In a Land of the 24-hour News Cycle and a Time of Science

by Morena_Evensong

Summary

Sometimes, history repeats itself. Sometimes, it gets written anew. And sometimes, there comes an age when old heros are no longer needed, when an age has created its own. In a world where protecting the innocent isn't as simple as swinging a sword, a small antiques shop stands on the boarder between Chinatown and Little Italy. Inside, history is never forgotten and legends are remembered as they truly were, and seen as they truly are.

Notes

When I finished The Singing Hills I thought I was done with my immortal Merlin stories. Then Merlin poked me on the arm and dangled this little storyline in front of my muse. I was powerless to resist. I have a few chapters written already and, while I'd originary intended this to be strictly a light-hearted comedy, it seems to be developing a rather serious undertone. I
do have another story I'm working on finishing up at the moment, so updates on this one will sadly be slow in coming -- at least at first.

Also, to give credit where credit's due: I'd like to point to the brilliant manga/anime Petshop of Horrors by Matsuri Akino, which was a strong influence on the idea for this story. If you've never heard of it, don't worry, this isn't in any way, shape or form a crossover or fusion with it. Anyone who is familiar with Petshop of Horrors will likely be able to spot the influences, but this is a very different story nonetheless (which is why I haven't tagged for it).

Disclaimer: I own a coffee maker, a computer and an imagination, but I don't own any of the MCU or Merlin.
The Beginning

Years, centuries had passed as she rested within the earth. Not even the magic that suffused it could shorten the time it took for the last smoldering sparks of life within her form to burn brighter and fill with life and magic once more. Time was irrelevant, and she felt it pass as the earth felt it pass. She existed. She was not awake, however. She knew she'd been awake once, and this felt like hovering on the edge of dreaming, when awareness was only starting to creep through the grey haze.

The earth cradled her within its embrace and she felt no cold and no heat, only vaguely aware of the changing seasons. And with every season that came and went, she grew a little stronger. Eventually, she was able to stretch invisible hands out to feel the land around her and lap at the well of its power. Power that felt familiar; it caressed her in return and she relaxed further into its touch, weakly holding on. Over time her grip grew stronger and she began to feel beyond the earth around her: there were trees, grass, stones, and the occasional bird. And water all around.

She wasn't sure when the first time she felt the other presence was. It came from the water and moved upon the land. She felt its steps like clear bells, vibrating with power that resonated deeply into the land. It was a pleasant sound: warm and strong like the earth, and vibrant and weighty like magic.

It didn't stay long, but after it left, the first memories began to emerge. Flashes of faces, places and sometimes objects danced across her mind in between the endless silence of the earth. She didn't recognize them, but felt joy or sadness when they flashed. Emotions: she'd forgotten those as well.

She was different from the Earth, she realized, but what her existence meant beyond that eluded her.

The presence returned a few times after that and once, she felt its touch embrace her briefly. It was long gone again when she recognized the emotion she'd felt from it as surprise. Then she began to remember more. Sometimes a trinket would pop into her mind and she'd remember wearing it, or remember the person giving it to her. She remembered a castle and an island. She remembered a room full of vials and talismans, infused with the smell of dried herbs and incense. She remembered the smell of smoke and burning flesh, anger and grief molten ball within her chest.

The next time the presence returned, she remembered his name. For the first time during her existence within the arms of the earth, she felt her lips move as she whispered his other name. The land shivered with delight and she felt the earth above her move. Soil whispered as it slid to the side and leaves rustled as they, too, rolled away. The sun's rays kissed her bare flesh for the first time in centuries.

She stretched out her stiff limbs and moved, rolling over onto her back. For a few moments more she simply relished the warmth of the sun and the coolness of the soft breeze. After her cocoon of silence, the world on the surface was loud, and it took a long while for birdsong to sound less abrasive.

Her eyelashes fluttered, her lids as stiff as the rest of her, caked and crusted-over from lack of use. Eventually, she opened her eyes and looked up into the sun.

Then she remembered her name.
She smirked. Now she remembered what had happened, why she'd needed to rest within the earth for so long. She was probably lucky; he'd been just a boy when he'd faced her, all anger and righteousness. He'd no more understood what she'd done than what he'd left undone that day. As though a simple lightening strike could kill a Priestess of the Old Religion.

She stood slowly on shaking legs, feeling like a newborn colt, but refusing to wait any longer. She didn't feel hunger yet, but she staggered to a nearby stream to quench her thirst. She could feel his presence at the edge of the island, unmoving. Waiting for her.

With every step she felt stronger, her magic burrowing into the land, into the sacred soil beneath her and augmenting her power. Her steps became surer, her back straighter and she stopped twitching at every sound. By the time she reached the edge of the island, she was once again a formidable opponent.

He was sitting on the grass with his back to her, looking out at the gently rolling waves on the lake. His hair was much longer than she remembered and tied behind him with a black bow, his clothing of a much finer material than she ever remembered him wearing, with tall boots of soft brown leather. Uncaring of her own dirt-smeared nakedness, she stopped several steps behind him and smirked.

“Well, hello Merlin, it's been a long time,” she said.

He continued to stare out at the lake. “Hello, Nimueh,” he said simply, a weight and weariness to his words that were also new. “I think it's been longer than you realize. Tell me, do you approach as friend or foe?”

The question startled her and chased away the anger that had begun to brew within her mind. “You would accept me as a friend after all that has happened between us?” The words tumbled from her mouth before she was aware of the question.

A sad, bitter chuckle was her response. “That was a long time ago and I have very few friends left in this world. I would be a fool to turn one away.”

She blinked and realized that even her pain and anger were distant to her now. Without another word, she sat on the grass beside him. Equally silent, Merlin handed her a large metal flask. She pulled out the cork and sniffed at it. The aroma was sweet, yet bitter and unlike anything she'd ever smelt before.

“What is it?” she asked.

Merlin smiled. “It's something explorers brought back from a land far across the sea. It's called cocoa.”

“A land far across the sea? That sounds like a fairy tale; has the world changed that much while I was asleep?”

“Hmm, perhaps. Some of it you might not recognize anymore, but people are still the same.”

She snorted. “Of course they are; people never change.”

She lifted the flask to her lips and drank. It was good. For a flask of this, she may even have forgiven Uther his crimes. Some of them, anyway.
New York was covered in a sleepy drizzle that Sunday morning as two figures walked noiselessly through the streets on the border of Chinatown and Little Italy. It was late enough that the late night revellers had staggered back to their university housing or found just enough money in their pockets to call a cab to take them to their expensive Manhattan condos, but not yet early enough for the first of the joggers to have hit the streets. The man wasn't anything remarkable to look at: tall and skinny with dark hair that seemed perpetually in need of a comb. The woman, however, was long-legged and curvy with full red lips – she would inevitably turn heads wherever she went.

Finally, they stopped in front of a squat, shabby brick building squashed in between two slightly taller brick buildings. The ones on either side of it were taller and seemed to be in much better condition, their front doors freshly-painted and the walk-ups looking considerably less like deathtraps.

“This is it?” the woman asked, not sounding particularly impressed.

The man shrugged. “The owner died; I got a good price. Don't worry, we'll fix it up and it'll be fine.”

The woman rolled her eyes. “Then we'd better get started. The truck's arriving this afternoon.”

The man waved his hand and the door opened for them. They went inside and, presumably got to work, though whatever they did happened inside the building and their neighbours were none the wiser. Which was likely for the better. At half past two in the afternoon, a large moving truck arrived, though its contents didn't seem quite right for a couple moving into a new home.

Monday morning at 10 am, a new antiques shop opened on the bottom floor, looking like it had been there for years. Everyone who passed by blinked at it, wondering how long it had been there, curious that they'd never noticed it before.

Years passed. And one day, a hole opened up in the sky and spewed aliens and giant mechanical whales. The little shop was, miraculously, undamaged.

Chapter End Notes

OMG, this chapter now has artwork!! Please go check out these lovey panels
Did_you See_the_light_in_the_dark drew me either on her tumpl or on deviantart.
The Isle of the Blessed

Chapter Notes

To everyone who read/commented/left kudos on the first chapter of this story: thank you! =D I loved writing that chapter and it was definitely important to establish how Nimeuh becomes involved in the story, but this chapter will actually give you more of an idea of what you're all in for with this story.

Also, no, I haven't seen Age of Ultron yet. I've been working all weekend, so I'm going to see it on Wednesday and will then decide whether or not it'll be included in this story. What I suspect will happen is that I'll include the events but maybe write in an alternate ending to the movie. But, again, won't know for sure until I see exactly what happens. Either way, it'll be a while before we get that far so for anyone who isn't going to be seeing Age of Ultron anytime soon, don't worry, any spoilers for the movie are at least a good ten chapters away.

He watched New York wake up, the streets becoming steadily busier and the sidewalks noisier as coffee shops opened and the first early morning risers took to the streets. As he jogged across the Brooklyn Bridge, the sun began to rise over the water, bathing the city in coloured light. The closer he got to Manhattan, the more suits appeared on the streets, walking with purpose, some already with little phones in hand as they inhaled their first cups of coffee.

Steve Rogers nodded his head in greeting and waved to a few familiar faces. He wasn't sure if they recognized him or if he'd simply become the nice young man who jogged by every morning. Didn't care either way. Sometimes he'd take a different route just to see a slightly different city facade, but usually he stuck to the same one.

He now knew faces he could associate with New York in the twenty-first century. It didn't mean that the memories of past faces didn't still haunt him, that he didn't still wake up and wonder at how quiet it was across the street, afraid he'd somehow slept through the Harold's morning argument and was going to be late to work. You didn't need an alarm clock when you lived upstairs from the Harolds: Mister Harold worked down at the docks and left their apartment at just around six am every morning, and every morning he and his wife would get into a loud screaming match about something entirely unimportant. They never seemed to argue in the evening, only in the morning.

Well, they used to. Steve had no idea what had happened to them and likely never would.

So he kept a digital alarm clock he never set on his bedside table, because the digital display helped remind him which century he was in. And then he jogged to Stark Tower, slowly regrowing his mental map of New York with new buildings and new faces. Some of them he now knew by name; some of them he'd shot the breeze with while helping with odds and ends in the morning; some he only knew by face.

His psychologist said it was a good thing and Steve spent most of their sessions rambling on about all the little things he was seeing on the streets, and the daily changes occurring as the city slowly recuperated from the Chitauri attack. It saved him trying to talk about why he still hadn't bought any proper furniture for his apartment, which only contained the basics SHIELD had given him. He had a small bed, a kitchen table with two chairs and a couch. It was all perfectly serviceable – even if the
couch was possibly one of the ugliest pieces of furniture he'd ever laid eyes on.

His feet automatically took him down familiar streets to Little Italy, where aromas spilled out onto the street from a variety of bakeries and coffee shops. Later in the day, a plethora of restaurants would add their own tantalizing scents, but those buildings were still dark for now.

There were only a few people inside Bakery Milano when he ducked inside. He greeted the young man behind the counter: the owner's grandson who helped out in the mornings before school when he didn't have baseball practise. He was a Yankees fan, but Steve forgave him this fault because the bakery made the best canolli he'd ever tasted.

Two canolli in hand, Steve then meandered through the streets of Little Italy, slowly making his way towards Chinatown as he ate. This was just an energy boost; he would eat a proper breakfast at Stark Tower. It had the dual purpose of giving Steve someone to share a meal with, while also making sure both Stark and Banner each ate at least one proper meal a day and spent some time outside their labs. Sometimes he would even win the argument and convince Tony to get a few hours of sleep.

And occasionally, Jarvis would have a message for him from Ms Potts – who was almost never present when he arrived – asking him to please make sure Tony showered and was on time for some meeting or other. Steve did as asked, figuring it didn't hurt to curry favour with Tony's girlfriend, since he never knew when he would need her on his side.

In the distance he was already seeing the first Chinese shop signs, when a brush of wind blew a lovely floral scent towards him. Steve looked down the side street to his right and immediately noticed two giant pottery planters bursting full of greenery, topped with an explosion of coloured blooms. He smiled slightly and walked over to take a closer look, marvelling at how well the flowers seemed to have grown in the middle of the city.

Up close he recognized them as begonias: the only flowers he'd ever given Peggy. His eyes began to tear at the memory. She hadn't wanted him to know it was her birthday, but he'd found out by accident anyway. Flowers seemed like the easiest (also the only unless she wanted a shell casing for a birthday present) thing to get her while they were marching back to camp by moonlight in the middle of Southern France. He'd hoped for roses, but all he'd found were begonias. She'd loved them.

Phillips had rolled his eyes at him.

Steve took a deep breath and shoved the memory back where it belonged in the past, looking to the building the planters obviously belonged to. It was a little shop with a brown wooden door, brass bordering the frame of a stained-glass window that depicted an island in the middle of bright blue water with a single, scrawny tree and a stone ruin. The wood looked newly varnished and the brass boarder and long brass door handle were polished to a shine. Above the door, the sign was painted in golden letters:

Isle of the Blessed
Antiques and Curiosities

Steve blinked and then decided that as he was both curious and an antique he would likely feel right at home inside. Luckily it seemed the shop opened incredibly early.

He expected the shop to be dark and smell musty. It was neither. Instead it smelt vaguely of incense and flowers, and the two large windows Steve hadn't even noticed from outside let in so much bright light that the large crystal chandelier hanging and subtle wall scones were hardly needed to illuminate the space.
The shop was, however, crowded. Every available inch of space was covered in stuff. There were porcelain dolls and tea cups sitting atop a sturdy-looking table that could've seated all the Howling Commandos and more glass ornaments haphazardly placed on the shelves of an ornate hutch behind it. Even the walls were covered in tapestries and posters with one section of the floor towards the back taken up by a large bear pelt, its mouth open wide and menacing.

He wondered if there was a method to the madness he saw, or whether any attempt at organization – assuming there had ever been one – had been abandoned long ago.

Faint tapping of wood on wood accompanied by shuffling steps caught Steve's attention and he looked up to watch an old man make his way towards him. If Steve felt like an antique, this man looked the part. His long white hair was nearly as long as his white beard, which draped down his front. His walking stick was made from gnarled wood and he leaned against it when he walked.

"Good morning, young man," he said, the English accent startling Steve for a moment. "Is there anything I can help you with?"

Steve shook off his surprise. "Good morning," he said with a smile. "I-I'm not really sure. I was just walking by and noticed your flowers and then saw the shop. Just curious I suppose."

The old man snorted. "They're not my flowers. The old woman cares for those."

"Your wife?" Steve ventured a guess.

The old man's glare would've made Peggy jealous.

"Hmph, as if I would've ever married that harridan," he said finally before looking away.

"I heard that!" a voice called out from above and for a moment Steve thought he'd heard Peggy. Leaning to the side, he saw a black steel staircase spiralling down from the top floor hiding behind the large statue of a fat man in a tuxedo holding a large blue fish by its tail. A figure was slowly coming down the stairs, footfalls resonating like heavy bells. "And I fail to see how it makes any difference since I would never agree to marry a cantankerous old goat like you anyway. If I were to marry anyone I would most certainly go for a slightly younger model!"

The old man snorted. "A younger model? They'd take one look at all your face and run away, hoping that whatever skin disease you had wasn't catching."

The woman sniffed as she finally reached the bottom of the stairs and came into view. Her hair was just as white as the old man's and done up in a neat bun. She walked stiffly, an aluminum watering can in one hand. She must've been a looker in her youth... back around the time when Steve had been a kid.

"I have aged gracefully, like fine wine," she said haughtily.

"That's turned to vinegar," the old man muttered.

She narrowed her eyes and glared at him with such intensity it should've set the old man's incredibly long beard on fire. Steve bit his lip to keep from laughing. Suddenly, her eyes turned to Steve, who immediately straightened his back.

"So, you noticed my flowers, young man?" she said.

"Yes, ma'am, they're very beautiful," he replied. "Never seen such colourful and... alive lookin' ones in the middle of the city."
The old woman's eyes softened and she smiled. “Not many people in the city have the patience for nurturing flowers to their full potential. Everyone's always in such a rush and raising flowers takes care and time.”

He and the old man both stepped aside as she passed by them. Suddenly, Steve felt something brush against his leg and he looked down. There was a large white cat sniffing at his running shoes.

“That's Aithusa,” he heard the old man say. “Pay her no mind, she just gets curious sometimes.”

The cat looked up at him and blinked. Then she quickly slipped between his feet, brushing as much of herself against him as she could before darting away. Steve watched her, fascinated by how nimbly she moved amongst the crowded shop without disturbing a single item. She leaped up onto a dainty-looking, stiff-backed armchair, climbed onto its left armrest and then leaped onto the top of a white bookshelf. In a particularly bright patch of sunlight, the cat curled up and closed her eyes.

Steve observed her for a moment before his eyes slid upwards. The shelf right above Aithusa held an intricately-carved Chinese dragon carved out of wood and painted bright red and yellow. There were some books on the right-hand side of the shelf above that and what looked like a forgotten scrap of white fabric with a royal blue line running down it.

Frowning, Steve walked towards the shelf – the cat lazily opened one eye to peer at him in annoyance when he blocked her sunlight – and reached for the item of fabric. It turned out to be a ballcap.

His breath caught in his throat when he saw the familiar looped 'B' stitched onto the front: two circles on top of each other looking like a figure eight, with a curved line connecting them on the left. It'd been 1938, when Germany wasn't quite on everyone's mind just yet, but the rumblings were there. He and Bucky had spent months saving up for tickets to see their team play – ate almost nothing but potatoes and carrots for nearly two months. This was the cap the Dodgers had worn at their home games that year: white with blue lines splitting it into quarters and the club's signature 'B'.

Steve had never been able to afford a Dodger's ballcap of his own, but holding this one in his hands felt like finding a piece of himself. He wasn't sure how much time had passed while he was lost in memories, but when he finally looked up again, his eyes scanned the antiques shop with renewed enthusiasm. What other treasures could he find here?

Behind him, the old man cleared his throat. Steve looked to find the man's eyes sparkling with amusement before they slid significantly to the side. Steve followed their direction and then his own eyes widened in surprise at the triangular-shaped blue and white banner hanging above a pair of headless mannequins displaying gorgeous old fashioned (even to Steve) ball gowns.

“So I suppose it turns out there is something I can help you with after all,” said the old man.

Steve smiled. “I guess there is. Just hadn't realized it at the time.”

“Oft times a man is not aware he is missing something until he finds it. Usually in the last place he would've thought to look.” The old man paused. “A baseball fan, are you?”

“Yes, I love the game. Haven't been to one in a while, though... I should probably fix that.”

“Hm, well I do believe the Mets are playing the Blue Jays at Citi Field on Saturday. Of course, the Yankees are playing on Thursday, but seeing as you've got a Brooklyn Dodgers cap in your hand I'd assume you'd rather cut off your own arm than go cheer for that bunch of hooligans.”

Steve laughed. “It'd be sacrilegious of me.”
“So, other than a baseball fan, what are you, young man?”

A superhero, he nearly answered. But no, that was Captain America and while Steve was Captain America, that wasn't all he was. Several moments passed.

“An artist,” he finally answered. “Or at least I was.”

The old man snorted. “Nonsense, boy. One doesn't stop being an artist. Now then, follow me, I believe I have just the thing.”

Steve blinked and followed the old man, quickly fascinated with how the shop seemed to bend at the back, revealing a dark corridor lined with brass wall scones that wasn't visible until you were standing in front of it. The corridor was lined with rooms, which were much more organized than the front of the shop. There were rooms full of glass display cases, and even one with several stuffed and mounted animal heads (and an entire lion who reminded him a bit of Thor) interspersed among mannequins wearing chainmail armour and ball gowns from various eras, including what looked like a musketeer outfit. An entire room they passed was covered in swords and medieval-looking weapons – with a few muskets and antique rifles for variety. The room they finally walked into was full of cases with jewellery and porcelain sculptures.

Except for the back corner, where three easels stood – one bare and made out of finely-curled iron, and two wooden ones holding large paintings in gilded frames. He walked over and ran his hand along one of the wooden ones; it felt sturdy under his touch. He'd never owned an easel half this nice and hadn't used paints since he'd had to drop out of art school for lack of money.

He had money now, though, and he was certain Jarvis could help him find an art store where he could get brushes and paints.

By the time Steve jogged into Stark Tower it was bustling with activity and breakfast had turned into brunch, but he felt excited, his limbs infused with an energy he hadn't felt since before the war. He stepped into the elevator and greeted Jarvis, grinning with amusement when the AI told him Mister Stark was 'concerned' that he was running so late with breakfast this morning.

He patiently waited until after breakfast to ask Jarvis about art stores and their proximity to the Tower and the antiques shop, where his new easel and banner were being wrapped for him to pick up later.
He hadn’t intended to pick a fight. He’d been feeling restless, yes, but the fire that usually ran through his veins wasn’t raging – he just couldn’t stand to sit still indoors. So he’d thrown on a large, ratty hoodie and nodded to Toad as he passed by him on his way out the door. Pulling the hood over his head, he then hopped onto the first subway heading into Manhattan, getting off at a random station somewhere around Little Italy before disappearing into the midday crowd.

If he felt like being fair to Bobby and Rogue, he’d acknowledge that they hadn’t exactly been looking for him either, but after their initial surprise had given into anger that glittered with hatred, he no longer felt like being fair. Walking aimlessly along the crowded streets had calmed his restlessness. Now the calm had melted away, but he still felt focused. And angry. Mostly angry.

He looked at them and sneered at their cosy pretence of a ‘normal’ relationship; wandering around the city as though the unsuspecting people around them would accept them as easily if they knew what the two of them were capable of. Suddenly, he felt like burning down the world around them as easily as he knew those people would burn down their imaginary bubble of ‘normal’.

“Well I see they let you out into the real world for a change,” he drawled casually, one hand sliding into his pocket to grab hold of his lighter. “Get tired of the school, or did you want to wander around and pretend you were normal?”

Bobby’s eyes narrowed as Rogue flushed and Pyro knew he’d hit the nail on the head.

“John, we don’t want to fight you, but if you try to hurt anyone we will stop you,” said Bobby predictably.

“Oh, you’ll probably try to stop me, sure,” said Pyro with a smirk.

He wanted to hurt them now, to wipe that self-righteous attitude right off their faces. To hurt them for assuming he was here to start a fight for no good reason, as if that was the only thing he ever did. He was their enemy because he thought they and Professor X were wrong, not because he was evil.

“Pyro, please,” Rogue implored him with the big brown eyes he’d once tried so hard to impress. Now he just thought they looked pathetic.

He took the lighter out of his pocket and flipped it open. And sure enough, with the first lick of flames that shot up from the lighter, the screams started. He grinned as the flames spun around, growing into a swirling inferno. Iceman and Rogue both changed their stance and a ball of ice began...
to form into existence above the palm of Iceman's hand. The screams got louder as more people noticed what was going on. He ignored the words: they didn't matter, were always the same anyway. Mutant. Monster.

And then one voice cut through the fire burning in his mind. Despite the chaos around him, the rush of adrenalin in his ears and the din of panicking civilians, he heard it bright and clear. It had a British accent.

“Young man you put that out this instant! I'm warning you: if you set fire to my begonias I shall be very cross!”

It startled him and only instincts honed by years of living around people who could make things suddenly happen stopped him from jumping. Instead his shoulders hunched in and he pivoted slightly to face this new threat... and watch as an old lady shuffled out of one of the shops to his right with a determined look and a walking stick held out in her hand like a weapon.

She shuffled carefully around two gigantic planters full of the brightest flowers Pyro had ever seen inside the city. He assumed they were the begonias, but was too busy blinking incredulously at the old lady to really care.

He looked at the fireball he'd managed to build up to nearly twice the size of a basketball just to make sure it was actually there. It was.

Then he looked back to the old lady – intending to sneer and taunt her, because really what could an ordinary old woman do – only to be met with fierce, angry eyes. Suddenly, he found himself remembering things he hadn't thought of for a while, of stories he vaguely remembered being read once upon a time. Whether it was because of how her back was just slightly hunched or because of the fearless anger in her eyes, he couldn't help the shiver that crept down his spine as the lizard part of his mind was transported into a deep, dark forest. His mind's eye pictured a cottage next to a gnarled old tree, with a very large stone oven inside: just the right size for cooking children for dinner.

He felt himself take a step back and swallow nervously.

“And you!” she exclaimed, pointing her walking stick at Iceman. “Don't think I don't see that ball of ice! I suppose you think that'll cause less damage?”

Pyro enjoyed watching Iceman's ears redden as he sheepishly moved his arm in an attempt to hide the bowling ball-sized chunk of ice behind his back. Beside him, Rogue was blinking at the old woman as though unsure whether to be amused or scared.

The old woman shifted her gaze between them, fierce blue eyes boring into each of them in turn. Pyro willed the fire in his hand away, letting it die out and dissipate into nothing. He heard Iceman's ice ball crash to the ground and shatter.

She nodded in approval. “Hmph, young people these days,” she declared as she turned to shuffle her way back into the shop she'd come out of. “No respect for the hard work of others.”

He expected a chime to sound as she opened the door, but apparently the shop didn't have one. For some reason, this seemed strange.

“Well, at least she wasn't yelling at you for being able to kill the flowers with fire and ice,” Rogue's southern tones broke the silence a few heartbeats later. He and Bobby both looked at her in surprise. She shrugged. “That's progress, right?”
Pyro snorted, the situation finally hitting him. He was sure Toad and Sabretooth would laugh at him when he told them. Magneto... well, it was difficult to tell what the old man would do. He would probably at least look amused.

Their quiet, incredulous moment was broken by the sound of sirens in the distance. Pyro shoved his lighter back into his pocket, raised his hood back over his head and ran off down a side-street, glancing back only once to see Bobby and Rogue duck away into a different side street.

The old woman shuffled her way into the antique's shop and closed the door behind her. There was no chime above the door; the owners didn't need one to know when someone entered. A large, white cat immediately darted out and began to weave around her feet.

“You enjoy playing the mean old witch a little too much,” said the old man standing by one of the large windows that looked out onto the street.

The old woman snorted. “That hardly means anything coming from you. As if you don't enjoy playing the grumpy old man just as much.”

The old man chuckled. “Oh I didn't say I disapproved. Nicely done, by the way.”

“Hm, thank you. It's aggravating how these mutants seem to think they're the first people to deal with persecution. I have yet to see any pyres being built for them.”

There was a sigh. “The world's changed Nimueh. No one does that anymore. Their problems are different. Humans believe in personal freedoms now.”

“I'm aware the world's changed, Merlin,” the old woman snapped. “I was there to see most of it, thank you. And with each new generation come new problems and a new ignorance of just how lucky they are compared to many who came before them.”

“That doesn't mean they shouldn't fight for their right to freedom and equality.”

“Something you never had a concept of, serving boy.”

“No.” He paused, considering. “Although I confess I would've expected you to sympathize with the mutants a bit more than you seem to.”

She rolled her eyes and waved him off. “Their troubles are different, as is their fight. They are not my kin.”

“Very few are.”

Nimueh made a disgusted noise. “You want to go to that mutant rights rally tomorrow, don't you?”

Merlin turned to her and grinned, the expression painfully familiar and yet oddly alien on the wrinkled face. “Of course.”

“Didn't you have enough of that in the seventies?”

“Those were different times, different problems.”
“God, you are such a hippy!”

“And that’s still not an insult. Besides, you were the one covering yourself in flower wreaths and painfully bright colours.”

“That was entirely different.”

“It was a different sort of protest, but it was still a protest.”

She threw her arms up. “Fine we can go to the rally!” she exclaimed before turning away from the window and heading towards the back of the shop, muttering to herself along the way.

Merlin watched her go, amusement dancing in his eyes. He looked down when Aithusa brushed up against him. “I don't suppose you know why she won't admit to wanting to help with the mutant rights cause.”

Aithusa looked up. Golden eyes met his and blinked. She meowed. Only Merlin's ears were sensitive enough to detect the subtle roar behind the sound, just as only he could see the smoke surrounding her.
Birthday Gift

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for the comments and kudos! For once I have nothing else to say, so just enjoy the chapter! =D

“I still can't believe Tony didn't tell me it was Pepper's birthday!” said Steve.

Beside him, Natasha made a show of rolling her eyes at him. He realized she was finding him highly amusing even if she was keeping it off her face for the most part. But after his sixth lament about being forced to do last-minute birthday gift shopping, he probably deserved the eye-roll. Still, if he'd known a week ago, he'd have had a week to ask Google, Jarvis, heck maybe even subtly feel out Pepper herself (and then get laughed at for his lack of subtlety). Natasha had suggested a bottle of wine and flowers, but that just felt... well, it was his backup plan.

Steve's therapist must've told Fury he was doing better, becoming 'more stable', because two weeks ago, Natasha had suddenly shown up at the tower and started spending time with Steve. He hadn't asked her to confirm it, but he was fairly certain it was Fury's way of slowly easing him into the idea of coming to work for SHIELD.

“It's Stark,” said Natasha. “He probably forgot it was her birthday. Any presents Pepper gets from Tony are probably Jarvis' doing. Except for the obnoxious, over-the-top ones: those are Tony overcompensating for having forgotten Pepper's birthday.”

Steve let out an irritated breath and ran a hand through his hair.

“Come on, Cap, it's not that difficult to buy a girl a gift; you're over-complicating things.”

“But Pepper's a classy kind of dame and the last woman I bought a present was my mother! And I didn't really buy her gift, just drew her a picture on some fancier paper than usual.”


Steve sighed. “Peggy was never my girl,” he said quietly. “I only wished she was. And there was a war on. The only thing I ever had the chance to give her were flowers for her birthday – though I did risk life and limb to pick those begonias from a garden five miles from the front.”

He paused as the image of bright begonias flashed through his mind.

“Actually, I think I might have an idea.”

Despite knowing that Natasha was most likely spending time with him in order to write an assessment on him for Fury, he did genuinely enjoy her company. She was an undemanding companion, allowing herself to be included in things like breakfast at the Tower, but also suggesting things to do and places to see. She knew a different side of New York. It was a grittier, seedier side, but even that had always been part of his city.

Now she followed him without question, seemingly content to just wander the city with him.
The flowers in front of the little antiques shop were just as bright and beautiful as he remembered them. He'd spent hours trying to get their colours just right on canvas and failed miserably. Maybe if he tried oil paints...

“They're gorgeous, aren't they?” he said when he noticed Natasha pause to look at them.

“They somehow look more... alive than any flowers I've ever seen in the middle of a city,” she said after a pause.

“Yes, that's a good way of putting it.” He pointed to the shop behind him with his thumb. “The old woman inside takes care of them.”

Natasha looked at the door and raised an eyebrow. “Better make sure they don't try to sell you along with the rest of the antiques.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Very funny. This is where I found my Dodgers cap.”

“Hm.”

It was also where he'd gotten the large ebony frame sitting in the corner of what was supposed to have been his guest bedroom and had somehow become his studio. It was a simple frame, but sturdier than it looked. He hadn't unwrapped it from the paper packaging the old man had folded around it. He remembered the thrum of anticipation that had filled him as he'd watched the old man work, his hands covered in age spots, but surprisingly steady.

The large canvas that would fill it was still only half-finished, laid out on the hardwood floor. For now it only showed a few tents and a jeep, with a small flagpost in the top right corner and several familiar, precious faces surrounding a campfire. He'd worked at it like a man possessed, until his charcoal pencil had become a stub and then, as though suddenly realizing what he was drawing, grief and loneliness had hit him like tank to the head. His nightmares had been full of the Howling Commandos for the next week and he hadn't been able to so much as look at the canvas.

Eventually, he just couldn't leave it unfinished. But with each figure he added, he found himself immersed in memories. The last two were going to be the most difficult: Bucky and Peggy.

The door opened as silently as always and Steve and Natasha walked into the stillness of the shop. Steve automatically scanned the interior, knowing Natasha was no doubt doing the same. He took in a few of the subtle differences: items that had been moved or missing and new ones that had taken their place.

And then there was Aithusa, curled up in the middle of a bright spot of sunlight in the centre of a beautiful mahogany table with carved legs. Steve chuckled and walked over to softly scratch the cat behind the ears. Watching her meander through the shop the last time he'd been here was what had brought the big black frame to his attention.

“Hello, Aithusa,” he said softly, part of him not wanting to disturb the quiet. The cat opened a single yellow eye to look up at him and began purring softly. “This is my friend Natasha. I'm here to find a present for a lady. Don't suppose you could help me again?”

Aithusa's eye shifted to Natasha for a moment before stretching with a big yawn that showed a rather impressive array of teeth. Then she rolled over and curled up again with her back to him.

He heard Natasha snicker. “I think you're on own with that, Cap.”

Steve shrugged. “It was worth a shot.”
Then he heard the tell-tale tapping of a wooden walking stick and looked up in time to see the old man shuffle from around the corner with a burst of energy that seemed to belie the long white beard.

“Ah, young man, you're back!” he exclaimed. Then his eyes narrowed onto Natasha. “And you've brought a young lady with you. Hm.”

“This is my friend,” said Steve quickly.

The old man blinked. “What is wrong with you?!” he demanded. Then he looked thoughtful for a moment. “Unless you'd prefer a young man, I suppose.” Steve sputtered. “Or possibly a young man who dresses as a woman. Or a woman who dresses as a man. I hear these are all possibilities these days. Things change so fast; it's hard to keep track of them all at my age.”

“I could also prefer a young woman, or a man who dresses as a woman,” said Natasha with a straight face.

“And that.”

The old man shook his head sadly. “Take my advice, young man, if you find something good, grab hold of it with both hands. In my day we took what snatches of happiness we could find, because what life gave, it could just as easily take away.”

Steve swallowed around the lump in his throat. This wasn't a lesson he needed to learn; he'd had it carved and frozen into his flesh for seventy years. The old man's eyes were dry, but there was a well of his grief in his eyes, old and deep.

“You loved, er... her?” said Steve.

The old man looked at him in amusement. “I barely knew her. Perhaps it was love, but perhaps she was simply the representation of everything I wanted and knew I couldn't ever have. I'll never know, of course. Her death was as sudden as her arrival into my life.”

He shook his head and the wistfulness disappeared from his face. “All ancient history now, I'm afraid. Now what was it you were looking for, young man?”

Steve smiled. “It’s a friend of mine's birthday. Well, she's my friend's, uh, girlfriend, but she's been real nice to me ever since I came back to New York and I wanted to show her how much I appreciate that.”

“I see. Then you'll be wanting to see the purple room.”

Without another word, he turned around and shuffled off towards the back of the shop. Steve and Natasha followed him through the winding back corridors, just past the room where he'd found his easel. The purple room was clearly named such because of the bright purple and lilac-striped wallpaper plastered over the walls. The ceiling had escaped the wallpapering, but had a brass and crystal chandelier hanging from it that was so ostentatiously elaborate it had become a hideous, shapeless mass of cut crystal pieces hanging from a bulbous metal octopus.

There were glass displays and curio cases scattered around the room. The stand-up cases were full of porcelain figurines and fine china, and the longer, table-top ones contained jewellery. Some of it was quite fancy-looking to Steve's eyes, but some of the plainer pieces were nice too.

“Please, feel free to look around,” said the old man. “I'll just be a moment.”
“He's rather trusting,” Natasha commented after he'd left them to their own devices. “Or has a surprisingly state-of-the-art security system. I haven't seen a single camera anywhere.”

“Maybe we just look especially trustworthy,” said Steve with a shrug.

“You look trustworthy, Cap. If I look trustworthy it's only by default. Still, this is an impressive collection. I'd almost be suspicious except for how easily he brought you here.”

“You just don't trust anyone,” Steve chided. “And for heaven's sake call me Steve.”

“No, I don't: occupational hazard.” A small smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. “Steve.”

Steve smiled.

Suddenly something brushed against his leg and Steve looked down at the familiar cat. It meowed at him. Steve chuckled and bent down to rub the top of its head and pet it down its spine.

“Hey there, have you decided to come help me pick something out after all?” he asked with amusement.

“Well, look at you so easily whipped,” said Natasha, not even bothering to keep the laughter out of her voice.

“Always had a problem saying 'no' to a classy dame.” Not that he had much experience in that respect. The classy dames didn't tend to look down low enough to see him.

“I'll remember that.”

Aithusa shook off his hand, apparently being done with accepting Steve's attention. She twisted away and trotted off towards the corner of the room. Then she leaped onto the top of one of the low glass display cases and sat down, looking towards Steve expectantly.

Steve and Natasha exchanged looks and then went over to take a look at the contents of the case. It was a collection of smaller pendants, tie clips and cuff links. Except for a set of hair clips sitting directly next to where the white cat had settled herself. They were silver, lined with white starched lace and threaded with a mix of pale pink and black pearls.

“They're perfect, Steve,” said Natasha, casting an assessing look at Aithusa. “The cat's got good taste.”

“Yeah, she really does,” said Steve with a nod.
The clouds hung low over New York, fat and pregnant with rain that seemed reluctant to fall. The air was heavy with smog and humidity, making the streets feel small and claustrophobic. Which didn't slow New Yorkers in the slightest; the sidewalks were just as packed with people as usual.

Erik watched it all with amusement, idly considering how easily he could send all of them scurrying away like ants. There was so much metal around him, all of it at his fingertips to command... Ah, but he wasn't here for that today. No, he was here to see about an interesting story he'd heard from Pyro.

Beside him, Mystique's stiletto heels clacked along the pavement. Dressed in tight jeans and a silk blouse, she easily passed for his granddaughter.

They found the little antiques shop easily enough – the begonias were indeed noticeable. And there was an old woman outside watering them, humming while she gently massaged each and every petal.

“She doesn't look scary,” said Mystique under her breath as they crossed the street.

“No, but looks can be deceiving,” he answered with a pointed look. “Besides, Pyro said she didn't actually do anything. Perhaps she has some form of mutation that allows for subconscious suggestion.”

He smiled widely as he approached the woman and her flowers. “Good morning, madam,” he said, tipping his hat to her politely.

The woman looked up with a wary look in her eyes. “Good morning,” she said gruffly.

“I couldn't help but notice your beautiful flowers,” he said. “They are truly a vibrant touch to this otherwise dull city.”

She snorted, but the wariness in her eyes was replaced with amusement. “If you think this city is dull then you are looking in all the wrong places. Or perhaps there is something wrong with your eyes.”

He blinked, surprised by the answer. Then again the begonias really were spectacular and those sorts of results in the middle of smoggy, dirty New York City didn't happen by an amateur gardening hobbyist. It was entirely possible she lived in the city because she liked it. Or she was a mutant whose powers controlled plants.

He nodded to her in acknowledgement. “True, New York is vibrant in its own ways. And dangerous in many others.”

“He got the distinct feeling she was laughing at him, but her face betrayed none of the amusement he
felt coming from her. He suddenly wondered if she knew who he was. Mystique had run a background check on the antique shop owners and discovered nothing unusual: the old woman's name was Nimueh Priest and she and her partner Merlin Pratt had moved to New York seventeen years ago and had lived above the antiques store they owned ever since. Neither one of them seemed to have any family in the city, nor any ties to either government or mutant organizations.

“I haven't considered myself a young man in a very long time,” he said with a chuckle, and then on a whim, decided to test her. “I actually wanted to come and apologize to you. I heard one of my... students was involved in an incident some weeks ago. I'm afraid I was away and so wasn't able to come sooner.”

“Oh?” she said, raising an eyebrow as she straightened as far as her stooping shoulders would allow. “And who was yours then: the spark or the icicle?”

He felt Mystique stiffen beside him. So the woman somehow recognized him as a mutant, but didn't know Iceman, Rogue or Pyro. Curious.

“The spark, I'm afraid,” he answered with a small smile of genuine amusement as he pictured the boy's face at the title. “He goes by Pyro.”

The woman snorted. “He thinks too much of himself,” she said derisively. “He lacks the control and discipline to justify such a strong name.”

It wasn't often that Erik found himself flatfooted anymore. Apparently this woman had a gift for it, because he also didn't expect her to look at his and Mystique's shocked faces and invite them in for tea. There was no reason to refuse, it being the perfect opening to speak to the woman and get her measure.

He was amazed at the amount of light inside the small antiques shop – could've sworn those windows didn't look nearly so big from outside. The old woman ushered them inside and told them to sit on some lovely white chairs, two sparrows carved into the top of the backrest with vines and fruit running along the sides, surrounding the cushion in the centre. The fabric was slightly frayed and faded through time and use, but matched the seat cushion and still showed a backdrop of blue and green leaves and golden grapes.

The air around them felt sacred, as though the small shop had somehow become a shrine to history. It was a very human shrine, with pieces ranging from the elaborate and no doubt expensive – like the chairs they were currently sitting on – to mundane, everyday items like copper tea kettles, hats and even a wooden rocking horse poking out from behind a solid-looking sea chest.

The woman left to conjure up tea (her words) and Mystique leaned over to whisper softly into his ear.

“I don't see any security cameras,” she said. “Do you think that means they're old and foolish or have alternate ways of defending themselves?”

He opened his mouth to reply when a loud meow sounded from behind them. Mystique jumped and swirled around. He did the same, his surprise quickly turning into amusement at the large white cat sitting regally upright on the back of a tall armchair. It stared at them, unblinking, for a few, long moments. Then it yawned, showing off a mouthful of sharp little teeth and fangs.

Erik felt the corners of his lips twitch. “I think perhaps they have a valiant protector,” he said.

The cat sniffed and curled itself up on the back of the armchair. Mystique shot him an amused
glance. And then the old woman returned with a tray of tea.

“Would you like some help with that?” he asked quickly, half-standing as he eyed the heavily-laden silver tray with trepidation.

She waved him off. “No, I've got it. I'm old, not an invalid.”

Erik eyed the tray skeptically. Not only was she clearly not an invalid, but apparently she also secretly moon-lighted as a bodybuilder if that tray was any indication. The silver service was there in its entirety – a stout silver tea pot sat next to a silver sugar bowl full of sugar cubes and a small silver milk jug – along with four china tea cups with matching saucers and a plate of little flat cookies. He wasn't certain he could lift it without some judicial use of his powers.

He exchanged a looked with Mystique, but didn't get the chance to comment before he was handed a delicate-looking bone china saucer full of tea. The aroma was lovely; he could smell rosehip and cinnamon among other things. He added a splash of milk and a single sugar cube and took a sip.

“This is excellent tea!” he told the old woman.

“I'm glad you like it,” she said with a pleased smile. “Merlin and I create our own blends.”

“Yes. I can't abide by those horrible pre-packaged blends. Especially the ones that come in those little bags. There are a few decent herbalists about the city and we travel into the countryside to collect everything else.”

Suddenly, a door opened somewhere within the depths of the shop with a loud, rusty creak. Footsteps followed, steadily coming closer and accompanied by an odd tapping sound. Which materialized into two men: one a young Asian man in an expensive black suit and the other an old man with a long, white beard and a wooden walking stick. The younger man was carrying a long, slim case under one arm. Magneto felt the pull of metal from inside: a sword wasn't entirely a strange thing to find in an antiques shop.

However, the gun he felt nestled snugly beneath the man's well-cut blazer, was.

The younger man barely spared him and Mystique a glance, though he nodded solemnly to the old lady, who nodded back just as solemnly. When the man turned back to the counter where the old man was ringing his purchase up on a cash register that looked every bit as though it belonged inside the antiques shop, her eyes became sharp and her lips turned into two thin, hard lines.

Those eyes, Erik realized, looked like they could peer into the very soul. There was a depth in them, more than could be subscribed to age and wisdom. They reminded him of Charles, except he imagined her soul-searching would hurt more.

Suddenly, Mystique made a surprised noise. Erik looked to her immediately... to find her looking down at the large white cat that had jumped onto her lap. It was looking up at her defiantly, as though daring her to do something about it. The stand-off lasted about a minute and ended when the cat sniffed and twisted its spine as it curled up into a ball.

The old woman snorted. “Don't let Aithusa push you around,” she said. “Just shove her off if you don't want to be taking home all that cat hair.”

The cat opened one golden eye full of disdain and snuggled in closer. Then she began purring. Mystique blinked down at the cat nestled in her lap, looking bemused. After a few moments, she
relaxed and brought a hand down to gently scratch it behind the ear. The purring got louder.

Erik chuckled as he shook his head. One of the deadliest mutants in the world and it had taken the cat all of a minute wrap her around its finger. What an unusual trip this was turning out to be.

He looked up as the Asian man said something quietly in what he was fairly certain was Japanese and bowed formally. The old man replied and returned the bow stiffly. Then the Asian man turned and sailed out of the store. Erik expected to hear the tinkling of a bell and was surprised when he realized there wasn't one. The old man stepped away from the counter and walked over to him.

“Oh, we're entertaining guests, I see,” he said, his eyes sweeping over them critically. His gaze landed on the cat in Mystique's lap and he raised an eyebrow at it. Not that it seemed to notice or care.

“I do wish you would stop dealing with yakuza,” the old woman spat at him.

He rolled his eyes. “I'm not dealing with yakuza. I was helping the young man find a good sword as a gift for his grandfather, a man who appreciates finely-made swords.”

“And he just so happens to be yakuza.”

“You don't know that he's yakuza.”

She snorted. “Oh please, I don't need x-ray vision to see the tattoos beneath that expensive suit.”

“It doesn't really matter what he is,” the old man finally snapped, annoyance filling his voice. “He was here about a sword: nothing more, nothing less. While that sword is in pristine condition and could be taken to a battlefield in an instant, it is far too valuable to be used as anything as mundane as assassination. Besides, it's not as if you haven't associated with a few rather unsavoury types over the years. At least I didn't sleep with him!”

The old lady straightened up indignantly. “Excuse me, I never–”

“I'm sorry, what was that Sicilian Don's name again? The one with the olive grove and the beautiful flower garden. If I remember correctly, you tended to his garden during the day and his body during the night. Or at least you did until his wife found out!”

The old woman's glare could've cut through concrete – metaphorically speaking. He exchanged a look with Mystique that was half-amused and half-horrified. This pair had obviously been together for quite some time, although it seemed they weren't actually the unmarried couple he'd expected. Either that or they were veritable pioneers for the term 'open relationship'.

“You sell swords here?” Mystique asked, breaking the pair's death-glares.

The old man turned to her. “Yes, they're in a separate room in the back,” he answered. “I also sharpen swords and other bladed weapons on occasion. Been doing it long enough, I'm apparently considered something of an expert in it.”

“The MET comes by and asks him to look at most of their new acquisitions,” the old woman added. “Then there's all those Medieval re-enactment people.”

“Ah, they're a fun group,” he said with nod. Then he turned to Erik and Mystique. “But where are my manners? I'm Merlin.”

Magneto stood to shake his hand. “It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Erik and this is Raven.”
“Hmm...”

“He came by to apologize for that young spark who nearly set fire to my begonias,” the old woman pipped up.

Merlin rolled his eyes. “You and those bloody flowers,” he muttered.

Just then the door to the shop opened, letting in a slight breeze and a tall blond man, who carefully manoeuvred in carrying a large, rectangular shape wrapped in plain brown paper. It looked like a painting.

In Mystique's lap, Aithusa perked up, lifting her head when the door opened and then sitting up to watch attentively as the man moved the painting so that it didn't bump into anything. When the door closed, the cat leaped off Mystique's lap and bounded up to the man. It purred loudly as it wound around his legs and Erik waited for the man to trip and fall over the feline.

He didn't. Instead he paused in his tracks and smiled down at the white cat. “Hello, Aithusa,” he said.

The cat stopped moving and sat down on her haunches, meowed loudly, and looked up at him expectantly. The man laughed and reached into his pocket, pulling out a package wrapped in a thin plastic bag.

“Yes, this is for you,” he told Aithusa. He looked up to Merlin and the old woman. Erik realized he was actually quite young, probably in his early twenties. He gestured with the package. “May I?”

Merlin was looking at him with amusement. “Oh, by all means. She won't leave you alone otherwise, the little glutton.”

The man carefully leaned the painting he was holding against a steel and glass side-table and then knelt down in front of the white cat. He unwrapped the other package as he spoke.

“This is to thank you for helping me find the present for my friend, Pepper,” he told the cat. The cat's attention was, however, entirely on the package. “She really loved the hairclips and I never would've found them without you. And for the hat, too. Finding it really meant more to me than I thought it would.”

Finally, it was unwrapped to reveal a large, white fish fillet that looked like it had come straight from the fishmonger. He placed it onto the floor gently. Aithusa didn't hesitate to dig into the treat. The man scratched her affectionately behind the ears and then stood, gathering up his wrapped painting before walking around it.

“Hello, Steve,” said Merlin.

“Hello, sir, ma'am,” he said with a polite smile. Then he nodded to Erik and Mystique. “I'm sorry if I'm interrupting anything.”

“Oh no, not at all,” the old woman waved him off. “Would you like some tea?”

“No, thank you, I just came to drop this off.” He indicated the painting he was holding. “It's for you. Something for, uh, the winter months I guess.”

The old woman looked surprised for a moment, before she rose to her feet, placing the tea cup onto a small table. She unwrapped the parcel with an almost reverent care.
“Oh, Steve, it's beautiful,” she exclaimed softly and then stepped away so the rest of them could see.

The top half of the canvas was an explosion of colour and Erik instantly recognized the old woman's begonias. After that, the young man had taken some artistic license and painted in a small round iron table and two matching chairs. Curled up in the middle of the table was a large, contented-looking white cat. The painting wasn't perfect and the table was a little lop-sided, but it was clearly painted by someone with talent.

“I told you one never stopped being an artist,” said Merlin.

The young man turned to him and smiled, happiness emanating from every his pores. “Yes, you were right. It'd been so long, I'd forgotten how much a part of me it was until I picked up a sketchbook again. I haven't had a whole lot of practice with paints, I'm afraid. Only could afford to go to art school for a year, and even that was a struggle.”

Something about this man niggled at Erik. He'd never seen him before in his life, he was certain of that, yet somehow he felt familiar regardless. He moved like a soldier and not even the thick leather jacket he was wearing managed to disguise the bulging muscles underneath. But Magneto never paid any attention to the soldiers he fought, so that wasn't where he knew him from.

Mystique stood to go take a closer look at the painting. “It's beautiful,” she said, her eyes skimming its entirety. “Maybe you should consider going back to art school.”

“Er, thank you, ma'am,” he said, suddenly looking nervous. “It's something to consider and I suppose I can probably afford it now.”

The man left about ten minutes later and Erik and Mystique excused themselves after finishing their tea. Erik still hadn't figured out if the elderly couple were mutants, nor had he any clear idea of what their abilities could possibly be if they were. He was almost tempted to ask Charles, but that would require talking to the telepath, which was a complicated proposition to say the least. There were times when he missed his old friend, missed having someone he could consider his equal in age and experience to speak to and bounce ideas off of.

Ah well, he supposed no one lived to his age without regrets.

Mystique was silent until they rounded the corner and were no longer in sight of the antiques shop.

“Steve Rogers,” she then said quietly. He looked to her and raised an eyebrow in question. “The painting was signed 'Steve Rogers'.”

Erik blinked, mind whirling as pieces fell into the right order in his mind. No wonder the young man looked familiar although he'd never seen him before. Well, never seen him in person anyway.

“Hm,” he said after a pause. “So that was Captain America then, was it? How very interesting.”

“I wouldn't have expected him to be so...”

“Nice?”

Mystique smirked. “Adorable.”

Erik laughed.
Heroes Great and Small

Chapter Notes

As always, thanks for your support on this story!

Warning: semi-graphic violence, mild PTSD symptoms

It came upon them so suddenly that the explosion of noise tore into Steve's dream, instantly transforming a peaceful evening around an empty barrel serving as a fire pit into an enemy attack. As the skies above Brooklyn opened and a deluge drenched the city in rapid-fire drops, a rain of bullets peppered into the Howling Commando's camp. Lightning streaked across the sky, followed closely by a deafening clap of thunder... and a bomb fell onto a jeep, sending debris flying in every direction. The wind howled and Steve heard screams and cries of pain.

The world around him was erupting into chaos and he couldn't move. He was frozen, helpless in the face of the sudden destruction around him. He looked at Peggy, who was sitting in his lap... whose eyes stared blankly back, a giant shard of glass embedded deep into her torso.

He turned his head to his right, to where Bucky had been sitting only moments before. He was standing now and the breath caught in his throat when he looked up at the devil-may-care smirk on Bucky's freshly-shaven face as he stood there in a clean, pressed uniform.

"Don't you go doin' anything stupid while I'm gone," he said, before giving him a lazy salute and turning on his heel.

"Bucky, wait!" Steve called desperately as his friend dashed off, his figure quickly disappearing into the thick, dust and gunpowder-fogged air. He tried to move, to go after him, but Peggy had become a weight too heavy for him to carry.

A flash of light illuminated the sky followed by an explosion that sent clumps of dirt directly at Steve. He grabbed the shield leaning against the crate he was sitting on and held it in front of him as he threw himself and Peggy to the ground. When the ground finally stopped shaking, he lifted his head and looked upon the devastated landscape: earth scattered, plants uprooted, the few tents they had flattened.

In the distance, he heard gunshots, but around him all was still.

Steve pushed himself up and walked forward, his boots squelching in the mud. The smell of gunpowder and blood was thick in his nose and on his tongue. He continued forward.

"Bucky!" he called out as loud as he could, but his throat felt strangled, his vocal chords frozen.

Then he heard a dull jangle to his left. He turned and found himself staring at a half-demolished wall made of mud bricks. Movement caught his eye and he rushed towards it. One brick on the wall had broken off with a ragged edge, from which a set of dogtags dangled. Steve reached for them. They were just plain dogtags, charred from fire and dented, the name engraved on them only partially visible: James Bucc...

“No,” Steve heard himself whisper as he stared at the mutilated dog tags. “No, no, no... Bucky—“
“– No!” Steve cried out as his eyes shot open. He lurched out of bed, heart racing, and brought his
shield-arm up to deflect the bullets... except his shield wasn't there...

Panicked, Steve whirled around, eyes darting in every direction at once until he finally found it
leaning against the wall next to the doorframe. Steve blinked. It was the doorframe in his bedroom.
Oh.

With a groan, Steve sank back down to sit on the edge of his bed, leaning over to put his head in his
hands. He willed his heart to slow down, wishing it would take the chill of terror with it. Outside, the
weather was still raging, only now he recognized the pouring rain and howling wind for what they
were. He wanted to laugh hysterically. God, what would people think if they knew what a mess
Captain America really was?

The wind suddenly picked up, slamming against the window and making it clatter loudly within its
wooden frame. Steve instantly sprang to his feet. Outside, the sky lit up like a giant flare had gone
off. Seconds later, thunder crashed, loud and mighty: a sound so wild, so primal, that Steve felt its
energy in his veins.

Unable to help himself, he walked over to the window and got his first true glimpse of the storm. The
rain was falling so heavily it was like a moving sheet of water. He heard dogs barking and sirens
blaring in the distance. He squinted into the darkness beyond the pouring water. Was that smoke he
was seeing?

Steve took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He wasn't going to be able to sleep anymore tonight,
might as well make himself useful and see if he could be of help in the city. Rain this heavy could
cause all sorts of damage, especially with those winds and the lightening. A moment's hesitation
later, he was changing into his uniform (because people listened to Captain America and he didn't
feel like trying to convince them to listen to plain ol' Steve Rogers).

It turned out he'd been right. The storm was doing a lot of damage and people needed help. He could
climb over rooftops and scoot down narrow alleys, which made him faster than the emergency
crews, who had to be careful of the slippery roads and poor visibility.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been out in the storm, when Ironman showed up to help him evacuate
a retirement home whose roof had given in under the strain, causing water to cascade into the
electrics of their one and only elevator. Happy turned up some time later with Bruce in the back and
a giant pile of blankets and waterproof smocks.

Bruce had come to help with first aid. When trees and telephone poles began to fall onto cars and
into houses, the Hulk showed up to help with heavy lifting – beginning with the pole that nearly fell
on top of him.

Hours after the sky made a sad attempt at lightening, the winds begin to die down and the rain finally
stopped. Then the dark, angry clouds began to break apart. When the sun peeked out from behind a
significantly less black cloud, it felt like a miracle.

The clean-up, however, was far from over. They'd moved over from Brooklyn to Manhattan after
flash floods made the roads dangerous just in time for morning rush hour. That was where Natasha
and Clint had showed up to help.

“You know, if you'd phoned us hours ago, we might've shown up a lot sooner,” said Clint as he slid
in beside him, SHIELD-issue black waterproof rain jacket pulled over his face. “And don't even try
that innocent, 'aw shucks, I'm such a silly ol' forties boy' on me! Fury and Hill might fall for it, but I
know full well you know exactly how to use that cellphone they gave you!”
Steve blinked at his teammate, hours of hard work in the heavy rain making his head feel fuzzy and water-logged.

“Uh, sorry,” he said, sounding slightly out of it even to his own ears. “I, uh... the storm woke me up and I wasn't really thinking very clearly after.”

Clint's expression changed from mildly irritated to understanding. He nodded once and that was the end of the conversation.

With the sun finally out, the mood lightened and Steve was amazed to find his smiles as he helped people out of one of the city buses and into a motorized emergency raft, were a little more genuine. When he got himself back to drier ground, he nodded to the rescue workers, avoided a camera crew and gradually made his way to where the others were helping pile sandbags and move fallen debris.

He picked up a fallen set of lights and moved them off the road.

“Man, the timing of this storm sucks,” Clint complained as he threw more branches onto the ever-growing pile of organic debris (Steve had been reading a lot about recycling, so he insisted that they divide the piles into compostable and not). “I was looking forward to a Cap Special Breakfast now that I'm finally in New York for once.”

Steve shrugs. “I wasn't going to be over for breakfast today anyway,” he say. “Was expecting a delivery.”

Clint perked up. “Oooh, finally getting your new couch today? 'Bout damn time.”

“It's a perfectly serviceable piece of furniture,” Steve protested.

“It's ugly as sin, Cap.”

Steve couldn't really argue with that. He'd finally finished the charcoal he'd been working on and set it gently into the ebony frame. It was quite a large drawing and deserved a place of pride – which was in the centre of his living room, right above the couch. Except he'd taken one look at the spot and winced, realizing he couldn't subject the Howlers to that couch: dead or alive, they'd never let him live it down. So he'd gone out the next morning and bought a new one.

“What are you doing with the old one?” Natasha asked from where she was piling sandbags.

“Hopefully burning it,” said Clint.

Steve ignored him. “I'm donating it to a church a couple blocks down. I talked to Father Ignatius last week and he's happy to take it for their community rec room.”

“That's because he hasn't seen it yet.”

Steve rolled his eyes at Clint.

“It's a church,” Natasha added reasonably. “I'm sure there are plenty of old ladies who like to quilt in the congregation.”

“That's a good point. They're probably dying for a project too.”

“Exactly.”

The sound of repulsors had him looking up just as Ironman gently hovered to the ground.
“Hey, it's the spy twins!” he said. “What's up?”

“Cap's finally replacing that offence to interior decorating that's been sitting in his living room,” said Clint.

The armor's faceplate lifted up to reveal Tony's face. He looked delighted. “Really? Aw, Capsicle, I'm so proud. What are you replacing it with?”

“A couch,” he deadpanned. When Tony's face flashed with irritation, he shrugged. “It's a bit bigger and it's dark beige. And there's a matching sofa chair.”

“Dark beige.” Tony gave him a flat look. “So you're replacing the ugliest couch in the world with the most boring couch in the world? I mean, at least the ugly one has character.”

Steve shrugged. “I like it. It's comfortable.” And it went well with the thick blue rug he'd bought to go with it and, most importantly, with the ebony frame.

“Excuse me, would anyone care for some refreshments?”

They turned to a woman in her late twenties with a large badge that said 'Volunteer' in big, bold letters pinned to her shirt. She was holding a large tray of plastic cups filled with steaming liquid.

Steve felt the breath catch in his throat. Her hair were several shades too dark, her skin tone not quite pale enough, but the accent, the deep, full lips, and the smile that seemed just shy of secretive... She stood with her back straight, holding herself like a woman who was used to garnering attention: half-seductive, half-commanding. He'd only seen that seductive sway on Peggy's hips once, but it had seared into his memory along with the red dress that made her legs seem like they'd gone on forever...

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, shoving the memories back into their usual compartments.

“Steve?”

He opened his eyes again and looked down at Natasha. Her face was impassive as always, but there was a hint of worry in her eyes. He smiled wearily.

“Sorry, it's been a long night,” he said.

He looked over to the woman, who met his eyes with a sympathetic nod. “I can imagine,” she said. “There've been reports of Captain America running about Brooklyn since about 3 am helping clear storm debris and evacuating people. We figured you all must be rather hungry and thirsty by now. I'm afraid it's not much, but I have coffee and power bars and my friend will be along in a bit with lemonade and sandwiches.”

“You mean you're beautiful and you have coffee?” Tony exclaimed with delight. “My hero!”

Tony took off one of his repulsor gloves and shoved them at Steve as he passed, grabbing a cup of coffee in each hand to the woman's obvious amusement and immediately guzzled down the first.

“Hm, this actually isn't bad,” he announced. “I mean it isn't Starbucks, but it's not bad. Which, come to think of it, I think there's a Starbucks around the corner here somewhere...”

“The Starbucks around the corner has no power,” the woman told him.

Tony's eyes widened in horror. “What?!” he exclaimed and quickly grabbed a third cup of
Natasha sidled in next to him. “Stark, stop hogging the coffee or I'll tell Potts you've been flirting with the volunteers,” she said and then ignored Tony as he sputtered in protest. She grabbed two powerbars and threw them at Steve. “Coffee, Cap?”

“Oh, no thanks,” he answered as he caught the powerbars. “I think I'll wait for the lemonade.”

He tried to tell himself it was because he liked the thought of cool, refreshing lemonade, not because he couldn't bring himself to get any closer to the woman whose accent and manner reminded him so much of Peggy.

“I'll take coffee, Nat!” Clint called.

“Then come get it yourself.”

“What? That's so not fair.”

Steve heard him grumble as he walked over to get his coffee. Steve, meanwhile, tore into his powerbars, suddenly starving from all the exertion. The serum was great for a lot of things and allowed him to keep going for far longer than an average human was able, but once he stopped, it quickly began demanding its toll. The powerbars just barely took the edge off his hunger.

“Hello, lemonade and sandwiches anyone?”

Steve looked up at the male voice. The young man couldn't possibly have looked different from the woman, despite the British accent. He was tall and lanky with short messy hair and ears that stood out prominently from his face. His smile was wide and friendly and made him look a bit goofy. Steve couldn't help the urge to smile back.

“Sure, sounds great,” he said as he stood to get a cup, grabbing three sandwiches off the tray without bothering to look at what they were. “Thanks!”

He'd just sat down next to Natasha and Clint on the front steps of one of the evacuated houses (its roof was caved in where the telephone pole full of electrical wires had fallen on top of it), when the Hulk came around the corner carrying another tree. He threw it haphazardly onto the growing pile and then noticed the rest of the Avengers.

“Hey there, Big Guy,” Steve called out to him. “We were just taking a break. Wanna join us?”

The Hulk cocked his head and then lumbered forward, stopping to look down at the young man with the lemonade, his nostrils flaring. The man turned around and looked up at the Hulk. Then he looked down at his tray. Then back up at the Hulk.

“I think I'm going to need a bigger glass,” he said. “Hang on, I'll just be a shake!”

The Hulk seemed amused as he watched the young man side-step him and scurry off. Ten minutes later, the man was back carrying a wooden keg. He beamed as he held it out to the Hulk.

“Here you go!” he said.

The Hulk blinked down and gently took the keg from the young man. Then he looked to Steve the others curiously. Steve raised his plastic cup and smiled.

“It's good,” he called to his giant green friend.
The Hulk grunted and took a tentative sip. Then he blinked and looked thoughtful for a moment, before gulping down the rest of the keg's contents. He was grinning when he handed the volunteer back the keg. The young man grinned back at him happily before running off to deliver lemonade to other emergency workers.

Logan watched as Professor X propelled his chair forward as the kid's eyes finally fluttered open. Chocolate brown eyes widened at their surroundings and then the kid tried to move, only to realize she was much too weak to get very far.

“Good afternoon, Tamara,” said Professor X, his voice soothing.

“Wha- who are you?” the kid said, eyes darting around the room. She quickly found him, Scott and Storm standing by the door and shrank back.

“You have nothing to fear from us, Tamara,” Professor X continued. “Someone found you last night and brought you here, because they thought we could help you.”

That got her attention. “Help me?” she spat. “How could you help me? I'm a freak!”

Logan brought his hand up and made a fist. The girl's eyes widened as deadly adamantium claws pushed out of his skin with a soft snick.

Beside him, Scott sighed. “We're supposed to be reassuring her, not terrifying her more,” he chided quietly.

Logan turned his fist towards Scott and pulled back the two outer claws, leaving behind just the middle one. Scott rolled his eyes. “Real mature, Logan.”

Then he heard Professor X sigh.

*Could you leave us for a moment, please? I promise I will be alright.*

Logan pulled back his last claw and looked over to the Professor.

“Yes, of course we can,” said Storm, pulling Scott out the door with her.

Logan shrugged. “Sure.”

He closed the door after him and then looked back at the sheet of paper – scroll paper of all the ridiculous things – he still held in his left hand. He'd found the kid unconscious on the school's steps this morning with the note attacked to her sweater, somehow completely dry.

*This child has a lot of power, but needs to learn control. Next time there might not be a convenient storm for her to hide behind.*

N & M

“Who's N &M anyway?” Logan asked.

Storm and Scott exchanged a look.

“We don't know,” said Storm after a pause. “They've brought mutant children to the school before,
usually after they've done something to endanger themselves or others. The odd runaway has also shown up at our gates, claiming N&M told them where to find us. But we've never seen them ourselves and the children who have tell a different story every time.”

“We think it might be an organization,” Scott added. “But no matter how much we look, there's isn't any information on them anywhere. And nothing the kids have told us has been helpful in any way.”

“Don't you have security cameras around the place?” Logan asked with a frown.

“We do,” Storm agreed. “But the most any of them have managed to capture is the image of a tall figure wearing a long dark robe with a hood. And the Professor's never managed to feel their presence, just that of the children they bring.”

“So they're not always unconscious?”

“No.”

“Hmm...” Well, now wasn't that just a fascinating mystery.
Moving On

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the wait on this chapter! Unfortunately, from now until probably about mid-
September the updates to this story are going to be a bit sporadic as I concentrate on
more pressing projects, but I promise not to forget the story completely. Thanks, as
always, to everyone who read, commented or left kudos on this story so far!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Merlin carefully tied another bundle of rosemary together. It was quiet in their small brewing room,
the bustle of the city outside only barely managing to penetrate into the calm, herb-scented sanctuary.
Light sneaked in through a gap in the daisy-covered curtains that hung over the large window at the
far end of the room. The rest was illuminated by electric light bulbs hanging naked from the ceiling.

It had taken them ages to get this room just right for both of them. The table in the centre of the room
was large, solid and made of rowan wood. One side wall was covered in shelves and cupboards and
cluttered with everything from cauldrons to bunsen burners, while the other was bare so that drying
herbs could hand unhindered from the ceiling. Magic potions, healing salves and tea could all be
made here in this room.

Aithusa lay curled up on one corner of the large table, her tail lazily flicking back and forth over the
edge. Her ears suddenly flicked towards the doorway and she perked up, uncurling herself and
sitting upright as she sniffed the air.

She was off moments later, a furry white blur disappearing around the corner and down the hall.
Merlin watched her go with amusement and then hung the rosemary bundle up with the others to
dry.

As he was leaving, he caught his reflection in the small silver mirror by the door and made a face at
the young man who stared back at him. Then his eyes glowed gold as he whispered familiar words
under his breath and tried not to wince as his body changed: skin shrivelling, hair growing and
irritating aches and pains returning to his now-brittle bones and sagging muscles. Oh yes, and his
arthritic hip. He sighed and closed his eyes, taking a moment for his body to settle into the change.
He'd gotten used to it over the years, but it hadn't actually gotten any easier.

Opening his eyes, Merlin grabbed his staff and hustled out to greet the man in the shop.

Steve entered the antiques shop, feeling oddly nervous and off-kilter. But as the door closed behind
him, several degrees of tension seemed to dissolve, soothing away some of the jitters he'd been
feeling for days. He was still left with the butterflies that were fluttering away in his stomach like
Tony after a week of little sleep and way too much coffee, but that was manageable.

It wasn't that he didn't know why he felt nervous; it was just that he didn't understand why he felt
quite this nervous.

The shopfront was deserted and Steve was glad for the short moment to himself among the old treasures. As had become his habit, he immediately began scanning for new additions. Idly, he wondered how and when the old couple managed to move their inventory around: the beautiful mahogany armoire now standing against the back wall behind what he’d come to recognize as Aithusa’s favourite armchair, looked darned heavy. Did they have people who came to help them after hours?

A white streak out of the corner of his eyes had him pausing in time to avoid stepping on Aithusa as she greeted him enthusiastically, winding around his legs. When she was done scent-marking him (according to Natasha this meant he was now her slave), she stood onto her back paws and leaned her front paws onto his legs, stretching her claws out towards him. He winced slightly at the pinprick of claws he could feel even through his jeans.

She meowed at him and he laughed.

“You know, I wish I could say you just liked me this much,” he said before reaching into the cloth bag he was carrying. “But I'm pretty sure being a nice guy hasn't earned me this reception. Now most of this is my dinner—” He pulled out a small paper-wrapped package. “—but this one's for you.”

It was salmon this time. He’d bought an entire fish at the market and had it de-boned, with a small piece cut off and wrapped separately. Aithusa attacked it greedily.

“Oh I beg to differ, young man. She absolutely adores you... and will continue to do so, so long as you continue to bring her fish. It's a simple arrangement, but effective.”

Steve looked over to where Merlin was just coming out of the back (Steve still felt a bit awkward calling him by his first name, but when Steve had tried calling him 'Mister Pratt', the old man had made a face and insisted he be called 'Merlin').

“Good afternoon,” he said with a smile.

“Hm, indeed. Now what brings you here today, young man?”

“Oh I've, uh, accepted a job in Washington,” he began – it hadn't really come as a surprise when Fury joined him and Natasha for lunch down at the waterfront last week, but he'd still taken a few days to consider the offer. “It comes with a fully-furnished apartment so I was hoping to find something portable to take with me and maybe make it a bit more... homey. But not something that would kill me to loose.”

“I see...”

“Oh, I'm still keeping my apartment here in New York,” he quickly added, wanting to make it clear he wasn't here to say good-bye. “For now, anyway. I-I'm not quite sure I'm ready to not call New York home just yet.”

“Perhaps you never will be.”

Steve grimaced. He didn't want to think about spending the rest of his life longing for the past that could never be brought back. And yet without it, what was he?

“That's not a bad thing, my boy, just a fact of life.” He turned to Merlin. There was that odd sad melancholy in his eyes again, this time making him somehow look older than ever, as though weighed down by the memories his mind's eye was showing him. “Things happen in life and time
passes without our permission; even a moment frozen in time would eventually have to end. And some things you can simply never be ready for, no matter how inevitable or how much time you have to prepare.”

Steve’s breath caught. “Yes,” he whispered.

He thought of Bucky, of the Commandos, of Peggy and his entire world: would’ve knowing what was going to happen have made him any more ready to lose all of them?

Suddenly, there was a gentle hand on his arm, firmly steering him away from the spot he’d found himself rooted in. Numb, he followed silently, allowing himself to be led and seated at the small round table beside the cash desk. The next thing he was aware of, was a steaming mug being pushed into his hands. It smelt nice. He took a sip automatically and sighed as warmth spread into his limbs, breathing life back into his body.

He looked up, finding himself feeling calmer than he had in days.

“Thanks,” he said. “This stuff’s amazing.”

“Why thank you, Steve. Now, tell me young man, what's bothering you? And don't try telling me you're fine, because I'm an old man and I can tell these things.”

Steve snorted, not believing a word of it, but also feeling like perhaps this old man would understand in a way none of his SHIELD-appointed therapists could. Sometimes a sympathetic ear was better than a professional, impartial one and it wasn't like anything or anyone could fix what was wrong, after all.

“All right, I guess I'm not fine. Last weekend I was in Washington signing employment contracts and stuff and, well, while I was there I went to see someone I used to know a long time ago...only it hasn't been quite so long for me...”

He paused and ran a hand through his hair. No, he had to start from the beginning.

“Do-do you know who I am?” he finally asked, carefully.

“Yes, of course I do. I've known who you were since the moment you walked into this shop.”

Steve’s head shot up and he blinked at the old man in surprise.

Merlin raised a bushy white eyebrow at him. “Exactly how many lost young men do you reckon would find peace and home in an old Brooklyn Dodgers cap? Everyone knew Captain America was a Dodger's fan.”

Steve gaped at him. “Hang on, so you mean asking me about art wasn't just a lucky guess, but because you'd read about it somewhere?”

“Hm, saw your old sketchbooks at the Jeffersonian Exhibit. It's always so much easier to appear wise when you've already looked up the answer on wikipedia.”

Steve burst out laughing. “I actually know what that means!” He stopped and thought about what Natasha had said before. “But, wait, you don't seem to use any computers at all, anywhere. I mean, I'm pretty sure that cash register's older than I am! But you use wikipedia?”

Merlin winked at him, eyes sparkling with amusement. “Well, now, that'll just remain our little secret, won't it? It would ruin my image.”
Steve grinned. It wasn't like he'd never played stupid after having been defrosted: if he didn't want to talk to someone, he just dismissed the call and then apologized later, blaming it on all the confusing buttons and his large, clumsy fingers.

“But you never treated me any different,” he said, growing serious, thoughtful. “I think that's one of the reasons I kept coming back, because you didn't seem know to I was any different from anyone else.”

“The person who walked into the shop that first day was Steve Rogers, not Captain America.” Merlin shrugged. “Besides, I've met a lot of different people in my time and I've always made a point of treating everyone the same. You see, that's always where problems start: when we start treating people as things. When we start seeing kings, queens, beggars and heroes instead of men and women. Humans are such peculiar creatures, aren't they? So quick to raise someone onto a pedestal and then forget that they're human underneath.”

“Captain America was perfect,” said Steve, feeling for the first time that someone got it, understood the weight of that mantle that had so quickly become his entire life.

“But Steve Rogers never was.”

“Never tried to be.”

“Exactly. Now, tell me about this person you'd gone to see while in Washington.”

Steve swallowed, but found the words came easily after that. He told Merlin about Peggy, about meeting her during the war, about how she helped him truly become Captain America in reality instead of just on stage, and what an amazing dame she'd been in every way. And then about that moment of incredulity when he realized that, maybe, just maybe, she might just like him back. He told Merlin about how hers was the last voice he heard before going down, the voice that followed him into the cold and dark.

The words were more difficult to find when he described seeing her again inside an old folks home, yet he still managed to find a few. She recognized him and despite the marks the passage of time had left on her body, he still recognized her. Except she had problems with her memories – the sort that came from old age – and things were muddled for her. She'd lived a life that hadn't included him, but she'd apparently never forgotten him either.

Merlin listened silently and when Steve was done, he looked off into the distance thoughtfully.

“It's not an easy situation you're in,” he finally said. “And there are no words of wisdom that will make it any easier. A new job, new friends, moving on, that's about all you can do really. It's not that looking back is bad, but make sure you're moving forward as you're doing so. As for your Peggy... well, you're in for a lot of pain there, but you don't need me to tell you that.”

He looked back to Steve and his sharp, blue eyes met Steve's. “You're trying to decide whether or not to go back.”

It wasn't a question, but Steve nodded anyway.

“Well, it's not up to me to tell you what to do, young man, but I think the real question you should be asking yourself is: will you regret it if you don't?”

Steve took a deep breath. Yes, he supposed that really was the question, and one he already knew the answer to. “Yes, I'll definitely regret it if I don't.”
Merlin nodded, seemingly unsurprised by the answer.

“Well then, there you have it. Perhaps bring her flowers next time, something memorable.” His eyes turned mischievous for a moment. “You could cut yourself a bouquet of begonias from the front.”

Steve coughed on the last of his tea. “Uh, no thank you. I'm not sure I wanna know what Ms Priest would do to me if I did that.”

“A wise decision, young man.” At that Merlin put down his mug of tea and stood. “Now then, I believe you came looking for something liven up your new apartment. Hmm... tell me, do you like music?”

Two days later found Steve driving down the interstate on his bike, a wooden gramophone box strapped tightly to the back.

Merlin wasn't surprised to hear Nimueh's steps on the stairs. He'd felt her magic when she'd returned earlier, while Steve was here (she'd probably been listening in, the old witch). Just as he could tell she hadn't cast the glamour by the lightness of her steps and the ease of her movements. She stopped by the desk and he heard her sigh.

“You're getting too close,” she said softly. “Again.”

He echoed her sigh, feeling the weariness in his soul as acutely as he felt his age in his bones.

“I know,” he answered just as quietly, as he gazed into the bottom of his cup. Fortune-telling had never been his forte and the tea leaves certainly didn't speak to him now.

She came closer and ran a gentle hand through his hair. “Why in the name of the Triple Goddess did the Old Religion choose someone like you?”

“It was Albion, not the Old Religion that chose me,” he replied automatically, leaning into the soothing motion of her hand. “And you know why.”

“Yes.” A few minutes passed in silence. “It'll break you one day.”

He felt an involuntary smile tug at his lips and looked up into her worried eyes.

“Isn't that what you're here for?” he asked.

She huffed in amusement and stepped away.

“You know, there's a carnival in one of the small towns just downstate,” Nimueh said a little later, as they were clearing away the tea things. “We could close up the shop and go down for a few days. It could be good to get out of the city for a little while.”

Merlin considered the idea and looked to Aithusa. “What do you think?” he asked. “It's been a while since you've had the chance to spread your wings properly.”

The cat looked up to him with golden eyes that glittered with excitement and grinned.
Author's Notes: Sadly I can't take credit for the 'people as things' speech. It's paraphrased and adapted to the conversation, but that bit of wisdom comes from the esteemed Granny Weatherwax as written by the late Sir Terry Pratchett. :)
Merry slightly belated Christmas! And many, many apologies for taking so long to finally get back to this story. Things just piled up on me, including stories that went way, way beyond their originally projected length, moving half-way across the city and then Christmas. Anyway, things should be calming down now and so you'll be seeing regular updates again. :)

Thanks for all your support for this story!

“You have got to be joking, Nat! Is this place owned by one of your more subtle mafia connections or something? I mean, points for creativity if it is, I suppose.”

Natasha rolled her eyes as she took a moment to glance at the planter that was covered in a thick white layer of late February snow. She missed the begonias. Ignoring Clint's grumbling, she walked out of the miserable cold New York street and into the welcoming cozy warmth of the antiques store. It was comfortingly familiar inside, bright enough for everything to be easily seen, but with just enough dark corners to retain an air of mystery. She couldn't help but wonder how much of it was on purpose.

Of the old man there was no sign, but an old woman looked up from behind the cash desk when they entered. Natasha guessed this to be Nimueh Priest, who co-owned the shop with the old man, Merlin Pratt. They were an interesting duo. They'd moved to New York together seventeen years ago and opened up an antiques shop. Before that they'd lived in Cardiff, Wales, where they'd also co-owned an antiques shop for ten years. There seemed to be no obvious reason for the move. Neither one seemed to have any living relatives anywhere or former romantic partners. It was just odd enough to be suspicious.

Sometimes Natasha wished it wasn't in her nature to be quite so suspicious of everyone she met, but her nature had been beaten into her so long ago there was no hope in changing it. It had also saved her life more than once.

She nodded to the old lady behind the desk. “Good afternoon.”

The old lady nodded back. “Good afternoon, young lady. Can help you find something?”

Natasha smiled brightly and latched onto Clint's arm. “Yes, we got last-minute tickets to a masquerade ball and we need costumes. I don't want anything too flashy, but I don't want it to look like it just came off a department store shelf either.”

The woman raised an eyebrow at her, but remained silent. Natasha casually resisted the urge to twitch. It wasn't entirely a lie in any case. They did get last-minute tickets to a masquerade ball. In Sweden. Courtesy of SHIELD. And probably involving more weapons than most people's masquerade balls, but then most of Natasha's party invitations did.

The old woman looked away, her gaze moving towards the ground and her eyes softening with amusement. Natasha followed her gaze just as a familiar white cat trotted out from around the corner.
Aithusa meowed once as she approached, barely sparing Natasha a glance as she brushed past her. She twisted between Natasha's legs and then stopped beside Clint, stretching her neck out as she looked behind him. Then she looked up at Clint and sniffed, before meowing loudly up at him. The white cat turned back to Natasha with an accusatory air and meowed again.

The old woman at the counter snorted. “Oh knock it off, you ridiculous creature. Steven's not here, it's just his friends. He moved to Washington and you know it.”

Aithusa let out one last, small meow before trotting off to an armchair upholstered in white brocade with golden leaves embroidered into the fabric. She nimbly leapt onto the seat of the chair and then from it, onto the top of a solid oak dresser, where she curled up into a ball, her back facing them.

“I think we've just been snubbed,” said Clint with an amused shake of his head. “I should feel insulted. Cats I don't even know like Steve best.”

“If you brought her fresh fish, she'd like you best too,” said the old woman with a roll of her eyes. She came out from behind the counter. “Come on, I've got what you're looking for in the back.”

She shuffled off, disappearing behind a tall statue of a colourful rounded man in a suit holding a large green fish with comically-bulging eyes.

“Oh, so I suppose I really shouldn't be surprised that Steve's a regular in a place like this,” Clint said softly as they followed the woman.

Natasha shrugged. “This is where he found that Brooklyn Dodgers banner. And the hairpin for Pepper.”

“Yeah, it’s probably responsible for that old record player in his Washington digs too. I think Stark nearly had a coronary when he saw it.”

“ Hmm.”

It hadn't been visible from the front of the store, but just behind the bizarre statue, the store opened up into a large spacious area lined with shelves packed with books, statuettes and all manner of crystal structures. A giant disco ball hung from the ceiling. Thankfully, it wasn't lit.

Clint stopped below it and stared up at it in fascination. “Think Stark would want one for Christmas?”

Natasha raised an eyebrow at him. “Sure. Just don't be surprised when he makes it fly.”

“Ugh, a flying disco ball? I'm gonna have nightmares now. Actually, can you imagine Thor's reaction to it?”

Someone cleared their throat.

They looked to the other side of the shelved area, where Ms. Priest was looking rather impatient. “I'm afraid you'll have a hard time dancing if you're wearing that,” she said.

Natasha smiled politely. “Of course, we apologize.”

Ms. Priest sniffed and turned around again. They left the shelves and entered a narrow, winding corridor. It looked almost familiar, and Natasha found herself disconcertingly unsure whether it was the same corridor Merlin Pratt had taken them down to the jewellery rooms. The shop couldn't have more than one back corridor, could it? They passed several closed doors, and a few open ones.
Finally, Natasha saw the purple room with its jewellery showcases and ugly chandelier. They walked past it.

“Jesus, how big is this place?” Clint asked. “You could hide a body in here and no one would ever find it.”

Up ahead, the old woman paused to look over her shoulder. “Don’t be ridiculous, young man, that’s what cellars are for.”

Clint froze. He stared after the old woman for a moment before shaking himself out of his stupor and then snorted in amusement. “You know, I'm not even sure she's joking.”

Natasha shrugged. “We could go check.”

“Yeah, I don't think so. Whatever skeletons she's got in her closet can just stay hidden as far as I'm concerned.”

Natasha smirked and followed Clint. As they rounded the corner a familiar sharp, rhythmic snicking sound greeted them. A door about half-way down was open, bright light spilling out into the dimly-lit corridor. Natasha fought not to tense. Sharpening her own knives was soothing to her, and she could spend hours lost in a meditative trance while doing it. This was different. This loud, sharp sound of an invisible weapon being sharpened in the darkness somewhere beyond her vision set her on edge, made her want to bare her teeth and grab her gun.

Torturers liked to unnerve their victims by loudly sharpening their instruments, letting anticipation do part of the work for them.

Just ahead of her, she saw Clint's back stiffen. His fingers twitched, no doubt itching to touch the bow he'd left back at SHIELD. But, like her, he barely paused in his step, instinctively hiding his reaction. The old woman gave the open door nothing more than a passing glance. Clint peeked in and froze. Natasha came up beside him and peered in.

The room was something between a showroom and an armoury. The centre of the room was bare, with smooth hardwood flooring that looked well-worn and carried the memories of more than a few clumsy moments. The walls were painted bright blue. They were also lined with weapons, though the closest thing to modern warfare was a small rack of muskets in the corner. Colourful wooden lances stood proudly in another rack, their colours faded, surfaces scratched and, in one case, cracked down the middle. Natasha recognized javelins, spiked maces, crossbows, spears, war axes, and swords. There were a lot of swords. There were a few shields of various shapes and sizes as well, but mostly, there were swords. And, more importantly, Natasha's trained eyes could tell at a glance that these weren't just show pieces. Every single edge came to a finely-sharpened, gleaming point. These were weapons and someone had taken meticulous care to make sure they didn't forget it.

If he felt their stunned gazes, Merlin Pratt ignored them as he carefully ran a whetstone along the edge of a heavy-looking broadsword. His hands were wrinkled and covered in spots, but their movements were steady and precise.

“You know, I think they mentioned there were rooms like this in the Hogwarts dungeons,” Clint whispered.

Natasha smirked. “I might have enjoyed the movies more if they'd shown more of those.”

“Blasphemy! Those movies were perfect. Not as good as the books, obviously, but perfect. There was even a double-agent spy.”
“Who should have just blown up Voldemort's base and been done with it.”

“Aah, but you're forgetting the horcruxes. Wouldn't have killed Voldy.”

“But it would have killed all his minions. And would've dealt enough damage to Voldemort himself. You'd just have to scrape what was left of him into a jar and drop it in a concrete bath. War over.”

Clint sighed and shook his head. “You have no sense of creativity.”

“No, I do believe she's quite right, young man,” said a voice from inside the room. The old man's hands were still, though he hadn't looked up from the sword. “That would've been a much easier way to go about things. Alas, some people do like to make things complicated for themselves.” Finally, he looked up to them, amusement twinkling in his eyes despite the frown on his face. “Although, personally, I like to think of myself as akin to Gandalf rather than Albus Dumbledore.”

Clint grinned. “Not so keen on going up against evil dark lords?”

The old man snorted. “Evil dark lords are boring and unimaginative. Now ringwraiths and balrogs, on the other hand…”

Natasha didn't bother to stop her lips from quirking in amusement. “Hello Merlin.”

“Ah yes, hello there, young lady. You have a different blond on your arm this time, I see.”

She shrugged. “I trade them out every once in a while.”

“Of course.”

Clint interrupted them with a wave of his hand. “Wait, hang on, can we go back a step there? Seriously, your name's Merlin? I was totally joking with the Hogwarts crack. I had no idea – woah! Is that a long bow?!”

Natasha rolled her eyes as Clint disappeared into the room.

“Well, I think we've lost him now.”

Natasha looked back to the corridor, where the old woman was waiting with one hand on her hip and a scowl on her face. Her eyes, however, danced with amusement. Somehow it was the amusement that finally put Natasha at ease. Her smile was much more genuine this time. “I don't suppose you have a Robin Hood costume back there somewhere?”

“I might. Or something like it, perhaps.”

Ms Priest turned without another word and continued her shuffled progress down the corridor. Only three doors later, she was stopping to open an elaborately-carved door that looked like it had once belonged in a grand manor. Natasha paused to run her hand over the smooth mahogany ridges and took a moment to wonder just how the co-owners had managed to amass their collection. From the furniture to the weaponry, there seemed to be few time periods not represented in the shop. She only knew enough about antiques to get by in conversation, but it was enough to recognize that many of the pieces would've been at home in any number of museums.

The room she stepped into was large, but crowded and hexagonal in shape. Three of the walls consisted of large floor-to-ceiling mirrors and the other three contained racks of clothes, the shelves above them stacked high with hat boxes. Except for the shelf with wigs. Natasha was very tempted to make Clint wear something baroque as revenge for abandoning her.
“Now then, young lady, does this masquerade of yours have a theme?”

“Yes, fairy tales.”

The old woman rolled her eyes. “How very original,” she said dryly. “So I take it there will be no shortage of princes and princesses.”

“Most likely.” Natasha had no particular opinion on the theme. An unoriginal theme would make it easier to blend in, be just another princess. Although she refused to be a Disney Princess.

“Hm.” Ms Priest stood in the centre of the room, her eyes skimming the racks thoughtfully. “Well, I’m afraid I don’t have anything quite fitting for Robin Hood, however if your friend doesn’t mind chainmail, I think I can do a knight errant. The long bow isn’t exactly fitting as a weapon for the role, but I doubt historical accuracy will be at the forefront of anyone’s mind.”

Natasha nodded. Clint would love the chainmail.

“And you, my dear, would you rather be the rescued maiden or the evil witch. Or perhaps a sprite of some sort... Pity there aren’t many good witches in fairy tales.”

Suddenly Natasha wished she didn't have to blend in – wished she could dig into the hidden well of half-remembered stories. There was a voice somewhere in the depths of her mind; an elderly voice that was raspy and slightly hoarse, but full of warmth. Her mind didn't have a face to go with the voice, but there was sense of peace surrounding it and a hint of happiness the Red Room hadn't quite managed to root out. In some of her darkest moments, she imagined the voice as that of her grandmother, though she honestly wasn't certain of anything. For all she knew, it was the voice of the woman who'd recruited her. If Natasha's memories of before the Red Room were fragmented, then those of her first months were a kaleidoscope of colour, sound, pain and fear. Natasha didn't think of those early days. It was easier to think of herself simply as a being that was born from the Red Room.

But she held on to that voice. It had once been her only reminder that warmth existed in the world.


The old woman shot her a look, before slowly nodding. “Ah well, I suppose appearing helpless has its advantages.”

Natasha waited until the old woman had turned away from her to frown. She'd done the background check herself and there was no indication that either Nimueh Priest or Merlin Pratt had connections to any organization except a few historical societies and season passes to the MET. But not even Clint was able to read her as easily as this old woman was doing. Was it because they were similar in some way?

There was a confidence in the old woman's demeanour that spoke of someone who wasn't used to fearing anything, but she didn't walk like an assassin. Which meant she either wasn't one at all, or was a very, very good one.

“Aha!” exclaimed the old woman, interrupting Natasha's musing as she pulled out a simply-cut blue gown with embroidery done in golden thread and long bell sleeves covered with lace. She held it out with a triumphant smile. “Try this one. I think you might be a bit shorter, but otherwise of a similar size.”

It was a perfect fit except for the skirt, which the SHIELD wardrobe department could shorten for her. She then picked out a long mailshirt and brown leather pants that looked like they would fit Clint
and went to find him.

He and Merlin were still, predictably, chatting about weaponry, although they'd moved on to crossbows. Clint looked up when she entered and grinned. “Hey, Nat, any luck?”

She smirked. “I got you chainmail. You'll be my knight.”

His eyes lit up and grin widened. “Wouldn't I need a suit of armour for that?”

The old man beside him had been looking at the dress in Natasha's arms with an odd expression, but at Clint's comment he snorted. “Knights only wore suits of armour into battle or for tournaments. So basically if they were either being shot at or showing off. Which means you'd best go with the crossbow for that.”

Clint looked to him. “How come? I can't be a knight and an archer?”

“Not with a long bow.”

“Aw.” He looked down at the crossbow in his hands and caressed it reverently.

The mission was a success. Natasha had been pleasantly surprised to discover the dress had a hidden pocket just the right size and shape for a knife holster sewn discreetly into the folds of the skirt. It did nothing to assuage her suspicion of the old woman, of course, but she liked the dress even better now. It never did make it to SHIELD's wardrobe department after the mission.

She also got her revenge at Clint. She handed in her paperwork for the mission to accounting an hour before leaving for a two week-long mission she'd selected at random. The image of Clint trying to justify the expense of an antique crossbow to Maria Hill kept her smiling all the way to Argentina.

None of the junior agents bothered her the entire trip.
Wow, thanks for the response to the last chapter! I'm truly happy and excited by how many people seem to have been really looking forward to me finally updating the story. And, as promised, here's the next chapter much, much faster. :) 

Hope everyone had a great New Years!

The air sparked with anger. Not even the thick layer of snow could cool the swelling tide, voices calling out with a single purpose, one loud creature of many, ugly faces. Logan clenched his fists and ground his teeth together. It wasn't anything he hadn't heard a dozen times before. He'd been called a freak more times than he could ever be bothered to remember. Yet it still took every once of willpower he possessed to keep his claws sheathed, to force down the bloodlust that desperately wanted the Wolverine to show the mob just what a monster could really do.

A hand touched his arm gently. Logan didn't have to look over to know it was Storm; he could smell the fresh scent of ozone that always surrounded her. He did anyway, meeting her sad, though determined, eyes and letting them ground him, remind him why he couldn't just let loose. He took a deep breath.

Crisis averted, she smiled slightly and looked away – only to suddenly stiffen and tighten her hold on his arm. Logan followed her gaze and growled. It was Magneto, casually strolling by in a hat and long wool coat, arm-in-arm with a young woman with long dark hair, pale skin and startlingly dark blue eyes. There were too many people between them to tell, but Logan would bet his secret beer stash it was Mystique.

He ears picked up the soft whirling sound as Professor X moved his wheelchair forward.

“What do you want to do, Professor?” he heard Scott ask – the suck-up.

“Nothing yet, but stay alert and ready for anything he might do.”

Logan hated waiting when their enemy was standing right in front of them. Magneto must've felt their eyes on him, because he stopped and looked directly at them. He smirked, tipping his hat in greeting. Logan growled. He felt the tips of his claws push at his skin.

An old woman shuffled determinedly past, breaking their staring match for a moment. To Logan's surprise, Magneto and Mystique's eyes followed her, frowning as she approached the crowd of protesters. The speaker at the podium was a large bear of a man wearing a heavy-looking canvas jacket and a bright red hat that was just a few shades darker than his face. White puffs of cloud hovered around his lips as he screamed into the microphone.

“This is a threat we can't ignore! They could be anyone: your neighbour, the guy at the gas pump or the woman getting on the subway with you. And we have no idea what any of them are capable of! Our children are going to school with them, getting taught by them for all we know. We can't let these freaks of nature continue to live among us as though they were normal!”
People in the crowd waved placards spouting the usual anti-mutant rhetoric, cheering him on. But as he paused to take a breath, one single voice was somehow heard above the mob. “And what exactly do you plan to do with them once you've got them?”

The crowd in the centre parted to make a circle around the old woman. The man at the podium looked down at her in surprise, apparently taken aback by the question.

The woman huffed and leaned forward on her cane. “Well?” she snapped. “Surely you've thought this through, young man. Once your witch hunt has been successfully completed and you've rooted out all these so-called monsters, what do you plan to do with them? Burn them?”

Around her, nameless faces protested in outrage. Logan frowned, wondering what this woman thought she was doing.

“Silence!” Amazingly enough, the crowd around her fell instantly silent. She continued to stare up at the man behind the podium. “I'm speaking to your ring-leader now.”

The protest leader sputtered for a moment, until he finally managed to collect himself. He straightened indignantly. “Of course we're not proposing doing anything as barbaric as burning them!”

The old woman raised an eyebrow at him. “Barbaric? Young man, segregating an entire group of people due to genetic differences and making them outcasts and lesser citizens in their own country is barbaric. What exactly were you going to suggest? Prison? Work camps? Indentured slavery? Fire may not be pleasant, but it's at least a final solution, an end to everyone's suffering. All you're left with is a pile of ashes to clean up afterwards.”

She paused, ignoring the horrified expressions around her. Even the man at the podium seemed to have been stunned speechless. “Although I would add that if you're going to chose that route, do make sure you have the courage to see it all the way through. Don't just leave it to some sort of distant authority to take care of where you don't have to watch. If you wish to destroy people, then be there to look them in the eye when you do it. Build the pyre yourself and then stay and watch as the flames burn their skins, listen to them as they scream – because no matter what they say in the books and movies, everyone screams before the end – smell their skin and flesh cooking like Sunday roast. Oh, and the hair: there's nothing quite like the smell of burning hair. And then there's also that lovely moment when the heat finally makes their eyeballs explode. But, eventually, it ends and then there's just a pile of ashes to clean up.”

Logan realized that even he was staring by this point. The man at the microphone looked rather pale, the red almost entirely gone from his face except for two points high on his cheeks. After a few, long moments, he finally managed to collect himself again. His eyes flashed angrily. “Look, ma'am, I have no idea what you think you're doing, but all we're asking for is mutant registration.”

“Segregation,” the old woman snapped. “Do everyone the courtesy of calling it by its proper name. Surely you're not actually naive enough to believe that society will continue on as one homogenized unit if everyone who's different has to put their names into a governmental database. Or that you have such faith in your government that you don't think they'll use this aforementioned database to find people to recruit from for their own nefarious purposes. Not to mention every criminal element, who manages to get their hands on this list. You think these people are dangerous now? Just think of what they'd be capable of doing if their families were threatened. Or in the name of revenge.”

The smile on the old woman's face was terrifying, and she commanded the crowd like it was second nature to her. Logan wondered if she had some sort of mutation herself. There was something about her that made him want to unsheathe his claws and run his fingers over the metal edges to reassure
himself they were still there and still sharp.

The man's eyes flashed in triumph at the old woman's final words. "Which is exactly the point: we don't know! How can we keep our own families safe if we don't know what we need to keep them safe from?"

"Being a decent human being would be a good place to start."

Beside him, he heard Storm slap a hand in front of her lips. When he looked over, he saw that her shoulders were shaking with silent laughter.

"Excuse me?"

The old woman snorted. "If you call someone a monster enough times, they'll start to believe you. And, what's worse, they'll start proving you right." Then she straightened, her presence suddenly imposing. "This is supposed to be the land of the free and the home of the brave. Well, all I'm hearing is the obnoxious ranting of a child too scared of sleeping in his own room for fear of the monster hiding under the bed. And what you're advocating certainly isn't freedom. Do you know there are parts of the city where women are too afraid to walk alone at night for fear of being assaulted? That there are children too afraid to go home because the people who should love them are hurting them? Those are real concerns deserving of your attention, so perhaps you should stop wasting time with this one."

She then turned her back on the podium and began shuffling her way back out of the crowd. The mob parted for her silently.

"Well, that was... interesting," said Scott.

Professor X chuckled. "Indeed. I should very much like to meet our stalwart defender."

Shockingly, Magneto beat them to it. Even more shockingly, he actually smiled warmly at the old woman and kissed her hand. "My dear lady, you were utterly brilliant."

The old woman smiled back at him. "Why thank you, young man. People are just so stupid and I simply can't help myself whenever Merlin drags me to these things."

"Lies!"

If Logan had ever taken the time to imagine what he would expect someone named Merlin to look like, the old man who shuffled over with his tall walking stick would've fit the description perfectly. Except that Logan might've imagined a few more stars on his coat and a tall pointy hat and this man looked like he would turn him into a toad for suggesting anything to do with stars. Or pointy hats.

The old man glared at the old woman. "Don't listen to her, young man, I did not drag her anywhere. She was the one who insisted on taking a walk in this direction."

Magneto laughed. "I'm afraid I'll have to say I'm more inclined to believe Merlin. I can hardly imagine anyone dragging you anywhere."

The old woman huffed, but looked pleased by the comment. Then her eyes swung to Logan and the others. "Are these friends of yours, Erik?"

Logan glowered.

Magneto smiled his usual superior smile that set Logan's teeth on edge. "Oh hello, Charles, fancy
meeting you here.” He then turned to the old woman. “May I introduce you to Professor Charles Xaiver. He runs a school just outside the city. The young man – what did you call him – oh, yes, the Icicle. That was one of his.”

Logan blinked. Icicle? Did Magneto mean Iceman?

They must've all looked equally blank, because Magneto's eyes lit up with humour. “Oh, did Iceman and Rogue not tell you about their encounter in Little Italy? They nearly got into a fight and were chased off by Nimueh here because they were putting her begonias in danger.”

Logan blinked again. Oh he was going to have to get that story out of Marie. And then neither one of them was living it down.

Professor X merely smiled pleasantly. “I'm afraid neither one of them mentioned the encounter. I do hope the begonias made it out intact.”

“They did, thank you Professor.”

Professor X maneuvered his wheelchair closer and then stuck out his hand. “Please, call me Charles. It's a pleasure to meet you.”

The old woman shook his hand firmly. “The pleasure is mine, Charles. I'm Nimueh and this is my old friend and business partner, Merlin.”

The old man also shook the Professor's hand. Meanwhile, Nimueh turned back to Magneto. “So, how is the Spark doing anyway?”

Magneto raised an eyebrow in amusement. “Pyro is doing well. Irritated at his new nickname, but otherwise quite well.”

Beside him, Mystique smiled slightly, her eyes dancing with amusement.

The old woman's lips quirked. “Yes, well a little irritation will do him good. The boy looked like he took himself far too seriously.”

“Young people always do,” Merlin added. “Nevertheless, you should bring the Spark with you the next time you stop by for tea.”

Nimueh's eyes lit up. “Oh yes, do. Steven's in Washington for the foreseeable future and I do believe Aithusa misses him dreadfully. Someone new to wrap around her fingers will cheer her right up.”

“She's missing her supply of fresh fish, is she?” Mystique asked.

Merlin smirked at her. “Exactly.”

Logan felt like he'd been transported into an alternate dimension. He wasn't quite sure what was going on and it was making him antsy. “Professor,” he growled.

“Relax Logan. If Erik was planning anything, he's not going to cause any trouble now. It appears he holds these two in some form of regard.”

“Violence won't solve anything, young man.”

Logan looked into Merlin's stern blue eyes and growled. “But it'll make me feel better. Besides, do you know how much violence those two have committed? How many people they've killed for their cause?”
The change was subtle, but instant. Suddenly, Merlin's eyes looked impossibly old. “Peace is a precious, fragile creature, one we should treasure during those few moments we are privileged to know it. Sadly, fear always wins in the end.”

He turned away from Logan, who couldn’t help but stare at him in stunned silence.

“It was lovely to meet you, Charles. You should join Erik and Raven at our shop for tea sometime. Erik, Raven, I look forward to seeing you again.”

And then he left.

The old woman sighed, her eyes full of her own grief as she watched him leave. “He's a good man – one of the best I've ever met. I knew him when he was very young. He loves people, truly loves them. Could never turn away from anyone who needed his help, no matter who they were, even trained to be a physician once. He still looks for the good in people, but they've broken his heart too many times. He no longer believes in them. Not that it stops him from trying, the daft bugger.”

She shook her head. “It's a right pain in my arse, keeping me from being the bitter old crone that I am.”

Magneto stepped forward and squeezed her hand comfortingly. “Nimueh, I will gladly join the two of you for tea. Perhaps between the three of us we can find some leftover crumb of optimism.”

She patted his hand gently. “You have no idea how appreciated that would be.”

She then said her good-byes and left. Logan watched her hobble off towards Little Italy and, when he turned back, Magneto and Mystique had disappeared. Professor X seemed unconcerned by this. Instead, he watched the old woman thoughtfully.

“Something the matter, Professor?” Storm asked him.

“I'm not sure.” He turned to them. “I couldn’t read them. I tried to skim their thoughts, but both of them were complete blanks.”

Scott frowned. “How is that possible? Do you think they're mutants?”

“It's certainly possible, especially given their apparent friendship with Erik, but I'm not certain. I believe we should speak to both Rogue and Bobby when we return to the school.”

Logan grinned. That was a plan he could get behind. “I'll round them up.”
Hey guys, sorry for the wait on this update. I've been having a really hard time concentrating lately - like, I know what I want to write but when I actually sit down in front of my laptop I end up spending half the time staring into space. So I haven't stopped writing, it's just coming really, really slowly. But, hey, at least the wait isn't as long as last time's, right?

Anyway, thank you so much to everyone who commented on the last chapter. I was pleasantly surprised by all the positive feedback. I hadn't been 100% sure about it myself, but apparently it managed to touch a lot of chords, which makes me really happy. If any of you are curious where the inspiration for Nimueh's speech came from, check out this video on YouTube. I didn't credit it, because it's a very different speech for a different occasion, but the idea behind it is the same and Matt uses the same sort of shock value to get his point across. To give a touch of context, 'Alien Nation' is a TV show from the 80s about an alien spaceship that crash lands on Earth and how humanity and these new aliens (and former slaves) attempt to co-exist.

**Important:** If you haven't seen Netflix's Daredevil yet, don't worry, there are no actual spoilers for the series here, although it does technically take place after the first season.

The bright afternoon sun streamed down on them as they walked melting away the top layers of snow that had long turned from white and fluffy into gray and tired-looking.

Foggy Nelson looked up and basked in the warmth. “Man, I can't wait for winter to be over,” he said loudly.

Beside him, Matt Murdock snorted. “No kidding. At least you can see the slippery spots.”

“Oh, what, so you're saying your special super powers can warn you about oncoming bullets, but not icy patches?”

Matt's lips curled into an amused half-smile. “Only if someone else steps on it before me, or something falls on it. Ice on its own doesn't really make noise.”

“That sucks, though I suppose being able to avoid things that could kill you makes up for the odd clumsy moment.”

“Yeah. Gets a bit irritating though. So, how far is this antiques shop again?”

“Uhh... according to my phone's GPS, it should be just a few houses down the next street. This place had better be everything Marcie says it is, 'cause this is no one's definition of 'close by'.

“I thought you said Marcie heard about it from a client.”

“Well, yeah, she did. But she also said it was 'just over in Little Italy' and we're almost in Chinatown now!” He looked over to his friend and sighed. “And you don't seem to be nearly as upset about this
as I am.”

Matt merely shrugged. “It's a nice day and it'll be worth it if we can find the perfect present for Karen.”

Foggy rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, you're right. I'll stop whining now.”

They continued walking, turning onto the next street with only a slight pause to admire the smell of pastry wafting out from an open shop door. Foggy looked to Matt. “We're definitely stopping here on our way back.”

“Good plan.”

The shop, when they finally found it, was rather inconspicuous-looking. Not that Foggy had really expected anything else from an antiques shop. Loud and conspicuous would've probably put him off the idea, now that he thought of it. It looked appropriately small and quaint.

“After you, my friend,” he said, opening the door with a grand sweeping gesture he knew his blind friend wouldn't necessarily see, but would probably hear – and possibly 'see' in his own, unique way Foggy still didn't quite understand.

Matt paused on the threshold and looked up with a small frown.

Foggy raised an eyebrow at him. “Uh, something wrong there, Matt?”

Matt shook his head. “No, sorry. It's just that these little shops usually have bells or buzzers to let the owners know when someone enters.”

Foggy craned his head to see past Matt. “Huh. Well there's definitely nothing on this door.” He paused and then continued more quietly. “That's not anything we need to worry about, though, is it?”

Matt smiled and stepped further into the shop. “No. It's just strange.”

Inside, the shop looked bigger than the outside had indicated. And every inch was full of clutter. He wondered if the owners would even notice if anything went missing. There were random pieces of furniture mixed in with shelves of trinkets and even a sea chest under the window sill. God, the insurance on this place had to be astronomical. “Well, I guess we've got a lot to choose from.”

“Hmm.”

Foggy cringed. “Right, sorry, you can't actually tell, can you?”

Matt shrugged. “Not in the same way you can. I tell can the room is full of furniture and stuff, but not specifically what sort of stuff. But that's not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean?”

Matt was silent for a few moments, his head dipped slightly to the side the way he sometimes did when he was listening closely to his surroundings. “It's just this place feels... peaceful. Calm.”

Foggy thought about that for a moment. He took a deep breath. The air didn't smell the least bit musty, but he couldn't smell any incense or air fresheners either – just the faint lingering aroma of herbal tea. A quick peek towards the cash desk – with a double take at the truly ancient-looking register – revealed a still-steaming rainbow pride mug. It seemed rather incongruous with the rest of the shop, a slight glimpse of the existence of the modern world. The desk was deserted, however,
and the only other person Foggy could see was a tall, slim woman wearing a long black wool coat – obviously another customer.

“Well, I don't see any staff, so let's just take a look around.” He grabbed Matt by the arm and slowly led him through the haphazard maze of antiques.

“They're both in the back,” Matt quietly told him. “One's showing rings to a man with a Russian accent and the other... uh, I think he's examining a sword. Appraising it possibly.”

Foggy paused and gave Matt a blank look. “Dude, that never really stopped being freaky. Even if it is kinda cool.”

Matt chuckled. “Don't worry. It took me years before I saw any sort of positive side to this.”

Just past the cash desk stood a weird statue of a man wearing a tux and holding a bright green fish upside down by its tail, its eyes bulging comically. Foggy wondered who bought this sort of thing. Or, more to the point, who made this sort of thing. Behind the statue, the shop opened up into a second, much larger area. A huge oak desk stood against one wall, its surface covered in an array of what looked like random junk, although the sort Foggy would've expected to find in a museum.

He headed towards it. “Huh, antique office supplies,” he said out loud for Matt's benefit.

Matt's eyebrows rose behind his dark glasses. “Well, I suppose that could count as practical. You did say you didn't want to make it too obvious that we were trying to cheer her up.”

“That's assuming any of this is actually useful.” Foggy eyed the assortment skeptically. Some of it really did look like junk.

“Any letter openers?”

“Letter openers? One sec.” Foggy scanned the crowded desk. “Uh, yeah, there's a few in here.” He picked up a dented blue tin cup. “They're kinda plain-looking though. I mean I know we agreed we didn't want to make it an obvious cheer-up gift, but we're doing a bit better now so I don't wanna totally cheap out.”

He paused and then looked to Matt. “Why a letter opener anyway?”

Matt was looking away from him, towards the far corner of the room. He shrugged. “It can double as a weapon and it's something she can keep on her desk so she doesn't have to fumble with her purse.”

Foggy gaped at his friend for a few beats. Carefully, he replaced the dented tin cup. “I'm not sure what it says about me and my life that I actually agree with your logic.”

“Pretty sure it says more about me.”

Foggy ran a hand through his hair. “Right, well either way, we should get something a bit more decorative than this junk. There's such a thing as a fancy letter opener, right?”

“Of course there is, young man. Now give me a moment and I'll show you a few.”

Foggy jumped at the voice coming from behind him and whirled around to see an old man with a long white beard hobble out from behind the large credenza in the corner of the room. A much younger man with hair so perfectly black it had to have come out of a box followed behind him, his eyes darting back and forth nervously.
Foggy watched them get to the till and leaned towards Matt to whisper. “The engagement ring guy?”

Matt paused for a moment, cocking his ear towards the register. “No, the sword. Apparently the old man sharpens them too.”

“That old guy? He looks like could barely lift a sword.”

Matt shrugged. “Sometimes people will surprise you with what they can do.”

Foggy snorted. “Oh you mean like a blind man doing martial arts?”

The corners of Matt's lips twitched. “Something like that.”

And then, suddenly, he froze, the amusement vanishing from his face. Foggy tensed as he watched his friend slowly turn to face the corner the two other men had appeared from.

“Matt?” he asked carefully. “Is there something wrong?”

Oh God he hoped there wasn't some secret drug-running or human trafficking operation behind the antiques store. He really wasn't eager to watch his friend jump into yet another fight that could get him killed. What they'd gone through last year had been close enough. Even if the new, much more protective outfit did look kinda cool.

“I'm not sure,” Matt replied after several long moments. Foggy now recognized the subtle signs of tension in his stance, hidden though they were beneath the loose hang of his dress pants, and how he'd loosened his grip on his walking stick in case he needed to use it as a weapon. “Something's coming. I-I'm not sure what, but I think it's big.”

“Something? So... not a person?”

“No, definitely not a person.”

Foggy swallowed down the bundle of nerves that was beginning to lodge in his throat. Something not human? Like, a monster? Was the old man also some sort of crazy scientist who bred fire-spitting monsters in his spare time? Or maybe the antiques store was just a cover for some crazy DNA experimentation lab? Maybe the swords were used to kill defective experiments.

Beside him, he could feel Matt grow tenser. Foggy strained his ears, but couldn't hear a thing as he watched the corner with the credenza intently for the slightest movement. His breathing sounded loud in his ears and he wondered if the creature approaching could hear it.

Finally, a shadow moved – closer to the ground than he would've expected, but maybe the thing was crouching. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Matt shift his stance again. He took a deep breath and balled his hands into fists...

And then froze as a large, white cat came into view.

Foggy blinked at it incredulously. “Uh, Matt...?”

His friend was still tense, poised for defense. “What is it, Foggy? Can you see it?”

He looked back down to the feline. It was staring up at them, looking mildly bewildered. It cocked its head and meowed loudly. Looking to Matt, who had if anything tensed up further, Foggy was struck with the utter ridiculousness of the situation. He burst into laughter.

Matt's flabbergasted expression only made him laugh harder. Finally, he managed to pull himself
together enough to gasp out a few words. “Matt, it's a cat.”

“It's what?! Are you sure?”

Foggy rolled his eyes. “I'm looking right at it! It's a big on the large side, but it's white and fluffy, and looking at me like I've lost my mind. Come on, Matt, it even meowed like a cat.”

“You heard it meow?”

The uncertainty in his friend's voice made Foggy frown, worried. “Yeah, man, I really did. Are you okay?”

Predictably, Matt just shook his head and waved him off with a small, self-deprecating smile. “I'm fine. I guess I'm just more tired than I thought I was.”

Foggy's frown deepened. He recognized that look: it was Matt's 'oh I just ran into the doorframe again, clumsy me' look. Except he seemed to have forgotten it didn't work on Foggy anymore.

“Ah, I see you've already met Aithusa.”

They turned back to face the old man who worked in the shop. Foggy really couldn't imagine anyone who looked more like they belonged in an antiques store – unless they were traipsing through a forest in Middlearth.

“I take it that's your cat?” Matt asked politely.

“Yes, of course.”

Foggy snickered. The man raised an eyebrow at him. “That corridor back there must really echo a lot, 'cause Matt here thought she sounded a lot bigger than she is.”

The old man's eyebrows rose as he blinked in surprise. “Oh?”

Matt shuffled his cane and looked chagrined. “Yeah. I'm apparently just a bit off my game today. I could've sworn she sounded like she was roaring a second ago.”

The surprise turned into a frown and Foggy could've sworn it almost looked thoughtful. “That's very interesting, young man.” His eyes slid down the length of Matt's white-tipped cane. “Very interesting indeed.”

He was silent for a long moment and then seemed to shake himself out of whatever stupor he'd fallen into. “Now then, I believe I heard you say you were looking for a decorative letter opener?”

“Oh, yeah, for our administrative assistant,” said Foggy. “She's been down in the dumps lately, so we wanted to get her something to cheer her up.”

“But without looking like we're trying to cheer her up,” Matt added with a smile.

“Ah, I see. Well, follow me then. I believe I have just what you're looking for.” Perhaps unsurprisingly he then proceeded to lead them down to the corner, where there was indeed a corridor hidden from view by the large credenza. On their way, they passed by an old woman leading a large man holding a small box. Foggy assumed this was the ring guy.

Not even fifteen minutes later, Foggy was making a mental note to thank Marcie a lot for telling him about this place. Once the old man had shown them where to look, finding the perfect gift had been easy. As they waited to pay for their purchase, the door opened behind them. The old man looked up
from the ridiculously old cash register and smiled, his eyes lighting up with delight.

“Ah hello, Erik, Raven,” he called. “Have a seat, I'm just finishing up here.”

“Hello, Merlin,” a deep voice called back. “Take your time, we're in no hurry.”

Foggy glanced back to see an older gentleman wearing a grey pinstripe suit and a black hat hold the door open for a young woman with long, jet black hair wearing a short white down jacket with jeans that hugged her very lovely curves. There was a loud meow and then Aithusa the cat jumped down from the back of the armchair she'd been sunning herself on and immediately began twisting around the young woman's legs.

Beside him Matt flinched at the sound. Foggy darted a look to his friend, wondering just why this cat made him so nervous.

“Tell me, young man, have you ever studied any of the Greeks?” the old man – Merlin, apparently, and wasn't that just the most appropriate name ever – asked suddenly, clearly addressing Matt.

Matt blinked. “Uh, no, I didn't actually.”

“Hm. A pity. The Greeks were very wise in their own way. And they certainly knew how to tell a good epic. You should read the Odyssey. It's the riveting tale of Odysseus' journey home from the Trojan wars. Took the long way home for some reason, the daft bugger – apparently spending ten years helping another man win back his wife didn't make him long for his own in the slightest. Anyhow, when he finally reaches home, the first one who greets him as the master of the house is his dog. There are some who call that dog a true philosopher. You see, after being gone for twenty years, Odysseus enters his home in disguise, but the dog sees past all the layers of lies and deceit straight to the truth hidden beneath.”

Foggy blinked at the old man, wondering what philosophical dogs had to do with anything. He looked to Matt, who seemed just as confused.

Then the old man grinned, his eyes twinkling. “Ah forgive me my ramblings, I am an old man, after all.” He handed them the letter opener, carefully wrapped in tissue paper so that its beautiful mother of pearl handle wouldn't scratch, and a hand-written receipt. “I do hope your assistant likes it.”

“I'm sure she will,” said Matt. “Thank you.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Foggy added over his shoulder as he side-stepped the slim, dark-haired woman who was now waiting behind them. “Have a great day!”

He was vaguely aware of the old woman taking the old man's place at the register as they left the shop.

Less than ten minutes later, the antiques shop's door opened once again as the tall, slim woman also left carrying her own bundle. The buttons on her long black wool coat were all done up to ward off the lingering winter chill. She walked casually towards the larger, busier street on her right and then let herself get lost within the crowd.

It was only then that she took out her cellphone and hit the speed dial. Around her, people rushed
past and only half of her conversation could be heard. Not that anyone was paying her half of the conversation any attention.

“Hello sir, this is Hill... I'm in New York, sir... No, nothing pressing. I was just checking up on something suspicious that Widow had mentioned a few weeks ago about the antiques' store where she and Hawkeye got their costumes for that party in Sweden... Yes, sir, that would be the one he got the crossbow for. Natasha said she got odd vibes from the owners... Not as such. She said it felt more like they might've been former spies: agent and handler or something to that effect. I took and peek and, if they were, they certainly don't seem to be active now.”

She stopped at a crosswalk and dutifully waited for the lights to change as she listened to the person on the other end of the line.

“Because I wanted to look into it myself to see if it was something worth bringing to your attention, sir... Not at first. Don't get me wrong, I can definitely see what made Natasha so suspicious, but I wasn't sure there was anything nefarious. Although they do have a rather impressive collection of Cold War spy gadgets. Got Phil a birthday present while I was there.” She shrugged. “He's a difficult man to shop for, sir. I was killing two birds with one stone.”

The right corner of the woman's lips curled in amusement for a scant second at the response from the other end before she became serious once again.

“As I was saying, sir, I'd more or less decided there was nothing suspicious the couple and their shop, when Erik Lehnsherr walked in. There was a young woman with him I didn't recognize, though I heard one of them call her Raven... No, sir, I don't believe I was compromised, however I was at the counter and set to pay so unfortunately couldn't remain without drawing suspicion. Nothing in the shop owners' files indicates they're mutants, but they seem to be on friendly terms with Lehnsherr and weren't hiding it.”

She paused again and listened. Then nodded as if to the person on the other end of the phone. “Yes, sir, I'm on my way back to the airport now. You'll have my report by the end of the day... Thank you, sir.”

She ended the call with the same no-nonsense efficiency she seemed to do everything and then stepped up to the curb to hail a cab.
From Beyond the Fourth Wall

Chapter Summary

(Wherein Wade Wilson tries to push the boundaries of the story's rating - seriously, I tried to tone it down as much as I could, but, there's only so much you can really tone down Deadpool before he just stops being, well, Deadpool.)

A/N: Warning for language, sexual innuendo and violence. This chapter acknowledges the Deadpool movie, pokes at it a few times, but contains no actual plot spoilers for it.

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for all the kudos and comments on that last chapter.

This chapter is pure, self-indulgent crack. Hope you all like! :) And please keep in mind that I have never been to Little Italy in New York, therefore my representation of it is probably entirely inaccurate. I apologize in advance to those New Yorkers out there who do live in Little Italy, but since I’m writing crack here, I figured accuracy could get side-lined in the name of humour for once.

Blood splattered onto the alley wall seconds before a dull thud and a splat were heard. Several moments of silence followed, punctuated by the sound of dripping blood and the soft drone of traffic and people from just beyond the alley. Then there was a shuffle of movement.

“Is that it?”

Somewhere around the approximate centre of the alley, Deadpool stood scratching his head as he surveyed the haphazardly assembled piles containing a bakers dozen of corpses and random assorted body parts. With a shrug, he then walked over to the wall and yanked his sword out. The body attached to the head it had been impaling slid to the ground and joined one of the haphazard piles. He stepped over said pile and headed over to the back of the alley to retrieve his other sword, where it was sticking out of another dead guy.

On the way, something caught his eye. It was a gun. After he'd wrestled it out of its previous owner's grip – he may have had to break a few fingers – he brought it closer to the light to get a better look. It was definitely a custom job, with chrome detailing along the top, a wide comfortable grip, and a skull and crossbones engraved into the side, just above the barrel. Deadpool liked the way it shone when the light hit it. He shoved it into his belt at the small of his back next to his other, more boring gun. If they happened to go forth and multiply, then all the better.

The dead guy holding his sword with his chest was at the other end of the alley, in the darkest, dirtiest part of it. He smoothly pulled the sword out in one, easy motion – at least that had been his intention. In reality, the sword stuck and he had to use his left foot as leverage in order to yank it out with both hands. When it finally slid out, the sudden lack of tension sent him stumbling back a few steps.
Bewildered, he then looked at the two swords he was holding and then back to where the first one
had gone through a skull and then into a wall. “Seriously, how does that make sense?” he wondered
out loud. “It's like something a writer would do purely as comic relief. Unless there's some sort of
mystical relevance to the story, but this is New York, not England and I'm pretty sure a brick wall
doesn't count as a stone. Unless it's a budget problem, I suppose. Kind of like have a giant-ass
mansion with only two X-men inside... But if it was mystical, would that mean that I'm the rightful
King of the Backalley Garbage Heap now? I wonder if there's a crown. And appropriate benefits,
like free food and courtesans to fawn over me.”

Deadpool shook his head, deciding it was probably time to leave so that the cops could show up and
do their thing, which would somehow not involve putting two and two together and realizing that the
guy walking down the street in broad daylight wearing a bright red suit and a clearly-visible array of
weapons was responsible for the violent killings in the alley. He spun the swords in his hands for
maximum coolness effect and then went to slide them back home into their sheaths.

“What do you think you're doing, young man?!”

Deadpool froze. Then he slowly turned to face the mouth of the alley, where an old man stood
 glaring at him. He had long white hair and an even longer white beard – like a wizard gone
 undercover. One bushy white eyebrow rose and Deadpool gulped nervously. It was a very
 intimidating eyebrow.

He looked back towards the alley, taking in the very obvious and very bloody carnage. Then he
 looked back to the old man and smiled disarmingly. “Dry cleaning?”

The old man glanced into the alley and snorted. “I didn't mean them. Those are the same ruffians that
 have been recently causing trouble for all the shopkeepers in the area. They actually had the gall to
 threaten the begonias. I don't think they realized just how lucky they were that the old bat is in
 England right now checking in with some old friends after that whole Thunder God/Dark Elf
 nonsense.” He shook his head. “No, no, I meant the swords.”

Deadpool blinked and looked at his swords. “My swords? What about them?” He hugged them
 close. “They're mine, old man, get your own.”

The old man rolled his eyes. “I have my own and all of them in much better condition. Honestly,
 what do they teach young people these days? A sword must never go into its sheath with blood on it.
 The blood will crust over and cause the blade to rust.”

With speed Deadpool hadn't expected for someone who looked like they were pushing well past
 octogenarian, the old man was suddenly in front of him and grabbing at one of the swords. He then
 held it up to inspect the blade. “A sword is a reflection of the swordsman and this one is, quite
 frankly, a disgrace–”

“–Hey!”

“–Chipped, scratched, and this edge! What did you do, raid the kitchen for a knife sharpener?!!”

The Eyebrow of Doom was once again turned his way. “Uhhh...”

“Humph. Very well, just this once, I'll do it free of charge. Now follow me.”

Not bothering to wait for Deadpool to agree to anything, the old man turned on his heel and left. The
 merc stared after him for a few moments, debating whether or not to actually follow the old man.
 When people gave him orders he generally felt a Pavlovian instinct to do the opposite. Then he
realized the old man still had one of his swords.

“You know, as much as I have a general policy of never saying no to anything that's free of charge,” he said when he caught up to the old man. “I've gotta point out you're a little too old for me and, really, it's a sad comment on the state of our economy when even—”

The old man paused and turned to Deadpool, effectively turning off his commentary with one, bushy white eyebrow. “I was referring to your swords,” he said dryly. He raised a finger. “And don't even start with me, young man. I've been around the world quite a few times so I can assure you, I've heard it all.”

Deadpool closed his mouth. “You're ruining my fun, old man.”

“Good.”

As the old man continued to hurry along, Deadpool turned to address the audience he knew was there, just beyond his limited vision as a fictional character. “This old man is nuts.” A beat. “I kinda like him.”

He caught up to the man just as he was passing by one of the many, many bakeries, delicatessens, and pastry shops that somehow managed to co-exist in Little Italy. A short, rounded woman with greying dark brown hair and olive skin was sweeping the front step. She looked up and smiled at the old man. “Good afternoon, Merlin! How's business?”

The old man stopped and smiled pleasantly at the woman. Deadpool stared at him. He turned to his invisible audience. “Seriously, Merlin? That's either the most ironic naming co-incidence ever or the worst secret identity on the planet.”

He turned back to the old man, Merlin, and the woman just in time to hear Merlin say: “Oh, and you won't have to worry about those ruffians anymore. This young man over here took care of them just a little while ago.”

The woman turned to him now, her eyes wide in surprise. Deadpool wondered how she hadn't noticed his bloody swords – well, okay, the old man was still holding one, but the blood spatter wasn't entirely invisible even on the red suit. Then she smiled warmly. “Wait here, I'll be right back.”

A few minutes later, she was back with a white paper box. Deadpool took it curiously and peeked inside. “Ooh, cannoli.”

“Thank you for taking care of our problem.”

He looked up at her. “Uh, you realize I got paid for that, right?”

She placed a hand on his bicep and squeezed gently. “Yes, but this is from me.”

Deadpool wasn't about to argue with free cannoli either way.

Gossip in Little Italy apparently spread at super-sonic speed, because it took him and Merlin about half an hour to finish going up the street, weave their way through the crowds on Canal, and then go half-way down another street. It seemed everyone and their mothers (and grandmothers and great-grandmothers) wanted to stop them to say 'hi' and thank Deadpool personally. By the time they arrived at what looked like an antiques store, the old man was carrying both his swords because Deadpool's were full carrying four boxes of pastries, a monster piece of tiramisu, three loaves of bread, a hunk of some sort of very smelly cheese, half a pastrami, a large bag of tea that would supposedly keep him awake and energized – and increase his stamina added the tiny woman, who
looked like she was about a hundred, with an impish wink. Oh, and an entire still-steaming lasagna
due to another old lady who had taken one look at him, poked him in the ribs and said “You are too
skinny, you need to eat.” before disappearing up a small stairwell and then reappearing with a
ceramic dish.

The shop door opened silently and Deadpool looked up as he walked through. “Huh, I thought all
small shops were supposed to have bells or buzzers or something on the doors to make noise when
the doors opened. Isn’t it a prerequisite to owning a shop? I mean, you’re breaking the cliche here by
not having one.”

“It isn’t, in fact, required and we don’t need one. I find those bells highly irritating.”

Deadpool simply shrugged as he followed the old man through the shop. It was full of random junk
of all shapes, sizes, colours, and possibly even religious denominations. He stopped to stare at a
bright green fish that was hanging upside down, its eyes bulging out comically. He turned to his
unseen audience. “I feel like that too some days.”

Thanks to his incredible flexibility – Vanessa had certainly never had reason to complain – he
managed to navigate the shop without banging the lasagna pan into anything and only almost
dropping his precious tea twice. He did manage to drop the smelly cheese, but he kicked that off into
the corner because, really, why in the world would anyone want to eat anything that smelled like it
had been fermenting for centuries in a damp compost heap?

The old man led him into a back corridor. Deadpool blinked at the sudden change in atmosphere.
The corridor was lined with doors, sconces lit along the wall every few feet. “Okay, this is creepy. Is
this the way to your secret dungeon? Actually, now I think I’m going to be very disappointed if there
isn’t a dungeon at the back of this place somewhere. Oh, oooh, or is this like in that movie with the
villain that doesn’t at all look like a really nerdy Nick Fury? Is Merlin, like, your codename or
something?”

The old man paused and looked back at him, raising both eyebrows incredulously. “No, Merlin is
my legal name and I’ve never felt the need for dungeons of any sort.”

Deadpool shrugged and then continued to follow behind. His stomach growled. He looked to his
audience. “What? You try carrying this much food without getting hungry. The lasagna smells
amaaaazing.”

He turned back to the old man. “Seriously, though, how is this place even real? I’m pretty sure New
York real estate isn’t this big unless its owned by secret government organizations, Stark Industries or
evil villains. How did you manage to get a piece of that action? Or is this place secretly bending
relative dimensions in space?”

“Magic.”

“Really?”

“No. We own the building behind the shop as well and have built corridors connecting the two.”

“Oh. That’s disappointingly boring.”

“Hm.” Finally, the old man reached a door he apparently liked and opened it. “Now, have a seat,
young man, and don’t knock anything down.”

Deadpool entered the room and stared. There may have been some drooling involved. Every inch of
wall space sparkled as light reflected off the surfaces of polished steel. Sharp, pointy polished steel.
“Wow, this is way better than a dungeon,” he said reverently. He let the bundles in his arms drop to the floor, then thought better of it and reached down to dig out a cannoli. He took a bite and groaned.

“Okay, so you can totally spread the word in the area that I will accept pastry in exchange for services rendered. Anyone in the area needs someone killed, maimed, beat up or scared off, just let me know.” A snort answered him and he turned to the old man, who was sitting on a low, three-legged stool and cleaning the swords with a soft cloth and steady, confident strokes. “Also, I think I might developing an entirely inappropriate and mildly disturbing mancrush on you.”

“Feel free not to tell me anything about it,” Merlin answered.

Deadpool opened his mouth to respond – and tell the old man all about his new inappropriate, and possibly more than a little kinky, mancrush – when something brushed against his leg. He froze. Something brushed against his other leg. So he did what every self-respecting mercenary would do: shrieked loudly and jumped away. Then he looked down.

And found himself staring at a large white cat. He blinked down at it. It blinked up at him. Then they both stared. Finally, he knelt down and reached out. “Aw, hey kitty kitty. Aren't you just adorable?”

“You really shouldn't approach her before she approaches you,” Merlin called out to him from where he was oiling the swords.

“Why? Is she shy? Aw, are you a little scaredy ca-yeowch!”

“No, but she does have incredibly sharp claws.”

Deadpool stared at the bloody gouges on the back of his hand. “No kidding.” As the flesh began to knit back together, he looked up to watch the cat stride imperiously away. “Hey cat, you ever want a job, come find me and I'll hook you up. You'll be set for life, all the catfood and kitty litter you could want.”

“You'd have better luck with fresh fish.”

The cat hissed at Merlin before leaping up onto a small wooden cabinet. There she curled up into a ball beneath two giant battle axes. The way she looked at him through eyes narrowed into slits told him it was probably a message.

When Deadpool exited the shop, it was with considerably less pastry than when he'd walked in. As soon as he stepped outside, he let go of the canvas bags Merlin had given him to use for the rest of his for once legitimately-gotten loot and pulled one of his swords out and marvelled at the way the sunlight gleamed beautifically off the polished, sharpened steel. The blade had been sharpened to such a fine edge that it looked almost paper-thin. It was the sort of sharpness that could cut hairs, the sort of sharpness that only legendary anime warriors possessed.

Deadpool sighed dreamily and slid the sword back into its sheath.

Then he picked up his bags (no way was he leaving his tea behind) and began making his way towards home. Once he was finally out of sight of the antiques store, he ducked inconspicuously into an alley. Then he peeked out and looked both ways to make sure he hadn't been spotted. Carefully, he slunk along the wall until he was satisfied no one was looking. Except for his constant audience,
of course.

Which he turned to now and whispered as he paced his bags onto the dingy alley ground. “You might be wondering what I'm doing. Well, my friends, what I'm about to preform is a very delicate procedure and not one to be undertaken lightly. Unless you're me.”

He straightened and faced the wall as he tapped his chin thoughtfully. After a moment, he reached out and tapped a brick. Then he tapped the next one. And the next one. And continued tapping bricks until he was almost at the other end of the alley and getting more obviously frustrated by the second as his tapping became less gentle with each brick. Until, finally, his hand went through the wall.

“Aha!” he declared, his demeanour instantly brightening. “Well, now this isn't just another brick in the wall!” He pushed the rest of his hand through until he was in the wall up to his elbow.

He turned to address his audience. “See this is the part where it's really awesome to be a meta character, because it means I can do things like... this!” Deadpool yanked his arm out of the wall with a dramatic flourish, showing off his newest acquisition: a small stack of papers. He grinned gleefully behind his mask. “The script! Or, in this case outline, since this isn't movie – although, I do have one of those out now and it's awesome, if I do say so myself. The main character is just to die for. Now, let's see, what we have here...”

Deadpool spent several minutes leafing through the meagre outline. Suddenly he froze. Leafed back towards the beginning. And then leafed forward again. “What? The cat is a dragon?!” He looked out to his unseen audience. “Did you guys know the cat was a dragon?” A beat. “Why does no one tell me these things?”

He continued grumbling as his attention turned back to the outline in his hands. Then he blinked at another section. “Huh. Wow, this part is really well-developed. It's almost like the author had planned this scene for a different story, but didn't end up using it and so is sticking it into this story instead. How lame. Wait, hang on. Ooooh. Oh man, that is... I wish my girlfriend could do that! That would be so cool.”

He threw the sheets of paper over his shoulder. “Well, that's enough of that. It's not exactly like I'm all that invested in a story I only have a cameo in. Oh, and to those of you, who've been asking – you know who you are – this is the twenty-first century and this is where everything changes–wait.”

Deadpool blinked, looked up and cocked his head for a moment as though listening. Then he turned back to face his unseen audience. “Sorry, wrong TV show crossover. Although I've gotta say, it's a way more dramatic catch-phrase. I mean, seriously, Part One is ending? How's that supposed to get anyone's attention? 'Cause guess what comes after Part One? That's right, Part Two! Ugh, it's so predictable and boring. I'm gonna go get me some chimichangas and see if I can convince Vanessa to learn that trick. You know the one... oh, wait, you don't know yet, do you? Well, that's something to look forward to then, isn't it?”

Still muttering to himself, Deadpool turned and headed off in the first random direction his legs took him. Several minutes passed in silence. Then came the sound of running feet as he rushed back to get the bags he'd forgotten in the alley (and especially his precious, precious tea)
Back in town

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone! Yes, I'm finally back.

Thank you so much to those of you who've left kudos or comments on this story so far. I'm really happy that my Deadpool chapter was such a success (and can I just say that writing a character breaking the fourth wall like that was so, so very much fun). Like Deadpool said, this chapter marks the beginning of what I'm thinking of as the second part of this story, so you should slowly see some elements of plot sneaking their way in. As well as more Avengers.

Aithusa heard the voices first. One moment she was lazily sprawled over a large dusty rose silk cushion, and the next she'd sat up with a twist of her body, the rocking chair beneath her gently swaying. Her tail swished against the silk cushion once. Her ears flicked. And then she meowed excitedly and leapt off the cushion with a loud creek from the rocking chair.

When Merlin looked up from the appraisal he was in the middle of, she was already gone.

Raising an eyebrow at her dramatic exit, he reached out to the magic that permeated the building and peeked into the front, at the energies gathered there. He and Nimueh had poured so much of their magic into this place over the years – both on purpose and simply as a result of their presence – that all it took was a bit of a nudge for either of them to see everywhere. Although 'see' wasn't entirely accurate. It was more that they could feel every shape within the building. There were currently two new shapes that were people in the shop front.

Merlin recognized one of the shapes. His lips spread into a delighted smile and he gently placed the jewel-encrusted dagger he'd been examining back into its velvet lined box and removed the jeweller's eyeglass from around his head.

By the time he'd shuffled his way to the front of the shop, his usual grumpy Dragoon the Great demeanour was back in its proper place. And Steve Rogers was crouched down and unwrapping Aithusa's present with an amused smile while the feline stared at his hands with rapt attention. Standing above them both was a dark-skinned man with a military crew cut, grinning with amusement.

The dark-skinned man shifted a large pastry box in his arms and he shook his head. “Y’know, I was thinking that was an awful little fish considering what I've seen you put away in a single sitting.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “You're having a really hard time getting over that, aren't you?”

“My mama raised three teenage boys and she goggled at how much you managed to pack away.”

The tips of Steve's ears turned pink. Merlin chuckled, happy to see the young man had managed to find himself a friend who wasn't afraid to tease him. Even the greatest of men needed someone who was neither intimidated by them, nor in awe – an equal.

“Ah, Steven, I see you've returned!” he exclaimed, finally making his presence know. He frowned
down at Aithusa, who was ignoring everyone in favour of devouring her fish. “And back at spoiling the furry menace.”

Steve looked up and smiled, scratching Aithusa behind the ear before standing. “Hello, Merlin. I’ve actually been in New York a few days already, but this is the first chance I’ve had to get up here.” He gestured to the other man. “This is Sam Wilson. Sam, Merlin Pratt.”

Sam Wilson stepped forward. “Good to meet you, sir,” he said with a smile as he held his hand out.

Merlin raised an eyebrow as he shook his hand. “Young man, I am not, nor have I ever been, a soldier. I have a name, so do endeavour to use it.”

Sam Wilson's grin widened. “Sorry, force of habit.”

“Hmm.” He let go of Sam's hand and looked over to Steve, eyeing him critically as the blond scanned the shop. There was a tenseness in his stance that reminded Merlin of the young man that had first entered the shop, a restless, frantic energy suffusing his limbs. And a wildness in his eyes, fresh lines of grief that might've been well-hidden from the casual observer, but were obvious to Merlin.

Steve must've felt his gaze, but chose to ignore it for as long as he could stand it. Finally, he sighed and turned to face Merlin.

“How are you, Steven?” Merlin asked gently.

“I'm--” He paused and closed his eyes, a pained expression passing over his face. “You saw the news broadcasts from Washington.”

It wasn't a question. Merlin nodded. “Of course. Quite the mess, it looked like. You know they declared you an enemy of the state at one point? I must say there's something comforting in realizing that politics hasn't really changed much over the years: it's still a viper's nest full of bipolar drama queens.”

That seemed to surprise a laugh out of Steve and his eyes shot open.

Sam snickered. “That is quite possibly the best description of Washington I have ever heard.”

“I believe it pertains to every political institution in human history, beginning with the grand royal courts of old. I never did stand much for it. Never had to care either, of course; I made my own path in the world.”

Steve's smile was bitter, his eyes haunted. “I wish I didn't have to care.”

Merlin considered him for a moment. As he watched, he saw the emotions cloud over until they were smothered by sheer force of will. Steve's jaw clenched and the tilt of his chin became defiant, as though daring Merlin to judge him.

Merlin huffed. As though he had the right to cast stones. He waved towards the elaborately-carved ebony table and chair set they'd set up for guests. “Have a seat, young man,” he said gruffly. “I'll go scare us up some tea. In the meantime, I'm sure Aithusa wants to show you her appreciation by covering you in white fur you'll never entirely get out of your clothes.”

He went to their little kitchenette in the back – it was really a storage cupboard Nimueh had appropriated and converted years ago, declaring the upstairs kitchen simply too far to go to just for a cup of tea. Why it also needed to contain a hotplate that, to his knowledge, neither of them had ever
used, and a small microwave, was a mystery he'd long given up trying to solve. He hesitated for a moment as he eyed the tea blends. Nimueh had brought some of her favourite herbs and leaves back from England – it took a very discernible palate (and a healthy dose of magical ability) to taste the difference between those grown in North America and those grown in Europe. Albion, in particular, infused plants with a fresh, earthy magic that somehow felt like home to Merlin.

Steve, of course, wouldn't be able to tell the difference. Even if he'd had magic, Albion wasn't his birthplace. Despite that, Merlin pulled down Nimueh's newest mulberry blend and measured it out carefully. He poured three mugs, whispering a mild warming charm over them to keep them from cooling too quickly. Then, as an afterthought, he reached into a dark corner beneath the small oak counter and pulled out another one of Nimueh's souvenirs from her recent trip. A sly smile slipped across his face as he poured a healthy measure of fairy wine into each mug.

The two men were both sitting at the table, the large soldiers looking almost comical in the dainty chairs. Aithusa, as promised, was shedding all over Steve's lap, purring loudly while he carefully scratched her behind the ear. Sam wasn't even trying to hide his amusement. They thanked him as he handed them each their mug.

Steve raised an eyebrow at the bright red and gold mug. “I didn't figure you for an Iron Man fan.”

Merlin waved him off. “I'm not. Too flashy by far for my tastes. No, your friend Natasha brought this by a while ago, told Nimueh to make sure to use it for you the next time you came by.” He shrugged. “For some reason people like to give me mugs. I'm really not sure why.”

Sam burst into laughter. “Man, she's got your number alright. Probably figured that if she gave you an Iron Man mug, you'd shove it into the back of your pantry and never use it, but if someone else served you something in an Iron Man mug, you'd be too polite to refuse.”

Steve's lips quirked in amusement. “Remind me to get her back somehow.”

Sam snorted. “Yeah, good luck with that.”

“Fine, I'll get Clint to help me.”

“You do that. He sounds suicidal enough to humour you.”

“Coward.”

“Nope, just smart.” And then, as if to prove his courage, Sam raised the bright rainbow mug he'd been given in a toast, and took a drink. He blinked and looked down at the mug. “Old man, you tryin' to get us drunk here?”

Merlin scoffed. “Please, there's barely enough in there to get a toddler drunk. It would've taken at least twice this much to get me drunk when I was young, and I'd once had tell mentor describe me I could get drunk off a whiff of a barmaid's apron.”

Steve laughed. Aithusa complained loudly as the movement jostled her napping space. “Sorry, Aithusa,” he told her, stilling instantly. The grin was still on his face when he looked back up to Merlin. “I was once that bad, before the serum. Now I can't get drunk no matter how much I drink.”

A shadow fleeted over Steve's face, his eyes suddenly haunted and weighed-down again.

“So, what's your mug got on it, Merlin?” Sam asked, watching Steve out of the corner of his eye.

Merlin turned his mug so they could see the large block script that proclaimed 'MUTANT RIGHTS
Steve chuckled. “Did she? Gosh, that was nice of her.”

“Woah, hang on there,” Sam exclaimed. “What do you mean ‘nice young lady’? Does Natasha know about this nice young lady?”

Steve rolled his eyes. “No, and it’s not like that. I met her here once, that’s all.”

“Oh huh, sure, Cap, sure.”

Merlin sat back and sipped his tea as he listened to the two of them snipe back and forth, momentarily overwhelmed by his own memories. He could almost see a different table in a different time, the smell of roasted meat, burning logs and mead. And the warm glow of laughter and friendship, men brought together by a common goal and a great leader.

“Merlin?”

He blinked and the image was gone. Instead Steve and Sam were both looking at him with concern. He idly wondered what the expression on his face had looked like.

“Are you alright?” Steve asked.

Merlin waved him off. “I am an old man, full of memories of days long gone by. Don’t mind me. Time may have healed the raw, gaping wounds, but the memories remain.”

Aah, he thought when the grief returned to Steven’s face. He took another sip of tea, closed his eyes as he felt the traces of Albion’s magic warm their way into his veins, like a gentle caress of home. He opened his eyes and met Steve’s. “It isn’t Hydra that has you so out-of-sorts, is it?” he said quietly.

Steve’s eyes widened momentarily. For a very long moment, Aithusa’s purring was the only sound in the room. And then Steve swallowed heavily. “No,” he whispered. “It’s not.”

He leaned back into his chair and looked off into the distance, his jaw clenched. Merlin waited patiently for him to speak. Eventually, he did, his voice distant.

“Before the war, before... everything, I had a friend, the best friend a guy could have. He was always there for me, always had my back – and that wasn’t an easy thing to do. I was a small mouthy guy who never met a bully he didn’t want to take down a peg. He... he was the reason I finally became Captain America – not just a war bonds salesman, but the real thing. He and his unit got themselves captured by Hydra and I couldn’t just sit around and not do anything. I went against orders and had a civilian pilot drop me behind enemy lines just to save one man. After, the brass cut the orders to make it look like it had been a legitimate operation, but it hadn’t been. It had just been me refusing to leave my best friend behind enemy lines to die.”

He paused to take a deep breath, the grief having clearly overtaken him for a moment. “He died anyway. Fell from a train and down a snowy mountainside in the Alps. At least, we were sure he was dead. No one should’ve been able to survive that fall, but we had no way of going back to recover his body to make sure.”

Merlin clamped down on his own emotions. He, too, could still see Arthur’s body laying at the edge of the lake, Merlin’s efforts all too late to save him. The weeks, months, years – centuries, if he was being perfectly honest – of recriminations, of wondering if he could’ve done something to change Arthur’s fate. Could he have saved Arthur if he’d only told him of his magic sooner, instead of hiding
“Like the coward he was?”

“I saw him,” said Steve, finally raising his eyes to meet Merlin’s. “I saw Bucky. He was there, in Washington. They’d done horrible things to him, wiped his memory. He couldn't remember me. But I know it was him.” His jaw clenched again, his eyes hardening with determination. “I'm going to find him. He's the best friend I ever had and I'm going to find him and bring him home. Not sure how yet, but I will. I need to help him the way he always helped me.”

Merlin sat silent, wondering what Steve expected him to say. “It sounds like it'll be dangerous,” Merlin finally said slowly.

“I don't care.”

Merlin nodded. He hadn't expected anything less. “Alone?”

“Hell no,” Sam said instantly and Steve smiled at him.

“Good.” Merlin opened his mouth to say more, but just then the door to the shop opened.

“Merlin, what in the world have you been telling that old buzzard that runs the cheese shop on the corner?!”

Merlin rolled his eyes. “I haven't been to the cheese shop in weeks,” he called back to Nimueh. “Now come see who's back in New York!”

There was the sound of shopping bags being dumped on the floor by the cash and then she finally stepped into sight. Her face lit up at their guests. “Steven! It is good to see you back – and in one piece as well. We were so worried when no one had any information as whether or not you'd survived after those helicarriers came down!”

Then Nimueh looked over to Sam. Her eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “Hmm, you look very different without the wings.”

Sam grinned, obviously looking pleased to have been recognized. “Yeah, they're not a permanent fixture, sorry.”

“Well, that's likely a good thing. Just be sure you don't fly too close to the sun, young man.”

“Thankfully my wings are made of metal not wax.”

Nimueh’s lips twitched in amusement. “A much better building material I'm sure.” She glanced over to Aithusa's happily purring form and rolled her eyes. “You've really created a spoiled little monster there.”

“Sorry,” said Steve, not sounding sorry at all.

“Hmph. Well, I'll just take the shopping up.”

“I can give you a hand with that,” said Sam, immediately jumping to his feet.

Say yes, Nimueh. I need to speak to Steve.

Nimueh paused in her automatic denial and her eyes cutting to Merlin for a moment, the only indication she'd heard his silent request. “Thank you, young man, that's very kind of you.”

“No problem, ma'am.”
Nimueh stood back and let Sam manage the shopping bags for her. She looked back at Merlin just before leading him up the stairs into their top level apartment. No doubt she'd be hankering for an explanation later.

Merlin turned to Steve and took a deep breath. “Steven, I, too, once had a friend. Only I suppose in our particular circumstances I was Bucky, protecting my friend from the things he couldn't fight on his own. Our situation was much more complicated and from the very beginning, our friendship was surrounded with secrets and lies of omission. Almost all of them on my part, I'm afraid. I had my reasons at the time, of course, but I'm not asking for absolution so they don't matter. Suffice to say that my friend never knew everything I'd done for him, never quite realized how much I would do for him.”

Thinking of Arthur, as always, brought a sad smile to his face. He'd met many men and women after Arthur's death, but none compared to his great, golden king.

“There was nothing I wouldn't do for him. He was a great man, a great leader and I believed in him. Everything I did was for him, to help him attain his destiny.”

The shop was silent. Even Aithusa had stopped purring. She always paid attention when he spoke of Arthur. Morgana had never had a good word to say about her half-brother, and Nimueh hadn't ever really known him. More than that, Aithusa had once told him that when he spoke of the Once and Future King, Emrys' words became profound, magical in a very primal way.

“What happened?” Steve asked quietly.

“I failed.”

Merlin took a deep breath, banishing the image of Arthur's body laying lifeless at the edge of the Lake of Avalon. “I was late to the battle and by the time I'd made it to his side it was too late, he'd been stabbed with a... poisoned dagger. I tried everything I could to save him, but he died in my arms anyway.”

“I'm sorry,” said Steve softly, his eyes now wet with tears Merlin doubted he would let fall. Not here.

Merlin managed a small smile. “Young man, this is all ancient history now. My point is that I understand. You have a chance to save your friend, so of course you have to take it. But, as someone who has, as they say, 'been there and done that', allow me to give you two pieces of advice.”

He waited for Steve to nod slowly, needing to make sure the blond was listening and willing to accept his advice.

“First, do not do this alone. I was mostly alone in my efforts and even now I sometimes wonder if I would've allowed myself to be so utterly blinded to everything that wasn't my friend had I had someone willing to stand by me in a way my friend couldn't. Undoubtedly I would've still made mistakes, but perhaps they wouldn't have been such grievous ones.”

He could feel the presence on the stairs pause to listen. Sam had been there for a short time, which was fine. It wasn't so much that Merlin didn't want him to hear, but rather that he'd wanted the conversation to be between him and Steve.

“I have Sam and the Avengers.”

Merlin nodded. He would leave it to them to make sure Steven didn't fail to ask for help when he needed it.
“Then my second piece of advice is to make sure you don't lose yourself. Do not let this consume you to the point that you forget who you are. Finding and bringing your friend home is important, but do not let it become the only thing that matters. Your other friends matter too, this city matters, every person who walks its streets matters, and so does your art. Don't ever lose sight of that.”

“Always be a good man,” said Steve absently. He chuckled humourlessly. “It's what Doctor Erskine told me the night before the procedure. He told me he chose me for the experiment because I knew what it was like to be the little guy, and because I was a good man.”

“Hmm... Good is subjective though. Are you a good man because you do what everyone thinks you should do? Even good men can do horrible things.”

“I know, but I suppose it's about being the best you can in the situation you're in.”

Merlin nodded and smiled. “I think my friend would've liked you.” He would have too. Merlin could just picture the gleam in Arthur's eye as he invited Steve to spar – he would've taken one look at Steve's shield and seen it as a new sort of challenge to overcome. A shiny new thing to bash his sword at. The idiot.

Sam finally descended the stairs and cleared his throat. Steve's eyes shot up, having obviously forgotten the two of them weren't alone. Merlin looked backwards and saw Sam looking a bit awkward and apologetic.

“Sorry to interrupt, but weren't really gonna have to get going if weren't gonna be at Stark Tower on time,” he said.

Steve blinked and then looked down at his watch. “Damn, you're right.” He turned to Merlin. “I'm real sorry, but we've gotta be at Stark Tower in twenty minutes.”

“It's quite alright, young man,” said Merlin. “Thank you for stopping by to visit and listen to an old man ramble.”

Steve smiled. “Thank you for sharing your wisdom, Merlin,” he said as he carefully picked Aithusa up and set her onto the ground – much to the feline's displeasure. “I'm not sure how long I'll be in New York for, but I'll try and come back to see you again before I leave.”

“I'll look forward to your visit. As will Aithusa, I imagine. Perhaps next time you'll manage to catch the old witch in residence as well.”

“I heard that!” came a scream from upstairs.

“Of course you did, you old bat,” Merlin called back.

“Excuse me, you're the one whose ears could be used for hang-gliding!”

Merlin scowled in the direction of the stairs. What was it with everyone and his ears? “They could not!”

“Oh yes, they bloody well could!”

There was a cough and Merlin looked over to where Steve was now standing beside Sam, both men looking like they were just barely managing to hold in their laughter.

“So, we'll, uh, just be going then,” said Steve.
They waited until they exited the shop before bursting into laughter.

“Man, those two remind me of my grandparents,” Sam declared. “Only my granddad would’ve probably offered us scotch or beer instead of tea.”

“They're not married, you know,” said Steve. Sam raised an eyebrow at him and he shrugged. “I'm not really sure they're really anything other than friends.”

“Yeah, I get that asking would be awkward, but they sure seem to argue like an old married couple.”

Steve grinned. “Oh, you should see them when they're in the same room for a while.”

“You mean like you and Stark?”

“Funny.”

“Yeah, I'm hilarious. Now let's not keep the genius billionaire whatever, whatever, waiting. And remember, he's got my wings hostage, so no pissing him off too much until I've got them back.”

“Sam, it's not like I do it on purpose! It's just that he's just so...”

“He's the cat to your dog, the oil to your water. Whatever, man.”

“You know, it almost sounds romantic when you say it like that.”

There was a long pause, during which Steve attempted to keep a straight face while Sam glared at him.

“Great now I'm going to have nightmares forever. Rogers, you troll!”

“Troll? I don't look like a troll, do I? Is this some sort of modern reference?”

“Yeah no, don’t even. Unlike most people, I know you have a twitter account, old man.”

Steve burst into delighted laughter.

Nimueh took her time putting the shopping away. If Steve's friend Sam had wondered why her bags seemed much too light for their size, he hadn't asked. Or perhaps hadn't noticed. Either way, it had taken her months to perfect the charm she'd cast on the bags so that they maintained the same weight no matter what she stuffed inside. Taking it off only to recast it later was more effort than she felt necessary. Which was why she preferred to carry her own shopping.

The things she did for that ridiculous warlock.

Her task finally complete, she poured two generous glasses of elf wine (which was a lot like fairy wine, only stronger, and more herbal), and headed downstairs. She found Merlin still in the same
chair, Aithusa curled up in his lap. He was stroking her absently, his eyes distant, melancholy. She sighed. Talking about Arthur – really talking about him – always left him contemplative and sad.

He blinked when she set the glass down in front of him, the sound waking him from his stupor. She sat down and sipped her own wine. For a long moment, the shop was silent, except for what sounds filtered in from the city street. There was a spell she could use to dampen even those sounds, but Nimueh found she liked the reminder of life beyond their sanctuary.

“I know what you're going to say,” Merlin finally spoke, his voice just slightly raspy. “And, yes, I know he's not Arthur.”

Nimueh took another sip of wine. “Good, I'm glad I don't need to tell you that.”

“This era has created its own heroes, ones to fit its image. Arthur and his knights don't belong in this world.” He paused and then continued more quietly. “I sometimes wonder if they ever will again. Who was the prophecy of the Once and Future King for, anyway? Who was it meant to give hope? The people of Albion, or me?”

It wasn't often that Merlin managed to shock her, but now Nimueh felt speechless. “Merlin...”

Merlin held up a hand. “No, truly. The people of Albion – of the world, in fact – know the legend of Arthur, the gods know its certainly been butchered enough over the years, but none of them actually care if the Once and Future King ever rises. They all think it's a fanciful story. The only one who believes it, who continues to wait for it to come to pass, is me.”

“Why does it matter what others think?” Nimueh demanded, suddenly irritated for no reason she could put into words. “Steven thinks you're nothing more than an old man, just like everyone else who walks into this store! Only Charles and Erik have even an inkling that either one of us might be more than we appear, and I'd wager they consider us mutants.”

It had been such a very long time since she'd acted as the Priestess of the Old Religion, but the feeling wasn't one she could ever forget, not with the steady hum of power constantly thrumming through her veins. And as one so connected with the Old Religion and Albion, she knew that some things were absolute.

“The Once and Future King was not just a hero, he was a ruler, a leader of men. One whose power was only complete – could only be complete – with Emrys by his side. Did it occur to you, Merlin, that the only one who needs to believe in Arthur's return, is you? The Old Religion doesn't do pointless gestures, you know that.”

Merlin was silent for a long while, but it was a contemplative silence, the melancholy seemingly broken by her words.

Finally, he smiled. “Thank you, Nimueh.”

She wasn't quite sure what he was thanking her for, and she supposed it didn't matter.

Merlin suddenly chuckled. “I really do think Arthur and Steven would've gotten along well, but Arthur was definitely a different sort of hero, one for a different time. Even if I would love to hear what he had to say about Steve's uniform.”

Nimueh snorted. “Don't be ridiculous, Arthur Pendragon would be too busy ogling Iron Man. He's even red and gold, Pendragon colours.”

“Hmm,” or Thor. They'd probably spend their time trying to compete for the shiniest armour, or
whose hair caught the sun the best, and who managed to swish their cloaks in the most dashing way...”

Nimueh grinned. “Oh, why we're inventing a time machine here, could we please send Uther the Hulk? As a present for Yule, perhaps?”

Merlin echoed her grin. “I don't see why not. The Hulk's not nearly as ugly as that troll he married.”

“Excellent! I'll get started on making a ribbon in Pendragon red big enough for the occasion.”
Rooftop Party

Chapter Notes

As usual, thanks for all the support this story has gotten! I'm thrilled by every comment, every kudo I receive. =D

Since this is probably going to be a question I'll be getting a lot from here on out, I figured I'd answer it in advance. No, this story is most likely not going to be Civil War compliant. I have two reasons for my decision. First of all, my intention with this story was to write something a little different, and most importantly light-hearted. While there has definitely been some unavoidable angst in the story, Civil War would simply make this story dark to a degree I don't really want to write. Secondly, Mutants. I realize that superheros and mutants obviously exist in the same universe in the comics and therefore their respective registration acts are both on the table at roughly the same time, but from my understanding Captain America and Magneto don't really interact much in them. Here I've already established a semi-friendly relationship between Eric, Raven and Steve (granted, Steve doesn't actually know who the other two are). While I think Captain America joining forces -- or at least creating an alliance between -- his group and Magneto's group would make for an interesting story, this isn't going to be it.

Anyway, that's my reasoning. I hope I'm not disappointing anyone too much, but I think you all seem to be enjoying the light-heartedness of this story anyway. :)

The New York skyline was an eclectic mix of tall structures, each seeming determined to outdo the others. Of course, one building outdid the rest simply by being the most distinctive. Only slightly taller than the buildings around it, the glass and steel tower was asymmetrical, narrowing towards the top before being interrupted by a platform jutting out, a landing pad for helicopters, advanced fighter-style planes and, most importantly, Iron Man. Sometimes, tourists gathered at the coffee shops across from the tower just to catch a glimpse of Iron Man, though the sightings had gotten less frequent.

Once, the side of the tower had proudly sported the word STARK, but four of the letters had fallen off during the nightmare that descended upon New York from a portal above the tower. Now it boasted only one single, lonely A. It was a testament to the damage done to the city, a testament to its survival.

A testament to the men and women who'd fought to save it.

Usually, the landing pad on Stark Tower – called Avengers Tower by many New Yorkers – was empty. Tony Stark didn't often use helicopters and the Avengers were unpredictable in their presence. From the ground, it was impossible to tell what was happening at the top of the topper. Only the upper floors of the neighbouring buildings, and passing helicopters could see any movement.

It was a bright, sunny day, not the first warm day of spring, but the first that seemed to carry with it the promise of summer. The gentle breeze was warm, and just strong enough to caress the skin and ruffle hair. Being indoors felt like a cruel punishment. Which was why it was hardly a surprise to find the landing pad at Stark Tower full of activity. Brightly-coloured lawn chairs covered the surface of the pad, along with two folding tables, several beer coolers and a gaggle of people. Smoke
steadily billowed out from a large barbeque.

“Seriously, I offer you JARVIS, who has all the best restaurants in the city on speed-dial and you go for the cheapest option available and decide to cook yourselves. I’d also like to point out that not all of us are super soldiers or thunder gods. I know for a fact that my doctor would have his own heart attack if he saw this spread here. What did you do, Rogers, just order an entire cow to go?”

From his place of honour in front of the grill, Steve rolled his eyes.

“Quit your whining, Stark,” Clint called out. “Remember this whole thing was basically your idea.”

“And I didn't order anything, that was all JARVIS,” Steve added.

“Also, for the record, I'm pretty sure this is all triple A grade beef,” Bruce with an amused quirk of his lip from the bright green deck chair he was sprawled out on, a beer covered in condensation dangling lazily in his grip.

Tony ignored Clint in favour of scowling at Steve. “My idea?! This was definitely not my idea. I suggested we should dinner, food and alcohol, ecetera, since we're all in the city at the same time for once. I even offered to make the reservations if you wanted to go out. This? This is you totally bastardizing my great idea into something sickeningly true blood American.”

“So you won't want the cheeseburger Steve's grilling you, then?” Natasha asked casually before taking a sip of her drink. Her hair was dyed blonde from a recent scouting mission in South America.

Tony blinked. There was a long pause. “There are cheeseburgers?!”

Steve shook his head in amusement. “Of course there are cheeseburgers, Tony. What did you think these round bits of ground meat were for?” His eyes twinkled mischievously. “There might even be apple pie for dessert.”

“Of course there's apple pie for dessert,” Tony grumbled halfheartedly.

Thor looked up from where he'd been hovering over the grill, as though curious about its function. “Friends, is it not enough that we partake of a hearty meal in the presence of our fellow warriors and friends?” he proclaimed.

Clint raised his beer. “Here, here!”

Sam stepped forward and clinked his bottle against it, grinning. “I'm with the God of Thunder, less arguing, more grilling.”

Tony frowned. “You know, I could've sworn you used to be a lot nicer, Wilson.”

Sam grinned. “I have my wings back now.”

Tony's jaw dropped. Everyone else burst into laughter. Eventually, the corners of his mouth began to twitch and then he closed his mouth and shook his head in amusement. “Well played, Falcon, well played.”

“Okay guys, I've got the first batch of meat done,” Steve suddenly called out. “Who wants what?”

The change was instantaneous as the Avengers all leapt out of their lounging positions and rushed to the grill. All except for Bruce, who watched on in amusement, and Natasha, who slowly unraveled herself from her seat, placed her drink onto the small side table next to her chair and walked over to
the grill.

Steve was laughing at the sudden onslaught of super heroes. “Okay, hang on guys, it's ladies first.” He looked at her. “What do you want, Natasha?”

“How quaintly medieval of you, Rogers,” Tony sneered.

“But surely, the Lady Natasha is a warrior like us, and therefore has no need of such considerations,” said Thor with a frown, his eyes wandering down to the sizzling, aromatic meat every few seconds.

Natasha smiled slyly. “Oh, it's not that, is it Steve?” she said, her eyes trained on the Super Soldier. “He's just trying to butter me up in order to mitigate my revenge.” Her eyes cut to the side. “And don't think I don't know who helped him.”

Clint flinched and carefully stepped around Tony, to put the genius between himself and the Black Widow. Tony just blinked at them.

Sam groaned. “Aw hell, I told you not to do anything stupid, Rogers.”

“I didn't!” Steve protested as he plated a large juicy steak alone with a potato wrapped in tin foil and handed it to Natasha. “Mostly. I just, well...”

“He switched the swimsuit I had in my suitcase when we met up in Belarus for a Captain America bikini. I didn't even notice until I was in Rio.”

“He did what?!” Tony exclaimed. “Cap, I'm impressed. I had no idea you were capable of such random acts of suicide.”

Steve coloured slightly as he placed a cheeseburger on a plate for Tony. “It's not like they don't sell swimsuits in Rio de Janeiro.”

“Oh, I wore it,” said Natasha casually. “Turns out its even easier to pull off a ditzy blonde persona when you're wearing stars and stripes.”

“Glad I was able to help,” said Steve dryly.

“What brought this on, anyway?” Tony asked, sniggering as he slathered toppings onto his cheeseburger.

“An Iron Man mug.”

Tony's head shot up. “A... wait what?”

Sam chuckled. “There's this antiques shop Steve goes to and he's friends with the owners. And apparently Natasha knows them too. Anyway, they're very British. Natasha gave the owners an Iron Man mug and asked them to serve Steve tea in it the next time he came by. Which they did. Although, I suppose it was that or the Gay Pride mug I got.”

Clint cackled as he put toppings on his own cheeseburger. “Is that what actually happened? I only got half the story.” He paused and pointed towards Steve with the spoon from the relish jar. “This is that place with the cat, right? And the old man who owns the most awesome weapons room ever.”

Steve frowned. “Weapons room?”

“Yeah, it's like three walls and a bunch of racks full of sharp, pointy blades.”
“There were muskets too,” Natasha added.

“And the most awesome antique crossbow!” For a moment Clint looked dreamily into the distance. Then he suddenly brightened. “We managed to get me a longbow and write it off as a mission expense. Totally worth the reaming out I got from Hill.”

“Okay, so first of all, how utterly cliche, Cap, for the antique soldier to hang out at an antiques shop,” said Tony. “Secondly, does everyone know this place except for me?”

“I, too, have no knowledge of this place,” said Thor.

“It’s just at the edge of Little Italy,” said Steve with a shrug. He arranged the next set of steaks onto the grill. “The hairclip I got Ms Potts for her birthday was from there.”

“You got my girlfriend a hairclip?”

“Yes, he did, Tony,” said a smooth voice from behind them. The Avengers turned to watch Pepper Potts walk out onto the landing pad, her usual pointed heels gone in favour of a more comfortable-looking pair of silver flipflops. She was holding a margarita in one hand and had a relaxed smile on her face. “And it’s lovely. I wore it to that cocktail party at the MET three months ago.”

“Pepper!” Tony exclaimed, his eyes lighting up with delight. “Light of my life, fire in my hearth, you brought me a drink!”

“No, I brought myself a drink. If you want a margarita, you’ll have to go get it yourself.”

“But that’s so far away!”

“Next steaks should be about twelve minutes, Ms Potts,”

“Thank you, Steve.”

The laughter continued to flow, happy and relaxed thanks to the bright sun that showed no signs of flagging, the continuous supply of beer, and food. They were too far up for the busy streets of New York to bother them – not even the angry frustration of rush hour reached them. Above them, they saw the occasional helicopter, and the Avengers amused themselves by waving to passing passenger planes. Because, what if there were bored kids looking out the windows, as Clint had pointed out. Tony had rolled his eyes, but waved along with everyone with only a 'sure, whatever, kids love waving at shit, I guess'.

Eventually, Clint took Steve's place at the grill so that the super soldier could take his turn eating the other half of the food Thor hadn't finished off. Pepper, with her usual efficiency, had at some point made sure several kinds of salad made it to the table as well. No one had actually seen her do it, of course, but JARVIS alerted them to the delivery boy's arrival.

Their mood pleasantly buzzed from sun, food and (in most cases) alcohol, no one was alert enough to notice their uninvited guests until a dark shape suddenly swooped down from the sky. There was a brief flutter of dark brown wings before sharp claws grabbed an uncooked steak from the cooler next to the grill and then flew off to land on the guardrail that extended along one side of the landing platform.

Clint had whirled around at the movement and then stood frozen, spatula raised in one hand, as he stared at the bird. “Wh-what the hell?!” he stuttered. “Did that seriously just happen?”

The bird let out a warbled-sounding chirping noise before leaning over and tearing off a piece of the
steak with its sharp, hooked beak.

“Gosh, even the birds in this city have gotten rude,” Steve commented absently.

Tony was about to say something, when movement out of the corner of his eye made him jump. He looked to the side and then did a double-take at the dark blue, long-tailed bird that had landed on the rim of the bowl of fruit salad. It stretched its neck out, showing off the red colouring at its neck and daintily plucked out a single, plump blackberry. Then it stretched out its wings and flew off.

To everyone's further astonishment, it landed next to the other bird.

“Okay, I'm pretty much the opposite of a nature guy, but I'm pretty sure that's not normal,” said Tony.

“The smaller one's a European swallow,” said Pepper. She sounded amazed.

“The larger one's small for a hawk or an eagle, but it's definitely a bird of prey,” said Bruce, frowning. “Maybe a falcon or even a chickenhawk of some sort?”

“Hey, Hawkeye, can you commune with your feathered brethren over there or something?” said Tony.

“Funny, Stark,” Clint answered as he slowly backed away from the grill and towards the chair he'd been lounging in earlier.

“If I may, sir, the second bird is in fact a falcon native to Europe, particularly to the British Isles. Scientific name Falco columbarius, it is more commonly known as a merlin.”

JARVIS' voice seemed to startled the merlin and the brown bird bristled, its wings lifting and its feathers flaring out away from its body. It warble-chirped at them loudly.

“Peace, my friends!”

All eyes turned to Thor, who they now realized had been oddly silent. He'd stood and was staring at the two birds with something akin to reverence. He raised a hand in Clint's direction, where the archer was pulling his bow and a quiver of arrows from beneath the bright purple deck chair.

“Friend Hawk, please lay down your weapons,” Thor continued, his demeanor brooking no argument. “I assure you, they would do you no good and only engender ill will.” He then turned to the birds and bowed. “My Lord and Lady, I apologize for not recognizing you sooner, it has been long since I encountered ones such as yourselves. I am Thor, Prince of Asgard. My friends and I are honoured by your presence and beg you to feel free to join us and partake in our great feast.”

The rest of the Avengers exchanged looks, each of them wondering whether or not their resident God of Thunder had completely lost it – or possibly had more to drink than they'd realized.

And then the merlin warble-chirped, his eyes calmly regarding Thor, even as he and the swallow bowed their heads to the Asgardian warrior. The swallow chirped, a much more melodic, airy sound.

When Thor turned back to the Avengers, he was beaming. “My friends, our distinguished guests have decided to join us for a short while.”

His smile faltered slightly when his enthusiasm wasn't met by the others.

“Uh, Thor, it would really help us get excited if you maybe explained just who our, uh, distinguished
guests are,” Steve suggested carefully.

Thor’s beaming smile returned. “Ah, of course, my apologies, Captain! I have forgotten that you Midgardians do not always see the obvious as I do.”

“Well, the obvious is that they're birds,” Tony interjected. “Clever, daring, thieving birds, I'll give them that. Actually, okay, I'm sort of impressed by them if I'm honest, but I'm still just seeing a couple of birds.”

Thor chuckled. “That is not their true form, Man of Iron. Just as you shed your armour at the end of the battle, so they too can shed one form for another. I confess, I am unsure as to why they will only join us in this form, but I am certain they have their reasons. They are beings of power, my friends, tied not simply to magic, but to Midgard itself.”

Sam groaned. “Please tell me those birds aren't gods.”

“Nay, friend Falcon, they are more than simple spirits, but not quite gods.” Thor frowned. “Though, I suppose, not for lack of power. They are... too tied to the mortal world to be gods.”

This time Tony groaned. “Fucking magic! There is no such thing! I absolutely refuse to believe it. Maybe they're science experiments, mutant birds, or something.”

“I think I prefer Thor's explanation,” said Pepper with a shudder. “The last thing we need in this city is a mad scientist with a Hitchcock fantasy.”

Thor opened his mouth to argue and then paused, his eyes sliding back towards the birds. The merlin seemed to be ignoring them in favour of tearing at his ill-gotten steak. The swallow was staring at Thor, her head cocked slightly to one side. Thor's mouth closed and a sly, amused smile stole across his face.

“Very well,” he said softly, bowing his head slightly towards the swallow. The swallow inclined her head back at him and then spread her wings, launching herself off the handrail. She gracefully flew over their heads before landing smoothly on Thor's shoulder, to the blond's obvious pleasure.

“So, for the record, this never would've happened if we'd gone to a restaurant like I'd originally suggested,” said Tony.

Clint threw a piece of apple at him.
Happy Canada Day weekend! And Happy Fourth of July weekend! And to those of you who aren't celebrating either, here's a new chapter anyway. To those of you who are celebrating both... well, you're probably still celebrating, so I won't expect to hear from you until, uh... Tuesday. Maybe? ;P

“Happy, stop, I think that's it!”

Pepper Potts peered out the tinted window. It was overcast, which made it difficult to see the golden letters above the shop door clearly, but the stained-glass window was exactly as Natasha had described it. The large planter of brightly-coloured begonias was also difficult to miss. They were a splash of vibrant colour in the dull gray that draped the city as the clouds sank low with promised rain. Even inside the air-conditioned car, Pepper felt like she could almost smell the blooms.

Happy parked the car right in front of the shop. Pepper waited patiently until he'd gotten out and walked around the car to open the door for her. As an independent woman, it irritated her to wait for someone to open a door for her, but it was part of the compromise she'd made with Tony. With Hydra exposed and at large, her position as CEO of Stark Industries had become slightly more dangerous. It had been Clint who'd pointed out what a perfect hostage she'd make.

She understood their concern. She also refused to give into the fear and to allow Hydra to change her life. Which meant, no body armour and no 24/7 squad of Iron Men bodyguards. Letting Happy or one of his security officers open doors for her, precede her into buildings and generally shadow her everywhere was the least invasive of Tony's over-protective suggestions.

Happy still looked mildly apologetic every time she had to wait for him to open a car door. She smiled at him and thanked him.

Before going into the shop, she couldn't resist stopping to smell the begonias. There was a bee hovering around the planter, as though trying to decide which of the beautiful blooms was the most appealing. “Better hurry before it starts to rain,” she whispered to it, at once amused at herself for talking to a bee.

Her grandmother had done it. Pepper's memories of her grandmother were always full of beautiful blooms and sweet floral scents. Even in her eighties, her grandmother had been a striking woman and extremely photogenic as she smiled radiantly at cameras in front of her award-winning garden. But Pepper's favourite memories of her were with wind-swept hair and dirt-smudged cheeks as she knelt in the middle of her garden and crooned to her flowers.

Pepper blinked tears from her eyes as she straightened, feeling slightly shocked. She hadn't thought about her grandmother in years.

“Ms Potts?” she heard Happy ask. “Are you okay?”

She took a deep breath. “Yes, Happy, I'm fine. Just got a bit lost in memories for a moment there.”
One last look at the begonias showed that the hovering bee had finally chosen a bright pink one. Pepper smiled in approval and turned to enter the shop. She paused once more to appreciate the lovely stained-glass window on the door before letting Happy open it for her.

Inside, the shop was a veritable feast for the eyes. There was simply so much to look at, so many things crammed into the space that she was certain she could look for hours and never quite see everything. Every time her eyes paused for a moment, she found a new gem looking back at her. A lovely crystal bowl, hand carved and stained red, sitting in the centre of a large oak table, a lamp standing on a base of roses carved out of alabaster, a beautiful vanity made out of polished dark wood, gold detailing painted into the elaborately-carved mirror frame... The proprietors had to have excellent memories to know where everything was. Or perhaps there was a method well hidden in the madness.

Happy remained standing by the door as she walked further into the shop. It looked deserted, but it didn't feel like it. There was a warmth infusing the space, welcoming and friendly.

“Hello?” she called out, knowing she would need assistance to find what she was looking for.

“One moment, young lady, I'll be right out!”

She smiled as she heard the old man call out in reply. Merlin Pratt. After hearing so much about him, she was looking forward to meeting the old man. The upcoming Maria Stark Foundation's charity gala simply made for the best excuse to satisfy her curiosity – she'd never such an easy time coming up with a theme.

It felt like no time at all before an old man shuffled his way out of a side room, walking stick tapping gently on the hardwood floor. His appearance was neat, clothes obviously bought for comfort rather than fashion, though they did at least look like they'd been purchased some time in this century. Not that it was easy to tell what he was wearing with the long white hair that hung down his back or the equally long beard and draped over his front. She bit her lip against the urge to ask him where he'd left Archimedes. Tony was clearly rubbing off on her more than was strictly necessary.

“Ah, sorry about that, young lady,” he said pleasantly. “Now then, what can I help you with?”

Pepper smiled. “Hello, my name is Pepper Potts. I'm a friend of Steve's... are you Merlin Pratt?”

The old man's eyes lit up at the name. “I am indeed. Pepper... what an unusual name. Do you happen to have a sibling named Salt by any chance?”

Pepper blinked. Behind her, she heard Happy cough around a laugh. “Uh, no. I'm an only child.” She grinned. She couldn't wait to tell Tony someone had actually asked that. “It's a nickname anyway. My real name is Virginia.”

Merlin's eyes met hers and she found herself looking into bright blue eyes that sparkled of mirth. “But you prefer Pepper? I don't blame you, my dear, it is a sharper name. Has more flavour to it, you could say.”

Pepper laughed. “Yes, you could certainly say that.”

“And how is Steven anyway?”

“Somewhere in Europe last I heard.” She shrugged apologetically. “I'm afraid I don't really ask for details. All I know is that his friend's in trouble and he's trying to find him so that he can help him.”

Merlin nodded. “Yes, the Winter Soldier. Such a horrible story, that poor young man.”
Pepper's eyes widened slightly. Steve had told Merlin about Bucky? That was somewhat unexpected.

“Yes, it is.”

He shook his head sadly. Then he looked back to Pepper. “Now then, any friend of Steven’s is more than welcome here. Were you after something specific, Pepper?”

“In a sense. The Maria Stark Foundation is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year and so I was thinking of doing a historical theme for its annual charity gala. I'm trying to come up with some centre pieces and displays for the rooms and Natasha mentioned that you had quite the collection of antiques from the forties and fifties.”

“Hmm...” Merlin looked thoughtful for a moment. “Were you thinking clothing, home appliances, or décor?”

“Depends on what you have. Although I think I'm leaning towards a bit of everything. I don't want it to necessarily be a domestic theme, or even a fashion one. I'd love a typewriter or two, if you have them.”

“Oh I can certainly come up with a typewriter. In fact, I think I can do much better than a typewriter. Follow me.”

Pepper looked over to where Happy was eyeing a bright pink tea set with delicately-painted gold and red flowers. She paused, frowning at the odd choice. Sensing her eyes on him, Happy looked up and then coloured at her raised eyebrow.

“It's my niece's birthday this weekend,” he said gruffly.

She nodded in understanding and smiled at his discomfort. “Well, I'm just going to...”

“I'll be out here, Ms Potts.”

Merlin Pratt was already out of sight when she turned back. She hurried towards the back of the shop and found him waiting for her in the far corner, which she presumed led to what Clint had referred to as 'The Secret Hallway of Awesome'. He, Natasha and Steve had all told her about the hidden hallway at the back of main part of the shop that led to what felt like a whole other world filled with wonders. She'd been looking forward to seeing it for herself.

It was, indeed, like stepping through the Looking Glass and into a whole other world. Where the shop had been bright and friendly, the back hallway was shrouded in shadow, wall sconces the only source of light. It wasn't a scary, uninviting sort of darkness, but it felt hushed, muted. Even their steps were muffled by thick carpet.

She was disappointed when Merlin Pratt stopped in front of the second door on the right. Until he opened it and reached over to flick a light switch, and Pepper realized it wasn't a room at all. It was a staircase. A staircase heading down to a lower level.

A grin spread across her face and she felt a thrum of excitement infuse her limbs. None of the others had mentioned a lower level. Steve and Sam both had mentioned a staircase that led upstairs, to the owner's flat, but not a basement.

Feeling a bit like a treasure hunter, Pepper followed the old man down the stairs. Although the overhead lighting took away some of the mysterious aura, Pepper was glad for it. The staircase was steep and would've otherwise been rather treacherous in her heels. There was another door at the
bottom of the stairs... Sort of.

She paused, gaping as the old man spun the wheel on what looked like the interior door of a submarine. A round green light lit up just above the rounded door. Merlin stopped spinning the wheel and yanked the door open using the handle beside it. The metal clanged hollowly and creaked slightly.

“Watch your step,” he called back to her as he carefully stepped over the raised metal lip of the hatch.

“I see it, thanks,” she replied. A light just above the door on the other side illuminated two concrete steps and just enough of a smooth concrete floor that she was able to enter the room with no mishaps.

The room was dark, except for the light above the door and another, smaller light several feet away, which Merlin immediately headed towards. Somehow, the darkness echoed, giving Pepper the impression that she was standing at the edge of a very large space. She heard a switch being flipped and suddenly the room was flooded with light from huge, round fixtures in the ceiling. The room, it turned out, was less like a large room and more like a small warehouse.

Pepper gasped when she saw what the darkness had been hiding. “This is definitely better than a typewriter,” she said softly as she stared at what she recognized as a WWII-era plane gleaming proudly on a raised dais.

Merlin came to stand beside her and she turned to him. “Is this authentic?”

He scoffed. “Of course it is. Nimueh fancies herself a bit of an amateur mechanic. This is her playground. She's restored all of these beauties and keeps them in working condition.” He glanced at her and smirked in amusement. “The Spitfire's her crowning glory, of course. However, I was actually thinking the Ford over here.”

Still feeling slightly overwhelmed, Pepper followed Merlin past a group of antique motorcycles that would've had Tony drooling towards a row of parked cars. It was nowhere near as extensive as Tony's collection, but even a modest collection of antique cars was impressive. Merlin stopped in front of a deep forest green car with a thin, collapsible beige hood and a thick body that began with a point in between enlarged front fenders and ended with an elegantly curved trunk.

“This is a 1940 Ford Custom Convertible Coupe. She was a masterpiece of her time. That frame is all steel, with none of that fiber glass you get in cars today.”

“Wow.” Pepper didn't know cars the way Tony or Happy knew them, but even she understood what a rare find this car was. “That would definitely make quite the centerpiece.”

Something brushed against her left ankle at the same moment as a woman's voice called out from the other side of the room. “Don't be ridiculous, it's a charity gala, isn't it? Raffle it off and you'll make a small fortune in tickets.”

Pepper looked down and smiled at the large white cat that was looking back up at her. “Oh hello,” she said. “You must be Aithusa.”

The cat meowed up at her, as though to say 'why yes, I am', and then brushed against Pepper's legs once more. Apparently, this was enough scenting for the cat, because she then left Pepper and padded up to the car. In a single leap, Aithusa was on top of one of the front fenders.

“Scratch the paintwork and I'll make handwarmers out of your sorry hide.”
Pepper turned to the old woman who'd joined them and held out her hand. “Hello, I'm Pepper Potts, a friend of Steve's. Can I presume that you're Nimueh Priest?”

The old woman continued to glare at Aithusa as the cat padded over the car's hood. “Presume away.” Eventually, the white cat found herself the perfect spot and settled, curling into a ball, her back to them. Then Nimueh turned to Pepper. “Your man upstairs told me you're trying to prepare for a themed gala.”

“Yes, that's right. I asked for a typewriter and Mr Pratt brought me here.”

“Please do call me Merlin,” the old man interjected. “Mr Pratt makes me sound like someone else.”

Pepper smiled at him. “Then I will, Merlin.”

“And by all means call me Nimueh,” said the old woman with a dismissive wave of her hand. “Now then, what sort of centerpieces were you thinking of exactly?”

“I didn't have anything specific in mind, since it largely depends on what I'm able to find. But I was imagining a sort of medley of objects from day-to-day life, perhaps including the odd article of clothing. I'd like to keep it as authentic as possible, which is why I've come here.” She gestured at the car. “This goes way beyond my wildest expectations, although I have to ask: why a raffle?”

Nimueh shrugged. “The Maria Stark Foundation is a charity that does a lot of good around the city, with fundraisers all year round, but the gala is definitely your biggest event. However, it's mostly accessible to society's elite, which of course makes sense given that those are the people with the most money to donate. You could, of course, auction the car off at the end of the gala, but then it would simply go to the richest person in the room who likes cars enough to spend obscene amounts of money on them. And undoubtedly they will love it, but it won't be special to them – it'll just be another collectible. A raffle is equalizing. True, the more money one has, the more tickets they can buy, but at the end of the night, it's still down to who Lady Luck decides to smile on in that particular moment.”

Pepper's smile widened. “You know, I like that. We could advertise the raffle in advance and sell tickets online before the gala, so that even people who can't actually afford to attend the event itself, can buy a raffle ticket. If we make them reasonably affordable – say a hundred or a hundred and fifty dollars each – then we can easily sell a lot of them. No, you're right, it's perfect. It makes it possible for someone who could normally only dream of owning a car like this the chance to own one.”

It felt perfect. Tony could build a secured display podium of some sort in the Tower's front lobby for the weeks leading up to the gala. She beamed at Merlin and Nimueh, who beamed back at her happily. She looked back to the car.

“Still, I'm amazed that you're willing to part with it after putting so much work into it,” she said.

“Oh that was nothing but puttering about really,” said Nimueh dismissively. “Besides, what good is a car that's sitting in a basement?”

“It's like with any of the trinkets we sell,” Merlin added. “If we hadn't collected them here, they would've likely been thrown away and left to rot or rust. Some of them have meaning to us, but all had meaning to someone at some point, even if all they did was make their lives a little easier. We could probably donate most of our collection to various museums easily, but in a museum they would sit about gathering dust, a memory. Now, don't get me wrong, young lady, museums have an important role to play by ensuring the past is never entirely forgotten. But they are sterile, quiet places and the objects inside merely there to be looked at.”
He stepped forward and made a sweeping gesture that encompassed everything inside the warehouse basement.

“Whether cars, furniture or crystal glasses, none of these things were made to be looked at. They’re meant to be used.”

Pepper couldn’t help the feeling that she was being told something profound. As though Merlin’s words were important beyond what she could immediately grasp. A hand touched her arm and she turned to Nimueh. There was a small smile on her face, her eyes gentle for the first time.

“It’s why we established this shop,” said Nimueh. “It’s not about selling to people. It’s about collecting objects that need a home and hopefully uniting them with people who will cherish them and use them the way they were meant to be used. I’ve been taking care of these cars so they wouldn’t rust and the mechanisms would be usable. Believe me, Pepper, nothing would make me happier than to see this beauty go into the hands of someone who would care for her and put her on the road again, because that is where she’s meant to be.”

Pepper smiled. “I understand. And it would be my pleasure to help find that person for this car, even if it is by luck of the draw. How much are you selling it for, anyway?”

Nimueh waved off the question. “Oh, let’s leave that for later. You wanted some other, smaller things for your décor as well – we can make it part of a package price for the whole lot you decide on.”

Pepper considered it for a moment. “Alright, that sounds fair. Since you know your inventory better than I do, do you have any other suggestions?”

“You should show her the telegraph,” Merlin suggested eagerly.

“She meant forties and fifties of this century,” Nimueh snapped back at him. “Why don’t you go make yourself useful and bring us some tea?”

Merlin huffed, looking unimpressed. “I’m fairly certain I know more about setting up feasts and banquets than you do.”

“Then I’ll call you when we need help with candles and pouring wine. Actually, on second thought, I’ve seen you pour wine at feasts, I think we’ll get outside help for that.”

Pepper bit her lips, her shoulders shaking with suppressed laughter.

Merlin glared at Nimueh and then muttered something under his breath as he turned to leave the room. “Just for that I’m using the rosehip-mint blend!” he called behind him.

Nimueh blinked, frowning as she watched him step over the false bulkhead. Then she turned to Pepper. “I don’t know why he thinks that’s a problem for me. I quite like that blend.”

Pepper finally gave up on trying to suppress her laughter.

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Tony, Bruce and Clint were in the communal kitchen when she returned to the tower, judging by the... odd aroma she could smell as soon as she stepped out of the elevator, and the cackling laughter that accompanied it.
“JARVIS, do I want to know what they're doing in there?” she asked as the doors slid shut behind her.

There was an uneasy pause. “In my estimation, based on previous reactions to sir's more eccentric spontaneous project ideas, no.”

“Thank you, JARVIS.”

Steeling herself for the scene of the science disaster-in-the-making, Pepper made her way to the kitchen. Clint was crouched on top of the countertop – in his bare feet – looking over Tony's shoulder as he and Bruce stood over a large stainless steel pot. The steam coming out of the pot was blue. There was a smaller stainless steel pot sitting on one of the backburners, one of its sides coated in some sort of foamy orange-yellow substance.

She didn't dare go any further into the room. Sighing, she crossed her arms and leaned against the doorframe. “You three do realize that you'll have to clean this mess, right?”

Three heads snapped towards her with near-identical looks of surprise. At her pointed glare, Clint sheepishly sat down, his feet dangling down and no longer on the kitchen work surface.

“Because you realize that when Steve gets back, he will absolutely refuse to cook anyone breakfast if everything's covered in unidentifiable goo,” she continued.

The three men exchanged worried looks. Bruce turned to the smaller pot and poked at the orange-yellow foamy goo with a long metal stirring spoon. It didn't move. He tapped the spoon against it. It sounded hollow. He and Tony exchanged a look.

Tony turned to her with a shrug. “Okay, so we may need to get some new pots.”

Just then the substance in the large pot burped and they jumped back as a large splatter of blue-green goo landed on the stovetop. It sizzled as it ate away at the ceramic coating.

“And possibly a new stove,” Tony added. He looked to Clint. “When's Steve due back again?”

“Two days or so according to Nat,” said Clint as he stared in fascination at the sizzling goo. Which was starting to turn neon.

“Totally doable.”

Bruce cautiously reached around the pot and turned off the heating element. Pepper finally felt herself relax, somewhat.

Tony turned to her with his brightest showman smile. “Pep, Pepper, darling, how was your day?”

Pepper shook her head in amusement. “I took the afternoon off and went to that antiques shop Steve, Clint and Natasha were talking about to look for items I could use as props for the gala.”

Tony's eyebrows rose. “Oh? And did you find anything useful?”

“Yup, it was a one stop shop.” She glanced at Clint and smirked. “I even got to see the basement.”

Clint froze, his eyes widening. “That place has a basement?! Does Steve know it has a basement?”

“Judging by that motorcycle I've seen him ride around town, I'd say so, yes.” Pepper then turned to Tony. “And no, Tony, you're not keeping the car. We're raffling it off during the gala.”
With that she turned on her heel and made her way to the elevator again. After taking the afternoon off, she really needed to check her e-mail, but there was no reason she had to do that while still in nylons and heels.

An hour later, she was lounging on the couch in yoga pants, a gin and tonic in her hand, and finishing off her replies to the last of the most urgent e-mails, when JARVIS' voice interrupted the silence.

“Ms Potts, sir would like to inform you that this is not a car, but a national treasure.”

Pepper smiled as she took a sip of her gin and tonic. “JARVIS, please remind Mister Stark that he still can't keep it,” she said sweetly. “And if he goes anywhere near it with anything more than a polishing cloth I will shave all his hair off while he's asleep.”

“Of course, Ms Potts,” the AI replied, sounding amused.

Pepper chuckled to herself as she took another sip of her drink.
A Tale of Philosophers

Chapter Notes

Well, it's been a while, but this story has definitely not been forgotten -- I just got onto a bit of a roll with the other one I'm working on and give how close it is to completion, I just went with it. Thanks so much for your patience. And for all your comments and kudos. I had a sudden influx of kudos there for a while, which I was absolutely thrilled with, so thank you. :)

It was the dead of night – not that New York could ever be described as dead. Death was the absence of life, of sound, of rhythm. It was when the flames of existence went out.

Secrets haunted him. Thoughts turning restlessly in his mind had driven him from his bed and into the night, but then the shadows and the night were the Daredevil's domain, his refuge. And so he slipped silently through the darkened city, challenging those who hid within the depths of its shadows. Straining his ears, he willed the streets to produce a criminal to stop, an innocent to save, a drug deal to break up. Anything

But, of course, tonight Hell's Kitchen refused to oblige.

Growing more frustrated by the minute, Daredevil increased his speed, easily leaping from one building to the next. He passed silent apartments and some not-so-silent ones, but nothing that required his intervention. He wasn't quite desperate enough to deal with noise violations.

Finally, he paused in his travels, his legs burning slightly from exertion, and listened once again to the night. Carefully, he cataloged every twitch, every rustle, and every footstep. Still nothing. He sighed, disappointed. The restlessness hadn't disappeared: he felt empty and unfulfilled. But looking for a fight clearly wasn't going to work.

So his mind turned back to an incident weeks ago that he somehow hadn't managed to leave behind no matter how much he'd ignored it. The problem, he knew, was that Stick had taught him to trust his instincts and inside the antiques shop his instincts had been screaming at him. He still didn't know why, and he hated not knowing.

Before he'd consciously making up his mind, Daredevil had changed directions, leaving Hell's Kitchen behind and heading towards Little Italy and Chinatown.

He'd thought of returning to the shop before, but never actually gone through with it. However he wasn't Matt, the blind lawyer, now. He was Daredevil, the Demon of Hell's Kitchen. Maybe the night would tell him something new.

He knew when he'd arrived at the right street by the lingering smell of the bakery he remembered being across the street from the antiques shop. And then a sweet floral scent: begonias. He and Foggy had been by in the winter, so they obviously hadn't been in bloom then, but he remembered the planters.

Daredevil leapt onto the edge of the roof, easily balancing on the wide railing that ran along the side. He took a moment to listen to the night. A soft, herbal scent reached his nose and a quiet rustle
reached his ears. And a steady heartbeat. He froze. There was someone on the roof.

“Ah, if it isn’t the philosopher,” a familiar elderly voice said into the night, just loud enough that it reached his ears. “Good evening, young man.”

Matt hesitated for a moment and then hopped down from the rail. “Good evening,” he said nonchalantly even though inside his thoughts were whirling, trying to figure out what could’ve possibly given him away. “You’re not surprised to see me.”

The old man chuckled. “I’d expected you much sooner.”

“You know who I am. How?”

“Perhaps I too am a philosopher.” He felt the old man motioning, a faint rustle of clothing and a slight displacement of air. “Have a seat, young man. Would you like a drink?”

The invitation was ridiculous, the moment surreal. Just who was this old man, that he calmly asked the devil over for a drink? It wasn’t bravado, either. There wasn’t a single hitch in his breath, not a heartbeat out of place, and not even the most minute stutter of nerves. Matt knew the smart response would be to leave, but curiosity made him stay.

He sat down in a wooden chair that smelt of wood varnish and smoke.

A cork was deftly popped and a liquid poured into two glasses – the wheat-malt, alcohol-sharp scent of good scotch infused the air. He then heard a heavy glass being picked up and then set before him, the alcohol weighing it down. The slight breeze brushed against it and made its edges sing: cut crystal, with edges so sharp a person could almost cut themselves if they weren’t careful. Matt hesitated only for a moment before reaching for the glass and raising it in toast.

He sniffed at it for show, and took a sip, savoring it on his tongue for a few moments before swallowing it down. It was very good scotch – the sort wealthy men served as a subtle reminder of how prosperous they were. Except Matt somehow doubted that was why the old man was serving it.

“Thank you,” he said. “This is very good. Did you collect it along with your antiques?”

The old man chuckled. “Something like that, yes. It’s amazing what sorts of things they sell off at estate auctions.”

His eyebrows rose. “You deal in antique alcohol?”

“Not usually, no. I acquired this case for myself.”

“Aah.” Matt gave a crooked smile. “Would be a waste to sell it, I suppose.”

He leaned back in the chair and took another sip, savoring the smooth burn. Around him he could still hear New York carrying on, but it felt distant, as though the rooftop had become its own world, untouchable by outside nightlife. A slight breeze tickled his cheeks.

“So, are you a philosopher?” Matt asked him idly, mostly curious whether he would get an answer.

For a long moment, the old man was silent. Somewhere in the distance, a siren blazed to life, its shrill tones harsh within the murmuring buzz of the city.

“Yes, I suppose I am,” he finally answered. “I know more than most and have seen more than most; I know much about the lies men tell others, and even more about those they tell themselves. It is
difficult for falsehoods to thrive in my presence.”

Matt nodded. “I may not have your experience, but people do a lot of things in the presence of a man who can't see.”

“Aah, but there is more than one way to see.”

Matt smiled, part of him delighted to meet a person he didn't have to explain it to. “You're like me.”

“Not quite.”

They descended into silence again, but it was a calm, soothing silence. He felt the air move as the old man took a sip of his scotch, heard him swallow. Down the street, a rat scurried around the large dumpster beside the bakery. Several blocks down, two sets of tires screeched. A horn blared. A second joined it, pitched two octaves lower.

Then they stopped and the night fell once more into silence, the sort of silence that wasn't really silent, as was usual in large cities.

Matt took a sip of his scotch, savoring the warm burn as it travelled down his throat. The night was toying with his senses, he thought, because there was a question at the tip of his tongue and he wasn't quite sure it was appropriate to ask. This old man was a stranger, for all that he'd apparently recognized Matt in an instant. He knew, reasonably, he should be more wary of him, more suspicious. Except...

Except Matt didn't feel any sort of malice from the old man, just a sort of calm acceptance.

He swirled the remaining scotch in his glass just to hear the crystal hum softly. “What do you think evil means?”

There was a pause. “Evil? Why young man, evil means different things to different people. Every generation has its own definition.”

“But some things are immutable.”

“Some things should be. It depends on who's writing the definition.”

“How Socratic of you.”

The old man laughed. “I've been accused of worse things.”

Despite the seriousness of his question, Matt found himself smiling. “Somehow that doesn't surprise me.”

“It shouldn't. I was young once too, you know, even if it was a very, very long time ago.”

“Then do you think intentions matter?”

“Intentions? Hm, well they do say that the road to Hell is paved with good intentions, which is silly if you consider that the opposite would mean that the road to Heaven is paved with evil ones... Or else everything we do will inevitably take us to Hell. I suppose in the long run what's important is that if you try your best to be a good man, you'll never be an evil one so long as you don't let anger, love, or grief cloud your judgment.”

Matt frowned. “Love?”
“Yes. Don't let the poets confuse you, a great many horrible things have been done in the name of love. And even more good people have turned a blind eye, or sat by and let things happen because their eyes were too clouded with love to see the truth.”

“All that is needed for evil to flourish is for good men to do nothing,” Matt quoted. They were words close to his heart.

“Exactly.” There was a barely-there creak and scratch of cotton on wood as the old man shifted in his chair. A deep breath. “Inaction was always my greatest sin, and the greatest evils done around me ones I let happen. At the time I'd thought I had no choice, but over the years I've wondered if maybe that was a lie I'd let myself believe. If, perhaps, I'd allowed others to infect me with their fear. It was easier to stay afraid than risk losing the friendship of a man I respected above all others and loved like a brother. I've always wondered if I could've made things better had I acted sooner. Of course, there's always the possibility that I would've made things worse. Sadly, history is rather set in stone and so we'll never really know.”

Matt heard the old man take a sip of his scotch and swallow.

“What happened to your friend?”

“He died much too young.”

Matt closed his eyes against the statement. He could feel the pain and regret in the statement, could smell the unshed tears in the old man's eyes, but the pain wasn't raw enough, the regret not sharp enough for a recent wound. Matt turned his head upwards, into the breeze that blew across the rooftop. It was warm, finally free of winter's chill.

“I'm sorry to hear that,” he told the old man. He meant it, too. What if something happened to Foggy? He couldn't – didn't want to – imagine what that would be like. Would that be the bad day that finally tipped him over the edge his enemies were always taunting him with? Is that what it would take for him to become like them? He swallowed. “Have you ever killed anyone?” he asked softly.

The silence stretched between them. He heard liquid sloshing in crystal and imagined the old man staring into its depths, lost in thought. The answer was clear even before he spoke again.

“Yes,” he said, his voice so low it was almost a whisper. “And, at times, I failed to kill someone I should have.”

Matt nodded in understanding. That, too, he'd wondered about in the deepest, darkest corners of his mind: was his resolve not to kill worth the risk that a monster like Wilson Fisk would return to continue his rein of fear and blood?

He ducked his head and chuckled dryly. “I didn't come here expecting to find a kindred spirit,” he said.

“Aah, but you did come to find understanding.”

Matt's smile widened. “So I did. Then maybe you'll answer me one last question: when is something that looks like a cat, sounds like a cat and acts like a cat, not really a cat?”

“Well, now that is a question you'll have to ask Aithusa,” the old man answered and Matt could hear the smile on his face and imagine his eyes twinkling mischievously. The old man shifted in his seat and there was the dull-zing sound of crystal being placed onto wood, several drops of liquid sliding along the bottom. “And, oh look, here she comes now.”
Matt cocked his head and braced himself for the heavy footfalls and deep hollow breathing he remembered from the last time he'd been to the shop. He remembered the creature sounding large. After a few moments absent of all those sounds, he frowned.

His eyes widened when he realized that instead of heavy footfalls, there was an entirely different sound approaching from behind him, and a strong breeze that wasn't a breeze. It sounded like flapping, but without the lightness of feathers – so a membrane or skin of some sort. He heard the same hollow breathing and a steady beat from what had to be a very large heart. It reminded him of the trip he and Foggy had made to the zoo with two of his cousins – the elephants' heartbeats had been almost this loud.

Then there were dual dull thuds, much softer than Matt would've expected given the size of the beast, and a pause, followed by two more dull thuds – four legs. The hairs on the back of his neck rose to attention. He felt its breath behind him, the air at his back warming rapidly.

Part of his mind was shouting at him to run far, far away and hide. He'd felt it before, in the shop, but it was much stronger now. Whether because the creature wasn't pretending to be a cat right now, or perhaps because it was outside, he didn't know. But he'd been taught to hone his instincts so that he could trust them above anything else and they were telling him he was a tasty meat popsicle and the creature behind him was licking its chops.

“Wh-what is it?” he whispered.

“She is Aithusa,” the old man replied. “Go ahead, you can touch her. She promises not to eat you... or flambe you.”

The statement should've been ridiculous, but Matt could hear the hint of seriousness in the old man's voice. Nevertheless it made him chuckle, the unexpected humour breaking him out of his stupor.

“I'd very much appreciate that,” he said. “I'd rather not go out ironically as the Devil-Who-Got-Flambed.”

“You'd give those oddly-dressed hipsters something to talk about.”

Behind him, he felt the creature – Aithusa – huff in what felt like amusement. And just like that, Matt felt his trepidation melt away. He grinned and stood, turning slowly to face Aithusa.

Carefully stepping forward, in case his judgment about her size was off – everything else about her apparently was – he listened to the breeze as it blew against her form. Within the fire in his mind's eye, a shadow began to emerge. He cautiously removed one of his gloves and reached a hand out towards her. There was movement in front of him, and then there was a smooth, warm surface beneath his palm. He ran his hand downwards, noting that the surface wasn't completely smooth, but evenly bumpy.

Scales. Whatever Aithusa was, she had scales.

An elongated snout and then he found her jaws. Aithusa helpfully opened her mouth and Matt ran his hand along dry lips and then smooth sharp teeth. Very large, very sharp teeth.

“Wow, you really could eat me if you wanted to,” he said quietly.

Aithusa let out a huff, sending smoke into his nostrils. It smelt of sulfur and something else, something... primal. Something that could flambe him. Fire.

Matt gasped as realization hit him. He looked into the fire his mind saw and the shadow was darker,
more defined.

“You're a dragon,” he said, awed. A blind man doing martial arts: it was impossible. A man who could transform into a giant green rage monster was also impossible. So was a man surviving seventy years trapped in ice, or mythical thunder gods, women who controlled the weather, or a man who shot lasers out of his eyes. But this, this was... “Holy shit, you're a dragon!”

He was nearly pushed off his feet when a giant scaly head nuzzled his torso. Matt laughed and rubbed Aithusa's nose, relishing the deep rumble that sounded a bit like laughter.

Eventually, he turned back to the old man. “How exactly can a dragon this big hide as a house cat?”

The old man chuckled. “Why, magic of course.”

Matt's grin widened. “Of course.”

Merlin remained on the rooftop sipping his scotch long after Daredevil had left. Aithusa, once more a cat, lay purring gently in his lap as he absently stroked her. It wasn't until the first hints of sunrise that he finally decided to move.

He nudged the feline in his lap. “Come on, Aithusa, we'll be opening soon.”

Aithusa's eyes blinked open and she looked up at him balefully. She blinked again and then yawned widely as she stretched. Merlin chuckled, waiting patiently until she was done stalling and jumped down from his lap.

“Well, you at least look nice and relaxed this morning,” he commented.

“I enjoy flying above the city. There's always so much going on, so many things to see. I always seem to forget how big cities have gotten. I found the tower where Steve lives. You know, the platform at the top is large enough for me to land on.”

“Is it really?” Merlin asked with a grin. “I wonder what the Avengers would say if you did land there.”

“Most likely panic. They are human, after all.”

“Most likely. You are rather large. I was quite surprised you showed yourself to Hell Kitchen's Devil.”

“You weren't against it.”

“Hm? I suppose I wasn't.”

Merlin looked off into the distance, not think about anything in particular, just taking in the cityscape as it was bathed by the first colours of dawn. Aithusa leaped onto the small wooden table without jostling the glassware or the scotch. She nudged Merlin's hand.

“He appeared to be in need of some wonder, something to show him there is still beauty in the world hidden beneath the ugliness.”
Merlin was silent for a long moment. “Yes, exactly. I can remember being young like him, thinking I could change the world. And he still believes it, still thinks he can change it.”

This time it was Aithusa who let the silence linger. “Don’t worry, one day someone will make you believe again.”

Merlin snorted bitterly. “If I manage to survive with my sanity about me ’till then.”

A gust of wind blew across the rooftop and for a split-second, Merlin was looking into the wise blue eyes of the Great White Dragon.

“You will, Warlock. You will because you have no choice.”

“No, you’re right, I don’t. It’s my punishment for letting Arthur die before his legacy was complete.”

“It is your destiny, Merlin. Now and forever, you are Emrys.”

“And you are sounding more and more like Kilgharrah by the day.”

Merlin heard Aithusa's laughter in his head as he waved a hand to levitate the glassware in front of him, grabbing the bottle of scotch on his way as he headed into the house for breakfast.
Tinker Toys and Lost Boys

Tony parked the Ferrari with a screech of tires and turned the motor off. “Come on, Bruce,” he declared as he adjusted his sunglasses. “It's time to go find me a new car!”

Bruce sighed from the passenger seat. “You realize that when Pepper figures out you're not actually working on the newest Starkpad remote link system, she's going to do some very pointed glaring in both our directions.”

Tony rolled his eyes and threw the car door open. “Don't worry Brucie Bear, I've been working on the Starkpad system. This is... a break. A well-deserved break.”

“It's your third one this morning.”

“Well, it's been a busy morning.”

“It's just after ten, Tony.”

Tony paused with his hand on the car door. He looked down at his watch. “Wow, and so it is! I thought it was later than that.” He slammed the door closed and motioned at Bruce to get moving.

Bruce rolled his eyes and slowly got out of the car. “That's because your morning began at 2 am.”

“There, see, that's totally a full and productive workday,” Tony pointed out as he walked around the car to the sidewalk.

Bruce gently closed the passenger-side door. “I'm not sure that Pepper would classify trying to make the Starkpad fly as 'productive'. Oh wow, those really are beautiful.”

“Bruce, Bruce, Bruce, can't you see the amazing potential of the Starkpad drone?” Tony continued on, not noticing his science buddy wasn't following behind him. “Think about it: you forget your Starkpad at home, or up in your office, or maybe suddenly get to a coffee shop and realize your date is running late, and instead of either sitting around in boredom or driving all the way home, you just activate the app on your Starkphone and, viola, your Starkpad comes to you!”

He paused on the steps and waited for Bruce's response, frowning when it didn't come. He turned to find his friend leaning over a large planter full of flowers. “Bruce? You know it's roses you're supposed to stop and smell, and those aren't roses.”

“No, they're begonias.” Bruce straightened and turned to Tony with a raised eyebrow. “Natasha, Pepper and Steve were discussing them at one point and, I have to say, they really are just as gorgeous as they described them.”

Tony blinked down at them. They were very bright and colourful. He looked back to Bruce and shrugged. “They're flowers.”

Bruce rolled his eyes and abandoned the planter in order to follow Tony into the shop. Tony, for his part, grinned and took only a moment to read the golden lettering on the shop's door to make sure it was the right place and then swung the door open. He breezed into the shop and stopped in the middle of the front room.

He heard Bruce shut the door behind them as he looked around the shop. It was cluttered with
objects of all shapes and sizes. They all looked old, some better-used than others. Tony didn't exactly frequent antiques shops, not seeing the point of them, but it was exactly what he'd imagined one would look like. It even had a creepy row of porcelain dolls staring down at him from the top of a black credenza with bright orange and red flowers painted along its sides.

Tony suppressed a shiver and looked away from the row of staring, unblinking eyes. “Well, it's a building full of old junk, so I'd say we're definitely in the right place.”

“It's not junk, Tony;” said Bruce, sounding pained.

“One man's trash is another man's treasure, young man.”

They swung around to face the counter they had, somehow, both missed seeing until now. There was an old woman standing behind it, her face set into a disapproving frown as she stared at them. Tony swallowed down the sudden feeling of being scrutinized by someone who could see right through to his soul and smiled his widest, brightest PR smile.

“Well naturally different people like different things, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and so on and so forth.” He sauntered towards her and let his smile become slightly flirtatious – the old woman looked like she was a hundred years old, she'd probably think it was cute. “Now speaking of treasures, my girlfriend was here, oh, two months ago or so and told me you have this absolutely amazing collection of antique cars. My friend and I here were wondering if we could maybe take a look at them.”

“No.”

Tony blinked at the woman. “No? What do you mean 'no'? Do you know who I am?”

“You're Steven's friend,” the old woman replied. “The loud one.”

He heard Bruce snicker beside him while he gaped at her. “Th-the loud one?! I think you've got your Avengers mixed up there, 'cause I'm pretty sure Thor's 'the loud one'.”

“Ah, I apologize, of course the God of Thunder would be the loudest one of all. You're the other loud one.”

Bruce burst into giggles. Tony glared at him. Then he turned back to the old hag. “Look, lady, I don't know what the problem here is: you sell antique cars, I want to buy an antique car. You know who I am, therefore you know I have the money to cover it, so what exactly is the problem?”

“You're not looking for a car, you're looking for a toy, something to tinker with and shower with attention until you tire of it and then discard it into the back of your collection,” the old woman snapped.

Tony was taken aback by the vehemence in her voice. The way Pepper had described her, he'd expected a sweet little old lady who'd pour him tea, offer him biscuits and chatter on about her grandchildren -- not this grumpy, glaring hag. She eyed him carefully with narrowed eyes before turning her attention to Bruce. He felt Bruce stiffen beside her.

Then she huffed. “Follow me,” she said.

Tony blinked and then exchanged a baffled look with Bruce. Moments later, he was grinning as he hurried after the old lady, who was shuffling around the statue of a tuxedo-clad waiter holding a large green fish with comically bulging eyes. Tony paused in front of the statue.
“Do you think Pepper would kill me if I bought this?” he asked Bruce.

“Yes,” Bruce answered immediately.

Tony ignored his answer. “You know, I really think this needs to stand in front of the employee cafeteria.”

“No, it really doesn’t.” Bruce forcefully pushed him forward. “Come on, we'll lose her if we don’t hurry.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “This place isn't that big, Green Bean.”

“That's not what the others said.”

“Obviously they're exaggerating.”

They both paused at the back of the shop when they realized there was no more shop and also no old woman. Tony carefully walked all the way up to the shelf at the back full of decorative plates and ran a hand along the wooden edge. He whistled with appreciation when his finger came away completely clean.

“Wow, not a speck of dust. This place must be a bitch to keep clean.”

“Tony.”

Tony turned to Bruce, who was standing beside him and motioning past Tony's left. Tony turned his head to look. “Ooh, now that's clever,” he said as he hurried to the far corner.

From where they'd been standing before, it had looked as though the large cabinet at the end extended all the way to the far wall, but from their current angle, they could see it actually didn't. Instead, there was a gap just large enough for a single person to get through. Tony grinned and hurried to the hidden passageway, a childish glee in his steps.

“What took you so long?” said the woman's voice as soon he was through.

Tony huffed. “Hey it wasn't like you were there to show us the way. Had to figure it out on our own.”

She raised an unimpressed eyebrow. “I thought you were supposed to be intelligent.”

“I am!” Tony protested and he was absolutely not pouting when the old woman spun around and continued down the corridor.

Bruce clasped him on the shoulder. “Tony, I'm willing to freely admit it, you were right. This was definitely a great idea.”

Tony tried to glare at the amused expression on Bruce's face, but ended up snorting in amusement himself. He shook his head and turned his attention to examining the corridor around him instead.

It wasn't particularly narrow, just wide enough for two people to comfortably walk beside each other without being in danger of knocking their heads into the sconces that hung on the walls every three and a half feet. They were the only source of light, making it both bright enough to see, yet dim enough to give the corridor a sense of mystery. The soft thick carpet beneath their feet reminded Tony of the carpeting in the hallways of Stark Manor when he was a kid. He'd loved that carpet: it'd made sneaking around a lot easier.
Just like in the Stark Manor's upper floors, this hallway was lined with a series of doors. Many of them were closed, but Tony peeked into the few open ones. They were mostly full of more haphazardly placed knickknacks, though seemingly organized by theme. There was a room containing jewellery cabinets and showcases, and another with a plethora of musical instruments next to one lined with bright pink floral wallpaper that housed an explosion of dishes and fine china. There was even a suit of armour standing surrounded by a variety of metal pieces and leather saddles, which Bruce dragged him away from before he could go in to take a closer look.

They rounded a corner and Bruce chuckled. “So, you know how you said this place couldn't possibly be that small?”

Tony threw his arms up. “I know! Seriously, what is this place? The TARDIS?”

“Don't be ridiculous, young man, there is nothing alien about this shop,” said the old woman – the first words she'd spoken since they'd started their seemingly never-ending trek down the corridor.

Tony and Bruce came to a stop beside her as she finally reached for a doorknob. It was noticeably different to the others, a hexagonal-shaped fake (he assumed) amber rather than the wood or brass that had been on the others. Their jaws dropped when she gripped it and, instead of pushing the door inwards, slid it sideways to reveal a perfectly-preserved early twentieth century-era elevator. The old woman pulled the iron cage door to the side and gestured them ahead of her.

Tony felt something brush against his right leg and looked down. A large white cat slipped past them into the elevator and sat down on its haunches in roughly the centre of the elevator. It stared up at them expectantly.

Bruce was the first one to move forward. “Well hello there,” he said warmly and crouched down next to it. “You must be Aithusa. I'm Bruce.”

He held a hand out towards her, knuckles first, careful not to actually touch her. The cat looked at his hand for a moment, then up at Bruce before leaning forward to bump her head gently against his hand and rubbing her head against it. Bruce chuckled and obliged by scratching her gently.

The elevator was full of loud purring when Tony stepped in, moving around Bruce to where he and his grey pinstriped Armani suit could be as far out of reach of the fluffy white fur as possible. The old woman stepped in after him and slid the cage door shut. Then she pressed a button and the elevator came to life.

Tony frowned as it began to rumble its way upwards. “Wait, I thought the cars were in the basement.”

“They are,” said the old woman. “I'm not taking you to the basement.”

“What? But—”

Suddenly the elevator came to an abrupt, clanking halt. The old woman ignored his protests in favour of sliding the cage door open. The cat immediately abandoned Bruce in favour of trotting imperiously out of the elevator first. The old woman chuckled and then followed the white cat.

“Welcome to the Attic,” she called over her shoulder.

Bruce stood. “You know, the others didn't mention an attic,” he said mildly.

Tony huffed in annoyance. “Yes, alright, fine.” He followed Bruce out of the elevator and headed towards the old woman. “You know, I could make that thing move a lot more smoothly. In fact, I
could probably do that while letting you keep that quaint, old fashioned look. I'd even do it for free if you just let me take a look at the basement.”

Tony took a breath, about to continue elaborating on his perfectly reasonable request, when he glanced at the room. The words suddenly froze in his throat. The ceiling was made of raw wood panelling that sloped on an angle, proving they actually were in an attic, though the room was still well-lit and spacious. There were things hanging from the ceiling: several Solar System mobiles – two made from wood, one out of metal and at least two containing gross inaccuracies -- a few airplanes, and a rather large model of something that almost looked like a submarine, but clearly built by someone who had no idea how physics and engineering actually came together to make one work.

“Tony,” he heard Bruce whisper. The obvious awe in his friend's voice caught Tony's immediate attention.

He walked over to where Bruce was standing in front of a shelf full of carefully laid-out manuscripts, the cat curled up on a hand-carved, high-backed wooden chair next to it. The manuscripts were all bound, but there were no covers – rough amateur jobs, or else incredibly old. He went up on his toes to look over Bruce's shoulder and read the title. His eyes widened and he gasped.

“On Computable Numbers, with an Application to the Entscheidungsproblem... by Alan Turing,” Tony read out loud. He reached out to carefully touch the paper. It was slightly yellowed and felt delicate, old. He turned the page and saw that someone had written notes in the margins, using an ink pen.

“A rough draft,” he heard the old woman say.

“Where did you get this?” Bruce asked quietly, reverently.

“From the man himself, I imagine.”

Tony and Bruce both turned to her at once. “What?!”

The corners of the old woman's lips twitched in amusement. “Merlin knew him once upon a time.” She gestured to the room in general. “This is his collection.”

“He must've been quite young when he met him,” said Bruce.

The old woman shrugged. “He was younger than he is now, yes.” She paused, looking thoughtful for a moment. “He's never shown any interest in pursuing science himself, however he's always been an eager listener to the men and women who attempted to use it to explain the universe. As far as Alan Turing went... Well, the idea that something as clean as mathematics, something used for such mundane things as counting apples, or calculating daily expenses, could also be used to explain how the world around us functioned – it fascinated him.”

“Where is Merlin?” Tony asked, suddenly realizing they hadn't actually seen the old man who co-owned the shop anywhere yet.

“He's off running an errand. I dare say he'll be sorry he missed you. It's not often that this room gets shown to anyone.”

Tony frowned. “Why not?”

“Most people wouldn't truly appreciate it.” Then she pointed towards the other end of the room. “Speaking of things most people wouldn't appreciate, the toys are over there.”
Tony blinked at her sudden change of tone and looked to that end of the room. There was a large metal tub-shaped object sitting prominently on a stand in the middle of the space. He walked towards it, curious to see what it was. There was what looked like a propeller on one side and a series of antennae at the top that looked like it was meant to receive radio signals. Tony tried to picture how the contraption could be used. The bottom was smooth and there were no wheels, or wings...

“A boat,” he said out loud. “It’s a boat.”

“A prototype,” the woman added. “The one used for the exhibit was four feet long. As you can see, this one is quite a bit bigger, but I believe Merlin said it does work, more or less. Nikola simply wanted it smaller and narrower for better manoeuvrability during the final demonstration.”

Tony’s eyes widened and his jaw dropped. “The robot boat.” He swung around to face Bruce. “Most people don’t know about Nikola Tesla’s work with radio, he’s not really remembered for it. But he built the robot boat for the 1898 Electrical Exhibition in Madison Square Gardens!”

The old woman nodded. “Yes, and most of the people present immediately saw it as a weapon, a potential remote controlled torpedo.”

Tony grinned. “But he didn’t! He said that in the boat he saw the first of a race of automatons and machines that did the work of people.”

Bruce smiled knowingly as he came closer. “A futurist indeed, then.”

“Yeah,” he said, looking around as he breathed in the presence of greatness.

There was a bulky telescope set up in front of the window, a small leather seat in front of it, reading for stargazing – not that it would be a particularly rewarding experience in the middle of New York City. There was a long, narrow table with a series of very, very old microscopes laid out on it, and also an ancient-looking printing press standing next to a camera – one of those ones with the black fabric in the back that the photographer stuck his head behind to take pictures. And then there was another shelf full of books and manuscripts.

“Do you think Pepper would mind if I just took the rest of the day off?” he asked no one in particular.

“I suppose it would depend on what you brought her back,” said the old woman. “Now, there is a vase downstairs in the purple room that she quite admired the last time she was here.”

Tony blinked and looked to her. “You are a devious, devious old woman.”

The old woman smirked at him. “I've had many, many years to perfect it, young man.”

Tony grinned. “Fine, it's a deal. I'll take the boat, and throw the vase in too.”

While Manhattan was enjoying bright sunshine, North Salem in Westchester County, New York, was experiencing unforecasted cloud cover. If it hadn't been a weekday and thus most people hadn't been either busy, there might've been more people wondering about the oddness of the sky. The clouds were dark grey, as though preparing for a storm, but there wasn’t a trace of humidity in the air.
In the northeast corner of Westchester County, a large manor house stood surrounded on all sides by extensive, grass-filled lands and a tall, black iron fence. For some reason, the clouds seemed darker there.

In the midst of the relative calm of mid-morning bustle, the two figures approaching the manor gates were barely noticed – especially not by the momentarily deactivated security cameras. The first was a tall, thin man wearing non-nondescript jeans and sneakers and a navy blue hoodie with a large hood that was pulled over his face. The second figure was much smaller, wearing jeans that were frayed and torn along the bottom, and covered in stains. His green and white jacket looked slightly cleaner, though the awkward way he held his body indicated there was more to see beneath it.

They stopped several feet from the gate and the taller one turned to the smaller one and knelt down. He looked like a fairly young man with short dark hair and wise blue eyes. Gently brushing the child's dirty brown hair away from his face, the man smiled at him. The child looked at him uncertainly, the wide-eyed innocence on his face marred by the dark bruise that covered most of his left jaw.

The man took the child's right hand and squeezed. “I'm sorry, but this is where I have to leave you,” he said, his voice carrying a distinctly British accent of indeterminable origin. The child opened his mouth to protest, but the man stopped him with a gesture. “You have to do this part alone. But don't worry, you won't be alone for very long. You are strong enough to do this, Aaron.”

Eventually, the child nodded, still not looking entirely convinced. “Why can't I go with you?” he asked in a quiet voice.

The man's smile became sad. “Because right now, what you need is a safe place where you can grow up and make friends. I'm afraid I can't give you that.” He looked towards the large black iron gate and the manor they could just barely see beyond it. “They can.”

“I... I'll be able to make friends there?”

The man turned back to the child with a grin. “Yes, of course, you will. Everyone in there is just like you.”

“A freak?” the child asked, the tone far too bitter for his age.

The man chuckled. “Well, sometimes being a freak is a good thing.”

The child frowned. “Really?”

“Yes, and that's one of the many things they'll be able to teach you here.”

For the first time, the child's eyes looked to the manor with curiosity instead of fear and the man relaxed. Then his expression turned serious.

“Aaron, before you go, I want you to remember two things for me.”

The child turned to him expectantly. “Okay.”

“First of all, I want you to remember to never, ever let someone else's fear define you.” The child seemed to mull the sentence over in his mind and then slowly nodded. The man smiled warmly. “And secondly, always be a good man. Even so young, you already know how horrid people can be, so don't ever be like them. Grow up and become a good man.”

Solemnly, the child nodded. “I promise,” he said.
The man reached out and carefully hugged the child, held still as tiny arms embraced him tightly in return. They stayed like that for a long moment, but eventually they split apart once more. The man politely didn't mention the tears on the child's face.

The man then stood and reached into the pocket of his hoodie. “Here, give this to one of the adults inside,” he said, holding out a small scroll.

The child took it. “Thank you,” he said before taking a deep breath and marching up to the tall, imposing black gate. It clicked open when he reached it, prompting a small smile to appear on his face just before he pushed it open the whole way.

He passed through the gate and looked back. The man who'd brought him here was gone. Swallowing down his fear, Aaron took a deep breath and marched up the long driveway to the manor.

Logan yawned as he sauntered down the stairs in his bare feet. It was Tuesday and his first class didn't start until eleven, so he'd taken advantage of that and decided to sleep through the early morning ruckus that usually happened on a schoolday morning. It made for a much more leisurely morning, which he enjoyed very much.

He was pretty sure the other X-men enjoyed how much more relaxed he was when he didn't have to share his morning with half a gazillion kids, which was why he kept getting the late mornings in his teaching schedule.

Just as he was about to turn towards the kitchens to grab some breakfast, he heard a faint tapping sound from the front entrance. Puzzled, he paused and waited. The sound came again. He groaned and went to check it out, hoping it wasn't just some student playing with their abilities.

As he got closer, he heard the sound again, only this time it was louder and obviously the sound of someone knocking on the front door. He wondered why they weren't just using the knocker. It was easier to hear inside the manor, which was why it was there in the first place.

He threw the door open. Then he looked down, taking in the wide-eyed, frightened eyes of the kid standing there. Wolverine took in the muddy sneakers and dirty, torn jeans, but his eyes narrowed on the large livid bruise colouring his left jaw.

Suddenly, the kid's hand shot forward, thrusting a rolled up piece of paper at him. Logan raised an eyebrow at him and took the scroll, unfolding it to find out what it said.

*Another lost boy in need of guidance and a safe haven.*

- N & M

“Will you teach me how it's good to be a freak?” a small voice suddenly blurted into the silence.

Logan looked to the kid and then back down at the note in his hand. He snorted in amusement. “Yeah, sure thing, kid. Come on, I'll take you to the Professor.”

The kid's face brightened instantly and, at Logan's gesture, he hurried into the manor. The frown returned to Logan's face when he noticed the careful way the kid was holding himself.
“Actually, I think the Professor's teaching a class right now,” he said. “I'm gonna take you to Hank instead and the Professor will come see you when he's done. You'll like Hank. He's, uh, very blue.”

“Blue's my favourite colour!” the kid exclaimed, the fear almost completely gone from his eyes.

Logan chuckled. “That great, kid.”
As usual, thank you so much for all your support! Every single comment and kudo is very much appreciated. This story's a bit shorter than some of the others, but it's something some of you have been asking for.

Erik accepted the cup of tea with a smile, taking a moment to admire the beautiful green and blue dragonfly drawn on the delicate bone china before leaning in to smell the herbal aroma.

“Mm, this smells lovely, my dear,” he said. “Do I detect rosehip?” He took another whiff. “And vanilla?”

“Yes to both,” said Nimueh as she sat across from him with her own cup. “There should be a faint note of jasmine as well. I'm experimenting with a new blend, so let me know what you think.”

“Of course.”

Raven sat down beside him and Nimueh leaned over to pour her a cup as well, glancing to the side where Aithusa was happily scarfing down Raven's gift. “You know, with Steve in town again, there are altogether too many people spoiling that cat,” she groused.

Erik poured some milk into his tea and smiled. “Well, she does have a talent for twirling people around her finger.”

“Yes, she does. If she wasn't a cat, we might have to be worried whether her ability to amass willing slaves was part of some devious plan to take over the world.”

“Or corner the world's fish market.”

Nimueh snorted. “Yes, I suppose that's entirely more likely.”

Just then the door to the shop opened quietly. The familiar soft whirling of a motor announced the new arrivals even before Charles came into view from around the seven foot tall wooden mermaid statue that was displayed beside the entrance. He was flanked by Jean Grey and Cyclops in their normal, civilian attire that did absolutely nothing to hide their identities, only making them less immediately noticeable.

“Aah, good afternoon, Charles,” Erik called, watching with amusement as the other two mutants stiffened. Had they been expecting him not to show?

“Good afternoon, Erik,” Charles answered, and his smile did seem genuine. He then nodded to Raven and turned to Nimueh. “And Nimueh, it is a pleasure to see you again. I thank you for hosting us.”

“You're quite welcome, Charles,” said Nimueh. “I know this little place is quite the trip out for you, but do be assured you are always welcome here. Merlin just went to get some pastries from the shop up the road. He should be back shortly.”
“You don't bake?” Raven asked, sounding curious.

“No, young lady,” Nimueh answered, looking up briefly as she poured Charles some tea. “I used to bake quite a bit at one time, but my hands just aren't up to it anymore. I only make tea now. And the less said about Merlin's culinary attempts at anything that isn't buttered toast or stew, the better.”

Erik chuckled before finally taking a sip of his tea, savoring the soothing warmth. He saw Charles sweeping his eyes around, and he wondered what he saw. The shop was truly a wondrous place and Erik swore the items changed every time he came. Which, of course, made sense given that it was a shop and thus the owners were expected to sell the items on display, but there was still something slightly mysterious about it nonetheless. If only because there never seemed to be many people in the shop.

Although, he thought as he perused some of the items more closely, it was entirely possible there were quite a few items of value here. He could feel more metal objects further away, clustered together in a way that wasn't quite normal for an ordinary home. There was much more to this shop than the front rooms he'd seen thus far.

Just like its proprietors.

Perhaps this calming, at-ease feeling was a result of one of their mutations...

A sudden clatter broke him out of his musings and Erik looked over just in time to watch as Scott's spoon slipped off the saucer he had been attempting to balance it on. It was pure reflex that had Erik reaching for it before he'd considered anything else. The spoon froze several inches from the ground, hovering there for a moment while Erik wondered at how relaxed he'd become that he'd used his powers so casually. It was something he advocated, yes, and did for effect, but not often did he react so easily without thought.

Ah well, by all accounts, Nimueh already knew he was a mutant.

He floated the spoon back up and laid it gently onto the silver tray so as not to dirty the table or the crocheted tablecloth.

“Thank you, Erik,” said Nimueh with a slight smile, her tone as casual as if he had merely passed her the sugar.

He inclined his head to her. “You're very welcome, it would be a shame for such beautiful pieces to get damaged. Pure silver, I believe?”

“Yes, they were part of a rather large set Merlin acquired at an estate sale in Spain. We sold most of it to a bride-to-be, however we kept some pieces for our own personal use.”

“They are exquisite,” said Charles while he carefully examined his own spoon.

Nimueh turned to him. “Mid-eighteenth century: they did things properly then.”

Just then there was a loud meow to his left. Erik glanced over to watch Aithusa jump onto Raven's lap and curl up without any sort of preamble, as though simply claiming her rightful spot. Raven smiled slightly and obligingly began to pet her. Moments later, loud purring filled the shop.

Erik looked over and exchanged an amused look with Charles. To either side of the telepath, his bodyguards looked shocked. It lifted Erik's spirits even more.

“So, tell me, Charles, how have you been?” he asked, surprising himself with just how much he
genuinely meant the question.

Charles blinked, the only indication of his own surprise, and his smile became several degrees warmer. “I have been well, my friend. Busy. Running a school is a lot of work, after all. We just finished settling in our latest charge.” He paused. “There were some legal issues to take care of.”

Erik didn’t miss the way the corners of Cyclops’ mouth tightened, or the anger that flashed across Jean Grey's face. He carefully didn't give any indication he'd noticed. “But they've been taken care of?”

“Yes. He will be staying with us for the foreseeable future.”

“Hmm.”

Before he could inquire further, the door to the shop opened.

“About bloody time!” Nimueh called out. “What took you so long? It's only up the street and I put the order in yesterday!”

“And if I'd realized you were expecting to feed an army, I would've gone appropriately prepared!” he heard Merlin call back. “I would have had to come back and get the wagon out of storage if I hadn't happened to run into Steven's friend on my way in.”

Almost immediately, Cyclops had set his tea down and was out of his chair, offering to help Merlin with the pastry load. The mermaid statue made it impossible for Erik to make out who had arrived with Merlin, but he did see Cyclops stiffen when he spotted the newcomer.

“Thank you, young man,” said Merlin, completely oblivious to Scott's discomfort. “That's very kind of you.”

Erik raised an eyebrow at the string bag wrapped around two large white paper cake boxes Cyclops took from the old man. The younger man looked down in surprise at the load when he took the bag, indicating it was indeed heavy. When the mysterious 'friend of Steven' finally came out from behind the statue, her face was still half-obscured behind a large box and the brown paper bag she was balancing on top.

The red hair, however, was unmistakable. Erik mused that he really shouldn't be surprised that 'Steven's friend' was an Avenger.

Black Widow, to her credit, barely showed any signs of surprise at having suddenly walked into a mutant gathering. Though, he supposed it was possible that Merlin had told her about the gathering and she'd two and two together.

“Well, I hope you all brought your appetite,” Merlin said cheerfully, while Nimueh directed Scott and the Black Widow where to set their packages. “Because apparently the hag expects you all to eat twice your bodyweight in pastry. And crumpets.” He paused, before pointing an accusing finger in Nimueh's direction. “And don't even think about using the forge for roasting them afterwards!”

“Of course not, the smell would be impossible to get out,” Nimueh retorted.

“I was under the impression that roasting people required a gingerbread house?” Charles asked politely, his eyes twinkling merrily.

Merlin immediately turned to Charles with an equally mischievous twinkle in his eye. “Oh, it's not a requirement, merely a suggestion.”
“Which is just as good, as I'm fresh out of gingerbread houses,” said Nimueh as she placed a plate piled high with decadent-looking pastry. It was a sweet-smelling bouquet of chocolate, berries, mousse and whipped cream. “Now please, help yourselves. As Merlin mentioned, there's plenty for everyone.”

“Thank you, I will most certainly endevour to eat at least some of my share,” said Erik, reaching for a strawberry custard tart.

“Indeed, this does look wonderful,” Charles added.

“Thank you,” said Nimueh. She turned to the Black Widow. “Will you join us for a cup of tea, young lady?”

The Avenger hesitated for a moment and then smiled. “Thank you, Nimueh. I don't think I can say no to one of your teas.”

“Excellent! Merlin, there are more cups in the tea room.”

Merlin grumbled something under his breath as he shuffled off towards the back – however to the other side of the stairs than where Erik had often seen Nimueh and Merlin disappear to with guests. Several minutes later, he came back with two more china tea cups. These, Erik noticed, didn't match the rest already out, being blue, with swans swimming majestically in a small pond circled with cattails and stalks of tall, green grass.

Nimueh accepted them and poured a cup for the Black Widow and another one for Merlin.

“This is delicious,” said Natasha after her first sip.

“Thank you, young lady. Now what was it that brought you here today?”

“Stark's decided to throw a huge, over-the-top Halloween party for charity. I need a costume.”

Jean frowned and twisted in her seat to look at Natasha, who was leaning against a hutch just behind her. “Halloween? But that's almost two months away.”

Natasha shrugged. “My schedule can be erratic. Besides, if I wait too late, then all the good costumes will be gone.”

“Prudent thinking, young lady,” said Merlin. “We don't get too many people in for Halloween, but there are always a few socialites or university students. And some of them can certainly take forever.”

“You sell clothing here?” Raven asked.

“Why, yes, of course,” said Nimueh. “All authentically 'vintage' as they like to call it these days.” She turned to Natasha. “I'm assuming you're not looking to be a princess again?”

Natasha smirked. “Definitely not.”

“Excellent! You know, I think I have a chain mail shirt that should fit you perfectly.”

“Hmm, we might even have a pair of gauntlets and vambraces,” Merlin added, looking Natasha over with an assessing gaze.

“And a sword, I assume?” Natasha asked.
Merlin smiled. “Yes, I might just be able to find a sword for you. Unless you'd prefer a mace.”

Suddenly, Cyclops groaned. “Jean, I know that look. What are you planning?”

Jean twisted back in her seat to face him, her lips curled into a sly smile. “Well, I was just thinking that Halloween *does* fall on a school day this year...”

Charles chuckled under his breath. “I’ve certainly never discouraged dressing up.”

Jean’s smile widened with delight.

Cyclops’ frown deepened. “I am not dressing up.”

Jean rolled her eyes. “No one said you had to. I'm certain I can convince enough of the other teachers to dress up.”

“I agree, Jean,” said Charles, leaning forward. “And it's entirely possible that Logan will agree to a costume that will match your own.”

Erik bit his lip as he saw Cyclops stiffen.

“Oh, what a brilliant idea!” Nimueh exclaimed. “My dear, what do you think of the Civil War era fashion?”

Jean Grey’s widened. “I've always loved Gone with the Wind.”

“Then I think it's time to abandon these old geezers.” Nimueh stood and hurried over to the pastry boxes. “Natasha, will you be a dear and carry one of these down with you. There's no reason we have to abandon the desserts along with the geezers after all.”

Erik laughed. “And here I thought I was a 'young man' to you.”

Nimueh waved his comment off. “Context is everything.”

It didn't take long for Nimueh to drag Natasha, Jean -- and Raven after a 'Come along, just leave the monster behind and join us' -- away and into the depths of the shop. Cyclops hesitated only for a moment, darting a quick look towards Charles, before following them.

Charles watching him leave and then aimed a quick wink in Erik's direction. Erik chuckled, amazed at how easily the shop had seemed to allow them all to forget their usual animosity.

Merlin reached for an eclair. “Well, now that the unnecessary audience is out of the way, how have you two been, gentlemen?”

Erik grinned. “I have been rather well. I began reading an interesting book the other day.”

Erik would probably deny it if asked, but a warm feeling spread through his being at the way Charles visibly relaxed at his words.
Chapter Notes

Thank you to all of you who left kudos or comments on the last chapter. Or just came out to read.

This chapter is dedicated to Did_you_see_the_light_in_my_heart, who drew some amazing artwork for me, which inspired this chapter (or at least the end of it anyway).

At long last the twittering teenagers had paid and were leaving the store along with their purchases. They paused just in front of the shop doors to take one, last selfie. Merlin rolled his eyes at their ridiculousness. The twenty-first century, he'd long concluded, was a wonderful, amazing era. And utterly ridiculous. What would Arthur and the knights have thought of it?

Actually, now that he thought about it, Gwaine would've probably loved all that social media nonsense – would've flooded the internet with his drunken selfies.

The door finally slid closed and Merlin turned his attention to the last customer in the shop. He'd been browsing for the past hour, refusing any help. And, although he'd done a very good job of looking interested in the shop's merchandise, Merlin had felt his gaze on him while he'd been serving other customers. Well, whatever the stranger was looking for, it was nearly closing time and Merlin had no intention of being dismissed again.

Besides, it was quite clear the man wasn't actually interested in buying anything therefore Merlin felt even less compulsion than usual to be polite.

“Sir, we're closing soon,” he said to the large African-American man.

The man turned away from the delicate bone china tea set – of all things – he'd been studiously examining and turned towards Merlin. One fierce eye stared down at him and Merlin raised an amused eyebrow at the attempt to intimidate him.

“This is an interesting store you've got here,” the man said in a gruff voice.

“Thank you, young man. Now, is there anything I can help you with before you go?”

“You also seem to get a lot of interesting customers,” the man continued, completely ignoring Merlin's subtle attempt to get rid of him.

“Hm, some more interesting than others,” said Merlin, pointedly looking him up and down, from the black leather eye-patch, down his long black leather coat, all the way to his heavy black combat boots.

The man folded his arms across his chest. He was obviously someone used to garnering attention, used to being obeyed. Used to intimidating. Merlin found it amusing. He'd met many men like him, some better at it than others. This man would've probably been able to look Uther in the eye without flinching. Of course, after all these years, Merlin had become a rather difficult man to intimidate.

“You also apparently host some rather interesting tea parties,” the man said after a long pause. His
tone was almost casual, just mildly curious.

Merlin scoffed. “If you're trying to get yourself an invitation, then I can assure you, young man, you're going about it entirely the wrong way.”

The man raised an interested eyebrow. “Oh? And what exactly is the right way?”

“Slinking in under the cover of darkness dressed like either a member of the mob or the CIA certainly isn't it.”

“You know it wasn't actually dark outside when I walked in through the front door,” said the man, looking amused.

Merlin waved him off. “A slight exaggeration. Poetic license, if you will.”

“I see.” The amusement vanished off his face. “You're aware that consorting with known terrorists is a crime?”

Merlin raised an eyebrow at him. “Yes, of course, young man.”

“And are you also aware that Erik Lehnsherr is a mutant and a domestic terrorist?”

Merlin clamped down on his anger. It was almost an automatic response – it was all-too-easy for him to imagine the word ‘sorcerer' instead of ‘mutant'. All these years and people were still the same, their reactions predictable. Sadly, that wasn't always comforting.

“I am aware that Erik Lehnsherr is a man and a friend. He enjoys his tea with just a dash of milk and has a taste for noir murder mysteries.” He made a show of looking down at the watch on his wrist. “Now it is quite late and the store is closed, so I'm going to have to ask you to leave.”

“Noir murder mysteries?” the man said, once again completely ignoring Merlin's attempts to get him to leave. “I wasn't aware of that.”

“Perhaps you would if you sat down and had a conversation with the man instead of about him. It's proven to be a much more effective way to get to know an individual.”

The man chuckled, shaking his head in amusement, the hint of humour back in his eyes. “Yes, it is,” he said. Then he was silent for a long moment. Long enough that Merlin contemplated just throwing him out the door physically. However, he was just curious enough about the man's presence to give him a few moments longer.

Then he would shove him out the door.

“You know, I've never been much of a history buff,” the large man finally continued. “But I've studied the past, listened to stories, learned to read between the lines of what's actually written down.”

Merlin frowned. “The history books never tell the whole story. Only the bits those writing them wanted known.”

The other man inclined his head. “Exactly. All of history is subjective, to a point, the events cataloged based on the importance of those who wrote it.”

“So, does that make you the man who writes the history books, or the one between the book's lines?”

The man smirked. “That's an interesting question, Mister Pratt.”
“I'm certain the answer would be just as interesting.”

“I'm sure it would be.”

Once again the silence hung between them. It wasn't an uncomfortable or awkward silence, more like an assessing, careful stillness that coated the space around them with a veneer of mystery. The large oak clock he'd mounted on the wall just this morning filled the air with its insistent ticking, the only reminder that time had not actually stopped.

“It's interesting,” the man finally continued, “the sort of things you learn when you stop to listen and learn to really pay attention to what's being said. See, for instance, there's this story I heard from an old friend of mine. She was a tough, one of the few women in front-line combat positions during World War Two. She and her unit were in France at the time, tired and hungry, tryin' to find a hidden German bunker. Rumour had it, the Germans were building something that would be devastating to the Allie's efforts, and so their orders were to find it and destroy it.”

Merlin carefully kept his face looking vaguely interested. He remembered the woman. Dark, wavy hair, full red lips and grief lingering behind the fierce determination in her eyes. He didn't interrupt the man as he spoke.

“Anyway, they eventually met up with a few members of the French Resistance and settled in to spend the night in this half-torn apart farmhouse on the outskirts of a small, half-abandoned village. Turned out the French Resistance had heard the same rumours about the bunker they had, and unfortunately had about as much luck locating it. Between them, they were all beginning to wonder whether it was false rumour put out by the Germans to send them on a wild goose chase through the French countryside.

It was coming on to midnight when suddenly the door to the room opened and a strange man walked in. He was young with dark hair, big ears and deep blue eyes. Peggy said the damned fool just grinned at them, greeting them like he was coming to a dinner party and like he didn't care that, to a one, they all had their weapons pointed at him. Then he asked them if they were the ones looking for the German bunker. A month they'd been searching for the damned thing and this guy just waltzes into the room and gives them not only its exact location, but also tells them whatever they're building down there was scheduled to be completed in three days time!”

The man shook his head, not bothering to cover his amusement at the story. Merlin remained silent.

“Merlin, what's taking you so long? I'm all ready up here.”

Nimueh's voice in his head was unexpected and nearly made him jump. He could feel her irritation.

“Just a man trying to dredge up old memories. I'll try to get him out soon.”

“What are you alright?”

The offer of help was implied, but Merlin decided he didn't need it. “I'm fine, Nimueh, thank you.”

“That was a rather lucky shot for them,” he said out loud. “It's a good thing the man was around.”

“Hmm, it was...” The dark-skinned man looked at Merlin thoughtfully. “He didn't stick around, but before he left, he gave them his codename: the Falcon. Peggy had never heard the name, but the guys from the French Resistance had. Apparently there were two of them, the Falcon and the Swallow, one man and one woman. No one knew who they worked for, or how they managed to get so close to the Germans, but every once in a while they would just show up out of nowhere with intel and then disappear again. They were never wrong either.
Now, here's the thing, I've read through all sorts of documents from the war, hundreds of reports, but none of them ever mention either the Falcon or the Swallow by name. But when you look real close, read between some of those lines, they're everywhere. I talked to an old spy from Prague several years ago, and he told me a similar story. Only he'd met the woman, a mysterious dark-haired beauty, he called her. And dangerous. Looking into her eyes was like looking into a fierce summer storm.”

“They sound like quite the pair,” said Merlin casually when the man paused once more, hoping the catch in his throat wasn't noticeable as memories threatened to overwhelm him. There had been one time that Merlin had stopped for more than a few moments, mesmerized by the look in a young Dutch woman's arms as he ushered three Jewish children and their mother into her home. He'd stayed until daybreak that time. After the war, he went back to her, only to find her laughing in the arms of a Canadian soldier.

“Hmm, yes, they were quite impressive by all accounts. Not that there are anything more than whispers about them. As far as official documentation goes, they might as well not have existed. And what happened to them after the war is anyone's guess.”

“A proper conundrum then.”

The man stared at Merlin. “Yes, a conundrum.”

Merlin felt Nimueh's magic grow thicker in the air around them, as she no doubt tried to figure out just what was going on in the shop below her. He shook his head and banished the memories back into the past where they belonged.

He cleared his throat. “Well, I thank you for sharing such an intriguing story with me, young man, however my friend is expecting me and I've kept her waiting long enough. And you, no doubt, have other people to share this story with.”

A small smile flashed across the other man's face. “No, I don't think I will be.”

Merlin raised an inquisitive eyebrow at him. “Oh?”

The man uncrossed his arms as he shrugged. “Well, most people would say they deserved the recognition for their deeds, and don't get me wrong I'm not against giving credit where credit's due... But I don't think those two wanted it. They came outta nowhere, helped, and then disappeared. I think the best thing I can do for them is let them remain a forgotten punctuation mark in the history books of World War Two.”

Merlin nodded. “Yes, I imagine they would appreciate that.”

And then the man finally stepped forward. “Ah, but it's getting late and I should let you get upstairs to your ladyfriend.”

Merlin snorted. “Nimueh is many things, but never mistake her for a lady, young man.”

“I'll keep that in mind. Have a good evening, Mister Pratt.”

“Have a good evening, young man.”

Merlin waited until the tall African-American passed by him and then followed him to the door, where the man paused dramatically and turned back to him.

“Oh, sorry, it suddenly occurs to me,” he said, the tone of his voice indicating that whatever he was about to say, it wasn't really just a random thought. “A merlin is a type of falcon native to England,
isn't it?”

Merlin barely restrained himself from rolling his eyes. “And large parts of North America as well as Euroasia, yes.”

“Hm, thought so.”

And then he left. Merlin locked the door after him manually, and then touched the door gently as he whispered the spell to activate the nighttime protection wards. Shop locked and secured, he then turned and swept the inside critically with his eyes.

“I'm going to have to search the place for listening devices in the morning,” he grumbled as he made his way to the winding staircase that led to the second floor.

At the top of the stairs he stopped to whisper the reversal spell, sighing as the magic flowed through his body and infused it with its warmth. His head felt pounds lighter as his long hair and beard shrunk and he straightened his stance as the aches and pains he’d lived with all day gradually disappeared. It was so liberating to once again be himself again.

Merlin found Nimueh on the large green couch in the den leafing through a car magazine and already on her second beer. He glared at the half-eaten bowl of popcorn on the table.

“I’m so glad you decided to wait for me,” he said dryly.

“You shouldn't have taken so long,” she said imperiously, closing her magazine and tossing it to the floor. She reached down beside her and handed him a beer as he settled into his half of the couch. “What did the strange man want anyway?”

Merlin snorted. “To tell me a story about history’s forgotten punctuation marks.”

Nimueh blinked at him. “What?”

He chuckled. “Oh, he was probably a friend of Natasha's, I expect. Most likely a former superior, in fact. He’d heard some stories from the Second World War, rumours that never made it into the official reports about a pair of spies who'd codenamed themselves 'The Falcon' and 'The Swallow'. He was trying to not-so-subtly tell me he knew it was us. Or, rather, that he suspected it was us.”

“Hmm... that's a rather good guess on his part. Personally, I'm rather surprised we managed to stay out of the reports. I suppose no one really wanted to admit that their best information came from a mysterious source they knew next to nothing about.”

Merlin laughed. “That sounds about right.”

Just then, Aithusa leapt onto the armrest next to him and meowed loudly. The deep rumble that accompanied the sound was audible only to Merlin.

“Finally, you're here Merlin! Now we can start.”

Merlin rolled his eyes. “Yes, yes, we can start.”

Nimueh laughed and pressed 'play' on the remote. Merlin concentrated on his beer bottle, feeling the magic pool behind his eyes as it chilled in his hand. Meanwhile, the familiar opening credits to Doctor Who played on their giant high definition television.
Hey guys! I am so sorry it took me so long to reply to all your reviews. Shortly after I posted the last chapter and the final chapter of my other story (I can't remember which order I posted them in anymore, but I think this story was first), my computer decided to take an extended leave of absence. Possibly an early Oktoberfest break. Anyway, it meant I was without a computer for nearly two weeks and then my sister was visiting. And you guys were just amazing and so I had a ton of reviews to answer from both this story and Search for Victory.

Also, before anyone else assumes anything, yes, I recently posted a two-page prologue to a brand new story. No, that does not mean this story is getting side-lined again. That prologue, and the first chapter of said story, have actually been written for months. However, now that Search for Victory is finished, this is going to be my focus. The thing is that while this story is a ton of fun to work on and the haphazardness of the plot means I can throw all sorts of characters and situations into the story without feeling the need to progress anywhere with each chapter, the downside to this style is that the 'what should happen next' isn't always clear. So, where there are certain events that have to happen and there are a few chapters that I've had planned for ages, the in-between chapters are less easy to figure out. As I'm sure anyone who writes knows, there's nothing more frustrating than spending hours staring at a blank screen and writing a few sentences only to then delete them because they don't feel right. I'd much rather have something I can work on during those times when I haven't quite figured out what the next chapter's going to be.

Make sense? Okay, awesome. Onwards to the next chapter! This one's the longest yet, by far.

“Okay, okay, so if I could have your attention please! I'd like to get this thing started.”

Tony Stark’s voice came on over the speaker system, causing most of the assembled groups to look up. Wearing a pair of torn jeans and a bright red T-shirt that read 'Property of Stark Industries' across the front, along with his signature sunglasses, Tony Stark looked much less like a corporate mongol and more like an over-eager university student. Especially since, despite his state-of-the-art wireless ear-mike, his raised platform was a park bench.

His audience, however, didn't seem to care one bit about this casual display as they looked up with excited, grinning faces. Tony echoed their grins as he waited patiently for his fellow Avengers to quiet the last members of their groups. Rather predictably, Thor's group was the last to settle down.

“Ladies, Gentlemen and assembled midgets,” he began, his grin widening slightly at the giggles his address elicited. “Before we get to the main event, where my team will crush all of you.”

“Dream on, Stark!” Clint called out, the group of rugrats surrounding him quickly rising to the occasion and adding in their own denials.

“Oh, bring it on, man!” Sam added his own voice.
“Indeed!” Thor's voice boomed across the park. “Your words speak of challenge and we shall meet it gladly. Victory will be ours!”

Thor's group's warcry made Tony wince with its volume. He caught Steve's pointed look that clearly told him to just get on with it. Tony shrugged at his team leader unapologetically. It took him a bit longer this time to instill silence.

“Aannyway, as I was saying,” he finally continued. “Before we get to the fight – I mean, the race – I wanna give you guys all a little history lesson. As you all know, I'm a futurist. I look to the future and design and build tech that's better than the tech we have now, and what we had before. But, sometimes it's important to remember to look back at what came before us, and take a minute to remember the amazing people who made everything we have today possible. Because just like they're our past, one day we're also going to be someone's past. And everything I build, everything you guys build, will be used as a stepping stone for some future futurist. Some genius fifty years from now will take what I've created and make it even better. Hell, might even be one of you.”

He paused for emphasis and then reached down to pick up the remote he had hidden within the folds of his sports jacket. It was the size of a laptop and twice as thick – not to mention several times heavier – but Tony had made a point of changing as little as possible from its original design outside of what he absolutely had to in order to make it work.

He held it up for everyone to see. Somewhere in the back, several flashes went off. “Believe it or not, this is a remote. I know, right? Can you guys imagine this was once someone's idea of portable? Well, in 1898 it was. That year a guy named Nikola Tesla presented the first ever remote controlled machine to an electrical exhibition in Madison Square Gardens.”

He flicked a switch and turned around towards the lake at his back. A few minutes passed, long enough that Tony could feel the crowd of children begin to get restless. Finally, a dark shape slid out from behind the greenery he'd it behind earlier in the day (it had taken quite a bit of creative finagling) and slowly, but steadily began to lumber its way across the water's surface.

“Okay, finally, there it is,” Tony said, feeling relieved. “That there is a prototype of the robot boat Nikola Tesla presented at the exhibition. It's almost five feet long and, trust me it weighs a ton. Captain America there can attest to that since he was the one who had to carry it across the park for me.” He paused for a moment to watch its progress, mentally calculating how much longer it would take it to reach the centre of the lake. “Just look at that clunker go.”

“Can't it go any faster?” one of the children whined.

Tony chuckled and turned around to face the crowd again. “Bit of patience there, my young padawan, this is like the great-grandpa of those remote control cars you've got at home. In fact your great-grandpa might not even have been alive when this thing was built!”

“I could perhaps fly it to the centre of the lake,” Thor offered, standing.

Tony pointed his finger at him. “Don't you even think about it! That beautiful clunky behemoth might be slow, but it's a one-of-a-kind priceless antique and the only person worse at breaking things than you are is the Hulk!”

The crowd snickered. Thor shrugged good-naturally and sat back down.

“So, why exactly didn't you sail it into the centre of the lake before we started?” Clint called to him.

Tony threw his right hand up in exasperation. “And I thought I was supposed to be the impatient
one!” He grabbed hold of the remote before it over balanced on his left arm. “Have some respect for history, guys. Tesla was a great man, a genius, a man before his time. I mean, if any of you kneebiters down there go into electrical engineering, you’ll find yourselves still using the Tesla coil. His work with radio and radio waves isn’t as well-known, but this robot boat was quite the achievement for its time. And not just because it was the first of its kind, but because of what it meant. Now, when he first presented it, there were of course those people who immediately saw it as a potential weapon, a remote controlled torpedo or something, but Tesla didn’t see that. No, he said he saw this boat as the first of many such automatons and machines that did the work of people.”

Tony paused for emphasis – and to sneak a peek at the boat’s progress. “Just think about your day, about what you’ve got around you. Think about all the store you go to where the doors open for you automatically, then when you get home, you push a button and your garage door opens. Factories are full of machines putting stuff together with humans in mostly supervisory roles, or quality control. So that vision he had of the future, that vision came true. And that’s why he’s a futurist, because he not only created something amazing, but he was also able to envision the full scope of application for what he’d created.”

Tony glimpsed behind him again and then turned fully in order to point the controller in the correct direction.

“And... I think we're finally in position.”

A few moments later, the robot boat came to a stop in roughly the centre of the lake.

Tony gently set the remote back down on top of his sports jacket. Then he straightened and rubbed his hands together with excitement. “Alright, so rules are simple. Every team has two boats, which you’ve spent the last three hours decorating so that you can tell them apart from the others. You can cut your competition off, get in their way, force them to the side, bump into them – although I'm warning you, there's only so much damage your own boats will take so be careful – but any and all physical action happens in the water. Any team that brings the fight to land will be immediately disqualified. If you purposefully sink your opponent's ship, you will also be disqualified and will then explain to me in minute detail exactly how you did it. Tesla's robot boat there is your marker. You approach it from your right, go around it in a loop and then come back to shore on the left. Do you all know which side is the right? Yes? No? Maybe? Come on, everyone raise your right hands.”

Tony waited for every single right hand to go up. He rolled his eyes as Cap patiently corrected one of his team, and Natasha corrected her keener who'd decided to raise both hands for good measure. Once everyone had the correct hand raised, Tony got started again.

“Okay, so you all know which side is right now, so none of you have any excuses for going the wrong way. If anyone goes left instead of right then... well, you won't actually get disqualified for that, but I will definitely make fun of you. Now, the robot boat is your no-go zone, so make sure you make your turns wide, because there is absolutely no touching of the boat allowed. If you so much as nudge it, the ship is disqualified. And if you think we won't be able to see, think again!”

Tony pulled his Starkpad out of his back pocket and tapped the screen to activate the drone he’d had sitting on top of the robot ship. It rose into the air and then came to hover about three feet up.

He looked back up and grinned menacingly at the hoard of kids. “Big Brother will be watching you,” he said in an intentionally sinister voice. Then his expression lightened and he extended his hand out to the side. “‘And now to introduce Big Brother himself. Here is the judge for this race and my bestest friend in the whole wide world, Colonel James Rhodes, also known as War Machine or Iron Patriot, or whatever it is they’re calling him this week.”
Excited applause greeted Rhodey as he came over and easily jumped up onto the bench-podium. Tony handed him the Bluetooth mike and hopped down to return to his group of kids.

“Tony, if you think that's going to get me to turn a blind eye to your stunts, then you clearly don't know me very well,” said Rhodey. “And it's still Iron Patriot.” He waited for the laughter to subside. “Now Tony just told you the rules, and I'm going to add one more. Avengers, friends, and Ms Potts, I love all of you and I think you're great, but I catch any of you – and, yes, that includes you Tony – touching a Starkpad controller, your entire team is disqualified. That clear? Okay, good. Then everyone get to your starting positions.”

Fifteen minutes later, fourteen remote controlled boat took off from the shore of the lake in Central Park amid a cacophony of cheers and yells and clapping from parents and curious on-lookers watching from the sidelines. Each was half the size of the robot boat and a slimmer, sleeker-looking designs. Their hulls were painted in bright colours and covered with sparkles, streamers, pom-poms and small flags. One even had a string of bottle caps trailing noisily behind it as it cut across the water. Though the course began as a fairly straight line, it quickly dissolved into a chaotic press of intersecting lines as the children at the controllers began to get creative at disrupting their competition.

The first boat to get disqualified was Team Hawkeye's after it tipped over onto its size following an unsuccessful attempt to knock over one of Team Thor's. The maneuver was met with cries of dismay from the group of children clustered in front of Clint and one of triumph from the thunder god (who managed to be louder than all his children put together).

The first boat to reach the center of the lake was Tony's. It was also the second to be disqualified as it approached the bend at full speed and the young girl at the helm fumbled with the Starkpad just as she'd barely managed to make the turn, sending the bright gold and red boat straight into the massive robot boat.

Minutes later, Black Widow's young protoge for the afternoon bumped into one of the Team Falcon boats from behind, also sending it crashing into the robot boat. Sam barely remembered to keep his language family-friendly. Natasha smirked at him.

No one seemed to take notice as both of Team Captain America's boats kept to the outer edge of the invisible race track, steadily making a wide turn and avoiding all the commotion in the middle. They passed the robot boat side by side, one just in front of the other. They passed by the robot boat and then suddenly shot forward at full speed. With most of the boats clogged in the center of the track and bumping into each other mercilessly, they quickly overtook half of them before they were noticed.

“Oh shugarplum fairies!” Clint exclaimed when he noticed the two boats. He bent down to look over the shoulder of the ten-year-old girl with blonde pigtails who was manning his last controller. “Quick, quick, before he gets past us!”

She nodded solemnly and then the boat swerved to the side... right into the Team Black Widow boat that had been trying to sneak past them.

Steve smirked, but his eyes never left the watery battlefield. A moment later, he knelt down to speak softly to the small dark-skinned curly-haired boy and the taller redhead who were in charge of his own team's controllers.

“Hey, good job there, Hawkeye!” Tony called to him. “I thought you two shared a telepathic connection or something. Is it broken? Also, sugarplum fairies? Really?”
“You're not nearly as funny as you think you are, Stark!” Clint called back as his and Natasha's boat controllers tried to disentangle the streamers from Clint's boat which were now caught on the pipe cleaner and pom pom mass covering the front of Natasha's boat. “Oh come on! We barely touched! How the he–eck did that tangle together?!"

Several children shrieked in delight as one of Team Hulk's ships banged into the side of the second Team Iron Man boat, causing Team Iron Man to cry out in dismay. The impact sent the sleek red and gold boat skimming the side of Team Thor's skull-and-swords bedecked grey warrior ship. Though sudden, the impact barely left a scratch on either ship – until the second Team Hulk ship rammed the grey warrior ship from the other side, using it to sandwich the Team Iron Man ship between them. The movement also loosened the glue that had been used to attach the plastic skull and crossed swords to the top of Team Thor's ship, sending the ornaments tumbling off the ship and crashing onto Team Iron Man's ship's receiver.

“Hey what the...?” Tony gaped at the scene for a moment amid the panicked cries of his team. Then he looked towards Team Hulk and pointed an accusing finger at their leader. “Bruce, I thought we were friends?!”

Bruce was calmly looking down over his team, a fist in front of his mouth to hide his amusement. He glanced up at Tony and shrugged. Meanwhile, the children who made up his team looked between the two adults and then at each other.

They looked back to Tony and grinned – the widest grin coming from the gap-toothed twins manning the first Starkpad controller. “Hulk smash!” they all declared in one, loud voice.

Bruce promptly lost it. His loud laughter drew the attention of the rest of the Avengers and even Tony couldn't find it in him to remain angry.

“Cap!”

The smile disappeared from Steve's face at the soft cry from the redhead controlling his first ship. Immediately he was looking down. One of the children not wielding the Starkpad pointed out to the lake where one elegant pink and silver ship had quietly taken advantage of the distraction provided by Bruce and his team in order to slip out from the throng of ships and cut then off the closer of Team Captain America's ships.

Steve chuckled. “Why, Ms Potts, how devious of you,” he said loudly.

Pepper looked up from where she was kneeling between her two controllers, her hands resting on her thighs, and grinned. “Thank you, Steven,” she said. “As the CEO of a major industry leader, it always pays to be sweet and polite, and completely and utterly ruthless.”

And then her second ship slipped out from the fray and shot past her first one. It quickly gained on the second Team Captain America ship, but that ship didn't waver on its course, rushing forward at full power. Both teams were completely silent as their ships sped across the water towards the shore, oblivious to the commotion around them. The red, white and blue-striped Team Captain America ship had a head start, however, and even with its protector ship blocked off, it didn't look like Team Potts was going to be able to catch them before the finish line.

The air around Steve's team was tense with barely suppressed excitement. Pepper's team matched their intensity, but with a more frantic feel, as though they were trying to will their ship faster with their minds alone. And then it almost seemed as though the Team Potts ship slowly began to gain on Team Captain America's ship.
The water around the red, white and blue stripped ship rocked slightly. Then a large purple maw full of pointy teeth rose up from the water and closed around the ship before slipping back into the lake.

Steve and his team gaped for several long moments.

“W-what was that?!” one of the children asked.

“I have no idea,” said Steve quietly. He turned to the bench, where ‘Big Brother’ was busy arguing with Tony over whether or not Team Hulk’s move was against the rules. “Rhodey! Did you catch that?”

Rhodey looked away from Tony. “Catch what, Cap?” He looked out to the lake and then frowned. “Wait, what happened to your ship? Wasn’t it in the lead?”

“Something ate it.”

Tony blinked in bewilderment. “Something ate it? What do you mean *something ate it*? How?!”

In a moment of near-perfect timing, a smooth rounded mouth slipped out of the water and snatched up the leading Team Potts boat and then disappeared beneath the surface with nothing more than a loud slurp.

Pepper's group cried out in outrage. Everyone else stared at the smooth surface of the lake, stunned.

“Like that,” said Cap.

A few moments passed in stunned silence. And then the surface of the lake began to foam and bubble. They could just barely make out five large shapes beneath the surface swimming towards the shore.

Rhodey's slightly elevated vantage point gave him the best view of what was heading in their direction. “Everyone get back from the lake!” he yelled.

That seemed to break the spell. Suddenly, the silence exploded into screams of terror and panic.

“Avengers, make sure the kids are safe first!” Steve called out even as he himself was herding his group of children in the direction of the waiting parents, guardians and volunteers. He passed them on to the organizer of the Big Brothers, Big Sisters program they'd partnered up for the boat race, knowing she and the others would make sure they got to safety. Then he nodded to Sam who, having left his wings at the Tower, was instead brandishing a tire iron he'd managed to find somewhere. Sam nodded back, wordlessly accepting the responsibility of protecting the civilians from anything that got past the Avengers.

Steve took a detour past the refreshment tables where he'd left the leather satchel that held his shield, but made it back just as the creatures began to crawl out of the lake on sturdy, though slightly stubby legs. They had three pairs of them. All five creatures were purple, though each was a slightly different shade of purple, ranging from the deep plum that had eaten Steve's boat to a pale lavender.

“You know, they look a bit like komodo dragons with a few extra legs,” Clint observed as he jumped onto the same bench Rhodey and Tony had been using as a podium earlier, his collapsible bow in hand and a quiver of arrows strapped to his back. “Only bigger and slimier. And purple.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Steve saw Tony stepping into his suitcase armor. He felt someone come to stand next to him. A quick glance told him it was Natasha securing her Widow's Bites on her wrists. Bruce was nowhere to be seen, which meant he was staying back until it was clear whether or
“Stark, this had better not be someone's idea of creative industrial espionage!” Hawkeye called out.

“Industrial espionage? That doesn't even make sense,” Iron Man answered from above them. “First of all, I built the boats for fun, not to sell. And second of all, none of my competitors are this creative.” There was a pause. “Also, JARVIS' scans indicate they're one hundred percent organic, no machine parts included.”

“Good, then they should be easy to kill,” said Natasha quietly.

“Let's hope so,” Steve replied. “Although we should make sure they're actually hostile before we start killing them. They could just be scared and defending their territory.”

The lead creature suddenly charged forward with a burst of speed that surprised the Avengers. Hawkeye managed to fire an arrow at it as he side-stepped to the far side of the bench. The arrow hit the creature's left flank and then slid down its slippery dark purple scales. Hawkeye fired a second arrow, but this time the creature paused in its steps and twisted to the side in order to snatch it out of the air. The arrow snapped in half.

The other purple lizard creatures rushed forward.

“Uh, Cap, I'm gonna guess 'hostile',” said Iron Man from above them. Steve heard the tell-tale sound of repulsors firing up. “But it was nice thought.”

Steve felt the corners of his lips twitch. “We'll get lucky one of these days,” he called up before focusing on the fast-approaching creatures. His eyes narrowed and his mind filled with angles and trajectories.

He pulled his arm back and threw his shield at the giant lavender lizard bearing down on them on the left. He followed it, knowing the path it would take and exactly where he needed to be to catch it. The shield hit the lavender lizard across the eyes, causing it to scream in a high-pitched garbled tone, and then bounced off to hit the dark purple one in the right flank... which it hit on an angle and then slid down just like Hawkeye's arrow had.

Steve cursed and picked up speed.

The lavender lizard shook off the blow from his shield and turned angry red eyes in Steve's direction. Then there was a gurgling deep in its throat just before it charged at him. The dark purple lizard on his right had been pre-occupied with chasing down Hawkeye before, but now it looked like it had finally taken notice of the new figure running towards it and turned its head to face Steve.

No choice. He'd have to risk sliding between the two lizards and hope their reflexes were more sluggish than their speed indicated. However, the dark purple one took the decision out of his hands when it suddenly swung to its right and charged at Steve. Its jaws opened and Steve came to an abrupt stop less than a foot away, immediately dropping into a crouch and punching upwards, using his thighs to add force to the blow. He caught the lizard squarely into the lower jaw, pushing its head up even as his fist slid along the slimy scales.

Knowing he needed his shield now more than ever, he didn't hesitate and threw himself forward into a roll. Behind him, he heard the lizard scream as it got hit with a repulsor blast. Glad for Tony's intervention, he rolled to his feet only to find the lavender lizard bearing down on him. Steve jumped to the side to avoid the first snap of powerful jaws. He could smell fish on the lizard's breath.

Feigning left gained him just enough time to finally get to his shield and bring it up in front of him
just as the lizard's jaws snapped at him a second time. Teeth scraped against metal and Steve felt the vibrations from the blow travel up his arm. He braced himself on the grassy ground, which was quickly becoming quite muddy from water dripping off the purple creatures.

And then the pressure was gone and Steve nearly stumbled at its sudden absence. The lizard screamed. Steve looked up over the top of his shield just in time to watch as Thor's hammer flew past him and then back into Thor's waiting hand.

“Thanks!” he called up to the hovering Thunder God.

Thor grinned down at him. “You are most welcome, my friend!” Then his expression became grim. “These are unexpectedly hardy creatures.”

Steve looked towards the lavender lizard. It looked slightly worse for wear, but it was getting back up without so much as a limp. He sighed mentally and prepared himself for a long battle. Without their comms and without his battle armor, it was going to be a long and dangerous one.

He ran to the struggling lizard creature. It saw him and lashed out, but its movements were slower this time so Steve jumped easily out of the way. Then he grabbed his shield by its edge with both hands and smashed it into the creature's head. He felt the shield slipping along its scales, but was able to keep it from sliding off. The creature staggered under the blow.

Steve felt a surge of heat pass behind him. He really hoped it had been a repulsor blast. Fire-breathing giant purple lizard creatures was not something he wanted to contemplate right now.

“Cap, look out!”

He glanced over his shoulder and then immediately threw himself to the ground as a set of light purple jaws closed in the space where he used to be. He tumbled when he landed, ignoring the squelching mud that coated his clothes, rolling into a crouch with his shield in front of him.

Just in time to bring it up higher as the same light purple lizard slammed into him. Unlike the lavender one, this one didn't try and bite into the shield, instead using brute force to send Steve and his shield flying. Steve cried out in surprise. His back hit a tree and the breath was knocked out of him, a strangled gurgled cry the only thing that made it past his lips when something in his upper back snapped.

It had been a long time since he'd had to try and force his body to breathe, but he'd had enough experience as a child and youth that it was second nature to him. Keeping calm took more effort than usual, however, as he watched the battlefield through bleary eyes. He saw Natasha leap onto the back of one of the lizards. She immediately began to slide off, but Steve saw her thrust something – probably a knife – into its body. She held on as the creature began to thrash and then thrust a second knife into it with her other hand, giving her two handholds to puller herself up with until she was sitting astride the creature's back.

Out of the corner of his eye, Steve saw the light purple lizard turn away from its examination of the lavender one. Its blood red eyes zeroed in on him. It didn't look happy that he was still alive.

Breathing mostly back to normal, Steve went to stand... and then screamed as his upper back exploded in sharp pain. He'd broken his shoulder blade apparently. Panting through the worst of it, Steve knew that even with the serum it would take him at least a few more minutes before he could move without excruciating pain.

Judging by the lizard coming towards him, he knew he didn't have those few minutes.
Slowly he bent his legs, his movements careful so as not to jar his injury before he had to. He would only get the chance to do this once. The lizard was coming closer. As Steve finally got his feet under him, he heard a twig snap behind him. He froze, his grip on his shield automatically tightening.

He strained his ears and could just barely almost hear something moving behind him. None of the lizards had been this quiet. Perhaps it was the person who'd been breeding them. Carefully, Steve reached down to the knife he had strapped to his ankle, gritting his teeth against the pain from his shoulder.

And then something furry brushed against his face. Steve froze for a moment before blinking in confusion. Fur? He looked up and, for a moment, surprise overrode the pain he was feeling. His eyes widened as he found himself looking into the yellow-gold eyes of a giant white tiger.

It stared back at him with steady, calm eyes.

Until it leaned down to nuzzle Steve, a deep satisfied rumble coming from its chest. The movement jostled his broken shoulder blade and made him cry out with the sudden, sharp pain. The tiger froze and pulled back slightly to sniff at him, its snout moving higher until it was sniffing at the junction of his shoulder and neck. Steve tensed instinctively, all too aware of how easily the giant feline could kill him.

It didn't kill him. Instead, it took a deep breath and then exhaled onto Steve's shoulder. A tingling warmth spread almost instantly into his limbs, starting with his injured shoulder, dulling the pain so completely he could barely feel it. He couldn't help the groan that escaped his lips as his body let go of the pain and tension. His legs slid out from under him as he collapsed bonelessly back to the ground.

The world around him looked slightly fuzzy. “Wow,” said Steve softly before smiling up at the tiger. “Thanks. This means you're not going to eat me, right?”

The tiger huffed in amusement and nuzzled Steve again. Being pain-free meant that he could now bring his hand up to run his fingers through soft white fur.

A rapid succession of repulsor blasts brought Steve's attention back to the battle, and the reason he was laying at the base of a tree to begin with. The light purple lizard had paused in its steps and was warily observing the new arrival. The tiger pulled away from Steve, using a single paw to bat at him when he attempted to stand as well. Its claws were sheathed, but it was stronger than Steve, whose world was still slightly warm and fuzzy and made his serum-induced muscles feel a little like wet noodles.

He gave up with a resigned huff. “I hope you know what you're doing,” he told the tiger.

The tiger licked the side of his face. Steve squawked in surprise.

Then it pulled away again and faced ahead. The lizard had apparently overcome its hesitation and was coming at them again. The tiger growled, low and dangerous. The low, rumbling growl didn't let up as the majestic predator stalked forward, stepping over Steve's legs as it moved to stand in front of him, its tail swaying behind it. The lizard opened its jaws to reveal two rows of very sharp-looking teeth. It hissed at the tiger. Then it picked up speed.

The tiger rushed forward. The lizard tried to snap at it, but the tiger was the more agile of the two, jumping to the side to avoid the jaws coming at it and, almost immediately, Steve saw powerful hind leg muscles tense. Seconds later, the tiger pounced. Paws now armed with razor sharp claws spread out and grabbed at the purple lizard's neck, sinking into the scales without difficulty. It's jaws opened
and Steve caught a flash of long, deadly teeth just before it bit into the flesh. Blood that was more pink than red poured down from the wound.

Steve shuddered when he realized just how close those teeth had been to his neck.

The lizard thrashed, its gargled screech definitely pained. The tiger held on for a long while, before letting go. It scrambled out of the range of the lizard's jaws before turning back to observe the purple creature. The lizard rallied, shuffling around to face the tiger – and right away Steve knew why the tiger was going to win. Moving in a straight line, the lizard was incredibly fast, but the tiger didn’t wait for the lizard to charge it head on. Instead, it took off to the side, racing around it in a circle the lizard couldn't keep up with. Perhaps if it had had only four legs instead of six, it would've stood more of a chance.

The white tiger was a blur of movement as it ran, and then seamlessly leapt onto the lizard's opposite shoulder, foreclaws digging in once more. He saw its hind legs slip on the scales until finally also sinking in. Powerful jaws opened and bit into the back of the lizard's neck when it reared up against the pain. The lizard's jaws opened and closed several times as it continued to thrash. The tiger squeezed its jaws harder and shook the lizard's neck.

From there, the rest of the fight was over in minutes, leaving Steve feeling both awed and unsettled. He staggered to his feet, no longer feeling comfortable with being in a vulnerable position around the tiger, no matter how gentle it had been with him earlier.

Still, Steve was no coward, and so he walked towards the tiger and the purple and pink carcass that had been its opponent – but carefully so as not to spook it. It suddenly occurred to him to wonder where it had come from. The zoo? He wracked his brain trying to remember if the Central Park Zoo had a white tiger. Snow leopards he remembered, but a tiger?

The tiger turned its head to watch him approach, its calm eyes betraying nothing of the viciousness he’d just witnessed. Maybe he was projecting, but he thought he saw intelligence in those eyes. Was this a mutant with a transformation ability? Except that it had also taken away his pain...

“Well, whatever your reason for helping me, I'm sure glad you're on my side,” he said out loud.

The tiger blinked once and then looked away, its whole body tensing. Steve looked over to the battlefield. The lizards looked as though they had taken some blows, but they were alarmingly still in one piece.

The one Black Widow was riding was no longer thrashing, and looked like it might've been limping slightly, but the dark purple lizard had apparently come to its aid. Steve watched as Natasha kicked out at its head. There were several bloody gashes on her legs. Tony was firing his replusors at the creature, but it barely seemed fazed by the onslaught.

Iron Man landed on the ground, apparently giving up on technology in favour of brute force. Steve began to run, peripherally aware of the tiger running beside him. In the air, Iron Man was fast and maneuverable, but on the ground he was a bit awkward and clunky. And those purple lizards had eaten two metal ships.

However, brute force Iron Man had in spades, which he proved by punching the lizard. The dark purple creature's neck snapped to the side. Not giving it time to recover, Tony brought up his other hand and blasted it with a repulsor. The creature let out another gurgled screech. Which was when the lizard Natasha was riding darted forward and closed its jaws around Iron Man's gauntlet.

Steve heard Tony scream and tried to pick up the pace. As did the tiger, and a glance told him it was
aiming left for the one Natasha was riding.

“Black Widow, get off now!” he called ahead and was relieved to see her obey him immediately.

Despite the urgency of battle, there was a surreal moment where he almost thought he could pick out faint mumbled words on the wind, the voice feminine and unintelligible.

And then the tiger put on an extra burst of speed and leaped onto the lizard's back, its claws digging deep gouges into its flesh. The lizard let go of Iron Man and screeched in pain. Meanwhile, the dark purple lizard had recovered from Tony's attack and Steve could see it preparing to counterattack. He could also see that, while in one piece, Tony's right arm was hangings just a little too limply even in the suit.

Hoping to at least distract the lizard, Steve brought his arm back and threw his shield. He frowned as he watched it fly. Was he imagining the faint blue glow encasing it?

When his shield hit the dark purple lizard on the back of its neck and then bounced back, Steve was almost too surprised to catch it. A quick glance confirmed that, yes, the vibranium shield was indeed faintly glowing blue. Any other thought disappeared from his mind when the dark purple lizard turned on him. He vaguely noticed Iron Man fly up and out of the way of the lizard's thick tail. Steve danced to the right and swung his shield at the side of its head. The blow hit with a dull ring and no slipping on the slimy scales.

The lizard shook its head and came at him again. Out of the corner of his eye, Steve saw something dart in low. The lizard screeched in pain and looked down. Steve followed its gaze and was surprised to see a giant grey wolf. Its eyes glowed molten gold and its teeth were digging into the lizard's front leg.

This was turning into quite the bizarre day.

The wolf had given him an idea, though. Steve backed away a few steps and then swung his shield with all his might at the lizard's other front leg. The bone broke with a loud snap and the lizard creature went down almost instantly. The wolf let go its leg and went for its neck. For a second, Steve almost felt sorry for the lizard.

He stood over it and brought his shield down on top of its skull, leaving the lizard visibly dazed. He did it again. The wolf didn't let go of its neck until the lizard stopped twitching.

“So, Cap, who are your friends?” Natasha asked when he stepped back.

“I have no idea,” he replied as he looked over to run his eyes up and down her form. There was a dark bruise forming on her right forearm and the gashes on her leg looked even worse up close, but she was standing.

Then they heard a loud crack of thunder and saw a flash as lightening shot down from the sky. A moment of silence followed, broken with a cry of triumph. They looked over to see that Thor had finally succeeded in beating down the lizard he'd been concentrating his efforts on. Steve smiled. That was four down, one to go.

He scanned the area for the fifth lizard. “Damn,” he cursed when he saw it slithering rapidly away, towards the bystanders who'd stuck around to watch the Avengers fight. They were running now, but it was obvious they weren't going to be fast enough. Steve took off towards it.

“Tony, Thor, head it off!” he yelled as loud as he could, hoping both Avengers were paying enough attention to hear him. He was never, ever leaving home without his communicator again.
An arrow flew at the lizard from a tall tree, but it slid off its scales just as ineffectually as the ones before it had.

The lizard had nearly reached the civilians.

Steve threw his shield. It was a considerable distance away, but he needed to get the creature's attention away from its current goal. The shield hit the lizard on the rump. It paused for a moment and looked back. Steve couldn't see its expression, but guessed it was probably irritation. At this distance, the shield couldn't have done much damage.

He wasn't sure where it had come from, but suddenly he saw a gorgeous five-point stag charging at the purple lizard. It reared up slightly just before ramming its antlers into the lizard's side. The lizard screeched and swung around, dislodging the stag's antlers. The stag took off, its movements graceful, but not fast enough to out-run the lizard.

Steve picked his shield out of the air and tried to go faster.

The lizard was at the stag's heels. It opened its jaws and the stag leapt into the air.

And then, between one blink and the next, the stag was gone and a small brown falcon was flying away, higher into the air. The lizard creature stopped in its tracks and watched as the falcon circled over its head. Steve watched in astonishment as it landed on a branch of the same tree Hawkeye was ensconced in.

Steve threw his shield at the lizard. Its temporary prey gone, he didn't want it to suddenly remember the running civilians. At almost the same moment, a repulsor blast hit it on its injured side. The shield hit its shoulder, causing it to stagger as it screamed from the hit at its open wounds.

And then two arrows came at it in rapid succession. Steve blinked, his eyes widening slightly at the blue glow on their tips. The first arrow embedded itself just under under its eye, the second at the base of its skull.

The lizard convulsed once and then collapsed to the ground.

Iron Man landed next to it. He observed it for a few seconds and then turned to the rest of them. The faceplate slid up. “It's dead,” Tony told them.

Steve came to a stop and nodded at him. “Good.” His eyes slid to the broken right gauntlet. There were some tooth-shaped dents in the armour and exposed electrical wires where it looked like it had been partially torn off. “Are you okay?”

Tony made a pained face. “JARVIS administered some mild painkiller already, but apparently I have a broken radius and a partially dislocated elbow. Won't know what the exact damage to the suit is until I can get it to the workshop. Damned lizard managed to disconnect a few wires, so Jay can't run the diagnostics properly.”

Steve winced. “You should head to a hospital to get that looked at as soon as possible.”

“As soon as we're sure there are no more of these things hiding in the lake.”

Steve nodded. He turned back to look for their unexpected helpers. They were gone. He smiled ruefully – they came out of nowhere, so he supposed it made sense they would also disappear into thin air.
Thor watched from the air as the Avengers poked at the purple lizard creatures. In the end, the Hulk had not been needed, but Bruce Banner had joined them in their examination of the corpses. The worry on his fellow Avengers' faces was clear. To think such a strong opponent had been hiding so close to their home, in the middle of a park where hundreds of innocent people walked through daily. It was indeed worrisome. However, figuring out how this had happened was the concern of the scientists. Thor was not needed at the moment.

Turning in mid-air, he flew off towards the power he felt settling in on the other side of the lake, by the small structure he'd been told was called the Ladies' Pavilion.

He'd been surprised by the familiar flash of blue that had enveloped Captain America's shield during the battle. And then again, Hawkeye's arrows. His knowledge of actual magic-craft was limited, it being more his brother's expertise than his, but he knew enough to recognize it when it was used. Even as a stag and a wolf, he knew the two beings who had arrived to help were familiar to him. He wondered if Central Park was their home.

No sooner had he finished the thought, he knew it was wrong. The power he'd momentarily felt from them had been overwhelming. The park would've been saturated with it had they taken it for their home, and it wasn't.

Thor landed just in front of the small, square-shaped pavilion, surprised at the two figures who waited for him. Instead of the wolf or the sparrow, a woman wearing a simple dark green dress, her long wavy dark hair spilling over her shoulders, smiled full crimson lips at him. She was beautiful – elegant as any court lady, yet with an untameable wildness in her deep green eyes that seemed to hide the secrets of the universe in their depths. The young dark-haired man beside her looked almost plain in comparison. He was lithe in figure, with large ears and deep blue eyes that sparkled with mirth. Wearing jeans and a deep burgundy button-down shirt, he looked entirely harmless.

Had Thor not witnessed what he had, he might've been fooled.

A clump of bushes to his left rustled slightly and Thor's eyes widened as a giant white tiger slid out of the foliage. It eyed Thor for a moment with speculative eyes before apparently dismissing him and padding over to the two earth spirits. As it moved, Thor could almost see something else moving in its shadow. The tiger was an illusion then. He concentrated on its edges, where reality was most readily discovered.

After a moment, he shook his head. Whatever this was, it wasn't just an illusion. Though the tiger definitely wasn't just a tiger, he could also tell it wasn't just a simple spirit – it felt different to the man and woman. Less human.

The tiger padded up to the man and nudged his hand. The man looked down at it fondly and then crouched down. As he did so, the tiger suddenly shimmered. Thor blinked and in the space of that half-moment, the tiger disappeared, leaving a large white housecat in its place. It meowed up at the man and then purred loudly when he scratched it between the ears before gathering it up in his arms.

“Thor Odinson, well met,” said the woman, her voice deep and smooth as honey with an accent reminiscent of the land of England where he'd met his precious Lady Jane once more.

Thor smiled and bowed slightly in greeting. “Indeed, well met, my Lady,” he said. “And on behalf of myself and my fellow warriors, I thank you for your assistance.”
The man grinned as he stood. “Oh, it was no problem. You could say we were in the neighbourhood. Curious about those boats Stark built, to be honest.”

It was an interesting contrast. Where the woman’s demeanor was polished in the way of a court lady, the man spoke like a peasant. But Thor knew that underestimating either of them would be dangerous.

“Then I must confess to my own curiosity. I felt your power during the battle and know now with even more certainty that you are no mere earth spirits. Who are you?”

The woman's lips curled into an amused smirk. “Our names are unimportant. History barely remembers them with any accuracy anymore anyway.”

The man’s eyes twinkled mischievously. “You know what we are. Who we are is dependent on who you happen to ask. Once upon a time, our names held power and a promise, but those to whom our names meant anything are long dead.”

Thor inclined his head. “I think I understand what you mean,” he said. “I am at once a warrior, a prince, a friend and an Avenger.”

“Yes, exactly,” said the man.

“I am curious of one thing,” Thor said hesitantly. “Though I am most grateful for your assistance, I wonder why you came to our aid now? Surely we have fought harder opponents, longer more difficult battles before. Why did you choose now to lend your support?”

The man and the woman exchanged a look and then the woman stepped forward. “Because those creatures had magic in them,” she said, her eyes only barely betraying any worry she felt.

“They weren’t magical,” the man quickly added. “Or even made of magic, really. But they were covered in it, possibly it was that slime. It’s why your weapons were mostly useless. Only magic can defeat magic.”

Thor nodded. “That explains why Mjolnir inflicted the worst damage before you cast spells on the Captain’s shield and the Eye of Hawk’s arrows.”

“Yes,” said the woman. “It seemed the most expedient way to defeat them.”

Both of them suddenly glanced into the distance before looking back to Thor.

“I’m afraid we must take our leave now,” said the woman.

“But I’m sure we’ll meet again,” said the man with a sincere smile.

Thor laughed. “Of that I have no doubt. Then 'till we meet again.”

A golden light lit up their eyes and Thor's eyes widened in surprise – it was a sign of old magic. A wind suddenly came to life, whipping around the figures with an intense ferocity. When it died down again just as suddenly, all three were gone.

Thor then turned to greet Hawkeye.

“Hey Thor, what are you doing all the way over here?” his fellow Avenger asked. “Did you find something?”

Thor grinned and shook his head. “No, I was merely thanking our unexpected friends.”
“Wait, you mean those transforming animals? They're here?” Hawkeye ran forward, sharp eyes scanning for any evidence of their presence.

Thor laughed. “They were here, but they are gone now.”

“What?! That's so not fair.”

Thor laughed.
Chapter Notes

HAPPY HALLOWEEN!!

First of all, thanks so much for your comments and kudos on the last chapter! I'm glad you all seemed to enjoy that change of pace. :) Secondly, I'd like to apologize in advance if this chapter has more mistakes in it than usual. I'm sort of breaking my own rule here about not editing and posting on the same day I finish writing. But, in an epic case of good timing, the next planned chapter just so happens to take place on Halloween. So, I've been working hard to get this chapter finished and posted tonight (it's still Halloween if I haven't gone to bed yet, right?).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The night was unseasonably warm, though the breeze held the distinct promise of winter nonetheless. City lights reflected off the cloudy sky, and he found himself thinking it didn't use to be this bright. It was a strange thought. He couldn't quite remember ever being in New York City before... and yet he'd found himself headed here before he'd thought of anyplace else.

It almost felt like home. He couldn't quite remember what home was, but he knew there was warmth. And people who didn't hurt him. A place where death didn't haunt his steps. He thought maybe he'd known what that was once.

He'd been wandering the city for days. It might've been longer. Or maybe not. He couldn't remember.

The city was almost familiar. But, mostly, it was alien. Loud, full of bright lights, tall buildings and people. He had noticed the window decorations, the large black and orange signs and grotesque, macabre figures, but he'd dismissed them. It was another layer of strangeness, a harmless one.

But tonight it seemed the city was celebrating. There were people walking around in costume, children running around with small plastic pumpkins, bags, or pillowcases full of candy. Excitement buzzed in the air. 'Happy Halloween', the storefronts all read.

Halloween. He stopped in front of a small bookstore and stared at the word. The window display had a skeleton sitting atop a large, grinning pumpkin and reading a book of ghost stories.

Halloween... The strangeness in the city was somehow explained by this one word. And yet, he didn't know how it was explained. Had he ever celebrated this Halloween? He didn't remember.

In his mind's eye he could almost see himself walking down a road beside a laughing ghost. No, not a ghost. A boy wearing a white bed sheet with two holes cut out for eyes. He couldn't see the boy's face, but the flowing sheet didn't quite manage to disguise how small and skinny he was, how slowly he walked.

He concentrated, trying desperately to catch hold of the image. Was it a memory? But the flash was all he could recall – whatever the rest had been was fuzzy and distant.
Eventually, a witch with a spider dangling from her pointed hat came to the window and scowled at him. He turned away from the shop window and continued wandering on.

The sky grew darker, the breeze colder.

The children were long gone from the streets, the music coming from the various bars and clubs he passed clearly indicating where the celebrations had moved. He passed by half a dozen Captain Americas and Iron Mans and a female Hulk who looked more like a green Amazon than a rage monster. He then leaped onto the top of a dumpster to watch a hoard of dead-eyed, groaning zombies shuffle past him. He observed them curiously, feeling a sense of kinship with the half-dead creatures. Re-animated from death without memories and without a purpose other than wandering aimlessly and occasionally causing destruction.

Except. He'd had a purpose. They'd given him one.

“Till the end of the line.”

The words echoed in his head. They meant something. He didn't know what. And the man who'd said them... He also meant something. To him. Not as a solider, or as an asset to be used, but as something else. Was this why he was in New York? When he thought of the man, he thought of New York City. Captain America. That was the man's name. But it also wasn't.

Suddenly, he found himself at a place where the tall buildings stopped, replaced by grass and trees. Everything looked dark gray, except for the spots where streetlights directly illuminated circles of green. Central Park. He didn't know how he knew its name, but he did. Perhaps it was part of his mission. He always knew everything he needed to know for his missions.

Who had given him this mission? What was the mission? He had known once, he thought.

He wandered through the park. There were people wearing costumes here as well, but the park was large and he could stay far away from them. For the first time in days, he felt like he could breathe. But he didn't relax. He couldn't relax. He was still on a mission.

He had to have a mission. Otherwise, they would've come for him already. Wouldn't they?

He remembered explosions and fighting the enemy, his target. Captain America. Except... was he really the enemy?

“Till the end of the line.”

Captain America had spoken those words, the words that had shattered the netting keeping his mind blank. He had saved him, saved the man. It had made sense then, he thought. Now he wasn't sure. Maybe tomorrow it would make sense again.

Just ahead he noticed a group of trees shrouded in darkness that was even less inviting than the rest of the park. He paused and stared towards the trees. Darkness didn't scare him. There were far more terrifying things than an absence of light. Except... this darkness seemed to almost absorb the light around it, as though trying to become a black hole. This, he knew, wasn't normal.

He walked towards the darkness.

With each step, the darkness became heavier, so heavy it seemed to further muffle his footfalls. He tensed further, but didn't reach for his various weapons, content in feeling their weight about his body. As he got closer, he could see things hanging from the trees, thin and light-coloured. They didn't look like metal.
And then, as though he'd stepped through a curtain, the darkness was gone. The space he found himself in was bright, full of light from a healthy fire burning in the centre of the clearing. In its light he could clearly see the white ribbons tied to tree branches, their long ends dangling down. He took a deep breath. The air felt clear, cleaner than anything he'd breathed in the city.

His mind supplied him with an image of a barren snowy wasteland, the air so cold it burned his nose and froze his lungs. But it had still smelt clean, fresh, even if he didn't remember what he was comparing it to.

The air in this clearing smelt even cleaner.

“Good evening, young man.”

His eyes snapped to the fire, muscles that had relaxed the moment he'd stepped into the clearing, tensing once more. There was an old man sitting beside the fire, long white hair spilling down his back and a long white beard trailing down his front. He was stooped over just a little and there was a long, sturdy walking stick leaning against the tree behind him, though the man himself didn't look particularly frail, just old.

“Who are you?” he asked the old man, his voice hoarse from lack of use. When was the last time he'd spoken to anyone?

“I'm Merlin,” the old man replied easily as he picked up the stick laying beside him and poked at the fire. He seemed entirely unconcerned with his intrusion. Perhaps the old man didn't realize how much danger he was in. If so, then the old man was a fool.

Or not nearly as harmless as he looked.

“What's your name, young man?” the old man asked him as he reached into a small leather bag he had sitting beside him and took out a handful of dried herbs. He threw them onto the fire, where they caught fire and burned quickly. The clearing momentarily filled with their scent.

He watched them burn in the fire. He'd made a lot of fires while chasing marks and staying hidden on his way to and from base. However, those weren't the fires he thought of. Those fires had been lonely, necessary for warmth and for survival. When he looked at this fire, he thought he heard laughter. This fire should have had laughter around it, and the smell of cheap alcohol and cigarettes. Why? He couldn't remember ever sharing a fire with others.

“Well?”

He looked to the old man. When had he looked away?

The old man looked back at him patiently. “What should I call you?” he asked again. His eyes were kind.

A name? He was the Asset, sometimes he'd heard the Hydra soldiers call him the Winter Soldier. Sometimes, they hadn't been Hydra and they'd worn the same red star as was painted on his arm.

He remembered going to a museum. It had seemed important to him at the time to go. Research on his mark perhaps? He'd read every single word in the Captain America exhibit. He could barely remember what he'd read. Some of it had felt familiar, some of it completely foreign, wrong. He remembered walking into the washroom and staring at his face in the mirror. There had been a large display of Captain America's childhood friend.

Was that who he was? He blinked and found the old man still looking at him patiently. “James...” he
began and then paused. No, he thought, that was wrong. It felt wrong. What had he called him? “Bucky. Call me Bucky.”

The old man – no, Merlin, he said he was Merlin – smiled at him. “Bucky then,” he said and then gestured to the space in front of the fire. “Well then have a seat, Bucky.”

He hesitated. But Merlin didn't look like he meant to hurt him. He came closer to the fire, sitting directly opposite to the old man. Merlin nodded and then threw another handful of herbs into the fire. The smell was pleasant, but it didn't explain what he was doing. Or why.

Merlin glanced at him across the fire, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

“So, tell me, Bucky, what brings you to my fire this evening?”

He blinked. The old man had told him to sit down, so he was sitting. Or maybe he meant how had he found the fire? “It was darker here than anywhere else,” he said eventually. He thought about it and couldn't really explain. “I wasn't afraid. I... wanted to know why.”

“Aaah, curiosity.”

He stared at the old man, stunned by the way the old man had explained his complicated, confusing feelings with one word. Curiosity. The desire to know things. Yes, that made sense. But... wasn't curiosity bad? He wasn't sure. He thought someone had once told him that. His body seemed to ache with the memory. Curiosity was punished, he was sure of it.

But the old man didn't seem angry. He seemed content. The kindness in his eyes hadn't vanished. There was a long moment of silence, the only sound the in small clearing the crackling of the fire. Not even the slight breeze he'd felt earlier penetrated past the darkness around them. It was as though they'd been cut off from the rest of the world, the only two living creatures in existence.

“As you may or may not know, tonight is a rather important night,” the old man – Merlin – began to speak. He spoke softly, just loud enough for his words to be heard.

He remembered the signs on the shops. “Halloween,” Bucky said.

Merlin snorted. “A pale shadow of the original celebration it's based on.” He met Bucky's eyes. “I mean Samhain, one of the four great feast days of the Old Religion. So much of the Old Ways has been forgotten, but a few key elements were translated into the New Religion when it came to the British Isles. Oh, the Christians certainly knew what they were doing when they crept onto the land like a cancerous growth.”

The old man sounded bitter, disgusted.

He remembered churches. There had to have been more than one. He could remember the feel of the hard wooden bench as he knelt on it to pray, surrounded by the smell of incense, wood polish, and a feminine perfume his heart ached to remember. But he also remembered looking up and watching as heavy rain fell through a hole in the roof, drowning the front pews and the masonry that covered the destroyed altar. It had been cold inside, desolate. He also remembered the warmth and the lovingly carved statue of the Virgin Mary who benevolently looked over the congregation.

And then there was a gorgeous church, overwhelming and awe-inspiring with its tall ceilings and beautiful stained glass windows, and brilliant golden altar. The sound of blood dripping onto the plush carpet from one of the back pews. A gun in his hand.

He dismissed the flashes of memories, unsure which he could trust or what they meant. Or what to
do with them. Memories weren't something to dwell on. They would change, he knew this. He didn't
know how he knew, but he knew they did. The mission was more important anyway.

What was his mission?

He didn't know, so he listened to the old man talk.

“No, young man, Samhain is more than just an excuse to dress up in costume, though the costumes
are significant as well. They were used to scare away malevolent spirits that would cause bad will
during the harsh winter months.” Merlin winked at him, amused. “They did nothing of the sort, of
course, but it made people feel like they were accomplishing something by acting silly, so it was
certainly never discouraged.”

He felt the corners of his lips twitching, like they wanted to stretch to the sides.

“Samhain does not end at the stroke of midnight, and that is the most important distinction,” the old
man continued to explain. “That is when it begins. With what is known as the Witching Hour. The
moment at which the walls between our world and the next are at their thinnest. Anyone sensitive to
the other world can feel it more keenly as the clock approaches midnight and spirits not at rest can be
seen most clearly.”

The old man's eyes turned mischievous. “And, to those who know what they're doing, it is the
moment when communication with the other world is possible.”

Bucky blinked at the old man. “And you know what you're doing?”

Merlin grinned. “Oh, but of course, young man.”

He reached behind him and pulled out two white cylindrical objects – candles. He tossed one over
the fire. Bucky caught it and held it carefully away from his body as he examined it. It looked like an
ordinary candle.

“There are many different ways of achieving the same results, but candles are the most
straightforward. Complicated isn't always better, after all. You see, after the ridiculous parading
around in costumes was over and the evil spirits were supposedly banished, everyone would then
return home and, after the stroke of midnight, light candles in their windows. To guide their loved
one's spirits home, to make sure they didn't get lost on their way.”

Bucky nodded. He looked down at the candle in his hand. Did he had any loved ones? Would they
still find their way even if he didn't remember them?

“It's coming on midnight,” Merlin warned him, holding his candle out to the fire.

Bucky followed suit, holding the wick close to the flames, but not close enough to catch fire just yet.
Out of the corner of his eye he saw Merlin reach into his leather bag and then throw another handful
of the dried herbs into the flames. The flames flared up just a little higher. He jumped when one
licked at his candle. The wick caught instantly.

He stared at it in dismay. Merlin hadn't told him to light it yet. He peeked over to the old man and
relaxed. His candle was also lit and he was calmly setting it on the ground in front of him, packing
some extra earth around it to hold it steady. Bucky did the same, adding a few small rocks for good
measure.

He wanted to ask what was going on, what would happen next. But it wasn't his place to ask
questions, unless they were pertinent to the completion of the mission. Except... he didn't know what
his mission was. The old man had gone silent, and so he, too, remained silent.

He watched the fire. It was soothing. Warm.

Across the fire, Merlin was also watching the flames, but he didn't look like he was brooding. He looked like he was waiting. Was he expecting something to happen? Bucky's eyes widened as the years suddenly melted away from the old man. His long white beard darkened and then shrunk until it disappeared, the same as his long snow-white hair. And the wrinkles around his face smoothed out, his posture straightened.

The now-young man met Bucky's eyes from across the fire and nodded, his deep blue eyes sparkling with mirth.

There was movement out of the corner of his eyes. He looked to it but froze as he noticed how their small clearing had changed. There were more trees now, taller, older trees – wilder. And their little camp fire was surrounded by logs, tree stumps and large rocks, the perfect seating arrangement for a sizable gathering of people.

A man stepped out of the woods and into the light cast by the fire. Bucky tensed, his right hand automatically reaching for his knife. The man was of average height with short dark hair, dark skin and a smooth face. His face looked open and friendly, but not trusting. He wore a white, collarless cloth shirt that tied at the neck and a dark leather jacket with buttons that looked like they were made of polished wood. He glanced in Bucky's direction briefly before turning to Merlin.

“Hello, Merlin,” he said with a smile.

Merlin grinned back, his whole face glowing with delight. “Elyan!” he exclaimed. “It's good to see you again.”

“Yes, it's been a while. The others are no doubt on their way.”

No sooner had he spoken the words, Bucky heard rustling from the other side of the clearing.

“Of course the others are on their way!” a voice called out from the trees.

Two men stepped into the clearing carrying wooden barrels. The first one had a mane of wild dark hair, a short beard and a wide grin on his face. The second man was considerably larger, but proportionately so. He was tall and muscular and just as obviously a trained fighter as the other two, not someone who relied purely on his size to win a fight.

“Didn't think Gwaine would miss out on a party, did you?” asked the large man.

“Course not,” said Elyan with a grin as he sat down on a tree stump. “That would be a sure sign of the world ending.”

“Who else would make sure there was plenty of mead?” the dark-haired man – Bucky assumed this was Gwaine – said, still grinning madly. “Without me you'd no doubt run dry within the first hour!”

“A tragedy, for sure,” said Elyan dryly.

Gwaine placed his barrel down and straightened. “That it would be, my friend.”

Then he walked over to Merlin in three long strides. Merlin stood to greet him, his grin echoing Gwaine’s. He held his hand out and then laughed as Gwaine completely ignored his outstretched hand in favour of throwing his arms around him in a hug. Merlin didn't even hesitate in returning the
Something twisted inside Bucky. He felt... a longing. This closeness, he'd seen it from afar many times but never experienced. And yet. It felt familiar, like how he could sometimes feel his arm ache even though he knew the metal didn't feel anything.

The two men pulled away, Merlin's eyes shining slightly. Gwaine's hand remained on Merlin's shoulder, clasping it gently. “Merlin, my friend, it's been far too long,” he said.

“Longer for me than you, I imagine,” said Merlin softly. “It's good to see you again, Gwaine.”

“And you.” Gwaine's grin widened. “Such a long-awaited reunion most definitely requires a toast! To good friends and fond memories! Percival, help me crack open that first barrel, so that we may commence with our celebrating!”

The men standing around the fire laughed. As Gwaine turned from Merlin to prepare the barrels, he paused, finally noticing Bucky sitting on the opposite side of the fire. Bucky tensed. Merlin had welcomed him, but the others hadn't know he'd be here.

“Oh, hello there,” Gwaine greeted jovially once he'd recovered from his surprise. “Merlin, who's this?”

Merlin looked to Bucky and smiled warmly. “This is Bucky,” he said. Then he pointed to each man in turn. “Bucky, this is Gwaine, Percival and Elyan, all good men of noble character, and friends of mine.” He turned to the others again. “Bucky has been through some hardships of late, and has become lost in both mind and spirit. He found his way to my fire and I could not, in good conscience, turn him away.”

Bucky froze. “You know who I am?” he demanded, his voice low.

The other three tensed at his tone, but Merlin's eyes merely turned sympathetic and his smile dimmed with a shade of sadness. “Let's just say we have a mutual friend, and it's from him I heard your story. Although, at the moment, I suspect that no one can say they know who you are, not even you. My hope is that perhaps a night among friends will become a first step for you to discover the answer.”

Bucky stared at the man. Despite everything he'd seen happen, despite knowing the man was aware of who he was, he still didn't feel any sort of threat from him. The others were watching him warily, waiting to see how he would react. But they weren't afraid of him. That, of all things, made him nod and relax.

“To be lost in mind and spirit is a truly terrible fate,” said a new voice to his left.

Bucky tensed again, his body twisting to the side to face the potential threat – ready to leap into action should he need to. The man who'd entered the clearing was tall, but not heavily-built, with a curly mop of reddish-brown hair on his head. He was wearing similarly-cut cloth and leather clothing as the others, though the jacket was decorated with leaves embroidered with golden thread. There was a broadsword at his hip.

The man held his hands out, palms up. “Peace, friend, I did not mean to startle you,” he said, his voice calm and polite. Then he walked closer to Bucky, carefully broadcasting every one of his movements. When he was standing next to him, he slowly lowered one of his hands, holding it out to Bucky. “I'm Leon.”

Bucky blinked at him for a long moment. Then, feeling as though he was re-learning how to use his arm all over again – except he didn't really remember learning to use it, only this sense of knowing
he hadn't always had an arm made of metal – he gently clasped Leon's hand in his.

“Bucky,” he said gruffly, when an unknown voice from the back of some long-forgotten part of his mind prompted him not to be rude.

Leon smiled warmly. “Then well met, Bucky. I hope we may help you in your path to finding that which was once lost.”

Again, that unknown voice, but intimately, achingly familiar voice prompted him. “Th-thank you,” he said haltingly. The words felt right, but strangely so. He didn't think he'd used them in a very long time.

He let Leon's hand go and the other man stepped away. Bucky felt himself relax almost immediately. He watched as Leon joined the others, all of whom were obviously happy to see him. And then Gwaine was coming towards him.

“Well, if anyone needs a drink, I'd wager it would be you, my friend,” he said with that wide, mischievous grin of his.

“Gwaine, you do know that mead isn't the cure for everything!” Elyan called out to him.

“Nonsense,” Gwaine called back, winking at Bucky as he handed him a full tankard. “Mead and ale both are known cures for all of life's ills.”

“Except stupidity,” said Leon with a soft, amused snort.

Bucky felt the corners of his lips twitch again. He took the tankard, blinking in surprise when he realized it was made of wood. A quick inspection told him it was probably hand-carved too.

“And alcoholism,” Merlin added with a grin. “And any number of diseases.”

Gwaine threw up his hands in exaggerated exasperation. “You're all hopeless!”

“That's most likely a good thing, Sir Gwaine,” a soft voice spoke from directly behind Merlin. “I don't believe Albion capable of surviving more than one of you.”

A man walked out of the forest, curly dark hair and tanned skin, his posture straight, though his smile was soft, his eyes kind. He wore a brown leather jacket and, like Leon, had a broadsword hanging at his hip.

“Too true, Sir Lancelot. The gods help us should there ever be more than one of Gwaine.”

The female voice startled Bucky and he turned to where a dark-skinned woman had suddenly appeared behind Gwaine and Percival. Both men whirled around.

“My Lady!” Gwaine exclaimed, before jumping to his feet and executing a rather elaborate bow. “What an honour to have your beauty grace our presence. Truly, you shine like the brightest star in the sky next to these ugly trolls.”

The woman laughed. “Why thank you, Sir Gwaine,” she said as she walked past him, deftly side-stepping the blatant attempt at flirtation.

Bucky watched her walk around the fire. The light blue dress she wore seemed entirely out of place in the middle of the woods. It looked like a ballgown, with long sleeves that widened at the cuff and pearls stitched into the bodice with gold thread. Her long dark curly hair was held up with a silver
comb decorated with pearls and dark blue jewels.

Merlin had stood as soon as the man had shown up behind him, but now he was facing the woman, a fond smile on his face. He bowed slightly at the waist. “My Lady,” he said solemnly.

“Merlin,” she said, her voice stern with disapproval. She placed her hands on her hips. “I'm fairly certain we've had this conversation before. More than once.”

Merlin straightened with a grin. “Sorry, old habits.”

Her snort was incredibly unladylike. But then her eyes softened. “I thought I meant more to you as a friend.”

Merlin nodded, the grin vanishing from his face. “You were my first friend at the castle. And you'll always be my dearest one. That means more to me than anything that came afterwards, you know that.”

“And yet you let the crown on my head blind you to that.”

Bucky saw Merlin swallow. “I did. And I'm sorry about that.”

Then woman smiled warmly. “I'm sorry too, Merlin. I got too caught up in what I was supposed to be that I lost sight of who I was and who you were.”

Merlin smiled warmly back at her. “Gwen.”

And then she stepped towards Merlin and they pulled each other into a tight embrace. Bucky felt that same aching, empty feeling twist inside him. As he watched, he remembered the feeling of holding a woman in his arms. Had there been a specific woman? He wasn't sure. He remembered the feeling of slender, delicate bodies and the way their curves felt pressed against him. A sense of anticipation. Desire?

Except that the two he was watching didn't embrace as lovers, past or present – the absence of any sort of passion between them was obvious. Suddenly he yearned for someone to touch him. Not for any reason other than to feel another living being, to feel their pulse, their warmth...

That closeness, he wanted that. Had he had that once?

He watched as the woman then greeted the soft-spoken man. There was significantly more passion between them, but their embrace was more brief than hers with Merlin had been, though she did leave this man with a quick peck on the cheek. And then Gwaine finished passing the mead around and they all took their seats, with the soft-spoken Lancelot (the name sounded familiar, but Bucky couldn't remember why) on Merlin's right and Gwen to Merlin's left.

Bucky frowned again. Because Gwen had chosen to sit down on one side of a log that could sit at least two, but on the side farthest from Merlin, leaving space for one other person.

“Well, now that we're mostly all here,” Gwaine announced. “Because we all know how much the Princess loves to make an entrance.” The group chuckled and several eyes glanced towards the empty seat between Merlin and Gwen, confirming Bucky's suspicion. “A toast. To friends, both old and new, and to long awaited meetings.”

Bucky raised his tankard tentatively towards the others, all of whom made sure to include him. He waited until they'd all taken their first drink before he brought his own to his lips. The liquid was unfamiliar, sweeter than he'd expected.
He took a second gulp, feeling the alcohol warm him as it travelled down his throat, and then he settled down to watch the others by the fire, soaking in the easy, comfortable camaraderie. He tried to ignore that tug in his chest, the longing. The image of a blond man flashed before his eyes: his mark, Captain America... No. Steve, Stevie. But it wasn't just him. Bucky stared into his tankard, suddenly desperate to remember those others. The ones he'd known belonged around this fire with him.

Suddenly, he felt a cold wind at his back, just enough to make him shiver. And then he was surrounded by the smell of wet leaves and dirt mixed with gunpowder, car oil and sweat. It wasn't a particularly pleasant smell, but it was familiar. Heart-wrenchingly familiar.

He heard bootfalls approach him from behind, several pairs of rubber soles squelching in mud he knew hadn't been there just moments ago. And whispered voices whose words he couldn't understand over the static buzzing in his ears, but recognized nonetheless.

A hand grasped his right shoulder, but instead of tensing, of attacking the unknown person, Bucky simply looked up. A familiar pair of eyes widened and then lips partially obscured by a large reddish moustache broke into a wide grin. “That you, Sarge?

Bucky blinked up at the man, looked at his familiar face. He could feel his name on the tip of his tongue. There were others crowded in behind him, all equally familiar. He knew them like he knew New York City and the smell of gunpowder and machine oil.


The man beside him nodded, looking just as worried. “Indeed, you look quite horrible,” he said and Bucky found he wasn't at all surprised by the upper class English accent with which he spoke. “Are you alright?”

Bucky blinked again and when he opened his eyes, it was as though a cavern of light had opened within his mind. Suddenly, instead of knowing he knew the men in front of him, he knew them.

He thought about the question he'd been asked. Was he alright? He shook his head. He was far from alright, and for the first time he truly understood that. He looked to his men. “I will be,” he rasped. He looked back to the first man who'd spoken and this time he let his lips spread into a small smile. “Dum Dum Dugan, it's good to see all you miscreants again. Can't believe anyone ever managed to make me forget you.”

Dum Dum, whose smile had waned with worry, threw his head back and laughed with delight. As though taking that as their cue, the others crowded in to greet him themselves, slapping him on the back, clasping his shoulders and even mussing his hair. Bucky shied away instinctively from the contact even as he relished in it.

Eventually someone cleared their throat.

They froze and Bucky noticed their surprise, as though his fellow soldiers had only just noticed the fire and its other occupants.

“A joyous reunion such as this surely deserves a round of drinks,” Gwaine announced loudly. “But I, for one, would love to know who we seem to have the pleasure of sharing our fire with this evening. Merlin?”

Merlin shrugged. “Ah, well, I don't really know them personally,” he said. Then he looked over and smirked. “But, if I'm not mistaken, I do believe these are the Howling Commandos. A group of
soldiers whose job was to infiltrate behind enemy lines and take out their strongholds and weapon's factories. Among other things. They became quite famous during the Second World War and not just because of their leader."

“Their leader?” Leon asked.

Merlin nodded. “Captain America. A frail sickly young man with a bad heart and bad lungs whose desire to serve his country and protect the innocent drove him to agree to participate in a dangerous scientific experiment. Luckily for him, it was a success and not only cured all his ills, but enhanced his body to the utmost peak of human efficiency.”

Beside him, Bucky saw Dum Dum nod. “Cap was the best of us,” he said sadly. “Honest, noble and brave. The day he went down was truly a tragedy.”

Bucky frowned. “But, he's not dead.”

The Howling Commandos all looked to him, their eyes all caught between shock, hope and pity.

“No, he's not,” Merlin agreed cheerfully and the pity and lingering sadness disappeared from their eyes. “The serum he'd been enhanced with allowed him to survive being frozen in ice for over fifty years.”

The stunned silence that followed was broken by the sound of sizzling and the crackling of the fire. Bucky suddenly realized there was a fairly large pig on a spit above the fire, looking very close to being done. His mouth watered at the smell that was wafting through the clearing. He immediately decided not to question its sudden appearance.

“Well that certainly sounds like a tale worthy of being told at my fire.”

A man stepped out of the shadows of the treeline. The firelight bathed his form, making the pommel of his sword, the thick chain around his neck and the resplendent crown on his blond head gleam gold. A thick, dark bright red cloak spilled over his shoulders while the air around him seemed to shimmer, as though the night itself was worshipping him.

Bucky blinked and the man took a second step forward... and the crown, the golden chain and the long red cloak were gone. Instead he was wearing a short red jacket, a pair of soft brown pants that tied at the front and a sword at his hip that looked practical rather than decorative. However, he held himself just as tall, his steps filled with the confidence.

“Arthur!” Gwen cried, hiking her skirts up as she ran to him.

The man grinned and picked her up by the waist when she flung herself at him, twirling her around once before setting her back on the ground.

“Guinevere,” he said, his voice sounding choked with emotion. He let go of her with one hand in order to caress her face, seemingly unable to look away from her.

Gwen brought up a hand to trace his face, tears shining in her eyes. For a moment, the world seemed to stall. And then they both moved and their lips met.

Bucky's mouth went dry as he watched the pair get lost in each other's presence, in each other's lips. Somewhere behind him, someone whispered: “Did she say 'Arthur'?”

“Yeah, and he said 'Guinevere',” someone else whispered back. Jones, his mind supplied, Gabe
A memory flashed before his eyes, of running through back alleys, towels wrapped around their necks as cloaks and sticks in their hands as swords. A scrawny boy draped in a sheet with a paper cone on his head covered with hand-drawn stars waving his arms and chanting loudly – because he didn't need to run around if he was a wizard.

He tore his eyes away from the couple and back to the others by the fire. They were all staring at the couple fondly. All except for Merlin, who was glaring and Gwaine, and Gwaine who was trying to look duly chastised. Merlin, Gwaine, Lancelot, Percival. Of course.

“You're the Knights of the Round Table,” he said.

They looked at him. “Of course we are,” said Gwaine. “Who else would we be?”

“You mean they still tell stories about us?” Leon asked, sounding surprised.

“But of course!” the Howling Commando with the English accent said. “When I was just a lad, I used to spend one month of every summer at my grandfather's estate. In the evenings we would sit in front of the fireplace in the library and he would tell me the stories of King Arthur and Knights of the Round Table. I read out a passage from the Mort d'Arthur at his funeral.”

He took a seat beside Percival, not even bothering to conceal his excitement. Montgomery, Bucky suddenly remembered. His name was James Montgomery Falsworth – they called him Monty.

“Yes, well, the legends have gotten a bit muddied over the centuries,” said Merlin. “A lot of people have embellished things and added stories that never happened. Like ‘Gwaine and the Green Knight’. Such a famous story, no idea where it came from. Gwaine fought a lot of men, but I can't remember a Green Knight in there anywhere.”

“Green, as in green-armoured or green-around-the-gills?” Percival asked.

The knights laughed.

Gwaine shrugged. “Don't remember any knights with green armour. Must've been drunk when it happened.”

“He was probably a jealous husband and not a knight at all,” Elyan added dryly.

The knights laughed again, while Gwaine looked thoughtful for a moment. “You know, Lady Southam's husband preferred to wear various shades of green.”

Leon snorted. “Lord Southam was twenty-five years older than his wife, short and balding, hardly a proper antagonist for a tale of knightly valour.”

“That's probably where the embellishments come in,” Percival added.

“Ah, I see,” said Leon with an overly thoughtful expression. “Yes, I imagine it would be.”

“While I'm certain there have been more than few embellishments added to whatever tales have been spread around, the least you could all do is actually behave as though you were legendary knights instead of a bunch of drunken idiots,” said Arthur as he led Guinevere to retake her previous seat on the log. He gave his knights a pointed look. “You're disappointing everyone who's looked up to you for all these years.”
“With all due respect, sire,” said Lancelot quietly. “We are all but men who set out to become knights of Camelot, not legends. What storytellers have made of us is not of our doing.”

Beside him, Elyan nodded.

“Speak for yourself,” Gwaine called out. “I set out to drink my way through the pubs of the Five Kingdoms. I became a knight completely against my will!”

Merlin rolled his eyes. “You know, I don't seem to remember forcing you to attend the knighting ceremony.”

“I also distinctly remember catching you in one of the hallways practising how to swish your cloak in the most dashing manner to attract the ladies,” Elyan added.

Gwaine grinned devilishly. “And it was well worth the effort.”

The knights laughed again.

Arthur looked up, as though asking the heavens for guidance – or possibly patience – and then sat down next to Guinevere. He gestured to the commandos. “Have a seat, my friends and join us for our Samhain feast. It might be simple fair, but good company will surely make up for that. Perhaps Merlin will even explain to us why he's decided to host his king in the middle of a forest instead of a more appropriate venue.”

He looked to Merlin pointedly. Merlin rolled his eyes. “You say that, sire, as though you weren't surrounded by people who all know full well that you prefer a spit roast in the middle of the woods with your men to all the fanciest feasts the castle can provide.”

The corners of Arthur's mouth twitched. “I suppose that's not entirely inaccurate.”

“Of course it's not.” Merlin looked at him slyly out of the corner of his eyes. “Prat.”

Arthur's eyes narrowed. “Tell me, Merlin, just how many of these so-called embellishments are you responsible for?”

Merlin blinked. “Not all that many, actually.” He shook his head. “I mean, I tried to keep the stories accurate, to make sure everyone knew what a great prat you actually were, but for some reason they didn't believe me. They all wanted to think of you as a great and noble king.”

Arthur sniffed. “Well, of course they did. Obviously they recognized you for the clumsy idiot you are and decided to ignore everything you said.”

“Well not everything. I did tell a lot of stories when I was, uh, younger.”

Arthur's eyes narrowed again. “What sorts of stories exactly?” he asked carefully, the threat audible in his voice.

Merlin cheerfully ignored the threat. “Oh, all sorts, about you, about the knights, your adventures. And, of course, about the powerful sorcerer you had by your side...”

Arthur snorted. “So you lied then.”

“Well, technically you did have a sorcerer standing by your side. You just didn't know it. If you think about it, my version actually sounds much more impressive, so you really should be thanking me for tweaking the story.”
Arthur glared at Merlin. Merlin grinned back. Guinevere rolled her eyes at both of them.

“As wonderful as it is to see the two of you back to your usual selves, I think there was a story you were interested in hearing?” she said pointedly.

Arthur turned away from Merlin, his eyes softening when he looked to his wife. “Quite right, my love.” He looked away from her. “Gwaine, how is it that both mine and our guests’ hands are empty?”

“Sorry, Princess, I'll get right on that!”

Arthur glared at Gwaine, but said nothing about the nickname. In short order, Gwaine – with Percival's help – had made sure the entire group had full tankards of mead in hand, Leon, meanwhile, took it upon himself to cut into the mouthwatering roast. Merlin helped pass out generous portions to everyone and Elyan pulled out a basket of freshly-baked rolls from somewhere.

“Well, now that we've both drink and food in hand then please, my friends, regale us with your tales of adventure,” Arthur announced once they were all settled.

Bucky turned to Dum Dum, who blinked at him and cleared his throat before taking another swig of his mead.

“Alright then, the name's Dum Dum Dugan,” he began. “It was October, 1943 when my unit took heavy fire from the Krauts...”

Once he began, the story flowed from him, and from the other Howling Commandos as they added their own experiences, and occasionally squabbled over what had happened in which order. Bucky listened carefully. Parts of their story felt like he was hearing for the first time, whereas other parts felt intimately familiar.

They talked, they laughed, they took turns telling stories, Gwaine turning out to be every bit the animated storyteller he felt like he’d be – even if someone had to get him back on track every so often. Leon, too, it turned out had a talent for captivating an audience with his words.

Arthur forbade Merlin from telling any stories.

“What?” Merlin had exclaimed in mock outrage at the proclamation. “Why? I've gotten very good at it over the years.”

“Because I don't trust the stories you'd choose to tell,” said Arthur.

“I don't know what you're talking about,” Merlin huffed. “I've never told anyone about the time you were enchanted to fall in love with Vivienne and then pranced around the castle spouting love poems about destiny and chicken. Or about the time that goblin charmed donkey ears onto your head and–”

“–Merlin!”

“What?” Merlin blinked up at him, the picture of innocence.

“Absolutely no storytelling from you,” Arthur growled.


Bucky wondered if he could ask Merlin later about the donkey ears.

Somewhere, in the middle of the merriment, mellowed by mead, hearty food and good company,
Bucky found himself relaxing. He himself didn't realize when it became easy for his lips to form smiles. Perhaps it was the dreamy, unreal quality of the Samhain feast, the knowledge that he was sharing the warmth of the fire with people who were no longer of the mortal world. Perhaps the dried herbs the old man had thrown into the fire had had magical properties.

Or, possibly, the Winter Soldier had finally reached the end of his endurance, the constant confusion, tension and lack of proper food or sleep becoming too much of a burden.

Bucky fell asleep.

He opened his eyes to a cloudy morning, the air smelling crisp and electrified, as though a violent storm had passed by during the night. He heard birds chirping away in the trees and a dog barking somewhere in the distance. There was a chill in the air, a sting of winter. But he didn't feel cold.

Blinking himself awake, he sat up in alarm to scan his surroundings and identify any threats. He shivered as a cold breeze blew across his back. Confused, he looked down to where a thick wool blanket pooled around his waist. It explained how he hadn't been cold. He reached down with his flesh hand and felt its texture, amazed by the softness. Where had he gotten it from?

He looked to the area in front of him, a memory nudging insistently at the back of his mind.

In front of him, he saw the remains of a campfire. He frowned, remembering an old man who threw herbs onto a fire. He also remembered laughter and being surrounded by people. And a roast pig? A candle, he remembered lighting a candle.

He scanned the ground directly before him and, sure enough, he found the candle. Though all that was left of it was a small mound of white wax. Beside it he saw a cloth-wrapped bundle with a note sitting on top. Carefully, he reached for the bundle and unfolded the cloth. Inside he found a large bun, a very generous chunk of roasted pig, some cheese and two apples.

He picked up the note and read the unfamiliar handwriting:

*Bucky,*

*Good luck with your search. I sincerely hope you find what you need. If Steven should happen to ask, I shall simply advise him to be patient. That you will come to him when you are ready.*

*Your friend, Merlin*

The corners of his lips twitched, wanting to stretch to the side. After a pause, Bucky let them.

Chapter End Notes

As you've all probably figured out by now, *this* is the main reason as to why this story can't be CA: CW compatible. I mean, the other reasons I've already given you guys are also valid, but... well, this is the main one.
Geez, I can't believe it's been a month since the last update. Ugh. So, so sorry about that. It took me a while to figure out just what to write for this chapter - funnily enough I know exactly what the next two chapters will be, but it just felt like there needed to be something else first. And the last couple of weeks have been stressful in a way that wasn't particularly conducive to writing... Anyway, I'll try to be much quicker with the next update.

Before we move on to the chapter, I'd just like to say: you guys are all awesome! Thank you so much for the comments and kudos.

...And that's all I've got. Enjoy the chapter!

The wind howled as heavy rain beat against the shop's windows. It was barely two in the afternoon and yet dark enough outside to be closer to midnight. There hadn't been any thunder or lightning yet, but Nimueh could feel a steadily growing hum in her bones and knew it wasn't far off.

The unexpectedly fierce autumn storm had succeeded in chasing most people indoors and away from nature's homage to the visiting Thunder God. The shop hadn't seen a soul since just before noon. And so she and Merlin both looked up in surprise when the shop door suddenly swung open to admit a waterlogged woman wearing a long wool coat and holding a newspaper over her head in a vain attempt to protect her long red hair.

"Pepper!" Merlin exclaimed as he threw his polishing cloth over the brass headboard he'd been polishing and hurried over to her. "My dear, whatever madness made you decide to brave that storm out there! Here, let me take your coat and hang it somewhere to dry."

"Thank you, Merlin," said Pepper with a polite smile. Nimueh noticed her hands shaking as she fumbled with the buttons. "I really didn't realize it was quite this bad when I headed out. I just... I just needed to leave. Canceled my afternoon appointments and..." She froze, her eyes widening. "Oh God, I forgot to tell Happy I was leaving. I left without him. He's going to be frantic when he realizes I'm gone."

"Now, now, with how hard you work, surely he's not going to begrudge you some time to yourself," Merlin soothed her worries as he took her coat.

"That's not the point."

Nimueh set her tools down next to the cash register and went to join them. "You can always call him later, Pepper," she pointed out. "For now, know that you're perfectly safe here."

Pepper met her eyes gratefully. "Thank you, Nimueh," she said, her smile was much more genuine this time, but with a delicate, brittle edge. She paused to brush the wet hair plastered to her forehead out of her eyes and then bent over to pick a small green gift bag off the ground. The bag itself was beaded with drops of water, but the yellow tissue paper peeking out looked surprisingly dry.
She handed the bag to Nimueh. “Here, this is for you and Merlin. It's a sort of belated 'thank you' for all your help with the gala decorations. We actually ended up auctioning off a lot of them and, between that and the car, it was our most successful gala ever. I'm just sorry it's taken me so long to come back and see you.”

“Pepper, it is never too late to say 'thank you’,” Nimueh assured her with a smile. “Besides, you paid for the merchandise, it was yours to do as you pleased with it. You hardly owe us any thanks for that.”

Pepper scoffed. “Oh, I know I paid you for it, but while I might not know a lot about cars, Tony does. That car alone had been worth more than what I paid you for everything.”

“Was it? Hm, I must not have been paying attention.” Pepper gave her a look, but Nimueh refused to let anything show on her face. “So, who did the car go to in the end?”

“A twenty-five year old plumber from New Jersey,” Pepper replied after a moment, clearly not fooled by Nimueh’s claim to ignorance but willing to let it go. “The car was for his father. He said he’d bought the raffle ticket on a whim, because his father had always loved old movies and old cars, but could never afford a car like that.”

Pepper's smile widened as she remembered. “Tony and I went to deliver the car in person. You should’ve seen the look on the father's face when we presented the car to him on his son's behalf, Nimueh. That car is definitely going to be cherished.”

Nimueh smiled. “Good.”

“Anyway, I wanted to thank you in some small way and I had some free time while I was in Beijing a few weeks ago, so I asked the guide they'd assigned me if she knew of any good, authentic tea shops. The woman got this secretive look on her face and said that, yes, she did. Then she took me to this lovely little shop overlooking a river. The proprietor helped me choose these for you. I hope you and Merlin enjoy them.”

“Why thank you, my dear, that was very thoughtful of you,” said Merlin as he shuffled up to them carrying a towel. “How is old Yong these days, anyway?”

Nimueh frowned and looked down at the bag in her hands. Sure enough, there was a small golden seal in the right-hand corner of the bag – hand-painted, no doubt, by the river god himself.

“You know the shop?” Pepper asked as she accepted the towel from Merlin.

“Oh yes, it's been there for as long as anyone can remember,” Merlin answered with a grin and an amused twinkle in his eye. “I haven't been to China in years, but Yong is an old friend of mine and his teas were indeed the best I'd ever found in that part of the world.”

Nimueh remembered the quiet old man who was so much more than he seemed at first glance. Though his powers had waned over the years as people turned away from old gods and old beliefs, he was so deeply rooted to the land and the Yongding river that he would survive long after most of the other gods had faded away. More than likely, he would outlive the city itself.

She shook her head as she listened to Merlin and Pepper discussing the tea shop. Merlin had always had a knack for making friends in places he shouldn't actually have been welcomed in at all.

Nimueh waited patiently until Pepper had towel-dried her hair and patted her face and neck dry. Her heavy coat had thankfully kept most of her dry, but the rain had soaked what it could reach. If further proof had been needed, it showed how upset Pepper was when she didn't even notice Merlin's eyes
flash gold and her shoes suddenly become dry. Which was likely a good thing, given that Nimueh hadn't a clue how exactly he'd planned to explain that to her if Pepper had noticed.

She glared at Merlin. Merlin ignored her, instead smiling warmly at Pepper when she handed him back the towel and thanked him. Nimueh rolled her eyes and left them to go make a pot of tea, knowing it would be needed – and not just because of the cold rain.

When she returned with the tea, Merlin had Pepper sitting at the table, but whatever good cheer had sustained her earlier seemed to have evaporated. She seemed calmer than when she'd first arrived, but there was a troubled look in her eyes. Merlin looked up and met Nimueh's eyes. She nodded to him, letting him know she had this.

A small smile flitted across his face and then he stood. “Well, I believe I have some swords to polish, so I'll leave you two ladies to your tea,” he said. He'd made it as far as the cash desk when he paused and turned back to them. “That, incidentally, is not a euphemism for anything.”

Pepper blinked at him and then burst into laughter. “I didn't actually think it was,” she said after a moment. “I've heard all about your awesome room of sharp, pointy objects. Clint was very enthusiastic about it.”

“Oh, good, I'd hate to have such a proper young lady such as yourself get the wrong impression,” said Merlin with a twinkle in his eye and a pleased expression on his face.

Nimueh rolled her eyes at him. “Just get going already, you old coot.”

“In a hurry to get rid of me?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact.”

Merlin harrumphed and then continued on his way. Nimueh poured the tea, having opted for a spiced berry she felt would be appropriately soothing, yet uplifting.

Pepper accepted her cup with an amused smile on her face, her eyes wistful. “I know this isn't really any of my business,” she began hesitantly. “But I can't help being curious. I know you and Merlin aren't actually married, but are you... together?”

Nimueh raised an eyebrow. “You mean, as they say, in the biblical sense?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm...” Nimueh considered the question. It wasn't surprising that someone had finally asked – someone always did eventually. It was how to answer that required thought. “Defining our relationship isn't as simple as you would expect. It's not love, or at the very least not the passionate, all-consuming romantic love poets so enjoy going on about. No, our relationship's beginnings are bathed in too much bitterness and anger for that.”

“You had a rocky start?” Pepper asked, her lips twitching in amusement.

“Yes, quite. He tried to kill me. For years he'd thought he'd succeeded and, had he been older and more experienced, he most likely would have.”

Nimueh took a sip of her tea as she watched Pepper's jaw drop and the amusement vanish from her face.

“He... he tried to kill you?!”
Nimueh placed her teacup down delicately and waved her off. “Well, to be fair, I’d been trying to cause harm to everyone he cared about, so I suppose it was justified.”

Pepper stared at her for a long moment, as though trying to decide whether or not to continue the conversation. “What happened?” she finally asked.

Nimueh sighed. Time and distance dulled things, but the Purge would always be a hot burning ember of pain buried within her memories. “I was young and arrogant, thought I was powerful enough to control the world.” She smiled bitterly. “I was wrong, of course, and the result was a tragedy I should’ve foreseen. Of course I’d known it was possible, but in my youthful arrogance I thought I could twist fate and prevent it from occurring. I lost a friend that day and a powerful man lost his wife. His grief quickly turned to vengeful anger, blaming me and all I stood for for his loss.”

She closed her eyes, momentarily overwhelmed by old pain and helpless, horrified grief. She’d barely had a chance to grieve for Ygraine, when she’d been blind-sighted by the deaths of hundreds of her kin. The land had screamed as it was flooded with the blood of hundreds of sorcerers, the wind filled with screams of pain and rage, and the smell of burning flesh. For several years, the sacred grounds of the Old Religion had been her only source of solace.

“He nearly captured me once, but I managed to get away. In my absence, he turned his anger on anyone he could and all I could do was hide as I healed.” She opened her eyes again and found a small, reassuring smile for Pepper, who looked wide-eyed and horrified. “When I returned for my own vengeance, it was to find that Merlin had been hired by the man and befriended his son. Now there was no love lost between Merlin and the man. In fact Merlin would’ve happily watched him die, I think.”

She paused, thinking back to her first impressions of Merlin.

“No, actually, that's not true. When I first met Merlin, he was a determined but gentle soul, wouldn't have wanted to hurt anyone, not even a man he hated. I was his first blemish, the first time he was confronted with the truth of how far he'd be willing to go to protect those he cared about…”

“It's terrifying.” Pepper whispered, a haunted look in her eyes as she gazed down at her own hands as though they were something alien. “When you think about what you'd do if you had to. Especially when you've already done it.”

Nimueh nodded. Though comparing what Merlin was capable of and whatever Pepper may have done was absurd, the sentiment was the same. Besides, Merlin had done far worse since striking her down with lightning to save Gaius, his mother and Arthur. Though Nimueh never quite understood why the Old Religion had chosen to take Merlin's mother instead of Balinor...

Unless getting rid of her and blemishing Merlin's soul had been the ultimate goal. The Triple Goddess could be cruel and manipulative that way.

“So, how did you get together after all that?” Pepper asked after a long silence had passed.

Nimueh took another long drink of her tea, considering. “When we finally met again, years had passed and all those we had protected and fought over were long dead. Merlin's soul had lost its innocence the next time I saw him, leaving him world-weary and burdened with grief. And enough time had passed that much of my anger had been leeched away. In the end, I suppose we needed each other and the companionship and understanding of another being who'd seen and experienced what we had more than we needed our anger.”

She took another sip of tea. “Understand, Pepper, over the years we've come to know one another as
intimately as any two people can ever hope to, both taking and giving comfort when one of us
needed it. However, though we’ve managed to put our past behind us, Merlin will never be able to
forgive me for my actions against those he loved anymore than I am able to forgive him for
protecting the man who’d once caused me so much pain.”

Nimueh took another drink, closing her eyes briefly as she let the berries remind her of the forest
where she’d picked them. She breathed in the tea’s aroma, letting the faint sting of spice ground her
into the present, so that the past could fall back to where it belonged, taking all her grief and bitter
anger with it.

When she looked up, there were tears in Pepper’s eyes. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I never thought your
story would be such a tragedy.”

“Only part of it,” said Nimueh with a reassuring smile.

Just then the door to the shop burst open and they both jumped at the sudden sound. A man bounced
in, spreading his arms with dramatic flourish. He had two swords crossed over his back and several
handguns and knives tucked into various holsters around his waist, thighs and biceps. He was also
clad head to toe in bright red fabric that was dripping wet.

“Hey everyone!” he exclaimed to seemingly no one in particular. “Bet you never thought you’d see
me again? Much less as a random insert to keep a scene from getting too sappy.”

“He’s in the back!” Nimueh snapped with a glare intent on moving him along. “He's polishing
swords.”

The strange man blinked at her. “Swords? As in plural?” He shook his head. “Wow, that old man
sure gets around. I hope I'm half that agile when I'm his age.”

Nimueh rolled her eyes at him as he bounced on towards the back of the shop with far more
enthusiastic glee than anyone wearing such an assortment of weaponry should’ve been capable of
mustering. A few moments later she heard a familiar hiss.

“Aw, hey kitty, kitty,” she heard him sing-song from somewhere in the back of the storefront.
“You're looking as homicidally adorable as alway–Yeouch!” There was a short pause. “Job offer's
still open, you know! Anytime you're interested, just come find me!”

The squeaky footfalls of waterlogged shoes and creaking of leather became gradually fainter. A very
satisfied-looking Aithusa trotted out from around the corner.

“Who in the world was that?” Pepper asked, looking torn between amusement and worry.

“I believe he calls himself Deadpool,” Nimueh told her. “A stray Merlin dragged in once and is now
fated to never get rid of. He comes by every so often to pester Merlin into sharpening his swords for
him.”

Pepper giggled. “Mutants, the Avengers and whoever the hell that is... you get some of the strangest
people in this shop.”

“My dear, you have no idea.”

A loud meow interrupted them and Pepper looked down to the large white cat looking up at her
expectantly. With a quirk of her lips, Pepper pushed her chair a bit farther away from the table.
Aithusa took that as her invitation, immediately leaping up onto her lap and curling into a ball. When
Pepper began to gently scratch her between the ears, the shop was filled with loud purring.
Nimueh watched in amusement as she finished her tea. Aithusa enjoyed being a cat far more than she would ever admit to anyone. Nimueh didn't quite know how she'd learned it either, except that Merlin had taught her how to transform long before Nimueh had awoken on the Isle of the Blessed. It was quite an unusual trick for a dragon.

She took a deep breath. She'd allowed enough stalling; it was time to get to the heart of the matter. “Now, what really brought you here, Pepper?”

Pepper froze momentarily, but didn't bother denying that something had been bothering her. Nimueh allowed her the time to organize her thoughts. Finally, Pepper took a deep breath and looked up. “It's Tony.”

Nimueh nodded silently. “What happened?”

“It's my mother's birthday this weekend and he was supposed to come with me to visit her,” she began and suddenly, it was as though the floodgates had opened. “I told him over a month ago and he said he'd make sure he was free. He promised to come with me. She's turning 60 and they're throwing a huge party for her. I haven't really had the time to help with much of the organizing, so the least I can do is show up with my boyfriend and now...”

“Now he's not going to be able to go with you after all?” Nimueh prompted gently.

“No, of course not,” said Pepper bitterly. “He left with the rest of the Avengers this morning to go chase down some Hydra cell or something.”

“Ah.”

She let the silence stretch until Pepper continued on her own. “It's not that I don't think it's important. I know Hydra needs to be stopped, but I just wish the Avengers didn't always take precedence over me and the things that are important to me.” She took another breath, and it was more of a sob. “I love him, I really do. Tony is an amazing man, both in what he can do and how he sees the world. But everything that makes him such an amazing person, also makes him incredibly frustrating to deal with.”

Pepper sobbed again. Aithusa's purring became quieter.

“He puts on such an arrogant, confident front, but I saw through that a long time ago. I know he's a lot less confident and more vulnerable than he wants people to know. And his heart's usually in the right place, even when his actions are completely over-the-top and ridiculous. Sometimes he can be such a spoiled child, but then he turns around and is the sweetest, most attentive man you can imagine.”

She paused again and looked down at Aithusa.

“He expects me to leave, I know he does. He expects everyone's going to leave him eventually and I want to prove him wrong. I want nothing more than to prove him wrong...”

“But it's difficult when he seems to callously disregard your wishes and put effort into maintaining your relationship,” Nimueh finished for her. Sadly, no matter what Disney said, this was the tale as old as time.

“Yes.” Another pause. “He's not doing it on purpose. I honestly don't think he knows how to be different. And... I don't really think I want him to change completely. Just maybe put in a little bit more effort into trying.”
Nimueh watched her silently for a moment, considering her next words. “For good or ill, a relationship takes two people for it to work.”

Pepper flinched. “Yes, I know. And I'm not blameless either.” She took a deep breath and, finally, looked back up to meet Nimueh's eyes. Her own eyes were glistening with tears. “The trip to Beijing. I-I didn't have to go. I wasn't even scheduled to go originally. I honestly don't even remember what Tony had done that week to make me so angry at him, but as he'd started planning this overblown weekend holiday, thinking he could make whatever it was up to me with yet another over-the-top gesture. And... I just snapped and told him I couldn't go, because I was going to China. I was being petty, I know. I even knew it then, but once I'd said it, I couldn't take it back. And so I went to China.”

Nimueh sighed. “You love him and you don't want to lose him, but you're worried that your relationship is spiraling to its doom before your eyes.”

“Yes.”

“Well, you don't need me to tell you that you're right and it is spiraling. You know you that already. Is it past the point of fixing? No. So long as you both still love each other, it's not too late. I think you're even intelligent enough to know what you need to do.”

“Talk. We need to sit down and have a serious conversation.”

Nimueh nodded. “True. But even before you do that, I think you need to sit down somewhere you find relaxing and consider things yourself. Because as much as you obvious love and admire Mister Stark, those things you find aggravating aren't simply going to disappear. Now, I've only met him once, however I have heard quite a bit about him, mostly from Steven, and I've gathered that feelings of admiration and irritation in equal measure seem to be common in all his friends.”

Pepper chuckled. “That's about right, yes.”

“Then you need to consider if you can handle it long-term, not just for now. Is everything else you love about the man worth putting up with his more irritating personality traits? He won't always put you first, you know that. Like a surgeon, or a soldier, he'll suddenly get called away with very little notice and, like any scientist and inventor, science and discovery will often be his mistress.”

Nimueh paused for a moment.

“But remember, you won't always be able to put him first either. You are an important woman with quite a bit of power and responsibility. This trip to China might've been one you could've avoided, but I'm sure there've been others you couldn't. Did he fight you about it? Did he try to convince you to stay?”

Pepper shook her head. “No, he was disappointed, but he understood.”

“He already knows he can't be your whole world. That you have other responsibilities that have to come before him.”

Tears sprang to Pepper's eyes. “Oh God,” she sobbed. “I was so horrible to him.”

“Pepper,” Nimueh said sternly. Pepper blinked at her, tears gathering in her eyes. “This is not your fault. Nor is it Tony's. At the moment you are both very busy people. One day, you will both slow down and then, perhaps, you will have more time for each other. But you can neither live for that day anymore than you can hope the other will simply change or be willing give up who they are. You must both be willing to work with the challenges you each face together, or else give up and
step away before you destroy one another.”

Nimueh smiled. “Both of you are wonderful people and you deserve to be happy. Think about it, Pepper, consider what being happy means to you. What do you want from Tony? And then ask him what being happy means to him, what he wants from you. Don't settle, but don't give up before you're sure love isn't enough.”

Pepper was silent for long time, but it was a thoughtful silence. A genuine, hopeful smile began to form on her lips.

“Thank you, Nimueh,” she finally said. “You know, I think I knew all that, but I just...”

“Needed someone to say it out loud for you?” Nimueh finished with a smile.

Pepper's smile widened. “Yes, exactly.” She took a fortifying breath. “I don't want to leave Tony, I don't want to give up on us. That's, ultimately, the truth.”

There was a new air of determination surrounding her as she gently gathered up Aithusa, depositing the cat back down on the chair after standing. Aithusa blinked and raised her head, meowing once in protest of losing her comfortable, warm resting spot.

“Sorry, Aithusa, but I really have to go now,” Pepper told her. She straightened her skirt and smoothed her matching blazer before looking back to Nimueh. “Again, thank you, for the tea as well as the friendly ear. I can definitely understand why Steve comes here so often.”

“Stop by anytime, Pepper.”

“You know, I think I will.”

Nimueh stepped up to the window to watch as one of the most powerful women in New York City dashed across the sidewalk to her car. The rain had let up slightly, but it was still showing no signs of stopping entirely. It was strange, this little community she and Merlin seemed to have inadvertently befriended. A good sort of strange – it reminded her of days long ago, when Albion had been much younger, and those of magical ancestry were freer with their movements.

For the first time in months, she didn't worry whether they were getting too close. She knew they were. But perhaps this time the inevitable tragedy would be worth it.
Annual Traditions

Chapter Notes

Happy Holidays everyone! I had been hoping to have an update for you sooner, but somehow December turned out to be far busier than I'd anticipated it being.

Anyway, thank you as always to everyone who took the time to leave a comment or kudos. Each and every one made me smile.

Now, this next chapter was one I'd wanted to write even before I saw Doctor Strange and was incredibly happy to see that the movie didn't contradict it. Having said that, if you haven't seen the movie yet, then you might want to pause before reading this chapter. It takes place at an unspecified time during the second act of the movie, but for the most part there aren't any spoilers that you wouldn't get from the movie trailers. Except for one thing that ties into one of the major plot points. Now, that specific part is told from Merlin's point of view and he uses his own words to describe it. I don't think it's anything more than a hint to the movie's plot point, but if you'd rather avoid all spoilers then maybe skip this chapter for now. Or else skip the second part of it. Doctor Strange will come back and, until he does, this chapter won't have any major relevance to the story.

The late autumn wind was brisk, the ever-present chill of the mountains a sharp edge that was only growing sharper as the year headed closer to its close. And yet it was strange to watch as the trees around the courtyard died, their leaves withering and falling off without a single colour. Stephan found he missed the colours. It was a strange thing to miss since he didn't remember ever really enjoying them to begin with. He'd never taken the time to.

The chill made his hands ache, a bone-deep pain that couldn't be touched by any conventional painkillers. If he were a quitter, he'd have stayed in bed today where he could keep his hands warm. Of course, if he were a quitter, he wouldn't be in Kamar-Taj to begin with.

And so he was up and out in the courtyard as usual, his thick coat only barely enough to keep the cold away – though he suspected magic was being used to keep it quite a few degrees warmer than nature herself dictated. The border of snow that decorated the stone wall and went no further was a fairly good indication he was right. He wasn't complaining. He was quite happy to have magic keep the worst of the cold away from him.

Doctor Stephan Strange took a deep breath, closed his eyes and cleared his mind. Again. And then he opened his eyes and concentrated on the ring on his fingers, willing with everything inside him to just work dammit. The space directly in front of him wavered, as though the air itself was liquefying. A golden spark popped into being, followed by another, and then another. A small train of golden sparks spiraled within the wavering air. Stephan clamped tightly down on all feelings of triumph – he'd done this much before. He could feel the perspiration on his forehead, but he narrowed his eyes and concentrated harder.

The golden train disappeared.
He slumped, unable to keep from letting out a small cry of frustration at failing once again. Around him the courtyard was a display of bright swirling golden lights as his fellow students effortlessly held their own spells. He felt an insidious moment of doubt and wondered if he would ever succeed. Was this, perhaps, something that even his great mind couldn't master?

He took a deep breath and banished the thought. He brought his hands up to try again. This time he would do it.

Suddenly a fierce wind blew across the courtyard. Stephan brought up a hand to shield his eyes from the dust it carelessly flung about, only to realize it was coalescing into a whirlwind. The spells around him abruptly vanished and he heard cries of alarm. Students backed away quickly and raised their hands, preparing to cast.

Stephan didn't back away. He knew he probably should, but was too mesmerized by the whirlwind. It wasn't so much the sight of it – after everything the Ancient One had shown him, it was rather underwhelming – but the feel of it. The Ancient One had shown him amazing, impossible sights, but he hadn't ever felt such power as he felt in this moment. It was... he couldn't quite string the words together to describe what it felt like. It didn't feel unnatural, however. In fact, if anything it felt just as natural as a particularly violent storm. A storm of magic.

The whirlwind intensified, its epicenter swirling so violently it was almost invisible to the naked eye. Stephan tried to concentrate, to see beyond the dust and wind.

It stopped as suddenly as it had started, leaving behind a man. Not a hair on his head had been displaced by the wind and once his long lambskin coat settled into place, it too looked like it had never moved. His eyes were glowing gold as though the power contained in his body was too great to hold inside. Stephan just knew he was standing in the presence of someone who was truly larger than life.

And then the man blinked and, just like that, the gold was gone from his eyes, replaced with dark blue. Within the blink of his eyes, he seemed to shrink, to somehow become an ordinary man. Disappointingly so. He was skinny with pale skin and ears that stuck out of his head in such a way that made him look a little funny.

The transformation was so subtle, and yet so complete, Stephan found himself blinking just to make sure he wasn't imagining it. Or maybe it was the previous greatness he'd been imagining.

But if there was one lesson he'd learned during his time in Kamar-Taj, it was that things were often not what they seemed... except when they were exactly what they seemed despite what his rational, scientific mind would say. So, if his scientific mind would dismiss what he'd felt and seen when the man had first appeared, then that meant everything he'd seen and felt was exactly what had been there.

It wasn't an explanation: it was reality.

The stranger looked around the courtyard, taking in the multitude of students with a surprise that seemed to echo theirs.

Mordo was the first to move. “Who are you?” he demanded, walking out to the front of the group.

The man looked to him and smiled. It was a warm, friendly smile that reached his eyes and made him look all the more comical – and harmless.

“Oh, sorry to interrupt,” he said – and Stephan couldn't quite decide whether or not the English
accent was a surprise. “I didn't realize you were having a class out here or I would've come 'round the front.”

The casual way in which he dismissed the threat in Mordo's voice seemed to take Stephan's friend and mentor by surprise, but he rallied quickly.

“This place is protected by the most powerful magical wards in the world,” he said, punctuating his words with the beginnings of a glowing golden spell circle. “Now who are you and how dare you invade this sanctum?”

The man raised an amused eyebrow. “Do you have much experience of magic beyond these walls?”

Mordo frowned and the movements of his hands halted. “Excuse me?”

The man swept an arm around them. “Beyond these walls is a large and expansive world. Have you traveled its length and seen the variety of magic it contains?”

“I've traveled,” said Mordo. “And I've seen some of the deepest, darkest parts of the world.”

The man shook his head sadly. “Darkness exists everywhere, young man, and nowhere moreso than in human hearts, but that wasn't what I asked. If you have not searched for the hidden places, the small sacred groves that litter the world, then you cannot claim to have seen all its magic. And if you have not seen all its magic, then you cannot possibly claim this sanctum is protected by the most powerful of all.”

The stranger's eyes began to twinkle mischievously and Stephan felt the corners of his mouth quirk in reply. Because, of course, the punchline was obvious.

“If you managed to breach them so easily, then they're obviously not the most powerful in the world,” Stephan finished.

The stranger looked to him and smiled. “Exactly, young man. One should never, after all, think in such absolutes. Something is only impossible until someone manages to accomplish it. Then it becomes only incredibly difficult.”

Stephan chuckled. He had less than an idea of who this man was, except that he was fascinating. And, apparently, older than he looked. “You're here to see the Ancient One?” he asked him.

The man looked to him again, approval flashing in his expression. “Yes, we make a point of sitting down for tea once a year, a personal tradition of sorts.”

“Emrys.”

While the rest of them jumped at the Ancient One's seemingly sudden appearance, Stephan noticed the stranger barely batted an eye.

“Ah, hello there,” he said, his eyes narrowing slightly as he took in her appearance. “I'm afraid I disrupted one of your classes. I am sorry about that.”

The Ancient One inclined her head to the man – and Stephan was somewhat surprised to note the genuine respect in the gesture. “And I apologize as well. I have had a lot on my mind as of late and had completely forgotten the date. But, please, come and join me for tea.”

“It would be my pleasure,” the mysterious Emrys said with an answering half-bow.
The courtyard watched them leave in stunned silence.

“Well, that was interesting,” Stephan commented, looking to Mordo. His friend was staring after the two with a troubled expression on his face. “So, I take it you didn't know about this annual tradition?”

Mordo frowned. “No, I didn't.”

Realizing this was actually bothering his friend, Stephan turned to him. “You know, they're probably just old friends,” he said. Then he paused. “Or, you know, 'old friends'. Although, I can't quite tell if making a yearly appointment to get together is sad or inspired.”

Mordo glared at him.

Stephan chuckled. “Oh, don't tell me you're a prude. I mean, I know the Ancient One is, well, ancient, but she does look like a not unattractive woman of unidentifiable age.”

Mordo's glare was lightened slightly with humour. “I'm not a prude, but what you're proposing is just ridiculous. The Ancient One is enlightened far beyond the desires of the flesh.”

Stephan raised an eyebrow at him, but said nothing.

Mordo finally just rolled his eyes at him. “Come on, you should be practicing,” he said.

“Right.” Stephan took a deep breath and retook his spot.

The room was perfectly tranquil. Merlin knew the Ancient One preferred it that way, but to him it was an artificial tranquility. He was a creature of the outdoors. The middle of a forest or a meadow was far more soothing to him – even in the middle of a city, he could find solace within the chaos of life that surrounded him. The candles and smooth, simple wood surfaces fit the space he was in, and certainly the woman, but it was not relaxing to him.

The Ancient One was silent as she poured them both tea. He knew she enjoyed the simple ceremony and so remained silent as he watched her elegant, precise movements. Her skin was smooth and flawless, but if he looked closely, he could see her age in the slight hesitance in her motions, the barely-there tremble in her hands and the way her skin looked stretched-thin. Merlin was one of the few still alive who remembered her real name, but even he only used it rarely.

He was also one of the few who knew her secret to longevity, who could see the chains she'd voluntarily donned in order to draw on the power required for such a feat. He was one of even fewer who truly understood the price what she'd done had cost her.

The chains – if it could be called such – had grown larger, darker, heavier than they had been in previous years. She could not possibly maintain the connection for much longer before she collapsed from the strain of keeping the one at the other end at bay. He wasn't certain she was even aware of how little time she had left before this happened.

Still, he remained silent about that as well. What had been done could not be undone, not even by him. Especially not by him.
She finished pouring their tea and handed him his cup. He took it with a smile and a slight bow and then waited for her to settle into her own place. He took his first sip.

“This is good tea,” he said. “Your blend?”

The Ancient One smiled. “Ah no, I actually buy it down at the market. My own attempts have been much less successful.”

“Hmm.” He took another sip. “Perhaps I'll have to pass through that market on my way back.”

“It might be best regardless,” she said. Her lips quirked with amusement. “I think you've frightened my students enough for one day. I can't even begin to imagine what sorts of rumours are already beginning to fly about.”

Merlin smirked. “Oh yes you can. You were young once too, after all.”

The Ancient One chuckled. “Yes, I suppose we've both been there.” She paused and looked away, her eyes suddenly distant and pained. “Some days I feel incredibly old.”

She paused again. Merlin let her gather her thoughts.

“Have you ever had a student betray you?” She finally asked. “Throw everything you'd taught them in your face and then use those very skills to hurt others?”

“Not a student, no,” Merlin answered after a few moments. “A friend, yes, one who perhaps should've been a student, though I'm not certain how competent of a teacher I would've been at the time. Perhaps if I’d listened to my heart instead of my mentors…” He took a deep breath and shook his head. “It does no good to linger on regrets, however, and so I'm merely saddened we ended as bitter enemies.”

She nodded, clearly listening even though her mind was elsewhere.

“He called me a hypocrite,” she said quietly. “I fear I know what he plans to do and it will be dangerous for all should he succeed.”

Merlin's eyes widened. “And you are prepared to fight him?”

Finally, the Ancient One looked back to Merlin. She met his eyes with a firm resolve, though sadness lingered in the tight press of her lips. “Yes. I am prepared to do whatever is necessary to stop him.”

Merlin nodded. “Good. Then I wish you luck.”

Her expression relaxed. “Thank you, Emrys. I fear I will need it and more besides.” She took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, her usual calm had been restored. “Now tell me, how are things for you. Are you still in New York?”

Merlin smiled and began to happily regale his old friend with tales from the shop.

After practice had finally concluded, Stephan hurried from the courtyard. It hadn't taken too much subtle inquiry to find out the stranger was still with the Ancient One inside her inner sanctum, and all
others had been barred from entering except for the greatest of emergencies.

He wracked his brain for an excuse to see the Ancient One as soon as she came out. In the end, he simply grabbed the top book from the stack on his writing table and went to linger in the vicinity of her rooms.

Of course, he realized, it was entirely possible the mysterious Emrys would decide to leave by the same means he'd arrived, thus leaving no trace of himself behind. Though Stephan would've much appreciated the luxury of safety in believing the Ancient One's sanctum unbreachable by any form of magic due to her own magic being greater than any others, as a man of science he already had empirical evidence to prove Emrys was very powerful. Whether or not he was more powerful than the Ancient One was still mostly a mystery. For all Stephan knew, there was a secret way around the defensive wards and the Ancient One had taught it to Emrys.

Obviously, they knew each other and respected one another. And each was clearly very powerful, though they practiced magic a little differently. At least, he thought there was a very strong possibility that they did.

Half an hour passed and Stephan began to wonder if maybe there wasn't some truth to the suggestion he'd jokingly made to Mordo. With a sigh, he finally turned his attention fully to the book in his hands. It was one about the mind's place in the cosmos and transcending the physical form he'd genuinely meant to read. Despite his best intentions, it didn't take long for it to grab his attention.

When the doors from the Ancient One's sanctum finally opened, he found himself so absorbed in the book that he glanced up disinterestedly and immediately returned to his reading. It took a few moments for him to realize that was what he'd been waiting for the whole time. Cursing, his head shot up, he straightened from his slump against a wooden beam and slammed the book shut.

His panicked motions were halted almost immediately when he realized the Ancient One and her guest had been stopped by one of the Master Sorcerers. He was telling her something quietly, his movements quick and erratic. The Ancient One's frown deepened as she listened. Without being entirely conscious of it, Stephan was already moving forward.

He'd covered half the distance between them when the Ancient One nodded. “Yes, I understand,” she said out loud and then turned to Emrys. “I am sorry, Emrys, but I'm afraid something has happened that requires my immediate personal attention.”

“Don't worry, I understand completely,” Emrys said with a smile. “I can find my way out.”

“Absolutely not.” The Ancient One paused and looked around, her eyes quickly finding Stephan. She raised an eyebrow at him, as though to let him know he really wasn't fooling her in the slightest. “Stephan, would you please escort my guest to the front door?”

“Of course, Ancient One,” said Stephan, carefully keeping the eagerness out of his voice. He looked at Emrys. “If you would follow me, please.”

“Thank you,” Emrys said. He looked back to the Ancient One, his eyes betraying a hint of worry. “Be careful,” he told her. “Remember, Sorcerer Supreme you may be, but you are not immortal.”

A soft smile touched her lips. “No, I know I'm not. And I'll be as careful as I can be. That's as much as I can promise.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Till next year, then.”
“Yes, 'till next year,” Emrys echoed with a smile and a small bow.

“Well, uh, if you would follow me,” Stephan said for lack of anything better to say after the Ancient One had hurried away with the Master who had come to fetch her.

Emrys turned to him with his usual smile. “After you, then.”

Stephan began to walk off, but making sure to keep only a few steps away. Once they rounded the corner where there were less people, he slowed down and settled in to walk beside the strange man.

“So, you and the Ancient One are old friends?” he asked.

Emrys glanced at him with amusement. “Yes, we are,” he answered. “I knew her long before she became known as the Ancient One. We met once upon a time, when she was just a very promising apprentice.”

Stephan blinked. He hadn't quite expected that to be his answer. “So you were a master here once?”

Emrys laughed. “Oh no, not at all. I was always just a wandering traveler. To be honest, I've never had a master as such. Long ago I had a mentor, but he wasn't really able to teach me the more practical elements of magic. I've been largely self-taught.”

“And what did your mentor teach you?” Stephan asked, more intrigued than before.

“Healing.”

“Healing?” Stephan echoed. “Your mentor was a doctor?”

Emrys chuckled. “Not by your definition of the word, I'm sure. But yes, he was once known as the finest heater in the land and I was his apprentice.” He looked over to him conspiratorially. “It was, of course, a cover for what I was really learning under his watch. Still, he had me assist when he needed me. I used to gather herbs for him and clean the leach tanks.”

Stephan sputtered. “Leech tanks?!” he practically screeched. “When exactly was this, the Middle Ages?”

Emrys smirked at his outrage. “As I said, likely not a doctor by your definition of the word, Doctor Strange.”

Stephan froze, his mind whirling, until he realized there was no huge mystery here. “The Ancient One mentioned me,” he said.

Emrys shrugged. “Yes, she did. I also attended your lecture on the benefit of eyebrow incisions for the removal of frontal lobe tumors at Stanford about two Novembers ago and found it particularly fascinating.”

“Yes, you went to see me lecture?”

“Yes. I may never have been a particularly gifted healer, but I do like to keep an eye on what's going on in the medical sciences. And sciences in general: it's fascinating, seeing the other half of the world.”

Stephan frowned. “What do you mean, the other half of the world?”

“Science and magic, both form parts of a whole truth. Magic itself is everywhere, but it doesn't explain everything in the world anymore than science can explain everything. There is always
something missing to each explanation. Most people think science and magic are polar opposites, but
they're not. They're intertwined, each with its own separate rules and logic.”

Stephan stared at him. Was that what he was doing? Not just learning to open his mind and see
beyond the normal world, but learning a different explanation – a complimentary explanation – about
how the world operated. Science and magic working together...

It made him feel a little more comfortable with the idea.

Before he'd realized it, they were at the entrance.

“Well, it was nice to meet you, Doctor Strange,” said Emrys, holding his hand out. “And if you're
ever back in New York, do look me up. My friend and I own a shop there.”

Stephan shook his hand warmly. “You live in New York?”

“Well, yes. It's a fascinating, lively city.”

Stephan laughed. “Certainly can't argue with you there. So, where's this shop and what's it called?”

Emrys' eyes sparkled with amusement. “Oh, I think that when you go looking for it, you'll find it
easily enough.”

And then Emrys turned around and left, disappearing almost instantly into the crowded street. As if
by magic.

Chapter End Notes

Have a Happy New Year! See you all in 2017!!
Shadowy Figures

Chapter Notes

Well, I had been hoping to have this chapter up over the weekend, but then got sidetracked by a stupid cold/flu thing. So, now that I feel more like a person and less like a giant blob of 'uuugh' (and what a great way to start a two-week vacation THAT was), I've finally managed to finish the chapter.

Warning: I might be going slightly AU to Agents of SHIELD here, as it's been a while since I've seen the show and I can't quite remember what was done on-screen and what was done off-screen. So I apologize if I've gotten this bit wrong here, but I figure it's minor enough that it doesn't matter in the long run. To anyone, who hasn't seen the show and might want to at some point, there aren't any real spoilers here either. Well, one minor detail, but if you've seen all the MCU movies, then you know where it's heading anyway.

As always, thank you for the comments and kudos. I'm so happy that Doctor Strange was such a hit! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The man stepped out of the shelter of the subway terminal and into wet white mess that were the streets of New York. A more romantic soul would've probably called it fluffy and white, but as the large wet flakes stuck to the man's hair and long wool coat, he wasn't feeling particularly romantic. He was, however, definitely glad he'd opted for deep-tread insulated ankle-high boots instead of his usual dress shoes. It was difficult to look calm and collected while slipping and sliding all over the pavement.

In his head, he pictured the instructions he'd been sent and then set off to find the meeting place. He wasn't quite running late exactly, but he would be right on time, which was later than he would've liked. Nevertheless, he kept his pace brisk – or as brisk as the snowy, shoe-printed sidewalks would allow – but not hurried. He watched his surroundings, taking in the people hurrying by, the leftover Christmas decorations still hanging in shop displays, the warm and inviting coffee shops. The combined smell of city smog and crisp winter snow mingled with aromas coming from the restaurants he passed by. As Chinatown gave way to Little Italy, those aromas changed from fried meats, soy sauce, sesame oil and turmeric to tomato sauce, olive oil and basil.

He almost paused in front of a small bakery whose sweet warmth seemed particularly mesmerizing.

It didn't take long for him to reach the meeting place. The stained glass window on the door was exactly as described. He took a few moments to dust off the worst of the caked-on snow and entered the shop.

Inside he found a curious, cluttered mix of shadowy corners and warm, inviting light. His eyes immediately swept the area, though he'd been warned it was much larger than it at first appeared. There was no one around and no obvious security cameras. Which didn't mean there weren't any; with all the clutter it would be ridiculously easy to hide something so small.

Then he caught sight of the cash register and his eyebrows rose involuntarily. Curiosity getting the
better of him, he went over to take a look. On closer inspection, he could see it really was exactly what he’d thought it was. And in remarkable condition as far as he could tell, though he’d never seen a cash register this old outside of an the old black and white movies his grandmother used to watch. He wondered if it was a red herring, meant to lull visitors to the shop into thinking the owners were as backwards and ancient as this contraption.

Soft, shuffling footsteps caught his attention and he stepped back from the cash register, turning instead towards their source. Moments later, an old woman came around a corner he hadn't realized was there. She didn't have a cane, but walked slightly hunched over, her steps sure but careful.

“Good afternoon,” he said politely.

“Good afternoon, young man,” she answered him. She looked him up and down critically and then rolled her eyes. “You must be here to meet with the other two. They're already in one of the back rooms. Follow me.”

He blinked in surprise, wondering how she'd pegged him so quickly. He'd long cultivated his blandness into an art. Maybe the others had told her they were expecting him? Still, meeting with them was why he was here, and so he followed the old woman, casually undoing the buttons on his coat to make sure he had easy access to his gun.

Just in case.

He passed by a comical wooden statue of a waiter holding out a green fish with big, bulging eyes. It was directly on the corner and he wondered if this was on purpose, to catch a person's eye and keep them from immediately noticing the bend right beside it.

The back of the shop was just as cluttered as the front, the assortment just as random-looking. It really was the perfect set-up for an advanced surveillance system. Nothing looked staged, though, not even from a merchandising standpoint – at least not beyond making sure everything was placed in such a way that it wouldn't all go tumbling down at the slightest touch. He liked to think he was trained enough to spot cameras no matter where they were hidden, but here he’d certainly need more than just a cursory glance.

Indeed, the back of the shop seemed to have everything: kitchen utensils, furniture, glass figurines, crystal vases, ballcaps, cups, a truly bizarre painting of a squashed, upside down cake, and what looked like an old store mannequin in a plaid raincoat. Everything, that was, except for the two people he had come to meet.

The old woman crossed the room and then disappeared in the back corner. He blinked, following her calmly, though his steps became a bit lighter as he shifted his weight to the balls of his feet, preparing for anything.

It wasn't until he reached the corner that he saw the narrow opening. It wasn't even a doorway, just a gap between the shelves that seemed to lead to some sort of corridor, but the way the shelves overlapped made it look like they connected from a distance. He felt the corners of his lips twitch with amusement.

He decided he liked this shop with its quirky, hidden spaces.

The hallway in the back was dimly-lit with wall sconces, but bright enough that he could see without straining his eyes. It was a long hallway, lined with doors on either side. The part of him that remembered being a little boy perked up at the sight, immediately salivating with the desire to go exploring, to run off and discover what lay behind every single door. With his toy Captain America
shield, of course – he remembered it being essential to every daring adventure.

Unfortunately, the old woman stopped by the second door on his left and pointed to it. “They're in there,” she told him.

“Thank you,” he said, polite as always.

She harrumphed in reply. “Just make sure you all take everything you brought in with you, back out with you again.”

He watched her go in amusement and then stepped into the room. It wasn't a large room by any means, but it was comfortable. Two of its walls were taken up by sturdy-looking oak shelves and a third had a single, massive wooden armoire surrounded by a series of framed black and white and sepia-toned photographs. The shelves were full, but not in the cluttered, haphazard way the shelves out in the main portion of the shop had been. Here, there was an obvious attempt at organization, at creating a collection instead of just a random assortment of stuff.

“Coulson.”

Of course, more importantly, there were also two people in the room. The woman who'd addressed him was sitting in a high-back upholstered chair next to the armoire and the man was standing with his back to him, examining something on the shelf.

“Maria, Director Fury,” he greeted them. “I apologize for my tardiness, but a minor issue came up that I had to deal with before I left.” He frowned. “Is it entirely wise to use names here? It wouldn't be good to have my face and name recorded on any sort of surveillance system, after all.”

Maria shrugged. “I've been here for over half an hour and haven't managed to find any signs of a security system. Widow's been here a few times too and she says she's never seen anything either.”

“Which doesn't mean there isn't anything,” Fury finally cut in. He turned around to face Phil, a familiar scowl on his face. “But if they've got any sort of surveillance, then I'll be damned if I can find it.”

Phil blinked, carefully keeping his expression neutral as he looked at the former SHIELD director, who was gently cradling a large white cat in his arms and gently scratching it behind the ears. Fury noticed his gaze and his scowl deepened.

“I didn't take you for a cat person, sir,” Phil said mildly.

“Cats are independent, stealthy hunters capable of deceiving you with their so-called cuteness and making you forget all about their sharp teeth and claws,” Fury growled. “And it's not my cat. It belongs to the shop.”

“I see.” Phil wisely decided not to comment any further, turning to Maria instead. “You say Black Widow's a regular here?”

Maria nodded. “Actually, Cap was the one who originally introduced her to the place,” she said. “He's made friends with the owners. From what I understand, most of the Avengers have been here at some point in time or other. Among others.”

Phil's eyebrows rose in surprise. “Among others?”

“We've had sightings of Magneto frequenting the shop,” Fury answered.
“So the shop owners are consorting with both superheros and villains?” Phil said with a frown.

“Natasha came here to find a Halloween costume and ended up spending the afternoon doing so over tea and pastries with both Jean Gray and a woman she's fairly certain was Mystique,” Maria filled in. “While Magneto and Professor Xavier shared tea with one of the owners, a Merlin Pratt.”

“That must've made for an interesting afternoon.” He paused, thoughtful. “So this shop has somehow become a sort of neutral ground for the mutants. I'll confess the shop has a fascinating setup, but I didn't notice anything particularly unusual about the old woman. She was one of the owners, wasn't she?”

Fury nodded. “Yes, Nimueh Priest. She and Merlin Pratt co-own the shop and as far as anyone has seen, they seem to be the only employees. On the surface, they're nothing unusual.”

“And beneath the surface?” Phil asked.

Fury smirked, his one eye gleaming with uncharacteristic excitement. “Nothing unusual.”

“I see.” Phil shifted his stance, clasping his hands behind his back as he waited patiently for the former SHIELD director to continue. He didn't usually show his excitement so overtly, so whatever he had on the owners had to be good.

“Ever heard of the spy duo that called themselves the Sparrow and the Falcon?” Fury finally asked him.

Phil blinked. “During the Second World War they brought vital pieces of information to the allies, often to smaller units such as the SSR and French Resistance cells. No one could ever figure out who they worked for, or how they got their information. Or how they knew exactly who needed it. After the war they just disappeared...” He paused, his eyes widening. “You think the owners of this shop are the Sparrow and the Falcon?!”

“As certain as I can be,” Fury replied smugly.

Phil thought back to the woman who'd led him through the shop. She had pegged him for an agent almost immediately – or at the very least had immediately known he belonged with Maria and Fury who were obviously something. “Are you sure? The woman was old, but I'm not sure she looked old enough to be a retired World War Two spy.”

“No one knew anything about the two of them,” Fury pointed out. “They could've been younger than anyone realized.”

“True.”

“It would've been fairly easy to falsify records back in the late forties/early fifties if they wanted to disappear after the war,” Maria added, her tone matter-of-fact, but Phil detected a slight hint of amusement.

Fury snorted softly. “Wouldn't have even needed to do much of that,” he said. “Like Phil said, no one had any idea who they were then and, as far as I know, no one's managed to figure it out since.”

“But that's as close to confirmation as we're going to get.”
Phil clamped down on the urge to bounce and break out into a giddy grin. He'd heard the stories, of course he had. Some of them from old SSR members – even Margaret Carter had had one or two to tell. Like many young SHIELD agents before him, he'd dug through the old archived records, even some old archived MI6 records during one joint mission (apparently SHIELD agents weren't the only ones who loved a good mystery). But, like all those young agents, he'd come up empty and eventually had to give up the search in favour of more pressing matters, of which there were always plenty.

“The Falcon and the Swallow are a spy legend,” he said reverently.

“The ultimate spies,” Fury agreed. “Unknown and invisible until they wanted to be. No one ever managed to figure out how they got their information. None of the records recovered from the Nazis after the war showed any sort of awareness of their presence. They weren't on their radar and they were barely on ours.”

Maria cleared her throat. “Well, it would certainly explain this particular collection,” she said motioning to the shelves lining the room.

Phil frowned and scanned the shelves. It looked like a collection of everyday items to him. “What do you mean?”

“Take a closer look,” she said with a slight smirk. “This is where I got your birthday present last year.”

“Really?”

He scanned the shelves again, this time his eyes eagerly taking in every single item. He stepped forward and picked up a heavy silver pocket watch. He pressed the clasp at the top and it sprang open to reveal black roman numerals on a mother-of-pearl clockface. It was even showing the correct time.

Phil looked up when Fury cleared his throat.

“Progress report,” he barked, apparently back to his usual gruff self, even if it was somewhat negated by the purring cat in his arms. “Coulson, are your people still buying your recruiting story?”

“For now, yes,” he replied smoothly even as he continued to fiddle with the pocket watch. “I think Mei's starting to get suspicious, but she's accepting my explanations for now. I don't know how long that'll last, but I'll deal with it when it happens.”

“Good. Hill?”

“The Control Room is set up and good to go,” said Maria, her posture automatically straightening as she spoke. “Stark should be contacting you within the next couple of days to run some tests on the systems.”

Fury nodded. “I'll be expecting his call. How has your co-ordination with Stark Tower's security been going?”

Phil ran his fingers down the heavily-embossed back of the pocket watch as he listened to Fury and Maria discuss Stark Tower's control room setup. It looked like a coat of arms: a large bird with its wings spread wide around a sword. The craftsmanship was excellent. Each of bird's feathers were distinct, its beak looked sharp and even its eyes seemed to have a proud, forbidding expression. Inlaid into the sword's pommel, was a small red gem. Phil ran his finger around it, find it odd that the gem was on the back of the watch and not its front. On a hunch, he pushed down on it slightly.
He was rewarded with a soft snick. Quickly suppressing a smile, he pulled his hand away and let the false bottom swing open. The watch's gears were enclosed behind a thin layer of steel and, while the space left behind wasn't large, it would've easily fit a few small things such as computer chips, powder or tablets. Though given the age of the watch, it probably hadn't been designed with computer chips in mind.

“Coulson?”

Phil looked away from the watch and reached for the encrypted memory stick in his pocket. “Yes, of course,” he said and held the stick out to Maria. “Here is all the information we were able to get on the Hydra base where we believe Loki's Scepter is being held.”

Maria accepted the memory stick. “I'll pass it on to the Avengers,” she said.

Fury nodded his approval. “Good, the sooner that thing is out of Hydra's hands, the better.”

“According to our intelligence, the scepter might not be the only thing they've got hidden down there,” Phil added. “Seems they were doing some sort of human experimentation as well. It's all on there, of course, but you should probably read it over thoroughly to minimize the amount of surprises.”

Maria nodded. “Of course.” Then she stood up and turned to Fury. “Sir, unless there's something more, I should probably be heading back now. If I take any longer on my lunch break, it will be noticed.”

“No, I think that's about covered it all,” said Fury. “Coulson, you got anything else for us?”

Phil shook his head. “Not at the moment, no.”

“Then we should probably head out,” Fury answered. He paused and looked them both over. “It was good to see the two of you again in person.”

“You too, sir, Phil,” said Maria, her eyes softening for a moment before turning on her heel and heading towards the door. There she paused for a moment and looked back. “Oh, and Coulson? The gold clutch has a camera built into the lining.”

“Oh?”

Phil turned to the shelves, finding the clutch almost immediately. It was, after all, one of the brightest pieces on display being gold with gold and silver beads arranged around an oval-shaped mirror about two inches across. The lining inside was a rich purple. When he felt along the inside he did indeed feel the hard ridges of rectangular-shaped object. He compared it to the outside and realized the lens had to be just behind the mirror – a small two-way mirror perhaps? Further inspection found a very small zipper delicately sewn into the stitching of the lining.

Something brushed against his ankles. Phil looked down and met the steady golden eyes of the white cat Fury had previously been holding. He looked up and chuckled when he saw that Fury was gone. Though the man knew how to make an intimidating entrance or over-dramatic exit when the situation called for it, he was also very good at disappearing quietly.

Phil looked back down to the cat. “Well, I guess it's just you and me left,” he told it. “But just so we're clear, I'm not going to lift you up and get cat hair all over my suit.”

The cat meowed up at him, and he swore it sounded rather annoyed with him. Phil let a small smile grace his lips. “Now, I wonder what the rest of these treasures are.”
It was just a few moments after Merlin disappeared into the back with a young lady looking for a gift with which to impress her future mother-in-law, that the last of the secret agents finally emerged. Nimueh didn't particularly care which agency the three were from, though it did amuse her to learn that she and Merlin had become such legends despite their efforts to go barely noticed. Merlin, apparently, attracted legends.

She raised her eyebrows at the small handful of objects he carried. “I would've thought you'd have some rather newer and more sophisticated tools by this point,” she said.

“Ah, well, I'm sure there are much more advanced things available, but these have old-school charm,” he answered smoothly. “I'm a bit of a collector myself.”

“Hmm,” Nimueh answered, very much aware that he'd dodged the question. “An odd type of thing to collect.”

He raised an eyebrow. “It's an odd type of thing to openly sell in an antiques shop.”

“What, exactly, is so odd about finding an antique in an antiques shop?”

The corners of the man's lips quirked. “Nothing at all.”

He set them carefully on the counter and Nimueh carefully wrapped them and rang the sale up on the register. He paid, politely wished her a good day, and then left.

Nimueh turned to Aithusa. “So, what was their little meeting about anyway?” she asked her. “Surely they weren't just discussing the possibility that Merlin and I were the Swallow and the Falcon?”

Aithusa looked up from where she’d been grooming herself atop an ebony coffee table. “Of course not,” said the dragon.

Nimueh leaned against the counter. “Well, it's been a slow day, so do tell.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, hope you enjoyed that. This chapter was born out of a desire to write Coulson at least once in this story but, while I'm not going to say 'never', it's unlikely that he or any of the AoS cast will be showing up again. I think throwing the Inhumans into the story along with the X-men would just be a bit much. Besides of which, I'm almost an entire season behind on the show at this point anyway.
Thank you so much for the comments and kudos on the last chapter and this story!

“I most certainly did not do anything of the sort!”

“Then you must be going more senile than usual, because I distinctly remember you saying you were going to go into the basement to organize the shipment last week!”

“Well I might have said I going to do it, but I didn't actually do it!”

“Oh, so you're selectively senile and a lazy old bat!”

“Actually, I'm fairly certain you're the one who's senile! You'll recall it was fifteen minutes after I went downstairs that the new Mustang arrived. You didn't think I'd leave it to you, did you?”

There came a loud snort from somewhere in the back. “The only mustang I'd know what to do with is the sort that runs on hay and water. And perhaps a few oats for variety.”

“Yes, well, if you go anywhere near my mustang with either of those I shall turn you into a toadstool!”

“I'd like to see you try!”

Sam and Natasha exchanged looks as they stood in the open doorway.

“Oh, do you think we should maybe come back later?” Sam asked.

Natasha shrugged and stepped further into the shop. Sam mentally crossed his fingers that the old woman couldn't actually turn anyone into a toadstool (he'd had a very strange year and was willing to believe quite a lot at this point) and carefully closed the door behind them. At the very least, that made the shop instantly warmer. It was warmer than it had been, but spring hadn't quite managed to break through yet, the breeze holding onto its cold bite for now.

He saw movement out of the corner of his eye, followed by a loud meow.

Sam's breath caught as he watched the large white cat that lived in the shop jump down from the top of a curio cabinet and onto the top shelf of a sturdy oak hutch full of decorative plates. He might even have stopped breathing entirely as the cat then proceeded to slip in behind the plates and along the shelf. At the end, it then jumped down onto a long table laden with an assortment of stacked tea cups on one end, and full dish sets and several tiered serving platters set up along the rest of it. The cat silently weaved its way along the table, not brushing against any of the tea cups or upsetting even a single plate.

When it reached Natasha, it stretched its neck out and meowed again.

Natasha reached out to scratch it gently behind the ears. “Well, aren't you a graceful lady,” she said
softly, a small smile on her face. Then she stepped back and held up a small bag. “I'm afraid Steve
couldn't join us today, but he sent his regards.”

The cat immediately jumped down to the floor and began circling Natasha, purring loudly. Sam
chuckled as Natasha knelt down to unwrap Steve’s offering of jumbo tiger shrimp. He had to admit,
it helped him handle Steve's sometimes too-perfect, all-American image to know that the super
soldier could also be this ridiculous. Even if he was sure his mama and sisters would've called it
sweet. He was calling it ridiculous.

“Aaah, I was wondering who it was that Aithusa was so happy to see,” said Merlin Pratt as he came
out from the back of the shop, the old woman right behind him. “Hello, Natasha. Oh, and you're
Steven's friend... the soldier.”

“Airman, actually,” Sam corrected with a smile. “Sam Wilson.”

The old woman snorted. “He has wings, of course he's with the Air Force,” she said.

Merlin glared at her over his shoulder. “Even the Navy has airplanes these days,” he snapped.

The Navy had, of course, had fighter planes for a long time, but Sam decided to stay out of the
argument.

“Nimueh, Merlin,” Natasha stepped in before the couple could settle into their next round of
bickering. “We actually came to invite the two of you to a party we're throwing at Stark Tower
tonight.”

Merlin turned away from Nimueh and blinked. “A party? What's the occasion?”

Natasha shrugged. “We had a mission, it was successful, so Stark suggested a party and no one
could think of a reason not to.”

“It's not every day you get the chance to party with the Avengers,” Sam added with a grin.

Natasha shot him an amused glance.

Merlin’s lips also quirked with amusement. “Yes, well it's very kind of you to think of us,” he said.
“But we're not really much for parties these days. It's just–”

“–We'd love to go,” Nimueh interrupted him.

Merlin frowned and turned to her. She met his eyes and they stared at each other for a few moments.

Merlin looked back to Sam and Natasha. “Apparently, we'd love to go.”

Sam bit his lip. Natasha smiled brightly. “Excellent! Steve was hoping you'd come. He and Thor
have been conscripted into heavy lifting for the afternoon, which is why he couldn't come himself,
but he's looking forward to seeing you.”

Merlin smiled. “It has been a while since he managed to find the time to stop by.”

“We look forward to seeing him as well,” Nimueh added. “And the rest of you, of course.”

“Great, then we'll see you tonight!” said Sam and then he and Natasha left the shop.
He could feel it the moment he entered the tower. Knew the moment the elevator was passing by the floor it was housed on, the pull of power reaching a peak before waning slightly as the building – or Jarvis, as it had introduced itself – continued to take them further up.

Merlin felt the power within his bones, reaching out to him. Enticing him to take it, use it. Promising him infinite power.

But within the sweet enticements, he could feel a discordant, unsettling jangle. It didn't belong here. Not that it was unnatural, oh no, Merlin could tell by the weight with which it clung to his limbs that it was old, older than anything or anyone he had ever encountered before. But it wasn't from Earth, didn't come from this land.

He tightened the grip on his walking stick, concentrating on the feeling of the wood and the magic it was imbued with.

“If they intend to use this, we will have to stop them,” Nimueh's voice sounded in his mind. She felt worried.

“Yes,” he replied. “Do you know what it is?”

“Not anymore than you do. Except that it is something that should not be used.”

Merlin nodded. It was a power that no mortal man could ever hope to contain. He knew this without any shred of doubt.

The elevator doors opened and they were greeted with noise and a world of music, laughter and dimmed lighting. Beside him, Nimueh perked up instantly and shuffled into the room, her long green satin skirt reflecting light as she walked. Merlin shook his head in amusement as he followed close behind her, leaning on his walking stick a bit more than usual – people were generally quicker to move out of his way if they thought he had trouble walking.

He followed Nimueh through the crowd to the bar, where they found Natasha serving alcohol to Clint. She looked up to them and smiled as they approached.

“Hi, Nimueh, Merlin,” she called to them once they were close enough. “What can I get you guys?”

“Are you proficient in all forms of cocktails?” Nimueh asked her as she slowly pulled herself up onto one of the bar stools.

“Why don't you try me?”

“Hm, well then I'll have a Manhattan, please.”

Natasha snorted. “And here I thought you were going to give me something challenging.”

“Maybe the next one.”

Merlin took a seat as well, cursing the need to come in his older body. Bar stool were so much easier to navigate when he wasn't eighty years old. Or wearing a tie. No matter how uncomfortable the heavy velvets and constricting overly-embroidered cloths of formal attire during his years in Camelot (not to mention the stupid hat) had been, at least they hadn't included ties. His old neckerchiefs had been far more comfortable than these ridiculous cloth collars modern people seemed to like for some reason.
Except that most men seemed to hate ties, which made the whole obsession even more baffling.

While Natasha was busy mixing Nimueh's Manhattan, Merlin turned to Clint. “And how have you been, young man?”

Clint grinned at him and lifted his glass. “I've been busy, but things are going great.”

Merlin chuckled. “Yes, I imagine you have a lot to do right now. Tell me, how were the presents received? They arrived safely, I hope.”

Clint carefully looked around surreptitiously, as though to make sure no one was listening in, and then moved to sit in the seat next to Merlin. “They got the package last week,” he said in a low voice. “Laura's in love with the mobile and she said the kids got really excited about theirs. Apparently Cooper spent hours wiping off the figurines and then setting up a huge battlefield.” Clint snickered. “The archers are, of course, his favourites. Although he did need Laura to explain to him why none of the knights had guns.”

Merlin laughed. “Of course, the armor wouldn't have been much use as protection against bullets, so it's just as good none of them had guns.”

“Oooh, good point. I don't think she'd thought of that one.”

“Most people don't,” said Merlin with an understanding nod. “And what of the tea set?”

“Lila refuses to drink out of anything else and suddenly wants to make tea for everyone all the time.”

“Now I know what to get her the next time I visit,” Natasha interjected into the conversation, looking amused. “Merlin, what can I get you?”

“Just an ale please,” Merlin told her.

Natasha's eyebrows rose in surprise. “I have three varieties on tap and five bottled.”

“Anything European?”

“Heineken and Stella Artois.”

“Then I'll have a Heineken.”

Natasha nodded and went to the fridge to get his beer.

“Merlin, Nimueh!” The two of them turned to greet Steve, who beamed at them happily as he strode over to him. “I'm glad you could make it!”

“Steven, it is good to see you,” said Merlin.

“Yes, it's been too long since you'd last stopped by to visit us,” Nimueh added.

“Uh, yeah, sorry,” said Steve, looking slightly chagrined. “I've been a bit busy lately.”

“And that's perfectly understandable, young man,” said Merlin with a smile. “Just don't forget us entirely.”

Steve laughed. “Don't worry, I don't think there's any danger of that.”

A small electronic melody sounded from beside him, barely loud enough to be heard over the music
being played in the room. Clint reached into his pocket and glanced at his phone. “Uh, sorry guys, I've gotta take this,” he announced as he got up walked away, his phone to his ear.

As he watched Clint go, Merlin felt eyes watching him. He didn't really need to look to know it was Thor, who'd been observing them since the moment they'd stepped out of the elevator. But he looked anyway, raising his glass in toast to the Thunder God. Thor smiled and raised his own glass in reply.

And that was when the human whirlwind named Tony Stark entered the party.

Or, more like, exploded into the room. Had Merlin not known better, he might've thought it was a sort of magic, the way the room suddenly seemed even more energized than before, the music just a touch louder, and the coloured mood lights just a touch brighter. It was impressive how thoroughly the man seemed to throw himself into the party, how a glass magically made it into his hands and how he seemed able to circle the room without ever breaking stride in conversation. Like it wasn't a chore, his duty as host, but something he enjoyed.

He smiled softly as he pictured Gwaine doing the same thing with every bit as wide of a smile on his face.

“Merlin?”

Merlin pulled his attention back to Steve, who was looking at him with worried eyes. He waved him off. “It's nothing, young man, just being reminded of an old friend.”

Steve looked back to where Tony was talking to a tall dark-skinned man wearing an Air Force uniform – at least, Merlin was reasonably certain it was an Air Force uniform. “Yeah,” he said, his voice almost a sigh. He was silent for a few moments. “I knew his father, you know. During the war. He was a swell guy, a good friend. Charming with the ladies and smarter than anyone I'd even met. He helped make me into Captain America and not just a dancing mascot, but the real thing. He gave made my shield. I... I owe him a lot.”

He swallowed. “Tony's a lot like him. Not the same, but sometimes he says something or does something and I see Howard in him. But Tony... I don't know what happened between them, but Tony doesn't like to talk about his dad.”

Steve fell silent.

“Cap, I see your hands are empty,” said Natasha loudly from behind the bar. “Anything I can get you?”

Steve looked up and grinned at her. “Sure, I'll have another beer please.”

Natasha rolled her eyes. “You guys are so boring.”

Steve just shrugged good-naturally. Natasha got him his beer and then turned to Nimueh. “Anything else I can get you?”

“I think I'd like a blowjob please.”

Steve choked on his beer. “W-what?!” he eventually stuttered out, face red.

Nimueh looked thoughtful, though Merlin could see the mischievous glint in her eyes. “I've always wanted to try one.”

Merlin looked to Steve, who was still gaping. “I'm going to go ahead and assume that's a drink,” he
told him before tilting his head to look in Nimueh's direction. “Unless there's something you've been hiding very well for all these years.”

“Who’s been hiding what?” a new voice suddenly asked just as Tony Stark materialized next to Steve. He blinked at Steve's expression. “Woah there, Cap, what's gotten your spangles in a twist?”

“Nimueh here ordered a blowjob,” Natasha answered for him.

Mister Stark looked to Nimueh. “The old lady ordered a blowjob?” He blinked and then looked down at his glass of champagne. “I think I need a stronger drink to go with that sentence.”

Nimueh and Natasha exchanged smirks across the bar. Merlin shook his head at all of them.

“Wait, speaking of old ladies,” Stark suddenly perked up. He pushed his way around Steve to the other side of Nimueh. “A little birdie told me you have a new Mustang...”

“1969 Boss 429, original engine. Currently painted a rather scratched-up and slightly rusted mustard yellow.”

Stark's jaw dropped. “A Boss 429? Wait, someone let it get rusty?! What's the engine like? Please tell me it's salvageable.”

“It's going to be whether it wants to or not.”

Merlin smiled at the stubborn defiance in Nimueh's voice. Wouldn't be the first time she'd used magic to help her with repairs, especially to restore small metallic parts that would've otherwise had to have been scrapped.

A man Merlin hadn't yet met sidled quietly next to Steven. He wasn't a small man, but he stood with his shoulders hunched and his head lowered, as though trying to look as small as possible. His head was a mane of dark curls that fell into his eyes.

“Hey Bruce,” Steve greeted him. “Have you met Merlin and Nimueh yet?”

Bruce smiled. “Yes, I met Nimueh when Tony dragged me to their antiques shop, however Merlin wasn't there at that time.”

Merlin leaned forward and held his hand out. “Yes, I heard all about that visit,” he said. “It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Bruce.”

Bruce hesitated for a moment before grasping his hand and shaking it gently. Merlin had to fight to control the expression on his face from betraying the powerful jolt he felt the moment he touched Bruce's hand. Beneath the surface of the other man's skin, he felt a grumbling angry beast, a shimmer of barely-controlled power. But not magic. No, there was nothing magical about this creature.

And Merlin realized that he had, in fact, met this man before. Or at least the grumbling angry beast hiding behind his quiet smile.

His smile widened. “So Nimueh tells me you liked my little attic room.”

Bruce's smile became much more genuine, and his eyes glowed with excitement. “It was amazing,” he said.
There were many things on Midgard he found fascinating or worthy of excitement, but very few truly surprised Thor. The old couple who exited the elevator while he was merrily regaling a crowd of eager listeners with the tale of his first great hunt had been quite the surprise.

He recognized the power he sensed from them immediately – he’d felt it twice before, though each time they had been wearing a different guise. This was a third guise, and a most curious one at that. He remembered well the flashes of power he’d felt in Central Park, but now he could feel just the barest shadow of that power, just enough for him to recognize. He wondered if they were capable of hiding it completely. And if so, why they hid it at all.

It was the old man who greeted him eventually with a raised glass, though Thor was under no illusion that his presence had been noticed by both as soon as they’d arrived. They’d proven themselves to be friends, however, and so he returned the old man’s greeting and continued with his tale.

Thor bided his time, waiting until one of them was alone to approach. It was the old man who eventually stood and walked away from the bar, leaving the old woman still deep in conversation with Stark and his friend who was the Machine of War. As he watched him, the man slowly made his way to the large window, where he remained leaning on his walking stick and looking out at the colourful lights of the city.

Waiting.

Thor slipped away from the crowd and walked over to stand beside the old man. New York was a grand city in the darkness, its breadth covered in so many tiny lights it was almost surprising there was any darkness left. But shadows, of course, existed everywhere.

“We meet again, Thor Odinson,” said the old man softly after several long moments had passed.

“That we do, Merlin,” Thor agreed. “Though I admit I do not know whether this is truly your name, or merely the one you have chosen to use for the moment.”

The old man chuckled. “Pratt is a surname I created, but Merlin is the name my mother gave me. It is not my only name, but to me it has always been the most important, the most precious.”

Thor nodded, moisture springing to his eyes at the memory of his own mother. In the back of his mind's eye, he could see her smiling at him as he flew past her garden.

“Such things are precious,” he agreed.

“And names are powerful,” Merlin added. “They represent a person, a thing, a memory or a feeling.”

“Yes.” He eyed the being beside him thoughtfully. “I understand now why you and the Lady have come to us in several forms, but what made you decide to befriend the Avengers?”

Merlin laughed. “That was pure coincidence, I assure you,” he said. “Steven just happened to wander in one day and then kept wandering in. And then, before long, so did the others. Although, I suppose someone poetically inclined might also choose to call it fate.”

Thor frowned. “Do you believe some horrible enemy approaches that will require your powers in addition to ours?”

“I have no reason to believe that, no. But then I can no more predict the future than I can return to the
Thor grinned. “Then we shall just have to hope we are prepared for whatever comes our way.”

“And speaking of that,” Merlin continued after a moment, his countenance serious. “There is a power being kept within this building that concerns me.”

Thor’s eyes widened. “My brother's scepter? You can feel it?”

“Hmm. It is old, very old and very powerful. I can feel it calling me, enticing me to pick it up.”

“And would you?” he asked, curious despite himself. Despite knowing he would never give the old man the option and yet feeling the compulsion to ask.

“Would I what? Use it?” Merlin frowned as he continued to stare at the night-darkened cityscape. “Not if I had any other choice.

Thor nodded. “Then you are truly as wise as I feel you are powerful. Too many would be tempted by the promise of power and then others would claim they would never use it.”

“Proclamations of 'never' too often become meaningless when held up against the lives of loved ones.”

“A man never knows how far his limits will stretch until he comes face to face with them.”

“Precisely,”

Thor turned to Merlin. “The battle we are celebrating here tonight resulted in the successful retrieval of the scepter from the hands of evil men who had wished to use its power for their own gain. On the morrow I shall be returning to Asgard with it.”

“Good. Its power is poison. It does not belong on this land. And certainly not in the hands of mortal men.”

All of a sudden, they heard a crash behind them. They both whirled around. Thor’s instant battle-readiness turned quickly into amusement, however, as he saw the old white-haired man who’d insisted on having Asgard ale earlier attempt to pick himself off the floor. His wire-rimmed glasses were askew and his tie was crooked, the tip dripping wet. And his legs appeared to have forgotten their original function.

Thor went to help him to his feet.

“Gee, thisss floor sure is shlippery,” said the man as Thor came to stand beside him.

“I fear it is not the floor that is the problem, my friend,” he told him.

The looked up at him with blurry eyes. “It'ssh not? Then why won't it let me goo?”

Thor chuckled as he leaned down and lifted the obviously drunk man to his feet. “I think, perhaps, it is the Asgardian ale that has thoroughly trounced your senses.”

“Hmmm... it wass goood.”

Moments later, there were two Stark Tower security guards by his side. He passed the drunk man into their care. “Excelsior!” the man declared as they dragged him off to the elevator.
“Well, as amusing as that was, I do believe it's time we were heading off as well. Though we will by the power of our own feet.”

Thor turned to the old woman who had joined them. Next to her, Stark was looking outraged.

“What already?” he exclaimed.

“We are hardly creatures of the night anymore,” she told him with a soft smile.

“You're just saying that to throw him off your scent,” said Merlin.

She ignored him. “We greatly appreciate the invitation, we've had a lovely evening.”

Merlin stepped forward with a warm, friendly smile. “Yes, it was good to see all of you in one spot for a change,” he said. Then he turned to Thor. “And you should come visit us sometime as well, Thor Odinson.”

Thor bowed to them both. “I shall, my friends.”

It was a few more minutes of fare-wells before they got into the elevator. Thor grinned as watched friends, secretly amused at the strange friendship they'd formed with the two earth spirits, though having spoken to Merlin, he wondered whether he was mistaken in his assessment of them.

Thor closed his eyes and concentrated. But try as he might, he could not feel the power in the scepter. What sort of power did it house that Merlin, this mysterious earth spirit could feel it? Or perhaps the better question should be: just how powerful was this Merlin?

He would ask the All-Father about it tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

There, I even managed to get a Stan Lee cameo into this story. Well, I borrowed one anyway... :)

And, since many of you are probably wondering this, sorry but this is as close to Age of Ultron as I'm going in this story. It's not until after that movie that I'm going to veer off from cannon.

Fun Fact: There's this little china and glass shop in Stratford, Ontario, whose owners have a couple cats. These cats tend to wander around the shop during business hours - kind of like Aithusa (except that, presumably, they really are just cats). I remember finding one of them sleeping curled up in the middle of one of the china displays the one time I visited the shop. Anyway, that's the inspiration for Aithusa's little bit of acrobatics in this chapter.
Two Lost Souls

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for stopping by to read this story, and especially to those of you who've taken the time to leave a comment or kudos. :) This chapter is where this story officially starts to go AU as I side-step Captain America: Civil War. The reason for this should become obvious very quickly. This is a plot point that I've had planned since more or less the beginning and there's simply no way it can be married to the Civil War arc. I'm good at adapting my storylines, but not this good.

The more he walked through the city, the more he felt he could almost touch its familiarity. And yet too much of it felt alien.

One day, weeks ago, he'd woken up with a start, suddenly remembering a day spent at a museum in Washington with absolute clarity. Remembered looking at a large blown-up photo of a man. Sergeant Bucky Barnes: the name echoed in his head and felt somehow right, known. So he'd found a neighbourhood at the outskirts of town – not poor but not so rich that they would have security systems – and broke into one of the houses. He'd showered and shaved and then stole some clothes before finally looking into a plain, full-length mirror hanging in the hallway. His reflection had looked worn, tired and like a less glossy version of Sergeant Bucky Barnes.

There had been no moment of recognition. No sudden remembrance.

He'd cleaned after himself, took some food, and left.

Then he wandered the city again, only now people noticed him. Women, especially. At first he would smile at them, the motion coming naturally, and they would smile back. There should've been words next, he knew and felt how they should've come just as naturally as the smile, smooth with confidence. But they didn't and the moment passed. Both he and the women moved on. Eventually, he stopped smiling at them.

Several men had tried to rob him one night at gunpoint, foolishly thinking he had something to steal. He'd stared at them silently for a very long time, until the one in charge became angry and struck out. It was how he'd acquired his first weapon.

The days blurred together. The sun rose and then it set. He slept whenever he finally felt too tired to go on. Occasionally, he caught a date on a newspaper or the time on a clock through a shop window or a passerby's cellphone display. He knew it had been well after midnight when he'd finally crossed the bridge to Brooklyn. It might've been on a Tuesday.

Brooklyn. The name sounded familiar. The place wasn't.

Except for those moments when it was. When he would round a corner and see a building so familiar something ached inside him. But then he would look beside it and the men's clothing store he'd expected to see was a deli. The signs in the shop windows were different, the logos, the clothes were wrong. Everything was too colourful, too bright, too loud.

He recognized the things he saw. Cars, cellphones, digital displays, computers. He knew what they
did, knew how to use them. But he couldn't understand why they were present. They didn't belong here. This was Brooklyn, a name that felt familiar. Felt like it should've been home.

But this place, this wasn't his home.

Maybe he was the one who didn't belong.

Sometimes, he would walk past a strange-looking sight and automatically turn to his right, to comment on it, knowing it would make his companion laugh. There was never anyone beside him. He would stop and wonder why he'd expected there to be anyone walking beside him. He couldn't remember anyone who would speak to him or laugh with him as a companion... as a friend. There was a hollow space inside him and it felt like a lead weight inside his chest.

Sometimes he would even remember the name of the one he expected to be walking beside him. He would see an image of a short, skinny blond man with kind blue eyes. The hollow space would burn with pain.

'Till the end of the line.

One day, when the breeze was still cold but the snow had slowly begun to melt, he'd walked by a cafe. The smell of coffee and sweet pastries was heavenly, but it was a discarded newspaper that caught his attention. “Captain America and the Avengers Fight Robots on Lexington!” the front page headline screamed. And the picture was in colour, a profile of a man holding a round shield and looking fiercely ahead, muscles tensed as he prepared to leap into action.

He took the newspaper and then found an empty alley with a rusty fire escape. He read the article four times. Then he sat on the fire escape and stared at the front page picture. This man had been his mark. He remembered the briefing, the cold, cruel eyes of his masters.

They weren't his masters anymore.

He ran the fingers of his flesh hand over the picture of the man. Captain America. Cap. No, Steve.

In his mind, he saw determined blue eyes boring into his own.

'Till the end of the line.

Captain America. The Avengers. He wanted to remember those names, to remember how they fit together. He tore off the front page and folded it up carefully. Then he took out the bundle of carefully folded papers from the inside pocket of his coat and gently untied the shoelace that held them together – it already had one knot in it, where he hadn't been gentle enough and snapped it apart instead. He added the folded front page to the small bundle and retied the shoelace. Then he slipped it back into his inside coat pocket and left.

He started noticing newspaper headlines after that.

Sometimes, there was nothing. Once the headline mentioned a Stark Tower being attacked. The name Stark sounded familiar and he could almost see a grinning face and dark amused eyes. But he couldn't remember how the two fit together, so he left the newspaper as it was.

Then there was another headline and a large green beast called the Hulk fighting Iron Man. The Avengers again. Several days and nights passed: he didn't count how many. And then the front page headlines began to mention a place, Sokovia.

His mind conjured up an image of a great stone fortress on a hill, surrounded by forest. He
remembered damp, cold hallways. And then his memory abandoned him once more. Dry, chapped lips moved, his voice cracked and raspy when he spoke and he knew the words were being formed with the Sokovian dialect. He didn't know how he knew that, or how he'd learned the dialect. But he accepted it as truth, as he'd accepted many other things.

One night he broke into a library and borrowed a computer. He researched Sokovia. He found a lot of information, but none of it helped.

He circled Brooklyn and then one night the salty smell of the sea lured him to the dockyards. Like so many things, they felt both familiar and alien. He easily scaled a stack of shipping containers and lay down to stare up at the stars. At some point he fell asleep, waking only when the sun was beginning to rise and the dockyards were stirring with the first sounds of engines and the clanking of machinery.

He spent the rest of the day observing, careful to stay out of sight of both people and security cameras alike.

And he tried to remember, but all he caught were fleeting sensations, half-dissolved images. He remembered the smell of smoke, sweat and exhaustion. Remembered shouts and laughs. He didn't remember the machines, not so many, not here.

The sun, as always, eventually set again and the dockyard went quiet. He flitted through the night like a ghost until he heard voices, low and menacing, just at the edge of the yard. Silently, he went to see who it was. Not a single one of them heard him. They didn't notice him until he was beside them, looking over their shoulders at the impressive array of weapons inside the trunk of a large grey car. He'd seen better, of course, but this would do, he decided.

The unknown men attacked him, tried to kill him. They didn't succeed. He walked away with a second handgun that felt comfortable and familiar in his grip, and an elegant Barrett M99 sniper's rifle. One of his attackers had a sturdy, well-balanced combat knife. He took that as well. The edge of the yard was silent again when he left.

Another day passed. He was vaguely aware of the commotion at the edge of the yard, the police cars and crowds of people, but none of them passed by his current hideaway, so he didn't concern himself with them. Instead, he took apart his new acquisitions and meticulously inspected each piece. Then he found a blanket and carefully wrapped the rifle into its folds.

By nightfall he was feeling restless again.

He gathered up his meager belongings and leaped down from his daytime hiding spot. He took in one, last breath of salty sea air. Then he turned around and began to make his way through the rows of containers, keeping out of view of the security cameras.

That was when he heard the scream.

At first he simply paused in his step. There came another scream, following by yelling. The voice was female, panicked, terrified. Something inside of him felt the need to run to her rescue. He heard the malicious laughter of several men and decided to listen to it.

There were three of them and they smelled of sweat, smoke and cheap alcohol. The woman between them was struggling, but despite their movements – made sloppier than usual from drink – the men were overwhelming her.

He overwhelmed them easily. When the third one slid down the wall of the alley they'd cornered her
into, his skull cracked and bleeding profusely against the brick wall, he finally turned to the woman. She was soaking wet and pale, with long wavy dark hair that cascaded down her slim shoulders.

She was also very naked.

She stared at him with wide, frightened eyes. The wind blew against her flesh and she shivered with the cold, but seemed otherwise unconcerned with her own nakedness. He stared at her, transfixed by all the pale skin that seemed to glow from within the darkness. She shivered again and he finally looked away, searching the area for her clothes. He didn't see any.

Mechanically, he found himself undoing his own coat and then handed it to her, waiting patiently until she reached out uncertainly to take it. She put it on and smiled at him gratefully.

It warmed something inside of him. He wasn't sure why.

“T-thank you,” she finally whispered.

He grunted in acknowledgment. They stood there, staring at each other across the alley.

“Please, may I know the name of my rescuer?” she asked, this time her voice louder, more sure.

He blinked at her. It had been a long time since anyone had asked him his name. No, there had been an old man, who hadn't been an old man. Or, he had at first and then he wasn't anymore. He had asked his name.

“Bucky,” he finally answered her, his voice raspy from disuse. And then, because somewhere deep in his mind a voice chided him about manners: “Who are you?”

The woman blinked at him. Then she frowned. “I... I don't know,” she replied softly. There was no fear in her voice, merely confusion. She was silent for a long moment. “I think... I think I'm looking for someone.”

He nodded. He was also looking for someone. Although, he had a feeling that someone was himself.

She took a step towards him, imploring him with her eyes. “Will you help me?”

Bucky looked down at the woman. She was small and innocent and the city was dangerous. So was he. But he would not hurt her. She wasn't his mark.

He nodded, looking at her. She would need her own coat. And shoes.

“Come with me,” he said. She followed him.
Lol, so glad to see everyone seemed to enjoy that last chapter. I find Bucky such a wonderfully intriguing character to write. And it was neat to, once again, try something a little different in this story. But that's obviously not what you all want to know: you want to know who that woman was. And I'm not going to tell you. I think there are a couple of obvious guesses, which some people have made (check the comments on the last chapter if you want to see), but I'm neither confirming nor denying any of them. All I'll say for sure is that she's not an original character. And that when she becomes really important to the story, you WILL know who she is.

Anyway, thanks for coming back to read the next chapter and for the comments and kudos!

P.S. Slight tissue warning for the beginning of this chapter.

“You know, you didn't hafta come with me,” said Rogue with an exasperated sigh.

Logan just glared at her. And then went back to surveying the people passing them by on the busy street like an over-protective guard dog. “I don't trust them,” he finally grunted. “They're friends with Magneto.”

Rogue rolled her eyes. “They're also friends with the Professor. And Jean liked 'em too.”

He made a face at the reminder. “Jean also spent the afternoon playing dress-up with Mystique. Clearly she was somehow compromised. The old woman probably has some sort of mental ability.”

She snorted. “In case you've forgotten, so does Jean.”

Logan, apparently, had nothing to say to that.

Shaking her head in amusement, Rogue led the way towards Little Italy. It had been a while since the last time she'd been this way, but very little had actually changed. Logan had insisted on coming with her this time since Bobby was busy, but she refused to let his grumpiness dampen her mood. Though, she was wearing a coat against the chill that still lingered in the air, the sun that shining merrily down at her felt warm enough to melt winter away.

Indeed, after a few rainy days, there wasn't really that much snow left to melt away. Not long now and the last vestiges of the cold winter would finally be gone. Which Rogue was very happy about. She'd come to love New York, and she loved the mansion and the school, but she'd never love winter.

Of course, she wasn't the only one enjoying the warm day. The sidewalks were more crowded than usual as people seemed to be using any and every excuse to be outside. Even the bare trees looked a little more alive, as though stoking themselves up for pushing through those first buds.

They found the right street easily enough, the bakery Jean had described to her smelling even more
wonderful than Rogue had remembered – somehow she'd barely noticed it all those months ago when she'd been here with Bobby. It felt like an age had passed since then. And, despite how unusual the encounter here with Pyro had been, she likely wouldn't have given it too much thought afterwards had the old couple who owned the shop not met and then become friends with the Professor. And Magneto, apparently, which Rogue wasn't quite sure what to think of.

Even Logan, for all his growling on the topic, eventually admitted to being impressed by the old woman and her speech at the anti-mutant rally.

And he still called Bobby 'Icicle', much to Bobby's eternal annoyance.

Rogue hadn't, in all honestly, paid much attention to the shops in the area last time, being more preoccupied with Pyro's presence than shopping. She did remember the begonias. It was much too early for them to be in bloom, of course, and so there were no bright splashes of colour to grab her attention. However, it took only a few moments for her to notice the trees lining the street.

There were things hanging from their branches, swaying gently in the wind. The sight was beautiful, mesmerizing to look at. And she saw she wasn't the only one to stop and stare, or come a bit closer to get a better look.

Ribbons. There were dozens of ribbons in a variety of shades from ivory to pale pastels tied to the tree branches. It made the trees look happy, festive, as though they were celebrating the coming spring as much as Rogue was.

“Okay, this is weird,” said Logan.

She rolled her eyes. “It's beautiful, Logan.”

“And weird.”

As they watched, a man and a little boy walked up to one of the trees beside the bakery and then stood there, looking at it while the man talked to the boy in low tones. The boy didn't look more than eight or nine, his head tilting to the right as he eyed the tree critically for a few moments. Suddenly he grinned and his arm shot upwards as he pointed to a branch. The man looked up and seemed to consider the branch before nodding along solemnly. Then he let go of the boy's hand and, in a clearly practiced motion, grabbed the boy under his arms and lifted him over his head to perch on his shoulders.

Curiosity overwhelmed Rogue's life-honed reticence and she walked over to the father and son (because that's obviously what they were). She reached them just as the father was pulling a bright pink ribbon out of his coat pocket and handing it to the little boy.

“Hello, I'm sorry to interrupt,” she said with a smile. The father looked to her and Rogue was surprised to see mist in his eyes. “I, uh, I just saw all these ribbons and was wondering what it was all about.”

It was the little boy, who replied. “It's to make the spirits happy,” he said as he held the pink ribbon carefully. When she looked up, Rogue was further surprised to note the thick scar that cut across the boy's face on an angle, just barely missing his right eye. “Because if they're happy then they'll help everything grow better. Mommy and Sammie liked cake, so we're putting the ribbons here so that their spirits can smell the cake and be even happier.”

Rogue swallowed around the that had suddenly materialized in her throat. Her eyes slid to the bright pink ribbon in the boy's hand. “Sammie was your sister?” she asked gently.
The little boy nodded sadly. “Mommy took us for ice cream and then the aliens came and mommy and Sammie went to heaven. I didn't go to heaven because someone had to make sure daddy wasn't sad and alone.”

He patted his father's head and the father immediately reached up and grabbed his hand, a sudden urgency in his grip.

“I'm very glad you stayed behind to keep me company, Dash,” said the father, his voice sounding slightly choked. “Now why don't you tie Sammie's ribbon.”

“Okay.”

The father let the boy's hand go and grabbed his thigh to keep him from falling off as the child twisted his little body to carefully tie the bright pink ribbon around the branch he'd selected.

“I'm sorry for your loss,” Rouge said softly to the father. The man smile sadly in acknowledgment. “The ribbons are a beautiful gesture. I've never heard of anything like it before.”

“Oh, apparently it's a very old tradition from somewhere,” said the man with a small shrug. “I don't really know where it's from, but my sister-in-law works at one of the cafés down the block and she told me about how people were doing this. It... it just seemed like a nice way to remember someone.”

He paused and looked across the street, at the other ribbon-covered trees.

“And, you're right, it's beautiful. I mean, we go to the graveyard every Sunday after church, but graveyards are such sad, melancholy places...”

“And the trees with ribbons look happy,” Rogue finished for him. “Like they've gotten all dressed up for a party.”

The father smiled. “Exactly. Angela loved parties. I guess it's nice to think of her spirit dancing in the wind.”

“With cake.”

He chuckled. “With cake. Chocolate cake, topped with more chocolate, topped with strawberries and a mound of whipped cream.”

Rogue laughed. “Sounds wonderful!”

“All done, daddy!” the little boy announced loudly.

“That's great, buddy! Now it's my turn.” He grabbed his son and lifted him over his head again in order to carefully place him back on the ground.

Rogue watched as he then took out a beautiful thick white satin ribbon. It was a little crinkled and fraying on one end, where it had been cut, but none of its imperfections stopped it from gleaming in the early spring sun.

“It's lovely,” she said softly.

The man looked at it with a wistful smile. “I cut it from her wedding dress.” He shrugged. “It just seemed right. I mean, I know that it doesn't really matter what ribbon I use but, well, it's just that...”

“It matters to you.”
He nodded, seemingly at a loss for words, and Rogue realized she was intruding on a very private moment.

“Well, thank you for the explanation,” she said with a smile and went back to join Logan.

Logan hadn't come with her, but she knew his sharp ears had heard every word from where he'd been standing pretending he wasn't paying attention. He raised an eyebrow at her when he reached his side. “Seriously, ribbons that call spirits that bring the spring?” he said.

“If it'll get rid of the snow faster, I'm all for it,” she said primly. She glanced back to the father and son. “Besides, I think it's sweet.”

Logan rolled his eyes. “Of course you do,” he muttered.

She ignored him as she crossed the street to the antiques shop. After pausing for a moment to admire the lovely stained-glass window set into the door, she opened the door and stepped inside. And found herself transported into a world of mystery and wonder. At least that's what her nana would've probably said.

As she stood there, taking in the atmosphere of the shop, she understood why the Professor kept coming back. There was a timeless sort of peacefulness here, like in the middle of a forest where the tree canopy was so thick it only let in a few rays of sunlight. Though she knew next to nothing about antiques, even she could tell many of the items around her were museum-worthy pieces. And yet, here in the shop, they seemed so much more alive than anything she'd ever seen in a museum.

Like the be-ribboned trees outside, there was something magical in this shop.

Logan interrupted her thoughts by growling.

Rogue turned to him. The other X-man was bristling with tension as he scanned the area, his nose flaring every few seconds in that way it did when he was catching an unpleasant, or unknown, scent.

“What is it, Logan?” she asked him, suddenly worried Magneto was in the shop. It hadn't even occurred to her that he might be, but she supposed it was entirely possible.

“There's a smell I don't recognize,” Logan answered her after a while. “An animal, a big one too... it's almost lizard-ish...”

“A large lizard. You mean... like a dinosaur?”

Logan glared at her.

Rogue smiled impishly. “Or, I know, how about a dragon?”

Logan's eyes narrowed with annoyance. “You've been spending too much time with Jean. I'm serious, though, this smell is everywhere and I have no idea what it is.”

“It probably arrived along with the shipment we just received from the Pakistan,” said an elderly male voice.

Already on edge, Logan whirled around to face the intruder and automatically unsheathed his claws. Rogue also spun around and stepped closer to Logan.

There was an old man standing beside a long dining room table laden with china holding a steaming Iron Man mug in his hands. He raised an eyebrow at them. Based on Jean's description, this
was obviously Merlin. Rogue couldn't help but wonder at how he seemed to fit the name perfectly.

“I'm flattered, young man, that you think I am enough of a threat that you might need those to disrupt my no-doubt nefarious schemes, whatever they may be,” said Merlin, his tone mild but clearly mocking.

Logan, rather predictably, bristled. “You should never assume that just because someone looks harmless, that they really are.”

“Ah, yes, that is quite true. It's never wise to judge based on appearances alone.” The old man took a sip of his drink and then placed the mug down onto the table beside him. Still, those are really quite fascinating.”

Despite his words, Logan must've already decided the old man wasn't, in fact, a threat, because he barely twitched when Merlin came closer. Although, possibly he was also more stunned than anything when the old man barely hesitated before gently taking Logan's hand. Rogue was surprised her friend allowed it at all, except that even from where she was standing it was clear the old man's grip was loose, not meant to be constricting in the slightest.

“Hm... yes, nice sturdy blades, I see...” the old man muttered as he carefully examined Logan's claws from all sides. “I personally would have made them a couple hairs slimmer for a more efficient design, but the point is nicely curved. Though, more importantly—” He tapped a knuckle against one of the claws. “—this isn't steel.”

It wasn't a question.

Logan took a step back and the old man let go of his hand. The claws retracted with a soft 'snick' and Wolverine eyed the old man warily.

“Just who the hell are you, old man?” he demanded, the snarl back in his voice.

“Logan...” Rogue tried to calm him down despite being just as taken aback by the old man.

Merlin merely smiled serenely – though his eyes were clearly laughing at them. “Me? I'm just an old man who co-owns an antiques shop.” He paused. “Though, I suppose I am also a bit of an amateur weapon's expert.”

“An amateur expert?” Logan repeated sarcastically. “That doesn't even make sense. What do you, build bombs in your spare time?”

Now the expression on Merlin's face was clearly disgust. “No, absolutely not! I deal explicitly in bladed weapons. And the odd musket. Come, I'll show you.”

The shop, it turned out, just went on forever. Beyond the regular shop, there was a secret shop filled with rooms of treasures. Rogue loved it.

Logan did not. From the moment they stepped into the dimly-lit hallway, he was once again on edge and tense, his eyes darting from side to side, seemingly waiting for something to jump out at him. Nothing did.

If the old man noticed Logan's unease, he didn't mention it as he steadily led them on down the dim hallway. Until, finally, he came to an open door and stepped through.

Both Rogue and Logan stopped in the doorway and gaped at the walls, where almost every usable inch seemed to be covered in some sort of bladed or otherwise medieval weapon. And, as though
that weren't enough, there were also several racks of spears, lances, and a smaller one of muskets.

“That's a lot of fucking blades,” said Logan.

Rogue just nodded. “Uh huh.”

Just like everything else in this shop, the blades didn't look dull and useless. *These* weren't museum pieces, these were weapons. While she couldn't gauge how sharp they were with any accuracy, they definitely looked dangerous.

Logan walked over to a wall of wicked-looking long daggers – some of them were long enough that Rogue thought they might' ve actually been short swords – and looked at them closely. He reached out and ran a finger along one of them. Though she was across the room, Rogue still saw the blood that beaded his finger for a moment.

He whistled in appreciation. “Wow, these are really sharp.” He looked over to the old man. “You sharpen them yourself, old man?”

“Of course,” said Merlin with amusement, and a hint of pride. “Most people these days don't appreciate the elegance of a well-sharpened blade. But a blade that is allowed to grow dull and become useless is then nothing more than a decoration, which it was never meant to be. These were forged to be weapons and they deserve to be treated as such even if they never truly taste of battle again.”

“Were any of these used in battles?” Rogue asked, curious despite herself.

“Hm, quite a few of them, I should think. During the times when many of these were forged, only very wealthy noblemen could afford to own decorative swords, or else knights who'd distinguished themselves in battle and were thus given these swords as gifts. And even then, the swords themselves were real enough, only the pommels and sheaths were inlaid with gold and precious stones, making them rather impractical for battle.”

Rogue looked around the room again, the realization that she was surrounded by weapons that had been used to kill people, made it seem even more menacing than before. She could imagine the blood spilling down the walls from every blade. There was nothing elegant about them anymore.

Logan, naturally, just grinned at the room. “Cool. Cyclops got to play dress-up and I get swords.”

Rogue rolled her eyes. “Well, if it's alright with you, I think I'm about done with things that kill people.”

“And that's a healthy attitude to have, young lady.”

They both whirled around at the voice from behind them and Rogue found herself automatically fixing her posture at the tone. It was the old lady. Only she was wearing beige coveralls liberally smudged with dirt and oil, and equally dirty heavy brown work boots. She also clearly wasn't actually interested in them, instead looking past them to the old man.

“Merlin, have you sent out the supply order out yet?” she said.

“No, I haven't,” Merlin answered. “Did you have something to add?”

“Yes, I'm on my last grinder belt.”

“That's a different supplier. And there's no point in filling out an order form just for the belts. We can
go down to the hardware store for that.”

The old woman rolled her eyes. “The regular hardware store won't have the industrial ones I use. I'll see if there's anything else I need and you can put in a full order.”

Merlin narrowed his eyes at her. “You know, you could just go fill the order out yourself.”

“Yes, I know, but you're much better at that computing contraption than I am.”

Rogue couldn't help the giggle that escaped her. It brought the old woman's attention to her. She frowned at her thoughtfully.

“You look familiar, young lady,” she said. “Have you been here before?”

“Ah, well not inside the shop,” Rogue answered. “But I'm one of Professor X's students.”

The old woman snapped her fingers. “You're the young lady that was with the Ice...”

Logan snickered. “See, told ya I wasn't the one who started that.”

“Um, yea, that was me,” said Rogue, ignoring Logan's amusement. “I'd heard about the shop from Jean so I was, uh, curious to see it for myself.”

“And you let Merlin drag you here?!” The old woman glared at her business partner. “Honestly, you enjoying showing off this room entirely too much, old man.”

The old man grinned cheekily at her. “Well, the young man had already shown me his blades, so it was only fair I showed him mine.”

The old woman rolled her eyes. “Men!” Then she turned to Rogue. “Come along, young lady, there are many more, less phallic rooms in this place.”

Rogue giggled. “I'd love to see them.”

She followed the old lady back down the hallway, the old lady's shuffling pace slow enough that she was able to peek into several of the rooms they passed. There was an entire room dedicated to musical instruments and another one that seemed to be a jumble of porcelain and antique vases. Once again, Rogue was reminded of her nana, something that hadn't happened in a very long time.

It was likely only because thoughts of her nana were already so close to the surface of her mind that she noticed the doll as they passed. Rogue gasped in recognition and found herself walking through the open door before she'd consciously thought of it.

The doll's taffeta dress was more lilac than blue she noticed when she got closer, but the cut and scalloped hemline were identical. She even had the same wavy blonde hair and straw hat that was a few shades darker than the dress, and the crocheted fingerless gloves Rogue had loved as a child. Even as an adult, she found the details were impressive for what was designed to be a child's toy. The white on white embroidered slip and matching white pantaloons were completed with small cotton socks and black oil fabric shoes.

Rogue heard the old lady come up behind her. “My nana had one just like this,” she told her.

“Aaah, that explains it,” the old lady replied. “I thought it was a rather odd choice for you to notice the dolls. That's a 1940 Arranbee Debu'teen doll, your nana must've received hers when she was child.”
Rogue nodded. “Her father gave it to her just before he shipped out to war. They hadn't had much then, so he got it second-hand, but she said it was still the most beautiful doll she'd ever seen. It was the last gift he ever gave her.”

“I see.”

Behind them, she was vaguely aware of Logan and Merlin wandering into the room.

“And you were complaining about the weapon's room?” she heard Logan say incredulously. “This room is way creepier.”

Rogue blinked and looked away from the Debu'teen doll. The rest of the room was lined with showcases and shelves, dolls lined up in neat rows. Dozens upon dozens of glass, plastic and painted-on eyes staring blankly ahead. She shivered.

“It does sort of look like the opening to a horror movie,” she said.

“A really bad horror movie,” Logan added.

The old woman grimaced. “Admittedly, I'm not thrilled with this set-up,” she said. “We used to have the dolls spread out throughout the shop, but we get quite a few collectors coming through and it just ended up being easier to have them all in one place.” She frowned. “Though, usually, we keep this door closed.”

Rogue nodded. She turned back to the doll and smiled at the memories of her nana. Her former life, and everything that came with it, wasn't something she allowed herself to think about much. Like with most mutant children, the bad that came towards the end often out-weighed most of the good that had come before it. But her nana had died when Rogue was twelve. Her memory wasn't tarnished with anything else.

She suddenly wondered what had happened to that doll.

The smell of leather and cigarettes announced Logan's presence at her side.

“Do you want the doll?” he asked softly.

Rogue blinked and turned to Logan. “Pardon?”

He huffed in exasperation. “The doll. Do you want it?”

“I... it's not necessary.”

Logan watched her with narrowed eyes for a moment and whatever he saw there made him nodded once and then turn to the old lady. “We'll take the doll.”

Rogue's eyes widened. “Logan, you really don't have to—” she tried.

“–It's a happy memory, right?” he cut her off.

She blinked. “Well, yes.”

“People like us don't get many of those, not from that far back. You should cherish the ones you do have.”

She swallowed down the lump that had lodged itself in her throat and nodded, not trusting herself to speak just yet.
“Well, I'll just let Merlin take care of you,” said the old woman softly. She gestured to herself. “Wouldn't want to risk getting her dirty, after all.”

The old man was gentle with the doll, carefully straightening her skirts and smoothing down her locks before wrapping her generously in purple tissue paper and then placing her into a plain brown paper bag. Logan grumbled only a little at the price as he paid and Rogue decided to make him her mama's gumbo as thanks – extra spicy, the way he liked it.

“One last thing before you go,” said Merlin as Rogue took the bag from him. He reached behind the delightfully old fashioned cash register and pulled out a dark wicker basket, which he held out to them. “Here, take one if you like. Apparently it's become all the rage.”

The basket was full of ribbons, each carefully wound tightly into a roll and secured with string.

Rogue looked at the old man critically. “Did you start this ribbon thing?” she asked.

Merlin's eyes twinkled mischievously as he replied: “Young lady, Nimueh and I have done this 'ribbon thing', as you call it, every year. This is simply the first year someone bothered to ask why.”

Logan snorted. “You willing to do anything to get spring here faster too?”

There was a strange look on Merlin's face when he looked up at Logan. “The spring?”

Rogue frowned. “That's what we heard from someone outside. That the ribbons are supposed to attract good spirits, which will help spring come faster.”

“Aah, well, I suppose that's not entirely wrong.” Merlin shook his head in amusement. “The ribbons are meant to attract good spirits and appease the restless, angry ones. They're a protection of sorts. In a way, by protecting against evil, they do ensure that nothing will stop spring from coming. The druids believed that if you start the growing season off with good energy, then it will make it more difficult for evil to take hold during the rest of the year. The ritual was meant to mainly protect crops and ensure a healthy harvest and healthy livestock.”

“So the ribbons aren't meant to be dedicated to loved ones who are gone?” Rogue asked, feeling slightly disappointed.

“A ribbon on its own is just a piece of fabric. A ribbon imbibed with a memory and dedicated to a loved one, now that has power.”

Rogue smiled. “But there are no spells to recite?”

Merlin snorted. “You've watched too much television, young lady.” He leaned in closer, as though he was about to impart some great wisdom. “Magic isn't just about spellcasting. The simplest things can be magical. Every ritual is a form of magic, only some are more powerful than others. And sometimes, each individual ritual isn't very powerful. But if you combine them...”

The corners of her lips twitched. “So, what you're saying is that one ribbon isn't very powerful, but if you put hundreds of ribbons together, then they are.”

“You can think of it as an allegory if you like.”

Rogue laughed and carefully sifted through the ribbons, until she found one that was a lovely pale pink with delicately embroidered cream-coloured flowers running down the middle. She seemed to remember her nana having a parasol that was about the same colour. She thanked the old man for the ribbon and then she and Logan left the store.
Outside, the sun was still out, but they could see grey clouds coming in from the east. Rogue hoped it was rain and not fresh snow. The wind had picked up, blowing through the ribbons and making them dance.

It gave Rogue an idea. With a smile she hoped looked charming, she turned to Logan.

“Hey, do you mind if we make one last stop before going back?”

Logan raised an eyebrow. “Sure, I guess,” he answered.

“Great!”

The dark grey clouds had, in the end, resolved into rain. A fairly gentle rain, considering its dramatic arrival. It didn't last long and an hour and a half later, the sun was once again peeking out of the clouds. Dinner was accompanied by a beautiful sunset, the purple and pink hues stretching out around torn-up remains of dark grey.

Rogue stared in awe at the sky, ignoring the dinner conversation around her as she reached into her pocket and took out the ribbon. She stood and left without a word to anyone, somehow knowing the moment was perfect. Sure, she didn't really believe in spirits, but even if it all existed only in her mind, she still wanted to share this moment with her nana. Just like her nana had once shared many moments with her, sitting on her porch drinking homemade iced tea.

Rogue pulled herself up into the crown of one of the trees at the back of the school. It overlooked the area most of the students gathered in and she thought her nana would enjoy watching their antics. It was also Rogue's favourite reading tree in the summer.

She carefully unwound the ribbon and ran her hand along it, feeling the smooth bumps of the flowers under her fingers.

“I miss you, nana,” she whispered and then tied the ribbon to a branch, making sure to do it tightly so the wind wouldn't blow it away.

By the time she climbed down there were several people waiting for her, eyeing her curiously.

“What are you doing, Rogue?” Storm asked, her eyes darting up to the ribbon.

Rogue felt her cheeks colour slightly in embarrassment. “Well, uh, Logan and I went down to that antiques shop in Little Italy today and all the trees on the streets had ribbons tied to their branches,” she began. “Apparently it’s an old druid tradition. See, you sort of dedicate the ribbon to someone and their spirit becomes tied to the ribbon. One ribbon doesn’t do much, but a lot of ribbons are supposed to apparently work together to appease bad spirits and attract the good ones, and uh... protect against evil. And maybe sort of make sure those evil spirits don’t keep spring from coming sooner.”

“Spirits?” said Scott skeptically.

Rogue shrugged. “Yeah, it's a bit out there, but the ribbons look pretty. And it's not like it hurts the trees.”
Jean smiled warmly. “And it is a nice thought that the people you love are so close to you even after they’re gone,” she said softly. “Who’s your ribbon dedicated to?”

Looking up at the ribbon, Rogue smiled. “My nana. You know, I hadn’t thought of her in years.”

The familiar whir of wheelchair mechanics announced Professor Xavier's arrival and the X-men parted to let him through.

“Regardless of whether or not spirits are real, it is a lovely ritual,” the Professor said with a soft smile. His eyes twinkled conspiratorially. “And, I suspect, the reason for the large bag of ribbons sitting next to the door.”

Rogue felt her blush return. “Yes, Professor. I just thought if anyone wanted to join in…”

And then Professor Xavier lifted his hand to show off the simple white ribbon he was holding. He looked to the side. “Jean, would mind giving me a hand?”

“Of course, Professor,” she said.

Rogue felt a warmth spread through her as she watched Jean levitate Professor Xavier up to the treetop so that he could tie his ribbon gently onto a branch. No one bothered to ask whose memory it was dedicated to. It didn’t matter.

By the end of the week, every tree on the grounds of the Xavier Institute was covered in ribbons.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Notes: I honestly have no idea whether or not the druids did the ribbon thing. In fact, I suspect not. You’ll remember, however, how the show had ribbons and dangling strips of metal hanging from trees in a lot of their sacred spots (example: S4 ep10, Herald of the New Age), but no one ever bothers to explain why. So I’ve decided to randomly step in with an explanation, even though I expect the actual explanation was ‘because it looked cool’.
Wow, just wow. Between the two sites I post this story on, I was absolutely floored by the response on that last chapter. I mean, don't get me wrong, if I didn't like an idea, I wouldn't write, but I certainly hadn't expected my ribbon story to get such an enthusiastic response. Thank you, all of you, for your comments, kudos, etc.

I also have a confession to make: that chapter had actually been completed for a while, but because of stuff going on it took me nearly two weeks to get around to editing it. The upside to that is that due to that same stuff going on, I'd had this chapter about 2/3 done when I posted that one (it was easier for me to write than edit, so I just continued writing). So, here's another long chapter for you! Well, long for this story anyway.

Steve tried very hard not to be irritated at Vision. It really wasn't his fault he stuck out like a sore thumb even on the crowded, indifferent streets of New York City. Steve never had this problem when he ventured out – or at least not too often. Sure, a lot of the people in the places he regularly visited had long ago realized who he was, but most of the time he was the right sort of blandly all-American blond that he could pass by without recognition until he put on the uniform.

Vision, on the other hand, was very distinctive and instantly recognizable as an Avenger. Which meant the rest of them got recognized by association. It was quickly becoming tiresome as the public wanted to meet the new Avengers team.

Wanda, especially, didn't seem to know what to do with all the attention so Steve was sticking close to her and keeping most of it on him. Decorum be damned, he could've kissed Natasha when she sidled up to him and said she knew a shortcut they could take.

Natasha's shortcut led them through several back allies and the kitchen of a Russian restaurant whose cooks looked suspiciously muscled and were packing handguns beneath their white smocks. At least one of them was also armed with an ankle holster, but if Natasha didn't care, then Steve wasn't going to mention it.

He also wasn't going to ask why there was a Russian restaurant in Little Italy.

Words couldn't possibly describe how relieved he was when they finally came out of an alley and out into a familiar street. Then he saw the trees: they were still mostly bare, with a light peppering of bright green from newly-sprung leaves, and covered in ribbons. They were mostly shades of white or pale pink, but a few bright coloured strips of fabric also fluttered merrily in the breeze. It made the street look as though it were celebrating the coming of spring.


“Yeah, Tony and I flew over Central Park yesterday and it's full of them too,” said Rhodey. “But I gotta say, it looks like someone really went to town on this street.”

“Is there some sort of meaning to these ribbons?” Vision asked, sounding intrigued.
“Something about it being an ancient druid tradition to commemorate the dead by attracting their spirits...” Rhodey shrugged as he trailed off. “Whatever it is, the whole city's just sort of adopted it this year. There's this copse of trees in Central Park dedicated just to those who died during the Chitauri Invasion and another one to victims of 9/11. No one knows who started it, but it's become a thing. Like, a huge thing.”

“There are worse traditions to revive,” said Steve with a smile, already mentally counting how many ribbons he'd need for the Howlers, his mom, Howard, maybe even Colonel Phillips.

“It is kind of pretty,” said Natasha from the head of the group.

“Probably why it caught on,” said Sam pragmatically, eyeing Steve out of the corner of his eye. “And I'm going to find myself in a craft store looking at ribbons this afternoon, aren't I?”

Steve flushed. “You don't have to come. I'm pretty sure your promise to stick by me doesn't include ribbon shopping.”

“Oh, I'm coming alright. Who else is gonna take pictures of Captain America looking at ribbons and post them on Instagram? 'Cause knowing you, you're not gonna be happy with any old ribbons. Oh, no, you'll be dragging me to all the ribbons-selling places you can think of until you've found just the right ones.”

“You know, Merlin and Nimueh probably sell ribbons,” Natasha pointed out with a roll of her eyes just as she set out past the beribboned trees towards the antiques shop.

Steve's eyes lit up at that. “Say, that's right, they probably do!”

He hurried after Natasha, oblivious to the bemused looks that followed him.

Tension he hadn't even been aware he'd been carrying melted away the moment he stepped into the antiques shop. No matter how aware he was of the shop's actual size, the front never failed to feel cozy and small. At first glance the space was abandoned, but Steve instinctively knew its proprietors were somewhere nearby. He took advantage of their absence to drink in the atmosphere and scan the space for changes and new additions.

“Woah, no wonder Pepper likes this place,” he heard Rhodey say from just inside the doorway.

Beside him, Natasha turned around to smirk at her new teammate. “So do Clint and Stark.”

“Right, the crazy Tesla boat. Wait, Clint? Why does Clint like this place?”

“Merlin sells historical weapons. Clint got his crossbow here.”

Sam looked thoughtful for a moment. “You know, I still haven't seen that weapon's room.”

“It's impressive,” Natasha told him, a gleam in her eye that would've made most sane people nervous.

A loud meow interrupted the Avenger's chatter and Steve stopped his perusal of the shop in favour of looking down. Aithusa wasted darted forward and wound her way around his legs, purring loudly as she brushed herself all over him. Steve grinned and knelt down.

“Hey, Aithusa,” he greeted her, reaching out to carefully scratch behind her ears. “I'm sorry I haven't been by in a while.”
“Pretty sure that's not the apology she's waiting for,” Natasha drawled before kneeling down next to him and running her hand along the white cat's spine.

True to form, Aithusa twisted around to accept Natasha's attention for a short moment, before turning back to Steve and bumping her head into his other hand – the one holding onto the plastic bag in his coat pocket. Steve laughed and slipped the package out of his pocket.

“Yeah, I guess actions speak louder than words, huh?” he said.

“Or, in this case, fish,” said Sam, his voice clearly amused.

“Wait, this is why we stopped at that fish market so Steve could buy a pathetic amount of fish?” Rhodey said, sounding incredulous.

Steve shrugged. “This is one lady that deserves to be treated right,” he said as he easily tore the plastic apart and set it down on the ground. He leaned even further down to whisper to Aithusa. “It's shark this time. I figured you might get a kick out of tearing into something that once had more teeth than you.”

Aithusa paused before the fish and looked up at Steve. She cocked her head and Steve got an impression of amusement before she looked away again and tore into the fish. He scratched her behind the ear softly before standing to face the others.

Who were looking at him with amusement.

“Does Tony know about this?” Rhodey asked. “I only ask 'cause I don't remember him ever mentioning it and I feel like this is the sort of thing he'd never ever let anyone forget. It sort of takes some of the inherent machoness out of Captain America when he lets a cute cuddly cat wrap him around its finger like that.”

“Aithusa's a 'she',” said Steve, feeling indignant on her behalf.

Sam snorted. “Yeah, you're not helping yourself there.”

Steve shrugged, accepting the ribbing good-naturedly. Then he noticed the expressions on Wanda and Vision's faces. Wanda's eyes were wide with what looked like a mixture of awe, confusion and worry, but Vision's was pinched with confusion... and something more. It took Steve a few moments to identify the other emotion he was seeing on Vision's face: fear. Frowning, Steve followed Vision's line of sight and realized he was staring right at Aithusa.

Vision was afraid of Aithusa?

While Vision was as much of enigma as he was anything else, he was also one of the most stoic people Steve had ever known. Everything in the world was new to him and Vision seemed to approach it all with an admirable sort of bemused curiosity and wonder. Steve had never seen him this openly scared before.

Standing, he moved towards them. “Vision, Wanda, are you guys okay?” he asked, carefully watching their reactions.

Wanda blinked and then seemed to come back to herself, but the awe lingered in the back of her eyes. “I am fine,” she said. “This place... I have no words to describe it. Not even in Sokovian. Is different to anything I have ever felt before.” She paused. “Is powerful.”

“Y-yes, I believe I feel something like that as well,” said Vision, his voice uncharacteristically shaky.
“Only I feel as though part of me is...”

He frowned as he trailed off.

“A part of you is what?” Natasha asked gently.

Vision's eyes flicked over to her. “I... I am not certain of the feeling. However, I think it wants me to stay. I feel a desire to find the source of this power.”

Steve shifted uncertainly. Could Merlin and Nimueh be hiding some sort of horrible power? He supposed it was possible... Something inside of Steve constricted sharply at that thought.

“Maybe it's something inside the shop,” Sam suggested carefully. “I mean with all the stuff in this place, the old couple could've easily picked up some sort of Asgardian artifact or something by accident.”

Yes, thought Steve, that had to be it.

Wanda, however, immediately shook her head. “No, this feeling, it is everywhere.”

“Perhaps it is something alive, rather than an artifact,” Vision suggested, and when Steve looked over he saw that his eyes were once again glued to Aithusa.

“What, Aithusa?” Sam asked with a laugh. “Granted, she's got some sort of magical ability to wrap super soldiers around her furry paws, but she's just a cat, man.”

“That creature is not 'just' anything,” said Vision resolutely.

Aithusa chose that moment to look up from her fish and up at Vision. The fur on her back instantly stood on end as she hissed at the Avenger. Even Steve had to admit the previously adorable cat suddenly looked menacing, dangerous. Vision paled and took a step back.

“Aithusa!” a sudden voice cut sharply through the tension. “Is that any way to treat our guests?”

The cat immediately stopped hissing. Her fur settled somewhat as she turned to look back to where Nimueh was now standing beside the ever-present waiter and his bulging-eyed fish. She meowed loudly at Nimueh. The old woman looked down at the cat and held her gaze, a frown slowly appearing on the old woman's face. After a few moments, the cat turned away to once again devote her energy to devouring the shark steak.

Nimueh shook her head and then smiled warmly at them. “I apologize it took me so long to get up here, but I was receiving an order of supplies at the back entrance.” She stepped forward and touched him gently on the arm, her eyes serious despite the smile on her face. “Steven, Natasha, it's good to see you again. I'm glad you both made it back in one piece.”

Steve felt his breath catch at the simple sentiment. The entire Ultron affair was clouded with so many casualties, so many wrong decisions, miscalculations, so much room for recriminations that their ultimate victory felt hollow. The best they could say in the end was: it could've been worse. As a mantra, it was weak.

To have someone just simply be glad he'd made it back alive... he hadn't been aware he'd needed that until this very moment.

He took Nimueh's hand and squeezed it, amazed by how the old woman had, once again, known exactly what to say. “Thank you.”
She squeezed back. “You're welcome, young man. Now, why don't you two show your friends where the seating is while I go make us a pot of tea. The old curmudgeon should be down soon as well. He's been unpacking and cleaning up his newest acquisition.”

“Swords?” Natasha asked, curious.

“No, although he did receive a set of throwing stars the other day. This one's some sort of vintage portable computer. Looked a bit like a very large, very heavy beige suitcase. Certainly nothing anyone in this day and age would call portable, but that's what he claimed it was.”

“Bet Tony'd know what it is,” said Rhodey.

The corners of Nimueh's lips quirked. “Without a doubt, Colonel Rhodes. Now, please have a seat while I make tea.”

Steve let Natasha lead the way to the table that sat around the corner, seemingly perpetually waiting for guests to come for tea. Which, as far as Steve could tell, was entirely its purpose.

Which was why he was shocked to notice the table had changed. In place of the previous metal table with floral cushions, sat a large round wooden table with a single pedestal leg and symbols carved into the top. An attempt to make it look less imposing had been made by placing an elaborate white and gold crocheted doily with a beautiful red crystal vase full of yellow roses. And yet, despite the decorations and the motley collection of wooden chairs surrounding it, the table still seemed to posses a dignity and air of importance.

Sam ran a hand along its edge and whistled. “Wow, this looks hand-carved,” he said, obviously impressed. He looked up at Steve, laughter in his eyes. “Also like a piece of furniture even you and Thor would have a hard time destroying.”

Steve chuckled.

“Young man, I would sincerely recommend not trying to destroy that table,” said a familiar voice from behind them. Steve turned to see Merlin watching them, walking stick in hand and eyes twinkling with mirth. “You might hurt yourselves.”

Sam barked with laughter. “Yeah, that wouldn't surprise me.”

“Hi, Merlin,” Natasha called to him. “You changed the table.”

“Hm. Yes, we do that every once in while. Change is good for the soul, after all.”

“It feels old,” said Wanda suddenly.

Merlin looked to her. “Well this is an antiques shop, young lady. We don't exactly keep many new things around.”

“You did notice the cash register, right?” Sam whispered to her loudly.

“Having said that,” Merlin continued without acknowledging Sam. “Yes, this table is particularly old. The Celtic lettering carved into its top date it back to somewhere in the first half of the first millennium of our calendar.”

“Seriously?!” Rhodey exclaimed, his hands suddenly leaving the tabletop as though they'd been burned. “That's not old, that's ancient, like this should seriously be in a museum ancient.”
Even Wanda's eyes had widened. Steve stared at the table with a new sense of awe. No wonder if felt important. Who knew what sort of people had sat at it in all that time. Had this table been built for war councils? Had thousands of families sat around it to eat dinner? He stepped forward and ran his hand along the table's edge, as though he could somehow absorb their stories just by touching it.

They didn't even make things like this in his time; the table was even more out of time than he was. Somehow, he felt a sense of kinship with it.

“And what, pray tell, would a table do in a museum?” Merlin demanded. “Sit and be gawked at? A table is meant to be used, to have platters and plates and pointless decorations heaped onto it, have people lean against it, sit and talk around it, eat and spill wine on its surface.”

Steve grinned and grabbed a chair before resolutely sitting down and folding his arms on the tabletop. The others looked at him with some incredulity. He just shrugged. “What? When are you going to have a chance to use anything this old? Merlin's right, the only thing you can do with furniture in museums is look at it.”

Natasha smiled slyly and then hopped up to sit on top of the tabletop, swinging her legs pointedly and raising an eyebrow at Steve.


Merlin burst out laughing.

Seeing his reaction, the others finally shrugged and sat down – on the chairs. Natasha hopped down from the tabletop once Nimueh returned with the tea. As she poured it, Aithusa trotted over to join them, leaping onto Steve's lap and curling up for a nap. Steve chuckled at her and couldn't help but peek over at Vision, only to realize with dismay that his new fellow Avenger still looked decidedly on-edge by her presence.

Vision must've felt him watching, because suddenly he looked up and met Steve's eyes. Steve clamped down on his initial reaction. He wasn't proud of it, but there was something unnervingly inhuman about Vision's stare – even if it had been possible to ignore Vision's odd skin colouring, his eyes never let a person forget that he wasn't really human. Like the Hulk, Steve knew he could trust Vision and hated that he still hadn't gotten past his instinctive reaction. Something he'd actually found easier with the Hulk – perhaps simply because he'd known there was a human underneath. Because anger was a very human emotion.

He missed the giant green rage monster more than he'd thought he would.

Steve met Vision's piercing, nearly emotionless eyes calmly and didn't look away.

After a moment, Vision sighed. “I apologize,” he said softly. “I find myself unable to correctly articulate just why I am feeling so... uneasy around that creature.” He paused for a moment, looking away from Steve and back down to Aithusa thoughtfully. “This cat, as you called it, is quite unlike anything I have encountered before. It is an ordinary creature as much as I am an ordinary man.”

Steve's hand stilled in Aithusa's fur. He couldn't deny that she had always seemed awfully intelligent even for a cat, but outside that he'd only ever seen her act like any other cat.

“Stop jumping at shadows, young man,” Merlin gently admonished Vision. “I assure you, Aithusa is mostly harmless.”

Vision's gaze snapped up to Merlin.
Beside him, Wanda looked thoughtfully at the old man. “Mostly harmless?” she asked.

Merlin snorted. “She's a lady who knows her own mind and comes equipped with a full set of teeth and claws.”

Wanda smiled. “I see.”

Aithusa chose that moment to uncurl herself and stretch on Steve's lap, yawning widely so as to show up said full set of teeth.

“Man, that cat sure has the best timing,” said Rhodey with a chuckle.

Steve chuckled with amusement as he watched Aithusa rearrange herself into a slightly different position on his lap. She purred loudly when he resumed stroking her, stopping only to accept a cup of tea from Nimueh. The old woman smiled and then steered their conversation towards their actual mission: decorations for the new Avenger's living quarters.

Also, Steve needed to finally replace that turntable hydra had shot up.

Merlin wasn't quite sure of the time when he felt the arrival on the rooftop. He didn't bother checking, just grabbed the bottle of scotch and two glasses – and his coat, because while the air had gotten noticeably warmer and no longer held the chill of winter, the nights were still cold.

Aithusa was already waiting for him at the bottom of the steps when he arrived. He rolled his eyes at her and whispered a spell under his breath. She was bounding up the stairs as soon as she heard the soft click of the door unlocking. Amused, Merlin followed more slowly in her wake.

He had to step over her tail once he reached the top, elbowing her in the flank so he could get around the dragon's bulk. Aithusa immediately shuffled to the side to let him pass, her neck rising and twisting around to look at him. It was strange, Merlin thought to himself: Aithusa played the cat so convincingly – a role she clearly enjoyed – it sometimes took him aback for a moment to see her as a dragon.

And then the figure she'd been greeting stepped into view.

“Hello, Merlin,” said Daredevil with a friendly smile as he placed a hand on Aithusa's neck, rubbing the warm scales gently.

“Good evening, young man,” Merlin greeted as he shuffled forward. “I haven't seen you in a few months. How did your friend's mother like the vase?”

His smile widened. “She loved it, said it was the most beautiful vase she'd ever seen. Foggy was jealous he hadn't thought of coming here to do his Christmas shopping.”

Merlin chuckled. “So we can expect him for next year?”

“Who, Foggy? Nah, he'll probably still end up at the mall two days before Christmas with a list that's half a mile long. Unless he can convince someone to do it for him this year.”

“Ah, I see. He's a creature of unfortunate habit then.”
Daredevil chuckled. “Something like that.” Aithusa nudged him from behind and he laughed, twisting around to pet her along the ridges of her forehead. “You know, I never pictured a dragon being so affectionate.”

Merlin snorted. “She wasn't before she began posing as a cat. I'm only thankful she hasn't taken to pouncing on moving objects when she's in her real form.”

“Hm, all those cars down there... It would be fun!”

“You'd get mistaken for Godzilla!” Merlin snapped at her.


“Um, Godzilla?” Daredevil asked, obviously confused by Merlin's seemingly random.

“Ah, nevermind, young man,” Merlin waved him off using the glasses as he began to shuffle over to the table. “Join me for a glass of scotch and you can tell me what brings you out of your usual territory tonight.”

Shuffling over towards the table, Merlin cursed his joints as they protested against the chilly evening. As tempting as it was to revert back to his younger body in front of the blind superhero, it was a dangerous thought. Because Merlin knew that Daredevil would know the difference in the tone of Merlin's voice, the fall of his steps and the creaking of his bones. There were many ways to see the world and none of them would be fooled.

That didn't stop Merlin from reaching out into the air around them and warming the air slightly with magic. It could be dismissed as a result of Aithusa's presence. Or yet another oddity for Daredevil to catalogue and ponder. The young man never seemed to miss much, even if he didn't about it or else was willing to accept the vague explanations Merlin was willing to give.

Another flash of gold in his eyes and a slight breeze blew across the table and chairs, clearing them of the dust and debris that had collected on their surface since Merlin had levitated them back to their usual spot three days ago. Daredevil sat down as Merlin poured the scotch. Aithusa, meanwhile, settled around them, her bulk shielding them from the cool spring wind.

“There's not really a story to tell,” said Daredevil after accepting his glass. “There wasn't anything going on in Hell's Kitchen and I felt like stretching my legs.”

“Well, it is a nice evening for a run across the rooftops.”

Daredevil chuckled. “I don't think it counts as evening anymore.”

“No, you're probably right.”

It began as a sudden pinprick of awareness at the back of his mind, one that gradually grew stronger. A familiar caress of power that was both inviting and unwelcome.

He sipped his scotch. “It appears we're about to have company.”

Aithusa raised her head, looking towards Midtown with narrowed eyes. Daredevil cocked his head, no doubt listening.

“Who?” he asked.

“Another philosopher,” Merlin answered him.
“Starting a club?”

Merlin laughed. “I certainly hadn’t planned on it.”

“This one was in the shop yesterday. His presence is... troubling.”

Merlin hummed, knowing the dragon didn't really need a response from him. It was the third such power to be felt in the world within the last several years and Merlin didn't believe in coincidences. Neither, he assumed, did Thor as Steven had told him the Thunder God had gone home to Asgard. No doubt it was to speak to his father about the matter.

The air shimmered with magic as Aithusa hid herself back into feline form. Daredevil stiffened for a moment as wind he was no longer being protected from ruffled the hairs at the back of his neck.

“Yes, she is back to being a cat,” Merlin answered him.

“Huh.” He paused. “It’s... strange. I mean, I can still hear her heartbeat and her breath, but it's not like she's smaller... more like she's only half there.”

“That's actually not an entirely inaccurate description of what she does.”

Daredevil looked back to him, surprise evident in his features. “Really?”

“A simplification, of course, but not a bad description at all.”

The corners of Daredevil's lips twitched. “Of course.” The tension returned to his limbs, but subtly this time. The Demon of Hell's Kitchen turned in his seat, sliding forward and placing both feet on the ground to make it easier for him to spring up should he need to. “I gather you weren't expecting this guest. Are they a friend?”

Merlin shrugged. “He's not entirely unexpected... a bit like you were that first time.”

Daredevil nodded in understanding, but remained silent otherwise as he listened to the night. Merlin braced himself as the power came closer, as the ancient stone attempted to draw him into its thrall. Aithusa loped over and then leapt up onto the small table, the movement only barely upsetting the scotch inside their glasses.

Merlin re-filled their scotch and then leaned back in his chair with his glass.

“Good evening, young man,” he then said loudly into the night. “I see it didn't take long for curiosity to get the better of you.”

He looked up and met the eyes of Vision, who slowly lowered himself down to the roof. If he was surprised Merlin had known he was there, his stoic features didn't show it. But his eyes did glance curiously towards Daredevil before sliding to Aithusa, who was sitting on the table, watching him attentively.

Then he looked back to Merlin. “Good evening,” Vision said politely. “I apologize if I'm interrupting something.”

“Not at all, young man. We're just an unlikely pair of philosophers drinking scotch by moonlight.”

Vision looked up towards the sky – the very cloudy sky.
Daredevil frowned. “I thought it was supposed to be cloudy tonight, too cloudy for any moonlight.”

“Oh, well, we can't see the moonlight but that's why we are philosophers.”

“Aah. So you're saying that we can see the moonlight that's undoubtedly there because the moon is always there, regardless of whether or not there are clouds in the way. I see.”

Vision stared at them both. “By that logic you are always drinking by moonlight,” he said. “Because the moon is always present, even when the Earth is turned away from it.” He paused thoughtfully. “Actually, that is incorrect. By that logic, you are always drinking by sunlight because the moon doesn't give off light of its own, but rather reflects light from the sun.”

Merlin burst out laughing. “You're a natural, young man! A perfect addition to our philosopher's circle, which we've just decided to create.”

“It's really more of a triangle,” said Daredevil between his own quiet laughs. Aithusa turned to him and meowed loudly, making the red-clad man jump slightly in his seat. He turned towards her and inclined his head. “Sorry, a square.”

Merlin waved him off. “Well, we're a philosopher's group of some indeterminate geometric shape in any case.”

Daredevil's grin widened.

Vision stared at them, looking baffled.

“Oh, but where are my manners?” said Merlin. “Daredevil, this is one of the new Avengers, Vision. Vision, this is Daredevil, the so-called Demon of Hell's Kitchen.”

Daredevil rose and held a hand out to Vision. “It's good to meet you, Vision.”

Vision hesitated for a moment before reaching out and shaking Daredevil's hand. “Yes, you as well. I'm sorry to say I haven't heard of you before.”

“I like keeping a low profile.”

They parted and Daredevil sat back down. Vision remained standing and Merlin resolved to bring a third chair up to the roof at some point in the next couple of days.

“Now then, I suppose I should go get a third glass,” said Merlin. “I wasn't quite expecting the both of you on the same night.”

“Thank you, but that isn't necessary,” said Vision before Merlin had managed to rise out of his seat. “I am unable to eat or drink.” Then he cocked his head thoughtfully. “You were expecting me?”

Merlin smiled. “Yes.”

“Then you know why I'm here.”

“You're here to ask the same question this young man here once came to ask me.”

Vision looked to Daredevil curiously. “And what was your question?”

Daredevil grinned. “When is a cat not a cat?”

Vision blinked once and then looked down at Aithusa. “Then you admit this is no ordinary
creature?"

“I never denied it. Though you may want to address Aithusa with a little more respect. There are not many things in this world capable of destroying you and that stone you carry, but she might just be one of them.”

It was almost comical the way Vision's head instantly shot up, his eyes widening even as he reached up to touch the stone in his forehead. “You know about this stone?”

“I know it is ancient and powerful. And I also know it does not belong on this world.”

He could see the way Daredevil tensed at his words. Hurt flashed through Vision's eyes and Merlin felt his own softening. Perhaps his words had been a little too harsh. Vision could hardly be put at fault for his own creation, after all.

“However, if Thor has judged you to be a worthy guardian of the stone, then I shall trust his judgment on the matter,” he said and saw Vision relax. “After all, he and his people are far more knowledgeable about such things than I am.”

Amusement tugged at Vision's lips. “So you do not believe I am dangerous?”

Merlin chuckled. “Like Aithusa, like all of us, I believe you are... mostly harmless.”

“I see.” He paused thoughtfully. “If I look at those words as a philosopher then harmless becomes a rather deceptive word. You are using the word to mean not someone incapable of doing harm, but rather someone uninterested in doing harm. Which means they can still be dangerous when necessary, therefore, *mostly* harmless.”

“That's a rather good way of summing it up.”

Vision nodded and then turned to Daredevil. “Did you ever receive an answer to your question?” he asked.

Daredevil smiled. “Yes, I did. But you'll have to ask Aithusa for it.”

Merlin smiled as he saw understanding dawn in Vision's eyes. There was less fear in his eyes this time as he looked down to Aithusa – perhaps simply having Aithusa's unusual nature confirmed had been enough to calm the terror he'd obviously felt in her presence.

“I apologize, Aithusa,” he said. “It feels somewhat rude of me to ask now, but my friends took me to an animal shelter yesterday and I held several cats of various breeds and ages. None of them possessed the same power and... strength of presence that I feel from you. Please, I know you are no ordinary cat... so what are you?”

Aithusa stood and approached Vision, her tail twisting casually behind her, but there was a regal air in her approach, her careful steps so obviously different from the curious, playful cat that Vision stilled.

“Vision, you are young and yet contain a power that is older than anything this world remembers. Power and youth do not always combine well together, but I can see a gentleness in your soul that I do not believe even you are yet aware of. Kindness is a human trait every bit as much as anger or fear. I will show you my true form, because we are alike. I am the last of my kind and you are the only one of yours.”

Vision's eyes widened comically as Aithusa spoke. Merlin, too, felt his eyebrows rise. It wasn't
entirely surprising that Vision could hear Aithusa, but it was unexpected.

“You can talk,” said Vision. “The others never mentioned that you can talk.”

“The others can't hear her,” Merlin pointed out, and then added mostly for Daredevil's benefit: “You only can because of that stone.”

Vision nodded. And then he frowned, his eyes cutting across the table to Merlin. “You can as well?”

Merlin chuckled. “Yes. But that is a far longer story.”

Whether because she was tired of the conversation, or because she wanted to help Merlin evade Vision’s next question, Aithusa jumped down from the table. Once again, the air around them blurred, looking for a moment as though it were full of steam. And then, within the blink of an eye, the cat was gone and the dragon loomed over Vision in its place.

Vision took several steps backwards, his jaw dropping as he gaped at the Great White Dragon standing before him. It took him a few moments to pull himself back together.

“My friends showed me a movie...” he began and then stopped himself. “You're a dragon. But they said dragons weren't real, that they are creatures people made up to amuse themselves.”

Aithusa grinned, her long pointed teeth glistening in the faint lights from the city around them. “Most mortals who walk upon this world do not truly know what is around them. The centuries have made them forget. You may still ignore those things as they do, if you wish.”

Vision seemed to consider this. “No, I don't want to live in ignorance,” he said with a shake of his head. Then he paused. “You said you were the last of your kind?”

“Yes. When I hatched there was one other, but he died many centuries ago.”

“I am truly sorry to hear that. It must've been lonely.”

“I have rarely been alone. There are still magical creatures left in this world, after all, even if we hide from sight.”

The dragon lowered her head and nudged Vision. He smiled and hesitantly lifted his hand to run it down her snout, an awed expression on his face.

Merlin glanced to the side and was warmed by the sight of Daredevil smiling, looking relaxed once more. Feeling his attention, Daredevil turned to Merlin and raised his glass. Merlin returned the gesture before sipping at his scotch.

“You know, the other Avengers would certainly tease the Captain less if they knew you were a dragon,” he heard Vision tell Aithusa.

“But he might not bring me fish if he knew I was a dragon!”

Merlin only barely managed to not choke on his drink before he burst out laughing.

When he returned to Stark Tower that night, and his teammates asked him where he'd been and what
he'd done, Vision simply smiled and answered: “I met the Demon of Hell's Kitchen and joined a philosophy club.”

Intrigued by Daredevil – and the fact that it had been Vision, of all people, who'd met him and could therefore confirm his existence – they never did get around to asking him to explain the philosophy club.
As usual, thanks so much for all the comments and kudos you guys have left me. I'm not entirely sure why this chapter took me so long to write and edit, but it's finally done so here ya go! :) There are a few questions answered in this one and a couple of speculations laid to rest (reader speculations, lol).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There was so much to do: debris to clear away, walls, floors and wards to rebuild, spells to strengthen or recast... The New York Sanctum wasn't nearly as badly damage as London, but it was still a mess. And in addition to the repairs themselves, Doctor Strange also had to assemble a new staff and familiarize himself with the building that was now both his new home as well as his charge.

At least the city itself wasn't new to him.

Christine had lasted two months before she put her foot down and demanded he take a Saturday off and spend the day with her. Or else.

Stephen wasn't entirely sure what exactly she was threatening him with and wisely decided not to ask. Admitting that he probably wouldn't notice she wasn't speaking to him for at least a month either way wasn't likely to win him anything. Well, maybe a slap.

Either way, they'd decided on a simple day. A walk through Central Park, the MET, and then dinner. Stephen was much too cynical to ask what could go wrong, as things could always go wrong, but simple plans were easily altered should it prove necessary. So he called his favourite Italian restaurant to make reservations, went onto the MET's website to take a look at what their visiting exhibitions were this week, and made sure he had three take-out menus on top of his fridge and two bottles of wine inside the fridge in case anything went awry. Or much better than expected.

He hadn't gotten where he was today by leaving things to Chance.

Well, except for the whole going to Tibet to search for a fairy tale, but that hadn't been chance so much as desperation clinging to some seriously flimsy straws.

Since they were coming from opposite ends of the city, and Christine claimed she wasn't quite ready for his space-bending mode of travel, they'd arranged to meet in Central Park. And so as soon as Stephan was back from his very early morning meeting with the other Sanctum heads (being thirteen hours apart from Hong Kong was a bitch when it came to setting up meetings), he had breakfast, skimmed through the daily newspaper, and then opened himself a portal.

It was almost unbelievable, how easy it seemed now, how naturally the magic came to him. He could still vividly remember a time when he struggled to create each golden spark of magic, when it felt like nothing short of sweat and tears – and more than likely blood as well – could produce anything of significant strength. And now magic flowed through his fingertips as easily as breath passed through his lungs. All it had taken was one moment completely void of thought, fueled by nothing but sheer, desperate desire, and the universe had snapped into place.
Though he'd been in New York for two months now, other than a few shopping trips – mostly for groceries – he hadn't really been out in the city itself. Well, he'd met Christine for lunch a few times. And once for dinner. But he portaled everywhere, happily avoiding New York traffic and the dirty, crowded subway in one fell swoop.

After months and months of outdoor training at Kamar Taj, apparently his body had gotten used to fresh air and nature. It was the obvious reason as to why his first steps into the park and out of his self-imposed exile felt so refreshing and... wonderful. Stephan couldn't help but pause and take a deep breath and enjoy the feeling. It was a beautiful, late spring day: the air was warm, the trees and grass now fully green, and many of the park's flowers were in full bloom. There were some clouds that looked slightly menacing, but they were thin in the sky and barely an obstacle to the merrily shining sun. Stephan couldn't have asked for a nicer day for a walk in the park.

Though only mid-morning, Central Park was already full of activity. He winced at some child's high-pitched shriek of delight and wished he'd had the foresight to insist on a date sometime mid-week when all the brats would be in school. At least he'd remembered to change out of his sorcerer's robes and into jeans. The cloak wasn't happy at being left behind, but he didn't care. He wasn't in the mood to attract attention today.

Later, he would wonder at how long it took him to notice the ribbons. In his defense, they were tied to tree branches and so somewhat hidden among the leaves even if, being mostly white, they didn't exactly blend in particularly well.

Curiosity peaked, Stephan walked closer to the nearest tree. He was fairly certain it was an oak – not that it mattered – and now that he was actually looking, he saw that nearly every lower branch had a ribbon tied to it somewhere. Even some of the branches that were far above anyone's reach had ribbons tied to them. For the most part the ribbons looked fairly ordinary, the sort of cheap polyester ones you could get at any craft store, but then there were a few that were obviously different. One in particular was slightly frayed and heavily water-marked, which made him think it was probably silk – it had likely been beautifully delicate before being exposed to the elements. The ribbons all showed evidence of having been hanging from the trees for quite some time.

He imagined the ribbons had been tied to the branches before they had begun to spring leaves: it had probably looked rather nice then. But would someone have really gone to all this effort just to liven up the leafless trees? He walked around the tree, staring up into its branches as he considered this mystery. Eventually, he even took a step back, thinking that maybe a little distance would give him more of a clue.

Unless a group of people had really just done it because they thought it would look nice. He crossed his arms over his chest as he pondered the ribbons. There was nothing special about them or the tree as far as he could see.

And then he looked.

His jaw dropped.

Someone touched him from behind and he whirled around, his heart calming quickly when he realized it was just Christine.

“Stephen?” she asked him, looking worried. “I called out, but you didn't answer.”

“Oh, sorry,” he said absently. “I was...”

Whatever excuse he'd been about to make to her vanished from his mind. Now that he'd already seen
it once, it was impossible for him to not notice the thin golden fog coating the rest of the trees surrounding them. Before he'd consciously thought about it, he felt the rippling, side-ways sliding sensation of his soul leaving his corporeal body. As he floated upwards for a better view, his eyes slowly widened with amazement as it became apparent that the whole park shimmered with gold.

It wasn't just Central Park either. Looking beyond, it was easy to spot the golden haze shimmering throughout the city. It was stronger in some parts than in others, but it covered all of Manhattan and Brooklyn, with spots of gold continuing beyond.

Stephan laughed with delight.

He'd thought rebuilding the wards and spells on the New York Sanctum had seemed surprisingly easier than expected. Wong had simply shrugged and told him it was likely because New York's wards hadn't been as badly damaged. In a way, it seemed he'd been right.

Sliding back into his body felt like a bizarre mix of donning a very heavy, bulky coat and clunky awkward shoes, and coming home. It always took a few moments for the weightlessness to wear off and for him to get used to the sensation of once again answering to air pressure and gravity. Once those few moments passed, his body inevitably realized that those awkward shoes were the most comfortable ones it would ever wear.

Stephan blinked and stared up at the sky. Then he groaned, both from the pain at the back of his head and shoulders as well as the sudden realization that he'd foolishly remained standing when he'd slipped out of his body.

A shadow fell over him and he looked up into Christine's worried eyes. “Stephan?” she said in a low – and to her credit, only slightly panicked – voice. “What the hell happened? I–is there something dangerous going on?”

Wincing at the slight throb of pain in his head as he pushed himself up off the ground, he tried to smile at her reassuringly. “Everything's fine, Christine, don't worry. I was just looking at the ribbons. I haven't seen them before”

“The ribbons?” She shot him a bewildered look. “Stephen, those ribbons are everywhere! How did you manage to miss them?”

He shrugged. “I've been busy, haven't really gotten out much.”

Christine rolled her eyes. “Yes, well, no one's really sure how it got started, although there are some rumours saying it was somewhere in Little Italy. It's supposed to be some old druid tradition, I think. You tie a ribbon to a tree branch while thinking of someone who's passed away in order to tie their soul to the ribbon. According to the stories I've heard it either keeps evil spirits away, or helps keep the spirits of loved ones close and at peace, or a mix of both. It's a silly little ritual, but apparently people really like it. And it's harmless and looks pretty, so why I not. You should see the trees around the hospitals. Especially the children's hospital, it's a rainbow of colours.”

Stephen shook his head in amusement. “Christine, my dear, I can assure you this ritual isn't silly in the slightest,” he said, chuckling at the way her eyes widened. He spread his arms. “It's magic. Oh, I imagine each ribbon isn't particularly powerful on its own, but there have to be thousands, if not millions of ribbons all across the city. All tied by everyday, ordinary people. No, it's not silly at all. In fact, I'd say it's rather brilliant.”

“Magic? But don't you have to be a... a sorcerer or something to do magic?”
“Apparently not this sort of magic.” Stephan grinned at Christine. “While the New York Sanctum wasn't defeated, its wards and defenses were severely weakened. This left the city, and by extension the world, vulnerable to magical and metaphysical attacks. But thanks to this 'silly little ritual', New York was given a new, albeit temporary, protection. And, no, this protection wasn't created by a powerful sorcerer, but apparently by the citizens of New York as they collectively tied those ribbons.”

Christine laughed. “Wow, that's actually pretty incredible,” she agreed. “New Yorkers protecting their own even if they didn't realize what they were doing. But there's no way this is just a coincidence. I mean, someone must have started this, right?”

Stephan thought back to a strange encounter with a man far older and more powerful than he'd seemed. A man who apparently owned a shop in New York.

He smirked. “And I have a fairly good idea who that was.” He offered her his arm. “Now, I take it you wanted to take the scenic route to the MET?”

As his portal closed behind him, Stephan looked around Little Italy and smiled. Oh, there was no doubt whatsoever that this was where the 'silly little ritual' had originated. The trees were so densely covered in ribbons that they undoubtedly out-numbered the number of residents. Clearly people had traveled to the area to tie their ribbons, just like they'd later traveled to Central Park.

The streets weren't particularly busy, but they were far from deserted. It was just another Monday afternoon to everyone else.

But Stephan clamped down on his excitement and walked the area, perusing the shop names as he passed. The mysterious sorcerer had told him, that he would find the shop once he went looking, which meant there had to be some sort of clues in its vicinity that pointed to its owner. His bright red cape and sorcerer's garb attracted a few curious stares, which he judiciously ignored. He wasn't an Avenger and thus no one to be recognized (except for that one time he'd decided to go grab a caramel late and someone mistook him for Tony Stark).

Eventually he found himself on a street whose trees were even more densely beribboned than any other he'd seen. Almost immediately, a beautifully vibrant planter of begonias caught his attention and he paused beside it, amazed at how lively the flowers looked despite the detrimental city smog. He wondered if they were an especially hardy breed.

Suddenly, he felt a sharp tug on his shoulders. Stephan looked over his shoulder at his cloak. “What is it?” he asked.

The cloak raised a bottom corner of fabric and pointed to the shop beside him. He looked at the shop, immediately intrigued by the stained-glass window in the middle of the door and the long, polished brass door handle. Above the window, gold letters declared the name of the shop. He read the sign and froze.

Then he chuckled as he shook his head in amusement.

The Isle of the Blessed: Emrys was indeed hiding in plain sight. Although... did it really count as being in plain sight if only those with the right knowledge would've noticed? Stephen couldn't even
be bothered to pretend to be irritated at the old man's presumption that he would've immediately gone
digging for any information he could find about the Ancient One's mysterious friend. Especially
since he'd been absolutely right.

Amused, he opened the door and walked into the antiques shop.

Inside, the shop was surprisingly bright, the windows letting in much more light than one would've
assumed based on its rather dark appearance from the outside. There was also no bell on the door,
but Stephan doubted it was necessary for announcing new arrivals. Not even Kamar Taj had felt so
completely saturated with magic.

Though he'd only gotten a short whiff of Emrys' magic before, it was distinctive and he immediately
recognized its presence. But here it was altered, entwined with another, heavier sort of magic. Not
dark, though. No, this other magic was heavy, but he could also feel a heat and light within the
magic, like smoldering embers in a fire pit. Somehow, it too felt intrinsically natural.

He caught movement out of the corner of his eye, a large shadow to his left. As he turned to face it,
he felt the cloak puff up around him, as though it were trying to make him look larger than he was in
a show of strength before the–

Stephan blinked, his thoughts cutting themselves off as he found himself staring into the golden eyes
of a medium-haired white domestic cat. It blinked back at him, unimpressed by him and his cloak's
posturing.

He carefully scanned the area. The cat was sitting on top of a tall wooden counter next to a
ridiculously antiquated cash register, behind which he could see a metal spiral staircase leading up to
a second floor. To the right of the staircase, it seemed as though the shop widened out into a second
room of sorts just behind a rather large, sturdy wooden table and a couple of armoires packed with
decorative plates and porcelain sculptures.

He paused for a moment, considering that table. It did look very sturdy, and the large dining room
table that apparently doubled as a conference table had been destroyed past repair...

The cloak poked him in the cheek. He batted it away. Moments later, two swabs of heavy red fabric
were plastered to the side of his face and turning his head back in the direction of the cat. Stephan
sputtered and pulled at the cloak. It let go and emphatically pointed at the cat.

Which was still sitting there, staring at him. Except now its bright golden eyes looked amused.

Stephan sighed in exasperation and pulled the side of the cloak away from his face. “What is wrong
with you?” he hissed at it. “It's just a cat!”

“Am I?”

He froze and then slowly looked away from the cloak. Then he carefully scanned the room again,
until he once again found himself meeting the cat's eyes. The very ordinary-looking white cat, whose
tail was swishing back and forth behind it.

It cocked its head at Stephan. “You are a student of the Ancient One.”

“Y-yes, I am. Er, was. She's, um, not with us anymore.” He winced at his stuttering attempt at being
articulate.

“Yes, she was in New York when she finally succumbed to the inevitable. We all felt her passing and
were saddened by it.” The voice paused, and Stephan could feel the sadness in the silence. Then the
cat stood. “As a student of the Ancient One, you should know to never accept the reality you see as truth.”

Stephan stared at the cat, his eyes widening. This couldn't have been Emrys: the voice that echoed in his head sounded distinctly female. Although, Emrys had said he owned the shop with a friend of his. Many people considered their pets friends.

Though Stephan wasn't entirely sure a telepathic talking cat counted as a pet. He certainly wasn't about to call it a pet out loud.

Assuming it even was a cat.

Still watching the cat thoughtfully, he stepped back and raised his hand, embracing the feeling of the normal world slipping away as he cast. A warm breeze blew against his face and he frowned in confusion. Until he realized that the great expanse of white in front of his eyes was no longer anywhere close to being a cat.

Letting out a cry of surprise, Stephan couldn't help the instinct that had him quickly backpedaling even as his eyes continued to travel upwards. Until they met the amused golden eyes of the dragon that was now standing before him.

The confined space of the shop bent around the looming white creature, whose scales gleamed within the darkened space. Its large wings were folded comfortably across its back as its massive tail swished back and forth behind it. Then it lowered its head towards Stephan and grinned, giving him more than a glimpse of a jaw full of very long and very sharp teeth.

Stephan swallowed and finally managed to find his voice. “Right, so not a cat then,” he said weakly. “Um, hello?”

The dragon chuckled, a sound that was large and booming and made shivers run down Stephan's spine. “I am Aithusa. It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Doctor Strange.”

Stephan blinked. “You—you know who I am?”

“Of course. You are the new head of the New York Sanctum. Merlin told me about you.”

“Merlin?” Stephan's eyes widened as a sudden realization came to him. Could it be? Was it possible? Why hadn't he thought... it should have occurred to him. He schooled his features and looked back to the dragon. “I am looking for Emrys,” he said carefully.

The dragon froze, the grin disappearing from its face almost instantly. Slowly it pulled back, an odd look on its face, as though it were considering him.

“He doesn't often use that name.”


“Because Emrys is a legend, was a legend long before he was born. Merlin is the name his mother gave him, the name of a man.”

“Emrys is Merlin, the Merlin,” said Stephan, not bothering to cover up the awe that coloured his voice. “The greatest wizard, no sorcerer, who ever lived.”

“Technically speaking, he's a warlock. In the old meaning of the word.”
Stephan jumped at the new voice that suddenly interjected into their conversation. It was also female, but the pitch of the voice was deeper, with a graceful dignified air in tune with its upper class English accent.

His eyes widened when an old woman suddenly appeared, shuffling calmly through Aithusa's torso as though the dragon weren't even there. Which, Stephan realized, it actually wasn't. In the normal world, Aithusa was a cat, after all. The old woman ignored Stephan as she headed to the door. He watched as she locked it with steady hands, slid the deadbolt into place and then turned the sign in the window around to say 'closed'.

"Whenever you two are done, do feel free to join me for tea," Stephan heard her in his mind as she shuffled past them again.

Aithusa watched her go and then looked to Stephan for a moment before stepping down off the counter, her intention of following the old woman clear. Stephan jumped back in alarm as it brought the dragon within inches of him. A moment's concentration, and he fell back into the normal world and the space in front of him was once again empty. He looked down and watched as the white cat trotted eagerly past the large sturdy table.

Amazed at how ridiculously mundane and harmless the cat appeared, Stephan followed her.

"How are you doing that?" he asked out loud as he moved around a hat stand holding a brown floppy hat with the largest, most obnoxiously blue feather Stephan had ever seen.

This area was just as crowded as the main storefront, with any available wallspace not devoted to some form of shelving unit, covered in tapestries and posters. The main feature was obviously the round wooden table surrounded by an eclectic collection of chairs. There was a beautifully delicate crystal vase sitting in the centre holding several bright begonias, most likely cut from the planters outside. The table looked just as old, if not perhaps older, than everything else in the shop and it looked ready for guests.

This was confirmed when Aithusa easily leapt onto the table and sat down, claiming her spot with the poise and dignity that could've belonged to either the dragon or the cat. Stephan pulled out a chair two spots away from her and sat down, staring at the cat, focusing on the edges of her form as he tried to figure out where the dragon began.

"Seriously, how are you doing that?" he asked again. "Is your cat form like an avatar while your true form is hidden in some sort of very fluid mirror dimension? I mean, obviously you're really here and not just a ghost since you can interact with objects... unless you're very good at mimicking being able to touch surfaces? I mean, transformation is obviously a possibility, except that there's the problem of all that extra mass..."

Aithusa regarded him for a moment and then stood, walking over to stand in front of him. She stared at him for a moment before reaching out towards him with a single paw. Stephan raised his hand to meet hers, feeling the very real weight of her paw as it rested on the palm of his hand. Taking is as permission to touch, Stephan carefully reached out with his other hand to caress her fur. It felt soft and silky to the touch, just like any other cat he'd ever encountered.

"Okay, so definitely not a projection," he muttered mostly to himself as Aithusa twisted around his hand in order to guide him to scratch her in exactly the right places.

Again, just like any other cat he'd ever encountered. A small smile appeared on his face as he happily obliged her, gently scratching the crown of her head, just behind her ears. She started purring and his smile widened.
“Don't waste your time trying to figure out how she does it.”

Stephan looked up, recognizing the old woman's voice. He blinked, surprised by the much younger woman carrying a full silver tea service to the table. She had long wavy brown hair, pale, though lightly sun-tanned skin, and full red lips. There was a sly, amused twinkle in her green eyes.

He cleared his throat. “And why shouldn't I try and figure out the technique behind that spell?” he asked.

The woman placed the tea service down onto the table. “Because dragon magic is inherently different to human magic,” she explained as she picked up the silver teapot and began to pour tea into wide bone china tea cups. “Even if you could puzzle it out, young man, you'd never be able to replicate it yourself.”

“I see.” He shook his head. “Look, I apologize if it's rude of me to ask, but weren't you just, ah...”

“Quite a bit older?” the woman asked, pausing in her tea-pouring to look up at him, her eyes full of laughter. “Well, I am still old, I merely no longer look it. You see it's easier to blend into the background when one looks old. People eventually notice when a young woman doesn't age, but an old woman simply always looks old.”

“That... makes logistical sense, but is it just skin-deep or do you age the cells in your body as well?”

“I suppose it would be my cells that age when I transform. When I look like an old woman, I also feel like an old woman and were you to examine my skin, heart and lungs, they would be those of an old woman. The same goes for when I am young.”

His eyes widened. “Fascinating. And all without drawing power from the dark dimension?” She passed him a cup of tea. “Thank you,” he said as he took it, inhaling the herbal berry scent.

He placed the cup down and stood. “And, once again, I apologize, I realize you probably know who I am, but nevertheless it is inexcusable for me not to have introduced myself.” He held out his hand to her. “Doctor Stephan Strange, Master of the New York Sanctum.”

The woman smiled and shook his hand. “I do indeed know who you are, still I appreciate the introduction. I am Nimueh.”

Stephan raised an eyebrow. “Just Nimueh?”

She shrugged. “Well, legally it's Nimueh Priest, however when I was born only those of noble birth had family names, and so I have no familial ties to the surname.”

“That... would make you quite old then.”

The corners of her lips twitched. “Yes, it would.”

They both fell into silence as they heard voices coming from the front of the shop. Stephan recognized Emrys among them and listened to him as he spoke to what sounded like a middle-aged woman, telling her to remind her son to take care of the new instrument as he rung up her purchase. Whoever the woman was, she sounded quite excited by whatever instrument she was buying her son (all Stephan managed to figure out was that it was something wooden with strings).

Eventually, the transaction concluded and Emrys – or, Merlin, as the woman kept calling him – escorted his customer to the door. It felt odd, thinking of this powerful magic user as an ordinary shopkeeper. It felt even odder to realize that most people couldn't feel the magic that infused the
shop. It seemed to have soaked into the floor and walls, and probably even many of the items they sold.

Actually... that made the large wooden table by the front even more appealing.

He sipped his tea, enjoying the warm taste of berries and spice on his tongue, as he listened to the front door open and then close. The latch slid shut again and then footsteps hurried towards them, accompanied by a wooden tapping.

Given the old woman's transformation, he really shouldn't have been surprised by the old man who finally came into view, glaring with disgust at the large blue feather as he batted it away from his face as he passed it. His long hair and beard were white as snow and he walked stiffly, slightly hunched over even with the aid of his walking stick. Though the wrinkles and extra hair hid many of his distinguishing features, the blue eyes that lit up when they spied Stephan looked quite familiar.

“Doctor Strange, I see you've found us at last!” he exclaimed with a grin. “Or is it Master Strange now?”

Stephan smiled back. “I go by Doctor Strange,” he said as he stood to shake the old man's hand. “And you were right, once I actually went looking, this shop wasn't that difficult to find. The Isle of the Blessed is quite the daringly obvious clue to those with the right knowledge.”

Emrys nodded once. “Knowledge which I see you made sure to acquire.”

“Just like you knew I would.”

“It wasn't difficult to figure out that yours was a mind that wouldn't be satisfied with a mere glimpse of something.”

Stephan chuckled. “No, I suppose not,” he acknowledged as he thought back to their encounter all those months ago.

“You've come a long way since then,” Emrys said quietly.

“You're welcome, Emrys.”

Emrys blinked, his face going blank. Then he grimaced. “Right, the Ancient One called me that,” he said. “Please, my name's Merlin. Emrys... Emrys is sort of a title of sorts, but not one I ever did anything to earn. It was just mine the moment I was born.”

Stephan nodded. “The Ancient One called you Emrys.”

“The Ancient One liked the gravitas of such titles. I thought you'd have figured that out by now given that she called herself the Ancient One.” Merlin shrugged. “It was her way and it suited her, but it's not mine.”

“Fair enough,” said Stephan. He personally liked the gravitas his title of 'doctor' gave him, but he'd also worked long and hard to achieve it. “Does this have something to do with how you're 'technically a warlock'?”

Merlin shot Nimueh a disgruntled look, but froze on her form, blinking in surprise. “Oh,” he said before looking back down at himself. “So that's why you closed the shop.”

Stephan glimpsed Merlin's eyes turning gold just before he closed them in concentration and began mumbling what had to be an incantation under his breath. The words didn't sound familiar to
Stephan, but he couldn't quite tell if it was because the words were spoken so low, or because the language was unknown to him. It wasn't a long incantation and no sooner had the final syllable passed Merlin's lips, then a sort of nearly-invisible ripple passed over Merlin's body just before his appearance began to change.

It wasn't one thing at a time either, but rather everything seemed to happen at once: his hair and beard shortened and grew darker, the wrinkles on his face smoothed out, eyebrows thinned, moisture returning to his skin as age spots receded, and his posture straightened. The entire transformation was over in less than thirty seconds and left Stephan even more amazed than before.

“Does that hurt?” he asked.

Merlin opened his eyes, their golden glow once again gone. “Not really,” he said, and even his voice sounded younger now. “It just feels uncomfortable for a few moments. Now, going the other way is a bit worse, but that's on account of all the aches and pains of old age returning, not because the transformation itself hurts.”

He pulled out a chair and sat down. “As for the warlock thing, no, my preference has nothing to do with that. And, really, I've never called myself a warlock.”

Stephan frowned. “A warlock is male witch, isn't it?” he asked.

“That's one definition, yes,” Nimueh answered as she poured another cup of tea for Merlin. “It's a slightly newer definition. As you know, language evolves just like everything else, and as a result the meaning of words changes as well. In essence, a warlock is an aberration, someone who exists outside what is considered the norm. Witchery is traditionally a female magical art because its teachings focus on healing magic and herbology, and often crosses into things like midwifery or animal husbandry. Not that a man can't participate in those areas, but it doesn't happen as often in terms of magic.”

She paused and Stephan nodded his understanding. Seemingly pleased, she continued.

“Another definition is someone who's turned away from their teachings, a traitor,” she continued. “Again, this could be seen as an individual who's gone against the norm, another aberration. There are, of course, darker contexts to the word in the modern sense as well, the blame for which we can lay at the feet of the Catholic Church.” She frowned darkly. “They weren't the first to hunt down magic users, but they were by far the most devastating in their aftermath.”

“And the most cruel,” Merlin added softly, his eyes reflecting long-remembered horrors.

“The oldest definition of 'warlock', however,” said Nimueh in an obvious attempt to steer the conversation away from that obvious minefield. “is one who is born with magic.”

Stephan blinked. “But aren't most people born with the potential for magic?” he asked.

“More or less, yes,” Merlin answered him. “But it's still a potential that has to be brought out and nurtured. Like any talent, it still has to be taught and learned. Whereas I was able to do magic from the moment I was born.”

“What?!?”

Merlin grinned. “My mum used to tell me about how I would amuse myself by floating things above my cradle.”

“That's... incredible.”
“Don't get me wrong, I still had to work hard at getting some spells to work right for me—”

Nimueh's snort interrupted him. “You have a very skewed concept of 'hard work'. What most people had to practice for weeks to get right, took you half a day. When you fought me you managed to conjure lightning on instinct.”

Merlin shrugged. Stephan laughed.

“Is this like knowing the ribbons would work the way they have?” he asked. “Which, thank you, by the way. I didn't notice them until recently, but I did notice how much easier restoring the New York Sanctum was than I had expected it to be.”

Merlin waved his thanks away. “It was nothing much. Nimueh and I tie ribbons every spring. This was simply the first year someone asked us about them, and then the whole thing just took off.”

Nimueh rolled her eyes. “You make it sound as though you didn't spend all morning outside until someone finally asked what you were doing.”

Merlin responded by glaring at her.

Stephan snickered. His amusement turned into annoyance when he felt tugging at his shoulders.

He sighed and looked over his shoulder to see what the cloak was up to now. And was greeted by the sight of Aithusa wrestling with it. She'd somehow managed to twist herself into the red folds and was holding them steady with one paw while batting at the waving corner of the cloak with the other. It looked adorable... and incredibly bizarre. He tried to imagine how this would work with a dragon and just couldn't picture the large, majestic creatures he'd seen earlier playfully batting at a piece of magical fabric.

“Don't bother trying to understand it,” said Merlin, amusement obvious in his voice. Stephan looked back to him. “It all makes sense in her mind and that's all that matters.”

“But she is still a dragon, right?”

“In a sense.” Merlin shrugged. “Dragons are powerfully magical beings and since their magic is tied to what they are, transformation isn't a skill most ever possessed. Not that I've met many dragons myself, mind you. The long and short of it is, though, is that right now she is a cat, but because there's such a large difference in mass between her forms, she essentially has to hide away the rest of her being in a sort of, er, pocket dimension is I believe the term for it.”

Stephan nodded. “Yes, it is.” He considered the explanation. “But this extra mass is from her true form, which is why I saw a dragon instead of just a very large cat when I saw her in the other dimension.”

“Yes.”

“Interesting.” He opened his mouth to continue his thought when he was suddenly yanked to the side by his cloak, the movement so abrupt it nearly unseated him. “Oh for—seriously?!” He shrugged the cloak off his shoulders. “If you want to play, go play. Just leave me out of it!”

The corner of the cloak's collar gently patted him on the cheek and then whipped away, one end trailing across the floor as Aithusa chased after it.

Stephan rolled his yes. “You'd think an ancient magical object would have more dignity than that,” he told Merlin and Nimueh.
They laughed.

“That’s the thing with magic,” said Nimueh with a mischievous smile. “It can be very unpredictable.”

“Speaking of which,” Merlin suddenly perked up and looked to Nimueh. “You know what we need?”


“Fairy wine,” Merlin confirmed and then darted out of his seat.

Leaning forward, Stephan raised an eyebrow at Nimueh. “Fairy wine, as in made by actual fairies?”

“Oh yes.” Nimueh grinned. “We don't generally serve it to guests unless they're likely to appreciate it.”

“Well, then I feel truly honoured.”

Moments later, Merlin returned with three small wine glasses and a thick green bottle with no label that was caked in a layer of dirt. He poured the wine and they each took a glass.

Stephan and Nimueh both stood as Merlin raised his glass.

“To the past, because it molded us into who we are,” he said, his voice strong and clear and, somehow, profound. “To the present and the friends we have made in it. And to the future, because it is where we are all heading.”

It was a good toast and Stephan drank to it gladly. The fairy wine tasted sweet with honey and yet light with flowers and slightly tart with berries. It was an interesting mix. And, beneath the complex flavours, he could also feel an airy breath of magic – though he'd never thought of magic having a flavour, this was undeniably it.

He set the glass down onto the table for a moment in order to pull his chair closer in as he retook his seat. Picking it back up, he suddenly noticed the engravings that spread across the tabletop. In fact, it was actually quite heavily engraved. The characters looked Celtic and they were arranged so that they circled the table in concentric circles....

Like a spell circle.

Stephan ran his hand over the table in front of him and gasped softly. He could practically feel the age, the power emanating from the symbols. This was no ordinary table.

Realization hit him like a freight train. Or a car careening off a cliff. His eyes widened.

“Is–is this the Round Table?!?” he asked, stuck somewhere between incredulous and awed.

He looked up to find Merlin grinning proudly.

Nimueh merely rolled her eyes. “He likes dragging it out of storage occasionally to use for the most mundane things.”

Stephan gaped at Merlin for a few more moments. Then he threw his head back and laughed.

Chapter End Notes
Lol, a lot of people had been wondering who the first one to figure out Merlin's identity would be... but really, this should've been obvious. ;) And, yes, I did sort of make up that 'warlock' explanation. The show used it in a very strange context (is a woman born with magic also a warlock? and if Merlin's special because he was born with magic then why is there a word for it in the first place?).
Sorry for taking so long with this update. I went away for a couple of weeks and didn't really get any writing done while I was away. But now I'm back and with a chapter that a couple of you have been asking about (oh who am I kidding, you all knew this one was coming). Anyway, thank you so much for all the kudos and comments you've left on this story: I appreciate each and every one. You guys are the best! :)

Wanda had felt the shop calling to her like a siren. When she closed her eyes, she could still feel it, the warm embrace of... power. It was all she could think to call it, the tingling sensation that had whispered across her skin like the build-up of static before a thunderstorm and yet nothing like electricity at all. She knew Vision had felt something as well, but he seemed reluctant to discuss it with her. Maybe he didn't know how to describe it either.

Training at the Avenger's new facility just outside the city had kept her from going back until she'd heard Steve and Natasha were coming into the city for the weekend. She'd jumped at the chance, asking to come along. Steve, probably hoping this interest in the outside world meant she was slowly healing from her brother's death, readily agreed. She didn't contradict him.

Tony Stark was obviously less than thrilled at having her stay at the Tower, but made an attempt at being a cordial host nonetheless. Wanda had tried to be as polite as she could before retreating to her guestroom for the night. Forgiveness wouldn't be quick to come between the two of them.

She'd slipped out of Stark Tower after breakfast, while Steve was showering after his morning workout and Natasha was out having breakfast with Tony's girlfriend, Pepper Potts. After months of living with her new team, she craved solitude – the sort that came with being able to disappear into a crowd of people.

The Avengers were good people, she knew this, but the part of her that mourned her brother resented them for surviving when he hadn't.

Being the reason one of their own had left them, coupled with her mental powers also made things awkward between them. Most of them did a fairly good job hiding their own resentment and wariness towards her, but she knew it was there.

There were days when she wished she was back in that cage being made to preform for von Strucker's scientists. At least her brother had been in the cage right beside hers.

But no amount of wishing, no amount of tears, would make time travel possible and so all she wanted was to once again feel that warm, gentle embrace she'd felt in the shop. She yearned to feel it touch her soul. Maybe it would fill the cold, gaping hole where she could once feel her brother. Just for a short while.

The trees were now covered in leaves, though the ribbons were still there hiding amongst the green. It made her smile and she thought sadly of the snow white ribbon she'd tied to a tree in the forest behind the Avenger's base. Some sort of birds had made a nest in that tree. Her brother would
probably laugh at her sentimentality if he were still alive. He would also make sure nothing harmed
the vulnerable baby birds.

There were flowers outside the shop, brighter than anything she’d ever seen. Awed, she carefully
reached out to touch the petals, her breath catching at the faint tingle she felt beneath her fingertips.
Fascinated by this feeling, wondering how it had come to be in the flowers, she ran her fingers over
the stems and leaves as well.

They felt like the inside of the shop, warm and alive... magical. They felt magical.

She pulled her hand away, unsure whether she wanted to finish that thought.

“We were wondering how long it would take you to come back.”

Wanda swung around, too shocked by the voice to chastise herself for ignoring her surroundings so
completely that an old woman could sneak up on her. Natasha would be very unhappy with her.

“Y-you knew I would be back?” she said after a moment.

Standing in the shop’s doorway, Nimueh raised an unimpressed eyebrow at her. “Are you trying to
tell me you didn’t?” she asked.

Wanda opened her mouth, but there was nothing she could say. She had always known she’d be
coming back to this shop. Nimueh’s eyes softened and she smiled at her gently.

“Well, come along inside then, child.”

She turned and walked back into the shop. Wanda swallowed as she followed, suddenly feeling
inexplicably nervous.

She didn't know why the old couple made her anxious. It wasn't as though she couldn't call her own
power to her fingertips in an instant. In fact, they seemed perfectly harmless, if a bit odd. But kind.
They didn't frighten her the way Vision had been frightened by their cat, but she couldn't quite shake
the feeling that what she saw wasn't quite true. That there was a mask waiting to be peeled off.

Then she stepped into the shop and all her anxiousness melted away as the warmth surrounded her in
a familiar embrace. Wanda closed her eyes and relaxed as let it seep into her bones until she almost
feel each individual cell vibrating. It felt unlike anything else. I felt almost like coming home.

Eventually, Wanda opened her eyes again, feeling groggy and slightly disorientated. Her eyelids felt
heavy as she blinked and she wondered how long she'd been standing there.

Blinking some more, she looked around her. The white cat, Aithusa, was asleep on top of an
elaborately embroidered armchair, curled up in a patch of sunlight so bright it made her fur glisten as
though covered in diamond dust. Wanda stared at the chair, confused. She could've sworn there'd
been a large wooden table there. In fact, she was sure of it: it had been piled high with fancy dishes
and tea services. Maybe they'd sold it.

Wanda frowned when she realized she also didn't see the old woman. After a short pause, she slowly
made her way towards the large round table in the back where the old couple had served them tea the
last time. Walking around the tall armoires that separated the front of the shop and this back area, she
found Nimueh sitting at the round table sipping tea. A second steaming teacup sat across from her, a
plate of pastries between them.

Nimueh looked up as Wanda approached and motioned for her to sit down. Part of Wanda still felt
like she was floating in a cloud of warmth, but, beneath that, she could feel a sliver of anxiousness returning. She sat down and thanked the old woman for the tea.

Nimueh nodded, watching her movements with an intensity that made Wanda remember the scientists who'd experimented on her and her brother. Part of her wanted to get up and run. Another part of her knew it was much too late for that. There was no part of her that didn't believe she wasn't completely within the other woman's power. She had no idea what this power was, but she knew this without a doubt.

She took a deep breath. She was an Avenger now; she could not be a coward. “You are not just a shopkeeper,” said Wanda softly.

Nimueh snorted. “My dear, none of us are 'just' anything,” she said, amusement dancing in her eyes. “But I do understand what you're trying to say. And you're not wrong.”

“Am I right?” Wanda asked after a moment.

The old woman smirked. “Now that is a far more complicated answer. Merlin and I are many things, and have been many more things before that. One of those things, is a pair of humble shopkeepers.”

Wanda hesitated, not sure how to continue the conversation without repeating herself. And then Nimueh smiled.

“You can feel it, can't you?” she asked.

There was only one thing she could've been referring to. Wanda nodded. “Yes. It is warm and... it feels powerful, but not so much that I can't stand it. What is it?”

“Oh, I think you already know what it is.”

Wanda blinked at the old woman. “How? I have never felt anything like it.”

“And yet there is a part of you that recognizes it,” Nimueh insisted. “Trust your instincts, child. Your body knows this feeling even if your mind does not.”

“My instincts?” Wanda asked, feeling confused. And more than a little surprise.

“You've always known things, felt things, had a sixth sense more acute than those around you, haven't you?”

Wanda felt her eyes widen slowly. Pietro was the last person alive who'd known about her 'feelings'. How she always knew when a bad storm was coming, been the first to know when their aunt Ola was going to have a baby, or when it was too dangerous to take the shortcut home from school. And how she'd woken up the morning of the bombing and just known her parents were going to die that day, just like she'd known she and her brother would survive even as they'd huddled together in the dark, staring at the unexploded STARK bomb, newly orphaned and terrified.

Like she'd felt the bullets pierce her brother's body, and then felt as the life left him, tearing a dark empty cavern in her heart.

“Whatever was done to you afterwards is unnatural, but the powers you started with were real and all yours.” Nimueh continued. Then she leaned in towards Wanda, her voice low, calm, but intense. “So tell me, child, what does this shop feel like to you?”

And Wanda let herself listen to the voice deep inside her for the first time since meeting von
Strucker. “Magic,” she whispered, her eyes widening further, knowing she’d spoken the truth even before the old woman in front of her smiled in approval.

And then the cream-coloured paper napkins flew up from the porcelain holder on the table. Surprised, Wanda pushed back from the table and then froze, staring up in wonder as the napkins unfolded in mid-air before twisting themselves into butterflies, which fluttered above the table as though they were real. Moments later, the butterflies were untwisting again and retwisting into a formation of birds, their wings flapping leisurely with a fluid grace that shouldn’t have been possible to achieve with paper. They flocked around the table in formation, gliding easily around Wanda's head.

The napkin birds flew around the table a second time. And then they burst into flames, the transition so sudden it made Wanda jump. The flames came together in a swirl of orange, yellow and red and then they too twisted and stretched... and then there was a phoenix opening its beak in a silent cry, its wings spread wide and sparks trailing from flaming feathers.

Twice it flew around the table and then away. Wanda followed its journey towards the armoire wall where Merlin now stood. She gasped. The old man stood taller than usual, one hand extended towards the table and the expression on his face fierce. His eyes were glowing gold.

The phoenix landed on his shoulder, its fire reflecting in the gold of the old man's eyes.

“Are you enjoying showing off?” Nimueh asked him dryly.

Merlin grinned, his features immediately losing their fierceness, though the gold remained in his eyes. “Of course,” he said, winking at Wanda. “I get to show off so seldom these days, even these simple tricks.”

“This was just simple tricks?” Wanda couldn't help but ask. It had seemed incredible to her.

“Don't underestimate simple tricks,” said Merlin. “Making the simple things look smooth and effortless often takes more talent and effort than any large grand feat.”

Nimueh nodded. “For once, he's actually right,” she said. “Summoning lightning from the sky might look much more impressive and certainly takes more brute force and raw power, but the talent and control needed for that little trick he just performed is in fact much more difficult to achieve.”

“Why thank you,” Merlin quipped.

With a wave of his hand, the phoenix on his shoulder dissolved into nothing and the gold bled out of his eyes.

“If I have this instinct inside me, does that mean I can learn to do magic like you?” Wanda asked, excitement fluttering in her veins.

Merlin, however, hesitated. “I'm not sure,” he finally admitted. “Originally, as you were, yes. But whatever it is that's been done to you has changed the balance of energy within your body, your magical equilibrium if you will.”

Disappointment was a worse than a cold shower. “Oh,” she said. “I see.”

“There is, however, more than one kind of magic.”

Wanda looked back up to him as he handed her a plain white business card. Curious, she took it. It was blank except for a name and address.
She raised an eyebrow. “Doctor Strange?”

Merlin shrugged. “I assure you he's no stranger than that band you already associate with.”

“He's a friend of ours,” Nimueh added. “And, if you truly are interested, he should be able to help you. I believe he could also use the help himself at the moment.”

“Just tell him we sent you to him.”

Just then the phone in her jacket pocket came to life, the sudden noise startling her. “Sorry,” she said as she dug it out and quickly glanced at the caller ID. It was Steve. “Hello?”

“Wanda, there are some sort of robots attacking in Midtown, uh just up from 38th and Madison. It's a couple streets up from the Empire State Building. Where are you?”

Wanda's eyes closed briefly as she remembered the last robots she'd faced. But she was an Avenger now and so she took a deep breath and opened her eyes once more, banishing the image of Ultron and picturing a rough map of New York instead. “I can be there in twenty minutes.”

“Okay, good. I'll see you in twenty.”

“I will be there.”

Hanging up, she turned to Merlin and Nimueh reluctantly. “I am sorry, but I have to go,” she said.

The old couple nodded, understanding in their eyes.


Wanda's lips quirked into a half-smile. “Yes.”

Merlin stood as she did and reached out to squeeze her arm. “Just don't forget to be careful while you're out there saving others.”

She nodded in acknowledgment, touched by their concern. They barely knew her, had no reason to care whether she lived or died...

“I promise I will try,” she told them, because it was the only thing she could.

“Good,” Merlin said. “And do tell Vision to bring you with him the next time he goes to his philosophy club.”

“Oh, it's a club now, is it?” Nimueh muttered under her breath.

Wanda had no idea what that meant, but she would make Vision explain it to her. “I will. Have a good day.”

“Good luck, my dear,” Nimueh called after her as she left.

Chapter End Notes

Now, I have no idea what the MCU is planning to do, but from what I understand - and the bits I've read in a few of the many, many Marvelwiki entries of various versions of
Wanda Maximoff - Wanda is thought to have genuine magic powers not just 'super hero' or mutant powers and has been helped by and/or trained by either Doctor Strange or Professor X in a few of the Marvel Universes. I'm sort of taking that and running with it because it suits this story.

Also, since a few people have already asked, I might as well just make it clear that I am going with Wanda's backstory as the MCU has set it up. So, no, she's not Magneto's daughter in this story.

Lastly, to those of you who are thinking 'aw, but I want to see that battle with robots in mid-town', well as it so happens you actually will. This chapter was supposed to continue into the battle, but then it started to get really long. And the change in tone from this part of the chapter to the next one is pretty drastic, so I made the decision to split it up. The second part isn't quite finished yet, but I'm almost there. The chapter was simply getting too crowded with too much going on and I realized it was also taking away from Wanda's part.
Ugh, let me count the ways I hate editing action sequences! No, seriously, writing action generally isn't too much of a problem for me, but going over it with a fine tooth comb afterwards and trying to figure out if it makes sense to people who aren't me? Is evil. Or at least almost evil. Baby evil.

Anyway, here's the second part of last week's chapter. I apologize for taking so long with it, but it's ended up being even longer than I'd anticipated. Plus, I got a cat over the weekend. :) No, she's not white and her name's not Aithusa (although it was incredibly tempting to wait until I found a white cat to adopt just so that I COULD call her that, lol).

Steve leapt out of the way of a laser blast, landing smoothly into a roll that ended in a crouch. Raising himself slightly, he reached his arm out and deftly caught his shield as it came sailing back into his hand. He was glad he'd taken to bringing it with him whenever he went out. Unfortunately it wasn't a perfect defence: his left side burned where one of the robots had hit him and the laser blast that had easily torn through his leather jacket. The pain was manageable, but it sure made him wish he was wearing his uniform.

The robot shot at him again. Steve jumped over the first blast and then ran forward, holding his shield out in front of him. He felt two shots deflect off of it. Then he cut to the side. He threw the shield before the robot had managed to re-aim its lasers and smirked with momentary satisfaction when it smashed into one of the lasers and along the red strip of glass along the front. Steve guessed it was where its sensors were located and hoped that meant he'd just damaged its targeting systems.

He changed directions again, rushing towards the robot in earnest now. The shield flew back towards him and he caught it just before he leapt, shifting his grip mid-leap and then ramming it directly into the top of the robot's metal surface. The robot stopped moving, the impact causing a crack in the glass to pop open with a small shower of sparks.

Steve felt the robot falter. He flipped backwards, getting off it just before it crashed to the ground. Landing in a crouch, he remained still for a few moments in order to scan his surroundings.

The robots had come out of nowhere, pouring out from the subway system like large evil metal mushrooms with legs. The tops were smooth rounded half-spheres with two lasers set to either side of a red strip of light. Five long spiked metal legs came out from the centre and were, unfortunately, much sturdier than their appearance suggested.

Wanda was the only Avenger he'd managed get a hold of so he could only hope FRIDAY would catch news of the attack and alert Tony. The others were at least a half hour out, so it would be just him and Wanda for now. Once she finally got here.

Well, one down, a dozen and something to go.

Movement farther down to his left caught his attention. He saw a jean-clad leg and a sway of floral fabric. Civilians. And there were two robots converging on their location.
Steve was up and running before he could finish the thought, already analyzing the angles of the building, cars and other objects around the robots. He saw a flash of light out of the corner of his eyes and twisted in his steps just in time to deflect the incoming laser blast right back at the robot firing it. Twisting back in a neat bit of footwork he'd credit equally to his boxing training and dancing lessons courtesy of the girls of the USO, he immediately continued on his original course.

The robots weren't slow by any means, but Steve was still a lot faster. By the time the two robots realized he was following them, he was close enough to throw the shield. He watched it fly through the air as he continued running. Exactly as planned, it hit the first robot on an angle, causing a visible dent in the smooth metal before bouncing off to hit the second robot, resulting in another dent.

As the shield flew back into Steve's hand, both robots stopped. Then the metal mushroom heads turned a full 180 degrees, their red lights flashing ominously. Steve cut to the side, running away from the civilians in order to lure the robots away.

The plan worked only too well and moments later he was dodging two sets of lasers. Which wasn't exactly ideal, but they weren't the first homicidal robots he'd dealt with and, with his luck, wouldn't be the last. He remembered thinking robots were cool once. Well, Tony's helper bots were cool, he supposed. Of course, they could just be biding their time and playing dumb while they perfected their plans for world domination.

That would also be his luck.

Seeing the low wall of a subway station up ahead, Steve put on an extra burst of speed. Off to the right, he could see a robot blasting through the glass storefront of a clothing store, mannequins flying apart as a fancy-looking lacy dress caught fire. Somewhere further down the street, he could hear screaming. Pushing past his anxiousness, Steve focused on the two chasing him.

He reached the low wall and jumped, using it as a platform to give him some extra height as he flipped backwards and landed neatly on top of the closest of the two robots. Spreading his legs as much as he could for balance, he threw his shield at the other robot, the angle and proximity enough to give the blow the strength to make the robot stagger and cave its top in almost in half.

Steve caught the shield when it came back and then rammed it down with all his strength. The robot below him froze for a moment before listing to the side. It crashed to the ground in a heap of metal, smoke and sparks.

And then Steve crouched low to avoid being hit by a laser blast. Bringing his shield up, he turned back to face the second robot. Half its head was dented, with one laser hangings loosely by a handful of wires and one laser swivelling around like a demented joystick while firing out at random.

It was the work of a moment to figure out the right angle. He waited until the robot was aiming in vaguely his direction before he threw the shield at the still-functioning laser. No sooner had he thrown it, he was leaping into a sideways roll to avoid the robot's wild blast. Reaching out automatically, he waited for his shield to slide back into his grip.

A laser hit the shield as it sailed towards him, knocking it off course and out of his reach.

Steve swore and looked to the source of the shot. Three robots were heading towards him. His eyes widened just before he was flipping backwards to avoid a heavy spread of laser fire. Burning pain exploded across the back of his right thigh mid-flip and he cried out.

His eyes glanced from the robots to where his shield was laying in the middle of the street, twice as far as it had been before. The only cover he had to work with between his current position and the
shield was a small orange Honda parked on the street.

The robots began firing again.

Steve dove for cover behind the shot-out storefront. More glass shattered as the laser blasts followed him inside. He immediately flattened himself against the ground, arms over his head as bits of mortar and shards of glass went flying into the room. He heard several screams come from the back of the shop. Shuffling so that he could look towards the sound, he saw two young women crouching down behind the large cash desk.

“Is there a back door?” he called to them.

They blinked at him, wide-eyed and pale with fear. Both had nearly identical long silky brown hair and similar facial structures. One was wearing a bulky pink sweater with jeans and the other a long-sleeved grey dress. The one with the pink sweater motioned towards where he could see a set of fitting rooms. “It's that way!” she called to him.

“Then get out of here!” Steve called back.

Two nearly identical fierce glares were his answer.

“We're not leaving him!” the one in the grey dress declared.

“Him?”

There was a pause in the blasts and Steve quickly crawled to the two women. 'He' turned out to be an elderly man in an elegant navy suit and yellow shirt trapped beneath a massive antique closet. From closer up, the pinched look on the first woman's face was much clearer, as well as how her bulky pink sweater had hid how she was protecting her right arm by holding it close to her body. The two women together might've been able to move the heavy-looking closet, but one alone didn't stand a chance.

Steve braced himself as he grabbed hold of the closet, idly noting its solid wood construction. He heard the one of the women try to say something, but then the man gasped as the weight was lifted off his body. There was no time to be delicate, so Steve simply tossed it to the side and tried not to wince at the sound of wood crashing against the wall.

He turned back to the civilians. “Now get out of here,” he told them. “I'm going to draw their fire away.”

“Holy shit, is that Captain America?” he heard one of the young women say softly as he ran back to the front of the shop.

He didn't hesitate, leaping through the shot-out storefront window and continuing on at a run. Steve wasn't sure if robots could be surprised, but these sure seemed to take a few moments to adjust to their mark's new location. Steve used every single one of those moments to put as much distance between himself and the robots as he could.

It was working until a fourth robot blocked his path.

He skidded to a halt with a heartfelt curse. Glancing behind him, he saw his hard-won head start disappearing. In front of him, two lasers targeted him.

And then the red strip of glass exploded into a shower of shards and sparks. Steve blinked in surprise, but wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. He ran as the robots behind him got close
enough to shoot at him once more.

One laser blast came so close to him that he felt its heat on his cheek.

Steve leapt up and ran across the small orange Honda, hoping the change in height might confuse the robots at least for a moment. He’d take every precious moment he could get. He jumped down and then heard it getting torn apart by lasers behind him.

Almost there.

He could see more robots coming at him from the left, their red sensor lights pointed in his direction. He pushed his limbs to go faster.

Small rocks and pieces of asphalt peppered his ankles as several laser blasts hit the ground at his feet.

He threw himself forward, hands out to grab his shield and then flipped himself over and into a crouch facing the on-coming robots. Almost immediately three laser blasts hit the shield and Steve felt some of the anxiety he hadn't allowed himself to acknowledge lift away. He hated losing his shield in the middle of a battle – especially when there were bullets or lasers involved.

From behind his shield's cover, Steve tried to figure out how best to face off against the now five robots heading towards him. Less than thirty seconds later, he was off running towards the second set of robots. They would hopefully provide some cover from the first three that had been chasing him and – if he was very, very lucky – might also become victim to friendly fire.

He'd keep his mental fingers crossed in any case.

Two robot heads swivelled to face him, their lasers aimed in his direction. Weaving from side to side, he continued to run forward, absorbing shot after shot with his shield. Finally, he was close enough and threw himself to the ground in the same breath as he threw his shield at one of the robot's legs. When he hit the ground he continued rolling away, not daring to stand still even for a moment.

The shield impacted the first robot's legs, sending it staggering back a few steps and throwing its aim off. One of its shots hit the second robot as the shield rebounded and hit it from the bottom. The second robot's upper body was thrown upwards and Steve was once more on his feet, catching his shield mid-motion almost as an afterthought. Five large steps and he was at the first robot, kicking it in the legs first before landing an uppercut right next to the dent left by his shield.

The robot fell backwards and he leapt over it, towards the second.

Which was when laser blasts from his original three pursuers resumed. Unfortunately, only one blast managed to clip the robot between them. However, while the clip didn't do much damage to the robot, it did unsettle it enough throw its aim off again, which Steve took immediate advantage of in order to get in closer once more. This time, he aimed his shield directly at the red sensor light on the front. It shattered spectacularly.

Steve then ducked down behind the robot's intact base and brought his shield up against the new onslaught of laser blasts.

He was beginning to think he would have to retreat to a more secure position when, suddenly, a red ball of energy hit one of the robots. Steve looked up and smiled at the sight of Wanda, her eyes glowing the same red as the energy ball, floating down to join him on the ground.

“Hey Wanda,” he called to her. “Welcome to the party!”
Wanda snorted. “A party should have less robots and more music,” she said.

“Well I'm sure Tony will be happy to provide the music if he ever gets here.”

Wanda threw another red energy ball at the robots, catching it directly in the red sensor. The robot froze for a moment before shuddering. The red strip of light sparked and then the robot slumped forward, the light dying out. “Is there a plan?” she asked.

“No really,” Steve admitted. “Just destroy the robots before they can do too much damage.”

“Okay.”

Between the two of them, they managed to take out the other two robots within minutes. Just in time for another half dozen to start skittering their way towards them. Steve realized with dismay that there must've been more coming out of other subway stations.

“Don't suppose you have your communicator on you?” he asked Wanda.

She blinked at him in surprise. “Yes. You do not?”

Steve chuckled wryly. “Oh I did.” He motioned to his injured side and damaged jacket. “It was in my pocket.”

“That is unlucky.”

“Yes, it's been one of those days.”

Steve took a deep breath as he analyzed the area for anything that could spell an advantage for them. Wanda was still fresh to the fight, but the pain from the laser burn on his side was steadily getting worse and it was taking all his willpower to keep himself from limping. As he scanned the battlefield and their on-coming enemy, Wanda was activating her communicator. Good. Natasha might ignore her cellphone, but she would never fail to answer her Avenger's communicator.

He was, possibly, a little annoyed that Natasha had ignored his call.

“Okay, you go high,” he told Wanda after she'd talked to Natasha. “I think their target range is limited higher up, and it'll split their focus.”

Wanda nodded. Red swirled into her eyes as energy crackled around her hands, and she steadily rose into the air. Sure enough, half the robots followed her movements.

Steve broke into a sprint, his shield in front of him to block laser blasts. Leaping above the blasts, he threw his shield at one of the robots and then landed into a sideways roll. He came out of the roll into a crouch and held his arm up to catch his shield just in time to use it to deflect two more laser blasts.

The robot he'd hit was heavily dented at the front, but the red sensor strip and one of its lasers were still very much intact. Steve's leg muscles tensed and he prepared to fling himself forward when. He froze as, suddenly, a robot flew through the air and crashed into one of the robots firing at him, knocking it to the ground.

Steve blinked.

Risking a glance to the side, he was surprised to see a large figure approaching him. It wasn't Hulk large, but Thor would certainly never tower over them. It – no, he, definitely he – looked like some sort of yellow-brown rock monster wearing blue pants. And, high above, Steve could see a fiery blur
moving towards them. Fast.

Steve shifted his stance, prepared to swing his shield around and throw himself out of the way of the fire. However, by the time it was close enough for him to move, he recognized its vaguely humanoid shape. That made him pause. And then the fiery human was flying around the robots, the sudden intense heat apparently confusing their sensors enough to make them stop firing.

Not needing any more of an opening, Steve threw his shield at the robot he'd already damaged. He caught it just as the rock-man came to stand beside him.

“ Heard you could use some help here, Cap,” said the rock-man, his voice gruff and only slightly gravely.

Steve looked away from the battle, where fireballs were being added to Wanda's red energy balls. “I certainly won't say no to it,” he said. A metaphorical light bulb suddenly lit up in his brain as he realized why the two men seemed somehow familiar. “You're the guys from the Baxter Building.”

The rockman grunted in affirmation. “I'm Ben Grimm. The show-off with the flames is Johnny Storm. Sue and Reed are a couple blocks down takin' care of strays. Damn doombots never can stay conveniently in one spot.”

“Doombots? Is that what these things are called?”

Ben Grimm shrugged. “S what we call 'em. They're made by a guy named Victor von Doom.”

“Victor von Doom?” Steve asked incredulously. “That's not his real name, is it?”

“Oh, it is. Apparently his parents just assumed he'd be a super villain when he grew up.”

“Well, he seems to have sure done them proud.”

Ben Grimm barked out a laugh. Steve felt his lips quirk into a half-smile and then he brought his shield up to deflect a laser blast. Apparently the robots had managed to get their sensors realigned again. Another laser blast hit the stone goliath beside him, but the impact only made Ben Grimm grunt.

The other super hero met Steve's eyes. “Well, guess we can't let the kids do all the work,” he said casually. Then he looked back to the doombots and punched his fist into his hand with a vicious grin. “It's clobberin' time!”

Steve echoed his grin and let his shield fly. Seconds later, he flipped over a couple of laser blasts. He watched the doobot go tumbling down next to one Ben Grimm was punching into submission as though it were nothing more than a tin can with spider legs, the shield came sailing back into his hand.

With the help of two extra superheros, the doombots were down within minutes. Wanda floated to the ground just as the last one went crashing down, a heavily-dented fiery heap of metal.

Steve was sure he wasn't the only one who groaned at the sound of approaching metal legs just before two more doombots rounded the corner.

Only to be taken out by a volley of repulsor fire.

Though there wasn't any music playing out of Iron Man's external speakers this time, as usual Tony Stark swooped in to hover above them as though he expected the universe to provide him with an
“Hey guys!” Iron Man greeted them. “So, Natasha's stuck in traffic with Pepper. And thanks for saving me some stragglers. You know how much I just love blasting robots.”

“Didn't want you to have gone to all the trouble of getting into the suit and flying out here for nothing,” Steve told him.

“And I appreciate it. 'Iron Man Arrives After Battle is Done' would not have made for a particularly flattering headline.”

Suddenly a streak of fire zoomed up to Iron Man, the human features becoming more distinct as it slowed and made a leisurely circuit around the suit. Steve was amused at how the Tony seemed to freeze, the motion somehow being conveyed through the metal suit. His circuit complete, Johnny Storm stopped to hover just above Iron Man.

“Wow, that suit looks even cooler from up close!” he exclaimed, his voice younger than Steve had expected.

It was amazing how much the Iron Man suit could emote. Or maybe it was more a reflection of how well Steve knew Tony that made him think he could see the subtle difference as Tony went from surprised and wary to preening.

“It's a marvel in scientific and mechanical ingenuity,” said Tony. “So, naturally, it looks cool from all angles and distances.”

Johnny Storm laughed, a wild, care-free sound that matched his fiery appearance. “Yeah, but nothing beats being able to fly without one,” he said cockily.

“Hmph, yeah well some scientists know how to follow proper safety protocols,” Tony answered primly.

Steve barked out a laugh. “If you ever meet one of those, Stark, please make sure to introduce them to me!” he called up.

Iron Man looked down at him and Steve could feel Tony's glare through the dull golden eyes of the suit. His grin widened.

In a flash, Johnny was suddenly right in front of Steve, wide excited eyes visible within the fire. And then the flames vanished as suddenly as a gas burner being turned off, and in front of him was a young man – Steve would've guessed no more than twenty or so – with short blond hair and blue eyes that sparkled with excitement.

“Wow, Captain America!” he said, beaming ear to ear. “It's so awesome to finally meet you! We were down in Oklahoma testing Reed's newest jet engine when the Chittauri invaded, which sucked 'cause it sure looked like you guys could've used our help–”

“–Hey, we managed just fine without you!” Tony protested from above them.

“You got lucky, you mean,” said a male voice from behind Steve.

“Lucky?!”

Steve turned and found himself facing a man and a woman. The man was tall and slim, his hair dark except for two patches of white at his temples. The woman was quite the looker with long blonde
hair and blue eyes of the exact same shade as Johnny. These had to be Sue and Reed.

Steve stepped towards them even as he heard Tony landing. “Hi, it's nice to meet you folks,” he said with a smile as he stuck out his hand. “I'm Steve Rogers. I assume you recognize Iron Man, or Tony Stark, and that over there is Wanda.”

Wanda smiled and waved a greeting to them. Within seconds, Johnny Storm was standing next to her. “Hey, you were the one using that weird red energy stuff,” he said. “What is that? Is it, like, part fire, part electricity or something?”

Steve's lips quirked in amusement as he turned back to the couple in front of him.

Reed blinked and the dismissive look he'd been aiming at Tony was replaced by a much more congenial one as he shook Steve's hand. “Yes, it's nice to finally meet you, Captain Rogers. I'm Reed Richards and this is my wife Sue. I'm assuming you've already met Johnny and Ben.”

“Yeah, I have.”

And then Tony was standing beside him, the suit's faceplate up – no doubt so he could glare at Reed Richards more effectively. “I'll have you know that defeating the Chittauri was entirely due to skill and ingenuity! The Avengers are just that awesome.”

Richards let go of Steve's hand and rolled his eyes as he turned his attention back to Tony. “Oh please, if you hadn't needed to get rid of that unfortunately deployed nuclear missile, it would've never occurred to you to attack the mothership on the other side of the portal directly, as you had no way of knowing the soldiers' lives were connected to it so closely.”

 Giving her husband an exasperated look, Sue Richards stepped forward and also shook Steve's hand. “It's really very nice to meet you, Captain.”

Steve smiled at her. “Please, call me Steve,” he said.

Her smile widened. “Then you should call me Sue.” Suddenly she glanced down and her eyes widened in alarm. “Steve, you're injured! There are EMTs stationed just around the corner. You should get them to take a look at you.”

Steve tried to wave her off. “It's really not that bad,” he said. “The super serum will take care of it.”

Sue gave him a look. “And I'm sure it'll take care of it much faster if you actually get it properly cleaned and wrapped.” Grabbing him firmly by the arm, she pulled him forward. “Here, why don't I walk you to the ambulances. We were the last to arrive, so it's only fair that we deal with clean-up.”

“Well, technically, Tony was the last to arrive,” Steve pointed out.

“Even better. Between Ben, Iron Man, and my brother's eagerness to show off for pretty young ladies, clean-up should be quick.”

Steve gave in gracefully and let her lead him to the waiting medics. Adrenaline from the fight having mostly worn off, by the time he was finally sitting down waiting to be checked over, he was honestly glad for Sue's insistence that her team (and Iron Man) handle the clean-up.

“Oh, and Steve,” Sue said just before she left. “You guys should come over for dinner tonight. Unless you already have other plans?”

Steve blinked at her. “None that I know of,” Steve replied with a smile. “And dinner sounds great, so
long as it's not too much trouble.”

Sue laughed. “Not at all. I was planning to make a roast anyway and at least it'll give me another excuse to drag Reed over to the dining table to eat instead of his lab. I try to do that at least a couple times a week, to make sure he doesn't forget how normal, civilized people do it.”

Steve snorted. “Sounds just like Tony.”

“Just don't let them hear you say that,” said Sue with a sly smile and a wink. “Don't let their attitudes fool you, they've know each other for a lot longer than either of them have been superheroes.”

“I was wondering about that.” Steve sighed. “I take it they don't get along.”

Sue grinned. “That's the polite way to put it. Although it's not quite so bad if you can manage to steer the conversation away from anything scientific.” She glanced to the side. “Damn, there's the press. That makes it time for me to disappear. See you at six, Steve! Top floors of the Baxter Building.”

“See you then, Sue!”

Sue Richards stepped backwards with a little wave and then vanished. Steve blinked. And then chuckled. That certainly was a handy trick to use for evading reporters.

He eyed his shield thoughtfully. He'd known there were other super heroes scattered throughout New York City and it felt nice to finally make friends with some of them. Couldn't possibly hurt to have back-up options available. And willing to help out.

He remembered Vision mentioning having met Daredevil and Natasha had spent time getting to know a few of the X-Men while she'd been shopping for a Halloween costume – of all things. It made him wonder if Tony had any contacts of his own within New York's non-Avenger superhero community. Apparently he'd known the Fantastic Four and never said anything, after all.

The familiar sound of repulsors made him look up with a frown. He watched curiously as Iron Man landed beside the ambulance. Steve raised an eyebrow at him as the faceplate came up.

“Pining for me already?” he asked.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Funny, Cap,” he said. “No, we were wondering if you remembered seeing anyone else in the area when you were fighting the doombots.”

“Someone like who?”

“Specifically, someone with a gun.”

“Uh, no. Why?”

“Cause one of the doombots was taking down by a very precisely targeted shot directly into the centre of its digital sensors.”

Steve paused, suddenly remembering the doobot that had been in his way until it had suddenly gone down. “There was one that went down mysteriously, but I had three behind me, another two coming from the left, and it was between me and my shield so I didn't exactly have the time to try and figure out what was going on.”

Tony nodded as well as he could in the bulky Iron Man suit. “Well it was a large calibre gun, probably a .50, though I won't know for sure until I pull the bullet out and run it through a proper
Steve froze, his eyes suddenly widening. “.50 calibre... that's a sniper's rifle.”

“Yeah, it is,” Tony confirmed softly. He paused. “I have FRIDAY analyzing any video surveillance he can get his hands on to see if we can identify the shooter.”

“Let me know if you get a hit.”

“You know I will, Cap.”

They lapsed into a stunned silence. At least Steve felt stunned, unsure whether he should allow the hope that wanted to bloom to life inside his chest. After all the time, all the effort he and Sam put into their search, could it really be this easy? Could Bucky have decided to come home on his own?

Was it even Bucky?

“So, uh, I should get back to the clean-up,” said Tony after a few moments.

Steve just nodded. Iron Man took off to rejoin the others just as an EMT came to look him over. Steve was so lost in thought he didn't even notice how the young woman's eyes widened at the shield innocuously leaning against the gunnery.
A Wonderful World

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay on this chapter, but RL is a bit weird at the moment (admittedly spending last weekend marathoning Daredevil season 2 didn't help), but I'll try to be somewhat faster with the next one. Sadly I can't promise that, however, but I will try.

OH MY GOD THIS STORY IS NEARLY AT 1000 KUDOS!!! Ehem. Thank you to all of you who've left kudos or took the time to leave a comment on the last chapter. This one is another random cameo chapter, featuring a character a lot of people were asking about. So, having said that, this chapter contains some spoilers for Jessica Jones season one (ie. the ending is alluded to, but nothing specific is mentioned).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"M-Main Street... Birch Street... Higgins Drive. C-Cobalt Lane."

She wasn't sure how much time had passed while she sat in the shadows between a foul-smelling dumpster and a pile of wooden flatbeds, head between her knees and trying to remember how to breathe. One of the bricks in the wall at her back was uneven, its edge jutting out sharply and digging into her back. It would bruise, but Jessica couldn't bring herself to move. It was a constant point of pain, something real, something existing in the present.

Dammit, he was dead. She'd made sure of that.

Jessica took another deep breath. The really infuriating part was that the guy hadn't even looked like Kilgrave. He'd been short and balding with the beginnings of a rather impressive beer belly. His jacket had been dark grey and unbuttoned at the front. The woman with him had been blonde with red highlights and she'd been wearing some sort of blue floral dress that came to her knees.

All she'd caught were a few words as she'd passed them on the street: 'Aw, come on, just give me a hint,' the woman had said and the man had laughed, 'Not even a little one. But you'll love it, I swear.'

And then her skin had begun to crawl as large, masculine hands had suddenly appeared on her arms and a warm presence had pressed up against her back. The smell of expensive cologne became stronger as lips came closer and a deep voice whispered into her ear: 'You'll love it, Jessica. Just keep smiling.'

Jessica took another deep breath. She grit her teeth and slammed her fist into the brick wall, only vaguely aware of the crunch of cracking bricks as pain from the impact traveled up her arm. It banished the feeling of those hands.

Shit. And she'd been doing so well, hadn't had an attack in weeks. She'd almost felt normal.

Two more deep breaths and then she slowly unwound, leaning back against the brick wall. The dumpster beside her had an oddly-shaped dent in it and smelled like three days worth of moldy corpses had been regurgitated into it. Along with some vegetables, probably green (the stench had an
undertone of humid, decaying grass).

At least it banished the lingering smell of cologne, but now Jessica wanted to puke for an entirely different reason. Pushing herself to her feet, she staggered out of the alley she didn't really remember stumbling into.

The street was noticeably quieter. Jessica guessed maybe an hour had passed. Not much more, though, because the light being reflected off the late evening sky indicated that most people were still awake. She ran a hand down her face.

God, she needed a drink.

The mark she'd been tailing was obviously long gone, so with nothing better to do, she crossed the street and headed towards the closest convenience store. Thankfully, she had until the end of the week with this one, so she'd just have to get the scumbag tomorrow.

Jessica was barely half-way to the store when she heard voices that made her freeze in her tracks. The first three were male. They sounded angry, threatening. The pitch made her think they were large, heavy. Bruisers. The fourth voice was also male, but he sounded much older, frailer, although oddly calmer than the men threatening him. He also had an English accent, but different than Kilgrave's.

Jessica hesitated for a moment, debating whether or not to get involved. And then Malcom's face flashed before her eyes – his disappointment if he ever found out she'd refused to help a defenseless old man.

She rolled her eyes at the image and changed directions, climbing up the fire escape of the nearest building in order to move faster.

Sure enough, the three younger men looked like a stereotypical trio of thugs, though it was difficult to tell how much of them was muscle and how much was fat beneath their bulky leather jackets. All three were armed with knives of various sort and Jessica could see a gun tucked behind the waistband of the one in the middle where his jacket kept riding up. They were surrounding the old man by crowding him against a fairly large tree and smirking menacingly.

The old man seemed more annoyed than scared, as he stared down the thugs while leaning against his cane. Jessica wasn't quite sure if the ridiculously long while beard helped the image or hindered it. Regardless, he was either a really good actor, or else he was anything but the defenseless old man he appeared to be. Jessica was half-tempted to just wait a while and see how the situation played out. However, then Malcom's face appeared in the back of her mind again, this time accompanied by Trish.

With an annoyed sigh, she jumped down from the roof. The thugs, preoccupied by the old man, didn't notice her entrance, so Jessica carefully uncapped her camera lens and snapped a picture. The flash caught their attention instantly.

She smiled the most saccharine sweet smile she could muster. “Say cheese, assholes,” she said and took another picture.

One of the thugs actually growled at her.

“Who the hell are you?” a second one demanded with an angry glare. He looked like the most intelligent of the three – which wasn't really saying much as the other two looked like they had combined IQ of a wilted houseplant.
“Just a friendly neighbourhood good samaritan,” she replied. Then she dropped the smile. It had been making her face itch. “Seriously though? I’m having a really shitty night so far, so beat it.”

“Or else you’ll what, little girl?” the thug who’d growled at her predictably sneered.

“Let you live with the shame of having had your ass kicked by a little girl.”

The somewhat intelligent-looking thug was the only one who didn't laugh. He glowered at her instead and raised his right hand a bit more to show off the seven inch blade he was holding.

“Is that a kitchen knife?” she couldn't help asking. “What are you guys, muggers on a budget?”

It was the final straw, apparently, as the thugs snarled and then finally lunged at her. The first one tried to grab her, but she side-stepped him and grabbed his arm, squeezing just hard enough to hear him cry out in pain. Not letting him go, she ducked under a punch from the second thug and immediately came back up to throw one of her own, careful to only put enough strength into it to break his nose, not smash his skull in. She was rewarded with a snap of cartridge and a howl of pain. While he went down, she grabbed the first would-be mugger by the front of his shirt and threw him at a nearby open dumpster.

Her aim was perfect. He sailed through the air and hit the open top with a clang before tumbling into the half-empty dumpster. The lid slammed shut after him.

Jessica turned to the last thug, who'd frozen at the sight.

“Shit, you're one of 'em enhanced freaks!” he exclaimed, tacking a half-sneer at the end of his exclamation, as though his disdain would prove he wasn’t afraid of her.

“You know, young man, insulting a woman's physical traits is, generally speaking, a dangerous proposition,” the old man suddenly pipped up, his voice coloured liberally with amusement. “But insulting one who could break you in half might just count as suicide.”

Jessica chuckled. “What the hell are you still doing here?” she called out to him.

“Why, enjoying the show, of course. Incidentally, I believe I should inform you that while marginally impressive-looking, that blade is in quite the abysmal state. I doubt very much you could so much as cut a carrot with it!”

“Shut up old man!” the thug barked at him. He sneered. “You suddenly an expert on knives or somethin’?”

Out of the corner of her eyes, Jessica saw the old man's large white bushy eyebrows go up. “Why, yes, in fact I am. Although, truth be told, most of mine are quite a bit bigger than yours.”

Anger flashed across the thug's face and he rounded on the old man with renewed ferociousness. Jessica barely had time to curse under her breath before she was rushing forward to cut the thug off. But even with her superpowers, she wasn't quite fast enough and the thug was there, in front of the old man, reaching forward with one hand and about to stab the knife forward with the other.

Suddenly the old man's walking stick came up, seemingly out of nowhere, and jabbed him directly in the esophagus. It must've been a fairly hard blow, because the thug let out a breathless yell and immediately dropped the knife in favour of bending over to clutch at his throat as he tried to breathe with desperate, painful wheezes.

Jessica whistled in appreciation. “Nice moves, old man,” she said. Then she kicked the wheezing
thug in the head, knocking him unconscious.

The old man smiled slightly and inclined his head in her direction as he leaned forward on his walking stick once more. “Why thank you, young lady,” he said. “One does not survive a war and then the New York City streets without learning one or two. Besides, yours were also quite impressive and I thank you for gallantly using them on my behalf.”

Jessica snorted in amusement. “I've sure been called a lot of things, but I've never been called 'gallant' before.”

“Ah, well, I admit it's not a word put to much use in modern times, however I stand by my words. It's not just anyone who would stop to help an old man out.”

“You're giving me way too much credit. I'm not that good of a person, just happened to be walking by.” She frowned. “Why are you out so late on your own anyway?”

“I was on my way to the park. I'm meeting a messenger from a friend of mine there, you see.”

Looking him up and down, Jessica decided he looked too healthy to be a druggie. She could, however, imagine him standing in front of a makeshift lab cooking drugs. Maybe he had a cool underground nickname that went with the beard.

“Your bookie?” she asked carefully, just to see what his reaction would be. And because it somehow seemed more polite than drug dealer.

The old man blinked once and then barked out a laugh. “Not even close,” he said. “No, he's just a very old friend and not particularly good at adapting to the changing times. Cellphones are a bit beyond him, I'm afraid.”

“So he sends messengers to meet with you in the middle of the night in Central Park?” Jessica asked him skeptically.

The old man shrugged. “He and his messengers like their privacy.”

“Right.”

Straightening, the old man suddenly turned his head down the street, though Jessica couldn't see what had caught his attention. A moment later, he turned back to her with a smile. “Well, once again, I thank you for your help, young lady. However, I really must be going now.”

“Yeah, sure.”

Jessica watched him as he began to walk away. He'd barely gone three steps, though, when he paused and turned back to her.

“Regardless of what you believe yourself to be, young lady, know that I believe you to be a good person.”

She froze, an unidentifiable rush of feeling suddenly infusing her limbs. There was a sincerity in the man's voice that was both confident and uncompromising. Jessica didn't know whether she wanted to run away or step closer and let that confidence embrace her.

“Y-you can't know that,” she said softly. She swallowed down her sudden nervousness, clenching her hands into fists when she realized they were shaking. “You don't know me! You have no idea what I've done,” she hissed through clenched teeth.
The man nodded. “Hm, yes, you're right I have no idea who you are,” he said after a moment's hesitation. “But I do recognize that look in your eyes and I can tell with certainty of one thing you did, and that it was quite possibly the most difficult thing you could do. You survived.”

Jessica felt her eyes widen.

“Whatever it was, it must've been horrible and now you are plagued by nightmares while feeling like you're hanging over a dark, gaping abyss threatening to swallow you whole.”

She wanted to scream at him, demand that he shut the hell up and stop trying to analyze her, because he had no idea what he was talking about... But the look in his eyes stopped her. There wasn't pity there, but empathy. And pain. The pain of someone remembering their own nightmares, their own dark, gaping abyss.

She wondered what had happened to him. She decided it didn't matter.

“I've done horrible things,” she whispered, trying to make him understand that she didn't deserve his faith.

He cocked his head to the side thoughtfully. “Did you have any choice?”

Choice. That was what it had been all about, hadn't it? She wanted to say 'yes', but deep inside she knew that was a lie. “Not really,” she answered reluctantly. “But I should have been able to figure something out anyway.”

“And that is why you are a good person,” he said simply. Then he turned and began walking away once more, this time clearly with no intention of stopping.

Jessica blinked. “What?” she exclaimed and then hurried up to catch up with him. “And who the hell are you anyway?”

“Merlin.”

“Seriously? Gandalf sound too cliched?”

The old man chuckled. “Not at all. A merlin is a type of falcon. When I was born, there was a one perched on the wood pile just outside the window of my mother's house. My mother said that after she'd finally finished birthing me, she'd laid back on the bed and looked out the window. She said he was looking right back at her, as though he were silently giving her strength and so, when the midwife handed her her newborn son, my mother decided to name me Merlin.”

“So you're not a wizard in your spare time then?” Jessica asked jokingly. Though, finding out the man beside her was a wizard certainly wouldn't be the strangest thing she'd ever heard.

“These days I'm mostly a humble antiques dealer.”

“Who collects knives.”

“Well, swords mostly.”

Jessica blinked and then grinned. “Oh, so you weren't exaggerating when you said your blades were bigger.”

“Young lady, I have no need to exaggerate anything.”

“Do the sword polishing jokes ever get old?”
“Not when I say them.”

She certainly hadn't intended to walk Merlin all the way to Central Park, but the next thing she knew they were walking crossing the street to the park anyway. Cutting a look to the old man, she wondered if he'd done it on purpose. Although, it wasn't like he'd been interrogating her. No, if anything she now knew quite a bit about him, but could only think of a handful of details she'd told him about herself in return.

Jessica was about to excuse herself to let him meet his friend's messenger in private (though she was tempted to stick around to at least listen in), when the old man handed her plastic container.

“Here, this is for you.”

Startled, she took the plain plastic container automatically. At first she blinked down at it, then she carefully opened it. And then blinked again at its contents. “Strawberries?”

“Drizzled with honey, yes.”

A warm breeze caressed her cheek and ruffled her hair. Behind her, the bushes rustled. And Jessica stared down at the strawberries, feeling decidedly bemused as she tried to figure out just how this was supposed to make sense.

“Uh... thanks?”

“Well, I suppose they're only temporarily yours,” the man suddenly continued as though he hadn't left Jessica to ponder this bizarre gift for several minutes. He pointed behind her. “They're actually for her.”

Merlin had barely finished speaking when something blunt nudged Jessica's arm. Whirling around, she immediately backpedaled a few steps to put some distance between herself and whatever was hiding in the shadows.

All she saw at first was a large, indistinct shape, but one too squat and bulky to be human. Like a very, very large dog (a mutant dog wouldn't quite be the weirdest thing she'd ever seen either). Then the creature stepped out of the shadow.

Jessica gasped.

She remembered once as a little girl hearing that there was actually so such thing as a truly white horse. The creature before her was not only white, but the white of its coat was so pure, so clear of any other colour, that it shone in the moonlight. The ethereal white glow was accented by the horn that spiraled up from its forehead, looking as though it were made from spun gold.

“This can't be real,” Jessica whispered, unable to look away from the vision before her.

“Can't it?” the old man asked.

The unicorn craned its neck and sniffed before stepping forward, its hooves light and nearly inaudible even to Jessica's sharp ears. It came right up to Jessica and nudged the container of strawberries she was holding.

Jessica swallowed down the lump in her throat. “Why is it coming to me? I thought unicorns only liked... I mean, I'm not–”

“–A virgin?” Merlin finished, sounding amusement. “It's a unicorn. What in the world makes you
She carefully took a strawberry out of the container and held it out to the unicorn, frowning. “Yeah, I guess. But I thought that was the legend?”

He snorted. “What, the thing with the maiden enthralling a unicorn so a brave knight could slay it? That might have worked once and the story was then re-told enough time by traveling bards to make it into common knowledge. But I assure you, unicorns don't care about that sort of purity. They're attracted to the purity of the soul.”

Her breath caught in her throat as she held out another strawberry. The unicorn pulled its lips back as it daintily took it from her hand.

“But…” Jessica said, trailing off before she'd even started her sentence. Merlin said the unicorn could read her soul, so it had to know what she'd done, but if it knew that then how could it possibly stand to be near her? How could this beautiful, glowing creature stand to be in the presence of someone as dark and sullied as her?

And yet she didn't want to say the words out loud, didn't want to admit to what she'd done. Because she didn't want the unicorn to turn away.

“I've killed people,” she finally whispered into the breeze, so quiet she wasn't sure if anyone could've heard her.

“Did you enjoy it?”

Jessica's head snapped to the side. “What?! No, of course not! I tried to do everything I could not to—to find another way, but... I-I failed.”

“Then you had no choice. Or, perhaps, not one that was actually an option.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but hesitated. “I could've just walked away.” She snorted. “I almost did. But there was this girl…”

“You did what you had to do,” Merlin finished for her.

“Yeah.”

Despite seeing him approach her, it still came something of a surprise when Merlin took her hand and gently guided it towards the unicorn. She held her breath until, finally, she was touching its flank and feeling its soft coat and recognizing the warmth of a living, breathing creature. But Merlin guided her hand further along its flank until Jessica felt raised skin. He let go and she followed it: a think line of raised skin about eight inches long.

A scar.

“She was injured?” Jessica asked incredulously, even as anger surged through her. How could anyone want to hurt this beautiful, gentle creature?!

“A battle wound.” Merlin chuckled at Jessica’s surprised look. “Did you think the brave knight from the stories needed a maiden to tame the unicorn, because the unicorn was harmless?”

He smirked at Jessica and walked around her, reaching into the container she was holding to pick out a strawberry. As the unicorn accepted the treat, he reached up and rubbed beneath its forelocks and around its horn.
“You see, the thing about unicorns, is that they are creatures of purity. Which means they are, of course, calm and gentle creatures when they are at peace. What most humans don't realize, however, is that 'purity' is not synonymous with 'gentle'. Just as they are calm and gentle with their whole being, when angered, they become angry with their whole being. There is no fear, hatred, greed or jealousy, which so often colour human emotions. All they feel is pure anger. Believe me, there is nothing more terror-inducing than an angry unicorn.”

Jessica ran her hand back along the unicorn's flank, until she reached its neck. “So, you're secretly a bad-ass in disguise,” she told the unicorn. “It's a good disguise.”

The unicorn looked away from Merlin and met Jessica's eyes. Its eyes were as blue as a clear summer's sky, flecked with gold. For a moment, she thought she saw humour in its eyes, and an ageless sort of wisdom. Then the unicorn's eyes slid downwards, to the container half-full of strawberries.

Jessica chuckled and offered the unicorn another one. She continued to slowly feed her strawberries and when they were all gone, she ran a hand up and down her forehead, even reverently running two fingers up the impressively long, sharp horn. The unicorn just stood there, patiently allowing the touch.

When the unicorn finally shook off her hands and stepped away, Jessica was surprised to realize she had no idea how much time had passed. She was even more surprised when she realized just how calm she was feeling – Jessica couldn't remember ever feeling this calm and at peace with herself and the world.

Unicorns were apparently better than yoga. On top of being bad-ass.

“Hey, uh, thanks!” Jessica called after the unicorn as it walked away.

The unicorn paused, looked over its shoulder, and neighed softly at her. Then it melted into the shadows. Even though it should've been impossible for anything that glowed that brightly to just disappear in the darkness.

Jessica looked around her to find the park darker than she remembered it being. And Merlin was gone.

Chapter End Notes

As a point of interest, this chapter came about because it's become a bit of a tradition for me to include at least one unicorn somewhere in each of my full-length Merlin crossovers. So, then it became a question of which MCU character should be the one to meet the unicorn. And, really, who is more perfect for that than Jessica? Lol.

Because I'm sure at least some of you are now wondering, no, I have no plans to have Jessica show up again for the time being (I know, I know, if you all had a dime for every time I've said that in this story). However, with the Defenders coming out in August I imagine that will change, unless their storyline just doesn't at all mesh with wherever this story is by then. As for Guardians 2, yes I've seen it (loved it!) and I think I might have an idea of how to bring them into this story, but I need to work out the logistics a bit more in my head first.
Doom and Gloom

Chapter Notes

Before you go reading this chapter, everyone please go check out the lovely panels Did_you_see_the_light_in_my_heart drew for the prologue of this story. If you've just started reading this story now, then you might've seen the links already as I've gone and added them to the end of the prologue, but to everyone who's been following along, you can see the art on either deviantart or tumblr.

Now, back to the story.

First of all, I apologize once again at how long it's taken me to update. RL's been a busy, stressful and exhausting lately. However, things should calm down within the next week or two, so I'll be able to get back to a more regular writing/updating schedule. In the meantime, thanks for your patience guys! And for all the comments and kudos you've left me. This is my first story to surpass 1000 kudos and that makes me all kinds of excited, especially given I'd originally began writing thinking this would attract a small, niche audience at best.

Anyway, this chapter features a character no one actually asked for, but I've liked for a while despite having never really seen him properly represented on-screen (I've done some research, but I apologize to hardcore fans if I haven't quite managed to capture him perfectly). I'd also just like to point out that I began writing this chapter before his solo movie was announced, although I can't help but love the coincidence.

Warning: This second part of this story features the death of a very minor character. And some liberties taken with said character's backstory... not that we were ever actually given one on the show.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve wasn't really paying attention to where he was going. Hydra could've probably marched several armed and fully-uniformed platoons down the street and he wouldn't have noticed. They probably could've brought a couple tanks and a marching band along too. His brain had shut off some hours ago and now he was numbly going through the motions on automat. He vaguely recalled stopping by the fish shop and bought some sort of fish – it had white meant. Probably.

Had anyone asked him why he'd needed the fish, his response would've been a blank stare. And then possibly a shrug.

But he wasn't thinking about reasons or motivations. There was pavement beneath his feet and yet he felt unmoored, his existence swimming in a murky sea of uncertainty. He knew he was in New York, because the streets felt familiar. Mostly. And he had fish.

It wasn't until a hot fiery figure suddenly appeared beside him that he paused in his steps to take in his surroundings.

“Hey, Cap!” a hovering Johnny Storm greeted him while Steve blinked at the streets around him, recognizing Little Italy and wondering how he'd gotten here. “You've got your eye on him too, I see.”
Steve took a moment to figure out whether or not he knew what Johnny was talking about. He quickly concluded that he was entirely clueless.

“Uh, hey Johnny,” he said. “Who are you talking about?”

Despite the indistinct features, Johnny's fiery figure still managed to convey his incredulousness well enough. He pointed ahead of Steve, towards a rather distinctive-looking figure wearing a long green hooded cloak and heavy grey boots that looked like they were made of metal. As the wind blew the cloak to the side, Steve caught snatches of more metal on his legs and arms. Five men and one woman dressed in dark grey and green uniforms flanked him from either side.


Steve felt his cheeks heat up. Apparently that marching band hadn't been too far off the mark. “Right, him,” he said, trying for nonchalant and knowing he was probably failing miserably. “So, who is he anyway?”

Johnny landed next to Steve and the flames surrounding him went out as he matched his steps. “That's Victor von Doom. I've been following him discretely for a couple of blocks now.”

Steve kept his doubts about Johnny's ability to be discrete to himself. Instead he frowned, trying to figure out why the name von Doom sounded familiar.

It came to him a few seconds later. “You mean that's the guy who made those robots that trashed Midtown last week?”

“Yup, that's him!”

“And why are you just following him instead of detaining him and calling the cops?”

Johnny grimaced. “Because he's got diplomatic immunity,” the young man spat in disgust.

Steve blinked. “Diplomatic immunity? How the heck does a known super-villain manage to get diplomatic immunity?!

“By becoming the dictator of a small European country.”

“That's... and why hasn't anyone helped overthrow him?”

Johnny barked out a bitter laugh. “Oh, 'cause good ol' Doc Doom's a genius. And he doesn't half-ass things. Decided if he was gonna run a country then he might as well do it right: fixed their economy, boosted their manufacturing industry, practically killed their unemployment rate and brought their crime rate down to single digits while he was at it. Trust me, you talk trash about Victor von Doom in Latveria at your own risk. The citizens freakin' love him.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.” Then Johnny frowned. “Wait, if you weren't following Doom on purpose, then why were you walking behind him?”

“Yes, Captain Rogers, please do explain how the leader of the Avengers just so happened to be following me by accident,” a smooth and oddly metallic voice suddenly interjected into their conversation.

Steve and Johnny both jumped slightly before looking ahead to find themselves being glared at by
Doctor Doom's mocking eyes. They were, in fact, his only visible facial feature as the rest of his face was covered by a silver metal mask.

Steve blinked. The man was wearing a lot of metal. In fact, on second glance, he was quite clearly wearing metal armour with a long fabric shirt draped over his torso and tied with a thick brown leather belt. It wasn't armour like the Iron Man suit either, but rather created in the style of a medieval knight with modern ascetics and techniques.

He wondered if Doctor Doom lived in a castle too. Being in Europe, Latveria most likely had one.

“Apparently we were going in the same direction,” Steve finally answered, after the question had been hanging in the air just a beat too long.

“Is that so?” Doctor Doom asked, clearly unimpressed. “And does the esteemed Captain America often just happen to wander through Little Italy?”

Steve's eyes narrowed. “Not that it's any of your business, but yes I do.” He felt himself straighten his posture further as he adopted his sternest 'Captain America' expression. “I could demand the same of you, Doctor Doom. And I warn you, if you try anything, we will stop you.”

Victor von Doom chuckled, the sound metallic yet still very much human. Under different circumstances, Steve might've even called it pleasant.

“You would try, Captain Rogers.”

“I'd say we did pretty well last week.”

Doom froze for a moment. “Ah, yes, I remember hearing you took part in that scrimmage. Well played, Captain, well played.” Then he shrugged, the metal accommodating the movement with surprising ease. “While it's hardly any business of yours either, I assure you my errand today is purely personal. An acquaintance of mine has managed to acquire an artifact of some historical significance to Latveria and I am on my way to pick it up.”

Steve blinked in surprise. “You're heading to the Isle of the Blessed?” he blurted out. There wasn't any other shop in the area that dealt in anything that could be referred to as an artifact. At least nothing legitimate.

Cold eyes narrowed at Steve. “Yes, I am,” Doom replied after a long pause. “You're familiar with the shop, I take it?”

“The owners are friends of mine,” Steve answered pointedly.

A skeptical “Hmm” was the only response Victor von Doom gave before abruptly turning his back to them and continuing on his way. Grey and green-clad bodyguards (dressed in regular twenty-first century military-issue body armour) closed ranks around him. Now that Steve was once more aware of his surroundings, he also noticed the bodyguard eyeing them from across the street. And the multitude of perfectly ordinary pedestrians going about their day.

“So, do you really know this place he's going to?” Johnny asked him quietly.

“Yeah,” Steve said, his hand automatically going to the fish in his pocket. Of course. “It's where I was heading.”

Johnny stared at him incredulously. “Seriously?! That's one hell of a coincidence.”
Steve simply nodded as they followed the Latverian entourage. If Doom knew they were still behind him – and Steve had no doubt that he did – then he showed no sign of it. Not until they reached the shop, did he turn once more to acknowledge their presence with a contemptuous sneer. At least, it was the expression Steve pictured was behind the mask based on the look in Doctor Doom's eyes.

Two of the bodyguards remained just outside of the door, two more fanned out further away and two accompanied Doom inside the shop. Steve eyed the two standing guard at the door, but when they did nothing to hinder him, he left them alone.

He stepped inside the shop and immediately froze in his tracks as he found himself staring at a giant wooden... creature? It towered over him and was easily twice his width, with large exaggerated, mostly-humanoid features and delicate wooden needles sticking out of its neck like a very pointy mane. It was holding a bleached white animal skull (Steve hoped it was ivory and not real bone) in one hand and a short sceptre in the other. The only articles of clothing it wore was a skirt made from flat golden straw and a bulky necklace made from stones, pieces of bone and feathers.

“Holy shit!” Johnny exclaimed from behind him. “How the hell did they get that in here?”

“Through the back?” Steve suggested even as he considered the narrow entrance into the corridor. Maybe there was a second, larger door into the shop he hadn't seen yet. It would hardly surprise him.

Suddenly, a white blur launched itself from the top of a heavy wooden cabinet, causing one of the bodyguards to yelp in surprise. It landed onto a small side table and then instantly leaped down to the ground before darting forward to twine itself around Steve's legs, purring loudly.

Steve laughed. “That's some fancy acrobatics you've got there, Aithusa,” he said.

Aithusa stopped and looked up at him before meowing plaintively up at him.

Still chuckling, Steve knelt down and took the fish bag out of his pocket. “Yeah, yeah, you know I don't come empty-handed,” he said as he unwrapped it. “It's cod today... I think.”

He only had the vaguest of memories of actually buying the fish, but Aithusa didn't seem to care as she dug into it.

Then he heard a metallic chuckle. His head snapped up and he found himself looking into the amused eyes of Doctor Doom and his two bodyguards.

“It would seem I owe you an apology, Captain,” said Doctor Doom. “My distrust of your motives was, apparently, unwarranted. Though, I trust you'll concede, not illogical.”

Steve stared up at him for a moment, not quite sure what to make of the apology. Thankfully, he was saved from responding by Nimueh's arrival.

“Ah, Victor, I see you've managed to fit this old woman into your busy schedule after all!” she exclaimed as she shuffled into view.

Steve's jaw dropped at the greeting. Beside him, he heard Johnny make an equally surprised sound.

Doctor Doom immediately turned to Nimueh and inclined his head in greeting. “Whether or not I would find the time to come see you was never in question, Ms Priest,” he said smoothly. “It was merely a matter of when I would find it.”

“You could have always just sent your assistant to pick up the items,” Nimueh pointed out with amusement.
“This is too important to me personally to send an assistant. Besides, it's been nearly two years since I last visited.”

“Yes, that it has. Merlin will be sorry he missed you.”

Steve's heart sank at the news that Merlin wasn't at the shop.

“I've cleared my schedule for the afternoon...”

Nimueh shook her head. “I'm afraid he's back in England, Victor. He received a message from an old friend: an acquaintance of his isn't much longer for this world and wished to see him.”

Steve felt his heart stutter and his lungs seize up. It was a familiar feeling, though not one he'd felt in a very long time. But it also felt less immediate, as though he were only feeling it second-hand, his body not truly his own.

A loud meow startled him back into reality and was somehow enough to restart his heart. He looked down at Aithusa, who was staring up at him worriedly. She meowed again.

“Steven!” Nimueh exclaimed, and then suddenly she was standing in front of him. “You look a touch peeked. Are you alright?”

Steve nodded numbly and then cleared his throat. “Y-yes, I'm fine. I was hoping to talk to Merlin, but I guess he's not here, so I'll just–”

“...Nonsense, you'll do nothing of the sort. What you will do is sit down and let me pour you a stiff drink.” Not bothering to give Steve the chance to protest, she grabbed him by the elbow and led him over to the large round table in the back. “Now, just give me a moment to dig out Merlin's stash.”

Despite feeling like he'd been run over by something (twice), Steve couldn't help feeling bemused at the thought of Merlin having a 'stash' of liquor that Nimueh periodically raided. He wondered if the stash was supposed to be a secret.

“Hey, Steve, are you okay?” Johnny suddenly whispered to him from his left.

Steve took a deep breath. “I'm fine,” he said. The Human Torch seemed like a swell guy, but Steve didn't really feel like discussing things with someone he barely knew, fellow superhero or no.

Johnny seemed to understand and just nodded in silently in response. After a quick glance towards the front of the store, he pulled out a chair and sat down.

Steve smiled at him, an empty acknowledgement of his obvious lie and gratitude to Johnny for not pushing him about it. There were, in fact, very few people left alive with whom he was ready to discuss this with. Maybe in a few days.

He saw Nimueh approaching out of the corner of his eyes, quickly followed by the faint ring of crystal as a flat-topped whisky glass was placed in front of him. Steve raised an eyebrow at the incredibly generous amount of scotch it was filled with.

“You realize I can't get drunk, right?” he said.

“You can still feel the burn, can't you?” Nimueh immediately retorted. “Whisky like this is meant to be savoured.”

Steve couldn't help the way his lips quirked in response, a genuine sign of amusement. “Yeah, I can
“Well, then drink up, young man. By the time Victor and I return with the chalices, it should be about ready.”

“Chalices?” Steve couldn't help asking. It seemed like a rather odd thing for a supervillain who happened to be a world leader to come looking for.

“Silver chalices encrusted with a single large emerald,” Doctor Doom took up the explanation from where he was now standing casually beside the armoire that stood as a partition from the rest of the shop. “Once used by the kings of Latveria for ceremonial toasts, they went missing during the Second World War. Nimueh came across them at an estate sale and contacted me immediately. I am, of course, most interested in returning them home.”

Steve nodded. “Then I'm glad they're being returned to the people of Latveria,” he said simply.

Amusement flashed through Doom's eyes. “An interesting choice of words, Captain. But, yes, that is what I intend to do. Latveria is a small and oft-forgotten nation, but we are proud of its history.”

“Then we'd best go get them or else they won't be returning anywhere,” Nimueh cut in as she shuffled away, leaving Doom and what was left of his entourage to follow behind her.

As their voices slowly disappeared towards the back of the shop, Steve looked down at the glass of whisky on the table in front of him. Several long moments passed in silence before he finally picked up the glass and took a drink, savouring the burn of very good whisky as it travelled down his throat.

“Must be a weird feeling knowing you hang out at the same place as a known supervillain,” said Johnny. He glanced back towards the rest of the shop with a worried look in his eyes. “Are you sure that old lady's going to be alright?”

“I'm pretty sure she'll be fine,” Steve answered. “Both Magneto and Charles Xavier have been seen in here too.”

“You mean, the mutants?! I thought those two were enemies.”

“Yeah, but sometimes they meet for tea?” Steve shrugged. “I have no idea what their story is, but Natasha saw them here together. Actually, I met Magneto and one of his lieutenants here once, back when I was still pretty new to the twenty-first century and had no idea who they were.”

The Human Torch gaped at him for a few seconds before promptly bursting into laughter. “Shit, what the hell is this place? Some sort of secret clubhouse for super heroes and villains?”

Steve chuckled. “You remember that race in Central Park the Avengers hosted a few months back with the boats Tony built based on some really old remote controlled boat?”

“The Tesla boat, yeah.” Johnny smirked. “Reed nearly bust a gut pretending he wasn't totally jealous of it.”

“Tony got that boat here.”

“Seriously? I'll have to tell sis that. She never knows what to get Reed for his birthday.”

“I've never been in the attic, so I honestly have no idea what's up there. Although, it's probably worth the look...”
Steve trailed off as his ears picked up the sounds of Nimueh and Doom returning. He took another sip of whisky.

When they came back into view, Victor von Doom was carrying a medium-size wooden crate and Nimueh was convincing him to stay and have tea – her tactic mostly revolving around not taking ‘no’ for an answer. Even Doom seemed amused at the way she corralled him to the table and strong-armed him into a seat. Graciously giving in to the inevitable, he sat down and gently placed the wooden crate down on the seat beside him.

Nimueh nodded in satisfaction and hurried off to prepare the tea.

“This obviously isn't your first time in here,” Steve commented with amusement, curious despite himself at how easily the bizarre-looking man seemed to fit into the shop.

“Indeed,” Doom replied and then paused, as though considering for a moment whether or not to continue. “I once ran into Merlin at a guest lecture series at Columbia. I was just a lowly Phd student then, but found myself curious about the old man who attended physics lectures as a hobby.”

Steve blinked. “I didn't know he did that. I guess that doesn't surprise me. I mean, I think I remember Bruce and Tony being really excited because Nimueh had told them he'd met Alan Turing.” He shrugged. “I mean, Mister Turing sure seemed like an interesting guy when I met him, but I didn't really understand a lot of what he was doing.”

Doom stared at him. “You met Alan Turing,” he repeated after a moment.

“Uh, yeah, there was a sort of cocktail party with a bunch of military people and English bigwigs and I had to go as a representative of the SSR. I basically just got introduced to him before he and Howard started talking about things I didn't understand.”

“Of course they did,” said Doom, his tone somehow managing to sound not the least bit condescending. “Tell me then, Captain, how did you stumble upon this shop?”

“I used to jog through Little Italy every morning on my way to the Tower and, well, there's that little Italian bakery just down the street...”

“Ah, yes, it has excellent canolli.”

Steve grinned. “Sure does. Anyway, I just sort of noticed it one morning as I was walking past and decided to come inside. Merlin and Nimueh... they really helped me when I was trying to get used to, well, everything.”

“Hang on, are we seriously just forgetting that he's the enemy?!” Johnny suddenly exploded, staring between Steve and Doctor Doom with wide, incredulous eyes.

“Young man, if you so much as think about starting a fight while you're inside this shop, I will introduce you to some of the more interesting antiquities in the basement!”

As far as Steve knew, the only antiquities in the basement were the cars, motorcycles and airplane, but he plastered a stern look on his face as he looked at Johnny in disapproval. “I'm sure he wasn't planning on causing any sort of trouble, ma'am.”

Johnny, to his credit, looked contrite in the face of Nimueh's fiercely narrowed eyes. “I wasn't, promise.”

“Good,” Nimueh said before setting the tea service down on the table.
Steve gulped down the rest of the whisky as she poured the tea and then thanked her for the cup she handed to him. Johnny tried to say no, but was promptly stared down by all three of them.

“Mm, this is a new blend,” said Doctor Doom after his first sip. “An excellent taste. Is that blueberries, I taste?”

Nimueh nodded. “Yes, I’ve been experimenting with adding dried fruit to the blends.”

“I commend you on your success then.”

“Thank you. I’m quite happy with this one.”

“Look, not that I can’t appreciate weirdness, but are we seriously just going to ignore that his robots trashed part of midtown last week?” Johnny tried again.

“No one proposes anything be forgotten, young man,” said Nimueh as she calmly took a sip of tea. “All we are doing is having tea.”

“Yeah, but... but he's evil. He's trying to take over the world.”

“There are worse people to theoretically rule the world,” Nimueh pointed out. “Latveria is a prospering country, after all.”

“Why Latveria, anyway?” Steve asked, mostly out of curiosity and partially because, well, the shop just had this way of making him forget that his job was, in fact, stopping people like Doctor Doom.

Doom shrugged. “Why not? It was a struggling country with a weak economy and high unemployment rate. What better example to use in proving myself a capable leader.”

Steve frowned. “A leader who took his position by force.”

He could vaguely catch the motion of Doom's eyebrows rising behind his mask. “In the past that has been a rather acceptable way to attain leadership.”

“Not in a free country,” Steve countered. “You've taken freedom away from the people of Latveria and given them a dictatorship.”

“Freedom?” Doctor Doom carefully set his teacup down. “Freedom to do what exactly? To live in poverty? To starve? To beg and steal in order to feed their children? To be denied an education, or medical care due to social and monetary constraints? What exactly is this freedom you speak of worth to you, Captain?”

“It's worth fighting for. People should have the freedom to choose how to live their lives, the freedom to choose their leaders.”

“People are stupid. They rarely know what is best for them and are all too easily led by empty promises and dazzling smiles rather than intelligent debate. They are sheep who latch onto an idea in droves, no matter how nonsensical.”

“Making stupid decisions is part of being human. Besides, by taking away their freedom, you're simply forcing them to become those sheep against their will, to conform with ideals they might not believe in.”

“That is the job of every leader,” Nimueh suddenly interjected. Steve turned to look to her. “No matter how a leader gets to their position, they will never make decisions that everyone will agree
with. Sometimes, they will, in fact, be forced to make incredibly unpopular decisions for the good of their people.”

“Assuming those decisions are truly for the good of the people and not just a matter of ego or personal grudges,” Doom pointed out.

Steve nodded. “Good men can make bad decisions, or misguided ones.”

“Exactly,” Doom agreed. “No matter the form of political system in place, a government is only as effective or as good as the intentions and capabilities of their leaders. Latveria may be a dictatorship, but it is also a prospering nation with a strong economy. Can your democracy claim the same, Captain Rogers? Can you truly claim that there are no starving children, no men and women living on the streets because they have nowhere else to go, no young men and women forced into a life of crime because working their way to a better life is simply too far out of their reach? I can claim that of Latveria, can you claim that of your free country?”

Steve swallowed down his first reaction of outrage. He'd fought for freedom and democracy with all he had and would die for it if necessary, but he also knew that Doom would dismiss anything less than a well-reasoned argument.

“Democracy isn't perfect,” he agreed, knowing that to claim otherwise would prove him a fool. “But it puts the power into the hands of the people, instead of power-hungry individuals. I can't claim to know much about Latveria, but you and Johnny both say the people there are happy so I have to believe you. What happens when you're gone, though? Can you guarantee that your successor will have the country's best interests at heart and make decisions that will keep them happy and prosperous? Getting rid of an elected official is easy: you just don't vote for him the next go around. Getting rid of a dictator? That usually takes violence.”

“And so you are both back to questioning people's intentions,” Nimueh pointed out. “And competency. Even the best intentions are useless when the person wielding the power is an idiot.”

Doom chuckled. “Quite right.” He looked at Steve with almost looked like respect. “You bring up some valid points, Captain Rogers, which I find quite surprising and I am not often surprised. Still, this only means we will inevitably find ourselves at an impasse. You hold freedom as a treasure above all others, whereas I see it as meaningless if the people who have it are not healthy and happy, if society as a whole is not flourishing.”

“Can they really be happy if they're not free?” Johnny asked. He glared at the others when they looked at him in surprise. “What? You thought I wasn't capable of coming up with an intelligent argument?!”

“Yes,” Doom replied easily and Steve found himself chuckling.

It was almost an hour later that Victor von Doom finally excused himself. Johnny followed shortly after, leaving Steve alone in the antiques shop with Nimueh. After seeing them both out – and rolling her eyes at the Human Torch's attempts at being subtle with his intentions to follow Doom – Nimueh then came to sit beside Steve. Aithusa easily leaped up onto the table on his other side and rubbed up against his bicep.

“Now, something's been troubling you today, Steven,” said Nimueh gently.

And just like, Steve found himself plunged back into an icy river of grief. One he wanted to push far, far out of his mind, to deny its existence by never speaking of it... But one look into Nimueh's eyes and he knew he couldn't claim to be fine.
“I—it's Peggy,” he finally blurted out, his voice soft, almost a whisper. “She... Her son called me this morning to tell me...” He stopped, took a deep breath as he tried to find the strength to continue. “The funeral's this weekend.”

Nimueh's eyes were understanding. “Of course it would hit you hard,” she said softly.

“I know we were really that close and that she stopped being my girl a hell of a long time ago...” he began rambling. “It doesn't make much sense since I barely knew her, all things considered, but it feels like my world's falling apart all over again. Which doesn't really make sense, but, well...”

Nimueh took his hand. “Young man, what the heart feels rarely makes sense. Your Peggy was a final link to a world you’d lost and now that link has been severed. Not only have you lost someone close to you, but her loss is reminding you of everything else you've lost.”

Steve nodded numbly. “I'd wanted her to be my future, once.”

“Alas, the future rarely comes about the way we'd like it to. Life, sadly gets in the way of our dreams.” She squeezed his hand and Steve squeezed back. “Of course, dreams have a way of changing along the way as well.”

“Yeah. Back when I first Peggy, before I became Captain America, I dreamed of settling down and having a nice house and a pretty dame, and maybe some kids... and a dog.” He laughed bitterly. “Not sure my asthma and allergies would've let me have a dog, but I'd sort of imagined there being one anyway.”

He looked down at the tiny bits of leaves swimming in his teacup. “I don't think that was Peggy's dream. She wouldn't have been happy with just that.” He paused again. “After I became Captain America, there was a war on and I never really stopped long enough to think about what becoming Captain America would mean for my future. Maybe back then I could've retired to civilian life, but not anymore. I can't even imagine what that would look like anymore, not in the twenty-first century.”

“So, in other words, it's not just the woman you're mourning, but the last vestiges of the dreams she represented.”

Steve's head snapped up, his eyes widening in horror. Had he been using Peggy and her memory for his own selfish needs? “I—I never meant to... she's a person and she deserves to be thought of as one! She's not just a fantasy!”

“Steven!” Nimueh snapped firmly before his thoughts got the chance to spiral further. Her eyes softened once she had his attention once more. “You never got the chance to properly know the woman she became. It is inevitable that you will first, and foremost mourn the passing of the woman you once knew, the woman who was tangled into your hopes and dreams regardless of how realistic they would've ended up being.”

Steve took a deep breath. “I guess we'll never know.”

“No, you won't.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes longer, until with a screech of wood, Nimueh suddenly stood. “Now then, it occurs to me that the cars in the basement could do with a good polish. I don't suppose you have the time to help an old woman out?”

“I, uh, sure I've got time,” Steve answered, feeling slightly bewildered by the change in topic. “I don't mind helping.”
“Excellent!”

It wasn't until much, much later that it occurred to Steve that Nimueh didn't bother changing into her usual work overalls, but rather led him straight down to the basement, handed him all the cleaning supplies, before promptly disappearing. She returned five hours later, after all the cars were shining and Aithusa had fallen asleep on the white leather seats of a 1960s corvette convertible, with more tea and a plateful of sandwiches.

Steve simply smiled in amusement and devoured several sandwiches. Then he went to polish the plane. It wasn't anything like the one Howard had flown at Peggy's request on that day so very long ago, but somehow it still felt like he was honouring them both by making sure it was properly polished and ready.

The caves hadn't changed much over the centuries. They also hadn't been discovered and mined for coal or minerals either, which was more surprising. And yet less.

Time hadn't done much to wear away the signs of rudimentary excavation, of pickaxes and shovels. If he concentrated, Merlin could still smell sweat and fear lingering in the air. There was nothing particularly magical about these caves, except that they were home to a being who was both pure magic and yet defied magic in the same breath.

He'd seen much over the years and Merlin had his theories, but he'd never asked for the truth. It had never mattered.

“Emrys.”

Merlin paused in his tracks and turned to the man who had stepped out from a side-tunnel. Interesting. He'd never noticed before, the way these caves muffled magic. Normally he would've felt his friend's presence the moment he'd entered the first tunnel. Few people could truly catch Merlin by surprise, after all.

“Anhora,” he greeted. “It's good to see you again.”

The old man's lips curled into a small smile. “And you as well. My messenger had an interesting story to tell upon her return. I admit to being quite surprised at your willingness to introduce the magical to someone of so obviously non-magical origins.”

Merlin shrugged. “Mortals search for answers in the mundane, but sometimes they need to be reminded that the world has wondrous things in it as well. Magic still has its place in the world.”

Anhora nodded slowly. “Mortals will never realize how much they have lost by pushing the Old Religion and magic away.”

“Unfortunately, no.”

As always, Merlin took a few moments to bask in the presence of someone who understood things the way he did. Nimueh... Nimueh was a friend, a companion, a confidant, but she hadn't been there for the most tumultuous parts of Merlin's long life. Anhora and the others of the Old Religion had been there to watch him grieve for Arthur, Gwaine, his mother, Gwen, Leon... It had been Freya – no, the Lady of the Lake – who had consoled him when he'd finally realized the truth of his
immortality, realized he was cursed to forever watch those he cared for whither away and die. Anhora had been the one to help him come to terms with it.

“Come, we should not delay too long,” Anhora finally spoke quietly. “She does not have long for this world.”

“Yes, we should,” Merlin agreed.

It shouldn't have surprised Merlin to find the Diamair alone on her deathbed. Even among the magical beings of Albion, she was especially mysterious and reclusive. He himself had only ever seldom visited her and never anywhere outside her caves.

The Diamair's home was located deep in the cave system, at the end of a narrow, winding side-tunnel that was barely visible unless one knew where to look for it. The tunnel eventually exited into a large cave whose walls were covered in phosphorous moss that bathed the cave in an eerie green glow. Some animal skins littered the cave floor and several generously-stuffed cushions provided sparse seating around a small fire pit. A few trinkets made of seashells and precious gems hung from the ceiling and one wall of the cave was lined with large, elaborately decorated ceramic pots.

The Diamair's bed was in the far corner of the cave, nothing more complex than a large pile of furs and a thick wool blanket. Anhora remained at the cave's entrance as Merlin crossed to the Diamair's bedside, making sure to let his steps be heard as he wasn't sure how much his magic could be felt within this sanctum.

Large, pale glowing blue eyes calmly watched him approach. When he finally reached her, Merlin was struck by how dimmed she seemed. When he'd first met her, the Diamair had shone in the darkness of the caves like a giant blue firefly, but now her skin was nearly translucent and the light barely visible. Like a light bulb on the verge of giving out.

“Emrys, I'm glad you've come,” she rasped as he knelt on the sheepskin beside her bed.

“You asked me to come,” Merlin pointed out. “And you never ask for anything.”

Slowly, as though the movement took great effort, the Diamair nodded. “I have a favour to ask of you, Emrys.”

“If it's within my power to grant it, Diamair, then I shall.”

“It is. But first, there is a story I must tell you.”

The Diamair paused for a moment. Her eyes glazed over as she stared into the distance beyond Merlin, as though searching for a long-forgotten memory. Eventually, she blinked, returning back to the present. Then she took a deep breath.

“Long ago, before I came to Albion, I was once a queen. Diamair, you see, is a title not my name. My people were called the Dia and in their language, 'mair' means ruler, or protector. A very long time ago, I failed to protect them. With their final breaths, my guards helped me to escape with our most prized artifact. It is... not quite a weapon, but powerful nonetheless. I have spent my remaining years protecting it, but now my life is coming to an end.”

Merlin took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“You want me to take over its guardianship?” he asked gently.

The Diamair paused. “For now, yes. I do not believe it will be a long guardianship, as I feel the time
approaching when this artifact will be needed once more. You, will know when that time comes, Emrys.”

Merlin nodded. “Then I will make sure it gets to the right person.”

A relieved smile graced the Diamair's face. “Good. Then I gladly entrust you with the last legacy of the Dia.” A hand rose up from beneath the woollen blanket and shakily pointed towards the row of jars. “It is the third jar from the left.”

He glanced over. The jar was blue in colour, with white and yellow floral patterns painted over it and a bright red tassel tied to the lid. It would fit in well with the other pieces inside the shop.

“Can I ask a question?” he said as he turned back to her.

“Yes.”

“If Diamair is your title, then what is your real name?”

This time her smile was sad, and perhaps slightly wistful. “It does not matter. That person died long ago with the rest of her people.”

Sadness stabbed into Merlin's chest, but he understood. It was why he only ever told the stories of Arthur as a grand, legendary king, why the knights were only ever brave and fearless, and Gwen was always the beautiful and wise Guinevere. Let the world hear of them as legends, heroes that were larger than life. The memory of the people who were his friends were his alone.

He felt Anhora approach them from behind as Merlin continued to kneel at the Diamair's bedside, watching solemnly as the faint light inside her grew dimmer and dimmer. Until it was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Lol, well hoped you enjoyed that chapter -- bonus Merlin characters and all. The Diamair was such a randomly weird character on the show that I have fun giving her fantastical backstories.

One last thing: I signed up to write for the Marvel Big Bang again this year, but I need a beta. Now, given that the rough draft deadline is in two weeks and I've barely started writing, it's quite possible I'll have to drop out. I haven't entirely given up yet, though, so I was wondering if there was anyone interested in betaing my story if I do end up getting enough written within the next two weeks. Given the time crunch it's not likely to be epic-length (maybe 40-50K). And it's going to be an Avengers/Doctor Who crossover. (if I don't end up writing this story for the Big Bang, I will most likely finish it anyway, just much later).
Red, White and Black

Chapter Notes

Merry Christmas everyone! Well, except those of you who don't celebrate Christmas, in which case... Happy First Day of Winter!

Wow, okay, so it's been a while. Again. Sorry about that. I ended up taking longer than expected to write my big bang story, although I did finish it on time - barely (it's a Doctor Who/Avengers crossover if you're interested). Thank you so much to everyone who responded to the last chapter. I went and replied to some of you, but to those of you whom I didn't, please be aware that I've read them and really appreciate each and every one. I was especially happy at how you all seemed to enjoy the meeting of the minds that was Steve and Doctor Doom.

And since Disney now owns the rights to the Fantastic Four, maybe we'll actually get to see those two meet on the big screen as well. =D (Hey, I can dream.)

Anyway, here's an entirely not seasonally appropriate chapter for you. I'm going to try my best to have another one out by New Years Eve to make up for the fact that it's taken me so long to update. Also, please keep in mind that I haven't yet seen Thor: Ragnarok so please no spoilers. I was going to go last week, but then I spent the entire week sick and now that I'm finally mostly better I'm playing catch-up. Ugh.

Also, I have finally seen Daredevil season 2 and the Defenders, but not yet the Punisher. This chapter, therefore, contains spoilers for the end of Daredevil S2, but none for The Punisher S1. Or the Defenders.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Even though the sun had set hours ago, the city was still hot, the air oppressively humid. Instead of cooling the city off, the darkness felt dense and the hovering cloudy sky closer in and claustrophobic.

It almost made Frank Castle wish for the dry heat of the desert and its chilly nights. Almost.

Unfortunately even the criminal elements of the city were apparently unwilling to venture out, away from whatever fans and air conditioning units they'd managed to find – or steal – and so the night was quiet. The usual police and ambulance sirens were less frequent than usual.

None of that was helping Frank's already foul mood. Not only was the sweat pouring down his brow getting into his eyes, but it was making his shirt stick to his back, his skin chaffing as his kevlar vest rubbed against it. He itched for something to do, anything to take his mind off the uncomfortable, oppressive heat and the desire to cool off, to throw himself fully-clothed into the nearest body of water.

He and Maria had spent their honeymoon at a cabin by a lake. The water had been so cool and crisp, warmed just enough by the bright mid-day sun to be nearly perfect. The water in the pool where he'd taught his daughter to swim had been warmer... Little Frank Jr. had learned at the same cabin by the lake where he and his wife had gone on their honeymoon... They'd had a wading pool in the backyard when the kids had been younger... sprinklers on the lawn drawing out shrieks of laughter...
Frank Jr. knee-deep in a stream as he watched little fish swim around him with avid fascination... Frank called to him and the boy looked up and gave him such a wide, dimpled smile it made his heart melt... and then the water running around him was red and his sister was beside him, but they were laying on the ground and his daughter...

Frank tore himself out of his memories with what felt like inhuman strength. His heart was beating loudly in his ears and his breaths were coming out as wheezing gasps. He closed his eyes for a moment, not willing to leave himself vulnerable for longer than that, as he tried to force his heart to slow.


He wasn't entirely certain how long it took his breathing to even out and for his heart to stop its marathon, but he'd wager it wasn't more than a few minutes. It wasn't the first time his memories had threatened to overwhelm him, and it wouldn't be the last. Part of him wished he could exorcise them from his mind completely, but a much larger part couldn't bear to let them go. He was well aware they were the only thing keeping him human, keeping him connected to the man his wife and his children had once loved.

Frank turned his gaze back to the city, scanning the rooftops to see if there was something he'd missed. It was disappointingly still. Just as he was debating heading down closer to the docks to see if there was something going on there, he finally spotted movement out of the corner of his eyes. He looked over and squinted into the distance, before using his night-vision binoculars.

Of course he didn't really need them to know that the only other person crazy enough to be out in this heat was Red. The insane bastard didn't even have the decency to look sluggish as he ran, leaped and flipped his way across Hell's Kitchen's rooftops in his usual armour. Frank could feel himself sweating even more just thinking about it.

He gave it no more than a second's deliberation, before tucking his binoculars back into one of the pockets of his flak vest, throwing his P-90 over his shoulder and taking off after the Devil of Hell's Kitchen. The kid looked like he was on a mission which had the potential to be more interesting than anything else going on at the moment. Especially since Red had been conspicuously absent from the streets and rooftops for the past few weeks – the last time Frank had seen him had been with that woman in his arms.

Frank hadn't been lying when he'd told him he didn't care who was behind the mask, but having caught a glimpse of a vaguely familiar face, he couldn't help the sliver of curiosity.

What sort of man hid his face behind a devil's mask? No, what sort of catholic hid his face behind a devil's mask?

As he followed Red, Frank realized that while his movements might have seemed fine, all was clearly not well with his fellow vigilante. He didn't quite know how he did it, but Red seemed to have a sixth sense for knowing about people in his vicinity, no matter how well-hidden they were. Four whole blocks, and Red didn't appear to know Frank was behind him. Sure, Frank had researched that whole rooftop-hopping thing he did, had even practiced it himself – it was a handy way to get around without being easily spotted – but while Frank could parkour well enough without sounding like a gorilla on every landing, his movements were a far cry from Red's silent ease. His body just wasn't built for that sort of graceful flexibility.

Red was also heading in, more or less, a straight line. Frank got even more worried when he realized they were heading out of Hell's Kitchen and then through Chinatown, towards Little Italy. Daredevil wasn't exactly known for venturing outside his home territory. Who the hell was he here to take
Frank really hoped Red hadn't just decided to go for an evening run. He seemed to be heading somewhere specific... unless he knew Frank was following him and was just stringing him along for kicks. If that was the case, Frank was going to shoot him. In the head. Again.

There was nothing different that Frank could tell about the rooftop Red finally stopped on. It was flat, with a short wall along the perimeter, just high enough for someone to lean on as they looked out onto the city. Pausing a few buildings away, to get a better look through his binoculars, Frank saw a small, round table with two chairs. There were a couple more chairs lined up next to the door that led into the building itself. Red, of course, didn't stop to lean on the wall, or sit down at the table, instead pacing the length of the roof in obvious agitation.

Frank frowned. It almost looked like Red was waiting for someone... but who? As far as he knew, this wasn't anywhere near any of the mafia hangouts.

Suddenly, Daredevil froze. He relaxed moments later, some of the agitated energy seeming to leech out of his posture as he turned towards the door. It opened and an old man in a dark terrycloth robe stepped out onto the roof, a bottle in one hand and a small round tray of glasses in another. Frank raised an eyebrow as the old man casually greeted the Devil of Hell's Kitchen and then set the bottle and glasses down on the small table.

Red finally came over and sat down at the table, accepting a glass with a slight tilt of his head.

The old man didn't look like an informant.

A large white cat gracefully leaped onto the rooftop wall and sat down, its tail visibly swishing behind it. It stared directly at Frank. Several minutes passed and the creature didn't even twitch, its eyes that glowed gold from the reflected light of the city never faltered in their gaze.

Frank felt a shiver run down his spine.

And then there was a dark figure standing just behind the cat. Frank looked up... and met the eyes of the old man. He was far enough away that he shouldn't have been able to make out his eyes, let alone the stern expression in them. The old man slowly raised his right hand and beckoned Frank over with one finger. Somehow, the gesture managed to also imply the 'or else', though Frank had no idea how.

Or why the 'or else' coming from this particular old man seemed quite so sinister.

Taking a deep breath and pausing for a moment to verify that he did, indeed, still have his P-90 draped over his shoulder, Frank began to make his way over to the old man's rooftop.
would've noticed him following me.”

“Well, you don't seem to be concerned that he's an enemy.”

The young man grimaced. “He's not... he's just not really a friend either.”

“You thought highly enough to defend him.”

That seemed to surprise Daredevil, his head snapping up to stare at Merlin.

Merlin chuckled as he sat down. “I read the news, young man, it was a rather difficult story to miss.”

“Oh, right.” Daredevil chuckled dryly. “For a second there, I forgot that you'd met me as, well, me.” He paused. “Frank isn't a bad man despite what he's done and the public defender assigned to him was just going to give in to the DA's demands. That's not really justice.”

“Hm.” Merlin took a sip of his scotch, wondering idly whether he should've brought up the fairy wine he'd brought back from England instead. “You and he have a lot in common.”

“I'm nothing like him,” Daredevil hissed. “I don't kill. And I hate guns.”

“That is a rather simplistic view of Frank Castle and you know it.” He paused. “Under the right circumstances, I believe you do have the potential to become like him. Quite possibly without all the guns, however. Of course, on the flip side, that also means he is a lot like you and has the potential to become like you.”

Daredevil stilled. And then his head cocked to the side and his lips quirked in amusement. “He really came.”

Then there were faint sounds of shuffling behind him and Merlin turned in time to watch as the Punisher pulled himself over the rooftop wall. He landed lightly despite his bulk and heavy, steel-toed boots. And then he just stood there on the edge of the rooftop, looking uncomfortable. Like he wasn't quite sure why he'd come.

Merlin watched in amusement as Aithusa wandered over to him and butted her head against his left hand. The man tensed, but relaxed the moment he spied her. She meowed loudly and then swiped her paw at his hand before butting her head against it again.

Frank Castle snorted in amusement, all uncertainty seemingly leaving him as he moved to gently scratch at her head and neck. Aithusa purred loudly as she angled her head to guide his fingers exactly where she wanted them.

“Pushy little creature, ain't ya?” he said, his gruff voice full of amusement.

“She's a lady who knows what she wants,” said Merlin. “And who she can wrap around her finger in order to get it. But do feel free to ignore her, young man. Come over and have a seat instead.”

Picking up one of the extra glasses, he poured a healthy measure of scotch and placed it in front of the third chair. After a few moment's pause, Frank Castle scooped Aithusa up and strode over to join them, settling her onto his lap. His guard never came down even as he began stroking Aithusa once more.

Aithusa happily curled up in the Punisher's lap and began to purr loudly.

Daredevil looked rather unsettled at the noise, but managed to cover his unease before the other man
noticed. “Won't Max be jealous?” he asked out loud.

The Punisher snorted. “'S not like that dog needs an excuse to slobber all over me,” he said.

Aithusa chose that moment to rub herself against his painted kelvar vest. Merlin chuckled. “I'd be more concerned about how you're going to get all that fur off your vest. Would be a bit detrimental to your image, I'd think.”

Frank Castle shrugged. “Can't be any worse than dog hair,” he said. He side-eyed Daredevil. “'Sides, Red here seems to be able to keep it off.”

Daredevil smirked. “I don't get any on me in the first place.”

“What, does cat hair not stick to that fancy suit? Or do you not like cats?”

To Merlin's amusement, Frank Castle seemed rather skeptical about the second option.

“No, I like cats well enough,” Daredevil answered. “Probably better than dogs, really, even if my friends used to keep urging me to get one.”

Frank frowned. “Why'd your friends want you to get a dog?”

Daredevil shrugged. “Companionship, I guess. And possibly protection. I don't exactly come off as, uh, fierce or intimidating without the mask.”

There was a slightly pause, during which it almost seemed as though Frank was going to say something, but then the moment passed. Merlin wondered whether the Punisher knew something about Daredevil's identity.

Instead, Frank reached out for his scotch and swallowed down a good mouthful.

His eyes widened almost immediately.

“Shit, this is the good stuff,” he said.

“Of course it is,” Merlin replied with a smirk. “It's over one hundred and thirty years old, and French to boot.”

“And you're wasting it on a guy like me?!”

“Don't be ridiculous, young man. If you're sitting here in the spirit of good will and enjoying a few quiet moments of peace and contemplation together with us, then it's hardly wasted.”

“Did you bring this back from your trip to Europe?” Daredevil asked.

“Hm, yes, indeed I did,” said Merlin. “There was a small estate sale up by Glasgow I decided to attend, where I picked up several bottles as well as a gigantic mirror framed in ebony with gold detailing and a rather dilapidated 1920s Royals Royce for the hag. It'll give her something to fiddle with.” He paused. “I take it you stopped by while I was away?”

Daredevil nodded. “Yeah. Nimueh came up to tell me you were in England visiting a friend who was on their deathbed.”

Merlin nodded. “Indeed. The hazard of living for as long as I have.”

“You don't really have to have lived that long,” said Daredevil quietly.
“That's quite true. It's an unfortunate, yet inevitable, part of life. If you live and create connections, you are in danger of also losing them. And yet it is those connections and that threat that makes life worth living in the first place.”

Merlin eyed the two men before him, knowing both were intimately familiar with heart-crushing, life-altering loss. He frowned. The devil mask was purposefully imposing and covered most of Mathew's expression, so Merlin couldn't be certain... but there seemed to be a heaviness to his shoulders, an added weight that hadn't been there before. Something had clearly happened.

The Punisher's expression had darkened, the fist that wasn't caressing Aithusa clenched. “Sometimes you don't lose them,” he said. “Sometimes they're taken from you.”

“It doesn't make them any less gone,” said Merlin quietly.

A moment passed. The darkness cleared from the Punisher's face and his eyes filled with raw grief. His clenched fist relaxed. “No,” he whispered. “No, it don't.”

Daredevil relaxed minutely, letting out the breath he'd been holding.

Merlin managed to not sigh audibly in relief. He'd heard of the antagonism between these two and it wasn't exactly surprising. However, he also knew that the Punisher respected Daredevil enough to let him be the one to hand him over to the police and the justice system. And, well, Matthew Murdock thought the Punisher was, at the very least, deserving of a fair trial.

Both vigilantes took a sip of their drink, Frank Castle refraining from gulping down the remaining contents of his glass. Merlin followed suit, savouring the flavour of the scotch as it burned its way down his throat.

“So, what exactly is this anyway?” Frank Castle asked after the silence had reached a sort of comfortable plateau. “You two midnight drinking buddies?”

Daredevil smirked. “We're a philosophy group of indeterminate geometric shape,” he replied. “At the moment we have three, sorry, four members.”

“Five, actually,” Merlin corrected. “There's a young lady that might also be joining us in the future.”

“Really? Another Avenger?”

“Hm, yes, actually.”

“Another Avenger?!” Frank Castle said incredulously. He turned to Daredevil. “You working with the Avengers now, Red?”

“No.” Even with most of his face covered, it was clear the vigilante was frowning. “I've met one of the Avengers right here, on this rooftop, and we've talked about things entirely unrelated to saving the world or fighting crime. I'm not a superhero and I have no interest in teaming up with anyone, let alone the Avengers.”

Castle snorted. “Could've sure fooled me with all that running around in a devil costume.”

Daredevil shrugged. “It's bullet-proof. Besides, I didn't come up with the whole 'Devil of Hell's Kitchen' thing, although I'll admit I'm not exactly fighting against the name. I like the colour red. It's... fitting.”

“Fitting to what?”
Merlin pursed his lips in amusement. It was more than fitting that the moniker chosen for Matthew by the residents of Hell's Kitchen allowed him to wear his father's colour. Some would call it Destiny. Merlin was a bit more conservative with his use of the word, but wouldn't deny that it felt like the sort of game Destiny liked to play.

Daredevil shook his head, obviously unwilling to actually explain.

Castle huffed in exasperation. “You teamed up with that girl of yours.”

Daredevil, already a man of conservative motions, stiffened to gargoyles-like stillness. Merlin saw regret pass through the Punisher's eyes – a fleeting emotion Merlin only caught because he'd been looking. The silence that stretched between them was now charged with tension and unsaid emotion.

“And look how that ended,” Daredevil finally replied, his voice pitched so low it almost managed to hide the hoarseness. “Besides, Electra wasn't my... hadn't been my anything for a long time. Assuming she'd ever been.”

Merlin's mind flashed to Freya, wonderful, beautiful Freya. The woman who'd been his dream, his imagined salvation from a destiny so heavy it had threatened to overwhelm him. Still, sometimes threatened to overwhelm him. She hadn't been his either, but he'd wanted her to be.

He reached over slowly and grasped Daredevil's hand. “I'm sorry for your loss,” he said. “Both times.”

The corners of Daredevil's lips twitched and then he chuckled bitterly. “Thank you.” He took a deep breath. “Fo–my friends want me to hang up the suit and stop going out.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Merlin saw the Punisher had stilled.

“...And what about you, Frank?” Daredevil spat. “You've gotten your revenge. What are you going to do now?”

The Punisher shrugged. “Don't know yet. Might try laying low for a bit and, I don't know, see if there's still something left of me worth salvaging.”

The air between the two men remained charged for a few moments longer and then, like a summer's storm, it passed and both vigilantes slumped, seemingly too emotionally drained to continue their
standoff. Merlin picked up the scotch and refilled their glasses.

The Punisher raised an eyebrow at him. “You trying to get me drunk, old man?”


A surprised blink followed and then the Punisher threw his head back and laughed. Aithusa looked up from her place in his lap and chirped happily.

“I walked right into that one,” he said. Still, chuckling, the Punisher looked at Merlin contemplatively, as though truly noticing him for the first time. “Just who the hell are you anyway? Or you got some sort of secret identity too?”

Merlin blinked. “Have I not introduced myself?” He thought back over the conversation. “I do apologize, young man, how inexcusably rude of me. No, no, there’s no secret identities here. I left those behind after the war. Not the War to End All Wars, the one after that. I’m Merlin.”

The Punisher blinked. Then he shook his head. “Of course you are,” he muttered.

Daredevil cocked his head inquiringly.

Merlin chuckled. “I think he’s referring to my long, white hair and beard,” he added helpfully, not knowing whether Matthew would’ve picked up on that particular detail of his appearance. And even if he had, he certainly wouldn’t have picked up on the colour. Unless he could somehow differentiate between the lightwave frequencies given off by various colours...

“Ah,” was all Daredevil said in reply, which didn't exactly answer Merlin's musings.

He was going to have to, at some point, draw Matthew into a conversation about his abilities.

“Wait, you had a secret identity during World War Two?”

Blinking in surprise at the non-sequitur, Merlin realized that, yes, he had mentioned that, hadn’t he? Damn. He hadn’t intended to do that.

Shrugging internally, he smirked at the two men. “Well, it was more of a codename, really.” He leaned forward. “Now, I would very much appreciate if you were to keep this story to yourselves. I have a bit of an amusing stalemate going on with several SHIELD agents who think they’ve got me figured out except that I’m refusing to confirm anything.”

The Punisher raised an eyebrow. “SHIELD doesn’t exist anymore,” he said. “Captain America took it down in Washington last year.”

Merlin gave him a flat look. “Young man, you don’t actually believe that with so many people dedicated to their cause, an organization as vast as SHEILD would simply ceased to exist overnight, do you? Hydra might have infiltrated much of it, but certainly not all.”

“Why would these SHEILD operatives be interested in something you did seventy years ago?” Daredevil asked.

“Ah, yes, well...” Merlin grimaced. “It would appear that over time we’ve become some sort of spy legends. You see during the war Nimueh and I decided to use our, shall we say, unique abilities to help the allies. Sometimes we smuggled Jewish families out of occupied countries and sometimes we gathered intelligence on the movements of the German army. On a few memorable occasions, we even helped allied agents escape capture. However, mostly it was intelligence gathering. Of course
we weren't officially affiliated with any group specifically, but despite that we quickly became known for coming up with accurate, difficult-to-get information. Everyone in those days were using codenames and so we did so as well. I was the Falcon and Nimueh was the Swallow.”

A sly smile spread across Daredevil's face. “And since you weren’t affiliated with any group and, I assume, you disappeared after the war, it's been driving the intelligence community nuts trying to figure out just who the Falcon and the Swallow really were.”

“Apparently. It also helped that operatives seemed to almost unanimously neglect to mention us in any official reports.”

The Punisher burst out laughing. “So you became some sort of spy legends without even trying?”

“Only in the intelligence community.”

“You should write it down and sell the rights,” said Daredevil. “Could be the next big movie franchise.”

Merlin snorted. “I think I'll leave that to James Bond and that Bourne fellow, thank you. Neither one of us have any desire to dredge up ancient history. Besides, it gives those spies and information gatherers something to puzzle over.”

“How'd you end up becoming spies anyway?” the Punisher asked, sounding genuinely curious. “You must've been quite young.”

Refilling their glasses once more, Merlin settled back into his chair. “Well now, it was 1939 and tensions were quite high, what with that nasty business with Czechoslovakia, Hitler continuing to spout his hate-filled rhetoric and the German army not-so-quietly mobilizing. Nimueh and I had been traveling separately at the time, but met up in Vienna. It was about a week into the new year, I believe...”

The city wasn't quite on the cusp of waking up when Matt felt the air warm in a way that meant the first rays of sunlight were beginning to peek into the horizon. He blinked beneath the mask, shocked to realize he'd just spent the entire night listening to Merlin's stories and commenting along with Frank Castle, of all people.

“Jesus, is it seriously that, uh, early already?” Frank suddenly echoed his thoughts.

“It would appear so, young man,” said Merlin, sounding amused.

“I should get going,” said Matt. If he hurried home, he could still catch a few hours of sleep before he had to meet Mrs Bednar at his office to go over her case.

“Well, thank you for keeping an old man company and listening to him ramble on.”

Frank snorted. “I'm pretty sure you were doing us the favour, not the other way around,” he said. “But I'm with Red. Should get back before the morning rush hits.”

Matt heard Aithusa's deep grumble of dissatisfaction as Frank picked her up off his lap and deposited her on the ground. Her tail swished back and forth, and Matt braced himself for the sound of a chair
being knocked down... which, of course, didn't happen. It was an odd sensation. He apparently wasn't used to Aithusa pretending to be a cat in his presence.

He shook his head, dismissing the incongruity of his senses versus others' visual perception and stood to go. He heard the gentle scrape of a chair as Frank did the same. There was a slight movement of air as Merlin nodded to them.

“Well, I wish both of you a good day,” he said. “And, remember, whatever you decide to do or not do, our door is always open. Feel free to come by the shop anytime for tea.”

Matt paused, suddenly realizing he hadn't actually been inside the shop itself since that very first time. He'd only ever come as Daredevil to the rooftop. Did he dare show up as plain Matthew Murdock?

“Shop?” Frank asked.

“Why, yes,” Merlin answered. “Nimueh and I live on the top level, but the rest of this building is an antiques shop that we own. You should most certainly stop by to see it sometime.”

“Huh. Sure, maybe I will.”

Smirking at Frank's surprise, Matt nodded to Merlin. “You have a good day as well, Merlin,” he said and then looked downwards. “And you too, Aithusa. I'll try to find the time to stop by.”

And then Matt took off towards the edge of the building, leaping up onto the ledge before launching himself up onto the opposite roof. He wanted to put as much distance between himself and Frank Castle as he could before he reached Hell's Kitchen.

As he traversed yet another rooftop, Matt suddenly realized that despite the exhaustion he could feel pulling at him from the late night, he felt calmer, lighter than he could remember feeling in a long time. He grinned and picked up speed.

Chapter End Notes

Well, hope you enjoyed that! Now I'm off to bake Christmas cookies. :)

Chapter End Notes
Hey everyone, and thanks for the warm welcome back! :) So, obviously this chapter has not come out before the New Year... or anywhere near New Year's Eve/Day. My days ended up being far more hectic and tiring than I'd anticipated and so now we're here about two weeks after I'd hoped to have this out. Sorry.

Sadly, I never did get to see Thor: Ragnarok in theatres and I haven't entirely decided what to do about that yet with regards to this story. As I've mentioned before, this story will not be CA:CW compliant, but I do want to try to otherwise be as consistent with cannon as I can. This is mostly just a warning as there's still a bit of timeline ground to cover before we actually get to that particular movie and I'm suddenly also realizing that I need to figure out how to introduce Black Panther into a non-Sokovia Accords MCU. Methinks there is a lot more brainstorming in my future...

Anyway, thanks for your patience, guys -- and for the comments and kudos. Here's the next chapter!

He walked through the streets, the harsh sun beating down on his shoulders. Beads of sweat trickled down his brow and his shirt stuck to his back uncomfortably beneath his brown leather jacket. He wished he could discard the jacket, but his arm was a distinguishing feature and distinguishing features were bad. Someone might see it, recognize it. They would come for him. He wasn't entirely certain he knew who They were; all he had was the unshakable feeling that bad things, painful things, would happen if They found him.

He could deal with the discomfort. He'd survived worse. At least he was fairly certain he had. Sometimes, when he woke up from one of his nightmares, he could almost remember. Or maybe he had remembered and then forgotten again. All he remembered now was pain and terror. And a lingering conviction that he could never let Them find him.

They would take him away, and then he wouldn't be able to protect Sarah. Not that her name was Sarah, or at least she didn't think it was. But he'd decided to call her that. He thought he'd once knew someone named Sarah, someone important to him. He sometimes got flashes of a kind smile and tired blue eyes.

And he was Bucky. At least, most days he was certain he was Bucky. He didn't always feel like Bucky, but it was what he called himself now. Sarah had said names were important. She couldn't quite remember why they were important, but she knew they were.

“I think,” she'd once said as they'd sat on a rooftop staring up at the stars, “that if only someone were to say my name, I would remember who I am and why I am here.”

Bucky didn't think it worked that way, but hadn't argued. If she didn't remember the pain, he wasn't going to remind her. Sarah also didn't feel like a killer, seeming harmless and incapable of violence. But Sarah wasn't her real name either.

He had left her waiting for him in the top floor of the abandoned building in Hell's Kitchen where
they’d slept last night. Getting to the top floor had been tricky, but with his help they’d both managed. It looked like it had once been a warehouse, until a bomb had blown it apart – Bucky knew what bomb wreckage looked like. He could also tell the blast hadn't been recent. They’d run out of food again, and so he was out looking to see if he could make some money to get them more. The last time he’d had to steal it, but lately there was a voice in his head telling him that stealing was wrong, and it was steadily getting louder. So he looked for signs in shop windows and awkwardly asked at the warehouses and construction sites if they needed help for a few days. But they’d wanted identification and a social insurance number...

Bucky was sure they didn't use to need these things. Or maybe this was another thing he'd forgotten. But in this world, in this New York City that wasn't the New York City he remembered, they did. He knew this was the same city, only seventy years older, but it was easier some days to think of it as a city that only looked a bit like the one he vaguely remembered.

At least Chinatown was still where he remembered it, though it felt bigger than in his memories. He also didn't remember understanding the words residents said to each other. Apparently, the Winter Soldier had once been implanted with Chinese... and Korean.

He passed a family standing on the corner outside a tea shop, the adults arguing with their children. He recognized the language as Vietnamese, but could only understand some of the words.

Bucky didn't know why that was. As he'd been forced to talk to people in order to find somewhat respectable work (a rather shady man with a cocky grin and an over-sized leather jacket, carrying several poorly-disguised handguns had offered him a job in ‘appropriations’ which Bucky had turned down, killing several of his enforcers when the man had tried to convince him to reconsider), he'd discovered he could speak a lot of languages he didn't remember learning. He also didn't remember learning to pick locks, or fight using martial arts styles he couldn't even name. He could look at a car and knew exactly what he'd need to do to steal it – he'd tested it.

Whatever mysterious skills he discovered were always complete. It was strange that he only spoke some Vietnamese.

The family had long concluded their argument and gone when he finally gave up trying to figure out what it meant that he apparently only spoke some Vietnamese. They could probably explain it, but he didn't want to find Them to ask.

He felt something tighten in his chest and suddenly became aware that he wasn't breathing properly. And just like that he wanted to be gone from here, this place that made him use skills he didn't remember learning, didn't want to remember learning. His memories were full of pain: sharp, burning pain that didn't stop, and people yelling at him, hurting him.

He couldn't run well, with his heart beating too fast and his breaths coming out as wheezes, but he tried anyway, not stopping until he smelt garlic, basil and tomato sauce, and there were sparks of white light dancing in front of his eyes.

Collapsing into the mouth of an alley, he staggered to the wall and leaned against it as he tried to catch his breath. Unbidden, a memory danced across his mind, of himself helping someone else breathe.

“Till the end of the line.”

Stevie.
He remembered the small, frail form struggling to breathe, remembered as he'd rubbed his bony back, talked to him, urged, begged — willed — him to take one breath, and then another. The smaller boy had shook, but valiantly fought for each laboured wisp of air...

He found himself bringing his knees up and lowering his head between them. Just like Stevie had done. Not the strong one who'd been his mark, the smaller one he’d wanted to keep safe. He felt like, somehow, they might've been the same person, but he wasn't sure how. He wasn't sure of anything right now as his head became blurry and the world became muffled and there were even more bright spots in front of his eyes and he felt a pathetic, needy desire to have someone's hand rub his back and beg him to breathe.

And then, inexplicably, there was a hand rubbing his back with strong, sure motions. A voice accompanied the hand — not Steve's, not Stevie's, yet somehow familiar — though he couldn't understand the words.

He concentrated, strained to hear past his own thundering heart until he understood the words. He listened, letting the calm voice guide him. Following instructions was easy; he was used to following instructions. The voice told him to take a breath. He did. It told him to let it out. He did that too. It was simple.

He wasn't entirely certain when the bright spots disappeared and the tightness in his chest unclenched, but suddenly the voice praised him, telling him how well he was doing, and he realized he was breathing. He took a few more breaths, internally relishing in his ability to do so. Had it been like this for Stevie?

Wait, who was Stevie?

A face flashed before his eyes, a fleeting image that was gone as quickly as it came.

He blinked and dismissed the image. It was unimportant to the mission and only the mission was important. Except... He couldn't remember the mission. Was there a mission?

There was a gentle, yet firm hand still rubbing his back and a calm voice telling him to take his time. It sounded kind. Missions didn't have kindness; they had blood and pain.

“Till the end of the line.”

This wasn't a mission. There was no mission. He wasn't the Asset. He wasn't the Winter Soldier. He was Bucky. There was no mission. Bucky didn't have missions.

Bucky took another deep breath and then he raised his head.

The hand methodically rubbing his back retreated and Bucky felt the presence he hadn't truly registered until now pull back. It didn't leave entirely — Bucky could still hear the person's breathing and see the shadow they were casting onto his arm. He turned and found himself meeting worried blue eyes set below thick, bushy white eyebrows.

“How are you feeling, young man?” the old man asked softly.

Bucky stared at him for a moment, recognizing the wrinkled face and long white beard yet having no idea who this stranger was.

“I... yes,” Bucky answered after a long pause, once he realized he'd been asked a question. “Th-thank you.”
The old man smiled. “You're quite welcome, young man. It was lucky I happened to be walking by.”

Bucky frowned. “Do I know you?” he asked carefully.

“Hm? Oh, why yes, you do. We met last Halloween in Central Park.”

Bucky's frown deepened. Halloween. That was the holiday with all the pumpkins and ghosts. It was in October and people dressed up in costumes. Children got candies and apples. He thought he remembered it being fun. Except, Halloween sounded wrong...

“Samhain,” he said softly, feeling the word on his lips as he said it.

The old man's eyes lit up with delight. “Yes, that was indeed what I'd called it, young man! I wasn't sure if you'd have remembered me.”

Bucky did remember him, but he also remembered a younger man with short, dark hair, and a campfire with a roast and drinks. He remembered others too, but some of them couldn't have been there... He was almost certain the meat had smelt good and tasted even better, along with bread and cheese. And there had been laughter. Bucky remembered feeling a warm glow in his chest. It had been nice.

“So, tell me, how goes your quest?” the old man suddenly asked.

“Quest?”

The old man – Merlin, Bucky suddenly remembered, his name was Merlin – chuckled. “The quest to discover yourself, young man. Have you had much luck?”

Bucky paused and considered the question. It sounded so much like what Sarah would've asked that he felt compelled to answer. “I know I am Bucky,” he finally said. He paused, grimaced. “I don't really know what that means yet.”

Nodding, the old man reached out to pat him on the shoulder. “Well, I'm certain that one day you will. Perhaps not tomorrow or the day after that, but then again, some people take a lifetime to figure out who they are so it's hardly fair to expect you to know in only a few months.”

Unsure what to say to that, Bucky remained silent. He couldn't argue that Merlin's words didn't make sense, but he also didn't exactly feel reassured by them. The idea that he might never know who Bucky was made him feel... uneasy. He had no other word to describe the heart-sinking, skin-crawling sensation that made his mouth go dry.

“Now, what brings you to my little corner of the city?”

Bucky blinked and then frowned as he tried to remember the answer. Luckily, the answer came to him quickly. “Looking for work,” he replied. At Merlin's raised eyebrows, he added: “Didn't want to steal.”

“Ah, I see,” said Merlin. “That's a rather noble goal. Hm...”

He looked thoughtful for a long moment.

“You know, Nimueh and I received a shipment from overseas this morning. Some things I picked up at estate sales I attended while in Europe a month or so back. There's quite a few large, heavy boxes, and the Roles Royce, of course. I think we could probably use a strong lad like you to give us a hand
with them. Though Nimueh hates to admit it, she is older than I am, and I'm sure she'd appreciate help with the Roles, even if she will no doubt protest the very notion.”

Bucky stared at the old man. “You... really?”

“Why, of course, young man! I have a job that needs doing and you are in search of work. It's the perfect arrangement.” Merlin began to struggle to his feet, grunting as his back and knees apparently twinged in pain. “Now, come along then, young man, no point in wasting daylight.”

Bucky quickly rose to his feet and helped the old man stand. After thanking him, Merlin hurried off down the street, not bothering to check whether or not Bucky would follow. He did, of course.

They hadn't gone far when Merlin suddenly stopped in front of one of the bakeries and looked at open door and front window display speculatively.

“Hm, perhaps one, last stop is in order,” he said just before entering.

Bucky paused, uncertain for a moment, before following Merlin inside. The shop was small, but not cramped, its walls lined with plain wooden shelves stacked with bread and several large bins full of rolls. A tall, rail-thin woman, whose dark hair was pulled back into a bun and liberally peppered with grey, manned the cash register nestled between the wall and a large display case full of cakes and pastries. She glanced up briefly when they entered, but quickly turned her attention back to the customers she was serving.

Merlin walked over to a large, three-tiered round wooden table in the centre of the shop's floor and pretended to examine the bagged cookies and biscuits stacked around it. Eventually, the other customers left and the woman stepped out from behind the counter.

“Good morning, Merlin,” she greeted with a small smile. She spared Bucky a curious glance, but quickly turned back to Merlin.

“Hello, Eva, how's business going?”

“It's been busy. The tourists seem to be out in droves this year and I've had some large orders coming in from unexpected places.” She paused and looked at Merlin pointedly. “Such as Stark Industries and the Xavier Institute.”

Bucky had no idea what either of those places were, but the name Stark sounded familiar. He could just about picture a guy with dark hair and a mustache, but when he tried to concentrate on the image it slipped away.


“And very good for business. Though it does make me wonder how they'd heard of this small shop given that we don't exactly do much advertising, or catering for that matter.”

“Yes, but it's not as though you'd recognize any of the teachers from the Xavier Institute, for instance, if they happened to wander in to buy pastries from you.”

The woman stared at Merlin, who simply looked back at her with the same bland, pleasant look he'd had since they walked in. Bucky could tell he was missing something, but he had no idea what it was. The Xavier Institute didn't sound at all familiar, though if it had teachers then that meant it was probably a school of some sort.

Then the woman snorted, her eyes flashing with amusement. “I am never playing poker with you,
Merlin."

Merlin raised an eyebrow at her. “Oh? I've been told my poker face is quite horrible.”

“Clearly not by someone who actually knows you. Now what can I do for you today?”

Bucky saw the corners of Merlin’s lips twitch for a moment. Then he cleared his throat. “Ah, yes, of course. I heard your son hurt his shoulder kayaking over the weekend. How is he doing?”

“All right was white water rafting, actually, but yes his shoulder was partially dislocated. He's still in quite a bit of pain and more than a bit irritated at not being able to participate in football camp next month, but the doctors say everything should heal well enough so long as he doesn't put too much strain on the joint.”

“Good, good. Do tell him I send him my best wishes for a speedy recovery. Now, I was wondering how you were going to handle receiving your supply shipment tomorrow. Or is your father going to be handling that?”

“Oh, I'm sure he thinks he's going to be handling the receiving,” said the woman, her shoulders straightening slightly with the air of a woman bracing herself for an argument. “But even if his balance wasn't getting a bit shifty, he's in absolutely no physical condition to be moving large bags of flour and boxes of butter, eggs and everything else. No, we're going to just leave it all in the hallway until my husband comes home from his shift at the hospital and then the two of us will move it all.”

“Hm, not the best of solutions...”

She shrugged. “No, but what can you do? Alfie's asking around to see if one of his friends would be willing to come 'round for a couple of hours to help us next week...” Suddenly, her eyes narrowed and she glanced over to Bucky again. “Unless of course you have a different suggestion?”

Merlin smiled and motioned for Bucky to step forward. Bucky did, feeling a bit awkward at suddenly being the focus of their attention. They were normal people, talking about normal things, things he didn't know anything about.

“Eva, this is my friend Bucky,” said Merlin and Bucky blinked at the confident way he called him his friend. He could only ever remember person doing that. At least he thought he could. “He's an army veteran who's fallen on some hard times, but is looking to turn his life around without falling on any, uh, dishonest means.”

Eva raised an eyebrow as she looked directly at Bucky. “Dishonest means?”

Bucky paused and then shrugged. “Gotta eat, ma'am,” he said.

A moment passed and then she nodded. “True enough.”

Merlin cleared his throat. “In any case, I'm employing him for a few hours at the shop to help Nimueh and I with our latest shipment and taking apart the Rolls Royce I found her in England. Those old cars were built like tanks, after all, and she isn't getting any younger.”

“Hm...” Eva watched Bucky critically for a few moments. He held her gaze as he forced himself not to fidget. Behind him, he heard people enter the shop – two voices, one male, one female, and the faint clack of heels. “Alright, be here tomorrow by two thirty and be clean.”

Bucky nodded. There was a gym a couple of blocks down from where he and Sarah were staying that he could break into to shower. “Thank you,” he said.
Eva nodded at him and then turned to the customers who'd just entered with a pleasant smile. “Hello, what can I help you with today?”

Merlin led him out of the shop and they crossed the street. A few buildings further down, he entered another shop. Bucky followed him in.

“What the hell took you so long?!” a woman's voice demanded just as he stepped across the threshold.

Bucky tensed at the slight growl in her voice. Several feet from the door was a small counter and a cash register. Behind the counter stood an old woman, her long white hair pinned up into a severe-looking bun. Her fierce green eyes glared at Merlin with promises of fiery retribution. Bucky considered leaving.

Merlin, however, didn't seem the least bit concerned as he waved the old woman off. “I got side-tracked for a few moments,” he said. “It happens.”

“Side-tracked by what? The Thanksgiving Day Parade?!”

As he turned to gesture him further inside, Bucky saw Merlin roll his eyes. “Come along inside, young man,” said Merlin. “Don't let the old hag frighten you away. You're too big for her oven anyway.”

Bucky carefully closed the door and stepped further into the shop.

“Careful, or I'll stuff you into my oven,” he heard the old woman snip at Merlin as he looked around.

He wasn't quite sure what he'd been expecting, but somehow Merlin owning an antiques shop didn't surprise Bucky. It felt... right. Every bit of space was crowded with stuff, some decorative, some useful, some just odd. Yet the shop didn't feel claustrophobic, but calming. Bucky could immediately find several places where someone could hide and observe the people in the shop unawares, and the places where one could hide surveillance equipment was endless... but he didn't feel nervous.

“In any case, this is Bucky,” he heard Merlin continue as he was scanned the shelves until he suddenly found himself meeting a pair of yellow eyes. “I've hired him to help us move those boxes we got in this morning.”

There was a pause as Bucky continued to stare into the calm, unblinking eyes of the large white cat sitting completely still between an ivory statue and a large ornate wooden clock with gold detailing.

“Merlin, those boxes are incredibly heavy,” the woman finally commented.

“Well, then it's a good thing Bucky is incredibly strong. He'll also help you take apart that Rolls Royce.”

“I do not need help taking apart a car!”

“Nonsense, you know how heavy those steel frames are. This will make it much easier for you.” The cat finally blinked, proving it was actually alive and not just a very realistic stuffed animal.

“Fine, but he'd better not break anything!”

“That thing is a bloody tank! Nothing short of heavy artillery will break it.”

“And yet you managed to break my last one.”
“What? When did I—hang on, you're not still going on about the black car? That was sixty-nine years ago, woman! Not to mention that I only crashed it after getting hit by mortar fire, which really just proves my bloody point.”

“Wait, was that the Rolls? I thought that was the Martin...”

“No, that was the Rolls. That MI6 agent you took up with in July of 1952 crashed the Martin.”

Bucky heard the old woman snort. “He wasn't an MI6 agent.”

The cat flicked its tail.

“Well, he was something.”

“He certainly thought he was in any case.”

Finally breaking his staring contest with the cat, Bucky looked back to the old couple and wondered if they'd forgotten he was here. Now they were staring at each other intently, as though wordlessly continuing the conversation.

After a few moments, the old woman huffed. “Fine, I'll take the help,” she said and turned to leave. “I'll be down in the garage when you're finished up in receiving.”

Merlin turned back to Bucky with a triumphant look on his face. “Well, that went better than I expected,” he said, prompting Bucky to blink at him incredulously. “Now, come along, young man, and I'll show you to the receiving area.”

The old man shuffled off to the right, past a large armoire full of china tea sets. Bucky followed him slowly, carefully maneuvering around the large, bright green unicycle that was propped up against the armoire. On the other side of the massive piece of furniture, the shop continued and Bucky glanced curiously at the large round table that sat in the centre of the space, looking like it was patiently waiting for a group of people to come sit down to tea. And maybe plan a war campaign.

Suddenly, there was a loud screech of wood. Bucky's head snapped up and then his jaw dropped in amazement as Merlin slid one of the large bookcases to the side to reveal a wide entrance. It was dark, like a gaping black hole sitting in the corner of the shop. Merlin then reached inside and flipped on a light.

Bucky walked up behind him and peered in. The entrance led into a long tunnel that curved to the right about six feet away. The floor looked like smooth concrete and the were walls painted a warm blue with halogen tube lights on the ceiling illuminating the space.

As he followed Merlin through the tunnel, he realized it was not only kinda long, but also ran on a slight decline, not nearly enough for it to be a problem, but just enough to be noticeable. They passed by a service elevator just before the tunnel exited into what was clearly a receiving bay, where Bucky immediately saw the boxes Merlin wanted him to move. There was about a dozen of them of various sizes, including two large wooden crates and what looked a bit like a sea chest wrapped in plastic.

“Now then, Bucky, do you know how to work a service elevator?” Merlin asked as he finally turned to him.

Bucky thought about that for a moment and then shook his head. “I don't know,” he said.

“Ah, well then, let's find out, shall we?”
Nimueh pretended to be completely absorbed with the car engine as she watched Bucky wolf down another sandwich out of the corner of her eye. He'd tried to refuse her offering of lunch at first, but she was nothing if not persuasive and he was, in the end, too hungry to hold out against her.

Sergeant Bucky Barnes, best friend of Steve Rogers, the true reason Captain America had ultimately become a hero in more than just name. She wondered what Merlin was playing at here. Why not just tell Steven where to find his friend and let them figure out the rest on their own? This was one case he only needed to minimally get involved in and yet he was quickly becoming fully invested.

She sighed. Merlin couldn't help himself sometimes, even if he had gotten more subtle over the centuries. Well, except for that blip in the seventies. Then again, no one had exactly been subtle in the seventies.

Still, she supposed it wasn't entirely horrible to have someone else down here with her at least for the manual bits. The undercarriage would definitely require a bit of a magical touch in order to restore it to anywhere close to road-worthy, but most of it seemed to just need some hard, dedicated work. Nimueh quite enjoyed the physical aspects of restoring cars and only used magic sparingly.

What she hated was the endless polishing. Although...

“Bucky?” she called out. “Do you have anything lined up for Friday?”

The former assassin straightened automatically at being addressed before relaxing into a more casual pose. Nimueh didn't react, but internally she was pleased to see him so obviously fighting his programming.

“No, ma'am,” he replied.

“Then show up here at nine in the morning and I'll have some work for you,” she said. “I've got some gentlemen coming mid-afternoon to take a look at my vehicles and I need them polished up and gleaming.”

“Sure thing, ma'am.”

“And for God's sake call me Nimueh!”

“Yes, ma-uh, Nimueh.”

Nimueh smiled to herself. And then winced as she realized just how insufferable Merlin's gloating was going to be.
Wow, time sure flies when you're not paying attention... (does anyone know where February went?) Anyway, as usual thank you so much to everyone who's read this story and left comments or kudos. I really appreciate them all. :)

This chapter is a bit different from most of the others. Having said that, if you have questions or aren't clear on some of the logistics, make sure you read the end notes because chances are, I might've answered them there. I just don't want to give too much away ahead of time. And, finally, the warning many of you have been waiting for: This chapter contains spoilers for Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2!! Although, if you haven't seen the movie, you might just be really, really confused.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was no warning, no signs preceding it. One moment Merlin was walking out into the late August heat, leaving behind the comforting smell of dried herbs and incense, and the next he was frozen breathless by a sharp, all-consuming feeling of danger. As though the Earth itself was crying out a desperate warning.

There had been nothing to indicate something was coming. And even in North America, thousands of miles and an ocean away from Albion, Merlin was connected enough with the land to have felt trouble brewing. Which he hadn't.

The day had begun in gloomy rain, large drops of water instantly soaking the city. But that had dissipated by mid-morning, giving way to bright sunshine and blue skies dotted with white puffs of cloud. The humidity that had plagued them for weeks was gone and so Merlin decided to take a trip towards Brooklyn and his favourite little magic shop.

Or at least a modern person's understanding of a magic shop.

Although, he supposed, the very idea of a 'magic shop' was a modern concept to begin with. Throughout the years there had been apothecaries, market stalls that sold charms and amulets, and any number of spice shops or book stores that sometimes included more 'unusual' items – if one knew how to ask for them. However, most magical commerce had always been done in a more informal, clandestine fashion. Hedge witches, hags, healers, wise men, and even the druids or the occasional wandering sorcerer or mage: they would often sell or trade for potions, tinctures, charms and talismans. More often than not, they were far more reliable than any of the stalls or shops.

Merlin himself had spent the first two decades after Arthur's death wandering the forests of Albion, only surfacing when the need for human contact became too unbearable. He would always bring with him potions and charmed talismans to barter with, an excuse to interact with people and yet keep them at arm's length. It wasn't until people began actively seeking him out within the darkest depths of the forests that he realized he'd become a legend. Again.

Despite the grief that plagued his existence in those days, he remembered them fondly. It was a simple life and connected him to Albion and the Old Religion in a way no amount of talk about Destiny had. In retrospect, he wished he'd been born a decade before Arthur and allowed to connect
with Albion before going to Camelot. It would've made so many things much, much easier.

Magic shops of the twenty-first century were the home ground of the neo-pagans, counter-cultures and others to whom magic was either a religion or an interesting, romantic notion with some lovely paraphernalia. Merlin didn't often frequent these shops, many of them feeling soulless to him, tragically devoid of the magic they claimed to understand. However, occasionally he would come across one that welcomed him in as a long lost friend.

This particular shop was run by a woman who was magically sensitive. With training, she might even have had the potential to become a proper sorcerer, but the time when he'd taken up apprentices was long past Merlin.

He'd first met Delia in the seventies when she'd been working on her first PhD at Columbia while being a loud environmental activist. She'd been immediately drawn to Merlin and between her long golden hair, radiant smiles and green eyes that shone with optimism and determination, it had taken him a few months to realize it was his magic that was attracting her. In the end, he'd stayed for a year before heading to South America to wander the rain forests with Aithusa.

Eight years later, Nimueh had found him and dragged him back to Wales.

And then they, eventually, ended up in New York, where Merlin had come across the shop during his wanderings of the city. Delia, though heavily-wrinkled now and wearing less brightly-coloured clothes, was still beautiful, her smile every bit as radiant. Her shop, The Wanderer's Resting Stop, felt welcoming, a faint breath of magic infusing the space with a warm glow. She'd recognized him instantly despite the beard.

Merlin didn't come by often, but he always enjoyed his visits, meeting both her children and husband in turn. Delia had never been to the Isle of the Blessed and Merlin found himself both glad she hadn't and wishing she would. He himself wasn't quite sure whether Delia understood what the connection she felt between them was, but after all these years he wasn't going to be the one to explain it to her.

Her daughter, just recently turned sixteen, had been in the shop with her today. The child had clearly inherited her mother's sensitivity to magic along with her expressive green eyes. Green eyes that had immediately looked up from her cellphone when Merlin entered the shop.

“Hey, Merlin,” she'd called out. “I had a feeling I'd be seeing you today! Hang on, I'll let mom know you're here.”

Like with Delia, he wondered whether her daughter had the potential to become a sorcerer with the right training. Today, especially, he wondered whether it'd be worth trying. It wasn't often anymore that he came across people with the potential for sorcery – over the years the amount of people born with magical potential had lessened.

Merlin spent over an hour at the shop, purchasing a few crystals and some dried herbs. Then he left. And was struck by a metaphorical lightning bolt of danger.

It was the only way he could think to describe the sudden sensation that encased his body and squeezed him like a vice, leaving him breathless, paralyzed for several, long moments. He felt someone touch his arm and, as though moving through foggy water, turned to look into the concerned face of a stranger who was asking him if he was alright. It was then that he realized he had dropped his bag and was clutching at his heart. In a daze, he answered he was fine and gathered up his bag.

Despite the increasing sense of wrongness and danger he could feel pressing down on him from all
sides, Merlin managed the presence of mind to wait until he was in a deserted alleyway before gathering his magic around him and transporting himself to Central Park.

Nimueh was already there when he arrived, her eyes molten gold and wide with fear.

“Contact Stephen,” was all Merlin said. There was, after all, no point wasting time with anything else. And if the Sorcerer Supreme hadn't already felt this attack – because it could really be nothing less – then he should certainly be told about it.

Nimueh nodded and then her eyes became distant as she called out for Stephen with her mind.

Merlin closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

He concentrated on the feeling, isolated it and was only somewhat surprised to feel a presence behind it, a consciousness: something living. Something powerful. Something that didn't belong. Not on this land, not on Albion... nor anywhere else he'd been to. It felt alien.

There was also nothing benign about this presence, this power. Merlin could feel it greedily reaching out across the distance, from its point of genesis, with a familiar earthy weight that burned with fiery life and carried the smell of forests, mountains and rivers. Like a compacted sliver of the Earth itself... and yet it felt nothing like the Earth. There was a spark, a gentle constant stream of power that wasn't quite magic, missing from this presence.

Or perhaps it was there, barely recognizable as such, twisted as it was and fueled by a madness intent on absorbing all it could into itself.

He felt along its edges, then pushed towards its core. And gasped as he touched something molten hot that left him momentarily frozen with the intensity of its anger and desire. Alerted to his presence, he could feel its attention turn towards him, blackened gold tendrils twisting towards him greedily.

He pulled back from the tendrils, barely avoiding their reach as he realized with stunned horror what they desired: to possess him. Devour him.

Just like the power wished to devour everything else.

Merlin pulled back completely. His eyes shot open and he gasped for breath as his vision spun momentarily. He felt physical arms grabbing hold of him to keep him steady and heard muffled words from somewhere beyond the fog that was clouding his mind. It took him a few moments to realize he was on his knees. He staggered to his feet, leaning on the people helping him stand, grasping at their familiar magical presences to anchor himself, letting them become a steady balm that soothed away at the remaining vestiges of twisted madness.

Even if he were in Albion, where his connection to the land was strongest, he knew he'd need help to destroy the power that now threatened this land – and perhaps the entire planet. The madness was much further away now, but having touched it he could feel its impression all over the wrongness screaming from the land.

“Merlin, are you alright?” he heard Stephen ask him.

Merlin glanced to the side to meet the sorcerer's worried eyes. He didn't bother trying to smile, just took a deep breath and nodded. “Yes, I'm alright, young man,” he said. On his other side, Nimueh huffed in disbelief. “But I'm afraid none of us will be if we don't manage to stop whatever this is.”

“You couldn't identify it?” Nimueh demanded, her eyes widening at his wording.
Merlin frowned. “Not entirely... It feels sentient and not from this world.” He met their worried eyes. “This power, this being, or whatever it is, it's definitely on this continent. I followed it to somewhere in the mid-west... Missouri maybe.”

“Do you know its intentions?” Stephen asked.

“To devour us.”

Stephen's eyes widened for a moment. Then he swallowed and his expression steeled with determination. “I'll contact Kamar Taj and the other Sanctums. If we bolster Earth's protections and then attack the invasion at its source we should at least be able to help.”

Merlin nodded. “We'll do what we can from here.” He turned to Nimueh. “Would you like to ask for permission or shall I?”

Nimueh snorted. “They like you better.”

“Ask permission?” Stephen asked with a frown. “Ask permission from whom?”

Merlin chuckled. “We are merely visitors on this land. It would be rude of us to perform such powerful magic, magic that reaches into the land, without asking permission of those to whom this is home. In truth, I shouldn't have done what I've already done without it, but I can hope to be forgiven given the sudden urgency of the situation.”

“We are creatures of the Old Religion and thus tied to Albion,” Nimueh added. “But Albion lies an ocean away.”

Stephen opened his mouth as if to ask more when suddenly, the bone-deep heavy wrongness that had been vibrating its way into their beings stopped. Merlin gasped with the sudden relief, feeling light-headed. It took all three of them a few moments to regain their equilibrium.

“Is that it?” Stephen finally asked, sounding skeptical. “Is it gone?”

Merlin closed his eyes and let his magic gently flow back into the land, easily finding the same path he’d used before, until he brushed against familiar grasping tentacles of twisted madness.

“No, whatever it is, it's paused in its efforts for some reason,” he answered after a while. He opened his eyes. “However, whether this will last for minutes or years, I have no idea and we cannot risk it. I don't know how long this speck of power has been here, but now that we know it's here, we cannot just leave it. It is a cancer on this land and on this world and must be excised immediately.”

Stephen nodded. “Then I should get going.”

Merlin nodded and turned to Nimueh, not bothering to watch as Stephen used his sling ring to open a portal to Kamar Taj, or possibly the New York Sanctum. He supposed the Sorcerer Supreme most likely had underlings he could send off to deliver messages. Or just arrange a conference call; this was the twenty-first century, after all.

High above the clouds, he could feel Aithusa circling the park.

“I'll clear the park,” said Nimueh before Merlin could get a word out.

The corners of Merlin's lips twitched. “Thank you.”

Nimueh took a few steps back and then the golden glow of magic lit up in her eyes as she held out
her arms and chanted. Immediately a fierce wind began to whip through the park, its invisible talons lashing at people and bending younger trees as it stripped them of their leaves. Discarded newspapers and candy wrappers swirled up from the ground to join the dust and leaves and flew at the faces of those who'd only moments before been enjoying a peaceful summer's day. Merlin heard shrieks and panicked barking.

He turned away from the chaos after only a moment's guilt when he realized the sudden, focused windstorm would probably be blamed on mutants.

Then he closed his eyes and reached out, gently touching the land as he called out a greeting to those who inhabited it. They'd obviously been waiting for him to reach out to them, because their response was almost immediate as they greeted him back.

Merlin smiled. He'd always enjoyed speaking with the First People of this land, their were voices beautiful, sounding so much like the land they'd been born on and given birth to.

“Silver Fox, Coyote, I know you must know of the infestation that has taken hold on this land. Though this is not our home, Nimueh and I have come to love this land and we wish to help destroy this danger.”

Merlin knew the moment they stepped out of the shadows of the Spirit Way. He opened his eyes and saw their shades out of the corner of his eyes. They weren't fully in this world, which wasn't unusual. The Spirit Way was everywhere and yet nowhere, a place between the world of the living and that of the dead. They were, no doubt, watching the twisted madness seeping further into their lands even as they appeared to him.

It was Silver Fox, who spoke to him, her calm eyes the colour of a clear blue sky and her fur a shiny, silver-grey. This was her form out in the Real World, but if he concentrated, he could just make out the outline of the naked old woman draped in a fox pelt that traversed the Spirit Way.

“Emrys, yes, we are aware of the power that wishes to devour the lands we created and all its creatures. We have been aware of this speak of creation that did not belong for many years, since the visiting stranger from beyond our ken dropped a piece of himself into the soil.”

“A piece of himself?”

“Yes, Emrys. Many years ago, a man who was not a man anymore than I am a woman or Coyote is a man, visited these lands. He lay with a woman and planted his seen in her. Then he took a small piece of himself and planted it in the land before leaving. His seed in the woman became a child, a boy, and the piece of himself grew into a flower. It was beautiful, but unnatural, neither withering in winter nor blooming in spring. It took nothing from the Earth and gave nothing back.”

“Until now.”

“Yes, Emrys. Until now. Now it finally reveals its selfish desire to swallow the land we created, the land of the Real People.”

Merlin considered Silver Fox's words. This stranger... he wished he knew more about him, but ultimately it didn't matter: they had to stop him regardless. The Spirit Way, like Avalon and the Seelie Court and other such places that existed just outside the human world would likely be fine, and while he was certain that some wouldn't care, he knew that, despite her stoic demeanor, Silver Fox was not indifferent to its fate. And so he measured his words carefully.

“Will you fight this incursion?”
Merlin felt the air around him grow sharp with determination and cold with anger. Silver Fox's eyes darkened to a stormy blue and she bared her teeth at him.

“We will.”

“Can you stop it?”

There was a long pause and Merlin found himself holding his breath as he waited for her reply. The stranger felt old, older than Merlin himself, but he wasn’t sure if he was older than the spirits of this land. They were a part of the land, after all, and the land was therefore as strong as they were. Merlin wasn’t quite certain how that sort of power could be measured, let alone compared with another.

And then the reply came at last: “I do not know.”

“Then let us help! With all of our power weaved together we might be able to stop him. And if we alone cannot and he threatens to reach further than these lands, then there are others who, surely, will be willing to add their power to ours.”

He could hear Silver Fox chuckle in amusement. “Compared to us, you are still young, Emrys. But you are not wrong. It would be foolish of us to turn you and your friends away when we are uncertain of victory, and we are no fools.”

Merlin grinned. “Thank you, Silver Fox.”

She nodded and then faded back into the shadows of the Spirit Way, enough of her remaining in Central Park to keep the entrance open so that he could feel her presence. Like Avalon, the Spirit Way was a place Merlin could sense, could stand on the edge of, but never actually enter.

He felt Aithusa settle behind him as he turned to Nimueh. “They've agreed to let us help,” he told her.

Nimueh raised an unimpressed eyebrow at him. “Yes, I know. I heard them.”

Merlin winced. “Right, of course.”

He opened his mouth to say more, to try and figure out a plan, but all that came out of his mouth was a strangled scream as the land cried out and he felt that same stab of twisted wrongness vibrate back into his being. The respite they'd been granted in order to think, to breathe freely, was apparently over.

Clenching his teeth, Merlin took a deep breath, leaning into the steady fiery thrum of Aithusa's dragon magic behind him as he found his equilibrium once more. Beside him, he could feel as Nimueh grabbed at the land with her magic as she too fought against being overwhelmed by the feeling. Merlin let his magic flow into the land as well, though more gently as he used Aithusa and his connection to her as his grounding force.

A few moments later, Merlin opened his eyes, feeling his magic infuse his whole being in a way he hadn't let it in a very, very long time. He knew his eyes were glowing with it, but felt as though his whole body was also glowing. Looking over to Nimueh, he met her eyes, felt her magic mingling with land next to his, her fierce hold having lessened now that she'd settled once more. He then looked behind him and smiled up at Aithusa.

“I'm here, Emrys” said the dragon, her voice echoing slightly.

And that was when he finally heard the song on the wind. It was barely a whisper, and yet it echoed...
with primordial power. If the land could sing, this would've been its song: it sounded like flowing rivers and whistling wind; like rustling leaves and creaking branches; like waterfalls and settling snow; like steadfast mountains and wheat-filled plains; like blowing sand and tumbleweeds.

He'd wandered many times through this land, even before it became known as America, and heard Coyote and Silver Fox both sing, but he'd never heard them sing.

It was beautiful, awesome and mesmerizing; Merlin let it wash over him. If the power threatening them was twisted and wrong, this sound and its power was pure and right. These were the voices, this was The Song, that had sung the world into being, after all. There was no bracing needed, it felt completely natural for him to intertwine his power with Nimueh's and add it to this melody.

Deeper tenors and lighter notes joined the song and Merlin felt the brush of fur and howling of Wolf, the deeper grunts of the Bear. Somewhere high above, he heard the near-silent rustling of wings as Eagle added his voice and the louder stampeding of hooves as the Thunder Sisters ran across the sky, their cloak thundering behind them. Closer to the ground, nearly invisible to all but the sharpest eyes, Frog croaked and Snake hissed, their voices quieter and yet no less important to the rich melody of The Song.

Merlin felt his magic flow along with their voices, deepening it, adding strength, but not coming close to overpowering it. He couldn't have even if he'd wanted to.

The Song reached the source of the twisted madness of the stranger and broke against it like a wave breaking against a cliff. But the song was not made of water, but of power and magic and determination. It flowed around the madness, surrounding the incursion and battering at its walls. The twisted tentacles paused for a moment, as though surprised by the resistance, but soon renewed their efforts, reaching out to grasp and possess.

Albion was an ocean away, and yet connected to Merlin every bit as he was connected to it. He could always feel her in the back of his mind, a warm piece of home that followed him wherever he went, like a thin yet unbreakable tree root. And now he reached back, across the ocean and thousands of miles that lay between them, calling to the land he'd been born on, that had given birth to him. Albion responded, as she always did, instantly rising up to greet him, the magic of the Old Religion intertwining with his.

He welcomed the power of the Old Religion, the same power he had once accepted into himself all those centuries ago within the depths of the Crystal Cave, and felt it infuse him with its glow. For a moment, he smelled the weather-worn stones of Stonehenge, the salty air of the coast, the foxglove and mushroom-filled forests and felt chilly, humid wind blow across his face. He felt its spark of magic, ever-present and hidden except to those who cared to look.

Now he was no longer Merlin the Wanderer. Now he was Emrys, warlock, High Sorcerer of Albion and a child of the Old Religion.

He felt Nimueh pull on her own connection, on the threads that had bound her to Albion and the Old Religion since the day she'd taken up the mantle of its Priestess. Beside him, she glowed with its power, her eyes bright as the stars in the sky.

Once again, Merlin pushed his own magic towards her and felt it brush hers. They'd done many things together, but nothing like this. And yet weaving their magic together felt natural, like something they'd done a thousand times before.

They pushed forward with their magic, like a battering ram hurtling towards the intrusive, twisted madness. Greedy, reaching tentacles were crushed beneath their blow and Merlin felt as the intrusion
wavered under the combined onslaught of their magic and The Song, which continued to grow as even more voices joined the chorus. The air pulsed with the beat of accompanying drums and vibrated with the strength of its anger, the sheer power of the will of the land and the spirits protecting it.

The madness rallied and pushed back, its tentacles regrowing and snapping forward with even more intensity than before. The spirits around him never let up The Song even as they sprang forward to nip and claw and tear at the reaching tentacles, too strong to be neatly absorbed by their greedy pull. More tentacles reached for Merlin and Nimueh. Nimueh pushed them back with magical wind that sent them flailing right into the reach of the sharp teeth and claws of their allies. Merlin imagined his magic as a sword, cutting down his slippery, incorporeal enemy.

But the tentacles kept regrowing, the madness never faltering.

Until, suddenly, it did.

After aggressively pushing forward and reaching out for everything near its grasp, the twisted madness simply stopped. They stared at its frozen form, holding their breaths and bracing themselves for what would come next, when suddenly, it vanished, disintegrated into nothingness before their eyes.

Merlin blinked. “Is that it?” he asked out loud, frowning as he carefully stretched his magic out, feeling for any signs of it. “It is gone?”

“Not quite,” Coyote replied.

Moments later, he found it, the last remaining speck of that foreign, alien power. It was severely diminished, as though cut off from its source, and now just a twisted, lonely seed.

Merlin gathered his power, feeling the air swirl around him as it encased his form. Then he closed his eyes and sent it along the path towards that speck, his magic transporting him there even as the thought manifested in his mind. The speed of his magic’s response had stopped surprising him centuries ago.

He opened his eyes and found himself on the edge of a clearing in the middle of a forest. Far in the distance, he could feel the presence of a large group of people – most likely a town of some sort – but they were far enough away that no signs of them could be heard despite the unnatural silence in the clearing. He felt the spirits also present in the clearing and within the next few moments, they became visible to his eyes and then their images strengthened further, until even mortal eyes could have spied them.

There was always something uniquely strange about seeing the spirits take on corporeal form in the Real World. Most of the time they appeared more as specters, shades, as though trapped between one world and the next and Merlin could see shadows of both their forms, but in the mortal world, they usually took their animal forms. On first glance, they looked like ordinary beasts. But there was something otherworldly about them, especially around the edges of their forms, as though they didn't quite fit in with the world around them. It wasn't that they didn't look real – if anything, they somehow looked more real, their innate power projected outward, making their outlines just a bit sharper, just a bit more in focus than everything else. He supposed that if one wasn't paying attention, it would be easy to mistake them for just some ordinary denizens of the forest.

However, if one was paying attention, and really looking, it was impossible to mistake them for anything but what they were.
In the center of the clearing stood a man, though even on first glance it was clear to Merlin that he wasn't just a man. At his feet grew a single large flower that looked unlike any Merlin had ever seen – it was obviously alien even without the tendrils of familiar twisted madness that connected it to the man. This was the part of himself the Stranger had left behind. Something had happened, however, something that had cut it from the source of its power – Merlin was already resigning himself to never quite knowing what – leaving behind a single floundering, confused piece of what had once been a vast, overbearing whole.

It took the man in the clearing a few moments to notice their presence. Wide-eyed and terrified, he searched for any opening for escape, perhaps for any sympathetic eyes, clearly having enough presence of mind left to realize the animals surrounding him were not just animals. Wolf, Bear, Coyote and Silver Fox bared their teeth at him and he shrank back.

The man looked over to Merlin and met his eyes. “Please, I-I don't know what happened, but I'm no threat to you now,” he said, eyes pleading for mercy. “You don't need to kill me. I'm completely defenseless!”

Merlin kept his face stony. “I'm not the one you should be pleading with,” he told the man. “This is not my land and whether you live or die is not my decision to make.”

The man's eyes widened even further as his gaze once more turned towards the spirits.

“Please,” the man begged them. “I don't want to die!”

Silver Fox stepped forward, her teeth no longer barred, but her tone hard and unyielding: “Then you should have remained peaceful.”

The remaining tendrils of twisted madness shot outwards and the man brought his hands up in front of him, screaming in pain and terror as Silver Fox, Coyote, Wolf and Bear set upon him. They tore him into pieces, Coyote ripping the flower out of the ground and shredding the roots with his teeth.

However, Merlin could tell the stranger's power was not completely gone. Considerably dimmed, yes, but not gone and even a single spark remaining could be dangerous. He looked to Silver Fox as the spirits stepped back, who nodded to him.

And so Merlin reached deeper into himself, into the molten hot core that was forever tied to his magic. As the power that was somehow both his and yet not rushed to the surface, Merlin felt his eyes change and his skin harden and heat up – it always felt like he was growing scales and yet no matter how many times he looked, there were never any there.

He was now Emrys, the Dragon Lord. When he roared, the ground shook with the might of ancient magic and set flames to the remains of the stranger. Within moments, there was nothing left but ashes.

A few moments passed in silence. The wind rustled through the trees and, as though aware the danger was now passed, the forest around them began to come to life. It was then that Frog came forward carrying a clay pot, Spider riding on his back. Bear used his large front paws to sweep up the ashes and scoop them into the pot. Frog then placed a lid on the pot and waited patiently as Spider crawled off his back and began to weave a net around the pot. When Spider scuttled away, Eagle swooped down and carried the pot away.

Merlin watched as Eagle disappeared beyond the horizon, idly wondering where exactly he planned to drop it, but knowing that no one knew of better places to dispose of such heinous things than Eagle himself. Once Eagle was no longer in sight, Merlin looked away and turned to Silver Fox. It
seemed the others had mostly gone, though he could still feel their lingering presence in the clearing.

“We thank you and Nimueh for your help, Emrys,” Silver Fox began. “Though it would seem that victory was not won by any of us in the end.”

“You are welcome, Silver Fox,” Merlin replied. “It was our honour to stand beside you to help defend this land which we are temporarily calling home. Victory may not have been won through our efforts, but we certainly slowed it down. I suspect whatever this... entity was, it wasn't expecting much opposition, if any.”

Silver Fox chuckled. “I suspect you are right. Till next we meet again, Emrys.”

“Fare thee well, Silver Fox.”

Then she disappeared even from his sight and, soon after that, Merlin felt the last, lingering vestiges of the Spirit Way vanish. With one, last look around the clearing, Merlin gathered his magic around him and let it take him back to Central Park.

“Well?” Nimueh demanded as soon as he opened his eyes.

He smiled at her. “It's over.”

She nodded, expression fierce with a hint of bloodthirst. Merlin wondered whether she'd ever been kind and peaceful, whether her violent nature wasn't just an ever-present remnant of Uther's Purge. Right now, with her long auburn air being mussed by the wind, blood red lips and green eyes lined with gold, she looked like a Valkyrie.

Merlin blinked, suddenly aware of the magic still thrumming through his veins, hot and alive even though he was no longer pulling it from Albion. He groaned as he realized his eyes were no doubt also still glowing gold.

“Damn it, we can't go back to the shop like this,” he said, looking down at his hands which looked mostly normal even though he felt like they should've been glowing gold.

Nimueh snorted. “It's like you've never experienced the aftermath of powerful magic before,” she said. “Also, do you really think I abandoned the shop without locking up first?!”

Merlin winced at her glare. “Ah, well, I admit it probably wouldn't have been my first instinct to lock up.”

“Yes, well, thankfully, I'm not you.”

“I'm going to go fly around the city,” Aithusa suddenly announced before taking off, turning into a large, white pigeon in mid-flight.

Watching her go, Merlin felt like he wanted to follow, to transform and fly, to out-fly the jittery feeling of leftover, unused magic that desperately wanted to be used. It felt like if he didn't somehow use it, it would explode suddenly from out of his skin. He clenched his fists.

“We don't have to open the shop up again,” said Nimueh casually.

“No, I suppose we don't,” Merlin agreed, turning his attention back to her. “If anyone asks, we were sick. Or perhaps we were visiting a sick friend... I want to go flying.”

“Hm, that is one way to deal with excess energy...” She gave him a sly, seductive smile and raised a
single, challenging eyebrow. “I can, of course, think of a few others.”

And, just like that, the magic thrumming through his body transformed into a slightly different sort of heat. He licked his lips. “Yes, that could work as well.”

The authorities that arrived to investigate the source of the sudden wind disturbance in Central Park took no notice of the hawk and the sparrow that flew out of the park moments later.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes:

First of all, Timeline: Yes, I am now aware that the GoTG timeline is a bit off from the rest of the MCU in terms of when their movies came out, although I didn't actually realize this until I finished writing the chapter and was looking up info for the sake of accuracy. However, given that the GoTG movies don't really affect the rest of the MCU directly, I'm just shrugging my shoulders and going 'whatever'.

Native American Spirits: Okay, let me make one thing clear, there are hundreds of Native American tribes across the continent and many of them have very different creation myths and differing mythos. However, it's impossible to somehow include them all and yet write a coherent narrative so I've chosen one and stuck with it. Specifically, I'm going with the legends of the Miwok tribe of California, which I did extensive research on for a story I wrote several years ago (The Singing Hills). This is also why I've written Silver Fox as female, despite many other tribal legends depicting her as male, because in Miwok tradition she is female and I now have a hard time picturing her as anything else.

And, finally, Ties to the Land: To those of you who've read some of my other stories (specifically, 'Through the Eyes of Minerva's Owl' and 'The Singing Hills'), this talk of connections to the land probably came as no surprise to you. In those stories, Merlin's ties to Albion and his lack of ties to North America were big themes -- especially in the Singing Hills, although that one was less about Merlin. I hope it's mostly clear as to why Merlin has to ask the spirits for permission in order to do such powerful magic. It's sort of like the difference between going over to visit someone and staying for a few days, maybe helping with the dishes, but then packing up your suitcase at the end of it and leaving, and showing up and immediately start hanging up paintings and rearranging furniture. It's wrong and highly disrespectful. Anyway, there are probably multiple ways fantasy writers do magic, but this my take on the relationship between Merlin and Albion, and magic and the land: he's always connected to it and a lot of his power comes from said connection, but he's not always using it, especially not for little things on a day to day basis. But Merlin does need that connection for the truly impressive, powerful magic (ie. the stuff we barely saw him do on the show).

My brain might only be functioning at half-speed at the moment, so I'm hoping that wasn't complete gibberish. Feel free to ask questions if you're either curious or still confused. I will attempt to make more sense when I answer them. :)
Ehem. Uh, hi! So... it's somehow August and I'm not quite sure it's happened that I've gone so long between updating again. I don't even have a Big Bang story to present as an excuse this time, because I purposefully didn't sign up for one this year so that I could concentrate on finishing at least one of the stories I have on the go. This clearly is not happening the way I'd hoped it would.

Anyway, as usual, thank you so much to all of you who took the time to leave a comment - or even just read, subscribed and/or favourited this story. I appreciate every single one. :)

To be clear: this chapter does NOT contain spoilers for Deadpool 2! Or either of the Deadpool movies really, although if you haven't seen at least one of them you might be confused as to who exactly Negasonic Teenage Warhead is... While there are allusions to the movies, I think they're of the kind that won't make sense unless you've seen the movies. I felt like the latest Deadpool movie didn't have enough Negasonic, so here she is!

Aaand that's all for now, so enjoy!

The thing about a school for 'gifted individuals' was that even when the lawn was full of screaming, rambunctious children on their lunch break, there was always someone watching. It wasn't necessarily the teachers casually eating lunch as they kept an eye on their charges – though Wolverine would certainly smell anyone arriving well ahead of any traditional guard dog – and it wasn't any sort of fancy security system – though the mansion boasted one of the best in the country. In fact, it was almost never anyone obvious.

This morning it just so happened to be Negasonic Teenage Warhead who was watching the front gates from her seemingly idle and uninterested slouch against a large oak tree. To the outside world she projected boredom. Internally, she was waging an intense debate with herself, contemplating a newly discovered interest in one of her fellow X-Men...

The girl who warily approached the school gates instantly banished all other thoughts from her mind.

She couldn't have been older than fourteen, her short curly brown hair adorned with dirty pink and white polka-dotted bows. The jacket she wore looked several sizes too big for her and, once washed, would probably be blindingly canary yellow. It still managed to look in better shape than the ratty pink-ish sneakers on her feet. Her steps slowed the closer she came to the gates, looking for all the world like she was on the verge of high-tailing it out of there at a moment's notice.

Negasonic Teenage Warhead sighed. Another runaway. She hated dealing with the runaways.

Reaching for the controller in her jacket pocket, she pressed the button on the right, watching with some amusement as the kid jumped when the gates began to silently slide open. She didn't bother radioing in, knowing the opening of the gates would've already signaled whoever was watching the feed inside. She was pretty sure it was Colossus as anyone else who wasn't overseeing the
The runaway stood wide-eyed in front of the open gates for a very long minute. Negasonic Teenage Warhead finally ran out of patience and rolled her eyes.

“You coming in or not?” she called out.

The girl's head whipped around to her and several small objects flew out of her hands, harmlessly hitting the ground as they disappeared into a grass a couple feet away from Negasonic's tree.

“Well, at least now we know you're in the right place,” she muttered. She look back to the girl.

The girl's eyes were even wider and she was quaking. She violently shoved her hands into her pockets. “I'm sorry,” she blurted out.

Negasonic stared at her for a long, tense moment. In the back of her mind, she realized the staring probably wasn't helping the girl's nerves, but she was too busy questioning her own sanity. Because either Negasonic was becoming delusional or the girl's hair was now about two inches longer than it had been a moment ago.

She stepped towards the girl and the girl shrank back, her body angling ever-so-slightly away from Negasonic and the mansion itself. This time, Negasonic was watching when the girl's curls lengthened again. She paused in her steps and cocked her head at the girl.

"Your hair's growing,” she said simply.

The girl hesitated uncertainly. “It does that,” she said, her body still turned half away from the mansion while she watched Negasonic carefully. After a pause she pulled her hands out of her pockets and held them up palms towards her. “I-I can do my nails too.”

Negasonic's eyes widened slightly as the girl's nails began lengthening before her eyes, not stopping until they were about three inches long and sticking straight out from the girl's fingers.

“Wolverine's gonna to love you,” Negasonic commented quietly and then, more loudly, added: “Must be a bitch to take care of.”

Once again, the girl hesitated. Then she took a deep breath and turned to fully face Negasonic. Her nails grew another inch as she lowered her hands so that her fingers pointed towards the ground. The girl's face scrunched up in concentration. She flexed her finders once, twice, and then she flicked her wrists and several projectiles flew out of her hands.

No, Negasonic realized in amazement as the girl brought her hands up to show off her now short again nails: her extra long nails flew away from her hands.

“Okay, that's new and weird,” she said after a few moments, because she felt like the girl was waiting for her to say something.

The girl stuck her hands firmly back into her jacket pockets and looked away from Negasonic, but her posture seemed a bit more relaxed. “I can do teeth too,” she offered casually, and then she winced. “But growing teeth really hurts so I only do it when I have to.”

Negasonic blinked and frowned. She pointedly did not ask why the girl would have to grow teeth. Or, more likely, re-grow teeth. Instead she turned and indicated with a shrug for the girl to follow her. After another hesitation, the girl hurried to catch up to her.
“I met a woman who told me to come here,” the girl suddenly began to babble. “She told me I could find people like me here and maybe make friends and learn how to control the nail and hair growing thing. I really want to know how to, ’cause my hair grows all the time when I’m nervous and it’s annoying that I have to cut it all the time and people stare at me and I hate the weird looks...”

She trailed off and the nervous silence returned.

“A-are you like me?” she finally asked quietly, her voice trembling with what sounded like both fear and barely-controlled hope.

“I’m a mutant,” Negasonic stated bluntly. She’d let others deal with being gentle; it wasn't her MO and never would be. “And, yeah, I got powers I had to learn to control. Only my are less of the irritating kind and more of the likely-to-kill-people-accidentally kind. Not something I can demonstrate without collateral damage.”

She glanced to the side. The wide-eyed amazement on the girl's face now definitely had a bit more excited hope than fear in it.

And then the doors of the mansion opened and the girl gasped when Colossus stepped out. Negasonic didn't bother containing her amused smirk. She fucking loved watching people's first reactions to her former mentor. Flesh-and-blood, he would’ve been imposing enough, but made out of shiny, smooth metal, the man was a truly impressive sight, one that tended to make people stare in both admiration and fear.

Negasonic wasn't quite cynical enough that she didn't see the beauty there. Not that she'd ever admit it out loud.

“Ah, hello there,” he warmly greeted the girl with a friendly smile. “Welcome to Xavier's School for Gifted Children! I am Colossus.”

The girl stared up at him in awe. “I-I'm Evelyn,” she finally managed to get out. “I met a woman who told me to come here.”

A shiny metallic eyebrow rose in question. “A woman?”

“Oh, she told me to call her En. She bought me dinner and gave me cab money and told me to come here.”

Blinking in surprise, Negasonic looked back to the girl with a bit more interest. She'd heard of this N&M who occasionally sent them students, sometimes bringing them to their doorsteps directly. It wasn't how she'd come to the X-mansion, but students talked and so did the X-Men (some days it was difficult to decide who were the worse gossips).

“What did she look like?” Negasonic found herself asking before she'd managed to curb the impulsive question.

Evelyn looked to her in surprise. “Uh, she was really pretty. With, uh, wavy hair. And her eyes were very green. She was kind, but, I don't know, she felt like the sort of person you didn't really want to make mad.” Suddenly, she paused and looked between them worriedly. “It's okay that she sent me here, isn't it?”

Colossus' face relaxed into a pleasant, friendly smile. “Of course, Evelyn,” he said. “We are simply curious. She and her accomplice, they send us students, but none of us have ever met them. We would wish to thank them, that is all.”
He turned and opened the door, beckoning her into the mansion. “Now, come, I'm sure the Professor would very much like to meet new student.”

Still clearly nervous, but without the same undercurrent of fear as before, Evelyn followed Colossus into the mansion. With a shake of her head, Negasonic Teenage Warhead turned to walk back to her tree. She wondered how long it would take this one to realize that as intimidating as he looked, her former teacher and mentor was really just a giant shiny Russian boyscout who wouldn't hurt a fly unless it tried to threaten the world.

By the time she'd taken up her previous position, the front gates had closed shut again. And there was a bird with a long, forked tail perched on the tall metal fence that surrounded the property. Negasonic stared up at it, and it seemed to look back at her calmly for a few, long moments. Then it chirped and flew away, leaving her once more to her own thoughts.

The teacher's lounge was packed when Negasonic Teenage Warhead entered from the side door. While she technically wasn't a teacher (she occasionally substituted when one of the others was away on a mission, although since she tended to just tell the kids to 'do whatever, just don't be loud about it' while she played on her phone, they only ever asked her as a last resort), X-Institute's teacher's lounge doubled as the unofficial clubhouse for the X-Men. Either way, the lounge always had coffee, tea and refreshments available and having just finished her shift as glorified guard dog, she needed some of those refreshments.

Sure, the cafeteria would also have some sort of food available even if it was between meals, but she was an X-Men now and that meant she could pilfer the coveted X-Men fridge at will.

Tuning out the conversations around her as she made her way towards said fridge, she contemplated whether or not she was in the mood to piss off Wolverine by grabbing one of his beers. It would also earn her a disapproving look from Colossus, but the Russian would ultimately defend his former trainee from Wolverine if it came to that. Not that Wolverine would actually attack her anymore: his growls were mostly for show ever since he'd figured out Negasonic always replaced whatever beer she took.

Sure, she could just get her own beer to keep in the fridge, but taking Wolverine's made her look tough to the younger X-Men – and some of the older ones.

A quick scan of the room revealed that its occupants were mostly made up of the older X-Men. Negasonic shrugged and grabbed a rootbeer before making her way to the refreshment's table to see what was left. She hoped there were carrot muffins.

“Hey, Negasonic!”

With a sigh, she left the comfort of her own headspace and turned towards the sound of Cyclops' voice. She opened the rootbeer can.

“Yeah?” she said.

The X-Men's esteemed leader looked like he was frowning behind his thick dark sunglasses. “You were on gate-duty when that new student came in?”

She raised an eyebrow at him, not sure why he was posing it as a question. All he had to do was
check the roster to know she'd been on duty. It'd take him ten seconds on his phone, maybe thirty if he wasn't particularly competent.

“Yeah, I was” she answered and took a drink of her rootbeer.

There was a long pause, as though Cyclops was somehow expecting her to elaborate. On what, exactly, Negasonic wasn't really sure. He'd asked her a pretty straightforward question. Which she'd answered.

“Uh, did you get any sort of read from her?” he awkwardly asked her after a while.

Negasonic blinked at him. “I'm not psychic,” she said dryly, before relenting with a shrug. “Looked like a runaway, scared, nervous, came here 'cause some woman named N had told her about the place and gave her cab money.”

Predictably, that got their attention.

“They've been busy lately,” Jean Grey said quietly. She looked thoughtful.

“That's the fourth one this month they've sent us,” Storm added.

Wolverine grunted. “Makes it an even dozen this year,” he said.

They all turned to stare at him. “You've been keeping track?” Cyclops asked, sounding incredulous. Then he frowned. “Wait, I've only counted eight.”

That earned him a glare. “I got curious, so I started asking around. Turns out a lot of the runaways around here have mysterious good samaritans to thank for finding this place. You just gotta ask how they heard about us. I mean, 's not like we advertise.”

Negasonic blinked. Huh, well that was interesting. She didn't have time to contemplate the implications of this new bit of information when Wolverine turned to her.

“So, what does this one do?” he asked.

She smirked at his bluntness even as everyone around her make exasperated sounds of disapproval.

“She can spontaneously grow her hair and nails. And her nails detach and shoot out. Apparently she can grow teeth too, but it hurts a lot when she does.”

Wolverine nodded in understanding. “Yeah, teeth hurt like a bitch.”

All conversation stopped when the doors leading to the school's hallway opened and Professor X wheeled into the room, Colossus just behind him. His eyes sparkled with amusement.

“I see you've all heard about our new arrival,” he stated. “She's being looked over by Beast at the moment. As long as he doesn't find anything worrying, I see no reason why she can't begin classes with the rest of our students next week. Jean, if you don't mind, would you be able to take a look at the dorm assignments and see if you can't find a place for her.”

“Of course, Professor,” Jean Grey said with a smile and left, presumably, to do just that.

“Professor,” Cyclops spoke up after she'd left. “Shouldn't we be at least attempting to make contact with these people sending us students? I mean, we have no idea who 'M and N' actually are, but we keep accepting the children they send us without question.”
“Are you saying we turn them away?” Colossus asked with a disapproving frown and Negasonic couldn't help echoing her former mentor's frown. “Children they send need us, need to learn from us.”

“Still, Cyclops does have a point,” Storm interjected. “Whoever they are, M&N have some sort of way of finding mutant children. If nothing else, that's not something we'd want to fall into unsavory hands.”

Wolverine just rolled his eyes. “Maybe one of them's a mutant and their mutant ability is to find other mutants.”

Professor X raised a hand for silence before the room could devolve into an argument. “I've spoken with each of the children that have been sent here by M&N and I only ever gotten a sense of safety and goodwill from them. Would I like to meet the people behind the moniker? Of course I would, if only to thank them for what they've done for all these children by sending them here, where they can be safe and happy. However, for whatever reason these individuals, these guides of lost souls, seem to want to remain anonymous and, unless something happens to make me doubt their intentions or believe that they are in danger, I am willing to respect their wishes.”

He paused and then smiled wryly. “It's not that I don't understand your reservations, Scott, I do, but consider this: what if they have a legitimate reason for their anonymity? What if, by searching for them, we inadvertently put them in danger?” He shook his head. “No, these people are clearly our allies, at least in their desire to help mutant children and it isn't worth it.”

“Is delicate balance,” Colossus added after a moment of silence. “If they trust we will not hunt for them and we break this trust, they could hide and become more careful, probably help less children as a result.”

The Professor smiled happily. “Exactly,” he said in a tone of voice that clearly indicated the conversation was over.

Not everyone in the room seemed happy with his decision, but Negasonic Teenage Warhead saw them accept the Professor's words. Personally, she didn't care. If someone else was sending them mutant kids before they did something stupid or put normal people in danger with some sort of uncontrolled burst of power, then it meant less menial work for the X-Men as far as she was concerned.

She took a drink of her rootbeer and turned away from the conversations as she continued on her interrupted hunt for carrot muffins.
One of these days I will manage to be timely with my review replies. Clearly this day is not today. Anyway, once again my apologies for taking so long to update: last month was really stressful and I had very little genuinely free time. And thank you so much to everyone who took the time to comment on the last chapter. I appreciate every single one, even if I don’t always manage to respond to them all.

And now for a meeting that no one asked for, but I hope you enjoy anyway. Because if I can only be one thing, it might as well be unpredictable. :)

He’d been a fighter pilot and then an astronaut, and now he was a super hero: he was used to making split-second decisions. Hell, just being Reed Richard’s friend meant making decisions on a dime (often to do with knowing the exact moment running for cover became necessary). This, however, was a decision that was making Ben Grimm’s stony palms sweat and his heart pound like some rookie on his first milk run gone south.

He’d heard about the antiques shop from Johnny – and then later Cap during one of their by-weekly poker/movie nights – and it had sounded like the perfect place to go, but from the moment he’d entered he’d felt awkward and out-of-his-element. Sort of like a large rock-man in a china shop. Sure, not everything inside was made of glass, but there were enough little trinkets and delicate teacups to make him self-conscious of every move he made.

The old couple who owned the place had been really helpful, their eyes gleaming with excitement at the challenge he’d brought them. But as he looked between the three options they’d finally whittled the massive selection down to, he felt completely, helplessly unsure. He clenched his fists at his sides, once again wishing his clunky rock-fingers weren’t so useless in this.

It was his and Alicia’s fifth anniversary next week and he wanted to get her something different, something special... something she could appreciate. She was an amazing woman, one who took him as he came and had accepted him without question from the very first at a time when even he hadn’t been accepting of himself. Hell, if he was being honest, she was a big part of why he’d eventually learned to live with himself and the changes in his body that had resulted in 'the Thing'. He loved her for it and wanted to reciprocate.

He just hadn’t thought it would be so god-dammed hard.

Ben took a deep breath and looked at the three pieces sitting on the glass surface in front of him. The first was a small tapestry: heavy blue, purple and red brocade and velvet fabrics sewn together in diamond-shaped swatches with invisible seams, gleaming golden thread forming the image of a large bird sitting on a branch, its wings spread as though about to take off. Small clear glass beads were delicately stitched into the fabrics. They reflected light like tiny little raindrops.

The second was a wooden relief. Carved from dark, polished wood, the only colour variations coming from the natural patterns of the wood itself, it was about three feet wide and a foot high. It showed a small herd of galloping horses, their necks extended and manes and tails flying. The detail
was pretty impressive and even the art plebeian Ben knew himself to be recognized the skill that had to have gone into making each strand of hair feel like it was in motion despite being frozen in time. The horses started from the right as just simple carvings on the wood and then with each horse came out of the wood a little more, the line of horses curving outward until the last pair, who looked like they were racing neck and neck towards the viewer, their front legs suspended in mid-air.

The third piece was a heavy marble teddy bear. It even had a little bow tie and a top hat – a classy teddy bear. Its body was smooth and polished to a gleam, except for the bow tie and hat, which the sculptor had decided to leave a little rougher to the touch. Dabs of gold paint accentuated the nose, eyes and bow tie. It was Ben's favourite, though he wasn't sure if that would've made it more a gift for himself rather than Angela. Part of him just really, really wanted to know just why someone decided to carve a teddy bear out of marble.

He supposed the teddy bear would also double as a handy weapon... which was something he knew better than to say out loud in front of Alicia herself. Ever.

Sighing in frustration, Ben ran a hand down his face and then looked back to the old couple who'd been helping him, hoping for a hint of direction. They stared back at him, their expressions revealing none of their thoughts.

“Sorry,” he grunted, looking away. “I don't know why this is so damned hard.”

The old man's eyes softened with sympathy. “Because you care,” he replied. “And because you want her to be able to experience it in a way you are unable to.”

Ben nodded. He knew all that, understood that he and Angela both interacted with and experienced the world differently. They'd each tried to explain to the other what the world 'looked' like to them, but even Angela's well-spoken words couldn't quite manage to convey her experience.

“Isn't it always dark?” he'd asked her.

“I don't really know what dark means,” she'd answered with a shrug.

“Then how can you tell if it's day or night?”

Angela had shrugged at that. “It's warmer during the day and sometimes I can feel the sun. Besides, I live in New York and the city has a rhythm. I can always tell what time of day it is based on what the city around me feels like. Well, that plus the little voice on my watch tells me the time when I press a button.”

Which, when Ben thought about it, made a lot of sense. Over the next couple of days he'd made a point of stopping when he was out and about in the city and closing his eyes to listen. And, yeah, it did kinda feel and sound different at different times of day. Go figure.

None of which helped him choose her anniversary gift.

Suddenly, the large white cat that had followed them into the room uncurled from her nap on top of an elaborately decorated dumbwaiter. In what looked like a single, fluid motion, she unfurled and stood onto all fours, her back stretching into a steep arch and her tail sticking sharply upwards. Her mouth opened into a wide yawn that made it look like the skin was trying to stretch right off her face. She held it for a few moments before relaxing.

Full-body stretch over, she then leaped down to the floor, brushing against the old man and meowed loudly before trotting out of the room.
The old man looked after the feline thoughtfully. “Hm, you know, I think I might have a possible solution,” he said. “Just a moment...”

Ben blinked after him as he hurried out the door, baffled by what solution could possibly be inspired by a cat.

“Don't mind him, young man,” the old woman told him. “At times, his mind can be quite the mysterious place.”

Ben snorted and then sighed. It had taken them an hour to narrow the shop's ridiculously massive selection of stuff to just three options. Now it was looking like it was going to take him another hour to decide between the three.

Part of him was tempted to just forget the whole surprise thing and go get Alicia and let her choose.

Or he could just get the damned teddy bear. It was both sweet, durable and unique; maybe he could claim it was a metaphor for their relationship or something.

Just then he heard voices coming from the hallway. It was the old man with some occasional words from a younger soft-spoken male voice.

After so many visits in the dead of night via rooftops, it felt incredibly strange to be walking up to the Isle of the Blessed during the day. The lack of snow and ice made it a much more pleasant experience than the last – and only – time Matt had come here as himself instead of Daredevil.

But Daredevil was retired now, though Matt's skin itched with restless during the night while the uniform burned a hole in the false bottom of his closet. He couldn't bring himself to ditch it, he just couldn't. It wasn't that he thought he'd need it again (though, in his more honest moments, he knew he wasn't discounting that possibility), but the suit was a physical representation of the metaphorical devil that had always permeated his life, existing just beneath his purposefully benign exterior. It was a part of him he couldn't quite shake despite trying to for most of his life.

Karen and Foggy likened it to an addiction and treated him like a former junkie. He wasn't sure he agreed with them, but, for once, he couldn't quite find the words to argue.

Knowing that a part of his being yearned to put on the suit and run out into the screaming New York night, wasn't any sort of surprise. Hearing the suffering of others was what had sent him out there in the first place, after all. However, what he hadn't anticipated was just how much he'd miss the impromptu meetings of the philosophy group of indeterminate geometric shape. It wasn't even like they'd had a whole lot of meetings, but just the knowledge that he could hop rooftops to Little Italy and join Merlin and whomever also happened to show up for drinks and rambling conversation that sometimes had a point and sometimes didn't, was a comfort he hadn't known he'd become used to depending on.

Stick would tell him he'd gone soft. Of course, Stick was always telling him he'd gone soft. Foggy claimed Stick was insane.

Matt let the delicious scent of the Italian bakery across the street distract him from his thoughts until a potent floral scent joined it. He gotten whiffs of it before from the rooftop, but here at ground level it was nearly overwhelming. Pausing for a moment to reach out his hand and run it gently over the
petals, he realized there was large planter in front of the shop. Well, that solved one minor mystery.

With a small smile, he turned and walked up the steps into the antiques shop.

He heard Aithusa approaching from a distance – it had been a while since he'd encountered her inside, and the sensation was stranger than usual even knowing what he now did. Matt snapped his fingers, listening to the sound echo off objects surrounding him in order to ground himself in his actual surroundings, which he knew had to be smaller than Aithusa's loud steps were indicating they were.

“Ah, young man, it's so good to see you again!” Merlin exclaimed as he hurried in behind her. “And with such perfect timing as well! Come along, there's something we could use your help with.”

Matt's eyebrows rose in surprise and allowed himself to be ushered along to the back of the store. He blinked as the storefront turned into a narrow corridor with thick carpeting. Every few feet or so he could hear the faint buzzing of light fixtures along the walls, which told him the corridor was designed with a mysterious, old-fashioned aesthetic in mind. Knowing Merlin, this was hardly surprising.

“So, what exactly do you need my help with?” he asked, curious. He could only assume it was a legal matter, but Merlin somehow didn't seem like someone whose problems should be mundane enough to require a lawyer. The man had a dragon... or at least was friends with one (Matt wasn't quite sure how that worked, but got the distinct impression that calling Aithusa a 'pet' would result in a char-broiling).

“Art,” Merlin replied.

“Art.” Matt blinked. “That's... not even close to any of my areas of expertise.”

“Well, in this particular case, you are exactly the consultant we require.”

And then Merlin dragged him into a room.

The carpet immediately cut off and was replaced with the soft thud of hardwood. Two heartbeats awaited them inside, one carrying a familiar floral scent mixed with motor oil and tea leaves – this was clearly Nimueh whom Matt had curiously never actually met but heard a lot about. The other smelled like an odd mix of masculine-scented soap, coffee and rock. His movements were loud, joints sounding like they were scraping against each other painfully.

“Apologies for the delay, but I believe I come bearing a solution to your crisis, young man,” Merlin declared as soon as he entered the room. “Or at the very least someone with a more informed opinion than the three of us can muster.”

Matt felt two sets of eyes looking towards him.

“Oh,” he heard the woman say. “Yes, I suppose that's not daft at all.”

“Thank you,” said Merlin primly. “Now I don't believe you two have actually met yet. Matthew, this is my partner, Nimueh. Nimueh, this is Matthew, that young philosopher I've told you about.”

“I figured as much. Hello, Matthew, it's a pleasure to finally meet you.” Air currents moved as light, slightly shuffled footsteps approached. The footsteps stopped a few feet in front of him and then he heard movement that probably meant – “I'm holding my hand out to you,” she said just as it finished.

Matt couldn't help the small smile as he brought his hand up, making a slight show of searching for
her hand for the sake of the third person in the room. Despite knowing very little about her, he instinctively knew that being closely associated with Merlin meant Nimueh was somehow similar to Merlin in whatever way it was that made him not quite normal.

Not that Matt really knew much about this fabled thing called 'normal'.

“It's good to finally meet you, Nimueh,” he said as she shook her hand.

“And now this young man could use your help,” Merlin continued, carefully maneuvering Matt around Nimueh and towards the other man in the room.

The mystery man stepped forward towards Matt and immediately felt the devil come alive beneath his skin: the steps resonated with heavy, solid thuds against the wooden floors.

“Ben Grim,” the man introduced himself with a deep, gravelly voice. A heavy arm moved. “I'm, uh, holding my hand out.”

On autopilot, Matt reached out to grasp his hand, the other man's hand clearly moving to help them meet. Matt froze. The hand didn't feel human in the slightest. In fact, had Matt not been able to hear his heartbeat and the breaths going in and out of his lungs, he would've thought he was shaking hands with a statue.

“Uh, I guess you don't recognize the name then,” Ben Grim said, sounding slightly uneasy.

“No, sorry,” Matt replied, trying to keep his voice even. “Should I?”

Ben looked down at the smaller man, feeling awkward once again. Not only was Ben twice his size, but there was a gentleness in Matthew's demeanor that made Ben incredibly conscious about being able to break him in half with a single blow. Forget the dark sunglasses and white cane that highlighted his blindness, between floppy brown curls and a boyish face, this man look a bit like a lost puppy.

Alicia had never seemed to be overly surprised by his looks but he supposed feeling his hand without the visual to accompany it would be quite jarring. But, damn, he didn't recognize the name 'Ben Grim'?

“Uh, maybe you'd know me as The Thing?” he tried.

He could see the man's eyes rise above his sunglasses. “The Thing?” he asked incredulously. Then he frowned. “Wait, I think I might have... You're part of that other superhero team, uh, out of the Baxter Building, I think?”

Ben relaxed slightly. “Yeah, we're the Fantastic Four. We all got caught up in one of Reed Richard's experiments a few years ago and, well, this is the result for me. The others all got different superpowers, but I'm now a living rock man.”

Matt nodded thoughtfully. “Could be worse,” he said. “At least you'll never having to worry about getting mugged in New York ever again.”

Ben chuckled. “There's that, yeah.” He paused. “Problem, though, is that rock isn't particularly
sensitive, at least not to detail... See, my girlfriend is blind and, well, our anniversary is commin’ up and I wanted to get her some art that she'd enjoy. Alicia's an artist, you see, a sculptor and she's amazing at it, but I don't know the first thing about regular, uh, visual art, let alone art for the blind. I'd take her on one of those blind art tours at the MET, but we already did that for her birthday last year.”

He paused and took a deep breath. “Merlin and Nimueh here have been real helpful, so I've narrowed it down to three choices, but I'd really appreciate it if you could take a look – er, I mean, like feel them out or something – to see if you think one's better than the others.”

Whatever tension had remained in Matt's frame, had melted away during his explanation and been replaced with amusement.

“First of all, while I might not know your girlfriend, I can guarantee you that just the fact that you're going to all the trouble of trying to find artwork that she can experience rather than just be told about by others, will count for a lot,” he said quietly. “Secondly, you should also realize that just because we're both blind, doesn't mean our taste in art is the same.”

Ben grimaced. “Yeah, I get that,” he said. “But I don't want to choose something just ’cause I like it when I don't really see the world the same way.”

Matt nodded, a small smile on his lips. “Okay, I'll take a look at them.”

“Lookin' at them would sorta defeat the purpose,” Ben muttered just loudly enough to be heard. Then he froze, suddenly wondering if that came across as offensive.

The smaller man's lips, however, spread in a delighted grin. “Good thing that isn't my area of expertise then, isn't it?” he quipped back.

Ben relaxed.

He then watched with bated breath as Matt looked over the three pieces he'd chosen. The tapestry was quickly rejected: apparently the bold stitching didn't quite stand out enough against the brocade and it was too busy with the beads even if the variety of fabrics made it interesting to touch. The teddy bear got a set of raised eyebrows.

“The smooth marble is soothing and it's definitely something that can be touched without worrying about damage,” he said. Then he shrugged. “It's not my sort of thing, that's for sure, but I guess I can understand the appeal. I'm pretty sure there's a metaphor to be mined somewhere in there too.”

“That's what I thought,” Ben said with a chuckle.

It was the horses, however, that seemed to fascinate Matthew. He spent long minutes tracing his fingers along their forms, seemingly taking in every detail carved into the wood, from the straining of their muscles to the strands of their hair and minutia of their expressions.

“That one's amazing,” he said after he'd stepped back. “You can really feel the movement, the power in their forms...”

“Thanks, that helped a lot.” He gave the teddy bear one, last look of regret before turning to the old couple. “I'll take the horse carving.”

Nimueh nodded, looking pleased. “An excellent choice, young man.”

“And, you never know, perhaps the teddy bear will still be here should you decide to add some
artwork to your own home,” Merlin added with a knowing twinkle in his eye.

Ben paused to consider that. “It's not flammable, and can take some degree of damage... 'S not actually a bad idea really. I'll think about it. Maybe in a few weeks if it's still here.”

“You know, you didn't actually have to go with my suggestion if you liked the bear,” Matthew pointed out after the two shop owners had bustled off to polish and wrap the carving.

Ben waved him off. “I think that was a choice for me more than her,” he said. “She's not really a cute animal person, you know?”

“Ah.”

“So, anyway, thanks again for helpin' me out.”

“It was my pleasure,” Matthew answered. “This was infinitely more pleasant than the sorts of things people usually ask my help with.”

“Oh?”

Matthew shrugged. “I'm a lawyer.”

That was a bit surprising, though he couldn't quite pinpoint why. Ben frowned. Matthew Murdock... the name hadn't meant anything to him at first, but now that he knew the guy was a lawyer, something was niggling at his brain.

Merlin bustled back into the room just then. “I do apologize for leaving you both in here,” he said. “Please, come with me. We've got your package up at the front, young man. And, Matthew, Nimueh is making tea. I assume you'll have some?”

Matthew's lips twitched. “Sure, I'd love some.”

“Good, good, I don't think you had the opportunity to stop by since you were here with your partner, uh...”

“Foggy, Foggy Nelson.”

A metaphorical lightbulb chose that moment to go off in Ben's brain. “Nelson and Murdock!” he exclaimed and then turned to point at Matthew. “You're one of the guys who helped take down Wilson Fisk!”

Matthew blinked up at him. “Uh, yeah, I am,” he said.

“Then I owe ya more thanks than just for helping me picking out an anniversary gift,” he said, ignoring Matthew when he tried to protest. “No, I got family in Hell's Kitchen and I knew it was gettin' kinda tense there, but I had no idea how bad 'till he got arrested and then Daredevil took him down. Don't really think my aunt realized how bad it really was until then either, mind you, but that's still no excuse. I'm supposed to be a god-damned superhero and I didn't notice a villain in my own backyard!”

Matthew just smiled. “Hell's Kitchen is my city. I might not be able to do much, but I'll do whatever I can to keep it safe to live in.”

Ben barely took any time to think it over, as soon as they came to the front, he grabbed a notepad that was sitting on top of the counter and the pen next to it. With careful, practiced movements, he
poked holes into the paper, just enough to make the braille legible.

“Here,” he said, tearing the paper and handing it over to the other man. “My cellphone number. Guys like Fisk, they never give up and they've always got connections, resources and flunkies to bribe their way to just about anything. If you or your partner ever need help, you call me, got it? I might not have a ton of connections, but I've got a few friends to call on and the police mostly like us. Plus, the Baxter Building is an, uh, safe place you can hide out in if you need to. Unless, Reed's doing one of his more questionable experiments, that is.”

The lawyer took the phone number seemingly by reflex, looking stunned by the offer. “Uh, thanks. I don't think I'll need–”

“–Never say never, kid.”

He didn't give Matthew Murdock any more chances to protest, instead turning back to the old man to pay for his purchase and then quickly leaving. He still had flowers to get, after all.

Matt wasn't quite sure what to feel as he felt the strongest member of the Fantastic Four hurry out of the shop, muttering something about flowers under his breath. That hadn't gone in any expected direction.

Nimueh's soft, careful footsteps broke him out of his musings. She was accompanied by the clink of china and silverware and the smell of tea with a hint of alcohol. Matt felt his lips twitch: had she spiked the tea?

Merlin came around the counter and gently took Matt by the elbow. “Allow me to guide you to the back,” he said softly. “I'm afraid it's a bit of an obstacle course on its best day.”

“I think I remember some of that,” Matt said with a smile, allowing the guiding with grace. “Is there anything you don't sell in here?”

There was a thoughtful pause.

“Dinosaur bones. I'm reasonably certain there are no dinosaur bones in the shop.”

Matt laughed. “Well, if you're reasonably certain.”

“Hm.”

He could hear Aithusa's steady, echoing heartbeat coming from the table. Matt greeted her and received a soft rumble in response and a swish of movement as her tail trailed along the table.

Merlin ushered him into a seat just as Nimueh placed a mug in front of him.

“Thank you,” said Matt as he inhaled the herbal scent of the tea – sure enough, spiked with the sharp tang of alcohol, though not any sort Matt recognized. “It smells lovely... and potent.”

Nimueh chuckled. “There's not nearly enough of anything for you to be worried about,” she said. “Especially as, from what I hear, you can handle quite a bit.”

Matt felt the corners of his lips twitch. “I suppose I can't exactly deny that.”

It also answered the question as to just how much Nimueh knew. Somehow, Matt couldn't find it in
him to be worried that she knew who he was... or at least who he used to be.

Was, a small voice inside him insisted – the suit was a mask, not the source of his abilities, after all.

Matt took a large sip of tea in an attempt to drown it out. His eyes closed without conscious thought, as though the gesture actually did something to block out the world around him, while the tea exploded across his taste buds. It hadn't been brewed using a bag, he could immediately tell; it lacked the processed, metallic taste of the machines that'd been used. Instead, the fruity herbal mix danced across his senses like a summer garden in liquid form. And the alcohol was sweet, but not sugary – it wasn't like anything he'd had before, couldn't identify it from his vast internal database of liqueurs and spirits.

“This is amazing,” he stated softly once he'd recovered from his momentary overload.

“Why thank you, young man,” said Nimueh, smile obvious in her voice. “We gather our own ingredients and mix the blends.”

“I can tell,” he replied with a smile.

Even as he took his next sip of tea, he knew he'd be back. Whether it was the tea, the general atmosphere of the shop, or the company itself, as he sat at the large round wooden table, Matt realized that the terrible itch that had settled itself just beneath his skin, the one that had been plaguing him for months, demanding that he don the suit and take to the streets, was suddenly, inexplicably silent.

For the first time in what felt like years, he felt like he could breathe and just... exist.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: So, while I did do some research into art for the blind, as someone who's very much a visual learner, I have absolutely no idea how any form of art would translate to someone who can't see. Honestly, it's one of the reasons I love writing Daredevil: it's such a fascinating challenge, trying to understand how he perceives the world and interacts with it. However, as a result, I am entirely guessing as to his takes on the artworks.
City of a Thousand Wonders

Chapter Notes

Hey guys, so it's been a while... again. Although, at least it's been less than two months this time, so that's progress, right? I'd actually originally hoped to have this out last weekend, but trimming my tree took longer than I'd anticipated (it always does, I don't know why I expected differently). The cat... 'helped'. Anyway, then I got sick, because of course I did. I mean, I'm still not feeling well, but at least now I have medication and am off for two days so I can hopefully just kill this bug.

Ehem. Anyway, as it happened I ended up with unexpected writing time last week so the next chapter is already about a third of the way done. I mean, it's not going to be a long chapter, but my goal is to have it up around Christmas. Whether before or after will depend entirely on if I end up going home for Christmas. If I go to my mom's you probably won't get the chapter until after Christmas, if I end up in town then you'll get it by Christmas Eve.

And, as usual, thank you to everyone commenting or left kudos on the last chapter! I'm glad you enjoyed that unusual meet-up. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I'm so sorry, this meeting was supposed to take place later this afternoon, however something came up—”

“–That's quite alright, young lady. I understand perfectly. Sometimes things happen that are completely out of our control. You mentioned it shouldn't be more than about half an hour or so?”

“No more than that, no. They were just beginning to wrap up when I slipped in to tell Doctor Yeoman you were here. If you'd like, I could make you a cup of tea in the Balcony Lounge.”

It was the woman's use of the word 'make' instead of 'get' that had T'Challa finally turning towards the conversation he'd been vaguely paying attention to. The Balcony Lounge was a member's only lounge on the MET's second floor. That the woman was implying she would make the older man she was speaking to a cup of tea herself instead of leaving it to the lounge's employees was... curious.

His first glance told him very little, except that the employee was a woman with copper-blonde hair tied back into a bun and a warm smile, and the older man looked like a retired university professor, though not necessarily one who'd have business with Doctor Clarise Yeoman, the curator of the Arms and Armour Department. His long white hair and beard looked vaguely unkept, as though he'd ran a comb through them in the morning and not bothered since, his blue sweater and khakis looked equally wrinkled in places, though were clearly clean. T'Challa remembered Doctor Yeoman from the last gala he had attended in New York and while it had been almost two years ago, she'd been quite the memorable presence: tall and thin, with glowing porcelain skin, thick wavy black hair and delicate-looking deep red lips. His first impression had been that she looked like a retired runway model more than a museum curator of any sort, let alone one whose specialty were weapons. Then he'd been introduced to her, shook her perfectly manicured hand and met bright green eyes which had held his gaze with a piercing fierceness even Okoye had been grudgingly impressed by.
She'd been even more impressed later, after they'd both witnessed those delicate red lips verbally eviscerate an obnoxious rich patron who'd made the mistake of commenting on how the beautiful woman would be more suited to the art wing instead of arms and armour.

“Oh, don't bother on my account, young lady,” the old man was quick to assure the employee. “I'm sure you have plenty of work to do.”

“It'd be no trouble, Merlin, really.”

T'Challa raised an eyebrow at the name. So, perhaps not a rumbled old professor, but a wrinkled old wizard, he thought in amusement. He certainly looked the part.

The old man waved off the young woman. “Tamara, dear, I appreciate your offer, but this is a museum, after all. I'm entirely certain I can find something to keep myself occupied with.”

The young woman – Tamara, apparently – smiled fondly at the old man. “Yeah, I guess you can. In that case, you should definitely take a look at the new additions to the African collection. Oh, and that ax you helped us with last month was finally added in earlier this week.”

“Ah, there, you see, that's more than enough to keep me occupied for half an hour!”

“Is there a problem?” a voice suddenly hissed Wakandan into T'Challa's ear. Though his bodyguard spoke several languages fluently, she refused to speak anything other than Wakandan unless absolutely necessary.

He sighed internally before calmly turning towards Okoye. “No, I am merely being curious,” he told her. He nodded towards the old man, who was standing alone now that the museum employee had left. “He is here to meet with Doctor Yeoman, the Curator of the Arms and Armament Department.”

His bodyguard nodded. “That woman had a warrior's spirit,” she grunted as she carefully examined the old man askance through half-lidded eyes so as not to be obvious. “He, however, does not.”

The Wakandan prince chuckled under his breath, amused as always by the very exacting measure Okoye used to judge people. “Perhaps he is simply very good at hiding it,” he offered mildly.

She snorted. “Then he is exceptionally good.”

The old man looked casually around the room and then began to slowly shuffle his way down the hallway, his cane tapping gently on the marble floors. T'Challa blinked in surprise as light reflected briefly off the large polished crystal orb on its top, revealing a beautiful purple stone being grasped by the old man's wrinkled and liver-spotted hand. It was a more elaborate handle than he would've expected on the otherwise plain, though slightly gnarled, wooden cane. Perhaps it was a hint of something more lurking beneath the surface of the otherwise ordinary old man... or perhaps it was a gift from someone with more refined tastes.

Either way, T'Challa found himself following automatically.

Behind him, he felt Okoye's eyes on him, radiating her own special kind of unimpressed annoyance. No one managed to project that mix of emotion quite the way she did.

“And where exactly are we going now?” she asked him dryly.

“To take a look at the new additions to the African wing of the arms and armaments collection,” he answered as he idly smoothed down the front of his burgundy sports jacket. His only answer was an ever-so-slightly sullen silence, his bodyguard no doubt annoyed she couldn't come up with a good
reason to protest their direction.

Merlin didn't rush to his destination, but there was a certainty in the old man's steps that spoke of someone who knew the museum well. He wasn't ignoring the other exhibits around him, but his eyes also didn't linger on any in particular. They were clearly familiar to him, which cemented the impression that the old man was frequent visitor. There was a reverence in his demeanor but no awe and, for some reason, this intrigued the young prince.

The African exhibit was impressive, though sterile in the way all things were in a museum, the pieces sitting proudly in their glass displays, removed from the world as it flowed around them. Here T'Challa couldn't help but slow his steps as he entered, the history contained in the room speaking to him more intimately than the other exhibits he'd seen so far. Almost none of it came from Wakanda, yet it still felt kin to him: a breath of the jungle, the wild rivers, vast plains, wind-swept deserts, and the people who lived in them.

His father had taught him that all history was worthy of their respect for it had something to teach them – if they were wise and took the time to listen. T'Challa knew well that he was not yet as wise as his father, but he tried to observe and listen as best he could in the hope that, perhaps, one day he would be.

A glint of metal to his left caught his attention and he looked over, only to find himself momentarily awed by an intricately-crafted shield. It was beautifully preserved, covered in thick leather woven together in familiar geometric patterns of red, brown, beige and dark yellow, and from between the interwoven strips of leather, glinted hints of a silver metal. Vibranium had a very distinct shine to it to those who knew it.

T'Challa strolled over to the display case and glanced at the description card. He just barely managed to contain his snort of amusement – or perhaps derision. It was labeled as Kenyan.

Sometimes it rankled just how much the world overlooked Wakanda, how poorly it estimated its history and its warriors. However, the young prince remained calm, reminding himself it was a measure of just how successful his ancestors had been in concealing their might. How successful they were at it still. He suspected he'd never quite grow out of his boyhood desire to wipe the superior smirks and condescending pity off the faces of outsiders he'd encountered at various functions, dash their preconceived notions of a poor, pathetic nation barely scraping by. His ability to look past those glances and find silent amusement at their ignorance had gotten much better since he was a boy but he suspected it would never disappear entirely.

“Hm, a magnificently preserved specimen indeed,” a voice beside him suddenly interrupted his musings. T'Challa only barely managed to stop himself from visibly startling.

“Yes, it is,” he answered as he casually turned to partially face the old man he'd followed into the exhibit room. “The colours in the leather are especially impressive for their age.”

The old man didn't look away from his admiration of the shield, though his expression became thoughtful as leaned forward on his walking stick.

“That they are, young man, that they are,” he said after a pause. The corners of his lips twitched. “But then I'd expect nothing less from Wakandan craftsmanship.”

T'Challa froze. “The display card marks it as Kenyan,” he commented once he'd managed to unfreeze his vocal chords, relieved his voice didn't catch or stutter. It was the first thing he could think to say that didn't consist of demanding how exactly this old man recognized Wakandan craftsmanship.
The old man chuckled, finally shifting in order to regard T'Challa with blue eyes that twinkled with amusement. “Young man, I have been on this Earth for many years and during those years I have seen many things and travelled to many places. During my travels across the African plains, I came across a woman. She was a wanderer like myself, although Africa was her home and, unlike myself, she felt no desire to stray from its shores. Though I had already been impressed by the land, she taught me to truly love Africa. Once she took me to the Savannah to witness the Great Migration, hundreds of thousands of stampeding wildebeests tearing across the plains...”

He trailed off for a moment, seemingly lost in memory. A few moments passed and the old man shook himself out of it before turning to face T'Challa fully.

“Of all the wonders I've seen in my life, that will always be one of the most amazing,” he continued. “If you ever need a reminder that you are but one small cog in the turnings of the world, that there are places where the decisions you face do not matter in the slightest, where events are propelled by a primal power neither one of us can touch nor effect, then journey to the Savannah. Go watch the wildebeests, young man. It will change you.”

T'Challa listened to his words, saw the genuine awe in the old man's voice, and felt a stab of jealousy that this old, white man – this visitor to what was T'Challa's land and that of his people – had seen such an awe-inspiring sight in Africa that he, a prince, had not ever seen. In fact, it had never even occurred to him to seek it out. He was heir to the Panther; what did he care for wildebeests? And yet the tone of Merlin's voice...

T'Challa frowned and considered the old man's words. Suddenly, he wondered if perhaps this old man knew who he was. Wakanda was a small nation, but they had a seat on the UN Council. Anyone with an interest could easily find pictures of the country's ruler and his children. Had it not been for the conversation he'd overheard earlier, he'd almost wonder if this was a setup.

Suddenly the old man shook his head, smiling ruefully. “Ah, my apologies, but I appear to have gotten side-tracked, haven't I?” he said, abruptly breaking the mood. “My friend showed me many more places, of course, sights I'm almost certain I never would've found on my own, Wakanda among them. A beautiful land, Wakanda, full of lovely and talented people. In fact I have a large knitted blanket that's just as soft and supple as the day I bought it from a tiny slip of an old woman whose eyes clearly indicated she would stuff me full of elephant dung should I dare to besmirch her products. Though why she thought I would has always been a mystery to me as she was clearly a master of her craft.”

The old man paused in bewildered contemplation. Meanwhile, T'Challa carefully bit the inside of his cheek to stop himself from smiling – he was fairly certain he knew exactly whom Merlin was describing.

“Ah, but that is, supposedly, only one side of Wakanda,” Merlin continued and T'Challa felt his breath catch, conscious of how Okoje's already still form, froze. “You see, my friend told me that beneath the surface of Wakanda lies a hidden city. A City of a Thousand Wonders she called it.”

T'Challa felt as his mind exploded with jumbled thoughts and racing speculations. This old man definitely knew he and Okoje were from Wakanda, that much was obvious. But who was this woman who'd revealed Wakanda's secrets to a stranger? Even if he'd proven himself worthy of her trust, it was something that was simply not done. And why was the old man telling him? There was no hint of malice in the old man's voice, no indication he was attempting to blackmail T'Challa with this knowledge.

T'Challa felt his eyes narrow at Merlin, carefully taking in his appearance, knowing that Okoje had no doubt already taken an image of him to investigate later. Oddly enough, the old man had turned...
back to his contemplation of the shield, seeming entirely unconcerned by T'Challa's inner turmoil. Carefully, the Prince of Wakanda considered his answer.

"Wakanda might, supposedly, be home to a city of a thousand wonders," he finally said. "But most importantly, it is my home."

A wide smile stretched across the old man's face as he turned back to T'Challa, approval shining in his eyes. "And that, young man, is perhaps the greatest wonder of all," he declared. "Certainly it is priceless beyond all others."

T'Challa couldn't help the small smile that graced his lips in response, feeling like he'd somehow passed a test he hadn't known to expect.

Okoje cleared her throat, pointedly looking at her watch when he glanced in her direction. Trying to be both discrete enough to be polite and yet visible enough for his gesture to be noticed, he peeked at his own watch. There was still plenty of time before he needed to leave in order to meet with his father at the Wakandan embassy, which meant Okoje was setting up an excuse for him to leave. He understood the implied wisdom of disengaging from the conversation with Merlin, though couldn't help the disappointment at being unable to follow it to its natural conclusion.

"I apologize," he said smoothly, meeting Merlin's curious eyes. "I'm afraid I have an appointment elsewhere I must get to. It was a pleasure to make your acquaintance..."

He trailed off, not wanting to let on that he'd been eavesdropping earlier.

The old man turned and held his hand out, his face illuminated by a large grin. "My name is Merlin Pratt," he said. "And the pleasure is mine, young man. Should you ever find yourself in the city again with some time to spare, my friend and I run an antiques store in Little Italy called the Isle of the Blessed. You may just find some interesting items hidden within our collection."

"I am T'Challa." He smiled warmly, finding himself unable to dislike the old man despite his suspiciously acquired knowledge. "Perhaps during my next visit to the city I will find myself with more time to spare."

With a final incline of his head, he and Okoje left the exhibit room.

"I will begin researching him after your lunch engagement," Okoje informed him, switching back to Wakandan as they waited for his hired car to drive up to the museum's steps.

He nodded. "Very well. But be discrete. He has clearly not been a threat until now and I'd hate to bring attention to an old man if he happens to be just a curious scholar who managed to somehow charm the right person."

Okoje's glare burned into the side of his face. "I am always discrete," she said pointedly as the car finally pulled up.

T'Challa didn't bother trying to hide his amusement.

Merlin watched the future king of Wakanda and his honour guard walk away. Bastet's claim was clearly visible on the young man – to those with the ability to see such things. This man was, without
a doubt, one of her Chosen Warriors. Or at the very least, he would be.

In all his years, she was one of the more interesting being he'd met: a goddess as wild as the African plains, as mysterious as its jungles, as seductive as its sun-warmed valleys and beautiful waterfalls, and as savage as its deadliest predators. She was by far the oldest he'd ever met as well. Most deities withered from existence once their purpose was gone, but Bastet had been clever. She'd left the crumbling walls of Egypt behind and found herself a new people, a new purpose. Wakanda was minuscule compared to the mighty Egyptian Empire in its prime, yet she was fiercely proud of it, of her people and what they had accomplished.

Merlin couldn't deny she had much to be proud of. He'd felt both awed and humbled when she'd led him through the heart of Wakanda. Though, for him, the city paled in comparison to some of the other sights she'd shown him – such as the Great Migration – however the clean, smooth lines and human ingenuity present in Wakanda's hidden capitol was impressive and called to an entirely different part of Merlin.

He turned back to the shield that had sparked the conversation between himself and Prince T'Challa and wondered for a brief moment whether he should mention to Clarise that it was labeled incorrectly. Almost immediately he discarded the thought. No, he'd promised Bastet he would keep her secrets unless given permission otherwise.

Bastet did not give her friendship lightly and Merlin hoped to someday return to Africa with Aithusa and spend more time travelling its depths at her side. Perhaps Nimueh would accompany them next time. After all, she'd said before she was curious as to how Aithusa had learned to transform herself into a cat. Introducing her to the being who'd taught the trick to a dragon was probably even better still.

“Ah, Merlin, there you are!”

Merlin took a deep breath and pulled himself out of his musings and memories before turning to the stunning dark-haired woman hurrying towards him.

He smiled warmly. “Clarise, hello,” he said. “It's good to see you again. The new additions look lovely.”

She smiled widely. “Thank you, I'll pass your praise on to Ken when he comes back from vacation. And I do apologize for making you wait. This meeting wasn't supposed to be until this afternoon.”

“It's no problem, I assure you,” he waved off her apology. “Now where are these daggers you wanted me to look at?”

Her eyes instantly lit up. “Follow me and I'll show you! You'll love them. They need a bit of care but otherwise they're in excellent condition. A truly amazing find!”

He echoed her grin, already looking forward to the rest of his morning. And probably most of the afternoon (after all, Clarise no longer had a meeting to get to later).

Chapter End Notes

I don't think the movie really mentioned the panther goddess of Wakanda: Bastet/Bast, but according to the comic books (ie marvelwiki because I don't actually read comic
books) she is one of the gods worshiped by the Wakandan people.

Anyway, in case I don't update before Christmas: Happy Holidays Everyone, whatever holiday you happen to be celebrating! And if you're not celebrating any holiday, then have some goodwill and cookies anyway! And eggnog, don't forget the eggnog.
Okay, so... it's definitely AFTER Christmas... Ugh, sorry it's been so long. I think literally the day after I posted the last chapter I suddenly got sick. Not so-sick-I-couldn't-go-to-work, but sick enough that by the time I'd get home from work I'd be utterly drained. Then I had some technical issues, which I've managed to band-aid but my laptop is officially now on its last legs. Not at all helping was the fact that this particular chapter ended up being one of those ones where I'd end up rewriting sections I'd just finished because I'd changed my mind on where I wanted conversations to go.

Aaanyway. I do have some good news. I had a couple of very productive train rides visiting my family earlier this month and as such the next two chapters are already written. They're shorter than this one but feature some side characters I've gotten multiple requests for. I'll try to have the first of those up by the end of this weekend. The second one might take a bit longer as there's going to a bit more work needed as far as editing goes.

This chapter's a bit of break from my usual form for this story. After trying to figure out just how to approach CA:CW, I ended up deciding to tackle it directly. With this, here, we are officially entering Alternate Universe territory. Enjoy!

This had been far from Steve's first explosion. It had also been far from the first important, iconic building he'd seen blown up. Yet he'd entirely failed to predict his reaction at seeing the massive hole blown into the front of the UN building when he'd finally arrived. Even now, two days and many, many hours spent helping with relief efforts later, he still felt a lingering shock.

Steve was tired, having started the whole ordeal by sprinting through what felt like half the streets of Vienna after traffic had ground to a confused and panicked halt following the explosion. He was just relieved their plane had already landed or he and Sam would have never made it into the city in the first place.

He'd glimpsed Natasha a few times, but only ever from a distance. Only once had she paused to acknowledge him with a quick nod before rushing off to whatever she'd been doing. There just wasn't time for anything else between moving debris to get to survivors.

They hadn't been within speaking distance until last night at some indeterminable time when an Interpol officer had found him and escorted him to a military airport just outside the city. Natasha and Sam had already been on the plane, all of them too exhausted for more than one-word greetings. He was fairly certain he's slept on the plane, though the trip from Vienna to Berlin wasn't nearly long enough for that to mean much of anything.

Exhaustion, world-weariness and grief threatened to pull him under as he stared at the black and white image flickering slightly on a screen inside the Joint Counter Terrorism Centre. His hand was clenched in anger and his teeth grit with frustration: those emotions the only things keeping him steady, keeping him from succumbing to the tempting pull of exhaustion.
Bucky Barnes, the Winter Soldier. The Counter Terrorism taskforce thought his old friend, his brother, was behind the bombing. Despite the photographic evidence, Steve knew it was a lie. It had to be. Why would Bucky bomb the UN? Unless he was under Hydra's control again... but what would Hydra possibly gain from the act?

“You look exhausted, Cap,” a familiar voice said softly from behind him. “Maybe you should go get some rest. Stop staring at screens and blaming yourself for not looking hard enough.”

Steve snorted softly as Sam's comforting presence came to stand beside the table he was currently sitting on – in direct opposition to every bit of proper manners he'd ever been taught.

“I stopped looking so hard because Merlin told me to,” he said, idly aware of how ridiculously childish that sounded. “He told me that maybe Bucky just needed some time, that he'd find me when he was ready to face me.”

Sam's soft intake of breath was audible to Steve's enhanced hearing despite the noise filtering into the office through the open door to his right. After a few moment's pause, his friend walked into Steve's line of sight. There was a frown on his face, confusion warring with worry in his eyes.

“Are you saying that Merlin Pratt knows where Bucky is?” he asked carefully.

Steve paused. “I think so. Or at least he did at one point.” He sighed and scrubbed his face with one hand. “He never really said so in so many words, but I went to see them when I was in town for Christmas last year and Merlin told me that maybe I was searching too hard. That I should ease off, that maybe Bucky was being so hard to find, 'cause he wasn't ready to face me yet and I should give him time. He'd find me when he was ready.”

Steve looked back up, his eyes automatically finding the screen just past Sam's shoulder where a zoomed-in black and white image of Bucky's face continued to flicker. He couldn't deny how much the image looked like his friend, but he simply refused to believe what he was seeing was true.

It just couldn't be. Bucky... Bucky wasn't some terrorist. He was... he was...

Steve took a deep breath and reminded himself once again that he wasn't actually sure what Bucky was right now, other than probably confused and possibly still the Winter Soldier. Out of the corner of his eye he idly registered others walking in the door.

“That does sound kinda ambiguous,” Sam admitted, his eyes wary. “But also like maybe he knows more than he's sayin’.”

“Merlin and Nimueh always know more than they're saying,” Natasha stated calmly as she casually leaned against the wall just within his line of sight. She folded her hands over her chest and raised an eyebrow at him, as though daring him to disagree with her.

Steve sighed, knowing full well he couldn't. While he still completely trusted them, he'd spent enough time around the two of them to recognize that they weren't ordinary shopkeepers no matter what they tried to say. Or at least they hadn't always been ordinary shopkeepers.

Although... somehow even 'former spies' seemed almost too mundane for them...

“Excuse me? Am I hearing this right? You have a potential lead on the Winter Soldier and you haven't bothered to share it with the rest of the task force?!”

Kicking himself for allowing his mind to wander to the point that he hadn't noticed former General Ross walk into the room, Steve took a deep breath and mustered what energy he could find to glare
at the man. He was flanked by Tony, who was wincing slightly, and a shorter blond man in a grey suit.

“No, I know someone who maybe might have run across Bucky in New York sometime last year,” he said slowly, not bothering to cover up his contempt. “Or who might've just been giving me some friendly advice over tea. Not sure that counts as much of a lead.”

“There was also that unidentified sniper who helped you against those doombots a couple months ago,” Tony added.

“Yeah, but that would still put him in New York, not Vienna,” Sam pointed out, cutting in before Steve could retort with something much less reasonable that he would probably regret saying later. “And you never did confirm who it was, so for all we know that could've been the Punisher practising his aim.”

Natasha snorted. “The Punisher shoots gangsters, not robots.” She looked over at Tony. “Still it's a bit of a drastic shift to go from potentially helping Steve protect civilians in downtown New York to bombing the UN.”

“Sure, but, as you've all oh-so-helpfully pointed out, we're not actually sure who helped Steve out in New York,” said Tony. “Maybe it wasn't Barnes in New York.”

Steve growled under his breath, but clamped down on the instinctive urge to shout at Tony.

Tony, who'd been so unusually quiet in his excitement when he'd presented Steve with the possible evidence of his friend's presence in New York. Tony, who spent untold hours scouring every bit of available footage for even a glimpse of said friend and never mentioned a word of what he was doing, waving away Steve's attempts to thank him (until he started thanking him with baked goods and daily breakfast). Tony, who'd taken one look at SHIELD's official schedule for introducing Steve to modern technology and declared it asinine (“Jesus, these guys apparently think you're an idiot!” had been his exact words) before handing him a laptop and a Starkphone and showing him how to use them. Tony, who'd known about Secretary Ross' plans with the UN, plans that had the potential to change all of their lives and had chosen not to prepare any of them for what was coming their way. Tony, whom Steve really, really wanted to punch through a wall right now.

He shifted his weight further back onto his ass in an effort to prevent himself from getting up.

Because, dammit, Steve needed Bucky to have been in New York. To know he'd made his way home, even if that hadn't been as far as Steve's doorstep.

“What reason could Bucky possibly have had to bomb the UN?” Steve asked through gritted teeth, hanging desperately on to the thinnest semblance of calm. “It didn't even exist the last time he was a free man.”

The room was silent for a few, long moments. And then Natasha took a careful step forward, her hands now on her hips and eyes slightly apologetic.

“Maybe Hydra found him again,” she said. “Maybe that really isn't Bucky Barnes anymore, but the Winter Soldier carrying out their plans.”

Steve froze. He'd thought of it, of course he had, but hearing someone voice the thought out loud made the blood in his veins freeze in horror. If it was true then they had to find Bucky, to get him away from those bastards who'd been using him, treating him like a tool, a weapon made of flesh instead of a living human being...
His eyes slid momentarily in Ross' direction. He didn't trust the man. During his time at SHIELD, Steve hadn't had any real contact with the then general, though he'd overheard some things on the grapevine (it was amazing how easily people forgot that he, as a super soldier, came with really good hearing). Things like how he'd attempted to have Steve classified as US Army property in an attempt to gain access to him, his blood samples and medical records. And that was damned polite compared to how he'd treated Bruce over the years.

Yeah, didn't take much for Steve to want to punch former General Thaddeus Ross through a wall.

“Then that just makes it all the more imperative that we find the Winter Soldier and secure him,” said Ross without so much as an ounce of sympathy. “Something that should have been done in Washington.”

“Okay, yeah, I'm gonna stop this right now,” said Sam, smoothly stepping in front of Steve and cutting off the angry response he'd been about to make. “There are a lot of things that should've been done both before, during, and after Washington, but if you're about to make a crack about catching Barnes, you can keep it to yourself. Steve spent a week in hospital after those carriers went down and if super soldier healing powers here spends more than a day in hospital, it means he's been beat up real bad. Capturing Bucky, or the Winter Soldier, or whatever he'd been at that point hadn't been on the menu no matter how many ways you look at it.”

Steve closed his eyes, the memories from the fight on the helicarrier painful. He was sure that, for a moment, the blank-eyed creature that had once been his best friend had hesitated. Had there been a moment of recognition or had he imagined it? But here he was, alive. Someone had pulled him and his shield out of the water, so there must've been something... so why hadn't he stayed?

He felt his chest tighten, his sides vibrating with pent-up tension: worry, anger, grief. Clenching his fists he tried to will away the unhelpful emotions.

“Uh, Steve?”

Steve opened his eyes and met Sam's anxious look. His friend's gaze quickly slipped pointedly downward.

“Your phone's ringing,” he said simply.

Blinking, Steve looked down, realizing in that same moment that the vibrating he was feeling wasn't coming from within him – or, at the very least, not all of it. He pulled his phone out just in time to catch a quick glimpse of the caller ID before it went silent. He froze. What a strange coincidence...

“It's Merlin,” he said quietly, thumbing his phone's call history. His eyes widened. He had nine missed calls, all from 'The Isle of the Blessed'. There were voice messages waiting for him as well. “He's been trying to get a hold of me, apparently.”

“Merlin has your number?” Tony asked, sounding surprised.

“Uh, I think I gave it to them before I moved to Washington,” Steve replied absently, vaguely remembering doing such a thing. “They've never used it before.”

“There's no way this is a coincidence,” Natasha pointed out.

“They?” Ross asked, frowning in confusion.

“Merlin Pratt and Nimueh Priest,” Natasha answered casually. “They own an antiques store in Little Italy. Steve made friends with them a few years ago.”
“I assume you've done background checks on them?” the blond man who'd been observing from beside Ross asked.

Natasha glanced over to him and nodded. “Of course. Nothing unusual popped up no matter how much I looked. And I looked several times.”

“I didn't find anything either,” Tony admitted with a shrug. “I mean, they've travelled a lot over the years, but that's not exactly unusual.”

Steve frowned. It wasn't that he didn't know the sort of people he now called friends, but to hear them so easily discussing it, like it was normal to exercise this much paranoia about the people they met, was sometimes disconcerting.

Taking a deep breath to calm himself, he tuned out the conversation going on around him and dialed Merlin back.

The phone rang three times.

“Yes, hello, this is Isle of the Blessed, what can we help you with?”

Steve smiled at the familiar voice. “Hi, Merlin. It's Steve. You, uh, you've been trying to get a hold of me?”

The change in tone from the other end was immediate.

“Ah, Steven! Excellent! I'm so glad you finally managed to take a break from the madness in order to call back. What an awful tragedy! Nimueh and I have been following the news quite closely ever since we heard. Maria sent her husband by to tell us about it.”

Steve winced. Despite the complete lack of accusation in Merlin's voice, he suddenly felt guilty for not having checked his phone sooner.

“Yeah, it's bad,” he agreed, because what else could he say? Part of him still couldn't believe it was real. He took a shaky breath. “They think... they think Bucky did it.”

“Yes, we're aware of that. It's all over the news, along with a number to call if he's spotted. They suddenly seem rather determined to find him.”

There was a hard line of disapproval in Merlin's grim voice that almost made Steve smile. Even if Merlin knew almost nothing about the situation, the distant support was still nice.

“It's why I've been calling, in fact. Whichever idiots are in charge of the investigation have been circulating a photo of the suspect and claiming it's former Sargent Barnes. Which is, of course, utter nonsense!”

The relief at having someone so whole-heartedly echo his thoughts was profound, like an iceberg being lifted off his shoulders. It also made Steve nearly miss Merlin's next words. He froze, unable to comprehend them at first.

“I'm sorry, Merlin, I... c-could you repeat that please?” he said, certain he must've heard wrong. And too afraid to hope he hadn't.

There was a pause and then, slowly, Merlin repeated what he'd said, his voice coloured by what Steve thought (hoped) was fond amusement:
"I said, that two days ago, at 8:30 am New York time, Bucky Barnes was helping offload supplies for the Bella Donna bakery."

For a long moment, Steve's mind was completely still as it processed the words. 8:30 am would still potentially give Bucky time to... no, wait. New York time. Vienna was five, seven, eight hours ahead of New York... Steve wracked his brain, the correct answer on the tip of his tongue and yet completely illusive as a hundred other thoughts vied for his attention. Except, he finally realized, it didn't really matter how far ahead of New York Vienna was, because it didn't change the truth.

"He couldn't have done it," he said softly, breathlessly. He felt the corners of his mouth curl upwards without his permission. "There's no way Bucky could've caught a plane to Vienna and gotten there on time to bomb the UN and get caught on camera leaving the scene at the time code on the camera footage."

"No, Steven, there most certainly is not." A pause. "Speaking of which, I think you should get your CIA and Interpol friends to stop besmirching the, uh, intimidating name of the Winter Soldier. Honestly, what sort of top-tier ghost assassin makes such a horrendously amateurish mistake as getting caught on camera! After purposefully looking back at their target, no less! The Winter Soldier did not go unnoticed and undocumented for decades because he was incompetent!"

Steve laughed, unable to help himself. Every part of him feeling light with relief. "I'll pass on the message."

He was mid-laugh when a hand carefully came to rest on his arm. Steve turned his attention to Sam, who was looking at him with a wary expression.

"Uh, Steve?" he asked, his eyes assessing him before they slid to glance at the rest of the room. "What's going on there, buddy?"

Following Sam's gaze, Steve noticed he'd become the centre of attention. He supposed the made sense: his best friend who'd tried to kill him not too long ago was being hunted for mass murder and here was laughing loudly and grinning like a loon. They were probably wondering if he'd finally gone insane. Suddenly, he had an idea.

"Hang on, Merlin," he said. "I'm going to put you on speakerphone."

It took him a few moments of staring blankly at his phone before he managed to remember how to do that. In the meantime he felt the area around him shrink as the others moved in closer.

"Okay, I think I've got it," he finally declared, feeling like he'd accomplished something for the first time in what felt like weeks. "Can you hear me?"

There was a slight pause, and then: "Loud and clear, young man. I take it there are others there with you then?"

"Hey, Merlin," said Natasha with a small smile. "We couldn't let Steve have all the fun. Tony and Sam are here too."

"Among others, I assume."

Natasha's smile turned sly and her gaze sharpened. "Among others."

"Hmm, I see."

Steve cleared his throat into the ensuing silence, before Secretary Ross' patience evaporated. This
wasn't just for their benefit: he needed to hear the words out loud just one more time, with witnesses to corroborate that this wasn't just a fever dream born from lack of sleep. “Merlin, could you please repeat what you told me again?”

“Ah yes, of course, Steven.” The old man paused for effect. “Two days ago – that would be Tuesday if I'm very much not mistaken – at approximately 8:30 am, ah... New York time former Sergeant Bucky Barnes was offloading supplies at the Bella Donna bakery.”

Silence filled the room for several, long moments.

“The Bella Donna, that's the one with the canolli and the, according to Pepper, to-die-for tiramisu, right?” Tony asked.

“Yeah, that's the one,” Steve answered, trying to remember if he'd ever actually had their tiramisu.

“I like the chocolate tart,” said Natasha with a shrug.

Which was when former General Ross apparently decided he'd finally had enough and strode forward until he was looming over the cellphone in Steve's outstretched hand.

“Exactly how can you be certain that this individual is James Buchanan Barnes?” he barked.

Merlin's initial answer was a pointed silence. “Well, the metal arm and memory problems were a bit of a hint,” he finally answered, his voice mild to the point of mocking. “And, of course, I have seen pictures. He was in many of the news reels and promotional movies during the war, you know, and quite a few of those made their way across the pond. Also, just last week, Eva decided to do a thorough clean of the back kitchen while he was there and so asked him to move the big industrial mixer, thinking he would shove it a bit to the side so that she could clean the dirt that had collected around the edge of the stand. Now, to clarify this mixer is about the height of the average man and constructed out of heavy-duty metal and industrial rubber. Needless to say, she was hardly expecting him to lift it off the ground single-handed.”

Sam snorted and then shook his head in amusement. “Yeah, that sounds about right.”

“And if you were aware of who this man was, why didn't you report it?” Ross demanded.

Steve could just picture the unimpressed raised eyebrow that comment no doubt garnered and wished Merlin was here in person for the former general to experience its full effect.

“Young man, I have no idea who you are nor do I honestly care. However, I do know that Bucky Barnes is a veteran, one who survived decades of captivity and torture at the enemy's hands and is now not only suffering from PTSD but also from some rather understandable memory and personality issues. When I came across him he was struggling to find himself and then later expressed a desire to live without resorting to dishonest means, something which I was more than willing to help him realize. Eva's father is a veteran of Vietnam and as she happened to be in need of some temporary help at the bakery, she was also willing to employ him for a few hours a week. In fact, I believe he has also been helping Maria with some renovations at the Canzone D'amore Bistro and I think Wang Shu got him to help for a few days last week with offloading when he realized the young man speaks and reads Mandarin. Needless to say, this is a polite and hard-working young man who is attempting to turn his life around and find himself as well as his place in society while dealing with some rather deep-seated trauma and all of us here were horrified and infuriated to discover he'd been thrown into the centre of this ridiculous manhunt of yours for something he quite clearly did not do!”
“So if he wasn’t in Vienna then how the hell did his face end up on that security footage?” Tony asked after an uncomfortable pause.

“Could be a fake,” said Sam thoughtfully. He turned to Natasha. “Remember when we infiltrated the Triskelion, you had some sort of weird holographic facemask thing to make you look like that council member.”

Natasha nodded, looking equally thoughtful. “Those weren't widely used, but they weren't exactly top secret either. Most former SHIELD agents above the basic clearance level would've at least known of their existence.”

“That seems like a lot of effort simply to frame someone whose face is somewhat recognizable to the right people,” the blond man who’d entered with Ross pointed out as he eyed them all somewhat skeptically.

“Indeed it does seem to be quite a lot of effort. Perhaps the key to finding the perpetrator would be to first discover who would benefit from framing the Winter Soldier for the bombing and why.”

“The manhunt.”

Steve looked past Tony to the young dark-skinned man who'd slipped into the room earlier. This was the first time he'd spoken and Steve had honestly forgotten he was in the room. The man's eyes met their stares with calm confidence, though Steve could tell there was a powerful emotion being suppressed beneath the calm.

“Before the bombing, no one was looking for the Winter Soldier, at least not openly,” the man continued, his voice soft, but loud enough to be heard. Spoken like a man who knew he didn't need to speak up to be heard. “Now the whole world is looking.”

“Killing thousands of people just to find one man seems a bit... elaborate,” said Steve after a long pause.

“Even with SHIELD gone, shouldn't Hydra have better resources?” Sam asked, his words feeling like they'd been carefully chosen. “This feels kinda like a last resort plan.”

“So maybe it's not Hydra,” Tony pointed out with a shrug that was trying very hard to be casual.

“This is pointless speculation,” Ross suddenly sharply interjected. He was frowning. “As much as I hate the idea of the Winter Soldier out in the vicinity of the unknowing public, I hate being used in someone else's petty revenge plot even less.”

Steve felt his eyebrows rise incredulously. “What makes you think this is about revenge?”

Surprisingly, it was Merlin who answered, his quiet chuckle effortlessly gaining Steve's attention.

“Because, young man, humans are nothing if not predictable and there are few things that would motivate someone to these sorts of extremes.”

Tony groaned. “Well, if we're looking for people who might have a grudge and want revenge against the Winter Soldier, that list's going to take us forever to get through. Assuming we can even find a complete list.”

“Or we could just spring the trap and see who we catch,” said Natasha. They turned to her and she grace them with a grin that was as sharp as her knives and looked just as deadly.
It took less than ten minutes for the world to catch the news of the Avengers being engaged in a high-speed chase across Bucharest. Millions of eyes and ears tuned into all forms of broadcast and online news, and social media, eagerly taking in every snippet of information as Captain America and an unknown man – identified a short time later by unspecified sources as former US Sergeant Bucky Barnes – were pursued by Romanian police, Interpol, Iron Man and Black Widow. They were apprehended after a drawn-out chase that spanned a large part of the city and then arrested by Interpol before being unceremoniously stuffed into a car for transport back to Berlin.

The room was loud with tension, every buzzing computer tower, clacking key, and quiet conversation feeding the air around them with anxious energy as the seconds crept on. Every time the doors opened, half the heads in the room would look up from their monitors, just in case the person entering happened to have some sort of important news to impart. They usually turned away seconds later, back to their own tasks.

Steve knew there was a second security room somewhere in the UN building, where even more agents and security officers were studying every single movement caught by security cameras and every second of CCTV footage from the surrounding area, and another where computer specialists were analyzing every speck of data they could unearth for any hint of a clue. Knowing that didn't stop him from watching the security screens in front of him as though catching the precise moment of the anticipated attack was all on him. His friend's life was on the line and he refused to fail him again.

A phone by the main monitor bank rang. The shrill sound had startled Steve the first time it abruptly cut into the room's near-silent din, but that had been hours ago and now he was almost constantly expecting it. Ingrid Vos, the Interpol agent co-heading the operation picked up the phone on the second ring. After a few moments, and several quiet words of acknowledgement to whatever she was being told, she nodded to herself and then hung up.

She then turned to the agents she was co-commanding with – Everette Ross of the CIA and Charles Teller of MI6. “The psychologist is here,” she said simply.

The CIA agent nodded. “Do you want to explain the situation to him or should I?”

As they conferred, a tall blonde woman whom Steve hadn't been introduced to but was fairly certain was also Interpol leaned over the computer console, frowning as she studied the live feed from the main lobby.

“Vere is he?” Steve heard her ask with a thick German accent

The small middle-aged man she was towering over looked up and pointed to the screen. “Right there, ma'am,” he said.

Her frown deepened. “Zoom in on him.”

The technician immediately reached for his mouse with one hand and pressed several keys on his keyboard with the other. The young woman sitting at the console next to him looked over curiously
while he did so.

A few moments passed and then the tall blonde straightened, angling herself towards the taskforce's co-co-commanders. “Three years ago Doctor Broussard did a special lecture for field branches of Interpol on brainwashing techniques und how to recognize their use. I spoke to him after the lecture. He was very informative.” She pointed at the screen. “He did not look like that.”

The young woman in front of the monitor seemed to take that as her cue and immediately turned back to her computer screen, bringing up a web browser over the security footage. Her fingers flew over the keyboard as she typed. Less than a minute later, she had the University of Cambridge's website up on screen.

Steve finally walked over the cluster of agents and security officers.

“Here, this is Doctor Broussard's official University of Cambridge bio,” the young woman announced.

All three co-commanders stared between the two pictures for a moment. They shared a single look while the Interpol agent picked up the phone.

“There's been a change of plans,” Steve heard her say into the phone. After she'd hung up, all three of them turned to Steve.

As two security officers led him deeper into the bowels of the UN building, Helmut Zemo couldn't help noticing how the walls seemed to be getting greyer. This far away from the lobby there were no more tourists or dignitaries to impress. They passed many people: mostly office workers, some Interpol agents, and he thought he caught a glimpse of several Avengers.

He kept his face neutral, fighting the impulse to sneer at the 'heroes'. Soon. Soon they would pay. Patience, observation and perseverance ad been his greatest weapons for the past year and it would ruin everything were he to squander them now.

His escort rounded a corner and they passed by three Africans in suits that appeared much finer than anything the others had been wearing. The man in the middle looked vaguely familiar, but Zemo couldn't quite place him. It didn't matter.

Finally they reached a set of magnetically-sealed security doors. He nodded approvingly. They were taking the threat of the Winter Soldier seriously: good. It would take them an extra thirty seconds to get those doors open once they caught on to what he was doing. Those thirty extra seconds would be very important then.

The man who looked up was dirty, dishevelled, his hair greasy with sweat and grime as he glared at him through an overgrown fringe. His hands were shackled to the armrests of the metal chair, yet he still somehow managed to radiate danger.

“Hello there,” Zemo said, careful to maintain the blandly pleasant face. No point in giving the game away until he absolutely had to. “My name is Doctor Broussard and I'm just here to have a little chat with you. Now don't worry about replying. All I need you to do for now is listen.”

As he spoke, he took the small blue book out of his jacket pocket.
He started speaking the Winter Soldier's activation code and almost immediately the other man's eyes went wide with understanding and then fear. He began to thrash, desperately attempting to break the no-doubt adamantium bonds that held him in place. As Zemo continued to recite the string of words, the thrashing slowly quieted until he'd stopped and slumped forward like a marionette with cut strings, an eerie emptiness surrounding him instead of the menace from earlier.

Just to be absolutely sure it would hold, Zemo finished to the end. Only then did he allow himself a grin of triumph. But only for a moment.

“Soldat,” he barked, not caring if he gave away his military background to the watching cameras. Already he could hear faint shouting coming from the other side of the thick steel doors behind him. “Give me mission report: December 16, 1991.”

A long pause followed.

Zemo frowned. Then he repeated the command, more forcefully this time. Tensing, he waited for the Winter Soldier to answer him.

What he got was a low chuckle.

“How the hell to you figure that a guy who's had his brains scrambled and memories regularly erased for the past fifty years would remember a mission from over twenty years ago?”

The Winter Soldier looked up, and his eyes were no longer afraid. They were mocking him. Zemo felt himself break out in cold sweat. Something had gone wrong.

And then the Winter Soldier stood up, his binders falling away. As did the brown, dirty wig he'd been wearing. The now-blond man reached behind him and pulled out – of all things – a bow and arrow, pointing it directly at him.

“Whoever the hell you are, you're under arrest for acts of terrorism and mass murder,” said the man just as the door behind Zemo opened with a tell-tale hiss.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: I had someone ask about the time of this story in a review for this last chapter... Yeah, sorry, I really don't suggest trying to compare this story with the MCU official timeline as I'm honestly not paying attention to exact dates when stuff is supposed to take place. I've certainly written those stories where every ridiculous detail I could think of was extensively researched (in "The Search for Victory" I even researched planetary alignments for when I wrote the space battle despite knowing that there would be maybe two people who would notice if I got that wrong). This story, however is not one of those. At least as far as the timeline goes. Which is why I've mostly gone with movie events happening off-screen - until this chapter. Besides, from what I understand even the Official Marvel Cinematic Universe Timeline doesn't actually make sense...
Two Old Men

Chapter Notes

Well, it's mostly still the weekend... I haven't gone to bed yet, that means it's still Sunday, right?

Anyway, thanks so much to everyone who read, commented or left kudos on the last chapter (I'm nearing 2000 kudos on this story, holy shit!!). Now back to something light and fun and completely unrelated to anything else that's been going on. Enjoy! =D

The wind was brisk as it blew through the streets, sweeping dust, litter and the first fallen leaves down the sidewalks and hair into everyone's faces. It was still warm – a sign that summer hadn't yet given up its hold, though that capitulation was inevitably around the corner. The skies were clear – a pure blue that no painter would ever manage to emulate to perfection – but the sun didn't seem quite as sharp as it had been only a week ago.

Change was in the air.

The old man who wandered aimlessly through the streets of New York could feel it. And he didn't mean the weather. There was something else, something less tangible infusing the air, and it was making him restless. It was why, after months of consideration and internal debates, today was the day he'd finally slipped his minders and took to the streets. That had been hours ago and he was still walking, wandering aimlessly with no destination in mind, just going where his feet felt like taking him.

It wasn't often that he felt his actual age. In fact, until recently, he never had. Now he was tired, time's endlessness suddenly a burden he no longer wanted to bear. However, he could feel it: change was in the air, relief on its way. And with it danger... But not yet. No, there was still some time to go before then.

The wind blew through his mane of hair and thick beard. And on the wind he caught the scent of... flowers? So tantalizingly vivid was the scent that he thought he'd accidentally wandered into a garden. Looking around, however, he saw only the last of the decorative flowers lining the streets, already beginning to wilt. Still, even with the gusts of wind momentarily dying down, the sweet floral scent lingered, as though it has taken root within his mind as much as his nose.

He turned left, followed it as it lead him down yet another street. He wasn't entirely sure why he felt inclined to chase after this illusive smell, except that it reminded him of his wife. Pausing between steps, he considered that realization. His wife... yes, it truly did feel like her. Only different, not in a way that would ever have him mistake it for her.

And then he found himself stepping onto another street and gasped. The difference a few steps made was profound, almost impossibly so. He immediately looked up into the trees and spotted ribbons, hundreds, nay, thousands of them. His eyes widened as his jaw dropped in wonder. This was old magic, so old no one could quite take credit for its inception for it had always existed in some form or other and used by many without realizing they were doing so. The sort of magic created by living beings through their actions, not incantations.
But what was it doing _here_?

Stretching internal muscles he hadn't consciously used in a long time, he reached out to follow the magic’s threads. Moments later found him chuckling at his own foolishness. Of course there were no threads. Or rather, the threads led everywhere, connected to the thousands of souls whose actions had weaved it into being.

There was a spring in his step as he continued down this street, the concentrated magic invigorating him in ways nothing had been able to in quite some time and healing some of the heartbreak that had slowly been eating away at his soul.

Ironically, he had nearly forgotten the floral smell when he finally noticed the large planter of impossibly bright blooms. He smiled at them, admiring their beauty and wondering whose efforts had managed to produce them. Out of curiosity, he looked over his shoulder to the shop behind him.

And froze.

Isle of the Blessed.

No, surely not. That had to be a coincidence. And yet...

There was no real conscious thought involved. Before he realized he was moving, his hand was reaching for the handle and opening the door.

Stepping into the shop instantly dispelled any lingering doubts. The shop's name was no coincidence. An unmistakable signature surrounded him. A being who hadn't even been born when he'd last visited the realm of Midgard, and yet one he knew well as one of its greatest champions, his coming spoken of in awed whispers around campfires and grand banquet halls alike despite it being centuries too early.

“Emrys,” he said softly into quiet of the shop. It was still, but not empty. Far from empty. “Well met.”

“Well met, Odin, son of Burr,” came the soft reply.

An old man with long white hair and an equally long white beard stepped out of the shadows. Piercing blue eyes met his. There was no hostility to be found in their depths, but there was power. A power, Odin realized, this man – this _being_, for Emrys was so much more than just a man – most likely tended to hide. He was being shown a great amount of respect by forgoing the mask.

The former king of Asgard bowed his head to the other man, a sign of respect returned in kind.

“Am I to assume the protection charm outside is your doing?” he asked out of curiosity as much as a desire to acknowledge what he'd felt outside.

Emrys chuckled. “Not in the slightest. I merely planted the seed. It's truly amazing what people will nurture and grow when the time and conditions are right. You should see Central Park.”

“Perhaps I shall.”

“Now tell me, your majesty, what brings you to our humble shop?”

Odin went to answer and then paused as he realized he had no answer. He shook his head, huffing in amusement at himself. “In truth, I do not know. I had merely felt restless and this was where my feet took me.”
“Aah,” said Emrys, his eyes twinkling with amusement. “Yes, sometimes our feet have a way of doing that to us. Amazing how often they seem to know where we need to be before the rest of us catches up.”

He couldn't help the laughter that bubbled up from his lips. It wasn't something that had happened to him for quite some time. “I suppose you are also wondering what I am doing in your realm, not just in your shop.”

Emrys shrugged. “Well, yes, there was that part of it too.”

“I'm afraid that is quite the long story.”

“Well, then I suppose I should put the kettle on. Please, follow me.”

Curious, and feeling a sort of kinship he hadn't experienced in quite some time, Odin followed Emrys into an adjacent section of the shop, one which was masterfully concealed from first glance behind shelves and statues. And some sort of contraption suspended from the ceiling that looked like it was perhaps supposed to fly... awkwardly. Emrys hurried ahead, calling over his shoulder for Odin to have a seat.

Odin came up to the table in question and blinked down at it. At first glance there was nothing truly remarkable about the table, although its sturdy construction and perfectly smooth lines were worthy of admiration. There was even a small doilie and a delicate blue vase containing three flowers from the planter outside. He placed his hands on the tabletop and breathed in the smell and feel of ancient wood.

In his mind's eye he saw an image of men sitting around the table, planning, arguing, laughing. A great many important decisions had once been made at this table.

He opened his eyes to find Emrys had returned and was now looking at him curiously.

“This is no ordinary piece of furniture,” Odin declared. “Emrys, what is it?”

Emrys made a face. “Please call me Merlin,” he said. “Emrys is a title given to me before I was even born. Merlin is the name my mother gave me.”

Odin smiled and nodded, understanding the distinction only too well. “Very well, Merlin. 'Tis true we have no need of titles here.”

Merlin nodded in agreement, a smile tugging at his lips. “As for this table.” He paused, as though to gather his thoughts while he ran a hand along the smooth wooden surface. “Long before my time it belonged to ancient kings, their knights, their advisers and even their sorcerers. Their names have sadly been lost to time, but their impressions remain within the wood. Centuries later it was rediscovered by myself, my king and his knights during one of our darkest hours. We thought we'd lost everything, but around this table we sat and swore to fight to get it back. Now all who once sat around this table are legends, but back then we were merely scared yet determined young men who believed in our king.”

He took a deep breath, memories seemingly overwhelming him for a moment.

“Its round shape is deliberate. With no head, it means that all who sit at this table, whether king, knight or servant, share equal standing, all of them warriors no matter their rank or circumstance.”

“A noble effort,” Odin offered, seeing the wisdom of the move. “Though someone must still lead on the battlefield.”
“Oh of course.” Merlin snorted. “You’re also assuming all they did was plan battles and discuss epic quests at this table. Sometimes they just sat around and got outrageously drunk.”

Odin laughed. “That, too, is the way of warriors.”

“So it does seem to be.” Merlin grinned. “Speaking of which, have you ever had fairy wine?”

Odin's eyes flew upwards. “I have, however it has been centuries.”

A delighted smile spread across his face as Merlin left to get a bottle. Midgardian fairy wine was a delicacy he hadn't thought of in a very long time. He wondered if it really did taste as divine as he remembered or whether time had skewed his memory.

There was a whisper of movement to his right and his eyes snapped to the side. He couldn't see anything, but he could sense a presence. It felt old and powerful, dangerous... yet the danger felt muted. Warrior instincts that had never truly left him flared to life. Muted danger was never to be trusted, though it was true that he didn't feel any malicious intent, no desire to attack.

Then there was more movement and Odin took half a step back until he realized with surprise that he was staring into the golden eyes of a large white feline. He blinked. And then he looked closer, because he knew better than to disregard his instincts – and this was, after all, the home of Emrys.

Gold eyes stared at him steadily and, as he lost himself within their depths, he realized there was a fire hidden within. He also recognized the intelligence of something more than just an animal, an agelessness that didn't belong on a common house cat. Reaching within himself into his inner eye, the well of eternal wisdom that understood beyond the mortal realm, he looked deeper.

His eyes widened in amazement. He considered being surprised, but really, what sort of companion did he really expect the legendary Emrys to have?

“Ah, there you are,” he heard Emrys say and looked up. “Odin, this is Aithusa. Aithusa, Odin, King of Asgard.”

“Alas, former king,” Odin admitted with a sigh. “I have been dethroned.”

Merlin’s eyebrows rose in surprise.

“Then we look forward to hearing your story.”

Odin blinked at the unexpected feminine voice that spoke into his mind. No sooner had he thought to be surprised then the surprise was gone and replaced with understanding.

“My apologies, Aithusa,” he said to the cat – or rather the dragon who'd somehow taken on the appearance of a cat. “It has been quite some time since I last encountered a dragon of your caliber.”

“No apologies are necessary. There are very few people who recognize me for what I am let alone understand my level of intelligence. But if you are insistent upon an apology then perhaps you can do so by entertaining us with the story of how you came to be deposed and exiled to our realm.”

Chuckling, Odin finally sat down at the table as Merlin began to pour them both a glass of fairy wine. “If you request a story from me than you shall receive it, friend. I shall attempt to tell it in a way to make it worthy of both the company and the wine.”

Merlin snorted. “Let's just hope we don't finish the bottle before Nimueh returns or else no amount of stories will save us from her wrath.”
Nimueh opened the shop door practically humming, an extra bounce in her step that wasn't at all hindered by the arthritis in her hip. The trade show had been exhilarating: an afternoon talking to people who enjoyed cars and considered car engine designs to be something to expound upon and debate at length had been exactly what she'd needed. And despite all the newest models on display, most people were thrilled to meet her when they learned she restored old cars. In fact, these trade shows were often how she found buyers for some of her children.

One of the first lessons she learned when she began attending them years ago was that just because some engineer was using his fancy degree to design a newer, flashier engine or break system that was more something-or-other, didn't mean they didn't also appreciate older models.

Sometimes she attended as her younger self just to time how long it took all the men (and the occasional woman) to stop drooling at her legs and cleavage and start drooling at the pictures of her first generation Ford Torino or 1953 Chevrolet Corvette.

Upon entering the shop, it didn't take her long to realize they had a visitor. A very powerful visitor. A very loud one as well.

Carefully, she walked around the large shelving unit they'd put up to divide the shop into separate spaces and into the area where Merlin had decided to display the Round Table. The scene that greeted her would've made her laugh out loud had she been the sort of person prone to such reactions. As it was she she couldn't help the grin that spread across her face at the two white-bearded men that were leaning heavily on the sturdy wooden table while surrounded by half-eaten plates of biscuits, sandwiches and pastries, an open bottle of fairy wine, and the heavy silver tea service (which looked like it had been put together haphazardly). She couldn't tell if there was any tea left in the pot, but the lid was on crooked so someone had clearly used it – or perhaps merely sniffed at the tea to see how well it would accompany the wine.

Merlin was in the middle of telling some wild tale, which for some reason Nimueh couldn't fathom required sweeping arm motions and floating sugar cubes to be told. The other man looked on with rapt attention, his one eye visibly glazed over from drink. Shaking her head in amusement, Nimueh folded her arms over her chest and waited patiently for the story to end.

When it did, the stranger broke out into delighted laughter and raised his crystal class – so dainty and breakable it looked in his large hand it was comical – to toast the successful tale (or journey, or whatever the story had been about). She wasn't entirely convinced the two of them really knew what Merlin had been talking about. A furry white head looked up from behind the stranger's hand.

"Hello, Nimueh," Aithusa greeted her.

The two old men paused and turned to her with wide blinking eyes.

"Ah, Nimueh, you've returned!" Merlin called out. He picked up the bottle of fairy wine. "We saved you some wine! Come, sit down and meet the King – sorry, former king – of Asgard."

That certainly explained the power the strange man radiated. Nimueh approached the table as Odin of Asgard stood on shaky legs, realizing the missing eye really should have been enough for her to guess his identity.

"Greetings, dear lady!" the former king greeted her with enthusiasm that could've only been
facilitated by alcohol. “‘Tis always a pleasure to make the acquaintance of such a fair maiden.”

Nimueh snorted. “That fairy wine must've really gone to your head if you're calling me a fair maiden,” she said. “But the pleasure is mine, Odin of Asgard.”

“Ha, indeed, it is a forr-middible drink. One worthy of the great halls of Asgard!”

“It's not formin... that,” said Merlin with an annoyed face. “It's tricky is what it is. Just like faeries. When you have magic, it feeds your magic and makes you, uh, it makes you...”

“It uses your own magic to amplify the effects of the alcohol based on your emotional state,” Nimueh finished with a roll of her eyes.

Merlin nodded with a wide grin on his face. “Yes, exactly.”

Odin nodded with a knowing look on his face. “That sounds like my youngest son,” he said sadly. Then he leaned in towards Nimueh. “It is his doing that I find myself exiled from Asgard.”

“Oh?”

“Indeed.” Odin made an overly-wide motion with his arm to indicate the chairs. “Have a seat, my lady, and I shall regale you with the entire sordid tale.”

In her mind, she heard Aithusa groan. “He's already told it three times,” said the dragon.

Ignoring her, Nimueh took a seat, pouring herself the rest of the fairy wine as she settled in to listen to Odin’s story. She bit down on a smile as the cat-shaped dragon dragged herself to her feet and leapt off the table, presumably to find herself quieter spot to nap.

“Just don't ask him about the ravens,” were her last parting words.

Chapter End Notes

As I said in the last chapter, the next one is also already written, however it's going to be a bit longer in coming than this one was. I have some research as well as some re-working to do which I didn't for this one. That, plus I'm not off again until Friday and I should get at least some work done on my other story. If you think the updates on this story have been bad, that one's fared much, much worse.
Okay, so first I would just like to take a moment to drink some coffee, appreciate life in general -- although especially the fact that spring seems to be on the nearby horizon -- and also just go "HOLY SHIT YOU GUYS, THIS STORY HAS SURPASSED 2000 KUDOS!!!!" Wow, just wow. Anyway, thanks for all the support and for sticking around during my less lucrative phases.

Anyway, here's another character I've had requested a few times and this seemed as good a time as any to bring them in. Yes, it's another short chapter, but I'm gearing up for another monster so you've got that to look forward to. Uh, no real spoilers for anything, although it does reference something that's revealed in The Defenders (but not anything that, I think, actually spoils the plot itself). Anyway, enjoy!

Oh, and yes, I have seen Captain Marvel (loved it!), and, yes, I will somehow make that meeting between Goose and Aithusa happen. I have no idea how, but it will.

Nimueh buttoned her jacket up the rest of the way as a gust of wind made her shiver. Fall had descended on the city almost without warning, though the sun still shone brightly in the sky, as though attempting to soften the blow from the sudden chill in the wind. Still, there were much worse days to come and so she braced herself with the determination to enjoy what warmth remained and walked on. Her destination wasn't far, regardless.

The transition from Little Italy to Chinatown was both sudden and yet gradual. Chinatown had more outdoor vendors and the smells wafting about and the languages being spoken loudly on the streets were different – though as Nimueh spoke both Italian as well as Chinese (her Mandarin was slightly better than her Cantonese) that made little difference to her. The Italians were more likely to call out to her in greeting as she'd left the old woman behind today in order to avoid the joys of arthritis and allow her the opportunity to wear a pair of trendy heels and mini skirt she'd acquired in London during one of her trips.

If anyone noticed the resemblance, she was a visiting grandniece. She and Merlin used to do that a lot, play at being each other's grandchildren or grandniece and grandnephew – before they'd began associating quite so much with groups of people prone to doing detailed background checks. It was a shame, really, though worth being able to consider such an interesting group friends. These times and these people, too, will one day be gone and she and Merlin will mourn them and move on to lead different lives with different identities. Perhaps their next 'lives' will allow them to live as their younger selves.

Another gust of chilly wind prompted Nimueh to consider tropical countries she hadn't yet lived in.

Her internal musings ended as she turned down an almost invisible side street (it was mostly hidden from view thanks to large, overhanging banners, vegetables stalls, and a display of grilled ducks from the neighbouring shop). One of the food vendors looked up as she slipped between the stalls, curiosity in his eyes. A Caucasian woman heading in this direction was an oddity, she knew, so she simply nodded to him in greeting – an acknowledgment that she knew where she was going. He nodded politely back before returning to his customers.
The side street was really more of a back alley than a street, darkly shadowed even on such a sunny day and crowded on all sides by dumpsters and large plastic bins that created even darker corners and areas that seemed to hide all sorts of dirt, grime and rodents. Only a second look revealed that, despite its rather standard, back alley appearance, the space was actually quite clean. The illusion of the dark, dirty alley was just that: an illusion.

As befitted the descendants of the union between a human woman and a fox spirit.

Nimueh entered the shop, the metal chime above the door rang its usual discordant sound of metal coins and bells chinking and clanging against each other. She closed her eyes and breathed in the calming smell of dried tea leaves, spices and incense. The door softly clicked shut behind her.

Opening her eyes, she looked over towards the counter just as Huang, the woman who ran the shop now that her father-in-law had fallen ill, looked up from where she was already serving another customer. Her eyes immediately widened in recognition. Though she did not possess the rest of the family's sensitivity to magic and the supernatural, Nimueh and Merlin were regular customers, and friends with her in-laws.

For a moment, the woman looked panicked, her eyes quickly flicking between Nimueh and the small, frail-looking old woman she was already serving. Nimueh smiled and waved her off, indicating that she would wait. She was, after all, in no hurry to return and had no need of any sort of special treatment.

Barely moments later, however, the thick curtain that lead to the back room was swept aside and the oldest son, Liu walked in. Huang sent him a grateful smile before apologizing to the elderly lady in front of her. Liu acknowledged his mother politely before he turned to Nimueh, his smile perfunctorily polite but his eyes sparkling with mischief and excitement.

Liu, of all his family, truly had the blood of his fox spirit ancestor flowing through his veins. He'd probably felt Nimueh approaching from the end of the block. She wondered if he was even supposed to be helping in the shop this afternoon or if he'd come down from their upstairs apartment just to help her.

“Hello, Nimueh,” he said, using her first name because he knew full well that for her and Merlin, their surnames were mostly meaningless. “How are you today?”

“Hello, Liu,” she greeted with a smile. “I'm well, thank you. Not entirely happy with this change in the weather, of course but there’s nothing to be done with that.” She paused for a moment and then switched to Chinese. “How are you doing? You must be starting school soon.”

He nodded, smoothly switching languages. “Yes, I start in two days. My last year of high school.”

“How, and then university, yes?”

Liu made a face and nodded. “My parents want me to go to university.” His eyes darted towards his mother before he leaned slightly over the counter to whisper conspiratorially to Nimueh. “I want to go traveling.”

Nimueh grinned. “No reason you can't do both, young man.”

The young man in question didn't even blink at the moniker, but his face broke into a decidedly vulpine grin. “Ah, this is true. I have many summers to travel.”

“Exactly.”
Liu paused for a moment with an uncharacteristic uncertainty, before leaning in even closer.

“Is it true?” he asked quietly, the uncertainty quickly burned away by excitement. “Did you really have Bucky Barnes, Captain America's best friend who was turned into an assassin working for you? The man they thought had bombed the UN?”

Nimueh blinked. “I wasn't aware the Winter Soldier was common knowledge,” she answered, her voice just as quiet.

Liu shrugged. “Some of it was on the internet,” he replied. “And Mister Shu said the CIA came to his restaurant asking questions.”

“They came by the shop as well, bloody idiots. Tried to call us out on not having employment records for him. Of course we're all fairly certain he was living on the streets, and none of us have seen Barnes since the day of the bombing so they didn't get much.”

“Yes, Mister Shu was very upset he'd lost one of his best workers.” With a small nod, Liu then straightened and continued in a louder voice. “So, what can I get you today?”

“Do you have any jasmine?”

As Liu hurried off to the back to gather some of the newer stock they had just received that morning, Nimueh took advantage of his absence in order to subtly observe the elderly woman Huang was serving. She didn't look familiar in the slightest, however Nimueh could feel the steady hum of power in her presence. For all her fragile appearance, there was clearly nothing actually fragile about this woman. But the power felt different than the usual Asian-flavoured magic she had encountered in the past.

It felt... out of sync.

Then Liu returned and she turned her attention to the tea leaves and dried flowers she'd originally come for.

It was some fifteen minutes later that both Liu and Huang had disappeared into the back to retrieve items for their customers, leaving Nimueh and the elderly woman alone in the shop. The elderly woman appeared to pause thoughtfully for a moment before she turned to Nimueh, a pleasantly calm smile on her face.

“It is not often one finds someone so young so interested in the more traditional aspects of tea brewing,” she said neutrally, as though she were merely making small talk.

Nimueh snorted. This approach would've worked with Merlin. She was not Merlin.

“Don't play coy,” she said, just barely managing to keep the snap out of her voice as she turned to face the other woman. “You know I'm not as young as I look just as I know that you're much older than you look.”

The smile barely faltered, however Nimueh felt a slight flare of darker, heavier magic. It smelt of sulfur and burned of flames... dragon magic. Oh, bloody hell, she cursed to herself. The Hand.

Suddenly, she felt incredibly grateful Merlin wasn't with her. He was long past the point of tolerance when it came to others abusing the powers of his kin. Unlike Dragon Lords, the Hand didn't tie themselves to dragons, didn't become dragonkin but rather stole their powers, defiled their graves and leechied it from their bones without any deference, any respect given to the magical creatures themselves. The only reason any sort of peace existed between them was because Merlin generally
stayed clear of the Hand and the Hand... well, if they knew of Merlin's existence, then they wisely stayed out of his reach.

Nimueh felt no personal anger towards the Hand, but hated the unnatural feeling of power twisted to artificially extend life. She and Merlin were long-lived, yes, but they were being sustained by the powers of Albion and the Old Religion, her chosen children. Their lives were tied to the lands and so, while Albion lived, so did they. And one day, when Albion's darkest hour approached, Nimueh and Merlin would pay back the debt they owed.

This selfish theft filled her with nothing but contempt.

She carefully kept her disgust from leeching into her expression, but didn't bother smiling at the old Chinese lady. She had no interest at pretending to be friends.

The other woman must've picked up on at least some of Nimueh's coldness towards her because her eyes opened from the slits they'd been previously, revealing piercing cold, dark eyes. To anyone else the frail old woman would've likely felt quite intimidating, but Nimueh wasn't that easy to impress.

“Indeed,” said the old woman softly. “New York is an easy place for people like us to disappear into the masses.”

Nimueh couldn't help the amused grin. “Oh, hiding in plain sight can be done just about anywhere if one is clever about it.”

She felt Liu's presence behind her and turned away from the Hand elder. The young man looked nervous, less sure of himself than she'd ever seen before. His mother looked just as nervous, having also picked up on the tension between her customers though likely not in the same way as her son.

Nimueh considered Liu as he measured out green tea leaves for her.

“Liu, who is that woman?” she finally asked.

The young man fumbled with the scales, nearly tipping over their contents as he did so. Nimueh snickered at the less-than-smooth motion. Well, that explained whether or not he was powerful and sensitive enough for mind-speak. Now, the question remained whether he would figure out how to answer.

After a pause and a surprised look in her direction, Liu took a deep breath and continued to measure and pack her order.

“Nimueh?” she finally heard a short while later. His voice was smooth, but fiery with a combination of nervousness, excitement and the natural extension of his familial heritage.

“Yes.”

Another pause, and then she received a jumble of words, emotions and images which was obviously his answer to her question. It was unrefined, but not at all bad for a first attempt.

“Madame Gao,” she heard and then she felt fear, distrust and saw images of violence, bodyguards with guns and young men and women walking with white-tipped canes, along with the impression of silence. Mute and blind... ah, drug mules.

And then she got the image of a red devil and had to bite down on the laughter that threatened to bubble out of her. Oh, so the Devil of Hell's Kitchen had been quite busy before his retirement.
Nimueh sent Liu back a feeling of grateful acknowledgment. He met her eyes again, the uncertainty gone from his expression, replaced once more with excitement — coloured with a slight bit of awe. She had the feeling he’d be paying her and Merlin a visit at the shop at some point in the future.

She thanked him out loud as she paid him. “I hope the beginning of your last year at school goes well,” she said. “If you need anything or have questions about universities, come by and see us. Merlin and I have quite a few contacts from all over and even some scholarship committees, depending on what you were thinking of doing.” She paused, snorting. “If you’re looking to travel, I hear the newly established University of Latveria might be looking to attract some international students in the near future to boost their standing.”

At that even Huang looked over and smiled at her, looking delighted. “Thank you, Nimueh,” she said, bowing. “Liu is very smart, but I’m sure he will appreciate any help you can give him.”

Liu bowed as well, though Nimueh could see him barely restraining an eyeroll. “Yes, thank you, Nimueh,” he said. “I will probably have many questions and I will appreciate your guidance very much.” He cocked his head thoughtfully. “If the University of Latveria is new, will it even count as a recognized international degree?”

Nimueh shrugged. “Give it a few years and the University of Latveria will be world-renowned.”

She collected her bag of purchases off the counter and then turned to leave. Half-way to the door, however, she paused and then looked over her shoulder.

“Madam Gao,” she said, her voice low enough that the words were clearly only meant for the old woman she was addressing, though she knew that Liu, especially, would still hear her. “My partner and I have no interest in your ridiculous war, however, we love this city. Do what you will in the shadows but if your organization’s actions endanger this city and the people in it then my partner may just decide to finally move against you. It would be in the interest of your continued... survival... for you to not allow that to happen.”

She exited the shop without waiting for a reply, though she could feel the shock in the air behind her.

“Thank you,” she heard in her mind as she exited the side street and re-entered the usual bustle of Chinatown.

She smiled. “You're welcome,” she replied, infusing the words with pride. She couldn't wait to tell Merlin about this development. “Let us know if she begins to harass your family.”

A bright column of light shot down from the sky somewhere in the distance just as Nimueh was crossing the arbitrary border of Chinatown back into Little Italy. She paused just long enough to roll her eyes.

“Bloody Asgardians,” she muttered under her breath. “Always so dramatic.”

She was nearly at the shop when the street suddenly shook with the impact of distant explosions. Looking up she saw smoke wafting up above Stark Tower. And then a small speck flew up from the landing pad — Iron Man.

“What the bloody hell now?!” she grumbled under her breath, irritated, even as more impacts shook the streets.
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