Heart of a Hero

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Heart of a Hero

by Setcheti

Summary

It's finally time to go to New York for the wedding, and Josie isn't the only one who's got some surprises coming. Not to mention that something else seems to be going on in the world of 'law enforcement'...and it's probably not a good thing.

Notes

Chapter 1 updated 14 Sep 16 - had a Marvel character confused with a DC character, sorry about that!
Chapter 1

Four weeks passed. Four weeks with no visits to the café’s pastry case or any restaurant that didn’t serve salad for Josie, Max and Blake, because formal wedding-guest finery is not designed to be forgiving of stress eating. Elise was still eating whatever she wanted, of course, but Josie had figured out early on in her career at FindLove that Elise was not a standard a normal human should use to measure themselves against.

Going to the airport to catch their flight was a relief, and Josie spent most of the flight alternating between tapping away at code on her tablet, reading the Skymall catalog because it was full of weird things, and watching Max watch a movie across the aisle while Blake napped against his shoulder. She normally wasn’t quite so intent on keeping herself busy when she flew…but this flight was different, because this flight was going to end in New York, home of Josie’s boyfriend Steve and the place where Steve had promised he was going to tell her everything. Like his last name and what he really did for a living. And exactly why he was famous, which thanks to Max Josie now knew went far beyond him having just gotten a medal or something from the Army.

By the time the plane touched down at JFK, Josie had created a new subroutine that would display personally interesting items from the Skymall catalog by using the matching algorithm, tagging it as a potential paid add-on for the site. Elise, who had slept through most of the flight just like Blake, had been interested but hadn’t wanted to talk about it right then. “Happy as I am that you channeled your nervous energy into coming up with a way to make more money for the company,” she said, covering a yawn with one perfectly manicured hand, “I really don’t want to think about work right now. We’re likely to end up doing some tonight and tomorrow as it is.”

Josie wasn’t sure what she meant by that, unless it was because some of their investors would be there and might want to talk about the business, but she couldn’t really ask about that on a plane full of people so she just concentrated on getting off the plane and hoping all of their luggage had made it. Luck was with them on that score, and while they were sorting out suitcases a man in a chauffeur’s uniform approached Elise and after some I.D. verification on all sides led them to an extremely nice town car, helped Max and Blake load the luggage into the trunk, and then started navigating the perpetually congested New York traffic with what Josie could only assume was the ease of long practice and/or a complete disregard for safety, his own life, and several laws of physics.

It took them nearly an hour to get downtown, and when they finally reached their destination Josie was more than surprised that it turned out to be a very tall building with a large red ‘A’ on the top. “Wait, this is Avengers Tower! Why are we at Avengers Tower?”

“Because it’s where we’re staying,” Elise told her. “Security is an issue with a shindig like this, obviously, so all of the out-of-town guests are being put up in the safest place possible. Not that you’re in any danger,” she assured Josie airily. “You and Max and Seth are probably the three safest civilians on the planet this weekend, the whole city would be rubble before anything could touch you.” She arched a perfect eyebrow. “Allison and I are…well, we’re friendly rivals, let’s put it that way; Blake’s mother trained us both.”

Josie’s eyes widened. “You’re one of them! ‘Law enforcement’!”

Blake cracked up, falling against Max’s shoulder. Max was grinning. “The whole family is,” he explained. “Some of them are actually related, the rest of them just sort of adopted each other. But if the current level of interrelationships keeps steady, we’ll all be legitimately related eventually.” He raised an eyebrow at Elise. “Are you sure there isn’t a supervillain out there we could marry my sister off to? I’m telling you, she’d have him de-balled within six months at the outside, he’d never
bother any of you again.”

“That would be cruel and unusual,” Elise told him. “I’m still considering it, I’ll let you know when I make a decision one way or the other.”

“Fair enough.” The town car pulled into a parking area at the base of the tower, the security bar raising automatically to let it in. It stopped by a set of glass doors, and the driver got out to hold open one door for Josie and Elise; Max and Blake got out the other side and went for the luggage, but the driver waved them off. “We’ll take those up for you,” he assured them. “Just go straight through into the lobby, the receptionist will tell you which elevator to get on – Jarvis will have already told Ms. Potts you’re here, so they’re expecting you.”

He waited until they’d gone through the doors, then got back in the car and drove farther into the parking garage. The lobby they stepped into was beautiful, all glass and chrome and gleaming burgundy-veined marble floors, and the receptionist greeted Elise by name. “Ms. Gomez, so glad you could make it. How was your flight?”

“There were no crying babies on board, so it was fine,” Elise told her. “Ms. Potts is expecting us?”

“Well, Mr. Stark is,” the receptionist responded. “Ms. Potts had a meeting, she’ll be back later. If you’d care to step into the elevator on the left, it will take you to the penthouse level.”

Elise looked somewhat surprised by that, but she nodded and herded the rest of them to the indicated elevator, which had no floor indicator above it, just a simple and rather old-fashioned looking up/down arrow. The doors opened when they approached them, and closed as soon as they were all in; the interior of the elevator was paneled with beautiful burled wood and had no buttons of any kind on the walls. And it went up for what seemed like a long, long time before it finally stopped, doors opening into a strangely homey-looking foyer with coat hooks on the wall, some of which were occupied – one of them by a jacket Josie was intimately familiar with. “Steve is here? I thought he lived in the city.”

A British-accented voice came out of nowhere, making her jump – making all of them jump, in fact. “Captain Rogers lives here, Ms. Noonan, although he is out at the moment,” it said. “I do apologize for startling you. I am Jarvis. Mr. Stark is currently distracted by science and did not come when I called him, but Agent Barton is on his way.”

Sure enough, a few seconds later Consultant Ken, otherwise known as Clint and apparently also Agent Barton, came hurrying around a corner. He was wearing sweatpants and a sleeveless t-shirt that looked like it had seen better days, and the straps crossing his chest said he had something on his back. He had on fingerless black leather gloves, and weirdly he was also barefoot. “Sorry guys, Tony has trouble with the concept of ‘time’ some days,” he said, grinning. “Come on in, have a seat. Pepper should be back soon, she’s probably on the phone yellin’ at Tony right now.” He accepted the hug Max offered him with a laugh. “I’m gonna get you all sweaty, I was in the gym.”

“We were just on a plane, Clint,” Blake told him, getting a hug of his own. “We’re probably nastier, believe me.”

“It’s all good, then.” Clint wiped his hand on his pants and offered it to Elise, and then to Josie. “I am especially glad to see you,” he told her. “Steve’s been drivin’ everyone nuts all month, hopefully he’ll calm down now.” He cocked an eyebrow. “He did tell you, right? I mean, you know who he is.”

Steve hadn’t yet, of course, but Josie wasn’t Science for nothing: ‘law enforcement’ plus dog tags plus really famous and living in Avengers Tower could only add up to one answer. “He’s Captain
America, right?”

And Clint grinned. “Aw, he didn’t tell you – I’m gonna give him shit about this forever.”

“I will totally help you with that,” a new voice said. The man it belonged to was about Blake’s height with dark wavy hair and a neat goatee, and even though he was wearing a stained t-shirt and jeans instead of a suit he was instantly recognizable as Tony Stark. And he apparently knew that, because he didn’t bother to introduce himself. “Welcome to the Avengers’ living room, everyone. I was in the basement, I didn’t hear you come in. And I would be going back to the basement, but I’ve been informed that if I don’t stay out here like a good normal host I’m sleeping alone tonight. So would anyone like a drink? Because I’m having one.”

“Ms. Potts left a pitcher of lemonade in the refrigerator, sir,” Jarvis said, in what was obviously a reminding tone. “And there are cookies hidden in the locked cupboard.”

“Thank you, Jarvis. Lemonade it is.” Tony rolled his eyes. “And the cookies were hidden and locked up because there probably wouldn’t be any left if they hadn’t been, because superheroes and commandos are all locusts in human form.”

“I only ate one,” came from Clint, who was shrugging out of the harness he was wearing; he dropped it and the thing it was connected to – a quiver? – next to the coat rack. “Bruce ate three.”

“That’s because Brucie is Pepper’s favorite,” Tony snarked back. “And he wallows in it.” He started herding his guests toward the couches. “Go get what’s left, Clint – I had two, myself, but I’m pretty sure Steve was a good boy and didn’t touch them. He’s Pepper’s other favorite,” he informed Josie airily, “hence all of the ‘errands’ she kept sending him on to L.A. after the wedding. He figured it out after about the third trip and made her a painting to hang in her office. Which I can’t really complain about, since it has me in it, but still.”

Clint came back with the tray of cookies, which did look a little more lopsided than six missing cookies would account for. There were some pieces of paper under a cookie on the lesser side, and Clint was snickering. He fished the papers out from under the cookie and handed them to Tony.

“You’d better find out what she’s bribing him with and fast, man, or none of us will be safe.”

Tony snatched the papers, looked at them, and groaned. “God dammit.” He held them out to Josie. “Here, see what it is you’re dating – a cookie spy for my girlfriend.”

Josie took them and looked. They were pencil sketches, instantly recognizable as Steve’s by anyone who’d ever seen him draw, apparently of the Tower’s kitchen. One showed Clint getting a cookie, one showed Tony looking around furtively while reaching into the cupboard, a cookie already in his mouth, and one showed a rumpled-looking man she’d never seen before – Bruce, most likely – accessing the cupboard while the woman she knew was Natasha kept watch. Elise, who had been looking over her shoulder, burst out laughing and handed the pictures to Max and Blake, who both laughed over them too, and then Clint took them back and laid them on the coffee table next to the plate of cookies. “I’ll put them on the refrigerator later, Bruce will probably want them – I think he’s got a scrapbook. Steve’s a compulsive sketch-artist, he leaves them everywhere,” he explained. “We’re not sure he’s ever realized that a hundred years from now every single one of them’s gonna be priceless.”

“Of course he hasn’t.” The rumpled-looking man from the sketch had come wandering out. He took a chair, a cookie, and the sketches. “Hmm, he’s using the camera in the kitchen now instead of hiding in the pantry, I guess the booby trap worked as a deterrent if nothing else. Oh, I’m Bruce,” he introduced himself with a little wave. “Natasha’s downtown, she won’t be back until tonight. And yes, I am keeping a scrapbook, because the ones that aren’t beautiful are hilarious.” He held up the
one of Tony with the cookie in his mouth and grinned. “Like this one.”

That made Tony huff. “Just don’t show that to Pepper.”

“You know he already sent it to her phone, Tony.”

“Yeah, but if she has the original she’ll frame it.”

“Nope, I’m calling dibs on this one.” Bruce carefully rolled up the sketches and tucked them into his shirt pocket. “So where exactly is Steve, anyway?”

“Out earnin’ his consultant’s pay for the week,” Clint answered, but shook his head when Tony stiffened. “No, nothin’ serious – and it was Clay who called it in, not Fury. They had another sighting of Lightning Boy, Steve went down there to help search – nobody knows Brooklyn like he does.”

“Lightning Boy?” Elise inquired. “New supervillian, or just a regular bad guy?”

“Wish we knew,” Clint told her. ‘People keep sayin’ they’ve seen him all over the city, but by the time anyone gets there he’s long gone. Young guy, light brown hair, average height, moves so fast he’s just a blue-white blur, and seems to be generating some kind of force from his hands. He likes to knock people over with it, or shock them, but they all swear he didn’t actually touch them. Hasn’t killed anyone yet, but we think it’s just a matter of time – he’s been escalating.”

Blake was interested now. “No pattern?”

Clint grinned. “Not that we could see, but you’re welcome to have a look. A fresh set of eyes can’t hurt.” He shook his head again, though, when Blake and Elise both started to stand up. “No need to get up. Jarvis?”

“Certainly, Agent Barton.” The massive flat-screen television across from the couches lit up with a map of the city, and a scattering of blue dots appeared. And one red dot which was steadily moving away from Brooklyn. “I was assisting Captain Rogers to correlate his search with previous sightings. The red dot is his current location.”

Josie saw Tony smile. “Is he speeding back this way because you reminded him of what time it was, Jarvis?”

“I did tell him to be careful, sir.”

“Of course you did.” He raised an eyebrow at Blake. “Well, any ideas that my supercomputer A.I. hasn’t already had?”

Blake ignored the snark, frowning at the screen. “Jarvis, can you color the dots with a gradient, oldest to most recent?” Jarvis apparently could, because some of the dots changed color. “Thanks. That…that’s what I thought, it’s a deliberately randomized pattern, not an actually random pattern. He’s…he’s messing with you, trying to keep you running from one end…from one end of the city to the other without looking like he’s doing it. He’s divided the city into a…a pie with ten slices, and he’s counting around it by fours.”

There was a moment of shocked silence, and then Jarvis spoke up again. “I believe Mr. Bryce-Tegan may be correct.” A circle appeared on the map, divided into wedges. “If so, the next sighting should be in the vicinity of Wall Street.”

“Do you know what time?”
Jarvis put the times of the other sightings up next to the dots without being asked. Blake squinted. “Around noon. He’s…he’s getting the time by taking the number of the slice he’s on and adding nine to it. He’s using military time, twenty-four hours instead of twelve.”

The look on Tony’s face was priceless. Clint and Bruce were laughing – at Tony, quite obviously – Elise was smiling a very self-satisfied smile, and Max looked like he was about to burst with pride. Clint recovered himself enough to lean over and clap Blake on the shoulder. “Man, that was awesome, thanks – I had a feelin’ you’d be able to see the pattern we were missing.”

Josie’s intuition clicked on, and she blinked. He was telling the truth, but he’d brought it up in the first place because he’d been trying to make a point to Tony about something. Not to mention, he liked Blake and he’d wanted Tony and Bruce to see what Blake could do with data and be impressed by it. This was probably also what Elise had meant when she’d mentioned possibly having to ‘work’ earlier - she’d been talking about ‘law-enforcement’ work, not the business of online matchmaking, and Clint had been making sure the others wouldn’t discount Blake if something happened. Josie smiled, liking that…and Clint saw the smile and winked at her before moseying back to the kitchen to get the lemonade and glasses. Oh, he was good, he was really good. No wonder he was an Avenger.

“I have informed Captain Rogers and Colonel Clay of the next scheduled sighting,” Jarvis intoned. “The colonel says he will be back later to go over the existing data again in hopes of finding more clues.” A pause. “Ms. Potts has just informed him that he will be back later for dinner and he is not allowed to call a meeting or conscript anyone to help him until after everyone’s dessert has settled.” Another pause. “Ms. Potts told him, quote, to ‘suck it up and stop whining’ when he protested.”

“Of course she did.” Tony stood up to take the lemonade pitcher from Clint and started filling glasses. “She tells me that all the time.”

Josie took her glass gratefully, hiding what she was sure was a really sappy smile behind it. Because her intuition was still on, and Tony loved Pepper a lot.

About fifteen minutes of small-talk later, the elevator door opened and Steve came blowing in. He dropped what looked like a large portfolio case next to Clint’s quiver, looked around…and then broke into that very special smile when he saw Josie. She heard Tony gasp and Bruce chuckle, and then Steve walked across the room, leaned over and kissed her cheek. “Sorry, I was helping Clay and I lost track of time,” he told her. “Good flight?”

“Long flight, but not bad,” she responded. “Did you find anything?”

“I wish we had.” He circled around and found a spot on the couch for himself – next to Tony, who handed him his glass of lemonade and didn’t even blink when Steve drank it down practically in one swallow. “Thanks. No sign of Lightning Boy anywhere, and no witnesses who can say where he goes after an attack.”

Max frowned. “How can there not be any witnesses?”

“Good question,” Steve shook his head. “People remember seeing him, but they all swear he just stopped being there after that - they didn’t see him go, no blur, he just stopped being there. The police think they were all just scared, hiding, and don’t want to admit that they weren’t looking.”

“That…doesn’t make sense.” Blake put down his glass. “People are…people are nosy, someone would have looked no matter how…no matter how scared they were.”
“My thoughts exactly,” Steve agreed.

Josie was frowning now. “Could he be doing the same kind of thing Stephen does?” Everyone stared at her. “I mean, could he be making people forget they saw him leave?”

Elise’s mouth dropped open; so did just about everyone else’s. Max, though, was nodding. “Crap, yes, that would explain it, wouldn’t it? Blake said he was messing with you guys. If he has more than just running really fast and knocking people down powers he could just stroll off down the sidewalk, maybe even stop for coffee and kick back to watch everyone show up to look for him.”

Tony blinked, then blinked again and sat back against the couch cushions. “Am I just getting too old for this or what?”

Clint was laughing. “Fresh eyes, I told you,” he said, and clapped Max on the shoulder. “You guys wanna come down and watch me show off for a while? It’s a few hours ‘til dinner yet, and if you’re out here when Clay comes in we’re all gonna be workin’, Pepper or no Pepper.”

“We’ll come with you,” Blake told him, standing up and pulling Max up with him. “Is Amanda going out with Aunt Allison tonight?”

“Her and Rhonda both, and Sue and Pepper,” Clint confirmed. “Come on Steve, you and Josie come too. You can shower in the gym while she watches me in awe.”

Clint wanted to get them all out of the living room – for some reason he really didn’t want them to be there when whoever Clay was showed up. Steve apparently agreed with him, because they exchanged a little nod and then he immediately got up and stretched. “That’s a good idea, I need a shower. Josie?”

“I’d love to come watch Clint show off,” she agreed, getting up herself. Steve met her on the other side of the couch, taking her hand in his. “Missed me?”

“All month,” was his reply, and then he kissed her again and they trotted off after Clint.

As soon as they were well out of earshot Tony raised an eyebrow at Elise, who shook her head. “I didn’t know until Max told me, because she asked him about it. She has no idea who Stephen actually is, but she knew he’d tried to wipe out her memory of a certain conversation the three of them got into on a sidewalk on the…other side of L.A.”

“Bad or just inconvenient?” Bruce wanted to know. He was looking a lot less laid-back and a lot more intense now. “And how did she know?”

“Josie has an…ability to hear the truth of a person when they talk; it became active just over two years ago for some reason but it isn’t ‘on’ all the time that I know of,” Elise explained. “The way the story was related to me, Stephen was teasing Steve about being clueless, Josie’s ability turned on and she corrected him, and Stephen reacted with a great deal of surprise.” She smirked. “She’s actually more clueless than her boyfriend can be, she thinks he tried to erase the conversation because someone might have overheard and thought we were doing something unethical at work.”

“Oh Jesus Christ.” Tony wiped a hand down his face. “Yeah, Stephen probably about had kittens. I don’t suppose you’ve heard from him since then, have you? Or she has?”

Elise tensed up. “Don’t tell me he’s missing.”
“We don’t know if he’s missing or not,” Bruce told her. “But we do know nobody’s seen him for at least a couple of weeks, and if we’ve got another magic user running around the city…”

“It’s a leap, but not a very long one,” Elise agreed. “How do you usually contact him? I know Steve uses his phone.”

“Yeah, that’s how we all do it,” Tony said. “Allison and Pepper both say he hasn’t been answering texts or calls, though, and Jarvis can’t trace his line because Stephen has a free Netherworld calling plan that I’m pretty sure is called ‘I have magic, therefore my phone works’, so I can’t tell if the phone is actually in use or not.” He sighed. “It’s possible he’s just off someplace where time doesn’t run the same… but for some reason I don’t think that’s it.”

“I wouldn’t think so either. Clay?”

“Colonel Clay says he also does not think it is a coincidence, Ms. Gomez,” Jarvis intoned. “And Captain Rogers would like to know if what Dr. Strange made him forget may have some bearing on the situation.”

“No, I doubt it,” Elise said. “If it did, someone would have already come after Josie and I doubt we’d have been able to stop them. We’ve had Amanda’s security-camera program keeping an eye on her to and from work, just in case, but nothing untoward has happened.”

“Thank god for that small favor, anyway.” Tony was shaking his head. “You had plans…”

“Of course we do – she’s working for me and dating Captain America, not to mention she attended Blake’s wedding at your mansion in Malibu.” This time Elise sighed. “The coincidences are piling up, though, and I don’t like it. Something is going on.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Bruce assured her. “Just about everyone will be here tonight, we’ll have a meeting. And on the plus side, it’s good to know Stephen’s Jedi mind-trick doesn’t work on her – he’ll be glad to hear that, once we find him.” Elise looked a question, and the scientist shrugged. “He worries about it – becoming compromised, that is. I do too, but Stephen could actually do a lot more damage than I could. Knowing that someone is even a little bit immune to his powers will be a relief to him.”

“Yeah, it will.” Tony snorted, pouring himself more lemonade. “So now we just have to find him and tell him about it.”
Chapter 2

Steve whisked Josie off once he’d taken his shower, leaving Clint to entertain Max and Blake while he gave her a tour of the ‘family’ part of the tower and told her some things about himself. Like how he’d become a supersoldier and how he’d woken up some 70 years later after being frozen in the Arctic ice. “I’m not immortal,” he assured her. “I heal faster than normal, I’m in top physical condition and I’m sort of genetically predisposed to stay that way, but that’s all. After the thing with the ice some people thought maybe I’d just keep going the way I am now forever, but Bruce got with Jarvis and between the two of them they were able to confirm that I really am getting older just like everyone else does. I was kind of hesitant to get involved with anyone before I knew that, because it wouldn’t have been fair to either of us if they got older and I didn’t. And I also found out that the government had used some of my…biological material to make children, after I died, and that just made things worse.”

Especially since he’d found out pretty much by accident. “So they made you children and they didn’t tell you? That’s horrible!”

“I was pretty upset when I found out,” he admitted, relief evident. “Completely by accident, too. The person in charge now wasn’t going to tell me at all, ever.” A man whose name he couldn’t say without getting mad, Josie heard, a man he’d literally wanted to tear limb from limb. “I love my family, though, they’re all great, and I wouldn’t have them if it hadn’t happened so…well, I made myself get okay with it.” He steered her into a room that had a smaller set of floor-to-ceiling windows on one wall and a large flatscreen on another, and they settled onto a comfortable couch. “Jarvis, could you pull up pictures of my grandkids so Josie can see them, please?”

Because his children were all dead, and their children were now all the family he had. “Of course, Captain.”

The screen lit up with a picture of a pretty blonde woman and a slightly younger man who looked entirely too much like Steve. “That’s Sue and Johnny,” Steve told her. “They were the first ones I found out about, because Bruce was consulting with Sue’s husband Reed about something and then Johnny came in and he noticed the family resemblance right away. And then that led us to Jake and Jenny…” Another picture popped up next to the first, featuring the bouncy young computer guy from Stephen’s threesome, a slender dishwater-blonde woman and a little girl who had the family hair and eyes. “…and my great granddaughter, Jessie,” Steve said proudly. “She plays soccer, I’ve gone to some of her games. And she loves science, so we got her into a really good school here that focuses on science and math.”

Which he was happy about, because she was smart and he wanted her to have every advantage, but for some reason it still made him unhappy and somewhat angry. Josie looked him in the eye; this was something she obviously needed to know, because it involved a little kid and it had been bad and he was afraid it could happen again. “What happened? What did they do to her?”

His jaw tightened, and it almost looked like his eyes had gotten a little bit bluer. “Nothing, thankfully - because Reed and Sue stopped it.” Another picture appeared without any prompting, replacing the others, this one a wedding photo featuring a tall, slender, distinguished-looking man standing with Steve’s granddaughter Sue. “That’s Reed, Sue’s husband - you’ll get to meet them both tomorrow at the wedding. Jake and his team had been set up by a whole bunch of different government agencies working together for…well, basically for evil, there’s really no other way I can describe it. When we found out about it, I went with Tony’s best friend Rhodey to get them back home and Reed and Sue went to let Jenny know what was going on and make sure she and her daughter were okay. Reed is a
scientist, so he was just overjoyed when he found out how much Jessie loves science…and then she showed him the lab kit her mother had gotten for her.” His anger was rising just from talking about it, but Josie wasn’t worried - it wasn’t her he wanted to kill. “Someone had switched the kit out at the hobby store - we found out later the store clerk had been paid off to make the switch, but he thought it was a special present from a relative, not…what it was. There were chemicals in there that Reed said even university research labs keep under lock and key, and they’d been mislabeled so that if she’d tried to do the more advanced experiments in the book that came with it…well, apparently it would have been written off as a gas line explosion, their house and three or four others on the block would have gone up. Reed contained the chemicals and they brought Jenny and Jessie back here to be safe.” His smile was still a little hard-edged. “Reed is spoiling Jessie absolutely rotten with lab privileges - he says he has to make sure the next generation of scientists can pick up where he leaves off.”

Josie batted her eyelashes at him. “Any chance Jake and I can convert her to computer science?”

Steve laughed. “He’s trying, but we’ve all forbidden him from teaching her how to hack.” He batted his eyelashes back. “He taught me, though.”

“I’ll remember that the next time I need to make life hell for someone at work.” She settled in under his arm. “Reed looks really familiar for some reason. What kind of science does he do?”

“All of it, depending on the day and what kind of mood he’s in,” Steve told her. “But he probably looks familiar because you’ve seen him in the news somewhere. Mr. Fantastic?”

Jarvis obligingly put up a press photo of the Fantastic Four, and Josie’s eyebrows went up. “Your granddaughter and your grandson are both superheroes? Coincidence or something in the genetics?”

He shrugged. “No idea. The others tease me a lot about the way I ride my bike being genetic, though - Johnny’s pretty big in the motocross circuit, and his riding style is a lot like mine.”

Josie considered the photo again, frowning. ‘Combat motorcycle riding’ wasn’t hereditary, of course, but the traits that made someone a thrill-seeker could have been. “So they didn’t just get your genes for physical characteristics, that’s interesting. Jake and his sister?”

“Will not ride with me or Johnny,” Steve admitted. “But Jessie’s the kind of kid who goes on every ride in the carnival twice, the higher and faster the better. So it skipped a generation, but not the same one for each set of kids. According to Bruce, though, that might not be genetics, it could just be the way the serum works. Dr. Erskine found out the hard way that the serum didn’t really create supersoldiers, even though they kept calling it supersoldier serum: What it actually did was make a person more of what they already were on the inside.” He was blushing now, and it was adorable. “It made me…well, like this. But the first guy he tried it on turned into a monster.”

For real, apparently, not just on the inside. “I can display the pictures you have drawn of Red Skull, Captain,” Jarvis offered. “Would you like me to do that?”

Josie thought it was telling that Jarvis had asked before just putting these pictures up. “Yes,” Steve agreed. “But show her the photographs of him with his mask on first, the official ones.”

An old file-photograph appeared of a tall, slender man wearing an SS uniform. He was handsome in an arrogant way, with an angular jaw and hard eyes; he didn’t look like a nice person, even though he was smiling, and Josie said as much. “I’m guessing whatever was inside of him was pretty bad.”

A colored sketch appeared next to the photo, and she squeaked in spite of herself. “Jesus Christ, Steve!”
“You’re telling me,” he said. “I had nightmares about seeing that human mask he was wearing come off - sometimes I still do. I don’t know how the people who were working with him stood it.”

“I don’t know either.” She looked back up at him. “He’s gone?”

“Yeah. There was this artifact they called the Cube, it’s something that came from Thor’s people although they aren’t really sure how or why it was down here. Red Skull tried to pick it up and use it while I was fighting with him, and it…well, it sort of dissolved him.” The picture on the screen changed again, displaying another sketch of the red-skinned skull-faced monster, but this time he was disintegrating in a spiral of blue light that also looked like it was eating part of the ceiling. “Like that. And then it fell through the plane into the ocean, and later on Tony’s dad found it and he and SHIELD started studying it.”

Tony’s father had found it by accident; what he’d actually been out looking for was Steve. Josie hugged him. “He’d rather have found you.”

He hugged her back. “Yeah, I know. He was looking for months, he only gave up because they made him.”

Which apparently had nearly destroyed the man, and Steve’s sorrow and anger over that was all tangled up with some guilt and a deeply protective impulse directed at Tony. A man nearly twice his age, who happened to be the son of a friend who had slipped off the track, nominally because of him, and been a very bad father as a result. She looked him in the eye, tightening her hold. “Not your fault, Steve.”

His blue eyes widened…and then he smiled, a little lopsidedly. “Yeah, I…I know,” he agreed. “Doesn’t mean I don’t wish I’d been there to stop it from happening, though - I’d have kicked Howard’s ass for him.”

And from Steve, he would have taken it - or at least Steve hoped he would have. That made Josie smile; her boyfriend might be stubborn, but he wasn’t arrogant. She changed the subject, deciding he needed a break from the serious stuff. “So how did you meet Quentin Tarantino? Max told me about the wedding present you gave he and Blake, you must know the guy pretty well.”

Steve blushed again. “I…kind of, yeah. It’s sort of a mutual admiration thing, honestly. And he loves his fans, so when I asked what he thought would be a good wedding present and told him about how much Max loves that one movie, he grabbed a copy of the movie and signed it and then we went hunting for Dylan and he signed it, and then we all went out for dinner and drinks. Quentin wants me to be in a new movie he’s writing - that’s why I was at his house in the first place, and why I’d forgotten to pick up a present - and he wants Dylan in it too, so it was as much business as pleasure but it was still a fun night. And we didn’t get back to Quentin’s house until around three in the morning, that’s why I ran late dropping off my present and ended up crashing the party.” He looked at Josie from underneath his eyelashes. “I’m pretty happy it worked out that way in hindsight, though.”

She snuggled in again. “So am I.”
Chapter 3

The Avengers’ family room was full of people that night, and for dinner there was pizza, salad and dessert laid out in the kitchen – enough pizza to feed an army, from Josie’s perspective, but then she remembered what their host had said about superheroes and commandos being locusts and recalculated to decide they probably just barely had enough for everyone. It was sort of like a party, something like a family dinner, and really fascinating to watch. Josie had been worried about making a good impression on Steve’s friends and family - especially once she’d found out who some of them were - but so far she’d managed to remember not to drink and talk at the same time and they all seemed to like her, so she thought that was going to be okay. And she felt certain she could manage not to turn into a science fangirl in the presence of all these geniuses for one weekend.

Or at least she’d felt certain she could until half of the Fantastic Four showed up. Josie had known he was coming and she’d told herself she was going to be a mature adult about it, but once the man himself was right in front of her she failed miserably. “I can’t believe I’m actually meeting you – you flew the Space Shuttle, we had a poster of you in our science classroom. You’ve been to space!” He was staring at her with his mouth open, and she blushed hard. “I geeked out there for a minute, I’m sorry. I just can’t believe I’m actually meeting Ben Grimm in person.”

Ben recovered himself. “Right this second I’m havin’ a hard time believin’ I’m standin’ here too,” he rumbled. He shook his head, then smiled and held out his massive orange arms. “Give an old astronaut a hug, sweetheart?”

Josie was more than happy to hug him, and Johnny raised an eyebrow. “You do know that’s Grandpa’s girlfriend, right?”

Ben snorted. “Of course, you idiot – it’s not like she could be anyone else.” Josie moved back from the hug - reluctantly, like a little girl letting go of a teddy bear - and he gave her a crooked grin. “The shuttle’s a bitch to fly, just so you know,” he said. “We’ve got better stuff now; Hot Stuff here and I helped Reed design a lot of it.”

“How much help each of us were is a matter of debate,” Johnny put in. He held out his hand, and when she shook it without hesitation that seemed to surprise him, but he covered it quickly. “So I hear you’re one of the few people on Earth who’s not afraid to ride behind Gramps on a motorcycle.”

Steve came strolling up and very casually smacked him on the back of the head. “Does Gramps need to start taking an interest in the racing circuit, Johnny?”

“Please - we can split my huge contingent of 14-year-old fangirls and Tiger Beat photographers. Although I’ll warn you now, they have a tendency to send hate mail to anyone I date.”

“Half the women you date send you hate mail anyway - the ones that can write, that is. He don’t usually go for the smart ones,” Ben told Josie. “Just the ones that have an ‘open for business’ sign on their panties.” He offered her his arm. “Come on, let’s go grab some pizza and I’ll tell you aaalll about the fangirl fit your boyfriend had when he found out who I was. It was so cute, I wish I had pictures to embarrass him with…”

Josie was more than happy to go with him, and as soon as they’d moved a suitable distance away Johnny rooted in his pocket and pulled out two flat foil packages, which he handed over and Steve immediately tucked into his own pocket. “Thanks, Johnny.”
“No problem. They’re rated to withstand me, so I’m pretty sure you can’t break them. Reed said let him know if they’re too thick and he’ll make you some thinner ones - you’re not trying to contain the orgasmic equivalent of a volcanic eruption, after all.”

“No, I just have to worry about putting out instant baby-making serum - I love Josie, but we’re nowhere near that point in our relationship yet. And Bucky’s ghost would show up and give me hell forever if I got my girlfriend pregnant out of wedlock, I used to nag him about being careful all the time.”

Johnny patted his shoulder. “Saw that anniversary come up on Sue’s calendar last week. How was Washington?”

“It was…good.” Steve smiled. “I think I’ll always miss him, but it’s getting easier. And this time someone called the Smithsonian before we got there; they kept all the tour groups out of the exhibit, but there were a few old soldiers there who’d served at the same time I did just sort of hanging around. We talked, we even went to the cafe for coffee together, it was…it was a good day, really.”

“Have you told her about him yet?”

Steve shook his head. “I will, but later. That’s the past, right now we’re working on the future.”

Johnny gave him a one-armed hug. “Good plan. If we’re all done having a family moment, though, I’m gonna go grab some pizza before Ben eats it all and try to keep him from telling Future Grandma a bunch of lies about me. You knew she’d react to him that way?”

Steve smiled and shook his head again. “Nope, but I’m really glad she did - now I’m not the only one.”

The meeting happened right after the last of the pizza disappeared, the older man with the silvering dark hair who’d been introduced as Colonel Clay just corralling everyone in the family room so they could quickly go over the new information on the Lightning Boy situation, a few security details for the wedding the next evening, and the fact that Stephen’s current whereabouts were still unknown. Which was how Josie found out that her all-the-fun shopping buddy Stephen was actually the Sorcerer Supreme, magic was really real, and she’d bought her dress for the wedding in the Netherworld area that was euphemistically called ‘the other side of L.A.’ It was some consolation to her that Steve hadn’t known they were going shopping in the Netherworld either, and absolutely devastating to ‘hear’ the impotent desolation Jake was feeling in every word he spoke. Josie did her best not to show that she’d heard that, though; Elise had taken her aside pre-meeting and warned her not to ‘give herself away’ if she could at all help it. Tony and Bruce knew about Josie’s ability, because Elise had told them herself, but they’d collectively decided it was better not to say anything about it until they’d figured out why Stephen hadn’t told anyone. They were pretty sure his disappearance wasn’t connected to the ‘incident’ on the other side of L.A., though, which had been a relief.

The meeting was over pretty quickly, mainly because nobody really had anything else to add, and then some people gravitated back to the kitchen to get more dessert or another drink while others got as far away from the dessert as they possibly could. Josie was one of the ones hanging back - although not as far back as Max, who was keeping as much distance between himself and the dwindling tray of brownies as possible - and she ended up making small-talk with a lot of people. Everyone already knew who she was, of course, and she’d been wondering if she was going to be getting interrogated by just about everyone over the course of the weekend because she was dating Steve and he was really obviously serious about keeping her, but when she mentioned the distinct
lack of nosy questions to Colonel Clay he just smirked at her and shook his head. “Little girl, the fact that you’re standing here means you’ve already been vetted six ways from Sunday,” he said, sounding amused. “In this business, people who take chances in their personal lives don’t usually last too long.”

“He says ‘usually’ because he does it all the time, and most of them have tried to kill him.” That was the tall, quiet Hispanic man with the long hair and watchful eyes who everyone called Cougar. “Some are still trying – never stand between the colonel and a woman, his women are all vicious.”

Clay shot a glance up at him, raising a bushy silvering eyebrow. “She works for one of them.”

Oh, that made way too much sense. “Elise let you live?”

“Because I would have had to stand in line if I’d wanted to kill him.” Elise had swept up, smiling in an only slightly predaorial way. She greeted Cougar with a hug, kissing his cheek when he kissed hers. “Back with Rhonda finally, querido?”

His smile was surprisingly shy. “She waited.”

“Of course she did – you can hit the target every time.” She arched an eyebrow at Clay. “And you? I heard something about a violent little girl who’d been following you around.”

He shrugged. “She stopped, at least for the time being. This,” he indicated the Tower, “is not something she wanted to get involved with.”

“I think we’re all glad that you got involved with it,” she told him. “Nick was making a mess out of everything like usual?”

“Oh, you don’t know the half of it. Allison called him on it, I called him on it, Tony and Ben and Reed called him on it, Tony’s buddy from the Air Force called him on it…near as I can tell, he’s either a fucking idiot…”

“Which we know he’s not.”

“…Which we do know he’s not, or the job has finally gotten to him and he’s just losing it.” He made a face. “Losing Coulson didn’t help with that, of course. I’m not sure anyone realized how much Fury was relying on the guy until he was gone, and that’s not a position they’re going to be able to fill again.”

“No, it certainly isn’t.” She slapped him on the shoulder. “Come on, let’s go have a drink. It’s obvious I need to catch up on things, for safety’s sake.”

He quirked a grin and took her arm. “Yeah, we both do. And I’ve been wanting to ask you about this dating site you run. Got anything on there dangerous enough for an old guy who likes to play rough?”

“I’ll show you playing rough…”

Josie just stared after them as they walked away. “They won’t kill each other, right?”

Cougar laughed. “No. They will both be walking funny tomorrow, though.”

Steve came back from the kitchen with a brownie on a paper plate; it had been cut in half, and he offered it to Josie. “I know you didn’t want to eat a whole one, so I got one for us to share. Did I just see Clay leave with Elise? I didn’t know they were…”
“A long time ago,” Cougar told him, and winked at Josie. “She couldn’t be bothered to kill him afterward, apparently.”

That made Steve smile. “Lucky for him - and us, too. So that’s it for business tonight?”

“One can only hope,” Tony said, joining them. “If I just saw what I think I saw then thank god, because he needed laid in the worst way.” He raised an eyebrow at the divided brownie Steve was holding. “Are you feeling okay?”

“I’m sharing this one with Josie - and I didn’t work that hard today,” Steve disclaimed, rolling his eyes. “Did you eat salad earlier?”

“Have you already drawn an incriminating picture of me not eating it?”

“No, but I can if you want me to.”

“No, thank you, you’ve embarrassed me enough today: Pepper already has the cookie picture set as her phone’s lock screen.” This time he raised an eyebrow at Josie. “Did you eat? Or did the horde frighten you away?”

She smiled and shook her head. “I have a brother, I know how to defend my share of a pizza, and especially of dessert. I didn’t have to, though, everyone has been very polite.”

“They’re on their best behavior tonight,” he agreed. “Except for me, of course. And Bruce, who’s just avoiding things that taste good altogether right now…”

“I heard that!” the other man’s voice rang out. Bruce came wandering over - ‘wandering’ seemed to be his normal style of moving, so far as Josie could tell - with a steaming cup of something in his hand. “Some of us have to watch it with the sugar and caffeine, you know.”

“I don’t feel sorry for you,” Tony told him. “The rest of us have to work out, Mr. ‘The Other Guy Runs For Me’. Do you?” he asked Josie. “Go to the gym, do yoga or whatever?”

She shrugged, feeling somewhat relieved by the blunt, nosy question; her ability didn’t have to be on for her to notice that Tony, out of all of them, was the most nervous about having a strange new person introduced into the group. “No, not really, except for walking instead of driving sometimes so I can justify having dessert. Max and Blake are the ones who work out all the time, because Blake needs to stay in shape and Max has been working pretty hard to keep his weight down for the wedding. Someone brought a box of donuts into a meeting last week and he almost cried.” She saw Blake react to that with a self-satisfied smirk and her mouth dropped open; the donut-bringer had been oddly subdued for the rest of the week… “Oh my god, what did you do to him?”

“I didn’t…didn’t do anything to him,” Blake said, almost looking like he was telling the truth. “He really does like goats, so now he’s got a whole board full of them on Pinterest - they’re all really cute, too - and I put a link to it in his profile under ‘Interests’. He got…he got a lot more hits after that, he should be thanking me.”

Josie facepalmed, and Tony was actually giggling. “Kid, I like the way you think. If you ever get tired of the matchmaking business, I could use you in mine.”

Blake smiled. “I…I appreciate that. I like working with Aunt Elise, though. She hires a lot of…a lot of horrible people for me to torment at my leisure. You’d…you’d get in trouble with HR for that.”

“Well, he’d get in trouble with Pepper when HR tattled on him,” Bruce corrected. “She’d love having you around to give her new ideas, though - her favorite punishment for assholes is to make
them do ‘company representative duty’ with Tony or Steve.”

That drew a joint ‘Hey!’ out of both Tony and Steve, and Bruce smirked into his tea. Tony pointed at him and rolled his eyes. “See, I told you,” he told Josie. “Favoritism in action, right here.”

Click. It actually made Tony really happy that his best science bro got along so well with his one and only love. Josie did her best to hide that realization, and knew she hadn’t done a very good job when Tony colored up a little. She was going to have to ask Elise to help her with that…once Elise was done with Colonel Clay, that was. Elise could help her change the subject, though. “So were Elise and the colonel…”

“Not really, sometimes, maybe once,” Blake said. “And that’s a direct quote. She says women usually love him until they hate him, and then they hate him until one of them dies.”

“She also says she thinks that if gypsy curses are real, he’s probably under one of them.” Max had braved getting closer to the brownies to come see what his husband was up to. “Because nobody can be that lucky everywhere else and that consistently unlucky just with women all at the same time unless they pissed off a witch.”

“I have wondered about that myself,” Cougar agreed. “If it’s true, though, I don’t think we should bother to uncurse him - he’s used to it now.”

“True, he probably wouldn’t know what to do with a non-homicidal woman,” Tony mused. “Speaking of…Max, Dr. Doom is rich, single, and rules his own tiny country with an iron fist - literally. And he’s also a pain in everyone’s ass. Think your sister would go for him?”

Max snorted a laugh. “Probably not - she goes for pretty first, financial stability second. Right now she’s dating something she claims she met at the beach, but I’m pretty sure she found him on Kindlin.”

Josie pretended shock. “Your own sister doesn’t use our site?”

“She tried, but that was pre dick-pic block and after about a week she told Mom and Dad I was working for a quote ‘nasty hookup site’.” He grinned. “I told them no, that was our competitors. And they totally refused to believe me, because they have no understanding at all of what I do for a living.”

“Yeah, mine still think we’re some sort of ‘for entertainment only’ business,” Josie agreed. “I try to explain the science to them and they just blink at me. The last time I tried, my brother suggested I get a whiteboard and draw pictures instead.”

“If your brother wasn’t…wasn’t already married, I’d suggest hooking him up with Cecily,” Blake offered.

“He says that because she hates him,” Max put in. “Which of course has nothing whatsoever to do with him taking every opportunity to scare the hell out of her every time they see each other.”

Blake huffed. “I just move really quietly, and she’s easily…she’s easily startled.”

“Only after she met you,” Max countered with a fond smile, nudging his husband affectionately. “I’d say you should teach me how to do it, but she’d see me coming a mile away.”

“It’s not easy for a tall person to blend into the woodwork,” Cougar commiserated. “I am the tallest in my family, my brothers got away with everything - me, not so much.”
That made Max laugh. “Yeah, but I’m sure you always won at keep-away.”

Cougar smirked. “I still do.” A yell from another room made him roll his eyes. “You guys want to come play with us for a while? It sounds like Jake is losing again.”

Max and Blake indicated that they were interested, but Steve shook his head. “Not tonight, guys, thanks. Come on Josie, there’s a really great view on the other side of the building that I wanted to show you…”

She blushed bright red for some reason, which made him blush too, and they left the room pretty quickly. “Take Tony,” Bruce requested, nudging the open-mouthed billionaire. “Playing games will keep him from worrying about Pepper.”

Tony huffed at him. “She’s out partying her way across the city with the Wild Bunch…”

“She’s out with three commandos and a member of the Fantastic Four, and Natasha is tailing them,” Bruce corrected. “Pepper is safer right now than she would be at the White House.”

“The White House is about as secure as a wi-fi hotspot at Starbucks,” Tony shot back. He did relax, though. “Jarvis, remind me I need to do something about that, would you? The leader of the free world really ought to be at least half as safe in his office as I am at home.”

“Of course, sir. And Ms. Potts has requested that I ask you for information regarding the proper amount to tip a stripper.”

“Ha. Ha. Tell her I said she’s funny.” He clapped Blake on the shoulder. “Okay, let’s go get Jake to switch games; we can all play the prop game instead of that zombie thing he keeps getting killed at…”
The next day pretty much everyone slept in, and Jarvis verbally herded the guests upstairs to the penthouse as they woke up. Breakfast was coffee and trays full of muffins and pastries which emptied with alarming swiftness as more people wandered in and out. Most of Clay’s team lived in the building and so did all of the Avengers except for Thor – who still showed up and ate four muffins – and then Steve and Clint got back from their morning run and Steve whisked Josie off again so he could show her where he’d grown up and all of his other favorite places in the city. “Hope she likes the art store,” Clint observed once they were gone. “You know he’s gonna stop.”

“Of course he is, they’re closing down next month,” Bruce said, shaking his head when the other man looked startled by that. “Building got bought out, they just couldn’t make enough to keep going - by Christmas it’ll probably be a fro-yo place or something. So he’ll show it to her, he’ll buy stuff to sketch with, and then they’ll get on the bus and go to Brooklyn.”

“They’re taking…oh, you mean the tour bus.” Clint snickered. “Ten to one he’ll end up giving the tour if Harry’s working.”

“Which means he’ll get off the bus with enough tips to buy them lunch. Which might be his idea.” Bruce shrugged it off. The Air Force hadn’t been able to straighten out Steve’s pension and the pay for his ‘consulting’ job wasn’t a steady source of income, so he’d taken a job working as a local guide on the tour buses, telling the tourists stories he’d ‘heard from his grandfather’. It was a good use of his USO training, or so he said, and he seemed to enjoy doing it - that, and the buses stopped running if something was going to attack the city, so it didn’t interfere with his other job very much at all.

Thor had been listening to this exchange with interest. “Is that not the job Captain Rogers was not supposed to take due to a possible breach of security?”

“Don’t quote Fury,” Tony scolded him, plopping down on a stool at the end of the bar and rubbing his eyes like a sleepy little boy; it was early, for him. “I don’t want to think about tall dark and asshole today if I can help it, because if I do I might fly over and drop a missile on his house. Pepper thought she saw him last night, spying on Allison’s tame excuse for a bachelorette party.”

“She did, but he wasn’t.” Natasha poured him a cup of coffee and slid it down the bar; it stopped right in front of his hand, and he nodded his thanks before inhaling half of it in one gulp. “He was briefly in the area, but he appeared to be waiting for someone to meet him. He did not see me, but he became nervous and left when he spotted Allison.”

“So he’s up to something his HR department isn’t supposed to know about, wonderful.” Clint shook his head. “It’ll have to wait, and we’ll just have to hope it’s not somethin’ big - if we tell the team now, Allison won’t go on her honeymoon. We’ll worry about it tomorrow.”

“He may have been attempting to meet with the agent he’d assigned to the wedding venue.” Elise was at the other end of the bar, looking every bit as perfect as usual although a good deal more relaxed. “Clay was muttering something about taking lessons from Frenchmen and thank goodness Chef Jim has learned restraint, so apparently the agent was discovered fairly quickly and ejected from the premises. He was waiting to mention that incident until tomorrow, too.”

“We’re gonna have one hell of a meeting tomorrow.” Bruce sipped his tea. “Jarvis, maybe you should be keeping a list of all the things everyone is waiting to talk about, so we don’t forget anything.”

“I have already made such a list, Dr. Banner.”

Tony forced one eyebrow up - the caffeine was taking hold, but slowly. “How many things are on it?”

“Fourteen, sir. I am unable to read them off to you, as they are not to be spoken of until tomorrow. I anticipate that tomorrow’s meeting will last for at least two hours - longer if any other issues of note are added today.”

Tony just groaned and put his head down on the bar. Sometimes being a superhero really sucked.

Josie would have agreed with him, if she’d been there. Steve and his family might have supersoldier genes and all of the benefits that came with them, but they had horrible luck - assuming it actually was bad luck and not something more deliberate and organized, which was entirely possible. His children, a son and a daughter, were both dead and so were their spouses; he’d never gotten to meet any of them, and they’d probably never known he was their father. Most of his grandchildren were older than he was. An accident had mutated two of them into superheroes, another grandchild had been framed for murder along with his unit and spent several years on the run, and some unknown agency had tried to kill his non-super granddaughter and his science-inclined great granddaughter and make it look like an accident. No one had tried to kill his great grandson, Sue and Reed’s little boy, yet, but that could have been because no one had been able to get close to him - his parents were superheroes, his uncle and godfather were superheroes, and they all lived in the second-most secure building in Manhattan. Not to mention that their closest friends were all either powerful or dangerous or both - one of them was even a sorcerer.

A sorcerer who had quite possibly been missing for weeks and no one even knew where to begin looking - forget the planet, Stephen could be anywhere in the universe. Not that anyone had come right out and said that, but every time Jake had opened his mouth the night before it had all but come screaming out so far as Josie was concerned. He and Stephen and Todji Wong were lovers in every sense of the word, and the idea of losing Stephen was devastating him. Which had set Josie to thinking hard and seriously about the future. Her boyfriend wasn’t just a superhero, he was Earth’s first superhero - and he wasn’t immortal. What Jake had been projecting all evening…was she willing to risk that being her someday when Steve just didn’t come back from battling a supervillain or something? And was she able to live with the idea that someone would almost certainly be coming after their family at some point in the future just because Steve was who he was?

She’d thought about it all night - hell, she’d thought about it in her sleep - and she’d decided the risk was acceptable and not much different than if he’d been a career soldier or a pilot or a firefighter. The things that threatened Steve were just a little bit bigger and more horrifying. She’d actually dreamed about Red Skull too, but in her dream Steve had showed up and kicked his ass, and on waking she’d decided that had been her answer. He was worth it, and she could handle it. And she’d told him so after they’d gotten in the elevator that morning, too, because she’d thought he needed to hear it.

Which had also meant she’d ‘heard’ very clearly in return that he was now completely decided that he wanted to marry her, and he’d realized she’d heard it - Steve had adapted very quickly to the idea that she could hear what he didn’t say - and put a finger against her lips to keep her from saying anything. “Nope, not yet,” he’d told her. “Unless you were going to say no?” She shook her head, and he removed the finger and kissed her hard. “Okay, then just hold that thought.”

She’d held it, because he obviously had something in mind - part of which was chagrin because he did not have enough money to go to Jared, which observation made her laugh and made him laugh
too. Where they’d actually gone was an art supply store that had been in New York for over a hundred years, and it had a sign on the window that said it would be closing in a month. Steve walking in with her had caused a minor commotion - he had never, apparently, brought a girl to the store before - and then he’d whisked her up a set of steep, narrow stairs into an upper room that was full of handmade paper in every color, size and shape, from neat stacks of squares and rectangles to huge sheets hanging on racks. She distracted herself in the stacks at Steve’s request - and ended up picking out a large sheet that she couldn’t not take home with her, and then another one she wanted to give to Max and Blake - and didn’t come out until he called her. He was beaming, and the middle-aged man behind the small counter who’d been introduced to her as Tom chuckled when he saw what she was carrying and held out his hands to take the sheets from her. “Here, let me wrap those up for you,” he said. “When you get them home, unroll them and then roll them up the other way for a little while, that will get rid of the curl. What are you planning to do with them?”

“I want to frame them - the aquamarine one is for me, and the blue and gold one is for some friends of mine.” She couldn’t resist stroking the paper one last time before handing it over. “What do people usually do with them?”

“Cut them up to make other things.” He chuckled again when she flinched. “I’ll be sure to tell the person who made those that they went to someone who thought they were too beautiful to cut, she’ll be thrilled. Have Steve mat them for you, if you take them to a framer they’re likely to cut off the deckle edge.”

“The rough edge,” Steve clarified. “It’s part of what makes handmade paper look handmade. I can mount them for you so it will will show inside the frame.” He reached out and stroked the paper himself. “These are beautiful, you have really good taste.”

She smirked up at him. “I know.”

Steve blushed, and Tom laughed. “I like you,” he told Josie. He had smoothed out the two sheets onto some stiff brown paper that came off of a roll on the side of the counter, and put tissue paper between them. He rolled the layers of paper up into a stiff brown tube, folded down the ends, and stuck the tube closed with two pieces of thick, yellowish-white tape. Then he rang them up and Josie paid for them while wondering what it was Steve had bought, because she’d heard the card reader beep while she was looking at paper. “Get Greg to give you a plastic bag on the way out,” the man told Steve as he handed the tube to Josie. “You’ll be here for the grand closing, right?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world - although I wish it wasn’t happening.”

The older man patted his arm. “All things come to an end, Steve. I know what you mean, though.” He winked at Josie. “Come with him if you can, it’s going to be quite a party - wear clothes that will wash, though, because we’re going to break out the paint and let everyone do their thing on the walls, and we’re going to film it all for posterity. The new owners are going to gut the building anyway, I decided we might as well have one last hurrah on our way out.”

Josie agreed that she’d be there if she could, and then they were making their way back down the steep, narrow stairs. Steve bought two packs of pencils and a wire-ring notebook full of stiff white paper, and then everything went into a long white plastic bag with the name of the store on it and they were off again. “There’s a stop for the tour bus two blocks away,” he told her. “We’ll hop on there, and then we’ll change buses in Times Square and head for Brooklyn.”

The bus hit the stop at the same time they did. Steve flashed his employee ID for the bus driver but produced a ticket for Josie, and then they went up to the top deck and found a pair of seats near the back. The guide who was on the bus had some interesting things to say about some of the buildings they were passing, and it wasn’t too long before they were disembarking on one side of Times
Square right in front of several nearly identical tchotchke shops and a very small Starbucks. The bus for Brooklyn was already there, idling at the curb, but this time when they ascended to the upper deck they were greeted by two seats in the front which had a chain hung in front of them with a small sign that said *Reserved*. The guide on this bus was an old man wearing a flat cap who made a show of removing the chain for them. “You sit right there,” he told Josie. “It’s about damned time this kid found himself a woman - I was startin’ to wonder if he just didn’t want to admit he went in the other direction, if you know what I mean.”

“Harry!”

The old man chuckled. “Well it ain’t like it’s somethin’ to be ashamed of these days, you know.” He took the art supply bag away from Steve and handed it to Josie, then sat down in the seat next to her and stretched out his legs. “Go on, kid, load the bus. I’m gonna enjoy gettin’ to be off my feet for a while.”

Steve rolled his eyes, but he stretched and picked up the microphone that was hanging from a hook at the front. He flipped a switch, then stepped up so he was clearly visible to people on the sidewalk. “The tour for Brooklyn is leavin’ in ten minutes!” he called out. “If you’re headin’ for the Bridge, we won’t try to sell it to you but we’ll tell you aaalll about it! Still time to grab a ticket, folks! Why walk when you can ride on a double-decker bus?”

Within five minutes more people were coming up and finding seats, and Steve got the sketchbook and a pencil out of the art supply sack and started quick-sketching some of them and then passing the sketches back. He gave Josie the sketchbook and picked up the microphone again when the bus’s bell rang, getting into position. “Alright, everybody, we’re about to take off. Stay in your seats! The street signs hang awfully low in some places, we don’t want anybody gettin’ a free haircut on this trip.”

That got a general laugh, and then the bus moved away from the curb and Josie got to see a side of her boyfriend she’d only somewhat vaguely heard about - this was Steve the Actor, slipping easily back into what must have been his natal accent and maintaining a running monologue about streets and buildings and history. When they hit the Brooklyn Bridge and got caught up in dense traffic that slowed the bus’s pace to a boring crawl, he held an impromptu bridge auction, pointed out places that wouldn’t be good to jump from, and made jokes about what he could see floating in the water today. Josie could tell he was not actually kidding when he bemoaned the loss of the Dodgers, and felt his sadness when he described buildings that weren’t there anymore and what had been in them. He told stories about his ‘grandfather’ growing up, pointed out places where important things had happened, and waved to people on the street - some of whom waved back. People got on and off the bus at each stop, and Josie couldn’t help but notice that the ones who did get off did so kind of reluctantly. She couldn’t blame them, Steve was amazing.

Finally, the bus turned around to go back and Steve made a show of handing over the mic to Harry. “Sorry folks, this is my stop,” he said, giving Josie a hand up and taking the bag from her again. “I’m gonna hand you over to Harry here - don’t let him sell you the Bridge on the way out, okay?”

Harry made a show of swatting at him with his hat. “Get off my bus, loverboy - clap for him, everyone, he’s takin’ this one home to meet his mama the way a good Brooklyn boy should.”

The ensuing round of applause made Josie blush - to be honest, Steve did too - but she waved shyly when he did and then they were going down the steps and the bus driver was handing Steve a fat envelope; he signed the flap, tore it off and handed that part back, and then the envelope was going in his pocket and he was waving to the passengers in the bottom as they got out. Josie blinked up at him once the bus pulled away. “I know I should have guessed that you were that good, from...some
He chuckled. “Be sure you tell Tony that, he gives me endless shit about the USO thing. You mind doing a little sightseeing before we have lunch?” Josie indicated that she didn’t, so he took her hand and they started walking. Steve told her about things and places and people as they walked, and although she could hear someone being left out of those stories, she could also hear why: That person, Steve’s first and best friend, was long gone and it still hurt too much to talk about him. She knew he’d tell her eventually, she got the feeling that when the time was right he would take her to visit the man’s grave so he could introduce them, but it was still too soon for that and she was willing to wait until it wasn’t. They were sorting out their future right now, after all; the past could afford to wait.

About half an hour of walking around brought them to a run-down block of brick walk-ups which was gradually being eaten from one end by newer, taller, shinier buildings - Old Brooklyn being relentlessly overtaken by New Brooklyn. The particular building Steve led her to didn’t look any different from the others, and the fourth-story windows he pointed up to were indistinguishable from any other windows she could see. “This is where I was born, where I grew up,” he told her. “I lived in that apartment with my mom, and during the summers I’d sit in front of the windows trying to catch a breeze, even if it was just caused by a passing pigeon. That’s where I learned to draw, sketching the people and things I could see down here in the street - I couldn’t go out a lot of the time when I was younger, because I was sick a lot.” He sat Josie down on the worn stone steps, then took her hand in his and got down on one knee. “Sorry for making you wait…but I’d decided that if I was going to propose, it was gonna be here in the old neighborhood. Josie, would you be interested in marrying a guy from Brooklyn?”

There was so much going on in those words that she couldn’t take it all in…but it didn’t matter. She wrapped her other hand over his. “As long as it’s this guy from Brooklyn? Of course I would.”

He beamed, then reached into his shirt pocket and pulled something out, holding it up. It was gold and various shades of blue, and it looked like a ring. “Since we can’t go to Jared right now,” he said, sliding it on her finger, “origami will have to do.”

Josie’s mouth dropped open. The ring was made of the same kind of beautiful handmade paper she’d bought to hang in her apartment, folded and twisted into a narrow, pretty band with a ‘stone’ on top. She was trying to come up with the right words - and trying not to cry - when a peal of laughter startled her. An old woman carrying a shopping bag had stopped to see what was going on; she pointed to the ring, shaking her head. “Honey, that’s better than Jared any day.”

Josie found her voice. “I think so too.” She leaned forward and kissed Steve, ignoring the applause - apparently the old woman wasn’t the only one who’d seen what was going on and stopped, but she didn’t care. She’d just agreed to marry a guy from the neighborhood, after all, so it only seemed appropriate that some of the neighborhood got to witness it.

Steve had one of the watchers take their picture, sitting on the steps together holding hands, and then he got the paper and pencils back out and did some sketching; he drew the building, and the people, and he drew Josie sitting on the step by herself. He gave away some of the sketches because people asked for them, taking pictures of them with his phone first so he’d have a copy, and then they packed up and started walking again. What was left of his old neighborhood’s business section was only a few blocks away, a good many of the storefronts shuttered or boarded up, a few of the spaces taken over by little eateries that were trying too hard to be trendy. Steve bypassed these with a roll of his eyes, and lunch ended up being sausage and pierogies at a quiet little hole-in-the-wall place with a hand-lettered sign on the counter warning customers that they only accepted cash and an owner who switched back and forth between fluent Polish and accented English. Steve switched back and
forth with him, countering the man’s teasing about his accent with easy good humor.

After lunch they walked down by the waterfront and then back toward the bridge to catch another tour bus. This time they rode in the bottom part because the top was full, and Josie rested her head on Steve’s shoulder and watched the city slide past through the window as the invisible tour guide’s voice reverberated through the interior of the bus, amusing herself by listening to the undercurrent of his spiel, hearing what was mostly true and what was complete fiction, which stories he’d heard from someone else and which ‘facts’ he was hoping no one would call him out on. She heard his life in a dingy one-room apartment and how much he was starting to hate the too-rapidly changing city he’d grown up in. And she heard the jealousy when he pointed out Avengers Tower in the distance, and she remembered being at the wedding in Malibu and comparing it to being on Mt. Olympus and reflected that the people who lived at the foot of that mountain might not always be too happy about the shadow it sometimes cast on them.

They walked back to the Tower from Times Square, taking their time and talking about inconsequential things because none of the ones that were consequential were things they could talk about in public. A group of old men who apparently knew Steve stopped them outside of a little patio cafe, spotted the paper ring almost immediately and offered congratulations all around. “I won’t say anything until tomorrow,” one of them told Steve, smiling. “That’s bad manners, making an announcement like that right before someone else’s wedding.”

“Thanks Stan,” Steve told him. “I couldn’t wait…”

“…Because she’d already figured out that I was going to ask her,” Steve finished, making a face at him. “I was going to ask tomorrow, after the wedding, so she’d have time to think about it without me hanging around.”

Josie rolled her eyes. “You really thought I’d say no?”

“I thought you might say you wanted to wait,” he admitted, squeezing her hand. Or that she might say yes because everyone else was around - she was really going to have to work on Steve’s self-confidence when it came to this sort of thing, she really was. “We’ve only been dating for eight months.”

“I’d only known my wife for six weeks before I popped the question,” one of the other old men advised. “And we were married forty-six years, kid. My old man used to say that when it comes to courtin’, a good woman’ll take quality over quantity any day of the week.”

“True,” Stan agreed. “I courted my wife longer, but that was because of her father, not her. One thing, though.” He aimed an admonishing finger at Steve. “I know it’s sentimental and all, but you get that genius engineer you live with to coat that ring with something so it won’t fall apart the first time she washes her hands, you hear me? A woman wants to show off her engagement ring, not hide it in a box so it won’t get wet.”

Steve promised that he’d ask Tony to do that at the first opportunity, and then after another round of congratulations - and a lot of assurances for Josie that she’d picked ‘a really good one’ - they left the cafe and headed around the corner to the Tower. Josie took off the ring in the elevator and gave it to Steve, who put it back in his pocket for safekeeping, and then after making an appearance in the penthouse to make sure nothing was going on they went their separate ways to get ready for the wedding. Josie went back down to the guest rooms with Max and Blake; if she told them the minute they got downstairs, nobody heard the squealing but Jarvis and everyone promised not to say anything until after the wedding was over with.
Steve, on the other hand, got intercepted by Tony before he’d even made it out of the kitchen. Who huffed at him and held out his hand, and Steve rather sheepishly fished out the paper ring and handed it over. Tony examined it with a raised eyebrow. “Okay, that is…actually kind of clever. I like it. Does she like it?”

“She loves it - she bought some paper like that to frame and put on her wall as art. Before she saw the ring.”

“Nice to know she has good taste all the way around,” Tony told him. “I’m going to take this downstairs, you go get prettied up for Allison’s hopefully non-violent wedding ceremony. I’ll give it back to you tomorrow so you can present it again in front of everyone.”

Steve blushed. “I wanted to propose in Brooklyn. Closest I could get to taking her home to Mom, you know?”

Tony smiled and slapped him on the shoulder. “Yeah, I know.”
Chapter 5

Haven 73 had to be one of the most beautiful restaurants Josie had ever seen, and the view of the city from the outdoor seventy-three story high patio was amazing. It was a very different view of the city than the one from Avengers Tower, looking out over lower buildings all the way to the bay beyond. They’d kept the decorations simple and tasteful, white drapery and ribbons and tiny white fairy lights, and small bouquets of white and pink flowers on each table. The cake was a work of art – designed by the groom, of course – five tiers high and adorned with candied flowers and spun sugar and a topper that inexplicably had the bride holding a gun and the groom a knife. Because ‘law enforcement’, Josie assumed, and shrugged it off because the topper was cute and it suited them. And Seth was a chef, it wouldn’t surprise her if he knew how to use a knife offensively as well as culinarily. Assuming culinarily was even a word, that was - she’d look it up later.

The wedding ceremony itself was short and sweet. Blake had actually started to cry when they’d gotten to the I Do’s and Seth had put a finger to his bride’s lips before she could speak and said simply, “Please,” and Allison’s response had been to take his hand, clear her throat, and say her vows in what Josie could only imagine with horror was her ‘real’ voice and had to have been the result of a horrific accident or something. And then they’d kissed each other so passionately Josie had teared up, because it was so obvious that what she was seeing was true love. And Steve had had tears in his eyes too - just about everyone had – and he’d hugged her and then the party had started and there’d been food and dancing and finally cake and then more dancing and people just mingling around with drinks in their hands because they were pretty much all family in one way or another and they all genuinely liked hanging out together.

Being included in that family – being chosen to be included in it, no less – made Josie feel like someone had just made her a princess. And not just because of the dress, although it was definitely a contributing factor. It was a beautiful deep, soft blue, made out of something softer than silk and with just a hint of sparkle to it, fitted on top with a high round neck and dainty little petal-shaped sleeves, and the bottom was petal-cut as well so that although it flowed almost to the floor and was actually pretty clingy, it was neither restrictive nor revealing when she moved. She had a simple crystal necklace to wear with it, slightly fancier matching earrings, and a handful of tiny crystal-adorned combs and pins for her hair. And Steve was wearing crystal cufflinks and a vest that exactly matched her dress - Tony had said they looked like the prince and princess from a Disney movie and mentioned that he was going to have to talk with Stephen about the guy’s new fairy godmother gig once they got him back. Which Josie could tell he wasn’t really sure would happen but he was trying to be positive for everyone else’s sake because what did he know about magic, so she smiled and nodded and backed him up by asking if Stephen already had a wand or if they should get him one. Tony had laughed - a genuine, full laugh which had quite obviously taken a few people by surprise - and told her they’d get him one with extra glitter.

She and Steve had gone out to the patio not long after that to get some fresh air when Steve suddenly stopped in his tracks, squinting out at the bay…and then he shook his head. “Dammit.” Josie looked where he’d been looking and saw something that looked dark and lumpy bobbing in the water. “Is that a submarine?”

He sighed. “No, it’s another sea monster – they keep showing up here. Bruce and Reed and the National Science guys say they’re spawning in an irradiated trench someplace a few hundred miles off the coast, they’re some kind of mutation.” He looked over his shoulder, caught someone’s eye and waved; Clint came jogging over, Amanda right behind him. “Guess who decided to come say hi to the bride and groom?”
Clint squinted, then swore. “God dammit. And it’s the tentacle kind, too, I hate those. Who…”

“Tony got the last one, maybe...” Steve pulled out his phone and speed-dialed someone. “Hey Thor, we’ve got another sea monster, do you want it? No, it’s still out in the bay, I can send Johnny out to keep it there until you get here...okay great, thanks.”

Clint had already headed back into the party, and he came back a few seconds later with Johnny Storm. “Just keep it in the water?”

“Yeah, Thor’s coming, this one’s his,” Steve told him. “He was kind of bent out of shape about not getting any of the other ones. Stay way up in the air, though – remember how far that last one could stretch.”

“I’m sure you and Clint remember it better than I do,” Johnny laughed, and then shrugged out of his jacket and draped it over a nearby chair. He kept getting undressed until all he was wearing was a form-fitting blue suit with a patch that had a stylized ‘4’ on it, and then he jumped up in the air, caught on fire, and streaked off toward the bay.

Josie watched him go, wide-eyed. “Oh my god.”

“That is kind of mind-blowing the first time you see him do it up close,” Steve admitted, sliding an arm around her shoulders. He nodded to the people who had come running. “It’s okay, it’s just another sea monster. Thor is on his way to take care of it, Johnny’s just going to keep it in the water until he gets there.”

The little blonde woman who had been introduced to Josie as Sue Storm-Richards - Johnny’s sister and Steve’s granddaughter - rolled her eyes. “I think it says something about all of us that this has become routine.” Her husband came up beside her, looked out at the bay and reached for his tie; she slapped his hand. “No you don’t. Thor’s coming for this one.”

“Another sea monster?” That was one of the groom’s friends, Todji Wong’s cousin Teddy. “Dr. Banner, are you sure...”

“Yes, quite – even if they weren’t living in a pit of toxic ooze, the radiation would still be a problem,” Bruce told him. “Unless you’re going to keep it in the freezer for five hundred years, then it might be safe.”

Teddy grinned. “I would if I could, believe me – prepping that piece of sashimi would net me a world record.” He squinted. “Wait, are there two of them?”

Sue’s husband had put an earpiece in, and he shook his head. “No, not entirely; Johnny says it looks to be conjoined. He is requesting backup, though, apparently the creature seems quite determined to reach shore.”

“On it!” Tony sang out. The Iron Man suit came streaking past over their heads a minute later, and Steve and Clint both snickered; Josie hadn’t noticed, but they were both now wearing earpieces too. “What...”

“He asked who ordered octopus,” Steve told her. “Thor did, Tony, he’s just running late to pick it up.”

“I blame Jane,” came from Clint. “You know what they were doing.”

“Yeah, eating popcorn and watching Adventure Time,” Steve told him. “Yes, Tony, Adventure Time. I have no idea, I just know they both like it. Unless you want to see him pout again, though,
don’t do anything but keep it in the water, okay?”

“Keep what in the water?” Allison and Seth had stopped dancing and come out to see what was going on. Her blue eyes went wide – with happiness, apparently, because she hugged her new husband. “Oh good, we get to watch this time!”

Seth opened his mouth; Teddy shook his head. “Nope, Dr. Banner still says we can’t cook it.”

“Damn. That would be world-ending calamari,” Seth said. “Should we drag over some chairs for everyone? If that’s the tentacle kind, this might take a while.”

Josie looked around the group and decided that every single one of them was nuts. And, weirdly, she found she didn’t really mind. She helped bring over some chairs for people who wanted them, then slipped back under Steve’s arm and wrapped her own arm around his waist; he glanced down at her…and then he smiled that breathtaking smile before returning his attention to the sea monster battle in the bay. Josie oohed and aahed and laughed with the rest of them when Thor showed up looking way too much like Superman and hit the sea monster so hard it flew up in the air, tentacles wiggling in a way that just looked cartoony. Having knocked it farther from shore he started hitting it with lightning – lightning! – and finally it was just a floating heap way out in the water. Johnny flew back to the patio and then retreated to a corner to pull his clothes back on, and Tony landed nearby and his suit took itself off and folded up into what looked like a large metal suitcase which he dragged into a different corner. Thor dropped onto the patio, cape billowing behind him even though there wasn’t any wind, approached Allison and Seth and bowed before pulling a little gold-wrapped package out of a leather pouch at his waist and handing it to the bride. “From Jane and I, all congratulations on your joining,” he intoned. “I shall return to her now, we were enjoying a most excellent program about the Time of Adventure.”

They thanked him, and he hugged them both before taking off again. And the party went back to…well, as close to normal as Josie thought it was ever going to get, considering. “What will happen to the dead sea monster?” she asked Steve. “Does someone come and get it? I know they can’t just leave it out there to pollute the water.”

He shrugged. “The National Science guys took the second and third ones, and after that SHIELD and the Navy did cleanup on the rest – they hauled them out to the general area of the trench and left them there, the other mutations ate them so far as we know.” He raised an eyebrow. “Not running screaming for the elevator?”

Josie supposed that might be some people’s reaction to having a giant mutated tentacle monster interrupt the wedding party you were attending. “Didn’t even consider it,” she told him honestly. “If you’d asked me to help clean up after the sea monster, though, that might have been a different story.”

That made him laugh, and hug her again. “I’d have run with you if they’d asked me to clean it up – those things are the size of a house, and they’re slimy. Want to go dance some more?”

“Love to.”

Some twenty minutes later, Josie was talking to Elise, Blake and Max while Steve went to get a refill on punch when the elevator opened and a scowling man stalked out. He was tall and looked strong the way Steve did even though he was obviously much older. He had dark skin, a black eyepatch, a long black leather coat and shiny black boots. Josie resisted the urge to duck behind Elise. “Is that a supervillain?” she whispered. “Which one is he?”
That made Elise laugh. “That’s Nick Fury, the director of SHIELD – technically one of the good
guys.” She reached over to slap Blake on the arm, making him jump; he’d been glaring at the tall,
dark man. “Stop that or I’ll remove you from the room.”

Fury’s eye fell on their little group just then, and his eyebrow went up; Josie didn’t like the way he
looked her up and down, or Max either, or the way he sort of sneered when he apparently
recognized Blake. “Well what do we have here?” he asked Elise, stalking over to them. “I thought
you said you’d never have another team again, Gomez.”

Elise raised an eyebrow. “It’s Gomez-Blacula, Nick – you of all people should remember that. And
these are my employees – FindLove.com, you know. I’d say you should go check it out, but we
don’t allow unrepresentative photos and I’m pretty sure this look,” she waved a hand at his black-on-
black outfit, “would get you nothing but twinks and subs. Unless you’re planning to switch teams?”

He scowled. “I want to know what you’re doing in L.A. I know you had this one,” he indicated
Blake with a contemptuous gesture, “out playing vigilante. Testing the waters or just trying to get rid
of him?”

And Blake snarled, which startled Josie considerably because she’d never seen him do that before.
This time, however, Elise didn’t call him on it. Max was glaring at the man and had drawn himself
up to his full, admittedly imposing height. And Josie cocked her head, feeling a tingle…

Click. She wasn’t able not to react: her eyes widened, her hand flew to her mouth, and she backed up
into Max. “You know it was your fault, but you’re blaming it on Blake...”

Fury’s eye widened, then narrowed with something nasty and calculating, and Blake immediately
stepped in front of Josie while Max wrapped a protective arm around her. Elise smiled her dangerous
predator smile. “Nick, you might want to rethink that thought you just had – very quickly.”

He turned his glare on her. “What the hell are you playing at out there, Gomez?!”

“A matchmaking service, like I just said,” she told him. “You probably shouldn’t say anything else,
though, unless you want all of your secrets spilling out into the open. In fact, you should probably
leave now and forget you ever saw us.”

“Oh, he should definitely leave.” Steve had come up beside them; he raised an eyebrow over one
brilliantly blue eye. “Director, do we have a problem?”

Fury drew himself up; he was nearly as tall as Steve, not quite as tall as Max. “Captain Rogers,
this...”

Josie gasped. “He’s afraid of you!”

And Steve smiled at her, holding out his hand; Max let go and she came to him without hesitation.
“Yep,” he said. “Because this is a line he’s been told not to cross anymore – not by me, but everyone
else had told him so I didn’t think I needed to.” He returned his intensely blue gaze to Fury. “You
frightened her. Should I frighten you now?”

“You wouldn’t...”

“We’ve told you before that he would.” Clay had come jogging over. He gave Josie a reassuring
smile. “It’s okay, sweetheart, he’s just shaking his dick to prove it’s still there.” That made her giggle
in spite of herself, even though she wasn’t sure she really should, but Steve grinned and hugged her
and Clay...relaxed. “Colonel, you have the damndest luck,” he told Fury, shaking his head. “Now
get out before Allison realizes you’re here and decides she needs to remind you you weren’t invited
– her husband gets hot when he sees her kick someone’s ass, if she does it in her wedding dress they
won’t make it out of the room and I can honestly say I do not want to see them naked and going at it.
Do you?"

Fury backed off a step. “She works for me.”

“Do you realize how kinky that sounded?” Clay waved a hand toward the door. “Get the fuck out,
the sea monster attack made this shindig memorable enough - you’ll get the report tomorrow, not
tonight. Oh, and Chef Jim wanted me to tell you that if you ever try to slip an agent into his staff
again, he’s leaving them tied up naked in a dumpster out back with the rest of the trash.”

Another step back. “With all of you together in one place like this, we needed someone on the
inside…”

“I wish you didn’t think that was a good argument,” Clay told him. He motioned to the door again,
this time a lot more like someone shooing off a dog or a chicken. “Go on, get out.” Fury opened his
mouth…but Josie cocked her head and he abruptly closed it again, spun around and stalked back to
the elevator. Clay gave Josie an assessing look, then turned to Elise. “You know what I’m about to
to say.”

“Oh yes – and I agree with you completely.” She smiled at her employees. “Training, monkeys,” she
said. “I’m going to be running you ragged as soon as we get back home. Because he’ll definitely
point someone in our direction now.”

Max’s eyes widened. “He’d send agents to L.A. for that? To do what, scare us?”

Blake answered before Elise could. “No, he won’t send…won’t send agents, unless they’re just
watching things go down. He’ll let some bad guys know we might be valuable, though. He’ll make
us targets.”

“And he’ll wish he hadn’t,” Elise assured them; Clay was nodding, so Josie took that as a sign he
agreed with Elise. “I have friends in L.A. who won’t like that kind of thing coming into their territory
– and who won’t be happy with Nick for getting it started. Especially when I tell them why.” She
looked Josie in the eye. “It was Nick’s fault, yes…because he did the same thing to Belinda that he’s
about to do to us. He was angry at her for having a child and basically telling him to piss up a rope
afterward, so he painted a target on her and kept making it bigger.”

“He was trying to force her back into the fold,” Clay elaborated. “He wasn’t so much trying to get
her killed as he was trying to make it so that giving up her son and coming to work for him was the
only safe place either of them could be. Even though she was training people who were the best of
the best for him to hire…well, it’s like that story about the goose that laid golden eggs, he wasn’t
satisfied with what she was willing to give him, he wanted it all, so he just kept squeezing.”

Surprisingly, he smirked, shaking his head. “The guy who finally hit the bullseye got taken out so
hard by Gomez and Clarke that his death is practically an urban legend at this point, half the people
who hear the story aren’t even sure it could possibly be true.”

“Which is what we wanted,” Elise acknowledged. “A monster under the bed is always going to be a
better deterrent.”

“It is,” Steve agreed. “I’m not sure why bad guys are mostly all superstitious idiots, but it definitely
works out in our favor.”

Clay rolled his eyes. “Your original bad guys were working for a red-skinned, skull-headed monster,
Steve, they had every right to be superstitious - hell, I’d have been drinking holy water out of my
canteen after seeing that thing strutting around in an SS uniform, and throwing what was left on every Nazi I ran into just in case.”

“Oh believe me, we did that a few times,” Steve admitted. “Dum-Dum had been raised Catholic, just like me, we figured better safe than sorry.”

Josie raised an eyebrow. “Holy water? Really?”

“Actually made one abomination of nature we ran into smoke and burn when we threw it on him, although I’m still not sure why,” Steve told her. “Stephen didn’t know either when I asked him about it, but he suspected it might have been psychosomatic, like stigmata. Thor agreed with him, and since the power to make those things came from his people, he’d know. It was still scary as hell to see it happen, though.”

“I probably would have pissed my pants over that,” Clay agreed, and Josie heard quite clearly that he was telling the truth - the idea of demons and monsters was honestly disturbing to him because he didn’t know how to handle them. And it was a current worry for him, too, because the man he’d been relying on to fill that gap was suspiciously missing…and in their line of work, coincidences usually weren’t.

That was when Josie heard a soft sliding noise and turned her head, thinking it might have been the elevator doors opening again and worrying that it was Fury or someone who worked for him coming back to bother them, but although the doors had indeed opened nobody was there. Although for just a minute she thought she saw something black down around floor level…
Being on watch, Josie reflected, was always boring unless it wasn’t. She was sitting behind the reception desk in what had once been FindLove’s building, sitting in the chair that had once been Blake’s and watching the hot L.A. afternoon pass by in tiny little increments marked only by sharp, narrow shadows and even sharper shards of refracted light alternately growing and shrinking around the broken glass windows that fronted the lobby. The parking lot outside was broken too, a few straggling weeds pushing up through heat-opened fissures in the asphalt. The few cars which had been in front of the building had long since been moved down to the end of the lot, to prevent them from being used as cover by anyone looking to attack the building. The debris in the parking lot hadn’t been removed, but that was because none of it was big enough for someone to hide behind.

A few people had tried, though. And they’d died trying, too, because Max was a damned good shot.

He was sitting beside the desk, perched on top of a filing cabinet with his gun held loosely in the ready position because that was how he always held it – being too tense, Elise had taught them, once upon a time before everything had gone to hell, would actually make you slower to react instead of faster. Josie glanced over at him, then looked away again. Max had lost quite a bit of weight, and then of course there was the eyepatch; if anyone else ever did make it back, she wasn’t sure they’d recognize him at first sight. Especially since he didn’t smile very often now, and even when he did the old glow just wasn’t there. It hadn’t been there since Blake had disappeared.

Weird to think that she and Max were the only ones left now. Holed up in the basement of the building they’d once worked in, Josie spending every day trying to help Amanda make an Independence Day-style miracle occur, or at least to keep their communications linked up and secure, and Max guarding Josie. Max was pretty much fanatical about guarding Josie, in fact, and she felt guiltily grateful that him worrying about her was keeping him from doing something stupid and getting himself killed. She knew – damn her intuition sometimes – that the only reason he had to stay alive right now was not wanting to leave her alone in the war-torn hellhole the city had devolved into.

Especially not since she’d be alone and pregnant if he did. She put her hand on her stomach, feeling a little kick, then another. Steve had been long gone, captured and killed by the Skrulls, before she’d realized they’d had an oops. A really lucky oops, because it was the only piece of Steve she’d ever have going forward, but a really unlucky oops if anyone ever found out her baby’s daddy had been Earth’s first supersoldier. Even their surviving allies in New York didn’t know she was pregnant; she hadn’t dare pass the news along, for fear someone else would find out and put two and two together. And she and Max wouldn’t have to leave their building for quite a while thanks to the paranoid survivalist stockpile they were sharing the basement hideout with, so hopefully by the time they did need to leave things would have calmed down and nobody who saw them with a toddler would be doing any calculations that could give the truth away.

Not that anyone in L.A. would probably be doing any calculations anyway, of course, because pretty much everyone she and Max had known was either dead or missing at this point – or had fled the city, something they themselves hadn’t done because Elise had said staying put in familiar territory would be safer. Josie hadn’t been sure about that at first, but she’d gradually realized their boss had been right. Not to mention ‘we’re glad you’re safe’ was a refrain she’d heard more than enough of from the New York survivors…

Movement caught her eye and she shifted the gun she had resting on top of the counter; Max stood up, glass crunching under his boots. “Hey there, stranger!” he called out to the man who was now
staring at them through the broken glass. “Visiting or just passing through?”

“Searching,” the man called back, stepping through what had been the front door. He was about average height, had long and somewhat greasy-looking dark hair, and inexplicably seemed to have a metal hand. He had another man who was apparently unconscious slung over his shoulder, and a fairly large gun at his side which he hadn’t reached for, most likely because Max and Josie had him covered. “I was told this was a safe place,” he said in an inexplicably Russian accent. “A sanctuary?”

Max nodded slowly. “It can be.” He frowned, squinted a little. “You look human, anyway.”

The man nodded, giving a little gesture toward the eyepatch. “Is a trick that only works if they do not take the patch away from you, you know.”

“I do know.” Max raised his free hand and flipped up the patch, then flipped it back down again. “Got it covered, thanks.”

“Yes, I see that you do.” The man inclined his head. “So, this is sanctuary or is it not?”

Josie blinked at him. “Introduce yourself and we’ll tell you.”

“I am a soldier.”

Hmm, not a lie, but not quite the truth either. So he either had been a soldier in the past or he wasn’t wanting to be one now. “Tell me your name.”

“I am called the Winter Soldier…”

“Nope, wrong answer.” Josie shook her head. “Tell me your actual name.”

Something in the dark eyes flickered. “It was James Barnes, once.”

That had been the truth. And he was confused, but not bad. Not evil or trying to rob or kill them, not out to kill Max and rape her – or the other way around. Josie nodded to Max, who lowered his gun. “You can have sanctuary. Do you want to stay up here, or come with us down into the basement where it’s safer?”

“I will follow you,” he allowed. His eyes widened, though, when she stepped out from behind the high desk. “You are with child.”

“None of your business – or anyone else’s,” Max warned him. He threw his gun back over his shoulder. “Follow us down, then we’ll see what we can do for your friend.”

The man called Barnes grunted. “He will heal. But it is not safe, to be out where we might be seen. The one who told me of this sanctuary will be coming, once he has made sure we were not followed.”

“Nice of him.” Max moved Josie so he was behind her, between her and the strangers, and they went back down into the basement. By unspoken agreement they didn’t go into the hidden area behind the gun range where they actually lived and where all their supplies lived with them, but the outer area was carefully set up to look like they lived in it so the soldier didn’t seem to notice that anything was amiss. He dumped his burden on the cot Max indicated with another grunt – the guy was apparently heavy – and then straightened, stretching. And Josie screamed.

And would have kept screaming if Max hadn’t clamped a strong hand over her mouth, pulling her against his chest. “Stop,” he warned gently. “You’ll hyperventilate and give the baby hiccups again.”
She pulled his hand away and gulped in a breath, nodding, and he held her a little tighter. “Barnes, I think you’ve got some ‘splainin’ to do – because your buddy there was supposedly killed by the Skrulls on the other side of the country.”

Barnes shook his head. “They killed a double, one of their own, and took him.” A sudden, surprising smile. “They should not have let us find each other. That ship, it is in the ocean now. And it did not float very well.”

“They usually don’t when they’re full of big holes,” Max concurred. He and Josie hadn’t seen the ship going down, but they’d heard and felt it – at first they’d thought it was an earthquake. He gestured to the man on the cot with his free hand. “You know who he is.”

Barnes nodded. “Steve Rogers. We grew up together, in Brooklyn. We were friends, like brothers.”

Josie buried her face in Max’s chest. “He’s…he’s telling the truth.”

Max stroked her hair. “I know.” He nodded to Barnes. “They were engaged. We were told Steve was dead. She didn’t realize he’d left a little piece of himself behind until later.”

The soldier’s eyes widened. “That is…” And then his jaw set, and he leaned back over and gave the man on the cot a hard shake. “Wake up or I will kill you!” he demanded. “I should kill you anyway, you were the one always lecturing me about using protection!”

And Steve’s blue eyes blinked open. “Wha…” He raised a battered hand to his jaw, rubbing it. “Son of a bitch, what hit me?”

“Me, and then the water, and then a rock,” Barnes told him. “We are in a sanctuary, with the mother of your child.” He did not quite smirk. “Now who is the irresponsible bastard?”

Steve swatted at him. “Hey, my parents were married, thank you very much. I’m not…” His eyes widened, he blinked hard and turned his head…and sat up so fast he would have fallen off the cot if Barnes hadn’t caught him. “Josie!”

“St-Steve?” She wanted to run to him, wanted to believe so badly…but she couldn’t, not yet. “Say your name.” He looked confused. “Say your name!”

He blinked hard again, shaking his head. “My name is Steve Rogers. Sometimes Captain America.” Luckily Barnes had been ready for it or the impact from her throwing herself into Steve’s arms would have landed them both on the floor. Steve did his best to hang on to her, though, and once everyone involved was sure they were staying on the cot he touched her stomach with a wondering hand, blue eyes widening even more when he felt the little kick. “Oh Josie. I had no idea…”

She sniffed into his shoulder. “I…I didn’t either. By the time I realized…you were already gone.”

His response to that was to hold her tighter, burying his face in her hair. Max swiped at his leaking eye, nodded to Barnes. “We don’t actually live out here, the real sanctuary is further in and better protected. I’ll take you guys back there, then wait out here for your friend to show up.”

Barnes snorted. “I will wait with you…” He seemed surprised when Max shook his head. “No?”

“Your friend might not be your friend when he shows up,” Max pointed out. “Someone able-bodied and not pregnant needs to be in there as the last line of defense just in case you were followed, and the person who can spot a duplicate needs to be out here keeping watch. Seems pretty clear to me.” He checked the corridor outside the room, then went to the back and opened the hidden door. “Okay everybody in.”
The soldier had been giving him an odd, penetrating look, but he didn’t say anything, just pulled Steve to his feet – and Josie along with him – and started moving them to the door. He paused before going in himself, though, and looked Max in the eye. “Do nothing foolish,” he warned quietly. “You are still needed.”

“I realize that,” Max acknowledged, just as quietly. “This,” he touched the patch, “is my job, though.”

That got him a nod, and then Barnes slipped into the secret area behind the gun range and Max sealed up the hidden door again. He went to work straightening the lived-in illusion, piling things on the second cot so that it looked like he was the only one staying there. And then he went back up to the reception desk, gun at the ready. He was really, really hoping the guy they were waiting for was okay…but hope wasn’t something Max had very much of anymore.

Two hours of waiting later, the guy slid in through what was left of the windows like water flowing over the rim of a broken glass…and stopped short when he spotted the gun Max had pointed at him. “Nice hoodie,” Max told him. “Come the rest of the way in nice and slow, and then push the hood back so I can see your face. I was told to expect someone, but you’re going to have to figure out how to prove to me that you’re him.”

The man came the rest of the way in, slowly, and just as slowly pulled down the hood of the oversized jacket he was wearing. And Max backed up until his back hit the wall behind him, although his gun stayed up and aimed. “Shit, no. Why do you bastards keep doing this?! Twice wasn’t enough for you, third time’s the charm, what?”

The man had been squinting at him, and then his brown eyes widened – mostly in horror. “Max?

What the hell…”


“Max, I…I am your husband. Really, it’s me, Blake.” He took a step forward, raised his hands when the gun lifted a little more in response. “Max, it really…it really is me. I escaped when…when the others did. I told them how to get here.” He squinted again. “You…the eyepatch…can’t you tell I’m not a Skrull?”

“You look human,” Max admitted. He was shaking so hard it was a wonder he still had hold of the gun…but then again it wasn’t, because the gun was rock-steady even though the rest of him wasn’t. He’d learned not to let it shake when he did early on. He still felt like he was going to pass out, though. Two times already the Skrulls had come to the building wearing Blake’s face, and two times Max had been forced to kill them. Him. He didn’t think he could do it a third time.

That thought must have showed pretty clearly on his face, because the man who looked like Blake winced. “How can I prove it to you, Max? Tell me what you…tell me what you want me to do.”

“Don’t make me kill you.”


“You’re telling me.” It was so hard, so very hard not to relax, not to lower the gun. He wanted this to be Blake, the real Blake, so very badly. What he really needed was Josie to confirm things for him…
but Josie was with Steve, and when she was really upset her talent for personal truth-hearing didn’t always work very well anyway. So he was on his own.

He lowered the gun, pointed it at the floor. And Blake took a step back, not forward, and leaned against the cracked and bent door frame. Tense but waiting.

The way they’d been trained. By Elise, who probably wasn’t coming back.

The way ‘Blake’ had done the last two times, too.

But this time, Max didn’t have to make the choice to kill his husband or let Josie die: Josie was safe in the basement with Steve. He let himself slide down the wall, slid the gun across the floor toward the other man. Tears were blinding him. “Either leave or kill me. Please. I can’t…I can’t do this again.”

He closed his eye and turned his face away, not watching because he didn’t want the last thing he saw to be his husband killing him. He heard boots crunch through the debris on the floor, heard the rattle when the gun was picked up, then more crunching…and then strong arms were going around him and his husband’s long-missed voice said in his ear, “It’s okay, you don’t…you don’t have to.”

Max cried until he couldn’t cry anymore, cried until his good eye was swollen and his damaged one was burning so much he wanted to claw it out. And he listened while Blake told him about being taken by the Skrulls and imprisoned with hundreds of others who had been deemed to potentially have value, about meeting Barnes and finding Steve and making a plan they really hadn’t though was going to work and then making their escape, and about having to do it all without his glasses because they’d been lost not long after he’d been captured. That brought Max out of it. “I…I have your spare pair.” He blinked, clearing his vision as much as he could, and started standing up. It was harder than he thought it should be. “I saved everything I could. Even Blue. She was here for a while, and then one day she walked through a wall and disappeared and I haven’t seen her since.”

“Well, she was from another dimension or…or something,” Blake soothed, helping him get back to his feet. “She probably went home.”

“I hope so.” Max shouldered the gun again when Blake handed it to him and they went down through the maze of corridors that used to be their office to the fake living space. Where he sat down on the cot. “I…need a minute, okay? I don’t want to upset Josie.”

Blake sat down next to him. “Nobody else…”

Max shook his head. “Nobody here. Some of them are still alive in New York, but our channels of communication aren’t secure so we don’t know who exactly that is except for Amanda. They don’t know anything about us either, for the same reason.”

“I…I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Max sighed. He was so tired – he had been for so long now, he couldn’t really remember not being tired. “Surviving is something to be happy about.”

Silence. Then… “Are you?”

Max stared up at the ceiling. “Josie needed me.”

Blake sighed, wrapped his arms around him in a reassuring hug. “I need you too.”

And Max started to cry again.
When they finally went into the bunker, Barnes was waiting for them - he greeted Blake with obvious recognition, much to Max’s relief - and Josie was curled up with Steve on the other side of the room; they were both asleep, and one of his hands was curled over her stomach. Oh yeah, he was going to be the world’s most overprotective husband ever. Not that that was a bad thing. Max busied himself getting things set up to comfortably accommodate three extra residents, and ended up coming out of the storeroom in the middle of what seemed to be a fairly vicious conversation between Blake and Barnes. “I realize that,” Blake was saying. “But dammit, if something so…so bad isn’t…isn’t going on in Manhattan, I’m disowning them all and declaring them targets. There was no…no excuse for any of this.”

“I agree, there was not. But they did well on their own, they are a credit to their teacher.”

Blake snorted a laugh. “She’d have loved to hear you say that, believe me. And they did, and they are…but I’m still pissed off enough to kill someone.”

“I would be also.” Barnes spotted him. “Ah, you are back. We are making plans.”

“We’re going to have to leave, aren’t we?” Max dropped onto one of the folding chairs that were out, resting his elbows on his knees. He was still tired. He was always tired. “I knew we’d have to eventually, but I didn’t want to risk it until Josie had the baby.” He shot Blake an apologetic look. “The idea was that if anyone saw the two of us with a baby, they’d just assume it was mine. We knew we didn’t dare let anyone know it was Steve’s.”

“No, that would have been a bad thing to let…to let become known,” Blake agreed. “You heard what I was saying?” Max nodded, and he sighed. “We know at least some of them are still alive and free, Max. What we don’t know is why they left…why they left you and Josie here alone.”

“Because we were safe, probably.”

Barnes cocked his head, much the way Josie usually did when she was hearing what someone wasn’t saying. “You do not believe that.”

“Not entirely, no. But that’s what Amanda kept telling Josie, that it was good we were safe. I doubt she was lying, she just wasn’t saying all of it: It was good we were safe, because we weren’t valuable enough to justify the risk of trying to get us out of L.A.” He shrugged. “It didn’t matter. We are safe, we have plenty of food and water, we’re relatively secure…it didn’t matter.”

“It matters to me.” The vigilante gravel had crept back into Blake’s voice. “It’s going to matter to Steve, too – and believe me, I may be mad enough to kill someone, but they’ll be endlessly sorry if they managed to…to really piss him off.”

“Yes true,” Barnes agreed, looking happy about that idea for some reason. “We should wait until the birth of the child if at all possible, however. As you say, we are very well supplied here, and more secure than I would have expected. We can wait.” He raised an eyebrow. “We should not, however, allow the others to know it is no longer just the two of you.”

Max blinked. “You don’t want them to know Steve survived?”

“We don’t want them to know any of us survived. At least not yet,” Blake clarified. “We need to figure out what’s going on first. If something is…is really wrong, surprise may be our…our best advantage.”

“You think we may need to go save them?”
“I’m hoping we’ll need to do that rather than go kill them, because then you’d be…you’d be married to a supervillain and we’d have to go live on an island somewhere.”

“There’s one near the monster trench,” Max threw out. “Nobody would bother us there, probably not even Skrulls. And maybe we could train some of the smaller monsters, or make friends with them or something.”

Blake blinked at him for a second…and then he grinned. “That sounds like a plan. We’ll go be supervillains on Monster Island. All of us.”

Barnes seemed to be trying not to smile. “Me as well?”

Blake nodded. “Of course you as well; you’re Steve’s brother, aren’t you? That makes you the baby’s…the baby’s uncle. You have to come.”

“I will come,” Barnes agreed, letting the smile out. “I like the beach.”

They whiled away another hour planning out a grandiose supervillain lair on Monster Island, and then Steve and Josie woke up and the real planning started. It didn’t take long. Stay where they were until after the baby was born, then find a safe way to get out of L.A. and away from the worst of the Skrull invasion. Whether or not that path led to New York was a decision nobody was ready to make just yet. “SHIELD could definitely be compromised,” Steve admitted. “And if they are, then the Tower is most likely under siege and everybody is in the bunker. It has one,” he confirmed. “Tony knew something like this could happen, he’s got an Armageddon-proof compound under the Tower that would make a survivalist come in their pants.”

Josie leaned into him. “I hope that’s what’s going on.”

“If it’s not…well, we’ll deal with it when it comes up.” Steve slid his arm around her shoulders, pulling her closer. “Not something we need to worry about right now, though - they’re on the other side of the country and I doubt they’re going anywhere if they haven’t already. So the only thing we really need to worry about is the Skrulls stepping up their activity in this area because we crashed their ship. If they decide to flatten L.A. we could end up sealed inside the bunker.”

“We could get around that,” Barnes countered. “We have tools and the strength needed to use them. I would be more concerned about fallout.”

“The bunker has an air filtration system for that,” Max told him. “I clean the filters once a week so they don’t get overloaded. The water filters have to be cleaned every other day, because if I don’t we have brown water that smells like the bottom of an ashtray. Don’t drink it without purifying it first, though, because who knows what’s actually in it at this point.”

“Not to mention it’s a lot more alkaline than water should be - I think ash actually is the culprit there.” Josie put a hand on her stomach when the baby kicked. “Okay, that was the ‘I’m hungry’ kick.”

“Better than the ‘mommy’s sitting in a weird position’ backflip extravaganza,” Max said, making her smile. He stood up and stretched. “I’ll go get out some dinner. Beef or chicken tonight?”

The question had been addressed solely to Josie, who shrugged. “As long as it’s not turkey, I don’t care.”

“Beef it is,” Max disappeared into the storeroom again, came out with four large green-gray
rectangular packages. “We’ll pour all of the stroganoff into a pot and have it family style,” he said, ripping open the packages and starting to distribute their contents into little piles. He checked labels and tossed one packet of something to Josie, who immediately ripped into it and started eating the contents; Max winked at Steve. “Grape pop tart - keep your hands away from her mouth or you’re likely to lose a finger.” Josie’s response to that was to throw the wadded-up wrapper at him; he caught it deftly and tossed it into a canister sitting a few feet away, not quite smiling. “Behave, we have company.”

Josie leaned into Steve, finishing off the remains of the pop tart and then licking her fingers. “The baby likes them.”

Steve rested his cheek against her hair. “If Thor was here, he’d agree with the baby.” Max raised an eyebrow, and he shook his head. “He went home for a visit and he took Jane with him; that was a couple of weeks before the first Skrull ship showed up. At the point when I was taken we still hadn’t heard anything from him, so no idea what was going on there. I’m pretty sure he’s not back, though, because someone would have heard from him.”

Nobody felt like saying that someone may very well have heard from him…but just not told anyone else. Because Steve was right, worrying about what may or may not be happening on the other side of the country just wasn’t a priority right now.

They drew dinner out, making a sort of celebration out of it, and then after a game of cards everyone went to bed. Everyone except Blake, that was, because he couldn’t sleep and he felt too restless to stay on his cot so he’d quietly gone back to his chair on the other side of the room. Where he sat and watched Max, who had fallen into an exhausted but still restless sleep on his own cot.

The rattle of that gun sliding across the debris-littered lobby floor was going to haunt him for the rest of his life, Blake was sure of it.

Not to mention, the Skrulls had taken relatively good care of their prisoners. It hadn’t been great or anything, but it hadn’t been anywhere near the hellhole someone might have expected. So Blake – and Barnes, and Steve – were all actually in pretty good shape, considering. Josie wasn’t doing too badly either, because she’d had to keep eating and sleeping as regularly as possible because of the baby. Max, though, was skinny and sleep-deprived and looked pretty much like he’d been running on fumes for a little too long. The eye under the patch had been burned into its current state of white blindness with toilet bowl cleaner, according to Josie; Max hadn’t told her he was doing it, he’d just gone out into the building one day and then come back a few hours later and taken a handful of painkillers, saying now he wouldn’t have to worry about the patch coming off again. It had apparently come off a couple of days before that incident, leaving him unable to tell who might or might not be a Skrull right in the middle of a firefight that may or may not have been a cover for an assault on the building.

Another thing the rest of ‘their’ people in New York didn’t know, of course. All of their back-and-forth communication was being done via a highly encrypted text format, not video or audio. Which almost made sense…until you remembered who was on the other end of that communications feed and what they were capable of. Josie was an algorithmic genius, yes, but Amanda and Tony Stark were fucking gods.

Gods who had put Blake’s husband in a position where he’d felt the only way to keep Josie safe was to mutilate himself in abandoned bathroom with an eye dropper full of nicely scented blue acid. Gods who had left two half-trained fighters alone in a war zone, and who were probably only keeping in contact at all because they were using Josie’s reverse-matching program to try to root out humans
who were working with the Skrulls and needed her input. Because even gods don’t know everything.

So, he could either make it his life’s mission to kill all the gods with his bare hands…or he could retreat to Monster Island and build an anti-god empire with his burned-out husband, two supersoldiers, a tech genius and a super baby.

“Thinking about how many people we may need to kill?” Steve asked in a quiet voice that still made Blake jump. When he sighed and nodded, the supersoldier got up and came over to where he was sitting, taking another chair. “Yeah, I’ve been thinking about that myself. And I wasn’t kidding when I said I liked the island idea earlier. If we’d had an isolated, secure base before, a lot of this shit might never have happened. We won’t make that mistake again.”

“No, we won’t.” Blake sighed. “I…I don’t know what to think, Steve. I just…I just can’t seem to let it go. They shouldn’t have still been here. I didn’t…I didn’t expect them to still be here, I damn near had a heart attack when I recognized Max in the lobby. Especially because…because I didn’t recognize him at first.”

“I almost didn’t either.” Steve sighed too, shaking his head. “We’ve got about four more months’ worth of supplies with five of us here, so that’s four months we have to catch our breath before we have to head out again. The surrounding area?”

“Mostly abandoned except for a few scavengers. It looks like there used to be a gang in the area, but I think they’ve either moved on or scattered. There’s more activity about five blocks west, doesn’t look like it would move this way, though. So as long as we keep a low…a low profile, we shouldn’t have any problems.”

“Oh, we’re gonna be keeping a low profile,” Steve assured him. “Max and Josie managed to avoid getting noticed all this time, we’ll just do what they were doing and everything should be fine.”

“Yeah.” Blake looked back over at his restlessly sleeping husband. “He sleeps with the patch on.”

“Josie said he never takes it off, he says she doesn’t need to see the mess he made.” The smaller man flinched, turning somewhat green. “Yeah, that was how I felt about it too. I guess Bucky saw, when we first got here; he said the pupil is burned white, and there’s a little bit of scarring around the corners of his eye but not much.”

“It hurts…hurts when he cries.”

“At least you got him to cry. Josie said he hadn’t in a long time, at least not where she could see.” Steve sighed. “She also said she felt sort of guilty, because the only reason he’s still alive is because he knew she needed him.”

“Shit.” Blake scrubbed his face with his hands. If he hadn’t been the first person to show up at the building after that…but he wasn’t going to think about that, because he didn’t want to start crying again. Or screaming. “Elise…Elise would be so proud, of both of them.”

Steve put a hand on his shoulder. “There’s always a chance, Blake. I mean, they didn’t think we were still alive.”

“Anything’s possible.” Blake agreed. “But if they’re alive, my family, then they’re either prisoners or trapped some other way. Because there’s no way in hell either of my aunts would have left Max and Josie here alone unless they had no choice. Someone would have come.”

“We’ll find out what happened,” Steve assured him. “And then we’ll avenge whoever we need to,
and fix whatever we can.”
Six months later, things couldn’t have been more different.

The lavish compound on Monster Island had been mostly restored to its former glory – all it had really needed were a few repairs and some cleanup, because the former owners had apparently left in a hurry. Everyone was pretty sure those former owners had most likely been connected to a cartel or something, because the place was a richly furnished modern palace stuffed with weapons and electronics and various types of assets ranging from cash in multiple currencies to bars of gold and boxes of jewels. And the compound had obviously been set up with security in mind: It was built like a fortress on top of the island’s highest central point, and completely inaccessible from below unless someone on the inside let you in – or unless you were a supersoldier who could scale the rocky summit, that was. Not to mention there was a toxic irradiated trench hidden deep beneath the ocean’s waves a few miles off the north-western end of the tiny island, a trench filled with monstrous mutations that could be pretty territorial.

The six of them had gotten lucky sailing out, mainly because a storm had blown up and the monsters didn’t swim around a whole lot during storms. They’d seen a lot of monsters since then, but mostly from a distance except for the odd one that occasionally crawled up onto the beach to sun itself. The larger ones couldn’t really do that, they just swam around. Thank goodness.

L.A. hadn’t lasted the four months they’d hoped it would; ten weeks after Bucky, Steve and Blake had arrived at the FindLove building’s hidden sanctuary, they’d had to be on their way again, avoiding Skrulls and desperate humans alike, and very quickly discovering that trying to go overland was a bad idea. Appropriating a small yacht had been a better one, and they’d been able to carefully navigate the coastline, stopping for supplies whenever it looked safe, until they’d finally reached their destination on the other side of the country, some ninety nautical miles off the New York coast: Monster Island.

Finding the compound already there had been a wonderful surprise, and finding it empty of people and habitable had been Christmas. They’d settled in pretty quickly and started making plans. First for getting necessary things done around the compound and the island, and then for finding out what was going on elsewhere and seeing if there was anything they could do about it.

Finding out what had happened to their former teammates, relatives and allies was on that list, but not at the top – making themselves secure was their top priority. Especially since they weren’t sure if some of those friends had been compromised or not. And so the first thing they did was up the defense on the compound, and if Blake had added some touches that might have been better suited to a comic-book supervillain’s lair…well, nobody was holding it against him, because no one knew what might happen once they were back in contact again.

Not to mention, adding those touches had made Max smile.

Josie finally initiated contact over the same encrypted text-only channel they’d been using before. Had to leave L.A. Found another place to hide. Are you still there?

After some delay, she got a reply. Josie? We thought you were dead!

We would have been if we’d stayed there.

Where are you now?
Safe.

Another delay. **Not an answer.**

**The only one you’re going to get. Security, remember?**

**Don’t you trust us?**

I did. Then Bucky showed up with Steve and Blake.

**Steve is dead.**

You’d better hope he isn’t, because he’s the only thing keeping Blake from hunting you all down. He’s kind of pissed about what happened to Max in L.A.

Delay. **You didn’t say anything had happened to Max.**

You didn’t ask. You just kept telling me you were glad we were safe.

**We were. We are.**

Are you safe?

**Of course.**

Well, so are we. Everybody is safe now. Yay! So, have you bypassed the security system yet, or was that just to make me think I was doing something to help?

No answer.

*I cracked it last month, by the way. Talk to you tomorrow at the usual time, baby is crying.*

The next day, right on time, she logged back on. **Hello.**

**What baby?**

Mine.

**With Max?**

Max is gay. And married.

**He’s a widower.**

I will let Blake know you said he was dead.

**THEY’RE ALL DEAD**

Shouting is rude, you know. I’ll talk to you tomorrow when you’ve had a chance to calm down.

Third day, same time: **Hello. We’re all here this time because the others said I was having too much fun.**
You’ve lost your mind. Did Max die? How long have you been alone, Josie?

Let me ask someone. Oh, I haven’t been. Btw, Max says I’m being mean to you. Blake says you deserve it. Bucky is laughing, and Steve is trying to convince the baby that he doesn’t have milk.

Tell us where you are, we’ll come get you.

Why would you do that? I’m safe, remember?

You’re alone and you need help. You could endanger all of us.

Blake pulled Josie’s chair away from the desk before she could reply to that, taking her place. Okay, now I know we’re not talking to Amanda. Who is this?

Amanda.

Like hell.

I’m Amanda.

No, you aren’t – you aren’t anybody on Aunt Allison’s team. Now where the fuck is my family?

OMG, you’re alive.

And pissed. Tell me where you are, I’ll come for a visit. I have a lovely new gun and some knives I’d like to show you.

Threats are meaningless and you know it.

Want to bet?

Let me talk to Josie again.

Josie is busy with the baby. Any other requests?

I want to talk to someone who isn’t you.

Ooh, rude much? You know what that means – buh bye until tomorrow.

On day four, Bucky logged on. He typed a long complaint – in Russian - about how little thanks he and Steve and Blake had gotten for bringing down the Skrull ship they’d been held prisoner on, about how much of a hypocritical bastard Steve was for lecturing him about being careful and then knocking up his own girlfriend, and about how frustrated he was being stuck with two loving couples when there was nobody around for him to fuck. And then he logged out before anyone could reply and went to make himself a snack, snickering.

On day five, Josie hadn’t even gotten past the H in Hello before a message popped up. Was that the Winter Soldier yesterday?

His name is James Barnes – Bucky, to his friends.
He’s dangerous - he shouldn’t even be there. We need to come get you.

He’s my brother-in-law, so no, he’s not dangerous to me.

He’s an assassin.

I know. He’s been teaching Blake tricks of the trade.

Blake is unstable.

Blake is pissed because his husband is not in the same condition he was before Blake was taken, and he blames you for that.

We’re at war.

No, really? I hadn’t noticed.

This is serious.

No shit. So who is this, really? And why did you say you were Amanda?

Amanda is gone. We were doing our best to keep tabs on everyone who was left.

Why does that sound like bullshit to me?

Because you’re paranoid.

Gee, I wonder why – we’ve been invaded by aliens who can almost perfectly mimic any human being they catch.

Not ‘almost’. The people with you are probably Skrulls, Josie, using you to catch the rest of us.

Actually, we can tell who’s a Skrull and who isn’t.

No, you can’t. The camouflage is perfect.

Only over text. Ask me how many times Max had to kill his husband in L.A., NotAmanda. Go ahead, ask me.

Did he snap, is that what happened? Did he rape you?

It took Josie a minute to get her rage back under control so she could type again. Be very glad Blake isn’t in here right now, NotAmanda. She cut the connection, somewhat viciously. “Blake!”

Blake stuck his head around the corner. “Need more…more snark?”

“I need you to kill whoever that is, and I want to watch.”

That got him into the room. He leaned over her shoulder to look at the text transcript…and then he straightened slowly, jaw setting. One strong hand squeezed her shoulder, reassuring even though she was so visibly enraged she wondered for a minute if he was going to Hulk out. “Hide that,” he said in a flat voice. “I know they’re just playing head games with you, but I don’t…I don’t want him to see it.”

“I don’t want him to see it either.” Josie saved down the file to backup and closed it, then cleared the
cache. “Who do you think that is? Now I’m sure it’s not anyone we know.”

He shook his head. “I’d have said it was that bastard Fury, before, but he’d have come after you in L.A. – he knows you can tell a Skrull from a human, or at least…at least he should. So this must be someone else. Someone who’s…who’s trying to do damage.”

“Yeah, it was kind of hard to notice that they wanted to make me think I was nuts.” She blinked up at him, raised a tentative hand to squeeze his arm. “I’m not, right?”

“I certainly hope not, because that would mean I’m not actually standing here and Max has been having sex with a figment of his imagination.” He pretended to consider that. “Hmm, maybe you are just imagining…just imagining me, nobody in real life can be that good…”

“I do not sit around imagining the two of you having sex!” she insisted, smacking him on the arm. “That one time, yes…but what can I say, I was single and you shoving him up against the wall in the office was really hot.”

That made him laugh, and he kissed the top of her head. “You’re terrible – but it was, it really was. Now come on, come get some fresh air and play with the baby. She’s…she’s awake and Max just changed her and they were…they were playing peek-a-boo.”

“At least she doesn’t try to nurse off him.”

“No, he’s…he’s too skinny for that.” Josie stood up and gave him a hug, and he sighed. “I know he’s gaining it back, it’s just…it’s just taking so long.”

“Because all the food we have is healthy stuff,” she reminded him. “If someone would just put a Starbucks down on the landing, or a donut shop, he’d go back to being cuddly in no time.”

“Yeah, you’re…you’re right.” He pulled away, lifting up his glasses to swipe at his eyes. “Come on, let’s get out of here. It’s a nice day outside, we can go…we can go watch the monsters play in the water.”

“I think they may actually be breeding, but okay.” She glanced back at the dark screen before she followed him out of the room, though. Whoever NotAmanda was, she was going to get a lot of pleasure from watching them die.

Josie waited several days before logging on again. Hello.

_I’m sorry I upset you. Are you okay?_

_I will be once you’re dead._

_Don’t be that way, Josie. It’s not like we know what’s going on, you won’t tell us anything._

_I’ve told you plenty. We had to leave L.A., we’re safe, Steve and I have a baby, and everyone wants you dead but Blake has dibs on killing you. Oh, did I mention there aren’t just six of us anymore?_

_Are you pregnant again?_

_No, because we’re grownups who know how to use condoms. Back-to-back babies is a sign of poor planning. Or cheap condoms. Or, honestly, having sex with a supersoldier using regular condoms. The corner store down from my apartment is directly responsible for us having Matilda._
I’m glad you’re not pregnant again. We’re worried about you, Josie.

I actually believe you.

You do?

Yep. I think you’re very, very worried right now. And you should be, because Max and Blake’s kitty came back yesterday.

I thought you said you’d left L.A.?

I did and we did. But Blue found them anyway, and she brought them a present. Well, all of us a present. Except you, of course.

Josie could almost hear whoever was there rapid-fire discussing whether or not she’d actually jumped the track or not and what they should do about it. Then finally, What was it?

Who. It was a who. Blue is a very special kitty.

Their cat brought them a person?

A very special person, the person who gave her to them in the first place. Blue remembered and went looking for him, she knew they needed help.

Delay. Josie, did something else happen?

Yes. Blue brought us Stephen.

A much longer delay. Stephen disappeared, Josie. Before the wedding, remember? He’s probably dead.

I will tell him you said so. Blake thought it was funny, he probably will too.

They’re all dead, Josie. You need help. Please tell us where you are so we can come get you.

You never wanted to come get us before.

We couldn’t, we didn’t know where you were in L.A. You wouldn’t tell us, remember?

“Stepping up their game,” Bucky murmured, frowning at the screen. “They are getting desperate now.” And the others were getting worried, hence the reason Bucky was sitting with her – he was the only one she couldn’t have imagined being there, because she’d never seen him before and Steve had thought he was dead. “Agree with them, let us see what they do if they think it is working.”

“Okay.” Because security, we couldn’t be sure our communications were secure, remember?

No, that wasn’t why, Josie. You were paranoid, we were going along with you, hoping you’d tell us something so we could come get you.

That’s not how I remember it. Or Max.

Max is dead, Josie. He raped you and you killed him, remember?

Max wouldn’t do that.
War does funny things to people. And he was already a sexual deviant, it isn’t surprising he snapped in that direction. Did your baby actually live, Josie? We don’t think it did.

She’s in the other room, sleeping.

She’s not real, Josie. And if there’s anyone there with you, they are a Skrull.

I will tell them all you said that.

If you do they’ll kill you, Josie. Don’t do that. Tell us where you are, we’ll help you get away.

She glanced at Bucky, who smiled and shook his head. “Tell them you aren’t sure who to believe. You do not want to give in too soon.”

I don’t know who to believe.

Believe us. We’re your friends, we’re telling the truth. We want to help you, Josie.

I have to think about it. Maybe you’re all lying, maybe I’m the only one left. She had a sudden thought. If I kill myself and you all go away, then I’ll know none of you were real.

Delay, then: True. Let us know if you’re going to try that, so we can say goodbye.

Okay. I’ll let you know. Josie logged off, pushed back from the keyboard, just staring at it. “I…I don’t know what to think about that.”

“I do.” Bucky, to her surprise, was still smiling. It was a hard smile, the kind Elise had worn sometimes, and seeing it was reassuring. “They do not know what you can do. Which means they do not actually know you, and they do not have the trust of anyone who does. This is a new player, someone who has limited information and thinks it will be enough.”

“But why would they do something like this during a war? It doesn’t make sense!”

“It would to someone who is crazy for revenge,” he told her. “I think they may be making others watch this go on – as I said before, they are out to cause damage.” He stretched and stood up, holding out his hand to her. “Come, let us go tell the others. In a way, this is a good thing. We can let them think they have won, and then strike while they are lax in their supposed victory.”

“But we don’t know where they are! And there aren’t that many of us…”

His smile widened. “There are more of us than you think. Remember, they are playing to a captive audience. Free the audience, gain an army.”

“But…” And then the lightbulb came on. “The security they wanted to breach. Steve said there’s a secure bunker under Avengers Tower…my god, they’re all in there, aren’t they? Everyone is in there. The Tower has been under siege all this time, just like Steve thought.”

Bucky nodded. “The invaders were most likely highly amused.”

Josie just bet they had been.

A week and only one or two desultory text conversations later – conversations carried out by Blake and Bucky, not Josie, because everyone else involved had collectively decided she’d had enough –
the people on the other end of the line were convinced that Josie had killed her baby and was going to commit suicide. And Stephen had recovered enough to confirm that those people were a) working with some remnant of SHIELD, and b) had magic – which was how they’d imprisoned him in the Netherworld, of course. Steve and Bucky had taken the yacht and the instructions for breaching the bunker’s security and set off for Manhattan – during a storm, for safety’s sake – to try to free the others, and the rest of them were left to wait for news, play with Blue and the baby, and watch the monsters frolic in the water. Josie would sit in a comfortable chair on the compound’s pretty stone patio and watch them, remembering how she’d stood next to Steve at the wedding and watched Thor blast the tentacle monster out of the water and how everyone had laughed, and she’d send the monsters a silent apology.
Chapter 8

After nearly three weeks had gone by, Josie logged back on. *Hello!*

Quite a bit of delay, because obviously they hadn’t expected to hear from her again - because she was supposed to be dead. *You’re alive?*

Yes. *We were just fucking with you.*

Delay. *Will you let us come get you now? Because we will, if you tell us where you are we can be there tomorrow.*

*Oh no, tomorrow wouldn’t be a good day. We’re having a party tomorrow.*

*Okay, what about the day after tomorrow?*

*Don’t you want to know what the party is for?*

*Can we come get you after the party?*

*Only if you ask me what the party is for. You have to prove to me that you care, you know.*

*Of course we care, Josie – we want to come rescue you, we’re worried. What is the party for?*

*That would be kind of hard to explain. I don’t think you’d believe me.*

“Crap, you can almost feel the frustration rolling off the screen.” Tony chuckled. “We should have popcorn for this.”

“If we had any, I would have made some,” Steve told him. “Go ahead, Josie, let them have it.”

The other end was typing. *We’ll believe you. Is it the baby’s birthday?*

*No, of course not. Can’t you count?*

Multiple people cracked up. *What is the party for, Josie? Just tell me, and then we can make plans to come get you.*

*Oh all right. But I don’t think I can tell you. I think it would be easier to show you.* She hit Send, then hit the button to make the A/V feed active. A young woman with dark hair and eyes appeared on the screen, two young men behind her looking over her shoulder. Her eyes widened when she saw Josie.

And all of the people behind Josie. Who waved. “We’re having a party to celebrate your impending death,” she said sweetly. “Because apparently the Skrulls didn’t know where you were before…but they do now.”

“How did you…” She turned to the man at her left. “I thought you were watching the Tower!”

“Someone checks every day…”

“Someone was supposed to be watching!”
Josie cocked her head. *Click.* “She’s insane, you know. And if she finds out you haven’t been taking her seriously, she’ll kill you.” The man gave her a horrified look. “Oops.”

He turned and tried to run, but he hadn’t made it more than three steps before he dropped to his knees screaming, clawing at his face…and then pulled out his gun and shot himself. The other man started to back up, but a glare from the woman made him shake his head emphatically and resume his position. Stephen rolled his eyes and leaned over Josie’s shoulder so he could look into the camera. “Little girl, I tried to tell you before and you didn’t listen: You aren’t in your own universe, this one is completely different. There aren’t any mutants here, and this Tony isn’t a megalomaniac asshole with a drinking problem.”

“He’s responsible! He’s a monster!”

“Yours may have been, this one isn’t. This one caught on to the arms dealing and stopped it.”

“And ended up killing the guy who started it,” Tony added quietly, leaning in himself. “I get you going after me, though, because I’m sure I’m a dashingly handsome fellow in every universe and you probably couldn’t tell us apart just by looking. But why torture everyone else? None of these people have ever done anything to you, have they? Hell, if I understand Stephen’s explanation, half of these people don’t even exist in your universe! So why them, Scarlet? Why hurt all of them?”

Her mouth twisted. She’d probably been a pretty girl once upon a time, but crazy was taking its toll. “They were collateral damage. I needed them to get to you.” A low growl was heard. “What was that? Your cat?”

“No, that was my husband.” Max had moved to stand beside Stephen. His face was nearly expressionless, the look in his remaining brown eye sad. “He’s angry at you, because what you did killed everything about me that he loved. It would make him really happy to kill you because of that.”

A smirk. “He could try. He’d die knowing he failed.”

“I know. Which is why I’m going to take care of it for him.” He looked down, just barely smiled. “Blue, precious, do the daddy a favor? The bad girl needs to go to the place where you found Stephen.”

And Blue stood up on her hind legs. She was almost panther-sized now, and with her front paws on his chest she was nearly looking him in the eye. She licked his cheek and rumbled a purr, he ruffled her fur…and then she vanished. She reappeared mid-pounce in the video feed, grabbed the girl by the scruff of her neck like an erring kitten, and then disappeared again before the resultant scream of rage was entirely finished. Max cocked an eyebrow at the wide-eyed young man. “You can thank me by going after the Skrulls and saving as many humans as you can.”

The man seemed to be considering that, and then he shook his head. “I’ll find you.”

Max shrugged. “And do what, exactly? Kill me? Too late, sorry, the Skrulls already did that, with your crazy girlfriend’s help.”

“She was my sister!”

“And she almost killed you where you stood not five minutes ago. Even my sister was never that bad, dude, and she was so bad we were considering marrying her off to a supervillain. Now either go make up for what the two of you did or go home, your choice. I mean, you got here somehow, I’m sure you have a way to get back, right?” The look on the guy’s face was telling. “You have got to be
kidding me. What, you just picked a universe at random? How stupid are you?"

The man lunged forward, either meaning to grab the camera or something nearby…but Blue pounced again, the camera fell over and the transmission ended when it hit the floor. Max sighed. “I didn’t tell her to take that one,” he said. “But at least his sister won’t be alone now.” And then he turned and walked out of the room without another word. They heard him start to run a few seconds later.

Blake jumped up and ran after him. Clint and Bucky both jumped up too, but Steve shook his head at them. “No, let Blake do it,” he said quietly. “If he can’t get through to Max, I’m pretty sure none of us can.” He was surprised when Josie stood up. “Honey…”

She kissed his cheek. “One of us can,” she told him. “Because he only thinks he’s telling the truth.”

Josie caught up with Max and Blake on the large patio. Max was sitting on the parapet, feet dangling over the abyss. He looked tired, and Blake…well, Josie decided that she was just going to have to ignore Blake for the moment. “Max, I’m sorry.”

He didn’t turn his head. “Josie, go back inside.”

His voice was hollow, but…click. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, Max.”

“Tell him what?”

She kept her attention fixed on Max. “Tell him what I hear when he talks.”

Max snorted. “I know what you don’t hear.”

“No, that isn’t it.” She swallowed. “I hear fear. Every time you open your mouth, I hear it. And I’m sorry, because I thought…I thought it would go away by itself. I thought you’d stop being afraid you’d killed the real Blake by mistake in L.A. I thought you’d stop being afraid you were going to wake up and find out this was all a dream. I thought you’d stop wanting to die once we were safe…but you didn’t.”

“I didn’t,” he admitted. “I want all of this to be real – or at least, I want all of you to be alive, I could’ve done without the Skrulls and killing and destruction and stuff. But the only way to prove you’re all alive and real is to kill the person who might be dreaming all of you up and see if you’re all still here afterward.”

Josie recoiled. “That’s the same thought that popped into my head, that one time. Almost word for word.”

Blake had gone dead white. “She got to him. Somehow, she got to him.”

“I think I know how.” Josie composed herself as much as she could. “Max, you need to listen to me, because I need you to answer a question. The first time a Skrull came pretending to be Blake…was I with you?”

He made a face. “You know you were. He was going to kill you, that’s how I knew he wasn’t Blake.”

She shook her head. “But Max…I wasn’t there when that happened.”
Max gave her an odd look. “Of course you were.”

“No, I wasn’t. And neither was anyone else.” He shook his head; she kept going. “Okay, what did you do with the body?”

The question seemed to startle him. “I dragged it out to the end of the parking lot, like the rest of them.”

“Was it still Blake?” He turned away and his fists clenched. “Max, the illusions the Skrulls wear go off the minute they’re dead.”

He was shaking. “So I killed Blake.”

“No, you didn’t kill anyone. Nobody was there.” Blake had gotten it. “Dammit, I’m such an idiot! If they’d scanned me and come down, you’d both be dead – they’d have waltzed right into the bunker under the building, because I knew… I knew how to get in.”

That got Max’s head back up. “But…”

“But nothing. It wasn’t him, and it wasn’t a Skrull. It was an illusion, a hallucination. Was the second one the same way, you had to drag him across the parking lot?” He nodded, wincing, and Josie glanced at Blake. “Can daddy tell the kitty to eat that bitch?”

He snorted. “Do you really want us to start using humans as cat treats?”

“When you put it that way, it does sound like a bad idea.”

“Good, because it is – and I know that because Max talked me out of it earlier.” Blake took a step forward, stopped when Max tensed. “Max, you didn’t kill me, I’m right here and this is me. Josie?”

She nodded. “It is. I wish I didn’t know he’s considering jumping if you do, but I guess that’s just more proof.”

Max shook some more. “How do I know you’re not lying?”

“You don’t.” Josie looked him right in the eye. “But I know you’re not. I know you really think killing yourself will work to prove things one way or the other. But I also know where that idea came from, because she tried to convince me to do it too. Bucky was there with me. And remember, after that you and Blake wouldn’t let me text with her anymore? Because she was starting to get to me too, I was starting to wonder if any of this was really real. What’s in your head right now isn’t real, Max.”

His eye widened, as though with a sudden realization. “You’re right, it’s not,” he said. And jumped.
Max hit the asphalt hard, having been caught off-guard by the attack he hadn’t seen coming and almost as shocked by it as he had been the first time. Trusting what the police had told him, he hadn’t expected to get jumped in the parking lot at work again. Not to mention that this time it wasn’t some random junkie with a knife attacking him with the implied intent to rob and possibly kill – this time it was Martin, FindLove’s HR guy, and nothing about his intentions was implied because he announced those intentions right up front and quite loudly after knocking Max off his feet. “You cost me some of the cushiness of my position by tattling to the boss like the worthless emo whiner you are,” Martin informed him. “So in return for you fucking up my life, I am going to beat the living shit out of you, Tegan.” He shook the tire iron he was holding for emphasis. “And you’re going to take it, and you’re going to tell everyone another junkie did it, because if you don’t I’m going to tell the cops aaalll about how you killed Blake, got it?”

Max sucked in a breath. “How did you know about that?” The parking lot was intact and full of cars, no debris, no weeds poking up through heat-broken fissures in the asphalt…no spaceship hovering like a menacing cloud off in the distance. “It wasn’t him, it was a Skrull!”

“Aw, you’re cracking up already?” Martin seemed amused. “It’s him, all right, look for yourself.” He gestured with the hand not holding the tire iron, and sure enough there was a person dressed all in black lying on the asphalt a few feet away. Lying perfectly still in a puddle of blood. Max sat up, staring. Martin was holding a tire iron, but it was all too obvious Blake had been shot. Twice, at close range. Max remembered doing it…

…but he also knew that hadn’t been Blake. Josie had told him that hadn’t been Blake.

She’d told him what was in his head wasn’t real, and now he knew it wasn’t.

Max rolled over like he was going to be sick, Martin jumped back with a curse just like he’d known the prissy bastard would, and then he lashed out the way Elise and Blake had taught him and knocked Martin’s feet out from under him. He rolled to his own feet with a groan as his body protested its recent collision with the parking lot, but he was shaking his head. “You aren’t real. None of this is.”

“I’ll show you real,” Martin snarled, and threw the tire iron. Max ducked, losing his balance in the process…

…And hit his head hard enough to see stars on the stone-flagged patio of the supervillian lair on Monster Island. One hand came up and encountered fur, Blue was on his chest. Blue had most likely knocked him off the parapet and back onto the patio while he’d been trying to jump off. Another hand caught his, and he looked up into Blake’s worried brown eyes…and then with an effort he physically felt he tore his gaze away and looked at Josie instead. “You…told me it wasn’t real,” he managed. Blackness was closing in on him, and he could feel wetness on the back of his head. “You have to…you have to tell the rest of them. So they’ll know…”

He saw her eyes widen, and then something huge and scaly stuck its head over the edge of the parapet and roared. “Go, tell them!” he screamed, and she ran. Blake was trying to pull him back toward the doors, the head lunged, and Max forced himself to sit up enough to shove his husband out of the way. He felt a claw sink in, Blake was screaming…and Max locked eyes with him. “Blake…
it’s not real,” he said. “Get her to tell you, it’s not…”

And then the claw yanked him backwards…

…And Max hit the wall behind him, the same hideously gold-muraled wall his husband had once pushed him up against for some after work fooling around one evening when they hadn’t known Josie was watching them. He had his gun up, though, and the effort of will it was costing him to keep it steady actually hurt. Actually, most of him hurt and he wasn’t sure why. “Shit, no. Why do you bastards keep doing this?! Twice wasn’t enough for you, third time’s the charm, what?”

The man had been squinting at him, and then his brown eyes widened in apparent horror. “Max? What the hell…”


“Max, I…I am your husband. Really, it’s me, Blake.” The man took a step forward, raised his hands when the gun lifted a little more in response. “Max, it really…it really is me. I escaped when…when the others did. I told them how to get here.” He squinted again. “You…the eyepatch…can’t you tell I’m not a Skrull?”

“You look human,” Max admitted. He felt like he was going to pass out. Two times already the Skruls had come to the building wearing Blake’s face, and two times Max had been forced to kill them. Or was it more than two? He distinctly remembered seeing Blake’s body in the parking lot outside, two bullet holes in his chest, dead. And Martin had been there, and there had been a monster and it had hooked him with its claws and the last thing he’d seen had been Blake’s horrified face…

Hadn’t he decided that wasn’t real, though? Max eyed the man standing tensely by the twisted remains of FindLove’s front doors. They’d been here before – over and over again, unless he missed his guess. He’d killed Blake. Blake had killed him. Once they’d fought, but he hadn’t been able to bring himself to hit Blake and the other man had kicked his ass and left him partially paralyzed in the floor while he went after Josie; Max had shot him in the back and then died. Over and over and over again, it all kept coming back to this.

Because Max knew it wasn’t real, but this was still the best way for the bitch to hurt him. And he couldn’t deny he was hurting, physically and mentally, but he also knew he couldn’t stop fighting. He didn’t dare.

The man who he was pretty sure wasn’t Blake was laughing. “You are just pitiful,” the man told him. “Yes, I know you know this isn’t real…but how much of it isn’t real, Max? How much of this did you just make up when you got stabbed in the parking lot by that junkie?”

Okay, that was new. Max shook his head. “He didn’t stab me. Blake kicked his ass.”

“Blake isn’t capable of kicking anyone’s ass, he’s an idiot savant your former boss can’t fire because of the disabilities act,” the man said, rolling his eyes. “Jesus Christ, Max, I know you’re not the brightest bulb on the tree but try rubbing those two remaining brain cells together to see if we can get a spark, would you? You got stabbed in the parking lot at work. You don’t have a boyfriend, much less a husband. Your family disowned you for being gay. And you aren’t friends with the fucking Avengers, you don’t have any friends.”

Max swallowed. “Josie…”
“Tried to get you fired, remember? She only backed up on it because she realized just how much of a psycho your boss was and decided having someone around to use as a human shield was a good idea.” The man rolled his eyes again. “I mean really, look back over these stories you’ve been telling yourself, Max – it’s like a fucking comic book, like something a kid would make up. You never were anything, and you were never going to be anything. And now you’re just a vegetable dreaming superhero dreams in what’s left of your consciousness. None of this was ever real, Max…not even you.”

“Not even me.” Max blinked at him, and then slowly, he nodded. “You may be right, NotBlake. That is a really far-fetched story – ninjas and commandos and superheroes and me marrying this awesome, loving man whose face you happen to be borrowing. And hey, I, even managed to get Godzilla in there at the end, and if he hadn’t been about to eat me that would have been pretty awesome too. I’ll give you the comic book thing, because it sounds like one, doesn’t it?” He smiled, though. “But if that’s true, if I’m just a vegetable rotting away in a hospital bed somewhere and making all this shit up in my dreams…then why would you show up and try to tell me it’s not real?”

The other man’s answer was to snarl and shoot him in the chest with a gun he hadn’t had before, and Max laughed as he slid down the wall. “That would have…hurt a lot more if…if you weren’t so obviously…not my husband.”

The man raised his gun again, but this time there was a flash and something threw him back out through the broken windows. Max felt a touch on his shoulder, let his head roll to one side and saw Stephen slumped against the wall beside him. “You…don’t look so good.”

“I look better than you do, sweetheart, believe me,” the sorcerer told him. “You have to wake up now, Max. You’re the only one who can do this. If you wake up, if you can distract her, then the others will be able to break out too.”

Max lifted one hand that felt like it weighed a hundred pounds, and the sorcerer took it in a grip that was very quickly losing cohesion. “How can I know it’s real?”

“Good question. I don’t…have an answer.” Stephen gave him a very sad smile. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Max told him. The sorcerer vanished, and his hand hit the floor again; this time, though, something clinked. Max looked down – trying very hard not to look at the hole in his chest – and saw a glint of gold. And pink. He blinked. It was his Planeteer ring, the one some of his coworkers had given him as a cruel joke when he’d started trying to be nicer to people. The cheap plastic toy that had kicked off his relationship with Blake.

Except it didn’t really feel like plastic right now, it felt like metal. And it was warm.

Max smiled. He couldn’t lift his hand again – he did try – but he curled that hand into a fist and concentrated on the thing that Blake had loved most about him. “By the Power…of Heart,” he whispered. Pink light washed out across the room, and post-apocalyptic L.A. shivered apart like snowflakes.

He reappeared in the parking lot, on the island, and even once in the hospital…but every time the ring was there on his hand and every time he called on the power light flared out and the not-realities shattered into pieces around him. Until finally he opened his eyes and saw fairy lights and white ribbons and realized he was laying on the floor of Haven 73 and so was everyone else who’d been at the wedding.

Except for Stephen, who was lying beside him, just barely touching his shoulder, looking a lot the worse for wear. And except for the woman he only knew as Scarlet, who was standing in the middle
of the room with her hands pressed to her temples and looking rather frantically pissed off. Max glanced down, saw that the ring was gone, and took a deep breath. This was reality. They’d never left the wedding party.

He forced himself to stand up, feeling a cacophony of ghostly injuries trying to tell him what a bad idea that was and ignoring them all. “Hello, Scarlet.”

She gaped at him. “How…no!”

“Yes, I’m afraid so.” She was younger than he’d thought, and wearing some kind of superhero outfit of her own with a spiky, sparkly red headband sort of thing. He cocked an eyebrow at her. “Was it the truth, that one time? Was this all about punishing the alternate-reality version of the guy who hurt you in your own reality?”

“He deserves to suffer!”

“Wow, he must have been a real prick in your reality, huh?” Max waved his hand in the general direction he thought he remembered Tony Stark being in. “This one’s pretty nice, though. Kind of insecure sometimes, but he’s working on that.”

She snarled. “He’s a monster.”

“No, not here. The only monster I’m seeing here is you…and honestly, I’m not too sure about that.”

She’d called what looked like a ball of red plasma into her hand when he’d called her a monster, but the addendum seemed to confuse her. “What…”

“You didn’t get here on your own, Scarlet. Someone sent you – I remember your brother saying that, in the dream. Someone sent you here and you didn’t have a way to get back.”

She smiled. “He’ll move us just like he did before – but we have to be finished first.”

“Taking out Tony Stark…and all the other superheroes?”

She waved a contemptuous gloved hand. “They’re just collateral damage.”

“Maybe to you,” he pointed out. “But to whoever sent you…well, I’m sure he can’t have any other reason to want Earth’s first line of defense taken out, right? He’s totally just doing this because you want revenge on multiple versions of one guy?”

She threw the plasma ball, and he managed to duck but it still winged him; it felt sort of like the electric tingle he got when Blue teleported out of his hands, only this one hurt and Blue’s didn’t. He shook out his arm, and she laughed. “If you hold still, I’ll make this quick,” she told him with fake sympathy. “You’re not important enough to torture, in fact I don’t think you even exist in any other universe besides this one. I know I’ve never seen you hanging around before.”

“So I’m unique, is that what you’re saying?”

She smiled. “No, I’m saying you’re a worthless, powerless human.”

He managed to duck the next plasma ball. “You’re human.”

She snarled at him. “I’m a mutant – the next evolutionary step. You’re like bugs compared to us.”

“Ooh, that’s a mental health red flag – thinking everyone around you is a bug,” he told her. “Maybe you did come to the right universe after all, we have medication for that here.” That made her scream
with rage, and he ducked behind a chair. He could see a few people starting to move now, obviously waking up. “Admitting you have a problem is the first step to getting better, you know!” The chair disintegrated, red fire eating it, and he slowly stood back upright; he even raised his hands in surrender. “I don’t suppose you want to talk about this, do you? Sometimes talking makes things better…”

“The Scarlet Witch doesn’t need to ‘talk’ to some lowly, powerless human,” she told him with a smile, and he swallowed. Somehow he didn’t think she was interested in making it quick anymore. Sure enough, a little dart of red fire shot out, hitting his leg and knocking it out from under him. More people were moving, though, he could see Clay sitting up holding his head. Distraction, he needed to keep being a distraction. He scooted backwards, acting like he was trying to get away from her, like he was very illogically trying to make it to the elevator; she cackled and followed, stalking him across the floor, raining little red darts down all around him. Distraction, distraction, distraction…one hit him in the chest and his scream was choked off as his lungs decided to stop working. She was looming over him now, laughing about powerless humans not being able to stop her…and then she just sort of fell down and Clay was standing there with a wine bottle in his hand. “How about one who’s just tired of listening to your shit, would that do? Oh look, it did.”

Max really wanted to laugh at that, but he was too busy trying to remember how to breathe.
Chapter 10

So far as wedding receptions went, Seth could honestly say his had to have been the most exciting one ever held in New York. Almost every superhero in the city had been there, a conjoined tentacled sea monster had tried to attack the city while everyone was dancing, and then some crazy little girl who called herself the Scarlet Witch had somehow made them live out a few unreal ‘dream’ years in a post-apocalyptic alien invasion scenario. Luckily, she was not there anymore; a second Sorcerer Supreme had shown up while they were all still trying to figure out what the hell had just happened - apparently he was from another version of their universe - and dropped off a glowing crystal thing before whisking her off, saying he thought the place she’d had their Stephen imprisoned would be adequate for keeping witchy-poo out of everyone’s hair.

The crystal thing, as it turned out, had been some kind of magical healing aid for Stephen, and Todji had known how to use it; their own sorcerer was sitting up in a chair now, looking half-dead instead of mostly dead and tiredly assuring his two lovers over and over again that he was going to be fine. They were about halfway believing him, but Seth had a feeling Stephen wasn’t going to be getting out of their sight for quite a while. He nudged his friend Teddy with his elbow. “So where were you guys while everything was going on? Jack isn’t talking.”

Teddy made a face. “I think they must have got us in the first wave of attacks, honestly. I remember the invasion starting, there was some bombing going on, and then nothing after that. You two?”

“Trapped in a bunker, being bored and frustrated most of the time,” Seth told him. He thought it was probably not a good idea to say where that bunker had been, just in case. “I remember thinking you guys must have all bought it, yeah - and being kind of glad you had, because things really went to shit later on and if we hadn’t been trapped in the bunker it would have been really hard, really bad.” He frowned across the room. “Blake was captured by the aliens early on, so was Steve…and Max and Josie were sticking it out in L.A. all by themselves. I remember that really well. They got us out, got us all to safety…but Jesus, Teddy, I don’t ever want to see the boys look like that again. Max was half the size he is now, and he had this awful hollow look in his eye - the eye he had left, that was. And Blake…it was like I could see a killing machine right under his skin just itching to get out.” He snorted. “Of course, that could have been because Steve’s Russian Assassinator buddy with the metal arm had been training him, too.”

“Who’s that?”

Seth grimaced. “That’s a story and a half. You ever been to the Smithsonian?”

Across the room, Steve was having a similar if one-sided conversation with Nick Fury - the person dressed all in black who Josie had just barely seen crumpled on the floor of the elevator before the ‘dream’ had started. The person whose abrupt entrance into the private party had most likely been Scarlet’s ‘in’ as well, because the timing was just too coincidental. Scarlet had used Fury as a distraction, and he’d most likely been her source of thankfully incomplete information about all of them. And about some other things nobody but him could have known...like the actual status of a certain supersoldier's first and best friend.

Fury had just been coming out of it when they’d found him in the elevator, and he was still pretty confused; he hadn’t shared the dream with the rest of them, he’d just been out. Or maybe in the fake reality he’d been dead. Either way, it didn’t really matter. What mattered was the incandescently furious supersoldier who was standing in front of him. “Where is he?”
“Who?”

“You know exactly who, you game-playing sack of shit. James Barnes, ring a bell?”

“He’s dead.”

Behind Fury, on his blind side, Josie rolled her eyes and shook her head. Steve’s jaw set. “Try that again. Where have you bastards been hiding Bucky, Fury? I know what happened, I know about HYDRA and SHIELD and how they’ve been using him. Now tell me where he is!”

Fury’s bloodshot eye went wide. “How did you find out about that?! That information is classified, soldier. Your old friend is dead, forget you ever heard…”

Steve’s eyes glowed blue - visibly glowed, which didn’t usually happen. He grabbed the front of Fury’s leather coat and shook him the way a dog shakes a captured squirrel in the park. “WHERE IS HE?!”

The other man tried to pull back from him. “He’s not your buddy anymore, Rogers! He’s completely insane, we have him in a secure facility…”

Josie blinked, then mouthed ‘headquarters’ at Steve. Then she moved around so she could look Fury in the eye, ignoring the fact that her fiance still had him by the throat and he was still trying futilely to get away. “She had to be using something to manipulate you. What was it?”

“I wasn’t…”

She blinked at him, and he trailed off. And then she shook her head. “He doesn’t know, Steve. She slipped him a psychic mickey, she made him think he had his friend back? Someone he’d been missing a lot.”

And Steve let go of the other man, pretty much just dropped him back into the chair. “Son of a bitch.” He visibly composed himself, eyes going back to their normal blue. “I’m sorry, Fury. I still don’t like you, I’m never going to like you…but that’s way worse than what she did to the rest of us.”

Fury sat up slowly, rubbing his throat. “I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.”

“The little bitch who called herself the Scarlet Witch,” Blake said from Fury’s other side. He was glaring. “She had mind-control powers, she made you believe…believe Phil Coulson was still alive.”

“He…you aren’t supposed to know about that! Nobody is supposed to know about that!”

“That’s because it’s not true,” Josie told him, and his eye went impossibly wide as that sank in and the comfortable illusion he’d been living in fell apart. “I know, I’m sorry. But he’s dead, Director Fury. She made you believe he wasn’t so she could manipulate you.”

“How do you know that?” he snarled. It was obvious he was trying to regain control of himself by getting angry. “How do you know any of this?!”

“Scarlet told us,” Steve said, standing back up and pulling Josie up with him, pulling her out of Fury’s reach at the same time. “Bad guys have this uncontrollable urge to monologue, you know.”

Clay was watching this little scene, and although he wouldn’t have admitted it to anyone his heart
was sinking. They’d really obviously done it before - him playing the heavy, using the boost the activated serum gave him to subdue the enemy while she tuned in on the person from just outside their field of vision and silently fed him information. Blake was on the other side, standing ready to protect her or support him as necessary, and Clay grimaced. When they’d finally hit the island, in the dream, it had been really obvious that Bucky had decided he was the kid’s new teacher and he had not-so-subtly warned Clay off. By that point Belinda’s son had already gone from dangerous to flat-out lethal, his only real weakness had been his husband.

Who was across the room talking to Bruce and Natasha; he’d already spoken to half of everyone else in the room, it looked like he was making the rounds. Small talk? Just checking up on people? Probably - Clay couldn’t think what else it could be. He’d been staying away from it himself…okay, he’d been avoiding Max and he knew it, because if it had taken him ten more seconds to come up behind that crazy bitch, if she’d been even half a tick less crazy and hadn’t felt the need to taunt and brag before killing, Belinda’s son would have been a widower and he’d never have gotten over it - guys like Blake didn’t, in Clay’s experience. It wasn’t just that, though. Back in the dream, on the island, Clay had written off what he was seeing in Max as something the guy was either going to get over or he wasn’t; he could admit, to himself anyway, that he’d passed it off as a civilian reacting to being caught in a war zone for too long. And then of course they’d found out that the little bitch had gotten inside the poor guy’s head, she’d been trying to make he and Josie both commit suicide…and well, Clay was feeling guilty. Yeah, he knew that if it all hadn’t gone down the way it had they would all probably be dead, but he couldn’t help but feel like he’d failed Max by…well, by judging him unfairly. Only compounded by waking up from an unintentional nap on the floor to find that same guy doing his best to save them all…all by himself. A god-damned public relations guy who worked for a fucking matchmaking company.

Bruce and Natasha slipped off toward the kitchen - holding hands, probably a good sign, and Max started talking to Clint and Amanda. Whatever he said to them got one hell of a reaction, though; Clint was looking more than a little shell-shocked, and Amanda had put a hand over her stomach…oh yeah, that. He’d wait until the shock had worn off and then congratulate them; sure it was an oops, but he also knew Clint had been thinking of popping the question…yep, he was dragging her off to a more private corner of the room, so that was probably a done deal.

And then Max turned around and Clay accidentally caught his eye…and the younger man colored up and looked away, shoulders hunching just a little. Clay winced. Okay, it looked like avoiding the kid had been a mistake, he’d have to fix that as soon as he had a chance. Right now, though, he had to keep an eye on Fury - who was still more than a little out of it and wasn’t showing any signs of trying to leave the chair he’d been put in, but that might not last. And Fury running amok in a room full of on-edge superheroes and commandos would be a recipe for disaster. Max was approaching Josie now, anyway, so Clay was sure that he’d be okay for at least a little bit longer - she’d know right away if he wasn’t. He frowned. He needed to get Stephen alone and find out why the sorcerer hadn’t told anyone about Steve’s girlfriend’s extra-special talent, make sure it wasn’t because they might have a leak or something…

Josie was startled when a hand fell on her shoulder; turning, she found Max standing there and was startled all over again by how awful he looked - he looked a lot like he had back in post-invasion L.A., just not as skinny, and the hand on her shoulder felt unsteady, like it wanted to shake but he wasn’t letting it. He looked her in the eye. “Josie, I just wanted to say that I’m sorry. For you and Steve both.”

He didn’t have to say why, she heard it loud and clear. She raised a hand to her mouth, eyes filling with tears as the loss she hadn’t really had a chance to process yet surged up inside of her, and he
pulled her into a gentle hug. “It’ll be okay,” he reassured her softly. “She was…a possibility, for the future. You guys can have a little Matilda any time you want.”

Steve paled when he heard those words, and Max passed Josie off to him. “It’s okay to miss her,” he said. “Clint and Amanda won’t have time to miss their baby, though.” Steve gasped and Josie’s head snapped up, and he nodded, smiling just a little. “Yep. Jacob was almost six months older than Matilda, remember? They just got a big baby surprise - and added one more thing to the list of stuff we all have to talk about tomorrow, because I’m pretty sure he just popped the question.”

Sure enough, the corner Clint and Amanda had retreated to now had a little knot of excited people in it, and a lot of hugging appeared to be going on. If Max slipped away while they were distracted, heading out to the patio alone, nobody but Stephen Strange noticed it.

Max had settled on the far side of the patio’s parapet, his back against the wall of the building and one knee drawn up so he could rest his folded arms on it. It wasn’t a precarious position by any means, but the look on his face might have made someone question why he was sitting there. The man who faded into view on the patio, dark cape swirling around him, was definitely questioning it – especially when Max didn’t react to seeing him. “Why didn’t you tell them?” the man asked.

Max just sighed; he was too tired to be startled. “I’m hoping it’s psychosomatic, honestly. I was blind on one side for a long time in that dream, you know.” He turned his head, took in the newcomer with a raised eyebrow; he hadn’t gotten a really good look at him the first time he’d showed up that night. “You look a lot more intense than our Stephen does.”

That made other Dr. Strange chuckle. “Well, I am slightly older than he is. And not so…”

“Fashionable?”

“Flamboyant, I’d say.” He smoothed down his gold-embroidered black vest. “I consider myself quite fashionable, actually.”

Max smiled. “If no one else has said it…thanks for rescuing him.”

“It was my pleasure - not to mention incredibly necessary. Thank goodness your cat came and found me and led me to him; I’d known something was going wrong with one of us but not which one or where. I took her back to your apartment, by the way, so she could rest in familiar territory - she’s worn out after all the hunting she did tonight. That wasn't what I came to speak to you about, however.” The decidedly not flamboyant version of Dr. Strange put a hand on his shoulder. “Max, do you know why you were able to break free when no one else was?”

Max shrugged, leaning his head back against the wall. “Josie told me what was in my head wasn’t real, she made me believe it – an element of her truth-hearing thing that someone probably should have anticipated, she hears the truth so she can make you hear it too.”

“That was the key that let you recognize the unreality of the dream, yes,” Strange agreed. “It was not, however, the reason you kept that dream-universe from turning into the nightmare it was supposed to be.” He nodded gravely when the younger man’s eyes widened. “Yes, really. Things were bad, but until the very end when the Witch was actually focusing on you they never went all the way, something always stopped them from being as bad as they could be.” He tightened his grip. “That something was you, Max.”

Max considered that. He didn’t think Strange was lying to make him feel better, so he forced his tired
“Was it because I’m…well, an optimist, a romantic?”

“Yes, although think it may have been a bit more than that. Tell me, how did you find your way back to reality?”

Max blushed. “I, um, imagined I had my Planeteer ring. Some of my coworkers gave it to me as a joke a few years ago, but it was a good memory because that was the beginning of my relationship with Blake. The real ring is just a toy, it doesn’t even fit on my finger and I wouldn’t wear it in public even if it did, so I knew that as long as I was wearing it and it worked I wasn’t in the real world.”

Strange was nodding. “Very clever, especially considering what power you were calling on.” That made Max’s blush deepen, and the sorcerer smiled. “It’s fitting, Max, don’t be embarrassed. You just said you’re their optimist, the unabashed romantic in their midst – that makes you their Heart. So what now?”

Max shrugged and looked away again. “Clay thinks I was trying to get away.”

“No, Clay is cursing himself for not coming out of it faster,” Strange corrected. “He knew you were trying to distract her – he saw and heard you, Max, and he knew you saw him. His avoidance is guilt, not disgust. You’ll be bound to see that more clearly in the near future when he overreacts about training to try to make you safer. Which wouldn’t be a good thing, for you or your team…”

The sorcerer abruptly stepped back, and held out his hand. “Max, will you trust me enough to come with me for a moment? I believe I know of something that might work to stabilize this situation, but I’m going to need your help.”

“My help?” Max took his hand, though, and let himself be pulled to his feet – and steadied by the other strong hand when those feet proved not quite so steady on their own. He still looked the other man in the eye, though. “You saved our Stephen, of course I trust you. Are you sure I’m the one you want, though?” He raised his free hand, waving it in front of his unseeing left eye. “I’m not exactly 100% right now.”

“I think you’re the only one who will do,” Strange assured him, and then he murmured some words in an arcane language, and with a wave of his hand they both disappeared.

Inside the dining room, Stephen whispered something in Jake’s ear and waved a shaking hand toward the patio; when the younger man started to object, he murmured something else. Jake paled and helped him stand up, waving Todji over. “We have to go sit on the patio,” he said in a low voice. “The other Dr. Strange came back and left again…and this time he took Max with him.”

Todji’s jaw set. “Crap. Blake…”

“The other side of the room. He’ll notice Max is missing any time now…and think the worst.”

“I can’t blame him for that, after the night we’ve already had.” Sure enough, they’d just barely gotten Stephen settled again on the patio when Blake came out looking panicked; Jake waved him over and kicked out a chair. “The other Dr. Strange took him somewhere a few minutes ago. Have a sit, we’re waiting for them to come back so we can find out what’s going on.”

“He…he took…”

“He couldn’t have taken you with them, Blake,” Stephen told him. “Reality hopping is a strain with one person, he’d never have managed it with both of you.”

Josie appeared on the patio just in time to hear that, and she gasped. “Reality…” She was hearing
what he suspected about where they’d gone, but it was fantastic, ridiculous. “No, that can’t be…”

“Real? Everything is real somewhere.” Stephen coughed into his hand, waved away a few exclamations of concern even as he leaned a little more into Todji’s hold. “Stop that, I’ll be fine once I’ve had some rest. And not a word,” he warned Josie when she started to open her mouth. “There’s no telling what they’ll find, or if they’ll find anything at all.” A few more people came out, quite obviously thinking something else had happened. “Max will be back soon,” he called out. “The other me came to talk to him and then whisked him off somewhere. Hopefully along the way they’ll stop at a clinic and check his eye to see if the damage is going to heal or not.” He sighed when several people went pale. “No, you didn’t notice…but that’s because he wasn’t calling attention to it. Not to mention, at least several of you had gotten used to seeing him only look at you with his right eye during the incident, there’s no reason you’d have thought that was odd.” He pointed a shaky finger at Clay, though. “You, however, owe him an apology – he doesn’t know you well enough to understand why you were avoiding him.”

“I figured that out about five minutes too late,” Clay agreed. “You’re sure…”

“It’s still me, Clay, just from another part of the multiverse. They won’t be gone long. Apologize when he gets back, he’ll accept it.”

“He will,” Blake agreed. “Max…Max always accepts an apology. Even if you don’t mean it.”

Clay didn’t take offense. “Of course I’ll mean it - I’m not that much of an asshole. You all do need more training, though. That isn’t a criticism, it’s just a fact.”

“True.” That had come from Todji. “But Elise knows how to handle her team, you don’t, so back off.”

Josie sat down next to Blake. “We’re really Elise’s team?”

He nodded. “She said she’d never have another team, she really did…really did plan on staying as much out of the ‘family business’ as she could. But she won’t…this is going to be all hands on deck, and we…we’re going to be needed. And we’ll be filling a different spot than the rest of them, we have…different skills in different proportions, basically.”

“Meaning you’ll need to be trained differently,” Elise added, appearing out of nowhere much the same way Blake often did; Josie jumped, and she smiled. “Don’t worry, it’s going to be fine. Like I said before, Nick’s reindeer games won’t go over very well in L.A., so by the time we even see any of it you’re all going to be able to handle it. I promise.”

Elise’s team hadn’t just been killed, they’d been wiped out by a madman. The same one who’d framed Clay’s team, and who’d almost killed Allison when her team had gone out to stop him. The same one Steve had said was evil. Josie blinked up at her. “He’s dead, right?”

The smile widened. “Yes, the Botos - Allison’s team - got him. I’m sure the video of his execution by the Argentinean government is still online somewhere if you want to see it, and all the confessing he did before that, too.” She cocked a perfect eyebrow at Stephen. “I’d been meaning to ask you…necromancy really doesn’t work, right?”

“Do you want me to lie?” She made a face, and he laughed. “Don’t worry, it’s not easy to do and I have a watch on certain things and people just in case. Because zombies are disgusting, no matter what kind they are.”

It wasn’t only Josie’s eyes that went wide at that statement, but Steve came out before anyone could
ask him to elaborate. He frowned, looking around. “Wait, I thought Max was out here?”

“The other Dr. Strange whisked him away somewhere,” Blake told him. “We aren’t sure exactly… exactly where, or why, but Stephen said they should be back soon.” That got him a hug from Josie and Steve. “No, really, I’m… I’m fine.”

“Like hell you are,” Steve admonished. “I don’t think anyone here is okay right now, and you guys had it worse than most of the rest of us did.”

If Josie hadn’t been in love with Steve before, she’d have loved him just because he’d said that - and because he’d honestly meant it.

The floor below Haven did not have anyone renting it, but there were a few desks left by a previous tenant and Natasha had perched herself on top of one of them. Her indigo dress sparkled in the city lights coming in through the big windows, and she was swinging her feet. “You are usually not this slow to take your clothes off,” she teased her boyfriend. “I would help you…but I like to watch.”

Bruce blushed. “We are not having sex in an abandoned office underneath Allison and Seth’s wedding,” he said, pulling off his shirt and draping it over the back of the chair his pants were already hanging on. His undershirt joined them, as did his socks; his shoes were under the chair. The fabric of his blue underwear had a sheen to it in the refracted light rather than a sparkle. “I’m not even sure we should be doing this down here.”

“I am.”

“You always are - that’s one of the many things I love about you.” He sighed, running a hand through his hair, then shut his eyes. “Okay, time to see if all that meditation I did in the dream carried over. Here we go…”

The transformation from relatively small man into gigantic green Hulk was always, to Natasha, somewhere between fascinating and horrifying to watch, but the roar he let out when it was over had long since ceased to frighten or even startle her. She cocked her head as he looked around the shadowy space, his heavy brows lowering in a fierce frown. “Well?”

The Hulk looked at her, raising an eyebrow, then grinned widely and winked. “Hey pretty lady, you come here often?”

The other-world version of the Sorcerer Supreme reappeared on the patio roughly twenty minutes after he’d left it, Max beside him looking even more tired than he had before. He gave the sorcerer a hug, murmuring a thank you, and shook his head when several of the people who’d been waiting there for them gasped. “No, it’s okay,” he said, touching the black patch that was now covering his left eye. “I couldn’t see out of it before, I just… didn’t tell anyone, I was hoping it was psychosomatic.” He squared his shoulders. “It isn’t, Dr. Strange checked to make sure.”

“His brain has basically shut down all communication with his optic nerve on that side,” Strange told Stephen, who winced but nodded that he understood. “On the plus side, he’d had plenty of time to adjust to it in the dream world, so he’s already used to functioning with monocular vision and it’s not causing him any problems.”

“Well, not until it’s time to renew my driver’s license, anyway,” Max added. “But that’s not for a couple more years, or even longer if I renew it online, so for now what the DMV doesn’t know
won’t hurt them.” Blake was looking up at him, seemingly studying his face, and he tentatively reached out. “Is it…okay?”

“It’s okay,” Blake confirmed, and then wrapped his arms around his husband and hung on as hard as he could. “At first I thought…I thought you’d…”

“No, I wouldn’t have, but I know why you’d think that. I’m so sorry…”

“Don’t be. That wasn’t your fault, it was hers.”

“Yeah, I know – but I’m still sorry I scared you.” He pulled back, just a little, so he could look down into his husband’s tear-filled brown eyes. “We need to talk - now, it can’t wait. I know we need to go rescue Bucky…” Steve gasped that time, and Max rolled his eye at him. “Well of course we do, Steve - he was there, in the dream, which means he woke up in whatever cell they’re keeping him in remembering who he was and knowing who Blake and I and Josie are. Figure out how the four of us are getting in there and getting out with him while I talk to my husband, we need to get to him before they realize something’s wrong and start trying to ‘fix’ him again.”

“He’s right,” Josie chimed in when Steve hesitated; Max was already pulling Blake to the far side of the patio. “We’ll all have to go, so he’ll know it’s not a trick.” She kissed him, then gave him a little push. “Everyone was wondering what we were going to do about Director Fury, right? He’s still confused, maybe we can use him to get us all inside.”

He kissed her back, not budging. “Getting in isn’t the part I’m worried about.”

“We can get you out.” Todji locked eyes with the rest of his team. Amanda and Rhonda both nodded, but he shook his head at Allison. “Nope, you have a honeymoon waiting,” he said when she started to open her mouth. “We can burn this one down without you - consider it an extra wedding present.”

Seth wrapped an arm around his new wife’s slender waist. “We can’t help?”

“We are helping,” Allison told him. Her eyes hadn’t left Todji’s. “We’re taking Stephen and Jake with us.”

“Hey!”

“Stephen, shut it,” Jake ordered. “You couldn’t light a candle right now if I handed you a lit match, and this could go south in a big way. We’re evacuating you and that’s final.”

Stephen deflated, leaning into his hold. “Fine, I’m too tired to argue with you.” He saw the look on his other self’s face and winced. “No?”

“No. There’s no one in my world I could trust that much, I’m afraid - not at present, anyway.” Strange shook his head, made an impatient swipe at his eyes. “That’s neither here nor there, though. I’m going to have to go soon, Stephen, but there are things you should know first. I took Max to another version of Earth, one very different from this one…and much to my surprise we were expected, in fact the first words out of the man’s mouth were, ‘Finally, you’re here.’ He said he’d known we’d be coming for years, but the only other thing he’d tell me was that there are certain powers which transcend all barriers. I’m sure Max will tell you more when he’s ready; the week we spent there was a…highly personal experience for him, so it may be some time before he’s ready to share it with anyone besides his husband.” Josie gasped, her eyes going round with disbelief, and he nodded at her. “Let him tell it when he’s ready, please. He’ll know when it’s the right time and I dare say you will too.” He wavered then, the way the picture on a screen wavers when the power is
flickering, and rolled his eyes. “Well, at least my fail-safe is functioning. Stephen, I’m glad I got to meet you – you’re a braver man than I am, that’s for certain. Win for us here, would you? In my reality that little bitch tore the hero community apart from the inside and then set things up so outside forces would keep widening the breach. Half of our people are fugitives now, and I’m about to turn my Tony Stark into a puppy and give him to my Steve Rogers as a pet - it would probably be the best thing that could happen to either one of them, at this point.” He wavered again. “All right, I really am going now.” He bowed. “It was a pleasure to meet all of you. I’ll tell the others…maybe it will give them some hope…”

And then he was just gone, almost like he’d never been there at all. “His ‘fail-safe’ is a demonically-powered magical recall that pulls him home if he gets too low on power to shift back on his own,” Stephen explained. “I’ll have to consider setting up one of those myself…”

“In a month or so, maybe,” Todji scolded him. “You’re not going to have enough energy to do more than drink tea and read books for at least that long, Stephen.”

“True.” Stephen rubbed his eyes. “I want to sleep for a week.”

“We’ll let you,” Jake told him. “That way we’ll know exactly where you are.” That got him pulled closer. “Dammit, Stephen, you’ve got to come up with a way for us to track you, you’ve just got to.”

“Putting a spell on your phone so we can trace it would be a start - at least, putting one on a month from now, that is,” Amanda put in. “You scared the hell out of all of us by disappearing like that.”

“Oh believe me, you weren’t half as scared as I was,” Stephen told her. “When she trapped me and left... well, I knew then it wasn’t me they were after, or at least not just me, anyway.” He cleared his throat. “This has been happening all over the multiverse. One of my other selves caught on to what was happening in a nearby universe and stopped it, and he figured out a way to send a warning to the rest of us. The primary target in most of those universes has been Steve, because he’s apparently a lynchpin for the Final Apocalypse - lose him too soon, or in the wrong way, and you’ve lost the last war. And in far too many of those universes SHIELD was actively involved in causing it to happen. They are...a much bigger problem than we’d all thought, or at least they can be.” He cleared his throat again. “Max and Blake’s island supervillain lair is truly the idea we should go with, and that as quickly as possible. Some of our other selves have already done the same thing, it seems to be the best way to protect ourselves against what’s coming...and what’s already here as well. And we have to protect ourselves first in order to be able to protect the rest of the world.”

Steve had been absorbing this with a very intense expression on his face. “We need to be autonomous. Which would make some things a lot easier, because we wouldn’t have SHIELD and half a dozen government agencies watching our every move and the news media trying to whip up a controversy every time we have to do something. But on the flip side…”

“...No coffee shops, restaurants, or stores,” Max said, re-entering the group. He was holding Blake’s hand, and Blake looked...well, somewhere between shocked and relieved, to Josie’s eyes at least. “We’d all had time to get used to not having a lot of modern conveniences before, because they were all pretty much gone already - everyone was either living off stockpiles or scavenging. This time, though, we’ll need to consider how we’re going to fill that gap before we get out there. Because we’re going to be cutting ties all the way around, and someone may decide to retaliate by cutting our supply lines.”

“Or trying to use them to compromise us,” Steve agreed, nodding. “First, though, we need to get Bucky the hell out of SHIELD’s clutches, but there’s no way I’ll be able to get Fury to agree to taking all of us. If the rest of you show up at headquarters when we do and get aggressive about being left behind, though...well, he’s still really stuck on the idea of causing rifts between the teams,
so he’d probably see that as an opportunity too good to pass up. Not to mention, he’ll see the three of you as hostages he can use to make me do what he wants.” He stood up. “I’ll go talk to Fury, we need to get moving. Allison…” He hugged her. “This was one hell of a wedding. Try to have an unadventurous honeymoon?”

“We can do that. Don’t make us come back early to rescue you.”

“Not going to be an issue,” Blake said before Steve could say anything. He hugged his aunt, then hugged Seth. “We’ll see you…see you both in a week. Don’t…don’t worry, we’ve got this.”

“We know you do,” Seth told him, ruffling his hair. “Still going back to L.A.?”

“We have to, we have work on Monday.” Max hugged them both too. “Have fun, guys. We’ll let you know if anything super interesting happens, I promise.”

The rest of the ‘family’ moved in to say their goodbyes, and Rhonda collected Cougar so they could escort the newlyweds along with Stephen and Jake to the private airstrip where their plane - or rather, Tony’s plane - was waiting to whisk them away. The rest of the wedding guests clustered around them, offering well-wishes and promises to keep everything under control while they were gone; if Allison whispered in a few ears on her way out, nobody who shouldn’t have noticed - just like nobody noticed Steve having a very quietly intense conversation with Clay in the background. And then as soon as the elevator doors closed Steve started loudly insisting that Fury take him to see Bucky, and in the confusion Josie, Max, Blake, Todji and Amanda slipped out through the kitchen and into the service elevator.

Ben was waiting when the service elevator opened up into the parking garage, one rocky eyebrow raised and his arms folded across his chest. “Took you long enough,” he rumbled. “I was startin’ to think you were usin’ the stairs. Come on, van’s over here. There’s no way we can walk with all of you dressed up like this - especially you, little girl, you look like a fairy princess.”

Josie took his offered arm. “You know…”

“I know the parts that Johnny told me.” He used his free had to tap the side of his head. “Witchy-poo couldn’t get through this, so I didn’t share the experience with the rest of you - I just got to play with her brother.”

“Lightning Boy was here? Are you okay?”

That had come from Josie, Max and Blake, and Ben chuckled; these new kids were so cute. “I’m made of rock, guys - he couldn’t shove me around, all he did was piss me off and then I clotheslined his ass and he was down for the count. He may have been dead, even, or gettin’ there. SHIELD came and hauled him off, though, so keep an eye out for him while you’re in there just in case.”

Todji frowned. “If he's alive he’s either under observation prior to being interrogated, or whoever might have been working with he and his sister has him. The new team Fury’s been hiding?”

“God I hope not,” Amanda moaned. “I know it’s probably psychosomatic, but I’m definitely feeling queasy - if we had to fight, I’d probably puke on someone.” Ben raised the eyebrow again, and she blushed. “Um, Clint and I just found out we’re pregnant - I had the baby right in the middle of the dream, so I’m probably about two weeks along right now.”

“She’s not going to be fighting,” Todji maintained before Ben could say anything. “We’re burning the place down and then getting the hell out - and not going back. This has gone way beyond what
we can fix from inside the HR office, and the probability of us being attacked by our own people while we’re at work just went through the roof. Not to mention, we’re going to be needed more on the outside.”

“Probably, yeah.” They all piled into the van, Todji and Amanda farther back so they couldn’t be seen easily; they had Ben drop them off a block from SHIELD’s headquarters and disappeared into the warm Manhattan night like ghosts, but the van was pulled up right in front of the building to let the other three out. “You’re sure?” Ben wanted to know.

“This plan will work,” Blake assured him. “Just wait here, we’ll be out with…with Steve and Bucky soon.”

“Right after we finish dazzling Director Fury with bullshit,” Max added, grinning. He pulled off his eyepatch and stuck it in his jacket pocket. “Let’s go get our buddy, guys.”

Ben watched them converge on Fury and Steve when the two men got out of the black car that pulled up; he even waved when Fury scowled at the van. “Yeah, I know you’re scared of me, asshole,” he muttered, not at all unhappily. “But if that little girl comes out missin’ so much as a bobby pin, you’d better hope I get to you before Steve does.”

Back at Haven, Tony was crouched in front of a laptop, earpiece in, most of the rest of the remaining guests clustered around him eating cake - it wasn’t only Max, Blake and Josie who’d been dieting hard for the wedding. “Okay, they’re in. And Jarvis says the other two just hit the HR office…”

Amanda plopped down into her desk chair and turned everything on; across from her, Todji was doing the same. “I’m going to miss this chair. And the carpet.”

“I’m not going to miss these fluorescent lights,” he countered. “Okay, activating Project Endgame two-point-four. Firewall is down, email blast is going out. File transfer initiated, five minutes and counting.”

“IT lockout is active. And Elise’s team is in, they’re following Fury downstairs,” she told him. “They’re going to need a name.”

“Hollywood.”

“That’s cheesy. And it really doesn’t suit them.”

“Point. What’s California’s state animal?”

“A grizzly bear, no dice.” She tapped open a new window and looked something up. “I may have one. The state fish is the garibaldi - a pretty orange finny thing, known for how aggressively the males defend the eggs after the female lays them. They’ll even bite divers to chase them away.”

“Doesn’t Elise hate fish?”

“Didn’t Elise say she’d never have another team?”

“Yes, but that has nothing to do with her hating fish. Do we have guard movement?”

“A few following Fury and the others, yeah. Keeping their distance for now. Blake and Steve can
handle them. Did I hear Steve say a legendary assassin had been training Blake?”

“You did, and I did too,” he confirmed. “Three minutes and counting until the transfer is complete, and my email blast is forty percent done. Do you think Hill’s a Skrull?”

“Jesus, Todji, don’t even say that - I like Maria, I don’t feel like killing her tonight.”

“Point. And you did say you’d puke if you had to fight.”

“I totally would. Okay, at two minutes I’ll initialize the Manhattan Fishing program.”

Todji grinned. They’d gotten the name from a Crocodile Dundee movie; it was an apt description for what Amanda’s program was about to do to certain sections of SHIELD’s project database, briefly uncovering everything and revealing all the data links so that certain other pre-warned federal agencies could just scoop project records up without having to fish around for individual records. “Twenty…ten…five…go!”

“Gone. Fuse is lit, fishing will commence in two minutes thirty seconds.” Amanda checked the other monitor. “Crap, that’s half an armored unit moving for the ramp. I feel like I’m in a Star Wars movie.”

Todji snorted. “I don’t think Bucky would appreciate being compared to Princess Leia. Fury’s definitely got the Vader thing going on, though.”

“As long as he doesn’t try to tell Blake he’s his father.”

“He’d be lying and they’d both know it. It would be funny, though. Would that make Max Chewy and Steve Han?”

“And Josie R2-D2, yeah.” Amanda smiled. “I’ve got it, they can be the Falcons. As in Millennium.”

“I like that better than naming them after a fish, but falcons are big and mean, it still doesn’t quite fit...” He snapped his fingers. “Kestrels, they’re kestrels. Small, fast, look different and hunt differently than other members of their species…and make their nests in buildings. They’re cute little city falcons.”

Amanda grinned. “Kestrels, that works. I’ll let Elise know. Okay, forty seconds and counting, and then we can grab a couple of boxes and clean out our desks. You get Rhonda’s, I’ll take Allison’s…”

The bowels of SHIELD headquarters were a place even most SHIELD employees did not like to go - not even when they had clearance, which most of them didn’t. Tucked away beneath the agency’s secure underground parking levels, the concrete walls and fluorescent-lit corridors were far too reminiscent of hidden prisons, secure bunkers and secret laboratories. Not that SHIELD wasn’t using its lower level for any or all of those things, because it most certainly had been and sometimes still was, but even some of the people who worked there found the area disquieting. Josie could tell it had long since stopped bothering Director Fury, who stalked down the long corridors in a very businesslike fashion.

In the middle of one such corridor was a door just like all the other doors, flat gray-painted metal with a little steel-mesh inset window near the top and a keypad to one side. Steve looked through the window, then stepped back with narrow eyes and set jaw. “Really, the locked steel door wasn’t enough?”
Fury huffed. “I keep telling you, Captain, he’s violently insane. That’s not your buddy in there anymore.”

“He may not have been a few hours ago,” Blake pointed out, ignoring the scowl he got for talking. “But that has most likely changed.”

“Oh, it’s changed all right.” Max had moved to look through the window himself; he smiled suddenly, then gave a little wave before stepping back. “Yeah, he recognized me. So are you gonna let us in or do we just go in?”

“I’m telling you, that man in there is a psychotic killer, you can’t…!”

Steve reached over, grabbed the door handle, and ripped the door out of the wall. “Can, did, have before,” he said calmly, strolling into the room. He raised an eyebrow at the long-haired man in the hospital-type gown who was strapped into the chair-like arrangement in the room’s center, taking hold of one of the restraints and ripping it out of the metal before throwing it aside and reaching for the next one. “Jesus, Bucky, what is it with you and people wanting to tie you down?”

“The same thing it is with you and getting the shit beaten out of you in alleys,” Bucky told him. His voice was hoarse, and Josie hurried to the sink to get him some water while Steve took care of the rest of the straps. He took the cup from her with a smile. “So this is what you look like not pregnant.”

“I wasn’t pregnant the last time you saw me,” she reminded him. “I was post-pregnant and had huge milk boobs.”

“Same difference,” he maintained, taking her hand and kissing it before standing up and stretching and then ripping off the gown and tossing it away. “Real clothes, please? Or should I walk out like this?”

“You aren’t going anywhere, Sergeant,” Fury growled. He couldn’t help but notice that neither Rogers nor Gomez’ ‘employees’ had reacted at all to the sudden nudity, but he tried to insert some controlling shame into the situation anyway. “And cover back up, this is inappropriate.”

Josie snickered. “Like he wasn’t walking around this way half the time when we all lived together.”

“Clothes do not belong on a beach,” Bucky maintained. He clasped Steve’s arm, used it to pull him into a strong hug. “Missed me?”

“Every day, buddy, every day.” Steve slapped him on the back, pulled away. “We’ll have to get you someone else’s clothes, yours are in the Smithsonian.”

“On it,” Blake said. He moved to the door, Max stepping aside to give him more space, then yanked a black-uniformed guard into the room and dropped him without giving him time to make a sound. He considered the limp body. “May be…may be a little small, but it should do until we get home.”

Barnes, to Fury’s surprise, absolutely beamed. He strode forward, stepping over the guard’s body, and swept the smaller man into a bear hug. “Sloppy but still good, my apprentice.”

“Hey, this is the first time I’ve ever done that move in actual reality,” Blake protested. He nodded when Bucky felt his bicep and frowned. “Yeah, unfortunately all that muscle I’d…I’d earned training with you stayed in the dream.”

“He’s back to ‘cuddly vigilante’ now,” Max put in. Bucky started to say something, but he shook his head. “No, not in present company, please. He’ll get jealous because I wear it better.”
Bucky put his hands on Max’s shoulders, looking him in the eye - the good one. “If you ever do that again, I will kill you myself. Do you understand?”

Max nodded. “Yeah. Thanks.”

That got him a hug, which he returned. Fury was rolling his eye. “Jesus Christ, people, can we stop with the Hallmark moment and get serious. You just broke into a secure facility, killed a guard…”

“I didn’t…didn’t kill him,” Blake huffed, offended. “Jesus Christ yourself, Fury. Not everyone’s a…a fucking murderer of convenience.”

“Show some respect.”

“Earn some.”

Fury snarled at him. “You should never have been born.”

Blake just blinked back. “You told my mother that, and she told you to go piss up a rope.” He scratched his front tooth. “And…and suggested therapy to fix your control issues. Still haven’t taken her advice, huh?”

“Why you little…!”

“Enough!” Steve snapped. “Pants, Bucky - I’m too broke right now to pay your bail if you get hauled in for indecent exposure. Not to mention Ben will laugh at you.”

“Ben?”

“Drove us over here - big orange guy, used to be an astronaut, you’ll like him,” Max told him, moving in to help divest the unconscious guard of his pants and boots. “Scarlet couldn’t get into his head, so he wasn’t able to join the rest of us on our all-expense-paid post-apocalyptic adventure tonight.”

Fury had backed away, into the doorway. “None of you are going anywhere except to a debriefing room and then to individual cells. I might let you three useless civvies out after you’ve told me about the operation your boss is running in L.A.” he allowed. “But Captain Rogers just crossed a line there’s no going back from.” He raised a hand to his own earpiece. “Guards, move in…”

Back at Haven, everyone watched tensely as black-armored guards filed into the corridor, then watched the people in the room stroll out behind Fury and follow him up and out of the lower level, a portion of the guards following them. Tony frowned at the screen, wondering why the display color had shifted further into red just then, giving everything a pinkish overcast. He decided he’d check it later and tapped his own earpiece. “Okay, they’re on their way out, it looks like a distraction isn’t going to be needed. Finish up and get the hell out of there.” He turned his head so one eye could find Elise. “Did Steve’s girlfriend do that?”

She shook her head. “No, that wasn’t Josie. She wouldn’t be able to make someone do something that way.” Elise suspected she knew who had been able to do that, though, and kept herself from smiling. He’d tell her once they were home, she was sure of it. He was married to her nephew, after all - and she was his team leader.
Ben saw people starting to come out and pulled the van up, not sure why everyone was just strolling out of SHIELD headquarters like they’d just stopped in to say hi and Fury and his parade of goons were just coming out to see them off. The big half-naked guy with the metal arm had to be Barnes, especially since Steve had one arm draped across the guy’s shoulders. Fury was just standing there looking like someone had pissed in his cheerios - what he always looked like, from Ben’s point of view anyway - and his guards were just standing there too, almost like an honor guard. The kids seemed relaxed and happy, and neither Fury nor his goons moved as they strolled casually over to the van. Max lingered behind the rest of them, though. He approached Fury and held out his hand. Fury took it, looking confused, Max said something to him, and then he broke off the hand-clasp, turned and followed the others, climbing into the back of the van and sitting down beside his husband. Ben blinked, noticing that the usually yellow streetlights had taken on a rosy cast, or maybe his eyes were just tired. He made sure everyone was in and buckled up, then pulled out into New York’s never-ending river of traffic and drove away, resisting the urge to gun it since it didn’t seem to be necessary. He glanced back in the rear-view mirror, seeing Blake hugging his husband, who appeared to be crying. “What just happened back there?”

Max just sniffed, shaking his head; nobody deserved to be as alone as Nick Fury was, nobody.

Nick Fury stood on the sidewalk outside of SHIELD headquarters, staring into the street. *I just wanted to say that I’m sorry for your loss*, Belinda’s defective son’s husband had told him with what appeared to be honest feeling. *The others talk about Agent Coulson sometimes, it sounds like he was an amazing man. I’m really sorry I’ll never have the chance to meet him.* And then he’d let go of Fury’s hand, turned, and walked to the waiting van without a backward glance.

Fury blinked, not entirely sure what had just happened, and then shook himself and turned to the waiting guards. “Okay, everyone back to your posts. This exercise is over!” he ordered, and they obediently filed back inside. He threw one more questioning scowl at the traffic, then shook his head and went back in himself. He’d figure it out later, he supposed.

In a completely different part of the building, in their nice office with the maroon plush carpeting, Todji and Amanda were just gathering the last of their personal effects into boxes when the office door was kicked open and two armed guards burst in. “Hands up, stop what you’re doing!” one of the guards called out, aiming his rifle at Amanda. “Back away from the computer or I will shoot…” Which was when a panel in the ceiling fell out and Clint Barton fell out with it, taking down both guards at once. “You don’t point a gun at a man’s future wife and future baby,” he scolded. “Or his future brother-in-law, either, for that matter.” He grinned at Amanda. “Did you already clean out your desk? I can carry the box for you. Jarvis says we have five minutes before the cameras come back on.”

“You can carry my laptops,” she told him, handing over a heavy bag. “I still have to get Allison’s unicorn statue, she’d have a fit if something happened to it…”

Tony sat back in his chair, grinning. “Okay, everybody’s out and nobody’s following them,” he announced, and winked at Haven’s owner. “One hell of a party tonight, huh?”

Chef Jim just smiled, shaking his head. He’d refused to tell anyone what he’d experienced in the dream except for one whispered conversation with Sue and Reed, but it didn’t seem to be upsetting
him too much, whatever it had been. “It was calmer than I expected it to be, actually.”

Halfway across Manhattan, a cab dropped Jack off at Nolita. He let himself in, locking the door behind him, and checked to make sure everything had been closed up to his satisfaction. One or two oversights caught his eye, and he huffed out a frustrated breath; it was just fucking impossible to hire a decent cleaning crew in New York these days, apparently. Didn’t anybody take pride in their work anymore? Was he going to have to get some of his own people to do the job if he wanted things done properly?

He checked the office, quickly reading over the notes Steven had left for him about how things had gone that night - for obvious reasons, Steven had not been invited to Seth’s wedding party - checked to make sure no orders were due to arrive in the morning, and then went upstairs to his apartment, changed into comfortable clothes, and got on the computer to type out his report. Nobody was going to be pleased about the failure of the Witch to take out the city’s heroes, Thanos least of all. It was his understanding that Thanos had been amused by the Witch, who had still somehow retained the idea that she was a hero even while being used to destroy the defenses of multiple Earths. Jack had a vague idea that Thanos had been force-feeding news of she and her brother’s exploits to the remaining defeated heroes in the universe she’d started out in, but he had no real opinion about that. Defeated was defeated, conquered was conquered, and if you weren’t smart enough to die then torture was what you deserved for your failure.

That thought made him frown. Using the Witch should have worked, he wasn’t sure why it hadn’t. Possibly the new people in the equation had something to do with it? He hadn’t thought much about them until he’d seen them interacting with Fury, but after that he’d made a mental note to find out more because Fury’s reaction to them had been unexpected and betokened a failure of intelligence somewhere. Jack added that to the report, along with the steps he planned to take to get the information he wanted. He was just detailing everything he’d noticed about the new group’s interaction with Fury when the lights went out. He cursed, hoping auto-save had kept the report mostly intact for him, and leaned back in his chair to look out the window; it looked like the whole block was dark. “God-damned rolling blackouts,” he swore. “If I have to re-type that…”

“You won’t.”

Jack jumped to his feet at the sound of the female voice. “Who…”

“Careful, you’ll give yourself away,” a male voice scolded. “Most middle-aged men don’t move quite that fluidly, you know.” Something rustled in the darkness, and before Jack could react there was a ripping sound and a few sparks as the cords connecting his computer to everything were torn out. “Got it,” the male voice said.

And the power came back up. Jack scowled. “What the hell…why are you in my apartment? Have you guys gone bad like the news people keep saying you will?”

Mr. Fantastic just smiled. “If I wanted to turn to a life of crime, I doubt I’d start with a chef who lives above his restaurant.”

“Saks Fifth Avenue would be my choice,” the Invisible Girl said as she finished fading into view. “They haven’t had a decent sale in months.”

“Well, the economy is fluctuating, the demand for luxury goods has gone down,” Jack told her. “So is this just the way superheroes send a ‘thank you for attending’ note or what?”
“Or what,” Mr. Fantastic said. “It didn’t go unnoticed that you weren’t affected by what happened tonight. Haven does have very nice restrooms, though, so I’m sure you were comfortable while you waited.”

“It does and I was.” There was no sense lying about it. “Still not an explanation, though.”

“No, of course not.” The other man cleared his throat. “You failed to take into account that Scarlet’s ‘dream’ was incorporating all elements of the current reality. It was discovered, within the dream, that you were in fact a Skrull posing as Jack Bourdain while the real Jack was overseas filming a television series.”

Jack smiled. “I’d really like to see you try that argument out on a judge. Especially since I told everyone here that the project was on hold, so I could call every single member of my staff as a witness.”

“Very true. None of that will be necessary, though.”

He reached back a long arm and opened the door, and Steve Rogers strolled in trailing his pretty little red-haired girlfriend. Who was still dressed up and looked completely bewildered. “I couldn’t leave her outside,” he told the two now-frowning members of the Fantastic Four. “Especially not dressed like this.”

Jack’s smile widened. He wouldn’t mind a good fight tonight. First, though, some fun. “It’s Josie, right? I’m so sorry you’re being dragged into this. He’s right, though, leaving you outside wouldn’t have been safe at all.”

She blinked at him. “I remember seeing you at the wedding, but I don’t think we were introduced. Mister…?”

“Jack, Jack Bourdain.” She smiled in recognition, and he preened just a little - keeping up the act now would only help him later. “Aw, you’ve heard of me.”

“Oh yes. And I’ll look forward to meeting you in person someday, too.”

Well shit. “Listen, I don’t know what they’ve told you, but…” He lunged forward, reaching for her - she’d make an excellent hostage - but ended up falling flat on his face because his legs had been tangled up by Mr. Fantastic’s other arm. And then Rogers was helping to pin him to the ground - the guy was stronger than he’d realized - and he could see feet as more people came in. Men, it looked like. The girl’s friends? “What the fuck is this, an assault or an afterparty?!?”

That made a few of the people laugh. “He must have picked the sense of humor up from the real Jack,” one of the newcomers said. “Skrulls don’t really do funny.”

Dammit, they really did know. “I’ll think it’s funny to kill you.”

Dead silence, and then that same voice said, with inexplicable sadness, “Yeah, you would.”

And then something happened to the light and his illusion shattered. He roared in rage and fought to get to his feet, and about five seconds too late realized that they had let him get up. He was being very securely held by strong, rubbery limbs, and after a few moments of renewed struggling he stopped. “Nice,” he growled. “And it only took all of you to capture me. You might as well surrender now, humans. Tonight’s failure was not a reflection of our prowess, only of the weakness of the Witch.”

“You boss shouldn’t have been relying on an unstable little girl to get the job done for him,” the
man who had been speaking agreed. He was tall, possibly taller than Rogers, and the man beside him was short...oh yes, the nephew’s husband. Who so far as he knew was nobody, really, they both were, so why were they here? The man was still talking. “Scarlet had no imagination, she just used things she’d already seen to craft her illusions, her nightmares. So she ended up telling us a lot more about Skrulls than I think you guys wanted us to know this early in the game, am I right? You needed us to stay ignorant, but she was stupid and she practically force-fed us all the information she had about you.”

He drew himself up, a little huffily - a mannerism he’d picked up from impersonating Jack. “She did not know everything. And if she led you to believe we can be defeated, then she was, as you said, stupid.” He did not understand the looks that were passing between them, but he assumed they were attempting to non-verbally ask each other if that might be correct, and he smirked. “You should surrender. We cannot be defeated.”

The smaller man, the nephew, rolled his eyes. “Did you pick up huffy from Jack too? Because you guys don’t usually have this much personality on your own.”

“If anyone could rub off on a Skrull, it would be Jack,” Rogers said. “Or Tony.”

The Invisible Girl snorted. “Trying to be Tony would probably drive a Skrull into a breakdown. They’d never manage to pull it off.”

She was probably right; they had considered attempting to replace Stark, but due to his mercurial nature and the extent of his intellect it had been decided that the facade would not be consistently believable. Still, though, admitting a weakness was not their way. “We can be anyone!”

“I’m pretty sure your brain would melt if you tried to be Tony,” Rogers corrected him, rolling his eyes. “Do you have him, Reed? I’m gonna call Fury to come pick him up. We wouldn’t be able to effectively interrogate him, but I’m sure SHIELD has figured out something by now.”

He considered waiting for the man from SHIELD to show up, as killing him along with these others would be a considerable achievement, but decided against it. The Chitauri had been here, and they had physiology much like that of a Skrull; he could not take the chance that the organization called SHIELD might have figured out how to harm him. So he moved his finger, using the tip of a claw to depress the nearly invisible button on his wrist guard, and he smiled. In five seconds they would all be dead.

Two seconds later he was airborne, having been flung out the window, and a shield had formed around him...but only down to the bottom of his wrist guard, preventing him from pushing any more buttons. How had they known?! What had the Witch…

The explosion, even contained, rattled windows and set off alarms all the way up and down the street. Reed caught Sue when she staggered from the backlash, and Blake hurried to the window to see the extent of the damage. “His head is rolling down the street, we should probably go get that.”

“Eww.” Sue wrinkled her nose. “I’ll remember that next time. Reed?” Her husband immediately flowed through the broken window, grabbing Jack’s wastepaper basket on his way out. She smiled but made a shooing motion at Max, Josie, Blake and Steve. “We’ll see you at the meeting later, get going before the police come in - secret weapons don’t stay secret if they’re in a police report.”

They hurried out and back downstairs - Ben was most likely parked down a nearby alley, waiting with Bucky for them to come back out. Reed flowed back in the window a few minutes later, putting the trashcan sans trashbag and Skrull head back in place. “The police are coming in, are they gone?”
“I made sure they left with plenty of time to spare.” She sighed. “I admit it, I was worried when the three of them took off after Steve earlier.”

“I wasn’t sure they were ready for ‘the big show’, as Johnny calls it, either,” Reed admitted. “They did very well, though.”

“They were practicing all night,” Sue said quietly. “Even Clay says that field training is the best training.”

“Hopefully he’ll remember he said that the next time he talks to them.” Reed wrapped his arm around her. In the ‘dream’ he’d ended up using his untested portal generator when the Skrulls had targeted their building, so most of their experience had involved hopping from reality to reality, blindly trying to get back home. According to Johnny this had been a lot like the plot of an old television show, but Reed had never seen said show so he couldn’t vouch for that. He had, however, seen so many different realities that were bad that he was somewhat hesitant to continue work on the portal generator now - including one Earth which had been infected by some sort of horrible flesh-destroying virus where only Sue’s shield had kept them from being infected themselves. “I need to talk to Tony about the portal generator, and possibly to Stephen as well when he gets back. It could be very useful, but it could also be much more dangerous than I’d originally anticipated.”

“No, we definitely don’t want to bring the zombie virus back to this Earth,” Sue agreed, stretching up on tiptoe to kiss his cheek; she knew that was the one he’d been thinking about, because evidence had pointed to the original source of the virus in that world having been another version of Reed himself - who had also been using a portal generator. “That was much more disgusting than a Skrull getting his head blown off in midair. And what was with that one guy with the metal skeleton and the claws? I still think he’d been some kind of organic robot, maybe grown in a vat around the skeleton?”

“It’s possible.” The police were coming up the stairs now, and he detached from her and opened the door for them. “We’ve done our best not to touch anything any more than necessary,” he told them. “We were at a wedding, and that…creature was impersonating one of the guests. We followed him back here after confirming that the man whose place he had taken was safe and that we weren’t dealing with a hostage situation.”

One of the officers raised an eyebrow. “What was that thing? It looked like one of those lizard people the kooky conspiracy theorists keep saying are taking over the country.”

Reed made a face. He’d heard those rumors, and dismissed them - everyone else had too. Perhaps they shouldn’t have. “It said it was something called a Skrul,” he answered. “As to the other…well, we’re convening an emergency meeting at Avengers Tower tonight, just in case.”
Chapter 11

It took some time for everyone to make their way to Avengers Tower, and the slow trickle of incoming superheroes and sundry into the penthouse created shifting little knots and clumps of people who were for the most part much more subdued than they had been the previous night - or even earlier that night. Except for Thor, who along with Jane had gotten pulled into the dream with everyone else; whatever had happened to them had made Thor frustrated and near-frantic and left Jane more than a little shell-shocked. She’d been rebuffing everyone until Max had strolled over and introduced himself, shortly followed by Blake and Josie, and then she’d been confused. “Wait, you all work for a dating service? Like that Match.com thing?”

Josie opened her mouth; Max put his hand over it. “No, we have a better algorithm than Match,” he explained. “Which I just saved you from having to learn about in great detail.” Josie bit him. “Ow, wench! You totally know you would have.”

“She’s a scientist, my algorithm is science,” Josie scolded. “You think higher math is having to figure out how to split a tip three ways without a calculator.”

“I can do that in my head, pick a better example,” Blake told her. He cocked his head at Jane. “You and Thor weren’t…weren’t with us, and you weren’t here. In the dream Steve said Thor went home for a visit and took you home with him…but the two of you never came back?”

Jane sniffed and nodded, but although she looked like she might get upset again, she didn’t. “The Bridge was damaged, we couldn’t leave Asgard.”

Clay, who had been keeping an eye on that group, winced. He’d never had the displeasure of meeting Thor’s bad-boy brother, or the asshole father who’d thought using Earth as a time-out corner for a misbehaving son was a good idea, but he’d been around Thor enough to know the guy’s native culture was a lot different than anything Jane had probably ever encountered before. And from Thor’s ranting on the other side of the room it sounded like Asgard had been having problems of its own when he’d whisked his girlfriend up there to meet his mom - basically, he’d gone home for a meet-the-folks visit and ended up fighting off invaders and then dealing with yet another insurrection engineered by his brother on top of that. And had Jane just said Thor’s mother had died in the dream? Crap, no wonder the guy was ranting, he’d had one hell of a night.

Of course, he wasn’t the only one. Clay saw Max cut Jane off mid-science, saying something to Josie that made her take off and come back with a concerned Bruce in tow. Jane started talking faster once Bruce was there, but after a couple of minutes he cut her off too, making eye contact with Ben Grimm and waving him over, explaining once he got close, “This is astrophysics, I’m out of my league.”

Ben sat down and Jane started talking again, and once Reed showed up he joined that group and the discussion got a lot less one-sided and lot more lively. Not half as lively as the one Thor was currently having with Tony, Steve and Clint, but then Jane wasn’t a thunder god. Max and Blake finally wandered over to them and not long afterward Thor calmed down and the discussion seemed to take a turn for the calm and rational.

Max eventually slipped away from that conversation as well, and Clay trailed him into the kitchen. The younger man poured himself a cup of coffee and drank it down practically in one swallow. Clay frowned, but before he could say anything Max sighed and said, “If I thought snorting the grounds would be more effective, I’d have already tried it.”
Clay smirked. “I don’t think that would work. You okay?”

Max shook his head. “I’m just tired. I don’t want to nod off during the meeting.” In the other room voices started going up again, and he rubbed the eye not covered by the black patch. “I should probably go back out there…”

“No, you shouldn’t.” Elise had come in, and she blocked his path out of the kitchen and made him sit down on one of the stools. “They’re big boys, they can handle it themselves.” She eyed the empty cup. “Did you actually swallow that or just pour it down your throat?”

“He poured it,” Clay said. “She’s right, Max, let them handle it. Thor’s mainly just blowing off steam right now, he knows Steve will rein him in if he gets too worked up.” He cleared his throat. “While we’re here, though…I was avoiding you after the incident, and I’m sorry. I was reacting instead of thinking, and kicking myself for not being able to get my head back together faster; honestly, I thought she was going to kill you before I could get over there.”

“Yeah, that’s what Dr. Strange told me.” Max smiled and shrugged. “And you weren’t the only one who was reacting. Apology accepted, though, thanks.”

With anyone else Clay might have thought that had been too easy, but he’d been warned Max was just like that so he nodded, accepting it. “Is there anything I should know before we start the meeting?” he asked. “Stephen and his double both said we needed to give you some space when it came to telling everyone what happened on your little trip tonight, and I’m fine with that, but not everybody got that memo. So if something comes up…”

“I’ll answer the questions I can answer right now,” Max told him. “There’s a…really good reason I need to keep it mostly to myself for a while, actually, and it’s not because I’m feeling emo.”

Ouch. “I know you aren’t, but even if you were that would still be a good reason,” Clay assured the younger man. “Everyone had a long, rough night, but yours was longer and you’re wiped out. Coffee is not gonna fix that, trust me - been there, done it, still didn’t snort the grounds.” That got him a chuckle, and he smiled. “Honest, we make allowances for stuff like this during meetings. So if there’s anything you want me to deal with, just tell me.”

Max nodded slowly. “I do have a piece of information I’m not sure what to do with,” he admitted. “We may run into a problem when it comes to dealing with the Skrulls.”

Clay pulled up a stool of his own. “I’m listening.”

The younger man made a face. “The Skrulls aren’t…well, you already know they aren’t human. But where people apparently get into trouble is assuming that they must still think like humans - and they don’t. The heroes on that other Earth made that mistake, because they were good people who had strongly-held morals and a firm belief in the sanctity of life.”

Elise had sat down beside him. “They didn’t want to kill.”

“No, that went against everything they stood for. And because they had…assumed, they were sure they could reason with the Skrulls.” Max swallowed. “Apparently, you can’t. As awful as I feel saying it, the Skrulls not thinking or feeling like us is…a very bad thing. Josie can confirm that. In the dream, she got used to listening just enough to hear them lying about who they were and then we were trying to kill them and she was doing her best to tune them out after that - mostly they were offended that we refused to just lay down and die, but they like to fight and they could get pretty gleeful about the idea of killing us. And they thought it was funny to play with people by pretending to be someone they knew while they did it. She found that disturbing and to tell the truth so did I.”
“It is disturbing,” Elise agreed. “Because it means they have a cruel streak and no problem indulging it.”

“So what you’re saying is it’s kill or be killed if you don’t want something worse to happen to you.” Max nodded; Clay did too. “Okay, yeah, that is important.” He thought of something else, remembering the younger man making the rounds of every little knot of people in Haven and in the family room just now too, remembering that Jane had looked like she wanted to get upset again but hadn’t and Thor had dialed it down a few notches once Max had gotten close to him. “You’ve been calming everyone down, haven’t you?” Max flushed, but nodded. “No, that wasn’t a bad thing; you gave them all a little space to get their heads together and they needed that. Not during the meeting though, okay? Elise is right, they’re all big kids who do this for a living, so if someone blows up during the meeting it’s not gonna be a problem. They’ll handle it just like they always do.” He stood back up. “Does doing her thing take it out of Josie they way it does you?”

“No, but mine’s not taking it out of me the way you think it is.” Max rubbed his eye again. “I had a much longer night than anyone knows about, I just didn’t want to talk about it. Once Scarlet figured out that I was what was holding her back…well, she had me popping in and out of so many different nightmare scenarios that I lost count of them all. Fighting and killing and dying over and over and over again. It took what felt like forever for me to make it back to actual reality, and then I had to deal with Scarlet’s crazy live and in person, and then when I finally went to sit down and cool off the other Dr. Strange showed up and we were gone for about a week and I didn’t get much sleep there either. I’m so tired I feel like I’m moving through molasses right now, but it’s not because of…my thing. I didn’t even realize I was using it at Haven, honestly - I didn’t realize I actually had it to use, I thought it had just been part of the dream - and it’s actually about the only thing keeping me upright at this point. The coffee didn’t even give me a buzz.”

Clay was very glad at that moment that Max couldn’t read people the way Josie could, because the vicious swearing going on inside his head probably would have shocked the hell out of the poor guy. “No more coffee, then,” he said, patting the younger man’s shoulder. “Stay in here until it’s time for the meeting, that way you won’t be tempted to help anyone else. Elise, your other two?”

“Are fine for now - but I’ll come back out when Blake comes in, which should be any time now. Are we expecting any…issues to crop up during the meeting?”

“Just the same ones you already saw,” Clay assured her. “If he gets too aggressive Steve will shut him down or I will - or Rhodes will, if he’s coming. Jarvis?”

“Sir checked in with Colonel Rhodes, and was pleasantly surprised to find he had already been asleep and thought the entire experience had been caused by something he’d eaten. He currently believes it to have been a ‘shared dream’, and his role in that dream was…distressingly minimal.”

Well crap. It made sense, though - since so much of Scarlet’s shit had been aimed at Tony, taking out his oldest friend fast and hard would have been integral to her plan. “Okay, it’s good he doesn’t need to be here - it means we don’t have to wait for him,” Clay agreed. “We can brief him later, once we’ve got our ducks in some kind of a row instead of scattered all over the place quacking at each other.”

That made Max snicker, and Clay was somewhat surprised when he felt that amusement touch him, a little wave of warmth that made him feel…well, better than he had been. And it must have showed, because Max immediately colored up and started to apologize, but Clay waved it off. “No, don’t - you didn’t do it on purpose, I could see that. And I won’t deny I needed it.” He thought about that for a second. “Okay, I’m gonna change my mind about what I said. I still don’t want you to help during the meeting just to be doing it…but if I think someone needs it, I’ll signal you. No more than
necessary, though; they’re all pretty close already, make ‘em too happy with each other and we’ll end up with a super-orgy on our hands.”

Elise nodded. “And with Steve involved, it’s entirely possible everyone would end up pregnant - including the other men.” That made Max dissolve into laughter, and Clay acknowledged her wink with a nod and headed for the door. He looked back and saw her squeeze Max’s arm to get his attention, then look him dead in the eye. “You made me very proud tonight, Max,” she said. “You’ve managed to live all the way up to your ideal self, and I’m proud to have you on my team - and in my family.”

The fact that she let him hug her proved she was telling the truth - and that even Elise had been in need of some comfort - and Clay quietly slipped out of the kitchen, catching Blake’s eye and jerking his head toward the kitchen to let the younger man know he should head that way. The meeting needed to start soon, but he could give Elise and her boys a few minutes while he talked to Tony about conferencing in their people on the plane. Because this was a discussion they didn’t dare leave any of their front-line people out of now - not after what Max had just told him coupled with them finding a Skrull impersonating Jack Bourdain.
Some twenty minutes and a conference-call intervention by Jarvis later, everyone had piled into the Avengers’ conference room and managed to seat themselves more or less comfortably around the table. “Okay, I am honestly not sure where we should even begin to start,” Clay admitted to the room at large. “If we try going around the group and having everyone tell what happened to them tonight, I’m pretty sure we’ll all still be here a week from now. Half of you were trapped in the bunker under the Tower, Thor and Jane were on Asgard, most of my team was down in South America, three people were captured by Skrulls and half of Elise’s team was in the bunker in L.A. before all five of those people met up and bugged out to Monster Island. After which they started gathering up the rest of us. That still leaves a few people missing from the picture, though. Reed, where were you guys?”

Reed Richards cleared his throat. “I have been working on a portal generator, as have the other versions of me in other universes if the dream was accurate - and I believe it was. In the dream, we escaped the destruction of the Baxter Building by using the generator. We realm-hopped for a long time…”

“Just like in Sliders,” Johnny put in, getting several nods of comprehension from some people who had been looking confused.

“I haven’t seen it,” Reed disclaimed. “But we jumped from one version of Earth to another, and we discovered something very important but also quite disturbing: I’m not the only one of me doing it, but I am possibly the most careful. One other version of me in particular…isn’t. Through what I can only assume is sheer carelessness he managed to spread a particularly destructive virus to two, possibly three other Earths. They were all Earths which had a mutant population, but there’s no way to be sure that was a factor in the spread of the disease.” His back straightened. “I’m going to need Tony’s help with the portal generator - I know now that it will work, but we’re going to need a good many more safeguards than I might have originally thought. And I’m going to need Bruce and Stephen’s help to determine if a virus like the one we saw might be able to take hold here, and if so what we might be able to do to stop it.”

“What he’s not saying is that it was a zombie virus,” Johnny broke in again. He was as serious as his brother-in-law now. “If it ever gets here, we’re doomed. Every single one of you was infected on that other Earth,” he said, waving a hand at the Avengers. “And so was almost everyone else.”

On the video feed, Stephen lifted his head and looked at the screen; he’d been leaning back in his seat, staring up at the plane’s low ceiling. “You’re positive it was a virus?”

“It behaved like a virus,” Reed told him. “Even if I’d had the means, though, I wouldn’t have dared try to take samples to confirm it.”

“Thank goodness we got the responsible version of you.” Bruce patted his shoulder. “We can research it. Any chance SHIELD…”

“They’d have records of the experiments done during the war,” Steve said, startling more than a few people. “Because HYDRA did try reanimating the dead, but they never got it to work that we knew of.”

“And SHIELD was hatched from a HYDRA egg,” Bucky put in. He had borrowed some of Steve’s clothes and pulled his dark hair back neatly with one of Josie’s hair bands. “Those records would be buried deep, and most likely never put into a computer.”
“No, they wouldn’t have dared to digitize something like that,” Amanda agreed. “Microfiche, maybe.”

“So what you need to be looking for are current bio-science projects referencing the old data with no…no corresponding file link.” That made a few people blink at him, and Blake shrugged. “If they have it, there’s no way they’re not using it. Jarvis, can you…”

“I can confirm that such projects with associated unlinked references do exist in the SHIELD databases,” Jarvis answered at once. “I will perform a more detailed search and save anything which may be pertinent in a secure file.”

“Which nobody will be accessing for a while yet,” Tony warned. “Group safety first, possible zombie virus or resurrection reagent second. Unless you think that other Reed might show up here, trailing his virus behind him?” Reed shook his head; so did Johnny and Sue. “Okay, good - one less thing we have to worry about. How about Lightning Boy, do we know where he is yet?”

“His body has been logged into SHIELD’s medical research department and placed in cold storage,” Jarvis answered. “He is listed as a John Doe.”

Ben made a face. “Well, he did hit me doin’ about eighty. I wasn’t sure if that was somethin’ he could bounce back from or not.”

“It is a good thing for him he could not, since he is not alive to be interrogated,” Bucky said. “But may be an even worse thing for us, as now they can study him in much more detail. Do we know anything about these ‘mutants’ from the other universes?”

“Very little.” Reed shook his head. “I know it’s supposedly a naturally-occurring genetic variant, and that it’s inconsistent - some are born different, others don’t manifest until puberty, and some apparently manifest due to outside stressors. Some of the mutations also continued to progress over time, but others didn’t.”

“So it’s an unstable genetic mutation, most likely recessive.” Bruce was frowning. “No, we don’t have anything like that here, even the mutations from the trench are genetically stable. It’s possible SHIELD might try to insert the mutant DNA into a test subject, maybe vector it into normal cells using a virus, but their chances of even getting that to produce a viable mutation would be slim to none.”

“Not to mention, it could take years for them to even get to that point.” Reed shrugged. “And we’re also assuming they’ll notice the DNA variation, but they might not - or they might not discover it immediately. After all, they don’t know the body came from another version of reality. I am wondering why he thought it was a good idea to physically attack Ben, though; with his speed, and considering how much planning must have gone into the attack on us, it would have made more sense for him to just bypass Ben completely and go upstairs.”

“He may have just been overconfident,” Todji suggested. “But running into Ben in the parking garage probably wasn’t part of the plan, and once he saw him he may not have thought they could afford to leave him there - a missed check-in could sound the alarm and close their escape window before they were completely finished. Because if you think about it, torturing everyone and then running away doesn’t make sense.

“True,” Elise said. “Even if the game his sister was playing had left us all comatose, that still would have tipped off the authorities and the public in general that there was a new, powerful enemy around - one capable of taking out their first line of defense, no less. ‘Lightning Boy’ had speed and concussive force, in theory he could have finished off everyone in minutes and left the room looking
like there’d been a huge fight. What better way to get rid of your current enemies, make sure their deaths don’t cause another defensive force to be mobilized and finish getting revenge on the man you hate than to kill everyone in the room…and make it look like he did it?”

Tony paled; so did Pepper. “He’d have been in no fit mental state to refute the accusations,” Steve agreed slowly. “Especially if her original plan, in the dream, had been to make him think everyone was dead and it was his fault. Or if she just brainwashed him the way she did Fury.”

“Why have the fake Jack there, then?” Sue wanted to know. “She knew he was there, because Chef Jim saw him in the dream, but he wasn’t affected by whatever it was she was doing - he hid in the bathroom. And he was making a report when we caught up to him. Was he supposed to be the sole surviving victim, or just an observer?”

Clint frowned. “I doubt he was planni’ to help finish up, because even if he’d claimed to have survived by hiding in the bathroom the cops would probably still have checked him and the bathroom for physical evidence. The report…”

“We brought his computer back with us,” Reed said. “We told the police we were turning it in to SHIELD, since it was potentially alien tech and might be dangerous.”

“It’s actually the sort of computer people who don’t know much about computers buy at Walmart,” Amanda volunteered. “I checked the OS and ran a few security programs through it; it looks like the only thing the Skrull did to it was install all the updates Jack had been ignoring, clean up all the porn-related malware and turn on the firewall.”

“Jack is a great chef, but he’s not techy at all,” Seth put in. He was doodling something on a pad of paper. “He probably got someone on his staff to set up the computer for him in the first place.”

“In which case the Skrull actually did him and his restaurant a favor,” Amanda said. “He was one wrong click away from losing everything on his hard drive. Anyway, I did find the unfinished report in an auto-save temp folder. The alien agent was unsure why the Witch, as he referred to her, had failed. He suspected it might have had something to do with the ‘new people’ who were at the wedding after observing their sole interaction with Director Fury, and he planned to observe them further and extract what information he could.” Josie shivered in spite of herself. “No, he was going to get the information he wanted by cultivating local sources, Josie, or possibly through direct personal contact using his adopted celebrity persona. He wasn’t planning to hurt any of you at this point, he just wanted information.”

“Do we know where the report was going?” Jake wanted to know.

“I turned the hard drive over to Jarvis so he could scan the rest of the files and check for anything that was hidden or encrypted. Jarvis?”

“A confirmation of the accepted RSVP to Director Clarke’s wedding was sent to supremecommander69@aol.com. The account has been active for approximately two decades and appears to be in regular use, but I could find no name associated with it other than the username.”

“The leader of the bad guys is calling himself Supreme Commander 69?” Johnny was trying not to laugh. “Yeah, I can see why nobody suspected anything.”

“That’s probably just whoever’s in charge of the Skrulls down here,” Max said. “I think the actual bad guy’s name is Thanos, unless he changes it from world to world.”

“We also heard the name Thanos while we were jumping from Earth to Earth,” Reed confirmed.
“The virus we encountered was marginally attributed to him - some apparently thought it was punishment because that Earth’s heroes had fought against him and pushed him back. There was no actual evidence of that, however, only media speculation and hearsay.”

“And the usual demands for all the heroes to be held accountable, of course.” Johnny rolled his eyes. “That, unfortunately, seemed to stay the same from Earth to Earth to Earth to Earth.”

“Which is another really good reason for us to get independent as quickly as possible,” Pepper said. “Which means talking to the U.N.”

“Will they talk to us?” Clay wanted to know.

Pepper nodded. “I can get us an appointment with the Secretary General. I have…channels I can go through that I don’t normally use, but if I do he’ll know it’s important and give us top priority. I can’t say much more than that, but I can tell you all that the U.N. would be overjoyed if we split off on our own. It’s come up before, some people worry about who pulls this group’s strings and what direction they might pull them in - and the current U.S. ambassador has hinted a few times that our government can pull those strings whenever they feel like it.”

Ben raised a rocky eyebrow. “So he’s been usin’ us to threaten other countries?”

“Subtly, but yes. I’ve made sure my contacts know it’s a hollow threat, but the suspicion is still there. So if we approach the Secretary General, and then go before the Security Council…”

“…Then they’re almost certain to agree to our request.” Allison was nodding. “The information we released tonight will shine a very bright light on SHIELD’s darker levels, I have no doubt the White House is buzzing like a beehive right now and fully in damage-control mode. And some of that information is about the way SHIELD had been attempting to keep control of the Avengers, so if we can petition for autonomy quickly Washington is going to assume that’s the reason.”

“And the press will hammer that idea home to the public,” Elise agreed. “So our window of opportunity…two weeks?”

Pepper nodded. “I can make something happen in two weeks. And since our perm rep is going to be busy putting out fires thanks to the released data, he shouldn’t have time to mount a case against our request - SHIELD probably would have helped him do it if this had come up yesterday, but they won’t be able to do that as long as this window is open.”

“You may also need to ask about Monster Island,” Tony said. “Isn’t it in international waters?”

“Yes sir, it is.” Jarvis put up a satellite photo of the island in question. “The United States has only refrained from attempting to claim it due to fears that such a move will result in the United Nations holding them responsible for the nearby trench.” A pause. “Which they are responsible for in part, due to clandestine underwater missile testing. Other contaminants were most likely the result of illicit dumping from any number of international vessels, including United States vessels.”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “Can we use that information to get the U.N. to cede the island over to us?”

Pepper was the one who answered him. “The Secretary General would probably be more than happy to let us have it, actually, but that information could be used to counter any dissent. Not that there should be very much dissent in the first place, because everyone wants to study the mutations but nobody wants to be responsible for them.”

“We don’t want to be responsible for them either,” Bruce pointed out. “None of the really huge ones have ventured too far from the trench. Yet.”
“Yet,” Reed agreed. “Satellite imagery suggests the ones we’ve seen so far may not be the largest.”

“Any of the medium to large ones would probably be able to reach the island with no problem, however,” Bruce continued. “And there is no way to tell how many of them are capable of leaving the water. The plan you guys had in the dream,” he indicated Steve, Josie, Max, Blake and Bucky, “about letting the mutations be another layer of security for the island was a good one, but it’s also completely insane. If a really big one spawns that turns out to be amphibious…”

“He’s probably already out there, he was too big not to be,” Max said, covering a yawn with one hand. “I’m going to name him Jerry. Because calling him Godzilla would be copyright infringement.”

Blake flinched and Josie went dead white. “You don’t think…”

“I do. Scarlet didn’t have much imagination, remember? She had to have seen him somewhere, ergo there’s a good possibility he’s here or something a lot like him is.” That wasn’t the question she’d been asking him, but Max wasn’t going to get into that right now - and he knew she could hear the answer anyway. “That other Earth Dr. Strange took me to, they even had a trench like ours. Out-of-control polluting was one of the factors that led to their defeat; before Thanos came they’d already had multiple organizations which seemed to be devoted to actively destroying the planet.” He made a face. “Some of those may have been due to Skrull involvement, but not all of them were. A lot of it was just motivated by plain old human greed.”

“Something we already have plenty of here.” Clay was thinking it over. “I don’t think it’s too big a risk, honestly - we’ve got enough firepower to take out Jerry or something like him if they misbehave.” Not that he thought they were going to need to, because he suspected that Max was sure they weren’t going to need to. “And the mutations will be another layer of security, even if it’s just against the paparazzi. One problem, though: Being isolated will make us harder to infiltrate, obviously, but we’ll still have to leave the island sometimes. And when we do…”

“They’re going to be waiting,” Tony finished. “The Skrulls, SHIELD, everybody. So before that can happen, we’ll need to make sure we know who’s who and who’s where at all times.”

“Yes, that is something which should be put in place - before we relocate,” Natasha specified. “Being compromised before our plans can be put into motion is a definite possibility, especially since they may already know their agent closest to us has been killed. How fast do you think you can come up with something?”

“He can use the same tracker he has hidden in all my purses,” Pepper said, and rolled her eyes when Tony winced. “Stop that, I knew it was necessary. How fast can you make more?”

“A few days, if I don’t have to wait for any materials. Jarvis…”

“We may need more sealant, sir.”

“It came from Home Depot,” Tony said. “Put in an order for five gallons, someone can go pick it up when they open.”

“Done, sir.”

“I’ll send someone to go pick it up,” Pepper corrected. “Everyone is exhausted, and we’re not inflicting that on the Home Depot staff on a Sunday morning.”

Nobody disagreed with her. “We also need to be thinkin’ about the Skrulls that are already here,” Clint said. “We know they’re here, and now we know they were one step ahead of us, if not two.
We need to figure out what we’re going to do with a Skrull if we catch one, before we catch one, especially since at least some of them come with a built-in suicide bomb.” He saw the look on Max’s face, and Josie’s, and shook his head. “I know you guys…”

“You don’t know,” Max corrected him - politely, although the sudden expressionlessness of his face and voice made the hair stand up on the back of Clay’s neck. “You fought them for a little while before the bunker was sealed, but Josie and I did it for almost a year. And on that other Earth the heroes had tried capturing some, tried setting up a prisoner exchange. The Skrulls killed the prisoners - the captured Skrulls and the humans - and killed everyone else who was there too. You can’t negotiate with them, because they don’t negotiate. They have no reason to, and there is no incentive we can offer because they already have what they want.”

Tony swallowed. “And they want…”

“What they already have.” Max was still expressionless, but there was an indefinable sadness in his eye. “They want to fight, and kill, and conquer - but after that they just want to move on and do it again somewhere else, they have no desire to stick around and run things. The fighting isn’t just what they do, it’s not a means to an end…it’s what they love.”

Josie was really proud of herself for not reacting when he said that, because what she could hear behind those words was heartbreaking. “I can hear them lying if they introduce themselves,” she put in quickly before anyone could ask Max another question. “It worked in the dream, and it worked tonight - well, this morning - on the Skrull pretending to be Jack Bourdain.”

“And that brings up an area where security could get really tricky,” Clay cautioned. “For anyone who may have missed it and doesn’t know what the hell we’re talking about: Josie can hear the truth about you when you talk. And if she tells you the truth, you’ll believe it unconditionally. That’s how she broke the reality of the dream for all of us, and how she and Steve broke through Fury’s delusions, too.”

“Was that how you guys got out of SHIELD headquarters?” Tony wanted to know. Josie shook her head. “Amanda? Was it you guys?”

“Nope, wasn’t us either.”

“Leave it alone, Tony,” Stephen said before the billionaire could open his mouth to ask someone else - and before Clay could open his mouth to stop him. “There will be a time and a place for that information to come out, but it isn’t here or now. The other me said so…and he’s the one who knows the most about it.”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “He wasn’t here a month ago when you didn’t tell anyone about what Steve’s girlfriend could do. Was he?”

Stephen, much to everyone’s surprise, laughed tiredly. “No, he wasn’t - if he had been none of this would have happened, and I’m not sure what might have come of it all in the long run. Probably nothing good, even though we’d have known earlier that this was all part of a many-headed plot to take over the multiverse.” He sighed. “It’s still disturbing to me that so many of those plots were set in motion by SHIELD, though. We’ve got hundreds of universes that have some form of this,” he waved a shaky hand, indicating the assembled superheroes, “general arrangement as their basic structure, and apparently only in a handful of them has SHIELD managed to overcome its foundation as HYDRA’s sock puppet. Ours has - mostly, anyway.”

“Which is why they had to compromise Fury first,” Clay agreed. “How long do you think…”
“Not that long,” Todji told him. “My guess would be three or four months ago, tops. Time to do some damage, not enough time for anyone to get suspicious about why the damage was happening. At least it seems to have been mostly all in his head, though - I’d hate to think we have a Skrull running around out there somewhere with Phil Coulson’s face.”

“We’ll double-check anyway,” Amanda put in. “Triple-check, even. There’s a team out right now that only reports to Fury, all young agents who wouldn’t have known Coulson personally. If we do have a doppleganger, that’s where we’ll probably find it. And we’ll need to check Hill, too, because she should have noticed something was going on. I’m hoping she’s just been brainwashed - if she was, it’s possible she was living the same dream as Fury.”

“I’d much rather that than find out she’s been replaced by a Skrull.” Allison had sat back in her seat, frowning and tapping her perfect pink nails on the table in front of her. “Director Fury wasn’t alert enough to realize it was Josie who broke through to him, or how,” she said. “We need to keep it that way for as long as possible.”

“Agreed, but Stephen still hasn’t answered my question,” Tony said. “I know Elise and her team have been keeping an eye on the situation, but even she admits that if someone had come for Josie they probably couldn’t have stopped them. So why didn’t you tell any of us a month ago so we could have helped?”

“I was relatively certain nobody knew except myself and the rest of her team,” Stephen said. He didn’t appear to have taken offense, and Josie had already heard the reason; it was because Tony wasn’t meaning to give offense, he just didn’t like being left out of the loop and he wanted to know why it had happened. “I didn’t want anyone to find out before I had a chance to figure out what was going on and explain it to her - because it was blindingly obvious she didn’t understand what she was actually doing or what it meant.” Josie blushed. “Not your fault, sweetheart,” he assured her quickly. “I wasn’t able to find anything before I was captured, but once I do you’ll be the first to know.”

Bruce leaned forward. “She shook off your memory spell, Stephen. Within hours.” The sorcerer looked startled for a second, but then he smiled widely. “Yeah, thought you’d like that. And maybe it’s a clue?”

“It very well could be, yes.” That seemed to make Stephen even happier. “So that’s some good news. The bad news is we only have two people who can definitively tell a Skrull from a human, and I won’t be recovered enough to do magic for weeks.”

“It took you not quite three weeks to be up…up and around again, in the dream,” Blake reminded him. “At least this time you’re able to…to talk to us.”

“Thank god the other version of him had a compatible magic battery,” Jake agreed. “So in the dream…?”

“Blue rescued him and brought him to us,” Max said. “In this reality, too, apparently. The other Dr. Strange told me he dropped her back at our apartment in L.A., she was worn out.”

“She led him to me in the Netherworld,” Stephen confirmed. “And helped us teleport out, too, so I’m sure the poor baby was done in for the night.” He made a face. “Call Jake if she gets sick, boys. Who knows what she may have eaten over there. Or, well, who.”

Seth stopped sketching and turned around to look at him. “You gave the boys a man-eating demonic cat?”
Stephen shrugged. “They’ll never have to worry about anyone breaking into their apartment.”

“Point.” Seth got comfortable again. “So if she teleported you, does that mean Blake and Max don’t have to book plane tickets anymore when they want to come visit?”

Max’s eye went wide, so did both of Blake’s, but Elise shook her head. “For now they should, just so nobody gets suspicious,” she warned. “In an emergency, though - yes, definitely. We’ll make those plans when we get back.”

“And I’ll pick a room here in the Tower that you guys or Stephen or anyone else who finds a way to do that can use as a landing pad,” Tony said. “That way if someone shows up in that spot, Jarvis will know shit has hit the fan somewhere and put everyone else on alert.”

“Good plan,” Todji approved. “Maybe we could use the portal generator that way too.”

“It’s possible,” Reed agreed. “If it were calibrated correctly, and if I could be sure it wasn’t just opening a portal to a very similar neighboring reality. But it’s nowhere near that stage of development yet - I only used it in the dream because I had no other choice.”

“And right now, we do have other options,” Clay reminded everyone. “What’s more urgent is finding another way to detect Skrulls. Relying on just two people isn’t going to cut it.”

A few people looked at Max, who touched the eyepatch somewhat self-consciously and shook his head. “No, that was just…that was just in the dream. It doesn’t work that way in real life.” Blake squeezed his hand, and he squeezed back. “It’s okay, really. It worked when we needed it to, that’s all that matters.”

Tony wasn’t the only person who flinched at that. “Stephen, isn’t there…”

Stephen shook his head. “Tony, reactivating a dead optic nerve would be the medical breakthrough of the century,” Bruce explained. “Hell, nobody anywhere we know of can do it - Thor’s father only has one eye, and the Asgardians are so far ahead of us that their science might as well be magic.”

“Very true,” Thor agreed gravely. “I would ask, but I am unsure that it is my father who currently sits on the throne of Asgard.” He cleared his throat. “In the vision Jane and I shared, I took her to visit Asgard. Which was attacked while we were there, and many lives were lost. As many of you already know, my brother possesses the power of illusion; he maneuvered himself into a position where I believed him to be dead, but he used his power to take our father’s place and I had only just discovered his deception when we awoke to reality. How likely is it that this vision told the future truly?”

“There’s no telling,” came from Stephen at the same time Reed said, “There is no real way to be sure.” This made several people smile, including Stephen. “There’s no telling what part of the multiverse Scarlet got that idea from,” the sorcerer told the frowning thunder god. “If it was a reality that’s nearby, then the odds go up; farther away and the odds go down. Josie might be able to tell if she heard him talk, but…”

“But that doesn’t do you any good if you’re down here and he’s up there,” Steve finished for him. He was frowning too. “Can you get him down here, Thor? If it’s still him he needs to know about all of this anyway, and if it’s Loki we can contain him until we find your father. Maybe get your mother down here at the same time, that way you’ll know she’s safe.”

“That’s a good idea,” Clay agreed. “A really good idea, actually. Is it possible, Thor? Is there a way you could get them both to drop in for a visit?”
Thor nodded slowly. “There is. In the dream...I saw Ragnarok. That truth would bring him, especially as we have cause to believe the Witch had seen this horror occur somewhere already.” His frown deepened, and he looked down at Jane. “I could bring my mother by saying I need her to comfort you...if you would not mind.”

Jane shook her head, leaning into him a little harder. “It wouldn’t be a lie. I liked your mother, I... need to see that she’s alive.”

“I do as well,” Thor agreed, the arm he had around her shoulders tightening in response to her need for reassurance. “I will not attempt to make contact until we have slept and our plans have been set in motion, however. And until I have decided how best to proceed if what I fear has indeed come to pass.”

“We can help you with that,” Steve assured him. “Or well, Bruce can. But you’re right, that’s not something we can tackle until we’re all more alert - that’s a full-on battle plan.”

“Okay, so tabling that one until later - although not too much later,” Clay said. “I don’t suppose the Asgardians would know anything about ‘truth-hearing’ talents, would they?”

“My mother has the gift of prophecy,” was Thor’s reply. “Not similar, but perhaps not so different either. I can but ask her; she may have advice to offer, even if she does not have specific knowledge to share with us.”

Elise shook her head. “Only after we’re sure the Skrulls haven’t infiltrated your home as well,” she said, and rolled her eyes when he scowled at her. “You don’t know that they haven’t, Thor. I’m sure your parents live in a palace of some sort, and that means they have servants. In most places it would be all too easy to slip someone in that way.”

“She’s right,” Clint confirmed. “I’ve gotten in lots of places as part of the wait staff, or as a janitor or a landscape guy or even as a doorman. Nobody pays attention to the staff. Todji knows what I’m talking about.”

“I always liked sneaking in as part of the kitchen staff,” Todji agreed. “Nobody but nobody notices who’s doing the dishes or chopping vegetables - they only notice if you screw up, and my cousin made sure I knew enough not to screw up.” He made a face. “Speaking of which, in the dream Nolita was targeted by the Skrulls almost immediately, probably to cover for their fake Jack disappearing, and then he showed up at Haven to clear out everyone else who had connections to this group.”

“So we need to keep a closer eye on our connections,” Clay said. “The real Jack…”

“Will be back by the end of the week,” Tony told him. “We’ll have that long to figure out what to tell him, right now he just thinks someone broke into the restaurant.”

“That’s also what Teddy is going to tell the rest of the staff,” Seth chimed in. “And that Jack flew out right after the wedding because the studio called him. That does mean we’re going to have to tell Jack at least part of the truth, though.”

“True,” Clay said. “He doesn’t need to know everything, just enough so he doesn’t start asking questions that make other people start asking questions.”

“‘Just enough’ is probably going to be less information than you think,” Seth said. “If you tell Jack someone tried to infiltrate his restaurant because Teddy is Todji’s cousin and Todji works with the Avengers, he’d probably just nod and assume they’d been wearing a mask like the ones in a Mission
Impossible movie.”

“Well, that is sort of what they’re doing,” Jake looked up from his typing with a frown. “Okay, Monster Island may not be claimed by anyone officially, but it is currently non-officially inhabited by Distribuir Omega - which is a really powerful, really dangerous cartel, for those of you who didn’t already know. The compound is there too, and my guess is they don’t have trouble with the mutations because the mutations can’t climb that high and Jerry hasn’t made an appearance yet. And we might be able to reason with their current head, because he seriously admires Tony.”

“Meaning if we get him to talk, we just might be able to get him to help.” Clay was nodding. “Wouldn’t be a bad idea, actually. The Omega Syndicate has ties all over the place, and one hell of a lot of firepower. If Tony can convince them to help fight the Skrulls…”

“We may just start to make up for losing SHIELD’s dubious but well-armed help on the international sneaky level,” Tony finished. “You think he’d deal?”

Clay shrugged. “Possibly. I think he’s not gonna want to die at the hands of aliens who’re trying to conquer our planet for their intergalactic thug boss. And I seriously doubt that Skrulls snort coke, so he’s not gonna be able to do business with them.”

“Hopefully they haven’t already replaced him.” Pepper tapped one fingernail on the table. “That would be a very good position for someone who wanted to get control of the criminal underworld.”

“In L.A., they did infiltrate some of the gangs,” Max agreed, and Josie nodded too. “They’d get into what looked like turf wars with each other, usually a cover for trying to draw out or drive out hidden humans as near as we could tell - and at least once trying to kill off some of the spare humans in their groups. We took in a survivor from that fight, but he died after a couple of days - his injuries started it, withdrawal finished it, and he ended up on the pile at the back of the parking lot with the others.” Max raised his visible eyebrow when one or two people grimaced. “What, we were supposed to dig holes in the asphalt and put up little markers made of office supplies for all of them?”

“No, you were supposed to do exactly what you did - and that isn’t why they reacted that way.” Elise had quickly moved to stand behind him; she put her hands on his shoulders. “I think something needs to be made clear: This isn’t going to be a fight, it’s going to be an all-out war…and some of us have already fought in it. After the Skrulls pulled their version of Independence Day on us by attacking all of the major cities at once, SHIELD vanished and no one knew why, and any field agents who didn’t vanish with them were on their own. My friends and I had gathered up the ones we found around L.A. and tried to put them to work helping us protect the civilians who were left…and they turned on us, locked us up while they hid from what was going on and waited for SHIELD to magically reappear and tell them what they were supposed to be doing - to tell them which side they were supposed to be fighting for.” That got more than a few gasps, and she nodded. “They reverted to drones, completely incapable of acting on their own aside from the basic necessities of survival and certain routines that had been trained into them. It was…frightening to watch. And I’m honestly not sure how much of that was Max and how much was the truth, so I think we also need to be keeping an eye on SHIELD’s field activities just in case.”

“It is within their capabilities to do such a thing,” Bucky said. “I have seen it.”

“As have I,” Natasha agreed. “Those would not be upper-level agents, however; they would be the sort who are sent to do non-critical surveillance and data-gathering, possibly limited guard duty.”

“The sort who get sent to keep an eye on…on people of interest who aren’t yet considered threats,” Blake pointed out, indicating himself, Max, and Josie. “Is it possible to…to fix them, do you think?”
“If I catch one, we can see about it,” Elise said. “I hope it is, because if it isn’t they’re going to have to be warehoused or killed.”

“Another decision we won’t be able to make until we have to, so we’re tabling that one too.” Clay had seen sudden realization dawn in Tony’s face, and this time he was able to intercept the incoming question by partially answering it. “Okay, something else everyone may not have heard already: Max was the one who kept Scarlet’s nightmare at the level of a bad dream tonight. He was fighting her for control without knowing he was doing it, and luckily she didn’t realize what was going on until the very end.”

“At which point she made…made him pay for it,” Blake muttered. He shook his head at Clay’s raised eyebrow, his jaw tight. “No, they…they need to know that.”

“They do,” Bucky agreed, surprising some people. “It is why you jumped anyway?”

Max colored up, but nodded. “Yeah. Josie told me what was in my head wasn’t real, that was when I got it. When I jumped I landed…well, somewhere else, and then Scarlet eventually kicked me back into the dream with the rest of you. Or maybe that was Blue, I’m not really sure.” He rubbed his eye. “I’m sorry, I’m really tired.”

“With good reason,” Elise allowed. She locked eyes with Clay. “I’m thinking this may be where the meeting needs to end for the time being. Everyone is tired, at least half of us to the point that we’re not thinking entirely straight.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right.” Clay had noticed it too, a little wave of emotion like the one he’d felt in the kitchen earlier; Max’s control was slipping, so they were maybe five minutes out from having a group slumber party and/or a superhero orgy on their hands. “We’ve covered the high points, everyone could probably do with some time to digest it all - and Allison and Seth need to get on with their honeymoon. While I’m thinking about it, though…Seth, I thought you were just doodling, but then I kept seeing you erase. What are you drawing?”

The pastry chef smirked. “Amanda and Clint’s wedding cake. We can talk flavors when I get back from my honeymoon, guys.”

“Yeah, they aren’t the only ones you’ll need to talk to,” Tony said, lounging back in his chair; Josie could tell he’d come to the conclusion that something else was going on and had decided to give everyone a little added distraction. The billionaire pointed at Steve. “We have to make sure he doesn’t try to make the cake the way he made her engagement ring.”

“I like my engagement ring,” Josie immediately shot back with a smile, ignoring the loud reactions coming from the rest of the group and snuggling up to Steve. “We just need to waterproof it.”

Steve smiled down at her. “Well, I’ve heard that Home Depot sells sealant…”

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