuck, head feels like it was squished by a semi…” He groaned, blinking at Stephen with a pained and confused look in his eyes.

“From what Alduin could tell, something was possessing you. Don’t know who or what, but…” He trailed off, gesturing weakly to the scalped corpse to one side.

The mercenary blanched at the sight, barely reacting as Stephen cast a spell on him to alleviate his headache. “What the fuck? Are you telling me I did that?? I unalive people, I’ll never deny that, but that’s just fucked up.”

“Yes, that’s how we knew you weren’t yourself… which might not have happened if you hadn’t run off on your own, which we *will* be talking about later.” Stephen gave the hazel-eyed man a sharp look.

Swallowing hard, Wade gave the man a sheepish look and a nod before something drew his eyes to behind Stephen. “Uh, Merlin?? Is he supposed to be glowing like that…?”

Stephen whipped his head around, finally noticing the fact that Alduin had begun glowing brightly, heatwaves radiating from him and warping the air around his person from the rapidly increasing temperature. He cursed and made another hand motion, sending himself and Wade into the mirror dimension. “I have no idea what he’s doing, but the thing that was controlling you tried to get into his mind to start controlling him…”

Wade blanched hard, looking back to Stephen. “She’s trying to control *them* ??” The sorcerer nodded, brow furrowing in confusion at Wade’s reaction. “Merlin, I heard the stories from when you guys rescued Tony from the Wicked Witch of the West-- Minowa scared Sauron back into Mordor because he was *trying* to get into her head!”
Blue-green eyes widened in sudden realization, and a moment later the light and heat suddenly exploded outwards from Alduin with enough heat and force to produce an impressive ‘boom’ and reducing everything in the room to molten slag, ashes, and charred remains. Stephen had no doubt that if they’d still been in the room, even he would have been hard-pressed to survive such an onslaught, no matter how talented he was in magic. After a few seconds, he brought himself and Wade out of the mirror dimension, slowly approaching Alduin who was simply breathing deeply with a calm smile on his face. “You okay?” Stephen asked softly, giving a puddle from a melted folding chair a wide berth on his way over.

The being’s eyes opened, black and red orbs finding them after a moment. “Your concern is appreciated, fahdoni. Rest assured, her will would have never been enough to overpower us. She will not be a problem any longer-- I’m sure the Dread Lord will be more than happy with our gift.” He smirked for a moment before his eyes found Wade, annoyance flashing across his features. “The dovahkiin is EXTREMELY displeased at your actions. You and she will be having a discussion later, make no mistake. Your actions were foolish-- you understand this, correct?”

Wade shrank back from the force of the being’s glare. After the display he’d just witnessed, he was now even less inclined to consider pissing the woman… man… either of them off. “Yeah, I’m smart enough to know when I’ve stepped in it.”

“Oh, rest assured, she will gladly take you to task… but she won’t be too strict.” He turned away, waving a hand in false dismissiveness. “After all… you also have to tell Rem.”

A laugh managed to escape Stephen as the mercenary went wide-eyed with horrified realization. The whispered, ‘I’m DOOMED’ only made him laugh harder. Alduin simply grinned as he led them down the hall. “Hopefully Tony’s had a more enjoyable time than us…” The sorcerer mused, grinning at the other two.

- Tony, Dorian, and Zevrael

“For fuck’s sake, where the hell is everyone?!”

Dorian glanced over at Tony, who was retracting his helmet into the rest of his armor. “I’m not sure. I’ve noticed that it looks as though Sinister was packing everything up-- possibly planning to move locations.” He remarked, looking over to Zevrael for confirmation. His husband had far better observation skills than he did, able to pick up on the smallest, yet most telling details that most would overlook.
Noticing his husband’s look, the elf nodded in agreement. “He wasn’t just packing up to move-- he was doing it fast, and he planned on abandoning this lab-- possibly destroying it. As for people… He may have already moved them ahead, but it’s far more likely he killed them.” He shrugged at the horrified look Tony shot him. “From what I know of this ‘Sinister’, he seems like the kind of man who wouldn’t want loose ends or would consider people expendable. I wouldn’t put it past him.”

Tony grunted, looking forward again. “We won’t give him the chance to do so again. I swear though, I’m about to use my other abilities to find this bastard.” After a few seconds, he growled in annoyance. “Y’know, fuck this. Give me a second, guys.” The Pavus husbands took a step back and stood watch as the genius sent out a pulse of his magic, directing it to find the man in question. After a few seconds, he felt it latch on. “Got him. Come on, this way.” He gestured for them to follow, and they followed behind the brunette a step behind him. A few minutes later, they slowed their gait as they approached a door, and Tony quickly cloaked them so they could lean against the wall to listen in on whatever was being said.

Inside of the room, a tall, imposing man with black hair and glowing red eyes was directing the few human workers left in this lab, his face completely expressionless as he spoke. “How many times do I have to repeat myself? This room was supposed to be emptied already, it’s the last left in this wing. I can’t keep leaving the security cameras alone to come correct your mistakes,” Mister Sinister stated flatly. “Gambit will arrive any time now and as soon as he is secured with the tranquilizer and power suppressor, this lab has to be ready for demolition.”

There was a quieter question from one of his minions, the scientist exhaling slowly before he replied, speaking as if the recipient were nothing more than a child. “I don’t know how he became younger but-- I know my creation when I see him. There is no room for doubt that it was indeed Gambit that Victor sent me a picture of before his disappearance. Since he has not returned, I must accept that he has perished and I will have to rectify that once everything is up and running in my new laboratory. I already have plans to clone a replacement for him and age him back to his current age. He’s best for keeping my creation alive and aside from his… tendencies, he has never failed to keep Project: Gambit from being a success.” There was no emotion, no pride, nothing in the man’s voice when he spoke of the red-haired mutant, merely a clear sense of ownership in the fact that it was his work that had brought life to the male in question.

Tony barely reacted to the words outwardly, but Zevrael and Dorian knew him well enough to see that the man was infuriated by the man’s words. Eyes glowing burning orange, the genius raised his hand and, with a flick of his wrist, erected a set of wards that would keep anyone from entering or leaving the room by any means without his say so, then another one to alert the other Reapers the moment they stepped into the room, allowing his team to find them almost instantaneously.

“Dorian.” He called to the mage, holding out his right hand, summoning power into it and turning the grooves in his gauntlet blue.

Fiendfire was curling up and over the man in question, who turned enraged hazel eyes towards him. “Light them up?”
“No.” The light from the armor was suddenly expelled outward, his scythe falling into his hands a moment later. “Set a few pockets of that stuff around the hall. Once everyone is here… set them off.” He turned his eyes to Zevrael next, who was manifesting a set of ice daggers. “Zev, if you wouldn’t mind making them aware of our presence…”

The elf gave him a feral grin, eyes filled with demented glee as ice and frost began to crawl up his arms. “Lethallin, it would be an absolute pleasure.” He pressed his hand to the wall just before the doorway, and the cryomancer let loose his full power. The temperature in the room instantly plummeted to well below freezing, ice coating the floor and frost creeping up the walls. The lights in the room flickered before the LEDs died, the regular bulbs bursting and shattering in a shower of glass and sparks. A wall of ice formed over the doorway, completely trapping everyone inside.

Stilling when the room froze over, Mister Sinister looked over the workers within the room, knowing that it would not take long for the regular humans to die. What a waste of valuable resources but this was not of his doing. “Place the boxes against the far wall and stand back,” he instructed them. It seemed that his masterpiece could surprise him still, for he realized now that Gambit would not be coming. The scientist had failed to take into account that the group his creation was allied with now were nothing like the X-Men by any means and had responded accordingly to remove a threat to a teammate that they cared about. It was a strange notion to a man who felt no emotions but he had seen this sort of loyalty towards his creation from none other than Deadpool. Of course, it had been inconvenient to deal with the mercenary and perhaps killing him would have been easier than simply teaching him painfully that no matter what he did, Deadpool could not kill him. However, the fact that Deadpool was willing to kill to protect his creation filled the void sometimes left when Sinister had need of Victor, so it was… better to let him live to protect Gambit in Victor’s absence. It had been child’s play for Sinister to discover that Deadpool’s body was ravaged by a very deadly cancer that was held in check by his healing factor. That, in turn, gave the scientist the additional benefit of reminding Victor that he was not irreplaceable in that while Deadpool could not kill him due to his healing ability being focused on the cancer, should Victor displease Sinister, he could cure Deadpool and let the man kill him. It mattered not to Sinister and he neither condoned nor approved of what Victor did with Gambit so long as Deadpool survived. The DNA testing from over a year ago had shown that Gambit’s genes might be adapting to incorporate the healing factor from Sabertooth’s DNA and begin reproducing it without Sinister having done any manipulation for it to do so, something that absolutely fascinated the scientist to the core. He was eager to retest it and see if it was true. While Sinister’s thoughts twisted and turned, the boxes were being stacked neatly by the humans, who stayed out of the way of whatever might be coming.

A few seconds after the humans had backed away from the boxes, several things happened at once. Black flames erupted around the boxes, reducing them to nothing more than ash in a matter of seconds, and the humans all suddenly yelped in shock as dark vortexes formed under them, sucking them in before closing as if they’d never been there. Absolute silence filled the room for a moment before another corridor opened up, admitting Tony and a still cloaked Dorian and Zevrael. “Tisk tisk, Dr. Essex.” The genius began blithely, his cordial tone belied by the cold fury present in his glowing orange eyes. “One would think after having lived so long you would learn that human experimentation is a big no-no. Clearly, wisdom doesn’t come with age in some cases.” He set the
butt of his scythe on the ground, leaning against it in mock relaxation. “I guess in yours, it came with a loss of morality.”

Turning from where he stood to face the intruders inside of his laboratory, renowned genius Doctor Nathaniel Essex, also known as Mister Sinister, inclined his head towards his fellow genius, Doctor Anthony Stark. Of course, the man didn’t have the same doctorates as him but he was a fellow intellectual. “Ah, but there are some things that have come about because of human experimentation, Dr. Stark. I think it all depends on what it is used for,” he replied matter of factly. “And think on this- now that you know my little project, would you truly prefer for him to never exist at all? As for my wisdom- it was I who invented most of the known vaccines- polio, influenza, pneumonia… Those came from me and were distributed by others to benefit the world.” Thinking on the view of morality, the scientist shrugged. “I can’t weigh in on something that my Master removed from me decades ago when he tasked me to undertake genetic experimentation in the first place. I failed to realize that my creation’s new team… You care about Gambit as the X-Men never did; only Wolverine ever bothered to come for him when Victor brought him back to me so that I could ensure that his power levels remained where they were and that he didn’t need another surgery. And, of course, Deadpool was here trying to unsuccessfully kill me. It was unfortunate that I had to demonstrate to him exactly why he should. It was a waste of my time, but at least he survived the vivisection and he stayed conscious the whole time. Victor simply ripped his spine out…” Mister Sinister stopped short, before looking more closely at the three. “You are what happened to Victor, yes? The last I heard from him was the picture he sent me of my creation, a teenager again in a town, and nothing since…”

Tony had remained silent during the man’s shpiel. He had been focusing on the man’s soul as he’d been speaking, and what he saw sent chills down his spine. His soul was in tatters, twisted and warped until it barely resembled a human soul anymore. Not only that, but something had been… fuck, it looked as if something had ripped it open and put something… wrong in, something that was not meant to be there. “Yeah, I’m gonna have to stop you there. Whether you created those vaccines or not is a moot point in the face of the fact that you’ve been performing experiments that go against your Hippocratic oath at the very least. Morality or not, that is a law, and if your mind is running on logic alone currently, then you should have enough common sense to understand that. Gotta wonder about that though, seeing as you just casually mentioned both vivisecting and tearing the spine out of a good friend of mine.” He stood straight, lifting his weapon and casually resting it across his shoulders. “As for Sabertooth… nah, that wasn’t me, per se…” He waved his one hand, and Zevrael and Dorian both flickered into view with murderous expressions on their faces. “... That was all them.”

“And we took an enormous amount of enjoyment in it.” Dorian snarled, black flames solidifying into his armor. “What kind of monster are you that you would condone the abuse, neglect, and worst of all, sexual assault of another person?”

Zevrael was just as angry, but his voice came out as a low, cold hiss. “The repeated sexual assault, to boot. Whether Rem was born of a womb or out of a Maker-be-damned tube, he is as human as Tony, or as Fiendfyre.” He eyed the scientist, looking down his nose and sneering. “It’s clear to me why Deadpool has tried multiple times to kill you-- If you are the kind of Shemlan to ignore, even
“Considering that Deadpool decapitated me, stabbed and shot me in the heart, and then blew me up, I believe that vivisection could be considered self-defence,” Mister Sinister countered first to Tony, looking at the man quite seriously. “Should I have killed him instead? And I didn’t tear his spine out, that was all Victor. Deadpool came after both of us in different locations.” Turning to the man with black flames that became part of his armor, the scientist’s red eyes blinked at the accusations. “I didn’t tell Victor to do what he did, I don’t even understand why he did it to be perfectly honest. I only ever saw Gambit in the lab when I needed him or his blood. The rest of his care was on the others; why trouble myself with caring for a child when I have no such inclination?” Lastly, the scientist looked at the elf. “And he was born from a surrogate after I brought his biological parents’ DNA together-- carefully selected donors. Though if I had known that it would give him powers that would nearly kill him I would have lessened it during his conception rather than give him brain surgery at 17 to save his life and having to repeat it again at 25 so his powers do not give him a brain aneurysm. And your ‘Rem’, my creation, my Gambit, the proof of my genius and culmination… His name, the name I gave him is ‘Remington’.”

Glowing orange eyes narrowed in disbelief at the man. “Do you even hear yourself right now?” Tony barked, outrage dripping from his voice. “That is a human being you’re talking about! That is a someone-- not an experiment, not some creation whose sole intent and purpose is to be your lab rat, a living, breathing, feeling sentient being! To make it worse, you’ve done nothing short of torture him!” He whipped the scythe off his shoulders, gesturing behind him in some vague direction. “We saw the tape, Essex! We’ve seen the pictures! We know what you put him through, what you sanctioned, and that kind of shit is why the Nuremberg Code was put in place! What you’ve been doing would make fucking HYDRA balk!!”

Mister Sinister really did not understand the reason for all of the emotion coming from Tony Stark, mentally sighing as he blinked and tried to come up with a rational explanation for it. Before he did so, he heard the words about HYDRA and paused. “Not really, Dr. Stark, considering that Baron Von Stucker reached out to me for assistance with HYDRA’s experimentation on children with Loki’s scepter,” he informed the man stoically. “I am renowned in that field and what HYDRA was doing affected the children on a genetic level, though I did warn them that with it being an alien artifact, that they should take better precautions than they normally would. So many wound up dying because they did not listen, typical arrogance…” Brushing the memory aside, the emotionless doctor then went back to his original line of thinking. “Okay… You’re attached to my… to your ‘Rem’-- then I will relinquish him to you and simply make myself a new one… And you can keep him and I will have one and then all will be well.”

A sudden ringing, chilling silence filled the room. After a moment, Dorian and Zevrael slowly turned their gaze to Tony. The man had gone very still, eyes fixed unblinkingly on the Doctor in front of him. The Reaper’s breath had stalled in his lungs, though his mind was moving at the speed of light. “It was you.” He finally whispered, the hushed voice still carrying in the absolute silence of the room. “You were responsible for the Maximoff twins.”
“For who?” Mister Sinister questioned, not having known the names of the children in the experiment that Von Stucker had been conducting. “I only spoke with Baron Von Stucker and gave him advice on the Scepter that he was trying to unlock for his experiments with the orphaned volunteers from the war—”

Whatever the doctor might have said next was cut off when Tony suddenly surged forward with a speed that had Zevrael and Dorian flinching from the suddenness of it, and he had the man pinned to the wall with the blade of his scythe against the man’s throat. “You are a piece of filth, Essex!” He roared, the glow in his eyes consuming them entirely as a corona of orange light began to ripple around him. “Not only were you fucking around with a power you had no idea how to even begin harnessing, you go so far as to suggest that we keep ‘our Rem’ while you just make a new one! Even if you were to regain your emotions, your list of crimes is long, and dripping with the blood of countless people whose lives you just carelessly threw away!” The aura around him surged, bathing the icy walls in bright orange light. “Rem is one of mine, and I will play the part of executioner if it means keeping him safe!”

Zevrael rushed over to Dorian as the power surged again. “Vhenan, we need to summon Hadrian! Tony doesn’t have control over this power yet, and he could lose himself to it!”

The mage nodded, holding out his palm for Zevrael to slice with his dagger. “Get ahold of the others while I’m doing this. Have everyone evacuate, but have Stephen come here. As Tony’s soulmate, we might need him.” Getting a nod from his husband, Dorian quickly went about drawing the symbol of the Hallows, pressing his handprint to it without hesitation.

The silverette quickly conjured an ice wall between them and Tony, just in time for another surge of power to wash over them and send cracks spiderwebbing through the ice on the floor, walls, and ceiling. He quickly knelt behind it, putting a hand to his headpiece. “Guys, we have a serious problem! Stephen, I need you here immediately, but the rest of you need to get out now!”

- Alduin, Wade, Stephen

“Shatterfrost, what’s going on?”

“Look, there’s no time to explain! Stephen, to me, everyone else, GO!”

“I’m on my way!”
“But what about--!”

“You are already in enough trouble as it is! Come, we must go!”

- Boone Trio

“Are Dorian and Glitch okay?”

“They’re fine for now, don’t worry Sonic. Just get you and your husbands out!”

“Us, Levi, and the baby, you mean!”

“What in Andraste’s name do you mean, ‘the baby’?!”

“Not now. Give you a full report later-- grabbing the boxes and supplies too. Stay safe.”

- Zevrael, Dorian, Tony

Stephen stepped out of his portal and immediately staggered at the onslaught of emotion that seemed to pierce his skull. Zevrael shot to his feet and caught the sorcerer as his knees buckled, gently easing him to the ground. “What-- what’s going on--” He hissed in pain at the overload he was experiencing. “He’s angry-- fuck, he’s furious -- Why--”

The elf looked over to Dorian, panic in his eyes. If Stephen was feeling Tony’s anger, then things had just taken a dire turn. The mage turned back to the symbol, pressing his bloody palm to it again. “Stephen, Tony’s channeling the power of the Soul Stone right now. He’s never used it consciously before, though, so we think he’s lost control of it! You’re his soulmate-- you have the best chance of getting through to him and at least bringing him back long enough for Hadrian to get here.”

The sorcerer nodded before shakily getting to his feet, Zevrael helping to support him for a moment. He looked towards the bright light that contained his soulmate, thoughts whirring as he pushed Tony’s anger away for the moment. After a second or two, the blue-green eyes of the man closed as he reached out for Tony in the same way the genius’s emotions were reaching into him. He channeled all the love and reassurance he could into the tentative link, not noticing the way the Eye of Agamotto opened and the Time Stone within began to glow and hum under his robes. After
a few seconds, the unbridled rage seemed to pause before beginning to pull away, the brilliant
glow beginning to fade as well. After a handful of seconds, the anger and glow both subsided
completely, leaving Tony heaving in deep breaths while standing over the pile of ash that used to
be Nathaniel Essex. The scythe dropped from his hands, immediately dispersing into bright blue
sparks and fading before he collapsed to his knees, shaking violently.

Stephen quickly approached the man, concern and worry lancing through him as well as relief that
his love was okay. The instant he saw the silent tears flowing down Tony’s face, the sorcerer
dropped to his own knees and pulled him into a tight hug. The genius broke into sobs,
overwhelmed by the events of the day as well as his impromptu use of the Soul Stone and
subsequent loss of control over it. “Shh, it’s okay baby. I’ve got you, you’re okay, everyone’s
okay.” Stephen gently reassured him, rubbing his back and holding his soulmate tight.

Dorian and Zevrael both gave a huge sigh of relief, only to jump when they heard a voice behind
them. “What in Merlin’s name happened here?” The duo turned to see Hadrian striding from the
black portal that now sat where the symbol of the Hallows had been. The Master of Death
readjusted his glasses before sweeping towards Stephen and Tony, eyes quickly finding the pile of
ash that had been Mister Sinister. His ebony eyebrows rocketed into his hairline and the man gave
an impressed whistle. “I have to say I’m impressed, Anthony. I’ve never seen someone completely
obliterate a soul so thoroughly they can’t be reconstructed.”

The genius didn’t reply, simply burying his head in Stephen’s chest as the tears continued to roll
down his cheeks. Hadrian observed him for a moment before giving a soft sigh, casting a
featherlight charm on the man so Stephen could pick him up. “Dorian, please make a corridor to
the Compound for us. I’m going to need a quiet, stable place to help bring him down from what
just happened. We won’t be able to have any kind of conversation with him until we get that done.”
Hadrian turned back to Tony, gently running his fingers through the chocolate brown locks on his
head as he heard a corridor open behind him. “Come on, boys. Let’s go home.”

Stephen nodded, falling in step behind the Master of Death. Dorian gently tugged Zevrael’s hand
before he could leave. “Amatus, please take care of your ice. I’m going to make sure if someone
comes looking for this place, all they’ll find is an empty crater.”

The elf nodded and withdrew his ice, the temperature once again meeting a normal level. Zev
gently kissed his mage before pulling away with a soft smile. “I’ll be waiting for you, ma vhenan.”

Dorian nodded and he watched Zev pass through the darkness of the corridor, and he turned back
to the room and stalked towards the pile of ashes. He summoned a fiendfyre snake in his hand,
 glaring at the remains of the doctor. “Can’t have any loose strings, can we?” He growled, the light
from the fiendfyre making his eyes glow ominously.
Zev looked up as the portal opened to his left, and his eyes widened when he saw Dorian step through, a massive fiendfyre snake consuming the building behind him. Without a single thought or care in the world, he summoned another of the serpents and casually threw it over his shoulder before the portal completely closed behind him. He gave his husband a confident look and nod of his head. “Let’s see them find the remains of anyone in *that* mess!”

The elf stood from his own seat, crossing the room in three long strides to pull Dorian into a passionate kiss.

Badass Dorian had always been his *favorite* Dorian.

Chapter End Notes

New Thu'um from Alduin!

Fus Ro Dah -- Unrelenting Force. Best utilized by shouting people from high places to fall to their deaths.
Gol Hah Dov -- Bend Will. Pretty self explanatory. Basically like the Jedi mind trick, only with the power of hundreds of dragons backing it up.

The thing that took control of Wade then TRIED to take control of Alduin was one of the Marauders, Malice. Apparently she's a mutant that exists in a purely incorporeal form and has to possess people to interact with the living. She's also 100% off her rocker.
Tony comes back from training in the Nexus and deals with the aftermath of what happened in the lab. Wade needs lessons in team dynamics, and Tony meets the Boone's (un)official daughter. Rem gets advice from Peter, Slei, and Jör regarding feelings and communication. James Barnes and Shuri arrive at the Compound, and two people are in for a MASSIVE surprise.

(James deserves love and kindness, even if he doesn't think so.)

((Shuri is a bundle of exuberance and energy... and a perfect 'in' for our favorite Harbingers.))

Chapter Notes

Hello, my loyal vassals of our Lord and Master AO3!! I'm sorry this chapter took so long to get out... but we wanted this to be as amazing as possible. Because there is a revelation in this chapter that you ALL have been asking about!! READ ON, VASSALS!!

-Cackles with lightning flashing in the background-

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What the hell is going on in here??”

The argument that had been occurring between Wade, Minowa, and Stephen ground to a sudden halt as the trio turned as one to see Tony standing in the doorway to the meeting room, a look of confusion on his face. “Tony! Welcome home, love!” Stephen swooped over to the genius, giving him a gentle kiss. “How was your week in the Nexus?”

Tony couldn’t help but smile and melt into Stephen’s arms. “Not gonna lie, it was tough. And I have to go back every other night for a month…” He pressed himself against the sorcerer, inhaling his scent as he pressed his face into his collar bone. “And it sucked because I didn’t get to fall asleep next to you… I missed you.”

Minowa dipped her head to Tony as they finally pulled away, a smile on her face as well. “Welcome back, Zeymahi . Judging by your reaction, I take it that you are not aware of what else occurred in the lab.”
The genius shook his head as he took a seat with the others, grinning for a moment when Levi settled himself around his shoulders. “There’s my favorite snuggie! No, I’m not at all aware. Chief took me back to the Nexus almost immediately after getting back… what else happened? I walked in to hear something about possession…?”

“The thing we’re addressing right now is what happened with Wade, Stephen, and Alduin.” The Dragonborn began, turning her burning crimson eyes towards a petulant looking Wade. “Wade went ahead without us and was possessed by a mutant we’ve now been able to identify as Malice. Alduin was able to remove then kill her, but it’s a situation that could have been avoided entirely if he had stuck with us.”

Wade threw his hands in the air. “I get that, okay?! I messed up! I still think being grounded is a little demeaning!”

Tony blinked, looking between the other three. “Okay, everybody needs to take a breath for a second. As someone who’s just coming into this debate, let me give my two cents.” He turned his attention to Wade first. “So, yeah. Running ahead-- no bueno. I can see you understand that, and honestly? I know where you’re coming from. You’ve never worked on a team before, have you?” The hazel-eyed man shook his head negative, so he continued. “So you’ve been doing the solo-act thing for years. It would be unfair of us to expect you to get those kind of team dynamic right out the gate. The Rogues did that with me-- didn’t bother to explain what was expected of me, or where I was going wrong. I’m gonna nip that problem in the bud right now with you. You and I will sit down later, and we’ll discuss what’s expected of you on these kinds of missions.”

The mercenary nodded in agreement, gratitude in his eyes. “If I know what I’m doing wrong, I can at least make an effort to fix it.”

Stephen nodded as well, brow furrowing. “I think it would be a good idea for you to have one of us acting as supervision on team missions like this for a bit. Hear me out.” He held up one shaking hand at the incredulous look Wade shot him. “Like Tony said, you’ve not had to work in a team setting before us. There might be nuances you miss or overlook because you just don’t have the experience. I’m thinking we pair you with Dorian and Zevrael-- Zev would be especially good for that because of his past with the Inquisition.”

That prompted a rumbling chuckle from Minowa. “He went from being the most wanted person in southern Thedas to leading the armies of the faithful in less than a week, yet he learned very quickly and was a very successful leader.” She dipped her head in a nod. “I am in agreement with this plan. Zevrael is a patient teacher, and will have you caught up soon.” He turned towards Wade, tilting her head to one side in a curious motion. “What do you think, Wade?”
Wade took a moment to consider before sighing deeply. “Yeah, alright. I can see the benefit. They’re not going to be my babysitters, though, right?”

The question caused Tony to burst out in laughter. “No, Gods no!” He finally managed to choke out. “Mentor, yes, but don’t ever let Zev or Dori hear you call them babysitters!” He sat forward, a massive grin on his face. “They will take it as a challenge.”

This prompted a round of laughter before Stephen spoke again. “Wade, I’d also like to bring up what I found during my scans…” He waved towards Tony and Min, and once he got an ‘okay’ from Wade he continued. “I performed a diagnostic scan on Wade while we were in the lab…” He paused for a moment, as if unsure how to continue.

“He found the terminal cancer in my lungs, brain, prostate, and liver that my healing factor is holding back.” The mercenary finished in a completely calm tone of voice.

Tony went almost completely white, a look of absolute horror on his face. “I-I’m sorry, what?! How bad--?!”

Stephen reached over and rubbed Tony’s back with a shaky hand. “From what I saw… If his healing factor went out, he’d be dead in less than a week. We’re bringing it to your attention because I’m hoping between us and Bridget, we can come up with something that can help.”

It took a moment for Tony to regain his bearings before a determined look replaced the horror from before. “Absolutely. In fact, let’s also call in Bruce and Vision. The more minds on this, the better. FRIDAY, please send Brucie-bear a message to contact me as soon as he has a free moment.”

“Once you’re done with that, have him contact me. Don’t take too long, Zeymahi, you still have the drives from the lab to look over.”

The genius gave her a shit eating grin. “You just want an opportunity to talk to your lover.”

“You’ll get no denial from me.”

“Okay, I’ll have Bruce give you a call once they’re done, Minowa. Should I have the Boones bring their other finding up?” FRIDAY asked from the ceiling.
Stephen nodded at that. “That would be fine, thank you FRIDAY. Wade,” He turned his attention to the merc, who sat a little straighter. “You’re free to go. Tony will come find you later, alright?”

Wade nodded and stood, stretching big. “You got it, Gandalf. I’ll talk to you later, Tony.” He gave the group a wave over his shoulder as he left.

It was five minutes later when there was a quiet knock on the door before it was pushed open, Aria skipping inside first. “Tony! Welcome back!” She leaned over briefly to kiss Tony’s cheek before bounding back over to her husbands.

The genius immediately took notice of the peculiar bag bouncing on her hip. “Aria, why are you carrying a diaper bag??” He asked, arching an eyebrow in confusion. The question was answered when a coo came from the bundle in Craig’s arms, and Tony’s eyes went wider than any of them had ever seen them as he croaked, “Oh. That’s why.”

Craig nodded, a small smile quirking his lips as he sat next to Tony so he could see the infant girl. “We found her in the lab… She’s been given a clean bill of health, just needs to gain some weight. She had a bracelet like Rem’s only it said Project: CHANGELING. Pretty sure the reason is…” The baby blinked, and Tony’s mouth fell open when her brown eyes suddenly became green. “Yeah, that.”

Stephen couldn’t help but grin at the completely lost look on his soulmate’s face as he reached over to gently run his hand over her head. “What’s wrong, love? You act like you’ve never dealt with an infant before.”

“Because I haven’t.” Tony shot back, his hands twitching as if he didn’t know what to do with them. “I’ve never held a baby in my life. Barely interacted with them either.”

Aria grinned and bounced over to them again. “Well, now’s a good a time as any to start! Here, hold your arms like this…” She quickly adjusted the genius’ arms, then gestured for Craig to set the baby in them.

Any protest Tony might have had died in his throat as the baby cooed happily, and he couldn’t help but smile at the tiny human in his arms. Without thinking about it, he reached out a finger to her, his grin widening at the way she grabbed it. “She’s so tiny…” He murmured in awe, clueless to the indulgent looks he was getting from everyone around the table. “Does she have a name? Rem’s was on the other side of the bracelet…”
“No.” Ulysses replied, shifting so he was standing with his lovers. “We gave her one-- Sunniva.”

The genius nodded and grinned down at the infant again. “Well then, welcome to the family, Sunny!” The baby cooed again, prompting a chuckle out of everyone. He passed the baby back to Craig, and the sniper took the bottle Ulysses offered him and began feeding Sunny. “Alright, I assume all the proper paperwork has been filled out regarding all…” He waved towards the Boone trio, Sunniva, then in the general direction of the door.

Minowa nodded as she stood from her own seat. “Pepper sent over the necessary forms. Most of them went through this morning. T’Challa also made me aware that he has spoken to Barnes, and he has agreed to come back state-side to receive treatment.” A sharp grin suddenly stretched across her face. “In fact, he seemed both adamant to receiving the help and making sure Rogers was not aware of him deciding to do so.”

“Great. I’ll shoot him a call and give the all clear for them to bring him home.” Tony stood from his seat as well, taking a moment to wave to Sunny. “Stephen, mind portaling us to the workshop?”

The sorcerer nodded, waving a hand to do so. “Do you plan on looking through the drives first, love?” He asked his soulmate as they stepped through, the portal flickering out behind them.

Tony thought for a second before shaking his head. “I dunno how long it will take me to get through that stuff… better for me to call Simba now and have that put in motion before I dive into whatever the hell Essex has been up to.” He turned his attention towards a large holographic monitor. “FRIDAY, call King Kitty for me, please.”

There was a few seconds of silence before the screen lit up, T’Challa’s face flickering into focus a moment later. “Good evening, Dr. Stark, Dr. Strange-- though I suppose it would be morning for you.” He smiled at the duo, though there was tension around his eyes and weariness in his posture.

“Woah, you look like you’ve had a rough day there, Simba.” Though the genius’ tone was cavalier, there was real concern in his whiskey brown eyes as he took in the king’s bedraggled look.

T’Challa gave the duo a tired smile. “Well, I’ve been dealing with Rogers for most of the day. No,” He quickly held his hand up at the worried looks he got, “he doesn’t know about Barnes. It would seem as though someone slipped hair removal solution into his shampoo… He’s been complaining about it to me over the phone, but he absolutely refuses to come out of his room-- even for meals. Between that and the alarms that he claims are waking him up at night… He’s looking somewhat the worse for wear.”
The news was met with absolute silence for a few seconds before Tony snorted once, which turned into chuckles, and before long he was doubled over laughing so hard he needed to cling to the table in front of him to stop from falling over. Stephen was pinching the bridge of his nose, shoulders shaking with laughter as he leaned on the desk as well. “Pictures!” Tony managed to finally gasp out. “I want pictures the **instant** he comes out of his room and the others see him!”

Seeing the genuine mirth and joy from the two men seemed to relax some of the tension in the king, and he nodded with an indulgent smile. “I’ll tell Shuri-- I’m sure she’ll be **more** than happy to help you in that regard.”

It took another few minutes for the duo to fully calm down, and Tony finally managed to take a deep breath and straighten from where he had been bent over. “Okay, let’s move on before I bust my gut. We’ve got everything ready on this end for Barnes’ arrival, so whenever you guys want to send him this way, let us know.”

T’Challa nodded with a thoughtful look on his face. “Perhaps we could utilize Rogers’ predicament and send Barnes while his attention is elsewhere. We could have him on a jet in less than an hour, and he’d be landing at the compound in four. Is that acceptable to you?”

Tony looked over at Stephen, who smiled and kissed the top of his head. “It’s up to you, love.” He whispered to him. “No matter what, we’ll all support you.”

The Reaper didn’t need to think for more than a second or two before turning his attention to the ceiling. “**FRIDAY,** put the Compound on notice-- James Barnes is coming home.”

“You got it, Boss!”

The monarch smiled brightly at Tony, dipping his head in acknowledgement. “I’ll let James know. I am continuously left in awe at the depth of your compassion and generosity, Dr. Stark. How Rogers can claim you are anything else is a mystery to me.”

“Stop, you’re making me blush!” Tony waved him off. “We’ll let you know when Barnes is settled in. Or we’ll shoot you a message. Don’t know what kind of hours you keep, but I would imagine getting a call at one in the morning would not make you happy.” The monarch agreed to an email, and after an exchange of goodbyes the line was cut. “Alright! While we’re waiting, let’s take a look at what Essex has been up to.”
Stephen nodded, giving the brunette a gentle kiss. “While you’re doing that, I’ll give Bruce and Vision a call regarding Wade’s cancer. Between the three of us, I’d be surprised if we didn’t come up with something.”

The genius nodded and pressed one more kiss to Stephen’s lips before moving to the drives, picking all four up and sitting in a rolling chair, eyes lighting up blue as his technopathic abilities came online. Shooting his soulmate another loving look, Stephen asked FRIDAY to patch him through to Bruce, and the AI happily complied.

An hour later, the trio were debating between a couple of different solutions when a sharp gasp followed by a crash made Stephen whirl around to where Tony had surged from his seat, the drives having hit the ground at the motion. The sorcerer bid Bruce and Vision a hasty goodbye, and the duo called out their goodbyes before the screen went dark. The sorcerer was barely in time to catch the genius as his knees buckled, Levi quickly moving to support some of his weight. “Tony, baby, what’s going on? Are you okay??” Blue-green eyes swept over Tony as he was guided to the rolling chair again, searching for the cause of his distress.

Tony had to focus for a moment on just breathing, mind spinning at the information he’d found on the drives. He’d been prepared for the information regarding the countless experiments Essex had been running. He’d braced himself for the human experiments, the cruelty, the callous way he’d regarded each ‘specimen’. What he absolutely had not been prepared for was what he’d found at the end. “Babe,” He finally managed to croak out, “get Zevrael and Dorian down here immediately. You’re not gonna believe what I just learned.”

---

Wade leaned against the doorframe leading into the communal rec-room, watching the people inside with a wistful look on his face. Rem and Peter were playing a co-op video game while Sleipner and Jörmungandr cheered them on, an assortment of drinks and snacks scattered across the table in front of them while they played. Feeling more than a little like an outsider, the scarred man turned to leave, stilling immediately when his hazel eyes locked with a very familiar pair of crimson orbs.

For his part, Rem knew the moment that Wade had come close and paused at the door, always knowing when the older male was near him. His eyes lifted from the TV to look at the mercenary with a somewhat furrowed brow. Why, of all places, had Wade been so reckless in that lab, of all places? Rem knew how impulsive Wade could be– that was what had sparkled both their first kiss and the first time they had slept together but… Damn it, Wade could have been killed-- or he might have killed Stephen if Minowa hadn’t been there. And yes, maybe his fear, pain, and anger was irrational but the redhead blamed it all on being a teenager again. Everything was so complicated,
Rem meeting Wade’s eyes across the room and seeing that they held similar emotions. Before the mutant could decide what to do, the mercenary had swallowed hard before turning and walking back down the hall with his shoulders hunched.

A touch to his shoulder caused Rem to look up, and he found Jör standing next to him with an understanding smile on his face. “It’s okay to be upset, you know.” He said softly, prompting Peter to pause the game and join them on the couch, Sleipnir joining them a moment later and perching on the armrest.

“Indeed. What Wade did was undeniably foolish.” Slei reached over and began running his fingers through Rem’s hair to relax him. “However, I believe there are other factors to take into consideration in all of this.” Seeing that he had the group’s attention, the godling continued. “Wade cares very deeply for you, Rem. He knows about what you have experienced, especially regarding what Sinister subjected you to. Being in the lab could not have been easy for him, knowing that it was a place that caused you so much pain and suffering. Finding Sunniva there as well, knowing she would have suffered the same fate…”

“And Wade’s never worked on a team before, right? The X-Men don’t count.” Peter asked as well, rubbing Rem’s back as he asked.

“...I’m used to him being reckless but it usually isn’t in a situation like this,” Rem admitted softly, looking between the three who spoke to him, his eyes bright with emotion. “But he knows-- why there, of all places? The Doctor’s one of the few people who could kill Wade permanently and he knows that.” A lone tear made its way down the teen’s face as he thought of the man who’d been the first to unconditionally love him and whom he loved in the same way. “He can’t die, he just-- I couldn’t … I wouldn’t survive that. Wade has a healing factor but he’s not immortal, no matter what he thinks… And if he thinks I’ve forgotten that, he’s very much mistaken.”

The other three males looked at each other for a moment before shuffling around so Rem was on Slei’s lap and the other two were flanking them in a group cuddle. “His behavior and the situation scared you, and that’s okay.” Peter said softly, giving the teen a tight squeeze. “I don’t know everything about what happened with this mad doctor dude, but he clearly hurt you, and the thought of him hurting Wade scares you.” He paused for a moment to gather his thoughts. “But Rem, have you talked to Wade about this? Have you told him how much it scares you, how much it would hurt you if something happened to him?”

Jör shot the teen a thankful look before turning his attention to Rem. “Spiderling has a point, Rem. Wade may know you’re upset because of what he did, but maybe knowing the full extent of it would help deter him from making such a decision again. He can’t fix it if he doesn’t know the full extent of the problem.”
“You need'n't go talk to him right away, though.” Slei tucked Rem’s head under his chin, allowing the beat of his heart to soothe him. “Give yourself time to settle and sort through your emotions and thoughts. That way, once you approach him, you can do so with a clear head and calm heart.”

Rem sighed and nodded against the ebony-haired man’s chest. The calm, compassion, and understanding radiating from the group around him made a warm feeling ignite in his chest and helped ground him so he could think clearly. The other three were happy to remain quiet as he thought over the situation, knowing that the best thing they could do for him at the moment was simply be there. After ten minutes, Rem took a deep breath and let it out in a long huff. “Thanks, guys.” He smiled at each of them individually, heart feeling lighter than it had before. “I don’t know what I’d do without you guys…” He admitted, a blush staining his cheeks at the admission.

A soft chuckle escaped Slei as he shuffled so he could press a soft kiss to Rem’s fiery locks. “You’re strong, smart, and resourceful, Rem. Give yourself some credit.”

“You would have figured it out eventually, with or without us.” Jör continued, pulling Rem away from his brother gently so he could hug the teen as well, pressing a kiss of his own to the teen’s forehead.

Peter grinned brightly as well, pulling Rem towards him and squeezing him tight. “We’re glad to be here to support you, though! Whatever you need, you can always ask us!”

The blush on Rem’s face had quickly migrated down his neck, but he couldn’t help but smile brightly at the group. He opened his mouth to speak again, but was interrupted by FRIDAY calling out to them. “Guys, Sergeant Barnes’s jet just landed. Harley is going to be joining you all in there, but Dorian and Zevrael have requested Rem join them in their bedroom while the rest of you stay put.”

Rem nodded and stood from where he had been cuddled with the others. “Please tell Dad and Papa that I’m on my way.” He smiled at the group on the couch and, after a moment of consideration, gave them all another hug. They called out their goodbyes as he left the rec-room, and the mutant quickly made his way towards his parents’ suite. Less than five minutes later, he was knocking on the door to the room, and immediately Zev called out for him to enter. “Dad, Papa, you called for me?” He slipped inside, smiling at the duo in front of him.

Dorian nodded, a smile on his face that didn’t quite hide the nervousness in his eyes. “Yes, we did. Have a seat, Rem-- there’s something we need to tell you.”

~
Tony smiled at the duo approaching him across the landing pad, two vastly different personalities on display. Princess Shuri was all smiles and boundless energy, wide eyes eagerly taking in the sights around her. James Barnes was quiet and reserved, nervously hunched over and eyes darting to various points he could see as if waiting for an attack. The genius’ brow furrowed at the haunted, hollow look in the man’s eyes and the almost defeated aura he was giving off.

“Poor guy looks like he just came out of a Legion slave camp…” Craig muttered from where he was flanking the genius on his left, getting a nod in reply from Ulysses who was standing at Stephen’s right.

The sorcerer regarded the man as well, soothingly rubbing Tony’s back as he did so. “Are you alright?” He asked just loud enough for his soulmate to hear, glancing down at the shorter male.

Whiskey brown eyes regarded James for a moment before Tony nodded, the smile never leaving his face. “I’m okay, babe… I forgave him a long time ago. He deserves to have his life back… now more than ever.” With that said, Tony finally started moving towards Shuri and James, the smile turning into a grin. “Princess Shuri, a pleasure to meet you at last!” He held his hand out to the woman, and was surprised by the enthusiasm he was met with.

“It’s good to finally talk to you face-to-face!” The teen shook his hand rapidly, eyes bright and voice filled with awe. “Your work has always fascinated me, Dr. Stark! I hope you and I get a chance to sit down and discuss technology! I try with my brother, but he just can’t keep up like you could!”

The princess’ eagerness startled a laugh out of Tony. “I’d like that very much, Princess.” He then turned his attention to James, who was watching them with a cautious, lost look on his face, shooting glances at both Ulysses and Craig every once in a while. “Sergeant Barnes, welcome home.” He held his hand out for the man, and after a few seconds the male reached for it, gently shaking it as well. “Before we continue, how would you like to be addressed?” Tony asked, softening his voice as much as possible.

“James…” The assassin replied in a quiet voice, his icy-blue eyes meeting Tony’s brown for a second. “I don’t deserve what you’re offering-- not after everything I’ve done.”

Tony regarded James for a moment before he sighed and shook his head. “James, I forgive you-- I actually forgave you a long time ago, but I think you need to hear it from me. What you went through at the hands of HYDRA… I wouldn’t wish that on anyone. You had no choice in the matter, and that’s something I understand. It may have been your hands that killed my mom and Howard… but it was HYDRA pulling the trigger. You don’t blame the weapon for a crime that the
person holding it committed.” The soldier stared at him with a look of breathtaking gratitude, and Tony made an impulsive decision to reach forward and pull the man into a tight hug. “I forgive you, James. It was never your fault, and I don’t blame you.”

An oddly wounded sound escaped James, and he wound his own arms around the genius and rested his head on his shoulder as he began to cry. Tony rubbed his back and murmured soothingly too him, shooting Stephen a look and jerking his head to one side, indicating for him to give them some space.

The sorcerer nodded in understanding before moving towards Shuri, who had a massive smile on her face and tears in her eyes. “Princess Shuri.” He called to the teen, catching her attention. “Welcome to the New Avengers Compound. I’m Dr. Stephen Strange, co-leader of the New Avengers and Tony’s soulmate.”

Shuri’s eyes went wide, and she looked back at Tony for a moment before turning her attention back to the Sorcerer Supreme, a massive grin on her face. “Yes! I knew it!” She squealed, pumping her fist. “My brother owes me so much money!” Seeing the confused look she was getting, the princess quickly elaborated. “After our first conversation, where your whole team was there, T’Challa and I got into a debate whether there was something between you and Dr. Stark. I said yes, but my brother thought you were just being protective. Oh please, can you both be there when I tell him?! The look on his face will be amazing!”

A chuckle escaped the man as he nodded. “I’m sure we can work something into our schedules…” The resulting ‘yes!’ turned the chuckle into an outright laugh. Once they’d calmed down, he continued. “Princess, this is Craig Boone and Ulysses Boone— I’m sure you recognize them as New Avengers members. They’re also head of security here at the Compound. They’ve offered to show you to your rooms.”

The princess looked between the two soldiers, the grin on her face spreading. “Very well, lead the way, boys!” As they walked away, she asked, “So, you both share a last name with Miss Aria…”

Both men looked at each other before looking back at her and replying simultaneously, “We’re her husbands.”

The resulting squeal echoed across the grounds of the Compound. “I KNEW it!!”

Stephen chuckled again before turning back to Tony and James, who were finally pulling out of the hug. Tony pat James on the shoulder with a calm smile on his face and compassion in his eyes. “So, why don’t you, me, and Stephen head inside and we can go over everything with you?”
James nodded his agreement, eyes much clearer than before and heart far lighter. “Yeah, sounds good.” He followed slightly behind them as they entered the building finally. “So… You and Strange, huh?”

“He’s my sexy wizard. Back off.”

~

“So you found all that data in the lab?”

Dorian nodded in affirmation, running his fingers through Rem’s hair as the teen rested his head on his lap. “Yes, we did, along with several other things. We figured since this directly involved you, you deserved to know.”

“Fortunately, Sinister won’t be a problem ever again.” The elf picked up, rubbing his thumb over the top of the teen’s hand that he was holding. “Tony managed to obliterate his soul. Lethanavir confirmed it himself and let us know that there’s no coming back from that kind of thing. It’s also the reason Tony’s going to be in and out of the Compound for a little while… he’s training to make sure that kind of thing doesn’t happen by accident.”

Rem gave a soft sigh, melting into his fathers’ touches. “I’m… not sure how to feel about that. I mean, I’m happy I never have to worry about him again… It just doesn’t feel… real.”

Zevrael gave a compassionate smile, gently squeezing his hand. “I know what you mean, Da’len. Like, it’s a threat you’ve lived with for so long, then it’s just… gone. That will heal with time.” The smile fell from his face and he looked up at Dorian, nodding after a moment.

The mage gave a heavy sigh and gently tugged a strand of Rem’s hair. “Little Firefly, there’s one other thing we found in the lab… something you need to know.” The teen sensed that the conversation was about to take a turn, so he shifted so he was sitting facing them instead laying down. “While he was going through the drives, Tony found documents related to someone breaking into the lab-- someone not affiliated with the X-Men or any of Sinister’s known enemies. They were forced to retreat, but they left behind blood samples that Sinister preserved and began experimenting on.”

Rem’s eyes went wide at the thought of someone being foolish enough to go against the doctor.
“Someone got into the lab and managed to escape?? Who would be stupid enough to break into such a place??”

There was a second of silence before Zevrael answered. “The person was sent by HYDRA, Rem.”

~

“Wait, a lab? I have… really vague memories of a lab.”

Tony nodded at James’ words, a solemn look on his face. “Wasn’t sure if you would… but the initial infiltration isn’t the important part. It’s what you left behind that’s important.”

From his spot on the genius’ right, Stephen reached for a tablet on the table, tapping on it for a moment. “From what we found on his hard drives, you must have been injured at some point during the mission because your blood was found splattered in several rooms. Sinister apparently preserved as much of it as possible for use in his work on genetic experimentation. For some unknown reason, he was working to create individuals with extremely powerful mutations-- Omega class mutants. However, Sinister met with failure every time until…”

Seeing his soulmate falter, the genius picked up where he left off. “Until that point, he was never successful in his attempts…” Tony took a deep breath and sat forward with his elbows on his knees, whiskey-brown eyes locked on James’ icy ones with a piercing look. “But then he started doing experiments using your blood, thinking that the super-serum HYDRA gave you could be the key he’d been lacking… He finally had a breakthrough when he realized that the only way to achieve what he desired was to make you biologically responsible for half of the end result.”

~

“So that HYDRA agent’s blood… Sinister used it in his experiments?”

Dorian nodded, gently squeezing Rem’s hand. “Yes, but the difference is the outcome.”

Icy blue eyes glanced towards Dorian before Zevrael spoke as well. “The agent that HYDRA sent… it was the Winter Soldier, Rem. And whatever they did to him, to his blood… it led to Sinister finally having his first success.”
A look of stunned comprehension dawned on Rem’s face, and his mouth fell open. “But-- I’m his first success! Doesn’t that mean--?!”

~

“Wait, are you trying to say what I think you are?”

Tony took a deep breath and nodded, glad for the feeling of Stephen’s hand in his own to ground him. “James, though the methods may have been unconventional… you have a son.”

~

“Yes Rem. Your biological father is James Buchanan Barnes.”

Chapter End Notes

DUN DUN DUUUUUUUUN!!

HA!! Bet none of ya saw THAT coming!! Oh, I am SO eager to see what y'all have to say about this one!!

NOTE: I've seen the same question posted a couple of times now, so just to clear up--SUNNY IS NOT JAMES' DAUGHTER!! Medical technology has progressed far enough by this point that Sinister didn't need his DNA to create Sunny! Just FYI!!
Chapter Summary

Rem gets advice and comfort from the man who's been there for him the longest, and James gets a chance to talk to Dorian and Zevrael. Music helps bring people together, and the Boone trio gets a chance to meet and reassure James. Father and son finally meet, and the feels are real all around. Wade goes to Tony to ask for help, and foreshadowing abounds.

(Wade is officially out of the doghouse now. )

((Aria is the coolest of cool aunts, and Sunny is the cutest tiniest cream puff))

Chapter Notes

Guys, you all have been amazing in understanding how trying this time has been for me, and for that, you have my most heartfelt thanks. The people I love and care about have rallied around me to help support me, and that you were willing to do the same fills me with gratitude that I will never be able to fully express with words.

This chapter is dedicated to my friend Alice, whose life was a brilliant light in mine that was snuffed out soo soon. It's also dedicated to my family and friends, and you, my fanbase, who were so willing to support and comfort me and provide light of their own. You all are amazing, and I can never say 'thank you' enough. I especially want to single out Jen, my beta who has been willing to comfort me and offer compassion in my inability to put words to paper some days.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
“I thought I might find you here.”

Rem startled a little bit at the unexpected voice that broke through his thoughts, his red eyes turning towards Wade as he shimmied through the vent towards him. The merc gave him a hesitant smile, eyes filled with trepidation. “I know you’re probably still really angry with me-- can’t blame you after the stunt I pulled. But no one has seen you for hours… We were really worried about you.” He settled himself close to Rem, but not touching him directly to respect the mutant’s personal space. “Are you okay?” He asked softly, eyes sweeping over the teen to check for any visible sign of injury.

The teen stared at him for a moment, mind moving a mile a minute. Any remaining anger he had towards Wade’s actions at the lab fizzled out quickly, and before either of them knew it he was pressing himself against Wade, holding him in a tight hug as he buried his face in the man’s chest. He breathed in the man’s scent as Wade returned the hug, the familiar smell of gunpowder, metal, and Mexican food easing his chaotic emotions. They stayed like that for a few minutes before Rem finally spoke in a small voice. “Tony found info on my biological dad…”

Wade blinked in surprise, tightening his grip on the slighter male. After all this time of not knowing anything about where Rem came from aside from Sinister being involved in it, the merc didn’t even know what to think. Neither of them had ever believed that the truth about the mutant’s origin would ever be known, not after all this time. “Okay… So is that a good thing, or a bad
thing?” He asked encouragingly, gently running his fingers through Rem’s hair.

“I… I dunno.” Rem finally answered, brow furrowing. “He’s… Wade, my dad is James Barnes.” The teenager said it as if he didn’t quite believe it yet, his expression speaking volumes to the man who knew him almost as well he himself did.

A soft huff and an ‘oh’ escaped the merc as he rearranged them so he could hold the teen more comfortably. “Yeah, I can see why would be a little conflicted,” Wade admitted as he continued to gently massage the teen’s scalp. “Talk it through with me-- how are you feeling right now? Just say whatever comes to mind.”

Rem nodded, giving the man a small grateful smile as he relaxed into the gentle fingers within his hair. “I… I’m conflicted.” He eventually started. “On the one hand, he’s my biological dad-- I want to talk to him and get to know him, at least give him a chance. But I’m afraid because he was the Winter Soldier. He’s here to heal and it’s probably hard for him to find out he has a son he never knew about-- not only that but a son that should be 34 years old, but is actually 17. And I’m scared of losing Papa and Dad. I’m scared that if I tell them I want to at least get to know James, they’ll be angry at me and think I’m ungrateful. And what if James doesn’t even want to get to know me? But I want to try…”

Wade sat there and listened as the teen spoke, humming and nodding as he continued to comfort Rem. Once the teen had grown silent again, Wade finally spoke. “First, I’m glad you got all of that off your chest. I’m betting this has been eating at you since you found out, huh?” Rem nodded against his chest, a blush staining his cheeks. “So, let me ask you a question. Do you love Dorian and Zevrael?” Rem nodded rapidly, and Wade reached out to stop him before he could kink his neck. “And I know Zevrael and Dorian love you to the moon and back. Finding your bio dad won’t change that one iota for them.” The mercenary paused to think for a moment before continuing. “I think you should talk to them about the way you’re feeling. They can’t help or reassure you if they don’t know how you’re feeling. As for James, I’d say give him a chance. He’s your bio dad so he might want to get to know you. On the off chance that he doesn’t; well, it won’t change a thing with us-- we’ll always want and cherish you, Rem.”

There was quiet for a moment before Rem sighed softly, giving the hazel-eyed man another tight hug before pulling away to smile at Wade. “Thank you, Wade. I feel a lot better.” He admitted softly.

Wade smiled and nodded, gently squeezing Rem’s hands. “You’re welcome, Rem. You know I’ll always be willing to talk.” The smile then became a hopeful grin. “Does this mean I’m out of the doghouse, now?”

The resulting laugh and hug was all the answer he needed.
“But what if he doesn’t need us anymore, Zev?? What if he has second thoughts about the adoption?”

The silverette sighed as he watched Dorian pacing back and forth in their personal living room, heart aching for his husband. “Dorian, do you really think Rem would do that? He loves us, Vhenan, and we love him just as much. I wouldn’t blame him for wanting to get to know James, but in the end, we’re his Papa and Dad. I know he wouldn’t willingly give that up.”

Dorian sighed and sat down next to Zevrae, allowing the elf to pull him into his arms. “I don’t want to lose him, Amatus…” He admitted softly, relaxing into the fingers that started carding through his hair. “He may not be of our blood, but I love him so much…”

“I love him too, Dori’. We may want to sit down with Rem and talk about all of this-- Maker knows he’s probably having the same fears and doubts as us.”

The mage nodded in agreement, but before they could continue FRIDAY spoke to them. “Dorian, Zevrae, Sergeant Barnes is asking to speak with you both.”

The husbands looked at each other in shock. “Allow him up, FRIDAY. I think we need to have a conversation of our own.” Zevrae told the AI, standing from his seat and pulling Dorian up with him. “I’ll make some tea. I trust you can show the good man to a seat?” He smiled charmingly at his husband, giving him a small kiss.

Dorian nodded with a smile of his own on his face. “Of course, my love.” He watched as the elf padded to the kitchen before turning his attention to where the elevators were, waiting for the assassin’s arrival. After a minute, the doors opened and James stepped out, looking around nervously before his eyes found Dorian. The mage smiled at him and spread his arms in a welcoming gesture. “Good evening, Sergeant Barnes. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

The brunette swallowed and dipped his own head in greeting. “It’s good to meet you too. And I prefer James, if you don’t mind.” The last part was said in a softer voice, almost hesitant in tone.

The hazel eyes of the mage softened at the unsure, anxious way James spoke. “Of course, James. Come in and have a seat, my husband will be out momentarily with something to drink.” He led the
man to a seat close to the windows, draping himself across the chair regally while the assassin sat opposite to him.

“Thank you for agreeing to speak with me,” James commented as he dropped his icy blue eyes to the floor. “I… I wanted to ask…” The man struggled for a moment, not sure how to voice what it was he’d come for.

“You wanted to ask about Rem.” The new voice caused James’ gaze to snap up, and his eyes went wide at the elf that approached him with a tray with three mugs. “Hello James, I’m Zevrael Pavus, and that’s my husband, Dorian Pavus.” He sat gracefully next to the mage, who immediately reached for his mug. “I would imagine it comes as a shock to learn you have a son you never knew about.” Zevrael began as he sat back with his tea, a compassionate smile on his lips.

James nodded in agreement, eyeing the mug in front of him warily at first before slowly reaching for it and taking it. “Yeah… Of all the things I expected to hear in that meeting from Stark-- Tony- the fact that I have a son wasn’t one of them.” He studied the tea for a second before taking a hesitant sip, eyes widening at the flavor before taking a larger sip. “This is really good.” He remarked, looking back at the husbands on the couch.

Zevrael nodded with a big smile on his face. “I’m glad you like it. It’s a blend of natural herbs from my home, it has a calming effect on the nerves.” He took a sip of his own, taking the time to gather his thoughts. “So, you’re here about Rem. What would you like to know?”

James cradled the mug in his hands, looking down into the liquid within. “I… could I see a picture of him? And can you tell me about him?” He finally asked, looking up at the duo with hope in his eyes.

The duo nodded and Dorian gently nudged Zevrael. “Would you run to the bedroom and grab my tablet, Amatus?” The elf nodded and kissed him briefly before striding away to do so. “First, what has Tony told you so far?” The mage turned his attention back to James as he asked.

The assassin shifted in his seat, taking another sip of his drink. “He mentioned that there was some kind of magic that made him younger than he really is… didn’t really go into detail about it, though. Other than that…” James closed his eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath. “He told me what Rem… what my son has been through. It’s one of the reasons I’m here. I wanted to thank you and Zevrael for loving and protecting him and making him happy…” His eyes opened, and there was something undeniably cold and malicious in them. “The other is to find out where exactly I need to aim my gun to make sure that shit never happens again.”
There was a moment of quiet before a grin slid across Dorian’s face, and the mage drained his tea before setting the mug down. “James, I do believe you’re going to fit in **perfectly** around here, and you, my husband and I are going to have a wonderful relationship.”

“Fortunately, there are certain ones you don’t have to worry about anymore.” The sound of Zev’s voice drew their attention and the silverette gracefully lowered himself into his seat by Dorian’s side again, a tablet clutched in his hands. “The elvar’nas ghi who sexually assaulted him on a regular basis was taken care of by Dorian and myself. As for the man who had been experimenting on him… Well, let’s just say Tony was less than pleased with his pseudo nephew’s treatment.”

James sat straight at that information, eyes widening again. “Wait, Tony killed him??” Getting nods from both, the brunette let out a long huff of breath as his gaze went far away for a moment. “Damn… I owe him so much…” He whispered almost too low for the duo to hear him. He cleared his throat after a moment, looking back up. “So… can you tell me about him?”

Dorian nodded and unlocked his tablet, pulling up several pictures and handing the device to James. The assassin’s eyes filled with tears as he was presented with a picture of Rem grinning from his place between Dorian and Zevrael, eyes sparkling with joy and love as he held up a piece of paper for the camera. “That’s the day we adopted Rem,” Dorian told him softly, a loving smile on his face as he thought back to that day. “I must say that’s the biggest grin I’ve ever seen on him. He was so nervous as we signed out the paperwork... I think he might have thought that we would change our minds at the last moment-- that it was some kind of joke and that we were leading him on. I blame what the X-Men did to him for that… Once we got the last piece signed and sent off, it finally hit him it wasn’t a joke, and the look of joy on his face was just… **breathtaking**.”

The brunette swallowed hard, his fingers tracing the shape of Rem’s face. “He... he has my eyes--the shape, I mean. That’s definitely my nose, too… And the long hair…” He sniffed a little, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. “Can... can you tell me about him?” He choked softly, looking up at them with hope and longing in his expression.

“Of course, James. What would you like to know?”

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“Rem, would you mind playing for us?”

The redhead looked up to see Aria come into the music hall, gently rocking Sunny in her arms. “Of course, Auntie Aria. Is Sunny being fussy tonight?” He asked, standing from where he’d been studying his sheet music to approach them, smiling at the baby in the brunette’s arms.
Aria smiled and leaned over to press a kiss to Rem’s head. “Just a little bit-- we think she’s getting used to a normal eating and sleeping schedule again, so there’s going to be an adjustment period.” The Reaper gently smoothed her daughter’s currently blond hair and cooed to the infant a bit.

Rem smiled brightly at them, gently holding his finger out for Sunny to catch for a moment. “Of course, anything for my baby cousin. Anything in particular?”

The woman smiled and took a seat in one of the armchairs near the grand piano. “I think I’ll leave it to you, Rem. You always know what’s best for the moment.”

A thoughtful look crossed Rem’s face before he brightened, striding towards the piano and settling himself on the bench. He took a breath before his fingers began to glide across the keys, the soothing melody quickly filling the room. It took a minute for Aria to recognize the song, and once she did a few tears welled in her eyes before she wiped them away, concentrating on humming along as she rocked Sunny. She shot a brilliant smile towards the teen, who was focused on his music in a way that showed just how much he enjoyed the craft.

Outside in the hall, James leaned against a wall, listening to the music coming from within with tears in his eyes. The soothing melody tugged at his fractured memories, piecing together brief images of his mother playing and singing for him on the rare occasions she could. He swallowed hard and began to shift to move closer, but the sound of movement from down the hallway stopped him. The assassin sank into the shadows, and a few seconds later Ulysses and Craig came around the corner, their own faces lighting up at the music.

Craig quickly moved to one portion of the wall and tilted his head up. “FRIDAY, could you activate the one-way window?” He called, and a second later the wall in front of him seemed to melt to reveal the inside of the room where Rem, Aria, and Sunny were. “It’s always nice to see him playing.” He murmured, leaning into Ulysses who put an arm around him.

“Can tell he’s feeling better too-- his song feels like hope.” Ulysses rumbled as well, eyes flicking between Rem and his wife, holding their daughter. The love in the man’s eyes was stunning, and they held a fierce protectiveness that had never been there before.

The jade-eyed sniper nodded as well, smiling brightly. “I’m glad we found Sunny, ‘Ses. She may have had a tough beginning… but she’ll never be left wanting for love. She’ll never doubt that she has parents who would do anything for her.” His voice became somewhat choked for a second, prompting his husband to tighten his grip on him. It took only a few seconds for Craig to reign his emotions in again, and he pulled off his glasses for a moment and tuck them in his breast pocket. “So,” He called a little louder, a small smile on his face, “You feel like joining us over here,
Sergeant Barnes?

There was a moment of silence, filled only by the piano music, before the man in question shuffled closer. “You knew I was there?” He asked softly, looking between the duo nervously. He could tell just by the way the duo held themselves and the strength of their presence that both men had been soldiers at one point or another.

“Not much can hide from us… Snipers. You’d understand.” Ulysses replied, beckoning him over.

The brunette blinked in shock, even as he moved so he could peer through the window as well. “You know I was a sniper? Was it in my file?” He asked curiously, looking between the trio inside and the soldiers beside him.

Craig shot him a knowing smile. “Yeah, but it’s not just that. If we’d been anyone else, you would have been completely undetected. You were standing in a position where you can see and access that end of the hallway there,” he pointed down in the direction of the far hall, “And you stationed yourself right under the air duct.” He looked back towards the music hall, the smile softening. “No judgment here. You’re in an unfamiliar place with unfamiliar people. I get that.”

James gave a tentative nod before his attention was pulled back to the music hall as the song came to an end. They watched as Aria rose from her seat, Sunny sound asleep in her arms, and she gave the teen a kiss on the head and a soft, heartfelt thank you. Rem nodded and smiled, whispering something to her before he sat back at the piano, starting a new song as the woman approached the exit. The assassin looked panicked for a moment, but before he could react she slipped from the room, eyes immediately finding the trio.

To James’ surprise, she smiled brightly at them. “Of all the songs Rem could have picked, I shouldn’t be surprised that he chose ‘Promise of the World’... I get the feeling he would pull the moon from the sky for her.” She murmured in a soft voice, gently rocking Sunny in her arms. The Reaper approached them, kissing her husbands for a moment before turning to James. “Hello, you must be James. I’m Aria Boone, and this is our daughter, Sunniva.”

Icy blue eyes blinked in shock before he found himself creeping closer to peer down at the infant in her arms. A memory flickered to the front of his mind again, his mother coming home from the hospital after the birth of his sister. He could hear her voice echoing softly in the corner of his mind-- ‘James, I have someone I want you to meet. This is your new baby sister--’

“Rebecca.” It took a moment for James to realize he’d spoken aloud, and he blushed under the curious looks he got. “I… she… I remembered… when Ma brought home my baby sister.” He
swallowed, closing his eyes for a moment. “Her name… I remembered it. Rebecca.”

Aria’s eyes softened at the admission, and she passed Sunny to Craig for a moment so she could slowly reach out and hug James. After a few seconds, the sniper tentatively returned the embrace. “Don’t worry, they’ll all come back you you in time. And if you ever need someone to talk to about it… well, I have some experience with missing memories.” James pulled away for a moment to look at her curiously, the woman giving him a half smile before she lifted her band away from her forehead to reveal the scar from the wound she’d received so long ago. James inhaled sharply in realization, and after a moment his eyes softened as well and he nodded. “If you need me, just ask FRIDAY to summon me. I’ll be there whenever you need me.”

James swallowed and nodded, overwhelmed with gratitude for the brunette in front of him. “Thanks… I think it would help a lot.” He finally admitted, prompting another hug from Aria.

Craig and Ulysses smiled at the duo, Ulysses’ hidden by his ever-present mask. “Came looking for Rem, right?” The latter asked, tilting his head towards the music hall. James nodded, and the sniper turned to the door. “One moment.” He slipped inside and made a beeline towards Rem, who had begun playing again. “Rem.” He called out, catching his attention.

The redhead jumped slightly, missing a key. “Uncle ‘Ses, you’re always so quiet!” The teen laughed softly, standing from his seat again. “Is Sunny sleeping okay?”

“Deep and calmly.” He replied, dipping his head with the corners of his eyes crinkling with his smile. After a moment, he spoke again. “Rem, you have someone who wants to say hello.” He fixed the teen with a pointed look.

It took a moment for Rem to realize who he was talking about, and after a second he took a deep breath and nodded. “I… okay. He can come in.” He paused for a moment, and Ulysses stayed put, knowing the teen had something else to say. “Would… would you, Uncle Craig, and Auntie Aria stay as well?” He practically whispered, looking up through his lashes at the sniper.

The brown-eyed man blinked at him before pulling the teen into a brief but tight hug. “Of course.” He gently said, pulling away to smile at the ecstatic look on Rem’s face. He gently tugged a strand of his fiery locks before moving to the door again. He peeked out and gestured them in. “Rem wants us there.” He gently told James, who nodded in understanding.

“Familiar presence, I get that.” The assassin replied softly, following the group inside. He took two steps towards Rem before pausing, caught off guard by how similar their features were. It was one thing to see it in a picture, but the real thing, the proof in front of him… James let out a shuddering
breath, torn between wanting to approach the teen and not wanting to spook him with a sudden movement.

Rem inhaled sharply as well, seeing the similarities between them quickly as well. The eye shape, the nose… the teen felt his empathy kick in and he was momentarily blindsided by the depth and intensity of the emotion from the older man-- the desire to approach him to get to know him, the fear of accidentally hurting him, the hope of having a chance to be a part of his life… the desperate need for acceptance and understanding. In that moment, Rem realized that James, despite having been through so much, wasn’t nearly as broken as others might assume… he was cracked, and Rem wanted nothing more than to help him heal… Just like what the New Avengers, his friends and family, had done for him. Without realizing it, he slowly approached the man, pausing when he was close so he could study the assassin’s face closely. James remained still, though his hands twitched with the desire to pull his son closer. After a few seconds, Rem smiled and reached forward, pulling James into a hug. “I’m glad to meet you, James.” He mumbled against the muscular chest his cheek was pressed against, pouring all the conviction and finality into it that he could. After a tense second, James returned the hug, pulling the redhead closer and resting his chin on his head as tears welled up in his eyes. A few rolled down his face as relief flooded his body at the small action that spoke so much of acceptance and willingness to try.

Finally, the duo pulled apart, and James offered the teen a tentative smile. “Did you want to sit down? I… I’d like a chance to talk you you, if you don’t mind.”

Rem nodded with a smile and guided the man to a group of plush chairs situated in one corner of the room. There were two sets in the room in separate corners, the other section occupied by the Boone trio and Sunny so they could watch from a distance but not interfere or intrude. The teen guided James to one chair and sat in another close to his.

The assassin took a moment to breathe before looking up at Rem. “So… first, I want to make sure that you know… I’m not tryin’ to take the place your Dad and Papa.” He started softly, yet no less resolutely. “I went to talk to them a few hours ago… I wanted to assure them that, while I do want to get to know you, I don’t want to take you from them-- they love you so much, and I’d be a bastard to try to separate you.” He took a deep breath to organize his thoughts. “They… actually encouraged us to talk. I think my threatening to shoot anyone who hurt you earned me some brownie points.” He gave the teen a tentative half-smile at that.

The teen gave a startled, wet chuckle at that, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. “Yeah, Dad and Papa would definitely appreciate that…” He croaked, gratitude shining in his eyes. He smiled at the sniper and continued, “I’m not used to having so many people defending me…”

James’ face fell into something fiercely protective. “Yeah, Dorian and Zev told me that… I wish I could have been there to keep you from hurtin’ and being hurt.” Seeing the look of realization on Rem’s face he quickly explained, “I… didn’t want to accidentally say or do anything that might
hurt you… I want to get to know you, and I didn’t want…” He floundered for a second, making a half-hearted hand motion.

Rem’s anxious expression melted in the face of the intense desire to defend and protect him the assassin was giving off. “It’s okay… I understand-- you don’t want to do anything that might put that in jeopardy.”

James nodded in agreement, a thankful look passing through his eyes. “Yeah, exactly.” He observed the teen for a moment before speaking again. “I… heard you playing piano earlier. It… it sounded beautiful-- brought back a memory of my Ma playin’.” His eyes went far away for a moment before returning to his son.

Rem’s eyes went wide, a startled look in them before a smile stretched across his face. “Really? I helped you remember?”

James nodded with a small but joyful smile. “She was real talented… pretty much a natural.”

“That’s where I get my musical talent…” The teen breathed with shocked joy, eyes lighting up with wonder. “I always wondered…” He thought for a moment before looking back to James, the smile now slightly nervous. “Do you want me to play for you some more?” He asked tentatively.

The assassin swallowed down the lump in his throat and nodded. “I’d love to hear you play some more.” He finally managed to say, a bigger smile on his face.

Rem nodded and moved to the piano, a song already in mind as he sat. He shot the man a smile as he laid his hands on the keys and began playing, and after a few chords he began to sing along, startling James at the beautiful sound. As he listened to the lyrics, tears began to fill his eyes again, and he couldn’t help the proud smile that stretched across his face as they fell.

From the other side of the room, the Boone trio cuddled together as they smiled at the duo. “He usually doesn’t sing along…” Craig mused as he listened.

“Must be special…” Ulysses mused, both his and his husband’s attention being drawn to Aria when they heard her sniff.

Aria smiled brilliantly as she watched them, her heart swelling with pride and love for her pseudo
nephew. “I think he’s playing for both of them…” She grinned at them as the song hit the chorus. “After all… he chose ‘Coming Home’.”

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Tony sniffed as he subtly wiped the tears from his eyes, a grin of his own on his face while he watched the security feed that showed Rem playing for James. “FRIDAY, I hope you’re recording this.” He managed to croak out, heart full of joy as he listened to the music filtering through.

“As if I wouldn’t, Boss.”

The genius laughed at that, grinning brightly towards the ceiling. “I didn’t program you to be sassy…”

“Pretty sure she got that from her Dad.” The sound of the additional voice caused the brunette to jump and turn towards the voice, revealing a smiling Wade. “He’s damn good, isn’t he?” The mercenary hummed as he tilted his head towards the camera feed.

Tony sighed and nodded, sparing another glance towards it. “Absolutely… I’m glad Mom’s piano is getting some use.” His voice became quiet towards the end, and the feeling of a supportive hand on his shoulder pulled a thankful smile from him. After a second, he took a deep breath and reached for a tissue. “So, what brings you to my domain, Wade?”

The hazel-eyed man sat in a swivel chair, Tony taking the one opposite him. “It’s about Rem.” He started, leaning forward so his elbows were on his knees. “He’s been through a shit ton of emotional upheaval in the past month. Like, he went from being in an environment that was nothing short of emotionally abusive along with being kidnapped and experimented on as well as being sexually assaulted on a regular basis to having the most amazing, supportive family who would do anything to protect him, a set of parents who would pull the damn moon from the sky if he asked, friends who would jump to support and defend him in an instant… and that’s not even taking into consideration not having to deal with Sabertooth or Sinister anymore AND finding his biological dad…”

The genius listened attentively, running his fingers through his hair and huffing out a breath as Wade paused to think. “Damn, it has only been a month for him. I didn’t even realize…” He cast his whiskey-brown eyes to the ceiling.
“Yeah, time freaking flies in this place.” Wade agreed. “I’m thinking that if he had a stable tie to his life before now, it would help ground him.”

Tony looked back down, a small smile on his face. “That’s a good idea, especially if it helped him back then too. Just name it and I’ll do my best to find it.”

Wade gave the man a grin. This, this was where many people seemed to get Tony Stark’s personality completely wrong. They saw him as arrogant, selfish, egocentric, and disrespectful. The truth was so much different though-- Tony Stark was one of the most compassionate, selfless, and generous people he’d ever had the pleasure of knowing and calling a friend. This was a man who’d opened his home and life for them, despite barely knowing them. He’d sprung to Rem’s defence the instant he’d learned what the X-Men had done to him, and was genuinely outraged at the mere thought of allowing someone to mess with his head for their own gain. Sure, he was sarcastic as hell, but he never used it to hurt or demean the people he loved and cared about. And he did care-- he cared so damn much.

He was a man he’d trust with Rem’s life. He was a man he’d trust with his own.

The mercenary pulled his thoughts back to the present and finally replied. “Thing is, it’s not a something… I need your help finding someone.”

Tony’s eyebrow arched and his eyes lit up at the prospect of a challenge. “This person must have been a real ally and friend to Rem if you’re considering bringing them in. Alright, I’ll bite-- who is it you want me to find, and do you have a clue where to start?”

Wade’s grin was nothing short of maniacal. “Weeeell, given what time of the year it is, I’m thinking we start out search somewhere in Canada…”

The genius nodded as his eyes flashed blue as he activated his technopathy. Wade continued to feed him information, and after a few minutes, the genius abruptly returned to himself, staring wide-eyed at Wade for a moment. Then he threw his head back cackling madly. “Wade Wilson, you are a devious son of a bitch. I love it. Let’s do it.”

Chapter End Notes

You all are amazing, once again. Thank you.
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Minowa and Wade head into the wilderness to find one Logan Howlett, and our favorite merc with a mouth is taken by surprise by his previously unknown mini-me. Dragonborn relationship dynamics need further explanation... but that can wait until after they take care of the group of Weapon-X scientists that show up to take Logan and his daughter. Rem and Logan are reunited, and it turns out Logan is a 'familiar' figure to a certain brainwashed assassin.

(Squishy sciences make Tony's head hurt-- good thing he has Bruce there.)

((Bruce plans to publish a book, "Dragonborn Dating for Dummies" because he KNOWS this isn't the last time this will happen.))

Chapter Notes

So, seeing as I am tragically single for this Valentine's day, I figured I'd give all of YOU a lovely gift of a new chapter!

... That's 8,701 words long.

... That Jen and I started yesterday.

Hm? A life outside of my writing? What's that? It sounds lovely-- can I have one?... No, I didn't think so. Worth a shot.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Light brown eyes watched attentively as a six-year-old girl bounded around the yard in front of the cabin they were living in, tucked away in the Canadian wilderness and far from any civilization. He gave a soft sigh as his mind drifted for a moment or two, heart panging with momentary hurt. They’d been here for a month and a half, hiding from those trying to hunt them down for their own gain. Unbeknownst to the little girl running around, her father had a secondary purpose for choosing this location. He needed the distance from his previous ‘allies’, needed time to work through his own emotions.

Nobody would tell him anything about what happened that led to his pup being taken. They sure as hell weren’t saying anything about why they’d all come back BUT him. Considering how they’d treated his pup… it wasn’t hard to guess what had transpired. And it made him angry-- they’d beaten him down, ostracized him, hurt him… and now it was very likely that they’d killed him.
He was pulled out of his dark thoughts when he felt a tug on his hand, and he looked down to find his daughter grinning up at him. “Daddy, let’s play hunter! I’ll give you ten seconds!”

A rumbling chuckle came from the man as he knelt and ruffled his daughter’s hair. “Alright, Lex. Start countin’, kid.” A loving, tender smile crossed Logan’s face as he watched her for a few moments before the older mutant went to hide, grateful for each day that they had together. Alexia might be his clone but he honestly considered her to be his daughter, created or not, and Logan was just as protective of her as he had been of the young man he’d done his best to keep safe. That was one reason he had changed her name to Alexia, rather than leaving it as ‘Laura’ or the more hated ‘X-23’. Alexia Howlett was a far different name than Laura Kinney and considering that those who constantly hunted Logan didn’t actually know his last name, it was much safer.

“Okay! One… two… three…”

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A mile from the cabin, a corridor suddenly sprung into existence, Wade stumbling through it before being followed by a much more composed Minowa. “Jeez, is it always supposed to feel that trippy?” He groaned, leaning against a tree for a second to regain his bearings.

Minowa gave a chuckle as she engaged the armor around her, leaving only her head free. The Obsidian core had been exchanged for one built with more defensive capabilities in mind that would boost her support Thu’um and magical strength in the Alteration and Restoration fields. The new armor was dubbed the ‘Diamond Dragoon’, though there was little aesthetic difference between the two besides the color of the armor and thickness of the plates. The black was now a smokey grey with noticeable luster, which she attributed to the alteration spells woven into it, and the grooves now glowed a soft white. When asked about the color, the Dragonborn had arched an eyebrow and pointed out that diamonds weren’t always white, and her aim was to defend people, not blind them accidentally. “I had forgotten that the first time you were made to use a Corridor, you were running on adrenaline from the events at Sinister’s lab. You would not have been focused on the feeling.” A plate on her arm lifted, and she rifled through the compartment it revealed before pulling out a vial and tossing it to him. “There. That will take the edge off.”

Wade nodded gratefully and quickly took the offered medicine. He let out a sigh of relief as the dizziness quickly faded. “How is it that Takabisha didn’t manage to throw me for a loop, but just stepping through that thing fucked me six ways to Sunday? They could learn a thing or two from you guys…” Seeing the curious look he was getting, Wade explained, “It’s a roller coaster in Japan-- steepest one in the world currently.”

The information immediately caused a grin to stretch across the Dragonborn’s face. “Oh? I would very much like to ride this… Takabisha, then.”
The mercenary stared at her for a second in stunned shock before groaning in exasperation, pushing himself away from the tree. “Right. Forgot who I was talking to for a second. Freaking crazy woman, freefalling like it ain’t a problem, giving everyone a heart attack…” He grumbled under his breath as he gestured for Minowa to follow him. “I think it’d be best if we split up. Wolfy could be anywhere, and if we show up as a group it might make him nervous.”

Minowa nodded at that. “Sound reasoning. My coms are on, you know how to reach me.” The Reaper suddenly flickered out of existence, and Wade realized she’d cast a discrete, high powered invisibility spell.

“No problem. Same for me. Good luck.” He called to the empty air, knowing the woman had heard him despite seemingly not being there. With that said, he looked around before starting in a random direction. Hopefully, it wouldn’t take too long to find Logan.

A full ten minutes later, something prickled at the back of Wade’s neck, and he slowed his gait to a slow walk, listening closely to the forest around him. After a moment, it hit him that he wasn’t alone, that something had been following him. Thinking it to be the man he’d been looking for, he turned to call out to him, only to screech as he was tackled by a small brown blur. He landed hard on his back and stared in stunned shock at the little girl sitting on his chest. After a second, it hit him that he was staring at what was basically a young female version of Logan, claws and all.

The young girl’s grin fell quickly when she saw the man underneath her wasn’t the person she had thought it was. Without thinking about it she said, “You’re not my daddy…” with a confused head tilt.

The merc’s mouth opened and closed several times as he tried to find something to say, but was cut off by the sound of the repulsor mechanisms in the Dragoon armor coming towards them, and he turned his head to see Minowa landing a few yards from them, the helmet folding back to show Min looking at them with surprise in her crimson eyes and her eyebrows in her hairline. “Wade, you seem to have acquired a little one.”

“Trust me, Min. I’m just as confused as you are.” Wade replied, looking back at the girl who had yet to leave her position on his chest.

The brown-haired child looked towards Min, and her eyes went wide at her appearance. The Dragonborn saw the look and quickly disengaged the armor so only the gauntlets, boots, and backplates remained. She gave the child a gentle smile, dipping her head to her. “We’re sorry for frightening you, malkiir. It was never our intention to do so.” She came a bit closer and dropped to her knee a few feet from them. “My name is Minowa Norddahl, and my friend there is Wade
Wilson. We’re members of the New Avengers.”

“Oh! Daddy told me about you!” The girl grinned at Wade from her spot on his chest.

As if summoned by her words, a call of “Lexi!” prompted the group to turn their eyes to Wade’s left, where Logan Howlett was running towards them. He slowed the run as he registered whose chest his daughter was sitting on. “Wade? The hell are you doin’ all the way out here??”

The hazel-eyed man grunted as Lexi scrambled off his chest and ran to the mutant. “Looking for you, actually.” He huffed as he pulled himself to his feet. “First though, wanna explain your mini-me?”

Logan huffed out a chuckle, scooping the girl into his arms and settling her on his hip. “Her name’s Alexia. It’s… complicated to explain, but basically, she’s a younger female clone of me.”

Alexia wiggled in Logan’s grip and tugged his shirt. “Daddy, that lady has horns!” She squealed with excitement, pointing to where Minowa had been observing in the background.

The mutant blinked in confusion before turning his attention to the woman in question, freezing the instant their eyes locked. Minowa went still as well, and there were a few seconds of silence as they simply observed each other, warmth and a deepening sense of awaren*ess* flaring between the pair that had never before laid eyes on each other. Several long seconds went by as their eyes remained locked together, no words needing to pass between them as a deeper part of themselves met on a metaphysical level. Finally, Logan dropped his eyes in a gesture of submission—his feral side might not have been as prominent as normal, but right now, that side was screaming at him that, no matter how short and small she seemed, the woman was an apex predator that deserved—demanded— respect. He stayed still as Minowa tilted her head silently and approached him at a calm pace, looking between him and his daughter. She studied him with a critical eye before smiling and nodding once. She pressed herself against him and tucked her head under the male’s chin, rumbling softly in her chest. After a second or two, she gently nipped his neck and nosed it, moving back to his chest as he wrapped an arm around her for a few seconds of cuddling.

Wade watched the display in confusion, waiting until she was settled against Logan again before speaking. “So, what the hell did I just witness?”

“An assertion of dominance between predators,” Minowa replied easily, her crimson eyes sliding to the confused merc. “His feral side submitted to me, and I acknowledged that.”
The hazel-eyed man nodded slowly at that. “Okay… good luck explaining this one to Brucie.”

That prompted Minowa to pull away enough so she could turn the full intensity of her glare on him. “Bruce and I have spoken on this matter, and he understands why this happens and what it entails. You, on the other hand, do not have the same knowledge, so you would be wise to be silent on matters you have no business questioning.” By the end, her eyes had started glowing brightly, signaling the strength of her other tenants’ ire.

Wade swallowed hard and ducked his head, holding up his hands in surrender. “Right, sorry, shouldn’t have said anything, shutting up now.”

The exchange prompted a rough laugh from Logan. “You are one hell of a woman to be able to wrangle Wade Wilson.”

A sharp laugh erupted from Wade at that and he shook his head. “Oh, it ain’t just her I’m afraid of…”

That prompted a sharp smile from the woman in question, and for a moment black bled into her sclera, prompting a squeak from Wade. It was quickly gone though, and Minowa pulled away to speak to them as a group. “You are Logan Howlett, then. It’s a pleasure to meet you-- Wade actually speaks quite fondly of you.” She smiled at the merc for a second, prompting the merc in question to relax. “I am Minowa Norddahl, Field Commander of the New Avengers.” She continued, turning her eyes back to Logan.

Logan nodded with a small smile of his own on his face. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Minowa.” He replied, receiving a kind smile from the Dragonborn. “This is my daughter, Alexia.” He gestured to the girl sitting on his hip, watching the proceedings with both curiosity and trepidation.

“We’ve met briefly. So your name is Alexia, malkiir?”

Lex nodded quietly, studying the woman who had just bonded with her daddy. “Uh-huh…” She replied, her green eyes slowly making their way back to the horns on the woman’s head. She made to reach out to touch them before stopping herself, blushing a bit.

Minowa smiled indulgently at the child and moved to one horn was within reach. “Just be careful with them, little one. They are attached to me, after all.” She gave the girl a playful smile at the last bit.
The girl nodded enthusiastically, reaching out to run her hand over the protrusions. “Wow! They’re so warm and smooth!”

That prompted a gentle laugh from Min, who shot Logan a bright smile of her own. “Your little one is delightful, Logan.”

Logan gave the Dragonborn a grateful smile before turning his attention back to both her and Wade, who had come closer. “So, you guys were lookin’ for me for a reason. What’s goin’ on?”

After a second or two of silence, Minowa pulled away from the duo to reach into the compartment in her armor she’d pulled the potion for Wade from. After a second or two of digging, she closed it and held her hand out silently to Logan.

The mutant looked at her curiously and allowed the item to be dropped into his open palm, and he choked on a gasp at what it was. His dog tags from his past life sat in his hand, despite the fact that he knew where they’d been the last time he’d seen them. “I… these are the tags I gave Remy…” He whispered, his heart clenching in agony at the implication of one of the New Avengers having them. He held them close for a second before freezing, then lifting them to his nose and sniffing. The scent he’d come to associate with his pup was fresh, only a day old at most, and he snapped his now hopeful gaze to the woman in front of him.

Minowa dipped her head with a compassionate, knowing smile. “He is safe. Different from the last time you saw him, for sure… but safe, and very loved.”

“It’s true, Logan,” Wade spoke up, drawing the feral mutant’s attention. “He’s the reason we’re here. Rem’s had a lot of emotional upheaval in the last month and a half, and if I started that story now we’d be here all night. But Logan… I swear, I’ve never seen Rem so happy and carefree… he’s got a team and family who would kill for him-- have already killed for him.”

Logan gave a shuddering sigh of relief, turning his eyes to Minowa only to pause at the look on her face. “Minowa?”

The Dragonborn held her hand up, eyes far away. “Quiet,” she commanded in a firm voice, demanding complete silence with her tone alone. After several seconds, her armor fully engaged as she informed them, “We have people headed in our direction at a steady clip-- several helicopters as well. I don’t think they have innocent intentions.” She listened again for a moment, eyes narrowing in anger. “Something about Weapon X… X-23… tranquilizers only, no killing…”
“Shit,” Logan swore, pulling Alexia closer to himself. “They’re lookin’ for Lexi and me. They’re the guys from the lab…” He trailed off as his daughter clung to him.

“I don’t wanna go back to the lab, daddy!”

Minowa was quick to turn to the duo, pressing a comforting kiss to Lexi’s head and nosing along Logan’s jaw. “No one is going to any lab while I’m standing here.” She swore, eyes glowing brightly as she pulled away from them. She turned to the woods as the sound of helicopter blades came closer. “Let them come. We will show them the full power of our Thu’um.” She growled, voice resonating with several others on the last sentence.

Wade quickly pulled out his own pistols, moving towards Logan and Lex. “Logan, let me take Lexi, I won’t let them get anywhere near her. Go help Min fight, but whatever you do, don’t get between her and anything she’s attacking. Just trust me on that.” He saw the confused, incredulous look he was getting, and the merc shook his head. “If it had been anyone else with me, I would have had them take her. But despite the fact that Minowa is scary a hell, I trust her to defend us.”

Logan nodded, gently passing Alexia over to the merc. The words coming from anyone else wouldn’t have meant a thing-- coming from Wade Wilson though? You couldn’t get higher praise. He told Lex to stay with Wade and stay out of sight before quickly joining Minowa. He was confused when something was tossed to him, even more so when he found it to be a pair of earplugs.

“Believe me,” Minowa said grimly as the voices came closer, “you’ll want to put those in if you value your hearing.” She turned back to the treeline and glared at it, and ten seconds later the first group burst through. She took only a moment to make sure the feral mutant’s earplugs were firmly in his ears before turning back to the group, who had raised their tranquilizer guns towards them both. She inhaled deeply, and the force of a hundred dragon souls surged to lend their power to hers as the mask folded over her face. “FO KRAH DIIN!!” The sound of the Thu’um echoed like an explosion through the forest around them and the Shout that was unleashed lanced towards the men with the fury of a thousand mid-winter blizzards.

Logan staggered for a moment from the shockwave the Thu’um caused but quickly righted himself, extending his claws and launching himself at the next group with a snarl on his face. The duo fought together in a terrifying display of natural synchronization, one dodging out of the way of another’s attack before finishing off the ones left behind. Logan was finding it hard to fully keep his head in the battle though-- Minowa fought with a ferocity and efficiency that spoke of savage beauty, as if she’d turned killing into an art form. She had a grace that was rare on the battlefield, and she fought with the same skills as one who’d been fighting their entire life. It confused the mutant a bit-- how could someone who looked so young have skills as honed as hers?
Finally, Minowa growled and looked to the sky. “I tire of these fools-- they do not even provide a
challenge to us!” She turned her glowing crimson eyes to Logan. “Go to Wade and your daughter--
You do not want to be hit with what I’m about to do next.” She waited until he was far enough
away before turning to the remaining men and the helicopters. She began channeling crackling
destruction magic into her hands while taking a deep breath, the dov adding their power to hers
once again. “ STRUN BA QO! ” She roared at the same time as she released the magic in her
hands, a cloak of lightning flashing into existence around her as the sky above them filled with
dark, ominous clouds that rumbled and flashed. She channeled another spell into her hands,
grinning as she took another deep breath. “ WULD-“ She suddenly vanished from her spot,
reappearing a moment later smack dab in the middle of the rest of the men. She didn’t wait to hear
the “ -- NAH KEST! ” That followed a second or two behind her before she flung her hands into
the air, releasing the final spell.

She’d only ever thought about chaining magic like this in theory. It had the potential to work, but
whether it did or not she didn’t know, she’d never had a chance to try it. However, all the pieces
were in play here-- The ‘Storm Call’ shout to summon the required energy, the ‘lightning cloak’
spell to center it, and the metal armor being worn by the soldiers and in the helicopters as a
target… all it needed was a catalyst.

And the ‘Thunderbolt’ spell she had just hurled into the air worked spectacularly.

All at once, several pillars of raw lighting crashed down around her in a thirty-yard radius, stopping
and starting randomly while wiping out every man and helicopter there in a magnificent display of
electricity and blinding lights. She held the spell for a good fifteen second before cutting the
magic, bringing the attack to a sudden stop. The silence that followed was only interrupted by the
sound of crackling electricity, the still rumbling clouds, and a tree falling over several feet away.
Minowa nodded sharply with a pleased smile on her face before turning her attention to the sky
again. “ LOK VAH KOOR! ” She shouted to the sky, the Thu’um immediately clearing the skies
of the remaining clouds and allowing the sun to shine on the forest again.

“How shit, Min! That was amazing!! ”

The Dragonborn turned at the yell, relieved to see Wade, Logan, and Alexia coming towards her
looking unscathed. She became alarmed when she saw blood splattered on ‘Lex, however, and she
immediately swooped forward to check on her. “You’re bleeding, malkiir, are you hurt?”

The little girl shook her head with a huge grin as she clung to her father’s shirt. “It’s not mine!
Somebody tried to grab me, so I stabbed him!” She held up her hand, and a pair of claws similar to
Logan’s slid from the knuckles.
Wade flinched a bit and dropped his head. “He managed to get the drop on me-- literally. He climbed up a tree behind me.”

“Don’t be too hard on him.” Logan requested softly, drawing the woman’s attention. “This group was way bigger than the ones that usually show up. I’m really glad you and Wade were here… Don’t know if we would have been able to escape this time.”

A soft sigh escaped Minowa as she turned back to Wade. “I wasn’t angry, my friend. I was worried about both your and her safety and well-being. And I would imagine it isn’t normal for enemies to drop out of trees.”

Wade gave a laugh before leaning in to whisper conspiratorially, “Nobody ever looks up.”

The tension was immediately diffused by the laughter that followed, and as it died down their attention was drawn by a glowing orange portal opening up next to them, and Tony and Stephen stepped through with a tied up man floating behind them. “Min, you forgot to close your corridor, this guy… just...” Tony’s words died in his throat at the sight of the group standing in a forest with several scorch marks seared into the trees and ground around them. The wreckage of two helicopters sat to one side, as well as several dozen corpses all still smoking and crackling with lightning magic. Wade was grinning with delight, as was the child in his arms. Logan was blinking in confusion as he looked between Tony, Stephen, and the portal. Minowa arched an eyebrow in challenge, completely unrepentant of the chaos around her.

The man floating behind them took one look around and promptly announced, “I surrender.”

Tony closed his eyes and took a deep breath, taking the few seconds it took to do so to sort through his thoughts. “Minowa, I’m going to need a full report on what happened here to give to the Accords Committee, but give me the TL;DR version first.”

Minowa nodded sharply. “We arrived here and immediately began to scour the area for Logan, but were found by his daughter Alexia first. We made contact with Logan and began to inform him of the current goings on, but were interrupted by this group of men who have been actively hunting him and his daughter. They made no effort to explain their reasoning, nor did they hesitate to attack a civilian and child, so I acted within my right to defend against malicious intent without just cause towards a bystander. My use of such destructive magic was born of the desire for efficiency, and I will be undoing the damage once the bodies and wreckage have been removed.”
The brief report prompted a sigh from the sorcerer of the group. “While it would have been preferable that you didn’t resort to such drastic measures, you were well within your right to use lethal force in the defense of civilians. Just…” Blue-green eyes swept around the area again before returning to Min. “Maybe less drastic next time.”

“Understood.”

Logan had been watching the byplay with a small smile on his lips, but was pulled towards Alexia when she pulled gently on his shirt. “What are we gonna do now, daddy?” She asked softly, worry in her eyes.

The older mutant sighed and gently pressed a kiss to the girl’s head. “We’ll have to head back to New York, kiddo.” He said softly, a glower crossing his face once Lex’s head was tucked against his shoulder. “I don’t really want to go back to the X-Men, but we may not have a choice…” Logan’s glower deepened into a scowl at the thought, particularly at the idea of exposing his daughter to them.

Minowa huffed at that, tucking herself against Logan. “I would much prefer you to stay close. The X-Men have proven themselves to be untrustworthy, cruel, and abusive, and I would not allow you or your daughter to be subjected to their behavior.”

“Min’s right on that end.” Tony spoke up, drawing their attention. “Considering what they put Rem through and what they condoned being done to him, I wouldn’t want a kid within a 25-mile radius of that place, or even a grown adult for that matter. Why don’t you come back and have some dinner with us, and you can figure out where to go from there.” A second later, a knowing grin slid across his face as he jerked his head towards the portal. “Besides… I think there’s someone here who would love to see you again.”

Logan swallowed hard at the implication, heart jumping with hope. “Are you serious? He’s really alive?”

“Alive, happy, and thriving,” Wade swore, nodding.

The mutant took a moment to think before nodding, looking to Tony and Stephen for a second then to Minowa who was pressed against his chest still. “I… yeah. I’d like that.” He finally said.

The genius nodded with a bright smile. “Excellent! Go ahead and step through with Wade and
Min. Stephen and I will stick around here and assist with cleanup. Min, I’ll let you know when to come back through to do your part.” He started to turn away before pausing and turning back. “Also, you and I need to talk once I get home, because this --” He gestured between Min and Logan, indicating their closeness, “-- needs a bit of explanation.”

“Of course, Zeymahi. I will explain everything later, I swear.” The Dragonborn dipped her head in acknowledgment. Getting a nod and a jerk of the head from the genius, Minowa gestured for the others to follow her, and they were quick to step through the portal to the other side.

As the portal closed behind them, Bridget approached them with a soft smile and portable kit resting on her hip. “Welcome back, Wade and Minowa, and welcome to the New Avengers Compound, Logan and Alexia. Is everyone alright?” She ran a critical eye over the duo, looking for any sign of injury. Her eyes quickly found Alexia and the blood on her hands, and she stepped forward with an alarmed look.

Wade shook his head with a smile of his own. “I’m fine, Bri. Logan, Lexi, and I didn’t get hit at all. Don’t worry about the blood on Lex, it isn’t hers.” He turned his gaze to Logan and Lex, sweeping his hand towards the woman. “Guys, this is Bridget Ivorsen-- she’s in charge of the Medical Wing here.”

Logan dipped his head in greeting to the woman, a small smile on his face. ‘Pleasure to meet you, ma’am. Don’t worry about me an’ Lex, we’ve got a healing factor that would take care of any wounds. Neither of us was hurt though… What about you, Minowa?”

The ebony-haired woman held up one hand as the Diamond Dragoon armor retracted to a pair of simple boots, fingerless gauntlets, and back plates. “I sustained no injuries, worry not.”

“That may be so…” Bridget reached into her bag, fishing around for a moment before withdrawing a vial of a glowing blue liquid. “But you still need to take this to mitigate the effects of the magic you used.” She pressed the vial into the surprised Dragonborn’s hands, giving her a hard glare. “Minowa Norddahl, don’t you think for one second I don’t know what you did. You’ve never attempted chain casting before-- it looked good on paper, but you should have tried it in a controlled setting first! I don’t care how old you are, how powerful you are, or how much help you had!” She poked the stunned woman in the chest as she continued. “You don’t go flinging around spell techniques you’ve never tried before on a field of battle, especially when there are civilians involved!”

“Actually, Logan and Alexia aren’t civilians, per se…” Wade swallowed as Bridget turned stern eyes on him.
“Do you know what happens when a living body is hit by a bolt of lightning? THE SAME THING THAT HAPPENS TO ANYONE ELSE!” She whipped back to Minowa, who was blinking at her. “No chain casting on the field with bystanders!”

After a moment of silence, a small smile quirked at Minowa’s lips, and she pulled the stopper off the bottle in her hands and chugged it back. “Understood.” She passed the bottle back to the Restoration Master, who huffed and tucked the bottle away. The blond gave each of them a quick check before pulling Min into a tight hug that the crimson-eyed woman reciprocated immediately. As Bridget swept from the room she turned back to Logan and Lex. “She is simply worried. As one who has seen what magic is capable of, she knows how useful a tool it is, and how dangerous a weapon it is. Admittedly, I should have tested it in a controlled setting first before taking it onto the field… she was well within her right to scold me for such a thing.”

Logan nodded in understanding, a small smile on his face. “She seems to care a lot… even though she’s a bit of a spitfire.”

Wade snorted at that, shaking his head. “Oh, you have no idea… Just wait until she’s chasing you through the compound waving a potion in one hand and a fist full of restoration magic in the other.” A second later, he tilted his head up, resolutely ignoring the confused look he got from Logan and the amused grin on Minowa’s. “FRIDAY, where’s Rem right now?”

“All three girls waved and called out ‘hello’s. After a moment, Hela stepped forward to look up at
Alexia. “Hi, what’s your name?” She asked with a smile, missing the proud smile Holly aimed at her.

Alexia blinked down at the girl from her spot on Logan’s hip. “I’m Alexia, but I like ‘Lexi and ‘Lex.’” She replied softly. She wiggled a little bit, and Logan gently set her down so she was at eye level with the little goddess.

Hela smiled brightly at her, holding out her hands to the 6-year-old. “Nice to meet you, Lexi! Do you wanna come play with us?”

“Wait, she needs a bath. We can all take a bath together!” Lila suggested, bouncing up beside Hela.

Hannah grinned at that idea, nodding rapidly. “A bubble bath!!” She declared, prompting cheers from the other two.

Holly smiled indulgently at the children before turning her attention to Logan. “Would you be alright with that? She can always borrow some of Hannah’s clothes-- they look like they’re almost the same size.”

Seeing the conflicted look on Logan’s face, Minowa tilted her head towards him to speak softly to him. “I trust her with the safety of the children here, and the conversation about to happen… it is not meant for young ears.”

Finally, Logan sighed and nodded, turning back to Holly. “Just so you know, she’s got adamantium claws she can extend from her hands and feet. She’s got control over the ones on her hands… still working on the feet, though.” Holly nodded at that, and Logan took a knee so he was face-to-face with Alexia. “Hey kiddo, you be good for Holly, alright? I’ll come to find you later once the grown-ups are done talkin’.”

The young girl nodded with a big smile, hugging Logan tight. “Okay, daddy! I’ll be good, I promise!” She pulled away after a moment, and Hela took her hand and guided her along behind Holly, chatting with her all the while with Hannah and Lila piping in as well.

“I think I need a shot of insulin before this meeting starts.” Wade quipped, turning and walking into the room with the others trailing behind her. “Like, damn, they are too cute!”
“I quite agree, Wade. Although I would think with your healing factor, diabetes wouldn’t be a problem.” The voice that answered belonged to Dorian, who stood from his seat with Zevrael at his side. “So, this is Logan Howlett, then? A pleasure to meet you-- I’m Dorian Pavus, and this is my husband, Zevrael.” He gestured to the elf at his side, who waved with a bright smile.

Logan dipped his head to the duo, shaking their hands briefly. “Good to meet you too. I gotta admit that I’m curious about why we’re in a meeting room like this, though.”

In response to that, Minowa waved a hand, and the door shut tight. “Because this room is reinforced against eavesdropping, and is capable of withstanding the full fury of the Hulk at full strength.”

The mutant stared at her for a second, dread curling in his gut. “I’m not gonna like what you’re about to tell me, am I?”

“Not in the slightest.”

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They were right-- he didn’t like it.

Logan could feel his feral side clawing at his mental walls, desperate to escape and hunt down the ones who had hurt his precious pup. He’d always known about what Sinister and Creed had done to him, and it infuriated him that he hadn’t been able to help… but what the X-Men had been doing under his own nose-- He took a shaky breath and looked up at the group in the room. “Doesn’t explain why he was taken though… or why they didn't come back with him.” He finally said, looking to Minowa in particular.

The Dragonborn dipped her head from her seat a few feet from him. “Indeed not… From what Rem has told us, he was taken to a place called the Citadel for a farce of a trial regarding the Morlock Massacre. The person supposed to be defending him was Warren.”

“What?! Why would they let Warren defend him when he clearly blames Remy for what happened?! He never tried to hide how much he hated him!”

Wade sighed deeply, shaking his head. “I think that’s the exact reason they chose him… Keep in mind, Magneto was the one to set up the trial, not the X-Men themselves. Once Rem’s unwilling part in what happened was brought to light… well… the verdict was passed pretty quickly,
especially once Warren refused to defend him and walked out of the room.”

There was absolute silence for a moment before Logan snarled, “What did they do to my pup?”

Minowa sighed deeply, closing her eyes for a moment before opening them again, speaking in a soft tone. “When the citadel collapsed, Rogue took him out into the Arctic wilderness and drained Rem of his powers. She then flew back to the others, they boarded the jet they flew there, and then they left, leaving him there to die.”

Logan felt his brain short circuit. They’d left Rem, his pup, behind. They’d left him unable to defend himself alone, in the cold. They’d left him to die.

There were several seconds of silence before Minowa suddenly sat up straight, eyes snarling unerringly on Logan. “Everyone needs to stand up slowly and calmly move to the far wall. Now. Do not move until I tell you to.”

Wade realized what was going on and nodded to the Pavus duo. “Do as she says. Just… trust me.” The husbands nodded and joined him, confusion clear on their faces as they watched Minowa and Logan.

The Dragonborn rose from her seat calmly, eyes never leaving Logan. A moment later, the mutant snarled in sheer, animalistic rage and surged from his seat, stalking towards the door with murder in his eyes. A moment later, Minowa intercepted him, eyes glowing brightly as she grappled him to the ground and straddled his chest, wings erupting from her back and flaring out in a clearly dominant position. <Be still.> She commanded in Dovahzul, the translation echoing loudly through their bond as clearly as the Thu’um woven into the words themselves.

On the other side of the room, Dorian and Zevrael inhaled sharply at both the display and the power the use of her Thu’um conjured. “Wade, what’s going on? I’ve never seen Minowa act like this!” Zevrael asked, turning his wide icy blue eyes to the merc.

“I wasn’t sure at first myself, but I’ve got a theory,” Wade replied, watching the duo intently. “Logan’s a feral mutant. He’s got this… side to him that’s more animal than human, and sometimes that side takes over and he goes into a kind of berserker rage. Normally, anything that gets between him and his target ends up dead, dying, or destroyed… but he and Min reacted oddly to each other earlier, and now that I’ve had a chance to consider it, I think it’s because she’s Dragonborn. She called their first interaction ‘an assertion of dominance between predators’, and it honestly did remind me of two alpha wolves meeting. Only… she’s not a wolf-- she’s a damn dragon.”
Dorian considered that a moment before his eyes widened. “Maker’s breath, he basically imprinted on her, acknowledged her as his alpha. Things never seem to be dull in this place…”

Completely ignorant to the conversation happening behind them, Logan writhed in her grip and growled, prompting Minowa to tighten her grip a bit. <Your anger is justified, and your desire to protect your pup from further harm is admirable. But to hunt down the ones who have hurt him alone, without pack, is foolish. Calm your rage for now-- your pup is here, and he is safe and loved. There will be time for retribution later. > The words had been firm and unyielding in the beginning before softening into a soothing tone at the end. Logan stopped moving finally, looking up at her with his eyes still wild, but no longer filled with unbridled fury. The Dragonborn stared back, eyes still glowing and posture calm and assertive as she allowed her wings to relax into a more neutral position. Finally, the mutant made a soft rumbling noise, relaxing his posture and baring his throat to the woman above him. The woman gently let his hands go, moving to run her nose along the column of his neck, gently biting it before kissing the area, pulling back once she was done. <You are no longer alone in protecting your pup. He is part of our pack, and we will keep him safe. > She rumbled softly, the glow finally leaving her eyes a few seconds later. She stayed where she was as Logan calmed completely. After another minute or two, Logan blinked rapidly as if coming back to himself. “There you are.” She murmured gently, drawing the brunette’s attention to her.

Light brown eyes stared up at her in stunned shock for a second as Logan’s mind caught up to what exactly had just happened. He’d gone feral, that much was clear… and he could count on one hand the number of times someone had been able to bring him out of that state and still have fingers left over. It was somewhat understandable considering Remy’s empathy and the fact that he considered the redhead his pup. But still, that was only two or three times. So to have a woman eight inches shorter than him with no empathic abilities to speak of but the aura of an apex predator be able pin him to the ground and break through that feral state with little to no effort… After a moment, he blinked again when he registered something different about the woman above him. “You have wings now.”

A soft rumbling laugh escaped Min as the appendages in question flared out in a dramatic display before withdrawing back into her body. “I’ve had them for a long time-- they simply remain hidden more often than not.” She finally rose from her position atop Logan’s chest, helping the man get to his own feet once she was up. “FRIDAY,” She called up to the ceiling, “Is Rem still in the music room?”

“Rem and James have both moved to the communal kitchen, Minowa.”

“Perfect.” The Dragonborn turned her attention to Dorian, Zevrael, and Wade. “You all did exactly as I commanded, and I thank you for that. Come, let’s go find our little redhead.”
The group nodded and followed behind her, Logan sticking close to her back. They engaged in small talk as they walked, and Wade couldn’t help but give a small smile when he heard Logan thanking Zevrael and Dorian for taking care of Rem. As they got close to the communal rooms though, the sound of Minowa’s name being called caused them to pause and turn, where Tony stood at one end of the hallway. “A word, if you don’t mind.” He called calmly, nothing in his posture or expression giving away what was going through his head.

The Dragonborn nodded in affirmation. “One moment, Zeymahi.” She turned back to the group, smiling slightly at the way Logan’s eyes seemed fixated on the door a few meters away. “Wade, please take Logan to see Rem. I will come to find you all later.” The group nodded, and Minowa took a moment to gently nose Logan’s neck and jaw again before striding towards Tony, who led her in the opposite direction.

Wade huffed out a breath at the display before turning back to Logan. “Okay, stay here a moment while I let Rem and James know we’re here. Startling either of them would be a piss poor idea, so just hang tight.” Logan nodded, and the merc swept into the room with a grin on his face. “I’m home~!” He sang out, catching the attention of the duo sitting at the counter. He immediately found himself with an armful of happy Rem, and he laughed and ruffled the fiery locks. “Good to see you too, Rem.” He looked up as James slowly approached them, a small smile of his own on his face. “Hey, James. Glad to see you’re settling in okay. How did your appointment with Tony go today?”

The assassin gave a small dip of his head. “It went pretty well. A little nervous about using the BARF tech… but…” He looked down at his son, giving the teen a smile.

“Hey, I get it. You want to be able to be there for him.” Wade finished the unspoken thought. “On that note, though, I brought Rem a present.” Seeing the curious look on James’ face and the excitement on Rem’s, the hazel-eyed man grinned brightly and pulled away, taking a few steps to the side so the teen was visible before turning to the doorway again. “You can come in now!” He called out loudly to the trio on the other side.

Dorian and Zevrael stepped through first-- they didn’t want to alarm James by allowing a stranger to enter the area they were in before them. By showing they were allowing Logan to enter as well, it displayed a level of trust the ex-assassin would understand. Finally, Logan stepped through the doorway, and a split second of silence passed where the two mutants simply stared at each other before--

“LOGAN!!”

The joyful shriek cut the silence as Rem threw himself at the older male, who wasted no time in picking the teen up and holding him close, overwhelmed with relief that his pup was truly alive and well. Rem was babbling with excitement as he held Logan tight, tears running down his face at
having one of his biggest supporters holding him again. It was clear to everyone in the room that
there was a special bond between the two, and if anyone noticed the tissues being passed between
Dorian and Zevrael to wipe away tears, no one was foolish enough to bring it up.

Finally, the duo pulled away, and Logan finally got a good look at Rem for the first time. He
blinked in shock for a second before saying, “You've shrunk.”

Rem laughed wetly, wiping his eyes with his sleeve with a huge grin on his face. “It’s a long story.
I’m really glad you’re here, Logan!”

The mutant nodded in agreement, pulling Rem back in for a hug. “I am too, pup… I’m so relieved
you’re alive…” He managed to get out, his voice gruff and laced with emotions he couldn’t quite
hide. Despite being younger than the last he’d seen him, Rem’s scent was the same, and his smile
similar if not brighter… and he looked happy, so happy. Clearly, this place had been good for the
redhead.

Dorian and Zevrael smiled brightly as the two embraced again, and the silverette looked over to
where James was standing. He was confused by the vacant, thousand-yard stare the assassin had,
and he warily called out, “James? Are you alright?” The question pulled the attention of the rest of
the room to the man, who seemed frozen to the spot.

The male didn’t reply, attention instead on the vague, grainy memory that had slotted into place in
his mind. Finally, after a few seconds, he blinked rapidly, coming back to awareness. “Howlett?”
He finally managed, snapping Logan’s attention to him immediately. “Logan Howlett?”

Logan stared at the man, eyes cautious and questioning even as he nodded. “Yeah, that’s me.”

Seeing how the assassin’s knees were shaking, Wade calmly stepped forward and helped him sit in
the armchair behind him. “Easy, James. Deep breaths, don’t force it.” He soothed him, shooting a
pointed look at the others for a second. Zevrael immediately moved to the kitchen to make some
tea, Dorian taking a seat on a nearby chair to observe the room.

Rem looked at Logan for a moment before gently pulling him forward so they were sitting with
James and Wade. “Did you remember something, Patris?” He asked the man softly, reaching out to
take his hand.

After a moment, the sniper nodded. “I… yeah. The Howling Commandos… We got help from a
mutant at one point… tough bastard, near indestructible…” He looked up at Logan again, eyes and expression nervous. “I think… that was you. Logan Howlett.”

The mutant stared at him for a second before sighing and sitting back. “I wish I could tell ya, bub, but I don’t have any memories beyond a decade ago.”

“I wish I could tell you if it really was you,” James replied quietly, eyes drifting down to the table. “I’m only just now getting everything back.”

The redhead at his side smiled and squeezed his hand. “Don’t worry, Patris. Between the BARF tech and things like this, you’ll get it back.” He received a squeeze back and a thankful smile from the assassin and Rem grinned before turning to Logan again. “Logan… I’d like you to meet my biological dad, James Buchanan Barnes.”

Logan’s eyebrows shot into his hairline, and his gaze snapped between the duo for a second. Before anything more could be said, Zevrael entered the room with a tray of tea and various cookies. The elf smiled kindly to the mutant as he put the tray down before announcing, “Better settle in, Logan. This explanation could take a while.”

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“Okay, hold on. I’m not good with the squishy sciences, so could you run that by me one more time?”

Minowa groaned in annoyance even as Bruce was laughing from his place on the other side of the holoscreen. “Alright, from the top again. I am Dragonborn. Being such entails absorbing dragon souls upon slaying them. Because of my unique circumstances involving Alduin and what happened during the battle of Sovngarde, I have access to the memories, power, and knowledge contained in those souls. However, it also brought certain dragon-like characteristics forward, like the horns, eyes, and wings on a physical level. Having multiple partners helps ground the power that comes with such circumstances, and I have explained this to Bruce already. Logan’s case is also special in that he has a feral side that submitted to me, and it is in a dragon’s nature to dominate. My acceptance of his submission came as naturally to me as my Thu’um does.”

Bruce laughed again at the flummoxed look on Tony’s face, shaking his head in fond exasperation. “Tony, just go with it. Min explained that this was a thing, that stuff like this would happen. I know that doesn’t make her feelings for me any less, and I’m secure in my place in her life.”
The words caused the Dragonborn to turn to the screen, an adoring smile on her face. “You will always be one of mine, Diisu’um. Never doubt that.”

After a few more seconds, Tony simply sighed and nodded. “I’m moving you to a bigger suite, Minowa. If you’re going to keep collecting people like this, might as well keep them close to you…” He turned on his heel and walked from the room, but after a second or two he popped his head back in. “And you get to tell Logan about his new living arrangements!”

“With pleasure, Zeymahi.”

“Minowa Norddahl, I see what you did there!”

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“Hey guys… where the hell did that thing come from?”

Natasha looked up from where she’d been reading, Clint’s head resting on her lap as she did so. She followed Sam’s finger to the kitchen table, blinking in confusion at what sat there. “I don’t know. I haven’t seen one of those floating around anywhere…” She looked down at Clint, who silently shook his head.

Scott arched an eyebrow as well, standing from his seat next to Sam to move towards the item. “Maximoff and Rogers have barely been out of their rooms in two weeks… So I doubt this was their doing.” He finally reached out and plucked the item from the table, as well as the note underneath it. “‘Hello, my name is Quackers. My siblings and I want to play a game with you! We love to play hide and seek-- come find us!’” A moment later he paled. “‘All… 999 of us’.”

Absolute silence met the note before they all simultaneously turned their gaze to the rubber duck sitting innocently in Scott’s hand.

Finally, the quiet was broken by an incredulous screech from Sam.

“What the fu--?!”
So it begins... RISE OF THE RUBBER DUCKS-- THE QUACKENING!!

New Thu'um!

Fo Krah Diin -- Frost Breath. For when you want to kill whatever is in front of you, but don't want to reduce it to ash with fire breath.

Strun Ba Qo -- Storm Call. Summons a thunderstorm to smite your enemies with lightning. Minowa never does anything by the book though, so she took the attack and made it BETTER.

Wuld Nah Kest -- Whirlwind Sprint. For when you want to move faster than the speed of sound and NOT have your skin torn from your face by the sheer force of it. Don't try this at home, kids.

Lok Vah Koor -- Clear Skies. For when those pesky thunderstorms aren't needed anymore, or they're a threat to the outing you have planned. Don't think for one second that she wouldn't use it like that.

Malkiir -- Little child. Basically a generic term of endearment.
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Logan accepts his new position as a resident of the Avengers Compound, and as a member of the New Avengers, but expresses his desire to return to the Xavier Institute to pick up his things, and Rem's things while he's at it. Minowa and Tony tag along for emotional support, Tony more because they need to grab both Logan and Rem's motorbikes, and Min doesn't even know how to drive a car. A particular pair of mutants don't seem to know when to quit, and everyone is SO DONE with the idiocy coming out of the Xavier Institute by the end of the day.

(Coldharbour will have several new souls in it if the X-Men don't quit while they're ahead.)

((Tony is planning financial murder. Stand clear, everyone.))

Chapter Notes

Jen's salt towards the X-Men is on FULL display in this chapter. Also, the specifics of the Dragoon Armor will be covered on the Tumblr page. Go look for it there.

THE ONE SHOT HAS DROPPED!! Go read it!

Jeez... THIS is why my relationship status on my FB says I'm in a relationship... I'm in a relationship with this FANFICTION SERIES! I have no time for anything else!

Who the hell am I fooling. I love this series, and I love my readers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Logan was quiet as he watched the interactions between everyone at the table. After only five minutes of observing the group, he could already tell there was a massive difference between the team dynamic here and the one between the X-Men. The relationships here were built on camaraderie and positivity, the desire to build each other up and support each other instead of tearing them down. His eyes slid to Alexia, who was chatting animatedly with Hela, Lila, and Hannah while cutting her food with her claws. No one was giving the behavior a second look though, and the mutant couldn't help but ponder on the fact that the X-Men wouldn’t have hesitated to reprimand her for doing so before turning their ire to him for allowing it. He snorted at the thought-- he could just hear Warren’s voice sneering ‘what do you expect, being raised by Logan.’

“You’re quiet, Grohiiki. Is something wrong?”
The man blinked out of his thoughts before looking at Minowa, who was curled up next to him on the couch. The invitation to stay with the Avengers had been a surprise, but not unwelcome one. Here, ‘Lexi would always have friends and support, and he wouldn’t have to worry about the other residents of the Xavier School targeting her in any way. And if he was being honest with himself, the chance to be away from that environment was a blessing, made even sweeter by being near Minowa. Hell if he could explain why he seemed to be so connected with her so quickly, but really? He wasn’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth. “Nah, I’m fine. Just thinkin’ about how different it is here compared to the Mansion. Everyone here is so… supportive.”

Minowa nodded, a knowing smile on her face. “That is how a team should be. It does no good to tear down the ones you fight with on the field of battle. Being grah-zeymahzin extends beyond that, to be willing to stand by your allies in all things. That your previous team fails to understand that is a reflection of them.” She gently nosed his neck again, nipping the skin gently for a moment. “You need not worry about them again. You are one of us now-- one of mine.”

“I know, Min. But there is one last piece of business I need to take care of with them.” Seeing he had Min’s attention, he continued. “I need to get my stuff from the Mansion, and Rem’s stuff too. I don’t want their mitts all over it, and I don’t trust them worth shit to not tamper with anything.”

The Dragonborn blinked before a small smile quirked at her lips, and she nodded. “Then we will go with you. I do not trust them in the slightest, and I refuse to send you into a situation with one such as Jean Grey.” She stood gracefully from her seat, Logan joining her a moment later. “I have heard what that woman is capable of. I welcome her to try and get into our head.” Her eyes glowed for a moment as she gave a sharp, almost cruel grin. “It would be the last mistake she ever made.”

“Minowa Norddahl, are you plotting someone’s death over there?” Tony’s voice drew their attention, and the genius approached with Stephen at his side.

The innocent smile on the Dragonborn’s face wasn’t fooling anyone, nor her blithe tone of voice as she replied, “Of course not, Zeymahi. There are other ways to incapacitate a person that doesn’t involve death.”

The unimpressed looks that got her caused Logan to snort in amusement. “You are not allowed to break people’s minds, Minowa.” Tony deadpanned, arching an eyebrow.

“What if they try to target our team and family?”

The duo stared at each other for a full minute, and Stephen and Logan shot each other an exasperated yet ultimately amused look. Finally, Tony replied, “Case by case basis, run it by me
first.” Minowa nodded at that, grinning sharply. “Seriously though, What are you two talking about over here?”

Logan put an arm around Minowa’s waist, and the woman leaned into his touch. “I was just tellin’ Min that I’d like to go back to the Mansion to get mine and Rem’s stuff. I don’t trust them to leave it alone, and I wanna get my motorbike as well as Rem’s.”

Tony nodded in agreement with his assessment. “Yeah, from what I’ve heard from Rem, that would probably be a good idea. Two motorbikes though… Min, do you know how to ride?” The woman shot him a blank look, and the genius rolled his eyes. “Didn’t think so. Tell you what, I’ll come with you guys. Apart from James, I think I’m the only one who knows how to ride a motorbike. And I’m not sure James wants to go anywhere outside the Compound right now… nor do I think it’s a good idea to have him anywhere near them. After finding out what they did to his son… yeah, no, it’d be a bloodbath.”

A snort escaped Stephen, and he leaned down to gently kiss Tony. “While you do that, I’m going to call Bruce and Vision again. We have an idea on how to deal with Wade’s cancer that may also solve our conundrum with mind control prevention.”

“Great! Let me know if you need any input.” He pulled Stephen in for a deeper kiss for a few seconds. “I’ll see you tonight, love.” Stephen nodded and kissed his head with a murmured ‘love you too babe’ before he dipped his head to Logan and Minowa, sweeping away towards the lab.

After a moment of silence, Logan gave a soft huff and a small smile quirked at his lips. “That man’s got it BAD for you, Tony.” He pulled away from Minowa a second later. “Let me go tell ‘Lex that I’m headed out. Wouldn’t want her to worry.” He turned and began walking towards the group of girls who had now been joined by Cooper. “Hey ‘Lex!” The girl’s head popped up at the sound of her name, and she squealed ‘Daddy!’ as she ran over and threw herself into his arms. “You makin’ friends, kid?” He smiled down at the child, relieved that she seemed to be getting along with everyone.

The brunette nodded with a grin. “Yeah! I made lots of new friends! I’m glad we get to stay here, Daddy!” She proclaimed with a happy sparkle in her eyes.

Logan ruffled the girl’s hair, prompting a laugh out of Lex. “I’m glad you’re havin’ fun. Listen, I have to get some of my stuff from my old residence, alright? I’ll be back soon, be good and stay outta trouble.”

“Okay, Daddy! I’ll be good!” The 6-year-old gave Logan a big hug before running over to the
children who all cheered and welcomed her back.

The mutant gave a soft huff as he stood again, a gentle smile on his face as he watched her. He felt someone step up to his side, and he turned his eyes to find Minowa at his shoulder. “Your pup will have love and support in abundance here, Grohiiki.” She assured him, shooting him a knowing smile. “Come, best to do this sooner rather than later.” She turned back to face Tony, who was approaching her with a piece of tech that looked suspiciously like the arc reactor, except thinner. “Ah, is that the new core?”

Tony smirked and nodded. “Yep. I think you’re gonna like this one.” She held out her hand, and Tony immediately passed the cylinder over, the multiple colors flickering within casting a soft glow over her skin.

Minowa smiled eagerly, holding the other gauntlet out. A moment later, a ‘hiss’ was heard as a similarly shaped disk was released, and she passed it to Tony before inserting the new one. A moment later, the plates of the armor began to cover her again, only now they were black with multicolored flecks in them. Several grooves through the armor glowed and pulsed blue, and Minowa twisted to see herself a bit. “I admit my curiosity, Anthony. What capabilities does this set have?”

The genius passed her back the other disk, and as she put it away he began to explain. “I figured that there will be situations where you can’t go in openly showing any kind of weapon. I know you love your daggers, but again, they won’t always be available to you. So this core is made to boost your magical prowess. If you thought your chain casting was devastating before, which I will be coming to find you later to learn just so you know, then this set will make what you did in Canada look like a simple zap from static buildup. Your Shouts of any elemental variety will also gain a boost.”

“Delightful.” Minowa purred with a massive grin full of too many teeth. “What is this set called?”

“The ‘Dark Opal Dragoon’.”

Logan couldn’t help but give the woman a once over. “Looks damn good, I’ll tell you that. Suppose you gave her this one because of where we’re goin’?” The massive grin on Tony’s face was answer enough, and the mutant snorted and shook his head. “How are we gettin’ there anyway? Got a jet or somethin’?”

That prompted a smirk between Tony and Minowa. “Let me introduce you to a new method of travel, Grohiiki…”
“Okay, what the fuck was that?!”

A rumbling laugh escaped Minowa as she easily supported the mutant at her side. “We call them ‘corridors’. They’re a popular mode of travel for several of us in the Compound.” She handed him a vial of medicine to soothe his stomach and equilibrium.

Logan easily knocked the drink back, sighing in relief as it took hold. “I’ll just stick to walkin’ thanks.” The Dragonborn outright laughed at that as she took back the vial.

“Holy shit, Honey Badger, what era did they pull THIS house from?!”

The exclamation from Tony prompted the duo to turn and stare at him for a few seconds. Tony was staring up at the mansion in front of him with an incredulous expression on his face. “It’s just aesthetic. Didn’t understand the reason myself.” Logan finally said, deciding to resolutely ignore the nickname Tony had given him.

The genius aimed the look at him. “Aesthetic or not, there’s no need for merlons! Unless you’re staging castle siege themed LARP sessions I don’t know about.”

“No idea what merlons are, bub.”

Minowa stepped up, rolling her eyes deeply at the genius. “Poor architectural tastes aside, we have a job to do. Let’s just get in, get your belongings, and get out.” She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, and as she opened them both men noticed the tiny streaks of black in her sclera. “I do not wish to tempt fate today should one of the fools in this place speak poorly.”

Tony nodded, all trace of joking gone from his face and demeanor. Honestly, he couldn’t blame her for wanting to be here as little as possible. “Alright, I understand. Logan, you know this place… lead the way.”

The mutant nodded and gestured for them to follow him up to the front of the mansion. They slipped inside with no problems, and Tony subtly looked around as he followed Logan down a
series of hallways before stopping in front of a door. “This was Rem’s room.” The mutant
informed them quietly as he pushed the door open. The trio silently entered the small, single
bedroom, and after a few seconds, the feral mutant growled in anger. “They’ve already been
through his stuff-- his CDs are missing, and so is his player…”

“Don’t worry about that stuff. We’ll replace it for him if we haven’t already.” Tony reassured him,
patting his shoulder. “Min, help him pack everything up, then get my attention. I’m gonna do a
little digging myself.”

That prompted a confused look from Logan whose eyebrows then shot into his hairline as the
genius went still, eyes flashing to a glowing blue. He was pulled away by the feeling of a hand on
his arm, and he looked down to see Minowa smiling gently at him. “Later, Logan. Let’s get what
we came here for.”

The duo did a quick sweep of the room, piling what they found on the bed-- a stack of pictures, a
few books, a plethora of card decks, a well-loved bo staff, and a stuffed animal that had been very
well hidden. “Alright, the key to Rem’s bike is in my room. Took it once I realized somethin’
happened to him, and I didn’t want to give anyone the chance to fuck with it… namely Bobby or
Warren.” Minowa nodded in agreement and the mutant turned his eyes to Tony, who hadn’t moved
an inch from his position. “So… how do we…?”

“I’m still aware of what’s going on around me, Claws.” Tony blinked, the blue flickering from his
eyes. They landed on the pile stacked neatly on the bed, and the genius’ expression became sad. “Is
that all he had?” His voice was soft as he turned his gaze to the mutant standing to one side, and it
was clear the brunette was hurting for Rem from the lost look on his face and the almost
unnoticeable waver in his voice.

Logan nodded, a rough sigh escaping him. “Yeah, that’s everything.”

Tony looked back to the bed, and after a second or two of silence, he felt a hand on his back. He
looked over to see Minowa standing next to him with a compassionate look on her face. “He is safe
now, Zeymahi, and he is loved. He will not return to a place where he is hurt like this any longer.”
The genius nodded and took the chance to take a few deep breaths. As he did, Minowa moved to
look in the closet, returning a moment later with a cardboard box. She gently packed everything
into it, and upon nodding at Tony, it was stored away in his pocket dimension. “Grohiiki, lead the
way to your room-- we’ve everything from here.”

The mutant shot Tony another confused look before nodding, leading the way out of the room and
closing the door securely behind him. They made it halfway down the hall to Logan’s room before
two men turned the corner, and Logan stopped in his tracks, stiffening noticeably. He tilted his
head so he could mutter under his breath for the duo on either side of him could hear. “Warren
Worthington III and Bobby Drake.” He informed them, eyes cold as he observed them. “Archangel
and Iceman respectively.”

Instantly, Tony’s attention was locked on them unerringly. He remembered that Warren was the one Rem had said repeatedly called him a whore and Bobby had never hidden his own distaste for the redhead. From the way Minowa’s eyes seemed to flicker with fury, she wasn’t letting her guard down either.

Warren was the first to notice them, and he shot them a mix of a smirk and a sneer. “About time you got back. Done having your pity party over him?” He spat, something truly venomous coloring his tone.

“How long do you plan on staying this time?” Bobby shook his head with a roll of his eyes. “It’s hard to call you a team member when you’re never here.”

Logan’s muscles coiled hard as if he were about to lunge at the duo. “Shut the fuck up about Remy, Wings, or you’ll be lookin’ for a new code name by the time I’m done with you.”

A warm hand found his shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze, and he looked down at Minowa who had a well constructed neutral expression on her face. “Calm, Grohiiki. They are but children speaking of that which they have no understanding of.” She murmured to him, even as a bit more black bled into her sclera.

Warren eyed the duo even as he scoffed. “Well I, for one, am glad he’s gone. The only one he really fought for was himself.”

A second later, Bobby took full notice of the woman at Logan’s side. “Well damn, Logan, looks like your healing factor is gonna come in real handy with that kinda arm candy.” He leered at the woman, eyes roaming over her figure.

Tony’s ire skyrocketed, but before he could move, Minowa smiled blithely at the young adult. “Are you jealous, Bobby Drake? After all, I can’t imagine you could ever give a woman what she desires.”

The words prompted a choked laugh from Tony, a snort of amusement from Logan, and a soft ‘oooh’ from Warren. Bobby gaped at her for a moment before a snarl crossed his face. “At least I don’t get my dates killed.” The statement brought dead silence from the hallway, and the brunette continued. “What’s the count now, Logan? Four, maybe five? Oh, wait… they’re not all dead… just scarred for life because of you.”
Logan went very still, his eyes narrowing sharply before snarling and lunging at Bobby, claws appearing in a flash. Before anyone else could move further, he was tackled to the ground by Minowa, who pinned him before looking up at the other two mutants, sclera completely black. “You both would do well to leave.” Alduin’s voice ripped from her, the deep voice filled with a wild fury the likes of which Tony had never heard. “He is not the only danger here now, and we are tempted to allow him to finish what he started, or better yet, do the job ourselves.”

Both Warren and Bobby took a step back with wide eyes at the sudden change in the woman. “What the fuck is that?!” Warren asked with a horrified tone.

“I told Scott letting him join was a mistake!” Bobby added, even as he stepped back again. “He’s only slightly better than that slut of a thief was!”

“Alright, enough!” The sharp voice of Tony was accompanied by him stepping around Logan and Alduin, eyes flashing with unbridled fury. “You both need to leave now. If you think Logan is dangerous, then you really don’t want to be on the receiving end of whatever they will dish out!” He gestured to Alduin, who was now speaking in Dovahzul to Logan.

The duo finally took notice of the genius, and Warren blinked in confusion. “Tony Stark? What brings you here? And with the likes of him, no less?” He shot a look at Logan, who had stopped flailing by that point.

Tony shook his head with narrowed eyes. “Between outright sexualizing one of my team members, someone I see as a SISTER, and what you said to Logan, I’m inclined to completely ignore that question. But I’m feeling rather… generous today, so I’ll tell you-- Logan came to gather his things because as of an hour ago, he is officially a member of the New Avengers. Minowa and I decided to be good, supportive team members and help him, and I also admit my curiosity about this school. I have to say… I’m not impressed.” He crossed his arms and adopted his Tony-Motherfucking-Stark persona, the one he wore to business meetings and appearances in front of the close-minded fools who thought they were better than him or thought they could control him. “For what it’s worth, you both are free to have your own opinions on other people. What I have a very serious problem with the way you’re speaking about the dead. Between Remy LeBeau and Logan’s prior love interests, it really makes me wonder what the hell kind of morals are being encouraged here. Do everyone a favor-- pull your heads out of your asses and grow the fuck up.” Having said his piece, the genius turned to face Alduin and Logan. “You guys okay?” He asked, looking over the duo.

After a second or two of silence, Logan nodded, opening his eyes again. “Yeah… I’m good.”
Alduin glanced up at him and started to nod before they snapped over Tony’s shoulder, widening a bit. An instant later, he threw his hand out, a greater ward springing into existence around them as Warren’s voice shouted, “Bobby, no--!”

A blast of frigid air slammed over them, and Tony choked in fear as his mind dredged up the memory of a frozen bunker and pain, blood splattered on the concrete, numb, can’t breath can’t breath --

A surge of warmth suddenly filled him, driving the memories back with the feeling of home and love, family. The genius came back to himself to find Alduin holding him from behind, supporting him in the kneeling position he’d collapsed into with one arm around his waist, the other hand pressed against his chest where his Claiming mark was. Logan was kneeling in front of him, calmly speaking to him, light brown eyes filled with concern. “-- on back, Tony, you’re okay, you’re safe.”

Tony took a few more deep breaths before he nodded, croaking out, “I’m okay. How long--?”

“No more than a minute, Zeymahu.” Alduin responded, voice rumbling and shaking oddly as he continued to hold Tony close. “Your memories pulled you under for a moment.”

Logan nodded at that, gesturing around him for a moment. “Min… Alduin… reinforced the… whatever this is, and told me how to help. You gonna be okay? Flashbacks can be a bitch.”

The genius nodded and took another deep breath. “It’s been a while since that’s happened… I’ll be fine. Thanks, guys.”

Finally, the arms that had been holding him close loosened, and the genius was gently nudged towards Logan. “Good. Stay where you are, the both of you.” Tony blinked as Logan wrapped an arm around his shoulders, and he finally looked up as Alduin pulled himself to his feet. He waved his clawed gauntlet, allowing the ward to fall from around them. The floors and walls had taken on a frosty appearance, the air a few degrees cooler than it had been before. Bobby and Warren still standing at the end of the hallway, and their expressions were shocked when the trio was revealed to be fine. Alduin’s eyes flicked open, and there was a light in them that Tony had only seen once from either Minowa or Alduin.

“Are we supposed to be impressed?”

The voice caused a jolt from all of them. Alduin’s voice was resonating with Minowa’s and two others that Tony didn’t recognize. The dovah turned in a controlled movement, even as his body
shook with suppressed rage, the potential energy of a hypernova churning just beneath the skin. “**Was your display supposed to intimidate us? To cow us into fearing you?** ” The grin that stretched across Alduin’s face was terrifying—too many teeth, too sharp, too much cruelty. “**Little mortals, you do not know the meaning of fear.**” He turned to them fully, wings ripping free from his back and flaring out, shadows stretching towards him and darkening in appearance. “**But we… we would be more than happy to teach you. Run, little mortals.**” The grin took on an insane appearance. “**For you are prey now… and we yearn to HUNT!**”

Bobby and Warren stayed frozen for a moment, but as Alduin took a deep breath, they turned tail and ran, and barely made it around the corner before a thunderous roar shook the mansion.

“**YOL TOOR SHUL!!**”

The blast of fire that ripped down the hallway reduced the ice to steam in an instant and blackened the floor and walls within a second. It hit the intersection and blew out the window from the force of the Shout, the sill and frame burned away moments later. The last echoes of the attack died away, and Alduin huffed out a breath of smoke before turning back to Logan and Tony, who were both watching him in stunned shock.

After a second of silence, Logan finally spoke. “I probably shouldn’t find that sexy, but God **damn**.”

Tony let out a groan of disbelief as the black bled away from Minowa’s eyes, and she smirked at Logan before pulling her wings in, kneeling in front of Tony again. “Are you alright, Anthony?”

“I’m fine now… though I really want to tell those two dicks ‘I told you so’. Seriously, you both heard what I said to them!” Tony allowed Logan and Min to help him to his feet, and he followed Logan down the hall again towards his room as he continued his thought. “I told them point blank to go away or suffer your wrath! But did they listen, nooOOOoo…”

Logan snorted as they reached his door, and he briefly reached over to ruffle the genius’ hair. “There’s no accounting for intelligence in this place. ‘S’why I’m joinin’ you guys.”

The indignant look Tony shot the mutant at having his hair messed up was quickly replaced by a small smile. “Well, at least **you’re smart**.”

The trio chuckled softly as they entered the room, quickly gathering everything Logan wanted and
storing it Tony’s pocket dimension. As they left the now practically empty room, the mutant tossed a key to the genius, and as he deftly caught it Logan explained, “That’s the key to Rem’s bike. I’ll have Min ride with me on mine.”

Tony swallowed and nodded, knowing that he was being trusted with something that was precious to both Rem AND Logan. “I’ll be careful with it.” He swore, prompting a knowing smile from Logan.

“I know you will. That’s why I gave you the keys.” He gestured for them to follow, pointedly ignoring the small sheen of tears in Tony’s eyes. The feeling of Minowa’s hand in his own, giving it a gentle squeeze, let the mutant know that Min had seen it too. As they approached the foyer again, Logan slowed his gait a bit. “There’s a group waiting for us in the lobby… wait, just four… The little shits probably got Summers and Grey.”

“Scott Summers and Jean Grey? Cyclops and Marvel Girl respectively?” Getting a nod and a curious look from Logan, Tony shrugged. “Hacked into their systems while you were working on Rem’s room.”

The mutant blinked before shaking his head and looking forward again. “I’ll ask later.”

The moment the trio stepped through the doorway, they were approached by a man with a red visor across his face and a woman with flaming red hair. “Logan, what’s this I hear about you attacking Bobby? Between that and bringing strangers here, I think you need to have a few sessions with Jean to get you straightened out.” Scott announced, Jean nodding along in agreement behind him.

The similarity between Scott’s expression and the ‘disappointed Captain America’ face made Tony’s stomach lurch painfully. Between that and the knowledge that Jean was capable of ‘reprogramming’ someone, the genius was seconds away from activating his armor when Logan spoke again.

“So let me see if I’ve got this right, One-Eye. Wings and Frosty can bring their non-mutant, non-superpowered dates here all they want, but the leaders of the New Avengers are a no go? Fuck off, Cyke, you have no idea what actually went down. Minowa actually stopped me from attacking them, then retaliated when Bobby attacked Tony without provocation. Don’t worry about it happening again, though. I’m done, I’m out… and this time, I ain’t comin’ back.”

Both mutants looked incredulous at the announcement, Scott gaping and pale before he looked at Jean. The redhead sighed softly and reached out to touch Logan’s arm. “Don’t say such things, Logan. We worked so hard to get you past your anger… and I know how much you miss Remy.
But don’t let that drive you away from your friends.” She made to gently tug his arm for him to follow her. “Come, let’s go talk before you make any hasty decisions.”

Logan was quick to yank his arm away from her hand. “Don’t even try it, Jean. I’m done here, and you don’t have the power to make me stay.”

Jean sighed again, putting her hand back on his shoulder. “Logan, come with me. You need to sit down with us.” She implored him with wide, soft eyes.

Before anyone could react, a clawed gauntlet shot out and gripped Jean’s wrist, yanking it away from Logan. The woman’s green eyes snapped to the side and locked with wild, slit-pupiled ones the color of hot coals with black sclera. “Keep your hands to yourself, mortal, lest you desire to lose them. We will not tolerate your attempts to twist his mind, especially when it is now ours to protect.” Alduin’s voice thundered, gripping the woman’s wrist so hard the bones were grinding together.

The words earned Jean twin looks of outrage from both Tony and Logan, and the genius was quick to grab Logan’s arm. “Come on, let’s get out of here before they make any more mistakes that will encourage Alduin to bring the building down.”

Jean tried to pull her hand free from Alduin’s grip but stopped when it tightened instead. “I-I was trying to keep him from going feral like he does when he’s upset!”

“We do not require you to do so. Stay out of his mind.” Alduin finally pushed the woman away, sending her several feet back. “And if you value your lives… you will stay out of OURS.” He snarled the warning, eyes flashing and glowing for a moment before he whipped around to follow Tony and Logan.

By the time they made it to the garage, Minowa was back in control, and she wasted no time in swinging herself into the seat behind Logan on his bike. “Let’s go. My patience will only last for so long, and I have the desire to burn this place to naught but rubble and send their souls to Uncle Molag.” She growled, burying her face in Logan’s back as she wrapped her arms around his waist.

Tony cringed at that as he mounted Rem’s bike. He knew who Minowa was referencing-- Molag Bal, Daedric Prince of domination and enslavement of mortals. For her to even consider such a threat meant that she was reaching the end of her usually very long tether. It was the equivalent of giving their souls to a demon. “Alright, let’s get going then. Logan, can you get us to the main road?”
Logan sighed and he held Minowa close to his chest to stop her from pacing. “I left, more often than not. Trust me, I hated being in that place any longer than necessary. I stayed for Rem, though… couldn’t leave him alone with those bastards.”

A soft mumble came from Tony, whose head was resting in Stephen’s lap with a warm washcloth over his eyes, his soulmate gently stroking his hair and channeling a calming spell through him. “From what you told me happened, you and Alduin showed remarkable restraint, Minowa.” The sorcerer informed the Dragonborn, his blue-green eyes filled with anger towards the group in question. “Gave my soulmate a panic attack just because he couldn’t deal with being told his dick was small and he was acting like a child…” He growled in anger, gently rubbing the back of Tony’s hand with his thumb as he moved for a moment to cast another warming charm on the washcloth.

Minowa growled and buried further into Logan’s arms. “They should not be allowed to taint children with such vitriol. And the woman-- Jean Grey-- for her to warp a person’s mind for her own benefit…” Logan’s grip tightened, and a kiss was pressed to her head, helping her calm a bit. “Something must be done. I would ruin them if I could-- tear their false school down stone by stone, burn the earth and salt it…”

“Let’s ruin them financially,” Tony said suddenly, and he pulled the washcloth from his eyes as they looked over to him. “Sorry, I heard someone plotting and had to chime in. How long have I been out?”

Stephen sighed with relief as he took the cloth and tossed it onto the table next to the couch. “You, Logan, and Min rode in about two hours ago, and you got into the living room, laid down with your head in my lap, and just… passed out. Logan and Min told me what happened… I figured something would go down, but attacking you?” He growled, the sound only stopped by Tony sitting up and kissing Stephen tenderly.

Logan couldn’t help the small smile at the obvious love between the duo. “You said ruin them
financially... how would we go about doing that?"

The genius sat back to think for a moment. “The easiest thing to start with is Worthington Industries. Their main claim to fame is their aviation technology, followed by experimental alternative fuels. I’ll start pushing SI on the aviation tech end, start cranking out stuff better than anything they could come up with. The alternative fuel part is easily taken care of with the arc-reactor tech. Companies eat up the chance to look good by using clean energy.” He stood from his place and began to slowly pace, a thoughtful look on his face. “As for the school itself... I can’t believe I didn’t think to ask before, but where the hell even IS Professor Xavier??”

Logan arched an eyebrow and deadpanned, “Would you believe me if I said ‘galavanting around the universe with his alien empress girlfriend’?”

For a moment Tony stopped dead, looking over at Logan to gauge if he was serious. After a second he groaned and shook his head. “To be fair, I’ve seen enough recently that my suspension of disbelief is practically non-existent.” He made to start pacing again before he stopped dead, a look of dawning realization on his face. “But I think the better question is ‘would anyone else believe it’?”

The tone of his voice caused everyone to look back at him. “Why do you ask, love?” Stephen asked, standing from his seat as well.

“Think about it for a second. Doctor Charles Xavier, a foremost expert in genetics and renowned psychologist, not to mention one of the richest men in the world, is off-world with his alien girlfriend. Do you think Summers and Grey happened to tell anyone where he is, or obtain legal documentation that they’re allowed to use his money? Let me set the stage for you. Someone enquires about the good professor, but no one outside the X-Men knows where he is. He would legally be declared missing, and upon asking Summers and Grey, they would say that they have his permission to use his money. But if asked for proof, they wouldn’t be able to give it. Then if they’re asked if they know where the professor is... how many people are going to believe he’s where you told me he is? So now not only are they under the microscope about using the money of a missing man, they’d also be hit with accusations of having done something to him because they can’t produce any kind of proof on that end either. The fact that they also took over the institute that he was running prior to his disappearance would paint a rather ‘telling’ picture of a hostile takeover.”

A soft chuckle escaped someone, and it became a full blown laugh as they turned to see Minowa pull away from Logan, eyes filled with dark mirth and promises of retribution. “Oh Zeymahi, if only you’d been born on Tamriel... you would make an excellent member of the Thieves’ Guild.” She sighed softly, shaking her head. “Regardless, that is a plan that would certainly work. From what I know of Charles Xavier, he was a man beloved by many, especially other mutants. If this story were to reach them... Xavier Institute would very quickly fall out of favorable light.”
“It presents another problem, though.” Logan spoke up, brow furrowing. “Any kids that come into mutant abilities come to the school to learn to control their powers… Where would they go if the school was shut down or destroyed?”

Tony cleared his throat, an apprehensive look in his eyes. “I… might have an idea on that end. I don’t want to say anything yet, just in case, but let’s just say that this is far from my first encounter with mutants.”

Stephen took Tony into his arms and kissed his head. “Whatever you have planned can wait until tomorrow. Hadrian said you can stay here tonight, and I fully intend on actually falling asleep next to you tonight.”

“Steph, baby, you’ll get no complaints from me.”

---

Clint huffed as he staggered into the bathroom, rubbing a hand down his face and groaning in exasperation. He had just had to sit and listen to Maximoff bitch and whine for an HOUR about how her shampoo and conditioner were ruining her hair, how her body wash was causing her to break out with acne, and boo-hoo, life wasn’t fair and it must be Stark’s fault somehow. It also was somehow Stark’s fault that she was gaining weight, which completely floored the archer. How were her bad eating habits a reflection of Tony?

Thinking about the genius caused him to groan again. Holy shit, he’d fucked up his relationship with the man, even though it was due to Maximoff being in his head. He’d always appreciated the man’s snark and sass, how animated he was and how quick he was willing to jump to other people’s defense and aid. No matter what Rogers said, Tony Stark was not arrogant, self-centered, petty, or selfish. The good ‘captain’ could go suck a dick-- if they ever got back to the United States, he was fucking groveling, because he didn’t want to lose the friendship they’d had before the witch had started fucking around in his head.

And that didn’t even take into consideration the fact that Tony had saved his family. Even after being a major tool to the genius, he’d still gone out of his way to rescue them and keep them safe. Forget groveling, he’d stand by the man’s side for the rest of eternity for what he’d done for them. After all the trouble he’d caused, it was the least he could do.

Clint stood in front of the mirror for a second, gazing at his reflection before sighing and tilting his
head back. He froze for a moment, eyes locked on the top of the cabinet above him before slowly reaching up for the item he found there. The moment his fingers wrapped around it, music started playing, and he yelped in surprise and pulled back, the item falling into the sink. He gaped at the Batman rubber duck as the music finally registered in his mind.

“Dananananananana Dananananananana QUACKMAAAAAN!”

When Natasha came to look for him five minutes later, she found Clint leaning against the wall of the bathroom with a musical rubber duck in his hand, laughing his head off.

Chapter End Notes

New terms and Thu'um from Minowa/Alduin!

Grohiiki -- My Wolf (Min's term of endearment for Logan, because Wolverine doesn't exist in the Dragon tongue.)

Yol Toor Shul -- Fire Breath. If he'd hit them with this, they'd be nothing more than ash in a matter of seconds. Seriously, pissed Alduin was PISSED.

I also want to make a quick note on grammar for Dovahzul. the '-i' in words like 'zeymahi' denotes the possessive suffix 'my', while the '-u' like Alduin uses in 'zeymahu' denotes a possessive suffix 'our'. Alduin uses the '-u' because when he called Tony 'our brother', he's speaking for the other dragon souls within Minowa as well.

More ducks to come!
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

A trip up to Massachusetts brings to light facts regarding Tony's family that have been kept on a strict 'need to know' basis for years, but what the genius finds when they get there means that it won't be a secret for much longer. Information comes up that puts the final nail in the coffin for a certain group of mutants, and Tony is taking no prisoners. While that's happening, events happen that would make the setup of a good joke—'A quintuplet of blonds, a brunette with spider powers, a redhead master thief, and the only responsible adult present at the time walk into a training room...'

(The Quintet look at the others and ask the people on the climbing wall, 'What are you doing?)

((The duo on the climbing wall reply, 'Nothing much, just hanging around.'))

Chapter Notes

I'M ALIIIIIIIVE!! I'm so sorry this chapter took so long to get out, lovelies! In an effort to appease you, my dears, this chapter is over 10,000 words long!! New characters being introduced in this one, and canon has now been warped beyond recognition!!

ENJOY!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Alright kiddies, gather ‘round and tell us what you’ve been learning!”

Harley snorted as he took a seat next to Peter, rolling his eyes fondly at the grinning man at the head of the table. “Mechanic, I’m fifteen, Peter is sixteen, and Rem is seventeen. I’m not sure we count as ‘kids’.” Peter nodded in agreement with his statement, Rem shrugging from his place next to Peter.

The whiskey-eyed man laughed and shook his head. “Nope, doesn’t matter to me! If you’re still in school, I’m gonna call you kiddies or some variation of such! Now, has anyone been having any trouble in a particular subject, or in any other way including, but not limited to stress, homework, time management, or bullying?”

Even as there were reassurances from most of the younger kids, Harley and Peter shot a look at each other at the last word. Before anyone could enquire, Rem spoke up in an exasperated tone. “I
still don’t know why I need to know fractions, Uncle Tony.”

Peter turned to the mutant and leaned against him with a bright smile. “Well, if you want to go into something related to engineering in the future, you’d need to know. Or if you wanted to go into medicine— especially medicine, actually! Those fractions could mean the difference between life and death, so you don’t want to be lacking in that area!” Seeing the incredulous look on Rem’s face, the brown-eyed teen shrugged. “Just a thought.”

“I…” Rem cleared his throat for a moment, trying to stamp down the momentary surge of fear. “I don’t think I’ll be getting a degree anytime soon…” He blushed brilliantly and looked down at the tabletop. “And I’m scared to death of doctors.” He admitted softly, only loud enough for Peter to hear. The brunette nodded at that, quickly wrapping the older teen in a comforting hug.

Seeing the discomfort clear on Rem’s face, Tony moved to bring the conversation back on track. “Any discussions about college, degrees, or majors can be put on hold for the foreseeable future— You’ve only been back in school a month and a half. Rem, your tutor told me you’ve been making impressive progress… she also reported you’ve been writing in a very interesting looking pen. One that looks identical to the one that went missing from my workshop about a week ago…?” He arched a knowing eyebrow at the teen, a smirk on his lips.

Rem grinned cheekily, inwardly relieved at the change of topic. “I have it on good authority that you don’t have enough evidence to convict me one way or another.”

His words prompted Tony to smirk and drawl, “Is that so?” He lifted his hand and flipped his pointer finger up, and the pen in question was plucked out of Rem’s sweater pocket, where it’d been poking out, before floating over to Tony.

The teen’s red and black eyes blinked before a sheepish smile stretched Rem’s face, and he rubbed the back of his head and chuckled nervously. “Eheheh… oops?”

Tony laughed along with the rest of the table as he tossed the pen back to him. “I’m just playing with you, Rem. I don’t mind if you use my pens.”

“Well be careful about what exactly you’re grabbing down there,” Stephen spoke up from his space beside Tony. “Why you decided that you needed a pen that is, in fact, not a pen at all but actually emits a small, yet high-powered laser is beyond me, love. I’d bet that thing could cut through vibranium if left long enough.”
Rem looked intrigued and studied the pen intently. “This thing has a laser in it??”

The genius shook his head negative. “Not that one. The laser is a new addition. And no,” He aimed at Harley and Peter, who had perked up at the information, “They aren’t leaving the workshop.” He started to turn back to the group as a whole but stopped dead at the look the duo shot each other again. “And do not even think about doing it to anything outside of the workshop… At least not without me there to supervise.”

Stephen groaned softly at the cheers from the duo. “Amendment-- without both of us there to supervise.”

That caused laughter to erupt around the table again, and as they quieted Tony spoke again. “Alright, if no one is having trouble, you’re free to go! Not you three,” He pointed to the three high-school-aged teens. “Got one more thing to talk to you guys about. The rest of you, run or I’ll give you even more homework!” The kids all ran from the room all shrieking some variation of ‘no!’ which caused the two adults in the room to laugh for a moment at their antics. Once the door was closed again, The brunette turned his attention to the trio again. “Alright guys, here’s the deal. I need to go somewhere this weekend, and Peter, this is a mandatory trip for you. Rem and Harley, you have the option of going, but I won’t force you into it.”

Harley and Rem looked at each other, then to Peter, before looking back at Tony. “I’d like to go, thank you.” Rem replied, scooting a little closer to the younger teen.

“Thanks for the invite, Mechanic, but I think I’ll sit this one out.” Harley shook his head with a small smile.

Both Rem and Peter grinned at him knowingly. “Probably gonna be talking to his girlfriend!” Peter ribbed him, a knowing light in his eyes.

Harley blushed brightly and pushed both of them. “Shut up! We’re just friends!”

“Denial isn’t just a river in Egypt, Harl!” Peter quipped with an even wider smile.

The teen let out a frustrated noise and threw his hands in the air. “JUST! FRIENDS!”

Rem’s smile suddenly disappeared, brow furrowing as he stood from his seat. “Hey, I’m sorry.”
He said quietly as he moved to pull Harley into a brief hug. “I didn’t intend to make you upset--
either of us did.”

“Rem’s right. I was just trying to tease you, I didn’t mean to make you upset.” Peter joined in on
the hug too, voice soft and expression open and apologetic.

The teen nodded in acceptance, a small smile on his face as he hugged them both back. “S’okay. At
least you stopped.” They pulled apart finally, and Harley got to his feet. “I’ll leave you guys to
talk-- I’m gonna go find Slei, Jör, and Fen.”

They said their goodbyes to the teen, and after he’d left Tony turned his attention to the duo at the
table again. “So, I’m betting you’re wondering what the details of this trip are.” The teens nodded,
and Tony sat back in his seat with a half smile. “It will be you two, Logan, Zevrael, Stephen, and
myself driving up to Massachusetts. It’s only about a two, two and a half hour drive, and we’ll be
staying over from Friday into Sunday.”

“Papa isn’t going?” Rem asked, tilting his head with a small bit of trepidation in his eyes.

Stephen shook his head with a small smile. “Dorian and Pepper will be busy with PR details
involving the reserve New Avenger’s help in the aftermath of Hurricane Matthew.”

Rem nodded in understanding, a smile on his face. “They’ve been doing really good work… Could
I ride my motorbike up??” He grinned at them excitedly.

To his disappointment, Tony shook his head negative. “We might have considered it, but you’re
forgetting that you no longer have a valid driver’s license. That’s something we’ll work on once
we’re back, okay?”

The teen blinked at the realization. “Oh… yes, that would be important.” Admittedly, he wouldn’t
have thought twice about the fact before. Knowing that it would be important to not only his
fathers, but to his entire extended family gave him pause now, and he made a note to work on that
to put their minds at ease.

Peter laughed softly, bumping his shoulder against the redhead’s. “Well, how are we getting there,
then??” He aimed the question at Tony.
A Cheshire-like grin spread over Tony’s face. “Oh, I think something you’ll enjoy as much as your bike, Rem…”

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“Babe, when exactly did you acquire a Lamborghini Limousine??”

Tony gave his soulmate a shit-eating grin at the question, even as Peter and Rem were cheering and running towards the vehicle. “Lamborghini comes out with a limo that has the engine of a sports car and you expect me to not have one? Perish the thought!” He paused for a moment before a nervous look crossed his face. “Logan will be driving, and he’ll be super safe. Are you going to be okay?”

Realizing why the genius suddenly seemed so nervous, Stephen swooped in and gave him a firm kiss. “I trust you, babe. I know you would never let anything happen to us.”

The genius gave a small sigh of relief and pressed another kiss to Stephen’s lips, one that was interrupted by the arrival of Logan, Minowa, and Alexia. “Don’t worry, Stephen. Even if I’ve never driven anything this fancy in my life, I’m not gonna let anything happen to us.” He turned to Min, who had Lexi firmly in her arms. “Okay kid, I’ll be back in two days. You be good for Minowa, alright?”

Lexi huffed with a petulant look on her face. “I don’t want you to go, daddy!”

Giving her partner a brief, understanding smile, Minowa pressed a kiss to the top of the girl’s brown locks. “Now now, little one. Anthony and Stephen need his help, and your daddy agreed to help them. It wouldn’t look good if he broke his promise, would it?” The girl shook her head negative, so she continued. “At the same time, he has promised to always come back to you. You know he will keep his promise to you as much as he would for them. So why are you sad, malkiir?”

The child looked up at her with enormous green eyes. “But… if he leaves me behind, I can’t make sure he stays safe…” She finally mumbled in a whisper that they all heard.

Logan blinked at her words, unsure of what to say in reply. Fortunately, the Dragonborn saw his struggle and spoke again. “I swear to you that your father will be well protected and cared for by Anthony and Stephen. They are both very strong and will allow for no harm to come to him. But
malkiir, you are but a child. A strong, very talented child, but a child nonetheless. It is an adult’s job to look after young ones so that they can grow stronger and learn to protect themselves.” Seeing the conflict on her face, Minowa turned to an empty part of the garage and wave her hand, conjuring up an illusion of two wolves-- an adult and a pup. “Tell me, malkiir. Would you expect the pup to hunt with the adults? It is small and doesn’t know how. They would get in the way, and that could cost them a hunt. Instead, the adult teaches the pup, so that when it grows up…” she flicked her wrist again, and the pup aged to an adult. “…It may add their own strength to the pack and hunt as well. Do you understand?”

Lexi nodded at her words, studying the two wolves intently. “I wanna get strong so I can fight with daddy.”

A soft chuckle came from Logan as he reached over to ruffle her brown hair. “You will, kid. For now, stick with Min and we’ll talk more about this when I get back.”

Lexi nodded at that, and the ebony haired woman took a moment to tuck her head under Logan’s chin, rumbling softly. “I’ll take care of her, Grohiiki. Perhaps some time in the training room would do her some good?”

The mutant nodded and pressed a kiss to Minowa’s head. “That’d be great, thanks Min.” The two shared a brief kiss before he bade them both goodbye, finally making his way back to Stephen and Tony. “Alright guys, get in or we’ll never get out of here.”

Tony nodded and held the door open for Stephen to get in. “Everything alright over there?” He asked Logan softly before getting in himself.

“Yeah, we’re good. Min’s amazing with her.” The genius nodded with a smile before sliding in himself, Logan closing the door behind him.

As the limo pulled out of the garage, the group turned to Tony as he cleared his throat. “So, I’m betting you’re all wondering about where we’re going, and why.”

Zevrael nodded in agreement, reaching for a bottle of sparkling water on the bar. “You’ve been remarkably tight-lipped about it. I would imagine it’s something very important to you, though.”

The genius huffed out a breath, nodding. “It is. There’s something you guys need to know-- something that’s been kept so far under the rug that there are maybe only a handful of people who
know about it. The ones that do know are under strict orders to not breathe a word about it.”

The group all looked at each other with confused expressions. “Are we talking something world ending, or something personal?” Stephen asked finally, turning his gaze back to his soulmate.

“Personal.” Tony took a deep breath to center himself. “And when I say a handful of people, I mean it. This is something that SHIELD doesn’t know about, the Rogues have no idea about, and now that things have happened the way they did, I’m honestly glad we made that choice.”

Rem shifted a little closer to Zevrael, eyes fixed on Tony. “Uncle Tony, from the way you’re talking… this involves someone else-- this secret, I mean.”

Whiskey brown eyes closed for a moment. “You’re right, Rem. I’ll cut to the chase-- I have a half-sister.” He held up a hand to stop the potential chaos about to happen. “Her name is Emma, and she’s the result of a tryst between Howard and a woman named Hazel.”

Stephen suddenly sat up straight in his seat, realization lighting in his eyes as the sorcerer recognized the not so common name of ‘Hazel’. “Hazel and Emma-- Wait, you don’t mean Hazel Frost, do you? Winston Frost’s wife? I had heard that he had affairs, but I never heard about Hazel doing so…” He pinned the genius with a shocked look. “Are you telling me Emma Frost is actually your half sister??”

Tony gave him a smile, nodding. “Yep, she is. We didn’t know until later, though. We were friends, though-- Howard and Winston liked to set up play dates for us. Looking back, both Emma and I are sure that they wanted to set us up…” He laughed when Peter made a face at the thought. “Yeah, I feel you there, Pete. But something happened that, while it didn’t confirm our familial relation 100%, put a very sudden stop to those plans… if they were, in fact, a thing. We don’t know for sure, but the signs were all there--”

“Tony, babe, please focus.”

The genius chuckled and nodded. “Right, sorry. When I was seven, I ended up getting seriously ill. And we’re not talking a go to the hospital, spend a few days, come back out kind of ill.” The genius’ expression became grim and he took a shaky breath. “No, I’m talking the kind of ill where I had a 24.7% chance of survival.”

A solemn hush fell over the limo at that. “What were you diagnosed with?” Zevrael finally asked.
Tony closed his eyes at the vague memories. “Acute lymphoblastic leukemia-- ALL.” Stephen inhaled sharply, reaching to grab Tony’s hand. Peter quickly came around to snuggle into his other side, and he wrapped his arm around the teen. “I needed a bone marrow transplant to have any chance of fighting it off. Keep in mind, they didn’t have databases back then for donors-- transplants as a practice was still in its’ infancy as it was. If you didn’t have a familial match… well, your chances were slim. As luck would have it, neither Howard nor Mom was a match…” he trailed off, waiting for them to draw the connection.

He wasn’t surprised when Stephen was the one to do so. “... But Emma was.”

“Bingo. Emma was basically my only shot at survival. The stakes were also higher because Mom couldn’t have kids after me.” Seeing the shocked looks he was getting, he briefly elaborated, “There were complications during Mom’s pregnancy with me. She ended up getting sick a lot, and she almost died giving birth. The doctors weren’t sure her body would hold up through another pregnancy.”

Zevrael’s brow furrowed as he nodded. “I may not have much understanding of what that kind of sickness entails, but the fact is that you were an only child, without the possibility of more, and the heir to a huge fortune and company. That already raises the stakes… It’s a good thing they allowed Emma to help.”

A sardonic grin stretched across Tony’s face. “Here’s the thing though-- they almost didn’t. They didn’t want to admit to the fact that Emma was the result of an affair and risk scandal, and there was the chance that Emma would have suffered complications of her own. In the end, it took Obadiah Stane waving a substantial amount of money in their face to allow Emma to donate-- Money that she and I both came to find out later he’d embezzled from Stark Industries.” Tony sat back with a disgusted look on his face. “Honestly though, it came down to Winston not wanting anyone outside of his family, Howard, and Mom to know that Emma wasn’t his. It would have cost them financially because of the scandal that would follow.”

The look of outrage on Zevrael’s face was more than clear. “He would put his business and comfort above the well-being of a child??”

Tony nodded at that. “Trust me, Zev, there’s a reason Mom was planning on filing for custody of Emma before she and Howard were killed. Out of everyone in that family, the only ones I could stand to be around for any length of time were Emma and her older brother, Christian… and we don’t know what happened to him.” His voice became soft on the last line, eyes going slightly far away.

A tense silence fell over the limo, but it was cut when the sound of a throat clearing came over the intercom. “Y’know, I’ve always had a lot of respect for Frost,” Logan said casually. “She’s never
been afraid to stand up to Cyke and Jean.”

A grin stretched over Tony’s face, causing his whiskey-brown eyes to light up. “I didn’t know you were listening, Logan! You know Emma?”

“Sure do. Helped out with a group of students, was instrumental in their recovery. I was wondering why you knew the address to the Massachusetts Academy… makes a hell of a lot more sense now.”

Rem tilted his head in curiosity. “The Massachusetts Academy? What’s that?”

A grin was shot in the teen’s direction as Tony answered, “It’s a school for mutants, Rem. Infinitely better, though—what you’ve been through… if Emma found out one of her students was pulling shit like that, she’d rake them across the coals.”

Logan’s voice came over the intercom again, this time sounding concerned. “Pup, you’ve heard of the Academy before… In fact, I distinctly remember you flirtin’ with Frost the first time you met her. She seemed more amused with it than anything… offered you a place at the Academy too.” There was silence for a moment. “Rem, you do remember that, right?”

The teen shook his head in reply, a lost look in his black and red eyes. Tony, Stephen, and Zevrael all looked at each other as Peter moved to sit with the older teen, wrapping an arm around him. “Logan, maybe speed this limo up a little. I think Emma’s gonna have some words to say about this development.”

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“What the hell happened to this school?!”

Stephen and Zevrael looked over at the genius, who had an expression on his face that was in equal parts shocked, confused, and indignant. “So, I take it that it’s not normally supposed to be in this kind of…” the elf waved his hand in a vague motion.

“… Disrepair?” The sorcerer finished, blue-green eyes scanning the various bits masonry strewn about.
Tony turned his eyes back to the others for a moment. “I was here a few months ago! This level of anarchy is news to me!”

A huff escaped Logan as he crossed his arms, tilting his head at the scene in front of him. “Yeah, this is definitely a new development. Th’place is usually pristine.”

The genius didn’t reply to that, instead marching up to the front doors of the standing building and pushing them open. “Knock knock, Emi!” He yelled into the building as he swept inside, the others following behind him. “Your favorite genius billionaire is here to visit!!”

The sound of heels clicking drew their attention to the stairs, and a blond-haired, blue-eyed woman dressed entirely in white smiled as she descended the stairs. Upon closer inspection, the chin-length blond hair actually had brown roots that were identical to the shade of Tony’s hair. A white bandage was wrapped around her head, and there were lingering signs of exhaustion in her stance and face. Despite that, she smiled brightly at Tony and replied, “Antonio, you know I hate it when you call me that…”

Any trace of joking died the moment Tony got a good look at the woman, and he seemed to teleport across the foyer with the speed at which he crossed it so he could check her over. “Sorellina, you’re hurt?! What happened??”

“And what the fuck did you do to your hair?!” Logan couldn’t help but ask, arching an eyebrow at the sheared locks.

A soft laugh escaped Emma, and she grabbed Tony’s hands. “Calm down, mio fratello. I’m alright now.” She looked over his shoulder at the feral mutant, the smile never leaving. “And hello to you as well, Logan. I was unaware you and Antonio were acquainted!”

“Eh, ‘S’a recent development.”

Tony sighed and pulled the woman in a tight embrace, basking in the loving hug that she reciprocated. “Looks like we have a lot to talk about, Emma.” He mumbled, a feeling of relief surging through him at having his sister close.

The mutant nodded in reply, pulling away to press a kiss to his forehead. “Indeed we do, Tony. Come, let’s adjourn to my office.” The group nodded and followed her down the hallway to a
bright, well-lit office. Though, some of the light could be attributed to something Tony took notice of the moment he walked through the door.

“Emma, there’s a hole in your ceiling.”

“I noticed, Antonio.”

“Why is there a hole in your ceiling??”

Emma gave a soft laugh as she closed the door behind them. “Before we get into that, I believe introductions are in order, don’t you think?”

The genius shot her an unimpressed look. “I think you’re deflecting the question, but you have a good point. Very well, Emma, from my left and going around, this is Zevrael Pavus and his son, Remington Pavus.”

The elf waved, and Rem ducked his head and mumbled, “Just Rem is fine, thank you, ma’am.”

“Then there’s Peter. He’s my ward until the paperwork goes through-- then he’ll be Peter Stark, my son.” Tony said the words with pride that Emma had never heard before.

The blond turned to the teen and smiled brightly at him. “So that will make you my nephew, then! Hope you don’t mind having an aunt now.” She was nearly knocked off her feet as the teen tackled her in a tight hug. She immediately reciprocated the hug, shooting a confused look at Tony as she did so. He simply shook his head and mouthed ‘later’. Emma nodded, gently ruffling Peter’s hair as he continued to hug her. “So, can I be your Aunt Emma, Peter?” Peter nodded against her shoulder, pulling back with a bright smile on his face even though he had tears in his eyes.

The interaction prompted a grin out of Tony, and he waited until the teen had taken a seat before quipping. “You know, you could always call her Auntie Em inste--”

“Don’t even go there, Antonio.” The blond deadpanned, shooting the genius a supremely unamused look.
Tony cackled before finally turning to the last two people, who were standing at his right. “You know Logan already, so no need for formalities there. And finally… Emma, this is Stephen.” He reached for and took the sorcerer’s hand, prompting a loving smile from Stephen and an arched eyebrow from Emma. “…La mia anima gemella.” He finished, the words spoken with a love and reverence that it made the sorcerer’s heart ache with love for his partner.

Emma looked between the two for a moment, eyes slightly wide as she studied the pair. Finally, she smiled and stepped up to Stephen to press a kiss to his cheek. “Well, it seems we three have to have a separate conversation later, then. For now…” She swept to her own seat and sat gracefully.

“You can start by explaining the hole in your ceiling, Emma.” Tony pinned the woman with his sharp, whiskey brown eyes.

The woman had the good grace to look chagrined. “Now Antonio, it’s not as bad as you think…”

The genius’ expression seemed to harden a bit. “Somehow, I doubt that. The fact that you started with that is actually telling me I’m going to like this even less.” Emma went quiet at that, and shot a brief look towards both Rem and Peter. Tony instantly caught on and shifted his eyes to Zevrael. “Zev, can you take Peter and Rem to the training room? I think Emma, Stephen, Logan, and I need to talk privately for a minute.” The elf had caught on to the sudden change in atmosphere and nodded, quickly getting directions from Emma before gathering up both Rem and Peter, ushering them from the room before closing the door behind him. “Sorellina, what happened?” He asked, moving to sit next to his sister and gently grab her hands.

The blond gave a long, shuddering breath before looking up at Tony again. “Where do I even start, mio fratello? So much happened at once…” She paused to think for a moment before she closed her eyes. “I… I should start with Adrienne.”

“Your sister? What about her?”

There was a tense silence before Emma’s head bowed a bit. “She’s gone, Antonio. She was going to reveal us as a school for mutants, our public facade would have been destroyed.”

Logan closed his eyes at the realization. “That woulda been a death sentence for the kids.”

Emma nodded at his words but didn’t look up at Tony. “I couldn’t stop her, I… I had to…” She choked for a moment, tears welling up in her eyes.
Understanding hit Tony like a bomb, and he pulled his sister close as she started crying heartbrokenly. Stephen came around the other side, sitting on the table and comfortingly rubbing her back. It took a few minutes for her to calm down, and Tony started speaking once her tears had stopped. “You did what you had to, Emma. Her actions would have lead to kids getting killed, and she knew that. You had to make an impossible choice, and I’m sorry I wasn’t here to help you.”

“It didn’t matter in the end anyway…” She whispered into his shoulder, silencing the room again. “There was an attack on the school, Antonio. The children, all of them…” She choked again, and Tony tightened his grip on her. “They died trying to protect me, Tony… I don’t know why we were targeted, but they died… I was in a coma for a month…”

“Jesus, Em,” Tony whispered as he tucked the blond’s head under his chin. “Where was I, Sorellina? I would never have left you alone to deal with something like this…”

Emma laughed wetly, the pain from the re-opened emotional wound tearing through her. “You were tied up with the Accords, and you were healing from what the dear captain did to you…” She spat the title like it was poison in her mouth. “I didn’t want to put the secret of our relationship in jeopardy…”

The genius froze for a moment before pulling away to look the woman in the eye. “No. No, no, no Emma. To hell with the secrecy-- I’ll announce it to the whole damn multiverse if it means you never have to suffer through something like this alone again. What went down here should never have happened, but I’ll be damned if you have to recover alone. We kept it a secret to hide it from SHIELD and the other Avengers, but neither of them are a problem anymore. You say the word, Emma, and I will gladly have Pepper and Dorian schedule a press conference, and I will tell the whole damn world that you’re my half sister.” He gently cupped her face in his hands, gaze never wavering from hers. “You come back with us-- give yourself some time to heal and recover. I, my team, every single person living at the Compound will help you. If anyone tries to give us shit about it, I’ll have Stephen throw them in a hell dimension.”

Emma gave the man a tiny, sad smile, even as tears continued to flow down her face. She struggled to say something for a moment before Logan suddenly cut in. “There’s more, isn’t there.” They turned to look at him, and he pinned the blond with a knowing look. “I can smell when somebody’s hurtin’… what else happened, Frost?” His voice was soft and somber, a far departure to his usual gruff timbre.

A look of realization flashed across Stephen’s face, and he continued rubbing her back even as he asked, “You mentioned you were in a coma for a month… does it have something to do with that?”

“Yes.” She whispered, reaching up to grip Tony’s hand that was still on her face. “I… Here.” She pulled away from her brother for a moment to reach over the back of the couch to her desk. She
grabbed up a picture frame and passed it to the brunette in front of her.

Tony took the picture and looked at it for a long moment, eyebrows slowly climbing into his hairline. “... Emma, what?” He finally asked, looking up at her with a stunned look as he unconsciously passed the frame to Stephen.

Logan looked over the Sorcerer’s shoulder and snorted in shock. “Huh. That’s either one hell of a funhouse mirror, or there are six of you in that picture.”

The joke had the intended effect of prompting a laugh out of Emma. “The teen ones are clones of me. They’re… practically my daughters. They were created from my eggs. They have my powers exactly, and can actually link with each other in a kind of hive mind. They were being kept in a lab, and I went to rescue them when I found out about them.”

“Okay, Emma, I’m gonna have to stop you right there.” Tony suddenly interrupted her. “I have several questions, pretty damn important ones. One, where were you taken during your coma? Two, was someone supposed to be protecting you? If so, then three, how did someone manage to get close enough to you to get your eggs?”

Emma blinked at the sudden tone from Tony, and after a moment she replied, “I… was taken back to the X-Mansion by Jean Grey when I knocked into the coma by Trevor Fitzroy. I guess they were supposed to be protecting me…”

A wave of magic rushed through the room, and Tony surged from his seat with an infuriated look on his face as his irises flashed to orange. “As if they weren’t already on my shit list, this, this right here is the last straw! How dare they pull this shit with my family! ” The orange was suddenly replaced by a vivid blue, and Tony immediately began speaking to his AI. “FRIDAY, baby girl, change of plans involving the X-Men. Push forward the aviation stuff with SI, I want the Worthingtons put out of business as of yesterday. Stage a hostile takeover if you have to! Start spreading the rumors around that the good professor is gone, then find everything you can about the various members-- social security numbers, bank information, DoB, I want all of it, FRIDAY, I don’t care how mundane it is-- and I want you to ruin them. Get a tracker on Jean Grey, I want a collar put on her and under lock and key so she can stand before a judge. For that matter, contact Pepper and tell her I want to file a lawsuit for medical malpractice and whatever other charges we can come up with for this… fucking fiasco! See if you can figure out who exactly it is that took Emma’s eggs-- this was an egregious breach of privacy on so many levels, and I swear if the X-Men knew this happened, or if they allowed this to happen, I will see every single one of them lock up in the Raft for the rest of their lives!” He growled and began to pace the length of the office.

Emma was stunned into complete stillness for a moment at the sudden display from her brother. Upon registering what exactly it was that was being said, she rose from her seat to approach him,
but a hand on her arm made her pause. “It’s better to just call out to him.” Stephen murmured to her. “He can still hear you just fine.”

The mutant nodded and turned her attention back to Tony. “Antonio, the students at the school… they’re children, they’ve done nothing wrong… please, make sure there are at least teachers there…”

Tony paused in his stride, turning his head in her direction as if he were looking at her. Despite the unadulterated anger he was feeling for what had been done to his sister, he couldn’t help the pang in his chest for her loving heart, caring for those students even though they weren’t hers… “Logan,” He turned his head in the male’s direction, and the mutant nodded to show he was listening. “Give me some names-- teams or people who weren’t involved in either this or what happened with Rem.”

After a moment of thought, Logan replied, “I’d ask Storm-- she overlooked Rem, but didn’t hurt him beyond that. She was leading a team of her own, though, so it’s kinda understandable. On that note, though, Banshee and Nightcrawler would make good teachers. Havok and his team would be good for that-- X-Factor is what they call themselves. Helps that ol’ Alex is nothing like what his brother became.” Seeing the looks he got, the feral clarified, “Alexander Summers-- he’s Cyke’s younger brother.”

“And you would trust him with this sort of thing?”

Logan nodded without hesitation. “Damn right I would.”

The genius nodded at that. “Good enough for me. FRIDAY, you get all of that? Good, I want updates if anything major happens.” The glow faded from his eyes, and he looked over to see Emma staring at him with wide eyes and a completely stunned expression. It took him a moment to realize why, and he sighed deeply once he did. “Yeah… I have some explaining of my own to do.” He was quiet for a second before letting out a long breath through his nose, stepping up in front of her and tapping his head. “It… would probably be easier if you took a look for yourself.”

Emma nodded at that, and gently placed her fingers against the genius’ temples. Stephen noticed the complete lack of flinching or fear, and his respect for the woman skyrocketed-- that she could so freely use her gift around Tony after what he’d experienced at the hands of Maximoff spoke of years worth of trust and usage between them. She’d never used her powers against him in a malicious manner, he was absolutely certain of that.

There was a second or two of quiet before a sudden chill and darkness fell over the room, and the
abrupt change caused Emma and Tony to pull apart, confusion on both of their faces. Before they could speak, a swirling black vortex opened in front of Emma’s desk, and the group turned as one to see Hadrian step through, a grim look on his face. Logan turned and extended his claws only to have Stephen grab his shoulder, shaking his head vigorously with wide eyes. The Master of Death noticed the motion and shot the sorcerer a smile before turning his eyes to Tony and Emma. “I felt someone trying to get into your mind, Anthony. What’s going on?”

Tony let out a breath of relief. “You almost gave me a heart attack, Chief… I was just letting Emma look at my memories regarding everything that’s happened over the past few months. Hell knows how many times I’ve had to tell people…”

The ebony-haired man looked between them with a furrow in his brow. “Emma-- oh, wait.” He held out a hand, and a black folder with the symbol of the hallows stamped into it with Tony’s full name below it dropped into it in a flurry of silver sparks. He flipped it open and through several pages before pausing and reading one. “Ah yes, your file does mention Emma Frost is your half sister. My apologies.” He snapped the folder closed and tossed it into the air, the file disappearing in another shower of sparks. “Would you like for me to add her as an exception?”

The genius nodded at that. “That’d be great, thanks.”

“Antonio, what is going on??”

The incredulous exclamation from Emma caused them both to turn back to her. “My apologies for that, Emma Frost. Allow me to introduce myself.” Hadrian swept into a bow, a charming smile on his face. “My name is Hadrian Black, and I am the Master of Death. Anthony has recently come under my employ, and I was alarmed when I felt someone trying to enter his mind. I take care of my own, you know.”

Emma’s eyes darted between Tony and Hadrian, a cautious look on her face. Finally, she turned back to Hadrian and took a deep breath. “You… if you’re who you say you are, then please tell me-- my students…” She swallowed hard, and her brother pulled her into a hug. “Are… are they at peace? Did they go on to somewhere better?”

Hadrian blinked for a moment before realization lit up in his eyes before he smiled. “Most of them, yes.” Seeing the confusion and fear in the blonde's eyes, he held up his hand to pause anything that she might have said. “Marie-Ange Colbert and Angelica Jones chose to be reborn. They died heroic deaths, and took the option when it was presented to them.”

The blue eyes of the woman filled with tears, and she buried her face in Tony’s chest after a
moment and started sobbing again, prompting the man to tighten his grip and run his fingers through her hair. Stephen also moved to rub the woman’s back, shooting the emerald-eyed man a thankful smile. Hadrian smiled back and dipped his own head. He was content to wait for the woman to calm down again-- considering the news she had just been given, it was completely understandable.

Finally, Emma took a deep breath and pulled away from Tony to wipe the tears from her cheeks again. “Thank you. Knowing they’re at peace or have another chance at life… it’s more than I could have ever hoped for.” She said softly, turning her eyes back to the Master of Death.

“Okay, hold on, I’m still lost as to what the actual fuck is going on.” Logan finally said, eyeing Hadrian with confusion.

That caused everyone to turn and look at the feral, and Hadrian blinked once before letting out a soft laugh. “Well well, Anthony. It seems you’ve found another one of my Champions. You seem to have a talent for finding these people…” He thought for a second before nodding once. “Tony, why don’t you share your memories with Emma while I catch Logan up on what he’s missing? Otherwise, we’ll be here all day. And I’m expecting Zevrael to show up soon… no doubt he felt my entrance.” Tony nodded in agreement, and the Master of Death snapped his fingers together. “You should be good to go now. Logan, have a seat-- we have quite a bit to cover.”

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“Dad, are you okay? You kinda just… stopped moving for a second.”

Zevrael blinked a few times before turning his attention to Rem and Peter, a small smile quirking his lips. “I’m alright, Da’len. It seems Lethanavir has made a surprise visit. Tony may have asked him to come to help explain things to Emma and Logan.”

A bright grin immediately appeared on Peter’s face. “Oh, Mister Hadrian is here? I hope I can say hi before he leaves! I know he’s super busy and everything, but he’s always really nice to us!”

A soft chuckle escaped the silverette as he reached over to ruffle the teen's hair. Anyone else would have been terrified by the Master of Death. Not Peter, though. “I’m sure he’ll pop in for at least a minute to say hello.” He then gently bopped the teen on the head. “Now come on! Back to the wall, both of you!”
Peter immediately bounded back over to the climbing wall, followed by Rem as they bantered back
and forth about the advantages of spider powers versus master thief skills. Without bothering to put
on any protective harnesses, they began scaling the wall with little difficulty all the while trading
barbs back and forth and grinning madly. Zev watched the duo with an indulgent smile on his face,
happy that his son had such a good friend in Peter.

They were so engrossed in what they were doing that they failed to notice the door to the room
silently opening. However, it was only a matter of a few seconds before the elf felt a prickling on
the back of his neck, and he was instantly on alert as he stood straight and spun on his axis, ready
to summon his ice. What he found made him stop dead, his mind freezing in sheer
incomprehension. “What in Andraste’s sacred knickers??”

The sudden exclamation caused the duo on the wall to turn suddenly, and Rem yelped as he lost
his grip on the wall. He only fell a few feet before a line of Peter’s web caught him, leaving him
dangling in mid-air. The redhead quickly rearranged himself so he was hanging onto the line for
dear life, giving the teen above him a thankful, shaky smile. Peter grinned down at him, relief in
his eyes that his friend was safe.

Zevrael took a moment to look at the teens. “Off the wall, both of you. Nearly gave me a heart
attack, Rem!”

Rem shot his dad a shit-eating grin and quipped, “Aw, dad, can’t we just… hang around for a
while?” The completely deadpan look he got in return made both teens laugh, and the duo quickly
did as instructed giggling all the while.

The silverette groaned under his breath before turning back to the group that had entered. “So,
there are five completely identical clones of Emma in this place… younger looking, actually.
That’s good to know. Can’t wait to see Lethallin’s reaction to this.”

The blonde girls looked between them all for a moment, curiosity in their eyes. They looked at
each other before turning back to the group. Their eyes suddenly lit up before they spoke, “We
normally cannot use the climbing wall without safety harnesses.”

Zevrael jumped at the way all five of them spoke at the exact same time, Rem’s eyes as going wide
as dinner plates behind him. There was no way all five could be in complete synch like that-- not
unless there was a shared connection between them.

Peter, on the other hand, gave them a brilliant grin and chirped, “Wow! That was so cool! And I
love the climbing wall! We have something like that back home, but I love having a different one
to climb!” He bounced forward to the girls, drawing their attention. “I’m Peter! Are you guys related to Miss Emma?”

The five looked between each other again before their eyes flashed. “She is our mother. Who are you all?”

Icy blue eyes blinked in complete shock, and as Zev tried to bring his brain back online from that revelation Rem cleared his throat and stepped forward with a small grin. “Well, I’m Remington Pavus, but I prefer Rem. It’s nice to meet you all!” He held his hand out for the girls to shake

They did so one by one, even as they replied, “Hello, Rem. It’s good to meet you. We are Sophie, Phoebe, Mindee, Celeste, and Esme.” They gestured to each girl as they were named. After a moment of quiet, their collective voice suddenly echoed in the trio’s heads. ‘We would like to conduct a surface read on you all. Would you let us?’

A sharp inhale from Zevrael caused Rem to turn back to his Dad. Seeing how stiff the elf had gone, the teen quickly gave him a hug. “Dad, it’s okay. They’re curious, and I can tell that they don’t have bad intentions at all.” He snuggled a little closer and said softly so no one else could hear. “I think they’re just like me, Dad.”

Understanding instantly lit in his icy blue eyes, and after a moment he kissed the top of Rem’s head, murmuring “If there were four more of you, Da’len, how many more gray hairs would your Papa, Patris, and I share between us?”

“Not that many, Dad! You and Papa don’t age!” The teen replied quietly with a cheeky grin.

The elf laughed before he looked back towards the girls with a softer gaze. “If Rem is okay with it, go ahead with him. Peter?”

The brunette nodded with a bright smile. “I don’t mind! I wonder if it feels tingly…”

A snort escaped Zev at the words before he turned his gaze back to the blonds. “As for me…” He gave a soft sigh as he played with the end of his braid. “I’m not sure you would even be able to get into my mind. There are… let’s just say very special and powerful protections around it.”

‘We understand.’
Rem quickly moved forward, silently volunteering to be first. Before they could start, though, the mutant’s voice echoed across their bond. ‘There are things Peter doesn’t know… please, don’t let him see.’

Seeing the silently pleading look on the teen’s face, the girls nodded in agreement. ‘We promise.’ A moment later, they allowed their telepathy to reach out to the redhead’s mind, and he allowed them access to his memories.

-

<Grey walls, cold and unfeeling, cold table against a barely covered back, so many needles and endless tests, black and red eyes set in a face with an emotionless expression>

-

<Destructive power bound out of necessity for a price, finally just one last job, deception, then desperation to stop the madness-->

‘There is much pain and darkness here… We will pry no further.’

-

<Red and black, unlikely allies turned friends, loyalty and love continually strong an unyielding, standing against the test of time, all-encompassing scars so much like the mental ones from so much hurt>

-

<Isolation, ridicule from every direction, a man with brown hair, kind eyes, rough demeanor as a lone defense, hateful words for a past never asked for, “Remy, they’ll turn against you in the end, please get out now”>
<Judgement passed for sins unwillingly committed, a second betrayal that cuts deeper than the first, left behind in a collapsed ruin, biting cold a death sentence with no way out, “Don’t you fucking dare give up, I’m coming, I’ll hotwire a damn jet if I have to”, a desperate cry for help, not going to make it, darkness>

~

<Warmth, a familiar soothing voice pulling him up, body the same but different, a young teen with a bright smile and sparkling eyes so full of life, a familiar man with determination and compassion in his expression, “You and Wade are going to be staying here”, safety after so long, a call to gather and embarrassment from the need for help, a man with piercing emerald green eyes-->

‘What? The memory suddenly cut?’

‘I’m sorry, ladies… but that isn’t my secret to tell.’

~

<Compassion, love, and acceptance such a far cry from before, uncertainty in the face of the sudden shift in dynamic, patience and tolerance and a willingness to teach and understand, bonding over music and good food around a table, family found both chosen and blood, “We all care about you very, very much, Little Firefly”>

‘We’ve seen enough. Thank you, Rem.’

~

From the perspective of Zevrael and Peter, the whole exchange took less than a few seconds. The glow faded from the girl’s eyes and the redhead opened his own, fixing the quintet with a knowing look and a compassionate smile. Without even thinking about it, he moved to hug one of them, prompting the others to quickly join in. “You are wanted here, and you won’t be judged by us. You guys are more than your pasts, and you can overcome what you went through… just like I did.” He mumbled as the girls snuggled up to him.
The girls gave small sniffles before they spoke again, quiet. “Thank you, Rem…” After a few more seconds they pulled back and allowed the teen to rejoin Zevrael. They turned again as Peter bounced up to them with a bright smile. “Are you ready?”

“Yep! Go ahead!”

~

<A school field trip, sneaking away out of innocent curiosity, a flash of pain, brief and quickly forgotten until night falls, an unexpected change as a harbinger of things to come>

~

<Blood splashed across the pavement, a miscalculation leading to pain and fear, a sudden unexpected rescue from a figure clad in red and black, kindness and kinship from an unexpected source, a much-needed friendship blossoming between two vastly different forces, “Here’s my number. Don’t be afraid to call if you need my help”>

~

<A confrontation with evidence and a request for aid from the most unlikely source, peaceful apprehension throw aside in the face of a forced confrontation, the illusion of an idol and supposed hero violently shattered like the chest of his mentor>

~

<Family ties tested in the face of secrets revealed, fear, panic, confusion upon finding an empty room, a desperate plea for help and resulting investigation bringing answers, the crack of bone from a strike made in anguish, anger, and grief, an offer to change it, turn back the clock, “She deserves the chance to love again, to have a family, and be safe”>
A scolding from a treasured friend, embarrassment at being called out and joy from their shared connection, a desire for something more coupled with a hesitance to ask, ‘What if I ruin what we have’.

~

Jealousy for a new arrival, fear of being replaced and left behind unspoken but acutely felt, a reassurance from the ones who matter most, papers that will make them family in all but blood in the future, dark clouds chased away by the love shared between them.

~

New friends quickly found, a teen with honey-blond hair and similar intelligence, younger found-siblings looking for guidance, family in all but blood filling a void left in the wake of loss, bittersweet memories of connections severed quickly made brighter by endless support and love, ‘Everything will be okay.’

‘Thank you, Peter. We’ve seen enough.’

Peter shook himself for a second as he came back to himself, only to yelp a second later as he was engulfed in a tight hug by the girls. He quickly hugged the one in front of him, grinning brightly at the show of affection.

“We are glad you found a family.” They said with knowing smiles before turning their gazes to Zev and Rem, who were watching in curiosity. “We like him. He is bright and happy and full of light. We wish to keep him.”

“That may be a little hard, girls.” A new voice pulled their attention to the doors again, and Emma entered the room with Tony, Stephen, Logan, and Hadrian close behind her.

“Hello, mother!” They quickly left Peter to crowd around Emma, who smiled lovingly at them. “We made new friends!”
The older mutant nodded with a sparkle in her icy blue eyes. “I’m glad you’re getting along so well. Now, I have someone I want you to meet.” She gestured for Tony to come closer, and he did so with a smile on his face that seemed to only brighten further as he looked towards the quintet. “Tony, these are my daughters Sophie, Phoebe, Mindee, Celeste, and Esme. Girls, this is my half-brother, Anthony Stark.”

All five looked towards the Reaper, blinking for a second. After a second of quiet, they asked quietly, “Can we call you Uncle Tony?”

Tony’s heart melted at the unsure tone, completely unphased by the connection they seemed to possess. He grinned at them and declared, “Ladies, I would love if you called me Uncle Tony.” He opened his arms in invitation, and the blonds immediately crowded around him in an enormous group hug.

Hadrian smiled at the group before the sound of his name being called made him turn towards Peter, who was approaching him with a grin on his face. “Hi, Mister Hadrian! It’s good to see you again! I hope your work hasn’t been too busy or anything!”

The Master of Death gave the teen a calm smile and gently ruffled his hair. “It’s good to see you, Peter. Everything is well in the Nexus, never fear. Although I have the feeling the calm won’t last long… Mortis has been acting rather peculiarly, and that normally ends in an inordinate amount of paperwork for me.”

“How bad could it be, Mister Black?” Rem asked as he approached with Zevrael.

The ebony haired man arched an eyebrow as a grimace crossed his face. “Well, there was an incident where an entire nation was wiped out in an attempt to create a stone capable of granting eternal life… It wasn’t the number of souls that was the problem, oh no! It’s the method in which they died, and the end result, and the chaos and death that caused…”

Zevrael shot the emerald-eyed man an unidentifiable look. “Hey, wasn’t that the world with that gate thing?”

Hadrian groaned in exasperation and threw his hands in the air. “That thing is infuriating on the best of days! Always about ‘equivalent exchange’ and the ultimate source of alchemical know-how… I’ve had more constructive conversations with Sithis!”
The redhead tilted his head in confusion, looking up at his Dad for an explanation. Zev saw the look and quickly shook his head. “Oh no, Rem. Trust me when I say you don’t want to know. That whole world was a bag of cats and a half… and let’s not even touch on the one alchemist you sent us to find… nineteen years old and only 4’11”, short little bean that he is.”

Hadrian snorted and shook his head. “He’d eviscerate you if he heard you say that.”

“Well, he’s not exactly here, is he?”

- Elsewhere in the Multiverse...

“Ed, what’s wrong?”

“SOMEONE SOMEWHERE JUST CALLED ME SHORT!!”

“H-hey now, calm down, big brother-!”

---

A deep sigh escaped Scott as he slipped from his room, silently shutting the door behind him. Sleep wasn’t coming easy for him tonight, the desire to find a quiet place to unwind driving him from the suite he normally stayed in. Tension between Steve, Wanda, and the rest of the team was rising higher day by day, and the engineer was debating finally going to T’Challa and asking about turning himself in to the authorities.

He started to pass by the communal living room before pausing at the sight of Sam standing by the window, silently observing the grounds. “Trouble sleeping tonight?” Scott called out softly to him, cringing at the way the man jumped. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Sam waved the apology away. “Nah, don’t apologize. I was lost in my own head…” He turned back to the window, Scott joining him a moment later. They were quiet for a moment before Sam spoke again. “I didn’t sign up with Rogers to become a damn terrorist. I wanted to help and protect people, make their lives better.” He dropped his gaze to the floor. “He told me that’s what we were doin’, that the government wanted to take away our rights and freedom. And I believed him, took him at his word.” He snorted bitterly and shook his head. “Droppin’ an overpass on people, almost destroying an airport, leaving a teammate for dead … He didn’t want to protect anyone but
his best pal.”

“He’s Captain America. You, me, the whole damn world saw him as the poster boy for justice.” Scott gave the veteran next to him a small smile. “At least the world knows the kind of man he really is now. That illusion has been stripped away.” He pushed off the wall and gestured for Sam to follow him. “Come on, I was gonna ask to use the pool. Come join me.”

The male nodded and followed behind Scott as they were lead to the pool by two members of the Dora Milaje. The guards tended to be a few degrees warmer to them, plus Clint and Natasha. Sam chalked it up to their willingness to be respectful and follow commands, unlike a certain witch and captain. They were left once they reached the outdoor pool, but neither was under any delusion that they were actually alone.

“Gotta say, I love this pool.” Scott sighed as he slipped into the water that always seemed to be heated perfectly. “I will be eternally grateful that King T’Challa lets us use it.”

Sam nodded in agreement, falling into a thoughtful silence for a few seconds. “Hey, you know those rubber ducks that have been popping up around the wing?"

The question caused a grin to break out on the engineer’s face. “Hell yeah! I love those things! I don’t know how they’re getting here, but they always get a laugh out of me! Clint still has the one duck, Quackman. I think it’s helping him with what happened with Laura and the kids…” He gave the area a quick look around before leaning towards Sam. “I know he’s hiding that they’re alive, but I’m pretty sure he has a good reason for it.”

The vet nodded as well. They’d managed to stumble across the news regarding the family and quickly deduced that the archer had to know about it, but was acting like he was grieving. Given who was living with them in the suite, neither could blame him for keeping it to himself. “Yeah, I was a little nervous at first, but when fifty of them fell out of a cabinet as Rogers opened it up, I damn near busted a gut.”

Scott laughed at the memory as well. “He looked so confused and indignant! It was glorious!”

The duo shared a laugh before calming so Sam could speak again. “I kinda wish we had a few of those for the pool. I wonder how many could fit in here.”

The brunette shook his head and opened his mouth to speak before stopping. He tilted his head,
brow furrowing in confusion. “Sam, do you hear something?”

They fell quiet as they listened together. “... Isn’t that the Pirates of the Caribbean theme??”

Without warning, a pair of pirate ships burst from the water, facing each other from opposite ends of the pool. The duo’s mouths fell open when they realized that both were manned by a crew of pirate themed rubber ducks, two individual ones sitting behind each ship wheel. “Yo ...” Sam muttered as he cautiously approached one, a massive grin crossing his face as he picked up the duck behind the wheel. “Is this seriously a Captain Barbossa duck??”

“Sam!!” The excited voice caused him to turn, and he saw Scott holding a Jack Sparrow duck over his head, waving it excitedly. “Look! It talks!!” He squeezed the duck, and immediately it said ‘Hide the Rum!’ . Another squeeze produced ‘I love those moments. I like to wave at them as they pass by.’. “Best rubber duck EVER! I have dubbed him Captain Jack Mallard!”

Squeezing his own duck, Sam grinned as it yelled ‘Brace up yards, you cack-handed deck apes!’ and another squeeze produced a shout of ‘Loose the cannons, you lazy bilge rats!’. After a moment, he looked up at the engineer on the other side of the pool. “Scott?”

“Yes Sam?”

“Do you know what this means?”

A massive grin spread across the brunette’s face. “Come at thee, ye scurvy seadog!!”

Sam cackled and pushed the ship towards Scott. Oh yes, these ducks were the best!

Chapter End Notes

Languages! HOORAY!!

Sorellina -- Little sister
Mio fratello -- My brother
La mia anima gemella - My soulmate (This one is SUPER special in Italy. Like, this is reserved for 'the one'. You don't just bust it out in a casual relationship.)

Full Metal Alchemist is only getting a BRIEF cameo in this story! This was just for
humor!

A post will be going up on the WardenNews Tumblr regarding the difference between Reapers and Champions!

Special thank you to Sylwioszka for this rubber ducky variety!!
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

The Compound eagerly awaits the return of Tony and company from Massachusetts, and 'Lexi shows off her mad hunting skills in the meantime. A chance meeting in the climbing room averts any bad decisions, and Minowa arrives just in time to pull a certain assassin back from a dark place in his own mind, one that she too is intimately familiar with. Tony has given up trying to tell her not to claim people and instead focuses on getting Emma and her daughters situated in the Compound. The events of the weekend finally catch up with him, but he, fortunately, has two amazing family members to help him cope with it.

Meanwhile, Steve is confronted by the news that James is no longer in residence, and Clint lays a verbal smackdown on Steve of absolutely glorious proportions.

(Let it be known that Bridget Ivorsen is one of the sweetest people in the Compound... but she is also one of the most underestimated.)

((Don't underestimate her. That is a mistake that most people don't live long enough to tell anyone about.))

Chapter Notes

WARNINGS! ALL THE WARNINGS HERE!

This chapter delves into some pretty heavy stuff including PTSD, flashbacks, and the aftermath of them. Please be advised if any of these things make you uncomfortable or upset!!

Also, how in Helheim did I manage to get 11,000 words written in less than 24 hours?! -throws hands in the air- Social life, what's that? Sounds interesting, but let's get on to the story!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sound of a child running towards her caused Minowa to look up from where she was flipping through a book from her homeworld, smiling at the sight of Alexia running towards her. “Hello, Malkiir. Did you enjoy your time in the pool with Hannah, Lila, and Hela?” She put her book to one side, standing to greet the girl.

‘Lexi nodded, giggling as the Dragonborn scooped her into her arms. “Yep! I really like the slides Uncle Tony made for us!” For a moment, her smile fell. “Hela didn’t want to swim with us though… she seemed scared of taking off her beanie.”
Crimson red eyes softened at that, and Minowa made a mental note to bring this fact up with Tony and Loki soon. “Worry not, Alexia. Hela is nervous, but she will join you all soon enough.”

“Okay, Min!” She chirped, snuggling against the Dragonborn. The ebony-haired woman seemed to run hotter than normal, something the girl enjoyed immensely. She reminded her of her Daddy a bit, something about her almost primal aura and smell helping her say calm while he was away. “Min, when is Daddy gonna be home?” She asked after a few seconds of enjoying the way the older woman’s fingers were running through her hair.

Min smiled indulgently at the young girl in her arms. “Sometime tomorrow, Malkiir. They’ll send us a message when they’re on the way, and I’ll make sure to tell you, alright?” She got a nod in reply. “Good. Now, how about you and I play a game?” The brunette sat straight in her arms, head tilted curiously. “Out in the wilderness, there are scents and sounds that stand out, and allow you to hunt for a specific animal or human more quickly, yes?” Getting a nod, the Dragonborn continued. “However, you are in a new environment here-- the sounds, smells, and layout are different, and could provide a worthy challenge of your skills. Would you enjoy that?”

The girl cheered and wiggled, and Minowa quickly set her down. “That sounds like fun! What would I be hunting??” She suddenly paused and looked sheepish. “It’s not something that can be hurt, right? Animals could get hurt if I hunt them.”

This brought a smile to Min’s face, and she knelt and gently ruffled Lex’s hair. “It is an animal of a sort, Alexia, but it is a very special animal. A dear friend of mine, actually.”

Wide green eyes looked up at her. “But if it’s your friend, won’t it be hurt??”

“Not at all, Malkiir. Watch.” She turned to the center of the room, taking a deep breath. “Odahviing!”

The sudden noise was accompanied by a burst of blue light leaping from Minowa, coalescing into the form of a one-foot-tall dragon in front of her. Alexia gasped in awe, and the creature turned to Minowa for a moment. “Drem yol lok, Dovahkiin. It has been too long since you have summoned me in this way.”

Minowa smiled and dipped her head, a strange look of melancholy on her face. “Drem yol lok, Odahviing. Indeed, and the fault for that lies with me. You and I will speak soon, Zeymahí, but for now, I am in need of your aid.” Minowa turned to Alexia, who was staring at the glowing blue
dragon with fascination. “Malkiir, this is my friend and ally, Odahviing. Zeymahi, this is Alexia, daughter of one of my partners.”

The young girl inched forward, eyes wide with awe and delight. “Wow… he’s so cool, Minowa!” She reached out towards the Dragon, and he flew forward a bit so she could try and touch him. To her delight, the small head felt as firm as a real animal, slightly cooler but thrumming with energy the likes of which Lexi had never felt before. He smelled of ozone and burning tinder, something that tickled her nose and stood out among the other smells in the Compound. “Hello, Od-- Oda--” She looked up to Minowa, a furrow between her brow.

The Dragonborn chuckled and slowly pronounced the name for her. “Od-ah-viing. His name means ‘snow hunter wing’.”

Alexia nodded and turned back to the dovah. “Hello, Odahviing.” She greeted him, pronouncing the syllables slowly as Minowa had.

Odahviing rumbled out a small chuckle, butting his head against her hand. “Drem yol lok, monsedovahkiin. It is good to meet you.”

The Dragonborn choked at the term, turning her eyes to Odahviing. “She is not truly my daughter, brother. You realize this, yes?” She asked him in Dovahzul, getting a confused head tilt from Alexia.

“*She is the daughter of one of your partners, is she not?*” The dragon replied back in the same language, an amused tone to his voice. “*Then, for all intents and purposes, she is your daughter.*”

Burning crimson eyes narrowed at him before she sighed and shook her head. “We will discuss this at a later date, zeymahi. For now…” She rose to her feet once more, backing up a step or two. “Alexia, Odahviing is special in that he is a spirit, even with a corporeal form. If his form is disturbed enough, he will disperse and find his way back to me quickly enough. You have nothing to fear in terms of hurting him-- he cannot feel pain, and I can summon him back at will.”

Alexia looked over at Odahviing, who nodded at this. “It is true, malgrohiik. Trust in the words of the Dovahkiin. She would not lead you astray in this matter.”

This seemed to appease the young girl, and the ebony-haired woman continued. “Odahviing will have five minute’s head start to find a place in the compound to hide. He will not go into any
restricted or private areas, and he will not leave the premise. He will stay in a place that is safe for you to reach or be in, and the hunt is over once he has been dispersed. He may choose a different floor to hide on, but no bedrooms. Do you understand the rules?”

Alexia nodded rapidly, turning back to Odahviing. “I’m ready, Minowa!”

“Good. If you complete the hunt before sunset, there will be a prize waiting for you.” The Dragonborn turned and nodded sharply to her brother.

Odahviing gave a deep, rumbling laugh before beating his wings, rising a bit further into the air. “Pruzah nir, Malgrohiik!” It took him only a few seconds to fly from the room.

Alexia clapped, excited at the prospect of a hunt before turning back to Minowa, who was smiling after the dragon. “Min? What did he say to me before he left?”

The Dragonborn sat on the couch, a smile on her face. “Pruzah means ‘good’, and nir is ‘hunt’. He was basically wishing you good luck on the hunt. The term malgrohiik means ‘little wolf’.”

The emerald eyes of the girl lit up as she breathed out a ‘wow’, prompting a chuckle out of Minowa. As the waiting period came close to an end, Alexia looked back up at Minowa with a hopeful expression. “Min? Your language is so cool… can you teach me to speak it?”

Minowa stopped dead in her tracks from where she had been going to get a drink, something in her heart clenching. She turned back to the young girl, an expression on her face that spoke of shock and delight at the same time. A moment later, she had the girl in her arms, hugging her tightly but not squishing her. “We would be honored to teach you, malgrohiik.” She finally managed to get out. After a few seconds, she pulled back with a smile. “I will have Anthony aid us as well-- I taught him the Noble Tongue as well, and he picked up on it quite easily.” She tilted her head, the smile becoming a smirk. “Now, I believe you have a dragon to hunt!”

Alexia whooped, immediately running out the door that Odahviing had disappeared through with a cry of “Thanks, Minowa!!”

A soft, wet chuckle escaped the woman at that, though she didn’t rise quite yet. A few seconds later, she heard footsteps approaching her, and a warm, familiar hand began caressing her neck. “You’re good with her, Min.” Bruce’s voice was soft and loving as he came around her front, kneeling in front of her.
The Dragonborn’s face lit up and she immediately moved to snuggle up to him. “Diisu’um, I wasn’t aware you would be here today. I’ve missed you very much…”

Bruce chuckled softly, kissing the top of the woman’s head. “I’ve missed you too, love. I wanted to talk to Wade about his cancer, and I wanted to surprise you.” He pressed another kiss to her forehead, a loving smile on his face. “So, that was Logan’s daughter? She seems like a good kid, lotta energy though.”

“Are you surprised, Diisu’um? She is her father’s daughter, after all.”

Bruce nodded at that, a small smile on his face as he thought back briefly to when he and Logan met.

~

“Minowa, I’m here!”

The sound of Bruce’s voice caused Minowa’s head to snap up from where she’d been curled up next to Logan, a grin crossing her face. “Diisu’um! I was wondering when Anthony would finally release you from the lab!” She stood from the couch in a graceful motion, easily crossing the floor to press herself against Bruce, gently nosing his neck and kissing it before pulling him down for a real kiss. “Come, we were about to sit for dinner. I’m eager for you both to meet.”

Bruce nodded and easily sat with Minowa, but eyed Logan warily when he took a seat on her other side as well. Something about the man, the feral side of him most likely, was putting him on edge and on high alert. From the way Logan was sizing him up, the mutant was getting the same vibe.

However, their lover was very quick to pick up on the tension, and she set her fork down with a calm look on her face. “What seems to be the problem?”

They both looked over at her, blushing a bit. Logan was the first to break the tension. “The feral side of me… I think it’s wary of the Hulk. I know you’re not like that now,” He addressed Bruce quickly, “But I think it’s the smell.”

The scientist nodded at that, cleaning his glasses with his shirt as he spoke. “The Other Guy is getting that same vibe from you, I think. I guess it’s just… two powerhouses meeting, sizing each other up.”
The ebony-haired woman nodded with a smile on her face, casually sitting back in her seat. “You are both very dominant in your own ways, so it’s understandable that such a thing would occur. However, you’re both overlooking something.”

They both looked towards her with confusion on their faces. A moment later, her eyes started glowing as the pressure in the room increased noticeably, forcing both men to sit back in their seats in shock. Minowa grinned, her smile sharp and full of teeth as she purred with her voice resonating with Alduin’s, “You forget who the top alpha is here.”

They both nodded rapidly, quickly reassuring her that they remembered. The dinner progressed quickly afterward, and once the food had been put away and the dishes cleared, the woman excused herself for a moment to freshen up. They watched as she left the room, then after a second turned to each other.

Logan was the first to speak. “She can be damn scary sometimes.”

Bruce nodded at that. “No kidding. Sometimes I forget how powerful she truly is.”

“... I probably shouldn’t find that hot.”

“Trust me, you’re not the only one in that boat.”

They were silent for a moment before a smirk quirked at Logan’s lips. “Y’know, I think you and I are gonna get along just fine. Wanna have a drink and talk about how terrifying and beautiful our partner is?”

“Do you prefer whiskey or bourbon?”

“Yes.”

“And that thing she did to the Weapon-X team, holy shit! Was like she dropped the sky on those fucks!”
“You should have seen what she did at Sinister’s lab. Well, it wasn’t exactly her, it was Alduin, but still. She’s such a powerhouse!”

“I know. Tony showed me the footage. But as terrifying as she can be, she can be so tender and loving too. Like, she’s not afraid to show her affection, no matter who’s in the room, and she just makes you feel…”

“Like you belong somewhere... Being in her presence is like coming home.” Bruce sighed softly as he sat back with his mug of tea. “And she’s not afraid to speak her mind, either… but she never does it to tear you down. More often than not, she’s ripping into someone in defense of the people she loves and cares about.”

Logan nodded at that, taking a swig of his whiskey. “She’s got such a strong personality, but she uses that strength to support the others around her. Like, she asserted dominance over me when my feral side came out, but she didn’t do it any longer than necessary. And she’s great with kids, too, have you noticed that? I thought it was crazy how fast she and Alexia got along, but she’s so good with all the kids here.”

The scientist looked over at the mention of Logan’s daughter, curiosity in his eyes. “Minowa mentioned you had a daughter. You said her name is Alexia?”

The mutant nodded, digging into his pocket to pull out his wallet, taking a picture from it and passing it to him. It showed the girl in question waving at the camera from a wooded area, a huge grin on her face and happiness in her emerald eyes. “Yeah, this is ‘Lexi. She’s a sweet kid, and I’m glad she’s getting positive social interaction here. Min’s so good with her, and she’s able to help ‘Lex understand things that she sometimes has trouble with.”

Bruce smiled at the obvious joy radiating from the girl in the picture. “She’s super cute. I’m glad she’s doing well here.” He handed the picture back to Logan, studying the mutant as he put it back. “We’re both so lucky to have her, aren’t we?”

The mutant gave him a smile, nodding in agreement. “Hell yeah, we are.”

The sound of footsteps padding towards them made them look up, and Minowa came into the room with a knowing smile on her face, dressed in a red tank top and a pair of black sleep pants. She didn’t say a word, simply settling herself between them, and neither man hesitated to curl up with her, even if it meant the mutant’s hand was settled on Bruce’s arm, or that the scientist’s head was
resting against Logan’s arm. The two shared a knowing look and a smile over the Dragonborn’s head as she rumbled contently.

She had absolutely planned for this to happen. Neither really cared.

~

“Her being her father’s daughter isn’t a bad thing. Logan’s a great guy, has to be to have raised such a sweet kid.” Bruce smiled down at Minowa, brown eyes sparkling with love.

Minowa studied the scientist for a moment before an enormous shit-eating grin crossed her face. “So, I assume you and Logan worked out the last of the tension between you both?”

The scientist gave a choked noise before laughing, kissing the woman soundly for a moment. “Yes, we’ve managed to relax around each other now.”

The words caused the Dragonborn to break out in laughter as well, crimson eyes sparkling with mirth. She pressed her nose to Bruce’s throat, gently nipping the skin there. “Perhaps you and Logan could show me your preferred method of relaxation later.”

Bruce snorted and pulled the ebony-haired woman in for another kiss. “I think we can arrange something.”

---

“Gotcha!!”

Odahviing managed to call out a congratulation before being dispelled in a shower of blue sparks. Lexi cheered as she bounced out of the pool area on the top floor of the compound, a massive grin on her face from the success of her hunt. And she’d done it before the sunset too, so she would get the prize Min had for her! She quickly made her way back to the elevator, pressing the button she thought led to the common area. She hummed softly as it descended, but paused when she saw the door open to a floor she wasn’t familiar with. Her curiosity getting the better of her, she stepped out and looked around at the new location. After a moment she chose a random direction and started walking. Despite the trepidation at being in an unfamiliar place, the young girl couldn’t help but feel excited too. It was like she was going on an adventure like the ones Minowa had told her.
before bed the night before! The thought made her break into a little bit of a skip, even though she was sure Minowa never skipped on her own adventures.

After a bit, she found a door that was ajar, and she peeked inside curiously. She gasped with delight at the sight of the floor to ceiling climbing wall that took up the entire wall, and a portion of the ceiling as well. She squealed and rushed inside, emerald eyes alight with excitement before she paused. She had used climbing walls before, much smaller ones though, and she’d always had an adult with her. She bit her lip as she looked back at the wall. ‘Lexi was smart enough to know that if she was caught climbing the wall without an adult, she’d be in a lot of trouble. The young girl was so distracted by her excitement coupled with the internal debate that she failed to hear the door being pushed open, nor the footsteps that stopped after the person got a few steps through the door.

James blinked in confusion at the sight of the six-year-old girl looking longingly at the rock wall, seemingly torn between scaling the thing with no safety gear and not doing something as silly as that. The sight of the kid made James’ heart melt a bit, so he softly cleared his throat to catch her attention. She spun around, blinking at him with wide, almost guilty emerald eyes, and the assassin gave her a reassuring smile. “Pretty impressive wall, isn’t it?”

Blinking in surprise at the man, it took a moment for ‘Lexi to nod, a nervous smile on her face. “I-I really want to climb it, but I don’t want to make my daddy mad if I do it alone…”

The soft voice of the girl drew a slightly larger smile from James, and he shrugged off his jacket and put it to one side. “You were right not to climb it alone. This wall has some features built in that make for a tougher climbing experience for adults. Your dad would probably be upset if you got hurt, right?” Alexia nodded at that, and the brunette turned to her with a smile. “But, since there’s an adult with you now, you can climb the wall safely. How’s that sound?”

“Yay!” Alexia threw her fist in the air with a whoop, then paused when a little bit of her claws extended from the motion. She lowered her hands, blinking at the claws before giving the super soldier in front of her an embarrassed smile. “Oops!”

James blinked for a second before laughing, something he’d been finding himself doing more and more the longer he stayed at the Compound and recovered. The sight of the claws along with the facial features of the young girl confirmed his suspicions about who’s kid she was, and he waved off her embarrassed exclamation. “It’s okay, don’t worry about it. Now, how about we get you a harness and we’ll get you up on the wall. What do you say, ‘Lexi?” The girl cheered and shot over to the storage box where the harnesses were kept, James following behind her with a smile on his lips. He quickly helped her into a child-sized one, leading her over to the wall and securing her to the line on a medium difficulty section of the wall. “Okay, kid. Whenever you’re ready.”
Lexi took off up the wall like a shot, giggling all the while. The man with the metal arm was super nice, every once in a while calling out advice on how to better use her natural strength to boost herself up whatever rock. She quickly made it to the top of the wall, waving down at the nice man. “Look, I made it!”

The assassin grinned at her, easily lowering her to the ground. “You sure did, kiddo. Wanna try a harder part?”

The girl nodded vigorously but went quiet as he was clipping her in. “What’s your name, mister?” She asked, looking up at him with wide green eyes.

Icy blue eyes sparkled as James stood straight again. “My name’s James. Sorry about not telling you earlier, but it seemed like you were really eager to get up on the wall. Speak of which, let’s see how fast you can get up this one.” She immediately started up the harder section, using all the tips James had given her to boost her speed. The assassin grinned at her obvious enjoyment-- the girl was a fast learner and full of energy. She made it to the top in short order, waving down at him from the top of the wall. “Great job, Lex! Hold on, let me get you down.”

She was little more than a few feet off the ground when the doors to the room swung open again, Aria coming through the door with a worried look on her face. It quickly changed to one of relief when she caught sight of James and Alexia, who were both blinking at her in confusion. “Alexia, there you are! Minowa wasn’t sure where you were since you didn’t rejoin her after you found Odahviing. Hold on, let me tell her where we are.” She flicked her fingers, her Cazador patronus bursting into existence. “Maverick, please take a message to Minowa. ‘Found Alexia, she’s with James and me in the climbing room’.” The insect immediately buzzed away, moving at a rapid pace.

“Hey, Aria.” James greeted her as he lowered ‘Lex the rest of the way to the floor. “I was just helping Alexia on the climbing wall. I didn’t know anyone was looking for her.”

The woman waved him off, a smile on her face. “Don’t worry about it, James! Thank you for helping her though-- Logan would be less than pleased if something happened to her.”

A snort escaped the assassin as he unclipped the ropes from the girl in front of him and helped her out of her harness. “It was no problem. ‘Lex is a good climber, seriously fast going up and down the wall.” He gave the kid a smile, and she grinned right back at him. “Okay, kid, why don’t you go put away the harness and go grab some water. You did a good job today!”

“Okay, thank you, Mr. James!” She quickly bounced over to the box, prompting a chuckle out of
both adults.

Aria looked over at the brunette adult to her left, smiling at the peaceful look on his face. “Thank you, James. I’m glad you enjoyed helping ‘Lexi as much as she liked having you help her.”

James shrugged, a small smile of his own on his face as he replied, “She’s a bundle of energy, but she makes it hard to not be happy. It’s like she just radiates this happy vibe you can’t help but feel.” Aria nodded at that, and the sound of the door opening caught their attention. James made to turn to the door--

*BAM!*

The sudden sharp, echoing thud caused several eyes to whip in the direction of Lexi, who looked sheepish. “Sorry, the lid slipped in my hands!”

Aria smiled and shook her head, but the sight of Minowa suddenly standing straight up caught her attention. Minowa turned her eyes to Lexi for a moment, a small smile on her face. “Well, better go wash up then. Wouldn’t want to stay sweaty, right? I’ll come to find you later, I have a prize for you like I promised. Aria, would you mind accompanying her?”

The woman nodded sharply with a smile of her own but mind on high alert. Minowa had sensed something, else she wouldn’t be passing Lexi off to her. “No problem, Min. I’ll race you to the washroom, ‘Lexi!’ She quickly bolted out the door, a squealing and excited six-year-old following behind her.

The moment they were gone, the smile faded from Minowa’s lips and a flick of her wrist had the doors shut and locked so no one could enter unexpectedly. Another flick raised a set of wards that would protect against magical entry as well. She immediately turned back to James, who had gone stark white at the sound from the lid with a fearful look on his face. A moment later he seemed to stagger back, hitting the wall before sliding to the ground, eyes darting back and forth as if seeing something she couldn’t. Knowing what the super soldier had been through, he probably was. Min slowly approached the violently shaking man, lowing herself as much as possible once she was closer. Compassion and a sense of shared emotional anguish filled her at the sight of the super soldier so obviously terrified. It brought back flickers of her first few years at the Nexus after Hadrian had brought her back, and she pulled on the techniques he’d used for her to try and help the man in front of her. “James,” she called out in a soft, but calm voice, mimicking the tone the dinokthur had often taken with her, “My name is Minowa, I’m a friend of Tony’s. You’re in the climbing room at the New Avengers Compound, and the time is 7:43 PM, Eastern Standard Time. You’re safe here, you’re safe with us. We’re not going to hurt you, and we’re not going to let anyone else hurt you.” She kept inching closer to him as she spoke, watching his posture like a hawk for any sign that she should keep back. She knew that he could be less than receptive to
physical touch, and any attempt to restrain him would be met badly, and the last thing she wanted
to do was cause him more distress-- Sithis knows he was already in emotional agony. “James, I
need you to put both feet flat on the floor. Can you do that for me?” After a few seconds, the male
did as she asked, though the movement was uncoordinated and shaky. “Good, that was good,
James. Can you feel the floor beneath your feet? Can you feel how sturdy it is?” Again, it took
several seconds before he nodded, and Minowa took the chance to inch forward until she was
within touching distance. The shaking was lessening now, and the woman was relieved to see
awareness slowly returning to the brunette’s eyes. Having his senses grounded in the present was
helping him come back from where his mind had dragged him to, so she made the decision to try
and initiate physical touch. “James, would you let me put my hand on your shoulder?” The nod was
quicker to come this time, the Dragonborn clearly broadcasting her movements as she did just that,
the warmth of her hand easily leaching through the shirt the brunette was wearing. Something
about the warmth must have helped, because James leaned into the touch, almost seeking it out.
Understanding lanced through the Dragonborn as she remembered what had been written in his file
about the cryostasis. With that in mind, she slowly moved in closer to pull him into a comforting
hug, tucking his head against the crook of her neck so he could hear her heartbeat. The feeling of
the man trembling against her broke her heart, knowing how hard it was to experience something
as unexpected as a flashback. She unconsciously reached to gently run her fingers through his hair
and massage his scalp, the warmth from them helping soothe the tight muscles in his neck. “You’re
okay, James, you’re safe here.” The sentence was said with a soft, but unyielding finality, a fire
lighting in the heart of the Dragonborn to never let the man in her arms suffer like this alone. She
gently pressed her cheek to his head, relief filling her as the soldier burrowed further into her arms.
A small, understanding smile crossed her face as she tightened her grip a bit and continued
speaking soothingly to him to help guide him out of whatever his mind had pulled him into.

It took several more minutes of gentle murmurs and comforting touches before James took a deep,
shuddering breath and let it out. “How did you know?” He whispered almost brokenly, not pulling
away from the warmth that seemed to surround him and drive off the cold the flashback had pulled
forward.

“I’ve been there.” Minowa replied softly, a sadness filling her tone that was too deep and poignant
not to be real. “Are you okay? What do you need right now?”

James shuddered slightly, gripping tightly to the fabric of the tank top the woman was wearing.
“Don’t leave.” He whispered, something heartbreakingly raw in his voice.

Minowa felt her heart shatter, and without thinking about it she pressed a gentle kiss to the top of
his head. “I’m not going anywhere.” She promised, rubbing the man’s back and channeling the
tiniest bit of fire destruction magic through her body to raise her core temperature a bit more. She
would stay with him as long as he needed.

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James came to slowly, head hurting a bit and mind sluggish. He grunted softly, ice-blue eyes fluttering open and blinking in confusion at the place he found himself in. The first thing he noticed was the numerous windows in the room, high up and looking over the vast area of the Compound. Sunlight was just starting to peek over the horizon, bathing the room in a comfortable morning glow. The second thing he noticed was the bed he was in— the frankly ENORMOUS bed, covered in the softest sheets he’d ever felt in his life, with several soft blankets strewn over top of them. He slowly sat up in the bed, immediately noticing that he was wearing little more than sleep pants, causing a fierce blush to cross his face because he was pretty damn certain he’d also been wearing a shirt yesterday.

The errant thought suddenly made him aware of what had happened, the last thing the super soldier remembered… Instead of the lingering fear he felt after a flashback like the one he’d experienced, an odd warmth seemed to fill him, radiating from the center of his chest. He looked down and was confused at the odd pendant he found there. It was a metallic black disk, about an inch in width with red shards set into it in no discernable pattern. Upon further inspection though, the combination of dots and lines seemed to have some kind of order, he just couldn’t tell why. He brushed his fingers against it, and another surge of warmth filled him, flooding him with a feeling of comfort, safety, and heat.

Before James could begin to try and figure out where he was, the handle of the door turned gently, causing his eyes to snap to it as it slowly swung open. A moment later, Bruce poked his head in, and he smiled when he saw the assassin awake. “Good morning, James.” He said softly, pushing the door open more while carrying two mugs, one with tea and one with coffee. “Glad to see you awake. You had a bit of a rough night.”

James swallowed hard, looking slightly uncertain as the scientist passed him the coffee. “Where am I, Bruce? I don’t recognize these rooms…”

The scientist took a sip of his tea, a small smile on his face. “This is Min’s suite. She brought you back here after what happened last night. She didn’t want you to be alone, and you seemed to respond well to being near her. She was with you until about an hour ago, up all night working on that.” He gestured to the pendant around his neck.

The super soldier blinked in shock, looking at the coffee in his hands then back to the pendant around his neck. “I… what is it?” He finally asked. “It… feels warm. And it makes me feel calm.”

“That surprises me very little,” Bruce replied with a knowing look. “You can’t tell just by looking at it, but those shards of ruby have tiny engravings on them, infused with Min’s magic and set into a hematite base in such a way that the shards form words in her native language. The back of the hematite actually has a runic circle on it as well. It’s a pretty special piece of jewelry, meant to keep inner demons at bay.”
The super soldier felt like he’d had the breath knocked out of him, and he touched the pendant again with a sense of reverence for the work put into such a thing. “I… why would she do that for me?” He asked softly, taking an errant sip of the coffee in an effort to work down the lump in his throat.

The brown-eyed man was quiet for a moment before he moved so he could sit on the edge of the bed, a sad look in his eyes. “Because, while Aria can empathize with you over lost memories… Minowa had intimate experience with being a victim of your own mind.” He took another sip of his tea, gathering his thoughts. “I don't know all of the details, but from what I can gather… Minowa knows torture. She knows being used for nothing more than her body. She knows death.” He turned his eyes back to the assassin, pinning him with a look that took his breath away. “Somehow, at some point... she was hurt like you.”

James stared at him, searching for any sign of deception or that the scientist was lying. Seeing the grim truth there, he swallowed again before downing the rest of the coffee, ignoring the burning it caused. “Where is she?” He asked, moving to shift to the side of the bed.

Bruce didn’t respond verbally, instead waiting until he’d stood before motioning for the assassin to follow him. James did so, taking a moment to admire the space he found himself in, the comforting warmth of the colors, decor, and overall atmosphere of the common room. His attention was drawn to the scientist at his side, and Bruce wordlessly pointed towards a door leading to an outdoor area. James nodded thankfully, slowly padding towards the door and pushing it open, taking two steps out before freezing at the sight before him. Minowa stood several feet away, leaning one hip on the banister, looking over the grounds with a peaceful look on her face and a mug of her own in her hands.

Minowa heard the door open but didn’t turn towards it immediately. She assumed it was Bruce coming to join her, but when the footsteps halted a little too long, she turned her crimson eyes towards the door. She inhaled sharply when she saw James standing there instead. “James, you’re awake. I apologize, I thought you were Bruce coming to join me.” She set her mug down on the railing before gracefully approaching him, eyes traveling over him as if searching for any sign of distress. “How are you feeling? You passed out while I was with you last night, and I felt it would be best if you had someone with you through the night. I hope I didn’t overstep my bounds.”

James opened his mouth to reply but found himself lost for words for a second. Finally, he managed to get his voice to work only to blurt out, “You’re so goddamn beautiful.” Moments after he said it he blushed brightly. He hadn’t meant for that to come out, but it was true. Not just in a physical sense either, though that was absolutely true as well. That this woman that he’d never met had been so willing to help him, had suffered through the same horrors he had experienced and still sat and comforted him through his own pain, had created something with her own hands to drive back the nightmares that continued to plague him through his recovery… how could she be anything but the most breathtaking being he’d ever encountered?
His train of thought was broken by a soft laugh from Minowa, and he looked up to find her watching him with a look of amusement on her face, a gentle smile on her lips. “I have massive bedhead currently and am wearing nothing more than a tank top and sleep shorts. I’m not sure where you got the impression that I look any kind of beautiful.”

“Are you shitting me?” Nope, James had just lost the last fuck he had to give. If she thought for one second he was going to let her continue that train of thought, she was sorely mistaken. “Yes, you’re gorgeous in a physical sense, but I’m not just talkin’ about that. You… you get it. You’ve been through it, you know what it’s like, but you… you stayed. You didn’t have to stay, but you did, and you knew just what to say and do, and…” He took a deep shuddering breath, not seeing the way the Dragonborn was watching him with a startled look of her own. “And for the first time since I can remember… I woke up feeling safe and warm.” He looked up at her, his icy blue eyes haunted and pained, but filled with so much gratitude. “I haven’t felt safe since Steve showed up in Bucharest… and I haven’t felt truly warm since coming out of the ice the last time with HYDRA.”

The words spoken in such a soft, thankful voice finally spurred Min into approaching the assassin, and she didn’t hesitate to pull him into her arms in a tight, comforting embrace that was immediately reciprocated. She settled his head against her shoulder as she tried to fight back her own tears. Because yes. She did get it. It wasn’t something she thought back on often—there were a million years worth of memories between then and now. But some things… some wounds even time couldn’t heal without leaving behind massive psychological scars. And for poor James… those wounds were still raw and bleeding.

They were both quiet for a long time, content to enjoy the embrace they were sharing. Finally, after several minutes, James mumbled quietly, “I want to stay.”

The soft admission brought a smile to Minowa’s face, and she pulled away enough to be able to look the soldier in the eye. “I have Bruce and Logan too, in case that could be a problem.”

James shook his head, pulling her close again, trembling a little. “No. I don’t care. I just…”

Minowa soothed him softly, rubbing his back in a comforting gesture. A few seconds later, she felt Bruce joining in on the hug, and she shot him a smile from her position pressed against James’ shoulder. She wordlessly pressed a kiss to the assassin’s collarbone, nuzzling it gently. The taller man shuddered and began to cry quietly, overwhelmed with relief, gratitude, and joy. Minowa and Bruce stood with him, easily offering comfort and compassion for the soldier. Finally, as James was finally sniffing back tears, Minowa’s lips quirked into a teasing smile before she said, “Now, how do we go about telling Logan?”
“FRIDAY, remind me when I get down to the workshop that I need to start on a new bed for Min and her… whatever is going on here.”

Stephen had to suppress a laugh as he glanced over at his soulmate, who had an exasperated, resigned look on his face as he watched Minowa tuck herself with her head under Logan’s chin while the mutant was softly speaking to James while gently cupping his face and caressing his cheekbones. More than likely he was reassuring the assassin of his place in their seemingly ever-growing… ‘nest’, he supposed. Bruce was pressed next to James, offering him a stable presence as the duo spoke. “Might want to wait on that, baby.” He murmured with a grin on his face. “For all you know, it could get bigger.”

The completely unamused look Tony shot him nearly made him lose his battle against the giggles. “Please don’t joke about that, babe. It’s akin to saying shit like ‘what could possibly go wrong?’ The universe listens for that kind of stuff, and they will screw you six ways to Sunday just to prove a point.”

Stephen snorted and shook his head, pressing a kiss to the genius’ lips. “I need to head back to the New York Sanctum for a bit to make sure no one has burned the place down or summoned any demons in my absence. I’ll be back later tonight, okay?”

The genius nodded in understanding and gave him a kiss, wishing him good luck as he stepped through a portal, the sorcerer waving back at him as it closed. Tony smiled before a squeal of ‘Daddy!!’ pulled his attention back to Minowa and her group to see Alex’ leaping into Logan’s arms with Minowa having stepped away just in time, chatting a million miles a minute and waving around a plushie shaped like his alter ego of Wolverine, though it had one of his much older, pre-X-Men costumes. The mutant must have asked about it because Lexi grinned and pointed at Minowa, who smiled adoringly at the child.

“She’s very good with children, isn’t she?”

Tony turned his eyes to Emma, who had stepped up beside him with a smile on her face. “She is, yes. The other kids in the Compound love her, not to mention most of the adults.”

The blond turned her eyes to her brother, arching an eyebrow. “Most of them?”
Whiskey brown eyes sparkled with mirth. “Well, Wade has a healthy amount of fear for her. It was kind of his own fault-- he pissed off her tenant.”

A look of understanding passed over the woman’s face, and she nodded with a small smile. “If what I’ve heard is any indication, Alduin isn’t a being I would ever want to annoy for any reason.”

“No one in their right mind would ever incite his wrath-- I am the king of bad decisions, and even I would be hesitant of goading him.” Tony gave a dramatic shudder, prompting a soft laugh from Emma. “Okay, Sorellina, there’s a family suite close to mine, Stephen, and Peter’s that’s free if you and the girls want to set up there. If you want other arrangements, let me know.”

The woman sighed softly as her daughters joined her, pressing close to her and Tony. “No, that would be perfect, mio fratello. Thank you for having us here.”

Tony immediately pulled her close, kissing her forehead in a comforting gesture. “No way in Hell was I gonna leave you and my nieces in that place by yourselves. You deserve a chance to heal and be safe, you and the girls.” He finally pulled away after a few seconds, smiling at the group. “Now, I should first introduce you to my girl FRIDAY.” He tilted his head to the ceiling. “FRIDAY, say hello!”

“Welcome home, Boss!” The Irish lilt was full of warmth and happiness, though the suddenness caused the blonds to look up and around in confusion. “Hello, I’m FRIDAY, I’m the Boss’ personal AI. I help keep him safe and comfortable, and I keep the rest of the Compound and its’ residents secure and happy!”

A startled laugh escaped Emma, and she turned her eyes to Tony with a look of wonder and pride on her face. “Hello, FRIDAY. I’m Emma Frost, and these are my daughters.”

The eyes of the quintet flashed as they called out, “Hello Ms. FRIDAY.”

The genius grinned brightly at them, tilting his head back to the ceiling for a moment. “FRIDAY, Emma and her girls are going to be staying with us. Make sure they’re taken care of and have everything they need. Her word carries the same weight as mine, okay?”

“You got it, Boss!”
Tony nodded sharply with a ‘thanks’ to her before turning back to his sister. “Emma, FRIDAY will show you and the girls up to your suite so you can freshen up. I have one or two things to take care of, but I’ll check in on you guys in a little bit, alright?”

The blonds nodded in understanding, and Emma took a moment to hug him tightly. “Thank you so much, Antonio.” She said softly, a look of pure gratitude on her face as she pulled away. She quickly ushered the girls into the elevator after they’d all given him a hug as well.

The brunette smiled as he watched them go, but it fell once the elevator doors finally closed. He gave a deep, shuddering sigh as he leaned back to support himself with the wall behind him. After a moment, his eyes flared orange, and he connected himself to the minds of every adult in the Compound. ‘Hey guys, I normally wouldn’t do this, but… we have a few new residents of the Compound-- you’ll know them if you see them. Please give them space, and I’ll explain everything as soon as I can.’ He immediately disconnected from them, taking a moment to just breathe before pushing himself away from the wall. He gave an errant wave to where Min and her group were blinking at him in confusion, not breaking stride as he moved to the elevator, the doors closing behind him. “To the lab, FRIDAY,” His eyes flared blue. “and put me through to Pepper, please.”

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Bridget hummed quietly under her breath as she stepped into the elevator, calling up for a moment to ask FRIDAY to take her to Tony’s lab. It was one place the Reapers wouldn’t Corridor into, knowing the delicate nature of some of the science that was conducted inside. That was fine, it gave her a chance to organize her thoughts for the idea she was about to put forward to Tony. The thought made an excited grin pull at her lips. The discussions between herself, Stephen, Bruce, and Vision had finally produced results that had the potential to solve the problem regarding the cancer plaguing Wade’s body.

The elevator ‘dinged’ and Bridget stepped out as the door opened, but the smile fell from her face when she heard Tony’s voice from inside the lab.

“Yes, Pepper, I’m absolutely sure. You and Dorian set up the conference, I’ll make sure she’s free that day… I… I hope she’ll be okay. She should have never had to go through this alone, Pep, and I’ll be damned if I leave her alone after this… Yeah, I’ll tell her. You could always give her a call too, she always likes talking to you… especially that. You two teamed up against me often enough to badger me to take care of myself.”

Bridget came around the corner, a concerned look on her face that only deepened when he saw the way Tony was leaned against the desk behind him, an odd look on his face as his eyes glowed blue. His head turned in her direction as she came in, and he quirked a small smile before turning
back to his call. “Alright, just let me know when you get it scheduled… Yes, that will be all, Ms. Potts.” The blue faded from his eyes as he ended the call, and he looked back to Bridget with a tremulous smile on his face. “Hey Bri, what’s up?”

The blond didn’t speak for a moment, simply studying Tony with a critical eye before moving towards him, gently grabbing his hands. “Tony, what’s going on? You normally don’t do press conferences unless it’s something major. And you’re shaking like you just came face to face with Mehrunes Dagon!” She began rubbing them between her own hands, hoping the skin-to-skin would help him settle a little.

Tony gave a soft, choked laugh and shook his head. “It’s not bad news, but it is major. But I’m not letting this stay a secret for a second longer, not after this. She-- I…” His voice failed him as he shook his head, tears beginning to rapidly well up in his eyes.

Alarm shot through the healer, and she gently tugged his hands to guide him to the nearby couch and help him sit. She sat in front of him still gently rubbing her thumbs over his hands, but before she could speak the door to the lab swished open again, and Minowa swept into the room with an odd look on her face. Her eyes immediately found Bridget and Tony, and the Dragonborn wordlessly strode over to them, settling herself behind him and holding him in a comforting embrace. Her eyes snapped to Bridget as the healer made to stand. “Stay where you are, Bridget.”

The blond nodded, resettling in front of Tony. Minowa could probably tell through her empathic bond with Tony that he needed them both there. “Tony, please… what’s going on?” She asked softly, squeezing his hands comfortingly.

Tony looked up at her with tears in his sorrowful, whiskey-brown eyes. After a second, they flashed orange, and he linked to both of them and pushed the memories of what he’d learned to both of them. It took a minute for them both to get through them, but both of their eyes flared with rage at what they’d learned. “I wasn’t there for her.” Tony whispered brokenly, pulling them both back instantly with his tone alone. The tears finally rolled down his face, and he heaved in a deep breath. “She lost them all, and she didn’t reach out to me, and she was completely alone and fucking suffering…” He choked out, and the dam on his emotions finally broke violently after having to hold back what he’d been feeling the entire weekend. A heartbroken cry escaped him and he started sobbing uncontrollably. Bridget and Minowa instantly pulled him close, sandwiching the genius between them to comfort him. They spoke soothingly to him as he continued to cry, comforting him through the tumultuous emotions currently raging within him.

It took a good half hour for him to finally calm down, but he didn’t try to move away from where he was pressed between the two women. They were quiet for a minute to make sure he wouldn’t start crying again before Minowa spoke first. “It is true, she was alone through these things, but she will be alone no longer. She is here, and she will have all the support in the multiverse going forward. She is your sister, and the Reapers will honor and love her as if she were one of us-- her
The genius let out a long, shuddering breath and nodded gratefully to them both. “Thank you both,” He replied softly, looking up at them with a small smile.

Bridget hugged him tightly as well, a relatively calm look on her face. “It begs the question though-- who gave the X-Men permission to take Emma when she was in that state? She couldn’t have.”

Tony froze for a moment, realization crossing his face before he sat up, looking towards the ceiling. “FRIDAY, send a message to Pepper and tell her to add kidnapping to the charges against the X-Men. At this rate, every single one of them is gonna end up in a jail cell for the rest of their lives.” He stood from the couch, the women following as well. He turned back to them with a thankful smile on his face, and the duo pulled him back into their arms for a few seconds. “Thank you, guys… I really needed this.”

The Dragonborn nodded with a kind smile, pulling his head down so she could press a kiss to his forehead. “Always, Zeymahi. We are family, Anthony, and we would never let you suffer like this, not alone.” Seeing the flash of guilt on his face, she turned his head so they were eye-to-eye again. “Your sister was in a coma, Anthony. She was incapable of reaching out in such a state. And from what we’ve seen of your memories, everything happened so fast for her, that she barely had the time to process everything herself. Do not blame yourself for this, you hear me? You cannot go back and change what happened, but she is here now. She will always have allies, now.”

The healer nodded as well, a smile on her face. “I would love to meet the girls. Not just to make sure they’re healthy, but… they sound like such sweet girls, and it sounds like they could use friends.”

A laugh escaped Tony and he wiped his eyes with the back of his hands. “I don’t know what I did to deserve you guys… you know that, right?”

That prompted a snort out of both of them, and they both pulled him into another hug. “You just had to be you.” Bridget softly reassured him with a grin.

“Being you was always enough for us,” Minowa said as well, pulling away with a reassuring smile aimed at him. “And let no one tell you otherwise.”
Tony nodded and took a deep breath, feeling lighter and calmer than he had since the first day they’d stayed at Emma’s school. “Okay.” He said simply, smiling brightly at both of them. He gave them both another brief hug. “I think I need to take a nap for about an hour. It’s been a long time since I’ve felt this emotionally exhausted.”

They both nodded and encouraged him to take care of himself. They watched as he left the room, the fact that he’d allowed them to stay a testament to the trust he had for them. The door closed and locked behind him since he knew the duo could just Corridor out. Minowa smiled softly after him, the bond between herself and the genius thrumming with contentment and peace. She turned to Bridget to speak before the Dragonborn froze, a chill lancing through her as the words died in her throat.

The restoration master had gone very still, a curtain of blond hair shielding her face from view. What it didn’t hide was the way her body seemed to be practically vibrating with energy. After a moment, she raised a shaky hand and opened a corridor, striding through it with hard, angry steps. Minowa cautiously followed behind her-- Bridget was one of the first Reapers who had been Claimed through the ritual instead of being directly linked to Hadrian, which meant that she was one of the older Reapers in the Nexus. In all that time, the Dragonborn had never seen this kind of behavior from the woman. She came out the other side to find that they were in the outdoor training yard, Bridget standing stock still in the middle of it. Something prickled at the back of her neck, and as the corridor closed she put a powerful ward around herself.

It proved to be the right instinct, as a moment later the blond threw her arm out in an arc, a blinding, powerful shockwave of golden white magic flooded the area, setting every training dummy aflame before obliterating them entirely. Minowa inhaled sharply, recognizing the master level restoration spell she had just used-- Bane of the Undead. It had been combined with the primal energy of the white arts she commanded so easily, and Min had no doubt that if she hadn’t thrown up a ward when she had, even she would have been injured by the attack. From the aftershock that followed, it was clear that there had been another power driving it as well, one that made the ebony hair woman shudder at the feeling-- daedric energy. It really brought home the fact that, while Bridget was one to heal instead of hurt… even she had her limits.

“Minowa.”

The Dragonborn straightened as Bridget turned to her, eyes full of so much unbridled fury that turned the dragon blood in her veins to ice.

“If the X-Men show up here… any of them… they will die.”

And those limits had been well and truly shattered.
Minowa didn’t say anything, choosing to silently nod as they stood among the ashes of the dummies that used to be on the field. This wasn’t Bridget Ivorsen, the cheerful but stern matron of the Medical Wing speaking currently.

This was Bridget Arendottir, Archmage of the College of Winterhold and Champion of Meridia, Daedric Prince of Life and Lady of Infinite Energies. And the word of Archmage Bridget was nothing less than law.

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Steve wasn’t sure what pulled him from the land of Nod. He had been taking advantage of the fact that the alarms that had been plaguing him for several weeks seemed to have finally stopped, passing out almost immediately upon collapsing into bed that night. Maybe his body had become used to being woken up at obscene hours. The super soldier shifted, his brow furrowing at the abnormal weight on his chest. After a few seconds, he managed to crack his eyes open to figure out what the problem was…

… And immediately screamed upon finding the massive rubber duck sitting on his chest.

He sat straight up in bed, the sudden motion sending the duck flying across the room and into the dresser. Upon making an impact with the wood, the duck exploded into a poof of smoke and split into a dozen slightly smaller ducks that did the same, until his floor was completely covered in a layer of normally sized rubber ducks. Steve was on his feet on the bed, his back pressed against the wall behind him and eyes wide with incomprehension, horror, and outrage. Before he could even begin to try and figure out what the hell was going on, the door to the room was thrown open to reveal T’Challa and two members of the Dora Milaje.

The matriarch paused upon seeing the room, arching an eyebrow with a bland expression on his face. Behind him, the other Rogues poked their heads in curiously, snorts and giggles being heard upon seeing the state of the room. “Mr. Rogers, kindly keep your voice down while the rest of us are trying to sleep.” He eyed the plethora of ducks on the floor before continuing. “I must say, though, I wasn’t aware you kept such… interesting bed companions.”

Behind him, Sam and Scott lost their battle against laughter, and they both collapsed to the floor howling with laughter as they tried desperately to support each other. Natasha arched an eyebrow, inwardly applauding the fact that the king had managed to deliver the line completely straight-faced with zero hints of humor in his voice. Clint was pressed against her side, hiding his face in her shoulder and using every technique he knew to keep from joining Sam and Scott on the floor. Wanda immediately started in on how it must be Stark’s fault, but at that point, no one would listen
to her if Tony’s name came up in any way. Even the Dora Milaje seemed to be affected, both trying desperately to force down their smiles, shoulders trembling just the tiniest bit.

The monarch aimed another droll look at Steve before speaking again. “In the future, Mr. Rogers, whatever happens between you and these ducks in this room should stay in this room. Have a good night.” He firmly shut the door behind him, though it did nothing to block out the sound of another round of laughter, this time joined in by the guards.

Bast bless their king and his sense of humor!

--

The conversation T’Challa had been having with Scott, Sam, and Natasha was suddenly and violently interrupted by the door to the suite slamming open, a frazzled and fearful looking Rogers standing in the doorway. “T’Challa, Bucky’s gone!”

The group stared at him for a few seconds, Clint tensing a tiny bit from his place at Nat’s side. The assassin could understand his sudden wariness-- considering that the super soldier in question had been exactly what they had been discussing a moment ago, Roger’s reaction was more than a little alarming. This was a man who had dropped an overpass on civilians in pursuit of his ‘best friend’, after all.

To his credit, T’Challa remained calm, taking another sip of his tea as he gathered his thoughts. “I am aware. Sergeant Barnes was offered a chance to return to America-- there is technology there that is capable of removing the trigger words from his head, and it came from a reliable source. Seeing as I have full faith in the man in question, and his creations and morals, I thought James would appreciate the chance to remove the triggers and live the life he wanted without fear of hurting anyone.”

The Rogues all shot looks at each other-- they had all heard what had gone unspoken in the King’s words-- James had the right to choose the life he wanted without the influence of Steve Rogers. Honestly, they couldn’t blame the poor man-- between the brainwashing and the fact that Steve wanted a man that had been gone for 70 years, Barnes would have never had the chance to be who he wanted to be.

“What?!” Rogers shouted in shock, horror, and no small amount of anger. “You let him go back?! How could you let him go back, he’s not safe in America! If Stark gets his hands on Bucky, he’ll kill him! And he could be arrested if the police find him!”
Deep brown eyes became hard and steely as T’Challa replied, “Considering the person who offered to help James also acquired a full pardon for him, I believe your last argument is a moot point. Being a prisoner of war for seventy years tends to bring out the compassion in people.”

Steve was pacing by that point, a wild look in his eyes. “That won’t matter if Stark finds him! Stark doesn’t care about anyone other than himself, and he tried to kill Bucky before!”

An aggravated huff escaped Sam, and he stood with a flinty look in his eyes. “Gee, I wonder why Stark lashed out, Rogers. Could it be because a man he trusted for years knew the truth about the death of his parents and didn’t tell him? Could it be because that same man used his money and resources to actively search for the person who killed them and didn’t say anything about it? Could it be because he had to watch footage of his parents being murdered while the killer was standing less than ten feet away? Could it be because he was hurt and angry and feeling absolutely betrayed?”

Absolute silence met his words, one that was broken by a voice most of them hadn’t heard in months. Clint shifted his position next to his love and pinned Steve with the full force of his piercing golden brown eyes before coldly saying, “‘Sometimes my teammates don’t tell me things’.”

All the color rushed from Steve’s face at Clint’s words. Before he could think of anything to say, the archer pushed himself from the couch, standing straight and still looking the super soldier dead in the eye. “He tried to be friends with you. He knew how close you and Howard were, and even though Howard was a piece of shit to Tony, he never held that against you. But you? You despised him for not being your precious Howard, for not being an exact replica of his father. Whenever Tony said anything regarding his own childhood involving Howard that went against your view of him, you ripped into him about it and for ‘disrespecting the dead’. How long did you know Stark Senior, Rogers? Weeks, months, maybe a year or two.” He took two steps forward, eyes flashing with anger. “Tony grew up with that man, and I’m inclined to trust his view of the man far more than I am to trust yours. You act like the sun shone out of Howard’s ass, when that same man was outright physically abusive of his own kid. And despite the fact that his dad did that, despite the fact that it left him with all manner of emotional and mental scars…” Clint pulled himself up to full height, and he spoke with a finality in his tone that shocked the room, “Somehow, Tony Stark grew up to become a better man than you ever were.”

Complete and absolute silence met his words, everyone in the room staring at the brunette in various states of emotion. Natasha was staring at the archer with well concealed love and pride in her eyes, the tiniest smile quirking at her lips. Scott was outright grinning at the archer with awe in his eyes as he inwardly applauded him for giving Rogers such a sharp verbal backhand. Sam smirked, nodding at what Clint said in complete agreement with his assessment. Though it was hard to tell, the Dora Milaje were also watching them with appreciation in their eyes, their respect
for the man raising several notches. T’Challa was smiling with pride as well, knowing that the four in front of him had finally seen Tony Stark for the man he really was instead of the one his haters portrayed him as.

After several seconds of silence, Scott also stood and spoke. “You claim you respect Howard, that you think he’s a great man. Guess what, Rogers? It’s not very respectful to take the only child of that man, beat the hell out of him, then leave him to die.”

The noise that Steve made was barely human, but Natasha rose before he could say anything. “What would he have said to that, Rogers? How do you think he would have reacted to what you did to his son? Howard was cruel and abusive to Tony, but the fact is that Tony is his legacy, his heir and successor. If you had been there after they’d died, Howard would have wanted you to take care of him. And you damn near killed him.” She took a few deep breaths before she opened her eyes and pinned Rogers with a look. “If Howard were here now, Rogers, I doubt he’d have anything good to say to you. You two might have been friends, but Tony is his son.”

A growing look of anger had been crossing Roger’s face, but before he could open his mouth to say anything a soft *pop!* sounded above him that was immediately followed by something small and light bouncing off the top of his head. Steve fumbled with the item for a moment with a vicious curse before he paused, looking closer at what was clearly a rubber duck in his hand. A moment later, the rest realized why he was looking closer.

The duck had a mop of brown hair on its’ head, was wearing black leather armor, and had a metallic left wing with a red star painted on it.

In the silence that followed, Scott couldn’t help but whisper in awe, “The weight of the stones on that man…”

Steve’s head snapped up to lock eyes with T’Challa, who simply arched an eyebrow in reply. A look of incandescent fury crossed his face, but he only got a step towards the Monarch before he found himself with several weapons pointed in his direction, though where Natasha had pulled a knife from was a mystery for the ages.

Before he could get a single word out, T’Challa rose from his own seat with a cold look on his face. “You will not ever approach me in such a manner again.” He started, his voice firm and unyielding with an undercurrent of anger as he addressed the super soldier. “Indeed, Anthony Stark offered his technology to help rid James of the trigger words in his mind. He has come to the understanding that, while it was the sergeant’s hands that killed his parents, HYDRA was the one pulling the trigger. I have spoken to both of them over the course of James’ treatment, and I can say with utmost certainty that Barnes is looking and feeling better than he has since before falling into HYDRA’s hands, to begin with. His recovery is going remarkably well, the trigger words nearly all
but negated.” He crossed his arms, staring down his nose at the blond in a way that only a king could pull off. “It makes me wonder… how much of this could have been avoided—this civil war of yours— if you had simply told Anthony the truth from the very beginning?” He didn’t wait for the soldier to answer before gesturing for the Dora to escort him out, saying something to them in isiXhosa before following behind them, dipping his head to the other rogues in farewell.

The group watched them go in silence, and once they were alone again Sam turned to Clint, who was glowering at the door Steve had been led out of. “Hey, Clint?” The archer looked over at him, cocking an eyebrow. “That was fucking amazing.”

The three men in the group shared a laugh, and Natasha slid next to her partner and rested her head on his shoulder. Maybe everything would be okay in the end.

Chapter End Notes

One or two new terms in Dovahzul.

Monsedovahkiin - Daughter of the Dragonborn
Malgrohiik - Little wolf

So, yeah. This one was a damn feels-coaster. I hope I did the scene with the flashback justice. If not, please let me know in a kind manner.

In terms of Minowa having experienced the same thing... I have to get that backstory up sooner rather than later because guys... you have NO IDEA just how well she knows what it's like.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

A wayward thunder god shows up at the Compound finally, but what he has to say and what he reveals will rock everyone's preconceived notions of him. Apologies are tendered, bridges begin construction or rebuilding, and things are looking up. But some old men just don't know when to leave well enough alone.

(Laura is a freaking BADASS and takes no prisoners.)

((There's no place like Midgard, there's no place like Midgard!))

Chapter Notes

FINALLY, a moment you've all been waiting for!! Sorry it took so long to get this one out, Jen and I debated how many parts this one is being split into... but we figured it out! Here's the first, more coming soon! ENJOY!!

Ducky scenes are going to be put on hold until the end of this arc. It all happens within the same day, and it shouldn't take too long.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Even before the alarms started going off, every resident of the New Avengers Compound knew what the sudden rumble of thunder and accompanying sound of something making an impact on the ground meant. Seconds later, an alarm started sounding throughout the building, accompanied by FRIDAY announcing, “Attention residents, the ‘Blanket Fort’ Protocol is now in effect. Please make your way to your designated safe rooms or stations as quickly and calmly as possible before waiting for further instruction.”

Tony was striding down the hallway with Stephen and Minowa flanking him, his face grim as he pressed his palm to the core on his chest, allowing the newly updated nano-tech armor to sweep over his body without breaking stride. “Talk to me, FRI. Where’s Point Break right now?”

“He’s walking up to the front doors of the Compound, Boss.” The AI reported, sounding unusually serious. “Loki, Laura, Holly, and the younger children have already gone to the safe room. Peter, Rem, Slei, and Jör are on standby in the Spire with James watching over them. Wade isn’t due back at the Compound for another few days, but a warning was sent out to him as well.”

The crimson eyes of the Dragonborn were glowing as she nodded sharply. “Good. Make sure to tell
them that if the ‘Containment Bubble’ Protocol goes into effect, Sleipnir and Jörmungandr are to retreat to the safe room immediately."

“Two steps ahead of you, Dragon-Boss!”

The trio turned a corner and was immediately joined by Dorian and Zevrael who were wearing identical looks of stern determination. A few seconds later, the Boone trio joined as well, followed closely by Logan and Bruce, who quickly fell in step on either side of their lover. As they reached the lobby, Bridget came from the other direction with Emma, her staff slung across her shoulders with a dark look on her face. “We have thirty seconds before he gets here. What’s the plan?” The healer asked, wasting no time in the wake of the potential incoming threat.

Tony turned to the group as a whole. “Considering he’s coming in the front door and not knocking down walls, I want to know what he’s here for. Spread out, cover the lobby from different angles but don’t let yourselves be seen all at once. Stephen, I want you waiting to intercept him. Initial contact will be left to you and Minowa, and we’ll see where things progress from there.”

Everyone nodded and scattered to do as he asked. The genius positioned himself between where Stephen situated himself and where Minowa perched, shooting a smirk at the woman who was now watching with glowing eyes from one of the beams set into the ceiling. He waved a hand to cloak himself from detection from all but his friends and family, eyes lighting up blue for a moment. ‘FRIDAY, are the cameras broadcasting into the Spire and to Laura’s tablet?’

‘Crystal clear, Boss-man.’

The genius nodded sharply and the blue faded from his eyes in time to see the doors slide open, the blond thunder god striding through the door with a worried, almost pained expression on his face.

Thor got three steps through the door before stopping at the sight of Stephen standing there, arms crossed over his chest and Levi flared out dramatically behind him. It took him only a moment to recognize the man, and he dipped into a small bow. “Greetings, Sorcerer Supreme. I seek Anthony Stark, my shield-brother. I have only recently learned of events on Midgard that led to him being injured most grievously, and I wish to see for myself the truth of his recovery.”

The dark-haired man arched an eyebrow, even as Tony’s voice came over the coms saying ‘well fuck me sideways, never thought I’d see the day…’. “You only found out recently? Pray tell, what rock have you been hiding under that you missed those events?” Stephen asked incredulously.
A flinch escaped the blond and he replied, “I have been distracted by a great many things-- Odin sent me on a mission to Vanaheim, and when I returned I was given news of a distressing nature that kept me away. I had gone to see my Lady Jane not but a day ago, and she made me aware of the events of this… ‘civil war’, and the nature of the injuries Anthony received in the process.”

Blue-green eyes flashed in subtle warning as Stephen asked, “What is your opinion on Roger’s actions, thunder god?”

“It was a most dishonorable thing to do!” Thor immediately replied, eyes filled with anger. “To keep a secret of such magnitude from a comrade, then inflict injuries of such severity when he lashed out in his anger and grief… I do not blame Anthony for doing so-- I cannot imagine the torment he felt at being confronted with such a thing.” He began to pace slightly, agitation thrumming through him. “And as if that wasn’t enough, he left Anthony behind in conditions he could not hope to survive on his own, even if he had been uninjured! Rogers’ actions were abhorrent and unforgivable, and I have no mercy for a man who would commit such heinous acts.”

Stephen stared at the god silently, as if gauging the truth of his words. Finally, he tilted his head up, nodding at the figure who was still sitting in the rafters.

Seeing the motion, Minowa stood from her perch, jumping down with ease and landing almost completely silently. The thunder god turned to her as she straightened, eyes widening as he took in her appearance. “Rogers was not the only one to inflict pain on Zeymahi, Strunrah.” She said in a firm voice, pinning him with the full force of her gaze.

Understanding lit in Thor’s eyes, and he dropped his gaze and nodded. “Indeed… I must tender my apologies to Anthony as well. My actions towards him were… uncalled for, and most extreme. Please, I would speak to him and offer them myself.”

There was quiet for a moment, then Minowa moved so she was standing next to Stephen with about three meters of space between them. Before Thor could ask, a surge of darkness erupted between them, and after a moment it fell away to reveal Tony with his helmet having retreated to show his head. His arms were loosely crossed over his chest as he studied the blond Asgardian a few feet in front of him, the tiniest traces of orange glowing in his eyes. “You called for me?”

A huge sigh escaped the god, a look of profound relief crossing his face. “Anthony, I am glad to see you are well! When Lady Jane told me of what had transpired between Rogers and yourself… His actions bring him much dishonor.” He took a step forward and paused, seeming hesitant. “I have done you a great disservice, Anthony. Grabbing you in the way I did was unacceptable, and I humbly ask your forgiveness for my assault on your person.”
Tony dipped his head at Thor’s words. “I accept your apology, Thor. Yeah, what you did wasn’t cool. I was a squishy human and easily broken— you could have really hurt me. The fact that you recognize that you screwed up and are apologizing for it goes a long way.”

Thor nodded at that, a relieved smile on his face. “Thank you, my friend. Indeed, I have discovered that there have been countless mistakes I have committed, ones that I now work to rectify.”

“Is that why you’re back on Earth?” The genius asked, subtly fishing for answers. If the Thunderer was a threat to him or his own, he wouldn’t hesitate to remove him as a threat.

To their surprise, the god’s face twisted into an expression of breathtaking sadness, his voice catching for a moment as he spoke. “Oh Anthony, I have made a most grievous error…”

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“I want Asgard searched from top to bottom! Send soldiers to all corners of the Nine Realms, do whatever you must to bring them back!”

From where he was leaning on the wall outside the council chamber, Thor’s brow furrowed at the furious words his father was shouting. He had been coming to inform Odin of his return from Vanaheim when he’d heard the raised voices. Deciding to return later when the Allfather’s temper had cooled some, Thor slipped away and out to the streets of Asgard. The niggling curiosity over what his father was searching for soon drove him to the far end of the Rainbow Bridge, a small smile quirking at his lips upon seeing Heimdall standing guard. “Heimdall!”

The golden-armored man dipped his head in greeting to the blond, turning briefly to face him. “Welcome home, my Prince. Your mission went well, I hope.”

Thor nodded with a happy glint in his eyes. “Indeed it did, my friend, thank you.” His smile fell after a moment, a contemplative look replacing it. “Heimdall, I heard my father speaking in the council chambers. What is it that he seeks that he would send agents to all nine realms?”

The piercing eyes of the man closed for a moment before opening again, the golden orbs filled with sorrow. “He seeks Loki, my Prince.”

The blond froze in place, shock slamming through him at the words. “But Loki was slain on
Svartalfheim, why would my father seek him?"

“He was not dead, my Prince,” Heimdall replied in a solemn voice. “Odin had him brought back and imprisoned in a place where even my sight could not reach.”

A ‘thump’ echoed through the Bifrost as Thor’s back hit the wall, a feeling of stunned incomprehension flooding through him. “I don’t understand-- why would Father have hidden my brother away if he were alive??”

Heimdall was quiet for a moment as he waited for the Thunderer to compose himself. “It is not just Loki who has gone missing.” Thor looked up, confused, so the guardian continued. “Sleipnir has vanished as well, along with Fenrir from his own bonds. I have not been able to see Jörmungandr either.” He hesitated for a moment before speaking again. “Permission to speak freely, my Prince?”

Thor nodded, straightening again. “Always, my friend.”

A nod was given in the god’s direction before Heimdall spoke again, something grim and ominous coloring his tone. “My Prince, if Odin could hide this from his most loyal… I fear what else he may have hidden. What reason could he have had to do so in the first place?”

“I know not, Heimdall, but I will find out for myself.” Thor made to exit the Bifrost but was stopped by the Guardian calling out to him again.

“My Prince, I must urge caution in this matter.” The god turned back to him, and the golden-armored man continued. “The Allfather kept this from us, from everyone. He would not have done so if there was not something he wished to conceal.” His golden eyes were serious, as was his voice. “For your own safety, my Prince, he must not know that you are aware.”

The blue-eyed male studied him for a second, mind whirling. Finally, he nodded. “I’ll say nothing to him until I have found the evidence as to why he would keep such a thing from us.”

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A deep sigh escaped the prince as he meandered through the palace halls, brow furrowed in frustration and thought. So far he’d found nothing to explain his father’s actions, nor how Loki was
The thought caused Thor to pause suddenly as an idea hit him. He’d not been in his Mother’s chambers since her passing, unable to be in a space so saturated with her presence. Perhaps he would find some clue there. Taking a deep breath to center and brace himself, he quickened his pace towards the suite in question. He hesitated only a moment once he reached his door before steeling himself again and pushing them open. His mother would want him to find Loki and his children as much as he did, to find the truth of what was happening under his nose.

It took only a minute for him to realize there was a shelf on a nearby bookcase that had a leather-bound journal on it that hadn’t been there when his mother was alive. He quickly crossed to the shelves and gently pulled it towards him. He immediately recognized his father’s writing and settled in to see if it held the answers he sought.

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[Despite the circumstances surrounding his spawn’s conception, Sleipnir has grown powerful in magic, much to Loki’s delight. I had thought that he would have been against carrying the beast to term, seeing as it was the product of unwilling copulation. Had I know the spawn would have such strong magic in its’ veins, I would have never allowed Loki to carry to term. The beast would have been taken care of... one way or another.

Alas, the thing is here now, and something must be done with it. I have witnessed the little wretch pull from the magic of the Bifrost as if it were as simple as breathing, and it is little more than two summers of age! I will not allow this... monster to put my place on the throne of Asgard in jeopardy! But I cannot simply kill it... perhaps there is another solution.

(My plan was successful. Loki’s little urchin is no more, and I now have a fine steed that will carry me into battle. Norns can only hope it will be slain while doing so.)]

[Loki has brought another monster into the world by the frost giant Angirboða, whom he has named Jörmungandr. Again, the Norns have seen fit to curse me by gifting such a vile creature with strong magic. I had thought that the addition of another frost giant’s blood would weaken its’
potential. Had the spawn been weak in magic, I may have allowed Loki to keep it. But I will not allow a threat to my position here. This time, I will send it to a place far from here, bound in my own magic so that Loki may never find it. It is no small loss-- it is little more than a monster, after all.]

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[Once more, I have sent a mistake away from our home-- another beast born of Loki, Fenrir. I had believed the thing to be weak in magic for a time. As my assumption has been proven wrong, I have had the beast bound in chains created by the dwarves that cannot be broken by any known weapon or magic-- they are dubbed ‘Gleipnir’. However, Loki is able to visit it-- I find it enjoyable to watch him try and comfort his spawn, knowing he can do nothing to help it. He cannot even bring food to the beast-- the blade that pins his jaw to the ground will not allow for such. We cannot have the mongrel attempting to snap, after all.]

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[This will be the last time I will ever stand for this level of degradation by one of Loki’s little beasts! Hela was showing magic even when still in the womb, and I would not even entertain the idea of even allowing Loki to hold it for a moment after such. Oh, he begged and pleaded and agreed to whatever I desired if only to be allowed to keep it. Of course, I would have been a fool to pass on such an opportunity. When the little wretch was born, I announced the thing to be dead before casting it away into Helheim. I commanded Thor to hold Loki back, claiming he was acting out of grief at the stillbirth of his child.

Loki has vowed to bring Ragnarok upon Asgard for my actions, and he was punished severely for such a threat. I cannot allow such a thing to come to pass. As I write this, a platoon of Asgard’s finest march to put an end to the wench who bore Loki’s monsters. Soon the threat will be disposed of, and I can turn my attention to ruling my kingdom in peace again.]

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[Even after everything Loki has been through by my hand, it would seem he still has a soft spot for Thor. He risked his own life for my son, nearly dying in the process. Loki hates me, this I will not deny. I care very little for the consternation of one who has no means to act upon it. But this ever-present affection for Thor... I have tried to drive a wedge between them, going so far as to visit Fenrir and Hela in my son’s shape to instill true fear into them. Clearly, it has not been enough. Loki must be taken care of permanently now, though I am hesitant to outright kill him. He could have a use later on still. He simply needs to be broken, his spirit crushed. Perhaps things would progress faster if Loki believed Thor’s heart to be full of hatred towards him, despite everything. I believe I will go visit him tomorrow and see for myself how things are progressing.]
The book fell to the floor with a ‘thud’, Thor staggering backward with a hand over his mouth and blue eyes full of shock, horror, and absolute anguish. He felt bile rise up in his throat over the words he had read, the clear disdain, hatred, and disregard of his brother. Not once in the entries had Odin referred to Loki’s children by gender of any kind, choosing instead to speak of them as if they were little more than beasts. And Hela… Norns preserve him, he’d believed when the Allfather had told him of why Loki had been hysterical. He’d held the ebony-haired god back as the Allfather had thrown his daughter-- his living daughter-- into Helheim. He had actively participated in the damning of an innocent child, no matter how unknowingly it had been. Then to read that Odin had been taking his form to further torture the poor children...

Tears began to stream down the blond’s face as his knees collapsed underneath him, horrified realization surging within him. No wonder Loki hated him, had finally snapped in the way he did.

… No wonder he allowed himself to drop into the Void.

An anguished sob escaped the Thunderer, and he curled in on himself from the weight of the guilt and self-loathing that settled over his shoulders. He didn’t know how long he sat there with tears streaming down his face before he finally took several deep breaths to steady himself. He looked up at the book again, anger and determination lighting in his eyes. He quickly rose from his position and scooped the book up to carefully place it on the shelf again. He knew he had to leave before he was discovered, and report his findings to Heimdall. He cast one more look at the book on the shelf before striding from the room, an ominous roll of thunder echoing through Asgard as he closed the doors behind him with a ‘thud’ that sounded more like a death knell.

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“I am not often surprised by the things I See and learn,” Heimdall said softly, his voice grave and sorrowful. “But in this… I willingly admit my own shock.”

Thor nodded as he paced the length of the Bifrost, eyes wet with tears as he did so. “I cannot look at Odin the same after this, my friend. To know what he did to my brother, to his children…” He turned to look at the guardian with distress written on every inch of his face. “He has been using my face to terrorize children I myself have never laid eyes upon! I allowed him to throw Hela, an innocent, living infant into Helheim!”
Heimdall nodded at that, lips set in a firm line. “The King’s words paint a much different picture than how the rest of Asgard sees him... But there is perhaps still hope yet, my Prince.” Seeing that he had the blond’s attention, he explained, “I turned my eyes to Odin’s meeting while you were searching for answers, and have discovered facts that could aid us in locating your brother and his children. They all disappeared at roughly the same time, though there was no sign of a struggle of any kind. Sleipnir’s bit and bridle were found in his paddock, though the enchantments Odin had wove into them were completely destroyed. Gleipnir was destroyed as well, a large section of links simply disintegrated, several others reduced to naught but melted metal.” The Guardian paused for a moment to collect his thoughts before reporting the next part. “It is also worth mentioning that in Sleipnir’s paddock, the island where Fenrir was chained, and Jörmungandr’s lair, there were traces of magic the likes of which Odin has never encountered before. It has made him terribly angry, along with the missing status of Loki and his children.” He turned his eyes to the void again, gaze unfocusing for a moment. “Perhaps the owner of this magic is the one who has your brother. Whether their intentions are good or evil... I do not know. But there is hope, my Prince.”

The words gained him a thankful nod from the god, who stepped up onto the Bifrost. “And I will hold that hope close to my heart and begin the search for my brother and his children. Pray for my success, my friend.”

The golden-armored man nodded and activated the Bifrost, watching the rainbow light carry the prince away. A moment of silence passed before the man bowed his head, beseeching the Norns to guide the Thunderer on his quest... and that wherever Loki and his children were, they were safe, healthy, and happy.

At the moment... it was all he could do. It would have to be enough.

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The silence in the lobby of the Compound was deafening save for the sniffs from Thor as he tried to force back his already falling tears. Every person in the lobby was in various states of shock, horror, and rage at what had been revealed to them by the thunder god, the truth of his words validated by a nod from Logan.

Finally, a soft, horrified female voice spoke. “What kind of monster does that to someone-- to anyone?” Minowa stepped to one side away from Tony so Emma could take her place, an indescribable look of disgust on her face. “Odin’s actions make my stepfather look like a damn saint!”

“Was your dad dropped on his head as a baby?” The question came from Zevrael as he stepped forward as well, a grim-faced and silent Dorian at his side.
Thor shook his head, a look of supreme anger and sadness on his face. “I do not know, but with the knowledge, I have now… I cannot look upon Odin as my father-- not after this, not after knowing what he did to Loki and his children… not after knowing what I unknowingly allowed to happen.”

The sound of three nearly silent sets of footsteps heralded the reveal of the Boone trio. “You would willingly renounce your father?” Aria asked, blue-purple eyes shining as she searched the God for any sign of deception.

“Not an easy path to choose-- could lead to scorn, consternation… attack.” Ulysses continued, deep voice rumbling with challenge.

Thor nodded sharply and without hesitation. “Let them try-- I would sooner lay down my own life than allow anyone from Asgard to hurt him in any way ever again!”

A tense quiet filled the room for a moment before a soft pinging caught Tony’s attention. It took him a moment to realize someone was trying to get through to him from the safe room. He shot a look at the other still-hidden people to keep an eye on Thor before electric blue lit up in his eyes, and he pulled up a screen in his mind to look in on the others. “Everything alright?”

From the other side of the monitor, Loki sighed deeply as Laura gently squeezed his hand. “Thor has never been good at lying… In this, I feel he is telling nothing but the truth.” He took a deep breath before looking up at the screen and into the currently glowing blue eyes of the genius. “I want to speak with him.”

“And I’m coming with him,” Laura added, leveling a look at her partner when he tried to interject. “Uh-uh, no way in Hell am I letting you go up there alone, love. I have some words I want to say to his Holy Thunderer anyway.”

Loki stared at her for a moment, inwardly debating. Finally, he nodded, pulling her in for a brief kiss. “Swear to me you will be careful, min gudinne.”

The brunette smiled and kissed him back. “I promise, Loki. Don’t worry about me, no one will let anything happen to me.”

Tony nodded at that, a smirk on his face. “Thor tries anything, I’ll send Minowa after him-- see how he deals with a dragon like her.”
The threat caused the trickster to snort with amusement. “Fair warning, Anthony-- Thor enjoys grilled dragon steaks.”

Tony grinned at him. “It would be amusing to watch him TRY to get them from her.” He took a moment to think before nodding sharply. “I’ll signal to you when you can come in. I’m going to make Point Break’s position MORE than clear to him.” With that said, he pulled himself back to the present. He immediately turned his eyes to Thor, who was staring at him in shock. “Loki is willing to come and talk with you, him and his partner. But before that… You are going to listen to what I have to say first.”

A moment later, cold and despair swept through the lobby, and the God’s knees buckled under the weight of the deathly aura and the fathomless magical power that accompanied it. He looked up to see Tony with his arms crossed over his chest, eyes glowing burning orange and a grim look on his face. “If you lay a finger on him, on his partner, on his kids… If I get so much as a hunch that you might tweak even a hair on their heads…” The pressure increased for a moment, causing Thor to choke on his breath. “I swear, I will drop you into the void myself. Do I make myself absolutely clear?”

The god nodded rapidly, barely able to speak before the feeling suddenly retreated. He had no idea what power it was that Tony now seemed to be able to wield, but after having felt it for only a handful of seconds, the Thunderer decided it wasn’t one he ever wanted to cross. Staggering back to his feet, it suddenly occurred to him that whatever had happened to his shield-brother in Siberia could possibly be the reason for this sudden change in him. Glowing orange eyes glared at the blond for a moment before Tony turned to one side and slashed his hand through the air. A corridor immediately sprung into existence, and after a second or two it fell away to show Loki and Laura.

Loki first turned to the brunette with a small smile quirking his lips. “Don’t you think that was a bit much, Anthony?”

The genius snorted as he pressed himself against Stephen’s side, fixing Thor with an unrelenting stare even as the sorcerer wrapped an arm around him and Levi moved so he could settle over both of them. “Not a chance in your daughter’s realm, Rock of Ages.”

“I have to agree with Tony, love.” Laura turned to the blue-eyed god, who was looking between them with an expression of shock. “I have some words to say to you, mister!” To the shock of everyone present, the woman marched straight up to Thor and poked him in the chest. “We’ve already covered the points involving Odin and his current seat on a throne of lies, and touched on your behavior and actions, but answer me this-- where the hell were you when your friends were outright bullying him?” The god made to open his mouth, but the woman steamrolled over him, “I am not done speaking yet, buster! Your pals targeted, teased, and hurt Loki up and down the block,
six ways to Sunday, but you never stepped in to stop them! You enabled their targeting and hurting of someone you claimed to love! You’d better have a damn good reason for it too, because if you try to give me some half-assed excuse as to why you let this happen right under your nose, then you won’t be facing me …” She gave the God a malicious grin before continuing in an ominous voice, “You’ll be facing the Harbingers of Havoc.”

Thor’s expression immediately filled with sorrow, and he dipped his head silently before replying. “In truth, I have no excuse. I had thought their words to be in jest, all in good fun… It was not until my Lady Jane pointed it out to me and made me aware that I realized that their words were meant to be knives, used as a weapon to attack Loki.” For the first time since Loki had entered, blue eyes met green as Thor directed his words to Loki. “My ignorance has caused you pain in many ways, Loki… I am unsure how to even begin apologizing, or making reparations… but you deserved to hear it from me-- your children as well. I’m so sorry, Loki… for everything, for putting Odin’s word above yours, my friendships above our relationship… All of it, every slight I’ve committed against you. I will not ask for your forgiveness… Though I hope that one day I may earn it. That, and the right to once again call you ‘brother’.”

A quiet filled the lobby, everyone looking on with muscles tense to see what would happen next. One word from Loki, one hint that he was in distress, and every single one of them would leap to the aid of him and his family. Finally, Laura looked over at Loki and studied him. She moved over to the man, gently grabbing and squeezing his hand, getting a tremulous smile in return. “Loki?”

Loki took a deep breath before waving his hand, erecting a silencing ward. “I… I am unsure how to react to this, min gudinne.” He admitted to his love, eyes filled with a mix of so many emotions they were impossible to identify. “I care about Thor, it’s true… and I can tell that his apology is true and heartfelt. But there’s so much history, so much hurt…”

“You don’t have to forgive him immediately, love.” The brunette reassured him, raising her hands to stroke his cheekbones with her thumbs. “He hurt you, and you need a chance to organize your thoughts and emotions and decide where to go from here. No one is going to rush you on this.” The ebony haired god nodded, and they shared a kiss before Loki dropped the barrier. “We’ve heard your apology, Thor,” Laura said calmly, looking towards the blonde who hadn’t moved an inch, watching them with an odd expression. “Give us some time to think and organize our thoughts and emotions. This isn’t something that’s going to be fixed in a day.”

Thor nodded at that, a small smile quirkling at his lips. “I understand. Thank you for at least hearing me out.” He turned his eyes to Laura, who matched his gaze unwaveringly. “And thank you, my Lady… for being there for him. Your love for each other is more than clear, and I am thankful he has someone to support him.”

Laura blinked for a moment, as did Loki. Finally, a small smile quirked at her lips. “My name is Laura. And Loki and I support each other -- that’s how a relationship should be.” With that said,
she allowed Loki to teleport them away with a soft pop.

A deep sigh escaped Thor, the smile not leaving his face. After a moment, he opened his eyes and blinked at the number of people in the lobby that he hadn't noticed before. “Ah… hello?” He waved to them all, his smile turning sheepish.

Finally, a few chuckles were heard, and Tony stepped forward looking a bit more relaxed, tension gone from the corners of his eyes. “Come on, Point Break. Let’s take this to the common room.”

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‘Boss, you’ve got a message coming in.’

The sound of FRIDAY’s voice over his link pulled Tony’s attention away from the meet and greet that was currently happening in the room in front of him. He quickly activated his technopathy, eyes lighting up with the action. ‘What’s up, baby-girl?’

‘Sleipnir and Jörmungandr took Rem and Peter to hang out with Holly, James, and the kids in the media room, and they want to know if they can come and meet Thor.’

The genius was quiet for a moment, thinking deeply. ‘Alright, tell them to come up. If Thor tries anything, all but two of the New Avengers are present, and we won’t let anything happen to them.’

The AI chirped out a confirmation, and Tony pulled himself back to approach the blond god. “Thor, just want to let you know that Slei and Jör are on their way up.”

Blue eyes lit up in excitement and a small amount of trepidation. “Loki’s eldest and second-born? Do… do they wish to speak?” The whiskey-eyed man nodded, and Thor swallowed and looked around. “I… should I sit? Stand? I don’t want to intimidate them or make them uncomfortable, Norns know they must not have the best opinion of me--”

“You could start by taking a breath, Strunrah.” The rumbling chuckle from Minowa drew their attention to the couch where the Dragonborn sat between Logan and Bruce, with the scientist rubbing her feet and the mutant playing with her hair and horns. She had a calm smile on her face, clearly enjoying the attention of her men. “They are making an effort to initiate contact. Allow them to set the pace, and if they give you any sign that they are uncomfortable, allow them to
leave. These things will take time.”

The blond did as she commanded while nodding at her words. A few seconds later, the elevator dinged, the doors opening to admit the two godlings. The duo paused upon seeing him, and Thor did the same, eyes widening. After only a glance, the god could see similarities between the two young adults in front of him and Loki. Sleipnir had his cheekbones and hair, but Jörmungandr had his eye shape and nose. “Norns…” Thor murmured under his breath, studying the duo closely. “You both look so much like Loki…” He shook himself free from his musings and carefully stepped up to the duo, holding out his hand. “It’s… it’s good to meet you both.”

Sleipnir’s lips quirked into a smile, and he stepped forward to grip Thor’s arm in a typical warrior’s grip. “Well met, Thor.” He greeted him kindly, “I’m Sleipnir, and this is Jörmungandr.” The green-haired teen shook as well, sticking close to Sleipnir’s side.

Thor nodded with a smile of his own, amused and a little amazed that he was having to look up at the eldest. “It’s not often I meet anyone taller than me… and you don’t have Loki’s body structure either… Something you got from your… mother? Father?” He made a face and looked to the ebony-haired adult for guidance.

“We call him father, but for Slei, I suppose it would technically be ‘mother’, ” Jör answered with a grin growing on his face. “And yeah, I’m pretty sure he’s the tallest one here.”

“I’d would not surprise me. You have a very strong body, I see.” Thor shifted for a second before asking, “Do you have your father’s talent for magic?”

The duo seemed to relax a little bit, and Sleipnir nodded. “We both do. I tend to use it more, though… can perform some pretty incredible feats with it.”

The blond nodded at that, a grin crossing his face. “I don’t doubt it. Loki has always been able to do marvelous things with his magic… May I see what you can do?”

Slei and Jör looked at each other again before turning back to Thor, smiling brightly. “Yeah, we’d be cool with that.” The second born motioned for Thor to follow them as he yelled over his shoulder, “Who wants to see Slei’s new tricks??!”

“I volunteer as tribute!! You still have to show me how to do that chain prism thing!!”
“Wait for us, Tony!”

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The sound of footsteps moving towards him caused Peter to look up, and he smiled as Rem sat crossed-legged in front of him and handed him a warm drink. “How are the others?”

Rem took a sip of his coffee, casting a quick look behind him. “Alexia finally exhausted herself wrestling with Patris, and he’s helping feed Sunny while Aunt Holly takes care of Lila and Nate. Your cousins, Harley, Hannah, Cooper, and Lila are playing a game in the corner over there.”

The spiderling nodded, running his fingers gently and soothingly through Fenrir’s hair as he rested his head on the older teen’s lap. Hela was cuddled up to him on his other side, lightly dozing with a thumb in her mouth, an adorable snake plushie clutched close to her chest. “They curled up next to me and just dozed off. Thanks for bringing me a drink, I didn’t want to disturb them.”

“Don’t worry about it, Pete.” Rem reached over to rub the brunette’s knee with a smile. The younger smiled, blushing brilliantly as he squeezed the hand with his own.

They were pulled out of the moment by Fenrir and Hela both sitting up simultaneously, eyes wide and expressions panicked. “Do you feel that?” Fen gasped, pressing closer to Peter as he began to shake again.

The teens looked at each other with alarm before Rem moved to cuddle closer to them. “Easy, little ones, what’s going on?”

Hela shook her head rapidly, and the mutant flinched from the sudden surge of true fear that rocketed through his empathy. She looked up at both Rem and Peter, swallowed and simply whispered, “He found us.”

There was no time to react to the words before the world seemed to drop out from underneath the quartet, and Rem barely had time to try and call out for his Patris before they made an impact on a mirror-like surface and the hole above them closed. The mutant was on his feet in less than a second, Peter right behind him. “What the hell happened??” Rem barked, pulling Fen close to his side.
The brunette swallowed, easily sweeping Hela into his arms while muttering, “I don’t know, but I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore…”

“Who are you?!” All four turned to see a man with white hair and a full beard striding towards them, his one blue eye blazing with anger with the other covered by a gold eyepatch. He wore gold and silver armor that seemed to swish around his calves as he walked.

Rem blinked at the man before leaning over to whisper to Peter, “Since when does Santa enjoy LARP? I mean, the costume is on point, but is the eyepatch necessary?”

The question managed to get a snort of amusement out of Peter, even as he was eyeing the man with complete distrust. Whoever the man was, he was putting his spider senses on high alert. “Rem, I don’t like this guy. He’s sending up every red flag I’ve got.” He muttered under his breath only loud enough for the redhead to hear.

Red and black eyes narrowed at the figure, tensing at the waves of rage coming from him. “You’re not kidding. It’s like an IRL version of ‘The Night Santa Went Crazy’... And the armor...” He paused before shooting Hela and Fenrir an alarmed look before turning his attention back to Peter. “Pete, I think we might be in trouble.”

Before the teen could answer, the man stopped at the edge of the mirror-like surface, a snarl on his face. “The mirror was supposed to grab all of the little beasts! Yet I see only two monsters and two Midgardian children!” He shot a glare to one side. “Clearly, they were just as useless in death as they were in life.”

Rem followed his gaze and paled dramatically, quickly turning Peter and the kids away from the sight of three dead guards, their throats slit and blood pooling around them. “What the hell?! You want a real monster, look in the mirror, buddy!” He snapped, turning his red and black eyes on the man.

“Silence!” He roared, slamming the butt of the spear in his hand onto the ground. “How dare you speak that way to Odin Borrson, the Allfather, and King of Asgard!”

Fen and Hela whimpered in terror, and Peter quickly pulled the younger boy close to him while the youngest buried her face in his neck. He swallowed and looked back towards Odin, a single thought racing through his head.
‘We could really use some ruby slippers right about now!’

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter -- The New Avengers rush to save their wayward kids, and the quartet tries to stall for time so their backup can arrive!

New Avengers VS. Odin -- FIGHT!!

New term from Minowa!
Strunrah -- Storm God
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Rem decides to stall for time by doing what might be the most foolish thing in the entirety of the Nine Realms-- sassing the Allfather to Helheim and back. The New Avengers and company finally make it to Asgard, and chaos commences on a level that Loki could never hope to achieve. Rem is a badass, Sleipnir and Jörmungandr are badasses, and Peter is simultaneously a smol cinnamon bun and the ultimate badass. And a certain primordial truth and his master are finally ready to lay down the law on Odin.

(Rem has given James at least a dozen more grey hairs)

((Pop culture references abound in this chapter))

Chapter Notes

Finally, you all have the chapter you've been waiting for!! Who's excited?! I KNOW I AM!! Read on, my darling vassals!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Black and red eyes were locked unerringly on the god in front of Rem, even as his mind was moving at lightning speed. The teen knew of the man’s cruelty, what he’d been willing to do and sacrifice to obtain what he wanted. He had no doubt Odin wouldn’t hesitate to strike them all down, not just Hela and Fenrir. Even as fear was surging within him, he knew he had to keep the white-haired man’s attention on him. The longer he stalled him, the more chance there was for the adults to realize something was wrong and come for them. And as long as his attention was on the mutant, it wouldn’t be on Hela, Fenrir, and Peter. “You call yourself ‘Allfather’, but unless your name is Zevrael Pavus, Dorian Pavus, or James Barnes, you ain’t my father.” He scoffed, casually crossing his arms and quirking his hip out, relieved when he felt the bag of shurikens on his waist shift. Good, he had remembered to grab it before heading to the Spire.

“You Midgardians are all the same, completely disrespectful to your betters!” Odin growled back, eye flashing with fury. “I will teach you manners if you are so ignorant of them!”

Rem subtly motioned to Peter to start moving away with Hela and Fen as he snarked back, “I am respectful, old man, but only to those who have earned it. I can name a dozen people off the top of my head right now who deserve it, and you sure as hell aren’t on that list.”
The god was practically frothing at the mouth at the blatant show of defiance. “How dare you! I am the King of Asgard! I need not earn respect from anyone!”

The sentiment garnered a snort from Rem, who was slowly and subtly positioning his body to spring into motion at a moment’s notice. “Yes, your tiara is very pretty, but the rocks on your head have nothing to do with whether you deserve my respect. It does make me question your proclivities and preferred gender, though!” A grin suddenly formed on his face. “So, do your subjects address you as ‘my lord’ or ‘your ladyship’?”

“On, k chertu, sumasshedshi?!”

Tony snorted at the assassin’s words as everyone sprinted out onto the yard outside the Compound. “I’m not sure he’s crazy, Snowflake. Though I might have to rethink that, given that he’s pissing off a god currently…”

A huff of laughter escaped Logan as he sprinted next to Minowa, James, and Bruce. “He ain’t crazy, trust me. He’s trying to divert Odin’s attention to himself, buy them some time for us to get there.” He stopped with the rest of the group, tapping the small com in his ear. “Gotta admit though, I’m glad we can hear them. As long as they’re talkin’, they’re still alive.”

That got a nod from the rest of the group, and a sardonic smirk crossed the genius’ face. “I’m not sure HOW we can-- might have something to do with the runes carved into it… Something to check on later. After what happened with Mordo, well… there are some mistakes you only have to make once.”

There was a growl from in front of them, and Thor turned with a pinched, furious look on his face. “I cannot get through to Heimdall! My calls for the Bifrost have gone unanswered, and I do not know why…”

Tony paced for a second, going over several solutions in his head. He stopped when he saw the terrified look on Loki’s face, and he swept over to pull the man into a tight hug. “Deep breath, Lokes. We’re gonna figure out what’s going on, and we’ll get your kids back safe.” He pulled away once he felt the ebony-haired man nod. “Stephen, keep watch for a second. I’m going to get some answers.” He shot the others a quick grin. “The rest of you… don’t freak out.”
They were confused for a second, but it immediately shifted to stunned shock when Tony suddenly went boneless in Stephen’s arms, and an incorporeal form of him materialized to one side. The sorcerer blinked between his soulmate’s body and the grinning form to his side before choking, “Did you just straight up *project* your soul from your body?!”

“Yeah, it’s a new trick I learned. Just hang tight, I’ll be back.” A moment later, he seemed to flicker away.

Absolute silence reigned for a moment before a sudden laugh escaped Bruce, and as they turned to face him he gave a shaky smile and began to sing, “I’ve got no strings to hold me down, to make me laugh, or make me frown~!”

That startled a laugh out of several people, and Stephen took the time during the lull to observe everyone. Emma was standing to one side with her daughters huddled around her, and she was taking the chance to reassure and calm them. Holly and Laura were keeping an eye on the younger children, Nate and Sunny bundled up in their arms as they spoke and gave gentle commands. Harley was standing with them, a grim, dark look on his face that did nothing to hide the worry he was feeling. Dorian and Zevrael were pressed close to each other with fear in their eyes and expressions even as Aria held the mage’s hand, rubbing her thumb over the symbol on the bracelet around his wrist while doing the same with the elf’s ring. Craig and Ulysses had taken up defensive positions on the outside of the group, rifles out and armor engaged. Bridget checked through her portable kit even as she glanced over at Minowa, James, Logan, and Bruce. James was being squished between Logan and Bruce as they wordlessly provided support for the soldier. Minowa was standing in front of them, running a whetstone across her favorite dagger with an ominous ‘shk, shk’ sound. The absolute silence from the woman was worrisome, given how she only became such when she wasn’t sure of her control over her *Thu’um*. The fact that black had almost completely overtaken her sclera was more than telling of her current mental state. Sleipnir and Jörmungandr stood with Loki, the small family engaged in a brief prayer to the Norns for the safe return of their youngest members.

It was less than two minutes later that Tony suddenly gave a gasp as his soul returned to his body, and Stephen helped him sit up as the genius caught his breath. “Gotta figure out how to do that without my heart stopping…” He groaned, holding his head for a second before turning his attention back to them. “Heimdall said that Odin forbid him from opening the Bifrost for anyone, whether going in or out.”

“Then what can we do?” Thor asked, a fearful look in his own eyes. “I cannot allow Odin to harm the children anymore than he already has.”

Tony grinned at that as Stephen helped him stand finally. “Yeah, but you missed what *wasn’t* said. He said that Odin forbid *him* from opening the Bifrost. No one said anything about opening it from the other side.”
The group blinked at him in shock before the Thunderer nodded with a growing smile. “You are correct, Anthony-- The Bifrost could, indeed, be opened from this side. However, such a thing would require an enormous amount of magic…”

A sudden gasp of realization escaped Loki, and the trickster spun to Sleipnir. “Sleipnir, when you were two you managed to pull magic from the Rainbow Bridge-- It made Odin quite angry, and you were taken from me not long after.”

Realization lit in the young adult’s eyes, and he gave a hopeful smile. “I do not know if I could open the bridge from here… but I will do my best.”

Before he could do so, Tony held up his hand. “Before that, we need to decide who’s staying and who’s going. Stephen, Minowa, Loki, his kids, and myself are a given, as are Zev, Dorian, and James.”

Emma and the Cuckoos stepped forward immediately. “We’re coming with you, Antonio. Peter is my nephew, and I refuse to lose any of my family, blood or not.”

The girls nodded as well. “We will not allow Odin to take our new cousin away.”

After a moment of consideration, Bridget stepped up as well. “I should probably come too-- I don’t expect anyone to come out of this unscathed. It’d be best if you had a dedicated medic come along.”

“We’ll stay behind, Glitch.” Craig spoke solemnly, quickly joined by Aria and Ulysses. “We don’t want to leave the Compound unguarded, and we’re the best option to make sure nothing goes wrong while you’re away.”

Bruce nodded as well, smiling softly at Minowa. “I’ll stay as well. Much as I would love to make Odin pay for this shit, it wouldn’t feel right to just leave the Boones as the sole defence.”

Minowa nodded at his words and pulled him in to kiss him soundly for a moment before turning to Logan, her red irises glowing. “Stay here with the others, Grohiiki.” Seeing the mutant about to protest, she narrowed her eyes and pulled her inner alpha forward some. <Your daughter needs you here, my wolf. Stay, and trust us-- trust me -- to bring our pup home safely>
After a second or two Logan sighed and nodded before he whispered, “Bring him back safe, Min… and you better come back in one piece too.”

The Dragonborn’s eyes softened, and she quickly strode forward to pull him into a kiss as well. “Worry not, we will not allow any harm to ourselves or our pup.” The brunette nodded and allowed Bruce to press up against his side as Minowa strode over to the rest of the group, James falling into step behind her while strapping a mask over his face.

Tony nodded to the others standing to the side before turning to Sleipnir, who was watching him and waiting for his signal. “Alright, beam us up, Scotty!”

Sleipnir nodded and closed his eyes, even as the comment got a few chuckles around him. His brow furrowed in concentration, and after a moment he held his hands up and clapped them together once, a flash of iridescent light flashing from his fingertips. A moment later, a beam of similarly colored light crashed down around them, carrying them away within the next second.

‘Okay, maybe asking the mad god whether he prefers needlework lessons or etiquette lessons wasn’t the greatest idea!’

Rem grunted as he jumped out of the way of a beam of magic, vaulting off the wall to avoid the second. He couldn’t help but grin, though, as he reached into his pouch for a shuriken while also calling, “Well, forgive me for asking, my Lady! Given your use of magic, I couldn’t help but be confused-- isn’t it considered a woman’s tool?” The comment garnered a roar of fury from the man, and Rem had to flip to one side to avoid the next attack. He landed easily and sent a charged shuriken flying in the same motion, grinning as it hit the god and sent a powerful electric shock through him. “It does raise a good point, though-- If magic is a woman’s art, then Loki must be the most badass, powerful woman I know! What would that make you to him, then? Because I’m thinking you’re the Snow White to Loki’s Elsa!” He bounced backwards as the next bolt came towards him, and he laughed before he started flipping around to avoid attacks while singing, “Someday, your prince will come~!”

From the corner where he was covering Hela and Fenrir, Peter couldn’t help but snort out a laugh. He couldn’t tear his eyes from the redhead as he continually stayed in motion, bouncing and flipping around the room while avoiding the god’s attacks like it was the easiest thing in the world. Even though the mutant was clearly trying to keep Odin’s attention on him, he was obviously enjoying goading and ribbing the Allfather for all he was worth. The cocky grin on his face perfectly matched the gleeful sparkle in his eyes, and the brunette couldn’t help but swallow hard
as a vibrant blush crossed his face. ‘Holy crap, Rem’s usually so quiet and soft… but now…’ The mutant flipped backwards, his red hair flashing in the sunlight coming through one of the windows, a look of genuine enjoyment on his face coupled with fierce determination shining in his eyes. ‘Now he’s a freaking badass!’

Everything suddenly came to a stop as a flash of multicolored light momentarily lit up the room. Odin’s head swiveled to the side, incandescent rage crossing his face. “That traitor! I’ll see him dead for his betrayal!” His eyes whipped towards Rem, who was standing still with a grin on his face. A moment later, he roared in fury, forgoing magic entirely and instead rushing the teen with Gungnir in hand.

That just made the teen grin brighter, and he very easily flipped out of the way of the attack with a laugh. “Woops, looks like your prince is here, your grace! Should we make ourselves scarce? It would be improper for us to be present during such a passionate reunion, after all!”

Odin screamed with fury at the words and he charged the teen, who only vaulted off the doors behind him and to the side, making swooning noises and saying, ‘Oh, my prince, we shouldn’t!’ He turned and made to strike the teen, but was stopped by the doors next to him slamming open with an echoing ‘boom’, hitting him in the process. The force sent the Allfather careening back and crashing into his throne with a cry of shock and pain.

Immediately, Rem made his way over to Peter, Hela, and Fenrir, panting slightly as he allowed the younger teen to support him a little. “Well, I’d say I got my workout in for the day.” He looked up as someone strode in through the door, and a grin pulled at his face when he saw who it was. “Oh, they’re sending in the big guns first.”

Peter nodded as he took in the sight of Minowa striding forward, the Obsidian Dragoon Armor completely formed around her body and daggers in hand. After a moment, he realized something was amiss with the woman. “Uh, Rem? Why is she holding her daggers like that?”

The mutant’s eyes immediately snapped to the two blades, and alarm shot through him when he saw what Peter was talking about. The woman was holding the weapons in an icpick grip instead of her normal forward saber grip. Immediately, Rem turned his eyes to the others. “Because Minowa fights with a forward saber grip… but she’s not currently the one behind the wheel.”

Odin pulled himself from the ruin of what was left of his throne, infuriated at the sudden entrance of the armored figure. “How dare you intrude in this place! I’ll have your head for this arrogance—” He suddenly had to dive out of the way as a dagger was slashed through the air where he’d been standing not a second prior.
“Silence, fool.” Alduin’s voice rocked the room, sounding cold as ice and carrying the promise of death. “Điể mǎ kiể̄, ” He rumbled, looking back towards the younger ones huddled in the corner. “Are you unhurt?”

The words were met with nods before Rem stepped forward. “We’re okay, Alduin. I knew you guys would come for us, so I did my best to stall him so you could get here.”

Alduin grinned at the redhead, his smile sharp and full of teeth but ultimately amused. “Indeed, we are aware. Your coms have been broadcasting your words to us, even though you’ve not been able to hear ours in return.” He jerked his head towards the open door. “Ungrah-zeymahzine -- our shield brothers-- are on their way. Go, I will deal with this… folaaskin.”

Rem and Peter nodded, ushering the children in front of them and through the throne-room doors. Before they could follow, however, a shimmering wall of magic slammed down in front of them, cutting them off from the children who cried out in shock. Peter’s head snapped around at the infuriated cry from Odin, and he quickly turned back to the kids. “Go, find your dad! We’ll be okay, just go!”

Hela sobbed even as Fenrir nodded and his body rippled as he took his wolf form. He quickly grabbed Hela by the back of her shirt and threw her into the air so she landed on his back, and after one last look at Rem and Peter took off running down the hallway.

“No!” Odin screamed, gripping his spear in his hand and raising it over his head. “I’ll not have my power and position threatened by mere beasts!” He slammed the butt of the weapon onto the ground and a wave of magic pulsed through the room, passing through the walls. “Even if I cannot kill them by my own hand, I will still see them put down!”

An ominous rumble shook the palace, and a moment later Thor’s voice came over their coms. “Odin has activated one of Asgard’s defenses! It’s meant to summon automatons, armored constructs fueled by magic! They are powerful, but weak in several areas-- Where are Fenrir and Hela?”

“Headed your way!” Peter called back, even as he pressed himself into one corner with Rem. “We’re trapped in the throne room with Alduin and Odin-- Evil Santa threw up some kind of barrier before we could follow them!”

There was a moment of quiet before Dorian’s voice came over the coms. “Stay out of their way, both of you. Bridget, Stephen, James, and myself are enroute to your location, just don’t get in
Rem quickly reached out and took Peter’s hand, giving it a squeeze. “Okay, Papa! Please hurry!”

Faster, you have to move faster!

Claws dug into the tile as a large black wolf sprinted down the halls of the palace, a young girl clinging to his back as tightly as possible. His enormous amber eyes stayed focused on the path in front of him, following the pull of his father’s magic as he did so. He had to make a quick evasive maneuver as a construct stepped into his path, and a jolt of fear lanced through his heart as the automaton’s ax barely missed his tail as he rushed past. He felt Hela sobbing in fear as she gripped the fur around his neck.

The sudden appearance of another construct forced him into a quick stop, and he jumped to the side only to be flanked by another from the other side of the hall. A feral growl ripped from his throat as he backed against the wall, eyeing the metal men as they shambled forward with weapons raised. After a second, he shook himself so Hela slid down to stand on the floor, and he lowered himself to look her in the eye for a moment. <Hela, you must be brave for me! I will attack them, and you must escape while they're busy!>

Hela shook her head violently even as tears streamed down her face. “I’m not leaving you alone, big brother! I won’t let you!”

<Hela, you must!>

“I won’t!!” The defiant shout was accompanied by a pulse of magic from Hela that pushed the constructs back into the wall, one of them exploding from the sudden overload of magic. The others seemed to glitch for a second before rising again, advancing on them once more.

Before Fenrir could think to react, a bolt of lightning shot down the hall, arching between the automatons and causing them to explode as well. Fenrir quickly positioned himself in front of Hela so none of the shrapnel would hit her accidentally and looked to the side to see Thor running towards them. “Thank the Norns I arrived in time!” He stopped in front of them, tucking Mjolnir into his belt and dropping to one knee. “Your father and brothers are but a few steps behind me-- are you both alright?”
Hela clung tight to Fenrir, even as the wolf nodded in affirmation. Though the man in front of them wore the face of their once tormenter, he was now aware that it had been Odin wearing his son’s face. Despite his reservations, Fen quickly changed back to his human shape, his sister still clinging tightly to him. “Hela and I are okay… Thank you for saving us.” He said quietly before looking towards where they’d come from. “Peter and Rem got stuck with Odin and… Alduin, I think they called him? He was wearing Minowa’s armor…”

In an act of courage, Hela peeked out from behind where she was hiding behind Fen. “Please, you have to help them! Odin will kill them!”

Thor felt his heart break, and despite his desire to reach out and comfort the children he restrained. He was aware that Odin had used his visage to torment the children, and such an action would only frighten them more. “I swear I will do everything in my power to protect them both.” He said with a voice that held no falsities, expression one of grim determination.

Hela stared at him for a few seconds, tilting her head to one side to show the side of her face that had no flesh or muscle. After a moment, she nodded and whispered, “Okay.”

“Fenrir! Hela!”

The sound of their father’s voice caused both children to whip around. They cried out with joy and leapt towards the man, who immediately wrapped his arms around them. “Thank the Norns, you’re both alright!” He choked, pressing a kiss to both of their heads and holding them tightly against himself. After a moment, he looked up at Thor, who simply dipped his head with a small smile before running off down the hall towards the throne room.

After a few seconds, Fenrir spoke softly. “He saved our lives, Papa.”

Loki pulled back to look between his children, and Hela nodded at that. “The bad metal men had us cornered, and Fen told me to run, but I didn’t want to leave him alone… I accidentally blew one up, but Thor destroyed the others.”

As Sleipnir and Jörmungandr finally reached them and wrapped their younger siblings in a tight hug, the trickster looked up towards the hall that Thor had run down with a thoughtful look on his face. After a few seconds, He hugged all of his children tightly before rising gracefully to his feet. “Come, it’s time we put an end to Odin’s tyranny once and for all.”
Sif turned a corner and skidded to a stop as she came face to face with an elf with snow-white hair and piercing blue eyes which were locked on her form. He was dressed in black armor with icy blue and white designs like frost-covered leaves around the hems and up the sleeves. A pair of sharp black leather boots sat on his feet, snow-white pants tucked into them. His posture and expression remained completely calm even as she growled and drew her sword. “How dare you intrude upon Asgard’s hallowed halls! I will strike you down for--”

Zevrael didn’t give her a chance to continue before he held out his hands, a pair of icy daggers forming in them before lunging forward at lightning speeds, the female warrior barely having time to raise her blade to parry the blow. The look of murder in the icy depths of his orbs made her breath catch. “Asgard gave up their right to privacy when you took my son.” The silverette announced before pushing her back forcefully. His assault was fierce and precise, forcing her on the defense. Shock flashed in her eyes as she was finally backed into a corner with nowhere to go. Instead of going in for the kill, the elf banished the blade in his left hand and instead swung it upward, trapping the woman against the wall with a thick sheet of ice.

The brunette struggled for a moment and spat, “Magic is a tool for the weak, for those who fight with lies and deception!”

Instead of getting angry, Zevrael smirked and drawled, “Well I could simply kill you, but that’s not the kind of person I am.” He pulled off his armored jacked and slung it over his right arm, allowing his metal prosthetic to show. He seemed to pause for a moment before whipping back around to her in a blindingly fast movement, gripping her chin in the metal hand that was now blisteringly cold. “Of course, if you are so eager for death…” The woman shook her head as best she could, true fear lighting in her hazel eyes. “I didn’t think so. Now, be a good girl and stay put.” He pat her face condescendingly before spinning on his heel and casually striding away.

The female warrior watched him leave, swallowing hard. After a moment, she shifted and sighed. “Stay put he says... I don’t exactly HAVE another choice.”
Hogun simply huffed, easily keeping up with the blond member of the Warriors three. Their advance was abruptly halted when a woman with blond hair and pale blue eyes stepped around the corner in front of them, a stony look on her face. She wore pure white clothes of a revealing nature, small gemstones sewn into the bodice and other places on her body. She crossed her arms and arched an eyebrow challengingly at the trio.

Fandral gave the woman a once over, a charming grin on his face. “Well now, I’m not sure how a Midgardian got here, but you are a rather exquisite example! The norns have blessed you with great beauty, my lady!”

The cold look on Emma’s face went arctic in the course of a second. “I had planned on simply rendering you unconscious before going to find my nephew… but I do believe I’ve changed my mind. Girls, they’re all yours.”

The statement caused looks of confusion from the three before the sound of footsteps behind them made them turn. Their jaws dropped when five identical, if not slightly younger clones of the first woman stepped up to them, eyes glowing brightly with infuriated looks on their faces.

The quintet looked at each other for a moment, nodded, then turned back and calmly announced, “We are the Stepford Cuckoos. You kidnapped our cousin and acted improperly towards our Mother. Prepare to die.”

As the girls’ skin took on a diamond form and the warriors three cried out in shock and alarm, Emma couldn’t help but roll her eyes and mutter, “I knew it was a bad idea to let them watch that movie…”

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“ZUN HAAL VIIK!!”

Odin cried out in shock, anger, and alarm as Gungnir was forcefully ripped from his hands, flying across the room to bounce and slide towards where Rem and Peter were huddled against a side wall. Before he could move to retrieve it, Alduin had him on the defensive again, desperately slinging his magic to keep the Dovah from putting an end to him.
Peter immediately shot a line of web towards the spear, pulling it towards him a moment later. He lifted the weapon to observe it, twisting it around to admire it for a second. “Pretty nice LARP prop. Excellent craftsmanship. Do you know what would make it even better, though?” He shot Rem a grin, excitement shining in his eyes. The mutant shook his head, and the grin became almost maniacal. “If it were in several smaller pieces.”

The redhead gaped at him for a second before laughing and holding his hand out. “Well, technically LARP weapons shouldn’t be sharp. I guess it’s our duty to… dispose of such a dangerous cosplay piece!” Peter held the shaft of the spear towards him, and a moment after he wrapped a hand around it a bright magenta glow surrounded the metal.

Thinking for a moment, Peter suddenly turned back to the battle. “Hey your ladyship, I think you dropped something!!” As the Allfather turned towards them, he sent the spear flying towards him will all his strength as the glow brightened. Odin immediately reached out to grab the still-glowing weapon, and as Alduin vaulted backwards the brunette shouted, “Now, Rem!”

The crimson color in Rem’s eyes intensified, and the result was instantaneous as Gungnir exploded in the god’s hand, sending shrapnel and smoke into the air from the force of it. A deafening scream escaped from Odin, comprised of both pain and sheer rage-- in equal amounts.

Alduin looked over at them briefly with appreciation and pride in his eyes. “Pruzah grahmindol, Diimalkiire! A good strategy!”

The teens cheered and high-fived each other. Before they could continue though, a wild blast of magic slammed them both, sending them flying in opposite directions.

‘Oh shit, this is gonna hurt!’ Rem barely had time to think the words as he careened towards the far wall. He was flying way too fast to rebound off the surface like he normally would-- if he did try, it was likely every bone in his feet would be shattered by the force. He closed his eyes in preparation for impact, only to suddenly be jerked in the opposite direction by something colliding with him. He opened his eyes as he felt himself come to a stop and let out a shocked yet relieved breath when he saw who was holding him. “Jör! Am I glad to see you!”

The black and green eyes of the godling glanced down at him for a second, a relieved smile crossing his face. “I’m glad we got here in time! That could have gone so badly!” He hugged the teen close for a moment and pressed a tender kiss to Rem’s fiery red locks, prompting a rosy blush to cross his face.

Peter had attempted to use his web slingers only to find them unresponsive-- no doubt they had
been damaged by the magic in some way. ‘He could have at least shouted ‘YEET!’ before killing me like this!’ He thought vaguely as he rapidly approached the wall. Instead of hitting though, he found his propulsion slowed before a flash of red and black surrounded him, pulling him back to the ground. The teen gasped as he found himself wrapped tightly in the arms of Sleipnir, who looked elated to have him close. A vibrant blush crept up his neck to his ears as he gave the ebony haired godling a shy smile. “Good catch!” He squeaked out.

Sleipnir sighed softly, pressing a kiss to his forehead before replying, “I am only glad my brother and I arrived in time. I do not want to imagine what would have befallen you both had we gotten here too late.”

“Neither do I.” The voice of the resident thunder god caused them all to look up and towards the door where Thor was striding towards where Alduin was standing in front of Odin. Following immediately behind him were Loki who was holding Hela, and Fenrir walking at his side. Dorian and James entered and immediately sprinted towards where Jör was still crouched with Rem in his arms. The teen immediately wiggled free to throw himself into the arms of his Papa and Patris, who immediately began to look him over for any injuries while both praising him for his quick thinking and scolding him for so thoroughly pissing off a god. Tony and Stephen were a step behind him, and Peter slipped from Sleipnir’s grip to sprint over to embrace them. They instantly sandwiched the teen between them, Levi wrapping around all of them to complete the hug.

Thor took a moment to look over everyone from a distance before turning back to Odin while setting his hammer on the ground. “I do not understand what possessed you to kidnap Fenrir and Hela, along with two children of my shield brothers. However, it is clear to me that you have been allowed leniency for too long.”

“I was not aiming to take the Midgardian brats!” Odin shouted, practically foaming at the mouth.

A snort came from the side where Rem was approaching with James and Dorian at his back. “Did he end up getting rabies during his last LARP session? Do we need to get him a shot?”

Peter laughed at his words as he stood on Thor’s other side, the snickers of Jör and Sleí being heard as well as they stood behind him. “I dunno, Rem. For all we know, it could just be an effect of losing his sanity.”

That caused laughter around the room, especially when Loki added, “Not that he truly had any to begin with…”

“Insane or not, the point still stands that he took four children right from our home.” Alduin
ruled, even as a smirk quirked at his lips. “Then, he attacked two without provocation.” His black and burning ember eyes snapped to Odin as he made to protest. “That you are incapable of holding your temper in the face of mocking words does not absolve you— in fact, it brings into serious question your competency as a leader of any kind.”

The blond god nodded towards Alduin, even as he was eyeing the dovah warily. “I am inclined to agree with you. Had it not been for the intervention of Sleipnir and Jörmungandr, it is unlikely they would have survived your last attack.”

The Allfather’s eyes snapped behind Peter, where the godlings in question were standing with grins on their faces. Something lit in his eye, a spark of realization, and a moment later he screamed in madness and unbridled fury, holding his hand out to shoot them with a bolt of magic that formed in his hand.

Peter saw the attack about to happen and immediately reacted. His eyes snapped down to the handle on the ground next to him, and the teen didn’t even hesitate to wrap his hand around it and jump in front of the white-haired man. With a sharp cry, he swung the weapon as hard as he could, the resulting clang echoing through the room as Odin was flung backwards by the force of the hit. He crashed into the wall behind him, sliding down and groaning without trying to rise. Peter heaved in deep breaths, trying desperately to calm the surge of adrenaline rushing through his veins. No way was he letting Odin hurt Slei and Jör! Once he'd gotten his breathing under control again, he turned back to the group, only to pause at what he found. Almost everyone was wearing identical expressions of shock and awe, with the addition of pride on Stephen and Tony’s faces. A blush rushed up Peter’s neck and ears, and he grinned sheepishly. “Too much?”

The two godlings whose defense he’d come to stepped a little closer. “Little spider, you may want to take a look at the weapon you’re holding.” Slei finally said, brown eyes shining with excitement and glee.

The teen blinked and did as he asked. A shocked squeak escaped him as he held Mjolnir up, brown eyes wide with stunned realization. “Wait, what?!”

“Yeah, that’s my kid!!” Tony crowed, pumping a fist in the air with the biggest smile on his face. Stephen grinned as well, and Rem whooped with joy before bounding over to the teen, grabbing him in a hug. Sleipnir and Jörmungandr were quick to join in on the hug, squishing the duo between them. Peter continued to grip the hammer, a stunned blank look on his face as the other three hugged him for all he was worth.

Loki watched on with a somewhat knowing look on his face, something that Thor noticed after a moment or two. “You do not seem surprised by these developments, Loki.”
The ebony-haired god laughed and shook his head. “In truth, I’m not. Peter has always been a soul of remarkable light and love. If any here were worthy of wielding Mjolnir… It would be him.” Blue eyes studied the trickster before Thor nodded with a smile of his own.

“Woah, what party is going on in here?” The sound of another voice turned their attention to the door, where Zevrael was striding in while banishing his second icy dagger. He immediately opened his arms as Rem sprinted towards him with a shriek of ‘DAD!’, easily catching him and holding him close.

A few seconds after he entered, Emma swept through the doors with the Cuckoos behind her, and the Warriors Three suspended in a telekinetic field floating over their heads. “Alright, where is my nephew? Peter!”

The teen finally snapped out of his stupor and stepped around the group, a huge smile on his face. “Aunt Emma!!” He squealed, dropping the hammer and running over to hug the blond. She wrapped her arms around him, pressing his face against her shoulder as they were surrounded by the girls.

“*We’re glad you’re okay, little cousin!*” The quintet exclaimed, still maintaining perfect control over the telekinetic field as they snuggled their cousin.

Tony and Stephen also approached the group, and Emma broke away from the group so she could hug her brother. “Antonio, I’m happy to see everyone is okay.” She said softly, pulling away to give him a relieved smile.

The whiskey-eyed man sighed and nodded, a soft smile on his face as he leaned into Stephen’s embrace. “You and me both, *Sorellina*. But we still have a dilemma to solve.” He turned his gaze back to where Alduin-- no, wait, Minowa was back in control-- was snapping a set of bindings around the wrists of the unconscious Allfather. “He’s committed some pretty heinous crimes. I wouldn’t even know how to go about judging him.”

An instant after he said it, a feeling of cold and dread swept through the throne room, an ominous darkness falling over the city around the palace. A second later a swirling mass of black surged into existence just inside of the throne room doors, and from the mass stepped a figure in a black top hat with two feathers, his outfit pressed and crisp with his cane gripped tightly in his hand.

Tony inhaled sharply, standing straight up with eyes wide with shock. “Mortis?”
The physical embodiment of death smiled and nodded to Tony before stepping to one side, bowing respectfully as Hadrian stepped through as well. The man’s emerald eyes were blazing with fury, and the expression only marginally softened when Hela ran up to him. He scooped her up in his arms and murmured to her for a moment before turning to Minowa, who was approaching him with a bound Odin. The ebony-haired man glared at the Allfather and waved his hand, forcing the man back to the waking world as the white-haired man knelt in front of him. Odin made a noise of confusion and anger, but as he looked up at Hadrian, the man spoke. “I was content to allow my Reapers to deal with this situation once it became necessary, but the direct attack against not only my agents and their families, but one who’s domain falls under my protection… It would seem my hand has been well and truly forced.” The pressure increased exponentially, and Hadrian drew himself up to full height while casually balancing Hela on his hip. “Odin Borrson, I am Hadrian Black, the Master of Death. I am your judge, my chosen, your jury, and Mortis, your executioner.” His bright eyes flashed with power, glowing for a moment like the curse that had given him the faded scar on his forehead. “Pray to your Norns for mercy, for you will find none here.”

Chapter End Notes

- New Thu'um and phrases for Alduin
  - Diimalkiire - my little ones
  - Zun Haal Viik - Disarm shout. If it's a weapon, and your enemy is holding it, that thing is going to be sent careening in the opposite direction.
  - Pruzah grahmindol - Good strategy!

- Random Russian from James -- "Is he fucking crazy?!"

- I'll post more notes when I feel like I'm not gonna fall asleep at the keyboard.
Chapter Summary

Hadrian and Death hold Odin for all of his crimes, including a few that no one else knew about, and Tony takes all of Asgard to school. Thor gives his friends an ultimatum, and Sif should have thought twice before trying to talk down to the Master of Death. Tony, Stephen, and Peter have a chance to bond, and Thor knows who to call when political advice is needed.

(Tony's been a general on THAT battlefield for a long damn time.)

((Mortis takes very poorly to anyone badmouthing his master.))

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for being so patient with me!! This chapter just did NOT want to be written! But it is, and it comes with a duck scene at the end!! HOORAY!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was with a grim silence that Tony followed Hadrian down the hall, staying at his right while Mortis remained on his left. As they approached a set of doors leading to a balcony, the Master of Death turned to them all for a moment. “I would like to request everyone but those directly involved in this matter to wait here. That included you both, Peter and Remington.” Before the teens could argue, he held up his hand. “No, boys. I have to put my foot down on this matter. I’ll not have you exposed to what will happen shortly before you’re mentally prepared for it.”

The two quieted for a moment, looking between the ebony haired man and Odin, who was floating behind Tony. “He’s going to die, isn’t he?” Rem finally asked, reaching for and gripping Peter’s hand. The emerald-eyed man didn’t verbally reply, simply tilting his head in a way that confirmed his suspicions while not breaking eye contact. “… Okay.” The redhead agreed quietly as he pulled Peter close, guiding them to the wall and sitting.

They were quickly joined by Sleí, Jör, and Fen. “We will remain here as well.” The eldest aimed the words at Loki. “This matter… it involves Hela far more than it does us. We will keep an eye out with the others.”

Bridget moved over to finally check on their physical health as the other Reapers settled themselves around the hall, and soon only a select group of individuals stood with Mortis and Hadrian. Stephen started to move away, but the Master of Death quickly gave him a discreet shake
of his head before jerking it in Tony’s direction. The sorcerer nodded and quickly moved to pull Tony against him, a small smile quirking at his lips as the genius cuddled close.

Hadrian gave the duo a kind smile before turning his attention to Thor, who was looking towards Odin with a complicated expression. “Thunderer,” He said calmly, drawing the god’s attention to himself, “do you understand what’s about to happen, and why?”

The blond god nodded, swallowing around the lump in his throat. “I am aware. While I mourn the loss of my father as the good man I remember, I am not so ignorant as to believe he is innocent in any way. And after what he did to Loki and his children…” He briefly glanced over at the trickster before turning his blue eyes back with a resolute expression. “No. Odin must face the consequences of his actions.”

Loki took a moment to glance over in the Allfather’s direction, no longer phased by the look of unadulterated hatred shining in his eye aimed at both himself and his daughter, who was sitting on his hip. He’d tried to accuse the trickster of seducing Thor and using the influence to turn his son against him. That had gotten laughs out of everyone present, and Loki had taken a great deal of enjoyment from announcing to the old man that he had a mortal lover as Hadrian slapped a silencing spell on him. “Has everyone already gathered, Lord Hadrian?”

It was Mortis who answered the question, glee shining in his eyes. “They were gathering long before my Master and I stepped foot in this place. They wait to hear the Allfather speak and explain what’s been happening. I would say the entire population of the city is standing below the balcony at the moment.”

“Then let’s not keep them waiting.” Tony levitated Odin closer to them, and the group pushed open the doors and stepped out onto the balcony together.

The moment the Asgardian people saw their king bound and silenced and their crown prince standing beside Loki, a cry rose from them, several reaching for their weapons or magic. Tony remained completely unphased as he positioned the disgraced king in front of them, and an instant later a wave of the deathly aura washed over them all, the Master of Death himself as the source.

“Asgard,” Hadrian called out, his voice touching every soul of the city no matter how far they were from his location, “I stand here today before you because of crimes committed by your king, Odin Borrson. For centuries, he has kept his exploits to himself and caused a great deal of harm to those he was meant to be serving. However, he has made the mistake of not only attacking one who’s power falls under my domain, but my chosen agents, my family. As such, I am taking it into my own hands to put an end to this behavior once and for all.”

Less than a second later, a voice in the crowd called out, “And who are you to decide such?! Odin is our king, our Allfather! His word is law!”
“And what of Loki?!” Another shouted, causing several murmurs of agreement to crop up. “He threatened to bring Ragnarok upon us! He and his spawn will bring our destruction!”

Thor growled and reached for his hammer, but a crushing wave of cold, despair and fear crashed over the entirety of Asgard, dropping everyone below the balcony to their knees. He looked towards Hadrian and Mortis with shock, but both shook their heads before pointing towards Tony. The genius’ eyes were glowing a fierce orange, and his face was cold and angry as he stepped to the edge of the balcony to look down at the people below them. “Okay sheeple, listen up because I’m only going to waste my breath once. Do any of you know why Loki threatened such a thing? Wait, let me rephrase-- do you know the real reason he did it?”

“He’s a Frost Giant! He wants to kill us all!”

Tony glared in the person’s direction and his eyes flared brighter. “Congratulations, you failed that test. Back to primary school with you!” A moment later the man was dressed as a Catholic schoolboy, including a blazer, dress shirt, pressed pants, and a tie. As the others around him yelped in scandalized shock, the genius turned back to the others. “Does anyone ELSE have a guess?”

There was quiet before a woman called up in a hesitant voice, “He was distraught over the death of his child.”

“Ding ding ding! Partial credit, along with extra points for not calling his kid any kind of derogatory term!” He turned back to the rest of the crowd, subtly summoning a few precious gems into the leather pouch on her hip. “Pens and paper out for notes, everyone. Loki threatened to bring Ragnarok on you because Odin took his daughter, who had been born barely three hours prior, and banished her to Helheim.” He slammed his hands onto the banister in front of him, causing the stone to crack and web ominously. “Your wise and benevolent king took an infant, a living child, and damned her to a life of isolation and consternation. She was left there alone and helpless and had it not been for the kindness of some of the inhabitants, she would have died.” He turned for a moment and held his arms out for Hela. The young girl sniffed and quickly moved to him, allowing the Reaper to pick her up and hold her close. Tony pressed a comforting kiss to her black hair before turning back to the crowd, eyes full of anger and challenge. “Is this the visage of one who wants to bring chaos and destruction down on your heads?! Look at her, sheeple! This is a child who is terrified of being back in the place she was born because the last time she was here was when she was ripped from her family and condemned for simply existing!”

Absolute silence fell over the people below him as they looked at each other, several murmuring among themselves at the sight of the child in Tony’s arms, her appearance half dead, half alive.
Finally, one brave person called out hesitantly, “Why would Odin do such a thing? Did Loki have no say in these proceedings?”

Loki flinched hard at the words but was stopped from speaking when Thor took a deep breath and stepped forward to stand with Tony. “Loki was forced to watch as Odin committed this act of evil… and it was I who held him back as it happened.” The crowd shouted in confusion, alarm, and anger, but another burst of magic from Tony silenced them again. “Odin’s lies do not just extend to you, my friends. I was told that Loki was distraught over his daughter being stillborn, and would have to keep him from interfering with the Allfather’s disposal of the body. I did not think much on the order at the time, and so the fault for what happened to Hela is partially my own.”

“Prince Thor, is there proof of our king’s crimes against Loki and his children?”

Had the words been spoken in a condescending tone of voice, the question would have pissed Tony off. However, he could tell that the inquiry wasn’t from disbelief, but a need to make an educated decision. He subtly rewarded the man in the same way as he’d done before as he nodded. “There is, good for you for looking for proof before making an assumption.” He flicked his fingers through the air, a glowing white line following the path. He reached into his pocket dimension and pulled out the journal Thor had retrieved earlier, passing it back to the prince post-haste.

Thor nodded gratefully and flipped it open to the first entry about Sleipnir. He read each entry out loud for the people of Asgard to hear, unwilling to censor or justify any of Odin’s actions as he did so. By the time he’d reached the last entry, the crowd was crying out in anger and shock, several calls for justice and blood being heard among them.

A surge of satisfaction rose within Tony, and he gently tugged a lock of Hela’s hair to catch her attention. She looked up at him, and he quietly asked, “Do you want to go back to your brothers now?” She nodded and, after a moment of thought, gave a shy wave to the crowd. Almost immediately the crowd started cheering, and several started chanting the girl’s name. Soon the majority of the people were doing so, and she laughed and gave them one more wave before darting back inside to be with her brothers. Tony caught a glimpse of Slei scooping her onto his shoulders, Jör tickling the bottom of her foot as Fenrir handed her the plushie she’d been cuddling before being taken. The sight of the trio of men doting on their sister made the genius’ heart melt for a moment.

Finally, the crowd quieted down enough that another voice could be heard calling up, “What’s to be done with the King, my Prince?”

A gleeful expression suddenly lit upon Tony’s face, and he leaned over briefly to whisper something in Thor’s ear. The blue-eyed god nodded his agreement, and the duo turned to the still kneeling form of Odin. “I think we should hear what the king has to say for himself regarding this
Hadrian nodded at that and lowered the banister of the balcony so the crowd could see them clearly. “We will keep the questions short and concise to expedite the process. Otherwise, we’ll be here all night.” He waved Stephen forward, and the sorcerer quickly joined him. “If you have a truth spell, Stephen, now would be a good time to use it.” Nodding in agreement, the Sorcerer Supreme made several hand motions while muttering under his breath. A glow briefly surrounded Odin before fading away, and the dark-haired man nodded towards Hadrian again. “Excellent, thank you. Now, shall we get started?”

A deep sigh escaped Tony as he stared with disgust at the old man at his feet. “Guilty on all charges, every single one. The hell kind of person do you have to be to pull this kind of shit?” Odin snarled in anger, trying to lunge toward him in vain yet again. He’d admitted to all of his wrongdoings in front of his kingdom, laying everything bare under the influence of the truth spell. Asgard was calling for his blood by the end, horrified and angered by the cold callousness of their king’s treatment of children and a man he claimed was his son. The genius shook his head before turning back to Hadrian. “I don’t think we’re gonna get any more out of him. Shall we move on?”

“Not quite, Anthony,” Hadrian replied, and a hush fell over the crowd at the ominous tone of the Master of Death’s voice. “I have one more question I need to ask.” He pulled himself up to full height, emerald eyes glowing with power and promises of pain. “Odin Borrson,” he asked with a tone of finality, “Did you plan to kidnap Loki and his children for the sole intent and purpose of killing them and absorbing their magical power for yourself?”

A ringing silence filled the air, the world seemingly holding its’ breath. Tony looked between Hadrian and Odin, a surge of horror lancing through him at the accusation. A quick glance at Loki showed the ebony-haired man to be deathly pale with an expression of fear on his face.

Finally, Odin spoke. “I did.”

Screams of outrage instantly erupted from the crowd, and Thor had to lunge to help support Loki as his knees collapsed. The orange glow in Tony’s eyes that had lessened to almost nothing flooded back within a second, and it was only the feeling of Stephen’s arms wrapping around him that kept him from killing the man where he knelt.

As the shouts continued, Mortis stepped up for the first time since the proceedings had started. “Did you think we didn’t know, Borrson?” He growled, gripping the head of the cane in his hand.
“You directly threatened one whose domain falls under our control! You threatened the very balance of life and death itself!”

Hadrian’s eyes flashed with anger the likes of which Tony had never seen. “You have confessed to your crimes, and now we will pass judgment!” He held out his hand and a length of elder wood fell into it. In a motion too fast for anyone to follow, the stick suddenly grew into a full-length staff, and the ebony-haired man slammed the end on the ground, the ‘boom’ it seemed to produce causing everyone to fall silent. “Odin Borrson, you have been found guilty of crimes against the primordial Truths of the universe, and therefore your life is forfeit!” Hadrian turned to Mortis and nodded even as the crowd roared their approval.

Everyone on the balcony backed up as the physical manifestation of death held out his cane, which suddenly took the shape of a pitch black scythe a moment later. The weapon was swung at Odin, but the blade passed through the body, seemingly leaving him unharmed. Instead, the scythe ripped through Odin’s soul itself, shredding it in half. The ex-king’s body immediately went deadweight and collapsed to the side, garnering more cheers from the crowd.

Tony couldn’t help the smirk that crossed his face at the sight of the now lifeless body. He could very clearly feel the smug satisfaction echoing through his bond with Stephen, and he snuggled into the arms that wrapped around his waist. After a moment though his smile fell as he looked over at Thor. Even if the god understood and agreed with the actions that had been taken, he had just watched his father being executed. For a moment, he wondered if there’d been a better way-- for all the mistakes and atrocities Odin had committed, he’d been a decent father to Thor. Finding out about the true depth of the king’s depravity and what he’d been planning for Loki and his kids… it had to feel like a cold punch to the gut. The genius pulled himself from Stephen’s arms to slowly approach Thor.

The blond noticed him approach and gave him a shaky smile. “I am aware of the cruel and terrible things he has done and was planning to do… but I cannot help but mourn the good man I remember. Executing him was the right thing to do, in the end.” His blue eyes closed and he took a deep, trembling breath.

Loki looked between Tony and Thor for a moment before shuffling over, laying a pale hand on the man’s shoulder. The shocked look the thunderer gave him was rapidly replaced by a look of gratitude, and the blond hesitantly reached up to squeeze the trickster’s hand in thanks. Loki gave him his own small smile before gesturing to the balcony. “Your kingdom awaits. Best not keep them waiting.”

A small laugh escaped Thor as he nodded, striding towards the edge of the balcony to look upon the population of Asgard. Hadrian smiled and dipped his head before turning to them as well. “Asgard! Welcome your new king!”
Thor smiled and waved to the crowd as they all simultaneously bowed, and a movement to the side
drew his gaze to where Stephen and Tony were also giving him a shallow bow. The blonde gave
them a bright grin before turning back to the crowd to address them. Even though his heart still
hurt from the loss of Odin, he couldn't help but feel excited. Asgard had a bright future ahead of it,
and he was more than eager to lead the charge towards it.

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“You sure you don’t want someone with you, Point Break?”

The newly crowned king shook his head with a small smile. “I am certain, Anthony. I must prove
that I am capable of handling all manner of problems no matter who or where they stem from…
even if the decisions that lead to those problems fall on my friends.” The whiskey-eyed Reaper
nodded and pat his shoulder before stepping away, and Thor took a deep breath to center himself
before opening the door in front of him and stepping into the room. His eyes were immediately
drawn to the chained forms of Sif and the Warriors Three.

“Thor!” Sif immediately tried to stand but was halted by her bindings. She glowered for a second
before giving the king a smile. “Surely all of this is unnecessary. Release us, we can sit and discuss
this like we always have. You haven’t been acting yourself recently-- A good drink and a hunt will
do you good.”

The blonde crossed his arms and drew himself to full height. “I am afraid such a thing
is necessary--
- You, in particular, attacked the ally of one of my shield-brothers, a man he considers a brother in
all but blood.”

Sif’s eyes widened at the stern stance the Thunderer had taken. “How was I to know that? All I
knew was that he was a stranger standing in the halls of the palace!”

“Asgard has had many strangers wander her halls and streets!” Thor shot back, eyes flashing.
“What would have happened if he had been the ambassador of a foreign land or world? You failed
to even ask for identification, instead choosing to confront with clear intent to harm!”

To the side, Hogun nodded at the King’s words while Volstagg chimed in, “T’was a foolish thing
to do, Sif. Had it been as the King said, your life could have been forfeit, or even worse, you could
have brought war upon Asgard. Were he still alive, even Odin would not have looked upon your
actions favorably.”
Thor nodded with a pleased spark in his eye towards the duo before turning back to the group as a whole. “Do you all understand why Odin was executed?”

A snort escaped Fandral as he shifted in his own bonds. “Because of Loki. I fail to see what the problem is, though. He’s been nothing but a troublemaker and a trickster since he was a child—even you wanted nothing to do with him when we were children!”

Sif nodded in agreement at his assessment. “Odin took a firm hand with him because he had to, and he would have never done so if Loki didn’t need or deserve it. But with all the mischief he caused with his magic, it was only right that the Allfather discipline him.”

“But not to mention that Loki brought shame upon your family for having his first child out of wedlock!” Fandral picked up, a sneer on his face. “And considering that his children are going to bring about the end of Asgard, Odin was right to be rid of them! He did what he had to in an effort to protect us!”

An ominous rumble filled the air, and something in Thor’s eyes flashed dangerously. “Have care how you speak of Loki and his children. I will not have them spoken poorly of in my presence.” He took a breath to continue, but he paused when a Corridor sprung into existence a few feet from him, Hadrian stepping through with a black folder stamped with the symbol of the Hallows in silver in his hands. “Greetings, Lord Hadrian.” Thor greeted him, giving him a bow.

The ebony haired man smiled brightly at the blond, dips his own head to him. “Hello, Thunderer. I’m glad to see that you’re settling into your duties so well.”

Sif lurched in her chains, anger lighting in her eyes. “The gall to speak to him so casually! You will address our king with respect!”

Emerald green eyes turned in her direction, and the Master of Death arched an amused eyebrow. “So, this must be Fandral the Dashing, Hogun the Grim, and Volstagg as the Warriors Three, and the Lady Sif. Quite the little firebrand, aren’t you?”

Thor snapped his eyes to the brunette woman. “Indeed, and also one that needs to learn to hold her tongue.”

Sif completely missed the warning tone of the king’s voice, instead turning to him with an
incredulous expression. “You would let this foreigner speak to you with such familiarity?! You are the King of Asgard!”

A sudden chuckle echoed around them, and a moment later Mortis stepped into the room seemingly out of thin air. He gave Sif a deceptively benign grin as he sauntered over to her. “Oh, you silly, silly girl,” He simpered, patting her cheek with just a tiny bit more force than necessary. “Haven’t you learned not to assume or act above your station yet?”

The woman started to open her mouth to retort before freezing as she looked into his eyes. Though his posture was relaxed and his smile blithe, the multi-colored eyes that met hers were filled with promises of pain and endless torment. After a moment it hit her that the hand that had touched her had been as cold as a corpse. She looked over to Thor briefly as if she expected the blonde to come to her rescue. Instead, the monarch simply arched an unimpressed eyebrow at her-- no way in Helheim was he getting between Sif and death.

Seeing the shock and fear light in Sif’s eyes, Mortis’ grin turned a little feral. “Tisk tisk, you should know better than to correct those higher than you, my dear. Do you know who that man is?” His face took on an expression of dark glee. “Better yet-- do you know who I am? You would if you’d had the sense in your head to follow your friend’s advice. It speaks very poorly of you that not two minutes after being reprimanded for such an action, you turned around and did the exact same thing to another stranger. No request for introduction, no questions asked… instead, you attempted to make yourself look good by putting a stranger in his place.”

A huff escaped Volstagg, drawing their attention to him. “Have you taken leave of your senses, Sif? If your aim was to get yourself into more trouble, you’ve accomplished that rather spectacularly.”

“You missed all of the clues.” Hogan suddenly spoke up, eyes moving between Hadrian, Thor, Moris, and Sif. “Our king addressed him as Lord Hadrian and bowed to him as one of a lower station would. He did not demand that he be called by his title, and gave you a very clear warning by telling you to hold your tongue.” He glanced over at Mortis, who was watching him with intrigue. “Forgive us for interrupting.” He murmured, dipping his head as best he could while chained.

Fandral looked between all of them, eyes narrowed in scrutiny. “Still, Thor is our king, and even as visiting dignitaries they should show the proper respect. This is not their home, and they have no influence here.”

Both Mortis and Hadrian laughed at that, and Death straightened from where he’d been leaning over Sif to casually walk to the center of the room. “That would be correct were it not for the fact that our domain reaches even here.” He turned back to them, a sharp grin on his face as a wave of
cold and despair swept through the space, the pressure in the room raised to almost crushing proportions. The lights flickered ominously as the being announced dramatically, “Allow us to introduce ourselves. I am Mortis, the physical manifestation of Death. I am the open at the close, the beginning of the end, and the debt all life pays in the end.” He turned and swept into a respectful bow to Hadrian, who stepped forward with an amused smirk. “And this would be Hadrian Black, the Master of Death-- my master.”

A soft chuckle escaped the emerald-eyed man as he glanced over at Mortis. “Mortis, ease up a bit or you might suffocate them.” As the cold and pressure receded, he turned his attention back to Thor. “Are you alright? The deathly aura isn’t something the living should be subjected to for very long.”

Thor took a deep breath as he wiped the sudden cold sweat from his brow. “‘Tis most potent, but I will endure. Thank you for your concern, Lord Hadrian.” After another second he straightened his stance again, a smile on his face. “So, I imagine you and Lord Mortis have not come for a simple social call?”

The emerald-eyed male nodded sharply, holding up the black folder in his hand towards Thor. “You’re correct on that point. We’ve made a discovery regarding the prophecy of Ragnarok.”

Reaching for the folder with a quick thanks Thor flipped it open, blue eyes scanning over what he found within while resolutely ignoring the shifting and murmurs from the others in the room. Finally, he reached the end and a deep sigh escaped him. “After everything I have learned… I wish I were surprised by this.”

Hadrian’s eyes softened and he gently pat the god’s back. “At least it speaks of only Odin’s downfall and not the entirety of Asgard. The prophecy has been fulfilled, and your realm is in no danger from Ragnarok.”

“Lord Hadrian?” The duo looked over to Volstagg, who was looking between them and the folder. “Forgive me for the interruption, but what is it that the prediction truly spoke of?”

The Master of Death gave him a pleased smile as he took the folder back. “Ragnarok was never meant to be applied to Asgard as a whole-- it was aimed specifically at Odin and his rule. Your previous king warped and twisted it for his own benefit, targeting and ostracising Loki and his children for the sole intent of keeping himself on the throne as long as possible.” He tossed the file into the air and it disappeared in a shower of silver sparks.

Thor sighed with relief before turning back to the chained group. “Such information will make this
easier.” He crossed his arms and drew himself to full height. “We have been friends for many
centuries, but my relationship with Loki has suffered because of it-- through the words you all used
to attack him, and my ignorance of the harm they were doing. No longer, though-- If you all desire
to remain my friends and shield-brothers, you will have to make peace with the fact that I will no
longer allow him to be demeaned in such a way, nor will I tolerate any hatred towards his children.
If you cannot abide by such, then I am afraid this is where our paths part.” The blue eyes of the
god were hard and unyielding as he gazed at each one of them. “So, what say you?”

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“They’re right through here, Sir Anthony, Sir Stephen.”

Tony nodded with a smile at the guards who had led them to the room, preening under the looks of
awe and appreciation he was getting. “Thank you, gents. We’ll let you know if we need
something.” The duo bowed before moving to stand guard on either side of the double doors. The
genius wasted no time in pushing them open and striding through with his soulmate hot on his
heels.

Dorian looked up from where he was seated with Rem, smiling at the duo as the doors closed. “
Fratris, there you are. Would you like for me to quickly tell you where everyone is? I know you
want to go check on Peter.” Getting a nod, he continued, “Loki and his children are holed up in his
rooms down the hall a bit-- he seems rather leery of letting them out of his sight for the moment.
Lady Eir managed to waylay Bridget on our way here-- last I heard, they were engaged in a rather
intense discussion about healing magic. Poor Minowa got accosted by a group of enthusiastic
guards who wanted to see her using the Thu’um. If the room rumbles every once in a while, don’t
worry-- it’s just her. A few of the guards are showing your sister and nieces around the palace. And
you can clearly see where James, Zev, and I are.” He gestured around to the couch the four were
curled up on. “Peter is through the door to the left. He wanted to get cleaned up, and I think he got
distracted by the view out the bedroom window…”

That prompted a soft laugh out of Stephen. “Thank you, Dorian. We’ll go find him before we
accidentally wake up Rem.” He gave the redhead in question a soft smile. Tony nodded as well and
gave them a brief wave before making a beeline for the bedroom door they’d been directed to.

The whiskey-eyed man wasted no time in pushing the doors open, and it only took him a second to
find Peter. The teen looked towards them from his place on the small balcony as Stephen closed
the doors behind them. He crossed the room at lightning speed and threw himself into their arms
with a cry of “Dads!”

Tony felt his heart jump in his chest at the utterance, and he shared a stunned look with Stephen
over the top of the brown-eyed teen’s head. After a moment, they hugged him comfortably,
speaking soothingly to the teen as he began to shake uncontrollably. “Easy, Pete, you’re okay. Everyone’s okay, your safe. We’ve got you, buddy.”

The trio shuffled their way to the bed to sit, Levi moving to stretch over all of them like a blanket. Peter sobbed as he clung tightly to both men, overwhelmed by the events of the day. “I-I don’t know what happened, we were home one second, then we just dropped through the floor right in front of him, and Rem was distracting him and he was so badass but I was so scared and I thought Odin was gonna kill him and then kill us--!”

Stephen gently rubbed his back and pressed a kiss to his hair. “I know, Peter, and we’re so proud of you. You were so brave, and you protected Fenrir and Hela. You’re safe now, and so is everyone else.”

It was several minutes before the teen was able to pull himself together and stop crying. As he was sniffing and wiping his face with his sleeve Tony swallowed and hesitantly started, “Pete… you called us ‘dads’.”

Peter blinked before pulling away to look at the duo with a poleaxed expression. He opened and closed his mouth a few times before he finally swallowed and ducked his head shyly. “I… I know the papers are still being processed, but you both have been super supportive of me, and it kinda slipped out but I’ve been thinking about you guys as my dads for ages…”

Stephen and Tony shared a smile before turning back to the brunette. “Actually, Pete, I was coming to tell you before Point Break showed up-- I got the news this morning that the papers finally went through. So…” He grabbed Peter’s hand and gave it a squeeze. “If you want to call us that… At least it’s official now.” The smile on his face was simultaneously brilliant and nervous as Peter’s gaze snapped to him.

“It did? Really!” The duo nodded with grins and Peter whooped with joy before tackling the duo in another hug, one they didn’t hesitate to reciprocate with equal enthusiasm. Levi left their shoulders for a moment to do a strange little dance through the room, prompting a laugh out of all three. “Okay, so now you’re Iron Dad,” He pointed to Tony, who grinned and nodded at the title, “And you’re Doctor Dad!” He turned to Stephen, who laughed and ruffled his hair.

Tony pulled Peter into another tight hug. “So, does this mean Iron Dad can plan a party to celebrate?” The teen cheered, prompting a joyful laugh from the genius as they converged in another group hug.

They stayed like that for several minutes before a quiet knock on the bedroom door drew their
attention. Stephen stood to open the door, dipping his head at the guard on the other side. “Can we help you?”

The guard nodded, shooting a glance behind him at the group on the couch. “My apologies for the interruption, Sir Stephen.” He kept his voice low and quiet in an effort to not disturb anyone. “King Thor has asked to see you and Sir Anthony in his chambers as soon as possible.”

“Thank you for delivering his message. Please let him know we’ll be there soon.” The guard nodded and bowed low before slipping from the room. The sorcerer turned back to Tony and Peter with a small smile. “Peter, would you like to stay here and take a quick nap? I’m thinking we’ll be headed home after we’re done with Thor.”

Peter nodded and yawned, prompting a chuckle out of both men. They both gave him another hug and a kiss on the head before crawling into the bed, waving as Levi covered him like a blanket and his dads closed the doors.

The duo quickly left the suite, allowing a guard to lead them to where Thor was currently staying. Odin’s chambers still had to be cleaned out, so the newly-crowned king was content to remain in his own rooms for the time being. Upon knocking on the door and being told to enter, the guard pushed open the door and waved them in.

Tony dipped his head to the man with a smile before calling out to Thor as they walked in, “Hey Point Break, you asked to see us?”

“Thank you both for coming so quickly.” The blonde stood from his seat to greet them, as did the two men with him. “Anthony, Stephen, these are my friends and shield-brothers Hogun and Volstagg.” He waved the two Asgardians forward with a bright smile on his face. “Hogun, Volstagg, this is my Midgardian shield-brother Anthony Stark, and his ally Stephen Strange.”

The statement caused Tony and Stephen to suddenly snort with laughter, prompting confusion from the trio. “Sorry, Thor, I forgot that you didn’t know. Stephen and I aren’t allies…”

The sorcerer nodded at that, pulling Tony against him and wrapping an arm around him with a grin. “We’re soulmates.” He finished for the genius, the two shooting each other brief, loving grins.

Immediately, all three grinned brightly at them. “You are most blessed, then.” Hogun murmured, dipping his head with a bright spark in his eyes.
“Indeed! The Norns must favor you both to bestow such a bond!” Volstagg added with a sharp nod.

Thor approached them and clapped them both on the shoulder, a massive smile on his face. “I wish you both many long and joyful years together, then. I apologize for my earlier words, I was not aware of your relationship.” He guided them all back to the table he and his friends had been sitting before.

Tony chuckled and waved the apology away as they sat. “Don’t worry about it. How were you supposed to know if I didn’t say anything?” Two bottles were put down in front of him and Stephen, and he took a swig from his even as he quickly changed the contents to sparkling water without them knowing. “I take it you didn’t just call us here to gossip, though. After all…” He cast a quick glance around the room, brow furrowing, “I’m noticing two of your pals are missing.” The God’s face fell noticeably, as did Hogun and Volstagg’s. The brunette grimaced and reached over to pat Thor’s arm. “I take it things didn’t go too well with them?”

The blond shook his head with a sad look. “Unfortunately not. Sif and Fandral refused to accept Loki’s presence here, nor my unwillingness to overlook their hurtful actions towards him and his children. They both believe that Odin’s actions were justified, that he was doing what he had to in an effort to keep Loki in line.”

The genius nodded before turning his gaze to Hogun and Volstagg, who sat straight at the piercing quality of his gaze. “And what about you two? I’m aware that neither of you would be sitting here if you shared their opinion, but I consider Loki one of my friends, and I won’t let anyone cause a slide in his recovery, not after he’s come so far.”

The duo looked at each other for a moment before Hogun started speaking. “We both admit and acknowledge our wrongdoings in these matters. Loki cannot be the monster Odin claimed him to be if he has the loyalty and love of someone like Thor. I have apologized wholeheartedly to him, and would like to speak further with him without the poison of Odin’s hatred tainting our interactions.”

“I especially should have known better,” Volstagg admitted, drawing their attention to him. “I have children of my own, and had I found one of my children treating someone the way we treated Loki, I would have been most cross, and they would have been punished severely.” He sighed and rested his elbows on his knees. “I will not lie in this… it was easier to follow along with Sif and Fandral’s words and actions than to stand up for Loki. It does not absolve us of our actions, and I would like to make an effort to repair the damage that has been done between he and I.”

Orange-tinted whiskey-brown eyes studied them for a moment before Tony nodded and sat back
with a small smile on his lips. “You keep up that attitude, I think we’ll get along just fine.”

Thor nodded with a smile on his face, relieved that both groups were getting along. He cleared his throat after a moment to draw their attention. “Odin’s policies and prejudice have caused serious damage to our relationships with the other realms and the people living upon them. He has isolated Asgard, but now that I have taken the throne I would like to begin trying to either repair or initiate alliances throughout these places.” He turned his gaze to Tony with a hopeful look on his face. “Anthony, you have had a great deal of experience in these matters, and any insight you have to offer would be greatly appreciated.”

The genius nodded with a thoughtful look on his face for a moment. “I’d start by appointing an ambassador. They would act as an envoy to Asgard, and they could go in to negotiate a potential meeting between you and whatever leader you would be attempting to contact.”

Stephen took a sip of his own drink before continuing the thought. “It’s the first line of communication, and would be received a hell of a lot better than you and a full contingent of guards just marching up to the front gate.”

The Asgardians nodded at that, looking between each other with contemplative expressions. “Tis a politically sound idea, Thor.” Hogun mused, a faraway look on his face. “It would also show that Asgard is trying to move away from the prior actions of Odin. We would be knocking on the door with respect instead of attempting to bash in their gate by force.”

“I am in agreement with this plan, Anthony,” Thor announced with a smile. “Is there one you might recommend for such a role?”

Tony immediately nodded, a smirk on his face. “Actually, I was going to suggest Hogun.” The man shot him a startled look, and the genius chuckled at the motion. “I don’t know if you realize it, but you have a very calm presence. You’re a damn skilled warrior, I have no doubt about that, but you seem like the kind of guy to observe for a bit before jumping into a situation. Politics is a battlefield all of its own, and one I am more than familiar with. I feel like you would be the best choice for something like this.”

The blond of the group nodded at that before turning to Hogun. “What do you say, friend? Would you be willing to take up the role of Asgard’s ambassador?”

Hogun smiled and bowed his head. “I would be honored, my King.”
The quintet immediately toasted to the man and his new position before Tony stood and stretched. “Well, now that we have that sorted out…” Stephen stood as well and took the genius’ hand as they turned their attention to Thor. “We’ve got to head back, Thor. Odin took Fen, Hela, Rem, and Pete right out of the Compound, and we had to leave pretty quickly afterward. There are people at home who are still waiting for news.”

“Of course. I shall accompany you all to the Bifrost to see you all off.”

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Stephen couldn’t help the snort of laughter that escaped him, even as Tony was clinging to him, trying not to fall over from laughing so hard. “Well… I can’t say I didn’t expect this to happen.”

Standing next to them, Craig sighed and shook his head as he looked at the dog pile that had resulted from everyone trying to hug everyone simultaneously. “Couldn’t it have been done inside, though? The landscapers are going to kill them.”

A giggle escaped Aria, who was leaning against Ulysses as she fed Sunny. “They’re getting paid an obscene amount as it is. I don’t think they mind too much, babe.”

Tony finally managed to take a breath and straighten. “I’ll give them a nice bonus. Anything happen while we were away?”

“Negative,” Ulysses replied, eyeing the pile of bodies that was trying to separate with a mixture of exasperation and amusement. “No word from Wade yet, either-- should hear within the next day, maybe two.”

“Keep us posted,” Stephen said with a dip of his head. “For now, though… You know what I’m in the mood for, love?” He side-eyed Tony with an arched eyebrow.

The genius gave him a smile and sweetly replied, “A year-long nap and a vacation to the Bahamas?”

“Read my mind, baby.”
The sound of a music box playing stopped Natasha in her tracks, her hand hovering over the door handle to her and Clint’s room. After a few seconds of listening, her green eyes narrowed when she recognized the tune to ‘Swan Lake’. The handle was slowly turned, and the assassin took a second or two to slowly peek into the room and make sure there was no threat. She slipped into the room and peeked around the corner to where the music was coming from. She froze at what she saw, breath catching in her throat. A small stage was set up on the coffee table, a few basic rubber ducks sitting in front of it as if watching a show. On the stage was a single duck, spinning on its’ axis-- a ballerina duck with green eyes and fiery red hair. The assassin swallowed hard, slowly moving to kneel next to the table, eyes fixed on the duck spinning on the stage. After a moment, a tiny smile quirked at her lips.

She didn’t know how long she had been kneeling there when she heard the door open again, Clint calling her name. She turned towards him as he stepped into the room, and the archer paused at the little ducks he saw. “... Huh. Not as flashy as Scott and Sam’s pirates... But it suits you, Nat.” He suddenly pointed to the stage. “Hey, wait a second, isn’t that...?”

Natasha turned back to the stage to see the ballerina duck had been joined by another-- one with a mop of short brown hair, a black outfit with the SHIELD logo on the chest, and a small bow strapped to its’ back. The two were now spinning and circling each other in a basic dance, and the smile on Nat’s face grew as Clint joined her on the floor. For a few minutes, they watched the scene in a comfortable silence, content to simply relax in each other’s presence.

She was pulled out of her musing when her partner suddenly gave her a gentle nudge, rising to his feet. Nat blinked in shock when he backed up a step and gave her a theatrical bow, holding out his hand to her. “May I have this dance, my Lady?”

The question was met with a second of silence before the redhead laughed, allowing Clint to take her hand and pull her up and into an impromptu slow dance. She gave the ducks one more look and a smile before she allowed her love to take the lead and sweep her away.

Chapter End Notes

Wait, WHAT? No language notes in this one?! Nope, because Minowa took a backseat for this chapter. Yeah, she's been getting a LOT of screentime recently... don't worry! Jen and I are working to correct that! Not that we don't love the resident Dragonborn... but come on, our main characters need some love too!

Stay tuned for more!
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Minowa and her partners are called away by the 'in-laws', and Tony makes preparations for the eventuality of revealing the relationship between himself and Stephen. The X-Men question what they did to Tony for him to be making their lives so difficult and the answers provided by the SI press conference they watch have rather horrifying implications... for them, at least. Preparations for the Maria Stark Foundation Charity Gala lead to sweet moments between several people, but the Gala itself leads to plans being bumped up in terms of timeline.

(Levi is best accessory for more than one reason.)

((Nice things are rare in the Mojave-- Aria indulges whenever she gets the chance.))

Chapter Notes

I LIIIIIVE!! I'm so sorry this chapter took so long to get out!! I hope you all find this satisfactory, with rampant Tony/Stephen love and fluff! Also, possessive Stephen being possessive AF. Enjoy, my dear vassals!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stephen blinked in confusion at the sight he was greeted with upon stepping through his portal into the Compound. “Min… why is there a bird sitting on your shoulder??”

A small smirk quirked at the woman’s lips as she turned towards him, the pearlescent eyes of the shadowy bird turning to look at him as well. “It isn’t a normal bird, Stephen. It is a messenger of one of my aunts, Nocturnal. Her message is actually the reason Anthony and I are speaking.”

The genius nodded at that, moving to press himself against his soulmate. “Min has to leave for a few days. She’s been called back by her family, and they want her to bring James, Logan, and Bruce along as well.”

“Don’t forget Alexia, Zeymahi.” The Dragonborn added in with a nod. “They are curious about my partners. I cannot blame them for it…” For a second her face fell, and the shadowy raven on her shoulder reached over to preen her ebony locks. She smiled gratefully at the bird and gently rubbed its’ chest feathers. “I have been a Reaper for the Dinokthur for many years, have been to countless worlds and met many wonderful people… but for the first time since being Claimed, I have taken partners. For my family, it is cause for celebration.”
A soft, sharp inhale cause their attention to be drawn to the doorway where Min’s partners were standing, staring at her in shock. “You haven’t had a relationship in over a million years??” Bruce finally managed to ask, his voice soft and almost hesitant.

The woman sighed and dropped her gaze to the floor. “You must understand… for many years after being Claimed, I was doing nothing but recovering from what I had experienced. Even afterwards, I found peace in the family the Reapers gave me. I had… considered, on some missions, engaging in such things… but I could not bring myself to do so. Perhaps out of wariness, perhaps it never felt like the right time.” After a moment, she raised her eyes to Tony, a soft look in them and a small smile on her face. “Or perhaps I simply needed to open up in a different way first.”

Something flashed across their empathic bond, and a soft, wounded noise escaped Tony as the realization hit him. “Me? Are you saying that you acting as my center helped you heal?”

Minowa nodded, the smile on her face widening a bit. “I believe so. You are very special when it comes to love, Zeymahi -- you love truly and deeply, give of yourself completely when you do. Whether you know it or not, the fathomless depth of that capacity for love has touched us all.”

The genius pulled away from Stephen to reach for the Dragonborn and pull her into a tight hug, one she immediately reciprocated with just as much force. The raven fluttered to perch on the sorcerer’s shoulder as they hugged, prompting an arched eyebrow from the man. “A messenger, hm?” He thought for a moment before a smile quirked at his lips. “Would you take a message back to your master for me?” The raven blinked and nodded. “Tell them, you should be proud of Minowa. She is an amazing teammate, and an even better friend.” The bird gave a small squawk and bobbed its’ head.

Finally, Tony and Min broke apart, and the genius quickly wiped the tears from his face. “Alright, you guys should get going. Wouldn’t want to keep your family waiting.”

The ebony-haired woman smiled knowingly at him and dipped her head in a nod. “Indeed. We will return in a few days, Zeymahi.” The raven flew over and resettled on her shoulder, and she turned to join her men. She scooped Alexia into her arms and nodded with a smile. “Do we have everything we need?”

James nodded at that, patting the bag on his hip. “Yeah, just need to say goodbyes first.” He suddenly straightened, head tilted as he listened for something. “Speaking of…”
A moment later, a red blur shot into the room, and it was only the assassin’s quick reflexes that kept himself from being knocked on his back from the force of the flying hug he was hit with. Rem buried his face in the brunette’s chest as he exclaimed, “I’m so glad I found you before you left! I wanted to say goodbye and to be careful, but I know you’ll be okay because you have Aunt Min and Uncle Bruce and Uncle Logan with you, but I still wanted to see you off--!”

“Rem!” James laughed as he hugged the teen tightly. “Take a deep breath, Moy Svet! I wouldn’t have left without saying goodbye to you!”

A large hand reached to gently ruffle the fiery red locks, and Rem looked up to see Logan smiling at him. “We would’ve made sure you knew, pup. Don’t you worry about us, we’ll be back in a few days.”

Bruce nodded as Rem hugged the mutant tightly as well. “We won’t let anything happen to us, okay Rem? It’s just meeting the inlaws.”

A sudden laugh escaped Minowa, drawing their attention. “I may have forgotten to mention… I have always referred to myself as one of the ‘children of Akatosh’, correct?” Getting nods all around, she continued, “Well… I do not think you all realize how literal that is.”

There was silence for a few seconds before the realization hit and James choked, “Wait a second! Isn’t Akatosh one of your gods?!”

Minowa nodded with a grin. “Our chief Divine, actually. You will be primarily speaking with him, my grandfather, and my grandmother.”

“Oh, terrific. So this has gone from meeting the inlaws to a shovel talk from literal gods.” Logan groaned softly, closing his eyes in exasperation.

The Dragonborn buried her nose in Alexia’s hair as she tried not to laugh. “I have sixteen aunts and uncles who will also be there... Who could also be considered gods.” She pressed a kiss to Rem’s head and wished him well before spinning on her heel and walking away. “Come, let’s not dally any longer.”

“Alright, but we gotta talk about that bombshell when we get home!”
Tony laughed at Logan’s departing words as the group left before turning his attention to Rem, who was waving goodbye to the group. “So, what’s on your agenda for the day, Rem?”

The redhead grinned brightly at them. “Papa and Dad are talking about taking me on a trip soon! I’ve only ever been on one vacation before, when we went to meet Ms. Emma. They won’t tell me the details yet, though-- they want to keep it a secret for now.” He thought for a moment before speaking again. “Slei, Jör, Peter, Harley, and I are going to hang out in the media room-- Wade keeps beating us at Mario Kart, so we’re gonna practice together.”

Stephen nodded at that with a small smile on his face. “Make sure Slei uses the magic resistant controller. I’m curious if the runic array we used will keep it from shorting out when he gets over-enthusiastic and his magic leaks.”

“Got it, Uncle Steph!” The teen waved as he left the room as well, leaving Tony and Stephen alone in the common room.

After a few seconds, Tony sighed and turned to face Stephen, giving him a tender kiss that lasted a few seconds before pulling away. “Are you ready for the interview?” He asked softly, his whiskey-brown eyes searching his soulmate’s face.

The sorcerer nodded with a loving smile on his face. “As I’ll ever be. Are you ready for the press conference and the gala tonight?”

A soft groan escaped Tony as he snuggled into Stephen’s robes, a chuckle escaping him as Levi joined in on the hug as well. “Yes to the second, kind of to the first. I’ll be fine… I’m just worried about Emma. After everything that happened with her students, and the girls, and her own trauma…” After a moment, he shook his head. “But the fact that she had to suffer through those things alone because of keeping it a secret…” The genius struggled for a second, thinking. “FRIDAY,” He finally called up to the ceiling, “could you tell Emma to join us in the common room, please?”

“Sure thing, Boss-man!”

Stephen guided them to a love seat and sat with Tony practically on his lap. They spoke softly to each other as they waited for Emma to arrive, and a few minutes later the soft click of her heels against the tile drew their attention to the door that the woman was stepping through. “Hey, Emma, are you ready for--?” The words died in Tony’s throat as he registered the noticeable change in his sister’s features.
The woman gave him a soft smile as she toyed with one end of her now longer, brunette locks. “I only dyed my hair to better hide from Winston. If I’m coming out as your sister, I refuse to hide any part of myself from the world, Antonio.”

Tony swallowed hard as he stood from his seat and approached her. “I was gonna ask if you’re okay with this… but you answered the question before I got a chance.”

Emma laughed as she pulled the genius into a tight hug. “As if there were any doubt, Mio Fratello.” She held Tony for a few seconds before pulling away to look at Stephen over his shoulder. “What about you both? Your interview is in an hour or so, is it not?”

The sorcerer nodded as he approached them both, wrapping his arm around Tony’s waist. “Indeed. We’ll be going to do that while everyone else is preparing for tonight’s gala. I would assume you’ll be preparing for the press conference, then just change once it’s over?”

“That’s right. Bridget will help me with my hair and everything.”

A knowing grin quirked at Tony’s lips. “I assume that’s where you got the hair growth potion from?” Emma nodded with a bright smile. “Thought so. Did you talk to the girls about what they want to do?”

The brunette woman nodded, her features softening. “Yes. The Cuckoos and I believe it would be best if their presence remains unknown for now. Most of the decision comes from the fact that we don’t know who got my eggs or if they have any more, and the fact that I was under the ‘care’ of the X-Men when it happened. I’ll not put my daughters in danger as long as they have control over the Institute.”

The genius nodded with an understanding expression. He couldn’t fault his sister for being protective of her daughters, no matter how they had come into being. If Summers, Grey, and the school caught wind of the existence of the girls, he had no doubt they would raise several kinds of hell. The thought caused orange to briefly flicker in Tony’s eyes before he pushed it away. No way was he going to let the X-Men get their hands on his nieces.

“That could be a problem, Mio Fratello.” The sound of Emma’s voice brought his attention back, blinking at the small smile on her lips. “The way your eyes light up with power-- do you have a way to hide it?”
Stephen nodded in confirmation. “I’ll cast a glamour over his eyes-- If he did it himself, there’s the chance that a moment of intense emotion could cause it to fail.”

“Not that there’s a big chance of that happening anyway.” Tony groused quietly. “I’ve dealt with Christine before, I can handle anything the press throws at us, and I can schmooze with the upper class even when almost blackout drunk. What are the chances of something making me lash out?”

Emma and Stephen stared at him for a moment with completely deadpan expressions. Finally, Emma spoke again. “You gave your address out to a terrorist in December of 2013 on live TV.”

“And before that, you pissed off practically the entirety of Congress by flaunting yourself and Iron Man and saying they couldn’t have/afford you... ALSO on live TV.” Stephen added in.

The brunette woman nodded at Stephen. “And then let’s not forget the most memorable one of them all…”

They both turned to look at the genius and said simultaneously, “‘I am Iron Man’.”

For a few seconds Tony floundered, mouth opening and closing as he made several vague hand gestures before stopping and starting over with a different one. Finally, he threw his hands in the air with an exasperated noise. “Alright, you made your point. Never let it be said I can’t admit when I’m wrong.” He sniffed indignantly before pausing, shooting the duo a smirk of his own. “I’m not sure how to feel about the fact that you two are so in synch about ganging up on me.”

The duo in question shot each other a look before Emma returned the genius’ smug expression. “Well, I would suggest you get used to it, Antonio.” She replied in a blithe tone. “After all... I would imagine that, eventually, Stephen will be my brother-in-law.”

Both men choked and looked at each other with wide eyes. After a few seconds of silence Tony sighed and ran a hand down his face. “God help me if I put both of you in a room with Rhodey-- I’ll never get any work done.”

“But you’ll have better sleep and healthy eating habits!”

“I’ll sleep when I’m dead!”
“Tony, you’re a Reaper! You can’t die!”

“Even better!”

“Anthony Edward Stark, you get back here right now!”

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“Dr. Stark, Dr. Strange, thank you both for coming today!”

Tony smiled brightly at the blond woman across from where he and Stephen were seated. “It’s a pleasure to be here, Christine. You’re looking as lovely as ever.”

Christine Everhart laughed and waved his words away. “You are ever the flatterer, Dr. Stark. Now, I must say I’m curious as to why you want to have this interview now, but release it later.”

The genius sat back in his seat with a nod. “This interview would draw attention away from the press release later tonight, not to mention the Maria Stark Foundation Gala tonight. Both of those things deserve to be recognized for their own importance, especially since the second is a charity function.”

“The money raised tonight will be going towards helping the people and communities that were directly affected by the events this past June, during the media-dubbed ‘Civil War.’” Stephen picked up smoothly. “There was an extensive amount of damage to property as well as casualties. It’s our hope that what we raise tonight will help provide further aid alongside what the Stark Relief Foundation has already donated.”

The blond reporter nodded at that, crossing her legs in an easy, relaxed manner as she spoke up. “And it’s been going a long way to help rebuild the lives that were affected in areas like Bucharest. You’ve been paying, nearly single-handedly, for the reconstruction efforts when you weren’t even there. It begs the question why the current king of Wakanda hasn’t offered aid as well, seeing as some of the blame would fall on him.” She waved dismissively a moment later. “Speculation and questions for another day, though. So, tell me gentlemen-- what is it that you want the world to know?”
Stephen and Tony shot each other smiles before shifting a bit closer to each other. “Well, we wanted to get this interview done before the mainstream media or, God forbid, the paparazzi, gets ahold of any evidence. But to put it plainly… Back in early 2014, you made a quip betting that I would remain a bachelor for the rest of my life.”

Green eyes sparkled with laughter as the blond nodded. “Indeed, I did. There were those who claimed you were simply unfaithful, but I felt there was more going on than that.”

That got a nod and a smile out of Tony. “There was a lot going on during that time, yes. I had just had the arc reactor removed, as you’re aware, and the events surrounding the Mandarin had put a strain on our relationship. Pepper and I decided to remain friends, and I’m thankful to have such a fierce, dedicated woman as my CEO. However, that little quip is the reason Stephen and I are sitting in front of you today.”

The sorcerer nodded at that and held his hand out to the genius. As Tony allowed him to grasp his own, he turned his bright blue-green eyes to the reporter, who had a look of realization on her face, and grinned brightly. “Turns out all it took to pin him down was a little bit of magic.” He announced with pride, aiming a wink at Tony that was returned with an air kiss.

“Wait, so you both are together?” Getting a nod from both men, Christine couldn’t help the bubble of laughter that escaped her. “Well, I must admit I wasn’t expecting this when I agreed to this interview! Dr. Stark, I wasn’t aware you were bisexual to begin with.”

Tony shifted so he was gently pressed against Stephen’s side. “You can blame that on my father, Howard. He couldn’t fathom the idea of his son liking other guys, so he… shall we say, heavily discouraged that side of me. After the events of Bucharest and Siberia, I did a lot of thinking about who I was and what I wanted out of my life, and I decided I didn’t want to let the views and beliefs of a man two decades dead continue to dictate where I find my happiness.”

The blond reporter nodded at that, looking between the two men. “What of yourself, Dr. Strange?”

“I grew up in a small town in Nebraska with a relatively conservative family. They never knew I was gay, though I suppose the constant rumors surrounding myself and a work colleague helped with that. We were never really close, and at the time I was more focused on my career as a neurosurgeon. They passed away in 2010, and I don’t have any other close family.” Stephen replied easily, gently squeezing Tony’s hand.

“So it seems like you and Dr. Stark are very similar in regards to family. Is that something that drew you both together?”
Stephen nodded with a bright smile. “Part of it, yes. There are much deeper, more complex facets to our relationship though. Tony and I have an understanding about things that would be hard to find in most other people.”

Christine tilted her head curiously to one side. “What sorts of things?”

The duo looked at each other again before Tony spoke. “Chronic pain, for one. We both understand and can empathize with the struggle of having to cope with pain, how debilitating and demoralizing it can be. Me from the arc reactor, and Stephen from, well…” He held up their still joined hands, Stephen’s still covered by a set of gloves.

The sorcerer shot him a loving smile and kissed the side of his head. “We both have mingled with the rich and affluent of society, and can play the political and societal game with the best of them. We also have very similar personalities—quick-witted, sarcastic, confident. But I also know that Tony is someone who loves with his whole heart, and would go to great lengths to make his precious people comfortable and happy.”

“Stop, you’re making me blush!”

The byplay between the two men pulled a delighted laugh out of Christine. Only five minutes in, and she could already tell that the duo shared something with each other that had been lacking in the relationship between Pepper and Tony. There was a sparkle in Tony’s eyes that was reflected in Stephen’s, a kind of soul-deep love for each other that was nearly breathtaking. “What about your recently adopted son, Dr. Stark? How are you all getting along?”

Tony’s smile broke into a proud grin. “Pete’s been doing great, and he’s been adjusting well to life living with a bunch of superheroes. He’s such a smart kid, too, love having him around the workshop.”

“As for myself, Peter and I have a great relationship.” Stephen assured her. “He’s naturally very curious, and he constantly has this sense of light and joy around him that makes it really difficult to be any kind of unhappy around him. I’m honored that he considers me his dad as much as he does Tony.”

“He calls you both dad?”

That prompted nods and chuckles from the men. “Yeah, apparently I’m Iron Dad and he’s Doctor
Dad.” Tony replied with a spark of love and joy in his eyes.

Christine cooed at that, clapping her hands. “That’s adorable! I’m glad you all have found such a great family in each other!”

Stephen snorted and rolled his eyes good naturedly. “Not just us. Everyone in the Compound loves that kid. He makes it hard not to love him.”

“That’s so sweet!” The reporter barely held back a squeal before composing herself again. “I know that your teammates Zevrael and Dorian Pavus just adopted a son of their own, Remington, I believe. How does Peter get along with him?”

The duo groaned good naturedly and grinned at each other. “Honestly? They’re inseparable. They love hanging out together and doing all the things that teen boys do-- video games, music, social media-- although Rem’s been getting Pete into card games and Pete’s been introducing Rem to legos. Speed building contests have become a regular thing in the Compound…” Tony trailed off with a good natured shake of his head.

The blond smiled at the duo indulgently. “I would imagine they go through sets very quickly then. Are the Pavus husbands a factor to your coming forward to publicly state your relationship at this point?”

“Only in that it would be fun to do double dates with them!” Stephen replied with a smirk.

“Honestly, I personally feel like it’s not that big a deal. If I’d been a woman, me being with Tony wouldn’t be that big a thing. The media would move on to the next thing within a day or two. The only reason this is going to get so much attention is because we’re both men, and I simply fail to see why that should matter.”

The genius nodded, leaning his head on Stephen’s shoulder. “I’m happier and healthier and in a better place mentally than I think I’ve ever been in my entire life. Stephen… he’s been so good to me, and for me. What we have with each other…” He smiled up at the sorcerer, a barely-noticeable sheen of tears in his eyes. “Being with Stephen feels like coming home.”

Stephen swallowed hard at that, blinking back the tears that suddenly formed in the wake of Tony’s words. Before he can speak though, Christine actually squealed quietly. “You two are adorable! I must admit my curiosity, though-- you two seem to share such a strong love for each other. How did you both first meet? Was this thing between you kind of a ‘love at first sight’ thing, or something different?”
The duo looked at each other again, as if they were having a conversation with their facial expressions alone. Finally, the duo turned back to her and Stephen spoke first. “I had gone to Tony for a consultation regarding a threat I’d detected. During our meeting, Tony and I discovered that we are, in fact, soulmates.” He held up his hand to stall any remarks from Christine. “As ridiculous as it sounds, they are a very real thing. Only about 1% of the population of Earth has a soulmate, and even then the chances of running across each other are… infinitesimally slim. For us to have met and been recognized as such… it’s a blessing the likes of which I could have never even dreamed of.”

“I was pretty sceptical at first, honestly.” Tony admitted with an almost shy smile. “Had to have it confirmed by another sorcerer before I believed it. Now, though? I wouldn’t trade this for anything. We were meant to be here and together, even though I don’t know what favor I cashed in during a past life to get someone as incredible as Stephen.”

Christine nodded at that, a contemplative look on her face. “Suddenly, the fact that you wouldn’t settle down makes a lot more sense.” The comment prompted laughter out of both men as they nodded in agreement. “I would imagine this news coming out could garner some hatred from people. What do you have to say to those who might look down on your relationship?”

Tony looked straight into the camera, arching an unimpressed eyebrow. “What do I have to say to them? Go away. I am currently sitting on top of the largest tech empire in the world, one that is rapidly expanding, and have friends and family around me who are willing to support and stand by me. Call me bent or twisted or whatever other hatred your minds can conjure up— I have more productive things to do with my time than listen to any negativity you might spew.”

His boyfriend nodded sharply at that, looking into the camera as well. “Love, by nature, cannot be wrong. You all can scream and shout and cry all you want about how wrong our relationship is, but at the end of the day, the hatred you feel towards us will never be enough to overpower the love I have for this man in my arms.”

Christine clapped in approval, a massive grin on her face. “Well, I think that’s the perfect place to end this interview. Gentlemen, it was a pleasure having you here today, and I wish you both the best in the future!”

Tony and Stephen both stood and shook the woman’s hand. “Thank you for having us, Ms. Everhart.” The genius gave her a charming smile, though it was as real as all the others he’d given her during the last hour.

The blond motioned to cut the cameras and turned back once the camera man gave her a thumbs
up. “Off the record here, guys, I’m really happy for you both. You’ve suffered so much, and it makes me really happy to see you so in love with each other.”

Whiskey-brown eyes softened and Tony reached forward to shake the woman’s hand again. “Thank you, Christine. We’ll let you know when to release the footage, alright?”

“You got it, Tony. So, what exactly is today’s press conference about, anyway…?”

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The sound of a door being slammed prompted Bobby to look up from his phone, and he winced at the thunderous expression on Warren’s face. “Not good news, I take it?”

The man began pacing with a growl of frustration. “Ever since Worthington Industries was blacklisted by SI, our stocks have plummeted and companies are abandoning ship because they don’t want to risk their relationship with Stark! We can’t even compete with SI because of the new aviation tech they’re putting out and the fact that they’re offering the arc reactor tech as an affordable source of clean energy! We are losing money hand over fist, and if something doesn’t change soon, we’ll have to start laying people off!” He stopped and crossed his arms, tapping his fingers in an agitated movement. “There’s something about all of this, though... The odds of SI coming out in direct competition against us, the fact that they quoted a difference in ‘fundamental values’ as a reason behind the blacklisting, all of that so soon after what happened here…” The blond’s eyes narrowed in contemplation. “It may not have started off as such… but Stark made this personal.”

The door opened again, and both Bobby and Warren turned to see Jean and Scott enter the room. “Warren, you’re back.” Jean smiled gently at the man, dipping her head towards him. “How did your meeting go?”

“Like hell.” Warren grunted, running a hand down his face. “We’re pretty deep in the red, and our prospects aren’t good if something doesn’t change.”

Scott huffed in annoyance as he sat. “That’s not good, Warren. We just got issued a subpoena to explain the Professor’s absence, and it’s likely his accounts will be frozen within the next day or so. With both that and how poorly WI is doing…”

“Why did Stark take things this far, though?” Bobby finally asked, looking between them all. “I
mean, he wouldn’t have used me lashing out against him, would he?”

Warren shook his head at that. “Nah. It would probably have more to do with the way we were talking about Remy and the comments towards Logan’s past love interests.” He shot an apologetic look towards Jean and Scott before continuing. “The fact that you guys were so dismissive of him and... Norddahl I think is her name, probably didn’t win us brownie points either. They’re two out of the three leaders of the New Avengers, and you kind of brushed them off.” He sat back with a grimace on his face. “But that still wouldn’t make sense anyway. Stark has dealt with that kind of thing before, and he’s never responded with this level of retribution. We’re still missing something, and I have no idea what it is.”

An annoyed huff escaped Bobby before something on the TV caught his attention. “Hey guys, isn’t that Pepper Potts and Dorian Pavus?”

The group turned as a whole towards the screen where a live broadcast was being shown of an SI press release. Someone quickly reached for the remote to turn the volume up, and they were just in time to see Tony walk on stage and step up to the podium with a calm expression on his face. “Good afternoon, everyone.” He began, dipping his hand and waving to the crowd of reporters and cameras. “Thank you all for coming today. I know for many of you this was very last minute, so I’ll keep this short and to the point. Several years ago, my father Howard had an affair with another woman, one that resulted in an illegitimate child. I have known about and had a sibling bond with them since I was about five years old, but the knowledge of our familial relationship has been kept between us and a handful of other people for our safety. Recently, we made the decision that those precautions were no longer needed. So, without further ado...” He turned and held his hand out, and a familiar woman stepped gracefully out on stage. She smiled at him and allowed Tony to pull her next to him as he turned back to the podium. “I would like to introduce my half sister, Emma Stark.”

The reporters broke into shouts and questions, but the X-Men sat in complete and utter silence. The quiet persisted even through the question and answer session, and it was only when Tony and Emma were leaving the stage arm in arm with Pepper and Dorian trailing behind them that Warren finally broke the silence.

“Well, shit.”

There was a bark of laughter before a new voice quipped, “Honestly, you all brought this on yourselves.” They turned to see Hank McCoy leaning in the doorway, gold eyes hard as he glared at them all. “After the way you treated Remy, along with anyone who defended him, or just outright enabling the behavior... To me, that would be enough.” He straightened, gesturing towards the TV. “But now? Knowing the relationship between Emma and Tony? Now it makes a whole lot more sense. She was supposed to be protected here, and still someone managed to get to her and... well, I don’t think ‘violate’ is too strong a word for what was done to her.” He turned his
piercing gaze to Scott and Jean specifically. “Then, instead of doing anything about it, you both chose to outright ignore the fact that it happened. Interesting how history repeats itself-- you acted the exact same way after what Warren and Rogue did.”

Warren shot to his feet, a look of outrage on his face. “Now wait just a damn second--”

“Shut the hell up, Warren.” Hank barked in fury, eyes flashing dangerously. “No matter how you try to spin it, what you both did was nothing less than murder. And you both,” He aimed the next words at Scott and Jean again, “are too busy treating this school like your own private kingdom to care about the fact that someone who was supposed to be part of this team was killed by someone who is still a part of your team! He wasn’t even a part of it-- you sure as hell didn’t make him feel welcome! Same goes for Logan, too! It’s no wonder he went to Canada so often with how you all barely tolerated his presence! Somewhere inside of you, you know what would happen if you told Logan what really happened to Remy. You didn’t have the guts to tell him the truth and face the consequences.” He crossed his arms with a sneer on his face. “God help you all when Ororo finds out. Storm wasn’t always there for him but she was busy with being the leader of her own team. And when she learns what you did to Remy, to the man who saved her life and protected her until she regained her memories? She won’t hesitate to leave and she’ll take her whole team with her.” He straightened from his position, his golden eyes locking unerringly on Jean. “I can guarantee you that if Charles knew about the kind of shit that was going on here, he’d be so disappointed in all of you-- maybe that’s the real reason you don’t want to try reaching him.” He turned on his heel and made to leave before pausing, looking back at Warren out of the corner of his eyes. “After what happened in Antarctica, Sabertooth admitted point blank that Remy wasn’t a willing participant in the Morlock Massacre. How’s it feel to know that you indirectly helped to murder an innocent man, Worthington?” He didn’t bother waiting for an answer, striding away and leaving behind a now deathly silent room.

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“Hey, you look great, Bri!”

Bridget smiled charmingly, twirling once. Her dress was very simple, an off the shoulder long formal dress in solid lavender, the tulle bottom giving her a floaty appearance as she moved. A pair of silver heels sat on her feet, barely visible as she moved, and a set of pearls was draped around her neck. Her blond tresses had been styled into an up-do with small white flowers scattered throughout. “Thank you, Tony! I prefer simple when it comes to formal wear, and I thought this would be perfect!” She inspected her brother for a moment, eyebrows arching into her hairline. “My my, but you clean up quite nicely yourself. Stephen may have to beat any interested parties off with something bigger than a stick.”

Tony grinned brilliantly as he posed in his own suit, a sharp Brioni number in such a dark blue it was almost black. A tie sat snug around his neck, the same dark blue but with the addition of
several Swarovski crystals sewn into it. A watch was clasped around his wrist-- one of his own making-- with several runes engraved into multiple places in it to protect against anything he could think of. On his feet were a pair of sharp leather shoes, the kind one would normally wear to high-end social functions. “Or with an eldritch whip, if he gets annoyed enough.”

That simply caused the Restoration Master to roll her eyes. “I can’t wait for the day you two come out to the public. It’s either going to be a moment of ‘I knew it’ for the world, or it will come as a complete shock.”

“Betting pool is leaning towards ‘I knew it’, currently.” The words heralded the entrance of Ulysses and Craig. Ulysses was dressed in a black Armani suit with a royal blue tie, with his usual mask nowhere to be found. Craig was fitted in a navy blue suit with a similar appearance to military attire and his red beret still perched on his head, though the patch had been glamoured so no one would pay too close attention to it.

Tony gasped as if scandalized, putting a hand over his heart. “There’s a betting pool on our love life?! And you didn’t bother to tell me!”

Ulysses snorted at the man’s antics. “Didn’t want you influencing it one way or another.”

His male partner nodded at that. “And you know you would, don’t even deny it Glitch.”

The genius waved off their accusations, though the grin on his face spoke volumes. “So, where’s your other third?”

“She’ll be down soon-- Making sure Sunny’s settled in with Laura and Holly once she's dressed.” Ulysses replied, moving to sit on one of the chairs, pulling Craig down next to him.

The elevator dinged, signaling the arrival of Dorian and Zevrael. Tony looked at both and arched his eyebrow with a smirk. “Matching outfits, gentlemen? I must say, I love the gold and silver accents.”

The husbands grinned, their hands tightly linked together. Dorian’s swallowtail coat was inky black with gold embellishments, a dragon holding the symbol of the New Avengers in its’ claws embroidered into the back. His form-fitting black pants were tucked seamlessly into mid-calf length black boots with several buckles on them. Zevrael’s was similar, only in silver and a majestic Halla superimposed over the New Avengers logo on the back. “Well, if we’re going to be a pair of tens among fives, we’d best be dressed the part!” Dorian proclaimed, hair perfectly styled and kohl immaculate.
The silverette at his side nodded at his words, the additional weight of the thin silver snake effortlessly braided into his plait gently tugging at his roots. “I believe the proper phrase is ‘go big or go home’.”

Bridget gave a soft chuckle before it suddenly died in her throat, her eyes widening as she moved to look over their shoulders. “Well then, gentlemen, I believe then that someone has decided to go as big as possible.”

All eyes turned to where Aria was sweeping into the room, a sultry smirk on her face. She wore a sleeveless, deep rose pink velvet mermaid dress, the neckline plunging so it showed off quite a bit of cleavage. The edges were studded and framed by sparkling crystals, as was the cut from her armpits that swooped down to her waistline. A curving slit split the fabric from the floor to her hip, and if the fabric weren’t situated *just right* it would have been nigh-on indecent. The slit was framed by the same crystals as up top with the hem of the dress just barely sweeping the floor. A pair of striking silver heels were on her feet and clicked sharply as she approached them. Her hair had lost the electric blue accents and was styled into waves that fell over one shoulder, eyes framed with just enough makeup to make the color pop. As she passed Tony, he noticed that the dress was almost completely backless, with only a small strip of fabric from the sleeves clipped together.

There was silence as she finally made it to Ulysses and Craig, who had gotten to their feet at her arrival. She smirked up at them and drawled, “Well, boys?”

The fact that both men took a moment to kiss her senseless was answer enough, and Tony couldn’t help the grin on his face. “Well *holy shit*, Aria. You weren’t kidding when you told me your dress was going to turn heads!”

Aria laughed and turned to the rest of them. “Well, with Bridget being as conservative as she is-- nothing wrong with that, don’t worry-- I figured I should do as Dorian said and ‘go big or go home’.”

“Well, consider us well and truly upped, Aria.” Zevrael said with a grin. “I can’t even find it in myself to be any kind of annoyed. Like, I’m not sure you can get much better than that!”

“Tony!”

The familiar voice brought a huge smile to the genius’ lips and he bounded over to where his best friend was coming into the room. “Rhodey-bear! Looking good, Platypus! Always loved the
Rhodey chuckled and gave the man a brief hug so his dress uniform wasn’t wrinkled in any way. “First time I’ve had to wear them in a while. You look damn good, Tones-- you all do, really.” He looked around briefly. “I suppose we’re just waiting on Stephen and Emma, right? Do you know how long we have until we need to be there?”

“We’ve got about half an hour, and Steph agreed to portal us to a location about five minutes out-- there’ll be a limo waiting.”

Fortunately, the semi-awkward silence that descended was cut by a sharp gasp and an awed utterance of “Damn,” from Rhodey. All eyes turned to where Emma was coming into the room, dressed in an icy blue gown with one halter sleeve that swept into a makeshift sweetheart neckline. Several swarovski crystals were sewn into the bodice and swept around her back, which was covered by little more than a thin piece of chiffon. The fabric fell from her hips in a smooth line to the floor, the airy material giving her a floaty appearance as she walked. Her smooth brown hair was piled on top of her hair in a classy, sweeping up-do with a small iridescent clip studded with diamonds perched within the silky strands. Around her wrist was a classy diamond bracelet that matched the necklace she wore as well.

Tony grinned and stepped forward to kiss the woman’s cheek. “Sorellina, I take it the dress is to your liking?”

Icy blue eyes were alight with joy as Emma did a small spin to show off the dress. “I adore it, Mio Fratello! Thank you so much for this!”

“As if I would let my younger sister go to this gala in anything less than the best!” Tony gasped in mock horror, though there was a glint of playfulness in his eyes.

Bridget was grinning ear to ear at them, and the grin only grew when she realized Rhodey was still staring at the mutant with an awestruck expression on his face. She gave a small giggle and reached over to manually close his mouth. “Flies, Rhodey,” she teased him with a knowing expression.

The military man coughed, taking a moment to compose himself before approaching the duo. 
“Emma, you look absolutely stunning.” He said to her, catching the woman’s attention.

“Rhodey!” the brunette’s face lit up with joy as she swept over to him, the two sharing a kiss on the cheek. “It’s been too long! You look very strapping in your formal wear!”

The man nodded, even as he felt his face heat up a bit. “Thank you. We’ll have to catch up again soon-- last time we spoke was after Tony had his reactor removed.”

Emma smiled brilliantly, eyes lighting up with joy. “I’d like that very much. Are we still waiting on anyone?”

“Sorry for the wait, everyone.”

Tony’s face lit up as he started to turn towards where his soulmate’s voice had come from. “Hey babe, you’re right on ti--!” The words died a sudden death in his throat as he got a good look at Stephen. The sorcerer’s robes were nowhere to be seen tonight, instead having been replaced by a sharp white tailcoat with silver buttons and lapels over a crisp white shirt. The black bowtie around his neck perfectly matched with the black of his dress pants and shoes, and the striking red pocket square against his breast was the perfect splash of color. His blue-green eyes found Tony’s, and the genius felt as if the breath had been knocked out of him by the sheer perfection of the man approaching them.

Stephen couldn’t help the shuddered breath of awe that escaped him as he finally stopped in front of Tony, drinking in the sight of the sharp figure he made. “Tony, you look… absolutely gorgeous.” He purred in a deep voice, an adoring smile on his face.

It took a few seconds for Tony’s brain to start working again, but once it finally rebooted he returned the smile, love shining in his eyes as he pulled the sorcerer in for a kiss. “Damn, Stephen… you look like perfection.” He said without fully pulling away from the kiss.

The rest of the group gave each other fond looks, exchanging knowing smiles. Finally, Rhodey stepped up to them to grab their attention. “Alright guys, save it for later. Stephen, you look damn good.”

Blue-green eyes turned to the officer, and Stephen made to reply before he paused, studying the man for a second. “You do as well, Rhodey, though I’m curious if the lipstick mark was a conscious choice.”
Rhodey floundered even as Emma made an embarrassed ‘eep!’ in the background. Tony cackled and simply waved his hand to banish the mark away. “FRIDAY, I hope you got pictures of their expressions!”

“Of course, Boss-man!”

A long groan was pulled from Rhodey as he ran a hand down his face. “God help me, but you two are too perfect for each other. Come on, let’s get going before I figure out a way to lock you both in a room that you can’t escape from.”

“Not a chance of that happening, Sour Patch!”

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So far, the charity gala had been a rousing success. People seemed all too eager to contribute funds towards helping rebuild after the events of June, and the New Avengers as a whole were getting along with everyone they spoke with. Dorian and Zevrael in particular seemed to be having a blast, falling into habits used in the Game back in Thedas to win people over on one topic or another. Together, the duo had somehow managed to raise an additional $100,000 through sweet words and silver tongues.

But there was a problem, and by the time several hours had passed, every single person from the New Avengers group had been made aware of it. Given the magnitude of said problem, none of them were willing to stray too far from the head of their team.

“That’s the seventh one tonight!” Emma hissed to Rhodey as she kept a close eye on her brother, who was again pulling himself away from a woman who seemed intent on getting far too close for comfort. Fortunately, the brunette was accosted by Christine Everhart before she could latch on again, and the reporter’s chattering gave Tony a chance to slip to the other end of the ballroom with a supremely annoyed look on his face.

The military man nodded, a grim look on his face as he looked towards the bar. “And Stephen looks ready to blow his top. Not sure how much longer he’s going to put up with their behavior before he puts a stop to it himself.” Movement near Tony drew a groan from him. “Are you freaking kidding me-- oh, wait, false alarm. Pepper is looking good tonight.”
Emma’s face lit up for a moment at the sight of the redhead. “I haven’t spoken to Pepper in quite a while. She’s looking very happy, I must say.”

A voice calling them drew their attention, and they turned to see Craig approaching them. “Hey, just wanted to let you know I’ve been hearing some chatter that you both are here together.” He put emphasis on the last word to indicate his meaning.

Rhodey rolled his eyes and shook his head in exasperation. “I didn’t even know Emma was back until a few days ago, and the New Avengers came as a group. Gossips, the lot of them.”

The brunette woman nodded at that, casting her eyes around the ballroom to pick out each member of said group. Stephen seemed to be migrating closer to where Tony had been a few minutes ago, Dorian and Zevraael having taken his place while chatting it up with a few men who were laughing about whatever it was they were discussing. Bridget was having an engaging conversation with someone she vaguely recognized as someone from the medical community, the duo sipping champagne while maintaining a respectable distance from each other. Ulysses was pressed close to Aria’s side with his arm around her waist, shooting warning looks at anyone who approached them to talk. The woman was currently laughing at something a petite ebony haired woman was saying, and the fact that her husband had relaxed the tiniest bit meant he had deemed her a non-threat. Finally, her eyes swept back towards her brother, and she let out an aggravated noise. “She’s back again?! She just can’t take a hint!”

This garnered a sharp nod from Rhodey and a dangerous sounding hum from Craig. “I’m getting the feeling we’re going to need to step in on this one-- He’s said no several times, and she’s just not getting the cue.” The sniper’s words were met with agreement, and the trio smoothly approached the duo.

“Look, I’m not interested. I’ve said it multiple times to you tonight.” Tony tried to pull away from the blond again, annoyance lining every inch of his face.

The woman tittered, stepping forward again. “Oh come on, Stark, why don’t we ditch this party and find some real fun? You and Potts aren’t together anymore, so there’s nothing holding you back.” She fluttered her eyelashes coyly at him.

The tension in the genius’ shoulders was evident even through his suit. “That may be so, but again, I’m gonna say no.” He stressed the last word, hoping desperately she would finally bugger off.

“Oh Stark, you’re such a kidder, playing so hard to get.” She purred, stepping close to link arms with the brunette.
Suddenly, the atmosphere in the room shifted in such a way that it drew the attention of every member of the New Avengers simultaneously. Rhodey’s eyes widened at the almost synchronized straightening of posture and the way their attention swung to the corner of the ballroom where Tony was. A moment later, the black man saw exactly what had drawn their attention so suddenly.

Stephen had been watching Tony being badgered all evening by women, his temper only being held back by the fact that his soulmate firmly told each and every one of them no. Most had taken the hint and left him alone, but this woman had just crossed a line that none of the others had dared to and initiated unwanted physical contact. The frayed control the sorcerer had over his emotions finally snapped at the sight and the echoed feelings of discomfort, unhappiness, and frustration that thrummed across their soulmate bond. As Tony pulled away again, this time more forcefully, Stephen tugged the pocket square from his suit, which suddenly expanded into Levi who shot between the duo. The woman gasped as the genius blinked in shock at the appearance of the relic, even as relief filled his eyes.

Before anyone could speak, Stephen’s deep voice rumbled through the nearly silent ballroom. “Alright, I’ve had enough! Tony has told you time and time again tonight that he’s not interested, and you still seem to think it’s okay to continue harassing him! Since you don’t seem to respect his no, allow me to make it more than clear for you-- he is not interested in what you are offering in any way shape or form.”

The blond blinked in shock for a moment before she sneered at him. “And why do you care? Stark is a free man, you have no business butting in!”

The woman’s patronizing tone grated against every single one of Stephen’s nerves, and his blue-green eyes filled with fire. He looked towards Tony for a moment and noticed that the genius had a knowing, understanding look on his face. After a moment, he gave a single firm nod to the sorcerer.

Around the ballroom, the New Avengers group shot each other looks of realization. Every single one of them knew what was about to happen.

From her space next to Rhodey, Emma smirked and dipped her head. “Go get ‘im, Copperfield.”

Sensing the approval from everyone, Stephen spoke again. “Why do I care? You mean besides the fact that he’s my teammate, my friend, and is entitled to say ‘no’ and have that respected? Oh, I can think of one very, very good reason.” A smirk crossed his lips as he waved for Levi to settle on his shoulders before turning to Tony, a possessive glint in his eyes. He took a moment to make a motion with his hands, a beam of light flying into the air above them. Stephen reached forward and
pulled Tony into a bruising, passionate kiss as it took the shape of two very clear words:

‘HE’S MINE!’

All at once, the ballroom exploded into noise, including an incredulous screech from the blond woman. Within a few seconds, the other New Avengers were present and forming a protective ring around them. Every woman in the room was applauding Stephen’s actions, Pepper being the loudest among them.

Within thirty seconds, Christine was approaching them with a sardonic smile on her face and a pad of paper in her hands that she was scribbling notes on. Once they’d gotten a nod from Stephen and Tony, the New Avengers allowed her to pass. “So,” she said blithely to the duo, “I take it the release date for the interview just got moved up?”

From his place securely in Stephen’s arms, Tony nodded sharply. “As soon as you can, Christine.”

The reporter nodded, making a note on the pad. “Would you be alright if I added a bit of commentary before airing it? I think people should be made aware of the harassment you experienced, if only to bring light to how overlooked the topic is for male victims. What you experienced tonight…” She made a brief face of disgust.

Stephen nodded at her words. “I think that would be lovely, Christine. I noticed that you made an effort to intercept several of those women, and I thank you for the effort.” He pressed a kiss to the top of Tony’s head before murmuring, “Babe? What do you think?”

“Do it. You’re right, it’s not talked about as much, but it’s just as important for people to understand that this upsets men as much as it does women.” The genius sighed deeply, burrowing into his soulmate’s arms. “I think we’re done here, Steph. Can we go home now?”

“Don’t need to ask me twice, love.” Flanked on all sided by the New Avengers, the duo quickly vacated the ballroom, leaving the chaos and noise behind them.

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The sound of laughter filled the common room of the guest wing as Sam and Scott collapsed against each other, joined by chuckles from Clint and Natasha. “He looks ridiculous!!” The
engineer howled, tears of mirth rolling down his face.

“Well, it’s not like there’s something that can grow his hair back any faster.” Clint pointed out with a sly grin on his face.

Nat nodded at his words, arching an eyebrow. “Well, I’m betting someone like Strange might be able to-- he seems to be rather knowledgeable about things like magic. He bends the rules of reality on a whim.” A tiny smirk quirked at her lips. “It really puts Maximoff’s abilities into perspective, doesn’t it? She always claims to be so powerful and completely in control.”

Sam managed to take a few breaths before he quipped back, “Maybe if she had even a fraction of his magical mojo, she could have prevented having to have all of her hair shaved off!”

Remembering the way the young woman had screeched in indignation and fury as the razor had been taken to her head brought a new bout of laughter to the group. Their laughter was cut off suddenly by a strange ‘fwoosh’ followed by a shout of shock. A moment later, the shout was repeated with a great deal more anger and frustration before a smoking mass suddenly came sailing into the room, bouncing a few times before landing in front of the four Rogues sitting together.

Nat had gotten to her feet and pulled out a knife the moment the object entered the room, but she stopped when she finally registered what they were looking at. “What the hell??” She murmured, stashing the knife before bending down to study the black, flame-patterned rubber duck.

The archer of the group sank to his knees as well, reaching out to gently poke the lightly smoking rubber. “Why is it smoking??”

The answer came a moment later when Steve came storming into the room, his appearance prompting choked noises and raised eyebrows. Whatever hair Steve had finally gotten back on his head had somehow been burned completely off, along with his eyebrows, eyelashes, and facial hair, though his skin remained miraculously unburned.

“Rogers!” The voice from the doorway caused everyone to turn towards T’Challa, who had a supremely unimpressed look on his face. “Are you attempting to burn down Wakanda? I cannot help but wonder, considering you are kicking smoking, possibly flammable ducks around! And did I not tell you that what happens between you and these ducks needs to stay in your bedroom??” Steve sputtered for a second, and it was a miracle that the other rogues didn’t lose their minds right then and there. Arching an eyebrow, the king crossed his arms and continued. “Normally, I would have you thrown back in a cell for this stunt… but I believe a better punishment could be administered through exposure. From now on, if you desire to eat, you will do so out here, in the
common area. You will no longer be permitted to take your meals in your chambers. Those rooms are strictly for sleeping…” He aimed a look at the smoking duck before arching an eyebrow at Steve. “Unless, of course, you are with your… bedfellows.” Behind him, the two members of the Dora Milaje gave the smallest of snorts. “I hope, from now on, you will keep any quarrels between you and them where they belong.” The king gave the others a curt nod before turning on his heel and striding from the room.

The instant they were gone, Sam, Scott, and Clint broke into howls of laughter, Clint curling up on his side and wheezing from a lack of oxygen. Steve made a furious noise before stomping from the room, the slam of a door being heard a few seconds later. The assassin of the group shook her head with a soft laugh of her own. At least the super soldier didn’t have to worry about his ridiculous hairstyle anymore.

Chapter End Notes

Another Daedric Prince mentioned in this chapter-- an update will be made to the appropriate codex entry on the Tumblr! I'll also be posting images of the ladies' dresses!

And yes, I made Christine Everhart a good bro! THERE IS A METHOD TO MY MADNESS, VASSALS!

Look forward to the next chapter, my dears!
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Minowa and her partners return from meeting the family, and Tony gets a call from a dead man (Hadrian is only slightly displeased over it) who's with another dead man (who, turns out, was never really dead to begin with), regarding a soon-to-be dead man (warnings were not taken seriously). Questions are asked that produce even more question, and it turns out Hadrian might not be the only primordial truth in residence on Earth...

(Mortis is MANY kinds of displeased, and surprisingly possessive of certain mortals.)

((Daedric Princes and 'chaos' are synonymous.))

Chapter Notes

VASSALS!! I AM ALIVE!! Jen and I have been working hard on this chapter, and finally it is ready for you, my lovely readers!!

BEFORE WE BEGIN, however, there is a new poll! Jen and I have been discussing and debating the use of Tumblr as a social media platform with which to engage with you all. Then, INSPIRATION!! This poll, lovelies, is to see if you all would use a Discord server with which to connect to Jen and I, to access the codex and other such things! This poll will be open until April 15th, so GO, MY DEAR READERS!! Vote and let us know if you would like a Nexus Discord server!!

POLL CLOSED! THANK YOU FOR VOTING!!

With that out of the way-- ONWARD!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Hey guys, welcome back! How was meeting the inlaws?”

James, Logan, and Bruce gave each other looks, even as Alexia was running over to give Tony a hug. “I liked them! They were mostly nice to me!” She made a face for a moment before adding, “Minowa’s Uncle Hermaeus was really creepy, though… he was all wriggly and had lots of eyeballs…” Her expression brightened again as she continued, “But her Uncle Hircine was super nice! He played hunter with me for a while!”

Behind her, Minowa had to chuckle at the irony of the statement. “Alexia, why don’t you put your things away in your room while I talk to Anthony?”
Alex nodded with a chirped ‘okay’ before grabbing her bag to take to her room, hugging each person in the room for a second before darting off to do as she was told. Tony smiled and shook his head fondly before turning back to the group as a whole. “So, is anyone going to need a psychiatrist/therapist after this meeting?”

The Dragonborn laughed at that, shaking her head. “Honestly, it went quite well in my opinion. I had to stop Uncle Sheo from turning one of them into a rabbit several times, but considering that was the most drama during the meet-and-greet, I must admit my relief.

“I still don’t know how to feel about the fact that your grandmother and grandfather made me an honorary member of the Dark Brotherhood, Dorogaya.” James cut in, his voice hesitant. “And your Aunt Nocturnal was weirding me right the hell out with the way she kept looking at me.”

Bruce nodded at that, rolling his own eyes. “I mean, Akatosh’s siblings weren’t too bad… it was your ‘extended’ family that was being… eccentric.” His expression became pleasantly contemplative as he continued, “Still, Julianos was a wonderful conversationalist. Your father wasn’t at all like I was expecting either.”

A small snort escaped Logan as he added his own input. “Hircine was pretty interested in me too… Gotta wonder if it has to do with our feral sides.”

Crimson eyes sparkled knowingly as Minowa dipped her head at his words. “It absolutely was, Grohiiki. Hircine is the Daedric Prince of the Hunt— he’s directly credited with the creation of werewolves on Nirn.”

“Oh… that explains so much.”

That caused the ebony-haired woman to laugh, and she gently ushered the group towards the door. “I wish to speak with Zeymahi for a few minutes. If you wish to return to our rooms, I will join you all shortly.” The men nodded and each kissed her for a moment before leaving the room, chatting and pressed against each other protectively. Minowa smiled after them for a second before turning to face Tony again. “So, how did the gala go, Anthony?”

There was a moment of quiet before Tony laughed nervously. “Well, you know how we filmed the interview with myself, Stephen, and Christine but decided not to release it for another week because of the press conference and gala?” Minowa nodded, crimson eyes narrowing in suspicion. “Well, during the gala, there was a slight… altercation …”
The Dragonborn didn’t even let him finish before she whipped out her own phone from seemingly nowhere, typing something into it before reading over what she found. After a minute, she slowly looked up at him with a blank look before arching an eyebrow in a clear gesture to explain. He did so immediately, and at the end she hummed and nodded with a pleased look on her face. “Though I know you desired to not have this come out for another week, I am in full agreement with Stephen’s actions. How has the public’s reaction been?”

Tony gave a deep, put upon sigh. “Let’s just say that those who bet on the side of ‘I knew it’ in the pool won a substantial amount of money.”

“Excellent. I’ll see about picking up my share later.” Minowa laughed at the affronted look on Tony’s face before settling again. “What were the children up to during the event? Seeing as the Compound is still standing, I would imagine nothing too destructive.”

“Nah, the only thing destroyed were our hearts.”

“What??”

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“Oh God, I think I just acquired diabetes.”

Stephen couldn’t help but nod as he and Tony stared at the almost literal nest on the floor where Sleipnir, Jörmungandr, Peter, and Rem were curled up sound asleep. The T.V. above them was still playing as the boys slept, bathing the room in a comfortable glow. “I’m… slightly reluctant to wake them up.” The sorcerer admitted, eyeing the way Rem was latched onto Jör like a living teddy bear.

A quiet laugh escaped Tony as he nodded in agreement. He quickly flicked his wrist to cover the group in a blanket, shooting Peter a loving smile at the way he was nestled into Slei’s arms, held close to the godling’s chest. “Come on, we should let them sleep.”

The blue-green eyed male nodded and made to turn and leave before pausing, blinking at what was playing on the screen. “Babe, what are they watching right now?”
“Let’s see… looks like some British television series based off the Sir Arthur Conan Doyle books—Sherlock Holmes. Why?”

After a few seconds of eyeballing the screen some more, Stephen shook his head and turned to leave the room as well. “The actor playing Sherlock seemed familiar to me… Or I’m just exhausted from everything tonight.”

Tony grinned and took his hand. “I prefer sexy wizard to sexy detective anyway.”

~

A soft ‘aw’ escaped Rhodey and Emma as they gazed in on the pile of girls on the couch, sound asleep. “Looks like they were trying to do a Disney princess movie marathon.” The soldier murmured as he moved to reach for Lila and Hannah, scooping them gently into his arms to carry them to bed.

Emma nodded as well as she ran her fingers through Hela’s hair before scooping her up and settling her on her hip. “Let’s take them to bed. First, though…” She glanced over into the corner, where several blondes could be seen huddled together in a makeshift blanket fort. “Girls, lights out in ten minutes.”

“Yes mother. We’re almost done with our games.”

“I’m not!”

“Find a save point.”

“It’s the middle of a battle!”

“Save after the battle.”

“Oh, okay.”
“What have they been doing in here?!”

Zevrael sighed in exasperation as he looked to where Cooper was curled up with Fenrir, who was in his wolf form. “From the looks of it-- low level explosives. At least they didn’t do anything worse than burn a few surfaces.”

The mage at his side was looking between him and the various scorch marks around the room with an incredulous look on his face. “They scorched the ceiling, Amatus!”

“Come on, Vhenan.”

“The ceiling!!”

It was a testament to how exhausted the couple on the couch were that they didn’t react when several flashes went off in front of them. “Aw, those are going to look so good!” Aria cooed as she passed her phone to Ulysses before approaching Loki and Laura with Craig by her side and a grin on her face.

The soldier gave a soft laugh before kneeling in front of Laura, who had Sunny sleeping on her chest while she was reclined against Loki’s chest. Nathan was securely held in the god’s arms even as one hand rested in Laura’s chestnut locks. “Probably shouldn’t leave them like this, though. Their backs will be killing them in the morning.” He eyed the God of Mischief warily for a moment before moving to tap the fabric next to Laura’s hand firmly.

“No need for that, Craig.” The voice caught them all off guard, and Loki slid his eyes open with a sleepy, knowing grin. “I was aware of your entrance. Everything alright?” Getting a nod, he shifted to gently comb his fingers through Laura’s hair again. “Sunny was unhappy at being separated from her mommy and daddies. I’m sure she’ll be happy to see you again.” He pressed a kiss to his partner’s hair. “Laura, min gudinne, the Boones are here for their daughter.”

Laura grumbled quietly in her sleep before cracking one eye open to blearily gaze at them. “Hey, welcome back. Here,” She opened her arms so Craig could gently take the infant, who fusses for
only a moment before settling into the soldier’s arms with a happy coo.

“Thanks for watching her for us. We’ll let you sleep.” Aria whispered to her, but the brunette had already snuggled back into Loki and fallen asleep.

Emerald green eyes sparkled with laughter as Loki nodded to them. “Have a good night, everyone. And send me the pictures you took-- I desire a copy of my own.”

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Minowa hummed and dipped her head with a look of understanding. “I see, that makes more sense. What of Harley?”

A soft chuckle escaped Tony. “He spent most of the night tinkering and talking to his mysterious girlfriend who he swears up and down the block is ‘just a friend’.”

“And I’m not the Listener of the Dark Brotherhood. Denial is not simply a river in Egypt.”

Tony choked and looked over at her. “You’ve been on Tumblr again, I just know it.” The woman gave him a massive grin with too many teeth. “Other than that… the only problem we have is that I haven’t heard from Wade yet.”

Crimson eyes immediately filled with concern. “No? He was supposed to be back already…”

The genius nodded at that. “And I don’t know why… but I’m getting kind of a bad feeling about this. Wade would have let us know if something were holding him up, right?”

A rumbling hum escaped the Dragonborn as she stared into the middle distance. “Not necessarily. Were he in a position that would compromise his safety should he be heard, there is a chance he would maintain radio silence.”

“I guess so…” Tony looked down at his phone as he pulled it out of his pocket, face set in a grim expression as he was faced with the lack of notifications. “I just hope he’s safe, whatever’s going on…”
‘Has Nick lost his damn mind?!’

Shaky hands reached for the phone on the table, the owner quickly punching a number in despite the trembling in his fingers. He sagged against the wall behind him as the dial tone started. ‘Come on, Stark, pick up the phone…’

A moment later, the tone stopped with a click, and the genius’ voice filtered over the speaker. “You have reached the life model decoy of Tony Stark, consulting hours are from--”

“Stark!” The name was barked in a low tone, sharp but soft to catch Tony’s attention, “Fury has your teammate!” Dead silence fell over the line at that, so he continued, “You know, a certain merc with a mouth?”

“That son of a bitch!” Tony snarled with fury, something crashing to the ground in the background. “I warned him not to come after me or mine, and he pulls this shit anyway!” The brunette shouted for FRIDAY to call the other members of his team before he spoke into the phone again. “Who is this, and how did you manage to get close enough to 007 to figure this out??”

A huffed laugh escaped him. “Come on, Stark. I know it’s been a while, but you have a mind for faces and voices.”

The sound of movement on the other end stopped dead, a shocked gasp replacing it. After a few seconds of silence, Tony finally managed to get out, “Agent??”

Phil gave a soft chuckle at that. “Good to speak to you again.”

There were a few seconds of quiet before the genius slowly asked, “How the actual fuck are you alive?”

“Still trying to figure that one out, myself.” The blue-eyed man replied in a sardonic tone of voice. “Listen, we can go through all of this later-- You need to get Wade out of here, and I’d like to request an extraction of myself and one other person. The moment you show up, Nick will know it
was me who told you. But between this, the rumors of him doing something to a May Parker, along with a few other questionable decisions… He’s not the man I remember, and I refuse to stand by and enable this kind of shit, no matter what history we share.”

After a second or two, Tony spoke again. “Alright, Phil. You, me, and the rest of my team need to sit down and have a little pow-wow afterward so you can explain a whole truckload of questions that this call just pulled in with, though.” There was shuffling on the other end before he spoke again. “Who’s the other person that needs an extraction?”

Blue eyes closed as Phil took a deep breath. “You’re not gonna believe this, Tony… but it’s Pietro Maximoff.”

“... You have to be fucking kidding me !”

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“So, yeah, Fury apparently decided it was a good idea to abduct Wade as he was returning from his mission, and I got a call about it from a fucking dead man, who asked for a daring rescue of himself and another dead man, and I am so fucking done with the shit Jason Bourne is pulling, and he’ll be lucky if he comes out of this with his life !”

Craig and Ulysses glanced at each other before turning their eyes back to Tony, who was pacing around the room, waving his arms wildly as he ranted. “Glitch, take a breath before you pass out.” The ex-NCR sniper finally told him, stepping forward to put his hand on the genius’ shoulder. “Let’s focus on getting everyone out of that place before thinking about what to do with Fury and his merry band of spies.”

Tony nodded and took several deep breaths, calming a bit as he did so. After a minute or two of just breathing, he turned to look at Bridget as she bounced around the medical wing. “Bri, are you ready? Healing factor or not, Wade might be in pretty bad shape, and the last time I saw Pietro he was full of bullet wounds.”

The restoration master looked up and nodded sharply. “All ready to go on this end, Tony. Min’s going to help me with whatever I need-- she prefers to leave the healing to me, but you know she’s capable in her own right.”

He nodded sharply and turned back to the two snipers in front of him. “Let me give Phil a call,
make sure we’re not going to corridor into a hostile situation.” A moment later, his eyes lit up blue as his technopathy came online. “... Agent, are you in a remote place?... and you have Speed Racer with you? Good. Doors are locked, no cameras broadcasting, no one else around, yes?... Alright, stand with your back against the wall, give us a few seconds.” The blue faded from his eyes, and he nodded sharply at the snipers in front of him. “Weapons hot, look alive, gents.” He double tapped the disk on his chest, the nanotech armor flowing over him.

“Ready when you are, Amicus.” Ulysses readied his rifle as his husband did the same.

Whiskey-brown eyes took on a determined, grim look as Tony nodded and turned to an open part of the room close to the beds Bridget had prepared. He opened a corridor and waved for Ulysses and Craig to go through first, and they did so with their rifles at the ready.

Phil’s eyes went wide at the sight of the dark, shadowy mass springing into existence in front of him, though he recognized the two men who stepped through first as members of Tony’s new team. The genius himself stepped through a second later, and Phil gave him a small smile as he stepped forward. “It’s good to see you again, Stark.” He held out his hand for Tony to shake.

“Good to see you alive, Agent.” Tony smirked as he shook the offered appendage. “We’ve got a lot of questions for you, but that can wait. So, Maximoff?” His eyes trailed to the side, where the silvery-blond man was lying comatose on a bed, attached to several monitors and what looked like a drip line. “I’m surprised you kept him under.”

The brunette agent sighed deeply. “I don’t know how he ended up here, and whether Nick forced him into sedation or not. I didn’t want to risk him coming out of it and trying to get off of a ship that’s several thousand feet in the air.”

Tony cringed at the thought. “Yeah, that would be messy.” He motioned Craig and Ulysses towards him. “Phil, this is Craig and Ulysses Boone, Silent Shot and Voidstrike respectively. They’ll take you through to the other side of the Corridor-- once there, you’ll be left in the care of Bridget Ivorsen and Minowa Norddahl, they’ll take care of whatever injuries or whatnot you have.”

Phil nodded and shook the hands of the two snipers. “Thank you all for this. I’ll explain whatever I can once this is all over.”

Tony watched as the group stepped through the Corridor, the Boone duo helping move the bed along. A minute later, they reappeared and the Corridor blinked out of existence. “Alright, give me a second to find Wade. I doubt he’s going to argue about the dormant tracker in his belt after
“I don’t know what Stark is paying you, but SHIELD is willing to match it if you just talk.”

The hazel eyes of the man glittered with vindictive glee as he spat a mouthful of blood at the director. “First of all, you couldn’t even hope to match any kind of paycheck Tony provides! But you’re assuming that I only stick around for the money-- and that would be where you’re going wrong!” He struggled to sit up a bit so he could look the man in the eye. “I stick with Tony and his team because they support me and want me around for more than my skills and healing factor! I stand with them willingly because I’m 100% certain that they’ll come for me because I will always do the same for them!” He gave the director a cruel grin. “And I will never betray their trust, because they’re my friends, and they have something that is notoriously hard to get-- my loyalty.”

Fury calmly wiped the blood from his cheek before reaching for the pistol at his side. “Everyone has a breaking point. Your healing factor is still compromised…” He drew the firearm, steadily pressing the barrel against Wade’s temple. “I wonder if you would still heal from a bullet to your brain.”

“I don’t know, Fury, but he wouldn’t be the first to do so.”

“Scar on Aria’s head didn’t come from nowhere.”

Fury’s head whipped to one side, freezing at the sight of two rifle barrels being aimed unerringly on him by Craig and Ulysses respectively. “Now you, on the other hand…” Craig continued in a calm, cold voice, “You don’t have a healing factor of any kind, and we’re about two seconds away from testing your resilience against .50mm bullets at almost point-blank range.”
Ulysses’ trigger finger visibly twitched as his dark brown eyes drilled into the director’s single eye. “Weapon down, back away.” He commanded in an unwavering voice. Seeing the moment of hesitation in the Director’s face, the sniper’s eyes flashed with cold anger and the shadows around the room darkened and began to crawl towards Nick. “Wasn’t a suggestion. Move, now.”

Slowly, Fury lowered the gun away from Wade’s head, though he was startled when the weapon was yanked out of his hand by an unseen force a second later. It was caught by Tony who materialized out of nowhere with a look of unbridled anger on his face as he walked between Craig and Ulysses, who had yet to lower their guns away from Fury. “Keep him in your sights, Craig.” He commanded coldly, getting a sharp nod from the sniper in question. “Ulysses, with me.” He stashed the gun in his belt before moving to the table Wade was strapped to, a flash of fear and anxiety momentarily lighting in his eyes at the numerous wounds that were healing at a much slower pace than usual.

Wade grinned weakly at the genius as he began to undo the straps. “I did tell him you’d come for me.”

“I just wish we’d gotten here sooner.” Tony hissed, forcefully unbuckling the straps and throwing them to either side of the bed. “If I’d known you were being held and tortured, I would have sent out feelers the instant we got back from Asgard two days ago! If they’d negated your healing factor entirely, you would have been dead within a week!”

The merc saw the burning orange color flicker in Tony’s eyes, and he twisted for a moment to weakly grab the genius’ hand. “I’m not dead yet, but I feel like I could sleep for a year.” He gave the appendage a tiny squeeze in the hopes that it would pull his mind back to the present.

Tony snapped back to himself at the words and nodded in understanding. “Yeah, I don’t doubt it. ‘Ses, could you take him through to Bridget?’”

The sniper nodded in agreement, grabbing a blanket from a chair nearby to gently cover the merc with before lifting him into a bridal carry. Tony flicked his wrist to open a Corridor for them, and as they stepped through the other three heard Wade make a swooning noise and proclaim, ‘I knew you always loved me, ‘Sessie!’

There was silence as the corridor closed, and it was only broken when Tony straightened and slowly turned to face Fury, eyes glowing orange from the full force of his anger. “I gave you a warning, Fury.” He started in a voice that was quiet, yet brutal in intensity. “I told you to keep away from me and mine. I told you what would happen if you ignored me.”
“Stark--”

Tony whipped his hand out, using his magic to throw Fury into a wall and pin him there. “No. You don’t get to speak to me. Not after this. Frankly, you’re lucky I don’t kill you where you stand.”

After a moment, his eyes flashed to blue, and he dove into the files stored in the systems around him, ruthlessly digging for what he was looking for.

Seeing the eye of the director darting around a bit, Craig growled at him, “You move even a centimeter, you’re a dead man. I won’t hesitate to splatter the wall behind you with your brains-- Wouldn’t be the first time I’ve done something like that.” The eyes behind his shades narrowed in cold fury. “I don’t take kindly to anyone fucking with my team like you’ve been doing. First with Peter and his aunt, then coming here and finding you actively torturing Wade… I’ve only met one guy I hate more than you, and I killed that man myself.” A smirk crossed his face at the memory. “One of the most fulfilling things I’ve done in my life-- looked that bastard dead in the eye and told him, ‘Thumbs down, you son of a bitch’ before slitting his throat and painting his tent with his blood. Even sweeter, he died right in the middle of his own damn fortress.” A sudden sharp laugh escaped the sniper. “Seems to be a trend that the sweetest victories are when you take out an enemy from the inside.”

Fury went still, eyeing the sniper silently as Tony continued to root through the files. He couldn’t help but wonder where the hell Tony had found these new team members of his. The spy hadn’t been able to dig up any information on them, not even a DoB, and that pissed him off to no end. He had absolutely no information on most of them, and only snippets on Peter Parker and Wade Wilson. He knew better than to lay even a finger on Peter, and the Director never imagined that Deadpool was more than just a hired gun to Tony and his team.

“I shouldn’t be surprised that you resorted to blackmail to get help with this little ploy.” Tony’s voice drew their attention to where the blue glow in the genius’ eyes was replaced by the orange again. “Did the fact that you had to coerce 3/4ths of the agents involved in this fiasco into helping not clue you into the fact that this might be a terrible fucking plan ?!” He took a few deep breaths to calm himself, even as Fury looked ready to launch into a thousand questions. “Fortunately, there was one person you completely left out of the loop in both the events with May Parker and this shit you pulled with Wade.” He flicked his wrist out, and Fury suddenly found himself in handcuffs with bands around his chest and upper arms keeping his arms pinned to his sides. A similar pair of cuffs snapped around his ankles, and he opened his mouth to speak before it was covered by a strip of duct tape. “Shut up. Craig, haul his ass up and set him in that corner. If he tries to get away, pop a cap in his head-- Actually, store the rifle, use this.” He plucked the pistol from his belt and held it out for the sniper.

Craig nodded and grabbed the Director by the back of his coat once he’d stored his rifle. He took the offered firearm from his brother and cocked it before forcing Fury into the far corner, keeping his pistol trained on the man. Tony took a position leaning against the wall next to the door, and a
moment later, his eyes lit up blue again.

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A growl of frustration escaped Maria Hill as she sat back from her computer, running a hand over her face. She’d been digging and combing through files for hours and had come up with nothing to explain the sudden secrecy Fury had been displaying. Even now, she could still hear his accusatory tone as he questioned her loyalty, citing her willingness to work for Stark Industries after the fall of SHIELD. She didn’t bother trying to point out that a huge majority of surviving SHIELD employees had joined SI after the fall, for both the safety of person and security of finances. Considering the effort Tony had put into finding as many of the agents as possible to keep them safe, the brunette couldn’t find it in herself to care if Fury thought of it as a betrayal.

The Director’s behavior had taken a disturbing turn recently, however. He’d been showing an interest in technology that could alter a person’s memories, and there were several rooms on the Helicarrier she could no longer get into. Above all of that though was his borderline obsession with getting any information he could about the New Avengers. He’d been especially vocal in his disapproval of Wade Wilson, pointing out his mercenary status as a major flaw. More than once she’d heard him muttering under his breath about how Rogers would never have approved of a killer for hire to join the Avengers, and that the super soldier couldn’t get back fast enough to put Tony back in his place. It alarmed Maria greatly to hear the Director saying such things and she was certain that if Fury had known she was listening, the words would have never come out of his mouth.

While he’d been trying to dig up information on them, Maria had been doing her own searching, trying to figure out what Fury wanted to keep hidden so badly. So far, her search had born nothing. Maria sighed deeply, closing her eyes to think for a moment. She was seriously considering reaching out to Tony directly regarding her suspicions. Fury already considered her ‘disloyal’—she’d just be doing what he’d already accused her of.

A sudden beep from her computer caused the woman to sit up straight, blinking in confusion at the audio file that suddenly opened itself and began to play. “Maria, we need to talk.” Tony’s voice filtered through her headset. “A tracker signal has been sent to your phone-- follow it. You’re not going far-- I’m already aboard the Helicarrier. See you soon.”

The file disappeared, and Maria quickly pulled out her phone to check it. Sure enough, it was giving a small beeping sound through her headset. She glanced at the computer once before standing from her seat, checking to make sure she had her guns before striding from the room at a steady clip.

She followed the tracker to a room with a locked door, but before she could figure out how to open
it, the locks disengaged to allow her entry. “Tony?” She called, pushing the door open to step inside. She made it two steps in before she stopped short at the sight of Fury tied up and silenced with Craig standing over him, the soldier arching an eyebrow in her direction while keeping his gun aimed at the man. The table in the center of the room was splashed with a horrifying amount of blood, some of it less than a few minutes old. Before she could even begin to attempt to figure out what was going on, the door was shut behind her, and she whipped around to see Tony leaning against the wall next to the doorframe, an eerie orange glow in his eyes.

A small smile quirked at Tony’s lips as he pushed off of the wall. “Good to see you again, Maria.” He greeted her easily, seemingly unphased by the blood splashed in the room. “I’m guessing you have a lot of questions right now.”

“That would be an understatement,” Maria replied with an arched eyebrow, even as she stepped forward to shake Tony’s hand. “Good to see you too, Tony. Dare I ask whose blood is on the table?”

The smile on Tony’s face fell instantly, the glow in his eyes intensifying in the same movement. “Wade Wilson’s.”

The brunette’s eyes instantly snapped back to the table, a look of horror flashing across her features. “What?! How?!"

A snort escaped Craig, drawing her attention. “The person you should be asking that is at the barrel-end of this gun.” He jerked his pistol a bit to emphasize the statement.

Maria’s eyes quickly shifted to Fury, a look of realization quickly crossing her face. “Fury, what did you do?” She asked in a low, dangerous voice.

Tony arched an eyebrow and motioned with his head for Craig to remove the duct tape. The soldier did so, and Nick hissed in pain as it was ripped away from his skin. “He’s a fucking fugitive!” He snapped, aiming the words at the two members of the New Avengers, who simply arched an unimpressed eyebrow apiece at him. “He kills people for money! Whether they deserve it or not, it’s still murder, and who else but us would apprehend a dangerous killer when they have a healing factor?!”

“You didn’t capture him because he was killing people!!” The sudden roar from Tony caused everyone to jump in shock. “You took him because he’s one of mine, and you were torturing him to get information about the New Avengers!!” The genius moved as if to assault the man, only being held back by Maria throwing an arm out in front of him. “If the Accords Council had any problem with Wade, they would have reached out to me, or at least to Dorian! They sure as hell wouldn’t have reached out to SHIELD!” He threw his arm towards the table. “And you slowed
down his healing factor so you could continuously torture him!! If the Accords Council had reached out to you on this matter, why would you need to do that?!” He tried to lunge at Fury again, this time having to be intercepted by Craig, who abandoned his place at Fury’s side to pull Tony against him. “You could have killed him!! His healing factor is the only thing keeping his cancer at bay, and you fucking compromised it!! You put a gun to the temple of my friend and taunted him about surviving a head wound with his healing factor on the fritz because of you!! You were going to kill him if he didn’t talk, and don’t you dare try to deny it!!”

The room around them rumbled, the lights flickering dangerously as something within the walls suddenly seemed to hum a little louder. Craig looked up with a startled expression before turning Tony so he wasn’t looking at the Director. “Glitch, you need to pull it together. Wade is safe, and he’s going to be okay. Deep breaths, you don’t want to send the Helicarrier crashing to Earth.” Tony trembled violently against him, though he started taking shaky breaths at Craig’s insistence. The shaking and flickering finally stopped, the drone of machinery quieting to a normal level once a full two minutes had passed.

The quiet was suddenly shattered when Maria took several steps to where Fury was getting to his feet and punched him as hard as she could in the nose. The force sent him slamming back into the wall, and he dropped back on his ass as his nose began to gush blood. “Nicholas Joseph Fury, I have never in my life been so tempted to just shoot someone and be done with it. But this, this is a new low that I never thought you would go to! I don’t even know what to address first-- the fact that you abducted a member of the New Avengers, the subsequent torture of said member, God only knows who and what else is involved in this whole shit storm--”

From his place in Craig’s arms, Tony called out, “He blackmailed other SHIELD agents into helping him and is responsible for tampering with the memories of a civilian, May Parker.”

Maria’s face went white so fast it was a wonder she didn’t pass out. “No. No, *no* Fury, you didn’t. Is that why you were looking into tech for memory alteration?!”

“It was for her own good to forget everything and start somewhere new, Maria!” Fury tried to stay through the blood still running down his face. “Sooner or later, May would have been targeted and killed by someone looking for Peter!”

Maria went *nuclear*. “Don’t you fucking dare try and blame this on Peter, Fury!! What the fuck were you thinking, immediately deciding to tamper with her memories?! I can name a dozen better options off the top of my damn head, and I only heard about it in the last thirty seconds!!”

A sudden thought hit Tony, and he yanked himself away from Craig to face Fury. “Hold on a second, you told us that she was only supposed to forget Peter being Spiderman!”
Fury’s eye went wide at the slip, and Maria launched into him again while Craig pulled Tony back into his arms as the Helicarrier began to shake a bit again. He put one hand to his coms to open it up. “Guys, I need a Corridor back to the Compound, STAT. Someone needs to contact Stephen if he isn’t already there, have him come find us ASAP.” After a second or two, the Corridor in question sprang into existence, and Craig reached back to grab Fury by the back of his coat, dragging him through the Corridor as Maria trailed behind them, still ranting furiously at Nick. Once on the other side, it only took a second or two for a portal to open up, Stephen stepping through and automatically reaching for his soulmate. The sniper gently pushed Tony towards him, a small smile quirking at his lips at the two hugged, even as Stephen gave Fury a death glare over the brunette’s head.

The Sorcerer pressed a kiss to Tony’s head before pulling away to level the full weight of his ire on the spy who was currently dripping blood on the tile. “Nicholas Joseph Fury. I have to tell you, you are currently on the shit list of most of the people currently living in this building.”

Maria paused in her rant to look over at the Sorcerer Supreme with a confused expression. “How do you know his full name?”

A snort answered that, and Tony turned back briefly with a smug smirk on his face. “I’ve hacked into SHIELD’s files for shits and giggles, and I found out at the same time I learned about ‘phase two’. As for how he knows… there are no secrets between Stephen and myself.”

Stephen smiled adoringly at the genius and pressed another kiss to his SO’s brunette locks before turning his attention back to Fury, the glare firmly on his face. “If I had it my way, I’d throw you in the nastiest hell-dimension I can think of, wash my hands of you and call it a day.” He took a deep breath, closing his eyes as he did so. “Unfortunately for me, due process and protocol must be observed. Luckily for you, that means I can only throw you into a cell for now.” The sorcerer made a few hand motions before a line of glowing orange magic surrounded the man, allowing Craig to let go of him. “Craig, Min is waiting in the main meeting room to debrief you.”

The sniper nodded sharply before turning his attention to Tony for a second. “You gonna be okay, Glitch?” The genius mumbled something against Stephen’s chest and nodded in affirmation. “Alright, I’ll come to find you later.” He turned to Maria and, after a moment, held a hand out for her to shake. “Wish we could have met under better circumstances, ma’am. You’ve got one hell of a swing, it was satisfying to watch you put Fury on his ass.”

Maria shook his hand with a smirk of her own. “Don’t worry, it was my pleasure. Go do your debrief-- if Coulson were still alive, he’d hound you in his infuriatingly polite manner until you finally gave in.”
There was silence for a second before Tony pulled away from Stephen, a sardonic smile on his face. “Stephen, you wanna drop Fury off?”

Stephen nodded and motioned with his hand to open a portal beneath Fury. The eldritch whip holding him in place loosened, and the spy dropped through with a cry of shock before the portal closed. Seeing the shocked look he was getting, the sorcerer shrugged unrepentantly. “What? You told me to drop him off.”

Tony barked out a laugh and shook his head before turning back to the woman who was staring at the place Fury had been not a few seconds prior with an expression of surprise on her face. “Maria, listen, about ‘if’ Coulson were alive…”

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“I’ll explain whatever I can, but even I’m spotty on some of the details.” Phil started in a soft voice, taking a sip of his tea to wet his throat. He was sitting on a comfy chair in the common room with the members of the New Avengers plus Maria scattered around him, each holding a drink of their own as they settled in to listen to what the man had to say. “I know I should be dead-- I don’t know how long I was gone before I was brought back, and I don’t know how it happened. From what little… flashes I remember, it was bad enough that I had to have my memories wiped. I wasn’t even aware that I’d actually died until recently.”

Tony nodded from his place in Stephen’s lap, taking a sip of his own water before speaking. “I’m guessing Fury kept you pretty isolated.”

The agent nodded in affirmation. “He told me that there was no real way of knowing if all of HYDRA was fully gone-- and wasn’t that a kick to the gut, finding out that SHIELD was infested with HYDRA…”

From where he was seated with his husband and kid, Dorian snorted and shook his head. “Let’s not even touch on his idiocy involving okaying a plan that involved Rogers, Romanoff, and Wilson dumping all of SHIELD’s files on the internet. I daresay if not for Tony, several of those agents would have been rather brutally killed.”

“Wait, Fury gave that plan the go-ahead?!” Maria surged from her own seat, a look of outrage and horror on her face. “Do you know how many agents were killed because of that?!”
A somber silence fell across the room, and several people turned to look at Tony. The genius had a troubled, haunted look on his face as he took another sip of his drink. “Yes. I do.” He finally replied, eyes moving to look out the windows set into the far wall. “If I’d known sooner, I might have been able to save more of them. I did everything I could when I finally did hear about it, but… for some of them, it was… I didn’t get there in time.”

Something about his tone seemed to catch Stephen’s attention, and he shifted their positions so he was kneeling on the ground in front of Tony as the genius sat on the couch. “Tony, if Rogers had bothered to pull his head out of his ass and call you to ask for help, I guarantee you none of this would have happened. He didn’t even have the decency to warn you or Bruce that you were in danger, even though you both were two of the most important targets. You did absolutely everything in your power to save as many people as you could in the aftermath of his poor decisions, and even sent the Iron Legion to protect their families. So don’t you dare blame yourself for not being able to save them all, Anthony Edward Stark, because it’s not your fault that sometimes your teammates don’t tell you things.” There were a few moments where the two simply stared at each other, whiskey-brown locked on blue-green. Finally, a small smile managed to cross Tony’s face and he nodded, relishing in the hug Stephen engulfed him in.

Phil couldn’t help the smile that crossed his face at the display from the two men. While it was a shock to learn of the relationship between the duo, the love and trust the two shared was more than clear, and the genuine joy they both radiated left no room for doubts about the legitimacy of their feelings for each other. A moment later, movement from the couch with the Pavus family drew his attention.

Rem shifted in his seat so he was sitting up, hands held out as if sitting at a computer typing. He grinned as he pantomimed the motion while saying, “And… then… they… kissed…”

Laughter erupted around the room, effectively dispersing whatever lingering tension there had been. Tony and Stephen shot the teen a smirk and gave each other a quick kiss just to play along with the redhead before moving back to their previous positions. Once everyone had settled again, Phil continued from where he’d left off. “As for Pietro… I think he was very close to death, but he never actually died. Why Nick kept him alive and under, I don’t know. Honestly, there’s quite a lot I’m unsure about, but if I had to take a guess, I’d say Fury planned to somehow use him against Wanda Maximoff if she ever stepped out of line.”

“Well, the ‘Civil War’ derailed those plans quite spectacularly, I would say.” Minowa hummed from where she was sprawled across a rather large couch. “It’s rather hard to be the puppet master controlling the strings from the shadows when your marionettes have fled the stage.”

Maria nodded at that, a thoughtful look crossing her face. “Speaking of ‘fleeing’, I have to wonder what happened to James Barnes after the chaos from a few months ago. Like, I know he was pardoned and he was getting treatment to help with his recovery, but how many places are going to
“Somebody say my name?” The sleepy voice caused Maria and Phil’s heads to whip to the side where James was walking through the door, pressed close to Logan’s side as the mutant rubbed his shoulder in a soothing gesture. The duo immediately made a beeline for Minowa’s seat, and they wasted no time in joining her with James resting his head on her lap and Logan maneuvering so he was settled behind the woman. She made a pleased, rumbling noise as she snuggled back against Logan and began to run her fingers gently through the long brown locks attached to the head in her lap.

After a few seconds, she cracked one eye open to look over at Maria and Phil, who were staring at her in stunned shock. “You can look, but no touching—**they are mine**.” The last part came out with a little more rumble than before, a small glow emanating from her eyes for a moment.

Both agents looked towards Tony, and he smiled and waved them off. “Don’t worry, she’s always like that with her men. Just don’t try to separate them if you don’t feel like being turned into a pile of nothing more than ash and wayward strands of DNA floating away on the wind.”

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“Wade is still sleeping, but that’s to be expected. His body is working through the drugs and his healing factor is kicking back in at a steadily accelerating pace. I’ll let you know if anything changes during the night.”

Tony sighed with relief and nodded, gratitude shining brightly in his eyes. “Thank you, Bridget. I was legitimately worried when I saw what Fury did to him…”

The restoration master smiled brightly at him, pulling him in for a quick hug. “He’ll be okay, Tony, don’t worry.” She reassured him as they pulled apart. “Pietro is still sleeping soundly as well, and we can talk with everyone in the morning regarding what to do about him. Phil is staying here tonight just as a precaution, and I’ll offer him a dose of dreamless sleep just to make sure he gets the proper rest after everything that’s happened today.”

A soft laugh escaped the genius as he nodded. “Hey, you’re the boss of Medical, Bri. I trust your judgment explicitly in your domain.” He gave the blond another hug before bidding her goodnight, slipping from medical and striding down the hallway. He stepped into the elevator but didn’t press any buttons as the door closed, instead leaning against the back and thinking deeply.
“... Boss?”

A small smile quirked at Tony’s lips at the soft call from his AI. “Roof access, FRI. I think I want to fly for a while.”

The elevator immediately began to ascend, and a few minutes later the genius was stepping out into the cool night air and his nanotech flowing around his arms and feet to form the gauntlets and boots. He took a moment to cast a few spells over himself before shooting into the air, taking the chance to simply enjoy the freedom that came with flying. He stayed within the perimeter of the grounds, content to stay closer to home for the time being.

Finally, after flying and performing tricks for about an hour, the genius took the chance to simply hover in the air and bask in the bright light from the moon overhead. He spent a few seconds simply breathing and enjoying the tranquility of the moment, the simplicity of simply being. Abruptly, something gently tickled at the back of his neck, though not in a threatening manner. Tony pulled himself out of his trance to turn, smiling at what he found there. “I’d heard the rumors around the Nexus, but I didn’t think you actually flew on a broom, Chief.”

Hadrian laughed from his place perched sideways on the racing broom, emerald eyes sparkling with joy at the genius. “It’s a relic from a bygone time and place, and I technically don’t need it… but I decided to pull it out for nostalgia’s sake.”

Tony chuckled and dipped his head. “I don’t mind if you join me, but I get the feeling you’re here for a reason.”

The Master of Death nodded, crossing his legs as easily as if he were sitting in a chair. “That’s correct. Several reasons actually.” He held his hand out in front of him, a black folder falling into it in a flash of silver sparks. “The first thing I want to cover involves Phillip Coulson.”

“Agent? What about him?” Hadrian fixed him with a look, and it only took a second or two for the genius to realize what the problem was. “Shit. He was dead.” He choked a little, something clenching at his heart at the possible implications.

Seeing the sudden distress in his Reaper, Hadrian rushed to reassure him. “Make no mistake, Anthony, Phil was dead, and certainly should have remained such. Normally, I would reclaim his soul so he could have his peace... However, there is something staying my hand this time—something that could cause ripples in the future.” He tugged a sheet from the folder to hold up so Tony could see.
Whiskey-brown eyes narrowed as Tony flew a bit closer. “Is that a shot of his soul?? I shouldn’t be
surprised by the colors-- blue and earthy brown. But what’s the streak of pure white? I’ve never
seen that before.”

The ebony haired man nodded at the observation. “I’ve seen this once, maybe twice while I’ve
been here. I wasn’t sure what it was myself until recently, and that’s the second reason I’m here.”
He let go of the paper, leaving it suspended in the air as he sat back on the broom again. “You
know how I identify my potential Reapers by my mark upon their soul?” Tony nodded, allowing
one thruster to die momentarily so he could rub his hand over his chest where his own was. “Well,
that streak of white on Phil’s soul is a mark as well… just not mine.”

Tony shot the Master of Death a stunned look for a second before a pensive look crossed his face.
He turned back to study the image again, and after half a minute he spoke again. “I might be
talking out my ass here… but I think it might be life.” Getting a gesture to continue, Tony pointed
to the pure white. “Sunniva… her soul is like that-- pure, untainted. Nate’s soul has some color to
it, but there’s a lot of that same pure white. I’ve never seen it in an adult… but there it is on Phil’s,
and he’s come back from the dead…”

Hadrian gave a soft laugh as he put the sheet away. “You’re absolutely right, Anthony. That’s
exactly what it is.” He tossed the folder into the air, where it disappeared in a shower of sparks. His
face became pensive as he looked towards the Compound again. “Considering the fact that Phil
carries my elder sister’s mark, I’d be a fool to reclaim him.”

“Your sister??”

A laugh erupted from the emerald eyed man, and he shot the stunned Reaper a grin. “Life and
death are primordial truths, Anthony… but without life, there cannot be death. And even if she is
directly related to Mortis and not myself, we all consider each other kin.” Hadrian reached out as if
to grip something before pulling a cup of tea from thin air, taking a sip.

Tony took a second or two to compartmentalize that information before turning his attention back
to Hadrian. “So, does that mean someone like you is hanging around here, Chief?”

Hadrian nodded in confirmation. “Their position would be similar to what mine is with Mortis. The
problem comes from the fact that I have no idea who that person could be.” He took another sip of
his tea, a disgruntled look on his face. “And even if I were to ask her, Gaea wouldn’t tell me. She
would smile like she does, pat my head and tell me that finding the answers is more fulfilling.” He
threw his unoccupied hand in the air with a huff. “I mean, I agree with that, but a hint would be
nice at least.”
The put upon look on the Master of Death’s face as he drank his tea prompted a laugh out of Tony. “Don’t worry, Chief. There are eight Reapers currently in residence on this world-- we’ll figure it out.”

“I have faith in all of you, Anthony. Don’t concern yourself too much with it, however-- Gaea and life as a whole are inherently good forces, and I’d focus your efforts on Thanos and his efforts to destroy it.” He reached out and pulled another cup out of thin air and handing it to Tony, who activated his shoulder repulsors so he could take the cup. “That brings us to the third reason I’m here. I wanted to check in on you and see how you’re holding up. You’ve been doing remarkably well, and I cannot begin to tell you how proud I am at how far you’ve come.”

Tony nodded and launched into an enthusiastic discussion with the man, who listened attentively and responded enthusiastically. The genius thanked whatever deity/deities that were out there that he’d found such a supportive, amazing family with Hadrian and his chosen, that he was considered worthy of being one of them. If the Master of Death noticed the way Tony unconsciously reached up to rub his chest right over his mark every once in a while, he didn’t draw attention to it.

“And he managed to pick up Thor’s hammer, Chief!” The genius’ whiskey brown eyes were alight with joy, pride, and love for his adopted son as he recounted what Hadrian had missed during the events in Asgard a few days prior. “You came in a few minutes after it happened, but Pete just snatched that thing off the ground and bitch slapped Odin into the wall with it like it was the easiest thing in the universe! God, Chief, I’m so lucky to have a kid like him in my life, him and Stephen. They’ve made me better, I love them both so damn much.”

Emerald eyes were soft with familial love as Hadrian reached over to gently squeeze the man’s shoulder. “And you deserve their love as well, Anthony. You, all three of you, are absolutely remarkable and brilliant in your own ways. But together… Well, I look forward to seeing what you all can do for the world, how brightly its’ future will shine.”

Tony gave the man a smile filled with breathtaking gratitude and love. “I never thanked you, Chief… You believed in me when I lost faith in myself.”

“I accept your thanks, Anthony, though I never needed it. Yours is a light far too bright to be put out by the words and actions of others… I’m glad I have the opportunity to help you shine.” He gestured for the genius to follow him to land on the roof. Once the nanotech had retreated, the Master of Death pulled Tony into a tight hug, one the brunette returned more than willingly. They remained like that for a minute before Hadrian pulled away with a kind smile. “Now, my last order of business was to check on Wade. He may not be one of my Reapers, but he is still one of my Champions, and Mortis was most displeased with what Nicholas Fury has been up to.”

A small ‘ah’ escaped Tony as he led Hadrian into the building and towards the medical wing.
“That’s right, Mortis and Wade are drinking buddies, I heard.”

Hadrian chuckled and nodded in confirmation. “Indeed, he seems to have a great deal of fondness for the ‘merc with a mouth’. Fury is in for a rough time when he passes on, I promise you that.”

“Good.” Tony growled, orange flickering in his eyes as anger surged within him. “I told that bastard to keep away from us, and he didn’t listen… you should have seen Wade, Chief, there was so much blood—”

The genius was stopped and pulled back into Hadrian’s arms, and it took Tony a moment to realize he was shaking and had tears in his eyes. “Easy, Anthony,” Hadrian soothed him, rubbing his back soothingly. “He’s going to be alright, and Fury will pay for his actions in both life and death. Take a few deep breaths.”

After a minute, the genius pulled away and shot the man a sheepish smile as they began to walk again. “Sorry Chief…”

Hadrian gently rested his hand on the back of Tony’s neck, giving it a gentle squeeze. “He hurt you, and he hurt the people you love. You have every right to be upset, so don’t apologize for your emotions.”

Tony nodded at that, quietly leading them the rest of the way to Medical. He peeked in once they arrived, finding Bridget by Wade’s bedside tapping away on a tablet. “Bri,” He called softly, catching her attention.

The restoration master looked up from the tablet, amethyst eyes lighting up at the sight of Tony leading Hadrian into the room. “Master Hadrian, hello! I wasn’t aware you were making a house call!” She called softly to him, turning to face them fully.

“Hello to you as well, Bridget. I wanted to check in on everyone, given the events of the last few days, and Mortis wanted to make sure his favorite drinking buddy wasn’t going to be joining him on a permanent basis.” Hadrian gave the woman a brief hug before sweeping to Wade’s bedside to check on the man. “His recovery is going well?”

Bridget nodded with a smile. “The more his healing factor kicked back in, the faster the drugs were burned out. He should be good to go by morning.”
The Master of Death nodded before movement on the bed drew their attention. Wade shifted a small amount and gave a raspy hum, hazel eyes fluttering open for a second. “Whozat…”

“Wade, you’re awake.” Tony spoke soothingly to the merc, relief in his eyes as he joined Hadrian by the man’s bed. “You’re back at the Compound, and it’s currently about 10:30 at night. You feeling okay?”

Wade was quiet for a moment before replying, ‘Feelin’ a little fuzzy… kinda sore, too.”

Emerald eyes were compassionate as Hadrian put the palm of one hand over his forehead. “The soreness may be from your healing factor kicking back into full gear after being dulled for a while. Stay still.” A moment later, an iridescent shimmer covered the man for a few seconds before fading.

A huff of relief escaped Wade as a soothing numbness washed over him. “Hey, Harry. Tell Morty the next time you see him, I want a shot or two of that firewhiskey stuff. Need something strong after this…”

Hadrian chuckled kindly, pulling his hand away from the man. “I will, Wade. Get some sleep, you can talk to everyone in the morning.” Wade gave a drowsy hum before his eyes slid shut, dropping back into the land of Nod. Hadrian watched him for a moment before reaching to grab something out of thin air to give to Bridget. “Make sure he only gets that once he’s been cleared, alright?”

Tony took a peek at the label before grinning up at the Master of Death. “Ogden’s Old, 1840? That’s one of the best bottles you have, Chief!”

Bridget nodded at that as well, tucking the bottle under her arm. “Either Mortis was really worried, you simply feel like spoiling him, or some combination of both.”

“And I say, why can’t we have both?”

“Oh God, the Master of Death has been on Tumblr. The world is coming to an end.”
“GET IT AWAY FROM ME!!”

Clint toppled off the couch from how hard he jumped, heart racing as Nat surged to her feet as well and pulling a knife out in preparation. Behind them, they could hear Scott hacking up a lung and Sam gently pounding his back to help dislodge the coffee he’d just inhaled. “What the *fuck* was that??” Clint asked as he scrambled to his feet.

Sam held a napkin out to Scott as he struggled to catch his breath, getting a thankful nod from the engineer. “Sounded like Maximoff. Wonder what her major malfunction is today.”

Everyone rolled their eyes at his words, but they didn’t get a chance to reply before there was the sound of a commotion in the hall. Everyone quickly made their way to the door to peek out, watching as several members of the Dora Milaje restrained a violently writhing Maximoff.

“Miss Maximoff, cease this behavior at once!”

“GET THAT DUCK AWAY FROM ME!! IT’S FOLLOWING ME, I KNOW IT!!”

“Miss Maximoff, there’s no duck here, rubber or otherwise!”

Wanda screamed incoherently as she continued to thrash, prompting one of the guards to bark something to another. As she sprinted off in the other direction, Clint turned to look at the others. “Forget a malfunction-- I think she’s *broken.*”

That prompted laughter from everyone which was momentarily cut off by Rogers’ voice as he yelped, “What are you doing to her?!” They turned their attention to the man and burst out laughing again at the sight of the bald, eyebrowless man jogging towards the guards and Wanda. He shot them a glare for a second before making to help Wanda, only to be stopped by one of the guards.

“Mr. Rogers, stand back. Miss Maximoff appears to be having a psychotic episode, and our efforts to get through to her have failed so far-- we’re sedating her for her safety, and ours.”

Steve’s eyes snapped up to where the guard was returning with a doctor, who was holding a syringe. “But she’s just a kid, this isn’t her fault! Stark has been torturing us with these ducks, he did this to her!”
The guard gave him a hard look, even as the doctor plunged the needle into a still screaming Maximoff. “Mr. Rogers, we’ve looked at the footage, studied it extensively, and there is. No. Duck! And what triggered this episode is irrelevant in the face of the danger she poses to both herself and the people around her! If her powers were not being suppressed currently, I have no doubt she would have injured or even killed someone by now!”

“It has not been easy to do, either.” Another Dora with her knee pinning Wanda to the ground huffed, waiting until Maximoff had gone completely still before rising. “Her powers react with the strength of her emotions, and I was barely keeping it in check.” She turned her attention to the other side of the hall, where T’Challa was approaching while being flanked by Okoye and Shuri. “My King, I must recommend that Maximoff’s powers be suppressed for a time-- were I not in the area to assist when this episode happened, I cannot guarantee that there would not have been injuries, or even fatalities.”

T’Challa nodded at that, turning his head to Okoye for a moment. “I am in agreement with this plan. Okoye, take Maximoff to one of the dampening cells and see that it is done.”

Rogers’ eyes widened in horror as they gathered Maximoff up and whisked her away. “Why are you doing this?? She’s just a kid, she doesn’t know what she’s doing!”

“She isn’t a child, Rogers!” Natasha snapped as she stepped into the hall. “She’s 25 years old, she’s considered an adult no matter where you are in the world.”

Clint stepped out and pressed himself behind her, glaring at the super-soldier. “If she’s a kid as you say, though, why was she an active member of the Avengers?”

A snort escaped Sam at that. “Considering everything else we’ve learned, I wouldn’t be surprised if ‘Captain America’ condoned child soldiers.”

Steve made a noise of anger, frustration, and disgust before storming down the hall, and they heard the door to his room slam shut a moment later. T’Challa rolled his eyes and bid the group goodbye before sweeping down the hall in the other direction. After a moment of quiet, Shuri shot the group a knowing grin before skipping jauntily down the hall, humming under her breath.

Scott watched her leave, eyes narrowed in consideration. “Guys, do you get the feeling Princess Shuri might be in on this whole thing with the ducks?”
There was a moment of quiet before Natasha dipped her head. “She is. I’m not complaining though.” Seeing the looks she was getting, she explained, “We’ve all been victims of the ducks… but the only destructive ones have been used on Maximoff and Rogers.”

A soft hum escaped Clint as he nodded. “That’s a good point. But it raises the question… if Shuri’s in on Tony’s plan with these ducks… why haven’t we been hit with anything bad yet?”

There was a few seconds of contemplation before they all split off in different directions. Clint slowly meandered back to his and Nat’s rooms, eyeing the desk as he walked in. He gave a soft sigh as he took a seat on the chair, reaching for a spare piece of paper and a pen.

‘Dear Tony and Laura…’

Chapter End Notes

Dorogaya - 'Precious' or 'Darling'
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Wade deals with the fallout from his ordeal-- fortunately, he has endless support from his team and friends in coping. A meeting with the Accords Committee results in a full pardon for Loki and his signature on the Accords, along with his two eldest, James finally being announced as being free from his trigger words, and the impending return of the Rogue Avengers... with conditions, of course.

Meanwhile, the Rogues finally hear the news regarding Emma Stark, the relationship between Tony and Stephen, and the pardon for Loki. Reactions are... mixed. Clint gets messages from Tony, Loki, and Laura, and is faced with a choice on how to react.

(Hogun is a good ambassador. Like there was ever any doubt about that.)

((Nate says his first word and everyone loses their minds.))

Chapter Notes

IT'S DONE!! FINALLY!! This chapter took way too long to get out, in my opinion, but things have happened the last few days that have knocked me on my ass... AGAIN. BUT, here it is, my Vassals! ENJOY!!

Don't forget to vote in the poll! Five days left to vote!!
https://linkto.run/p/SLUICNUR

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sound of the door to the Medical Wing sliding open softly was enough to tug Wade from sleep, and he turned his head a little towards the sound as voices floated through the quiet room.

“I think he’s still sleeping, Rem.”

“I know that, but I just… I need to see that he’s okay, Pete. He was being tortured, I have to make sure--!”

“Rem, how did you find out about Wade being tortured?”

“Er…”
“You were hiding in the music hall again, weren’t you.”

“I can’t help that no one looks around, Jör! Dammit, Slei, stop laughing!”

Wade couldn’t help the soft chuckle that escaped him, allowing his eyes to slide open and gaze at the group that had frozen in place, eyes wide as they looked at him. “I’m fine, Rem. I’m made of tougher stuff than that.” He huffed as he pushed himself up from a reclining position, just in time to catch the mutant as he lunged at him in a flying tackle hug. Wade immediately wrapped an arm around him, quickly maneuvering to use the other arm to embrace Peter as he came around the other side for a hug as well. “Hey, no tears now!” He soothed them both as he felt Rem’s shoulders hitch with stifled sobs, Peter trembling while he clutched to the fabric of his tank top. The thought of either teen being subjected to his scars made him slightly uneasy, but right now they both needed the comfort more than he needed to cover up.

Slei and Jör glanced at each other for a moment before approaching as well. “You worried us greatly, Wade.” Slei said in a soft tone, reaching out to grab the merc’s hand.

“Fury is lucky he’s still alive. Uncle Tony was so damn pissed.” The green-haired godling shuddered for a moment as he moved to where Peter was, sitting by Wade’s side and leaning his head on his shoulder.

Peter sniffed and nodded at that. “Iron Dad was… he wasn’t just angry, guys-- he was terrified.” Everyone’s attention turned to him, and the spiderling snuggled further into Wade as he continued. “I don’t know why, but he was so angry and upset about the whole thing, but hearing about your healing factor being screwed with…” he swallowed hard for a second. “Doctor Dad had to just… hold him for a while-- he was in tears.”

Guilt lanced through Wade for a second before he pushed it away-- he hadn’t asked to be kidnapped, and he was finally starting to learn to put the blame where it was due… and the fault for this was fully on the shoulders of Nick Fury. However… he still owed it to three of the people in the room to explain why his team leader, uncle, and dad was so upset. “I know why he was upset.” He said in a somber voice, catching their attention. He pulled away from the hug and took a deep breath, looking towards Rem with a knowing look. The mutant’s face lit up in startled realization, even as he turned his hazel eyes back to the rest. “Guys, there’s no easy way to say this…” He took a few deep breaths to steady himself. “Tony and the rest were upset over what Fury did to my healing factor because, in reality… it’s the only thing keeping me alive.”

Peter reacted violently, ripping himself away from Wade to stare at him in horror. “W-What?! What do you mean it’s the only thing keeping you alive?! You’re dying?!”
The merc dropped his eyes, unable to look into those agonized chocolate brown orbs. “Rem knows this story… but a few years ago, I was diagnosed with cancer in my lungs, brain, prostate, and liver.”

Peter went deathly pale within seconds. “How bad?” He whispered, something horribly broken in his tone.

“... Terminal.”

Rem reached forward to grab Peter and pull him into a tight hug as he nearly toppled over. “We didn’t even think about telling anyone because we’ve been dealing with it for so long. His healing factor holds it back, so we didn’t consider it that big a deal. We never meant to keep it a secret.”

Green eyes with black sclera were filled with worry as Jör turned his attention to Wade. “And Fury negated your healing factor-- Norns, no wonder Uncle Tony was worried! That could have killed you!”

That got a nod from Sleipnir as he moved to rub Wade’s knee. “Is there nothing that can be done? Surely, there must be a solution of some kind…” He sounded distressed, brown eyes filled with sadness and a bit of fear.

Wade looked towards the two godlings with a small, reassuring smile. “Yeah, Bridget told me they have an idea on what to do-- she, Bruce, Vision, and Stephen have been working on it non-stop.” He sighed and hesitantly reached for Peter, getting the teen’s attention. “Pete, both of your dads are working their asses off to help me, so trust them to do their best, okay?”

The brunette pulled himself away from Rem to throw himself against Wade, who immediately pulled him close. “I-I don’t want you to die, Wade! I can’t lose you, I need you here!” He sobbed brokenly, pressing his head into the merc’s shoulder to focus on the sound of Wade’s pulse.

Hazel eyes filled with tears for a moment as Wade tightened his grip on the teen. “No, spider-baby, I’m not going anywhere, I promise. I’m staying right here, don’t cry.”

It took several minutes of soothing words and touches before Peter was calm again. Rem shot Wade a knowing smile before gently taking Pete’s hand. “Let’s go get something warm for us to drink, Pete. You came home from school late yesterday and we passed out in the media room for
only a few hours... It’ll help you calm down, I promise.” Pete sniffed and nodded, taking a few
seconds to hug Wade again before peeling himself away from the merc and allowing Rem to lead
him from the room.

Wade waited for a second to make sure the duo was really gone before leaning back and pressing a
hand over his mouth, tears welling up in his eyes as he tried to stifle a sniff. Between being
abducted, tortured, interrogated, and rescued within the past two days, his emotions had finally
reached a breaking point, and the phantom sensation of a cold gun barrel being pressed against his
head finally sent him over the edge. A wracking sob finally escaped him, and within a second or
two he was being sandwiched between Slei and Jör.

Sleipnir rested his chin on Wade’s head as his younger brother pressed against his front. “Shh,
you’re safe here, Wade. We will not let anything hurt you here, we swear it.” The eldest soothed
him, Jör echoing the promise as well as they comforted him. Slei shot his brother a look over
Wade’s shoulder, and the green-haired male nodded in understanding at the expression on the
erlder’s face. For Wade to break down like he was, something else had to have happened,
something he didn’t want Rem and Peter knowing about. After a while, the merc finally managed
to settle a bit, so Slei spoke again. “Wade, what else happened aboard the ship? I’ve never, ever
seen you like this before.”

“You don’t have to tell us if you don’t want to…” His younger brother added, pressing his head
into Wade’s shoulder in a comforting motion, “but something is really hurting you, and we want to
help…”

Hazel eyes filled with tears again, but Wade’s voice remained mostly steady as he whispered, “H-
He had the gun to my head-- Fury was gonna pull the trigger; he was taunting me about my healing
factor being compromised… I wouldn’t tell him anything, and he just…”

The brothers shot each other alarmed looks before pulling the merc even tighter. “Jævla fitte!”
Slei growled in anger, eyes flashing.

His brother nodded in agreement, lips curled in a furious snarl. “Do you want us to kill him,
Wade?”

Slei nodded in agreement with that idea. “Just say the word and it will be done.”

Wade looked at the two men with shocked, watery eyes before a soft laugh escaped him. “I think
that’s the first time someone has offered to unalive someone for me.”
The sudden laughter from Wade prompted both godlings to relax, and Sleí impulsively brushed a kiss to the top of Wade’s head. “Vi ville gi deg verden hvis du bare spurte…” He murmured just loud enough for Wade to catch.

His brother grinned knowingly, and he shifted to give the merc a tender kiss on his cheek. “Du er stjernene til vår natteliv.” He breathed softly as he pulled away, a tender smile on his face.

Wade looked completely poleaxed, and he barely reacted as Sleí and Jör slid from the bed. “We’ll come by in a bit with some food. You need the energy to recover.” The eldest told him with an almost adoring smile, and he and his younger brother silently swept from the room with knowing grins.

After a few seconds, Wade lifted his hand to touch where Jör had gently kissed him, and without realizing it a silly grin slid across his face. He then proceeded to jump a foot in the air when, from the corner of the medical wing, Phil called in an amused tone, “You have it so bad for those four.”

“Mother Fu-- !”

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“Good morning, Wade! It’s good to see you doing better!”

The merc’s head shot up from where he was getting one last checkup from Bridget, expression brightening when he saw the three team leaders approaching him. “Hey guys, I’m glad to be feeling better!” He allowed the Restoration Master to give him a few last minute instructions before standing to approach them. “So, I guess you all have some que-- Oof!” He suddenly found himself in an enormous hug from all three people, and he stood there shocked for a second as he tried to comprehend what was happening.

Stephen let out a soft chuckle as he pulled away for a moment to look at him. “You worried the hell out of us-- just let us enjoy this for a second.” After a moment, Wade nodded and relaxed into the group hug.

After a minute, they all pulled apart and Wade stretched as they made their way out of the medical wing. “So… debrief, I take it?”
Crimson eyes slid over to the merc, a soft smile on Minowa’s face. “Indeed, but we are foregoing the usual meeting room.”

Wade’s brow furrowed in confusion before he let out a small ‘ah’ as he was led into a room with pastel blue walls, soft grey carpet, and several soft squishy chairs littered around. “I haven’t been in any of the quiet rooms for a debrief before… was in one when Logan came in, but…”

“After what happened, we thought this would be a good setting.” Tony told him with a small smile, flopping down next to Stephen in an enormous bean bag chair. He waited until everyone was seated in a close circle before his expression grew somber. “Okay, whenever you’re ready, Wade. No rush, just take your time.”

The merc swallowed hard and leaned forward onto his elbows, eyes going far away. “The mission… the whole thing was a setup from the get go. They took me and Fury started interrogating me… h-he didn’t start with torture until two days before you guys found me.”

Stephen shifted on the bean bag so he could gently grip the merc’s knee. “Did he re-administer the drug for your healing factor at that point?”

“Yeah. Fury let it flush from my system, but once he realized he wasn’t going to get anything by just asking, he took more drastic measures.”

Minowa scooted her own chair closer to them. “What kind of questions did he ask, Wade?” She asked softly, reaching out to rub his back soothingly.

Wade took a deep breath to center himself. “He mostly asked questions about you, Minowa, and Zevrael. He wanted Rem’s identity, too-- in terms of who Maelstrom is, I mean. He… mentioned Rogers a few times--” He suddenly gasped, sitting straight and looking towards Tony. “Tony, he talked about the pardons for the Rogues, and whispering in the committee’s ears about letting Rogers lead again!”

The genius swore and surged to his feet, eyes flickering orange. “That matches with what Maria said she heard Fury muttering about under his breath! That son of a bitch, we need to go to the committee and put a stop to that shit immediately.”

Stephen rose as well, a grim look on his face. “We have to go out there for an emergency session
anyway regarding getting a pardon for Loki. We can make it very clear while we’re there that there are certain rules that must be obeyed regarding the Rogues and the New Avengers.”

Minowa nodded at that, though she remained sitting with Wade. “We will need an actual list before we go before the committee, though. Even then, there are only two whom we really need to be concerned over.”

“Rogers and the female Maximoff, yeah.” Tony paced for a second, thinking deeply. “I don’t want either of them near any New Avengers or SI property unless by invitation from Minowa, Stephen, or myself to start with.”

“And neither of them is to be near you, period,” Stephen interjected in a firm voice. “Considering Wanda has stated that she wants to kill you, and Steve nearly did so, that’s one rule I will not compromise on.” He pulled his soulmate into his arms, eyes narrowing. “You shouldn’t have to occupy the same space as someone who abused and assaulted you, and the witch has played in both your head and Bruce’s.”

Something feral and angry flashed in Minowa’s eyes at the mention of her lover. “If that little folaaskiin thinks she can come into our home and twist the mind of its’ residents, she will quickly find herself a place in the Void!”

Tony sighed and snuggled into Stephen’s arms as Levi wrapped around them both. “Okay, that’s fine.” He thought for a little longer. “They can’t call the Compound in any way. If they want to reach out to us, they have to do it through a liaison, and only through screened letters. Otherwise, we’ll be dealing with them calling all the time.” He huffed and put his head back. “They’ll probably need a handler of their own, but for now… let’s put candidates on the back burner.”

“You shouldn’t have to pay for any of their shit either.” Wade reminded him with a furrow in his brow.

A soft chuckle escaped them all, Tony nodding at the man’s words. “Nah, not a chance in hell am I paying for them to live comfy.” He slowly sank into a seat near Wade again. “But we managed to get thoroughly distracted. Wade, I’m thinking we need to take you off the active roster for a while. Now hold on, hear me out!” He took a breath to gather his thoughts. “Wade, no matter how you want to try and play it off, you were tortured and interrogated for a few days, and at one point had your life actively threatened. I need you to do at least three psych evals with Bri, if only to reassure the Accords Committee that you’re okay. And you need a chance to come to terms with what happened. We love you, Wade, and we want you to be at your best when you fight with us. This isn’t a permanent thing, and you’ll be back on active before you know it.”
Wade huffed and looked at the ground. “Wasn’t as bad as getting my spine ripped out.”

Stephen shuddered at the memory of when that piece of information had come out before sitting next to the merc and putting a shaky hand on his shoulder. “We know, Wade, but what you went through classifies as torture regardless... That’s going to leave mental and emotional scars, even if there aren’t physical ones.”

“What about my individual missions?”

Minowa shook her head at that, a small frown on her face. “Those especially. I do not wish to imagine what could happen if you were on the field alone and something triggered you in the middle of whatever it is you were trying to accomplish.”

Wade’s eyes went slightly wide at that, the merc pausing for a moment before he spoke again. “I need the income, though! I don’t get a paycheck if I don’t accept missions and I have bills that I need to pay- like my credit cards…”

Blinking once, Tony looked at the merc in incomprehension. “Wait, but what about your contract with--” A moment later, he groaned and ran a hand down his face. “Right, I never got to talk to you about it… fucking Sinister’s lab…” He reached out in front of him and opened his pocket dimension, pulling out a tablet and tapping a few things on it. “So, there’s a paycheck that comes with being an active member of the New Avengers, and you should have been receiving it for about two months now… The whole thing with Sinister and storming his lab made me forget, and that’s on me. Here,” He passed the device over to Wade, who took it with a nod. “Just pop in a number, blank check style. I’ll make sure you get your back pay, and it counts as a salary income. The temporary suspension will have no impact on your pay-- I want you guys safe and healthy, and I won’t penalize you for needing that.” There was something truly raw and open in the expression he got from the merc, as if the man was completely unused to people looking out for him. Wade did some calculations in his head before typing in a number, handing it back to Tony once he was done. The genius raised an incredulous eyebrow at the number. “Come on, Wade, you’re worth so much more than that! Here, let’s throw a few zeroes in there…”

A soft chuckle escaped Stephen as he stopped the man from speaking up. “Wade, really, It’s okay. You’re a member of our crazy ass family, and we want you taken care of.” He glanced at Tony before leaning in to whisper conspiratorially, “And since Rem is going to school with Peter after winter break, consider it a bonus for playing bodyguard on any field trips that might happen.”

Hazel eyes finally softened as Wade laughed quietly. “Alright, fine, I can do that.” Tony passed the tablet back to him, and the merc signed the pad with a bit of a flourish.
“Probably should have told you to read the fine print-- your credit cards and bills are paid off along with receiving the back pay as of you signing.”

“Tony!!”

The genius ran from the room, cackling away at the screech of protest from behind him.

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‘Nervous’ didn’t even begin to cover how Loki felt as he checked his appearance in the mirror again. He was due to appear in front of the Accords Committee in a little over an hour, and the Trickster God felt just about ready to vomit at the prospect. He knew that the evidence proving his innocence was solid and proven to be authentic, but he had still caused the people of Midgard a great deal of pain and suffering, even if he had been little more than a puppet at the time. In the end, it would be them to decide his fate.

A set of arms sliding around his waist from behind startled him for a moment. “Loki, you’re thinking too much again,” Laura reassured him with a tender smile, giving him a squeeze.

The emerald-eyed man chuckled softly as he turned in her arms, bending to give the woman a loving kiss. “I cannot help it, min gudinne,” He admitted softly, gazing into her soft brown eyes as if they held the answers to the universe. “I fear for the safety of myself, you, and our children should the Committee not decide in my favor.”

The brunette smiled adoringly at Loki, reaching up to bring their foreheads to rest together. “I have faith in Tony, Stephen, and Minowa to make sure you get the pardon you deserve. You and your children will be safe and free, I swear it.”

Loki sent a quick prayer of gratitude to the Norns for having such a loving, supportive woman at his side as he bent the rest of the way to kiss her again. “Well, if you say it, it must be so.” He murmured against her lips, pulling a laugh out of Laura.

“And don’t you forget it, my Prince!” The duo kissed again before Laura gently prodded him towards the door. “Don’t worry about Fen and Hela today, Holly and I will watch them. Now go on, shoo!”
Feeling much lighter in spirits, Loki gave her a dramatic bow before striding away, pausing only for a moment to blow her a kiss over his shoulder. She laughed and pantomimed catching it and holding it close to her chest. The ebony-haired man grinned brightly as he turned the corner, quickly making his way to the common room where his companions were waiting.

Tony looked up from where he was standing with Stephen, grinning brightly at the god as he entered. “Lookin’ good, Rock of Ages! You ready?”

The question got a confident nod in reply. “Indeed. Is everyone ready?”

There was a ‘click’ as Minowa popped in the Dark Opal core into her armor, allowing the gauntlets and boots to form over her body. “Almost. We are still waiting on Slei and Jör-- ah, speak of the Dremora…”

Loki turned to see his two eldest sons step into the room, dressed in red and green variations of armor. Sleipnir’s was that of a battlemage, Jörmungandr’s better suited for stealth and rogue type work and fighting styles. “You both look magnificent!” He praised the duo, eyes shining with pride.

“Thank you, father! Uncle Anthony worked many long hours on these pieces, which we are most appreciative of.” Sleipnir aimed the last part at Tony, dipping his head with a thankful smile.

Jör nodded as well, fiddling with one sleeve. “He managed to put some pretty nifty features into them, too. Check it out!” He reached into what looked like a fold in the fabric at his elbow, producing a throwing knife from within.

Tony waved off the thanks that were called to him, a knowing smile on his face. “You’re welcome, guys. I want you all to be safe and comfortable, so the extra time was well worth it.” He looked around for a moment, a furrow in his brow. “We’re just waiting on one other person… now where is--” A sudden rumble filled the air, and the genius’ face lit up as a beam of rainbow energy hit the ground outside the window. “Ah, there he is! Perfect timing.”

A minute later, the doors swung open to admit Thor with Hogun a step behind him. “My friends!” He boomed with a massive smile on his face. “I am glad to see you all in good health!” He turned to Loki and his sons, his smile softening quite a bit. “Good to see you again, Loki. You look very nice today.”
The trickster god blinked at his words before dipping his head with the tiniest smile. “Thank you, Thor. I see you acquired armor befitting a king of Asgard.”

Thor chuckled and tapped on his breastplate with his knuckles. “Indeed, though I see your sons are not without protection, themselves.”

“Indeed not, Uncle.” Sleipnir approached them, holding out his hand for the blonde. “Though I would imagine our armor came from a much different source.”

Jör nodded at his words, also holding out a hand for Thor. “Uncle Tony made ours. It’s pretty awesome.”

The king shot Tony an impressed look. “Did you, Anthony? That is most impressive! I should not be surprised, but this is the first I have felt magic and power sewn into a garment in such a way. You are a man of many talents!”

A laugh escaped Tony as he stepped forward as well, Stephen and Minowa a step behind him. “Yeah, you could definitely say that. Good to see you again, Point Break.”

“And you as well, along with your companions.” He shifted his eyes to Minowa and paused for a second before dipping his head. “Greetings to you, Lady Dragonborn. Fair wind and clear skies to you this day.”

Minowa blinked in shock for a second before a pleased grin slid across her face. “It seems you have taken diplomacy to heart as much as your ambassador has. Paaz shul grind, Thur Strunrah.” She turned her eyes to Hogun, who bowed to her with respect. “You have done your job admirably so far.”

“Thank you, Lady Dragonborn.” Hogun said softly before turning his eyes to Loki, who tensed a tiny bit. “Well met, Prince Loki. I hope you and your children have been well.” He greeted him with a kind smile, giving him a small bow as well.

Loki gave a soft groan under his breath at the reminder of his status. “Well met to you as well, Hogun. We’re doing well, thank you for asking.” He turned his emerald eyes to Thor, who was beaming at them. “The day cannot come soon enough when you produce heirs, Thor. I do not relish the idea of sitting on the throne.”
A choked laugh escaped Tony at the reminder. “Okay, before we get too deep into *that* rabbit hole, let’s get going. This little unbirthday tea party in Wonderland won’t wait for us forever, and the table is already filled with march hares and mad hatters!”

“... *Zeymahi*, what?”

“Don’t worry about it, Min. I’ll get you the books later.”

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Tony grinned unabashedly as he watched Loki embrace his family, tears of joy running down their faces as the Trickster clutched a piece of paper in his hand. After being presented with the evidence and eyewitness accounts from everyone, including the new King of Asgard, Loki was declared innocent of all charges and had immediately signed the Accords when presented with the opportunity. Slei and Jör had done so as well, both hoping to act as a possible backup to the New Avengers if the need arose. The Committee had been strangely charmed by all three; between Loki’s genuine remorse and eagerness to prove himself, Sleipnir’s gentle compassion and positive attitude, and Jörmungandr’s quick wit and sense of humor. They quickly won over the various members of the committee, and Tony was glad they were now free to live life as they chose without fear from either Asgard or the people of Midgard.

The squeal of a child drew his attention back to the present, and he looked up to see Laura enter the room and set Nathaniel on his feet, who immediately toddled over to Loki with his arms outstretched and an enormous smile on his face. The Trickster instantly dropped to his knees and held out his arms for the toddler, a grin still firmly on his face. Nate fell into his arms with a happy babble, and as Loki rose with him in his arms and praise on his lips, he squealed, “Dada!”

The room as a collective froze, staring at them in shock. The silence was finally broken by Laura, who gave a watery laugh and announced with tears in her eyes, “That was his first word.” The sound of Loki choking on a sob was drowned out by the squeals and ‘aw’s that erupted around the room, and the ebony-haired man was quickly engulfed in a group hug from Laura, Cooper, Lila, and his own kids.

The genius glanced over to see Stephen having his tears wiped away by an insistent Levi. “FRIDAY, if you didn’t get that on video, I will donate you to the MIT freshman programming class.” He called up to the ceiling quietly, knowing the AI heard him despite the noise.

“No, you wouldn’t, Boss-Man. You love me too much for that.”
“... Yeah, okay, you're right. But you got the footage, right?”

“As if there were any doubt, Boss-Man.”

Tony dipped his head with a smile towards the nearest camera, a call of his name pulling his attention back a second later. James was approaching him with a nervous smile on his face, Bruce pressed against his side as a calming presence. “Tony, did the council say anything about my progress?”

The genius’s face broke into an enormous grin, and he wordlessly reached into his suit and removed a folder, passing it to the assassin. Icy blue eyes filled with a tiny bit of trepidation as he flipped it open, though the look quickly changed to shocked joy and relief as he read through the contents. “Congratulations, James,” He said softly, a truly happy smile on his face as the brunette turned his gaze to him again. “You are officially a free man.”

Bruce swept him into a hug as the sniper burst into joyful tears, which quickly got the attention of Logan and Minowa, who joined them a moment or two later. James managed to tell them the good news before breaking into sobs again prompting an enormous group hug from his partners.

Tony made to quietly slip away but yelped when a gauntlet shot out and pulled him into the hug as well. “Don’t even think about it, Zeymahi.” Minowa grinned at him, a knowing sparkle in her eyes. “This wouldn’t have been possible without you. You can put up with our gratitude for a minute.”

“Min’s right, Tony.” Logan said, grabbing the genius’ shoulder gently with one hand. “You gave James his life back, and you deserve the thanks we have to give for that, so shaddup and deal with the hug.”

Though he tried to play it off and ‘reluctantly’ give into the affection, Tony couldn’t help the surge of joy and confidence that came from being at the receiving end of someone’s wholehearted gratitude. Finally, he pulled away with an “Alright, alright, you’re happy, I’m happy, we’re all happy. We still need to sit down and discuss what else happened!” He called the last bit to the room as a whole, causing a quiet to settle over them. “Let’s sit down, guys. Pizza has been ordered and should be here soon, and I want to get through at least a part of this before it arrives.”

Everyone quickly made their way to a seat in the common room, getting comfortable as the trio of team leaders conferred for a moment. Finally, they made their way up front and Tony clapped
Once. “So, other than Loki and James being pardoned/cleared, there was another big development that happened during the meeting—pards for the Rogues are a few days away from being approved.” There was a rumble of murmurs through the room, though no one was actively freaking out yet—it was a testament to the trust they all had for Tony, Stephen, Minowa, and their combined leadership. “While the Committee wanted them all to stay at the Compound originally, that idea was shot down very quickly by us. It was pointed out that I shouldn’t have to be forced to reside in the same place as someone who has assaulted me and actively threatened my life. As such, alternate accommodations will be made for Steve Rogers and Wanda Maximoff. As for the other four, they’ll be staying in a separate wing of the Compound during their probationary period. It was decided that they would stay here for a number of reasons. First, we need to make sure that Clint’s mind is free from what Maximoff has been doing to him.”

Stephen nodded at that, taking over the announcement for a moment. “Loki and I will be making sure there aren’t any holes in his psyche or aura, and we’ll be monitoring his behavior closely.” He shifted his eyes to Laura for a moment, and she sat straighter at the motion. “Laura, Clint will not be allowed to cross the Compound into anywhere the kids may be. It’s up to you to take them to see him.” He shifted his gaze to her partner, who gave him a nod and a knowing smile.

“Romanoff will need to be monitored closely as well.” Minowa spoke up, drawing their gazes to her. “She has been known to switch sides on a whim based on what will benefit her in the long run, so we will need to express to her that such behavior will not be tolerated here.”

A soft snort escaped James, and he dipped his head to his female lover. “Don’t worry, Dorogaya, I know what makes Natalia tick. I’ll be able to pick up on if she’s lying before it even comes out of her mouth.”

Tony’s eyes narrowed for a moment at the name before a look of realization crossed his face. “I forgot that you knew her from the Red Room… We may make your first unofficial assignment just watching her.” James nodded again with a smirk on his face. “We’re not anticipating any problems with Scott Lang or Sam Wilson.”

“Oh, that’s gonna get confusing real fast.” Wade grumbled from where he was sandwiched between Rem and Peter.

Laughter erupted from everyone at the merc’s grumbling. “Well, you may not have to put up with either for long. Depending on how the probationary period goes, Rhodey might have a place for them on the Disaster Relief team. If they’re a good fit, they’ll be relocated to the Tower.”

That garnered nods of agreement from everyone. “The shrink/grow capabilities of the Ant Man suit would be a great boon for them. I can see the Falcon Wings being used for aerial coverage.” Bridget murmured, nodding with a smile.
A soft sigh escaped Phil, brow creased a small amount. “We still have a problem in that there’s going to be questions about the survival of both myself and Pietro, from Clint and Natasha I mean. Do we tell them the truth about it?”

“Yes.” Tony immediately nodded. “Secrets played a major part in the self destruction of the Avengers 1.0, and I don’t want to hide your presence from them. You were important to them, Agent, and they were important to you. I won’t do that to them… I already know what it feels like to have something that major kept from you.”

Stephen quickly gathered his soulmate into his arms, kissing the top of his head. “Except for a few major things, we’re going to have a pretty liberal information policy here. The big, BIG things that are need to know involve the Reapers, Tony being the Soul Stone, and his access to magic.”

Light brown eyes narrowed as Logan huffed, holding his daughter against his side. “Yeah, that makes sense. Can’t trust ‘em quite yet, so we keep the dangerous stuff under wraps.”

Tony nodded with a small quirk of his lips. “Exactly. However… there is still a danger of things accidentally slipping out if you don’t know who’s listening in. So for that reason, I’d like to recommend the use of a Geas.” Seeing a few confused looks, the genius elaborated, “So, a geas is a spell used to keep information secret. Those under the effects of the geas are able to talk about the topic freely among each other, but if there’s someone listening in or even in the premise who’s not a part of the spell, all they would hear is nonsense or idle smalltalk. It’s non invasive, and would keep everyone safe without the fear of spilling beans.”

“I’d say go for it, then.” Bruce replied with a sharp nod. “It’s safer than trying to watch our words all the time.” The rest of the group nodded in agreement.

Crimson eyes flickered with pleasure as Minowa dipped her head. “We will get that set up quickly, then. Zeymahi, was there anything we needed to cover?”

The genius hummed, thinking for a second before shaking his head. “I think that’s it. If anything else does come up, we’ll make you guys aware of it. Alright, break time, we’ll call you back when the pizza gets here!”

Stephen moved to embrace his soulmate from behind as everyone filtered out, and before long they were the only two left in the common room. After a few seconds of enjoying the quiet, the sorcerer spoke. “If they hurt you-- any of them-- I will send them to a hell dimension.”
Instead of laughing or brushing the words off, Tony reached to gently place his hands over Stephen’s gloved ones, and the sorcerer looked down to see a troubled, grim look in his whiskey-brown eyes. “I hope it doesn’t come to that, love,” He said in a quiet voice, “Truthfully, I’m anticipating trouble from only Rogers and Maximoff. Maybe Clint, depending on how badly the witch fucked with his head.”

“We also have to prepare for Clint’s reaction to Loki.” The sorcerer added, brow furrowing. “Last time they saw each other, a mind-controlled Loki was screwing around in Clint’s mind. It’s going to take some serious third-party mediation to get them on the same level.”

Quiet fell over the duo again, and after a few minutes Tony spoke again. “I’m not sure I’m ready for this, Stephen— on an emotional level, I mean.” He admitted in a small voice. “It’s one thing for Rogers to be on another continent, out of sight out of mind style. But he’s going to be back here, in the United States, and I’m scared he’s going to hurt the people I love. I’m not worried so much about me anymore— but people like Harley, Peter, Rem… any of the kids…”

Blue-green eyes filled with compassion as Stephen turned Tony around to rest the genius’ head in the crook of his neck. “We’ll do everything we can to keep them safe, love. Besides, we have several agents of death in the Compound. They aren’t going to let anything happen either.” He pressed a kiss to Tony’s head, then one to his lips.

Tony sighed and nodded, allowing his soulmate to comfort him. “At this point… all we can do is wait and see how things play out.”

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“Hey guys, Stark is on the news again!”

The words from Sam prompted a scramble for the seats around the television, Scott flopping down next to him while Clint curled up against Natasha on a loveseat. “Wonder what he’s doing now? Haven’t heard much from him since the one small skirmish…” The engineer mused as he reached for the remote, turning the volume up so they could hear easier.

“… Stark and the New Avengers have had a much busier week than we originally thought. Where do you want to begin, Alice?”
The brunette anchor on the screen gave a bright smile. “Well, let’s start with the Maria Stark Foundation Charity Gala and what happened there. I first want to point out that the New Avengers managed to raise over $10 million towards relief efforts for the families and countries affected by the media dubbed ‘Civil War’, an impressive and much appreciated feat. Several members of the New Avengers were in attendance, though there were a few noticeable members missing. Upon being asked later, Mr. Stark told the press that Minowa Norddahl, one of the three leaders of the New Avengers, was away on family business, and Wade Wilson was on a mission at the time. Maelstrom was also missing, though given his desire to remain anonymous, I suppose that’s self explanatory.”

“Indeed, Alice, and I’d like to point out how stunning each member in attendance looked.” Garrett waved to someone offscreen, and a moment later a group picture of the New Avengers in their formal wear appeared on the screen behind the two anchors.

Scott whistled in shock, eyes widening. “Wow, they look great!”

A soft laugh escaped Sam as he gestured to the Boone trio. “I don’t blame them for keeping her between the two of them. I wouldn’t be surprised if they had to beat admirers away with a stick, with her looking like that.”

“Strange looks damn good, too.” Clint hummed softly, tilting his head as his eyes narrowed in contemplation. “Is it just me, or are he and Stark standing--”

“What’s this?”

The group turned to see Rogers standing in the doorway, blue eyes narrowed in distrust at the picture on the screen. The other four looked at each other before shrugging and turning back to the screen, completely ignoring the super soldier in favor of focusing on the news broadcast.

“... Not just the New Avengers that caused a stir that night. As he entered the gala, Tony had Emma Stark, his recently announced half-sister on his arm.”

A shocked cry escaped the group at the sight of the footage of the brunette woman being escorted into the building by a brightly smiling Tony. “Stark has a sister?!” Sam squawked, eyes completely wide.

Nat suddenly sat straight, eyes locked on the figure of the woman. “Wait, I know her. That’s
Emma Frost, the daughter of Winston Frost and Hazel Frost. But…” Emerald eyes narrowed as the spy studied the duo standing side by side. After a moment, she breathed, “Bozhe moy, they have the same hair color, ear, and nose shape. But she has Hazel’s cheek structure… and her skin tone is just a little darker, it looks more… like…” She sat back, eyes going uncharacteristically wide. “Winston wasn’t her father-- Howard was.”

“What?!” Steve stomped forward, outrage in his expression. “Howard would have never done something like cheating! This has to be some kind of ploy, or publicity stunt!”

“Rogers, Tony has never once lied about his family. Not to mention that revealing her could have affected the stock prices of SI. Though I have to wonder how long they knew about each other?” Clint turned his eyes back to the TV, listening for a while. ‘Jeez, they’ve known since they were kids! Wonder why he never told us…”

A soft sigh escaped Nat as she began to run her fingers through Clint’s hair. “Did we ever ask? We were so busy demanding upgrades to our uniforms and weapons…” She trailed off as the anchors began speaking again.

“That wasn’t the only shock of the night, though. Mr. Stark was harassed for a good portion of the night, which was stopped in a rather spectacular fashion, seen in this video taken by one attendee.”

The video began playing, and Natasha cringed at the way the woman was trying so desperately to latch onto Tony. She had experienced her share of that behavior from men while on assignments, though there always seemed to be someone willing to jump to the aid of a pretty woman. From the way the genius was acting, he’d been dealing with the behavior all night, and looked about ready to put his foot down in a much firmer manner. She flinched as the thought passed her mind that Tony had always attended the galas and fundraising events without them. How many times had he suffered through something like this all alone, without anyone there to support or stand up for him?

It seemed this incident would end much differently, though, and the Rogues gasped in shock at the red fabric that shot between Tony and the woman who had managed to physically grab him. “I knew that shade of red was familiar!” Sam announced with a grin. “That’s the cape he normally wears! Probably hoodooed it into a smaller size. That’s amazing, hiding it as a pocket square…”

“Is no one else going to question how it seems to be moving on its’ own?!” Scott asked in an incredulous tone of voice, eyes locked on the fact that Levi was suspended in mid-air between the two.

A snort escaped Clint and he shook his head. “Nope. I’m chalking it up to magic and putting it out
of my mind.”

Nat hissed at them to shush as Stephen approached them, verbally reaming the woman for continuously harassing the genius after he’d said ‘no’, several times apparently. The woman’s emerald eyes softened with gratitude towards the sorcerer for defending Tony, though suspicion suddenly surged within her as the woman asked why he cared and the room went suspiciously quiet.

“You get the feeling like shit’s about to go down?” Sam muttered, watching the way Stephen looked over at Tony, and the whiskey-eyed man nodded.

Stephen turned back, and his deep voice rumbled through the speakers. “Why do I care? You mean besides the fact that he’s my teammate, my friend, and is entitled to say ‘no’ and have that respected?”

“I think those are already good enough reasons…” Scott mumbled, nodding at the man’s words.

“Oh, I can think of one very, very good reason.”

The group held their breath as Stephen launched magic into the air… then proceed to pull Tony against him and begin kissing the living daylights out of him as the words ‘he’s mine’ formed over them.

“AHA!!” Scott crowed, leaping from his seat and throwing his hands in the air in triumph. “I fucking called it! Pay up, bitch!” He spun to Clint with his hand out, the archer grumbling with a half smile as he pressed a piece of paper into it that clearly said, ‘IOU $100’ on it with the archer’s signature below it.

Sam snorted at them, even as his eyes remained on the screen. “Huh… I have to wonder how long Stark’s been bisexual. He never seemed to show any inclination before…”

A soft breath escaped Nat as she looked over towards him. “I had suspicions, but I also have a feeling that Howard wouldn’t have approved of him liking men.”

“... It was later revealed that, earlier that day, Mr. Stark and Dr. Strange sat down with Christine Everhart for an interview regarding the pairs’ relationship, which it turns out has been a thing since
just after the events of the Civil War. When asked about the circumstances of their meeting, they revealed something rather shocking-- take a look.” Garrett motioned to the screen behind him again.

“... We are, in fact, soulmates. As ridiculous as it sounds, they are a very real thing. Only about 1% of the population of Earth has a soulmate, and even then the chances of running across each other are... infinitesimally slim.”

A murmur erupted from the group, looking at each other in shock and wonder. “Wow-- soulmates!” Scott breathed with a look of awe on his face. “Can you imagine having someone out there who’s your perfect match in every way?”

Clint hummed as he dipped his head. “They certainly look like they could be-- look at the goo-goo eyes they’re giving each other! TOTALLY smitten.”

Standing behind them, Steve’s eyes were locked on the duo, an unfamiliar rage rising in his chest at how happy the duo looked. How dare he look so happy after everything he’d done– tearing the Avengers apart, attacking him and Bucky in the bunker, and stealing Bucky! Who knows what the bastard was doing to his best friend-- he hadn’t received so much as a letter from his best friend since Tony had stolen him! Clearly, the genius couldn’t do the right thing no matter what motivation he had. He hadn’t shown so much as an inkling of getting them the pardons they deserved. Probably sitting atop his pile of blood money and sycophants that made up the ‘New Avengers’.

The sound of the female anchor’s voice brought his attention back to the present. “As shocking as that was, though, nothing could compare to the shock felt by the world when the leaders of the New Avengers entered a meeting with the Accords Committee accompanied by two familiar faces and three unfamiliar ones.”

Shocked noises escaped Nat and Clint at the sight of a familiar blonde god standing next to the aforementioned leaders. “Hey, Thor’s back! Wonder what brought him our way…” Clint trailed off, even as Steve spoke as well.

“And why didn’t he come to see us? We’re his team and friends, he should have come looking.” Anything else he might have said was cut off by Garrett picking up from where Alice left off.

“With Thor Odinson was a man he has hoped to put forth as an ambassador between Asgard and Earth. Upon being asked why his father was sending one now, Thor revealed that the King had been tried and found guilty of countless crimes against Asgard, its’ people, and the other members
of the Asgardian royal family. And it was that last piece of information that lead to the most shocking, and ultimately heart-breaking revelation from these past few weeks. Accompanying Thor was the god’s adopted brother, whom he introduced as ‘Crown Prince Loki, next in line to the throne of Asgard’.”

The sight of the ebony haired god stepping up next to Thor with his head bowed caused the room to break into absolute chaos. It lasted for several seconds before the sound of an air horn suddenly blaring brought the room to a dead silence. T’Challa stood in the doorway leading into the room, a supremely unamused look on his face with his hands covering his ears. Next to him stood Shuri, earplugs in her ears as she held the air horn in question aloft. “If you are all quite finished acting like children, perhaps we can listen to the rest of the story like the adults we are supposed to be.” The king said calmly as he lowered his hands, Shuri popping her earplugs out as she passed the airhorn to one of the accompanying Dora.

The group as a whole turned back to the screen without another word, listening attentively as the God of Mischief began speaking. Several images and videos were presented, Thor giving a passionate speech regarding the cruelty that Loki had been subjected to, along with the torture he had endured for crimes he hadn’t consciously committed. As the Committee granted him a full pardon in the face of the overwhelming, indisputable evidence that had been provided, Steve finally lost what hold he still had over his temper. He made to lunge at the TV, like he could murder the genius through the screen. Before he could take more than a few steps, an armored, clawed glove tightly grabbed his wrist, T’Challa stepping between the super soldier with a dark look on his face, the Black Panther armor partially engaged. “There will be no further damage of Wakandan property because you can’t keep your temper in check properly.”

The blond tried to pull his wrist free, to no avail. “How can you be okay with this?! Stark just let a mass murdering, mind raping terrorist get a full pardon! After what he did to the world, after what he did to Clint!”

“How’s that mirror treating you, Rogers?” Natasha spoke up, arching a condescending eyebrow at the man as he switched his gaze to her.

“What the hell are you talking about--?”

Natasha stood from her seat in a quick, smooth motion, her partner less than half a second behind her. “Maximoff.” Natasha hissed green eyes flashing. “Johannesburg, Sokovia, 177 dead. Wanda was almost directly responsible for all of them .”

Blue eyes widened before Steve snarled in anger, “Stark was responsible for Ultron, not Wanda!”
In a flash, the assassin was in his face, causing the soldier to jerk back in shock at the sudden intrusion of his personal space. “*The Ultron project was scrapped.*” The Black Widow hissed with venom dripping from her words. “Then Maximoff gets into his head at the Hydra base, and suddenly he reopened it. You want to rip into Tony for acquiring a pardon for a ‘mass murdering, mind raping terrorist’, maybe you should look at the one who committed those crimes of her own free will.” Before Steve could respond, Nat and Clint looked at each other, nodded, and made to leave the room.

The sound of T’Challa’s voice brought them up short. “One moment, if you would. Shuri?” The princess approached the duo, handing them an envelope and a usb. “*Now you are free to leave.*”

They nodded and quickly swept from the area, retreating to their private rooms and shutting the door behind them. Nat quickly pulled Clint down next to her on the bed, tucking his head in the crook of her neck. “Are you okay, *moy yastreb*?” She asked him softly, running her fingers through his light brown hair.

The archer was silent for a full minute before he replied, “I don’t know what to feel right now.” He shifted closer to his lover as he continued, “Loki… they hurt him, Nat. Shit, his own dad was actively torturing him and his kids. I… I can’t hate him, knowing that. After seeing what they did to him, after hearing about everything he went through…” He curled up closer to her as his mind continued to race.

Nat hummed softly, pressing a kiss to the top of his head. She remained quiet for a while before reaching for the envelope, holding it out for the man to take. The brunette sat up, plucking the letter out of her hand and ripping it open. “It’s from Tony.” He said softly, immediately recognizing the handwriting.

*’ Legolas,*

*First of all-- stop apologizing. I’m pretty sure you spent at least a fourth of that letter doing so, and I’m telling you right now that I forgave you after the first one. Look, by this point you’ve seen the news regarding Reindeer Games and Point Break. If I can forgive the guy who tried to ‘yeet’ me out of one of the highest windows of my tower while he was being mind controlled, then I can sure as hell forgive you.*

*As for your family, there was no way I was going to let them be hurt or killed because Ross decided to throw a tantrum because he didn’t get his super hero army. They were… are innocents in this whole Civil War insanity. I did what any other decent person in my position would have done.*
The USB has some things you need to see, and a message you need to hear. Go take care of that. You and I will be speaking face to face soon enough.

-Tony'

The archer couldn’t help the chuckle that bubbled from him at the genius’ words. “Seriously, he described what Loki did as ‘yeeting’ him? At least his humor didn’t freeze over in that bunker…” He put the letter gently to one side before grabbing the thumb drive as Nat reached for the laptop she was borrowing. They plugged it in, and after a few seconds several files blinked into existence. Opening the first one, they watched several clips of Loki interacting with everyone at the Compound, adults and children alike.

A video came on that made Clint sit a little straighter-- his youngest nephew running around an outdoor playground, Loki and Laura chatting in the background. Nate suddenly stumbled and fell, and as he began to cry Loki seemed to teleport to his side with how fast he moved. He gently scooped the toddler into his arms, hushing and soothing the boy as Laura came over as well. Loki said something to her before taking Nate’s scraped palms into his hand, glowing magic covering them for a second before fading to reveal he had healed the scratches. The baby babbled happily, prompting soft chuckles out of Loki and Laura both.

“He… he really cares about them…” The Archer’s voice was small, eyes wide and somewhat teary at the way the God had instantly come to the aid of his nephew.

They opened the next file, showing a video of Loki being embraced by his kids as the other members of the New Avengers mingled in the common room. They watched as Laura entered the room with Nate in her arms, though the toddler squealed and babble as soon as he saw Loki. He was set down, and Loki was quick to kneel and scoop the child up as he came over. The sudden pronouncement of ‘dada!’ brought a gasp to Clint’s lips and Natasha’s eyes widened almost comically. Loki seemed stunned, and as Laura announced the fact that Nate had just said his first word, emerald eyes filled with tears and, though they couldn’t hear over the sounds of excitement that suddenly filled the room, it was clear the ebony haired man was sobbing with joy.

The next video began playing, Loki seeming to fiddle with the camera for a moment before sitting back with a sigh. “Hello, Clint,” he began before hesitating. “Or… Barton, whatever you wish for me to call you. I… I don’t know where to begin. By the time you see this, you’ll have seen the news about my pardon for the events surrounding… well, you know.” He waved a hand, a sad and haunted look on his face. “I wanted to apologize to you for the part you were forced to play. You were a victim as much as I was, yet… it was because of me that you were…” He sighed, running his fingers through his hair. “You have my word now, though-- I truly wish to make amends for my actions, no matter how unwillingly they were committed.” He dropped his gaze from the camera. “I don’t expect you to trust me. Not yet, if ever. But… You deserve to hear this apology from my lips, not through a letter. I am sorry.”
There was the sudden call from offscreen, Loki’s eyes snapping to whoever it was. A smile lit up his face, and he turned in his seat as a preteen came into the shot, one with blond hair and golden eyes. The young teen reached in for a hug, one Loki instantly reciprocated once he’d stood. “Sorry, dad.” He said in a soft, trembling voice.

“Don’t apologize, Fen.” The ebony haired god soothed him, running his fingers through the honey blonde strands under his chin. “Is it the nightmares again?” The teen nodded, and Loki pressed a kiss to the top of his head. “Alright, I’ll be right with you. Just stay there for a moment.” He reached for the camera, scooping it up. “Well, duty calls, Barton. My son needs me, so I hope you will forgive me for cutting this message short, at least. Thank you for at least taking the time to listen.” He gently reassured Fen, the sound cutting out part way through as the video ended.

A soft laugh escaped Nat, a kind of understanding in her eyes. “He makes a good dad.”

Clint gave a slow nod, something further softening in his gaze. He started the next video and sat straight when he saw Laura sitting next to Loki on the couch. “Hello, Clint.” Laura began, a small smile quirking at her lips. “First, I want to thank you for the letter to both myself and Tony. It takes a brave man to admit when he’s wrong… I always thought there was something odd about the way you seemed fixated on that witch.” Loki gave a small hum at that. Laura shot him a small smile, one that widened when she looked back at the camera. “So, if you played the videos in the order they were put on the drive, you’ve already seen the clip where Nate called Loki ‘dada’.” The God in question made a face as if he were going to burst into tears again. “Clint, there’s no easing into this sort of thing-- Loki and I are in a relationship.” She slipped her hand into Loki’s, the god squeezing it tightly with a look of love on his face for the woman next to him. “I’m sorry if that hurts you, or makes you angry… but I’m not going to give him up. I’ve found something special with him, something I never had with Robert. Clint…” She sniffed for a second, prompting Loki to shift over and put an arm around her comfortably. “Loki got me my kids. He convinced Robert to drop the case, he and Tony.”

“I just did the same for you that Tony did for me.” Loki said with such conviction in his voice that it took the archer and assassin’s breaths away.

Laura nodded and took a few deep breaths to calm herself. “Clint, please give Loki a chance, get to know the good man I’ve come to love before you judge our relationship. He’s been good to us, to me. I don’t want to have to choose between you both.” She looked into the camera, eyes filled with tears, yet a fierce determination. “Please don’t make me choose… I want my family and my happiness, and I don’t think that’s too much to ask.”

They both gave some parting words before the video was cut. Silence reigned for a few seconds before Nat turned to Clint. “Well, moy yastreb? What do you think?”
The archer was silent for a second or two, brow furrowed in thought. Finally, he turned his gaze to the redhead. “Nat, could you help me make a video?”

- 

It was worse than he thought.

Steve stood at the window looking out of his bedroom, brow furrowed and mouth set into a grim frown. He had thought there was something left to salvage in his relationships between himself and the rest of his team. Clearly not-- the only one truly on his side for who was at fault during the events of Ultron was Wanda.

Oh well. It was a problem for another day. For now, he had to focus on Bucky, finding out where he currently was and rescuing him. Stark must have been keeping him from making contact, the selfish bastard. The sooner they got back, the sooner he could get back Bucky, put Stark in his place, and send the members of this new team away. They would all return to the Compound, Stark would return to his workshop where he belonged… right after he made the genius apologize to them all for what he’d put them through.

He was jerked from his thoughts when music started playing behind him, and he turned to see several rows of ducks dressed like stormtroopers hovering in front of him, a Darth Vader duck floating in front of them. As the Imperial March continued to play, the Darth Vader duck suddenly said, “What is thy bidding, my Master?”

Rogers’ mouth fell open, but a tingle suddenly covered his entire body, and he looked down to see his clothes had been changed into the robes worn by Emperor Palpatine. Realization his him, and he screeched in fury as he grabbed the Vader duck, throwing open the window behind him and hurling the duck through it, slamming it shut without seeing where it landed. He breathed a sigh of relief, though it froze in the soldier’s throat as he turned to see that said duck had managed to teleport back to its’ original position in front of the stormtroopers. “I find your lack of faith disturbing, my Master.”

The door to the bedroom opened suddenly, T’Challa peeking his head in to find out why the soldier was yelling. One eyebrow slowly raised into his hairline, and he calmly said, “I apologize, I was not aware you were engaging in one of your fetishes. Though it could be more than one, judging by your costume.”

The incredulous shriek of rage was quickly cut off as the monarch dipped out of the bedroom and closed the door behind him.
New language!!

Vi ville gi deg verden hvis du bare spurte - We would give you the world if you just asked
Du er stjernene til vår nattehimmel - You are the stars of our night sky

I forgot to mention it last chapter, and its' now been added, but the term James uses for Minowa...
Dorogaya - 'Precious' or 'Darling’

VOOOOOOTE!!
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

Pardons for the Rogues are finally processed and in the 24 hours between then and the pickup, chaos ensues in the form of secret data hidden in SHIELD, paparazzi nearly being roasted alive, secrets hidden in the Baxter building, proof that fate IS indeed listening, and absolution a long time coming.

(Stephen Vincent Strange, you should know better!)

((OMINOUS FORBODING ABOUNDS))

Chapter Notes

IT'S DONE!! For as much as I bitch about the wrist brace, It has allowed me to get this chapter out early!! Thank you all so much for your patience!! Love you all, Vassals!!

Also, the Discord server is up!! Go join, fun things abound!!

https://discord.gg/vRSuK5Y

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony’s eyes glowed blue as he scanned through the message he’d just received, his brow furrowed and lips set into a firm line. Stephen sat next to him, perusing the Grimoire while waving a hand and muttering under his breath as he tried to adopt a certain warding spell he’d found to the ways of the Mystic Arts. Knowing that the pardons for the Rogues would be going through any day now, Tony wanted to make certain that he was as prepared as possible if things took a turn towards a violent confrontation. Just because the two most probable offenders wouldn’t be staying on the premises didn’t mean the genius was going to take any chances. Levi hung over both of them, running a corner over Tony’s hair in a comforting gesture like he was petting the genius.

“Crazy enchanted snuggie.” The snort from his soulmate caused Stephen to look to where Tony was gently grabbing Levi’s corner and lifting it from his head, shooting the relic an affectionate grin. The smile fell after a moment as whiskey brown eyes closed in a silent gesture of resignation for a few moments. “FRIDAY,” Tony called up to the ceiling after exhaling slowly, “Please make everyone aware that the ‘Noah’s Ark’ Protocol is now in effect, as is the ‘Pest Control’ Protocol.”

“Right away, Boss-Man.”

The sorcerer reached for Tony and pulled him into his arms immediately, holding his soulmate close. “The pardons just went through, then.” It was more of a statement of fact than a question, a serious look within Stephen’s blue-green eyes.

The brunette nodded in confirmation. “Just about an hour ago. We have 24 hours to put all the
necessary precautions into place before they come back.” Tony closed his eyes and breathed in the scent of sandalwood, incense, and ozone that clung to his soulmate. “I think I’ll be okay with seeing Clint, Natasha, Sam, and Scott… but if Rogers and Maximoff show their faces-- I don’t know if I’ll be able to handle it, babe.” He admitted in a small voice.

Stephen immediately pressed a kiss to the top of his head, nodding in understanding. It was true that Tony was now capable of defending himself against the likes of the super soldier and the witch, but psychologically… It would take more time for those wounds to fully heal, and even then there would likely be scars. “Don’t worry, love. If either of them dare to come near here, we won’t hesitate to defend you. Min would probably send their souls to Molag for trying such a thing. If she didn’t, they would quickly find themselves at home into whatever Hell dimension I decide to chuck them into.”

The blunt statement startled a laugh from Tony, who maneuvered so he could press a lingering kiss to the sorcerer’s lips. “I don’t know what I did to deserve you.” He whispered in a tone that spoke of fathomless adoration and gratitude.

“You were you.” Stephen whispered back, his blue-green eyes locking with the genius’ whiskey brown for a few seconds before he pulled him in for another kiss. He pulled away after a minute, noticing the small furrow still in Tony’s brow. “Something’s still bothering you-- talk to me, love. What’s going on?”

“I… I was thinking back to when this whole Civil War thing started,” Tony admitted, reaching out to take one of Stephen’s hands and rub it gently. “I feel like I’m missing a piece of the puzzle regarding why four perfectly decent people suddenly sided against me with no prior knowledge into the Accords, into the circumstances that lead to their creation… into me. Something about the circumstances doesn’t sit right with me.” He stood from his seat and began pacing. “Maximoff and Rogers are no brainers… but what about the others? Could it be something regarding the personality profile Natasha made about me? Or is this simply more of Fury’s meddling?”

The sorcerer rose from his position to move closer to the genius. “You have the means to find out, love. Just let Maria know you’re doing some digging, then go find the answers.”

Tony nodded and gave him another kiss before stepping back, eyes lighting up blue after a moment. There was a few seconds pause before he spoke. “Hey Maria, it’s Tony. Yeah, I’m doing alright, thanks for asking… yeah, Wade is much better now. I’ll let him know that you asked. Listen, I need to dig around within your SHIELD files for a few things… no, I’m looking for information about Natasha, Clint, and maybe Sam. Yes, I promise I’ll stay out of anything involving weapons and secret projects… Thanks, Maria, you’re a doll.” He fell silent after that, diving headfirst into the data he had been given access to.

Giving his soulmate a loving smile, Stephen picked up the Grimoire again to continue what he’d been doing before. Half an hour later, he was in the middle of a complicated series of hand gestures when FRIDAY spoke up. “Magic-Boss, Dragon-Boss and her partners are requesting access to the family suite.”

Without breaking his movements or losing his concentration, Stephen called back, “Let them up, FRI, but tell them not to come too far in until I tell them to.”

A few minutes later, the elevator dinged and opened to admit the group, though they stopped before entering the living room, watching transfixed as the Sorcerer Supreme continued to cast the complex-looking spell, muttering furiously under his breath as he did so. Several glyphs and mandalas now surrounded the man, spinning and glowing brightly as they pulsed with arcane energy. Finally, Stephen spread his arms before bringing his palms together in a sweeping motion,
the glyphs rushing inward to form a single, glowing point in his hands. A thrilled laugh escaped the sorcerer as he held the tiny, brightly glowing speck up. “Perfect! I wasn’t sure it would work, adapting so many different kinds of magic into one spell! Now, we just have to figure out how to-” He looked up at that moment, blinking at the enthralled group watching him closely. “Oh. Hello, I wasn’t aware you were there.” He quickly looked around before smiling sheepishly. “Ah, would you happen to know where to find some kind of container to put this in? A reliquary of some kind?”

Minowa laughed as she approached him, holding her own hands out and a small glass box fell into it. “Perhaps you should have had such a thing ready before casting your spell.”

“Well, hindsight is 20/20.” Stephen delicately placed the spark in the box before the Dragonborn snapped the lid shut. “Thank you all for your patience. Come, let’s have a seat while we’re waiting for Tony to be done. Would you like a drink of some kind?”

James shuffled forward and sat on the couch, quickly being flanked by his lovers. “Some of Zev’s tea if you have it, please.” He spoke in a soft, hesitant voice.

Blue-green eyes found icy blue as Stephen studied the assassin. He nodded a second later, sweeping into the kitchen to make a pot of the beverage. Now that he was paying attention to the three men and one woman, they all seemed a bit on edge, their worry and concerned mostly focused on James. The sniper himself seemed slightly jittery, metal fingers tapping on his thigh in a rapid, nervous movement for several seconds before Minowa reached over to take his hand and run her thumb over the metal in a soothing gesture. Before long, a pot of tea and several mugs were floating towards the group, each member calling out thanks as they grabbed a mug. “So, what’s on your mind, guys?”

There were several seconds of quiet where James opened his mouth to say something, paused, closed it, then repeated the process again. Finally, he cleared his throat. “I… I actually wanted to talk to you and Tony about Ste--”

“**You have to be fucking me in the ass, sideways!!**”

There was a yelp of shock from James as he nearly dropped his tea, a grunt of surprise from Logan while he nearly broke the mug in his hand, a hiss from Bruce when the hot liquid sloshed over his hands, and a choking noise from Min as she tried to dislodge the tea she’d just inhaled. Stephen’s head whipped to the side to see Tony standing in absolute stunned incomprehension with the blue fading from his eyes. As the others resituated themselves, Min soothing the burns on Bruce’s hands once she had banished the tea from her lungs, the genius blushed crimson when he realized it was no longer just him and Stephen in the room.

The sorcerer shot them a look before he turned his hooded gaze to Tony, arched an eyebrow, smirked, and purred, “Maybe later, love.”

Minowa proceeded to, once again, choke on her tea as the men in the group burst out laughing. “Can’t believe you just said that, Stephen!” Logan chuckled, shaking his head.

“How do you think I feel?!” The whiskey-eyed man squawked, staring at his soulmate in shock with a bit of humor shining in his eyes as well.

It took everyone a minute to settle down, and James sat back and took a sip of his drink with a much more relaxed expression. “So, FRIDAY told us that both protocols went into effect.” Tony nodded, both he and Stephen sitting on the loveseat opposite of James and his lovers. “I… I know that the first thing Steve will wanna do when he gets back is get in contact with me-- to talk to
me." The super soldier took a deep breath, drawing strength from the fingers carding through his hair, and two different hands holding his own. “Truth is, I don’t want to talk to him. The last time I saw him, he caused an international incident in my name.” Icy blue eyes looked up to gaze into whiskey-brown and green-blue. “I have a life here now… I have my partners, my extended family… I have my son, and I don’t want to give Steve the chance to take that away from me, not after I’ve worked so hard.” He shuddered for a moment, expression vulnerable and pained. “Even if it’s selfish… I just can’t risk it.”

“James,” Tony said softly, leaning forward towards James and speaking with a compassionate tone of voice. “There is nothing selfish about looking out for your own well-being. Unless it involves hurting yourself or someone around you, you are more than well within your right to do what’s best for you. No one is going to force you to communicate with Rogers in any way. If they try, you send them my way post haste.”

The sniper nodded with a small, grateful smile before he sighed, leaning back into Logan’s fingers, which were now massaging his scalp. “Steve… he wouldn’t understand. He’s gonna flip when he finds out about my relationship with these guys…” he shot each of them a loving look for a moment before turning his attention back to Tony. “And I really don’t want him around Moy Svet. Every instinct I have is telling me that it’s a bad idea. Rem can be mouthy when he wants to be, and Steve wouldn’t put up with that.” He sighed and closed his eyes in a kind of mental exhaustion. “Steve wants me to be ‘Bucky’, to be the man he remembers from before. I can’t be that guy though-- not only do I have no frame of reference for ‘Bucky’, I like the person I am now, I’m happy where I am. He wouldn’t care if I’m happy, though. Hell, he probably wouldn’t even call me ‘James’ if I asked him to.”

Tony nodded at the man’s words, a small and sad frown on his face. “Well, I don’t know if it makes a difference, but I’m happy to hear that you’re happy. Rogers doesn’t run your life, and he sure as hell isn’t living it. You do you, and to hell what Captain Tightass thinks about it.”

The group as a whole laughed over the name Tony had given Rogers, quickly falling into comfortable chatter and discussions. The genius smiled as he watched them, though it quickly fell from his face as he remembered what he’d found hidden deep within SHIELD’s files. He closed his eyes as they flared blue, quickly composing a message to a select group of people.

‘Zevrael, Dorian, James, and Minowa,

I need to see you tomorrow morning as soon as possible. Zev and Dori… bring Rem with you.

Tony’

---

“I want to light them on fire, Zeymahi!”

“No, Min! You can’t light the paparazzi on fire!”

“The nerve of that little fool, daring to ask such demeaning questions and shoving that thing in my face--!”

“Min, no, put the dagger away! No killing!”

Stephen was leaning against a nearby wall, using it for support as he tried desperately to get his laughter under control. The trio had gone into New York City proper to do some shopping, trying to both keep their minds off of the impending arrival of the rogues and to acquire a few things.
About an hour into their trip, they had been accosted by a group of photographers and several members of the paparazzi. Stephen had quickly summoned a portal and dragged them through it, though not before Min had almost drawn her well-concealed dagger on one particularly insistent man. The indignant, ruffled look to the woman was so out of place on the normally composed and unflappable Dragonborn that the sorcerer hadn’t been able to suppress the sudden bout of hystericis that swept over him.

Minowa snarled in anger, turning towards the sorcerer with something foreign flashing in her eyes. “Laugh all you want, Stephen! You did not hear some of the things being said about me! They called me a ‘freak’ and a ‘monster’!” She turned on her heel to pace agitatedly, not noticing the way both men had gone silent. “I had thought myself done with such foolish behavior upon leaving Tamriel, but I suppose there are some behaviors that never change.” She spat with bitterness in her voice.

It hit Tony like a punch to the gut when he finally realized what exactly it was he’d seen in the Dragonborn’s eyes—hurt. Without hesitation, he moved to grab Min and pull her into his arms in a tight hug. After just a split second of hesitation, the ebony-haired woman burrowed into his arms, trembling from the intensity of her emotions. Stephen joined them a moment later, a distressed and guilty expression on his face as he hugged the woman from behind. “That’s why nearly all mutants keep themselves secret, Min.” Tony told her softly, sympathy shining in his eyes. “As accepting as some people may be, there are those that are far less so. They’re ignorant and fear things they don’t understand. Things aren’t as bad as they used to be… but we still have a long way to go.”

A hard swallow preceded Stephen’s words. “Min, I’m so sorry I laughed. I never heard that being said to you, but if I had, I swear to you I would have raked them across the coals for it.”

The Dragonborn let out a soft breath as the tension bled from her body. It felt good to receive the comfort that came from her brother, and Stephen also apologizing and supporting her was a welcome addition to that. “It’s alright. I… I simply have not heard such things in… quite a long time.” She leaned her head back against Stephen and gave a small rub. “You’re forgiven, both of you.”

The soulmates gave each other a relieved and somber look before giving the woman one more hug, pulling away after a few seconds. “Let’s use cloaking from here on out.” Tony recommended, looking towards the edge of the roof Stephen had portaled them to. “The rogues will be here in about 12 hours and we don’t need to draw any more attention than necessary. I’ll have Dorian release an official New Avengers statement regarding this incident, and that derogatory slurs against any of us will in no way, shape, or form be tolerated.” Minowa and Stephen both nodded, a grateful smile quirking at the ebony-haired woman’s lips as her brother waved his hand to apply the cloaking. “Alright, we’re almost done with what we needed to do anyway, so let’s just--”

It happened instantly and without warning. A lance of intense emotional agony slammed through Tony, piercing his being with the potency of the feeling. The genius’ eyes flashed brilliant orange as he cried out in shock and pain, knees buckling from the unexpected blow.

“Tony!”

“Zeymahi!”

The genius gasped in a breath at the feeling of the metaphysical gut punch he’d just received. He barely noticed as Stephen caught him before he could fully collapse, both he and Min gently lowering him to the ground as he shut his eyes tight to try and regain his bearings. “Fucking hell…” He finally groaned, looking up at the worried faces of his soulmate and sister. “Did you guys feel that?”
Minowa nodded, eyes glowing slightly as she took in Tony’s condition. “Not directly. However, whatever that was echoed through our empathic bond-- it’s little wonder why you nearly collapsed.”

The sorcerer nodded as well, hands shaking far more than usual. “Whatever or whoever that came from is in a massive amount of emotional pain. Whether it’s physical as well, I’m not sure.”

Tony nodded in agreement and took another few seconds to steady himself before hesitantly standing and moving to lean against the wall to the stairwell. “Whoever that was, there’s no way in hell that I’m going to let them suffer through whatever is causing them that level of emotional distress.” His eyes flared orange again as his power sought out the source of what they’d felt. A moment later, another echo helped him lock on, even though it was weaker than the first. The genius wordlessly waved his hand to open a Corridor, his soulmate and sister flanking him protectively even though they couldn’t be seen.

The trio soon found themselves standing in front of what looked like an office building. Tony's brow furrowed in confusion. “This is the Baxter Building-- the Fantastic Four are stationed here, at least for a while now… I’ve heard there's been some trouble between them recently though. Dunno the specifics…” He closed his eyes and flared his power again. “I'm only feeling one person in the building. They're the one I'm getting that feeling from.” They slipped into a nearby alley, and the whiskey-eyed male sat on the concrete. “Keep an eye out for me. I'm gonna go figure out what's going on.” Minowa and Stephen immediately took up defensive positions around him. Tony gave them a brief smile before closing his eyes and allowing his soul to slip from his body. He waved to the pair guarding him before heading towards the building.

Stephen hummed once he was gone, looking towards Minowa. “I'm almost afraid to know what he's going to find in there.”

“You should be.” The reply from Minowa was dark, her eyes flickering like flames. “That was not just a soul in distress, Stephen-- it was one on the verge of being broken.”

A somber silence fell over the duo, but it only lasted a minute before Tony twitched and sat up straight with a gasp, his still-glowing eyes filled with shock, anger, and no small amount of absolute horror. “Okay, yeah, no, we're doing an immediate extraction. You guys aren't going to believe what I found.” He staggered to his feet, allowing Stephen to support him for a moment before he opened another Corridor, motioning for them to follow behind him.

The space they stepped into was a 12’ by 12’ whitewashed room with no windows, colors, or decorations to speak of. The space held their attention for barely a moment before Min and Stephen realized what else was in the room… or rather, who. A pale, gaunt man was laid out partially on a basic bed, hands chained to the head and feet chained to the bottom. His clothes were barely more than a white shirt and basic white pants and nearly hung off his malnourished form. Brown, somewhat shaggy hair fell to his shoulders and was splayed out across the pillows he was propped up with, though it seemed to be in a state that spoke of a lack of brushing. Burn scars covered a good portion of his face, and the green eyes that stared at the ceiling were dull and almost vacant.

“What in Sithis’ name is this madness?!?”

The scarred man’s head snapped in the direction of the voice, eyes wide with shock and incomprehension. He barely had time to look at the trio before Tony was striding towards him, kneeling so they were face to face. “Stark?” He croaked, blinking sluggishly in confusion. “How did you… I must be hallucinating; this can’t be real…” The words were cut off as he gave a dry, hacking cough.
Recognition lit in Tony’s still-glowing eyes, and he motioned for Minowa and Stephen to join him. “Easy, Victor, I’m as real as you are. Minowa, get those things off of him, Stephen, check him for injuries please.”

Minowa nodded and moved to the ones on his hands first. She gripped the chains so hard that her knuckles turned white, and a moment later the metal shattered, freeing the man’s wrists from the cuffs around them. She quickly moved to the ones on his feet as Stephen moved in.

A hiss escaped Stephen as he inspected the discolored wounds that had become fully bared without the chains. “Deep contusions, welts, swelling, and cuts… this was not a one-time thing, and he’s been like this for a long time.” He gently placed his hands over the injuries and muttered under his breath, beginning to heal the area. The sorcerer’s eyes moved down the man’s hands again as he did so, and something alarming caught his attention. He finished healing the wounds before gently grabbing the brunette’s right hand, studying it closely for a second. A moment later, he seemed to explode into action, catching the other two off guard. “His body temperature is dangerously low, he’s not breathing well even while at rest, blue tint to his fingernails along with what appears to be severe swelling in his ankles… Have you been able to sleep? How has your appetite been?” He aimed the questions at Victor as the chains on his ankles were shattered as well.

Victor blinked at the odd line of questioning, mind sluggish as he tried to formulate a response. “Not eating well…” He managed to get out, pausing to cough again. “Or sleeping much either.”

“Shit!” The sorcerer swore, tugging on one of Levi’s corners to gesture for the relic to wrap around the man. “He’s got advanced congestive heart failure; he needs to be taken to Bridget immediately, and we need to get Loki in on this as well.”

Tony nodded sharply as he continued to look over the man. Suddenly he snarled in fury, drawing everyone’s attention. “There are six fucking blocks on his magic! Whoever did this is lucky they didn’t kill you, Vic!” The glow in his eyes intensified before he grimaced. “Combined with the heart failure… dammit, we’re gonna have to do this so carefully.” He straightened and glanced around the room, eyes narrowing in anger at what he wasn’t seeing. “There isn’t even any sort of oxygen supply in here! Have to wonder if whoever did this was aiming for death!”

Crimson eyes glowed with anger, even as their owner reached forward to tenderly run her fingers through Victor’s hair. “I will lend my aid as well. We must make haste, however-- time is of the essence now, and I’m unsure at how long we may have.” Victor pushed into the gentle touch, another cough tearing through him and leaving him gasping for breath. A warm, soothing rush of magic washed over him, and he found himself able to take a few deep breaths. After a moment, he finally tilted his head to see where the magic had come from, and his eyes widened upon seeing the ebony-horned woman with burning, slit-pupiled eyes. She gave him a supportive smile, reaching for his hand and squeezing it gently. “Don’t worry, we’re going to get you out of this… prison.” She looked towards the door behind her, eyes flashing with fury. “Zeymahi, is he almost ready to be moved?”

Tony nodded, standing straight and backing up to allow Stephen to move in. “I’ll have Bridget and Loki join us in one of the warded rooms. If this isn’t done right…” He cringed at the thought.

Victor tilted his head weakly in confusion, feeling mentally foggy and exhausted. A moment later, he made a shocked sound as he was scooped off the bed in one smooth motion, and his eyes widened when he realized that he was being effortlessly carried by the only woman of the group.

Minowa shot him a knowing, gentle smile before turning her attention to the two men. “Come, we shouldn’t dally.”
“Wait,” The brunette whispered suddenly, catching their attention. “There… could be trackers on me. I would not put it past R-Reed… He went through so much trouble to get and keep me here…” He wheezed out before coughing again.

Tony went very still at the name, a look of incandescent rage flashing over his face. “Reed? Reed fucking Richards did this?!” A moment later, he shook his head. “Nope, can’t think of the implications of that right now.” He approached the brunette, eyes flashing brilliant blue as his technopathy was activated. After a few seconds, his brow furrowed and eyes narrowed. After several more seconds, the glow faded back to orange. “I found about a dozen in different areas of your body. I deactivated them all so they’ll stop broadcasting, and we’ll remove them entirely once we’ve taken care of your heart and gotten rid of the blocks on your magic.”

Victor weakly nodded before finally allowing his head to rest fully against the Dragonborn’s shoulder, snuggling into her body heat. Stephen nodded before waving his hand to open a portal, waving them through before closing it behind them. “FRIDAY,” Tony immediately barked, waving for Minowa and Stephen to follow him. “I need you to send Bridget and Loki to the warded healing room, tell them it’s an emergency and that they need to drop everything.”

“Right away, Boss-Man!”

They made it to the Medical Wing in record time, Loki and Bridget already waiting for them as they crossed the threshold to the requested room. “Mara have mercy!” Bridget gasped in horrified shock as Min set Victor down on the bed. She instantly slipped into her Restoration Master mindset, rapidly casting several diagnostic spells. “Talk to me, what have you found so far?” She aimed the question to Tony, Minowa, and Stephen.

The Sorcerer Supreme stepped forward to answer. “In order of severity, symptoms of advanced congestive heart failure, dangerously low oxygen levels, dehydration, malnutrition. On the metaphysical side, he’s got six blocks on his magic, method of application unknown.”

Loki suddenly gasped, drawing their attention. “I know how they did it.” He turned the brunette’s arm so the inner part was facing up, showing three identical metal discs set into the flesh. He sent a pulse of magic through them and hissed in horrified shock. “Norns preserve us, they’re made so if he tries to use his magic, it exacerbates the heart failure. There’s something else…” He focused for a moment before going completely white. “There’s… there’s a failsafe. If we’re not careful about removing them, they’ll trigger a massive heart attack.”

A dry heave escaped Tony as the implications slammed into him. “Combined with the heart failure… that would kill him.” He paced around the room for a few minutes and Bridget and Loki did their best to mitigate the damage done to the poor man. “There’s no other option right now.” He finally spoke up, shooting an apologetic look towards Victor. “We have to leave them in. Removing them is a moot point because, on the off chance that the failsafe goes off, his heart isn’t strong enough to handle what they’ll cause. Once he’s in the clear, or at least strong enough to handle it, we’ll have to remove the blocks one by one. I’m taking no chances with this.”

Bridget nodded in understanding at that. “It makes sense. Loki, do you know where the potions cabinet is?” Getting a nod from the God, she continued, “Grab one of the big bottles of the organ restoration potions and we’ll give it to him intravenously. I don’t want to give it to him all at once; his body could reject it.”

There was a quiet conversation between Stephen and Tony as he moved to do that, and Tony turned back to the bed after a moment. “Victor,” He called to the man, a grim look on his face. “It’s going to take a few days for this stuff to work. We can’t remove the blocks until then, considering what Reed programmed them to do. I swear to you, though, the instant you’re strong enough and
feel ready, we’re going to get that shit out of you.”

Feeling his breathing becoming easier already, Victor nodded with a small smile. “I understand… thank you, all of you.” The look of gratitude and relief on his face was breathtaking in its intensity. A moment later, the bed shifted and the brunette looked up with startled green eyes to find Minowa settling behind him, his back resting against her chest. A soft rumble escaped the woman as she rested her chin on his shoulder, wrapping her arms protectively around his overly thin middle. He blushed vibrantly, though he made no move to pull away from the touch-- the woman radiated strength and security, and he knew on a subconscious level that she wouldn’t let anything happen to him.

There was quiet for about ten seconds before Tony turned to Stephen with a deadpan expression. “So, Stephen, baby. Remember when I came back to the Compound with Emma and the girls?”

“I do.”

“Remember when you told me to wait on the bed?”

“Indeed.”

“And how, for all I knew, Min’s group could get bigger?”

“Yes.”

“Remember how I said that fate listens for shit like that and will always fuck you over just because it can?”

“I remember, Tony.”

The genius threw his hand toward Minowa and Victor, the female watching them with a knowing, shit eating smirk on her face. “Case. In. Point.”

Bridget, who had been completing the setup of the IV, burst out in laughter. “So, I suppose there’s no point in trying to move her from the bed.” A rumbling growl escaped Minowa, and the Restoration Master backed up with her hands in the air, a grin on her face. “Okay, okay! Just be careful with him, alright?” The Dragonborn nodded, settling in further behind the man. She quickly sterilized the area before inserting the needle into Victor’s arm, giving the brunette a compassionate, friendly smile. “I’m sorry, I never introduced myself. My name is Bridget Ivorsen, I’m the head of the Medical Wing here in the Avengers Compound. My specialties lie in restoration magic and the white arts, and it will be primarily myself and Loki taking care of you.”

The brunette nodded with a small smile. “A pleasure to meet you, ma’am. My name is Victor Von Doom, and I thank both you and Loki for your care.”

“Hold on, Doom? As in Doctor Doom?” The exclamation from Stephen drew their attention as the man put two and two together in regards to the brunette’s name, and he approached the bed with wide eyes. “You’re the current King of Latveria! How the hell did Richards manage to…??”

A soft chuckle escaped the brunette, and he turned a sardonic smile in the sorcerer’s direction. “I’m no longer king, actually. Though there’s been no formal announcement, I have relinquished the throne to my son Kristoff. I wished to make amends for the wrongs I have committed, along with finding help for my heart condition.” He closed his eyes for a moment, a grimace crossing his face. “I had gone to apologize to Ri-- Rich--” His face fell and he sighed, “Reed, and he seemed thrilled that I had reformed… though he was angered by my rejection of his advances, however.”
Tony did a mental double take as everyone around the room made various noises of shock, including a low, menacing growl from Minowa. “Hold on, Richards is married, though! Are you telling me he was coming on to you despite his wife and children??”

“Indeed. However, not only do I not have any attraction to Ri… Reed in such a way, I have no interest in being a homewrecker of any kind. I never encouraged his fixation on me, so I’m unsure where such a thing came from.” The brunette closed his eyes and turned his head to the side in shame. “He… refused to take ‘no’ for an answer, though. He offered me a drink and I felt… decidedly odd afterward. I recall collapsing and R… Reed’s arms around me, and I awoke to find myself in the same room you found me in, hands and feet chained in the same way as you found them. I…” His brow furrowed in thought. “I don’t know how long I’ve been his prisoner there.”

Min shifted to gently run her nose behind Victor’s ear. “Why do you continue to stutter over his name?”

The brunette flushed in embarrassment. “Reed taught… Rather, he conditioned me not to refer to him by his last name. He would deny me food and companionship if I did so… I was often isolated for days on end.”

Whiskey brown eyes flared a bright orange as Tony snarled, “That bastard was inducing Stockholm syndrome! Wonder how Sue would react if she knew that little tidbit of trivia about her husband!”

“She-- they, actually-- didn’t know that he...”

The room ground to a dead halt at the soft, shaky admission from Victor. “Are you telling me,” Bridget began in a slow, dangerous tone, “that this… Reed Richards had you locked up and isolated for Mara knows how long with only himself for company… and the rest of his team had no idea you were there?”

Victor shifted uneasily against Min, who rumbled comfortingly while running her nose along his neck to relax him once more. “From what R-Reed said, the other members are actually gone at this point. Mrs. Richards left and took the kids with her-- I think she wants a divorce from Reed. Mr. Storm went with her, seeing as he’s her brother and underage, and Mr. Grimm… I don’t know what happened between them except for a disagreement regarding Mrs. Richards and the kids.” He let out a soft breath as he thought back. “Richa-- Ri--” The man looked ready to cry, but was stopped by the arms around his waist maneuvering to rest over his breast bone.

The Dragonborn shifted so her chin was on his shoulder again. “Names only have power if you give it to them. You are strong, you can take back what he took from you. He doesn’t have to be Reed anymore. He is Richards.” Victor struggled for a second, and the ebony-haired woman nosed behind his ear encouragingly. “He does not have power over you any longer. Do not give him that power by allowing him to reach you even here. His name is Richards.” This time, she channeled just the tiniest bit of her Thu’um into the words to add weight behind them.

There was a moment of quiet as the brunette blinked in shock. There had been something about her voice for a moment… like there had been magic woven into it to make the words more powerful. He had no doubt that, had his magic not been blocked, he would have felt it. “I… I had to listen to Richards,” He paused for a moment to shoot a grin at Minowa over his shoulder, and the crimson-eyed woman smiled back pressed a small kiss to his neck. “He was ranting about his wife and saying some things that were pretty… well, sexist, to be honest. He kept ranting about how she didn’t know her proper place and how she needed to be staying out of their battles and that her duty was to stay home and take care of the kids. He kept insinuating she was a bad mother due to her insistence on fighting alongside their team.”
All at once, everyone else in the room flinched noticeably. “Mara have mercy on that man if he said shit like that in front of Aria…” Bridget said with a pained look on her face.

“Not just Aria,” Loki added, his own face pale. “He’d have to contend with her and her husbands.”

All of them shuddered before a weary yawn from the green-eyed man in the bed brought their attention back. “Don’t fall asleep yet, Victor.” Bridget said gently, gesturing for Loki to grab something. “I’d like to put you on oxygen for a while. Nothing too invasive, just a nasal cannula. Are you okay with that?” Victor nodded, and the duo quickly got the equipment set up and hooked to the man. “You should get some rest, give your body a chance to start healing. Once you wake up, we’ll see about getting something substantial in you. Min, I take it you’re not moving from your spot?” The Dragonborn stared at her unblinking for several seconds, causing Bridget to chuckle. “I’ll take that as a no. Shall I send your other partners in so you can explain, though?” Minowa thought for a second before nodding, allowing Victor to cuddle closer to her. “You got it. The rest of you, out. Come on, chop chop!” She ushered them out of the room before shutting the door behind her. “Stephen, Tony, a word before you go?”

The soulmates turned back to her at her call. “What’s up, Bri?” The genius asked head cocked in curiosity.

Bridget gestured for them to follow her to a one-way window looking into one of the private rooms. Inside, Pietro lay unconscious in the bed, looking far healthier than he had been before. “Mr. Maximoff has been showing an increase in brain activity, and at the rate he’s going, he could awaken any day now. How would you like this handled?”

Whiskey-brown eyes widened in understanding as to why the Restoration Master was asking. “Thinking we need to have a familiar face there, first of all-- one that isn’t mine, for obvious reasons. Keep in mind, the events regarding Ultron happened a year and a half ago, it’s gonna be a bit of a shock coming back from that. Let’s find out what he remembers, his current mental state, and his physical one as well. We’ll figure out where to go from there.”

The sorcerer at his side looked towards him with a grim look on his face. “Who else was there, though? Bruce was the Hulk at the time, neither Rogers nor Wanda are an option, Vision is at SI…” His face lit up suddenly with an idea. “What about Natasha and Clint?”

“Well, it’s not like we have another option. They would probably be the best for that, anyway.” Their conversation was cut off by Peter’s voice calling out to them both. Tony turned and smiled when he saw both Peter and Harley approaching him. “Hey, guys, what’s going on? You holding up okay?”

Peter fidgeted with the hem of his shirt for a second before looking up at them through his long lashes. “We… heard about the pardons for the Rogues getting approval.” He admitted in a small voice. “How can you let them back on the team, Mechanic?? After everything they did to you??”

Amber brown eyes were filled with worry, even as Harley crossed his arms with a frown on his face. “How can you let them back on the team, Mechanic?? After everything they did to you??”

“Now hold on--”

“No, Iron Dad!” Peter exploded, tears welling up in his eyes as he continued, “They hurt you, Rogers almost killed you! I can’t lose you, Dad!”

“Wait just a damn--”
Harley spoke this time as he rested a comforting hand on Peter’s shoulder. “We’re freaking terrified, Mechanic! Every single kid in this building is scared that Rogers is going to do something, then they’ll be able to hurt you again--!”

“BOYS!” Tony barked in a loud voice, bringing them to a halt. He pulled them both into a tight hug to comfort them as he explained, “While yes, it’s true that the Rogues have been pardoned, that doesn’t mean they’re automatically members again! Only four are even up for consideration in that regard!” He pressed a gentle kiss to Peter’s head and, after a moment of consideration, did the same for Harley. “Come on, let’s go talk to the rest of the Compound-- methinks there’s been a bit of miscommunication…”

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“Alright, everyone, listen up!” Tony called out in a sharp voice, bringing the conversation around the common room to a halt as they all turned towards him to listen attentively. On the screen close by, Minowa and her group were listening in as well with their earpieces while sitting cuddled around a sleeping Victor. “We’ve got a few topics we need to discuss before the Rogues land, so I need your undivided attention. First, I’d like to go over the specifics of the pardons we procured for them.” Getting a series of nods, he continued. “First of all, the matter of who is and isn’t eligible to join the team. The only two hard ‘no’s are on Maximoff and Rogers, for obvious reasons. Wilson and Lang may have an offer waiting for them, depending on how their probationary period goes. Barton and Romanoff are eligible provided they pass several tests, including a psych eval. Maximoff and Rogers will not be staying at the Compound, or in any SI or Avengers related property. They’ll be lodging in government barracks, where they can keep an eye on the duo… as will we.” That garnered a round of chuckles from everyone. “The other four will be staying in their own wing on the opposite end of the building. If they want to come over to this side, they must be accompanied by one of the members of the New Avengers. If the probationary period for them goes well, they have the option to become members of the New Avengers. If they accept, they will sign the Accords and follow them to the best of their abilities.”

Every kid in the room relaxed simultaneously, breathing audible sighs of relief. After a second, Cooper raised his hand and asked in a small voice, “What if they come here anyway, even if they aren’t allowed?”

That got several looks from the adults in the room, shot both towards the kids and at each other. Clearly, they needed to start checking rooms before they started talking about these things…

“Well, if either Rogers or Maximoff shows up here, then we defend our home,” Emma told him softly, getting nods all around.

“The chances of it happening are rather slim, though,” Stephen spoke up, drawing their attention. “There are so many defensive measures in place, magical and mechanical, that it would take a miracle to get through them all.”

In one corner of the room, Craig and Ulysses shot each other knowing smirks. Several new additions had been added to the Spire’s systems, and neither man was afraid to use them to protect the people in the room before them. Tony noticed the looks immediately and arched an eyebrow at them. The two immediately adopted completely neutral expressions, and the genius decided that it was probably better not to ask. “So, the last thing on our agenda! Who wants to go pick up the Rogues in a few hours?” His eyes immediately snapped to the screen where Minowa had started to grin. “Not you, Min. I love you, but you’re liable to kill Maximoff the instant she opens her mouth. And Vic needs you here.” The Dragonborn took on a contemplative look before nodding her concession.
There was a minute of debate between everyone before it was decided that Stephen, Logan, and Loki would pick the Rogues. Stephen pressed a kiss to Tony’s head before he departed to grab a few things, Logan slipping from the bed his lovers were on to make his way to the common room. Loki turned to whisper something in Laura’s ear, and she smiled and nodded, pressing a kiss to the Trickster’s lips. The kids all split off, Alexia following only after she was gently persuaded by Minowa not to stab Rogers on the off chance that he showed up. Tony joined in with her chuckling, but it quickly died when he realized Rem was leaning heavily on the counter with his eyes closed, face scrunched up in pain. “Rem?” the genius calmly approached him, gently resting his hands on the teen’s shoulders. “What’s going on, Rem?”

The redhead huffed out a breath, quickly finding himself being bracketed by his Papa and Dad when he opened his eyes again. “There’s… so much pain, Uncle Tony,” He managed to whisper, blinking up at the genius with a glassy look in his eyes. “Sadness, fear, despair, loneliness… It’s too much--” Rem cringed again, knees nearly buckling from the intensity of the pain.

Tony lunged forward, catching the teen and gently lowering him to the ground. “Shit, that has to be Victor. Okay, hold on for a second.” He quickly opened his pocket dimension and pulled a leather cord from it, an obsidian pendant in the shape of the Hallows hanging from it. In a smooth motion, he slipped the cord over Rem’s head, the pendant resting against his breastbone. A moment later, Rem gasped in surprise as the migraine disappeared, and his other powers settled under his skin. He looked up at the genius in surprise, unaware as the black and red faded from his eyes, leaving them a soft icy blue.

“Fasta vass!” Dorian murmured, eyes lighting up in surprise. “Without the mutation, your eyes are identical to James’.”

Getting a curious look from the teen, Tony explained, “The pendant blocks your powers, so it will give you a break from feeling the emotions of everyone in the Compound or elsewhere. I wouldn’t recommend using it all the time, but if things get too overwhelming, go ahead and pop that on.”

The mutant nodded with a look of gratitude before giving the Reaper a tight hug. “Thank you so much, Uncle Tony!”

Tony hugged him back just as tightly, pressing a kiss to his fiery hair. “You’re very welcome, Rem. Just let me know if it gives you any problems, okay?” Getting a nod from the teen, he pulled away and nodded to Dorian and Zevrael with a smile. “He should be okay, now. I need to go check and see if everyone is ready to go.”

“Of course, Lethallin.” Zevrael smiled and reached out to give the brunette a quick hug. “Thank you for your help.”

The group went their separate ways, Tony’s technopathy activating momentarily. “FRIDAY, where’s Loki right now?”

“He’s with Laura, Boss-Man. He said he’ll be down soon, he and Laura are taking care of something.”

The genius’ whiskey brown eyes widened. “I hope that doesn’t mean what I’m thinking it means…”
“It’s a video message.”

Loki stood straight from where he’d been looking at the tablet over Laura’s shoulder, a flicker of fear passing through his eyes. “Your brother sent us a video message? Should I have FRIDAY activate soundproofing?”

The brunette woman snorted as she pressed back against him. “Not if he doesn’t want me to rip him a new one the instant he gets here. Let’s see what he has to say, okay?” She pulled Loki down onto the bed next to her, linking their hands as she pressed play on the tablet.

Immediately, a video taken with what seemed to be a smartphone camera came up, showing Clint sitting in a chair looking somewhat nervous. “We rolling?” He asked whoever was behind the camera, and after getting what must have been an affirmative turned his golden eyes back to the feed. “Hey Laura… and Loki, if you’re there.” He started, sounding somewhat unsure and a bit nervous. “I… shit. I had this all worked out in my head, and now-- no, Nat, it’s fine. We don’t need to start the video again for the 37th time.” A soft feminine laugh was heard, and the couple on the bed recognized it as Natasha’s. “Okay, first things first… Loki, thank you for your apology. I don’t really feel like there’s anything to apologize for-- you were getting yanked around like I was, and worse if what I heard was any indication. I…” He paused and swallowed. “I know how powerful absolution can be, though, so… for what it’s worth, I forgive you.” Loki gave a small, choked noise as tears welled up in his eyes. Laura smiled brilliantly at the video, reaching to thread her fingers through the ebony-haired man’s. “Second… I saw the way you were behaving with everyone at the Compound. I… I saw the love you have for your children, and for my nephews and niece. You… you’ve been there for them, and I want to thank you wholeheartedly. I… we can tell that you have a great relationship with everyone in that place. I’m glad… I’m glad Nate has a good father figure.” The archer took a deep breath, even as the tears began rolling unabashedly down Loki’s face.

“Laura, I’m smart enough to know when I’ve stepped in it, even if it wasn’t fully or at all my own will. But I’ve seen the way Loki looks at you, I’ve seen how much he genuinely cares about not only you but the kids too.” He looked dead into the camera for the next bit. “Loki, the fact that you helped Laura finally kick Robert to the curb… I will never be able to thank you enough for that.” He paused for a moment to gather his thoughts. “I would never force you to choose between your family and happiness, Laura… and if Loki makes you happy, then I can sure as hell put forth the effort to get to know the man you fell in love with.” This time, he fixed the camera with a knowing look and a half smile. “Don’t think for one second we didn’t see it, Laura. You are completely taken with Loki, even if you didn’t say it.” Laura flushed brightly, even as she gave a watery laugh. “By the time you get this message, chances are we’ll be on our way home. Laura, I’m looking forward to seeing you and the chicks again. And Loki… I’m looking forward to getting to know the real you.”

The ebony-haired man finally lost the battle with his emotions and broke into heaving sobs, relief showing clearly as Laura pulled him close. Clint said a few parting words before the video finally cut. Laura gently ran her fingers through the god’s hair as she soothed and cooed to him, grounding him against the sudden upwelling of emotions. Finally, Loki managed to take a deep breath before pulling back to look into Laura’s warm brown eyes. “I can hardly believe it…” He managed to croak with an enormous smile on his face.

Laura gave him a soft, tender kiss before murmuring, “That’s the brother I know-- you two will have a great relationship going forward, I promise you that.”

Any reply that might have been said was cut off by Tony’s voice filtering through the speakers in the room. “Hey, I hate to interrupt whatever might be going on in there, but we need to get going. Hope I’m not cockblocking at all.”
The mood was broken as Laura burst out in laughter. “No, not at all, Tony.” She replied with a grin towards the ceiling. “Clint sent us a video message, we were just watching it.”

“Oh? What did Legolas have to say?”

Loki wiped the tears from his eyes and smiled brightly. “You may look if you wish, Anthony.”

There was a pause as Tony did so before his voice filtered through again. “Honestly? I’m not surprised he replied like that. Clint has always been pretty easy going, and he’d understand that you put anger where anger’s due. I also know how good he is with kids, so seeing you interacting with the various chicks in the Compound was bound to win you a few brownie points. Now, are you ready to go get the Rogues?”

“Almost. Though I do have a question.” Getting an affirmative noise from Tony, the emerald-eyed male tilted his head and asked, “What is that term you used earlier-- ‘cockblocking’?”

“LAURA, YOU’RE ON YOUR OWN.”

The brunette woman’s hysterical laughter rang through the room as Tony rapidly disconnected from the speakers.

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“... And once we get back, I’ll have the New Avengers dismissed, things can go back to the way they’re supposed to be…”

Forest green eyes observed as Rogers’ words garnered a synchronized eye roll from the other members of the Rogues before they continued to ignore him. A small smirk quirked at Wanda’s lips at Steve’s rant before the woman leaned back in her seat to think some more, outwardly appearing calm despite the dark nature of her thoughts. The unmitigated vitriol against Tony Stark the captain displayed was the main reason she had never tried to control his thoughts and feelings—they were strong enough on their own. It was actually rather amusing that Steve would launch into an anti-Tony tirade without any prompting from her, with or without her powers.

The other Rogues, though… the woman cast her gaze to the others on the jet, a small sneer pulling at her lips. It was a shame she hadn’t gotten her hooks into their minds from the very start. They were now speaking out in favor of that murderer, turning their backs on both her and Steve. It couldn’t be allowed to continue, of course, but until they landed, there wasn’t much she could do. She wasn’t willing to risk her life by trying to use her magic while their plane was flying over the ocean, or wherever they were now. Romanoff had kept her from keeping control over Barton after learning about his family’s death, so it was likely she’d have to start over with him. Honestly, thinking back, the entire rift could have been avoided if she’d just turned Stark into a mindless puppet from the beginning. Or maybe not... After all, if she’d done that, she wouldn’t have Vision. Thinking of the android brought another smirk to her lips. One way or another, she would have him back. He might protest at first, but he would see that they were meant to be... one way or another.

She was pulled from her thoughts as a voice announced over the intercom that they were ten minutes from landing. Wanda quickly schooled her features, even as her eyes flickered with eager anticipation. Soon, everything would be the way it was supposed to be.

-“So, do you think that either Rogers or Maximoff will try to start something the instant their feet
hits the tarmac?”

Logan snorted as he glanced at Stephen from the corner of his eye. “It’d be stupid of them to start shit when they’ve only been back for five minutes. The pardons only covered certain things, so if Tony presses charges for what he did in Siberia…” Thinking for a moment, the mutant then considered what he’d been told of the pair. “Then again, from the things I’ve heard, they’re both impulsive and angry when things don’t go the way that they’re expecting. Either way, I’m glad that this airport is deserted,” he gruffly stated, not wanting innocent bystanders to get caught up in something if things went south.

“Don’t forget the Ultron fiasco as well,” Stephen added, dipping his head in agreement in regards to the place being vacant. No more innocent lives would be forfeited this way. “Maximoff would also be in trouble for those events-- mind control and manipulation actually goes against several rules on the metaphysical side of the law. Not to mention that deliberately unleashing the Hulk in Johannesburg could be considered terrorism, and her willingly working with Ultron would make her an accessory to terrorism.”

Huffing, Logan nodded before turning his head to where the jet was finally coming into view. “Lokes is waiting by the car?”

Blue-green eyes fixed on the jet as well as the sorcerer nodded. “He had to take a phone call but should be done by the time we get this over with.”

The duo fell quiet as the vehicle landed, a few seconds passing before the hatch slid open. A guard stepped out and quickly approached them, dipping his head in respect to the duo. “Dr. Strange, Mr. Howlett. How would you like this to be handled?”

“Have Barton, Romanoff, Wilson, and Lang come off first. Once we’ve sent them to the car, we’ll continue with Maximoff and Rogers.” Stephen replied, getting a nod of agreement from Logan as well. The guard nodded and returned to the jet to relay the order. A few seconds later, the group requested descended onto the tarmac and move towards them cautiously. Natasha approached first, Clint just a step behind her, and Stephen stepped up to greet them. “My name is Doctor Stephen Strange, and this is my associate, Logan Howlett. We’ll be escorting you back to the Compound as soon as we’ve dealt with Rogers and Maximoff. Go ahead and wait at the car for us-- this shouldn’t take too long.”

Natasha and Clint nodded, though Scott and Sam paused before following them. “Are you guys gonna be able to handle Rogers and Maximoff okay?” The engineer asked, eyes darting back to the jet for a moment. “Not that I doubt your skills or whatever, I just…”

Sam picked up the thought for him, “We don’t want them to hurt anyone else the way they did with Tony.”

The words prompted the two New Avengers to exchange a look. “Rest assured, gentlemen,” Stephen replied easily, a small smile crossing his face, “Logan and I are capable of defending ourselves from them.”
“Don’t worry about us, bubs.” The mutant added, lighting a cigar and taking an easy puff. “They try anything, I’ll rake ‘em across the claws.”

Scott arched an eyebrow at him, confusion in his eyes. “Er, don’t you mean ‘across the coals’?”

Logan gave him a deadpan look as he held his hand up, his claws extending in a smooth, quick motion.

“Ah. Whelp, we’d better join Clint and Natasha! No time like the present, come along, Scott!”

“Aaaw, but questions!”

As the duo retreated, one more reluctantly than the other, Stephen turned his eyes back to Logan, who had gone back to smoking his cigar. “You ready to deal with the demon duo?”

The mutant breathed out a stream of smoke and smirked at him. “Been waitin’ for this all day.” As they approached the jet, Logan spoke up again. “You got their papers?”

Stephen nodded, briefly reaching into a pocket dimension and pulling them out. “Right here. We’ll wait until Loki gives us the okay before we do this… don’t need Rogers or Maximoff making a break for it.”

“I truly appreciate Disney’s willingness to grant us use of the suites for the duration of our visit… I know the money helps, but I care more for the enjoyment we will have with this experience.”

Clint and Natasha slowed their gait as they approached the car, their eyes immediately locking on the God of Mischief leaning against it as he spoke on the phone. The first thing they noticed was his clothes— an emerald green turtleneck over black pants, a black coat overtop that swept around his calves. A pair of sunglasses covered his eyes, and his lips were stretched into a brilliant smile. The god listened to the person on the other end for a few seconds before a soft laugh escaped him. “I believe they would be thrilled with a meet and greet!... The girl’s names? Lila and Hela. Yes, of course I’ll let Laura know.” They exchanged a few more words before Loki finally hung up the phone, the smile still on his face. A moment later, he finally registered the presence of the two spies, and his face lit up crimson. “Oh, I apologize. I was just…” He quickly tucked the phone
back into his pocket, flicking his glasses off as well.

After a moment, the archer stepped forward with a soft look in his eyes. “Are… you taking the kids to Disney?”

Loki nodded at that, eyes lighting up in excitement. “Indeed, we’ll be leaving in about a week and a half. I managed to procure the rooms in the castle for our stay there— that’s what the phone call was about.” After a moment of quiet, he tentatively stepped forward and held his hand out. “Our first meeting was… under rather unfortunate circumstances. I would like to try again… if you’re amicable.”

The partners looked at each other for a moment before Clint stepped forward fully, grasping the God’s hand in a firm shake. “I’m Clint Barton, codename Hawkeye. It’s good to meet you.”

Nat stepped up as well as they pulled apart, offering her own hand. “Natasha Romanoff, Black Widow.”

Giving the duo a relieved smile, the ebony-haired man shook hers as well. “I am Loki, God of Mischief and Crown Prince of Asgard… for now.” He wrinkled his nose as he pulled away. “I’ve no desire to rule anyone or anything except my own life.”

“Totally get that.” Clint dipped his head at the god’s words, a small smile on his face. “We saw the whole… meeting with the Accords Committee.” He exhaled sharply at the memory. “And I thought I had a shit dad.”

Whatever might have been said next was interrupted by the arrival of Sam and Scott, who stopped short at who was waiting for them by the car. “Holy crap!” The engineer of the duo bounced forward with a massive grin on his face. “You’re Loki! Like, legit God of Mischief Loki! I have officially met a God, I can die happy now.”

Sam couldn’t help but chuckle at the stunned look on Loki’s face as he caught up. “Dial it back, Scott. Don’t be a rabid fanboy.” He quickly shook hands with the man in question. “Sam Wilson, Falcon.”

“I’m Scott Lang, I’m Ant-Man, and I am not a rabid fanboy!” He shot a glare towards the dark-skinned man before turning his attention back to the group as a whole. “So, are we waiting for Dr. Strange and… Mr. Howlett? He doesn’t have some fancy title, does he?”
A small smile quirked at Loki’s lips at the question. “He uses the codename ‘Wolverine’, but beyond that, we simply call him Logan.”

The group nodded as a whole, and they fell into idle chatter for several minutes. Finally, the sound of footsteps drew their attention to where Logan and Stephen were approaching them. “I must admit, I was worried for a moment,” Stephen commented in a blithe tone of voice. “Considering the color of Rogers’ face, I’m rather surprised he didn’t have a stroke.”

Logan snorted at that, flicking his cigar to the side. “Surprised he didn’t straight up explode, ‘specially when you told Spangles that James basically told him to ‘fuck off and leave me the hell alone’.”

“And of course he decided that Tony had to be forcing James to say that.” The sorcerer rolled his eyes deeply and sighed. “Nothing to be done for it, I suppose. Alright, enough stalling everyone! In the car you get!”

The Rogues immediately piled into the vehicle, Logan moving to slide into the driver’s seat with Stephen next to him. Loki took a seat with the Rogues in the back, a small smile on his face. “Well, I do believe we’re ready to go. Oh, wait…”

The odd looks the pause gained him quickly changed to shock as several poofs were heard, and a rubber duck fell into each of their laps, all with a sign that said the same thing-- ‘welcome home!’.

After a moment of quiet, Scott looked up to Loki with a massive grin on his face again. “We’ve been had by the God of Mischief!! My life is complete!”

Chapter End Notes

-Plays ominous music- Things are picking up, lovelies!! Clench up, vassals, because things are about to get CRAZY!!
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

The rogues returned to the Compound, and one of them is about to have their world turned on their head. Victor meets the rest of the Dragonharem, Tony and Stephen bond over justice served and the value of self-confidence, and Reed Richards learns very quickly that trying to take from a dragon’s horde is a suicide mission at best. Two weeks of putting up with Rogers’ shenanigans finally leads to a face-to-face confrontation, and sick Rem is still a good bro.

(Scott Lang is absolutely a fan boy, no matter how much he tries to deny it.)

((Threats and insults aimed at any member of the Dragonharem will very quickly be dealt with by every other member of said harem. Be afraid—be very, VERY afraid.))

Chapter Notes

If my diagnosis of Dequervain’s Tendosynovitis thought it was going to stop me from writing, then it had better start running, because this 12,000-Word behemoth of a chapter is about to run its’ ass over!! And only 300 of them were typed!! TAKE THAT, HAND BRACE!! I AM THE MASTER OF MY OWN FANFICTION, AND I CANNOT BE STOPPED!!

For those of you who are still in the dark, I have to wear a very specialized hand brace for the next 6+ weeks because the tendons in my thumb are extremely inflamed and need a chance to recover. Unfortunately, this also means I am without that extremity for that same length of time, and subsequently also without my job—I was forced to take leave. But just because the chapters are a little slower coming doesn't mean they're not getting done!! I encourage you all to engage with me on either my Tumblr or my Discord! I'm finding the latter to be a fun way to engage with you all!

On that note, brace yourselves for the next couple chapters, vassals, because they are going to ROCK YOU. Trust me, this chapter is only the beginning of the surprises…

Thank you all for being patient with me, and I hope you all enjoy this one!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Zeymahi, you’re liable to wear a hole straight through the ground if you don’t cease pacing.”

The genius huffed out a breath, turning his whiskey-brown eyes to Minowa. “I know that, and I don’t get why I’m anxious. Rogers and Maximoff aren’t going to be here, and the other four have shown genuine remorse over what happened…” He ran his fingers through his hair in a nervous gesture.
A clawed gauntlet covered his shoulder, gripping it in a comforting, supportive gesture. “Because it doesn’t feel real yet.” The Dragonborn explained in a compassionate tone. “It’s one thing to hear their words from the other side of a screen… it’s entirely different to have them said in front of you and to your face. Rest assured, your mind will settle once they’ve arrived.” A sudden noise caught the ebony haired woman’s attention, and she turned her head towards the gravel drive leading up to the Compound. “Speaking of…”

Tony’s gaze turned to where the car they’d sent out earlier was rolling up the path. “Alright, showtime.” The hand on his shoulder gave him one more squeeze before dropping, and Minowa took up her position on his left as the vehicle came to a halt. The passenger side door opened up, but before anyone could emerge a flash of red erupted from the car, and the genius couldn’t help but laugh as he found himself being wrapped up by Levi. “Dammit, you crazy enchanted snuggie! You’re ruining my image!”

A bark of laughter escaped Stephen as he pulled himself from the car, striding towards them. “Levi, put him down, buddy.” The cloak settled around the sorcerer’s shoulders again, and Stephen pulled his soulmate into a quick kiss. “Mission accomplished. I’ll tell you everything later tonight.” He murmured, not fully pulling away from the genius’ lips.

“Sounds good, babe.” Tony pulled away for a moment to smile at his soulmate before turning to the rest of the group that was stepping out of the car. After only a moment of hesitation, he let a small smile across his lips before approaching them with a confident aura. "Hey guys," he called out to them, catching their attention, "welcome back."

Natasha was the first to step forward, a smile of her own on her face. "Hi, Tony." She greeted him with a sparkle in her green eyes. "You're looking really good--this new team has been good for you."

"She's right, I don't think I've ever seen you look this healthy." Clint chimed in as he stepped up to join the assassin. Struggling for a moment before he brought his eyes up from where they had been on the ground, the archer looked at Tony with an expression of breathtaking gratitude. "Tony, what you did for my sister and her kids… I just…"

Something in Tony's eyes softened, and without thinking, he reached forward to pull the archer into a tight hug, one that was immediately reciprocated. After a moment, Clint began sobbing, thanking the genius and apologizing in the same breath. "Hey, easy there Legolas. You're alright, they're safe, everything is going to be okay." The brunette gently soothed the man in his arms, shooting the agent's partner a momentary look of apprehension. The redhead simply smiled and dipped her head in understanding, knowing how important Clint's family was to him. Tony gave her a quick smile before turning his attention back to Clint, continuing to comfort him.
As the trio reconnected, Scott took the chance to bounce over to Minowa with a massive grin on his face. "Wow, you're Dragoon! You're the field commander of the New Avengers! You're just as badass in real life as you were on the screen!"

Minowa blinked in shock before giving the brunette a sharp grin, delight shining in her eyes. "My, my, I wasn't aware I had a fan boy amongst this group. Keep up that attitude, and you and I will get along just fine."

A snort escaped Logan as he approached them and pulled the woman into his arms. "Should Bruce, James, Victor, and I be concerned?"

The ebony haired woman wasted no time in turning and tucking her head under the mutant's chin, rumbling with pleasure as Logan wrapped his arms around her waist. "Now now, Grohiiki, you know there's no reason to be jealous. This is simply the first time I've come face-to-face with a fan-allow me to have my fun."

"Hold on a second," Sam spoke up and he stepped forward arching an eyebrow in shock, "are you trying to tell me you're seeing four different guys?"

"Indeed I am. If you have a problem with that, I suggest you speak up now. Just know that if you do…” Minowa's crimson eyes began to glow with an ominous light. "You should also start running at the same time."

Both men were quick to reassure her that they had no problems with the arrangement and that it had simply come as a surprise. A few seconds later, they were joined by Loki, Natasha, Tony, Stephen, and a much calmer Clint. "Alright, is everyone ready to head inside? We still have a few things to cover before I send you on your way to your rooms." Tony looked between everyone with an expectant expression.

Scott gave the genius a nervous smile. "We're ready when you are, Mr. Stark. Lead the way."

The group quickly made their way inside, but a few steps in Clint froze in his tracks. Standing on the other side of the lobby was Laura, a soft smile on her face as she locked eyes with her brother. He made to take a step toward her before he paused and looked to Tony as if asking for permission. The genius smiled knowingly and nodded once, and that was all the encouragement the archer needed. A second or two later, he was pulling the brunette into his arms for a tight hug, bursting into tears all over again from sheer relief. Laura spoke soothingly to him as she held him close,
running her fingers through his short cropped brown hair. A few moments later they were approached by Natasha as well. The look of relief was clear on the assassin's face, and Laura quickly pulled her in on the hug as well.

Tony smiled indulgently at them for a moment before turning his attention to Sam and Scott. "Let's give them a second or two to regroup. In the meantime, let me go over a few specifics with you two specifically." He turned toward Stephen, who opened up a pocket dimension and removed two folders from it. The sorcerer handed one to both of them as Tony continued to speak. "While you've been pardoned for your parts in the events of the Civil War, you still have to go through a probationary period before you can be considered candidates for the New Avengers. Your eligibility will be based on your behavior during that period along with the pending results of any evaluations you'll be called on to complete. However, depending on the results, you already have an offer waiting in the wings for membership in the New Avengers disaster relief team."

Both Sam and Scott nodded at that, nearly identical looks of consideration on both of their faces. "I can definitely see how the shrink/grow capacity of the Ant-Man suit would be useful in something like that, but what about the Falcon Wings?" The dark skinned man asked in curiosity.

"Aerial support," Stephen answered easily. "In the event of a natural disaster that causes a lot of damage over a widespread area, your kit would be invaluable in expediting the process of finding survivors."

Tony nodded in agreement, taking notice of the way both Scott and Sam's eyes seemed to light up at the prospect of helping people in such a capacity. "Of course, you have to earn your place on the team, so Rhodey will be in and out of the Compound to evaluate you as well as get updates on how your probation is going. If you have any questions, I can set up a meeting between you guys see you can talk over the details. For now though, I'll have Minowa show you both to your rooms. She'll cover a few additional details once you get there."

The duo nodded in agreement, but Scott lingered for a moment when the ebony haired woman gestured for them to follow her. "Mr. Stark," he started softly with a look of remorse in his eyes, "I just wanted to apologize for my part in everything. I'm smart enough to know when I've stepped in it, and I let the words of a bitter old man influence my opinion of you when I should've gone looking for information on my own. So... For what it's worth, I'm really sorry."

"Me too, man." Sam chimed in, turning back to face the genius as well. "I screwed up on several levels, but especially Rhodey. He got hurt, and I didn't even have the damn decency to stop and make sure he was alright when his injury was my fault." He dropped his eyes to the floor, a look of shame flashing in them.

Whiskey brown eyes shone with gratitude as Tony dipped his head in acknowledgment.
"Ultimately, the ones I'm truly angry with are Rogers and Maximoff-- the first for hiding the truth about my parents’ deaths from me, then lying to my face, using my resources, and ultimately leaving me for dead after caving my chest in. I’m angry at the second for holding me responsible for a crime committed behind my back by someone I trusted, getting into my head, pulling my worst fears to the surface-- something that was directly responsible for the creation of Ultron, getting into the head of one of my best friends and dredging his worst fears up to make them a reality, throwing my friend through several levels of concrete, and blaming me for everything wrong with the world." He crossed his arms loosely with a small smile pulling at his lips. "Compared to them, your transgressions were little more than a blip on my radar with the exception of what happened with Rhodey. But if it makes you feel better, I forgave you both a long time ago." He looked over their shoulders at Minowa, who was smiling at the duo with a pleased look on her face. "Now go follow Min, there will be time to talk later."

Stephen watched them leave before turning and pressing a kiss to his soulmate's head. "I'm glad they recognized that they made a mistake and owned up to it. We should make a note to mention that to Rhodey--it will certainly win them both some brownie points."

The brunette nodded in agreement, his heart feeling lighter now that he had gotten a face-to-face apology. "Alright, two down, two to go."

The sorcerer nodded, a look of trepidation momentarily flashing across his face. He leaned down to whisper in Tony's ear, "Were we planning on telling her tonight?"

Whatever answer Tony would have given was cut off by someone calling out to him. The duo turned to see Dorian and Zevrael walking towards them from the other side of the lobby, their adopted son pressed against their backs. "Good evening, Fratris!" The pyromancer reached out to give Tony a quick hug. "I wanted to ask you a quick question regarding a press release regarding our new residents."

As the duo spoke, Rem peeked around his dad's back to gaze towards where Natasha, Clint, Laura, and Loki were standing and talking. A second or two later, the assassin of the group seemed to realize someone was watching them, and her gaze shifted over to observe the teen as well. Something about the young man seemed to pull at her attention, though she couldn't quite put her finger on why.

A few seconds later, the archer of the group noticed that his partner's attention was elsewhere. "Nat? Is everything okay?" He followed her gaze to where Zevrael and Rem were standing, and his brow furrowed as his gaze bounced back and forth between them for a few seconds. Suddenly his eyes widened and he gasped, "What the actual hell?"

The sudden outburst from the archer pulled everyone's attention to him, and it only took a second
or two for Tony to realize what had happened. "Oh for fuck's sake, of course he would figure it out first." Tony groaned under his breath as he ran a hand over his face. "Nat, Clint, please follow us to my office, we can discuss this there. FRIDAY," he called up to the ceiling as they began the trek, "please tell James he's needed up in my office ASAP."

"Already two steps ahead of you, Boss-Man!"

"'Atta girl!"

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"Nat, I wouldn't ask if it weren't important, but I need to know if you remember something very specific from your time in the Red Room."

Natasha's green eyes snapped over to Tony, and she studied his face for a few seconds as if searching for the truth in his words. Finally, she nodded and sat back on the couch and allowed Clint to put his arm around her. "It's not a time I look back on often, and certainly not fondly. What is it you want to know?"

The genius took a deep breath to organize his thoughts before reaching for his tablet and tapping on it, handing it to the redhead a moment later. Displayed on it were two separate photos of Nathaniel Essex, one in his human form and the other of the form he had had in the lab. "Did you ever see this man in the Red Room at any point in time?"

The assassin studied the pictures for a moment before nodding, tapping on the picture of the more human form. "Yes, I recognize him. From what I remember, he was brought in not long before I graduated, he did a lot of lab work with scientists there. Why, who is he?"

"That man is Dr. Nathaniel Essex, but what most people don't realize is that he was also the man known as Mister Sinister." Stephen sat back in his seat next to Tony, reaching over to gently rub the genius' back. "If you don't recognize the name, Dr. Essex was known for his controversial opinions regarding genetics and human evolution, and was less well-known for his experiments regarding cloning and DNA splicing."

Green eyes widened at the alias. "I've heard the name Sinister in passing, but nothing beyond that."
Dorian nodded as he reached over to rub his son's neck comfortingly. "That surprises me very little. Given the nature of the experiments he was performing, he kept them as far under the radar as possible. However, one of those experiments involved the attempted creation of Omega level mutants…"

"And Rem here was the result of his first success." The silverette on Rem's other side finished the thought as he pressed a kiss to his son's fiery locks.

Tony gave the family a gentle smile before continuing. "Not for lack of trying though--Essex had countless failures before he finally managed to have a breakthrough, one brought about entirely by accident. At some point, Sinister's lab was broken into, and in the ensuing fight, the person was injured. By using the blood left behind to make up for one half of the DNA, he was finally able to bring Rem into being."

Clint sat forward in his own seat, suspicion flaring in his gold eyes as he studied the teen sitting on the couch. After a few seconds he snorted and shook his head. "I thought it was weird when they called you in," he aimed the words towards James, who was hovering protectively behind the couch, "but now it makes a lot more sense."

The words prompted a small smile from the sniper. "Gotta admit, it was a shock finding out I had a son I never knew about…" He reached forward with his mental hand to gently run his fingers through the teen's hair. "But I'm super lucky to have him, and that I get to be part of his life."

Rem rose from his seat so he could move around the couch and hug the ex-assassin. "I'm really glad to have you in my life, Patris." He mumbled into the brunette's chest as James returned the hug without hesitation.

Everyone was quiet for a few seconds to allow the duo to have their moment. As they finally pulled apart, Nat spoke up again. "I never imagined you as a father, James, but I must say it looks good on you." She turned her eyes back to Tony after a moment, and he immediately took notice of the longing that she couldn't quite hide well enough. "I still don't understand what this has to do with the Red Room, though."

"Are you kidding me right now, Nat?" Clint jumped in before anyone else could speak. "You missed one important piece of information in that explanation-- James is one half of the DNA."

The Sorcerer Supreme nodded at his words. "To put it plainly, Essex was in the Red Room for the sole intent and purpose of collecting DNA samples for these experiments. We found evidence of this in two different places-- on hard drives we took out of Sinister's lab, and in some very well
hidden SHIELD files. It was while we were digging through the latter that we found something rather shocking."

Tony sat forward and fixed the assassin in front of him with a piercing look. "Natasha, I'm not going to beat around the bush." He gestured to Rem, who was still curled up against James's side. "James was responsible for one half of the DNA, but the other half came from you. You're Rem's mother."

In the silence that followed, the assassin's eyes flicked between Tony and Rem, doubt shining within them. Seeing the look on his partner's face, Clint reached over and took her hand. "Nat, look at him-- really look at him." He urged the redhead with an unusual light in his eyes.

The woman took a moment to do as he asked, and as she did so something in her gaze began to soften into something raw and vulnerable. The teen met her gaze unwaveringly, his empathy picking up on the way the disbelief began to ebb away only to be replaced by an intense feeling of hope. Finally, after several seconds of absolute silence, Nat swallowed and managed to get out, "How is this possible? The Red Room… They…" Her voice cracked the tiniest bit at the end.

"As we said, Ms. Romanoff, Essex was doing some rather questionable experiments--we believe his purpose in the Red Room was to collect DNA samples from the girls that were currently there." Stephen sat forward in his own seat with a compassionate gleam in his eyes. "I know it's hard to believe, but for all intents and purposes, he is your son."

The Black Widow's mask finally shattered, and she began to weep as Clint reached out to pull her into his arms. See the confused looks they were getting he moved to whisper in her ear for a moment. "Natty, do you want me to tell them?" The redhead nodded against his chest. The archer sighed and looked up at them with a mournful look on his face. "Guys, the Red Room… Nat can't have kids of her own-- they took that away from her."

Before anyone could react to that, a soft, wounded noise escaped the teen before he moved from where he was standing next to his father to cautiously approach the spy and assassin. Sensing his approach, Nat pulled away from Clint so she could stand and reach out towards her son. He immediately burrowed into her arms with a happy smile, ignoring how the woman's body still shook from the intensity of her emotions.

As the two held each other, Clint stood as well to make his way to where Tony and Stephen were sitting. "Tony, thank you for telling us." He started softly, casting a glance towards the duo as he did. "Nat has never said anything, but she loves kids, and has always wanted one of her own. Unorthodox as it may be, this gives her the chance to finally fulfill that dream."
Tony gave the Archer a smile. "No way was I going to keep this from her, especially given where I found the information. The fact that SHIELD knew and never said anything… I'm hoping the number of bad decisions like this decrease now that Maria is in charge."

Clint suddenly went very still, golden eyes widening in shock. "Hold on a second, SHIELD knew and didn't tell us?? Nick knew and kept it hidden?!

That prompted snorts of laughter from everyone else in the room, and Tony shook his head as he replied, "You guys should probably sit down for what I'm about to tell you..."

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It was the feeling of fingers gently running through his hair that brought Victor back to the waking world, and the first thing he noticed was the ease with which he was breathing. He let out a soft sigh of relief before allowing his eyes to slide open, squinting against the light he was assaulted with. It only took him a second to realize that fingers carding through his hair weren't Min's and he wiggled for a moment trying to turn to see who was holding him.

The fingers stopped their movement, and an unfamiliar male voice called out, "Bruce, I think he's awake. You could probably send off for that soup now." A moment later, James leaned around so he could be easily seen by the recovering former king. "Good to see you back with us-- I'm James Barnes, one of Minowa's three other partners. She asked us to watch you while she took care of some business with the other leaders of the New Avengers."

Victor immediately relaxed, giving the assassin a small, shy smile. "It's a pleasure to meet you. I apologize for my earlier reaction…"

"Hey, don't worry about it. I get where you're coming from-- unfamiliar environment with unfamiliar people. It'll take you a few days to acclimate, but don't feel the need to try and force it to happen faster." James gently rubbed his shoulder with his metal hand, a look of soul deep understanding on his face.

Another new voice pulled their attention towards the door where Bruce was entering carrying a tray with a bowl of soup on it. "I'm glad to see you're doing better, Victor." He greeted the brunette with a smile. "My name is Bruce, I'm also one of Minowa's partners. Let's see if we can get something on your stomach, and I can give you an update on your health while you eat. Sound good?" Victor nodded at that, eyeing the bowl eagerly as it was set down in front of him. After a moment of shifting, he realized there was a problem. The doctor picked up on it before he could speak, though. "Yeah, I had a feeling something like this would happen. Your muscles have
atrophied from how long you've been held captive. Nothing a little physical therapy won't fix, along with a good diet and lots of rest. James, would you mind…?"

James slid out from his place behind Victor so he could sit in front of him, taking the spoon and offering it to him. Seeing the embarrassed flush on his face, the assassin quickly moved to reassure him. "Hey, there's nothing to be ashamed of, okay? Nobody here is judging, and if anyone gave you shit about it, they'd be on the receiving end of Bridget's wrath."

"If Minowa didn't get to them first, you mean!" The trio shared a chuckle before Bruce reached for a nearby clipboard and flipped through it as James began to assist Victor. "So, I'm not sure how much you remember from when you were brought in, so let me rehash what we found. You have advanced congestive heart failure, malnutrition, and your oxygen levels were dangerously low. You currently have six different blocks on your magic, though we're not able to remove them quite yet. We would if we could, but it would appear Richards put in a failsafe of sorts-- if something goes wrong while we’re taking them out, they'll trigger a massive heart attack. Given the state of your heart right now, such a thing would outright kill you. We decided it's better that you recover a little first before we even begin to contemplate trying to remove them." He flipped to another paper on the clipboard. "That IV you're on currently is meant for organ renewal, and you'll be on that for about a week. We'll do a check at the end of the week, and if we find the your heart is strong enough, we'll get those blocks out of you. Once you've recovered from that some, you'll be moved to a room up in Minowa's suite-- Bridget trusts us to make sure your recovery continues to go well. Understand so far?"

The brunette nodded as he swallowed another spoonful of soup. "What happens if Richards shows up here?" He asked in a soft, hesitant voice. "He went to great lengths to capture me and keep me hidden--I don't want anyone to get hurt if he comes after me again."

A soft snort escaped James at the thought. "First of all, he'd be trespassing on New Avengers property, and the only reason the last person to try that survived was because Ulysses recognized them. Anyone else who crosses the property lines with malicious intent would never make it past the Spire. Second, he'd be in violation of several laws involving diplomatic immunity--not that he wasn't already, but now he'd be up against Stark Industry lawyers, and that's a battle he wouldn't win. Third, he'd have to make it past everyone in this compound, and the New Avengers alone are a force to be reckoned with. Fourth, and most importantly, even if he made it past all of the defenses he would then come face-to-face with some combination of the Hulk, Wolverine, and the Winter Soldier. God have mercy on him if Min is here too, because she sure as hell won't."

The former king's brow furrowed in a confused look. "The Winter Soldier? I was not aware of his identity had been announced. He's here?"

A soft bark of laughter drew their attention to the door, where Logan was leaning against the door frame with a smirk on his face. "Yeah, he's here alright-- the most feared assassin in the world is
currently sitting across from you, hand feeding you soup."

“Rosomakha!” James blushed brilliantly as he gave the mutant a halfhearted glare over his shoulder. He pouted when the man simply laughed at his expression.

Victor blinked in shock at the bombshell that had just been dropped on him before studying the man in front of him. The assassin noticed the look of scrutiny he was getting and huffed, silently offering another spoonful of soup. Deciding it would be for the best to remain quiet for now, the brunette took the food with nothing more than a grateful nod.

The door suddenly slid open again, and everyone perked up as Minowa stepped into the room. She gave them all a loving smile, moving to kiss and embrace each of the elder members individually. "Hello, my loves. I hope you've all been giving Victor a warm welcome." Getting nods and murmurs of affirmation, the Dragonborn moved to join Victor on the bed, settling in behind him and resting her chin on his shoulder. "How are you feeling tonight, Victor? Have my men been treating you well?"

The inquiry received an enthusiastic nod from the man in question. "They've been more than kind to me, don't worry ma'am."

A soft chuckle escaped the ebony haired woman as she pressed a gentle kiss behind his ear. "Our dynamic is not one where one person is in higher standing than the others, but of equality. The others call me Minowa or Min-- the same right applies to you."

Victor nodded with a smile on his face, allowing himself to relax back into the arms of the woman behind him. As the others settled in various places around the room, he couldn't help but marvel at the difference between the cold sterility and manic obsession he had experienced under Richards' care, and the genuine love, support, and warmth that radiated from every member of the unorthodox partnership he found himself involved in. Intellectual equals or not, the brunette found the people around him an infinitely better choice against anything Richards could have ever offered him.

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"So, details! Let's hear 'em!"

Stephen laughed as he ran his uncovered fingers through his soulmate's hair. "Logan, Loki, and I
arrived at the airport about 15 minutes before the jet landed. About five minutes before they touched down, Loki had to take a phone call regarding the Disney trip, so once the jet landed we had everyone but Rogers and Maximoff join him at the car. Which means it was up to me and Logan to deal with the other two."

The grin on Tony's face was nothing short of maniacal in it's glee. "And? How did they take everything?"

"Well…"

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"We just got the okay from Loki. Let's get this over with."

Logan grunted and nodded as he fell in step behind Stephen. Seeing their approach, one of the guards approached them and stood at attention, waiting for orders. "We're ready for the last two. Let's get them informed and on transport so we can all go home." The man nodded, a look of agreement on his face as he leaned back and shouted up into the jet.

A few seconds later, Rogers and Maximoff descended the ramp, and both men had to stifle their sudden urge to laugh. Steve had no hair on his head anywhere, and Wanda had been shaved bald relatively recently and she had obviously gained weight as well. "The Harbingers are gonna love this." Stephen murmured under his breath just loud enough for Logan to hear. The mutant gave a subtle nod, amusement clear in his own eyes even as the sorcerer schooled his features and moved to take a step forward.

The super soldier looked around as if searching for something, a small sneer crossing his face when he didn't see it. "I'm not surprised Stark would send his lackeys to do the dirty work for him. Too much of a coward to own up to his own mistakes?" He scoffed and rolled his eyes. "Whatever. How long is it going to take us to return to the Compound? I'd like to resume leadership as quickly as possible, I'm sure you understand."

The two members of the New Avengers gave him a supremely unimpressed look. "Oh, we understand alright. That understanding is actually the reason we're here and not Tony." Stephen handed one folder to Logan before opening the other one and floating several pieces of paper to Steve. "Tony isn't here because, as of 24 hours ago, that restraining order means that you need to keep at least 500 feet away from him at all times." Several more pieces of paper joined the first few. "These court orders mean you're not to get within 500 feet of any Stark Industries or New Avengers owned property or buildings. That also includes SI and New Avengers sanctioned galas, events, or
any gathering that directly involves either of the above parties."

Logan nodded with a smirk as he dropped several papers into Wanda's hands. "That restraining order is double for you, missy-- 1000 feet between you and Tony, Stark Industries property, or New Avengers property and shindigs. If I had it my way, you wouldn't even be in the same country."

Rogers' eyes were wide as he juggle the papers in his hand. "How am I going to resume leadership if I'm not allowed near them??"

Stephen and Logan shot each other an exasperated look. "Dear Vishanti, are you truly that dense? Allow me to spell it out for you, then-- neither you nor Ms. Maximoff are considered candidates for any part of the New Avengers. Seeing as we are under no obligation to house anyone who isn't a member of the New Avengers or officially cleared by us, the United States government has graciously agreed to house you in a set of military barracks until such time comes that you are able to find your own housing."

The announcement caused a look of panic to appear on Rogers face. "But what about Bucky?? When am I going to get to see him?? I need to make sure he's safe!!"

"Oh, I'd almost forgotten." Logan reached into his jacket and removed an envelope, dropping it unceremoniously into Rogers' hands. "He asked me to give that to you."

"Wait a second-- Howlett? James Howlett??"

Logan snorted as he took a deep pull from his cigar. "Maybe, maybe not. Couldn't tell you one way or another if I'm the guy from your memories-- my own are pretty scrambled as it is."

Rogers stared at him for a moment before turning his attention to the envelope in his hands, ripping into it and pulling out the papers within. Logan shot Stephen a look as he began to read, knowing full well what the contents said and the possible repercussions. The super soldier's face took on a thunderous appearance the further he got into the letter, and at the end he looked up at them with an enraged expression. "What kind of sick joke is this??"

The outburst prompted an incredulous eyebrow arch from Stephen, who wasn't privy to the details but could definitely take an accurate guess as to the contents. Seeing as he had been standing there when James told Tony that he didn't want to talk to Steve, it wasn't too far of a stretch to assume
the letter told Rogers the same. "Seeing as I have no idea about the contents of the letter, I can accurately say I have no idea we’re talking about."

Blue eyes flashed with fury as the super soldier took a threatening step forward. "Bucky said he doesn’t want to talk to me, that he’s afraid of backsliding in his recovery! You bastards must’ve done something to him! Bucky would never shut me out!"

Wanda gasped and turned an accusatory pout towards the two men. "How could you keep him from his best friend? Are you just trying to punish us further?"

"Put that face away, witch, you’re not foolin’ anyone." Logan barked at her, causing her to shrink back in shock. He turned his steely gaze to Steve next. "And you, you need to step the fuck back. You have been back on American soil for all of five minutes-- you don’t want to start somethin’ now, or at all for that matter. Barnes is entitled to do what he thinks is best for him and take care of himself during his recovery, and if he thinks it’s best not to have contact with you, then you need to damn well respect that."

The look of outrage and confusion on the two Rogues' faces was more than satisfying to witness, though Stephen didn't outwardly express his delight. Instead, he gave both a cold look and began speaking in an icy tone. "If you’re both through making a scene and complaining about things that cannot be changed, Logan and I will escort you to the car that will take you to the barracks that has agreed to house you. Be aware, though-- your pardons apply only so long as you remain on your best behavior. You step one toe out of line, you violate either of the restraining orders, you will be slapped with so many charges you both will be spending the rest of your lives on the Raft."

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Tony cackled with a look of unadulterated mirth on his face. "I can't imagine the look on Rogers’ face when you presented him with the restraining orders! I bet he looked so confused!" The smile fell from his face though when all Stephen did in reply was hum. He looked over to see an oddly distressed look on his soulmate's face, and if he focused he could feel a faint echo of aggravation and anger from the sorcerer. "Stephen? Baby, what's wrong?"

Blue-green eyes shifted to meet Tony's, Stephen struggling to find an explanation for a moment. "It's just… Hearing the way he talked about you, the way he acted like you were beneath him… I wanted to throw him in the Dark Dimension, Tony. How could anyone talk about you like that and call you a coward after everything you've done for the world?"

The genius let out a shuddering breath before moving in to pull Stephen into his arms. "Because
I'm not the man he wants me to be, because I'm not willing to be cowed and ordered around. I refuse to bend to him, and he can't accept that." He pulled Stephen into a kiss before resting their foreheads against each other. "Fortunately, I've learned to love and appreciate myself enough that I care jack shit about his opinion or approval. It especially helps that I have people around me who love me just the way I am, who don't need me to buy them things or build them things to prove my worth to them." Their lips met again, and this time Tony didn't pull away from fully before whispering, "I don't need his approval when I already have someone who loves me just the way I am, flaws and all."

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It wasn’t supposed to be like this.

Inside of the empty room where Victor von Doom had been securely kept, a tall brunette stood still, gazing at the rumpled bed as if he could will the man in question back there with a simple thought. It was impossible and yet, somehow, Victor was gone, despite all the precautions that Reed Richards had taken to ensure he couldn’t leave. At first thought, the scientist wondered briefly if perhaps Susan had come back, found Victor, and had released him. He dismissed the thought immediately-- the first thing she’d have done would’ve been to nag him about keeping Victor, just as she always did. If it wasn’t one thing she was complaining about, it was another. Was it any surprise that he hadn’t exactly been displeased when she had abruptly left with Valeria and Franklin after their last argument?

Even now, Reed was certain that he had had the right of it.

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“If I’ve told you once, Franklin, then I’ve told you a hundred times-- stay out of that room!”

Scowling down at his son, Reed was more than irritated, he was positively livid. Franklin was old enough to understand that when he was told not to do something, then he shouldn’t do it. If Sue didn’t coddle their son so much, he’d listen better. After all, Franklin was almost old enough to go to school now.

“But Daddy--”

His brown eyes narrowing, Reed took a step closer to the boy, his frown deepening into a definite
scowl. “No buts! You might get away with such behavior with your mother, but when I tell you not to do something, I mean it!” Reaching down, he took Franklin’s hand in a firm grip, pulling him slightly to walk down the hallway away from the room his son had been trying to get access to.

“I just wanted--”

“I don’t want to hear any excuses, Franklin. Did I not tell you to stay out of there?”

“Yes, but--”

“And were you not disobeying me?”

“I-I thought I heard--”

“It doesn’t matter what you thought you heard. When I tell you not to go somewhere, what are you supposed to do?”

“L-Listen to you?”

“And did you?” Reed stopped walking, looking at his son and allowing his displeasure to show clearly.

“No,” Franklin whispered, his young face constricting slightly as tears welled up in his blue eyes.

Before Reed could say anything else, Susan Richards came around the corner, searching for their son. Immediately spotting his tears, the blonde woman rushed to Franklin’s side, kneeling down to see what was wrong. “Honey, what’s the matter?” she questioned gently, then noticing her husband was holding his hand.

“Franklin was caught trying to go into the room I’m working in,” Reed replied for the boy, his brown eyes showing his irritation clearly as his wife began defending Franklin.

“Reed, he’s just a little boy who was curious about what his father was doing!” Susan protested
immediately, seeing how angry and irritated the brunette male was. When Franklin’s hand was released, the blonde child ran behind his mother, sniffling once.

Sick and tired of Susan always, always making an excuse for when Franklin did something he wasn’t supposed to, Reed gritted his teeth. “He is not a toddler anymore, Susan,” he replied back sharply. “Franklin is old enough to know what it means when he is told not to do something. Or would you prefer that I let him enter that room, knowing the danger that awaited him?” Taking a deep breath, the scientist continued. “This isn’t the first time he’s deliberately disobeyed when told not to go somewhere. And having you acting as though his age is an acceptable reason for not listening is ludicrous. I told you I was working this afternoon and you said you were going to watch Franklin and Valeria. So how did he get up here by himself in the first place when you were supposed to be with them?”

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Of course, Reed wasn’t proud that he’d let his pent up frustrations get the better of him. But it was Susan’s responsibility to take care of the children, after all. He had a lot of other responsibilities that he had to take care of and the money that Susan enjoyed required Reed to continue his scientific work and research. And, of course, part of his annoyance was that he couldn’t spend as much time with Victor as he would like.

Keeping him hidden from everyone else was extremely difficult, especially when Franklin had nearly gotten into the room where Victor was confined. Reed had known that they’d never understand that this was for Victor’s own good. The confrontation between himself and Sue that had led to her departure with the children had not been planned, nor had Reed thought that both Johnny and Ben would leave as well.

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“I don’t like you having secrets that you won’t tell even me!”

“You wouldn’t understand even if I told you!”

“Why don’t you trust me, Reed?”

“I could say the same for you, Susan! Why don’t you trust me to know what I’m doing?”
“What’s happened to you? You’re acting so distant, Reed… It’s not just me, you act like that with Franklin and Valeria too! All they want is your attention-- you’re their father!!”

“And you’re their mother! You’re the one who wanted to bring children into our lifestyle. You knew going into our relationship how seriously I take my work and don’t even pretend you didn’t!”

“I didn’t get pregnant by myself, Reed, and you know it wasn’t on purpose!”

“I never said it was. But you swore that having children wouldn’t interfere with our lives, that you were going to take care of them while I was working. And yet it seems I can’t relax and focus on my work without Franklin constantly trying to be underfoot in a place he’s not supposed to be. Even with that and you knowing how dangerous some of the things I’m doing are, it keeps happening!”

“You’re exaggerating!”

“Really? What would happen if Franklin wandered through the portal to the Nether Dimension that I’m working on? Oh, maybe now you get it, Susan? If that happened-- and the probability is getting higher since he does not obey-- you would have only yourself to blame! You let him continuously put himself in danger and excuse the behaviour instead of enforcing the rules!”

“R-Reed…”

“Don’t look at me like that. You know I’m right, Susan. It’s bad enough that you undermine me when I try to make Franklin understand that he needs to listen; you treat him like he’s just a baby and doesn’t understand. He understands plenty! He even admitted to deliberately disobeying me!”

“Maybe he wouldn’t keep trying to go there if you would give him your attention once in a while, Reed!”

“Maybe he wouldn’t keep disobeying if you didn’t let him get away with it!”

“I don’t let Franklin get away with-”
“Yes, you do. He’s tried to sneak into that room over ten times this past week alone and not once have you disciplined him for it! You always come up with some excuse for why Franklin is doing it.”

“If you don’t like my parenting methods, then maybe you should step up as a parent and be a father, Reed! I’m tired of you doing this-- you criticize the way I raise our kids when you don’t do anything for them!”

“You decided that you wanted to be a stay-at-home mother, Susan, and I agreed to be the one working to bring in money! And speaking of that, don’t think I haven’t noticed that you are still going on team missions behind my back. I’ve told you my feelings about it before-- that you should stay home with Valeria and Franklin.”

“I may be their mother but I’m still part of the team, Reed!”

“And what if something happens to you? Then who would be taking care of the kids?”

“Is THAT all you think I’m good for!? To take care of our children? My God, I never realized what a sexist jerk you are, Reed Richards!”

The resulting smack had surprised both of them, the blonde woman’s eyes widening in shock as she touched her face slowly, her hand trembling slightly when it covered the handprint upon her cheek. Watching her husband for a few moments, she made a soft, wounded sound before turning, stalking away without another word.

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The smack had set off a cascade of events-- Sue had taken the kids and left within the next two days, Johnny hot on her heels. Ben had left not long after that, claiming Reed had changed, and that the man he remembered would have never laid a hand on his wife in such a way. The scientist couldn't find it in himself to be displeased, though. Now that such distractions were out of his life, he didn't have to worry about anyone finding Victor, and he could focus his attention fully on his intellectual equal.

Except that someone did manage to find Victor somehow, someone who had taken him away from where he was meant to be.
A snarl twisted at Reed's lips at the memory of watching the footage showing Victor being carried through an odd portal by the leaders of the New Avengers. Footage taken about an hour later showed none other than Tony Stark stepping through a similar portal into the room again, looking the security camera dead in the eye, flipping it off, then performing a flawless about-face and walking right back through the portal before it closed behind him. What right did they have to come into his home and take Victor away from him? Victor was his! He was the only one capable of taking care of the prior king like he needed to be!

Without a second thought, he spun on his heel and stormed from the room. It was easily fixed--he'd simply portal in, find Victor, and bring him back to where he belonged. This time, he'd spirit the man away somewhere that no one could get to. It would just be Reed and Victor, like it was always meant to be.

The portal deposited him in what appeared to be some kind of advanced medical wing. He gave it only a cursory glance before boldly striding up to the door that had Victor's name next to it. He gently push it open, not wanting to alert anyone else who could be in the medical wing to stop him. Within the darkness, he saw Victor lying in the bed, and he managed two steps forward before something froze him in his tracks. Behind the former king, a pair of eyes suddenly opened-- slit-pupiled eyes glowing like red hot coals that instantly locked on him, burning with violence and malice at his intrusion. A flicker of some kind of magic fell over Victor, prompting Reed to snarl and lunge forward. "Get away from him, you filth!" He commanded loudly, pausing only for a moment at the threatening, low growl he received.

That moment's pause was all it took for someone to suddenly come up behind him and press a blade against his neck. "Try it." The male voice goaded him, the tenor tone icy and full of promises of pain. "Make my day, malen'kaya suka."

The brunette froze, not willing to test the patience of whoever had their weapon at his neck. "Do you have any idea who I am?! And do you not care that there's a demon in bed with Victor?!!"

"You're someone who was stupid enough to try and break into one of the most secure rooms in the medical wing of the New Avengers Compound." The voice came from another corner of the room, where a small light flicked on to reveal Bruce calmly placing a pair of glasses on his nose. "You're also someone with a fervent enough death wish to call Minowa Norddahl a demon. Poor choice of words, I have to tell you."

Reed squirmed in impatience but froze again when the blade was pressed a bit closer. Another rough laugh heralded the appearance of Logan, who came to stand in front of the scientist with his arms crossed and an almost amused look on his face. "He's also gotta be pretty damn stupid to keep
fidgeting when he's got a blade held to his neck by the Winter Soldier. Careful there, pretty boy, wouldn't want him to see you as a legitimate threat."

For a moment, the breath stalled in the brunette's lungs. The presence of the three males confused him to no end--Logan was a member of the X-Men, Bruce Banner was the director of the medical technology R&D department of Stark industries, and the Winter Soldier was the single most dangerous assassin on the planet. What was their motive with his Victor? Steeling himself, Reed puffed himself up as much as he could and announced in an authoritative tone, "I'm here to get Victor back, and I'm not leaving without him."

To his annoyance, the men simply laughed at him. After a second or two, though, he realized another voice had joined them--a woman's voice. Logan stepped to one side so the bed could be seen again, the glowing red eyes piercing through the darkness as they pinned Reed. "You are either very brave, obscenely foolish, or monumentally arrogant." Minowa's voice oozed from the darkness, settling like a malevolent fog over the room. "Have you any idea just how out of your depth you are in this moment? You're a little fish that is king of the small pond it inhabits. But this is no pond, little fish--this is the ocean, and you swim among sharks, now." There was a movement within the darkness, and the light brightened just enough that Minowa could be seen perched regally in the bed with Victor's head propped up in her lap. "I know your kind, Reed Richards," she continued while soothingly running her fingers through Victor's hair, "you tell the world 'jump' and expect it to ask 'how high, how far, when, and where', and then once it has gained all of the information, simply salute and say 'yes sir'. You are accustomed to receiving what you want without someone telling you 'no'." She dipped her head, black bleeding partially into her sclera for a moment. "Men like you led to the death of our world. We'll not let it happen a second time."

She blinked, and the black was gone from her eyes entirely. "Now, you're going to leave this compound without Victor, and it is going to happen in one of two ways. Either you turn around and leave peacefully the way you came in, or I will have Strunodi slit your throat and you will leave in a body bag."

The cool metal from the blade pressed against Reed's throat again. "She means me." The Winter Soldier growled in his ear.

Reed seem to struggle internally for a moment, eyes flicking between Minowa and Victor. Whatever decision he would have made was suddenly derailed by a new voice. "Or he could take option C, and he gets the hell out of here before I call the Accords Committee on his ass and have him brought up on multiple charges including but not limited to trespassing, assault, abduction, holding a hostage, and threatening a charge of the New Avengers." Tony came around James and Reed, righteous indignation alight in his eyes as he leveled the scientist with an impressive glare. "You've got some massive balls on you to pull a stunt like this. You also have 30 seconds to haul ass off my property before I tell Ulysses and Craig to activate the defenses in this place--you won't make it out of the medical wing before you're turned into nothing more than pink mist, a stain on the wall, and wayward strands of DNA."

The scientist knew he'd been beaten, and he put his hands up in a motion of surrender. James
snorted and pulled the blade away from his throat, and before he portaled out Reed snarled in Min’s
direction. "Victor is mine! You won't be able to keep him here forever, and I'll do whatever I have
to to get him back! He belongs to me!" Having said his piece, he allowed himself to be swept
away.

There was quiet for a moment before Minowa snorted in amusement and leaned back in the bed,
smirking at the space where Reed had been standing. "Big words for such a little fish."

James easily slid his knife back into its sheath, icy blue eyes scanning the room for any more
potential threats. "Should probably figure out what he used to portal in here and get a ward set up
against it. The fact that he was able to teleport right into the medical wing doesn't sit well with me
at all."

"I'm absolutely in agreement with you, James," Tony nodded sharply at the assassin, eyes taking
on a glowing orange color. "FRIDAY, get me everything you can about whatever it is Richards
used to get in here I want a ward up against it as of yesterday. Hack into his systems if you have
to." He took a few seconds to take a deep breath or two before turning to the room as a whole.
"You all handled that like champs. I'm not saying that to patronize you-- if this had broken into a
fight, it could've put a lot of people at risk. Instead, you kept him pinned, and more importantly
you kept him talking. I'm even more impressed you did all of this without waking him up." He
aimed the last part at Minowa while gesturing to Victor.

Crimson eyes sparkled with mirth as the woman smirked. "Admittedly, the instant I realized it was
a stranger coming into the room, I placed a silencing spell over Victor so he wouldn't hear
whatever transpired next."

“Look at you, clever Dragonborn."

"That's not being clever, Zeymahi, that's a million years' worth of common sense."

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Two Weeks Later

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"Tony, I'm sorry if I'm interrupting you, but I need to talk to somebody before I'm tempted to
murder Steve with a baseball bat covered in rusty barbed wire and Tabasco sauce."
Tony blinked in shock at the sight of the obviously frazzled super soldier standing in the doorway to his workshop. "Well hey there, Snowflake. You're looking a little worse for the wear. Come on in and take a seat, I'll grab us some water bottles."

The assassin gave him a grateful nod as he flopped down into one of the rolling office chairs. "I'm surprised you're not more worried about the threat involving a bat."

A snort escaped the whiskey eyed man as he flopped down in the seat across from James, passing over a water bottle. "Are you kidding me? You should've heard the comment Natasha let loose the other day. Apparently, Rogers needs to get off the high horse he's riding around on or she's going to rip him off of it, bend him over for said horse, and… Well, I don't think I need to finish that imagery for you."

James couldn't help but laugh as he cracked the cap on his bottle. "Natalia was always more than a little inventive with her threats."

"I don't have to imagine! You should've heard some of the stuff that came out of her mouth when she found out about Fury, Phil, and Pietro! The only person in that room who wasn't uncomfortable was Minowa, and the fact that they get along so well is already terrifying enough!" The duo shuddered simultaneously before Tony sat back with a sigh, taking a sip of his water. "I noticed the common theme between your threats, though. So tell me, what has the star-spangled man with a flagpole up his ass done now?"

Icy blue eyes closed in sheer exasperation as the sniper put his head back. "Since we limited contact to only letters passed through their handler, she's been inundated with letters from him, and he started harassing her about whether I'm getting them or replying. They've been back for two weeks, Tony-- two weeks! I don't want to have to face him, but this is getting ridiculous, and Ms. Myers shouldn't have to put up with his harassment for my sake."

The brunette genius groaned in disbelief as he ran a hand down his face. "Are you for real?? I might have to take this before the Accords Committee-- if this keeps up, they'll need a new handler before a month is out."

Nodding with a somber look on his face, James weighed his next words carefully before speaking. "I don't think he'll stop, even with the new handler. I think the only way to bring this to any kind of resolution is if I talk to him face-to-face."

"James, you know you don't have to--"
James gave Tony a knowing smile as he held up his hand to stop him. "I know, Tony. This isn't a
decision I'd make lightly, and it's something I've spoken to my partners about at length. I'd have
one of them with me of course, but I think talking to him is the only way to bring this to any sort of
conclusion."

Whiskey brown eyes studied the sniper for a moment, and after a few seconds, Tony sat back with
a soft sigh. "Alright, I'll get in touch with Ms. Myers and we'll set up a meeting in an open place--
thinking something like Central Park would be best. I'd also like for Stephen to go with you under
an invisibility spell, both to help deal with the public and to keep things from getting out of hand on
the off chance your meeting goes south."

"Sounds good. I'll take Min with me as backup as well. Don't worry, we'll be super careful."

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James smiled lovingly as he watched his female partner signing pictures for a small group of
children who had recognized her and run up to them as they strolled through the park. They had a
few minutes left before their meeting with Steve, and the assassin was more than content to watch
the ebony haired woman interact with the kids. As they ran off squealing and giggling with joy, he
stepped back up to her side and slid his arm around her waist. "You're so great with them,
Dorogaya."

The Dragonborn turned a brilliant smile towards him, her crimson eyes shining with happiness and
love. "How was I supposed to say 'no' to them, Strunodi? Their spirits are so bright and full of
hope."

A soft chuckle escaped James as he pulled her in for a real kiss. It only lasted a few seconds before
the sound of a throat being cleared pulled them apart, and they turned to see Stephen floating
towards them with a knowing smirk on his face. "I just got a call from Ms. Myers, she and Rogers
are about five minutes out. I'll be nearby under an invisibility spell, keeping the wards maintained
so you can have your meeting in peace." He paused for a moment before settling one hand on the
sniper's shoulder. "You going to be okay, James?"

The assassin nodded without hesitation, smiling at the way Minowa pressed herself against his
side. "Don't worry, I'm not worried about anything that Steve might try to do. I got the best backup
in the world with me." Stephen smiled and nodded, casting his spell and floating away without
another word.
Minowa and James spoke to each other softly for a few more minutes before a shout caught their attention. "Bucky!" The duo turned to see Rogers jogging towards them with a grin on his face, though it quickly became a frown when he caught sight of the woman with him. "What's she doing here?" He asked in an almost an accusatory tone, eyeing her with consternation and distrust.

James arched a disbelieving eyebrow at the petulant tone the man had taken. "Min and I have somewhere to be after we're done here, so it was easier for us to be dressed ahead of time. And I would really rather prefer if you called me 'James'." He crossed his arms as his lover shifted a bit closer to him. "Listen punk, you've been causing Ms. Myers some serious grief, and that ain't cool. I get that you wanted to make sure I was doing okay, but your behavior has stepped over the line of what could be considered appropriate."

"But I had to make sure you were safe! T'Challa just handed you over to Stark, I don't trust him not to hurt you." Steve tried to explain as if speaking to a small child as he took a step forward.

Within a second, Minowa had smoothly planted herself between James and Steve, fixing the latter with a cool look. "You would be wise to think very carefully about the accusations you sling towards my brother. It's because of his efforts that James is now able to walk as a free man."

The blonde super soldier snarled in her direction, eyeing her with distrust and consternation. "Of course a lackey of Stark would say that. How much is he paying for your friendship?"

Icy blue eyes narrowed to little more than slits at the words. "If you don't stop slinging your baseless accusations around, punk, we're turning around and leaving right now. You wanted to talk to me, and the only reason I'm even able to be here right now and thanks to Tony's help. Now, instead of using this time to make wild assumptions and derogatory remarks, you say whatever it is you wanted to say to me that was so urgent you harassed Ms. Myers into developing an aneurysm." He barked at the man, patience already dangerously thin at Steve's attitude.

Seeing how deadly serious the sniper was, Steve reined himself in and turned his attention back to James. "I was really worried about you, Bucky," he started, not noticing the way James twitched at the name. "When I found that you were gone, I had no idea you'd even left to begin with, and I wanted to make sure you were really doing better. You were never seen outside of the compound, so I didn't know if what they were saying was the truth or not."

James let out a long breath through his teeth. "I wasn't seen outside the compound because I didn't go outside the compound. I was focusing on my recovery, and I didn't want to potentially put anyone at risk until I was sure that the trigger words were gone. As you can see, I'm doing just fine-- better than I can ever remember being, even."
Steve nodded with a pleased glint in his eyes. "I'm glad you're doing better… So does this mean you've gotten your memories back?"

The assassin sighed and shook his head in a negative response. "Afraid not. They could come back eventually, but from what they found that could take some time, if it happens at all. For now, all I can do is make new memories." Minowa shifted beside him, and a second later he felt her hand rubbing soothingly up and down his back.

"Oh… Well, I'm sure they'll come back eventually. Whether you remember or not, you'll always be my best friend. What do you plan to do now that the treatment is done?" There was a strange look in Steve's baby blue eyes, as if he were anticipating a certain answer to the question.

Something about the expression sent alarm bells ringing in James' head even as he replied, "I'm gonna stick around the Compound-- got a good thing going there, a great support base, and Tony is helping me look into getting my GED-- didn't graduate high school before enlisting, and I'd like to catch up on everything I've missed."

A look of confusion and anxiety flickered across Rogers' face. "Will you be allowed to stay at the Compound? You're not a member of the New Avengers…"

James gave a super soldier a tiny smile. "No, but I have an open invitation to stay, seeing as my son is there."

It took a few seconds for the words to register in Steve's mind, and his eyes went wide as dinner plates once they had. "Wait-- your son?? You don't have kids, Bucky!"

A snort escaped James as he reached for his wallet, tugging a picture out of it. "Trust me, it was a shock to me too… Here, this is Rem." He passed the picture over to Steve, who studied the grinning redhead with a critical eye. "He's a great kid, he inherited Ma's musical talent."

Steve hated to admit it, but the kid did have a lot of Bucky's features. After a few seconds, he swallowed and looked back up at the assassin. "He… He does look like you, aside from the red hair… How did this happen? And when will I get to meet him?"

‘Never, if I have it my way.' James kept that thought firmly in the back of his mind as he diplomatically replied, "It's not up to me alone if and when that happens-- Rem's adopted dads have a say as well, possibly even more than I do.”
Apparently, that was the wrong thing to say, because a look of indignation immediately flashed across Steve's face. "Why does your son have adopted parents? And how could they possibly have more say than you?"

"Dorian and Zevrael adopted Rem long before I knew about him, and even after I found out I wasn't going to try and take that away from them. First of all, those three have a beautiful, supportive relationship that I would be a fool to try and break. Second, I hadn't even started treatment when I first learned about him-- I was a risk to myself and others, and even if I had wanted to contest the adoption, I would have never won due to that fact alone. Rem is happy where he is, and I'm happy to be a part of his life in whatever capacity he needs me. The fact that he considers me his father alongside Dori and Zev is all I could ever ask for."

Steve's eyes lit up as he latched onto one part of the speech. "But now that your treatment is done, you have a fighting chance! You should go to court, fight for custody!"

An aggravated sound escaped the sniper as he ran a hand over his face. "What part of 'I'm not going to try and take that away from them' did you fail to understand, Steve? Just because I'm his biological father doesn't mean I'm going to be an asshole and try and break them apart! I'm happy with how things are, and I'm happy with the relationship I have with my son. That's it, end of discussion, no further deliberation needed."

From her place next to him, Minowa took a quick glance at her phone before gently tugging on James' sleeve. "Strunodi, we should get going-- our reservation is at six."

James nodded at her words and pressed a gentle kiss to her head. "Thank you for the reminder, Dorogaya. We'll be on our way momentarily." He turned his attention back to Steve momentarily, inwardly smug at the look of stunned shock on the super soldier's face. "I'm afraid our time is up-- we have to get to dinner before our show."

Steve's mouth opened and closed several times, trying and failing to get words out for several seconds. Finally, he managed to choke out, "You… Are you on a date?"

Unable to resist, James puffed up with pride as he slid an arm around Minowa's waist, the woman more than happy to rest her head against his collarbone. "Yep, got myself a beautiful gal, here." He gave Steve a shit eating grin as the Dragonborn muffled her giggles into his neck. "I don't need my memories to woo a pretty lady."
"No, all that took was your endless charm and gorgeous body." The ebony haired woman ribbed him with a loving grin, prompting a chuckle out of James.

The super soldier in front of them gave them a weak smile, trying desperately to cover up the stricken look on his face at the same time. "Oh… Okay. Have fun."

James dipped his head to Steve with a smile on his face. "Oh, we plan to. Stay out of trouble, punk, and stop giving Ms. Myers a hard time!" With those parting words, the duo turned and walked away, linking arms and trading loving smiles as they did so.

As they departed, the smile on Steve's face rapidly changed to a look of indescribable anger. 'This is Stark's doing, it has to be. Bucky would never stick around unless that bastard was holding something over him-- probably his son. I'll bet Stark had him adopted by his lackeys to further get his hooks in my friend!' Baby blue eyes narrowed in determination as he drew himself up tall. 'Well, two can play at that game. Hold on, Bucky-- I'll save you from Stark no matter what, you and your son.'

---

“Achoo!”

Peter looked up from where he was bent over his homework, shooting a smile at the redhead curled up in the window seat. "Wow, someone must be having a long conversation about you, Rem! That's the fourth time in an hour I've heard you sneeze like that!"

The mutant tried to shoot him an amused smile, but it came out as more of a pained grimace. "Well, they can stop at any time now. It's getting a little--" his words were cut off by a sudden cough, and at the end, he groaned and rubbed a sleeve over his eyes. "It's getting a little painful."

The sound of the wet cough cause the smile to fall from the brunette's face, and he stood from his seat to walk towards Rem. "That didn't sound so good, Rem. Are you feeling okay?" Getting a lethargic shrug from the redhead, Peter reached out slowly to check his temperature. After a moment, he hissed and pulled back. "You're burning up! Why didn't you say anything?"

Red and black eyes blinked up at him in a confused motion. "What? I didn't realize…” Another cough escaped him, and he groaned softly at the end of it.
Peter wasted no time in scooping Rem into his arms, sweeping from the room as quickly as he could. "It's probably nothing more than a cold, but I'm still going to take you to see Bridget anyway. Not only do I not like seeing you so miserable, she'd have me scrubbing test tubes for three hours if she found out I knew you were in this condition and simply left you alone."

"I suppose if he keeps you out of trouble, I can put up with a quick visit to the medical wing."

"Thanks, Rem, you're the best."

Chapter End Notes

Before I say anything else, there's one big thing I want to address: Reed Richards' behavior. It is comic book canon that Reed has hit his wife, so we are not just pulling that behavior out of thin air to make him more of a bad guy. This is a man who has always put his work before his family, going as far as to shut down his son's brain when his mutation went out of control. This is a man who forced Ben Grimm to retake the form of The Thing after his mutation had been cured, despite Ben saying 'no' and making his stance more than clear on the matter. This is a man who has never been shy about his beliefs that a woman's place was in the home taking care of their children. To paraphrase Steve Rogers in the first Avengers movie, Reed Richards may not be a villain, but he sure as hell isn't a hero. This is the role we cast him in, and there is a very good reason we did so that will be revealed later in the story.

Now that THAT'S out of the way…

BOOM. Shout out to those of you who guessed Rem's mother correctly!

A few little language notes

Rosomakha -- Wolverine
malen'kaya suka -- little bitch
Strunodi -- my snowstorm (Minowa's name for James)
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

Bacterial bronchitis has Rem laid up in bed-- fortunately, he has his family to dote and fret over him. Rogers approaches a well-known lawyer with a ridiculous request, who then proceeds to report to Tony what kind of legal shenanigans the super soldier approached him for. A possible solution for Wade's cancer is in its final stages of preparation, and Pietro deals with the ups and downs that come from recovery. Tony loves his unofficial niece, Stephen loves what Tony is willing to do for said unofficial niece, and Rem is missed by his friends.

(SMGs are the best super soldier deterrent)

((Pietro will not be putting up with any more shit from his twin))

Chapter Notes

SURPRISE, VASSALS!! A new chapter has appeared!! Jen and I decided that this chapter wasn't necessarily a part of the arc we promised, so you get one more chapter before the arc drops! Rejoice, and enjoy the insanity in this one, for there is quite a lot of it!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was quiet in the family suite as the doors to the elevator opened, admitting Stephen carrying a bowl of chicken soup. He was immediately assaulted by the sound of a hacking cough, and he grimaced as he looked towards the sniper approaching him. "He's had a rough few days, hasn't he?"

James sighed and ran his fingers through his brunette locks. "More than you know. We've been taking turns alternating sleeping with him to help him keep upright-- he can't breathe otherwise, ends up coughing so hard he ends up dry heaving. He actually did end up throwing up one night…" His expression was pained and worried as he looked over his shoulder the way he'd come from. "Why can't Bridget just give him something for it?"

"Because she's never encountered something like this before. From the way she explains it, she can't create a treatment for an illness she's never seen before, and this is the first time she's encountered a germ like this. Now that she has samples from Rem, she can start working on a potion to help mitigate the symptoms. Until then, the antibiotics Bridget gave him will have to suffice. Here's hoping they kick in soon-- poor kid sounds miserable…" The sorcerer sighed as he followed behind James, who led him to the bedroom towards the back of the suite. Inside, Rem was propped up with numerous pillows and leaning against Natasha as she gently ran her fingers through his fiery locks, the assassin singing a Russian lullaby to him as he dozed. "I brought him
something to eat, Nat." Stephen called out quietly as James let him into the space.

The woman smiled gratefully as she nodded to him. "I truly appreciate it, Stephen. Cher cœur has barely been able to get up from bed these past few days…" The soup was levitated over to her, and she caught the bowl and placed it in her lap before gently rousing Rem. "Rem, Stephen brought you some chicken soup. Can you try eating a little bit for us?"

The mutant blinked open his eyes tiredly before eyeing the soup with a spark of interest. "I am kinda hungry…" He mumbled with a lethargic smile. It was quickly gone as another cough escaped him, briefly reaching over for a tissue to blow his nose. "How long am I going to be sick?" He aimed the question at Stephen as Natasha began to help him eat.

"You have a bacterial upper respiratory infection-- the antibiotic should be helping you feel better within the next day or two. Just be glad it's not viral, otherwise, we wouldn't have been able to give you anything and you would simply have to wait it out." Stephen gave the teen a sympathetic smile. "Just make damn sure you take ALL of the pills, no matter if you're feeling better or not. If you stop taking them, even if you only have one pill left, it could come back worse than before."

James let out a soft chuckle as he took a seat on Rem's other side and began gently rubbing his back. "Don't worry Stephen, between us, Dorian, and Zevrael, the kid will be back up and running around before you know it."

Remy swallowed the soup he had in his mouth before letting out a rough sigh. "I just wish I could see Peter, Wade, and the others. I get why I can't, though-- don't want to get anyone else in the Compound sick."

A soft 'hm' escaped the Black Widow as she looked towards Stephen with a considering look. "Remind me again why they can't come to see him? Peter, I can understand, but Sleipnir and Jörmungandr don't get Midgardian illnesses, and Wade has a healing factor."

Stephen leaned against the door frame as he explained, "The first two could act as carriers and end up spreading it to the other residents of the Compound, and given how we have residents like Sunniva here, it's not a risk we really want to take. As for Wade, he'll be going into surgery within the next few days to see what we can do for his cancer--it's a general rule that you don't go into a surgery of any kind if you've been sick at any point in time in the month prior to the procedure."

"I guess that makes sense…" The redhead accepted another spoonful of soup from his mother before giving the Sorcerer Supreme a small smile. "I don't know if I would be able to stay up long enough to talk to them anyway… I've just been so tired."
The super soldier of the group pressed a kiss to the top of Remy's head. "Your body is fighting off a pretty nasty infection, Moy Svet. Give it some time, it will run its course."

The teen nodded and finished the rest of the soup, yawning and curling up against James as the bowl was levitated away. Stephen smiled understandingly and gave both Natasha and James a nod. "I'll let them get some rest. Give either me or Bridget a call if there's any change in his condition."

The duo nodded and curled up against their son as the door was shut. The sorcerer wasted no time in leaving the family suite, and as the elevator began to descend he looked up towards the ceiling. "FRIDAY, has Tony gotten out of his meeting yet?"

"Not quite yet, Magic-Boss. They're on a break right now if you want to give them a call, though."

"That would be perfect, thanks FRIDAY."

There was quiet for a few seconds as the call was routed to his earpiece, and after a few seconds of dial tone, the genius' voice wafted through from the other side. "Hey, baby! Always happy to hear from you! What's going on?"

The sound of his soulmate's voice brought a smile to the lips of the Sorcerer Supreme. "I know you're busy today, but I just wanted to give you an update on Rem's condition."

"How has he been doing? I know Bridget gave him some antibiotics recently-- are they helping?"

A soft hum escape Steven as he stepped off the elevator and towards the suite he, Tony, and Peter shared. "It's going to take a day or two for them to take full effect, but as long as he keeps taking them until they're all gone, he should be fine in a week or two. James and Natasha are with him right now, they've been switching off with Dori and Zev."

Tony couldn't help the laugh that escaped him. "Sorry, don't mind me… It just occurred to me that Rem has gone from having no family or friends whatsoever to having four different parent figures, a horde of aunts and uncles, several cousins, and a ton of great friends. I'm glad we were able to give him such a supportive environment."
Blue-green eyes sparkled with joy as Stephen leaned back against the wall of the elevator with a nostalgic smile on his face. "He really has come a long way in his recovery. You should be proud of yourself, babe."

"Love, as far as I'm concerned, we all can take credit for this one."

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Steve Rogers frowned as he studied the unassuming brick building he found himself standing in front of. Apparently, this was supposed to be the location of one of the best lawyers in New York City-- if they were so good, why would they be staying in a rundown looking building like this? Pushing the thought of the side for the moment, he carefully swung the door open and stepped inside. He quickly found himself standing in an empty waiting room, and he frowned as he looked around at the oddly blank space. "Hello? Is anyone here?" He called out tentatively.

"Come on in," A voice called from the back, and Rogers quickly made his way there to find a man rising from his seat with an odd cane in his hand, a pair of shades with red lenses firmly on his face despite the interior setting. It took the super soldier a moment to realize the dark-haired man in front of him was blind. "My name is Matt Murdock, attorney at law. Whom am I speaking with?"

The super soldier gave the man a once over for second. Murdock was the name of the lawyer he'd heard so much about-- he hadn't heard anything about him being blind. "Steve Rogers, Mr. Murdock. I have a problem I'm hoping you can help me with."

The lawyer looked intrigued as he retook his own seat and folded his cane up. "Please, take a seat. How can I help you, Mr. Rogers?" As the super soldier took the chair across from him, Matt was already on high alert. He'd had a hunch since the man walked through the door, given the size of his chest, the width of his shoulders, and his heart rate, but hearing the name just confirmed his suspicions. The man sitting in front of him was none other than Captain America, and only those who had been living under a rock for the past half a year would be ignorant to the atrocities the man had committed.

Steve sighed as he sat forward in his seat. "It's about my friend, Bucky. I think he's being coerced to stay somewhere he doesn't want to be-- he just found out he has a son he never knew about, but the kid has been adopted by two of the guys working for Stark. I'm sure he's staying there because he doesn't want to leave his son alone with them, so I want to overturn the adoption and file for custody myself. That way, he won't feel like he's forced to stay there."

It took Matt several seconds to work through exactly what the captain had just said. From the
man's heartbeat, he could tell Steve believed every word of what he was saying, and that was a legitimately scary concept. Pushing his reaction to the back for the moment, Matt leaned back in his chair, looking thoughtful before threading his fingers together over his abdomen. "Is there any reason why Bucky didn't try overturning the adoption himself? Do you know if his son is in any danger?"

"Bucky said he didn't see the need to try and overturn it because he didn't want to ruin the relationship his son had with the adopted parents. I think he was just saying that because there was another member of Stark's crew there with him. And I think any kid would be in danger around a guy like Stark." Steve sneered for a second at the thought-- no child should ever be put in the same room as Tony Stark out of fear for their personal safety.

Matt let out a soft 'hm', his expression remaining the same even as he was internally questioning the sanity of the man sitting in front of him. After a second, he leaned forward slightly and began speaking. "Honestly, with Bucky being unwilling to overturn the adoption himself, a court case like this would be an uphill battle. You would have to provide evidence that the kid's parents-- and that means all of them-- are unfit. I should also point out that I personally don't specialize in custody cases. I'm a defense attorney, and you would need to go to a family law attorney for this sort of thing. If you want my honest opinion, though, I don't think there's much of a chance of you winning a case like this. Even if there was enough evidence that the three parents in question are unfit, there are other adults in the Compound who could step in and take custody before you would have the right to try and do so." A small smile suddenly quirked at his lips as he then added, "I should also mention that Tony Stark was approved to adopt a teenager with his own partner, so he's clearly not considered a danger to kids in the eyes of the law."

"There has to be something that can be done!" The captain snarled as he jumped from his seat, slamming his hands on the desk in frustration. "I can't just leave Bucky there in the hands of someone like Stark!"

Matt barely reacted beyond an arch of his eyebrow. "I'm afraid the firm can't help you in this matter. Please see yourself out." He said in a calm, yet firm manner, his tone brokering no room for argument.

For a moment, Steve seemed almost ready to argue. He finally growled and spun on his heel, storming from the office and the building and slamming the door behind him. He ran his fingers through his tousled blond hair, pacing back and forth agitatedly in front of the office for a minute. Maybe he just hadn't made the severity of the situation clear enough to Murdock. Nodding sharply at the thought, the blond turned as if to reenter the building, only to come up short at the sight of the man leaning against the door blocking the way. "Um, excuse me--"

The man pulled the cigarette he had been smoking away from his lips, breathing out a stream of smoke in its' wake. "Don't even think about it." He said in a deep, gravelly voice as he flicked the
butt away. "Murdock's got too much on his plate to be worrying about the likes of you. Do yourself a favor and get lost-- he gave you an answer, and you'd damn well better respect it."

Steve glared at the stranger, despite the fact that he could barely see his face in what minimal daylight remained. "Now you listen here--!" He started, taking a step towards the man.

In less than a second, a gun was drawn and aimed at the super soldier. "I ain't gonna tell you again. I'm not afraid to shoot a 'national icon'."

There was a pause as Steve eyed the gun warily. If that weapon was fired, the police would be there within minutes, and there was no doubt he would get in trouble. Forced to admit defeat, for the time being, the blonde growled one more time before turning on his heel and storming away.

A smirk twisted at the lips of the stranger as he re-holstered his weapon. Checking one more time to make sure the super soldier was well and truly gone, he quietly slipped inside the same offices Steve had come out of. "He was not happy about whatever you told him, Mattie." He called out conversationally as he stripped off his jacket, tossing it to one side.

"Ironically enough, I wasn't happy to hear what he was here for, Frank." The lawyer came striding down the hall with a smile on his face, and within a second he was being pulled into a tight embrace. "You totally pulled a gun on him, didn't you?"

Frank Castle snorted even as he maneuvered Matt's head to rest against the junction of his throat and shoulder. "And I'd do it again in a heartbeat, baby. You know I'll do whatever it takes to keep you safe."

A soft chuckle escaped Matt as he took a second to simply breathe in the scent of the man pressed against him. "Apparently, 'whatever it takes' includes aiming an SMG at a super soldier."

The dark-haired man snorted and rolled his eyes. "Trust me, I would have no problems doing it again. Th' man grates on every nerve I've got." He pulled away from the embrace just enough to press a kiss against Matt's lips. "So, what was he here about?"

Matt kissed his lover back tenderly for a moment before pulling away. "He basically wanted to overturn the adoption of his 'best friend's' son, despite the fact that his best friend had no desire to do so, on the absolutely ludicrous grounds that somehow Tony Stark is using said son to keep the Winter Soldier 'under his thumb'."

There were several seconds of silence as Frank absorbed that before he finally said, "That has to be the biggest load of bullshit I've ever heard in my life."

"Oh, I'm well aware. He didn't even bother to figure out what kind of lawyer he'd actually need for something like that."

The Punisher shook his head with an incredulous scoff before pressing a kiss to Matt's forehead. "What are you planning to do, Mattie?"

A small, yet no less wicked smirk twisted at the lips of the lawyer. "Well, seeing as there was no agreement regarding client confidentiality… I think the first thing I need to do is make a phone call."

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"Boss? You've got a call coming in."

Tony blinked and looked up from where he was hunched over several diagrams and schematics. "Do you know who from, baby girl?"

"It was transferred from the Tower-- the caller is a man named Matt Murdock, he's with Nelson and Murdock attorneys in law."

The genius immediately sat back in his chair with a stunned look on his face. "Murdock?? He was responsible for locking that scumbag Fisk behind bars… Go ahead and patch it through, FRIDAY." His eyes immediately flashed blue as his technopathy came online in preparation.

There was a second of silence before the smooth voice of the lawyer in question came through. "Dr. Stark, thank you for agreeing to speak with us."

Tony sat back with a smile on his face at the cordial tone of the man's voice. "It's no problem at all. I gotta say that I'm extremely impressed with what you managed to do with Fisk. That man's network is a tangled mess that not many would be brave enough to get into. But I get the feeling you're not calling tonight to discuss your numerous exploits in the legal world."
The man let out a soft chuckle in response. "Thank you for your kind words, Dr. Stark. I wish I were calling under more pleasant circumstances, but something happened today that I thought would be prudent to bring to your attention. Our firm was approached by Steve Rogers, who was hoping to find someone to help him overturn the adoption of Remington Pavus."

"... I'm sorry, he was looking for what?"

Matt couldn't help the soft chuckle that escaped him at the outraged and incredulous tone the genius took. "And now you know why I thought it best to bring it to your attention. I politely and firmly informed him that we were unable to help in this matter and sent him on his way."

A snort of amazement escaped the whiskey-eyed man. "And he just left? I'm surprised he didn't try and put up a fight."

A new voice chuckled in the background before speaking. "Oh, he would have. Let's just say I gently persuaded him to leave."

The lawyer sighed before replying, "Your 'gentle persuasion' involved aiming a submachine gun at Captain America."

"You know that I go with what works."

Tony broke into laughter at the banter and the mental image his mind conjured up. "Murdock, I don't know who that is you have sitting with you right now, but I thoroughly approve of his methods. God, I love it when people refuse to take shit from Captain Tightass!"

The unknown voice chuckled as well while Matt groaned in resignation. "Dr. Stark, the person sitting with me is my significant other, Frank Castle." The lawyer's voice was undeniably fond, any exasperation easily pushed aside in favor of genuine affection.

The genius' eyebrows rocketed into his hairline at the name. There was something truly ironic about the fact that one of the most well-known criminal defense lawyers in New York City was in any kind of romantic relationship with none other than the freaking Punisher. That had to be the definition of a complicated relationship. "I'll be the first person to admit that he would have been one of the last on the list of people I would have expected."
Matt chuckled on the other end of the line. “Well, when you’ve found the one for you, you just know it. I believe you, Dr. Stark, would understand that better than anyone.”

Something about the way the lawyer said the words had Tony on high alert within a second. “Wait, are you saying that--?” Whatever might have been said next was suddenly cut off by the ‘bang’ of a door being thrown open, Matt yelling in shock, and the sound of a gun being fired. “Murdock?!” The genius surged to his feet, alarm lancing through him. “Shit! FRI, can you find any tech in his building?!”

“Negative, Boss-Man. The only tech in the building is the phone Mr. Murdock is using and a laptop, but the webcam on it is minimal quality at best.”

“Connect me anyway, get me a visual!” A screen flickered to life in front of him in his mindscape, and after a second or two the connection was made and he was staring at the sideways shot of the lawyer laying on the ground behind his desk, the sound of gunfire still evident in the background. “Murdock, are you hurt?? I’ve got a visual on you, but the footage is only so good.”

Matt readjusted the red-lensed glasses on his face as he tilted his head towards where the whiskey-eyed man’s voice was coming through. “I’m alright, Dr. Stark, Frank managed to push me down before anything could hit me. I’m surprised you can see anything through that webcam, though.”

Tony let out a soft sigh of relief at the news that the man was uninjured. “It’s not terrible, but we may need to invest in better tech for you.” The blind man laughed at that, and it only took the genius a moment to see the fact that the lawyer’s breath was more than visible. “Woah, is your heating out in the office or something? It’s, like, 38 degrees in NYC right now!”

A snort escaped the auburn-haired man as he shook his head. “That would imply that we have a heating unit, to begin with. Not that it matters much, anyway-- once the building is clear, Frank and I are headed home anyway. Speaking of...”

The sound of footsteps was heard before Frank’s boots came into view, the rest of the man appearing a moment later to fret over his partner. “Mattie, are you hurt? I’m sorry I pushed you so roughly. Did you get hit at all?”

“I’m fine, Frank, thanks to you.” The two men stood, and Tony was left looking at their shoes. “Besides, Dr. Stark has been watching to make sure I’m alright.”
Hearing the alarm in Frank’s voice, Tony quickly spoke up. “The moment I heard gunfire, I had FRIDAY connect me to the laptop webcam to make sure Murdock was uninjured. Sorry, not sorry-- the fact that I was hearing semi-automatic weapons didn’t exactly instill me with confidence.”

There was a deep sigh as Frank’s boot approached the laptop, and it was quickly resituated on the desk so Tony could see both men. “Fortunately, the semi-automatic fire was all me. They didn’t really stand a chance, considering they had pistols. Thanks for keepin’ an eye on Matt.”

“Don’t worry about it. Glad to see you didn’t get hurt either.”

“Trust me, the only ones hurting right now are the ones in the hall. That is if they haven’t bled out already.” The dark-haired man suddenly grimaced and looked towards his partner. “We’re gonna have to call the cops about this, baby. Stark, we should probably take care of this.”

The genius nodded at the man’s words, forgetting momentarily that the duo couldn’t see him. “Totally get that. Murdock, thank you for bringing Rogers’ idiocy to my attention, and Castle, nice work on the Star Spangled Man with a flag up his ass.”

A bark of laughter escaped the latter. “It was my pleasure. Have a good night, Stark.”

The phone was hung up soon afterward but as Tony made to disconnect himself from the webcam, the sight of the lawyer sitting back in his seat with a look of soul-deep exhaustion on his face made him pause. That was an expression he was all too familiar with-- he’d seen it enough in his own reflection for years. He felt a pang of sympathy in his heart, and without thinking about it he began to listen in as the duo turned to each other.

“Looks like we’ll be waiting a bit longer before going home to get warm.” Matt made a half-hearted attempt to lighten the situation, but the weariness on his face gave away the lack of sincerity.

Frank nodded before leaning down to brush a kiss against his partner’s forehead. “You give the cops a call, I’ll order some Chinese while we wait for them to show up.”
A flicker of anxiety flashed over the auburn-haired man’s face. “Can we afford it?” He asked softly, tone filled with apprehension.

“Babe, we’ll make it work tonight. You’re in no state to be trying to cook, and I’m in no mood to try and cobble something together. We have no way of knowing how long this will take-- they’ll need to get statements and take pictures… It’s gonna be a shit show, and I don’t want you going too long without eating something.”

Matt finally sighed and nodded, slumping forward in his seat. Frank immediately moved to embrace the man tightly, the duo taking comfort from each other. “Alright. Just… let’s stay here for a second.”

Frank nodded, burying his nose in the hair under his chin. “Of course. Whatever you need, baby.”

Having seen enough, Tony finally disconnected from the webcam entirely, though he remained in his mindscape as he thought deeply about what he’d just heard and witnessed. Someone had gone into the office for the purpose of getting to Matt-- whether that was to kill, incapacitate, or abduct was still an unknown. From what he’d heard between Matt and Frank, the duo seemed to be going through some financial trouble, especially given the lack of heat in the building and evident worry over budget. An idea hit him and he called out, “FRIDAY, find me the nearest Chinese delivery in proximity to the office is and order… let’s say one of everything off the menu. Make sure the delivery person knows that if they get it there in the next thirty minutes, there will be a very generous tip waiting for them. If either Matt or Frank asks, have the guy tell them it was from me, and I said ‘Sorry you guys will be stuck there dealing with the cleanup. Hope you don’t mind I provided dinner. Even if you do mind, it’s already been paid for, so neener neener, you can’t give it back!’”

There were a few minutes of quiet before FRIDAY announced, “Done and done, Boss-Man. They’ll have it there in no more than 20.”

“That’s my girl.”

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The sound of the doors to the medical wing being thrown open while a voice called out, “The fun has arrived, bitches!” prompted the group huddled towards the back of the room to pop their heads up and swivel towards where Wade had just come into the room with a grin on his face.
“Wade Wilson, you’re lucky none of the kids are here.” Bridget deadpanned as she toyed with the idea of smacking the merc in the head.

The hazel-eyed man held his hands up in surrender. “Hey, I checked to make sure, first!” He quickly joined the group and flopped down in the only empty seat in the makeshift circle. “So, I heard you might have found a solution to the fact that my body is trying to kill me from the inside.” His tone became serious as the smile fell from his face.

Tony nodded from his place seated between Stephen and Bruce. “Given the fact that your healing factor has been already keeping it at bay for years, the worst that could happen is we have to go back and start brainstorming other ideas. But this has a damn good chance of taking care of the problem permanently.”

The other scientist of the group nodded at that. “What’s going to happen is we’re going to inject specially designed nanobots into your body, and they’ll seek out and destroy any cancer cells they come across. They’ve been specifically programmed to do so, and once your healing factor takes over, we’ll deactivate them and they’ll leave your body by natural means after a while.”

“We don’t have to worry about them breaking down while they’re doing their job, either,” Stephen spoke up, holding up a familiar glass box containing a glowing pinprick of golden light. “This is a specialized preservation spell, and the nanobots will all get a liberal application of it before being injected into your body.”

The restoration master sat back in her own chair with a small frown on her face. “The only downside is that you need to be put under for the procedure. I’m not going to lie, this would be exceedingly painful otherwise. I wouldn’t be able to give you anything for the pain if you were awake because I don’t know how the nanobots would interact with a potion of any kind.”

Wade nodded at the explanation, brow furrowed in thought. “How long do you think it will take the nanobots to fully get rid of the cancer?”

Pulling a clipboard full of papers from the table next to him, Bruce looked them over before replying, “From the scans we did on your body, we’re estimating no more than 24 hours.”

Hazel eyes went wide at the estimation. "Hey, if I have to be under for a day in exchange for being cancer free, that's a price I'm more than willing to pay. Anything I should be doing pre-op?"
Stephen nodded at that, allowing his doctor mentality to come to the forefront. "We prefer you didn't eat or drink anything 12 hours before we begin the procedure, but beyond that, this isn't a very invasive procedure that involves opening you up. There's not a lot that can go wrong with this that would end up with you being in immediate danger."

"Yeah, the healing factor would quickly take care of anything unsavory that might end up in my body." Wade was quiet for a moment or two before he took a deep breath and raised his eyes from where they had fallen to the floor to look up at everyone again. "So, when are we doing this?"

Tony sat back in his own chair with an easy smile on his face, hoping his calm demeanor would help put the man at ease. "Give all of us two weeks to make sure our schedules are completely clear. We'll let you know a few days in advance once we're ready, and that will give you enough time to make preparations."

The merc nodded and let out a slow, somewhat shaky breath. "After everything I went through just trying to get rid of this shit... Hard to believe it might actually be happening this time."

The group as a whole looked at each other, and a moment later the hazel-eyed man was being engulfed in a group hug. "We made you a promise, Wade. Like hell I was gonna leave you hanging." The genius reassured him quietly.

"You're in good hands with us, and even if this doesn't work will just go back and try again with a different solution. I went to medical school to help people, and I'm not going to let my lack of steady hands keep me from doing this for my friend." The sorcerer announced with a determined light in his blue-green eyes, taking a moment to squeeze the body between them all tightly.

Wade nodded his head and allowed himself to relax into the group hug. He didn't know what favor he'd cashed in where or when to have a group of friends as amazing as this, but he was grateful every day that he had them. Finally, he waved them all away while trying to subtly wipe the thankful tears from his eyes. "Alright, enough of the sap, you lot are giving me cavities. Need to go brush my teeth now..." He stood from his seat and gave them all a bright smile before turning to skip out of the medical wing.

The blond of the group laughed before calling after him, "Nice try, Wade! You don't get cavities!"

A soft snort came from one of the side rooms, and the group turned to see Clint hanging halfway out the door with a smirk on his face, one eyebrow arched in humor. "Poor dude took off like a shot, didn't he? Probably got overwhelmed..."
"He's not used to having people around him who are so supportive. I'm sure he'll get used to it eventually." Tony's gaze was drawn to the window of the room, where he could see a mop of silvery blond and brown hair and sky-blue eyes peeking over the ledge at him. The genius' expression softened as he gave the owner a wave accompanied by a friendly grin. After a moment of hesitation, the young man waved back and sat up from his wheelchair just enough so he could give the man a small smile.

A day or two after the rogues had returned and Natasha and Clint had been debriefed regarding everything with SHIELD, Phil, and Pietro, the speedster had finally shown signs of waking up. The brunette closed his eyes as he thought back to that day and what they'd learned from Pietro.

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"Are you sure it's a good idea for us to be here? Are we really the best choice?"

A soft sigh escaped Tony as he gazed at Nat and Clint through the tablet his own was connected to. "Guys, he's been under for over a year and a half. Besides me, he's not really going to know anyone else in the Compound, and until we have more information I think I'm the last person who should be anywhere near that room. That kid almost died protecting you, Legolas-- the reassurance that you did indeed survive will probably go a long way towards putting him at ease."

Natasha reached out to gently rest her hand on her partner's. "Tony's right-- considering he's waking up in a completely unfamiliar place, it will be good for him to wake up with someone familiar around. It's going to be fine, moy yastreb."

Any reply the archer may have had was cut off by a soft groan coming from the bed they were sitting on either side of. Tony gave them one more reassuring nod before cutting his connection to the tablet. The two agents turned their attention to Pietro, whose eyelids were fluttering as he tried to pull himself back to the waking world. After a moment of hesitation, Clint reached out to gently take one of the blond's hands and rub the top with his thumb. "Easy, pal, you're okay. Come on back, you're safe here." He spoke soothingly, keeping his tone soft and reassuring.

Sky blue eyes finally blinked open fully, and after a moment of disorientation, he turned his head towards where Clint was sitting. He squinted in confusion at the man before speaking in a raspy voice. "What... What happened?"

Hearing the state of the man's voice, Nat reached for the pitcher of water and cup that had been
placed by the bedside in preparation. "That's a long story, and there are parts of it you may not like." She said softly, slowly standing from her seat so she could offer the straw in the cup to Pietro. "Drink, slowly. Don't make yourself sick."

Pietro gratefully drank from the offered straw, and after a few sips, he relaxed back in the bad with a tired sigh. "My head feels foggy... The last thing I remember was Wanda influencing me to jump in front of that attack..." His eyes suddenly went wide and he looked towards Clint with fear flashing across his expression. "The twin bond-- I can't feel it anymore! Is she here? Please, don't let her near me, I can't--!"

The archer immediately squeezed the blond’s hand again to soothe him, mind reeling from what he’d learned from those few sentences alone. "Whoa, steady there, buddy. Your sister is in a completely different part of the state-- she's not allowed anywhere near this place." A shaky, relieved sigh escaped the blue-eyed man as he relaxed into the bed again. "So, after hearing all that, I've got some serious questions. First, did you just say that Wanda somehow forced you to jump in front of the attack I was supposed to get hit with?"

The young man dropped his eyes to the bedsheets he was covered by. "Wanda has been influencing my thoughts and decisions for many years. It started when I began to express doubt that Stark was truly a fault for what happened to our parents. She was adamant that the blame rested firmly on his shoulders, and she was angry that I didn't share that same hatred. Once she had her powers, she began using them to push my thoughts and feelings in the direction she wanted them to go. Anytime I expressed an opinion that didn't align with hers, she would do so."

Natasha’s eyes closed at the implications. "Bozhe moy, no wonder you wouldn't want to see her. But why would she force you into sacrificing yourself?"

"Because I started fighting back harder." Pietro seemed to curl in on himself as he continued, "As conflicted as I am on Stark's role in our parent's deaths, I would have never willingly brought someone's worst memories to the forefront of their minds. As soon as Ultron came into the picture, I suppose I became desperate. Her willingness to sacrifice me served to both take me out of the picture entirely and gain sympathy from your Captain." A wet laugh escaped him. "I suppose Wanda's desire for revenge was stronger any love she had for me."

Clint inhaled sharply as sympathy surged within him. "Christ, and I thought what she did to me was bad... But this-- this is a level of disgusting I never thought anyone was capable of." Pietro's head snapped up to look at him and the golden-eyed man quickly explained, "You're not the only one she's manipulated like that. She got into my head too-- it was probably a lot easier because I've had my mind controlled before. From the way Strange explains it, it left open pathways right into my head that she used to her full advantage."
A look of befuddlement crossed Pietro's face at the words. "I'm sorry, the way 'Strange' explains it? Is that a name?"

The redhead chuckled at the look of confusion they were getting. "Yes, his name is Dr. Stephen Strange, and it's a surname he more than lives up to."

Blue eyes found hers as a furrow in Pietro's brow deepened further. "I don't remember there being a Stephen Strange on the Avengers roster... Or is he simply a friend?"

The partners went very quiet at that, looking over at each other and having a brief conversation with their facial expressions alone. Finally, Clint turned back to Pietro with a grim look on his face. "He wasn't a member of the Avengers... But he is a member of the New Avengers."

"The New Avengers? Why would you need new avengers?"

Natasha leaned forward to take Pietro's other hand and gently squeeze it. "Because the old team collapsed from the inside. Battle lines were drawn, and people got badly hurt and even killed because of it." She paused before continuing in a subdued voice, "One of us was almost killed by another member-- it's a miracle he survived."

There were several seconds of silence as Pietro looked between the duo, a feeling of dread welling up within him. "I... How long have I been sleeping?" He finally asked in an uncertain tone.

A resigned sigh escaped Clint as he looked away for a second before looking back up. "Pietro, you haven't been asleep. You've been in a medically-induced coma for the past year and a half. Up until a few days ago, we didn't even know you were alive."

For a few seconds, the young man seemed frozen in place, an expression of shock and disbelief flashing across his face. Finally, a soft choked noise escaped him, and as he looked between the duo with tears in his eyes he whispered, "Please, I need to know... What happened?"

The duo didn't leave the room for several hours. Neither held anything back.
"Hello? Birdbrain to Tony, come in Tony! Guys, I think he needs a reboot."

The sound of the archer’s voice brought the genius back to the present, and he snorted in humor. “I need no such thing, Legolas. I was simply in standby mode.”

Clint groaned in exasperation. “Oh God, I’ve opened up the floodgates. I’m leaving before the tech humor gets worse than this.” He quickly ducked back inside the room to a round of laughter, though from what the group could see, Pietro found the entire exchange amusing as well if the shaking from his shoulders was any indication.

The Restoration Master of the group smiled and shook her head before turning to the others. "Alright, everybody out! I have someone else to see to now, and unless you break a bone in the next ten seconds, you need to make yourselves busy elsewhere!" Everyone quickly scattered, and Bridget immediately swept towards the room Clint and Pietro were sitting in, smiling at the duo as she shut the door behind her. "Thank you both for your patience. How are you feeling today, Pietro?"

The blond gave her a shy smile as he replied, "I'm doing well today, Ms. Bridget. You said you wanted to check on my progress today?"

Bridget nodded as she came to stand in front of him. "That's right. The high-strength nutrient potion you've been taking at every meal should be helping mitigate some the damage that comes from being stuck in a bed for as long as you were. If your progress is good, we may start you on muscle strengthening potions next. Not a high dose, mind you-- that would have to wait until you're completely off the nutrient one." Getting a nod of understanding from Pietro, she allowed her magic to flow over him and scan him. After several seconds, she allowed it to recede and stepped back with a smile on her face. "These results are very promising-- your body is recovering remarkably well, and you're gaining back the weight you lost at a healthy rate. I think you're at a point where we could put you on the low-dose muscle strengthener."

The archer grinned as he reached over and gently squeezed Pietro's knee. "Hear that? You'll be back up and zipping around before you know it!"

"Clint Barton, he'll be doing no zipping of any kind until I give him clearance to do so. Even with the muscle strengthener, he'll need at least a few sessions of physical therapy." The amethyst-eyed woman scolded him gently as she moved to retrieve the potion in question. "Now, he'll need ten drops of this in a glass of water at every meal. Pietro, make sure you drink the entire cup. You might experience an odd minty aftertaste, but I assure you that's completely normal." Pietro nodded with a soft 'yes ma'am', and she gave them a kind smile in return. "There is something else I wanted to bring up. Pietro, what you've been through would absolutely qualify as a traumatic experience. Between what your sister put you through, the near fatal wounds you sustained, and being in a
coma for a year and half, we're of the opinion that therapy might be a positive thing for you. There are two on-call therapists for the New Avengers, and you're welcome to talk to either of them regarding the things you've been through. We can always find you a different one, but they both come highly recommended and have helped several people here deal with the things they've been through."

The blond's knee was squeezed again as Clint leaned over and softly spoke to the young man. "I can vouch for credibility on that one-- Mr. Lee is a phenomenal therapist, I definitely recommend him."

Pietro thought for a second while drumming his fingers on his leg in a nervous gesture. Finally, he took a deep breath and nodded. "Okay. If you could set up an appointment with this Mr. Lee, I can give it a try."

The female healer smiled brightly as she nodded. "Excellent! I'll give him a call once we're done here. I think you'll really like him, Stan is a very sweet man."

The trio exchanged a few more words before Bridget shooed Clint and Pietro out of the medical wing. The younger sighed and leaned back in his wheelchair as Clint pushed it. "I like her quite a lot. She's friendly, but she takes her job very seriously."

"Oh, don't let that fool you. That woman can be absolutely formidable under the right circumstances." Clint gave a mock shutter, the blue-eyed man laughing in response to his antics. "So, how have you been finding the Compound? It was pretty nice before, but Tony's done some really nice renovations on it."

Pietro gave him a bright grin in response. "I love how it's so open and bright! The people here are very friendly, too." The smile seemed to fall from his face after a second as a new thought hit him. "Though… I've barely seen Mr. Stark at all." He looked up as best he could from his position with a sad frown on his face. "Does he resent me being here? I wouldn't blame him if he did…"

Golden eyes softened at the hesitant words, and Clint wheeled him outside to a screened in, heated patio that overlooked the grounds. "No, he doesn't resent you being here in the slightest."

"Then why has he been keeping his distance from me? Is it because of Wanda?"

The archer situated the wheelchair in front of a seat so he could sit across from him. "It's not that he
doesn't want to see you-- it's actually because he isn't sure you would want to see him. Your sister made no secret of the fact that she blamed Tony for what happened to your parents, and he's not sure if the same holds true for you. Honestly, I can't blame him for his hesitation-- even when she was presented with the evidence that wasn't his fault, she still hated his guts."

Pietro's eyes snapped up to stare at the man in front of him, shock crossing his features. "Wait, what did you just say?"

Clint seemed confused at first before the realization hit him. He let out a soft sigh before turning his gaze to the ceiling. "FRIDAY, could you bring up everything Tony compiled regarding the death of the Maximoffs?"

"Sure thing, Mr. Barton!"

The duo turned as a few holographic screens lit up above the table next to them, and Clint tapped the first one closest to him. "So, less than 24 hours after he got back from Sokovia, Tony started looking into what happened regarding your parents. Stark Industries never distributed weapons to any country outside the US government, though that didn't keep several shipments from getting out. The blame for that falls solely on this man." The archer pulled a picture of an elderly man forward. "This guy is Obadiah Stane, he was the CEO of Stark Industries before Tony took over. He was also selling weapons under the table, and actually had a hit taken out on Tony to try and take over the company."

Pietro eyed the picture warily. Even as a still photograph, there seem to be something cold and ruthless in the man's gaze. "And Mr. Stark didn't know?"

A sorrowful look flickered over the man's face in response. "Not at all. Stane was like a father figure to Tony, and to find out he'd been doing this shit... It was a pretty harsh blow to him." The picture was quickly flicked away. "That's not the important thing right now though. From what Tony found, the bomb that fell in your house was from a shipment slated for destruction. It's a business thing where if even one out of the batch has a flaw of any kind, the entire set gets scrapped. Stane managed to smuggle those out and sell them off to the highest bidder. When he did a little more digging on the buyer, though... " Clint pulled the document in question up and zoomed in on the signature line. "Well, see for yourself."

The young man leaned forward to study the signature, and less than a second later he reeled back in shock. "Strucker?! He was the buyer?! But that would mean he was the one... Who..." An expression of dawning, horrified realization crossed his face, and if Clint had lurched forward to steady him, the blonde had no doubt he would've pitched out of his chair and onto the floor. "Oh God..." He choked, slamming his eyes shut against the tears he could feel welling up. "That bastard killed our parents, and we walked right into his arms."
Clint didn't say anything reply. Instead, he wrapped his arms around the blond in a comforting hug, more than willing to steady him as he finally lost his fight against his emotions and began to sob. "Shh, you're okay, everything's okay, just let it go." He comforted the distraught man, easing him from his chair and settling him on the bench next to him. "Take all the time you need, I'm not going anywhere..."

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Aria sighed as she rocked Sunny back and forth, using her free hand to clutch the warm mug of caffeinated tea she was drinking as she reclined in her seat. The infant had been fussy for several days now, and no matter what she or her husband did for their daughter, nothing seemed to be working. Her purple-blue eyes dropped to where the girl was squirming and crying in her arms, and she gave the currently redheaded infant an exhausted smile. "Sometimes I wish my omnilingual skills extended to babies as well. Your daddies and I are trying so hard, little jewel, I wish I knew what was bothering you." She glanced towards the digital clock nearby, groaning under her breath a little and how early in the morning it was.

"Wow, she is not a happy little tyke tonight, is she?"

The Reaper's head snapped up, and she gave a soft sigh of relief when she saw Tony standing in the doorway. "Craig, Ulysses, and I haven't been able to get her to fully calm down in days. I didn't want to wake them, so I brought her out here to the common room. I didn't think anyone else was up."

The brunette took a seat in front of her, giving the woman a compassionate smile as he stroked the infant's hair. "I was just coming up for something to drink-- normally I'd just have coffee from the pot down in my lab, but I do want to go to bed sometime tonight." He observed the duo for a second before standing again and gesturing for Aria to follow him. "Come on, I got an idea."

The woman nodded and followed behind him dutifully, continuing to speak soothingly to her daughter as she did so. A look of realization lit in her eyes as she was led into the Music Hall. "Oh, this is a good idea! I don't know why I didn't think of playing for her."

Tony chuckled as he guided sister in all but blood to a seat near his mother's grand piano. "You aren't going to be doing anything other than listening and holding Sunniva. Just sit back and enjoy." The genius turned on his heel and swept over to the instrument, smoothly taking a seat on the bench and resting his hands on the keys. He took a second to think before beginning to play, a soft and tender melody filling the room for several seconds before he began singing along in Italian. He quickly lost himself in the motion of his fingers across the keys, not realizing how much he'd
missed playing the piano until that moment.

As the song drew to a close, the genius finally became aware of the lack of noises from the infant and the soft sniffs coming from Aria instead. He whipped his head in her direction and blinked at the brilliant smile he was met with. "Anthony Edward Stark, you have been holding out on us." She whispered to him, standing with a deeply sleeping Sunny in her arms. "That was absolutely magnificent, Tony. And thanks to you, Sunny is sleeping like a rock."

Tony shrugged with a small smile on his face. "Honestly, I didn't realize how much I'd missed playing Mom's piano. It makes me feel like I'm closer to her…" He reached out and stroked the now dark brown hair on the infant's head with featherlight touches. "Let me know if you need me to play for her again."

"I might come and seek you out even if I don't need it for her." Aria gave the man a kiss on the cheek before turning to leave the room. "I'm going to put her to bed, then get some sleep myself. Thank you so much, Tony."

The genius watched her leave, and as the doors closed he turned his eyes back to the piano with a contemplative expression on his face. He was pulled out of his thoughts a few seconds later when a pair of arms wrapped around his waist from behind him. "That was exquisite, Tony." Stephen whispered as he rested his chin on his soulmate's shoulder.

"Hey love, when did you get in? I thought you were taking care of an emergency at Kamar-Taj."

The sorcerer chuckled softly as he kissed the genius' shoulder. "Just a few minutes ago. I portaled in towards the beginning of your song. Such a shame I didn't get to hear the whole thing."

Tony gave a soft laugh at that as he turned his head to catch the dark-haired man's lips with his own. "Well, I'll just have to play it from the beginning, then."

The brilliant smile he got in return was well worth the fact that the piano music didn't stop until just before dawn.

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Sleipnir loved his siblings very much-- there was very little he wouldn't do for them. He would pull
Jör sighed and flopped down in the nearest chair. "I'm sorry, I can't help it. The fact that Rem is so sick and we can't do anything to help him... It's driving me nuts! We're practically GODS, we should be able to do something!"

Soft footsteps padded across the carpet before Peter lowered himself into the seat next to the distraught male. "I know it sucks feeling helpless, but Rem will be okay! His parents are with him, and we've got the best healer in the multiverse looking out for him. He wouldn't want us to spend our time fretting over him when we could be doing something more productive."

After a few seconds, the dark green haired man sighed and pulled the brunette against him, nuzzling his nose into the soft hair under his chin. "How is it that, at 800 years old, I'm still getting schooled by a teenager?" The words were spoken fondly, prompting a giggle from the teen in question.

"Perhaps it is because we never truly stop learning-- the source of such knowledge is irrelevant." Sleipnir gracefully rose from his seat to join the duo, settling on Peter's other side to rub his back. "You are wise beyond your years, Peter."

The teen blushed ruby red, but before he could say anything the doors to the media room were opened, Wade stepping inside and closing them behind himself. "Wade!" The teen sprung from the couch to throw himself at the merc. "We haven't seen you all day! How did your appointment go? How's Rem? Did Iron Dad and Doctor Dad figure out a solution?"

Wade laughed and pulled Peter into a warm embrace. "Easy, Spider-Baby! Take a deep breath, let me explain what I learned." He guided them to the seat across from Jör and Sle. "So, let me update you on Rem's condition first. According to Bridget and his parents, he's got bacterial bronchitis. It sounds nasty, and it’s making him feel miserable, but Bridget gave him a round of antibiotics that will start helping him feel better within the next day or two. Once he's completely done with the regiment, he'll just need some basic over-the-counter stuff to combat the rest of the symptoms."

The elder godling tilted his head in curiosity. "It's good to know that Rem has medicine that will be making him feel well again soon. I admit my curiosity, however-- you put clear emphasis on the 'completely done' part of your statement."
"And why can't Bridget just give him a potion that will fix him up in a day or two?" The second born piped up as well.

The merc sat back as he ran his fingers through Peter's hair. "Antibiotics are weird in that if you don't take every dose, there's a chance that whatever illness you have could come back, sometimes even worse than before. It's not really a chance you want to take, and it's not that hard to just pop a pill in your mouth. As for Bridget, she's never encountered something like bronchitis before, and she can't create a cure for something she knows nothing about. Now that she knows about it, she can work on something to take care of it if it happens again."

Peter sighed in bliss as he leaned into the fingers gently carding through his hair. "What about Loki or Doctor Dad? Couldn't they magic it away?"

Hazel eyes sparkled with mirth as the owner reached out and booped Peter's nose. "First of all, Loki is at Disney with Laura and the kids. We already gave him a call and reassure him that Rem will be okay and we'll take care of him. No need to tear him away from his vacation right now when we're perfectly capable of handling this. As for Stephen, he flat out admits that he's never dabbled much in healing spells, and he doesn't want to just pull one from the Grimoire. It's magic from different parts of the multiverse, and it already takes time to figure out how to convert magic from one world to that of another's." He shot everyone in the room a grim look as he said the next piece. "He's also said that healing magic isn't a type he would consider doing a rush job on. You could put somebody at risk doing that, or outright kill them if you're not careful. With all that being said, everyone involved is confident that Rem will be fine with the treatment he's getting. It may take a little longer, but ultimately it's the best solution."

Sleipnir nodded as he sat back in his seat, steepling his fingers against his chest as he thought. "The logic is sound, that much is certain. I suppose that, at this point in time, all we are capable of doing is waiting." He sighed for a moment before turning his soulful brown eyes back to Wade. "Nothing to be done for it, I suppose. On another note, I understand you had your meeting today to discuss a potential solution for the cancer that plagues you. Please, tell us about it."

Chapter End Notes

First, translations

Cher cœur -- Dear heart (French)
Moy Svet -- My light

Alright, all done on that end! What did you guys think? Stay tuned everyone, because this madness is only the tip of the iceberg!

Until then, stay chaotic, Vassals!!
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

Stephen and Tony discuss a certain red-clad vigilante and his partner, and Rhodey has confidence in the progress made by the Rogues. The New Avengers get pulled away in four different directions for a mission that was merely meant as a distraction, and shit proceeds to hit the fan on several fronts. The New Avengers now have several fires to put out... and none of their leaders to help them.

(Rem is going to make bank when he's finally old enough.)

((Harley and Thor are simultaneously hilarious and terrifying.))

Chapter Notes

Vassals, it is with great pride and pleasure that I present to you the first chapter of this arc three months in the making! You all have my unending gratitude for your patience during this waiting period, and I hope the 50,000 words worth of content is worth it! This is a five-part update, with one being posted every other day!

Thank you to Jen for your patience as I worked myself out and learned to trust in my own skills again, and a big, BIG thank you to LvSoulFriend for helping in the final stages of editing! And thank you, my dear vassals, for you continued support and dedication!!

“Mail call, Tony!”

The genius in question popped his head up from where he’d been bent over a workbench, a grin lighting up his face at the sight of Stephen striding into the room with several envelopes in his hand. “Hey, baby! Thanks for bringing those in. How was your class?”

Stephen chuckled and passed the letters to his soulmate before wrapping his arms around him from behind, pressing a kiss to the top of his head. “It went well-- the new students are very promising. What are you working on?”

Whiskey brown eyes sparkled with excitement as he shifted through the mail. “New core for Min. I have a few ideas, just deciding which one to work on next. First, though…” He was quiet for a second or two as he pulled two envelopes from the stack, setting the others aside. The genius’ brow furrowed at the return address on the first one, and he quickly ripped it open and pulled the letter
from within. He barely made it through the first paragraph before groaning in exasperation and tossing it onto the workbench. “That’s the sixth law firm we’ve heard from in the past three days! You’d think Rogers would be smart enough to know when he’s got a losing case!”

The dark-haired man holding him gave a soft chuckle as he rested his chin on his shoulder. “Love, I don’t think ‘Rogers’ and ‘smart’ belong in a sentence together unless we’re discussing his lack of intelligence.”

Tony laughed at the remark, turning his head to kiss Stephen properly. “Truer words were never spoken. Let’s see…” He held up the other envelope, blinking in shock when he realized who it was from. “Speaking of… It seems we’ve been contacted again by our surprise allies in law. Hope he hasn’t been giving them more trouble…” He ripped the envelope open and pulled out the letter inside.

‘Dr. Stark,

Frank and I wanted to thank you for your generosity a few days ago. Seeing as we were both forced to stay at the office until much later than we anticipated, the food was a welcome boon. Several officers were thankful too-- I’m unsure of why else you would order one of everything on the menu.

We hope Rogers isn’t giving you too many problems. The man seems to be stubborn on the best of days, hellbent on the worst. I am aware that you have Stark Industries lawyers at your disposal, but if you ever are in need of a second opinion, I’m always willing to lend an ear.

Have a pleasant day,

Matt Murdock and Frank Castle’

A snort escaped Stephen as Tony put the letter down. “If only they knew the kind of chaos that man is causing....”

“I have no doubt he knows. He gets around far more than anyone realizes.” Seeing the confused look he was getting, Tony turned and pulled up a holographic screen. “So, it turns out that Matt Murdock has a second job of the vigilante variety. It took some digging and facial recognition analysis, but... all the data points to Matt actually being this guy-- Daredevil.” A picture of a man in red popped up, along with a few clips of grainy footage of said man fighting off several others.
“He primarily operates out of Hell’s Kitchen and is more than likely the one responsible for the drop in crime in the area. DD was on the scene when the cops showed up to arrest Fisk-- given who his alter-ego is, it makes a hell of a lot more sense now.” he leaned back against Stephen’s chest as he watched the footage. “I just can’t figure out how he’s doing it. He’s legally blind, there’s no debating that… but it brings into question how he seems to know where people are and where they’re coming from.”

Stephen hummed as he studied the figure as well. “My first guess would have been something related to the Mystic Arts… but I’d never heard of Matt Murdock until he contacted you, and there were no records of him at Kamar-Taj. Perhaps a mutation of some kind?"

The genius pushed the images away and deactivated the screen. “Whatever the case, he’s been doing damn good work in New York. I’m content to leave him be for now-- might call on him later, though.”

The sorcerer nodded before he gave a soft laugh. “It brings a whole new level of hilarity to the relationship between him and Castle, though.”

“Actually, it’s a damn good thing he has Frank with him.” Tony turned his eyes towards the paper on the workbench with a grim look on his face. “I found out why those perps were there that night they called-- there’s been a hit taken out on both Matt Murdock and Daredevil, alive or dead.”

A hum escaped Stephen as he looked thoughtful for a few seconds. “You think Fisk had something to do with it?”

Tony gave an incredulous scoff. “A man like the Kingpin gets put behind bars and you expect him not to retaliate like that? Whether he’s in jail or not, that guy has pull, and he wouldn’t hesitate to use it.”

The duo was quiet for a few minutes as they considered what they’d learned. Finally, Stephen spoke again. “Are you planning on doing anything about it, babe?”

“At this point in time? No.” The genius replied in a quiet, yet no less confident voice. “If Matt and Frank need help-- really need it-- they’ll reach out to us. Besides, from what I heard while I was on the phone with them, Frank has it under control for now.” Stephen nodded his agreement at that, trusting his soulmate's judgment on the matter.
The sound of FRIDAY's voice caught both men's attention a second later. "Boss Man, Magic Boss, Colonel Rhodes is on the line asking for you."

“Go ahead and bring him up, baby girl.” A holographic screen flickered to life in front of them, the man in question appearing on it a second later. “Platypus! You’re looking good!”

The man in question snorted. “You’re full of shit, Tones-- I just got done in the gym, I look like I spent an hour in a steam bath.” Tony cackled in reply, prompting the dark-skinned man to roll his eyes. “I wanted to talk to you about Romanoff, Barton, Lang, and Wilson-- Sam, not Wade.”

“Our Rogue residents? What about them?”

Rhodey let out a sigh as he sat in a chair. "They've been back in the states for almost a month, and they've been passing their evaluations at a consistent rate. I'm thinking about doing one last evaluation for all of them, a big one, and if it goes well I'll declare them field ready. What are your thoughts?"

The soulmates looked at each other and took a moment to think before applying. "From my standpoint, they're all free of any metaphysical influences. The holes in Clint's psyche have been well and truly sealed so he won't be a liability on that end, and he'll also have a decent defense against it in the future." Stephen reported as he looked back over at the screen.

Tony nodded before adding in, "Their behavior here has been good as well. Scott and Sam were never really a problem, but I think having Rem around has been a damn good motivator for Nat, and by extension Clint. 'Tasha has always kept walls up around her heart that kept her from connecting with anyone-- I blame the Red Room for that. Beyond being a motivator, I think having her son close by is helping her heal."

A small smile pulled at the dark-skinned man's lips as he nodded in agreement. "I noticed that too. She wants to be a good mother for him, someone he can be proud of, and it really shows in the way she's been behaving and interacting with the people around her. I never thought the Black Widow could show that kind of emotion-- I can honestly say I've never been so happy to be wrong."

"I always knew she had the potential. I just wasn't sure how to bring it out of her." A small frown crossed the genius' lips after a second or two. "The only problem I can see involves Pietro. He's become very attached to Clint, and by extension, Natasha. All things considered, it's not really a surprise. He's only had two therapy sessions so far, and I'm not sure how well he would do with being separated from either of them for any length of time."
A flicker of sadness sparked behind Rhodey's eyes, and he nodded at his best friend's words. "Yeah, I heard about what you all found out. That poor guy's been through some shit… Tell you what, he could probably come along while I'm doing the last assessment with the Rogues. He'll have to sit off to the side, but he'll get to see how everyone interacts outside the Compound, and if something happens and we need medical, they're only a floor or two down."

Stephen nodded his approval at the idea. "That's probably the best solution. We don't want to cause a backslide in his progress, and this will allow him to stay close to them while also allowing them to move forward as well."

The trio spent the next half hour hashing out the details, and once Rhodey had said his goodbyes and hung up, Tony sighed with content and sat in his rolling swivel chair. He hummed with delight as Stephen began to gently run his fingers through his hair. "You've been working so hard recently, love." The sorcerer murmured as the genius melted under his ministrations.

"Ugh, no need to remind me, babe."

“I believe a massage is in order-- doctor’s orders.”

Tony cracked an eye open, whiskey-brown locking on Stephen’s blue-green. “Steph, your hands won’t hold up against the steel coils that make up my back currently.”

The smile on Stephen’s face turned downright sultry at that. “Oh? Well, in that case, I suppose we’ll have to upgrade that to a special massage.”

The genius blinked in incomprehension for a second before realization lit in his eyes, and he returned the smolder an instant later. “Well, I suppose if it’s what the doctor recommends… Who am I to disagree?”

Stephen smirked and hauled his soulmate to his feet, kissing the genius breathless as he opened a portal to their bedroom, pulling him through it within a second and letting it close behind them.
The sound of clattering and banging around prompted Rem to look up from where he had been bent over his tablet, icy blue eyes blinking curiously towards the grate situated at the top of the wall to his right. After a second or two, the covering slid back and Clint stuck his head out to wave at the teen. "Uncle Clint!" Rem called out in surprise before pausing to cough a little into his arm. "What are you doing here? And where did you find one of those masks??"

"I didn't find it anywhere, Little Chick," Clint replied in a conspiratorial voice as he dropped from the vent. "I borrowed it from Ulysses-- turns out he really, REALLY likes Dots, they remind him of some kind of candy from back home. Where 'home' is for him that doesn’t have Dots, I have no idea, but it sounds like a terrible, sugarless place. I passed him a couple of boxes, and he's letting me use his mask to safely come visit you. He says 'hello' and 'get well soon', by the way."

Rem laughed at the knowledge, prompting another coughing fit that he quickly quelled and shook his head in amusement. "I'll have to store that knowledge away for later. Are you the one responsible for the vent nests I found in there?"

Golden eyes sparkled with mirth as Clint sat on the edge of the bed. "Yep that's my domain! So YOU'RE the one who's been in there! I shouldn't be surprised-- mark my words, you and I are gonna have some fun together once you're better." He reached out and gently ruffled the fiery locks on the teen's head. "You certainly sound better today. Though I would imagine the mountain of tissues next to you means that not everything has drained out yet."

Shaking his head, Rem sniffed and reached for an unused tissue. "Ugh, it's been the worst, Uncle Clint! Just when I think everything is out, I end up sneezing or coughing up more!"

The archer nodded and quickly grabbed another box of tissues from nearby, seeing as the one near Rem was nearly empty. "Yeah, and chances are you'll be doing that for a while. Fortunately, just because you're coughing crap up doesn't mean you're still contagious, so you should be able to see your friends before too long. In the meantime, why don't you tell me how you know about my vent nests?" The mutant grinned with delight and immediately launched into the tale of how he'd managed to sneak out of the Compound. He ghosted over the parts involving Sabertooth and what had nearly happened-- no need to reopen old wounds that were long since healed, after all. By the time he was done, the redhead didn't need for Clint to remove the mask to know how wide the man was grinning. "Yeah, you're James and Nat's kid alright! How did Tony react to all that, though? The fact that you managed to get out completely undetected means you managed to outsmart his AI."

The smile on Rem's face softened into something fond and happy at the question. "He was actually glad it happened. He considered it a massive security flaw and was grateful I brought it to light. He wasn't even angry at all-- just worried about my safety and well-being."
"That definitely sounds like Tony. Honestly, I feel like the man spends more time worrying about the safety of the people around him than he does himself." Clint gave a big stretch before flopping onto his back so his head was by Rem's knees. "I guess that means we'll have to do all the worrying for him. Whaddya say, kid?"

Rem hummed for a second as if thinking deeply before grinning back at the man. "Well, as long as we feed and water him two times a day and make sure he gets plenty of fresh air and sunlight, I suppose we can look out for him."

A bark of laughter escaped Clint. "We're comparing Tony Stark to a house pet. God help us if he ever finds out."

The mutant giggled and shook his head. "Don't worry, he'll only come running if I call for him, or he thinks I'm in danger." The archer gave him an intrigued look, so he elaborated, "Uncle Tony and I… We share a minor empathic bond. We think it has to do with what happened when he, Uncle Stephen, and Aunt Bridget saved my life. We still don't know the full details, but the main thing is that he can sense if I'm in immediate danger."

Golden eyes blinked before Clint sat up and tilted his head. “Hm. That’s pretty handy.”

"This necklace has come in handy, too." Rem held up the pendant in question, shooting a grin at his uncle.

Clint snorted at that and reached out to gently ruffle the teen's hair again. "Yeah, I'll bet it does. I don't think anyone would appreciate it if you started blowing up the furniture. They've been having you keep it on the whole time you’ve been sick?"

Rem nodded, toying with the pendant and giving it a fond smile. “They’ve been making me wear it less as I start feeling better, but they want me to keep it on if I go outside the room.”

The archer nodded with a compassionate smile on his face that was hidden by the breathing mask he wore. “Well, hopefully it won’t take you too much longer to heal up fully. You must be going completely stir crazy being in this room all the time.”

“Actually, Papa and Dad said they’ll be by in an hour to check on me-- If I’m feeling good, I get to go see everyone during lunch!”
There was quiet for a second as Clint blinked. “Wait, an hour-- lunch--” He whipped out his phone and checked the time. “Shit! I have to meet Phil, Pietro, Nat, Sam, and Scott in the lobby in five minutes for our meeting with Rhodey!” He stuffed the phone back in his pocket and hopped off the bed. “Sorry for cutting this visit short, Little Chick!”

Rem waved him off, a grin on his face. “I don’t blame you, Uncle Clint! If you cut through the vent above the training room, you should be fine, just take a left, then a right once you get across!”

“Thanks, Rem!”

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“I hope you don’t plan on getting in the van like that, Clint.”

The sheepish grin the archer gave Phil in reply caused Natasha to sigh deeply as she stepped up to him to attempt to brush the dust off of him. “I know I’ve told you before that it’s not a good idea to use the vents to get to meetings, moy yastreb .”

Scott couldn’t help the laugh that escaped him at the petulant look on Clint’s face at the assassin’s words. “Hey, do you really want to face Rhodes looking like that? Because he doesn’t seem like the kind of man who would tolerate the inch-thick layer of dust you seem to have accumulated.”

“I know the vents are your preferred method of travel, Clint,” Phil admonished the golden-eyed male as Natasha moved to his back, “But you know very well that if you’re going to a meeting with higher-ups, it’s better to just walk-- better to be a little late than filthy. You really shouldn’t be late at all, but if you have to pick one or the other…”

A cough escaped Clint as his redhead partner finally pulled away, and he sneezed once before replying, “I was visiting Rem and lost track of time! Sorry not sorry for wanting to make sure he was okay!”

“Well, since you were visiting my pseudo nephew, I can forgive you this once.” The group as a whole turned to where Rhodey was approaching them from the front doors, a small smile on his face. Turning his attention to Clint and Natasha, he asked “How’s he doing? I haven’t had time to check in with him recently.”

Natasha gave him a smile, thankful for his concern for her son. “He’s doing much better, thank you. He’s almost done with his antibiotics, and he’s going to be allowed to see his friends at lunch today.”
The dark-skinned man nodded at that, a pleased smile on his face. “I’m glad he’s feeling better-- give him my love when you see him next, you hear?” They all gave him their enthusiastic agreement, and the Lieutenant Colonel turned to Pietro, who was watching him nervously from his wheelchair. The blond seemed so insecure, and the sight made Rhodey’s heart melt a bit in sympathy. He gave the speedster a reassuring smile and held out his hand in greeting. “It’s a pleasure to meet you in person, Pietro. I’m James Rhodes, but most everyone just calls me Rhodey.”

Pietro reached forward and gave the man a handshake. “It’s nice to meet you as well. Thank you for allowing me to come with today.”

“Figured you might want a chance to get out of the Compound and see some new scenery.” Dark eyes sparkled with mirth as Rhodey straightened again. “Alright, is everyone ready? Good, follow me.” He waved for them to follow behind him. As they fell in step with Clint pushing the wheelchair, he began to speak again. “We’ll be headed to Avengers Tower for your last assessment. I’ll cover all the details in the van once we’ve gotten everyone loaded up.”

They all murmured excitedly, and it wasn’t long after that everyone was seated and strapped in, Rhodey closing the door behind him and buckling himself up as well. As the van began to move, he turned to the group as a whole with a small smile. “So, I also want to take this time to actually talk casually to all of you. Have you all been settling in alright? Four of you have been back in the states for about a month and a half, and one of you has been recovering for about as long-- has everything been going well?”

The group all smiled at each other for a second. “Tony has been really accommodating, that’s for sure,” Scott spoke first, eyes sparkling with gratitude. “He actually let me do some work to pay for a Starkpad so I could talk to Cassie. He’s definitely not the man Hank claimed he was…” He sighed and sat forward so his elbows were on his knees, a troubled look on his face. “I dunno why Hank seemed to hate Tony so much… He’s really compassionate and selfless when you get to know him.”

Rhodey nodded at that, a knowing glint in his eyes. “Hank Pym always had a major grudge against Howard-- that resentment carried over to Tony, even though they’ve never spoken at great length. I’m glad you’re taking the time to get to know the man behind the assumptions.” Scott nodded and gave him a bright smile, and after a second dark eyes then turned to Sam, who was watching him with a guilty look on his face. “What about you, Sam? How are your mom and family doing?”

“They’re good. Mama’s still mad as hell at me, but it’s getting better… She always appreciated a man who could own up to and take responsibility for his mistakes. My sister, though…” His head dropped, a grimace flashing across his face. “I dunno how I’m gonna repair my relationship with her when she won’t even acknowledge my existence when Mama and I are talkin’.”
The car went quiet at that, but the one who broke the silence was the one they least expected. “Family is a tricky thing,” Pietro said softly, catching Sam’s brown eyes with his sky blue as he looked back up. “But sometimes… it isn’t words that truly speak, but actions.” He took a deep breath and took a moment to center himself like Mr. Lee had taught him. “Wanda… the choices she made spoke volumes more than anything she ever said. In the end, she made her stance more than clear.” Clint and Natasha both leaned over to grab one of his hands, and he shot them both a grateful smile. “You made a bad choice,” He looked back at Sam again with a spark of determination in his eyes, “But you then made a better one. Keep making the good choices, keep showing her that one mistake does not define you, and she will eventually see the good, not the bad.” Sam stared at him for a few seconds before he swallowed and nodded, a tremulous smile quirking at his lips.

Rhodey gave them all a proud smile. Clearly, Stan was already doing good work with the young man. They’d had two sessions so far, both of which had run far longer than the anticipated time. No one was surprised, honestly-- he was a phenomenal therapist, one even Tony spoke highly of. For a shrink, there could be no higher honor than to have gotten the approval and outright endorsement of Tony Stark. “What about you two?” He turned his attention to Clint and Natasha, both looking towards him upon being addressed. “I can imagine it was a shock finding out about Rem, Natasha.”

“Yes, but a welcome one.” The redhead admitted without shame, love and happiness sparkling in her normally cold eyes. “He’s such a brilliant young man, and despite everything he’s gone through, he’s always so happy, so full of light.”

Clint nodded enthusiastically at his partner’s words, a bright grin of his own on his face. “He’s got a great sense of humor, too! And now I have a buddy to share the vents with! He and I are gonna have some fun once he’s feeling better.”

The Lieutenant Colonel laughed at that, approval shining in his eyes. “It’s a shame he got sick so soon after meeting you guys. He’s on the up and up, though, so I have no doubt he’ll be joining you soon enough.” He looked around conspiratorially for a second. “If you guys manage to get the drop on the Boone men, I’ll give you both $100. It’s like they’re both psychic, they always know when someone is there.”

“Challenge accepted!”

A groan escaped Phil at the proclamation from the archer, causing Rhodey’s eyes to turn to him next. “How have you been holding up, Phil? Tony told me you and Bridget have been spending quite a bit of time together…”
The man shot him a deadpan look from behind his shades. “We have things in common—irritation over team members making impulsive decisions that land them in the Medical Wing more often than not, exasperation at experiments gone wrong that lead to mishaps of the physical and metaphysical variety that cause even more visits to medical, frustration over paperwork being filled out incorrectly, and the shared agony of trying to maintain some semblance of order amongst a large number of adult-sized children, teenagers, and actual children.”

Natasha shot the man who was likely to become their handler in the future a knowing smirk. “Any regrets, Phil?”

“Honestly? I’ve never felt so alive in my life.”

Laughter echoed in the vehicle, and as it continued to roll down the road Rhodey sat back in his seat with a smile on his face. The men and woman sitting in front of him were far different than the ones he’d dealt with before. The cold cruelty they’d shown his best friend was nowhere to be found, replaced instead by a fond camaraderie that should have been there from the start. Oh well, better late than never, he supposed—he couldn’t go back and change the past. And honestly, he didn’t want to. Now Tony had a team, a family, that was absolute and genuine in their loyalty and love for the genius. They were there for him at his darkest, and Rhodey would never be able to fully express how grateful he was for them being exactly what Tony needed, exactly when he needed them.

The irony of the fact that it had been the Master of Death and the Reapers, agents of Death, that had brought a spark of life back into the genius was not lost on Rhodey. Frankly, as long as his best friend was safe, happy, and loved… he was happy too.

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Head all across the Compound snapped up in unison as an alarm began to blare through the building. Even as FRIDAY was calling for the New Avengers to assemble, corridors and portals were already opening in the main conference room of the Compound, everyone present less than a minute later. Tony stepped through the portal with Stephen and Peter, the latter already dressed in the Iron Spider armor they’d been testing. A screen over the table flickered to life, and Tony smiled grimly as Maria Hill appeared on it. “What’s going on, Maria?”

“There have been reports of demons coming out of rifts in four different places on the globe.” The projection of a globe materialized over the table next to her screen, four different points lighting up. “Cairo, close to the Pyramids of Giza—Egyptian officials would prefer if property damage was kept to an absolute minimum. Seoul, Korea—tensions have been high since the whole scandal with President Park Geun-Hye came to light, so don’t cause any more trouble than necessary. Chicago, Illinois—They just had a huge amount of snowfall out that way, so whoever goes out that way
should definitely bundle up. And finally, Panama City, Panama— rather, a few miles outside the
city. Whoever goes out there needs to be very, very careful— I don’t care if the World Health
Organization declared the Zika epidemic over, I don’t want any of you bringing it back.”

The group all looked at each other before conversing for a minute or two. Finally, they turned back
to the screen, the team leaders stepping forward to address the woman. “So, I’m going to take
Stephen and Peter with me to Chicago,” Tony spoke first, gesturing to the two behind him. “This
will be Peter’s first mission— better he stay with his dads, and we’re more than capable of handling
demons.”

“James, Logan, and I will head to Panama,” Minowa spoke next, the two men stepping up to stand
next to her. “We are all immune to disease— it would actually be burned from my blood moments
after entry, Logan’s healing factor would take care of him, and the serum in James’ body would
eliminate the virus quickly as well.”

“The three of us will head to Cairo, and we’ll take Sleipnir as backup.” Aria smiled at the screen as
her husbands nodded, Sleipnir grinning with excitement. “One type of ammo in their guns causes no
damage to property— thank you very much to Tony and Stephen for that— and I have my pistol.
Our abilities cause minimal collateral damage as well, as long as I’m careful with mine.”

“That leaves me and the Pavus men to assist in Korea— we’ll take Jörmungandr with us on this
one,” Bridget spoke finally, shooting a look at the three men behind her. “Dorian is good with
diplomacy, Zevrael too. Seoul is a major city as well, so if there are any injuries, I can be there to
help with Jörmungandr acting as civilian defense.”

Maria nodded sharply with a satisfied smile on her face, and she typed something into the console
she was currently standing at. “Alright, I’ve informed the necessary parties and officials. Will
everyone else on your end be alright? You have civilians in the compound— I could have a few
SHIELD agents sent over.”

Tony shook his head negative, a grin on his face. “Thor is supposed to be coming by to visit within
the next hour or so. Pretty sure no one is going to be stupid enough to attack while there’s a god
hanging around the property. Besides, Holly, Hannah, Alexia, and Sunniva are out at the moment—
girl’s day out’, from what I heard. Loki and Laura have their brood at Disney World, having the
time of their lives. Victor is down in the Medical Wing sleeping, FRIDAY will let him know
what’s going on once he wakes up. Harley is doing something with his potato gun in the lab, and I
trust him not to blow anything up. Well, anything important at least. Wade is hanging out with
Remy watching a movie, and Emma and the girls are in the training room, they’ll be able to hold
down the fort until we get back.”

The brunette woman nodded again, the genius’ logic sound. “Alright, that’s fair. Suit up, everyone,
Be ready to leave in five minutes—” Her words were stopped as several flares of energy and tech
erupted around the room, uniforms and weapons equipped within a few seconds. “Or… be ready to leave now.” She amended with a knowing smirk on her face.

“Don’t worry, Maria. You’ll get used to it in time.” Stephen reassured her with a massive grin.

“For some reason, I’m having trouble believing you.”

“Always the pessimist, Maria! You should learn to lighten up!”

“Get, Tony!”

“Alright, alright, we’re going!”

---

Rem couldn’t help the soft giggle of excitement that escaped him as he slipped into the passenger seat beside Wade, who was quick to turn on the car and crank up the heat. “I hope the others will like us getting lunch for them! I’d just cook something, but I’m not sure if I’m still contagious.”

The merc flapped his hand dismissively, a smile of his own on his face. He had foregone his normal uniform, instead wearing a long-sleeved shirt and a thick hoodie with a pair of nice jeans stuffed into winter boots. “Yeah, best not to tempt Madame Fate on that end. She’s a tricky woman, plus she and Lady Luck are in cahoots.”

“I don’t know, Wade, Lady Luck has always seemed to like me!”

Wade snorted and shook his head as he pulled out of the garage and headed for the main road. “I’m more than well aware. God help us all when you graduate from using candy to bet to using actual money. Everyone will be broke before the week is out.”

A bright laugh escaped the redhead, cut off by a small cough. “I have to teach them all poker first!”

“I know, and that’s what scares me! You’ve been beating them hand over fist at Crazy Eights!!”
Rem laughed even harder, prompting a slightly rougher cough. Once he’d gotten his breath back, he quipped, “At least I’m not going to casinos!”

“Rem, you’re not old enough to go to a casino!”

“Details, details! Besides, my I.D. still says I’m an adult!”

“But the difference between the picture and what you actually look like say something much different.” The redhead responded in the most mature manner possible by sticking his tongue out at the merc, prompting a laugh out of both of them. Once they’d calmed, Wade turned his attention back to the road and remarked, “Anyway, the others have been gone three hours already, and I don’t anticipate them being out for much longer. Let’s get the food and get back so they have a hot meal waiting for their triumphant return.”

The teen smiled and nodded, eyes sparkling with joy as he and Wade engaged in lighthearted conversation and banter. After having been isolated because of his illness for so many days, it was uplifting to be around someone he cared so much about.

- 

‘That was too easy.’

A sense of glee and victory surged within Reed as he approached the Avengers Compound stealthily on foot, eyeing the vent grate leading into the building. He’d attempted to portal back in a few days after the initial confrontation between himself and the other members of the New Avengers, only to find himself blocked by a specialized ward. He’d played around with several ideas on how to get into the building, grab his Victor, and get out, but the main problem usually involved how many people were in the building at any given time, not to mention how powerful most of them were. Any attempt to fight his way in would be suicide, and anything thrown at the Compound itself would meet a swift and grisly demise—he’d seen what the New Avengers were capable of, and the brunette had no doubt all of them put together could easily decimate an army.

Fortunately, the benefactor that had approached him had offered a solution—open not a single large portal in one place, but instead several smaller ones across the globe. That way, the group would be divided to deal with the multiple threats, leaving maybe a handful of people in the Compound. And really, if it came down to it, he could more than easily handle a few teenagers and whatever baselines were in residence.
Slipping into the grate, it took only a matter of minutes to navigate to the Medical Wing. He slipped out of the vents and immediately made a beeline for Victor's room, a smirk on his face at how well everything was going so far. Without much thought, he pushed the door open to find Victor sitting up in bed on the other side of the room, hooked up to various wires, machines, and what looked like an oxygen tank. Upon seeing who was standing in the doorway, the Monarch's eyes flashed with unbridled fear, and he scrambled to press back against the headboard of the medical bed. Not that it would matter in a few seconds, Reed mused with a triumphant grin. He strode towards the bed with purpose, reaching to grab his Victor's ankle--

It happened so fast, the brunette was only able to process it a second or two after the fact. A barrier flared into existence between Reed and the bed, and the man was thrown back so far that he soared through the still-open door and skidded into the main hall of the Medical Wing. The man blinked in stunned incomprehension for a second before snarling and jumping back to his feet. He took a step towards the room again, but the sound of a throat being cleared caused him to spin to an open door labeled 'supply closet' that was suddenly open.

In the doorframe stood a stern-looking god of thunder, casually tossing Mjolnir into the air and catching it with one hand. Blue eyes swept over the man, and a frown twisted at Thor's lips. "I've not seen you around before. Are you a friend of one of my shield brothers?"

"Quite the opposite, your highness," FRIDAY responded with something rather sharp in her tone. "That man is Reed Richards, and he's actually banned from entering the Compound at all after trying to abduct Victor."

The brunette snarled in fury as he turned to enter Victor's room again. "Victor is mine! I'm the only one who can take care of him! He's my intellectual equal, we were meant to be together!"

Thor's grip tightened around his hammer as he subtly shifted into a battle-ready stance. "Such behavior does not speak of caring, but obsession. I am going to have to ask you to remove yourself from the home of my allies."

"I'm not leaving without Victor!!" Reed shouted back, spinning to sprint into the room again. Before he could take more than two steps though, a fast-moving projectile hit him in the head, sending him flying to the side and knocking him for a loop. The Thunderer quickly made his way to the intruder and set Mjolnir on his chest, effectively stopping him from moving or rising. Sighing with relief, he turned to the entrance to the Medical Wing to see who was standing there.

Harley stood with an odd weapon in his hands, and he sneered as he shifted it to rest over his shoulder. "Potato Gun Mk. X - 1, insane intruders - 0. Mechanic is going to be pissed when he gets home, I hope you know that."
A booming laugh escaped Thor as the teen stepped up to him, and he grasped the blonde's arm in a traditional warrior's grip. "That is a most impressive weapon, my friend! You are truly a skilled marksman!"

The blonde shrugged with an embarrassed smile on his face. "Well, I did have a good mentor. Now," he turned to the genius on the floor, who was struggling to rise from his current position yet unable to shift Mjolnir from its place on his chest. "What are we supposed to do with him?"
Without waiting for an answer, he sauntered towards the brunette and squatted next to him with a smirk on his face. "Well well… not worthy, it seems." The comment prompted a chuckle from Thor, blue eyes filled with amusement as the God looked towards Harley momentarily. "I wouldn’t try pulling your elastic thing right now--wouldn't want that hammer crushing the air from your lungs."

Thor approached the man as well with a grim look on his face. "I would suggest we escort him down to one of the special cells friend Anthony designed, but I do not wish to risk him escaping."

A sudden dark chuckle escaped Reed, drawing the duo's attention again. "I may not have gotten Victor, but at least I'll get a consolation prize out of this."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Harley scoffed at the genius with an arched eyebrow.

Reed gave them a smug grin in reply. "Don't you think it's a little suspicious that I chose a time when all of your precious New Avengers are away from the Compound, scattered across different parts of the globe, to make my move?"

Unease lanced through Thor, and he swiftly moved to add his foot to Reed's chest, putting just a small amount of pressure on it. "What do you know, intruder? If you have put my shield siblings in any danger…"

"Oh, they aren't the ones currently in danger…"

---

The feeling of something in the car jolting unnaturally caused a frown to pull at Wade's face, and he arched an eyebrow in Rem's direction. "I'm not the only one who felt that, right?" The teen shook his head negative, eyes wide with surprise. "There might be something wrong with the car."
Let's pull over so I can take a quick look--" His words were suddenly cut off by a sharp cry as the wheel was wrenched from his grip, turning sharply as they went around a turn. The sudden maneuver overbalanced the car, causing it to flip and roll several times before miraculously landing on his tires in a ditch nearby. "Holy shit, what the fuck--?!" Wade coughed, shooting a frantic glance at Rem to check him for injuries. "Rem, are you okay?!

"I'm okay, just bumps and bruises." The redhead reassured him, reaching over to grab his hand for a moment.

Wade gave a gusty sigh of relief as he wrestled with his seatbelt. "Thank fuck for small mercies! Just stay still for a second and let me see what I can do about getting you out of there." Rem nodded, and the merc tested the driver-side door to make sure it would open. It swung open accompanied by the sound of metal grinding together, and he quickly staggered out of the totaled vehicle. A small hiss escaped him as he registered his more than likely twisted ankle but pushed the pain away for the moment-- there were more important things to worry about right now. He limped around to the passenger side and pulled the door open, thankful it wouldn't require any complicated finagling to get open.

Rem gave him a relieved smile, but it suddenly changed to an expression of horror as his gaze snapped to behind Wade. "Wade, watch out--!!"

The mercenary had no time to react to the words before something collided with the back of his head, agony shooting through his body and filling his vision with scarlet before he plunged into terror-filled darkness.

Tony cried out in sudden shock, hand flying to his head to grip it even as Stephen and Peter were calling out to him with alarm in their voices. Taking a few deep breaths to re-center himself, he told them "Guys, I'll be right back. My empathic bond with Rem is screaming for some reason, I just want to go check on him real quick." The duo nodded as their posture relaxed. Tony gave them a reassuring smile before turning and opening a corridor to where he could feel Rem's energy coming from. As he stepped through, however, shock and fear clenched at his heart at the sight that greeted him. Steve was pulling a thrashing Rem from a wrecked vehicle, Wade's body laying off to one side twitching and seizing randomly. "Rogers, what the actual fu--?!" He didn't get farther than that before something hit him from behind with enough force to send him flying forward, the pain cry escaping him as he slammed into the car next to Wade. He dimly heard Rem shrieking his name before a dark shadow fell over him, and he looked up in time to see Rogers pass Rem off to Wanda before turning to kneel in front of him. The genius stared in stunned shock at the super-soldier, who simply gave him a look of utter hatred before reaching for either side of his head and--
A sudden shocked cry escaped the Boone trio, Aria bending double for a moment as she covered her heart while Ulysses had to grab and support Craig so he didn't collapse to his knees. "Oh God, was that what I think it was?" Purple-blue eyes looked up at the two men, fear written all over the woman's face.

Ulysses nodded with a grim look in his eyes before reaching his hand up to switch on his com. "Sound off. Where is everyone right now?"

"Bridget's team, here! Everyone is okay on our end, but Dorian, Zevrael, and I all felt what you just did!"

The coms suddenly crackled again, Peter's hysterical voice filtering through a moment later. "Guys, I really need help over here! Iron Dad left for a bit to check up on Rem, and a minute later Doctor Dad collapsed in front of me! I can't get him to wake up, I don't know what's wrong with him, he was fine just a second ago!"

Bridget immediately replied, "It's okay, Peter, just stay where you are, I'll be there soon, I promise. Has anyone heard from Minowa's team?"

As if summoned by the question, James' frantic voice called out, "Guys, we've got a big problem on our hands over here!"

"James? What's going on?"

The assassin looked over to where Logan had their lover wrapped up in his arms, the woman's eyes unseeing and entirely pitch black. The sounds coming out of her mouth were nothing short of feral, an odd combination of growls, snarls, and what may have been words in her native tongue. "I don't know what happened-- one minute everything was fine, we had just finished up with the demons on this end... Suddenly Min completely froze, and a second later she was bent double holding her head in her hands as if she were in pain. And the sound she made... It was like a hundred voices simultaneously screaming in agony, and when she managed to straighten again her eyes were completely black and had this wild look in them."
On the other end of the line, Bridget went sheet white in fear as she opened a corridor to Peter.
"Mara have mercy-- James, you and Logan need to get away from her as fast as possible! Min just
experienced a Fracture-- she'll destroy anything and everything in her path right now, and she can't
distinguish friend from foe in that state!"

"I don't know about that, Bridget. Seems to me like the only thing keeping her here right now is
Logan-- she's curled up in his lap, and she sounds mad as hell, but she isn't attacking us."

Across the coms, various people made noises of confusion. "Well that's rather unusual," Dorian
said with a tone of befuddlement, "because normally Minowa in a Fractured state warrants anyone
with her to get out as soon as possible. I'm not sure what caused her to Fracture to begin with, but I
can't imagine what's keeping her in one place right now besides Logan."

A sudden gasp echoed across the comms before Aria spoke again. "Wait, Min hasn't had romantic
partners up until now! What if having them close to her is helping ground her in some way?"

Zevrael nodded as he joined Dorian, Jörmungandr joining them a moment later as the mage opened
his own corridor back to the Compound. "It's the best explanation we have right now. Let's
rendezvous back at home and try to figure out what's going on."

"I've got Peter and Stephen, everybody convene in the Medical Wing." Bridget got several noises
and calls of confirmation as she stepped through with Peter, who was holding his dad close with a
look of fear and pain on his face. She was situating Stephen in a bed as everyone else entered, and
turned to James and Logan as they stepped through with the Dragonborn curled up in the mutant's
arms. "James, Logan, that door in the back of the Medical Wing leads to a room that was specially
built and warded on the off chance Minowa ever Fractured. You need to take her in there and stay
with her. We can't afford for her to lash out right now, especially when we don't know exactly
what's going on." The two men nodded and whisked the woman away to the room in question, the
door closing behind them.

"My friends! You have returned!" The group turned as a whole to see Thor and Harley stepping out
of Victor's room, the monarch observing from his place in the bed as best he could. "I would make
you aware that there was an intruder here while you were away. This young man and I managed to
detain him, and Anthony's sister and daughters took him to one of the cells."

The group of women entered at that moment, a grim look on Emma's face that was mirrored by her
daughters. "Reed Richards decided to pay an unexpected and unwelcome visit while you were all
out. Turns out it wasn't a coincidence that all of those portals opened in different parts of the world-
- it was his intention to split the New Avengers up long enough to get in, grab Victor, and get out
without anyone realizing it." She looked around for a moment, her brow furrowing with confusion. "Where's Tony? I know he went with you all..."

The words made all of the Reapers look up and around before they all looked at each other with realization in their eyes. "Maker's breath, it was Tony?? How did that happen??" Zevrael asked with shock and worry in his expression. Seeing the confusion on several people's faces, the elf quickly explained, "So, it's never come up in conversation, but now is a good a time as any to cover this. Reapers are the chosen of the Master of Death, and as such, he's not going to let us go easily. Because of that, we can't actually die. Instead, when a Reaper suffers a fatal wound or experience of any kind, what happens instead is called Displacement. Their body almost immediately gets transported back to the Nexus, where the Reaper in question can recover from such a jarring experience. If a Displacement happens while other Reapers are also on the same world, they'll feel it through the bond they share with each other. A few minutes ago, all of the Reapers felt the sensation that comes with a Displacement. Seeing as the only one who isn't here is Tony…"

"It means that he has to be the one who was Displaced." Dorian turned to Peter, who had gone deathly pale at the information. "Peter, you said earlier that Tony left briefly to check up on Rem, correct?" The brunette nodded affirmatively, prompting Dorian to look towards the ceiling. "FRIDAY, where is Rem right now?"

"Rem and Wade left the Compound about half an hour ago to get food for when you all returned. I haven’t heard anything from them since."

Total silence filled the Medical Wing for a second as everyone processed that. "We'll go look." Ulysses announced, getting nods from his two partners. "Something's not right-- Wade, Rem, Stephen, Minowa, and Tony, all at once... Gotta be connected somehow."

Bridget nodded at that, turning to them after inserting an IV needle into Stephen's arm. "I agree. Hurry back as fast as you can."

The trio nodded, and Aria took a moment to lock onto Wade's energy before throwing open a corridor and stepping through, Ulysses and Craig a step behind her. "What the actual Hell?!" She gasped upon seeing the wreck of the car, both the passenger and driver side doors were thrown wide open. "How the fuck did this happen?!!"

"Aria!" Ulysses suddenly barked, exploding into motion to stride towards the front of the car. Wade lay prone in front of it, every once in a while twitching or flinching as he wheezed in almost desperate breaths. A malevolent haze of scarlet magic twisted around his head, and a fire lit in the sniper's eyes as recognition lit within him. He moved to slip his arms under the Merc's chest and legs, gently lifting him into a bridal carry and turning to his lovers. "Maximoff's magic. She was here, likely Rogers too."
Craig nodded at his words, studying the passenger side of the car with sharp eyes. "The blood here is fresh-- can't be more than a few minutes old." His eyes slipped to one side and narrowed at the strands of hair trapped against the door. "Long red hair. This has gotta be Rem's."

There was quiet for a moment before Aria noticed something else. "Her magic is all over the steering wheel. Is that how the car crashed??"

It only took a few seconds for Ulysses to put the whole picture together. "Wade and Rem were driving, Wade in the driver's seat. Maximoff took control, caused a crash-- not enough that they'd be hurt, aim was to total the car. Wade got out, likely to check on Rem. Was hit by Maximoff's powers, likely from behind... They dragged him aside, Rogers went to get Rem. Didn't count on Tony showing up though. *Amicus* didn't have enough time to react before being attacked. Obviously injured him enough to cause Displacement... Then took off with Rem."

"Oh fuck… Are you telling me Rogers and Maximoff have Rem right now??" Craig choked, eyes going wide with horror and fear behind the shades

Ulysses nodded in confirmation, his own brown eyes shining with rare fury and vengeance. "Should get Wade back to Bridget-- nothing more we can do here." Aria nodded and open a corridor, and the dark-skinned man took a moment to look back at the wreck one more time before stepping through as well.

Sounds of shock and horror escaped the group in the medical wing when they saw the state Wade was in. “On the bed, now!” Bridget barked, the sniper not hesitating to do as she commanded. She immediately swept over to him and began flinging diagnostic spells at him.

As she did so, Zevrael and Dorian stepped up to Ulysses with worry in their eyes. “Did you find Rem? What happened out there?? Where were they??”

Before any of the Boone trio could answer, Bridget made a pained noise that drew everyone's attention back to her from the sheer intensity of it. "Mara have mercy, this is bad. How did she even... No, that's the last thing we need to worry about right now. This is Maximoff's magic all over him, and she somehow managed to knock out his healing factor entirely... Divines preserve us, I don't know if I can fix this!" The blonde looked up at them with an expression of fear and desperation on her face.

Emma immediately stepped forward with a determined look in her blue eyes. "Let me try, maybe I
"Don't!" Bridget threw out her hand to stop her, panic flashing in her eyes. "That's not the only thing she did-- from what I can tell, she's trapped him in a loop of his worst memories and nightmares, and I can't take the chance that you could get pulled into that. I'm sorry Emma, but right now that's not another thing I want to worry about."

Everyone looked at each other as the magnitude of the situation at hand began to register in their minds. "What are we supposed to do?" Aria finally asked in a hesitant voice. "All three of our team leaders are incapacitated right now for one reason or another, we've got another teammate in critical danger right now, and we don't know exactly what happened to Rem! We need to delegate, and we need someone to lead in their stead right now."

There was a moment of quiet as everyone thought, and eventually, it was Craig who stepped forward with a knowing gleam in his jade eyes. "I know who we call."

-Hela, Lila, are you both ready to go? We have to get on the monorail soon!-

The two girls giggled as they ran over to Loki, who was quick to scoop them up in his arms and settle one on each hip. "We're ready to go, Papa!" The young goddess squealed as she wrapped her arms around his neck with an excited grin on her face.

Laura laughed as she approached the trio, plucking her daughter out of her lover's arms and settling her against her own body. "Fenrir and Cooper will be here momentarily, they're just packing up their stuff in their backpacks."

Emerald green eyes sparkled with joy as Loki leaned over to give the woman a brief kiss. They pulled apart with a chuckle when both girls squealed, complaining about kissing and cooties. Before the trickster could say anything to the contrary, he felt his phone vibrate in his pocket, and he set Hela down for a moment to answer it. "Bridget, how are you? Everything alright?" A second or two later, the smile fell from his face, and his face went deathly pale. "I see. Give me a moment please." He pulled the phone away from his ear for a moment to answer the two young girls with them a smile. "Girls, would you mind joining Cooper and Fenrir for a few minutes?" The two nodded and quickly ran out of the room, having sensed the change in atmosphere. The smile immediately fell again as he turned his attention back to the phone. "Talk to me-- what's going on?"
The brunette woman with him shifted a bit closer, reaching to grab his other hand in support. The longer the call dragged on, the more alarmed and worried Loki looked, and Laura had a feeling something major was happening back at Compound.

"Alright, I'll let her know. I won't be long, just wait for me." Loki hung up the phone and took a moment to glance towards the doorway to make sure no young ears were listening in. He threw up a silencing ward just in case before turning back to Laura. "Laura, I have to return to the Compound. Anthony, Stephen, Minowa, and Wade have all been compromised in some way, and Rem is missing. Wade's healing factor has been knocked out entirely, they're not sure if they can get it started again. Please, don't leave the suite for a while, let me find out what's going on and I'll contact you soon. Don't tell the children what's going on, either."

Laura didn't hesitate to reach up and pull the god into a quick kiss. "Go, we'll wait for your word."

The ebony-haired man nodded and took down the silencing ward before teleporting away. He found himself in the Medical Wing of the Compound a second or two later, and upon seeing the chaos happening around him let out a piercing whistle to catch everyone's attention. "Alright, give me an update-- what happened here?"

Bridget waved him over to where she was standing with the merc. "Maximoff hit him with her powers, managed to trap him in his nightmares and knocking out his healing factor in a way I can't fix. Because of that, his cancer is beginning to spread again, and unless we do something to restart the healing factor or at least stop the growth, he won't last more than a few days."

The trickster God nodded and put his own hands over Wade's body, sparkling green magic surrounding them a moment later. Everyone watched in tense silence as he worked, hoping he could do something for their friend. After a full five minutes, he grimaced and pulled his magic back. "I am unsure what she did to halt his healing, but even my magic isn't enough to restart it. At this point, he would need a constant flow of healing magic to stop the cancer from spreading, but that is not a permanent solution."

After a moment of silence, Sleipnir and Jörmungandr stepped forward with identical looks of determination on their faces. "Allow us to aid him, Father. We may not be as strong or knowledgeable about magic as you, but we cannot simply stand here and watch him perish."

"Slei's right," the younger agreed with a sharp nod, "I'm not just gonna sit here and watch him die because of that witch!"

Loki studied his two sons for a moment, conflict flickering in him for a moment before he finally
gave them a nod. "Do what you can, but don't overexert yourselves." The two godlings nodded at his words before moving to aid the unconscious man. The ebony-haired god then turned to the rest of the group to address them. "Has anyone contacted Rhodey and Pepper about what happened?"

Emma shook her head in a negative response. "Not yet, and we should contact Bruce as well. He went to the tower briefly to retrieve a few things for Wade's surgery, and I think Minowa's group was going to pick him up on the way back."

"Loki, there's a problem." Bridget stepped up to the man with a grim, yet knowing look in her eyes. "If we tell Rhodey... Then the Rogues will find out as well. About everything."

After a moment of silence and looks between the various Reapers of the group, Craig stepped forward. "Right now, four members of our team are compromised, and one is missing. We have to take the chance and tell them, or at least one of them is going to die."

Finally, Loki nodded his concession. "Make the call."

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"Alright, everyone! The results of this last round of assessments look phenomenal, and I'm sure Minowa, Stephen, and Tony will think the same." Rhodey gave the group in front of him a bright smile, one that was returned wholeheartedly by everyone. "Five minutes, then we'll hop in the van and grab some lunch before heading back to the Compound. Pietro," the dark-skinned man turned for a moment to address the young man, "how are you holding up?"

Pietro gave the man a bright smile, his sky blue eyes sparkling with excitement. "I'm doing fine, thank you. I'm glad I got the chance to come with you all today!"

Rhodey smiled indulgently back at him. "You've been holding up really well so far, just let us know if you need to take a break or anything." He turned to the others to continue but was suddenly cut off when Friday spoke from the ceiling.

"Army Boss, you have a call coming in from the Compound."

Dark eyes glanced to the ceiling as Rhodey called back, "I'm almost done here, just let them know I'll give them a call back--"
"It's a Code Black, Army Boss."

Clint and Natasha gave each other a stunned, horrified look. From what Tony had explained to them during their briefing regarding changes to the Compound, a Code Black was only called in the direst of emergencies. Considering the New Avengers had been called out recently…

Rhodey had drawn the same conclusion, and his face lost all color. "Patch it through, FRIDAY--immediately."

There was a pause of a second or two before Loki’s voice came over the speakers. "Rhodey, we need you and the others back at the Compound immediately. We have emergencies on several fronts, one of them of the 'life or death' variety."

The military man swore and looked towards the others, who were beginning to mobilize in a group with Clint pushing Pietro's wheelchair. "We'll be there as soon as we can, we took the van here though so it will take us a while to--"

"Rhodey, there's no time."

A sudden, ominous silence filled the room as an expression of realization crossed the dark-skinned man's face. "Shit, are you sure? Is it really that bad?"

There was quiet on the other end for a moment before Loki said in a soft voice, "Tony got Displaced."

"Fuck. Alright, do it quickly." The call disconnected, and dark eyes were grim and serious as Rhodey turned back to the group. "Listen up, all of you. What you are about to be let in on is top-secret, need-to-know only information the likes of which you wouldn't even have access to yet under normal circumstances. However, it seems the timeline has been moved up given the severity of the conversation you just heard. Consider this your final evaluation-- I need you all to remain calm and focused for the duration of whatever happens next, and whatever you see or witness, questions must be saved for later. Do you all understand me?"

Everyone nodded without hesitation. Whatever was going on, it had to be serious for Rhodey to be acting this way. A second or two later, an odd black mass suddenly sprung into existence a few feet from the military man, Aria stepping through a second later with an uncharacteristically serious
look on her face. "We're ready for you. Follow me." She didn't hesitate to execute an about-face and walk right back through the Corridor. Rhodey gestured for the Rogues to follow behind, and they did so without hesitation even though there were now several questions in everyone's minds.

Bridget was waiting on the other side, and she pushed a potion into everyone's hands as they passed through. "Drink that, it'll help alleviate nausea from the Corridor." They did as she asked before passing the vials back to her. "Clint and Natasha, Loki needs you in that corner over there where Dorian and Zevrael are. Phil, Scott, and Sam, stand with your back against the wall there and wait for further instructions." She turned to Pietro and her face softened a bit. "Pietro, I need you to stay with Victor for a while. There's a lot going on right now, and we're racing against the clock to save Wade's life. The best thing for you is to stay with him and out of the way, cruel as that may sound."

Pietro vehemently nodded his head at the last sentence. "If that's where you need me to be, then put me there. I don't want to be in the way." The Restoration Master nodded with a relieved look on her face and quickly pushed his wheelchair into Victor's room so they could keep each other company.

Dorian and Zevrael gave the two agents approaching them a tremulous smile before turning back to Loki. "What's going on? You still haven't told us where Rem is!"

The God held up his hand to stall any questions from Clint and Natasha before turning back to the window where he could see James listening while Logan continued to hold Min. "I've spoken to the Boones regarding what they found at the crash site. My friends, there's no easy way to put this... It would appear that your son and nephew is currently in the hands of Rogers and Maximoff. We don't know where any of them are at the current moment."

Reactions among the group were varied, but the one that stood out the most was Natasha's. She gasped as a hand flew to her mouth, face going sheet white as the others turned to look at her questioningly. "Oh no... FRIDAY, is Rem's bottle still in his room??"

"Yes, it is."

This time, it was Clint who went pale. "I was in there just this morning-- Little Chick still had three pills in the bottle. He wasn't done with his antibiotics!"

A long string of vicious, fear-laced swears in Russian escaped James before he turned his eyes further into the Medical Wing. "Bridget! We have a huge problem!"
"One more serious than this??" She called back as she pressed a bottle of water into the hands of Sleipnir, who drank from it with one hand while channeling healing magic into Wade with the other.

"Rem wasn't done with his regiment!"

Bridget's head snapped over to him as her mouth fell open in horror. "Fucking shit!" She snapped, the use of foul language completely out of character for the normally sweet woman.

Rhodey quickly approached Loki and his group. He could tell from a glance just how much was going on. Minowa was stowed away in the room specifically designed to contain her should she ever Fracture, James and Logan with her trying to keep her calm and still. Stephen lay in a bed nearby connected to an IV drip with Peter at his side, gripping the Sorcerer Supreme's hand while Emma stood next to him trying to comfort him, her five daughters spread out around it as well as they tried to comfort the teen. Sleipnir and Jörmungandr stood over Wade's body, a constant stream of what must have been some kind of magic being channeled into him. "Talk to me, Lokes. What needs to be done, and how can we help?"

The god thought for a moment before speaking. "Honestly, what I need right now is for you to take command. I need to lend my aid to my sons-- their magic will not hold out forever, but given that Wade's healing factor has been completely knocked out, he cannot afford to lose more time than necessary."

"I can definitely do that. Go help your kids." The dark-skinned man turned back to the group as a whole as the trickster joined his two eldest. "Alright everyone, listen up!" He barked in a commanding tone of voice, catching everyone's attention. "We've got a lot of fires we need to fight at once, so I need everyone at the top of their game and willing to follow instructions and put in 150%. First of all, I need to know if there's anybody missing from the Compound currently."

Ulysses stepped up at that. "Laura, her kids, and Loki's youngest are still at Disney-- Holly and her group are still out shopping."

That garnered a sharp nod from the military man. "We need to have Holly and the kids brought back to the Compound. I don't want to pull Laura and her kids away from Disney, but I don't want them left alone either. I need ideas, people."

After a second of silence, three of the cuckoos stepped forward. "Let us go," Phoebe stated, looking over each shoulder at her two sisters. "Esme, Mindee, and I will be able to protect them while also leaving room for you to work."
"Don't worry, we'll keep them safe! We won't let anything happen to them!" Mindee reassured everyone with a bright grin on her face.

Esme nodded sharply as well, a stern glint in her eyes. "If anyone does try anything, they're quickly gonna regret it."

Rhodey quickly looked over at Emma who gave him a reassuring nod and a confident smile. "Alright, girls. Let Laura know what's going on, but not the kids. Keep them company, keep them entertained, and most importantly, keep them safe." The trio called out an affirmation before being ushered through a Corridor summoned by Craig. "Alright, any volunteers to go get Holly and the kids?"

Aria stepped forward at that point with her hand partially raised. "I can do it, but I might need some backup just in case."

There was a moment of consideration before Rhodey turned his eyes to the trio against the wall. "Sam, front and center." The man didn't hesitate to step forward, a look of grim determination on his face. "Go with Aria, get Holly and the three kids back to the Compound safely and expediently. You'll receive further instructions after."

Sam nodded and turned his dark eyes to the Reaper. "Lead the way, I'm right behind you ma'am."

The woman nodded and summoned a Corridor, the soldier not hesitating to follow her through it.

"Phil, do you think you'd be able to help Bridget with whatever she needs around the Medical Wing? Fetching things, making sure everyone is fed and watered, that sort of thing?" Rhodey aimed the question at the ex-SHIELD agent.

The dark-haired man nodded before stepping up to the blond. "Whatever you need Bridget, just let me know."

Taking a second to think, Rhodey aimed the next question at FRIDAY. "Hey FRI, has Pepper released a press statement and an Amber Alert on Rem?"

"Yep, the Amber Alert went out about seven minutes ago, the press statement, two."
Dark eyes closed as the military man took a second to take a deep breath and let it out. "Craig, Ulysses, you both are with me-- we're going over everything with a fine-tooth comb from here on out for any sign or hint of Rem. They won't be able to get far, not in a single day. Let's get to work, everyone!"

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"Breaking news here, an Amber Alert has been put out for Remington Pavus, adopted son of Dorian and Zevrael Pavus. Information we received indicates that he was abducted by none other than the recently pardoned Steve Rogers and Wanda Maximoff. If anyone has any relevant information as to the location of any of the above parties, it's requested that they report to their local police--"

Dark eyes widened as the head of a tall man snapped up to the TV in his apartment, dreadlocks bouncing as he did so. There was a moment or two of silence before he surged to his feet with an indignant shout.

"Oh, that stupid mother fu --!!"
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

Death and its Master are less than pleased by what landed their newest Reaper in the Nexus after being displaced, and a certain cousin to the Black Panther is just as peeved by the monarch's inaction. The various residents of the Compound step up to the plate in an effort to keep things afloat in the 'hurry up and wait' period, Emma and the girls are amazing family members, questions are asked about the oldest Reaper, and Dorian lays down some painful truths before pulling on the same charisma that inspired so much faith in his husband to rally faith in Tony. Rem takes enjoyment in screwing with Steve and Wanda, though things may be more dire than he originally thought. Then, just when things seem darkest, reinforcements arrive.

(Erik Stevens is a good cousin who knows when supportive words are needed.)

((He's also smart enough to know when a verbal kick in the ass would do better.))

Chapter Notes

New chapter, Vassals! Have fun with this one! Those of you who follow the Discord channel know exactly who's showing up in this chapter, thanks to the chapter teasers I've dropped!

The doors to the Nexus Medical Wing were thrown open in a single, forceful movement, the ‘bang’ only muffled by the charms laid into the doors themselves. Hadrian stalked through them with hard, purposeful steps as his emerald eyes immediately locked on one of the beds in the back of the room, specifically designed for if any of his family were Displaced. “Of all the Reapers I ever anticipated getting Displaced, Tony was not one of them.” He stated firmly as he stopped by the edge of the man’s bed, looking over as Mortis joined him on the other side.

Mortis nodded as well, reaching for the tablet by the foot of the bed. “I am curious as well, my Master. Anthony is the strongest among yours…” He began to play the video on the tablet as Hadrian began channeling his deathly aura into the man to help revitalize him. About a minute later, an expression of absolute fury crossed Mortis’ face, the temperature of the wing instantly plummeting. Hadrian looked over alarmed, and Death simply hissed, “I think you need to see this, Hadrian.” He passed the tablet over, allowing the ebony-haired man to see the cause of death himself.

It was silent as the Master of Death observed, before a look of incandescent rage crossed Hadrian’s face, black smoke beginning to trail from the corners of his eyes as the cloak of invisibility took on a more shadowy appearance, a mantle of darkness seeming to settle over the man. “He dared do
“This to one of my own!” He hissed in rage, traces of a rarely used language slithering into the syllables. “That little fool has no idea what he’s in for when he crosses into my realm!” He threw the tablet back to Mortis, who caught it easily even as he observed the ebony haired man with wide eyes. “This cannot be allowed to stand for more than one reason, Mortis.” He continued as he moved to settle his hands an inch over Tony’s still form. “I normally would not intervene in this sort of matter, but there is more at stake here than they realize.”

Mortis nodded as he paused the footage on an image of Rem struggling in Rogers’ arms. “I know, my Master.” He said softly as his own mismatched eyes found the prone form of Wade Wilson in the shot as well.

As if sensing Death’s feelings, Hadrian glanced over at him as shadows began to form under his hands and swirl around the prone form of his Reaper. “Don’t worry, my friend. I won’t let him join you permanently. But in order to do that… we need this one to--” He clenched his fists in a sharp movement, a pulse of deathly aura filling the room for a moment, “-- wake up .”

Glowing, burning orange eyes snapped open.

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“T’Challa! You have a phone call!”

The monarch sighed and gave only the barest glance up from his desk as Shuri approached him with her Kimoyo beads glowing and a small frown on his face. “Sister, I’m rather busy at the moment, please tell whoever it is to call back--”

Shuri quickly cut him off in a tone that brokered no argument. “He said, and I quote, ‘If you don’t get your furry ass on the phone now, I’m going to come out there and rain some good ol’ Oakland-style justice down on your cat tree’.”

The change in the king was instantaneous as he snapped up straight in his seat with a stunned look on his face. After only a second, he activated his own beads to take over the call. “What seems to be the--”

Before he could finish the question, the voice of Erik Stevens shot over the speaker. “Turn the news on.”
“What? Why would—”

“Look, cousin, I ain’t playin’ around right now. Turn on the damn news.” the voice barked out with a firmer tone.

The siblings looked at each other in confusion before the Black Panther did as he was told. It only took a minute for them to realize why their family member had been so insistent. “Oh, Bast…” the monarch choked in stunned horror as the images and information continued to roll across the holographic screen. Shuri stood with her hands to her mouth, fear flickering within her dark eyes. “How did they--?”

Killmonger didn’t wait for him to finish before speaking again. “We are way past the ‘how’ of it, Cuz! You need to get on a jet now and haul ass over here so you can help fix this mess!” T’Challa was already rising from his seat and rushing down the hallway, Shuri hot on his heels even as the ex-SEAL continued to berate him. “What the hell were you thinkin’, man?! You’ve done jack shit to help pay for the damage that was done during that back-ass Civil War fiasco, and you just tossed the Rogues back on American soil and washed your hands of them once the pardons went through! Stark has been single-handedly paying for everything and overseeing the political side of the cleanup, despite the fact that there were other parties involved in the mess— you know, such as yourself! Whether the world knows it or not, you’re sitting on the throne of one of the wealthiest nations on the damn planet! Seems like your hand ended up there too with how deep your thumb is up your ass!” T’Challa made to speak, but Erik steamrolled right over him. “Nuh-uh, I’m the one talking now! King or not, I will not hesitate to whoop your ass! Now, you are gonna fly over here, pick me up, and then you and I are gonna go offer what help we can to Stark and the New Avengers. After all this, it’s the least you can do!”

Shuri tilted her head even as they continued down the hall, her older brother making several hand motions and barking orders to the guards. “Why do you want to come along, Erik? You have never met Dr. Stark or his team before.”

The man’s voice was audibly gentler and softer when talking to the woman. “There’s a kid being held prisoner by a delusional super soldier and a psychotic witch, and he’s probably in a lot of danger. I don’t need another reason than that.” His voice became hard again as he barked at T’Challa. “Get on it, cousin! If you ain’t here in the next few hours, the ass-kicking you’re gonna get will make my training with the SEALs look like kindergarten PE! Move it!”

The monarch flinched as the phone was hung up, and he dropped his head even as they continued to move. ‘Bast, I’ve been such a fool.’ He groaned internally. ‘He’s right, about all of it. Though it was never my intention to do so, I left Dr. Stark to handle the Rogues once they left my country. Other matters of state distracted me, and now a child is in peril because of it.’

He remained silent until they reached the hangar, but as they made to board a jet the king
straightened and turned to Shuri, who perked up at the look on T’Challa’s face. “Shuri, I need your aid in this matter.” He announced in a firm tone.

At any other time, the words would have prompted an excited exclamation from Shuri. Now, she simply nodded sharply with a grim look of determination on her face. There would be time for questioning later-- for now, she needed to turn her attention to the matter at hand… one of which was why Dr. Stark hadn’t contacted them to begin with. Giving only a brief glance over at T’Challa as he ordered the pilot to take them to her lab, she activated her Kimoyo Beads and sent a message.

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ShuriGotLow: We just saw the news-- Tell Mechanic we’re on our way.

LeanerMeanerKeener: Mechanic is incapacitated. I’ll let Trickster and SouljaBoy know.

ShuriGotLow: Is Spiderling okay? What about Gandalf?

LeanerMeanerKeener: Gandalf’s down as well, and Dragoon. Spiderling’s… not good.

ShuriGotLow: I’ll tell the pilot double time. Are you safe?

LeanerMeanerKeener: Lot of chaos happening on this end, but I’m safe.

LeanerMeanerKeener: You realize if you come out here, they’re going to find out about us, right?

ShuriGotLow: Let them find out… then let them try to stop us.

LeanerMeanerKeener: Fair enough. See you soon, Shuri.

ShuriGotLow: Stay safe, Harley.
Sam had to admit to himself-- he had a few questions.

Scratch that, he had many, many questions.

He also had enough sense in his head to realize that those questions needed to wait, dammit, because there was a lot going on and he knew better than to start asking for answers that would take more time to explain than they currently could afford. He looked over to Aria as they moved through the mall undetected, studying her grim expression for a moment. He hadn’t had too much interaction with the New Avengers, not wanting to encroach on their space or time. From he’d seen and heard about Aria Boone, Sonic Boom, painted her in the light of the bubbly, fun-loving, musically gifted mother and aunt. Right now, none of those traits were present, and Sam couldn’t really blame her. He looked forward again, and a second later he caught sight of the group they were looking for. “Targets spotted, ma’am. Your orders?” He asked in a professional, no nonsense tone that spoke of how seriously he was taking their current job.

The brunette wouldn’t say it, not yet, but she was wholly impressed by the man’s willingness to push his curiosity to the side for now in favor of getting Holly and the kids to safety. “I’m going to shoot Holly a text telling her code black and to meet us in the hall leading to the bathrooms. We’ll meet her there, and then corridor back. I need you to provide reassurance and backup as needed.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Aria nodded and whipped out her phone, shooting the text off before tucking it back in her pocket. A second later, Holly perked up at the vibration in her own, and she pulled out her own phone to check it. A second later, she paled dramatically, but didn’t outwardly show her fear to the kids beyond that. Alexia seemed to sense the change in atmosphere-- probably smelt the change-- but the woman quickly reassured her before beginning to herd the girls towards the bathroom. Aria quickly motioned for Sam to follow behind her, and they wasted no time in joining the group in the hall. “Holly,” the New Avenger called out to her as she removed their cloaking.

The woman turned with a small frown on her face, even as she was automatically moving to pick Sunny up and settle her in her mom’s arms. “Aria? What’s wrong? What’s going on--”

“Tony, Stephen, and Min are compromised.” Aria cut her off in a hushed tone, even as she was settling the now brunette infant against her. “We have to go now, and we’ll fill you in when we get the chance.”
Sensing the seriousness of the situation at hand, Holly gently tugged Hannah towards her and explained that they had to go home sooner than anticipated. Meanwhile, Alexia crept up to Aria and tugged on her sleeve. “Auntie Ari’, what’s wrong with Uncle Tony, Uncle Stephen, and Auntie Min?” The young girl asked with fear in her eyes.

Before the woman could reply, Sam stepped up and knelt down so he was eye level with the girl. He knew this was Logan’s daughter, and that she had a unique way of thinking and processing things because of that. “They’re not doing so well, kiddo.” He explained in a soft, but firm tone. She’d know immediately if he were lying, so he was trying to be honest while keeping the details obscure-- not that he had a lot of them to begin with. “I know you may want to see them, but the adults are doing their best to make them better, and they need to focus completely on that. Right now, we need you to do something really important.” Alexia tilted her head curiously, so Sam continued. “Your dad is trying to help the grownups, but you can help too by staying with the kids- play with them, distract them, make them feel safe and happy.”

For a minute, Alexia looked like she was considering something. “So… I need to be their Alpha?” she asked softly, looking to him for confirmation.

Sam nodded with a smile. “That’s right, you need to be their Alpha for now. You’re older than them, and they’re gonna follow your example. Stay calm, stay happy, and keep their minds off whatever’s happening. Can you do that for us?”

“Yeah! I’ll take good care of them!” She nodded with a proud smile on her face and determination in her emerald green eyes.

“I know you will, kid.” Sam ruffled her hair and stood, turning to where Aria was guiding the others through a Corridor. The dark-skin man encouraged Alexia to follow, and he couldn’t help the small smile that tugged at his lips as she ran after them. He turned to address his companion before pausing at the expression on her face.

Aria was smiling with a pleased, approving glint in her purple-blue eyes, and she met his darker ones and firmly stated, “You handled that perfectly. I’m very impressed, and I’ll be informing Rhodey of such when this is all over.”

Sam simply nodded and said, “Thank you, ma’am.” Before following behind her through the Corridor. As he accepted another nausea potion from Bridget, he couldn’t help but think that this was what being a hero really was about.
Phoebe, Mindee, and Esme had barely gotten more than a step out of the corridor before they were being tackled by several children, all squealing and calling out to them with joy. “Hey ladies!” Laura greeted them as well, a smile on her face even though she was definitely nervous internally. Loki had been called back not that long ago, and the fact that it wasn’t him returning, but three of Emma’s daughters, was alarming. “Which ones am I talking to right now?” Phoebe held up her hand to reveal her silver bracelet, studded with a number of flawless pink topaz, Mindee showing off her anklet with several sparkling aquamarines dangling from it, and Esme gestured to her choker with a single large green tourmaline embedded in the metal. “Phoebe, Mindee, and Esme, gotcha.”

“It’s good to see you guys. Are you all enjoying Disney so far?” Phoebe turned to address the children who all cheered, drawing smiles from all three girls. “That’s good to hear! Mindee, Esme, and I have always wanted to visit Disney too, so we decided to come join you! I’m sure you all know the best rides, right?” They all called out affirmatively, and Phoebe turned her attention to Mindee for a second. “Mindee, can you help them get their stuff together?”

“Yep! Come on, guys, let’s get ready for an adventure!!”

Laura, Phoebe, and Esme watched them run from the room laughing and joking, bright-eyed and eager for the fun afternoon ahead. Once they were out of earshot, Laura turned to the two blondes, anxiety written all over her face. “What’s going on?”

Esme crossed her arms with a grim look on her face. “Long story made very short, Wade and Rem were attacked by Rogers and Maximoff-- they took Rem and knocked out Wade’s healing factor entirely. That’s the reason Loki isn’t coming back yet-- he, Sleipnir, and Jörmungandr have him on a constant stream of healing magic to keep the cancer at bay. Stephen’s in a coma and Minowa Fractured, so Rhodey and the Rogues came back to help out where they can.”

“But that means the Rogues are going to find out about the Reapers, about Hadrian… about Tony.” The brunette whispered in shock, brown eyes widening with realization.

A sigh escaped Phoebe as she nodded in confirmation. “They’ll be filled in completely once everything has calmed down. But Laura… Tony got Displaced, Wade is in mortal danger, and Rem wasn’t done with his antibiotics. All of the leaders of the New Avengers are compromised in some way. They had to make a choice based on necessity. It wasn’t an easy choice, and there will be fallout to deal with later. But right now, they’re doing their best, and all we can do is try to make their job easier.”

Her sister dipped her head in agreement at her words before picking up where she left off. “That’s
why we’re here now. They don’t need all five of us at the Compound right now, and we don’t need your brood or Loki’s youngest two freaking out. If we keep them happy and entertained, it buys everyone at home more time to set things right. And we’re more than capable of keeping you and the kids safe on the off chance someone or something comes looking.”

Seeing a spark of hesitation in Laura’s eyes, Phoebe stepped up to her and put her hands on the brunette’s shoulders, her blue eyes bright with firm determination. “I know this is frightening, and things look bleak. But your kids need you to step up and be strong whether they know something is wrong or not. I need you to dig deep and find that same strength that you pulled on when your brother left, when your home was destroyed, when you and your family found yourself in a new and unfamiliar situation… I need you to find that spark and harness it like the supermom everyone knows you are. We know you can do that-- do you?”

Laura had tears in her eyes by the end of the speech, but she swallowed and nodded sharply, drawing herself up straight. “If what they need me to do right now is to take care of my kids--” She glanced towards where she could see Mindee helping Hela and Fenrir with their bags, “--all of them, then I will.”

Both Esme and Phoebe pulled the woman in for a quick hug. “And you won’t be alone. We’ll help you with whatever you need-- you just need to ask.” Phoebe reassured her softly, getting a nod from the blond on Laura’s other side. They pulled away and Laura wiped her eyes with a nearby tissue in time for the kids to come running in, Mindee pushing Nate’s stroller with a massive smile on her face. “Everyone ready to go? Awesome! What ride are we doing first?”

“Space Mountain!!”

“Wow, unanimous vote! How can we disagree with that? Lead the way, guys!”

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The sound of soft footsteps barely registered in Peter’s mind as he sat completely still next to the prone form of Stephen, brown doe eyes watery as he continued to grip the sorcerer’s hand gently as he rested his head on the bed. He was only pulled out of his mind when fingers began to gently run through his hair in a comforting gesture, and he turned his head to see Emma standing above him with a soft, compassionate look on her face. “Hey, Pete.” She greeted him gently, giving him a half smile. “Your cousins made hot chocolate… they’re wondering if you wanted some?” For a few seconds, the blond was worried the teen would say no. Finally, he gave a small nod and stood shakily, allowing Emma to wrap a comforting arm around his shoulders and guide him to a corner of the room that had been set up with several chairs, blankets, and pillows.
Celeste and Sophie stood from their own seats as they approached, and as their mother guided him to a seat one draped a blanket over his shoulders and the other pressed a mug of warm cocoa into his hands. “I know you don’t like peppermint, so I put in caramel instead… I hope that’s okay.” Celeste murmured, sitting next to him and twirling a strand of her blonde hair around her finger in a nervous movement. She gave him a shy smile when he nodded and took a sip, his eyes regaining a bit of life at the wonderful taste.

The second sat on his other side and pulled out a new LEGO kit with a bright smile. Peter’s eyes widened as Sophie announced, “I planned to give this to you for Christmas… but I thought a distraction would be nice. Do you want to work on it with us?”

“This… this is the limited edition Millenium Falcon kit… I thought they discontinued it…” The teen looked up at the blonde with a look of wonder, gaining a smug grin from her. “This must have cost a fortune! How--”

Sophie pressed a finger to his lips in a ‘sh’ motion. “Ah ah, little cousin! Trade secret! And besides, I knew you would like it, and you deserve nice things!”

There were a few seconds of silence before Celeste suddenly noticed the mug shaking in Peter’s hands and tears welling up in his eyes, and she reached to gently tug the drink from his grasp. It turned out to be the right instinct as the teen let out a rough sob and buried his face in his hands, shaking from the intensity of his emotions. The duo sitting on either side of him didn’t hesitate to pull him into a hug, speaking softly to him and soothing him as best they could. Emma immediately joined them, massaging the boy’s scalp with her fingers and humming quietly so only they could hear her. “I-I’m sorry!” Peter finally managed to get out between his tears and hiccuping breaths, “I’m just so scared, and I feel like my mind is all messed up and muddled and I miss Iron-Dad and Doctor-Dad and Wade is dying from his cancer and Rem’s missing and I don’t want to lose anyone else! I can't lose them, Aunt Emma, I just can't !”

“We know Peter, we know.” His aunt soothed him, leaning over to press a kiss to his head. “You just let it out, let yourself cry. We’re here, we’re not leaving you alone.” The teen continued to cry into the shoulders of the blondes on either side of him. Emma stole a glance over at Bridget with a furrow in her brow before turning his attention back to the trio. “Pete, I’m gonna go talk to Bridget about how everyone is, and I’ll let you know how Doctor-Dad is doing, okay? I’ll be back shortly.” That got a nod from the brunette, and Emma took a moment to smile at her daughters before slipping away. She slowly approached the Restoration Master, who was passing a water bottle to a tired-looking Sleipnir, even as he shook his head stubbornly at the suggestion that he take a break. “Just like his father, huh?” She quipped as the Reaper turned to her.

Bridget sighed and nodded, moving to take care of Stephen next. “He and his brother both. They’re hell-bent on keeping Wade alive, even at their own expense.” She shook her head before casting diagnostic spells on Stephen.
“How is everyone holding up?”

Amethyst eyes rose to meet hers. “Honestly, the one in the most danger right now is Wade. Minowa is still with James and Logan, and she doesn’t seem like she’ll be coming down from her Fracture anytime soon. Stephen is at least stable for now. His brain activity is still within normal parameters, as are his bodily functions.”

Emma nodded, biting her bottom lip in thought before she asked, “Do you have any idea about what caused this? I mean, I know what happened with Wade, but what about Min and Steph?”

The inquiry got a small hum out of the Archmage before she answered, “I do have a theory, a damn good one. It has to do with Tony.” Seeing the mutant was listening, she continued, “Let’s address Stephen first because he’s the easiest. He and Tony are soulmates-- I have reason to believe that Tony’s sudden and unanticipated Displacement caused a kind of backlash on their bond. The shock of such a thing would have knocked Stephen unconscious at least, but I think that Tony being the Soul Stone also amplified the effect.”

“That makes a lot of sense… what about Minowa?”

“That’s slightly more complicated,” Bridget replied with a soft sigh. “So, I should first explain exactly what it is she’s suffering from right now. The Reapers as a whole have dubbed it a ‘Fracture’-- basically, her sanity is shattered, albeit temporarily. It triggers in moments of extreme emotional duress or trauma, and during these times, she is mind-blowingly dangerous to be around. She can’t tell friend from foe in this state, and she lashes out with intent to destroy and kill. I’m not going to lie, Emma… she's wiped out entire cities in this state." She glanced towards the specially warded room for a moment before turning back to her companion. "This is the first time any of us have seen her relatively calm during a Fracture, and we're of the opinion that it's thanks to her having intimate, romantic partners."

"She hasn't had lovers before now?? But I've heard she's over a million years old!!"

Bridget nodded with a sad smile. "She considered it, but something in her psyche just wouldn't allow her to have that attachment. That might be a result of what happened to her before she became the first Reaper." She put her hand up to stop Emma's questions before they started, something dark and haunted flashing in her eyes. "Don't. Don’t ask. That's a pandora's box of grief and anguish and guilt that you do not want to open. Just… accept that Minowa Noddahl has suffered , and it left wounds on her psyche that will never fully heal, and scars that will never fully fade."
Emma studied her for a few seconds before nodding her acceptance. "Something must have changed, though, because now she has Bruce, Logan, James, and Victor. Even a blind man could see how much love she has for them."

The Restoration Master nodded, a smile stretching across her face. "So, when we bring a new Reaper into the fold, a 'Ritual of Claiming' is performed to bestow death's blessing and power upon the newcomer. The Claiming needs three people-- Master Hadrian, the newcomer, and a person to act as a 'Center'. The Center and newcomer form an empathic bond, though the more newcomers the Center has sponsored previously, the more moderated the effects become as its spread out over multiple people." Bridget moved to the window looking into the warded safe room, Emma stepping up next to her to observe as well. "But again, Minowa is different in that she never Centered for anyone. In the beginning it was because she was still recovering… again, we won’t go into that. After that, it was just a matter of personal choice. No one caught her attention… until Tony."

Emma’s eyes turned to Bridget, who hadn’t turned from her position looking through the window. “Wait, Minowa is Tony’s Center?”

“That’s correct. Minowa was the leader of the team sent to retrieve him, along with myself and Ulysses. Something about Tony, about what she learned of his history and his values… for the first time since becoming a Reaper, she stepped up and volunteered to be a Center. However, this means that their empathic bond is very intense-- Min can sense when Tony’s in emotional distress and find him within a few minutes, the inverse being true as well. We think that bond is also the reason she’s now able to make those romantic connections… it kick-started that part of her psyche again.” The Restoration Master crossed her arms as a grimace crossed her face. “I think Tony’s Displacement caused one of two things to happen to their bond-- either it was something like the backlash Stephen suffered, or… the sudden void left by the bond being temporarily severed was too much for her to handle.”

The mutant next to her nodded slowly with a furrow in her brow. “I see… and because Tony is the only one she shares that bond with, she didn’t have anyone else to pull from to supplement the sudden loss.”

Amethyst eyes sparkled with pleasure as Bridget led Emma away from the window. “You hit the nail right on the head! But it only holds true if that’s the correct theory.” The duo stopped in the center of the room, the two women turning to face each other. “Theories will have to wait for another time, though. Go back to Peter and tell him Stephen is in a coma, but he should be okay. I know this it extremely hard on him right now-- given what happened to his previous guardian, I can’t say I blame him.” Emma nodded with a small ‘thank you’ before moving back towards the trio in the corner. Bridget took a moment to close her eyes and take a few deep breaths. They suddenly opened when the scent of peach green tea tickled her nose, and she looked over to see Phil holding two mugs in his hand, one held out towards her. “Divines bless you, Phil.” She
murmured with gratitude in her eyes as she accepted the offered tea from him and took a sip

“Are you holding up alright?” Phil asked as he gently rested a hand on her shoulder. “You’ve been running yourself ragged.”

Bridget’s shoulders sagged for a second as she looked over to the agent with an exhausted look in her eyes. “There’s too much going on right now for me not to, too much at stake. There’s people who need healing and taking care of, I need to make sure everyone who isn’t a patient is fed and watered so they don’t end up as patients… I can rest when everything is over.”

The brunette arched an eyebrow as he said firmly, “Or you could delegate.” Seeing that he had the Restoration Master’s attention he continued. “Have someone else take over kitchen duties, someone who can throw a decent meal together, give them an assistant to help out. Have someone circulate among the non-patient residents and take care of whatever concerns they have.” He turned the amethyst eyed woman to face him fully, and Phil grabbed her shoulders in a firm, comforting grip. “You don’t have to do this by yourself. Let us help you.”

A few seconds passed in silence as Bridget stared at Phil, absorbing what he’d said. A look of determination finally crossed her face and she nodded sharply before turning to study the room. “Sam, Scott, front and center!” She softly barked, and the duo was in front of her within a few seconds. “Can either of you cook?”

Both men nodded, shooting each other a grin. “We’re not gourmet, but we can throw together a good meal.” Scott replied, Sam nodding along to his words.

“That’s your job for now. We’re fighting a lot of fires here, and we need you to take on kitchen duties. FRIDAY will provide you with anything you need, and will make you aware of people’s preferences and allergies-- If you have any questions, feel free to ask her. I want meals served at 9:00, 1:00, and 6:30, bonus points if you can throw together snacks in between.”

Sam nodded and parroted back, “Meals at 900, 1300, and 1830 with snacks in between, watch for allergies and preferences. You can count on us ma’am. Let’s hop to it, Scott!”

Phil smiled with pride as he watched the two men leave, calling out for FRIDAY to guide them to the kitchen. “See? Delegation. Speaking of, let me do the rounds with everyone to make sure they don’t need anything, alright?”
A gusty sigh escaped Bridget again, though she seemed far more relaxed than before. “Thank you, Phil-- you’re a lifesaver.”

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Bruce barely took a second to throw back the anti-nausea potion Bridget pushed into his hands before he was striding away from the Corridor closing behind him. “I’ll be with you in one second, Bri, just…” He stopped outside the window looking into the warded room, waving to the trio inside. James and Logan perked up at seeing him, waving back with looks of absolute relief on their faces. “FRIDAY, can you filter my voice through?” The AI chirped back affirmatively, and after a second the scientist spoke again. “I’m glad to see you guys are okay! How’s Min?”

The mutant and super soldier looked down at the woman in question, who had twitched and shifted at hearing Bruce’s voice. “I wish we could tell you with any degree of accuracy, Doll.” James said softly, reaching to slowly move the woman’s ebony hair away from her fathomless pitch-black eyes so Bruce could see them. “It’s like she knows we’re here, but she’s having trouble pulling herself back to us.”

“It’s killin’ us that we can’t reach her.” Logan added, resting his chin on top of her ebony locks with a pained look on his face. “‘S’like lights are on, but nobody’s home.”

Bruce nodded, putting a hand on the glass that separated them in an effort to comfort them as best he could. He wanted nothing more than to be able to join them and support their lover like she’d so often supported them. Right now, though, he was needed elsewhere-- he knew Minowa wouldn’t begrudge him that. “I wish I could be there with you guys.” He said softly, getting understanding smiles from the two men behind the glass.

The sound of footsteps behind him caused him to turn to where Bridget was approaching him with an earpiece. “Here. You guys can set this to a private channel and talk while we work. I just gave one to Victor as well.” She set the tech in his hands before moving to check on Loki and his sons.

“Well, that’s useful.” James hummed as Bruce slipped his earpiece on, and once the scientist gave them a thumbs up he spoke again. “Victor? Can you hear us?”

A second later, the monarch’s voice came over their earpieces. “I’m here! I’m so glad to hear your voices… Is Min okay?”
All three men seemed to relax more upon hearing the brunette’s voice. “Physically, she’s fine. Mentally… no. It’s not something that should be discussed over the comms though, so… once everything is settled again, we’ll fill you in. Are you okay, Vic?” Logan asked, looking in the direction of where Victor’s room was.

“I’m better now… but I had a pretty bad scare earlier.”

Bruce had moved to help the Restoration Master check on everyone around the wing, and he tilted his head warily at Victor’s words. “What do you mean? Is it your heart?”

“Sort of. Richards showed up again while you guys were gone.”

A feral snarl escaped Logan at the words, though James quickly soothed him as Minowa shifted restlessly in response to the surge of anger. “How did that fucker get in?! He didn’t hurt you at all, did he?”

“He portaled to just outside the Compound and used his mutation to slip in through the pipes and vents. He made it into the room, but… I think Min put some sort of magic around my bed-- a barrier of some kind knocked him back out through the door, and he was apprehended by Thor and Harley from there.”

That brought the men up short, and after a second of silence James spoke again. “Thor and Harley?? How did that go down?”

A soft chuckle echoed across the comms before Victor replied, “I’m not 100% sure, but I think I heard something like ‘Potato Gun Mk. X’ and ‘not worthy’.”

FRIDAY suddenly cut in and informed them, “Richards attempted to re-enter Victor’s room, but Harley had entered at that point and shot him in the head with the Potato Gun, at which point Thor set Mjolnir on his chest to keep him from escaping.”

All at once, all four men snorted with laughter. “Yeah, that sounds like Harley alright.” Logan shook his head with a fond smile. “Good for him, takin’ that bastard out.”

“Where is Richards right now, anyway? I take it he didn’t get away…” Bruce asked with a combination of anger, mirth, and worry in his eyes.
The monarch laughed outright at that. “It turns out Richards is as impervious to a lightning bolt as just about anything else. He’s now in one of the heavily warded rooms down in the basement with a collar slapped around his neck.”

All three men nodded at that, Logan and James smirking at each other. “Well, I think we could use some good old bonding time, what do you say, James?” The mutant rumbled, a feral spark in his eyes.

James gave him a cold smile as he sat so he was pressed against both him and Minowa at the same time, and he laid his head on the mutant’s shoulder as he replied, “I’ll get my good knives from the bedroom once we’re done here.”

“I love the way you think, baby.”

A snort escaped Bruce at the exchange. “I suppose we all have our preferred methods of bonding…” He sighed deeply before continuing, “It’s going to have to wait, though. Wade, Rem, Min, and Steph have to come first.”

Even if they couldn’t see each other, all four men shared a simultaneous flash of determination and purpose. “James and I have to stay here until Min comes down her Fracture-- we can’t risk her lashing out right now, and I’ve heard stories about what she’s capable of when she’s in this state.”

“Guys, I meant to ask about this earlier…” Victor suddenly cut in, and his tone caused all of them to fall quiet. “I know I was brought into this relationship only recently, so I’m not sure if I’m allowed to know, but… How much do we actually know about her background-- her history?”

There was complete silence for a minute before Bruce started. “She… made me aware of certain things. From what we all have collectively though, not much. She’s old-- as in over a million years. Alduin hasn’t been with her the whole time, but definitely the majority of it.”

“She’s suffered from something extremely traumatic.” James picked up, his blue eyes shifting to meet Logan’s brown. “Something that involved being held, tortured, and… used as a weapon.” He swallowed hard at that, leaning into the comforting arm Logan wrapped around him once he shifted them around. “She’s never gone into details… I can’t say I blame her for that.”

Logan gently pressed a kiss to the top of his head before continuing. “She and Bridget are from the
same world, but Min’s always made it clear that Bri’s from the second cycle and she’s from the first. She’s never said anything about what happened to the first cycle…”

Quiet fell over them as they thought about that before Bruce finally spoke up again. “I think, after everything is done here… We need to sit down with her, and we need to get the full story. She’s always been willing to help us with our demons… Now it’s our turn to be strong and help her with hers.”

The other three murmured out their agreement, and Logan and James both moved to give the woman a kiss on the top of her head. Answers would have to wait for later… but they were more than willing to do so for the woman they’d all come to love.

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“Clint? What are you doing here?”

The archer jumped a foot in the air, head whipping around to find Dorian and Zevrael standing in the doorway to the room he was standing in. The brunette swallowed, his golden-brown eyes turning to the bed again, fixing on where Rem had been laying just a few hours prior. “Sorry, I know I shouldn’t be here, I…” He croaked out, but was stopped when he felt a cool hand on his arm.

Zevrael gave the man a compassionate smile, even though worry was written in every line of his face. He silently guided the man to the family room where Natasha was sitting as well. The assassin immediately rose upon seeing her partner, and he didn’t hesitate to move over to her and allow the redhead to pull him into a comforting embrace. Zev poured a cup of tea from the pot on the table and sprinkled in some sugar before approaching the duo that had sunk back onto the couch. “You don’t have to go through this alone.” He said softly as he pressed the cup into Clint’s shaking hands. “Maker knows we’re not.”

A soft choked noise escaped Clint as he closed his eyes. “You’re his parents, though.” He croaked, even as his stomach lurched with fear.

“And you’re basically his stepdad.” Dorian replied, shooting the man a stern but comforting look as the man looked over at him. “Your relationship with him is just as important as ours.”

The archer didn’t reply, simply taking an errant sip of his tea, though he couldn’t help the
appreciative sound that escaped him at the taste. “I just… I saw him just a few hours ago, he looked so much better, and now...” He took a bigger sip, ignoring how it burned going down. “How are you two not freaking out? That’s your adopted son Rogers and Maximoff have!”

For a few seconds, Dorian and Zevrael were absolutely silent, simply looking at each other and having a conversation with their expressions and body language alone. Finally, Dorian set his cup down with a ‘thunk’ on the table. “Don’t mistake our calm for apathy.” He started as he sat back with a pinched look on his face. “We’re both worried to death about Rem. However, he doesn’t need us to be freaking out right now-- there’ll be time for that later. Right now, we need to be calm, collected, and focused. We can’t afford to make mistakes right now, and heightened emotions will increase the chance of them.”

“We’ve also had years of practice.” The elf picked up, taking his husband’s hand and squeezing it comfortingly.

Nat studied them for a few seconds before speaking again. “You say ‘years of practice’ as if it’s not a long period of time. I know you’re not human, Zevrael… but I don’t know how long ‘elves’ live.”

That caused an odd laugh to escape the Pavus husbands. “Funny you should say that… I know Rhodey told you that whatever questions you have would have to wait for later, but… we’ll let you in on a few little tidbits.” Dorian sat back in his seat, fixing the duo with a piercing look that had them both sitting up straight. “Several of us here-- and I’m sure you can guess which ones-- we’re not exactly from around here.”

Clint nodded at that, head tilting to the side as he replied, “Well, the obvious ones are Zevrael and Minowa… but going further, I’d have to guess you, Dorian, by proxy… and Bridget.”

“The Boone trio as well, actually. I’ll put this bluntly-- we’re not from around here by way of not even being from this universe. All of us have been pulled together from different parts of the multiverse, united under a common cause.”

Emerald eyes shone with interest as Natasha sat forward, her partner barely half a second behind her. “Are you at liberty to tell us what that common cause is?”

Zevrael nodded and held his hand out, summoning his ring into existence as Dorian did the same with his wrist cuff. “Yes. We’re agents of a being known as the Master of Death, Hadrian Black-- this is his symbol. His job is to protect the multiverse from sources of unbalanced death and beings who would put death’s balance with life in danger. We’re known collectively as Reapers, and when
Ser Hadrian is made aware of a universe in danger, he deploys a team of Reapers to defend the universe in question.

A soft gasp escaped the archer as something clicked into place in his mind. “Wait, does this have something to do with the threat Tony kept trying to tell us about?”

“Yes, and you damn well should have listened to him.” The sudden firm tone of the pyromancer caused the agents to sit back a bit in shock. “The threat coming is massive, with an end goal of wiping out all life in the universe.”

Both Natasha and Clint went sheet white. “How would someone even do that??” The assassin asked with a tiny tremor in her voice, Clint reaching to pick up his tea again.

Zevrael pulled up a holographic screen over the table between them, and began to pull up images as he spoke. “By collecting the Infinity Stones. They’re the energies from the singularities of the universe given shape-- Mind, Space, Time, Power, Reality, and Soul. You’ve actually encountered four of them already.” Loki’s scepter appeared on screen, though it quickly took the form of Vision with a bright yellow light in his forehead. “The Mind Stone was in the scepter-- that’s how it managed to take over people. Now it’s in Vision, as you know.” The tesseract appeared a moment later, a small pinprick of glowing blue light pulsing inside of it. “The tesseract has the Space Stone- wormhole capabilities explained.” An odd, but familiar looking necklace showed up, pulsing green. “This is a relic carried by Stephen, the Eye of Agamotto. It actually has the Time Stone in it, and can only be used by the Sorcerer Supreme.” Two more pricks of glowing light, purple and red respectively, showed up, though they had no defined shape. “We have yet to retrieve the Power Stone--” He gestured to the purple one, “Or the Reality Stone.” This time, he pointed to the red. There was suddenly a pause as Dorian and Zevrael looked at each other, as if debating.

“That’s only five thought…” Clint murmured, golden-brown eyes scanning the screen. “You left out the Soul Stone.”

There was a moment of heavy silence before Dorian and Zevrael turned back to them. “Before we tell you where that one is… there’s something else you need to know.” The silverette began, then he sat back and steepled his fingers and fixed the duo with a cold, piercing look that pinned them to their seats. Whether they realized it or not, this wasn’t Zevrael Pavus sitting in front of them-- this elf was Inquisitor Zevrael Lavellan. “Let me preface this information with a warning. The Reapers are a family that has a bond that transcends mortal understanding. We will defend our own from any perceived threat, and we will not hesitate to eradicate anyone who would harm one of our own. Now, having said that… At the same time as we were made aware of the threat to your universe, we also discovered one with Hadrian’s mark upon their soul.”

Dorian nodded and continued, “The mark is an indicator of a potential Reaper, someone who can be brought into the family. Normally, when a mark appears, Hadrian is made aware almost
immediately after. Yet for reasons we still have no answer for… he didn’t know about this one until your universe lit up like a damn beacon. A team was immediately dispatched to find that person… especially when Hadrian realized they were in mortal danger.”

“That team consisted of Minowa, Bridget, and Ulysses.” Zevrael picked up again, eyes still boring into theirs. “Imagine their shock, surprise, and outrage when they arrived at where that person was… only to find them gravely injured, freezing nearly to death in a bunker in Siberia.”

Shocked noises of realization exploded from both Clint and Natasha. After several seconds of silence, the redhead finally whispered, “Bozhe moy… Tony is a Reaper??”

A small smirk quirked at Zevrael’s lips as he dipped his head. “Indeed. But to you, he’s far more than that… He’s the reason our son lived long enough to meet you.”

Dorian manipulated the screen in front of them again, pulling up Rem’s picture. “See, the Rem you know is… far different than the one he should be. A few months ago, Wade tried sneaking onto the Compound to hijack the quinjet-- his best friend had been left to die in conditions he couldn’t hope to survive-- that friend was Rem. Tony, Stephen, and Bridget portaled him there instead, but…” Hazel eyes closed for a moment, Zev reaching over to rub his back. “He’d been left to die in Antarctica with no protective clothing, and even Bridget didn’t think he’d pull through.”

Clint reached to grab Natasha’s hand comfortingly, and the redhead swallowed hard as she finally asked, “Then how did he?”

Dorian reached for the screen again, this time summoning an orange pinprick-- the final Infinity Stone. “Because of this.”

“The Soul Stone…” Clint breathed in shock, eyes snapping to the duo again. “So someone here has it!”

A soft laugh escaped Zevrael as he banished the other images on it. “Sort of. You see, through the use of the Soul Stone, he was de-aged from his actual age of 34 to the 17 year old you know today. We’re still not quite sure how, but it also healed him completely of whatever wounds and ailments were plaguing him at the time.”

Natasha was staring transfixed at the glowing pinprick of light. “You said Tony saved Rem’s life… he used the stone to do it?”
The archer’s brow furrowed as he looked up towards Dorian and Zevrael again. “So Tony has an Infinity Stone here? How long has he had it, and why has he never pulled it out??”

“Because he didn’t know he had it.” Seeing the confused looks from the two agents in front of them, the Pavus husbands reached forward at the same time to tap the light, and it immediately shifted and expanded into a humanoid figure-- one that quickly became a very familiar genius billionaire philanthropist Reaper.

Several seconds passed in confused silence before it finally clicked. “No way.” Clint whispered in shock and awe, realization slamming him all at once. “That can’t be possible. Can it? I mean, I’m no expert on these things, far from it, but… If you’re insinuating what I think you’re insinuating, then this means…”

Emerald green eyes swam with a myriad of emotions as Natasha finished in a whisper, “Tony is the Soul Stone.”

Dorian and Zevrael nodded simultaneously. Absolute silence reigned for several seconds before Clint let out a heaving breath, and the brunette sat forward with his elbows on his knees as his entire body trembled. “This explains so much,” The archer whispered into the quiet. “Tony was always our heart, he kept us all together. He… he was the glue that held the Avengers together, and when he left… we fell apart from the inside. He was our soul.”

The redhead next to him nodded in agreement, even as tears welled up in her eyes. "We owe him so much," she murmured in a shaky voice, "between Laura and her kids, Loki and his, and now our son…” The assassin covered her mouth with her hand, the tears finally beginning to roll down her cheeks. "And we treated him like shit, we belittled and ostracized him…”

Dorian and Zevrael stood simultaneously from their seats to flank the duo, Zev sitting by Clint and rubbing his back while Dori' smoothly pulled Nat in for a comforting hug. "What's done is done, my friends," the mage murmured into the quiet, "but Tony… he always thought there was something redeemable in you both. Now, you both have a second chance, and a reason to give it everything you've got.”

"You have to put your trust in Tony that he'll do everything in his power to find our son, and you need to be willing to stand behind his decisions." The silverette said firmly, drawing on the charisma he’d channeled as the leader of the Inquisition. "Everything he does, every choice he makes has the consideration of the well-being of his team and precious people behind it. Stephen and Minowa may be our co-leaders, but Tony is our heart and soul."
Something sparkled in the mage's eyes as he stood from the seat, drawing himself up to full height as he asked firmly, "Are you willing to follow him?" The duo nodded firmly. "Are you willing to fight with him?" They nodded again. "And will we triumph with him as our heart and soul?"

Clint and Nat both nodded and stood, determination and renewed purpose in their eyes. "Always." Clint replied firmly, Natasha echoing the sentiment.

"Then let's step up and help wherever we can. Head to the elevator, we'll meet you there in a second." The group shared another round of hugs before the agents were striding towards the elevator with a renewed spring in their steps. Dorian turned to Zevrael to say something, only to find himself being pulled into a brief, yet no less passionate kiss. "Now, whatever did I do to deserve that, Amatus?" The brunette asked with a grin once they pulled apart.

His husband smirked and arched an eyebrow. "Don't think for one second I didn't pick up where you pulled that speech from, Vhenan."

Dorian didn't say a word, simply giving him a knowing, shit eating grin.

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“You know, I think I preferred it when Peter, Hela, Fenrir, and I got captured by crazy LARP Santa-- at least he provided some measure of entertainment.”

Baby blue eyes rose to the ceiling as if praying for patience. Ever since they’d gotten back to the safe house and Rem had woken up, he and Wanda has been subjected to non-stop sass and snark from the redheaded teen. “Look, son,” Steve finally said as he turned back from where he’d been watching Wanda weave more of her power into the barrier surrounding the house, “I don’t know what kind of manners and habits you’ve been taught by Stark and his lackeys, but you need to learn to respect your betters. This was for your own good, as well as Bucky’s. Now he doesn’t have to stay with that bastard, and he can come back to where he should be.”

Rem arched an eyebrow, sitting forward as best he could with the ropes tied around him. They’d tussled him up after he’d tried to throw himself from the moving car, and even after getting back to… wherever the hell they were, they still hadn’t freed him. Smart move on their part-- the only one they’d made in this entire situation. “Honestly, I have to wonder if you left part of your brain in the ice.” The mutant snarked, currently icy blue eyes narrowing. “Do you have any idea the kind of shitstorm you’re in for when they find me??”
“They won’t find us.” Wanda smirked maliciously as she sauntered over to him, bending to get right in his face. “The magic around this place will keep anyone from sensing us. I’ve picked up some new tricks... I’m sure you’ll experience the full extent of them soon enough. Stark finally got his just desserts, and your friend is trapped in a cycle of death and nightmares.” She reached out and grasped his face, lifting it so they were eye to eye. “No one is coming for you, boy. What do you say to that?” Rem didn’t reply at first, his face suddenly taking on an odd expression. “What’s wrong, boy? Nothing to say? You were so willing to mouth off earlier--” A sudden, violent sneeze escaped the redhead, covering Wanda in snot and spit. She shrieked in disgust, reeling away from him. “You vile little--!”

Steve surged to his feet, holding his hand out to stop her from lashing out at the teen. “Easy, Wanda! He didn’t mean to do that! And don’t get in his face, anyway, it’s counter productive.” The woman ‘hmphed’ and stalked away to wipe her face clean.

A rough chuckle escaped Rem, prompting the super soldier to turn back to where Rem was sniffing back snot. “You’ve got a storm coming for you, Rogers.” He chuckled, raising his eyes to pin the blonde’s with a piercing, gleeful look. “Dad and Papa are bad enough on their own, but Patris is going to be pissed when he gets his hands on you… if Mama doesn’t get to you first.”

That last piece caught Steve’s attention immediately. “Bucky never mentioned your mom.”

“We just found out who it was. And I’d brace yourself while you have the chance to do so… because she’s going to show you no mercy.” Rem gave the man a sharp grin.

Steve puffed himself up, looking down at the redhead condescendingly. “Why would I ever be afraid of some random woman?”

There was a moment of silence before Rem answered by beginning to sing in a slow, ominous tone. “The itsy bitsy spider went up the water spout… down came the rain and washed the spider out…” Steve’s face suddenly went sheet white, and Rem grinned almost maniacally as he continued, “Out came the sun and dried up all the rain… now the itsy bitsy spider went up the spout again.”

The super soldier was dead silent as he stared at Rem with wide baby blue eyes. The teen held his gaze unerringly, and couldn’t help but smirk as Steve finally turned on his heel and left the room without a word. He chuckled, though it was cut off when he coughed, turning his head to spit out a glob of mucus. He grimaced when he realized that it had taken on a thick, yellow appearance again-- the bronchitis was setting back in, even though it hadn’t been that long since his last dose of antibiotics… but he hadn’t been done with them. Even so, it was coming back much faster than normal. His brow furrowed at that before something hit him like a sledgehammer.
Ice surged through Rem’s veins at the implications of that sentence. His icy blue eyes closed a second later, and he settled back against the mattress he was sitting in to get what little rest he could. He knew he’d need it in the coming days.

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“I swear to Mara, you are all going to send yourselves into magical exhaustion if you don’t let up!!”

The words from Bridget caused three sets of eyes to turn a glare in her direction, though she didn’t back down an inch from where she was standing at the foot of Wade’s bed with a stern glare of her own on her face. “We don’t exactly have a choice,” Jör grunted, even as he swayed in place from exhaustion. “Wade don’t exactly have the luxury of time.”

Bruce gave a strained chuckle as he approached them as well. “I’m pretty sure he’s going to kick your asses when he finds out how hard you’re pushing yourselves for his sake.”

“Then that is the hill we lay our lives down upon.” Sleipnir shot back, looking only slightly better than his younger brother.

Loki chuckled, looking over at the duo with only the barest hint of bags under his eyes. “They’re stubborn, my friend. You’d have to drag them away physically, and I wouldn’t recommend trying that.” He looked back at his sons with a small frown on his face. “That being said, you both are nearing your limits, I can tell. Are you sure you don’t wish to take a short break?”

Both males immediately shook their heads vehemently. “We won’t lose him to that bitch, Dad!” The ebony haired son snapped back with something fiery lighting in his eyes.

“We would sooner work ourselves until we collapse than not put every ounce of effort we have into keeping him here with us.” Brown eyes shone with determination as Sleipnir spoke as well.

Loki looked back to Bridget with an arched eyebrow, and the woman groaned softly and shook her head. “Just… ugh, fine. I know a losing battle when I see one. I’ll be back to check in with you later.” Getting nods from the trio, she moved to the area of the Medical Wing that had been
temporarily dubbed ‘The Nest’, and a small smile quirked at her lips at the sight of Peter curled up with Celeste and Sophie, sleeping cuddled between them. She looked over as Emma approached her with a small smile on her face. “How’s he doing?”

The brunette looked over her shoulder at the teens with a soft look in her blue eyes. “He finally dropped off about two hours ago. The girls have been doing a good job of keeping him occupied…” Emma looked over towards Loki and his sons with an arched eyebrow. “They’ve been at it for over 10 hours… Jör looks like he’s about to collapse.”

“And yet, they won’t be moved from Wade’s side.” The Restoration Master sighed and shook her head. “We’re stuck in a holding pattern here-- Stephen won’t wake until Tony’s back most likely, Minowa is still struggling to come back from the Fracture…” She ran her fingers through her hair with a tired, pinched look on her face. “Wade’s only hope for survival involves the surgery we’ve been discussing with him-- the problem is that we need both Stephen and Tony! Something has to change, and it has to happen fast.”

As if the universe itself was listening, a pinpoint of light suddenly erupted from the center of the floor, drawing everyone’s attention to it. It seemed to trace along the floor drawing out a familiar symbol on the floor, one that erupted in light that quickly turned into a swirling mass of darkness that coalesced in the center of the symbol. From the Corridor stepped Mortis in all his glory, prompting gasps from several people. He then turned and took several steps back and bowed as Hadrian also stepped through and took a few steps forward. He turned back to the Corridor, and it collapsed away to reveal one more person-- a familiar brunette with cognac-brown eyes.

“Tony!!”
Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

Tony returns to the Compound, tearful reunions are had, Wade is taken in for surgery, and Rhodey gives Emma a much-needed pep-talk. Lexi is adorable and Min is full of motherly feels. Loki and Thor mend bridges just a little more, and a soft moment between Min and Emma is interrupted by the arrival of the Wakandan King and Princess and their badass cousin. Shuri's been keeping secrets, the X-Men are finding OUT secrets, and James has finally reached the end of the line for his patience for Steve.

(Min has also been keeping secrets, and for a damn long time.)

((I wonder how much longer THAT will last...))

Chapter Notes

WARNING!! WARNING!! POTENTIALLY TRIGGERING CONTENT IN THIS ONE!!

Forced suicide in this one, folks. No one we know, thankfully. You've been warned.

The name being exclaimed by Emma preceded several things happening in rapid succession. In the Nest, the three teens sat straight up making confused sounds, rubbing the sleep out of their eyes. Peter’s drowsiness only lasted a moment before he realized who it was turning towards him, and an elated cry of "Dad!" escaped the brunette as he launched himself at Tony. The genius easily caught him and held him close, whispering reassurances in his ear as he rubbed the sobbing teen’s back. Nearby, Stephen’s vitals suddenly went crazy, and a second or two later he sat straight up in bed with a shocked gasp. His head snapped in Tony and Peter’s direction, and he immediately ripped himself free from the IV and other medical equipment so he could stagger over to join them. Tony pulled him down for a desperate kiss before pulling him in for a hug as well, the trio taking comfort from their reunion.

The sound of a door slamming open pulled people’s attention to the warded room, where Minowa stood grasping the doorframe in a tight grip with her eyes wide and lacking any black. A moment later, she and Bruce were meeting in the middle of the room, the duo sharing a kiss that was then repeated with Logan and James, who had followed immediately behind her. The group migrated into Victor’s room, and a joyful noise escaped the current resident as the group was reunited at last.

Finally, Tony, Stephen, and Peter pulled apart, and Stephen cupped the Reaper’s face in his hands
to look into his eyes and drink in his features as if to reassure himself that his love was alive and well. Tony indulged him, knowing the sudden disruption of their soulmate bond had more than likely been jarring and traumatic. After several seconds, Stephen pulled him into another kiss, tears rolling down his face as he did so. “I felt you die,” He choked out, pulling back to stare at him again.

“I’m so sorry, love,” Tony whispered, tears welling up in his own eyes. Even though what had happened had been no fault of his own, the fact that his soulmate and son had been so badly affected by his displacement caused something painful to twist in his heart.

Stephen shook his head violently, resting his forehead on Tony’s for a moment. “It’s not your fault. You’re okay, I’m okay, we’re okay.” He then turned his eyes to their son, who was still plastered to their sides. “We’re okay, Peter.” He said in a firmer tone, pulling the Spiderling into his arms again.

“I’m so sorry you went through this again, Pete,” Tony said as he joined the group hug again. “You’ve been so brave, and we’re so, so proud of you.”

Peter simply sobbed as he held onto them with a white-knuckled grip. They continued to hold and support him so he could work through the worst of the intensity. “I was so scared, dads…” He finally croaked out, pulling back to look at them.

The Sorcerer Supreme nodded with a compassionate look in his eyes. “We know, Pete. We’re here now, we’re okay.” He pulled Peter close and pressed a kiss to his forehead, prompting Tony to do the same. The teen nodded and sniffed, wiping his eyes on his sleeve.

A throat being cleared drew their attention to where Emma was standing with Sophie and Celeste, and Peter shifted to snuggle against Stephen as Tony moved to pull them into a tight hug. “Anthony Edward Stark, don’t you ever scare us like that again!” Emma choked, burying her face in his shoulder. “If I weren’t so happy to see you safe and alive, I’d throttle you for worrying us like this!”

“I’m really glad to see you’re okay, Uncle Tony!” Celeste squeaked, snuggling against his side with a small, yet no less brilliant smile.

Sophie nodded at that with a grin of her own. “We knew you’d be alright, but you took so long! You should never keep a lady waiting in such a way!” Tony recognized the words for what they were-- a way to mask the very real fear she had felt, and he bent to press a kiss to both girls heads. He pressed one to Emma’s forehead as well, and he whispered something in Italian to the woman.
that prompted a sniff and nod before the woman pulled away with a sigh of contentment.

Another Corridor sprung up in the wing, the first to come through it being Dorian and Zevrael. “Fratris!” Dorian gasped with relief, and Tony was pulled into a hug by the pyromancer, being joined by Zevrael a moment later. “Maker’s breath, it’s good to see you on your feet!”

“You scared the hell out of us, Lethallin!” The elf admitted, pulling back after a second or two with his husband a moment later.

Tony snorted with a sheepish look, though his eyes were drawn to their corridor when Natasha and Clint stepped through as well, stumbling only for a second before righting themselves. “Hey guys.” He greeted them with a grin, waving at the duo. “Miss me?” A moment later he made an ‘oomph!’ noise as he was tackled into a hug by both. “Damn, I’ll take that as a yes, then!”

The archer laughed and pulled away, hastily wiping the tears from his golden-brown eyes. “Tony Stark, you are a tough son-of-a-bitch.” He gave the genius a happy grin. “Good to see even death can’t keep you down.”

“Not surprising, giving the kinds of secrets you’ve been keeping.” Natasha pulled back with an understanding smile quirking at her lips. “I don’t blame you for that, though.”

The genius nodded at that, his face taking on a more serious appearance. “Yeah, I heard you were either about to be let in on everything, or slated to once everything was over.”

The duo nodded before the archer held up his hand. “That can wait, though-- we’ve got more important things to worry about right now.”

“Clint’s right, Glitch.” The group turned to see the Boone trio striding towards them with Rhodey on their heels, and the sniper didn’t hesitate to pull him into a tight hug. “Good to see you back, Tony.”

Aria didn’t hesitate to pull the genius into a hug as well. “We’re glad you’re back! It feels like our family is whole again!”

Ulysses didn’t say anything, simply grasping Tony’s shoulders and studying him for a moment before pulling him into one of his rare hugs. “Welcome back, Amicus.” He finally rumbled with a soft, relieved look in his dark brown eyes as he pulled away.
A relieved laugh escaped Rhodey as he stepped up and pulled the genius into a hug. “Dammit, Tones, I hate it when you go places I can’t follow. You’re one lucky bastard, you know that?”

“So you’ve told me, platypus.” Tony grinned at the dark-skinned man before turning towards where Bridget, Loki, Sleipnir, and Jörmungandr were standing over Wade’s body, all of them giving him a relieved grin. His cognac eyes went wide as dinner plates as he strode towards them. “Holy shit, you all look like you’re about to pass out! Have you been doing this the whole time?! I mean, that’s impressive as hell, I’ll give you that, but you’re all going to end up flat on your back if you all don’t take a break.”

Bridget spun to the trio and swung her arm in Tony’s direction. “See?! I’ve been telling you that for hours!” A second later, she turned back to the man and pulled him into a tight hug. “I’m glad to see you’re okay, Tony. I’ll give you a full check-up later, once everything is done.”

Tony grinned and nodded at her words. “Yeah, sounds good.” He turned back to the trio surrounding the bed again. “However, it won’t be necessary any longer. Chief, would you mind…?” The Master of Death nodded and opened a pocket dimension, reaching inside and withdrawing what looked like a large needle and syringe, passing to Tony.

“Those are the nanobots you designed to cure Wade’s cancer…” Bruce’s said as he stepped out from the doorway to Victor’s room, Minowa right behind him. “You stored them in your pocket dimension… why--?”

Cognac brown eyes met the scientist’s as Tony sighed deeply before answering, “The Displacement… It knocked something in me out of alignment. I can’t access any of what I normally could, not yet, so I can’t get into my pocket dimension. But I was a damn good engineer before the technopathy, one of the best in the world, and I don’t need my abilities to access my brain.”

“Well said, Zeymahi.” Min rumbled as she stepped around her partner to approach him. The genius wasted no time in pulling her into a tight hug, one she returned in earnest. “I lost myself, Anthony…” She whispered in a choked, guilty voice.

“I know.” Tony murmured, tightening his grip. “We’ll talk about it later, okay?” The ebony-haired woman nodded and pulled away to cuddle against Bruce, who wrapped an arm around her, pressing a kiss to her head before leading her back into Victor’s room. “Alright, I know we were planning on doing Wade’s procedure in the next few days, but the timeline has been moved up-- I’m sure he’ll forgive us. I need him in one of the warded operating rooms prepped and ready to go in the next fifteen minutes. Bridget, Stephen, Bruce, be ready to rock and roll in that time.” All three
nodded, and they departed to do as he asked, Stephen only following after once he’d shared another kiss with his soulmate and nudged Peter towards Emma. Tony turned to the bed again, shooting Loki and his kids a proud smile. “Loki, Slei, Jór… you did well. Go get some rest-- it’s up to us, now.”

They nodded and finally allowed the magic to fade away, and Sleipnir had to lunge to catch his younger brother before he collapsed on the floor. Loki was by their sides immediately to support his second born, and he led them to the Nest before he pulled them both into a tight hug. “I’m so proud of you both,” he croaked with an expression of absolute pride on his face, tears welling in his emerald eyes. The two males simply smiled up at him, and the trio settled into the various pillows and blankets to sleep for a while.

Hadrian smiled at the family before catching Tony’s attention. “Well, I’m going to see where I can offer my aid. I’ll leave this in your hands.” The genius nodded, and the Master of Death turned to leave the room, though he stopped when he looked inside the room where Min and her partners had settled. He gave Minowa a smile, and the Dragonborn dipped her head with an exhausted, sad smile. His eyes trailed over the various men in the room before suddenly stopping on Victor. The monarch noticed him at the same time, and his eyes widened as recognition flashed in them. After a moment of tense silence, Hadrian simply gave him a smile and dipped his head in greeting before slipping from the room.

“Tony,” Rhodey and Emma approached the genius, Peter tucked against Emma’s side. the dark-skinned male giving him another smile and said, “Let us know if you need anything. Emma and I are gonna go grab a snack, then I’m headed back to the Spire with Craig and Ulysses.”

Emma looked towards the door as she said, “I’m going to see if Holly needs help with the kids… and let Alexia know it’s safe for her to see her Dad again. Celeste and Sophie have gone to help in the kitchen.” She gave Peter a kiss on the top of his head before nudging him towards the nest-- she knew the teen wouldn’t want to be too far from where his dads were, even though they would soon be going into surgery with Wade.

Peter looked towards Loki and his two eldest before making to lay down in another part of the area, only to yelp softly as he was pulled into the small pile with Slei and Jór and cuddled. He didn’t hesitate to burrow into them, a content sigh leaving him as he did so. Loki gave him an indulgent smile and reached to gently run his fingers through the brunette’s hair in a soothing motion.

The genius grinned at the sight his son made cuddled up with the two demigods and their father before turning back to Rhodey and Emma. “Alright, I’m going to prep for Wade’s surgery. Have FRIDAY contact me if you need anything.”

The duo nodded and gave him another round of hugs before striding through the doors. “Damn…” Rhodey finally huffed out a gusty breath, “Apparently, knowing your best friend can’t die doesn’t make the experience any less nerve-wracking.” A soft sniff drew his attention to the brunette next
to him, and his eyes widened in shock and alarm at the sheen of tears in Emma’s. “Em, hey, it’s okay,” He immediately reassured her, drawing her into his arms in a comforting embrace. He rubbed her back in a soothing motion even as she began to sob into his shoulder. “I know, Em, I know. This was scary, and it hit way too close to home.”

Agony filled eyes raised to look at him as the woman choked, “I-I can’t lose him, Jim, I just can’t, not now, not after everything else, it’s too soon--!”

The dark-skinned man felt his heart clench painfully in his chest at the reminder of what she’d lost only recently. He remained quiet and still as she cried into his shoulder, allowing her to vent everything she’d been holding inside of her in an effort to remain strong for the people around her--especially her daughters and nephew. Once the tears had stopped and her breathing had somewhat returned to normal, he spoke again. “Feeling better?” Once she nodded, he continued, “Emma Stark, you have to be one of the strongest goddamn women I know. But you don’t have to be strong all the time, and I’m honored that you have enough trust in me to allow yourself to be weak in front of me.” He pulled away and gently cupped her neck in his hands. “We’re not out of the woods yet, though. I need you to keep pulling on that incredible resilience I know you have, just for a little bit longer. Can you do that for us? Can you do that for me ?”

Emma took several deep breaths and nodded with a look of determination on her face. “Yes, I can. I just needed to let some of it out… it was getting overwhelming.”

“I understand completely. Now, go find Holly and the kids-- I’m sure they’d love to see you, and Alexia will be waiting on news of her dad. I’ll bring you guys some food before I head up to the Spire.”

The brunette gave him a small smile and made to turn before pausing for a second. She proceeded to turn around and press a quick kiss to his cheek. “Thank you,” she said softly with a look of gratitude in her eyes. Before Rhodey could say anything, she was already striding down the hallway away from him.

Several seconds of silence passed before a cough drew the Colonel’s attention to the way they’d come. Craig and Ulysses were approaching him from the direction of the medical wing, a knowing smile on the former’s face and the latter sporting an arched eyebrow. Rhodey scowled at both of them and grunted, “Not a word out of either of you. Open a Corridor to the kitchen, please and thanks.”

The words pulled a chuckle out of the snipers as one opened a Corridor. Neither of them would bring attention to it. At least… not yet. There would be time for that later.

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The door to Victor’s room burst open, and several heads whipped towards it as a small blur shot into the room and leaped into Logan’s arms with a shriek of “Daddy!!”

Logan barked out a laugh as he held his daughter tightly, burying his nose in her hair. “Hey, pup! Did you enjoy your shopping trip? Were you good for Holly?”

Lexi nodded rapidly with a grin on her face. “It was fun! I got clothes and a bunch of games to play with the other kids!” She looked towards James next, and she wiggled out of Logan’s arms to run over and hug the assassin.

The super soldier didn’t hesitate to scoop her up into his arms, holding her against him in a comforting hug. “Well, hello to you too, Volchok! Your outfit looks very cute today!”

“Thanks! Aunt Holly helped me pick it out!” Her bright eyes then slid to Victor, who was once again reclined against Minowa. She tilted her head curiously before looking to the Dragonborn for guidance.

Amused eyes met hers and the woman dipped her head and explained quietly, “Alexia, this is Victor. He’s a new member of our pack. Be careful, he’s unwell, and it wouldn’t be good to hurt him further.”

The young girl nodded in understanding, and James set her down so she was seated on the side of the larger bed. “Hi, I’m ‘Lexi, he’s my daddy,’” She pointed behind her to where Logan was standing with a proud smile on his face. She then turned to Minowa and pointed at her, announcing with all the authority of a six-year-old, “And she’s my mommy!”

A stunned silence fell over the group for a second, and Victor looked up at Min for confirmation. The ebony-haired woman had a look of complete shock on her face, and she looked to Logan in turn for help. Instead of speaking, he simply smiled and gave a firm nod. Something raw and joyful flashed over her features before she turned her attention back to Alexia and Victor. “We may not share blood, but… indeed. She is monu, our daughter.”

“Yeah! And he’s another daddy!” Alexia gestured to James, who gave her an indulgent smile and reached to ruffle her hair. “Daddy Bruce is helping Uncle Wade feel better, but he’s my daddy too!” After a few seconds of thought, she turned her big green eyes back to Minowa. “Mommy, when is Daddy Bruce gonna be done?”
Minowa reached to gently tug a piece of the child’s hair in an affectionate gesture. “I’m unsure of that, malgrohiiki. They’ve only just started, but I’m sure they’ll let us know when they’re done.”

The brunette girl nodded in understanding before looking around again. “Hey, was someone else here? I smell it!”

Logan stepped up and gently rubbed the now tense girl’s back soothingly. “Easy, Lexi-- Pietro was keeping Victor company, but he’s with Ms. Romanoff and Mr. Barton now.”

Green eyes lit up in recognition. “Oh! He’s the boy in the wheelchair with the pretty hair! I like him, he’s nice!” Hearing the amused chuckles around the room, a small pout appeared on her face. “What? It’s fluffy and colored like storm clouds!”

“Indeed, his hair is very pretty. I’m sure he would like the compliment.” Minowa reached to gently stroke the young girl’s hair, a soft glint in her eyes as ‘Lexi leaned into the tender touch. The group fell into a comfortable silence as they basked in the shared bond between them. After a few minutes though, the Dragonborn looked up at James with a knowing look. “Strunodi,” she softly called out to him, drawing his attention from where he’d been looking towards the doorway. Seeing the guilt begin to cross his face, she held up a hand to stop whatever it was he was about to say. “I know, love. Go, they need you.”

James swallowed as he stepped closer. “But you need me here,” He said, pain lacing his tone.

The woman reached up to gently pull him down for a quick kiss. “You were and are with us in our hearts, no matter where you go. Right now, your son needs you, as does the family you share.”

A raw vulnerability and breathtaking love and gratitude flashed across the assassin’s face, and he leaned in again to press another kiss to her lips. “Ya lyublyu tebya tak sil’no moya koroleva,” He whispered against them before pulling away with a bright smile. He quickly shared a kiss with Logan, brushing one against Victor’s head as well once he’d gotten his permission. He pressed another kiss to Alexia’s head with a promise to be back later before turning and striding out the door.

After a moment of quiet, the young girl turned to Logan, Min, and Victor with wide green eyes. “Mommy, Daddy, does Daddy James have cooties?”
The laughter that echoed from the room at the question could be heard throughout the entirety of the medical wing.

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“Loki, your brother just arrived.”

The god of mischief looked to the ceiling and nodded. “Thank you, FRIDAY. I’ll go speak with him.” The AI called out her confirmation, and he silently rose from his spot in the Nest so he didn’t disturb his two sons or the teen sandwiched between them. He slipped from the room, making his way down the hall to the communal living room where Thor had stationed himself.

Relieved eyes turned to him as he entered, and Thor turned to him fully as he began, “Loki, it’s good to see you again, though I wish the circumstances were not as grave as they are. I cannot imagine this is easy for anyone.” He slowly approached the ebony-haired man, carefully reaching to place his hands on his shoulders. A feeling of relief and joy filled him when Loki allowed the contact, even leaning into it a bit. “Are you well?”

Loki sighed after a few seconds of quiet, shoulders slumping as he replied, “I’ve been helping keep Wade alive for several hours, though I had help from Sleipnir and Jörmungandr. I admit, I’m exhausted.”

Thor nodded at his words, a compassionate smile on his lips. “Aye, I could tell from the moment you entered the room. Your sons are strong in magic, and in spirit… just like their father.” Shocked eyes rose to meet his, and the thunderer continued, “You are a valiant and loyal man, Loki, one others would do well to respect-- Norns know you have mine.” He let go of the shorter man’s shoulders and took a step back. “I will not keep you from your allies and family. Tell me, do you know where Anthony is? Heimdall informed me that he has returned.”

Swallowing down the sudden surge of emotion within his chest, the god of mischief nodded and looked behind him over his shoulder. “He has, but he’s in the middle of helping with Wade’s surgery, and they don’t know how long that will take. Stephen is aiding them, but Minowa is up and about now. If you so desire, you may talk to her.”

“The Lady Dragonborn! I would be honored to speak with her.” A smile quirked at Loki’s lips and he gestured for the thunderer to follow him. “I wish there was more I could do aid you all.” He admitted after a few seconds of walking side-by-side. “My skills do not rest in the healing arts, nor am I one for tracking and stealth.” He ran his fingers through his golden-blonde hair, a frustrated expression on his face. “I find myself at a loss. How does one help in a situation such as this when
The words prompted Loki’s gait to slow before stopping entirely, a thoughtful look crossing his face. “... Perhaps... there is a way you can help.” The ebony haired man slowly said as his nervous gaze turned to Thor.

The thunderer’s eyes lit up with joy as he turned so he was fully facing Loki. “Speak then, and I will do everything in my power-- nay, the power of Asgard-- to fulfill whatever request you have.”

A quiet fell over the hall at his words, and it took the god of mischief a moment to work through his surprise. “The child that Rogers and Maximoff abducted was sick when he was taken, and I’m unsure the state he’ll be in once we rescue him. I…” He ducked his head and averted his gaze, something raw and fearful shining within them. “Rem… He’s become a beloved member of this family that we created, and has become important to all of us… especially my two eldest.”

Thor studied him in silence for a moment before realization hit him. “I see.” He murmured with a bright smile spreading over his face. He reached out to gently grip Loki’s shoulders again, tilting his jaw so they were eye-to-eye again. “I know what it is that you are asking for, and I am more than willing to do this for you, and for your sons.”

The choked noise that escaped Loki was simultaneously relieved and wounded. “Thank you, Thor. Words can’t express--”

“There’s no need for thanks, Loki.” The blonde smiled reassuringly before pulling away from the shorter man and looking down the hallway. “Allow me a moment to speak with the Lady Dragonborn, and I will do as you requested.”

Loki nodded and stayed still as he watched Thor sweep down the hallway with a confident, powerful stride. After a few seconds of quiet a small sob escaped him, and he leaned with his back against the wall as the god tried to catch his breath and force back the sudden wave of grateful tears. Finally, once he’d gotten his breath back, he looked down the hall again with a bright smile on his face. “Thank you, Thor.” He whispered in the silence. He knew the thunderer would get the message, one way or another.

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Quiet had fallen over the medical wing of the Compound, its residents waiting in trepidation for
news of Wade’s condition and prognosis. Minowa hummed as she leaned against the wall next to
the windows peeking into the yard outside, watching silently as the sun rose and spilled sunlight
across the cold, frost-covered yard. The chill brought to mind the high, snow-covered peaks of
Skyrim, though the thought also caused a pang in her heart. She gave a long sigh of resignation as
her eyes slid shut.

“Penny for your thoughts?”

Minowa did little more than tilt her head in the direction of the female voice. “Memories of home. I
take it the children are asleep?”

Emma leaned on the wall opposite of her, humming in affirmation. “It took them a while, but yes.
Aria and Holly are with them now.”

“What of Celeste and Sophie?”

A small smile pulled at Emma’s lips at the obvious concern for all the residents of the Compound,
whether related or not. “They whisked Peter away for a bit to cuddle with him. Sleipnir and
Jörmungandr pouted for a bit, but they understand.”

Amused eyes slid open as the Dragonborn chuckled. “They understand the value of family. I’m
glad Peter has support while his fathers are helping Wade.”

The words prompted Emma to shoot the ebony-haired woman a knowing look. “What about you,
Min? I know you have your partners…” Minowa went very quiet at the question, and the mutant
took a chance and steadily announced, “Bridget told me what happened-- what you were
experiencing.”

For a few seconds, the Dragonborn seemed to stop breathing. Finally, her shoulders slumped and
she shifted her gaze to Emma with an expression of soul-deep exhaustion on her face. “You are one
of a privileged few to hold such information-- I would ask you to keep it close to your chest.”
Getting a nod and a promise to do so, Min gave a weary sigh and turned her gaze back to the
window. “How much?”

Acting on instinct, the brunette shifted closer and gently placed her hand on the woman’s shoulder.
“She told me what a Fracture entails, and how dangerous it can be. She also made brief mention of
something having happened in your past to have caused it, but she wouldn’t tell me what, and I
didn’t pry further.”
Minowa’s shoulders sagged in relief as he sighed deeply. “It’s… not something I enjoy speaking about, and there are a million years worth of memories between then and now. But…” she paused to think before continuing in a slow voice, “I believe my hand will be forced in this matter. My partners… They will want to know what happened, they will want to help.”

“Could they?”

Another silence followed before Minowa hesitantly answered, “I don’t know. I’ve… never told anyone the full story.” She turned her eyes back to Emma again. “There is a reason my partners and I have connected the way we have. Diisu’um I found similarities with in that we are not alone in our own minds. Grohiiki, he appeals to the primal side of me, the dragon’s nature of domination. Strunodi and I have… shared experiences. Diimalkro… seeing him chained up, nearly broken yet still holding on as tightly as he could… He was unwilling to let Richards break him without one hell of a fight.”

Emma nodded at her words, giving her shoulder and upper arm a gentle rub. “What about Alexia?”

The question prompted a smile out of Min, one full of wonder and joy. “Oh Emma, that beautiful little girl… she called me ‘mama’ earlier, and I’ve not felt such an upwelling of joy and maternal love in many years. It was…” she gestured inarticulately for a moment.

A soft noise of understanding escaped the brunette, and she gently tugged the Reaper into a hug. “I know. It’s hard to describe that kind of love.” Minowa gave a content noise and nodded in agreement.

The quiet was cut suddenly when FRIDAY called out, “Dragon-Boss, I hate to interrupt, but Rhodey needs you. There’s an unidentified jet en-route to the Compound, he needs you to see who it is.”

The Dragonborn’s eyes flashed with a fierce protectiveness as she pulled away from Emma. The brunette gave her an understanding smile and tilted her head towards the door in a ‘go on’ motion. Minowa smiled and nodded, turning on her heel and sweeping from the room. She pressed her palm to the top of her right forearm over the Core slot as she walked, the dragoon armor flowing over her body, blue plates streaked with lighter blue lines, grooves glowing a silvery white. She couldn’t help but ponder how her brother would react if he knew this Core was one she’d created herself-- the Blue Agate Core, designed for speed and aerial maneuvering. The smirk that crossed her face was fierce and full of too many teeth; if whoever was encroaching on their air space had malicious intent, they were going to find themselves far out of their league. She finally stepped outside, head immediately turned in the direction of the sound of jet engines. The wing protrusions
extended, a small elated whoop escaping her as she took to the skies.

“Damn, Min! Never seen the Dragoon Armor move like that! New Core?”

“Indeed, one I designed myself,” Minowa replied, glancing for a moment at the shot of Rhodey that appeared on her HUD. “The Blue Agate-- made for speed and agility.”

A snort preceded Craig quipping, “Like a hummingbird to a pigeon. Go get ‘em, Boomer.”

Glee-filled eyes glittered as the woman purred, “Gentlemen, it would be my pleasure.”

“Brother, I think you need to see this!”

T’Challa looked up from where he’d been sitting and studying something on his Kimoyo beads. His eyebrows shot into his hairline when he saw what she was gesturing to. “Something is approaching us, and it is doing so at a speed that the sensors are having trouble tracking... Bast, it’s moving at Mach 3!”

An impressed whistle escaped Erik as he stepped up to study the feed as well. “Damn, that’s pretty impressive. And it’s headed right for us...” A grin slid over his face, and his gleeful dark brown eyes rose to the windshield of the jet. “Taking a guess here that we’ve got a welcoming party inbound.”

They didn’t get a chance to reply before the thing shot past them with enough force to send the jet wobbling in the air. T’Challa activated the claws in the Black Panther suit’s hands and feet to grip the ground and wall, Shuri yelping in shock as she grabbed the controls harder. Erik dropped low to the ground and grabbed the nearest handle, even as an excited laugh and a ‘goddamn!’ escaped him. The jet recovered in time to see the shape shoot up in front of them, having circled around in the time it took them to straighten and regain their footing.

“Well, holy shit ,” The ex-Navy SEAL breathed in awe as he realized what they were now hovering in front of... or rather, who . “If that ain’t sending a message, I dunno what is.”

Shuri and T’Challa nodded in agreement, and the young woman reached out to request a line of
communication to the suit in front of them. After a moment or two, it patched through. Minowa’s voice rumbled from the speakers, filling the cabin with her powerful voice. “Grind, Thur Vedkaaz. Your presence is… unexpected, to say the least.”

A bark of laughter escaped Erik as he stood straight again, moving to the console to see the Blue Agate Dragoon armor better. “Yeah, that’s my doing. I saw what my cousin’s idiocy led to and decided that someone needed to use some common goddamn sense.”

There was silence for several seconds, Shuri having to cover her mouth to stifle her snickers as T’Challa began to sweat nervously. Finally, the Dragonborn’s laughter filled the cabin, prompting the king to let out a soft sigh of relief. “I don’t know who you are, but I can already tell that we are going to get along very well.”

“I knew you’d like him.” Shuri proclaimed with a grin and a sharp nod. “Hello, Minowa! It’s good to speak with you again!”

Outside, Minowa dipped her head and raised her hand in greeting. “Greetings to you as well, Shuri. I’m sure Harley and Peter will be eager to see you—come, follow me.” She turned on a dime and began to fly off at a much slower pace, reaching out to Rhodey as she did so. “Rhodey, it’s King T’Challa, Shuri, and an unknown party who claims to be their cousin.”

A surprised noise escaped Rhodey at that. “A cousin? That’s news to me… take them to the public landing pad, I’ll meet you there.”

The Dragonborn called out her agreement and did as he asked, watching to make sure the quinjet landed before looking towards the glass doors leading into the building. Through her visor she saw a Corridor open up a few feet from the entryway, Rhodey stepping through a second later. Minowa couldn’t help the small snort of laughter as she watched him immediately pull a vial from his jacket pocket and take a small sip from it, slipping it away a moment later. Her attention was pulled to the jet as the back hatch opened, T’Challa stepping out with Shuri by his side. A second behind them was the man who claimed to be related to the two royals. After taking a moment to simply observe the trio approaching Rhodey, she shot over their heads to land next to Rhodey, the helmet of the Dragoon armor flowing away.

Shuri grinned and bounded up to her, despite the hissed discouragement from her brother. “Min! It’s good to see you again! This is a new look to the armor—new Core?”

Crimson eyes glittered with appreciation as the ebony-haired woman nodded, reaching to rest a clawed gauntlet on her shoulder in a friendly greeting. “Indeed, one I designed for speed and
“Well, it sure as hell did its job!” Erik stepped up as well, an excited grin on his face. “Moving at Mach 3 and able to turn nearly on a dime-- damn impressive, I gotta say.”

Seeing the curious head tilt from the Dragonborn, the princess gestured to each other grandly as she introduced them, “Minowa, this is our cousin, Erik Stevens. Erik, this is Minowa Norddahl; Field Commander Dragoon, co-leader of the New Avengers.”

Minowa nodded and stepped forward, holding her hand out to him. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Erik Stevens.”

The dark-skinned man grasped her hand and shook it firmly. “Pleasure’s all mine, ma’am.”

“Wait, Erik Stevens? I’ve heard of you.” Rhodey stepped up as well, eyes slightly wide. “Navy SEAL, right? I think I remember your name from a couple of JSOC reports that crossed my desk…”

The man turned to him and snapped him a sharp salute. “Yes, sir. Honor to meet you, Colonel Rhodes.”

Minowa gave a tiny snort at the movement, even as Rhodey was saying ‘at ease’. “Krosis, apologies.” She said at the confused looks she got. “I was remembering what Bridget told me happened the first time Craig met you.” she aimed the words at Rhodey, a fond sparkle in her eyes.

The man gave a small ‘ah’ of realization. “Yeah, I remember now… he did react pretty similarly. Must be a military thing.”

T’Challa took that moment to step forward, though he stopped dead when Minowa’s eyes turned to his. Instantly something within him was on high alert, the part that made him the Black Panther screaming ‘danger’ as the woman turned and approached him. He swallowed hard, his sudden rigid posture catching the attention of the other three.

A sharp grin slid across the Dragonborn’s face as she stopped a few feet from the king. “King T’Challa. We meet face to face at last.” T’Challa swallowed hard, and the smile on her face grew. “Yes, I thought this might be the case… you feel it, don’t you? That predator that lends its strength to you is an intelligent one, a powerful one…” Her eyes flashed as she then purred, “But it’s also smart enough to know when it’s in the presence of something far more dangerous.” The armor
began to melt away, leaving her standing in a simple red tank top and black leggings. “I won’t lie, \textit{Thur Vedkaaz} -- I do not like you. Though your actions were done with good intention in regards to James, they led to the Rogue Avengers landing on your doorstep. The moment they were no longer in your home, you washed your hands of them without taking responsibility for your part in things.” The energy of the area seemed to ripple for a second before Min’s wings burst into existence, flaring out in a display of aggression, power, and dominance. “But this is not your home. It is ours-- it is mine. Those most precious to me reside here, and your inaction indirectly led to several of its inhabitants being hurt, grievously injured… and one almost \textit{killed}.” She hissed the last word, eyes flashing with anger. “If it were not for extenuating circumstances, Anthony, my brother in all but blood, my \textit{family}, would have been \textit{murdered in cold blood}.”

Shuri choked in shock as her hands flew to her mouth. She’d been fixated on the woman’s wings from the moment they appeared, but Tony’s name pulled her attention to the Dragonborn’s words. “Bast, no! Is he alright?”

The ebony-haired woman took a second to look over at both her and Erik, who also had an expression of concern and sympathy on his face. “He is. It’s not something that should be spoken about here, though. I swear to you though, he lives, and he’s alright.” A gusty sigh of relief escaped Shuri, and her cousin rested a supportive hand on her shoulder. “But his survival does not absolve you of your actions.” She addressed the king again, who had visibly paled at her words. “One of our children is \textit{missing}, and another of our team members is in surgery fighting for his life. Needless to say, the thought of having you in my home is… off-putting, to say the least.” She hissed the last part, a bit of black beginning to bleed into her sclera.

“I forced him here.” The words from Erik pulled everyone’s attention to him, and he stepped around Shuri to address the irate Dragonborn. “I saw the news and knew that my cousin had to step up and take responsibility for his part in this shit-show. I basically told him, ‘get your ass on a jet, come get me, and we’re gonna offer whatever help we can to help fix this mess that you didn’t clean up, to begin with’. It wasn’t done to make you uncomfortable in your home, I swear, and I’m sorry that we encroached where we’re not wanted.”

There was quiet for a tense few seconds as Minowa studied him, looking between the various family members. “You would do well to learn from your cousin, \textit{Thur Vedkaaz}.” She finally said, wings relaxing into a more neutral position. She gestured to Erik as she continued, “He saw a problem, said he would fix it, and then moved to do so. Words can only go so far if there are no actions to back it up.” She turned fully to Erik, a small smile on her face. “You have my respect, Erik Stevens. Your cousin is lucky to have you to aid him.” The ex-SEAL nodded and murmured ‘thank you ma’am’ before Min turned his attention back to T’Challa. “Though your presence here was… unanticipated, we would be fools to turn down aid of any sort at this point. Lives are on the line now, and I will not let my own personal feelings come before their safety and well-being.” She took a step or two back, allowing the monarch to take a deep breath again. “Rhodey will see you to a room. Erik, Shuri, with me, please.”

Rhodey stepped up to the man’s side as Shuri bounced along next to the Dragonborn, Erik
following along half a step behind her. “I hope you understand that you got off lucky.” He said conversationally as he looked at T’Challa out of the corner of his eye.

The Black Panther swallowed hard and nodded. “She... what is she??”

“The most dangerous woman you’ll ever meet, and currently not your biggest problem. You just got a smackdown from Minowa... but I’m still Tony’s best friend, so now you’re gonna get one from me.”

A deep sigh escaped T’Challa as he shut his eyes in resignation. This was going to be a long visit.

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“Peter!”

From his place sandwiched between Loki’s eldest sons, the teen’s head snapped up and a look of joy lit up his face. “Shuri!!” Quick as a flash, he was rocketing from the blankets and pillows to tackle her in a hug. “I didn’t know you were coming! When did you get here?!”

The princess laughed and hugged the teen tightly. “Only about five minutes ago! It’s good to see you too, little spider!” She pulled back to gently tug a piece of his hair, the duo chattering excitedly and pulling Slei and Jör into a group hug once they approached.

A chuckle escaped Minowa as she watched the two, and she shared an indulgent look with the man next to her. “They get along quite well, don’t they?”

Erik snorted and he nodded, a smirk pulling at his lips. “Yeah, Pete’s a cute kid, that’s for sure. I’m just wondering…” He looked around for a moment as if searching for something.

The Dragonborn smirked and held up her hand, lowering her fingers in a ‘3... 2... 1...’ motion, and as she dropped the last finger the door to the medical wing was thrown open forcefully, prompting an annoyed call from Phil to ‘keep it down’. Harley completely ignored him as he burst into the wing, and it took him only a second to see the group near the Nest. A relieved noise escaped the blond as he strode purposefully over to them, and Shuri turned and allowed the taller teen to pull her into his arms, resting his chin on her head with a relieved look on his face. A few seconds later, he was pulling away to study her face with a critical eye before he suddenly leaned
down to press a kiss to her forehead, cheeks slightly red as he did so. Shuri’s eyes narrowed as he pulled away, and she muttered something that sounded like, ‘you can do better than that’ before reaching for the front of his shirt and pulling him down forcefully for a real kiss.

“Oh, damn!” Erik laughed with vindictive glee even as Peter was squealing ‘I knew it!!’ with the two godlings echoing the sentiment. “Is this who you’ve been texting back and forth with for three months, Shuri?”

Shuri pulled away from the kiss, shooting Erik an arched eyebrow and a smirk. “Indeed, this is my idiot white boy, Harley.” She turned her sparkling brown eyes to Harley, who was staring at her like she was the most beautiful thing in the world. “Harley, this is my cousin, Erik Stevens.”

The teen immediately took a fearless step forward, offering his hand to Erik. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir. I’m Harley Keener, I think your cousin might just be the most beautiful and chaotic girl I’ve ever met, and I adore her.”

That pulled an outright laugh out of Erik as he shook the offered hand firmly. “You’ve got guts, kid. You’re not afraid to say what’s on your mind... on that note, what’s your opinion of king kitty?”

Harley paused to think for a second. “I’d ask for permission to speak freely, but honestly, I’d do it anyway. I think T’Challa needs a reality check and a boot up the ass.”

Erik whooped and clapped the teen on the back, “Damn, I like this one! You really know how to pick ‘em, cuz!” Shuri laughed and latched onto Harley again, and the man turned to Peter. The teen was watching his two friends with a massive grin on his face, and the ex-SEAL commented, “You don’t seem jealous at all.”

The brunette’s head snapped in his direction, adorable brown eyes wide at the words. “What?? Why would I be jealous? I want my friends to be happy, and if they make each other happy, it makes me happy!”

Minowa chuckled as she stepped around Erik to soothingly run her fingers through Peter’s hair. “You show wisdom that so many others lack. Besides...” She gave him a knowing look as she lowered her voice, “Your mind is elsewhere in such matters, is it not?”

A squeak escaped Peter and he ducked his head, face turning bright red. He was saved from further
embarrassment when the doors at the far end of the wing opened, admitting Stephen, Tony, Bridget, and Bruce. The genius pulled the gloves from his hands and tossed them away, turning back just in time to catch his son in the flying hug he’d hit him with. Stephen was quick to join them, pressing a kiss to Peter’s head and another to Tony’s before simply holding them close.

Phil approached Bridget, though he had to lunge suddenly to support her as she staggered. “Easy, Bridget,” He murmured as he helped her sink into a chair. “Are you okay? Need a drink?”

“That would be good, Phil. She may also need this as well.” Minowa approached one of the cabinets, pulling a subtly glowing blue bottle from it and uncorking it. “Bridget, here,” She pressed the vial into the Archmage’s shaking hands. “That will help take the edge off, but you need sleep.”

The nod of agreement they received in lieu of an answer spoke to just how exhausted the mage was, and she tossed back the potion without complaint. A second or two later, she took a deep breath and straightened in the chair. “Thank you, Min.” She murmured before turning to Phil, though she was unable to get more than a syllable or two out before she trailed off, eyes closing as she fell asleep right in front of them.

Phil wasted no time in swooping her up to deposit her in one of the beds. “She’s been going non-stop for almost 24 hours… She went straight from the mission in Korea to trying to keep things together here. She deserves the chance to take a break.” He pulled the blanket of the bed over her, taking a moment to check her vitals before stepping away to let her sleep.

The words got a nod of agreement from Minowa who then turned her attention to Bruce, eyes softening at the tired look in his. “Diisu’um ,” She murmured, approaching him and pulling the scientist into her arms. “Are you well?”

The brunette sighed tiredly and nodded. “Feels like I could sleep for a year… but yeah. I’m okay, love.”

“What of Wade?” Sleipnir and Jörmungandr stepped forward with twin expressions of hope and trepidation on their faces. “Will he be alright?” The eldest asked, resting a supportive hand on his brother’s back.

Tony sighed and straightened, turning to them with a calm expression. It quickly changed to a reassuring smile as he announced, “We removed what we could from his system manually, then set the nanobots loose. If they keep going at the rate they are, Wade will be cancer-free in less than two hours.” Peter let out a happy cry before pulling both of his dads back in for a hug, the two godlings doing the same with each other. “We did it, Pete-- he’s gonna be okay.”
Bobby’s head snapped up from where he had been sitting on the couch and playing with his phone. Warren had surged to his feet, his own tablet clutched tightly in his hands and a look of incandescent fury on his face. “Warren, what the hell? What’s with the shouting??” The mutant asked as he tucked his device away, rising to his feet.

Blue eyes snapped in his direction, and there was a look in them that nearly had Bobby taking a step back out of shock and fear. “We’re going to talk to Scott and Jean, now. Let’s go.”

The young man nodded mutely, two shocked and intimidated to form words. He silently followed behind the clearly irate man and slipped into Jean’s office when indicated to do so.

Jean rose to her feet as they entered, moving around to gently put her hands on Warren’s shoulders. “Warren, take a deep breath and calm down. What has you so upset??”

“The Amber Alert that Stark Industries just put out on the Pavus kid-- have either of you seen it??”

From where he was seated in his own chair behind the desk, Scott shook his head with a furrow in his brow. “I didn’t pay too much attention to it-- just that one of their adopted kids got taken by good ol’ Captain America. Man’s got a screw loose if he thinks he’ll get away with that.”

Warren growled, the intensity and hostility of the noise shocking everyone. “Yeah, that’s great, but have any of you seen the picture of the kid?!” Getting shakes of the head, he whipped the tablet out and slammed it on the desk, the force of the hit sending a crack webbing across the screen. Despite the damage done to the surface, everyone present could immediately tell why Warren was bringing it to their attention.

As the picture of a young Remy LeBeau smiled up at them from the cracked screen, Bobby finally managed to get out, “How the actual hell??”

“It doesn’t matter how!!” Warren screamed, grabbing the tablet and hurling it with all his strength at the wall and shattering it completely. “I don’t know how the fuck he survived us leaving him where he belonged in the freezing back ass end of nowhere, but that little bastard is the reason
“Warren!” Jean called in a firm voice, putting both hands on his shoulders. “You need to calm down! I know you’re angry and upset, but destroying property won’t help.” The winged mutant nodded at her words and took several deep breaths. “This does bring up several questions, though,” She continued, turning back to everyone once the blond was stable again. “The first being how he made it out of the Antarctic to begin with. Remy is also much younger than the last time we saw him, and he looks much healthier and happier too. It bears further investigation, there’s no doubt about that.”

Bobby suddenly hummed before slowly saying, “This could also explain why Wade Wilson joined the Avengers shortly after that whole thing at the Citadel. I mean, it’s pretty obvious Wade and Remy were a little too close to be just friends. If mini-Remy got adopted by two of the New Avengers, it would make sense why Wade would follow shortly thereafter.”

Jean nodded at that and turned to the group as a whole with a calm, commanding aura. “Let’s begin researching this and find out what we can. We don’t want to move against Stark or the New Avengers until we have all the details. With Worthington Industries in the shape that it’s in and our access to Professor Xavier’s fortune cut off, we don’t have the financial pull that we used to.”

“We also have the government keeping a very close eye on us,” Scott reminded them as well. “We can’t risk having them descend on the place right now, so we need to bide our time and figure out how best to deal with this. Only after we’ve gotten some idea about what’s going on can we decide what to do about his survival.”

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Steve growled as he stormed out the door, shutting it firmly behind him to muffle the sound of wet coughs coming from within. How was it that, even sick, the redhead could still back-talk him worse than he ever had to any of his superiors? “That kid needs to learn some respect.” He huffed as he sank down in a chair at the table, looking over to where Maximoff was leaning over someone with her scarlet magic engulfing his head.

“Well, I’m sure we can teach him once we’ve got Bucky here. Now that he doesn’t have to worry about staying under Stark’s thumb, he doesn’t have to be afraid to leave anymore.” Wanda simpered as she continued to weave her will through the man’s mind. “It will just be you, Bucky, the child, and me, and Stark can’t exactly come at us from beyond the grave.”

The super soldier nodded at that, a small smile on his face. “Bucky won’t have to be scared
anymore, that’s for sure. And the shield around the house is holding well?”

Wanda smiled at him as she finally pulled away from the man. “They are-- nothing can detect us as long as I’m holding it, and it would take quite a lot of force for it to come down.”

Blue eyes twinkled at that and Steve stood to pull her into a hug. “Thank you for helping us, Wanda. I always told them you just needed a chance.”

“You shouldn’t have to be punished for protecting your best friend, Steve,” Wanda replied with a bright smile. The sound of another wet, wracking cough from the other room caused a frown to pull at her lips. “Steve, I don’t think Bucky will be very happy if he comes and his son is as sick as he is. Maybe you should find him something to help with his cough at least.”

Steve frowned as well as he looked over his shoulder. “Maybe… is the messenger ready to go?”

Forest green eyes sparkled with excitement as Wanda nodded, gesturing for the man to join them. “He is. He has the note, and he’ll deliver it directly to Bucky like we asked.”

“And he won’t remember anything?”

Wanda reached to hug him again. “I promise, he won’t remember a thing.”

The super soldier nodded and gave her a pat on the back before pulling away. “Alright, let’s send him on his way.”

Wanda nodded and waved to the blonde has he walked down the hall before her smile turned sinister, and she waved her hand over the man’s head again before patting his cheek condescendingly. “No, you won’t remember a thing at all. Off you go, pet.” The man nodded, his eyes glassy and vacant as he walked out the door. The brunette smirked before a small cough escaped her, and she cleared her throat to dislodge the bit of phlegm there. She was startled when another, slightly rougher cough escaped her, but the witch chalked it up to the dry winter air. She couldn’t wait until Barnes showed up-- maybe then they’d be able to find something a bit more luxurious than some run down safe house.

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James stared in shock at the man standing in the lobby, completely numb to the fact that Tony and Stephen had their weapons aimed right at him. Given that the man had an obvious haze of familiar red magic around his head, he really couldn’t blame them. “Who the hell are you?!” He snarled, a combination of fear and fury lighting in his tone.

“A messenger, nothing more.” He replied in a hollow voice, head tilted to one side like he was having trouble supporting it. He reached into his coat in a motion that was too smooth to be natural, withdrawing a piece of paper from it and dropping it on the floor in front of him. “The message is delivered.” He reached into the coat again and withdrew a pistol, and before anyone could react he’d pressed the barrel against his head and pulled the trigger.

A horrified cry escaped the assassin at the sight, and he vaguely registered the sound of Tony throwing up to one side with Stephen soothing him in a tremulous tone. After what felt like an eternity, he took several shaky steps to where the note was, pointedly ignoring the cooling corpse next to it. “How much you wanna bet this guy was an innocent in this?” He finally asked as he straightened, looking over to where Stephen and Tony were. “Just more collateral damage in the grand scheme of things.” The words were spat with such venom that they could have melted a hole through the floor if given physical form.

Stephen shook his head and pulled Tony against his chest, the genius continuing to shake and sob as the Sorcerer Supreme waved his hand to portal the body to a secure location. “What does the message say, James?” He asked as he rubbed his soulmate’s back soothingly.

The sniper looked down at the note in his hands again, cringing at the sight of a few drops of blood staining the pages now. He popped the paper open and scanned it, and a few sentences in he went eerily still.

Blue-green eyes slid to James, the sorcerer having sensed the sudden change in atmosphere. “James? What is it?”

For a moment, icy blue eyes closed in resignation before they then opened with a much colder, angrier spark in them. “The end of the line.”

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Bucky,
If you’re reading this, then it means Wanda’s messenger reached you safely. Don’t bother asking him any questions, he won’t remember what happened. Bucky, I got your son out of Stark’s clutches, he’s safe with us. That bastard won’t be able to hurt you or him or anyone else ever again, I made sure of it. You can leave the Compound safely and not feel trapped by him or his false team, and you can come live with us now! Leave as soon as you can, we’ll find a way to get in touch.

See you soon,

Steve
Chapter Summary

Hadrian and Minowa have a brief heart-to-heart while Pepper makes new friends in the form of Matt Murdock and Frank Castle. Victor and James bond over being fathers, and Pietro is finally forced to accept that his sister may not be redeemable. Sam and Scott are told a few interesting (and sometimes hard-to-hear) facts by Death and its master, and Aria lets Holly in on one of the painful truths about being a Reaper. Loki checks in on Laura and the girls, Steve and Wanda get overconfident, and a breakthrough is had.

(Craig Boone needs a damn hug.)

((Scott is a fanboy, no matter how hard he denies it.))

Chapter Notes

Small warning for Craig Boone's backstory in this one, folks. That poor man has canonically gone through some awful shit, I wish I could reach through the screen and just hug him.

“How is Tony doing?” A male voice inquired.

Crimson eyes slid to where Hadrian stood besides Minowa, and the Dragonborn hummed in contemplation before turning her eyes to look over the grounds again. “Still shaken by what he witnessed. He has Stephen with him, and he’ll help Zeymahi sort through what he’s feeling.” The woman looked forward again and dipped her head as she heaved out a deep sigh. “That man was innocent in all of this.”

The Master of Death nodded with a melancholy expression on his face. “It was murder what Wanda Maximoff did, plain and simple. She could have gone about delivering Rogers’ message in a number of other ways… she didn’t need to kill someone to do it.”

Minowa looked over at Hadrian again, and after a moment turned to him fully. “How are you holding up, Dinokthur? This sort of thing has never occurred during a house call…”

A soft chuckle escaped the ebony-haired man as he turned to face her as well. “Ever the observant one, aren’t you?”
Snorting in amusement, the woman gave him a knowing look. “I am the eldest of your family, Hadrian. I know when something troubles you.”

“That you do, my dear.” Hadrian hummed before falling into a pensive silence to gather his thoughts. Minowa remained quiet as he did so, and after a full moment, he spoke again. “In truth, it was a shock. In the Nexus, I don’t feel the souls crossing over into my realm-- the Deathly Aura helps dampen it. Here, though… I felt that death, Minowa. I felt the terror and anguish that accompanied that murder. I…” He looked over the grounds again, guilt flashing in his eyes. “For a long time, I was afraid I’d become so accustomed to death that it would no longer phase me. This reminded me that, no matter how much time passes, it never gets any easier.”

Minowa gave him a sympathetic smile and reached to gently grasp and squeeze his shoulder. “It’s a reminder of your past, Hadrian-- that you were human, that you were just as susceptible to it as the next man. That you took on the mantle of death doesn’t change that.”

The duo was quiet for a moment as the Master of Death allowed what the Dragonborn said to settle in his mind. Finally, the male spoke again, tone softer than before. “You felt it too, didn’t you?”

There was silence for a few seconds as slit-pupiled crimson eyes bore into emerald ones, tension hanging like a blanket between them. Finally, a sardonic smile quirked at the Dragonborn’s lips. “I felt it as clearly as the day my home took its last, gasping breath.”

Hadrian didn’t say anything in reply; instead, he nodded and pulled Minowa into a tight hug. The woman simply burrowed into his arms, content to take comfort in the presence of the man who’d saved her from herself. No other words needed to be said between them.

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Pepper closed the door to her office and gave a long groan, running a hand down her face. The fallout from Rem’s kidnapping was proving to be a nightmare between the PR shitshow it was causing and the media uproar, all topped off with her own worry for the redhead. She sat heavily in her seat and reached for the coffee on her desk, taking a sip only to grimace. The beverage had gone cold in the time it had taken her to do her most recent media statement. She was contemplating whether it was worth the energy to get up and make a fresh cup when her desk phone rang, prompting another groan out of her. The redhead reached over to answer the call, forcing her tone to remain civil as she called, “Yes?”
“Ms. Potts, pardon me for the interruption, but there are two men here to see you-- A Mr. Matt Murdock and Mr. Frank Castle?”

The CEO of Stark Industries sat straight up in her chair, surprise lancing through her at the names spoken by her secretary. “Go ahead and send them up, Tanya.”

Tanya called an affirmative, and a few minutes later there was a knock on her office door. “Good evening, Ms. Potts.” Matt greeted the woman as he stepped through, Frank a step behind him holding a drink carrier with several cups in it. “I apologize for our unexpected visit-- I hope coffee is enough to placate whatever wrath we may have incurred.”

A relieved laugh escaped Pepper as she gestured them forward. “You’re a godsend, the both of you. Please, have a seat.” They did so, and Frank wasted no time in passing the woman her drink. She hummed in pleasure at the first sip, and she gave the duo a look over the lid. “I won’t ask how you managed to get my order to my exact specifications without knowing them.”

“We tried callin’ the Compound first to see if we could get ahold of Stark-- he was indisposed, but a guy there was willin’ to point us in your direction. He told us your preferred coffee order when we asked.” Frank admitted as he took a sip of his own black coffee.

Blue eyes sparkled knowingly as Pepper nodded. “The only two there who know my specific coffee order are Tony and Rhodey. You were probably talking to the latter if Tony was busy.”

Matt nodded as he reached for his own coffee, smoothly plucking it from the tray. “Yes, that name sounds familiar. He was grateful we were willing to offer our assistance and pointed us in your direction.”

“In what capacity?” The question garnered twin looks of surprise and caution from the duo, and the woman simply gave them a knowing smile. “Gentlemen, there is very little that Tony doesn’t tell me. I know exactly who I have sitting across from me currently, and said knowledge will not leave this office unless I have your express permission, so let’s drop the coy act and get down to business.”

There was a period of silence as Pepper took another sip of her coffee, and finally Frank barked out a laugh. “I like this one. I can see why Tony made you CEO.” Pepper gave him a slightly sharper smile at that, and the Punisher looked over at his lover. “No sense in keepin’ up the act, Mattie.”
The lawyer gave a sigh and nodded, sitting back in his chair and taking a drink. “Very well, I’ll keep this simple. We’re wondering if there’s anything we can do to aid in this ongoing situation with Remington, on both a legal front and a hero front.”

The CEO hummed in thought as she turned her eyes to the ceiling. “Truthfully, we have lawyers standing at the ready for whenever Rogers, Maximoff, and Rem have been found. On the other end… how do you get around so easily when you’re blind? I have no doubt about the legitimacy of the claim, but it does raise several questions…”

Matt’s lips turned up in an amused smile. “The chemical that blinded me when I was younger heightened all of my other senses to superhuman levels. I can hear a person’s heartbeat and tell where they are, and if they’re lying-- quite useful in the law world-- and have a sort of… proximity sense. I’m also a master in Jiu-Jitsu, hand-to-hand combat, kung fu, judo, and several other martial art forms.”

An impressed whistle escaped Pepper as she sat back in her chair, looking the duo over with a piercing, critical gaze. “That’s extremely impressive. As for you…?” She looked towards Frank, arching her eyebrow. “Tony made mention of your skills, but didn’t go into detail.”

The dark-haired man smirked and sat back in his chair, taking a pull from his cup before replying. “I’m an assassin, but I only go for the real scum of humanity. I’m essentially a one-man army with a fuck-ton of durability and little to no pain threshold.”

“He’s also got stamina for days…”

“Mattie!”

Pepper laughed outright at that. It felt good to do so-- she hadn’t laughed since all the stress and drama regarding Rem had started. The love between the duo was more than clear, and the teasing simply endeared them to her. “Oh, I needed that, thank you.” She gave a sigh as she took another pull from her cup. “Well, gentlemen, I can’t say one way or another if we could use your skills currently-- we don’t know exactly where Rem is, and until we do--”

The sound of a phone going off stopped her, and Matt quickly fished the device out of his pocket and answered it. “Matt Murdock speaking… Luke, thanks for checking in. Have you found anything?… What about Jessica?… Alright, keep an eye out and ears to the ground. The New Avengers are doing their part, we can keep tabs on things here. Perfect, keep us posted.” He cut the call and gave the CEO a grin as he tucked the device away again. “Frank and I aren’t the only ones with eyes sweeping in the city for Remington. If he’s here, chances are we’ll figure out where
The redhead nodded, the trio exchanging a few more minutes of pleasantries before Frank and Matt took their leave. Pepper couldn’t help but smile again as she drained the last of her coffee, tossing the cup in the trash before reaching for her holographic display again. The visit had been a welcome and much-needed break, and she jumped back into the fray with renewed energy and a lighter heart.

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The sound of the door sliding open prompted Victor to look up from his tablet, and he smiled brightly at the assassin that stepped through the doorway. James gave him a brilliant smile in return, striding over and bending down to press a kiss to the monarch’s forehead. “Evening, Vic.” He greeted him softly, lowering himself into the chair next to the bed. “Have you been holdin’ up okay?”

“I’ve been fine, thank you, James.” Victor reached to grab the super soldier’s hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. “Are you alright? I can’t imagine this has been easy for you…”

James’ expression melted into a warped amalgamation of sorrow, dread, and wrath. “It’s not. I’m scared to death for my son, for his health and well-being. I’m trying to figure out how Steve came to the conclusion that Rem and I were being held here against our will, or that Rem was being held over me to keep me here. And I’m absolutely infuriated at the actions of both him and Maximoff. My head feels like it’s moving at a thousand miles an hour, and I can’t focus on anything besides worrying about Rem.”

Emerald green eyes were full of compassion as Victor nodded at his words. “You love him very much, and it’s in a father’s nature to worry. You may not have known him long, but he has a place in your heart that would remain an aching, dark void if he were suddenly gone.”

The assassin nodded, swallowing hard and nodding in agreement. “I can’t lose him, Vic.” He choked softly, overwhelmed tears welling up in his eyes. “Not yet, not when I only just got him--”

Victor gave the hand he was holding onto a tug, prompting James to settle into the bed with him so they could embrace. The sniper began to sob brokenly, Victor murmuring soothingly to him and rubbing his flesh hand tenderly as he waited for the tears to abate. It took over thirty minutes for James to regain control, but he didn’t move from his place cuddled up with Victor. “Feeling better?” The monarch asked as he began to thread his fingers through the man’s hair.
“Yeah, doesn’t feel as raw,” James admitted as he wiped his eyes with his sleeve. “How did you know what to say?”

The monarch gave him a small, compassionate smile. “Because I have experience-- I have a son of my own, though I haven’t had time to tell anyone else about him.” James’ head snapped up, eyes widening in surprise and curiosity. “His name is Kristoff, I relinquished the throne to him shortly before I was taken captive by Richards.”

There was silence for a few seconds as James absorbed that information. "Does he know what happened? That you're okay?"

Victor shook his head as he snuggled into the assassin's arms. "I needed to build up my strength first-- I could barely stay awake for longer than an hour when I was first brought here. I plan to reach out to him soon, but Rem must take precedence right now." Seeing the unsure look on James' face, the monarch reassured him, "James, my son would be extremely displeased with me if I didn't recover at least a little before reaching out to him. I guarantee that he's also seen the news regarding Rem by now, so he'll completely agree with my decision to wait."

James finally nodded at his words, though his brow remained furrowed. "So… were you married at some point, then? I haven't heard any mention of his mother…"

A chuckle escaped the monarch as he shook his head, explaining, “He’s my adopted son-- his mother was one of my servants, and his father wasn’t in the picture at all. She would bring him to work with her, and I came to enjoy having him around as much as her.” A nostalgic smile crossed his face before it fell again. “When Kris was ten, my castle came under attack… his mother was killed when a portion of the roof collapsed. I couldn’t bear to see him go through the same struggles I did, growing up without parents or any kind of close adult figure. I adopted him and made him my heir, and I think of him as my own son.”

The assassin hummed softly at his story, something dark flickering in his eyes for a moment. “You mentioned your castle was attacked. Was it…?” The smaller man gave a nod, causing James to close his eyes and take a moment to force himself not to march down to the cells and murder Reed himself. “Would you tell me about him? About Kristoff?”

“I would love to. What would you like to know?”
“Clint? Natasha? Can I come in?”

The two agents looked up from where they were cuddled together on the couch to see Pietro in the doorway, a hesitant expression on his face as he looked between them. “Come on in, Speedy,” Clint gestured for the younger man to join them, and the blonde slowly wheeled himself forward until he was sitting across from them. “Did you wheel yourself all the way over here?? Damn, your stamina is recovering quick! Nat, would you mind getting him some water?” The redhead nodded and rose gracefully from her seat, reaching to gently thread her fingers through Pietro’s hair in a tender gesture before moving to the kitchen.

The blonde gave her a smile before turning his attention back to the archer across from him. “I wanted to ask if you two needed anything,”

Clint sighed softly before moving to gently grasp and squeeze the young man's hands. "We're okay, Peregrine. Nat and I know there's not much we can do until Rem is found, so we're playing the 'hurry up and wait' game."

Pietro nodded at the logic even as his brow furrowed at the nickname. A soft laugh preceded Natasha sitting down next to him, handing him his drink. “Peregrine as in the falcon. I think the better question though is ‘are you okay?’” The blonde stiffened a bit, and the redhead reached to gently take his hand. “I could tell something was on your mind from the moment I saw you in the doorway.”

Sky-blue eyes looked between the two agents for a moment before Pietro swallowed hard and looked down at his hands. “I... I heard about what happened in the lobby."

A deep sigh escaped Clint at the words, and he moved so he was sitting on Pietro's other side. "I was wondering if you had... How are you feeling?"

The young man remained quiet for a moment before he lifted his eyes again, revealing the tears that had welled up within them. "How could she have done something like that?” He croaked in a heartbroken tone, prompting the man and woman on either side of him to pull him into their arms in a tight, supportive hug. "She killed him! She didn't even think twice! How could she?!" The blonde buried his face in Clint's shoulder, sobbing.

Clint and Natasha exchanged a look over the young man's head as they attempted to soothe and comfort him. They could understand where his grief was stemming from, to a certain extent. Some
part of Pietro had clearly been hoping that there was still something worth saving in his twin—
given how she was all that remained of their family, neither agent could begrudge him for that.
Now, between what she'd done to a complete stranger and what she'd forced her own brother to do,
he was now having to face the reality of the atrocities his sister had committed. It was an
understandably hard pill to swallow, and they were content to sit with the young man and hold him
as he worked through his undoubtedly tremulous emotions.

It took several minutes for Pietro to calm down, and after several more taken just silently
contemplating the young man spoke again. "I think I already knew this is how it would end up," he
admitted in a soft, resigned tone. "I didn't want to just give up, though. I hoped... maybe she could
be convinced, maybe we could change her mind and show her a better way." A bitter, hollow laugh
escaped him. "I should have known better."

"Should have known better than to hope that your family could be helped? That they could be
redeemed somehow?" Nat turned the blonde's head so they were looking eye-to-eye. "Pietro,
there's absolutely nothing wrong with hoping someone you care about can be turned towards a
better path. But ultimately, they have to choose that path-- you can't force them to take it."

Clint gave his partner a knowing smile at that. "They have to be willing to change, be receptive to
being shown a different way forward. Wanda had the chance-- two of them, actually. She didn't
want to change. Honestly, I think it's pretty damn admirable that you held onto that hope for so
long, especially given what she did to you personally."

There were a few seconds of silence before Pietro suddenly blurted out, "I was going to save you
anyway." Seeing the confused looks he was getting, the young man blushed and elaborated,
"During the fight against Ultron, when Wanda compelled me to jump in front of the bullets... I had
planned on grabbing you and the child to pull you out of the way. Wanda... made me stop before I
could follow through." He swallowed hard before looking down in shame. "I know when we first
met, I was a bit of a jerk. It was my fault that you got hurt, so when I saw you were in danger... I
couldn't just stand there and let you get hurt or killed."

A soft, shaky sigh escaped the archer at the admission, and he slowly moved to take and squeeze
the speedster's hands. "Hey, it's water under the bridge, okay? I don't hold any of that against you--
one of us do. You have a chance to start over with a clean slate here, and dredging up the past isn't
going to help you move forward."

"We've already forgiven you for all of that," Natasha reassured the blonde as she hugged him from
behind. "Now let's focus on moving forward and leave the past mistakes where they belong. You
don't have to carry them around anymore." The blonde nodded with a sigh as if he'd had a weight
lifed from shoulders, and the assassin gently tilted his head to the side so she could press a tender,
feather-light kiss to his cheek. A moment later, Clint repeated the gesture on his other cheek.
Even though he was unsure about the implications of the gestures from both agents, Pietro couldn't help the small, shy smile that tugged at his lips. For now, he was content to be held and supported by the duo. Questions could wait until later, once things settled down.

Until then... he was perfectly content to stay right where he was.

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Sam and Scott were busy debating dinner options as they stepped into the kitchen, but a moment later Sam was forced to duck with a startled yelp as a knife whizzed over his head. "Yo, what the fu--?!"

"Oh! Dreadfully sorry about that!" The Master of Death approached them with a sheepish grin, even as the room behind him continued preparing the meal without his help. "I should know better than to magic knives around by now..."

Even as Scott was helping the dark-skinned man get to his feet again, he was giving the youthful-looking man a massive grin. "More magic! Awesome! I've seen Minowa using her magic while she's sparring, she's freaking amazing!"

A laugh escaped Hadrian at the engineer's enthusiasm. "Ah, you must be Scott Lang. Min mentioned she had a fanboy among the Compound's residents..."

"Dammit, I am NOT a fanboy!"

Sam snorted and arched an eyebrow at Scott. "You flipped your shit when you got that duck from Loki, dude, and it has its own place of honor on your shelf. Face it, you're a fanboy."

The exchange between the duo prompted a delighted chuckle from the emerald-eyed man. "Alright, you two, if you're quite done debating the obvious, I could use your help finishing the last few things. Mr. Wilson, if you would help me finish the croissants with honey butter, I would greatly appreciate it. Mr. Lang, there's a pile of green beans on the counter that need the ends snapped off. Would you mind taking care of that?"
The duo nodded and moved to help him. "I don't think we've met before," Sam stated as he briefly glanced over at the man next to him.

A knowing smile quirked at Hadrian's lips as he summoned over a pot of boiled potatoes and a masher. "No, we haven't. Rest assured though, we would have eventually—everyone does."

Curious chocolate-brown eyes slid over to where the duo was standing. "That's a lot of people you'd have to meet! How do you plan on doing that?"

"Simple. I'm immortal."

Both men stopped dead and turned to face him fully. "I'm sorry, what??" Sam squawked incredulously. "I call bullshit. I've seen some crazy stuff in the last few days that has me questioning my understanding of reality, but immortality? That's a bit of a stretch."

A gleeful grin slid across the Master of Death's face at the words. "I think you'd be surprised at how many here are, in fact, truly immortal."

Even as he returned to the green beans in front of him, Scott ventured warily, "But everyone dies eventually..."

A chill suddenly settled over the kitchen before a smooth, cultured voice spoke. "My Master is above such things, as are his chosen."

"Mortis," Hadrian turned to the being with a smile, "perfect timing. Would you care to introduce yourself?"

The male figure dipped into a bow towards the emerald-eyed man. "Certainly, my Master." He turned to the other men, who were staring at him with shock and confusion in their eyes. The cold of the room intensified, shadows lengthening and darkening as the Truth spread his arms in a deceptively welcome gesture. "Gentlemen, I am Mortis, and I am the physical manifestation of the primordial Truth of Death. Hadrian is my Master, having proven himself worthy of the title of 'Master of Death'."

A small smile was aimed in the being's direction as Hadrian urged him, "Draw it in a bit, Mortis. The Aura is a bit stronger than normal, currently."
A grim look passed the being's face as he did so. "Because of what transpired here earlier, I know. Wanda Maximoff will pay dearly for all of her transgressions once she crosses over into our domain."

"Okay, hold on, back the hell up for a second." Sam finally managed to choke out, still covered in a cold sweat, courtesy of his exposure to the Deathly Aura. "Are you trying to tell me that a) we currently have Death standing in our kitchen, b) the person who's been cooking dinner for us is the MASTER of Death, and c) we currently have at least two people on-premise who are 100% immortal??"

Death and Hadrian nodded simultaneously. "There are eight people here who fall under my command." The latter informed them, waving his hand errantly to mash the potatoes. "They are my Reapers, my family."

"The New Avengers," the hushed words of realization from Scott drew everyone's eyes to him. "Minowa, Bridget, the Boone trio, and the Pavus husbands-- they're Reapers, aren't they?"

Even as Hadrian nodded in confirmation, Sam's brow was furrowing as he did a mental headcount. "That still leaves one missing, Scott."

Scott was quiet for a moment as he thought. Sudden realization flashed in his eyes, and as he turned his gaze to Hadrian, the man gave him a knowing smile and a single nod. "Tony."

Confusion lanced through the dark-skinned man as he looked towards the engineer. "Tony? What about him?" A moment later, the same understanding hit him. "That explains so much..." he groaned as he ran a hand over his face. "But if he's a Reaper, how did he get beat half to death by Rogers in the bunker??"

"Because people aren't born Reapers, Sam-- they're chosen." Hadrian patiently explained. "Anthony was rescued by Minowa, Bridget, and Ulysses from that very place, and it was then that he became a Reaper."

There was silence for several seconds before Sam spoke again, something aching and hollow in his voice. "He was going to die there, wasn't he." The words were spoken as a statement of fact rather than a question.
Scott looked over at the dark-skinned man seriously. “Sam, Ms. Potts said that on the TV. His injuries were fatal…”

Mortis studied Sam with a knowing glint in his eyes. "Rogers slammed his shield into the chest of a man who had life-saving technology embedded six inches deep into it that he only recently was able to remove. Considering the impact turned his artificial sternum into little more than shrapnel, cracked and/or broke most of his ribs, one of which then proceeded to puncture a lung and further compromise his already decreased lung capacity... yes, Sam Wilson. Anthony would have died. It was only because of the intervention of my Master that he didn’t."

A shuddering sigh escaped the ex-Air Force soldier as he leaned against the counter to support himself. "Damn. I was so focused on the fact that Rogers left a man behind... He was supposed to be the epitome of the good American soldier, a paragon of those values and ideas, and I was so angry over the blatant disregard of them that I completely missed how severe Tony’s injuries were.” After a moment of silent contemplation, he looked back up at Hadrian and Mortis. “He didn’t deserve the shit Rogers put him through, and he didn’t deserve the way we all treated him. You guys took him at his lowest and supported him through recovery, you stuck by his side... you gave him the family he really deserved.” A smile suddenly tugged at his lips, a soft chuckle escaping him. “It’s pretty ironic in hindsight. Captain America is supposed to be the model soldier, the physical embodiment of the values the United States military encourages. Turns out it’s Tony Stark who everyone should really be emulating.”

The statement brought smiles to the faces of the entire group, Hadrian and Mortis exchanging a knowing look. “Interesting how things seem so different when you’re not looking through rose-colored glasses, isn’t it Sam Wilson?” Death quipped while aiming a smirk in his direction.

“His glasses weren’t rose-colored,” Scott interjected, a humorous grin on his face. “They were red, white, and blue!”

A bark of laughter escaped Sam at that. “Yeah, well those glasses aren’t in style anymore. I’m thinking a pair that are hot-rod red and gold would suit me much better.”

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Purple-blue eyes looked up as Holly entered the room, the woman casting one last glance at her daughter sleeping in the bed behind her before silently shutting the door. "Is she finally sleeping?" Aria asked quietly as she continued to rock Sunniva in her own arms.

"Thankfully, yes." Holly sank down into the chair in front of the Reaper, running a hand over her
She’s starting to get antsy at having to stay in our suite, but until Rem has been found and Rogers and Maximoff have been put in a cell, I don't want to let her wander too far. Emma’s in the other room with Celeste and Sophie watching a movie, she’ll let us know if she hears anything from Hannah. How is Sunny holding up?"

Aria turned her gaze to the infant in her arms, running her fingers over the downy soft hair on her head. "Honestly, I'm glad she's an infant right now. She has no comprehension of the chaos going on around her--all she cares about is when she's getting fed, when she's getting changed, and the love she gets from me and her daddies. She's been a little more fussy than usual only because Craig and Ulysses haven't been around as much. They take turns coming to see her, but given the severity of the situation right now, it's hard finding a balance."

A soft smile spread over Holly's lips at the way Aria interacted with her daughter. "Sunny is very lucky to have such great parents. Even though she's not yours biologically, the love you all have for her is simply breathtaking."

The Reaper gave a tinkling laugh as she raised the child so she could press a kiss to her forehead. "You should see the way they interact with her, Holly. Every time Craig looks at her, it's like he falls in love with her all over again, and Ulysses can't seem to put her down sometimes. They love and dote on her so much, and I look forward to the day some random boy asks her on a date--though I get the feeling my husbands won't let her date until she's at least 30!"

A playfully shocked noise escaped Holly at that. “30? With the way your husbands are, I’m surprised she’d be allowed to date before she turns 50!” The duo shared a laugh before falling back into a contemplative silence. “Aria, I wanted to confirm something with you…” the Reaper gave her a curious look before nodding and gesturing for her to continue. “I don’t remember which one I heard it from, but… is it true that the Reapers can't have children??"

There was a period of silence before the brunette nodded with a deep sigh. “Yes, Holly, it’s true. It’s one of the sacrifices we make upon becoming Reapers-- a sad, but ultimately necessary one. It's one of the reasons we cherish them so much, why we latch onto and become attached to them so quickly and strongly.” Aria looked down at her daughter again, brushing her fingertips over her hair. “The Reapers… we share a bond that transcends space and time, Holly. No matter where we are in the multiverse, we know we’re never truly alone. That bond also keeps us on the straight and narrow-- it acts as a series of checks and balances so we don’t… I don’t know, go power-hungry and try to destroy universes, I suppose. But a child born of a Reaper wouldn’t have that bond.”

Holly stared at her with an expression of sympathy. “But… couldn’t Hadrian make them a Reaper??”

“It doesn’t work like that, Holly,” Aria replied softly, an aching sadness in her tone. “Hadrian can’t
make people Reapers willy nilly-- they have to carry his mark on his soul, and that… there’s a lot of factors that determine whether it happens. A child of a Reaper wouldn’t necessarily have the mark… and without that, their fate is the same as all life’s.”

Utter silence filled the room for a moment before Holly whispered, “But… that means that Sunny…” Aria gave her a sad, resigned smile and nodded. “Why would you do that to yourself??” The woman continued, tears welling up in her eyes and rolling down her face. “How do you cope with that, knowing that she…”

Aria lifted the bundle in her arms so she could press a kiss to Sunny’s head. “Because she needed someone, because we know her life is just as precious as anyone else’s, and because she’s an infant who didn’t ask to be born into the circumstances she found herself in. Even if we only have her for a short time, she’ll make our lives so much brighter while she’s here.”

Realization sparked in Holly and she gave the woman a small, tremulous smile. “That’s why you named her ‘Sunniva’, isn’t it?”

“Our bright, brilliant star.” Aria’s smile grew as she cuddled the infant, who gave a happy gurgle at her. “You should have seen the way Craig reacted when we found her in the lab… He and Ulysses just sprang into action as if it were the most natural thing in the world. I admit I was pleasantly surprised at how well ‘Ses fell into that role.”

Holly tilted her head in confusion. “But you weren’t surprised by Craig?”

The brunette lifted her gaze to the woman, and after several seconds of silence, her shoulders drooped almost in resignation as she spoke again. “No, I wasn’t. He always had the potential… even if he never had the opportunity. He almost did, but…” She paused for a moment before continuing, “Holly, I’m not Craig’s first wife, though Ulysses is his first husband.”

“He was married before?? But I thought you guys are soulmates…”

Aria nodded at that, something raw flashing in her eyes. “We are -- we share a triquetra soul bond, one soul split between three people. But we didn’t always know that, and this was before he knew us. He was married to a lovely woman named Carla, and they lived in a small town called Novac. I have no doubt they loved each other very much-- Craig is a man whose loyalty and love is hard-won but well worth having.”

Holly couldn’t help the small smile at the fond way Aria spoke of her husband before it fell into a
look of trepidation. “But… what happened to Carla?”

Something agonizingly raw flashed over Aria’s face at the question. “She was sold into slavery with a faction known as the Legion without Craig’s knowledge. He knew she’d been taken, and by who, but not who actually sold her. He managed to track them to a place where the Legion was holding an auction for slaves.” Aria looked back for a moment to make sure Hannah was still asleep before continuing. “Holly, the Legion treated their women as little more than cattle. I won’t go into detail on the kinds of atrocities they committed… the point is that Craig managed to follow them there. But by the time he got there, he had only his pistol and one bullet left in his rifle. Craig… he couldn’t just watch his wife being sold off like property and damned to a life of torture and subjugation, but he couldn’t fight his way in—there were hundreds of soldiers there. That would have been a lost battle before it even began.”

An unpleasant feeling welled up in Holly’s chest as she swallowed and croaked, “So… what did he do?”

Aria gave her a grim, sad smile. “He saved her the only way he could— with the only bullet left in his rifle.” A gasp tore from Holly’s lips, and the Reaper held up her hand to stop whatever it was she would have said. “Holly, you have no idea how hard it was for him to make that call. It wasn’t just his wife he ‘saved’…” Purple-blue eyes closed as Aria took a breath to steady herself. “The bill of sale was for Carla and her unborn child.”

A lance of pain pierced Holly’s heart at the implications of the choice Craig had made. God, now she understood why the man adored and doted on Sunny like he did, why he looked at her with such love and reverence and joy. He saw her as his second chance at being a father. Suddenly the woman sat up straight in her seat as something the brunette had said registered in her mind. “Wait, you mentioned a bill of sale…”

A smile slowly stretched across Aria’s face, though the cold cruelty and vindictive pleasure within it was a far cry from the bubbly joy it normally held. “Craig didn’t know who it was who sold his wife and unborn child… but I never said that he didn’t find out.” She purred.

Holly swallowed nervously at the sudden change in the woman’s demeanor. Something about the malicious glee in her expression was nothing short of disturbing. “Where did he find it?” She asked with a note of trepidation in her voice.

The smile on the Reaper’s face grew wider. “He didn’t find it, Holly… I did. And if I helped him dole out a little wasteland-style justice for the transgression—well, that’s nobody’s business but ours. And they have no way of proving anything anyway.”

After a moment or two of silence Holly simply nodded. It was times like these she was reminded of the kind of place Aria, Craig, and Ulysses were from— a well-structured justice system wasn’t
exactly at the top of people’s list of necessities when every day brought struggles just to survive. “I don’t know about you,” she mused to the woman across from her, “but if that had happened to me and I’d had the means, I would have razed them and their cause to the ground and salted the earth behind me.”

A burst of laughter escaped Aria at the declaration, though she quickly quieted herself when Sunny fuzzed at the sudden noise. “Funny you should say that…” she began, her smile absolutely bloodthirsty, “you see, Caesar-- that was the leader of the Legion at the time-- decided to try and sway me towards the Legion’s cause at one point. He would forgive me for every ‘sin’ committed against them and give me free passage to their main camp, Fortification Hill. That place was as impenetrable as the city of Troy.” A fire lit in her eyes as she sat forward a bit. “It’s a bit of a cruel irony-- none of them were familiar with the story of the Trojan Horse.” A noise of realization escaped Holly and the Reaper continued, “I went in under the banner of peace, but while I was busy with Caesar my allies were unknowingly smuggled into the fort as well. Luckily for us, one of them was intimately familiar with the layout of the place, and he was able to guide them into the optimal positions for each of them to cause the most chaos. On my signal, we sprung the trap we’d set.”

The woman across from her was practically on the edge of her seat, eager anticipation and excitement written on every inch of her face. “And? Did it work?”

“Spectacularly. The Legion soldiers didn’t even have time to mobilize once they realized what was going on. You should have seen the look on Caesar’s face when he figured out he’d been tricked. The fact that he died with that same expression still on his face makes the victory even sweeter.”

A soft whoop escaped Holly and she clapped with excitement. “You killed him in the middle of his own camp! That’s fantastic! Who was the one to get the honor of killing Caesar??”

Aria had a smug grin on her face as she drawled, “Well, let’s just say that Craig got revenge for his wife and child that was a long time coming.” A sudden cry escaped Sunny, prompting the Reaper holding her to coo softly at her. “Looks like someone’s getting hungry. Let’s go get you fed, little star.”

Affection shone in Holly’s eyes as she watched the woman continue to soothe her daughter as she stood. Before she could depart though, a thought struck her and she called out to the brunette, “Ari’, you said someone helped you with the layout of the camp-- how did they know it so well??”

“Because he lived there for a while-- he is ex-Legion, after all.”

Blue eyes widened in shock at the admission. “And you trusted him not to betray you guys??”
Aria proceeded to give her the biggest shit-eating grin. “Of course! I trust him with my life. I wouldn’t have married him otherwise!”

Holly was confused for a second, but as Aria disappeared into the kitchen the pieces clicked into place.

“Ulysses !?”

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The sound of a phone ringing broke the calm stillness of the room occupied by a brunette and a set of triplets. Phoebe was quick to reach for the device and put it on speaker. “Good evening, Uncle Loki!”

“Good evening to you too, Phoebe. I hope you and your sisters have been doing well.” The voice that filtered through sounded tired, but calm. “Is Laura there with you?”

Laura immediately stepped closer and took a seat near where Phoebe had set the phone down. “I’m right here, my Prince.”

A sigh of happiness could be heard escaping the god. “It’s good to hear your voice again, min gudinne . How have the kids been holding up?”

Chocolate-brow eyes slid to the room where the kids were sleeping peacefully, Mindee standing in the doorway gently rubbing Nathan’s back as he slept in her arms. “They’re doing just fine. Lila got a bit sunburned, but she’ll be okay. Fenrir and Hela miss you terribly and send their love.”

“I’m glad everyone is doing well. You’ve gotten no trouble from any of the park goers or wayward paparazzi, correct?”

From her place leaning against the wall nearby, Esme gave the phone a smirk. “Nah, but even if someone did try and start drama, you can be damn sure we’d end it. Don’t worry, Uncle Lokes, we’re taking good care of everyone, and we won’t let anything happen to them.”
“I have absolute confidence in you and your sisters, Esme.” After a second or two of silence, Loki spoke again, “I wanted to give you all an update on what’s going on here. The search for Rem is still ongoing, though we’ve had aid show up in the form of King T’Challa, Shuri, and their cousin Erik. The king has been giving Minowa a rather wide berth… though I suppose that can be attributed to the rather brutal tongue lashing she gave him when they first arrived.”

An amused grin stretched across Esme’s face. “You have got to send that to me later! Min’s scary all on her own, but talking smack to a straight-up monarch?? That’s a whole new level of badass!”

A chuckle escaped Loki, and his voice went muffled for a moment before he said, “FRIDAY will send you the footage once we’re off the phone. Wade is officially cancer free, and now that his healing factor isn’t focusing so much energy on keeping it at bay, his scars have been healing at a steady pace.”

“That’s wonderful!” Mindee squeaked, staying relatively quiet as to not wake up Nate. “He’s gonna be so happy, he always seems so nervous when his scars are showing, now he doesn’t have to worry anymore and he can enjoy things like the pool, the sun, beaches—”

A soft laugh escaped Phoebe as she gently rested a hand on her exuberant triplet’s shoulder. “Mindee, take a breath and don’t wake up Nate-- you’re starting to bounce a bit.”

“Eep! Sorry!”

A round of quiet laughter escaped everyone before quieting so Loki could continue. “Peter is doing much better, now that he has his dads back. Since they’ve both been busy with the search for Rem, he’s been getting passed between Slei and Jör in the mornings and Sophie and Celeste in the evenings. We had to set up a schedule because they kept clashing over who got him when.”

Laura snorted with laughter at that, even as the triplets shot each other knowing looks. Honestly, Loki’s two eldest were not subtle. It was frankly stunning that no one else had picked up on it, yet. “We only have two or three days left here, love,” The older woman’s voice pulled their attention back to the conversation. “What should we do if Rem hasn’t been found by then?”

The god sighed deeply at the question. “Let me speak with Anthony about that-- I pray to the Norns that Rem will have been found before then-- I cannot imagine the state he’s in by now. One can only hope that Rogers and Maximoff had the sense to try and keep him healthy.” There was a low murmuring on Loki’s end of the line before the man spoke again. “My help is needed,
everyone. Have fun and stay safe, and look after each other, alright?” They called out an affirmative before Loki spoke again in a much softer, tender voice. “I’ll try to come back for at least one day soon, min gudinne. Be strong for me. I love you, Laura.”

“I love you too, my prince.”

“Talk to you soon, Uncle Loki!”

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“Something isn’t right.”

Steve looked up from where he was sitting with a book to where Wanda was pacing around the room, brow furrowed and a frown on her face. “What do you mean, Wanda?”

Green eyes turned in the super soldier’s direction as the woman huffed in aggravation, a brief cough escaping her. “We’ve heard plenty about the Amber Alert they put out on Rem, and we’ve heard several statements from Stark Industries regarding the same thing… but have you noticed what they haven't said anything about?”

It took a moment before Rogers realized what it was the woman was talking about. “Stark himself. They haven’t made any mention of him being killed.” He mused, snapping the book shut and setting it on the table.

The woman nodded in affirmation. “You’d think something like that would make national headlines-- murder of a murderer, or something like that. But we’ve heard nothing about it, not even a whisper.” She continued to pace for a few seconds before stopping and turning back to Steve to face him fully. “Is it possible he could have survived somehow?”

A snort escaped Steve as he stood and swept Wanda into a comforting hug. “It’s not likely. Stark’s a lot of things, but he wouldn’t have a failsafe against death, and he sure isn’t immortal. They probably just don’t want to announce it until this thing with Rem is over.”

Wanda nodded at his words, sniffing a little. “You’re right, that’s probably it.”
Baby blue eyes shone with affection as the man gave her a firm nod. “Don’t worry Wanda, we have nothing to worry about.”

At that moment, a wracking, wet cough came from the other room, followed by pained wheezing. Frowning, Wanda turned her attention to the hall. “Steve, you should probably find some medicine for him-- I doubt Bucky will be happy if he comes and finds his son like this.” Another, rougher cough escaped her at the end.

Steve frowned and studied the woman. “I’ll get a dose for you too. You sound like you might be coming down with something.” He turned to wander down the hall before a particularly violent round of sneezes escaped Wanda, and he turned back to the brunette with a small smile. “Good lord, maybe I should get you two.”

“I’m fine with just one. Go on, give Rem something for that cough.” Steve nodded and departed again, and Wanda sank into the couch under her, grabbing a blanket thrown over the back and wrapping it around herself. As she closed her eyes, she had no idea that those brief, violent sneezes had caused her concentration to slip if only for a few seconds.

Those few seconds were all it took for the wards around the house hiding them from detection to collapse in on themselves, the caster being none the wiser.

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“Rhodey!”

The sound of Craig’s voice calling out with urgency in his voice caused the man’s head to snap up from where he’d been dozing. The Reaper waved for him to join him at the console in front of him, and the dark-skinned man was on his feet in an instant, at Craig’s side in the next. It only took a second or two for him to realize what Craig had called him over for-- a small blinking orange dot on the northern border of Pennsylvania.

“Holy shit, we’ve got him! We found Rem!”
Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

The New Avengers and the various residents of the Compound mobilize to retrieve Rem, and James severs all ties with Steve as his son fights for his life. Erik Stevens doesn't hesitate to pull rank on 'Captain' America and believes that a voice as deep as Alduin's does NOT belong coming out of a body as small as Minowa's. Frank and Matt get a call from Pepper with good news, and Clint, Natasha, and Pietro lay some hard truths down on Wanda. Ulysses resists the urge to shoot a couple of stupid bastards, and Tony had to have team leader meetings from bed because of not taking care of himself. Hadrian takes matters into his hands to locate someone that can find a wayward professor... even though that help may come from elsewhere in the galaxy.

(*Insert Brooklyn 99 'VINDICATION' gif here*)

((Matt Murdock may be Catholic, but he's not above being a troll))

Chapter Notes

THIS IS IT! THE LAST CHAPTER OF THE ARC!! Once more, thank you all for your patience and support!! You all rock, and here's to more chaos to come!!

The sound of someone banging on the door jolted Dorian and Zevrael out of their light sleep, and the duo scrambled to the door to find out what the ruckus was. On the other side stood a flustered looking Clint, Natasha, and James. “Guys, what in the Maker--??”

Natasha interrupted them, “Guys, they found Rem!”

The Pavus men immediately exploded into movement, throwing on their everyday clothes over their sleeping pants and gathering various pieces of equipment before returning to follow them. “Where is he?? Is he alright??” Dorian asked frantically as he reached for and grabbed Zevrael’s hand.

“A SHIELD safehouse on the northern border of PA.” Clint replied as they broke into a run to the conference room FRIDAY directed them to. They burst into the room at the same time as Tony and Stephen stepped through a portal, bringing the general noise in the room to a halt. “Tony? How are we handling this?” He asked, not hesitating to defer to the genius.
Tony took a deep breath and looked towards the map where a glowing dot was blinking away. “We need to assume that whatever team is going in will be entering into a hostile environment. On that end, whoever is chosen to go in needs to have some kind of combat experience. I’m thinking a small team as well.”

Immediately, James and Natasha stepped up. “James and I want to be there-- James to provide a distraction if need be, and I can get in and out of the building without being detected.”

Stephen nodded at that idea. “Rogers would be so focused on James that it would be easy to get into the building and find Rem, maybe neutralize Maximoff at the same time. But if it comes down to a confrontation, I want you both to focus on getting Rem out safely.”

“What about the Witch?” Logan spoke up, a mix of worry and anger in his eyes. “If she starts shit, I want her dead before she hits the ground.”

A huff of laughter escaped Craig as he stepped up. “Leave that to me. I’m good in a firefight, and I’ve got just the thing in case she tries something.” He patted his hip where a pistol sat gleaming in the light. “It won’t kill her-- I figure you all will want a piece of her, too.” He gave them all a smirk, and it only widened further at the collective nods he got.

After a second of silence, someone else called, “I’ll go as well.” Jörmungandr gave them all a grim smile. “I may not have as much power as you, dad,” He looked towards Loki as he spoke, “but I can hold my own against the likes of her if need be, and I can provide some first aid if Rem’s in bad shape.”

“I’ll be here waiting for you guys to get here in case more intensive support is needed,” Bridget spoke up, Loki nodding and maneuvering next to her in a show of solidarity. “He’s been without his medication for a few days now-- I can’t imagine the shape he must be in.”

Stephen flinched at that and nodded. If Rogers had neglected to treat Rem’s symptoms, it was very likely that the teen had developed bronchitis, or even worse, pneumonia. “I think that’s a good team.” He turned to Dorian and Zevrael with an understanding expression, having noticed them open their mouths in protest. “I know you’re worried about Rem, guys, but we need you here. You can be waiting for him in the medical wing, but for now, I need you to trust the team we chose to bring him back safe.”

Dorian and Zevrael both looked conflicted for a moment before they found themselves being pulled into a hug by James and Natasha. “We’ll bring him back safe, I swear.” Natasha murmured softly, understanding the distress radiating from the two men.
The sniper nodded as well, pulling back to look both men in the eye. “We aren’t going to let him go after we just got him.” After a moment, the Pavus husbands nodded. The assassins were Rem’s parents as much as they were-- they wouldn’t let anything come between them and bringing their son home.

A small smile quirked at Tony’s lips at the show of support before his expression turned grim again, and he addressed the room as a whole again. “Alright guys, let’s bring our little redhead home.”

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“I’m in position, Soldat.”

“Ready to go here, too.”

James nodded at that, even though it couldn’t be seen. “Jör? How about you?”

After a second or two of silence, the godling’s voice came over the line. “Sorry about that, wanted to position myself with a clear line of sight on the house. I think I see what room Rem is in, but I can’t tell what kind of shape he’s in.”

“Alright, we’re ready to go then. Nat, Craig, once I have Rogers’ attention, you’re free to move in. Jör, wait until we have everything secure before following them.” Getting calls of affirmative, the sniper stood from his place hidden on the side and slowly stalked towards the house, schooling his features into a look of neutrality. Once he was close enough, he took a deep breath and called out, “Steve?? You home, punk?”

Something in the house thudded as if dropped, and a second or two later the door was thrown open. A massive grin spread across the super soldier’s face as he cried out “Bucky!” He wasted no time in bounding up to the assassin, oblivious to the pinched look that momentarily flickered over James’ face. “You found us! How? Wanda has had a barrier over the place hiding us…”

A hissed curse in Russian was heard over the coms as James gave him a tight smile in reply. “I’m the Winter Soldier, Steve. Did you think I wouldn’t have figured it out?”
Steve adopted his disappointed face for a moment. “That wasn’t you, Buck. You were being used by HYDRA.”

“That doesn’t make the skills any less mine, and you gotta admit they came in handy.”

The blonde paused to think before nodding slowly. “Okay, that’s true. I’m just glad you were able to find us without Stark’s lackeys following you!”

A surge of anger shot through the assassin even as he nodded placatingly. “Speak of which, where’s Rem? He wasn’t feeling good when you took him…”

As if answering his question, a sudden gasp of horror escaped Natasha. “Oh my God, James, he’s sick. Like, we need to get him out of here and back to Bridget now.”

Ice shot through the brunette’s veins at the words and the genuine horror in the woman’s voice. His attention was pulled back as Steve grimaced and answered, “He’s been coughing and hacking stuff up, but he’ll be fine. It’s nothing a little medicine and rest can’t cure.”

“Holy fuck-- James, he’s full of shit. This is advanced pneumonia-- at this rate, it could be fatal.” Craig’s voice was just as urgent, though there was the sound of shuffling as well. “It looks like Maximoff is laid up in bed as well-- maybe that’s how the barrier fell.”

James closed his eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath. “Take her down, Craig.”

Steve blinked in incomprehension for a moment. “What was that, Bucky?”

Icy blue eyes flicked open, filled with an inner fire as he stealthily pulled a small disk from the pouch at his side.

“End of the line, Rogers.”

A shocked shriek echoed from the inside of the house as Craig stunned and restrained Maximoff in a smooth movement, and as Rogers turned towards the sound with a horrified look on his face James surged forward and slapped the disk onto his bare upper arm, the modified widow bite
delivering a powerful electric shock through the man and sending him to his knees with a cry of
pain. Immediately James had him tied up in special ropes Tony had designed and enchanted
months ago-- he wouldn’t explain what they really had been for, but judging by the vibrant blush
on the man’s face, the assassin didn’t really want to know. A moment later, Jör burst from the
bushes and sprinted towards the house, not even giving the duo in the front yard a second glance.
He’d heard the words regarding Rem’s overall health, and he didn’t want to waste any time with
the blonde when James had things well in hand.

Inside the house, Natasha was immediately at her son’s side and she took his cold, clammy hand in
her own. The teen was wheezing and whimpering deliriously, breathing shallowly and coughing
weakly. A splatter of blood stained his lips at the action, which had taken on an alarming blue
shade to match the shade under his fingernails. “Oh God, hang in there, cher cœur, Mama’s here
now, you’re gonna be okay,” she choked, tears welling up and rolling down her face. It was rare
that the woman experienced true fear-- now, seeing her son as ill as he was, she could feel the
emotion lancing through her heart and choking her with the lump that it formed in her throat.

The godling raced through the door a moment later, a horrified noise escaping him at the first look
at the redhead. An unidentifiable emotion flashed over his face before he forced it away, drawing
several bottles from the bag on his hip as he stopped next to the bed. “I’m gonna spell these right
into his stomach-- he won’t be able to swallow them right now. We need to get him back to Bridget
immediately, he’s in bad shape and right now… Natasha, I’m not gonna lie.” He turned his slit-
pupilled green eyes to hers. “We’re fighting a battle against the clock now, and at this point, time is
not on our side.”

Natasha nodded at that and put a hand to her earpiece. “Stephen, I need a portal to the medical
wing, and I need it now. Bridget needs to be ready to treat the symptoms of advanced pneumonia,
tell her it’s all hands on deck.”

From where he was standing outside, James had heard everything, and an unholy rage flared within
him as he looked back down at Steve, who was beginning to regain his senses. After a moment, the
super soldier’s awareness returned to his eyes, and he looked up with a betrayed look on his face.
Before he could speak though, James planted his foot on the man’s chest and pressed down hard.
He growled in a voice that spoke of promises of pain, “I swear to whatever gods are out there, if
my son dies because of you, I will kill you myself. You couldn’t have just let us live our lives,
could you? You couldn’t handle the fact that we found a life, a family, that didn’t include you. Did
you think this was going to help?? Did you really think this would work ?!” He pressed down even
harder, Steve wheezing as the air was forced from his lungs. “Even if he survives, we’re done,
Rogers. This is the end of the line-- you are fucking dead to me. It didn’t have to be like this-- this
is no one’s fault but your own.” Steve opened his mouth as if to say something, but James reached
into his pouch, removed a small silver ball and dropped it on Rogers’ face. The nanotech
immediately expanded into a muzzle that cut off whatever would have been said by the blonde.
Even as tears welled up in Steve’s eyes, James couldn’t find a single ounce of sympathy for the
man. No matter the past they may have shared, the fact was that, in an act of sheer selfishness,
Rogers had put his son in mortal danger… and no amount of camaraderie they shared in the past
could fix the bridge that his actions had burned into nothingness. Honestly, the assassin had
absolutely no intention of even trying to repair it. Steve had the chance to fix things— and he had destroyed their relationship in a spectacular display of idiocy and arrogance.

And James Buchanan Barnes didn’t need anyone in his life that came between him and his team and family.

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“Bruce, get him on a ventilator now, Loki, I need you to get him set up on an IV drip of amoxicillin— wait, scratch that, he’s allergic to penicillin— make that Levaquin, give him the highest dose that’s medically safe.”

Bridget’s eyes moved to the sorcerer momentarily, even as she was casting spells at a rapid pace in an effort to stabilize the teen. "The highest dose right off the bat??"

Stephen nodded firmly with a tense look on his face as Loki sprinted off to get the drug. “Bridget, I’ve seen bad cases of Pneumonia before, but this has to be the direst I’ve ever witnessed. And not only that, Levaquin is the strongest antibiotic we have on hand that doesn't have penicillin. Hopefully, it will stabilize him and start fighting back against the bacteria. It's his best, and honestly only shot.”

“Stephen’s right, Bridget,” Bruce announced as he hooked Rem up to the ventilator. “His organs are starting to shut down, and we have to hit the bacteria hard and fast if we want to stop it from advancing any further and prevent any permanent organ damage.”

A huff escaped Loki as he ran back into the room with the IV bag and a vial of the drug that had been requested. “He’s only been gone for a few days, though-- how did it get this bad??”

Amethyst eyes narrowed as Bridget settled her hands over the teen’s chest, centering her magic in his lungs to try and clear out some of the fluid there. A second later, his chest cavity lit up so she could better see inside, and she shot Stephen a thankful smile before replying, “I have a theory behind that— I think whatever barrier Maximoff threw up was also meant to weaken Rem somehow. Unfortunately, that means it pulled on and exacerbated the infection he was already fighting and… well, you see the results.”

Loki nodded with a grim expression on his face as he pressed the needle into Rem’s arm. “At this point, his prospects look pretty grim. I hate to say it, but… I’m afraid that it’s going to take a
miracle of the Norns for him to pull through this.”

The group exchanged heartbroken looks, though they only lasted a moment before a strong voice shot through the room. “Well, I’m not the Norns, but I might have the miracle you so desperately need.” Every set of eyes swung to the doors that had been thrown open to see Hadrian striding through them like an avenging angel. He was across the room in a few hard steps, and he reached into his cloak before withdrawing a vial with a glowing gold liquid within it.

Bridget’s eyes immediately widened and she gasped, “Master Hadrian, is that…?”

Hadrian nodded as he moved to the IV, Loki stepping back still holding the antibiotic. The bottle in the Master of Death’s hand immediately took the proper shape to be screwed in, and it only took him a moment to secure it and open the valve. The mysterious substance immediately flowed down the tube and into Rem’s body, the room holding its collective breath to see if it would work.

It took thirty seconds for Bridget to notice the first change. “His lungs are clearing up, and his lips and fingernails are going back to a normal color!” She cried out with relief as she began slinging her own healing spells. “Master Hadrian, you may have just saved his life!”

“I did save his life, my dear.” Hadrian corrected her, eyes sliding to the corner of the room for a moment. In the shadows, a dapper figure with multicolored eyes wearing a hat with two feathers gave him a relieved smile and a nod before sinking back into the shadows.

Oblivious to the interaction, Stephen sighed heavily with relief as he continued his own spellcasting. “He’s not out of the woods fully yet. The bacteria has stopped advancing, but I think the antibiotic should still be administered after that vial is done.” He turned a curious expression to the ebony-haired man. “Hadrian, what is in that vial??”

The smile that quirked at the man’s lips was simultaneously knowing and sad. “A gift from a very dear friend… something I can procure only every once in a while. That vial is filled with phoenix tears.”

A gasp of shock escaped Loki at the announcement. “Even I know the power of such a thing… phoenix tears are said to be able to cure all manner of ills. And an entire vial of them… Master Hadrian, this is an incredible gift.” He looked to the teen again, trying to hide the sheen of relieved tears that welled up in his eyes.
A knowing smile spread over Hadrian’s face as he dipped his head in acknowledgment to the trickster god. He knew the god and his sons had a bigger stake in this than anyone realized. It wasn’t his place to share that... but if he could ensure their happiness while saving the teen, that made the action all the sweeter. “Give the tears an hour to do their job,” he instructed them, addressing the group as a whole. “Keep monitoring his progress, he should recover steadily as long as the tears last. Once they’re done, replace it with a mid-strength antibiotic. He won’t need something as strong as the Levaquin once the tears have done their job.” The group nodded as one, and as the Master of Death made to turn away he paused, glancing back at the teen. “Oh, and one more thing... you might want to have a hair growth potion ready for when he wakes up.”

Bridget blinked in confusion before looking back down at the teen.

“I didn’t even notice-- Rogers cut his hair! That bastard!”

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Baby blue eyes didn’t rise from their place pinned on the floor as the door to Steve's cell was thrown open. He couldn’t muster the energy or the will to care-- Bucky, his best friend, his only link to the past... he couldn’t get past the image of the hatred and disgust and anger on the brunette’s face. Steve didn’t move as the sound of footsteps echoed off the bare walls.

“Gotta admit, I never thought Captain Goddamn America would ever stoop so low as to intentionally cause a car crash to get to someone, kidnap a kid in an effort to ‘rescue’ his best friend, and attempt to murder someone in cold blood because of a petty grudge.”

Steve didn’t even flinch at the cutting tone of the male voice that addressed him, nor did he make any move to acknowledge him.

“Private Rogers, on your feet when a CO is talkin’ to you!”

By sheer instinct alone, the Super Soldier was on his feet and standing at attention within seconds at the forceful words. He blinked in stunned incomprehension as he stared at the man in front of him. “Who--??”

“Did I say you could speak, Private?!?” Erik barked out before Steve could ask his question, and immediately Steve fell silent. “I’m Erik Stevens, JSOC Navy SEAL and someone who will not hesitate to kick your ass if you step one toe outta line. You try my patience, I will show you just
how easily I can do so. Now sit your ass down, you and I are gonna have a little chat.” Steve obediently sat on the bed, and Erik continued, “I don’t know what you were thinkin’ pulling the stunts you did. Honestly, I don’t think that you were thinking of anyone other than your fool self. Do you have any idea how much damage you and this fiasco caused?” Steve shook his head without speaking, prompting a snort out of the dark-skinned man. “At least you know when to keep your damn mouth shut. SI’s PR team and Ms. Potts have been running themselves ragged trying to run damage control from a public press standpoint. The New Avengers have spent the past several days trying desperately to find the kid you took, knowing they were working against the clock on that end.” He paused for a moment, looking thoughtful. “Actually, let me expand on that one. Do you know how sick that kid was?”

“He… just had a cough and a fever…”

Erik barked out a laugh at that. “Not even close, Rogers. That kid was sick as hell when we found him-- telling James that it was nothing that a little medicine couldn’t fix is the biggest lump of rhino shit I’ve ever heard.” He pulled a phone from his pocket-- a gift from Tony for his help in the events surrounding Rem. “I’m gonna show you footage of when he was brought in, and your eyes will not leave the screen, do you understand me?” Steve nodded again, and the Navy SEAL didn’t hesitate to play the footage. He watched as Steve’s face continued to pale as the video played, and by the end the super soldier was white as a sheet. Before Hadrian could enter the room, Erik cut the clip.

“Is he alive?” Steve croaked as he looked up at the other man, a haunted and fearful look in his eyes. “I never meant… please, is he okay?”

Dark eyes studied the super soldier and the expression on his face. Finally, Erik pulled up a live feed on his phone and showed it to the man. Rem was sleeping on a bed, the ventilator still hooked to his face and attached to a variety of machines and monitors. Steve let out a choked noise, and Erik growled, “That kid doesn’t have the serum, Rogers-- your actions, and subsequent inaction, came damn close to killing him. It took outside intervention to just pull him back to a treatable level.”

A soft sob escaped Steve at that. “I never meant for this to happen… I didn’t want to hurt him…”

Erik tucked the phone back into his pocket. “That doesn’t change the fact that you damn near killed a kid. You need to think long and hard about your choices, and decide for yourself whether this was worth it in the end.” Without another word, he turned on his heel and left the room, the door shutting and sealing behind him. He didn’t even pause as the sound of the blonde beginning to sob heartbrokenly echoed in the hall he began walking down.

In truth, the ex-SEAL was angry-- hell, he was pissed. Between the actions of Rogers and
Maximoff, his cousin’s poor choices in the matter, being witness to the fallout of everything… the image of Dorian and Zevraël holding each other as they wept with fear for their son’s life flashed across his retinas, and he stopped for a moment to collect himself. After a few seconds, they flicked open again, and he changed direction to head to the outdoor training yard. He’d been given free use of it, and right now, beating the hell out of some training dummies sounded like the perfect stress reliever.

His plans were derailed when he stepped outside only to find the yard already occupied. Erik’s eyes widened as he watched the form of Minowa savagely tearing into several dummies at an impressive speed, and he had to cover his ears at one point as a thunderous noise rocked the place and filled the arena with fire that glowed blue from the intensity. As the woman came to a stop, Erik called out, “Goddamn, I knew you were impressive Min, but that was somethin’ else!”

The hand holding a knife came down to her side as she straightened, and it took Erik only a second to realize something was amiss. Min normally held her daggers in a forward saber grip.

The one she was using currently was an icepick grip.

“I will take that as a compliment, even though it wasn’t necessarily aimed at me.” Alduin turned to face the man, black and red eyes shining with amusement. “You must be Erik. Minowa has spoken to us about you-- it takes quite a lot to impress her, and you have done so admirably.”

“Uh… Thank you?” Erik eyed the now androgynous figure warily. “Who the hell am I talking to right now? Because Min sure as hell doesn’t have a voice that deep.”

A rumbling laugh escaped Alduin as he sheathed the dagger in his hand. “I am Alduin. You could say I am a tenant sharing Minowa’s mind and body.” He pressed his hand to the core on his arm, the armor retracting into gauntlets and boots. “Minowa is troubled by the events of the past few days-- she has allowed me to assume control while she processes what has occurred.”

Erik studied him for a moment before slowly asking, “Are you… one of Hadrian’s guys?”

“Geh, yes, we are.” The Dovah confirmed as he stepped off the field, shooting the man a smirk. “Rest assured, the dinokthur is well aware of our presence. Come, walk with me.”

The man didn’t hesitate to nod and fall in step next to Alduin. In the few days he’d been at the Compound, Erik had found that Minowa exuded a sense of tranquil power, something akin to the
calm surface of a river masking a swift, deadly current underneath. The guy currently behind the wheel changed that feeling entirely. Now that aura was akin to the heat given off by a powerful flame, something raw and primal and wholly dangerous. Despite the palpable change in the figure, Erik looked over at the being and fearlessly asked, “Is Min okay? I can understand why she’d need a chance to just retreat for a while.”

Red eyes with black sclera glanced over to him as they continued to walk. “Truthfully, I believe that what has occurred over the past few days unsettled her… but what happened to her personally … that frightened her.”

The words prompted a snort out of the dark-skinned man. “Gotta tell you, Min doesn’t seem like the kind of person who would be scared of anything.”

Alduin was silent at that, a troubled look on his face. As they finally made it to an outdoor seating area on the top of the building, he turned back to face the Navy SEAL. “It is true-- there are very few things in the world around us that instill a sense of fear in Minowa. But sometimes… the hardest battles fought are ones that others cannot see.” He looked over the expanse of the Compound, the dying light of day made all the darker by the heavy cloud cover overhead. The storm clouds seemed to make the glow of Alduin’s eyes all the brighter, even though his expression remained dark and shadowed. “Sometimes the worst demons we fight are the ones that exist only in our minds.”

Erik’s brow furrowed at the ominous tone and words, and he stepped closer to the being. “She’s been through some shit-- wait, scratch that-- you both have.”

A rumble of laughter escaped the ebony-haired being at that, though the sound was haunted and bitter. “To say that we have… as you put it, ‘been through some shit’, is an egregious understatement, Erik Stevens. What Minowa has been through… it is not a fate I would wish upon anyone.”

“Not even Rogers?”

“Not even him.”

That caused the soldier’s eyes to widen in shock. After everything the man had put them through… was it really that bad?
Alduin seemed to sense his train of thought, and he turned his attention fully to the dark-skinned man. “It is true, Rogers’ actions have brought a great deal of strife and suffering to our family and allies… and to Minowa and myself. But what we experienced… what was done to us, what we were made into, what we caused… No.” He shook his head firmly. “It is not a fate we would wish on even the worst of our enemies.”

In a fearless move, Erik stepped up and gently grabbed Alduin’s shoulder in a tight, but comforting grip. “What happened to you guys?” The question was soft, the compassionate look in his eyes conveying a desire to reach out and help them.

After a moment or two of silence, the dovah sighed and reached to rest his hand over the soldier’s, giving it a squeeze. “It is… not something that is easy to speak of. I would not do so without the permission of the Dovahkiin, either. However…” Alduin looked up at him, their eyes meeting in a steady gaze. “When the time comes, we will share it. You are not the only one who is deserving of an explanation.”

“I’m not demanding anything that you guys aren’t willing to give.” The Navy SEAL reassured him, squeezing his shoulder again. “No one is forcing you to tell me-- to tell us.”

Alduin hummed at his words. “We are of the opinion that she has paid a penance that was never hers to fulfill. Minowa has carried the story and burden by herself for long enough-- it is time for her allies, her friends, her family, her partners, to show her that it is not a weight she is forced to carry alone.”

Erik stared at him for a moment before nodding slowly. “If I can help in any way…” He trailed off, knowing he didn’t need to finish the sentence.

Black and crimson eyes glittered with gratitude as Alduin squeezed his hand again. “When the time comes, we will call for you-- you have my word.” Something suddenly flickered in his eyes, and a smile quirked at his lips. “It seems the Dovahkiin is ready to take control once more. It has been a pleasure speaking with you, Erik Stevens. I hope we have the chance to do so again soon. Lok, Thu’um, fahdoni.”

The soldier dipped his head with a murmured, ‘you too, man’ before stepping back, putting some space between himself and the being. Alduin’s eyes closed, and something in the air shifted again. Erik took a moment to study her before calling out, “Min? You back with us?”
The eyes that opened held the same crimson color, though the black sclera was nowhere to be found. The woman took a moment to get her bearings before giving the man a small smile. “Hello, Erik.” She said softly to him, dipping her head in greeting.

A gusty sigh of relief escaped the man, and in an impulsive movement, he reached for the Dragonborn and pulled her into his arms. “Okay, I don’t care exactly who or what Alduin is, it doesn’t change the fact that it’s a little strange hearing a voice that deep coming out of a body like yours!”

Minowa blinked in shock before she gave a laugh, giving the man a hug back. “Yes, I would imagine hearing his voice for the first time would be a bit… unnerving.” She pulled away after a few seconds and walked to the edge of the building, sitting so her legs were dangling over the side. The woman gestured for Erik to join her with a knowing expression on her face. “You must have questions about what you witnessed. Have a seat, I’ll explain what I can.”

Brown eyes were troubled as the soldier did so, though not for the reason Min probably suspected. From the way the woman was acting, she had no idea about the conversation that he had shared with her tenant, had no idea that Alduin had hinted to them having suffered a great deal of trauma. After a moment of contemplation, he let the thought go. Alduin and Minowa shared a relationship that obviously spanned the length of several lifetimes but they were still their own autonomous beings. If her… tenant wanted to share it with Minowa, that was up to him. “Yeah, let me start with this-- what the hell is Alduin??”

“A Dragon-- the eldest of them, including myself.”

Erik’s train of thought derailed completely at the statement. “... I’m sorry, what?”

Minowa’s crimson eyes sparkled with mirth as she gave the ex-marine a knowing smile. “Settle in, my friend-- let me tell you of Skyrim, and the tale of the Dragonborn.”

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“Frank, can you get the phone?”

“Sure thing, Mattie.” Frank rose from his seat, crossing the room in a few quick steps to snatch the cell phone off the table. His eyes widened when he saw who it was trying to get ahold of them, and they snapped towards the TV for a moment. “Babe, get in here, it’s Potts!” He quickly answered
the phone, and as Matt hurried into the living room he spoke, “Ms. Potts, is everything okay? Did you find the kid?”

The voice on the other end of the line was exhausted, but happy. “Yes, Frank. They found him. He was in pretty bad shape, but he’ll be okay.”

A relieved noise escaped Matt as he leaned against Frank, the taller man wrapping an arm around his shoulders in a supportive gesture. “Oh thank God, I was so worried--”

“*We were worried.*” Frank gently corrected him, rubbing his partner’s back. “What about Rogers and Maximoff?” He continued, voice and eyes going steely. “Hope they didn’t let them get away.”

The laugh that escaped Pepper at the statement was nothing if not ominous. “Oh, I wouldn’t worry too much on that end. Maximoff is in a containment space as deep down in the Compound as we can get her, and Rogers is in a cell near her. Though after the smackdown he got from both James and Erik, I don’t think he’s in any mental state to be going anywhere.”

Matt tilted his head in curiosity, and he took the device as Frank reached to grab the cup of coffee he’d set down to answer the phone. “Erik? I don’t recognize that name. Is he new?”

“Somewhat. A day or two ago, we had a few interesting guests show up-- King T’Challa of Wakanda, his sister Shuri, and a previously unknown cousin, Erik Stevens.”

The final name caused Frank to inhale his coffee, and Matt quickly nabbed the mug from his hands as the ex-Marine bent double, coughing. “You’ve got to be shitting me!” He finally got out. “Fucking *Killmonger* is the direct cousin of a foreign monarch?!”

The redhead next to him frowned as he handed the ex-Marine his drink back. “Frank, who is Erik Stevens? I don’t recognize the name. Is he new?”

Russet brown eyes slid to Matt as Frank grunted, “Not surprised there, Mattie-- only reason I know about him is because of my work with Cerberus. Erik Stevens was a Navy SEAL stationed in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Africa, one of the best they’ve ever had. He has the highest count of confirmed kills among his entire unit-- that’s how he got the name Killmonger.”

“He was also recruited into a JSOC ghost unit associated with the CIA.” Pepper blithely informed him with a note of amusement in her voice.
“Of fucking course he was,” Frank grumbled under his breath, rolling his eyes and shaking his head in exasperation.

Matt couldn’t help but laugh at the petulant tone of his partner’s voice. “God help us if you two ended up in the same room together. The amount of testosterone would be enough to choke a person.”

“Mattie…”

“Of course, I’ve choked on other things involving your testosterone before…”

“Mattie, oh my God!”

On the other end of the line, Pepper burst into laughter again. The sound of the Punisher himself becoming flustered and embarrassed by his partner would never not be entertaining.

---

“You don’t have to do this immediately, you know.”

Sky blue eyes slid to the Archer on his right, and Pietro gave the man a small smile. “I do know. But I’ve thought about this a lot since Rem got taken. I need to confront her about everything she did so I can finally move on with my life and recovery.”

Nearly silent footsteps heralded Natasha stepping up on his left, and she gently rested her hand on the back of his neck in a supportive gesture. “We’ll be right here if you need us, okay? And remember that no matter what she says, we’re here to support you, and we want only the best for you.”

Pietro turned his attention to the assassin and he nodded firmly. “I know, Natasha. There’s never been any doubt in my mind about that.” After a moment of thought, he held his hands out to both agents. “Help me up, would you?” The duo nodded and helped him stand from his wheelchair. He leaned against Clint for a moment before straightening, giving them a nod once he was ready. Clint and Natasha both gave him a proud, supportive smile before guiding him into the room.
Natasha sneered at the brunette behind the thick glass walls of the containment cell before her attention was pulled to her partner, who had made a strange noise upon seeing her. Her eyes widened when he suddenly stalked forward, and she held a hand out to stop Pietro from advancing for a second. “Give him a moment, Peregrine. Remember, you aren’t the only one whose mind she messed with.”

A small noise of realization escaped Pietro at the reminder. He took a small step back so the agent could have his own moment with his twin-- Clint deserved it as much as he did.

Inside the cell, Wanda’s green eyes lit up at the sight of Clint approaching. “Clint!” She called out as she jumped up from her bed, coughing roughly for a moment before continuing. “I knew you’d come!”

“Yes, I’m here alright…” Clint growled as he stepped up to the glass, eyes hard and full of anger. “But definitely not for the reason you think.”

“Clint, what--?”

“I find it ironic,” the archer steamrolled over whatever the witch was about to say, “Loki put holes in my mind during the events of the battle of New York with his use of the scepter… but the one who exploited them the most was you. The one who toyed with people’s minds the most was you!” He snarled as he slammed his fist on the glass. “You fucked around in the head of a man who was already suffering from PTSD and anxiety over the things he’s experienced, whose worst nightmare was seeing the people he loved and cared about all laid out dead before him, who tell him he could have done more to save them! You toyed with the emotions and feelings of the people around you for the sole intent and purpose of turning them against a man who has suffered horrors the likes of which you would never be able to understand! You were actively pulling my emotions and opinions to match yours, trying to keep me firmly on your side! And not just me-- you were subtly influencing Sam and Scott as well! If it weren’t for what the Red Room already put her through, ‘Tasha would have fallen victim to your manipulations too! All this time, you were playing the innocent little doe eyed victim while simultaneously pulling the strings of other people’s minds like a master puppeteer! And for what-- revenge for a murder that was never on his hands to begin with! Did you think we wouldn’t figure it out?!”

Seeing her partner beginning to get worked up, Natasha stepped up to him and put a hand on his back. “Breathe, moy yastreb ,” She coaxed him, gently beginning to rub it in a soothing motion.

“Natasha--”
Cold green eyes snapped to the pale woman in the cell. “Silence, witch. It was only Clint’s request to stay my hand that kept you alive when I found out what you’d been doing to him. Never forget who I am, Wanda Maximoff-- nor what I am.” She took a breath to calm herself before giving the woman a grim smile. “Above all of that, though… there’s one person you’ve wronged more than anyone else. And he has some things he wants to say to you.”

Wanda’s face twisted into an ugly sneer, even as she sniffed back mucus. “I don’t care what that murderer has to say to me--”

“Wanda Maximoff, shut up.”

The words died in the witch’s throat as her forest green eyes went wide as dinner plates at the sound of the familiar voice. Natasha and Clint moved so Pietro could step up between them, a frown marring his face. A choked noise escaped the brunette as Wanda scrambled for words. “You… you can’t be real… you’re dead!”

Pietro shook his head at that. “I’m as alive as you are… not for lack of trying on your part, though.” Clint and Natasha shifted closer to the blonde as he took a deep breath. “I don’t even know what to say, Wanda. You manipulated my thoughts and opinions for years, volunteered us for human experimentation for a terrorist organization, took outright enjoyment from the pain you inflicted on the victims HYDRA threw at you… And when I started trying to exert my free will more and began to break away from your control, you arranged my death as a way to get in good with the Avengers, knowing that there was no way Rogers would turn you away after everything you’d been through and how you’d helped save the world.”

“What kind of monster do you have to be to do something like that?” Clint growled, wrapping his arm around Pietro’s shoulders and pulling him against him so the young man’s head was in the crook of his neck. “My brother may be a piece of shit, but I would never try to set him up to die!”

Natasha joined their huddle while continuing to glare at the woman in the cell. “Siblings are supposed to support and take care of and look after each other. It really speaks to the kind of twisted individual you are that your desire for revenge was stronger than the love you should have had for Pietro.” She took a deep breath to center herself, eyes going far away for a moment. “We should have listened to Tony and Bruce when they said they didn’t create Ultron. It was supposed to be a peacekeeping program, but what actually was born… Tony wouldn’t have screwed something like that up. He’s been creating minds for too long and has too big a heart to make a mistake like that.”

“But the moment you got your mitts in his mind, suddenly that changed.” Golden-brown eyes narrowed at Wanda, who had gone sheet white as they spoke. “In hindsight, the only person responsible for Ultron is you, Wanda. Hell knows Pietro had no idea what you’d done to Tony’s
mind until the man himself disclosed it to him.”

A sigh escaped the redhead of the group as she maneuvered so she could give the witch a mocking clap. “If nothing else, it’s impressive what you managed to accomplish-- you fooled the world into thinking you’re a hero when in reality you’re the one who was responsible for that tragedy and those deaths, to begin with… someone else simply took the fall for it.”

The words caused Wanda to suddenly erupt with a screech of, “He deserved it! He killed our parents! How can you work with the man who killed our mother and father, Pietro?!”

“Because he didn’t kill them, Wanda!!” Pietro shouted back, having finally had enough of the woman’s attitude and delusions. “Dr. Stark has never sold weapons to any foreign country! The CEO of Stark Industries before him was selling weapons under the table without his knowledge! And do you know what makes it worse, Wanda?! The buyer for that shipment was Strucker! You want to blame anyone for what happened to Mother and Father, blame the very man whose arms you sent us into in the aftermath!” He pulled away from Clint and Natasha, taking a hard step forward towards the glass wall of the cell. “And that doesn’t even cover what you’ve done in this past week! That innocent man that delivered Rogers’ message to James killed himself, and we know it was your doing! And you nearly killed Rem! You have no compassion for the people around you who are directly affected by your choices! You disgust me, Wanda, and Mother and Father would be ashamed and appalled by your behavior!”

A heavy silence settled over the room, broken only by heaving breaths from Pietro as he tried to rein in his emotions after his outburst. Wanda was staring at him with a look of shock, horror, and anger on her face, even as tears were trickling down her cheeks and she was forcing back coughs and sniffs. Clint and Natasha looked at each other and nodded before the archer gently pulled Pietro away from the glass and wrapped him in a hug, Natasha pressing up against his back to do so as well. “I think we’re done here, Peregrine.” Clint murmured softly in his ear as he rubbed the speedster’s back.

Pietro took a deep breath before pulling away a bit to face the glass again. “We’re done, Wanda. After this, I never want to see you again, I never want to speak to you again. After this, I don’t have a sister.”

The trio turned and walked away from the cell towards the exit. Halfway there, Wanda began screaming inarticulately, thuds echoing through the room as she threw herself against the glass in an effort to break through and follow them. The noise only quieted once the doors closed behind them, leaving the woman alone with only the echo of her own screams to keep her company.
“What the fuck is that noise?! It’s been going on for thirty minutes!”

“I dunno, it sounds like someone being tortured.”

“Stark doesn’t seem to be the kind of dude to torture someone…”

A snort escaped Ulysses as he silently slid into the hall, cells flanking either side of the long corridor. Towards the end of the hall, he could hear the voices of the only two residents at the moment talking to each other, and he rolled his eyes as they descended into arguing.

“Well, you don’t exactly seem to be the best judge of character yourself!”

“‘Scuse me, but which one of us stalked and kidnapped the object of our obsession??”

“You mindwiped a person and relocated them against their will, leaving a family member behind, how the fuck is that not worse?!”

“You captive had advanced congestive heart failure that you were willing to exacerbate by blocking his magic!”

“Your agents had to be blackmailed into helping you!”

“You put your own kid in a coma!”

“You both need to shut up.” The sound of the sniper’s deep, rumbling voice brought the argument between Nick Fury and Reed Richards to a sudden halt. He stepped up between their cells so they could see him, and the masked man gave them both a glare. “Didn’t like either of you to begin with. Hearing this… like you even less, now.”

Reed sneered at him, recognizing the man as one of the New Avengers. “What do you want? Come to gloat?”
Ulysses arched an unimpressed eyebrow at the scientist. “Don’t have enough hours in my day to care about you. Too much going on right now anyway... Rogers made a mess of things, nearly killed a kid. This kind of thing is a distraction-- don’t need or want it right now.”

An instant later, Nick was on his feet and right up against the glass wall separating them. “Woah, hold the hell up, what was that about Rogers almost killin’ a kid??”

A spark of realization flickered in the man’s eyes, and Ulysses tugged his phone from his pocket before tapping it a few times. He held the phone up so Nick could see the live feed of Rem in the hospital bed with Bridget screwing another bottle onto his IV. “Remington Pavus-- got kidnapped by him, ended up with advanced bacterial pneumonia-- almost didn’t pull through.”

“Motherfucker! What the hell possessed him to pull a stunt like that?!” Fury swore as he stared at the screen. “Is the kid gonna be okay?!”

Dark eyes pierced the man as Ulysses kept holding the phone up. “He will. Gonna be a long recovery… got support in spades, though. Speak of…"

On the screen, Bridget turned as if something had caught her attention, and a moment later Natasha stepped into view. The two exchanged words before the assassin swept forward to sit next to the bed, and she began to run her fingers through the short red locks on the teen’s head.

The realization hit Nick, and he murmured softly, “Son of a bitch… that’s Romanoff’s son.”

Even as Reed was screeching, "Wait, she has a what now?!", Ulysses nodded and drawled, “She wasn’t impressed when she found out you knew.”

Nick snorted at that. “Oh, I damn well know that. She made her opinion very clear on that end. And here I was wondering how she found out…”

A dark chuckle escaped the sniper, drawing both men’s attention. His eyes glittered with a knowing, dangerous light as Ulysses said, “His mother isn’t the one you need to worry about. Rogers took Rem for a reason-- trying to get to his father.”

“But we don’t know who his dad is!”
“You don’t.” Ulysses corrected him, an unseen grim smirk pulling at his lips. “Tony figured it out. Watch your back from now on. Romanoff and Rem’s father have similar professions, but one did something the other never could.”

In the footage, Natasha looked up as someone else came into the room. A moment later, James was joining her sitting by Rem’s bedside, and he grabbed the teen’s hand while beginning to quietly converse with the assassin in Russian.

Nick’s eye widened in horrified understanding of the implications.

“Black Widow never fired a shot on you… but the Winter Soldier sure did-- and he didn’t miss.” Ulysses tucked the phone back in his pocket and gave them both a glare. “Keep your mouths shut. Too much going on to be worried about you both. Might decide it’s easier to take care of you on a permanent basis. Wouldn’t blame them for that.” The warning given, Ulysses turned on his heel and began walking away. As he reached the end of the hall, he heard Nick groan, "Motherfucker!", and just before the door closed behind him, Reed stated in a calm, almost pitying tone, "Dude, you’re a dead man."

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From his place watching the security feed, Craig couldn’t help but laugh as Reed looked at Fury as if he wanted to ask how the hell Natasha Romanoff and James Buchanan Barnes had a kid when the first was unable to have kids, to begin with. He wisely kept his mouth shut instead, and the look of supreme frustration on the scientist’s face was one that would be a treasured memory for the soldier for years to come.

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“How’s he looking, Bridget?”

The blonde looked up and gave the man approaching her a smile. “His recovery is going well so far, Phil. From what I can tell from his vital signs, he should be waking up soon-- probably sometime tomorrow morning or later.”

Phil gave a soft sigh of relief as he sat down in the chair next to hers. “I was worried when they brought him in… he looked like hell.”
Amethyst eyes sparkled with compassion as Bridget reached over to rub his shoulder. “It looked bad for a while… Thank the Nine that Master Hadrian stepped in.”

The agent reached up and squeezed her hand, a quiet falling over them for a few minutes as they took comfort in each other’s company. “We should probably talk to Tony, Stephen, and Minowa,” Phil finally spoke up, catching the Restoration Master’s attention. “Something occurred to me in regards to the Amber Alert. We put up pictures of Rem so people could keep an eye out for him…”

Comprehension hit Bridget after a few seconds, and she swore as she got to her feet. “Mara’s mercy, I didn’t even think about that! Come on, we’ll have Min meet us in Tony’s room. FRIDAY, please tell Minowa that I need to speak with her in the medical wing.”

“You got it, Medic-Boss!”

Phil nodded at her words as he walked beside her. “How is Tony doing, anyway? I heard he passed out not long after Rem was found…”

A sigh of exasperation escaped the blond as she shook her head. “He’ll be fine-- he pushed himself too far too soon after his Displacement. He’s going to have to stay here for a night or two, but afterward, he should be at a safe level again.”

The dark-haired man nodded at her words, and he looked up at the door they were approaching. “He wasn’t able to use his technopathy or magic when he got here… does that have something to do with it?”

“Partially, yes,” Bridget answered, stopping them outside the door. “Normally, a Reaper can access at least some of their abilities after such a thing-- we think Tony being the Soul Stone caused more of a disturbance than normal, though. It could take a few days for those things to come back fully to him, but rest assured, they will come back.” Getting a nod from Phil, she reached for the door and pushed it open.

Inside, Tony was laying in a bed with a sheet pulled up over his waist, looking chagrined at the words being spoken by the Master of Death standing beside the bed. “Yes, Anthony, you have to stay in bed for the length of time Bridget tells you. You really shouldn’t have left the Nexus so soon after waking up, but I understand the reasoning. However, that choice means that you now have to face the consequences, thus, being bed-ridden for a day or two.”
Stephen gave a soft chuckle at the look on his soulmate’s face, and he leaned in to brush a kiss to his forehead. “If you’re good, maybe I can convince them to move you to the bedroom so you’ll at least have access to the TV.”

Hadrian gave the Sorcerer Supreme an indulgent smile at the suggestion. “I wouldn’t argue with such an arrangement-- you are a doctor, after all, and if he attempts to leave the bed, you can simply sit on him… though strenuous activity should be kept to a minimum, so don’t let it go too much farther than that.”

Laughter burst from both Bridget and Phil at his words and the subsequent expressions on both men’s faces. Once they both had calmed down, they approached with smiles on their faces. “I needed that laugh, thank you,” the Restoration Master declared as she pulled over a chair to sit, Phil joining her a moment later.

“Hey, Bri, Agent, what’s goin’ on?” Tony gave the duo a bright grin, leaning his head against Stephen’s shoulder as he laced their fingers together.

Behind his shades, Phil rolled his eyes good naturedly. “Got something we need to talk to you about. We’re just waiting on-- ah, here she is.” He turned his eyes to the door as it opened, admitting Minowa.

Min gave the group in the room a smile as she willed a chair into existence. “Bridget, you called for me?”

The blond nodded and addressed the room as a whole. “Yes, I did. When we put out the Amber Alert for Rem, we put his picture up for the world to see. What we didn’t take into account was who might see it beyond the general public.”

It took only a few seconds for someone to pick up what she was insinuating. “The X-Men,” Minowa rumbled with a furrow in her brow and a frown on her face. “Rem doesn’t look much different than how he did before they abandoned him to die. It would make sense that they would recognize him, even in his de-aged state.”

“But how are they going to react, though?” Tony piped in, doing several calculations in his head. “Worthington Industries is damn near bankrupt at this point, and the school has been cut off from the good professor’s money entirely. Given their behavior in the past, it’s not too much of a stretch to think that they might find a way to blame him and retaliate.”
Stephen hummed softly in thought at that. “Would they, though? The authorities have them under a magnifying glass right now—would they be foolish enough to try anything when their actions are being watched so closely?”

After a few seconds of silence, Phil spoke up. “For now, I would suggest upping surveillance on them, but nothing beyond that. Knowing you, Tony, you planted several bugs in their system when you were there getting Logan’s stuff.”

“Guilty.”

The group as a whole chuckled before Phil spoke again. “There’s also another faction that hasn’t been taken into consideration in terms of Rem-- the New Orleans Thieves’ Guild.”

Min tilted her head in consideration. “I had forgotten that Rem was the adopted son of their leader at one point… You believe they may try and make a move?”

Phil shook his head at that. “Honestly, I’m not sure. Remy LeBeau was banished from New Orleans years ago, and the Assassins Guild has a kill-on-sight order should he ever show his face there again. Whether they would be ballsy enough to try and get to him here, I don’t know, but it’s something to think about.”

As the group continued to talk, Hadrian slipped from the room and Corridored to the roof of the Compound. He looked over the grounds for a few minutes, and as snowflakes began to descend from the sky he finally raised his hand and flicked his wrist out. A burst of blue magic escaped him and formed into the shape of a skeletal, winged horse in front of him that pranced in place and gave a nicker. He gave the figure a smile as it trotted forward to rest its snout in his hands. “Hello, Lethe.” He murmured softly to the Thestral, pressing his forehead against the mare’s. “I’ve need of your services, dear heart. Would you carry a message for me?” Lethe tossed her head and snorted as if to say, ‘Well, obviously!’ “Good girl. Now, here’s what I need…”

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“What the hell is that thing?!”

Peter Quill yelped in shock as he fell from his seat, having been shocked by the sudden exclamation from Rocket behind him. “Dude, what’s your problem?!” He turned to face him, only
to freeze at the sight before him. “Uh…”

Gamora had her hand on her blade as she glared distrustfully at the glowing creature that had shown up without warning in their ship. “That’s no animal I’ve ever seen before. It doesn’t seem to be aggressive, though…”

From behind Rocket, Groot peeked his head out to stare in wonder at the leathery-looking winged horse. “I am Groot!”

“No, you can’t ride it!” Rocket Racoon snapped, paws tightening on the gun he had aimed at the creature. “It might have fleas!”

“I am Groot!”

“Whether it has skin or not doesn’t matter! We don’t know where it’s been.”

Drax cocked his head curiously at the creature. “Well, we are not on a planet, so it must have come from space.”

“I am Groot?”

“Alright, fine, but you still can’t ride it!”

An unfamiliar laugh brought them all up short, and the thestral tilted its head in Rocket and Groot’s direction. “He technically could-- the form you see before you is corporeal, as solid and real as you are.” Lethe dropped to her knees, and Groot gave a happy “I am Groot” before running forward, despite Rocket’s hiss of “Get back here!” Hadrain’s laughter echoed from Lethe’s form as she pressed her snout gently into Groot’s tiny outstretched hand. “You are a curious young thing, aren’t you?”

“I am Groot!”

“The form you see is a Thestral, young one, though that isn’t what I myself am.”
“I am Groot?”

“She is a messenger, young Groot. Her name is Lethe, and she is capable of reaching places beyond where normal communication could.”

The gun was slowly lowered from where it had been aimed at Lethe. “Wait a damn second, you can understand him?”

Lethe lifted her head, uncaring of the way Groot then proceeded to try and scramble up her back. “I can indeed, Rocket Raccoon. He is very smart, and has quite a lot of love for you.” She looked to the rest of the group. “But I forget myself. I apologize for any fear I may have caused you all-- my intentions are entirely benevolent.”

Finally, Gamora dropped her hand from her blade. “Who are you, then, and what do you want?”

Lethe dipped her head in greeting to them all. “My name is Hadrian Black, and I need your help finding someone. Events here at home require my full attention, and you are in a much better position to find them than I am.”

Peter stepped a bit closer to the glowing Thestral, momentarily distracted when Groot finally managed to pull himself up onto Lethe’s back with a triumphant cry. “Who do you need found, and why?”

“The why of it is long and complicated. To be brief, his old colleagues have been causing my family a great deal of strife recently, actively putting one in danger and nearly killing him.”

Drax’s brow furrowed at that. “But why would they do that? If they are colleagues, should they not be working together?”

A deep sigh escaped Lethe. “Their actions were those born of unwarranted distrust and discrimination, Drax. It was no fault of the teen’s.”

Gamora immediately straightened at the mention of the age of the victim. “This was a child??”
Lethe was quiet for a moment at that. “Not… exactly. Again, it’s long and complicated. What you need to know, however, is that recent events may lead them to try and target him again. The man I want you to find is very well respected by them, and would be able to put an end to their behavior with non-violent means.”

After a moment of quiet consideration where Quill looked at the rest of the Guardians, he finally nodded. “Alright, who do you need us to find?”

“A man by the name of Charles Xavier.”
Chapter Summary

Emma gets a chance to chat with Tony one-on-one and discuss the benefits of family therapy. T’Challa and Erik finally get a chance to talk with the resident genius with an offer of aid in more than one way. One member of the DragonHarem has a surprising history with the Master of Death, and Tony finally gets the chance to air all of his grievances and feelings out in the open in front of the one who hurt him most... then shove it in his face that they can't hurt him anymore. The Rogues finally get the chance to fully reconcile with Tony, and gratitude and humor abound. Phil and Bridget have a moment, and Rem's awakening finally means all is right in the worlds of his parents.

Chapter Notes

VASSALS!! The new chapter his now available to you all!! I first want to give a shout-out to these particular users for their support:

AmandaJo
Arikins the Fox
BlindDingo
LvSoulFriend

Darlings, you all know what you did!! Thank you for your love!!

I want to also make an announcement regarding an upcoming one-shot. Directly after posting this chapter, there's a one-shot that's going to drop, and it's one I've been hinting at for a while. Vassals... brace yourselves. You're finally going to learn the full story of Minowa Norddahl, the First Reaper.

In the meantime, enjoy the new chapter!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Emma carefully balanced both mugs she was carrying in one hand as she knocked on the door in front of her with the other. At the call of ‘come in!’ she nudged the door open with her foot, readjusting her hold on the drinks as she slipped inside. She gave the man in the bed in front of her a bright smile as she approached him. “Good morning, mio fratello. You're looking much better today.”

Cognac brown eyes lit up with happiness as Tony straightened in the bed he was reclining in. “Emma, hey! Did you bring me coffee? Thanks, Sorellina, you're a lifesaver.” He made grabby hands towards the mug, and Emma couldn’t help but giggle as she passed the beverage to him. “Laugh at me all you want, Em, but you know I need this to survive.”
The woman gave a soft hum as she shook her head, taking a sip of her own coffee. “How are you feeling, Antonio? I would imagine you managed to get a good night’s rest, even here.”

Tony gave a soft sigh as he nodded in confirmation. “It helps that I had Stephen here with me. He had to pop back to Kamar-Taj for a bit just to make sure everything is running smoothly on that end, but other than that… he’s been pretty unwilling to leave my side for very long.” He took a sip of his drink before setting it down, his expression becoming sad and pained. “I can’t really blame him for that… me being displaced fucked with our soulmate bond something fierce, and if being close to me more often than not helps him feel secure again, I’m more than willing to allow him to stick himself to my side.” After a few seconds of contemplation, he looked up at his half-sister with a knowing glint in his eyes. “On that note… how are you doing?”

Blue eyes turned to meet his cognac, and Emma gave him a smile that came out more like a grimace. “I… won’t say it’s been fine, because it isn’t, and you’d call me out if I tried to fib.”

“You’re damn right I would.” Tony waved his hand to send the mug to the bedside table, only to groan with frustration when it simply wobbled a little. He grumbled under his breath as he manually moved the mug instead before turning and opening his arms for Emma. The woman immediately put her drink to the side before moving to curl up next to him, sobs beginning to escape her as the genius began to run his fingers through her hair in a soothing manner as he reassured her in a quiet, comforting tone. “I’m okay, Emma, I’m right here, we’re all okay. I know, this sucked on so many levels, and I know how hard this was for you in particular. You’ve been so brave and so strong, I’m so proud of you, Emma.” He pressed a kiss to her head before tucking it in the crook of his neck, and he rubbed her back in soothing circles as she clung to him for dear life as if she were afraid to let him go.

It took several minutes for the woman to calm down, and once her sobs had lessened to only sniffles she managed to croak, “I was so scared, Tony… I was trying so hard to stay strong for the girls and for Peter, but I was so afraid, and I know you can’t really die, but…”

The genius shushed her again, shaking his head. “Emma, after everything you’ve been through, it’s perfectly understandable that you would have that kind of reaction. You have every right to be scared and hurt by this, let no one tell you otherwise.” The younger woman sniffed and nodded, pressing her face into his shoulder as she clung to him. Tony sat with her for several more minutes, more than willing to provide her with comfort after such a traumatic experience. Finally, he gave her a squeeze before speaking again. “Emma, I think you, the girls, and I need to sit down with Kirby after this.”

Emma lifted her head to blink watery blue eyes at him. “Jack? The other on-call therapist?”

Tony nodded and explained, “I actually wanted to suggest it sooner, but I didn’t want to push
anything. But after everything that’s happened the last few days… I think it would be good for all of us.”

“Don’t you normally see Stan, though?” The brunette woman questioned softly.

A soft hum escaped the older male at that. “Yes, but I think we could do with a family session, and that’s more Jack’s area of expertise. Maybe we could pull Peter into it, too. God knows that poor boy is going to need several sessions of his own…” He swallowed and shook his head, guilt flashing in his eyes. “Pete’s been through so much already in terms of his family… I can’t imagine how this affected him. I think I’m gonna ask Stan if he’d be willing and able to talk to him about everything that’s been going on.”

The woman nodded at his reasoning, a small smile tugging at her lips. “I would be more than willing to sit with him for that. If you ever need me to do so, please just let me know.”

A gentle kiss was pressed to Emma’s head before Tony pulled her in for another tight hug. “I will, thank you Em.”

The siblings were content to relax in quiet for a few minutes, but the tranquility was broken when a soft knock came from the door. “Dr. Stark?” The voice of T’Challa came from the other side, sounding uncertain and hesitant. “May we speak with you for a moment?”

Tony shot a glance at Emma, and the woman gave a soft laugh as she rose from the bed and nabbed her beverage from the table. “Better talk to him, Antonio. He’s been very patient all this time.”

“Alright, go ahead and send King Kitty in.” The genius reached to gently squeeze Emma’s hand before the brunette swept to the door, opening it to allow T’Challa and Erik in before ducking outside and closing it behind her. Tony arched an intrigued eyebrow at the ex-SEAL before turning his whiskey-brown eyes to the monarch. “Hey there, Simba. I have to say, I wasn’t expecting you to show up during this whole mess.”

T’Challa shot a sheepish look at his cousin, who didn’t hesitate to step forward and raise a hand with a smug look on his face. “That was my doing. I’m Erik Stevens, cousin of this dumbass.” He jerked a thumb in the king’s direction, who did nothing more than cringe in response.

A bark of laughter escaped Tony at the words and interaction, and he shifted so he was sitting up a
little straighter in bed to reach for his drink. He huffed out a curse when he couldn’t reach it, though the problem was solved a moment later when T’Challa immediately moved to help him. “Thanks, King Kitty. I didn’t know you had a cousin.”

“Not many do, Dr. Stark.” The monarch admitted as he took a seat, Erik leaning against the wall behind him. “Had events transpired differently, I may have never known about him.”

The ex-Seal nodded as his words before picking up the story. “My uncle, the king before him, was responsible for the death of my father. He was smuggling vibranium to less than reputable sources, so I can kinda understand why it happened. Initially, I was left behind when T’Chaka left, but... I guess he had second thoughts about leaving the kid he orphaned behind, and he got me a day later. I grew up for several years in Wakanda, but I wanted to make a difference for the people I grew up with in Oakland. I came back to the states when I was old enough, and enrolled in the Navy to keep the skills I picked up in Wakanda sharp.”

T’Challa took a second to throw a proud smile over his shoulder at his cousin. “He is a warrior of great skill, and Shuri and I are proud to have him as a member of our family.” His face fell as he turned back to face Tony. “In some ways, he is wiser than I am-- he was the one to enlighten me on how my negligence has affected you and yours, though it was never my intention to cause you harm with such. I became distracted by matters of state, trying to fill in the shoes my father left behind when he--” A choked noise escaped him, a look of compassion flickering over Erik’s face as he stepped up to grab the man’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze.

“Hey,” Tony said softly with a sympathetic smile, reaching to gently rest his hand on the man’s arm in a supportive gesture, “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry for your loss. And I know how it feels, you know? The difference is that you had to take over a country-- all I did was take over a company.”

A sardonic chuckle escaped the monarch, and he raised his tearful gaze to the genius. “And yet, you’ve done a far better job than I have. I have much to apologize for, and I intend to follow through on the promise I made to you about taking on the financial responsibility for the damage my actions incurred. Given what has happened here as a result of my negligence, I-- we would like to offer something else.”

Seeing the curious head tilt from Tony, Erik raised his hand again. “Look, chances are the Accords Committee are gonna wanna keep Rogers here for the foreseeable future, and I could make a guess that the same holds true for the female Maximoff. The New Avengers shouldn’t have to play babysitter for them, so... If you’ve got the room, I’m offering to take on that responsibility.”

Tony’s eyebrows flew into his hairline at that. “That’s a big job to volunteer for, given both of them and their attitudes.”
Erik grinned at that, and he looked towards the ceiling. “Oh, I don’t think Rogers will be a problem. Hey FRIDAY, would you mind showing Dr. Stark the footage from before?”

“Gladly, Mr. Stevens.”

A holographic screen flickered to life on the wall to Tony’s left, and his eyes grew steadily wider as he watched the interaction between the ex-SEAL and the super soldier. “Well, consider me well and truly impressed.” He turned his attention back to Erik and T’Challa again, a grin spreading over his face. “I think you’re gonna fit in here just fine, Erik. Have you gotten a chance to meet any of the Compound’s other inhabitants yet?”

To his confusion, the question prompted a burst of laughter from Erik, along with a droop of the head from T’Challa. “Oh yeah, we got the chance alright, didn’t we Cuz?”

The monarch sighed despondently and looked up at Tony again with a contrite expression. “Miss Norddahl has expressed a distinct distaste for me…”

“She seemed to like me well enough.” The ex-SEAL gave his cousin a shit-eating grin, then laughed outright at the petulant look he received in response.

Tony arched an eyebrow at the interaction, a small smirk quirking at his lips. “Dare I ask?”

“Dr. Stark, your teammate is terrifying when she’s angry.”

“I thought she was a badass. You’re the one who pissed her off, ya know.”

“I’m aware, Erik. No need to rub it in.”

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“There you go, Vic! You’re doing great!”
Victor huffed out a breath but shot Bruce an excited grin anyway. “It feels good to be back on my feet again! How long am I allowed to be up this time?”

The scientist checked his watch as he approached the emerald-eyed male. “I’d say you’ll be good for about half an hour. If you feel tired before then, let us know and we’ll pull over a chair.”

From where he was lightly supporting Victor, James leaned down to press a kiss to the younger male’s hair before pulling away to let the man stand on his own. “Don’t be afraid to tell us either, okay Doll? It’s gonna take time for you to get back your full strength, and there’s no rush for you to do so.”

“James is right, Vic.” The voice heralded the arrival of Logan with a cart of sandwiches and drinks. “And you’re gonna need energy to get better, too, so come grab somethin’ to eat.”

All four men quickly crowded around the cart, each grabbing a sandwich and a drink while chatting and laughing together. The sound of the door swishing open again caused the noise to halt, and they turned as one to see Minowa stride through the doorway, Erik hot on her heels. “And this is the physical therapy room, it’s been getting more traffic than usual these days—oh, speak of which…” The woman’s crimson eyes lit up with joy at seeing her men, and she gestured for Erik to follow behind her as she approached them. “Hello, my loves. Diimalkro, it’s good to see you on your feet again!” She pulled him into a gentle hug, pulling away after a moment to press a kiss to the corner of his mouth.

The former monarch smiled brilliantly at her, even as a vibrant blush covered his cheeks. “I’ve been trying my best to get better. The sooner I do, the sooner the blocks on my magic can come off.”

The ebony-haired woman nodded at his words, giving him a loving smile. “You’ve made remarkable progress so far, but don’t push yourself beyond your limits. We’ll speak with Bridget soon to see how much longer we should wait before performing the procedure.” Getting a nod from the youngest of her partners, she stepped back and gestured to Erik, who had been observing quietly with a curious look on his face. “Boys, I’d like you to meet Erik Stevens. He’s agreed to come on as handler for Rogers and Maximoff. Erik, from left to right this is Bruce Banner, James Barnes, Victor Von Doom, and Logan Howlett.”

James stepped forward first, reaching out a hand towards Erik. “Must need a wheelbarrow for the weight of the stones you gotta have to take on a job like that.” The sniper quipped, though there was a momentary flash of anger and hurt in his eyes that he was quick to repress.
“Nah, I don’t have stones that big,” the ex-SEAL joked back, a small smirk on his face, “but I do have years worth of Navy SEAL training under my belt and experience with JSOC, so I suppose that more than makes up for it.”

An impressed whistle escaped Logan as he came forward as well. “Navy SEAL, huh? That’s nothin’ to scoff at, that’s for damn sure. It’ll be good havin’ you around-- could join me, Craig, Ulysses, and Rhodey for poker when we get together. Just a bunch of old military vets sittin’ around with cards and booze.”

A small grin crossed Erik’s face at the offer, though his brow furrowed a moment later. “Craig and Ulysses are the Boone men, right? They’ve got military history?”

Bruce nodded at the question and cleaned his glasses with the edge of his shirt. “Yeah, that red beret Craig wears all the time is from when he served with the NCR.”

“The NCR? I’ve never heard of them.”

The addition of a new voice drew their attention to the doors again. “That’s completely understandable. The NCR stands for ‘New California Republic’, and it’s not a thing you’ll find here.” Hadrian gave the group a smile as he pushed himself up from where he’d been leaning in the doorway, sweeping over to them at a level pace.

Erik nodded at his words, even as he was eyeing the man with wariness. He’d been at the Compound long enough to know who exactly the person coming towards them was, but the fact that the youthful-looking ebony-haired man moved with a gait that spoke of prior experience on a battlefield was something the ex-SEAL hadn’t accounted for. Considering the fact that this man was straight up known as the ‘Master of Death’, Hadrian Black was not someone he wanted to get on the wrong side of. “Is this one of those multiverse things I was hearing about?”

The Master of Death dipped his head towards him, a genial smile on his face. “That’s correct. Craig and Ulysses were both snipers, much like James was. If you want to know more about their experiences, I’m sure they’d be willing to trade stories with you.” Getting a nod from the dark-skinned man, he turned his eyes to the others in the room. “Now, I did come here for a reason, and I believe one of you knows why.”

There were a few seconds of confused silence before a soft sigh was heard, and Victor stepped forward with a nervous look on his face. “Hello again, Lord Hadrian.”
The smile on the ebony-haired man’s face grew, and he took a few more steps forward so they were standing closer. “Greetings to you as well, Victor. You’re looking much better than the last time I saw you.” He glanced up at the stunned expressions of the others in the room before turning his attention back to the former monarch. “I’m glad you’ve found love and acceptance here. Don’t be afraid to open up to them, they’ll help you accomplish what you’ve been trying to do for so long.”

“Wait, back the fuck up! How the hell do you know Victor??” Logan asked incredulously, looking between the two in shock.

Victor gave the mutant a soft, yet brittle smile as he explained, “When I was in college, I created a phone that was an amalgamation of advanced tech and powerful magic that let me speak to the dead. It… wasn’t an easy task, for more than one reason.” He reached up to run his fingers over the scars on his face for a moment. “The prototype was sabotaged and it… well, these scars didn't come from nowhere. I did eventually build another one, but… it drew the attention of Lord Hadrian.”

The Master of Death nodded at that, giving them all a stern look. “I understand that what he was trying was being done with good intentions, but such a thing could then be advanced further, like someone trying to use that connection to pull souls back to the world of the living.” He huffed out a soft sigh before giving Victor a sympathetic look. “I’m not without compassion, however-- I allowed Victor to make his call with the condition that he destroy the phone along with all research involved in its creation and not bring another one into existence once he was done.”

After a few seconds of quiet, Minowa slid to the former monarch’s side and gently took his hand, drawing his attention. “Who were you trying to call, Diimalkro?” She asked in a soft, comforting voice.

Victor swallowed hard, giving her hand a squeeze. “I was trying to talk to my mom and dad.”

“Shit,” James murmured softly, reaching to wrap his arms around the brunette’s waist from behind. “I remember now-- you told me you were orphaned at a young age. I don’t blame you for wanting that…”

Bruce moved in to take Victor’s other hand, rubbing his thumb over the top in a soothing motion. “Did you get through to them?”

The green-eyed man nodded at that, though his expression was distressed as he did so. “Yes, but I learned something upsetting when I spoke to my mother. Her soul is currently being held and
tortured by a demon, Mephisto. I’ve tried for years to free her, but I’m just not strong enough.” He cast a forlorn look down at his arms, frowning at the metal disks there. “Having my magic bound… I don’t know how I’m going to face him this time.” Seeing the looks of intrigue he was getting, he clarified, “I’m able to challenge him only once a year, but… I haven’t been able to beat him yet.”

“Damn, that’s not good.” Logan hummed, and after a few seconds of consideration he looked up at Hadrian. “Do you think you could remove the blocks? You’ve got years of experience with the magical mumbo jumbo…”

Hadrian frowned and took Victor’s hand from Bruce, studying the blocks there for a second or two. A movement behind the group drew his attention, and he subtly looked up to see the shadowy figure of Mortis standing in the corner. The Truth shook his head firmly with a grim expression on his face before flickering away. “I’m afraid this is outside my capabilities,” He told them, looking back to them with an apologetic expression. “With the deathly aura that I command combined with the fail-safes built into the blocks… I wouldn’t dare take the chance of accidentally setting them off.”

Victor didn’t look upset as he withdrew his hand, instead giving the Master of Death an understanding smile. “Thanks to you, I still have the chance to help her. I know everyone here will do whatever they can to help me get better, so I can wait a little longer.”

“And we’ll do everything we can to help get her back.” The announcement from Erik drew several surprised, yet thankful looks, and the dark-skinned man shrugged with a grimace. “Look, my mom died when I was really young, I don’t remember anything about her. But you can bet your ass that I’d move heaven and hell to save her if I heard she was going through that kind of shit, and I bet you guys would, too.” He aimed the last part at the others clustered around Victor.

Immediately the group nodded with various noises and words of confirmation and support. Crimson eyes shone with pride as Minowa stepped around them so she was in front of Victor, and she gently took her face in his hands and pressed their foreheads together. “This is no longer a battle you must fight alone. We will do everything in our power to help you.”

A choked ‘thank you’ escaped the former monarch before he found himself being pulled into a spontaneous group hug by his partners. Erik gave them a small smile and a nod before stepping back to give them some space. The sound of a throat being cleared pulled his attention to where Hadrian was standing with a small, knowing smile on his face. “Enjoy being able to do that while you have the chance. Next time, they won’t let you off so easy.” Before the ex-SEAL could ask him what he was talking about, the Master of Death flickered out of existence.
The sound of the door in front of them opening prompted Craig and Ulysses to look up from where they’d been speaking in hushed whispers, and upon seeing Tony and Stephen come into the room were immediately out of their seats and approaching them. Tony gave them a small smile and softly murmured, “You guys didn’t need to be here. I know Sunny has been really fussy without you around, so…”

“Sunny’s down for a nap right now,” Craig reassured him with a wave of his hand. “We wanted to be here.”

’Ses nodded at his husband’s words and turned his burning gaze to the soulmates. “Don’t trust him not to pull something… use words as a weapon, try to pull on guilt and self-hatred from before.”

Verdigris eyes flashed with promises of pain as Stephen reached to grab one of Tony’s hands. “Let him try it.” He growled with uncharacteristic violence coloring his tone. “I won’t hesitate to put an end to it.”

Tony turned to Stephen and pulled him down for a brief, yet firm kiss. “Let him say whatever he wants, love.” He murmured as he pulled away, something flickering in his cognac eyes. “Let him sling whatever hatred and guilt trips and hypocrisy he want. At the end of the day, they’re just words. And I don’t have to believe any of them.”

The Boone men nodded at that, pleasure clear in their own expressions. It was a true testament to how far their friend and brother had come that he could say something like that without any hesitation and believe every word of it. “We’ll be right behind you while you’re in there, Glitch.” Craig said as he turned to the biometric reader for the door next to him. “We won’t say anything to him, but we’d prefer to be there just in case.”

The genius nodded with a murmur of understanding, and as the door slid open he turned to Stephen and waved dramatically towards it. “Would you like the first honors, my love?”

Even Levi’s collar perked up at the words, and Stephen nodded with a truly vindictive smirk on his face. “Tony, babe, I would be absolutely delighted.” He gave his soulmate a kiss before sweeping into the room, followed by the trio of Reapers. They hung towards the back as he allowed Levi to lift him several inches into the air as he approached the first cell. Steve looked up once he realized someone was approaching, and upon seeing the figure floating in the air his jaw dropped in shock. “Steven Grant Rogers,” The Sorcerer Supreme began in a voice that caused everyone in the vicinity to go silent and still, “I was always of the opinion that you were a delusional, egocentric, narrow-minded fool. Now, though? I know those are facts. That you were so willing to put people in danger, attempt to murder someone, and put a child in mortal peril for your own selfish gain
speaks of the kind of man you truly are. I bet you don’t even realize you’ve done something wrong, so caught up in your unflappable belief that you’re Captain America and that your way is the best way.” Stephen’s eyes flashed as if lit with an inner fire as he glared daggers down at the super-soldier. “Know this, Rogers-- the only things keeping me from wrapping you up and gifting you to the leader of the Dark Dimension are the desire to see justice done and your life torn apart in front of the world, my Hippocratic oath, and my duty to protect the world by not giving Dormammu any new toys to play with… and not necessarily in that order.”

Steve’s face twisted into an angry sneer as he spat back, “I never wanted Bucky’s son to get sick! I didn’t realize he was as sick as he was! And I did what I had to do to get my best friend back! If Stark had just stayed out of it, he wouldn’t have died!”

Seeing the perfect opening he’d been supplied with, Stephen allowed his jaw to drop and he put one hand to his mouth as if horrified. “What? Tony is dead??” He turned his head to yell behind him, “Tony, love, you told me you weren’t a zombie!”

The genius in question barked out a laugh as he finally stepped into view, smiling charmingly up at his lover as the sorcerer landed back on the floor. “I’m not, Stephen, I promise!” Tony glanced over at Steve, seeing how the blonde had gone sheet white and his expression had gone from angry to stunned horror. With steel in his cognac eyes and ice in his tone, he then purred, “I got better. I wouldn’t recommend trying this at home though-- leave it to the professionals.”

Even as he heard Craig and Ulysses snort with laughter in the shadows behind them, the sorcerer sighed with relief and pulled the brunette into his arms for a fierce kiss. “Alright, I trust you, love. But if you start craving brains in bed, you’ll be sleeping on the couch until you find a cure.”

Tony sighed with feigned despondence and drawled, “Yes, love.” They shared one more kiss before the genius finally turned his attention to Steve, the jovial look falling from his face entirely. He sneered at the blonde in the cell as he growled “Surprised, Rogers? Trust me, so was I when you snapped my neck without hesitation when you were presented with the chance.” Stephen stepped back so he was standing behind his lover, wrapping his arms around his waist as the genius continued to speak. “So much for the great Captain America, defender of the people. How will the world react when they hear about the true extent of your crimes, I wonder? They already know that you and the female Maximoff caused a car crash and abducted a kid-- a good portion of your fanbase jumped ship the moment they heard that. But when it comes out that your negligence nearly killed that kid, that your compatriot magically compelled a man to commit suicide, that you straight-up attempted to murder a man? And not just any man, but the same one you already tried to kill once before.”

The super soldier’s mouth opened and closed several times as he tried to find something to say, finally settling on croaking, “How? You’re supposed to be dead…”
“Oh, trust me, I’ve heard that question in various different formats my whole life. After all, you’re not the first person to have wanted to see me dead-- the Ten Rings, Obadiah Stane, AIM, alien army from the sky… But you? You’re the only person who will ever be able to say that they were ballsy enough to actually put their hands on me and do the job themselves… twice, now that I think about it.”

Baby-blue eyes flashed with anger as Steve surged to his feet. “I’ve never tried to kill you before!”

The words forced a harsh laugh from Stephen as he tightened his grip around his soulmate. “Don’t act the part of the righteous man in front of us, Rogers. Do you really expect us to believe that you didn’t know exactly how much damage you were doing when you beat Tony into the ground in that bunker? Even if on the off chance you didn’t, you left a man in freezing temperatures in Siberia with no protective cover, no way of keeping warm, and no way of getting ahold of his allies. If his injuries hadn’t gotten him first, the cold would have done the job.”

Tony laid his hand on one of the hands resting on his chest and gave it a tiny squeeze of support even as he drawled, “You had a chance to walk away from all of that, though-- all of those wrongs and deaths you caused. The problem is that your pardons-- and this goes for everyone else as well-- were contingent on your behavior and willingness to play nice. Unfortunately, you and Maximoff didn’t just decide to not play nice, but break every rule you possibly could in one fell swoop. Actions have consequences, Rogers, and you both are about to be hit with so many charges that it would take a miracle or divine intervention for either of you to get the chance to see the light of day again.” There were a few seconds of quiet as Tony took a deep breath, steeling himself for what was about to happen. “From the moment we met on the quinjet, I could tell you didn’t like me. Admittedly, it wasn’t the first time I’d faced something like that, so I shrugged it off as I normally do. But you didn’t just not like me-- for some reason, you seemed to loathe every fiber of my being, every word out of my mouth and every action I took was subject to scorn and consternation from you in some way. I don’t know if it was something SHIELD told you about me, I don’t know if it’s because I’m me and not Howard, I don’t know if it’s because I refused to back down from you… all I knew was that you seemed to hate me right out the gate, and no effort I made was ever enough for you. You were completely unwilling to even consider the idea that my old man was an abusive drunk my whole life, even though you only knew him for a year, maybe two. You were unwilling to give me the benefit of the doubt when I tried to explain what went wrong with Ultron, having already decided it had to be all my fault. You’d think you would have given me the benefit of the doubt, seeing as I came by my title of Doctor Stark honestly by studying and being the foremost expert in the field of engineering and computer sciences! Can you say the same for yourself, Captain?”

Tony pulled away from Stephen, stepping up to the glass in a firm motion that caused Steve to actually take a step back. “You gave me so much shit for not being a team player, not being around for things like team building exercises and meetings, and it didn’t even cross your mind that I had a life outside of the Avengers! Do you think running a multi-billion dollar company like Stark Industries is all sunshine and rainbows and minimal effort? Do you really think I would be willing to put every single ounce of stress on the shoulders of Pepper and leave her alone to deal with it?”
Tony took a deep breath, feeling his heart throb with pain as he growled, “But I was willing to forgive all of that. I was willing to keep being a team player, keep funding you guys, keep building your toys. I was willing to forgive and forget. But what I will *never* forgive and *never* forget is what you did when you found out about what happened to my Mom. Knowing what I know now, the fact that you managed to look me right in the eye and said the words ‘sometimes my teammates don’t tell me things’ while simultaneously knowing what really happened to Mom and Howard is a true testament to how much of a hypocrite you really are. You knew for *two years*, could have told me at any time… and then when I *did* find out, you tried to *lie to my face* about it.” The feeling of a gloved hand on his shoulder was a welcome one, and Tony reached to grab it gently to ground himself. “I don’t know why you didn’t like me, Rogers, but I bent over backward for years trying to change that. Now, I have a team, a family… a partner, who don’t *want* or *need* me to be anything more or less than who I am. Because who I am is, and always will be enough for them.” He took a step back from the glass, giving the man on the other side a small, satisfied smirk. “I don’t know why you never liked me… and honestly? I really don’t care anymore.” He looked up at Stephen and gave a nod, and the two turned and walked away from the dumbstruck super soldier behind them. Before the blonde could think of anything to say, they’d already retreated back to the hall from before.

Stephen wasted no time in swooping in and kissing Tony soundly for several seconds. “I love you so damn much, you know that, right?” He murmured as they pulled away, adoration shining in his eyes for the genius in his arms.

For once, Tony forwent any kind of sarcastic retort and instead gave his soulmate a brilliant, loving smile. “I know, baby. I love you too.”

Craig and Ulysses shot each other identical fondly exasperated expressions as the two kissed again. After several seconds, they pulled apart and turned towards them again. “Bet it felt good to get all that off of your chest, huh Glitch?” The former quipped, giving him an understanding smile.

The genius gave a soft sigh and nodded, leaning into Stephen and allowing the sorcerer to wrap an arm around his waist as Levi extended to cover them both. “Definitely. Getting a chance to say all of that and show Rogers he doesn’t have any kind of control over me anymore… yeah, it feels like closure.” His expression went grim as he turned his eyes towards the one-way observation window nearby. “At least I got it from *him*. Dunno how much of a response I’ll get out of *her*.”

“It’s more likely that you *won’t* get one at all.” Stephen murmured softly as he leaned in just enough to look down into the cell where Wanda was curled up in a corner completely motionless, eyes glassy and expression blank. “I guess seeing her brother alive, then hearing him completely disown her, coupled with the events of the past few days… She threw herself at the wall and screamed incoherently for *hours* before ending up like this. As far as we can tell, she’s completely catatonic.”
“Mind broke, couldn’t deal with reality.” Ulysses hummed, crossing his arms as he observed the woman with narrowed brown eyes. “She could come out of it-- might not be sane, lash out at anyone around her.”

There were a few moments of quiet as the group considered his words before a resigned sigh escaped Tony. “No matter how badly she hurt me or the people around me… I think death would have been more merciful than this.” He turned away from the window, giving his soulmate a small grimace. “She can’t stand trial if she’s not mentally there. Put several power suppressant spells on the cell and keep watching her. If and when she comes out of it, then she’ll go before a court of law.”

Stephen nodded and moved in again to press a kiss to the top of his head. “Come on, love. Let’s get out of here.”

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Tony could hear the sound of hushed voices conversing as he calmly approached the door to the meeting room where he knew Natasha, Clint, Scott, and Sam were waiting for him. He stopped just shy of the door to take a few calming breaths before reaching for the door handle and turning it, striding confidently into the room. He gave the group inside a smile as he quipped, “Well, glad to see everyone’s recovered from the chaos.” The group as a whole nodded before Nat and Clint stood and pulled him into a hug, surprising the genius. “Damn, I think Hell must be freezing over. I think I can count the number of times either of you has hugged me on one hand and have fingers left over.” He chuckled, not hesitating to hug them both in return.

Natasha gave a wet laugh at that, giving him a squeeze before pulling away to reveal her teary eyes that were full of breathtaking gratitude. “We’ll hug you every day for the rest of our lives if you want. God, Tony, we owe you so much, and we didn’t even realize it…”

Her partner nodded as her words as he wiped the tears away from his face with the back of his hand. “You saved Rem twice, and your attempt to save him when this whole thing first started nearly cost you your life. I don’t think a simple ‘thank you’ will ever be enough to express how grateful we are…”

“Hey, none of that.” Tony reached and pulled them back in, heart aching with sympathy for the duo. “You never have to thank me for that, okay? I’d do it again in a heartbeat. Now come on, you both are supposed to be big, scary agents that all the minions speak about in whispers. Dry those eyes and chin up. Everything is okay, now.”
Scott and Sam snorted at his words, and upon getting confused looks Sam immediately explained, “As scary as Clint and ‘Tasha are, I’m pretty sure the one the underlings both fear and worship the most is Phil.”

The brunette next to him nodded firmly at that. “Sorry guys, but Coulson has you both beat on that end.”

The duo laughed at the proclamation as they took a seat alongside Tony. “Trust me, we’ve known and accepted that since he was assigned as our handler at SHIELD.” The redhead reassured them while sharing a smile with her lover.

Cognac eyes sparkled with humor as Tony nodded sagely at their words. “Alright, now that we have firmly reestablished that Agent Agent is the badass-iest of badasses, let’s get this meeting started. I want to cover a few things with you all, then I’ll open the floor for questions. Hell knows you probably have quite a lot of them.” The group nodded in understanding, and Tony first turned to Sam and Scott. “Guys, you both impressed everyone at the Compound with your ability to keep your heads cool and in the moment during a time of crisis. Sam, Aria made special mention of how well you handled Alexia at the mall. Because of this, and the glowing reports from your previous evaluations, you’ve been approved and have spaces waiting for you as official members of the New Avengers Disaster Relief and Rescue team.”

Both men started nodding immediately, the engineer doing so with an additional excited whoop. “Man, I can’t wait to start making a difference in a way that matters,” Sam announced with a grin. “Doin’ this kind of work… it makes me feel like I can be a real hero, and I don’t even have to punch an alien in the face to do it.”

“I can’t wait to tell Cassie, Maggie, and Jim!” Scott crowed with excitement and joy in his eyes. “They’ve been so supportive and understanding, I can’t wait to tell them I made it onto the team!”

The duo’s happiness was infectious, and Tony found himself grinning as well as his eyes flickered. “I’m sure they’ll be thrilled for you, Scott.” He turned his attention to Clint and Natasha next, and the two sat up straight in their seats as he addressed them. “Clint, Natasha, you both received glowing reviews as well. Dorian and Zevrael both told me about the conversation you had… as well as the things they revealed to you. You both handled it maturely and with calm heads-- well, relatively calm, but that’s to be expected given the situation. Because of that, along with your past reviews, we would like to offer you both a place here at the Compound as instructors for any future recruits that come through. You would also be a part of the New Avengers reserves, in case we face a threat we can’t deal with on our own.”

Natasha gave him an enormous smile and nodded at the offer. “We would be happy to accept the offer, Tony. This way we get to mentor and guide future heroes on how to use their skills as a team.”
A soft choked noise escaped the archer at her words. “It’s more than we could have ever hoped for… and probably more than we deserve. Thank you for giving us the chance to prove ourselves.”

There was a second of silence before Tony sighed and repositioned himself so he was facing them fully. “A man who was a hell of a lot smarter than I was once told me, ‘Don’t waste your life, Stark’. I got my second chance, and I haven’t wasted a single second of it. Have we all done bad things? Yes. Have we all been victims of circumstance in one way or another? Yes. Did those circumstances shape us and influence some of those bad decisions? Yes.” He reached out to take their hands, looking them in the eye with a compassionate, understanding smile. “Are we still deserving of second chances to try and be better than we were before? Hell yes. Here’s your second chance, guys. Now I’m going to give you both the same advice that was once given to me when I got mine: don’t waste your life.”

Tears had welled up in both agent’s eyes again as Tony was speaking, and when he finished they both pulled him into another hug, thanking him and promising not to waste their chance simultaneously. Scott gave them a massive grin, though a curious sound from Sam drew his attention to the ex-soldier. “What’s up?”

The dark-skinned man gave a small quirk of his lips as he observed the hug in front of him. “You remember how Hadrian said that Reapers aren’t born, they’re chosen?” The engineer nodded, and the smile on Sam’s face grew. “Speaking for myself, here… I can’t think of anyone more deserving than him.”

“Stop, Wilson, you’re making me blush!” Tony flapped his hand at the man as he pulled away from Nat and Clint again. “Actually, that’s an excellent segway into the Q&A portion of this meeting. Given what you guys have seen and heard over the last few days, I’m not even sure where to begin.” He paused for a moment to think before slowly continuing, “Actually, let’s begin with what you do know, then work from there. That way, you’re all working with the same cheat-sheet.”

The group nodded as one before Nat took point. “From what we learned from Zev and Dori’, you and most of the New Avengers are Reapers, agents that are under the ‘employ’ of Hadrian, who’s the Master of Death. His job is to protect against sources of unbalanced death, which he does by sending a team to any world where such a thing becomes a threat. That’s why he has a team here now.”

A momentary cringe flashed across Clint’s face as he continued, “Yeah, considering the size of the threat, wiping the entirety of life from the universe… they reamed us for not listening to you on
that one. They told us about the Infinity Stones… and about you somehow being one of them, and using that power to save Rem.”

Scott and Sam’s heads whipped in Tony’s direction, and the genius nodded and closed his eyes. “Yeah, that matches up…” He opened them again, revealing his now glowing, burnt orange irises. “We’re still not sure how it happened, but… I’m the Soul Stone.”

“Woah…” Scott sat forward with a fascinating gleam in his eyes, Sam doing the same. “That’s pretty cool! I know Min’s do that sometimes, but this is completely different!”

The genius blinked at the duo’s relatively calm reactions. “Neither of you seem particularly perturbed by this.”

That got a flat out laugh out of Sam. “Man, in the last few days I’ve seen magic the likes of which shouldn’t even exist, found out some of the people I work with are from alternate dimensions, found out they’re also immortal, and cooked dinner with Death and his master. Frankly speaking, this is maybe the least weird thing I’ve encountered so far.”

Scott nodded at that with a calm look on his face. “Hadrian almost accidentally stabbed Sam with a knife he was magicking around.”

“Dude, no need to be so casual about it…”

“You’re still alive!”

The exchanged forced a chuckle out of Tony. “Well, when you put it like that…” He gave a small sigh as he sat back in his chair. “Okay, that’s a good start. So, given what you’ve heard, seen, and been told… what else would you like to know?”

“So, the multiverse is a thing. Is there one out there where… I dunno, birds are the superior intelligent species and rule the world?”
“Clint, do you have *any* idea how big the multiverse is? I’m pretty sure it exists, but I don’t have the time or the patience to go looking for it.”

“Tony, you’re immortal now.”

“Fine. I have better things to *do* with my time. Happy?”

“Only marginally.”

“That Claiming thing you went through… it made you immortal. Did it do anything else?”

“The Claiming also grants Reapers special abilities. That’s why Dorian and Zevrael have total pyro- and cryo-kinesis respectively.”

“Sweet! Did you get any cool powers??”

“Yes. I have technopathy now…”

“Holy crap, that’s so cool!”

“… And omni-magic.”

“Oh my god, you have *magic* !!”

“Scott, stop bouncing or you’re going to fall out of your damn seat!”
“Are Minowa’s horns and eyes a product of becoming a Reaper?”

“Pffft, no! If you were to ask her, she’d call them battle trophies. In reality, they’re because of her bond with Alduin.”

“With who?”

“Oh shit, have you not met Min’s tenant yet, Sam? Have any of you??”

“No, we weren’t even aware she even had a… tenant, did you say? Who is Alduin?”

“...”

“...Tony, I really don’t like the fact that you’re cackling maniacally right now...”

“Wait, so they’re not Emma’s daughters per se, they’re younger clones of Emma?”

“Yep, made without her knowledge and everything. She doesn’t even know how someone managed to get close enough to her to get the necessary eggs to do so.”

“They all have such different personalities, though… Not just in terms of Emma, but each other.”

“You should have been here when they all spoke at the same time using their hive mind.”

“Wait, what do you mean they all spoke at the same time?”

“Hm… Okay, have you ever seen ‘The Shining’? Think the Grady Twins, but less murdery and less evil, and there’s five of them.”
“I… suddenly, I’m totally okay with them all being so different.”

“So, you and Stephen adopted a son.”

“Peter, yes. We love him so damn much, and we’re so proud of him. Not just because of his smarts, either, but he’s so strong emotionally.”

“Yeah, ‘Tasha and I heard about what Fury did. Pretty dick move on his part. Still, we can tell he loves you guys to the moon and back. He’s such a bright, happy kid.”

“He’s also able to pick up Mjolnir.”

“Woah, that was one hell of a spit-take! Y’allright there, Clint??”

“THE SPIDER CHILD IS WORTHY!!”

“Are you happy?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Tony, at the end of the day, the details don’t matter to me. We were shit to you back then, and these people helped you come back even stronger than before.”

“She’s right, Tones. We worked with you for years, and we took advantage of you and belittled you at every turn. We couldn’t even give you the decency of trusting your word during that fiasco with Ultron.”
“I was willing to listen and take the words of Pym at face value without even meeting you first. Pretty crappy move on my part…”

“And I had the balls to say that you wouldn’t listen to us if we came to you about the accords and James, and just… Man, I may not have known you back then, but I didn’t even give you a chance before I passed judgment.”

“We weren’t a good team to you… but the Reapers were, and are. So, given all of that… at the end of the day, are you happy?”

“Yes. I am.”

“Then that’s more than enough for me.”

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Tony let out a gusty sigh as he sat back in his seat, giving Nat a smile when she reached over and rubbed his neck to help work the tension out. “Wow, I’m getting flashbacks to when I told all this stuff to Pepper and Bruce. You guys have been champs about all of this, you know that?”

“It was our pleasure, Tony. Besides,” Scott sat forward in his seat again, an eager grin on his face. “Once you get your powers back, I get to see more magic!”

“Oh my God, Scott, it just hit me. You fanboy over Min, Loki, and now Tony… you are a fanboy for magic!” Sam chuckled fondly, shaking his head.

The engineer started to glare at him before he smiled and shrugged unrepentantly. “You know what? Yeah. I’m a fanboy for magic and proud of it.”

Nat and Clint snorted at that, though the noise in the room was brought to a stop at the sound of a knock on the door. Stephen poked his head in and gave them a smile, stepping inside as he greeted them, “I apologize for the interruption-- Levi, must you??”
Tony laughed as he pat the collar of the cloak that had just wrapped around his shoulders. “Leave him alone, Steph, he hasn’t been getting enough love recently.” He turned to the others who were staring at them in awe, and as Levi waved a corner he announced, “Guys, this is Levi, he’s a sentient relic in service of Stephen.”

Immediately, Scott was waving enthusiastically to the Cloak, and Levi didn’t hesitate to shoot over to him and wrap snugly around him. “I have found Nirvana, I can die in peace!” He called in a muffled voice from the cocoon he found himself wrapped in.

Laughter immediately erupted through the room, Sam nearly falling out of his chair from the force of his. As Clint lunged from his seat to keep the ex-soldier upright, Tony called to the cloaky burrito, “I’m pretty sure there are several people waiting for you currently who would be most unhappy with you if you died!

There was a wiggling motion from within Levi before Scott popped his head out with an excited gleam in his eyes. “Wait, what was that?”

Tony and Stephen grinned at each other, and as the Sorcerer Supreme moved to an empty portion of the room the genius drawled, “Well, since you’ve successfully completed all of your evaluations, I figured now would be a good time to maybe talk about setting up visits with Cassie...”

A grin stretched across Stephen’s face as he swung his arm in a circle, opening a portal to a living room Scott recognized instantly. “... Starting now. Want to go see your family?”

Scott whooped with joy, and once Levi let him go he bounded for the portal, calling goodbyes and thank yous over his shoulder. As he jumped through, everyone could hear squeals of ‘daddy!! ’ and ‘Scott!’ along with an ‘oomph!’ from the engineer in question. Stephen chuckled and shook his head fondly before reaching for Tony and pulling him into a quick kiss. “I’ll make sure everything gets set up properly. I’ll see you tonight, love.”

The genius nodded and blew him a kiss as Stephen stepped through to the other side of the portal as well, and once it had closed he turned to the rest of the group. Seeing the expressions on their faces, he gave them a shit-eating grin. “What?”

Finally, Clint snorted and shook his head with a massive grin of his own. “Tony Stark, you are a sentimental sonuvabitch.”
“Guilty and proud!”

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“How in Oblivion does he manage to have hair that looks this good less than two days after surgery?!”

Phil couldn’t help but chuckle at the petulant tone from Bridget as he watched her casting diagnostic magic over the man in the bed in front of her. “It might be his healing factor keeping any imperfections away from his scalp. If that theory holds true, he could potentially go his entire life without bathing.

Bridget spun around and pointed a finger at him with an unamused look in her eyes. “Do not give him any ideas! I don’t care if he’s still unconscious, I wouldn’t put it past him to have heard it anyway!” She huffed and cast one more spell before stepping back and nodding. “Alright, he should be waking up soon. Today, maybe tomorrow.”

The agent nodded at her words, and as she made to brush by him he reached out and gently caught her wrist. “Hey, before you go. I just wanted to say I think you’re a strong woman to have gone through everything the past few days have thrown at us and kept a clear, level head.”

“I…” Bridget tried desperately to will the blush from her face as she swallowed and nodded. “Thank you, Phil. You were an enormous help as well, and I doubt I could have done it without you.”

Cornflower-blue eyes sparkled as the agent gave her a smile. “It was my pleasure. And, for what it’s worth…” In a bold move, he reached to gently curl one of her blonde tresses around his finger. “... I think your hair is much prettier than Wade’s could ever be.”

Before the restoration mage could think of anything to say to that, Phil pulled away gently before he calmly turned and walked out the door. The blush she had been trying to will away was back in full force and far more intense, and she made several attempts to speak before simply squeaking and retreating to the other end of the medical wing.

From inside of Rem’s room, Dorian and Zevrael chuckled and gave each other massive grins. “Maker’s breath, I’ve never seen Bridget blush like that before!” The silverette exclaimed softly, getting a rapid nod from his husband.
“She was bright red, alright. Hasn’t she had a pass made at her before?”

The Pavus men turned to where Natasha and James were sitting and thought for a moment. “Honestly? If they have, she didn’t pay them any attention.” Dorian admitted. “I think the difference this time is… well, I think Bridget likes Phil. She connects with him on a level I haven’t seen with her before.”

The elf nodded at his words before continuing, “And it’s not the same as what was going on with Min, either. She just never really meshed with anyone. Most men found her behavior and attitude off-putting and brash. Phil is different because he doesn’t try to force Bridget to behave differently, he finds a way to work around it and adjust to her. It’s a completely new thing for her.”

“And thus, she’s drawn to him.” Natasha hummed, looking towards the door again. “I’ve known Phil for a long time, and I can’t say I’m surprised that he would show interest in someone like Bridget. I would be thrilled if they got together.”

James nodded in agreement with the assassin’s words. “They’re both good people. I think they’d be really happy together.”

Everyone nodded at that, and they quickly fell back into small talk and contemplative silence. The calm atmosphere was suddenly broken several minutes later when a soft, barely audible hum escaped Rem, and all eyes snapped to the bed to see the teen shifting a tiny bit, brow and face twitching with increasing frequency. There was a flurry of movement as the adults converged on the bed, Natasha and Dorian both grabbing a hand. “Cher cœur, can you hear me?” Nat spoke softly yet firmly, squeezing the teen’s hand. “You’re okay, you’re safe. Come on back, Rem.”

“Da’len, we made you a promise when we adopted you-- if you’re missing or in danger, we will always come to help you.”

There were a few seconds of silence before Rem’s eyes slowly fluttered open, and he blinked at them in incomprehension for a few seconds before they lit up in realization. He gave a small, elated cry as he tried to reach for them, and the group immediately pulled him into a group hug, crying and laughing and pressing kisses to every available inch of his head and face. “Papa, Dad, Patris, Mama, I’m so glad you guys found me!” Rem croaked with tears in his eyes, relief flooding him in waves as he clung to them for dear life. “I thought I was done for, I’m so happy to see you--!”

Zevrael choked out a laugh as he pressed a kiss to Rem’s forehead. “Da’len, we made you a promise when we adopted you-- if you’re missing or in danger, we will always come to help you.”
Now that Natasha and James are here, they can promise that as well.”

“We’d turn the world inside out to find you, Moy Svet,” James promised with a firm nod, gently tilting the redhead’s face in his direction. “We’ll never let you go, not without one hell of a fight.”

A sob escaped Rem, and the adults didn’t hesitate to pull him in for another tight hug. They whispered love and reassurances to him as he cried, shooting each other looks of utter joy and relief as they did so. Biological or not, each of them was a parent to the teen, and their love for him was one shared between them all. After several minutes, the moment was broken by Rem giving a sudden shocked, indignant cry. “Rem, what’s wrong??” Natasha asked as they all pulled back to look at him.

The teen raised a hand to the sheared locks on his head, a look of outraged and annoyance in his eyes. “That dick cut my hair!!”

The adults in the room all burst into laughter, pulling the teen into another hug. Their son was awake and alive. All was right with the world.

Chapter End Notes

'Minowa Norddahl, the First Reaper' should be read directly after this chapter.
Rhodey brings news regarding the Accords Committee that has the leaders of the New Avengers ready to go to war, and explanations are given as to why caffeine is never to be given to children. (Or godlings.) Wade finally wakes up to both the knowledge of what's been going on while he's been unconscious and a full head of hair. The various parents of Rem are willing to do anything to protect their son... the Harbingers of Havoc are willing to take it a step further.

Chapter Notes

Woop woop, new chapter in the house! Thank you all for your patience during my brief hiatus, I hope this chapter makes up for it-- several things are coming into play that will be a source of great excitement!! Again, big thanks to these people:

AmandaJo
Arikins the Fox
BlindDingo
LvSoulFriend

You know what you did/are doing, my dears! Much love!

Anyway, enjoy this chapter, vassals!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Excuse me, they’re trying to do what ??”

Rhodey gave the irate trio in front of him a grim smile. “Yeah, I had the same reaction. The rep handed me all of the paperwork involving Natasha, Clint, Sam, and Scott and mentioned off-handedly about releasing Maximoff and Rogers. When I asked, he told me a few Committee members are still hoping Rogers will eventually take control of the New Avengers.”

An infuriated snarl escaped Stephen as he pulled Tony into his arms in a protective movement. “Not a chance in the Dark Dimension! After everything those two did, I’d sooner see them in the Raft for the rest of their miserable lives!”

Crimson eyes glowed with fury as the resident Dragonborn began pacing agitatedly. “This is getting absurd! They’ve done little more than verbally reprimand them both for their past
transgressions and violations of their parols. Do they think such will be sufficient for a crime of this magnitude?? For the attack on our own, for the endangerment of a child, for the death of an innocent?!

Tony looked at his soulmate and sister in all but blood and gave them a firm nod. “I’m done with them doing jack shit beyond giving them a slap on the wrist every time they pull shit like this. This time, they’ll take the two of them to task properly, or we take it somewhere they really don’t want it to reach.” He looked up at the ceiling, and a moment later his eyes flared blue. “FRIDAY, dear, please set up a meeting with the Accords Committee for me for… let’s say two days from now at 2:00. Make sure their schedules are free and clear for us.”

“Gladly, bossman.”

The dark-skinned man nodded in approval at his best friend’s order. “This is the last thing we need to be dealing with right now-- it’s only been about 48 hours since Rem was brought back here, barely clinging to life. If his parents heard what the Committee is trying to do… I dunno about you, but there’s no way in Hell I’m getting between the Accords Committee and the two most dangerous assassins on the planet.”

Stephen couldn’t help but snort at the completely serious way Rhodey had made the declaration. “That’s just common sense, Rhodey-- though it seems to be something the Accords Committee is lacking in currently. Maybe you should share some with them.” Chuckles escaped the group as a whole, and once things had quieted down again he asked, “How are Scott and Sam settling in at the Tower?”

“They’re doing well-- should’ve seen Scott’s reaction to Vision, though. It’s a good thing V’s got patience, because I’m pretty sure Scott took a breath maybe once the entire time he was firing off questions at him.” Rhodey sighed fondly and shook his head. “That man reminds me so much of a labrador, all happy and optimistic and full of so much freaking energy. Are we sure he isn’t consuming Red Bull regularly?”

All at once, the three New Avengers leaders shuddered. “Red Bull, 5-Hour Energy, Mountain Dew Kickstart, and any/all other related highly caffeinated beverages have been permanently banned from the Compound.” Minowa explained in a solemn tone of voice.

Seeing the confused and wary expression on Rhodey’s face, Tony quickly explained. “Loki’s kids had never had any of those things before, and Harley and Peter thought it was a grand idea to take them as shots. By their fifth ones, they’d turned the entire outdoor training yard into some kind of obstacle course from the depths of Hell and were seeing how fast they could make it through while simultaneously attacking and sabotaging each other. It got even worse when Fenrir got ahold of some-- suddenly, they then had a giant wolf chasing them through it at the same time.”
Minowa nodded at his words before adding in, “It also doesn’t help that they were screaming the most random phrases while doing so. At one point, Peter got his hands on some kind of small explosive and proceeded to shout ‘this bitch empty!!’ before throwing it at Sleipnir screaming ‘yeet!!’. Rest assured, said small explosive was most certainly not empty.”

“And at one point, Harley declared he would die for Jor… to which Jor responded by pushing Harley off the course shouting ‘THEN PERISH’.” The Sorcerer Supreme sighed and shook his head, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Cognac brown eyes flickered with both exasperation and amusement as he added in, “Towards the end, Peter and Harley were screaming at each other about chicken strips, and Sleipnir said ‘fuck your chicken strips!’... when Peter then proceeded to-- and I am not exaggerating here-- pick Sleipnir up and toss him across the course shouting ‘begone thot!’ at the top of his lungs, we decided it was time to both put an end to the insanity and ban any and all energy drinks from the Compound for the rest of forever.”

Utter silence filled the room for several seconds as Rhodey stared at them all in incredulous shock. Finally, a smirk slowly slid across his face. “Pics or it didn’t happen.”

“Rhodey, I swear to God--!!”

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The feeling of the bed shifting underneath him was the first thing Wade registered as he very slowly came back to the waking world, though the feeling of a warm body curling up on top of him caused him to doze back off for a while. The position and feeling were familiar, even comforting to the half-asleep mercenary. It was only when the sunlight began to shine through the window next to his bed that he fully came to, mind still swimming with lethargic confusion as he opened his eyes to the sight of the ceiling of the Compound’s medical wing. It took only a handful of seconds for him to recall the last thing he remembered, but before he could fly into a panic the warm body shifted against him again with a sleepy mumble. Wade looked down to find a mess of fiery hair against his chest that could only belong to one person, and he couldn’t help the choked noise that escaped him as he immediately moved to gather the teen close to him. Even though he’d been attacked, Rem was okay! Tears welled up in his eyes from the level of sheer relief he felt upon seeing the redhead alive and well and unharmed. A few rolled down his face as he tried to suppress his sobs, relishing the gentle rise and fall of Rem’s chest against his own.

The sound of a throat being cleared snapped his attention to the side where Natasha and James stood with identical arched eyebrows on their faces. Wade swallowed to try and force down the
lump in his throat as he softly explained, “He used to seek me out to cuddle whenever he had nightmares… He must have come in while I was sleeping. Hell knows he couldn’t do it with anyone else before he came here…” He took a moment to squeeze the mutant a little tighter. “I’m glad he’s okay… I’m pretty damn hard to kill, but Rem…” Something softened in both assassins’ gaze and they nodded as they quietly entered the room. James reached to gather Rem into his arms, and after one more squeeze Wade relinquished the teen. As the redhead was pulled away, hazel eyes finally fell on the completely unblemished skin on his arms. “What the hell…?” He whispered as he ran his fingertips over the skin.

Natasha couldn’t help the smile that quirked at her lips as Wade physically checked himself over, a small laugh escaping her when he ran his fingers through his brown hair and tugged, earning a yelp from himself. “That tends to happen when you pull your own hair, Wade.”

“Yeah, well, it’s been a while since I’ve HAD any.” He mumbled almost absentmindedly as he studied his hands and fingernails with an expression of awe. The sound of the door to his room closing again prompted him to look up, and the merc couldn’t help but swallow hard at the hard look he was getting from the Winter Soldier, who was now standing at the foot of his bed with his arms crossed over his chest.

Icy blue eyes bore into hazel as the assassin remained silent for a few seconds. Finally, he asked in a cool voice, “What exactly is your relationship with Rem? I’ve heard one or two things from the others, but I want to hear it from you directly.”

“I-- what ??” Wade choked for a moment, eyes widening in shock at the question. “Okay, hold on, I know why you’re asking. It’s true, back when Rem was an adult, he and I had an intimate relationship. When he got de-aged to a teen, though, I stopped that immediately. I would never have any sort of sexual relationship with any teen, ever.” Both Natasha and James studied him for a few seconds before they both nodded and relaxed. Wade couldn’t help but give them a small smirk before admitting, “You know, I seem to remember having a conversation with Tony, Stephen, Dorian, Zevrael, and a more than irate Bridget over this exact same thing. Like I told them, the first time I had sex with him, he was 30. Just like them, I’m glad that Rem has people who are willing to defend him from those kinds of things.”

Nat gave him a sardonic smirk at that. “Considering the stuff he’s been through in the past few days, we can’t really be blamed for being over-protective.”

“What happened??” Wade looked up at the woman with wide eyes and a flummoxed expression. “I don’t even know how long I’ve been under…”

The assassin’s face fell immediately, and James’ took on a dark, grim expression. “Rogers and Maximoff happened.” He said as he moved to lean against the wall close to Wade’s bed. “Not sure
how much you remember…”

Blinking in confusion at the suddenly serious tone, the merc slowly replied, “I… remember the car crashing, asking Rem if he was okay… I got out and around to check on him and help him get out of the car, but… he told me to watch out before I got hit by something, then… nothing.”

Natasha nodded at his words and sat forward in her seat to gently squeeze Wade’s hand for a moment. “What you were hit with was the full extent of Wanda’s powers. She knocked you unconscious and trapped you in a loop of your own worst memories. She… also managed to knock out your healing factor—completely knock it out. Neither Bridget nor Loki could get it restarted.”

“Hold on, it was Maximoff?? Let’s forget about me for a second, why did she attack the car??” Wade sat up straight as fear flashed in his eyes.

“She and Rogers were trying to get to Rem.” James replied softly, something raw and angry flashing across his expression. “They kidnapped him and took him across state lines to an old SHIELD safehouse, and Maximoff threw up some kind of barrier to keep us from finding them.”

Wade’s eyes widened with horror at the explanation. “But they couldn’t have been hard to track! I mean, you have Tony and Minowa and Stephen, they’re the power trio of magic in this place!”

Natasha squeezed the brunette’s hand again as she continued, “They were also completely incapacitated at the time. Stephen was in a coma, and Minowa was… have any of them told you about the Fractures?”

A sound of distress escaped the merc at the question. “She fucking Fractured?! Bridget said that even I would have trouble surviving that! What the fuck happened that caused her to get into that state???”

An ominous silence filled the room for several seconds before James silently approached the bed and sat in the chair next to it, giving the bedridden man a devastated expression. “Tony’s bond with Rem alerted him that he was in danger, and when he went to check on Rem… he was attacked, too. Difference is that Rogers… took it a step farther.”

It only took a second for Wade to realize what the sniper was alluding to. “Holy shit, did he… he killed Tony, didn’t he?”
James frowned and looked over at Natasha, and the assassin gave Wade a knowing smile as he looked towards her as well. “He would have, but… being the chosen of the Master of Death has some advantages, as you know.”

“Shit,” the brunette whispered in realization, “things must have been well and truly in the shitter if you were told that information.” Both assassins nodded, prompting a small whistle from Wade. “When both the Black Widow and the Winter Soldier both agree on how dire a situation is… How bad?”

A silent conversation passed between Nat and James before they both turned back to the merc. “We were fighting fires on several fronts,” James started in a solemn tone. “Tony’s Displacement set of a chain reaction of both Stephen falling into a coma and triggering Min’s Fracture. Someone had tried to infiltrate the Compound-- fortunately, that was the least pressing issue since it had already been taken care of. No one could figure out where Rogers and Maximoff had taken Rem, and you were actually in very real danger of dying because of the cancer. Loki, Slei, and Jor were feeding you healing magic for almost 24 hours straight.”

Nat picked up where he left off, “Tony came back not long after, and he, Stephen, Bruce, and Bridget immediately took you into surgery. Seeing as there wasn’t much we could do but wait for a sign or hint of where Rem was, we-- that being Sam, Scott, Clint, and myself-- were told everything regarding the Reapers, Hadrian, the multiverse… all of it. It took a day or two, but we finally managed to pinpoint where Rem was being held. When we got there, though…” A choked noise escaped the assassin as a small sheen of tears welled up in her eyes, and James reached over to gently take her other hand. “Wade, Rem wasn’t done with his antibiotics, and the barrier Maximoff put up… we think it was made to weaken Rem so he couldn’t escape. It ended up making him sick again, but Rogers didn’t get him any kind of medicine or medical help… by the time we found him, he had advanced pneumonia, and was barely clinging to life.”

Wade shot the nearby door a terrified look, and James quickly reached out to grab his shoulder in a steadying grip. “You saw him yourself, Wade-- he’s alive, and he’s on the mend. Rogers and Maximoff are holed up in two of the most secure cells in this place with no chance of escaping.”

A shaky sigh of relief escaped the merc as he slumped over, tension flooding from his body. “Thank fuck, the moment you said advanced pneumonia…” He scrubbed his face with his hand before pulling it away to study the unscarred skin again.

The redhead of the group couldn’t help the soft laugh that escaped her at the awed look on the man’s face. “Necessity dictated that you go in for surgery a bit earlier than originally planned, but at the end of the day… the procedure was a success, Wade. You’re officially cancer-free.”

“I…” For the first time in his life, the merc-with-a-mouth found himself lost for words, and his
eyes drifted to his hands again almost unconsciously. “I just… it feels like a dream. I can see the proof right there in front of me, I feel like a million bucks, but… I’ve spent so long living with it as a reality that… It doesn’t feel real.”

Smirking knowingly, James immediately reached over to tug a few strands of the merc’s brunette hair, prompting an indignant, pained squawk from Wade. “How about now? Feel real enough to ya?”

A burst of laughter escaped Wade at both the motion and the words, though it didn’t take long for James and Nat to realize the laughter had become sobs. “Hey, it’s okay, Wade,” Nat didn’t hesitate to stand and pull Wade into a hug, soothingly running her fingers through his hair as James reached to rub his back. “You’re okay, Rem’s okay, everyone’s okay. Just let it out, you’re safe here.” She murmured comfortingly, giving the assassin on the other side of the bed a knowing look, getting a nearly identical one in return. They knew that the sudden influx of information and events were overwhelming the man who hadn’t even been awake for any of it, and he needed a few minutes to process before they could continue.

It took almost fifteen minutes before Wade inhaled deeply and let it out in a shaky sigh, pulling away from both assassins while wiping his face with the back of his hand. “Never thought I’d see the day when I’d be getting emotional comfort from the fourth and fifth scariest people I know.” He quipped with a wet chuckle, giving them both a shaky grin.

The duo smiled at him as they retook their seats, though James couldn’t help but ask, “Only the fourth and fifth?”

Wade immediately nodded at that. “Third is Phil– I’ve heard stories about that guy, and you couldn’t offer me enough to screw with him. Second is Bridget, though that’s to be expected given her occupation. That woman does not fuck around when it comes to her practice and patients.”

Both assassins nodded in agreement at that. “What about the first?”

There was quiet for a second as Wade looked at them individually with an uncharacteristically grim expression on his face. “Ever seen someone eject a foreign presence from their mind and kill them by superheating themselves so high that the release of energy reduced everything in the room to molten slag and ash in a fraction of a second? Ever witness someone send a person flying through a window by yelling at them?” Getting simultaneous shakes of the head, Wade sat forward and pinned them with the intensity of his hazel eyes. “I have. James, you’re completely safe from her, but you, ‘Tasha? If you only ever listen to one piece of advice I give you, let it be this: never ever piss of Minowa Norddahl.”
A soft ‘ah’ of understanding escaped James as he sat back in his seat. “Okay, I concede that point… honestly though?” He gave them both a roguish grin, “Watching her kick ass is goddamn sexy.”

Nat gave him an incredulous, shocked look as Wade cackled at the declaration.

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Loki made a small noise as he lifted his bag before giving the trio next to him a bright smile. “Anthony, thank you for your help in extending our stay at Disney. I’ll give Laura and the kids your love, alright?”

The genius nodded with a half-smile on his face as he leaned into the embrace of his soulmate. “It was no problem, Lokes. Do you plan on telling them about what happened?”

“I do. Now that things have calmed down, I can make them aware of what transpired here while simultaneously reassuring them that everything is okay now. If they’d been told while everything was still going on, they wouldn’t have been able to enjoy the park to its full extent. Now, they can be informed, and the fact that everything has been resolved means they won’t fret about it too much, if at all.”

Minowa nodded in agreement with his words. “Children are more perceptive than you would believe. I think you made the right choice in waiting to tell them.”

The ebony-haired man gave her a grateful nod before turning his eyes to Stephen, who waved his hand to open a portal. Before he could move towards it, three blondes entered the room from the other side. “Hello, girls,” He greeted the trio with a bright smile and immediately had to open his arms to catch them as they all hugged him simultaneously.

“We’re glad to see you again, Uncle Loki!” Phoebe mumbled into his shoulder, happy to know the chaos was over and that everyone was okay.

Mindee gave the man a bright, happy grin as she pulled away. “We made sure the kids were happy while you were away helping everyone!”

A smirk quirked at Esme’s lips as she stepped back as well. “And we made sure they were safe, too. Had a couple of people try to take pictures. Let’s just say they didn’t get too far with that
idea.”

Loki gave them a grateful smile and a nod. “You three have my thanks for protecting Laura and our kids. Now, I’m sure your mother and sisters are eager to see you again, and I need to return to my family.” The group bade him goodbye, and Stephen closed the portal once he’d gone through, cutting off the squeals that erupted at his entrance.

Cognac eyes sparkled as Tony turned towards the trio, and he staggered backward a few feet as they threw themselves at him to hug him. “Hey, easy girls, I’m okay,” He gently soothed them, pressing kisses to each of their heads as his soulmate joined in on the hug. Despite the distance between them and the chaos that had unfolded at the Compound, it was clear that the girls had been shaken by what happened. “Everyone’s safe, Rem is on the mend, and things are calm again. You three did a fantastic job, I’m so proud of you.”

“We were really worried about you both, Uncle Tony, Uncle Stephen…” Phoebe admitted as she buried her face in Tony’s chest. Mindee and Esme both nodded at her words, content to bask in the comfort of the group hug.

Stephen shot Tony a small smile as he hugged the quintuplet closest to him tight against him— from the choker around her neck, it was Esme in his arms. “We know, girls. You were so strong and brave, and we’re both proud of you.”

The group fell into quiet for several minutes, though a call of the trio’s names caused them to pull apart and look towards the source. Sophie and Celeste bounced over with massive grins on their faces, and the five quickly found themselves in their own group hug. Stephen and Tony gave each other indulgent grins and quickly slipped from the room to give the sisters a chance to reconnect. “And the Cuckoos return to the nest,” Tony murmured as he leaned into the sorcerer next to him, prompting the man to slip an arm around his waist.

The Sorcerer Supreme hummed and nodded in agreement. “It’s good that everyone is settling back into some semblance of normal. After everything that’s happened…” He took a shuddering breath before leaning over briefly to press a kiss to Tony’s head. The genius stopped and turned to pull Stephen into a firm, reassuring kiss that he didn’t hesitate to reciprocate. He reveled in the intimate gesture from the man he loved more than life itself, the man he would burn the world for. The kiss was just beginning to take a turn for the indecent before the sound of a throat being cleared caused them to pull apart, heads swiveling in the direction of the doorway.

Hazel eyes glittered with amusement as Dorian gave them a smirk, Zevraeiel standing just behind him with a hand in front of his mouth as he tried to stifle his laughter. “Fratris,” The mage drawled, “I know you’re happy to have your soulmate back, but if we let that progress any farther
we’d run the risk of the children being exposed to their first case of indecent exposure in a public area.”

“Bold of you to assume we would have stuck around for that long.” Tony snarked right back, prompting an amused chuckle out of everyone along with a ‘good point’ from the Vint. Once they managed to calm down, the genius continued, “So what can I do for you both today? I get the feeling you’re not just here to sass us about our PDA.”

The faces of both Pavus men fell at the question. “It’s about something we saw on the television earlier…”

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“... sixth in a string of murders that have plagued New York over the past month. This time, the victim was a young man, 23-year-old Jerald Spencer, recently graduated from ESU…”

A choked noise escaped Dorian when he saw the picture of the young man-- pale skin, fiery red tresses similar to the ones that covered his son’s head and that of his mother. Immediately, Zevrael pulled him into his arms in a comforting movement before looking up at the other two in the room. “That’s the fourth one that’s been a redhead…” He murmured as he began to card his fingers through his husband’s brunette locks.

James nodded with a deep-set frown on his face as he studied the picture. “The victims are all pretty young, too… ‘Tasha?”

Vibrant green eyes narrowed to slits as she nodded in agreement. “If the trend is anything to go by... yeah, Rem would be a prime candidate for whoever this sick bastard is.”

The four fell into contemplative silence as the footage continued to play. “I don’t want him staying here.” Dorian finally spoke in a soft voice, catching their attention. “After everything that just happened, after what he just went through... Until whoever is doing this is found, I don’t want to put Rem in a position where he’s this psycho’s next victim.”

“I don’t blame you for that…” Zev hummed softly, pressing a kiss to Dorian’s head. “He’s been through too much already only to have the potential threat of whoever this is targeting him hanging over his head.” The silverette looked between the two assassins who moved to sit on the table in front of them. “What do you think?”
Immediately, the duo nodded in approval. “At this point in time, he’d be much safer in Thedas than here.” Icy blue eyes glanced at the window to look outside suspiciously before turning back to the group as a whole. “I do have a request, though…” Getting nods from the duo, he stated plainly, “Take us with you.”

Seeing the startled looks on Zevrael and Dorian’s faces, Nat gave them a soft smile and reached to grab their hands. “We-- all four of us-- nearly lost our son. We want to keep him close, but we respect your right as his adopted parents to make the choice to keep him safe. I think we could do it better together.”

There was quiet for several seconds before Dorian nodded sharply. “I’ll make arrangements for travel. You must understand that things function very differently in Thedas, however-- we’ll have to catch both of you up on the latest happenings and higher powers.”

“On that note…” A smirk slowly slid across Zev’s face as he gave his husband a cheeky look. “Perhaps now would be a good time to mention our son’s status in our world?”

Hazel eyes closed in exasperation, a groan escaping the Vint as Natasha and James looked at him quizzically. “Alright. The short version is that I’m a Magister of Tevinter-- that basically means I’m a noble of the country. My title as Magister Pavus means that Rem is the Pavus Scion-- he’d take on the title after me should something happen.”

A few seconds of silence followed before James sat forward in his chair. “Yeah, I think we’re gonna need the long version, Dorian.”

“I was afraid you were going to say that…”

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“It’s not a bad idea.” Tony hummed with a thoughtful look on his face. “Rem could do with some time to rest and recover from what he’s been through, and I’m confident that everyone in Skyhold would keep him safe, regardless of his proclivity of getting into trouble without going to look for it himself.”

Stephen nodded with a small smile. “It helps that his parents will be going with him. Dorian and Zevrael are powerful on their own, but James and Natasha are terrifying.”
The Pavus men immediately nodded at that. “I’m honestly afraid of what's going to happen when they meet Leliana and Zevran.” The elf pondered with a curious expression on his face.

“Zevrael Pavus, don’t even joke about that.” Tony immediately responded with wide eyes. “If you added Josephine into the mix, what you’d have is the entirety of Thedas under your thumb in a week.”

“Imagine if they added Pepper into that mix.”

“A day. It would happen in a day.”

“Sounds about right…”

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The mood in the room was somber and grim as a group of young adults sat around a circular table, studying several holographic screens in front of them. “We need to up our game.” Harley said with a tone of utter finality as he scrolled through several pieces of footage. “It was one thing when Mechanic got taken out of the workshop by Mordo. This, this was uncool and unacceptable on a thousand levels.”

Sleipnir nodded from where he was seated with determination alight in his brown eyes. “We were assaulted on several fronts, which resulted in the loss of our leaders. Such a thing cannot be permitted to happen again.”

“I’ve already started going around the building etching protective runes into the various duct entrances,” Jörmungandr continued, pulling up a projection of the Compound with the various ducts lit up. “Now that Rogers, Maximoff, and Reed have been detained, we need to turn our attention to the other potential threats out there. Currently those consist of the New Orleans Assassins Guild and the X-Men.”

Peter scrunched up his nose adorably, something that nearly caused the godlings on either side of him to coo. “From what Rem has told me, as long as he stays far away from New Orleans, the Assassins Guild won’t go out of their way to actively attack him.” He informed them before gesturing to the X-Men. “But them? They worry me. From what I’ve heard, they treated Rem really poorly before, and they have a telepath there that could completely rewrite his personality to their standards. For now, I think they’re the most obvious threat.”
“It doesn’t help that you all posted pictures of him for all to see during the Amber Alert.” All eyes turned to where Shuri was pulling up her own screen, a frown on her face. “I’m betting the X-Men saw it, and they recognized him in a second. I know Tony has been driving Worthington Industries into the ground-- I believe they’re planning on filing for bankruptcy soon. Between that and the fact that they were suddenly cut off from Professor Xavier’s money, they’re probably desperate right now. I’m betting they’ve already started blaming Rem for what they’re going through.”

All of the guys nodded at her words before Slei continued, “The New Avengers and other residents of the Compound do not need to be dealing with the imminent threat they pose after they have endured such a traumatic experience themselves. Therefore, I believe the correct course of action is to turn the attention of the Harbingers towards the Institute and its residents. Before now, our aim was to target the Rogues as a whole until it was discovered how many had defected. This time, we don’t have to hold back.” A projection of the Xavier Institute was pulled up, along with blueprints on other monitors and a list of residents on the other. “Uncle Anthony compiled this information while helping Logan in retrieving his and Rem’s stuff. Now, we are going to use it to make sure the X-Men are too busy with the havoc we bring to even begin to turn their attention on us.”

The group as a whole nodded before turning to shift through the information. “But where do we start?” Peter asked as he studied and turned the 3D blueprint.

“Five hundred.” All eyes once again turned to Shuri, who sat back in her chair with a dark, gleeful look in her eyes. “The Rogues. They only found five hundred.”

It took a split second for everyone to understand what she was implying, but once they had a round of laughter escaped them all. “Princess,” Jör declared with a massive grin on his face filled with too many teeth, “I think you’re going to do just fine here with us. So tell us-- what’s your first idea?”

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“We’re ruined!! Completely and absolutely ruined, and it’s all that little slut’s fault!!”

Ignoring the calls for him to wait and come back, Warren stormed from the room with a wild look in his eyes. He immediately made a beeline for his room and slammed the door behind him. It was over. Worthington Industries was finished and would be filing for bankruptcy before the new year. A snarl escaped him as he swiped his arm across the desk, scattering papers everywhere, all of which contained red text and numbers of some kind. Damn Stark Industries, damn Tony Stark, and most of all, damn that stupid slut of a thief! The little shit should have done the world a favor and died in Antarctica like he was supposed to! He spun around to storm into the bathroom before
stopping dead at what was sitting on his bed.

A rubber duck with a mop of blonde hair, a black bodysuit, and an extra pair of metallic wings coming from its back seemed to be looking right at him, and for a moment the mutant couldn’t help but marvel at the intricate little thing. After a moment though, something about the duck began to change, and it took Warren only seconds to realize what it was-- the metal wings of the duck were melting, the stench of liquified rubber quickly filling the room as the material dripped onto his comforter. Soon the entire rubber duck was melting, but instead of being completely destroyed, another duck soon emerged from the melted remains-- a red one with glaring eyes, a pair of horns on its head, and holding a little trident.

Warren’s mouth dropped open in silent horror, unable to utter a noise due to his throat closing up from sheer terror. In the chilling silence that followed, a whisper echoed through the room.

“Murderer.”

Archangel ran from the room with an unusually high-pitched scream, chased by the sound of sinister laughter.

Chapter End Notes

RISE OF THE RUBBER DUCKS 2: THE SQUEAK-VENGE!!

THE DUCKS ARE BACK, VASSALS!! -cackles madly-
Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

The leaders of the New Avengers lay some hard truths down on the Accords Committee-- at least, the American delegate. Bridget brings news of the resident witch, and bridges are mended between Minowa and T’Challa. Another person joins in on the plans regarding a vacation in Thedas, Slei and Jör are protective of their precious spider-baby, and the Guardians make a bit of headway into finding the good Professor. Meanwhile, two new players enter the scene trying to figure out the truth behind the disappearance of Xavier and Remy LeBeau.

(Rogers deserves every bit of what's coming at him.)

((The Dragon Harem is about to be busy, busy, BUSY.))

Chapter Notes

VASSALS!! TIS I, YOUR REIGNING QUEEN!! I AM ALIVE!! I'm sorry this chapter took so damn long to get out, I started a new job and Jen was having health problems and LIFE HAS BEEN CRAZY. However, it's finally done and ready for reading!!

Once again, a huge thank you and shout out to these particular readers!

AmandaJo
Arikins the Fox
BlindDingo
LvSoulFriend

Love you all, dear hearts!

Enjoy the chapter, vassals!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was with great haste that the various employees of the Peace Palace leaped out of the way of the trio striding down the hallway with purpose in their steps and fire in their eyes. The leaders of the New Avengers barely gave them any notice, intent on making it to the meeting where the Accords Committee would be waiting for them. Tony looked as sharp as ever, dressed in a black Brioni number with a hot-rod red pocket square, a Starkpad clutched in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other. Stephen remained on his right, donned in his usual sorcerers’ robes with Levi flaring out dramatically behind him with each step. On the genius’ left, Minowa kept stride even in her full Obsidian Dragoon armor. Anyone who saw them coming could tell the three were on a mission, and no one was willing to get between them and whatever their objective was.
Tony reached the doors leading into the designated room, and he didn’t hesitate to throw them open in a forceful motion. “Good, everyone is already here.” He said simply as they stepped inside, Min waving a hand to close the doors behind them.

The noise in the room had ground to a sudden halt at their entrance, and after a few seconds, the US delegate sat forward in his seat with an arched eyebrow. “Considering we all found our schedules surprisingly open for this exact time, it shouldn’t be a shock.”

“Well, after experiencing the disappointments we’ve had with the Committee so far, you can forgive us for our reactions.” Stephen drawled while fixing the man with an unamused stare.

Cognac eyes also met the US delegate’s as Tony held up his StarkPad. “Speaking of disappointments, we’re here regarding disciplinary actions against Steve Rogers and Wanda Maximoff for the most recent stunt they pulled. I’m afraid a slap on the wrist simply isn’t going to suffice this time.”

A round of murmurs filled the room at his words. “Dr. Stark brings up a point that we had been meaning to inquire about as well.” The representative from Egypt spoke up from his seat. “Your country has done little more than verbally reprimand Mr. Rogers for the various violations of the conditions of his pardons.”

From her own seat, the South Korean representative raised her hand. “We have also heard rumors that there are those who wish for him to take over control of the New Avengers. From what we have seen and experienced in my country, their leadership is already well in hand.” She turned her gaze to the group for a moment with a grateful smile. “Your people have my thanks, and the thanks of South Korea, for their recent aid.”

Tony, Stephen, and Min all gave her a smile and a nod. Their expressions immediately fell when the US member spoke up again. “Steve Rogers is a figurehead of America, an icon of the people. Seeing as the New Avengers are based out of our country, it would make sense to have him lead it. And he’s human, just like the rest of us-- we can’t expect him to be flawless.”

“There is a difference between a few small mistakes here and there and a long chain of bad decision making in a short period of time.” Minowa snapped back. “If he had simply broken the rules of the restraining order once, or showed up on a restricted property once or twice, that would warrant a verbal reprimand. But Rogers committed atrocities far beyond the severity of such things with his most recent actions, things that require a far firmer hand.”

Stephen nodded and turned to Tony, holding out his hand for the StarkPad. As his soulmate passed
it over, he announced in a loud voice, “Rogers’ crimes include first-degree kidnapping, reckless endangerment, and attempted murder. Wanda Maximoff’s crimes include intentionally causing a car crash, acting as an accessory to previously mentioned kidnapping, acting as an accessory to murder, first-degree murder using her powers, and reckless endangerment. These are not small charges that can just be swept under the rug.”

The US Rep’s brow furrowed at the list of charges even as murmurs of discontent erupted around them. “I fail to see where you would get the neglect charge from.”

The trio snorted almost simultaneously at that. “Rem was already sick when Rogers and Maximoff took him-- even as the symptoms got progressively worse, they failed to procure any kind of medical treatment for him. As a result of that, by the time we found him he was practically on his deathbed. It’s honestly a miracle he survived.” Tony told them in a no-nonsense tone.

“Rem had advanced stage pneumonia when we finally were able to bring him back-- if he’d gone another few hours, he would have died, or at least been too far gone to do anything for him.” The Sorcerer Supreme tapped several things on the pad, and a moment later footage of when the redhead had been brought in began to play. The frantic voices of Bridget, Stephen, Loki, and Bruce could be easily heard in the now deathly silent room. The video cut just before Hadrian made an appearance, and a small clip of Rem in the medical wing attached to all kinds of machines and wires and IVs replaced it. “Miraculously, Rem pulled through, but it was more than a close call.”

The general volume of the room rose again, and the Italian Rep finally demanded above the din, “I am in agreement with their calls for stricter punishment. You cannot expect us to allow such a man to lead a team founded for the sake of protecting the world if he cannot even care for a child!”

Another rep, this time the Japanese one, stood as well. “It is clear that Rogers does not care for the world as a whole, only his own. I cannot endorse such a person for a leadership position of any kind.”

The trio on the floor gave each other smirks as every representative in the room called out their agreements. The US rep’s face went red, but before he could blow his top Tony spoke up again. “On the off chance that the collective opinion of 176 countries isn’t enough to sway your stance, let me make something very clear.” The room fell silent again, and the genius continued, “If you don’t drop this notion of making Steve Rogers the head of our team, we’re going to take this somewhere you really don’t want it to go.”

“Oh? And where would that be?”
Minowa gave the man a sharp grin filled with too many teeth. “The media.” The man’s face paled immediately, and she continued, “How do you think the American people will react if they heard you were willing to brush aside crimes of such severity for your dear ‘captain’? How would the people of the world? They will begin to question if Rogers is above the law.” Crimson eyes flashed with a knowing light as she crossed her arms. “They would begin to question if you have a personal agenda. You are willing to overlook kidnapping and murder for a man like Steven Grant Rogers… some would think you’re getting something out of that.”

“Rogers doesn’t exactly have many fans right now… allowing any of those crimes to be overlooked would be political suicide, and you know it.” Verdigris eyes flashed with vindictive pleasure as Stephen brought down the final blow. “But those things are almost moot in the face of one simple fact. If Rogers was made the leader of the New Avengers… he’d be the leader of a one-man team.”

Gasps were heard around the room, and the brunette in the middle quickly held up his hand. “Worry not, everyone, that doesn’t mean we would simply retire and let the world burn! We would simply register under a new name and continue to serve as we always have.”

The other reps nodded before the Brazilian one observed, “I would understand such a decision. I can’t say I would blame Mr. and Mr. Pavus for not wanting to be on a team led by the very man who nearly killed their son.”

There were a few minutes more of deliberation before the representative from Mexico stood, causing a hush to fall over the group. “Dr. Stark, Dr. Strange, and… ah…”

Minowa gave the suddenly uncertain man an understanding smile. “The proper form of address towards me in a formal setting is ‘Lady Dragonborn’.”

“Thank you, Lady Dragonborn. You, your team, and your families are the injured parties in this fiasco. What would you see done with Steve Rogers?”

The trio looked at each other before turning to huddle, speaking in hushed voices amongst themselves for a minute or two. The rest of the room held its collective breath, waiting to see what the verdict would be. Finally, the group turned back, all with grim smiles on their faces. Clearly, a decision had been reached.

“I think we have the perfect punishment in mind…”
“Wait wait wait, hold up. You told the Accords Committee you wanted to de-super serum Rogers so he doesn’t have his strength or healing, then force him into doing manual labor??”

Tony nodded with a smirk on his face. “We thought it was fitting. This way, he can’t continue to cause problems like this, and the Committee won’t have to worry about him again after this.”

A snort escaped Minowa before she added, “Not to mention the rest of the world will no longer have to worry about him causing destruction of such magnitude as he did before.”

Erik threw his hands in the air with an indignant look. “Well, now what?? I was supposed to be here acting as that dumbass’ keeper!”

Min laughed and reached to pull him in so she could kiss his cheek. “We’ll talk about it later. I’m sure we can find something for you to do…” The man grumbled, but the fond light that lit in his eyes as he pulled her into his arms spoke volumes.

Verdigris eyes turned back to the group as a whole after taking a moment to observe the duo. “The Committee as a whole agreed, even if the US delegate seemed miffed about the punishment. It will have to be done with magic as well— I don’t want to take the risk that Rogers will be returned to his state of ill health from before.”

“Just because we want his power stripped doesn’t mean we want to do that kind of harm to him,” Tony added as he leaned against his soulmate, the sorcerer not hesitating to pull him into his arms. “As for Maximoff, there’s not much we can do in terms of justice until she comes out of her catatonic state.”

The sound of a throat being cleared caused everyone to turn their attention to Bridget, who stepped up with a grim look on her face. “Tony, about that… I’ve been monitoring her from afar, and from what I’ve observed, the chances of her coming out of that state at all are infinitesimally slim. It would seem that the mental trauma of everything she’s been through had already put cracks in her psyche— they could have been fixed with psychological help and therapy, but she never sought such a thing out. They continued to worsen as time went on, and finding out her twin was alive and hated her enough to disown her… I can only assume her mind broke entirely. Her powers are still there and she’s still physically alive, but it’s more than likely she’ll spend the rest of her life in that state.”
The group was silent for a few seconds as they absorbed that information. “So she has no higher brain activity?” Stephen finally asked in a subdued voice. The restoration master nodded in confirmation, and the Sorcerer Supreme sighed deeply. “I’ll make the Committee aware. I’m going to request permission to permanently seal her powers-- just in case they leak out, and in the unlikely event that she does wake up.”

Bridget shook her head at that. “I’ll make them aware, myself. I can provide them with the proof I’ve acquired, along with the observations I’ve been making in real time. Besides…” She shot a quick look at Tony. “… I think you’re needed here more.” The sorcerer gave her a smile and a nod, and the blonde swept away while asking FRIDAY to compile everything and have it sent to her StarkPad.

It didn’t take long for most of the others to filter out, and before long it was only the leaders of the New Avengers and Rhodey in the room. “I honestly can’t believe Rogers still has any supporters out there,” the dark-skinned man groused with a glare on his face. “They’re basically celebrating a man who damn near killed a kid!”

“Extremists and fanatics are some of the most dangerous people, no matter where in the multiverse you are,” Minowa hummed with a dark look in her eyes. “They’re willing to commit some of the most incredible acts of violence and insanity in the name of their cause. They’re even willing to die for it.”

The rest nodded in agreement with her words. “Fortunately, Rogers is getting moved to a secure, undisclosed SHIELD safehouse. Good luck getting in there.” Tony rolled his eyes before waving it off. “I think I’m going to retreat to my workshop for a while. Steph? You coming with?”

The Sorcerer Supreme simply smirked and waved his hand, conjuring a portal to the aforementioned workshop. “After you, love.” He bowed and gestured dramatically.

“Stephen Strange, you are such a dork,” the genius declared with a grin on his face as he stepped through.

A laugh escaped Stephen as he followed behind, and before it closed Min and Rhodey heard the sorcerer declare, “Yes, but I’m your dork.”

The exchange brought a smile to the lips of the two remaining people, and they traded fond glances between each other. “I’m glad they’re both recovering,” Rhodey murmured softly as he looked out over the grounds of the Compound. “This whole fiasco has been a nightmare… I’m glad it’s finally reaching some semblance of an end.”
Min hummed as she dipped her head in agreement. “Indeed, and now that the immediate threat has been dealt with, other loose ends can be tied up as well. To that end… would you be able to point me in the direction of T’Challa?”

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“Thur Vedkaaz. A moment, if you would.”

The monarch’s words died in his throat as he turned from where he’d been speaking to Shuri to lock eyes with the resident Dragonborn. “Of course, Lady Minowa. Shuri--”

Shuri gave him a smile and waved him off. “Hey, don’t worry. We’ll have time to talk about it later. Go talk to Minowa, I’ll go find Harley and the rest of my idiot white boys.”

A soft chuckle of amusement escaped the ebony-haired woman as the young princess pranced down the hallway. The phrase had been uttered with such fondness, it was almost impossible to mistake the name for what it was-- a good-natured jab at people she actually cared about very much. She turned her gaze back to a nervous T’Challa and jerked her head. “Come, walk with me.” He nodded silently and followed slightly behind her, and once they’d reached one of the heated sunrooms she turned to him with a sympathetic glint in her eyes. “I owe you an apology, T’Challa.” She finally said in a tone that was much softer than when he had first arrived at the Compound.

Dark brown eyes widened in surprise at her words. “An apology? Whatever for?”

“I made a judgment on the content of your character without even meeting you first, and with incomplete information. For that… krosis, my deepest apologies.” A small huff escaped her, and the curl of smoke it produced was gone in the course of a second or two. “The attack in Vienna in June… I was not aware your father was among the victims.” She tilted her head to look towards the windows, breaking eye contact with the monarch. “He was a man you loved very much and admired greatly. His sudden passing meant you were forced to step into shoes that you were not anticipating filling for many more years to come. Between the events with the Accords and the arrival of the rogue Avengers, then the matters of state you were suddenly in charge of… You have not even had time to grieve him.” After a moment of silence, she turned her eyes back to him. “In light of this, I have found myself reevaluating my opinion of you. Given the situation you found yourself in and the events surrounding such… I believe you have been doing an admirable job. You are a good man, Thur Vedkaaz, and a strong one. Your father… I believe wholeheartedly that he would be most proud of you.”
T’Challa was staring at her in stunned shock, though a sheen of tears had welled up in his eyes at her words. Finally, he swallowed hard and choked out, “Thank you, Lady Minowa. I have been doing my best to live up to Baba’s legacy… Not a day goes by that I do not miss him, and his council.”

Crimson eyes glittered with understanding and sympathy as the woman reached to rest a hand on his shoulder. “I know what it is to have someone you love, only to lose them so suddenly. It will take time for such wounds to heal… And they must heal at no one’s pace but your own. Let no one tell you how soon you must recover from such an agonizing loss.”

The monarch swallowed again, the tears finally beginning to roll down his face. “Mama, Shuri, and Erik have done all they can to help me… But it is hard some days.”

“Zu’u mindok, Thur Vedkaaz. I know.” After a moment of consideration, she pulled the dark-skinned man into a comforting hug. It only took a moment for T’Challa to relax and hug her back, something within him loosening at the friendly, soothing touch from someone who had obviously seen loss of her own. Min gently rubbed his back, a small pang tugging at her heart at the realization of just how young T’Challa was in comparison to her, and how hard he was trying despite everything he had been through up until this point. He truly was trying his best under the circumstances, and upon further reflection, she realized she had been comparing him to those who had been in power far longer than he had been. It wasn’t fair to expect him to live up to that standard, especially given all other factors.

After a few minutes, T’Challa finally gave a soft, relieved sigh as he pulled away from the hug. “It is times like these when I am reminded that your looks betray your age, and the wisdom that comes with such.”

A sardonic smirk quirked at the woman’s lips at his statement. “As I’ve said before… you are not the first to do so, and you will not be the last.” She gestured to the door they’d walked through, the smirk softening into a kind smile. “Shall we, Thur Vedkaaz?”

For the first time, T’Challa managed to give the woman an open, relaxed smile. “I believe, given the circumstances, formalities can be dropped. Please, T’Challa is fine.”

Minowa’s smile widened in return– clearly, the monarch held no ill will towards her for her error. “In that case, either Minowa or Min is fine for me.”

The man nodded, and they left the room while engaging in easy conversation. Both were content to leave any bad blood behind in the past where it belonged.
Dorian huffed out a sigh as he flopped down onto a couch in the Pavus suite, giving his husband a thankful smile as he was handed a steaming cup of fresh Antivan coffee. “Thank you, Amatus, this is just what I needed.” He murmured once he’d taken a sip.

As the elf joined him on the couch, a soft laugh escaped Victor, his emerald eyes glittering with mirth at the way the duo interacted. “You guys have been packing for most of the day… I would imagine any chance to sit and take a break would be a welcome one.” He took a pull from his own tea before continuing, “I’m thankful you guys were willing to let me sit with you while you did this.”

“Posh!” Dorian waved him off with a grin. “It’s no trouble at all! It’s enjoyable to talk about magic with someone who doesn’t use the same kind. It gives one new ideas on how to incorporate it in different ways to hear a different perspective.”

The silverette next to him gave Victor a kind smile as well. “On that note, how have you been recently? How has your recovery been progressing?”

The smile fell from the former monarch’s face at the question. “It’s… not recovering as fast as we hoped. It will all come back, that’s for sure… but the theory is that it was bound for so long that some of the channels have closed off, and need time to re-open again.” He ran his thumbs over the porcelain mug in his hands in an attempt to soothe himself. “At this point, we just have to wait. I can’t start practicing and learning in earnest until those channels have opened back up-- if I ended up magically exhausted, it could take much longer for my reserves to fill again, and I could actually end up getting sick.”

The duo nodded with sympathetic expressions on their faces. “It makes sense to wait, then.” Zev murmured with a nod. “It must be tough, knowing you have access to your magic back but being unable to use most of it.” Victor nodded in agreement, sadness flickering in his eyes. The elf studied him for a while before he lit up in excitement. “I have an idea! Why don’t you come with us to Thedas?”

Dorian’s head whipped in his direction, eyes widening. “That’s a rather sudden proposition, love. Any particular reason why?”

Zevrael nodded, his icy blue eyes flashing with excitement. “Well, with all the chaos that has
happened recently, I’m sure you would enjoy the chance to step away for a while and take a breather... between Richards showing up at the Compound again, Rem’s kidnapping—” His voice caught for a moment, and Dori’ reached to take his hand and squeeze it gently. The elf took a deep breath and continued, “And everything that has happened over the past week... I think you’re long overdue for a vacation.”

Emerald eyes went far away for a moment as Victor thought. “I... I’ve never actually had a vacation before...” He murmured before a small, teasing smile quirked at his lips. “Unless my time with Richards counts.”

The mage choked on the sip of coffee he’d taken in the quiet, and once he’d managed to clear his lungs he resolutely declared, “No, it absolutely does not. You’ve never been on a vacation? Scandalous! Well, I’m sure you would have a grand time with us in Thedas.” Dorian sat back to think for a few seconds. “Natasha and James will be with us as well. I guess this will also give you time to bond with James, hm?” He waggled his eyebrows with a cheeky grin on his face.

Victor blushed brilliantly, and Zev sighed with exasperation as he reached to gently cuff his husband. “Vhenan, don’t tease the poor man.” The brunette apologized with the grin still on his face, and Zevrael turned his attention to the man in front of them. “That being said, it’s totally up to you if you want to come along. We’re not forcing you either way.” He checked the time on the tablet sitting on the table before standing. “Dori’, we should check on Rem and see if he needs help with the last of his packing. Victor, we’ll give you some time to think.”

The former monarch nodded and sat back with his tea as the duo left the room. In truth, a vacation did sound rather nice... and he knew none of his other partners would begrudge him the chance to step away. While he hadn’t been affected nearly as much as Rem, the events involving the teen’s kidnapping and Richards showing up during such had shocked and scared him. And the others were bound to be busy over the coming days or weeks as well. Minowa would be taking a more active role in dealing with the Accords Committee-- their failure to punish Rogers properly the first time for his recent crimes had prompted her to light a fire under their asses, and she was determined to see justice properly done from here on out. Chances were good that she would demand Richards be taken to task properly as well. Bruce was getting ready to premiere the nanotech they had used to save Wade as SI’s MedTech division’s first big successful venture. He and Vision would be busy with the press and scientific community for a few weeks at least. Logan had been meeting with Tony and Emma frequently to discuss the X-Men and getting in contact with a few mutants that he trusted. Now that Rem’s survival was known, they were also preparing for the eventuality of conflict. Erik was getting everything straightened out in regards to becoming the Wakandan ambassador and emissary. Since Rogers wouldn’t be kept at the Compound once his serum was negated, the ex-SEAL decided to focus his efforts into laying the foundations of an outreach program to try and start communication between Wakanda and the rest of the world-- a cause both T’Challa and Tony were more than happy to support.

A call of his name snapped him out of his thoughts, and he blinked up at Dorian and Zevrael with a blush on his face. “Forgive me, I was lost in thought. What were you saying?”
“We were wondering if you had any thoughts on our proposition.” Zevrael prompted kindly, an understanding light in his eyes. No doubt the former monarch was taking everything into consideration and weighing the pros and cons of the offer.

After a second or two, Victor nodded with a smile on his face. “I think I’ll take you up on your offer. A vacation sounds really nice after everything that’s happened.”

The duo broke out in massive grins at that. “Splendid! In that case, I would suggest you hop along and start packing. We plan on leaving tomorrow morning at the earliest, so best to get that done sooner rather than later. We’ll mostly be staying in Skyhold, which is situated high in the mountains, so pack for cold weather. If you need anything while we’re there, it can be easily procured.” The mage announced while dramatically flourishing towards the door. The smile never faded from the former monarch’s face, even as he practically bounced out of the room. After a second or two, Dorian turned his gleeful expression towards Zevrael. “I can’t wait to see the look on James’ face when he finds out he’s coming!”

Zev simply laughed at his husband’s antics and pulled him in for a kiss.

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Peter couldn’t help the wince that crossed his face as he shifted his backpack on his shoulders. His neck and shoulders were still sore from his most recent run-in with flash, the jeers of ‘penis parker’ still echoing in his mind. The teen shook his head as he shuffled towards the warded pick-up point where Iron-Dad or Doctor-Dad normally met him-- sometimes, one of the New Avengers would be waiting for him instead. He was surprised when he rounded the corner and found two people there he hadn’t been expecting, and the sight made him light up with shocked joy. “Slei! Jör!” He gasped, rushing over to throw himself into their arms.

A bright laugh escaped Jör at the motion, and he didn’t hesitate to pull the teen into his arms along with his brother. “Hey, little spider! How was your day? Hope the teachers haven’t been giving you trouble!”

Slei nodded at his younger brother’s words, though the smile on his face was quickly replaced with a frown as he gently cupped the brunette’s face and tilted it so the black eye he was sporting could be seen. “I believe the instructors are not the current cause for concern. Who put their hands on you in such a manner, Peter?”
Swallowing hard, the young man dropped his head in embarrassment. “I... It’s no--” He suddenly stopped, and after a moment he continued in a small voice, “There’s... this guy in my class-- Flash Thompson. He likes to pick on me and be a jerk, but I usually brush it off. This... this is the first time he’s taken a couple of good swings at me.”

“And managed to land them, too.” The younger sibling hissed as he took the backpack from Peter’s shoulders, having seen a minute flinch he gave when he shifted the bag. “How long has he been doing this?”

Peter shrugged non-committedly and mumbled, “All through high school.”

Brown met slit-pupiled green for a second before Slei reached forward and pressed a hand to the bruises on the teen’s face, and a gentle, golden glow radiated from it as the bruises healed over. “I will tend to your other injuries once we have arrived home.” He promised Peter as he pulled away and wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

Jör nodded as he sent a tendril of magic to activate the permanent portal Stephen had set up once Peter had started school again. “And we can also talk about what to do about it.” He said calmly, even as anger continued to burn in his eyes.

A squeak escaped the teen at the attention of the godlings, a vibrant blush covering his face. The feeling of the duo pressed against either side of him made his heart jump in funny ways, their willingness to come to his aid sending a surge of affectionate warmth through him. He was also relieved it hadn’t been Wade to pick him up-- Flash wouldn’t have lived to see the sunrise. “Y-you guys don’t have to worry about me!” He tried to grin at them reassuringly, though it came out more nervous than anything.

The World Serpent simply chuckled at his declaration. “You’re right-- we don’t have to worry about you…” They sat the teen on the couch, and as his older brother moved to sit in front of the spiderling he began to run his fingers through Peter’s brunette tresses from where he was standing behind him. “... But we’re gonna do it anyway.”

Sleipnir nodded at that and gave Peter’s hands a gentle, yet firm squeeze. “We care for your well-being greatly, Peter, and if someone is going out of his way to antagonize you in such a way, we would make sure you are properly cared for afterward at least.”

“I’d prefer it if you didn’t need the care at all.” Jör hummed as the ebony-haired godling began to heal Peter’s other injuries. “Pete, how has he been getting away with this crap?? Haven’t you told your dads, or at least a school administrator?”
Peter blushed and ducked his head. “N-no… I haven’t told Doctor Dad or Iron Dad… I-I was dealing with it while I was living with Aunt May--” He choked for a second before swallowing and continuing on, “I can deal with it now, too.”

The brothers looked at each other again before they sat on either side of Peter and pulled him into a hug. “You should not be made to tolerate his behavior, Peter, and certainly not alone.” The elder murmured as he pressed a kiss to Peter’s head.

Jör nodded in agreement, though his eyes flashed with dark glee as he added, “And since he’s getting physical now, that means you can at least fight back! No one’s going to blame you for self defense!”

Brown eyes widened in alarm, but as the teen opened his mouth to say something, he found a finger pressed to his lips. “I understand that the thought of a physical confrontation is off-putting for you, Peter,” Slei murmured once he was sure the teen would be quiet. “You are one to negotiate first-- it is a good thing. However, there comes a time when such things are no longer effective. You should not have to sacrifice your safety because you do not wish to cause harm to another.”

There were several seconds of silence as Peter sat still, enjoying the warmth of their embrace while also thinking on their words. The siblings remained quiet, knowing the teen needed to ruminate on what they were saying-- he had been on his own and taking care of himself for a long time. May had been a wonderful woman, always willing to support Peter no matter how his activities worried her. But she hadn’t been aware of the bullying, so she couldn’t help him with it.

Finally, a soft sigh escaped the teen before he spoke, “I’m… Yeah, I’m tired of being picked on by him… but I don’t want to hurt him if I fought back. I’m Spiderman, I could really cause some damage if I’m not careful!”

“Then we will instruct you on how to defend yourself without striking at your aggressor,” Sleipnir announced with a smile on his face.

Slit-pupiled green eyes flashed with excitement as Jör jumped from the couch. “Yeah! There’s a bunch of fighting styles that are about self-defense! Come on, to the training room!”

Peter yelped as he was pulled to his feet and dragged away by the younger brother, the older following along behind them at a more sedated pace while chuckling at their antics. Honestly, the teen wasn’t arguing. The idea of being able to avoid being hurt by Flash while simultaneously not
hurting the other teen was more than appealing to him. And although he would never admit it…the chance to learn from the two men was a damn good motivator, too.

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“Are we sure that tip is legit?”

Green eyes turned to the woman standing at the controls of the ship. “It’s the only tip we’ve got,” Quill replied with a tiny note of frustration in his voice. “You’d think one of the most powerful telepaths in the universe and his empress girlfriend going around world-hopping would be kind of big news, but so far we’ve heard almost nothing.”

From his own corner where he was polishing his gun, Rocket huffed in annoyance. “That might be the reason why we haven’t heard shit. That sort of power couple would attract attention, and not necessarily the good kind.”

The sound of rapid taps preceded Groot scampering up to the raccoon and tugging his sleeve. “I am Groot?”

“I dunno if Lethe will show up again, pal.” A paw reached out to pat Groot’s head. “Although it’d be nice to hear from Hadrian-- he could lend us a hand in finding our wayward mutant.”

Drax looked up from his own weapon to blink at them in confusion. “Why would he give us his hands? I cannot see how they would be useful if they are not attached to the rest of his body.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake…”

“I am Groot!”

“GROOT, NO!”

Quill and Gamora burst into laughter as Rocket tried desperately to stop the young Floral Colossus from repeating his words. Once their chuckles had abated, the Terran turned back to his companion. “Anyway, we should probably act on that tip before we lose the chance.”
Gamora nodded as she took the seat beside Quill’s. “Where exactly did that tip point us in the direction of?”

The brunette wrinkled his nose as he kicked the ship into gear. “Ugh, you’re not going to believe this… We have to go see Tivan again.”

“Back to Knowhere?”

“Back to Knowhere.”

“Fantastic.”

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The sound of the door opening and the sound of footsteps padding into the room caused the dark-brown haired man sitting at the small table to pause with his coffee cup halfway to his lips, and after a second he set both the mug and the paper in his hand down with a small smile. “Good to see you back safe. Have you learned anything?”

The black-haired woman sighed deeply as she took the seat across from him. “Not much that’s definitive, I’m afraid. The few things that are certain is that neither LeBeau or Charles are in residence.”

“Remy, my dear. What did you hear?”

The woman reached for the coffee carriff and a mug of her own. “Well, there’s some serious undercurrent and unrest between the teachers. The students don’t know much, if anything, but it sounds like the major rifts include Cyclops and Marvel Girl.”

Pale blue eyes narrowed as they drifted to the hotel window. “Summers and Grey. I’m not surprised they’re involved with this somehow… what else?”
A sip of coffee was taken before the woman continued, “Well, it sounds like the school is also in serious financial trouble. They’re under some pretty heavy scrutiny from the government, and from the sound of it they were cut off from Charles’ money.” A pleased hum escaped her companion as he nodded. “And considering the bankruptcy filing from Worthington Industries, I would imagine they’re getting no help on that end. Although…” A frown pulled at the blue-eyed female’s lips. “I overheard Archangel saying some rather… disparaging things regarding LeB-- Remy.” There was a heavy pause for a few seconds. “He… he was calling him things like a slut and a whore… he was saying it was his fault that Worthington Industries went under.”

“Interesting…”

“Not as interesting as the fact that one of the prevailing theories regarding Remy is that he’s dead.” Pale blue eyes snapped in the direction of the female across from him. She nodded and continued, “The thing is, there’s not proof. No body, no death certificate, nothing.”

Silence filled the room for several seconds, both lost in thought over what they’d learned. “There is something amiss here,” The male finally spoke, downing the rest of his coffee and rising from his seat to move to the window. “Stark Industries made no effort to keep their efforts to ruin Worthington Industries a secret, and Wolverine was announced as one of their new active members. On top of that, Wade Wilson is also amongst their numbers…” He was quiet again before turning to the woman who had stepped up beside him to look out the window with him. “I believe we need to make a trip to Antarctica, my dear.”

The ebony-haired woman’s gaze snapped to him with a confused expression on her face. “Why??”

A small, grim frown pulled at the man’s lips as he turned to face her fully. “Because I believe all of these things have one factor in common-- the fate of Remy LeBeau. Despite what occurred at the Citadel during the trial, it was never intended to lead to anyone’s death.” A look of understanding crossed her face, and she nodded as she turned to pack her bags. “Oh, and Raven? You can drop the look, now.”

A laugh escaped the mutant as her appearance shifted to a woman with striking red hair, blue skin, and bright yellow eyes. “Only for you, Erik.”

That prompted a chuckle and a nod from the man, and as Mystique turned to pull clothes from the hotel dresser, Erik Lehnsherr flicked his wrist and pulled a coin to himself, weaving the metal disk around his fingers as he contemplated the information they’d gotten. Out of everything, one thought stood out clearly in his mind.
If Summers and Grey had done something to Charles to get to his money, they were going to find themselves face to face with an irate master of magnetism.

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Anna Marie hummed a cheerful tune as she walked through the halls of the school, a smile on her face as she flipped her hair over her shoulder. Things had been going well so far for her, and even though they were tight on money currently, it didn’t stop her from pampering herself a bit. She had to keep up appearances, after all. Now that LeBeau was no longer a problem, she was a free agent again, and even if ‘Remington Pavus’ was Remy, she wouldn’t even consider looking at him like that again. The man was a murderer and a thief, after all, and she deserved far better.

A sudden movement out of the corner of her eye caused her head to turn-- a small flash of brown and purple rounded a corner before she could get a good look at whatever it had been. She hummed and shrugged before continuing on. It was probably just one of the students in the middle of something. A minute or two later, the same blur caught her eye again, and she managed to catch a glimpse of something slightly smaller than her fist zipping around a corner. An annoyed sigh escaped her as she shook her head and continued walking. As she rounded a corner, she saw the same thing zoom into an unused classroom, and she huffed and approached the open door.

“Alright, what’s going on--?” She froze once she was inside. There was nothing except empty desks and chairs, a thin layer of dust over everything speaking of a lack of use. “What in the world…?” She took a cursory glance around before turning to leave the room.

She came face to face with a rubber duck with brown hair, a brown trench coat covering a purple bodysuit, black and red eyes, and a bo staff tucked under one wing.

“Bonjour, chérie.”

In the classroom one floor down, several students jumped in shock as a shriek of shock and fear echoed above them.

Chapter End Notes

Rogue deserved every bit of that. Out of all the X-Men, SHE is the one Jen is saltiest at. This story will NOT be kind to her.
Hello, Vassals, gather round and take a seat. I need to have a serious talk with you all.

I'm sure you all have noticed that Warden and Tales from the Nexus has been slow to update recently. In truth, I've felt almost no passion or inspiration towards it, I haven't had any desire to try continuing. There are many reasons for that, most of which I won't go into. Two big ones involve my mental health and my writing style. I'm sure everyone has been facing their own hardships in their day to day lives-- we live in a different day and age, and with that comes significant change. Looking back on this story, I see several things I want to do differently, and I figured now would be the perfect time to do this.

As of now, Vassals, Warden is being discontinued. While I've enjoyed writing this story, I've endured quite a lot of personal hardship recently that has tainted it a bit for me. By focusing on another project, I'm hoping I can heal and move on from the various struggles I've had in the past year.

However, I want to assure you that this series will remain on AO3. This work has brought together a community of amazing people from all over the world, and I love and respect it for that. On a more exciting note, in place of Warden, I will be starting an entirely new story, with many of the same characters, some new, with an entirely new plot. I hope this is enough to entice you to stick around.

After all... the title of this series is 'Tales from the Nexus'. There was never meant to be only one.

Thank you for your continued love and support, everyone. Stay chaotic, Vassals!!

~Lalia

End Notes

Don't forget to follow Warden News on tumblr for story updates and a chance to ask the Reapers questions!!

https://wardennews.tumblr.com/
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!