Newly-minted Grand Master of Void Order, Phil Coulson, has his work cut out for him: to hunt down any hidden members of the Void cabal, Hydra, within his order's ranks. It's a huge task, but he has help: his fellow Grand Masters, Ianto Jones and Stephen Strange; as well as his daughter Daisy, her friends, and his new lover, Clint Barton. Honestly, its surprising he isn't feeling more than a little overwhelmed even with the support.

Sir Steven Rogers, the Paladin of the Western Lands, is having his own problems, because he's nearly three hundred years out of his time. He really just wants something to do, to keep his mind off things. Enter Sam Wilson, who becomes a friend and ally in Steve's quest to deal with this new world. Oh, and the Winter Knight is someone he thought long dead, and who has no memories of what he was before being cursed.

There are enemies in unexpected places, familiar forms of prejudice, and surprises that will change lives. All the usual, really.
Here is the monster sequel to "The Wizard and the Void", and starts immediately after that story. Because I'm writing this outside the Marvel Bang, there's a lot more Torchwood in this one and, while it's not necessary to read the stories before "The Wizard and the Void" to understand what's going on, I wouldn't be averse to get more readers for those stories.

*grins*

Tags may change. There are also characters appearing in this as cameos and, if I added them all...

This is also, officially, the longest story I've ever written.
They’d called him the Winter Knight.

It was as good a name as any, although he thought he might have had a different one long ago.

He couldn’t recall it, however.

What he could remember was killing. How to kill, with weapons and his body and the magical arm he’d been given so long ago he couldn’t think of a time when he hadn’t had it. He was fairly certain he hadn’t been born with it, but he couldn’t bring to mind his birth, either.

He had no idea how many lives he’d taken, under the orders of his various masters. There had been quite a few of them, and the ways he could kill were written into his muscles and sinews, but not his conscious memory.

How he’d come to belong to the ones who’d held him in thrall this time was something else lost to the mist that seemed to hover over his mind, thick and viscous and impenetrable. All he could say was that he’d had no choice, their will had been his, until he’d broken free somehow and had run away into a strange world he had no idea of.

The magic that had muffled his own inclinations was fading, however.

He could date it to the moment the heavy magic stopped weighing on him. That magic hadn’t had anything to do with his lost memories – not that he knew – but that power had made it easier for his current master to hold him under his control. It had been like wet cotton, stuffing his head with darkness, until all he could do was blindly obey the orders he’d been given.

Somehow, that magic had lifted, leaving him confused and needing to escape. Without truly considering it, he’d broken out of the mansion his master had lived in, losing himself in the town outside its doors. There was no way of telling where this place was, although the enormous bridge that crossed a narrow strait which opened up into a bay that was bustling with boats would have most likely been a landmark that would have given it away…if he’d understood what the bridge was even called.

The house he’d been held in was high on a promontory looking down at the bay, but the bridge had been just out of view until he was far enough away to see it. He stood there and simply stared at the impressive structure, until he shook himself out of his clearing thoughts and made his way into the crowds in the city, hoping no one would notice his arm.

He did take the opportunity to pull a cloak from a washing line to use to cover himself up. Later, there were different clothes to replace the leather he’d been wearing, because that had been as obvious as the arm.

Until he knew what had happened to him, he really needed to find a place to lie low. He couldn’t let them take him again, to weigh him down with magic and the solidity of loss of self. He had no hope; hope was for children, and he wasn’t a child any longer, even if he could even remember being that young.

A vague memory of a boy with golden hair flashed before his inner eye, and he couldn’t take the time to dwell on it. He had to get somewhere safe first.
Wherever that would be…
Clint Barton awoke on what was quite possibly the most comfortable bed ever, with an arm around his chest and a very warm body pressed against his bare back, sore in places he hadn’t been sore in ages.

Damn, but he felt amazing.

Sure, he’d been determined to get to know this version of Phil Coulson better before falling into bed with him, but fuck that…there were years of attraction and pining and he just hadn’t been able to help himself.

And yes, he did fuck that… and had been fucked in return. Apparently, being a Wizard with a close connection to the Void gave Phil absolutely insane penile stamina. And a really short refractory period. That man was going to ruin him for anyone else.

Not that Clint minded. Because, even if the sex hadn’t been mind-blowing, he still fully intended on keeping Phil Coulson for as long as possible. The sex was just the icing on an incredibly fantastic cake.

A gorgeous, brilliant, strong cake.

Damn, but Clint could wax poetical, and he wasn’t that kind of guy.

“You’re being very loudly smug this morning,” Phil’s voice was gravelly from sleep, soft puffs of breath tickling the delicate point of Clint’s ear. It shouldn’t have been erotic, but it was.

“I’m not the one with the right to be smug,” the Elf denied, twisting in the Wizard’s grasp until he was facing Phil, casually tangling their legs together, their morning erections rubbing tantalizingly.

Phil’s eyes were blinking sleepily, and he smiled at Clint as if he’d just been given the best Naming Day present ever, his morning scruff more gray that brown, which explained why he didn’t wear that beard he’d had during his Dark One years anymore.

“You are a sex god,” the archer murmured, leaning in for a kiss despite Phil’s muttered comment about morning breath. Even with that, the kiss was awesome. “You have addicted me to your dick.”

Phil laughed at that. “You are crazy.”

“Yep. Crazy for you.”

“Sappy, as well.” But the Wizard seemed pleased by what Clint had said, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

“You’re the reason if I am sappy.”

That had him rolling his eyes. “You don’t need to flatter me. You already have me.”

“Not flattery. The honest truth.” To press his point home, Clint kissed him again, this time teasing Phil’s mouth open with this tongue.
He could taste the magic that flowed through Phil. He’d often heard that various Wizards could tell if something had been around either the Void or the Deep Ways simply by taste, but this was the first time he’d ever experienced it. The Void was cool and smooth and powerful and Clint couldn’t get enough of it now.

Phil had the Void through every bit of him. Clint had easily tasted it on his skin last night, and it had become addictive, almost as addictive as the sex. He’d never once been able to experience magic like that before, and it made him wonder how Phil experienced it as well, since the Void was so integral a part of him.

He wondered what Phil tasted when he kissed Clint. Maybe he’d ask at some point.

They lost themselves for a long time, until their cocks urgently demanded their attentions. It led to yet another very vigorous round of sex, which made Clint a very happy Elf. He could ride on this feeling all...day...long.

Afterward, as they lay there getting their breath back, Phil said, “I’d really like you to stay here at the Keep…if you want to, that is.”

Clint’s breath caught. He was stunned. They’d only been reunited for days, and that seemed…hasty. But he wanted it…oh, how he wanted to. He wanted to wake up next to Phil every morning, eat breakfast with him, get to know Daisy better and play host to her friends. He wanted to be completely and utterly domestic with them both, but hadn’t wanted to push the issue.

Phil had taken that out of his hands.

He must have been silent a little too long, because suddenly Phil was up and tossing the blanket aside, his back stiff and shoulders hunched, and Clint knew immediately that this was his fault, although it had been completely unintentional.

The Elf snagged Phil’s arm, keeping him from leaving like he was obviously about to do. “No, wait. Sorry about that, you just surprised me, that’s all.” He tugged his lover back down and onto his chest, wrapping both arms about the Wizard and holding him tight, looking up into his intensely blue eyes. He’d never noticed the miniscule black flecks in them until that moment. “I would love to stay here. Hells, the only way you’re gonna get me out is if you kick me out at this point.” It felt strange, because up until that moment he’d always thought he’d be a wanderer for a while yet, traveling with Natasha and kicking random ass. But now, he was honestly excited about settling down, and was happy that Phil wanted that with him as well.

Phil relaxed against him. “Good,” he shifted slightly, looking down into Clint’s eyes, the sincerity and the love shining in them, “because I’m not going to do that anytime soon.”

“Excellent.” He playfully poked Phil in the chest. “But you’re gonna be with me when I explain to Natasha that I won’t be traveling with her anymore.”

“I’m still looking forward to the punch she’s most likely going to give me.”

“This hunt for Hydra is keeping her way too busy at the moment, so you have a bit of a reprieve.”

He hadn’t seen Natasha ever since they’d parted in Triskelia, back when this whole thing started. Nick had assured him that she was fine and running down leads, especially now that she had more information at her disposal. The last he’d said was that she was on the trail of the so-called Winter Knight, because someone with a magical metal arm was hard to hide. Apparently, when the Void Point had closed, whatever spells Hydra had been using on him to get him to work for them had
faded out, and the guy had broken their control and had taken off.

The raid on the house where Hydra had been set up had led to several interesting discoveries, including papers that detailed a project called ‘Destroyer of Worlds’, which sounded far too nuts to be real. Clint would leave that shit to the Wizards. They’d work it all out.

At that moment, Clint’s stomach growled, and it made Phil laugh. “Come on,” he smacked the archer in the hip, making him yelp in surprise, “let’s bathe and then get something to eat. I want to see if Daisy’s here, or if she stayed in Gateway after we left there last night.”

Phil had a very nicely appointed bathtub, with up-to-date plumbing, so it took no time at all to fill. Apparently, hot water was furnished from a boiler in the kitchen, so the water was nearly scalding, but Clint didn’t mind. The bath salts that Phil favored smelled nice, as well, and the hand-crafted soap was silky against his skin. It was a soft blue, and he wondered just what it was dyed with to get it that shade.

The bathtub fit them both, although it was a bit of a squeeze. Not that either of them cared…Phil didn’t even say anything about the fact that they managed to make quite a few waves when they decided to have yet another round of fairly energetic sex in it, getting the floor all wet.

Magic made the clean-up that much easier.

The Wizard shaved; as an Elf, Clint didn’t have to, he had yet to meet an Elf with any sort of beard. He just had to kiss Phil once more, the moment the scruff was gone.

Yes, just as good without the stubble.

Clint was stuck with the clothes he’d worn yesterday, but they weren’t too bad; they’d been the best he owned, a better quality that his usual style. He’d already talked to Nick about replacing his armor; it was gone, although they’d found his bow and quiver at the Hydra house. Nick had claimed to know a guy who was an excellent armorer, and that he’d introduce the Elf the next time he was in Triskelia. Which was most likely going to be soon, since the rest of his belongings were at the hostel he and Natasha normally stayed at when visiting the Baron. He was really glad that the owner was an old friend, and wouldn’t throw his shit out for non-payment, but collecting his knapsack and saddlebags was best done sooner rather than later. Besides, he’d get tired of wearing the same thing after a couple of days.

Phil dressed a bit casually, in simple tunic and trousers, comfortable boots on his feet, and then the pair of them headed down toward the kitchen, Lola joining them once they exited the bedroom from where she’d been waiting for them in the outer sitting room. The dragon was chattering happily at them, and even though he couldn’t actually sense her emotions he could tell that she was truly pleased that they were together, not at all upset that they’d basically locked her out of the bedroom. Which was a good thing, because it was most likely going to happen quite frequently from now on.

Phil grabbed onto Clint in the wide stairwell and floated them both down to the ground floor, the Elf whooping on the way, Lola circling around them as they descended. He had to talk Phil into doing that more often! It was the closest he’d ever come to truly flying.

The main hall was empty, as was the kitchen, although someone – probably Andrew – had thoughtfully left a pot of stew for them on the hob, where it was warming over the low heat. He’d also provided a meal for Lola in the shape of a haunch of beef, which she gladly set about wolfing down as Phil got bowls and spoons out of the cupboard and ladled the stew into them.

No one had bothered to shrink the table back to its smaller size, after their meeting before the
Quorum. Phil gave it one look, shrugged, and took a seat at one end.

Clint sat beside him, stomach growling even more at the smell wafting up from the bowl. He actually moaned at the first bite; it was venison, with hearty spices, and Clint asked the Wizard where they were getting their meat from.

“Melinda arranged to have someone bring up supplies every couple of weeks,” he answered. For some strange reason, Phil’s pupils were blown and he was staring at Clint as if he wanted to devour him the way Lola was with that haunch.

Then he realized what he’d done, and made the same noise on his second spoonful.

Yep, that was it.

“You’ll have an Elf living here now,” he said, not addressing the fact that Phil seemed to have been turned on by the sounds he made when he was eating, “so I’m sure I can handle some of the hunting now.” He smirked. “You should eat that. You need to keep up your strength.”

He blinked once. “Yes…right.” Picking up his own spoon, Phil dug into the stew. “Although,” he said after a few mouthfuls, “it sounds as if you’re planning on helping me burn some energy later.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” He batted his eyelashes outrageously, which had the Wizard choking on the bite he’d just taken.

“You are both ridiculous,” Melinda declared. She was standing in the kitchen doorway, leaning on the jamb, her arms crossed. “Is this what I’m going to have to put up with from now on?” Her voice was severe, but Clint didn’t miss the pleased gleam in her dark eyes.

“Yep,” the Elf confirmed. “Better get used to it.”

Phil rolled his eyes. “Is Daisy here, or did she stay at Gateway?”

“She stayed,” Melinda reported. “She should be home later today, however.”

“I thought she might have,” Phil replied. “Thank you, Melinda. And when you see Andrew, thank him for leaving the stew on for us.”

She shrugged, one-shouldered since the other was leaning against the doorjamb. “No problem.” She turned to leave, but looked back over her shoulder. “Love looks good on you both. Just so you know.” What that parting comment, she left them alone.

Clint was grinning. “Glad she thinks so, but then I always thought you were gorgeous anyway.”

He had the pleasure of seeing a slight flush on Phil’s cheeks. “You look better.”

“I think we should agree to disagree on that.” It didn’t surprise the archer that Phil didn’t know he was absolutely beautiful, because Clint had the same self-esteem issues that his lover did, only from different sources. He figured he’d have to work on that, which would most likely be easier than he may think, since he was pretty certain Phil would be doing a lot of complimenting. The archer would just have to keep up with the compliments about Phil.

They’d each finished off one bowl of stew, and were working on their second – Lola begging for bites for all she was worth – when Phil suddenly stiffened, then tilted his head to one side as if he was listening to something. “What?” Clint asked curiously.
“Someone just pinged my mirror.” The Wizard stood, taking his bowl over to the sink. “Let’s go and see what they want.”

Clint had a feeling he and Phil wouldn’t be going back to bed for a while.
“I’m just saying,” Pepper said, trying for patience, “that perhaps we need to get someone in here who’s an expert in the Void.” Then she turned to their guest. “No offense, Dr. Banner.”

Bruce Banner smiled somewhat bemusedly. “None taken.”

The problem with Tony was, he wasn’t a Wizard. He tended to try to solve things with science, and often didn’t take magic into consideration. It wasn’t his fault; it was how he’d been raised, and despite being married to one of the more powerful Wizards in the Western Lands. Pepper had found that people who didn’t use magic sometimes discounted it, which made some sort of sense.

It didn’t help that Tony was a genius, almost insufferably arrogant in his intelligence, and hated to be told he was wrong even when it was obvious that he was.

“Pepper,” Tony argued, “Bruce here is an expert – “

“In magical theory,” Dr. Banner corrected, fiddling with his spectacles.

“And if anyone can figure this out, it’s him.”

“I love that you have such faith in my abilities,” the other man said dryly.

“Of course I do!” Tony exclaimed expansively.

“But even I know when it’s time to call in someone who actually knows magic and can actually perform it.”

Pepper smiled at him, glad Dr. Banner wasn’t taking what she’d suggested personally which showed, even though the theorist was a genius on par with Tony, that he didn’t have that sort of ego that would bruise the moment someone questioned their knowledge.

It had been decided that the man who everyone believed to be Sir Steven Rogers, the Paladin of the Western Lands, would be brought to Castle Ferrous; mainly for his own protection, since he was still firmly unconscious, and no one would have thought to look for him there…if anyone knew of his existence; there was no evidence that Hydra did, but who knew?

Also, because it had been a Stark who had discovered the Paladin in the first place and there was all that family history to consider, plus Tony was as curious as a hundred cats where his family history was concerned mainly because he wanted to see what had made his father such a dick. Of course he was going to volunteer to look after their new guest.

Tony had thought they could figure out what was keeping him from waking up, now that Sir Steven was out of the Void, but nothing he or Dr. Banner had done had worked. If it was within Tony’s nature to admit defeat, this would be the time to do it, but since it wasn’t he was being stubborn about accepting true, magical, help.

Sir Steven had been there for four days, laid out in one of the castle’s guest rooms, ever since they’d brought him back from Shield Keep. It was as if the man was some sort of statue; Pepper would have sworn he was dead except for the fact that he was breathing. Every time she looked at him, she could see the Void flickering about his body like some sort of ship’s fire, only black and non-
reflective instead of the brightness of the static that would often dance about a ship’s masts during a
storm at sea. There wasn’t a thing she could do about it; it wasn’t within her power to manipulate the
Void. They needed a Wizard who was good at that sort of thing.

And, by Wizard, she meant Phil. Which Tony called her on at once.

“There’s no one more knowledgeable about the Void,” she pointed out patiently. “After all, he’s
been inside it several times now – “

“Which is amazing and I really want to meet this guy,” Dr. Banner cut in, sounding admiring.

“And he’s also the one who brought Sir Steven out through the Void Point. Not to mention, his
being able to close that same Void Point all by himself.”

“Tony,” Dr. Banner said, “you know she’s right.”

“He does,” Pepper confirmed, “he just hates admitting that he can’t do something.”

Tony threw up his hands. “Alright, fine! Call in your Wizard friend.”

The Cardinal Head of Order snorted. “It’s not like you haven’t actually met him, and that you like
him as well.”

“Alright, true. But I was really hoping to keep this off him, since he’d gonna be busy with becoming
the new Grand Master Void whatever, as well as cleaning up his entire order and taking on a
Novice, which you really want him to do.”

Alright, that made Pepper feel just a little bad. Phil was going to have a lot on his plate, coming up,
but he really was the best one for this job, plus they knew he could be trusted. “You’re right.”

Tony pointed a finger at her in triumph.

“However, Phil also happens to have an historical interest in Sir Steven Rogers. You haven’t seen
the framed, original print he has in his study. It’s of Sir Steven during his propaganda tour. He’d do
anything to help out.”

“That I did not know,” her husband admitted. “So, the big, bad Void Wizard is a fan?” Tony
grinned widely, and Pepper was now wishing she hadn’t said anything.

Instead, she made a tactical retreat from Tony’s own study. As she closed the door, Dr. Banner
started up a conversation having to do with the Laws of Conservation of Magic, distracting her
husband from what Pepper was about to do.

She headed toward the library, where her speaking mirror was. Ferrous Castle was a large, rambling
house, updated with all the modern amenities as soon as Tony had taken control of the Barony from
Obadiah Stane. Before then, the castle had been a bit run down, as Stane hadn’t stayed there at all,
but it was now bright and open and magical items were complimented by the various scientific
devices that Tony had come up with, in order to make living easier. Last year, every single
glowglobe had been replaced by what Tony had decided to call lightbulbs; he’d hand-laid the wires
himself, and the generator in the cellars had also come from the inventor’s extremely fertile mind.
Currently, he was hoping to make the generators smaller so he could offer them to every home in his
Barony, as a cheaper alternative to magic. Not everyone could afford magical assistance, and
Wizards weren’t that plentiful in the world as yet, that they could furnish those sorts of amenities to
everyone.
As a Wizard potentially being put out of work, Pepper was very pleased by her husband’s inventions and was perfectly willing to help him get the word out. It would free up Wizards to other tasks.

The demand for magical devices had only grown in the hundred years since Wizards had begun reappearing. Honestly, she had no idea how those first Wizards had managed to keep up with it all.

Oh right…they hadn’t, and Ianto would be the first one to admit it.

Pepper could understand why, though. Glowglobes were a lot safer than candles, and cold boxes kept perishable foods from going bad quickly. They were amenities that would make life so much easier, but at the moment such things were only available to the wealthy…and the Wizards themselves. What Tony was working on would revolutionize the world.

She passed Jarvis in the hallway. She stopped him by calling his name. “Yes, Mistress Pepper?” he inquired politely, his United Kingdom accent pleasant to her ear.

“Master Phil will be visiting. Can you please ask Ana to prepare something snack-wise for him? Oh, and he will most likely be bringing a quest.” It was a little before lunch time in Triskelia, and there was no telling how tired Phil would be after performing whatever magic he’d need to, to diagnose Sir Steven’s condition. It was always a good idea to have something ready when a Wizard needs to use higher level magicks.

And she doubted that Clint would want to be left behind. Hence, Phil bringing a quest.

“Oh course,” he said, smiling. “Will we need to prepare rooms or anything?”

“I doubt it, but it never hurts to be ready just in case.”

“Very good.” He bowed a little, and then turned from his path to head toward the kitchens, where his wife, Ana, would be working to prepare their own lunch later on.

Pepper continued on, the library just down the wide corridor from Tony’s study. Of all the public rooms in the castle, this one was one of Pepper’s favorites. While Tony was very fond of updating everything he could get his hands on, the library was possibly one of the most old-fashioned places in Ferrous Castle, as it was still being lit by glowglobes and had other magical accoutrements. As much as Pepper loved the idea of Tony’s lightbulbs, there was just something about performing small acts of magic under magical lighting that touched Pepper’s romantic soul.

The library was filled with as many types of books and scrolls as possible, huge shelves from floor to ceiling along the circular chamber, sturdy rolling shelves positioned in strategic places along the circumference of the massive shelves. There was an upper level stuffed with books as well; a narrow spiral staircase led up to it, and that was where Pepper kept all of the spell books and handwritten scrolls she’d managed to collect over the years. It had become easier to find such things now that magic was back; they were popping up all over the place, since people now knew what to look for.

There were also bespelled books, that for some reason had been enchanted with various sorts of spells but were fairly innocuous. And, along one side, were the shelves where Pepper kept her favorite books, mostly romances and adventures and a few books of fairy stories that she’d had since she was a child.

Leather chairs were spaced about the library, every single one of them comfortable…after all, Pepper had had the opportunity to try them all. Two of them were positioned in front of the fireplace, which took up space in an area that wasn’t covered by shelves. There were small niches circling the library, where art was framed on the wall, and in one of those niches was her speaking mirror.
It was slightly more ornate than the one in her quarters at the Wizard School, the frame gilt and molded into fanciful vines that twined around the highly polished glass. It was larger as well, big enough to show her from the waist up. Stepping up to it, Pepper rested a hand on one of the many twisted vines, calling her magic to her easily.

She’d made it so the mirror could also be used by Tony and Jarvis, but only she could change the coordinates to other mirrors. Tony had griped about it, vowing to create some other form of long-range communication that didn’t rely on magic. She honestly would love to see him succeed.

It was a simple matter to calibrate it to Phil’s own speaking mirror; she’d contacted him several times about Daisy and her school and spell work. The mirror that Phil had created for himself was slightly tainted by the Void and, as he was the only Void Wizard on her personal network, he was easy to locate.

The mirror’s image of herself wavered, taking on that heat haze that occurred when it was searching out another one of its kind. Her reflection vanished, revealing a nicely appointed bedroom, but the position of the other mirror only gave her a view of a corner of a large bed, a rich blue duvet on it, and a large wardrobe against one of the walls. Pepper felt just a little uncomfortable by the fact that Phil kept his mirror in his bedroom, and made a mental note to ask him to possibly either move it, or enchant a second one, if he was going to be convinced to take on a Novice…that way, no one would be calling and interrupting whatever he got up to in the privacy of his own bedroom. Which was most likely Clint at this point.

She couldn’t help but smile at that. Another reason she was glad of that romantic soul she owned.

Phil wasn’t around, but Pepper was content to wait. Every Wizard could tell when their mirror was being called, and all she had to do was be patient, and he’d be there presently.

It was a couple of minutes before Phil showed up within the mirror, the Hawk beside him. The moment he noticed who it was, he was smiling. “Pepper, hello.”

She returned the smile. “Good day, Phil…Clint.”

The Elf waved back at her.

“To what do we owe the honor of this call?” Phil asked.

We. Well, that was certainly telling…and confirming what she’d known about them almost from the moment she’d seen them together.

Getting back on task after that little thought, Pepper explained about the issues with the man they believed to be Sir Steven, and how she could see the Void still around him. Phil frowned as she explained it, his blue eyes turning slightly unfocussed as he considered her description.

“I really would have thought he’d have awakened by now,” the Void Wizard mused. “But, if the Void is still keeping him unconscious…”

“That’s what I was thinking. We really need to get your help on this.”

“Of course I’ll help.”

Pepper smiled a little wider. “Thank you.”

He shook his head. “You know all you needed to do was ask.”
“I know, but it was Tony I needed to convince.”

A tiny line formed between his brows. “I can imagine.” Phil shook his head. “Clint and I will be there presently. I still have that teleport ring you gave me the last time we needed to consult about Daisy’s studies.”

She thought that might have been the case. Still, she had to tease him a little. “And Ferrous Castle isn’t unPlotable.”

“This is true.” Her fellow Wizard looked amused. “Although I suppose I should see about dissipating that particular spell, since everyone seems to know who I am now.”

“And your Novice might need to come to the Keep at some point.”

Phil laughed. “You are bound and determined I take on young Miss Maximoff.”

“I think you’d be a good fit for her, yes.”

“I’m still considering it, although Daisy will certainly have an opinion…and I suspect it might align with yours.”

The last time Pepper had seen Wanda and Pietro Maximoff, they’d been hanging about with Daisy and her friends, so she could see his point.

“I’ll meet you both in my casting room,” she promised.

“Give us half the hour.”

“That sounds fine. I’ll see you then.”

Phil nodded, and then the mirror shimmered, and her reflection returned as he cut the connection. Pepper smirked a little, glad to see him connecting with more people…

And one in particular, although she really didn’t know the Hawk all that well.

She looked forward to getting better acquainted.
“But,” Daisy Coulson protested heatedly, “we want to help!”

The last thing Ianto Jones had expected that day was to have Novice Daisy and her ‘gang’ – now including the young Maximoff twins – at his door, wanting to speak to him about the hunt for Hydra, especially within the school grounds.

It was alarming that someone had given Werner von Strucker access to the Quorum, and it had to have been one of the Wizards who’d attended. There was also the idea that Hydra could have been fomenting discord among the students and teachers at the school that really had Ianto getting angry at the whole thing. He and Jack hadn’t yet discussed how they were going to handle the hunt, wanting to get their daughter’s input as well; Eirlys, being Baroness Gateway, would most likely have her opinions on the subject as well, since the school fell under her jurisdiction. Plus, there was Stephen and Phil who, as Grand Masters, would also need to sit in on any decision that was being made. Especially Phil, since it was his own Order that was suspect.

He’d planned on inviting Stephen and Phil over for dinner, to talk about this very subject. However, that had been before these seven students had shown up out of the blue, determined to help in any way they could.

He thought it was wonderful, this mixed bag of students working together, but he knew it was too dangerous. Daisy had already been kidnapped once, and they couldn’t risk her again.

“I know you want to help,” he said conciliatorily, “but at this moment even we don’t know what we’re going to do. So, there’s literally nothing for you to help with.”

Daisy had her arms crossed, the metal gauntlets she wore flashing in the sunlight from the open window behind Ianto’s desk. Surrounding her were the Elves, Jemma Simmons and Leo Fitz, both Great Wizards; another Great Wizard, Lincoln Campbell, who was also Daisy’s boyfriend; a Void Novice, Antoine Triplett; and of course the two Maximoffs, Wanda and Pietro, and they all looked as if they were ready to take on the world. Including their dragons, who hadn’t immediately tumbled into the dragon pile that every single dragon did when in gatherings of more than one. It seemed as if they knew just how important things were just as well as their Wizards did.

If Ianto hadn’t already been proud of them before, for standing up to the entire Void order for Master Phil Coulson, this would have tipped him over the edge.

“But sir,” Novice Antoine – Ianto believed he’d heard people refer to him as Trip – said respectfully, his rather large green and brown dragon peering at Ianto just as respectfully, “any sort of plan needs to be put into place now…before whoever it was who let von Strucker into the Quorum gets away.”

He had a point, but… “I doubt the Wizard who did that is even still in Gateway. After the Quorum, every one of the gathered Wizards left for their homes.”

“We should have done something to stop them!” Jemma exclaimed.

“Now we might not figure out who it was,” Leo added behind her, finishing her thought as Ianto had seen them do before.

“At least let us talk to von Strucker,” Novice Lincoln suggested.
“I would do more than talk to him,” Wanda spoke quietly. A red flicker of her magic – and Ianto had never seen that color of Void magic before, chalked it up to what had been done to her by King Wolfgang while being his prisoner – twisted about her mobile fingers as if in response to the anger in her eyes. Her dragon, a deep red lady whose head reached her Wizard’s chest, hissed a little.

Myfanwy, who had been curled up on the sofa, ignored the temper tantrum, which meant she wasn’t at all concerned about the other dragon actually doing anything that needed her to intervene.

Pietro didn’t say anything, but the curl of his lips spoke volumes.

“Now,” Ianto sat forward in his chair, lacing his fingers on the top of his blotter, “while I understand you want to contribute, I really have to put my foot down. Each and every one of you are students at the school, and you have parents that we will have to answer to if anything happened to you.”


He held up a hand. “The last thing I want to do is piss off a man who eats Void Points for lunch.” That act had had Ianto vaguely wondering if he couldn’t do the same to a Cardinal Point, but wasn’t about to even attempt it, simply because he didn’t want Jack yelling at him and threatening to withhold sex. Sure, that would more than likely hurt his husband more than Ianto, but Jack would do it anyway.

The pride she felt for her father warred with sheer stubbornness, the two emotions flickering in her eyes. “You can’t just ask us to step aside while Hydra’s out there!”

“I’m afraid that’s exactly what I’m going to have to do…for now,” he quantified, seeing her gearing up to argue once more. “I promise you, once we have a firm plan in place, we’ll find something that includes you all. But, until then, you all have your studies, and I expect everyone to work just as hard as they would have if this wasn’t breathing down our necks. Do I make myself clear?”

There was some grumbling. That was to be expected. Ianto knew how he felt when he had to sit and let someone else handle things, and he was an adult. For children, it would be even worse…especially for Daisy, who’d been through so much in the last several days. Wanda and Pietro as well; after all, their history was just rife with people doing evil things to them, and they would certainly empathize with Daisy more, perhaps, than her older friends. Who were determined to stand beside her and kick whatever arse they could find.

Honestly, he wished he’d had such friends when he’d been growing up, It was quite wonderful to watch.

These students were the future. Ianto couldn’t have been more proud and excited for it.

Daisy didn’t look happy, but even she couldn’t argue with Ianto. She made a disgusted noise, then capitulated. “Alright. But we really want to help. They could come after Dad again and none of us want that to happen.”

Every single member of the group of friends nodded. They’d all stood up for Phil in the Quorum and, now, they were doing the same thing for him with Hydra…and with Ianto himself, really.

“We’ll do all we can to keep that from happening,” he assured them. “I might not have known your father long, Daisy, but I already count him as a friend. And we’re going to be friends for a very long time.”

Daisy’s shoulders slumped. “I know. I just…”
“You want to protect him, and that’s a credit to you. But, you’re not alone in wanting to make sure he’s alright anymore. At the very least, Clint will be there for him.”

The young Wizard nodded. “But you’ll definitely let us know when we can help?”

He couldn’t help but notice she said, ‘when’, instead of ‘if’. “You have my word.”

There were traded looks amongst the students, and Daisy was about to say something when Myfanwy suddenly perked up, let out an excited chirp, and was off the sofa like she’d been propelled from a crossbow. Ianto could feel her happiness and excitement as he stood up to follow her, figuring out just what had set her off the moment his foot crossed the study door threshold.

Toshiko had made it home.

His friend was kneeling in the foyer, greeting a joyous Myfanwy, her bow already leaning up in its usual corner when she was there. Her ageless face was grinning as Myfanwy pounced all over her, and Ianto leaned against the wall laughing at the image.

“I’ve always said that my dragon likes you best,” Ianto said in greeting.

Toshiko’s dark eyes lighted on him, and she smirked at him. “She just shows good taste.”

She’d left with Jack and the other two members of their team, but she’d stayed with the others when Ianto had called Jack back about the Hydra mess. Toshiko had been his first friend among the people his husband seemed to be able to gather around him, and despite being almost two hundred years old the Elf didn’t look a day over thirty.

As if her voice had somehow summoned them, every other dragon in the house was suddenly in the foyer, all looking at Toshiko with varying degrees of devotion. Raising her eyebrow in Ianto’s direction, she happily greeted the newcomers, not bothering to hide her confusion at seven dragons being in the house besides Myfanwy, who seemed perfectly content to share Toshiko with the others.

“Allow me to introduce you,” Ianto offered. “To the dragons as well as their Wizards.” He didn’t even have to look behind him in order to know the students had gathered as well, brought by the unexpected exodus of dragons from the study.

“And this,” once he was done with all of his visitors, “is Lady Toshiko Sato, of the Nippon Enclave.”

“Hullo,” Toshiko said, smiling.

“Tosh is as close to me as a sister, and she’s my husband’s Second in his troupe.” He turned back to Toshiko. “I didn’t expect you quite so soon.”

“We were pretty much done,” Toshiko answered, “and I’ll admit to curiosity as to why Jack had to teleport back as soon as possible.”

“I’ll be happy to explain, but let me see my guests out first.”

Ianto met Daisy’s eyes, and she nodded in reply. Confident that he’d gotten through to her, he ushered the students out of the door, bidding them all a pleasant goodbye and then closing the door behind them.

Sparks, Lincoln’s dragon, had managed to stay behind in order to demand more attention from Toshiko. Ianto told him off and sent him back to his Wizard, laughing internally the entire time.
Toshiko was very amused by these events. “I’d ask if you were taking Novices again, but there were only two Cardinals in that bunch.”

Ianto didn’t mention that Pepper really wanted him to take on Pietro Maximoff. Mainly because she’d tell him what a great idea that was, and then go off to plot with Pepper about it.

“That’s a part of what’s been going on,” he said instead, motioning her into the study. “Can I get you anything?”

“Do you have to ask?” She took the chair in front of Ianto’s desk, crossing her ankles and letting Myfanwy settle her head in the Elf’s lap.

He couldn’t help but smirk. “I’ll be right back…or it may take longer, if Jack drank the entire carafe already.”

To his surprise, Jack hadn’t drank all the coffee yet. Ianto would have to reward him for his restraint.

It really wasn’t Ianto’s fault that all his friends were addicted to his coffee.

Alright, so maybe it was.

He fixed them both a cup, then left the kitchen and went back to the study, where Toshiko was waiting. He gave her the coffee – perfectly prepared to her tastes – and then perched himself on the edge of his desk, giving her a bright smile as he took a sip from his own cup.

“I’m really hoping this is a good enough story to have made Jack leave just in time to saddle me with Wade Wilson.”

Ianto flinched. Jack was about the only one who could handle Wade with enough patience; the man may have been one of the team’s best contacts in the United Kingdom, even if he was certifiably mad. “I’m sorry about that, but yes…it really was that important.”

The Grand Master went on to explain everything: about Master Phil Coulson being approached by a new Void cabal calling itself Hydra; how they’d claimed to want to recreate the Deathless – which had Toshiko gasping in sheer disbelief, because she knew as well as anyone that that was impossible; to Daisy’s kidnapping, Phil being the Dark One, and how they’d come to discover that the Master Void Wizard was actually Ianto’s own counterpart.

Toshiko looked devastated, even though she’d never once met Phil Coulson. “That poor man. I get that he was a criminal and did a lot of bad things, but that…I’m sorry, Ianto, I know you’re the same way, but you have Jack. He doesn’t have his own version of the Deathless to be his partner throughout time.”

He could understand her sorrow. While she wasn’t magical herself, Toshiko was one of the most attuned people he’d ever met, and knew it had more to do with her Elven nature than being exposed to magic herself. She’d studied it as well, enough that she’d been able to hold her own in conversations about the various Laws of Magic, back when Ianto had been new to the traveling mercenary business. It had been his first trip with Jack and his team, and Toshiko had befriended him almost immediately.

In the years since, Toshiko had made it her duty to learn all she could about magic, and Ianto had been glad to teach her. She’d been an unofficial Novice while she wasn’t Jack’s Second, which Ianto did miss at times, when they were all out on the road and him unable to ride along with.

“We’re going to be there for him, when it’s time.” He’d already promised Clint that, and Ianto...
would never deliberately go back on his word.

“I know.” She gave him a sad smile. “But having such a close bond with the Void…it really is a form of punishment, isn’t it?”

The Wizard had to agree. “The Void isn’t taking mitigating circumstances into consideration.” He told her about how Phil had become the Dark One, and he watched as her sympathy turned to rage.

“Has anyone offered to track down those parents of his and give them a piece of their mind?”

Ianto chuckled. “With that sort of thinking…I’m not so sure that would actually work.”

Toshiko leaned forward just enough to set her coffee cup down on the desk, then leaned back in order not to rest too heavily on Myfanwy’s head in her lap. “I’m looking forward to meeting him.”

“I think you’d like him…him, and his lover, Clint Barton…who’s an Elf as well.”

That had Toshiko laughing. “Good. An Elf will be able to stay with him for a really long time. He’s going to need someone like that.” Her head tilted. “And that was why you were entertaining so many students? Daisy Coulson…that was his daughter, the one with the magical gauntlets, correct?”

Ianto nodded. “She and her friends stood up for him when it came out in the Quorum that he was the Dark One.”

“That’s really impressive.”

“But I’m jumping ahead of the story.” He continued with their escape from Hydra, the closing of the Void Point, the Quorum, and Werner von Strucker. He finished with Wanda and Pietro’s testimony. “And up until Baron Nicholas saying anything, I was one of those who thought the Dark One and his crew had gone into Buda-Pest and deliberately burned it to the ground. I had no idea that King Wolfgang was torturing magical children.”

That had scared him, and Ianto couldn’t help but wonder if there were other children out there who were in the same straits as Wanda and Pietro had been, and if they’d ever know if there was. It could be a real danger, one that wouldn’t leave his thoughts for long. At least the Quorum knew it was possible, and they could start taking steps to keep such a thing from happening again.

“So,” Toshiko said, once he was done, “it does sound like it was a good enough reason to have Jack teleport back. It also sounds like we’re all going to be busy for a while, cleaning up. We can also get word out to all the mercenaries out there, to keep an ear out for anything hinky going on with magical children. There are a few out there – and I’m going to count Wade in on that, although he’s rather barking mad – who wouldn’t hesitate to report in anything they might hear.”

That sounded like an excellent idea. While the Council of Barons for the Western Lands and the Wizard’s Guild could put out all the alerts they wanted, there was no guarantee that the members of Hydra they knew of wouldn’t just go deep underground, where they could just vanish and keep on plotting. Letting the various mercenaries know what they were looking for, that would open up that entire under-society to their search. Ianto also made a mental note to inform Their Majesties about it, as well.

Also, there was the Widow. Baron Nick was very confident of her ability to find out things, or else he wouldn’t have sent her out to look for signs of their quarry. He wasn’t all that aware of her reputation; but then, Jack’s team wasn’t really into the mercenary life anymore, plus from what he did know the Widow was based out of the Western Lands, although that hadn’t stopped her and her
companions from traveling through the United Kingdom and other areas of the world. They’d just primarily been across the ocean.

He mentioned that to Toshiko, who nodded. “If Jack doesn’t know much about her, then I certainly don’t. However, if she was involved with what happened in Buda-Pest… dammit, Ianto, why didn’t we hear about that before it got so bad that the Dark One had to go in and raze the place to the ground?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.” Yes, he was upset about that. Children shouldn’t have had to suffer just because they were budding Wizards.

“And you say those two young Wizards that were here with Daisy Coulson were Wolfgang von Strucker’s victims?”

The Wizard nodded. “Wanda and Pietro. They’re twins…one a Cardinal, and the other a Void.”

Toshiko whistled. “That’s unheard of.”

“It is. You can understand why an unscrupulous person would have been interested in them.” Once again he didn’t mention about his considering taking on Pietro on. Not really necessary at this point.

“It still shouldn’t have happened.”

“Agreed. The problem is,” he set his own cup down, leaning a little forward on his perch, “Wizards have only been around for just about a hundred years. We don’t yet have the network that was available back in their heyday, a thousand years ago. Even when it was just Greats around, they still had more connection with the people than we do now. It’s allowed rumor and innuendo to spread, and it leads to too much oversimplification and downright disinformation to run rampant. Just look at Phil…his parents so firmly bought into the idea that Voids were evil – because of their connection to what we call the Deathforce – that it completely wrecked his life. Suzie tried to help him, but by the time she took him on as teaching Master, it was too late. He was damned from the moment he was Tested.”

Ianto remembered Suzie despairing of her final Novice. She’d taken him on, when she should have retired, because she’d seen something in him that had reminded her of herself. She’d once been an assassin, a daughter of assassins, before she’d met Jack and redeemed herself…however, she hadn’t stood a chance against an evil, sentient artifact and had attempted to kill Ianto.

They’d made up during the events of Canary’s Wharf, and Suzie had discovered that she was, in fact, a Void Wizard. She’d spent some time within the Void itself, and it had terrified her, until Ianto had helped her deal with the power she’d suddenly gained. When the school had opened, she’d gladly become a teacher.

Then, she’d met an angry young man named Phil Coulson and, instead of being able to help him like Ianto had once helped her, she’d lost him…to the Dark One.

Although, Ianto wanted to believe, she’d be proud of the man as he was, now.

Toshiko’s mouth fell open a little. “Wait. That young man, the one Suzie took on and was so certain she could help… he became the Dark One?”

“It wasn’t general knowledge,” the Wizard admitted. “Suzie didn’t want it getting around, out of fear of retribution against him. After all, he’d taken on the persona of the Dark One, and she firmly believed that the mercenary and the student weren’t the same person. She wanted to give him the chance to come back into the light. I just wish she’d lived long enough to see it finally happen.”
“I miss Suzie, she was an amazing teacher…and an amazing friend. I know you and she got off to a rocky start…”

“That was all water under the bridge, Tosh. Suzie and I were almost as close as you and I are now, at the end. It was an honor to know her and call her my friend.”

“I know.” She smiled and reached over to clasp his hand. “Despite her tough exterior, she really cared about all of her students. I just didn’t put together Novice Phillip with Master Phil Coulson.” She sighed, leaning back and letting go of his hand. “I really want to meet him, now.”

“And you will. I plan on inviting him and Stephen to dinner tonight, in order to discuss plans on how Phil is going to be cleaning up the Void Order and the Hydra situation. You’re more than welcome to sit in; after all, I’m certain Phil will be bringing his young Elven friend with him.”

“Did I see Toshiko’s horse out front?” Jack’s voice interrupted.

Ianto glanced up. His husband was leaning into the room, a big grin on his face, cloak flopping around his ankles. “You did,” the Wizard confirmed.

Jack was in the room and scooping the Elf up into a large hug. Toshiko laughed. “You only saw me five days ago, Jack.”

“Five days too long, darling Toshiko,” he exclaimed. “You planning on hanging around for the mess we seem to be neck deep into?” He let her go, except for his hands resting on her shoulders.

“Try and keep me away.”

“Excellent. What about the rest of the team?”

Ianto listened as they chatted, slight smile on his face. Toshiko might not have been related to them by blood, but that didn’t matter. She was his sister, and she was home.
“Well,” Trip said, “that actually went better than I thought it would.”

Daisy shot him a look as the group headed down the cobbled lane toward Gateway, and the school. Grand Master Ianto’s house was just outside of the city, in an area that was still fairly rural, although at the rate Gateway was growing she didn’t think it would stay that way. It was quite a walk, since none of her friends had any access to a Teleport spell – as it was a high-level magic – or any sort of artifact attuned to the Grand Master’s house. They could have seen about getting a carriage or something, but they were students, and none of their allowances was really enough for that sort of thing, even combined. Daisy knew her friends, and they were all pretty much broke.

So, they were walking. It was a nice day, at least.

Overhead, she heard a chirruping call; glancing upward, the young Wizard could see the sunlight glinting off the seven dragons that were taking the opportunity to fly. There were times when Daisy wished she could do the same, but as far as she knew the closest she would ever get to flight was the Levitation spell her Dad used at times to get to the upper levels of the Keep.

She didn’t know what one, either. But she really wanted to learn it.

Trip caught her side-eye, because he added, “He could have refused outright.”

He did have a point. Ianto had promised to let them know how they could help, as soon as he knew anything, and that had to be enough for now.

“It wasn’t like he really would have let us question Werner von Strucker,” Jemma pointed out.

“He’s younger than most of us,” Leo replied, “and I’m pretty certain there are laws about interrogating kids.”

“Even if we’re kids as well,” Jemma finished.

“Grand Master Ianto is a man of his word,” Lincoln said. He was walking beside Daisy, and his hand clasped hers. “If he says he’ll find something for us to do, he will.”

Daisy was really glad that her Dad gave his permission for Lincoln to date her, because he was calm and cautious while Daisy herself could be a bit reactionary and had a tendency to jump in with both feet. He balanced her impetuous nature, which would only be a good thing.

She really should have introduced Lincoln to her Dad right away. However, the young Wizard had been a little skittish after her near-miss with Grant Ward. Lincoln got that, and he’d been fine with it.

Another reason she really liked him. Although she could tell that Lincoln was very glad that it was all out in the open, now.

Daisy suspected it had been Mistress Pepper who’d tattled to Dad about the whole boyfriend thing. She would have to have a talk with her teaching Master about it, but she knew it wouldn’t have done
a bit of good. After all, she was still technically a minor, and she was under Mistress Pepper’s protection and oversight. This would most likely continue until Daisy earned her Mastership.

“I would have enjoyed talking to von Strucker,” Wanda piped up, sounding really bloodthirsty.

Daisy couldn’t fault her. After all, it had been Werner’s father who’d kidnapped them and then put them through hellish tests, just because she and her brother were magical and twins to boot. Wanda and Pietro both deserved justice for what had been done to them and, although Dad had taken down the guy’s corrupt regime, Werner was still out there and apparently following Hydra’s lead. He’d outed her Dad as the Dark One, after all.

“I getcha,” Trip commented. “If it was me, I’d want to punch von Strucker’s smug face in.”

Wanda gave him a gratified smile. Trip shrugged self-deprecatingly.

“I’d like to do that myself,” Lincoln added.

“Looks like we have a queue forming,” Leo said.

“I wouldn’t mind standing in it,” Jemma replied.

 Gods, Daisy loved her friends.

She would have been concerned about Wanda and Pietro’s wanting to do bodily harm if they hadn’t been through so much. Yes, they’d just turned fourteen, which was the age that they’d begin applying for a formal teaching Master, but they were far more adult than some of the seventeen-year-olds that Daisy shared primary classes with. She was hoping that, whoever took them on, would have the patience to deal with that sort of thing.

She also knew that Mistress Pepper was angling toward her Dad asking to teach Wanda. Daisy really hoped he’d agree. He’d be awesome at it, and he had all that experience with being angry and wanting to destroy the world. If anyone could sympathize with a traumatized teenager who could have very easily gone the same way, it was her Dad.

The lane where Ianto and Jack’s house was led directly into the center of the city, where the Wizard School was. The Wizard’s Tower, the main school building, was obvious in the near distance, standing tall against the brilliant blue of the sky. If Daisy squinted, she could just make out the indistinct dots of what had to be dragons circling the Tower, enjoying a midday flight.

Daisy loved Gateway. It was her second favorite place in the world, next to Shield Keep. The Deep Ways were evident in every breath she took while she was in the city, since the place had been such a hotspot for magical activity back in the past. It even had an Avatar, and one day Daisy hoped she’d get to meet her; from what Ianto had said, he’d consulted the Avatar just after Ward had kidnapped Daisy a couple of days ago. Apparently, the Avatar didn’t appear very often anymore, because of the now abundance of Cardinal Wizards in the world, and the presence of those Wizards was stretching her a little thin. That was fine; Daisy understood. That still didn’t stop Daisy from hoping, though.

Gateway made her feel powerful in ways Daisy couldn’t quite understand, even after attending school there since she’d turned eleven. She’d once asked Mistress Pepper about it, and her teaching Master had claimed it was because of Daisy’s own connection to the Deep Ways. All Cardinal Wizards felt the same.

“Hey, Pietro?” she called out to her newest friend.
“Yes?” He eyed her, as if he wasn’t quite happy with her bringing attention to him.

“You can feel it, can’t you? Gateway, I mean.”

He nodded somberly. “Gateway is special.” His Middle Kingdoms accent was a little thicker than usual. “It’s like being wrapped up in a favorite blanket. I feel safe here.”

That was it, exactly. Safety. Even though she’d been kidnapped from the school – and that wasn’t Gateway’s fault, that was all on Ward and Garrett – the place did make her feel safe.

“There are some Great Wizards who want to move to another location to teach their own students,” Jemma mused. “Grand Master Stephen won’t hear of it.”

“I don’t understand it,” Leo continued, “because this is a special place. I certainly wouldn’t want to go anywhere else.”

“They’re right,” Lincoln added. “Gateway may be a really strange Cardinal Point, but it’s special to all magicks. It wouldn’t make any sense to leave.”

“I can feel it,” Trip mused. “Cause me being a Void, and all. But there’s nothing bad about Gateway, even if there are times it sets my teeth on edge a little. It’s not a bad thing, and Master Jasper’s been good about teaching me how to deal with it.”

“When I was in that Void Point,” Daisy said, “it was like walking through mud, and my magic was really suppressed. I know I would have died if I’d stayed there for very long.”

“I think there is a fundamental difference though,” her Void friend said, “between the Deep Ways and the Void…well, besides the obvious ones. The Deep Ways is…energizing, in a way. Sure, it grates on me at times…but I’d think it was easier to be around for me than the Void would be for you, even though your Dad is awesome.”

Daisy laughed at that. All of her friends thought her Dad was awesome.

“But it’s because the Void is heavier,” Trip continued. “It’s Deathforce, you know? Although I think that’s oversimplifying things, and death is supposed to be heavier and darker and all-consuming. The Deep Ways is the Lifeforce, which means it’s lighter and brighter, and the opposite of the Void. It’s just what you’re used to carrying around with you.” He shook his head. “Not sure if that makes any sense, really.”

“Yeah, I think I understand what you’re saying,” Daisy pondered Trip’s words. “And it does make sense. It was an actual Void Point I was practically on top of, and it’s always going to be stronger around a Void Point.”

“Plus,” Wanda pointed out, “wasn’t that Hydra Void Point tainted in some way? You certainly don’t feel stifled around your father, do you?”

“No, I don’t. Dad’s…calm, and steady, like he’s the cornerstone of my life.”

The younger Void Wizard gave her a dazzling smile. “Yes, I get that impression about him as well. Master Phil is quite the steadying influence.”

Daisy turned to her. “You met him, back then. What was he like?” She found herself quite curious about her Dad, before she’d met him. Yes, there was a part of her that was afraid of hearing what a bad person he was, but this was Buda-Pest, and he’d done real good there.
Wanda chewed her lip thoughtfully, eyes darting toward her twin, who gave her a nod of encouragement. One of the things Daisy had noticed about the pair was that Pietro was more willing to let Wanda take the lead whenever conversation was involved.

“Please, realize…we were quite young at the time,” she began, “but our memories are quite clear on the subject. However, we saw things through children’s eyes, as it were, and that may color our perception a bit…”

“That is quite understandable.” Jemma was nodding in agreement.

Leo’s head was practically bobbing in time with hers. “And those sorts of memories are always going to be romanticized, as it were.”

“Yes, that is it exactly,” Wanda agreed. “Romanticized. I remember the care he took with us, as he released us from the cages we were in. Back then, we didn’t know how to do any sorts of spells, and base metal would hold us, no matter how badly we wanted to escape. His arms were strong, and they carried me, and then Pietro, out of the laboratory we were in. There was another man…we know now he was called the Hawk, but you know him as Clint Barton…who was kind to us, taking care of our injuries and doing little tricks to make us laugh. And the woman with the red hair…we didn’t see much of her, but from what we discovered later she was like a whirlwind of death in that castle. The last man was tall, and I was afraid of him at first, but he was also gentle, even if he was a bit gruff.”

“Baron Triskelia,” Pietro confirmed. “I remember the eyepatch. I wanted to see what was under it.”

Daisy laughed. “It’s really gross.”

Pietro gave her a wicked smile. “You have made me really want to see now.”

That wasn’t going to happen, knowing her Uncle Nick the way she did, but she didn’t say anything. She simply winked at the younger boy, who smirked in reply.

“We didn’t know it was the Dark One until we were back home,” Wanda went on. “That was when the rumors began to spread. Neither of us believed that the strong, caring man who released us from our cages was so very evil. I recall putting my arms around his neck as he carried me, and he kept whispering that everything was going to be alright. He smelled…well, now I know it was the Void I was smelling, but back then it was like something had shifted within my soul, because I knew this man was just like me.” Her pale faced blushed slightly. “I do hope your father decides he would teach me, Daisy. I trust him.”

Daisy reached out, putting her arm around the smaller girl. “Let me work on him, because I think he’d be good for you. And it’s not like you’re not part of the family already. Us that he’s saved have to stick together.”
Phil, Clint, and Lola teleported into Ferrous Castle, directly into Pepper’s casting chamber. Like most Wizard’s sanctums, it was subterranean, a circular area with a raised plinth in the center where Pepper’s gramariya would usually sit when she was working her magic. It wasn’t there now, but then Phil knew she usually kept it up in the library when she wasn’t using it.

The chamber was tidy, plain wooden tables against the walls along with racks of potion ingredients and a cabinet with different sorts of items within it, ready to be enchanted into artifacts when needed. A small tabletop cauldron took up space on one of the tables, the burner underneath on its heat-resistant pad unlit but ready for use.

Wizards often enchanted their Teleport artifacts so that whoever used them ended up in the casting chamber of the home Wizard, simply for safety’s sake, but also as a sign of trust and tacit permission to consider themselves friends and family. There were quite a few exceptions, mostly blind teleports, since a Wizard’s casting chamber was also heavily warded and practically unPlotable without specific coordinates. Or when someone was showing up without calling first; it would just be plain rude to simply Teleport into someone’s home without warning. There were also privacy issues as well, if a Wizard felt the need for that sort of thing from others of their Order.

Pepper was waiting for them, smiling in welcome. “Thanks for coming.” She actually hugged Phil, who was slightly uncomfortable by the show of affection but also grateful that she felt like they were friends enough for the gesture. He could feel the Deep Ways that lived within her even through the boundary of two layers of clothing, but it wasn’t a bad feeling.

She then hugged Clint, who flailed a little but ended up patting her rather awkwardly on the shoulder and then giving her a smile that made him look as if he was slightly constipated when they parted. Phil wanted to laugh but managed to control himself. Happy, who had accompanied his Wizard, promptly crawled over from Pepper’s shoulder to Clint’s, greeting the Elf equally as effusively, wiping away the awkwardness almost at once.

Lola, though, had no issue with accepting the scritches Pepper gave her. But then, she adored that sort of thing and was always wanting to make sure she received the attention she believed she justly deserved.

“Thank you both for coming,” Pepper greeted, smiling.

“I have to admit,” Phil said, “I’ve been wanting to see our new guest ever since I woke up after our escape from Hydra’s base.”

He didn’t mention that he probably would have thought more on the man who’d looked like Sir Steven Rogers, except he’d been a little distracted by a certain Elf, who was currently cuddling Happy in one arm while tickling the dragon’s belly, causing the small dragon to wriggle and make the cutest chuckling noises Phil had ever heard. Lola, who must have caught the emotion behind that particular thought, had left Pepper’s side and was sniffing up at him rather disdainfully. The Wizard, properly chastened, gave his own companion the scritches she obviously wanted from him, soothing her sharp feelings.

“And you say you can still see the Void around him?” That was strange. After all, their guest had been out of the Void for almost five days now, so it should have faded away.
Pepper nodded, motioning them toward the door. “The only thing I can think of, is that the Void is keeping him unconscious for some reason.”

It was certainly possible. Phil thought back on how he’d come to bring the man out of the Void in the first place, as the three of them – plus dragons – headed up into the public areas of the castle. It had felt as if he’d been practically thrust into Phil’s arms as he’d struggled to close the Void Point, like the Void had wanted to get rid of him. Maybe it had; after all, the Void really didn’t care to have things in it that didn’t belong, and that included Paladins who should have been dead centuries ago.

He had first-hand experience of that sort of thing, of not belonging within the Void. He was walking up a staircase in Ferrous Castle as proof of that as it had kicked him out rather spectacularly after his ‘death’ at Loki’s hands. He still felt a little bitter about that.

They exited the stairs and into the large, airy main hallway of Ferrous Castle. Phil had always liked being there; it had a very pleasant atmosphere, and very little magic despite one of the more powerful Cardinal Wizards living within it. That was all down to Baron Tony, who was a genius when it came to non-magical artifacts. Even the lights in the castle were of the Baron’s manufacture, and Phil had often thought about asking to have that sort of thing installed in Shield Keep, but it was Tony Stark’s ego that was keeping him doing just that.

“I’ll need to really get a good look at him.” Phil hadn’t had much of a chance of that before passing out back at home, and then they’d moved him before the Wizard had awakened. He was a little irritated by that, to be honest, but there wasn’t a thing he could do about it now.

“I wanted to bring you in from the beginning, ” Pepper admitted, “but Tony had a point…you’ve got quite a lot on your shoulders at the moment, and more will be coming once you and the other Grand Masters decide on how you’ll proceed with weeding out Hydra among the Voids.”

She was right; or course, she was right. Phil hadn’t wanted to be named Grand Master of Void Order but, now that he was, he meant to do the job properly until they could clear the Order of Hydra. Then, he’d step down in favor of someone else. He could go back to Shield Keep, be Daisy’s father, and maybe take on a Novice like Pepper was trying to convince him to do. Teaching Wanda Maximoff seemed like a good idea to him, especially with their shared history. He could instruct her in the lessons that Mistress Suzie had tried to instill in him, but had failed because he’d been too stubborn to believe her when she’d attempted to teach him that being a Void wasn’t a bad thing and didn’t mean he was automatically evil.

It galled him though to admit that Tony Stark had been nice to consider what Phil was up against.

Maybe he was being a bit hard on Baron Tony. Phil knew he could be a generous man, always working to help as many people as possible. It hadn’t always been that way, but since his kidnapping and subsequent taking the Barony from Obadiah Stane, Baron Tony had settled down and made it his duty to help the people of Barony Ferrous. If anyone understood what it was like to be in charge of people who depended on him, it would have been Baron Tony.

Still, it didn’t keep the man from getting on Phil’s nerves. Sometimes he’d wondered how Pepper managed to be around him so much of the time, if he’d irritated Phil during their very first meeting.

Although, Baron Tony did like Daisy. He liked her so much he didn’t mind her hanging out in his workshop. The Wizard had to be concerned about his daughter spending so much time with the other man, and just what sort of bad habits she’d pick up.

They were heading toward the ornate staircase that rose up into the upper levels of the castle when they were brought to a stop by Baron Tony, and a man that Phil didn’t recognize. The man had dark
hair that was just starting to go gray, and was dressed in a deep purple tunic and black trousers. He
didn’t have any of the accoutrements of a Wizard about him; there was no wand, nor ceremonial
dagger, but there was something faintly magical about him that Phil couldn’t identify…as if he’d
been exposed to magic, but wasn’t a Wizard himself.

“And there he is,” Baron Tony announced, giving Phil a wide, slightly sarcastic, grin. His own
clothes weren’t what a Baron would have usually been seen wearing, which made the Wizard
believe he’d been down in his workshop at some point in the day and just hadn’t bothered to change
into something suitable for company. “Our newest Grand Master. You know, I was really surprised
to learn who you really were, Coulson, because I certainly can’t see it.”

Phil wanted to grit his teeth, but instead brought up one of his blandest smiles and aiming it at the
Baron as if it was some sort of weapon. “That was the point,” he said, keeping his voice perfectly
calm and not giving the man any sort of satisfaction at seeing him bothered by his comment. “But I
can still Stun spell you into unconsciousness, Your Grace.”

That had Clint snorting, and Pepper hiding a smile as Baron Tony sniffed in mock insult. “This is
why I like you so well… you show me so much respect.” His dark eyes were laughing, so Phil
could tell he wasn’t really bothered by the comment.

“Then I should keep right on that.” Phil turned toward the stranger, holding out his hand. “Phil
Coulson, Void Wizard.”

The man wasn’t bothering to hide his own amusement. “Doctor Bruce Banner,” he introduced
himself, shaking Phil’s hand. That faint tingle of barely-there magic was evident in his grasp. “It’s a
pleasure to meet you, Grand Master.”

That title was going to take some serious getting used to. “And you.” He frowned slightly. “Doctor
Banner…I’ve heard of you, I believe.”

“Brucie here’s the premier magical theorist out there.” Baron Tony threw an arm around Dr.
Banner’s shoulders. The doctor seemed to become even more bemused than he was by the gesture.

“Of course. I read your treatise on the Conservation of Magic. I thought you really brought another
dimension to Einstein’s own Laws.” It had been an impressive paper; he had a copy in his library
back at the Keep.

Doctor Banner looked slightly embarrassed. “Thank you. That’s kind of you to say.”

“Nothing kind about it at all,” the Wizard hastened to reassure him, “it’s the truth. I’ve been able to
use some of the Principles of Substitution in my own spells.”

That had the man perking up and out of his embarrassment. “I’d love to talk to you about that,
Grand Master –”

“This is really fascinating,” Baron Tony butted in, “but don’t we have a sleeping beauty to awaken?”

Phil rolled his eyes, not really surprised that the Baron had referenced that old fairy story. “I’m not
going to kiss him awake, Your Grace.”

“I should hope not,” Clint added, his voice a little harsh. Happy, who’d still been in Clint’s arms,
flipped himself over in order to glare at the Baron, as if he, too, was irritated with the man.

Pepper was laughing…or, at least, she was trying very hard not to. Phil could understand why.
Baron Tony had his hands up, as if to shield himself from the little dragon’s glaring. “Well, that’s a new reaction. I knew dragons loved Elves, but I wasn’t expecting that, especially since Happy adores me.”

Clint was stroking Happy, in an effort to get the dragon to calm down. Lola was vastly amused by it all, Phil could tell. He couldn’t blame her, because he was equally amused.

“Let’s go and see what I can do to get our guest to wake up,” the Wizard suggested, not able to keep all of the amusement out of his voice. “And, Dr. Banner, I’d also enjoy speaking with you at length about your theories and how they fit into my own spellcasting…but it might be a little while because, as much as I hate to admit it, Baron Tony has made a valid point about my time being not my own at the moment.”

Tony looked gratified at that, and Phil couldn’t find it within himself to be bothered by that. Because the man had a very valid point: with Hydra out there, and now being the new Grand Master of Voids plus considering taking on a Novice for the first time ever, Phil was about to become busier than he’d ever thought he’d be.

He’d been perfectly happy being a semi-hermit, living with Daisy and Melinda and Andrew at Shield Keep, and staying away from the politics that the Wizard’s Guild excelled in. He’d thought he’d put his past behind him, and was living the life of Master Phil Coulson, Void Wizard, and enjoying the peace he’d gained in his ‘retirement’. Never in his wildest dreams could he have foreseen what his life would become.

This wasn’t even counting his close connection to the Void, the connection that would keep him alive beyond his human lifespan. He’d never set out to be as he is now, and truly believed that this was a punishment for his past deeds, that the Void had chosen him to balance out Grand Master Ianto because it somehow decided that justice needed to be done for his actions as the mercenary known as the Dark One.

Phil had been prepared to face any sort of judgment his fellow Wizards would have meted out, once the truth had been revealed. But this…no, there was no way this had even crossed his mind.

He didn’t want it.

He didn’t have a choice.

And so, he’d stepped into a role he’d never would have chosen for himself, instead of living quietly in the place Marcus had given him, doing his best by his daughter and helping her become the amazing young woman he’d seen in her that day, in the midst of battle, when he’d stumbled over her quite by accident just after he’d revived for the first time.

That had been taken away from him.

However, he’d regained Clint in his life, and that would make it all worth it…until he lost the Elf to old age, while he continued on, unchanging.

Phil mentally shook himself. Losing Clint would be far into the future; he didn’t need to be anticipating that loss just yet.

“We put him in one of the guest rooms,” Pepper said, trying to get them all back on track. Extracting Happy from Clint’s arms, she settled her dragon onto her shoulder and headed up the stairs. Phil followed, his excitement growing at seeing the man he’d been given by the Void, knowing in his soul that it really was Sir Steven Rogers but needing to confirm it. He had no idea how the man had
gotten trapped within the Void, but he suspected it had to do with that last battle with the man known as the Skull, when rumors of Sir Steven vanishing had begun.

“Once Sir Steven is awake,” Pepper suggested, “I think we should get Jack in here to speak to him.”

“Oh?” Phil asked politely, not sure where she was going with that, unless it had to do with Captain Harkness being the Deathless and having lived back during the Century War, when Sir Steven had been lost.

“I’m sorry, I forgot you weren’t in the room when Jack admitted to having met Sir Steven back then.”

The Wizard was surprised just enough that the toe of his boot caught on one of the risers, making him stumble. “He did?” No, Phil’s voice didn’t just squeak.

Lola was laughing at him. Clint wasn’t any better, but at least he was muffling it a little.

“He wasn’t a part of the Howling Commandos, but he was certainly in the same military posting as they were, and he was very impressed. I don’t know if Sir Steven would remember him, but Jack might be able to help him get his feet under him.”

“That makes sense.”

Pepper gave him a bright smile. “And don’t think I can’t see that you want to interrogate Jack about what he recalls about Sir Steven.”

Phil had been thinking that, but he wasn’t about to admit it. “I have no idea what you mean.”

She met his eyes, and he could practically see her calling him a liar with her expression, but she didn’t say anything aloud. She really didn’t have to.

Phil really didn’t know exactly when his minor obsession with the Paladin of the Western Lands began. He did know he’d been a child, before Lola had come to him, but he wasn’t certain if it had been his Dad or someone else who’d introduced him to stories of Sir Steven Rogers and the Howling Commandos. To be honest, he’d been as equally enamored of Lady Peggy Carter, the woman behind the scenes, so to speak, but there wasn’t a lot of information on her, not as much as there was on the Paladin, the Commandos, and the men who’d been responsible for bringing him into the war: Baron Howard Stark and General Sir Chester Phillips.

After he’d destroyed his life by becoming the Dark One, Phil had given up on his need to know everything about Sir Steven…until he’d found a shield that its former owner had claimed to have once been one of many that had belonged to the Paladin. The shield was certainly ancient, and painted in the crest of the fallen Paladin, and to be honest there was no way to really substantiate that sort of thing. However, Phil had gladly recovered it from the man’s possession, when he’d gone back to get revenge on the bastard for the attempt to betray Marcus to the authorities back then. Phil had carried that shield with him until he could find a safe place to store it and, when he’d faked his death and given up on being the Dark One, he’d retrieved it along with several more treasures he’d taken in his years of wanting to burn the world down.

He’d always known that Sir Steven would have been ashamed at what he’d done, but Phil couldn’t think of that at the moment. It wasn’t like they’d be around each other all that much once the man was awake once more.

Now, he just needed to make certain that Sir Steven would wake up.
A hand touched his, and he turned toward Clint, he was looking at him as if he could read the very
thoughts in Phil’s head. The Wizard gave a small nod toward his lover, and the Elf’s warm fingers
wrapped around his and squeezed, before releasing his grasp and giving him a nod of his own. Phil
took the comfort and support that was being offered, and let his dark thoughts about not being able to
live up to the Paladin’s good opinion fade away.

Clint and Daisy were the important ones now. They were the only ones that Phil should care about
how they felt about him.

The door that led into the guest room was open, so Pepper simply waved him through. Phil stepped
inside, taking in the rather opulent surroundings at a glance before his eyes settled on the still form on
the bed.

Sir Steven Rogers was just as handsome as he’d been in the paintings that had been done of him
back during the Century War. His hair was blond, and he was well built, with broad shoulders
tapering to a narrow waist. He was tall; he would have easily towered over Phil himself, who was of
average height. His large hands had been folded onto his chest, and rose and fell in time with his
even breathing. Someone had removed his armor and had set it upon a rack built for that purpose in
the corner of the room, the shield he’d been carrying with him resting against the base, his
broadsword leaning against it, replacing the gear with a set of comfortable-looking pajamas. His face
was as kind as it was well proportioned, with a slight scruff of beard on his jaw and cheeks.

Phil could immediately see what Pepper had meant about the Void still surrounding him.

It coiled and twisted about his silent body, almost like some sort of lover. Phil knew he was seeing
more than Pepper had, just because of his affinity with the Void, and what he was seeing was
bothersome. The Void should have faded out, and yet it hadn’t, and there had to be a reason for that.

Blinking, the Wizard let his magical senses take over, examining the unconscious man in order to
find the reason why the Void wasn’t letting go. There was so much of it, twisting and twining about
their guest, as if the Void had somehow become a part of him…but Phil could tell that the Paladin
wasn’t a Wizard, so he looked a little deeper to see just what the Void had done to him.

Reaching out with one hand, Phil called the Void to him. A ribbon of it came at his call, tangling
around his spread fingers, and he gave it an experimental tug to see what would happen.

If the Void could coo, it would have done so.

It recognized him. If Phil had had any doubt that the Void was such a large part of him, the reaction
to the magic surrounding Sir Steven put paid to it. It was as if the Void was calling to him, wanting
to come home to him, and he let it, knowing that he’d have to dig it all out if the Paladin was ever
going to awaken.

Because, to his magical vision, he could tell that Sir Steven had been in the Void for so long that it
had literally become a part of him, although not in the same way as it did with himself and other
Void Wizards. Phil suspected that it had been to prevent any damage to the Paladin, which could
have very well have happened if the Void hadn’t taken the step of incorporating the man into itself,
until such time as it could expel the foreign individual.

He could get the Void out, but it was a damned good thing that the man was unconscious, because it
would have hurt like all the hells if he hadn’t been.

Taking a deep breath, Phil grabbed two handfuls of Void and yanked.
Sir Steven’s body arced off the bed, almost suspended in the air from the sheer force of the Wizard’s grasp upon the Void. From somewhere behind him, he heard someone gasp – it was most likely Pepper, as she was the one who would have been able to see at least part of what he was doing – but he ignored it, in order to use even more force to drag the Void out of the man on the bed. It wanted to come, but it had become so deeply entwined that it needed the extra help of Phil’s own will to let go of its grip.

In a way, it was like wrestling a Void Point. Except a man’s life was dependent on him getting every single bit of Void out and bringing it into Phil’s own body, instead of standing on one single point and the Void staying put. It wasn’t as powerful, either, and eventually it began to pull free, to come home to the Wizard who was so bound up in the Void that it had literally killed him within a heartbeat when he’d been cut off from it.

Sir Steven settled back onto the bed when the last tendril of Void released its hold, curling into Phil’s chest as if it was some sort of contented cat. The Wizard took a step back at the sudden lack of resistance, dropping his arms and taking a whooping breath, lungs suddenly telling him he hadn’t had any air in them for a while. He hadn’t even been aware of it, so focused on what he was doing.

Lola leaned into him, supporting him, although Phil didn’t need it. He hadn’t actually overextended himself, but then he suspected that the Void he’d just sucked into himself had been reenergizing him even as he was expending power.

“Damn,” Clint breathed, “that was pretty fucking incredible. I am so turned on right now.”

Of course, Clint would have at least known Phil was doing something, even if he couldn’t actually see the Void and how Phil was manipulating it.

It was just a good thing he didn’t blush easily. Still, internally he was feeling pretty smug about having that sort of effect of his lover.

“Ugh,” Baron Tony groaned, “that is a little too much information.”

“I can share more – “ Clint teased.

“No, thanks!”

Doctor Banner was chuckling and blushing at the same time.

“You alright?” Pepper asked solicitously, resting a hand on his arm.

It took every bit of self-control not to jerk away; after being so exposed to the Void, Phil could feel the Deep Ways within his friend practically burning him through his sleeve. “Perfectly fine,” he reassured her. “There’s no longer any Void within Sir Steven. He’s sleeping normally now, and he’ll probably wake up naturally.”

“Any idea how long?” Dr. Banner inquired.

“A couple of hours, I should say. Before dinnertime.”

“Then I should probably let Jarvis and Ana know we’ll have an extra guest.” Pepper was smiling apologetically, removing her hand. She’d most likely figured out that Phil could barely stand the touch at the moment. “Do you need anything, Phil?”

“To be honest, I’m parched.” He was also a little hungry, but needed a drink of water or maybe even wine before eating anything.
“Then let’s get you something. I already warned Jarvis that you might want something after performing high level magic, so he’ll have a snack prepared.”

“That sounds perfect.” He should have known she’d be ready in case he’d needed anything; after all, she was a Cardinal Wizard, and would have had experience with working powerful magicks.

Now, it was only a matter of time before they got some answers from Sir Steven Rogers.
Chapter 7

Clint hadn’t been joking when he’d claimed that Phil’s show of magical ability had turned him on.

While he hadn’t been able to see much of what his lover had done, he’d at least been able to sense it a little, and what he’d sensed…damn, that was some impressive magic being thrown around. He did wish he’d been able to see it like Mistress Pepper had obviously been able to do, because she’d been in awe almost from the moment Phil had raised a hand toward the bed.

He’d seen what had happened with the Void Point, but then the Void had been so very strong in that cave it would have been noticeable by a headblind null. The shadows alone had been pretty spooky, and to have seen them move the way they had…plus, the Void had actually been visible there, mainly because they’d been right on top of the Void Point. It had been the clearest Clint had ever seen it, and amend if it wasn’t amazing.

There was times when he wished he’d been born with more than just a sense of magic, if just to be able to see what Phil could do.

Mistress Pepper had them all out of the bedroom and down the stairs, then situated in a comfortable yet enormous library, two tables covered with finger foods and various drinks, including coffee and tea. Phil took a small glass of wine and a plate with several different sweet treats on it, settling onto a sofa with Lola at his feet, a haunch of lamb held delicately in her claws as she gnawed on it in satisfaction.

Clint took the sofa with Phil, after setting his bow and quiver against the end table next to him, not at all hiding the fact that he was scoping the place out. The sheer number of books was mind-boggling, taking up two levels that included a walkway around the circumference of the round room. There were even those rolling ladders at various places around the tall shelves.

There were paintings in niches spaced around the room…except for one place, and it held an ornate mirror. The archer was willing to bet it was Mistress Pepper’s speaking mirror. It didn’t hurt that he recognized this room from the call she’d made to Phil, back at Shield Keep.

The coffee he’d accepted from the Steward, Jarvis, was strong…just the way he liked it. The cake was moist and the candied apples and cranberries were to die for.

Jarvis waited on them efficiently. He was a tall, gangly man that Clint swore had some Elf in him; it was around the eyes that told the tale, because he had human normal ears. He was polite and unflappable…or at least he seemed to be, until Baron Tony said something completely inappropriate, and then the Steward had gaped for approximately two heartbeats and then withdrew swiftly.

Mistress Pepper chastised the Baron for it. Baron Tony rolled his eyes and didn’t argue with her, as if he knew he wouldn’t win.

Clint believed the Baron was just so used to Mistress Pepper winning any argument they got into that he simply didn’t bother anymore.

“Grand Master Phil,” Dr. Banner began the conversation, “can you please explain to those of us who couldn’t see, what exactly you did?”

Clint found himself liking the soft-spoken magical theorist. He seemed to be a bit tentative and shy,
and yet it was obvious he took pride in the knowledge he had. There was something about him, though, that he couldn’t quite put his finger on, but it didn’t make him like the man any less.

Trust was something else; however, the Elf didn’t really trust a lot of people so it really didn’t say anything bad about the scientist.

“Sir Steven had been within the Void for so long,” Phil began, “that the Void had actually bonded to him…although I’m fairly certain it was also to keep him from being expelled before he could actually survive it. But, it wasn’t an actual part of him and so it had to come out. All I needed to do was take the Void away.”

“Easy as pie for the man who closed a Void Point,” Baron Tony added.

There was a sarcastic tone to his words, but Phil didn’t seem to take offense to it at all. “I’m not sure about it, but I’m beginning to wonder if I’m not some sort of walking Void Point right now.”

He looked a little stunned, as if the thought had just occurred to him, and Clint couldn’t help but free up a hand in order to rest it on Phil’s thigh, in a sign of comfort and solidarity. Suddenly realizing that you’re some sort of walking, talking magical artifact would have freaked anyone out. Phil, usually so calm and collected, had to have been screaming internally.

“If you are,” Pepper said stoutly, “then Ianto would be a walking Cardinal Point. Somehow, I’m not so sure that’s how it works.”

“Mistress Pepper would be right,” Dr. Banner spoke up. “Now, I’m not in any way magical, but I’ve studied these things, and I believe I can safely say that, despite the fact that you managed to take on a Void Point and manipulate it enough so that it could be closed, and that the Void has so strong a connection to you, that it is impossible for you to actually be a Void Point. As we know, a Void Point is a crack in the universe, where the very Deathforce can seep up into our world. Cardinal Points are the opposite, yet the same…it’s also a crack in the universe, but it’s where the Deep Ways enter our world. Now, if you were some sort of animated Void Point, you would be spewing Deathforce all over the place. And you’re obviously not. If you were, Mistress Pepper wouldn’t be able to sit here in this room with you.”

As the scientist spoke, Clint could tell that Phil was relaxing a little, digesting what Dr. Banner was saying. The Elf wanted to thank him for talking sense, but simply listened as he went on with his explanation.

“Also, take into consideration the control you have over your magic. If this were a situation where you were exuding Void energy constantly, you would be unable to hold that sort of control over it for as long as you have been. Yes, I know you can close a Void Point, but doing so tires you out. So, it would have been impossible for you to be doing it all the time. Grand Master Phil, while I certainly understand why you’d think that, it’s based on emotion and not through sound, magical, theory.”

By the end, Phil was nodding in agreement. “I know…you’re correct, Dr. Banner. But…the Void, it recognized me. It came to me, and I absorbed it. It was happy that I was there.”

“Whoa,” Baron Tony muttered, “that’s some weird shit. Are you saying the Void is alive?”

Phil shrugged. “We know the Deep Ways has its own sentient Avatar. I’m only surprised that the Void doesn’t have the same. It’s definitely alive. I’ve heard its heartbeat. And it gave me Sir Steven. That I recall vividly.”
That announcement had everyone staring at Phil in surprise, Clint included. Sure, he knew about the Avatar of Gateway, but the Elf hadn’t put it together with the notion that both the Deep Ways and the Void were alive.

And yet, it made sense in a way. Elves were close to nature, and to life itself. Each Elf could sense magic, especially both the Deep Ways and the Void, even if that Elf didn’t have magic of their own. It would explain a lot if both forms of magic were living in some way.

“What exactly happened while you were in the Void Point?” Mistress Pepper prompted quietly, as if afraid Phil might actually tell them.

“It…it was dark, and calm…only the Void in that place had been tainted in some way. I had to fight it a little, in order to get it back out of our world, because it didn’t want to go.” Phil took a sip of his wine, his eyes distant, like he was back inside the Void Point. “The rest of the Void, though…I could hear it, in a way…it’s hard to describe exactly how it was speaking to me, but it wanted me to force the injured part of it back within its own dimension, so it could embrace and heal it. So I did, and in reward it gave me Sir Steven back. Not that it wanted him there; the Void had wanted to expel him for a while, now, but hadn’t known how without doing any more damage to him. I was its way to do so, even though I didn’t want to leave.”

Lola dropped her half-eaten lamb shank, sitting up in order to rest her front claws on her Wizard’s knees, cooing at him sadly. Phil set his plate and glass down on the table at his side of the couch, in order to reach out to his companion. He stroked her head with one hand, the other covering the hand that Clint still had on his thigh, squeezing the archer’s fingers in acknowledgement of the very real concern Clint was experiencing. There had been a very real longing in Phil’s voice, and his eyes had gone a little misty…not with tears, but with Void, the black of the magic ghosting across his irises like the darkest of storm clouds.

“When I was first resurrected,” he went on, “I believed that the Void had expelled me because I wasn’t worthy. After everything I’d done, that the Void had rejected me.”

“I thought you didn’t remember,” Clint murmured.

The Wizard gave him a small smile. “I didn’t…not until my second near-death by Hydra. Then, it was as if the Void wanted me to remember it, and so I did.”

“And did it?” Mistress Pepper asked, sympathy making her voice ache.

Phil shook his head. “No, not rejection…but it knew I wasn’t ready, and that I still had a part to play.” He smiled self-deprecatingly. “It’s not the part I thought it was, though. I didn’t think the Void simply didn’t want me to die, to take the easy way out.”

“It’s your punishment,” Baron Tony said, sounding completely serious for once. “For all your evil past deeds.”

“To live long past your time,” Dr. Banner added. “To be the balance to Grand Master Ianto.”

“Exactly.” Phil bowed his head a moment, as if ashamed to meet their eyes.

Clint’s heart hurt for the man he loved. To know that he was being punished like that because some universal force hadn’t liked how he’d lived his life and used his power.

The thing was, yes…Phil – and Marcus, and the Widow and Clint himself – had done a lot of bad things, there were those times when burning down cities or assassinating people had been the right thing to do. That, somehow, they’d been elected as the swift hands of justice, doing what needed to
be done to protect people who didn’t deserve to be hurt. Just look at Buda-Pest…they’d gone in there, ready to raze the kingdom down, because King Wolfgang was doing something so vile that normal justice would never have been enough.

That mission had really done a number on everyone’s reputation, but Clint knew he’d pay it again and gratefully if it meant that even one single child would be saved. It was quite possibly the one thing Clint had done that he’d never regret, no matter what anyone else said.

Lola made another sad sound, and this time Happy – who had been given a chicken leg by Jarvis before the Steward had left – caught the atmosphere of melancholy and actually dropped his own dinner and, completely belying his own silly nature, practically flew into Phil’s lap in order to cuddle him. The Wizard was surprised by it, taking his hand away from Lola in order to cuddle the little dragon right back.

Lola didn’t seem bothered by the attention that another dragon was giving her human. Instead, she dropped her head to Phil’s knee, sighing deeply and looking up with such poignant eyes.

“Well,” Baron Tony humphed, “this became a real downer real fast.”

At the same time that Mistress Pepper said, “Tony!” Phil was ordering calmly, “Shut up, Your Grace.”

Clint couldn’t help the chuckle that escaped. Banner was equally amused, while the Baron simply rolled his eyes and complained about not getting any respect.

Still, Phil was perking up a little, and Lola looked somewhat less distressed. Happy actually twisted onto his back, displaying his belly for rubs. The Wizard shook his head fondly and did what the small dragon demanded, running his fingers along the fine scales of Happy’s chest and stomach. He gave out the dragon form of a giggle, waving his four legs in the air, tail twitching in pleasure.

With that, Phil laughed. “Pepper, your dragon is ridiculous.”

Pepper joined him. “You’re just now realizing that?”

Clint reached over and gave Happy, and then Lola, their own scritches. “He did the job needed, didn’t he?”

“Yes, he did,” his lover admitted.

“You have a lot of friends, Phil,” Pepper said. “Yes, even Tony.”

Baron Tony squawked in protest at that. “I’m nobody’s friend!”

“You protest too much, Your Grace,” Phil said, raising an eyebrow.

“Then maybe you should call me Tony.” The man smirked. “Although I’m gonna keep call you Grand Master, because you get this really hilarious look on your face whenever I do. Your eye twitches…yep, just like that.”

Clint snorted. He wasn’t about to tell Phil that the Baron was absolutely correct, that Phil’s left eye really did twitch whenever someone called him Grand Master. Not that many people did at the moment, but it was there and he wasn’t going to admit it for one moment. Phil had tells, and the Elf wasn’t going to share them.

“Look,” Ferrous’ Baron went on, “we’ll keep the Void Knight here as long as he needs it. I’m sort
of invested, what with the family history and all. He’s gonna need all the help he can get to reacclimate to this time.”

“I may know someone who can help,” Phil said. “His name is Andrew Garner, and he was an instructor in the mental health sciences before he accidentally got a hold of a cursed artifact. If he can’t, then he might know someone who can.”

Phil had said something to that effect about Andrew, back when he’d first talked about Melinda’s cursed husband. The effects of the curse had been horrific, but Grand Master Ianto had managed to unpick the curse and get Andrew back to his normal self. This would be just the thing to get the man back out into the world and he would be useful to someone who needed it.

Although, it might mean there would be no more excellent meals.

Hm.

Maybe not such a good idea after all.

He couldn’t say that out loud, though. He didn’t want to seem selfish.

Before Phil could say anything else, a small chiming sound came from one of the walls. It had Clint up from his seat in a flash, a knife in his hand, before realizing that he was in one of the most secure places in the Western Lands, the combination of Mistress Pepper’s magic and the Baron’s genius making it almost impossible to get in unless they let it happen.

He wasn’t embarrassed, though. It never paid to be too cautious.

“It’s my mirror,” the Head of Cardinal Order said, rising from her chair.

Baron Tony looked somewhat impressed by Clint, but why the Elf couldn’t say, as he hadn’t really done anything all that impressive yet. He slid the knife back into its sheath in his boot, surreptitiously nudging his bow a little closer with his boot as he returned to his seat.

Phil gave him a look that absolutely did not make Clint’s cock twitch in his trousers.

Nope, it didn’t.

But it was a damned sexy look.
Chapter 8

The first thing Ianto noticed through Pepper’s mirror were her guests.

Of course, he’d been expecting to find Phil there. When he’d contacted the mirror at Shield Keep, the Steward – the formidable Melinda May – had informed him that both the Grand Master and the Hawk had left for Barony Ferrous, in order to see about helping the fallen Sir Steven. Ianto could understand why Pepper would have called him in; after all, it had been Phil who had brought the hibernating Paladin out of the Void, and would have been able to see what exactly was wrong.

Baron Tony was with them, as was a man with dark, curly hair and a somewhat amused demeanor. Ianto could swear he’d seen the man before, and it took him a moment to bring the memory forward: that was Doctor Bruce Banner, a magical theorist with several rather scholarly treatises under his belt. Ianto hadn’t officially met the man, but he’d seen him deliver one of those papers at a symposium on the Laws of Magic, and he’d been impressed by it, especially coming from someone who wasn’t a Wizard.

“Good morning, Ianto,” Pepper greeted him warmly.

“Good afternoon,” he returned, chuckling. It would have been morning on the west coast of the Western Lands; as it was late afternoon in Gateway. “I see you have the man I’m looking for with you.”

“Of course you want me,” the Baron snarked, a sparkle in his dark eye that Ianto could make out even through the mirror. “Everyone does, so why shouldn’t you?”

“Certainly, it’s you,” Ianto snarked right back, “because the two of us are so compatible.”

That had Tony barking a laugh. “And the last thing I want is Jack coming after me in a fit of jealousy.”

“Jack doesn’t get jealous…at least, that’s what he says.”

“And we know he lies about that sort of thing,” Pepper grinned.

They all knew his husband, alright. Because that was all so very true. Jack denies being jealous, but it was so obvious that he was.

It really was one of the many things Ianto loved about him, not that he was ever going to admit that to Jack.

“Actually,” Ianto got back on track, “I was told by Steward Melinda that Phil was with you…and I see that he is.”

That had Phil getting up off the sofa where he’d been sitting next to Clint Barton, curiosity in his eyes. “What can I do for you, Grand Master?”

Ianto clicked his tongue at him in disapproval. “It’s Ianto, Phil. I’m about as uncomfortable about that title as you are.”

He could see the humor brighten the Void Wizard’s blue eyes. “Then, Ianto…what can I do for
“I think we should meet, to discuss what’s going to happen next. I’ve already called Stephen, and he can be here for dinner…which, I suppose, would be a late lunch for you. I think it’s high time for the Grand Masters to take action on the Hydra menace.”

Phil nodded in agreement. “That sounds fine. I’ve done all I can here, and so I’m free for the rest of the day.”

“Excellent. Please, bring Mr. Barton with you. We’ll eat before we get into the actual meeting. Besides,” he couldn’t help the smile, “I have someone who’d like to meet him.”

“Meet me?” The Hawk was surprised, his eyebrows rising.

“Indeed. You’d be welcome regardless of that, however.”

Toshiko had wanted to meet this young Elf, to get to know him, since Ianto was pretty certain she was going to invite him to come along with her in her quest to dig around the mercenary underground for information. That made sense; after all, Clint Barton had been on the wrong side of the law for many years, until he’d chosen to leave that life behind and work for the Baron Triskelia. While the archer still had his thumbs in some fairly shady pies, he was doing his best to change his life for the better. Becoming Phil’s lover was yet another positive change.

And his request to Ianto, back at Shield Keep…honestly, Ianto was pleasantly in awe of the Hawk, for what he was willing to do for the man he loved.

“Also,” the Cardinal Wizard continued, “you might wish to be aware that I had a visit earlier from young Novice Daisy and her group of friends. They are all quite determined to help out.”

The Void Wizard shook his head fondly. “That’s my girl.”

“You should be very proud of her.” Ianto had been impressed at how loyal she was to her father. Pepper had had the right idea taking the young woman on as a Novice; he couldn’t help but wish he’d been the one to do it, although he hadn’t taken a Novice since Pepper herself. It was why she was so determined that he accept Pietro Maximoff as his next Novice.

“I really am.” It was obvious in the way his eyes softened when he thought of her, and the tiny smile that graced his lips.

Ianto had to believe that the very best thing that could have happened to Phil Coulson was finding that girl and deciding to raise her as his own.

“I think she should come to dinner as well,” he spontaneously decided. “I’m not going to ask that she be included in Grand Master business, but she might feel as if we’re letting her be a part of things. Nor do we need to have all of her friends show up. However, I suspect that you wouldn’t mind spending time with your daughter while you can, before you get busy and she goes back to her studies.”

Phil was nodding. “Give us a couple of hours, and we’ll be there. I want to stop off back at the Keep; I need to speak to Andrew about something, and I’ll call Daisy on her speaking stone. Then, if Clint wants to accompany me – “

“I do,” Clint piped up from where he was still sitting.

“—we’ll be there,” the newest Grand Master finished.
Ianto returned the nod. “We’ll be expecting you.”

“Should we bring anything?”

“Just yourselves. Jack has realized that he has a real talent for cooking, and wants to amaze everyone.” It was nice of the man to ask, however.

“We shall see you in two hours.”

“See you then.” Ianto turned his attention back to Pepper, as Phil went back to the sofa. “Please, let me know when Sir Steven awakens. I’m very curious as to what he has to say.”

“We were wondering if Jack might want to be there,” she said, “since he remembers the Paladin. I’m not sure if Sir Steven will remember Jack…”

“But it might be nice to have a friendly face there, if he does.” Ianto could understand that reasoning. “I’ll ask Jack if he’s willing.” He didn’t think Jack wouldn’t be, but he’d ask.

“Phil also says he has someone he can ask who might help Sir Steven reacclimatize.”

That would have been Andrew. Ianto had gotten to know the man a little when he’d undone the curse that he’d accidentally triggered, turning Andrew Garner into a beast that had hidden his true self. The Wizard had discovered that Andrew had been an instructor at a university, where he’d taught the mental sciences. If anyone could help Sir Steven, it would be Andrew…unless he didn’t feel capable of it, and Ianto didn’t doubt that Andrew would be able to give some sort of referral, even though he’d been a hermit for years.

Honestly, Ianto had been impressed with the man, and that was before the curse was lifted. Andrew had been awkward and uncertain, but he’d carried that curse the best he could.

“Even if this isn’t the near-mythical Paladin of the Western Lands,” and Ianto didn’t really doubt the man’s identity, but stranger things had certainly happened, “he needs to get the best help we can offer.”

“He does.” Pepper had that look on her face that Ianto knew meant that she was taking on this man as a personal ‘project’. He’d recently seen that same expression when she’d started making hints about Ianto taking on a Novice…so she was now dedicated to doing whatever she could to help.

Ianto said he goodbyes, then deactivated the mirror, stepping away from the plain, silver frame. He sighed, not able to stop the tiny smile from curling his lips. The day he’d taken Pepper as a Novice was one he would never regret. She was almost like a daughter to him, and only meant the best for him. She was now dedicated to doing whatever she could to help.

Not that he didn’t blame them. It was hard for them to grow older, and for Ianto to stay the same. At least, Eirlys was managing to keep her own children close to their grandparents.

It hadn’t even been quite a hundred years yet, and the Wizard could completely sympathize with his husband, who’d been losing people for over a thousand.

“Sounds like Pepper has things well in hand,” Jack’s voice interrupted his thoughts.

Ianto turned, the tiny smile morphing into one that reached his eyes. “And you doubted?” he teased
“Oh, hells no,” Jack denied. “That woman is as formidable as our Toshiko.”

This was quite true. Once Pepper put her mind to something, it was a done deal. Which meant that he’d better be making arrangements for Pietro Maximoff to become his Novice.

Really, Ianto should have known better. This was Pepper Potts he was thinking of. If she hadn’t been one of the more powerful Cardinal Wizards in the world, Ianto had no doubt that she could have been anything she wanted. The Order was damned lucky to have her.

“I suppose it’s a good thing I got that roast at the market yesterday,” Jack went on. “It’s large enough for at least ten.”

“And we’re only having seven,” Ianto teased right back.

“This thing keeps getting bigger and bigger.”

“Do we have enough pies?” Jack could certainly cook, but he could bake like a dream, especially pies and cakes.

Jack rolled his eyes. “Do you doubt?” he snarked, tossing Ianto’s words right back at him.

That had the Wizard laughing. “Never.” He stepped forward, pressing a kiss to Jack’s lips.

Jack took the opportunity presented to deepen it. Ianto could taste the Deep Ways on his husband’s tongue as it tangled around his own, making his own magic spark in response. Jack might not have been a Wizard, but he was still a magical being, the Deathless, made immortal by such an enormous infusion of the Deep Ways that it was nearly an unlimited supply. One day, it would run out, and on that day Ianto would sever his own connection to it, letting himself follow the man he loved beyond reason into death.

Even as Jack was doing his best to distract him, Ianto was making a mental note to, someday, let Phil know how to do that himself. He had no doubt that his Void Wizard counterpart would want to do that very thing one day, when it became too difficult for him to go on.

With a regretful sigh, Ianto pulled away, shifting slightly to make his trousers just a little more comfortable. “I have a lot to do before everyone starts to arrive…”

Jack’s smirk made him want to kiss it off…and then get down on his knees in order to lavish attention on another part of his husband’s anatomy. “We have plenty of time. I don’t have to put the vegetables in to cook until about half an hour before everyone begins to arrive.”

Alright, he had a point.

Ianto gave Jack a smirk of his own, grabbed the other man’s hand, and pulled him toward the bedroom, Jack laughing the entire way.
Chapter 9

Daisy was walking up toward Grand Master Ianto’s house when she saw the unmistakable flair of a Teleport spell at the home’s front door, fading away to reveal Grand Master Stephen Strange, that weird cloak of his fluttering despite the fact that there wasn’t any sort of breeze. The Great Wizard’s dragon was curled about the man’s shoulders, like an emerald green serpent. The young Wizard hadn’t ever seen a dragon without wings before, and she was fascinated by it.

Skye, sensing her curiosity, distracted Daisy with a sharp nip to her ear. Daisy yelped, brushing her dragons’ head away, mentally chiding her for the slight pain it has caused.

Skye wasn’t at all apologetic. Gods, sometimes the dragon could be downright jealous. Daisy had no idea where she’d got that from.

When her Dad had called to her over her speaking stone, to inform her of the dinner at the Grand Master’s home, Daisy had been excited. Maybe this meant she was going to be let in on what was going on? Was this her chance to get a place on the inside of their plans? She certainly hoped so, because there was no way she was going to be sitting on her hands while everyone else got to fight Hydra. She’d been kidnapped, after all, and her Dad killed. It was impossible to keep her out of it now.

Dad had made it clear that only Daisy had been invited. That had cause a minor uproar among her friends, especially Wanda and Pietro, who felt they had a place in proceedings as well. Daisy couldn’t blame them; it had been her Dad who’d ended up saving the twins, and they both felt beholden to him for that. Already they were proving to be as loyal as anyone else Daisy had ever met, and she could appreciate that sort of loyalty, especially when it came to her Dad.

Daisy felt exactly the same way. Loyal, not beholden. Although, there was a small part of her that would feel beholden for him finding her in that alley and taking her in, adopting her as his own.

Back before she’d started at the school, Daisy had once wondered about her biological parents, if they were still alive or if they were dead. Why they’d abandoned her at that first orphanage, and had never come for her. She’d thought about finding them, if just to yell at them and to show them just what they’d give up, but she’d grown out of that fairly quickly. She had a father, one that loved her no matter what, and would never have even dreamed of giving her up. He’d changed his life in order to give her everything he’d never had as a child, and there was no way Daisy could love him any more than she already did.

Trip, the calm guy he was, got everyone settled down by pointing out to them that Daisy would share whatever she found out with them, and that all of them descending onto Grand Master Ianto’s place was just plain rude…and they’d already done that anyway, so Grand Master Ianto knew they all wanted to be involved. Having the group of them all over for dinner was just too much, and that they should all be patient.

Really, if Daisy wasn’t already dating Lincoln she’d seriously consider asking Trip out. And wouldn’t that just fry the brains of all those Great Wizards who thought Cardinals and Voids shouldn’t be getting along!

Like it wasn’t already, what with Trip being Daisy’s friend.
She just didn’t get it. Why shouldn’t she be friends with whoever she liked? Yes, she knew the rhetoric about how the Cardinals and Voids were being all sacrilegious with the Deep Ways and the Void, but they just had no clue whatsoever. They didn’t know what it was like, to be connected to the Deep Ways like she was. It was like having another internal organ, or something flowing through her veins along with her blood, and separating it from her would have been impossible. There was no way to just shut off such a connection. The Greats were nuts.

From what she’d heard of Grand Master Stephen, he pretty much agreed with her.

The Wizard’s dragon noticed her first; it chirped, bringing Grand Master Stephen’s attention to her. Daisy kept walking toward him, not at all uncomfortable approaching one of the most powerful Great Wizards in the world…especially with that smile he was giving her, one that said he was happy to see her.

“Novice Daisy,” he greeted her warmly. “I take it, you’ve been invited as well?”

“Dad called me and asked me to come.”

The man was handsome, she couldn’t deny that. His dark hair had just a little bit of gray in it, and she couldn’t make up her mind just who pulled off that sort of beard better: Baron Tony or the Grand Master. Comparing was probably a pretty bad idea. Daisy needed to stop that.

“Excellent,” Grand Master Stephen said, surprising her a little. She hadn’t expected her welcome to be so…nice, especially since she was still technically a child. “Let’s announce our arrival, shall we?”

With that, he turned and knocked on the door. It opened within seconds, revealing Ianto, dressed a little less casually than he’d been earlier in the day, black trousers and waistcoat against a deep red shirt. He gave them both a smile. “Please, come in,” he invited, stepping aside. The pair of them entered the foyer. “Myfanwy is in the front room, already anticipating the dragon pile.” He laughed. “I’m sure Skye and Agamotto would be very warmly greeted.”

Grand Master Stephen’s dragon – and what sort of name was Agamotto, anyway? – instantly made an inquisitive chirp, then made his way down his Wizard’s body – with help from the cloak, honestly! – and then slithered his way into the indicated room. Skye hopped off Daisy’s shoulder and took off after the other dragon, and Daisy couldn’t help but giggle at it. Dragons did love their dragon piles.

Ianto ushered them into the sitting room. “Besides,” he admitted as he offered them seats, “this means the dragons won’t be attacking the Elves for attention, if they’re already occupied. Can I get either of you something? Coffee? Tea?”

Grand Master Stephen gave him an arched eyebrow. “You think we’re going to accept anything other than coffee?”

That had the Cardinal Grand Master chuckling. “I had to offer.”

Daisy was a little confused. Yes, she’d had coffee before, since her Dad enjoyed a good cup or three in the mornings, but she didn’t quite understand the big deal Grand Master Stephen was making it. Coffee was coffee, and she would have been tempted to ask for something else if it hadn’t been for his reaction.

“Daisy,” Ianto addressed her, “would you like something other than coffee?”

“I wouldn’t dream of it, not after that.”
Grand Master Stephen leaned toward her a little, as if he was about to share a confidence. “You haven’t had coffee until you’ve had some of Ianto’s own brew. It will ruin you for anything else.” With that, he flicked his fingers and the cloak was hovering off his shoulders and floating over to a hall tree that was in the corner, settling itself on one of the fancy brass hooks. There was already a cloak there, this one a rich blue-gray.

Daisy tried very hard not to boggle, but knew she’d failed when the Great Grand Master winked at her. “The Cloak of Levitation gets bored with all the talking, and sometimes just likes to hang around. Besides, I think it likes Jack’s cloak.”

“It’s the pheromones,” Ianto replied, handing them each a cup. “I don’t know how you like yours, Daisy, but there’s cream and sugar over on the credenza if you want it.”

Daisy carried her coffee over to the credenza, where Ianto had been preparing their cups. On it was the cream and sugar, and she fixed hers the way she did at home, with a healthy dollop of cream and about half a teaspoon of sugar.

“Pheromones?” she had to ask, as she took her first sip.

And promptly closed her eyes in pleasure.

“This isn’t a thing like the coffee Andrew makes,” she exclaimed. “What do you do…use your magic?” She was teasing, because she couldn’t taste any sort of magic on her tongue as she drank.

“Ianto’s coffee magic,” Jack confirmed, coming into the sitting room. He was dressed in tan trousers and a dark blue shirt, the sleeves rolled up to reveal well-muscled forearms. “He denies it, but I know it’s some sort of charm he uses when he brews it.”

Ianto rolled his eyes at his husband, and refused to rise to the teasing.

“As for pheromones,” Jack continued, “it just means I smell good.”

“Jack was originally from a place called Boeshane,” Ianto explained.

“It no longer exists.”

Daisy couldn’t help but be sad at Jack’s words. To have outlived your family was bad enough…but to have outlived your own people, that was horrible.

She took another sip of the awesome coffee in order to hide her sympathy for the Deathless.

Jack noticed, though, and gave her a nod in thanks.

“All Boekind had natural pheromones,” Ianto went on, giving his husband a soft, caring look as he headed back to the credenza in order to prepare another cup, “it meant they smelled really good to potential mates. All of Jack’s clothing are saturated with them, but his cloak is a hundred times worse…or better, as the case may be.”

He turned back, handing Jack his own cup. Daisy didn’t miss how their fingers brushed as he passed it over.

It really was sweet. Daisy hoped she found someone like that someday…if she hadn’t already. She and Lincoln were very new, so only time would tell.

Gods, she hoped her Dad would find that sort of relationship with Clint. The young Wizard really
liked Clint and wanted him to hang around. He’d be really good for her Dad, who really spent far too much time alone.

“I see two of your guests have arrived already.”

Daisy turned. The speaker was Toshiko Sato, who she met earlier in the day.

The Elf was a little shorter than Daisy herself, but there wasn’t a doubt in the young woman’s mind that she could kick just as much ass as Melinda could. She had that far Eastern cast to her face that Shield Keep’s Steward did, only there were some pretty big differences, which made Daisy guess that the Elf was from another country than Melinda was. Dark hair hung down to her shoulders, and she had a bright smile on her face that made her dark eyes sparkle.

She was dressed all in shades of green; the dress was fancy without getting in the way if she had to spring into action; Daisy felt just a little underdressed in her skirt and sweater, but Dad had assured her it wasn’t in away way a formal dinner.

Before Ianto could introduce her to everyone else, a knock came from the front door. “That’s going to be Phil and Clint,” Ianto said. “I’ll be right back, then we can perform some introductions.” He walked by the Elven woman, touching her on the shoulder as he passed.

It was only moments before Dad and Clint made their way into the room. There was something about her Dad that Daisy couldn’t help but notice, but she couldn’t put her finger on what it was. He seemed… relaxed. No, he was at peace.

She’d seen so many of her Dad’s moods over the years. Daisy could easily read him now, could tell when he was mad, or stressed, or please…literally dozens of emotions that he’d displayed almost from the day they’d met. But this…this was something very different. It was almost as if he’d gained something he’d lost, and no one had noticed it was gone until it had been returned. And Daisy had no doubt that it was down to Clint Barton.

There was only one thing she could do.

She stalked right up to the Elven archer and hugged the stuffing out of him.

Clint made this really cute ‘eep’ sound as she threw her arms around him, holding on so tightly there was a part of her wondering if the metal gauntlets she was wearing weren’t digging into his back. It took him a couple of heartbeats for his arms to come up around her, but his hug was tentative, almost as if he was afraid of how she would react to him returning the favor.

“Thank you,” she whispered into his rather muscular chest.

“Oh…” that single sound was so very confused.

Daisy decided to put him out of his misery. “Thank you for loving my Dad.”

With that, Clint relaxed, embracing her a little more easily. “Actually, I should be thanking him for loving me.”

The young Wizard pulled back a little, in order to look him in the eyes. They were blue, with bits of green and brown in them, so soft and friendly and happy. She couldn’t help but smile. “Yeah, well… if you hurt him, I reserve the right to curse you horrifically.”

“Daisy,” her Dad chided softly.
“Nope, Phil,” Clint said, “it’s only fair. Besides, I’d let her, because I’d deserve it if I did hurt you.”

“Then we understand each other.”

“Indeed we do, Daisy Coulson. Indeed we do.”

“Well,” Jack said, obviously going for sarcasm, “while this is all nice and everything, dinner’s getting cold, and I slaved in the kitchen all day cooking.”

“It was more like a couple of hours,” Ianto corrected, giving his husband a fond eye roll. “And he was distracted at some point and not actually doing any work in the kitchen.”

Daisy felt herself blushing a little when she figured out what he was talking about.

Oh Gods…this meant her Dad would be having sex on a regular basis now. It wasn’t something she’d ever considered thinking about. It was just wrong knowing that her parent did that sort of thing. She’d probably have to be careful now about moving around the Keep at all hours. There wasn’t any telling what she might run into from now on.

The Elven woman snorted. “Why am I not surprised?”

Ianto laughed. “Everyone, this is Lady Toshiko Sato, of the Nippon Enclave.” He went around the room, introducing everyone. “She’s as close to me as a sister would be, and she’s been with Jack’s team for over a century.”

Clint was nodding. Daisy got the impression that he’d heard of this Elven warrior before, and was putting her face to the name.

She stepped away, turning to give her father his own hug. He kept his arm around her even when the hug was over, which was nice. He gave the best hugs, even though she was just a tad grossed out by the idea that her Dad was…yeah, not going there.

“Let’s eat,” Ianto invited, “and then we can get down to business.”
Chapter 10

After dinner, Ianto took Phil and Grand Master Stephen – *call me Stephen, please* – down to his casting chamber, citing security concerns and wanting as much privacy as possible for their discussion.

If Phil had thought that his casting chamber was well warded, his precautions were *nothing* on the Cardinal Grand Master’s.

He couldn’t help the little shiver as he crossed the threshold to the stairs leading downward, the caress of the Deep Ways-laden magic that protected Ianto’s sanctum from unwanted visitors. It wasn’t anything he couldn’t handle, but it was still just a little uncomfortable at first. He reached to his side, only to remember that Lola was with the other dragons, in the front room cuddled up in their dragon pile. Mistress Suzie had once told him that dragons were born in creches; she’d once seen the main creche in Genosha, and the cuddle piles were something that dragons were practically birthed into. The Mother Dragon, the Queen of Air and Fire, would keep her newborn children in such groups, for their comfort, so when they left the creche to find their Wizard they already had the behavior taught to them. It made sense to Phil, now that he considered the story.

Not for the first time, he wished that his former teaching Master had lived long enough to see him live up to the potential she’d seen in him.

Like the majority of casting chambers, Ianto’s was underground, at the bottom of a tight spiral staircase that had been carved into the bedrock of Gateway. It was a large room, round, with the plinth in the center where the traditional Wizard’s *gramariya* would sit when Ianto was using it for his spells. Tables and shelves lined the chamber, holding various books, scrolls, and artifacts; one of the tables held potion-making paraphernalia; another had a single map unrolled upon it, the edges held down by three paperweights made from various materials and the fourth corner by a plain wooden box, its lid closed.

Off to one side, there was a door, made of plain wood, and Ianto urged them toward it. “I had another study dug out when I had this place excavated,” Ianto explained as he pulled the door open and ushered them both inside. “This is where I do my work with unknown artifacts.”

The room beyond was smaller than the Grand Master’s study upstairs, although not by much. Instead of a traditional desk, there was a raised workbench with a hinged top in one corner, a tall stool tucked under it, one glowglobe in a wall sconce over it, and another in a lamp that was clamped onto the side of the table. Resting on the top were several pairs of white cotton gloves, magnifiers, and a couple of scrolls that looked as if Ianto had been translating, judging from the spectacles that practically sparked with magic resting nearby, along with a ream of paper and various writing implements in a cup, ready for use.

Phil knew about the magical spectacles that the Grand Master owned, the ones that would translate any language. In a deep part inside him, he almost coveted those spectacles, although he was fairly sure their use would be beyond him. Ianto Jones’ original magical power had been as a Catalyst: someone who could work out just what a magical item could do and then be able to use it…before he’d been revealed as the first Cardinal Wizard born in about a thousand years.
It was a fascinating power, along with the Grand Master’s ability to unpick spells, no matter how they were cast. It made him a first-rate curse breaker, as evidenced by Andrew and his return to human.

Truly, Ianto Jones was the most powerful of them all. That included Phil himself, and he could wrestle a Void Point into submission. And he’d argue with anyone who disputed that fact.

There were a couple of chairs in the room as well, but Phil got the impression that Ianto had brought them in for them to use before their arrival. They were positioned opposite what resembled some sort of plain wooden coffin, flat-topped, with two age-stained brass handles on each side, one set at the front and the second at the back. It was resting on a wooden trestle, keeping it off the stone floor.

It bothered Phil to look at it.

Judging from the expression on Stephen’s face, it did the same to him. “What is that?” the Great Grand Master demanded, taking one of the chairs and turning it away from facing the casket.

“That was found in the mansion Hydra was using as a base, and was just delivered about half an hour ago” Ianto explained. He rested a hand on it, and Phil had to wonder just how he was doing that, because that thing wasn’t any sort of magic that the Void Wizard knew. It seemed to have been made up of all three orders, which should have been impossible as Cardinal and Void magicks didn’t like to cooperate.

And yet, there they were. Whoever had enchanted that casket had been extremely powerful, and had had the cooperation of all three Orders to do whatever it was they’d done.

“This,” Ianto continued, “is a Zero Cabinet.”

Phil felt his jaw drop in surprise.

A Zero Cabinet was…nothing. Whatever was placed within it, would never wither, nor age, nor decay. It held back entropy in a way that should have been impossible, and yet there it was…sitting on that frame, denying Phil’s certain knowledge that such a thing couldn’t possibly exist.

“I thought they were myths,” Stephen exclaimed.

As had Phil, and he said so.

“I’ve only heard of one before finding this,” the Cardinal Grand Master answered, “and that had been discovered in a cave, of all places, on Argentyn Devastal…by Harold Saxon.”

Before Phil had become the Dark One and had started his reign of terror, Void Master Harold Saxon had been the standard by which every Wizard with questionable morals had been measured. Harold Saxon had attempted to release the Silver Devastation upon the world, and had very nearly succeeded. He’d been stopped, no one really knows how it happened as the story had long been kept a secret from only a select few, for reasons Phil didn’t know.

Harold Saxon had been mad. And he’d apparently been able to find a mythical artifact in a cave.

“Do we know who made this one?” Phil had to ask, it was a question that needed to be answered. If it had been one of the Wizards of Hydra…

“No idea,” Ianto replied, “only that it’s very old. I’ve examined it as best I could, and I wouldn’t hesitate to put its age at over two thousand years old.”
“So,” Stephen sighed, “before magic was locked away.”

Phil nodded. “That makes sense. I sincerely doubt such a thing could have been enchanted in this day and age.”

“Phil’s right,” Stephen agreed. “Did you find anything interesting about it?”

“I did.” Ianto walked over to the workbench, lifting the lid and bringing out a white cloth. He gravely passed it to Phil, who gently unwrapped the cloth, not wanting to touch whatever it was it held.

It was a hair.

A long, brown hair.

“Someone was kept in that thing?” he demanded. He was outraged that anyone would have stooped to holding another person prisoner within a Zero Cabinet.

How long had whoever it was been preserved within? It could have been centuries, and they would have been exactly the same coming out as going in. They wouldn’t have even dreamed, only held in stasis until the casket was opened once more.

“That’s what it looked like,” Ianto confirmed. He looked as angry as Phil felt.

As did Stephen. “And we thought Hydra was bad before…do we have any idea who it might have been?”

Phil cast his mind back to walking into the Hydra mansion, attempting to recall just who he’d seen in that place that had long, straight hair that dark.

He immediately discarded the Master Wizards and their Novices. None of them had the hair that matched the strand in Phil’s hand. That left only one person.

“The Winter Knight,” he found himself speaking before he even realized he’d said anything.

“He had hair like that?” Ianto confirmed.

“He did. Now, I didn’t get a look at him. You’d have to ask either Clint or Daisy about it. But, Clint did describe him to me, and it matches.” He wrapped the hair back up in its cloth, handing it back to the Cardinal Grand Master.

“I was thinking that may be the case.” Ianto accepted the cloth bundle back.

“Can we use that hair to Scry for him?” Stephen inquired.

Ianto smiled. “We can. Something this connected to the man should be able to find him easily.”

Phil thought of the worktable out in the casting chamber with the map already prepared, and figured out that Ianto had already planned on it. He just had to wonder why it had taken the man this long to go hunting for the Winter Knight?

Something must have shown in his face – he was going to have to work on getting his inscrutableness back, apparently – because Ianto said, “I only found the hair a few minutes before you both arrived. I also wanted to get some sort of confirmation on who it might have belonged to.” He smiled slightly. “I’d actually summoned you here to talk about plans to dig Hydra out of Void Order. This just sidetracked me a little.”
“It’s a damned good reason to be sidetracked.” Stephen stood, still not looking directly at the Zero Cabinet. “Although, this begs the question…or two, at that: one, just who is the Winter Knight? And two: how long has he been in Hydra hands, if indeed Hydra’s been around since the Century War?”

They’d explained what the Avatar of Gateway had said about Hydra not being a new organization. However, Phil hadn’t heard of them until that day at Shield Keep, when John Garrett had approached him about joining their cabal…and the Void Wizard prided himself on knowing about that era, if only because of his respect and regard for Sir Steven Rogers.

This was something they’d need to ask the man when he finally awakened.

“And three,” Phil said softly, “just how did Hydra get its hands on this thing?” He motioned toward the Cabinet.

“I suggest we find him and ask,” Ianto said. He led the way out of the study and back into the casting chamber, toward the table that was already set up with a map of the Western Lands, specifically the western edge of the country.

Phil nodded at that, because that was where the Winter Knight had last been seen.

He hoped this worked. Taking the Winter Knight out of play – although he’d seemed to have broken from his Hydra masters – would be a coup they couldn’t afford to let get away.

He’d never been much of a scryer, so watching the Grand Master prepare the crystal pendulum was a rare treat. Phil took careful note of the spells involved, vowing to try it again now that he’d watched Ianto do it, thinking this way was more elegant and less messy than what Phil had once attempted. That had led to a mess and the need to replace the workbench he’d been using.

The hair was effortlessly bound to the pendulum that Ianto had brought out of the wooden box; Phil had gotten a glimpse inside, and noticed that there were easily half a dozen more within.

“I can’t believe you actually stalked Jack with one of these,” Stephen laughed, once the crystal was ready.

“Excuse me?” Phil asked, confused.

“When we were looking for Daisy, Ianto here Scryed for her, using one of those pendula with a thread from a shirt she owned.” Stephen’s dark eyes were highly amused. “It was at that time we discovered that Ianto not only magically stalked his husband when they were separated, but had crystals made up for everyone he’d ever known that he was close to.”

Ianto didn’t look at all apologetic for it. “I like to know where my loved ones are.”

Phil couldn’t help but laugh. “Now, I want to make one up for Daisy so I’ll always be able to find her.” And Clint, as well, but for some reason he didn’t want to admit that aloud. Everyone might know they were together now, but the Void Wizard didn’t want to admit to anyone else just how he felt about the Elf.

It wasn’t because he was ashamed or anything. However, what he and Clint had was personal, and private, and he didn’t want to share it with anyone.

It was fine for them to know they were lovers. Not that Phil loved him. Not yet, anyway. Even though he did, very much. He wasn’t ready for it to be public knowledge just yet.
Although, from Daisy’s greeting to the Elf when they’d arrived, it was obvious she’d already guessed how much he was feeling for Clint.

From the expression Ianto was aiming in his direction, he knew exactly what Phil was thinking and thought it was ridiculous to hide such a thing.

Perhaps he should rethink this.

Phil shook his head. He needed to concentrate on what was going on now, and worry about how much everyone had assumed about his relationship with Clint later. It really wasn’t anyone else’s business, but it was most likely too late for that.

Ianto had the crystal dangling over the map, holding the pendulum lightly by the large O-ring that was at the end of the silver chain. Phil could feel the magic being evoked, and as he watched the crystal tugged forward, to land onto the map.

On the city of Golden Gate.

Right where the Hydra base had been.

The Winter Knight hadn’t moved far from the area.

“Can we get that any closer?” Phil asked, leaning over the map. Golden Gate was north of Barony Ferrous but Phil hadn’t ever been there. It hadn’t been high on his list of priorities as the Dark One, being a city larger than what he and Marcus would have normally targeted, and afterward he’d stayed at home, only visiting Ferrous when he’d have meetings with Pepper. He did know it was a trading hub with one of the best seaports on the west coast, but beyond that…

“I’ll need to find a map of Golden Gate,” Ianto said, deactivating the magic and pulling the crystal away. “I’m not sure if I have one…let me check.”

He put the crystal onto the closed lid of the box, and then went to one of the shelves, where he retrieved a scroll tube. Phil could sense the magic in the tube, and from the smile on Stephen’s face he knew what that magic was. It wasn’t Cardinal or Void, that the Wizard could tell.

“If we find exactly where the Winter Knight is,” Stephen said, as Ianto ran his wand over the tube, using the tip to flip open the end, “we’ll need to figure out who to send after him.”

The Void Wizard immediately knew he’d be going. He wanted to see this through. The Winter Knight might have escaped his controllers, but he’d manhandled his daughter. He couldn’t allow that to stand.

“No, Phil,” Stephen said softly. He rested a hand on the Void Wizard’s shoulder. “I know what you’re thinking; it’s written all over your face. But, we need you here, to help root out Hydra from Void Order. We’ll need to figure something else out, but you can’t go haring off after the Winter Knight just because of what occurred with Hydra.”

“Stephen’s correct,” Ianto added. He must have found the proper map, judging from the one he was holding in his hand. “You’re going to be busy enough here.”

“Damnit,” he swore. They were right. Of course they were. Hunting the Winter Knight wasn’t in his future, and he knew that.

“Let’s find him first,” the Cardinal Wizard urged, “and then we can decide.”
With those words, he was laying the map out on the table, using the paperweights to keep the edges from curling up. As Phil watched, he stuffed far too many maps back into the tube, figuring out that it had been enchanted with a Dimensional Expansion spell. Neat. He wanted that spell.

“Ianto’s already promised me a copy.” Stephen said, when Phil said exactly that. “I’m sure he wouldn’t mind getting you one as well.”

“Not at all,” Ianto said serenely. Once again, he held the crystal over this map, calling upon the magic to Scry for the Winter Knight.

It landed.
Chapter 11

Clint was a little disappointed that he wasn’t going to be in the meeting with Phil and the other Grand Masters, but he certainly understood why he wasn’t invited. They had magical business to take care of, and despite his own senses the Elf really knew very little about it. They’d need to discuss Guild issues, as well, and as he wasn’t a member he really didn’t need to know…unless Phil decided to confide in him. One thing Clint had come to learn, was that there were things he was good at, and things he wasn’t, and running an entire order of Wizards didn’t even enter into his many talents. The best thing he could do was support his lover, and help out if asked. That meant he’d be left out of stuff, and it wasn’t personal, so Clint didn’t let it bother him. He’d just leave Phil to it.

Still, that left him with Jack, Daisy, and Toshiko Sato.

Ianto had mentioned Toshiko back at Shield Keep, when the archer had been having some doubts about his relationship with Phil. Not wanting to put the man he loved through the pain of eventually losing him, knowing that Phil would potentially live forever. He was destined to lose everyone, and Clint would have given anything to keep that from happening.

Toshiko had been the example that Ianto had used to get Clint to realize that he needed to seize what he wanted with Phil with both hands and hold on for as long as he possibly could. Toshiko, being an Elf, had an extended lifespan, and yet she’d taken a human husband and had had children with him. She’d taken the chance, and had lived a wonderful life that she didn’t regret, according to Ianto. Yes, it had hurt her badly when Tommy had eventually passed, but she’d considered it worth it.

Clint certainly hoped that Phil would consider it worth it, as well.

“I wanted to talk to you,” Toshiko said, as the four of them got comfortable in the sitting room with coffee. The sun was still bright through the curtains, but it would be going down, and night was approaching. This far north, daytime was a little shorter, and even though it was spring it wouldn’t be long before it was full dark.

At least he and Phil wouldn’t be riding horses in order to get home.

Home.

Shield Keep was home now.

Wait until he told Natasha. She was going to either going to kiss him, or slap him. Probably both.

Clint took a sip of the excellent coffee he’d been given. Apparently, Ianto had made it, and it was awesome. Possibly the best he’d ever had. He wondered if he could sneak one of Phil’s Teleport artifacts and show up at the house every morning for a cup or three.

He nodded at her to continue, not wanting to let his mind wander with plots to have this good stuff every single day. And not have Andrew find out about it.

“I was talking to Ianto earlier,” the Elven woman said, “and he agrees that we should probably put out the word with the various teams of mercenaries to see if they can sniff out any word of Hydra as well.”
Clint considered. “That’s not a bad idea, although I can tell you that my partner, Natasha, will be doing the same thing.” Natasha had contacts that even Clint didn’t know of, and they’d been living out of each other’s pockets for years.

“It’s been a little while since I’ve been a member of the Mercenary Guild, really ever since Jack’s team was chartered by the Crown,” the other Elf admitted. “I do have quite a few people I can approach, but I’m guessing you’re a lot more in touch than I am at this point. And I didn’t know about your partner.” She cast a pointed glance at Jack, who raised his hands in surrender.

“Hey, I would have said something if I’d known you and Ianto had talked about it,” he defended himself. “By the way, Clint’s partner is the Widow, which even I didn’t know all that much about.”

Toshiko nodded. “Ianto informed me.” She narrowed her eyes at Clint. “Then, that would make you the Hawk.”

“Guilty as charged.” There wasn’t any reason to deny it, since he’d long ago turned over a new leaf.

“I understand congratulations are in order for what you all did at Buda-Pest.”

Honestly, he really didn’t think there was anything to be impressed with, but he let it slide. He and the others had only done what had needed to be done. Children should never be treated in that way; he should know, having had an asshole father who’d thought he hadn’t deserved what he’d gotten, and had taken it out on him, his mother, and his brother.

Barney had turned into his own, different, brand of asshole. But that was beside the point.

“To be fair,” he said, “we don’t have that sort of Guild in the Western Lands.” The Guild system only existed within the United Kingdom…except for the whole Wizard thing, which had grown up out of the Guild system that Toshiko was familiar with. “So there’s no central governing body we could go to, in order to get the word out.”

Toshiko swore softly. “I didn’t even think of that.”

Clint shrugged. He could understand it, since the team she worked with really didn’t come to his side of the ocean all that often…if at all.

“Still,” Jack stepped in, “there are networks you may be able to touch upon, Clint, to get us some leads on Hydra.”

“Look, you really want Nat for that. She’s the spy of our team. I know for a fact that she’s pulling on every thread in her web of contacts now, trying to find any sort of whisper on Hydra.” He hadn’t heard from her in days, but that wasn’t unusual. He wouldn’t worry until it’d been weeks and Nick came calling. “Sure, ask whoever you want here in the United Kingdom, but the Widow will have things covered at home. I’m just pretty sure I’m not going to be able to help out much.”

Toshiko looked a little disappointed, which Clint frankly felt unapologetic for. He knew what his strengths were, and what she was suggesting wasn’t all that much in his wheelhouse. Add to that fact that he really didn’t have any sort of close contact in this country…yeah, he was pretty useless in that regard.

“Do you think we should be looking to hear from your partner soon?” Jack inquired, changing the subject slightly.

“No idea.” Clint shrugged.
“Yes, I figured that was what you’d say.” Jack didn’t look bothered by Clint’s admission, which the Elf thought was pretty good of him.

“What are we going to do once we get a lead?” Daisy wanted to know. She looked as if she wanted to be doing something, and Clint could totally understand.

Usually, Clint was the one who wanted to be out and working on the problem, but for some reason he was content to let Natasha do the ‘heavy lifting’ on this one. Maybe it was because he was with Phil, and his future wasn’t going to be doing work for Nick anymore. He was settling down, with the man he’d loved for years and the daughter he wanted to get to know. The traveling life was over for him now, and for the first time since he’d left the traveling show he and Barney had joined as children he wanted to put down roots.

Hm…well, that was an idea…

“What are you thinking?” Jack asked, obviously noticing something in Clint’s expression that he was curious about.

Clint waved the Deathless off. “It’s a bad idea.” Now that he’d thought of it, he realized he didn’t want to do it.

“Nothing at this point is a bad idea until it doesn’t work.”

Alright, the man had a point.

“It’s just that there are other groups out there besides mercenaries…like the traveling shows. I have… certain contacts among them, we could spread the word that way, too.”

He’d expected to be dismissed, but he hadn’t expected for Jack to go pale.

“What is it?” Toshiko asked worriedly.

Jack shook his head. “It’s nothing.”

“It was obviously something.” She glared at him. “Spill it, Jack.”

He huffed, rolling his eyes. “Fine. I…had a bad experience with a traveling show, once. They called themselves the Night Travelers, and while I never really discovered what they were up to, rumors had it they were responsible for deaths and disappearances all throughout the United Kingdom and Albion.”

“Well, shit.” Clint couldn’t help cursing about that.

The Night Travelers were the boogeymen of the traveling shows. No one wanted to run into them, because Jack was right…death followed them, and the more superstitious of the villages would run the show he’d been in off when they’d get too close. No one had heard of them in centuries, but that didn’t matter…their reputation was still out there, possibly blown up beyond the truth, but even if half of what was said was true then the Night Travelers were just plain evil.

“Yes, that wasn’t us,” the archer denied. “I was with Carson’s with my brother. It’s where I earned my nickname…well, they called me Hawkeye, the World’s Greatest Marksman back then; I shortened it to Hawk when I left.” There was a lot more to that story than that, but Clint wasn’t about to share. He didn’t want to depress anyone. “But we still heard all sorts of stories about the Night Travelers, and none of them were good. I can understand why you’d be bothered by my suggestion.”
“No, you’re right,” Jack sighed. “Not all the traveling shows are the Night Travelers, and I shouldn’t tar them all with the same brush. You think you can find one of your contacts and get the word out?”

“I can try.” Contacting Barney was never the problem. It was keeping himself out of his older brother’s schemes that was the real issue.

Still, they needed to track down the members of Hydra. If spreading the news that way would do it, then that was what he’d do.

A sudden chiming noise sounded in the room. Daisy jumped, surprised, as she dug around in her pocket for something…

A speaking stone.

Clint had heard about Daisy and her friends enchanting their own stones. He thought that was amazing, that a group of students could do that without help from a Master Wizard. The Elf knew that Phil was very proud of his daughter for it, but then he was her Dad and pride was what a father should feel toward a talented child.

Not that Clint would know anything about that, since his own father had been a drunken, violent coward.

Daisy cupped the stone in her hand. It was a plain river stone, smooth from the movement of water over years, and was a dark gray. She tapped on the stone with a fingernail, cutting off the chiming sound and saying, “Hello?”

“Daisy,” the unmistakable voice of Nicholas Fury, once mercenary Marcus Johnson and now Baron Triskelia, echoed a little as it emanated from the stone, “I can’t get Phil on his own stone.”

“He’s in some sort of Grand Masters’ meeting, down in Ianto’s casting chamber.” She looked a little less surprised, but it was still there. “How did you get in touch with me? You don’t have a stone attuned to mine!”

The snort was sharp and irritated. “Don’t ask questions you don’t want to know the answer for.”

Clint wondered just which one of Daisy’s friends were carrying around a replacement stone. Because it would be just like Nick to pick a child’s pocket.

“I’ve heard from Natasha,” Nick went on. “She’s found Ward.”
Daisy couldn’t believe how angry she was at Uncle Nick’s announcement. 

Oh, not at Uncle Nick. No way would that news make her mad at him.

No, it was Grant Ward she was furious with.

Ward had been a friend. He’d been a member of their group. Daisy had liked him, and had seriously considered dating him…until he’d tried to kill Jemma and Leo.

He’d claimed the Confinement spell he’d trapped the two Elves in had been a mistake, a horrible accident. But it had taken Grand Master Ianto to unpick the spell and release Jemma and Leo, and he’d testified at the hearing that had been held at the time that there wasn’t anything accidental about that spell.

Ward had claimed up until his expulsion from school that Ianto had been wrong, that he hadn’t meant to trap the pair in a hermetically sealed Containment spell, but no one had believed him. That had been the last time Daisy had seen him…until he’d kidnapped her on behalf of Hydra, because his teaching Master, John Garrett, had been a member of the shadow cabal. Hells, he’d even tried the old accident story on her while he’d been actively holding her prisoner.

So yeah, she really hated him.

She really wanted to punch him his smug face…again. It had been gratifying the first time.

The young Wizard was gripping the speaking stone so hard that Clint had to pry her fingers apart in order to take it from her. He gave her an understanding smile in return for the stone, and she watched as he addressed Uncle Nick, asking him what was going on.

Jack and Toshiko had stood as well, grouped around Clint as if the speaking stone held the mysteries of the multiverse. Her Uncle Nick’s voice came through, and Daisy could hear his own anger over the connection.

“Widow managed to track him down in the Pleasure Dome,” he said.

Daisy had never seen the Pleasure Dome, but she’d heard of it. It was in one of the desert cities to the south and west of Triskelia, and the stories that were told about it were…well, almost unbelievable. It was said any sort of vice could be found there, if the price was paid. There was always some sort of scandal coming out of the Pleasure Dome, and if she remembered correctly hadn’t Baron Tony been the subject of one such scandal? Back before his kidnapping and all that?

“She’s got him in custody, but we’re going to need a Wizard to contain him and his dragons indefinitely.”

“I’ll get Ianto and the others,” Jack volunteered. He was out of the room like a fired arrow, leaving the three of them standing around the stone in Clint’s hand.

“Where is she taking him?” Clint demanded. “We can meet her there.”

“Gateway,” Uncle Nick answered. “She’s got that open-ended Teleport artifact she’s been using to
“She got it from a magical hoard we managed to find a couple years ago,” Clint said at Toshiko’s puzzled expression. “The majority of the artifacts went to the Wizards’ Guild, but she was given that as a reward. Can’t remember the name of the Wizard who told her what it was, though.”

Daisy knew from her Dad that, sometimes, when a bunch of artifacts was found, that there was always some sort of reward for turning it in. Mostly, it was monetary; but it looked as if the Widow had managed to convince the receiving Wizard for something a little more magically tangible. Not that she could blame her; an open Teleport spell, that allowed a person to go wherever they wanted, was a prize definitely worth having. From what she’d learned in her own studies, most Teleport spells had to have specific coordinates set within the warp and weft of their magic so, for someone non-magical to be able to use something like that…she really wanted to meet the Widow. She figured there was an awfully good chance of that, if she was bringing Ward to Gateway.

“How is the Widow keeping Ward contained?” Toshiko asked.

There was a silence from the speaking stone. “Who the fuck is this?” Nick demanded.

“I am Lady Toshiko Sato,” the female Elf answered before anyone could perform official introductions. Clint looked as if he wanted to grin at the display of rudeness returned. “Now, can you answer the question, whoever you are?”

Clint was laughing now, and Daisy couldn’t help it, either. No one ever really gave Uncle Nick the hells like that, and it was really funny. It might have been even funnier if Grant Ward wasn’t the reason for the call, but it was still hilarious.

“Lady Toshiko,” Uncle Nick actually sounded respectful, “I’m Nicholas Fury, Baron Triskelia. And, as to your question,” and there was that scorn, “the Widow has a set of enchanted manacles.”

“Vibranium?” Daisy’s own voice quivered slightly, recalling just what that metal had done to her Dad. Yes, she wanted Ward in prison, but not that way.

“No, don’t worry about that.” She could tell that Uncle Nick understood why she was asking. “These manacles don’t cut off a person’s magic, like Vibranium does. These keep their magic from actually being used. But we’re gonna need a more permanent way to keep him confined until he can be brought to trial.”

Daisy wanted to ask where Uncle Nick had gotten them from, but she had a sinking suspicion that it had been her Dad. Back at the beginning, he’d been afraid of backsliding into the Dark One’s old habits once more, so the young Wizard could see him giving Uncle Nick those manacles in order to stop him if he ever got out of control. That hadn’t happened, which was a really good thing, but she knew her father, and knew he would have done anything to keep from hurting her. Phil Coulson wouldn’t have done any such thing…but the Dark One, Daisy could see it. Or at least she could see him worrying about doing it.

Well, that was before she’d learned about Buda-Pest. Now, she understood that as bad as he’d ever gotten, her Dad would never intentionally injure a child.

“We’ll take care of that,” Ianto’s voice had them breaking out of their huddle. He, along with Grand Master Stephen and Jack…and Daisy’s Dad, who came around the group in order to put his arm around her, as if he knew she needed the comfort.
He wasn’t wrong.

It was scary how much she’d trusted Grant Ward. He’d been one of her first friends at the Wizard School, before she’d even met Jemma, Leo, and Trip. She’d been drawn to him, which should have been strange since he was studying to be a Void Wizard, her opposite. But it hadn’t been, and she’d seriously considered taking him up on the offer of a date.

But that had been before it had all gone wrong.

Daisy didn’t miss him. Not at all, not after what he’d done. If anything, she hated him more than she’d hated anyone in her life, and that included some of the orphanage workers she’d had to deal with and her own parents, who’d abandoned her when she’d been a baby.

She let herself lean against her Dad, his warmth and love protecting her. To her surprise, though, Clint tucked up against her other side, even as he was handing the speaking stone over to Ianto. As he accepted it, the Cardinal Grand Master raised an eyebrow at her, so he must have sensed her magical signature in the spells laid on it. He also looked very impressed, and Daisy found herself blushing. The thing was, she couldn’t take credit for the idea; that belonged to Lincoln, and it had been the five of them together who’d gotten together to create the stones.

“When will the Widow be here?” Ianto asked. “Do we know?”

“She should be there now,” Uncle Nick answered. “She was due to arrive at the Quorum.”

“We should head there, then,” Her Dad murmured.

“Agreed, “ Grand Master Stephen added. “We’ll need to make certain one of the subterranean cells is ready to accept him.”

“They should be, since we were expecting to put a few Hydra Wizards in them.” Ianto sounded almost gleeful.

Well, Daisy could understand it. No one liked being betrayed.

She knew the from first-hand experience.

“There’s…just one thing.”

Daisy frowned. Uncle Nick sounded…hesitant. And he never was hesitant.

“What is it, Marcus?” Phil asked.

“Ward said he’d tell us everything…”

“There’s a ‘but’ in there,” Jack noted.

“But he’d only talk to Daisy. No one else.”
“We also have a lead on the Winter Knight,” Ianto said into the silence that followed Baron Nick’s announcement.

That did what Ianto had hoped it would: it broke the sudden tension in the room. Phil had his arm around his daughter, Daisy leaning heavily into his embrace as she processed the idea of Ward’s demands on her. Clint stood by to also offer his support, which she looked very grateful for.

He could very easily recall the case of Grant Ward, the young Novice who’d attempted to commit murder when he’d cast a sealed Containment spell on two of his so-called friends. Ianto had been called in to break the spell, and he’d managed to do it before the two young Elves – Jemma Simmons and Leo Fitz – had run out of air. Ward had been cast out, his teaching Master had repudiated him, and that had seemed to be the end of it.

Until that same teaching Master, John Garrett, had ended up in Hydra, sending Grant Ward to kidnap Daisy from the school, in order to use her as leverage against Phil, to get the Void Wizard to do what they wanted him to. At that point, they’d believed that Phil was the Void opposite of Jack, which wasn’t true at all, but that hadn’t stopped them from killing Phil and expecting him to arise from the dead like the Deathless.

Instead, Phil had turned out to be Ianto’s opposite, someone to connected to the Void that it would never let him die.

He, like Ianto and like Jack, was cursed to live forever.

It was an ugly truth, one that Ianto still wasn’t quite resolved to.

Of course, neither was Jack, and he’d had a thousand years to become used to his Deathless state.

Their friend, Master John Smith, had once said that mortals were not meant for immortality. That was as true today as it had been nearly a hundred years ago when he’d stated it so baldly. It had been meant as some sort of insult to Jack, but his husband had taken the comment to heart, holding it to himself like a flower that would also never wither.

Later on, when Master John had apologized and had come to accept but Jack and Ianto for who – and what – they were, the words had become more of a talisman for both of them, and a promise…a promise never to forget their journey through eternity together.

“What sort of lead?” Baron Nick demanded.

“He’s still in the city of Golden Gate. We have a more precise location, but there’s no guarantee he won’t move. We need to send someone there now, before we lose him again.”

“I’m not gonna ask how you know that…how the hells do you know it?”

Ianto gave them all a small, sly smirk. “I used magic.”

That got him a bark from laughter from the Baron on the other end of the speaking stone. “You can be a bastard, Jones.”
“Of course I can. Now, we need to get someone to Golden Gate; someone we can trust.”

“I’ll go,” Jack volunteered.

“As will I,” Toshiko replied.

“And me,” Clint spoke up. “I owe that asshole a few good licks in.”

“Be careful, Clint,” Daisy urged. “That guy was something else.” She was pale, most likely remembering meeting the Winter Knight in person, when she was a prisoner of Hydra.

“And you be careful about Ward,” the Elf said. “He’ll try to twist you up.”

“Oh, believe me…I know. He won’t get away with it, though.” She raised her chin stubbornly, and Ianto could believe she meant every word.

Grant Ward didn’t stand a chance against her.

Phil seemed placid, but there was a troubled look in his eyes. Ianto knew what his new friend was thinking, and how could he blame the Wizard? After all, his lover just volunteered to go after a very dangerous man, one that had been under the control of Hydra and who know one knew what was capable of. Of course, he would want to go on the hunt with them.

It wasn’t like Jack going. Jack would always come back, even if he was somehow killed. Not Clint. And yet, he was willingly walking into trouble, because he was needed.

Clint was examining his lover closely. “Phil, you’re not thinking of coming along.”

“Well, as matter of fact…”

The Elf’s examination turned fond. “You know you’re needed here. There’s whatever you’re planning on doing to clean up Void Order. Also, you need to be here for Daisy. Going halfway across the world on a hunt that might end up fruitless is a waste of your time.”

The Void Wizard looked as if he wanted to argue, but instead he nodded. “You’re right. That still doesn’t stop me from wanting to go with you.”

Ianto could see the bond that was growing between the two men. Oh, it wasn’t just physical; but magical as well, a connection between the two that would only grow with time and closeness. It was almost like what was between himself and Jack, and he had to wonder where it had come from. Was the Void giving Phil a consolation prize for making him immortal? What would that mean, later on in years?

He wanted to examine it a little closer, but didn’t. He’d have time to do so later, when there wasn’t the risk of losing the Winter Knight once more.

“Here.” He handed his husband a leather bangle, much like an archery wrist guard, only a looser fit. Jack had long given up the bow, when Ianto had proved to be more proficient at its use than he was. It had been the first weapon he’d taken up, Toshiko teaching him before Jack had bought him his first sword…and Suzie had been his sword master.

That had been before he’d become a powerful Wizard. But Ianto had kept up with his weapons training, because there was never telling if he might, someday, lose access to his magic for some reason, and he didn’t want to be defenseless.
“This will take you to the coordinates for the Winter Knight,” he explained. “You’d best hurry, though, before he leaves the area.”

Clint left the room, handing the speaking stone on to Phil, and Ianto knew he was going to get the weapons he’d left in the foyer. Toshiko followed him, while Jack grabbed Ianto by the shoulders and pulled him in for a kiss. It was harsh, and concerned, and pretty much perfect. Then, he also left the room to get ready.

Ianto wished he was going as well. However, Clint had been correct: they had things they needed to do, Guild business, to root out the Hydra rot within Void Order. Because the Cardinal Wizard knew there had to be someone still left within it, someone who’d been responsible for letting Werner von Strucker into the Quorum without anyone knowing.

There was still so much to do.
Chapter Notes

Hi, everyone! Just wanted to let you all know that I won't be posting again until a week from Thursday. I'll be heading to C2E2 in Chicago, where I hope to meet Clark Gregg, Ming-Na Wen, John Barrowman (again!), and David Tennant. Then I'll be back to posting regularly when I get back.

The warehouse wasn't deserted, there were plenty of things stored within, but he hadn't seen anyone in the time he'd been hiding inside.

How long that was... he wasn't certain.

Time had no meaning. It could have been hours or weeks since he'd escaped Hydra. The warehouse was dark, and it smelled of the sea and fish and other things he couldn't identify. There was a slight chill in the air, and he pulled the stolen cloak around him as he huddled behind a stack of crates that shielded his presence from anyone who did happen to come inside.

As he sat there, he let his mind drift, strange, hazy visions floating though his brain, places and people he didn't recognize. A blond haired boy – the one he'd remembered when he'd first escaped - replaced by a blond haired man with fancy armor and a shield with a crest on it he felt he should know. A stout man with a huge ginger mustache and a sword that should have been too heavy to lift yet wasn't; a thin man with dark hair and an accent from somewhere he could have sworn he'd been before; a dark-skinned Elf with a twinkle in his eye and quick with a joke; a woman, beautiful, dark haired and armored in leather and as fierce as a storm at sea.

He knew them. But he didn't remember them.

And they were important.

He just didn't know how.

It was the blond man who seemed to be special to him. He closed his eyes, not wanting to sleep but hoping that the cutting off of any distractions would bring this man to mind. Unconsciously, he rubbed his magic arm, as if it shouldn't be there where this man was concerned, that it was something the man would have been sad about.

That last thing he wanted to do was make that man sad.

But there was no idea why.

As he attempted to remember the man, a sudden feeling of falling struck him, vertigo making him feel as if he was going to vomit. He felt himself slide down to the stone floor, curling his arms around his knees, shivering as the sensation of freezing overwhelmed him, his breathing harsh in the quiet.

He had to get himself together.
However, the memory was far too strong to break its hold on him.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he thought, *This is how I died.*

No, that wasn’t right.

But it *was.*

He jerked back into awareness by a scuffing sound of a boot against the stone of the floor. Silently, he slid the dagger – something else he’d stolen, having dumped everything including his clothes, which he’d also replaced, keeping only the arm, and he would have gotten rid of the arm as well if he could have figured out a way to remove it without killing himself – out of his boot, holding it ready in his flesh and blood fist. Eyes trying to pierce the darkness of the warehouse, he felt himself slide into a form of hyperawareness, not scared of being caught…but prepared to fight his way out of anything that might come his way.

A light went on, dazzling his vision for a heartbeat while he blinked to clear the spots away. He peered out and around the crate he’d taken refuge behind, needing to see if the person approaching was a threat.

It was a man, wearing metal plated armor, a blue-gray cloak flowing about his legs, a naked sword in his hand.

Objectively, he could see that the stranger was handsome, dark haired and blue-eyed, tall and well-built. He was obviously a fighter, just from the way he moved and held his sword, dangerous in ways that he would never have been unable to hide. Those eyes were sharp, darting around the warehouse, not letting anything escape that gaze.

He settled into wait, although he just knew the man was searching for *him.* There was no other reason for him to be stalking through the empty warehouse, with a sword to hand.

He calculated just how much of a chance he’d have against this fighter.

He wondered if the man was Hydra.

He didn’t recognize him from the house, but that didn’t mean much. There could have been others out there, that never would have been around, so not knowing this person wasn’t a guarantee.

The man stopped just next to the crate he was hiding behind. “I know you’re there.” It wasn’t taunting, or angry…it just *was,* as of this person had neither good nor bad feelings in the matter that had brought him to the warehouse.

The words echoed about the empty room.

He didn’t move.

The man suddenly slid his sword back into its sheath. “We know about Hydra, and what they did to you. We want to help, if we can.”

He now had tactical advantage. The man had disarmed himself voluntarily.

He did not move out into the open, waiting for the next move.

This stranger knew about Hydra.

Had he known the Wizard that had been brought to the house? Had he known about the girl, who’d
been so brave and had attempted to escape? Had he known the Elf, who’d given him enough of a fight that he’d been impressed?

The man seemed as willing to wait as the Winter Knight was. The warehouse thrummed with something like anticipation, as the fighter stood there, not moving, delaying any sort of action that he might take.

Waiting for the Knight to come out of hiding.

How had this man known where he was?

“If it makes any difference,” the fighter said after a little time had passed. “we want to track down and stop Hydra probably as much as you do. That Wizard they took? He’s a friend of mine. That young woman was my friend’s daughter. And the Elf? He’s the Wizard’s loved. So you see…we do want them stopped. We’d like it if you helped us do that…or we helped you do it. So…what do you say? You want to get a little of your own back?”

He really did. He wanted to get revenge on the ones who’d kept him under their control.

He wanted to take some of that control back.

This could have been a trap. The man could have been some sort of mercenary sent out to bring the Winter Knight back in. To get him back under their thrall.

He regarded the fighter as he stood there patiently, hands out from his sides. Waiting for some sort of sign. The man was close enough that he could see those bright eyes, blue and warm as the sky, unclouded by the darkness he’d seen within the ones who’d held him. If he had to trust his instincts, he would have said this man wasn’t Hydra, wasn’t a killer that had been paid to hunt him down and bring him back to his masters.

He was a killer, however. Just not one that wanted to kill the Knight.

He couldn’t stay out in the cold forever. He’d been a prisoner far too long, and his mind was a foggy mess of half-remembered images that he wasn’t sure he could trust. However, the magic that had been smothering him was gone, and it was now possible for him to think for himself.

He didn’t know if he could really trust this man.

But, he didn’t have much of a choice, if it meant having help in taking down Hydra.

“Are you alone?”

His voice was brittle and gruff. It had been so very long since he’d spoken, it was as if he was relearning how to form the words he needed to communicate.

The man didn’t startle, which was a plus. “No,” he admitted. “There are two Elven archers with me. One of them is the Elf from the house; you may recall seeing him there.” He tilted his head back. “Toshiko…Clint…you can come on out now.”

Twisting sharply, he turned his eyes upward, toward the network of beams that held up the warehouse’s ceiling. He could just make out movement up there, and he realized that they’d had him covered this entire time, and hadn’t taken the shots that would have been easy from where they’d been positioned.

They hadn’t killed him.
They could very easily have killed him.

They weren’t there to do that, then.

That told him more than his observations of the fighter could.

Tucking the dagger back into his boot, the Winter Knight arose from his crouch, his own hands held away from his body as he stepped around the crates that had hidden him…well, not so well, actually.

It had been a very long time since he’d been able to trust anyone.

Perhaps it was time to start.

He could always kill them if they proved to be a danger to him.
Chapter 15

Clint crouched upon one of the warehouse’s beams, arrow trained unerringly on the crouched form of the Winter Knight.

Toshiko had taken up position on another beam, her own bow drawn as Jack talked to the hidden knight, and together they had him thoroughly covered. It had been his idea that the pair of them take up position on the thick wooden beams; Jack had agreed that it was a really good plan, and had commented that it would also put them out of reach of that magical arm. Clint had already faced the guy once in a fight, and agreed that not being anywhere near that arm was a really good idea.

Jack had said he’d go into the warehouse himself in order to try and talk the man down; Toshiko had resisted that, practically yelling at him that, if he got killed, Ianto would kick both their asses. It had taken Clint just a moment of boggling at that to recall that Jack was the Deathless, and that he’d come back, but he could certainly understand why Jack’s friends wouldn’t want him to actually die.

Clint had seen Phil die…or come as close to it as he could. It wasn’t a pleasant feeling to have, knowing that someone you loved had died, even if they were functionally immortal and will come back eventually. The archer could definitely get behind his Elven counterpart not being pleased with Jack’s plan.

He’d still walked right into that warehouse though. And had put his damned sword away. Which was incredibly stupid even for someone who’d resurrect if he was killed.

He didn’t want to be anywhere near the fit Tosh was going to pitch when this was all over. It was most likely going to be epic. And Clint had no doubt that she’d be informing Ianto about it, as well.

Still, it had worked. Jack was bound to point that out during whatever argument they were going to have. Not that Clint expected that to work all that well. He might have only known Jack and Ianto a few days, and Toshiko a few hours, but he could already tell what Jack’s dying meant to both of them, along with him risking his life.

At Jack’s shout to come on down, Clint was up on his feet and, looping his bow over the quiver at his back, walking quickly across the beam, his Elven agility coupled with the time he’d walked the wire in the traveling show making his steps sure as he reached the end of the buttress. He moved along the connecting structure to an area that was easily climbed down; he did so, followed by Toshiko, her own feet and hands almost as sure as Clint’s were on the open beams.

By the time the pair had rejoined Jack, the Winter Knight had showed himself, minus the long knife that Clint had seen glittering in the gloom of the warehouse. A quick glance found the handle tucked into the man’s right boot, within easy reach if needed.

The Winter Knight had been a legend for as long as Clint could recall. His history went back
centuries, which he’d totally discounted until Ianto had shared with them the existence of that Zero Cabinet thing, back at the house before they’d left. It would be just like Hydra to keep the guy in that thing, pulling him out when he was needed. It was a fucking terrible way to exist, and the archer hoped they’d be able to help whoever this was recover from what had to have been a form of magical torture.

No one deserved what had been done to him. It was just one more red blotch in Hydra’s ledger.

He really got a good look at the legendary assassin this time, since the Knight wasn’t busily trying to kill him. He was taller than Clint, well-muscled but not bulky, poised on the balls of his feet as if ready to explode into action. Lank, dark hair fell over the pale forehead, and pale eyes were taking in all three of them, assessing their level of threat to him. He wasn’t wearing the black padded leather armor anymore; he’d found a dark red tunic and black trousers from somewhere, as well as a dark blue cloak that certainly looked warm enough.

The metal part of the arm not hidden under the tunic sleeve glittered in the overhead lighting. It just looked damned menacing, and that was without the aura of magic it carried.

Clint, though, had to do a bit of a double-take when he glanced in Jack’s direction.

The immortal’s mouth was hanging open in sheer shock, his eyes wide as he stared at the Winter Knight like he was seeing a ghost. His face was a little pale, and Jack took a single step forward before stumbling to a stop.

“Sir James?” his gasped, his voice soft in his surprise.

What?

“Jack?” Toshiko asked, her own voice equally soft, although her tone was pitched that way as if she was trying to keep her friend from panicking. “What is it?”

The Winter Knight was frowning, practically glaring in his confusion. “Who?” His voice caught, and Clint got the distinct impression that the man hadn’t really spoken in a long time.

“Oh course,” the Deathless murmured, “you don’t remember.”

“I don’t…” he was shaking his head. “You know me?”

“I do.” Jack moved forward again, practically right up into the Winter Knight’s personal space. Toshiko had her bow out, an arrow on the string, ready for anything the assassin may do with that sort of crowding.

The Winter Knight, however, stood his ground, watching Jack with…was that hope in those almost fathomless eyes? Surprise? Confusion, certainly. But hope?

Clint could understand that, though. If what everyone was assuming about the Winter Knight was true, that he’d been under some sort of magical control, then Hydra could have very well wiped his memory of any past life he’d had. Although, for as long as the Winter Knight had been around, the magical control would have been going on for a lot longer than magic actually returning. Which most likely meant some sort of artifact.

It occurred to the archer that Ianto might not have checked that Zero Cabinet quite as closely as he might have, because Clint had to seriously wonder if it wasn’t that damned box also messing with this guy’s head while he was in that stasis between missions.
He’d mention it…at some point.

Right now, Jack was regarding the man closely. “I knew you. You were Sir James Barnes, boon companion to Sir Steven Rogers, the Paladin of the Western Lands.”

Holy shit.

Toshiko’s eyes widened at Jack’s announcement, and Clint was positive his was doing the same. “You mean to say,” the archer gasped, “that Hydra’s had the Gods’ damned best friend of the Paladin under their control for centuries and no one realized it?”

Jack had mentioned that he’d been in the army when Sir Steven had had his own group of commandos…and one of those had been James Barnes, Sir Steven’s brother-in-arms. Hells, Phil had talked about it himself, explaining that Sir James had been lost in a chasm over a frozen river just before Sir Steven had confronted the Skull and had been lost.

And they had Sir Steven now, back from the Void.

Was this just some sort of horrible coincidence, or was something else going on? That Hydra had had Sir James Barnes…and then Sir Steven had come through the Void Point at the Hydra house. Had Hydra known all along where Sir Steven was?

They might never know, unless one of the Hydra Wizards would talk.

Or if Sir James remembered anything about his captivity.

“Will you…” the Winter Knight swallowed. “Will you tell me?”

“I’ll be glad to.” Jack rested a hand on the man’s flesh shoulder. “But I think we need to make sure all the magic that’s been affecting you is gone first. And I know just the people who can help with that.”

He was obviously thinking of the Grand Masters…most likely, of Ianto, because what that Wizard could do with spells was phenomenal. He’d seen the results with Andrew, who’d been cursed by accident. Ianto had come in, unpicked the curse, and Andrew had changed back from the monstrous form he’d gained and to his normal, human, body. It had been spectacular, and from what Clint understood he was the only Wizard who could do such things. And it didn’t matter what sort of magic it was: Cardinal, Void, or Great.

The whispers were that Ianto Jones was the most powerful Wizard in the world. Clint believed it.

Although, he was pretty sure Phil was coming close.

And no, it wasn’t because he was biased.

Even Ianto had admitted that he couldn’t control Cardinal Points, not like Phil could with Void Points. That was something unique to Phil Coulson, and from what any of the Grand Masters could tell should have been impossible.

Phil was impossible. Clint loved that idea.

“Yes they Wizards?” the Winter Knight sounded uncertain.

“They are,” Jack confirmed, “but you can trust them.”

That had Clint stepping forward. “One of them is the Wizards that Hydra tried to kill. Phil
Coulson.”

The man now known as Sir James Barnes nodded slowly. “They thought they killed him, but they didn’t. He was…he was the one who cut off the magic that was suffocating my mind.”

“That’s him.” Clint didn’t go into detail; he figured now wasn’t the time.

“They were furious when he escaped.” A small smirk decorated lips that, chances were, hadn’t had a reason to smirk for a very long time.

Clint returned it. “That’s awesome.”

“We should get out of there,” Toshiko said. She’d put her arrow away, but she was still holding the bow in her hand. “I don’t think Hydra knows, or if they did they could even do anything right now…”

“We can’t take the risk,” Jack concluded. “If we found Sir James…”

He had a point. Clint suddenly felt as if time was of the essence. “We should leave.”

“You’ll need a way to keep me confined,” the Winter Knight said, “I won’t risk hurting anyone until we’re sure anything that Hydra’s done to me is gone.”

“We’ll take care of it,” the immortal promised. “We’ll do our best to keep you from doing any sort of damage.”

Sir James’ shoulders slumped. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Jack gave him a winning smile. “Now, let’s get the hells out of here. Once we’re back at Gateway, I’ll feel better.”

Clint couldn’t disagree.
Chapter 16

Phil wasn’t at all sure about this.

He, along with Ianto and Grand Master Stephen, as well as Daisy, had left for the Quorum before Clint and the others had gone on their hunt for the Winter Knight. The Wizard really had wanted to go with them, but Clint had had a point: there was too much to do, and he wasn’t about to let Daisy be alone if she was going to face down Grant Ward.

He was confused as to why Ward would be asking for her. Yes, Phil had been aware of Grant Ward as a friend of his daughter’s, someone who had been a member of Daisy’s group of would-be troublemakers. To be honest, he’d only heard about what had happened to Jemma and Leo after the fact, when Pepper had called him about Daisy testifying at Ward’s expulsion hearing and needing his permission as her father. Which he’d given, but he’d sat up in the balcony over the main assembly hall at the Wizard School and watched her as she stood, tall and proud, and answered the questions that had been put to her by the Headmaster.

His Daisy was amazing, but that didn’t mean he was about to leave her on her own to face this.

The Quorum Building was fairly deserted at this time of the day, only pages and people having business within the building watching in various states of awe as the three Grand Masters strode past, their dragons with them, Daisy bringing up the rear as if she was in some sort of trouble when, in fact, she wasn’t. It probably didn’t help matters that all three powerful Wizards were dressed casually; only Stephen was different, and that was because his ever-present Cloak flapped about his legs as he moved, the tall, ornately embroidered collar actually waving at surprised Wizards as they passed through the main hallway and toward the Quorum Hall, where Marcus had said that Natasha would meet them, along with her prisoner.

If he was honest, Phil was a little worried about seeing her again. It had been years, after all…years during which she’d thought he was dead. Clint might not have punched him like he’d been inclined to on their first meeting after over a decade, but he didn’t dare hope that Natasha would be so accommodating.

The moment they entered the hall, Lola was chirping happily and launching herself at the Widow, who was standing at the base of the dais where the three chairs for the Grand Masters were, Grant Ward at her feet. Natasha smiled as Lola landed right onto Ward’s stomach, forcing the air from his lungs, and the Widow, the most fearsome mercenary in the Western Lands, wrapped her arms around the excited dragon in greeting, seeming to encourage her to step all over the prisoner, her tail almost knocking over the cage where Hive, Ward’s gestalt dragons, were being held. The six tiny dragons hissed at her, and Lola didn’t even notice.

Natasha’s eyes met Phil’s, and they narrowed at him a little, the only warning the Wizard would have as to the greeting she was going to give him. Yet, when she stood, she didn’t automatically punch him, which was either because she wasn’t going to, or she didn’t want to in front of the bad guy. It could have been either.

Or both.

“Phil,” she nodded once, her voice level and calm.
“Natasha.” He was very glad to see her, and he let that show in his eyes, and in his voice. He’d missed her; not as much as Clint, but then Clint was a completely different subject entirely. “This is my daughter, Daisy.” He thought he’d better get the introductions in before it all went to the hells.

“Hello,” Daisy answered chirpily. “It’s nice to meet another person my Dad’s never talked about.”

Phil barely kept himself from pinching the bridge of his nose. She wasn’t ever going to let him forget that.

Natasha raised a single eyebrow. “I like her.”

Letting the pair of them meet may have been a mistake. The Wizard was going to have to keep an eye out on them both, in order to attempt to stem the tide of chaos that may ensue later on.

“This is Grant Ward?” Stephen nodded toward the gasping young man, who was trying to get his breath back after Lola’s unintentional assault.

Phil sent his amusement to his dragon, then silently requested her to get off the bad guy. She huffed, but did as he asked, but not before putting a rear paw right in Ward’s face.

Ianto snorted, rather indelicately. He didn’t bother to hide it.

“Yes, it is,” Natasha answered. “I discovered him in a barber’s, of all places. I managed to track the place back to John Garrett, through several fake owners. Garrett, himself, wasn’t there, but I’ve put a watch on the shop just in case he decides to come back. I highly doubt it, however. I’m certain he would have warded the place against intruders.”

She didn’t bother to say how she’d made it past said wards, but then Phil had long ago learned never to ask for what Natasha wasn’t willing to share. She had her ways, and that was good enough.

He did suspect, however, that it had to do with her upbringing. Natasha had been raised in the Red Room, and no one really knew exactly what those bastards had been up to. Rumors claimed they took impressionable girls and trained them into assassins, and Phil rather thought it was the truth, since he knew Natasha and just what she was capable of, although he suspected there was more to it than that.

“We need a place to store him,” she went on, “the manacles will work in the short run, but if you intend on keeping him imprisoned indefinitely…”

“We have cells below the hall,” Ianto answered. “They’re for just this sort of occasion.”

The Widow hauled Ward to his feet. Where Lola had kicked him in the face was going to come up a lovely bruise, matching the one that Daisy must have given him when she’s tried to escape Hydra’s control. “Lead the way, Grand Master.”

“It’s Ianto,” the Cardinal Wizard said warmly, “and follow me.”

He went through one of the side doors in the main hall. Natasha practically yanked Ward along, Phil taking up position just behind her, wanting to keep an eye on him just in case he tried to pull something. Stephen had grabbed the cage with Hive in it, and Agamotto stared down at the tiny dragons from her Wizard’s shoulder, enduring the hissing and snapping from Hive with what looked like true amusement.
The hallway beyond ran the length of the building. It was practically deserted, and Phil took the opportunity to drop back a little so he was walking next to Daisy and Skye. His daughter was looked a little frazzled, as if seeing Ward again was already preying on her. It probably was; after all, the last time she’d seen the young man, he’d kidnapped her. It was bound to be bringing up things Daisy really didn’t want to think about.

“You don’t have to do this, you know,” he murmured, not wanting the now-upright Ward to overhear. “None of us will think any less of you.”

She gave him a wan smile. “Maybe not, but I’ll think less of myself, Dad. He’s a bully and a traitor to Void Order, and we need to know whatever he has up in that brain of his.” She reached out, taking his hand in hers. “I can do this.”

He squeezed her fingers, careful of the gauntlets she was wearing. “I know you can. I have faith in you.”

“I love you, Dad.”

“Love you, too.” He did. Fiercely. More than he would have ever guessed, that day he’d found her in that alley. “Now, why don’t we get this over with.”

“Sounds awesome to me.”

The cells were on the lowermost level of the Quorum Hall, in what had to have once been the dungeon of the original Baronial residence. He had to wonder just what the first Baron Gateway had needed with this sort of thing, before he remembered that Baron Dafydd hadn’t actually lived within the residence for long, preferring his quarters within the main Wizard’s Tower.

Natasha was quite happy to throw Ward in the first cell she got to, knocking him back on his ass long enough to remove the manacles he was wearing. She kicked him once more, just because, then left him in the cell, which Stephen was more than happy to lock and activate the anti-magic wards that had been woven into the very walls.

Ward clambered to his feet, staring out from between the bars as his dragons were placed within another cell, left in their cage. They were certainly small enough to be able to fly between the bars of the cell, and the last thing anyone needed was for them to escape somehow and help Ward get out of his own cell. They weren’t happy about it, but it would do until they could do something about keeping them inside with Ward. They weren’t about to keep a Wizard separated from his dragon – or dragons, as the case would be – for very long.

“All of that violence wasn’t really necessary,” he claimed, his dark eyes calm as he approached the metal bars. He rested his hands on them, but jerked back almost immediately, repelled by the spells on them. His gaze touched all of them, although Phil could tell Ward was surprised at seeing him there.

Good. Although that gave him all sorts of thoughts about just what Ward had known about Hydra’s plans and he didn’t know about the accusations during Quorum.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Natasha commented, “I think it was very necessary.”

Skye echoed the Widow’s words with a hiss all her own. Lola joined in on the fun, and then Myfanwy and Agamotto did the same. Every dragon in the room apparently were excellent judges of character.

“I’m more than willing to tell you what I know.” Ward said, “but you know my terms.” His eyes
went to Daisy, and it was all Phil could do not to step in front of her, to protect her from that dark regard.

But he stayed where he was, his hand wrapped around hers, offering her his strength and support as she stared Ward down.

“Why me?” she asked, her voice strong.

Damnit, but Phil was so very proud of her.

“I like to think we have a connection.”

“If kidnapping me forges some sort of connection between us, then yeah…I suppose we do.”

The Wizard wanted to smirk at her sarcasm, but he kept himself under control. He could tell that the two other Grand Masters were having the same issue, but they were as aware that this was Daisy’s confrontation and not theirs. She needed to set the ground rules here, and not let Ward drag her along into whatever it was he had planned for her.

Ward simply looked at her, and his eyes were suddenly sad. “I mean, before my mistake, Daisy,”

“You tried to kill my friends,” she snapped.

She was losing her temper, but Phil could understand. After all, Jemma and Leo could have died due to that spell that Ward had cast on them and, despite his words, it hadn’t been any sort of mistake. He’d done it on purpose, and that had come out in the inquiry into his actions.

He surreptitiously squeezed her fingers once more, needing to get her calm. Daisy couldn’t allow him to bait her like that, but Phil also knew that was going to be difficult. His daughter was a passionate young woman, ready to defend those she cared for, and Ward was going to push her buttons until he got the reaction he wanted.

“Do you think we could have a little privacy?” their prisoner said, sounding as if it was a perfectly reasonable request to make. It really wasn’t, but Phil had to give him credit for making it seem like it was.

He knew that Daisy really didn’t want to be alone with Ward. And she wouldn’t be; they’d discussed it on the way over, and there were Listening spells all over the place, so they could hear every single word spoken. Daisy was aware of it, that they could get to her at a moments’ notice, so there really wasn’t anything to be afraid of.

Still, she was facing the man who’d kidnapped her. She’d believed they were friends, and had started to have feelings toward him. The Wizard knew very well that they might have ended up dating, if Ward hadn’t made his attempt on Jemma and Leo. To this day, no one knew what had motivated him to do it, but Phil suspected it was wrapped with in John Garrett in some way. Ward had been his official Novice, and had played at repudiating him during the hearing, yet he hadn’t given up the wayward Void Novice, instead recruiting him into Hydra.

Perhaps that had been some sort of recruitment test. If Hydra had been willing to blackmail Phil into helping them by holding his only daughter prisoner, then anything was certainly possible.

Phil turned to Daisy, giving her an encouraging smile. “You can do this,” he said, putting all the confidence – and none of the concern – in his voice.

“Thanks, Dad.” She nodded once, stepping away and letting loose his hand.
In that moment, Phil knew he would have done anything in order to keep her from having to be the one to question Ward. There were certain spells, truth spells and potions, that they could use, but he wasn’t so sure they would work within the cells. He’d been considering using something along those lines to track down any Hydra agents amid the Void Order, but he hadn’t run it past his fellow Grand Masters yet.

The problem was, he’d need to prepare such a spell or a potion and, while he was willing to put in the time and effort, this was the fastest way to get information…if Ward really was willing to talk to Daisy. This could be something else, but they had to take the chance.

Leaving Daisy alone with Ward wasn’t what Phil wanted to do, but she was strong, and could handle herself.

A hand rested on Phil’s shoulder; it was Ianto, his Cardinal magic pinging against the Void within Phil’s very blood. It wasn’t a bad sensation, nor uncomfortable, and the Void Wizard smiled at his newest friend and let himself be led toward the corridor leading back up to the occupied areas of the Quorum Hall.

Leaving Daisy alone with the man who’d hurt her.
Chapter 17

Daisy did the best she could to hide her nerves at being left alone with Grant Ward.

She didn’t want to do this. The very last thing she wanted was to be there, in that dungeon, facing the person she’d thought was a good friend, and who could easily have been more…if he hadn’t turned out to be a homicidal bastard.

The young Wizard really didn’t know how it had happened, what had caused Ward to decide to cast that spell and try to kill two of their friends, who’d never done anything to him to deserve such a thing. Ward had always claimed it was an accident, but no one believed it, not after Grand Master Ianto had gone into the specifics of the spell Ward had used. For one thing, it had been well within his power to cast, despite telling the hearing that he’d only attempted that particular spell because it was advanced, and because of that he’d lost control of the magic and it had led to the hermetically sealed bubble that had trapped her two Elven friends. He’d never admitted to where he’d gotten it from, but now Daisy suspected it had been John Garrett. Now, whether Garrett had, for some reason, ordered Ward to do it, or if he’d just decided one day that Jemma and Leo were a danger to him, she doubted anyone would ever really know.

She found that she didn’t really want to.

“Hello, Daisy,” Ward greeted her, his tone smooth and warm.

Daisy crossed her arms over her chest, the gauntlets clinking softly as they touched. “Ward.” She was proud of the fact that she didn’t sound as defensive as she felt.

The bruise from the punch she’d given him back at Hydra’s hideout was now a worn-out yellow, but there were now marks on his face from where Lola had stepped on him. At no point did Daisy believe that was an accident on the dragon’s part. Lola was protective of Daisy’s Dad, and that extended to Daisy as well. Knowing that Ward had been responsible for kidnapping her and then ambushing Dad would have given the dragon all the motivation she’d needed to get a little damage in.

Apparently, Natasha had done some damage as well, judging from the black eye. Daisy was spitefully pleased about that.

“I’m really sorry about what happened.”

Daisy scoffed at that. “No, you’re not.”

“But I am.” Damned if he didn’t look sincere. The young Wizard had had no idea that he’d been such a good actor. “I don’t care what Jones said…what happened was an accident. He just doesn’t care about Voids, and will do whatever he can to make things our fault.”

She had to laugh at that. “You obviously don’t know Ianto Jones all that well if you think that! One of his best friends was Mistress Suzie Costello, a Void Wizard and the woman who taught my Dad. He doesn’t hold a thing against the Voids…unless they’re traitors to magic, that is. Then he’ll do his damnedest to hunt you all down and make sure you’re punished for what you’ve done.”

“I didn’t realize you were so naïve.”
“And I didn’t realize you were such a manipulative asshole.”

Ward sighed. “These recriminations won’t get us anywhere. I have something important to tell you, and I need you to listen to me.”

Now, his voice carried such conviction that Daisy found herself wanting to listen…for about the space of a heartbeat. Then she remembered what Ward had done, and that she had to real reason to trust him. “Fine. Share away.”

He nodded. “I let the Widow find me, because it was the only way I could get to you.”

Daisy didn’t believe that for a second. Even though she’d never met the Widow before, she’d gotten the distinct impression that the woman was extremely capable of knowing a con when she saw one. No, Ward was a prisoner, and this was his chance to sow a bit more chaos and doubt, so he was going to take it.

“I only want to hear about Hydra,” she told him. “What can you tell me about them?”

“I’m simply a Novice, Daisy. Why would they tell me anything about their plans?”

Well, he might have had a point about that. Would they have shared their plans with their Novices? Daisy knew that Pepper didn’t share everything with her, after all, and the Head of Cardinal Order trusted her. There were just things that a Novice shouldn’t know. She wasn’t ready, or they were Guild secrets that Pepper didn’t tell anyone.

She didn’t say anything, though. She waited to see what Ward would do next.

“Look,” he finally spoke, “I might not know their plans, but there are things that they did share, and one thing is pretty personal…to you.”

“I’m not sure what Hydra would know about me. I’m just not that important…unless, I’m a bargaining chip to get my Dad to do what they want him to.”

“When Hydra figured out that Phil Coulson was the Dark One,” Ward explained, “they checked into him…and you. Whitehall went all the way to Asgard to question Loki, after all, because they were so certain he was the Void version of the Deathless.”

Daisy hadn’t known about that. Loki was a prisoner of the Asgardian King, Odin, and from what she did know there was no chance of him ever getting out. How Daniel Whitehall had gotten in to see him… that seemed impossible, but it certainly explained how they’d all been certain that Dad was who they’d assumed he was.

“Hale also went searching for information on you…the Dark One’s Cardinal daughter. Garrett thought he’d adopted you in order to make some sort of power play later on, that this was just some sort of long game that only Coulson knew about. Hale felt that, if she could find out more about your past, we could somehow co-opt you into acting as Hydra’s Cardinal figurehead as well.”

Daisy had heard that sort of thing from Garrett, back when he’d first approached her Dad with this whole Deathless scheme. She knew it wasn’t the truth, but she could see why they’d think it; after all, he was Void, and she Cardinal, and usually magic followed bloodlines…plus, Cardinals and Voids were opposite. A Void parent even adopting a Cardinal child was basically unheard of.

Her Dad loved her. She knew that in her very bones.

Still, she found herself curious as to what this Hale person had discovered. Not that she could
necessarily trust whatever came out of Ward’s mouth, but she really wanted to know what he was about to drop on her.

“What she found out,” the captive Wizard continued, “was who your true parents are.”

What?

Now that….that, she hadn’t expected.

There had been a short time in her life that Daisy had wondered about her birth parents; why they’d given her up, and if they were still alive. She’d grown out of that, understanding that even if she did know, it wouldn’t have mattered. Phil Coulson was her Dad, the only parent she’d ever known, and she loved him fiercely.

There was a small, burning anger deep within her that her parents had simply dumped her at that first orphanage. She had no desire whatsoever to know anyone would do that to a defenseless baby.

Daisy snorted. “Like I care.”

That seemed to take Ward by surprise. “They’re your parents, Daisy…and not the man you call your Dad. . . .”

“No, you’re wrong.” Now, that low-banked fire was rushing forward, and it was all she could do not to step right up to those bars and punch Ward in his oh-so-smug face. “The people who abandoned me aren’t any sort of parents I ever want to know. My Dad is the man who took me in, who gave up his entire life just to raise me, the person who loves me unconditionally. Not someone out there who didn’t give a damn about me.”

The young Wizard clenched her fists at her side, even as Skye was hissing at Ward, her outrage echoing Daisy’s own. Even if he did know her real parents, she could see this was just some sort of ploy: was he going to offer to take her to them, as long as she released him from his cell? That was the only motivation she could see for this sort of revelation, because she was absolutely certain he didn’t care one way or the other about any sort of reunion.

“You’re not getting a damned thing from me,” she swore. “You can rot in that cell for the rest of your life for all I care.”

She spun on her heel and stalked down the corridor, Ward’s voice calling her back hurting her ears. There was no way she was turning around to listen to more of his bullshit. Skye was agreeing with her, the dragon angry on her behalf, although she wanted to fly back to Ward and flame his ass.

That sounded like an awesome idea, but Daisy wasn’t going to allow it. She could appreciate the sentiment, though.

How dare he? Trying to wreck the relationship she had with her Dad by throwing up these missing parents at her. Well, it wasn’t going to work. She didn’t give a single fuck about the people who’d birthed her. Childhood curiosity was one thing; but, now that she was older, she had absolutely no desire to know them. They’d left her, and she’d lived the first six years of her life being moved from orphanage to orphanage, no one caring enough about her to take her in and make her their own.

Not until her Dad had found her.

He’d completely changed his life in order to raise her. He’d taught her, and helped her, and supported her and loved her. He was her father, and it didn’t matter that his blood didn’t run through her veins. He was more her Dad than those bastards who hadn’t wanted her, because he had.
Arms wrapped around her, and she recognized her Dad’s embrace without registering that he was there, holding her. She hugged him as hard as she could, needing him to know that she loved him and that she’d never leave him, no matter what.

“I know,” he whispered into her ear, understanding without her even saying anything. “I know.”
Chapter 18

Ianto watched as Phil hugged his daughter to him, whispering to her as she clung to him as if her very existence depended on it. And, perhaps it did, after what had happened down in the cells.

They’d heard it all. And Ianto was unbelievably angry with Grant Ward and his attempt to coerce Daisy into…well, there was no doubt that he’d wanted to get the young woman onside and to manipulate her into releasing him. It had only been Daisy’s steadfast love of her father and the anger she held for her biological parents that had scuppered that plan.

His eyes met the Widow’s. She was standing next to Stephen, and she was looking as if what had just occurred hadn’t bothered her one bit. Still – and Ianto didn’t know her, had barely only met her – there was fury in the way she held herself, arms crossed over her chest, the coldness in her green eyes chilling the Wizard even though he wasn’t to blame for anything.

Natasha Romanov nodded slightly. Then, stepping forward, she said, “Let’s get both of you out of here.”

Phil pulled away from Daisy slightly, giving her his own nod. “That is an excellent idea.”

“I can still go and speak to him,” Daisy said stoutly, her voice wavering only a little.

“He’ll only try to manipulate you again,” the Void Grand Master replied, giving her a fond smile.

“Your father’s right,” Natasha added. “You’re not going to be able to get anything out of Grant Ward.”

“Why don’t you take Daisy back to my home?” Ianto suggested. “We’ll make certain Ward is secured and then join you.”

“That is an excellent idea,” Stephen said. “Get Daisy a cup of tea, and we’ll be there soon.”

Phil’s expression was one of gratitude. Without saying another word, he tucked his arm around his daughter and led her back up toward the upper levels of the Quorum Hall, the Widow ghosting after them like a red-headed specter followed by their pair of concerned dragons.

“That…wasn’t at all what I was expecting,” Stephen murmured.

“You and me both,” Ianto agreed, “but we could have guessed Ward would attempt some sort of manipulation.”

“Do you think Hydra really knows who Daisy’s birth parents are?”

That was the question. Ianto could certainly see Hydra wanting to get as much information on Phil’s daughter as possible, especially since they’d planned on using her as a bargaining chip against her father. And yes, there was a part of the Wizard who wanted to know, just because someone as powerful as Daisy Coulson had to have come from somewhere, but in the long run that simply wasn’t as important as the young Wizard who’d come up from the cells so very shattered and who’d immediately accepted her father’s support.

Her real father. Of that, there was no doubt.
Anyone who would have so easily abandoned such a remarkable child as Daisy didn’t deserve to have anything to do with her.

“Why don’t we go down and have our own little talk with Ward?” Stephen said. “Not that I think he’ll say anything to us, but…”

“I, personally,” Ianto growled, “have met that boy before, and he’s rotten to the core.” He could recall that tribunal they’d held when Grant Ward had been accused of nearly killing his supposed friends, and the evidence that the Cardinal Wizard had given at that trial. It had been obvious that Ward had meant for Jemma and Leo to die, just from the intention behind the magic, and despite Ward’s denials he’d been found guilty and drummed out of the Wizard Guild. He’d vanished afterward, and honestly Ianto should have checked on where he’d gone a lot sooner. Perhaps, if he had…

Well, that was over and done with now. It was too late to go back and fix things.

Stephen nodded sagely. “It’s hard when one of us goes bad; but now we have an entire subset of Voids who thought they could just mess about with destiny and magic and that’s the hardest part of all.”

“I remember when I was the only Wizard,” Ianto said softly. “That didn’t last long, because then there was Suzie and Dafydd and John…and don’t get me started with the whole Harold Saxon mess…but, even with Saxon, I never really gave any thought to what would happen if one of us really did go rogue. It wasn’t until rumors of the Dark One started that I had to consider just that sort of thing occurring…”

“And the Dark One turned out to be a young man who’d suffered a form of mental abuse by his parents that had him convinced he was evil, although he really wasn’t.”

Stephen had hit that on the head perfectly. Suzie had seen it, in Novice Phillip, and had tried so very hard to help him…and had failed. That had destroyed her, and while Ianto was certain it wasn’t the reason she’d finally died, he could see that the guilt would have haunted her for the rest of her life…what little bit of it had been left. Suzie had been old when she’d taken on that damaged young Wizard, past the point of actual retirement, the Void the only thing keeping her going. The magic extended a Wizard’s life a little, but not to the extent that himself – and now Phil Coulson – now had to accept.

“This is different,” he sighed, seeing the acknowledgement in his colleague’s eyes. “From what we know, none of the Wizards involved with Hydra had the same sort of childhood that Phil had. That might be a fallacy; we really don’t know much about the Novices involved, but the Master Wizards themselves…none of them have the excuse of being good men twisted by their upbringing. Hells, I’ve met Gideon Mallick’s family, and they were about as normal as you could ask for. His daughter, Stephanie, was a bright young woman, and it looks like his ideals have been passed along to her. It…” he sighed again, “it’s heartbreaking, Stephen.”

The Great Wizard rested a hand on Ianto’s shoulder. Whenever another Wizard touched him, the Cardinal Wizard could easily tell the difference, and this form of magic was almost like being doused in some sort of fizzy drink; tickly and effervescent and it made his nerves feel as if they were prickling pleasantly.

“I understand. Unfortunately, there’s not a lot we can do about Ward. However, we can work to sow tolerance between the Orders, to make certain that what happened to Phil never happens again.” He gave Ianto a small, encouraging, smile. “Now, let’s go and see what Ward has to say for himself.”
Ianto agreed, heading down the steps toward the dungeon once more. Myfanwy, sensing his anger and unease, chirped back at him and sent her support and love over their connection, and the Wizard would have reached out to give her a scratch if she wasn’t several steps ahead, as if scoping out the territory ahead. It was a little amusing, and he let her know just that.

Myfanwy sniffed at him, but didn’t stop what she was doing.

Grant Ward had taken a seat on the bunk in the cell, but he stood as soon as both Wizards came into view. There was something, some sort of expression on his face that Ianto couldn’t identify, but it smoothed away under a small, sincere-seeming mask that conveyed worry that Ianto was fairly certain he wasn’t feeling.

“How’s Daisy?” Ward asked. “Is she with you?” He craned his head as if searching for the young woman.

“Daisy isn’t here any longer,” Ianto answered. “We think you’ve upset her enough for today.”

“That wasn’t my intention.”

If Ianto didn’t know any better, he would have believed the young man.

Stephen snorted quietly, which the Cardinal Wizard interpreted as the same level of disbelief that Ianto, himself, was feeling.

“You should know,” Ianto began, ignoring that obviously false platitude, “that you and your Hydra masters have been found guilty, in absentia, of crimes against the Order. You will be held here until such time as we find a permanent prison for you.”

“Usually, it’s the Head of Order who comes to pronounce sentence,” Ward rebutted calmly. “And, last I checked, you’re the Cardinal Grand Master and he,” the man jerked his head toward Stephen, “is the Great Grand Master. So, why isn’t the Void Grand Master here?”

Ianto wanted to be angry at his tone, but for some reason he felt completely calm. This young Wizard was being an insufferable bastard and trying to play the system, which wasn’t going to succeed. After all, he was correct in what he was saying; only a Void Head could pronounce judgement on another Void. It would have been Phil’s job to do so, but Ianto was perfectly willing to cover for his fellow Grand Master in this case.

“The Grand Master of Voids is occupied at the moment,” Stephen said.

Another micro-expression flickered across Ward’s face at that, and this one Ianto could certainly identify.

“You mean,” he smirked, “your spy within Void Order hasn’t informed anyone yet that we have a new Void Grand Master?” That did make sense; Hydra had obviously scattered, but there were many different ways someone could have kept in touch magically. “Phil Coulson is the new Grand Master of Voids, Mr. Ward.”

He had the distinct pleasure at the surprise that was so very open on their prisoner’s face.

“You Hydra masters made it abundantly clear that Grand Master Phil was the only Void Wizard we could trust,” the Cardinal Wizard went on. “I’m sure that wasn’t their intention…especially when they brought Werner von Strucker into this. His outburst during Quorum simply told us that there’s at least one more Hydra member within Void Order, and we intend on discovering who they are and put them in a cell just down from yours.”
“Did you think that outing Grand Master Phil in Quorum was going to get him into the same bucket of hot water you and yours are in?” Stephen queried. “If anything, it just hammered home to everyone in Void Order that he could be trusted, since it brought to light the events of Buda-Pest and it showed the Dark One as the hero that he truly was.”

Well, that wasn’t exactly the case, Ianto knew, but he could certainly get behind Stephen’s need to rub that sort of salt into the wound, so to speak. Because, it was apparent that Hydra hadn’t known the true events behind the Dark One and his friends’ razing of the city, and had only hoped that it would destroy whatever reputation Phil had had. Ianto was also fairly certain it was a form of revenge on Phil’s kicking Hydra’s collective arses back at their base.

Which also lent itself to the idea that there was some form of open communication between Hydra and whoever their mole was in Void Order.

And also, Ianto could infer, that that link hadn’t involved Grant Ward.

“So you see,” he pushed it home, “the Grand Master of Voids is currently unavailable...since you’ve decided it would be a really good idea to upset his daughter.”

“Not so much a good idea,” Stephen added. “Although I get the impression you hadn’t expected to see our newest Grand Master at all, and was surprised when he showed up with us.”

Ianto mentally cursed himself for missing that, but at the same time he was glad that Stephen had noticed. He had to wonder if Phil had, as well.

Ward shrugged a little, but he didn’t say anything.

The Hive dragons kicking up a fuss had Ianto turning toward the cell where their cage had been placed. They were really perturbed, and he wondered if they were exposing Ward’s inner turmoil or if they were just upset at being separated from their Wizard.

Most likely a combination of both.

“We’ll need to rework some of the spells on the cell so we can put your dragons in with you,” Ianto told Ward, “so hopefully you won’t be apart for too long.”

“In the meantime,” Stephen said, “you might want to be thinking about what you want to do. You’ve been found guilty of treason against Void Order; anything you might want to share with the Quorum about your masters could possibly mitigate things a bit.”

“You still kidnapped Daisy Coulson,” Ianto pointed out, “and that, in itself, rates being imprisoned. It will be up to her if she wants to include in those charges the attempt to manipulate her with this so-called knowledge you have of her birth parents.”

“That wasn’t my intention,” Ward murmured.

“Yes, it was. That was exactly your intention. You most likely thought that you’d give her this, and she’d do something to break you out of this cell in order to get to the truth.” Ianto favored him with a slight, pitying, smile. “As you’ve seen, she’s not interested. I’m also pretty certain you weren’t expecting her to be so against finding her biological parents, to be honest.” He didn’t blame her, not one bit. She now had a father who loved her, and was proud of her. Why should she go looking for parents who’d abandoned her?

“You’ll be brought in front of the Quorum to face the formal charges,” the Great Grand Master continued, “although you’ve already been found guilty so there’s just the punishment to consider.
That will be at the hands of your former Order. And don’t think anyone will come to your rescue, Mr. Ward, because anyone Hydra has within Void Order will most likely want to lie low, in order to avoid being taken into custody."

Ianto noticed he didn’t mention that the wards on the cell area were going to be attuned to just a few others, to avoid anyone coming down there who wasn’t authorized. They’d leave that up to the wardens for the dungeon; they were trained for that sort of thing.

And it occurred to him that they’d most likely have to vet the wardens.

*Damn.*

So, it seemed as if he and Stephen had their work cut out for them. They’d get Phil in on the spell adaptation as well. Ianto had seen a bit of his ward work, and had been impressed with what he’d managed to teach Daisy.

“Oh,” Ianto added, “you won’t be alone... Werner von Strucker is in a cell down the way. I’m sure you’d both enjoy trading Hydra stories.” Yes, he was petty. Yes, he needed a parting shot.

Without either Grand Master saying anything else, they both turned and left the area, their dragons accompanying them. Ianto’s head was buzzing with thoughts on what had happened, already making plans on warding the cells, to adapting the spells on Ward’s cell in order for him to be able to keep the Hive dragons in with him...

And how they were going to find out just who was Hydra within the Wizard’s Guild.

It wasn’t something he was looking forward to, mainly because he hated the idea of traitors in their midst. However, it needed to be done. They needed to know what other wolves they had in their midst, and to discover a way to keep it from happening ever again.
Chapter 19

He awoke slowly, blinking groggily, realizing almost at once he wasn’t where he’d been before
darkness had taken over.

Sir Steven Rogers, the Paladin of the Western Lands, sat up quickly, hissing as his brain seemed to
be left behind and was slow to catch up with his head, pounding as it settled back into his skull. He
clutched at his head as he tried to regain his equilibrium, curling into himself as the agony in his head
slowly faded until he could straighten and get a better look at his surroundings.

He was in a bedroom.

It was really fancy. If Steve had to guess, he was in some sort of palace or baronial residence, as
those were the richest people he knew of. The bed was huge and soft, the mattress supporting his
sore body like a lover would. The sheet and comforter were of a bright fabric, in shades of reds and
golds, and yet they weren’t overly gaudy.

Well, he was being polite about that. It really was fairly gaudy.

The bed frame was of some sort of reddish wood; Steve didn’t know what sort of wood was
naturally that color, but it certainly wasn’t painted like that, just well varnished and gleaming in the
soft light of a lamp on the matching bedside table…a lamp that wasn’t a flame, but shone with a
steady glow, which just couldn’t be natural. For a moment Steve thought it was magic, but
dismissed that; magic hadn’t existed in the world for centuries, except for scattered artifacts that could
be most likely found in various abandoned towers and buried in deep caverns.

Like the artifact that the Skull had had.

Steve could recall it with vivid clarity, his last battle with the Skull.

The war had been raging for years. The Despot from the North had rampaged through the Western
Lands, only to be stopped near at the proverbial line in the sand…a ragged trench system that had
run from the western coast to the Mountains of the Continental Divide, over hundreds of miles.
There had been rumors that the Despot was going to attempt to go around the mountains, but that
would have meant retreating and leaving his rear guard practically defenseless, and Steve hadn’t seen
him doing that, not after all the losses his troops had already suffered in the fighting.

He and his hand-picked band, the Howling Commandos, had been on a mission behind enemy
lines. Their spies had claimed that the Skull had found some sort of magical artifact and had been
experimenting with it, and Command had been concerned that he’d be able to work it out and the
impasse would be broken, so in they’d went.

To be honest, Steve had wanted to go in. After Bucky had been killed, he’d wanted to get a little
revenge, and this had been his opportunity. It had taken them weeks, but they’d finally managed to
locate the Skull’s base, and they’d infiltrated it surprisingly easily.

It had been in a mansion that had overlooked a beautiful mountain valley. Steve remembered
wishing he could sketch the place, and that such evil hadn’t tainted it by its very presence. The Skull
had always been a bit greedy, and him ‘owning’ this gorgeous view had been just like him.

Steve could recall facing down the Skull, and him raising a strange, glowing block before him…and
then nothing but blackness.

He didn’t even know what had happened to his men.

And now, he was in some sort of sumptuously appointed bedroom, in a strange place, without knowing how he’d gotten there.

Oh, and then he noticed that the pajamas he was wearing were silk. Definitely, he was the guest of someone of not-inconsiderable wealth, although he no real idea why someone would have taken him to a place like this to recover from whatever had happened to him.

He flung the covers aside, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. The carpet was warm and plush against his bare feet, and was a deep red to match the comforter. The curtains were also the same reds and golds, and the furniture that red wood. It was…too much, really. Why would anyone put him in such a room? He was just a simple soldier, even if they all insisted on calling him a Paladin, and if he’d been injured – which didn’t seem to be the case, unless it was a head wound that he couldn’t see, and would also explain why his head was aching so badly – they certainly wouldn’t have gone out of their way to set him up in such a place as this.

Whoever had put him in the pajamas had thoughtfully hung his armor on a rack especially built for that purpose, his shield and sword leaning against it. It was obvious now that he wasn’t a prisoner because, if he had been, that would have been locked away somewhere else. Instead armor, shield, and sword had all been taken care of, and Steve was grateful for that little kindness.

His under-armor garments were nowhere to be found, however; he even looked in the large wardrobe which, for the moment, was empty. He didn’t really want to go snooping around in just those silky pajamas, but knew he’d have no choice.

Besides, if he wasn’t a prisoner, then he didn’t need to put his armor back on, and that would have been uncomfortable without the specially made padded underclothes anyway.

Still, he buckled on the sword anyway, as well as picked up his shield. He might have been in friendly territory, but that didn’t mean he had to be completely unprepared.

The door was unlocked. That was another mark in the ‘not a prisoner’ category.

The hallway outside was wide, and just as ostentatious as the bedroom had been. What looked like hand-carved wood decorated lintels and wainscoting, small tables holding knickknacks and vases of brightly colored flowers lined the walls, giving the area a friendly aspect that had Steve relaxing just a little.

The floor was gleaming hardwood, cool against his bare feet as Steve made his way down the hallway, toward what looked to be some sort of open space that, once he reached it, proved to be the landing to a wide staircase that led down to the lower level. The place seemed to be mostly empty… until he saw a man pass by below him, dressed in a somber dark suit and seeming to not be in a hurry, his shoes clicking across the highly polished floor. He had dark hair and was tall and thin, and Steve could tell he wasn’t any sort of soldier. A servant, perhaps.

The man crossed the hall and then vanished below where Steve was standing. He took a deep breath then started down the stairs, shield held out before him, but his sword still sheathed. He didn’t want to appear aggressive; but he wasn’t about to accept anything at face value, either.

He was halfway down when the riser he stepped on squeaked.

That wasn’t good at all.
Steve didn’t freeze, however. That wasn’t the way he was, although the noise had been startling. He made his way down to the ground floor just as a door was pulled open and a man stepped out.

He couldn’t help it, Steve stopped then, his jaw dropping in surprise. “Howard?” he blurted.

The man froze, dark eyes widening. In that moment Steve realized this wasn’t his friend, although there was certainly a resemblance. The man who was staring at him was a little older, wearing a different cut to his well-trimmed beard, and his face was a little narrower. Still, they had to have been related, which was a shock considering Howard hadn’t had any living relatives that Steve had known about.

The man visibly shook himself out of his surprise. “Um, no. Sorry. Not Howard…or the Howard you knew, anyway. And it’s nice to see you up and about, anyway. We were all beginning to wonder if you were gonna sleep the day away, and Ana is making lunch, you don’t want to miss her cooking.”

“Tony,” a woman’s voice reprimanded him gently. A lovely strawberry blonde moved around the Howard lookalike, giving Steve a gentle smile as she walked toward him, the hem of her deep blue dress brushing the tips of her matching shoes. “Please excuse him,” she said to Steve, “but he can be a little overwhelming.”

The man – Tony – rolled his eyes at her. “C’mon, Pep…he surprised me, that’s all.”

“But that doesn’t mean you get to babble at him.” Her tone was fondly irritated, as if this was something she was used to. And, she must have been, if she was living there.

Steve was about to speak, when something flew out of the room to land on the woman’s shoulders. If he’d been startled at the man looking so much like his friend, then this set him back on his heels.

In an instant, he had his sword out and aimed toward the creature that was perched on the woman. It was winged, and small, a silver-white color with whirling solid blue eyes. It chirped in confusion as the woman raised her hand. Her pale eyes flashed gold and suddenly the sword was torn from Steve’s hand to land with a clatter against the far wall.

“We’ll have none of that,” the woman snapped, anger tinging her cheeks a pale pink.

“You have no idea just how hot that is,” Tony purred.

“Not now, Tony.”

“You never let me have any fun.”

“If this is your idea of fun…” she stopped what would have most likely become a tirade, instead focusing on Steve. “I know you’re confused, but we aren’t going to hurt you. We only want to help you.”

She lowered her hand, and that was when Steve took in more about her appearance. There was a fairly impressive knife in a sheath hanging from her belt, and on the opposite side a long, slim piece of wood in a leather holster rested. The creature grinned, its tongue lolling, and it flexed its wings as if it was going to jump into flight.

“No, Happy,” she spoke to it, “you can’t go and greet him, not yet anyway. He’s not used to seeing dragons around.”
Wait…what?

“Did you say dragons?” Steve exclaimed. “But dragons don’t exist any longer!”

The anger faded a little from her pretty face. “You have a lot to catch up on. Please, put the shield down and we’ll explain as best we can.” She took a step forward. “I’m Mistress Virginia Potts, Head of Cardinal Order of the Western Lands. And, I’m a Wizard.”

Steve shook his head in denial. Wizards were a legend; they’d all died out a long time ago. There was no way this woman could be one…

But then, she’d obviously used magic to disarm him. She had a dragon on her shoulder, and everyone knew that dragons were Wizard familiars, at least they were according to the old stories.

“This,” she turned to her companion, “is Anthony Stark, Baron Ferrous, and you’re in his mansion, where you’ve been recovering.”

Steve stared at the man identified as Baron Ferrous…Anthony Stark. The only Stark he’d known had been Howard Stark, his friend, and he hadn’t admitted to any relations that were Barons. In fact, Howard had been rich, yes; but not any sort of noble. Maybe this was another family named Stark? But Howard would have bragged about being related to some sort of Baron, wouldn’t he have?

He certainly wasn’t dressed as any sort of Baron Steve had ever seen—not that he’d seen all that many. His clothes were a bit threadbare and stained with something the Paladin couldn’t identify, and it looked like he hadn’t combed his hair lately, as it stuck up in all different directions. There were also stains on his hands, and that might have been a burn hole in his tunic…

Steve’s head was pounding. He was confused. All he wanted to do was sit down. Things were strange and he didn’t know how to accept what this woman was saying. He couldn’t relax, because he didn’t know what was coming at him next and he had to be prepared for anything.

“Please,” she coaxed, “we only want to help you. You’ve been…ill, for a very long time. Won’t you please come in and sit, before you fall down? You can even bring your sword if that will make you feel better.”

It would, but Steve had the distinct impression that it wouldn’t do him a lot of good, not against a Wizard, of all things. If he was inclined to believe her, but then she’d just raised her hand and his sword had flown right out of his grasp.

But there were artifacts out there, maybe she had one of those? He didn’t see anything but the knife and that piece of wood—a wand, his mind told him, even though that sounded a little silly in his head.

“Pep,” Baron Tony said, “I think you freaked him out more than I did with my resemblance to Howard Stark.”

She ignored his comment, although Steve wasn’t sure what ‘freaked out’ meant. If it was surprised and shocked and out of his depth, then that was exactly true.

“Please,” she said once more. “Please, Sir Steven…we do want to help. Come into the sitting room and I’ll get you something to drink. You look like you could use a brandy.”

The Baron moved back into the room, leaving the Wizard on her own…not that Steve thought he could overpower her. He was definitely outranked, power wise, and he knew it.
Still, there was something about the woman…something calming. If she was a danger, then she was giving a very good impression of *not* being one.

Steve had no idea where he was. These people had answers.

Besides, his head was really hurting and he really did want to sit down; besides, a brandy sounded just the thing. He didn’t know if he could really trust these people, but something was going on, something he didn’t understand, and he needed more information before he could act.

And so, Steven Rogers, Knight and Paladin, accepted Mistress Virginia’s invitation to join her and the Baron in the sitting room, where another man was waiting for them.
Daisy was quiet all the way back to the Harkness-Jones home, and Phil let her be, knowing she was dealing with what Ward had offered her.

A while back, when she’d just turned fourteen, Daisy had expressed some interest in locating her birth parents, but that had died out quickly when she’d come to realize that she really didn’t want to face the people who’d abandoned her when she’d been a baby. Phil had sat with her through the rages she’d had back then, at how they’d left her at that first orphanage with nothing, not even a name to call her own. The workers there had named her Skye; but, when she was old enough, she’d chosen Daisy for herself.

Phil had thought it a little ironic at the time that she’d given her dragon the name that had been chosen for her by strangers, but he never did ask her why. It was Daisy’s own business, and if someday she decided to tell him, he’d listen.

That dragon was flying overhead, along with Lola, keeping a watch on their Wizards as they made their way out of town. It wasn’t all that long a trip, especially on the horses that Jack and Ianto had provided; that was another reason the pair of dragons was flying, as horses not used to dragons tended to shy away from them. Not that any horse that had been trained by Jack Harkness would do that sort of thing, especially with Myfanwy around, but there was always the off-chance that a simple mis-step could cause an incident.

They could have teleported back to the house, but this was better. This would allow Daisy time to think, to consider what had occurred, and hopefully to come to terms with what Ward had said to her. And riding horseback could be calming; he knew she wouldn’t hide from him that she was upset, and angry, because she would need the comfort of his presence. This would also give her time to take a little control back that she’d lost to Ward and his machinations.

And she needed to do just that. Ward had managed to sneak right past his daughter’s defenses, with that shit about knowing who her real parents were. To be honest, if Phil hadn’t known how she really felt about them, he would have been concerned that Ward’s gambit might have worked. But Daisy had been through that sort of self-doubt before, and had come out on the other side stronger than ever. The Wizard understood his daughter’s feelings on the matter, and while he would have supported her search for her parents if she’d wanted to just that, except for a very short time when she’d been younger she’d carried around quite a chip on her shoulder about how they’d left her.

She’d always maintained that Phil was the father she wanted. Which was perfect, because she was the only daughter he’d ever plan on having.

They tied the horses up to the hitching post out back of the house, where Ianto had requested they do so, and headed inside. The wards let them in with no effort; the Cardinal Wizard had taken the time to key their auras to the magic, like giving them both a key to the house, which had been an immense sign of trust. Ianto had shrugged it off, saying that, chances were, Phil would be coming to the house more often now that he was a Grand Master.

The rear door opened into the kitchens, which were tidy after the dinner they’d been served. Lola and Skye had joined them, and were poking around the cold box and pantry for something to eat, and if Lola was grumbling at him for being hungry then it was a good guess that Skye was doing the same with Daisy.
He shushed her, chuckling, then raided the box for cold hanks of meat for both dragons, knowing that Ianto wouldn’t mind by the fact that there was something already laid out on the cold box’s lower shelf although Phil would let the Cardinal Grand Master know about it when he arrived back later. Once they were settled with their snacks and glasses of juice poured for himself and Daisy, the Wizard led his daughter out of the kitchen and into the sitting room, where he sat her down on the couch and took the place next to her, making certain the glasses were in reach as he settled in. He lifted up an arm, and Daisy took the invitation, cuddling up to his side in a way she hadn’t done in a couple of years, after she’d considered herself too old to do that sort of thing.

Her magic sparked against his own, warming his skin through his clothes. It had been odd to so many people that a Void Wizard had adopted a Cardinal child, thinking that they were too opposite in their power to co-exist. And yes, Phil could admit that it had been strange at first, her magic reacting to his, but it had never been unpleasant. If anything, it seemed as if the Deep Ways in Daisy meshed with the Void within him all too well, like the pair of them were puzzle pieces that had slotted together perfectly, forming a larger image. Now, more than ever, it was as if they’d always belonged with each other.

Phil stayed quiet, waiting for Daisy to be the one to speak first. He couldn’t rush her; she was stubborn, and the more he’d prod her the more she’d want to keep silent about what was on her mind. He’d been in this battle with her so many times over the years, and knew just how to handle things by now.

It didn’t take her long to start talking.

“I’m sorry, Dad.”

Phil tightened his arm around her. “Sorry for what?”

“For not getting Ward to talk.”

“I doubt that was ever going to happen, sweetheart.” He’d doubted it from the moment Ward had demanded that he’d only speak to Daisy. It had been worth a shot, but he’d been positive that this had to have been some sort of trick.

“Still, I think I should’ve been able to get him to say something.”

She rested her head on his shoulder, much like she used to do after nightmares when she’d been younger. He wrapped his other arm around her, knowing she needed the comfort and perfectly willing to give it to her.

When Phil had found Daisy in that alley, he’d had no idea just how much she’d come to mean to him. She’d been his second chance, but he’d been that for her, as well. She’d been through so much in her young life, and Phil had reacted to that with a fierce protectiveness that still stunned him to this day. Daisy had long grown out of most displays of that protectiveness, claiming that she was nearly an adult and could take care of herself, but Phil knew he’d always feel this way.

She was his daughter. Not someone else’s, but his. And, if those derelict people who gave birth to her came into her life tomorrow, Phil would fight them tooth and nail to keep her his child.

Daisy sighed against him. “Do you really think Hydra went looking for my birth parents?”

Unfortunately, he could see them doing just that, and he said so. “Hydra wanted me to cooperate, and they were going to do whatever that took. If bringing your parents into the situation and threatening to take you away from me was a part of that plan, it would certainly have worked.” He
didn’t add that just by kidnapping her, Hydra would have assured his cooperation. He didn’t think it needed to be said, really.

“I wouldn’t have ever gone with them, you know. They gave me up.” She craned her neck, so that she could look up at him. “You never would.”

“No, never.” He leaned forward and kissed her forehead. “I recognize it’s your choice, Daisy, but I would have fought them with every bit of magic I have to keep you, if that was what you wanted.”

“Love you, Dad.”

His heart swelled every single time she told him that. “I love you, too.”

Daisy relaxed back into his arms, resting her head once more against him. Phil reflected on just how lucky he was, to have this amazing young woman in his life.

It was silent in the house; only the sound of the chronometer on the mantelpiece ticking over the heartbeats of the hours kept them company as they sat together, peace descending over Phil for perhaps the first time that day. He’d been perfectly content as he lay in Clint’s arms, and their little conversation before they’d gotten up that morning had given him a feeling of peace, and he wasn’t about to lose that feeling anything soon.

He regretted not having told Clint that he was still alive years ago, but that was done and over with now. Their future lay before them, for as long as they had each other.

Then he realized someone was watching him.

Phil glanced toward the entry, not surprised to see Natasha standing there, leaning against the wall, her pale eyes on both himself and Daisy, so still that he hadn’t noticed her there before. She hadn’t changed from the last time the Wizard had seen her, only that her vibrantly red hair was shorter, her face still unlined even after the decade that had passed. She was beautiful and deadly, and if Phil had been attracted to women Natasha would have been the one.

He was certain Clint would have felt the same way, if he hadn’t already considered Natasha more of a sister than a potential lover.

“It’s good to see you, Phil.” Her voice was quiet, and inflectionless. However, he could tell she was being completely honest.

“And you,” he admitted. “Clint says you’re either going to punch me, or kiss me. Which one can I expect?”

A corner of her mouth quirked upward. “I’ll let you know.”

Daisy shifted slightly in his embrace, yet she didn’t move away. “If you do hit him, make sure I’m a witness, alright?”

Phil snorted. “I see how you are.”

His daughter laughed. “You didn’t tell her or Clint you were alive, Dad. Don’t you think they deserve some sort of retribution? Well, Clint is different, because I’m guessing he gave up on that when you dragged him out of the Quorum yesterday.”

“Really?” Natasha was looking quite insufferable.
“Yep. There was a reason I stayed over in my dorm room last night…”

Despite the teasing, Daisy sounded very happy for him. Phil was glad; he wanted his daughter and his lover to get along, and that seemed to be likely.

“It’s about time,” the Widow snorted. “You have no idea the pining I had to deal with back in the day. Clint, because he thought Phil was far out of his league; and Phil, since he had this notion that he wasn’t allowed to be happy because he was the Dark One. It was disgusting.”

She’d hit the proverbial nail on its head. Still, Phil wasn’t about to admit to that sort of thing. “If you’re both through giving me grief…”

“Not by a long shot, Phil,” Natasha threatened. “You still owe me for you making me believe you were dead, and I intend to collect.”

He knew she would, too. Natasha had very strong feelings on the subject of getting even.

“I bet you can tell me all sorts of stories about my Dad,” Daisy said.

“Oh, I can. Just wait until you hear about the time we had to locate the Black Fortress. It would mysteriously appear at sunrise in one location, and then leave the next sunrise in order to teleport somewhere else…”

Phil had to laugh at that. As far as stories went, that one was fairly innocuous, except for the one-eyed giant and that swamp they’d had to track through. He’d ruined a pair of good boots in that swamp.

“How was that possible?” Daisy demanded. “That sort of spell…”

“It was a remnant left over from before magic had been shut away, although how it kept going when there hadn’t been any more magic to fuel it…well, we never did find that out.” Phil couldn’t help but grin, wishing he’d been able to explore the Fortress more at the time. He made a mental note to see if he could find it once more. “Some Wizard had had the brilliant idea of using a very powerful Teleport spell on the entire Fortress, as well as making it practically unPlotable. It’s actually where I got my own unPlotable spell from, the one that’s on the Keep at the moment.” That had been the one thing he’d been able to work out about the Fortress before they’d had to get what they’d been searching for and get out. None of them had wanted to end up on one of the moons, or across the world, when the Teleport magic got set off again. Getting home would have been a bitch, especially since they would have had no idea where they would have ended up.

“The problem,” Natasha continued, walking further into the room and taking a seat in the chair opposite the couch where they were sitting, “was that they’d had no control over the magic when they’d cast it, so there was no telling where the Fortress would end up. One day, it could have been on a mountaintop…the next, at the bottom of the ocean.”

“You’re kidding!” Daisy was laughing now, and Phil was glad to hear it. “How could anyone survive the bottom of the ocean?”

“There was also some Protection magic on the Fortress,” the Wizard answered. “No matter where that thing ended up, it would be protected from whatever environment it teleported to.”

He’d gotten a lot of enjoyment out of tracking down the Black Fortress. He could still hear the cursing Marcus had done when he’d discovered that the only way to catch up with the Fortress had been to ride a Fire Mare…oh, that had been hilarious. The Fire Mare had taken such a dislike to Marcus that his friend had ended up with both teeth marks and slight burns over the course of the
high-speed chase. And that dislike had been completely mutual. To this day, Marcus would, every once in a while, accuse Phil of deciding to call the Fire Mares to carry them as part of a twisted plot to get some sort of revenge on him for something the man couldn’t recall doing. Phil would laugh at the accusation, because it was a little closer to the truth than he would ever admit.

He would have been content to tell Daisy that story, but there was a sudden flare of magic outside the house, with the undeniable signature of a Teleport spell. “Someone’s just arrived.”

Natasha instantly tensed, a knife appearing in her hand as if by magic…which was about as far from the truth as possible. Phil had learned from experience that the Widow was never unarmed, and that she could hide any number of weapons on her person and no one would have been able to find them all.

Another presence pinged his magical senses…this one new, but familiar all the same. It was as if a star had appeared outside, but it wasn’t blinding in any way. “One of them is the Deathless.”

The knife vanished.

If Jack was back, then that would mean that Clint and Lady Toshiko were, as well. They hadn’t been gone all that long, and Phil wondered if the trail of the Winter Knight had already gone cold. They still had the pendulum, and Ianto could try to Scry for him again once he and Stephen returned from the Quorum Hall. They would keep trying until they found him…

No, wait.

Something was…not right.

There was a source of Void energy with them. It wasn’t a Wizard; if Phil had to guess, it was someone who’d been practically bathed in the Void.

That could mean…He stiffened, tense at what his mind was telling him.

“How’s that with them?”

“I need to get up, sweetheart.” He needed to see if he was correct about who Jack and the others had brought back with them.

Daisy scrambled up immediately, and Phil stood, striding toward the house’s front door. Natasha was beside him, the knife back in her hand, as if she’d put it together with just the scraps that Phil had said, although it was most likely his silent reaction to what he’d been sensing that was ruffling her own proverbial feathers.

Natasha actually beat him to the front door, as if she was attempting to protect him from what was outside. He was touched by it because, after all, he’d abandoned both her and Clint when he’d faked his death, and she didn’t really have much of a reason to watch out for his well-being.

The Wizard stopped next to Natasha, his magic rising within him, knowing he wouldn’t hesitate to use it if Clint or any of his new friends were hurt. It felt natural to be this protective, and it made him wonder how he’d been able to subsume that urge for so long, so down deep that it had never touched the Dark One’s conscience.

The truth of that thought suddenly hit him.

He hadn’t.
He’d always been protective, he just hadn’t realized it.

Just Buda-Pest alone should have given him that single, vital clue.

Gods, of course,

But he didn’t have time to consider that newest revelation.

In the front yard stood Jack in his armor, Toshiko behind him and to the left. Clint was even farther back, an arrow to the string of his bow, ready to loose it at a moment’s notice.

It was pointed at the man who stood in the midst of their group.

Behind him, Daisy gasped.

Phil hadn’t actually ever seen the Winter Knight. That had been Clint, who’d fought the man off as Pierce was busily putting the Vibranium chain around Phil’s neck, killing him instantly; and Daisy, who’d been up close and personal with him as she was attempting to escape. This man had been her guard.

Because it was the Winter Knight, standing in the middle of the group of well-armed fighters, looking unsure and wary and oh so very dangerous.
Chapter 21

Clint watched as Phil paced about the seated Winter Knight, his eyes black with Void, muttering under his breath as he magically examined the formerly brainwashed man, especially that arm that just looked wrong to the Elf. He didn’t have magic and it felt that way, so he could only imagine what Phil thought about the thing.

His lover had also recognized the man as Sir James Barnes, childhood friend of the Paladin of the Western Lands. However, Phil hadn’t let his confusion – and excitement; after all, this was Sir James, and Sir Steven was currently sleeping at Ferrous Castle, because this couldn’t at all be a coincidence – get the better of him, so when Jack had asked him to check out the silent man, the Void Wizard had readily agreed.

They’d taken the examination down to Ianto’s casting chamber. Jack had deemed it the safest place for them to do whatever magic Phil had to do in order to ascertain that the Winter Knight wasn’t so dangerous anymore. They couldn’t risk the man getting out once more, and if Phil did something to trigger some sort of episode…this was the best place for any sort of examination.

Jack would be the one explaining to Ianto if things got out of hand and his casting chamber was wrecked in the process. Clint didn’t envy the man one bit if that did happen.

Phil had pulled a chair up for Sir James to sit in, and the man had done so easily. The Wizard had then directed everyone else to stand away, and had gotten started, Lola prowling along at her Wizard’s side, but she wasn’t growling or hissing or anything like that...not yet, at least. So far, it was a good sign.

Phil’s wand was out, but at that moment he wasn’t using it, only whatever magical sight he had, so Clint was thinking this was also a good sign. The aura of power about the Wizard was filling the chamber, making the hairs on the Elf’s arms stand up.

Clint was just a little bit turned on by the display.

Of course, Natasha noticed, judging by the tiny smirk on her lips.

_Damnit, Natasha._

He hadn’t seen her in days. And now, she was leaning against the wall next to him, looking calm and cool and not at all like she’d been tracking Hydra for days on end.

It wasn’t fair, really.

To be an asshole, he murmured, “I didn’t notice any bruises, so I take it you didn’t hit him.”

“No, not yet, anyway.” Anyone who didn’t know her, wouldn’t have heard the humor in her words. “And I notice that you kissed him.”

Clint rolled his eyes fondly at her. “Well, it was about time.”

Natasha didn’t answer that, but the Elf could practically smell her approval.

Daisy sidled up to his other side, her own eyes watching her Dad as he worked. Jack was standing
close by, still wearing his armor, but Clint didn’t think he was about to attack even if he was prepared for that happening. He’d been shaken by the fact that the Winter Knight was actually a Hero of the Century War, and Sir Steven Rogers’ best friend to boot, and who could blame him? Clint had felt the same way.

Although, they did know how Sir James had survived so long. It was the box that was in the room beyond this one, the co-called Zero Cabinet, and wasn’t that a nasty artifact? Who would deliberately put someone inside that thing? Knowing that whoever came out would be unchanged, no matter how many centuries they’d been trapped inside? It was horrific.


Plus, Hydra had messed with the guy’s head. Sir James couldn’t really remember who he was, or how he’d survived the fall that history had claimed had killed him. How his best friend had thought him dead before going into his own final battle.

Clint didn’t want to feel sorry for the Winter Knight. That bastard had beaten the crap out of the archer in a completely unfair fight. He’d touched Daisy, who hadn’t deserved being kidnapped and used to coerce her father into serving Hydra…until Phil had actually died, and then there’d been no telling what would have happened to her then if Phil hadn’t come back.

But, he certainly felt bad for Sir James Barnes.

That didn’t mean he didn’t have his bow in one hand, arrow in the other, ready to shoot if things became chaotic.

“What if Dad can’t help him?” Daisy asked quietly.

“He’ll do the best he can.” Of that, Clint had no doubt. Whether it would work or not was still up for debate.

“I just…” the young woman sounded a little frustrated. “The first time I saw him, his eyes were just so dead. I feel a little guilty thinking what I thought of him, knowing now that it wasn’t his fault.”

“You have nothing to feel guilty about,” Clint reassured her. “There was no possible way for any of us to have figured out what was going on with him. Hydra’s to blame in all this.” Hydra sucked, and he couldn’t wait until it had been wiped out. None of them would be really safe until that happened.

“And it’s alright to still be frightened of him,” Natasha added. “So don’t feel bad about that, either.”

Trust Natasha to have caught that. Clint might be able to see better at a distance, but in this case it was a little too close for comfort.

Daisy glanced at them both gratefully. Clint couldn’t help but revel somewhat in the warmth that her gratitude built in his chest. It meant a lot to him that Phil’s kid had just confided in him, and had come to him – and Nat, sure – for some sort of validation of how she was feeling. He might have been shit at emotions, but the archer thought, in this case, he’d gotten it right.

They went back to watching Phil. The black was still swirling about in his eyes, but now he held the man’s magical arm in his hand, the other – wand now put away – hovering over it, tendrils of dark smoke weaving from his fingers and over the metal of that artificial arm. Clint could sense the magicks that made that arm possible, even if he had no idea how to identify the spells, and he leaned over to ask Daisy if she could see anything.
The young Wizard’s eyes flashed gold for a second, and she frowned. “It’s definitely cursed, but I can’t tell what sort of curse it is. Dad will be able to, and Ianto definitely could, since he’s so good at unraveling that sort of thing.”

Clint remembered how Ianto had picked apart the curse that had been affecting Andrew Garner, and had to agree that he was, indeed, really very good at unraveling curses.

“There’s still a lot of Void in him,” Daisy went on.

“Well, he had been exposed to it for quite a while,” the Elf said.

She nodded. “And the power of that Void Point there at that mansion was obviously used to make him the way he was. Dad’s gonna be a bit in fixing it…if he can.”

Clint could understand her uncertainty, but Phil was really strong. If anyone would be able to figure it out, it was him; and if he needed help, the archer was sure that Ianto would be able to step in. Together, the pair of Wizards would be able to work things out in the end.

And, if not...there was still the arrow Clint had kept a hold of. He’d hate to use it, but if that was the only response that could be made, then he’d be the one to make it. He didn’t want this sort of death on Phil’s conscience.

His instincts told him that Jack would be right beside him, looking out for Ianto’s conscience as well.

“Have we missed anything?”

Clint didn’t jump at Ianto’s voice, which seemed to have come from just behind his shoulder, when in fact the door was several paces away. Ianto and Stephen had come home at some point; the Elf was a little embarrassed that he hadn’t noticed the two Grand Masters arriving. But then, he’d been completely focused on Phil and what he was doing, so thought he could be excused.

“Nothing really yet,” Phil answered. Clint turned his attention toward his lover, who’d stepped away from the Winter Knight, his eyes blue again and any outward sign of his having just used his magic gone. He shook his head, not looking at all happy.

“I take it,” Grand Master Stephen said, “that this is the infamous Winter Knight.”

“He’s also Sir James Barnes,” Jack introduced, “Sir Steven Rogers’ companion in arms.”

The Great Wizard raised a single eyebrow. “That...is a surprise.”

“They seemed to know who I am,” the Winter Knight spoke up. His voice was gravelly and pitched low, as if he just didn’t speak all that much, which Clint figured was pretty close to the truth. “I came with them, because I need to know about myself.”

“We’ll do our best,” Jack assured the man. His eyes glanced toward Phil. “What can you tell us?”

The Void Wizard sighed. “It’s not good.”

“I don’t think anyone of us thought it would be.”

Phil nodded in agreement. “First of all, Hydra was using their tainted Void Point to reinforce every single curse that Sir James has had inflicted upon him.”

“Which was why he escaped once that power was gone,” Ianto surmised.
“I…” the fallen knight stammered, “all I knew was, I could suddenly think, and I had to get away before that changed.”

“Once the power that was fueling those curses was gone, a couple of them faded rather quickly.” Phil was pensive. “Many of those curses are old. And I don’t mean just because it’s been so long since Sir James had been cursed. I don’t know if we’ll ever know the source of the magic behind some of the actual spells, since they were cast back when magic wasn’t readily available, but I think we need to assume it was some sort of artifact.”

Clint could practically hear what Phil didn’t say…it was probably the same artifact that had most likely exiled Sir Steven to the Void. History claimed that the Skull had gained some sort of very powerful magical item, and that seemed to be the source of everything that had been done to both men.

“What curses can you read?” Ianto inquired.

“Amnesia and Suppression. Obedience. A particularly nasty geas. There are also parts of some sort of Berserker magic that I’ve never seen before, almost like Bloodlust, only vaguely different. And that’s not what’s included on the arm.”

Clint couldn’t help the whistle that escaped.

Phil gave him a wan smile. “That’s about the same reaction I had, only without the sound.”

Ianto stepped forward, his eyes changing into the black and gold ellipses that heralded his own magic. Then he blinked, and his eyes were back to being blue once more. “Yes, that Berserker magic is odd. I’ll need to consult some of the older records to see if I can find its like, the better to counteract it.”

“What about the arm?” Natasha spoke up.

“That…” Phil shook his head. “The arm itself is a magical artifact of very great age. I wouldn’t hesitate to say at least two thousand years old.”

“That ancient?” It was Grand Master Stephen’s turn to step up and his own eyes flashed with his magic as he took in the arm that was resting at the Winter Knight’s side. His fingers twitched in a pattern that Clint couldn’t read and, to his surprise, Agamotto – who had been twined over the Great Wizard’s shoulders – shivered and began to glow very faintly, as if his scales were being lit from within, their emerald color going translucent.

“Your estimate of age is a little off,” Stephen murmured. “I think we need to add another thousand years to that.”

Now, it was Jack’s turn to whistle. “Will any sort of record of it be in the Archive somewhere?”

“May be,” Ianto answered. “Sounds like I’m going to have a day ahead of me searching the old records.”

“Let us do that,” Daisy spoke up. “Me and my friends. We’ve been looking for something to do, and we can do this. That way you’re all freed up to handle Hydra and the Quorum.”

The Cardinal Wizard gave her a smile. “Thank you, Daisy. That would be ideal. Remind me to lend you my translation spectacles; many of the older scrolls are in the Wizard language, and in other languages that have long since died out.”
She looked pleased at that.

“What else about that arm?” Natasha brought them back on task.

“It’s magically connected,” Phil reported. “Without unwinding the curses on it, we’ll never get it off.”

“I want it gone,” Sir James whispered. “I remember…” His brow furrowed in what looked like old pain. “Falling. I fell. There was pain. And freezing. The arm isn’t mine, that I do know.”

There was a fleeting look of pity on Phil’s face, but then he went back to business. “There is a single decent charm on that arm, and it’s an Unbreakable charm. That’s about the only beneficial magic that I can see. Everything else…another Berserker, this one to give that thing immense strength. A modified geas curse that allows him to control it like he would a physical arm, but would also allow someone else to take control if necessary. Contamination –”

“What?” Clint cut in, worried. “It’s contaminated?” That wasn’t good. What had they all been exposed to?

“Not like that,” Phil reassured him. “It’s what’s called the Law of Magical Contamination. Any magical artifact automatically contaminates its user. Not usually in a bad way; it’s like not having a piece of paper to write something down on, and you use your arm instead. The magic marks the user.”

That didn’t sound too bad.

“In this case –”

Of course, there was a but…

“The magic makes the bearer of the arm compatible with the actual arm by contaminating the owner with its own magical signature.”

“Like calls to like,” Daisy spoke up.

Phil glanced at her proudly. “Exactly right. In this case, the similar magical signature kept Sir James’ body from rejecting the arm, and vice versa.”

“We’re going to have to invalidate the contamination before we can even hope to start removing it,” Ianto added. “And then the various curses. It’s going to be quite the operation.”

“What’s it to the three Grand Masters of the Orders?” Jack said confidently.

“There will come a time,” Ianto said, rolling his eyes fondly, “when I won’t be able to do something, and your confidence in me will get me into trouble. Now, you’re dragging Phil and Stephen into it.”

“Never gonna happen.”

Clint was leaning toward agreeing with the Deathless, because he knew Phil and knew just what he could do. Damnit, the man could do things with the Void that should have been impossible. The Elf might not have been a trained Wizard, but he’d seen it with his own eyes. His lover was amazing, and he was glad that someone else was seeing it, too.

“We have a lot to do,” Stephen put in. “Digging Hydra out of Void Order, and then helping Sir James, here. Unless he can tell us about just who we might be looking for?”
The knight shook his head, his dark, lank hair falling over his forehead. “I only know who was in that house, and I wasn’t even told their names.”

Jack was nodding. “That makes sense. They didn’t care about you, beyond you being a weapon for them.”

“I might still be.”

It was a good sign that he was doubting himself. Clint had been on the wrong side of mind control before – thank you, Loki – and knew what that was like. If he wasn’t worried that he might be triggered in some way, then the archer would have been more concerned. It showed he was coming back from whatever the hells Hydra had done to him.

“What do you recall?” Ianto asked softly.

The Winter Knight turned wounded eyes up to the Cardinal Wizard. “Hydra. All I can really remember, besides bits and pieces, is Hydra.”

“Then they have been around for a while,” Jack confirmed. “Looks like the Avatar was correct about that.”

Clint had heard about the conversation with the Avatar of Gateway, and her assertion that Hydra had been around a lot longer than just this iteration. If Hydra had been involved in the Century War…it could mean a bigger mess than what they’d all thought.

He wondered if Sir Steven would be able to tell them more once he was awake. After all, unless being trapped within the Void had somehow damaged him, then he would be the perfect source for any information on an historic cabal going by that name. It might even make their own hunt a little easier.

“Did you find the casket they kept me in?” Sir James’ voice went even softer, as if he was asking for some sort of horrible secret.

And maybe he was, knowing the true nature of that thing.

“Are you going to suggest we put you back in?” Phil questioned. He didn’t look very happy.

“Until you can get this off,” he raised the metallic arm, “and remove the curses, it might be for the best.”

“I don’t like that idea at all,” Jack growled.

“Neither do I.” Ianto’s face had gone adamant in denial.

“He could be right,” Natasha mused.

That had every eye in the room on her, including Clint’s, who’d been inclined to agree with the outrage that had begun to grow in his lover’s eyes. The very idea of anyone wanting to go back into that thing… it made him shiver just thinking about it.

Although, Clint could understand it. When he’d come out of Loki’s mind control, the first thing he’d wondered about himself was if he was safe to be around, if Loki could somehow regain the magical control that he’d had the Elf under. He would have done anything to protect his friends and loved ones; that had included Phil, but that had been before he’d been told that the Dark One had gone into open challenge with Loki and had been killed in the attempt. Also, by the time he’d been brought
out of Loki’s thrall, the armies of the Western Lands had rallied and pushed the mad Asgardian’s
demonic forces back. It hadn’t been long after that, that Loki had been taken into custody and
shipped back to Asgard, where he’d stood trial and had been summarily imprisoned…where he
remained to this day. He still wanted to know how Whitehall had gotten in to see him, but that was
for another day.

“I refuse to put you back into that Zero Cabinet,” Ianto swore. “It’s inhumane.”

“I won’t even know it,” Sir James said softly. “It’ll be like blinking for me.”

“But, I’ll know it!” the Cardinal Wizard nearly shouted. It was the first time Clint had ever seen
Ianto lose his temper, but the man was seriously angry for even suggesting that Sir James go back
into that box.

“And if I want to go back?” Sir James stood. He and Ianto were the same height, but there was
something about the man that seemed to tower over the Wizard. It wasn’t menace, although the
Winter Knight was certainly menacing. And it wasn’t power, either; Ianto was much more powerful,
magic-wise, and Clint had no doubt that he could take care of himself against the fallen knight.

No, it was more an emotional thing. Sir James Barnes was so full of despair and guilt and more that
it had piled upon him, making him more tragic than a person had a right to be. It gave him a gravitas
that had him seem taller and stronger than anyone else in the room.

“I can’t run the risk of hurting anyone,” Sir James went on. “And, right now, that’s a very real risk.
Until you can remove the curses and this arm,” he raised the metal/magic one, spreading his fingers
out in front of him, “there’s a very significant threat that I could get triggered and hurt someone.
That’s the last thing I want to do.” He stared Ianto right in the eye. “So, please. Put me back in that
coffin. Once you’ve taken care of Hydra, you can come back to me. I won’t be going anywhere.”

Clint held his breath. Because, the guy was right. Until they could get all that cursed shit off him, he
was a threat. Sure, he’d come with them willingly, but that didn’t mean Hydra could somehow get
to him in some way, and that would put everyone in danger. As much as he didn’t like the idea of
locking an innocent person away, at this point in time it would most likely be for the best.

He didn’t expect Daisy to be the one to break the stalemate between Ianto and Sir James.

That brave young woman calmly stepped between the two men, her gaze uplifted toward the Winter
Knight, her dark eyes examining him closely as if she could read his mind. As no one had said that
she had access to mental magic, that wasn’t something Clint thought she could do, but it was still
really impressive.

The only sign of her nerves were the twitching of her fingers, from where they protruded from her
magical gauntlets.

“Do you remember me?” she asked.

The Winter Knight nodded. “I’m sorry for what I did to you.”

“Yeah, I get that.” Skye, from her perch on Daisy’s shoulder, sniffed at the man and then sneezed.
It would have been funny if things weren’t so fraught at the moment.

“I don’t want to do that again, but I can’t promise that won’t happen.”

Daisy nodded. “I get that,” she repeated. “You see, when my magic first manifested, I caused an
earthquake that had half a mountain slide into the valley beyond our home.”
Clint’s eyes widened in surprise. While he’d known that the gauntlets she wore gave her control over her magic, the Elf hadn’t realized she was that powerful. From Natasha’s small flinch, she hadn’t known, either, and there wasn’t a lot that his partner didn’t know.

No wonder Mistress Pepper was the one teaching her. The Head of Cardinal Order was just about as powerful as a Wizard could get, if they weren’t named Ianto Jones.

“I was real dangerous,” Daisy said, “and the last thing I wanted to do was hurt my Dad. So, he made me these.” She held up her arms to display the gauntlets. “Not saying he could do the same for you, but I understand you better than I think anyone else in this room…well, except for my Dad, and he was the Dark One.”

She gave Phil a brilliant smile, one that he returned. He nodded at her to keep going, because it seemed to be getting through to their traumatized new friend.

“So, while I get what Ianto’s saying, I can also understand your point. Your case is a bit different than mine, what with all the brainwashing and cursing and stuff, but you need to feel safe…as well as keeping the ones who want to help you safe as well.”

“Yes, that’s right.” Sir James looked relieved that she seemed to be sympathizing with him.

“So,” the young Wizard took a deep breath. “Here’s what I propose. Since Ianto has a moral reason not to put you back into your casket, I’ll do it for you.”

“Novice Daisy!” Ianto barked, his eyes flashing in anger. “I forbid it!”

“Ianto,” Jack called softly. “Let her.”

The Cardinal Wizard whirled on his husband. “Jack, that thing is nothing less than a torture device –”

“One that he’s very familiar with.”

As Clint watched, the Deathless walked over to his Wizard, resting his hands on Ianto’s shoulders. Both Stephen and Phil had stepped out of the way; Daisy, however, had turned, her back toward Sir James, as if she meant to protect him from whatever was going to happen next.

That girl had guts. Clint respected the hells out of her.

“You have to trust him to know what he wants,” Jack went on. “Yes, that box is horrible, but he’s already survived it so many times. And we can’t risk him getting triggered by something we might accidentally do.”

“He’s right,” Natasha spoke up. “We can’t be watching over our shoulders for the knife that he could very well wield when we aren’t paying attention. And it wouldn’t even be his fault.”

“This will also give us a chance to work out a strategy to free him from the curses that were put on him,” Stephen pointed out. “I don’t like it any more than you do, but we might not have a choice this time.”

“This would make us no better than Hydra,” Ianto argued.

“But it does,” Daisy interrupted. “Because we’re gonna let him out, and fix him. He knows that, and it’s what he wants. But he also doesn’t want to hurt us, and I can understand his fear.”
“It’s going to take some planning in order to completely remove all the curses and triggers,” Phil said, “and this will give us time to get our house in order and to make certain it’s a completely safe environment for him to return to.”

The Cardinal Grand Master growled angrily. Jerking away from Jack, he threw his hand out toward one of the work benches that lined the walls, the force of the concussive burst he let loose shattering a couple of glass beakers and tossing a heavy marble mortar and pestle to the floor. Myfanwy, distressed in her own right and also feeling what her master was, keened sadly and flew to her Wizard’s side, wrapping one claw about his leg and mantling her wings, as if she wanted to tuck them around Ianto and protect him from his own emotions. It was obvious from the dragon’s reacting that Ianto wasn’t angry, but distressed at what he saw as unnecessary torment for an innocent whose only crime was to have been in just the wrong place at the wrong time, to have been taken by Hydra and cursed beyond anything anyone had ever witnessed.

It upset the other dragons as well, that a sister was in distress, so they all flocked to their own Wizard; except for Skye, who was already seated on Daisy’s shoulder.

Clint wished he could use whatever the hells Elves had to help, but no one knew exactly what made dragons like Elves so much. It was either pheromones, or magic, or perhaps because of his race’s closeness to nature, but it wasn’t something he could just turn on and off at will.

Still, at least the three others were with their Wizards, who would take care of them.

Through it all, the Winter Knight stood just behind Daisy, accepting her shielding of him even thought he was much taller and had at least twice the weight on the young woman, not including that damned arm. Skye kept her own attention forward, Daisy’s confidence in the fact that Sir James didn’t want to hurt her evident in her dragon’s actions.

For someone who’d been held captive by that very man, Daisy Coulson was showing a lot of faith in him not attacking her. She had more than guts; she had sheer cussedness and determination, and it was wonderful to watch…
Chapter 22

Daisy stood there, watching Ianto get upset, and while she wanted to help him, she couldn’t. This was up to him.

Oh, she could understand what he was saying. Daisy didn’t have any sort of knowledge about the Zero Cabinet, but it sounded horrific. To be put in that thing, and to never change or sleep or anything…she just couldn’t imagine it. It wasn’t something she wanted anyone to have to experience.

And yet, Sir James was suggesting that very thing.

However, she could totally get why he was asking. Having been under Hydra control for so long, and still carrying around the curses her Dad had seen, he would have wanted to make certain he wasn’t going to hurt the ones who wanted to help him.

She hadn’t been lying when she’d told him that she could sympathize with how he was feeling. Daisy could still vividly recall the day her magic had manifested after a particularly nasty temper tantrum she’d thrown. It hadn’t even been because of her Dad or Melinda or Andrew; it had been silly, and her own fault. But it had caused her magic to explode outward in a way that had caused part of a mountain to collapse, and it had been the scariest thing she’d ever experienced…and she’d been in the middle of a battle.

Dad had managed to help her regain control, and that very night he’d stayed up and worked on the gauntlets she now wore. She really didn’t need them anymore; now, it was more because she was used to them, and liked them, and they’d been a gift from a father who’d done his best to protect her from her own magic.

So, she just got why Sir James was worried about losing control. Sure, Hydra getting into Ianto’s house wasn’t something she thought was possible, but anything could trigger him, and he wanted to make sure he was safe.

And it was his decision. They had to respect that.

So, while she waited for Ianto to see that he couldn’t just refuse to accept Sir James’ need to make sure he wasn’t going to be a danger to himself and to others, she turned back to the man who’d been her guard back at Hydra’s base, wanting to get a better look at him and perhaps to know him a little better.

The horrible blankness was gone from his eyes. Now, his emotions were visible for anyone to see, and Daisy noticed the fear and uncertainty beyond the placid façade he was wearing. There was also pain there, and Daisy had to wonder just how he was hurting.

“I’m always in pain,” he answered, when she asked. “It’s mostly my shoulder and chest, where the arm’s connected. And my head, now, but I think that’s because I’m not under control anymore. I…hope that also means I’ll be getting my memories back.” He looked at her, cocking his head to side. “Why are you doing this?”

“Doing what?” She was confused.

“Standing up for me, after what I did to you…”
“Wasn’t you.” She shrugged. “It was Hydra.”

“I don’t even know who I am anymore…”

That was so soft, Daisy wouldn’t have heard the words if she’d been standing any further away. This is your chance to find out who that is.”

His eyes met hers directly. “Please…why are you helping me like this?”

Daisy took a single step closer. Like this, she could tell he hadn’t bathed in days, but she wasn’t about to let that gross her out. “Look, I can’t pretend to know what you’ve gone through. But what I do know is that you haven’t been given any sort of choice. This…” she waved her hand around, not pointing at anything in particular, “is you making a choice. You should be allowed to decide what you want to do.”

She gave him a small smile. “But, please see Ianto’s point of view. If he agrees to put you back inside that cabinet, then he believes he won’t be any better than the ones who did it without your consent. And there’s one thing I know… Ianto Jones is a genuinely good man. He just doesn’t get that, in thinking the way he does, he’s taking away your choice. He’ll understand, just give him a few moments.”

She had that much faith in the Cardinal Grand Master. She might have just recently gotten to know him, but that was what she was seeing in his stubborn denial of putting Sir James back into the cabinet for the time being.

Even now, the ranting behind her was over. Daisy blushed as she realized everyone must have heard her. She wasn’t one for being on the stage, so to speak, so it was a little unnerving.

And arm went around her shoulders, careful of Skye sitting there, and she didn’t have to even look to know who it was. Her head tilted up so she could look at her Dad, and his expression was equal parts love, pride, and the desire to pull her away from a man who was obviously still quite dangerous. That he wasn’t doing just that was a testament of his willingness to let her stand her ground…and the knowledge that he could overpower the Winter Knight with his magic the moment the man showed any indication of attacking her.

“She’s right,” Ianto’s tired voice spoke up. Daisy turned, and saw just how resigned the Grand Master was, Jack standing next to him in support. “I’m sorry for that, Sir James. I didn’t consider the notion that I was taking the very thing from you that Hydra did. I would have been just as bad as they were if I had.”

It was a ‘damned if you do, damned if you don’t’, moment. Daisy didn’t envy him in the least.

“And you,” Ianto moved toward Daisy, shaking his head, “you are showing a great deal of wisdom for one so young.”

“That’s my girl,” Dad said proudly.

“Makes me wish she wasn’t a Cardinal,” Grand Master Stephen said, “because I’d have snapped her up as my own Novice in a heartbeat.”

“I wish I’d beaten Pepper to the punch,” the Cardinal Grand Master replied.

Daisy felt herself blushing all over again. She didn’t honestly think she was all that special, but it was still gratifying to hear.
“Now,” Stephen said, “that we’ve decided to go along with Sir James’ request, we should probably get started.”

If Daisy was honest, she really didn’t want to do what the Winter Knight was suggesting. The very idea of being in that box, even if he wouldn’t really be aware of it, made her skin crawl. But, she wasn’t about to disagree with him, because this really was his choice. Because he was dangerous, and knew it, and didn’t want to risk hurting anyone.

Already his conscience was coming to the forefront. It was a very good sign indeed.

Daisy had hope for him.
The moment Pepper used that Disarming spell, she knew she’d made a mistake, but she really didn’t like swords aimed in her direction, let alone in Tony’s, not after his kidnapping a couple of years back.

Still, she could see just how shocked Sir Steven had been by her casual use of magic. She should have remembered that, back the last time Sir Steven would be able to recall, magic had been cut off from the world, a myth that populated most of the children’s tales. There had only been the artifacts of the Time of Wizards that had been left behind, and most of those only meant trouble, since no one knew how to use them.

From the stories, Sir Steven had gone up against the Skull, who’d been rumored to have a powerful magical artifact. It was possible that very artifact had been what had exiled the Paladin to the Void. Only Sir Steven knew if that was true or not, and at the moment he seemed content to let her sit him down on one of the sofas in the sitting room, as he watched her closely…or, more likely, he was watching Happy, the little dragon very curious about their guest and wanting to meet him personally. Pepper knew her dragon, knew that Happy was having a very difficult time sitting on her shoulder instead of jumping onto the Paladin, but she was shushing his excitement through their link, and seemed to be accepting of her concern that he might accidentally get hurt if Sir Steven reacted badly.

At least he’d left his sword out in the hall, but Pepper thought it was more because he didn’t know quite how to react to all of this than forgetfulness.

“Bruce,” she called over her shoulder toward the magical theorist, “would you mind bringing Sir Steven a glass of brandy, please?”

Bruce had wisely decided to not go out into the hallway, obviously not wanting to overload Sir Steven with too much stimulae. She heard him assent even as Pepper was getting the man settled and comfortable, Tony hovering just to the side. The Cardinal Wizard knew her husband wanted to ask all sorts of questions, but was refraining in saying anything for one of the few times in his life. Pepper was grateful to him for showing his restraint.

She’d reward him later.

A snifter appeared in her peripheral vision, and she accepted it with a murmur of thanks. “Here,” she handed it to Sir Steven, “this might help.”

His hand only trembling slightly, the Paladin took the offered glass after setting his shield down against the side of the couch. His blue eyes locked onto Pepper’s own as he sipped slowly, the pallor in his handsome pace fading a little as the brandy relaxed him.
“I’m sorry about that,” she apologized. “I forgot that you didn’t have much knowledge of magic.”

“Just what things that got left behind,” he confirmed. His brows drew together. “You’re a Wizard? What did you mean, Cardinal Order?”

Pepper stifled her sigh. Instead, she sat beside him on the couch, motioning Tony and Bruce toward other chairs. She needed to give Sir Steven her undivided attention; she was going to have to be the one to break the news.

This wasn’t something she’d considered, and the short-sightedness bothered her. She’d been hoping that Jack would have arrived by now, but Ianto had called to let her know that Jack, Clint, and Toshiko had gone out after the Winter Knight. Also, Phil had let her know that the friend he’d asked for help, Andrew, was going to contact someone locally since he wasn’t able to come himself. Pepper had been hoping that whoever was coming to aid in assimilating Sir Steven into this time would have been here by now.

No, it had been dropped on her lap, and she was going to have to do the best she could. She only hoped Tony would leave it to her, and not interject anything into the conversation that would destroy any headway she’d make.

There was one way to get Tony out of the room… “Tony, will you contact the others at Ianto’s and let them know our guest is awake now?”

He looked as if he wanted to argue, but Pepper simply raised an eyebrow and gave him a quelling look. She wasn’t going to put up with him possibly putting his foot into it, not now. The last thing they needed was for Sir Steven to become even more traumatized than he already was.

The minute dropping of her husband’s shoulders communicated to her that she’d won this round. Pepper would take the victory. “I’ll need the key.”

Long ago, Pepper had tuned her mirror to Tony, but to use it he still needed a key—one that she kept with her, unless she was going to be away from the castle. She didn’t want him calling up all and sundry just because he was bored.

When at home, the Cardinal Wizard wore the key on a bracelet that Tony had given her as an anniversary present. She slipped the platinum chain with its enchanted bangle off her wrist, handing it over. She didn’t say anything; he already knew how it would work. All he had to do was say the name of the owner of the mirror he wanted to contact, and the magic would do the rest.

He didn’t look happy, but Tony did as she’d asked. Really, she’d promised Phil that they would call as soon as the Paladin was conscious, so it wasn’t as if she was making up a task for him to do, in order to get him out of the way. So, he couldn’t look at it that way…but, knowing him the way she did, he would.

Bruce, though, she allowed to stay. The man was calm and discrete, and wouldn’t say anything awkward.

At least, she hoped he wouldn’t.

“If I can ask,” she began, “what you remember?”

Sir Steven frowned. “I’d gone after the Skull. There were rumors about weapons he was enchanting using this artifact he’d discovered, called the Tesseract. Anything that powerful couldn’t be allowed to be used on our allies, so me and the Commandos went in to stop him. I…remember facing him, and wrestling with him for the Tesseract…I’d overpowered him, pretty sure there was a
death blow, but after that…nothing. Darkness. That’s about it.”

Pepper nodded. That made sense. History said that the Skull had been defeated by the Paladin, although nowhere is it stated exactly how it had been done, but then Sir Steven had seemingly vanished into thin air. Perhaps they should follow up on what had actually occurred? Although, Pepper doubted there would be anything to it, knowing just what had happened to the Skull would set Sir Steven’s mind more at ease. Or, Phil might know, since he was an aficionado of that time in history.

She’d also have to ask Ianto what had happened to the Tesseract; he’d most likely know, since he was also the Master Archivist for the Wizard’s Guild. A powerful magical artifact didn’t need to be out there in the world, uncontrolled, if he didn’t have it in the Archives somewhere.

“That tallies up with what we know,” she agreed. “The Skull was, indeed, stopped, although I don’t know the details.”

That announcement earned her a small, grateful smile. “Good.” Then he frowned once more. “Then what happened? How did I get here?”

Now came the hard part. “For you to understand the next part, there’s a few things you need to know…”

Pepper began her explanation with the resurgence of magic. She didn’t go into any detail about how magic had been locked away by Master John Smith in an attempt to stop a future that would have led to utter destruction; that would be later, when Sir Steven had more of a chance to assimilate into this new time he’d found himself in.

She gave him a short precis on the three Wizard Orders, once again nothing too in-depth. He seemed to be accepting it fairly well, but she had to wonder how long that would last.

He seemed to be handling things pretty well so far, although Pepper hadn’t really gotten into how much time had actually passed since that final battle he could recall. She did assure him that they had won, although it had come at quite the cost. Sir Steve, being a product of war, had understood.

It wasn’t until she mentioned Hydra that she got more than a simple nod and the few questions at her story.

Sir Steven sat up, his grasp on the brandy snifter tightening enough that Pepper was a little concerned for the integrity of the glass. “They’re still around?”

That just confirmed the Avatar’s claim that the cabal had been present back during the Century War. “We didn’t know about them until recently.”

“They were secretive. I only knew about them because the Skull was their leader. But they were bad news.”

“They’ve changed a little since then,” Pepper said. “They’ve evolved into a cabal of Void Wizards, who are out to disturb the balance and grab power for themselves.”

The Paladin snorted. “Yep, that sounds like Hydra.”

She made a mental note to bring up Hydra again…once she was done explaining.

It was at that point that Tony rejoined them. “We’re about to be descended upon,” he reported.
Pepper glowered, and her husband held up his hands in surrender. “Like you weren’t expecting that when you asked me to call.”

Alright, she had.

So, Pepper turned back to the Paladin. “What we think occurred, was that this Tesseract sent you into the Void.”

Sir Steven’s expression was vaguely disbelieving. “But you said this Void was a source of magic…”

“It is.” She wished she had time to explain Magic Theory to him, and the physical manifestations of Void and Deep Ways, but she didn’t. However well she could speak about the Deep Ways, Phil was really their best authority on the Void. “But both Void and Deep Ways exist beyond our world and they can be entered if one is powerful enough. You’ve been trapped in the Void.”

“If that’s true…then how did I get out?” He still wasn’t quite understanding, but Pepper could certainly understand why. He hadn’t had much of a background in magic; hells, magic had been gone during the war. It was going to take a lot to get him caught up.

“One of the men coming here is the one who got you out,” she answered. “Our current Grand Master of Voids, Phil Coulson. He’s the most powerful Void Wizard in the world at the moment.” She wasn’t going to bring up the near-immortality. That wasn’t required for these explanations.

“But,” Sir Steven argued, “Wizards don’t exist. I know you claimed to be one, and that there are more out there, but if you’ve been around…why haven’t you all come forward to help fight?” His tone was accusatory, and how could Pepper blame him for that? Wizards could have saved lives back then…or just as easily taken them, if they’d been working for the Despot and Hydra. “And when did magic come back, anyway? Wouldn’t that have been announced or something? Just how many Wizards are there?”

They were all questions Pepper had expected, but that didn’t mean she could give him answers that would make sense without bringing up being trapped in the Void for centuries.

There was only one thing for it, really.

Taking a deep breath, Pepper looked Sir Steven right in the eyes. “You were in the Void a long time.”

“How long?” It had the snap of an order to it.

Pepper didn’t take offense, because he was a Knight and the Paladin of the Western Lands and was used to giving orders to his men. Besides, there was something about the man that made her want to be honest with him, so it was easy – well, to a certain degree of easy – for her to tell him the truth, even though it was most likely going to destroy his world.

She reached over and took the hand not still clutching the brandy snifter in hers. “Sir Steven…you were in the Void a long time…over three hundred years.”
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

Well, I survived Endgame... and now want to eventually adapt it to the Dragon-Verse...although there are certain things I would fix.

Since no one was there to meet them, Ianto led his fellow Grand Masters, his husband, Clint Barton, and their accompanying dragons out of Pepper’s casting chamber, where they’d arrived from Gateway after receiving Baron Tony’s summons.

They’d just managed to get the Winter Knight back into the Zero Cabinet when Ianto’s mirror had pinged his magical senses. He’d hated the very notion of putting that poor man back inside that thing, but Daisy had been right: it really was Sir James’ decision. There were so many curses and other sorts of magic all over that arm and the man himself, that the Cardinal Wizard could certainly understand why he didn’t trust himself enough to stay out of the cabinet. He was self-aware enough to not want to be responsible for hurting anyone in case he’d gotten triggered by something, but that didn’t mean Ianto had to like the idea of basically imprisoning an innocent man.

Sir James had also expressed his quiet confidence that they’d be able to help him eventually. Ianto had felt a little humbled by that; yes, he was quite possibly the best spell-picker in the world, but that didn’t mean he didn’t have failures, and the spells surrounding the Winter Knight were particularly nasty. Still, that didn’t mean he wouldn’t do his best to help, and even if he could remove the about half of the magic, then that would be an accomplishment. Besides, he’d have help, and who knew the Void better than Phil Coulson?

Daisy had stayed behind, to gather her friends and to do the research she’d volunteered them to do on a possible origin of the arm and the Zero Cabinet. Ianto was glad to let them do it; it meant less work for him, being the Master Archivist as well as the Grand Master of Cardinals. It also meant that, after speaking with Sir Steven, he and his counterparts could start the work in cleaning up Void Order.

Which was going to be a job unto itself.

Toshiko had also remained, the better to talk to Natasha Romanov about her hunt for Hydra, and how she could help. Ianto knew she still wanted to get the word out to the various mercenary bands, but his Elven friend didn’t have the contacts in the Western Lands that Natasha had. Ianto had a feeling the pair of them would make a very formidable team.

“Where are they?” Jack asked once they were up in the main house.

“Baron Tony said the sitting room. It’s down this way.” Ianto had been in the house several times, and was familiar with the Baronial residence’s floorplan. He took a right out of the stairwell, and then was down the hall, moving quickly with Myfanwy at his side, the door he wanted open just ahead. As he got closer he could hear Pepper’s calm voice speaking to someone, most likely Sir Steven, although he couldn’t make out the actual words.
He blinked at the sword that was laying against the wall. Apparently, the Paladin had come out swinging. Not that he could blame the man. He’d awakened in a strange place, and in a strange time, so self-defense would be the most logical alternative.

Clint walked over to retrieve it. Leaving a naked sword lying around was never a good idea, even in a seemingly safe place as Ferrous Castle.

Ianto stepped into the sitting room, taking in the tableau in front of him. Sir Steven and Pepper were on the sofa, while Dr. Banner stood against the mantel, watching as Pepper spoke softly to the displaced Paladin as Baron Tony hovered over his wife’s shoulder, looking as if he wanted to say something but was holding onto his tongue by the stint of sheer stubbornness.

Sir Steven was pale, and drawn, his eyes wide with shock. Pepper was holding his hand in an attempt to comfort him after what had to have been shocking news. He was clutching an empty glass that had to have had brandy in it, and without saying a thing Phil was at the drinks’ cabinet, fetching the bottle of brandy and bringing it over to the seated pair. Gently, he pried the snifter out of Sir Steven’s grasp and refilled it, handing it back over even as Myfanwy was making her way over to say hello. Before Ianto could stop her – realizing that the man wouldn’t have had experience with dragons – she was chirping at him in a friendly yet concerned manner, and resting her chin on the Paladin’s leg.

Sir Steven’s eyes darted down in surprise and, before Ianto could call her off, he was taking his large hand away from Pepper and was resting it on her head, the web of his thumb wrapped loosely about the base of her single horn.

“She’s very friendly,” Ianto said softly, not wanting to break the fragile quiet that had descended over the room and yet needing to somewhat apologize for his dragon’s behavior. “She wants to say hello.”

Wide blue eyes glanced up at him. “I…” he stammered back into silence.

Pepper turned, shaking her head. “And I told Happy off for trying to make Sir Steven’s acquaintance earlier.” There was a laughing undertone to the seriousness of her words.

Happy chittered, obviously displeased that Myfanwy had gotten to their guest first and, making a leap off Pepper’s shoulders, he landed right onto the Paladin’s own, telling off Myfanwy who simply huffed at the younger and smaller dragon and let Sir Steven continue to touch her head.

Ianto couldn’t help but chuckle. “Myfanwy always has to be first, Pepper. You know that.”

“At least it wasn’t Lola,” Phil added. “She most likely would have jumped up in Sir Steven’s lap.” His own dragon had stayed by his side, even while he was fetching the brandy, but Ianto could tell she wanted to join the group on the sofa. Agamotto was the only truly calm one of the group, still wrapped around Stephen’s left forearm and cuddled up to his Wizard placidly, half-hidden under the Cloak of Levitation…which showed its own interest in the Paladin by flapping one end in the Cloak’s own approximation of a friendly wave.

Both Clint and Jack had taken up watchful positions near the door. Trust the pair of them to be on the lookout for trouble. Jack being vigilant was sexy as the hells, Ianto admitted to himself.

“I just broke the news to Sir Steven about his being three hundred years out of his own time,” Pepper murmured, sympathy shining in her gray eyes.

Just from the way Sir Steven was reacting, Ianto was glad they’d decided not to inform him about Sir
James just yet. They would, once the Paladin had a chance to settle down, and once they knew just how the best way to aid Sir James would be.

“I’d hoped we’d be here before then,” Ianto commiserated, “to help perhaps soften the blow.”

“I don’t think there was a way to do that,” Sir Steven managed to quip harshly.

“You’re right, I’m sure,” the Cardinal Wizard admitted.

“These are the Grand Masters I mentioned,” Pepper introduced, “Grand Master Ianto Jones, Cardinal Order; Grand Master Stephen Strange, Great Order; and Grand Master Phil Coulson, Void Order.”

The Paladin’s eyes darted toward Phil. “You’re the one who pulled me out of the Void.”

Phil managed to keep the bland expression on his face, but his eyes showed just how startled he was. “You remember that?”

“Um, no. Mistress Pepper told me. I don’t remember anything about being in this Void place.”

The Void Wizard was nodding. “That’s understandable. Being in the Void…it’s not something a mind can deal with. I mean, a mind that’s not a Void mind. A Void Wizard mind, that is.”

There was something off about the man, something Ianto couldn’t put his finger on. Phil seemed to be acting his usual self—and, to be honest, they really hadn’t known each other that long, even if Ianto considered him now a good friend—but there seemed to be an excitement in Phil Coulson that the Cardinal Wizard wasn’t certain where it came from.

Then he remembered the framed artwork in the man’s study, back at Shield Keep. It had been of Sir Steven Rogers in his recruiting heyday, looking patriotic in his armor and with his shield, exhorting people to sign up for military service.

Phil was in the throes of hero-worship.

Oh, he was hiding it well. But Ianto could now see the barely twitching fingers and the gleam behind the concern in his friend’s eyes, then there was the stumbling over his words... It was funny, in a way...someone with as much power, and in such a position of authority, trying so hard to stifle that sort of reaction to someone was pretty hilarious. He had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing.

Well, Ianto should have seen this coming. Apparently, Clint had, judging from the smirk on his face.

“There isn’t anyone more knowledgeable about the Void than Grand Master Phil is,” Pepper announced, although she was also giving the Void Wizard a side-eye. Baron Tony hadn’t seemed to notice yet, neither had the other man present, Dr. Bruce Banner. Ianto was familiar with his work but had never officially met the man before.

With that, Phil seemed to lose even more of his usual collectiveness. Was he actually blushing? “I think you’re overstating things…”

“No at all,” Stephen added. He also seemed to have noticed, and Agamotto was giving a very draconic grin, tongue lolling, reflecting his Wizard’s mood. “Mistress Pepper is quite correct. You’re the only Void Wizard to have actually been inside the Void, so that makes you the expert.”

“Then maybe you can tell me how I managed to survive so long in there?” Sir Steven sounded
almost lost, and that tone had to communicated itself to Phil, because he suddenly lost every little bit of embarrassment he’d been feeling.

“From what I can guess,” he began, his voice going softly sympathetic, “you were suddenly thrust into the Void by the power of this Tesseract artifact. When that occurred, I believe a rift was torn from this world and into the Void, but with the spell that blocked magic still in effect it sealed the rift up almost immediately.”

Ianto nodded along with that supposition. It was logical, and explained why Sir Steven hadn’t been spit right back out again. Master John’s spell would have healed the breach at once and would have prevented the Void from even that little act of protecting itself.

“Now,” the Wizard continued, “when the Void realized there was an intruder, it acted the only way it could…by cocooning you in its own substance.” Phil chewed the inside of his cheek for a second, then said, “Think of it like getting a stone in your boot. It irritates your foot until you can get it out but, if for some reason you can’t right away, then your sock can cushion it a little while before it becomes too painful to handle. It was the same way with the Void; your presence irritated it, but since it couldn’t expel you, it cushioned you.”

“Only,” Jack interjected, speaking for the first time, “it cushioned you a little too well, Sir Steve.”

Their guest seemed to notice how Jack had referred to him, because Sir Steven’s eyes narrowed as he took a good look at Ianto’s husband. Jack stood there and let him, nodding when the Paladin’s eyes widened a little in surprise.

“I know you,” Sir Steven muttered.

Jack nodded. “You do, although I’m surprised I made that much of an impression on you.” He stepped forward, standing at attention. Ianto knew he was falling back into old army habits, although Jack had long been the captain of his own team and really didn’t take orders from anyone anymore. It was a sign of his respect for the Paladin that he did it now.

“You were with the battalion me and the Commandos worked out of, right?” At Jack’s acknowledgment, the Paladin shook his head in denial. “That’s not possible, not if you’re all telling me the truth about it being three hundred years after the war…”

“They are.” Jack stepped up, meeting Sir Steven’s confused gaze. “It has been three hundred years. History calls it the Century War now, even though it didn’t last nearly that long. And I was there, in your battalion, even though – as you said – I wasn’t in your commando group, although I wanted to be. It would have drawn too much attention to me, and attention was the last thing I could afford.”

“I don’t understand.”

Ianto watched as Jack took a deep breath. He understood why his husband was so very nervous; he’d lived a thousand years in hiding, moving when it became obvious that he wasn’t aging. When someone had discovered his secret, it was usually met with fear and rejection. Now, of course, the fact that Jack couldn’t die was common knowledge, even if the majority of the people had no idea what Jack looked like, and therefore couldn’t identify him. He was accepted now, but that same old fear always reared its ugly head whenever it came time to confess his greatest secret to anyone who wasn’t within their circle of friends and family.

Everyone else in the room was braced for that secret to be revealed once again, to someone else. Someone who might very well react badly to the news. Ianto could feel his magic rising within him,
just in case, and Myfanwy left the Paladin’s side to move toward Jack’s, giving him the support that he so very much needed. Jack dropped his hand onto her head, and the dragon cooed at him, her whirling green eyes looking at him with absolute trust and affection.

Ianto took up a place just behind Jack’s left shoulder, offering his own support. He didn’t physically touch his husband, but he didn’t have to; their magicks just knew when they were close by. He knew Jack was aware of him standing there, just from the lessening of the tension in his back.

Jack took a deep breath, then said, “You’ve heard the legends of the Deathless?”

“That old story about the witch who brought her lover back to life?” It was obvious when the realization of what Jack was admitting connected in his thoughts. “You?” he exclaimed in disbelief. “Are you telling me that you’re the Deathless?”

Ianto could see the minute flinch in Jack’s frame at the tone of the Paladin’s words. “I am.” There was no inflection in his words at all. It didn’t sound like Jack at all; his voice was usually light and slightly flirty. This wasn’t him, but the Cardinal Wizard could understand why he’d retreat into himself like that. It was always hard for him to admit to being the Deathless.

“It’s true,” Phil spoke up, his own words soft yet heavy with the truth of them, lacking the faint tinge of hero worship and shyness from before. “Jack is the Deathless. And a very good man.”

Ianto couldn’t help but smile at that endorsement. They might not have known Phil Coulson for very long, but both he and Jack did consider him a friend, so to hear him say that about Jack…it was gratifying.

Sir Steven rubbed his forehead as if he was getting a headache. “I don’t know why that should have been impossible with everything else that’s happened to me.”

Jack reached out and rested a hand on Sir Steven’s shoulders. “We’re going to help you out, alright? I’ve been where you are, and we’ll do the best we can for you.”

“We will,” Ianto confirmed. Everyone else in the room made the same sort of comment. “Although, we need your help as well, if you’re up to it.”

“Sure, anything you need.”

“We need you to tell us everything you can about your version of Hydra.”
The Archives of the Wizard Guild were in the lower levels of the Wizard’s Tower, all of them underground.

Daisy had been in them a couple of times, but not really beyond the first antechamber and always accompanied by Pepper Potts. The Archives themselves were considered off-limits to students; only Masters were allowed to roam through them at will, because anyone with less skill than that was considered too inexperienced to risk being around some of the powerful artifacts that were stored down there. There were rules about students and artifacts, and they made sense.

Still, she could recall that time a third-year got a hold of something from the Archives and promptly turned himself into a toad. That had been entertaining, and a lesson that student wouldn’t likely forget for the rest of his life.

The Archives were deep within the bedrock of Gateway, and the moment Daisy stepped onto the stairs leading down into the earth she could feel the magic thrumming against her skin. It wasn’t unpleasant, but she knew she wouldn’t want to stay down there for very long or else it could get that way. Hopefully, she wouldn’t, not with the friends she’d convinced to help her with the research Ianto needed done.

She really wanted to help Sir James. Seeing him accept his fate within the Zero Cabinet had been heartbreaking. Yes, she’d defended his right to choose it, but it still had bothered her. No one deserved to be so cursed that existing within nothingness was the better option. She wanted to find the answers to what that arm was, and how the curses could be removed. If what her Dad and the others assumed about it was correct, then it would have been a really ancient artifact that had magically grafted onto Sir James’ shoulder, and that was just plain wrong.

It hadn’t taken much to convince her friends to help out. Jemma and Leo had practically vibrated with the need to get their hands on those old records. Lincoln had looked a little resigned at the notion of some sort of scavenger hunt, while Trip had been game to help out in any way he could, especially when Daisy had confided in them all what it was all about. Trip could trace his family back to one of the original Howling Commandos, so it was like family history to him.

Wanda and Pietro had also joined in, although Daisy had felt a little strange about letting them help out, because they were really just kids, but Wanda had stared her down until Daisy had capitulated. She wasn’t so sure her Dad and Ianto would have allowed it if she’d told them about it, because the twins weren’t even novices yet, but what they didn’t know…

Dragons weren’t allowed down in the Archives; having fire-breathing creatures running amok among very flammable books and scrolls was like asking for trouble. There had been a special room built at the top of the staircase for dragons to wait, and their seven made themselves at home with the other dragons that were already there. Skye wasn’t happy about being left behind, but she understood the reason why, and would stay where Daisy asked her to.

“Oh, this is exciting,” Jemma exclaimed as they climbed down the wide stairway toward the lowermost level of the Archives. “I’ve been wanting to see the Archives ever since I arrived.”

“You and me both,” Leo agreed. He did the hand fluttering thing the Elf did when he was in danger of being overwhelmed. “All that magic, being stored down here… it’s amazing.”
“You two are unnatural with your love of studying,” Lincoln teased, his voice light and not at all derogatory. “I don’t get it.”

Jemma made a scoffing sound. “And who’s at the top of his class in healing this year?”

“And whose teaching Master keeps bragging about it?” Leo added.

“They’ve got you there,” Trip laughed.

Daisy laughed at Lincoln’s simple shrug. They weren’t wrong; she was quite proud of her boyfriend and how good he was at his lessons. Plus, Master Gordon didn’t brag about anyone else. The Cardinal Wizard didn’t much care for the acerbic Wizard, but she couldn’t argue that he didn’t support and help Lincoln to reach his potential.

“We can only hope to make our own teaching Masters proud,” Wanda said softly.

Daisy couldn’t help it, she bumped her shoulder against the younger Wizard’s. “You get my Dad, and he’ll be bragging on you all day. Just watch.”

“You really think he will decide to take me on?” Wanda’s voice was full of hope.

“With me and Pepper working on him? Count on it!”

“It would mean a lot to me if our rescuer chose me.”

“It makes me wish I was also Void,” Pietro replied, disgruntled, “because then he could take us both.”

“Yeah, but you’ll love Ianto,” Daisy assured him. “He’s fantastic. Sure, I only met him recently, but Pepper talks about him all the time. He was her teaching Master, so she should know.”

That seemed to calm Pietro down a little. Which was good, because Daisy really thought Pepper was right about Ianto being the best for her new friend.

Just like Wanda would be awesome for her Dad.

The staircase ended in a large room, lit by about two dozen glowglobes positioned about the room, casting plenty of light to see by. There were tables set up around the space, some of the chairs occupied by Masters of various Orders, researching or whatever it was that old Wizards did down in the Archives. Daisy couldn’t help but notice that the majority of them wore some sort of gloves, which she supposed made sense, what with all the old documents laying around. Nobody wanted to damage anything; most of the stuff down here was irreplaceable.

There was a reception desk next to the stairs, a youngish Master Archivist sitting at it and giving them all the evil eye. Daisy could tell he was a Great Wizard from his magical aura; his dragon, which was about the size of a herding dog and was a muted reddish color, was curled up at his feet.

So much for No Dragons Allowed.

Although, she did notice, that this was the only person with a dragon in the room. So maybe the Archivist was the exception to that rule.

The man was thin and a little weedy looking, but his robes were of a fine material as befitting his rank. He had dark curly hair and dark eyes, and wore wire-rimmed spectacles that glittered in the artificial lighting. His complexion was pale, probably from being underground for most of his day.
“Students and Novices aren’t allowed down here without a Master present,” he told them, before Daisy could even open her mouth to explain why they were there.

“We have permission,” she said, feeling slightly defensive as she pulled the note that Ianto had given her out of her pocket. Handing it over, she and her friends waited for him to authenticate it, suddenly aware that the older Wizards were now staring at them.

The man read the note, his eyebrows going up in surprise. His eyes flashed golden for a moment as he magically scanned the message, just to confirm that it was what it said on its face. “Well,” he cleared his throat, “this seems to be in order.” He tucked the note under his blotter, any trace of superiority gone in the face of the permission Ianto had given them to be there. “Now, what can I do for you?”

“Ianto sent us to check into old records dating from about three thousand years ago,” Daisy answered, deliberately not using Ianto’s title just because she could. “We’re looking for information on a specific magical artifact that might have dated from that time.”

The Archivist nodded. “Let me show you to that section. I take it Grand Master Ianto gave you his key?” The hard emphasis on Ianto’s title wanted to make Daisy laugh, because she just knew the man was attempting to correct her on not using it.

Daisy reached into the same pocket that had held the note, pulling out the long, brass key that Ianto had handed to her before he and the others all left to go and talk to Sir Steven Rogers. She also had his enchanted glasses, and those, above anything else, proved to her just how much the Grand Master trusted her.

It was heady and amazing and she had no idea how she’d earned that trust.

That had all doubt that the Archivist had been experiencing vanish from his face at once. “If he gave you the primary Archive key, then everything in his permission slip is confirmed.” He rose. “Please, come this way.”

He made a gesture toward the dragon, who stayed right where it was, and then led the group out of the main antechamber and into a corridor that ran deeper into the bedrock. It was lined with doors, all shut and warded, but Daisy wasn’t really paying much attention to them, because she hadn’t realized that the key Ianto had given her was the primary Archive key, which meant she could go literally anywhere in the Archive and that key would give her complete and total access to every single thing there.

That…wow.

“You didn’t say it was the primary key,” Jemma hissed at her, as they made their way down the corridor.

“I didn’t know!” she hissed back.

Lincoln said something that would have had her Dad calling him down for that particular bit of foul language.

Leo elbowed him in the ribs, hushing him. Which was a good thing, because Daisy didn’t think they were giving the Archivist a very good impression of them and their maturity at the moment.

“Girl,” Trip said admiringly, “Grand Master Ianto must really like you.”

“He told me he wished he’d beat Pepper to becoming my teaching Master.” Yes, she was bragging
a little, but she felt she deserved to, after the whole key thing. Oh, and the glasses, which they all already knew about.

When Daisy had approached them to help her find out anything they could about that cursed arm, almost every single one of her friends had jumped at the chance; Lincoln and pretended to be resigned, but Daisy knew him too well by now to have believed that act. Just hearing Sir James’ story had them all needing to sympathize with the man who’d been called the Winter Knight and had, in fact, upset them all in some way. They’d all had their reasons for wanting to do this, and Daisy loved them all fiercely for agreeing to step forward and aid in her search for information.

“The rules are,” the Archivist spoke over his shoulder at them, “you must wear protective gloves when handling anything. Not only to protect the documents, but some of them are magical in origin, and they may contaminate you if you’re not careful.”

Daisy thought about the contamination that Sir James had experienced with the cursed arm, and couldn’t help but shiver. Gloves it was, then.

“Nothing is removed from the Archives,” he went on. “If you need a copy of something, we have several very excellent Copying charms that myself or one of the other Archivists can use to replicate what you need. Each of the rooms down here are controlled and warded magically to prevent the artifacts and documents from decaying, and to remove them would damage them beyond repair, as they are very old and very delicate and would not be able to survive long outside those wards.”

The corridor became cooler the farther they went. The air was dry, though, and Daisy could feel her lips begin to chap a little. She licked them a little nervously, hoping to moisten them just a bit, although at this point she couldn’t be sure it was the atmosphere or her nerves doing it. Most likely a combination of both.

“If you need something translated, then we offer that service…unless you have some spell or artifact you can use to do the translating for you.”

“I have Ianto’s glasses,” the young woman couldn’t help but say. The last thing they needed was someone to see what they were researching. They couldn’t take the chance that Hydra might discover that they had their so-called Winter Knight.

That pronouncement had the Archivist stopping in his tracks and turning to gawp at Daisy. “You have Grand Master Ianto’s spectacles?” his voice squeaked a little.

She nodded, feeling unbearably smug. She couldn’t help it. Those spectacles were practically legendary amongst the Wizard Guild.

The Archivist had to clear his throat before he could usher them all forward once more.

The door they wanted was a little more down the way, on the right. There wasn’t anything to identify it as a place where ancient pieces of paper and objects were kept, except there was an unmistakable magical aura to the wooden door that seemed to radiate ancientness. The door was physically banded with metal and magically banded with spells, and Daisy could make out the intensively heavy Protection and Preservation spells, as well as a very blatant Keep Out charm that had her making a mental note to ask Ianto about. It would be fantastic to be able to use that on her dormitory door. It would certainly turn anyone away not powerful enough to ignore it.

Daisy, herself, wasn’t powerful enough. Still, she held the key out, slipping it into the lock, and when she turned it the spell stopped pushing against her. She suspected the key had given her a modicum of protection against that sort of magic, because when she turned very single one of her
friends were walking back down the hallway. She watched as they each stopped and turned around, varying degrees of chagrin on their faces as they made their way back toward the young wizard and the Archivist who’s escorted them there.

The Archivist was smirking. “Impressive, isn’t it?”

“I want that spell,” Trip exclaimed. “That is awesome.”

“Oh, it is,” Jemma was practically cooing.

“I didn’t know such spells could be so powerful,” Leo grinned. “I wonder what’s giving it that extra push.”

“I don’t know,” Wanda mused, “but it would be worth the expenditure of magic to put it in place.”

Pietro and Lincoln didn’t say anything, they were too busy nodding emphatically.

“It’s almost as good as the UnPlotable spell my Dad used on the Keep,” Daisy couldn’t help but stand up for her father and his magic.

“Now, that is a spell,” Jemma agreed.

“It’s on my to-learn list,” Leo agreed.

Daisy was sure her Dad would be glad to show them what went into it, once there was time. Right now, they had research to do. “Let’s get to work, shall we?”

“I’m going to leave you all here,” the Archivist said, “but only because Grand Master Ianto seems to trust you.” He waggled his finger at them. “However, if there’s a mess when you leave, I won’t hesitate to report the lot of you. Are we clear?”

“Crystal.” Daisy wasn’t about to leave any sort of mess. Her Dad had taught her better than that.

Everyone else gave their own affirmatives, which seemed to satisfy the Archivist, because he nodded once and then turned on his heel, heading back the way they’d come. Daisy had wished she’d gotten his name, because he was a real asshole and wanted to congratulate Ianto on his crappy hiring practices.

“Come on,” she said, pulling the door open. “Let’s get started.”

The room beyond was about the size of her Dad’s study. Shelves lined two of the walls; one with books, and the other with individual storage nooks for rolled scrolls. On the third wall was a glassed-in case holding various sorts of trinkets, all obviously very old. The last wall – the one with the door in it – was bare, except for a single framed map of the world, tattered and faded, names in a rust colored ink that was the exact same shade as dried blood. It was just a map, but it made Daisy shiver.

There was a tall desk in the middle of the room. A box of gloves – sparkling magically in her sight – sat atop it, as well as paper and pencils for note taking. There was also enough room to spread out any scrolls they’d want to look at, along with weights to hold down the edges of the scrolls. The entire place was lit with glowglobes, and Daisy had to wonder what the ancient Wizards had done when there were only candles and oil lamps available, and how many accidents there’d been with those open flames.

There was so much magic in the air as well. That wasn’t at all a surprise; not with the spells that
Trip whistled. “I didn’t think there’d be so many records.”

Truth to tell, it wasn’t as much as Daisy would have thought, but then paper just didn’t survive so long without some sort of preservation magic. When magic was cut off from the world, many of the old magicks had faded. Yes, there were magical artifacts that had survived, but they were also mostly diminished by the time magic had returned. Most of the artifacts had re-charged when they’d been re-exposed, but the papers…if they hadn’t been preserved in the right way, they would have disintegrated into dust.

How much knowledge had been lost just because one Wizard had thought he was doing the right thing? Daisy wished she could have met Master John Smith and ask him that very question.

Jemma and Fitz immediately went to the scroll wall, perusing the perfectly rolled up pieces of parchment, most of them discolored with age. Somehow, they’d managed to snag their own sets of gloves from the table and were slipping them on without Daisy seeing them do it.

Jemma had her nose right up to the scrolls, wrinking it in a way that Daisy refused to think of as cute. “How are we supposed to know how these are sorted?” she groused.

“By this.” Trip held up what looked like a ledger, flipping through the pages. “Someone’s done a really good job of sorting all this stuff out.”

“Excellent!” Leo said. “We should have expected some sort of cataloguing system.”

Lincoln laughed. “Only you would get excited about that sort of thing, Leo.”

The young Elf turned to look at him. If Daisy didn’t know him better, he would have thought Leo was affronted by the teasing, but she could tell he really wasn’t. “Of course I am. Why wouldn’t I be?”

Trip laughed. Daisy couldn’t help but join in.

“At least the books appear to be in alphabetical order,” Wanda sniffed. She was staring at the spines of the books as she was putting her own pair of gloves on.

“And at least there aren’t that many,” Pietro pointed out. “About three dozen. I was expecting more.”

“Books this old wouldn’t have survived this long without powerful Preservation spells on them,” Lincoln pointed out. He handed Daisy her own gloves, which she pulled on, the ends of them barely fitting over her gauntlets. “The scrolls would have had a better chance, I think, which is why there’s so many more of them than the books.”

“Scrolls were also the chosen form of storage three thousand years ago,” Jemma added. “Book binding had only been around for a couple of hundred years back then, and was only really used for gramariya.”

“Pepper has this really old gramariya,” Daisy said. “But it’s only about a thousand years old.”

“Also,” Trip replied, “from what I understand, Wizards were putting all sorts of spells on books, once they were more widespread. I took a study course on that sort of thing, and it was like Wizards
“Dad has a book of really old fairy tales like that,” Daisy commented. She joined Jemma, Leo, and Trip at the scroll shelves, peeking around her Void Wizard friend’s shoulder in order to get a look at the ledger. Someone had used a black ink in order to make the inventory, in a neat handwriting that was easy to read. “He’d read it to me and when I was old enough he told me he’d found it at a book sale, and the seller hadn’t even been aware that the book had magic in it.”

“Master Jasper has a couple of stories like that,” Trip commented. “He said it was unusual for him to go into a used bookstore or library and *not* find something enchanted anymore.”

He ran his finger down the column in the ledger. The scrolls had been arranged in a form of alphabetical order, like the books, but unfortunately there wasn’t any listing for a ‘cursed arm’ or anything like that. “We’re going to have to go through the likeliest scrolls,” Daisy sighed.

“Pietro and I will take the books,” Wanda volunteered. “There are so many more scrolls than books, so you all should focus on those.”

“Good idea.” Daisy was beginning to wish she hadn’t volunteered them for this. It looked as if they were going to be there the rest of the day…and possibly tomorrow, as well.

Oh well. It was time to get to work. She wanted to prove to the adults that she and her friends could help, and so that was what they were going to do.

Even if it took them time to accomplish it, because Sir James needed everyone on his side that he could get.
Chapter 26

Phil couldn’t believe he’d actually stammered at Sir Steven Rogers. It was embarrassing.

He wanted to pull the cool exterior that he’d cultivated as the Dark One around him, but it no longer fit. He’d been away from that life for far too long. From what Clint had told him, he’d done it back at the Hydra mansion, but he simply couldn’t recall that. The Void had been speaking through him, that he was positive of, in an attempt to keep the secret of his surviving Loki from them. It hadn’t worked, but it had given Phil a lot to think about in the days since he’d discovered his new, true, nature.

He wasn’t sure he could ever be that person again. Which meant embarrassing himself because he couldn’t keep the hero-worship out of his voice.

There would always be part of him that looked up to the Paladin. He accepted that. But he didn’t need to act like a fool because of it.

There was also another, smaller, part of him that wondered if Sir Steven would have been willing to accept his help if he knew what Phil had done years ago. Would he be ashamed? Angry? How would the Paladin react to know that the man who brought him out of the Void had been one of the most evil Wizards since the first and only Harold Saxon? Yes, the other Voids had accepted him, had named him Grand Master, but that had only been because he was the only one they could be certain of as not being Hydra. As soon as they were able to vet the rest of the order, Phil knew his services would no longer be required.

That actually sounded quite good to him.

Still, there was yet another, smaller, part of him that felt he could do a lot of good as Grand Master of Voids. He could completely overwrite the red in the ledger of his conscience, and that would only be a good thing.

The larger – and more vocal – part of his thoughts were telling him that he’d be content to go back to Shield Keep and be the best father and best lover he knew how to be, hiding away from the world and hoping they would all eventually forget his past.

Sir Steven sat there, Happy on his shoulder, and he had such a combination of awe and exhaustion and confusion on his face. But he was also determined, and when Ianto asked about Hydra he’d stiffened perceptively, some of that confusion dissipating under the wish to help them as much as possible.

“I know Hydra was run by the Skull, back during the war,” the Paladin began. “They were doing experiments on innocent people, using magical artifacts they’d managed to locate. I have no idea who their members were, but they were obsessed with magic and power. The Skull was hoping to catch a ride to rulership on the Despot’s coattails.”

Surprisingly, Phil wasn’t disappointed that Sir Steven didn’t know more than that. He thought that it probably hadn’t mattered, as long as he’d known who his enemies were. From the historical records, Sir Steven Rogers had hated bullies with a passion, and had always gone after them with a stubbornness and single-mindedness of purpose that had been enviable to a much younger Phil Coulson.
Feeling that way hadn’t stopped him from becoming the Dark One, but then there were reasons at the time for that. Reasons that Phil didn’t care to revisit. He’d done enough of that in the last several days.

Ianto looked a little disappointed at the lack of information, but didn’t say anything about it. Instead, he told the Paladin, “He would have succeeded, if not for him meeting you.”

Sir Steven shook his head, faintly embarrassed. “I’m not so sure about that.”

“The Skull vanished soon after sending you to the Void,” Phil cut in, glad that he’d at least had a passing familiarity with events, “and it was widely spread about that you’d killed him. I think, though, now that we know what happened to you, that we can assume the Void kept him when it gave us you back.” It wasn’t something that had occurred to him until that moment, and it was just a bit worrying.

The Paladin shuddered. “I hope he never comes out.”

“Phil,” Stephen spoke, “do you think you can check the Void and see if that maniac really is there?”

The Void Wizard shrugged. “It’s worth a try. I’d like someone to watch over me while I do it.” It wasn’t that he didn’t trust the Void; he did, it was impossible not to, even though it had made the arbitrary decision to refuse to let him die…ever. It was that he wasn’t sure he could get out, despite the fact that the Void had already spat him out three times now. Four, if you count that one time back when he’d been the Dark One, the time that Clint – and Marcus – were fond of recounting. That time, though, he hadn’t actually gone into the Void, only a Void Point, which was a little different.

Clint looked like he was going to speak up, but before he could Ianto volunteered, “I’ll be happy to keep watch.”

His lover didn’t speak, but Phil knew that he’d be there as well. For which he was grateful. He’d have to say something to Clint later, when they were in private.

“But,” Phil said, “I’m afraid that’s going to have to wait. We really need to discover who Hydra still has in Void Order and remove them from play.”

“Agreed,” his Cardinal counterpart said. “We need to cut Hydra off at the knees first. We can’t have them coming at us when we least expect it.”

“I want to help,” Sir Steven’s expression became determined.

Phil’s inner child began to jump up and down in excitement at that. The adult in him told it to settle down.

“While we appreciate that,” Jack interjected, “you’ve just had one of the biggest shocks ever. You need to rest and recuperate.”

“Jack’s right,” Pepper added. “There’s so much out there that you’re simply not prepared for.”

“You’re welcome to stay here,” Tony offered. Phil had almost forgotten he was there; this was the longest he’d ever known of Tony Stark staying silent. The man was usually quite the chatterbox. Here, he was showing remarkable restraint.

“I don’t want to infringe on your hospitality – “
“You won’t be.” The Baron waved off the Paladin’s objection. “Look, I’m aware of how much I resemble my many-times great-grandfather, and I figure that has to be uncomfortable for you. But, right now, the only people who know you’re here are the ones in this room, plus Mini-Pepper—”

“I can’t believe you call my daughter that.” It was amusing, really. Phil was very proud of Daisy, and respected the example that Pepper showed her. She’d needed a woman in her life that wasn’t Melinda May, and Pepper was a good influence.

“— and a couple others,” Baron Tony finished, as if Phil hadn’t said anything at all. “We can keep it a secret for as long as we need to. Come on…you have to admit, you’re not really ready for the outside world yet. Hells, you weren’t ready for dragons, and you’re gonna see a few of them in any sort of travels you decide to make.”

“Also,” Ianto said, “this is Wizard business. I know you have long-standing history with Hydra, but they’re now Wizards and that puts their capture directly at the Grand Masters’ discretion.”

Sir Steven slumped in his seat, dejected. “To be fair, I really wouldn’t know where to look.”

“We’ll take care of this.” Ianto didn’t even sound patronizing, which was most likely a possibility when those particular words were spoken. Phil knew that for a fact; hells, he’d been the patronizing one, a long time ago. “While you get used to this time. We even have someone coming to help.”

That had the Paladin smirking slightly. “Someone actually knows what it’s like to wake up in another time?”

“I’m afraid not.” The Cardinal Wizard returned the smirk. “But someone who’s willing to listen to whatever you need to say.”

“I’ll be around, too,” Jack said. “We might not have been officially acquainted back during the War, but I’m perfectly willing to do anything I can.”

Myfanwy made a little chirping sound, from where she stood next to Jack, while Happy rubbed Sir Steven’s cheek affectionately. Lola made it known that she wanted to help as well, and Phil couldn’t help but give her a little appreciative skritch for that. Dragons were, on the whole, loving creatures, would often go out of their way to aid people who needed it.

Unless they were constrained by their Wizards, of course. Or they shared their Wizard’s dark thoughts and designs.

It was telling that, while Phil had been wearing the façade of the Dark One, that Lola had been just as she was now. She’d also reflected his inner struggle to discover just who he was, and had been a very important support for him when he’d needed it the most. He loved her fiercely, as much as she loved him.

“Thank you all. I appreciate everything. But really, the sooner I get acclimated the better I’ll feel.”

“That’s completely understandable.” Ianto reached into a pocket in his tunic, pulling out a smooth, gray rock. “Now, this is a speaking stone. All you have to do is say one of our names, and we’ll answer.”

Sir Steven accepted the stone. “That’s handy. Wish we’d had something like that in wartime. Communications on the battlefront would have been a lot easier.” He examined the stone closely, working it between his fingers, as if he was trying to feel the magic that had been cast upon it.

“You’ll have the run of the castle,” Pepper said. “The only thing I ask is that you not go into my
casting chamber, which I’ll show you what door it is. There are things in there that are dangerous for someone who isn’t a Wizard. Even Tony isn’t allowed inside.”

“Hey,” the Baron squawked, although it was completely without any heat.

“You might want to stay away from Tony’s workshop as well,” the Cardinal Mistress added. “He’s a bit messy and there’s no telling what sort of trouble you could get into there.”

“I’m not messy!” Baron Tony exclaimed. “I know exactly where everything is.”

“But no one else does.”

He opened his mouth to rebut that accusation, but closed his mouth without saying a thing. He really couldn’t argue about it; the time Phil had been down there, it had been just as cluttered as Pepper claimed. He really didn’t know how the Baron could figure out where anything was, despite his assertions.

“We should be going,” Ianto said. “Sir Steven, please…get some rest. You’re going to need it.” He rested a hand on the Paladin’s shoulder, in the one place that Happy wasn’t laying on. “But don’t worry…we’ll do everything we can to help you.”

“Thank you, Grand Master.”

“Please…it’s Ianto. I like to think we may become friends someday.”

Phil couldn’t help the slight smile. Ianto was fast becoming someone he could trust absolutely. It didn’t seem possible they’d only known each other a short time. If anyone had ever told him he would have been friends with the Grand Masters of either Great or Cardinal Orders, he would have laughed at them.

With that, the meeting broke up. Pepper escorted them back to her casting chamber, where they would teleport back to Gateway…except for Phil and Clint, who were planning on going back to Shield Keep for the night. To be honest, the Wizard was exhausted, it had been a long day, and with the teleports between different time zones it had seemed like Phil had been up for a full day, even though that wasn’t exactly true. All Phil wanted to do was to go to bed, preferably not alone.

Jack, Ianto, and Stephen left first. But not before arranging to meet again tomorrow, to discuss what actions they were going to be taking in order to hunt down any further Hydra members in Void Order. Phil hoped to have some ideas that he could share with them in the morning. Also, he was hoping to hear if Daisy and her cohort of student friends were having any luck with discovering anything about that magical arm.

He was so proud of his daughter for standing up for Sir James. He could understand why the so-called Winter Knight had chosen to go back into the Zero Cabinet; he could also understand Ianto’s ethical objection to it. However, Daisy had been correct in saying it had been Sir James’ decision. His brave, strong, intelligent daughter…he will always love her just as fiercely as he had when she’d said she’d be the one to help Sir James back into the cabinet. And she’d been right when she’d pointed out that this was the man’s decision, that refusing to accept that decision was taking away the very agency that Hydra had done for centuries.

“You look tired,” Pepper observed, once the three of them were left.

“It’s been a long day,” Phil admitted.

He felt Clint’s arm settle around his waist, and the Void Wizard wasn’t ashamed to admit that he
leaned into the comfort that was being offered. On his other side, Lola rested against him as well, knowing just how exhausted Phil was feeling in that moment.

“I’m going to get him home and tuck him in,” Clint promised.

“I’m not a child,” he protested, although it was half-hearted.

“Phil,” Pepper rolled her eyes in fond irritation, “let him take care of you. It’s about time someone did.”

“I think the day’s just catching up with me.”

“You’re allowed to be tired, Phil.”

He reached out and took her hand. “Have I told you lately what a good friend you are?”

She gave him a brilliant smile. “No, but I won’t tire of hearing it.”

“There’s something else you might want to know.”

Her smile faded away. “That sounds serious.”

“It is.” They hadn’t actually talked about telling Pepper about the Winter Knight, but Phil thought she deserved to know the truth.

So, he explained. Everything. About how Jack had recognized the Winter Knight as Sir James Barnes, the childhood friend of the Paladin. How they planned on helping rid him of all the curses that had been placed upon him by Hydra. And how they’d had to put him back within the Zero Cabinet that had been his resting place for so many centuries.

By the time he was done, Pepper had such a look of shocked dismay on her face that he couldn’t help but hug her. Hugging and being hugged, for Phil, was something he hadn’t thought he deserved until he’d met Daisy, who was free with her affection and had given him a need to return that affection to his daughter and to others who needed it. It could still be vaguely uncomfortable, but he was getting over that feeling.

She pulled away fairly soon, staring him straight in the eye. “And you’re not telling Sir Steven because you’re afraid of his mental status.” It wasn’t a question.

“Once Andrew’s friend speaks to him and we get some sort of idea of how he’s most likely going to cope, we’ll say something. But Sir James’ condition…it’s grave. There are so many curses on that arm, and on the man himself...he’s going to need the support of his friend, when we figure out a way to get those curses removed.”

“We’ll take care of Sir Steven,” she vowed, “if only to return him to Sir James.”

He gave her a tiny smile. “I know you will. Even Baron Tony can help, if only to keep Sir Steven distracted.”

“You know almost as well as I do that Tony isn’t as bad as his reputation claims.”

He did. The Baron’s reputation was pretty dire, but his propensity for philanthropy mitigated that reputation somewhat. The problem was, Baron Tony really hadn’t done all that much to warrant such a reputation; well, there were his earlier days, before he’d married Pepper and his kidnapping. He’d come back from that a changed man, and not just personality-wise. Phil was well aware of that
magical stone that kept him alive; he could feel it buzzing against his own magic every time he was in the Baron’s company. No one knew the origin of the stone, only that the kidnappers had used it when the Baron had been nearly killed in an explosion during his capture, and that they couldn’t risk him dying before he’d perfected the weapon they’d wanted him to build. Phil had no doubt that, once Baron Tony had done what they’d asked, they would have killed him and taken back the stone. Fortunately for him, Tony Stark was far smarter than any terrorist, and had managed to escape on his own.

Then, there was the way he doted on Daisy, when she wasn’t even his own…Phil might pretend to be irritated with him at any given moment, but Baron Tony was actually a decent human being.

To be honest, the man amused Phil greatly. Not that he was going to admit that, because Baron Tony could also exasperate him just as easily. He didn’t want to give him any ideas—or leverage.

“Let’s go home,” Clint urged. His arm squeezed Phil a little closer, then released him enough to give him room to work his magic.

Phil’s chest warmed at Clint’s calling the Keep, home. He was gratified that the Elf wanted to share the Wizard’s home and life. It had been a long time coming, eleven years of separation—which was Phil’s fault, and he’ll do his utmost to make up for that rather idiotic decision to remain dead to both Clint and Natasha—but they were now in a place where they could be together for as long as Clint wanted to.

For Phil, forever would never be long enough, but he knew they wouldn’t get that. He’d settle for what he could, and then deal with the loss later.

Lola, sensing a little of his upset at the knowledge that he’d one day lose Clint, nestled against him and cooed mournfully at him. He rested his hand on her head, stroking down the length of her long neck, sending her reassurance and peaceful thoughts.

Clint must have caught the dragon’s sadness; he gave Phil such a look, as if he was using some sort of mind magic to read the Wizard’s thoughts. “Let’s go home,” he repeated softly.

“Take care,” Pepper said, “and we’ll talk soon.”

She stepped back, and Phil activated the magic of the bracelet that would take them back to Shield Keep. The feeling of teleportation swept through them, and between one blink and the next they were back in Phil’s own casting chamber, the familiar magicks of the Keep surrounding them. He took a deep breath, glad to be home once more.

“I know we ate dinner at Jack and Ianto’s,” Clint said, “but I’m hungry again. Let’s see if Andrew left us anything.”

That sounded like an excellent idea, and Phil wasn’t afraid to say so. Taking Clint’s hand, he led his lover and his dragon back up into the living areas of the Keep, and into the kitchens.

There wasn’t anything on the stove, so Phil opened the cold box to see if something had been preserved there. A chilly blast of air hit him in the face, refreshing him a little, and on one of the metal mesh shelves was a cold plate of meats and cheeses, along with some of the beer that was made locally. Two pieces of apple pie had been set on individual dessert plates on the shelf below it, nestled amid several bundles of fresh vegetables and some of the tropical fruits that Phil liked so well and Melinda would always arrange for him to have whenever he wanted.

Clint helped him with the plates, setting them onto the kitchen table. Lola gave him such sad eyes
that Phil had no choice but to chuckle and to head back to the cold box for the rather large chop he’d seen in there and knowing that Andrew had left it specifically for the dragon.

Lola showed her gratitude by wolfing down the chop and then promptly begging for more once the two men had taken seats and began their own snack.

“Sorry,” the Wizard laughed, “but you’re going to get fat if you keep eating like that.”

Lola huffed at him, giving him the dragon equivalent of a nose in the air. Clint joined in on the laughter, mock-sneaking the dragon a slice of cheese. Phil glowered at him, but he couldn’t hold it for long, shaking his head in amusement. “You’re setting a really bad precedent here, Clint.”

Clint snorted as Lola finished the cheese and promptly rested her chin on his leg, her blue eyes glittering up at him in a very passable attempt at a puppy eyes.

“Glutton,” Phil said fondly. He could tell she really wasn’t expecting anything else from the Elf, but had to put on a show because it amused her to do so. “She’ll know you’re a soft touch, now.”

“I’ve just got to spoil my girl, Phil. She deserves it.”

“I thought I heard someone in here,” Andrew’s voice came from the entryway.

Phil looked up at the man. The changes in him, now that the curse had been torn away, were striking. He’d never met Andrew Garner before the curse, so seeing him standing there, looking wholly human once more, was going to take a little bit of getting used to.

In his cursed form, Andrew had been much taller, with albino-white skin and a head full of writhing snakes. He’d been powerfully built, scarily strong, and yet under all of that had been a very gentle soul who hadn’t deserved what had happened to him. Now, he was a handsome man, still large but not unnaturally so, with dark skin and short hair, his tunic and trousers a little big on him now that he didn’t have that sheer bulk anymore.

Phil made a mental note to ask Melinda to take her husband shopping for decent clothing. He thought she might get a kick out of filling a wardrobe for him now.

“I hope we didn’t disturb you,” he told the man.

“Not at all. I see you found what I’d left out for you.” Andrew walked into the room. He headed over to the urn, where he poured some of the tea within into a mug he pulled down from the cupboard above. Then, he turned, leaning against the counter, in order to regard the two men at the table. “Busy day?”

“You have no idea.” If Phil had known what was going to happen, he would have happily stayed in bed with Clint. He decided not to go into detail at the moment, but he did want to say, “Sir Steven woke up. He’s pretty shocked by the whole thing.”

“I’m not surprised. Losing time is bad when it happens, but to suddenly wake up and three hundred years has passed you by…I did contact one of my former students, and he should be at Ferrous Castle in the morning. He’s up on the latest in stress situations as pertaining to battle, so hopefully he’ll be able to help. Unfortunately, what the Paladin has been through is something none of us can really relate to.”

Andrew had a point. The closest person even close would have been Jack, and he hadn’t actually jumped in time; he’d taken the slow path to where and when he was now. Phil was pretty sure the immortal would be of help, but there really wasn’t anything anyone could do to really empathize in
this particular circumstance.

“Sam’s good,” Andrew continued. “He was one of my best and brightest.”

“Sam?” Clint inquired.

“Sam Wilson. He’s from the Falcon Enclave.”

“An Elf?” that had Phil’s own Elf perking up a bit.

“Half-Elf. Mother was from the Enclave; father was a human.”

Clint whistled. “Usually, the Enclaves don’t accept half-bloods into their ranks.”

“This one did. Apparently, Sam’s Mom was a bigwig in the Enclave. The way he tells it, her running off with a human was a huge scandal, but when she returned pregnant they took her back in. Sam looks enough Elven to pass for a full-blood.”

“As long as you trust him,” Phil said.

Andrew nodded. “I do.” His lips curved upward in a rueful smile “He yelled at me for losing touch. I apparently had made quite an impression on him when he was in my courses.”

“Now that the curse is gone, you should be able to contact anyone you want.”

“I’ve been giving that some thought, and I just might. There are a few people out there that I’ve missed. Melinda has, as well.”

“This can be a new beginning for you both.”

Andrew looked at his shrewdly. “Are you trying to get rid of us, Phil?”

“Not at all,” he assured the man. “You and Melinda are invaluable to me and to Daisy. Although, if you both did decide to leave, I wouldn’t stop you. But, this place is your home just as much as it is mine and Daisy’s. You both are always welcome here.”

“That’s good, because we’re not about to leave you and Daisy to fend for yourselves. You’d both starve to death in a week.”

“Hey,” Clint protested.

Andrew rolled his eyes fondly. “You’re just one more for Melinda to take care of, Hawk. Get used to it.”

Clint’s grin was bright. “Yes sir.”

“Please, stop.”

Phil laughed at that. Things weren’t going to be boring around here, he just knew it. And, despite his wish for that sort of thing, he was glad that they weren’t. Not when he had all this family around him.
Chapter 27

Clint never wanted to give up waking next to Phil. Never.

Phil was still asleep, so the Elf decided that watching would be the way to go. The Wizard’s face was unlined and appeared at least ten years younger when he was like that, relaxed and warm and… dare he say, beautiful? Not that Phil would most likely appreciate being called beautiful, but the word fit.

“You’re staring at me.” Phil’s voice was rough from sleep.

Clint couldn’t help the smile that broke across his face. “I thought you were still asleep.” He must have missed the signs that his lover was waking up.

“I was, until you started staring.”

“Can I help that I love looking at you?”

Blue eyes opened, meeting Clint’s own. There was just a hint of black flecks in them now, something new from just the last couple of days. He could easily recall how that black had taken over the blue, when they’d been facing down Hydra, and knew it was the Void that was presenting itself.

He was the most powerful Void Wizard ever. Grand Master of Voids.

But none of that mattered to Clint. Yes, he was proud to know that is lover was all that, and more, but the Elf simply wanted Phil, the former Dark One, now devoid of the pain and anger that had plagued him for years, replaced by love and happiness and a sarcastic glint that had Clint grinning at him helplessly.

He hadn’t mentioned to him what he and Ianto had discussed, but there was plenty of time for that later, after Hydra was found and stopped.

Phil gave him a sweet smile, it was yet another difference between Phil Coulson and the Dark One, who’d never would have had that sort of expression on his face, no matter what. “You’re disgustingly sappy, you know it?”

“You bring out the sap in me…what can I say?”

The Wizard rolled his eyes affectionately. “I need to stop that then, don’t I?”

“Never.” Clint leaned over, kissing Phil gently.

The Wizard hummed in pleasure, deepening the kiss, one hand stroking along Clint’s back while the trailed along a well-muscled shoulder and down a bicep, then to the forearm and back up again, a trail of heat left in its wake. Clint had been touched by many lovers in the past, but there was something about Phil that left them all in the dust. It was addicting, the way he touched the archer, as if Clint was something precious, something to be admired and cherished, that had him falling more in love with Phil than ever.

They made love slowly, tenderly, and when he orgasmed Clint felt tears in his eyes. He lay under
Phil, staring up at the man he’d been attracted to before, but now…now, it was so much more. He’d seen something in the Dark One, something that he’d not been able to easily identify, but it had been the good and kind man that touched him with such reverence that it had the Elf wondering just what he’d done to deserve everything he’d gained in just the several days since he’d found out that Phil Coulson was still alive, after thinking him dead for eleven years.

“Are you alright?” Phil must have noticed that Clint was in the verge of crying.

“Are you kidding? I’ve never been better.” He used a hand to pull Phil into yet another kiss, not ready to stop touching him yet even though he felt slightly rung out from that spectacular orgasm. “Do you have any idea what you do to me?”

“I believe I’m beginning to get the idea.” Phil pulled out of the kiss, looking almost unbearably smug.

Which, if Clint was honest, he had a total right to be.

“Come on,” Phil said, smacking Clint lightly on the thigh, “we need to get up and moving. It’s going to be a busy day for both of us.”

With a groan, Clint flopped an arm over his eyes in disgust. “When is it going to slow down so we can have a nice lie in just once?”

“Not until after Hydra’s taken care of.” Phil was up and out of bed, and Clint removed his arm so he could enjoy the view of a naked Wizard standing there, hands on his hips. “Then, I can get someone else to be Grand Master and we can get more time to ourselves.” He turned on his heel and headed toward the facilities.

Clint groaned again, then got his own self out of bed. He didn’t want to say it, but there was something telling him that Phil was deluding himself if he thought he’d be able to retire peacefully from the position of Grand Master after all this was done and over with. If Ianto and Grand Master Stephen had anything to say about it, Phil was going to be Grand Master of Voids for a long time to come.

It didn’t hurt that he’d be good at it. He was also far more powerful than all of the Voids there were currently in the Order, and would be able to hold the job against all comers. He had the knowledge and the experience needed to carry out his duties. And, he had the respect of the other Grand Masters, as well as other Masters in the Guild.

However, he could understand why Phil didn’t want it. There were bound to be rumors about the Dark One wanting to grasp power, and that was really the very last thing on his lover’s mind… which, if they ever gave it a single thought, made him a perfect Grand Master. He wasn’t power-mad and he had no wish to use his magic against anyone else…anyone who didn’t deserve it, that was. In a fight, Phil Coulson was exactly the person you wanted to have your back.

But there would be people who would think this was just a ruse to gain power and prestige over the Wizard’s Guild. Those people didn’t know Phil, and would be judging him on his Dark One ways. The thing was, even then the Dark One hadn’t even been about that sort of thing. It had been all about making people hurt the way Phil had hurt, and some of the time he’d taken that pain out on the bad guys. Not that anyone knew that, all they knew was the reputation for ruthlessness and the blood on Phil’s hands from his proverbial reign of terror.

They didn’t know the man who hadn’t believed he was worth loving. Who’d thought he was supposed to be evil because he was a Void Wizard and his parents had had an unhealthy view of just
what the Deathforce was. The Dark One had been rage and agony and the need to feel better…but hadn’t known how to do go about achieving that.

Phil Coulson was a very different person from the Dark One. He’d learned to give and accept love freely, and to use his knowledge and magic to help others. The rage and the pain were both gone, replaced by contentment and happiness. The Dark One was gone, dead and dust, replaced by a man who had been hidden down so deep within the villain that he hadn’t understood that there was a hero underneath it all.

Clint followed his lover into the facilities, to find Phil seated in the enormous tub that took up most of the space. The archer’s mouth went dry at the sight of his naked and wet lover, and he couldn’t help but rake his eyes over the parts of him that weren’t underwater.

Phil cocked an eyebrow at him. “Well, are you just going to stand there and stare, or are you going to join me?”

There was only one answer to that.

Which meant they were a bit longer getting ready for the day.

Natasha had been nice enough to make sure Clint’s things had been sent to the Keep from their rooms in Triskelia, so he had clean clothes to change into, and Melinda must have been the one to have put his saddlebags and extra weapons in Phil’s bedchamber. He chose his riding leathers, because he knew for a fact that he would probably be in the saddle today, depending on whatever plan Toshiko and Nat had come up with while he’d been busy at Ferrous Castle.

Unlike the United Kingdom, the Western Lands didn’t have a Mercenary Guild, so they couldn’t put the word out about Hydra that way. Natasha had contacts that, knowing her, she’d already alerted, but Toshiko had wanted to get the word out to as many mercenaries and soldiers of fortune as possible. Clint was sure she’d already done that in her home country, because the Guild would have made the passing along of information so much easier, but Toshiko hadn’t travelled in the Western Lands as much as he and Nat had. She would need their help, and the pair was willing to do just that.

In Clint’s opinion, the more people who knew about those assholes in Hydra, the better. And that meant the sooner they’d catch up those bastards and they could get on with living their lives in relative peace.

He couldn’t help but notice Phil’s appreciative glance at Clint’s backside as he pulled his trousers on.

He also couldn’t help the extra shimmy in his step as they left the suite. After all, Clint knew what his best features were, and he had it on good authority that his ass was magnificent.

Breakfast was waiting for them, along with Daisy, who must have come home last night after he and Phil had gone to bed. She was sitting at the table, finishing up what looked like a bowl of oatmeal, Skye curled up on her shoulders as the dragon was wont to do. After Phil had gotten Lola her usual hunk of meat, he and Clint finished up the crock of oatmeal that had been left on the stove; Clint adding honey to his, while Phil had more fruit that actual cereal in his own bowl. The coffee was a little stronger than Clint usually took it, but that was fine; after all, he and Phil had spent a bit more time upstairs than they’d planned, and the grounds had had time to steep a little longer than normal.

It was just too hard not to jump his lover when they were both naked. In fact, Clint considered it a moral imperative to do so.
“Good morning,” Phil greeted his daughter. “Are you heading back to Gateway today?”

Daisy nodded. “We didn’t get much of a start yesterday in the Archives, so I’ll be meeting everyone else in a bit.” She scraped the last of the oatmeal out of her bowl. “I should warn you, Dad, you’re gonna have several Novices wanting to learn some of the spells we’ve run into, and everyone seems to think you’re the one to teach them.”

Phil gave his daughter a fond eyebrow. “Which spells specifically?”

“This really great Keep Out spell that’s on the doors in the Archives. Oh, and Fitz really wants to know all about the unPlotable spell you use on the Keep. He was practically drooling over it.”

“Well, the unPlotable spell might be a bit advanced right now, but I’m sure Fitz will grow into it. I am familiar with the Keep Out spells in the Archives, but you might want to talk to Ianto about those. He was the one who found them, after all, and made certain they were in place. Beyond that, I’ll be willing to show your friends anything they want to learn.”

That got him a brilliant smile from Daisy. “Fantastic.”

“Other than that, how was your search?”

She shrugged. “Nothing yet on that arm. Although, we didn’t have all that much time yesterday before the Head Archivist chivvied us out. I think he was really confused over the fact that I had both Ianto’s spectacles and his primary Archive key.”

Phil laughed at that. “I’m not surprised. It’s a great sign of trust that he let you borrow both.”

“I know, Dad, and I don’t intend letting him or Sir James down.”

The smile that Phil gave his daughter was so full of pride that it made Clint a little embarrassed for the young Wizard; she seemed to feel the same way, if the blush that colored her cheeks was any indication. “You’ll do your best.”

“I just feel bad for him, you know? He’s lost everything and had his memories messed with and cursed and…well, you know. I just want to help him.” She set her spoon down in her empty bowl. “You didn’t tell Sir Steven, right?”

“Not yet. It won’t be a good idea to let that particular cat out of the bag until Sir Steven is settled and Sir James has had all those curses removed. I’d hate to reunite them only for them to break apart again.”

“Me, too,” Daisy sighed. Then she looked at Clint, slyness in her gaze. “So…should I be making any threats about hurting my Dad?”

“Daisy,” Phil scolded, even as he was smiling at her protectiveness.

Clint shook his head. “It’s fine, Phil. She has a right to ask.” He looked her straight in the eye. “You don’t have to say a thing. Because I don’t need to be reminded about how good I have it. And I’m not gonna hurt Phil if I can absolutely help it.” He’d never do anything to deliberately injure his lover, not after waiting for so many years in order to finally be this happy.

“Perfect.” Daisy gave him a big smile. “I’m off to meet the gang and get started on more research. As much fun it is to be completely trusted by the Grand Master of my Order, most of those old papers make for kinda dry reading.” With that, she flounced out of the kitchen, Skye calling out her own dragon version of a farewell as they exited.
“Well,” Phil said, bemused, “I should have expected that.”

“Yes, you should have.” Clint winked. “Look, if the daughter of the man I love can’t threaten me over possibly hurt her Dad, then who can?”

“Thank you for humoring her.”

“Not humoring her. I’m taking her very seriously. She’s pretty protective of you, and who can blame her? You’re her only parent. She loves you. She needs to make sure I’m good enough for you… although, I’m not entirely sure I am…”

“Yes, you are.” Phil reached over and touched Clint’s hand. “It’s me who’s not worthy of you.”

Clint had to laugh. “I think we can agree to disagree on that, alright?”

“If you say so. Now, eat up…then we need to get going. Time is passing and we have too much to do.”

The Wizard was right, and Clint did agree. Besides, the sooner they got everything done, the faster they could get back here and start acting all domestic.

Something that Clint was looking forward to.
“Well,” Ianto said, leaning back in his chair, “do we have any idea how we’re going to track down whoever Hydra has in Void Order?”

Phil sat in the visitor’s chair opposite the desk, while Stephen lounged on the sofa that Myfanwy usually used as a nest when she was in the office with Ianto. Today, the three dragons were out in the front room, in their traditional dragon pile, and the Cardinal Wizard could sense just how much Myfanwy enjoyed having the two other dragons with her. She was becoming fast friends with Lola, as she had with Agamotto, and it would only be a matter of time before all three dragons would be practically inseparable.

Stephen’s Cloak was hovering in the background, just on the edge of Ianto’s vision, and not for the first time he was amused by the Cloak of Levitation’s antics as it noticed him looking and the lower edge of the Cloak waved at him jauntily.

“I’ve thought about it,” Phil answered, “and one way would be to use Truth potions on those we might suspect of collaboration.”

“That’s the entire Void Order,” Stephen pointed out. “We’d have to make enough Truth potions for over one hundred-fifty people.”

“Maybe not,” Ianto mused. “We can disregard students and Novices…”

“I can understand the students, but how do you come up with that about the Novices?”

“Because every Master I met at Hydra’s base had an attendant Novice, except for Pierce, and he never had one even before being ousted as the leader of a Void cabal,” Phil pointed out. “Now, certainly, Masters can have more than one Novice, but I got the distinct impression that it was a one on one deal.”

“At the very least,” Ianto said, “we can try that on the accredited Masters within the Order first. That would cut down the amount of potions needed to sixty. Still, that’s a lot of work.”

“How good are you two at potion making?” their Void Wizard inquired.

“I’m fairly good at it,” Stephen admitted. “And Ianto’s had more experience than the two of us combined.”

“It’s still not really one of my strengths,” Ianto admitted. “I can make do, but I’m more of a spellcaster than a potions’ maker.”

Phil smiled slyly. “Something you’re not good at, Ianto?”

Ianto chuckled. “I’m not perfect, despite what others may say.”

Stephen laughed as well. “That’s not what Jack claims.”

“Jack’s just a wee bit biased.” One of the many things his husband, when it came to Ianto himself, was biased. Honestly, he loved it, not that he’d ever admit that. Especially in front of Jack, who would run with it and never let it go.
“There are also charms that might do the trick,” Stephen got back on track.

“This is true.” Ianto considered. “In this sort of case, charms aren’t as efficacious as potions, but a temporary geas might work.”

“I…don’t care for using a geas,” Phil said slowly. “I’ve…seen it done, and it wasn’t pleasant.” He looked as if he wanted to speak further, but didn’t, instead saying, “I will if it’s the last resort.”

Ianto had a feeling he already knew why Phil didn’t care to cast a geas on anyone, and it had to do with Clint and Loki. He wasn’t about to bring it up, however. If he was correct, it wouldn’t have been a good idea to rake up old recollections like that, especially since his new friend didn’t want to talk about it.

“I think we need to clear the Heads of Void Order first,” Phil suggested. “I have a feeling that Mistress Elena isn’t Hydra, just from her reactions during the last Quorum, but she could just be a very good actress.”

“No, I tend to think her reactions were true.” Ianto pinched his lower lip in thought. “Once we have the senior Masters cleared, you’re going to need to appoint a new Head of Order for the Western Lands, Phil.”

The Void Wizard nodded. “Also, there’s something I thought of last night, that…worries me.”

Stephen sat up a little. “What is it?”

“We haven’t considered the notion that it’s just not a Void Wizard we have to look out for.”

Well, shit.

Because he was correct, and Ianto was a little mad at himself for not thinking of it. Yes, every single Wizard so far attached to Hydra had been Void, but there was no guarantee that was the case for every member of that cabal.

Stephen cursed out loud. “You have a point.”

“Have we been able to get anything out of Werner von Strucker?”

“No, Phil,” Ianto answered. “But then, we haven’t really had a chance to really question him yet. He’s still locked up in the detention level of the Quorum Hall.” He gave a little grin. “Daisy wanted to talk to him. I told her it was a very bad idea.”

“Thanks for that.” Phil’s expression was fondly exasperated. “My child tends to jump feet first into things sometimes. I know she’s trying to help, but…”

“Were we ever that young?” the Grand Master of Great Order asked.

“If so,” Ianto said dryly, “I’m old enough to pretend I don’t recall it.”

“And I was determined to be completely and totally evil at that age.” Phil shrugged. “I didn’t want to be, but I was really quite good at pretending.”

“So good,” Stephen pointed out, “that there are people who still shiver when someone says, ‘Dark One’, in too loud a tone. You’ve become the Boogeyman to a lot of people, Phil.”

Phil minutely flinched at that. Ianto couldn’t blame him; looking at it in a particular way, none of that Dark One business was really the man’s fault. His parents had had him firmly convinced that
Void Wizards were evil, just because they were able to manipulate what was colloquially known as the Deathforce, and it had affected a young Phillip Coulson at a very early age.

On the agenda, after Hydra was done, was to begin some sort of re-education program, so that such misinformation wasn’t passed along ever again.

“We’re going to need to call another Quorum,” Ianto said. “We need to get everyone in the same place. Usually, we don’t mind if a few Guild members don’t show up, but in this case we can’t be sure that anyone who can’t make it is simply avoiding being found out.”

“How long does it usually take to have the entire Guild recalled?” Phil asked.

“I think the last time it happened was right after the flooding that the reappearance of Genosha caused and, back then, there was only really about a dozen of us, and we were all based in Gateway at the time, not counting students and the Genoshan Wizards.” Ianto shrugged. “It hasn’t occurred since.”

“And Genosha wouldn’t join in anyway, even now,” Stephen added. “They’ve never agreed to the Guild system.”

Genosha had hidden itself away to preserve their own magic, but in the end it hadn’t worked. Wizards had become rare there, only the most powerful ones bound to the Royal Family. Magic was also coming back there as well, but it was at about the same rate as the rest of the world. Those Wizards had declared themselves beyond the Guild system, which was a shame…Ianto’s old friend, Charles Xavier, had done his best to get them to rejoin the rest of the Wizards in building the Guild, but they hadn’t agreed. Genosha was still just as insular as if they were still magically cut off from the rest of the world.

Charles had done what he could. But, in the end, he hadn’t been able to sway his lover, King Erik, that opening up Genosha’s borders was the best thing for their people. It was his greatest failure although, in the end, he’d been accepted back by his people and his exile revoked. And he’d stayed in touch with Ianto, helping as much as he could behind the scenes, not wanting to risk King Erik’s ire once more.

“We should send the notifications out,” Stephen replied, “because by now word will have gotten out to every Guild member about what’s going on. It might make it easier to get them all here for the full Quorum because of Hydra. This is something that needs to be addressed with everyone, and not just the majority.”

“I think I want to speak to von Strucker,” Phil said. “Perhaps he’ll talk to me. If we can get the name of the person who let him into the Quorum…”

“That would definitely help.” Ianto thought that was as good a plan as they could have. “In the end, it might be practically impossible to clear everyone. We’ll have to track down the members of Hydra we do know and hope we can get them to spill their secrets.”

“That’s going to be the easiest thing to do. Maybe we should make the Truth potions for them?”

Ianto met Phil’s eyes. “That would make sense. Are you good to do that?”

“Certainly. I have a dab hand at potions, to be honest. And it’ll be a bit of payback; Garrett showed up as I was starting a Transfiguration potion, and it was ruined.”

Ianto flinched. “Ouch.” Transfiguration potions were fiddly, and would fail at the drop of a pin. They were worse than souffles. “You can have first crack at him, just for that.”
“I’d gotten to adding the kingsfoil…”

Kingsfoil was a very expensive herb, and one that wasn’t to be found in the United Kingdom. In fact, Ianto thought the only place to get it fresh was in the mountains of the Middle Kingdom. He could certainly understand why Phil was so put out.

“I have some, if you need it for the next attempt,” Stephen volunteered. “I got it to try my own Transfiguration potion, but then never got around to concocting it. Wong accuses me of being wasteful with my funds so if you want it, maybe he won’t glare at me anymore when the subject comes up.”

Phil laughed. “It sounds as if your Wong and my Melinda would get along far too well. But yes, if you’re willing to part with it. Perhaps when I have some free time I’ll make the attempt.”

“Phil,” Ianto leaned forward, resting his forearms on his desk’s blotter, “there’s something else I wanted to speak to you about.”

The Void Wizard motioned to him to continue.

“I know you said you’d give up the Grand Master position as soon as Void Order was cleared of Hydra, but I really wish you’d reconsider.”

That earned Ianto a frown and a head shake. “Ianto, you can’t even think they’d want to keep me on, especially since my past has come out of the woodwork. None of the Voids are going to want the Dark One in charge; my reputation as being evil is too strong to overcome. They’ll want to get rid of me as soon as they can. Also, I don’t want it. I don’t want the power being a Grand Master gives me. The responsibility doesn’t bother me, but it’s the whispers that are bound to crop up about the Dark One lusting after the prestige and power of being Grand Master.”

“I think,” the Cardinal Wizard said, “that if you do a good enough job of digging Hydra out of our midst, that they’ll want you to stay.”

“And you have the sheer power to hold the position against all comers, should someone challenge for it,” Stephen pointed out. “You are, quite literally, the most powerful Void Wizard in the world at the moment. The Grand Masters are supposed to be the ones with the most magical ability as well as the morals to keep from going mad with the power the position entails. You’re not going to do that, because you don’t want the job. You’re perfect for it.”

Phil was very uncertain, and Ianto couldn’t blame him. His past played against him, and the Cardinal Wizard knew it would be a very long time indeed before that past would be forgotten. Until then, there may always be the question of the Wizard’s motives in accepting the Grand Mastership, that he’d only taken it because the Dark One was power-mad and wanted to control his own section of the Guild. Ianto knew that wasn’t the case at all; if there was anyone less likely to make a power grab, it was Phil Coulson, just because of that very notion. He had no desire to be in charge of anyone, let alone Void Order, and was perfectly willing to give it up.

He was, in fact, perfect for the position. Stephen was correct in that assertion.

Phil Coulson was like Ianto, himself, that way. He hadn’t wanted to be Grand Master of Cardinals, and yet he’d taken it on because he’d known he was the one least likely to enjoy having it. Even Stephen didn’t really care for being Grand Master of Greats; he’d been a medical man until an accident had taken the fine motor skills from his hands and had ended his career. Now, he was perfectly happy in his library, studying magic and teaching the next generation. He took his duties very seriously, though, and had accepted his responsibilities when he’d been called to take them on.
“None of us really wanted this,” Ianto pointed out. “But we serve the best way we know how.”

Phil slumped a little in his seat, looking tired. “I’ll make a deal with you. If, when we’re done with the Hydra issue, the entire Order votes for me to stay, I will. If not, we find someone else to take over.”

“Agreed.” It was a good deal, especially since Ianto didn’t think he’d come in on the losing side. He had a good feeling about Phil and his becoming a well-respected Grand Master.

“I agree as well,” Stephen echoed. “However, I think you may find you’ll be in that position for a long time to come.”

“You have an awful lot of faith in me.”

“And you don’t have enough faith in yourself and your order, Phil. You have a lot to offer, and it would be a waste of that potential if you let yourself believe you’re not good enough.”

Ianto knew that Stephen was correct. Phil would do a lot of good for Void Order, but he simply didn’t have enough confidence in both his order and in his own abilities. It would be up to him and Stephen to show him that he was the right man for the job.

But then, Phil had been treated very poorly by the very people who should have loved him. Ianto could only hope that both Daisy and Clint would be able to prove to him that he was perfectly capable in handling whatever the Order threw at him.

And he still had to prepare what Clint had asked him to.

That, above anything else, would do a world of good in proving to Phil that he wasn’t a product of his past. That he could rise above the Dark One and be something even greater.

There were a lot of people willing to show him that he was so much more than his past.

And Ianto was one of them.
Chapter 29

Clint sighed, shaking off the Teleport magic that had carried him and the others to their destination.

It had been Nat’s fancy, open-ended Teleport bracelet, and sometimes it wasn’t the easiest trip, especially when there were more than just her with him along with the ride.

This time, this also included Toshiko and Jack, both looking just as peaky as Clint was feeling, so he didn’t feel himself special.

“That was damned rough,” Jack groused, his neck cracking loudly as he rotated his head carefully in order to work the kinks out.

Natasha tucked the magical bracelet back under her sleeve. “I’ve never carried this many people before.” She didn’t look at all affected, either, which wasn’t at all fair.

“No offense,” Toshiko said, “but I’m going to use my own Teleport artifact for the trip back.”

Ianto had supplied them all with specific Teleport spells to bring them back to Gateway when they were done with whatever the hells they were going to be doing; Natasha had said something about checking in with a contact of hers, but she hadn’t even told them where they were going. Nat was secretive that way, though, and Clint had come to expect it and went along for the ride. She’d talk when she was ready to. Apparently, both Tosh and Jack were alright with it, since they hadn’t kicked up much of a fuss when the Widow had invited them along with her.

Also, Clint had his own Teleport bracelet, the one that Phil had given him, that would take him home when he was ready.

Home. He liked the sound of that.

Phil had also given him several more of the bespelled arrows, which were in his quiver at his back. The Elf was hoping to get to use them, but that would mean there would be trouble.

Oh, wait…of course there would be trouble. Why would he expect anything else?

“None taken,” Nat answered, giving the other Elf a slight smile. “Now, I have some contacts to meet with. They’ve been looking into any sorts of leads, and the message I was sent said they might have been able to track at least one of our flown birds.”

Jack twitched his cloak aside, taking a long look at where they were. “Lasavar, isn’t it? Near the Pleasure Dome?”

Clint took his own look. They were in an alley, and it was just like a lot of alleys all over the Western Lands, so he wasn’t at all certain how Jack had recognized it.

“It’s the sound,” the Deathless answered, when Clint asked. “Can’t you hear the chime of the casinos?” He grinned. “I thought Elves had exceptional hearing.”

Clint rolled his eyes at the banter. He wanted to make a sharp remark, but he really hadn’t paid that much attention. Now, that Jack had pointed out it, the archer could indeed here the unmistakable sounds of the chimes of the games, and music being played. In the distance, a woman was singing,
and it sounded like one of the more popular songs currently out.

“Have you been to Lasavar before?” Natasha inquired politely.

“A long time ago, but I bet it hasn’t changed one bit.”

Clint barked a laugh. “If you wanted to bet on anything, this is the place to do it.”

They strode out of the alley to join the crowds that were making their way down what was the main thoroughfare of the gambling capitol of the Western Lands. Lasavar was one of the older cities in the Barony the city was named for, a place where every vice known to man was catered to; it was also the home of the infamous Pleasure Dome. To be honest, Clint really didn’t care much for Lasavar, having been through several times in their travels; it was a bit too noisy, and crowded, and the sight lines were terrible. All of the buildings were gaudy and, while the Elf usually liked heights, were too tall for even his tastes. Only someone in the most excellent of health would have been able to climb to those upper stories. He was, and it still irritated him.

The five of them being heavily armed didn’t even raise any eyebrows from the people bustling to and fro toward whatever gambling hall or brothel they were heading toward. It was still early in the day, but Lasavar was a city that was active anytime of the day or night, although it was somewhat less busy at this time of the day. Still, there were enough people around to make their progress a bit slower than they would have usually walked, and it grated on Clint’s nerves just a little. He felt jumpy, not at home around all these strangers even though he was walking with people he trusted to have his back.

He might not have known Jack and Toshiko long, but Clint had trusted them almost immediately… which was really unusual for him. He would have been at a loss to explain it, except the archer knew it was because Phil trusted them. Well, Phil trusted Jack; Jack trusted Toshiko, but that made sense since the other Elf had been a long-term associate of both Jack and Ianto, and was Jack’s Second. As long as they’d known her, Toshiko had become a part of their family, and Clint could get behind that.

Natasha was making her way toward a pub that Clint knew from the sign outside; on it, were a stylized pony, a puppy rollicking around its hooves. The Dog and Pony was the place where most of the mercenaries in the area met and made their deals, so seeing them walking toward it made sense.

Mercenaries worked differently in the Western Lands than they did in the United Kingdom. There, they were organized into a single Guild; in the Western Lands, mercenaries were in loose groups, not holding to any rules or regulations or contracts unless they were being well-paid for it. While it would have been easy to get the word out in the United Kingdom, here it was a matter of putting the right word in the right ear and letting rumormongering take its course. It wasn’t pretty, but it worked in its own way.

The Dog and Pony wasn’t anywhere near full capacity when they entered the dimly lit pub. A long bar along one wall had an innkeeper behind it, serving the few standing there, waiting on drinks. There were round tables dotted about the room, some of them with occupied; but there were more empty than full ones at that time of day. The immense fireplace wasn’t lit, but it wasn’t necessary; Lasavar was a desert city, and was rarely that cold except in the middle of the night and in the winter.

It didn’t take but a moment for Clint to realize who they were there to meet.

“Aw, Nat…no,” he sighed.
That earned him twin looks of confusion from both Jack and Toshiko, and a smirk from the woman who was supposed to have been his best friend. “Come on,” Natasha urged, not quite laughing in his face, as she made her way toward the table at the back of the pub.

Two people were at that table; two people Clint were known to him. Too well, really.

“Clint,” Jack murmured, “if there’s a problem…”

“It’s personal,” he assured his new friend, since Nat had apparently given up that title, “it won’t affect our mission.”

“Just say the word, and we’ll pull out.”

The archer was pitifully grateful for the support but, if Nat had decided to meet with these two, then there was a valid reason for it. She was aware of how he felt, and wouldn’t have deliberately set out to irritate him.

Wait, this was Natasha Romanov. Of course she’d do something like that, just because she enjoyed being a pain in his ass.

Natasha took a seat at the table. “You have anything?” she asked the pair, as she motioned for the others to sit down as well.

Clint did so. He didn’t have much of a choice. The was Nat’s show; he’d been busy elsewhere, and Natasha knew what she was doing.

Most of the time.

However, things were tense. Not that Clint hadn’t expected that, the moment he’d seen who Nat had tapped to be her contacts for this particular mission. It was as if every single expectation weighed far too heavily over them all, like something was going to explode and no one would escape the blast.

_Damnit, Nat._

“You going to introduce us to your new friends?” the woman asked, raising an eyebrow.

Her companion spoke up. “That’s Jack bloody Harkness,” he stabbed a finger toward Jack, his accent easily identified as from somewhere near London-town. “And that would make her Toshiko Sato.” He turned toward Natasha. “When did you start running in such rarified circles, Widow?”

Natasha just gave him her patented smirk, the one that promised danger and death, usually in equal measure. “Jack…Toshiko…this is Bobbi Morse and Lance Hunter. They’re very good at ferreting out information that doesn’t want to be ferreted out.”

That was an understatement. Bobbi and Hunter were excellent spies, and were usually paid very well for what they were asked to find.

Bobbi looked impressed. “We’ve heard a lot about you, Captain Harkness.”

Jack gave her a bright, flirtatious smile. “I’m sure you have. Most of it was most likely bad.”

She laughed. “I also know you’d flirt with anything, despite being married.”

The immortal laughed. “Ianto’s often claimed that if I didn’t flirt he’d think someone had either cast a spell on me, or replaced me with a doppelganger.”
“Yeah,” Hunter snorted, “keep that to yourself, mate.”

“Hunter gets jealous,” Bobbi grinned. “It’s going to be only worse with Barton here.”

Jack gave Clint an appraising glance, as if making some assumptions about what he’d just heard. He’d probably get close to the truth, but the archer wasn’t about to let those assumptions get out of hand.

“Bobbi and I were married once,” he admitted. “It didn’t go well.”

Bobbi shrugged. “It was fun while it lasted, but it was a mistake.”

That was an understatement. He and Bobbi had had a whirlwind romance – that was mostly sex – and had gotten married after about a week. The marriage itself lasted for two months, when they’d come to figure out they’d made a really big error in judgment. Bobbi had been a rebound, in a way, from Phil…who’d been dead at that point. It had been a year after Loki, and he hadn’t been over losing the man who could have meant more to him than his own life, so it hadn’t been fair to Bobbi.

But then, Bobbi had been rebounding from Hunter, who was an asshole and who didn’t really deserve her, but she loved him all the same. Now, the two of them were back together, and Clint had Phil, so it had all been for the best.

Hunter was giving him the evil eye, and Clint was glad he wasn’t some sort of Wizard because he’d be feeling the effects of a curse right about now. There was no love lost between the two of them, and it really because of Bobbi.

“As for the Widow’s question,” Bobbi got them all back on track, “we think we know where at least one of your Hydra targets is right now.”

“Do tell.” Jack’s expression went predatory, and Clint made a vow right then not to get the man mad at him. Ever.

“Madame Aida’s brothel,” Hunter answered. “A man matching Daniel Whitehall’s description has been seen inside the place.”

“That’s not all,” Bobbi added. “There are some strange happenings inside that house. Large supply orders going in…too large for what usually goes on inside a brothel. We’ve discovered that some of those deliveries contain weapons and items that would normally be used in spells and potions.”

Toshiko nodded. “Whitehall is a Void Wizard. That sort of thing makes sense.”

“How many residents are in this brothel?” Jack asked, any trace of flirtatiousness gone, his eyes steely as they stared at Bobbi, who didn’t even look uncomfortable under that strong gaze. She was a better person than Clint was; he would have been looking away. “And can we get some sort of building plan? Get the layout?”

Hunter was giving Jack that little grin that said he thought the man was insane. “You really want to go in there after him?”

“We need to get to Whitehall,” Jack pointed out. “Going in after him is most likely the best alternative… unless there’s a way to get him outside that place.”

“He doesn’t come out, from what we’ve seen.” Bobbi shook her head, blonde hair coming loose
from the really sloppy ponytail she’d pulled it back in.

“Are there any other Hydra Wizards in there?” Natasha asked.

“That, we don’t know.”

“Bloody hells,” Hunter moaned. “You really are crazy.”

“Nope,” Jack denied. “Just Deathless.”

“And Ianto will have both our hides if you die again,” Toshiko scolded.

“He has to catch us first.”

Clint stifled a sigh, wondering if Phil would ever get this cavalier about his life. He hoped not, because it didn’t matter than the Void would keep him alive…it was still coming that close to death that the Void would have to act, anyway. That was the last thing the archer wanted for his lover.

“We can get you the original plans for the brothel,” Bobbi said, “but we can’t guarantee they’ll still be accurate.”

Hunter rolled his eyes, but didn’t make another comment on their mental health…which was a surprise to Clint. Hunter was usually the one to make that sort of caustic statement, and he didn’t mind repeating himself as he felt was needed. “From our surveillance, we believe there are ten whores in the building, not including Madame Aida: six ladies and four men. There’s also security; four rather nasty-looking guys…two in the front and two in the back. Five employees: servants, a cook, and there’s also a doctor who comes in when needed. We saw him show up this morning.”

“With Whitehall,” Toshiko said, “that makes five combatants, plus we don’t know what sort of self-defense training the…employees…have been given. The servants, well…they’ll most likely run if there’s any sort of assault. What do you know about Madame Aida?”

“She’s been in business for about five years,” Bobbi reported. “Hers isn’t the most popular brothel in Lasavar, but it has a good reputation. The workers are clean and she takes care of her own. Her reputation says she’s strict, and there are rumors she can be a real bitch if someone mistreats one of her people, or if she’s betrayed. We also heard she can be a bit…”

“Crazy,” Hunter finished her sentence. “Bat-shit crazy.”

“That’s only if you cross her,” Bobbi hastened to add.

“She stabbed a client because they short-changed by two silvers.”

Clint whistled. “That’s a bit…drastic.”

Hunter shrugged. “Bat-shit crazy.”

The Elf couldn’t disagree. Anyone who’d get that bent out of shape over that little bit wasn’t playing with a full deck.

The comparison was apt, considering where they were.

“Do we have any idea why Whitehall would have gone to her for shelter?” Jack wanted to know.

“Nope,” Hunter answered. “No idea.”
“We thought about going in as clients,” Bobbi added, “but Hunter gets jealous.”

“And you don’t?” he accused.

She grinned, and took a sip from the mug that was sitting in front of her, only to discover that it was empty.

“Let me get the drinks in,” Jack offered, “and we can make some plans.” He stood, his chair scraping lightly across the wood floor. With a dramatic swirl of cloak, he strode toward the bar, leaning his forearms on it and talking to the innkeeper.

Flirting, more than likely.

Toshiko snorted. “I’d better go and rein him in.” She also stood and left.

Clint spared a glance at Natasha, knowing what she was thinking: that the two of them had left them to be questioned. After all, the Hawk and the Widow knew Bobbi and Hunter, and vice versa, and while the trust might be a little loose it was certainly greater than what would have been for two strangers, even one who was claiming to be the Deathless.

“Does he really think it’s a good idea to go in there?” Hunter demanded, confirming Clint’s own thoughts on the matter.

“We need to root out Hydra,” the Elf answered. “And this is the first lead we’ve had since Nat brought in Grant Ward.”

Natasha was nodding. “Until we get rid of Hydra, the entire Wizard’s Guild won’t settle. At the moment, each and every Wizard out there is paranoid that their friends or family are Hydra. That’s going to lead to…mistakes. And the Grand Masters may not be able to rein in anyone who believes someone might be plotting against them.”

“It’s also playing into the prejudice against the Voids,” Clint added. “Right now, the Voids’ collective reputation for evil outweighs the good they’ve done. Every single member of Hydra, so far, has been Void. If we don’t help them get their house in order, it’s only going to get out of hand, and the last thing we need is a war between the Orders.”

It wasn’t something that Phil had come right out and said, but Clint could read between the lines. This could get ugly fast, and the Grand Masters needed to clean things up and dig out Hydra before it became too late.

“How did you both get involved?” Bobbi was giving them both curious looks.

Clint met Natasha’s eyes once more. She nodded slightly, which confirmed to the archer that she was on the same wavelength that he was: they didn’t need to know that the newest Grand Master was also the former Dark One. Still, there was something he could say, something that would explain things.

“If you must know, I’m…intimately familiar with the newest Grand Master of Voids.”

Clint held his head up proudly. He wasn’t ashamed of what he had with Phil; far from it. He would be shouting it from Lasavar’s rooftops if he could. He wanted to spend the rest of his life with Phil Coulson and he didn’t care who knew it.

He knew Bobbi would understand it. Her eyes widened, and she gave him a pleased smile. “You finally meet someone who could put jesses on the Hawk, huh?”
“Wait,” Hunter exclaimed. “You…and this Grand Master bloke?”

Clint grinned slyly. “Grand Master Phil Coulson. He’s the only trustworthy Void in the lot right now.”

“Damn, Clint,” Bobbi laughed. “That is great news. I’m not going to have to threaten him, am I?”

“I’ve already done it for you.” Natasha’s own smile was small, yet full of fondness. “Grand Master Phil knows what I’ll do to him if he hurts our Hawk.”

Clint couldn’t believe that Bobbi was as equally happy for him as Natasha was. After all, they’d parted under terms that were far more acrimonious than anything, and she was still prone to trying to needle him about it under the right conditions.

Yet, he could see just how glad she was for him. It gave him a warm feeling in his chest, one that he’d never believed he would ever associate with Bobbi Morse.

“I was beginning to wonder if you’d be pining for whoever it was you were pining for, forever,” she added.

“What?” His jaw dropped. “What are you talking about?”

His former wife snorted. “Please. Once we got past the ‘I can’t keep my hands to myself’ stage of our relationship, it was obvious I was just a substitute for someone you couldn’t have. Now, I don’t know what happened to that person, but you must have cared for them a great deal if they continued to haunt you like that, Hawk.”

Well, he’d always known that Bobbi was smart as well as beautiful.

“That person died,” he admitted. “I couldn’t have him because there wasn’t a him to have anymore.”

Bobbi reached across the table and put her hand over his. “I’m sorry, Clint. If I’d known that, I wouldn’t have given you so much grief.”

“To be fair, I didn’t know the reason you were, so that’s fine.” He gave her his own smile, letting her see just how he felt about Phil in his expression. “Besides, I got Phil now.” He didn’t need to go into that it had been Phil himself that he’d thought dead, that simply wasn’t important.

But then, it really hadn’t been Phil back then…it had been the Dark One. They were actually completely different people, if Clint was being honest with himself. And that wasn’t a bad thing at all. He much preferred Phil Coulson to his evil alter ego. The man he was now was something incredibly special, and the Elf wouldn’t have traded him for the Dark One, if there were some way for them both to be in the same room.

“Shit, he’s in love,” Hunter commented, his eyes glittering as he must have come to the realization that he didn’t have to worry about Clint coming back after Bobbi anymore.

Not that he had to worry about that in the first place. However, there was no way either of them could have reassured Hunter of that. He was also a man in love, and Clint knew exactly how that felt now.

“So,” Bobbi leaned back in her chair, “when do I get to meet him?”

Clint barked out a laugh. “Never.”
She joined him in laughing. “I knew you were going to say that, Barton.”

With that, the atmosphere at the table seemed to relax, to gain a bit of the camaraderie that old friends should have had at once, except there was the past that kept getting in the way. The air was clear, and hopefully it would stay that way. Things were going to be getting bad enough, depending on what they planned, and Clint needed to know they could depend on each other when things went to hells.

“Everything taken care of?” Jack’s voice had Clint looking up just in time to have a mug of something dark and foamy set down in front of him.

“We’re good,” he said, accepting the drink.

“Excellent.” With the grace of someone who’d carried that many drinks before, Jack set down mugs in front of both Bobbi and Hunter, while Toshiko handed one to Natasha and then put her own down before taking her seat. Jack slouched down in his own chair, his own drink held in his hand.

“So, you said we can get a floor plan to the brothel?”

“Actually,” Bobbi reached into a pocket of her tunic, “I anticipated that request and have it here. I do like to be prepared.”

Jack favored her with a bright smile. “If you ever get tired of being independent, you’ve got a place on my team if you want it.”

“I might consider it.” Her eyes went sly.

“Not without me you don’t!” Hunter said vehemently.

She didn’t answer that. Instead, with a flourish, Bobbi had the diagrams out and was unfolding them, laying them on the table for everyone to see.

Clint wanted to laugh, but managed to contain it. Bobbi on Jack’s team? That could be very entertaining indeed.

Then, he was leaning over the floor plans, listening as his former wife and her current husband explained what they’d seen for themselves of the brothel, without having set foot inside.

It turned out to be quite a lot.
Phil stood outside the cell holding Werner von Strucker, with Ianto and Stephen flanking him, staring down at the young man who’d revealed his former self in front of the Quorum.

Von Strucker stared back, head straight, not backing down from the Void Wizard’s scrutiny. While the young man wasn’t a Wizard, he was a prisoner of the Quorum so, instead of taking him to the jail in the heart of the city, he was being held there pending interrogation. He’d broken Wizard law, and Baroness Eirlys had gladly let the Guild take care of the prisoner. Setting foot within the Quorum while it was in session and when not a Wizard was strictly forbidden – unless it was a special circumstance, such as to give evidence in an inquiry, and was always at the discretion of the Grand Masters – so von Strucker faced quite a long time in his cell.

Still, they had to know who had let him into the Quorum, since only Wizards could get into the chamber unless invited. Someone had to have let him in, and that someone was obviously part of Hydra, which was inferred by the attempt to discredit Phil himself.

It was just getting him to admit to anything.

Phil just stared, waiting to see if the young man would blink first. He did, although it took several heartbeats for him to do so. Phil was impressed; he’d perfected this particular stare back during his Dark One days, and not a lot of people could stand up to it for long.

He could sense Lola’s tension through their bond, but he didn’t dare reach down and touch her, to get her to relax. She sat next to him, body still, as if waiting for him to signal her to attack. Not that he would, but he figured she most likely looked as intimidating as Phil himself did.

“Are you just going to stand there?” von Strucker finally demanded.

“I thought I might,” Phil answered pleasantly.

That comment had Lola relaxing just a fraction, although she still sat at attention. Her mental presence was actually giggling. It made it a little harder for Phil to keep the smile from his face.

“I can do this all day,” the Void Wizard continued. “I do hope you don’t have anything else planned.”

Von Strucker began to move restlessly, pacing back and forth, his bare feet slapping the stone of the floor. He pushed his blond hair out of his eyes as he paced, a nervous, reflexive gesture. It was apparent he was someone who didn’t like to be still for too long, but he was also nervous, faced with the man who’d been responsible for the death of his father and who had, with only three companions, taken down his entire castle and the city surrounding it.

“Are you going to torture me?” the young man – no, the boy – demanded. “Kill me, like you killed my father?”

The very idea sickened Phil, but he forced the illness down and held onto his blank façade. Yes, this was the son of King Wilhelm, who’d tortured and murdered Wizard children in his quest for power, but the child wasn’t the guilty one. He’d been used by Hydra, the Wizard was sure of it, and didn’t deserve what his father had gotten.
“I don’t do that anymore. Especially to innocents.”

Von Strucker darted toward the cell door, his fists pounding on the bars hard enough to bruise. “My father was innocent, and you murdered him and his court!”

“None of those people were innocent,” Phil pointed out calmly. “What they were doing to magical children was obscene, and had to be stopped.”

“You lie!” von Strucker screamed. “You came and butchered them!”

That wasn’t exactly true, there hadn’t been any butchering involved, but Phil, along with Marcus, Clint, and Natasha, had burned out the nest and had salted the ground behind them. No one involved with the King’s vile schemes had been left untouched. Buda-Pest had eventually recovered, and from what he’d since learned, the place had become a much better kingdom to live in, without the taint of von Strucker’s evil left upon it.

Phil had to wonder just where young Werner had been during that particular mission. Where his father had hidden him, as there hadn’t been any mention of a son. He wanted to ask, but he didn’t dare. He didn’t dare show any sort of caring, even though his heart was going out to this poor, wounded child who had been so very badly affected by what Phil and his friends had done, all those years ago.

“Mister von Strucker,” Phil said, “what’s happened is in the past. You heard the testimony of those two young Wizards, and it’s your own decision not to believe them. What we need to speak to you about now is how you got into the Quorum chamber without magic of your own.”

The young man stepped back from the bars and, straightening his back, only said, “Hail Hydra!” in a loud, proud voice.

“You know Hydra was only using you, right?” Stephen pointed out. “The moment you revealed yourself, you weren’t getting out of the Quorum chamber under your own power, even if your accusations had been taken into consideration.”

“Which they weren’t,” Ianto added. “Phil Coulson is now our newest Grand Master, despite your attempt to ruin him.”

“That’s not possible!” von Strucker shouted. He grasped the bars, shaking them as if his strength could rattle them. “They promised me – “

“What, Werner?” Phil took a single step forward. “What did Hydra promise you in order to get you to attempt to wreck my reputation among my fellow Wizards?”

Von Strucker narrowed his eyes and said nothing.

Phil wasn’t surprised by that. Because it wasn’t going to be that easy.

“Let me see if I can guess.” Phil regarded the infuriated boy. Von Strucker’s face was pale, two spots of high color in his cheeks showing just how angry he was at his situation. His dark eyes were glittering almost as if he was running a fever. He did not look well at all, and the Wizard’s heart went out to him once more. He couldn’t help but hope they could somehow rehabilitate the youngster, but he knew it would be a long process. “I think they promised you revenge on me for your father’s death. They promised you a place within Hydra, even though you aren’t a Wizard.”

He could tell his suppositions were correct, but then those were the obvious guesses. Revenge would have been the prime motivating factor behind von Strucker’s agreement to help Hydra; he’d
most likely been dreaming about it for years, even when the news that the Dark One had been killed had gotten around. When Hydra had approached him, it must have been like all his fantasies had come true. It was no wonder he’d jumped at the chance to take down the man who had to have been the stuff of nightmares.

Phil liked to think that, if he’d known that King Wolfgang had had a son, he’d have done things differently. However, he wasn’t so certain of that. The elder von Strucker had needed to be stopped, and wrecking his ability to regain power had been the only way to go about that.

So, that was what they’d done.

Without realizing there would be collateral damage. Although, perhaps they should have.

“There’s something else, though,” Ianto mused.

Phil was certain he was correct.

“It’s not money,” the Void Wizard said. “That’s just too cliché and I doubt Hydra would even have offered it. No, I’m guessing it’s something personal.” He looked at the young man shrewdly. “No matter what it is, you’ll never be getting it.”

“You can’t keep me in here! I didn’t do anything wrong!”

“But you did,” Stephen said. “You broke Wizard Guild laws when you were let into the Quorum chamber during session.”

“He’s right,” Phil added. “Only Wizards are allowed inside the chamber during a Quorum.” That wasn’t exactly true, there were exceptions, but he didn’t believe that needed to be stated simply because the boy hadn’t been one of those exceptions. “I’m not certain what Hydra told you would happen once you dropped your little accusation into our midst, but I’m certain it didn’t have anything to do with spending a significant period of time in this dungeon, your only company a Hydra member who may or may not be a manipulative bastard who tried to get my daughter to release him.”

Then he cocked his head, looking closely at von Strucker. He could tell, just the right words would tip him over the edge.

And he thought he might know what that would be.

“They have lied to you. Repeatedly. They have shown absolutely no regard to your safety. They set you on this path, but they didn’t have your back, which I’m certain they promised they would. And whatever it was that they told you you would have, that was a lie as well. You’re not going to get anything from Hydra.”

“Yet,” Ianto picked up the thread, “you’re being loyal to whomever it was who invited you into the Quorum for the express purpose of discrediting Grand Master Phil Coulson. Which didn’t work. In fact, it simply strengthened his position.”

“Didn’t you even consider there might be a witness or two that might discredit your own testimony?” Stephen pressed. “We found two, in fact.”

Phil had thanked the Great Wizard for managing to locate Wanda and Pietro Maximoff, and for getting them into the Quorum as witnesses to the actions at Buda-Pest. He’d made a promise to himself to find other survivors, to see how they were coping as well. He was even allowing Pepper to talk him into accepting Wanda as his Novice, which hadn’t seemed like something he’d ever do,
But, perhaps, he was the best person to teach young Void Wizards. After all, what he’d gone through had scarred him for life, and he could be an influence in preventing that from ever happening again. Mistress Suzie had tried, but he hadn’t listened. However, Phil could call on his own experience as a teaching tool.

It was a heady thought, coming to him as he stood in front of the cell holding the son of the man who’d done his best to corrupt young Wizards and steal their magic in order to strengthen his power base. There were possibly even more crimes against magical children out there that Phil and Clint and his friends could prevent. They simply had to find them out and take the steps needed to stop such a thing from ever happening again.

And, perhaps, it was time to start with this young man, even though he wasn’t a Wizard himself.

“Werner,” he pled, “Hydra has thrown you to the wolves. They don’t care about you. Let us help you. We won’t abandon you like they did. Please, tell us who betrayed you. I know you don’t trust me, which I completely understand, but these two,” he motioned to Ianto and Stephen, “are good men and will do whatever they can to help you. I’ll even leave the room if you want me to. Just, please… we want to get you out of the mess Hydra’s gotten you into.”

“He’s right,” Ianto agreed. “You’ve just been Hydra’s puppet in all this. Think about it, and what you want to do about it.”

Stephen stepped up beside Phil, his face earnest. “What you’ve been through… we can’t even imagine. Losing your father the way you did…yes, he was an evil man, but he was your father, and you loved him.” He put a hand on Phil’s shoulder. “We’re not even going to trivialize losing your father. It was a terrible thing. But he was also guilty of so many crimes that the entire Guild would have gone after him if we had been aware of what he was doing to those poor children. What Grand Master Phil did…we’re not going to excuse it, either. He isn’t exactly innocent in all this, but he also knows that he’s being punished as well, even if you can’t understand it yet.”

“It’s true.” Phil had accepted that his longevity was a consequence of his actions as the Dark One, that the Void was passing sentence on him for all the evil he’d done in his past. “While you might not think so, the Void handles its Wizard’s infractions, and metes out its own forms of punishment. I’m not sorry for what I did at Buda-Pest, because of all the blood that was on your father’s hands, but I am sorry for what my actions have done to you.”

Everything he said was true. Phil would never apologize for razing Buda-Pest to the ground; it was well-deserved, for everything that King Wolfgang and his cronies had done to so many innocent children. He had no idea how many had died before he’d even heard about it and had gone to Marcus about the situation, but it had to have been dozens. Wanda and Pietro would have been next if he hadn’t decided to go in and destroy King Wolfgang and his vile experiments.

He could see that their words were making an impact. Von Strucker looked uncertain; he was chewing his lip, his eyes haunted. “I will never forgive you.”

“I understand.” He did. He was responsible for taking this boy’s father from him. He’d make the same choice all over again, if it meant saving lives. However, if that did happen, he would take more care with any innocent lives on the other side as well, to keep this sort of thing from ever occurring again. They’d had no idea that Wolfgang von Strucker had even had a son, but then they hadn’t exactly checked, either. “I’m responsible for making you so vulnerable that Hydra could prey on you. That’s on me, and there isn’t a thing I can do to change what’s happened.”
“I…” Werner von Strucker’s expression was confused and it took all Phil had not to open that cell and pull the young man into a hug, because he had the distinct impression he hadn’t gotten a lot of those in his life.

“I’ll leave and let you speak with Grand Masters Ianto and Stephen. That might make it easier on you, if I’m not here.”

With that, Phil left the cells, passing by Grant Ward without a single word. Ward, however, shouted at him as he strode by, reiterating his claim that he’d speak to Daisy if she came to see him, but to no one else, and that he had secrets to share about Hydra…but only to Daisy.

Like Phil was ever going to agree to that.

Lola loped along beside him, offering him her support and comfort, which the Wizard appreciated. She would always be there for him; she’d seen him through the worst moments in his life, had stayed with him even at his darkest, accepting him no matter what. It hit him then, as they were moving up the stairs, that as long as he was alive, he wouldn’t be alone; Lola would be with him, tied to him through their emotional link, and he was so very grateful that she’d picked him to be her Wizard.

He hoped that Ianto and Stephen could get that poor young man to talk. They really needed to know who’d let him into the Quorum. It would give them the first step in cleaning house.

The Quorum chamber was empty this time of the day, so Phil took a seat in the Head of Order section for the United Kingdom, not wanting to take that ostentatious throne he’d have to sit in during the actual Quorum until he actually had to. Lola curled up on the bench next to him, resting her head in his lap, humming in contentment when he began to stroke down her neck.

The Wizard sat in the quiet chamber, letting his mind drift, and simply enjoyed the peace while he waited for whatever Ianto and Stephen could discover from that traumatized young man, the boy he, himself, was responsible for putting him on the path he’d taken for revenge.

He knew the peace wouldn’t last.
Ianto glanced over at Stephen, and saw what had to have been a matching expression of awe and respect on the Great Wizard’s face.

What Phil had just said…those words had come from the Void Wizard who, according to stories, had been ranked up there with Harold Saxon for sheer evil. Harold Saxon…who’d had an entire island of people convinced he was some sort of god; who’d encouraged cannibalistic behavior in his followers – and what they’d done when they’d discovered that Jack was the Deathless still gave his husband nightmares – and who had actually managed to change time itself in order to gain enough power and knowledge to release the Silver Devastation from their eternal prison.

Ianto was aware of so many of the things attributed to the Dark One, but he was beginning to wonder if he wasn’t missing some very important context to those stories. He’d already been wrong about Buda-Pest; how many more actions had the Dark One taken that rumor had twisted into something vile?

Phil Coulson had been a product of his upbringing, and what had happened to him had been truly horrible; being told by your very parents, the people who were supposed to love you no matter what, that he was wrong and evil until he’d been convinced they were correct. Ianto really wanted to track down that mother and father and give them a piece of his mind, and to show them just what a good man their son had become despite their twisting the truth. Ignorance like that needed to be fought, and the Cardinal Wizard was certain that this man, who’d been so damaged for no reason at all, would be the one to lead that charge.

And he was determined to be right beside him when he did.

“Mister von Stucker,” Stephen spoke softly, “I think I can say that you hadn’t expected to hear what you just did.”

“No,” the young man admitted. “All my life, I’ve always thought of the Dark One as a murderer and destroyer. I didn’t even consider that there might have been a reason; yes, I heard the rumors about my father, but I didn’t believe them. He only ever loved me.”

Oh, and the irony of the situation. A young man, believing so much in a father who’d been one of the worst people ever to have lived and yet who’d acted behind a mask of goodness, attempting to get vengeance on the Wizard who was a good man buried under years of emotional abuse by parents who’d been convinced that he was bad. It had a twisted sort of beauty to its parallels.

“You do understand that you were used and betrayed?” Ianto had to ask. The Cardinal Wizard needed to know that their prisoner did indeed comprehend his position, now that it had been pointed out to him.

Von Strucker swallowed, hard, then nodded. “I’m beginning to realize that, yes.”

“We have the power to commute the punishment for what you’ve done,” Ianto added. “You aren’t the villain of the piece. That’s who we want. We don’t want to keep someone who was used by Hydra in a cell. It’s not fair to you.”

“We also don’t want to use any sort of magic on you to get you to speak,” Stephen added. “That would make us as bad as you think we are.”

This child would most likely feel the need to follow up on his revenge for the rest of his life, despite what Hydra had done to him. The only thing they could do was try to mitigate things, and help Werner find a new home and to get his life back together. He was young; he had the rest of his years for this need to hurt the man who’d hurt him to fade, although it would never completely go away. Phil would outlive Werner von Strucker, but Ianto had the feeling his new friend would never forget until the centuries conspired to make that memory fade.

Ianto nodded in acknowledgement of von Strucker’s comment. “Who was it who let you into the Quorum?”

“You don’t owe them any sort of loyalty,” Stephen added. “You don’t owe us that as well, I know that, but this would allow you to get a little revenge on the people who did betray you into that cell. Because, we would never have let you out of the Quorum even if the charges you laid had been excepted. Hydra would have known you were walking yourself into custody the moment they set you on this path.”

“They’re Wizards, and you’re not.” From what Phil had said, Hydra was out to get power for their own cabal of Voids. “They wouldn’t have given a damn about you, since you’re not one of them. It was all planned out, that you’d be out of the way at the end of their plot.” Ianto took a step forward. “You have the power to get back at them for what they did to you. I believe that’s something you’d like to do.” He’d come after Phil, after all, the man responsible for the death of his father. Revenge would be something von Strucker would have been very interested in, no matter the wrong done to him.

That seemed to make up von Strucker’s mind, because he crossed his arms over his chest and said, “His name is Mordo. I was told he’d want to take down the Dark One because he didn’t like either the Voids or the Cardinals. I’m not sure why.”

Ianto’s eyebrows rose in shock.

He was aware of just who Master Mordo was.

He was a Great Wizard.

And his shock at hearing that name wasn’t anything on Stephen’s, because Mordo had been his friend before they’d had a massive falling-out over something that Ianto never learned about, although he’d always wanted to ask. He hadn’t wanted to drag up any unpleasant memories.

To save his friend from having to say anything, Ianto got his own surprise under control and said, “Thank you for that. We’ll have someone take you from the cell and get you a room in one of the inns in town. You can decide where you want to go from there. We just need you to swear not to go after Grand Master Phil.”

“I can’t promise that, even knowing what my father was responsible for.”

That was the answer Ianto had expected. He wasn’t about to let von Strucker out without that vow, even though there wasn’t a lot he could do to Phil that would have any lasting effects, now with his connection to the Void the way it was. Still, he didn’t want to put temptation in the way of the young man’s eventual rehabilitation.

“Then we’ll have to leave you in here until we can arrange for you to leave the country.” The Cardinal Wizard didn’t really want to put any sort of geas on him, but he would if he had to. A
simple one, that would make him want to stay away from anywhere Phil would be likely to go. A suggestion to stay at home, wherever von Strucker ended up settling down. He’d have to speak to Stephen about it; he had the feeling that Phil would object to the very idea of it. Hells, Ianto didn’t like it, either, and it wasn’t as if the boy could do any lasting damage to his Wizard friend, but that wasn’t the point. Any act of revenge that von Strucker may take would just make things worse for everyone.

He could see it now. Von Strucker would go after Phil, and that would set off both Daisy and Clint. Of the two, Ianto was more concerned about the Elf’s reaction; the Hawk was an assassin and mercenary, and von Strucker could very well end up with an arrow in him if he hurt Phil…well, a second arrow, actually, only this one a lot more deadly than the one in his shoulder he’d gotten in the Quorum Hall. There would be no stopping it, because Clint just got Phil back, after thinking him dead…and for a second time, because of Hydra and that Vibranium chain they’d forced around Phil’s neck. It wouldn’t matter that the Void would bring him back, Clint would show no mercy to anyone who attempted to take his lover away from him again.

Not that Ianto wasn’t the same way, with Jack’s well-being; he could still vividly recall the first time Jack had died and Ianto hadn’t known he was Deathless. He could certainly understand the need to avenge that sort of pain very easily. Knowing he’d just come back didn’t make that any better, because death still caused his husband pain, and Ianto would do anything to prevent that from happening.

“If you need anything,” he went on, “just speak and someone will come. These cells are all charmed so that anything said in here can be heard upstairs, and now that you and our other guest are here, that spell is monitored constantly in case of trouble.”

“We’ll make certain you’re as comfortable as possible,” Stephen added. “For now, we’ll bid you good day.”

With the information they’d needed, both Wizards left the cells, passing by Grant Ward who stared at them balefully as they walked by. Ianto had had hopes that Ward would want to chat with von Strucker, perhaps spill some of his own secrets, and to keep Daisy from having to face the man once more. He’d hated that Ward had tried to manipulate her like that, but it was a testament to the young Wizard’s love for her adopted father that Daisy hadn’t accepted Ward’s word about her natural parents.

Stephen’s face was grim, and Ianto could understand why. Yes, Phil had posited that there might be someone from another order involved in this mess, but both of them had hoped that wasn’t the case. And yet, von Strucker had mentioned Master Mordo as the one who’d given him access to the Quorum for the express purpose of denouncing Phil and his Dark One past.

Ianto needed more information on Master Mordo. All he knew was that the man had been Stephen’s friend, but that there had been a row that had broken that friendship.

First, though, they needed to find Phil.

Fortunately for them, Agamotto seemed to know exactly where their wayward third was. That dragon was unusual, and not just because he didn’t have wings, but Ianto knew that it was the height of impoliteness to ask after another Wizard’s dragon in that way.

Phil was in the main Quorum chamber, which was empty at this time of the day. He was seated on one of the Master of Order benches, Lola curled up beside him with her head on his thigh, exuding contentment from every single scale. Her Wizard sat there, his eyes closed, and Ianto couldn’t help but notice the expression of utter calm on his face. Some form of meditation, he assumed.
“It’s not polite to stare,” Phil murmured without opening his eyes.

Stephen snorted, plopping himself down on the bench next to Lola, who’d scooted over a little to make room without losing her own aura of calm, tucking her tail around her rear legs to avoid having it sat on. Agamotto actually climbing down from his Wizard’s shoulders and plopped himself on top of the red and black dragon. “Nice technique. Where did you learn it?” he asked about the meditating.

“Didn’t learn anywhere.” He opened his eyes; Ianto couldn’t help but see the flecks of Void in them, before they faded away. “It’s just something I do when I have a lot to think about.” He glanced at each of them. “Did he say anything after I left?”

The Cardinal Wizard was a little surprised that Phil hadn’t listened in; but then, perhaps he shouldn’t have been all that surprised after all. “He did.” Ianto took his own seat, this one on the step close by. Myfanwy draped herself on the step above, the better to rest her head on his shoulder and watch proceedings. “He gave us the name: Master Mordo.”

Phil frowned. “I don’t think I know him.”

“You wouldn’t,” Stephen said. “He’s a member of my own order.”

The Void Wizard sighed. “I was hoping I was wrong about that.”

“You weren’t, but I don’t think Mordo’s in this for the same reason as Hydra is.”

Both Phil and Ianto regarded the Great Wizard. “What do you mean?” Ianto inquired.

“Mordo and I used to be friends. We went through training together; had the same teaching Master. However, he holds to the same hidebound ideas that a lot of the other Greats do: that Cardinals and Voids are wrong in using the Deep Ways and the Void in their magic. Only, he’s a lot more…well, proactive, than someone like Mistress Maria. Mordo believes in action, and while I can’t tell you how Hydra got him onside, they must have appealed to him some way. Perhaps it was just the story they told him, about Phil being the Dark One… we won’t know until we ask him. But you can bet the testimony at the Quorum over what Hydra has been doing didn’t sit well with him.”

“Then,” Ianto stood, “perhaps we should go and speak to Master Mordo.”
Chapter 32

Daisy sighed, leaning back a little to give her back a rest. She and her friends were back in the Archive, still going through the papers she’d volunteered them to go through, and while she was learning a lot of interesting things about history and magical theory, there still wasn’t a damned thing about that cursed arm.

What made it difficult was that she was the only one with the magical, language translating, spectacles. Some of the documents could be read normally, but others…at least she could sometimes pass off the spectacles to someone else when her eyes became tired. It made it a little easier on her to be able to have someone else do the reading when she needed them to, although sometimes they’d get a bit distracted by the subject matter of what they were translating.

Not that she’d been any different, really.

Lincoln had gone a little crazy over a healing scroll he’d found, asking the Head Archivist – who was the same one who hadn’t thought it was such a good idea for students to have free reign in the Archives despite their accreditation – to make a copy for him to study later on. Daisy knew he was hoping to get a paper out of it; it was on surgical spells, something that her boyfriend was very interested in.

Jemma had also found things she wanted to keep, as had Leo. Trip, in his own, laid-back, way, had become excited over a series of maps of the world as it had been three thousand years ago. Wanda had practically clutched the book of nursery rhymes to her bosom, and Pietro a journal of some sort of Hero of a revolution that no one even remembered about but had taken place in what was now Sokovia.

And, yes, Daisy had coveted the still brightly illustrated treatise on dragons, and had asked for her own copy of that as well. It had been like being on a treasure hunt…only, they still hadn’t found the treasure they were actually seeking.

She really was worried about Sir James. Sure, he didn’t feel the passing of time in his Zero Cabinet, but Daisy did and, while it had only been a day since the man had voluntarily gone back into that magical box, it was a day longer than Daisy really wanted to go by. She felt an almost driving need to do something, and she knew she was working as quickly as she could, but she still wanted to get him out of that thing as soon as she could.

Even with the seven of them, and the fact that there really weren’t as many scrolls and books as they’d all thought there would be, it was still taking time. When they couldn’t read whatever document they were looking at, they had to rely on pictures where there were any, until Daisy – or whoever had the spectacles on at the time – could confirm or deny if it was useful. Plus, some of the writing was so faded as it be almost illegible, since the papers were so old.

While Daisy was glad she’d volunteered – and brought her friends with her – she’d been hoping for more success than what they were having.

She hoped her Dad was having better luck. She knew that he was going to meet with Ianto and Grand Master Stephen today, to discuss what to do about Hydra within the Void ranks. She really wanted to get into that, as well, but the young Wizard knew they’d never allow it. Honestly, there wasn’t a lot that she could offer three Grand Masters…and she still got a thrill of fierce pride
knowing that her very own father was one of those Grand Masters. Phillip Coulson, Grand Master of Voids…yep, that had a wonderful ring to it. Daisy had always known her Dad was special, and this just proved it.

He might have been a bad guy before he’d found her, but he’d changed. And now all his hard work was paying off.

Well, maybe he’d been a bit of a hermit before all this Hydra stuff had happened, but Daisy was aware of just how much he’d changed. Even Uncle Nick said so, and he’d known her Dad since they’d been kids. And now, Dad had Clint as well, and Daisy couldn’t be happier to have a possible second Dad in her life.

Damn. So much had changed in such a short time. It was **fantastic**.

“What was that one?” Jemma asked, motioning toward the scroll Daisy had been using the spectacles to translate.

“Nothing, just agricultural records.” She blew out a loud breath, rubbing her nose while dislodging the magical lenses.

Jemma rested her hands on her hips, frustration fairly screaming in her stance. “Bugger. I’m sorry, I thought I’d translated that one word correctly.”

“It was close.” The young Wizard rested her gloved finger on the word Jemma had thought she’d recognized. “Instead of ‘curse’, it means ‘pestilence’.”

“Not exactly the same, though.” Her friend fiddled with the end of her ponytail. “I guess Old Elvish is a bit different than the current language.”

“Languages change over time,” Trip said. He was perusing one of the shelves that held scrolls, his own gloved hands pulling one at random from the group. “It’s a pretty interesting subject of study, really.”

“Didn’t Master Jasper write a monograph on it?” Lincoln asked, frowning slightly at the rather large book he was flipping through. “And…I think I’ve just found ancient pornography…”

That had everyone flocking to stare over his shoulder, Daisy included. Her eyes widened as she read the words that were being translated by the spectacles. “Um…yeah, I think you did.” She could feel her face heat up as she blushed in sheer embarrassment.

The others didn’t need to read the actual words; the illustrations were enough to clue the others in on what the book was all about.

“Can…people actually do that?” Leo sounded bemused, even as the tips of his pointed ears pinked.

Lincoln was nodding absently. “Physically, the person would have to have excellent agility…but yeah, it could be done.”

“You should all be ashamed of yourselves,” Jemma chastised. She’d stepped back once she’d seen for herself what Lincoln had, and had her fists on her hips, her face red even as she was giving them her best ‘Mom’ expression. “We’re here to help Sir James, not ogle…that.” She waved a hand toward the book, then put that hand back on her hip.

“You’re right,” Trip said. He surreptitiously licked his lips, then moved back toward the section of the archive he’d been searching.
Wanda, who was blushing just as hard as Jemma was, stumbled back a little, bumping into her brother. Pietro grabbed her by the shoulders and pushed her out of the way but, after taking one more look at the open book in Lincoln’s hands, he bustled Wanda back to their own area of the room.

Daisy shook her head and took her place at the desk once more. Anyone who was busily doing the translating was taking the stool at the desk, the better to spread things out on.

Lincoln practically slammed the book shut, making Leo jump…he’d still been looking over Daisy’s boyfriend’s arm, and was startled by both the sudden movement and the sound. He mumbled something Daisy couldn’t catch then stumbled back to whatever he’d been doing, trying to hide the fact that he was just as affected as everyone else in the room was.

“Yeah,” Trip spoke, clearing his throat a little and picking up the previous thread of conversation, “Master Jasper did write something about the Laws of Language Mutability. Even the most static of languages can change over time, like Elvish. Just because Elves live a long time doesn’t mean their terms for stuff stay the same.”

“Like ‘curse’ and ‘pestilence’,” Jemma said. “They’re enough alike and yet mean different things.” She grinned, her embarrassment over Lincoln’s find forgotten in the rush of new knowledge. “I really do need to read that monograph, it sounds absolutely fascinating. I never would have considered that Elvish itself was like the human tongue in that respect, in that it also changes. I’d be very interested in the etymology involved.”

While Daisy usually thought her friend’s quest for information pretty adorable, she didn’t this time. There was too much to do, and they were getting off track. Still, getting distracted by pornography wasn’t something she’d anticipated. Surely they would have vetted that sort of thing?

The inventory had proved to be pretty useless. They’d noticed as soon as they’d started poking around yesterday. It was as if the room had been sorted, but then someone had come in behind whoever had done the initial work and randomly mixed things up. It was a pain in the ass, and had irritated Daisy the moment they’d noticed.

They’d informed the Master Archivist, who’d also been irritated by the news and then had said he’d get someone in to clean up…and, if they weren’t busy with their own researches, could they start on that while they were in there? Then he’d quickly changed his mind about that, since they were merely Novices and students and such things should be left to trained Archivists.

Daisy would have been insulted if she hadn’t been so busy holding in her laughter.

“Here,” Pietro held out a scroll he’d been checking out, “I think this might be something.”

Daisy accepted the scroll, opening it and using a couple of the paperweights to hold it open. She immediately saw why Pietro had wanted her to take a look; on it, in faded black and red ink, was the distinctive drawing of a metal arm.

The young Wizard immediately sat up straight. It did resemble the arm that Sir James was currently cursed with. The words on it where a series of loops and whorls that she realized was the Wizard writing, and it twisted under the magic of the spectacles until it resolved into something she could understand.

A geas to hold the arm to the person wielding it.

Enhanced strength.

UnBreakable.
The ability for the thing to Contaminate its host so it wouldn’t be rejected.

Her heart thundering, Daisy knew that this was it. This was the original document for that cursed arm.

“Pietro, well done.” She grinned up at him.

The youngster gave her a grin of his own, this was tinged with embarrassment and pride.

Everyone gathered around Daisy in order to get a look at what Pietro had discovered. “That’s the arm?” Jemma asked excitedly.

“That’s it,” Daisy confirmed. “It’s a little different, but I know it’s what we’re looking for.” She released the tension holding the scroll flat, and it rolled itself back up with a quiet whisper of ancient parchment. “Let’s get a copy and take it to my Dad and Ianto. They can figure it out.”

She had faith that her Dad and the other Grand Masters could help Sir James. After all, they were the best of all the Wizards.

It would only be a matter of time, and Sir James would be free.

And then, they could tell Sir Steven Rogers that his best friend wasn’t as dead as he’d been led to believe.

They might get a happy ending, which would be awesome.
“Mistress Pepper,” Jarvis announced, stepping into her casting chamber, “there is a Samuel Wilson here to see you.”

Pepper slipped her wand back into its holster, excitement and relief washing over her. “Thank you, Jarvis. Where’s Baron Tony and Sir Steven?”

Happy jumping up onto her shoulder, Pepper headed up the stairs, Jarvis following closely behind. “His Grace is in his workshop with Dr. Banner,” he answered. “Sir Steven is in his room. Ana had just taken him up a snack, and she said he was reading.”

Before Sir Steven had pled tiredness, he’d asked for something to read, preferably something about history since he’d been banished to the Void. Pepper had chosen one of the student textbooks she’d had in the library, and the Paladin had accepted it with quiet thanks.

She’d left him alone, and had gone down to her casting chamber to work on some lessons for Daisy, if just to keep herself from fretting. Their conversation and the subsequent explanations had gone as well as it could have been, she supposed, but she’d really wished that the person Andrew Garner had contacted would have been there for it.

And there he was now, if a little late to events.

Andrew had shared what he could about the man who he’d thought would be able to help Sir Steven. Sam Wilson had been one of Andrew’s students before the curse, and had specialized in battlefield shock and stress-related issues, which she supposed Sir Steven did fit into those particular categories in a way. It wasn’t as if anyone had any sort of experience with time displacement, what with the only person who’d ever traveled in time, Master John Smith dead, so anyone that spoke to the Paladin would have been feeling their way along in that regard.

Pepper hoped that Sam Wilson would be able to at least make things a little easier for Sir Steven to assimilate into this time. She didn’t think he could do any worse than she had.

There was a man standing in the front hall. He was tall and well-built, handsome, with dark skin and a neatly trimmed beard, which made his pointed ears a little difficult to explain since Elves didn’t need to shave. Andrew had explained that Dr. Wilson had been a half-blood, so that made sense then. Happy perked up at seeing him, and Pepper could feel his pleasure at meeting another Elf… and then his confusion at this person not quite being an Elf that the dragon was familiar with.

Apparently, though, half-Elves had the same charisma where dragons were concerned, because once
Happy got over the man’s strangeness, he was off the Wizard’s shoulder and greeting their guest enthusiastically.

Doctor Wilson laughed, letting Happy settle onto his own shoulder before giving him a good skritch under the chin.

Pepper gave him a pleasant smile. “Welcome to Ferrous Castle, Dr. Wilson. I’m Mistress Pepper –

“Head of Cardinal Order and Baroness Ferrous,” he interrupted her in a way that made her not think him rude at all, making her wish she could do the same sort of thing herself. “Doctor Garner explained to me who you were when he asked me to come by and, besides, the castle kinda gives it away.” His dark eyes were twinkling with good humor. “He said something about having a guest who was having some trouble assimilating after being in the military?”

She should have realized that Andrew wouldn’t have shared anything about Sir Steven over an open speaking stone…or however it was he’d used to contact Dr. Wilson. They couldn’t risk it getting out to Hydra that they actually had their oldest enemy in their house, alive and well. That would most likely had stirred up all sorts of trouble they just didn’t need.

“That’s one way of putting it. Perhaps we should have a seat and I’ll explain what Dr. Garner couldn’t share with you?”

Doctor Wilson gave her a side-eye that Pepper could totally get behind, since he was essentially walking into an unknown situation with a person he’d never met. He only had Andrew’s word on things and, while she could see him trusting his old teacher, Dr. Wilson was coming into this thing blind. He needed all the information that the Wizard could give him.

So, she ushered him into the sitting room, poured him some wine, and explained everything she knew about Sir Steven Rogers.

To his credit, Dr. Wilson didn’t call her insane.

His jaw did drop a little, though.

Other than that, he was amazingly put together after she was done. Pepper had expected something far worse than that.

“Well,” he said, bemusement making his expression just a little bland, “that was possibly the most impossible thing I’ve ever heard.”

“How do you think we feel?”

Doctor Wilson leaned back in his chair, careful not to dislodge Happy from his shoulder, who was eying his wine with intention. Without even looking at the dragon, he moved the glass out of reach. Happy huffed, but Pepper could sense his amusement and his disappointment in equal measure.

“And he’s been completely de-magicked, as it were?”

She nodded. “Our Grand Master of Voids says so, and he would know.”

“Have there been any other physical issues that I need to know about?”

Pepper wanted to curse, since they hadn’t actually had a medical doctor in to check Sir Steven over. “He seems fine to me.” She admitted the lack of a physician examination.
“I’m a field medic as well; I can give him a cursory examination, but you might want to find a medical professional you trust to come in and do something more thorough. Physical health has a direct correlation to mental health, so anything off with one could be detrimental to the other.”

Already, Pepper was beginning to see why Andrew had recommended him to help with their little problem. Doctor Wilson certainly seemed to know what he was talking about.

“I’ll see who I can find to do that.” There were a couple of people Pepper could consult, it was just figuring out which one wouldn’t freak out or something like that over the fact that this was the Paladin of the Western Lands, who everything believed had died three hundred years ago.

“Would you like to meet Sir Steven now?” she asked politely. A part of her found that she wanted to protect the man upstairs, even though she was quite positive he could protect himself… at least, he could do that physically. It was mentally that she wasn’t so sure about.

“I’d like to speak to this Void Wizard friend of yours and get some more information from him about what Sir Steven might have gone through when he was stuck in the Void, but that can wait. You said he doesn’t remember it?”

“No, he says not. Phil did say it was like the Void was trying to make Sir Steven a part of it, because it couldn’t expel him… like some sort of allergic reaction to someone who wasn’t a part of the Void.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know all that much about magic, despite the fact of these.” He waved toward his ears. “I didn’t quite get the magical sensitivity my full-blown kin have.”

Pepper could understand that. Non-magical Elves still had a sense of magic that non-magical humans didn’t, attributed to their closeness to nature. Doctor Wilson, having one parent that was human, could very well have inherited that magical ‘blindness’ that most humans had.

“But you got the dragon affinity,” she teased.

Doctor Wilson laughed. “That I did.” He set his wineglass on the table beside him then, with a sudden movement, had Happy off his shoulder and pulled down into his arms, where he proceeded to tickle the dragon mercilessly. Happy began laughing as the man flipped him onto his back and went for the soft dragon underbelly, Dr. Wilson’s fingers finding just the right places.

Pepper didn’t intervene because she could tell Happy was loving every minute of it, his mental chortles bright and beautiful in her mind. She couldn’t help but join in on the laughter, especially when Happy began kicking his legs helplessly, as he became breathless under the assault.

Doctor Wilson stopped just shy of it becoming uncomfortable, giving Happy a cuddle while the dragon regained his breath. Happy nipped gently at the half-Elf’s hand in way of thanks and then wriggled about enough to be able to take to wing and fly back to his Wizard, settling onto Pepper’s shoulders once more. She could feel his heart thundering against her neck, but it calmed down after only a few moments, and his glee was fading into a general boneless contentment after that workout.

“Let’s go and see our misplaced Paladin, then?” he requested, standing.

“I’ll be more than happy to introduce you.”

Standing as well, Pepper led him out of the sitting room, glad that Tony was busy in his workshop. The last thing Dr. Wilson needed was her husband getting way too curious about what was going on and sticking his nose in. Sir Steven needed the time to accept things, and doing that in peace would be for the best.
When they got to Sir Steven’s room, Pepper knocked on the closed door and let him know she was on the other side. He bid her to enter, and she did so, Dr. Wilson following just behind.

Sir Steven was seated in a chair by the window, the book open but his attention outside. Ferrous Castle had been built on a mountainside, with a fantastic view of the ocean, and he was watching the tide as it broke on the rocks of the beach below. The remains of the food that Ana had brought it were on the table next to him; an empty plate with a mug that Pepper thought must have contained the dregs of coffee were on a tray that Ana must have used to carry the meal up to the room.

His blue eyes turned toward her, and he smiled. “Mistress Pepper,” he greeted her.

“Sir Steven,” she returned his smile. “This is Dr. Sam Wilson. He’s the one Phil mentioned that was coming to see about helping you deal with being in a different time.”

His smile went just a tad brittle at that introduction. Pepper knew he hadn’t been looking forward to this, but he also understood that he needed help. This was just one way they were going to provide that help.

“Not sure how that’s going to work,” the therapist said jovially. “But we’ll give it our best shot.”

Sir Steven laughed at that, his expression going just a little warmer. “I like a person who knows their own limits.”

“Oh, I’m all sorts of limited here. We’ll just have to muddle through it together.”

And, with that, Sir Steven relaxed. There was something about Dr. Wilson’s manner that just seemed to put him at ease, something that Pepper appreciated. She felt confident that she could leave them alone to talk, and not have to worry about Sir Steven being overwhelmed.

She did wish that Jack had stayed around, but the hunt for Hydra had to take precedence. He’d come back when he could; she could see the two men becoming friends. Hopefully Jack’s experience with living through different times would help Sir Steven find his footing.

Leaving the two men alone, Pepper left the room, shutting the door behind her. She would trust Dr. Wilson to do the best he could.
Stephen had taken them to a small house that was outside a village somewhere in the Western Lands, his magical portal opening up onto a dirt path, leading up to a house set back a little from the lane itself.

The house was plain, and unadorned. Painted a pale green, it rose to two stories above the patch of spotty front garden and a gravel walkway up to the darker green door. The shutters on the windows were the same shade as the door, framing three windows in the front on the lower level, and two slightly larger windows on the top floor. There were places on the roof overhanging the stoop, where shingles had been replaced but not matched perfectly, with a tiny dormer window above the porch.

Phil thought rather uneasily that he may recognize the place, and when it came to him he suddenly realized that he’d been there before.

That there might have been a very good reason for Master Mordo to hate him enough to side with Hydra in order to get rid of him.

Some of his unease must have shown on his face – Lola certainly reacted to it by giving out a distressed little whine – because both Ianto and Stephen didn’t even move a step toward the house’s door before turning back to him. “What is it?” Ianto asked softly.

“I’ve been to this place before,” he admitted. Lola, sensing his distress, cuddled up to his side and offered him her unequivocal support.

Both Wizards seemed to get his inference immediately. “As the Dark One?” Stephen asked.

Phil nodded. “Me and Marcus…we came through here on one of our earlier tirades. We…made a mess of things.”

That was an understatement. It had been during the worst of their rampage; neither one had cared back then who they’d hurt as long as they weren’t the ones in pain. They’d razed many of the homes to the ground, and had hurt a lot of people. The only thing that had kept them from salting the ground behind them was that they hadn’t thought of that sort of thing at that point in their erstwhile former careers.

“Well,” Stephen sighed, “I think we probably know the motivation for having someone announce to all and sundry what you’d done in the past.” Agamotto, draped across his shoulders, chirped in agreement. However, there wasn’t any sort of condemnation in it, which would keep on being a surprise to Phil. He should be completely and utterly condemned for what he’d done, now that it
was out there for everyone in the Guild to know.

But then, everyone also thought he was already being punished for those crimes. Phil had to agree with them on that.

“I’m only curious as to why Master Mordo didn’t say anything himself in Quorum.”

Ianto had a point in that. It was a good question. If this Master Mordo had been some sort of witness, it would have been a simple matter to speak out at the time von Strucker had made his own accusations. His evidence would have been weighed in on at that point.

Phil didn’t think it would have changed the Order’s decision to name him Grand Master, but it would have certainly damaged any sort of credibility he might have had until he’d proved himself.

Actually, that was really the case now, so it might not have made any difference really. He was just the only person any of the Voids could trust not to be Hydra. It was the only thing recommending him for the job, in his opinion.

“Well,” Stephen sighed, “we should go and speak to Mordo anyway. I suspect we’ll only get more of the same biased rhetoric out of him that we would any Great Wizard prejudiced against the Cardinals and Voids, but he may have something to say about who approached him.”

With that, the Great Wizard took a deep breath and walked toward the door, Ianto and Phil stepping up behind him, flanking him and offering him their unspoken support, their dragons moving along with them. Phil knew what it was like to have a schism like that form between himself and a friend, and could sympathize with losing someone you once thought of as a brother. Because, while he hadn’t come out and said it, Stephen clearly felt that way about Mordo. It was obvious in the distress in his eyes.

Raising a hand, Stephen knocked, also letting his magic flair out so that whoever was inside – if they were a Wizard – was aware that it was another Wizard making themselves known. Phil, however, kept his own personal magic in tight rein, sensing that Ianto was doing the same. If Mordo was as much of a zealot as they’d been led to believe, it would only make him more hostile if they flaunted their power in that way.

It was perhaps a minute before anyone unlocked and opened the door, although it had been obvious to Phil that a Wizard was within the modest home. That that person was a Great Wizard just from the wards alone, but he had been beginning to wonder if no one was coming. The man who stood in the open doorway was handsome, Phil’s height, with dark skin and dark eyes, which narrowed as he took in just who was standing on his stoop. His tunic was a dark green, trousers black, and while he had the traditional wand at his waist, the Wizard’s dagger was nowhere to be seen. Neither was the Wizard’s dragon, although he would definitely have had one.

“Oh, it’s just me, Stephen,” he answered, his words tinged with an accent that Phil couldn’t quite identify.

“Mordo.” The Grand Master’s voice was bland, but from his place at Stephen’s left shoulder Phil could tell just how tense the man was.

“I assume you’re here because of your von Strucker.”

Phil had been expecting Master Mordo to deny any sort of accusation, and yet he was coming right out and giving voice to the information they’d received from Werner von Strucker. In fact, Mordo seemed almost proud of it, as he stood tall and straight in his doorway, staring down Stephen even though the Great Grand Master was a little taller than the other Wizard.
“And you would be correct.”

A small smile twisted Mordo’s lips. “Then I suppose you should come in.” He stepped out of the doorway, allowing the three of them to enter.

The house within was as modest as the outside. The entry was narrow, one half of the space taken up by a staircase the headed up to the second level. The walls were unadorned, lined with an understated pale green and pale blue wallpaper. An open archway on the right led to a sitting room; on the left was what would have been the dining room, but had been converted into a make-do casting chamber, judging from the wooden book stand in the center that would have held a moderate-sized *gramariya* easily.

There was a dragon sitting in the entryway to that room, alert to the three interlopers in her Wizard’s home. She was mottled black and brown and green, almost a camouflage pattern, intense brown eyes staring at them intently. She was a little larger than Lola and Myfanwy, who were eyeing the new dragon with interested antagonism. Agamotto was looking at this dragon avidly, and a little sadly, and Phil was reminded that Mordo and Stephen had had the same teaching Master and had been friends before their ideological falling out.

“You aren’t denying it.” Stephen didn’t phrase it as a question. He also didn’t introduce either Phil or Ianto, but then Mordo would have known who they were anyway.

“Why should I?” Mordo shrugged. “You already know what I did, and I’m certain you know the reason why, as well.”

“There are actually two reasons,” Phil chimed in.

Mordo gave him a skeletal-looking grimace. “Very good, Grand Master.”

He made the title sound like a curse.

“But I’m not Hydra,” Mordo went on. “I’d never ally myself with Voids.”

“You didn’t need to say anything about that, either,” Stephen commented. “Knowing you the way I do, the moment I heard your name I knew you were doing it for your own purposes, even if Hydra put you up to it.”

“They approached me, knowing my history and my beliefs. I went along with it for personal reasons.” His dark, intense eyes met Phil’s; the Void Wizard flatly refused to look away. “Of course, it didn’t do any good. The Voids still accepted you as their leader. But then, that’s simply not that much of a surprise, given how ambiguous Void morals are.”

Phil wanted to rant at him a little. After all, it had been that attitude – aimed at him by his very own parents – that had brought about the birth of the Dark One.

The Greats simply didn’t understand the connection between the Void and its Wizards. And explaining it yet again wouldn’t do a damned bit of good, if what Phil was seeing in Mordo was correct. After all, he’d heard the testimony in the Quorum, about Buda-Pest and Phil’s participation in that affair, and was obviously not taking any of that into consideration.

It wasn’t as if Phil wasn’t ashamed of what he’d done. He was. Fucking ashamed. But there was no way to go back and change anything, only to move forward to make up for what he’d done. Besides, that life had brought him Daisy, and he wouldn’t trade his daughter for anything.

The smirk on Mordo’s face flickered a little, as if Phil’s own stare was unnerving him. And maybe it
was, because the Void Wizard wasn’t backing down. Honestly, Phil was tired of backing down. He was tired of hiding, tired of being a hermit, although he’d been happy with that life for a long time. He’d gained friends in the days since Hydra had made its presence known, had gained a lover that he’d wanted for years, and was ready to live his life no matter where that led.

“You really have no idea.” Stephen shook his head in despair. That was all he said, before drawing himself up, putting on the pride that Mordo seemed to wear so easily. “As Grand Master of Great Order, I officially put you on record as breaking the rule of the Quorum. We shall discuss your punishment at a later time.”

“And I would do it again,” Mordo vowed, “if it meant bringing that man’s crimes against the natural order to light.” His finger stabbed right at Phil, and the Wizard had the rather childish urge to bite it. He refrained. But that was only because he needed to keep his dignity wrapped around him in the face of Mordo’s disdain. It seemed to unsettle the man just a little, which the Wizard counted as a win. He was pretty sure it was because he wasn’t acting like what Mordo expected the Dark One to act. But then, Phil had changed so very much in the years he’d given up being that evil bastard and had concentrated of just being Master Phil Coulson.

He was proud of Master Phil Coulson. And he honestly felt as if he had something to be proud of.

Phil gave the other Wizard a grim smile. “I’m well aware of what I’ve done, and I’ll be paying for that for a very long time. However, you could have put my daughter in danger by your actions, and that I cannot let stand. She is a very real target for Hydra, and if you had succeeded in getting me out of the way, it would have made her vulnerable to whoever Hydra has in Void Order. You may be prejudiced, Master Mordo, but I cannot see that you’d put children in danger.”

Mordo stepped right up to Phil, so close that the Void Wizard would feel the man’s magic sparking against his personal magicks. “She is a Cardinal. They are just as unnatural as the Voids.”

In that moment, Phil couldn’t stop the laughter that bubbled up and burst forth. “You really believe that. You really have no idea what you’re talking about, do you.” Explaining the relationship between the Void and their Wizards wouldn’t do a damned bit of good, not to someone as close-minded as Master Mordo obviously was.

Mordo’s expression turned affronted. “Using the Deep Ways and the Void is wrong. The ancient Wizards had the right of it.”

“I’m not going to argue it with you. You will never accept anything I tell you, because you’re so certain you’re right and not even the truth will change your mind. However…”

Phil cocked his head. Whatever he’d been about to say was lost as the Void spoke to him.

Well, ‘speaking’ wasn’t the correct word. Communication it was, but it wasn’t anything as prosaic as speech. This was something that thrummed deep within his soul, like a siren song only he could comprehend, with the strong connection to the Void he had.

“What is it?” Ianto asked quietly.

Phil blinked at his fellow Grand Masters. “There’s something…” He turned his head, trying to catch what the Void was telling him.

To everyone’s total surprise including his own, Phil was back out the door and walking toward the village, Lola taking flight overhead. He had no real idea why he was doing this, only that the Void was leading him on, and there was no way he would ever be able to ignore that signal.
The others were following him. He paid them no mind at all.

The village was laid out in concentric circles with a green in the exact center. The main street bisected the circle, businesses lining the dusty road, and Phil strode toward that green, ignoring the looks he was getting from the few villagers who were out and about at that time of the day.

He had a feeling he knew what they would be seeing: a man who looked as if he wasn’t going to let anyone or anything get in his way, his eyes gone black with Void. Someone fey and inhuman and unstoppable.

He didn’t care. It wasn’t important in that moment that they seemed to be afraid of him. He’d sown such fear too many times to count for it to bother him, although a small voice in the back of his mind was telling him he should care, that frightening innocent people wasn’t something he should be doing.

The Void was drawing him on. Anything else simply wasn’t important.

He could just make out a thin stream of Void, leading him onward. It was coming from the green ahead, and Phil followed it. He had no choice.

Well, he did. But he wasn’t about to make another one when this one was so obviously right.

There was a rather fancy raised gazebo built on the green. Its wooden eaves were carved into swoops and whorls, abstract patterns that added to the gazebo’s charm. White paint gleamed in the sun, polished wood on the floor, four steps leading up onto it.

The area wasn’t quite deserted, but no one was actually in the gazebo. In fact, if Phil wasn’t mistaken, the villagers who were on the green seemed to be avoiding the place, one woman nearby actually cringing a little when Phil stepped up onto its wooden plank floor. It creaked slightly under his boots as he walked to the exact center, turning on his heel to contemplate the view before meeting Ianto’s eyes, from where his friend – as well as Stephen and a confused and angry Mordo – were standing, watching him. The dragons were keeping back, except for Lola, who landed near the short steps leading up into the gazebo, her gaze on his, and the Void was within her as well, spinning within her whirling blue eyes.

“What do you see?” the Cardinal Wizard asked softly, the accent on the word ‘see’ obvious.

The Void Wizard knew what his counterpart was asking. So, he blinked, bringing his magical sight fully into use.

There was a small area of the gazebo floor that was coated with Void.

“Someone’s here,” he said, before he could even realize that was the truth. “Someone calling out to the Void for help.”

“What are you doing?” Mordo demanded, his face dark with anger.

“The Void is alive, and it’s telling me someone needs me. It’s led me here.”

Lola bugled loudly, as if she was calling out to whoever was nearby that left that stain of Void on the gazebo floor. They were beginning to gain quite a crowd, but Phil disregarded it in favor of casting his senses outward, to locate who was in trouble enough that the Void had decided to intervene.

“You speak as if the Void was alive,” Mordo scoffed.
“It is,” Ianto answered. “It and the Deep Ways are alive. From what I understand, the Void even has its own heartbeat. It also chooses its Wizards. As does the Deep Ways. We don’t have anything to do with it, except to accept that decision.”

“Something’s moving under the gazebo,” Stephen interrupted. “I can just about see the shadows shifting.”

That had Phil out of the gazebo and kneeling on the ground, not caring that he was getting grass stains on the knees of his trousers. He leaned forward, and saw what Stephen had from farther back: a shadow a little paler than the ones under the floor was shifting, and it took the Void Wizard a moment to realize he was seeing a dragon.

Without any prompting, Lola was wriggling under the low floor in order to meet the new dragon. She barely fit, and for a heartbeat Phil wondered if he’d have to pull her out, if she’d get stuck. There was an inquisitive chirp that echoed out from under the structure, Lola’s bright curiosity flowing across their bond. Phil himself would never fit, but he laid flat on the ground the better to get more of a look into the darkness.

The source of the Void call was under that gazebo

“There’s no need to be afraid,” he urged. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Do you promise?” came a child’s voice, scared and trembling and female.

“You have my word. I’m like you, can’t you tell?”

Phil sent out a light pulse of his magic, hoping she would be able to feel it. There was a gasp. “You are,” the voice said in wonder.

“My name is Phil, and my dragon is Lola. What are your names?”

There was silence, and even though Phil couldn’t see her, he just knew the child was considering what she should say. Finally, she answered, “I’m Crystal. My dragon is Lockjaw.”

Phil couldn’t help the smile. “Hello, Crystal. Lockjaw. It’s nice to meet you both.”

“No one wants to meet us,” the child’s voice was suddenly full of suspicion.

“Why is that?”

“Cause I’m bad.”

Phil’s heart stammered in his chest. “You can’t be that bad, Crystal.”

“I’m so bad my parents didn’t want me.” No child’s voice should sound that resigned.

The Wizard did everything in his power not to let his anger show. Not want her? How could anyone reject an innocent little girl? “Why do your parents think you’re bad?” He was dreading the answer, because he was certain he already knew what she was going to say.

“Cause I’m an evil Wizard.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” It was his worst nightmare…someone trying to convince their child that they were evil. It brought back all the memories of his own parents, and their conviction that because he was Void he was evil. It had led him on the path to becoming the Dark One, to becoming the evil that his own parents had been convinced he was.
He wasn’t about to let that happen to another child.

“I swear to you,” he continued, “you aren’t evil. We’re the same, you and I, and I have friends who will tell you that I’m not.”

There was a rustle, and Ianto was down on the ground next to Phil, his cheek laying on the grass.

“Hello, Crystal… I’m Ianto.”

“You talk funny. So’s your name. It’s pretty, though.”

Ianto laughed at that. “I’m from a land that’s across the sea.”

“There’s a place across the sea?” There was such wonder in her voice Phil wished he could pull her into his arms and just hug her.

He suddenly found himself wondering if Daisy would want a younger sister. Because, if Crystal had been abandoned, then she would need someone to look after her. She was Void; it would make sense it would be him. After all, he’d already adopted once and Daisy had turned out pretty well, even if he did say so himself.

“You’re different,” Crystal said.

“Yes, I am,” Ianto confirmed. “But I also have magic, like you do.”

“Are you evil?”

“I’m afraid not.” His voice was dry, but the Void Wizard doubted the little girl would notice. “Neither is Phil. He’s a good man.”

He could hear someone scoffing off to the side, knowing it was Mordo without looking. It wasn’t like Phil could blame him for his opinion, but at this moment it wasn’t helping.

“You should leave her be,” Mordo did say.

“And why would we do that?” Stephen inquired, his voice sharp.

“She’s Void. None of the villagers will want her like that.”

“Well,” Phil snarled, raising up enough in order to pin Mordo with a glare, “I’m not one of your villagers, and I want her.”

There was a sudden rustle from the darkness under the gazebo. Lola was backing out, and Phil couldn’t help but sense her joy as another dragon followed her.

This dragon was all in shades of brown, although there was a faint, iridescent sheen to his scales that made them almost reflective. He was a smaller than Lola was, although Phil could tell it was more because he hadn’t been eating enough and not because he was just naturally that small. There was a single horn on his head, except it was split and almost resembled a tuning fork, and it glittered like pearl in the sunlight.

The moment Lockjaw was out from under, both Lola and Myfanwy jumped him playfully, giving the little starved thing all the loving they could. There was a giggle from under the gazebo, and a blonde head emerged, followed by a child who looked to be about seven, also on the sharp end of malnutrition.

She was a pretty thing, even though her skin was smeared with dirt and her hair was tangled into
knots. Her dark eyes were watching Phil warily, even as she was obviously getting the full blast of her dragon’s happy emotions. “You really want me?” she asked timidly.

“I think the question is,” Phil told her, sliding into a seated position, “is if you want me.” He had to admit, he was scared; this would potentially be one more loved one he’d lose to death. But there was no way he couldn’t not be there for her, if Crystal wanted him to be.

A pair of thin arms flew around his neck as she hugged him. That was his answer.

Over her head, Phil could see Ianto nodding, his blue eyes glittering with unshed tears. “Congratulations,” the Cardinal Grand Master said, grinning, “it’s a girl.”

Chapter End Notes

There is an instance in this chapter where a child has been abandoned, not having to do with Phil's own past. Phil finds her, but she was cast out of her family for being Void.
Chapter 35

Ianto was having a hard time, because he wanted to cry at the poor little girl hugging Phil as if she never wanted to let go…but he was also furious at what this village had done to an innocent child.

He wondered how long she’d been living underneath that gazebo. Thank Gods it wasn’t winter; she never would have survived on her own, with only her dragon to watch out for her. And, if they hadn’t come looking for Mordo, chances were they would have never known about her.

It was only because Mordo had wanted to get revenge on the Dark One that they’d discovered Crystal and Lockjaw.

In that moment, as he was getting to his feet, Ianto realized that there was one thing that would keep Phil in the position of Grand Master after Hydra was gone: it was having a cause. And this…this little girl, who’d been rejected by her birth family simply because she was Void, this was the cause that would do it. It was far too close to Phil’s own past, and the last thing he’d want was for it to happen to another child. Ianto knew his friend would move every heaven and every hell in order to keep this from occurring ever again.

“You live here,” Stephen growled. He was glaring at Mordo, who was simply smirking at his former friend’s ire. “You live here, and you let this happen?”

“She’s Void.” Mordo shrugged. “Unnatural. And this village has had its fair share of pain caused by Void Wizards.” His smirk failed, in favor of a glare at Phil, who didn’t even seem to notice, as he was too busy comforting Crystal.

Which appeared to irritate Mordo even more.

“She is a child,” Stephen spat. “An innocent.”

Ianto had to wonder how many children had suffered the same fate because of this village’s fear of Voids. He shivered at that thought. “This will also be brought before the Quorum,” he promised. “You will surrender to us for immediate return to Gateway.”

Mordo laughed at that. “I seriously doubt that, Grand Master.”

With that, the Great Wizard had his wand out, but Stephen was faster. With a single Word of Power, red bands shot from the Grand Master’s fingers to encircle Mordo, trapping his arms against his body and keeping him from using his wand to cast any sort of spell. Secondary magic did the same for Mordo’s dragon, who’d leapt to his Wizard’s aid.

That didn’t mean that Mordo was defenseless.

A brilliant golden glow flared up from the man’s eyes, and Ianto instantly had his own wand out, in order to deflect the curse that Mordo had just cast at Stephen. He really hadn’t needed the wand; Ianto was the most powerful curse breaker ever seen, and his magic easily picked the components of the Blinding curse apart before it could reach his fellow Grand Master.

Before he could add his own Binding magic to Stephen’s, black bands of pure Void joined the red, two smaller strands covering Mordo’s mouth and eyes. Ianto turned; Phil stood there, Crystal in his arms, his eyes black smoke as he brought the Void to bear against the man who’d railed against it.
“You scoffed at the Void having a heartbeat,” he murmured almost disinterestedly. “Would you like to hear it, Mordo? I can open a Void Point right now and toss you in it so fast you’d have no time to react. I’m quite sure it wouldn’t mind holding onto you until your trial.”

With a sudden flash of insight, Ianto knew that this was the Dark One. This was the legendary dark Wizard staring out at the world through Phil Coulson’s Void-obscured eyes. He could see the anger, the sheer rage at what he saw as a horrible injustice, his power rising to counteract that injustice. The Cardinal Wizard realized that Phil would have razed the village to the ground again in a heartbeat because it had hurt one small, frightened, child.

He should have been afraid.

But he wasn’t.

Instead, there was a part of himself that wanted to lash out as well. To make Mordo and this village pay for what they’d done. Children were special; they were the future, and what happened to them in the present would only taint that future. Could this village’s indifference have created a new Dark One, if Crystal had managed to survive?

Yes, this was the cause that Phil needed. And Ianto wasn’t at all afraid that his friend would go too far.

Because Phil Coulson wasn’t the Dark One any longer. This anger wasn’t motivated by his parents’ words; it was there for a truly righteous reason. And not a single member of the Quorum would condemn him for it.

However, at the moment they were surrounded by villagers who were becoming more and more terrified. They needed to gain control of the situation and, for Ianto to be able to do that, he really needed to get Phil out of there, and to take Crystal and Lockjaw out of the line of fire.

At least Crystal didn’t seem to be afraid of what she was seeing Phil do. That boded well for her integration into the Coulson family…and he was going to see that was exactly that happened. Phil had done wonderfully with Daisy; Ianto could only imagine what he’d do with a child that matched his own magic.

“Phil,” he called softly, “perhaps you might wish to take Crystal and Lockjaw home.”

The Void immediately vanished from his friend’s eyes; however, the black bands binding Mordo remained. “There’s a lot to be done here,” Phil pointed out, lifting Crystal a little higher in his arms. She was clutching at him, as if she wasn’t about to let go anytime soon.

“Stephen and I can handle that,” the Cardinal Wizard assured him. “Crystal doesn’t need to be here to see it.”

Phil nodded. He turned to the little girl. “Would you like to go home with me?”

“Can I?” Crystal asked shyly. “I’d really like to.”

One more thing on Ianto’s list: to make the adoption that Phil was obviously going to apply for go smoothly. That would mean he’d have to find Crystal’s biological parents. Ianto thought there wouldn’t be any issue with getting them to sign away their parental rights in front of either a notary or a magistrate.

After all, there would be one there as soon as Ianto could summon one, if just for the charges he planned on leveling against every single villager.
“Of course you can.” Phil gave her such a sweet smile, it wiped away any left-over sign of the Dark One in his face. “How would you feel about having an older sister?”

“Yes, please!”

That single, awestruck exclamation had Phil hugging her tightly. “Then, let’s go.” He turned smiling eyes on Ianto. “You might want to collect Myfanwy before she decides to go back to Shield Keep with us.”

Ianto laughed. “I’m certain she wouldn’t mind all that much, actually. She and Lola seem to have become fast friends.”

Myfanwy huffed at that, her amusement golden and warm through their connection. She gave Lockjaw, who was belly up on the grass under hers and Lola’s affections – Agamotto hadn’t joined them, but Ianto could tell he was equally happy to make the acquaintance of a new dragon – a lick across the muzzle and then rejoined Ianto, leaning into his side happily. Lola helped Lockjaw up, cuddling the smaller dragon to her as if she didn’t want to let him out of her grasp. After all, Lockjaw had been through so much, even the Wizard could tell he was starving for more than just food.

“Hold on tight,” Phil told Crystal, as their two dragons stood close, “I’m going to use magic to get us home.”

Crystal’s eyes went even wider as her too-thin arms wrapped around the Void Wizard’s neck. “I can learn how to do that too?”

“Yes, sweetheart, you can.”

With that promise, Phil triggered the Teleport artifact he carried with him, and the small group vanished in a flash of black-tinted magic.

The Void that had been binding Mordo faded away, as if it had never existed. Ianto stepped in, using his own magic to help Stephen keep the other Wizard under control. “We’ll take him back to the Quorum,” he said, “and then we can handle things here.”

“You will release Master Mordo immediately,” one of the villages proclaimed.

Ianto wanted to laugh in the man’s face. He was older, his hair gray, and he held himself with a pomposity that shouted the fact that he believed himself to be better than Ianto and Stephen, simply because he ran things around there.

Instead, the Cardinal Wizard said, “No. Mordo has committed crimes within the Wizard’s Guild, and he will be held accountable.”

“In fact,” Stephen chimed in, “after we place Mordo into custody, we will be approaching the local Baronial Court and laying charges against your village for what we’ve discovered today. So, don’t be surprised when the magistrates arrive.”

That had the villagers muttering and whispering amongst themselves. “We’ve done nothing wrong!” someone from the back of the crowd denied.

“It’s called ‘child abuse’,” Ianto answered. “And I’m certain the investigation will reveal that the child we just found isn’t the only one you’ve done this to.”

“It’s an abomination!” another person shouted out. “We don’t need that thing around here, tainting
our village!”

Ianto couldn’t help the anger from leaking out into his words. “Not only will the magistrates be here, but someone from the Wizard’s Guild will, as well. Abusing a magical child carries with it a punishment through the Guild as well, especially to the parents of said child.”

“And don’t think you can hide who Crystal’s birth parents from us,” Stephen added. “There are spells we can use to trace her to them.”

“And when we find out,” Ianto continued, “we will first make certain that any parental rights they had will be stripped away.”

“And secondly,” Stephen went on, “we shall be performing an Infertility curse, because if they do this to one child, what will they do to another magical child born to them?”

Now, that caused an outrage that had Ianto believing that some of the gathered crowd might actually attack. So Ianto decided to give them another hard truth.

“Magic runs in families. Which means that Crystal’s parents are more than likely to give birth to another Void Wizard. And that means they’ll do the same to that other child.”

Really, Crystal was a little too young to have been Tested properly, so it made him wonder if her parents had already had one Void child, and had gotten rid of that one as well. It would make sense, and it would be how they might have realized that Crystal herself was Void before the official Testing.

Or, there was someone who was during unauthorized Testing. It would be something else to look into when the investigations took place. It might have even been Mordo, which would make the most sense.

They were going to be busy here. He and Stephen were going to have to find people they could trust to send along with the magistrates. And, if they could dig out Hydra from the Quorum, Phil could choose someone to represent Void Order, since it had been a Void child who’d been hurt.

There was a muffled sound of outrage from the bound Mordo. He could hear everything Ianto and Stephen were saying. “Perhaps we should get Mordo back to Gateway,” Ianto suggested. He really wasn’t liking the look of the crowd and, while he had faith in his and Stephen’s abilities, he really had no desire to take on an entire village of people with his magic. It would end up being fodder for all sorts of rumors, and that wasn’t at all what the Wizard’s Guild needed.

The villagers were definitely getting restless. With a flick of the Deep Ways, Ianto had a Shield up around him and Stephen and their prisoner. “Would you mind opening a portal, Stephen?”

“Not at all.” With a swirl of his free wrist, the golden flare of the Great Wizard’s personal portal appeared in the air in front of them, growing until it was large enough to step through. Within its opening, Ianto could make out the Quorum Hall; a young Wizard, most likely a Novice, was staring at them in shock.

“After you.” Stephen waved Ianto through.

With Myfanwy at his side, Ianto walked into the portal, giving the staring Novice a single, raised eyebrow. “I take it you’ve never seen a Portal spell before.”

The Novice shook her head, stunned speechless.
Ianto despaired sometimes of the caliber of their Novices.

“Well, you have now,” he said, as Stephen came through, shoving Mordo in front of him. Their prisoner, not being able to see where he was going because of Ianto’s magic, stumbled a little as his feet hit the stone of the hall’s floor.

“I’ll get him and his dragon down to the cells,” his friend volunteered. A new red band took the place of Ianto’s own Binding magic, letting the Cardinal Wizard relax his hold. “You know, we’re going to have to enchant more if we keep bringing in prisoners like this.” With that parting shot, Stephen was dragging Mordo out of the hall, although he did stop just outside the door to say he’d be around in the morning.

The Novice had made her escape while Ianto had been paying attention to Stephen. Myfanwy was laughing, both aloud and in his head, and he couldn’t help the smile as he rubbed her head. “Let’s go home.”

Together, Wizard and dragon left the Guild Hall. He knew Stephen hadn’t been wrong; there weren’t that many cells, and once they cleared up the remaining Hydra members…if they allowed themselves to be taken alive, of course. Well, once they got Werner von Strucker out of the country, that would be one less cell occupied, but Ianto was aware it would be a little while before that was done. Maybe Eirlys wouldn’t mind taking him into the Baronial dungeons temporarily, if Ianto asked.

He sighed. There was so much to do. The three of them were going to be busy for a while, yet. And now Phil had the possibility of a new daughter in the mix. They would need to meet again tomorrow, perhaps at Shield Keep this time. All of this needed to be done sooner rather than later, if they were hoping to get things back to normal quickly.

Deciding to take the easy way home, Ianto triggered his own Teleport spell, appearing within his casting chamber. He was tired, and he doubted that Jack would be home that night, what with the new lead on Hydra. It wouldn’t be the first time they’d slept apart; but he still didn’t have to like it.

At some point, Ianto was going to have to reschedule his meeting with Baroness Anwen. He was still hoping she’d be amenable to get the rest of Torchwood’s artifacts and documents transferred to the Quorum Archive. He would have to explain why he was delayed, and perhaps she’d understand. This Hydra mess simply took precedence over his own plans.

He trudged up the stairs and into the main house, where he could hear voices in the sitting room. Curious, Ianto made his way down the hallway and stopped just outside the open entry, the smile tugging it his lips despite his irritation at not being alone.

Daisy Coulson and her friends had made themselves at home.

If he was going to be taking Novices again, Ianto would have to get used to that sort of thing happening.

“Ianto!” Daisy exclaimed, noticing him. That had every member of her little gang turning toward the Wizard, and his smile grew.

“Daisy,” he greeted her. Myfanwy squeezed past him, heading toward the dragons that were laying on the floor in front of the fireplace. She was eagerly welcomed into their ranks, Scarlet, Wanda’s dragon, making room for her between herself and Knight, Trip’s dragon. Myfanwy settled down into the offered spot, sighing happily.
Daisy stood. “We found something.” She handed him a rolled up parchment; as she wasn’t using gloves to hold it, it was most likely a copy of whatever they’d found in the Archives.

He accepted it, a little surprised they’d discovered something so quickly. Ianto had thought it would have taken longer, but then there were seven of them and they made a good team. Even Wanda and Pietro, as new as they were to the group, had been accepted into their ranks easily and apparently worked well within the assembly of Novices despite being mere students currently.

He unrolled the scroll. On it were words written in the ancient Wizard’s language; without having to be prompted, Daisy handed the spectacles over, Ianto putting them on so he could read what the parchment said. They really needed to start up courses on the old language, it wouldn’t hurt if Wizards had their own way of writing once more.

It was a list of spells, spells that matched closely what was currently on the Winter Soldier’s arm.

But, what was the giveaway, was the sketch of the arm itself.

It was almost a direct match.

“Well done,” he congratulated them.

There was a chorus of thanks from the gathered young ones. Ianto really was impressed. These were, indeed, their future, and he couldn’t have been more confident in whatever the future these children brought into being.

“I’m going to look this over.” He would, once he was in bed. He’d need something to distract himself from Jack’s absence. “In the meantime, you should all get some rest.”

No one really protested, which was telling.

“Daisy.” He turned to the ringleader of their little band. “You might want to head back to Shield Keep, Your father will want to speak to you as soon as possible.”

“I was wondering why he wasn’t with you.” She was curious; her face gave it away, and her dragon would have done the same if he’d needed the confirmation.

“Something happened. Nothing bad, I promise,” he swore, when her expression turned concerned, “but he really does need you at home now.” He wasn’t going to speak about Crystal, knowing that Phil would want to do that himself.

“So much for your plan to stay at the dormitory tonight,” Trip said teasingly.

“I’ll be back in the morning,” she said. “We do have lessons, after all, and I know Dad would pitch a fit if we all skived off.”

“And he’s not even our father,” Jemma laughed.

“He does take our education quite seriously,” Leo added.

Lincoln shrugged. “He’s kinda our Dad, though…only one that didn’t contribute to conception.”

“Ew, no.” Daisy looked a little grossed out. “That’s my Dad. It’s bad enough that I know him and Clint are sleeping together. I don’t need to even consider him wildcatting around and spreading his manly seed back when he was younger.”

Ianto couldn’t help the full belly laugh that had him leaning against the wall in support.
“Besides,” Trip put in, “that would mean you and Lincoln are brother and sister, which is an entirely new level of gross.”

Ianto laughed harder, just from the expressions on both Daisy and Lincoln’s faces. It felt good to let go like that.

“Go home, the lot of you,” he snorted. “You are all very bad for my dignity.”

Everyone got up to leave, bright smiles and laughter following them along with their dragons; Myfanwy was looking just a little put out at losing her dragon pile so soon. However, as Pietro passed by, Ianto touched him on the shoulder. “Please come by tomorrow morning. We have something to discuss, you and I.”

Pepper had rather helpfully sent him the young man’s academic record. But then, she had a vested interest in Ianto taking on a Novice and she wasn’t afraid to goose things along.

From the pleased expression on his usually somber face, Pietro was guessing what Ianto wanted to talk about. He nodded and then followed his friends out of the door.

Ianto was heading toward his and Jack’s bedroom, scroll in hand, when he heard a loud shout of sheer happiness outside, followed by some cheering.

Smiling, he made his way upstairs, to get ready for bed and to peruse the rather interesting scroll those rather brilliant children had brought him.
Chapter 36

Steve found talking to Doctor Wilson – “Call me Sam, none of that doctor crap’ – very pleasant. The half-Elf let him ramble on, making comments here and there but not making any judgments or assumptions. He was willing to answer any question Steve had, although some of those answers didn’t quite make sense; when that happened, Sam did the best he could to explain what he’d meant.

Mainly, Steve had been interested in magic.

Luckily for him, Sam seemed to have a bit of knowledge in that area. While he wasn’t a Wizard himself, the man could explain the history of and how magic had reemerged, and could go into a little detail on the Wizard’s Guild and what it did exactly. He learned that Mistress Pepper was one of the more powerful Wizards in the Western Lands, hence her position at the head of Cardinal Order. Each country had their own Heads of Order, but Sam didn’t know exactly how many that meant.

And, above all, were the three Grand Masters, all of whom he’d met: Ianto Jones, Stephen Strange, and Phil Coulson.

The whole three Orders thing, though. That was taking a little bit of getting used to, but he thought that was more to do with the fact that he’d always been taught that magic didn’t exist anymore, and now there were all different types of it.

While Sam couldn’t exactly explain what made Cardinal, Void, and Great Wizards different from one another – he’d thought it had had something to do with what sort of magic they had access to – Steve thought he could understand it with just the small bit of information he’d been given. After all, he’d been trapped within the Void; so there being two other forms of magic out there made sense in a way. He wasn’t a Wizard, so he really didn’t need all the details, as much as he might want them. Maybe he’d have to ask one of the Grand Masters at some point.

Back when he was from, there wasn’t a lot of knowledge about magic. Sure, once in a while artifacts were found, like the Tesseract that the Skull had had, but it took a lot to get one to function the way it should. He’d heard rumors about a place over in the United Kingdom that collected lost artifacts, in order to keep them out of the wrong hands, but they hadn’t obviously done such a good job there in the Western Lands if they hadn’t managed to locate the Tesseract. So much horror and death could have been avoided if only someone had come looking for that damned thing, who hadn’t had despicable intentions and wasn’t out for total power.

The more he talked with Sam, the easier it became for Steve to accept that he’d been trapped within the Void for three hundred years. That certain knowledge also meant for the crash of grief to hit that much harder, to knock the wind physically from his lungs and to make him feel as if he’d been stabbed directly in the heart. Everyone he’d known…all dead and dust. The Commandos, Peggy…and, of course, Bucky, who’d died before Steve had been banished to the Void by the Skull.
That loss had been the one to make him face the Skull, alone.

Still, there was Jack Harkness. The Deathless, of all things. That had been completely unexpected. Jack had promised him he’d come back to visit, but they were in the middle of their Hydra hunt and he couldn’t afford to be pulled away just now. Steve recalled the man who’d served in the regiment that had been support for the Commandos; he’d been a good soldier, with sword skills that had made some of the weapons’ masters weep, and he hadn’t been afraid to do what needed to be done. To be honest, Steve had actually considered him for the Commandos but, in the end, had realized that all he’d known about the man had been his combat skills, and the Commandos had been a very tightly knit group. Adding someone none of them really knew could have been a disaster waiting to happen.

So, Steve had put that choice aside until he could have gotten to know the man better.

And then, it had been too late.

He was glad that the war had been won, even though it had been done without him. To have awakened and found the Skull’s disciples in charge would have been the stuff of Steve’s nightmares. Still, Hydra had managed to survive in some way.

That bothered Steve a lot.

He wanted to help, but he didn’t know enough about the world to actually do it.

Which was where Sam would come in.

“I really wouldn’t mind getting out of here for a bit,” he proclaimed, after they’d been talking for a while.

Sam cocked his head thoughtfully. Elves were something else that had been a surprise; they just hadn’t seen that many of them back in his day. Gabe Jones, one of his Commandos, had been the only one he’d been personally acquainted with, and Gabe had claimed that his people really didn’t leave their Enclaves all that often. The ears were fantastic, if he was honest with himself.

“I don’t see a problem with that,” his new friend said. “You know what you can and can’t handle, so I expect you to tell me if you’re having difficulties.”

Steve agreed to that readily. Hopefully the world hadn’t changed that much.

Well, except for the whole magic thing, but the Paladin didn’t think that would be too noticeable, especially if there weren’t that many Wizards out there yet.

“Besides,” Sam went on, “we can’t keep you hidden away. You’ll never get acclimatized if you become some sort of hermit.” He cracked a smile. “Although the pajamas you’re wearing might not quite fit into polite society.”

Steve glanced down at what he was wearing. When he’d come up to his room, he hadn’t anticipated going back out again, and so he hadn’t bothered to change out of his sleeping clothes. “I’m not sure what I have will work,” he admitted, thinking about the tunic and trousers he’d had on under his armor. And, going out in full armor probably wasn’t ideal.

“I’m sure whatever you have will be fine.” Sam waved off his objection. “I’m also sure Mistress Pepper will have arranged for some sort of fund for you to find whatever you need until you can get on your feet. Baron Tony is notoriously generous, and so is his wife.”
Now that Steve hadn’t considered. He had nothing but the armor and weapons he’d come out of the Void with; as he could recall, he hadn’t taken any money with him into battle.

“Get whatever you’re thinking out of your head, Sir Steven,” Sam commanded. “You’re here not by choice, and you have people who are willing to help. Let them, until you can deal with where you are and how you’re going to live now that you’re here.”

“If you’re gonna tell me off like that, the least you can do is call me Steve.”

Sam snorted. “Fine. Now, let’s go bother Mistress Pepper and get you ready to go out. Change into whatever you have and we’ll pick up some new stuff while we’re in town.”

That sounded like an excellent plan. Steve got up from his chair, hunted for the clothes he’d arrived into this time while wearing while Sam left to fetch Mistress Pepper.

He wasn’t sure how he felt about accepting their charity but, at the same time, he really didn’t have anything except his clothes and armor, his sword and his shield. From what he’d been able to discover, there weren’t any wars currently going on, so he wasn’t able to earn a living by fighting on whatever side he could agree with on principle. He really was at the mercy of people who’d decided he was worth helping.

He pulled on his undertunic and trousers, then laced up his boots. He played with the idea of taking his sword, and figured he most likely wouldn’t need it. Barony Ferrous was at peace, so he doubted he’d need to protect either Sam or himself. It didn’t hurt that Sam wasn’t armed, as well. At least visibly.

By the time Sam returned, Steve was ready for his first outing in this brand new world he’d found himself in. To be honest, he was nervous, afraid that things had changed so much that he wouldn’t be able to recognize anything he did see. Still, he’d never been a coward, and he knew he had to face the outside world or go insane, so he followed Sam out of the room, and then out of the house he’d awakened in, that belonged to the many-times great-grandson of his friend, Howard.

Of everything, meeting Baron Tony had been the hardest to reconcile. He just looked so much like Howard, it was almost frightening. Yes, there were differences, but enough was the same that it had threatened to kick in flashbacks whenever they were together…which had only been the once so far. Steve knew he needed to start accepting the Baron for his own person, and not someone who so much resembled that it felt like he was mourning all over again every time he looked at the man.

Castle Ferrous was at the top of a bluff that overlooked the ocean. A path ran from the front door into a place where people could park their carriages or leave their horses whenever they came to visit. A young boy was standing there, reins of two horses in his hands, and he passed them to Sam and Steve with a little grin, then headed around the house toward where the stables most likely were.

Well, at least the future still had horses. Steve had been half-expecting some sort of magical transportation that drove itself.

They mounted, and Sam led the way down the neatly-cobbled drive and toward Ferrous Town. From their vantage point, Steve could make out the town below. It curved about a deep water bay, ships at anchor out from shore and along several long piers that jutted out from rows of warehouses and what looked to be some sort of thoroughfare that led into the city proper.

The place itself was pretty large. It was a sprawling mass of buildings, the ones in the middle of town taller than the ones on the outer edges, roads snaking between them in lanes and wider streets in what appeared to be the business sections. Houses were closer set, the roads narrower and lined
with tall trees, and were in the outer circles of the city.

It was a little larger than what Steve was used to, but then he’d been born in a smaller town on the eastern coast. The closest large city had been New Andrade, but he’d never been there, having been born into a poorer family with just his mother, and then later Bucky had practically adopted him as his best friend and shield brother.

Back then, Steve had been a scrawny kid with a penchant for picking fights with bullies two and three times his size. Bucky had always been getting him out of scrapes that could very well have done a lot of damage.

He really missed Bucky. He’d never believe that losing him hadn’t been his fault.

He needed to be distracted, so he said, “I do appreciate you coming and talking to me.”

Sam grinned. “Been my pleasure. Really.”

“Just how did you know to come? I was told that someone would be contacted, but his name was Andrew, I believe...”

“Professor Andrew Garner is an old instructor of mine. I hadn’t heard from him in years before he tracked me down and asked me if I’d come and assess you.” He chuckled. “I’m pretty sure he thought you’d be eaten up with angst and grief and all that sort of emotional stuff.”

“How do you know I’m not?”

Sam laughed. “True. Actually, I know you’re confused and a bunch of other issues that I’m sure will rear their ugly heads at some point, but keeping you confined wasn’t about to help you any. I get the feeling you would’ve broken out on your own if I hadn’t agreed to coming along with you.”

“You’d be right.” Steve had thought he’d hidden that well.

“Don’t blame you. You’re an action-oriented sort of guy. It would only be a matter of time before you’d gotten sick and tired of Mistress Pepper and Baron Tony thinking they were doing you a favor keeping you away from the world and doing something about it.”

Steve didn’t say anything; he figured he didn’t have to.

“Anyway,” Sam continued, “when you showed up – I wasn’t actually told anything about you, but that was for the best so I didn’t have any sort of preconceptions – Andrew was asked to help you out. Since he’d been out of practice for about twelve years, he contacted me. He’s still recovering himself, and didn’t feel up to the task.”

“Recovering?”

“Well, I don’t suppose he’ll mind if I share. Andrew accidentally activated a curse that messed him up. He’s only just been cured.”

“Magic just doesn’t seem worth it,” Steve exclaimed. Magic had put him in the Void for three hundred years; it had been used to nearly conquer the Western Lands. Now, he was hearing that it had hurt someone that Sam obviously respected. He was beginning to wonder what actual good it was for.

“Maybe,” Sam allowed, “but without it, Andrew would never have gotten back to normal. It had been an artifact that had been discovered in someone’s personal library, of all places. There’d been
no telling how long it had been there. If not for Grand Master Ianto, he would have remained cursed for the rest of his life.

The main road going into Ferrous Town met up with the road they’d taken down from the castle, and the horses’ hooves clopped smartly on the smooth-worn cobbles. Steve could see that the Baron obviously cared about such things as public works, and his opinion of Baron Tony – although he really hadn’t gotten to know the man all that well so far – went up several notches. Making things easier for the residents and visitors to get around showed a level of caring for his people that not many really understood. Having grown up with dirt roads and half-collapsed wells, Steve was aware of just how important a thing it was.

It wasn’t long before they were passing out of the residential areas and entering the business district. Shops lined the streets, carrying different types of necessities, novelty items, and luxury goods all displayed behind glass-fronted stores. Not far into town a large blacksmith compound took up an entire city block, heat rolling from the forges and the sounds of metal clanging against metal rang out over the street. Steve wanted to get down and check out the blacksmith’s wares, and so he did, Sam right behind him.

Leading his borrowed horse over to the rail that separated the main work area from the street, Steve watched as the brawny smith worked his bright orange metal into shape, pounding strongly with a large hammer, face and shaved head glistening with sweat. To the side, a woman was working with more metal, her sleeveless tunic showing off well-muscled arms as she used what had to have been an even larger hammer on what was shaping up to be some sort of sword, her black hair pulled back from her face in a really sloppy ponytail.

There was a third man with curly blond hair who was making nails and other sundries, rolling molten metal into sharp points and tamping heads onto the ends. Steve was a little surprised that there were no jewelry makers in the group, but then he thought that must have been in another shop somewhere else that handled luxury goods.

“Good day,” the woman said, even as she continued to work. “Are you looking for something in particular?”

“My friend here has a sword,” Sam spoke before Steve could say a thing, “but I’m willing to bet he would appreciate a few knives.”

The woman smiled, revealing slightly crooked yet white teeth. “We have the best knives and daggers in the city.” It should have sounded boastful, but to Steve it was as if she was merely stating facts. “Our storefront is across the way,” she took a moment to motion in the direction indicated with her hammer, “and Matt will be more than happy to help.”

“Much obliged,” Steve thanked her. Sam was right; he’d only had his sword; the knives he’d usually have carried had all been lost in battle.

Together, they crossed the street toward the shop the woman had pointed them toward. It was a large affair, all sorts of weapons displayed in its window along with a set of mail that was as fine as any Steve had ever seen. If their work was as good as this, he’d be bringing his own armor down to have it repaired. There were various dents and missing plates in it, so he’d need it taken care of before even thinking about fighting in it again.

Although, hopefully, he might not have to. But with Hydra out there, there was no guarantee that it could happen at some point.

The shop was cool and well-lit from both the large window and from glowing orbs on the walls, not
quite like the ones he’d seen up at the castle. It was a little bigger than Steve thought it would be from the outside, and was well-stocked with anything he might have ever needed.

Weapons and armor shared space with nails and tools, each one well-crafted and displayed for best effect. A rack of spears sat next to another rack, this one filled with pikes and other pole weapons. Different types of armor were at the rear of the shop, along with what looked to be some sort of space that Steve thought might have been used to measure for custom-made articles. Everything was neat and well laid out.

Along one side of the shop was a wooden cabinet with a glass display area along the top, and was where the knives and daggers were kept. Steve gravitated toward it; not only were there knives, but there was also utensils and smaller tools, including several sewing kits with fine needles in various sizes within.

“Hello,” a voice had Steve glancing toward the rear of the shop. A man had entered from the back room. He was wearing a wine red tunic and black trousers, a pale off-white dragon at his side. The way his eyes didn’t seem to meet theirs told Steve that he was blind.

The dragon, a whipcord thin creature, took one look at Sam and launched at him. Steve hadn’t been expecting that, and didn’t have time to react before the dragon was climbing all over the half-Elf, Sam laughing as he twisted the dragon in his arms and began giving it belly rubs.

The Paladin took a deep breath, glad this wasn’t some sort of attack.

“Dragons love Elves,” Sam explained. “No one has figured out why.”

The man – Wizard – gave them a wry smile. “That explains why Stick isn’t being as well behaved as he usually is.

“You must be Matt,” Sam greeted. “The lady smith told us to speak to you about my friend and his need for new knives.”

“That’s me.” Matt made his way toward the display case with the ease of someone who knew exactly where everything was and could navigate the place without any trouble. “Jessica’s not shy about sending people here, but then she loves it when people purchase her works.”

“Then you should probably show us what she’s responsible for forging,” Steve finally spoke up. “I’d hate to disappoint the lady.”

Matt laughed. “Oh, please call her a lady when I’m around. That would be really entertaining. She might even be so surprised she doesn’t knock you to the ground.”

Steve had to laugh as well. Some of the women warriors who’d fought with him – Peggy Carter among them – really would have decked him if he’d dared to call her a lady to her face. He was also positive Peg’d somehow find out he had, and punch him after the fact.

The Wizard began pulling different designs of knives and daggers from the display, laying them on cloths that were spread out on the glass for that purpose. Steve had to admit Jessica did good work; they were all well-balanced, and fit his hand as if they’d been forged especially for him. There were also fine throwing knives, especially the matching set of three that had hilts that were made of a deep red wood, highly polished, and yet they weren’t slippery in his grasp.

He really wanted them, but didn’t want to even ask the price.

Sam did it for him.
Then promptly began to haggle with the man behind the counter, even as he was letting the Wizard’s dragon crawl all over him.

Steve was impressed.

Sam and Matt finally settled on something a little lower than what price had first been given. Sam had him throw in two boot daggers as well. “I have a letter of credit from Mistress Pepper,” Sam explained. “I hope that’s acceptable.”

The smile he received was wide and happy. “Perfectly. After all, once it gets around we had Barontial guests in here, our business is bound to go up.” He turned his head a little toward the back of the shop. “Foggy,” he called out. He then turned his attention back to Sam and Steve. “My friend here will get the information on the letter for our bill.”

“What?” an irritated voice shouted. “I was right in the middle of the accounts – “

The man who came out from the back of the shop stopped in his tracks, his pale eyes darting toward Steve and then Sam. His clothes were slightly rumpled, and even from where Steve was standing he could see ink stains on his fingers; he guessed this Foggy person was some sort of clerk.

“Um,” he said, “oops?”

“Help me with this,” Matt requested, amused. “They have a letter of credit they want to use.”

Foggy bustled toward them. He was shorter and bulkier than his friend, Matt, and yet there was something sharp in his gaze that had Steve deciding he might have been a clerk now, but he’d been something different before he’d landed this job.

It was the same for Matt. He might have been blind, but he still moved like a fighter of some sort. Steve wondered how he’d lost his sight, but knew it would be rude to ask.

“Sorry,” Foggy said sincerely. “Can I see the letter, please?” He reached under the counter as Sam took the letter from a pouch on his belt and handing it over. Foggy squinted a little, and then began to write in the ledger he’d grabbed, asking Matt what they’d decided on as price for the throwing knives and the two daggers and notating it in the ledger.

Once the transaction was complete and Steve’s new weapons well wrapped up in leather in order to protect them – Matt had thrown in sheaths for the boot daggers as well – the Paladin said, “I have armor that needs some work. You think you could take on something like that?”

“That’s Luke’s bailiwick,” Matt commented. “Bring it in and we’ll have him take a look at it, give you a fair price.”

“Sounds good. I will.”

He and Sam were about to leave, after Sam had handed over the dragon, when Matt called them back. “I’m sorry if this is none of my business, but are you a Wizard?” His sightless eyes were on Steve when he asked. “If you are, it’s…sorry, it’s just me being curious, but you don’t have a dragon and you don’t feel like a Wizard, but there’s a sense of the Void about you...”

Sam glanced at Steve, shrugging. Steven stepped back to the counter, saying, “I was just recently under a curse, but a Void Wizard brought me out of it.” It was about as close to the truth as Steve could get without downright lying. Besides, what had happened to him had been as much of a curse as anything he could think of.
Matt nodded. “That explains it. Whoever did the removal did excellent work.”

“It was the Void Grand Master, actually.”

“Really. I’d heard we’d gotten a new one, but I haven’t been to a Quorum in a while. It’s not something I’m all that interested in, to be honest.”

“You did get another summons,” Foggy pointed out. “I’m assuming you’re going to ignore that one as well.”

“Yep, most likely.”

From the conversation he’d had with Grand Master Phil, that summons was most likely to get the Wizards together in order to root our Hydra from their ranks. “You should go,” Steve blurted. “It’s important that you go.” He didn’t think this Wizard was Hydra; they’d been into personal perfection, and the last thing they’d do was recruit someone who was sightless, but it was now obvious that the man was a Void Wizard. It would be best if he was cleared of any wrongdoing, and no one could come back and suspect him later on.

Matt gave him a shrewd look. “I think you know exactly what’s behind this summons.”

“I do, but it’s not my place to say anything.”

The Wizard was nodding. “I can understand that. Hm.”

“Maybe you should do,” Foggy mused. He was also regarding Steve shrewdly, and there was the man the Paladin had guessed existed under the slightly bumbling clerk persona. “If it’s that important.”

“I know you have no reason to trust me,” Steve said, “but it’s imperative that you attend the next Quorum.”

“And here I thought it was just to recognize the new Grand Master.”

“I can assure you, it’s not.” Steve had gotten the distinct impression that Grand Master Phil hadn’t cared a single jot about that sort of recognition. “I can’t go into detail, but something big is happening. You really need to be there for it.”

Sam was giving him a knowing glance, but then he’d discussed Hydra with him so he knew what Steve was trying not to say. If he was wrong, and for some reason Hydra had decided to go against their usual rhetoric and recruit someone who was blind, it wouldn’t do to give so much away. It would conceivably tip Hydra off, and while Steve didn’t know what any of the Grand Masters had planned, Hydra could attempt to prepare their mole in some way that would defeat whatever way the three men had worked out to expose Hydra in the Void ranks.

Sam bustled them both out of the shop after that, saying their goodbyes and promising that Steve would bring his armor in to have Luke give them an idea of what it would take to repair it. Steve had already said more than he should have, and he knew it, but at the same time Hydra needed to be rooted out, and if getting Matt to go cleared him, then that would be for the best.

They got their horses and, after Steve had put his new bundle into one of his saddlebags, this time they eschewed riding, walking along the road and deeper into town. But Steve’s thoughts were now a million miles away, knowing he’d done the right thing and yet worried that he’d overstepped.

“You didn’t,” Sam assured him. “We need to figure out Hydra, and getting Master Matt to the
Quorum is the best way to either clear him or condemn him. Honestly, I think it would clear him. He didn’t strike me as being someone who’d be drinking the Hydra sweet wine, as it were.”

Steve had to agree.

“No,” his new friend declared, “let’s get more shopping done. Mistress Pepper gave me orders to get you as much as you need, no matter the cost.”

The Paladin shook his head. He resolved to pay them back as soon as he could, but he really didn’t have a lot of choice at the moment. He needed things, and the Baron and Mistress Pepper were willing to help him. He would lean on them until he could be self-sufficient.

However, he fully intended on helping out against Hydra in any way he could.

Steve just had to figure out how that was going to work.
Chapter 37

In the end, getting into Madame Aida’s brothel turned out to be pretty easy.

Jack had argued that it should have been him to go in, mainly because being Deathless meant that any sort of traps or curses wouldn’t do lasting damage, and if they did manage to kill him he’d just come back. That had both Natasha and Bobbi telling him that Hydra knew who the Deathless was, and Whitehall – and any other Hydra fugitive in there they didn’t know about – would recognize him at once. There would have been no way he’d be setting foot inside that brothel without tipping off the bad guys.

Clint, Toshiko, and Hunter had just stood back and let the three of them hash it out.

It had finally come down to drawing lots.

Natasha won.

Clint was pretty sure she’d rigged the game somehow. After all, she was good at that sort of thing. He’d lost a lot of money to her over card games, after all. Her cheating was practically legendary.

Jack hadn’t been happy, but he’d accepted the outcome, even though he had to have been aware of the fact that it hadn’t been an honest draw. They’d come up with the rest of the plan, which went into action as soon as Natasha had enough of a disguise to suit her…which wasn’t much of one, because the Widow wasn’t as well-known as the Deathless, and she’d just needed to fit into the ambience of the place.

Still, she’d found a nice dress that wouldn’t have been out of place at some sort of upper crust ball, showing more bare skin that was actually necessary. It had meant she’d had to hand over her most overt weapons, but Clint had seen the dagger tucked into the garter on her right leg, and had grinned at it. Her fancy Teleport bracelet looked as if it belonged with the ensemble.

Truthfully, his best friend was just as dangerous empty-handed as she was with a knife. Clint loved her to bits for it.

When it was time to move in, Clint took a position across the street on the roof of a rooming house that was a couple of stories shorter than the building Madame Aida operated out of. From the plans that Bobbi and Hunter had managed to scrounge up, the upper two floors were the bedrooms for the sex workers who plied their trade within, the middle three the ‘play’ rooms, with an attic topping off the rest of the building. They didn’t know what was in that attic, but everyone guessed it was Madame Aida’s private residence, and perhaps businesses offices. At the moment, there were no lights on up there, no movement showing through the dormer window Clint had a perfect vantage point on.

Toshiko was on another building, this one was facing the rear of the brothel. She’d told Clint that, while she probably wasn’t as good with a bow as he was – the Hawk did have a certain reputation for never missing, and it was completely true – she would be able to stop anyone coming out the back when needed.

Bobbi was stationed in the alley below Toshiko’s position and, while Clint couldn’t make him out due to the angle, Jack was seated in the rooming house’s tiny bar, nursing a beer and keeping his own lookout. Hunter was in another alley, doing a really good impression of being drunk off his ass
and busily getting people to underestimate him. With his Elven hearing, Clint could just make out the man’s raised voice as he was telling someone else off for doing something they hadn’t and for disrupting his solitary attempts at alcohol poisoning.

As he watched, Natasha made her way down the street, her hips swaying a little more exaggerated than how she usually moved. She was also going in without the anti-magical manacles she had; Hunter had those, ready to move forward in order to subdue Whitehall if he came out the front. The problem was, they only had one set, so their plan was predicated on both Whitehall coming out the front door and there being only one Wizard in attendance.

Clint really didn’t think they could get that lucky.

The plan was sound. It would work. If they could only get Whitehall to follow it without knowing he was doing it…

Clint kept his eyes on Natasha as she sashayed her way right up to the dark red front door of the brothel, knocked on it, and then be let in by a boy who looked no older than sixteen. Probably not one of the prostitutes himself; he was more likely just the kid who’d been assigned door duty that day. From experience, the archer knew that most of the support staff would be children, usually those born of the workers whose birth control had somehow failed.

Poor kid. Not exactly the best way to grow up.

Now, they just had to wait.

Nearly half an hour later, one of the hells decided to erupt within the brothel.

Fire began licking at one of the first floor windows. A piercing scream came from within the house, then a second as flame erupted from the second story. People began to stream out of the house, mostly young men and women in whatever they wore to attract the attention of visitors to the brothel…in other words, not much at all. They were followed by whatever support staff was on premises, mostly kids too young to service the clients in the way the adults did; for the most part, they were wearing rather fancy uniforms of dark green tunics and black trousers, both boys and girls dressed exactly the same.

Madame Aida was obvious by her rich brocade gown, also in shades of green and black, her dark hair piled upon her head in what would have been a rather nice chignon if not for the few strands that had come loose and were flying into her face, her eyes lined with kohl and making them look that much darker than they were.

She was also rather gorgeous. Back before meeting Phil, Clint might have been interested in a night with her.

There was no sign of Natasha, but the Elf wasn’t worried. His partner knew what she was doing, and could be trusted to carry out the plan to the letter…until she had to improvise.

Jack had left the bar and had approached Madame Aida, in the guise of a concerned citizen. Apparently, their concern over anyone recognizing him had been overblown, because Madame Aida began haranguing him, as if yelling would save her property any faster. The sirens signaling the coming of the fire brigade echoed up the street as Jack backed off, pretending to capitulate to whatever demands she’d made and drawing her attention away from Hunter, who’d been making his rather stealthy way toward the milling brothel workers on the sidewalk. If their suppositions had been sound, then Whitehall would be coming out the front, in order to hide among the crowd gathering outside the burning building.
And, right on cue, he did.

Clint recognized him easily. His arm was still in a sling from where the archer had put an arrow in it a couple of days ago, which meant he was at a little bit of a disadvantage if he had to defend himself physically. His dragon was with him, but it had launched itself into the air once it was past the now-burning threshold, screaming angrily as it gained height in the warming air.

The problem was, Whitehall wasn’t alone.

Raina was with him.

Clint cursed. He vividly recalled what that bitch had done to Phil, using whatever magic that had corrupted her voice into something that had easily put a very powerful Wizard under her control. Clint hadn’t seen it all, but he had the aftermath, and he had one of the enchanted arrows on his bow string before he could think of what he was doing.

He couldn’t allow her to say one single damned word to Hunter. It was going to be hard enough for him to get those manacles on Whitehall, even incapacitated as he was, but with Raina in the picture…

He’d switched out the magicked arrow for a regular broadhead, and it was in flight even as Hunter managed to get the first manacle cuff around Whitehall’s wrist, surprising the Wizard with his sudden presence.

Clint Barton never missed.

He’d been aiming for Raina’s heart.

She’d been one of the responsible parties who’d attempted to murder his lover. For that offence, Clint’s justice would always be at the end of a fletched shaft.

There was a sudden scream, and Raina’s dragon dropped down beside her body, dying as its Wizard died.

If Clint regretted anything, it was the death of that poor dragon. It had only been following its instincts when it had gone in search of its particular Wizard. That was a dragon’s nature. What Raina had done wasn’t on its soul.

Dragons were creatures of love. Of loyalty. Its only crime had been in choosing Raina in the first place.

Clint mourned that dragon more than he would its Wizard, because it was a victim of what Raina had done just as much as Phil had been.

The ruckus grabbed Whitehall’s attention from what Hunter was attempting to do. Jack managed to join the mercenary, and together they got Whitehall on his knees as the Wizard’s dragon moved in to attack the ones who were going after its Wizard. Clint knew he should take a shot, to put the dragon down before it could hurt someone in its rage at what was being done to the person it was bound to, but he couldn’t. Instead, he took another arrow from his quiver, and let it fly; as it arced through the sky, it broke apart to form a net that caught in the dragon’s wings and bore it to the ground, where it flapped against the steel mesh, trying to escape, its cries pitiful as it attempted to get to its Wizard.

Clint was down from his perch as Madame Aida began yelling at both Jack and Hunter, as they were hauling Whitehall to his feet, the manacles now around both wrists, the Wizard grimacing in pain at having his injured shoulder pulled back like that.
By the time he’d joined the chaos on the sidewalk, both Bobbi and Toshiko had left their places as well. Jack was shouting at Madame Aida, his charm replaced with hard-edged anger, and he was threatening her with her business being shut down as she screamed at him about murdering her clients and assaulting others…and oh, destroying her house in the process.

“That was surprisingly satisfying,” Natasha said as she sidled up to Clint.

He certainly did not jump at her sudden appearance.

“You just love to cause trouble,” he accused lightly.

She didn’t answer, but then she didn’t have to.

“It was you!” Madame Aida shrieked, the moment she caught sight of Natasha.

Natasha simply shrugged. “That’s what you get for harboring fugitives.”

That was about the time when the magistrates and the fire brigade showed up.

Clint watched as Jack took over, leaving a furious Whitehall with Hunter and Tosh. Bobbi had gone over to Raina’s corpse; she didn’t bother to check it, knowing immediately that she was dead because her dragon was dead as well. Her eyes met Clint’s, and she nodded once, acknowledging his shot and, even though she didn’t really know the reason behind it, she accepted that he’d done it for a reason.

They’d been amazing together. They’d just taken it too far. Him and Bobbi would always be better friends than lovers.

Natasha, who had heard the full story of what had happened in Hydra’s hideout, tucked her hand into the crook of his arm. “You did good.”

He really didn’t need her approval, but Clint was grateful for it, nonetheless. “None of us would’ve been able to stand up to her voice.” He didn’t even sound defensive, which was good for him.

She squeezed his arm in response. In support. She’d always had his back.

What was odd, was that killing used to not bother him. He’d killed a lot of people in his time as an assassin, and hadn’t needed anyone to tell him he’d done the right thing.

This time…

And he knew exactly why…it was that dragon lying across Raina’s dead body.

Raina had deserved it, after what she’d done to the man Clint loved.

That dragon hadn’t.

Fuck.

Clint felt sick.

He suddenly needed Lola to tell him it was alright what he’d done.

Natasha knew him so well. She moved to Jack, tugging him down in order to whisper in his ear. He nodded, giving Clint a sympathetic glance. “I’ve got this,” he said, just loud enough for Clint to hear. “Let’s get you home.”
Clint wanted to argue.

But he couldn’t.

“It’s fine,” Toshiko murmured. She’d snuck up on him, just as stealthy as Natasha had been, and this time the Elf admitted to himself that he did jump at her sudden presence. “Believe me when I say I know exactly how you feel.”

He did believe her. Toshiko was older than Clint himself was, and she’d seen Wizards in all their horribleness and all their glory. Had she had to do what he’d just done? Had she been as upset as he was at the death of that innocent dragon?

From the expression in her dark eyes, he knew the answer to that was yes.


Clint let his best friend pull him even closer, as she twisted the Teleport bracelet on her wrist, tugging them away and trusting the others to handle the mess they’d left behind.
Phil leaned in the doorway, looking at the little girl he’d brought home with him, asleep on the bed in the guest room, Lockjaw curled up beside her. Lola was laying across the foot of the bed, her blue eyes alert, watching over the pair of newly-found orphans in order to make certain they could rest. Her concern and determination to make the two children as safe as she could meshed well with what he was feeling, and he couldn’t help but smile.

Melinda had taken one look at the little girl resting her head on his shoulder and hadn’t said a thing, although Phil knew she would later on…mostly along the lines of teasing him about bringing home more strays. She’d instantly gone into mother hen mode, taking Crystal from him and commenting that she’d help with a bath, and would Phil please get into some of Daisy’s old things and find her something to wear?

He’d complied at once. There was no telling Melinda May ‘no’ when she was on a mission.

By the time the bath was done and both Crystal and Lockjaw were cleaned, and the little girl dressed – and what Phil had chosen was a little baggy on her, but then Daisy had been a little older when he’d adopted her, plus a little better fed – Andrew had whipped up food for both child and dragon, something easy for shrunken stomachs that wouldn’t make either of them ill. Then, Phil had tucked them both into bed, and they’d fallen asleep almost at once, as if they truly did understand that this was a good place, that no one would hurt them here.

“You keep bringing home strays,” came Melinda’s inevitable teasing.

The Void Wizard turned, shrugging. His Steward and friend had joined him at the open door, a soft smile on her usually inscrutable features.

“What can I say?” he said softly. “I have a soft spot for children.”

She didn’t say anything to that, because Melinda knew him all too well. “We’re going to need to get her a few things. She can’t keep wearing Daisy’s hand-me-downs forever. We’ll also need to redecorate a room for her. This guest room doesn’t fit a little girl aesthetic.”

“We can take her shopping in Triskelia Town as soon as she’s up to it.”

“She’s going to need a bit more help than Daisy had.”

“I know.” Both girls had been abandoned by their parents, but at least Daisy had been given a fighting chance with an orphanage, instead of being cast out to fend for herself. Yes, Daisy had ended up doing exactly that, but it had been her decision. Crystal hadn’t been given that freedom. “I know Andrew doesn’t really do this sort of thing anymore…” Andrew had made that plain when he’d asked about counseling Sir Steven. And it wasn’t like Phil could blame him; after all, he’d been cursed for over a decade.

“This is a little different. Crystal is going to be family.”

“As soon as we can get her parents to renounce their rights.” Phil had every intention of fighting for that little girl, the same way he’d fought for Daisy. At least in this case Crystal was Void, and not Cardinal. There had been quite a few Wizards on both sides who’d thought he wouldn’t be capable of raising a child who was technically his diametric opposite.
Phil had been more than happy to prove them wrong.

“Hey,” Daisy’s voice called out, making them both spin around as she came up with stairs toward them, Skye on her shoulder as usual. “Andrew told me I’d find you both up here, but not why…” she stopped in her tracks, her eyes narrowing. “Dad…what have you done?”

Melinda snorted as Phil put a hand to his chest in a, ‘who, me?’ gesture.

“She’s got your number, Phil.”

Melinda was right about that.

Daisy stepped forward, peering into the room. Lola chirped at her in greeting from her position as guard, and Phil breathed a sigh of relief at his daughter’s soft smile as she caught sight of Crystal sleeping. “So, does this mean I now have a little sister?”

“It does.”

“I’ve always wanted one, you know.”

Phil was aware of that. He’d just never considered adopting another child…up until that moment in the village, that was. There had been too many times he’d been convinced he’d ruin Daisy, which of course hadn’t been the case at all.

“Come on into my study, and I’ll explain.”

“And here I was thinking I’d have news for you. At least now I know why Ianto wanted me to come home. I take it he was a witness to your latest adoption?”

Phil was grateful to the Cardinal Wizard for sending her back. “He was. And of course he left me to tell you the details.”

“Sure he did, he’s not family.” Daisy nodded. “I have a feeling this is going to be interesting. Horrifying and interesting.”

She didn’t know the half of it, really. But she would.

Skye made her own inquisitive chirping sound, and flew to join Lola at watch on the bed. She settled down next to the larger dragon, and her presence had Lockjaw looking up drowsily, but when he noticed it was another dragon he laid back down and dropped back into sleep, trusting they would keep himself and his Wizard safe.

It was really adorable. Phil’s heart swelled from the sight until it was a rather painful lump in his chest. “Let’s leave them to sleep..”

Pulling the door most of the way closed, Phil led Daisy down the stairs toward his study. Melinda went down farther, and the Wizard didn’t doubt that she and Andrew would be talking logistics about having a child in the Keep once more. Crystal would need a lot of support as she settled in, and Phil liked to think the family he’d formed around him would do an excellent job of it.

There was still Clint to consider, and he was hoping his new lover would want to be a father beside him. He was already bonding with Daisy, certainly Crystal would be just as easy.

Once they were in the study, Daisy didn’t go to her usual chair by the fireplace; instead, she sat on the couch, where Phil joined her. He reached out and took her hand, his thumb stroking across the
back of one of her gauntlets, the metal warm against his skin.

Through the contact he could better get the feel of her magic. It didn’t bother him that the Deep Ways flowed through her, like some people did when faced with their opposite in Order. To him, this was just a part of her, as much as the Void was a part of him. If only more could see that, the world would be a better place, where children weren’t tossed out like trash because they weren’t what their parents wanted.

Daisy was so very powerful, and he was intensely proud of the fact that he’d raised her to be such a conscientious young woman, someone who would stand up for what she believed in. She had such a generous heart, and would always do the right thing no matter what that was. And her intelligence was just amazing, so encouraging her in her studies had come to be second nature to him.

He could only hope he’d do the same for Crystal. He’d certainly do his very best.

Sighing, Phil explained how he’d come to find Crystal and Lockjaw, abandoned and starving under that gazebo, rejected by her birth parents and left to die. When he was done, Daisy’s outrage was incandescent, the only thing keeping her seated was his hands holding hers. It made him even prouder of her for reacting that way, for obviously wanting to do something to those people who’d hurt an innocent child. But then, he hadn’t expected anything different. Just look at her group of friends.

Although, if it had been a few years earlier, her magic would have backlashed all over the place. Her control had improved so very much, and Phil knew the only real reason she wore those gauntlets anymore was because he made them for her. Oh, and she thought they looked fantastic on her.

“She’s never going back there,” Daisy vowed.

“Ianto and Stephen are going to find out who the bastards are and get them to sign away their parental rights,” he told her. “I thought it was more important to get her out of there.”

“Yep,” Daisy agreed. She gave him a warm smile. “You always manage to do the right thing.”

He was touched by her confidence in him. “Not always, sweetheart.”

“Maybe,” she capitulated, “but a majority of the time, sure.” She bounced a little in excitement. “I can’t wait to officially meet my new baby sister. I don’t understand why her parents got rid of her just because of her magic. They weren’t much if they’d do that to a kid.”

He completely agreed. But there were extenuating circumstances, ones he hadn’t shared yet. He was almost hesitant to do so, but she deserved to know the complete truth. “It might have also contributed to the situation that your Uncle Nick and I blew through there when we were younger and made quite a mess of things.”

“But that wasn’t the only reason.”

He should never forget that his child was almost frighteningly smart. “No, but it certainly didn’t help matters any.”

“You can’t blame yourself, Dad. Besides, if you take Crystal in because you feel guilty, it’ll only wreck your relationship later on.”

Oh, yes… he was so very proud of his elder daughter for pointing that out. He just had to hug her, which he did gladly.
Because, she was correct. If he adopted Crystal because of the guilt he would always feel about his past actions, it would taint what he would come to feel for her. It certainly wouldn’t become the all-abiding love he felt for Daisy, and that was unacceptable.

No, he had to dismiss that right now and accept Crystal into their family because he wanted to, not because it was his duty to do it. Then they could all get on with the healing part of their lives.

“Besides,” she went on, “you can’t tell me, with all the propaganda that’s been spread around by the Greats, that this probably wouldn’t have happened anyway.”

She had a point. With Mordo living nearby, that village had probably been steeped in anti-Void and Cardinal rhetoric for years.

“If you ask me,” Daisy snorted, “someone needs to go to that village and drop a major truth bomb on them.”

Phil blinked, as his daughter’s words struck him.

A truth bomb.

No.

A Truth Bomb.

It would be relatively simple to create, and would be easier to use than a bunch of individual Truth potions. All they’d need to do it get all the Wizards in one place…which they’d already planned to do anyway…

“Dad, you’ve got that look on your face that says you’re plotting something.”

He gave her a sly smile. “I just might be.” He stood. “You want to help me make a Truth Bomb?”
Chapter 39

Daisy adored watching her Dad work.

She loved it even more when he invited her to help.

She leaned against one of the work benches in his casting chamber, listening as he began explaining to her what he wanted to do, using his magic to tack one of the largest blackboards he owned onto one of the walls. She understood instantly what he’d hoped to achieve.

“We need to work out how big a potion this is going to be,” she said as he rummaged around the bench for a piece of chalk which she handed to him the moment she found one, in a box that her Dad put all his writing implements in. “Do we have any idea just how big the Quorum chamber is?”

With a satisfied sound, Dad took it and went to the blackboard, scribbling arcane equations onto it, his handwriting precise and clear. “We can make certain assumptions based on equally large rooms we’ve seen,” he proclaimed. “We also know that the Quorum was set up to hold five hundred bodies. If we take an average of size of the Wizard, and then the approximate dimensions of the chamber itself…”

Daisy was nodding as she worked through his equations. “We know that only Masters and Novices are allowed in the chamber during a Quorum…”

“That would put the youngest Wizard at fifteen.”

“Which implies a smaller body size.”

“We also need to make it so that it evaporates once the bomb goes off.”

Which made sense; it wouldn’t do for it to just puddle on the floor. “What could we use to make that happen?” she asked.

“Some sort of Dispersal spell…”

They continued batting ideas back and forth, Daisy getting more and more excited the more and more complete the equations became. Her Dad really was onto something, his mind making leaps that she only hoped she’d be able to accomplish one day.

Crystal had no idea what she would be gaining when she officially became Daisy’s little sister, if just for the learning experience alone.

The young Wizard had long ago given up the wish of somehow suddenly becoming a Void Wizard so that Dad could teach her exclusively. Honestly, he was about the only person he’d trade Mistress Pepper for…well, maybe Ianto would figure on that list, but that was a new development, since she’d only just met him. Dad had taught her so many things, spells and such that she could perform that didn’t depend on what magic she could use, and Daisy would forever love him for the patience he’d shown her when she’d slammed him with all sorts of questions, needing to know everything he could share with her.

The Truth Bomb, as he was calling it, was one such magic that they could work on together. Daisy wasn’t as good at potions as Jemma and Leo were, but she knew her way around the various
ingredients, and she was making a mental list of things that her Dad would need in making what he was planning.

“Do we have enough lemon extract for this?” she asked.

“We might need to raid the kitchens for lemons,” he answered, the chalk coming to a stop as he considered the question. “There might not be enough nettle, either. Can you check on that? If there isn’t, one of us is going to have to go out on the mountainside for some.”

“Andrew won’t be happy if we steal all his lemons,” she commented as she made her way over to the cabinet where her Dad kept most of his potion ingredients. It was a large wardrobe-like affair that, instead of holding bars for hanging clothes on, was arranged with shelves holding glass jars and bottles, with ranks of drawers along the bottom third.

“We’ll make it up to him.” He’d gone back to making notations on the blackboard, the chalk squeaking slightly as he wrote.

Her Dad kept the cabinet well-ordered, all of the ingredients clearly marked and in alphabetical order, so she found the jar of nettle easily. “We only have about two-thirds of a jar.”

“Then we’ll definitely need more.”

“I’ll be glad to go and get some.”

He turned and gave her one of his sweet smiles. “Thanks, sweetheart. I know you’ll get exactly what we’ll need.”

There was a burst of warmth in her chest, both at his confidence in her and his giving her the credit for aiding in making the actual potion.

He began rattling off other ingredients, and Daisy started pulling them from the cabinet, sitting them in neat rows on the nearest worktable. “We’re also going to need more cabas root,” she said as she pulled that from the drawer it had been stored in.

“That I have on hand, in the pantry.”

That had her laughing. “Does Andrew know you put magical roots in with his potatoes?”

There was another pause. “Only if you tell him.”

“He won’t hear it from me.”

Dad winked at her, then continued writing. “Check the storage closet for a container big enough to hold this volume of potion in? We’ll most likely need something the size of a wine jug.”

Daisy did as he asked. “Why not use a regular wine jug then?” She knew they had to have something like that in the kitchen; most of the wine Andrew used for cooking came in enormous jars that were often stored on the floor in the pantry. “I’m sure there’s an empty one we could use.”

“The glass is too thick, might be too hard to break, even with magic.”

Alright, that made sense. If wine jugs were that easily breakable, the wine in them would never get to its destination.

The storage closet was just as neatly arranged as the spell ingredients; her Dad could be so totally anal about that sort of thing. He kept all sorts of things in there…including several large containers.
that might just work. She grabbed a couple out, for him to approve or reject. He’d know what he needed better than she would.

“Dad?”

“What is it?” He sounded distracted, but if there was one thing Daisy knew, it was her Dad was very good at multitasking, so she didn’t feel at all guilty about bringing up what she was about to bring up.

“If we’re adopting Crystal, does this mean you won’t be taking on Wanda as a Novice?”

He was silent for a moment, and Daisy’s heart dropped a little. Yes, she wanted Crystal to stay with them – even though she had yet to meet the little girl officially, she’d always wanted a sister – but Wanda was so looking forward to becoming Dad’s Novice, especially now that it looked like Ianto was going to be petitioning to become Pietro’s teaching Master. She wanted the best for her new friend and, to her, the best was her Dad.

“No,” he finally answered, “that doesn’t mean that at all.”

Daisy stifled her sigh of relief.

“What it does mean,” he continued, “is that Ianto and Stephen have finally gotten their wish.”

The grin Daisy got as she realized what he was saying hit her. “You’re going to be staying on as Grand Master?” That was the best news ever.

Well, maybe not ever.

There was still Crystal. That was really the best news ever, gaining a sister Daisy could love and take care of and teach her all sorts of things that sisters did with each other.

“Well, that depends on if the Order wants me to keep me in the position. It’s up to them, really.”

“But what changed your mind?” He’d been so set on giving up the job once Hydra had been rooted out.

“To be honest,” he turned from his equations, in order to look at her with his full attention, “it was finding Crystal the way we did.”

Daisy was a little confused, and said so.

“There’s a lot of bad things being said about Voids,” he explained. “Cardinals, too, but I’ll leave that to Ianto to correct. But the pervasive idea that Voids are evil because they work with the Deathforce… that’s something that’s not only affected me personally, but now there’s an innocent child upstairs who was rejected by her family just because she was born Void. How many other children out there have gone through the same thing? And how many have died or been killed just because of the magic they have coursing through them? It has to stop, and I think I’m the one person in a position of power that has had to go through all that. I have personal experience, and a lot of people out there know about the Dark One and what he did. I can use that, to show ignorant Wizards and regular people both that these lies need to be buried before we get another rogue Wizard on our hands who might even be worse. And it’s all because it’s far too easy to dismiss Voids as being evil.”

Daisy had to hug him for that.
So she did.

He hugged her back, his magic tingling against her. It wasn’t at all unpleasant, and Daisy never really could understand how either Order could be offended or disgusted by their opposites, or the Greats so convinced they were better than anyone not of their own Order. It didn’t make any sense, and her Dad had the right idea.

He pulled away slightly, in order to meet her eyes. “You’re a part of that too, you know.”

“Me?” she asked, surprised.

“You and your friends. You don’t care what magic they have, as long as they’re good people. And each of them are the same. You’re an example to all of us, Daisy. Don’t ever think yourself otherwise.”

She found herself blushing a little. But her Dad was right in this, too. Daisy just didn’t care about her friends’ magic; she cared about them.

“So,” he said, “staying in the Grand Master’s position would give me the political power to change things.” He grimaced at that. “Gods, I never thought I’d actually want to play the politics game. I spent all my time as a Wizard avoiding it.”

“Not anymore,” Daisy grinned. “You’re gonna be neck deep in politics in no time at all if you continue with what you want to do.”

“Now, that just sounds terrible.” He made an ‘icky’ face.

Daisy cracked up. “Oh, please do that again in front of Uncle Nick. I want to see his reaction.”

“Not going to happen.”

Gods, she loved her Dad to bits.

“As for Wanda,” he said, picking up the thread of Daisy’s concern, “I’ll be speaking to her after all this Hydra nonsense is done. Even if Void Order decides it wants me out of the Grand Master position, I’ll still be her teaching Master. Besides, one other thing I’d like to do is find the other children from Buda-Pest and see how they’re doing.”

Daisy jiggled up and down on her toes in excitement. “She’s gonna be so thrilled! Ianto’s already going to be speak to Pietro tomorrow, so you might want to say something to her so she’s not left hanging.”

“Will,” he promised, “the next time I see her. Now, let’s get this potion started. You’ll need to go out and collect the nettles before it gets dark out.”

“Let me get the shears and some gloves, and I’ll head on out.” She knew just where the best nettles were, and would take her about half an hour to get there.

The items were in the storage room, and Daisy had just collected them when there was a sudden bright flash along with a rush of air, and two people appeared in the middle of the casting chamber.

She immediately recognized Clint, but it was Natasha that caught Daisy’s attention.

The Widow was dressed in a slinky green dress, and Daisy had to admit that the older woman was absolutely gorgeous. She wondered what had gone on to warrant that sort of outfit, and could Daisy
get one like it? Green wasn’t Daisy’s color, but maybe a nice purple? Daisy liked purple.

But as attractive as Natasha was, it was Clint’s appearance they really got her attention.

He was pale, his eyes dark and upset. He was leaning on his companion, and she seemed perfectly able to take the weight he was sharing. It looked as if he’d just done something horrible, and was feeling all the guilt in the world.

Dad had noticed it as well; he was striding forward to take Clint away from the Widow, who gladly relinquished the Elf into Dad’s arms. “What happened, Natasha?”

The last she’d known, Clint had been on the trail of Daniel Whitehall, along with Jack and Toshiko. They’d had a solid lead, and were following it up. However, something had to have gone wrong for Clint to look the way he did.

She didn’t know him that well yet, but even Daisy could tell this wasn’t normal for her Dad’s boyfriend.

Ew.

There was something vaguely weird about her Dad having a boyfriend. For one thing, he was too old for that term to fit into Daisy’s brain easily. She’d have to think of something else to call him.

“Fetch a chair,” her Dad ordered.

Daisy hastened to obey, dragging the chair from the desk over and sitting it right behind Clint. Her Dad lowered him carefully into the seat, and then he knelt in front of the Elf, the better to look him right in the eye. Then his gaze darted to Natasha. “What happened?” he asked again, his voice sharp.

Natasha didn’t seem to take offense by his tone. “We found Whitehall…and Raina was with him. We hadn’t been prepared for her, so Clint killed her.”

Daisy wasn’t upset about that; she’d heard about what Raina had done to her Dad, that had led to him practically being murdered by Hydra. Hells, she would have killed Raina herself if she’d been there.

“It wasn’t Raina so much that’s bothering him,” Natasha clarified. “It was when her dragon died with her.”

Daisy got it. Apparently so did her Dad, who reached out for Clint’s hands, holding them in his.

Elves and dragons had a special relationship, even the Elves who weren’t Wizards. Every Elf Daisy had ever met – and it hadn’t been that many, to be fair – adored dragons, and dragons adored them as well. She could vividly recall the first time Trip’s dragon, Knight, had met Jemma and Leo. It had been a mess of epic proportions, with Leo getting jealous over the attention that was being paid to Jemma, despite it not being Trip paying the attention and despite Knight adoring Leo as well. The three of them had straightened things out, and had come out better friends for it, but dragons just couldn’t help themselves when it came to Elves.

Elves were the same around dragons.

So, for Clint to have caused the death of a dragon, even though it had been unintentional, had to have been hitting him really hard.
Dad’s eyes unfocused for a second. “Lola’s on the way down.”

“I’ll let her in,” Natasha volunteered. She squeezed Clint’s shoulder then withdrew, heading toward the stairs leading up into the Keep.

“Should I summon Skye too?” she murmured, wanting nothing more than to help her Dad’s friend. Having a dragon be around him would do that, and perhaps two would be better than one.

“No, she can stay with Crystal and watch out of her and Lockjaw for the time being. I don’t want them left alone.”

Daisy could understand why he’d not want Crystal to be alone. Waking up in a strange place would be disorienting, and even though Skye was a strange dragon it would still be a comfort to either Crystal or Lockjaw if they weren’t by themselves.

Whatever Dad had told Lola through their link must have been serious, because his dragon never came into the casting chamber voluntarily while Dad was working with potions. Dad had claimed it was because she hated the way he smelled afterward, which did make sense. Some of the ingredients for his potions had very strong scents, and there were times when even Daisy didn’t like it all that much. She can only imagine what Dad smelled like to a dragon, who had a more sensitive nose.

Plus, she’d been taking her protective duties toward their two new family members very seriously. For her to leave it would have been too important to ignore Dad’s summons.

She suspected all Dad had to do was mention it was Clint and that would have Lola moving.

There was a flutter of wings, and Lola appeared, flying across the room toward Clint and Dad, letting out a mournful cry as she landed next to the chair. As if knowing exactly what was needed, she laid her head on Clint’s knee, crooning to him sadly, and Daisy’s heart went out to the dragon who was so obviously distressed by her friend’s condition.

Natasha joined Daisy, standing next to her as Dad quietly spoke quietly to Clint, he didn’t seem to be paying attention; his eyes were on Lola, and there were tears in them that made Daisy want to cry, as well.

“Oh, beautiful,” Clint whispered brokenly, “I’m so sorry.”

He took one of his hands from her Dad’s grasp, resting it on Lola’s head. That hand was shaking slightly, but Lola bucked up into his touch, her tongue poking out to lick his fingers.

“She doesn’t blame you,” Daisy’s Dad said. “You did what you had to do. If Raina had managed to get anyone else under her control, it could have been so much worse.”

“Dragons, though,” Clint sighed. “Phil, dragons aren’t vicious or mean-spirited; they love their Wizards no matter how bad things are. That dragon was innocent of what Raina had done.”

“We don’t know that,” Dad denied. “Dragons are so much more than just companions. They choose their Wizards, in a way no one really understands. You remember how I was and you watched Lola follow me into fire and death and destruction. She hurt people, just like I did. She did it of her own free will. And she feels just as guilty about it as I do. But, Clint…Raina wasn’t like me. There was a good person under the Dark One. Raina wasn’t like that, and her dragon was her equal.”

Clint let out a shuddering sigh. “Dragons love their Wizards so much…they’d do anything they
were asked to.”

With that, Dad barked a laugh. “You have no idea how many times Lola’s told me off for something I’ve done that she doesn’t agree with. Once, she was so angry at me she set my bed on fire! Luckily for me, I wasn’t in it, but I certainly got the message loud and clear. Dragons aren’t mindless creatures. They might choose us, but they don’t follow blindly. Each and every dragon out there has opinions and desires and none of their Wizards can get away with shit when their dragon puts their foot down.”

As she watched, Daisy could tell that Dad’s words were being understood. Clint wasn’t as pale as he’d been, and he was actively scratching Lola around her crest. “I just…feel so bad about taking that dragon’s life like it did.”

“And that does you credit. But we both know none of the others were prepared for Raina. You did the right thing.”

“It’s still hard.”

“Of course it is. And you wouldn’t be you if you brushed this off like it didn’t matter.”

Clint glanced down at Lola. “I really am sorry, gorgeous. That dragon was one of yours, and I’d forgotten that when the Wizard dies, so does the dragon. I never would have even considered hurting another dragon if I could have avoided it.”

Lola chirped at him and then, pushing Dad aside, crawled up into Clint’s lap even though she was a bit too big to fit. She cuddled him fiercely, obviously accepting his apology.

“I knew bringing him here would help,” Natasha said approvingly. “He did do the right thing, but I know how he is about dragons. The moment I knew what had happened I knew I had to get him somewhere he thought of as safe, and to another dragon who wouldn’t judge him for what he’d had to do.”

“Lola would never condemn him for doing the right thing,” Dad said, standing. “Elves and dragons have an affinity, so I get why it was hard for him to realize that he’d not only taken down Raina, but her dragon as well.”

‘Raina deserved it after what she’d done to you,” Clint spoke up. Lola had relaxed against him, her head drooping over his shoulder and his arms around her body just under her wings. His eyes were fierce. “And her power was just insane. I can really get why she went bad, if she could control you with her power.”

“I don’t think – “ Dad began.

“Bullshit. You’re the strongest Void Wizard there is. For her to be able to convince you to stop fighting long enough for Hydra to get that cursed Vibranium chain around your neck…no one would have been able to stand up against her. She could have done anything she wanted and no one would have been able to stop her.”

Daisy was nodding in agreement. “He’s right, Dad. Just the very idea that there was someone out there who could twist your will to hers…that’s scary.”

If they’d been prepared for her, Daisy could see them taking Raina into custody. But this was the woman who was responsible for distracting her Dad long enough to nearly kill him, and to be honest Daisy felt she would have done the same thing Clint had. She’d never killed anyone before, but Raina would have been on the top of her list.
Plus, she’d been Hydra, who’d been set on turning her Dad to their cause, thinking he was another version of the Deathless. They’d kidnapped Daisy in order to convince him to work with them. Hells, Garrett had believed that Dad had been raising her as some sort of power play, to brainwash her into taking power in the Quorum and that way the Dark One would have had at least the Cardinals under his thumb. It was ridiculous, but then Garrett had been crazy. And he’d only known of the Dark One’s reputation, which was a total opposite of who her Dad actually was.

Garrett really hadn’t had a chance. Not with her Dad. Hydra really hadn’t had much choice but to kidnap her.

The Elf really was looking more like himself now, which was good. Daisy knew he’d probably feel guilty for a while, but that just showed what a good person at heart Clint Barton was.

And the way he was looking at her Dad, in that moment…

“Who’s Crystal and Lockjaw?” was what he asked.
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

This chapter is just a little bit of filler, but it sets up more to come. :)

When Sir Steven and Dr. Wilson returned to the castle, the time-displaced Paladin looked just a little bit less haunted than before they’d left.

Pepper thought this was a very good thing indeed.

She’d known they wouldn’t be able to keep him isolated. That was exactly the wrong thing to do, but she’d needed someone else to make that determination, someone with the experience to see it and recognize it for what it was. She was just fine with that because, while she knew her strengths, counseling in that form wasn’t one of them. No matter that Tony claimed she was perfect and good at everything.

She wasn’t.

Tony was totally biased.

And she loved him for it.

When the packages from town had started arriving, Pepper had been glad that Dr. Wilson was following her instructions about getting Sir Steven everything he’d need. She was aware that the Paladin would want to pay them back at some point, but that could wait until he was settled. It wasn’t as if Tony or Jarvis would notice the sudden expenditures…well, Jarvis would, because he kept the household accounts. Tony, however, was pretty well blind to the day-to-day running of the Barony and the castle, which was just the way he wanted it.

The money that Sir Steven was spending was but a mere drip into the rain barrel for the Stark household. The only reason she would ever agree with him to pay it back was because he wouldn’t have accepted it otherwise. She and Tony were determined to help in whatever way they could, and if Pepper hadn’t volunteered the letter of credit then Tony would have just flung however many gold coins he could hold in two hands at Sir Steven and walked away.

Honestly, she loved Tony to bits but he had no interpersonal skills whatsoever, and Pepper would have had to clean up the mess.

She had warned Jarvis that he would be receiving bills from town, and he’d taken the news with equanimity, as if he’d been expecting that very thing to happen. Maybe he had, knowing his employers so well. He was very much aware of their generosity and would have been prepared for anything in the way of aid to their guest.

Pepper wasn’t about to admit that she’d been hovering in the hallway, waiting for them to get back. Doctor Wilson didn’t look fooled, though, which had Pepper smiling at his insight. “How was your day?” she inquired politely.
Sir Steven gave her a brilliant smile that was only slightly tinged with bemusement. “The town is quite lovely…although a little larger than what I’m used to.”

She wanted to ask if he’d been overwhelmed at any time, but she stayed silent. If that had occurred then they wouldn’t have been gone as long as they had. Pepper felt like she could trust Dr. Wilson with Sir Steven’s health and sanity; there was just something about the man that screamed ‘trustworthy’ and she was inclined to listen.

“You’re both just in time for dinner,” she said. “Of course, you’re welcome to stay, Dr. Wilson.”

“It’s Sam,” he said, “and if it’s not an imposition – “

“Not at all. Although, it means you might have to deal with Tony.” She laughed, to let him know she was simply poking a little at her husband, but at the same time she was completely serious. Tony could be a handful, and with a new person in the house…perhaps Bruce could distract him a little. “Or he might not even show up, if he’s in the throes of invention.”

Doctor Wilson – Sam – gave her an understanding smile. “Geniuses often get a bad reputation for being forgetful or rude, when it’s simply the fact that they have so many ideas in their heads that what they consider as inconsequential are often disregarded. Like eating. And birthing days.”

It was nice to meet someone who understood what she’d discovered by trial and error. “Jarvis and Ana have already made enough for all, so of course it’s not an imposition.”

“Well, then, I’ll be glad to stay.”

“We also have a room ready for you if you choose to stay the night.”

Sam shook his head, grinning. “Now, that is an imposition. Besides, I didn’t bring anything with me to change into.”

“I’m certain we can find something,” Sir Steven cut in. “After all, something was found for me…before our shopping trip, of course.”

“Only if Sam wants to.” She turned back to the half-Elf. “You’d be welcome, but I would certainly understand you preferring to stay in town.”

“Actually,” Sam said, “I live in the Falcon Enclave.”

“Oh that’s right…Andrew did say something about that,” Pepper recalled. The Falcon Enclave was the closest Elven Enclave to Ferrous, about an hours’ ride from town.

“Would it be possible to visit the enclave?” Sir Steven asked, curiosity lighting his eyes.

“I don’t see why not,” Sam mused. “I’ll have to arrange it, but my mother would welcome your visit. Why don’t we plan on that for tomorrow?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Pepper wanted to beam at both of them. They were getting along so well, it was just what the Paladin needed, after finding himself in a different time.

“If we’re going to do that, then I should be heading out right after dinner.” Sam turned to Pepper. “Allow me to say that it’s been a real pleasure to meet you, Mistress Pepper.”

“If I’m calling you Sam, then you should call me Pepper.”
He gave her a winning smile. “Pepper it is.” He gallantly took her hand and kissed the back.

Pepper, because she was married to Tony Stark, overdramatically put her free hand over her heart and pretended to swoon.

Sir Steven laughed heartily at that, and Sam winked at her. “You are trouble. We are going to get along famously.”

“I do hope so.” She thought they could become quite good friends. She’d have to thank Andrew personally for sending this silly man along to them.

She showed them both where they could freshen up before dinner, herself very curious about the enclave. She’d only been out there once, and wondered if she could somehow invite herself along tomorrow. She’d need to check her schedule and see if she was free, although she very much doubted it. She’d been disregarding her duties to her students, and she’d need to at least work on lessons. She wondered about Daisy, and if she would be available for any sort of tutorials she could arrange. What with the distraction of Hydra and of her father becoming Grand Master, Pepper’s Novice was bound not to have had her mind on studying.

She needed to get back with Phil, to find out if he’d given any more thought to Wanda Maximoff as a Novice. Probably not, as she was quite certain he was busy with trying to figure out how to kick Hydra out of the Wizard’s Guild.

Pepper really needed to check in with everyone. Being back at the Barony and not at Gateway meant she was out of the loop of all the news. So she might need to put off going anywhere tomorrow.

Sir Steven came out of the facilities, a definite spring in his step. She gave him a smile. “All of your new purchases were sent up to your room.”

“I’ll pay you back for everything.”

Yes, she had been expecting that. “Whenever you can. We can work out something once you know what you’ll be doing after you get settled.”

He gave her a sunny smile. “I suspect you were already thinking I’d say something along those lines.”

“I was, yes.”

“Thank you for not saying I could just forget about it.”

“I wouldn’t do that. I understand morals and scruples, and you wouldn’t have wanted to accept charity even though Tony and I would never really miss the small amount of money you’ve spent so far.”

He nodded, gratified. “Let me go upstairs and get some things put away before dinner. If you can point Sam in the right direction when he comes out…?”

“I will. It should be ready at half past. The dining room is through there.” She pointed down the hall past the stairs. “Second door on the left.”

“We’ll be on time.” He turned toward the stairs, but then hesitated for a moment. “I did want to thank you for everything, Mistress Pepper – “
“Pepper, please.”

“Pepper. Then it’s Steve.”

If she had to admit it, he really was more of a Steve than a Sir Steven. History, after all, had a tendency to puff things up, and the Paladin of the Western Lands was a hero of every story dating from the Century War.

She was much more interested in getting to know Steve.

“Steve, you don’t have to thank us. We just want to help.”

“Well, thank you anyway. I’ll see you at dinner.” He gave her a small, old-fashioned bow and withdrew upstairs, carrying what bags he hadn’t had sent to the castle up with him.

Pepper smiled to herself. Everything looked to be working out with Steve. Hopefully, his assimilation into this time would go as smoothly as it looked to be so far.
Chapter 41

It was past middlenight, and Clint was awakened out of a sound sleep by something poking at him. It wasn’t Phil; his lover was wrapped around Clint, his nose against that soft spot behind one of the Elf’s pointed ears, his breath warm against the sensitive skin there. His arm was heavy and protective where it lay draped across his stomach; Clint could still smell the faint odor of lemon and cabas root despite the bath he’d taken before bed…which had been late, considering the potion-making marathon that Phil and Daisy has gotten into after things had calmed down. Apparently they’d come up with a plan to discover who was Hydra in the Quorum, and it involved lots of complicated math and a glass jar the size of a small child.

Oh and there was also a small child involved now. Named Crystal. Who’d been kicked out of her folks’ home because she was a Void Wizard.

Honestly, Clint had thought his parents had been bad.

Well, his father and brother. His mother simply had been too weak to fight back.

Anyway, he and Phil were going to be talking about that in the morning, when he finally got a chance to meet this kid that Phil was going to adopt, and her dragon.

So, they’d gotten to bed very late, and now he was being poked awake by something, and he didn’t want to open his eyes to see what it was.

He did it anyway.

Just in front of his face was Lola’s snout, her blue eyes smiling at him. She was looking quite pleased with herself, if Clint was reading her expression correctly.

He wanted to groan aloud, but didn’t want to wake Phil, not after the magic he’d been working while mixing that monster potion. Sure, he was powerful and that had barely tapped the reservoir of his magic, but he needed the rest anyway, just from what magic he had used and then staying up past their usual bedtime in order to work that magic.

Gods, Clint was getting old if he was now accepting the fact that he now had a regular bedtime.

Lola made a near-silent coo, tugging again at the hand that he’d unconsciously rested over Phil’s. For a single heartbeat, Clint thought she’d gotten a little lost in the near-dark of the room and had grabbed his hand by mistake instead of her Wizard’s, but she probably had better night vision than the archer himself did…which was saying something, really.

Her wings mantling, Lola pulled back a little, almost managing to drag Clint out of bed. He bit back a curse, hoping that her antics wouldn’t wake up Phil, shaking off her clawed hand as best he could and not get scratched.

“I’m coming,” he muttered, carefully maneuvering himself out from under Phil’s arm, not wanting to jostle him too much. His lover made a half-strangled moan of disappointment and grabbed for Clint’s pillow, snuggling up to it and then falling silent once more.

He never would have guessed that the former Dark One was such a cuddler. It really was nice,
especially when Clint got to actually stay in bed and be cuddled.

Lola was looking at him expectantly, so Clint got a move on. There couldn’t be anything wrong, or else the dragon would have alerted the Wizard in the family first. No, the Elf got the feeling this was something personal to him, and he had to admit he was really curious about it despite wanting nothing more than to crawl back under the covers.

And so, Clint followed the dragon, who had a very definite destination in mind…one that involved putting his boots on, if the fact that she nosed them over to him was any indication – sneezing once, and no, his feet didn’t stink, thank you very much – so he slid them on, including a shirt and trousers because if he was going to be walking around the Keep he wasn’t going to flash anyone. After all, there were kids and Melinda May in residence and didn’t want to expose himself by accident.

He wasn’t too worried about Andrew; he was a man, after all, and had to have been familiar with any kind of horror that being a naked man tiptoeing about could cause the unsuspecting. Andrew also wouldn’t beat him up like Melinda would, if he dared offend her sensibilities like that.

Once they were out of the master suite, Lola began making impatient noises and she jumped down the middle of the stairwell, letting her wings coast her down to the ground.

“Cheater,” Clint accused softly, and took the stairs down by foot, wishing he had access to Phil’s Levitation spell. Maybe he’d ask for some sort of enchanted artifact so he could float down as well, because it would be as close to flying as he would ever get.

The dragon led him through the kitchens and out the rear door. There was a mist across the valley below, making the trees look ghostly in the nearly full moon. Clint shivered a little, glad he’d gotten dressed; it wasn’t because of the cold, there was a strange power in the air, as if the world was waiting for something to happen.

There was a path down from the kitchen door, a beaten one that had been formed by countless feet coming and going from the Keep on whatever errands that took the residents out into the valley. As he accompanied Lola down the path, he could make out a small garden off to the side, with what appeared to be herbs growing in it. Another garden was of flowers, but it was wildly overgrown, with a beauty that had Clint wishing he could stop and simply enjoy the colors under the moonlight.

Lola wouldn’t let him stop, though. She kept checking over her wings to see if he was still with her as she led the way down the mountain, taking the path herself instead of flying. It was quiet, not even the insects were making their usual nightly noises, the wind ruffling the leaves was the only sound he could hear.

Clint had no idea how long he followed behind Lola, her red and filigreed black scales glittering under the moon. He trusted her to get him wherever they were heading toward safely; there was a small part of him that wondered if this was somehow her version of revenge for what had happened to Raina’s dragon, but she’d shown no inclination to that sort of thing, and Phil hadn’t sensed it either. So, no…it wasn’t anything like that.

He really wished he could sense dragons like Wizards did. He’d always loved dragons. Back during his traveling show days, there hadn’t been any in the actual show, but when they’d come with their attendant Wizards they’d had to put up warning signs stating that there was an Elf in the show and to make certain they kept their dragons under control, for their own safety. After all, it wouldn’t do for one to try to approach him during his act, and the last thing Clint had wanted was for an innocent dragon accidentally flying in front of one of his arrows and getting hurt…or, worse, killed.

But, afterward…he’d always get claimed by at least one dragon who’d find him no matter where he
was. And Clint had loved it, had loved how they’d let him love on them in a time when love was something he’d had so little of in his life. It was why he adored them so much now, and why killing one had hurt him so badly.

However, Phil had had a point. Dragons weren’t the slaves of their Wizards. They still had free will, despite the link that was forged between them on their first meeting. He’d recalled times when Lola had literally told Phil off when they’d been running missions together, even though none of them could understand her chattering the intent behind the noises had been clear. He hadn’t really recalled that until Phil had reminded him.

Raina hadn’t forced her dragon to follow her. It had done that of its own free will. Dragons chose their Wizards, after all. It would have known what lurked in her very soul.

It made him feel a little better, but he’d deal with the guilt that was left in his own time.

Lola passed into the mist line, and Clint went with her. The air was clammy against his skin, but at least the layer of cloud wasn’t too wide; five steps and he was through, almost as if he’d walked through some sort of magical barrier, although it hadn’t tingled like magic did, even with his limited sense of such stuff he would have known.

The path had opened up onto a clearing, the moon shining down into the center of the area. If he’d thought it had been quiet before, there was now a complete hush, and if it wasn’t for the faint sound of his boots crushing the grass Clint would have thought he’d been struck deaf.

In the exact center of the clearing was a dragon.

It was the largest dragon Clint had ever seen. It towered over the Elf, red and orange scales shifting like flame, the enormous head resting on muscled forearms as water-grey eyes regarded Clint closely, as if looking into his very soul.

_You are the mate of the newest Void Chosen._

Clint started. The voice was female, kind, and was in his head. There was only one place it could be coming from.

“You can speak?” he asked, shocked beyond measure. Dragons couldn’t speak, like this, in fully formed words and with someone who wasn’t a Wizard. Wizards themselves only received emotion and intent through their bonds with their dragons, feelings which were easily read and understood. This was very different, but it wasn’t unpleasant.

He stepped forward, meeting this new dragon’s eyes squarely. “If you mean Phil Coulson, I suppose I am.”

She looked very pleased. _This is good. He will need someone with your strength of heart to stand by him._

“I won’t leave him.” He didn’t add that, when it was time for him to finally pass on, that he had contingency plans so that Phil wouldn’t ever be alone.

_Our daughter has accepted you as family as well._

Lola chirped an affirmative, sitting tall on her haunches, her wings tucked close to her back.

Wait…daughter?
That would mean…

“You’re the Queen of Air and Fire!” he squeaked.

It was common knowledge that every single dragon ever born came from the One Mother, the Queen of Air and Fire. She’d once lived on the island kingdom of Genosha, where she would send her children out into the world to the Wizards that they’d chosen, through portals that would get them there in the blink of an eye.

When Genosha had put itself behind its magical barrier, because someone had foreseen the Wizard War that would destroy the world – and that had actually been stopped by Master John Smith, when he’d cast the spell that had cut magic off from the world – the Queen had fallen into a living sleep, where no more dragons were born except for the Wizards who’d still inhabited Genosha. Even those Wizards had begun to fail, and it had taken magic coming back to awaken the Mother and for her to bring dragons back to the newly emerging Wizards.

Now, while the Queen chose to still live within the dragon caves on Genosha, rumors told of her being able to travel between the nests that were now cropping up all over, sowing them with her seed and bringing back the glory of the dragons. While Clint had never seen one of these new nests, he’d heard tell of them, and had hoped to one day find one.

She was laughing in his head. Did you just squeak?

“Um…maybe?”

She was vastly amused by him, Clint could tell. Mortals have named me thus. I prefer to be called Idris.

“Well, I can do that.” This was just unbelievably surreal. There he was, a non-magical person, having a conversation with the Queen of Air and Fire. And she was inviting him to call her Idris.

Clint pinched himself, convinced he was dreaming.

All that did was make a sore spot on his forearm.

“May I ask why you’re talking to me? I’m not a Wizard.”

No, and that is a great shame. You would make an excellent Wizard.

“Thanks.” Clint himself wasn’t so sure about that, but he wasn’t about to argue about it. It also didn’t stop him from blushing at the compliment paid him by a creature who, rumor had it, had been alive since the beginning of time.

You are welcome. However, you also have asked why I am here. Perhaps you are not aware that I have a connection to all of my children.

No, he hadn’t known that, and admitted as such.

It is usually a passive connection, as any mother has with her children; however, it will also allow any one of my children to speak to me directly on certain matters. My daughter has told me of your actions, and how it bothered you that you inadvertently killed a dragon in the course of your duties to your fellows.

Oh, of course… he was being called on the proverbial carpet for what he’d done to Raina’s dragon. “I’ll accept whatever punishment you want to impose.”
Lola might have forgiven him and accepted his actions as necessary, but this was the One Mother. And Clint had murdered one of her children. She had every right to be upset with him about it.

His dragon companion made a very disparaging sound, like she’d just blown a raspberry at him.

The Queen of Air and Fire laughed at her. Peace, daughter. He knows, but he does not comprehend. He also does not understand that I have seen his future, and what comes of that future.

“Wait,” Clint waved a hand in her direction. “You saw my future?” What the hells was she even talking about?

I did. I was born within the fires of creation, even before the Gods of this world had been birthed out of the eternal chaos. As such, I have a rather tenuous connection to every time there has been, is, or will be. Unfortunately, my gift is but transitory, usually extending to which of my children will fit each newly born Wizard. However, there are times when prophecy comes upon me, and I am allowed to see the destinies of certain people. I foresaw the coming of the Deathless, and of his mate, the Cardinal Champion. I was the one who had Myfanwy await for the Champion in the depths of a broken tower, knowing that he would be there and that she would bond with him from the moment their eyes met.

Clint couldn’t help but be charmed by her. Idris’ voice was calm, and ancient, and yet there was a tinge of humor within it that wasn’t mocking, but simply seemed to be happy with the world around her, as if everything was as it should have been. It made him want to wrap his arms around her neck and hug her, but he really didn’t dare so that.

I choose each and every dragon to fit the Wizard that I perceive. That perception goes soul-deep, so that I know exactly what each Wizard shall need and what dragon would best suit, although the dragon does have the final say in whether they will accept the Wizard, or no. On the whole, they trust their Mother to be correct about such things, and will agree with my decision. Sometimes, however, they do not, and I always respect that choice.

When Lola was chosen for the Void Champion, I knew that he would suffer great darkness before the light would shine upon him once more. Lola was exactly what was needed; to support him at his darkest, and to love him in the light.

She glanced toward the aforementioned dragon, who straightened even more, her normal chatter sounding proud.

The Queen said something back, and while Clint couldn’t understand exactly what that was, he could see that Lola was affected by it; she looked pleased, and gratified, without losing that pride that she was wearing like a royal robe. The Elf figured that Idris had let her know what a good job she’d done with Phil. It was so very true, Lola and Phil were well-matched. There was certainly something in what the Queen was saying, in that she’d known the perfect companion for Clint’s lover even before he’d stuffed all his humanity down deep inside and had taken on the mantel of the Dark One. And that he’d changed so irrevocably into the good man he was now.

When I chose the dragon for the child, Raina, I understood that her path would be a difficult one. Not that I knew exactly what sort of trouble she would cause, I could not see exact events, but I did understand that she would be a black soul, and chose her dragon accordingly, and who willingly accepted Raina as his charge. When you meted out justice upon Raina for what she’d helped do to your mate, and killed her dragon in the process, you were merely fulfilling the destiny that the universe set for them. This was not your fault, although your mourning does you credit. I thank you for that, Clinton Barton. You are truly a good soul.
This new compliment had Clint blushing harder than before; even his ears felt warm. He’d done a lot of bad things in the past; while not on the same par as the Dark One and Marcus Johnson, he’d been an assassin for hire, up until he and Natasha had gone as straight as they could and still make a living. He’d never really ever consider himself good, although he was willing to try his very best for Phil and Daisy and now Crystal, although he wouldn’t meet her into the morning.

And that is the essence of a good soul...willing to try despite what one thinks of themselves, out of love or loyalty or the need to see that someone is happy.

“Well,” he shrugged, “when you put it that way…”

He still wasn’t sure that was all there was to it, but he’d let it slide. It wouldn’t do to argue with someone as old and powerful as the Queen of Air and Fire.

It truly is a shame you are not a Wizard. I would have the perfect dragon for you.

She raised a wing, and a glowing portal opened underneath. Stepping through the portal was a golden dragon, about the size of a retrieving dog, bouncing into the clearing as if it was the best thing it had ever done. Brown eyes whirled in laughter as it – he, Clint was certain – caught sight of the Elf standing there, busily being amazed at actually witnessing that whole portal thing and the fact that a dragon was now bounding over to him, throwing himself onto the archer and knocking him to the ground. A rough tongue began licking Clint’s face, dragon drool getting his hair wet.

Clint couldn’t help but laugh in helpless enjoyment. Just this greeting helped lift his spirits even more than Lola had; if this dragon was greeting him so effusively, then he thought everything was going to be alright.

At first, he was too busy wrestling with the new dragon to notice the faint glow of something in the back of his mind. He thought he was just feeling all the pleasure of meeting this new dragon, who was obviously so very glad to see him. Clint was convinced it was just another case of a dragon being attracted to his Elven-ness, and didn’t think anything of it.

But then, suddenly, something bloomed within his mind. A bright, happy presence that loved him despite not knowing him…or maybe it did know him, and accepted him despite all of his faults. It was like having all these glorious emotions dropped straight into his brain, and with a start that had Clint pulling away from the dragon who was bound and determined to lick every bit of visible skin, he realized what this must be.

It was impossible.

It should have been impossible.

Clint wasn’t a Wizard. He hadn’t a single magical bone in his body. And yet, this dragon had just bonded to him, and was his and his alone.

It was like getting every single Naming Day gift he’d never received as a child.

Clint struggled to sit up. The dragon wasn’t happy about it, but he allowed the Elf to shift him enough to push himself into a seated position on the cold, wet ground. His eyes met those of the Queen of Air and Fire – of Idris – and he knew that confusion and joy and all sorts of other emotions he couldn’t name were showing in them for her to see.

“How?” he gasped.

The Elves have always shared a link to nature. And, if you had been a human, it would not have
been possible. However, as he is my child and you are special for your love of the Void Champion, I was able to… tweak things just enough to allow the bond. He is your companion, Clinton Barton…and you are his. This bond will last until the end of all things. Are you willing to accept him?

How could he not?

Clint had always wished for more than just the adoration of every dragon who ever saw him. He’d dreamed of this sort of connection, and had envied Phil his closeness with Lola, who had loved the Elf unreservedly almost from the moment they’d met. He’d been perfectly willing to accept whatever he could get, and been just fine with it.

He couldn’t help but shake his head in wonder. “I just…I can’t thank you enough.”

Thank me by protecting dragons when you can, and mourn them when you cannot. And love my child as you love Lola.

She rose onto her haunches, which made her all the more imposing. Now it is time to name him.

Clint stared right into the happy brown eyes of his dragon, and it came to him in a burst of certainty that was stronger than any he’d ever felt.

“His name is Lucky.”

And he could tell that his dragon approved.
Ianto suspiciously eyed the enormous clear glass jug that Phil was carrying in both arms. It was filled with a slightly glowing blue liquid, the stopper sealed with thick white wax.

“What is that?” he demanded, even as he was motioning his fellow Wizard into the dining room, so he could put the heavy jug down. It hit the table with a solid thud, the liquid sloshing about gently.

“That,” the Void Grand Master indicated the jug, managing to look undeniably smug even as he was stretching out his back after having carried the thing up from Ianto’s casting chamber where’d he teleported in, “is a Truth Bomb.”

Ianto’s mouth fell open. He didn’t have to look at Stephen, who’d been there for about half an hour already, to know the Great Wizard was just as surprised by that answer. “And what do you intend on doing with this ‘Truth Bomb’?”

“I intend to have all the Wizards to Quorum, seal all the doors and other ways for air to get in and out, and then break the jar and ask just who in the chamber is Hydra.” The smugness changed into pure mischievousness. It was a good look on his normally serious friend.

Ianto’s mouth fell open further, but this time because… “That is bloody brilliant.”

Stephen chuckled. “It certainly solves a lot of your problems.”

“I can’t take all the credit,” Phil admitted proudly. “Daisy made the mention in a different context; I just ran with the idea. She also helped me with the equations and the brainstorming, as well as climbing the mountain at nearly dusk for enough nettles for the actual mixing. Oh, and she played distraction while I removed every single lemon in Andrew’s pantry.”

“Yet another reason to regret the decision not to take Daisy on as a Novice,” Ianto sighed. The more he heard about the rather remarkable young woman, the more he did wish he’d decided to take her on. Pepper was indeed very lucky to have struck while the iron was hot, as it were.

Besides, he had Pietro as a Novice now, and Ianto suspected he was going to be just as promising as Daisy; Pepper really had the best nose for amazing Novices, so trusting in her suggestion of Pietro had only been the right thing to do…even though he’d hemmed and hawed about it for a little bit. Pietro’s academic records bore that out. Ianto was looking forward to teaching that boy everything he could.

“You sleep, you weep.” Phil was really being insufferably smug this morning, although Ianto supposed he deserved to be. He also looked well-rested, even after he’d most likely been up all hours with this crack-brained yet amazing potion idea that was probably going to solve a majority of their problems and had a new child in the house, one that would most likely be suffering from nightmares for years to come.

Stephen, however, didn’t look so fresh. He’d decided to speak to the Baron responsible for overseeing that village where they’d discovered Crystal as immediately as he could, arranging a meeting that had also lasted well into the evening. It had meant a late night for Ianto’s friend, and he
doubted Stephen had gotten that much sleep once he’d returned home, either. He took the consequences of losing Mordo’s friendship seriously, and Ianto knew he blamed himself for driving Mordo away. That was patently untrue; Mordo had made his own choices, but Stephen couldn’t help but feel as if he was at fault somehow. Ianto knew he’d be doing whatever he could to fix the damage done by the spread of Mordo’s propaganda, in his need to make things right.

“It’s a good thing we’ve already sent out all the notices,” Ianto commented. “We can enact this plan of yours tomorrow morning, at the beginning of Quorum.”

“We still have a few things to prepare,” Phil said. “We’ll need to strengthen the wards about the chamber, and make certain we have the place completely sealed…the last thing we want is for everyone in the building to suddenly feel the need to tell the truth.”

“That could be awkward,” Ianto agreed.

“But what about the three of us?” Stephen wanted to know. “We’ll be in the Quorum as well.”

“Ah ha.” With a flourish, the Void Wizard pulled three small vials from a pouch on his belt. “These are the antidote. All we need to do is drink it just half an hour before the Truth Bomb is set off. We’ll be protected from its effects.”

“You do realize there are some ethical considerations involved,” Stephen said seriously.

“I do.” Phil lost a lot of his smugness. “I’m willing to take responsibility for it, if it comes to that. We can use my old reputation for ruthlessness and focus any anger onto me. I gave it thought last night, and while I like to think my fellow Wizards will understand, I also know I’ll be making some enemies with this. If you both want to pretend you’re affected as well, I’d understand.”

“No.” Stephen took one of the antidotes. “It’s all or none in this.”

“Agreed.” Ianto accepted the second. “We stand together, or we fall together. We need to show a united front when we do this. Besides,” he sighed, “sometimes it’s better to ask forgiveness later than to ask permission before.”

Phil looked relieved. Ianto could understand why he would feel that way, with his and Stephen’s agreement to stand with him in this he wouldn’t have to face the Quorum alone. He’d worked long and hard to bury the Dark One, and it was obvious he hated being reminded of his past. Especially since he was giving serious thought of staying as Grand Master, the better to put into practice his idea of cleaning things up and exposing the lies told about the Voids. His need to save the children from his own fate was a driving force in the man, and Ianto heartily approved.

Yes, the Truth Bomb was a perfect tool to use in this situation, and Ianto believed exactly what he’d said about asking forgiveness or asking permission.

This was the responsibility of being a Grand Master: doing what most would consider distasteful for the greater good. It seemed as if Phil had already accepted that.

And Hydra couldn’t be allowed to propagate any further within any of the Orders. He didn’t need to have the gift of prophecy to know that this could potentially tear the Wizard Guild apart. It could bring the war that Master John had thought he’d prevented with that spell that cut off all magic. Hydra needed to be stopped, and there were times when desperate measures were called for. This was one of those times; he’d lived long enough to recognize it as such.

“I think it would help if we also laid down some ground rules,” Stephen suggested. “We let the entire Quorum know what’s going to happen just before we break that,” he waved toward the
'bomb', “and we make certain that everyone swears not to use the situation for individual interests. Because, if you consider it, this would be the perfect time to ruffle feathers and open old wounds by asking questions when an enemy is compromised.”

“And,” Ianto added, “with the three of us protected against the potion, we can monitor things until it wears off.”

“Which won’t be long,” Phil assured them. “Making a potion this large and capable of dispersing in air means that the potency is a lot less than with a potion that’s taken internally. I’d say we’d have about a quarter hour before the effects begin to fade.”

That made sense. “I’d love to know how you and Daisy came up with the means for it aerosolizing enough to effect the entire Quorum hall.”

“Stop by anytime. I still have all the equations on the blackboard I was using back at the Keep.”

Ianto was quite sure those equations were going to be impressive, and made a mental note to do just that. Perhaps he could get Phil to write them all down and let him have a copy? That sort of prodigious work deserved to be copied for posterity.

“By the way,” the Cardinal Wizard changed the subject, “how did Crystal do last night?” He was concerned about the traumatized girl, and hoped she’d had a fairly peaceful night in her new home.

A soft, fond smile graced Phil’s features. “She actually slept through the night, although I suspect that had more to do with exhaustion than any feeling of comfort she may have had. I anticipate it won’t always be that easy. She woke up in time for me to make sure she officially met Daisy, Clint, Melinda, and Andrew, and to reassure her that they could be trusted while I was gone this morning.”

“That’s excellent. I hope she settles in quickly.” That little girl deserved happiness after everything that had happened to her in her very short life. “While you were sleeping, Stephen was busy.”

“Managed to get the ball rolling on the investigation,” Stephen reported. “I spoke directly to Baron Alexander Waverly, the sitting Baron for Uncelas, and he was outraged by what’s been going on in his Barony. He’s promised for a full inquiry into things, with certain sanctions for that village. He was sending his court Wizard, Master Illya Kuryakin, to look into the possibility that Crystal wasn’t the only child this had been done to, and his Knights’ Commander, a Lord Sir Napoleon Solo, to discover who Crystal’s parents are and to make certain they’re prosecuted for their part in the affair. The Baron has already had the dissolution of parental rights forms written up, and he’ll have them couriered to me as soon as they’re signed and approved. I informed him that you intended on adopting her, Phil, and he would like to speak to you when you have the time.”

“I don’t see why that can’t be today, and I’ll take Daisy along with me,” their Void friend answered. “I’m guessing the Baron would also want to speak to Crystal.”

“He would, just to make certain this is what she wants. Plus, she’s our only witness so far, and even though she’s a child she can give evidence. I hate for her to go through that, but they’ll be as kind as they can, I’m sure.”

Phil didn’t look happy, but he nodded in agreement. “I can get the paperwork done as well while we’re there, that way the Baron won’t have to go through you. You’ve got enough on your plate without overseeing the adoption proceedings as well.”

Stephen gave him a grateful nod. “I’ll accompany you, that way I can check in on the progress of the investigation as well. I get the distinct impression that Baron Alexander will be only too happy to
let us curse whoever is responsible. Apparently, he has a fine sense of justice and doesn’t like the idea of children getting hurt.”

“Then, why don’t we arrange to go after lunch? I’ll need to collect Daisy and Crystal, since I sent them shopping in Triskelia Town, so with the time difference we might catch them just after breakfast time.”

“Where are we going?” Jack’s voice popped into the conversation.

Ianto glanced toward his husband. Jack was leaning against the archway wall, arms crossed, smirking fit to burst. Although that smirk dropped a little when he noticed the enormous jug of glowing magical potion. “And what is that?” he asked curiously.

“That,” Ianto grinned, “is a Truth Bomb. We plan on using it in the Quorum tomorrow.”

Jack looked impressed. “That’s a stroke of genius, really.”

“Blame Phil for it.” Ianto corrected himself when he noticed Phil’s mouth opening to correct him, “And Daisy.”

“And we’re going to the Barony Uncelas later today,” Stephen answered the original question. “I’m sure Ianto’s already explained to you what we found there.”

Any humor that had been on Jack’s face faded. “He did. I just can’t believe there are assholes out there who would take that sort of thing out on an innocent kid.” His eyes darted toward Phil. “Although we had enough proof of that already having happened in the past.”

“The Baron would like to talk to me, apparently,” Phil said. “He wants to make sure Crystal really wants to live with me and Daisy, and if we’re good enough to look after her. I can’t blame him one bit; after all, that little girl has been through far too much for anyone to blindly trust strangers with her well-being.”

Not for the first time, Ianto really wondered about the disconnect between Phil Coulson and the Dark One. Everything he’d ever heard of the rogue Wizard had been of a heartless bastard who didn’t care who he hurt.

The man standing in his dining room was directly the opposite from the Dark One. Phil Coulson was a caring human being who’d raised one daughter into becoming a remarkable young woman, and was about to take on another child who’d been damaged by the very people who should have loved her. He’d found a cause in protecting children and changing opinion of Voids so that this would never happen again, using his own personal experiences as examples. He’d taken on the position of Grand Master temporarily, but then decided to remain in order to make the changes that needed to be made.

Phil had claimed that he’d done a lot of evil as the Dark One. Ianto didn’t doubt it. However, there was also good, with the actions he and his people had taken at Buda-Pest as the prime example of that. The Void had chosen him to become Ianto’s opposite in power and in near-immortality and, while Ianto couldn’t know what the Void’s rationale had been in that decision, everyone was considering this punishment for past misdeeds.

Ianto was beginning to doubt that.

He could see just how much good Phil could do, if given enough time. With the Void forcing its own version of immortality on him, it was giving him that time. Both the Void and the Deep Ways had their own consciousness, however there was no way of ever knowing what either one intended.
All they could do was make the most of things and move on.

However, there were three of them now. Jack as the Deathless, with Ianto himself to support him and love him for as long as they both lived. And then there was Phil, who would one day be alone...well, not totally alone, because they were his friends and would support him no matter what losses he sustained over the long centuries of their existence.

And, perhaps one day, Ianto would be showing him how to sever the connection that the Void had forged, just as Daffyd, Ianto’s out-of-time counterpart, had done when he’d lost his own version of the Deathless to the Silver Devastation, to live a normal lifespan and to die a natural death.

Jack was nodding at Phil’s comment. “That just goes to show what a decent Baron that is, looking after even the most innocent of his subjects. I’m sure he’s probably pissed off about not catching this before it got out of hand.”

“Exactly. I can’t blame him for that, and I know Daisy and I will do our best to convince him we’re willing to do everything possible to make Crystal a part of our family.”

“And what about Clint?” Ianto inquired. “I understand that you two haven’t been together that long...”

Phil nodded. “I told him what happened, and that Crystal would be staying with us, but we haven’t honestly talked about him adopting her as well, even though I’d like him to. And, after last night he’s going to have his hands full for a bit.”

Jack was frowning. “I know he was bothered about accidentally killing Raina’s dragon...”

His husband had let Ianto know last night about what had happened during their capture of Daniel Whitehall. He could understand; the death of any dragon was terrible, but what Clint had done hadn’t been his fault. There had been no way any of their group would have stood up to Raina’s mind control magic. Killing her had been the only way to prevent a larger disaster, and her dragon had been unintentional collateral damage. While Ianto really hated that term, in this case it was the correct one to use.

The smile that grew across Phil’s features was equal parts fondness, awe, and joy. “He was, until he had a very special visitor last night...”

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Chapter End Notes

Yes, for those who recognized the names of our Barony Uncelas trio...I have decided to add another fandom here... in this case, "The Man from UNCLE". *grins*
Daisy loved the idea of having a little sister.

She just hadn’t expected to ever have one.

Crystal was a shy, quiet little girl. She’d been through so much, so that was understandable. Daisy had to wonder just how many times she’d been punished for being the least bit noisy before her parents had kicked her out of the house. The very idea of that made her want to track down Crystal’s parents and kick them around as well.

She wouldn’t do that. She’d leave it up to the authorities. Besides, she knew what the punishment was for harming a magical child. Daisy thought her Dad might get a kick out of meting out Wizard justice.

Dad has eaten breakfast and then headed out of meet with Ianto and Stephen, taking the Truth Bomb with him. Andrew had made oatmeal for them all; Crystal had obviously never had it before, because she wasn’t sure how she liked it. Daisy had been more than happy to explain about cream and fruit and honey and other variations, until Dad had simply smiled and helped Crystal dump a bunch of strawberries over the cooling cereal, saying she could try it any way she wanted every morning until she’d decided how she preferred it.

Crystal had given him a hug for that.

Having two more dragons in the house made the kitchen area seem a little crowded, which was insane because the room was way too big usually. Both Lola and Skye had taken it upon themselves to show the new arrivals the ropes, especially for meals; Lockjaw seemed a little uncertain at first, but Lola had simply pushed a turkey leg toward him and that was enough to let him know it was fine to eat.

Lucky, though, helped himself. Then begged at the table for more.

Apparently, the silly dragon adored oatmeal…even if it got caught in his teeth.

Alright, it was just plain strange that Clint now had a dragon. Non-magical people shouldn’t be able to bond with one but, if anyone deserved a dragon, it was Clint. Just from the short time she’d known him Daisy could tell how much he adored them, and it wasn’t because he was an Elf. He’d been devastated by killing Raina’s dragon despite it belonging to Hydra. If anyone who wasn’t a Wizard deserved a dragon, it was Clint Barton.

Daisy wished she’d been able to meet the Queen of Air and Fire, though. That would have been fantastic.

Dad had left after he’d finished eating, kissing both Daisy and Crystal on the head before going to work. He also kissed Clint, but not in the same way…his kiss involved tongue and had Crystal giggling and Daisy rolling her eyes. Lola had followed him, giving cuddles to everyone, and Dad had to call her when she was taking too much time. He wasn’t angry; in fact, even though Daisy couldn’t see him, she was pretty positive he was laughing.

“So,” Clint said after Dad was gone, “do you lovely ladies have plans for today?”
“As a matter of fact,” Daisy spoke up, “Dad gave me a money pouch and permission to skive off classes today so I could take Crystal into Triskelia Town to get her new clothing and other things.” He’d caught her out in the hall before breakfast, pressing the heavy pouch into her hand, giving her directions on how to use it…which was along the lines of clothes and other sundries, and whatever toys or books the little girl might want. At the moment, Crystal was wearing one of Daisy’s own hand-me-down tunics and a skirt that was far too long, with the shoes she’d been wearing back at her old home, since Daisy’s were all too big. She really did need new clothes.

“I don’t suppose you’d mind a little company?” Of course Clint would suggest it. After all, Hydra was still out there and they’d already kidnapped Daisy once.

“Well, as long as you don’t mind us shopping until our feet hurt…then shop some more!” Clint laughed. “I’ve been shopping with Nat. It can’t be any worse than that.”

Daisy didn’t want to imagine it, especially after seeing that dress Natasha was wearing last night. It had been spectacular and the young woman had wondered if there was one just like it in purple.

“You don’t need to get me anything,” Crystal denied softly. “I don’t need anything new.”

Daisy’s heart went out to her. She reached out, stroking her blonde hair; there was an odd band running through it, black against the brightness. It was natural, but it made Daisy want to get something like it in her own hair, only purple. She’d been wondering about doing that for a while now; colored streaks like that were the newest fashion. Even Jemma had been considering it, only she’d wanted hers in either blue or red, and was dithering over the idea that her parents might not approve. “You’re ours now, and Dad wanted to make sure you’re spoiled rotten. He did the same for me, when he adopted me.”

Crystal’s pale eyes widened. “You’re adopted?” she gasped in wonder.

“Yep. And Dad went nuts when he found me.” She leaned forward, speaking conspiratorially. “In fact, he got the Keep for me, because at the time we didn’t even have a place to live. Uncle Nick gave it to him when he asked.”

“He doesn’t have to get a Keep for me!” the little girl squeaked.

“Well, he already has this one, and we both want to share it with you, if that’s alright.”

Crystal nodded, eyes bewildered yet happy, as if she couldn’t imagine anyone would want to share anything with her.

Yes, Daisy really wanted to find her parents and come up with the nastiest curse ever to cast upon them. Kinda like the way she felt about Dad’s folks and her own birth parents, actually.

Clint obviously felt the same way, but he covered it up easily. “I get why you want me along…you need someone to carry the packages.” He was laughing.

“That’s exactly right,” Daisy confirmed, joining him in laughter. Really, she wanted him along as a bodyguard, but being a pack animal was a bonus.

She’d been thinking about asking Melinda to go with them, but this would work out much better. Because, while Melinda was a great person who’d been the one to help out a teenaged Daisy when it had come to womanly things, and who was currently teaching Daisy to kick ass, the Steward really hated the idea of shopping. She’d have gone, though, because it was the safest thing to do, and because Daisy had been the one to ask.
If she’d ever had a mother, Melinda May had been the closest one to it. Even if she denied having a single motherly bone in her body.

“And,” Daisy said to her soon-to-be little sister, “you need to meet Uncle Nick. He looks a little scary, but he’s really nice.”

That got a disbelieving snort from Clint, one that was choked off just as suddenly as he’d let it out. Daisy wanted to take offense, but at the same time he’d known Uncle Nick back in his Marcus Johnson days, and probably could tell stories that would turn her hair white.

“We have an Uncle Nick?” It was as if she couldn’t believe her sudden good fortune.

Maybe that was the case. Daisy could recall how she’d felt when Dad had said he wanted to adopt her, and Crystal had to be feeling the same. Both of them had been unwanted by their parents, the only difference being that Crystal remembered hers, and her abandonment was still very fresh. Daisy had been dropped off at an orphanage as a baby, and didn’t have any memories of her mother and father. She’d been transferred all over the place, finally running away after her fourth one. She had no memories of them to make into nightmare fodder, not like Crystal had.

“He’s not really Dad’s brother,” Daisy explained. “He and Dad were friends since Wizard School, and they’re as close as brothers could be.”

“Uncle Nick is a Wizard too?”

No,” she answered. She could understand the confusion. “Uncle Nick’s Mom worked there. Uncle Nick doesn’t have a lick of magic in him, but he did stay there while his Mom taught Math.”

Describing Uncle Nick would have been an adventure, so Daisy didn’t even try. Crystal would just have to meet him and draw her own conclusions.

“We can teleport to Uncle Nick’s castle,” Daisy declared. “Then we can go into Triskelia Town and do our shopping. Maybe we can even eat lunch there.”

Crystal was starting to look excited about the whole idea. “I’d love to go shopping with you.”

“Great! Finish up your breakfast, and we’ll head out.”

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The Teleport ring Daisy used to get them to Triskelia Castle deposited them into the sitting room in Uncle Nick’s quarters. The room was empty, but it was still early in the morning and Uncle Nick would most likely be in Court. Taking Crystal’s hand, she led the little girl out of the room and down the corridor toward the ornate staircase that led down to the main hall, Clint on their heels, their three dragons accompanying them; Skye in her usual place on Daisy’s shoulder, while Lockjaw and Lucky trotted along beside them.

The stairs circled down to the main hall and before they could even get halfway down the sounds of voices echoed up at them. Uncle Nick had the Court doors open a couple of hours every morning, and from what Daisy could tell there was quite the argument going on in there. Well, more like someone was raising their voice at either Uncle Nick or someone else; her Uncle wouldn’t yell at anyone, unless provoked. He much preferred being quiet and intense. It was pretty impressive what
he got people to do when he was like that, because then you could tell he was really dangerous and not willing to put up with anyone’s bullshit.

There was a small crowd around the open door, and they all looked toward the three of them as they came down off the staircase and toward the court room. Daisy could feel Crystal tense up beside her, and without thought she reached down and picked up the little girl, holding her close as she proceeded past the group of courtiers and into the room beyond.

To be honest, Daisy didn’t care all that much for the Court. It was a long, high room, gray carpet leading up to the dais where the Baronial throne sat. Uncle Nick had confided in her that the damned chair had been purposely made to be uncomfortable, because it kept him from falling asleep.

The rest of the room was pretty empty. The people who came there to petition the Baron weren’t expected to sit in his presence. There was a pair of men standing at the base of the dais, yelling at each other, while Uncle Nick sat on his throne sat and listened, his single eye dark with boredom.

To Daisy’s surprise, Mistress Maria Hill was standing on the dais just behind the chair, resplendent in her blue Wizard’s robes, also watching the argument. Although, she seemed more amused than anything else at what was going on. Her dragon, Iliad, was curled up at her feet, seemingly asleep, however his tail was twitching slightly which told Daisy that he was actually awake and paying attention.

“Look,” Uncle Nick’s voice cut across the verbal sparring like a sword through paper, “the way I see it, you both have valid points in this…” Then his gaze found the three of them at the end of the hall, and he grinned. “I’m almost done here,” he said, “then we can talk. Why don’t you all go back up to my sitting room and I’ll join you there shortly.”

“Alright, Uncle Nick,” Daisy agreed brightly, even though she’d sort of wanted to see him in action.

Clint also gave him a salute, just a touch of a finger against his forehead. Crystal had buried her face in Daisy’s shoulder, although the young woman thought it was more out of shyness than any real fear.

“Have Carter get you all a round of hot chocolate,” he called out as they were leaving.

Daisy couldn’t help but grin at that. Uncle Nick’s Steward, Sharon Carter, made the best hot chocolate ever. Even better than her Dad’s, not that she was ever going to admit that.

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Steward Sharon had gotten them the mentioned hot chocolate and some snacks and they’d all just settled in – Daisy on the sofa, Crystal leaning against her, and Clint in another chair nearby, all three dragons in a pile at the hearth – when Uncle Nick sailed in, accompanied by Mistress Maria and her own dragon, who aimed unerringly toward the dragon pile because everyone knew that was going to happen. Dragons did love to cuddle.

“One sec,” Uncle Nick said, ducking into his bedroom. When he came back out, he’d removed his ceremonial cloak, and his sword had been put away as well. “Now,” he said, getting his own hot chocolate from the pot, grabbing a handful of cookies, and taking one of the other chairs, “what brings my favorite girl here? And who is this young lady with you?”
He didn’t mention anything about Clint’s presence, but then the archer didn’t seem to expect it. The Elf just kept right on sipping his chocolate, a plate of cookies balanced on his knee.

He also didn’t mention that Crystal was far too thin and dressed in clothes that were far too large for her. Daisy couldn’t pretend that he hadn’t noticed, because Uncle Nick noticed everything.

Mistress Maria had also taken a seat, but none of the snacks or drinks. Honestly, Daisy didn’t care for her all that much, mostly because of her beliefs about the Voids and Cardinals, but Uncle Nick loved her. Dad claimed that her Uncle would ask her to marry him at some point. So, Daisy thought she should at least be polite.

But she didn’t see herself ever calling her Aunt Maria. Nope.

Crystal had turned shy once more, burrowing into Daisy’s side, both hands wrapped around her own mug of chocolate. Uncle Nick could be intimidating, even though he was at least attempting to be gentle, so Daisy could understand why she was overly quiet.

So, Daisy gave the introductions. “This, is Crystal…soon to be Crystal Coulson, my new sister, and that’s her dragon, Lockjaw.” She pointed toward the dragon named, who raised his head, chirped a welcome, then laid back down, halfway draped around Lucky.

No one had asked about Lucky yet, but it was only a matter of time. Daisy was looking forward to it.

Uncle Nick’s eyebrows went up, and the smile that graced his features softened his expression tremendously. “Well, hello young lady. I’m going to be your Uncle Nick.”

Crystal sat up a little. “Hello, Uncle Nick,” she said softly.

“Dad gave me some money so we can go shopping,” Daisy explained. “Clint’s along for moral support and carting services.”

Uncle Nick laughed. “Well, he’s good at both those things.”

“Are you a pirate?” Crystal asked shyly.

Daisy stifled her laughter; Clint didn’t bother. Mistress Maria snorted, her dark eyes dancing.

“Afraid not.” Daisy could tell her Uncle was amused as well. “I’m actually a Baron.”

Crystal’s eyes widened. “An actual Baron?”

“That’s right.”

“But you wear an eyepatch and everyone knows that pirates wear eyepatches.”

“So do old soldiers who get into fights they couldn’t possibly win.”

Not even Daisy knew how Uncle Nick had lost his eye, but she did know that it would have been his life if her Dad hadn’t saved him, and Dad got a funny look on his face whenever it came up, as if he was trying hard not to laugh. Honestly, she expected to never hear the story, because it had been back in Dad’s Dark One days. Those stories hardly ever got told.

“When did this happen?” Uncle Nick aimed his question at Daisy.

So, she explained how Dad, Ianto, and Grand Master Stephen had gone in search of Master Mordo,
who’d been the one who’d let Werner von Strucker into the Quorum because Hydra had asked him to. At the name of the Wizard, Mistress Maria had started in shock, but she remained silent as Daisy continued on with the story, about how Dad has sensed someone calling out for help to the Void, where he’d found Crystal hiding under a gazebo, starving and alone.

When she was done, she could tell just how angry Uncle Nick was, even though he was keeping his face as placid as possible. “Do I need to step in?” His voice was low which, Daisy knew, was when he was at his most dangerous.

“Dad, Ianto, and Grand Master Stephen are taking care of it, since Crystal is a magical child and this falls under Guild rules. You might want to contact one of them and see if they need anything, especially when the adoption comes up.” After all, Uncle Nick had been the one to make Daisy’s own adoption possible.

Daisy was waiting for Mistress Maria to say something. Her opinions were well known, especially those opinions about her Dad. The Head of Great Order was staring at Crystal, who blessedly didn’t seem to notice, caught up in eating the cookies that Clint had given her back when the chocolate had been served. She seemed a little less wary, and smiled when Uncle Nick made a funny face at her.

Surprisingly, the woman didn’t as a word. Not a single thing about Crystal being Void and being unnatural. Daisy was a little disappointed at not getting the chance to yell at her.

“Tell you what,” Uncle Nick said, rising and walking to his desk, “I know your Dad gave you plenty of money, but let me make you out a letter of credit as well. If Crystal is gonna be my new niece, then I get to start spoiling her rotten.”

Daisy should have expected that, really. Uncle Nick had often done the same for her and Dad; he’d provided some of the funds and materials when they started reclaiming Shield Keep, after all, even though Dad had had quite a bit of money from his mercenary days. Uncle Nick had claimed that fixing up the old Keep was ‘helping to restore the history and infrastructure of Triskelia’ which was really just a load of shit, really. He’d just wanted an excuse to help out as much as possible.

“Also, I bet Natasha wouldn’t mind going along,” he continued as he wrote out the letter. “She knows some of the better shopping places in town.”

So, that was where the Widow had gone after bringing Clint home last night; she’d gone back to Triskelia. When she hadn’t shown up for breakfast, Daisy had asked Melinda about it, and Melinda had claimed that Natasha had left after they’d gotten Clint to bed and her and Dad had started up on the Truth Bomb again. Daisy had thought she’d just taken one of the guest rooms.

Although, Daisy knew that Natasha was going with them to act as an additional bodyguard. She wasn’t about to be ungrateful, either.

“I think she went down to the kitchens earlier,” Mistress Maria finally spoke. “I can check.”

“Thanks,” Uncle Nick said, giving her a quick smile before finishing up the letter with his seal. “Tell her there’s some new throwing knives in it for her.”

“Bribing her?” Clint teased. “I don’t think that’s gonna be necessary, Nick.”

“Never hurts to give an inducement, Barton.”

Mistress Maria got up from her chair, but before she left the room she turned back to the gathering. “I do have one question before I go, though.”
Here it comes, Daisy thought, grinning.

“Who belongs to the extra dragon in the room?”

It really had been only a matter of time…

“Lucky’s mine,” Clint answered proudly.

The expression on Mistress Maria’s face was priceless.
Chapter 44

Clint got the biggest kick out of telling people about Lucky.

Anyone who didn’t know him would have probably assumed he was just another Wizard. Sure, he wasn’t, he was unique in all the world, and it made him feel that everything he’d been through as a child and as an adult had been totally worth it. All the shit from his father…Barney’s jealousy…yes, all completely worth it. Maybe not losing Phil, but at least he got him back.

And, alright, the brainwashing by Loki would never be worth it. He never wanted to feel that way again, to have absolutely no control over his actions and thoughts and bent to the will of a maniac bent on domination.

Which, when it came down to it, was why he’d killed Raina without hesitation. The very idea of someone he cared about being sucked in with her voice chilled him to the bone. There had been no way he’d have let anyone else suffer that fate. Phil had been bad enough, back in that Hydra hideout.

Killing the dragon had been collateral. He still wasn’t sure why he’d been forgiven for it so completely that Idris had gifted him an actual dragon.

It had been hilarious to watch Mistress Maria’s reaction, especially since he didn’t actually like her all that much. She was attractive, but the Elf didn’t get why Marcus wanted to marry her, for Gods’ sake. Still, there was no accounting for taste, and he’d laughed himself silly when she’d began cursing…until Nick had told her to stop, there was an impressionable child in the room, and the last thing anyone needed was for Phil to come and given them shit about teaching his newest daughter language he’d have to correct her for. Which was really the pot calling the kettle black, because Nick could out-curse a sailor…and did it every day.

And yes, he’d actually used the word shit when telling her off. It had been hilarious. A part of him hoped that Crystal would actually use it at some point in front of Phil, because his lover would know immediately who to blame.

Natasha had been happy to come along on their shopping trip. Daisy had been ecstatic, and when she wasn’t carrying Crystal she was quizzing his partner about the dress she’d worn yesterday and had it come in purple.

Daisy showed excellent taste in colors.

Once Crystal got a little too heavy for Daisy to cart around – she may have been underweight for her age, but lugging around that extra weight would have grated on anyone – Clint had taken over. Crystal seemed to trust him already, which touched him in ways he’d never considered before. After all, he’d been raised by an abusive shithead whose idea of affection was giving Clint an extra smack to the back of the head that, in the light of distance, the archer had to wonder why he hadn’t walked around with a perpetual concussion back then.

Really, he and that little girl had far too much in common. It kinda broke Clint’s heart a little.
The first place they’d gone was a shop with all sorts of children’s clothes. He’d put Crystal down, who seemed to be content just to stand and boggle at the sheer amount of outfits there were. At that point, Daisy and Natasha both went a little crazy, asking Crystal what she might like and then bustling the child into a changing room, where there began a parade of clothing changes and feminine cooing that had Clint standing back and hiding his chuckles. He’d learned a long time ago that laughing at Natasha, no matter how ridiculous she was being, was a really bad idea.

No one would ever have guessed that this was the Widow, the bane of bad guys everywhere, acting like an indulgent auntie and suggesting outfits for Crystal to try on, the smile on her face lighting her eyes and making Clint’s own eyes a little teary. No one had ever seen this side of Natasha, and he was unbelievably touched that he could witness it. And this was from someone who’d once sworn she couldn’t handle children.

Well, Clint knew better than to call her a liar to her face.

It actually became a little too much for Crystal after a while. The girl wasn’t used to that sort of mothering, not after all she’d been through, and eventually she became too shy to come out of the changing room. Daisy seemed to understand the quickest; after all, she’d been in Crystal’s shoes at one point, and had to have figured out that the near-constant attention and encouragement would start to freak her out some point. Still, when it did happen, Daisy looked crushed, although Clint could tell it wasn’t because she was being rejected; it was just because Crystal just wasn’t used to so much caring.

The little girl only opened the door enough to let a very worried Lockjaw in; then she closed it once more, the unmistakable sound of the door lock engaging echoing like a stone being thrown into the wall.

“Alright, you two,” Clint decided to intervene. “Give her some space.”

“We got carried away and didn’t think,” Daisy whispered sadly. “I should have known better.”

Natasha didn’t say anything; but then, she didn’t have to, since her past was just about as fraught as Clint’s own, or Daisy’s. And her eyes told the tale, anyway.

Since he’d been staying out of the way, Clint figured he should be the one to talk to Crystal, to make sure she was fine.

He made his way toward the closed and locked door, one of the shop girls hovering nearby, looking worried as she wrung her hands. “I’m sorry,” she gasped, “I don’t know what happened…”

“I do, don’t worry,” he assured the poor girl. “It’s just been a little too much for her. I’ll handle it.”

He waved her away, and she moved quickly, having been given permission to escape. Clint slid down the door, resting his back against the plain wood; Lucky curled up next to him, sensing his upset, his head on Clint’s knee.

It was wonderful having a dragon, even if it was going to take him a little time getting used to feeling him in his head, especially when Lucky was bound and determined to make him feel better by projecting calming emotions directly into his brain.

He gave Crystal a few moments, then asked softly, “It’s alright, you know, to be scared.”

There was a sniffling on the other side of the door, as if the little girl had been crying. “I’m sorry.”

“No need to be sorry.” Clint couldn’t help it; his heart went out to her. “It’s all a bit much, isn’t it?”
“Why are they so nice to me?” The question was almost too faint for him to hear. “I don’t deserve it, I’m bad.”

Clint wished he could hug her right then; but he wasn’t going to demand she open that door until she was ready. “You deserve it. You deserve everything we can give you.”

“But why?” Crystal sniffled again.

“Because no one should have to go through what you did. And because we love you.”

The thing was, Clint did. He’d only just met this child that morning, but she’d been through so much and yet she was easy to love. He knew that Phil already did, and would be moving the two Heavens and the three Hells in order for her to become his daughter. He had to be seeing himself in her, in that her parents had rejected her for being Void.

They hadn’t really talked about this yet. Clint knew they would, because if he and Phil were to be in any sort of relationship then they would have to. At the moment, they were lovers, but it was a new thing, so any decision Phil made was his own, and he didn’t need Clint’s input into a damned thing. However, he also knew that his lover wanted that deeper relationship, and they would be raising Crystal together if that did work out.

He really wanted it to work out.

Just in less than a week, Clint had gone from a loner who did the odd job for Nick when he needed something vaguely dirty done, a one of a pair of mercenaries who loved traveling and kicking random ass…to being ready to settle down with the man he’d loved for what seemed like forever and to raise a child with him.

He’d planned on doing the whole child rearing thing some other way, but this one worked just as well.

Although, to be fair he hadn’t expected Phil to go out and adopt someone. Not that he disagreed with that decision one single bit. Crystal needed someone who would love her unconditionally, and she would certainly find that with a man who’d once done the exact same thing with another lost, little girl. And look how Daisy had turned out.

There was no response to that, and Clint figured she was busily chewing over his little declaration. He let it slide, and instead said, “You don’t have to come out until you’re ready. I’ll even tell Daisy and Nat to calm themselves down a little bit. I’d have been overwhelmed by them, too, so don’t worry about it. I can’t promise they won’t want to take you all over town and buy you lots of things, though, especially since your new Dad told them to. And your Uncle Nick, because we all do what he says.”

After about a minute, the door was unlocked and it cracked open a little, to reveal a little sliver of Crystal’s face, including a single blue eye that was bloodshot from crying. “What about you?” she whispered.

Clint cocked his head a little in confusion. “What about me?”

“Why?”

Well, that could be a question with a lot of different answers. He chose the first one that came to mind. “Because, if you don’t mind, I’d like to be your Dad, too.”

She was staring at him, and the archer let her, hoping she could read his truthfulness in his own
gaze. Up until that morning, he’d been happy to be some sort of father figure for Daisy, so this was just a little bit strange for him, but he’d meant every word he’d just said.

“I can’t promise I’ll be a good Dad,” he murmured, “but I’d certainly like to try.”

He certainly couldn’t be any worse than the bastards who had dumped her like trash.

“Now,” he gave her a smile, “why don’t you come on out whenever you’re ready, and I’ll do my best to protect you from Daisy and Nat’s well-meaning yet overbearing attentions?”

“I…don’t know what that means,” Crystal admitted reluctantly.

“It means those two want to go nuts and smother you with kindness. Now, if you really do want that, I’ll back off, but it can be a little hard to deal with if you’re not used to it.”

Crystal’s face vanished and the door closed, but the lock didn’t engage this time. There was a rustling sound, and then the door opened fully, revealing Crystal in a pretty yellow dress that looked a little worse for wear, and was just a hair too big in size for her thin frame. Lockjaw peered out from behind her, and the Elf could see him in the reflection; his tail was practically wagging.

“Oh, that’s pretty,” he said, wanting to give her a little positive reinforcement. While he wasn’t usually a yellow person, it did look nice on her. “You think you like that one?”

Crystal nodded, shily. “It’s really nice. Do you think it’s okay for me to want it?”

“You bet it is. You can have pretty much anything you want. We want you to be happy.”

“I don’t need anything to be happy, cause I have you and Dad and Daisy and Uncle Nick and Aunt Nat.”

Clint’s eyes welled up, and Gods’ be damned his tough persona, he didn’t care who saw it.

Crystal’s eyes widened fearfully. “Did I say something wrong?”

“No, sweetheart,” he choked a little, “you just said something right.”

The little girl gave him a dazzling smile. Then, she launched herself into his arms, almost knocking Lucky away; the dragon didn’t seem to mind at all, too busy doing the same to Lockjaw and pinning him to the ground so he could lick him.

Clint hugged her for all he was worth. It was humbling that this child, who had no reason to trust anyone, was trusting him. Of all people, she was trusting someone who’d once been a deadly mercenary who’d killed more people than even he could count. There was something in him that had her believing in him, and while Clint didn’t understand, he wasn’t about to question it.

He’d done a lot of wrong things in his life.

But this, he was going to do right.

“Hey,” Daisy’s voice broke into their quiet moment.

Crystal pulled away slightly so she could look at her. Daisy’s expression was anxious, and she said, “I’m sorry if it got too much for you.”

“It’s okay,” Crystal said, giving the older girl another version of that brilliant, happy smile. “You were only doing it because you love me.”
Now, it was Daisy’s turn to get teary-eyed. “That’s right, and it was too much.” She knelt down beside them. “I should have remembered how it was, when it’s all too much and you just don’t understand it. So, if you ever want to ask why I’m doing something, you go right ahead. I’ll keep on telling you that I love you until you believe me.”

Crystal’s smile turned shy. “I believe you now. Honestly. I just…no one’s ever loved me before, so I’m not sure what to do.”

“You’ve got plenty of time to figure it out.” Daisy held out her own arms, and Crystal accepted the hug. “We’ll help you in whatever way we can. And, if you start feeling like it’s too much, let us know, alright? And we’ll go home. We don’t have to do all of this today.”

“I…was having fun, but…”

“I getcha, kiddo. It’s fine.” Daisy released the hug. “Come on, let’s get whatever you want, and we can send it back to the castle. You don’t have to accept everything, just what you like.”

Crystal was looking at her with eyes that were far too old, and yet she was smiling. “I’d like this dress, please.”

The smile Daisy gave her was incandescent. “Then it’s yours. Let’s see what else we can find.” She stood, holding out her hand.

Crystal took it, and let her new sister lead her back out into the shop.

Daisy glanced behind them, mouthing thank you at Clint. He nodded, smiling. He was just glad it worked, because the last thing he wanted was for that child to feel overwhelmed by the kindness she was being shown.

“You’ve grown up.”

No, Clint didn’t jump at Natasha’s voice at his elbow, but it was only because he’d been around her for so long he was used to her popping up when he wasn’t expecting her.

He shrugged, watching the two girls as Daisy kept pointing out things to Crystal, who either nodded or shook her head, accepting what she liked now instead of letting Daisy just pick clothes for her. Clint was very glad to see her speaking up for herself.

“It had to happen eventually,” he commented.

“It certainly took you long enough.”

“Hey!” he exclaimed without any real heat. Clint knew she was giving him grief; it was her way of showing affection.

“Love looks good on you.”

His eyes darted to her. She wasn’t looking at him, instead she was doing what he’d been doing: watching Daisy and Crystal. She had on her usual unimpressed expression, but the archer could see the peacefulness in it, the contentment. “You and I haven’t talked about what’s going to happen next,” he blurted, then silently cursed himself. He’d meant for them to have this conversation in private, but it seemed as if he meant to do this now.

Really, his timing stunk.
Still, it seemed as if Natasha was fine with it. “We don’t really have to. I know you mean to stay at Shield Keep with Phil.” Her face turned to his, a small, happy smile gracing her lips. “It will be good for you. You need that stability, and the moment we found out that Phil was still alive I knew your days on the road were coming to an end. You forget…I was the one who had to pick up the pieces after Phil was killed, and you were free from Loki’s influence. I knew how you felt about him, even if you hadn’t at the time. So, when you got a second chance…” she shrugged, one-shouldered, “it was only a matter of time before you settled down.”

Her eyes went back to watching Daisy and Crystal. Clint did as well; they were talking to the shop girl, the one who’d been upset when Crystal had locked herself in the changing room. The girl was kneeling down, looking Crystal in the eye, and it was apparent that she was asking questions about the little girl’s preferences. Clint made a note to make certain she got a really good gratuity for her help.

“I didn’t expect it to be with two kids,” he pointed out.

“No, but I think you’ll be fine. You’re already well on the way to having Crystal love you; Daisy won’t be far behind, especially after all the crap the pair of you have been through. She knows you’ll be good for her Dad and will be more than glad to have you in their lives. Although, I expect there will be a bit of teasing.”

Clint huffed a laugh. “That goes without saying.” Daisy was the eldest daughter, and that came with the expectation of so much moaning and eye rolling at her Dad’s antics. She didn’t say anything about the affection now, but familiarity breeds contempt, so to speak. “She’s already given me the ‘you hurt my Dad I’ll do unspeakable things to you’ speech.”

“Then she’s ahead of the game.” Natasha smirked. “I really do like her. She’s tough. Melinda’s been doing good work with her, although I do think she needs more self-defense training. From what I’ve heard, she’s relying on her magic too much and, when she doesn’t have access to it, she doesn’t quite know what to do.”

Clint couldn’t argue with that, although he wanted to. Daisy seemed to have done just fine while she was being held prisoner by Hydra, even though her magic had been muffled by the Void Point and she’d been under intense emotional distress. Still, it wouldn’t hurt to have a word with Melinda about it. And he considered asking her if she’d want to learn to shoot, as well.

A sudden high giggle sounded, and Clint watched as Daisy picked Crystal up, trying to lift her and failing to get her high enough. Grinning, he strode over, grabbed the little girl, and did the lifting; Crystal laughed happily, giving him directions toward a hook on the wall, where a black and yellow dress hung on display. It reminded the archer of a bumblebee, but didn’t say anything. If she liked it, then he wasn’t about to tease.

She’d had nothing of her own – except her dragon, who was busily giving the dragon version of laughter at Clint’s feet – so whatever she wanted, he was going to make certain she received it.
For those of you coming to this from the Torchwood fandom, Happy "Let's all deny Ianto Jones is dead" 10th Anniversary. On this day, in 2009, Ianto Jones didn't actually die and is still living happily ever after with Jack in Cardiff, with a dog named Untitled, and is still catching aliens with his team (including Tosh and Owen, who also really didn't die in "Exit Wounds." If you're going to deny, deny big.).

I am now going to go listen to the Big Finish audio, "Serenity", and enjoy living in my personal land of denial. Later on, I may read some fic as well.
Chapter 45

Sam arrived just after breakfast, and Steve was ready.

He didn’t think he’d imagined Pepper’s curiosity about the Enclave, and was surprised when she didn’t ask if she could accompany them. At breakfast – which had been just herself and Steve; apparently the Baron and Dr. Banner were still in the workshop…and one day he was going to ask to see the place – his hostess commented on working most of the day on lesson plans and contacting individual students about study groups. She struck him as a very good teacher, she certainly had the patience for it, although he thought she might have developed that due to Baron Tony. He hadn’t talked to the man all that much, but Steve knew the type: genius, and all the kinetic movement and thought that implied. Sometimes those sorts needed a special hand, and she could see that in Mistress Pepper Potts.

The horse that he’d rode yesterday was ready for him when he and Sam left the castle, the groomsman handing him the reins with a friendly, “Good morning.” Steve returned the greeting, mounting easily, and then following Sam down from the castle grounds.

Instead of taking the road toward town, Sam turned them in the opposite direction. In front of them, forests rose like a barrier, tall trees glowing in the rising sunlight. “How long will it take to get there?” Steve asked.

“Just about an hour,” Sam answered. “Can you see where the trees rise toward the mountains?”

Steve did.

“That’s where the Enclave is. We’ll leave the road about two-thirds of the way there, and take the forest trails up.”

“There’s no actual road that goes there?”

“There is, but it’s a bit out of our way. Elves have always been a bit…reclusive, though, I guess you could say. It’s only been in the last seventy-odd years that more of them have left the Enclaves than before.”

“There was an Elf in the Commandos.”

“Really?” Sam looked intrigued. “That’s surprising. Back during the Century War, Elves were just happy to stay within their borders. In fact, it’s become almost an imperative now, that Elves get out in the world. We can’t stay hidden forever and hope to survive.”

“Why is that?”

“Elves don’t have children at the same rate as humans do; it’s a much slower process. It’s led to a decline in our numbers, as well as some forms of inbreeding, to the point where we really need fresh blood. The thing is, it’s still frowned upon for an Elf to go outside their own Enclave to look for a mate, let alone marrying a human. It’s getting better, but half-Elves still aren’t really welcome among pure-blood Elves, and sometimes half-blood is counting pure Elves born from different Enclaves. It’s a mess, really.”

“You’re a half-Elf, though.”
Sam nodded. “I’m sort of the exception, really. My Mom’s family is important within Falcon Enclave so, when she came back carrying a half-blood child, she got a special dispensation to bring me along. She’s been working on getting the old blood laws repealed, but it’s slow going. Falcon Enclave is pretty progressive compared to some.”

Steve just didn’t understand that sort of prejudice. People were people, no matter their blood, and should be measured by their actions, and not who their parents were. Sam seemed to be good people, one that Steve was proud to call a new friend, and it bothered him that he might not have been welcome among his mother’s people, just because his father was human.

“So, your does your father live at the Enclave, too?”

A shadow passed over Sam’s face. “No, he’s dead. An accident. It was what sent Mom back to the Enclave. She was pregnant with me at the time, so I never really met him.”

“I’m sorry.”

He shrugged. “Not your fault. And I have family who’ve accepted me within the Enclave, as well as some really good friends.”

“I should have asked this before, but will I actually be welcomed? I’m human, after all.”

“Visitors are always welcome to come. We have market days and everything. But, if you wanted to actually move there…not so much. So, since you’re only going to be there for the day, it’s good.”

As they rode, Sam gave Steve a little bit of history about Falcon Enclave. According to him, it was one of the newer ones, dating back only about seven hundred years, telling the Paladin that this was the reason why it was a bit more progressive than some of the more ancient ones. They were ruled by a Chief, which was an inherited position, and that Chief had his advisors. It was very much like a Baronial Court, really, which surprised Steve. He hadn’t even considered that the Elves and the humans were so much alike, at least in their forms of government.

There was also a Gathering every two years, of all the Chiefs of all the Enclaves. The meeting place rotated, never in one place twice in a row; Sam had been a child when it had last been held at Falcon Enclave. He could recall all the pomp and ceremony, and wasn’t afraid to laugh at it.

As they rode and talked, the road gradually rose toward the mountains. Sam said that the road went through the mountains and connected Ferrous with the baronies of the north, the Barons having the responsibility keeping the roads well-paved and cleaned of all overgrowth. That led to getting information about political climate of the area, and Steve spent a rather pleasant time getting a lesson in current politics.

Soon, though, they came to a dirt path that led off the main road. “On your left,” Sam pointed out, turning his horse onto it, and Steve followed, noting that the path was well-cleared and lacking any holes that might break a horse’s leg if they happened to stumble. The path climbed upward, weaving through the trees, the sun now blocked from hitting their directly.

It was quiet although birds accompanied them on their way, singing as if welcoming them to the forest. Insect sounds made a counterpoint to birdsong, the wind rattling the leaves and creating a harmony to the sounds of the natural world around them.

Steve had always enjoyed traveling. Even before Howard Stark had approached him, claiming that Steve was some sort of mythical Paladin and that it was his duty to be a rallying point for the troops fighting the Century War, Steve had enjoyed just getting out on horseback and basking in nature.
away from his home village.

He wondered if his village was still there, where it had been three hundred years ago. Maybe he’d check up on that sometime.

Riding with Sam was a pleasurable way to spend the morning, if he did say so himself. The half-Elf was a wealth of knowledge, but was also capable of being silent and let Steve rant about whatever was on his mind. Usually that had to do with the fact that he was alone, that everyone he’d known was dead and dust, and why had he been saved and no one else?

The Half-Elf wasn’t condescending, or judgmental. He gave some good advice as well.

Sam was a comforting presence as they moved closer to the Enclave. Steve was glad that Dr. Garner had sent him to speak to Steve when he awoke, because Sam was just that sort of person that it was easy to talk to. It had to be a natural gift, and not something learned. Steve very much doubted that anyone could teach that sort of empathy.

Eventually, the path opened up into a large clearing. Trees circled the perimeter of the clearing; the path continued on just across the way. Houses lined the clearing, single-story dwellings that were plain, yet well-made, with slate roofs and stone walls, large windows that were lined with brightly-painted shutters. Each house a small front garden, brilliant flowers blooming and lending the area a very cheery aspect.

There were several Elves outside their homes. A few of them waved at Sam as they rode past; others gave Steve odd looks which he ignored by greeting anyone politely. It wasn’t as if they were being unfriendly; but he was a stranger accompanying one of their own people, so Steve could understand the curiosity and wasn’t bothered by it.

“This is sort of the back way in,” Sam explained. “There’s a main branch off the road about another two miles up.” He flashed Steve a sly grin. “I prefer the back way.”

They crossed the clearing and took the next path up. This led them through more trees, into another clearing circled by more homes, and onto yet another path, this one slightly off-center compared to the first.

That path led to an even larger clearing amid the tallest, oldest trees Steve had ever seen. This clearing was oblong, and extended up the mountain for at least a mile, the land rising gently upward in places, steeper in others. These building weren’t houses; there were shops, a tavern, and an inn that was the only multi-story structure he’d seen in the Enclave so far. Off to the left, Steve could see the main road that Sam had told him about leading away from the center of town; there were also smaller paths as well, spaced in equidistant measures apart, almost as if this place was like an oddly shaped wagon wheel, and the paths were the spokes of that wheel.

In the near-center of the town, there was an ornate fountain, water tossed high into the air to land in a large stone basin, that had been lined with rich blue tiles. As he watched, three Elven children jumped into the fountain and began to water fight each other, their guardians calling to them to stop and come out of the water, trying to sound stern but failing to hide their amusement at their antics.

More laughter had Steve looking up, and above them, hanging from the trees, were various rope and wood catwalks, and peeking out from the trees were houses that had been constructed along the heaviest branches, almost blending in with the leafy canopy. A couple of Elves were looking down on the play at the fountain, their merriment the source of the laughter.

Cobbled walks meandered around the buildings and met at the fountain, stones encircling it and, in
turn, was surrounded by green, well-trimmed grass. Elves in bright clothing made their way to and fro, but Sam had been correct: the only children that could be seen were the ones in the fountain. Everyone else seemed to be of adult age.

Sam dismounted, so Steve followed suit. Instead of tying the reins onto one of the convenient hitching posts in front of the inn, he led his mount around the fountain and toward yet another of the paths, this one heading off to the right. At Steve’s confused expression, his friend explained, “We’ll leave the horses at Mom’s place. Then we can take the tour around the Enclave. It’ll be easier that way.”

So, he was going to get to meet Sam’s mother. Honestly, Steve was looking forward to it. This was the woman who’d managed to convince an entire Enclave to take her and her son in, when that son was the child of a mixed marriage. He had the feeling he was going to be in for a treat.

Steve had always had a thing for strong women. The strongest woman he’d ever met had been Lady Peggy Carter, and he’d fallen for her hard despite the feelings he’d long carried for his best friend. She hadn’t been his first love, that had been Bucky, but since Bucky hadn’t ever shown any interest Steve had allowed himself to fall into her orbit, and to lose a part of his heart to her.

He could honestly say he knew the exact moment when he’d realized he’d loved her: the first time she’d punched out an idiot who’d been trying to throw his non-existent weight around.

Steve missed Peggy like he’d miss a limb. He hoped she’d had a good life, and had found happiness after the Skull had disappeared him into the Void.

Although, he would always miss Bucky more.

The path took them up the mountain even further, finally coming to yet another clearing, only this one was small and held only one house. The house was also the only two story building he’d seen so far, built of wood and stone, reddish-colored tile shingles glittering in the sunlight that streamed down from the open sky above.

The front garden was a riot of flowers, and the hum of bees busily working among the blossoms was calming as Sam left his horse to graze on the grass that surrounded the place. He motioned for Steve to do the same, saying, “The horses are fine here. Don’t worry, they won’t run away.”

“If you say so.” he dropped the reins, letting his horse move freely around the clearing, then followed Sam as his friend walked to the front door. Without knocking, Sam entered, shouting, “Mom! We’re here!” which echoed through the large, open-plan front room.

There were also plants on the inside of the house, all in decorative pots with brilliant paint and lacquer finishes. The floor was bare wood, polished to a high sheen, and yet it wasn’t slippery as Steve was expecting when he took his first step into the room. On one side of the room was an immense fireplace, around which were a couch and several chairs. On the other side was a fancy dining room, a kitchen visible beside it. The only area of the room that was closed off from the hallway was what had to have been the kitchen wall, and that had the wide stairs going up to the second floor, which comprised of an overhang that had several doors along the inner wall. A large skylight was in the ceiling, letting in the sun at an angle that had the upper area illuminated.

“Samuel,” a woman’s voice sounded from upstairs. Steve’s eyes found her immediately; she was coming down the stairs, a wide smile on her pleasant features.

Once she was down to the ground floor, Sam made the introductions. Lady Darlene Wilson was a handsome woman, quite a bit shorter than her son, with short dark hair that framed her delicately
pointed ears. She was wearing a long, kaftan-like dress, and she didn’t even hesitate to welcome Steve into her home. “Please, sit down, and I’ll fetch the tea.”

“Thanks, Mom.” Sam leaned down and kissed her cheek.

“I haven’t forgotten my manners, young man,” she teased him lightly. “You and your friend have a seat and I’ll be back shortly.” With that, she practically glided toward the kitchen.

Sam waved toward the sitting area. “Take a chair. If I know my mother, she’s had the tea ready to be served for the last few minutes.”

Steve took a chair, using the time waiting to get an even better look around. Every single window on this floor seemed to be open, letting in the breeze and the scent of the flowers in the garden outside. A large tree – were those limes hanging from it? – sat in a large pot in the corner, while another tree, this one grapefruit, was in the opposite corner, threatening to take over that entire side of the room. A large vining plant was draped over the mantel, and several hanging baskets on ornate wrought-iron sconces attached to the walls held various sorts of flowers in brilliant colors.

He’d always heard that Elves were close to nature, but he’d never really understood until he’d entered that house. Everything was lush and vibrant, and no one should have a thumb that green. Sam’s mother must have been a follower of the Mother Goddess, to be this in tune with growing things.

Sure enough, Lady Darlene was back with a wooden tray holding cups and a teapot, the white ceramic decorated with vines and leaves. There was also a plate of tiny cakes, almost like cookies only square and thicker.

Sam got to his feet and maneuvered a table over for her to set the tea tray on, and she gave her son a loving smile. “Thank you, Samuel.”

He leaned over and kissed her cheek again. “You’re welcome, Mom.”

“Now,” she said, setting herself in another chair and pouring, “this is an herbal tea, made with peppermint. I don’t recommend any sort of milk or sweetener, but that is entirely up to you.”

“Plain is fine, Lady Darlene.”

She passed a cup to Sam – who was sitting between her and Steve – who promptly handed it over. The steam smelled wonderful. Following that was a small plate with three cakes on it, and despite the fact that Steve had eaten a rather hearty breakfast his stomach rumbled a bit.

He took a sip, and it was wonderful. He wasn’t afraid to say so.

Lady Darlene gave him a sunny smile. “Thank you. The cakes are lemon and poppyseed, so I hope they are to your liking.”

“I’m sure they will be.”

That was when he noticed there was a fourth teacup set on the tray.

Lady Darlene caught his eye. “We’re expecting a guest,” she said serenely.

As if on cue, the door opened and a voice called out the Elven lady’s name.

It was a man’s voice.
A very familiar man’s voice.

Steve didn’t even register Sam taking the cup and plate from him as he stood, his heart hammering so hard he wouldn’t have been surprised if the sharp Elven hearing wasn’t picking up on it. He stared as the man entered the house, taking a step forward before calling Steve by name.

“Gabe?” he gasped.

Gabe Jones, former Howling Commando, gave him a welcoming smile. “I should have known if there was a way you’d survive, you’d find it.”

Gabe looked just a little older than the last time Steve had seen him, before the Paladin had gone in to face the Skull and hopefully to stop his plans in their tracks. It was in the fine lines at the corners of his eyes; his hair was just as dark as before, his body still strong and upright, as if three hundred years hadn’t passed for him at all.

Without even realizing he was moving, Steve had darted forward and grabbed his old friend into a fierce hug, tears pricking his eyes as he realized that he wasn’t as alone as he’d thought.

He should have guessed that Gabe would have been still around somewhere. After all, Elves lived much longer lifespans, and Gabe had been a young man when he’d joined in the fight against the Despot and the Skull. However, he felt he could be excused because of all the new information he’d been getting thanks to Sam and Pepper.

Finally, though, he stepped away, only to keep his hands on Gabe’s shoulders. “How did you know I was even coming today?”

There was an embarrassed throat clearing behind him. “That was me,” Sam admitted. “Usually I’d keep everything I’d learned under patient privilege, but I thought this would be a special occasion. Seeing someone you knew back then could only be beneficial.”

“And you knew about this yesterday?” Steve demanded, turning to regard Sam.

“Not until I got back and it hit me that the same man who’d been paying court to my mother for years was someone you’d talked about.” He really did look embarrassed. “I actually feel bad not figuring it out earlier, but I have to admit I’m not up on my history the way I should be.”

Steve couldn’t be mad at Sam, not for this. He’d worked it out eventually, and then arranged this surprise for him, and really Steve couldn’t thank him enough.

“Steve,” Gabe said, his voice a little sad, “there’s something else you should know.”

He turned back to his old friend, confused. “What is it?” Then he grinned. “If you’re going to tell me that any of the other Commandos were secret Elves and I didn’t know about it…”

Gabe chuckled, but it was tinged by that sadness in his eyes. “No, sorry about that.”

“Then what?” He couldn’t imagine what Gabe would have to say that would be that bad.

“I have a several times great-grandson,” he began, “he’s a Wizard. A Void, actually. He’s also about one eighth Elven, so it doesn’t show in him at all. He’s about as human as he can be at this point.”

Steve didn’t know why Gabe was telling him this, because he wasn’t sure why it was so important. Yes, it was fantastic that his old friend had moved on after Steve had vanished, and he was happy for him – which he said aloud – but he didn’t understand what Gabe was trying to say.
“He’s friends with a young woman named Daisy Coulson.”

“Related to the current Grand Master of Voids?” Certainly, there couldn’t be all that many Coulsons in the world, and hadn’t he heard that there was a daughter? That Pepper was her teaching Master?

Gabe nodded, not seeming at all surprised that Steve had known that…but then, if Gabe’s grandson was friends with Daisy Coulson, then perhaps she’d already told him about how Steve had been brought back and Sam’s breaking confidence hadn’t been necessary. He’d have to check on that later.

“Daisy and Antoine are friends,” he reiterated, “so when Daisy needed help, she asked Antoine and the other members of what Antoine calls ‘her gang’. They were supposed to be hunting for information on a cursed magical arm…which they did find, thank Gods.”

Alright, he still had no clue where this was going, and said so.

“The arm was attached to a man called the Winter Knight. However, he has another name…Steve, you’re not the only one Hydra messed with.”

Steve shivered. He couldn’t say why, only that the expression in Gabe’s dark eyes were saying something that he really didn’t want to interpret.

“Steve…that arm is attached to Bucky. And he’s still alive.”
Chapter 46

Crystal was riding Clint piggyback, and Daisy couldn’t help the silly smile at the sight of her new sister laughing as the Elf bounced her around, his exaggerated steps graceful despite the fact that he was acting like a fool.

It was all for Crystal, and if Daisy hadn’t already liked Clint it would be just one more tick in the “Clint Barton is a Nice Guy and will be Good for My Dad” column that she’d been keeping in her head.

Already, they’d gotten Crystal several new dresses – most of them in various shades of yellow, one of which she was wearing now – three pairs of shoes, a couple of nightdresses, and a new cloak for when it turned winter as well as bedding and a few decorations for her new room. The little girl had seemed overwhelmed by it all at first, as evidenced by her freak-out at the first clothes shop. However, once she’d realized that she had control over things Crystal seemed to accept what was going on and got used to asking for what she wanted.

Daisy knew she should have taken it a bit easier, but she’d just got carried away by the very idea that she now had a little sister, and blanket permission to get her whatever she needed. Daisy should have remembered the first time Dad had taken her shopping; it had been scary for a lot of reasons, especially because she just hadn’t had any experience with kindness. Her Dad had been patient until Daisy had been able to accept that he was doing this because he loved her, and had wanted her to have everything she’d ever needed or wanted.

To be fair, he’d been as inept at being a parent as Daisy had been at being a daughter, but she liked to think they got it figured out in the end.

She couldn’t wait until she told her friends about her new sister. She just knew Crystal would love them, and they would love her, too.

Natasha was shadowing them from behind, so subtly it didn’t seem like she was. Daisy felt as if she truly had a bodyguard, and that was a bit of a relief for her. Hydra was still out there, but really… how would they even manage to find her there, in Triskelia Town? And, chances were, they wouldn’t even come after her again, not after Dad had managed to close their pet Void Point. Still, having someone watch out for them meant that Daisy herself didn’t need to keep her own eye out, and could relax and show her new little sister a good time.

Although she wasn’t fooled at all that Clint wasn’t doing the exact same thing that Natasha was; he was just a lot less overt about it. Or, at least he could have fun while keeping watch.

Crystal giggled when Clint pretended the arms she had around his neck were choking him; even Daisy could tell that little girl didn’t have the strength for that. He was really good with her. It made Daisy wish that Clint had been around when she’d been a kid, because it would have been nice to have two Dads. Not that her one Dad hadn’t been amazing; he had been. But just in the days since she’d met Clint had her imagining what it would have been like if Dad had gotten in contact with Clint instead of letting the Elf think he was dead. Daisy still didn’t get why Dad had done that, but she liked to think he had a good reason for it.

Up on the right was the shop she’d been heading toward, because there were a few things they hadn’t gotten for Crystal yet. Sure, they’d picked up the necessities; now it was time to be frivolous.
Crystal’s gasp told the young woman that her sister had finally noticed where they were going. “Is that…” she squeaked in surprise.

“A toy shop,” Daisy confirmed. “We’ve got you things that you need, but now it’s time to play.”

Crystal wriggled enough to communicate to Clint that she wanted down, so he obliged. She started to run forward…but then, she stopped in her tracks, looking back over her shoulder, eyes wide with joy. “I used to have toys, but I don’t anymore.”

“Then it’s time to get some.” Daisy held out her hand, and Crystal took it, the simple trust that the little girl was showing touching Daisy in a way she couldn’t explain. With a bright grin, she escorted her new sister into the shop, determined that she would get everything that Crystal showed an interest in.

She wasn’t the only one whose attention had been caught by the very idea of being inside a toy shop. Skye was bobbing about excitedly, and the young Wizard was concerned her dragon might take a header off her shoulders. Lockjaw, who’d been following, made chirping noises that were just on this side of audible, they were pitched so high.

The only dragon who didn’t show the same interest was Lucky, but then he was just happy to stay with Clint.

Daisy still thought Clint having a dragon was awesome. If anyone deserved it, it was him. She’d seen how he was like with Lola, and with Skye to a lesser extent – simply because they hadn’t spent all that much time together yet – and he was just awesome with dragons. His guilt at killing Raina’s dragon had been real, and heartfelt.

Still, she was a little jealous that he’d gotten to meet the Queen of Air and Fire.

Anyway.

The toy shop.

Crystal came to a halt, her mouth open, and Daisy was a little afraid she’d been overwhelmed once more, only this time by the sheer number of different sorts of toys and games that the shop had. Then, with a happy squeal, she let go of Daisy’s hand and practically ran toward the stuffed animals, Lockjaw following behind just as excitedly.

Daisy’s heart swelled at seeing her act like a kid for really the first time.

“She’s going to need a bigger room,” Clint joked.

“And Dad will be more than happy to get her one, even if he has to use magic to make hers grow.”

“You’re not kidding.”

Daisy took the chance to hug the Elf, who was more than happy to hug her back this time, a lot less surprised by it than he’d been back at Ianto’s just the other day. They’d been through a lot together, and the young woman was really glad he was going to be staying. She might tease him, but she could see how good he was for her Dad. It hadn’t really occurred to her until Clint had come into their lives just how much Dad had needed someone that wasn’t his daughter. Oh, that wasn’t to say he’d never dated; Daisy vaguely recalled a couple of times he’d gone out with others, but it had never amounted to anything. She was just now realizing that he’d put his entire life on hold for her, and it made him even more special to her, but it really was time for Dad to do something for himself.
As she watched, Crystal began to pet at several of the stuffed toys, and there were a lot of them. One entire aisle was dedicated to them, and Daisy wondered just how her sister was going to be able to pick out what she wanted. Hells, Daisy was having a hard time, although that one bear with the rainbows on the pads of its feet was absolutely adorable.

But this wasn’t about her. This was about Crystal. Daisy could come back anytime to pick something out for herself.

Suddenly, Clint was gone and, startled, Daisy turned to watch as he headed toward the toy weapons. She couldn’t help the grin as she watched him pick up a toy bow that had been painted a pretty vivid purple, arrows tipped with large cloth balls next to it. His eyes were lit with unholy glee as he clutched the set to his chest.

“Clint…” Natasha said in warning.

“My,” he practically hissed at her, although it had to have been an act because Lucky was giving the dragon version of an insane chuckle.

Daisy started laughing at them, which set Skye off. The sight of a grown man going nuts over a toy was hilarious.

“Daddy’s silly.”

Startled, Daisy glanced down to see Crystal standing beside her, watching as Clint tried to keep Natasha from wrestling the bow away from him. What had actually made the sight funnier was the very real bow and quiver that were strapped to his back, and the idea that he’d want a toy version was absolutely precious.

Then, it caught up to her what Crystal had just called Clint.

For that, Daisy had to kneel and give her a big hug. “Yes, he’s very silly.”

“Daisy?”

“Yeah?”

“Can you help me pick a stuffed animal?”

She gave the little girl a bright smile, pleased that she’d asked. “Why just one?”

Crystals’ blue eyes went wide. “I can get more than one?”

“Sure! I don’t see why not. You can get other toys, as well.” They’d gone through much of Dad’s money for the clothes and necessities; they could use Uncle Nick’s letter of credit for other stuff.

Crystal grabbed Daisy by the hand, leading her over the aisle of stuffed toys. It took them a little bit, but the little girl finally picked out five, one of them the bear that Daisy had noticed, the one with the rainbows on its paw pads.

Then, to her surprise, Crystal walked right up to Clint and said, “I want a bow and arrow, too, please.”

The expression on his face…if Daisy had even doubted that he loved her, that was wiped away. He handed over the set that Natasha had been trying to take away from him. “I’ll even teach you how to use it, if you want.”
“Please, Daddy. I want to learn.”

Being called Daddy made the Elf all sappy, judging from the glitter of unshed tears in his eyes. “You got it, baby. It will be my genuine pleasure.”

Crystal hugged his legs, almost poking him in a delicate place with the arm of the bow. However, Clint didn’t even flinch, resting a hand on her hair.

“Go and keep looking around,” he urged her. “We’ll make sure what you’ve already got will be taken care of for you.”

“Okay.” She handed the bow back, then headed down to the dolls.

This time, Natasha didn’t try to take it away from him. But then, it wasn’t his anymore, apparently, so it was no longer fair game.

“Her pile is over there.” Daisy pointed toward the counter, where she’d stacked the animals that Crystal had claimed. Standing behind the counter was a young man who looked pleased as punch to be standing guard over the selection so far. And Daisy hadn’t even mentioned the letter of credit yet. She could only imagine that reaction.

“Do you think Phil will mind that she calls me Daddy?” Clint looked and sounded in awe of that name, and Daisy supposed she couldn’t blame him.

“Are you kidding?” she scoffed lightly. “He’s gonna love it.”

That had him smiling rather dopily. Daisy would have teased him for it, if she wasn’t aware that she had the exact same expression on her face.

As Crystal looked around, other children and their families came into the store. Daisy kept an eye on her sister, not wanting her to get upset or anything at the other kids, but she seemed to be handling it just fine. In fact, Crystal got into a discussion with a little boy about the merits of building blocks; she was obviously getting his opinion.

She did eventually decide against the blocks.

Daisy got the distinct impression that her sister was going to be more into ‘girly’ toys at that point. Which was perfectly fine, really. Daisy had been the same way once she’d figured out that it was alright to be a girl and not a tomboy who had to give up pretty dresses for trousers and dolls for knives.

Alright, yes, there was still that little bit of tomboy in her, and she still had her old knife in her bedside drawer, but she was proud of it and she’d earned that title. Just ask the trees outside the Keep and the still slightly visible scars on her knees.

They were in the store for a solid hour. Natasha had managed to convince Crystal that the bigger the dollhouse, the better…although that hadn’t taken all that much convincing, actually. Dad was going to have fun putting that together, even though she was certain Clint would help. He would have to, because she was pretty sure that was going to be a two-person job, and that didn’t even count unwrapping all the tiny furniture which was going to be a real bugger.

She’d just finished paying – and yes, the letter of credit had caused a minor uproar, which was awesome – and was just arranging to have everything sent to the castle and then Dad could magic it forward to the Keep, when a cheeping noise came from her pocket.
It was her speaking stone.

“What is that?” Crystal asked curiously.

Daisy knelt so she could see. “It’s my speaking stone. I made it. Watch.” With a touch of her magic, she activated the stone and called out into it. “Hello?” It could have been any of her friends, or Dad.

It was Dad. “Hello, Daisy.” His voice warm even through the stone.

“Hi, Dad,” she greeted.

Crystal was bouncing a little. “Hi, Dad!” she shouted a little louder than was strictly necessary.

Dad didn’t speak for a moment, and Daisy just knew he was being all mushy about Crystal calling him that. Then, he said, “Are you both having fun?”

“We are!” Crystal answered, once again fairly shouting.

Daisy shushed her a little, letting her know she didn’t need to speak so loudly.

“Sorry,” she said, in more of an indoor voice.

“That’s alright, sweetheart. I’m glad you’re having a good time.”

“I’ve got clothes and Auntie Nat helped me with my dollhouse and Daisy helped me pick out some stuffed animals and Daddy said he’d teach me how to use my new bow – “

“New bow?” His voice was calm, but Daisy could tell he didn’t think her having that sort of thing was a really good idea and that he was going to have words with Clint about it.

Yep, Clint could read between the lines as well, judging from his rather sheepish expression. It hadn’t hit him yet that Crystal had called Clint, ‘Daddy’.

She knew it would, though…and there it was, that flash of pleasure accompanied by a blush that had his ears turning red. She would have teased him about it, if it wasn’t such a big deal.

“It’s a toy, Dad,” she assured him. “Not a real bow.”

“That’s good.” Once again, he didn’t really say anything, but Daisy knew the moment his brain caught up with what Crystal had said. “And I’m sure your Daddy will be able to teach you a lot about the bow. He’s very good at it.”

Oh Gods, and there was that same sappy tone Clint had gotten earlier.

Daisy couldn’t remember if he’d ever sounded like that with her, but she was willing to bet he had. For a former evil Wizard, her Dad was a real marshmallow.

“If you’re about finished, you both should be heading home. There are a couple of things I need to talk to you both about.”

Daisy was willing to bet it was about Crystal’s adoption, and what had led up to it. From what the young woman could recall of her own adoption, there had been a few people who hadn’t thought that a Void adopting a Cardinal was a good idea, and had fought Uncle Nick on allowing it to go
through. Dad had prevailed with the Baronial Council and the magistrates, which was a good thing, because she would have just run back to him the moment she could if they’d tried to take her away from him.

This would be different, because Crystal was Void and there were a lot of important people on Dad’s side in this. It didn’t matter that Crystal’s birth parents were around; Daisy was willing to bet whatever Barony she’d been living in had already begun dissolution paperwork. If everything went the way Daisy was hoping, then Crystal would be her legal sister as soon as possible.

“Can we go home now, Daisy?” Crystal asked. “I got everything I want now.”

“Sure, and if we need anything else then we can always come back another time.” She’d been hoping to stop by the bookshop down the street, but that could wait. Dad had some books of fairy tales that she could borrow if Crystal wanted to have a story read to her. They’d also need to see about her reading comprehension and writing level, and get her caught up if she was behind. There were books for that, and she was sure they could find something to help out. Andrew might even be able to suggest something.

“We have plenty of time to get anything else later,” her Dad concurred.

“We’ll head on back to Uncle Nick’s now,” Daisy said. “We have quite a lot to move back to the Keep.”

“Thanks for the warning, although I think I assumed that just from Crystal’s list.”

Daisy laughed. “We’ll be home soon.”

“See you all then. Oh, and tell Auntie Nat she’s welcome to come as well.” He sounded amused by that, which was fine because Natasha seemed to feel the same way, judging from the small smile in her eyes.

There was a single little ping, and that was the stone being disconnected from the stone Dad had back at the Keep. She slipped it back into her pocket, then stood up. “Let’s go home.” She held out her hand to Crystal, who took it without hesitation.

They really weren’t that far away from the castle; it rose up in front of them, the road they were on leading right up to the front gate. It was a bit crowded, and Clint and Natasha walked behind them to avoid getting in the way of the foot traffic that was going to and fro along the large stone slabs of the sidewalk, eventually falling even further behind. From what Dad had once told her, Triskelia had once been run by a madman who’d been set on bleeding the people dry, until Uncle Nick had come in and stolen the Barony right from under the man. Once he’d taken over, he’d fixed things, and now Barony Triskelia was one of the more prosperous among the Twenty Baronies of the Western Lands. Uncle Nick had done good work here, and Daisy was proud of him.

Foot traffic was getting heavier the closer they got to the castle; Daisy realized it must have been some sort of market day, and she hadn’t known. Although, to be fair, she really didn’t get to town that much, spending most of her time at the Keep or at school. She’d wished she’d thought to ask Uncle Nick before leaving out.

Daisy gripped onto Crystal’s hand a little tighter. She could tell her new sister was getting a little scared, because she squeezed right back and didn’t loosen her fingers. Daisy was about to stop and pick her up, but something grabbed her and yanked her toward the alley they were passing. In the process, Crystal’s hand was torn from hers, and a tiny scream sounded as the little girl was swallowed up by the bustling crowd.
Before Daisy could fight off whoever it was who’d forcibly pulled her into the alley, a cold wetness touched her neck, and suddenly the world slanted, and the young woman grew dizzy. Daisy staggered, slamming bodily into the side of one of the buildings that formed the alley, her shoulder colliding painfully against the brick as she slid down the wall to collapse against the cold stone walkway.

Daisy felt as if she wanted to throw up. The dizziness was throwing off her equilibrium; her vision swam as she tried to discover just who’d done whatever the hells it was to her.

She couldn’t bring her magic to bear; it felt almost like it was back in Hydra’s house, when the Void was stifling her. It was also different, because her magic was there, it was just that her head was so swamped by pain and nausea that she didn’t have the strength to use it anymore.

Blinking her eyes to clear the vertigo, Daisy managed to glance up…

To see John Garrett standing over her, a nasty grin on his face.

Tunnel-vision warped his features as he leaned over her, the nastiness of his grin fading into pleased superiority. He knelt in front of her, and Daisy raised a shaking hand…but he easily batted it away. “No, I don’t think so,” he laughed. “My little spell has you all messed up, little girl.”

Daisy did the only thing she could.

She leaned forward and vomited all over his boots.

It didn’t make the nausea any less, but she still felt better emotionally.

Garrett cursed as he stumbled back out of the way of any more puke. “Bitch! If I didn’t want you alive, I’d kill you right now.”

He slapped her, and that made her head hurt even worse even though Daisy knew, intellectually, that he hadn’t been in the best position to do much damage. Somewhere, far away, she could hear someone shouting her name, and she thought it might have been Clint but she couldn’t be sure.

The only sound she could make in reply to that was a harsh croaking noise that had Garret smirking.

“Having a hard time talking?” he taunted. “Not that they could actually come to your rescue. I’ve got wards all over this alley, so the chances your bodyguards finding you are nil. We won’t be here long, anyway.”

Daisy wanted to scream. Garrett was going to take her away, and if there was anything she’d learned from past events was that she hated being kidnapped and used against her Dad. Because she was absolutely certain that was what Garrett had in mind. It would probably mean he’d kill her this time, since he’d go for what hurt Dad the most.

“Let’s get you out of here, shall we?” Garrett got an arm around her, hefting her to her feet.

“Oh, I don’t think so.”

The young woman managed to get her head flopped toward the voice, her heart lifting at the sight of her Dad, standing at the mouth of the alley, with Clint coming to stand just behind his shoulder, his bow out and aimed at Garrett. Natasha was on the other side and, while she wasn’t armed, Daisy didn’t doubt that she could take out Garrett with her little finger.

Garrett looked gobsmacked. Daisy wanted to laugh, but all that came out was some sort of crazed
sounding gurgle.

What had he done to her?

“How did you get here so fast?” Garrett demanded. “I didn’t sense you anywhere close by!”

Dad just raised a single eyebrow. “Do you think you can take me, John?” Then he smiled, an almost viciously amused thing that had Daisy wondering if it was something he’d once worn as the Dark One. “Would you like to try?”
Phil put down the speaking stone, considering the conversation he’d just had.

Crystal had called him Dad.

She’d called Clint Daddy.

Everything suddenly felt very real.

He was going to be adopting another little girl, at the same time entering into what could most likely be a long-term relationship with the man he’d long ago fallen in love with but had thought he hadn’t deserved.

Phil had to wonder when he’d actually deserved to be this happy.

Although, it was a happiness tinged with just the smallest amount of sadness, something that he really didn’t want to think about. Because he was going to outlive them all, as well as Daisy, and he didn’t want to do that.

He sighed. He couldn’t dwell on that, there was nothing he could do to change it. He should take the happiness he’d been given and enjoy it while it lasted.

Standing, Phil left his study to find Melinda and Andrew hauling several packages down the hallway and toward the stairs. “The first of the new things for Crystal have arrived,” his Steward reported. “These look like clothes and other essentials.”

“I just finished speaking with Daisy, and they were at a toy store.” He knew he hadn’t quite given her enough money for everything, but figured that Marcus had chipped in. After all, his old friend did love to play the doting uncle.

Melinda rolled her eyes fondly. “You may need to move her to a larger room.”

“Do we have anything larger?” He thought about that spell on Ianto’s scroll tube, wondering if it could be adapted to entire rooms, but dismissed the notion. He might have coveted that spell, but at the same time he wasn’t entirely sure it was such a good idea to make one room larger, and not any others. While he was pretty sure Daisy wouldn’t mind, it still didn’t seem fair.

She considered. “Not on that floor. The room she’s in now is next to Daisy’s, which is actually the largest besides yours. We could make something into a playroom for all the toys that I’m sure Daisy will encourage her to buy.”

Now, that was an idea. “If it comes down to it, I can always magic some sort of door between rooms, although I’d prefer not to do that. If all the toys are in a different room, that means we won’t catch her playing after bedtime.”

He still remembered finding Daisy still up when she should have been long to bed, reading. She’d been quite the avid reader as a child, and Phil could just see her trying to foster that in her new sister. They were going to have to see what her reading and writing levels were and possibly finding her a tutor to get her caught up.
And perhaps Phil himself could teach her about her magic…which reminded him, he needed to arrange to speak with Wanda about becoming his Novice. He’d want to make certain that it would be fine with her for Crystal to sit in on some of their lessons, and he didn’t really think Wanda would mind, once she knew about the newest addition to the household. Crystal wouldn’t be able to perform any sort of magic on that level for a long time, but Phil wanted her to get used to the fact that her magic wasn’t evil, or bad. That it was completely natural. And he thought seeing him and Wanda working together would go a long way toward normalizing that sort of thing for her. Still, he needed to clear it, and make certain that Wanda wouldn’t feel like his attention was being taken away from teaching her.

“Go ahead and see what we have that will make a decent playroom.” Phil grinned. “Crystal said something about a dollhouse.”

“Of course she did.” Melinda hoisted the bundles a little higher then headed toward the stairs, where Andrew had already headed up, not being inclined to hang around and chat.

Phil shook his head. He had to wonder when his life had got so wonderfully weird.

Lola laughed at him, no doubt reading the intention behind his emotions.

He looked down at the dragon. “Come on, you. I want a muffin and you obviously want a chicken leg.” Breakfast had been a couple of hours ago, and he was still a little peckish from all the magic he’d used last night.

She agreed with him.

“I thought as much.” He scrubbed his knuckles across her crest, which had her arching into the gesture. He’d been so incredibly blessed the day this dragon had showed up in his room at his parent’s house and crawled into bed with him. She’d been one of his many saving graces.

He found the blueberry muffins easily enough. Andrew had made a batch a day ago, so they weren’t exactly fresh, but they were just fine slathered with butter. Lola gnawed on her chicken leg, her contentment leaking into his mind.

Phil was just thinking about a second muffin when his wards alerted him to someone suddenly appearing in the Keep. Which should have been impossible, since Shield Keep was unPlotable, and this wasn’t the signature of any Teleport artifact he’d ever magicked with the coordinates.

As he left the kitchens he heard Melinda shouting for him, so he used his magic to propel him upward to the level his friend was on…the girls’ rooms.

His heart pounding, Phil’s feet hit the landing and was heading toward Crystal’s room, where Melinda had last been. Wand out, he practically threw himself into the room…

To find Melinda cradling a sobbing Crystal, Lockjaw standing guard on the end of the bed, his own distress obvious from the little mewling sounds he was making.

The moment she saw him, she shrieked, “Dad!” and was in his arms. Phil wrapped himself around the level his friend was on…the girls’ rooms.

His heart pounding, Phil’s feet hit the landing and was heading toward Crystal’s room, where Melinda had last been. Wand out, he practically threw himself into the room…

To find Melinda cradling a sobbing Crystal, Lockjaw standing guard on the end of the bed, his own distress obvious from the little mewling sounds he was making.

The moment she saw him, she shrieked, “Dad!” and was in his arms. Phil wrapped himself around her, wanting to ask how she’d got there, and where Daisy and the others were. He stroked her hair, over that odd black streak, trying to get her to calm down.

“She and her dragon just appeared,” Andrew reported. He was standing by the wardrobe, where he must have been putting clothes away. “I think…it was Lockjaw. It could be his dragon secondary ability.”
Just like Master John Smith’s dragon, Tardis. It also explained how she and Lockjaw had survived on their own as long as they had, most likely by stealing food when they could by teleporting into homes.

“Crystal,” he soothed her. “It’s fine, sweetheart.”

“No, it’s not!” she wailed. “Something happened to Daisy! She was holding my hand, and then I was alone and she was gone, and I couldn’t find Daddy or Auntie Nat and I felt magic like ours but I didn’t like it and there wasn’t anything I could do – “

Phil’s heart clenched. “Crystal, look at me please.” He didn’t know what had caused this, but he was suddenly so very afraid for his daughter and lover and his friend. He needed to get there as soon as he could, to make sure nothing horrible had occurred.

She turned her tear-streaked face toward his, her eyes trusting.

“Can Lockjaw take me back to where you were?”

Crystal nodded. She rubbed her hand across her nose, sniffling roughly.

“Alright, I need you to stay here with Melinda and Andrew, and I’m going to go and fetch them all home, okay?”

She nodded again, and he was once again in awe of the trust she was showing him. Usually, Wizards didn’t trust people with their dragons, but there was Crystal, giving over Lockjaw into his care.

The smaller dragon was in his arms in seconds. He growled, but Phil knew it wasn’t aimed at him. “I’m ready whenever you are,” he told Lockjaw.

Lola stepped up beside them both.

And suddenly, they were in a busy street.

It didn’t feel like any sort of Teleport spell Phil had ever used. It felt more of a weird, sideways motion, but he didn’t question or stop to consider how it worked. He set Lockjaw down, turning on his heel to get his bearings.

He was on the main market road of Triskelia Town, the people passing by giving him funny looks as they dodged around him, moving onto their destinations and pretty much disregarding his existence. In front of him was an alley between two buildings, and he was feeling a definite Void presence within, as well as a Cardinal one that was as familiar to him as his own aura. Setting Lockjaw down next to Lola, he scanned the area before deciding that the alley was where he needed to be.

Phil was about to step into that alley when he heard Clint call his name.

Both Clint and Natasha were pushing through the pedestrians. Clint had his bow out and, while Natasha wasn’t visibly armed, she didn’t have to be. Trusting that they had his back, he turned back to the alley and strode inside, magic rising to his call.

Not that far in, he saw exactly what had happened to his eldest daughter.

John Garrett was hefting her to her feet. Daisy was completely helpless, sagging in Garrett’s arms, and Phil realized his must have used a spell to make her unable to fight back. Skye was on the ground next to her, flopping around as if she’d suddenly lost all coordination, so the dragon must
have been struck by the spell as well.

“Let’s get you out of here, shall we?” Garrett was saying as he lifted her.

That simply wasn’t going to happen.

A preternatural calm settled over Phil. He wasn’t about to let this bastard hurt his daughter.

“Oh, I don’t think so,” he said, his tone flat.

Without actually seeing them, Phil knew that Clint and Natasha had taken up positions on either side of him, ready to cover him if needed. The Wizard wasn’t going to need it, but he appreciated it all the same.

Daisy’s head flopped toward the sound of his voice. While her body wasn’t functioning, it seemed that she had all her faculties; she looked completely pissed, and then glad to see him standing there. The same look of trust that Crystal had given him was there as well, and he had to swallow down the emotions that threatened to choke him.

Garrett, however, didn’t look at all glad to see him. Phil sarcastically wondered why, not wanting to laugh in his face. He needed to retain his calm, because he couldn’t discount John Garrett even a little.

The last time he’d done that, he’d been stabbed in the back by a mad Asgardian Wizard.

Daisy laughed. Or, at least Phil assumed it was a laugh. It sounded more like she was gargling on her own saliva.

“How did you get here so fast?” Garrett shouted. “I didn’t sense you anywhere close by!”

Phil raised an eyebrow at him. “Do you think you can take me, John? Would you like to try?” He gave one of his Dark One smiles, the one that warned anyone going up against him that this was to the death, and there would be no quarter given.

Garrett seemed to rally, because his utterly shocked expression morphed into a sly smile. “Phil! Fancy meeting you here. As I said, I didn’t sense you anywhere in the area.”

“That’s because I wasn’t.” It didn’t hurt to tell the man the truth, although he wasn’t about to mention just how he’d arrived there. “I got wind of your little kidnapping attempt and came immediately. So…why don’t you put my daughter down, and I won’t kill you where you stand and take her back over your rotting corpse.”

Uncertainty flashed through Garrett’s dark eyes and instead of putting Daisy down, he clutched her closer, positioning her so that her limp body covered most of his own. “I don’t think you’ll do anything while I hold your precious Daisy.”

“I have the shot,” Clint whispered, so close that his breath tickled his ear.

Phil didn’t even twitch, although knowing that his lover was that nearby made him want to shiver. He couldn’t risk Daisy’s life by giving into his attraction to Clint. “Stand down,” he ordered. “He’s mine.”

The unique sound of the release of pressure of a drawn string on the arms of a bow sounded, and he didn’t even have to look to know that Clint had loosened his draw. “He’s all yours.”
Phil stalked toward Garrett slowly, taking the man’s measure. He could already sense that the other Wizard wasn’t nearly as strong as Phil, himself, was, but that didn’t mean he was any less wily. He had his experience with Loki to fall back on, but this time he had two trusted people watching his back, and also he’d lost so much of the arrogance that had ruled his common sense back then.

“I wouldn’t come any closer if I were you,” Garrett warned. He had one arm around Daisy’s waist, supporting her weight, while his free hand had roughly grasped her chin, holding her head upright. “I can snap her neck like a twig if I wanted to.”

“If you think you’re leaving with her, you’re wrong.” With a single flex of his magic, Phil broke every single Teleport artifact in the vicinity…including the one that Garrett had somewhere on his person. “You’re going to have to go through me to get out of here, and you won’t be able to do that.”

He could tell the moment Garrett noticed that whatever he’d been using to teleport wasn’t working. “I still have dear Daisy, Phil. And I can still kill her before you can even move.”

“What says I have to move to kill you?” He stopped several steps away, simply staring the man down. Garrett was once again looking very uncertain, but he wasn’t letting Daisy loose.

Oh, the urge to murder Garrett was so strong, Phil couldn’t really keep it in check. This bastard had his daughter, and he’d also trained the Novice who’d taken Daisy in the first place. There really was no way he was getting out of that alley, not with Daisy…and not with his life.

Phil called the Void to him…and out of John Garrett.

The Void was a part of all Void Wizards. It ran through their veins and bone and sinew. Removing it completely would mean the death of the Wizard.

And so, that was exactly what Phil did.

The Void had chosen him to be its Champion. Not that anyone had actually said that sort of thing, but the Wizard could feel that was his purpose, now that he was passing judgement on John Garrett for what he’d done, what he’d been a part of. Hydra had tried to warp the Void for its own ends, poisoning it so badly that Phil had had to close a Void Point so it could heal.

This was something the Void would not stand for.

Garrett’s eyes flew open. “What…” he swallowed, hard. “What are you doing?”

“You have been found guilty of crimes against your Order, and against the Void,” Phil answered grimly. “As Grand Master of Void Order, it is my duty to pass judgment.”

Garrett gasped, as if he was having trouble drawing breath. Even though Phil couldn’t hear it, he knew that the other man’s heart was laboring under the removal of Void from the Wizard’s body. Garrett was beginning to tremble, his grip on Daisy weakening.

“Natasha,” Phil requested, “will you please go and get my daughter before Garrett drops her?”

He didn’t see the smirk to know it was there as Natasha did as he asked, scooping up Skye as well. She carried them out of the alley.

Garrett attempted to bring his magic to bear, but it would not come to his call. The Void had spoken, and it was abandoning him, letting Phil draw it away as easily as he would draw air into his lungs.
“If you kill me,” Garrett growled, “you’ll never find the others.”

“It’s too late to bargain, John. You had your chance to escape your fate, and you decided to threaten my child instead.”

He could see the Void twisting and curling away from Garrett’s body as Garrett dropped to his knees, his dragon crawling to him, mewling pitifully.

Phil could hear Clint making almost silent distressed sounds, and Phil knew it was because of Buddy. That killing Garrett would kill his dragon as well. He sent a request to Lola that she help Lucky look after Clint, because this was going to be painful to the Elf who never would want to see a dragon suffer.

Neither did Phil, but this was justice and it needed to be meted out.

The Void had made him its Champion.

Of that he was now certain.

Hydra had hurt the Void. They no longer had any right to its power and support.

Thrusting his hands out toward the dying man, Phil made the final call to the Void within Garrett. It came at his summoning, curling around his arms, twisting through his fingers, warm yet cold but familiar to him as his own blood. It leaked out of John Garrett like sweat, like tears, the very essence of a Void Wizard coming because Phil had passed the Void’s sentence...

Death.

“Phil,” Clint gasped, his voice horribly broken.

“I am the Void’s Champion,” he said aloud for the first time, implacably, acknowledging the fact now that he knew it to be true. “This is the Void’s judgment, and it’s my job to carry it out.” He just wished it wasn’t hurting Clint so badly to see a dragon in pain.

“Idris told me that dragons had their own destinies,” his lover said, clearing his throat so that the words were a little less pained. “And sometimes those destinies are dark ones. Buddy was given to Garrett by the Queen of Air and Fire, but chose to accept that decision, and it wasn’t the dragon’s fault that his Wizard is a bastard. However,” he took a deep breath, and Phil wished he could divert his attention from Garrett just long enough to glance in his lover’s direction, “a very intelligent man also told me that dragons choose to follow their Wizards, and aren’t afraid to tell them off when they think the Wizard is doing something stupid. Between those two people, I understand that it’s fine to mourn a lost dragon, but there’s really nothing I can do to save them if they don’t choose to save themselves.”

“But you don’t have to like it.”

“No. I don’t have to like it.”

Phil prayed to every God there was that Clint never change. Because, the day he did, he wouldn’t be Clint Barton anymore.

As he watched, the last of the Void trickled out of John Garrett, and he collapsed into a limp pile in the dirt of the alley, Buddy lying on top of him, neither of the breathing. Phil dropped his arms, the Void still tangled about him, slowly fading back into its home beyond the veil between dimensions.
John Garrett was dead.

Phil should have been happy.

But he wasn’t.

However, it had needed to be done.

He didn’t have to like it, though. Even as much as he wanted to.
Pepper had had a productive day so far.

She’d managed to get through lesson plans for the two student courses she was responsible for; while she much preferred teaching Novices, Pepper did take quite a bit of pride in passing on her knowledge to the younger Wizards. She mostly taught various sorts of Cardinal charms, beginner’s level, and Tony sometimes made jokes about the types of charms he thought she should teach.

Sometimes her husband was incorrigible.

She’d also gone over the next steps in Daisy’s lessons. Her Novice was an extremely powerful Cardinal, and was advanced enough from her father’s teachings that she’d been able to skip almost the entire first-year Novice schedule; just Daisy’s wards alone were impressive. Thanks to Phil, of course, which was why she’d been too eager to push him into getting a Novice of his own. He was an excellent teacher, the way he’d been able to show Daisy how to adapt his spells to her own magic, despite the fact that he was Void, and that it shouldn’t have worked as well as it had. She really did hope he’d accept Wanda, because that young woman really did deserve the best. And Phil Coulson was the best, in Pepper’s informed opinion.

So, Pepper had mostly worked on control, because Daisy would eventually need to rely less on the gauntlets Phil had made for her, after she’d nearly taken down the side of a mountain.

Those gauntlets were a work of art. Pepper had been able to adapt Phil’s original spell work in them to help other students with control issues. None of them were as strong as Daisy, but then not a lot of young Wizards were.

Now that Daisy was better controlled, her magic had blossomed. Pepper figured that she would be a year early in taking her Master’s exams, which was a testament to Daisy’s work ethic and her father’s steadfast support and encouragement.

Yet more reason for Phil to become a teaching Master. Pepper just knew any Novice under his guidance would thrive and be amazing.

With everything that had been going on lately, Pepper could admit that she’d let her lessons slide a little. She really needed to get things back on track, and to do that she needed to start running her own lessons again instead of relying on her teaching assistant. Joey was quite good at teaching, and hoped to go into it himself after his own Mastery exams were done. But it was still Pepper’s responsibility to give her students the best education possible. She needed to get back to that.

She flexed her wrist, to relieve a little of the tiredness. She’d been writing for the last several hours, and her hand was beginning to ache a bit. Pepper wondered what Ana would have prepared for lunch. She was quite hungry…making up lesson plans apparently gave her an appetite.

Happy, who’d been sleeping on the chair nearest the window while she worked, awakened and chirped at her inquisitively. “Yes,” she laughed, “I’m going to go and get something to eat.”

The dragon, eagerness flooding their link, launched himself from the chair and took his usual place.
on her shoulders. Pepper gave him a quick scratch on the chin, and he playfully nipped at her finger in an effort to encourage her to get a move on with the feeding.

Setting her work aside, Pepper left the study and headed toward the kitchens. Pepper would have to roust Tony and Dr. Banner out of the workshop at some point, since they’d most likely forget to eat if she didn’t. It seemed as if Tony had sucked poor Bruce right into his orbit of scientific discovery; it wasn’t a bad thing that he now had someone who could understand a lot of what her husband did when he was being creative. Yes, Bruce had a different background when he came to such things, but there were still basic foundations that the two men could share. Besides, Tony needed more friends. He had a tendency to shut himself off from others, and didn’t have a lot of people he could name really close friends, and not just the friendly acquaintances he excelled at gaining. Hells, Pepper thought there was only the one person that close, Rhody, and that was it. And Rhody wasn’t around as often as he used to be, now that he was the Barony’s Knights’ Commander.

Well, of course she was close to him as well, but that was understood since she’d married him. However, there were certain things she just didn’t understand about him, but she did try even if her success rate was as close to nil as it could get, and she did encourage his inventions. Pepper knew that he loved her even more for that, although it was easy because she was just so proud of him.

Something was smelling divine when she entered the castle’s enormous kitchens. They’d been constructed with large Baronial banquets in mind, but Pepper and Tony really didn’t throw those sorts of things, except on Baronial anniversaries and other very special occasions. About the only times more than the family was there for any length of time, was when Pepper would have various students in for various reasons. Daisy spent a bit of time there as well, as Pepper’s Novice; to be honest, Pepper thought she might consider taking another one, now that Daisy was as far along as she was. There were many teaching Masters with several Novices; Master Alphonso Mackenzie had two, Daisy’s friends Jemma Simmons and Leo Fitz. However, those two youngsters were a package deal, so to speak. Still, she might think about that with the next crop of advanced students.

She could have taken on Pietro Maximoff, but Ianto deserved to have his own Novice, and she wasn’t about to let him get away with not teaching. Ianto Jones was just as competent as Phil Coulson was, and Pietro would do amazing work under his tutelage. Just as Wanda would with Phil as her teaching Master.

Ana was at the stove, her slight form stirring something in a large pot. Jarvis was tending to something in the large smoker cabinet; Pepper wondered just what sort of smoked meat they would be having for dinner tonight.

“That smells wonderful,” she commented, Happy agreeing with glad chatter. He loved both Jarvis and Ana, but was particularly fond of Ana, mostly because she fed him whenever he wanted.

“Mistress Pepper.” Ana greeted her, her voice slightly accented. She turned around with a bright smile, continuing to stir. “This is a sauce for the side of beef Edwin is fetching from the smoker.”

Pepper could smell the various spices in the sauce, and she inhaled deeply. Her stomach reacted to the olfactory stimuli by growling really loudly, completely destroying any sort of dignity she might have had.

Ana laughed. “There’s a plate for you in the cold box, and one for Happy as well. I thought you may want something after you completed your lesson work.”

“Thank you.” Ana was good at that sort of anticipation.

The cold box took up one entire corner. Pepper had been a little shocked when Tony had asked her
to create one that large, but she’d done it on the condition that he never put any of his inventions inside it. Tony had scoffed at that, and it hadn’t been until later that she’d realized that he’d intended on creating a version of it that didn’t run on Chilling enchantments. He hadn’t had a lot of success as yet—something about finding a stable cooling material—but he hadn’t given up. He’d wanted one as large as possible in order to observe how it worked.

After that, she’d been fine with doing as he’d asked, since Pepper thought his inventions would make life so much easier for the majority of people who couldn’t afford expensive magical devices.

And it didn’t hurt that Ana had practically fallen in love with the oversized storage unit the moment she’d seen it. She’d actually hugged Tony for asking Pepper to do it. Then, she’d hugged Pepper for putting in all the hard work.

Inside the cold box was the plate, sitting alone on one of the upper shelves. On it was meat and cheese, and two slices of bread. Next to it was another plate, this one with a half a chicken on it.

Pepper took both plates out and made her way to the table where Jarvis and Ana usually ate their own meals, and tucked into the food, setting the one meant for Happy on the table, since he was such a small dragon and would only get underfoot if he ate on the floor like others of his kind did.

She was most of the way through when Jarvis sat another plate down next to the one she was almost finished with, this one holding a cranberry orange scone with a small jar of clotted cream. Pepper grinned up at the Steward. “And what did I do to deserve this?”

Jarvis gave her one of his patented tiny grins. “I’m sure I don’t know what you mean, Mistress Pepper.”

She shook her head in amusement, because this was Jarvis’ way of saying she wasn’t eating enough. And she wasn’t about to turn down one of Ana’s homemade scones.

Pepper was just licking the remains of cranberry and orange from her fingers when someone pinged one of her wards on the castle. Happy felt it as well, because he roused from the sleep he’d fallen into once he’d finished eating, his head cocked curiously.

They had visitors.

Not unfriendly visitors, so Pepper figured she’d probably need to go and greet them.

“Someone’s here,” she told Jarvis and Ana.

“Should I go and answer it?” Jarvis inquired.

“No, I’ll do it. Whoever it is, they feel familiar to me.” It wasn’t a magical presence, but there was a faint tang of old Void…oh, of course.

Steve must be back.

But he wasn’t alone.

Together, she and Happy headed up toward the main hall. She’d told Steve to come right in when he got back from the Enclave; to be honest, she hadn’t expected him back until much later. Pepper hoped everything was alright, that he hadn’t been stressed by whatever he’d seen.

Steve was pacing in the hallway. And yes, he wasn’t alone; Sam Wilson was with him, as was an older Elf with skin as dark as Sam’s, wearing more traditional green robes and breeches, his boots
worn deer hide. His dark eyes rested on her as she approached, and they didn’t look happy at all.

Steve must have noticed her as well, because he stopped pacing to turn and face her. “Did you know?” he demanded, obviously upset about something.

Pepper frowned. “Know what?” She hated being confronted in her own home, but something was wrong so she held her own temper until she had more information.

“About Bucky,” Steve snarled, his fists clenched at his sides.

Pepper wasn’t afraid to admit she was confused now. “I have no idea what you mean. If you’d like to explain – “

“Bucky is Sir James Barnes,” the Elven man answered. “Perhaps you know him by that name.”

How had they found out about Sir James?

The last she’d spoken with Phil, they’d decided to keep this from Steve for now, until they could figure out a way to remove all those curses that had been put on the poor man while he’d been the puppet of Hydra. His condition was so very bad, they hadn’t wanted to get Steve’s hopes up about any sort of recovery, until they were certain they could actually do anything to help.

Besides, Steve had only been awake for a couple of days. He was still acclimating. None of them wanted his recovery set back in any way. Giving him bad news about his best friend…that could tip him over the edge of despair.

Still, they’d somehow found out about it.

It looked as if this was one more thing Pepper would need to explain.

Why did this happen to her?

She sighed. “Alright, yes. I know about Sir James.”

Suddenly, every single bit of belligerence was gone from Steve’s body. His shoulders slumped in what looked like sheer relief. “And you didn’t think I should know he’s still alive?” The question sounded unbelievably pitiful, and it took every bit of strength Pepper had not to go over and hug him. She didn’t think it would be welcomed at the moment.

“I don’t know how you found out…”

“Through my many-times great-grandson,” the Elven gentleman said. He stepped forward, offering Pepper his hand. “Lord Gabe Jones. I was one of the – “

“Howling Commandos,” she finished for him. Pepper had even been aware that one of the historical Commandos had been an Elf, but not that he’d been a member of the Falcon Enclave. “But how did your grandson know?”

“Because he’s a friend of Miss Daisy’s…Antoine Triplet.”

Pepper found her eyebrows rising to her hairline. Trip was related to one of the Howling Commandos? Had Daisy ever told her that? Pepper couldn’t recall ever hearing it before.

Trip must have had a majority of human blood, because there wasn’t anything even vaguely Elvish about him.
“Please,” she urged, “let’s have a seat and I’ll explain.”

Pepper led them to the library, mainly for the presence of her mirror, because she suspected she’d be calling Ianto before this conversation was done. She offered drinks; Lord Gabe and Dr. Wilson both accepted, while Steve refrained, content to keep right on pacing while everyone else sat. Pepper served them wine and then took a chair herself, wanting to be comfortable for what she was about to share.

“How much did Trip tell you?” She was going to have to have a talk with Daisy’s friends about keeping secrets, although she couldn’t find it within herself to necessarily blame Trip for letting his grandfather know. After all, Lord Gabe had been a friend to both Steve and Sir James. It was only fair to inform him that they’d both been found, and alive.

“He said there was something about a cursed arm,” the Elf answered.

“I don’t know how much Daisy told any of her friends about what was actually going on.” The entire group had been sent to look for information on that arm, after all. They’d had to know what to search for.

“Only that Bucky and Steve were both still alive, and that Bucky was in bad shape. Trip was trying to be cagey over the speaking stone he was using.”

And so, Pepper told them everything, silently despairing at always being the bearer of bad news when it came to Sir Steven Rogers.

About how they’d first discovered the Winter Knight, when Daisy had been kidnapped by Hydra. It hadn’t been until after the man had escaped his captors and been found in that warehouse in Golden Gate that they’d been able to discern his real name, because of Jack having met the man before.

“Wait,” Lord Gabe interrupted, “but how is that possible?”

“Jack Harkness is the Deathless,” Steve answered him tiredly. “He fought with us during the war, only he wasn’t a member of the Commandos. I’d…thought about bringing him in, but that was before my involuntary vacation in the Void.”

That announcement got a single bark of laughter from the Elf. “I’d never put the stories of the Deathless together with the man who’d been in the infantry with us.”

Pepper went on with her account. About all the curses that had been placed on Sir James and his arm, about how he’d been afraid of hurting anyone by accident.

About the Zero Cabinet.

She’d had to explain what a Zero Cabinet was, and it wasn’t a pleasant one. Personally, she was with Ianto in his hatred of the thing, but she’d also been proud of Daisy for standing up for Sir James’ decision to be put back into it for the time being. Steve was nodding along as she finished that part, having stopped pacing the moment she mentioned about Sir James wanting to be put back in, until the curses could be lifted.

“That sounds like him,” he snorted fondly. “Self-sacrificing jerk.”

“Is there a chance for the curses to be fully removed?” Dr. Wilson asked.

“The children found the original magical plans for the arm,” Pepper answered. “I haven’t talked to Ianto yet, but I know he was studying them to see what he could come up with. He’s the best curse
breaker in the world, and he has Phil and Stephen working with him. If anyone can do it, it would be those three.” She let every single bit of confidence she had leak into her voice. Because she was confident. Three of the most powerful Wizards in the world were on the case. They’d do everything in their power to heal Sir James as much as they possibly could.

“And you say he doesn’t remember anything?” Steve sounded wrecked. Happy, sensing his distress, was off Pepper’s shoulder and alighting on his, cooing at him sadly. Steve rubbed his cheek against the dragon’s tiny head in thanks.

“He gets flashes, but nothing certain. Ianto is hoping that, once they get rid of the curses, his memory will come back.”

“But that adds an entirely new set of problems,” Dr. Wilson announced. “Because that will mean he’ll remember everything…including what he did on Hydra’s orders.”

Pepper was shocked. Oh, of course he would, and the Winter Knight had been an assassin with a kill record going back centuries. Poor Sir James, would he be able to come back from having those memories returned?

“I’m sorry we hid this from you,” Pepper said, “but none of us wanted to tell you, out of fear that Sir James couldn’t be healed. We didn’t want to break your heart any more than it already was.”

“And if…when…the curses are removed?”

“Then we would have brought you to him immediately.” Of that, Pepper was certain. There would have been no way any of them would have kept the two men apart, especially since they’d been such good friends back then.

Unless Sir James had decided he didn’t want to see Steve again.

Pepper didn’t say that out loud.

“I want to see him.”

Of course, he’d want to do that. Pepper would have wanted the same thing. “Let me contact Ianto and let him know we’ll be in Gateway shortly.” It wasn’t what she’d had planned for the rest of the day, but that was fine. She’d have to also tell Tony she was leaving, but since she was prone to teleport off to Gateway, he wouldn’t have been too worried if she didn’t. She was just conscientious that way.

“And I’d also like to meet Daisy Coulson. She stood up for Buck, and she didn’t have to. I want to thank her for that.”

“I’m sure that can be arranged.” Daisy would be pleased to meet Steve, while Phil would most likely go a little hero worshipping once more.

Pepper wanted to see that. It was going to be hilarious.

Chapter End Notes
In case anyone was interested in a little lesson in Wizard education -

Most children gain their dragons early, between the ages of seven and nine. It is the first sign that a child will be a Wizard and should get Tested. Sometimes this can be later, but that doesn't happen very often.

Children are Tested around their tenth birthday, then start attending school the year they turn eleven.

Novices are chosen after the student turns fourteen. It can be pushed back until sixteen, if there is an issue with a student and how their primary education is going, or for disciplinary concerns.

At eighteen, a Novice can choose to become an Apprentice to a particular Wizard, if they show an aptitude for a specialty; i.e., potions, charms, wards, etc. Or they can continue on with their teaching Master if they want an all-around sort of education. Most choose to become Apprentices.

Then, at twenty-one, Mastery exams are given. Once a Novice (or Apprentice) passes their exams, they are granted formal Mastery and are employable.

There are also continuing forms of education, if a Wizard wishes to specialize even further. For example, healers, warrior Wizards, Archivists, or Druids. How long that takes depends on the level of specialization.
Chapter 49

In the moment between blinks, the world appeared around him again.

He struggled to sit up, his limbs a little logy but not enough to keep him from taking action if needed. A man was looking down at him, concern in his blue eyes, and it took him a few heartbeats to recall who it was.

“Grand Master Ianto?” he asked.

“Sir James.” The man gave him a faint smile. The Grand Master tucked his arm under James’ shoulders, helping him to sit.

James took a look around, finding himself still in the room he’d been in when he’d gotten back into the Zero Cabinet. Nothing had changed, which led him to believe… “How long has it been?”

“Only a day.” The Grand Master stepped back, in order to leave plenty of room for James to clamber out of the casket. “However, I may have news already. Also…something’s happened.”

James felt his heartbeat begin to race. “Hydra?” It had been one of his main worries…that Hydra would find him and attempt to take him back. The last thing he wanted was for anyone to get hurt because of him. Or by him, really.

Those had been the reasons he’d wanted to climb right back into the cabinet, even though that thing truly was one of his worst nightmares. That fear of people being injured because of something he did, or of Hydra coming for him. If he was in the Zero Cabinet, then maybe Hydra wouldn’t be able to locate him easily. And their curses wouldn’t be triggered accidentally by an innocent.

“No, not Hydra,” the Grand Master reassured him. “As far as we can tell, they have no idea you’re even here.”

James let out a breath in relief. These people were being kind to him; he didn’t want anything to happen to them because of him. They were also willing to help him, which was something he just didn’t have experience of ever occurring before.

“You said…you may have news?” He was hoping it was good. The last thing he wanted was to carry this damned arm around anymore than he had already had. It hurt him, and while he hated the idea of being used to the pain, he knew when it was finally gone it would be like regaining himself. What Hydra had done to him had been horrific, now that he was self-aware enough to understand.

He might not have remembered anything before the pain, except for flashes, he longed for that day more than anything.

“Daisy and her friends managed to locate the original magical diagrams for your arm,” the Grand Master explained. “I studied it last night and, while I do have to still speak to my fellow Grand Masters, I think I see a way to get the arm off.”

If he thought he’d been relieved before, it was nothing compared to how he felt after that. His knees felt a little weak, and he grabbed the edge of the casket to keep from falling onto the floor.

They could take the arm off.
It had been so long since he’d felt hope that it took him a few heartbeats to realize this was what he was experiencing. Any other time he’d thought he’d felt it, paled in comparison.

“That… I wasn’t sure you’d be able to do it, really.”

“To be honest, neither was I, if the original scroll had been lost. Oh, I have no doubt we would have done our best, but it might not have been enough.”

“And all the other curses?”

“Those might actually be easier now that we know the base composition of the arm. I feel confident that, with Phil’s help since he’s the expert on the Void spells that were used, we can eventually heal you of everything that’s been done. It’s going to take some time, but we can definitely help.”

James had also forgotten what it was like to smile. His face felt stretched, but it was nice. “I can’t thank you all enough.”

“No need.”

“And… what about my memories?” he asked tentatively. He’d gotten such good news, a part of him didn’t want to wreck this mood he was now in.

But, he needed to know the truth. If he was never going to get his memories back, then he had to prepare himself for that eventuality.

Ianto turned grave. “That, I can’t promise. However, that’s connected to why I woke you now, instead of waiting until we had our strategy worked out to rid you of all those curses.”

He was looking conflicted, so whatever the Grand Master was going to say…well, James couldn’t make up his mind whether it was going to be bad or good. “Then I want to know.”

“There… are people here to see you. People who are connected to your missing memories.”

How was that possible? James had the vague feeling that he’d been serving Hydra for a very long time, and it had only been the Zero Cabinet keeping back the years. How could there still be someone out there who remember him? “And they want to see me?”

“Before that happens, though, I want you to know that if anything triggers you, I’ll be there to stop you.”

James looked into the Wizard’s eyes, and saw the truth in them. “You think it could be that bad?”

“I really have no idea,” he confessed. “But we need to be prepared for the worst.”

That, James could understand. “Then we should wait, if you feel something could happen. That would be the last thing I’d want.” A tiny shiver of fear trailed down his spine at the idea of losing control, before all those curses could be neutralized.

“That decision has been taken out of my hands. I did try to explain that to your… visitors, but I’m afraid they out-stubborned me. It was either I come in here and get you, or they were going to do it themselves, and I didn’t think that was such a good idea.” Grand Master Ianto didn’t look pleased at that, and it made James a little mad that someone would so cavalierly demand that a potentially dangerous person be let out of their temporary prison on what seemed to be some sort of whim. “I may have been able to stop them, but that would have also made things worse. There wasn’t any way I was going to risk you in any way.”
“They threatened you?” James growled. Ianto was a good man, who only had James’ best interests at heart, and for someone to come forcing their way in and demand to see him…

“Not so much threaten, but they did imply they meant to see you whether I let them or not.”

“Tell whoever this is that I don’t want to see them.” If they were going to be like this, then James wasn’t about to trust them or himself. Ianto hadn’t even said how they knew he was there, but James supposed it had to do with the hunt for Hydra, or how they’d actually known him personally, or what it had to do with his missing memories.

He wasn’t so sure he wanted to know, honestly, not with that sort of attitude toward the man who was willing to do anything in his power to help him regain some semblance of a normal life.

It just wasn’t that important, not when compared to the possibility that he could do something to hurt someone just because Hydra had made him into a killer. Perhaps later, when the danger and his anger was a little less.

With that, he began to climb back into the Zero Cabinet, determined to have nothing to do with anyone who didn’t seem to care that waking James up could be asking for trouble. He trusted the three Grand Masters, and the Deathless, and those two Elves…and Daisy, he would always trust Daisy. She’d stood up for him, for his right to make the decision to go back into the cabinet for the time being, when he’d been the one to hold her captive when he’d been under Hydra’s control. She could very easily have turned her back on him, and he wouldn’t have blamed her for it. Not one little bit.

There was a soft touch on his shoulder, and James turned to look at Ianto. The Wizard had an approving smile on his face. “I did try to warn them you might feel this way.”

“Look,” James sat back into the cabinet, “you I trust. And the others. But no one that I don’t know and don’t remember. You tell them that. Also, if they do try to come barging in here, you have permission from me to zap their asses.”

“I’ll tell them that.”

“Now, after you’ve all fixed me, then I’ll consider seeing them. But, until then…no one I don’t know.”

“I’ll abide by your wishes.”

James could tell he meant it; it was one way for the Wizard to make up for his inadvertently taking away James’ decision to get back into the cabinet, just because Ianto had felt it was only a slow form of torture. And, really, James could respect him for feeling that way. But he’d also had the guts to admit he was wrong for forcing his opinion on James. Which was yet another reason to respect and trust Ianto Jones.

James laid back down in the cabinet. “Seal me back in, please.”

There was a flash of discomfort in the Wizard’s weird eyes, but he did as James bid.

James closed his eyes. The world disappeared once more.
“I’m sorry,” Ianto said, coming out of the room where Bucky’s cabinet was, “but he refuses to come out.”

Steve couldn’t believe it. “What did you tell him?” he demanded angrily.

“That he had visitors who were connected to his missing memory. He chose not to take the chance that he would be triggered in some way and hurt someone. I can respect that.”

Ianto had said as much would happen, when they’d barged into his house and commanded the Wizard to let them see Bucky. He’d said that he’d wake him up and let him know that he had visitors, but if Bucky refused to see them then he was going to go along with it. Steve had agreed, positive that Bucky would want to at least talk to him.

He hadn’t expected this, not when he’d heard that Bucky was still alive.

That had been the shock of his life, he had to admit. A part of him could understand why they hadn’t told him about the Winter Knight, but another part was hurt and dismayed by them all hiding this from him. When he’d heard, all he’d been able to think about was getting to him, to seeing for himself that his friend was still among the living despite all the odds.

It had never even crossed his mind that this would happen, that Bucky would deny the reunion.

“He really doesn’t remember his past?” Dr. Wilson asked.

“Not a thing,” Ianto confirmed. “And there was too great a chance that seeing Lord Gabe,” he nodded toward the Elf, “or Sir Steven would trigger something in him that could lead to Sir James doing something he would come to regret. And that is the last thing he wants to do.”

Steve didn’t want to leave it at that. He’d thought Bucky was dead, because Steve hadn’t been fast enough to save him, and it had motivated him in that last fight with the Skull before he’d been exiled to the Void. He’d believed he’d lost his best friend, the man he’d loved, and now to have him so close…

There was a logical part of him that understood Bucky’s reticence. After all, his best friend had been cursed and used by Hydra for so long, and had had to do unspeakable things for his masters. The last thing he would want to do, now that he had most of his wits about him, was to hurt anyone else even by accident. He had to be terrified of it, to deliberately go back into that Zero Cabinet thing.

However, there was a larger part of him that really wanted to see Bucky, to see if his best friend remembered him, if only a little. To be there while he recovered, and to support him through this. Because, if what Pepper had said was true, then it was going to be a long recovery. Steve felt a responsibility to his friend to do whatever it took to get him back.

He felt responsibility, and love, and sheer need to do whatever it took.

And Ianto was standing in the way.

Steve would just have to move him, then.
Something of his intent must have communicated itself to the Wizard, because Ianto, his dragon now beside him, put himself firmly in front of the closed door that led to the room where Bucky was. “I should warn you, Paladin,” he said calmly, implacably, “that I have been given permission by Sir James to stop you from getting to him by any means necessary. He was quite adamant about not being taken out of the cabinet again until we had a complete protocol for removing all of the curses as well as the Artifact from his body. I gave him my word that I would, and it doesn’t matter that you are his friend; if anything, that should make you want to respect his decision and back down.”

To say Steve was shocked was an understatement. Grand Master Ianto was perfectly willing and able to defend a man he’d only just met from the man who’d been that man’s friend for most of his life. Steve really didn’t know a thing about Wizards and how magic worked – how they’d all gotten to Ianto’s house was a mystery; he’d been at Ferrous Castle one moment, and then in this room the next – but it was patently obvious that Ianto was quite confident in his ability to stop a highly trained knight.

He felt a hand on his arm. Glancing down at Pepper, who’d accompanied them, he couldn’t help but see just how angry she was. “How dare you take Sir James’ choice away from him,” she hissed. “Hasn’t that been done enough already?”

He had to take a step away.

She was right.

Of course, she was right.

Hydra had done that to Bucky for centuries. And now, just because Steve had missed him, he was about to do the same thing. To take away Bucky’s choice in not seeing someone he didn’t even remember, and who could make things even worse than they already were.

With that, every bit of anger left Steve, making him feel weak. What right did he have to force himself somewhere he wasn’t wanted?

That made his heart hurt. Bucky didn’t want him.

But it wasn’t Bucky’s fault. It was because he didn’t remember Steve. And yes, there was a chance that Bucky could take his being there the wrong way, because there was no way of telling if he’d somehow been conditioned to react badly to people he’d used to know.

“You’re right.” He smiled down at Pepper, who removed her hand and returned the smile. Then he turned toward Ianto. “I’m sorry about that. It’s just…it’s Bucky. I thought he was dead. And now, to find out he isn’t…”

“That’s understandable.” The Grand Master shifted slightly on his feet, and it was then that Steve noticed that he’d been poised to strike, one hand positioned over the wand at his belt, ready to draw it if needed. It wasn’t a traditional weapon, but the Paladin had no doubt that it would have been just as deadly, although he doubted Ianto would have killed him outright. The Grand Master was a good man, and would have only done the very least he’d needed to defend himself and Bucky.

It was actually good to know someone was willing to stand up for Steve’s friend when Bucky couldn’t do it for himself.

“Now,” Ianto said, “why don’t I explain what I know about the spells on your friend and what I’ve come up with to do about getting him back as close to himself as possible.”

“Yeah. That would be great.”
“Then let us go up into the house and I’ll make us all a coffee. We can chat, and I can show you the diagrams on the arm that were found…and maybe you can tell me how you discovered that Sir James was even here.”

“I’m afraid that was my fault,” Gabe answered as they left the room they’d teleported into. He explained about who he was, and his connection to Antoine Triplet.

That had Ianto chuckling a little as he had them all sit at the kitchen table, then he’d gone over to a fancy-looking device on the counter by the stove. “I had no idea that Trip was a relative to an original Howling Commando,” he admitted as he bustled about the machine. “But then, I never thought to ask, either. Still, I may have to have a word with him about sharing sensitive information.”

“He only contacted me because of the family history,” Gabe defended. “Don’t be too hard on him.”

“I think Daisy might be harder on him than I will be.”

Gabe winced. “Ouch.”

“Perhaps I should speak with her,” Steve volunteered. “Let her know that Trip didn’t do anything wrong.”

“That might not be until tomorrow. She and her father have business elsewhere today.”

Pepper was staring at him, as if her eyes could burn a hole through the back of the Grand Master’s head, as he busily hand-ground the coffee beans in the little device that made a rather loud noise, an invention of his that made the coffee that much smoother and more flavorful. “Is there something I should know, Ianto?” she asked.

That question had the man turning around, sighing. “We…ran into some trouble tracking down the Wizard who let Werner von Strucker into the Quorum.”

Pepper leaned forward, her dragon doing the same and losing his usual playful manner. Steve had never seen Happy looking so serious.

He didn’t know what was going on, and asked about it. He understood about the Quorum, but not why someone shouldn’t be allowed in.

Ianto explained. “We’d called one about Hydra. Once the doors of the Quorum Chamber are sealed, no one non-magical can get in unless they were allowed entrance…which is actually against the rules, except if they’re there to give evidence or have an announcement to make. So, having someone suddenly show up and interrupt Quorum business just isn’t done.”

“Was the person Hydra?” It would make sense if he was.

“No, but he was a pawn Hydra put into place to discredit someone very powerful in the Guild.”

In Steve’s mind, that probably meant one of the Grand Masters, but he didn’t say anything. It was Wizard business, and most likely not really his. He was sure they’d share if it was important, if it was something he needed to know.

But then they hadn’t shared with him Bucky’s still being alive. Although, he could certainly understand why that was, now that Bucky had refused to see him. They’d simply wanted to protect him from any further heartbreak.
“Anyway,” Ianto went on, “it led us to a village that had a severe issue with Void Wizards. Let’s just say it could have been a lot worse than it actually was… and Phil is going to be adopting another daughter. He and Daisy, and the little girl, whose name is Crystal, are going to be heading to Barony Uncelas, where she was found, in order to meet with the Baron and to finalize the adoption.”

Pepper shook her head. “Phil and his strays.” Her eyes were shrewd. “How bad was it, Ianto?”

He sighed. “Very bad. Crystal is six, and she’d been thrown out like trash by her biological parents the moment she was Tested Void.”

That… that was outrageous. And Steve said so.

“There have always been Great Wizards who feel that the Cardinals and Voids are unnatural and shouldn’t exist,” Ianto replied. “We’re trying to fight against the propaganda and prejudice, but it certainly doesn’t help that Hydra was all Void Wizards and it just gave all Voids more of a bad reputation than they already had.”

“That reputation is certainly not at all deserved,” Pepper proclaimed.

Steve thought that was a little ridiculous. He’d met Grand Master Phil, who’s seemed like a good sort of person. And Gabe’s grandson was a Void Wizard. That didn’t make any sense.

Ianto went back to making the coffee. “Phil has decided to stay in the Grand Master position in order to help us fight against all that ill will.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Pepper said, “not after his own past.”

At Steve’s questioning glance, she added, “Phil’s parents were convinced he was evil when he was Tested as Void. It was abuse, plain and simple, and by the time he’d left home to go to school he’d been convinced they were correct. It… wasn’t a good situation, and not really my story to tell.”

“But…” the Paladin exclaimed, “he’s a decent person. Who would ever think he was evil? And it was his own parents?”

“I’m sorry, Sir Steven,” Ianto sighed, “but I’m sure you didn’t expect to get a lesson in Wizard politics today.”

“And it’s really complicated,” Pepper added.

“We have time,” Steve said. “Why don’t you explain it to us, and maybe we can help in some way.”

Pepper gave him a brilliant smile. “Just warn us if you get bored.”

“And then afterward,” Ianto went to fetch mugs for them all, “we can go over the schematics for that arm, and I can let you know what’s going on with your friend.”

Steve nodded. That sounded like an excellent plan. He needed to know more about the time he’d found himself in and, while Wizard politics was something he’d never have thought he’d ever learn, it would help him understand a little of the world he’d have to live in.

And, just maybe, give him a purpose now that there were no wars to fight.

Well, no more actual, physical wars to fight. Fighting for minds and souls was perhaps even a harder battle to win.
“What did Garrett do to me?” Daisy moaned, shifting slightly in her bed, trying not to dislodge Skye from where the dragon was curled up against her side, still recovering from the spell Garrett had used on them both; on the other side, Crystal was cuddled up, her head resting on her older sister’s shoulder as if she was afraid to let go out of fear Daisy would disappear again.

Clint figured she actually was. After all, suddenly having Daisy ripped away from her had to have been traumatic.

They’d brought Daisy home after that shit with Garrett. Melinda had volunteered to go back to Triskelia to arrange clean-up. Phil had put up a warding spell about the bodies, handing Melinda the key to it after they’d gotten Daisy settled, and she’d been off to liaise with Nick about the disposal of the remains. Natasha had gone back to the castle to explain what had occurred, and to wait for Melinda to show up to fetch the corpses from the alley where they’d been left. There were certain ceremonies for Wizard bodies, even if they’d been backstabbing, kid-stealing bastards.

Clint had to admit…what Phil had done was hot, the way he’d just taken on Garrett like that. He’d been amazing, really. Taking on the role of magistrate for the Void, which that was what he’d become, if Clint really thought about it.

Oh, that didn’t discount Buddy’s death. The Elf would never get used to a dragon’s death, but after his talk with the Queen of Air and Fire he’d come to understand that this sort of thing happened, and it was all part of the destiny a dragon took on when they were paired with their Wizard. Some dragons accepted what their companions did wholeheartedly, like Buddy had…others, like Lola, often argued with their Wizard when they disagreed with what they were doing. Phil had talked about that, the night Clint had come back to the Keep after Raina’s death – and really, Clint should have asked at the time what Raina had named her dragon, so he was feeling a little guilty about that – so yes, he could vividly now recall the times Lola had gone off on the Dark One over something or other. Sure, Lola had supported Phil through a lot of shit, but there’d been certain times she certainly hadn’t agreed with his actions.

It had taken about an hour for Daisy to become coherent enough to tell her story. Clint could tell she was mad at herself for not being able to defend herself, but had she really had a chance? He didn’t think so, especially when Phil went on to explain the spell he’d had to diffuse.

“A Befuddlement charm,” his lover said, “with a touch of the Void in it. The main charm would have made it impossible for you to function, while the Void was aimed directly at stifling your own magic.”

“I thought it felt a little like being back at the Hydra house,” Daisy mused. Her eyes were squinting a little, as if her head was hurting. Clint was willing to bet it was. “My magic was a little muffled, although not to the extent it had been back there.”

“He only meant to incapacitate.”

“Gods, I hate being kidnapped,” Daisy sighed. “How did he find me, anyway?”

“We don’t know, but we will as soon as Natasha and Melinda get back,” Clint answered.
There was a part of him that felt as if he was intruding on what should have been a family moment. However, when he’d attempted to leave after carrying Daisy to her room, Phil had stopped him. So had Crystal, who’d been sobbing as she hugged his legs.

That little girl calling him ‘Daddy’ would never get old.

“It was just a good thing he decided he wanted to monologue at me,” Daisy added. “There’s no telling where he would have taken me if you hadn’t had time to show up.”

She reached down and gave Lockjaw, who was curled up against both her and Crystal, a skritch at the base of his forked horn. The little dragon sighed in contentment.

They really should have asked Crystal if her dragon could do anything else besides the usual dragon stuff. A teleporting dragon is just an amazing idea.

Clint had panicked when both Crystal and Lockjaw had vanished into thin air, just as much as when he realized that Daisy was also missing. Both young ladies had come to mean a lot to the archer in the very short time he’d known them, and they’d been under his protection at the time. He’d gotten them lost, and the guilt at that far outweighed anything he might have felt about the rest of events.

“Stop it.”

Clint turned toward Phil, who was perched on the side of the bed, Lola sitting on the floor at his feet. He was glaring at the Elf, and Clint nervously rubbed the back of his neck under that harsh stare. “Stop what?”

“Blaming yourself. There was no way we could have foreseen what happened, although we’d been waiting for trouble. You are not at fault for his getting the drop on Daisy. We simply didn’t expect Garrett to strike like that, not in public.”

“Dad’s right,” Daisy piped up. “If anyone’s to blame, it’s me for getting ahead of you and Natasha and giving Garrett the opportunity to grab me.”

“No,” Phil sighed. “It’s Hydra’s fault. No one in this room needs to carry any sort of blame over this.”

“Besides,” the young woman said, “Dad came in and kicked Garrett’s ass. I might have been a bit out of it, but I still saw and felt it all. It was freaky when the Void just started being sucked out of him.” She cocked her head. “And what was all that about being Void’s Champion? Where did that come from?”

Phil shrugged. “It…just felt right.”

“Idris said the same thing,” Clint put in. “That night I talked to her. She called you Void Champion, and Ianto was Cardinal Champion.” Now that he had time to think, he did recall Phil saying just that thing to Garrett just before the other Wizard had died.

“Hmph.” Phil was pensive. “The Void…it does things, and no one knows why.”

“I think you’re aware of more than you think, Phil.”

His lover pinned Clint with those eyes, that used to be all blue but now had those tiny flecks of black in them, marking his deep connection to the Void. “Why do you say that?” There wasn’t any sort of censure in the question; it was asked out of sheer curiosity.
Clint shrugged. “Just things you do. Pulling Sir Steven from the Void Point even though you had no idea he was there. Saying you’re passing out the judgment of the Void as if it’s telling you what to do. Would you have ever thought of sucking the Void right out of Garrett before that moment?”

“No, I wouldn’t have. It just…came to me.”

“Maybe that’s just going to happen…when you need to do something, it just comes to you. The Void is unlocking abilities within you as you need them, but I think the knowledge on how to do that shit is there. You just can’t access it until it’s needed. And, once you can do it, you’ll always be able to in the name of Void’s justice.”

“Ianto has things he can do that other Cardinals can’t, like that Catalyst thing he does and the spell unpicking,” Daisy pointed out. “You should probably talk to him when you get the chance. But, Dad…I think we have this ‘Void punishing you for past deeds’ thing all wrong. I think the Void chose you because it somehow knew you could make the hard decisions and that you have the strength to carry out what it needs you to do, but at the same time you have enough compassion to adopt two orphan kids and give them a good home.”

Clint was nodding in agreement. Being near-immortal was absolutely some sort of punishment, but at the same time, if the Void was as sentient as Phil had been claiming all along, then it would want to hold onto someone with the unique set of abilities that would put them into the position to be some sort of judge, jury, and executioner – if need be – but could also balance that out with the heart to see the difference between deliberately evil and doing evil things because of circumstances beyond their control. Hells, Phil was the very definition of that last part.

Phil looked as if he was considering their words. “Maybe you’re both right. I still don’t have to like it, though.”

Daisy reached over and took his hand. “Dad, I might be wrong, but I think it’s safe to say if you do start to like it is the day the Void goes looking for another Champion.”

“She’s absolutely correct,” Clint supported her.

His lover looked like he was chewing on the notion. Then he shook his head. “As much as I’d love to continue this discussion, there’s something a little more important at the moment that we all need to talk about.”

“The reason you called and told us to come back?” Daisy wanted to know. “Is it about Crystal’s adoption?”

“It is. Stephen’s been working on it on our behalf, and he’s spoken with the Baron Uncelas in order to arrange to speak to all three of us about it.”

Crystal whimpered. “I don’t wanna go back there, Dad.”

“I know, sweetheart.” Phil leaned over Daisy in order to kiss the little girl on the forehead. “However, if you want to stay with us, you’ll need to speak to the Baron. He’ll ask you some questions, which you answer as truthfully as you can, and then when it’s all done, you can come back home and never have to go back again.”

“It’s easy,” Daisy added. “I had to do it when Dad adopted me. You have to go in front of the Baron or Baroness of where you lived, so they can make sure you’re going to a good home. Once we prove that, you’re ours.”

There was something Daisy wasn’t saying. Clint wanted to ask, but Phil caught his eye once more,
shaking his head little to stop him from putting his foot into whatever it was that was wrong.

Then it hit him.

While he didn’t know the complete story of how Phil came to adopt Daisy, it had to have been made even more difficult due to Daisy being a Cardinal Wizard, and Phil a Void. There were a lot of misconceptions out there – see Phil’s childhood as the prime example of that – and Clint could easily see those misconceptions coming up in any sort of adoption action that Phil would have made in order keep Daisy.

He’d ask about it later, when Crystal wasn’t around, because he didn’t want to scare her. He also wished he could have been there to fight for Daisy, too.

“We get this done,” Daisy went on, “and we’ll never have to worry about you being taken away from us.”

“I want to stay forever.” Crystal’s voice was almost too soft to be heard.

“That’s what we want, too,” Phil said, his voice full of certainty. “So, I want you two to get some rest, and we’ll leave later. You both need to be fresh to meet with the Baron Uncelas.”

“Dad?” Crystal raised her head, and Clint’s heart constricted at how distressed she looked.

“Yes, sweetheart?”

“Are you and Daddy going to be there too?”

Phil glanced at Clint, who nodded. There was no way they were going without him. “Yes, we’ll both be there.”

“Okay.” She put her head back down, as if he’d just spoken some universal truth and she was perfectly willing to accept it.

Of course she was. She was finally with a family that had accepted her.

Phil stood, pressing a kiss to Daisy’s head, and then Crystal’s. He left the room, but Lola stayed, jumping up onto the foot of the bed as if it was her personal watchtower. Lucky laid across the room’s threshold, keeping the door from closing, but on guard even though they were at home and both children were perfectly safe. Clint sent his dragon pleased acceptance at his willingness to play bodyguard even though it wasn’t needed.

Phil led him down to his study, where he collapsed on the sofa with a tired sigh. “Gods, please don’t let things get worse.”

“From your lips,” Clint said, sitting beside him. He tugged his lover up against him; Phil came willingly, relaxing once he was laying with his back to the Elf’s chest, Clint’s arm around him and holding him close.

“Thank you,” Phil sighed, after a few moments of silence.

“For what?”

“For being there. For accepting Crystal. For looking after Daisy.”

“I didn’t do such a good job on that last one.”
Phil smacked his arm. “Stop it. I already told you, there was nothing you could have done.”

“I could have stayed closer.” Really, Clint didn’t even want to think about what would have happened if Garrett had gotten away with Daisy. It would have killed Phil; oh, not physically, because now there was Crystal to look after, but a little piece of his soul would have died as surely as if someone had found that place in him and stabbed it with a poisoned blade. Someday, he was going to lose her, but Clint didn’t want that to happen so soon.

“Natasha was with you. Do you blame her as well?”

“Damnit Phil, that’s not playing fair.”

But he was right. If Clint was blaming himself, then he had to blame Natasha as well. She’d been keeping pace with him, and not with the girls. But then, neither of them had really believed that either Daisy or Crystal was in any danger. They were in the city that was the seat of Nick’s power, one of the most well-patrolled places in this part of the Western Lands. Sure, they’d been ostensible bodyguards, but Clint had barely even considered anything beyond being anything other than a pack horse for their purchases.

Then, he’d have to blame Nick as well, for not having enough patrols. Or Maria Hill, for the lack of wards in the area. Or even the patrols themselves for not getting there fast enough.

The round of blaming was never-ending. Damnit, Phil.

“Of course, I’m not playing fair. Because there should have been no way that Garrett could have tracked Daisy down to Triskelia Town and to that particular street without magical aid. In fact, I’m willing to bet that he Scryed for her in some way. Hydra had had her for hours; they could have easily taken hair or clothes samples. The only reason Garrett didn’t strike at her here was because the Keep is warded against that sort of thing. And, after Ianto managed to track Daisy here, when we escaped from Hydra, I reinforced the unPlotable spell for now, as well as the shielding around the place, so Garrett wouldn’t have been able to even think about teleporting here. If anything, I’m irritated at myself for not even having considered Scrying in the first place.”

Clint tightened his arms around his lover, and Phil relaxed even more. It felt good, just to sit there like this, and he thought he’d never want to stop.

“So,” he said, changing the subject, “I get the feeling that Daisy’s adoption wasn’t exactly easy, and I guess it has something to do with her being Cardinal and you being Void.”

“That’s a very good guess.” Phil’s chest rose and fell under Clint’s forearms. “You know, when I found Daisy it was in the middle of a warzone between Loki’s demons and Western Land troops?”

Clint nodded, having heard bits and pieces of that particular story.

“Well, you know I went eventually to Marcus.”

He did, and said so; and no, he really wasn’t still bitter about that. Yes, Phil’s rationalization for not finding him and Natasha still rankled a little, but the Elf really was on his way to completely forgiving it.

“He was already Baron Triskelia at that point, because Daisy and I were on the run for several months before I finally revealed us to him. He’d just taken over, so the Council of Barons was looking at him sideways, not sure if he was going to be better or worse than the previous man. So, when I made it known I wanted to adopt Daisy, he was the one who interceded on my behalf with Jerald Stern, Baron Shandling, where the last orphanage Daisy had been in was located.”
Clint remembered that time, when he’d awakened from Loki’s control. It had been in Barony Shandling. Most of the fighting had gone on there, and it had left several towns there in ruins. Natasha had gotten him out of there quickly, not wanting him to face any sort of so-called justice for what he’d done under coercion. It had been a shitshow, and it was well after the fact that Clint had really seen what a mess Loki had made.

What he’d made under Loki’s control.

He hadn’t been the only one taken against his will, but as far as Clint knew he was the only survivor.

“Stern…well, Stern was an asshole, not to put too fine a point on it. At first, it was because the Barony had been depleted of so many people. Loki had done a lot of damage, and the last thing Stern wanted was to lose any more…even if it was a child. She was a Wizard, after all, and she could grow up to be a productive member of the Barony.

“Things got worse when they found out I was Void. Loki had been Void, and so had the Dark One.” Phil twitched a little at that, and Clint knew he’d always feel badly about what he’d done in what he’d considered righteous fury at the time. “Even though the rumors were starting, about how the Dark One had challenged Loki and had been killed. That was what gave me the idea of remaking myself into just Phil Coulson, Master Wizard, and put the Dark One firmly into his final grave.

“Stern demanded to see me. Which, of course, is protocol in these situations. I’d already decided that I was going to fight for Daisy, because she was worth it, so I went into Barony Shandling, the place I’d thought I’d never go again, to stand at the Baronial Court and answer whatever questions Stern wanted to put to me.

“It…was rough. Stern had a Great Wizard as an advisor, a man named Thaddeus Ross…who’d also been Mistress Maria’s teaching Master. He…was so full of Great Order rhetoric it practically oozed from every pore. He was bound and determined that I not be allowed to adopt Daisy. We hadn’t Tested her yet, so there was no telling at that point what sort of Wizard she was going to be, but that didn’t matter to him. I’m certain though once she’d Tested as Cardinal he wouldn’t have had anything to do with her, but at the time…well, I was Void. That was all that he cared about, and Voids shouldn’t be allowed to corrupt innocent children to their ways. It didn’t matter that Daisy wanted to go with me, and Stern was the final authority on the adoption.”

Clint tightened his grasp on his lover, knowing how hard this must be for him to recount even without being able to look him in the face. If Crystal was any indication, Phil had fallen far and fast for tough little Daisy, who’d run away from several orphanages and had been content to be on her own until Phil had stumbled over her in a grimy alley, trusting this strange man implicitly for no other reason that he’d looked as lost as she was.

“Eventually,” Phil chuffed a soft laugh, “Nick garnered enough of the Barons to see his side of things. Stern wasn’t very popular, so it wasn’t hard to gain a majority of support for the adoption. That was the first time it took an act of the Council to approve an adoption, and it hadn’t been done since. Stern was furious, and so was Ross, but they couldn’t do anything about it. Nick earned a lot of goodwill over his actions, which he bartered into power within the Council.”

Clint couldn’t believe the arrogance of people who thought they knew better, and yet had no fucking clue. Daisy belonged with Phil; anyone who’d seen them together couldn’t doubt that. He just couldn’t understand why anyone would want to keep a child from someone who so obviously adored her just because he was a different type of Wizard.

“It got worse when Daisy Tested as Cardinal,” Phil sighed. “That was another whole fight entirely,
this one in the Wizard’s Quorum. Luckily for me, the adoption held, and no one could take her away from me.”

Which was a good thing, in Clint’s opinion. It was obvious that Phil and Daisy deserved to be together, and look how well she’d turned out.

“You know,” he said, “I’m glad you decided to stay on as Grand Master, just so you could fight this sort of crap.”

“It’s going to be a long fight, but yeah… I’m glad I am, too.”

“I’m also glad you finally got Daisy. You’ve done a remarkable job with her, Phil.”

“I like to think so.” There was such contentment in his voice, Clint couldn’t help but lean forward and kiss him, just below his ear.

Phil shivered a little.

“Oh, is that a sensitive spot?” Clint teased softly.

“I think you were aware of that when you kissed me there.”

He was right, because the archer had kissed that very spot before, and gotten the same reaction. Clint was about to suggest they take this upstairs when the study door opened. He twisted around just enough to watch Natasha and Melinda walk into the room, Natasha smirking and Melinda… well, she had that stoic mask of hers firmly in place, but Clint could tell she was pleased.

Phil moved to sit up, and Clint missed him at once. “What do you have to report?” he asked, voice grave.

“It was definitely Scrying,” Natasha answered. She held up a glass bauble, hung from a steel chain; wrapped around the chain was a single long, dark hair. “Found this in Garrett’s pocket.”

“Sometimes I hate being right,” Phil sighed. He held his hand out for it, and Natasha was more than willing to pass it over. “I’ll make certain it’s destroyed.”

“There’s no telling how many of these things there are,” Melinda warned. “And Pierce, Hale, and her Novice are still out there.”

“Daisy’s going to be a target until we get the rest of the pieces off the board,” Natasha added.

“I’m going to make a Disguising charm for her.” Phil stood up. “We still have a couple of hours before we’re scheduled to stand in front of Baron Uncelas. I should have something ready by that time.”

“Phil,” Melinda said, “they had you and Clint too. Maybe you should be making those charms for yourselves as well?”

Phil nodded. “Agreed.” He gave a sardonic little grin. “After all, we’d hate for Hydra to interrupt the adoption proceedings.”
Ianto couldn’t help but feel sorry for Sir Steven.

He’d been _that_ close to his best friend, and Sir James had refused to see him. Not that Ianto could blame the man; after all, there was still a very good chance that just seeing the Paladin would trigger something within the former Winter Knight and cause a negative reaction. Yes, Ianto hadn’t been _exactly_ honest, because he hadn’t named the ‘visitors’ that had come, but it had been for the best, because there was no way of telling how he would react, and the last thing the Wizard wanted to do was distress the poor man. There wasn’t even a guarantee that Sir James would have remembered him if he’d decided to see Sir Steven.

Now, Ianto just had to distract the Paladin.

And this was how he was going to do it.

He rolled out the diagram on the desk in his study. The copy that the Archive had made was exact, even down to fading due to age. That was the nature of the Copying spell, but that was for the better, since it meant there was no error due to copier mistakes. Back when he’d started out at Torchwood Castle, and had had to copy things by hand, he’d had to be extremely careful, and there had been no guarantee that what he was attempting to recreate was even original itself.

Now, they had spells to do the reproductions. Gods, was Ianto glad he’d come across _that_ particular spell in one of the lost _gramariya_ he’d discovered in his travels with Jack and his team.

Sir Steven, his companions, and Pepper all leaned over the desk, looking at the markings on the replica scroll. The writing on it was ancient, and he slipped on his magical spectacles, blinking once to activate the translation matrix.

“What is that language?” Dr. Wilson asked.

“The Wizard language,” Ianto explained. “It’s very old. I’m trying to get a syllabus together in order to have it taught at the school. It’s what the ancient Wizards used for correspondence.”

“No for spells?” Sir Steven inquired.

“No, that’s something completely different,” Ianto said. “We use a fixed set of runes for spell writing and casting, and it is a bit more…instinctive, in a way. Every child born a Wizard has a basic inbred knowledge of Wizard runes, and the ability only needs to be brought out, trained, and refined until the runes can be written by rote. No one understands why that is, but the theories say that it’s because of our innate connection to the natural magic.” He was, in fact, fascinated by the subject, and Pepper had often tried to convince him to teach classes in Basic Runes, as he was one of the best at writing them.

“What does that scroll say?” the Paladin wanted to know.

“See this.” Ianto pointed to the elaborate drawing of the arm. “This is how the arm was originally made.”

“So that scroll was made by the Wizard who created it,” Pepper inferred.
“Yes, it was. And here.” He pointed to a line of quite elegant writing. “It says here that it was originally created for the Wizard’s lover, who lost his real arm in a war.” He sighed. “This was originally made out of love for someone.”

Pepper shuddered. “Then Hydra corrupting it like that makes it doubly worse.”

Ianto had to agree. What Hydra had done to the arm was reprehensible. Something that had been made and enchanted because a loved one had been gravely injured had been changed in order to curse a man who’d done absolutely nothing to deserve it.

“What were the original spells on the arm?” Lord Gabe asked.

He began by explaining what Phil had found on the current arm, as well as the curses placed upon Sir James himself. Pepper was nodding, but he had to clarify things for his non-magical guests. Sir Steven asked some very pertinent questions, which had Ianto’s respect for him going up several notches. He was beginning to think the man wouldn’t have that many problems assimilating into this new time. And, he would have made a fairly powerful Wizard, if magic had existed back during the Paladin’s own time.

“So,” he went on, “the original Contamination part of the spell had a completely different intent from what’s currently on the arm. I believe we can definitely thank Hydra for that.”

“What was the original intent?” Sir Steven asked.

“It was to keep the body from rejecting the new arm by slightly contaminating the owner. Or, as Daisy put it during the initial scans, like calls to like. But the current level of contamination is wrong; it’s too strong. I think it’s because the arm was never meant for Sir James.”

“But it was for this long-dead warrior.”

“Yes, Lord Gabe. The amount of Contamination had to be changed in order to allow attachment to someone not meant for it. Disrupting the sheer amount of Contamination is going to have to be the very last thing we do before we totally remove the arm.”

Sir Steven shifted a little. “And it absolutely has to be removed? It can’t be adapted to Bucky in some way?”

Ianto was sympathetic to the question. “No, I’m afraid not. Even if we could, would he even want to keep it, after knowing how he got it?”

He could see the point hit home for the Paladin in the slumping of his shoulders. It couldn’t be easy, knowing that your best friend had been scarred like that, losing an arm, and not being able to keep the one that gave him mobility on that side.

However, there was really no way Sir James could keep it. Not with how Hydra had messed with it over the centuries. It had been corrupted, and that sort of corruption, no matter that all the major curses had been removed, wasn’t something anyone would want, and it could cause even more damage in the future.

“But how could they have done it?” Sir Steven inquired. “Magic didn’t exist back when Bucky was originally cursed.”

“I would have to say a combination of Artifacts was responsible. The spells all have a slapdash manner to them, as if the person who cast them didn’t quite know what they were doing. We can infer from that, that it was more of an experiment than anything else. To be honest, I’m surprised it
worked.”

It made Ianto sick to know that some idiot with a handful of half-working Artifacts had managed to do so much damage. He did wonder what had happened to what Hydra had used, and hoped the Artifacts had either been destroyed, or were locked away safe somewhere.

“Then there’s the *geas*, which makes the arm actually usable. That’s also been changed significantly, also because Sir James isn’t the original user. The changes made are rather ham-fisted, which isn’t a surprise judging from the rest of the work, and they’re causing the pain that he currently feels from wearing the arm. The *geas* isn’t fine-tuned to him, so it’s clashing with his own mental control of the thing, which is causing the pain. We’re going to have to wean him away from that *geas*, and it’s not going to be easy.”

“What do you mean?” Dr. Wilson looked confused.

Ianto decided to use an example he might understand better. “It’s going to be like taking someone off a powerful drug, after being addicted for years. His mind is so used to the *geas* being there and being a part of him, that removing it is going to be like someone going off addictive drugs all at once.”

“Damn,” the therapist murmured. “Yeah, he’s not going to have an easy time of that at all.”

Sir Steven stood upright. “If Bucky lets me, I’ll be beside him all throughout the procedure.”

That didn’t surprise Ianto in the slightest, not after the Paladin’s reaction to just the knowledge that Sir James was alive. “He’s going to need you, Sir Steven. I’m also hoping he’ll accept help from people he considers strangers during the removal. We’re going to need it if anything does go wrong.”

“Please, it’s Steve. And do you anticipate anything going wrong?”

The Wizard was honored by his request to use his name, especially after the bad news he’d had to relay from Sir James. “Anything could, Steve. And it’s Ianto.”

“Ianto.” His pronunciation was a little off, but that was more because of his Western Lands accent than any mistake on his part. “Then we’ll have to make sure to be prepared.”

“What about the rest of the magic?” Pepper asked.

“There was no modified Berserker on the arm originally. That spell concerns me, and I’ll want to remove it completely before we really do anything else.”

“Is that the one that gives the arm unnatural strength?”

“Yes, Pepper. It’s different from the other modified Berserker spell on Sir James himself. This one we don’t dare risk it being triggered because a single, uncontrolled swipe from it could cause myself or Phil grievous injuries. We both might be protected by the Deep Ways and the Void respectively, but I’d rather not be hurt if we can avoid it.”

Besides, Jack hated it when he got hurt. Just as much as Ianto hated it when Jack died.

“The Unbreakable spell is part of the original casting and it hadn’t been messed with too much. I don’t think we need do anything to that one in order to remove the arm.”

“So, let me see if I have this right.” Sir Steven – Steve – began ticking points off on his fingers.
“You’re going to need to get the Berserker spell first. Then this *geas*, which will be hells on him, and finally the Contamination before it can be removed.”

“That is essentially correct, yes.” Ianto was pleased he was showing such a grasp on the procedures needed to rid his friend of the arm. “Then, the arm needs to be stored safely so it would no longer be used. It’s a shame, because the original intent had been for good, but it’s been irrevocably changed. It simply can’t be trusted any longer.” It made Ianto unbelievably angry at Hydra for warping a thing that had been a gift of love into a curse and making it unusable for anyone else.

“And the arm needs to come off before we can begin clearing the rest of the curses from Bucky.”

“Yes, Steve. The ones actually cast upon Sir James physically are going to be bad enough without the arm getting in the way. I doubt we’d be able to do much if it was left on.”

“And it will be you and Grand Master Phil doing the actual work.”

“We’ll have Stephen there as well for back-up, but it will be primarily Phil and myself.”

“When do you think you’ll start?”

Ianto considered. “We’re going to need certain things and then get set up. I think we can be ready in three weeks. I hope that meets with your approval, Steve.”

He could tell that the Paladin was wishing it was sooner, but he nodded. “I’ve thought he was dead all this time. Three more weeks won’t be impossible to wait.”

Ianto rested his hand on the man’s arm. “We’ll do the very best we can.”

“I know you will. You’re both good men, and you genuinely want to help Bucky and me…and I can even understand why I wasn’t told about my friend, although I don’t like it.”

“And what about his memory?” Lord Gabe asked. “Is there a chance he’ll ever get his memory back?”

“I don’t know,” Ianto sighed. “He’s been mindwiped frequently. It’s a good sign that he’s having some flashes of things, and we’ll do everything we can, but this is one thing I simply cannot promise.” If they’d had the original Artifact that had been used to do the memory removal, he might have been able to give them more of an idea. However, it hadn’t been left behind when Hydra had abandoned their base. Ianto could only hope they weren’t using it again on someone else.

“Then,” Steve said, with such certainty in his voice that he had Ianto believing in him, “we’ll become friends again. I won’t leave him, not ever again.”

“You are a good friend,” the Wizard said, “and he’s going to need that, no matter how things turn out.”

“And he’ll have it.”

There was no doubt in Ianto’s mind that he meant every word.
Chapter 53

The trip to Barony Uncelas was, of course, taken in the blink of an eye, since teleporting was something a Wizard just did.

Daisy took a look around. So they wouldn’t be rude, Dad had gotten the coordinates for the foyer outside the Baronial Court chamber from Grand Master Stephen, who’d been there before, consulting with the Baron and his Court Wizard. The Grand Master had come with them, to facilitate introductions and to make the best effort to pave their way through the process, for which Daisy was grateful. She could vividly recall her own adoption, and how it hadn’t gone all that well until Uncle Nick had stepped in and gotten the Council of Barons involved. There’d been a moment in the procedure when she’d honestly thought Dad was going to steal her and run away, and she would have gone with him willingly. They hadn’t seemed to understand that she and Dad belonged together, that he’d been meant to find her in that alley, and that to separate them would’ve been a big mistake.

The adoption had gone through, but then she’d Tested as Cardinal, and things had kinda gotten all raked up all over again...

The foyer was a bit plain, with straight chairs in various places along the walls. Near the large double doors was a small yet ornate desk, where a young woman sat, regarding them closely as if trying to figure out who they were. It didn’t take her long, Daisy assumed she recognized Grand Master Stephen, from his previous visits, and she smiled in their direction. Rising from her chair, she came to meet them, holding her hand out to them in welcome.

"Baron Alexander is in the middle of reconciling a dispute," she said by way of greeting, “but he should be done presently. I’m Lisa Rogers, the Baron’s personal scribe. Can I get you all anything?"

“No, thank you,” Grand Master Stephen answered politely. “If the Baron will be available soon, we can simply wait.”

The Great Wizard gave all their names, and Miss Rogers took them all even though she didn’t write anything down. She was wearing what had to have been the Baronial service uniform: a dark blue skirt with a mustard colored tunic over, the coat of arms of the Barony embroidered on the left side of the tunic.

“I’ll go and let His Grace know you’ve arrived.” Her smile grew a little wider, showing off a single dimple on the left side of her mouth. “He’s been expecting you, and I suspect he’ll appreciate the interruption.” With that, she made her way toward the doors into the Baronial Court, pulling the right-side door easily and stepping inside. She didn’t bother closing it all the way, and Daisy could make out some really loud yelling going on. She could certainly understand why the Baron would want to be interrupted from that.

Miss Rogers was back shortly, accompanied by two men who were glaring daggers at each other. They both caught sight of their group at the same time, and those daggers flew right at them. Her Dad simply raised a single eyebrow, completed unintimidated, while Clint just smirked. Daisy didn’t even bother with all that restraint, and laughed. Crystal, who had instantly ducked behind Dad’s legs, crept out from hiding, gaining her courage when she saw how her family was reacting. Dad rested a hand on her head, and she looked up at him, as if confirming that everything was alright.
Grand Master Stephen just shook his head at all of them, vastly amused if Agamotto’s draconic chuckling was any indication.

The two men stalked out, rekindling their disagreement before they’d even left the foyer. Miss Rogers’ dark eyes were laughing as she said, ‘Baron Alexander will see you now.”

“Thank you, Miss Rogers,” Dad said sincerely.

“No, thank you, Grand Master. This means the Baron will be in a good mood the rest of the day, and that makes my job a lot easier.”

Grand Master Stephen led the way in; he’d been the one to arrange the meeting, and he would be the one to introduce them to the court. The chamber was fairly large; not as big or gaudy as Uncle Nick’s, but it was obviously very Baronial. The walls were clean and bright, and a long burgundy rug ran down the middle of the room to the raised dais at the end, where the Baronial seat was. Windows showing the city beyond were just behind the seat, the sun brilliant and warm.

On the throne sat Alexander Waverly, Baron Uncelas.

He was an elderly gentleman, with kind eyes that met Daisy’s with a smile in them…but, behind that smile, she could see the steel, the strength that spoke of him being a powerful Baron and not willing to put up with a lot that wasn’t to the point.

Standing on one side of the Baronial seat was a tall, dark-haired man, in full armor including a sword. He was handsome, and Daisy got the feeling that he knew it, too; but, at the same time, his eyes were also kind, especially when he noticed Crystal, walking alongside Dad, with her hand in his, Lockjaw at her side. Both of them looked terrified but were trying their best to hide it, and this man – most likely a Knights’ Commander – could tell.

The third man in the room was on the opposite side of the Knight. He was a little shorter, with blond hair that was almost white, and was wearing Wizard’s robes that were all in shades of dark blue and black. His dragon, a royal blue and a little larger than Happy, was curled about his shoulders. His ice blue eyes were discerning; from his magical aura Daisy could tell this was a Great Wizard.

She only hoped that wouldn’t be a problem.

Grand Master Stephen strode forward, bowing to Baron Alexander. “Thank you for seeing us so quickly, Your Grace.”

“When there is a child involved,” Baron Alexander said, “it’s always in everyone’s best interest to proceed with alacrity.” He smiled down at Crystal, and Daisy wondered if this was what the proverbial kindly grandfather would look like, since she actually hadn’t had one herself.

Then, the Baron stood, making his way down the steps of the dais. Grand Master Stephen performed the introductions, and Baron Alexander shook hands with Dad and Clint then, when he came to Daisy, he graced her with a pleased smile. “Novice Daisy, I was present at the kerfuffle your original adoption caused. It’s gratifying to see that our faith in your father wasn’t in vain.”

Daisy wanted to be a little insulted, but she just couldn’t. Baron Alexander was just so damned charming. She could vaguely remember him at the Council of Barons, and he’d been one of the many who’d voted to let Dad adopt her, which was why she was glad to have lived up to this man’s expectations. “I remember you there, Your Grace,” she answered. “Thank you for your vote of confidence.”

See, she could be charming as well.
Her Dad was grinning, as was Clint. So, she must have done good then.

“And this must be Lady Crystal.” The Baron actually knelt in front of her; for someone as old as he was, he seemed to be pretty spry.

Crystal actually giggled. “I’m not a lady, I’m a little girl.”

Baron Alexander winked. “All ladies were little girls at some point.” He glanced to the side, where Lockjaw was standing just behind her, hiding behind his companion just as Crystal had done behind Dad. “And who is this fine dragon?”

“His name’s Lockjaw.” She seemed to be warming to the older man, and Daisy had to hand it to him.

“It’s nice to meet you both.” Despite his nice suit and his age, the Baron settled himself onto the steps, so he could be more at Crystal’s level. “Did your guardian explain to you what was going to happen today?”

Crystal chewed her lip. “What’s a guardian?”

“Someone who looks after you.”

“You mean like my Dad and Daddy?”

Baron Alexander nodded. “Exactly.” His eyes glanced upward; Daisy knew he was regarding Dad, and then Clint, probably trying to figure out if they had something to do with Crystal calling them that, or if it was all her idea. Dad’s own eyes darted to Crystal, nodding slightly; the Baron seemed to understand that it had all been Crystal’s idea, because he returned the nod.

“You’re gonna ask me questions about what happened,” the little girl answered shyly.

“That’s right. Myself and these two gentlemen,” he motioned toward the Wizard and the Knight, who also stepped forward. “This is Sir Napoleon,” he introduced the Knight, “and this is Master Illya,” motioning toward the Wizard.

Crystal narrowed her eyes at the Wizard. “You’re like Grand Master Stephen.”

“I am,” Master Illya agreed, his eyes warming a little. “We are of the same Order.”

“But not like me and Dad. Or like Daisy.”

“That is correct.”

Well, he didn’t seem to be judgmental about either of them both being Voids, or her being Cardinal. One mark in the man’s favor as far as Daisy was concerned.

“What’s your dragon’s name?” the little girl asked shyly.

“His name is Vanya.” Despite being dressed for Court, Master Illya sat on the steps as well, the better for Crystal to pet his dragon.

Once she’d given Vanya a rub, the dragon launched himself off his Wizard’s shoulders and slammed into Clint, almost driving the air out of him. Fortunately, he managed to catch Vanya, and he laughed breathlessly as he got the traditional dragon greeting where Elves were concerned.

Lucky, instead of getting jealous, just sat at Clint’s feet and preened. Daisy couldn’t help but laugh
at it, rubbing Skye’s head as the dragon shared in her humor.

Skye really didn’t have any room for that sort of thing. After all, she’d acted like an idiot the first time she’d met the Elf as well.

Lola was laughing. Yeah, she had no reason for that, either, from the story that Dad told about her meeting with Clint. She’d been even less dignified than Skye.

Master Illya’s face was bland, but his eyes had warmed into delight. Sir Napoleon, though, was chuckling. “Seems you can’t control your dragon, my friend.”

“As if there is any way to control a dragon with an Elf in the room.” Master Illya rolled his eyes.

Vanya’s antics seemed to have broken the ice, which was a good thing. Daisy wanted everything to go better than her own adoption process had, because it wasn’t fair to Crystal to make this any harder than it needed to be.

“Now,” Baron Alexander said, his own voice amused, “what say we take this somewhere more comfortable? Sir Napoleon, would you mind sending for some refreshments and we’ll take this into my audience chamber?”

“Not at all, Your Grace.” With a smile and a bow, the Knight strode toward the door, most likely going to speak to Miss Rogers, his dark blue cloak billowing out behind him.

“Master Illya, if you wouldn’t mind helping me up?” Baron Alexander held an arm out to his Court Wizard.

Before Master Illya could get to his own feet, Dad was offering his own arm, which the Baron gratefully accepted.

“Thank you, young man. However don’t think your gallant move will factor into your favor.” Baron Alexander’s voice was light, which meant he was most likely teasing.

“Not a bit of it, Your Grace. But it’s been a very long time since anyone’s called me ‘young man’.” The little lines around his eyes were a bit deeper which, to Daisy, meant he was pleased with the comment.

Baron Alexander huffed. “Compared to myself, everyone is young.”

Daisy didn’t say, except for Ianto and Jack.

She didn’t think that was necessary.

Besides, she was getting a kick out of the Baron calling her Dad ‘young man’.

“If you’ll all follow me.”

With that invitation, the Baron set off, moving around the dais and to a door that Daisy hadn’t noticed when they’d come in, even though most Baronial Courts seemed to have a back way in and out. Just beyond the door was a large sitting room, brightly furnished in shades of light blue, two sofas looking as if they’d swallow whole whoever sat on them, matching chairs placed in strategic places with light wood tables spaced near them, windows letting in the sunlight. It was a fairly masculine room, but Daisy thought it fit into what a Baron would use as an audience chamber.

The Baron motioned them all to seats, taking a rather large overstuffed chair himself. Watching him
settle back onto the cushions had Daisy wondering if someone was going to have to help him out of the cushions like Dad had had to do when the Baron had sat on the steps.

They were all barely seated when a pair of servants entered, bearing trays with tea things and a selection of sweets piled high on a couple of platters. Daisy shouldn’t have been hungry, but the sight of all those desserts made her mouth water.

She’d taken one of the chairs. Dad and Clint were sharing a couch, Lola and Lucky curled up together at their feet. Crystal had squeezed in between them, Lockjaw enjoying himself being pinned against the carpet by the two larger dragons; it shouldn’t have been comfortable, but he certainly wasn’t objecting. Skye, wanting to get in on the impromptu dragon pile, flopped down on top of Lola.

Clint, once he was sitting, put Vanya down with the other dragons; he let out a contented sigh and puddled all over Lucky. Agamotto, not wanting to be left out, coiled himself up on the very top of the pile.

“Shall I be mother?” Master Illya offered.

Baron Alexander nodded. “Please.”

As he was pouring the tea, Sir Napoleon joined them, taking the other couch, sprawling out on the blue pillows. He’d set his sword aside somewhere, but Daisy didn’t think he looked any less dangerous without it. But then, he was a Baronial Knight, and they were only the best of the best.

Daisy had met a couple of Baron Tony’s Knights, and they’d been friendly yet damned intimidating, especially Sir Rhodey, who had kind intimidation down to a fine art. Sir Napoleon was cut from that same cloth.

She couldn’t help but notice the expression on Master Illya’s face when he passed the Knight his teacup. Daisy was pretty certain she saw their fingers brush when the Wizard handed over the tea.

Hm. They weren’t even bothering to hide it, which was awesome.

Once the tea was poured – and Crystal had been given lemonade – Baron Alexander began. “Lady Crystal, would you mind coming to sit here?” He patted the rather fluffy ottoman in front of his chair.

Lockjaw popped his head up out of the pile, chirping in concern. Crystal had gone a little pale, but Dad whispered something in her ear and she nodded. Climbing down out of the couch, the little girl joined the Baron, who helped her sit without spilling her drink.

“Now,” he reassured, “there’s nothing to be concerned about. I’m simply going to ask you some questions, and then we’ll take things from there. Be completely truthful and, if at any time, you feel uncomfortable, say so and we’ll move on to the next question. Is that alright?”

“I suppose so,” Crystal answered uncertainly.

Daisy was quite happy at the gentle way Baron Alexander questioned her sister. He managed to get quite a lot of information from her: that her parents had turned her out when she’d been Tested as Void; how she and Lockjaw had survived due to her dragon’s ability to teleport, stealing what they’d needed to survive. She identified Mordo as the Wizard who’d come to the village to Test her, and how he’d told her parents that she was bad because of what she could do.

“Do you know if there were other children treated the same way?” Master Illya asked softly.
Crystal shrugged. “I’m sorry, I don’t know. But…” she looked torn.

“What is it, sweetheart?” Dad asked.

“I think…I think I had an older sister.” Her eyes were stricken. “I think I had an older sister.”

Daisy was shocked, but then she knew that magic did run in families. If Crystal’s biological parents had had another magical child, then chances were any other siblings she’d had were Void as well.

Out of the corner of her eye, Daisy saw Sir Napoleon leaning forward, and an entire conversation seemed to go on between him and Master Illya, who’d taken another chair close by. Something must have happened, or else there was some information that they had that hadn’t been shared yet. It was probably a case of Crystal verifying things, and they didn’t want to poison that verification by letting anyone know what they’d discovered in the course of the investigation.

Believing that didn’t stop Daisy from wanting to demand answers immediately. She managed to control herself, though.

Baron Alexander nodded. “Thank you for that, Lady Crystal. Now, I’d like to talk about you for a bit, and what’s going to happen next.”

“Okay,” she said. Daisy wanted to go over and hug her, and she could tell that Dad and Clint wanted to as well, but she remained in her chair, knowing there would be time for that later, when they finally took her home for good. Because there was no other way this was going to turn out, she wouldn’t accept anything else.

Still, if things got hard for Crystal, she was determined to pull her out of the interrogation…no matter what sort of bad impression that might make.

And she was pretty sure she had two others in the room who agreed with her. Or, maybe three, if Grand Master Stephen went along with it.
Chapter 54

Clint had to admit, he was impressed by just how easy Baron Alexander was being with Crystal. He gently asked her questions, drawing out details that he was quite sure that little girl had no idea she’d even known, about her parents and the premature Testing and how she and Lockjaw had managed to survive long enough for Phil to find her.

He’d thought his life had been bad. Honestly, his had nothing on what Crystal had gone through, mainly because for a large part of it, it had been alright…it was just the beginning and the end of childhood that had been shit. Clint was determined that he would do everything in his power to erase the hells she’d been subjected to.

When Crystal said she’d thought she’d had an older sister, but couldn’t remember, Clint actually saw red. He’d had his own big brother, and Barney had turned out to be a real shit, so he really couldn’t compare it beyond the older sibling thing. To have a sister she could barely remember she’d had…what had happened to her? From the glance he saw the Knight and the Wizard give each other, Clint had the feeling they’d be hearing more about that at some point.

He had the horrific impression that he wasn’t going to like what they had to say.

He could also tell that Daisy was having a hard time sitting still. He couldn’t blame her. Phil was sitting close enough that the archer could tell the moment the outrage nearly overtook him, and he didn’t dare look over at his lover because he knew it would be his undoing. If they ever came face to face with Crystal’s asshole parents, Clint could guarantee that the Dark One could come out to play. And the Hawk would be right beside him.

“Thank you for that, Lady Crystal,” and no, Clint didn’t thing that was adorable, “Now, I’d like to talk about you for a bit, and what’s going to happen next.”

“Okay.” Crystal perked up a little at that. She shifted on the ottoman a little, but she apparently thought she could trust Baron Alexander, because she was watching him expectantly.

He gave her a grandfatherly smile…well, Clint thought it might be grandfatherly, since he had no memory of his own grandparents and so couldn’t compare it. “We’re not going to send you back to your first parents, so don’t be worried about that. But, I need to know if these two young men,” Clint wasn’t sure how he felt about being called a ‘young man’, since he certainly wasn’t that anymore, “are going to be proper new parents for you. You do want to go home with them, right?”

“Yessir,” Crystal affirmed. “They’re my Dad and Daddy, and I love them.”

The archer’s heart melted at that. Because, even though it had only been that morning when he’d met her, he loved her as well. She was such a sweet, damaged child and, while he’d never have thought he’d ever have a kid, Crystal had changed that.

Well, seeing Phil again and finding out he was now immortal…that had really caused the change in attitude.

“And I have a sister, Daisy,” Crystal went on. “And Auntie Nat and Uncle Nick.”

“That’s quite a few people,” the Baron observed.
Crystal nodded with that certainty that all young children have. “Dad’s gonna teach me how to be a Wizard, and Daddy’s gonna show me how to use my new bow – “

“Toy bow,” Clint felt the need to interject. He didn’t want anyone to get the wrong idea.

“– and Daisy said she wants to read to me, and to let me meet her friends and help me find friends of my own. Oh, and Steward Melinda says she’ll teach me how to fight back when bad people want to hurt me – “

“When she’s a little older,” it was Phil’s turn to interject.

“And Dr. Andrew wants to see how good I can read and write, which isn’t really very good, but he says he’ll teach me that, too, for when it’s time for me to go to a real school.”

“Melinda is my Steward,” Phil added, at Baron Alexander’s raised eyebrow, “and Andrew is her husband. He’s also a retired professor.”

“Auntie Nat says she wants me to learn about knives, but I’m not ready for that.”

“Natasha is my best friend,” Clint felt the need to explain. “She works for Baron Nicholas of Triskelia as a spy and bodyguard.” Well, that was putting it politely, but one didn’t just come out and say that Nat was the best assassin in the Western Lands.

“Uncle Nick is big and scary but he’s also nice. He’s not a pirate, though. I thought he was, but he says he isn’t.”

“And Uncle Nick is Baron Nicholas,” Phil added. “He is my oldest friend.”

Sir Napoleon was laughing. “I don’t think you needed to explain that.”

He had a point. There was only one Baron with an eyepatch. And, really, Marcus could really resemble a pirate when he wanted to. It had been unbelievably cute when Crystal had asked him if he was a pirate. No one else would have been able to get away with that shit.

“It seems like you have quite a lot of people to take care of you, Lady Crystal,” the Baron replied.

“It’s nice to have family who love me.” Her voice was full of wonder, as if she still couldn’t quite believe good things could ever happen to her.

At that, Clint felt himself tear up. No one that young should have had such bad things done to her. She was an innocent child, whose only crime in the eyes of the people who should have loved her was that she was a Void Wizard. And that wasn’t a crime at all.

“It certainly is,” Baron Alexander agreed. “And it’s obvious that they do love you.”

“I love them, too. Baron Alexander?”

“Yes, Lady Crystal?”

“You’re not gonna take me away from them, are you?”

No, Clint wasn’t crying.

Oh, he totally was.

And Daisy was as well, judging from the sniffling that was being done.
He didn’t dare look at Phil, because if he did then Clint would have lost even the tiny bit of dignity he had left.

“Of course not,” he assured her. “I think you belong with them, and they belong with you.”

“Thank you!” she squealed. She practically launched herself off the ottoman and into the old man’s arms, hugging him tightly.

The Baron laughed, hugging her back, although where her shoe had landed couldn’t have been comfortable. “You are quite welcome.”

Clint was up before he’d even registered moving, Phil right beside him. Daisy was standing as well, and the moment Crystal released her grasp on the Baron Phil had her in his arms, holding her as if he never wanted to let her go.

Daisy joined in the hug; Clint hovered a little ways away, until she rolled her eyes through her tears and dragged him in. Their dragons decided to get in on the action, and the Elf couldn’t recall the last time he’d felt so much love surrounding him.

He was never giving this up. Never.

To his credit, Baron Alexander let them have their moment, but then he cleared his throat almost apologetically. “Why don’t we get the papers signed? Then we’ll let Novice Daisy take her new sister down to the kitchen for something more substantial than cake while we speak to their fathers and Grand Master Stephen for a moment.”

Daisy looked like she wanted to argue, but Phil touched her on the shoulder, a silent signal for her to go along with it for now. Clint knew she wanted to hear what the Baron had to say, but he also knew that his lover would fill her in on it once they were home.

Clint had come to realize there was no real way of hiding things from Daisy Coulson. It didn’t hurt that it seemed as if she could handle just about anything.

It was shitty what a lousy childhood could do to someone. It had certainly made Clint grow up way too fast.

Master Illya was the one who laid out the papers they’d be signing for the adoption, on a small writing desk that he pulled up to them for the occasion. Phil put his signature on the document with a flourish, then handed the fountain pen to Clint.

Who stared at him, eyes wide.

What?

“She’s ours, Clint,” Phil told him. “I want to raise Crystal with you. I know we’ve only been together for a short while, and we haven’t even discussed getting married…”

“Ask me,” the archer blurted. “Ask me, Phil.”

He couldn’t believe what he was saying. Sure, he’d been thinking about that favor he’d asked Ianto, and about being Crystal’s Daddy, but they really hadn’t discussed any of this. It was such a huge step, one that he was ready for, although if anyone had told him before that he’d be willing to accept a commitment like this at all, he would have laughed in their faces.

The absolute love in Phil’s eyes made them practically glow. “I will, but not in front of people who
are practically strangers. One day soon, I promise.”

“Alright.” Clint thought that made sense, and he trusted his lover to keep that promise.

Daisy nudged him with her elbow. “Sign, silly.”

He glanced toward her. “Are you sure? I wasn’t around for you – “

“And that’s my Dad’s fault, not yours. Go on, Clint…sign it.” She gave him a happy little grin.

Well, he wasn’t about to argue with her, not when she wasn’t going to hold it against him that he hadn’t adopted her along with Phil, eleven years ago. It really wasn’t his fault, because she was right; Phil had let everyone think he was dead and, while Clint had been angry about it at one time, he wasn’t any longer. He was just glad to have Phil back in his life, loving him.

And so, Clint Barton, once the second-best assassin in the Western Lands – behind Nat, of course – signed the papers that made him one half of Crystal’s parents.

Sir Napoleon witnessed, as did Master Illya, and then Baron Alexander affixed the Baronial seal, making the adoption official. He smiled, obviously pleased with events. “And so, I pronounce you Crystal Coulson.”

“Crystal Barton-Coulson,” Daisy interjected, grinning.

Clint gaped at her. That…yes, he was also adopting Crystal, but that was completely unexpected. His heart thumped painfully in his chest, at the same time he couldn’t hold in the joy that flowed through him. Impulsively, he grabbed Daisy and pulled her into a hug of her own, silently thanking her for the honor that he never would have taken for himself.

“Crystal Barton-Coulson,” Phil confirmed. He looked at the little girl in his arms. “That sound good to you, sweetheart?”

Crystal nodded, her own eyes wide with sheer joy. “Dad and Daddy. And sister.”

“That’s us,” Daisy said, her own voice choked a bit. “I’ve always wanted a little sister, and now I have one.” She held her arms out, and Phil transferred their daughter – their daughter! – into them with ease. “Let’s go and leave them to talk grown-up talk.”

“Okay,” Crystal agreed readily, and Clint realized it was because she now knew she wasn’t about to be taken away. He doubted she would have let them out of her sight before that paper was signed.

Phil kissed both his daughters on the cheek. “We won’t be long.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Dad,” Dais admonished him playfully.

“I never do,” he told her.

Daisy gave him a sweet smile of her own. “I know. See you and Clint in a bit.” What she didn’t say was, And I expect you to tell me what’s going on, although Clint was perfectly capable of reading between the lines.

“Miss Rogers will be more than happy to show you where the kitchens are,” the Baron offered. “I’ll send along your fathers as soon as we’re done.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.” Daisy did as much of a curtsy as she could with a six-year-old in her arms, and then took Crystal out of the chamber, but not before the little girl called back, “Thank you,
Your Grace!” her happy voice ringing out over the room, echoing in the corners like pleasant ghosts. Lockjaw, not to be outdone, climbed out of the dragon pile that had accreted on the floor then galloped right up the Baron Alexander, chirped happily at the man, and then followed them both, gathering up Skye along the way.

Once the door closed behind them, the Baron waved them all back to seats. “Can I offer you gentlemen something to drink besides tea?”

Phil politely declined, as did Clint. Grand Master Stephen accepted a glass of wine, while Sir Napoleon and Master Illya kept to tea. Clint was nervous, even though the adoption had gone through and there would be no takebacks; besides, he doubted the Grand Master would have been invited if it were personal. He couldn’t imagine what else the Baron and his retainers would have to say to them, and it was making him a bit jittery.

Baron Alexander looked amused. “Please, it isn’t bad, Master Barton, at least where your family is concerned. I promise you that.”

Well, Clint had never claimed he could hide his emotions all that well.

“I admit,” Grand Master Stephen said, “I am curious as to what you wanted to speak to us about.”

Phil nodded. “As am I.”

Master Illya was the one who spoke. “I was present at the Quorum when the Hydra cabal was exposed.”

Clint felt Phil stiffen a little beside him; that also meant the Great Wizard knew who his lover really was. And yet, he’d been fine with the adoption, so that was a positive.

“And I attended the Council of Barons over it, as well,” Baron Alexander commented. “Sir Napoleon and I went to work immediately upon returning from that meeting, hoping to find out any sort of information on the Wizards responsible. After all, we have a history of Dark Wizards here in Uncelas, and I would greatly wish to keep that sort of thing from happening again.”

This time, Phil flinched. Master Illya must have caught it, because he shook his head once, as if reaffirming that he hadn’t said anything, the oath of the Quorum firmly in place. Clint was aware that a Wizard’s loyalty lay to the Order, and then their Barony, so he was glad to see that was being upheld here. The last thing Phil needed was to be censured over something that had happened in the past and they he’d been doing his best to atone for.

“Personally,” Master Illya said, “I am glad you exposed the rot in the Guild. It did lead to exposing the rot within our own Barony, which I have been investigating while Napoleon has been attempting to track leads on Hydra.”

“You must have found Crystal’s biological parents,” Phil stated. There had been two other signatures on the adoption documents, those of the birth parents signing away their rights to their own daughter.

“I did, and they are currently in custody pending judgement. And the entire village is undergoing a thorough investigation. The citizens were, each and every one of them, responsible in some way for Crystal’s state, and they need to pay for their crimes as well.”

The archer was all for that, and said so. He hadn’t been present when Phil had found Crystal, but he’d heard about it, and figured that the punishment on the Baronial level would be a lot more lenient than what the Hawk, the Widow, and the Dark One could enforce.
“Although,” the Wizard growled, “if I had known about a possible other daughter at the time of their arrest... I might not have been so nice as to simply toss them into a dungeon cell. We’ve... heard rumors about an older daughter, which we’re following up. At least we have some form of confirmation of it, now.”

Clint really wanted to be involved in that following up thing, but knew it wasn’t his place.

Damn it.

“They were demanding Baronial justice,” Sir Napoleon laughed. “I’m not sure why they think Wizard justice is going to be so much worse.”

“If they did, indeed, toss away another child,” the Baron snapped, “they would be facing the death penalty.”

“Wizard justice would call for forced sterilization,” Grand Master Stephen said, “but death is what they’d be looking at if we can prove they did cause the death of a magical child.”

“I’d be more than happy to do it,” Clint snarled. He was so very angry, moreso because he’d suffered a different sort of abuse from his own bastard father, who’d been so tied up over the fact that their family had been kicked out of the Enclave because they’d gotten sick and tired over his belligerent actions, and that he’d taken that out on his wife and kids. He and Barney – who’d gone the same asshole route as their Dad – hadn’t deserved what Harold Barton had done to either one of them, because it hadn’t been their fault.

It really was a parallel between Crystal and himself.

No wonder he cared about that little girl so much.

Phil’s hand closed over his, squeezing his fingers in comfort. Lucky pushed his own sadness through their new link, and Clint hoped he’d never take that link for granted because it was awesome.

“Sorry,” he apologized, feeling just a little embarrassed by letting his emotions get the better of him.

“No need,” Master Illya waved it away, “I think we can all sympathize with the need to stop child abusers from committing their crimes once more.”

“If you don’t mind me asking,” Sir Napoleon cut in, “but I’m not sure I understand this sterilization thing. Sure, not letting them do that again is important...”

“Magic runs along family lines,” Phil explained. “If a Void child is born to parents, then it is a near-certainty that, if they did have another magical child, that child would also be Void. In this case, the parents had a preconceived prejudice against Void Wizards, so letting them even attempt to get pregnant again would pretty much guarantee that it would just give them another chance to abuse again.”

“Plus,” Stephen added, “that prejudice seems to carry over to Cardinals as well. So, even if this was a crime against Void Order, in the off-chance the next child would have been Cardinal they may have done the exact same thing.”

“Grand Master Stephen,” the Knight said, “you said you have the Wizard responsible for spreading this sort of poison in custody?”

“We do.” The Great Wizard looked pained; Clint couldn’t blame him, since Mordo had been his
friend. “We’ll bring him up in front of the Quorum, where he will stand to charges of complicity.”

“Good. I don’t want any of that sort of thing in my Barony. I will trust the Guild to mete out its own judgment on the perpetrator.” Baron Alexander looked satisfied.

“However,” Master Illya said, “this really wasn’t the main reason we asked to speak to you.”

Clint sat up a little. They’d also mentioned Hydra; he had to assume this was about the investigation they’d said they’d been doing. “Please tell us you’ve gotten us some sort of lead on Hydra.”

Sir Napoleon smiled. It was almost as charming as Jack’s. “I have.”

“Anything you can tell us would be helpful.” Phil was sincere. He wanted to find the last stragglers of Hydra possibly more than Clint did.

“I believe I’ve managed to discover where Alexander Pierce has been hiding.” The Knight looked smug.

Clint thought he had the right to.
Chapter Notes

I actually rewrote a big chunk of this chapter this morning, because it didn't make sense. I have no idea why I didn't catch it before, but I'm sure you all know how that goes. If there's anything wrong with it, please don't hesitate to point it out.

"Pierce is with Baron Jerald Stern?" Ianto asked, slightly disbelieving.

Stephen nodded. "That's what Baron Alexander’s Knights’ Commander, Sir Napoleon, says, and I have no reason to discount it."

The Cardinal Wizard sat back in the chair at his desk, where he’d been working on some notes on the removal of Sir James’ cursed arm. The meeting with Pepper, Sir Steven, Dr. Wilson, and Lord Gabe had been fruitful, and had given him a few ideas he’d wanted to kick around. He thought he might have some valid procedures to break the curses, he just needed to discuss them with Phil first, since he was the acknowledged expert on Void magic.

Stephen had arrived a short time before, coming directly from Barony Uncelas, after the official adoption of Crystal by Phil and Clint. Ianto was so very glad there hadn’t been an issue with it; his Great counterpart had reported the entire affair, including sir Napoleon’s revelation about Alexander Pierce.

The United Kingdom didn’t have such a thing as the Council of Barons, not like the Western Lands had. For that country, the Council was their central government, and there were times when Ianto had to wonder how anything got done without someone in charge, like the King and Queen here in the United Kingdom. While he wasn’t familiar with the political climate in the Western Lands, the Wizard did get a few bits and pieces from friends who were peripherally involved, like Stephen was. And Pepper, who was technically Baron Tony’s Court Wizard and was always involved with Baronial meetings, both for official reasons and to keep her husband in line.

Now, of course, he had Baron Nicholas Fury he could also rely on. Ianto wondered if he’d been told as yet about Pierce. Well, he was certain it wouldn’t be long before Phil made his own report back to his Baron and friend.

What he did know about the Baronial situation across the ocean, was that Barony Shandling had borne the brunt of Loki’s predations. After that disaster, it had been fighting to repair its infrastructure, and he had to wonder if there were still issues within the Barony that would make having Pierce there considered a good thing.

He asked Stephen just that.

“Well, the Barony still has its problems, but from the outside it looks pretty well recovered since Loki and his demon army attacked. I don’t know any of the particulars of the accounting or the politics involved, however. For all I know, it could be on its last legs and Baron Jerald is putting on a front for everyone else. Having a powerful Wizard at his beck and call would suggest that position, in my
opinion.” He took a sip of the coffee Ianto had provided. “Are you familiar with the history Phil has with Baron Jerald and Barony Shandling?”

The grave tone told Ianto that this wasn’t a good thing. “No, I’m not.”

“That was the Barony where he found Daisy. Baron Jerald was against the adoption.”

“How was he allowed to adopt, then?” Ianto did know that adoption had to go through the Barony of residence of the child, so if Baron Jerald had denied it…there hadn’t been any sort of rumor about it within the Guild, at least not until Daisy had been Tested as Cardinal, and that had had more to do with the fact that her father was Void than anything about where the adoption had taken place.

He was beginning to wish he’d done a little more digging into it, since he’d been Grand Master of the Order back then as well. He really should have paid more attention, but it hadn’t really mattered to him what magic her adoptive father had had unless he’d ended up being an abusive arsehole. Of course, he could have stepped in at any point, it had just never gotten that bad, and his Head of Cardinal Order for the Western Lands had kept him apprised of the mess that had blown up over it.

That had been Mistress Cinnamon Carter. She’d told him about having to put her foot down about the adoption, rightly telling the upset Wizards protesting a Cardinal being raised by a Void that the paperwork was official. She’d informed them that they couldn’t overrule the adoption, reminding them that if they really had an issue with it, they would have to take it up with the Council of Barons…which they never had because they hadn’t had a viable case. The only time that the Guild could get involved with that sort of thing was if there was some sort of recognizable abuse involved. Then, they could step in and pull the magical child out of the home.

He had to smile slightly. He recalled fondly the uproar that had been caused when Cinnamon had married Master Rollin Hand…a Void. It had been such a scandal, at least among the Greats. It had also been highly entertaining. He and Jack had been invited to the wedding, which had been a splendid affair. Ianto had given the bride away. It had been an honor to do so.

Cinnamon had been an excellent Head of Order. He missed her, but Pepper was also amazing at the job. Ianto also had to admit to himself, though, that he was a little biased toward Pepper, as he’d been her teaching Master and had long considered her amazing anyway.

Then had come the revelation from Pepper about just who Master Phil Coulson really had been…yes, he really should have done more research into the whole situation. He wouldn’t be caught flat-footed now if he had done.

“It took an act of the Council. There was enough of a majority to overrule Baron Jerald, led by Baron Nick. From what Phil told me, it was the first – and so far only – adoption that had been approved by the Council itself. The only reason it went through was because of Baron Nick’s sheer cussedness and determination, especially since he was a new Baron himself and had no real connections yet within the Council.”

Ianto had to laugh. Yes, that did sound like Nick Fury, just from the short time he’d known the man. “So, there’s a history there between Phil and Stern.”

“There’s more.”

“Of course there is.” It couldn’t have been that easy.

“There was a Wizard involved as well. Master Thaddeus Ross.”

Ianto cursed. “Let me guess…he was the one stirring up trouble about a Void raising any sort of
Wizard child, even one whose magic we would have had no idea of yet.” Now, he really was beginning to wish he’d paid more attention eleven years ago, since that had been about the same time the rumors had started being whispered in the Guild Hall about Master Thaddeus being in a major strop about something, but then being in a strop was Ross’ default position. Usually, he was a bit more observant than that, and he did try to keep an eye on people who were so anti-Cardinal and Void.

*Damnit.*

But Cinnamon had had a good handle on the situation, and Ianto had learned quite a while ago not to micromanage his Heads of Order, that that was the quick way to engender bad resentment within Cardinal Order. She would have informed him if she’d needed any help. Besides, he’d agreed with her assessment over it all and wouldn’t have dreamed of sticking his nose in, no matter how curious he’d been at the time.

“Got it in one. You have to know, he’s going to be angry about it, now knowing that the Void Wizard who’d adopted a magic child had been the Dark One. He’s bound to be telling all and sundry that he was right all along, and had known better when the issue had come up in the first place.”

The Cardinal Wizard pinched the bridge of his nose. “And I wouldn’t put it past him to try to somehow work around his oath to the Guild and make it generally known just who Phil Coulson used to be. Phil would be the perfect target for him to raise more anti-Void rhetoric.”

“We’re going to have to watch him, Ianto. Since he’s in my Order – “

“You’ll try to keep it under control. But you’re not the only one involved in this, Stephen. Did you warn Phil?”

“I did. I’m not sure if Master Thaddeus would actually *do* anything, really, since Daisy is Cardinal and we both know he’s an equal opportunity bigot, but we can’t put it past him not to try to get some sort of revenge. I think I might speak to his daughter, Betty, tomorrow after the Quorum. She’s also a Great Wizard, and she’s a lot more amenable to things than her father is. And, if I can believe some of the stories I’ve heard, she’s not happy with her father one bit. Something about a suitor he didn’t approve of.”

“Phil needs to prove himself to the Quorum,” Ianto mused, “so that the choice of him being Grand Master of Voids can’t be questioned, least of all by people like Thaddeus Ross.”

“Especially now that he’s decided he wants to stay in the position.”

“Exactly.” Of which Ianto was quite grateful for. He had a feeling that Phil would be one of their greatest crusaders…and their best examples. He didn’t want to risk losing him to Wizard politics.

“If you’re asking my opinion…”

“You know I always respect your opinion, Stephen.”

“Then I say we send him after Pierce, to challenge the former Grand Master to a duel.”

Ianto considered. That was a good idea, as it would not only take down Hydra’s head, it would also prove that Phil really was that powerful. Alexander Pierce had been chosen as Grand Master more through politicking than through magical prowess, but he was still a very powerful Void. Ianto was willing to bet it had been Pierce who’d warped that Void Point through his experiments. So, Phil being able to take him down and hand out justice for the Void would certainly be an excellent start.
It would also cement his reputation of being the most powerful Void living…not that there could be much doubt of that, not after the story of how he’d taken down John Garrett got around.

Not even Ianto thought he, himself, could suck the Deep Ways out of someone. That had been scarily impressive.

“We might not have to ‘send’ him anywhere,” Ianto pointed out. “I think, at this point, he’s working to take down Hydra more to protect his family than anything else.”

“You have a point.” Stephen stood, stretching. “I’m going to head home. Tomorrow is Truth Bomb day, after all.” He smirked. “I can’t believe we’re calling it that.”

“Blame Daisy. It was her idea, according to Phil.”

“Ianto, that young woman is going to be after your job at some point.”

“And she will be amazing at it.” Of that, Ianto had no doubt. “It’s a good thing the adoption stuck, isn’t it?”

Stephen agreed, laughing.

“We also need to bring Mordo in front of the Quorum.”

The laughter faded into melancholy. “I know, and I’m not looking forward to it.” Stephen sighed. “To be honest, what he’s done…it might be just the example we need in our fight against the Greats and their propaganda.”

Ianto wasn’t going to deny that; he’d thought the same thing. After all, the crimes Mordo had committed involved an innocent child, and quite possibly one that was still missing, if Crystal was remembering correctly. Ianto had no reason to doubt her. This could just be the act that disgusts the majority of the Greats so badly that they finally see the damage their beliefs were doing.

After all, if it had been done to one little girl, how many other children out there had suffered the same fate as Crystal had? How many children had they already lost and not known about?

Ianto had to fight to keep his fury in check. So much for the Greats spreading lies about Voids being evil, because that had nothing on what the Greats were capable of in the name of their anti-Cardinal and Void sentiments.

Although, not all Greats were like that. But quite a few of them were, and they were spreading very dangerous lies about both Cardinal and Void Orders. That had to be stopped before their reputations were tarnished irrevocably.

“I hate using a child in this,” he admitted, “but it’s all going to have to come out in Quorum if we hope to hold Mordo accountable.”

“I know,” Stephen agreed. “But Mordo does need to be tried for his crimes against the Quorum, and this is the only way to do it.”

“Phil will have to bring Crystal to the Quorum. I’m not sure he’ll like that very much.” Even though he’d only known that little girl for a day, Ianto could tell how devoted he was to her. Phil Coulson was a man who loved quickly and deeply, such a stark contrast to his former life as the angry young Wizard who’d wanted to burn down the world.

Now, his actions looked different, through the lens of what had been done to him. Ianto could see
why Phil had let himself turn into the Dark One, and just what Suzie had seen in the boy she’d tried
to help before she’d died. She really should have retired back then, but she’d seen Novice Phillip’s
inner light and had tried so very hard to fan it into a flame. She hadn’t been successful, but now that
Ianto had the entire story he knew she really hadn’t stood a chance. It was no fault of hers, because
what Phil’s parents had done to him had been too deeply ingrained by the time he’d come to the
Wizard School, and at least she’d done her best.

Ianto thought that Suzie would have been very proud of how her Novice had turned out in the end.

“We’ll have to cross that bridge when it’s time,” Stephen sighed. “Right now, I’m going to go home
and let Wong yell at me for missing meals again.”

Ianto stood, in order to show Stephen out. “Get a good nights’ rest, we have a busy day ahead of us
tomorrow.”

He escorted his fellow Grand Master down to his casting chamber, after collecting Agamotto from
the sofa where both him and Myfanwy had been listening in. Once Stephen and his dragon had
teleported out, Ianto headed back up to into the main areas of the house, thinking it was time for
something to eat himself. So, he went to the kitchen, wondering if there was something already
prepared since he didn’t feel much like cooking.

He was just opening the cold box in order to search for some cold meat and cheese, when a set of
arms wrapped around him from behind, the warmth of a familiar body soaking in through the cloth
of his tunic.

“Well,” Jack drawled, “now that we’re alone…”

Ianto hadn’t jumped at his husband’s surprise embrace; after all, the Deathless really couldn’t sneak
up on someone who could sense the Deep Ways. He smiled. “Yes, we are. What do you plan on
doing about it?”

Jack pressed a kiss just behind Ianto’s left ear, making the Wizard shiver. Suddenly forgetting that
he was hungry, he spun around in his husband’s arms, catching his mouth with his own and kissing
him stupid.

They finally broke apart, when Ianto’s lips were tingling and he needed to take a deep breath. “Why
don’t we take this to our bedroom,” he purred. “Then afterward, you can feed me and I can explain
to you everything about my day.”

“I do like your priorities.” Jack gave him a small, private smile, one that communicated his feelings
far better than his usual, brightly large thing that he showed the world. Ianto loved that special smile,
and doubted he’d ever get tired of seeing it.

If there was one thing that Ianto loved about the unnaturally long life that the Deep Ways had given
him, it was the knowledge that he’d be with Jack for a very long time.

Unlike a certain, other, near-immortal he knew, and his lover.

Ianto shoved that thought aside. Instead, he took Jack by the hand and tugged him toward the
bedroom, needing his husband in so many ways. He would never not need Jack, of that he was
certain.

Giving Jack a smile of his own, this one sly, Ianto got him into the bedroom.

And onto the bed.
Where he proceeded to take him apart, and then put him back together again.
Chapter 56

It was Phil’s first official appearance as Grand Master of Voids.

A really large part of him felt distinctly uncomfortable.

It was having to stand up in front of a group of Wizards who knew exactly who he was and who were no doubt judging him on his past. Not that he blamed them; after all, his past was a hellish mess and he’d never be able to stop feeling guilty about the things he’d done…with some small exceptions. He felt a little bit like a pretender, a child on the cusp of something he wasn’t quite sure he understood, along with an intense hatred of the politics involved. He was about to jump, feet-first, into that morass of ego and arrogance, and Phil was intimately familiar with how that sort of combination could inevitably turn out.

His own brush with it had led to his so-called death at the hands of Loki of Asgard.

Not something he was in a hurry to recreate.

And yet, there was another part of him that was ready, that wanted to just wade in and get things done. He wanted to fix his Order, to fight the bad reputation Void Order had gained – much to the thanks of Great Order – and to put things back into balance.

More than anything, though, Phil wanted to prove himself. It was a feeling he hadn’t had in a very long time. He wanted to show that he really was more than just his past, that he could be a good person, a good Grand Master, and to do that he needed to dig out Hydra and then stop Pierce, as well as Hale and her daughter – whenever they found them, and there hadn’t been a sign as of yet – and to take away the vague sense of unease and mistrust that permeated the entire Quorum.

He did admit, though, that he did like his robes.

He’d purchased them years ago, when Phil had decided to become an upstanding member of Void Order and to start appearing at Quorums. He’d worn them rarely, but when he did it was as if he’d put on some form of armor, hiding himself behind the bland façade of Phil Coulson, Master Void Wizard. They’d actually been hanging up at the back of his wardrobe, near where his old Dark One costume had been until Melinda had thrown the remains of it out, while he’d been unconscious after closing the Void Point back at the Hydra house. Not that he’d blamed her. As a matter of fact, he’d thanked her for it once it had struck him that the entire ensemble had vanished. Melinda had only made a comment about it being ‘about time’ and asking him when he’d have some time to discuss the family accounts with him.

Melinda also must have been responsible for cleaning the formal robes as well. He wasn’t one of those who thought their robes needed to match their dragon; besides, red really wasn’t Phil’s color. Instead, he’d gone for a deep blue, almost black, with silver and gold runes picked out on high collar and snug cuffs, the spell work the first thing he’d done when he’d gotten the robes from the tailor who’d made them. He’d added his dagger and his wand, as well as a few items that were his personal favorites, like the enchanted bracer on his arm that would form his strongest shield.

He was as ready as he could be.

Phil and his fellow Grand Masters had gotten together early that morning; well, early for himself and for Stephen, because of the time difference between the United Kingdom and the Western Lands.
They’d made some decisions that morning, one of which Phil wasn’t all that happy about but understood why it needed to be done. He supposed the quicker it was finished, the sooner things could get back to its new semblance of normal for his family.

That decision had led to him sitting on that damned uncomfortable chair meant for him now that he was Grand Master, Crystal sitting on his lap, as the Wizards filed into the Quorum chamber.

She was going to be asked to speak about what had happened once more, but this time Phil could tell she wasn’t so nervous about it. But then, there was no danger of her being taken away from him this time, so the little girl was pretty calm for someone about to face a bunch of strangers and the man responsible for her birth parents tossing her out like so much trash.

Yes, Phil was still pissed off about that.

“You doing alright, sweetheart?” he murmured into her hair, cuddling her close

“I’m okay, Dad,” she answered. She hadn’t been happy about leaving Lockjaw outside, but had been fine with it when she’d learned that Lola and Skye would be with him, so he wouldn’t be lonely.

They were getting some strange looks as the Quorum found their seats. Pepper, though, was smiling; Phil had contacted her about the little girl last night, explaining what had occurred and about the adoption. His friend had been outraged that a child had been treated so badly, but she’d also been excited to know that Phil was going to open his home to yet another child in need of care. She’d also made some pointed remarks about Wanda, and the Wizard had capitulated to agreeing to take her on as a Novice…not that Phil hadn’t planned on doing that, anyway.

As he watched, Maria, who’d been a witness to the events of Daisy’s attempted kidnapping, leaned forward and murmured something in Pepper’s ear. Pepper nodded, and Phil got the distinct impression they were getting ready to plan something. It was just a little bit terrifying, to be honest.

Ianto and Stephen came into the chamber after everyone was settled. Stephen flicked his hand, and Phil could feel the magical wards descending.

While he remained seated – due to the six-year-old on his lap – Stephen called the Quorum to order, Ianto standing tall beside him. “Welcome,” the Great Wizard greeted. “As you all know, this Quorum was called as mandatory for all members to attend, so thank you all for dropping what you were doing in order to be here.”

Indeed, the place was nearly at capacity, with everyone from Masters to Novices were present. Still, it was completely silent as Stephen spoke.

“We have two items on the agenda today: the repudiation of one of our own; and the digging out the rot that is Hydra from our ranks. To be honest, the first item was something we hadn’t been aware of until yesterday, but all three of us felt that it needed to be taken care of as soon as possible.”

What Stephen didn’t add was that they wanted maximum effect with Mordo’s repudiation. There was far too much in-fighting that needed to be stopped, and the three of them were of the opinion that this was the best way to go about it. Make the Quorum face what their prejudices were doing and hopefully shame them into stopping.

Up in the Master seats of the Great section, Phil caught Master Illya’s eyes, and the man nodded, ready to be called as a witness. They’d contacted him that morning, making certain he was going to be in the Quorum, and asking him to bring along Sir Napoleon in case they needed a corroborating
witness that wasn’t a Wizard. He was waiting outside the chamber, with Clint and Jack.

Phil also went searching for Daisy, and found her; she was sitting with her friends, who didn’t seem to care that they were all in the Great section instead of in their own. His elder daughter waggled her fingers at him in an impudent wave, followed by Jemma doing the same although a lot less impudent, while the others simply nodded back with various sorts of smiles on their young faces.

He knew she’d warned them about the second part of the Quorum, about the Truth Bomb. But then, Phil trusted those four young people so he didn’t mind that she’d said something. Every single one of them would be locked into the chamber during the potion’s dispersal. They couldn’t leave anyone out and expect their actions to be accepted by the Quorum.

“You may be wondering why there is a child in Quorum today,” Ianto began. “This is Crystal Barton-Coulson, newly adopted daughter of Grand Master Phil’s, and the reason she came to him is the subject of our first order of business.”

That was Phil’s cue.

He began by telling of the hunt for the Wizard who’d let Werner von Strucker into the Quorum chamber without permission. He didn’t name names during his tale, but he did say they’d tracked the person to a village where this Wizard – he did say it was a Great Wizard – who’d been a part of a determined anti-Void and Cardinal propaganda campaign, which had led to Crystal being Tested the moment she’d gained her dragon and then subsequently cast out of her own family, to fend for herself.

That piece of information caused quite a stir within the chamber.

Then, Stephen called Master Illya, who gave his own testimony in a clear, concise manner, telling of the investigation into Crystal’s parents and how they received confirmation that the pair had actually done the same thing before, to an elder daughter who was now missing. He didn’t say they were presuming she was dead; Crystal didn’t need to hear that.

After Master Illya was done, Stephen moved to the front of the dais. “As you can see,” he proclaimed, his voice echoing over the entire chamber, magically enhanced so that it would be heard by everyone, “these disastrous teachings the Greats have been following blindly are now hurting children. Innocents who should be laughing and playing, instead of hiding and stealing because their parents believed there was something wrong, something evil, about them. We need to stop this hatred now, before something far worse happens.”

“This happened to me,” Phil finally spoke up. “My parents believed the rhetoric about Voids, thinking that every single Void was evil, and by the time I went to school I believed they were correct.” Even now, it was painful to talk about. “What they’d done had repercussions for so many people, because they were the reason for the existence of the Dark One.”

That had almost as much of an uproar as Crystal’s story had, even though by now they all had to have heard about his childhood. He hadn’t been keeping it a secret, after all, not now that he’d been so thoroughly outed by Werner von Strucker.

Mistress Elena Rodriguez, Head of Void Order for the Southern Confederacies, raised her hand to gain their attention. “Point of order,” she said, her pleasantly accented voice echoing about the room.

“Yes, Mistress Elena?” Phil had a lot of respect for her, even though she’d been hells-bent to take him into custody when she’d heard he’d once been the infamous Dark One. She’d also been the one to stand up for him for the Grand Master’s office, from what he understood. He hadn’t actually
been in the second round of debate about it, since he’d been the subject of said debate.

“The Cardinals and the Voids have been the targeted victims of a concentrated effort by certain Greats because of the ancient writings. It seems to me that it would be very difficult to convince those involved that they are wrong.”

“They’re part of the reason Hydra even currently exists,” Ianto answered. “Also, I was a personal friend of Master John Smith, who admitted that those writings were incorrect. He even wrote about it, but his book was destroyed by those Greats who would keep up their campaign of disinformation.”

“Not entirely,” Mistress Maria spoke up. “I’ve read that book, and it…made an impression.” She stood. “I’ve long been one of those who thought the Voids and Cardinals were wrong about using the Deep Ways and the Void, that the ancient writings were correct. I was the one that was wrong.” Her spine straightened, and in that moment Phil knew exactly what Marcus saw in her, the reason he loved her. She might have been pigheaded and prejudiced, but she admitted her faults and tried to do the right thing.

“Traitor!” a voice shouted from the Great Masters’ section. A man stood, stern-faced, with gray hair and a military bearing. He’d been handsome in his youth, but now his face was wrinkled and the lines around his mouth, despite being obscured by a thick mustache, gave him a slightly cruel expression. “I taught you differently, Maria.”

Phil remembered the man vividly, from Daisy’s adoption proceedings. Master Thaddeus Ross was still an asshole, age hadn’t mellowed him one bit.

“No, Master Thaddeus, you taught me wrong. And those teachings are now harming innocent children!”

As their voices got louder and louder, Phil could tell that Crystal was getting upset; she was beginning to tremble in his arms. It was time for her to leave, her presence had made the point they’d wanted, and he didn’t think she needed to be exposed to all the shouting that was bound to happen.

He motioned toward Daisy, who was immediately out of her seat and down at the dais, to pluck Crystal off Phil’s lap and to take her out of the chamber. The usher at the near door let them out without a word.

Phil was so glad both his daughters were out of the line of fire, although Daisy would be back in as soon as she passed Crystal off to Clint, just outside.

“That is enough!” Stephen’s voice bellowed out over the escalating argument. He glared down Master Thaddeus, who didn’t look at all quelled. “Mistress Maria,” he turned toward his Western Lands Head of Order, “your words do you credit. Thank you.”

Mistress Maria bowed, and then sat back down.

And, at that, Phil stood. “There has been enough of this,” he declared, having had all he could stomach. “How many children do we have to lose before you all get it into your thick skulls that you’re doing more damage than good? That, if this keeps up, the very war that Master John was so scared of – and cut off magic from our world in order to prevent – is going to happen, just a little later than he’d witnessed? Because this is where this is headed: war. War between the Orders, just because there are bad apples in the bushel who are so stiff-necked they can’t admit that what they’re saying is wrong!”
He moved to the front of the dais, Ianto and Stephen giving way before him. His eyes tracked along the rows of seats, finally settling onto Master Thaddeus, who was still up and glaring right back. “Sit down, Master Thaddeus, or I will make you sit down.” He let the Void show in his eyes, challenging the other Wizard silently in a war of domination that Phil knew he would win.

Master Thaddeus sat. He looked furious.

Phil didn’t care.

“What no one seems to understand,” he said, “is that the Void and Deep Ways choose us; we don’t choose either force. We have no more say in it than a ship does against a maelstrom at sea. It is a part of us, blood and bone and soul, and there is nothing anyone can do, short of killing us, to remove it. And, the sooner those among you who think we’re unnatural get over that, the sooner things will be the way they were meant to be: a balance between the two, with the Greats skirting that edge of balance and keeping it from tipping.

“So, Great Wizards who think they know more than the Void and the Deep Ways…get over yourselves. You have no right to tell the universal powers what to do…what the Gods have decreed. Stop being idiots and accept the truth: you’re doing more harm than good. Your mindless crusade is killing innocent children. It needs to stop before it gets even further out of hand.

“So, here and now, I’m making this vow: I will keep working until every single Wizard is accepted for who they are. Void or Cardinal or Great; each one of us is here for a reason, and that reason is not to spread hate and to do their best to marginalize entire Orders because they have a warped sense of what is right and what is wrong.

“We’ve already seen what the narrow-minded among us have caused. Their teachings caused the Dark One to be created, and look at how many were hurt or killed, all because a child was warped by parents who’d believed that he was evil just because he’d Tested as Void. How many other children out there are abused like that? Look at the little girl who was just removed from the chamber! She’s six years old, and her birth父母 tossed her out of their home like she didn’t matter. She did her best to survive, but Crystal would have died if the Void hadn’t called me to her. Is that what you want? Dead children? Because that’s what you’re going to get if this continues.”

Phil had everyone’s attention. A pin would have been heard if dropped onto the floor. He could see exactly who was being affected by his words, and they far outweighed the ones that were angry at him for standing up to them. Most of those irritated by his words were older Great Wizards, and it occurred to him that he’d outlive the hate in those few.

That thought had him, for the first time, thanking the Void for choosing him as its Champion. He really did want to see the day when the old guard was gone, and the young replace it, because his elder daughter was amazing and didn’t care what sort of magic her friends had.

Mistress Elena was staring at him in awe. He could tell he had her complete loyalty in that moment. Pepper looked incredibly proud, surreptitiously wiping the tears from her eyes. Even Mistress Maria was nodding in agreement, which Phil considered a win.

“We’re Wizards,” he pitched his tone down a little. “We should be supporting one another. Not sniping at each other just because we’re different. We really aren’t, if you think about it. I do wish you’d think about it. We should be sticking together, not tearing each other apart just because some really old documents say that was how things were a thousand years ago. This is a different age, one that we can make our own. I think we can be better than those who came before us. Don’t you?”

Wizards began to stand.
Oh, it wasn’t every Wizard. There was a knot of Greats who remained seated, Master Thaddeus among them. But the vast majority of Wizards were on their feet, applauding Phil’s words, and he had such a rush of hope for the future he could barely breathe.

“Well done.” Ianto rested his hand on Phil’s shoulder. Stephen stepped up to his other side, putting his own hand on the opposite shoulder, the three Grand Masters showing solidarity in the face of the Quorum’s enthusiasm.

Phil didn’t know how long that enthusiasm would last, but he was willing to keep at it, for as long as it took. Now he had something to fight for, and he was going to do just that.
Clint hated waiting.

Alright, that wasn’t exactly true.

He had no problem waiting for a target, or doing surveillance on someone that needed surveilling. It was just this particular sort of waiting that got to him.

On the other side of that closed door was Phil, along with Crystal and Daisy. It separated him from his loved ones, and that just wasn’t right. If anything happened…he very vividly recalled the last time Phil had been in front of the Wizard’s Quorum, and von Strucker had tried to attack him. Clint had barely gotten into the room in time to put an arrow in the man, to keep him from cursing Phil and Daisy, and the other innocent bystanders in the way.

They’d fixed the door he and Jack had broken. Which was a shame.

Still, he wasn’t alone, which made it just a little better.

Jack was his usual self, chatting easily with Sir Napoleon as he stood near the door, and from what Clint could tell the pair of them were getting along like a house on fire, discussing the various merits of different types of swords, Jack sharing outrageous stories about scrapes he’d gotten into over the centuries with weapons he’d either owned or picked up on the battlefield. Sir Napoleon would counter with his own stories and, while they weren’t quite as wild as Jack’s, were no less entertaining for that.

Honestly, that much charm in the same room should have been illegal.

Also, Wanda and Pietro had shown up just as the doors had closed. Being students, they wouldn’t be allowed into the Quorum unless called as witnesses, which wouldn’t be the case this time; while Ianto might have made his intention known to take on Pietro as a Novice, the paperwork hadn’t been submitted yet, and so the young man hadn’t been invited to the meeting currently going on.

Both seemed nervous, but Clint thought it was more to do with the fact that they were being excluded than anything else. He took the opportunity to get to know them both better, since it was a foregone conclusion that Phil would be taking on Wanda as a Novice, although she seemed concerned that he wouldn’t do any such thing, and said so.

“Don’t worry,” the archer assured her, “he’s just been a little busy. He is planning on speaking to you about it, just as soon as this Hydra thing is settled.”

“I do hope so,” she said. “It would be an honor to be taught magic by the man who saved us.”

Clint could imagine it would be. What those kids had been through in Buda-Pest had been truly horrible, and Phil had rained the full wrath of the Dark One down on King Wolfgang and everyone guilty of either actively helping or turning a blind eye. He could imagine that both young people were carrying around quite the burden of hero worship.

And yes, he’d noticed he was included in that hero worship, just not to the extent that Phil was. Which was perfectly understandable in Clint’s not at all biased opinion, since he’d only been back-up, truth be told. Shooting people who got a little too close to Phil as he made his rampage through
Buda-Pest had been the Elf’s main job, one he’d take quite seriously.

He knew that, had Loki not gotten to him with that damned spear of his, he would have been doing the same during that duel. He would have gladly put an arrow in Loki’s eye the moment he’d even tried to get the drop on the Dark One. Phil might have even died if Clint had been there.

Yeah, not something he wanted to think about, because he had enough guilt over what he’d done for Loki. He didn’t need that burden as well.

“You should know,” he said, “that he’s also concerned that you might not want to share your learning time with the little girl we’ve just adopted. Crystal is only six, but he wants her to be as prepared for school as possible.”

Wanda nodded. “Daisy has explained it to us, but we do not know many of the details beyond that the Grand Master found her after her parents abandoned her because she was Void.” Her eyes were distressed. “Who would do such a thing?”

“Someone evil,” the Elf answered simply, amazed that someone who’d been through everything Wanda had, had that much compassion for a stranger.

Alright, maybe not so amazed, as much as pretty damned proud.

“They must be,” Pietro said, sounding fierce. “Even our parents, who sent us to King Wolfgang, hadn’t known what evil they were handing us over to and, once they realized, they did try to get us back.”

“And,” Wanda added, “when the Grand Master brought us back to our village, our father and mother were so very happy to have us home again.”

“Your parents are different.” This was Jack speaking; Clint had seen him approaching in his peripheral vision, so he wasn’t startled. “They care about you. Crystal’s may have at one time, but once they found out she was Void…”

“But magic is magic,” Wanda exclaimed. “That should not matter!”

“And you’re absolutely correct,” Jack agreed. “But adults can be really stupid.”

“That is true,” Pietro proclaimed seriously.

Clint had to stifle the laughter that threatened to bubble up. Because, after all, the kid was absolutely right in agreeing with Jack about adults.

“Pardon me for asking,” Sir Napoleon cut in gently, “but do I understand that you’re two of the children from Buda-Pest?”

“Yes Sir,” Pietro answered. “We’re twins, and King Wolfgang liked us particularly because I am Cardinal and my sister is Void.”

From the sudden rise in the Knight’s eyebrows, Clint figured he understood exactly how rare an occurrence that was; but then, he’d gotten that lesson from Phil himself during Crystal’s adoption. Besides, Sir Napoleon struck him as someone who would have researched it and, from what he’d seen in Barony Uncelas, he would have had no trouble asking Master Illya about it. “And you were saved by Grand Master Phil?”

“We were,” Wanda said. “We would not be here without him and his friends coming to Buda-Pest
and not letting anything stand in the way of rescuing us.”

It was in that moment that Clint realized that Sir Napoleon was totally aware of just who Phil had been, and yet he’d agreed with the adoption anyway. Had he known at the time? What else did the Knights’ Commander know? Just that he let the adoption go through without comment if he _had_ known – and the Elf had no doubt that Baron Alexander would have halted it just on Sir Napoleon’s word alone – spoke of knowledge that the man should not have had in the first place.

Something was telling Clint that Master Illya had broken the oath to the Guild, at least with Sir Napoleon, and that bolstered what he’d witnessed of the men’s closeness. It meant that the Wizard, who’d implied that he _hadn’t_ broken his oath when they’d been in Uncelas for the adoption, had lied. Although Clint supposed he really hadn’t, since Master Illya hadn’t actually said anything and the archer was implying what that look to Phil had been about.

Or, there could have been another way for Sir Napoleon to find out. After all, the man wasn’t an idiot. And, if he was as good as investigating shit as Clint thought he was, it might have come up during the Knight’s investigations. Or, maybe he’d been a witness, or knew someone who’d seen the Dark One blow through their barony, all those years ago.

Well, he wasn’t about to say a thing about it, if it _had_ been Master Illya confiding in the man who was obviously his lover. Those two had done right by Phil and Crystal, and that was enough. Crystal would have a chance to thrive and grow, and Phil would get to share his love and knowledge with another child who already meant so much to him.

And to Clint himself.

“I am hoping that Grand Master Phil accepts me as his Novice, as well,” Wanda said.

“He will,” Clint answered. “He just wants to speak to you first about Crystal and the fact that she’s bound to be hanging around during your lessons.”

“I am glad that the Grand Master has adopted her.” Then she went a little red with embarrassment. “And you, as well, Archer Barton.”

“Please,” he waved her off. “It’s Clint. Because if you and your brother do end up hanging around the Keep a lot, we may as well be friends.”

“Thank you,” she said gravely. “I would indeed like to be friends.”

“Daisy has accepted us so completely,” Pietro added. “It’s…nice, to have that sort of friendship with someone. We have been…lonely, here and, although we do have a couple of friends, it has been hard for us to settle here, not after everything we have been through.”

“What about other Buda-Pest survivors?” Clint was curious.

“We don’t know who else here was a part of King Wolfgang’s experiments,” the boy answered. “We were just toddlers at the time. We might have easily recalled the specifics of our rescue, but we really don’t know anything of our fellow prisoners.”

“I think Phil was going to look for them as soon as things settled down.” He didn’t say that his lover was feeling a little guilty about not checking up on them all sooner.

Anything either of the twins would have said was interrupted by the door into the Quorum being practically thrown open, and Daisy emerging, carrying an obviously distressed Crystal. “Clint!” she called, “I need to get back to the meeting…” She sounded apologetic, as if she really didn’t want to
“Give her here.” He held out his arms, and she gratefully passed the little girl over, who then promptly curled up in Clint’s lap. Crystal was trembling, the poor kid obviously overwhelmed by whatever the hells had gone on in that Quorum.

Daisy pressed a kiss to Crystal’s head then did the same to Clint, which took the Elf by complete surprise. With a swirl of her skirt, she spun back toward the door, which opened at her approach. Through the opening, he could hear people yelling; one voice he recognized as Mistress Maria’s… who seemed to be taking the right side for once.

“Hey,” he murmured, cuddling her close, “you’re gonna be fine.”

At that moment, Lockjaw decided to put in an appearance, appearing in a cloud of golden sparkles. *So, that was what his teleporting power looks like.* It was pretty gaudy, really.

Crystal reached down for her dragon, and Lockjaw proceeded to climb up into Clint’s lap as well, to get closer to his companion; it was uncomfortable but he could endure it. The archer really hoped he didn’t think it was a good idea to teleport them all away, and he leaned a little closer to whisper, “Let Lockjaw know we’re gonna take care of you both, that he doesn’t need to take you away.”

“He knows,” Crystal answered, clinging to both her dragon and to Clint as if her very life depended on it.

And maybe it did.

“Hi,” Wanda said, leaning around so she could see Crystal better.

Crystal seemed to respond to the soft voice, and she lifted her head to look at the girl, who was smiling at her. “Hi,” she responded shyly.

“My name is Wanda. What’s yours?”

Crystal didn’t seem to want to answer, and she glanced up at Clint to see if it was alright. He nodded, so she answered, “Crystal. Crystal Barton-Coulson.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Crystal Barton-Coulson. This is my brother, Pietro.” She waved toward the young man, who waved back.

“You’re like Daisy,” she said, then turning toward Wanda, the curiosity finally blooming in her pale eyes. “And you’re like me.”

“Yes I am. And we’re also friends of Daisy’s, so I hope we see more of you.”

Crystal blinked, and Clint saw the moment that Crystal realized that these were some of the people her new sister said she wanted to introduce her to. “I hope so, too.”

“I heard what happened to you, and you are so lucky that your father found you.” She leaned a little closer. “Can I tell you a secret?”

The little girl nodded, and Clint swore then and there that Phil better take Wanda on as a Novice, or else they were going to have words. She was being fantastic with Crystal, and the Elf wanted to reach over and hug her, but didn’t dare break the metaphorical spell Wanda was weaving.
“Your father found me and my brother, as well.”

Crystal was confused. “But you aren’t my sister, and Peter isn’t my brother.”

Wanda didn’t correct her on Pietro’s name; surprisingly, neither did Pietro. “No, we had a family to go back to. But, we’d been taken away from them by a bad man, and Grand Master Phil came for us. He saved us.”

Crystal began uncurling a little from the ball she’d been folded into, drawn into Wanda’s story. “Dad did that?”

“He did. And, I’m hoping he’ll become my teacher, so I can learn more about our magic.”

That statement had Crystal smiling in excitement. “He said he was gonna teach me, too! Maybe he can teach us together!”

Lockjaw, apparently sensing that all was well, climbed down from Clint’s lap, barely missing stepping on a very sensitive area. Clint was eternally grateful for that. He sat on the floor, keeping watch, and it bothered Clint more than a little that such a young dragon had had to learn to be that watchful, so early. He really did want to do something nasty to Crystals’ parents.

Maybe he could talk Sir Napoleon into turning the other way for a few minutes while Clint confronted them in their cell back at Uncelas Castle…

“I’d like that.”

Clint could tell she absolutely meant those three words.

Yep, Wanda was getting a hug. He made a mental note to do just that, once he didn’t have a semi-traumatized child in his lap.

Then she noticed others in the room, and turned shy once more.

Clint made the introductions. “Hey, you remember Sir Napoleon, don’t you?”

Crystal nodded, “Hello, Sir.”

The Knight gave her a wide, sincere smile. “Hello, Lady Crystal.”

“And this is Jack, he’s a friend.”

Jack also smiled, but this one wasn’t as wide as Sir Napoleon’s although just as sincere. He leaned over, to be more at her level. “It’s nice to finally meet you.”

The little girl cocked his head at him. “You’re like Daisy, too…only you’re not.”

“What I am is very complicated,” the Deathless answered. “But I’m not a Wizard.”

She seemed to accept that easily. Clint wanted to be there when he did explain just what the Deathless was. That was going to be an interesting conversation, and he could see Jack putting it off as long as possible.

“Crystal,” the archer said, “why don’t you and me go and explore the town? I’m sure we can find something more interesting to do than just sit here, waiting for your Dad.” Honestly, Clint really didn’t want to leave before everything was done, but he knew it would be a bad idea to let Crystal worry about what was going on, and she would if they kept sitting there. He needed to keep her
occupied, so she didn’t have time to get scared that Phil wasn’t coming out so quickly. Plus, there was no telling how long that yelling they’d overheard would be going on. He wasn’t worried about his lover, because Phil could wipe the floor with anyone in that room, but he kinda needed to be distracted as well.

“Can Wanda and Peter come with us?”

He gave her an indulgent smile. “If they’d like to.”

“Do you want to?” she asked happily.

Wanda nodded, looking pleased. “I’d love to. Peter?”

Her brother barely managed to keep his eyes from rolling; Clint knew his sister wasn’t going to let him forget the mispronunciation of his name anytime soon, and could foresee much teasing. “We can tour the school. Crystal will be going there when she’s older, I bet she’d like to see it.”

“Can we, Daddy?”

Clint couldn’t say no to those pleading eyes. “Yeah, we can.” Besides, he’d never been to the school, either. It only made sense to check out the place his daughter would be attending. “Let’s collect our dragons then head up there.”

Crystal crawled down on her own, Lockjaw greeting her enthusiastically once her feet hit the floor. She giggled, her upset forgotten.

“We’ll hang around,” Jack told him, “and I’ll call on your speaking stone when the Quorum is done. I have the feeling it’s going to take a while.”

Clint agreed with that. “Thanks, Jack.”

“No problem.”

He turned toward the Knight. “And thank you, Sir Napoleon. For everything.”

“There’s no need,” the man shrugged.

He didn’t say anything else, but Clint supposed he didn’t have to.

“Come on, then.” He reached down for Crystal’s hand, and she slipped it into his with so much trust it made the archer’s heart ache from it. He had no idea how he’d earned that trust, but he vowed never to abuse it. “Let’s go and do some exploring.”
Chapter 58

Daisy made it back to her seat just in time to hear her Dad go off on all the asshole Wizards who thought they knew everything.

Damn, that was her Dad.

Yes, she’d been lectured in her time, but that had been nothing compared to the hells he gave to Wizards who should have Known Better, instead of them thinking they actually did. She was so proud of him, for standing up there in front of everyone, knowing how much he preferred being in the background, and yet putting all that aside in favor of outing every single prejudiced bastard in the Quorum.

It was about time.

Not that she was forgetting that Ianto and Grand Master Stephen had tried. However, neither of them had had the sheer amount of experience in how prejudice could mess a person up like her Dad had. And, what made it an even stronger argument was the fact that it had twisted her Dad’s loving nature into something that had destroyed places and killed people, just because his own parents had said that was how Voids operated. All of that rage and confusion had obliterated the good man underneath, until it had taken a crazy Wizard killing him and causing a major epiphany that had him adopting an orphan off the streets and giving up his former identity in order to turn his life around.

He’d also given up Clint, but Daisy thought Dad had seen the error of that decision, so she wouldn’t need to rehash it with him later on.

She stood, along with every single one of her friends. They’d all sat together instead of in their Order’s sections of the chamber, as a show of solidarity in what her Dad was attempting to accomplish. Their little group probably clapped and cheered the loudest when Dad was done, when Ianto and Grand Master Stephen had stepped forward to support him.

“Your father is amazing,” Jemma practically screamed in her ear.

Daisy couldn’t disagree.

“I wish he’d been training when I needed a teaching Master,” Trip said admiringly. “Master Jasper is good, but damn…”

“Makes me wish I was Void,” Leo exclaimed.

“I’m just glad he approved of me,” Lincoln said, under the crowd noises that were just beginning to die down.

Oh, not every Wizard was up on their feet. She could see Master Thaddeus down a few rows from where they were sitting, looking as if smoke should be streaming from his ears. There were another dozen Greats who were glaring at Dad disapprovingly, but after Dad had told Master Thaddeus to sit down, or else he’d make him…Daisy had no doubt that there would be little in the way of challenge from that quarter, at least any overt challenge, at least.

Covert, though…yes, that could be a really big worry.
Eventually, the entire Quorum fell silent once more, with only the sound of the standing Wizards sitting back down in a rustle of formal robes as they moved. That Void Mistress, the one that Master Mack suddenly seemed to like really well, was the only person still standing. “Point of order,” she requested.

“Yes, Mistress Elena?” Ianto asked. The three Grand Masters were still standing, not yet finished with everything they’d called the Quorum to do.

“Might we have the name of the Great Wizard responsible for what happened to Grand Master Phil’s new daughter, and possibly her eldest birth sister?”

That request had everyone leaning just a little bit forward in their seats. Well, except for Daisy, who already knew. She’d done as Dad had asked and not told her friends about who was responsible, even though she hadn’t seen the need to keep it to herself; apparently, there’d been an issue with Trip spilling the beans about Sir James to his Granddad Gabe, especially since Lord Gabe had informed Sir Steven about his best friend still being alive but horribly cursed. Which meant that Sir Steven had given Ianto all sorts of hells over not telling him.

What made it worse was that Daisy should have suspected it would happen, knowing Trip and his connection to the historical Howling Commandos. She’d known that Lord Gabe was still living and had actually met him once, on a visit to the Falcon Enclave during a school break. Trip had been proud to bring them all home to meet his family, even though Trip himself didn’t really have all that much Elven blood in him. The Falcon Enclave was pretty progressive when it came to mixed bloods.

Daisy could have sworn she’d told her Dad about it, but apparently she hadn’t. That had been a bit of a shock, since she was well aware of his fairly massive case of hero worship for Sir Steven.

Trip had apologized to Ianto before the Quorum for it. Ianto had shrugged and said, while he’d been mad at the time because Sir Steven, Lord Gabe, Pepper and another friend had descended upon his home without warning and Sir Steven had made some pretty loud demands, it had turned out for the best. He’d said their brainstorming session had given him a few ideas he wanted to try when their strategy for removing the cursed arm was thoroughly considered. So, Daisy supposed it hadn’t been so bad after all.

“What of the child’s parents?” Mistress Elena added.

“Of course,” Grand Master Stephen answered. “It was Master Mordo.”

Murmurs arose at that announcement, but none of them sounded overly surprised. Even Daisy had heard of Master Mordo and his views on the other Orders, since he hadn’t made any sort of secret of them. But, to have turned an entire village into a hotbed of prejudice and evil…there was a special hell for that sort of person, she was sure.

“He is being held in the cells below, totally unrepentant,” Grand Master Stephen continued, his face impassive but, even from the distance Daisy was from the dais, she could tell his eyes were sad. “As you know, there are certain rules of the Guild that apply in this situation, including the Child Endangerment rules that were some of the first drafted when the Guild was established. Barony Uncelas, where the offences took place, has graciously allowed the Guild to take priority in this. However, their own investigation is not yet complete, as Master Illya can attest.”

He made a motion toward the Wizard in question, and he stood, saying, “We will make our findings known as soon as they are all in.”

“And what of the child’s parents?” Mistress Elena added.
“They are currently in custody in the dungeon at Castle Uncelas,” Master Illya answered. “However, the Baron has ceded their punishment to the Guild. We are merely awaiting to see if there can be some confirmation as to the fate of the child’s elder sister.”

Daisy was hoping they’d find something, although she already knew Dad wouldn’t tell Crystal anything until she was older. She’d been through so much already, it was time for her new little sister to heal and to spend time with her new family, one that loved her.

Master Illya’s words appeared to satisfy the Quorum, and he returned to his seat. That also seemed to be some sort of cue for the Grand Masters, because Ianto and Grand Master Stephen took their own seats once more, leaving Dad to stand alone.

He’d already made one stand against the bad guys. It was time for his second one.

“As you all know,” he began, “I am only Grand Master now because there were no other Voids who could be excluded from the possibility of collusion with Hydra. My fellow Grand Masters and I,” he indicated the other two, “have given this much thought, as to how to discover who within the Quorum may have allied themselves with that cabal. Now, however, we have it as a confession that Master Mordo had allied himself with them, but only in the act of letting Werner von Strucker into the Quorum chamber in order to discredit me. That led us to consider that it might not be only Voids in Hydra.”

Well, that didn’t go over well, judging from the outcry.

Dad raised a hand for silence. “Unfortunately, this widened the suspect pool to all the Orders, not just the Voids. So, we came up with an idea that we thought would be easiest to put into action.” He turned to look over his shoulder at Grand Master Stephen. “If you would please?”

“Well,” The Great Wizard rose gracefully to his feet, creating one of his portals, through it Ianto’s study was clearly visible.

On the desk was a large glass jug that Daisy knew very well.

Her heartbeat ratcheted up a little as the Grand Master levitated the jug through the portal, setting it carefully onto the dais next to Dad.

It was completely silent, although Daisy knew a lot of the Wizards would have recognized the potion.

It had been decided that Daisy’s name be kept out of the affair, her help with the Truth Bomb known only to the Grand Masters and to close family members, in case there was some sort of backlash against the whole idea of a massive truth potion being used on the entire Quorum. Well, her friends already knew as well, but she’d felt she’d needed to be truthful to them about what was going to happen, and she’d had Dad’s blessing to let them in on it this once, with a warning not to share outside their group. All of them agreed to be in the room when the jar was broken, knowing that Daisy herself would be.

She really did love her friends.

“This,” Dad waved his hand over the jar, “is a specialized Truth potion created specifically to be used on the entire Quorum.”

More uproar. Not surprising, really.

“When this jar is broken,” Dad spoke over the babble, “the potion will aerosolize into the air and
penetrate to every corner of this room. We will seal the chamber completely to avoid any sort of leakage. Because of the nature of the aerosolizing agent, the potion itself has a limited life; it will only last approximately ten minutes. That will be long enough to get a couple of questions answered: is anyone in this room affiliated in any way with Hydra? Does anyone know the whereabouts of any outstanding member of Hydra? Does anyone know of any sort of plan that Hydra may have concocted against this Quorum? Are there any members of Hydra in place within the Quorum?"

He had their attention. It was obvious that many of the Quorum were beginning to accept Dad’s explanation, even if they didn’t like it all that much. Daisy couldn’t blame them, because it could lead to a big mess if the Grand Masters didn’t keep they eyes on things.

“We are going to set some ground rules before we use the potion,” Dad continued. “The last thing we want is for someone to take advantage of the situation by asking a rival a question when they cannot stop themselves from being totally honest. The three of us will monitor the Quorum while the potion is in effect, to make sure no one abuses anyone while they cannot protect themselves.”

“And what will keep you from asking questions beyond those four?” Someone from the Cardinal section demanded.

“We will make any binding vow this Quorum feels is appropriate.”

“We are all three together in this,” Ianto stood and joined Dad.

“We will take all responsibility for what happens during the use of the Truth potion,” Grand Master Stephen added.

“We are your Grand Masters,” Dad said. “We have decided that this is the only way to clean house, especially since we can’t tell if the all the Orders are compromised.”

Pepper stood up. “Point of order, please?”

“Yes, Mistress Pepper?” Ianto recognized her.

“I would like to have it on the record that I agree with this plan, and will abide by what we discover from its use.”

This wasn’t the first time that Daisy was glad that Pepper was her teaching Master.

“As do I,” Mistress Maria stood as well, “although I would also like it on record that I wish there was another way to do this.”

Well, that was certainly a surprise. Daisy might not have really cared all that much for Mistress Maria, not knowing what Uncle Nick saw in her really, but she was now quickly gaining the young woman’s respect.

“As do we,” Ianto agreed. “Believe me when I say we discussed the ramifications of this, and felt that they were outweighed by the chance that Hydra has infiltrated the Quorum beyond anything we might even have thought of. This rot needs to be gone, and it needs to be gone now, so that we can all heal and move on.”

While Daisy hadn’t been involved in any sort of discussion, she could see why they would have had one. The Truth Bomb was a really good idea, and she didn’t think that just because she’d helped make it. No, Ianto was right: they needed to get Hydra out of any sort of foothold in the Quorum, to clean house and get rid of the suspicion that had been floating through the Guild ever since Dad had
brought Hydra out into the open.

Mistress Elena stood, followed by almost the entire membership of Void Order. “We want these accusations that are hovering over each and every single Void Wizard gone. We will support this plan, as it will do that job admirably.”

“Thank you all,” Dad said gratefully.

It took a little more time for the rest of the Quorum to agree, and then there were still some who abstained from the vote of confidence. Daisy could understand; who really wanted to take the chance that their secrets could be exposed? It was a trade-off: getting rid of Hydra, in exchange for the very real chance someone could ask just the wrong – or right, depending on point of view – question.

Master Thaddeus and his group were among those that disagreed with the majority.

Why didn’t that surprise Daisy?

Oh, and of course she and her friends were the first to stand, right after most of Void Order. But then, they’d known what was coming and were all fine with it. They’d made their own promises not to ask anything of each other, and Daisy trusted them all with her life.

The three Grand Masters stood together, and Daisy could feel the magic in the air, rising from the three most powerful Wizards in the world, as they completely sealed off the room from the outside world. She surreptitiously crossed her fingers, knowing the equations were sound but at the same time hoping it would work the way it was supposed to.

Dad used a single Word of Power to crack the jug.

Instantly, the liquid turned to vapor, mixing with the air in the chamber. It seemed to surround the three Grand Masters; Daisy knew it wouldn’t affect them, not if they took the antidote before the Quorum. They would remain unaffected, while everyone else would start feeling the effects within minutes.

Daisy knew the moment the now-vaporized potion reached her by the unmistakable smell of lemons that tickled her nose.

It only took a little while longer to begin to take effect. Her brain felt loose in her skull, and her eyesight faded around the edges, making for a strange tunnel-like result. She slumped back into her seat, as if every single bone in her body had turned to mush, and yet it wasn’t that much of an unpleasant sensation.

In the back of her mind, the young woman knew it was the potion, that it was working. She couldn’t help the pleased grin at that. She and Dad had done it. They’d actually made a Truth Bomb, and it was awesome.

Dad waited an additional few minutes before asking that first question.

Daisy waited for the answer, knowing that anyone in Hydra wouldn’t be able to resist.

She was right.
Chapter 59

Chapter Notes

As of next week, my posting schedule is going to need to be changed. I'll still post on Tuesday, but because my work schedule is now different, I'll be posting on Saturday instead of Thursday. Sorry about the change, but it can't be helped; I won't have time on Thursdays anymore.

Gateway was a bit of a revelation to Steve.

Having grown up in a time when magic was non-existent, to see so many children who were Wizards…it was simply amazing.

When he’d heard that Pepper was going to be in Quorum that day, Steve had asked if he could come along and see the Wizard School and the Barony that had grown up around it. She’d been a little hesitant, explaining that she had no idea how long she would be tied up, but Steve had persevered, not content to stay at Ferrous Castle and haunt the place while Baron Tony was doing whatever it was he did in his workshop, Dr. Banner assisting…or arguing, as the case may be. He’d seen how the two of them interacted, which was some form of bizarre flirting/fighting sort of thing that had him shaking his head at their antics and wondering just how Pepper handled it.

They’d had to leave for Gateway at some unholy time in the morning, but Steve didn’t mind. Pepper had explained the eight-hour time difference between Ferrous and Gateway, which meant they’d left while it was dark at the Castle, arriving in daylight at Ianto’s home. The Wizard hadn’t seemed to be surprised that Steve and Sam had accompanied Pepper, nor had Captain Harkness; he’d insisted on Steve calling him Jack. They’d welcomed them into their home, introduced him to their daughter, who happened to be the current sitting Baroness Gateway, and then had ushered them all out toward the Guild hall. Ianto had pressed some money onto Steve, and he’d promised to pay the Grand Master back; Ianto had waved it off, saying whatever he wanted to do was fine with him.

Steve didn’t bother to say that Baron Tony had done the exact same thing, the last time Steve had seen him, just before they’d left for Gateway.

Sam had decided to come along with when he’d heard, and so the two of them were out exploring. Steve was aware that they’d been in Gateway yesterday, when they’d confronted Grand Master Ianto about Bucky, but they hadn’t actually left the man’s house and, so, hadn’t seen much.

Now was his chance.

Gateway was a beautiful city, not at all like anything he’d seen back in his own time. The buildings were clean and bright, most of them only about two or three stories tall. The exception was for what Pepper had pointed out as the Wizard’s Tower, which was in the exact center of the town, rising above everything else, a pillar of white stone and clear crystal. Surrounding it was the Wizard’s School, like the spokes of a wheel, with parks and dormitories and public buildings all laid out in a circular pattern about the immense Tower.
The only other large building was the Quorum Hall. From what Pepper had claimed, it had once been the Baronial Residence; however, the first Baron, Daffyd Jones – related to Ianto, apparently – had given it up for Guild use, instead preferring quarters within the Tower. The structure itself was rather ostentatious, in Steve’s opinion, and he could certainly understand why Baron Daffyd had decided he’d wanted to live somewhere else. Steve had always wanted to be a artist when he was growing up, when he hadn’t been fighting bullies with Bucky and, when Howard had pulled him out of obscurity and proclaimed him the Paladin of the Western Lands, he’d given those dreams up.

Well, he’d wanted a way to fight in the war, to follow Bucky into battle. He’d certainly gotten it, only it had been Bucky to follow him instead of the other way around when he’d eventually gotten to the front lines, through a circuitous route that still had him sighing in frustration even though he was three centuries removed from it all.

And look how that had turned out. Bucky had been captured and cursed, and there wasn’t anything Steve could do to help his best friend.

There was something also about the city that Steve felt, rather than saw. It was a faint tingling along his exposed skin, as if the very air was effervescent, making the hairs on his arms and the back of his neck stand up. It wasn’t unpleasant, but it certainly was strange. He’d never felt anything like it, and Gateway was the only place he’d experienced it, but he thought he could get used to it. Whatever it was about Gateway, it was unique, and Steve thought that uniqueness was very pleasant.

Pepper had given them a student’s map, and Sam had been the one in charge of getting them around. Steve had been fascinated by the grounds, even to the point of speaking with a couple of the caretakers they’d run into, as well as a few students who’d been too young to attend the Quorum, who’d only been too happy to answer his questions. Everyone had been friendly, which Steve really appreciated.

Pepper had said that they were going to be dealing with Hydra today, although she didn’t have any details as to how the Grand Masters were going to accomplish it, but Steve had faith in those three men to clean their own house. Even though he’d only known them for a short time, all three had seemed like serious, competent Wizards who cared about the ones they were representing. Steve thought the Wizards’ Guild was in good hands.

Even if he had absolutely no idea how the Guild actually worked, since there hadn’t been such a thing back in his own century. He figured if it was important he know, they’d explain. Or he’d just ask, because he was certain if he did that they’d be glad to tell him about it.

There wasn’t a lot of people about, but that was because of the Quorum. Steve wondered if that Wizard he’d met back in Ferrous had attended. Whatever they were going to do to flush out Hydra had to be done with the entire Quorum involved. Steve only hoped it worked.

It sickened him that Hydra still existed, and that it had mutated beyond what the Skull had created. Now, it was all Void Wizards, which had to be so much worse in so many ways. The Skull had had his Artifacts, but the Voids had real power, to do whatever they wanted.

Well, he wasn’t exactly sure if that was how magic worked, but Steve was willing to bet it came close.

“According to this,” Sam said, perusing the map, “there’s a place for food just up ahead. I don’t know about you, but I’m starving.”

Steve had to agree. They’d left Ferrous so early to get to Pepper to the Quorum on time that it had been hours since breakfast.
They were on one of the many walkways on school grounds, and Sam was pointing off toward their right. From where they were standing, Steve could make out the building that his friend was indicating: a one-story structure that had a sign out front, one that was just a little too far away to make out, even though it was obviously colorful. To be honest, Steve was ready to have a seat and at least get something to drink, but food really did sound good. “Come on, then.”

Together, the pair walked toward the building, passing a small garden on the left and another building, this one two story, that had a sign marking it as the Millennium Bookstore. Through the large plate glass window, Steve could make out shelves of books, as well as racks of writing implements and other items a student might need.

Also, inside the shop, was a very familiar figure.

With a warning word to Sam, Steve ducked into the place. Immediately, he noticed the smells of paper and books and ink, and it was a pleasant mixture that had him wishing he’d been able to continue his own schooling back before Howard Stark had come calling, but his mother had needed his help around the house, so he’d only really had a basic education. Perhaps that was something to consider, now that there weren’t any wars to fight and he’d need something to occupy his time.

The man he’d noticed from the outside was standing next to a shelf of what looked like children’s books, a child of about six years standing next to him, nodding as he crouched down to show her the book in his hand. Another girl, this one in her teens, was kneeling behind the little girl, while a boy the same age as the teenage girl was hovering behind her, pointing something out on the open page.

There were four dragons lounging around, keeping their eyes on things. Steve loved dragons; he wished he could have one, really. Happy was a true delight, keeping him company when his mistress was busy with other things around the Castle.

Every single dragon reacted to Sam’s presence by jumping on him and demanding his attention. Sam laughed, greeting them as enthusiastically as they were greeting him.

Clint Barton glanced upward at the ruckus, giving Steve a welcoming smile as soon as he saw him. “Sir Steven! I didn’t expect to see you here.”

The child started violently, darting behind Barton’s leg, hiding from the strangers. The teenaged girl was reassuring her, which seemed to do the trick of calming the smaller girl down a little, her peeking out from behind the Elf’s legs to watch Steve and Sam warily.

“Please…it’s just Steve.” Friends shouldn’t be calling friends by their titles and, to be perfectly honest, Steve really didn’t like being called ‘Sir’.

“Then, it’s Clint. And these are Wanda and Pietro Maximoff; Pietro is Ianto’s newest Novice and Wanda is Phil’s, although neither one has put in the paperwork for that yet which is why they aren’t in the Quorum with the rest of the Wizards. And this,” he rested a hand on the little girl’s head, “is my daughter, Crystal. Everyone, this is Steve Rogers…Steve, Wanda and Pietro helped find the information on Sir James’ arm.”

Steve was a little surprised that Clint had a human daughter, but he thought it might be rude to say anything; besides, he’d thought the Elf was Grand Master Phil’s lover, although that didn’t preclude him having had a child before the two men had even met. He supposed she could be a half-blood like Sam, one that took more after her mother than her father. Still, she was a pretty little thing, all big gray eyes and long blonde hair with an odd black stripe in it, wearing a yellow and black dress that made her look like a cute baby bee.
He decided to greet her first, since she seemed so shy. He knelt down, to be more on her level, then said, “Hello, Crystal. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Are you a friend of my Daddy’s?” she asked quietly.

“Well, to be honest we just met only a couple of days ago,” Steve answered. “But I like to think we’re friends.”

She nodded seriously. “I only met Dad and Daddy two days ago, too.”

Steve glanced up at Clint, his eyebrows rising almost to his hairline. The Elf narrowed his eyes, as if daring Steve to say something…but he didn’t, because he was putting a few things together in his head and came up with the little girl that Grand Master Phil had adopted. He’d learned about it from Pepper, who’d been pleased as punch about it at dinner last night, saying that Phil had taken her in after finding her abandoned in a village just because she was going to grow up to be a Void Wizard. Pepper had ranted a little about that part, and Steve couldn’t blame her for it. After all, anyone who’d treat a little kid like that was just as evil as their opinion of the Wizard she was destined to grow up to be.

And Clint was her Daddy.

He couldn’t help the smile that spread the moment he figured it out. Knowing Grand Master Phil the way he did, even though it hadn’t been long, he knew the Wizard was a good man, and him adopting this little girl, after her own family had tried to get rid of her, spoke highly of the man. That Clint would do the same, inviting this child into their home…Steve just had the feeling that she was going to be well taken care of.

He turned back to Crystal. “Sounds like you have two wonderful people looking after you.”

“And Daisy!” she exclaimed.

“And Daisy,” he agreed, having heard plenty about Daisy Coulson from Pepper. And it had been Daisy who’d volunteered to help find out what she could for Bucky, standing up for him when he’d needed someone to.

Remembering that, he stood to greet Wanda and Pietro Maximoff. “Thank you for helping my friend,” he said sincerely.

Both youngsters looked a little embarrassed at the attention. “We were happy to, Sir Steven,” Pietro said, with an accent he couldn’t identify. “We know what it is like to be cursed, and hated that it would happen to someone else.”

“It’s just Steve.” He really wanted to put all that Paladin stuff behind him. He was in a new time, and a new place, with a new life spreading out in before him. He could literally be anyone he wanted, and doubted that Sir Steven Rogers, the Paladin of the Western Lands, was really all that remembered outside of historians and the one Elf who’d been there for the War. “I’m not that person anymore, really.”

“Gotcha.” Clint gave him an understanding smile. “I’m a bit surprised to see you in Gateway. Well, you and your friend, who is spoiling our dragons rotten.”

Steve laughed. “My friend is Sam Wilson…”

The Elf must have recognized the name, because he said, “Andrew has a lot of good things to say about him.” He waded through the dragons, Crystal staying with Wanda and Pietro, in order to
introduce himself and the rather excited group around him. “Hey,” once he’d managed to get one of
the dragons – a gold one with brown eyes – off Sam and to sit at his side, “Clint Barton. Good to
meet you.”

“You too,” Sam answered. “I’d shake your hand, but they’re rather busy at the moment.”

“It’s not like it’s never happened to me,” Clint commiserated. “Let me…alright, the red one is
Scarlet, she’s Wanda’s. The silver one is Quicksilver, and he goes with Pietro. The brown one with
the forked horn is Lockjaw, Crystal’s companion, and this one,” he scratched the gold dragon, “is
Lucky, and he’s mine.”

Steve frowned, confused. “I didn’t know you’re a Wizard.”

“I’m not,” Clint denied, “it’s just that the Queen of Air and Fire really likes me.”

Sam started. “You actually met the One Mother?” He sounded completely and utterly gobsmacked.

“She even asked me to call her Idris!” And yes, Clint Barton just squealed that.

“Wait,” Steve cut into a conversation that might have gotten out of control and had already gone
completely over his head, “the Queen of Air and Fire?”

“Oh yeah,” Sam replied, “you wouldn’t have heard of her. The Queen of Air and Fire is the One
Mother. Every dragon to have been born came from her, all the way back to the beginning of time.
And Barton here is one lucky bas…um, jerk, to have met her.”

Steve could tell his friend had censored himself because of the children present, and he could read
between the lines as it were, to what Sam had meant to say.

“She was pretty amazing,” Clint offered. “She told me I would have made a good Wizard and how
much of a shame it was that I wasn’t.” He was quite proud of it; Steve thought he could understand
why. It had to be a really big deal for a non-Wizard to gain a dragon.

A hand tugged at his trouser leg, and he looked down to see little Crystal, staring up at him. “You’re
like me,” she proclaimed.

Steve was confused. He knelt, so he could talk to her face to face. “I’m sorry, but I don’t know
what you mean.”

“You’re like me,” she reiterated, with the certainty that only the very young could do. “Where is
your dragon?”

Before Steve could say anything, Clint was on his knees beside her, wrapping an arm around her.
“Steve’s not a Wizard, sweetheart.”

“But, Daddy,” she protested, “he’s like me and Dad and Wanda!”

Steve thought he understood why she was confused. “Crystal, I’m not a Wizard, but I was exposed
to the Void for a long time. You’re just sensing that. I’m afraid I’m not a Wizard.”

Crystal was disappointed. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” he told her, “although…can I tell you a secret?”

The little girl nodded.
He leaned a little closer. “I sort of wish I *was* a Wizard.”

That wasn’t much of a lie. Steve did wish he *could* be a Wizard, even though that thought had just begun to appeal to him. To him, back during the War, magic had been considered a bad thing, because of the Artifacts that the Skull had corrupted to his own purposes…just looking at Bucky, wanting to stay in that damned box in Ianto’s casting chamber…that would have been enough to turn him off magic for good, even if such a thing had existed back then.

However, now that Steve had seen the good that magic could do…it was almost an epiphany moment. Before, he would have condemned anyone who’d claimed to be one. Now, it was a completely different story.

Every Wizard he’d met so far had been a genuinely good person. Phil Coulson had pulled him out of the Void, and had helped him heal physically from the experience. Pepper had offered him a place to stay, until he was ready to make his way in the world. Ianto Jones was doing everything he could to help Bucky, along with Grand Masters Phil and Stephen. Daisy Coulson and her Novice Wizard friends, including Gabe’s several times great-grandson, had found the very information that would most likely help the Grand Masters with all of those curses that Hydra had put on Steve’s best friend.

And, then there was Crystal, little Crystal, who’d had so much bad happen to her – yes, it was at the instigation of a Wizard who could very well be considered evil – and yet was still going to grow up with obviously loving parents and a big sister who was already an amazing person, and Steve hadn’t even had to meet to know that about Daisy.

Oh, he wasn’t being naïve about it, though. Hydra was a cabal made up of evil Wizards. It was like every other sort of group out there; there was good, and there was bad. But, in this case, the good far outweighed the bad that Steve could tell, and the Guild was obviously quite serious about cleaning up their own messes. Which was, in itself, a good thing.

And so, Steve wanted to be a Wizard, if just so he could also help battle the prejudice that had sprung up in the Wizard’s Guild. To prove that the majority of Wizards weren’t evil, and who were willing to do everything in their power to fix the wrongs that others had created.

Perhaps he could help out in other ways, since he didn’t have any magic to speak of.

He’d have to speak to the Grand Masters. To find out exactly what he could do in order to aid in the cleanup from Hydra’s resurgence, and to change things for the better for the Guild if he was allowed to without being an actual member. He’d already decided that this could be his purpose in this new time he’d found himself in, another quest that would be within his remit as a Paladin…even if he didn’t care for the title, he wasn’t above cashing in on the reputation that the title implied if need be.

Crystal gave him a shy smile at his confession. “That’s too bad, but you can still be my Dad and Daddy’s friend. They don’t care if you’re not a Wizard.”

Steve glanced up at Clint, who was nodding. “I know that,” he told her, “and I hope to get to know them, and you and Daisy, much better.”

“Why don’t you and Sam join us to eat?” Clint suggested. “We were going to finish up in here, and then go to the eatery down the street for something.”

“Can you?” Crystal gave Steve the best ever set of puppy eyes he’d seen on anyone. She was going to be a heartbreaker when she got older, and he didn’t envy her parents one bit when the time came for her to bring her dates home to meet the family.
“We’d be happy to,” he replied.

“We were actually heading that way ourselves,” Sam added. “The more, the merrier.”

Crystal squealed a little, throwing her arms around Steve’s neck. It surprised him; she’d gone from shy to demonstrative that quickly, and he figured it was because Clint had accepted his presence so easily. That he’d been claimed as a friend, and for her that was enough.

Steve hugged her back and, for possibly the first time since awakening at Ferrous Castle and being told he was three hundred years into his own future, he felt as if he could really call this time ‘home’.

Just because a child was hugging him.

It was really strange how life did that.

Steve figured he’d just have to get used to having people around him like this.

Now, he just needed to get Bucky back, and he had hope that it would occur sooner rather than later.
In the end, there were three Hydra members still in the Quorum: two Masters, and a Novice, all Voids.

One of those Masters was Jasper Sitwell, Novice Trip’s teaching Master.

Ianto felt bad for the young man. After all, Trip had, at first, been accepted by John Garrett and, when that hadn’t worked out, he’d been taken on by Jasper Sitwell. It wasn’t fair, really.

He could tell that Phil was bothered by it, as well. As the three Hydra members were removed from the Quorum, once the Truth Bomb had worn off, Phil had approached Trip, who was busily being hugged by all of his friends, eager to support him. While Ianto was too far away to hear what Phil told him, he could see the relief on the young Wizard’s face as he nodded.

Daisy hugged her Dad, clearly excited, and it hit Ianto as to why: he suspected that Phil had just offered to take over as Trip’s teaching Master.

His Void friend was certainly going to be busy.

Ianto couldn’t help but shake his head in wonder.

“And to think,” Stephen drawled, “Phil used to be practically a hermit.”

“And he’d been proud of that fact.”

“Proud of what?”

Ianto turned toward his husband. Once the Quorum had been released, the doors had been opened and Jack had been allowed to enter. He was a bit surprised that Jack was alone, except for the Knight from Barony Uncelas, who promptly met up with Master Illya and left together; he’d been certain that Clint and Crystal at least would have been with him.

“Clint took the kids out,” Jack explained without Ianto having to say a word. “Crystal was upset, and I suspect that, while Wanda was fine sitting there, Pietro was getting a bit twitchy.”

“That’s good. And we were just saying that Phil used to be as close to a hermit as a person could get, and proud of the fact.”

Jack nodded. “As bad as things have been, you have to admit that they’ve brought that man out of his self-imposed exile, and given us someone who has the power and strength to handle being Void Grand Master. I doubt anyone else could have taken it on, what with all this hanging over the Order like it was.”

He had a point. While Ianto didn’t wish immortality on anyone, he thought that Phil would have the strength of mind and body to handle it. Yes, he was going to mourn when his loved ones were gone, and the Cardinal Wizard doubted his friend would ever get over those losses, but Ianto was also certain that Phil would be able to move on and do the best he could with what he’d been given.

He’d also be a strong ally, with the magic needed to hold onto the Grand Master position if he was ever challenged for it. Usually, the position was passed on to a designated successor, but Ianto
himself had been challenged to duels twice since he’d taken on Cardinal Grand Master. So, it wasn’t unheard of to have someone want to take the office by force. Ianto had no doubt that Phil was just that powerful and would have no trouble on that front.

As much as he hated the circumstances that had caused it, Ianto was glad that Phil had stepped out from the shadows and into the light, where he would do the most good.

“It’s not your fault,” Phil’s voice interrupted what Ianto had planned on saying, which had been basically agreeing with his husband on his assessment of Phil Coulson. He and Daisy’s Novice friends were approaching, Phil looking to be disagreeing with something that Novice Trip was telling him.

“But it had to be me,” the young man argued. “Something I said to Master Jasper, that had Hydra dig up your past.”

Ah, now that made sense. Ianto had been wondering just what had gotten Hydra on Phil’s trail, a trail that had been thoroughly obscured due to the Dark One’s reported death. Something had led Daniel Whitehall to actually go to Asgard in order to sneak into the prison where Loki was being held, to confirm the story that had been put around about that final battle. He hated to think that the young Wizard’s teaching Master had betrayed him even worse than being part of an evil cabal, but that was how it had to have happened.

And he could tell Phil felt the same, and yet he was still attempting to soothe Trip’s guilt.

The longer Ianto knew Phil Coulson, the more unbelievable it became that he’d once been the most feared Wizard in the Western Lands, on par with the late, unlamented, Harold Saxon.

“Trip,” the Void Wizard stopped their forward momentum, allowing the two of them to be surrounded by the rest of the group that Daisy had gathered around her. He rested his hands on the young man’s shoulders. “I’m not at all sure what you could have told your old teaching Master about me that would have tipped off Pierce and the others, but it doesn’t matter. It’s over and done with and, despite everything, I’m beginning to see that me being revealed as the Dark One was for the good. So, even if, somehow, you let something slip, it wasn’t your fault. I don’t want to hear you blame yourself ever again, alright?”

“Alright,” Trip agreed, looking very relieved.

“I feel so bad for you,” Daisy told her friend, “but you came out ahead, if I do say so myself.” She was looking quite smug.

“Yeah, girl, you would say that,” Trip laughed. “I’d tell you you’re right, but I don’t want your ego to get any more out of control than it already is.”

Daisy bumped her shoulder into him; because he was taller than she was, she ended up hitting his bicep.

“You realize,” Ianto told Phil, “that you really are going to have to take down that unPlotable spell around the Keep now.”

Phil rolled his eyes. “I’m planning on it, as soon as we have the last of Hydra taken care of. Now that I’ll have two Novices…”

“And they’ll be of different levels in learning,” Stephen reminded him.

“Plus, Crystal,” Daisy reminded them. “She’s so excited about learning magic.”
“You are going to have your hands full, my friend,” the Great Wizard chuckled.

“We’ll help in whatever way we can,” Jemma piped up.

“When we’re not involved with our own studies, of course,” Leo added.

“And even though we’re different Orders,” Lincoln put in.

“Sounds like you have all the help you need.” Ianto was impressed by all these youngsters that Daisy had managed to befriend.

Phil looked unbelievably proud. “Yes, it does.” Then he looked around. “Where’s Clint and Crystal?”

“He took Crystal and the twins out into the city,” Jack said. “I already reached him on his speaking stone to let him know the Quorum was done. He said they’re eating at that dining establishment on the main campus road.”

“Why don’t you five go ahead?” Phil suggested. “I still have a little business here, then I’ll join you all.”

“We can wait, Dad,” Daisy offered.

“No need. I’ll be right behind you.”

She looked as if she wanted to argue, but in the end Novice Lincoln grabbed her by the hand and half-dragged her out, Daisy protesting as she went, the two Elves and Novice Trip following along, laughing at the pair.

“Well,” Ianto said, “that young man shows sense.”

“He does,” Phil admitted. “But I also wanted them out of the way before we discussed Alexander Pierce.”

Ianto had figured as much. “You have some sort of plan?”

“Honestly? I think the best thing I can do is challenge him directly.”

“You don’t have anything to prove, Phil,” Stephen protested, even though Ianto had just discussed this yesterday with him. They both knew it was very necessary, and it was gratifying to know that Phil had come to that conclusion on his own.

“Yes, I do actually.” Phil took a deep breath. “Right now, I can tell I have the loyalty of quite a few of the Voids. But this thing with the Truth Bomb may have hurt that a bit. I’m going to need to gain it back, and to do that I need to prove I’m powerful enough to hold onto the Grand Master’s office. And, the best way would be to defeat the previous Grand Master.”

Ianto sighed. “You’re right. Intellectually, we all know you’re the most powerful Void Wizard of the age.” He shrugged. “To be my counterpart, you’d have to be. Plus, you apparently are able to eat Void Points for breakfast….”

“It didn’t quite happen like that,” the Void Wizard said dryly.

“Be that as it may,” Ianto waved off the objection, “even the notion that you literally sucked the Void out of John Garrett isn’t enough to prove to the entire Order that you’re here to stay.”
“It’s really too bad that the job isn’t more on merit than power or politics,” Stephen sighed. “But that’s the way it goes.”

“How positive are we on Pierce’s whereabouts?” Ianto inquired.

“I’d trust Sir Napoleon,” Jack butted in. “I just had a long conversation with him, and he’s about as competent as they come. If he says Pierce is with Stern, then we can accept that he is as positive as he can be.”

“Then,” Phil said, straightening his back, “I think it’s time for us to beard Pierce in the new lair he’s dug himself into.”
Clint put the speaking stone away, turning back to the table he shared with three kids, four dragons, a man who’d just woken up three hundred years in his future, and a trained mental health professional.

Yep, his life was officially strange.

And he absolutely loved it.

“The Quorum’s out,” he told his family and friends. “We should probably expect everyone shortly.”

“How do you think it turned out?” Steve asked, taking a sip from the honey mead he’d ordered.

Clint shrugged. “I’d say it went pretty well. I’m sure we’ll get all the gory details once Phil and the rest of the kids arrive.”

“It had to have gone well,” Wanda said, sounding almost defensive, like she didn’t want anyone to think that it hadn’t gone just the way it had planned.

Clint wanted to hug her for that confidence in Phil’s plan.

Well, it wasn’t just Phil’s plan, because it had been him and Daisy who’d put that Truth Bomb together.

Alright, Clint was damned proud of his lover. And, of course, Daisy, but he still wasn’t quite sure how she wanted him to refer to her as. Daughter, friend…something else…they were going to have to figure that out eventually.

“Let’s wait to order until the rest of our party is here,” he suggested. “I hope everyone can wait?”

There was general agreement to that plan.

They kept the chat light, although he could tell Steve wanted to talk about the Quorum and what might have occurred there. Clint couldn’t blame him; he was just as anxious, although he was certain Jack would have said something if things hadn’t gone well. Still, his curiosity was itching him, and when Daisy and the rest of her friends appeared outside, Daisy waving through the window when she spotted them, the archer shifted just a little bit, indicating his excitement for anyone who was paying attention to notice.

The five young Wizards spilled into the restaurant, Daisy leading the way, their dragons accompanying them and darting toward the nearest dragon pile; this being an eatery near the Wizard’s School, there were quite a few dragons in the place. “Clint!” she exclaimed.

“Daisy.” He gave her a large grin. “Good thing I arranged the larger table, then.”

“Daisy!” Crystal cried happily. She was down from the chair beside Clint and was practically tackling her new big sister’s legs, hugging her joyfully.

“Hey, sis.” Daisy returned the hug, her eyes bright.

“Come and sit beside me.” The little girl grabbed her hand and tugged her toward the free seat, and Daisy went willingly. Crystal began chattering to her, about how they’d spent the day. The young
Wizard listened raptly, and Clint thought it was fantastic that she wanted to know everything Crystal was telling her.

Clint, meanwhile, began things by introducing the rest of Daisy’s crew.

Steve was grateful to finally meet them, thanking each of them for helping his friend, Bucky. Trip looked like Phil had when he’d first, officially, met Steve: awestruck, although at least Trip didn’t babble. Steve made certain to thank him for telling his great-grandfather about what they were doing, and that did make Trip blush a little. “No problem,” he said, “although I did get yelled at by Grand Master Ianto about it, since it really did break a few rules. And I didn’t even think that it might get back to Hydra that their former puppet was still up and walking around.”

“Still,” Steve replied, “I’m glad I know he’s still alive. And now we can help him.”

“Dad will do his best,” Daisy answered stoutly. “Him, Ianto, and Grand Master Stephen will figure it out.”

“I did talk to Ianto, and he thinks he has the beginnings of a plan. He just needed to consult with Grand Master Phil about it and to get a few things together first.”

“They’re going to start work on preparing as soon as Hydra’s cleared out,” Clint said. “Which, I take it, the Truth Bomb worked?”

Both Steve and Sam looked a little confused by that, so Daisy explained just what it was. “And it worked,” she confirmed. “There were three more Hydra in the Quorum, and they admitted it and were taken into custody.”

“Including my training Master,” Trip sighed.

“You couldn’t have known,” Jemma spoke up.

“Master Jasper was just so very nice,” Leo added.

“Sorry,” Clint commiserated. It had to suck to have been betrayed like that. Not once, but this was the second time, although technically Garrett hadn’t really done any betraying of the kid.

“And you need to listen to Dad,” Daisy said. “It’s not your fault about Hydra finding out about him.”

Wait. What?

Trip looked embarrassed. “I think I had to have said something to lead Hydra to Grand Master Phil.”

Clint leaned back in his chair. He knew Phil had had questions about how Hydra had found out about his past, and this…made sense, even if Trip hadn’t known that Phil had been the Dark One, he could have easily said something that would have seemed suspicious to his training Master…who would have reported it back to the peers in Hydra. It could have been the simplest thing, nothing that anyone else would have connected to the Dark One.

He felt bad for Trip. Not only had his two training Masters been Hydra, but he could very well have been the reason Whitehall had gone to Asgard to get what information he could about Phil’s death, which would have raised enough questions without the evidence of his resurrection.

“Dad’s decided to take Trip on,” Daisy said.
Wanda glanced over at Trip, chewing he lip thoughtfully, and that had Daisy adding, “He’s got you, too, Wanda. Don’t worry about it. He can handle two…well, three, because Crystal wants to learn, too.”

“I do!” The little girl was practically bouncing in her seat. “It’s gonna be wonderful!”

The reassurance had Wanda smiling once more. “It will be.”

Daisy leaned over and ruffled Crystal’s oddly highlighted blonde hair. Just based on that, Clint could understand why she’d go for outfits that made her resemble a very happy bumblebee.

“You’ve got that right, kiddo. I wouldn’t trade Pepper as my teaching Master for anyone, except for Dad, and we have different magicks so that won’t work.”

“I’m sorry,” Steve interrupted, “but what do you mean by that? About Grand Master Phil?”

Damnit.

“I…don’t want to say anything in public,” Clint hedged. “But Phil has a past…a past he’d rather no one know about. Hydra did, and tried to get him to join them by threatening to expose it. It’s Phil’s story to tell, and what’s been said in open Quorum is under so many seals and oaths…sorry, but I can’t really elaborate on that.”

He wasn’t about to, either, because it really was Phil’s tale to tell, if he chose to. Steve seemed to understand, nodding in thought as the other kids moved to the rest of the empty chairs, thoughtfully leaving the one on the other side of Clint empty. His lover might, someday, feel comfortable enough to tell Steve about the Dark One, but Clint wasn’t about to tell Phil’s secrets out of turn.

“Dad said he’d be right behind us,” Daisy said. “He wanted to talk to Ianto and Grand Master Stephen first, then he said he’d follow. I’m pretty sure it’s about going after Pierce.”

Clint nodded. “They most likely need to figure out a way to make apprehending Pierce a show for the Quorum. If Phil is gonna keep the Grand Master’s position, then he really needs to be the one to bring Pierce in.”

Wizard politics were convoluted, but even Clint understood that the Grand Masters were in their position because they were powerful, both magically and politically. Phil had the one, he had the power to hold onto the Grand Mastership, and he’d done a fairly good job of rooting out Hydra in their midst. Still, his political clout wasn’t that strong yet, and taking down Pierce would bring his lover more political cache than anything he could do that didn’t have to do with Hydra.

Phil had to go after Pierce. He had no choice. And Clint would do his best to go with him.

“We all have things in our pasts we’re not particularly proud of,” Sam offered. “I have yet to meet the person who didn’t.”

“I don’t like the idea of Dad going after Pierce on his own,” Daisy argued.

“He won’t be,” Clint reassured her. “There’s no way in any of the hells is he going without me.” He was also certain that Ianto and Grand Master Stephen would be going as well, as representation for the Wizard’s Guild and witnesses to whatever Phil had to do to stop Pierce.

Clint was willing to bet Pierce wouldn’t be coming quietly.

“Do you need more drinks?” the waitress asked, standing at Steve’s shoulder. She’d appeared almost out of nowhere, and either she was really stealthy or she was teleporting in and out. Since
this place was within spitting distance of the school, Clint was willing to bet either was possible.

The archer requested another mead, while everyone else placed their own orders. “Oh,” he said as she was about to step away, “we’re expecting one more. When he gets here, we’ll order our food.”

“I’m here, actually.”

Clint craned his head around, smiling when he caught sight of Phil, standing just behind him. He looked tired, yet pleased with himself…which he had every right to be, now that they had the last Hydra people in the Quorum in custody.

He also looked dead sexy in his official robes. Clint would enjoy peeling him out of them at some point.

“I’ll have a cup of coffee, please,” Phil told the waitress, who wrote it down on her pad and then withdrew.

“Dad!” Crystal cried happily, climbing down from her chair in order to greet him with a hug that had been as vigorous as they one she’d given Daisy.

“Hello, Sweetheart.” He crouched down, the better to return the hug. “Looks like you picked up some new friends.” He indicated Steve and Sam, who were rising to greet Phil in their own way.

“Grand Master,” Steve said formally.

“Please, it’s Phil.” He stood and offered his hand.

“Then it’s Steve.”

Clint could tell the exact moment that it hit his lover that the man who’d been a hero to him was inviting him to call him by his first name. A faint flush spread along the tips of his ears, and those little lines at the corners of his eyes crinkled in pleased surprise. “Steve, then. And this must be Dr. Sam Wilson…”

“Sam, none of that doctor stuff, please.” He offered his own hand, and Phil accepted the handshake.

“I thought Steve was like me,” Crystal exclaimed. “But he says he isn’t.”

There was a flicker of black in Phil’s blue eyes; the sign of the Void. He seemed a little confused by what he was seeing. “Not quite,” he confirmed, but there was something in his voice that had Clint glancing at the former Paladin…not that he’d be able to see much, since he wasn’t a Wizard.

Steve, though, frowned. Although he didn’t question what Phil had just said.

After ushering Crystal back to her chair, Phil slipped into the one left empty next to Clint; the Elf reached over under the table and rested his hand on his lover’s thigh. Phil dropped his own hand on top, squeezing his fingers lightly, then chose not to move it away.

Clint would never get tired of those small touches. They were really nice.

“So,” Phil sighed, “that’s done.”

He didn’t elaborate, as the waitress came back with an overladen tray filled with mugs and glasses, that was floating at shoulder-height. She began passing out the drinks, getting every one of them to their proper owner then, with a smile that bordered on flirty, she pulled the tray out of the air and tucked it under one arm. “Are you all ready to order? Or do you need more time?”
“Let’s order,” Phil answered for all of them.

They did, and once the waitress was gone, Clint turned to his lover and asked. “Do we have a plan?”

The smile he received in return was sly. “We do.”
Pepper watched as Baron Nick appeared within her casting chamber, Mistress Maria at his side with her dragon, Iliad, sitting at attention next to her.

She’d been really surprised at the Great Head of Order’s support during the Quorum. That she’d actually admitted that she’d been wrong about her opinions on the Cardinals and Voids. Mistress Maria had always struck her as staid and set in her ways, so for her to say she’d made a mistake believing the ancient writings…in that moment, back in the Quorum, Pepper believed that perhaps the two of them could be friends, someday.

“Welcome to Castle Ferrous,” she greeted them warmly.

“Thank you, Mistress Pepper,” Baron Nick answered. “Have the others arrived yet?”

“No, they were waiting for you.”

With that, both visitors stepped out of the way with alacrity. Several heartbeats later, Alexander Waverly, Baron Uncelas, arrived, accompanied by Master Illya Kuryakin and Sir Napoleon Solo. Pepper greeted them as well, the Knight kissing her hand gallantly in reply. Master Illya was of Maria’s Order, and so Pepper didn’t know him that well, so he introduced himself and his dragon, Vanya, to her. Happy had promptly acted like his happy-go-lucky self and greeted the two dragons by pouncing all over them.

Honestly, her dragon was the least dignified creature, ever. Pepper adored him for it.

When Ianto had contacted her about their plan, Pepper had been all for it. It had been her idea that the two Barons come to Ferrous if they wanted to get Tony to sit still long enough to hear what was going on with Baron Jerald Stern. Usually, Baronial business sent him running, and he’d managed to create locks on his workshop that even Pepper had trouble with unlocking.

Both Barons, familiar with Tony Stark, had readily agreed.

“Does Baron Tony know we’re coming?” Baron Alexander inquired as they left the casting chamber.

Pepper huffed a laugh. “Of course not.”

That had Baron Nick chuckling. “You know, you would have made an excellent Baroness yourself.”

She’d had the choice when she’d married Tony to take on the title of Baroness; however, she’d kept her Guild designation, since she was more Head of Cardinal Order instead of nobility, as well as being Ferrous’ Court Wizard. Sometimes she did wonder why she’d done it, but then she would meet people like Phil Coulson, and to be able to teach the man’s remarkable daughter, and all of the politics were worth it.

She hoped Phil would feel the same, because she was aware that the real main reason he hadn’t participated in Guild events unless he absolutely needed to was because of the politics. It could sometimes get downright ugly, so she couldn’t really blame him for wanting to stay out for as long as possible.
“I like to think my talents are better used in being Head of Order,” she answered brightly, pleased at his compliment.

“Yes, don’t let Nick try to talk you into changing positions,” Mistress Maria put in, “because I’d hate to see what would happen with Cardinal Order if you weren’t there to babysit most of them.”

Pepper laughed aloud, because Maria was quite correct with her assessment of her Order.

“Tony’s in his workshop,” she explained once they were up into the Castle proper.

“I’ve heard that Baron Tony is quite the miracle worker when it comes to non-magical devices,” Baron Alexander said. For an elderly gentleman, he was in remarkable shape; he wasn’t even out of breath after the climbing the stairs up from the subterranean room.

“If you look,” she pointed out the lightbulbs Tony had invented, “we don’t really use glowglobes anymore. Those are run using power from a generator in what used to be the Castle dungeons. It creates its own form of lightning, which then is run through tiny wires to the lights.”

“That is amazing,” Sir Napoleon said. “Is this something that can be adapted to all non-magical homes?”

“Tony hopes so. He’s working on several forms of generator; one type that would be in each home, and another one that could be run from a central powerhouse and power would then be provided to houses within the same area.”

“That would indeed be a boon to many of our smaller villages,” Baron Alexander replied. “Is there some sort of waiting list for this invention?”

Pepper couldn’t help the smile that spread across her face. This was what Tony had been wanting: to get several Baronies on board with this new technology. “I’ll let him know you’re interested. He’ll be looking for places to set up testing for the generators, and if you and your people would be willing to do that…”

“I shall be more than pleased to see what towns would be interested in participating.”

“That goes for Triskelia as well,” Baron Nick spoke up. “I’m always looking for things to make life easier for my people. We could probably put the referendum in front of the Council of Barons to see if anyone else would be interested. I can’t see we’d be the only ones, especially with both Alexander and me backing the idea.”

Pepper wanted to dance with joy. She’d always believed in Tony, in what he was doing, and this could be the beginning of something much larger. She also knew that Tony wouldn’t look to get any sort of money for his invention; he would only ask that the Baronies where it would be set up foot the bill for the installation, and he would also be willing to help the poorer Baronies if they were also interested. Free power for everyone had long been her husband’s dream, and now it could be within his grasp.

Tony’s workshop was toward the back of the Castle, in a section that had fallen into disrepair during Stane’s occupation of the Barony. Tony had seen the use of having a place that was a bit distant from the living areas of the Castle, and had promptly begun the renovations. Pepper had been happy to encourage him, knowing her husband and his need to create things that would make people’s lives easier, after his kidnapping several years ago.

That had really been the event that had precipitated Tony’s major shift away from weapons’ research and into other avenues of inquiry. Before then, Pepper had simply been a high-ranking Wizard that
Obadiah Stane had had on retainer for political reasons; she’d met Tony and hadn’t been impressed by the playboy wastrel who didn’t seem to care what his Baron had his hands in – although technically Stane hadn’t really been the one in line for succession, that had been Tony; Tony just hadn’t been interested. However, after the kidnapping that Stane had instigated her would-be husband had changed, becoming the caring man he was now.

The man Pepper had finally fallen in love with.

The door to the workshop was at the end of a plain stone corridor. There hadn’t been any need to decorate in this section; after all, Tony was the only one using it, and visitors didn’t often come down this way. Pepper bringing the Barons and their guests were an anomaly, one that she was hoping would shock Tony out of his work binge and get him to think about his Baronial duties.

Well, hope wasn’t maybe a strong enough word.

Without announcing herself, Pepper pushed the thick wooden door open, glad that Tony hadn’t decided to lock it today. The room within was about the size of the Castle’s formal ballroom and lined with stone and wooden tables and lab benches, equipment scattered in what many people would consider a haphazard manner about the place. However, Tony had lectured her on moving anything, because apparently he could brag about knowing where every single thing was.

Standing against one of the walls was a suit of armor, red and gold in color, that Pepper had noticed a couple of times, when she’d needed to come into the workshop for any reason. It was a relatively new project, and it was eye-catching, especially with its blank spot in the exact center of the breastplate.

In fact, that opening corresponded with the magical stone that had been welded to Tony’s chest during the kidnapping attempt. The stone that was keeping him alive.

Pepper didn’t know what to make of that, and was bothered that she hadn’t put that together before now. Perhaps she should say something to him about it…

At the far end of the workshop, she could see Tony leaning over one of the benches, Bruce beside him. Pepper couldn’t hear what they were saying, but they seemed to be talking intently, and not for the first time was she glad that her husband had found someone who could keep up with him.

“– and the fluorescent nature of the metal,” Tony was saying as she approached. He noticed her and broke off, his eyebrows arcing downward at seeing she wasn’t alone. “Hey, Pep, there’s intruders in my workshop.”

Bruce looked up from whatever he’d been perusing, his own face showing confusion. It was actually a cute look on him, not that Pepper would ever say anything.

“You have Baronial business, Tony,” she told him.

“Nope, the next meeting isn’t until next month.” He waved his hand negligently. “And I don’t intend on doing anything that isn’t expressly about my own Barony until then.”

Despite his rather flippant answer, Pepper could tell he was irritated at the interruption. “Tony,” she said gently, knowing better than to directly confront him when he was like this, “this is about Hydra.”

Tony leaned against the bench, arms crossed over his chest, the faint blue glow of the stone melded with his skin showing through the stretched material of his work shirt. “I thought you Wizards had that all handled.”
“We do,” Pepper answered, “but it appears Alexander Pierce has taken refuge with Baron Jerald Stern.”

Pepper knew the moment Tony was completely engaged. “Of course Stern’s got something to do with this. The man’s an asshole.”

“We need your help, Stark,” Baron Nick cut in. “The Wizards can take care of Pierce, but Stern is one of us, and he’s harboring a known criminal. The Guild’s gonna need the Council onside to go in after him.”

Pepper knew that the Guild couldn’t just waltz in and demand that Stern turn Pierce over for justice. Well, they could…but it would be better if the Council backed the Guild’s actions, and to do that they needed a simple majority of the Barons to agree that whatever happened they would go along with it. They didn’t have to interfere, or be involved…just to say the Guild was in the right, despite them stepping all over the toes of a Barony that had offered a magical criminal sanctuary.

When Ianto had approached her with this idea, Pepper had seen the implications at once. If they did go in after Pierce without at least the Council being aware of it, it might cause a backlash against the Guild, one that the Western Lands didn’t need. Hydra was a Guild issue, although that actually extended to Barony Triskelia since it had been two of its citizens that had been threatened. Plus, there was also the second kidnapping attempt on Daisy, which had also taken place in Triskelia Town, so Baron Nick had a very good reason to want them stopped.

However, Hydra hadn’t really done anything else to any of the other Baronies, unless them taking up residence in Golden Gate counted, which was within Baron Henry Pym’s territory. Baron Henry had taken exception with that, which meant he’d most likely come down on their side about going after Pierce…even though the Baron didn’t particularly care for Tony. She had no idea what had precipitated that, but had a feeling it was more to do with Tony’s father than Tony himself, and it would most likely have taken common ground to get them to agree.

“You’re right,” Tony allowed. “How sure are you that Pierce is currently taking sanctuary within Barony Shandling?”

At that question, Sir Napoleon stepped forward. “I discovered that fact during a subsequent investigation,” he explained. “I’m positive that Baron Jerald is harboring Pierce. For what reason, I can’t say.”

“And you are…?” Tony was examining him, his eyes narrowed, taking in the tabard of Barony Uncelas over the well-used yet cared-for armor, weapons bristling at various places on his person.

“This is my Knights’ Commander, Sir Napoleon Solo,” Baron Alexander introduced. “And my Court Wizard, Master Illya Kuryakin. Which you would know if you paid attention in Council.” That last bit sounded amused, as if Tony entertained Baron Alexander…and, quite possibly, he did.

“Yeah, yeah.” Tony did that waving off motion he did when he thought something was completely irrelevant. “Look, I’m all for going after Stern. Like I said, he’s a dick. He totally overreacted when I announced there would be no more Stark weapons. And, if he’s hiding Pierce…”

“There’s something else,” Baron Nick spoke up. “Daisy was found in Barony Shandling. The Baron decided he didn’t want Phil to adopt Daisy.”

That news had Tony standing up straight. “You mean Coulson nearly didn’t get custody of mini-Pepper?” He sounded outraged, but then he really was fond of Daisy, hence the nickname he’d given her.
It had been before Tony’s time as Baron, so Pepper confirmed. She explained what she’d been told, about how Stern hadn’t wanted to give her up, because she was a Wizard and he wanted resources to aid in the rebuilding efforts of his Barony after Loki. How Master Thaddeus had backed him up.

“Then how did he pull it off?” Tony was intrigued.

“It was me,” Baron Nick admitted. “I cashed in the little influence I had at the time, and managed to get the Council of Barons to overrule Stern and get that little girl adopted.”

“It was a bit more than that,” Baron Alexander commented. “But that was the end result. Baron Jerald was being completely irrational over the whole affair, and a majority of the Barons could see that.” He turned his pale eyes on Tony. “Your predecessor, Obadiah Stane, voted to let Stern keep her. Thankfully, that particular partnership was outvoted.”

“Yeah, you’re not wrong.” Tony rubbed his eyes. “Look, we need to get Pierce out of Shandling. But you know Stern is just gonna do something stupid again. There needs to be a way to find out who he’s got as his heir.”

Pepper watched as Baron Nick began to nod. “That was my thought, too. Stern’s been a pain in the ass for decades. If he’s taken in Pierce, then there’s a case to be made that he’s gone over to Hydra.”

She could see where this was going. Yes, Tony had a point…from what she’d heard – mostly Tony bitching about things – Jerald Stern was a backward idiot who would do anything to grow his power base. The only saving grace was the fact that too many of the younger, more progressive, Barons were in the majority, and could easily vote down anything Stern put forward that they didn’t agree with.

Sir Napoleon cleared his throat. “I have a contact within the Baronial staff. She’s informed me that Stern doesn’t have an heir. His only child died when the boy was a youngster, and then his wife died as well. He never remarried.”

“What about close family?” Tony asked.

“None. There’s been talk that Stern plans on naming someone close to him, but he hasn’t.” The Knight shrugged. “He’s so paranoid that anyone he names will make a grab for power that he simply won’t take the chance.”

“Paranoia can be a good thing,” Baron Nick said, “but then there’s that shit. You know, though, that doesn’t surprise me one bit. Stern is just that sort of nutjob.”

“Then it would be up to the Barons to replace him,” Tony growled. “I hate this shit.”

“You and me both,” Baron Alexander admitted. It would be a mess, and no mistake.

“We’ll need to move fast,” Pepper pointed out. “Master Thaddeus was in the Quorum, and Pierce was discussed. If he gets to Stern before we can make our move…Stephen is going to do his best to delay him, and I’m pretty sure there’s no love lost between him and Pierce since Pierce is a Void and Master Thaddeus is a raging bigot, but there’s no telling what might happen since he and Stern were allies in the past.” Stephen had also thought to speak to Master Thaddeus’ daughter, Mistress Betty, to see if she might know where her father stood.

“Master Thaddeus?” Bruce piped up. Pepper had forgotten he was there, to be honest. “Thaddeus Ross?”

“You know him?” She wondered how that was possible. Bruce wasn’t a Wizard, and Master
Thaddeus was too full of himself to really speak to someone who not only wasn’t in his Order, but who didn’t have any sort of magic.

Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers. “Yes, I know him.” His dark eyes held equal parts guilt and pain in them, making Pepper want to hug him. She didn’t do it, because she believed she knew him well enough by now to know it wouldn’t be welcomed.

“What happened?” Tony asked, and Pepper knew the compassion in his voice would be a surprise to his fellow Barons. After all, he had a very effective public face, and Tony was prone to not let anyone get close enough to show his inner self. It was a testament to the quick friendship that had sprung up between the two that allowed him to drop that façade and reach out to Bruce.

The magical theorist sighed. “Ross hired me. He had this idea about magic, and he wanted someone with a solid foundation of theory to work on it for him. I didn’t realize what he wanted until I got into the equations, and then…well, let’s just say I didn’t want to work with him anymore.”

“What was this idea?” Mistress Maria, as Head of Great Order, would of course demand to know.

“He told me it was an in-depth evaluation on how Voids and Cardinals drew on their magic. It was actually an attempt to figure out how to strip them of their magic, using as a basis the original spell that Master John had utilized to close off our world to magic.”

Pepper suddenly wanted to sit down. Which she did, as Maria started cursing like some of the sailors the Cardinal Wizard had heard down at the docks.

“Does that spell still exist?” she gasped. Because if it did, it needed to be destroyed at once.

Master John Smith had really believed he’d done the right thing by cutting off the magic from the world. He’d seen a future where Wizards had been at war, and it had destroyed the world. The only problem was, the spell was flawed, and it had taken about a thousand years to break.

According to Ianto, Master John had later admitted that he might have made a mistake. Still, what was done was done, and they were still recovering to this day.

“No,” Mistress Maria growled. “The spell was destroyed.”

“You’re certain of that?” Baron Nick demanded.

She nodded. “I read Master John’s biography. He’d destroyed it himself right after he’d used it.”

“Ross didn’t have it,” Bruce confirmed. “He was hoping we could recreate it.”

“We?” Pepper snapped. If there were other Wizards involved…

“Myself, and another theorist he’d dug up from somewhere. A man named Emil Blonsky. When I figured out what Ross wanted to do, I left. But…” he took in a deep breath, “I tried to convince his daughter, Betty, to come with me. She’d been appalled by what her father was doing. I still have no idea how he got her to stay.”

“Wait,” Tony spun on his friend, “are you the one?”

Pepper was confused for a single heartbeat. Then she realized what Tony was claiming, just from Bruce’s reaction.

“There’d been a rumor,” she said, “about a suitor that Master Thaddeus hadn’t approved of.”
“Yep,” Bruce admitted, “that was me. Betty and I started going places together, dating really. But her father didn’t like it, wanted her to marry a Great Wizard, not someone who only knew theory. When I left, I wanted her to come with me, but something held her back. I haven’t seen her since.”

“Seems like we may have a bigger problem in Great Order than we thought.” Mistress Maria sounded furious, and who could blame her? They’d just managed to clean out Void Order, and now they were discovering that one of her own had been attempting to take away the Cardinal and Void ability to access their own magicks…effectively murdering them in the process.

“If you ask Grand Master Phil, I’m sure he won’t mind concocting another of his Truth Bombs,” Pepper suggested.

One side of Mistress Maria’s mouth ticked upward. “While that certainly sounds like a plan, I doubt it would work twice. The Grand Masters happened to catch the Quorum by surprise; you can bet it’ll be prepared for a second time.”

She was right, of course. Catching Wizards out yet another time with the same trick was going to be nearly impossible. Their best bet would be to bring charges up in front of the Quorum…they hadn’t had this many Quorums called in a long time.

“Truth Bomb?” Tony looked intrigued.

“I’ll be happy to tell you all about it,” Pepper promised. “But, right now, we need to find Pierce and keep Stern from getting in the way.”

“And what happens after the Guild finds Pierce?” Bruce asked.

Pepper grimaced. “Phil will challenge him to a magical duel.”
Chapter 63

Ianto trotted down the corridor toward Stephen’s office, hoping he wasn’t too late.

Pepper had contacted him via speaking stone, explaining to him what she’d learned from Dr. Banner about Master Thaddeus’ machinations. It had chilled him to the bone; he was the only Wizard alive who could remember the time before magic came back full-blown to the world, when he’d been a lowly Catalyst working for Baroness Gwen Williams and Torchwood Castle. He’d been Tested as a child; back then, everyone was when they reached eleven, because while magic had been long gone, there had still been the odd individual who could tap into some form of magic, even though it wasn’t a very strong connection. Ianto’s own ability had allowed him to identify and use magical Artifacts, and had made him singularly useful, which meant he had become the youngest serving Master Archivist Torchwood Castle had ever had.

When it had been revealed that he was, instead, an honest-to-Gods Wizard, things had become horrible. There had nearly been a war fought over himself, and then Suzie Costello, who’d manifested as a Void almost against her will. It would have gotten completely out of hand once Daffyd had showed up – and that was a story that no one would ever believe if they hadn’t been there to see it, since it had involved alternate timelines and time travel – if not for King Rory and Queen Amelia, who’d created the Wizard Guild and put Daffyd in charge of the new Wizard School planned for Gateway.

Daffyd being named Baron Gateway had been a shock for all concerned, especially Daffyd himself.

This, of course, was a little different circumstance. Master Thaddeus was a prejudiced arse, and he was only wanting to get rid of the Cardinals and Voids, to return to that time when there were only Great Wizards, who had worshipped the Deep Ways and the Void and considered it heresy to use either force. It would mean wholesale slaughter, but Ianto knew the man didn’t care. That the loss of two Orders would be in the man’s final plan.

It was an accusation enough to get Master Thaddeus ejected from the Guild, for plotting against the two Orders that his own was supposed to balance out.

After the Quorum and their conversation with Phil, Stephen had summoned Master Thaddeus to his office, in order to delay him leaving. There was no guarantee that he wouldn’t go straight to Baron Jerald and inform the man that they knew that he was hiding Alexander Pierce in his own Barony, and that the Guild would be coming for him. Yes, Ross hated the Voids, but he also wasn’t above making the Orders run a wild goose chase, as well as irritating the Western Lands’ governing Council of Barons, and it might not matter that the Guild had declared Pierce a criminal and ejected him from the Wizard’s Guild. The last thing they needed were for the Wizards and the Barons being on the outs from each other.

The problem was, this was a case of word against word; Ianto was willing to bet that Master Thaddeus would deny every single thing that Dr. Banner had claimed, and there was also no doubt that the Quorum would believe the Wizard over the magical theorist, even if he was being backed up by Baron Tony. They would need proof, and as yet he had no idea how they were going to get it.

He slowed down to a dignified walk as he approached Stephen’s office. Each of the Grand Masters had offices in-house, as it were, within the Quorum Hall, for them to perform the various duties of their positions. His own was just down this same hall, as was Phil’s.
Ianto made a mental note to show Phil where his office was, since he was sure no one had thought to do so yet. He was going to need it, as it was just inconvenient to perform the duties of Grand Mastership from home despite being able to Teleport wherever they were needed. Guild members needed access to the Grand Masters, and having offices readily nearby was just easier on everyone and kept their private spaces from becoming high traffic zones.

Each office didn’t have any sort of receptionist; the Grand Masters had personal scribes, usually Novices who needed the job for a short while. Ianto’s last had been the Cardinal Wizard grandson of his old friend, Charles Xavier, but he’d moved on to higher studies and no longer had the time. He’d have to find a replacement soon.

Ianto was willing to bet that Daisy would take on the position for her Dad. Or, Novice Trip, since traditionally it was of the Grand Master’s own Order. Another thing to take up with Phil when everything was done, and maybe Ianto could use it as an excuse to ‘steal’ Daisy for himself.

Outside of the offices, however, there were chairs for visitors waiting for an appointment with the various Grand Masters. In a seat near Stephen’s office was a young woman, with brown hair pulled back from her face in a somewhat messy bun, dressed in shades of blues and grays, a silvery-blue dragon fidgeting by her side. From what he could see, she was a Great Wizard.

As Ianto approached, he could tell just how nervous and upset she was, and not because her dragon was. Her hands were twisted in her lap, and there were dark smudges under her eyes, which looked strained as she stared at the closed door, as if she could make herself see through the wood to what was going on within. The moment she noticed Ianto, she was on her feet, taking a step back… and then she was apologizing for startling like she had.

Ianto waved his hand, to dismiss the fumbling apology. “It’s fine, don’t worry about it. Is there something I can help you with?”

Myfanwy, who’d been following closely, moved around Ianto in order to greet the new dragon. The dragon reared away slightly, then let out a sigh and chirped at Myfanwy; Ianto could sense her surprise at the new dragon’s wariness, not used to that sort of thing from dragons she usually decided were friendly.

“Gamma,” the woman chided softly. “It’s alright.”

Gamma let Myfanwy get close enough to greet her, letting the red and gold dragon rub her cheek against the silver-blue dragon’s muzzle softly, her own chirping sounding almost apologetic, sorry at startling the other dragon.

“There’s really nothing, Grand Master,” the woman sighed. “I’m just waiting for my father. He’s in speaking with Grand Master Stephen.”

Recalling what Pepper had told him, Ianto made the leap in logic. “Mistress Betty Ross?” It had to be; Stephen had wanted to speak to her, as well, about her father’s motivations.

She looked a little confused at Ianto knowing her. “That’s right. Have we met?”

“No, but I’m familiar with a friend of yours: Dr. Bruce Banner.”

Mistress Betty’s face, which had already been pale, whitened even further. “Bruce? How do you know him?”

“I met him at Castle Ferrous. He’s working with Baron Tony Stark.”
Ianto watched as the woman practically slumped in relief. “I’m glad he’s alright.”

“Is there a reason he shouldn’t be?”

Mistress Betty’s eyes darted toward the door, as if she was expecting it to open at any moment. “It… it isn’t important, I suppose.”

The Cardinal Wizard rather thought it did matter to her, but he let it lie for the moment. “I was wondering… do you have a moment to speak with me?” As she wasn’t a member of his own order, it could have been construed that Ianto was overstepping a little, but Stephen didn’t know what the Wizard had just been informed of. And, he was getting the distinct impression that Mistress Betty wouldn’t speak if her father knew she was talking to someone.

Because, it was obvious she was afraid of him. It made Ianto wonder just what Master Thaddeus had done to her to make a daughter fear her own father.

Her eyes went to the closed door once more then, as if gathering up her courage in both hands, Mistress Betty nodded. “Can we go somewhere private?”

“My office is right down the hall.”

Ianto ushered her toward the door to his own office, content knowing that Myfanwy was urging the other dragon forward as well. Hopefully their conversation wouldn’t take too long, before Master Thaddeus noticed her gone.

Ianto’s office was pretty bare, but then he only spent time there when he needed to meet with someone from his Order or if he had Guild business; then he usually made appointments on request. There were some minor artifacts in cases along one wall, the other lined with bookshelves and the third dominated by an enormous painting, of Jack’s original team: Suzie, Toshiko, Owen, Martha, Tommy, and Ianto himself, with Myfanwy and Suzie’s dragon, Pilgrim, flanking the group next to their Wizards. Jack was in the very center of the portrait, in full armor and cloak, his smile full of life and love for the people surrounding him. The painting was one of Ianto’s favorites; his true favorite was the one in the library back at home, also of the team but that one casual, looking more like the family they’d become instead of the band of mercenaries they’d been.

There was no window in the office, which was one of the drawbacks of the room, but as often Ianto was in it, that didn’t matter so much. He waved Mistress Betty to the seat opposite the desk, then moved to the small credenza in the corner where he had a small selection of wines and liquors. “Can I get you something?” he asked, not for the first time wishing he had coffee making supplies there.

“A glass of wine would be lovely.”

He poured her one and then one for himself. He handed the long-stemmed glass to her then took his own seat behind the wooden monstrosity that had been a gift from Jack after he’d been made Grand Master. A Grand Desk for a Grand Master, his husband had laughed.

Myfanwy had managed to convince Gamma to climb up on the sofa that was just underneath the painting, and Ianto sent her pleased affection at the two of them curled up together. Gamma looked content, calmer than she’d been out in the hall. But then, a good dragon pile – even when there were only two dragons involved – always had that effect on dragons.

Mistress Betty sipped the wine, sighing. “Thank you, Grand Master.”

“You’re quite welcome.”
She settled into her chair a little more comfortably, as if being away from the vicinity of her father was doing more to relax her than the wine. “You wanted to speak to me? I’m assuming it’s about Bruce.”

Ianto nodded, glad he wasn’t going to have to explain that bit to her. “It is. Or, I should say, it’s something I heard today that has me very concerned.”

Mistress Betty sat up a little, her pale eyes suddenly intense. “Is he alright?”

“Wouldn’t he be?” Ianto got the distinct impression that something was terribly wrong, and not just what Master Thaddeus had been up to.

The laugh she gave was brittle. “No, I’m sure he would be. It’s been years since I last saw him, though. I’m not sure what you wanted to talk about him with me for.”

“As I said, it’s not so much about Dr. Banner, but something he said. Something about a project he worked on for your father.”

Ianto hadn’t been sure how Mistress Betty would react to that, but the sudden collapse wasn’t it. Her hand was trembling so hard that the Cardinal Wizard was afraid she’d drop the glass, so he was up and out of his chair in an instant, taking the wine from her and setting it onto the desk. He took her hands in his, waiting for her to speak.

“I want… I wish I could confess it all, but I can’t.” Her voice was thready with dread. “My father… he put a curse on Bruce. Told me that if I ever saw him again, or spoke to anyone about what happened, he’d activate the curse.” Her eyes were wide and pleading. “I’m sorry, but I can’t risk Bruce’s life.”

“I understand.” Ianto tried very hard to keep his anger in check. Master Thaddeus was holding Bruce Banner’s life over his own daughter’s head, in order to get her to keep her silence. It was despicable.

“Mistress Betty,” he said earnestly, “I promise you, I will do my utmost to break the curse. If I do that, would you be willing to testify to what your father’s been up to in open Quorum?”

Her face went hard in determination. “Yes, Grand Master. I would. What he’s done…it’s wrong. Bruce probably doesn’t even know about the curse. He must think…I couldn’t contact him, you see. He was courting me, and my father found out…he didn’t approve. He wanted me to marry a Great Wizard, not someone without any magic at all. Plus, Bruce didn’t want anything to do with what he was told to do, once he found out what my father had in mind…”

“Destroying both Cardinal and Void Orders by cutting their Wizards off from the Deep Ways and the Void.”

She nodded. “It’s not possible, not with what he has, but he’s still trying to accomplish it. He has Dr. Emil Blonsky, he’s a theorist like Bruce is only without the morals.” Her eyes were fierce. “He’s not nearly as brilliant as Bruce is. He’s not having any luck whatsoever, and I know he’ll never succeed.”

That was good. If there was a way to do what Master Thaddeus wanted to, it would mean the deaths of so many people…it couldn’t be allowed to happen. And, to stop it, Ianto would have to try and figure out what sort of curse was on Dr. Banner and then break it. Then, that would free Mistress Betty to testify and, if her caring about the man was any indication, then perhaps she and the magical theorist could have some sort of happy ending after all.
“I need to know one thing, and I swear he won’t know I heard it from you.”

“If I can help…”

“Has your father had any sort of contact lately with Jerald Stern, Baron Shandling.”

Mistress Betty frowned. “I don’t think so. I seem to recall the two of them had a massive row a couple of years ago. But after that…no, as far as I know, there isn’t any sort of relationship there any longer.”

Ianto took a deep breath, then let it out in relief. Perhaps Master Thaddeus wouldn’t go running to Baron Jerald after all, and they had a little time in order to get some of the Barons onside before bearding Stern in his home and demanding he turn over Pierce. They were hoping to go in tomorrow, to give Phil tonight in order to rest and be ready for the confrontation that was coming, so having a third of the Barons behind them would be the minimum they’d want.

Yes, they could go in under Guild rule, but politics really did suck and the last thing anyone wanted was the Council of Barons angry with the Guild in the Western Lands. It wasn’t the same there that it was in the United Kingdom; if such a thing happened here, then all they would need to do was apply to the current King and get permission to make the raid and the challenge. It was different in the Western Lands, so Barons Nick, Tony, and Alexander were doing their best to find the number they’d need in order to pacify the other Barons.

Before Ianto could thank her for her information, his office door was slammed open, revealing the furious Master Thaddeus Ross standing there, glaring at Ianto as if his very gaze would burn the Wizard where he stood. Even his moustache was bristling in outrage. His dragon, green and really large, peered over his master’s shoulder, gold eyes whirling suspiciously. “Elizabeth,” he barked at her, “I told you to wait outside Grand Master Stephen’s office.”

Mistress Betty jumped a little, and Gamma cringed. Myfanwy soothed the other dragon by crooning at her.

“I asked Mistress Betty if she would like a glass of wine while she waited,” Ianto said smoothly, letting go of her cold hands surreptitiously as he stood smoothly. He managed to pass her the glass of wine without Master Thaddeus noticing. “She looked a little bored sitting there.”

“Thank you, Grand Master,” she said, taking a sip of the wine then handing the glass back, making certain that Master Thaddeus saw her do it. She stood, and her dragon was at her side in a heartbeat.

Ianto could tell that Master Thaddeus was fuming, most likely because it was a Cardinal Wizard who’d extended the kindness to his daughter. He hoped her accepting wouldn’t get her into too much trouble; after all, her father was a notorious bigot and most certainly wouldn’t have wanted her to accept the offer.

“You’re quite welcome,” he answered warmly. He reached forward and kissed her hand gallantly, taking a page from Jack’s charm instruction manual.

That earned him a bright smile. “I hope you have a good day.”

“You as well.” Ianto wanted nothing more than to get her to stay, but didn’t dare until they knew exactly what sort of curse Master Thaddeus had put on Dr. Banner. The Cardinal Wizard didn’t care at all for how controlling he was over his own daughter. From just the short time he’d seen it, he was certain it was at least vocally abusive.

“Come along,” Master Thaddeus snapped. “We don’t have all day.” The utter hatred in his eyes
would have bothered Ianto if he wasn’t somewhat used to seeing it in others, specifically certain Great Wizards who thought he was wrong and unnatural.

Myfanwy hissed. Ianto wanted to do the same.

“Control your dragon,” the Master demanded.

“Control your temper,” Ianto said in retaliation. “Then, perhaps Myfanwy won’t react so badly to you.” He sincerely doubted it, because his dragon was an excellent judge of character and the Wizard completely agreed with her mental disgust.

Master Thaddeus huffed. Then, pushing his own dragon out of the way a little, he practically tugged Betty out of the office once she was close enough to grab. Myfanwy hissed at the man once more, this time her own temper getting the better of her; she came off the sofa, mantling her wings at Master Thaddeus’ treatment of his daughter.

Ianto shushed her, knowing that they didn’t dare piss the man off at the moment. They had time, and they would expose Master Thaddeus for what he was.

Right then, though, he needed to speak to Stephen, and let him know what Pepper had reported to him. They would have to do something sooner rather than later. He was fairly certain that Master Thaddeus wouldn’t physical hurt Mistress Betty, but there were other ways to injure someone that didn’t involve fists.

Besides, there was a part of him that wanted to give that young woman a happy ending. And, if that meant breaking a curse and reuniting her with a lost lover, then that was what he would do.
Chapter 64

Have a chapter or two of fluff...before things start to ramp up again.

Phil let out a breath he hadn’t even been aware he’d been holding as the familiar walls of his casting chamber appeared around him.

It wasn’t that he was tired. No, today had been a bit stressful, but not anything he couldn’t handle. He’d really been afraid of far more blowback on the whole Truth Bomb thing, but in the end it had had results and three Hydra members were now out of Void Order for good. And he’d apparently gained the respect of a few Voids, and even some Cardinals and Greats, so that was a plus and would most certainly make his job easier. He may have lost a little trust, but that he would work on regaining.

To be honest, he’d never been all that comfortable with the sort of speechmaking he’d done during Quorum. But, he’d just gotten so sick and tired of all the bullshit, and the words had just come tumbling out. One would think that, being a reformed evil Wizard, he’d have been used to monologuing, but he really hadn’t done all that much when he’d been busily attempting to burn down the world because he’d just been so pissed off at it.

The meal afterward had done a lot of calm him down. Phil had realized that he’d gathered a family around him without even knowing what he was doing, and his heart had warmed as he’d sat there, Clint by his side, with Daisy and Crystal and all of the young people who’d somehow managed to get under his skin to become something like extended adopted children…which was a little odd considering Lincoln was actually dating his elder daughter.

And then there were Steve and his friend, Sam. The Paladin had been somewhat of an icon to his younger self, even while he’d been trying his best to live down to his parents’ own opinion of him. However, Steve wasn’t the Paladin, and Phil could see him becoming a friend. Especially after he’d pulled the Wizard aside and asked what he could do to help. There really hadn’t been anything, but it had given Phil an idea that might do. He just needed to contact Marcus, which he’d do later. At the moment, his oldest friend was out visiting various Barons in order to get them onside with the Guild, in sanctioning Baron Jerald for granting sanctuary to Alexander Pierce.

Phil hoped that was going well, because no matter what happened he was going to be challenging Pierce tomorrow.

Despite enjoying himself after the Quorum, Phil didn’t completely relax until he was at home, with his family.

Clint was carrying Crystal, who was half-asleep against his shoulder. “I think it’s someone’s nap time,” he murmured, careful not to jostle her too much.

Phil’s heart swelled at the sight. His lover was truly good with her, and Phil was glad that Clint had decided to sign the adoption paperwork as well.
“I don’t wanna nap,” Crystal whined, burrowing her face in Clint’s neck.

“You might not want to,” Phil pointed out, barely hiding the smile that threatened to take over his face at just how cute this all was, “but Lockjaw certainly does.” The dragon was obviously drooping, leaning against Lola while Lucky kept nudging him back upright. “You don’t want him sleeping alone, do you?”

“No,” the little girl grumbled.

“Then let’s get you up to your room.” Clint held her gently as they all left the casting chamber for the upper levels of the Keep. “He’ll be more comfortable there.”

“I’ll go up first and get her bed ready,” Daisy volunteered, Skye riding on her shoulders as usual.

“Thanks, sweetheart,” Phil said.

With that, Daisy was up the stairs, her own excitement over events practically giving her feet wings. Phil knew that she was pleased beyond anything that he’d taken on both Trip and Wanda as Novices. Really, he was as well. He’d never thought he’d ever be teaching, but now that he’d decided to take the plunge he found himself looking forward to the challenge. Both youngsters were scheduled to come to the Keep in three days, for him to test what they knew, and what he’d need to focus on. Wanda, of course, would be starting out fresh, but he had hope she’d catch on quickly. As for Trip…Phil felt badly for him, since both of his teaching Masters had turned out to be Hydra, but he had no idea just how much effort Master Jasper had put into his lessons.

Thinking about it, he might have gained a few unofficial students as well.

Phil thought his life was about to become even more interesting.

He was looking forward to it, which really surprised him.

Unfortunately, he was going to have to deal with Hydra first. Then, perhaps, he could get his life back, even though it had changed so much in just last several days.

It took no time at all getting Crystal settled. Daisy had the bedsheets pulled down, and she removed her sister’s shoes before allowing Phil to tuck her in. Lockjaw crawled in beside her, and both were asleep in only a few heartbeats.

“She’s had a very busy day,” Clint murmured, as Phil pulled the bedroom door closed, leaving it cracked just enough so, if she awoke, Crystal wouldn’t feel closed in, and with the acoustics in the Keep chances were they would hear her if she called out.

That didn’t stop him from casting a couple of charms; one that would let him know when she did wake, and another for Protection, although it was more for his peace of mind than anything else, since Shield Keep was perfectly safe.

“We all have,” Phil admitted.

“Clint,” Daisy enthused, “you should’ve seen Dad in Quorum! He gave this speech that had so many people on their feet…it was awesome.”

The Wizard felt himself blushing a little. “It hadn’t been my intention.” He’d been angry at the time, so being “awesome” hadn’t been on the agenda. He could only hope at the time that the other Wizards would listen. He hadn’t expected the ovation that he’d received.
She tucked her hand around his bicep. “Still…awesome. You had every single one of my friends wishing you were their Dad.”

Clint laughed. “He keeps this up, and he’ll end up adopting them despite the fact they have their own families.”

Phil rolled his eyes. “At this point, two is enough.” He reached over and ruffled Daisy’s hair.

“But you haven’t ruled out more later,” she teased right back.

Which was true; he hadn’t.

But then, with the life Phil was facing, it would be idiotic to assume there would be no more children in his future. He knew he would mourn each and every one of them when the time came, but he couldn’t not see himself raising more.

Especially if it was raising them with Clint.

“I need to contact your Uncle Nick for Steve,” he changed the subject. “I’m thinking he might be a good fit for his vacant Knights’ Commander position.”

Marcus’ last Knights’ Commander, Sir Felix Blake, had been grievously wounded in a tragic accident and had had to resign from the post. He’d been one of the knights who had backed Marcus when he’d taken over Triskelia from the former Baron, a right bastard who’d practically drained the Barony dry and had been on a crusade of terror among the populace. Phil had liked Sir Felix, and he’d been a very effective Knights’ Commander, so it was a shame he’d had to leave. It had been six months, and Marcus still hadn’t found anyone to replace him. He thought that, quite possibly, Steve would fit the bill nicely.

Daisy was nodding. “It seems Steve gets bored easily when he doesn’t have a crusade to fight.”

“Well,” Clint said, as the three of them left the upper floor, walking down the staircase, their dragons taking flight down the wide opening, “the last thing Steve recalls is fighting in a war. And, with me officially retiring from Nick’s service, Nat will need a new partner.”

Phil laughed. “You think he can keep up with her?”

“Not really. But then, I could hardly keep up with her myself, and I was her partner for years.”

He tried to imagine Steve trailing along behind Natasha, and laughed some more.

They reached the ground floor, where their dragons were waiting; except for Skye, who’d ridden down on Daisy’s shoulders. “Dad,” she turned to him, “do you really have to face Pierce?” Her previous humor was gone, replaced by worry.

“Yes, I do.” He didn’t want to go into the politics of the situation; Gods, he hated politics, which meant he now had to play at them. “Pierce needs to be stopped, and as the current Grand Master it’s my responsibility to do just that. It’s the only way I can really cement my place in the position.”

She chewed her lip. “It’s just…the last time you went up against a crazy Wizard, you ended up getting stabbed in the back and woke up in a morgue.”

Daisy had every right to be concerned, because she was correct. However, there were some differences in this time, and when he faced down Loki. “I was so arrogant back then,” he explained. “I didn’t even bother to learn anything about Loki. I was more interested in showing
how powerful I was, by kicking the would-be invader out of my territory. That arrogance and pride was what got me killed, Daisy. I didn’t take into consideration a lot of things, including Loki’s power over illusion.”

He didn’t add that he’d been motivated by the fact that that Asgardian bastard had taken Clint, but even back then he hadn’t really believed he deserved to be happy. He’d really hidden that motivation down deep, but he couldn’t hide from it any longer. Loki had magicked Clint into following him, and the Dark One had been furious that Loki had taken something that he had considered his.

“With Pierce,” he continued, “I know what he’s capable of. Ianto and Stephen have briefed me on everything they know about him, plus I’ve met the man and gotten the measure of his magic. And, if he’s powerful enough to warp a Void Point… I know I have to be wary of whatever tricks he might decide to play.” He put his hands on his daughter’s shoulders. “I will take everything I know into consideration when I face him. I’m not the same man I was back then, when I faced Loki.”

“No, you’re not,” she insisted. “You’re now my Dad, and I don’t want anything to happen to you.” Phil gathered her up into an embrace. “I will always do my very best to come home.”

He had so much more to come home to, now.

“Besides,” Clint spoke up, “he won’t be alone.”

“This is true.” He pushed her away from him enough to look into her eyes. “Ianto and Stephen will be with me, as witnesses for the Quorum. Your Uncle Nick will be, too, as well as whoever from the Council of Barons decide to come along. And I have Clint to watch my back.”

“As always,” Clint affirmed, his own hand resting on Phil’s shoulder, offering his support. “I might not have been around for the last eleven years – “

“Which wasn’t your fault,” Daisy exclaimed.

Well, she wasn’t wrong there.

“– but I’ll be here until the day I die.”

The Wizard wanted to beg him not to put it that way, but he couldn’t. Because Clint was right. Unless something happened between them, the Elf would indeed be with Phil until his lover’s end. It wasn’t something he even wanted to consider, not ever if he could avoid it.

“And we won’t be talking about fault,” Clint chided lightly. “It was in the past. We have the present, and the future to look forward to.”

“You’re right.” She gave Clint a smile over Phil’s shoulder. “And I’m glad you’re here. It’s good to know you’re going to be sticking around, and that you adopted Crystal, too. I do kinda wish you’d been around to adopt me, too…”

“He still could,” Phil put in, trying very hard not to feel guilty about his past actions where Clint was concerned.

He really should have gotten in touch much sooner. However, the Wizard had believed he’d put his past to rest, to start over with his daughter and his new life. That had been a mistake, and it had taken Hydra trying to get him into their cabal to make Phil face that.
Phil was ready for that new start.

Daisy’s eyes widened. “Could we? I mean, it’s up to Clint, of course…and we really don’t know each other all that well yet…” She was babbling, which was a sure sign of her excitement.

He couldn’t see Clint’s face, but he could imagine his surprise at the notion. “That’s up to him.” He turned, then, to see if he was right about his lover’s expression.

And, he was.

Clint’s own eyes were stunned, but in a pleasant way. Daisy was nearly an adult, so it would be different from Crystal’s adoption, but Phil thought it would be fairly simple to add his archer’s name to the adoption papers.

That was, if he wanted to. It seemed like Daisy was amenable to the idea.

The Elf rubbed the back of his neck self-consciously. “Yeah, we don’t know each other all that well, yet. But I’m planning on being around for as close to forever as I can give, and I’d be honored to be your other Dad.”

With that, Daisy squealed happily and launched herself into Clint’s arms, the archer barely catching her in time to keep Skye firmly on her shoulders. He was laughing, hugging her fiercely, but there was something in his eyes that communicated to Phil that he’d believed he’d never have this sort of thing, and just how grateful he was that he did.

Lucky wanted to get into the hugging act, and he caromed into their legs, almost knocking both of them off their feet. Clint craned his neck to stare down at this dragon, “Aw, Lucky…no,” spilling from his lips along with his laughter.

Lola leaned against Phil’s side, and he rested his hand on her head, his heart full. This was something he’d once thought he’d never have: a family, and a life without anger and pain.

Now this…this was definitely worth coming home for.
Daisy was excited about Clint officially adopting her.

Alright, yes…they really didn’t know each other all that well yet. But, he made her Dad happy, and that was what was important. She loved him just for that alone, because growing up with Phil Coulson as her father had been an experience, he’d loved her so very much but she hadn’t been able to miss how lonely he’d been at times. She’d done her best to get him through it, and she liked to think she did a really good job, but there had been something missing in his life and she hadn’t known what it was.

Turned out, it had been Clint Barton that had been missing.

Daisy couldn’t be happier to have him around. And, to be honest, maybe it was a little too soon to be talking about that sort of thing. But, he’d been pleased to adopt Crystal, so couldn’t that apply to her as well?

Or, maybe he didn’t want to have a grown daughter?

He’d accepted, though.

Daisy didn’t know how she’d gotten so lucky. She just had to hug him for it.

Lucky, as if summoned by her very thought, slammed into them, and it was only Clint’s natural dexterity that kept them on their feet.

Dad was looking on proudly, a little bemused by the whole thing. Lola was making happy chirping noises, as was Skye from her usual place on the young woman’s shoulders. “I think this calls for a celebration,” Dad said.

“It’s about damned time,” Melinda said, sounding quite pleased. Her expression matched her tone, and Daisy couldn’t help but notice the tiny smile that decorated her usual taciturn face. She must have heard what they’d been talking about, which wasn’t that much of a surprise. Melinda was as familiar with the secret ways around the Keep as Daisy herself was, and wasn’t afraid of eavesdropping when the occasion demanded it.

Andrew was standing just behind her, and Daisy was still getting used to him being around. Yes, he’d been around before, but he’d been one for the shadows while he’d been cursed so she hadn’t really seen much of him. The curse had rasped against her magical senses horribly, and she felt that he might have realized that, and had kept to himself.

Now, though, he was much more visible, and it was like having a new person around. Only when he spoke was it obvious that he was Andrew Garner, Melinda’s husband, and he’d already lived there for years with the rest of them.
Now, he also had a smile on his handsome features. He had to have been just as aware as Daisy had been, as well as Melinda, who’d known for a long time that her Dad was feeling lonely despite having his family with him. She knew that Dad had tried to date before, but things hadn’t worked out with Audrey. Which, while Daisy had liked Audrey, she was glad they hadn’t gotten together, because that meant when Clint had finally come back into Dad’s life, he’d been free to be with the man he’d obviously loved for a long time.

Hydra making their move was been horrible, but it had caused a lot of good things to happen. That didn’t mean she wanted to not kick their asses, though.

“I suppose it’s a good thing I made cake today,” Andrew chuckled.

Clint perked up at that; Daisy snickered because she could have sworn his ears twitched. “Cake?”

“Cake,” Andrew confirmed.

“It was going to be for Crystal’s official adoption,” Melinda added, “but we could certainly cut it now…”

“Let’s wait,” Daisy said. “I don’t want to usurp Crystal’s party.”

“It can be for both of you.” Dad hugged her, one-armed, tucking her against him. Daisy loved his hugs, despite the fact that their magic was supposed to be opposed to each other. Sure, it was obvious he was different from her, but that didn’t matter one bit. It was comforting to know he was there for her.

“That’s a good idea,” Clint replied. “We can wait until Crystal wakes up.”

“You actually got her to take a nap?” Melinda raised a single eyebrow in surprise.

Dad nodded. “She’s had a rough day. And mine isn’t over yet.” He kissed Daisy on the top of her head. “I need to contact the school and ask them to send along Trip’s records to me, so I can see just what sort of work he’s been doing before I meet with him in a couple of days.”

Melinda didn’t say anything, she simply waited.

So, Dad explained about Trip’s teaching Master being Hydra, and how he’d told Trip he’d take him on as a Novice. Daisy hadn’t believed her ears when he’d made the offer, but she couldn’t have been more pleased. Dad would be good for Trip; there were times when she had to wonder just what Master Jasper had been teaching her friend, but she hadn’t wanted to say anything. Master Jasper had been really nice, ready to explain things to anyone who’d asked. She still remembered the time he’d actually booped her on the nose after telling her about being a Void and living in Gateway, which was just one massive would-be Cardinal Point and should have been uncomfortable for him to live on. For him to have been Hydra seemed impossible. Daisy never would have guessed that outcome in a million years.

Her Dad was slowly coming out of his shell. He’d been content to stay at home, only leaving for important Quorum days or when Pepper asked to see him. He’d dated Audrey, of course, but that hadn’t gone anywhere, and the young woman thought at the time that it had had more to do with her Dad’s natural tendency to be a hermit than any lack of chemistry between the two of them.

No, Daisy understood now, they hadn’t had any chemistry whatsoever, now that she’d seen how Dad was with Clint. What they had was true chemistry.

“You also need to call Uncle Nick,” she reminded him. Personally, she’d liked Sir Felix, but thought
her Dad was onto something with Steve. He’d been a leader back during the Century War, and could be one again if just on a smaller scale. She’d genuinely liked Steve, now having officially met him, as well as his friend, Sam. She hoped everything would work out with Sir James, because it would be a shame if it didn’t.

“I’m going to suggest that he talk to Steve Rogers about the empty Knights’ Commander position,” Dad said into Melinda’s pointed silence. “He needs a purpose now that he’s not at war any longer.”

“That makes sense,” Andrew agreed. “It will give him some way to be useful, at the same time learning of this new time he’s found himself in.”

“Got to admit that I like Sam,” Clint said. “He’s a good guy with a solid head on his shoulders.”

Andrew looked pleased. “I thought he might be good for Sir Steven. I’ll have to contact him, see how he’s handling things. Sounds as if he has everything under control.”

“And Dad,” Daisy asked, “I’d like to have my friends over after you kick Pierce’s ass. We need to celebrate that, too.”

She might have been worried about him, but she also had faith in him to take down Pierce. Her Dad was really powerful; Daisy knew it, and it had been confirmed by people who would also know. Still, he’d need to be careful. She didn’t doubt that Pierce would try to use all the dirty tricks in the book to come out on top. Pierce would be furious at Dad for wrecking Hydra’s plans.

Besides, she also trusted the people who’d be going with him. Especially Clint, who’d been dead serious about watching Dad’s back. Daisy doubted that anyone would get close, not with Clint on guard against that sort of thing.

Daisy wished she could go with them as well, but knew they’d never let her. Even though she’d been wanting to get back at Baron Jerald Stern for trying to stop Dad from adopting her in the first place. If he’d been successful, Daisy would have just run away again from whatever orphanage he’d placed her in, and she would have tracked Dad down until she’d found him. It might have been illegal, but the young woman would have done anything to get back to the man who’d found her in that alley and who she’d had an instant connection with.

Nothing would have been able to keep her away. And she was positive Dad had known that, back then. Also Uncle Nick, who’d fought for them to be together. He could have easily damaged whatever tiny gains he’d made with the Council of Barons for backing the adoption, and yet he’d done it anyway. He’d come out on top and had really solidified his position with the Council, so in the end Uncle Nick had come up smelling like fresh flowers.

Uncle Nick was good at that sort of thing, she’d noticed.

“I don’t see a problem with that,” Dad said easily. “However, you’re assuming I’m going to come out as the winner of our confrontation.”

“You will,” she said, putting every little bit of confidence she was feeling into her voice. “As you said, you won’t be alone, and you know your enemy.”

She didn’t pretend to understand Guild politics, but even she knew that it had a lot to do with what her Dad had to do. He needed to solidify his own position as Grand Master of Voids if he expected to keep doing the job, and it seemed that he did, in fact, want to. That in itself was a huge turnaround, and she couldn’t help but be proud and happy that her Dad was finally stepping out into the light in order to help people, using his own experience as a guide.
His early life had been bad and, in a lot of ways, worse than Daisy’s own had been. At least the caretakers she’d been given to had pretended to want to do right by her. Dad’s own parents had gone from loving to condemning in the span of one magical Test.

It wasn’t fair.

It made her want to track them down and give them a piece of her mind. And then probably quake their house apart.

She did have to wonder, though, how her grandparents would have reacted to know that the son they’d done their best to ruin was now Grand Master of Voids.

Although, she did also have to wonder just how far he would have gone if not for that shitty past. For one thing, he never would have found her if he hadn’t gone the route of the Dark One. He never would have met Uncle Nick, or Clint, or Melinda. He wouldn’t now be Void Champion, which was what she seemed to recall him saying back in that alley, facing down John Garrett. So much would have been different, and honestly now that she’d thought about it, it wasn’t worth really thinking about at all. Not that she believed she wouldn’t again at some point, but for now Daisy decided to drop the notion completely in favor of enjoying what she had now.

Dad’s arm tightened about her, and she leaned into his warmth. Clint was grinning, and she returned it, once again happy that he’d agreed to be her Dad as well.

Oh, wait…she couldn’t call him Dad, too. That would be too confusing. And Daddy, like Crystal used, was just a tad bit immature for teenaged Daisy.

She’d have to come up with something else…
Pepper was surprised to see Ianto on her doorstep, flanked by Jack and Toshiko, Myfanwy at his feet, looking as grave as she’d ever seen her former teaching Master look.

Plus, both Jack and Toshiko were armed and armored, and Ianto was still in his official robes. Those facts were even more worrying.

But the most worrying part of all was the fact that Ianto had seemingly decided that Teleporting to the front door was the way to go in this situation, instead of appearing in her casting chamber, despite the standing invitation for him to do so. So, this meant the visit was official, that he was there as Grand Master of her Order instead of as her friend and mentor.

Her heartbeat ratcheted upward. She was alone in the Castle, except for Steve, who’d arrived back just a short while ago; Bruce, who was in his room since Tony was gone off on Council business; and Jarvis and Ana, who were going about their duties. She knew it wasn’t something she’d done, knew that for a fact, so it had to have something to do with any of the other residents of Castle Ferrous.

There was only one thing she could do.

Pepper bowed. “Grand Master.”

Ianto’s eyes pinched at the corners, but he returned the bow. “Mistress Pepper.”

Well, perhaps it wasn’t so bad, if he was calling her ‘Pepper’ and not ‘Virginia’.

She stepped aside to let them enter. “Welcome to Castle Ferrous. To what do I owe the honor of this visit?”

At that, Ianto pinched the bridge of his nose. “I can’t…Pepper, it’s not like that. So stop. Please?”

Pepper instantly relaxed. “Well, you three show up at my door looking all official, what am I supposed to think?”

“‘You’re supposed to think that I haven’t had a chance to get home and change out of my robes yet. You’re supposed to think that I wouldn’t just appear in your casting chamber without notice, which I didn’t take the time to send. You’re supposed to think that Jack and Tosh are overprotective arses who apparently don’t think I can make this sort of call on my own.”

Jack held up his hands in denial. “We don’t even know what we’re dealing with, and it doesn’t hurt to be prepared.”

“I’m with Jack on that,” Toshiko agreed, exasperated. “And, Ianto, you should know by now that neither of us are about to let you waltz into an unknown situation without any back-up.”

“But there is a problem.” Pepper grew worried once more, the relief she’d felt at Ianto’s response to her formality fading away.

Ianto nodded. “I’m afraid so. Is Dr. Banner in residence?”

“Bruce? Yes, he is.” She wondered just what was wrong, that was bringing Ianto out to Ferrous
without any notice. “He’s in his room at the moment.”

“Can you take me there? I’ll explain it all when we’re together. I’d rather do this the once.”

Now, this truly was worrying.

Pepper had to wonder what Bruce had done as she led them deeper into the Castle, up toward the room that had been Bruce’s ever since his arrival. Tony had originally asked him to consult on the Paladin, but the magical theorist had ended up staying, to help out on various projects that her husband had his fingers in. It was proving to be a profitable partnership, if she was being honest, and she truly liked Bruce. He was quiet and self-effacing, with a rather sarcastic sense of humor that had had Pepper snorting indelicately many times over the last several days. She really hoped this wasn’t anything serious, because she didn’t want to be the one to inform Tony that Bruce was in trouble with the Guild.

When they arrived at the door, Pepper knocked softly. After hearing Bruce tell her to come in, she opened the door, to find their guest sitting at the desk, writing something on a long piece of parchment; from what she could see, it was some sort of spell diagram.

He smiled at her. “What can I do…” his voice faded out into confusion when he noticed Ianto standing there; his eyebrows went up the moment he saw a visibly armed Jack and Toshiko in the doorway. “Alright…something’s going on, apparently.”

“I’m afraid so, Dr. Banner,” Ianto replied. He took a seat on the bed, Myfanwy jumping up beside him. Happy, who usually joined the older dragon wherever Myfanwy landed, remained on Pepper’s shoulders, and she could sense her companion’s confusion through their mental bond.

Which was fine, because Pepper was feeling the exact same way as her dragon.

Jack took up a position by the door, while Toshiko went to stand by the large window. Bruce’s eyes darted toward them both, alarm settling in their brown depths, but he turned back to Ianto as if figuring out he was the one with the answers. Pepper moved behind Bruce’s chair, showing her support of him; he didn’t look at her, but she could tell he was relieved she was on his side.

Ianto began. “I’m sure you know by now the trouble that Master Thaddeus Ross has been causing…”

“I do,” Bruce answered warily.

Oh, so this is about what Bruce had explained earlier. Pepper relaxed a little, knowing it wasn’t going to be as bad as all that.

“You should know, we find the allegations against him compelling. So compelling, in fact, that I ended up speaking with Mistress Betty, his daughter.”

Bruce stiffened at that, but didn’t say anything. Pepper rested a hand on his shoulder, knowing how Bruce felt about Betty, and how hurt he was that she’d never contacted him. He’d loved her, and had tried to get her to come with him when he’d left Master Thaddeus’ employ, but she’d stayed with her father for reasons Bruce hadn’t known.

Pepper thought they were about to find out, and it wasn’t something that Ianto had liked. Not if it had Jack and Toshiko backing him up in this.

“What she told me…” Ianto sighed. “I went straight to Stephen, and we’ve decided we needed to take action against the man, but…there’s a problem we have to find a way to fix, first.”
“It’s me,” Bruce’s tone was flat. “I’m the problem.”

“You are, but not in the way you’re thinking, Dr. Banner. Mistress Betty explained to me that her father, in order to keep her quiet on what he was doing and to make sure she stayed away from you, put a curse on you, one that he could activate remotely. Mistress Betty has been going along with her father in order to keep you safe.”

Pepper gasped. That…actually made sense to her, in what she’d been able to sense about Bruce from the moment she’d met him.

There had always been a slight tingle of magic about him, but she’d assumed it was because he had a magical relative, and he’d inherited that magic just enough to ping her senses, but not enough for him to be a Wizard. However, if what she’d been feeling was some sort of curse…

Bruce slumped down in his chair, and Pepper could have sworn it was in relief. “I’d…always wondered what had kept Betty away,” he admitted. “Now I know…because her father was holding my life over her head.”

Ianto gave him an encouraging smile. “Now that we know what’s going on, we can work on whatever curse Master Thaddeus has decided to cast upon you. That’s why I’m here.”

“Ianto is the best curse breaker there is,” Pepper said, encouragingly. “If there’s a way to get this removed, he can do it.”

A curse was bad enough. Pepper had seen quite a few of them in her time. There was even the case of a wife getting a hold of a cut-rate curse from some sort of untrained witch and using it on her husband; that has caused such a mess that it had taken Ianto a solid week to set right.

Hells, there was Andrew Garner, who’d been cursed by complete accident; Pepper had never met the man before, but she’d known about him, and it had taken Ianto getting in there to undo the curse.

But this…this was pretty bad. Cursing someone and then threatening to activate that curse just to keep your daughter under your thumb…Pepper really hoped Stephen would do his worst to Master Thaddeus when they removed this from over Betty Ross’ head.

“I suppose I should have said something sooner,” Bruce confessed, “but I didn’t want Betty to be hurt. I had no idea her own father was blackmailing her like that.”

Ianto shrugged. “Love makes us do things we wouldn’t ordinarily do. However, I need to get a closer look at that curse to see what Ross had in mind for you.”

It didn’t escape Pepper’s notice that Ianto had stopped calling him ‘Master Thaddeus’. Not a surprise, that.

This did also explain why both Jack and Toshiko were effectively standing guard. They had no idea what this curse entailed, and neither of them were about to risk Ianto getting hurt. They would watch out for the curse taking effect, and do their best to protect Ianto from anything happening to him while he worked to help Bruce.

Pepper, herself, would stay where she was, in order to be able to observe the magic being used. She felt she had a good enough chance in stopping things before they could occur, if it all started to go wrong. Ianto might have truly been the best curse breaker there was, but that didn’t mean hells could break out at any time.

“What do I need to do?” the magical theorist asked.
The Grand Master stood, then came to kneel in front of Bruce, graceful in his official robes. “Let me have your hands, please.”

Bruce did as Ianto bid, holding his hands out for him to take. Pepper watched as Ianto’s eyes changed to their magical aspect, the black and gold ellipses that were the unique, outward sign of his power.

The magic built around them, invisible to anyone not a Wizard. Pepper had once asked Jack if he could see it, with so much of the Deep Ways within him, but he claimed not to be able to, although he could certainly feel it when Ianto’s magic was in play.

It was as if standing in the midst of a maelstrom, although one under the strictest control. The Deep Ways spun about them; Bruce in his chair, Ianto knelt in front of him, and Pepper at the back. She took a deep breath, as always in awe of her former teaching Master’s adept mastery over the Deep Ways, conducting the power like a true maestro, bringing it to bear in his examination of the cursed man before him.

Releasing one of Bruce’s hands, Ianto began to make sigils in the air, and with her own magical sight Pepper could see the runes he was drawing, as well as a strange, green vapor that seemed to be oozing from the magical theorist.

Suddenly, Bruce’s back arched, and he gasped in pain. The green vapor drew back, and Pepper could have sworn she heard it roaring in anger at Ianto’s manipulation of it.

And then, as she watched, he began to slowly pick it apart.

Pepper could identify the components of the curse. Mindlessness, Forgetfulness, Berserk, and Chaos, all twisted around and made into something horrific, simply because Bruce had dared to love Master Thaddeus’ daughter.

The remote trigger was something else, and she could tell that it was the only part of the actual curse that was done away with easily. The rest was giving him a bit of a fit, but then Ianto was dealing with Great magic, and not the Deep Ways; although he could work to remove all sorts of curses, certain forms of magic did give him a little trouble. Strangely, Ianto had the least trouble with Void magic, despite it being his opposite. He’d once told her the story of the first spell he’d picked apart: a Disintegration spell, and an incredibly nasty one at that, as well as incredibly old. She’d been impressed as a young Novice; she was even more impressed as a Master at just what Ianto could accomplish.

Ianto twined his fingers through the green mist, dexterously twisting it around, examining it minutely. “This is such a ham-fisted attempt at a curse…no finesse at all. But, at least Ross can’t set it off any longer. I’ve taken care of that much.”

“What about the rest?” Pepper wanted to know.

“Just this much is causing Dr. Banner quite a lot of pain. I’m going to pick apart as much as I can, and the rest will have to wait until he regains his strength.”

Pepper could tell Bruce was becoming exhausted, the pain eating away at his calm. His body was shivering under her hands, soft moans escaping his lips as Ianto worked. Master Thaddeus had woven the curse through Bruce’s very being, and that sort of thing was notoriously difficult to remove. Ianto was honestly the best, but even he could only do so much without causing a person a critical amount of distress, both physical and mental.
“Let me take care of two parts of the curse for today,” Ianto was grinding his teeth in effort. “I have… there, do you see it?”

Pepper did. Woven around his fingers were two of the curse’s components: the Mindlessness and Forgetfulness threads, pulsing sickly in Pepper’s magical vision. “Yes, I do.”

With a deep exhale, Ianto blew onto the two strands and they faded out of sight. As if losing those two strings cut something within him, Bruce slumped backward, his own breathing harsh in the room.

“Doctor Banner,” Ianto called softly. “Your strength was drained along with the spells. We’re going to have to wait to take care of the rest until after you’ve slept awhile and regained some of your strength.”

“I understand.” Bruce’s voice was completely wrecked. “I wish you could have gotten it all.”

“As do I.” Ianto stood, then helped Bruce to his feet.

Rushing to help, Jack grasped Bruce’s elbow, and together he and Ianto maneuvered Bruce onto the bed. They carefully stripped him of shoes, socks, jacket, and trousers, leaving him in his underthings, then pulled the comforter up over him.

Ianto touched Bruce’s forehead lightly, and the scent of lavender filled the air as the Sleep spell sent the man into slumber. “Let’s leave him to rest.”

Pepper ushered them all out, making a mental note to have Ana prepare Bruce something to eat, to be ready for when he did awaken. The strength of Ianto’s spell told her it wouldn’t be for hours yet. “I’ll keep an eye on him,” she promised once they were in the hallway, the door closed behind them.

“Call me if there are any ill effects.”

“I will.”

“What would the curse have done?” Jack demanded.

Ianto rubbed his forehead tiredly; Myfanwy, sensing her Wizard’s distress, leaned against him in support. “It would have turned him into a mindless monster of unimaginable destructive power. I managed to deactivate the trigger, so Ross can’t make good on his threat to Mistress Betty. But I was only able to get two parts of the curse removed. I’ll have to get the rest later.”

“Which two parts?” Toshiko asked, leaning on her longbow.

“The Mindlessness and Forgetfulness spells. Which means if, Gods’ forbid, something should end up triggering the rest of the curse, Bruce will have at least some form of control over his actions.”

“Is it likely that the curse could be triggered?” the Elf asked worriedly.

“Very little,” the Grand Master assured her. “And it certainly won’t be because of Ross. That means Stephen can move on Ross, and Mistress Betty can testify against her father.”

“How likely is that?” Pepper wanted to know. They really needed to get rid of Master Thaddeus, especially after what he’d planned to do to the Cardinals and the Voids. He might not have been successful, but Pepper doubted that would keep him from making the attempt once more.

“She’s told me that she would, if she could be certain her father couldn’t use the curse against Dr.
Banner. I’ll have Stephen contact her; it will draw less attention to what we’ve done, until we can get her testimony and that of Dr. Banner on the record.”

As far as Pepper was concerned, the sooner they took Master Thaddeus out of play, the quicker they could work on changing the minds of his sycophants as to the general unnaturalness of the Voids and Cardinals. The last thing any of them needed was for this to become an issue ever again.

And, with both Ianto and Phil as Grand Masters for the foreseeable future, Pepper felt that would be very unlikely indeed.
Chapter 67

Clint awoke to the feeling that he was being watched.

“That’s not creepy at all,” he grumbled, twisting in bed until he faced Phil, who was smiling at him.

“I can’t help it if you’re beautiful when you sleep,” his lover said softly. His eyes, all blue with those specks of black in them, were shining, and it was easy to see all the love he was feeling.

Clint felt the tips of his pointed ears warm. “Men aren’t beautiful.”

“Gorgeous, then.”

“Alright, I suppose I can accept that.”

“Brat,” Phil accused fondly.

The archer wriggled forward just enough to be able to kiss him. There was morning breath involved, but it was still a fantastic kiss.

“You need to clean your teeth,” Phil sighed.

“Sweet talker.”

With a light push, Clint had Phil on his back, settling down on his lover’s chest, his fingers running through the fine chest hair over the nearly invisible line where Loki’s spear had penetrated. No one would have ever guessed that had been a death-blown, but the Void had healed it easily. There was a matching one on Phil’s back, but it didn’t draw Clint’s attention like this one did.

It was directly over his heart.

He stopped stroking, bringing his hand to rest flat on one defined pectoral muscle, Clint settling his chin on it and staring up at Phil. Phil wasn’t at quite the right angle to look down, but he wrapped an arm around Clint and pulled him close.

They lay there for a while, just enjoying their closeness. Clint was more content that he’d ever thought he’d be. He’d firmly believed that he’d always be alone, travelling with Natasha and kicking random ass around the Western Lands on behalf of Nick and for his own personal enjoyment. To have this, to be settled with the man he’d loved and thought dead, to share one daughter with him and another soon…it wasn’t even something he’d ever dreamed of. But, now that he had it, he didn’t want to ever give it up.

“You’re thinking too hard,” Phil teased.

After everything that had happened… “I’m just lucky, that’s all.”

“I think I’m the lucky one.”

“But I have the actual dragon named Lucky.” Who had been shut out of the bedroom, along with Lola. It was hard to have sex with two dragons in the room; they kept wanting to jump all over them.
Lucky wanted to do the jumping. Lola just basked in the glow of affection that was coming from her Wizard.

Phil’s chuckle shifted Clint’s head, and he couldn’t help but smile at that. “True.”

They were silent for a little while longer. Clint found himself getting drowsy, and was dozing until Phil shifted a little, sighing as he made to get up.

“And where do you think you’re going?” the archer demanded sleepily, refusing to be moved.

“Some of us have to visit the privy.”

“Sure, okay.” Clint rolled off, huffing in disgust even as he was watching his lover cross the room toward the door near the wardrobe. He couldn’t help the smirk; Phil had such a fine ass.

The rest of him wasn’t bad, either.

Clint really was one lucky bastard.

He was gone a fairly long time, which meant he’d most likely taken a bath and Clint had lost the chance to join him by being lazy and not wanting to move from the nice warm bed. Clint pouted as Phil came from the bath, towel wrapped around his waist, then headed toward the wardrobe to begin picking out clothes for the day. “Aw, Phil,” Clint whined, throwing off the sheets and putting himself on display, the better to tempt his lover back to bed.

Phil turned and gave him a fond smile. “You have no idea just how tempted I am.”

“Then why don’t you join me for a quick one before we have to leave?” He let his fingers trail down his chest, to rest just above the trail of hair that led to his groin.

“Do you have any idea what time it is?” It was a change of subject, and it didn’t fool Clint one bit. He could tell just how aroused his lover was, just from how blown his pupils were.

“Time to get in one more round before we have to face the day?” Clint answered hopefully.

Phil sighed in disappointment. “We have to meet up with the others at Triskelia Castle in about an hour, so I’m afraid we’ll have to put that on hold until later.”

Clint didn’t want to. He wanted to make love to Phil one more time, before they had to go and face down Alexander Pierce. Hells, he didn’t want Phil to have to face the man at all, but knew he had to. This whole thing needed to end and, while Catherine and Ruby Hale were still out there, he was positive it would be only a matter of time before they were caught. Taking Pierce out of play would cripple Hydra, and that was the goal.

He could understand Daisy’s concerns yesterday, though. She’d seen Phil just after his first near-death, and probably knew the details of what had happened better than Clint himself did. No, there was no ‘probably’ about it; the Elf only had the story second-hand, while Daisy had been there and had witnessed how Phil had looked from just after the resurrection. He was her father, after all, and the last thing she wanted to do was lose him.

Still, Clint believed that Phil had spoken the truth, and wasn’t about to make the same mistakes with Pierce that he had with Loki. For one thing, there would be plenty of people there as back-up, including Clint himself. Also, Phil had changed quite a bit since then; gone was the anger and arrogance that had ruled so many of his actions, and had made him reckless in a way that simply didn’t apply anymore. Oh, sure…Clint had thought the whole ‘going uncover in Hydra’ thing pretty
far up there on the list of *Stupid Stuff Phil Shouldn’t Be Doing*, but that had been Phil backed into a corner, needing to keep his secret and to make sure Daisy was safe. It didn’t help that Hydra had needed to be stopped, and that they’d known who he really was. The main problem with the plan had been that Phil had already been what Hydra had wanted to create, and he hadn’t even known it at the time.

Now, however, that secret was out, and Hydra had ways of at least tracking Daisy. She would never be truly safe until Hydra was stopped, and that meant going after Pierce and putting an end to whatever plans the asshole had put into action.

Clint had meant what he’d said: he’d watch Phil’s back, no matter what. There was no way he was going to lose him again, not after finding him once more.

Not that he thought he would. Because Clint had faith that the Void knew what it was doing when it had selected Phil, and would also be watching out for its Champion, as the Queen of Air and Fire had called Phil…and Phil had called himself, back in that alley before he’d sucked the Void right out of Garrett. That had to mean something, didn’t it? He was pretty sure it did.

Sighing, Clint climbed out of bed and headed into the bath himself. Quickly using the privy and then taking a very unsatisfying bath, he joined Phil in getting ready for the day. He watched as Phil put on the robes he’d taken to wearing as Grand Master: all in deep blue, with silver and gold runes along the cuffs of the long tunic. It could have looked downright funereal on anyone else; on Phil it made him look strong and powerful.

Damn it, it was so tempting for Clint to rip those robes right off and screw Phil into the mattress, and then let Phil do the same thing to him…

“I see what you’re thinking,” Phil teased as he settled his magical bracer onto his left arm, “and you can cut that out right now.”

Clint pouted. “I can’t help it if you’re dead sexy in those robes.”

Phil smirked but didn’t answer. Instead, he continued getting ready, and Clint had no choice but to join him, accepting the rather official-looking clothes that the Wizard handed to him.

Their dragons were waiting outside, in the sitting room. Lola made an approving sound at the sight of her Wizard, while Lucky generally behaved like he hadn’t seen Clint in years and demanded attention, which the archer was glad to give. “Who’s a good dragon?” he crooned, kneeling and roughly rubbing Lucky’s head. “Yes, you’re a good dragon…”

Lucky ate it up, adoring the attention, but Clint could tell he was hungry from the dragon’s emotions. Which was fine, because Clint was now equally as hungry.

Breakfast was waiting for them in the kitchen, courtesy of Andrew. So were Daisy and Crystal, both finishing up their bowls of oatmeal, Crystal’s loaded with berries and Daisy’s with lots of cream. Both their dragons were curled up at their feet, but Skye and Lockjaw looked intensely interested in what Phil pulled from the cold box for Lola and Lucky.

“Gluttons,” Daisy snorted, “the pair of you.”

Clint didn’t say that, to be fair, Lockjaw was really underweight from everything he’d been through, so he could cut the little dragon some slack. But all dragons were like that, which made him laugh at their antics in trying to entice food away from their companions.

The Elf got himself and Phil both bowls of oatmeal from the pot on the stovetop, fetching fruit and
cream as well. There was already bacon and toast on the table, although both plates looked fairly picked over. “They aren’t the only gluttons,” Clint chuckled, setting their bowls down. “You could have saved us some of the bacon at least.”

Daisy rolled her eyes at him. “That’s what happens when the pair of you don’t show up in time. You miss things.”

“Good morning, Daddy and Dad,” Crystal chirped, a blob of oatmeal on her chin.

“Good morning to you, too.” Without even thinking about it, Clint found a napkin and, reaching across the table, wiped his daughter’s mouth. “It goes in your mouth, kiddo, and not on your face.”

Crystal giggled. “I was saving that for later!”

“Oh, then I’m sorry,” he joked with her. “I’ll remember that next time.”

It was so good to see her like this, and not the shy thing that showed up around strangers. Crystal was supposed to laugh and tease and be a kid, not a traumatized little girl who hadn’t deserved what had happened to her, who most likely would have been saving that little bit of food for later, in case she couldn’t find a full meal somewhere.

Phil joined them at the table, setting a mug of coffee down in front of Clint. He thanked his lover with a smile and then fixed the coffee the way he liked it. Turning to his oatmeal, he did the same, liberally mixing in both strawberries and cream.

“What are we going to do today, Dad and Daddy?” Crystal asked.

“Well,” Phil said as he fixed his own oatmeal to his liking, “your Daddy and I have to go somewhere today, but then we’ll be back and spend the rest of the day together. With any luck, I’ll talk your Uncle Nick into coming by for a visit. In the meantime, you’ll be staying with Daisy, and her friends will be coming by later on as well.”

Crystal nodded, although she didn’t look very happy. “You won’t be gone long, will you?” It was a plaintive little question, and Clint wanted nothing more than to reassure her that they were both coming home. Phil beat him to it.

The smile Phil gave her was so full of love Clint almost teared up to see it. “We’ll be back as soon as we can, I promise.”

In that moment, Clint lost any lingering doubts about Phil’s being able to face Alexander Pierce. He was seated next to a man who had far too much to live for, someone who would do everything he could to come home after taking care of business. Phil would be careful, but he would also make certain Pierce didn’t get away.

Their daughter accepted that. “Can we have more cake?”

Phil laughed. “I’m sure there’s enough cake left over for days.”

Clint had to agree. Andrew’s cake had been enormous, and that wasn’t counting the ice cream the man had churned to go along with it. They would be eating both for a while yet.

He was certain that, if Andrew ever left, they’d all starve to death in less than a month.

“Those robes suit you,” Daisy observed. “And Clint doesn’t look bad, either.”
Clint looked down at his own outfit. It was something that had just ended up in the wardrobe, and suspected he had Melinda to thank for arranging to have it made. It was a deep purple tunic that left his arms bare, the better to shoot...at least that was what he told anyone who’s ever wanted to know why his shirts never had sleeves in them. It looked very much like something a Knight would wear, only without the armor. It made him look as if he would belong in the party that were going to Barony Shandling, and not like he was simply tagging along for the fireworks.

He hadn’t put on his shooting glove as yet, but he would before they left. He’d left his quiver and bow out down in the casting chamber, where they would leave from, to meet up with everyone who was tagging along for all the excitement. Nick would be there, as well as whatever Barons were going along.

Hopefully they’d be back by lunch.

Clint didn’t even pretend that things would go the way they were planning, but they were all good at thinking on their feet. Especially Phil, and Nick as well. Ianto wasn’t such a slouch, either.

He preened a little at the compliment. “But your Dad looks way better than I do.”

“Both of you look beautiful, Daddy,” Crustal said stoutly.

Phil choked on a laugh, most likely recalling their conversation back in their room. However, Clint wasn’t about to correct her, not like he had with his lover.

Once they were done eating, Phil kissed each girl on the head, so Clint did the same, getting a beaming smile from both. Then they gathered their dragons and headed down to the casting chamber, where he collected his weapons, and Phil slid his ceremonial knife into its sheath at his waist, as well as his wand in the specially made holster. Then, with a mere flex of his magic, Phil sent them on their way.
“Do you believe Phil will be able to take Alexander Pierce?”

Ianto turned to regard his husband. Jack was standing in the doorway to the study, looking pensive.

It wasn’t like he couldn’t understand where the question was coming from. Alexander Pierce was a powerful Void; he’d had to be, despite the politics that had been involved in his elevation. Ianto personally knew of two different attempts to unseat him, both failing. Challenges like that were rare anymore, but they did happen, and what was going to happen that day would fit into that category, even though Pierce had been unceremoniously ousted from the position already. Phil needed to do this, if he’d hoped to keep the Grand Mastership indefinitely.

It was like Ianto’s case, where everyone knew just how powerful he was, but that hadn’t stopped a few challengers from attempting to unseat him. Ianto had fought to keep it, and had won handily in front of witnesses. The Wizard did understand that, someday, he’d choose to step down and name a successor, and while he wasn’t a precognizant he somehow knew that successor would be Daisy Coulson.

Phil had yet to prove himself, in the way that Ianto had. Phil would have to do that by taking down Alexander Pierce and proving that the Void had, indeed, chosen him as its Champion.

“Yes,” Ianto answered unequivocally, leaning back in his chair. He’d already gotten dressed in his official robes, knowing that he’d have to be leaving for Triskelia soon to meet his fellow Wizards and whatever Barons would be accompanying them to Barony Shandling. “The power in him…it’s almost like looking into a Void Point when I use my magic to see him.” He took a sip of his now-lukewarm coffee. “You remember Canary’s Wharf, and how I had such a hard time dealing with the Void Point there?”

Jack nodded. That had been a bad mission; two Barons, of Telos and Skaro, had nearly gone to war over Canary’s Wharf and what had turned out to be a Void Point, back during that time when Ianto had been the only Wizard in the United Kingdom and magic had been at a premium. It had almost been a disaster, and he’d been so young and so untrained…and that Void Point had nearly damaged him because he hadn’t been used to the Void back then. Now, it wasn’t nearly as bad, and he could actually work with the Void a little as long as he had a Void Wizard cooperating with him – he’d have to get with Phil about it, and see if his counterpart could do the same with the Deep Ways…judging from his exposure to Daisy, who was such a strong Cardinal Wizard, he was willing to bet the other man could – but sometimes being around Phil did bring back those memories.

“Phil’s like that. He’s practically a walking Void Point, only not.” Because it was impossible to be that sort of thing, and any Cardinal would have had a problem being around Phil if that was the case. Daisy had lived with him for eleven years; she would have been able to sense it. It would have affected her magic. And that hadn’t happened at all.

“Just like you’re practically a walking Cardinal Point, only not.”

“Exactly.” It was the same thing, really, only opposite of what Phil was. “He literally sucked the
Void out of John Garrett, and he pulled Steve Rogers out of the Void. And, to be honest, I don’t think he’s even scratched the surface of what he can do. I don’t believe he’ll have any trouble taking down Alexander Pierce, it’s just the how of it I question.”

Jack came forward to perch on the edge of the desk, his knee bumping the chair arm. “Is he more powerful than you?” Concern shown in his blue eyes.

Ianto shook his head. “No. I just think we can do different things. He can’t unpick spells like I can, but then I can’t walk into a Cardinal Point and seal it up. We’re different, but equal. And, before you say anything, there isn’t any danger of him going back to being the Dark One. I can understand why it’s something you’d be concerned about, but don’t be. That man has too much love in him to ever go back to that, although I can’t promise he won’t channel his inner darkness if someone does any harm to his family.” He rested a hand on Jack’s thigh, the Deep Ways within his husband thrumming happily at the contact. “Just as I would, if something ever happened to you or Eirlys or our grandchildren. Just as you would, for the same reason.”

Jack conceded that easily. “Anyone who’s done such a turnaround in their lives…I have to be sure it’s not just a veneer, something he can toss aside whenever he feels like it.”

“I know. And you also know that’s a thought that’s occurred to a vast majority of Wizards in the Quorum. But Jack…you didn’t hear the speech he gave yesterday, about how Wizards needed to stand up for each other and to stop condemning things they didn’t understand. I don’t think I’ve ever heard such passion on the floor of the Quorum Hall, ever. He had nearly the entire Quorum on its feet at the end, and the loyalty of the Voids with just those words. He might have been the Dark One years ago, but in my opinion it’s a case of that being a strength, and not something he’s going to fall back into.”

“That’s how I assessed him as well, only without the speech.” Jack grinned. “I might have enjoyed that.”

Ianto could see it. Jack, being the Deathless, had faced a lot of prejudice and misunderstanding…and he’d had about a thousand years of it; there had even been a Wizard who’d supposedly come up with a way to give Jack a final death. They had no idea if it would have worked, but the two Artifacts – the Gauntlet and the Dagger – had been deemed too evil to use and were locked away in the Secure Archives after their limited sentience had nearly driven their friend, Suzie Costello, insane. Suzie had recovered from that, for which Ianto had been horribly grateful. Suzie had been made a Wizard as well, a Void, after her mind had been trapped within the Void for a short time.

Jack hadn’t taken the evil route, like Phil had. Instead, he’d hidden his Deathlessness, moving on after a couple of decades before friends and companions would notice that he wasn’t aging. That wasn’t any way to live, and Ianto was glad to know that, while acceptance still could be a bitch, Jack was visible and proud of his nature now.

It certainly didn’t hurt that Ianto was liable to live as long as Jack would.

Unfortunately, Phil did not have that.

Still, they would do what they could when the time came.

He still had to work on what Clint asked him for, though. He’d get to it soon.

“It’s a shame that we didn’t really pay attention to what was going on with Phil back when he was busily rampaging through the Western Lands.” Jack sounded contrite. Ianto could understand, because he felt the same way. “I’d like to think we could have helped.”
“Suzie tried. She did her best, but Phil was too far gone at that point. She’d come to me, hoping I could give her some advice and I just didn’t know what to tell her. I couldn’t even begin to empathize with that young man she was so desperate to save. Afterward, I just didn’t put it together that the Dark One was the poor Novice that broke Suzie’s heart.” He sighed. “There’s a part of me that thinks I’ve failed him, even though there wasn’t a thing I could do. However, there’s an even larger part that’s telling me that things had to happen the way they had, because we wouldn’t be at this point without Phil becoming the Dark One, him facing Loki and almost dying, and then finding Daisy and adopting her. It’s like Phil Coulson is a piece of a larger puzzle, and we’re just beginning to see the pattern of the jigsaw.”

Things were, indeed, falling into place. Ianto just didn’t know what that signified as yet.

The universe was a large, mysterious place. The Deep Ways and the Void were simply two parts of the whole. The Gods created things the way they’d wanted, and no one could understand Their motives, least of all the mere mortals – or not so mortals – who walk within it.

Before coming into his full power as a Wizard, Ianto hadn’t really believed. Honestly, he still wasn’t sure he did entirely. However, he’d seen things that pointed to some sort of higher power, and he was becoming more and more unsure of his previous disbelief.

“Well,” Jack said, “if anyone can work it out eventually, it’s you.’

He was touched by his husband’s confidence. “I like to think it won’t just be me.”

Which was true. He now had an excellent team of Wizards around him: Phil himself, and Stephen; plus the various Heads of Orders around the world. Hydra was now non-existent within the Guild, with only Alexander Pierce, and Catherine and Ruby Hale outstanding. There were so many promising young Wizards coming up through the Novices, Daisy Coulson and her group of friends amongst them. They were the future of the Guild, one that Ianto would see and, someday, move on from, letting the younger generation take over. Then he and Jack would once again devote themselves to travelling, with a new team around them.

He was thinking that, by that time, Phil and Clint might want to travel with them.

Checking the chronometer over the mantel, Ianto sighed. “I need to head out. When I get back…”

“We’ll be down one more Hydra asshole,” Jack finished. “You sure I can’t go along with you?”

Ianto appreciated it, but, “No, I’m sorry. You’re neither a Wizard nor a member of the Council of Barons. And we need to keep this whole thing official. As much as I want you there, this is something that you simply cannot help with.”

“I know. I just had to offer.”

“And you have no idea how much I love you for it.” Standing, Ianto put himself right between Jack’s thighs, pressing himself against the man he loved more than anything else in the world and out of it. “And I do love you.”

Jack’s arms wrapped around his waist, tugging him even closer. “You know,” he said, meeting Ianto’s eyes, the miniscule golden flecks of the Deep Ways flickering through them like glittering crystals, visible only to someone who had the same magic in their own blood, “I think I did know that.”

The Wizard smirked, resting his arms on Jack’s shoulders. “I always knew you were swift on the uptake.”
Ianto would never get tired of kissing Jack. He could taste the Deep Ways on his tongue, fizzing like the aerated water of a hot spring. He couldn’t help but moan slightly as Jack deepened the kiss, Ianto falling into it and trusting his husband to catch him as he did so. He could feel the familiar fire of arousal spiking through him, and he had to pull away, because he couldn’t let himself get distracted. Jack was imminently distracting.

Pouting, Jack let him go. “We are so taking this up again later.”

“Yes, we are,” Ianto promised. “Also, I wanted you to think about something…”

“Sure.”

“How would you feel about another child?”

The smile Ianto got this time was incandescent. “I like that idea. But I’ll carry them this time.” Then he cocked his head, eyes searching Ianto’s own. “What brought this on?”

“It’s something Clint asked me about. And, since I was already going to prepare one ring…”

“You thought you could re-enchant our own?”

“Exactly.” He was glad that Jack seemed up to it. Eirlys had been their first attempt with the spell that Daffyd had left them, and Ianto had been able to write down the specifics before he and Jack had used it. Daffyd, once known as Ianto Jones before being stranded in this strange timeline and away from the universe he’d known because of Harold Saxon’s tampering with time, had created the Fertility spell for himself and his own version of Jack Harkness, from that timeline that had been canceled out, but he’d lost his Jack to the Silver Devastation. After that, he’d never had the need nor the inclination to use the actual magic, and the ring that he’d enchanted had been a gift for Ianto and Jack. Daffyd had truly adored Eirlys, naming her as his heir to Gateway.

Losing his Jack had broken something within Daffyd, and he’d never found anyone to love again. He’d also severed his connection to the Deep Ways, so that he’d be able to die naturally. Ianto had been meaning to let Phil know that sort of thing was possible, but hadn’t done it yet. Really, Ianto didn’t think he’d need to for a while.

“And Clint wants to be able to have a child with Phil?” Jack was beaming. “That’s incredibly romantic, actually.”

“I think now his plans might be a bit delayed, what with them just adopting Crystal, but I’m certain he’s still fully intending on suggesting it once Crystal is a little older. I’ll have everything prepared for when that happens.”

“Yes, go ahead and do that for us, too. We can raise a child until it’s time for you to retire from being Grand Master.”

“When that happens, I think we should travel again.”

“I do like the way you think. So.” He moved his hand down enough to smack Ianto’s arse, making him jump and yelp in surprise. “Go on and get things done. Make sure you’re careful, but watch Phil’s back.”

“I shall.” He reluctantly left the circle of Jack’s arms and, calling Myfanwy to him, he headed down to his casting chamber for the journey to Castle Triskelia, tempted to call Jack to go with him anyway.
He didn’t.

But he really, really wanted to.

Chapter End Notes

For those of you who haven't read "Ways of Light and Darkness" -

A divergent timeline was created by Harold Saxon, who was the villain of that story, for his own nefarious purposes. In that timeline, Master John Smith (The Doctor) never cut magic off from the rest of the world, but the war that he'd seen was averted because of Saxon's future knowledge. The Jack and Ianto of that universe were sent to investigate Saxon's machinations, and discovered that Saxon wanted to open the prison holding the Silver Devastation (the Wizard-Verse version of the Cybermen) who fed on magic. Jack sacrificed himself by throwing himself into the Void where the Silver Devastation had been imprisoned, sealing up the door behind him. That Ianto, not wanting to live without his Jack, forcibly severed his connection to the Deep Ways, so that he would eventually age and die.

When the timeline was restored, that Ianto ended up being the only survivor of it, although he also lost his Myfanwy in the fight with Saxon. He took on the name of Daffydy Jones, became Baron Gateway, and was responsible for setting up the Wizard's School based on what they'd had back in his timeline. He was also the one who helped set up the current Wizard's Guild.

Oh, and he had this ring that would allow men to have a baby together. Which he gave to this universe's Jack and Ianto.

Hope that makes things a little more understandable.
Chapter 69

Chapter Notes

Yes, I'm posting this on Thursday.

There's a reason for that...I'm going out of town for a couple of weeks at the end of October, and I realized I won't be done posting this by then. I didn't want to leave anyone hanging, so I thought I'd get this caught up so it's done by my vacation. Which means posting on Thursdays as well for the time being.

After I get back, I'll be posting my Marvel Bang story. Then, I'll start posting the sequel, "The Rise of the Champions", even though it's not finished yet. I have enough completed on it that I can start posting while I finish up. It's going to be even longer than this one, if I have it plotted out properly. :)

Their group, with accompanying dragons, teleported into the courtyard of Castle Shandling, disturbing the bustling castle workers and causing a few of them to curse and swear as they jumped out of the way.

Castle Shandling was more a mansion than a true castle. It had a tall center section, stonework ostentatious with statuary and stained glass, and four stories tall. Two wings curved off the main section, each half the height of the center, their curve making the central courtyard an almost enclosed area with only a wide drive keeping the two sides from touching.

The courtyard was all stone, with a fountain in the exact middle of the round space. Not a hint of grass, or tree, or shrub broke up the unrelieved gray of the stone, making the area feel depressing and bleak.

Phil had already decided to hate it, back the last time he’d been there, when he’d applied to adopt Daisy. And it wasn’t just because of the accompanying bad memories involved.

“Well,” Baron Tony drawled sarcastically, “isn’t this place cheery?”

“Nothing’s changed then,” Phil couldn’t help but comment.

“Oh yeah, you’ve been here before, when you adopted Mini Pepper. Glad you got her, I’d hate to have had her grow up around here.”

The Baron had a point. Barony Shandling hadn’t been all that cheerful before Loki; things had just gotten worse over the intervening years, if the Castle was any indication.

“This place really does suck,” Clint added. “I didn’t think anyplace would be worse than Buda-Pest, but this comes damned close.”

Phil had to agree, although it was at least without the miasma of sheer evil that had settled over King Wolfgang’s fortress.
They were a group of ten. The three Grand Masters, four Barons – Marcus, and Barons Tony, Alexander Waverly, and Henry Pym, who was still furious over the fact that Hydra had decided to settle first in his own Barony, and had disturbed a Void Point in the process. Clint was along, ostensibly as Marcus’ personal bodyguard...like Phil’s old friend needed someone to look after him, so he was only doing it for Phil’s benefit and the fact that he didn’t have an actual Knights’ Commander at this time to do the job. Sir Napoleon had come along with Baron Alexander, once again as a bodyguard; Baron Henry had brought along his daughter, who was also his Knights’ Commander, Sir Hope van Dyne. Rumor had it that she was the paramour of Baron Henry’s own Court Wizard, Master Scott Lang, a Great Wizard; however, there was no substantiation of that.

Baron Tony has eschewed having Sir Rhodey along, preferring to carry with him his own means of looking after himself. He was wearing a red and gold gauntlet that Phil was very interested in, considering it gave off hardly any magic at all and yet was obviously some sort of weapon, judging from the round aperture in the palm which glowed faintly. It was the same color blue as the magical stone in his chest, which was another oddity in the gauntlet’s appearance. The Baron should not have been able to do that sort of thing, adapting a magical Artifact to use, and yet he had. Phil was grudgingly impressed, despite himself.

None of the Wizards had a bodyguard, but then they weren’t expected to need one. They had their dragons, Lucky joining them, and that was enough. Each of them was at the pinnacle of their Order, and could protect themselves.

Although, no one was admitting that Clint was actually Phil’s bodyguard. Because it meant that Jack could have come along as that for Ianto, and the Cardinal Wizard had told his husband that wasn’t necessary. Phil had to wonder what Jack would have thought if he’d known Clint was along.

“Let’s get this shit over with,” Marcus declared. With a dramatic swirl of his long, black cloak, he was striding toward the steps that led into the Castle proper, the rest of them trailing along. The Barons went first; the plan was to let them bring the charges against Baron Jerald first, and then let the Wizards take over, demanding that Pierce be turned over to them. There were specific plans if Stern refused, but they were all counting on the Baron being weaselly enough to knuckle under to the smallest show of force and not wanting to face the consequences of not going along on what the Council of Barons wanted.

What Stern didn’t know, was that the Council was prepared to act despite how things turned out today. Baron Jerald had long been a thorn in the side of the Council of Barons, and he wasn’t exactly liked by his own people. The only reason anyone could come up with for his giving Pierce sanctuary was the chance of gaining more power for himself.

Not that he would, of course. Phil was pretty sure any promises Pierce had given were all lies. The former Grand Master just didn’t have enough to bargain with anymore, now that his properties had been seized by the Guild and his titles stripped from him. There simply wasn’t anything that Pierce could offer Stern that would make the Baron protect him once they demanded his forfeiture, so they were thinking once that was pointed out Stern would simply cave into their demands.

They made an imposing entourage as they entered the Castle, people scurrying out of the way. Strangely, all three of the Wizards ended up in the middle of the group, surrounded by the Barons in the front, and the ostensible bodyguards to the rear. Despite not seeing him, Phil could practically sense Clint behind him, and was glad that he’d insisted on coming along.

The interior of the building wasn’t any less oppressive than the outside. The front hall was undorned, cold stone walls blank and uninviting. There wasn’t even a single piece of furniture for the comfort of visitors to the Baronial Court, making anyone who did have business there feel even
more unwelcome at Shandling than the façade of the building did.

“It’s no wonder we’ve been getting reports of dissatisfaction in the Barony,” Baron Alexander said. “Baron Jerald doesn’t like to have people come to him with their disputes, and this just goes to show to what ends he’s willing to go to, to make his people not want to approach him.”

Phil couldn’t disagree with Baron Alexander’s assessment. It had been the same when he’d been there eleven years ago, and he vividly could recall just how badly Daisy had been affected. She’d been so brave and ready to face whatever needed to be done to allow her to stay with him, but the very nature of the Castle and the Baron had bothered her almost to the point of tears. And the questioning…it hadn’t been at all like what Baron Alexander had done with Crystal; he’d been so solicitous of her very obvious fear and had done his best to put her at ease.

Baron Jerald had been the opposite of that. But then, he’d wanted to keep Daisy for his Barony, as a resource he could exploit. Luckily for them, Marcus hadn’t been about to let that happen, and had managed to rally the Council to the cause.

It had made Marcus a lot of friends on the Council. A Baron willing to do anything in the best interest of both a child and of a resident of Triskelia had gone a long way toward the goodwill he had today.

It hadn’t hurt that Baron Jerald was generally disliked. Even now, eleven years on, Phil could still hear Marcus bitching about the ‘self-centered fucking weasel who cared more about his personal wealth and power than the health and happiness of his own damned people’. That particular rant had been impressive, and for his old friend that was saying something.

There were two guards on the closed double doors to the Audience Chamber, wearing armor that wasn’t as well taken care of as it should have been. They watched the group warily as they all approached; Phil did a quick scan for wards, and found some fairly strong ones, yet not so old; they were tainted with Void, so he was willing to bet that Pierce himself had done the ward work himself.

With a single flick of his magic, Phil had the wards down in a matter of moments.

Both Ianto and Stephen glanced over at him; Ianto was giving him a sly, knowing smirk, while Stephen looked as if he was barely holding in his laughter. Phil simply shrugged; if Pierce had wanted to keep a Wizard of any significant power out, he should have tried harder.

“We’re here to see Baron Jerald Stern,” Marcus barked. “Council of Barons business.”

The pair of guards glanced at each other, not sure what to do. Certainly, they weren’t moving to let them in.

Marcus cocked his head, putting his hands on his hips. “Did I fucking stutter?”

Phil barely bit back a laugh as the two men became more and more intimidated. Which, really, if they were Baronial Knights, they should have had more backbone than this. Although, his friend could be downright terrifying, Phil could admit. As long as he’d known Marcus Johnson, and Nick Fury, the Wizard still sometimes had to take a step back from his friend when he got into a strop, and the man was Phil’s best friend.

The guard on the right straightened. “His Grace has asked not to be disturbed,” he managed to say despite betraying his obvious nerves.

“His Grace,” Baron Tony intoned, voice dripping disdain, “is about to be disturbed all to the hells.”
With that, he stepped between the two guards, slapping the palm of the hand wearing the gauntlet onto the solid wood of the left-side door, the sharp contact making the impact sound like someone had somehow summoned a door knocker and had given it a good, solid drop onto the door.

The guards – and the few others in the hall, who’d stopped to stare at the visitors – jumped at the loud noise. Baron Tony looked pleased by the racket, which Phil thought was a fine attitude to have. Tony Stark could be an asshole, but it worked for him. He was just so good at it. The Wizard couldn’t help but be impressed again by the man.

Not that he would admit that aloud. The Baron’s ego was already big enough without Phil’s adding to it.

Baron Tony gave a shit-eating grin, striking the door once more. This time, the wood actually splintered a little, and Phil had to wonder just what that gauntlet was made of, if it could damage such a sturdy door like that.

“Damn,” he heard Clint whisper behind him, “that is awesome.”

Phil couldn’t argue with that.

“Show off,” Marcus muttered. “You could try to just open the damned door.”

“It’s more fun this way,” Baron Tony quipped. “I like making a lot of noise.”

The expression he got from Marcus for that admission was grudgingly respectful. “I have noticed that about you, Stark.”

Not bothering to stifle his sigh, Marcus went to push the door open. The two guards, seemingly shaken out of their surprise, crossed their pikes across the entrance, blocking the way. “We cannot let you pass,” the one with the most guts said.

Phil had to admit, it was certainly brave of him. If not just a bit silly.

“Son,” Marcus was using his you are an idiot but I’m putting up with it instead of killing you voice, “don’t make me go through you. Better yet,” he motioned toward the three Grand Masters, “don’t make the powerful-ass Wizards go through you. Because they won’t leave anything but a couple of greasy smears on the boring stone pavers that, let’s be honest, could use a lot more color. A dash of red would work wonders for the place.”

Phil had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing. Lola wasn’t so sanguine, the sound of dragon chuckles echoing around the bare walls. Myfanwy had joined her, as had Lucky, and Agamotto’s hissing laughter was a pleasant counterpoint from where he was coiled about Stephen’s shoulders.

Apparently, dragons laughing was a lot scarier than Phil and his fellow Wizards were, because both guards blanched, and one actually took a step away. That was the opening Marcus was waiting for, because he slipped past both men and had the door thrown open before they could react.

Following the rather intimidating figure of his oldest friend, Phil and the others strode into the audience chamber. It was the direct opposite of the parts of the castle they’d seen so far; sumptuous tapestries decorated the walls, depicting various hunting and battle scenes in bold bright threads. A carpet, the exact shade of blood, ran up the center of the room toward the dais where the Baronial throne sat, piled high with pillows and furs, almost completely hiding the dark wooden seat. Curtains that matched the carpet hung from the windows behind the throne, blocking out much of the sunlight and the view outside.
It was ugly. And very familiar to Phil...although some of the tapestries had changed since the last time he’d been there.

Baron Jerald Stern was standing on the dais, and he didn’t look surprised to see them; but then, Baron Tony had made a lot of noise. Baron Jerald looked well and truly pissed, his hands on his hips belligerently, glaring down at them as they all approached. “I hope you have a good reason for bursting in like this,” he demanded. It would have been intimidating if it weren’t for the fact that his voice was pitched just a little too high to have that effect on any of them.

It seemed the Barons had nominated Alexander Waverly as their spokesperson, although Phil could see that not lasting all that long, just because he knew both Marcus and Tony Stark too well to figure they’d remain quietly on the sidelines; he wasn’t at all familiar with Baron Henry, but the last of the Barons present certainly had enough provocation to step in whenever he felt like it.

The elder Baron stepped forward, his back perfectly straight, and he stared up at Baron Jerald until the man began to look just a tad shifty.

Phil wished he could see Baron Alexander’s face. He had the feeling it was magnificent in its disdain.

“Baron Jerald Stern,” he intoned, sounding like someone’s disappointed grandfather, “we have heard some honestly bothersome rumors about you giving disgraced Wizard Alexander Pierce sanctuary here in Barony Shandling.”

In that moment, Phil knew that Baron Jerald was going to try to bluff his way out of the charge. “I don’t know where you got that from, but I can assure you, you’re wrong.”

Baron Alexander sighed wearily. “We have it on good authority. So good, in fact, that the Council has voted to bring you up on charges of harboring a convicted criminal, the aforementioned disgraced Wizard, Alexander Pierce. Fifteen of our number have signed the warrant.”

From what Marcus had said, they’d only needed thirteen signatures; however, they’d gotten lucky when visiting Barony Florana...apparently, the sitting Baroness was having a rather torrid affair with both the Baron Santana and the Baroness Long River. At the same time. And both Baronesses were expecting Baron Santana’s children.

That was going to be a very thorny problem for the succession for all three Baronies that the Council would have to deal with, once the children became of age.

Baron Jerald went a little pale at that, and he began sputtering something that had Baron Tony snorting and then retorting, “You’re not gonna be able to back out of this, Stern. I don’t have any idea what Pierce promised you, but it’s not like he can deliver.”

“This is true,” Phil found himself speaking up. “All of his properties have been forfeited to the Guild, and he’s been stripped of his titles and awards. And if it’s magical help...the wards he put up outside were pitiful at best. It took me a single heartbeat to take them all down.” Well, it was just a little longer than that, but he wasn’t above inflating things if it got the message across.

“He’s got nothing he can offer you any longer,” Stephen confirmed. “You may as well give him up to Wizard justice, and take your own punishment for protecting him.”

“If you’re lucky,” Baron Henry put in, “we’ll let you choose your own successor.”

“And, if not,” Baron Alexander added, his voice serene, “we’ll choose one for you. You’ve misused your position for the last time, Jerald. You may as well give in gracefully and keep some of your
remaining dignity intact.”

Jerald Stern’s face was becoming redder and redder, and Phil was honestly beginning to become concerned that he might have a stroke. “How dare you come into my Barony and make demands!”

“I don’t think you know what’s going on here,” Marcus pointed out. “You’re deluding yourself if you think keeping Pierce a secret is gonna work. The Barons are in majority here, and the only reason we don’t have a full docket of signatures is because we hadn’t needed to chase down anymore once we had the required number. If you really believe that you giving Pierce sanctuary is the only thing we have against you, then you’re more deluded than is generally considered. You’re not nearly as smart as you think, and this isn’t the first time you’ve tried some shit and it’s come back to bite you in the ass.”

Stern’s eyes darted toward Phil. It wasn’t like he’d done anything to hide; it had been a forgone conclusion that he’d recognize Phil as the Wizard who’d adopted the child Stern had wanted to keep as a resource for his Barony. The majority of the Barons who’d voted against him had had Daisy’s best interests at heart, and they’d all figured out fairly quickly that Stern had been more concerned for himself than for his own people.

While he didn’t know what else Stern had been up to in the intervening years, Phil knew it all had to have been bad for fifteen out of the twenty Barons – of, course, Stern was included in that twenty, and he wouldn’t sign the warrant against himself – had put their signatures on the edict against the man just on the evidence that Sir Napoleon had dug up. It must have been the last straw, knowing that Stern had been sheltering a criminal. And, as Marcus had pointed out, they would have most likely had all nineteen if they’d taken the time to get them.

At Stern’s glare at him, Phil simply raised an unimpressed eyebrow.

Just as Marcus had been gearing up to harangue Stern once more, Phil felt something prickle at his heart and mind, the Void that accompanied the presence that had announced itself through his magical senses getting stronger and stronger as it approached.

“He’s coming.”

At Phil’s announcement, Ianto and Stephen stepped away…as did the Barons and the various bodyguards. Clint didn’t look like he wanted to go anywhere, but Phil nodded slightly, letting his lover know that he’d be fine, that this was his battle to fight. Clint’s expression hardened, his eyes going from the swirl of pale colors the Wizard was familiar with, to a sharp, steel gray that would have pierced anyone to their very souls.

Phil wasn’t just anyone, though, and he knew that glare wasn’t meant for him.

Clint moved back, joining the others, leaving Phil alone in the center of the audience chamber. Lola would have joined her Wizard, but Phil sent her to stand with Clint and Lucky, knowing she would only be under foot if things escalated. He could feel the mental pout, and sent back a promise to make it up to her when this was all over.

Lola agreed, but he could tell that she would be keeping an eye on Pierce, and on his dragon, ready to step in if needed.

He certainly hoped one of the others was keeping an eye on Stern. He’d hate for the man to rabbit.

The Wizard turned his back on the dais, knowing without seeing the man that Pierce would be coming in through the main double doors.
As if summoned by Phil’s thoughts, Alexander Pierce and his dragon, Insight, pushed through the doors, facing him haughtily, looking down his nose at Phil contemptuously.

“Well,” he drawled, “you’re not exactly what was I expecting.”

Phil gave him a bland smile. “I’m glad I could surprise you.”

Pierce made a slight gesture, and Insight stayed in place as the disgraced Void Wizard strolled toward Phil as if he didn’t have a care in the world. “You seem to have quite a lot of support. I wonder how they’d feel if they knew the truth about you.”

That answered a question that Phil had had for a while now: if any of the disparate members of Hydra were in touch with each other. “If you’d kept up with your spies within the Quorum, you would have known that any secrets I may have had are now out in the open. So, you wouldn’t be saying anything these people don’t already know.”

Except for Barons Henry and Alexander – and he wasn’t about to bet that the Baron of Uncelas knew exactly who Phil had once been, and was just keeping quiet about it – but neither man seemed at all surprised at Pierce’s threats. Both had to have been prepared for something like this, even if either had had no notion that Grand Master Phil Coulson had once been the infamous Dark One.

It was a slight stumble, and not a lot of people would have noticed, but Phil had, and he couldn’t help the small smile at Pierce’s discomfiture. He obviously hadn’t counted on his blackmail material to now be invalid, and it had thrown him off his game a little.

Good. Phil would take any advantage he could.

May as well throw him off some more.

Drawing himself up, Phil announced, “Alexander Pierce, you have been found guilty of breaking the laws of the Wizard’s Guild. As Grand Master of Void Order, it is my duty to pass sentence. Do you submit to the will of the Quorum?”

Pierce’s jaw would have dropped if he hadn’t had any less control over himself. Then, he barked a laugh in sheer disbelief. “They made you Grand Master of Voids?”

“Thanks to Hydra, I was the only one they could trust with the position.” Phil let a tiny smirk twist his lips upward. “There really wasn’t any choice. “

“I bet you just loved that.”

That comment showed just how little Pierce knew the Dark One. It had never been about power, not in that way; it had been about pain, and having the power to make the rest of the world feel the same pain Phil had. He’d never done anything to accrue the sort of power that Pierce assumed he’d wanted.

“Actually, no.” Phil shrugged. “But I’m getting used to the idea. Now, shall we get back to business? Will you submit to the will of the Quorum?”

Pierce gave away his next move. It would have been obvious even to someone completely headblind to magic.

Extending his left arm, Phil had his shield up and blocking the Stun spell that Pierce had thrown at him, the vivid yellow of the magic splashing against the blue of the shield and making it hiss and crackle. Still, there’d really been nothing to worry about; it hadn’t been that powerful, Pierce going
more for surprise than to overpower. It had Phil thinking that the Void had truly disavowed Pierce, since there was so little of it in the spell he’d just cast.

Phil himself could feel the Void thrumming through his veins. It came easily to his call, eager to take justice for what Pierce had done to it: tainting the Void Point in the name of his quest to create a new Deathless. The Void demanded its due, and it was going to use Phil to get it.

Well, not use…not really. Phil was perfectly willing to go along with it. He wanted his own justice, for the kidnapping of his elder daughter and for the Void itself.

He was Void Champion.

Pierce just didn’t know that yet.

He would.

Phil stood there, under Pierce’s assault, the display of the other Wizard’s power not budging him from where he’d planted his feet…the Void might have mostly abandoned him, but Pierce was still quite powerful in his own right.

Stun.

Flame.

A Word of Power that would have flayed the skin from Phil’s bones.

Bone Breaker Curse.

And more, so many that Phil didn’t bother to keep track after the first few, his magic protecting the bystanders from getting caught in the backlash.

“Phil,” Baron Tony called out after about ten minutes, laughter in his voice, “are you finished showing off yet? You’re just making him look really bad.”

“Shut up, Stark,” Clint cattailed. “This is damned sexy.”

“Ew,” Baron Ferrous groaned. “I did not need to hear that.”

The heckling from the sidelines seemed to make Pierce even madder than before. He had to have noticed that Phil was just shrugging off his attacks, and that had to have started worrying him.

Pierce just hadn’t accepted yet that he wasn’t getting out of this room under his own power.

If he got out of it at all.

The Void was whispering to Phil, a soft susurrus of sound that spoke to him of its plans for Pierce. It wasn’t using words; the Void communicated through intent and flashes of insight and vision that no one but Phil would have made out. It wanted what Phil wanted: justice. And it was showing him how that would be attained.

Tony Stark was correct: Phil was done showing off.

Taking a step forward, Phil waved a single hand, cancelling out every single spell Pierce had in his arsenal. “Stop,” he commanded, the Void in his voice, making it echo and sing throughout the chamber.
Pierce, a sudden look of fear in his pale eyes, went back on one foot, as if he wanted to escape but was rooted to the spot.

“I am Grand Master,” Phil intoned, “but, above that, I am Void’s Champion. And the Void’s justice outweighs the Guild’s.”

He raised his hands, and the Void came to his call, cladding him in the armor of the Void, filling him with its purpose. Phil welcomed it almost as eagerly as he’d welcomed Clint to his life, his heart, and his bed, accepting his place as its Chosen, knowing that it would always be a part of him, just as he would always be a part of it. He was able to see so much more than ever before, how the Void and the Deep Ways and the Elemental Magic all waxed and waned about each other, entwined in an eternal dance that made him want to weep with the sheer beauty of it.

This time, when he gestured toward Pierce, it was with both hands.

His fingers grasped the Veil Between, and Phil Coulson, Void Champion, tore it apart easily, like ripping a piece of paper in two.

The Void was waiting.

“Alexander Pierce, you have been found wanting by the Void itself,” he spoke calmly, serenely, not at all like a man who’d just created a Void Point out of thin air. “You came from the Void; to the Void you go back.”

“Wait!” Pierce cried out. “I only wanted to make the Void into something to be respected and feared!”

“That was your mistake. You wanted to make the Void. No one can make the Void do anything. You took the power that the Void entrusted to you, and warped it into something unnatural. For that, you will pay and the Void will see it done.”

“Amen,” he heard both Stephen and Ianto murmur.

Phil pulled the tear open a little farther, calling to the Void to take Pierce into itself, as it told him it wanted to do. Pierce tried to run, but the Void was too powerful for him to escape its justice.

Black tendrils extended out of the Void Point, grasping the disgraced Wizard in their unbreakable grip. Pierce fought, but it wasn’t enough. It would never be enough to escape, as he was dragged into the Void that glittered like space, like cool darkness, through the rip that Phil had created.

Once Pierce was pulled inside, he began to close the opening.

At the last minute, a terrible, keening cry sounded, and Pierce’s dragon jumped into the Void after his Wizard.

With dexterous fingers, Phil Coulson knitted the tear back together, sealing the Void Point once more.

Alexander Pierce and Insight were gone, never to return.
Chapter 70

Daisy wanted to pace, but she didn’t want to worry Crystal just because she couldn’t keep her nerves under control.

So, instead, she helped her new sister put things away; they’d done a bit of it yesterday, but really they’d gone crazy on their shopping trip and there was still so much to do. Andrew was good enough to fetch them some more shelving, which they put into the new playroom and began stacking all of Crystal’s toys onto it, the little girl excited about being able to keep everything they’d bought for her. Daisy could understand, in lots of ways, what with having been in orphanages for most of her childhood. Once Dad had adopted her, it had taken her a bit of time to get used to the idea that any of the older kids weren’t going to appear and steal everything she’d been given by the caregivers. Really, it was how Daisy herself had learned how to steal, if just to get her stuff back.

Not that a lot of what she’d had had been worth stealing back. So she’d been content with taking extra food rations and a few other bits and bobs that would have been useful to her.

Crystal kept up the chatter, and Daisy loved her more for it. It was distracting her from the knowledge that her Dad – their Dad – was out there, facing down Alexander Pierce and she had no idea what was going on. She was so very glad that Crystal didn’t know that he was heading into danger because she had enough nightmare fodder to last for a long time. She didn’t need anymore.

It wasn’t that Daisy didn’t have any faith in their Dad. Or Clint, or Uncle Nick, or any of the others for that matter. It was Pierce she had absolutely no reason to trust, and there was no telling what he was capable of.

Well, there was…after all, he’d killed Dad and had had Daisy herself kidnapped. He’d done something to a Void Point to make it sick. And then there was poor Sir James, kept as a mindless assassin. Pierce was capable of a lot of shit. So, despite the fact that Dad was powerful some people were evil and could do a lot of damage just because of that.

See Loki as Example Number One.

“Daisy,” Crystal asked, “do you think we could go back and get some more books?”

“I don’t see why not. But, we can also check out the books we have here at home, see if there’s something you might like.”

The smile Crystal gave her was brilliant and so very happy. “How many books do we have here?”

It was then that it occurred to the young Wizard that her sister really hadn’t had a tour of the Keep. “Why don’t we go and see?”

“Can we?” Crystal began to bounce a little on her toes.

“Sure. Although I think Skye and Lockjaw are too busy cuddling to want to come along.”

Both dragons, who’d piled up in the corner of the playroom in order to keep out of the way of the chaos, looked up at the mention of their names. Seeing that their Wizards were fine, they sighed almost in unison and went back to sleep.
That was them told.

"Come on." Daisy held her hand out. "Let’s see what we can find."

Crystal took it, and Daisy led the way out of the playroom and toward the library. The library was different from Dad’s study; for one thing, it didn’t have any of the magical books or gramariya that the study did, since Dad was careful to keep those out of hands that shouldn’t have them…which had been Daisy herself, when she’d been much younger. She’d been as curious as a cat, and Daisy had gotten into things that she shouldn’t have, so Dad had had to take steps. When Daisy had gotten older it had become habit by then, and he’d never stopped.

The library was even on a separate floor from the study, which was just a little extreme in the attempt to keep a very young Daisy out of serious trouble; but then, Dad always had been just a bit overprotective. Not that Daisy would ever change that…

The library itself was a large room, taking up two floors of the Keep. Dad collected a lot of things, and books were many of those things, but then he’d been a self-described semi-hermit and had done a lot of reading in his time. He’d also made certain there were books for Daisy, as well, and they took up one entire shelf along the far wall. That was where she went, knowing a lot of those would be on Crystal’s level, if not a little above, but her new sister was proving to be quick and intelligent and Daisy thought she’s had either no problem understanding, or asking questions if she didn’t.

Crystal looked around in awe. "I didn’t know there were this many books anywhere!"

The young woman didn’t have the heart to tell her that there were larger libraries. The one at Castle Ferrous was at least three times the size.

"Do you know what sort of stories you’d like?" she asked instead.

Crystal stared up at her, eyes wide. "As long as they’re happy."

"I think we can arrange that." Daisy smiled down at her.

She knew that Crystal couldn’t read; she could recognize her name, and write it a little – Daisy was going to see about teaching her the whole Coulson-Barton thing a little later, when it was closer to her going to a regular school…unless Andrew already had that all planned out – but beyond simple words she’d never really been taught much. But then, she was six, and from a family that hadn’t had a lot of resources, so Daisy could understand why Crystal was just a little bit behind in her lessons…and that had been before her asshole former parents had tossed her out like she was garbage. She knew Andrew meant to help catch her up, and Daisy would help along with Dad, but for now she would be content to read to her sister.

And she thought she knew just the right book.

One of the first books Dad had read to her had been The Wizard’s Bride, by Master S. Morgenstern. She’d enjoyed it immensely, and had gone on to read it later…only to discover that Dad had censored out a lot of the boring stuff, like the political storylines and there’d been this really long chapter about fashion, of all things. Still, the parts he’d read, and the parts she’d gone on to find among all the unnecessary stuff, had been awesome. And Daisy didn’t mind editing it for Crystal’s benefit.

"I know just the thing," she told her little sister. Daisy went unerringly to the section of shelf where it was kept, pulling down the well-worn yet well-loved volume.

Her favorite reading chair was by the window, and it was large enough and overstuffed enough to
seat two, especially if one was a six-year-old who was a little small for her age. Crystal clambered up into her lap without any prompting, cuddling up to Daisy who opened the book to begin reading.

“The Wizard’s Bride, by Master S. Morgenstern,” she began, wrapping one arm around Crystal to not only keep her on her lap, but to be able to hold the book in both hands. “Buttercup was raised on a small farm in the Barony of Florin. Her favorite past-times were riding her horse and tormenting the farm boy who worked there…”

She had to admit, reading to an enraptured Crystal was doing an admirable job of taking her mind off things. She didn’t want to worry about Dad and Clint and Uncle Nick, or the others who’d gone with them to Barony Shandling. How things were going, if they’d found Pierce and what had happened after they had, because Dad wasn’t about to give up on chasing down Hydra until they were gone and done with. Having Crystal nestled in her lap, asking questions every once in a while, was enough to almost completely distract her from being scared for Dad, which was a very good thing indeed. It kept her from wanting to jump and teleport to the rescue, as it were.

Because she also remembered everything they’d gone through because of Baron Jerald Stern being a jackass. Everything. How he’d wanted to take her away from Dad, when it had been obvious that she was never going to leave him unless it was by her choice. Uncle Nick had come to the rescue, which is yet just one more reason she’d always love him, and she’d been able to live with Dad when it hadn’t been all that certain of happening. And Baron Jerald hadn’t even known who Dad was back then. Daisy could only imagine the horror of them discovering that Phil Coulson had once been the Dark One. She never would have seen him again if that had occurred.

Daisy knew he’d have done the same with Crystal, if Baron Alexander hadn’t been agreeable to it. Dad loved fiercely and well, and in many ways really quickly, as if he was making up for lost time. And maybe he was, because he’d had so little love growing up. It didn’t make that love he felt any less real, and sometimes Daisy mourned for his lost childhood almost more than her own. But then, she’d had one after Dad had adopted her, and he hadn’t had one after he’d been Tested as Void.

At least she’d never been judged for the type of magic that flowed through her veins. At least, not in that way. There were some Great Wizards who didn’t care for the company she kept, because three of her best friends were also Greats, and Trip was Void, which didn’t make any sense and hopefully wouldn’t matter anymore at some point in the future. Dad, along with Ianto and Grand Master Stephen, would see to it.

They’d been reading for some time when Daisy felt someone watching her. She glanced up from the page to see Andrew standing in the doorway, and her heart began to race as she caught a glimpse of the expression on his face.

“Is Dad back?” she asked, her voice a little hoarse from having been reading aloud for...according to the chronometer on one of the shelves, it had been going on for two hours now.

“He is,” Andrew said reassuringly. “Both he and Clint just arrived.”

She couldn’t help the sigh that escaped her at his tone. “He’s alright then?”

“Yes, just tired. Clint’s taken him up to bed, and he’ll be down as soon as he gets Phil settled.”

It took everything in her to sit still, to not run up to Dad’s bedroom and see with her own eyes that he as fine. She’d trust Clint to look after him, no matter how hard it was to let someone else do it, knowing that he’d have to have been exhausted after doing whatever it was he’d done with Alexander Pierce.
However, she considered the little girl in her lap, who looked just as glad at having Dad home, and said, “Then we have time to finish this chapter.”

Andrew smiled. “I’ll bring up some juice for both of you.”

“Thanks, Andrew.” Daisy wasn’t just thanking him for the drinks.

He knew it, too. “You’re welcome.” Andrew nodded as he left them alone once more.

“Now,” Daisy said, pulling the book back up from where it had fallen onto her thigh, “let’s see how they get past the Cliffs of Insanity…”
Chapter 71

For as long as Clint lived, he would never forget the confrontation between Phil and Alexander Pierce.

He hadn’t been joking when he’d told Baron Tony that it was damned sexy. It was, and if his lover hadn’t been in middle of taking Pierce down several pegs he would have shown Phil just how much he was aroused by the display of Phil just shrugging off every spell that Pierce tossed at him as if he was merely being spit at instead of having all sorts of magic tossed at him.

It was just a little frightening as well.

Oh, not in the way that made Clint want to run away. No, this was a fear borne of respect, of knowing that the man he loved was so very powerful that almost nothing could touch him. It wasn’t the sort of respect that Phil wanted or needed, but it was there, and the archer would never admit to it out loud. Phil didn’t need that. He needed support, and love, and those Clint could give without reservation.

And he would, for as long as he lived.

Eventually, though, Phil had had enough of Pierce’s posturing.

And that was when things went from bad to worse…for Alexander Pierce.

As the groups watched, the Void had begun to surround Phil’s body, creating an armor around him that would have resembled the finest chainmail if not for the fact that it was solid Void, as black as the darkest night, without moonlight or starlight to illuminate the pitch blackness. In that moment, Phil truly became Void Champion, and Clint understood just what the Queen of Air and Fire had meant by naming him that very thing.

Beside the Elf, Lola was making a soft, humming sound, and he risked a glance down at her to see how she was taking the fact that her Wizard was changing before their very eyes. Lola was changing as well, the red of her scales darkening as the black filigree pattern along their edges grew, until there was more black than red. Her blue eyes held flakes of Void, whirling like windstorms within them; Lucky, also aware of his fellow dragon’s changing, had his wings wrapped around her, comforting and supporting her as she sat on the sidelines, relegated to watching her Wizard become so much more than he’d been before.

Clint turned his gaze back to Phil, just in time to see his eyes change to the same black as the armor he was now wearing. Pierce looked terrified, but then who could blame him? He’d brought this on himself, and Clint refused to feel any pity for him as he’d tried to bargain for his life as if messing with the Void would allow him to get him a reprieve.

It didn’t.

As they watched, Phil tore a hole in the Veil Between Worlds.

Clint wasn’t magical. So he was aware he wasn’t seeing everything that was going on, only what his superior eyesight and his Elven blood was showing him. However, from Ianto’s and Stephen’s reactions, they could, and it must have been amazing. Phil’s hands reached out, making a ripping motion, and suddenly the hairs on the archer’s arms were standing on end, the sheer power that was
flooding the room obvious even to him. Everyone was paralyzed by it, including Pierce’s dragon, who’d obviously wanted to go to his Wizard’s defense but wasn’t able to move as well, struck still by the magic that was swirling about the room.

Pierce tried to escape. Not that that did him any good.

There was a heat shimmer around him, and suddenly the Wizard was being pulled backward, toward a larger shimmer hanging in mid-air. The room began to darken, the Void encroaching into this world from the hole Phil had made, and in just a single blink Clint could make out the black bands that had come from the Wizard-created Void Point, very much like what he’d witnessed back at the Hydra stronghold, when Phil had gone into the Void Point to close it for good.

Phil had created a Void Point out of nothing.

Somehow, this didn’t surprise Clint in the least.

Because well, why not?

After all, he’d closed one. It only made sense that he could open one, too.

Almost within the blink of an eye, Pierce was gone, Insight having jumped into the Void Point after his Wizard companion. Clint felt a pang at that; another dragon, gone. He’d never get used to that happening, but he took a little comfort in knowing that dragons did have choice, and that Pierce’s hadn’t followed because he was controlled. No, he’d gone in after Pierce because he’d wanted to follow his beloved companion, knowing it would most likely mean the dragon’s own death.

Still, Clint also could recall the fight back at that Hydra house, and the part that Insight had played. The dragon had still carried the half-healed claw marks from his fight with Lola. He’d willingly gone along with his Wizard, and the archer had to respect that decision.

Besides, dragons never outlived their Wizards. Being cut off from Pierce would have killed Insight, in the end. It was the curse of their connection, and the blessing of being a Wizard: neither would ever be alone as long as they had each other.

With a clenching of both fists, Phil closed the Void Point back up. The sense of power around them faded with the Void Point, until nothing was left except for Phil’s own aura of magic.

“Damn,” Nick exclaimed, “that was fucking impressive.”

“You’re not wrong,” Baron Tony agreed with a whistle.

“I’m not sure what I just saw,” Baron Henry chimed in, “but I think I have to agree with my fellow Barons.”

Phil turned back toward the rest of their group, Lola going to his side. Her scales had gone back to normal, just as Phil had, back in his robes, the armor now vanished back into the Void from where it had come. Phil’s eyes were also back to normal, no longer black with Void. He looked tired, but stood resolute, staring down Baron Jerald Stern who was white with shock at what had just occurred.

“The Void has spoken,” he murmured, “and its justice is done, as was the Guild’s. I think the rest of this mess is best handled by the Council of Barons.”

“Agreed,” Ianto confirmed. “The Guild’s business is completed. Alexander Pierce has been tried by the Void for his crimes against it. We shall take our leave.”
“Thank you all for allowing us to deal out justice on behalf of the Guild and the Void,” Stephen added. “We can go back and report to the Guild that our Void Grand Master has done the will of the Void and of the Quorum.”

They were all leaving in order to cover for Phil’s exhaustion. It was also a sign of the united front the Grand Masters had, but it was made to make certain Phil was on his way, so he could rest.

Clint appreciated it. He wanted to shake their hands, but didn’t dare, not wanting to expose his lover’s current weakness to the other Barons. Sure, Nick knew, and he was fairly certain Barons Tony and Alexander knew as well, but they weren’t giving anything away to Baron Jerald, who looked as if he couldn’t believe what he’d just witnessed. Baron Henry might have had a clue, but his face wasn’t giving anything away, either.

Clint kind of wanted to stride with pride to his lover and kiss him breathless…but he wasn’t so sure that Phil could stay on his feet long enough to respond.

“We thank you for your service,” Baron Alexander answered, giving each of them a bow, his eyes knowing as they glanced at Phil. Clint had to wonder just what else the man knew about the archer’s lover.

Although, did he really want to know? Probably not, in the end. The knowledge that the man may have been aware that Phil had been the Dark One was bad enough, even though he seemed perfectly willing to keep it a secret if he did.

“We can handle it from here,” Baron Tony added. He still looked impressed.

“Then we shall take our leave,” Ianto said quietly, giving his own bow to the gathered Barons.

Well, Clint wasn’t about to stay, either, even though he’d been brought along ostensibly as Nick’s bodyguard, though he would have come anyway. He met his friend’s single eye, and Nick got the message loud and clear.

“Barton,” he said, “I want you to accompany the Wizards and then report back to me later on. Understood?”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Clint would never get tired of calling him that. Nick Fury – Marcus Johnson – should have been the very last person to take over a Barony and make it flourish, and yet he had. Which was impressive in and of itself. For being such a badass, Nick could be a damned compassionate bastard.

Phil glanced at him, for a moment his tired face lit up at the thought that Clint would be going home with him. After all, Clint wasn’t really needed; Baron Jerald was done, and he doubted anyone would support him any longer. Besides, Nick could kick anyone’s ass; Sir Napoleon had to have been competent to have risen to his current position, as well as Sir Hope, who reminded him of Natasha on first glance; and there was no telling just what the fancy gauntlet on Baron Tony’s hand did. No, he didn’t have to worry about any of them.

“Shall we go?” Ianto offered.

“Yes, we should,” Phil answered, echoed by Stephen.

The three Grand Masters nodded almost simultaneously to the Barons, and then withdrew from the audience chamber, Clint following close behind, taking the opportunity to ogle Phil’s ass just a little. Ianto and Stephen must have known how tired Phil was, because they were walking slowly, making it look more like a stately retreat than two Wizards wanting to keep in step with a third who’d just
performed a miracle and was practically dead on his feet. Their dragons accompanied them, both Lola and Lucky flanking Phil as if to support him in case he staggered.

Once they were out of the chamber and into the foyer, both Ianto and Stephen stopped, turning toward their third. “How did you do that?” Ianto asked quietly, not wanting to draw too much attention to their conversation.

“I suspect you can do the same,” Phil answered, voice thin with tiredness. “You’ve just never needed to. We’re the Champions, Ianto…I’m Void Champion, and you’re Cardinal Champion. I suspect, at some point, there’s going to be a Great Champion as well, I just don’t know if you’re the one, Stephen.”

Stephen shrugged. “If it’s me, that’s fine. If not…we’ll find the one who is and make sure they’re trained well enough. This is uncharted territory for all three Orders, really. We’ll work it out as we go. Now, however,” he rested a hand on Phil’s elbow, “let Clint take you home. You need to rest after that rather impressive show of power in there.”

Phil nodded tiredly. “I’m most likely going to sleep for days after that.”

“I’ll look after you,” Clint said. “Me and Daisy and the others.”

It was a sign of his exhaustion that Phil let the Elf put an arm around him, to support him. Phil leaned into Clint, sighing. “Let’s go home.” He handed over the ring he’d enchanted that would take them back to Shield Keep.

Clint accepted it. “Lean on me and I’ll take care of you.”

Lucky and Lola gathered close, Clint let the Teleport spell take them away, landing them safely in Phil’s casting chamber. “Let’s get you to bed.”

“That sounds wonderful.”

Clint practically carried Phil up the stairs, letting Lucky take care of Lola, who was now dragging as badly as her Wizard even though she hadn’t been involved in the magical duel; their connection had shared with the dragon everything that Phil had done, and his fatigue was being communicated across it. Using that much power had really taken it out of Phil, which wasn’t a surprise really. Clint had seen him after closing the Void Point back at Hydra’s headquarters. This had to have been much more tiring than that.

Melinda was awaiting them as they exited into the corridor upstairs. “I’ve already turned the bed down,” she announced, “and Andrew is letting Daisy and Crystal know you’re back.”

The archer wanted to ask how she’d known they were on the way home, but dropped it. Probably Nick, calling on one of the speaking stones. Still, he was glad that they were expected, and he nodded toward her as he steered Phil up toward the stairs.

It was hard to get him up there under his own power, but Clint persevered eventually, with Melinda’s assistance; she let him take Phil into the room alone, giving them privacy, which Clint appreciated. He set Phil down on the side of the bed, helping his lover get undressed and the magical gadgets he’d carried with him – and ended up not using, except for the shield – put back where they belonged. Then he tucked Phil up into bed, pulling the sheets and comforter up around his chin. Lola climbed up after him, curling up at his side.

“Thank you,” he murmured, snuggling in a little.
“No need to thank me,” Clint answered, brushing his hand through Phil’s hair. “Not after that display. You are one magnificent bastard, Phil.”

Phil snorted, but it was a pitiful effort. “Just doing what needed to be done.”

“That’s what makes it so magnificent.”

His lover’s eyes were fluttering. Clint leaned over and kissed him chastely. “Get some sleep, and I’ll go down and talk to Daisy and Crystal.”

Phil didn’t reply; he was already asleep.

Clint would have loved to be able to crawl into bed with him, but he knew at least Daisy would need to know that her Dad was just fine. Instead, with a small smile, he closed the bedroom door and left his lover to his sleep. Melinda must have already gone downstairs; the sitting room was empty except for Lucky, who had been waiting patiently curled up on the couch.

Lucky got up and ambled over, giving him an inquisitive chirp. Clint dropped his hand to his dragon’s head. “You wanna stay here since I can’t?”

The overwhelming emotion he received through their bond was certainty, so the archer reopened the door just enough to let his own dragon into the room. To be honest, he felt a little better that Lucky had decided he wanted to play guard, it meant his lover wouldn’t be alone. Yes, he was perfectly safe within their home; Phil could look after himself if needed, and Lola was with him, but it was better for Clint’s own peace of mind if there was a connection between them while the man he loved slept. Lucky would be that connection, would look after both Wizard and dragon and keep Clint informed if there was anything amiss.

He wandered back downstairs, wondering where Daisy and Crystal had gotten to; Andrew met him, and pointed him in the direction of the library when the archer asked.

“Thanks,” the archer said sincerely.

“No,” Andrew replied, “thank you for bringing him home.”

The Elf shrugged. “I really wasn’t much use to him.”

The smirk that graced Andrew’s handsome face was just on this side of amused. “Keep telling yourself that, Clint.”

With those parting words, the formerly cursed man walked away, leaving a somewhat confused Clint standing in the corridor, pondering just what Andrew had meant by that.

Sighing, Clint gave up on trying to figure out what that had meant and headed toward the library. The door was cracked open, and through it he could hear Daisy reading to Crystal, her voice changing as she spoke as different characters.

“—I will say to him, ‘Hello. My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die’.”

Daisy must have noticed him standing in the doorway, because she stopped reading. He wanted to tell her not to stop on his account; Crystal looked totally enraptured, curled up in the older girl’s lap, and Clint couldn’t love Daisy more in that moment for putting that expression on the little girl’s face. Crystal had been through so much, it was amazing that a simple story had the effect of bringing out that innocence in her.
Crystal looked up, saw him, and then wriggled out of Daisy’s lap to come and embrace him. “Daddy!” she exclaimed happily. “Is Dad asleep?”

“Yes, he is.” He met Daisy’s eyes, nodding to her even as he was reassuring the little girl. “He’s very tired, so Lucky is going to be looking after him and Lola for a bit.”

“Lucky will do a good job,” Crystal said with all the conviction a six-year-old could muster.

“You bet he will.” Clint picked her up, hugging her, so very grateful to every single God there was that he’d been given the chance to raise this precious child. He swore to himself that he would do the very best job he could, because she needed him.

“And Pierce?” Daisy asked, her voice quiet; Clint could almost hear the dread she was doing her best to hide.

“He won’t be bothering anyone ever again.”

He could see the tension fade out of her shoulders. “Good.”

Clint knew he would be explaining to her what had happened at some point, but for now Crystal didn’t need to hear all that. Later, when the little girl was asleep, the archer would take Daisy aside and tell her the entire story. She deserved to know just how amazing her Dad was…not that she didn’t already know that, but it didn’t hurt to add to her knowledge of the man who’d raised her.

“We left the Barons to deal with Stern,” he went on. “Phil was exhausted, and that’s not Guild business anyway.”

Although that didn’t mean that there wasn’t a small part of him that really wanted to know what sort of hell the Barons had rained down on Stern. But then, he was sure he’d hear about it at some point, from Nick at least. Besides, Phil took precedence over whatever was going to happen to Baron Jerald.

“Daisy was reading to me,” Crystal said, “and she told me it was a book that Dad used to read to her when she was small.”

Somehow, he could see Phil doing that very thing. “Then, why don’t we let her get to a part she can stop, then we’ll get lunch.”

“Okay, Daddy.”

Daisy was smiling, which meant Clint hadn’t overstepped in volunteering her to keep on with the book. She took her seat once more, and Clint set Crystal down in her lap, curling up in another chair close by. He didn’t care about the story; all he wanted to do was spend some time with his girls.

And they were his. Just as he was theirs. He wouldn’t have it any other way.
“That was…” Stephen faltered, not quite certain what to say.

It was unusual for the Great Wizard to be at a loss for words.

Ianto could completely understand, since he wasn’t at all sure what words to use, himself.

The pair of Wizards had headed back to Gateway by silent, mutual agreement. The events of the day…honestly, Ianto had known that Phil was powerful, but to open a Void Point on his own…that was incredible. And Phil thought he, Ianto, could do the same thing? Well, Ianto wasn’t so sure of that, since he had talents of his own that no other Wizard had, but he’d see, and it wasn’t as if he hadn’t thought about it, at least the whole idea of being able to close one. After all, who knew what the Universal Powers were capable of? And what the Void and the Deep Ways had planned for either of them?

Ianto collapsed into his chair in the study, Stephen doing the same on the other side of the desk. He felt…well, he felt drained, and yet he hadn’t done a lick of magic. He thought it might be psychosomatic, knowing that Phil had looked like death before Clint had spirited him away, which made sense after the shit he’d pulled.

No one should have been able to do such a thing. And yet, Phil Coulson had.

It boggled the mind.

“He opened a Void Point, Stephen,” he felt he had to say that out loud. Because that made it real.

“I know.” Stephen rubbed a hand across his face. “It should have been impossible. There’s nothing in the ancient writings at all about such a thing.”

“Well, I think we can agree that the ancient writings are a bit rubbish.” But then, all they really had were things from Great Order’s point of view, and they both knew the Great Wizards in the past were the kings of propaganda. There would have been no way in any of the hells those ancient Wizards would have admitted that what Phil had done was possible.

That had his Great counterpart laughing tiredly. “You’re not wrong there. And, let’s face it…it would be something that the Greats would have wanted to hide, because the last thing they’d want were Cardinals and Voids opening and closing that sort of thing at will.”

“Very true.” It was gratifying to know that Stephen agreed with him. But then, if anyone was intimately familiar with the things the Greats had pulled in the past, it was Stephen Strange.

“And Phil thinks you should be able to manipulate Cardinal Points as well.”

Ianto didn’t admit that he’d been thinking the very same thing a couple of moments earlier. “I doubt it, and to be honest I don’t even want to attempt it. Although, as long as we’re being honest, I can totally see Daisy Coulson being able to do just that when she’s older.”

“So do I. She is one impressive young Wizard.”

“I’m also pretty sure she’ll be taking my job someday.”
Stephen raised a single eyebrow. “I wasn’t aware you were given to prophecy.”

“I’m not. But even I can see she’s going to be amazing. And besides, there will come a day when I’ll want to go back to traveling. After all, me being Grand Master of Cardinal Order hadn’t been meant to be a lifetime job for me.”

Stephen laughed at that. “My friend, that would be impossible where you’re concerned. You and Phil both.”

Ianto felt that hadn’t needed to be said, not really.

It had gotten a bit easier to joke about his impending immortality over the years. But that ease came with the knowledge that he’d always have Jack with him, to walk alongside the Wizard on the eternal path that had been set out for both of them. It also helped somewhat that they knew that Jack, while Deathless, would someday find that last, permanent, death, even though that would be perhaps millions of years into the future for them both. On that far away day, Ianto knew he could sever his connection to the Deep Ways and follow his husband into whatever Heaven the Gods called them to.

Phil, however…for him, the threat of near immortality was fresh, and he hadn’t lost anyone yet, not like Ianto and Jack had. The Wizard knew that the time would come sooner rather than later, since Daisy was as mortal as any other Wizard and would move on without her father being able to follow. Ianto also knew that his fellow Wizard would need them all to get through it. Thank the Gods that Clint had several thousand years of life before Phil lost him, as well.

“So,” Ianto said, changing the subject and getting himself out of his own head, “do you believe they’ll ever be a Great Wizard version of Phil and I?”

Stephen shrugged. “I seriously doubt it. The universal magic that myself and my fellows draw from is powerful but not sentient.”

“That you know of.”

“Point.” The Great Wizard glanced at him shrewdly. “So…do we inform the Quorum about Pierce as soon as possible, or wait for Phil to recover?”

Ianto considered. There were pros and cons to both methods. However…“Now. Before Phil gets his strength back. That way, one: he doesn’t have to deal with it; and two: it might make the other members of the Quorum believe he’s not as powerful as he actually is, if he’s been knocked for six afterward.”

“That’s what I was thinking. I know that facing down Pierce was to be the proof that he could hold the position against all comers, but this level of power might very well start a panic within the Quorum…and I don’t mean from the Voids and Cardinals.”

That was true. There were some Greats who were predisposed to being wary of both Cardinals and Voids; they didn’t need that to tip over into something even worse if it got around that Phil could tear into the Veil and create his own Void Points. They could use it as an example of how unnatural either order was.

Until they managed to do more to combat those certain factions, it would be best to keep Phil’s new ability secret.

“We can claim that the Void took Pierce on its own,” Ianto supposed. “It wouldn’t be all that far from the truth, except the Void acted through Phil instead of doing the deed itself.”
“That’s considerably less worse than the truth.”

“In certain eyes, yes.” Ianto leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers. “Can you imagine Ross and his cronies finding out the real story before things were more settled?”

Stephen shuddered rather theatrically. “That would be truly frightening.”

Ianto couldn’t disagree.

His fellow Grand Master stood. “And on that note, I’m going to head home. We can announce Pierce’s ‘death’ in the morning.”

“Sounds good.”

Ianto went to stand as well, but Stephen waved him off. “I can see myself out...as soon as I collect Agamotto from wherever he is.”

“Front room most likely. That’s where Myfanwy likes to hang out.”

“Then I shall see you in the morning.” With a backward wave from the Cloak of Levitation, Stephen was gone.

Leaving Ianto to his own thoughts...which had more to do with Phil’s assertion that Ianto himself could do the very thing Phil had done.

Yes, he’d done a little manipulation of both Cardinal and Void Points in the past; the latter, with the help of Suzie Costello during the Battle of Canary’s Wharf. It had been a last-ditch effort; men had been swarming the ship they’d been on, and Ianto had done the only thing he could: to get Suzie’s cooperation with using the Void Point in the town to repel the boarders. It had kicked off a whole mess that had culminated in the creation of the Wizard’s Guild, and the idea of that Guild remained strong to this day, even if the Guild itself was flawed.

However, Ianto had only been the guiding mind; it had been Suzie’s own magic that had brought the Void Point to their aid. She’d trusted him, and he’d proven that he could be trusted. It was a very different thing to create his own Cardinal Point out of thin air, something that Ianto didn’t believe he could do...even if he truly wanted to.

Which he did not.

Still, now that that particular earwig had been planted, he couldn’t stop wondering about it. The only thing that was truly stopping him was the notion that he could mess this up so badly the Deep Ways could repudiate him, and then where would Jack be? And Ianto wasn’t about to leave his husband to suffer near-eternity alone, not if he could possibly avoid it.

In the end, it didn’t matter if Ianto was that powerful or not. He wasn’t about to risk Jack’s happiness in order to test Phil’s words. No, the Wizard wasn’t that curious about whether it was possible or not. In the long run, it simply didn’t matter.

Perhaps in the future he may see a need to attempt it, but at the moment that very idea was too fraught with pitfalls to pursue. Ianto didn’t need or want to create his own, personal, Cardinal Point. He would go on as he had, and deal with it if it arises.

For now, he’d simply let Phil be the only Wizard capable of such a feat, and to keep the secret of it close. No one needed to know the truth of what had actually occurred. He’d have to speak to the four Barons about it, although he suspected that Baron Nick was gladly keep the knowledge to
himself.

He’d contact Barons Tony, Alexander, and Henry about it, but later. Right now, he was tired, and he wanted his husband.

Standing, Ianto went in search of Jack. He needed a little cuddling time with the man he loved.
Chapter 73

Pepper had to sit, she was so stunned by what Tony had just told her.

Phil Coulson – her friend – had been powerful enough to open a Void Point by himself, and to toss Pierce inside.

No one should have been able to do that. Yes, she’d heard the story of how Phil had closed the one that had been at that former Hydra base, but that had been somewhat different; that Void Point had already existed, and had been poisoned. Opening one, however…that shouldn’t have been possible, let alone then closing it once more after having the Void drag someone through to whatever fate the Void had decided would be Pierce’s.

And yet, Tony had done nothing but rant about it ever since he’d gotten back from Barony Shandling. Pepper had expected him to go on about Baron Jerald, but not this. He’d gone specifically to take care of the Baron, not to witness Phil Coulson’s show of power against the former Head of Void Order.

Honestly, Pepper didn’t know what to think, because it should have been impossible. Tony was impressed, if the sheer amount of sarcasm was any indication, and she and Bruce had been a rapt audience as he’d given a play-by-play of what had occurred, using hand gestures and colorful language in order to get the entire story out.

“But that’s impossible,” Bruce had broken into the tirade, echoing Pepper’s own thoughts on the matter. “No one can do that.”

“Yeah, well I saw it,” Tony disagreed. “Sure, there were parts of it that, not being a Wizard, weren’t things I could actually see, as it were. But was pretty obvious that Phil was just shrugging off every single one of Pierce’s spells, like they were just irritating him. And there was this black armor that appeared out of nowhere, and I’m pretty sure that was Void, too. Then…well, the air got weird, Pierce was dragged backward by some sort of invisible force, and then he vanished. Oh, but not before his dragon did a suicide run after him. It was the rest of the Grand Master Wizard party who’d explained, not in so many words but with that, ‘the Void passed judgment’, shit. So, it’s fairly obvious what went on, even if no one came right out and said, ‘Oh, hey…the guy created his own personal Void Point and threw Pierce in it’.”

“Grand Master Phil really is the most powerful Void Wizard in the world.” Bruce looked to be in awe. “That’s incredible. I’d really like to speak to him about it sometime.”

Ever since Ianto had broken a large part of the curse on Bruce, he’d been a lot freer with his opinions on certain things, as well as looking as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Pepper knew that Ianto still had some work to do, but at least what he’d managed to accomplish would make it possible for Mistress Betty to testify against her father. Plus, Stephen would oversee everything, so that the proceedings were fair and aboveboard. Catching Master Thaddeus in something like this would mean sanctions against him. The entire affair was going to get uglier before it got better.

However, Pepper couldn’t think of that at the moment. This news about Phil was just too much and had to be prioritized.

“This is not good,” she murmured in dismay, her mind making a leap that a non-Wizard would not
have.

Her words had both men looking at her.

The Wizard shifted in her seat, her eyes going to her mirror in its cubby. She desperately wanted to call and check on Phil, but didn’t dare. She also didn’t want to look at either Bruce or Tony, knowing that they were going to be demanding an explanation of her comment.

“There are certain Greats who already distrust both the Cardinals and the Voids,” she answered their unspoken questions, still not willing to glance at either. “They would look for any excuse to campaign against either Order. How do you think they’re going to handle knowing there’s a Void Wizard out there who can open and close the Void at will? Ianto can’t do that with Cardinal Points, but he’s powerful in his own right, and there are those who would do anything to get rid of him. Phil…he’s been beneath their notice until Hydra happened, and now it’s out in open Quorum that he was once the Dark One…and he can apparently manipulate the Void. That’s not going to go over well at all.”

Tony cursed. “You’re right. Damnit, Pep…he’s just painted a really big target on himself if this gets out.”

“Exactly.” She was glad to know he understood, even though he has a lot more politically savvy than he gave himself credit for.

“Would the other Grand Masters actually report that sort of thing?” Bruce asked.

Pepper sighed. “Most likely not. Both Ianto and Stephen genuinely like Phil, and need him as Grand Master of Voids. He’s their symbol of just what could happen when a person is treated abominably because of their magic, and possibly their greatest ally in the need to clean up all the Orders and to stop the discrimination that the Greats are perpetuating. They don’t dare put that target on his back, as you put it, Tony. Because it’s not just Phil here…it’s Daisy and Crystal, and Clint. Phil’s family. They won’t put any of them in danger.”

“What about Baron Jerald?” Bruce wanted to know. “He was there; he witnessed it, too.”

Tony waved that off. “Stern has too many things to worry about at the moment. The Council was going to let him select his replacement, because we’d already decided he’s a detriment to his Barony – something we haven’t done in ages, apparently – but he went nuts the moment after the Wizards left. Kept screaming that it was a conspiracy and that Hydra was gonna come and get us all. Oh, he’s not Hydra,” he answered Pepper’s unspoken question, “but he believed Pierce’s rhetoric something fierce. Stern is convinced Hydra is the future, and that was why he was so willing to hide a wanted criminal. It also helped that he’s been barking mad for a long time, according to his Steward, so it was pretty simple to get him committed to the nearest mental institution. No one’s going to believe whatever he says.

“And, as for Baron Henry Pym…he really doesn’t have any idea what happened. I’m sure we can convince him it wasn’t much. And, even if he did work it out, he’s just glad Hydra is out of his Barony and knows that Phil was the one responsible for that happening. He won’t give the game away.”

Pepper couldn’t help the relief that flowed through her. She also assumed there weren’t any other witnesses, or else Tony would have said.

Phil was going to be safe…for the time being.
Or, she should say, his family.

Because, while any potential enemies knew they couldn’t kill him, the Void wouldn’t allow it, his loved ones would be in serious danger if it got out that he was just that powerful. Phil’s weakness had always been his loved ones, and there were three of them now. Three potential targets, a way to get Phil to cooperate with whatever plans someone might have.

Hydra had already tried that with Daisy…twice. There was no way that particular plan wouldn’t be put into operation again if whoever out there believed they could get away with it. Not that they would, because this was Phil and he would move every Heaven and the world itself to protect the ones he cared for, but that wouldn’t necessarily stop a fool from attempting it once more.

“What about Stern’s successor?” she asked, as a way to get her thoughts out of that particular track.

Tony shrugged. “We have a couple of viable candidates, and we’ll have to choose soon, but Stern hadn’t actually picked anyone, not in his will and hadn’t even left a single clue to lead to the right person in case he keeled over and died. It would have left Barony Shandling in chaos.”

Pepper didn’t bother to even try to hide her flinch. “The man really is insane.” As Tony himself didn’t have any physical heirs – although both of them hoped to change that soon – he’d chosen Pepper herself as his successor, even though she really had no interest in running Ferrous. And, if anything happened to her, then Rhodey would take over. Not that he knew it, but then telling Rhodey ahead of time that he might be taking over an entire Barony was a really bad idea. He’d fight it tooth and nail.

“No doubt of that, not after the fit he pitched in front of all of us.” He shrugged. “There will be more of an inquiry as to the Barony’s status, but it’s safe to say that Stern most likely has run it into the ground. I don’t envy the poor idiot who takes over. The accounting alone is going to be a nightmare, and not everyone can be a Nicholas Fury, who managed to fix the mess that was Triskelia in less than a decade.”

She’d heard the stories about the condition of Barony Triskelia before Baron Nick had kicked the old Baron out, and Tony was right…what he’d done had been a miracle, really.

“Also,” her husband added, “I think Fury might be up to something.”

That piqued her interest. “Any idea what?”

“Nope,” he popped the ‘p’, “but I really want to find out. He’s acting even more cagey than usual, and while we were on our signature hunt for backing from the Council, he said he wanted to get together with several of the other Barons before putting some sort of plan out there that he’d been working on. Anything Fury has his fingers in, is bound to be either brilliant or bonkers.”

He had a point. Nick Fury was both of those things. Perhaps Pepper could mention something to Phil, when he was up and functioning once more. After all, the Baron was his oldest friend, and certainly he would have heard something.

“I’m heading down to my workshop.” Tony stood. “It’s been a crazy couple of days and I need to get my hands dirty.”

“I’ll come with you,” Bruce offered. “I wanted to talk to you about that armor you built…”

Together, the two men left the library, leaving Pepper alone with her thoughts.

And there were a lot of those.
Chapter 74

Well, we're coming to the end of this (really long!) story. I'm still working on the sequel, "The Rise of the Champions"; at the moment I'm in the middle of a big battle, trying to juggle fourteen characters (nearly half of which are viewpoint characters), and it's probably the most challenging thing I've written yet. Wish me luck!

Battles are HARD! *pouts*

Steve felt like fidgeting, and it took all his considerable willpower to keep himself from doing it.

Instead, he stood on the upper floor balcony of Gabe’s home in Falcon Enclave, leaning his arms on the railing, pretending to watch the Elven citizens stroll along the sidewalks and upper walkways amid the tree canopy, going about their business, as he tossed and turned mentally, lost in his thoughts.

He was aware that Grand Master Phil was planning on facing Alexander Pierce today, and the Council of Barons was going to do something with Baron Jerald Stern, but he hadn’t heard anything about it, as yet. Phil had promised that someone would be contacting him, one way or the other, no matter how the confrontation would turn out, understanding that, while this wasn’t the version of Hydra Steve was personally familiar with, he still had a vested interest in the outcome of today’s events. The Wizard had said that he, himself, might be tired out after any sort of magical fight, but that he would arrange for someone to call him on the speaking stone that felt as if it was burning a hole in his trouser pocket. It had been a parting gift from Phil yesterday, and Steve had appreciated the gesture, needing to be able to keep in touch as needed.

Steve also appreciated the magic involved in creating the object. Such stones certainly would have been useful back during his time, when communicating along battle lines had been crucial, and runners inefficient and prone to getting killed before delivering their dispatches. Sometimes those dispatches would fall into the wrong hands, and that would make a hash of any strategy that might have been relying on that information. Codes had been a bitch to have to recreate every few weeks, too.

The stone would also allow Steve to receive updates about Bucky. Ianto had sworn that, as soon as things quieted down, that he and the other Grand Masters would work on getting the curses removed. There hadn’t been any sort of promise that Bucky would be back to his old self; in fact, Steve rather thought he would never be the same, not after everything Hydra had put Bucky through. There wasn’t even any sort of guarantee that his memories would return, but Steve had to hold out hope for at least that outcome. He didn’t want to be so close to regaining his best friend – and, to be honest, the man he’d loved since he’d been a boy – only to lose him again. That would be too horrible to contemplate.

In the meantime, Steve was left to twiddle his thumbs. And he’d always hated waiting, even though he’d usually given a decent impression of being good at it.
He could have stayed at Castle Ferrous, but Sam had insisted he get out of the place, and to try to keep himself occupied instead of haunting the castle corridors like some sort of ghost. Pepper was doing enough pacing for all of them, Sam had pointed out, and she’d had more reason for it than Steve himself had.

Sam had had a point; it wasn’t like anyone Steve knew especially well had been going to Barony Shandling, not like Pepper’s husband and good friend had been.

Still, he’d thought he’d gotten to know Phil – and Clint, and all the kids that hung around Daisy Coulson – during their meal back in Gateway, and he was concerned for the man’s safety. And no, it wasn’t because Phil had promised to help Bucky. That was important, but Steve felt he and the Void Wizard could become friends if given the opportunity.

He really wanted that opportunity. He didn’t know many people now, and he would like to have a new friend. Or friends, as the case may be, since Clint would most likely be anywhere that Phil was. Plus, there was Daisy, and he’d gotten the impression that she would be someone who, despite the fact that she was so much younger than him – not even counting the fact that he was technically over three hundred years old – was well on her way to unofficially adopting him. And he’d be forever grateful for her help in finding out the information that Ianto had needed to help Buck. Her, and all her friends.

This place and time wasn’t going to be so bad, after all.

However, he was prone to brooding whenever the opportunity presented itself, like now…and, like back at the castle, while he awaited to hear what had happened at Barony Shandling.

So, Sam had whisked him away from Castle Ferrous to Falcon Enclave where Gabe had taken one look at Steve’s face, rolled his eyes, and then had given him the tour of the Enclave, as well as letting them get a bit of catching up done. Despite himself, Steve had enjoyed it; it really had taken his mind off what was going on out at Barony Shandling.

However, after several hours of it, Steve had told both Gabe and Sam that he really needed some time alone, and had retreated to the balcony, where he could look down at the Elven citizens bustling to and fro, and letting his mind chew over events. Gabe hadn’t been at all surprised, but then he’d known Steve and his habits from their service together.

To be honest, he really wanted to use that speaking stone. But Steve knew he didn’t dare; calling Phil or Clint at the wrong moment could distract them from whatever they were doing. He didn’t want to put his new acquaintances in any danger, and if they were in the middle of some sort of fight…well, that thought made Steve want to call them even more, which was exactly the wrong thing to do.

Steve sighed. Damnit.

He was pulled from his thoughts by the sudden appearance of a man down in front of the house, fading into view right in front of Steve’s eyes; it had obviously been some sort of Teleport spell that had deposited the man there. He was tall, dark-skinned, dressed all in black and wearing an eyepatch of all things. Even from his vantage point, Steve could tell just how intimidating this person was, and before he could even react the stranger was regarding him with that one, sharp, eye.

He thought of Crystal, talking about her Uncle Nick looking like a pirate and, if anyone did, it was that man down in the front garden.

Uncle Nick, who was actually Nicholas Fury, Baron Triskelia. Who’d been going to Shandling with
everyone else.

Steve was through the balcony doors and heading down the stairs before he even registered the fact that he was moving.

He blew right past a surprised Sam, practically running for the front door. He just knew that was who that stranger was...Baron Nick, and he’d come from whatever had happened at Barony Shandling and was there to see Steve himself. To tell him what had happened, and that frightened him a little because why would a seated Baron come directly if it was good news?

There was a knock, and Gabe was there, pulling the door open as Steve made it to his old friend’s side. “Yes?” he inquired politely to the man standing on the front porch.

“Lord Gabe Jones,” the man greeted, his voice amiable. But there was still that hint of threat in his dark eye, yet Steve knew it wasn’t directed at Gabe or Steve personally. “I’m Nick Fury, Baron Triskelia. I’m here to speak to Sir Steven.”

His heart racing, he stepped forward to introduce himself. “I’m Sir Steven,” he said, something in the other man’s stature that made Steve want to be formal with him. “How did you know I was here?”

“I called out to Ferrous first,” Baron Nick explained. “Can I come in? Or do we discuss our business out in the open where anyone might hear it?”

Gabe stepped aside in order to let the Baron enter the house. “We can go into the sitting room,” he invited.

“That will do nicely.” Baron Nick went in the direction indicated, taking a chair next to the unlit fireplace, not bothering to remove his cloak, as if he knew he wouldn’t be staying long.

“Can I get you anything?” Gabe offered, as he sat on the sofa next to an alert Sam, saving the chair next to the Baron’s for Steve.

“No, but thanks.” Baron Nick settled himself comfortably. “Now, I really wanted to speak to Sir Steven alone, but the pair of you seem dead set on serving as chaperones.” He sounded amused. “I suppose it won’t hurt for you to hear what I have to say. After all, if I can’t trust a former Howling Commando and a man whose training emphasizes keeping confidences, then who can I trust?”

It didn’t surprise Steve that Baron Nick knew just who Gabe and Sam were. “What can I do for you, Your Grace?” Steve asked politely.

“Well, I assume you know that Phil Coulson is my oldest friend…”

He had known that, and confirmed it.

“He suggested that I speak to you about the position of Knights’ Commander I have that’s going spare. Thought you might be perfect for the job.”

Steve’s eyebrows shot up to his hairline. A job? As Knights’ Commander for the Barony of Triskelia?

Well, if he’d led with that Steve had to assume that everything in Barony Shandling had gone as planned.

“It did,” Baron Nick answered, and that was when Steve realized he’d said that aloud, “but it took a
very unexpected turn. Needless to say, Alexander Pierce is no longer an issue and the Council of Barons are going to be fielding new Barons to take over at Shandling for the next week or so. Everyone came out of the situation just fine, except that Phil’s pretty damned exhausted and is most likely gonna be sleeping the magical hangover off for a couple of days.”

Steve was relieved at that. He’d been worried more than he’d thought, it seemed.

Although it appeared that Baron Nick wasn’t going to go into detail about what had actually occurred. It was probably private Wizard and Council business, and Steve wasn’t cleared to know. Even if he really wanted to. And he did. Perhaps he might be read into the situation if he accepted the position the Baron was offering…not that that was a good enough reason to accept. Although maybe he’d consider it more closely if it meant getting a few answers.

Or, maybe not. It certainly wouldn’t hurt his motivation any.

“Now,” Baron Nick went on, “I do want you to consider taking on the position I’ve offered. A man like you would do well in it.”

“But I’ve only been awake in this time for a couple of days,” Steve protested, even though he really wanted to say ‘yes’.

“The job hasn’t much changed over the centuries,” the Baron waved off the comment. “It would give you something to do, as well as get you a position that would allow you to work at something somewhat familiar to you while you learn more about the time you’ve found yourself in.”

“And it would give Triskelia the added prestige of having the Paladin of the Western Lands working for you,” Sam said shrewdly.

Ah, that made sense. Steve wanted to be outraged by the notion of Barony Triskelia trading on his name and title, but then this was Phil’s friend. Surely, if Baron Nick was friends with the Wizard who’d saved Steve and was going to try his damnedest to save Bucky, then perhaps he should give the man the benefit of the doubt.

To his credit, the Baron wasn’t insulted by Sam’s observation. In fact, he seemed to find the notion funny. “Doctor Wilson, hadn’t you heard? The Paladin of the Western Lands was lost about three hundred years ago. I seriously doubt he’d be rising up from the dead. Don’t you?”

The answer seemed to satisfy Sam, because he sat back and gave Baron Nick a solemn nod. “I do.”

“Sir Steven Rogers is a simple Knight,” the Baron continued. “One that was recommended to me by the Grand Master of Voids. Now, how that Grand Master met Sir Steven…I don’t know. I only know that he received a glowing report, had excellent credentials, and was looking for a job. I happen to have one open.”

The answer also satisfied Steve. He needed a fresh start, and to put that Paladin nonsense that Howard Stark had saddled him with far behind him. This would be his chance to do just that.

“Then,” he said, “we should leave that ‘Sir Steven’ thing behind, and just use Steve. It’s what I was called back then. I have no idea where history got that ‘Steven’ mess from.” It was probably Howard; he’d always been a bit of a stickler for certain proprieties, and he’d believed the Paladin needed a fancy sounding name.

The Baron shrugged. “Who knows what history is going to think of us all in a couple of centuries? Personally, I wouldn’t mind if I was just some sort of footnote on a dusty scroll somewhere. But, we don’t have any sort of clue what’s going to happen in the next several years, so there’s no telling
how we’ll all be remembered.”

There was something slightly shifty in that comment, but Steve let it slide, mainly because he doubted he’d get any sort of straight answer. Not that he thought the Baron was hiding anything; oh, well…he was sure he was. But Steve didn’t have to be privy to Baronial secrets to accept the offer he’d been given.

If it applied to him, he was sure he’d find out later.

He held out his hand. “Then I’ll take the job.”

“Excellent.” The Baron accepted the handshake, then rose from his chair. “I’ll expect you to report to Castle Triskelia in three days’ time.” He reached into his pocket, pulling out a heavy ring with a large black stone. “This will get you there. I’ll have Phil make you your own Artifact once he’s up and around again. For now, use this.”

Steve took the ring. It was really gaudy; not his style at all. Maybe he could speak with Phil about something closer to what he would wear…if it needed to be a ring at all. “I’ll see you in three days, then.”

Baron Nick nodded then, with a dramatic swirl of his cloak, he strode toward the front door.

He stopped once he got there, his hand on the knob. “Oh, and that ring can carry two. So, if your friends want to babysit you for a bit, they’d be welcome. I’ve heard good things about Doctor Wilson from Andrew Garner, by the way, and of course Lord Gabe is a living legend. I’d recommend, if you really want to leave the Paladin behind, you not let on who he really is if he decided to tag along with you when you report for duty.”

And, with that, he was gone, the door closing behind him.

“Well,” Gabe said, bemusedly, “he’s certainly got a presence and no mistake.”

“Steve,” Sam added, “I think it’s a good idea you put your past behind you and move on. But are you certain this is what you want?”

He could understand why his new friend was concerned. “I’m sure,” he reassured Sam. “It’s a job I know how to do, and it gets me out into the world again. Besides, I need something to do, and sitting around either here or Castle Ferrous isn’t going to cut it. I’m not made for inaction.”

Besides, he didn’t say, he was hoping that Bucky would get his memory back and join him. They’d made a formidable team, back during the War, and Steve wished they could be once more.

That would be up to Ianto and Phil. But Steve had confidence that the two most powerful Wizards in the world could pull off some sort of miracle, and bring the man he loved back to him.

He would just have to wait.
Chapter 75

Chapter Notes

Okay, I meant to have this up yesterday, but I was distracted by real life happenings. Not only did someone try to break into my apartment early in the morning - they didn't succeed - when I got up I found my refrigerator wasn't working and everything in my freezer had thawed out. I had to throw away an entire freezer full of food.

Anyway, I didn't realize that I hadn't posted until it was time for bed, so I'm taking the time to do it today. Any mistakes that you find is me being in a rush to get this up, because I only have a short time before work, so it didn't get my usual pre-posting read-through.

One more chapter to go...

Phil awoke slowly, languidly, swimming up from a dream he couldn’t recall once he was fully conscious. He could tell that he was in his own bed, recalling that Clint had tucked him in quite nicely after they’d returned from Barony Shandling. The Wizard had been barely able to walk, and he smiled quietly as he thought about how his lover had taken care of him. It had been nice, having someone do that for him.

“It’s about time you woke up, sleepy head,” Clint’s voice murmured close to Phil’s ear.

He turned his head just a bit, and saw Clint lying down next to him, on his side, his head propped up on his hand, eyes crinkling as he smiled. His lover was fully clothed except for his boots, stretched out on top of the quilt, looking quite comfortable.

Phil returned the smile. “How long have I been asleep?” He felt like it had to have been awhile, although he couldn’t tell how much actual time had passed from the sunlight streaming in from the crack in the curtains over the bedroom window; it had been daylight when he’d gone to bed, as it was. His body felt as if he’d been prone for quite a while, judging from the little aches and the stiffness that flared up as he turned onto his side to face his lover.

“Three days,” Clint answered. “And it’s been a trial keeping both Daisy and Crystal from climbing into bed with you at various points.”

Warmth bloomed in his chest at the thought of his girls wanting to check up on him. “You didn’t keep them completely out, did you?”

Clint snorted, rolling his eyes. “Please. Like anything I could do would stop them from coming to see you, especially since Lockjaw can teleport pretty much anywhere Crystal wants to go.”

He had a point.

“What’s been going on while I was out?”
The Elf shook his head, the smile he was wearing turning wry. “I should have expected you to ask that very question.”

“Yes, you should have.” Phil was pretty sure Clint had expected that very thing, and so didn’t feel bad about teasing him about it.

“Well,” Clint began, “Stern is out. According to Nick, he went a little nuts after you did your thing with the Void, so they sectioned him almost immediately. The Council of Barons have a couple of people in mind to take over, but no one is looking forward to the accounting that’s gonna have to be made on the Barony.”

Phil didn’t bother to hide his wince. He could recall the accounting that had been going on when he’d showed up on Marcus’ doorstep in the beginning, and it had been thorough as much as it had been ugly. It was a tribute to his old friend that Marcus had been able to turn Triskelia around so quickly, relying on his stubbornness and sheer determination to get things back on track. Phil could only imagine what they would find doing the same thing at Shandling.

At least he didn’t have to worry about that himself.

“Ianto and Stephen announced Pierce’s ‘death’,” Phil could hear the quotes in his lover’s voice without the benefit of the usual accompanying finger motions, “without going into detail about what you’d pulled off. From what Ianto told me, they both decided that letting the Quorum believe you’re not as powerful as you actually are was the perfect way to go.”

That made sense. Doing what he’d done would have put a target on his back if it got out that he could actually open his own, personal, Void Points at will. They had enough problems with the Greats; none of them needed to cause more of a fuss by detailing everything that had occurred back at Shandling, and the Wizard was certain they could trust those present – with the exception of former Baron Jerald, but if he was as mad as all that no one would believe his assertions about the duel, anyway.

As for Baron Alexander Waverly and Sir Napoleon Solo…he was fairly certain they knew exactly who Phil Coulson had once been, and they were being silent about it. He would trust in them to keep that secret as well, since neither of them – including Master Illya Kuryakin – seemed inclined to spread it around to all and sundry.

However, it meant that Master Illya had most likely broken the vows of the Guild, despite originally denying having done any such thing…unless they’d tumbled onto the fact that he’d been the Dark One some other way. However, Phil was willing to overlook it, if Master Illya had confided in both his Baron and his lover. He felt he could trust them at this point; after all, they’d let him adopt Crystal. They could have easily withheld that consent if they’d wanted to.

As for Baron Tony…Phil was certain he’d inform Pepper about what had occurred, but that wasn’t a problem that he could see. Pepper was teaching Daisy, and had shown she could be trusted when he’d informed her of who he’d been, when she’d taken his daughter on as a teaching Master. Pepper had kept his secret confidential; it had been a risk to inform her of his past, but Phil had been right to let her know. He would never regret in confiding in her. She hadn’t even told her own husband.

As for Baron Henry Pym…he wasn’t sure about what would happen from that quarter, but he trusted Marcus to take care of things if there was a need to. He had a feeling there wouldn’t be, but Golden Gates’ Baron was a mystery to him. He would just have to trust that it would be handled.

Perhaps, one day, Phil could let this secret out; but, for now, with a certain segment of the Greats being utter bastards about the Cardinals and the Voids, it was for the best that no one outside their
inner circle know just how powerful he was.

However, there would come a time when Phil would speak to Ianto about opening Cardinal Points. He was convinced his opposite number could do it as well, no matter what Ianto might think.

“The alerts for Catherine and Ruby Hale are still outstanding. They’re the last of the Hydra cabal at large, and there really isn’t any place they can hide for long. At least, that’s the general idea. Personally, I won’t feel completely at ease until they’re caught.”

Phil could understand that. While he wasn’t all that familiar with either of the Hales – he’d recognized them from various Quorums he’d appeared in, but that was it – if only one member of Hydra was still out there, there was no telling what sort of plots Master and Novice could have their fingers in. It made the Wizard uneasy, knowing they were still at large.

“Oh,” Clint added, “Nick went and hired Steve. He should be reporting for duty today. And I really think our old friend is up to something, and Steve is going to be a part of it.”

Phil raised a single eyebrow in question.

Clint’s pupils dilated slightly.

*That* was an interesting response.

“Damnit, Phil,” Clint growled. “You have no idea how that turns me on.” With a single, smooth, movement, the archer pounced, pinning the Wizard down onto the bed with his body. “Hells, I’ve been turned on ever since you kicked Pierce’s ass.”

With that pronouncement, he was kissing Phil to within an inch of his immortal life.

What a nice way to work out the stiffness in his muscles…while gaining a little stiffness in a different part of his body.

He’d certainly have to remember the eyebrow trick for future use, Phil considered as Clint had his wicked way with him. He was also glad that neither of their dragons had been in the room with them. Not because they would be able to see them making love, but because they’d want to pounce on them at just the wrong moment, and the last thing Phil wanted was to be cockblocked by their own dragons.

After a rather pleasurable hour, both men were cleaning up in the rather spacious tub that Phil had had installed just off his bedchamber, when the Wizard returned to the previous subject, “What makes you think Marcus is up to something?”

“He’s got that glint in his eye,” Clint replied. He sat behind Phil, using one of the sponges to scrub the Wizard’s back. “I’m sure you know the one.”

Indeed, Phil did. That glint had gotten both of them into all sorts of trouble when they’d been young. “I’ll have to poke at him later and get the story out of him.”

“If anyone can do it, it’s you.”

He felt himself blush a little at the compliment.

An arm snaked about his waist, and Phil grabbed onto it, snuggling into the embrace. He’d never really known he was snuggler until he’d started sleeping with Clint. It just felt natural to do it, and he was going to indulge in it for as long as he could.
Phil threaded his fingers through Clint’s…to his surprise, the archer was wearing a ring. He glanced down, seeing a plain silver band on his ring finger.

It was tingling with magic. Cardinal magic…and something else, something he couldn’t quite identify, an older magic than anything Phil had ever sensed before.

“What’s this?” he asked, when he was unable to read the spells involved. It was something new, and his curiosity was eating at him a little.

Clint was silent for a heartbeat, then he rested his chin on Phil’s shoulder, as if he wanted to see their hands linked together. “Back when we found out you were gonna live for a really long time, I had a lot to think about. I ended up in your unfinished observatory – and you should totally talk to Stark about getting yourself an awesome telescope up there, I’m serious.”

Phil had considered it, so it pleased him that Clint agreed. He made a mental note to approach Baron Tony about it, at some point.

But he was sure that wasn’t the entire story, and he said so.

“Well, yeah, you’re right.” Clint was warm against his back, the water not quite reaching the perfection of that heat. “But Ianto found me and gave me this speech about the issues I was having and it’s been straightened out.”

If Ianto had spoken to Clint…it could have meant only one thing, not that Clint obviously wanted to talk about it. Phil very carefully didn’t react to where his thoughts were headed, and he was certain he was right: that Clint hadn’t been sure about staying with him, because Phil would lose him some day; not wanted for Phil to be hurt by his lover’s eventual death. Ianto had had to have gone through the same thing, before he’d figured out that he, himself, was near-immortal, and would be around and by his husband’s side for as long as Jack lived.

It would be different with him and Clint. While the Elf had an extended lifespan, he would eventually die, and Phil knew it would hurt when that happened…and hurt quite badly, almost as much as when Daisy and Crystal leaving him. There was no forever for them.

However, he didn’t want to think about that as yet. It would be there soon enough, and borrowing pain in advance of loss wasn’t the way to live his life.

“But,” Clint went on, “during that conversation I asked Ianto for a favor. This,” he waggled his hand, “is the favor.”

“He enchanted a ring for you?” Phil was confused. He could have done that, if only Clint had asked…although, he still couldn’t pinpoint the exact spells that had been laid into that simple band of silver, plus there was no way he could control Cardinal magic enough to work with it.

“Not just any enchantment.” Clint’s chest expanded as he took a deep breath. “I wasn’t so sure he’d have it ready for me so quickly, not with Sir James and the other messes he needed to take care of, but he gave this to me just this morning when he stopped in to check on you.”

Phil twisted in the water, the better to face the man he loved. “Clint, what is it?” He couldn’t imagine just what the archer was getting at, and needed to see his face. Clint looked nervous, and yet determined, so Phil didn’t think it was a bad thing.

He just needed to get it out of his lover, but he also knew that Clint would get to it when he was ready.
Blue eyes met his. “I thought, if I could give you a little bit of myself, for you to have when I was gone, it wouldn’t be so bad, so I asked Ianto just how he and Jack had been able to conceive a child between them.”

Phil’s heart clenched in his chest at that, while his mouth dropped open in shocked surprise. It wasn’t a secret that magic had aided Jack and Ianto in the conception of their daughter, Eirlys; however, where the spell had come from remained a mystery to this day, and Ianto had demurred when asked, claiming it had been a one-time thing.

Apparently, that wasn’t the case, but the Wizard could understand why Ianto would want people to think that. He hadn’t even been born when they’d used whatever magic they’d had with Eirlys, but there were still murmurs about it in various cliques within the Quorum. And Phil didn’t need to have been exposed to the Greats and their rhetoric to be certain that that particular Order had been upset and horrified at the notion of using magic to conceive and carry a child. He was pretty sure they would have considered it unnatural.

Phil wondered just how much grief the late Baron Gateway had gotten when he’d named Eirlys his heir. It had to have been nasty.

And, here was Clint, proposing to go through that for him, in order to give him something to hold onto when his lover eventually passed on.

How had he deserved such an offer?

The Wizard was so unbelievably touched by the gesture.

However, he must have remained silent for too long, because the hopeful and determined expression on Clint’s face faded, replaced by hurt and resignation. “Alright, we don’t have to, it was just an idea, and we have Crystal now – “

“No, Clint.” Phil took his lover’s hand, the one with the ring on it. “You just…Gods, you have no idea what this means to me, that you’d be willing to go through something like this. It…I didn’t think I could love you anymore than I already did, and then you go and say something like this…”

The smile he received was brilliant. “Well, that’s good then. I know it’s not something we’ll do immediately, and like I said I hadn’t expected Ianto to get this to me so soon…we can wait til Crystal is a little older, and you’ve gotten settled into your duties as Grand Master…oh, and gotten used to having actual Novices now…”

“But some day,” Phil vowed. “We’ll use that ring someday, because I’d love to have a child with you, one that’s truly our blood and bone. It’s possibly the greatest gift you could have given me.”

Something of Clint; a life that the two of them had created together. The very thought was heady and threatened to make him dizzy with the sheer excitement of the very notion of having a child that was solely theirs. He hadn’t even imagined something like this every happening, and he’d been happy with the idea of adopting as many children as they possibly could.

They could still do that, but this…

Daisy would be absolutely thrilled.

But he wasn’t going to say anything about it yet. It would be several years before they put that ring to good use. Phil was also certain there were rituals and such that would need to be followed in order for the magic to work, so he’d approach the other Wizard when it was time to start considering going through with it.
For now, he was going to settle for kissing Clint, and making certain his lover knew exactly how much this meant to him.
Chapter 76

Chapter Notes

And here we are...to the end of this story. Before you get mad at how I left this...just remember, there is a sequel that's in the works, and should start posting on November 19th. It's nowhere near finished, and it's already surpassed the word count on this monster, so...hold onto your hats.

Until then, I'll be posting my Marvel Bang on the 12th, so that will come first.

I hope you've all enjoyed this, and thanks to everyone who's left Kudos and comments, You are all amazing.

Loki was monumentally bored.

He had been in this cell ever since Thor had brought him back to Asgard, eleven years previously, after his abortive invasion of the Western Lands. The King of Asgard – and Odin was not his father, no matter what he had once claimed; as far as Loki was concerned he'd been stolen from his natural parents – had found him guilty of treason and had sentenced him to life in this dingy, boring cell. The cell itself affected his magic, making it impossible for him to use it in order to break out. He could taste Queen Frigga’s magic in its construction, and he could not help but be angry at her for being responsible for his imprisonment. Odin might not have been a father to him, but Loki had considered Frigga his mother; she had been the one to encourage him and to teach him magic, when the Wizard shown an aptitude for it. He had been closer to her than anyone else in his adoptive family…not that he’d discovered until much later that Odin had, in fact, stolen him and had decided to raise him as a scion of the Royal Family of Asgard, as a hostage against his birth family...who had not even attempted to retrieve him. So technically, more kidnapping than adoption had been involved in his life.

Really, at the time he had truly loved them all, even Odin and his puppy-like older ‘brother’, Thor. They had treated him well, loved him in return, but Loki had never been able to get past the truth of his own origins when he’d learnt of them. He had been so very angry, and yet had wanted to prove himself to the man who had reared him, who had taught Loki kingcraft at his knee, by Thor’s side, and he had done it by calling up the Demons called Chitauri, and had taken them into the Western Lands in order to gain more land and resources for Asgard.

It had turned out to be a really bad idea.

Loki could admit that now. Invading a sovereign land had been monumentally stupid. There really had been no way he could have taken chunks of land out of the neighboring country and hold onto them, not without a great deal of fighting and loss of resources on both sides. Even though he had had his spear, the one that would cloud men’s minds and bend them to his will, in the end defeat had come by an armed force that easily rolled over his own, slaughtering the Chitauri easily.

Perhaps it was idiotic of him, but Loki really did want revenge. Not that he had any idea just who to
get his revenge on.

After all, the loss had been his fault. He was no tactical genius like Odin was, or even Lady Sif, Asgard’s Knights’ Commander and leader of the fighting unit known as the Warriors Three. Loki had only had his magic, and his ability to call as many demons as he could to throw at the Western Lands’ defenders until they either broke or managed to push back the hordes of Chitauri, causing them to lose every piece of ground they had managed to gain.

He sighed, reclining back in the chair he had taken to brooding in…which meant it was his favorite, as he brooded quite a lot. Frigga had visited just that morning, and he’d been glad to see her, not that he was about to admit that. Still, Loki thought she might be very much aware of his feelings on the matter of her regular visits to him.

Thor also came every once in a while, in his attempts to help in the Wizard’s ‘rehabilitation’. There were times when Loki thought about playing along, if just to get out of the cell and for the inherent entertainment purposes, but he always changed his mind. It wasn’t that he didn’t think he could keep up the act; far from it, as Thor could be a bit of an idiot especially where Loki himself was concerned. No, it simply was no fun to continually pull the wool over his adopted brother’s eyes, since Thor always wanted to see the good in Loki when, in fact, there wasn’t any to be seen. It was just too easy to do, there was no sense of accomplishment in the act.

Odin didn’t visit at all. This was not surprising.

However, Loki had once gotten a visit from a Void Wizard, who had asked him strange questions about his confrontation with the so-called Dark One. That particular Wizard had been an arrogant ass, and Loki had taken a great deal of pleasure in killing him. When he had confirmed that he had, indeed, stuck his magical spear through the man’s back, his mysterious visitor – a man calling himself Daniel Whitehall, who had been even more arrogant than the Dark One had…if that had been even possible – had seemed genuinely excited by the news. He never did explain why, and Loki had not asked, simply because he had had no interest in anything having to do with the Wizard he had bested.

Whitehall had claimed to be with a group calling itself Hydra, which had not meant a thing to Loki, and to be honest he not much cared. Whitehall had not seemed at all willing to help Loki escape, and so he’d refused to answer any more questions, mostly to do with the spear; that was a secret he did not wish to impart upon anything, especially this jumped up fool. The interloper had been angry, but Loki honestly had not given a shite.

Other than that instance, his captivity, so far, had been completely and utterly tedious. Which wasn’t a surprise, considering as a prisoner Loki certainly had no right to be entertained. It would have certainly broken the monotony of the same four walls if someone had been willing to accommodate him in this one thing.

His dragon, Sleipnir, chirped at him, giving Loki a curious look from the bed where he’d been curled up. He was just as bored as his Wizard, his green and black scales glittering under the bright lights of the cell. Loki waved a hand, telling the dragon to go back to sleep. Sleipnir, huffing in agreement, did just that.

Perhaps Loki would do the same. It would take the edge off his boredom, if for a short while.

However, before he could decide one way or the other, a presence on the other side of the magical barrier that kept him prisoner caught his attention. He turned to regard the stranger; a woman, in her forties perhaps, with blonde hair and an upright manner that, to Loki, communicated that she had once been in the military. However, it was apparent that she was a Void Wizard, and she stared at
him with dark eyes that were discerning, as if she was seeking to read his soul…not that she would have been able to, since Loki had long ago sold it in order to gain the loyalty of the Chitauri. Her dragon sat on its haunches next to her, its pale eyes as implacable as its companion’s.

He let a sardonic smirk curl one side of his mouth upward. “Well,” he purred, “tis not often I get guests I do not know.” He stood fluidly, then walked over to the barrier, looking down at her and letting her see his amusement. “To what do I owe the pleasure of the visit?” He also wanted to know how she had managed to get into the cells without triggering any of the alarms that he was aware were there; he had sought them out as best he could, as such knowledge would have been very helpful to him, if he had been able to attempt to escape. So, for now, he was going to be nice to her, to gain her trust and to steal her secrets. As his mother – adopted mother – was fond of saying, one caught more flies with honey than with vinegar.

“I am Mistress Catherine Hale…of Hydra. I know you’ve heard of it.”

He admitted as much, even as his mind was whirling in surprise. He had truly thought he would never hear from anyone of this Hydra again, not after Whitehall had suddenly appeared. That certainly explained how she had gotten in, although Loki still had no idea how it had been done: she must have used the same method Whitehall had to circumvent the wards on the prison. Perhaps he could learn what those were and exploit them himself at some point.

“I’m here because Hydra has been taken down to its roots,” she went on, “and I want to get revenge on the man responsible for it. I thought you might want to help me do that.”

Loki barely managed to keep from rolling his eyes. “I assure you, I have no interest whatsoever in whatever sort of revenge you want to enact.” He put every bit of boredom he had been feeling into his response.

“What if I told you the man I’m after is the Dark One?”

Now, that had Loki’s attention. “The Dark One is dead. I ran my spear through his heart.”

“You may have killed him, but he’s certainly not dead.”

Loki narrowed his eyes as he considered what Hale had just told him. The blow he had struck against the Dark One had been fatal; the man had been dead before even hitting the ground, of that he was certain. “What you say is impossible.”

“Not if he’s Deathless.”

Interesting.

Certainly, Loki had heard the tales of the Deathless, even in Asgard. The man calling himself Jack Harkness had hardly been subtle about it, after nearly one thousand years of remaining hidden, and the Wizard had looked into the man’s tale and knew for a fact that such a confluence of events that had led to his creation were unique and could never happen again. Besides, from his studies he knew that the Void did not act in the same manner as the Deep Ways, and anyone wishing to become an avatar of the Void like that would certainly not gain the same result.

He scoffed. “And you are surely joking.”

Hale shrugged. “You don’t have to believe me. You can see it for yourself.”

If you help me, were the unstated words.
He had to admit, he was intrigued. If someone was claiming to be the Dark One, and had this Hydra convinced he truly was, then perhaps there was something in Hale’s story…unless they had all been blinded by what they had wished to see, and this person calling himself the Dark One was a form of trickster.

Which, if that were so, then Loki would perhaps want to meet him. Anyone who could fool so many was someone worthy of his respect. And then he would kill them, as there was only room for one trickster of that regard in the world, and that trickster was Loki.

And, if somehow this man did indeed prove to be some form of Deathless…then, Loki would very much enjoy testing the limits of that Deathlessness himself.

“Alright,” he capitulated, “what if I agree to come with you. What is in it for me, besides my freedom?” As it seemed that Hydra had been ineffective in whatever plan they would put into motion, he thought this single woman would be of no use whatsoever, really. There was simply nothing she could give him, as it seemed as if she had nothing left to give.

He might consider joining forces with the one who had so blinded this Hydra cabal into believing he was the Dark One, though. This, he was curious about and it might indeed prove to be entertaining to take him down several metaphorical pegs.

Killing him would indeed remove all of the pegs.

“I should think your freedom would be enough. And, you have a chance to beat a Wizard you’d thought you’d killed. I can’t help but think that would stick in anyone’s craw.”

She did have a point.

Loki was willing to go along for now, but once he had met this Wizard who was claiming to be a dead man, all bets could very well be off.

“Then should be leaving before the guards realize you are in here with me?”

The smile Hale gave him was as sharp as a knife. “Yes. Let’s.”

Fin

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