

Chapter 64:

– Blake Himejima –

I hadn't expected to spend my Saturday morning studying.

That probably said something about how badly I was adjusting to college.

Most people pictured university weekends as parties, sleeping in, maybe stumbling across campus with a hangover and a half-remembered bad decision. My weekends apparently involved dimensional maintenance, magical girlfriend logistics, recovering from rich people restaurants, and remedial physics tutoring.

To be fair, I had missed a lot of classes.

Not by choice... *Mostly*.

Some people skipped lectures because they were lazy. I missed them because I occasionally got kidnapped by rainbow space bridges, accidentally joined a goddess's Familia in another universe, crushed a god's private army in a public arena, and then came back to Earth like I hadn't just changed the economic balance of a fantasy city.

Dr. Vasquez, unfortunately, did not accept "interdimensional War Game" as a valid excuse for missing problem sets.

So there I was, sitting at a table in one of SIT's smaller study lounges, hunched over a notebook while Jean Grey patiently walked me through *basic rocket science*.

Jean had drawn three separate diagrams on the tablet in front of us. One showed a rocket with little arrows marking thrust, drag, gravity, and something called "momentum flux," which sounded like a term invented by someone who hated foster kids with mediocre schooling. Another had equations stacked under each other in a horrifying staircase of Greek letters and fractions. The third was supposed to simplify the second.

It did not.

"So," Jean said, tapping the screen with the end of her stylus, "if the exhaust velocity is constant, and we assume no atmospheric drag for the initial model, then the change in velocity depends on the natural log of the mass ratio."

I stared at the equation.

The equation stared back.

I was pretty sure it was winning whatever this stare off was. Mostly because it didn't have feelings like me.

“Right,” I said slowly. “Because rockets are just angry metal tubes that lose weight while screaming at the sky.”

Jean laughed. It was soft at first, a small surprised sound that slipped out before she could stop it, and then it turned into something warmer. Her red hair shifted over one shoulder as she leaned back in her chair, her green eyes bright with amusement. “That is,” she said, still smiling, “technically not the worst explanation I’ve heard.”

“That means it was good.”

“That means it was memorable.”

“I’ll take memorable.” I grinned, then looked back down at the page. “Okay. Run it by me again before my brain starts leaking out of my ears.”

Jean’s smile softened.

She really was a good tutor. She never rushed me. She didn’t act irritated when I forgot a step or when I mixed up velocity and acceleration for the third time in ten minutes. She just guided me back through the logic, one piece at a time, like she had all the patience in the world and had decided to spend it on me.

We finished another problem after what felt like a minor lifetime. I circled the final answer, leaned back with a groan, and rubbed both hands over my face. “I think I understood that one.”

“You did understand that one.”

“I said I think.”

“I’m correcting you.”

“That’s ominous coming from a telepath.”

Jean nudged my shoulder with hers. “It’s also accurate.”

Before I could make another joke, she scooted her chair closer. Just enough that her thigh pressed against mine beneath the table.

My brain, which had barely survived the rocket equation, immediately abandoned all academic function.

Jean was wearing a tight pair of blue jeans that hugged her legs in ways that felt personally unfair, and a white tank top that showed off a distracting amount of creamy skin. Her shoulders were bare. The shirt ended high enough to reveal her stomach and belly button whenever she shifted, and the thin fabric clung to the curve of her breasts without any mercy whatsoever.

I wondered, not for the first time, if Jean was actually trying to help me study or if she had decided to weaponize casual clothing.

Then I glanced at the notebook. No. She really was helping me study. She just looked amazing while doing it.

Jean's cheeks flushed pink.

Right. Telepath. "Sorry," I said automatically.

Jean tucked a strand of red hair behind her ear, her blush deepening. "It's okay."

"You caught that?"

"It was very loud."

I winced. "That bad?"

Her lips twitched. "Not bad. Just... vivid."

I cleared my throat and looked very intently at the notebook, because apparently I had a survival instinct after all. "Rocket math. We were doing rocket math. Very sexy subject. Wait, no, not sexy. Academic. Normal. Entirely normal."

Jean laughed under her breath. "Blake," she said gently, "we can stop for now."

I looked up. "Seriously?"

"You've been working for almost two hours."

"That long?"

"Yes."

"Huh." I glanced down at the pages of notes, then at the tablet, then at the equation I had somehow solved without divine intervention. "Feels longer."

"That's because you keep assuming you're worse at this than you are."

I snorted. "Jean, I'm surrounded by geniuses. Peter builds web-shooters in his spare time and argues with robots about cooking temperatures. Tony invented powered armor in a cave with a box of scraps. Emma runs a multinational company while making everyone in a room feel stupid just by raising an eyebrow. You already became a doctor in another timeline and decided to switch majors because you were bored."

Jean's expression shifted. She went still in that way she sometimes did when she was about to say something that mattered. Then she leaned closer. Close enough that I could see flecks of

gold around the green in her eyes. "I'm serious," she said. "You are a lot smarter than you give yourself credit for."

My face warmed. "Jean—"

"No." Her voice stayed soft, but there was steel under it. "You survived things that would have broken most people. You adapted to multiple worlds. You learned chakra without being born with much of it. You developed your own combat style from scraps of completely different systems. You understand people better than you think you do, and you solve problems creatively when everyone else is still deciding which rules matter."

I didn't know what to do with that. Compliments about my looks were easy. They happened enough now that I had developed a basic defense mechanism of awkward smiling and pretending my blood pressure was fine. Compliments about my strength were easier. Strength made sense. I could measure strength. Wings, lightning, Falna, levels, speed, power. Those were things I could point at.

This was different. This hit somewhere softer.

"I'm not saying you're Tony Stark," Jean continued. "Or Peter. Or Emma. You don't need to be them. Everyone else sees what you are, Blake. I wish you would too."

For a second, I couldn't think of anything sarcastic to say.

That was how I knew she had done real damage.

"Thanks," I said quietly. Then, before I could talk myself out of it, I leaned in and kissed her cheek.

It was quick. Gentle. Barely more than a brush of my lips against warm skin.

Jean went completely still. Then her smile bloomed so fast and bright that my chest tightened. She looked down at the table, trying to hide it and failing miserably. Her fingers curled around the edge of her notebook. The blush that had started earlier spread all the way to the tips of her ears.

For once, Jean Grey looked like the one whose brain had short-circuited.

It was adorable. *Dangerously adorable.*

She cleared her throat after a moment, sitting a little straighter and trying to regain control of her expression. "So," she said, voice just a touch too careful, "how was your date with Emma last night?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Can't you just read my mind?"

Her smile faded. Enough that I immediately regretted saying it.

Jean looked away from me, her fingers tightening slightly around the stylus. "I wouldn't do that to you," she said. The words landed heavy.

I sat up straighter. "Jean, I didn't mean—"

"I know." She swallowed, then met my eyes again. "But I wouldn't. I hear surface thoughts sometimes because I can't always help it. Especially when someone is close, or emotional, or thinking very loudly." Her blush flickered again, but she pushed through it. "But I would never dig through your memories or invade your mind to find something you didn't choose to tell me."

I felt like an asshole. A very winged, very powerful asshole. "I'm sorry," I said. "That came out wrong."

Jean's expression softened immediately, which somehow made me feel worse. "It's okay."

"No, it wasn't."

"It was," she insisted. "Mostly. I mean, it stung, but I understand why you asked." She exhaled slowly. "Emma and I never really sat down with you and explained boundaries. Not clearly. We acted like you should just know what our powers meant because we were used to each other, and because in our timeline..." She stopped herself, jaw tightening briefly. "Because we forgot this version of you didn't have that history with us."

I stayed quiet.

Jean stared down at the tablet, but I could tell she wasn't seeing the equations anymore. "And Natasha was right," she mumbled.

That surprised me enough to pull a laugh out of me. "About what?"

Jean gave me a look. The look a woman gives that means "don't ask,"

I lifted both hands. "Okay. I bet I don't want to know anyway..."

That eased something between us.

Jean didn't pull away from me. Her thigh was still pressed against mine.

So I took that as a good sign.

"The date with Emma was fantastic," I said.

Jean looked up. A flash of something crossed her face. Jealousy, maybe. A little bit, even though Emma was her best friend. "Fantastic?" she asked.

"Very," I said. "For one thing, I finally got through a limo ride without anyone attacking it!"

Jean blinked. Then she giggled. It was such a bright, startled sound that I grinned before I could stop myself. "That is a very low bar," she said. She laughed again, shaking her head. "Continue."

I leaned back in my chair, thinking over the previous night.

The limo. Emma in that white dress. The restaurant. The paparazzi flashbulbs. The way Emma had held my hand like she was making a declaration and trusting me to understand at least half of it. "It was nice," I said. "Expensive in a way that made me feel like I was committing a crime just by touching the silverware, but nice. Emma was..." I searched for the right word. Beautiful was obvious. Gorgeous was too easy. Terrifyingly elegant was closer. "Emma was herself. Just more honest than usual."

Jean's eyes softened. "She does that when she feels safe."

I looked at her. "Does she?"

Jean nodded.

I smiled faintly. Then I thought of the man at the restaurant. The mood in my chest cooled. "There was one weird thing, though..."

Jean's posture changed. Very slightly. If I hadn't spent the last few months around people who could kill with facial expressions, I might have missed it.

"What weird thing?" she asked.

"There was a guy at the restaurant," I said. "Older. Rich, probably. One of those men who looked like he had never heard the word 'no' without making someone regret saying it."

Jean went very still.

I continued carefully. "Emma knew him. Or recognized him, at least. She didn't say much, but I could tell she hated him. Hated. She glared at him like she wanted to carve his name into a bullet before putting it through his eye."

Jean closed her eyes. "Damn it, Emma," she muttered.

That got my attention. "You know him? Who is he?"

Jean opened her eyes again, and the warmth in them had dimmed into something older and harder. "She didn't tell you?"

"She said she didn't want to spoil the date."

Jean sighed, rubbing at her forehead. "She should have told you after. At least after." She looked at me for a long moment, like she was measuring how much to say. Then her mouth

flattened. "That man was a villain in our past." She paused, then grimaced. "Our future. Whatever. The timeline we came from." Jean's expression turned grim. "His name is Sebastian Shaw," she said. "And the simplest version is this: he was an evil mutant Nazi, basically."

I stared at her.

A full three seconds passed. Then I said, very calmly, "I'm going to need you to explain that before I do something extremely illegal with that information."

Jean's eyes narrowed. "Do not do anything illegal."

"I said before I did anything illegal," I pointed out. "That implies restraint."

"Blake." The way she said my name made me close my mouth. Jean leaned closer, her expression serious now. "Emma and I can handle Shaw."

I didn't like how quickly she said that. Or how practiced it sounded.

"Can you?" I asked.

"Yes."

"You hesitated before telling me who he was."

"That doesn't mean we can't handle him."

"It means there's history."

"There is," Jean admitted. "Ugly history. But it's ours."

The words rubbed me the wrong way. I sat back slightly, studying her. "Ours?"

Jean's jaw tightened. "Mutant history. Mutant problems. Shaw is a mutant problem..."

For some reason, that bothered me more than it probably should have.

Maybe it was the way she said it. Not like she was trying to exclude me. Jean wasn't like that, at least not intentionally. But there was still a line in her voice. A boundary drawn out of habit.

Mutants over here. Everyone else over there.

I looked down at my hands, flexing my fingers once. "Jean," I said slowly, "aren't I technically a mutant?"

She blinked.

I looked back at her. "Where else does my portal ability come from? My fallen angel powers came from Baraqiel. Chakra came from Orochimaru being a dumbass and biting me before my

bloodline ate his soul fragment. Falna came from Hestia. But the blue portals? That's human-side genetics, right? My mutant ability."

Jean's mouth parted. Then closed. Then she looked away.

That, more than anything, told me I had hit something real.

"Blake," she said quietly.

"Am I wrong?"

"No," she admitted. "You're not wrong."

The study lounge suddenly felt a lot quieter.

A few other students were scattered around the room, most with headphones on, hunched over laptops and tablets. Nobody looked our way.

College was weird.

Jean dragged both hands through her red hair, then let them fall into her lap. "I'm sorry," she said.

I frowned. "For what?"

"For doing exactly what I just accused myself of doing earlier." Her laugh was small and humorless. "Emma and I have been keeping mutant matters out of your life. Intentionally."

I waited.

Jean glanced at me, then away again. "At first, it made sense. You had enough going on. Your memories came back. Kokabiel attacked you. You ended up in another dimension. Then you found your mother, your sister, Tsunade, Shizune, Pepper, Hestia, Orario, Konoha, devils, gods, SHIELD—" She stopped, then rubbed her temples. "Honestly, listing your life out loud makes me want to lie down."

"Same."

"So Emma and I thought we were helping by not adding more." Jean grimaced. "And then it became easier to keep doing that. Not because you couldn't handle it, but because..."

She trailed off.

Her shoulders slumped.

Then, with the air of a woman confessing to a terrible crime, she muttered, "Mutants have **way** too much fucking drama."

I stared at her. Then I laughed. I couldn't help it. It burst out of me before I could stop it, loud enough that a guy two tables away glanced up from his laptop with a frown.

Jean covered her face with one hand. "Don't laugh."

"I'm sorry," I said, absolutely lying. "It's just—after everything? After devils, ninja politics, divine pantheons, gods being horny menaces, SHIELD nonsense, and Tony Stark existing as a person? Mutants are where you draw the drama line for who I should be interacting with?"

Jean dropped her hand and gave me a look of pure exhausted sincerity. "Yes."

That made me laugh harder.

She jabbed me in the side with two fingers. "You think I'm joking. I am not." Jean huffed, but the corner of her mouth twitched. Then she leaned back in her chair, staring at the ceiling like she was asking some higher power for patience. Considering the Phoenix, she might have been asking herself. "You have no idea," she said. "You really don't. The mutant world is absurd."

"Educate me. I'm prepared."

"No, you're not." Jean pointed at me. "Nobody is prepared for mutant school **drama**."

I folded my arms. "Mutant school drama?"

"Yes. Xavier's Institute for Gifted Youngsters."

I blinked. "That sounds like either a very prestigious boarding school or a trap."

"It was both."

"Of course it was."

Jean's eyes went distant. Nostalgic, maybe. Tired and fond and annoyed all tangled together. "It was supposed to be a safe place," she said. "A school for mutants. Somewhere kids could learn to control their powers without hurting themselves or anyone else. Somewhere they could live without being hated for existing."

"That sounds good."

"It was good," Jean said. "Sometimes. But it was also a mansion full of teenagers with superpowers, trauma, hormones, secret identities, repressed emotions, and one bald telepath who believed very strongly in privacy while also being one of the most powerful mind readers on Earth."

I winced. "That sounds complicated."

"That was the easy part."

I gasped playfully. "Oh no."

Jean started counting on her fingers.

"There were secret training rooms under the school. A jet hidden under the basketball court. Danger Room sessions that were supposed to be educational but regularly turned into near-death experiences. Teachers who were also soldiers. Students who were also child soldiers, even when everyone pretended we weren't."

The amusement faded from my face.

Jean noticed, but she kept going.

"There were love triangles, betrayal arcs, alternate futures, clones, evil scientists, government programs, anti-mutant hate groups, sentinels, psychic possession, alien technology, teachers keeping secrets for our own good, enemies becoming allies, allies becoming enemies, people dying and coming back wrong, people not dying when they should have, people dying when they absolutely shouldn't have—"

She stopped. Her eyes had gone wet.

I reached out and covered her hand with mine.

Jean looked down at our hands. Her fingers slowly turned under mine until she could hold on.

"I'm sorry," I said quietly.

She shook her head. "No. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to dump all that on you."

"You didn't dump anything." I squeezed her hand. "I asked."

"You asked about Shaw."

"I asked about mutant stuff. Apparently mutant stuff comes with a trauma sampler platter."

That got a faint laugh out of her. "Pretty much."

I let the silence settle for a moment. Then I asked, "And Shaw was part of that?"

Jean's fingers tightened slightly around mine. "Yes," she said. "Not at Xavier's directly. He was older. Wealthy. Connected. A monster in a suit. The kind of man who believed power gave him the right to own people. Mutants, humans, women, children, governments. He didn't care. He wrapped cruelty in manners and called it civilization. I'm sure he'll try the same shit this time around as well..."

The description made my stomach turn cold. Because I knew men like that. Maybe not Nazi mutant supervillains specifically, but the shape of him was familiar. Foster parents who smiled at

social workers and raised belts behind closed doors. Noblemen in the Elemental Nations who thought ninja bodyguards were hired toys. Apollo leering at Hestia like her refusal was a game.

Different worlds. Same disease.

“And Emma?” I asked.

Jean looked at me. The warning was there before she spoke. “That’s Emma’s story to tell.”

I nodded immediately. “Okay.”

Some of the tension left her shoulders.

I meant it. I wanted to know. Of course I wanted to know. Every protective instinct I had was already clawing at my thoughts, demanding names, locations, weaknesses.

But Emma had chosen not to tell me last night. Maybe that had been a mistake. Maybe Jean was right and she should have told me after the date. But it still wasn’t mine to rip out of someone else.

Not even for revenge. Especially not for revenge.

Jean studied me for a second, probably catching the shape of that thought even if she didn’t dig for details.

Her expression softened. “You’re trying very hard not to go full avenging angel.”

“I’ve been told I should diversify my brand.”

“Natasha again?”

“Sona, actually.”

Jean blinked. “Sona Sitri told you not to be an avenging angel?”

“She told me to stop being a magical girl.”

Jean stared at me. Then she started laughing so hard she had to cover her mouth!

I grinned.

It felt good to make her laugh after the heaviness of the conversation. Jean carried so much inside her. More than she let people see. More than anyone should have to carry. Sometimes I forgot that because she was warm and patient and beautiful, because she smiled at me like she believed I could be better than I thought.

But she had lived through a future bad enough that she and Emma had broken time to escape it.

That kind of wound didn't disappear because she enrolled in physics and wore jeans on a Saturday morning.

"So," I said when her laughter finally faded, "besides Emma, did you have any mutant friends?"

Jean's smile dimmed in a different way. Not grief exactly. More like homesickness for people who existed and didn't exist at the same time. "In this life?" she asked.

I nodded.

Jean shook her head. "Not really. Emma and I found each other early. Or she found me." Her lips curved faintly. "Emma likes to pretend it was coincidence. It wasn't. She tracked me down the second she had enough resources."

"That sounds like Emma."

"It does." Jean looked toward the window, where the campus lawn glowed under late morning sunlight. "We've avoided the others so far. Some of them are children right now. Some haven't manifested. Some are living completely different lives. Some might not become the people we knew at all."

"That must be strange."

"It is." Her voice softened. "There are people I loved who don't know me. People who died in front of me who are alive somewhere right now, eating breakfast or complaining about homework or getting into trouble. And I can't just show up and say, 'Hi, we were family in another timeline, please trust me.'"

I thought of Akeno. Of Shuri. Of seeing people who should have been gone standing in front of me again.

"Yeah," I said quietly. "That sounds hard."

Jean squeezed my hand. "But," she said after a moment, "if you want to meet other mutants, you should."

"I should?"

"Yes. You're right. You are a mutant, Blake. Not only a mutant, obviously. You're also a Nephilim, Hestia's familia captain, Tony Stark's terrifyingly reckless step-problem—"

I snorted. "Step-problem?"

Jean smiled playfully for that one. "Emma and I shouldn't have kept that part of the world away from you..." her smile faded a bit.

I tilted my head. "So where would we go?"

Jean hesitated. Then she blew out a breath. "I could take you somewhere tomorrow..."

"Somewhere with mutants? You mean that school full of drama?"

She hesitated longer than I was expecting. "Yes... that is what I meant."

"The way you said that sounds ominous."

"It might be... awkward." she admitted.

"That also sounds ominous. There was a whole pause there and everything!" I pointed out.

"It will definitely be awkward," Jean corrected. "But probably good for you," she added. "And maybe good for them."

"Them?"

Jean gave me a look. "The less you know before we arrive, the less likely you are to overthink it."

"I feel like I should object to that logic."

"Your objection has been overruled by the ruling board of mutants! Maybe some day you'll be on the board." She was back to joking. Tired sounding joking, but she was doing her best.

I snorted playfully. "Fine. I will withhold my objections...for now..."

"Good." Jean sat up straighter, then immediately looked emotionally exhausted. "Just let me have the rest of today to prepare myself."

"For taking me there?"

"For dealing with the fact that I'm voluntarily reopening the mutant drama box."

"The mutant drama box?"

"It is a terrible box," she said gravely. "It contains secret schools, leather uniforms, and way too many moral debates about humanity."

"Sounds like every supernatural faction I've met so far."

"Exactly. That's why I avoided it."

I watched her for a moment.

Jean looked embarrassed now. Vulnerable in a way she probably hadn't meant to be. Like admitting all this had cost her more than she wanted to show.

So I grinned.

Jean narrowed her eyes immediately. "Why are you smiling like that?"

"Because you're amazing."

Her cheeks pinked. "Blake—"

I leaned in and kissed her again. This time it wasn't on the cheek. Her mouth was soft and warm under mine. She made a tiny startled sound against my lips, her hand tightening around mine as if she needed something to hold onto. For half a heartbeat she froze, and then she melted into it, leaning closer until her shoulder pressed against my chest and her free hand came up to rest lightly against my arm.

It wasn't a long kiss. It didn't need to be.

When I pulled back, Jean's eyes were glowing **gold**. Not bright enough to set anything on fire. Probably. But enough that the air around us felt warmer, like sunlight gathering under her skin.

Her face was bright red.

I smiled at her. "You're amazing," I said again.

Jean stared at me, lips parted, golden light flickering behind her eyes. Then she swallowed. "Your timing is terrible," she whispered.

"My timing is fantastic."

"You kissed me right after I confessed to hiding an entire part of your identity from you."

"Yeah," I said. "And then you admitted it, apologized, offered to fix it, and looked very cute while ranting about mutant drama."

"That is not—" She stopped, breathing out a laugh. Jean looked down at our joined hands, then back up at me. The gold in her eyes softened but didn't fade completely. "I'll take you tomorrow," she said. "But today, no illegal action against Sebastian Shaw. Just go do something else!"

I considered that.

Jean raised a stern eyebrow at me.

I sighed and agreed. "Fine. No illegal action *today*."

She pinched the bridge of her nose. But then she was smiling more. And because her thigh was still pressed against mine, her hand was still in mine, and her eyes were still glowing faintly gold, I decided Saturday morning studying had turned out a lot better than expected.

After Jean and I finished studying, I left the lounge with my head full of rocket equations, mutant drama boxes, and the lingering warmth of her lips.

It was a weird combination.

By the time I made it back across campus toward Himejima Hall, the morning had shifted closer to noon. The sun was bright, the campus lawns were full of students pretending they were definitely going to be productive later, and a group near the fountain was loudly arguing about whether the cooking robots counted as employees or appliances.

Depends on if those robots are sentient or not. That was my opinion.

SIT was still ridiculous. But it was starting to feel familiar.

Still, for once, I had a normal thought. *I want to hang out with Peter.* My best friend.

We lived in the same dorm room now, but somehow it still felt like we barely saw each other. Classes, training, my portals, his patrols, my girlfriends, his spider business, random cross-world-threatening nonsense.

Life kept throwing us into each other's orbit and then yanking us apart before we could actually talk.

It was Saturday. No classes. No immediate emergencies. So yeah. Hanging out sounded good.

I reached our dorm room and pushed the door open without knocking. "Peter, you here?"

He was.

He stood near his bed with a backpack slung over one shoulder, already half-zipped into a hoodie despite the warm weather outside. His hair was messier than usual, dark curls sticking out in every direction like he had run both hands through them too many times. His desk was covered in the usual Peter disaster zone of textbooks, loose wires, half-assembled gadgets, and one sad granola bar wrapper.

He looked like he was about to leave.

"Hey," I said. "Where are you going?"

Peter froze for half a second. Then he turned, forcing a smile that didn't really make it to his eyes. "Oh. Hey, Blake. Just heading out."

I stepped inside and let the door swing shut behind me. "Out where?"

"Just... around."

"That is the least convincing answer you've ever given me, and I've heard you explain why your backpack was smoking in sophomore year."

"That was a battery issue."

"You said it was a sandwich."

He looked away, adjusting the strap of his backpack. "I have to patrol."

I blinked. "Right now?"

"Yeah."

"It's the middle of the day..."

"Crime doesn't clock out because the sun is up!"

"No, but criminals usually prefer darker lighting for their nefarious plots." I leaned back against the door, trying to keep it light. "Come on, man. We haven't hung out in forever. It's the weekend. We should go do something!"

Peter's fingers tightened around the backpack strap.

I didn't notice it at first.

Or maybe I did and ignored it, because I wanted this to be simple.

"I could show you the Elemental Nations," I offered, warming to the idea immediately. "Konoha's insane, but you'd love some of the engineering stuff once you got past the whole 'child soldiers can walk on water' thing. Or Orario. The Dungeon is basically a fantasy death maze that prints money and occasionally tries to eat people. You'd lose your mind over the magic stone economy."

Peter didn't smile.

I kept going anyway, because apparently my brain saw a warning sign and decided to sprint directly at it.

"Or we could just grab food. Watch a movie. I don't know. Normal best friend stuff. Whatever that looks like when one of us has spider powers and the other one keeps accidentally collecting pantheons."

"I can't," Peter said. The words came out sterner than I expected to hear from him.

I frowned. "Why not?"

"I told you. Spider-Man needs to patrol."

“Peter, it’s Saturday afternoon.”

“So?”

“So I’m sure New York can survive a few hours without you webbing up purse snatchers.” I pushed off the door and walked a step closer. “You can go later. At night, when there’s actually more crime to put a stop to.”

His shoulders went rigid. “Wow,” he said flatly.

I stopped. “What?”

Peter turned fully toward me then, and the forced smile was gone. There was anger in his eyes. This was almost personal. “Must be nice,” Peter started on me.

I stared at him in confusion. I tried to see if he was joking, but it didn’t look like he was. “What does that mean?”

“It means it must be nice to decide when being a hero matters!”

The room seemed to narrow around us after those words..

“Peter—”

“No, seriously.” He gave a short, ugly laugh. “You tried patrol for, what, a week? A whole week of being the Avenging Angel or Blood Angel or whatever people were calling you online before you decided it wasn’t for you!”

My jaw tightened. “That’s not what happened!”

“Isn’t it?”

“No,” I said with sparks and irritation stirring under my skin. “I stopped because I was hurting people. Killing people. I needed to figure out what I was actually supposed to be doing before I made things worse!”

Peter’s expression twisted further. “Right. Because you got to step back and think about your brand.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Fair?” Peter’s voice rose. “You want to talk about fair? Every night there’s someone out there getting mugged, stabbed, shot, trafficked, attacked, whatever, and if I’m not there, maybe nobody is!”

“Peter, you are not responsible for every bad thing that happens in New York...”

His eyes flashed. "Yes, I am." The certainty in his voice scared me more than the anger.

"No," I said slowly. "You're not."

"I'm Spider-Man!"

"You're also Peter Parker."

"I don't get to be just Peter Parker anymore!" The words cracked through the room.

For a second, neither of us moved.

Peter was breathing harder now, his face flushed, his fists clenched at his sides. His backpack strap creaked under his grip.

I had seen him nervous. Excited. Embarrassed. Heartbroken. Brilliant. I had never seen him look at me like this. Like I was someone standing in his way.

"I have power," Peter said, quieter now but no less intense. "That means I have responsibility. I don't get to take breaks because I feel like hanging out. I don't get to disappear into other worlds and play adventurer whenever things get complicated."

That one hit hard and then I was the one glaring. "Is that what you think I'm doing?" I asked.

Peter's mouth tightened. He didn't answer. He didn't have to.

"Peter," I said, forcing my voice to stay even, "I'm not trying to have you dump your responsibilities. I just wanted to spend time with my best friend."

Something flickered across his face. For half a second, the anger cracked. Then it sealed over again. "I can't afford that right now."

"You can't afford one afternoon?"

"No." His voice hardened. "I can't. Because I'm not trying to be a half-hearted hero like you were."

The words cut clean. So clean I didn't react at first.

I just stood there.

Peter seemed to realize what he had said the moment it left his mouth. His eyes widened slightly, guilt flashing there and vanishing almost instantly under stubbornness.

But he didn't take it back.

"With great power comes great responsibility," he said, like he was reciting scripture. Like the words were the only thing holding him upright. "And I'm going to live up to that."

Then he pushed past me. His shoulder hit mine. It didn't move me. Physically, it barely registered. Peter was strong now. Stronger than any normal human. Strong enough to lift cars and swing between buildings and take hits that should have shattered bone.

But I was something else entirely. So the impact did nothing to my body.

Peter yanked the door open and stepped into the hallway. He didn't stop. The door slammed hard enough to rattle the frame.

I kept staring at it.

For a few seconds, I didn't move.

"Where the fuck did that come from? I thought we were cool this past week...?" I muttered to myself. *How long has this been building up with him? Half-hearted hero...?*

Peter had called me a half-hearted hero. My best friend. The guy who knew what my life had been like before all the wings and lightning and portals. The guy who knew me when I was just Blake Smith, foster kid disaster with a skateboard and no future. The guy I had wanted to hang out with because I missed him.

The shock faded first. The hurt stayed. Then the anger came in.

I could admit it. I was **pissed**. Fallen angels were a lot of things. Prideful sat pretty high on the list. My wings stayed hidden, but I felt them under my skin, restless and twitching.

Half-hearted. It was a bitch thing for Peter to say. That was the first clear thought that cut through everything. A mean one.

I stared at Peter's closed door like maybe he would come back through it, apologize, and we could both pretend the last five minutes hadn't happened.

He didn't. Of course he didn't.

Spider-Man needed to patrol. Because Peter Parker apparently didn't get to exist anymore...?

The fuck kind of thing to say was that!?

I dragged both hands through my dark hair and exhaled hard through my nose.

Part of me knew what I should do. I should talk to someone. Natasha was probably the obvious choice. She had somehow become the unofficial therapist for every emotionally unstable superhuman woman orbiting my life, so maybe she had room on the clipboard for two stupid teenage boys with hero complexes. She would probably sit me down, call Peter a martyrdom-addicted dumbass, call me a prideful idiot, and then make me spar until the lesson sank in through bruises.

Tony might actually be useful too, which was horrifying. He knew all about pride, guilt, responsibility, and acting like an asshole because your feelings were too intense to hold properly. He would probably give me a drink I wasn't legally allowed to have, say something obscene about Peter needing to get laid, and then accidentally stumble into genuinely good advice.

Even Shuri would have been good. Mom would listen, stroke my hair, tell me Peter was hurting, probably jealous of me, then remind me that hurt people still needed to apologize before someone lovingly kicked their ass.

There were so many better options. *Healthy options. Responsible options.*

I did not choose one of those.

Instead, I pulled out my phone. My thumb hovered over Natasha's contact for half a second. Then I opened a private Stark interface Tony had forced onto my phone because "if you're going to jump between universes and date half the supernatural world, you need better cybersecurity, kid."

A small blue icon pulsed to life.

I typed:

Blake: JARVIS, I need information on **Sebastian Shaw**.

The reply came back almost instantly.

JARVIS: Good afternoon, Blake. Would this request happen to be related to Miss Grey's warning that you should avoid illegal action today?

I stared at the screen.

"Snitch-ass robot," I muttered. This school really had no privacy.

Blake: I'm just asking for information.

JARVIS: Historically, that sentence has preceded several concerning Stark family incidents.

Blake: Tony built armor in a cave and started a weapons revolution. I'm asking where a rich asshole eats lunch.

JARVIS: Noted. Searching.

I leaned back against the wall, phone balanced in one hand, anger still buzzing beneath my skin.

I should have stopped there. I knew that. Every reasonable part of me was standing in the back of my skull holding up a sign that said, This is exactly the kind of reckless decision Natasha warns about in training. Always keep a cool head. Unfortunately, my unreasonable parts had wings and holy lightning and they were currently in control of my emotions.

A few seconds later, my phone vibrated.

A file appeared.

SEBASTIAN SHAW

Industrialist. Investor. Suspected organized criminal affiliations.

Primary known assets: Shaw Industries, multiple shell corporations, offshore holdings, private security groups, political donation networks, art foundations, “charitable” science initiatives.

A picture of him loaded beneath the text.

There he was. The man from the restaurant last night.

Another message appeared.

JARVIS: Mr. Shaw spends an unusual amount of time at a private establishment known as the Hellfire Club. Membership is restricted to individuals of considerable wealth, political influence, social status, or blackmail potential.

I snorted despite myself.

Blake: Blackmail potential?

JARVIS: Based on available records, that appears to be an unofficial but highly relevant category.

I scrolled through the attached images.

The Hellfire Club looked exactly like what I expected from a place with that name. Old stone exterior. Black polished doors. Gold trim. No obvious signage except a discreet emblem that looked expensive enough to insult poor people. The kind of building that didn’t need to advertise because everyone who mattered already knew it existed, and everyone who didn’t matter would be stopped at the door.

A gentlemen’s club. Only the rich and elite got through those doors.

I looked down at myself.

Black t-shirt. Jeans. Sneakers. A student ID still in my pocket.

Then I opened a news tab.

My face stared back at me from three different tabloids.

**EMMA FROST'S MYSTERY DATE REVEALED?
FROST HEIRESS STEPS OUT WITH STARK FAMILY BAD BOY!
WHO IS BLAKE HIMEJIMA-STARK!?**

One picture showed Emma and me outside Aurelia, her white dress glowing under camera flashes while my hand rested at the small of her back. Another caught the moment she kissed me across the table, which was frankly impressive considering there had been a window, curtains, and probably several waiters pretending not to look.

I stared at that one a little longer than necessary.

Emma looked untouchable in the photo. *Elegant. Possessive. Victorious. Mine.* The thoughts came hot and instinctive, and I didn't bother pretending they weren't there. *Shaw had shown up to mess with her. To remind her of something? To put his shadow across a night she had carefully built for herself, for us.*

Jean said Emma and she could handle him.

She was probably right.

Emma Frost was not some fragile princess waiting in a tower. She was terrifying. She could turn into diamond, crush boardrooms with her wit, humiliate billionaires with her snark, and probably make a senator cry with six words and an eyebrow. Jean had the Phoenix behind her eyes and enough power to make common sense flee the solar system and never come back.

They could handle Shaw.

But Peter had just told me I was half-hearted.

Jean had just told me I was a mutant too.

And Sebastian Shaw had looked at Emma like he still had some kind of claim.

My fingers tightened around the phone.

JARVIS: Blake, if I may offer unsolicited guidance—

Blake: You may not.

JARVIS: I am afraid I must. Your current heart rate and typing pressure suggest elevated aggression.

I looked at the screen.

Blake: My phone measures typing pressure?

JARVIS: Mr. Stark insisted it would be useful. He was correct...

Of course he did.

JARVIS: Miss Potts, Miss Romanoff, Miss Grey, Miss Frost, your mother, and Mr. Stark would all likely advise against confronting a powerful socialite like Sebastian Shaw while emotionally compromised.

I smiled without humor.

Blake: Good thing I'm not asking them.

There was a pause. Long enough that I could almost imagine the AI sighing.

JARVIS: Shall I alert them?

The anger flared hotter. Then I forced myself to breathe. Because if I answered too fast, JARVIS might actually decide I was a problem and call in the entire emotionally concerned cavalry.

Blake: No. I'm going to talk with the man. That's it.

Another pause.

JARVIS: I will refrain from immediate alerts. However, I reserve the right to notify relevant parties if you enter a situation with significant escalation potential.

"Everything in my life has escalation potential," I muttered.

JARVIS: Precisely.

I tossed the phone onto my bed and stood. I walked to my closet and pulled it open. If I was going to walk into an elite private club full of old-money and mutant Nazi bullshit, I couldn't show up looking like a college freshman who had lost a fight with a laundry basket.

I pushed aside hoodies and t-shirts until I found the second best set of clothes I had. The best set was what I wore on my date with Emma last night of course.

I changed into dark slacks, a black button-down shirt, and a fitted charcoal jacket that looked casual enough not to be a tux but expensive enough that nobody sane would ask where I bought it. The fabric sat comfortably over my shoulders, tailored with enough give that I could move if things went badly.

When things went badly.

I stared at myself in the mirror. My reflection's mouth flattened. I grabbed my phone again and checked the address JARVIS had sent.

Walking into a club wasn't illegal. Asking questions wasn't illegal. Looking a monster in the eyes and letting him know Emma wasn't his and to stay the fuck away from her wasn't illegal.

And if Sebastian Shaw said the wrong thing?

Well. Maybe I would kick his teeth in. Just a little. For my emotional health if nothing else...

– Emma Frost –

Emma Frost was in a pretty good mood.

She was not on campus today, unfortunately. SIT had its charms. The absurdly advanced laboratories, the beautiful view of young geniuses being crushed under elite academic pressure, Blake Himejima walking around looking unfairly handsome. All very enjoyable.

But Frost International did not run itself. Not yet, anyway.

Emma sat behind the desk in her office at the top of Frost International's Manhattan headquarters, the city spread beneath her in glittering afternoon lines of steel, glass, and money. Her office was all white marble, polished chrome, soft rugs, expensive art, and floor-to-ceiling windows designed to make lesser executives feel like insects when they were summoned into her presence.

It worked beautifully.

At the moment, three separate board reports floated across the screen built into her desk. Quarterly projections. International asset restructuring. A tedious legal summary involving mineral rights, tax shields, and one irritating senator who had apparently decided Frost International looked like a convenient campaign target.

Emma had already handled him. Quietly. Professionally. With only moderate psychic suggestions to alter his thinking.

The real annoyance had been the board.

The old fucks had seen the tabloids this morning and lost their collective minds.

Apparently, the sight of Emma Frost stepping out of Aurelia with Blake Himejima-Stark on her arm had sent several wealthy men into cardiac-adjacent panic. The words "Stark Industries merger" had been used no fewer than twelve times during the emergency call they had demanded at nine in the morning.

Nine! On a Saturday! That is criminal behavior.

Emma had spent forty-seven minutes explaining, with admirable restraint, that no, she was not merging Frost International with Stark Industries because she went on one public date with Tony Stark's adopted son.

By the end of the call, two board members had been sweating, one had apologized three times, and the oldest had asked if Blake's "romantic influence" might become a matter of corporate exposure.

Emma had smiled at him. Then she had explained that if he ever referred to her personal life as corporate exposure again, she would expose his third mistress, his second set of offshore accounts, and the fact that his favorite grandson was failing out of Princeton despite the family's best attempts to buy his grades.

The rest of the meeting had gone beautifully after that.

She hated whining old people.

Still, she could admit these particular old people were an improvement over the last batch. None of them were loyal to her late father. That alone earned them a basic level of tolerance. Most were self-interested cowards, yes, but self-interested cowards could be managed. A few were even competent at their jobs when they weren't panicking over tabloids like startled pigeons in tailored suits.

Emma leaned back in her chair and sipped her tea. Her eyes drifted to the physical newspaper resting on the corner of her desk. She rarely bothered with print, but she had made an exception today.

The front page showed her and Blake outside the restaurant.

Emma looked immaculate, of course. White dress, perfect posture, one hand on Blake's arm. Blake looked slightly overwhelmed by the cameras but handsome enough that even the photograph seemed to know it was lucky.

The headline was obnoxious.

She still rather liked the picture.

Her gaze lingered on Blake's face. A smile touched her lips before she could stop it.

Last night was lovely. Strategic, yes. Public, yes. Deliberately staged, absolutely. Emma Frost did not stumble into media narratives. She built them. But beneath all the strategy, it had still been a date.

A real one.

Blake had looked at her like she was the only woman in the room, despite the actors, politicians, socialites, parasites, and one lurking psychic void of a monster trying to make himself relevant.

He had listened when she spoke. He had held her hand without needing her to make a game out of it. He had told her she was beautiful out loud, deliberately, because he wanted her to hear it instead of merely catching the thought by accident.

The only thing missing at the end of the date had been some good passionate sex. Emma sighed. *A tragedy. A noble sacrifice.* A testament to her restraint.

Natasha Romanoff had better appreciate the sheer moral labor Emma was performing by not dragging Blake into the nearest private room and ruining him for every other woman alive.

The Black Widow's advice had been irritatingly correct. Again. Rushing Blake, cornering him with desire, trying to reclaim the man from a timeline that no longer existed—it had not brought Emma closer to him. Not really.

But patience had. A few weeks of restraint, of actual conversations and normal moments, had done more than months of aggressive pursuit. Blake looked at her differently now. Not with less desire, *thank God*, but with more trust under it.

That was better. Far more satisfying.

Her phone buzzed.

Emma glanced at it and saw three messages from her little sister. The first was a complaint about the private security detail Emma had assigned her. The second was a blurry photograph of said security detail looking deeply uncomfortable while her sister apparently gave them makeovers with stolen lipstick.

The third read: **stop trying to parent me you terrifying blonde control freak**

Emma stared at the message for a long moment. Then she snorted. Some things were apparently consistent across timelines. Her sister had been a rebellious pain in Emma's ass in her first life, and she was well on her way to becoming one in this one too.

Emma should have found it exhausting. She did find it exhausting. But she also loved the little brat. Unfortunately.

Perhaps she should introduce her family to Blake soon.

The thought came uninvited and settled with surprising ease.

Blake had a way with broken families. Or perhaps broken families had a way of finding him. Either way, he collected wounded people with the same accidental efficiency Tony Stark collected lawsuits. Emma could picture him being awkwardly kind to her rebellious younger sister.

The image made Emma's smile return.

Then something brushed against her mind. Psychically. A familiar golden-red warmth unfurled at the edge of her awareness, soft but powerful, like sunlight seen through closed eyelids.

Jean.

Emma closed her eyes. The psychic tether touched her with the intimacy of long practice. It was not invasive. Not between them. Jean did not need to break through Emma's defenses. Emma opened one carefully controlled gate, and Jean's presence flowed through it.

Jean was sending Emma her memories from earlier that morning.

A study lounge. Blake hunched over equations, looking betrayed by rocket science. Jean sitting too close in jeans and a white tank top. Blake thinking Jean looked amazing and immediately panicking because telepath. Jean blushing. Blake kissing her. Jean's startled joy.

Emma's eyebrow twitched.

Then more.

Blake asking why Emma had not explained Sebastian Shaw. Jean telling him the simplified truth. Mutant drama. Xavier's Institute. Jean admitting that she and Emma had kept mutant matters from him. Blake pointing out, correctly, that he was technically a mutant too. Jean apologizing. Blake kissing her again.

Emma opened one eye. "Greedy girl," she murmured. There was no heat in it. Not much, anyway.

Jean's embarrassment rippled down the tether, followed by defensive affection, followed by the mental equivalent of a very pointed, *You kissed him last night in front of half the city.*

Emma's lips curved. *Yes, darling, but I looked fabulous doing it.*

Jean sent back an image of herself rolling her eyes.

Emma opened both eyes. Her good mood thinned. "Damn it," she said softly.

She had fucked up.

She should have told Blake about Shaw herself. *Not all of it.* Some wounds were not first-date conversation, even when the date was also a public declaration of war against one's former tormentor. But she should have told him enough. She should not have let Jean be the one to explain why Emma had gone cold at dinner, why Shaw's presence mattered, why that smiling bastard occupied a dark corner of Emma's history that even time travel had not fully scrubbed clean.

She would apologize. Properly. Tomorrow, perhaps.

Jean wanted to take Blake to Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters. Emma had grimaced when that came through the tether, but she understood. Blake needed to see the mutant world eventually. He deserved to know that part of himself.

But Emma was sure as hell not letting Jean take him without her.

Absolutely not.

Charles Xavier could dress manipulation up in kindness all he wanted. He could speak gently, tilt his bald head with patient concern, and pretend every secret he kept was for someone else's benefit. Emma knew better.

She respected Charles in the past. Occasionally. Against her will. But she did not trust him alone with Blake and Jean.

No chance in hell.

If they were going to that school tomorrow, Emma would be there. And she would shut down any manipulative old-man bullshit before Xavier could finish the first wistful sentence about his dreams of a better future. That better future didn't work out, Emma knew that from personal experience.

Her office phone suddenly rang. Emma's gaze cut toward it as she snapped from her plotting.

She answered the call.

"Ma'am?"

Emma recognized him immediately. One of her field agents. Reliable. Discreet. Good instincts. A little too prone to sweating when frightened, but nobody was perfect.

"Yes?"

"You asked us to keep an eye on the Hellfire Club?"

Emma went still. "That's right," she said. "Did something happen?" She hated that she felt the smallest flicker of nerves. Shaw was not a threat to her in this life. Not like before. She was stronger. Richer. Better positioned. Her father was dead. The old arrangement was ash. Shaw could not buy her, corner her, or drag her into the dark with a contract and a smile.

Still. Her fingers curled lightly against the armrest of her chair. "Is Shaw making a move?" she asked, voice cool.

"Um," the agent said.

Emma's eyes narrowed. She disliked *um* from field agents. "Use your words!"

“Yes, ma’am. It’s just—” He swallowed audibly. “The club is currently burning to the ground...”

For one perfectly silent second, Emma Frost did not move. Then she closed her eyes. *Blake... What did you do?*

XXX