

Chapter 65:

– Blake Himejima –

I laid flat on my back in the middle of Central Park, with my arms spread across the grass as I stared up at the sky. Clouds drifted between the buildings surrounding the park, indifferent to everything happening beneath them. People walked dogs, pushed strollers, jogged along paved paths, and generally continued living their normal Saturday lives.

It was almost offensive how peaceful everything looked.

Still, I was calmer than I had been when I stormed out of my dorm.

That wasn't saying much. Five minutes earlier, I'd been angry enough to find Sebastian Shaw and introduce his teeth to the back of his throat. Now, I could probably manage an actual conversation before deciding whether he deserved reconstructive dentistry.

Progress.

Unfortunately, calming down hadn't helped me understand what the fuck had set Peter off.

I replayed the argument again, searching for something I'd missed. One moment, I had been asking my best friend to spend the afternoon with me. The next, Peter was accusing me of abandoning my responsibilities, escaping into other worlds, and treating heroism like a hobby I could drop whenever it became inconvenient.

Half-hearted hero.

That one still hurt.

Peter had looked like he regretted saying it almost immediately, but he hadn't taken it back. He had just thrown Uncle Ben's favorite lesson at me and walked out.

Maybe the argument hadn't really been about me. Peter had always carried more guilt than anyone should. Becoming Spider-Man seemed to have turned that guilt into a religion.

But knowing that didn't make his words sting any less.

He was my best friend. My brother in every way except blood.

And for the first time since I'd known him, I was genuinely worried our friendship might be in trouble.

"Excuse me?"

I blinked and turned my head.

Two police officers stood several feet away. One man and one woman, both with their hands resting near their belts, not reaching for anything, but close enough to respond if the weird teenager lying motionless in the grass suddenly became a problem.

The male officer looked vaguely familiar. I might have seen him directing traffic near campus. The woman studied my face for several seconds before recognition lit behind her eyes.

“...Mr. Stark?” she asked.

I resisted the urge to correct her.

Stark wasn't technically my last name. Legally, I was Blake Himejima, with Stark added to a depressingly large number of tabloid headlines whenever someone needed to remind readers that I was Tony's adopted son.

Apparently, that was close enough.

I pushed myself onto my elbows. “That depends. Am I in trouble?”

The officers exchanged a glance.

“No, sir,” the man said. “We were walking past and recognized you. You've been lying here for a while. We wanted to make sure you were okay.”

That was surprisingly considerate.

Then again, I doubted they checked on every teenager lying in Central Park. Being the adopted son of the world's most famous billionaire apparently came with attentive police service.

“I'm fine,” I assured them. “Just **touching some grass** before I go confront a guy who's been harassing my girlfriend.”

The female officer's eyebrows rose.

The male officer glanced toward his partner again. They seemed to communicate through a complicated series of facial twitches that probably took years of police work to master.

“Harassing her how?” he asked.

I considered the question.

How exactly was I supposed to summarize Sebastian Shaw?

According to Jean, he was a powerful mutant, a wealthy criminal, an evil Nazi, and a controlling monster who believed he owned anything he wanted. He had deliberately intruded on my date with Emma and stared at her like she was property that had wandered off.

I didn't know the full story. Jean had refused to tell me because it belonged to Emma, and I respected that.

Mostly.

"Unwanted gifts, invitations, and general creepy rich-guy behavior," I said. "He apparently doesn't understand that no means no."

The woman's expression hardened. "Has your *girlfriend* filed a complaint?"

"Probably not. She tends to handle problems herself."

That was an understatement. Emma could turn into living diamond, rearrange memories, enslave minds, and dismantle multinational companies before lunch. She didn't need me protecting her.

That didn't mean I was going to ignore someone harassing her.

"If you give us his name, we could look into it," the male officer offered. "If there's an active threat, we can accompany you."

I stared at him.

There was absolutely no chance two random patrol officers normally offered to escort people through relationship confrontations based on one vague sentence. If I had still been Blake Smith—the homeless foster kid with two hundred dollars and everything he owned stuffed into a backpack—they probably would have told me to file a report and avoid doing anything stupid.

Now I was Tony Stark's adopted son, Emma Frost's publicly photographed date, and one of the newest recurring faces in the tabloids.

Suddenly, the NYPD had time for personal service. Money and fame really were superpowers.

"I appreciate it," I said, "but I'll be fine. I'm only going to talk to him."

The woman's gaze sharpened as though she could hear the carefully constructed limitation in that promise.

"And if talking doesn't work?"

"I'll leave." *Probably...*?

The two officers looked at each other again. This exchange was longer.

Finally, the man shrugged. "All right. Stay safe, Mr. Stark."

"And call us if the situation escalates," his partner added.

"I will."

They walked away, neither of them looking particularly eager to involve themselves in what probably sounded like billionaire relationship drama.

I waited until they were out of earshot before chuckling.

"I'm pretty sure they offered to arrest a man without knowing his name."

My phone chimed beside me.

"An exaggeration," JARVIS said through the speaker. "They offered to investigate and provide accompaniment. Though I concede their enthusiasm was likely influenced by your public identity."

"See? Even you agree."

"I agreed with approximately twelve percent of your statement."

"Close enough."

I sat up fully, drawing my knees toward my chest. My anger was still there, but it had cooled into something manageable. Peter's words continued circling through my head, yet they no longer felt like an open wound someone kept pressing a finger into.

"JARVIS?"

"Yes, Blake?"

"I'm calm now."

There was a short pause.

"I'm pleased to hear it."

"Are you still planning to call Tony or Mom?"

"I have decided to trust your judgment and will not contact Mr. Stark or Mrs. Himejima-Stark at this time."

At this time.

There was the threat.

"Thank you."

"You are welcome. For clarity, this trust remains conditional upon you continuing to demonstrate sound judgment."

“Meaning?”

“If the Hellfire Club suffers a sudden structural collapse, mysterious electrical fire, localized meteorological event, or unexplained attack involving holy energy, I will reconsider.”

I pushed myself to my feet and brushed grass from my trousers.

“That feels weirdly specific.”

“I have reviewed your history.”

Fair.

I slipped my phone into my pocket and looked past the trees toward the skyline.

“I’m still going.”

“I assumed as much.”

“Even if I do nothing else, I need to talk to Shaw.”

Jean and Emma could handle him. That wasn’t in question. But whatever history existed between Shaw and Emma had followed her into this timeline, and he was already trying to reassert himself in her life.

I wasn’t going to let that happen uncontested.

“I’ll warn him to stay away from her,” I said. “No violence. No threats I can’t legally defend. Just a conversation.”

“A considerable improvement over your original plan.”

My original plan had mostly involved walking into the Hellfire Club and beating Sebastian Shaw unconscious in front of everyone he considered important.

Tony would have found it hilarious.

Mom probably would have offered tactical suggestions.

Pepper would have developed a headache powerful enough to register on medical equipment.

The problem wasn’t that Shaw didn’t deserve it. The problem was that the Hellfire Club was apparently filled with politicians, celebrities, business leaders, and old-money elites. Assaulting a famous industrialist in front of dozens of influential witnesses would create consequences far beyond me.

Those consequences would reach Tony, Stark Industries, Mom, Emma, and probably SIT.

I had caused enough trouble for the people I loved.

"I'm going to be responsible," I told JARVIS.

"I hope so."

"You could sound more confident."

"I could," he agreed.

I started walking toward the nearest park exit.

Halfway there, I felt the remains of my anger stir again.

Half-hearted hero.

I shoved the thought aside.

This wasn't about proving Peter wrong. It wasn't about being a hero, mutant politics, or living up to someone else's version of me.

Sebastian Shaw had been harassing someone I cared about.

I was going to ask him politely to stop.

What happened afterward would be entirely up to him.

– Sebastian Shaw –

Sebastian Shaw believed the Hellfire Club was the only place on Earth where true power gathered without pretending to be anything else.

Governments were theater. Elections were pageants performed for the comfort of the masses. Presidents, prime ministers, and senators strutted across brightly lit stages while believing they controlled the direction of civilization.

They did not.

The world was controlled in rooms like this one.

The Hellfire Club's Manhattan headquarters had been standing in one form or another for generations. Its halls were lined with imported marble, priceless paintings, and dark wood cut from forests that no longer existed. Every chair had hosted someone whose signature could alter the lives of millions. Wars had been funded over dinner. Governments had fallen during card games. Entire industries had been created or destroyed because two men disliked each other over brandy.

There were billionaires who would have sold their own children for membership.

Most were still refused.

Wealth alone did not grant entrance. Wealth was common among the world's elite. The Hellfire Club required influence, ambition, and the willingness to use both without being restrained by tedious concepts like morality.

Sebastian possessed all three.

More importantly, he was the Black King.

He sat at the head of one of the greatest financial and political organizations in the world. His companies controlled mineral rights, defense contracts, energy projects, shipping lanes, and research laboratories across several continents. Politicians answered his calls before they answered those of their own spouses.

And beneath all that mundane power lay something far greater.

Sebastian Shaw was a mutant.

Not merely a mutant, but one of the superior specimens who represented humanity's inevitable future. His ability allowed him to absorb kinetic energy and convert it into strength, speed, and durability. Every blow struck against him made him stronger. Bullets became fuel. Explosions empowered him. Violence itself bent to his advantage.

He was living proof that Homo sapiens had become obsolete.

Which was why Emma Frost's refusal continued to infuriate him.

Shaw sat behind an antique mahogany desk in his private salon, glaring down at the newspaper spread open before him.

The front page showed Emma stepping out of a limousine in a white dress that left very little to the imagination. She looked magnificent—cold, elegant, and impossibly desirable. A queen carved from ivory and dressed in silk.

Exactly as his future wife should look.

Unfortunately, the young man holding her hand ruined the photograph.

Blake Himejima-Stark.

Tony Stark's recently acquired adopted son stood beside Emma in an immaculate black tuxedo, looking far too comfortable in a world to which he did not belong. Emma's gaze was fixed upon him with a softness Shaw had never seen directed toward anyone else.

A second photograph had been taken through the restaurant's windows. In it, Emma had Blake by the lapels and was kissing him across the table.

It had been printed in color.

Shaw's fingers tightened around the newspaper. The paper crumpled beneath his grip.

Emma should have accepted my offer! She possessed everything necessary to become the Hellfire Club's White Queen. Wealth, beauty, intelligence, ruthless ambition, and a mutant gift capable of controlling the minds of lesser beings. Together, they could have produced heirs powerful enough to shape the next stage of human evolution.

She would have been the perfect wife. The perfect trophy. The perfect mother for his children.

Frost International would have come with her, naturally. Emma had seized control of the company after her father's unfortunate death, and its holdings would have fit neatly into Shaw's existing empire. Their marriage would have united two financial dynasties and created a mutant bloodline without equal.

It was a rational arrangement. A generous arrangement.

Instead, the ungrateful bitch had refused him. *Repeatedly.*

She had returned his gifts, ignored his invitations, and publicly denied that any agreement existed between them. Then she had humiliated him by parading herself through Manhattan with Tony Stark's adopted brat!

A *human* brat, as far as Shaw knew.

The son of that insufferable playboy who had stumbled out of a cave in Afghanistan and decided to reinvent himself as a hero.

Shaw despised Tony Stark almost as much as he coveted Stark Industries.

Across the room, Selene turned a page in the book resting upon her lap. "You have been staring at that photograph for eleven minutes," she observed. "Should I assume the boy personally offended you, or are you merely upset that Emma looks happy?"

Shaw lifted his gaze.

The *Black Queen* sat across from him on a velvet settee, looking as though the furniture had been designed specifically to display her. Long black hair spilled over her shoulders. Her crimson dress clung to a figure that had tempted kings, emperors, priests, and murderers across centuries.

Possibly millennia. No one knew precisely how old Selene was. Anyone who had learned the answer had apparently failed to survive the discovery.

She was the most powerful female mutant Shaw had ever encountered, though her abilities stretched far beyond what modern science comfortably classified as mutation. She controlled matter, magic, and the minds of others with terrifying ease.

Worst of all, she consumed life.

Selene could drain the vitality from living beings and add it to her own, preserving her youth and extending her existence indefinitely. She spoke of ancient civilizations as though recalling places she had visited last summer.

Shaw respected very few people. He feared even fewer. Selene belonged in both categories.

“Emma has made a mistake,” he said.

Selene’s dark eyes moved from him to the newspaper. “Has she?”

“She is throwing away her future for a passing infatuation.”

“With a handsome young man.”

“With *human trash*,” Shaw snapped. “She refused a place beside a *superior being* so she could entertain herself with Tony Stark’s spoiled son.”

Selene closed her book over one finger, preserving her place. “You sound wounded...”

“I am insulted!”

“Of course...” Her tone suggested she saw no distinction.

Shaw leaned back in his chair, forcing his hands to loosen. “Emma belongs among us! She belongs beside me as the White Queen!”

“Emma seems to believe she belongs wherever she pleases.”

“She is young.”

“So is the civilization currently surrounding us. That has never prevented either from being irritating.” Selene smiled faintly, clearly enjoying his frustration.

Shaw scowled. It was fortunate that the other members of the Inner Circle were absent. Shaw had no desire to endure their opinions—especially those of Donald Pierce.

The White King was a senator, an industrialist, and one of the most vocal anti-mutant politicians in the country. He spent every public appearance warning that mutants represented an existential threat to humanity.

Then he attended Hellfire Club meetings without realizing he was usually the only human in the room.

Shaw found the hypocrisy endlessly amusing.

Pierce considered himself the cleverest man at the table. He had no idea the Black King, Black Queen, and nearly every other member of the Inner Circle belonged to the species he hated.

Shaw intended to kill him eventually.

Selene had objected when he raised the possibility, claiming she had plans for the senator. She refused to explain those plans, which probably meant Pierce's eventual death would involve screaming, ritual sacrifice, or both.

Shaw was content to wait.

Pierce remained useful. His anti-mutant rhetoric kept frightened humans focused on public threats while the Hellfire Club quietly recruited gifted mutants and expanded its influence.

A fool could still serve a king.

"Stark remains useful," Selene said, drawing Shaw's attention back to her. "We agreed not to kill him."

"...I remember."

"His technology is accelerating faster than anticipated. We should observe what he creates before deciding whether to acquire his company or simply dismantle it."

"I have no intention of killing Tony Stark yet."

Selene's smile widened. "His adopted son, however, is another matter."

Shaw studied her face.

Selene uncrossed and recrossed her legs with deliberate leisure. "Killing the boy would present few complications," she continued. "Young men die every day. Accidents, overdoses, robberies, jealous lovers. Manhattan is remarkably efficient at swallowing inconvenient people."

"Tony would investigate."

"Let him. Grief makes intelligent men predictable."

Shaw glanced at the photograph again. Emma's fingers were tangled in Blake's dark hair. Her eyes were closed. There was nothing strategic or reluctant about the kiss.

A hot pulse of anger traveled through him.

Selene watched his reaction. "I could handle it for you," she offered.

Shaw's eyes narrowed. "In exchange for what?"

"A favor."

"Absolutely not!"

Selene laughed softly.

Owing the Black Queen anything was an excellent way to discover new definitions of suffering. She never requested money or political concessions when a more interesting price existed. The last man who owed her a favor had disappeared along with his wife, his three adult children, and every record proving his family had ever existed.

Selene lifted one shoulder in an elegant shrug. "A pity. The boy is rather handsome." Her gaze settled on Blake's photograph with predatory appreciation. "I might have enjoyed him before I drained his life."

A faint chill traveled along Shaw's spine. Selene's expression remained perfectly serene, but Shaw had seen what was left after she fed. Healthy men became ancient corpses in seconds, their skin stretched like parchment over brittle bones. Sometimes she took everything.

Sometimes she deliberately left enough life for them to understand what had happened.

"How old are you?" Shaw asked before he could stop himself.

Selene's gaze rose slowly from the newspaper. "Older than your courage."

Shaw decided not to pursue the subject.

The intercom on his desk beeped.

His irritation flared immediately. He had given explicit instructions not to be disturbed unless the building was under attack or someone of international significance arrived unannounced!

He stabbed the button with one finger. "WHAT?"

The club manager's voice emerged from the speaker. "My apologies, Mr. Shaw, but there is a visitor asking to see you."

"Then tell him to make an appointment!"

"He has been rather insistent, sir."

"WHO IS IT?"

There was a brief pause. "Blake Himejima-Stark."

Silence settled over the salon.

Shaw looked at the photograph beneath his hand. Then he looked at Selene.

For one perfect moment, neither of them spoke.

Selene slowly closed her book. A smile spread across her face—not the amused smile she used during conversation, but something ancient, hungry, and delighted.

“The lamb,” she murmured, “walks willingly into the twin lions’ den...”

– Blake –

The Hellfire Club occupied an entire city block on the Upper East Side.

That alone was impressive. Manhattan real estate prices were less an economic system and more a form of psychological warfare. I’d seen studio apartments advertised for enough money to buy half a village in the Elemental Nations.

The club wasn’t a normal Manhattan building, either. Most places tried to squeeze every possible square foot from their property. The Hellfire Club sat behind manicured grounds and a twelve-foot wrought-iron fence, as though someone had carved a private European estate out of the middle of New York.

The building itself was enormous, five stories of pale stone, black-trimmed windows, and classical columns. It looked more like a palace than a gentlemen’s club. Gargoyles perched along the roofline. Dark red banners hung beside the entrance, each displaying an unfamiliar black crown.

The place practically screamed secret society.

Armed guards patrolled the grounds.

They weren’t normal nightclub security. Every man I saw wore an expensive black suit tailored to conceal body armor. Their movements were disciplined, their eyes constantly scanning the street and rooftops. I spotted pistols, compact submachine guns, and at least one guard carrying a magical weapon disguised as a walking cane.

Some of them were probably former military.

The main gate had a reinforced security booth with three guards checking vehicles and verifying names against a printed ledger. The fence was high enough to discourage casual intruders, and I could sense a faint electrical current running through the metal.

Technically, I could have walked up and announced myself.

I had nothing to hide. My plan was to speak with Sebastian Shaw, warn him away from Emma, and leave without starting an international incident.

However, I didn't feel like explaining myself to a private army.

I walked past the property twice, pretending to inspect my phone while studying the patrol pattern. The guards were good. They covered one another's blind spots and varied their routes just enough that anyone relying on a fixed schedule would have trouble slipping through.

Fortunately, I didn't need to slip through.

I waited until the nearest guards turned toward an arriving limousine.

Chakra surged through my legs.

The world blurred.

One moment, I stood on the public sidewalk outside the fence. The next, I was beneath the shadow of the club's entrance portico, twenty feet from the front doors.

No alarms sounded.

No one shouted.

I straightened my jacket and walked forward at a calm pace.

Tsunade had taught me that confidence defeated more security systems than stealth. If someone saw a nervous teenager creeping around an exclusive club, they would ask questions. If they saw a well-dressed young man walking through the front entrance like he owned stock in the place, they would assume someone else had already approved him.

It helped that my face had appeared in newspapers all week.

I reached the front door, then paused.

Something was missing. Cameras. There weren't any.

I'd spent enough time around Tony, Pepper, Natasha, and JARVIS to notice surveillance systems almost automatically. Most luxury buildings had cameras watching every entrance, hallway, elevator, and service corridor. The Hellfire Club had enough armed guards outside to invade a small country, yet there wasn't a single visible camera near the front entrance.

Nothing. That was strange. Either the club valued its members' privacy more than conventional security, or the people running it possessed other ways of watching guests.

Given what Jean had told me about the mutant world, I suspected the second option.

I pushed open the heavy wooden door and stepped inside.

The entrance hall alone was probably worth more than every foster home I had ever lived in combined.

White marble covered the floor. Gold leaf traced the vaulted ceiling. Massive paintings hung on the walls in ornate frames, depicting kings, industrialists, generals, and beautiful women in historical clothing. Several looked old enough to belong in museums.

Nobody stopped me.

Two attendants in crimson uniforms stood beside a set of inner doors. One glanced at my face, clearly recognized me, and decided recognition was close enough to authorization.

I gave him a polite nod.

He returned it automatically.

Confidence really is magic.

The inner doors opened into the main lounge.

I stopped for half a second.

It was the middle of the day, yet the room was packed.

Dozens of men and women occupied velvet couches, private booths, card tables, and polished bars spread throughout the enormous chamber. Chandeliers cast warm golden light over dark wood and crimson upholstery. Waitresses in revealing period-inspired outfits carried trays of alcohol that probably cost more per glass than I used to spend on groceries in a month.

A string quartet performed on a raised platform near one wall.

On the opposite side of the room, women danced around brass poles beneath red spotlights.

This was apparently a gentlemen's club in every possible sense.

Several men at a nearby card table looked familiar. One owned a major pharmaceutical company. Another had appeared on television a week earlier complaining that government regulations were strangling innovation. A third was a famous real-estate developer who had somehow declared bankruptcy multiple times while remaining obscenely rich.

Nobody seemed concerned about being recognized.

That explained the lack of cameras.

Across the lounge, two actors sat with drinks in their hands while topless dancers pressed against them. One of the actors had won an award earlier this year for playing a devoted family man.

I suspected his publicist would have suffered a stroke if anyone photographed him here.

Then I recognized the woman dancing on the center pole. A famous actress.

Cassandra Vale. Her newest movie, *Midnight Vengeance*, was still playing in theaters. I had seen her face on three billboards during my walk from Central Park.

Now she was completely naked, climbing the pole with athletic ease before sliding down in a slow spiral. She released one hand, leaned backward, and displayed herself to the room while men at the surrounding tables applauded.

A famous actress with millions of dollars and an active blockbuster career was performing naked in the middle of a private club at two in the afternoon.

I stared for approximately one second longer than necessary.

Then Cassandra caught me looking. She winked.

I immediately redirected my attention toward the bar.

Wow. Whatever the Hellfire Club was, it had insane influence. Either Cassandra enjoyed dancing here, had been paid an obscene amount of money, or the club possessed something powerful enough to make fame irrelevant inside these walls.

Possibly all three.

I crossed the lounge with my head held high, ignoring the occasional curious glance. A few members recognized me. I heard Tony's name whispered behind a hand and caught Emma's name from somewhere to my right.

The photographs from our date had done their job.

By tomorrow morning, half of Manhattan's elite would know that Emma Frost's mysterious boyfriend had walked into the Hellfire Club alone.

The bartender watched me approach.

He was an older man with silver at his temples and the tired eyes of someone who had witnessed far too many powerful people make terrible decisions. His black vest and white shirt were immaculate, and his hands moved with professional efficiency as he polished a glass.

"What can I get you, sir?" he asked.

“Nothing to drink.”

His gaze moved over me, measuring my age, clothes, and face. Recognition flickered a second later. “Mr. Stark.”

“Himejima,” I corrected automatically. “But close enough.”

“Of course.” He set the glass down. There was a question in his expression, but he was too professional to ask it.

I rested one hand on the bar. “I’m here to see Sebastian Shaw.”

The bartender flinched. He glanced toward the upper balconies overlooking the lounge. Then he lowered his voice. “You don’t want to do that.”

That was not the response I expected. “I’m fairly sure I do.”

“No.” His eyes returned to mine. “You really don’t.”

“Is he here?”

The bartender’s jaw tightened. He leaned closer, keeping his voice low enough that the nearby guests couldn’t hear. “Listen, son. You walked in here without an escort, and nobody stopped you because they recognized your face. Take advantage of that mistake. Turn around, walk out the front door, and forget you ever came here.” His warning sounded genuine. He was trying to help me.

That made me take him more seriously. “I appreciate the warning,” I said. “Honestly. But I need to speak with him.”

“You don’t understand what kind of man he is.”

“I understand enough.”

Jean had described him as an evil mutant Nazi.

That covered most of the important points.

The bartender studied my face for several long seconds, apparently searching for fear or uncertainty. Whatever he found made his shoulders sag.

“You’re not going to leave, are you?”

“No.”

He closed his eyes briefly. “All right.” Reaching beneath the bar, he pressed a small brass button hidden beside the register. “I warned you,” he said. “Remember that.”

“I will.”

“I can’t take you to Mr. Shaw directly. I’ll call the club manager. He’ll decide whether your request goes upstairs.”

“That works for me.”

The bartender gave me one final, almost pitying look.

Then he picked up a telephone concealed beneath the counter and quietly informed someone that Blake Himejima-Stark had arrived to see the Black King.

...The club manager arrived less than five minutes later.

He was a thin man in his late fifties, dressed in a perfectly tailored charcoal suit. Sweat glistened across his forehead despite the comfortable temperature inside the lounge. “Mr. Stark?” he asked.

“...Blake is fine.”

He looked as though nothing about the situation was fine. “Mr. Shaw has agreed to see you. If you’ll follow me.”

The bartender gave me one final warning look as I stepped away from the bar.

I followed the manager through a velvet-covered door guarded by two men carrying enough concealed weapons to start a small war. Neither challenged us. The manager led me up a broad staircase, through a gallery of unsettling portraits, and along several corridors that gradually became quieter and less ornate.

The public areas of the club were designed to display wealth.

These halls were designed for privacy.

My senses picked up people behind some of the closed doors. Heartbeats. Quiet conversations. The occasional spike of magical or mutant energy. Several presences felt dangerous, though none approached Kokabiel, Tsunade, or the stronger adventurers I’d met in Orario.

The deeper we traveled, the more nervous the manager became.

His pace quickened. He glanced over his shoulder twice, as though expecting someone to emerge behind us.

Eventually, we reached a narrow hallway at the rear of the building.

Only one door waited at its end.

It looked like it belonged on a military bunker.

The door was at least six inches thick, reinforced with metal plates and surrounded by a frame anchored deep into the walls. Runes had been carved into its surface beneath the decorative wood veneer. I couldn't identify them, but I sensed power coiled within each symbol.

The manager produced a keycard and pressed it against a concealed panel. Several heavy locks disengaged. He opened the door but made no attempt to step through it. Instead, he immediately turned and hurried back down the hallway.

By the time I looked over my shoulder, he had already reached the corner.

"Reassuring," I muttered.

The armored door remained open. I crossed the threshold. The room beyond was smaller than I expected. It was a private lounge with dark wooden walls, a fireplace, several bookcases, and no windows. An antique table occupied the center of the room.

Only two people sat at it.

I recognized Sebastian Shaw from the restaurant.

He was a large man, broad through the shoulders and dressed in a black suit that probably cost more than my entire foster-care wardrobe. His dark hair was swept back from a heavy, aristocratic face. He sat with the relaxed confidence of someone accustomed to owning every room he entered.

The woman across from him was harder to categorize.

She was beautiful. Her features were almost impossibly symmetrical, framed by waves of long black hair that fell beyond her shoulders. A dark crimson dress clung to every curve of her body. The neckline plunged low enough that the fabric seemed to be engaged in a desperate battle to contain her breasts.

She looked late twenties, perhaps. She didn't feel that young. The instant her eyes met mine, every supernatural instinct I possessed recoiled. Her presence was ancient. Something vast and cold lived beneath her flawless skin. I sensed death around her—not as an aura of killing intent, but as something woven directly into her existence. Thousands upon thousands of lives seemed to whisper from inside her.

She studied me with immediate interest. Then her gaze traveled slowly down my body. She licked her lips.

A shudder ran through my wings even though they remained hidden. That was not the kind of attraction I wanted directed at me.

Shaw leaned back in his chair. "Well, well, well," he said. "The former street trash whose *whore of a mother* married into money has decided to grace the true elites with his—"

I hit him.

One moment, I stood inside the doorway. The next, my chakra surged and the room blurred around me. My fist connected with Shaw's face hard enough to produce a thunderclap.

His chair disintegrated beneath him. Shaw flew backward across the room and struck the reinforced wall with enough force to crack metal, stone, and whatever material had been layered between them!

Dust rained from the ceiling.

The table rocked but remained standing.

The woman didn't move. She simply watched Shaw slide to the floor, then looked at me with growing amusement.

Dammit.

I'd had a plan. I had calmed down in Central Park. I had spent the entire walk here telling myself I would handle this responsibly. I was supposed to speak with Shaw, warn him away from Emma, and leave without giving JARVIS a reason to call my family.

Then the bastard ***insulted my mother***. All that carefully cultivated restraint evaporated before he finished the sentence.

I lowered my fist. "Worth it," I muttered.

Shaw pushed himself upright. He was completely unharmed.

That was interesting.

My punch had launched him through a reinforced chair and into an armored wall. I hadn't used anywhere near my full strength, but the impact should have broken every bone in an ordinary human's body.

Shaw didn't have a bruise. His suit was dusty and his hair had fallen out of place, but his skin remained unmarked. More energy radiated from him than before.

He stared at me in absolute disbelief. "What the fuck?" he demanded. "You're supposed to be an ordinary human!"

"Insult my mother again," I said, "and I'll break you."

Shaw's mouth opened. Nothing came out. Apparently being punched through furniture had temporarily damaged the part of his brain responsible for smug speeches.

The woman began giggling. The sound was soft and musical, but it did nothing to make her seem less dangerous. "This is quite a surprise," she said. "It appears the Black King did not conduct his research at all."

Shaw dragged himself fully upright. "What the fuck are you talking about, Selene?"

Selene rose gracefully from her chair. She wasn't particularly tall, yet her presence filled the room more completely than Shaw's. Her black eyes never left me. "Look at him properly, Sebastian."

"I am looking at him!"

"No. You are looking at his face, his name, and his supposed social position." Her smile sharpened. "That is why you remain so limited."

Shaw turned his glare toward me. His eyes narrowed as though staring harder might reveal whatever Selene could see.

She circled the table slowly. "The boy is a mutant," she said.

Shaw went rigid. "A mutant?"

"Not merely a mutant." Selene approached me with measured steps, the slit in her dress exposing one pale thigh as she moved.

My instincts tightened further with every foot she crossed. She stopped several feet away. Power pressed against my skin as she examined me. It felt invasive, like cold fingers searching through my aura.

I gathered holy lightning beneath my flesh.

Selene's eyes brightened. "Oh," she whispered. "How fascinating."

"What is?" Shaw demanded.

"His gift is dormant but developing. Spatial displacement, dimensional travel, perhaps something far greater once fully matured." Her gaze grew hungry. "An Omega-class potential, certainly."

Shaw stared at her. "Omega?" Jealousy twisted the word into something ugly.

Selene ignored him. "But that is only one thread." Her eyes tracked something invisible around my shoulders and back. "There is divinity in his blood. Light that has fallen but not been

extinguished. Heavenly power, mortal flesh, foreign spiritual energy, and the blessing of another god, all woven around a soul that refuses to obey the boundaries of its native universe.”

My wings shifted restlessly beneath my skin.

Selene smiled. “A future Omega-class mutant and a fallen angel, wrapped together in one exquisite young man.”

Shaw’s face darkened.

“The potential,” Selene continued, almost to herself, “is staggering.” Her eyes moved over me again. Then she licked her lips for the second time. “Would you like to be **MINE**?” The question was delivered casually, as though she were asking whether I wanted a drink.

Shaw made a strangled noise.

Selene still ignored him.

I studied her face. She was undeniably gorgeous. Under different circumstances, I would have struggled not to stare. She possessed the sort of beauty that could convince sensible men to ruin their lives while thanking her for the opportunity. Unfortunately for her, I’d spent significant time around beautiful, terrifying women. More importantly, I trusted my instincts. Everything inside me was screaming that Selene viewed people as food.

“You’re very beautiful,” I told her honestly, “but I’m not interested.”

Selene’s eyebrows rose.

Shaw looked even more offended by my rejection than she did. “How dare—”

Selene silenced him by lifting one finger. Her smile never wavered. “Interesting,” she murmured. “Most young men would have accepted before I finished asking.”

“I’m not most young men.”

“No,” she agreed. “You certainly are not.” The way she said it made me want to take several steps backward.

I didn’t. Showing fear to something predatory was usually a bad idea.

Selene gave me evil Black Widow vibes—and not Black Widow as in Natasha. Selene felt like the other kind of black widow. The kind that seduced a man, murdered him, drained his corpse dry, and complained that he hadn’t been filling enough.

Whatever she was, she wasn’t simply a mutant. And I definitely didn’t want to owe her dinner.

Shaw eventually recovered enough of his composure to focus on the other half of Selene's explanation. "Wait," he said. "Did you say fallen angel?"

Selene's gaze remained fixed on me. "I did."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" Shaw demanded. "Some absurd title? A mutant classification?" Shaw looked between us, growing more irritated with every second. "I'm an atheist," he declared. "God isn't real."

Selene's grin widened. There was something deeply unsettling about watching an ancient predator discover a new opportunity to mock someone. "It is hardly surprising that religion has fallen out of favor in the modern age," she said. "The forces of Heaven and Hell have been largely banished from Earth for centuries."

I blinked. "What?"

Selene's eyes flicked toward me. That single word had apparently revealed more than I intended, because her smile turned knowing. "You were unaware?"

I said nothing.

She glided back toward the table and rested one hand against its edge. "The old wars became too destructive," she explained. "Angels, fallen angels, devils, and the other factions repeatedly turned human civilizations into their battlefields. Eventually, the other great pantheons imposed **limitations.**"

Shaw's face twisted. "You expect me to believe the pagan gods are real and held a committee meeting about the Bible?"

"Something remarkably similar, though the shouting lasted several decades and three divine realms required reconstruction." Her tone was so casual that Shaw didn't seem to know how to respond.

Neither did I.

Selene continued. "Only *one hundred* beings belonging to the Judeo-Christian supernatural factions are permitted to reside on Earth at any given time. Angels, fallen angels, and devils combined. Temporary crossings are possible, but every permanent presence must be recorded and accounted for. All unauthorized creatures are *hunted down and mercilessly killed...*"

Was she telling the truth? And did she mean stray devils at the end there?

Only one hundred? *Total?*

My mind immediately began running through the implications.

Rias had lived in Kuoh with Akeno, Kiba, Koneko, Gasper, and *almost Issei* before he fled with her pawn pieces. Sona had her own peerage operating in the same town. That meant two teenage devil heiresses and their servants occupied a noticeable percentage of the entire planetary quota.

Talk about nepotism...

Rias was the younger sister of Sirzechs Lucifer. Sona was the younger sister of Serafall Leviathan. Of course the Satans had found room in an allegedly limited supernatural exchange program for their little sisters and every member of their peerages.

It also explained why I had never heard about large numbers of devil peerages operating openly on Earth. Kuoh had made devil society seem more common than it actually was because two of the most politically connected girls in the Underworld happened to live in the same Japanese town.

I thought about myself. *Did I count? I was born on Earth. So was Akeno.* Did Nephilim children occupy quota slots automatically, or were we treated as humans because half our blood came from Mom? If Akeno and I counted, then Baraqiel's decision to have children with a human woman had permanently removed two of the Grigori's available positions.

That might explain more than I wanted it to.

The Himejima clan had called us abominations and tried to murder us because of our blood. I'd assumed their motives were entirely religious and cultural.

But what if there had been politics behind it too?

What if certain fallen angels wanted us dead because our existence reduced the number of their kind permitted on Earth? Kokabiel had hated Baraqiel personally, but hatred rarely existed in isolation. Perhaps he had also believed killing us would reclaim Grigori quota slots.

Then there was Riser. How much influence had the Phenex family spent to get him onto Earth while searching for Rias? He wouldn't have come alone. A pure-blooded devil heir accustomed to being surrounded by servants probably brought guards, peerage members, and attendants. Had the Underworld temporarily cleared part of its allotment for his personal manhunt?

How much had that cost? How many favors had been traded?

And I had sent him to Antarctica...

A laugh almost escaped me.

Somewhere near the South Pole, Riser Phenex was probably trudging through a blizzard while his family complained about the political expense of keeping him on Earth. *Beautiful.*

"Something amuses you?" Selene asked.

I realized both of them were staring at me. "Private joke."

"You could share it?"

"No."

Her smile became thinner.

I forced my thoughts back to the present.

Selene still watched me with the patient hunger of a cat observing an unusually interesting bird.

Shaw's expression had changed completely. The contempt hadn't vanished, but calculation had begun replacing it. He looked at me the way Emma examined a company she might buy. Evaluating assets, liabilities, and potential uses.

I disliked it immediately.

"So," Shaw said slowly. "You are a mutant. And this fallen angel claim is literal? Heh, not that it changes my faith. A god that can get banished isn't an all powerful god after all..."

"That's none of your business..."

His eyes moved over me again. I could almost hear his worldview rearranging itself to fit the new information. Shaw believed mutants were the future of humanity. Five minutes ago, he had dismissed me as ordinary human trash who got lucky when my mother married Tony.

Now Selene had called me a future Omega-class mutant, revealed my supernatural heritage, and described my potential as staggering.

Suddenly, I was worth something to him. "...Perhaps I judged you too quickly. You are clearly not an *inferior being* after all."

Selene chuckled softly.

I glanced at her.

She had reclaimed her seat and was watching the conversation as though someone had arranged private entertainment specifically for her.

Shaw straightened his jacket. The movement restored some of his earlier arrogance. "You came here because of Emma Frost? She sent you?"

"No."

"Then why are you here?"

"To tell you to stay away from her!"

Shaw stared at me for a moment. Then he laughed. Not because he found the situation genuinely funny. It was the calculated laugh of a powerful man attempting to remind everyone else that he remained in control. "Emma and I have an understanding."

"No, you don't."

"Our families arranged—"

"Her father is dead, Emma controls Frost International, and she has told you no. Whatever agreement you thought existed is over!"

Shaw's jaw flexed. "You are young. You cannot possibly understand the complexities involved."

"I understand the word **no**."

Selene's expression brightened with amusement.

Shaw glared at me. But then he took a calming breath. Shaw spread his hands. "I am willing to be generous." That sentence had never preceded anything good. "You have potential," he continued. "Power. Connections. An unusual heritage that could prove valuable to the future of mutantkind. You know what?" Shaw said. "I will even allow you to keep Emma."

I stared at him. "Allow me?"

"She requires **discipline**, but perhaps indulging her *current fascination* will make her more cooperative later. You may have her *for the time being*..."

My fingers curled into fists. Emma wasn't property to be handed between men.

Shaw smiled, mistaking my silence for interest. "I will also forgive your attack against me. On one condition." Shaw stepped forward, raising his chin. "Bend the knee." Shaw extended one hand toward me. "Pledge your fealty to me as your master. Join the Hellfire Club and place your abilities in my service. I will teach you what it means to stand above humanity. Wealth, influence, women—everything you desire will be yours."

I hit him again.

My fist crashed into his mouth before the final word finished leaving it.

Shaw flew backward for the second time, smashed through what remained of his chair, and struck the cracked wall hard enough to deepen every fracture.

Selene threw her head back and laughed.

"That was a mistake," Shaw declared. He climbed out of the crater he'd made in the reinforced wall, rolling one shoulder as chunks of stone and twisted metal fell around him.

I frowned. He was still completely unharmed. More concerningly, a faint red glow had begun spreading beneath his skin. It pulsed through his neck and hands like heated blood, growing brighter with every passing second. Power rolled off him in waves that hadn't existed before I punched him.

The first hit had increased his energy. The second had increased it even more.

Jean had warned me that Sebastian Shaw was annoying to deal with. She could have been more specific.

"Whatever," I said. "We're done here. You're going to stay the fuck away from Emma. No more gifts. No more invitations. No more showing up during our dates and staring at her like she belongs to you." I pointed at him. "And stay away from everyone else I care about while you're at it. If you threaten any of them, I'll do far worse than punch you through a wall."

Shaw brushed dust from his suit. "I don't think so." The red energy surrounding Shaw erupted. He moved.

Shaw crossed half the room in a blur, his fist driving toward my head with enough power to make the air crack. I twisted aside at the last possible moment. His knuckles passed close enough to stir my hair before striking the armored door behind me.

Metal folded inward. The entire door tore free from its reinforced frame and flew into the hallway like it had been hit by a speeding truck.

Okay. That would have killed a normal person.

Shaw turned toward me, red power blazing across his body. "You will kneel."

"People keep saying that to me." I drove my heel into his ribs.

The kick launched him across the room. He smashed through a bookcase, scattered several hundred years' worth of expensive-looking books, and buried himself in the opposite wall.

More red light exploded around him. The temperature rose. Shaw emerged from the rubble almost immediately, his expression shifting from fury to savage satisfaction. His body looked larger than it had seconds earlier. Muscles strained against his suit, and every step he took cracked the floor beneath his shoes.

I stared at him. Then at the destroyed wall. Then back at him. "Oh," I muttered. "You absorb damage."

Shaw smiled. "Every blow," he said, "makes me stronger."

"How annoying." It explained why neither punch had injured him. The kinetic energy had disappeared into his body and reappeared as strength, speed, and durability. Throwing him into walls had only provided more energy for him to absorb.

I'd basically spent the last thirty seconds charging his battery. Tsunade would have punched me for that. Then she would have punched Shaw to determine whether there was an upper limit.

"Now you understand." Shaw spread his arms, red power rolling from him. "Violence cannot defeat me. Bullets, explosions, physical force—all of it becomes mine. Every attempt to harm me only elevates me further above you."

"Congratulations. You're a rechargeable asshole."

Selene giggled. Both of us looked toward her.

She remained seated beside the antique table, one elbow resting against its polished surface and her chin balanced lazily upon her knuckles. The fighting had destroyed half the salon, but not a single piece of debris had touched her. Dust and splinters curved around her body as though an invisible force refused to let anything unpleasant disturb her.

Her black eyes glittered with amusement. "I'm afraid Sebastian is no longer the most pressing problem facing you, beautiful boy."

I didn't like the way she said that.

Selene rose. The amusement remained in her expression, but something changed behind it. The air grew colder. Shadows lengthened along the walls despite the unchanged fire burning in the hearth. "I have walked this world for a very long time," she said. "I have watched civilizations rise from mud and return to dust. I have known kings before their bloodlines learned to call themselves royal. I have collected warriors, sorcerers, prophets, monsters, and heroes."

Darkness spilled from her shoulders. It was something alive—black and violet magic twisting around her body in slow, hungry coils. Faces appeared within it for fractions of a second. Men and women screaming silently before dissolving back into the shadows.

The thousands of lives I sensed inside her became louder.

"I have never," Selene continued, "had a prize like you stumble willingly into my grasp."

"Calling me a prize isn't helping your chances with me."

"Oh, I am no longer asking." She stepped around the table. The marble beneath her bare foot blackened. Fine cracks spread across the floor, and every plant in the room withered instantly. Leather bindings aged upon the shelves. The remaining wooden furniture warped and splintered as though decades passed over it in seconds.

Shaw's confidence faltered. He took one step away from her.

That told me more than anything else could have.

Selene smiled at my expression. "Do not worry. By the time I finish altering your mind, you will be happy to serve me."

A cold pressure brushed against my thoughts.

Golden lightning reacted instantly inside my soul. The mental presence recoiled, but it didn't vanish. It circled the edges of my consciousness, ancient and patient, searching for another path inside.

Selene's smile widened. "I will not even discard you like the rest of my toys," she promised. "I doubt I could ever grow bored of you."

Shaw scowled. "I offered him a place first!"

Selene ignored him.

Right. She wanted to enslave me, rewrite my mind, and keep me as a supernatural pet.

Selene was also powerful. Really powerful. Her presence made Shaw feel like an angry battery with legs. Whatever she was, she had survived for thousands of years by consuming other people's lives. Magic saturated every inch of her body. The darkness surrounding her felt deep enough to swallow the entire building.

She was still standing within blasting distance.

So I did the logical thing.

Holy lightning erupted from my palm.

The golden-white bolt crossed the room before either of them could react. It struck Selene directly in the chest with enough force to lift her from the floor.

"Eep!" The ancient immortal mutant sorceress made an almost adorable squeaking noise as she flew backward.

Selene crashed through the antique table, reduced it to expensive firewood, and slammed into the wall hard enough to leave a woman-shaped crater in the stone. Dark magic exploded outward, extinguishing the fireplace and shattering every remaining light in the room.

For one second, complete silence followed.

I stared into the crater.

That sound had been almost cute. It was unfortunate she was so obviously evil.

Shaw looked from the smoking hole in the wall to me. "You can throw lightning?"

“Among other things.” Golden electricity crawled across my fingers as I raised both hands.

Shaw’s red aura continued burning around him.

Darkness stirred inside Selene’s crater.

I sighed. My calm, responsible conversation had lasted almost thirty seconds...

JARVIS was never going to let me forget this...

The darkness inside Selene’s crater erupted.

I threw myself sideways.

A spear of black energy ripped through the space where my chest had been and struck Shaw instead. It punched him through the remaining section of wall, carried him into the corridor, and detonated with enough force to shake the entire floor.

Selene stepped out of the crater. Her dress was torn across one shoulder. A black scorch mark covered the center of her chest, and several strands of her hair had curled from the heat.

The injury itself was already disappearing.

Burned skin peeled away in flakes of ash, revealing flawless flesh beneath it. The dark magic surrounding her poured back into her body, repairing whatever damage my holy lightning had caused.

She touched the scorched fabric and looked at me. “You ruined my dress.”

“You threatened to enslave me.”

“It was a very expensive dress!”

“That doesn’t feel equivalent...”

Selene raised both hands. The shadows throughout the room came alive.

They tore free from the walls and ceiling, stretching into dozens of black tendrils that whipped toward me from every direction. I ducked beneath the first, sliced through another with a quick lightspear, and jumped over a third that shattered the floor where my ankle had been.

Five more curled around me.

I opened my wings. Eight black wings erupted from my back with enough force to scatter furniture, shattered wood, and several incoming tendrils. Holy lightning raced through every feather. The remaining shadows struck my wings and burned apart in flashes of gold.

Selene’s eyes widened. “**Magnificent.**”

“Still not interested!” I launched myself forward.

Selene swept one hand across her body. A wall of darkness rose between us. I drove through it shoulder-first, using holy lightning to tear a glowing path through the spell.

She was waiting on the other side.

Her palm struck my chest.

Cold exploded through me. The force wasn’t physical. Something reached beneath my skin and pulled. My muscles weakened instantly, and my vision darkened as threads of pale blue energy began rising from my body toward Selene’s hand.

My life force.

I seized her wrist. Golden lightning discharged through both of us.

Selene screamed and recoiled. Her grip broke before she could drain more than a fraction of my energy. I twisted her arm, pivoted, and threw her toward the doorway.

Unfortunately, Shaw came charging through it at the exact same moment.

Selene struck him face-first.

They went down together in a tangle of expensive clothing, dark magic, and furious profanity.

I stared at them.

They stared back.

“That wasn’t intentional...” I mumbled.

“You incompetent brute!” Selene snarled, shoving Shaw away from her. “Watch where you’re going!”

“You were thrown at me!”

“And somehow that became my failure?”

Shaw surged upright, his entire body blazing red. He grabbed Selene by the shoulders and lifted her off him.

She responded by blasting him in the face.

Black energy exploded at point-blank range. Shaw rocketed backward and crashed through the armored doorframe, taking another section of wall with him.

The impact only made his red aura burn brighter.

“Stop empowering him!” I shouted.

Selene turned her glare toward me. “Do not instruct me!”

Shaw burst from the rubble before she finished speaking.

He moved faster than before.

I crossed my arms just as his fist hit me.

The impact launched me across the salon. I smashed through a bookcase, tore across the floor, and slammed into the fireplace. Bricks collapsed around my shoulders. Pain spread through both forearms where I’d blocked the strike.

Shaw grinned. “I warned you. Every blow makes me stronger.” He lunged again.

I opened a portal directly in front of his fist.

The blue oval swallowed his arm up to the shoulder. A second portal appeared behind him, and his own fist emerged from it with all his accumulated strength.

Shaw punched himself in the back of the head.

The impact drove him face-first into the floor.

I blinked. “That worked better than expected.”

Shaw lifted his head, blood finally trickling from his nose. Apparently, his body could absorb the force of his own attacks, but it still took him a moment to process the sheer indignity of what had happened.

Selene laughed. “You punched yourself.”

“Shut up!”

“You truly are the most impressive Black King in the club’s history.”

“I SAID SHUT UP!” Shaw tore his trapped arm from the portal before I could close it. He ripped a marble slab from the floor and hurled it toward Selene.

She vanished in a swirl of darkness.

The slab passed through the space she had occupied and flew directly at me.

I blasted it apart with holy lightning.

Chunks of superheated marble scattered across the room.

One struck Shaw in the forehead. His aura intensified again.

"Will everything make you stronger?" I demanded.

"Yes!"

"That seems exhausting."

Selene reappeared behind me. Her arms wrapped around my chest before I could turn. Cold flooded through my body as her fingers pressed against my skin. That draining pressure returned, stronger than before. "Hold still," she whispered beside my ear. "You will enjoy serving me once I remove all these troublesome attachments."

I slammed the back of my head into her face.

Pain flashed through my skull.

Selene's nose broke with a sharp crack. Her grip loosened, and I tore myself free.

Shaw was already charging.

I ducked.

His glowing fist passed over my head and connected squarely with Selene's chest.

The sound resembled a bomb detonating.

Selene vanished through three interior walls.

Shaw froze with his fist still extended.

I slowly looked toward the trail of destruction. "You hit her pretty hard."

He gulped nervously... "Fuck."

A wave of black power tore through the adjoining rooms.

Selene returned wrapped in darkness, flying several feet above the floor. Her broken nose had healed. The remains of her dress clung to her body in scorched strips. Black veins spread beneath her skin, and her eyes burned crimson.

She looked slightly upset. "Sebastian...."

Shaw took one cautious step backward. "It was his fault."

"Was it?"

"He ducked!"

Selene extended one hand. Shaw rose from the floor as invisible force wrapped around his throat. She flung him upward, smashing him through the ceiling.

Stone, plaster, and wooden beams rained around us.

Several people screamed from the floor above.

Shaw dropped back through the hole seconds later, landed in a crouch, and launched himself toward her.

Selene sent a swarm of spectral blades toward him.

I moved out of the way.

Shaw charged through the barrage, absorbing every impact. Dark blades shattered against his chest and arms, feeding the red inferno surrounding him. He reached Selene and swung.

She dissolved into shadows.

His punch continued through her and struck me.

I barely moved my head in time. His fist grazed my cheek before demolishing another wall.

“Stop dodging!” Shaw roared.

“That’s a stupid request!”

I drove a concentrated bolt of holy lightning into his side. Instead of throwing him across the room, I kept the current focused. Golden electricity crawled over his body and sank beneath his skin. Shaw convulsed as his muscles seized.

The red glow surrounding him fluctuated. *So he could absorb the energy, but the holy aspect still hurt?* I increased the intensity. He screamed louder!

Selene materialized above us and hurled a sphere of dark energy at my back.

I sensed it at the last moment and opened a portal. The sphere disappeared into blue light and reappeared directly above Shaw. It struck him on the head. The floor collapsed beneath his feet. Shaw vanished into the level below amid an avalanche of debris.

Selene’s face went very still. “You keep redirecting my magic!”

“You keep aiming it at me!”

“I am attempting to capture you!”

“I noticed!”

She descended until her feet touched the ruined floor. Dark power gathered around both hands, but this time it changed. The shadows contracted and ignited. Deep crimson flames spread across her fingers, edged with unnatural black.

The temperature surged. Selene's earlier attacks had been controlled. This was different. "You have embarrassed me," she snarled.

"Your friend has done most of that."

A roar of indignation came from the hole in the floor.

I almost laughed.

The flames around her hands expanded, swallowing her forearms before spiraling around her entire body. The remaining furniture ignited without being touched. Books burst into flame upon their shelves. The walls blackened, and the metal reinforcements began glowing dull red.

Shaw climbed from the hole behind her. "Selene, you're gonna destroy the club!" he warned.

She ignored him. The crimson fire surged outward.

I crossed my wings around myself as the inferno filled the salon. Heat slammed into me from every direction. The remaining walls ignited. Flames poured through the broken doorway and raced into the corridor, consuming carpets, paintings, and wooden paneling faster than any natural fire could spread.

Alarms finally began screaming throughout the building. People shouted below us. The string quartet stopped abruptly. I felt dozens of club members running for the exits as fire rolled through the upper floors. Smoke poured across the ceiling, thick and black.

Selene floated at the center of it all, untouched by her own flames.

Shaw's red aura grew brighter as the heat and falling debris fed him even more energy.

I could probably keep fighting. I could blast Selene again, experiment with methods that wouldn't empower Shaw, and eventually determine whether either of them possessed a limit.

But the entire Hellfire Club was burning around us. Hundreds of people were inside. Continuing the fight would turn an already terrible decision into a mass-casualty disaster.

This was a lost cause. I needed to bail.

...I opened a portal to the first safe place that entered my mind.

Blue light split the burning corridor in front of me, forming an oval doorway between dimensions. Through it, I saw two narrow beds, scattered textbooks, Peter's abandoned laundry, and the Spider-Man poster he had insisted was ironic.

My dorm room. Good enough. I stepped through and closed the portal behind me.

The roar of supernatural fire disappeared instantly. One second, I was surrounded by smoke, alarms, screaming socialites, and two homicidal mutants. The next, I stood in the quiet center of Room 217 with nothing more threatening nearby than Peter's unwashed socks.

The contrast made my ears ring.

Peter was still gone.

His bed remained empty, and the backpack containing his Spider-Man equipment was missing. He was probably swinging through Manhattan, trying to accept personal responsibility for every crime committed across eight million people.

I really hoped he wasn't near the Hellfire Club.

I stared at his side of the room. *Half-hearted hero*. The anger stirred again, but exhaustion smothered most of it.

Smoke clung to my clothes. One sleeve of my charcoal jacket had burned away completely, and black ash covered my shirt, face, and hair. Several feathers along my upper wings were scorched, though none had suffered serious damage.

I retracted them before dropping onto my bed.

The mattress bounced beneath me. I slumped backward, stared at the ceiling, and released a long breath. "That was crazy, huh, JARVIS?" There was no immediate answer. I lifted my phone. "JARVIS?"

"I am here, Blake." His voice emerged through the speaker, but something about his delivery sounded different. JARVIS rarely showed obvious emotion. He could sound amused, disapproving, irritated, or smug when Tony encouraged his worse habits. This time, he sounded worried. **"Are you injured?"** he asked.

"Nothing serious."

"Please define 'nothing serious.'

"Some bruising. A little magical life-force theft. Minor burns. My jacket is probably dead."

"A magical entity attempted to steal your life force?"

"Only a little."

"That qualification does not improve the situation."

I sighed and rubbed soot from my forehead. "I'm fine. Selene didn't get much before my lightning made her let go."

There was another pause. **"The instant you entered the Hellfire Club, I lost access to your phone," JARVIS said. "I could no longer receive audio, positional data, biometric readings, or environmental information. The device remained visible to its own operating system, but every external connection was severed."**

That explained why he hadn't interrupted the fight with increasingly judgmental commentary.

"I regained access when you opened the portal. Your phone's sensors detected extreme heat, smoke, structural damage, and multiple emergency alarms before you crossed into the dormitory. I'm glad you are ok, I grew... Worried... I was unable to determine whether you were safe."

Before I could answer, my phone began vibrating.

Emma Frost's name appeared across the screen. A photograph accompanied it. Emma in a white bikini, reclining beside a swimming pool with the sort of expression that had caused me to walk into a door when she first sent it.

Normally, the picture would have occupied my complete attention. The three consecutive missed calls displayed beneath her name were more concerning. "Oh, shit."

"I recommend answering."

"You just want someone else to yell at me."

"I believe shared labor promotes efficiency."

I swiped to accept the call. "Hey, Emma—"

"WHAT DID YOU DO?!" Her voice struck hard enough that I instinctively held the phone away from my ear.

"I'm okay," I offered.

"That was not my question!"

Through the dorm window, dark smoke climbed above the Upper East Side. Even from campus, I could see it staining the afternoon sky. Sirens echoed faintly between the buildings.

"Is this about the Hellfire Club being literally on fire right now?"

Emma made a sound somewhere between a growl and a strangled scream. "Of course it is about the Hellfire Club being on fire!"

“Right. Stupid question...”

“Jean and I are watching smoke pour from a building filled with some of the richest and most politically influential people in the country! News helicopters are already circling it.”

I heard Jean speaking somewhere behind her. Her words were muffled, but the tone sounded worried.

Emma lowered her voice without reducing its intensity. “We are not happy with you.” The use of *we* was never a good sign. “You lied to us,” Emma continued. “You agreed not to confront Shaw, then marched directly into his headquarters without telling either of us.”

“I didn’t lie.”

“You promised Jean you would not do anything illegal.”

“That promise was only for *today*.”

“It is still today!”

I checked the clock on my nightstand. She had me there. “Technically, I only went there to talk. I entered through the front door.” I didn’t mention how I got to the front door...

Emma inhaled slowly.

I suspected Jean was encouraging her to count backward from ten.

“I wasn’t lying at the time,” I said before Emma reached zero. “I honestly wasn’t planning to fight Shaw. Just talk to him.”

“Start from the beginning,” Emma told me.

Ok, I went back to the very beginning after I left Jean this morning. “There was this thing with Peter in the dorm room.”

The anger on the other end hesitated. “What thing?”

“We had an argument. He called me a half-hearted hero and accused me of escaping into other worlds whenever my life became difficult.”

Emma went silent.

“It pissed me off,” I admitted. “I asked JARVIS about Shaw afterward, which was stupid. Then I went to Central Park, touched grass, calmed down, and decided I could speak to Shaw civilly.”

“...You touched grass?”

“It worked!”

"The building is on fire, Blake!"

"That happened *later*..."

Emma made another strangled noise.

"I went there to warn Shaw away from you," I continued. "That was all. No threats I couldn't legally defend. No punching unless he started something. A calm, responsible conversation between adults. But then he went and insulted Mom..."

"...Of course he did. Sebastian cannot breathe without being offensive."

"So I hit him...."

"BLAKE!"

"Only twice!"

Jean's muffled voice became louder. I thought I heard her ask how *twice* was supposed to improve anything.

"The punching wasn't even the important part," I said. "Shaw absorbs kinetic energy. It turns into strength and speed, so hitting him was mostly useless."

Emma sighed. "Yes. We know."

"That would have been useful information!"

"We thought you weren't going after him!"

"Also fair." I rubbed the back of my neck. "Then **Selene** got involved... Shit kind of spiraled from there..."

"...The **Black Queen** Selene was there!?" Emma asked, sounding genuinely worried now.

"Apparently, she's an ancient mutant witch who eats life force."

"I KNOW WHO SHE IS! WHAT HAPPENED WITH **HER**!?"

"She said I was the most interesting prize she'd found in her extremely long life," I explained to Emma and obviously Jean was listening in as well. "Then she tried to drain my life force, alter my mind, remove my attachments, and turn me into an obedient servant."

When Emma spoke again, every trace of frustration with me had disappeared. "That bitch tried to do what with you?" Emma's voice dropped to a hiss. "I will hunt her down and skin her immortal ass alive!"

Jean said something urgently in the background. “No, Jean, I am not calming down! Selene tried to enslave him!” More muffled words followed. “Yes, I am aware we have to locate her first!” Emma returned to the phone. “Did she touch your mind?”

“She tried. My holy lightning stopped her.”

“Did she take anything from you? Memories? Emotions? Pieces of your identity?”

“I don’t think so.”

“YOU DON’T THINK SO?”

“My name is Blake Himejima. I’m eighteen. You’re Emma Frost. You’re beautiful, terrifying, and currently threatening to skin an immortal witch because she tried to steal me from you.”

A beat passed.

“...Continue.”

“You run Frost International. You turn into diamond sometimes. You love Jean. You claim economics is entertaining, although I remain unconvinced. You looked incredible in that white dress, and kissing you at Aurelia was the best part of the evening.”

Emma’s breathing softened. “...Acceptable.”

“So you’re not mad at me anymore?”

“I remain furious with you.”

Damn.

“But I am significantly more furious with Selene!”

That is progress.

Jean’s voice rose in the background. This time, I heard her clearly. “*Tell him we’re coming over!*”

“Jean says we’re coming to inspect your mind. We won’t delve deep but we want to make sure she didn’t try to leave any subtle traps!”

The call ended.

I fell backward across my bed. Still, Emma had threatened to **flay** an immortal sorceress for trying to enslave me.

I had such loving girlfriends...

– Shaw –

Sebastian Shaw watched Blake vanish through a portal of blue light.

Then the entire ceiling collapsed.

He threw both arms over his head as flaming timbers and sections of stone crashed around him. Every impact fed more kinetic energy into his body, strengthening him further, but the heat was becoming unbearable.

Smoke flooded the ruined salon.

Shaw coughed as he staggered through the burning wreckage. His mutation protected him from falling debris, explosions, bullets, and physical blows, but it did nothing to remove his biological need for oxygen.

It was one of the few weaknesses he genuinely resented.

The Hellfire Club was **burning** around him.

His club. His fortress. His monument to influence, wealth, and the quiet machinery of real power.

Centuries of irreplaceable artwork were going up in flames. Historical records that could never be reconstructed curled into ash. The upper floors had become an inferno, and Selene's unnatural fire was already pouring through the stairwells toward the public rooms below.

Members screamed as they fled.

Politicians, billionaires, celebrities, and industrialists shoved one another aside in their desperation to escape. Men who commanded armies of employees and influenced entire governments were reduced to frightened animals by heat and smoke.

Shaw's fury intensified with every breath.

"THAT BASTARD!" he roared, immediately breaking into another coughing fit. "THAT FUCKING STARK BASTARD!"

Blake had walked into his home, assaulted him, humiliated him in front of Selene, redirected their own attacks against them, and escaped without submitting.

Worse, Selene had found him interesting. Shaw had seen that hunger in her eyes. Selene had looked at Blake as if every treasure she had accumulated across her endless existence had become worthless beside the prospect of owning him.

Shaw hated the boy for that almost as much as he hated him for Emma.

Another explosion shook the building. Part of the floor buckled beneath Shaw's feet.

Before he could fall, Selene seized the front of his suit. Darkness swallowed them. The transition lasted less than a heartbeat. Fire and smoke vanished, replaced by freezing wind and the distant roar of Manhattan traffic. Shaw stumbled onto solid concrete and nearly fell to one knee before Selene released him.

They stood on the rooftop of an unfamiliar building several miles from the Hellfire Club. The skyline stretched around them beneath the afternoon sun. From this distance, the club's location was marked by an enormous column of black smoke.

Sirens converged from every direction.

Helicopters were already circling above the fire.

Selene turned away from him. Her appearance was a far cry from the ancient dignity she normally cultivated. Her crimson dress hung in scorched strips. Black hair had partially escaped its careful styling, and streaks of soot marked one cheek. Dark power still crawled over her skin in agitated waves.

Shaw adjusted his ruined jacket and drew a clean breath. "You lost control." Selene looked at him. The fury in her eyes nearly made him reconsider his choice of words. Nearly. "You set the entire club on fire," Shaw continued. "My club."

"The boy provoked me."

"He struck me first."

"And you offered to make him your servant while I was standing there."

Shaw stared at her. "You had just offered to enslave his mind."

"I saw him first."

"He came to see me!"

"He came to threaten you because Emma Frost finds you repulsive."

Shaw's jaw clenched.

Selene's lips curved with vicious satisfaction before her expression soured again. She turned toward the distant smoke, folding her arms beneath her chest. For several seconds, neither of them spoke. Then Selene sighed. "I apologize."

Shaw wondered whether smoke inhalation had affected his hearing. "What?"

"I lost my temper," Selene said stiffly. Each word sounded as though it were being extracted with heated iron. "Destroying the club was unnecessary. I apologize."

Shaw stared at her.

Selene had lived for thousands of years. She had destroyed civilizations, consumed countless lives, and treated kings like disposable amusements. Shaw had watched her murder men for speaking to her with the wrong tone.

He had never heard her apologize to anyone. He suspected he never would again. "Apology accepted," he said quickly.

Selene glanced sideways at him, apparently surprised he hadn't attempted to prolong her discomfort.

Shaw had many flaws. Suicidal stupidity was not among them. "We will rebuild," he continued. "The Hellfire Club has survived wars, revolutions, purges, and changes of government. It will survive this."

"Your optimism is touching."

"We'll make it better than before. Stronger defenses. Improved magical wards. *Fireproof construction.*"

Selene's eyes narrowed.

Shaw decided not to clarify why the final addition had become a priority. He looked toward the smoke again. Anger returned as he imagined Blake walking away unharmed after everything he had done. "What do we do about Blake Stark?"

"*Himejima*," Selene corrected.

"That is the least relevant thing about him!"

"Small preferences become useful when one wishes to manipulate someone."

Shaw studied her profile. "You still intend to take him?"

"Of course."

"He rejected you."

Selene smiled faintly. "So have many others. Their objections rarely survived my mental manipulations..."

The wind shifted, carrying the distant scent of smoke across the rooftops.

Selene's expression became thoughtful. "We monitor him," she said. "Closely, but from a distance."

"You want to wait after what he did?"

"He knows we are interested now. Striking again while he remains wary would be wasteful."

"He threatened me in my own club!"

"And then he demonstrated that neither of us understood the full extent of his abilities." Selene turned toward Shaw. "He possesses strength, divine lightning, flight, spatial manipulation, foreign spiritual techniques, and protections capable of resisting my influence. We do not yet know his limits."

"He couldn't defeat me!"

"He was beginning to understand your mutation after less than a minute."

Shaw said nothing. The boy had discovered that *lightning* disrupted his body even when the force of an attack became fuel. Worse, Blake had used those portals to turn Shaw's own strength against him. Given more time, he might have developed a genuinely dangerous strategy.

Selene looked pleased by the prospect. "We have time," she said. "Far more than he understands. Let him lower his guard. Let him believe he escaped. We will study his family, his lovers, his habits..."

Shaw's phone rang. The sound dragged his attention away from the burning club. He pulled the device from his pocket and scowled at the name displayed across the screen.

Donald Pierce. The White King.

"Wonderful," Shaw muttered.

Pierce had undoubtedly seen the news coverage. The senator would want answers, reassurances, and someone to blame. He always demanded information while contributing as little as possible himself.

Shaw answered. "Pierce..."

"What the fuck is happening?" Pierce shouted. "The Hellfire Club is burning! There are members calling my private office, reporters outside my building, and rumors that this was a terrorist attack!"

Shaw pulled the phone slightly away from his ear. He looked at Selene. *What exactly were they supposed to tell the only ordinary human king in the Inner Circle?* They couldn't explain that Shaw had invited a powerful young mutant into his private salon, attempted to recruit him through threats and arrogance, and then helped Selene provoke a battle that destroyed the building.

Before Shaw could invent something plausible, Selene's eyes gleamed. She took the phone from his hand. "Donald?" she said. Her transformation was immediate. The ancient confidence vanished from her voice. In its place came a perfectly performed tremor. She sounded frightened, shaken, and dangerously close to tears.

Shaw stared at her. *The fuck?*

"Selene?" Pierce's tone changed. "What happened? Are you hurt?"

"We barely escaped," she whispered. "A **mutant** attacked the club."

Shaw's eyes narrowed.

Selene turned away from him, hiding a smile. "He was **terrifying**, Donald. We tried to reason with him, but he wouldn't listen. He attacked Sebastian and me, then set the building on fire while hundreds of innocent people were trapped inside!"

Shaw's disbelief grew with every word.

Pierce swore. "Do you know who he was?"

"Not yet. Only that he was powerful and unstable." Selene allowed her voice to break. "You were right all along!"

There was a pause on the other end. "Right about what?"

"Mutants."

Shaw's head snapped toward her!

Selene continued before he could intervene. "They are too dangerous to remain unregulated. No one should possess that kind of power without oversight. You have been warning us for years, and we dismissed you." She released a beautifully controlled, frightened breath. "After today, I understand. Something must be done!"

Shaw stared at her in horror. *What the fuck was she doing?*

Donald Pierce was one of the most influential anti-mutant politicians in America. Giving him a fabricated story about a mutant terrorist destroying the Hellfire Club was not merely reckless. It was the sort of lie that could inspire hearings, registration laws, military programs, and open persecution.

Pierce's voice became grimly satisfied. "I'm sorry it took this for you to understand. But I promise you, Selene, we will do something. I already have several proposals prepared."

"I knew we could count on you." Selene ended the call.

Shaw snatched the phone from her. "HAVE YOU LOST YOUR MIND?"

Selene looked toward the burning club and smiled. It was not the smile of a woman improvising after a disaster. It was the smile of someone who had just placed the first piece on a board no one else realized they were playing upon. "Perhaps," she said. "Or perhaps Donald Pierce has finally become useful."

Shaw followed her gaze toward the distant smoke.

He didn't understand her plan.

That worried him far more than the fire.

XXX