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

A/N: Time for Thaddeus and Emma to face their greatest foe yet!

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"… Together. We face her together."

In the end, it's not a difficult decision to make. Emma is no damsel. Removing her from Earth and going to the Moon was as much about protecting people from her if a fight broke out as it was about protecting her from well-meaning heroes like the X-Men and the Avengers.

But she doesn't need to be kept safe always and forever… she's the host to the Phoenix Force now after all, even ignoring the sheer amount of power she can wield thanks to the number of times they've been in bed together. And Thaddeus figures that Emma deserves to be able to confront Selene face to face just as much as he does. The White Queen had been treated like a pawn by the Black Queen for longer than Thaddeus had even been in the picture.

Indeed, he can feel that Emma is pleased even as he makes the decision. And even if he weren't capable of sensing her emotions at this proximity, she all but proves it a moment later by taking his face in her hands and kissing him deeply on the lips. Thaddeus returns the favor of course, the two of them molding their naked bodies to one another and seizing upon the deep, tongue-filled kiss for a long moment.

When they finally pull apart for air, Emma smiles softly and nods.

"Together."

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"I am supposed to be watching you. I can't just let you out of my sight, it's literally only been one day."

Of course, there's one issue with deciding that he and Emma are going to confront Selene together… a Ms. Marvel shaped issue, to be exact. The blonde Avenger isn't entirely wrong either… she IS supposed to be keeping an eye on Emma Frost, the current host to the Phoenix Force, to make sure that if anything happens, she can step in or something.

Not that Thaddeus or Emma really think that Ms. Marvel could do much either way if something did happen, frankly. She's powerful by all accounts, but not powerful enough to take either them or their enemies on by herself. No, at this point she's more of a canary in the coal mine than anything else… but of course, she doesn't see it that way.

"… I am a businesswoman. I cannot have a superheroine attending all of my business meetings or I will never get anything done. Your presence would be more hindrance than help."

When Ms. Marvel just scowls and crosses her arms over her chest in response, Emma tries a different tack.

"You were fine with living on the floor underneath me, rather than spending every moment, both waking and sleeping, right at my side. How is this any different?"

That draws a scoff from the Avenger.

"I was willing to tolerate that request because I am not trying to completely infringe on your privacy. However, there is a difference between me leaving you alone when you're in your home and leaving you alone when you're out in the world where any possible stimuli might prompt you to lose control of the Phoenix."

Unfortunately, that too was a fair argument. Thaddeus had full faith that Emma wouldn't lose control of the Phoenix Force at this point, not under any circumstances, but obviously the Avengers didn't share his faith or Ms. Marvel wouldn't be here in the first place. Compromises… ugh.

In the end though, it's not worth fighting over too much… especially when he and Emma have yet another compromise to the current situation, one that Emma outlines to Ms. Marvel a moment later.

"Very well. You may come with us but you will have to remain outside."

When the blonde Avenger opens her mouth to protest, Emma holds up a hand and overrides her.

"I assume this should be fine… seeing as even waiting outside, if I DO lose control of the Phoenix, you'll be one of the first people to notice, won't you?"

And that… that is something Ms. Marvel cannot deny. If her real purpose is just to make sure Emma stays in control rather than outright spying on them, she can't exactly argue that she has to be within spitting distance of the blonde, now can she?

Realizing she's been argued into a corner, Ms. Marvel's nostrils flare for a moment… before she ultimately nods.

"Very well."

And so they wind up on a rather awkward car ride with the other woman, him and Emma sitting on one side in the back of the car and Ms. Marvel sitting on the other. Her presence doesn't exactly stop them from communicating with one another, but it does make things a little… tense.

Technically, Thaddeus could have just teleported all three of them over to Selene's place he supposed, but sometimes using flashy powers wasn't always the answer. Besides, aside from Ms. Marvel's constant staring, the car ride does do a lot to help Thaddeus settle his nerves and gird himself for the upcoming confrontation.

This was it, after all. This was the culmination of months of shadowy maneuvering and dodging Selene's machinations. The Black Queen's dark

intentions for Thaddeus had, supposedly, been finally and fully thwarted by his awakening as an External. However, it wouldn't really be laid to rest until he confronted her, him and Emma both. Nothing would be certain until he looked Selene in the eyes and knew for a fact that she wasn't still planning something.

In fact, part of him was convinced that she WAS still planning something. There was just no way that she'd give up this easily, right? No, she'd spent far too many resources so far. On the flip side though, he was an External just like her now. No longer a meal. Right? So… well, they'd see what happened wouldn't they?

Arriving outside of Selene's New York Townhouse, the three of them pile out of the car together. Emma glances to Ms. Marvel, but the blonde Avenger preempts her this time.

"I imagine you don't want me waiting outside, because that's only going to draw attention if an Avenger is standing around on a New York Residential Street. I shall wait in the foyer."

… Point to Ms. Marvel. Both Thaddeus and Emma are forced to nod to that, even as they make their way up the stairs to the townhouse's front door. Exchanging a look with Emma, Thaddeus reaches out to knock… only for the door to swing open all on its own.

Ominous, to say the least… though the inside of the manor is in no way as foreboding as it might seem. Its certainly richly appointed, and done up in a traditional, older style from the last century… but given how old Selene is, that might as well be cutting edge and brand new from her perspective.

Stepping into the foyer, Thaddeus finds himself looking around even as Emma and Ms. Marvel both trail after him, doing the same. Just when he's starting to wonder what to do next however… there's a psychic pulse from upstairs that might as well have been an invitation to ascend to Selene's office.

"… Come along, Thaddeus. And you… as you said, you'll stay here."

Ms. Marvel huffs but nods, crossing her arms over her chest and standing off to the side of the foyer with a constipated look on her otherwise beautiful face. Meanwhile, Emma moves to the staircase and begins to ascend as Thaddeus comes in right behind her.

They move as one unit, as one entity almost, heading towards a confrontation that feels like it's been eons in the making despite the relatively short period of time that Thaddeus has known he was on Selene's dinner menu.

Eventually, they arrive at a large pair of double doors that Thaddeus knows beyond a shadow of a doubt will lead into Selene's study… and should lead to the woman herself. After all, this was where the pulse originated from so… with a nod from Emma, he steps forward and pushes the doors open, not quite hard enough to make them bang on either wall, but hard enough that they fling wide for them.

Stepping in, Thaddeus feels like he's as prepared as he's going to be… prepared for anything, really. But he's wrong. He gets one step forward before he registers what awaits them in the room beyond… and then he freezes in place, staring gobsmacked at the macabre sight even as Emma stops right beside him, also struck silent by the view.

Selene… is nowhere to be seen. As far as Thaddeus can tell, she's not present at all. However… on the far wall, behind the large, well-appointed mahogany desk that dominates that part of the room… the body of Saul, supposedly eldest of the Externals, hangs.

Crucified with his head low, the External's robes have been ripped open and his chest has been split down the middle. His rib cage has been torn asunder and his heart… his heart is missing amidst the blood and viscera.

Right on cue, a see-through image of Selene appears off to the side of the study, staring not at Thaddeus or Emma, but rather at a heart in her hands. Without further ado, she proceeds to begin devouring it right in front of them, consuming the bloody organ until there's nothing left.

It takes a few seconds, seconds in which Emma transmits to Thaddeus what he probably should have already noticed… this is not some sort of real time connection. This is just a magical recording. Good to know, especially when Selene begins talking with a bloody smile staining her lips.

“I suppose you thought it was over, didn’t you? I suppose you thought you’d come to me today to tell me what’s what and put me in my place.”

Tilting her head to the side, eyes not quite focused on either of them, Selene… chuckles.

“I must admit, I’ve never had a morsel turn the tables on me quite like this before. I’ve certainly never had the cook turn around and conspire with the meal against me.”

Thaddeus’ jaw clenches as Emma bristles at his side.

“I had all sorts of plans of course. Plans for getting in nice and close to you, plans for driving you to the depths of despair. You both thought you were one step ahead of me this entire time… but obviously, that wasn’t the case. And yet… I cannot deny it.”

The image of Selene moves back over to her desk, seeming to fuss with something.

“You both, as you are now, as you’ve become, could so easily overpower me that it’s not even funny. One of you is the host to the Phoenix and the other not only shares something in common with me but has grown exponentially in these past few months.”

Glancing back in their general direction, Selene smirks.

“Just so we’re clear though… I always knew you were an External. From the very beginning. Garbha-Hsien has always been so certain of his knowledge. Just because he’s older than I am doesn’t mean he’s wiser or smarter, however. In fact, I would argue he’s far, far too slow to change. I discovered you as an

unawakened ages ago… and I knew I could cultivate you into something worth my time."

The smirk drops then, replaced by frustration as Selene gives a casual half-shrug.

"Alas, not even I could have predicted the Phoenix. That stupid bird has had many hosts through the millennia, both on Earth and otherwise… but coming back here so soon after that mess with it's last host… that was outside of my plans. Which brings us to now."

Turning to look at Saul's corpse, the projection shakes her head.

"Garbha-Hsien is but the first. But he will be far from the last. As we are now, you two are more powerful than me… but it won't remain that way for long."

Looking back over her shoulder at them, Selene's bloody smile returns with a vengeance, this time fully open mouthed and showing off her equally bloody teeth. Consuming hearts is a messy affair, clearly.

"Through all the centuries, nobody has managed to track me when I didn't want them to. Perhaps you'll prove otherwise… but I doubt it. Good luck~"

And with that… the magical recording ends, flickering off as Thaddeus and Emma stare at where the projection of Selene stood. There's a pause as they both process everything that's just been said… and then Emma grimaces.

"I'm trying to find her. I've got the entirety of Earth covered in my power. It shouldn't be possible for her to hide from me or the Phoenix. And yet…"

Thaddeus just sighs and shakes his head.

"It's alright. We'll hunt her down together one way or another. But first…"

He steps forward, reaching out with his powers towards Saul's corpse. He's not just going to leave the ancient immortal dead, after all. And while bringing Pietro

back from the dead had taken him, Wanda, and Rogue working together, that was without a body of any sort. Thaddeus figured that reversing the damage and resurrecting Saul should be easier… right?

Only… no. He certainly tries… and when Emma sees him struggling, she even steps forward and takes his hand in her own, offering him access to the Phoenix's cosmic power to bolster him. In an instant, Thaddeus knows that he's using more power than he, Wanda, and Rogue utilized before.

It's still not enough… or rather, it's a matter of there not being an 'enough' to work with here. Instead, it's as though the very fabric of reality itself is denying him. Saul is dead… and must stay dead. Selene has somehow permanently killed another External.

Thaddeus works his jaw around as he finally gives up on trying to bring Saul back to life. His failure prickles at his pride something fierce, but its more than just wounded pride… it's the beginnings of fear.

Selene herself had admitted that Thaddeus and Emma were more powerful than her at this point. But she'd also claimed they wouldn't be for long. It wasn't difficult to put the pieces together, in the end. She had some way of killing Externals so they couldn't come back to life and it likely involved her eating their hearts like she'd done with Saul. And that in turn… granted her more power? Granted her *their* power?

One way or another, it made it clear what Selene would do next. He and Emma don't have to say it out loud for them both to be on the same page on that front. She was going after the other Externals. She was going to hunt them down one by one and claim their hearts as well until she deemed herself strong enough to return and go after him and Emma.

… Fuck.

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