

(Every character depicted in the story below is a consenting legal adult over the age of 18)

A/N: Carrot meet stick.

-x-X-x-

“Sure.”

His easy agreement sends a ripple of surprise through the room, everyone blinking in confusion. Even Wolverine looks a little befuddled for a moment before scowling just as hard as before.

“‘Sure’? The fuck you mean, ‘sure’?”

Thaddeus rolls his eyes, even as he and Emma confer over their connection and Emma in turn starts to reach out to the relevant parties.

“I mean exactly what I said. Give me a moment.”

Wolverine doesn’t look convinced even a little bit, but he at least falls silent. Cyclops on the other hand... she snarls, hands clenched into fists at her sides.

“Give you a moment to do what? Find a way to trick or trap us? Like we’d fall for that sort of shit!”

Giving the brunette a thoroughly unimpressed look, Thaddeus sighs.

“No. Give me a moment to contact them and get them ready to come home. I *could* just grab them up and teleport them here without any warning, but that would be rude at best and criminal at worst. Considering they’re coming all the way back from the *Moon*, they should be given the chance to ready themselves.”

This time, the shock is far more pronounced as everyone processes what he’d just said. Jaws even drop open on a few people and there’s incredulity on a

handful of faces. Hawkeye makes a noise of outright disbelief in the back of his throat before interjecting.

“Sorry, did you just say the Moon?”

Smiling thinly, Thaddeus just tilts his head.

“Yes. I did.”

It was a calculated move, releasing that information of his own accord... one that Emma had already agreed with when he'd done it. From the moment they decided to just give in to Wolverine's demands and bring back everyone they were accused of having kidnapped, the fact that Emma was up on the Moon was going to come out.

After all, with Iron Man's psychic shielding currently turned off in the Avengers' Compound, the likes of Charles Xavier would read the minds of Kitty and Illyana immediately, even if Laura and Cessily would have been more difficult to parse. And from there, it would be out of their hands.

This way, they got to release it themselves. Not that Thaddeus expected it to earn them much in the way of goodwill or anything like that, but at the very least it made it on their own terms if nothing else.

Of course, the news is taken in all sorts of ways from all parties present. Ms. Marvel flicks some of her blonde locks behind her before crossing her arms over her chest and narrowing her eyes.

“If they're on the Moon and you're in contact with them... does that mean you can reach all the way up to the Moon, or that Emma Frost can reach all the way down here?”

Thaddeus doesn't bother giving that a straight answer though. Instead, he just offers up another thin smile at the blonde heroine. Fortunately, the ensuing awkward silence as he refuses to respond only lasts a handful of seconds before he receives an affirmative back from up above. Not long enough for

anyone to do more than begin to bristle and open their mouths, only for Thaddeus to cut them off.

“They’re ready.”

With that, he gives Emma the go ahead... and then sits back and does nothing at all. Could he have brought Kitty, Illyana, Laura, and Cessily back from the Moon of his own accord? Certainly he could have. But he didn’t have to reveal his hand because in the end... Illyana could do the heavy lifting and help him obfuscate his powers a bit longer.

And indeed, a moment later the ground begins to glow and the four women in question all rise up from one of Illyana’s stepping discs, the teleportation very clearly coming from Illyana herself given she’s holding her magical sword and has a look of concentration on her face.

The ensuing reunion is one that Thaddeus is happy to step back and let happen. Wolverine immediately goes to Laura, though that doesn’t work out the way he probably wants it to as they almost immediately get into a bit of an argument over him being over-protective. Kitty, meanwhile, is immediately drawn into a conference with Storm, Cyclops, and Professor X.

Finally, Cessily moves immediately to Thaddeus’ side, looking like she wants to just wrap herself around him and cease existing as a separate entity for the moment. Thaddeus would normally be all for it, but right now isn’t the best time. Still, he won’t stop her from signaling her support for him if nothing else.

Illyana, last but not least, looks uncertain for a moment. On the one hand, she’s developed a fast friendship with Kitty off of the previous relationship she’d had with an alternate version of the other female mutant. On the other hand... she and Thaddeus had just as deep a connection, if not deeper.

Thaddeus wouldn’t have been upset or disappointed if Illyana decided to stay neutral and off to the side... but he’s not at all surprised when she ultimately moves to join him and Cessily, taking up his other flank opposite of the red head and scowling a bit as she eyes the rest of the room.

Eventually, as certain voices are raised, namely those of Wolverine and Laura as the two feed off of each other's anger in a perpetual loop of negativity, Captain America steps forward and raps his shield with his knuckles hard enough to draw everyone's attention. Well, that and his raised voice.

"Excuse me! Please, let's all calm down and have a talk about all of this!"

It's probably the most mild mannered way that Thaddeus has ever seen someone take control of a room, truth be told. If it was anyone except for THE Captain America, he's pretty sure such a polite and measured call for quiet would have gotten absolutely nowhere.

But it is Captain America, its Steve Rogers in the flesh, and that means something to pretty much everyone, even the X-Men. And so, at his request, they all move back into a bit of a loose circle. The X-Men along with Kitty and Laura are on one side, the Avengers are on the other, and Thaddeus finds himself now flanked with Cessily and Illyana on the third.

Once they're all paying attention, Captain America looks to the X-Men rather sternly.

"Well? The missing mutants that you said Emma Frost kidnapped have all been returned. Every single one of them is in this room, are they not?"

Thaddeus wonders briefly if Xavier will speak up and mention Sage. He doesn't technically have to blow the woman's cover in order to express concern for her, but doing so will definitely look suspicious. On the other hand, what's being suspicious over making sure of her safety and the sanctity of her mind, right?

Only... no. Charles Xavier continues to prove that he sees Sage as nothing but an asset to be spent, not a person to be worried about, because even though it's the perfect opportunity to demand her safe return... he simply inclines his head in Captain America's direction, acknowledging Rogers' point.

"Indeed."

Stark clears his throat then, the billionaire raising an eyebrow questioningly.

“And? Are they all of sound mind? What’s the verdict?”

Before Xavier can respond, Laura suddenly jerks her arm out of Wolverine’s grasp where the older mutant had grabbed onto her. The two hadn’t actually fully stopped their argument even when Captain America stepped in, they’d simply quieted it down a lot and ultimately restarted things in low mutters while everyone else was speaking.

Now though, Laura pulls free and steps away from Wolverine’s side, scowling at him as she goes.

“I’m not in danger. I’m perfectly safe with my mate, Logan!”

Wolverine stands frozen for a moment before working his jaw in clear anxiety-induced anger, even as Laura crosses the no man’s land in the center of their loose circle and stands alongside Thaddeus, taking up a position next to Cessily. There’s a pause as everyone watches this happen, followed by Xavier letting out a sigh.

“... None of them are under the psychic control of Emma Frost or Thaddeus Cummings as far as I can tell. They are of sound minds and their actions... and decisions are their own.”

Ms. Marvel makes an incredulous noise in the back of her throat at that.

“Seriously?!”

She then gestures to him and his ‘faction’ as if to say ‘so why are three of them siding with him then?!’. This prompts Cessily to smirk and half-drape herself over him as she turns silvery right there on the spot.

“The Professor is right. If you knew more about us, you’d know it’s impossible anyways. I’m literally made of living, non-toxic mercury, so its all but impossible

for telepaths to access my mind. And Laura here has some of the strongest psychic defenses on Earth... the porcupine defense, I think it's been called."

Cessily flicks her currently silver hair back with a chuckle.

"Point is, we've all chosen to be with Thaddeus entirely of our own volition. Even those of us around this circle who aren't currently standing with him in the face of this current... adversity."

At that, the female mutant's eyes dart back and forth, lingering on both Kitty and She-Hulk for a moment each. Both of whom stiffen up enough to catch the attention of the others. Thaddeus holds in the urge to sigh as he sees understanding begin to dawn on those not already 'in the know'. Ms. Marvel in particular wrinkles her nose at She-Hulk. However, she doesn't seem to get it quite as well as the likes of Iron Man.

"Hang on a second... don't tell me... that mutation of yours isn't sex-based is it?"

A ripple goes through the rest of the Avengers at Stark's words, even as the X-Men watch on impassively. They already all know him all too well after all, having tracked Thaddeus down back before he really had any way of keeping anything about himself secret.

Honestly, he's not surprised that Xavier has spread the details of his powers beyond just Storm and on to Wolverine and Cyclops as well, given their complete lack of reaction, but he is disappointed.

Meanwhile, Ms. Marvel has once more reverted to incredulous.

"Excuse me?! Sex-based?!"

Stark meanwhile, just shrugs in the face of his teammate's disbelief.

"Think about it. He told us himself that his mutation allows him to make himself and other people stronger through 'engagement'. And then he admitted he left

something out when you pressed him. Now here we are and everyone on his side or associated with him in any way is a woman. It doesn't take a genius, which I am, to put two and two together and get four."

Then, because Tony Stark will be Tony Stark, he flashes Thaddeus a wicked sort of grin.

"Just how many times did you and Emma Frost bump uglies to give her enough power that the Phoenix came calling?"

Thaddeus considers not responding for a moment... but fuck it, cat's out of the bag. So he matches Stark's grin with a smirk of his own and shakes his head.

"Knowing what you know about me and Emma, you should know... there's nothing ugly about either of us or what we can do together."

That draws a bark of laughter from Stark, along with a low whistle. Meanwhile, the rest of the room seems torn between exasperated and disgusted. In the end though, it's Storm who steps forward and gets them all back on track.

"Enough, we've allowed ourselves to be distracted from the matter at hand. Emma Frost holds more power than is safe to have here on Earth. The last time the Phoenix went off the rails was nearly catastrophic. It was only through quick thinking and great sacrifice that we were able to keep it contained like we did. We need to decide now what to do with her."

Thaddeus narrows his eyes at that, glad now that he didn't bring Emma, Sage, and Daisy back along with the first four. He's convinced that there would have been a fight by now if the overly hostile X-Men were presented with a target. As is...

"You're not going to decide anything except to leave her alone."

His words settle like a lead weight in the room, but Thaddeus doesn't care. He continues on, his voice terse and sharp.

“The worst crime that Emma Frost is guilty of committing at this point is property damage. We will pay to have the buildings that were cracked by the Phoenix’s descent repaired. Other than that though, she’s done nothing wrong. She’s hurt nobody and even removed herself from Earth to make sure she had absolute control over the Phoenix in an emptier environment. Which to be clear, she now has.”

Cyclops growls, teeth gnashing.

“And how can we trust that, exactly? Jean couldn’t control it... why would Frost be any different?”

Thaddeus meets the red visor Cyclops is wearing with a steady gaze for a moment... and then slides that steady gaze down to the seated form of Professor Charles Xavier.

“From what I’m told... you would have to ask your Professor about that.”

Again, his words cause surprise and shock. And again, it’s not the X-Men who are really all that surprised by what Thaddeus is saying, they’re only surprised that he seems to know about it. The Avengers on the other hand, all look back and forth between him and Xavier curiously. And while it wasn’t necessarily Thaddeus’ intention to air the wheelchair bound man’s dirty laundry right now, he’s sick and tired of Emma being compared to Jean Grey.

“For starters, Emma Frost did not have the Phoenix Force inside of her from an early age. Nor did she have a well-meaning, well-intentioned mentor who decided to induce mental blocks in her mind to keep her from accessing the full breadth of her power until much later in life.”

Charles Xavier at least has the good grace to look tired and even a little ashamed, rather than offended or defensive as Thaddeus stares him down.

“... I’m not here to litigate what was done to Jean Grey, or what happened to her. I can only imagine that was indeed a very fine mess with multiple parties to be blamed. However, Emma was not involved in it. The only connection she has

to any of this is that she's the Phoenix Force's new host. And unlike Jean Grey, she was a full grown woman very well-versed in the fullness of her psychic power before the Phoenix Force arrived. She is in control. Not it."

Silence reigns for a moment as everyone is forced to chew on his words. Until finally, Ms. Marvel interjects again.

"Let's say that is true. That's still more power than any one person should have access to."

Thaddeus scoffs and crosses his arms over his chest in finality.

"Then I would suggest, given she and I have proven over and over again that we are benign... you should not make someone with that much power into an enemy when you *don't have to*."

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A/N: Remember to Vote, leave a Like, and let me know what you think!