

Chapter 19 - Nightmares

Oh, bugger.

Harry felt like he was frozen in place as he stared at the body of Bruce's father propped up against the grave, his glassy eyes still facing his son. The older Bruce was shaking, and Harry didn't know what he could possibly do, or say. Looming over the grave with a mad rage in his eyes, young Bruce Banner didn't even notice the rain that was slowly washing away the blood. What had happened here? What had led to something like *this*?

The younger Bruce cried out in pain and anguish, sounding for a brief moment like he was laughing. He fled, running from the graveyard like a man possessed. Colour and sound drained out of existence, evaporated into nothingness as the adult Bruce stared after his younger self with clenched teeth, incapable of forming any words.

The graveyard vanished, and for a few seconds Harry felt like he was falling, falling, and he'd never hit the ground. Harry tried to get his thoughts in order, realizing that he was staring at a ceiling. He was out of the memory, out of the pensieve, even. Bruce had ripped himself right out of the memory, and took Harry with him.

He didn't have to wonder how Bruce was doing when he heard the ripping of clothes and a bestial growl from the man's lips. Harry realized with a chill that he was reminded of himself, years ago, before Voldemort was defeated, when hope was a rarity. Guilt, grief, self-loathing, he recognized them too well. "Bruce! You have to calm down!" Harry tried, but Bruce didn't even flinch. Rage, endless rage took over from the guilt. It was all the Hulk, now.

"Sif!" Harry called, backing away, quickly conjuring a Shield Charm in front of him. "I could *really* use you in here, right now!"

She was there almost before he'd finished his sentence, brandishing a gleaming sword. She stared at the Hulk with a mixture of horror and excitement. Harry sighed in relief, smiling slightly. "We have a bit of a ... problem."

"This was not the plan, Seidmadr," Sif said quickly. "No matter, it has been many years since I tested my mettle against a creature of this size and strength." She smirked. "A challenge."

Harry shook his head. "We'd better get out of the way before he starts smashing."

Sif raised an eyebrow. "I have fought Ogres and Frost Giants, this is not so different."

Before either could react, The Hulk sent a last glance at Harry. In a single fluid movement it rocketed through the roof of the shed with enough force to sling itself hundreds of feet away, landing with an audible thud. Almost immediately it jumped again. Sif stared, and then turned to Harry. "Ogres don't do that."

"Tell me about it," Harry muttered tiredly. Granted, he'd chosen this location in the middle of nowhere precisely because something like this could happen. He'd expected that it would be memories of Bruce's transformations that got the better of him, though, or just sheer stress of working in a limited time. This, this was different. That memory in the graveyard had been blocked off, yet without any magic involved. Without the Pensieve, Harry would likely not even have figured

out that the memory was faulty at all. He could only come to one conclusion that made sense: It was a repressed memory. Something that his mind had been so overwhelmed by that it had been locked away, thrown into the recesses of the mind. It would've stayed there, unnoticed, if not for Bruce's enthusiasm in getting the Hulk's memories out of his head. The anger in those eyes said it all. That memory had been about something important. Something vital.

"Should we follow him?" Sif wondered, staring at the hole in the roof. "Are all the buildings here so shoddily built that anyone can just knock their way through? It must be terrifying, living in fear of the sky falling at any moment."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Sif, we're in the middle of a desert, what do you think? Anyway, I'm tracking Bruce as we speak; I put the charm on him before we even left. It should give me a good idea of where he's heading." He stared in the distance and sighed. "I'm amazed he kept his cool. He didn't even attempt to smash us into bits before he left, this time. Makes me hope Bruce is still in there, somewhere..."

Sif slipped her sword back onto her back, and nodded sharply. "Then we will track him until he stops for sleep or food. Will we run?"

Harry blinked and turned to her with narrowed eyes. "Run? Are you serious? Merlin, can you imagine how long that would take? Besides, the Hulk is rather a lot faster than either of us. Hold on, I've got something that'll be of use, here. It should at least allow us to cover some distance." He rummaged through his pouch and pulled out his Firebolt, smiling proudly. He brushed some sand off the handle; it'd been stuck there since Afghanistan, probably. "This... would be pretty difficult, actually. It's doable, but it'll be rather snug."

Sif looked on sceptically. "What do you mean to do? Sweep away the desert? I could carry you, instead. We Asgardians have far greater stamina than earthlings, and we are a lot faster as well. Surely the green beast will have to rest, sooner or later."

Harry didn't comment on that, trying to shake the mental image that had conjured up. Harry quickly busied himself with gathering the Pensieve and the leftover memories in it, depositing the magical artefact and a small bottle that shimmered silver-green into his mokeskin pouch. "This would be much easier if you knew how to fly, you know."

Sif scowled. "I leave that tomfoolery to Thor, thank you." She blinked as Harry flipped a leg over the Firebolt.

"The broom should be able to hold two, but it'll be a pretty tight fit," he said, tapping on the small area left over behind him. He didn't really need the footrests – they were mostly for quick and swift turns – so that left just enough to carry a second person. He wouldn't be able to hit top speed, he was sure, but the enchantments would not be stressed overly much.

Sif stared. "...It actually flies?"

Harry smiled broadly. "It's a broom, and I'm a wizard. What do you *think* it does? Get on!"

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"It's definitely confirmed, sir. Code Green."

"Well done," Director Fury muttered gruffly, turning away from the monitor that still showed an overhead map of Chile with three very bright dots blinking at the northern edge. He turned to Agent Coulson with a worried expression. "What's the status on the incident in Africa?"

"A significant amount of classified materials were taken," Coulson said, shrugging. "We don't have details, but local authorities are indicating that it could potentially be used to build weapons. I think we know where that is going."

"The target was Wakanda," Fury said, nodding. "Was it A.I.M.?"

"It seems likely. Between their activity on the American continent, the Middle-East and Africa, it seems they've gone global with their activities. I'm not sure if they could be called a domestic terrorist organization any longer."

"S.H.I.E.L.D.'s going to have to step up," Fury said darkly. "Wakanda is one of the most technologically sophisticated nations on the planet, it's hardly a shantytown. How did someone get in and out without tripping at least half a dozen of their security systems? There must have been traitors involved." He frowned. "I'm even more worried about what A.I.M. took."

Coulson nodded. "With Vibranium and the most sophisticated gamma-based technology that we've ever seen, what are we looking at here? What kind of plan do these fellows have with *that*?"

A small white pop-up window appeared in the middle of it, right on top of the green dots that Fury had been staring at. At the same time, music started playing, and Fury sighed, closing his eyes.

"Is that AC/DC?" Coulson asked, leaning in.

Fury scowled at the screen. "I should've expected something like this."

The message on his screen was a little picture of the Iron Man costume's helmet, alongside two fingers in the peace salute. Scrawled in the corner was: "Stop by soon, I have new information."

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Harry winced as he turned into the wind, nursing his ribs. Rising off the ground had been easy enough and he'd flown a few slow loops along the ground to get Sif used to keeping her balance, even if things were uncomfortably snug. Fitting her behind him on the broom was not really ideal, but she wasn't going to just learn to fly a broom in five minutes, and he'd need to see where he was going.

When he'd accelerated to full speed, though, things had changed. Sif had gone completely motionless as if glued to the broom, her knuckles white from keeping a tight grip on Harry. A painfully tight grip, actually; she hadn't been kidding when she claimed to be stronger than the average person. Harry was beginning to lose the feeling in his fingers and tried to look behind himself, but the wind wasn't helping much in letting him be heard. "We'll stop for a moment, alright?" He shouted.

"No!" Sif called back, squeezing tighter and Harry gasped. "Keep going! You're not getting me on this thing again!"

Harry couldn't hold in a chuckle. "You, the mysterious alien goddess of war, are afraid of *heights*?"

"No," Sif said sharply. "I have stood on the highest pinnacle of Asgard's highest towers, I have crossed the tallest mountains. It is not height that makes me uncomfortable." She glanced down uneasily. "I do not much care for falling to my death, though."

Harry shook his head. "We're closing in on Bruce, but he's still moving quickly. He's not turned back yet, obviously. Soon it'll be night-time, and I don't think flying with a passenger's a good idea. I might smack up right into something. I think we should consider finding a good spot to spend the night," Harry replied loudly. "We'll have to wait until he calms down before we get too close, anyway. Getting up close and personal with the Hulk isn't exactly what I'm looking for today." He looked around with narrowed eyes. "Down here seems good."

"Just keep going!"

"Unless you want me to fall asleep on this thing and give you that tumbling fall you fear, we'll take a break." He didn't wait for an answer, quickly slowing down and descending towards the ground; Sif almost squeaked but managed to catch herself and scowled the rest of the way down.

"Here we are," Harry said with a sigh, landing smoothly and sighing in relief as Sif released him and quickly stepped off the broom. His ribs felt like someone sat on them, and he was fairly certain that if he hadn't been as resilient as he was, he would have broken some of them already. He had taken enough tumbles in Quidditch to get used to getting hit, he supposed.

"Are you not worried about the green creature? Your friend?" Sif wondered, stretching her limbs. "Every minute we wait, it will get further away from us."

"I think that Bruce needs a little time alone," Harry said, sighing. "Seeing something like *that* must have affected him a lot. I certainly don't know what to tell him. I have no clue what I could possibly add. I think it's best if we let the Hulk rage out. There's nobody around in a huge area here, Tony checked. By the time he's done and Bruce is back, we might have figured out what happened." He turned back to where they came from and frowned. "I fear that I've done more harm than good back there."

"Is this a regular occurrence?" Sif wondered. "I had never heard of it before coming here – a human capable of turning into something else. Truly remarkable."

"You don't know much about humans, do you?" Harry observed, flopping down on the rather sparse grass that covered their hill. "You really *are* an alien."

"Of course I know about humans," she retorted, affronted. "I have been to Midgard many times, before the ties between our worlds were cut. When the last war against the Frost Giants was fought here, and the Seidr..." She shook her head, frowning. "It is not a pretty tale. I was young, then, and I did not see battle until much later. The people were friendly, welcoming even."

"You don't act like you know us," Harry muttered as he swerved over a particularly tall dune. "You're a visitor from some other world. Where you come from, Asgard, there's just... Asgardians, right? People like you?"

“Yes...?”

“It’s no different here. We just have humans, and nothing else,” Harry said. “There are extraordinary ones, of course, but they’re all still people, still human. You classify me differently than the others, and I can see why, but I’m really not. I have magic, that’s true enough, but I’m as human as anyone. Tony’s human too, even if we might question that at times, and Bruce is perhaps the most human out of all of us.”

He shrugged at her curious glance. “That transformation of his, it’s based on some kind of science. It’s not magical, it’s Muggle ingenuity, and perhaps not the curse that he sees it as. At least Tony agrees with that much. What I’m trying to say is, I don’t know how it works with your people, but we appreciate getting to understand each other. I’d suggest getting to know Earth and humans a little more, since you come off as rather uninterested, and in return you tell us about Asgard. Deal?”

“I suppose...”

“When all of this is over, we might have more time to get into that,” Harry said. “I had to learn quite a bit too, you know, and I’m still not done. I’m reading Tony’s books, and even the simple ones don’t make much sense to me, but I’m sure I’ll figure out these Muggles at some point.” He smirked widely. “Asgardians too, I suppose. Maybe I’ll go visit that Odin of yours in person. Perhaps I can persuade him to help us out, if the danger that’s approaching is as bad as you described it.”

“I doubt that,” Sif said softly. “The All-Father is set in his ways, and Asgard has not interfered with matters of Midgard for centuries. It is an established line that few but Loki have dared to tread, and none have broken it. He will not change this neutrality on a whim. We have had a war in Asgard before, and there is fear that the next might bring Ragnarok, the end of the Asgardian race.”

“Fair enough,” Harry said. “But what if you get something in return? I mean, I’m certain that if they really wanted to, there’s quite a bunch of people on this planet that could take on Asgardians, or bigger things. Asgardian protection of Earth could be mirrored with Midgard’s protection of Asgard?”

“Three people, against the foes of Asgard?” Sif shook her head. “I do not believe that’s plausible.”

“What if it’s more than three?” Harry said, smiling. “We’re not the only ones out there, you know. There’s whole organizations to keep track of the extraordinary, and I actually work for one. Didn’t you see that giant suit that nearly wiped out the Stark building, the other day?” Harry sighed. “That’s the thing, you know. I work for S.H.I.E.L.D. as a consultant, but what it ends up as is me, Tony and Bruce as the wrecking crew to tackle other people who are getting to our level. It’s not hard to figure out.”

“These are your enemies, not your friends.” Sif rolled her eyes. “What use could they be?”

Harry smiled. “Since the press conference, and it’s only been such a short time, S.H.I.E.L.D. has been getting triple the number of extraordinary cases. Some of those will end up being nasty stuff that we get sent after, but not all of them. Iron Man and the Magician are paving the way, they’re an example. That fight in the city was just a taste, but I think it got people informed on what’s possible. I think there’s others out there, other amazing people who have never been in the limelight, who have preferred to keep it to themselves.”

“You cannot rely on something like that.”

"I know. But I would not be surprised to see a wizard knocking on my door, no matter what you say, or any number of people like Tony who are smart and know what to do with it. I've already had you barge in, after all."

Sif sighed. "I suppose that the presence of unusual humans is a good sign. Perhaps this world is truly starting to change into something more formidable. For most of history, it has simply been known as _ "

"Mostly harmless? Yeah, Tony told me as much. He plans to change that, though I'm not sure how yet. The suit's just the beginning, I'm sure." Really, listening in on S.H.I.E.L.D. had let him in on most of these facts, and even now he was keeping an ear out for what was going on there. He had Bruce to worry about, but Fury was working on the mission that he was supposed to be involved in, and it was beginning to sound fairly ominous. With gamma signatures, multiple attacks on foreign soil, and now a personal visit to Tony, it seemed that S.H.I.E.L.D. had a busy schedule. Harry was glad, at least, that he would know exactly what was going on.

"How far is the green one, now?" Sif wondered. "I have seen nothing of him, as of yet."

Harry flipped over, looking at her tiredly. "He's a few hours away at the top speed we can reach, but he's still going. Unless he stops moving, this could take *days*. Maybe I could catch up on my own if I go all out, but I'd need to leave you alone somewhere in this wasteland." He frowned. "Bruce probably doesn't want to be found; I'd really like you around when we find him, if he hasn't turned back yet. If you can take even half the blows he throws, that should buy me enough time to force him to revert. Maybe. The Hulk's temperamental at the best of times; I can't imagine his mental state helps."

"What did you *do* back there?" Sif wondered. "I was getting quite thoroughly bored from waiting for you two to finish whatever you were up to, and then that creature was there. I understand that it is the same person in some fashion, but what caused this change?"

"I don't know all the details, but I do know that stress, especially rage, triggers those transformations of his. It's not just physical; it's mental too. Something I did went wrong... I shook something loose. It was a memory that he'd hidden from himself, something awful." He grimaced. "This wasn't what I intended. I have to put it right. If need be, I'll oblivate him, erase the memory entirely."

Sif inhaled sharply. "You can *do* that?"

Harry nodded glumly. "I don't like to do it, but yes. I can do a lot of things that people really wouldn't like. I think if S.H.I.E.L.D. found out they'd be utterly terrified. Apparating is bad enough; imagine if they found out I could rip their thoughts right out of their heads, or kill them with two words? That I could incinerate their entire base to ashes with a single spell? They would burn me at the stake, and yet I wouldn't even feel the flames."

Harry sighed as he turned away. "I think Tony suspects that if I really cut loose, *really* pulled the strongest aces out of my sleeve, there would be nothing left standing. The same is true for him and Bruce, I believe, if things got hectic. S.H.I.E.L.D. thinks it has us pegged, that we've shown how far we can go, or at least some of our most impressive tricks. They're wrong." He nodded in the direction that the Hulk went. "For example, I don't know if Bruce even has an upper limit. The first time we fought, I was toyed with. I realize that now. I got hit near the end, and not even that hard, because the Hulk wanted me to know that he was stronger. It hurt for *days*. No, I don't think anyone has seen

what he can do, yet. He's still fighting like Bruce is in there; he's still pulling his punches, being more careful than he needs to be. It needs something truly rage-inducing before even Bruce would go for the killing blow."

"If he is so powerful, and you are as well, why do you keep yourself limited? Why do you not use your strongest skills? I am a master of weaponry, and I carry my weapons on me and use them. It is foolish to let one's strongest skills lie in favour of inferior ones."

"Not necessarily." Harry looked down tiredly. "The strongest spells I know are considered dark magic. That description means more than that they're simply destructive in nature. Lots of spells can be dangerous, even lethal. No, it's because you've got to *mean* what the spells stand for. It's not really accurate to say that dark magic corrupts, but to even cast those spells you have to be willing to sacrifice a lot of things. There were only ever a few people that might've gotten me enraged enough to sink to that level, and they're dead."

Sif grimaced, staring into the darkness. "What you say reminds me of the history of an Asgardian woman who was banished long ago to wander the other worlds of Yggdrasil. Her name was Amora. She fell to the temptation of using her magic to control the minds of others, to enslave them, and in the end she endangered the stability of all. She was cast out for her transgressions. Her story is told to all magicians as a cautionary tale."

"You have magic in your world?" Harry asked suddenly. "Why haven't you said so before?"

"Some of us can use what humans would consider magic, though it is perhaps an inaccurate description," Sif said. "Odin All-Father is the master of such things; he has enchanted many of our weapons, such as the mighty hammer of Thor, Mjolnir. There are few others who pursue such roads. Of those whom I know personally, only Loki has studied the subject in depth."

Harry nodded. "Perhaps I should visit Asgard, sometime, and visit this Loki. It would be good to meet another wizard, even if they aren't strictly – human." He stared up at the sky and sighed. "It is strange, being the only one around. You came specifically for me, didn't you? That probably means my hope for the existence of other wizards or witches on Earth may be in vain."

"They may yet be hiding," Sif said, frowning. "You yourself have vanished from Heimdall's view, which few others are capable of. If anyone could vanish from his sight entirely, it would be the Seidr, masters of the arcane."

Harry nodded, and was silent for a little while. "I have been thinking on what to do about Bruce. There is something that I can do, now, that is not dark in nature. It might help me figure out how to pull him back from the edge. It's pretty risky, though." He grabbed the Pensieve from his bag along with a small flask that contained Bruce's memories. "His memory was in pieces, and I only ever saw the end of it, the awful conclusion. Perhaps I can dig out exactly what happened that day, and get to some kind of answer; maybe that will tell me what to do about Bruce."

"How dangerous is this?" Sif wondered, and Harry swallowed.

"It should be fine; I've been in the memory before," Harry said airily as he set the bowl down. He stared at the little flask he'd put beside it, and the single darkened memory in the mix of silver and green. That had to be the one he needed. Jabbing at it with his wand, he ever so slowly drew it out of

the flask. It was fraying, dissipating; the mutilated memory was beginning to fall apart. It looked almost jagged and thorny, and Harry narrowed his eyes. This was way too flimsy for the Pensieve. There was only one place where this memory wouldn't disintegrate utterly. Glancing at Sif twice, he swallowed. "Take care of me, would you?"

Before Sif could answer, Harry put the wand to his temple. The world vanished with a sudden wave of stifling darkness and his thoughts shattered.

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Tony sighed as he lounged on his patio, snacking on some of Pepper's delicious cookies as he sipped from a glass of wine. The fact that Pepper was also currently yelling at him had registered, but for a moment he savoured the taste of his delicious Montrachet.

"You flew into a *war zone* with your untested prototype ... thing? Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

Tony rubbed his forehead, setting down his glass. "Pepper, I was perfectly safe. As safe as one can be in a flying tank," Tony pointed out. "Help me out here, Rhodey." He pouted as said man turned around, shaking his head. "Ah, come on, you just got here! You can't leave me alone with this. I've got important people coming over. I want you with me when —"

"I'm not leaving the house; I'm just keeping myself out of *this* mess," Rhodey said pointedly, and he quickly headed back into the house. He was probably intent on seeing the suit again, but Jarvis would keep it safely behind lock and key.

"You can't even trust your closest friends anymore. It's a tragedy," Tony said. "Pepper... I would have told you about all the Iron Man stuff when I got the chance." He frowned at her sceptical expression. "You can ask the others when they get back. I told them that I planned on informing you and Rhodey."

"Others? Oh, you're not telling me you told Bruce and Harry about all this before *me*?" Pepper shook her head. "How long have I been working for you now, Tony? Looking out for you, even? You went missing for months, and who was biting her nails, hoping that you had survived after all?"

Tony looked down, sighing. "I know. It's just... things were a little hectic. Come on." He tapped next to him on his chair. "It's a bit narrow, but I'm sure you can fit there."

Pepper slowly sat down. "...Now what?"

"You know all about what happened in Afghanistan," Tony began, staring ahead. "Keep *everything* I say a secret, alright? There are some people that would get awfully miffed if you didn't." He glanced at her for a moment. "Right, of course you will. Well... it all started in Afghanistan. Harry saved me, I dragged him home with me, all that. What I never told you was that the way I escaped into the desert in the first place wasn't strictly normal."

"It was the suit, wasn't it? The Iron Man?"

"Yes, though I suppose that was an easy guess, knowing what you do," Tony retorted. "It was not the suave gold and red one, though; that one's my private ride. I escaped in something that looked like the big, bulky, grey one that you saw plastered across all the television screens." He paused, frowning.

"That one was a prototype that I left behind in the sand; it was in pieces. Someone else dug it up again, and dragged it back here. Obadiah Stane."

Pepper gasped. "No!"

Tony raised an eyebrow. "What, did you think his disappearance was a coincidence? He just happened to wander off to parts unknown the very day the company building he was in was creatively redecorated? No, listing him among the half-dozen that were unaccounted for was a good way to make him disappear. He's in custody in the best prison this nation can afford. I used the Iron Man suit against his, and I was there when he went down. I did the same thing a few days later, with those drones downtown."

"You couldn't let the army handle it?" Pepper asked sharply. "Anyone else? Why did you have to strap yourself to a glorified rocket? You could've *died*!"

"Yes," Tony said simply. "I could have been killed in that cave in Afghanistan too, if I'd simply given in to the demands of my captors. I could rip this damn magnet out of my chest, and I'd die soon enough. I could have been smashed a dozen times while in my suit. I know that. Yet I go anyway. You must know why."

"Tony, why do you have to put your own life on the line for things like this?" She shook her head. "You've always been self-destructive, but this..."

"This is the kind that's worth something," Tony finished, and smiled. "You know those weapons out there in Afghanistan? Those were my weapons, Stark weapons. We've been over this. I want to leave a legacy there that's not just war and death, both with my company and personally." He sipped from his wine. "You know those bastards that were behind Obi's suit and the drones that attacked me? They were from a domestic terrorist group that's gone a little crazy of late, and it was funded by Stark Industries. I'm cleaning up after my company, Pepper. When I'm done, Stark will mean something better than it does now. Stark will be synonymous with clean energy, perhaps, or with the Iron Man suit that protects the citizens of this country. It won't happen quickly, but I'm resilient."

Pepper sighed. "I suppose... I thought that you had ulterior motives for this radical departure from your previous habits. I've known you for so long, I honestly hadn't expected you to ever change your mind, even a little." She smiled, then blinked in consternation. "Wait, if you're the Iron Man..."

"Yes, they are," Tony said lightly. "Thought you'd get to that more quickly. I'm letting them crash in my home until I find something more suitable. Neither of them have particularly many places to go, for obvious reasons."

"The *Magician*, from the news? The one who shot fire out of his hands and stopped that green brute? He's been living in this house? Are you crazy?"

"Harry's no threat to us," Tony said simply. "What can I say? He and Bruce pitch in on repairing stuff, and they get me junk food. It's a match made in heaven. We might be getting a fourth tenant for a while, so don't get jealous now. She's quite the babe."

Pepper blanched. "You, living with a *woman*?"

"Hey, there have been lots of women," Tony said, scowling. "Not for very long, but they've been

here.”

“Yes, I distinctly recall that,” Pepper noted dryly. “If this one is supposed to be staying here for a longer time period, please avoid the whole one-night-stand thing.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t dare,” Tony said. “She might throw another knife at me, or worse.” He stood up, staring out over the sea. “Pepper... keep all this to yourself, alright? You probably noticed that Harry and Bruce are even more private than I am, and that’s saying something. Of course, one would expect that joint smashing of evil robot aircraft probably counts for something; they can be trusted. You already know about Harry. I suppose Bruce will tell you in due time. They should all be back here soon enough.”

Pepper shook her head. “What are you assembling here, Tony?”

“The Super Best Friends?” he joked. “I’ve been getting some ideas from a few files I’ve recently acquired. Interesting stuff. You know, I’ve heard about this new guy in New York, supposed to be pretty cool. Perhaps if we built a new home there, we’d have another interested tenant? Besides, it’s nice and eventful there, especially if we move in. I’ve always wanted a tower...”

“Please tell me you’re not...”

“I already bought the land. Want to help me out with the design, later this week?” Tony smiled broadly. “I knew you would. I’ve got an important meeting soon, national defence type stuff. Don’t worry, I’ll fill you in later. I suppose you could get me some coffee, though.” He quickly snapped off a kiss on her cheek before he walked back into the house. “Rhodey, I don’t think that suit’s going to open without the passkeys... I know you’ve been trying for the last ten minutes.”

Pepper sighed and shook her head before she snatched Tony’s half-finished glass of wine and drank it all.

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That had been a stupid idea. A tremendously stupid, ridiculously unsafe idea.

“Tony, you’re rubbing off on me,” Harry muttered as he opened his eyes. The world swam before his eyes for a moment, and when he managed to right himself, he stopped cold. It was dark and dreary, and graves jutted out of the ground like rotten teeth. There was a chill in the air and Harry recognized this place, recognized it from his nightmares. Slowly, he turned around, knowing what he’d see.

“Hello, Harry Potter,” the man said softly. His face was as pasty white as ever, and his narrowed red eyes stared down on Harry coldly. In his hand he held the wand he’d lost in their last meeting. The Elder Wand.

“You’re *dead!*” Harry blurted.

“Yes,” Voldemort responded simply, glancing at his bony hand curiously. “That is a most regrettable circumstance.” He shook his head, smirking viciously. “This form is interesting, isn’t it? Serpentine, powerful. I think I like it.”

Harry scrambled back to his feet, grasping his wand tightly and aiming it at his old enemy. The

graveyard was familiar, and yet it wasn't, strangely twisted. There, behind Voldemort, was the grave of Tom Riddle Sr. Right beside it was a second grave, Rebecca Banner's grave. "This isn't real," Harry said with certainty. "This is a memory – this is all in my head."

Voldemort smiled sardonically. "Of course it's all in your head, Harry Potter, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?" He shook his head in amusement. "Think of me as you wish. It is not the first time that you have spoken to a memory made conscious, is it? See me as such, or as an ill-conceived thought, or perhaps as everything that you could be." Voldemort smiled, and for a moment his eyes glimmered green. "Such potential, untapped..."

Harry frowned. "This is a memory, then... but you're clearly not a part of it. The real Voldemort would've cursed me already." Harry winced as his head throbbed painfully. He tried to remember where he'd been, before... this. He couldn't recall. He could only vaguely remember a Pensieve... A chill ran down his back. "Something's gone wrong, hasn't it?"

"Yes," The would-be Voldemort drawled, sounding distinctly bored. "Your unwise attempt at inserting a foreign thought into your puny mind backfired on you." He turned to the two nearby graves. "You made quite a mess of things in this head of yours. I suppose this would be an easy way to be rid of you, but... that would be so dreadfully uninteresting." He paused, turning back towards Harry. "This is a significant memory, is it not? An evening of rebirth, a turning point in your life, and now you've defiled it. You shoved another memory on top. It's unsurprising: Two graveyards, two deaths, two pivotal moments. The memories resonate. It is no wonder that your mind was so open, so unprotected, that anything and everything could traipse right in."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked warily. "Are you using *Legilimency* on me? Who are you, really?"

"That is not the right question," The man said simply. "There is a time for introductions, and then there is a time for stopping your mind from collapsing in on itself. I think we agree on which of these is more immediately relevant. Do you remember the graveyard, wizard? The duel that took place by these tombs, around a great cauldron from which the form I bear arose?" He grinned toothily. "Do you recall the moment when you almost died?"

"Yes... I think." Harry blinked confusedly, trying to recall the details. There had been Phoenix song, and an enraged man. Spirits, floating freely in the air, and the overwhelming urge to lash out. Green light? "This..."

"Two memories. Even you can make such an elementary connection, can you not? One of the memories is your own, the other is alien. Different. Filter out the memory that has invaded. That will return things to a semblance of normality."

"You're surprisingly helpful, especially considering that pasty-white face you're using," Harry muttered, trying to reason out which part of the memory was real, and which wasn't. It didn't make sense. He remembered it all as his own thoughts; there was no difference. The only reason he knew that he hadn't really killed his father against that headstone was because he knew his parents had long been dead. Grief and guilt over Brian Banner's death wouldn't leave him, though, even though he knew they weren't his own.

Voldemort shook his head. "Do not mistake my help for charity, Harry Potter. You are useful, promising. I would not have you snuffed out by your own idiocy, not now." He stared at Harry with his

red eyes, analyzing him. "You are an interesting specimen. The only one of your kind, aren't you?"

Harry nodded distractedly. Suddenly, his eyes widened. "That rage," Harry blurted. "Bruce, the Hulk. I'm remembering parts of his life. It's intermixed with my own. What... what did I do?"

"You'll have to live through the false memory before you will return to sanity," The man who looked like Voldemort said in distaste. "You must live it like an observer rather than a participant. Things should snap back into place."

"That'll hurt, won't it?"

"Yes." The false Voldemort smiled, and for a moment he eerily resembled the real one. "Very much so."

"Story of my life." Harry shook his head as the world evaporated into white agony.

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"You're not serious."

"I am," Tony said, tapping on his screen. "Three of them, armed and ready to fire. You were looking in the right direction, but you stopped too quickly. If it had been one, perhaps I could have bought this as the signature of a power station for a particularly large military base. Perhaps it was poorly shielded, which is why you picked it up. But three? No, we're dealing with weapons. Gamma bombs. Nuclear missiles, but even deadlier."

"This is a lot more serious than we expected, then." Fury scowled, glancing at Rhodey, who was looking on with interest. "Do you really want him here? He is military, you understand? That kind of weaponry should not fall into their hands."

"He's part of this now," Tony said sharply. "Pepper too, for that matter. They won't talk."

"I'll keep you to that promise," Fury murmured, focusing back on the screen. "Three of these 'Gamma bombs', each big enough to take out an entire damn city. This is a hell of a lot more than just a little hornet's nest. I know we wanted to send you and the other two in, but can we stop a group that's ready to unleash the apocalypse and seems to be aiming for world conquest?"

"Of course," Tony said, shrugging. "You've got me in the coolest suit *ever*, a guy who can smash those bombs up until they're little bitty pieces and skip even getting a mild tan from the radiation, and Harry, who will just turn them into fish, I imagine. Well, there's also a goddess, but you don't know about her yet, I think."

"...What?"

"You'll find out, eventually. Don't worry too much about it, I think you have a pretty full plate already." He shrugged. "I'm sending everything to Bruce and Harry soon enough, so they're effectively listening in already. I have all the known data for the bombs that should allow us to track down the exact position of the A.I.M. base. When are we moving out?"

Fury sighed. "I really would have preferred to have this conversation on the Helicarrier. This is a

make-or-break mission, you understand?”

Tony frowned. “Hey, last time I made a house call. I figured you could return the favour. Propellant for the suit isn’t free, you know.”

Fury blinked. “Doesn’t it run on arc reactor energy?”

“A technicality,” Tony replied. “Now, plans. We have our little team of four - roll with it - who can probably wipe out the entire base. Especially Harry, I think, with that fire of his. If he gets Bruce ready... there won’t be a brick left standing.” He tapped the map and frowned. “It’s in Chile, eh? I think we can Portkey or Side-Along over the border, none of that pesky military interference. Don’t worry about what those are, I’ve got it covered. We’ll need someone present to shoot down any of their projectiles if they fire them, though. I’m thinking whoever runs A.I.M. has twitchy fingers on the trigger, given what happened with the Mark I of my suit.”

“If we shoot down a nuke, we’ll have to deal with fallout, and considering the kind of thing that happened to Dr. Banner, I would rather not have anyone exposed to this stuff,” Fury observed. “These things have to be disarmed, or at least dropped somewhere relatively safe. Depositing them in water would still cause a small ecological disaster if it was anywhere near the coast, but the people would probably survive.”

“And you’d have giant hulked-out sharks within a couple years,” Tony said dryly. “I have one idea, but you’re not going to like it much. Latch a couple repulsors on them, set them to maximum thrust.”

“...You want to make them faster?”

Tony smiled. “Correct. Of course any missile would attempt to course-correct for the increased speed, if it has any sophistication at all. Repulsors with their own power-supply could reach a pretty impressive speed, which is why I’m already trying to figure out ways of getting it to NASA without the military stepping in...”

“NASA?” Fury repeated, shaking his head. “You want to send the damn things into space?”

“If you add enough speed to a rocket, even one that’s trying to head down towards Earth, sooner or later it’s going to fail and end up circling the earth, the ground curving away at the same rate as it is trying to fall. Orbit, or an outward trajectory towards the moon or wherever else. Then, when they’re nice and snug up there, I detonate the arc reactor. Big boom. Granted, fallout in space would probably still be a bad thing, but it’s easy enough to blast away considering all the hardware I know the military has sent up. The debris would go off into the black rather than rain down on our neighbourhood, or if it did come down, it’d burn up in the atmosphere.”

Fury sighed. “This would work?”

Tony shrugged. “Probably. I have alternatives, but I’ll need Bruce or Harry to give input on those. I imagine if we get to the bombs before they’re launched, we’d be able to knock them out easily enough - it’s the flying ones that’d be trouble.”

“Contact Dr. Banner and Harry as soon as you can, and tell them to hurry back here. We can’t wait a week.” Fury stood up, brushing off his jacket. “By the way, is there any reason there is a hole in your

roof?"

"Easy entry for the suit," Tony said easily. "Always wanted to fix it up, but I figure that sooner or later Harry will get annoyed enough by the draft that he'll do it for me."

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Harry couldn't move, no matter how much he tried. He stood a foot behind the grave of Rebecca Banner; a young Bruce Banner stood before it, his eyes closed, almost shedding a tear. Good, he was in the memory, Bruce's memory.

"What are *you* doing here?" Brian Banner said sharply as he approached his wife's grave. He scowled darkly, staring briefly at the headstone, and then back at his son. "Here of all places?"

"What a stupid question," Bruce replied, turning to face his father. His expression was remarkably collected. "Where else would I be, on the anniversary of mom's murder?"

Brian spat on the ground, glaring at his son with such loathing that Harry wasn't sure what to think of it. "You have a lot of nerve, coming out here, today, *Bruce*." He shook his head firmly. "This isn't a place fit for monsters, least of all you." He stepped forward then, grabbing Bruce by the arm. "Back off!"

Bruce tried to pull free, but Brian simply held on, twisting his arm. After a short scuffle Brian ended up throwing his son to the ground. Bruce tiredly turned, and stared at his father. "You are still suffering that delusion, aren't you? Even after all these years in the mental hospital, you haven't changed even the tiniest bit... You still believe I'm a monster."

"Your mother was a fool for not seeing it," Brian snarled in response, pacing back and forth. "I knew what you were, and she knew too, I'm certain of it. She was far too kind to you. She let you grow to manhood, with that *evil* still inside of you. She knew you were a monster, and let you live!"

"The only monster is you," Bruce muttered shaking his head. "The only evil I see is when a man cursed his son and killed his wife over a madman's dream. I was never a monster. I was intelligent, and you feared that. I was insightful, and you saw it as a sign of darkness."

"It's not your actions that make you a monster," Brian said, scowling. "I swore to myself that I would never have children, that I would never pass on my curse. You were an accident, a mistake. With every step you took. you convinced me more that the same darkness had infected you, and you are not as careful as I am about it. You will spread it, spread that cancer of mine."

"You're crazy," Bruce said. "You know that I work in a high-profile laboratory these days. Cutting-edge stuff. I'm making something of my life, and you never did. That's what has you jealous, not this idea that I am somehow flawed because of you. Perhaps you should look in the mirror."

The kick was vicious. One moment Bruce was upright, the next he crumpled to the ground holding his stomach, and a cry of pain escaped him. Brian balled his fists, staring down at his son with a scowl, and he slowly bent over to pick up a sharp rock, the edges gleaming. "I don't do this for my own sake, you know," Brian swore. "You are the demon spawn. You have to be *destroyed*!" He snarled as he sent his fist flying, the razor-sharp rock in his hand aiming to slice his son's neck.

Harry didn't miss the vicious snarl that formed on Bruce's face a split second before. "Not. Again." He kicked out in retaliation, hitting his father right in the knee. The man cried out in pain as he grasped at his leg, dropping his stone to the ground. He fell, and for a moment things seemed frozen in time. Brian crashed against his wife's headstone. There was an awful cracking noise, and Harry tried to recoil. Blood poured down the stone.

"No..." Bruce scrambled upright, eyes wide. "Dad? Dad!" He stooped next to the body, and he shuddered, pale as bone. "NO!"

Harry could only watch in terror as Bruce stared down on the body of his father in a mix of horror and relief, and for a moment he looked utterly insane, his eyes seeming almost to glow green. Then, he fled, and there was no intelligence there. He ran like a man possessed, crazed.

Brian Banner was dead, and the rain was slowly ruining any evidence the police might have had for determining what happened here. Bruce's footprints were washed away, even the blood soaked into the ground. Come morning, they'd find him, and the police wouldn't look too deeply into his death, all too aware of what an awful human being he'd been. Bruce fled, and he never really stopped running. What happened here had been burned into his mind so strongly that he'd rejected it outright. Blocked it out.

That flash of rage, that sudden burst of energy that Bruce had when facing his father's attacks, it was far too recognizable. For a moment, he and his father had been two people utterly consumed by their anger. Brian Banner had only come off as an angry drunk, though, swinging wildly. Bruce had been brutal: A single blow, and he'd taken out his father. By accident, perhaps, and it was certainly a justified retaliation, but still.

Brian Banner had argued that his son inherited the traits of a monster from him. He'd seen the volatile and raging aspect of Brian several times now. He'd seen the same from Bruce, up close and personal. Here in the graveyard - long before Bruce would start messing with his own genetics, before he even went into gamma research - the Hulk was born. For a split second, something else had taken over, some aspect of Bruce that had more of his strengths, fewer of his weaknesses, and without Bruce's conscious interference, far more aggression and hate.

Perhaps Bruce's father had been right about something – there was something different about Bruce. Something he might've inherited, or developed on his own in his youth when his father insisted that there was something utterly wrong with his son. Whatever that was, it had been unleashed by the effects of Bruce's research, but had not been created by it.

And it had saved his life.

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"Harry? Hello, can anyone hear me?"

Sif looked up from tending to Harry's unconscious body, frowning. The voice was coming from nearby, but... "Who speaks?"

"Ah, it's our resident warrior goddess! Is Harry there with you? I've been trying to call his cell for the last hour, but I guess he'd turned it off again. He said this was for emergencies, but I think right now counts."

Sif followed the voice and quickly rummaged through Harry's jacket, retrieving a very tiny box from an

inside pocket. Inside was a picture of Tony Stark less than an inch wide, staring up at her with a smile.

"There we go! You're still gorgeous, by the way. Anyway, can you fetch me Harry?"

"He is ... indisposed," Sif said. "He was going to attempt something and told me to watch him, and it might take some time before he wakes up. It is as if his spirit has vanished, though his body remains behind. I have never heard of the Seidr becoming capable of spirit walking to that extent, but I imagine there is much I do not know." She sniffed. "It is morning, soon – I imagine he will wake up soon so we can continue our trek."

"Harry's gone out for a little astral projection," Tony concluded. "I shouldn't be surprised, really. Where's Bruce?"

Sif glanced in the distance. "He is currently large and green."

"Ah," Tony said, pausing. "Listen, I need those two up and back here, and *soon*. A.I.M.'s turning out to be a tiny bit nastier than we'd anticipated, and they might have the capability to wipe a couple major cities off the Earth. The current model of the Iron Man on its own won't cut it. Get those two healthy and back here on the double, will you?"

Sif nodded, glancing at Harry. "I will see to it."

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Harry groaned painfully, dragging himself upright. Every muscle ached, and so did his bones. It felt like he'd just swallowed a good dose of Skele-Gro and it was kicking in. Faux-Voldemort hadn't been kidding. Slowly he turned to see Sif, sitting nearby. She was staring at the horizon, a rather familiar box in her hands.

"How long did that take?" he asked.

Sif turned, and smiled. "Ah, you have awakened. I had suspected it would be before morning. It has been a large part of the night, as you can no doubt tell."

Harry frowned, staring at the sun just peeking over the horizon. Quite a few hours, then; more than he'd anticipated. He would have berated himself for his complete foolishness in what he'd done with the memory. Things were coming back to him now, at last. He had bigger fish to fry, though. "Why do you have the emergency mirror?"

Sif held up the mirror and shrugged. "Mr. Stark contacted you while you were gone. I retrieved the mirror and spoke to him. It seems that he requires your presence sooner than anticipated. I would suggest that you use the alternative method that you hinted at, sending me back early."

Harry frowned. "Did he say what happened?"

"It was something about so-called 'Aim' and destroyed cities," Sif said with a shrug, and Harry stared. "You should ask him yourself, I would say."

"I will," Harry muttered. "That could be about half a dozen things, and most of them are horrible. I'll have to get Bruce at top speed, then, and hope that I can at least get him somewhere safe, even if he probably won't be coming along." He blinked as he looked down at himself. "Wait... why am I wearing my spare trousers?"

"I thought you would prefer a fresh set in the morning," Sif said, shrugging. "You brought a secondary set for a reason, did you not?"

"You undressed me?" Harry asked incredulously. "*Why?*"

Sif frowned. "That seems obvious, doesn't it? You were unconscious. You were not going to do it yourself."

Harry just spluttered indignantly.

"It's as if you think I have never seen a man before," Sif muttered, frowning. "Besides, Seidr are nearly indistinguishable from Asgardians, there are no extra parts."

A look of horror crossed over Harry's face. "Did you... did you *change my underwear too?*"

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Author's Note: Kudos to NASA and JPL for Curiosity, hell yeah.

Now... can we please get back to Zubrin's Mars Semi-Direct and send people pls?