

Transformative Variations

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Transformative Variations

by [Ithildin](#)

Summary

Friendship takes work; being friends with Tony Stark requires danger pay. When Tony said 'I am Iron Man', he affected the lives of those closest to him – they just never dreamed how much. Like a pebble tossed in a pond, the ripples eventually touch all in their path.

Notes

The sequel to Practical Applications, a story in the Echoes the Sea series. Methos/OC, implied Methos/Byron. Thanks to Casey and Ninjababe for the beta.

Train Wreck



This day was not going to end well; of that, she was certain. And the worst of it was that it was all her own damn fault. *Well done, Charlotte*, she told herself scathingly. Spying Ezra at the end of the bar, she worked her way further into the dim confines of Standish & Black, the saloon and restaurant she owned with her former ward. It may have been her fault, but Charlotte had a pretty good idea of just who had started the fire.

Not wasting any time on pleasantries, she got straight to business as she drew even with him. "Did you tell Tony about Methos?" she demanded of the younger Immortal.

Ezra looked startled at her unexpected question, but quickly gathered himself. "I may have mentioned 'Matthew'," he admitted. "We were playing cards, and there was possibly an offhand reference to your beau."

"Why would you do that, Ezra?"

"I think the question should be, why didn't you?" he shot back.

"I was going to!"

"When exactly? Did you plan on arriving at the Expo on Methos' arm? That would have gone well," he observed dryly.

"That isn't fair! You know what Tony's life has been like these last months; I was waiting for the right moment." Oh, that was rich: right moment! *Self deception is never an attractive quality, lass*. Just great; her little voice now sounded suspiciously like Jack. It ticked her off, but she knew 'he' was right. Tony Stark's on again, off again girlfriend – that's what the tabloids called her. But it had never bothered her, diverted her, perhaps, but bother? No. She cared little what strangers might think, and honestly, who would believe that she and the billionaire were 'just friends'? Not a one. And just friends they might be, but Charlotte knew how possessive Tony could be; he didn't like to share. And until now, he'd never had to. So she'd turned avoidance into an art form, and now, it was coming back to bite her.

"I know Methos isn't your favourite person, but the situation..." Shoulders slumped, her anger fled. "I'm sorry, Ezra, none of this is your fault." She would have left, but Ezra's hand on her

shoulder stopped her.

"What happened?" he asked, his voice now full of concern.

Sighing, she rubbed at her temple with two fingers. "Tony dropped by, very unexpectedly, this afternoon. He had Methos investigated, Ezra! He thinks he's some deadbeat sponging off my money."

Ezra began to say something, but whatever flippant remark he might have made died on his lips at the patently obvious distress in Charlotte's eyes.

"Do you know what that means, Ezra? Methos will leave when he finds out," she said, her voice cracking.

Ever practical, he asked, "Why does he have to?"

For a moment, she was tempted, but there had been enough secrets. "He has to; I don't have the right to keep something like that from him."

"I am sorry, Charlotte," he said sincerely.

"I have no one to blame for this mess but myself." She sighed resignedly. "And going to Afghanistan with Tony will only compound matters," she said to herself.

Eyes widening, his hand on her shoulder tightened. "Afghan... Have you lost your mind?"

Pulling away, she shook her head angrily, but her reply was interrupted by the arrival of a new Immortal presence. "We'll talk about it later," she said, her eyes now focused on Methos, accompanied by Duncan, as the two men made their way towards them.

"You're damned right we will," Ezra muttered in response as he smoothed his expression to one of nonchalant ease, leaning against the bar as they were joined by Methos and Duncan.

"How was the surfing lesson?" Charlotte asked Duncan as Methos kissed her on the cheek in greeting.

"It was great," the Scots Immortal enthused, eyes lighting up at her question.

Methos groaned. "God, do not get him started, I'm warning you!"

Duncan ignored his friend. "There's such a sense of freedom when you're skimmming across the surf; I've never done anything quite like it. And Tess is a great teacher," he enthused

"And has a great body, great eyes, and, oh yes, such a great smile," Methos said in a voice that was supposed to be an imitation of Duncan's, though not a very good one.

"Pay him no mind," Charlotte advised Duncan. "Tess is lovely, and it's hardly a crime you noticed." Tess Helm was Charlotte's winemaker, and the two had hit it off when Charlotte had introduced them. She privately thought that Duncan's sudden interest in learning to surf was a

pretext for spending more time with the hazel eyed, brunette beauty. "Just don't try and steal her away from me, or there will be hell to pay," she warned with mock sternness.

"Not a chance," he replied with a laugh. "But I hope you don't have any objections to me taking her to dinner?" He flashed a winning smile at Charlotte, waving at Tess as she approached the group at the bar.

"None at all." Quite the opposite in fact; she'd always had a bit of a matchmaking streak, and she thought that the Highlander and Tess were an excellent match. She gave Ezra an innocent look when he shook his head, smiling knowingly.

Duncan gallantly kissed the back of Tess's hand. "I'm glad you could make it," he told her warmly.

"Me too," she replied with a cheeky wink.

Charlotte's smile widened at the obvious attraction between the two; Ezra's low laugh at her side earned him an elbow in the ribs. Tess Helm's family had lived in the San Louis Obispo area since Spanish colonial days, and Charlotte had been good friends with her great-grandmother when Charlotte had first moved here in the 1870s. Tess reminded her sharply of her long dead friend, and her smile took on a wistful quality as she remembered.

"I can't believe you held out on me!" Tess said suddenly, turning her attention to Charlotte.

Jerked abruptly from the past, she blinked, trying to catch up with what Tess was saying.

"Tony Stark comes to visit and you keep him all to yourself! What kind of friend are you? You know how much I wanted him to try the private reserve."

"He did," Charlotte said faintly, noticing Methos' sudden interest in the turn the conversation was taking. She could salvage this, she could. "He loved it."

Tess beamed at the news. "I knew he would!" Then she added with mock pique, "But not enough to give *me* an Aston Martin."

Ezra tried to head the young woman off at the pass, while giving Charlotte a look that plainly said he wanted all the details later. "I do believe your table is ready."

"In a minute, Ez," she said, digging around in her purse for something. "When I stopped by the office, Lily said to give you this."

Charlotte felt as though she were standing in front of an oncoming train, powerless to stop the impending collision. Lily, Charlotte's personal assistant, must have filled Tess in on the afternoon's happenings. Her heart sank.

"Here it is!" She pulled out a crumpled piece of paper. "Pepper emailed it; the itinerary for the Afghanistan trip." She shoved the paper at Charlotte, oblivious to the stricken look on her employer's face. "It's very exciting," she said as Charlotte took it from her. Then, turning serious, she added, "But you'll be careful, won't you? I know you'd do anything for him, but it's dangerous and, well, after what happened..." she trailed off.

While Tess may not have noticed the charged atmosphere, Duncan did. "Hey, I'm hungry, so why don't we eat?"

"Sure," Tess agreed, letting Duncan lead her away. "See you tomorrow," she called over her shoulder to Charlotte.

Charlotte clenched the damning sheet of paper in her hand. How had it all gotten so out of control so fast? "Methos," she said, finally looking at him, but wishing she hadn't. His eyes were dark and unreadable; never a good sign.

"If you need me, call," Ezra said softly, kissing her cheek. His expression was one of remorse for what his offhand remark to Tony Stark had caused. At her nod, he left her and Methos alone.

"Methos," she repeated, "I was going to explain it all to you tonight."

"Better late than never, I suppose," he replied caustically.

"It's complicated... me and Tony...." She searched for the right words, but those obviously weren't the ones.

"Oh, not *that* complicated," he shot back.

The innuendo was obvious, and she bristled. "It isn't like that!"

"Then why don't you tell me exactly what it is like, Charlotte?"

The Way We Were

The glass she hurled against the stone of the fireplace exploded with a resounding pop, giving her a brief stab of grim satisfaction. She stared at the resulting destruction, the light of the fire reflecting off the shards of Waterford crystal that now lay scattered around the hearth. The sudden memory the sight evoked was not a good one, and she harshly shoved it back where it belonged. Now was not the time to dwell on past tragedies.

She had tried to explain to Methos, had tried to apologize, but in the end, his unwillingness to even attempt to understand had triggered a responding anger, and they had fought. Well, they had until he'd walked out. *But that was always his answer, wasn't it?* she thought bitterly. Several hours had passed, and honestly, she had no idea if he would even come back; or if she wanted him to.

Charlotte paced the room, now with a new glass that she'd refilled several times with single malt, barely tasting the fiery liquid as it slid down her throat. By the time Methos did return, she'd had too much to drink, and her simmering resentment needed only a spark to set it off.

"That bottle had a lot more in it before," he observed as he threw himself into a chair.

"So you're the booze police now?" she snapped back.

He only shrugged, which just made her angrier. Then he said, "You really are spectacularly foolish, Charlotte."

She almost threw another glass, though this time, it wouldn't have been aimed at the fireplace. Not replying, she shot back her scotch before pointedly refilling the tumbler with more.

"Being Immortal is supposed to be a secret, or had you forgotten that? Stark is arguably the most famous person in the country, perhaps the world, and you're going to go traipsing after him to Afghanistan! A locale, I might remind you, where they enjoy removing one's head from one's shoulders!"

"I can handle the publicity! And the press will be interested in Tony, not me. I can keep it low profile." Okay, that was probably stretching the truth; she'd appeared in enough tabloid spreads since becoming part of Tony's inner circle to know there would be interest. But damnit, she was tired of Methos treating her like she was a simpleton. She'd taken care of herself for a long time and didn't require him to tutor her in what it meant to be Immortal.

He rolled his eyes. "You give 'low profile' a whole new meaning."

Cocking her head, she asked with mock sweetness, "Is that what you told Byron? After all, he really hid his light under a bushel, didn't he?"

He obviously hadn't been expecting the turn the conversation had taken, and didn't immediately reply. Finally he said, "This isn't about Byron."

"No, this is about you being a goddamned hypocrite!" she shot back. "Was fame the death of him, Methos? I'd really like to know." She was being a bitch, and she knew it, but she was all for burning her bridges tonight.

He was glowering at her now, but all she did was look at him expectantly, waiting for an answer. Charlotte had met Byron once, at a party in London, a few months before his death. She'd loathed him on sight, and he hadn't liked her much either. Both of them wondering just what they might have in common that would interest a man like Methos. The resulting introspection after their brief acquaintance had left her uncomfortable and disconcerted.

Running a hand through his hair, he shook his head. "If you must know, MacLeod was the death of him."

She blinked. Now that, she had not been expecting. Arching an eyebrow, she said coolly, "My, my, I didn't realize Duncan had a jealous streak – should I be worried?"

Methos slapped the leather upholstered arm of the chair he was sitting in. "You're being ridiculous! We're friends, nothing more, so stop trying to twist this around to make you feel better!"

"Really, Methos, do you honestly expect me to believe that?" She threw his words from earlier back in his face. His refusal to believe that she and Tony had never been intimate was at the crux of her anger.

Standing, he crossed his arms across his chest. "Fine, you want to play this game? Then you look me in the eye and tell me that if given the merest hint of encouragement, Stark wouldn't have you in his bed without any hesitation."

Glaring, she pointed a finger at him. "I will if you will!" His accusation had hit a little too close to home. She couldn't tell him that, and he knew it. "But you won't, will you? Because you expect me to trust you! But you sure as hell don't trust me, do you, Methos? Just admit it!" She slammed the glass down on to the table.

"This has absolutely nothing to do with trust, and everything to do with you deluding yourself! I know you, Charlotte, know your weaknesses, predilections; you will smash yourself onto the rocks if you keep on the way you're going. Stark isn't worth it!" He was pacing around the room now.

"You think you know me?" She laughed bitterly. "You walked out of my life a century and a half ago, without a backward glance. You know *nothing*! Who you think you know is the girl I was, when I was mortal. I haven't been her for a very long time, Methos. There is a piece of her buried with every husband, every lover, and every child. And now? There is nothing of that girl left."

"As I said, deluding yourself. We never entirely lose who we were, Charlotte, no matter how much you'd like to think so, or wish it true."

"And of course, you're always right, aren't you?"

"No, I never said that," he said tightly, "but I've lived a very long time."

"And you don't think that is as much a handicap as my youth?" She snorted. "It doesn't give you special powers to see *me*, Methos, my heart, my soul. You think you have me all figured out because you knew me three centuries ago, because you were my teacher. But I have news for you; you don't. If you can't be bothered to get to know the woman I am now, and accept the life I've made for myself, then us, all of it," she waved a hand, "is worthless."

He nodded. "Maybe you're right," was all he said before striding from the room.

Once Upon a Time

It seemed everyone had an opinion on her current troubles, and all of them had managed to share them with her this morning. It was only 10 A.M. and yet Charlotte was already exhausted as she sought the sanctuary of her rose garden and a pot of tea. It seemed the only person she hadn't heard from was Methos. But that was probably for the best.

The hinges of the garden gate squeaked and she groaned, wondering who had decided to butt into her personal life this time. Okay, this was getting ridiculous, she thought as Lieutenant Colonel James 'Rhodey' Rhodes covered the distance between them. Though the fact he was in uniform indicated that this visit was about something other than her love life.

What she felt like saying was, 'What the hell do you want?', but what she actually said was, "Jim, what a lovely surprise." She must have overdone the sincerity, since the man gave her a searching look as he sat in the chair next to her.

"Charlotte, you know why I'm here."

"Actually, I don't have a clue, so why don't you tell me."

"You, Tony, going to Afghanistan; ring any bells?" He was all business, the stress he was under evident in his eyes.

"And?" Charlotte was tired, aggravated, and in no mood for whatever it was that Jim was here for.

"And? You need to make Tony see that it's out of the question!"

"Is that what you think?" Her anger flared up. "I am not Tony's keeper! You're his best friend, you tell him he can't go!"

"Damn it, you know that me trying to convince him will only make him more determined. You, on the other hand, can make him see that this whole idea is foolish, that he's endangering your life. You have a talent for making Tony see reason that I don't have."

Charlotte leapt from her chair, rounding on him. "Just what are you trying to imply, Jim? Because I don't like it! You think I'm going to use my sex to manipulate Tony into doing what the military brass wants?" She was furious. "Or is it you think I'll use sex to get him to see things your way? Is that it?"

"No!" Now he was on his feet. "That isn't what I meant, how could you think that?" He sounded hurt.

Her anger fled. "I'm sorry, Jim, it's just... The last twenty-four hours haven't been good, and I took it out on you. I'm sorry," she repeated.

"Me too. I shouldn't have come in here, ordering you around like you're one of my airmen. Want to tell me what's got you so upset?"

"Are you sure you want to know?" At his nod, she gave him an abbreviated version of her woes.

He drew her into his arms, hugging her comfortingly. "I'm sorry, Charlotte." Letting her go, he sat back down. "You and I both know that being Tony's friend can push you to the limit."

"Yeah." Reseating herself, she asked, "So what corner has he pushed you into?"

"My superiors aren't happy with a private citizen having the kind of power the Iron Man suit possesses."

"The same superiors who call Tony in the middle of the night to take care of threats to our security?" Charlotte laughed at the look of surprise on his face. "I'm not a fool, Jim; I know how the game is played." She shook her head. "And at the same time, I can see why they'd have grounds for concern."

Nodding, he said, "As long as Tony doesn't do anything tabloid worthy, keeps it low key, I can ward them off. But Charlotte, him going back to Afghanistan, publically, however noble his intent, that won't fly."

She kneaded her temple, a reaction to both stress and the nearing presence of another Immortal. "I'll go to L.A., talk to Tony, make him see that this isn't the time. But if I can't convince him, then I need to go too, Jim. He's going to need someone by his side." She was worried about Tony, his mental state, and wouldn't let him go back to that place alone.

"Agreed, but I have faith in you; I've seen you talk Tony down before."

"But not when the stakes were so high," she pointed out.

"No, and I'm sorry I'm dumping this on you, but you're the only one I can turn to this time, so thank you, Charlotte." The relief in his voice was obvious.

"I always have your back, Jim, you know that."

Nodding, he sat back, looking at her sidelong. "So, an Aston Martin. How come I don't get a car?"

"You'd have to look better in heels and a short skirt," she replied teasingly.

"And I'd have to shave my legs," he pointed out.

Charlotte laughed, the first laughter in what seemed like weeks. "At a minimum!"

"Hey, you know I can't give you a car, but anytime you want up in an F-18 again, I'm your guy!"

"Don't tell Tony, but that's the best offer I've had in a while." She flashed him an impish grin.

"And I have a cool uniform – I know chicks dig it." He made a valiant attempt to emulate Tony's 'on the prowl' persona, which sent Charlotte into a fit of giggles. He tried to look affronted, but failed as he started to chuckle. "Maybe it needs work," he admitted.

She leaned over, kissing him on the cheek. "You don't need any work at all, Jim."

"More of Charlotte's friends," Methos said snidely from behind them. "I thought we could talk, but I see I should have made an appointment with your social secretary."

So it had been Methos. Of course, it would have to be, right? She sighed inwardly. This day just kept getting better and better. She wondered how much of their conversation he'd heard, and then decided she just didn't care. As she introduced the two men, Rhodey gave Methos an appraising once over.

It was obvious Methos wasn't in the mood for social niceties. "When you're done," he said pointedly, dropping into a nearby chair.

Jim's hand on her shoulder stopped the angry response forming on her lips. "I need to get back."

"I'll walk you out."

As they crossed the lawn, he glanced back at Methos. "Kind of see where Tony's coming from," he told her softly.

She winced. "Jim, I'm sorry, there's no excuse for his rudeness, but this is my fault. I kept secrets; from him; he has a right to be angry."

"To err is human, to forgive divine, remember? And if he really does love you...."

"I think forgiveness is going to be in short supply for the foreseeable future," she said sadly.

They reached the gate. "Just remember you have friends who care what happens, okay? And that we're only a call away." He kissed her cheek. "I'll talk to you later."

Charlotte shut the gate behind him, squaring her shoulders, working up the strength to face Methos again. In the cold light of day, she regretted the things she'd said in the heat of anger, worse, even if Methos could forgive that, she still hadn't told him about Tony having him investigated. That bit of information had not made it into their knock down drag out of the night before. She knew it would be the final nail in the coffin of their relationship. Well, there was no point in delaying the inevitable.

Going back to where Methos sat, she stood in front of him, arms crossed tightly over her chest. "There was no need for you to be rude. Jim's...."

"I know who he is," Methos interrupted. "The internet is an amazing thing. Galas, Presidential dinners, Monte Carlo, Paris, Vegas; wherever the rich and famous are. And what a handsome couple you and Stark make – all the tabloids say so. To think, if only I'd known you were a celebrity, I could have Googled you and not wasted time searching through musty old Watcher chronicles!"

"Or maybe you just weren't that interested in finding me," she pointed out acidly. Her vow to herself to not let anger overtake her again fell to the wayside.

He narrowed his eyes, "Maybe I wasn't at that," he agreed with a tilt of his head. "The couture gowns, and all the jewels you're decked out in in those photos..., tell me, do you get to keep them, or do you have to give them back when he's done with you?"

He might as well have slapped her, because his words were like a physical blow. She wasn't angry anymore; this was a place so far past anger, that the only thing remaining was the bitter dregs of loss and regret for once upon a time when there had been love and joy.

She raised her chin, holding his gaze, refusing to give him the satisfaction of seeing her distress. "I'll be at the winery for the rest of the day, that will give you time to remove your belongings from the house. And one more thing, Tony had you investigated. Rather, he had Matthew investigated. Your cover is intact, he took you at face value; something I should have done." She didn't give him time to respond as she swiftly departed the garden.

Real Friends Help You Drink Tequila

Methos threw his duffle into the corner of Duncan's living room with a snarl. Joe Dawson gave Duncan a look before both men turned their attention to the new arrival.

"What's going on, Methos?" Duncan MacLeod asked as Methos dropped into an easy chair across from where the two other men sat on the couch.

"It's over, that's what's going on," Methos bit out.

Duncan sat up straight. "Over? I thought you were going to talk to Charlotte? Not walk out!"

"That was before one of her boyfriend's goons tried to pay me off!"

"You're kidding?" Joe leaned forward. "So just how much are you worth?"

Methos snorted. "Seven figures."

Joe made a low whistle. "I have always said that you are one huge pain in the ass, old man. Seems like Stark has the dough to match."

"This isn't funny, Joe!"

"Just sayin' is all." He waved his hands at the irate ancient Immortal. "So that's it then? You just call it quits, even though your lady had nothing to do with it?"

"Nothing...?" Methos sputtered. "Come on, Joe, you can't honestly believe that a man would make that kind of payout for anything less than a lover?"

"What we believe isn't the issue, Methos," Duncan pointed out, "it's what you believe – or choose to believe."

"And what exactly is that supposed to mean?"

"Only that you didn't give Charlotte a chance to disavow what Stark did. You convicted her with no opportunity for her to defend herself," the Scots Immortal remonstrated.

"Not that it's any of your business, but when I finally did get to see her, she was with Stark's military shadow, Rhodes. It was obvious from their conversation that she had no intention of choosing me over Stark!"

"Choosing you?" Duncan threw his hands up in disbelief. "Why should she have to? Did she make you choose between her and Joe?" He didn't give Methos a chance to reply. "No, she didn't! She accepted him as a part of your life, despite her antipathy for Watchers!"

"It isn't the same thing! I wasn't sleeping with Joe!" Methos practically shouted.

"Hey, man, you just ain't my type," Joe said with a smirk, trying to diffuse the situation.

Duncan looked at Methos intently. "I'm your friend, Methos, and as your friend, I think you're making a hell of a mistake. You're throwing away the woman you claim to love out of wounded pride, and I think that you'll come to regret it. She isn't the girl that was the wife of your best friend, or your student, or even the woman you were going to marry century before last anymore. She has a life of her own, just like you. The question is – are you willing to try and fit into her life here and now, the way she's tried to fit into yours?" Getting up, he shoved his hands into his pockets, shrugging. "Think about it, Methos," he said before leaving the room.

The silence stretched, Joe just looking at Methos with a 'know it all' gleam in his eyes.

"What?" Methos demanded. "Just say it, Joe, I know you're dying to!"

"Nah, man, just thinking is all." He shifted in his chair, getting comfortable, not revealing what exactly those thoughts were.

"Joe!"

"Okay, okay !" The 'know it all' look spread to his lips as he grinned at his friend. "I was just thinking that I was looking at the world's oldest fool. Damned impressive, I gotta tell you."

"Ha ha," Methos said sourly.

"How many of us get a second chance, let alone a third?" He jabbed a finger at Methos. "Seems to me, you're one damned lucky bastard. And yet here you are, throwing it all away because you're jealous."

Methos exploded out of his chair. "I am not jealous!"

"You do a hell of a good impression, old man." He chuckled, obviously enjoying needling the oldest Immortal. "It's that," the humour was gone, "or you have an aversion to being happy, and that, my friend, would be a crying shame."

Charlotte killed the engine, resting her forehead against the leather-wrapped steering wheel of the Aston Martin Tony had given her the day before. Day before? It seemed like years. After leaving Methos in the garden, she'd gone through her day on autopilot, and by the time the sun had set, the mocking emptiness of her house was more than she could bear. So she'd thrown clothes in a suitcase, gotten in the car, and had started driving. Though she hadn't had any real destination in mind when she'd started, she wasn't really surprised when she'd found herself on One heading into Malibu.

"Ma'am?" the voice of Happy Hogan, Tony's Man Friday said through the open window, making her jump, startled. "Are you okay?"

Pasting on a smile, she replied, "Fine, I'm fine, Happy. Just a little tired after the drive."

He nodded, but didn't seem to really believe her, opening the driver side door and holding out a hand. "Jarvis told me you were out here. Haven't told the boss; figured he'd like the surprise."

She took his hand, letting him help her from the car. "Thank you. He's in then?"

"Sure is; he and Miss Potts arrived just before you."

"I know the way," she told him when he made to follow her to the house, "I don't want to be a bother."

"You're never a bother, Miss Sparrow," he told her sincerely. "I'll bring in your luggage."

"Oh, I won't be staying, Happy," she said as she started up the steps to the imposing front door of Tony Stark's Point Dume mansion. "But thank you."

Happy watched her mount the steps, shook his head and said softly, "Whatever you say ma'am." Then he smiled and popped the trunk.

As she waited for Jarvis to announce her, she mused on the irony of the situation. Tony was at the crux of her current distress, and yet, at the same time, he was one of her dearest friends; the kind of friend you went to when you got dumped. Someone who would help you get blinding drunk and let you cry on their shoulder. In the end, that friendship trumped all. This life was comforting in its familiarity, and she wanted it back. Maybe her reunion with Methos had only been a momentary blip, one that was never meant to last. But Methos was gone now, and her life could get back to normal. That was for the best, wasn't it?

The door was pulled open, surprisingly enough by Tony himself. "Why are you hanging around out here, Birdie?" he scolded. "You could have just come in."

"Because I have manners," she informed him with a sniff.

Grinning, he took her arm, pulling her inside. "Yeah, yeah, you're a real Emily Post." He cocked his head. "So what brings you to my doorstep?"

"I need a reason?" she asked, repeating his words from yesterday.

"No, of course not," he said as they walked down the steps into the main living area of the mansion. "But just dropping in is more my thing."

"I...", she shook her head, "I don't know, Tony, I just needed to see you." Now that she was here, she didn't even know where to begin. She sank down onto the leather sofa, staring out

the floor to ceiling windows, her heart feeling as dark as the night beyond the glass. "There are things we need to discuss."

He sat next to her, arm across her shoulders, his extended right leg touching hers, and she let herself lean against him. "What's wrong, Birdie?"

"I need you to cancel the Afghanistan trip, please, Tony." She tilted her head so she could look at him. "It's too dangerous right now, and in the remote areas that need help the most, the situation on the ground will make it impossible."

"Is this you talking, or the boyfriend?" He sounded unhappy, but not as much as she expected.

"Me, Tony – you shouldn't have to ask." Pulling away, she slid down the sofa to sit against the armrest. "Matthew is no longer a factor; we're not together anymore." She looked at her hands curled in her lap. "We had a fight, about you, and...it's over."

"I'm sorry."

She shook her head. "No, you're not."

"Okay, I'm not." She raised an eyebrow, and he hurriedly added, "I'm not sorry he's gone, Birdie, but I am sorry he hurt you. You deserve so much more and you're better off with him out of your life. Better to find out now, right?"

She only shrugged, not answering.

He looked at her intently, absently rubbing at the area around the RT implanted in his chest with his fingertips. "We'll postpone the trip, you're right. And it isn't fair for me to paint a bullseye on you."

She sighed softly, more than a little surprised at his acquiescence, but too grateful to question it. "Thank you, Tony." Leaning forward, she smiled. "But I will take you up on your offer."

His lips curled into a lascivious smile. "I've been waiting to hear those words for seven years, sweetheart."

"And you're going to keep waiting," she shot back with a grin.

"Kill joy."

Behind her, she heard the tap of heels on the marble floor, and so did Tony, who turned around to greet the new arrival. "Pepper, just in time for Birdie's big announcement." He waved her to a chair across from the sofa.

The two women greeted each other as Pepper Potts, Tony's executive assistant, sat down, her ever present notebook computer already sitting open on her lap.

Charlotte had thought about Tony's idea for a charitable division of Stark Industries, and the more she'd thought about it, the more it appealed to her. Yes, there were risks, taking on so

high profile a position, but the good that she could do with the resources SI offered far outweighed them. "I'll head up your division, Tony; it would be my honour."

Tony's face lit up like a Christmas tree. "You won't regret it, Birdie, I promise! Pepper, meet with legal tomorrow, and get the ball rolling. And set up a press conference; I want this to make a splash."

"Will do," Pepper said, typing into her notebook. "I think we should book the two of you on some of the financial shows too; Neil Cavuto maybe?"

"Perfect!" Tony warmed to the idea. "We should get Ez down here to do an exclusive photo op. What do you think, Birdie?"

"He'd be more than happy to do it."

"I already have some ideas on how to wrap this into the Expo. We're going to do amazing things, you just wait!"

"I have no doubts in that regard," Charlotte said with a warm smile. "I know we can make a difference, and I'll do my utmost not to let you down, Tony."

"Letting me down isn't a possibility, Birdie. This is going to be good for you too; you have a lot more to offer than running a winery. The success of the Black Foundation proves that. It's time for you to step into the limelight." He cocked an eyebrow. "And I think you'll find the compensation more than adequate."

"No, Tony, I'm not doing this for the money and I won't accept any," she said firmly. "Take the money and donate it to charity, or roll it back into the division for special projects or something, I don't care; but I won't take a cent of it."

"Come on now, Birdie, no one, least of all me, expects you to do this for free ."

"Those are my terms, Tony, take them or leave them."

He sighed long-sufferingly. "Fine! But you will let the company provide you with a place to live when you're here." He waved a hand at her as she started to object. "Nope, this one you're going to agree to. I want you somewhere with top of the line security, and where you can entertain. You know that's part of the gig."

She wrinkled her nose. "Fine."

"Come on, Birdie, the face!"

Her succinct reply was to stick her tongue out at him. Then she held out her right hand. "Do we have a deal, Mr. Stark?"

"We do, Miss Sparrow." He took her proffered hand in his, shaking it. "Though I think we should seal it with a kiss," he pulled her a little closer, eyes gleaming, "don't you?"

"Incorrigible," she muttered, but leaned in, brushing her lips across his. "There."

He flashed a saucy grin, releasing her hand. "Pepper, this calls for champagne!"

"No champagne for me, Tony. I still need to drive myself to a hotel, and I'm tired. Rain check?"

"Hotel? You're staying here," he stated.

"No, Tony, I'm not. Please, I need some alone time, okay?"

"How about a compromise? You stay here tonight, and Pepper will book you into the Montage tomorrow. Come on," he wheedled, "it's been months since you've visited, and we need to celebrate!"

"We could always celebrate and Happy could drive me to my hotel later," Charlotte pointed out with a smirk.

"Any other night, and I'd agree, but tonight is Happy's weaving class. You wouldn't want him to miss it, would you?" Tony looked at her sadly.

Charlotte giggled, and Pepper grinned. "Shall I check you in to the Montage tonight, Charlotte?" Pepper asked, at least giving her the appearance of having a choice in the matter.

Charlotte gave in gracefully. "Tomorrow will be fine, Virginia; heaven forbid Happy miss his weaving class! And if I can impose upon you to go shopping with me tomorrow? I didn't bring a 'new Stark Industries division press conference' outfit with me," she said wryly.

"It would be my pleasure." Pepper tapped her finger against her chin. "In fact, there's a new designer who's set up shop in the Fashion District; I think you'll love her."

"That sounds perfect!"

"If you two are going shopping, I guess industry will come to a grinding halt till at least lunch," Tony told them teasingly.

"At least," Charlotte agreed. "Now, I think you promised me champagne?"

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The Future Begins With Mac & Cheese

Chapter Notes

Wasn't expecting Natasha/Natalie to want a piece of the story, but there you go. And Tony has a real fondness for macaroni and cheese - who knew?

Pepper and Charlotte piled bags into the trunk of the Aston Martin, both women satisfied with the results of their morning's shopping. Charlotte had insisted Pepper let her buy a few outfits for her as thanks for all Pepper's help, both now and in the past. It hadn't taken a whole lot of convincing, as Pepper was as much of a clothes horse as Charlotte was.

"I can't believe we bought all that in two hours," Pepper said as she and Charlotte slid into the car. While both women loved to shop, they also led very busy lives, with no time for lingering. They'd made their choices with an almost brutal efficiency.

"It helped that you called ahead and had them open early for us. A very handy fringe benefit of working for Tony." Charlotte giggled. "And the breakfast they provided was delicious!"

"It really was good," Pepper agreed as Charlotte pulled into traffic. "The dress you bought for the press conference this afternoon is perfect, the pumps are show stoppers."

"Not to mention all the other clothes you seem to think I'll be needing." Pepper had insisted Charlotte get enough outfits to wear for upcoming interviews and photo ops.

"You will need them, I promise you; not to mention Ez is doing that photo spread tomorrow, so you need enough for him to pick and choose from. You know what he's like," she pointed out.

If you only knew. What she said was, "I suppose you're right." His photo shoots were anything but a democracy – more like a benevolent dictatorship, where Ezra was absolute ruler. If the renowned Edward Zachary Sanbourne agreed to photograph you, it was on his terms, and he expected absolute acquiescence to his wishes. In fact, Charlotte wouldn't be at all surprised if he showed up tomorrow with his own collection of outfits for her to wear.

It didn't take long for them to reach Stark Industries, where Charlotte was boggled to discover she had her own parking space. "This is overkill," she muttered.

Pepper laughed. "All part of the package. Speaking of, you're going to need a staff. Are you going to want Lily to act as your P.A. while you're here?" Lily was Charlotte's assistant at the winery.

Shaking her head, Charlotte turned off the ignition. "No, I need her to keep things running smoothly at the winery. It's almost harvest and I need her there."

"No problem, I'll find you someone then, if that's okay?"

"I would be so grateful, Virginia! But I hate to impose on you more than I have. I know how busy you are already." Charlotte felt more than a little guilty of all the time Pepper had had to spend on her.

"It isn't an imposition," Pepper replied firmly. "Part of my job is to make what's important to Tony a reality. And this is important."

"Can I tell you something?" Pepper nodded. "I'm terrified; of taking on this position, of failing, and the press conference.... I feel like someone's taken my stomach and tied it into knots. I don't know if I can do this, Virginia." How stupid was it that a woman who faced down others of her kind with a sword, battling to the death, could be so afraid of a press conference?

"You can, I know you can; and so does Tony. And you've been in front of the press before. Every time you attend an event with Tony, you're mobbed by them," she pointed out.

Charlotte smiled crookedly. "That's different. I'm not getting up on a stage and talking to potentially millions of people."

"You'll be fine," Pepper insisted. "Now come on, we have a lot to get done today."

"It's going to be a good harvest," Duncan told Methos as he fingered a bunch of grapes on the vine in front of him.

Methos only grunted in reply, his thoughts obviously elsewhere.

"You could call her," Duncan said.

"It's better this way."

"Is that what you think?"

"Yes, it is, so butt out."

"Just tell me one thing; why did you think you loved her?"

Methos looked at him sharply. "I didn't think – I did love her."

Nodding, Duncan said, "But you don't now. Just like that, it's over, not worth trying to salvage. I get it."

"Oh, I doubt that," Methos replied with a low laugh.

"Then why don't you explain it to me, Methos? What was it that drew you to her in the first place?"

Tilting his head back, looking up at the sky, Methos sighed. "She wanted to live, Mac, she fought death with everything she had. If you could have seen her then.... When Jack brought me to the Pearl, and I saw her lying there, wracked with fever and infection. The absolute agony that I caused her when I had to clean out the wound on her back, digging out pieces of wood from the shattered mast she'd been thrown onto; again and again, till she passed out from the pain. And the days passed, but she kept fighting. I was tempted, Mac, more than once, to end it, plunge my dagger into her heart and release her. But I could fight for her no less than she fought for herself. She deserved a real life, a mortal life, before the Game claimed her."

Methos began to walk, Duncan following in silence.

"You could call him," Pepper said, looking at the cell phone Charlotte was staring at in her hand.

They were sitting at a table in the SI employee dining room, waiting for Tony to join them for an early lunch. There were no executive dining rooms at Stark Industries; everyone from the CEO to the gardeners ate in the same vast dining complex.

Startled, Charlotte dropped the phone into her purse, looking embarrassed. "No, I can't."

"I'm sorry," Pepper said. It seemed like she was going to say more, but she changed her mind.

"Me too. But the reality was that our lives didn't fit together and we wanted things from each other that we couldn't give. It's better this way." Charlotte wondered how many times she'd have to tell herself that to believe it. Anger and heartbreak warred for the upper hand, her inner turmoil as complicated as the man who had caused it.

Their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of Tony, who dropped into an empty chair between the two women. "When's the fashion show, Birdie?" He leaned back in his chair, winking at Charlotte.

"In your dreams."

"I have great dreams," he said suggestively. "I should tell you about them some time."

"Please, don't." Charlotte tried to sound disapproving, but she couldn't quite keep the smile off her lips. Tony had an uncanny ability to get past her best intentions and always had.

"About time you got here; I'm starving."

He gave her a look. "When aren't you?"

Pepper choked back laughter as Charlotte smacked Tony on the leg. "Consider your next words very carefully, Mr. Stark," she warned her friend.

Deciding discretion was indeed the better part of valour, Tony slapped his hands together. "So who's up for mac and cheese? I'm telling you, Birdie, people want to work here because SI mac and cheese is legendary."

"Is that a fact?" Charlotte asked dryly.

"Absolutely! Right, Pepper?"

Pepper shook her head. "Whatever you say, Mr. Stark."

"If you'll sign here, ma'am."

Charlotte nodded, signing the document where Natalie indicated. After lunch, Pepper had delivered her to legal, leaving her in the seemingly very capable hands of Natalie Rushman. Glancing over at the stunning redhead, Charlotte felt just a tweak of envy. She was gorgeous, and by comparison, Charlotte felt like a pumpkin in a rose garden. The woman radiated a heady mix of mystery, sensuality, and utter competence.

"And here." As Charlotte's pen scraped over the document, she said, "I'll make sure these are messengered to Mr. Tanner's office this afternoon."

"Thank you, Ms. Rushman." Between one breath and the next, the presence of another Immortal made itself known, and her pen froze in mid-signature for just a moment before she continued on.

"Are you all right, ma'am?" Natalie asked.

She was the sharp one, wasn't she? Charlotte thought sourly. Resisting the urge to scan the area for whomever it might be she was sensing, she kept her gaze on the paper in front of her. "Fine, fine, Ms. Rushman. Just forgot how to sign my own name," she said with forced humour. "You know how it is. There, all done." She pushed the document to the other woman. "Is that it?"

"You're all set. Let me walk you back up to Mr. Stark's office."

"No, that won't be necessary. I know the way." Charlotte waved her back to her seat. "Thank you for all your help, Ms. Rushman, I appreciate it."

"My pleasure, Ms. Sparrow," Natalie murmured as Charlotte moved swiftly from her office.

He was the one, of that, Charlotte had no doubt. Warily, she approached her quarry, to where he waited for her in the hall. Not tall, he was broad shouldered, with a barrel-like chest that wasn't hidden by the pale blue jumpsuit he was wearing. His lightly waved chestnut hair was pulled back into a small, tight ponytail at the base of his neck, and his skin was tanned to nearly bronze, a stark contrast to his pale gray eyes. Eyes that measured her as she stopped in front of him.

She took a steadying breath, hoping against hope that the man before her wasn't looking for a challenge. Glancing at the security badge he had clipped to his pocket, she saw that he was an electrical engineer. *Ingo Mannus*, the name on the badge read. "Mr. Mannus."

"Miss Sparrow." The man made a slight bow. "I hardly expected Mr. Stark's lady friend to be so *special*. He had a slight accent, one that Charlotte was unable to place.

"We do show up in all sorts of places," she said lightly, still having no inkling of the other Immortal's intentions.

"Indeed we do. And to think that my only plans up till now had been a beer with my coworkers after my shift ended. Who knew that the reality would be so much more stimulating?" His smile was cold, though his eyes were even colder.

Adrenaline hit her bloodstream as his intentions were made clear. "Is that how it's to be then?" She cocked her head. "I would be missed if we do this now."

"There's no hurry. In fact, I prefer the anticipation."

"Where?" she asked sharply.

"There's an abandoned hanger at the far edge of the facility."

She looked at him in disbelief. "Here? But the security...."

"No need to concern yourself; my position has certain advantages when it comes to making sure some things go unseen." He gave her directions and a time for their duel. "Be there, at the appointed time. I will take care of our...privacy." He laughed, low in his throat. "And don't even think of running. As the say, I know where you live. It would be a shame if those close to you died in your place."

"I am no coward," she hissed. "I have never run from a fight, and I have no intention of starting now!"

He bowed again. "I am pleased to hear it. My apologies if I offended your honour, it was not my intention." Before she could respond, he strode away.

Natasha watched Charlotte and Mannus unseen from her vantage point. She wished she could hear what they were saying, but all she could go by was body language. Whatever it was that was going on, it wasn't good – that was obvious. She quickly slid around the corner as Mannus walked past her, and she leaned against the wall, trying to decide exactly what it was she should tell her boss.

Shaking her head, she went back into her office and flipped open her cellphone; it was time to report in.

All In

Methos slid onto the barstool next to Duncan, nodding his thanks as Joe placed a bottle of beer in front of him. He didn't say anything, just picked distractedly at the label on the bottle, a million miles away. Duncan glanced at Joe, who shrugged.

"Quiet this afternoon," Duncan commented, looking around the nearly deserted bar area of Standish & Black.

"Yeah," Joe agreed. "It'll pick up in an hour or so."

"Proprietors around?" Duncan asked casually.

Joe shook his head. "Ezra had business in Manhattan, and Charlotte is in L.A." Methos looked up at Joe's words, not hiding his surprise. It seemed that he had no idea Charlotte was gone. "Drove down last night."

"How long will she be gone?" Methos was picking at the label again.

"No idea, old man." Joe looked at him thoughtfully. "You know, you could call her."

"If one more person...." He threw up his hands in disgust. Then he shook his head, shoulders slumping. "After the things I said yesterday, she won't be answering my calls for the foreseeable future."

Joe started to reply, but Methos was no longer paying attention to him, his eyes now on the TV screen above the bar, reaching for the remote to turn up the volume. Duncan and Joe looked up to see what had captured Methos' interest. The commentator's voice said, *This was the scene earlier today at Stark Industries, where Tony Stark announced the creation of a new division. Dedicated to improving life in the developing world by applying cutting edge technology, this new venture will be headed up by longtime Stark confidante, businesswoman Charlotte Sparrow.*

The screen switched to a close-up view of the outdoor press conference where Stark was speaking. "No technology, however advanced, can affect change without humanity, and a heart that truly cares. And no one I know has a bigger heart than the woman I am about to present to you, my good friend, Charlotte Sparrow." Stark held out an arm, extending his hand to bring Charlotte to the podium, stepping back to stand slightly behind her.

"Thank you," she said over the welcoming applause. "Thank you."

Methos chuckled, and the other men looked at him in surprise. Methos smiled in response, explaining, "That's pure Charlotte, she never does anything by half measures; it's all in or nothing." He looked back at the screen, saying quietly, "They're right; they do make a handsome couple."

"Methos," Duncan began.

"It's okay, Mac." He shook his head. "Seeing them together like this; he's proud of her, you can see it in his eyes. He believes in her. And she cares - so much so that she's willing to risk the publicity, exposure. It's not just what I thought it was," he admitted. He turned his attention back to what Charlotte was saying. The camera had pulled back, sweeping over the gathered audience of SI employees and the press. Then he sat straight up, his expression darkening as he hit the pause on the remote.

"What's wrong?" Duncan asked.

Methos shook his head, not answering as he rewound the footage, looking for something, hitting pause once more when he seemed to find it. "Damn it," he snarled.

"What's wrong?" Duncan repeated, more urgently this time.

Pointing the remote at the screen, he said, "Istvaeone."

Now Joe's face bore a similar expression to Methos'. "Istvaeone? What the hell is he doing at a Stark Industries press conference?"

"Working in maintenance, it would appear," he replied acidly.

"Would someone like to tell me what the hell is going on?" Duncan demanded impatiently.

"Marcomanni chieftain, first death, as near as we can tell, around 50 AD," Joe filled Duncan in on what he knew. "There's a class on him at the academy. I take it you've met?" Joes asked Methos.

"Aquileia, 167."

"And?" Joe prompted.

"And Marcus Aurelius' army interrupted, okay?" He exploded off the barstool, pacing around. "What's he doing these days?"

Joe was already bringing up the Watcher database on his laptop. "This isn't good," he muttered as he read.

"What?" Methos asked, that one word full of dread.

"We don't have a Watcher on him, dude's into some bad stuff: Al Qaeda," he paused, "Ten Rings."

Methos looked at Joe sharply. "Ten Rings? That's the group that..."

"That kidnapped Stark," Joe finished. "Yeah, the very same."

"Damn it, damn it!" Methos shouted, slapping his hand down on the bar. "I need to be there."

"This is a replay, Methos. Whatever's happened has happened," Duncan said gently.

"You think I don't know that?" Methos turned on the Highlander. "If I hadn't said the things I did, had given her a chance, she wouldn't even be there!" There was nothing they could say in response to that. "I need to know where she's staying, I need to find her. Know that she's okay."

"I know where she is," a voice said from behind them. "What's happened?" Chris Tanner asked as he joined the men at the bar.

Duncan explained the situation to Charlotte's godson. The younger Watcher's face paled at what he learned. "She's good, she can beat him." For all the confidence in the declaration, there was a note of question in Chris's voice.

Methos didn't immediately answer, deep in thought. Finally, he nodded. "Yes," he said quietly, then louder, "Yes; I was her teacher," he said with a touch of smugness. Despite the seriousness of the situation, the others couldn't repress a smile. "Now where is she, Chris?"

Natalie watched, entranced, the unfolding battle before her. Whatever she'd been expecting when she'd followed Charlotte to the abandoned dirigible hangar at the edge of the Stark Industries airfield, it wasn't this. She's been briefed on the existence of Immortals, but until now, it had been an abstract concept. And never in a million years would she have pegged Stark's girlfriend as one of them. She choked back a gasp as the duel ended with one final sword stroke, silence falling like a cloak, a silence that was swiftly displaced by the sound on an oncoming storm.

Charlotte collapsed to her knees, dropping the short blade she held in her right hand, and the sword she held in her left. It had worked, she thought numbly, just as he'd said it would. *It's a last resort*, his voice floated from somewhere in the past. *Use it only when you're certain that death awaits. A perilous move, but one that will save you if performed correctly.* "Thank you," she whispered. It was a whisper that turned into a scream of agony as the Quickening of Ingo Mannus tore through her.

Natalie waited until Charlotte's car was out of sight before entering the hangar. Surveying the scene before her, she turned Mannus's body over. She hissed, recognizing all too well the tattoo on the dead man's chest. This was all she needed, having to tell her boss that a Ten Rings agent had been operating right under her nose. This was not a good day.

Taking a firm grip on herself, Charlotte pushed open the door to Tony's office. All she wanted to do was flee, to gather her wits in solitude. But that wasn't an option; she had to act as if all was well, not draw suspicion to herself. Not give any clue that today, she'd killed a man. She'd cleaned up after the duel, changing back into the dress she'd been wearing earlier. Now it was time to meet with Tony, just as they'd arranged a few hours before. But she needed to be careful; Tony could read her so well. He'd know that something was wrong if she wasn't in total control. But control was something she was having trouble achieving; Mannus's Quickening was unsettling, disturbing. A strange sense of detachment settled over her as she walked into the room.

Fallout

Tony shoved the meter into his pants pocket, staring out of his office window. There was no getting around the fact that the palladium poisoning was progressing. At this rate, he'd be lucky to see another Christmas. There was something outrageously ironic about the fact that he'd survived his captivity, only to be slowly murdered by what had kept him alive. Usually, that sort of thing was something he appreciated, but this wasn't one of those times. And as much as he planned to go down fighting this until his dying breath, he also knew he had to plan for the future. Snorting, he shook his head. *My legacy.*

He only felt a little guilty about manipulating Charlotte into taking on the new charitable division of SI. He needed to have people he trusted in positions of power if, when, he was gone. As things proceeded, he had other plans ready to put into motion; this was just the beginning. His death would not mean the end of the company his father had started. While he didn't have any children - well, that he was aware of at least - he did have people in his life who were as close as any blood relations, and those were the people to whom he would entrust Stark Industries, and more importantly, the Iron Man technology, if the worst happened. His brooding thoughts were interrupted by a voice from behind him.

"If you're busy, I can come back," Charlotte said quietly.

Tony realized it wasn't the first time she'd tried to get his attention upon entering the room. "No, it's fine." He turned towards her.

She smiled. "Lost in your genius thinky thoughts?"

"Yeah, something like that." He really looked at her this time. There was a tightness around her eyes that was at odds with her light tone. Walking towards her, he asked, "Everything okay?"

For a moment, she seemed startled, then it was gone. "Yeah, I'm fine." She dropped her eyes.

Tony moved closer, standing right in front of her, knowing something wasn't quite right. Putting his hands on her shoulders, she stiffened, and he thought she'd pull away, but instead, she seemed to lean into his hold as she took a shuddering breath. "I don't believe you," he said softly, pulling her closer.

"It's been a long day," was all she said by way of explanation." She rested her forehead on his chest.

He breathed in her scent; it was like standing in a meadow after a thunderstorm, all vibrant green and dark moist earth with a hint of ozone. He could almost feel the tickle of the electricity. Without thinking, he wrapped his arms around her, drawing her against him. There was something different about this, though God only knew what it was. It wasn't as if he hadn't held her as close many times before. For two people who had never had sex, they had always had a tactile aspect to their relationship.

Now she was looking up at him, her ice blue eyes drawing him down, and he took a sharp breath. "Why do we do this to ourselves? Why do *I* do this?" she whispered. Her hands slipped up, palms flat against his chest.

'Birdie,' his voice caught. He was, for once, at a loss. The edge of her knuckles skimmed across the line of his jaw and he tried to find his voice. "What are you doing?" He had a pretty good idea, but this was Charlotte, his best friend - his best friend who had very carefully kept them 'just friends' for the last seven years.

Her laugh sounded like it belonged to someone else. "Always so many questions." Her lips hovered over his, the taste of her breath like a promise. And then, between one breath and the next, the promise was made real as she kissed him.

This could be the palladium poisoning, he thought, as the sensation of her lips against his seemed more of a fever dream than anything else. He tossed away that idea, grasping on to the here and now as her fingers dug into his upper arms with a steel-like grip. *That'll leave bruises*. Okay, granted, this was like one of his many fantasies, but this really was real.

"Men feel so much different than women," Tony thought her heard her say. Whoa, okay, that was another fantasy entirely, and he wasn't going there...not this time, at least.

There was a brief moment when he considered pulling away, but her lips trailing a path down his neck quickly drove away whatever chivalrous inclinations he might have had. He didn't have a 'bucket list', but if he was going to die, then didn't they deserve one shot at being more than just friends? It all spun away from him once he'd decided, his only thoughts now, if they even qualified as such, were what she felt like, what she would feel like, the anticipation of that moment gnawing at his gut. Her breath was hot against the hollow of his throat, his tie already gone, and his shirt mostly unbuttoned. He took her face in his hands, pulling her away from where her tongue was teasing along his collarbone, taking her lips with his. He wanted to taste her, melt into her till he knew every secret and every desire.

Both of them were breathing hard and she laughed that stranger's laugh again. "I'm tired of waiting," she told him.

So was he, but even if he hadn't been more than ready, the sensation of her fingertips brushing against the sensitized skin around the RT in his chest would have been his undoing. Swinging her into his arms, he carried her to the couch at the far end of his office, dropping her onto the smooth leather surface, quickly joining her. She gasped as his hands traveled along her thighs, pushing up the constraining fabric of her dress as he went. Arms snaking around his neck, she pulled him to her, her kiss almost painful in its aggressiveness. Her dress now up over her hips, he began his own exploration, the low sound she made against his mouth telling him that he was right on target.

Neither of them heard the door open, or anyone enter the office. But they did hear Pepper's sharp intake of breath and her rushed apology as she hastily exited, the door closing sharply behind her. He groaned, berating himself for not taking Charlotte to his place, or for at least not locking the damned door! He knew why he hadn't taken her home; afraid she'd change her mind if given the time to think about it. But how hard was locking a door? And now....

Damn it! Charlotte was as white a sheet, her hands across her mouth, looking as if she wasn't even sure where she was.

"Birdie," he reached for her, "I'm sorry. Come home with me, we can talk." *Talk, yeah sure, Stark, you wanna talk.* "This... it's going to fine."

But she was already pushing herself off the couch, straightening her clothes and her hair with an almost manic intensity. "I'm sorry, Tony, so sorry." She sounded as if she were going to cry and there was something desperate in her eyes. "I don't know if you can ever forgive me for what I've done." Before he could even form a response, she'd fled, running across the office and out the door.

Tony poured more scotch into his glass, slamming back the contents, frustration and anger twisting at him as he worked on getting drunk. In the past, he'd have gone looking for alternative female companionship, but that wasn't something he could do this time. The old Tony wouldn't have given it a second thought, but he wasn't that man anymore. Sometimes he wondered if that was a good thing.

"I hope you're happy with yourself," Pepper's voice said coolly from the doorway.

He grimaced; more fallout. "She started it." He didn't turn to look at her. *Yeah, you're a real prince, Stark.*

Snorting, she asked, "And you think that makes a difference?" She walked around to stand in front of him so he had no choice but to look at her. "You don't like sharing your toys, so you blew up her life, and then took advantage at her most vulnerable! That's low, even for you, Tony." She sounded more disappointed than angry, and that made it somehow worse.

"That isn't fair," he protested. "She's a big girl and can take care of herself." Okay, agreed, that was lame. Even if it were true. Pepper's charge hit a little too close to home, however much he didn't want to admit it. And while this certainly wasn't the first time he'd been caught *in flagrante delicto*, by Pepper even, it was the first time he could recall giving a damn. He was missing old Tony more and more by the minute.

"Is that why you sent Happy to pay off Matthew?" She shook her head. "It doesn't seem like you really believe she can take care of herself, does it?"

Startled, he tried to formulate some sort of defense to the accusation in her eyes. But all he came up with was, "Hogan has a big mouth."

"No, what he has is a conscience," she shot back. "After Charlotte showed up yesterday, he felt guilty and had to confess."

"I'm not going to apologize; the guy was bad news and he proved it."

"Proved it?" she said incredulously. "He turned your money down!"

He pointed a finger at her. "Only because he was holding out for a bigger payday," he said angrily, "but Birdie kicked him to the curb before he had a chance."

"You are unbelievable!"

He had to know. While he'd almost got himself to believe that his actions had been for the best, he was pretty sure Birdie's reaction, if she ever found out, would not be a good one. "What about you, Pepper? Are you going to tell her?"

"I thought about it," she admitted, "but in the end, I decided she didn't deserve anymore heartbreak."

Charlotte held it together all the way back to the hotel, handing her keys and a twenty dollar bill to the valet at the Montage Laguna Beach. "Park the car please, I'll send down for my packages later."

The valet nodded his understanding. "Thank you, ma'am."

All she wanted to do was reach the sanctuary of her suite, a hot bath, and a bottle of scotch. If this had been ninety odd years ago, she'd be looking for the nearest opium den. But she wasn't that Charlotte anymore; not that she was sure it was much of an improvement some days. Reaching her door, she pulled out the card key, but in an instant, her sanctuary became a trap. Before she could even begin to process that an Immortal lay in wait, the door was flung open.... by Methos.

It wasn't fair! Hadn't she been punished enough? Did he really need to follow her here so he could berate and belittle her one more time? She couldn't do this, not now, not for a very long time. "Methos, I can't...", she began.

What happened next seemed like a dream. "Thank God," he said, said as if he really meant it. Then he drew her into his arms, holding on to her as if she might disappear. "I am so sorry," he whispered at her ear.

She couldn't comprehend what was happening. Pulling away, she pushed past him, hurling her purse onto a nearby chair. "I don't understand," she said, holding onto control with a steel grip.

From behind her, he said, "If you'd checked your cell phone even once in the last few hours, you might." His voice held a hint of its usual teasing.

Whirling, she looked at him suspiciously, but he just shot her a smile and shrugged. But while his lips were smiling, his eyes weren't, and she wondered all over again why he was here. She

shook her head. "What do you want, Methos?"

He stepped closer. "What do I want, Charlotte?" He reached out, gently brushing a strand of hair off her cheek. "I want you to know how sorry I am, I want to never go through another day like this again, I want you to forgive me, and," he paused, taking another step towards her, "I want you."

She blinked, trying to comprehend what he was saying, guilt warring with joy as she realized he actually meant what he said. Her heart sank, and a feeling of loss pulled her down into dark depths. "Methos, there's something I have to tell you...."

He shook his head. "I already know; Ingo Mannus." At her look of confusion, he said, "The how doesn't matter now. I thought I'd lost you, and all I could think about was all the time we could have had together if I hadn't been such a fool."

"Not your fault, Methos, not all of it," she whispered. "I'm sorry." Her legs couldn't hold her up anymore and she sank into the chair she'd thrown her purse onto earlier. Wrapping her arms around herself tightly, she tried to stop the trembling that threatened to overwhelm her. "I'm scared. Scared I'm losing myself."

Methos sank to his knees, looking up at her. He took her face in his hands, searching her eyes. "You're there, love, I see no one else."

"I feel as if he's looking out of my eyes." Her voice cracked. "I've never felt this way after a Quickenings."

"He was old, Charlotte, but not strong enough to overwhelm who you are."

"How can you be sure?" She was desperate for his reassurance.

He stroked her hair. "Because I know you, and I knew him, and it would take far more than the Quickenings of Istvaeone for you to lose yourself. Do not doubt yourself, Charlotte. And always know that I never shall."

The Morning After

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Methos watched Charlotte sleep, finally, for now at least, peacefully. She had been agitated, muttering in a dialect that had disappeared from the Earth centuries before her birth. He had whispered reassurance in that same language, and she had settled, falling into a deeper sleep. But he wouldn't share the incident with her when she awoke; it would only serve to worry her unnecessarily. Some Quickenings were like eating takeaway Chinese that had sat in the fridge a few days too long, leaving one queasy and unsettled till it worked its way through your system. Unfortunately, there was no Pepto-Bismol for bad Quickenings. The only cure was time.

They hadn't had a chance to talk about what had happened after the duel, Methos warding off whatever Charlotte seemed driven to confess. Not that it was hard to figure out; cologne, expensive cologne, had scented her hair, her clothes, her skin. He didn't need to be a rocket scientist to know what must have happened between her and Stark in the wake of her victory against Mannus, the power of his Quickening still surging through her. The only thing Methos didn't know was how far it had gone. But he would deal with that later.

She had showered, and he'd ordered room service, but Charlotte had fallen asleep across the foot of the king bed before the food had even arrived. She'd barely stirred as he'd righted her, getting her under the duvet, head on a feather pillow. That had been some hours ago. Now, his eyes were becoming heavy, and he sighed, finally letting sleep claim him.

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He stirred, feeling her warmth against his chest, once more hearing her speak words from a language she never knew. That pulled him fully from sleep, but this time, she wasn't agitated; just the opposite in fact. He chuckled ruefully -- whoever the woman was, she had been very beautiful, and the encounter had gone on for some days. And it was apparent that this memory was one that Charlotte was enjoying a great deal.

Running his hand across her breast, down her stomach to rest on her hip, Methos kissed her lightly at first, but with more intensity as she returned his attentions. She sighed against his lips, her hands slipping up his chest, slowly waking. "You were dreaming," he said softly.

A blissful smile curved her lips as she opened her eyes, looking up at him. "I was," she agreed.

"And what did you dream about?" He ran his fingers up under her ink black hair, caressing her scalp.

She closed her eyes, breathing deeply. "There were swords and spears, the screams of horses and men. And the sun beat down upon us."

"And afterwards?" He held her tighter.

"After... after, there was always Setia. She loved me....loved him." A tear traced a path down her cheek, Methos wiping it away with a gentle fingertip. Opening her eyes, she took his hand in hers. "I'm glad I remember her, for him. He never forgot, not across all the centuries. He was not always the man I faced yesterday; she knew that, and now, so do I."

Methos cradled Charlotte against his chest, kissing the curve of her shoulder. "Any more doubts on who and where you are?" he asked just a little smugly. After the sex they'd just had, he was absolutely certain she would have no doubts.

She giggled. "None."

"Very pleased to hear it."

"Methos, you know I love you."

"I know you do."

Methos," she began only to be stopped by his lips on hers.

"Shhhh."

Pulling away, she shook her head, "There's something...."

"Something you have to tell me, yes," he interrupted. "You've been quite determined to confess from almost the moment you walked in." He sat up against the headboard, looking down at her. "I forgive you, Charlotte."

She pushed herself up, sitting cross-legged to face him. "But you don't even know..." her baffled reply began, only to be interrupted once more.

"Know what you did." He shrugged. "I think I have a pretty good guess."

"Stop that!"

"What?"

"Finishing my sentences!" The look of guilt on her face was quickly being replaced by one of irritation.

He grinned cheekily, pleased that he'd managed to snap her out of it. "Saves time." At her inarticulate sound of outrage, he added, "You're very fetching when you're naked and angry, you know."

Glaring, she pulled the bed sheet up, wrapping it around herself.

"That's a little extreme, isn't it?" he asked, his voice warm with amusement.

She threw herself back to lie on the bed, staring at the ceiling. "When you're done," she said pointedly.

Reaching for her hand, he squeezed it. "Let me tell you what I think happened." She responded by closing her eyes. "You took Mannus's head, his Quickening, and encountered Stark. And then you, with inhibitions in tatters after your duel, and Stark, I presume, with none at all," the last was said dryly, "proceeded to give in to an attraction that you've very purposefully sidestepped for the last seven years." He lay down next to her. "Charlotte, the only person angry at you for what happened is you."

"How can you say that?" she demanded. "I abused our friendship, used him because I knew I could!"

"And you think he minded?" Methos asked incredulously.

"That isn't the point!"

Sighing, he said, "Of course it wouldn't be to you."

She rolled off the bed, taking the sheet with her, wrapping it around her body as she began to pace.

Methos sat on the edge of the bed, watching in silence for a time before saying, "You're as bad as MacLeod. You hold yourself to an impossible standard, and then, when you have a moment of human frailty, you proceed to beat yourself over it far in excess of the actual sin." He grabbed her wrist, stopping her pacing. "You aren't a saint, Charlotte. You're human, you were emotionally vulnerable, and you had a moment of weakness. That's all."

She looked at him, disbelief written all over her face. "Are you kidding me?" She yanked her hand away. "Forty-eight hours ago, you thought I was the Whore of Babylon, and now...."

"She wasn't, you know, a whore, got a bad rap," he interjected. But he hastily shut up at the look of warning in her eyes.

"And now," she repeated, "I almost have sex with my best friend, and you're okay with it!"

"Almost? It was the one thing I wasn't sure about," he admitted.

"I can't take any of the credit for that; we were interrupted." She covered her face with her hands. "Oh, God, how can Virginia ever forgive me?"

"I always find that jewelry works well," he offered helpfully, attempting to lighten the atmosphere.

Charlotte began to laugh, laughter that swiftly became tears. This time, Methos didn't say anything, just drew her down onto the bed, gathering her in his arms, holding her till the tears stopped.

They had moved into the suite's living room, with its large bouquet of flowers, champagne, and chocolate dipped strawberries, courtesy of the management, and the handwritten note from the general manager welcoming Charlotte back to the hotel and promising anything she might desire during her stay. They sat on the loveseat in front of the gas log fireplace, having traded bed sheets for hotel spa robes, drinking the champagne, Charlotte eating the majority of the strawberries, while Methos polished off the now cold roast chicken from the room service he'd ordered previously. It was the middle of the night, but Charlotte supposed there would be no more sleep to be had for either of them.

Methos looked at her over the rim of the champagne glass at his lips, his expression making plain he wanted to say something, but wasn't sure if he should. Leaning back against the arm rest, she sighed. "Spit it out."

He shook his head slightly, a crooked smile forming. "It might have been better if you had slept with him," he finally said. "Don't get me wrong, I'm glad you didn't, but for you.... Sometimes it's just better to...." he trailed off.

"Beard the lion in its den?"

"Yeah, something like that." He took another swallow of champagne. "You were right, about Byron," he admitted. "There are those that burn so brightly that we can't resist falling into their orbit, even knowing that the result will be like moths to the flame. Maybe I was projecting."

"Maybe?" she asked with one expressively raised eyebrow.

"Fine, yes, I let my own past colour my feelings, and throw in a little jealousy on the side," he rubbed at his temple, "I behaved badly, and I'm sorry."

She rested her hand on his knee. "Not sorrier than I am. The things I said to you, I wish I could take them all back, and that I had told you about Tony weeks ago."

"Why didn't you?" he asked quietly.

"I almost did, I was planning to, but you saw his photo that day in my office, and after what you had to say on the subject of Tony Stark, well, I chickened out." Drawing her knees up to

her chest, she wrapped her arms around her legs. "I kept waiting for the right time, a time that never came," she finished sadly.

"Okay, we both wish we'd done things differently, so I'll ask what I should have three days ago: why Stark? What strange course of events transpired for you to be best friends with the most notorious playboy on the planet?" His question burned with curiosity.

Charlotte laughed, the sound like bells in the quiet of the predawn. "I ask myself that frequently!" Then she shook her head. "He's more than that, much more. You know what they call him? The da Vinci of our time. And it's true. You spoke of those that burn bright; Tony burns brighter than anyone I have ever met. Yes, there's the women, and the parties, the booze, but those are more of a symptom. The Tony that's my best friend is...well, he makes me laugh, he's spoiled and compassionate, a genius and a lost little boy, one of the most powerful men in the world, yet he sits in my kitchen and eats pie like it's going out of style." A sadness brushed past her eyes. "And then I thought I'd lost him, that day when I was told he'd been taken. As the weeks passed, hope that he was still alive slipped away, drop by drop. And the man who came back from that place...that man I wanted to draw into my arms and ward off the world."

"I wish I'd been with you then," he said sincerely. "No one should go through that alone."

"I wish you had been too." Then she smiled, chasing away the dark. "And now, I have to deal with a superhero. I'm a glutton for punishment!"

Chuckling, he asked, "How did you meet?"

"Ezra - he tried to set me up with Tony at a party in Monte Carlo seven years ago. It didn't quite work out as planned."

"Oh?"

"Ezra thought I was all work and no play and needed a man in my life. He believed Tony would be a sure bet, but it was a bet he lost. However, it wasn't a total loss from my perspective. My life became much more interesting, and I've loved every minute."

"I guess I'll get to witness the dynamic for myself in the near future," he said, resignation tingeing his voice.

Rolling her eyes, Charlotte drained the last of her champagne. "And you won't like him, and believe me, the feeling will be mutual. Assuming he ever even speaks to me again." She had no idea how she was going to face Tony in the morning, and could only hope he could forgive her. Despite Methos' words, she couldn't let go of the guilt she felt over what had happened.

"He will - forgiveness comes with love," Methos said softly.

Nodding, she picked up her cell phone from the side table next to her, looking at all the missed calls. From Ezra, Chris, Duncan, and from Methos. All of them trying to contact her after seeing the press conference. Methos had told her he'd already let everyone know she

was safe, and for that she was grateful; she hadn't been up to talking to anyone. As if on cue, strains of *Turn on Your Heartlight* began to emanate from the device in her hand and she took a sharp breath, just staring at it. Methos' snort of amusement broke her from the spell.

"Neal Diamond? Seriously?"

Shrugging with a wry grin on her lips, she said, "It annoys Tony."

"Are you going to answer it?"

Biting her lip, she pressed the answer button on the screen and raised the phone to her ear.

"I'm sorry," they said simultaneously, making them both laugh in relief.

"You don't hate me?" she asked, not able to keep the tremor of fear from her voice.

"That's stupid talk," Tony replied.

"Yeah, well I feel pretty stupid right about now."

"Look at the bright side, Birdie, there were no paparazzi around to capture the moment."

"Don't even joke about the possibility!" she scolded.

"Hey, it's late, but I had to hear your voice, know that we're okay."

"We're okay, Tony."

"We'll talk tomorrow."

"We will."

"I'll see you at the photoshoot then, a car'll pick you up at nine. Don't be late, or Ez will go all wounded artist on us."

"Heaven forbid!"

"Goodnight, Birdie."

"Goodnight, Tony."

Methos gently took the phone from her hand.

"He wasn't as drunk as I thought he'd be," she paused, "but then, neither am I."

Methos barked out a laugh at that. "One bottle of champagne isn't going to accomplish that." He picked up the empty bottle, swinging it back and forth.

"No, but the bottle of Lagavulin in the bar would help."

"You have Scotch in here and you didn't say?" he said accusingly, getting to his feet and heading for the bar.

"I'm a VIP, darling," she said airily, "of course there's Scotch; tequila and bourbon as well. And probably a few other things we most likely shouldn't mix if I don't want to be completely hung over at the photoshoot later today. I'd never hear the end of it from Ezra."

Methos came back with the bottle of Lagavulin and two glasses. "Oh, I don't know, I'm pretty sure Ezra would forgive you this time around. He was very worried," he said, pouring the amber liquid into their glasses.

"He wasn't the only one," she said quietly, taking a swallow of the liquor. "I was worried too. I'm pretty good," she said with no false modesty, "but I wasn't good enough to beat Mannus."

"And yet, here you are." His voice was deceptively calm.

"He didn't underestimate me because I was a woman - a rarity to be sure, and inconvenient. But, in the end, with death the only outcome, I remembered what he'd taught me. It caught Mannus by surprise, and that proved fatal. I doubt he'd encountered many of our kind who bore knowledge older than he." She held Methos' gaze. "And because of him, I survive."

Very still, Methos took a breath. "Because of Kronos." It wasn't a question.

Charlotte dropped her eyes. She'd told Methos very little of her time with Kronos in the 1920s after she'd once more crossed paths with the ancient Immortal. It had been a period of grief and darkness, memories she had little desire to revisit, and Methos had never pressed her. But from that time with him had come the ability to save her life, a life that in the here and now, she very much wanted to live. "The method of my salvation surely is an irony of fate."

Methos' hand came to rest against her cheek. "And for that salvation, I shall be eternally grateful."

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Chapter End Notes

Notes: Tony and Charlotte's first meeting is related in [Books & Covers](#), the time Charlotte chickened out about telling Methos about Tony happens in [Paving the Road to Hell](#), and the aftermath of Charlotte's time with Kronos is told in [Bound](#).

Stuck With Me

"Tony, what...", Charlotte began as she slid into the limo on the seat across from him.

"I thought it would be less awkward doing this now, instead of with an audience at the shoot," Tony interrupted, explaining. "That, and I was afraid if given the choice, you'd avoid being alone with me." He shrugged. He'd had a lot of experience dealing with embarrassing incidents, but while he was something of an exhibitionist, he knew the same was not true of his friend. "So I decided to take the initiative."

"A little warning would have been nice," she grumbled.

"Would kill the spontaneity."

"Wouldn't want to do that," came her facetious reply.

"Besides, I wanted to share."

"Share what?" she asked suspiciously.

"I got to thinking, what if we were a couple?" He paused for effect, enjoying needling her; grateful that he still could. "We'd need a cool mashup, like 'Brangalina!'"

She slumped in her seat. "You've got to be kidding. This is what occupies your thoughts?"

Ignoring her, he began to list his ideas, "Birony, Tonirdie..."

"No one calls me Birdie but you," she pointed out.

"Fine, how about Charony! Or maybe Tolotte?"

Groaning, she ran a hand through her hair. "What will it take for you to just stop?"

"You've lost your sense of whimsy," he said with mock disapproval. The, switching gears, he asked, "Rough night?"

"What?"

"You're still wearing your sunglasses," he pointed out teasingly, determined that they would work out what was between them before they left the limo - even if that meant they drove all day.

With deliberate care, she removed the Tiffany sunglasses, setting them on the seat next to her. "There, happy?"

He just smirked, handing her a Highball glass of pink tinged orange juice. "Hair of the dog."

She tapped her fingers along the armrest, considering, before reaching out to take the cocktail from him. "What the hell," she muttered, before taking a long swallow. Grimacing a little, she said, "It's a good thing I know just how strong you make a drink, or you'd be wearing that. God!"

Tony's grin widened, "Just a little OJ to go with your tequila."

She took a sip, then sighed. "Sorry I'm being a grouch."

"That's okay, Birdie, I'm used to it," came his lightening response.

A smile tugged at her lips, and then she began to laugh. "I suppose you are at that." Then, becoming serious, she asked, "Pepper; how mad at me is she?"

"She's not." At Charlotte's look of disbelief, he said, "She's not mad - at you, at least. Me, on the other hand, I'm in the Pepper Potts designer doghouse for total losers."

"I'm so sorry, Tony. I'll talk to her, make sure she knows it was all my fault."

Wincing, he shook his head. "It wasn't, not really."

"Of course it was! I was the one who didn't tell Matthew about you, I was the one who abused our friendship." She looked stricken. "I swear that I'll make this right, Tony. I promise, I will. I'm sorry for all of it..."

"Birdie, stop." He put up his hand, halting the rush of words. "There's something you don't know, and when you do...when you do, you may not be so forgiving." This was it, the real reason he'd met her this morning. He'd debated telling her, but in the end had realized it was something he needed to do. God only knew he didn't want her to hear it from anyone else but him.

"Tony, what did you do?" she asked, trepidation in her voice.

He took a deep breath before explaining how he'd sent Happy to San Luis Obispo to pay off Matthew, certain that the guy was after Charlotte's money. He waited, waited for the explosion that he was certain was coming. But she made no immediate reaction, her eyes staring past him as she finished her drink. "Birdie," he began, stopping at the sharp shake of her head.

"Don't." At that one word, his heart fell, but then she surprised him again as she slipped next to him, taking his hand. Searching her eyes, he saw only love and he sighed in relief.

"I'm sorry," he said simply.

"Me too." She squeezed his hand, her smile touched with sadness. "I know you had the best of intentions, Tony, but we can't protect those we love like art behind glass, no matter how much we wish we could."

"I hate that."

"Yeah, so I gather. I don't like it much either." The words were casual, but she couldn't mask the pain in her eyes.

"Pepper was right, I don't like to share, but, Birdie, it's more than that; I don't want us to change."

"Tony, change is inevitable, you know that." She shook her head. "But what's important; our friendship, what we've shared, nothing will ever get in the way of that."

"In here," he tapped his head with a finger, "I know that." His jaw clenched. "But here," now he touched his heart, "in here.... When I was in that cave, I used to imagine what was going on at home, it kept me sane. But as the weeks went on, a little voice whispered that you'd all forgotten about me, had moved on." Her hands held his tightly, but she didn't say anything. "I knew it wasn't true, but I couldn't stop the voice."

"What did you think about?" she asked softly.

He exhaled sharply, relieved she hadn't given him any platitudes about it being normal for captives to fear being forgotten, of life back home changing while they were prisoner. Tony had heard it all before. "I imagined a lot of things; some of them didn't even involve sex." He shot her a cheeky grin, one that she matched. Then, more serious, he said, "Playing cards in the back room of the saloon with Ez, eating pizza baked in your anachronistic wood stove - I really wanted a piece of pizza in that place, dancing with you at the Contessa's, taking the yacht out to Catalina for the week."

"You mean your floating penthouse?" she asked wryly.

"The very one!" Charlotte always made fun of his yacht - she has some strange obsession with sails that he didn't get. Though one day, he'd buy a ship with sails, just to see the look on her face. "You?"

"The first time you visited the winery and gave my foreman a stroke when you started tinkering with the machinery." She punched him lightly on the arm. "A sign of what was to come, if only I'd realized! That road trip to Mexico you and Ez talked me into; and the first time I had to bail you out of jail. The last time I saw you, after the charity auction when you and Ez played poker for rights to the last pie." Leaning her head on his shoulder, she said quietly, "Those memories are mine, and no one can take them away."

"We'll be there in a few minutes," Happy's voice issued from the speaker.

Charlotte realized she could no longer delay telling Tony about Methos being back in her life. "Tony, now I have to tell you something."

"I'm not going to like it, am I?"

"I can pretty much guarantee it," she said with forced levity.

"This is about the loser."

"Tony!"

"Fine!" He waved a hand at her. "Just spit it out already."

"Matthew, he was waiting for me last night." She ignored his muttered 'I knew it'. "He's sorry, for everything that happened. I told him what happened in your office, Tony, and he forgave me. We're going to try and make it work this time."

"Is this where you tell me we can't see each other any more?" He wasn't looking at her. "Nice."

"Oh for God's sake, Tony, stop acting like you're five, will you?" He grimaced, but didn't respond. With a sigh, she answered his question, "Of course not. Matthew realizes he can't dictate who my friends are. You're stuck with me, you idiot! And what about you?"

"What about me?" He sounded petulant.

"Are you willing to accept Matthew in my life, even if you don't like it?"

"Do I have a choice?"

Throwing her hands in the air, she threw herself back onto the seat across from him. "Why I put up with you, I'll never know!"

His lips twitched. "Masochist, probably."

"That would explain it." She looked at him. "Well?"

Closing his eyes, he scrubbed at his forehead. Then he met her eyes. "Yes, okay. But that doesn't mean I have to like him, or that we're going to be buds, or bond, or any of that crap, got it?"

"Gee, now that's a real disappointment; I'd already booked a fishing trip for the two of you," she said sarcastically.

Tony barked out a laugh at that. "We're still going to Monte Carlo next month, right? That's our place - you, me, and Ez."

"As if I'd miss it!"

"That's something, I suppose," he said grudgingly.

"Tony."

"Yeah?"

She smiled fondly. "Don't ever change."

Priceless

Chapter Summary

This chapter is much more lighthearted in nature than previously, and I'm really quite pleased at how it came out. I do hope you enjoy it!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Are you kidding me?" Tony demanded, holding up a cream coloured linen suit, shaking it on the hanger. "I thought this was supposed to be about introducing the new division, not remaking the Great Gatsby."

Ezra took a step forward, reaching out and removing the suit from Tony's grasp, hanging it back on the clothes rack. "If you wanted a pedestrian boardroom spread, you should have called the Sears Portrait Studio," he replied testily. "Considering I had little more than twenty-four hours notice to put this together, I'd think thanks were in order, not ingratitude!"

Tony held up his hands in surrender. "Okay, okay! Geez, Ez, get up on the wrong side of the bed this morning?"

"If anyone got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning, I'd say that would be you," Ezra said, a note of accusation in his voice. "Or would that be the wrong bed?"

At first, Tony was baffled, then realization dawned. "Birdie told you what happened?"

Ezra nodded. "An abbreviated version, but enough for me to get the picture."

"Look, Ez, I'm sorry. Things got out of hand, I'll admit that, but nothing happened!" Tony tried to explain. The last thing he needed was to lose Ez's friendship because he'd almost had sex with his cousin. Tony knew that Ez and Birdie were close, more like brother and sister, and Ez could be fiercely protective.

But Ezra didn't appear to be listening. "I always thought you were the sort of man who could close the deal, but instead, I'm now, thanks to you, consigned to a lifetime of family gatherings with Matthew!" He glared at his best friend. "Seven years I've waited for the two of you to get together, and that's the best you can do?"

Tony was momentarily confused at the one eighty the conversation had taken, before he realized that Ez was ticked off at him for entirely the opposite reason than he'd at first assumed. "If you'd only told me it was all about you, I would have tried harder," he said dryly.

Ezra snorted. "I was so certain," he muttered.

"Certain about what?" he asked.

Seeming startled at Tony's question, Ezra shook his head, then answered, "I don't know; it seemed to me that you and Charlotte...." He shrugged. "Maybe I thought it was written in the stars."

Clapping Ezra on the shoulder, Tony sighed. He wasn't much for talking about his feelings, what had happened in Afghanistan, but Ez deserved an explanation. "I knew a long time ago that we were never going to be together, but now, I finally accept it here." He tapped his heart. "I don't know if I can explain it, but after coming home, all those months of captivity...a part of me wanted to hold on to everything that mattered and never let go. What happened yesterday was a part of that. But I know now that Birdie's right; what we have, our friendship, it doesn't need sex to make it better, to mean more than it does now."

Nodding, Ezra said, "I understand; even though I'm not happy about it." Then he smiled, and Tony knew it was going to be all right.

"Is that's what's with the suit? Revenge?" Grinning broadly, he waved a hand at the offending garment.

Sighing dramatically, Ezra threw up his hands. "Have I ever, in all the years I've been photographing you, failed to produce a spread that didn't grab the public's attention?" Not giving Tony a chance to reply, he continued, "No! And besides, this is about introducing Charlotte and your new venture, and believe me, no one will forget either once I'm done." Then he looked slyly at Tony. "As for revenge, we'll see."

"Oh, I think I can make it up to you."

"Do you?"

"Hey, just because I'm resigning the field doesn't mean that I think the loser is going to last long. And I have a plan to expedite the process." He knew what he'd told Charlotte earlier in the limo, and it was the truth. Well, technically. All he was going to do was give Matthew enough rope to hang himself.

"I'm probably going to regret asking, but just what did you have in mind?" Ezra asked warily.

"Nothing complicated; I'm going to be a grownup."

Ezra laughed outright. "And how exactly are you going to accomplish that miraculous feat?"

"Ha ha. I'm serious. I'm going to invite everyone for a weekend on the yacht. We'll go to Catalina, and I'll be the soul of hospitality, prove to Birdie that I accept the loser."

Looking doubtful, Ezra asked, "Reverse psychology?"

"Sure. When she gets to see us together, me being gracious, him not so much, well, how do you think she'll react?"

"Probably not at all as you planned," Ezra shot back.

"Ye of little faith! Come on, Ez, we've been friends for years, compared to the few months she's known Matthew. I promise you, it's only a matter of time before she sees him for what he is and shows him the door."

Charlotte sat on the edge of the star fountain with its colourful Malibu tile, looking out at the lagoon. Unlike Tony, she hadn't complained about the period clothing Ezra had chosen for the photoshoot. Quite the opposite, in fact; she'd always been fond of the era's fashions. The location Ezra had chosen was inspired: Adamson House, built in 1928, on the rugged California coast. She'd never been here before, but now that she knew of its existence, planned to return in the future.

The shoot was nearly finished, Ezra having taken Tony away for a few more photos before it was all officially over. She heard footsteps behind her, and looked over her shoulder, surprised to see Pepper standing there. Tony's PA had done her best to avoid Charlotte over the ensuing hours - not that she was surprised. Truth be told, she wasn't sure what to say to her about what had happened yesterday.

"You look like you've worn those clothes all your life," Pepper said.

Not quite, she thought, smothering a smile. "I've always liked playing dress up."

Pepper stepped closer. "This is going to be a terrific photo spread."

"Virginia, I'm sorry. You have no idea how much I regret the events of yesterday."

"You don't have to...." Pepper began to protest.

"No, I absolutely do," Charlotte insisted. "I lost my way, and in the process, hurt you, hurt Tony. I know you blame Tony more than me, but you shouldn't. In some ways, Tony and I are very much alike, and that can be, as it was yesterday, toxic. I can only ask for your forgiveness, and swear to you that it will never happen again."

Pepper looked at her steadily. "Maybe you shouldn't make promises you can't keep."

Wincing a little, Charlotte took Pepper's hands, pulling her down to sit next to her. "I can keep this one. I love Matthew, and I love Tony, but Tony and I will never be lovers. What happened...it was selfish of me, a moment of weakness. I took advantage because I was hurt and in the process just about destroyed what I treasure most in my life."

"I want Tony to be happy," Pepper said, her eyes looking out to somewhere on the horizon.

"So do I, Virginia, but it won't be me who will make that so." She squeezed her hands. "You and I both know that; and now, he knows it too."

Shaking her head, Pepper looked doubtful. "Do you think so?"

"I'm certain." Charlotte reached into her purse, pulling out a velvet covered box. "A very wise man told me that jewelry is good in these sorts of situations." Her lips curved into a wry smile. "I'd like you to have this." She pressed the box into Pepper's hands. "It's not quite jewelry, but it was treasured by someone once upon a time."

Opening the box, Pepper, gently removed the contents, holding it up for a closer look, the enameled bird glistening in the sunlight.

"It's a hair comb, done in plique a jour." For once, Charlotte had taken advantage of her VIP status and had the estate jewelry shop in the hotel's lobby opened early for her. When she'd seen the Art Nouveau comb, she'd known it was the perfect gift for Pepper. "If I might?" she asked, holding out her hand. Pepper nodded, placing the comb in her palm. Charlotte expertly twisted a section of Pepper's strawberry blond hair into a knot at the top of her head, slipping the comb in to hold it. "Perfect." She fished around in her purse, finding the compact mirror, handing it to Pepper. "What do you think?"

Pepper held the mirror up. "It's beautiful, the way the light shines through the enamel. Thank you, it's exquisite."

The quiet shared moment ended abruptly. "I don't know why I'm always the one," they heard Tony protest from behind them.

"Oh, yes, because it's so hard being one of the richest men on the planet," Ez shot back, sounding exasperated.

Pepper and Charlotte shared an eye-roll before getting up to greet the new arrivals. Behind Tony and Ezra was Jason Dunne, Ezra's assistant, carrying a variety of cameras and accessories.

"Birdie, he...", Tony began.

Charlotte held up her hand. "Don't care, don't want to know," she interrupted.

"But..."

"No!" Next to her, Pepper choked back laughter, and Tony looked aggrieved.

"Told you so," Ezra said.

Tony huffed. "Like that's a surprise; she always takes your side."

"She does not!"

"Does to!"

Pepper was no longer able to stifle her laughter, and Charlotte joined in.

Tony looked even more put out now. "It's not funny!"

"Is to," Charlotte said. She looked over to where J.D. had divested himself of the camera equipment. "J.D., would you please take a photo of us all?" She waved her hand at the others.

"That's a great idea," Pepper said.

Ezra immediately was at the young man's side, muttering to himself about the light and exposures before picking up one of the cameras and changing the lens. "This one." But he didn't hand it to J.D., instead beginning to set up the shot himself.

"Ez, let J.D. take the photo," Charlotte said. "Get over here."

"Come on, Ez," Tony prompted, when it appeared Ez wasn't going to follow instructions. "The kid can take a picture, can't he?"

"Well of course he can," Ezra began, "but...."

"But nothing! You either get over here now, or I'm getting out the cellphone, and I'll take the picture with that," Tony threatened.

That seemed to have the desired effect. "Fine!" Ezra strode over to the group in front of the fountain, shifting them around as he settled in. "That will have to do. Cellphone. As if."

Charlotte poked him in the shoulder. "Smile, Ez, and say 'cheese' for God's sake!"

"What she said," Tony said from her other side. "Go on, kid, start shooting. If Ez fires you, I'll hire you, deal?"

J.D. had a nervous smile on his face, but he nodded. "Yes, sir, Mr. Stark." He began to shoot, though not without a stream of instructions from Ezra, which in turn led to bickering, razzing, and faux fisticuffs. Finally, J.D. had had enough. "Knock it off!" Everyone immediately stilled, Ezra looking shocked, the others snickering.

"Yeah, Ez, knock it off." Tony smirked.

Ezra straightened his jacket. "My apologies, Mr. Dunne, please, carry on." Then a smile began to tug at his lips. "You're all impossible, you know that, right?"

Tony looked at Charlotte, tilting his head towards the fountain, an evil gleam in his eyes. She answered him with a nod and a wicked look of her own.

"Yes, yes we do know that, Ez," Tony said. "And because we know, we have no choice but to do this." Before Ezra realized what was happening, Tony and Charlotte had dumped him in the fountain with a huge splash.

"How could you?" Ezra was the epitome of 'madder than a wet hen', sputtering with outrage. "Do you know how much this suit cost...and these shoes," he practically wailed.

"That's what you have a MasterCard for," Tony paraphrased the commercial, "but this," Tony and Charlotte jumped into the fountain next to Ezra, "is priceless." He splashed Ezra, who looked torn between apoplexy and amazement. Pepper had very wisely stepped out of range.

Ezra looked back and forth. "The two of you are insane!"

Tony considered. "We might be," he agreed. "Birdie?"

She shrugged. "A little."

"Yeah, okay." Tony put his arm around Charlotte and Ezra. "But you wouldn't have us any other way."

"God help me, but I think you're right." Then Ezra began to laugh, until tears streamed down his face. Then catching his breath, he looked over at J.D., eyes widening in shocked realization. "Wait a minute, you aren't still shooting?"

Tony slapped Ezra on the shoulder. "Yep, priceless."

Chapter End Notes

Notes: Adamson House is a California State Park, and you can visit the website [here](#). [Strangevisitor7](#) introduced Jason Dunne in her story, *Echoes of a Distant Time* (Yes, he's a descendant.) I'd hoped that [Strangevisitor7](#) would have started posting her newest story before I posted this part, since it would have been a nice bit of symmetry, but when she eventually does, there's a small part of this that will make more sense.

The Need Not To Know

Chapter Notes

I stole one of my own OCs: Jacob Tanimura. Those of you read my Blood Ties stories may recognize him from the two stories he appeared in. I always liked the character, and he didn't get used all that often after he was conceived, so I transplanted him in this part.

"Welcome home," Duncan said as Methos slid onto the bar stool next to him. "How was L.A.?"

"You know what they say, Mac, California is on a tilt and all the nuts roll south" He took a long swallow of the beer Joe placed in front of him before continuing, "You should see the house Stark's company is providing for Charlotte when she's in town. Talk about lifestyles of the rich and famous." He grinned. "I could get used to it."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" Duncan shook his head. "So you two are okay?"

"We are; better than okay, really. It isn't going to be a walk in the park, but the best things in life are worth working for, right?" Then he became serious as Joe came around the bar to join them. "Listen, Mac, I've already talked to Chris and Joe about this, and we're in agreement. Charlotte doesn't need to know about Istvaeone's ties to Ten Rings."

"Now wait a minute, Methos." Duncan sat up straight. "I don't think this is something we should keep from her."

Methos scrubbed at his hair, irritated. "You explain it to him, Joe."

"Look, Mac, I don't like it either, but what purpose would it serve? I haven't known the lady long, but I think it's a safe bet that she'd feel honor bound to warn Stark. And the only way she could share the information would be if she told him what she was."

"And how is she going to do that?" Methos interjected testily. "Oh, by the way, I decapitated a man in your dirigible hangar? Yeah that would be great."

"Still," Duncan said stubbornly, "what about Stark?"

"What about him? For God's sake, Mac, he's a bloody superhero!"

"And he has security, not to mention that he and the U.S. Government know that he's a target." Joe looked unhappy, but resigned. "Methos is right, Mac, it's better for her to never know."

"I don't like it."

"You don't have to, MacLeod! I haven't liked it from the moment I found out she was involved with Stark, but we all have our burdens to bear!" Methos snapped.

Duncan threw up his hands in surrender. "Okay, I won't say anything, but for the record? I think this is a bad idea."

"So noted," Methos replied sourly.

"Lily, a Jacob Tanimura will be calling at some point today to set up an appointment for an interview," Charlotte told her executive assistant. "Jim Rhodes recommended him, and Pepper agreed. She thinks that he's the one to head up my staff at Stark and wants us to meet."

"When would you like to see him?"

"I don't have anything scheduled tomorrow, do I?" Lily shook her head. "Tomorrow then, anytime." She took her leather bomber jacket off the coat rack by the office door, putting it on before pulling the door open. "I'll be at the winery if anyone needs me."

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Charlotte reached the winery, pausing at the entrance as she felt the presence of another Immortal. Looking over her shoulder, she saw the familiar figure of Ezra striding down the path towards her.

"Cousin," Ezra greeted her as he drew closer.

"Ezra, I wasn't expecting you till later today." She hugged him. "How was Paris?"

"Rainy." He returned her embrace. "How was the rest of your week?"

She shrugged. "I can't complain. Tony insisted that Stark provide me with housing when I'm in SoCal, and let's just say the house he came up with is as over the top as I'd expected." Grinning, she unlatched the cast iron gate, entering the winery as it swung open, Ezra following. "On the bright side, Methos didn't have a single complaint - I think the accouterments appealed to him"

"That's something, I suppose."

"Ezra --" she turned, taking his hands in hers "-- have I ever thanked you? For trying to set me up with Tony all those years ago? I know things didn't work out quite as you planned, but I'll always be grateful that you butted into my life."

"Can I get that in writing?" Ezra flashed her an impish smile before kissing her on the cheek. "My pleasure, Charlotte."

She leaned against one of the massive wine barrels. "And of course, you will be in attendance next weekend?" It was quite clear she didn't think there was anything optional about it.

"As if I'd leave you to deal with Methos and Tony meeting for the first time all on your own."

"Good answer." She sighed, reaching for the clipboard hanging on the wall next to her. "It's going to be a disaster. Methos hates the ocean, so that's not going to improve his mood."

Ezra followed her down the line of barrels as she made notations. "But I thought he sailed with you and your husband?"

"Oh, he did, but what choice did he have if he wanted to travel?" She stopped, a smile touching her lips. "When we hit rough seas, Methos was impossible; drove Jack round the bend. So Jack would spike Methos' rum with some sort of sleeping draught he claimed was from a voodoo priestess, to put us out of his misery. It may well have been, and to this day, I have no idea what was in it, but it put him out like a light. When Methos had particularly vexed Jack, he'd sit by Methos' bed and chant Psalms in an abominable Irish accent." Laughing, she shook her head. "Afterwards, when he awoke, Methos was always a wee bit twitchy."

Ezra joined Charlotte's laughter. "I'm sure the weekend won't be as bad as that."

"Seriously? Believe me, Ezra, I wish I had an ample supply of Jack's voodoo draught for this particular voyage."

"For you, or for Methos?" he asked, quirking an eyebrow.

"Me, of course!"

"Tony's trying."

"Trying to break us up," she shot back. "Come on, Ezra, I know what the plan is; it's classic Tony." She'd already been suspicious when Tony had first brought up the weekend getaway, but his totally innocent and sincere look confirmed he was up to something.

Deciding that there was no point to dissembling, he shrugged. "Tony is suffering from the misapprehension that you've only known *Matthew* a few months."

She pointed her pencil at him. "There's nothing I can do about that." Shaking her head, she strode down the aisle, tossing the clipboard onto the desk against the back wall.

Following, Ezra placed a hand on her shoulder and she turned to look at him. "Isn't there?"

"No." She shrugged away his hand. "We are not telling Tony what we are."

"Why not? It wouldn't be the first time we've told our friends."

"That was an exception, and one that you emotionally blackmailed me into, in case you've forgotten."

Ezra recoiled slightly from the sting of her words, stiffening. "I hadn't forgotten, Charlotte, but I would have thought that you'd have forgiven me by now."

"Oh, dearest, it isn't about forgiving you." Her irritation melted away. "There was never anything to forgive. But our time there, in New Mexico, it was an exception in so many ways. We can never recapture that place in time, no matter how much we might desire to." There was a sadness in Charlotte's eyes that seemed to reach right to her heart. "It's better for him not to know, and I think, deep down, you understand that."

Nodding, he reached out, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "But he could find out, despite everything."

She shrugged. "Accidents happen, of course, and nothing is certain, but it's just as likely that Tony will never discover our secret."

Sighing, he acquiesced. "Very well; we will just have to let the future take care of itself."

"This one will be the cover," Ezra said to Methos and Charlotte, pointing to the photo on the large wood plank kitchen table.

They had gathered in Charlotte's kitchen to look at photos from the prior week's shoot in Malibu. The scent of fresh coffee and cinnamon rolls permeated the cozy room, and the distant sound of the surf floated in through the open window.

Surprised, she said, "The cover? I thought the photos were for an article?"

"Come now, Charlotte, when have you ever known Tony to not be on the cover of any magazine that contains an interview he's given?" Ezra asked reasonably.

"But..." She didn't look happy.

"You wanted to be famous," Methos said, apparently enjoying her discomfort.

"I did not want to be famous!" she objected heatedly.

"You do an excellent impression."

Ezra interrupted. "It will be fine, Charlotte." He stroked her arm soothingly. "You look stunning."

Charlotte looked down at the photo critically. Tony was sitting on the floor, leaning against the leg of an ornately carved cherry wood table, one knee bent, and she was sitting on the edge of the table, one leg tucked under, the other over Tony's shoulder, her bare foot resting against his chest. "Well, Tony always photographs well."

Methos made a noise of frustration, taking her face between his hands. "You are an idiot, and I love you." Before she could react, he kissed her firmly. Pulling away, he said to Ezra over the top of Charlotte's head, "You have rare talent, Ezra."

Ezra seemed discomfited by the unexpected praise. "I.... Thank you."

Then all three looked towards the door, just before a knock was heard, followed by a voice. "It's Mac."

Charlotte went to the door, opening it. "Duncan, come in. You're just in time for fresh baked cinnamon rolls." She pointed towards the platter on the granite counter.

Duncan looked a little sheepish. "Methos may have mentioned something about that."

Laughing, Charlotte took a plate from the cupboard and picking up a spatula, slipped two of the warm rolls onto it, handing it to Duncan. "Help yourself to coffee." The other men took the opportunity for seconds.

"Putting together a scrapbook?" Duncan asked, gesturing at the kitchen table.

"Ezra's showing me the photos he's chosen from the photoshoot last week," Charlotte explained.

Duncan moved closer, looking down at the photographs. "You have an amazing gift, Ezra." Methos and Charlotte grinned at Ezra's now palpable embarrassment.

"Don't you have one of his originals?" Methos asked Duncan.

"Yeah, I do: 'Sunset in Bali'."

Ezra tried to smother his laughter, and Charlotte rolled her eyes. Methos looked at them suspiciously. "What?"

Charlotte gave Ezra a warning look, and he grinned impishly, answering, "Oh, just a memory of a trip that we took with Tony. Which was when that particular photo was taken."

"And?" Methos asked, seeming certain there was more to it than that.

"Just your usual," Ezra said nonchalantly. "Tony losing Charlotte to a sheik in a poker game, me getting shot...."

"Ezra!" she practically screeched. "You gave me your word you'd never discuss that trip!"

"But, Cousin...", he began.

"Ezra," she warned, "I can always share stories about Daisy."

The younger Immortal paled, quickly replying, "I take your point."

Nodding smugly, she said, "I thought you might."

"Hey," Methos protested, "you can't leave it like that!"

"Watch me," was her succinct reply. But before Methos could protest further, the sound of the front doorbell echoed down the hall and into the kitchen. "That must be my interview."

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As Charlotte entered the foyer, she stopped suddenly, grimacing. Couldn't anything ever be easy? She heard footsteps behind her, Methos' voice calling down the hall, "You forgot your file." Then he too stopped, just behind her. "You've got to be kidding!"

Covering her eyes with her hands, she slumped, shaking her head. Then she said, "It'll be fine." Methos' snort was eloquent on just what his feelings were on the subject. She looked back at him. "I'm answering the door."

"Fine. But this interview just gained a participant," he warned.

Charlotte wanted to object, but it was pointless. "Fine," she repeated back. Squaring her shoulders, she walked across the foyer and opened the door. "Major Tanimura, this is a surprise."

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Charlotte studied the Immortal sitting in the chair across from her. The former Marine held himself ramrod straight, his eyes wary, but not fearful. Slightly behind her, Methos perched on the corner of her desk, not saying anything, but exuding a cold menace that left no doubt that any threat would be dealt with swiftly and with no mercy. The atmosphere of the study was heavy with tension. "Matthew, I know it's early, but I think we could all use a drink. Major?"

"Yes, thank you, ma'am." He relaxed ever so slightly.

"Colonel Rhodes personally recommended you, and that's good enough for me. You have nothing to fear here," Charlotte said quietly.

Nodding sharply, Tanimura replied, "I appreciate that, ma'am." He took the glass Methos handed him with a thank you, before returning his attention to Charlotte. "Last one of you I met didn't share your feelings."

One of you. His words only confirmed Charlotte's initial appraisal; Jacob Tanimura hadn't been immortal long.

Seeming to read her mind, he amended, "Last one of us. First one, I guess." He took a swallow of his whisky. "I apologize, ma'am, sir. I wasn't expecting...."

"To meet others of our kind," she said the unspoken words. "You said you'd met another. Tell us about it."

"I didn't know. You have to understand. I thought I'd only been knocked out. I woke up with a headache, but that was it. My third tour in Afghanistan and I thought I was one damn lucky bastard." He brought himself up short. "Pardon my language, ma'am."

"You're fine, Major." Behind her, she heard Methos' soft chuckle.

Nodding, he continued, "A few weeks passed, and things happened, started to think I was losing it. Cut myself shaving, and I healed, just like that. It was just little things, but they all added up to something big. A few months later, I was in Kabul, walking down the street, and there was this feeling, like broken glass was scraping each nerve ending raw. And then he was there, challenging me. It didn't take long for him to realize I didn't know what he was talking about, or what I was." He fell silent, remembering, looking down at his hands.

Smiling softly, she looked over at Methos, with memories of her own, memories he shared. They didn't need words; they both knew exactly what Jacob Tanimura was feeling. "Then what happened?" she asked, once more focused on Jacob.

"He seemed to find the situation amusing. Then I guess he gave me the Readers Digest version of what we are, before telling me he didn't kill children, but that if I survived my first century and we met again, he'd take my head. That was over a year ago."

"Did he say who he was?" Methos asked curiously, speaking for the first time.

"He did; he told me his name was Istvaeone."

A Life Complete

Chapter Summary

Amanda won. Was there ever any doubt? So please welcome our favourite thief to the story.

Methos reached out his hand, laying it on Charlotte's shoulder comfortingly. He knew Istvaeone's death was still a fresh wound on her psyche. Looking at Tanimura, he said, "It's an appointment he won't be keeping." His meaning was clear.

"You killed him?" Tanimura asked.

Methos laughed. "First rule of immortality: don't make assumptions. I didn't—" he jerked his chin at Charlotte, "--she did."

The former Marine looked at Charlotte, reappraising the woman, who only a half hour ago, had been nothing more than a potential employer. "You're right, sir. Assumptions get you dead; I know better. Won't happen again. Apologies, ma'am."

"None needed, Major, but accepted." Charlotte reached up, her fingers intertwining with Methos' on her shoulder. "But now, we need to discuss matters other than your new job."

"I have the job?" He seemed surprised. "Pardon me for asking, ma'am, but it isn't just because I'm...." He waved a hand at himself.

Chuckling, Charlotte shook her head. "First off, please call me Charlotte, and secondly, no, you being Immortal has very little to do with it. You have an impressive resume, Colonel Rhodes' recommendation was glowing, and you made it past Miss Potts. I'd be a fool not to snatch you up. That being said, you are Immortal, you need a teacher, and decisions must be made."

"Teacher?"

"It's our way; an older Immortal takes on a new one as a student, instructing them in swordsmanship, teaching them what it is to be Immortal, mentoring them until they're ready to stand on their own," Charlotte explained. "And, to be clear, finding you a teacher is not predicated on whether or not you accept my offer of employment."

"Understood." He nodded.

"Still interested, Tanimura?" Methos asked

"Absolutely." Then he looked at Charlotte. "But wouldn't you like to actually interview me first?"

Shaking her head, she smiled. "I know all I need to, Jacob. Matthew?"

"Sure, why not?"

"Then it's settled, Now, we need to discuss this with the others," she said as she stood up, looking at Methos.

Before Tanimura could ask, Methos filled him in. "There are others of our kind here; an extended dysfunctional family, if you will." He chuckled as Charlotte grumbled something unintelligible. "Charlotte's something of a collector. And they are currently in our kitchen, no doubt helping themselves to my beer." She laughed outright at that, and Tanimura cracked a smile, finally beginning to relax.

"Make yourself at home, Jacob." Charlotte smiled reassuringly. "This shouldn't take long."

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The door to the study had barely shut when Charlotte put a hand on his arm, halting him. "That means Mannus was in Afghanistan when Tony was taken. Then he shows up working at SI? That can't be a coincidence, Methos." She chewed on her lower lip, and Methos was sure she was leaping to all sorts of conclusions he absolutely did not want her anywhere near.

He put his hands on her shoulders, doing his best to be reassuring. "Charlotte, the man was an electrical engineer, SI is a military contractor, it was how he made his living. There isn't anything nefarious in the mere fact he was in Afghanistan."

"I don't know. I think I should look into it, just to be certain."

Damn it! Kissing her on the forehead, he brushed a finger down her cheek. "You have enough on your plate. Dawson said he didn't have a Watcher, but I'll talk to him and we'll see if we can't find out more about his recent past, okay?" She smiled, and Methos felt just a twinge of guilt at the warmth in her eyes. *It's for her own good*, he reminded himself.

"I love you, Methos," she said, hugging him tightly. "Thank you."

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It seemed the day wasn't done with surprises. Walking into the kitchen, they were greeted by the sound of decidedly female laughter. "Darlings!" Amanda greeted them gaily, kissing a

bemused Charlotte on the cheek.

Methos looked to Duncan and Ezra for an explanation. Duncan shrugged, a lopsided smile on his lips. "She just dropped by."

"Missed us apparently." Ezra's tone made clear just what he thought of that.

"Oh?" Amanda just didn't drop by. "Weren't you just here?" Methos asked. "I'm quite certain I remember you at Duncan's winery last month, and your distinct lack of enthusiasm for country living." Crossing his arms, he narrowed his eyes. "In fact, you were eager to be off to Hong Kong."

Waving her hand airily, she replied, "A girl can change her mind, can't she?"

"Amanda."

"What?"

Methos shook his head at her look of complete innocence. "Who are you on the run from this time?" Charlotte dropped her head, trying to smother a laugh, but the other two men laughed outright.

"Don't be that way, Methos—" Amanda leaned in, running a finger up his chest, "---you used to be so much fun. When did you get all dreary and boring anyway? I remember that time in Marseille, 1525, wasn't it? Maybe 26, anyway, you were anything but dreary," she said, her voice almost a purr as she looked up at him from under her eyelashes.

Methos firmly pulled her hand away. While Charlotte knew that he and Amanda had been lovers once upon a time, and even though she had seemed to take to Amanda when they had met for the first time last month, she didn't need to have their past waved in her face. "That was a very long time ago."

Intervening, Duncan took Amanda's arm. "We need to talk, excuse us." As he led her to the other side of the room, Amanda looked back at Methos, flashing a mischievous smile.

"She and Tony should never ever meet," Charlotte said, sounding amused. Then she looked up at Methos, a wicked gleam in her eyes. "You know, it has occurred to me that I'm the only one in the room who hasn't had sex with her. Maybe I should rectify that."

Just for a moment, he wasn't entirely positive she was kidding. She had been friends with Stark for seven years after all, and if the tabloids were to be believed, the man threw some very wild parties in Dubai. Then she laughed, reaching up to kiss him, forestalling his thoughts of just what kind of sex life Charlotte had led since they'd last been together.

"You're quite enough for me," she whispered against his lips.

He smoothed her hair back. "Good, because I don't like to share."

The look she gave him was unreadable. Then she giggled, walking her fingers up his arm. "That's not what I've heard." Before he could respond, she'd already turned away, walking

towards the others. "Methos and I have something we need to discuss with you."

They gathered in the back garden, the scent of honeysuckle strong in the mid-day warmth, mixing with the briny smell of the nearby ocean. Charlotte had introduced Jacob to the group of Immortals, while Ezra had poured wine, serving it to the gathered company. They all settled on chairs and benches as Charlotte explained to the new Immortal just what had been decided.

"We're going to try something of a novel approach." Charlotte sipped at her wine. "Instead of having one teacher, we're going to share the responsibility, and hopefully, in the end, give you a more well-rounded education. And it will help accommodate what will be a hectic schedule. After all, you'll be splitting your time between my office at Stark Industries, here at the winery, and the traveling we'll be doing."

Ezra picked up the explanation. "I'm going to be spending more time in L.A., so I will handle teaching duties there. When you're here, Charlotte and Duncan will do their part, and of course, when you're traveling with Charlotte, she will be your primary teacher."

"And Matthew will butt in when the mood strikes," Duncan said, grinning.

"A mood that will strike very infrequently," Methos promised.

"When was the last time you had a student anyway?" Amanda asked Methos.

"It's been awhile," Methos conceded.

"Something along the line of one hundred and fifty years?" Ezra asked, his gold tooth glinting as he smiled widely.

Methos shrugged. "Give or take."

"He was your teacher?" Amanda demanded. "You never said."

Ezra shrugged. "It wasn't really relevant."

Smacking Ezra lightly on the arm, she asked, "Just what other secrets have you been keeping from me?"

"Me? Oh, dozens, I'm sure."

"We're supposed to be friends!"

"Precisely the point, my dear Amanda – I know you far too well to share all my secrets." Amanda looked put out. "If it makes you feel better, you know more of my secrets than my

mother does."

Amanda tilted her head, considering. "Actually, it does."

"I'm sure that comes as a great relief to us all." It was clear Methos was becoming impatient. "Now if we might return to the subject at hand?"

Amanda huffed. "Fine."

Charlotte shook her head, a slight smile on her lips. "Duncan and Ezra are going to show you around town, give you the lay of the land," she told Jacob. "I think you've had enough to deal with today that getting down to business with your new position can wait till tomorrow."

Duncan stood, dropping his hand on Jacob's shoulder. "We'll all meet at my place for dinner later. If that's okay with you?"

"Sounds like a plan, sir."

"It's Mac." He pointed to himself before turning to Amanda. "You coming?"

"As if I'd miss spending the afternoon with my two favourite guys, and one very sexy new guy." She held out her hand to Ezra who obligingly helped her to her feet. "Thank you, darling."

"We'll see you two at dinner," Duncan said to Methos and Charlotte.

"Thank you. Oh, and Duncan?" Charlotte called after him. "Any chance of those little shrimp stuffed mushrooms of yours?" She looked at him entreatingly. "You know how much I love them."

Obviously pleased by her request, Duncan smiled warmly. "Anything for you, Charlotte. Besides, they're practically the official food of the *Immortal Wine of the Month Club*." Charlotte's laughter followed them out of the garden.

Ezra propped himself up on an elbow, looking down at Amanda. She was pretending to be asleep, but he knew better. "Tell me, Amanda, if MacLeod weren't dating the very lovely Tess Helm, would you still be in my bed?" He wasn't sure why he was asking. It wasn't jealousy – after all, he'd known about Amanda's longtime on again, off again lover for decades. But knowing about and knowing the actual man was turning out to be quite entirely different things.

Amanda grumbled something under her breath before rolling over to look up at him. "Come on, Ezra, are we really going to have this conversation?"

"I'd like to know," he insisted stubbornly.

Amanda slapped her palm against the mattress. "I don't know, okay? It's complicated."

"Not really. You love him, he loves you, and yet..."

"And yet, here we are." She sighed. "Yes, I love him, but we aren't the happily ever after types, you know? I'm grateful for the time we have had, and will have, together. That doesn't make our time together mean any less to me." Sitting up, she kissed the hollow of his throat. "And I really hope it won't for you."

He stroked her hair. "I really shouldn't like him as much as I do."

Laughing, she said, "He has that effect on people."

"And you're sure he's okay with me and you...?"

"Perfectly – he wants me to be happy, Ezra. And you, you make me happy."

"Glad to hear it." Her teeth teased the corner of her bottom lip, and she looked at him slyly. It was a look he'd learned to be wary of. "What?"

"What?" she asked innocently. "Oh, honey, I was just thinking; you know what would make me very happy?"

"I'm sure I'll regret asking, but what, Amanda, would make you very happy?"

"Being your date this weekend on Tony Stark's yacht."

"Absolutely not!" Ezra couldn't think of a more disastrous idea.

"Come on, baby, why not?" She pouted prettily. "I would be *very* grateful. And you know how much you like it when I'm grateful." She slid her bare skin against his, nipping gently at his collarbone.

He shivered as her fingers began a tantalizing journey across his body followed by her lips. "Amanda," he croaked. "Amanda," he tried again, this time with more success. Grabbing her hands, he held her away. "This is beneath you."

A lascivious smile curled her lips. "That's the idea – I like you beneath me."

This was spiraling out of control. Firmly, while he still had some will left, he pushed her away, bolted out of the bed, grabbing his robe and putting it on. "Tony is my friend, Amanda, not a mark!"

Rolling onto her stomach, she propped her chin in her hands. "Don't be silly, Ez. I wouldn't take a professional interest in your very rich, very eligible, very sexy friend. Okay, fine, I might, but I'd resist the temptation," she added at her lover's snort of disbelief.

Shaking his head, he began to pace. "I believe you, but there's already the potential for enough disaster, I don't need anything more to worry about."

"Oh?"

Briefly, Ezra explained the situation to her.

Following him out of the bed, she linked her hands behind his neck. "Then that's even more reason for me to go!" At Ezra look of doubt, she rolled her eyes. "Sweetie, I've known Methos for a very long time, and I know how to distract him. Listen, I've only just met Charlotte, but she and Rebecca were good friends, and I'd like to do this for her." Her eyes were sad. "For both of them."

It was late. Charlotte leaned against Methos, his arm around her waist, as they walked up the path to the house. They'd had a wonderful dinner at Duncan's, and for the first time, Charlotte felt as if all the pieces of her life were finally drawing together. For once, there had been no tension between Ezra and Methos, and she'd been able to talk about Tony freely, Methos having accepted Tony's place in her life. It was as if a weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

Methos opened the kitchen door, and as they stepped over the threshold, there was a feeling of truly coming home. She turned away, walking over to the stove, surreptitiously wiping away the tears that threatened as Methos closed the door behind them. "Tea?" She heard him come up behind her, but instead of answering, he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her tightly against his chest.

"I feel it too," he said softly at her ear.

She just nodded, not certain she would find her voice if she were to speak. Then Methos was turning her, taking her face in his hands and kissing her as if it were the first time. And maybe it was in a way. As she closed her eyes, the memory of another first time formed before her: the Pearl and a concerned Doctor Adams laying a gentle hand on her forehead, checking for fever. It was long ago, and yet, as vivid as if it happened only yesterday.

His thumbs stroked her cheeks as he broke the kiss, and she opened her eyes, looking up at him. They were the same eyes that had kept watch over her so many times in the past. She turned her face into his hand, kissing the palm.

"Thank you, Charlotte."

She gently pulled out of his hold. "For what?"

"For letting me back into your life, a life that didn't need me in it, for a second time." He shushed her protests. "It's true, you know it is."

"You are a ridiculous old man," she said, exasperation warring with fondness. "Do you think I would have the life I have now, the life I had in New Mexico if not for you? That is what's true, you idiot!"

"Charlotte...."

"Shut up, Methos. This time, you're going to listen to me." She glared at the 'yes ma'am' muttered under his breath. "You gave me the gift of a mortal life, and that is something I can never truly repay. Those extra years, few as they were, changed the course of my life." Sighing, she remembered. "And when the time came, you taught me what it was to be immortal, to embrace what I was." Taking his hands in hers, she pulled him closer. "And then, my dearest Benjamin, and then...you let me go. I know now, if I didn't fully then, what that cost you." Tears streaked her face. "You are most dear to me, my love, as you have always been; my guardian angel. Even when you were not at my side, and the years passed, you were always with me."

He hung his head. "You give me entirely too much credit."

"No, my love—" she tipped up his head with one finger under his chin "—you don't give yourself nearly enough."

Shoot Me Now

Charlotte grasped Ezra's arm as they walked down the causeway towards Tony's yacht, burying her face into his shoulder. He heard a muffled, "Just shoot me now," mixed with a groan. Behind them, Amanda's animated chatter floated on the ocean breeze, interspersed with occasional comments from Methos and Jacob Tanimura, who walked with her. Charlotte had leapt at Amanda joining them; his cousin seeming to think there would be safety in numbers.

Making sympathetic noises, Ezra patted her comfortingly on the shoulder. "It's going to be fine."

One eye peered up at him as she shook her head. Then, standing straight, she replied, "You say that now. You're just afraid I'll bolt once we reach the ship."

"Charlotte, it will be fine," he repeated. "Remember, Tony's plan is to be a gracious host."

Snorting, she replied, "And just how long do you think that's going to last? No, mark my words, Ezra; this weekend is going to be a disaster."

"See? Everything's fine," Amanda said quietly at Charlotte's ear. "Everyone's playing nice, and honey, your Mr. Stark is absolutely delicious."

Despite herself, Charlotte giggled, taking a sip of champagne. "Yeah, he really is. But that's our secret – his ego is already too big." She looked across the room to where Tony, Jacob, and Ezra were talking. Tony had approved of her choice of Jacob, and Happy had told her that part of his boss's approval was due to the fact that the former Marine could watch Charlotte's back.

It had gone far better than Charlotte had anticipated, and she had started to let herself relax. Tony actually seemed to be sticking to his plan of being a grownup, and Methos had settled on his amused and charming personality. And really, the two men had had very little one on one interaction, thanks to the concerted efforts of Amanda, Ezra, and Pepper. They'd all had a lovely dinner on deck, and now, they were all gathered in the salon, enjoying the evening and good company.

"Looks like Matthew isn't holding a grudge against Happy," Pepper said softly, as she joined the other two women who were seated on one of small couches in the room. Over in the corner, Happy and Methos were having an animated conversation with much gesticulating. Charlotte had no idea what they were talking about, but they seemed to be enjoying it.

"Happy was just following orders; Matthew wouldn't hold that against him." Charlotte looked at Pepper. "Thank you for everything you've done to make this day go smoothly, Virginia."

Pepper sat on the chair across from them. "My pleasure. And I like Matthew – despite what Tony thinks, he doesn't reek gigolo." Amanda choked on her champagne, and Charlotte did her best to hold back laughter at Pepper's remark. Seeming not to notice the reaction of the other two women, Pepper said to Amanda, "I'm really glad Ez brought you, it's plain to see that you make him happy. Ez is one of the good guys; he deserves it."

Amanda seemed, for once, speechless. Then recovering, she said with a brilliant smile, "Ez and I get each other, you know? That's special."

"Yeah, it is," Pepper agreed, her eyes drifting towards Tony. A knowing look passed between Charlotte and Amanda.

Amanda raised her voice, assuring that the men of the group could hear. "There's something really wrong when three gorgeous, not to mention very sexy, ladies are left all alone on this big yacht. What do you say, girls? Time to find another party?"

"Agreed." Charlotte blew at her nails. "Bored."

"I believe the ladies are trying to tell us something," Ezra said to his companions.

"I think you may be right," Tony agreed. "Jarvis, House Mix 5, if you please." The unobtrusive after dinner music of before was replaced by something definitely more upbeat as the men joined the women. Tony perched on the corner of Pepper's chair, while Methos slid in between Charlotte and Amanda. Ezra and Jacob remained standing, though Ezra's hand came to rest behind Amanda's neck. "Hogan, find the steward and some more champagne." Happy nodded and left the salon.

"I like the way you operate, Tony," Amanda said approvingly.

Tony flashed his megawatt smile. "I do to, Amanda, I do to." Pepper caught Charlotte's attention and the two shared an eye roll. "So how did you and Ez meet?"

Amanda looked up at Ezra, waiting for him to spin the tale. "Amanda and I have known each other for several years; we run into each other in the course of her work and mine."

"And what do you do, Amanda?" Pepper asked.

"She's a security consultant," Ezra answered quickly. Well, it wasn't really a lie; Amanda sometimes used her skills for non-criminal purposes.

"Oh? And just how good are you?" It seemed like it was impossible for Tony to ask a woman a question that didn't sound like a come-on. He leaned forward, all his attention on Amanda.

She mirrored him, leaning in to say huskily, "Oh, I'm very good, Mr. Stark. The best, in fact." Her tongue flicked at her lower lip and a slow smile curved her lips.

"Is that right? Then how about you and I go steal something one day, and we'll see if you really are as good as you think you are."

Amanda's laugh was like a purr. "You really do know how to sweet-talk a girl."

"There will be no stealing. Tony, no," Pepper said firmly.

"What about just breaking in?" Tony looked down at Pepper with a saucy grin.

"Absolutely not!"

"You could come along."

"Tony," she said warningly.

Charlotte decided Pepper needed some backup. "No stealing, no breaking in, Tony, no criminal activity of any kind, or I'll never bake you another pie again."

Tony looked affronted. "You are no fun anymore, Birdie!"

"Yeah, I know, I'm a real killjoy. Deal."

"As long as you realize that about yourself." His eyes twinkled unrepentantly. "Acceptance is the first step to recovery, you know."

Charlotte sighed long-sufferingly. She'd have to speak to Amanda later to make sure she didn't think taking Tony on her next heist was a good idea. "Nice to know you care," she replied with a grin.

"I'm that kind of guy." Suddenly, Tony's attention was focused on Methos. "So what exactly is it that you do, Matthew, you know, when you actually do it?" The casual teasing mood of before was completely gone, replaced with a flinty sharpness.

Damn it, she'd let Tony lull her into a false sense of security. She hadn't even seen it coming. *Stupid Charlotte*. She squeezed Methos' hand in hers, praying he didn't let Tony push his buttons, and having no idea what his response would be.

"I like variety, new experiences. I have a couple things lined up." Methos' smile didn't reach his eyes.

"Is that right? Lucky you found Birdie then; makes being in-between jobs a pretty comfortable place to be." There was a current of disapproval running through his words.

Methos looked at Charlotte. "Oh yes, she's the soul of generosity." He was enjoying himself. *Damn him*.

Pepper broke in with a forced brightness. "What do you have lined up?"

"I'm sure we're all interested," Tony added, his eyes practically boring holes through Methos' skull.

"Trains," came Methos' totally unexpected answer.

Trains? Has he lost his mind? Charlotte slumped, closing her eyes in silent prayer.

"Trains," Tony repeated flatly.

"It would be great, wouldn't it? Riding the rails, seeing the continent." Methos warmed to his subject, actually sounding like this was all for real and not just a way to irk Tony. "I could write a book, maybe parlay it into a reality series. I think it has real potential."

Charlotte wondered if it was too late to throw herself overboard. Probably. Leaping to her feet, she held out her hand to Methos. "Dance with me." The unspoken 'now' was clear. Turning, she said, "This is supposed to be a party, right?" Not waiting for an answer, she practically dragged Methos over to the dance floor, asking Jarvis to increase the volume as she went. Ezra and Amanda joined them, both of them giving her sympathetic looks.

"Trains?" Amanda hissed at Methos as the two couples passed each other.

"I happen to like trains," he said with a smirk.

"You are unbelievable!" Charlotte told him in a low voice.

"What? It's okay for Stark to want to play jewel thief with Amanda, but it's trains that are weird?"

"Tony's just worried about me, you know that! The whole idea was to reassure him you're not some gold-digging Lothario, remember? But all you've managed to do is confirm his worst suspicions."

"And you think it would actually make a difference to him if I were a slacker sponging off your money or a neurosurgeon?"

"That's ridiculous! If you honestly think...." She stopped, nearly quivering in frustration. Throwing herself overboard was becoming more and more attractive. "I have an idea – let's just not talk about it anymore, okay?"

"Fine. What would you like to talk about? Botany? North Sea fisheries?"

Glaring at him, she was searching for a snappy comeback when she felt a hand on her shoulder. "Can I cut in?" Tony asked from behind.

"Yes!" she said with a little more strength than she'd intended. Before Methos could mount an objection, she took hold of Tony's hand, pulling him away.

Tony drew her into his arms, and for a moment, Charlotte thought they were just going to dance, but that hope was short-lived. "Seriously, Birdie, that guy.... I don't get it. Is it the sex? If it is, okay, I can understand, but even great sex doesn't mean forever and happily ever after; you know that, right?"

"My sex life is none of your business!" She could not believe they were having this conversation.

He held her tighter. "But it could have been, and you know we would have been great together." She tried to interrupt, but he continued, "I accept the decision we made, I do, Birdie, but when you find the right guy, I want it be spectacular. That's all you deserve."

Charlotte felt the tears prickling behind her eyelids. She knew that all this was coming from love, and no matter how much she wanted to throttle Tony, she couldn't hold on to the anger. "Tony, I love you, and I know you only want what's best for me, but I don't want to talk about this anymore. Please let it be."

"I'm sorry, Birdie, I don't think I can." He massaged her hand in his, raising it and grazing her knuckles with his lips.

She stepped away, gently breaking his hold. "Then I'm sorry too, Tony. You need to tell the captain to take us back to port, because I can't do this anymore." She turned, swiftly walking away from her friend, seeing the steward finally arriving with the champagne. She fervently hoped that he had a bottle just for her. Reaching the bar, she heard Tony coming up behind her.

"Birdie," he began.

Sighing tiredly, she turned... and the world stopped. Crystal prisms of light from the chandeliers shimmered across the metallic gleam of the muzzle as the gun came up, pointing straight at Tony. "Stop him!" she screamed, throwing herself against Tony, the bullet meant for him tearing into her back. She thought she would die at the look of horror on Tony's face as she collapsed against him. *Silly, you're going to die from the bullet* Oh, right. She wished she could tell him everything was going to be fine, but that would be a lie. "I'm sorry," she whispered between one breath and the last, but she didn't know if he heard her as she died.

If Today Was Your Last Day

Chapter Notes

Errr, it grew by part. This got really long, and there's still stuff that needs to happen! But almost :) I'm really fond of this part, so I hope you enjoy it. The majority of the Charlotte POV section was written nearly three years ago, and only needed a few slight modifications to fit into what was written later.

Pepper stood next to Methos, both of them watching Tony and Charlotte on the dance floor. Glancing over at Methos, she said, "If you'd known Tony before, before Afghanistan...." Stopping, she shook her head, sighing, then continued, "He wasn't so intense... overprotective. And the rest of us, well, I guess we're different too. It changed Tony, and it changed the people who care about him."

"It's hard to imagine those two in the before you describe. My only experience is with that." He pointed as Charlotte broke away from Tony, upset, Tony following, looking determined. Methos understood the fallout from captivity all too well; and maybe that was part of the problem, if he were being brutally honest. Then he went still. *Something was wrong*. He felt it in his gut as Charlotte turned, her whole stance changing. Methos stood up straight, ready to strike, seeking a target, following her eyes as she screamed, "Stop him!"

Mere seconds after the crack of a shot muffled by a suppressor rang around the room, Methos' knife was in his hand, and moments after that, it was buried deep in the assassin's back before he could get off a second shot. It all happened so fast, and yet, time seemed to slow to a crawl.

Methos strode over to the would-be killer, making sure he was dead, kicking the gun away angrily. Tanimura now had a gun in his hand, as did Ezra, the two men's eyes scanning the room, making sure all was secure as Amanda went to Tony, who was clutching Charlotte's body against his chest. Stark's eyes were glassy, his face a study of shock and grief. Pepper was sitting in a chair, her face covered with her hands, shoulders shaking.

"You need to let her go now, Tony," Amanda said quietly, Jacob joining her as she gently pulled at Tony's arms. He just nodded dumbly, loosing his hold, Jacob carefully slipping Charlotte's body to the floor.

Ezra joined Methos, running a hand through his hair, looking down at the assassin. "Charlotte said this weekend was going to be a disaster, but even my imagination didn't extend to this."

His body taut, the adrenaline still pumping through him, Methos chopped his hand through the air. "I told her something like this was going to happen, but would she listen? Of course not! Now it's over."

Ezra had a strange look on his face. "It was inevitable," he said, as if to himself.

Methos looked at him sharply; it didn't seem like they were talking about the same thing. Then he took a step closer to Ezra, pitching his voice low. "We need to get her out of this room, and then her body needs to disappear."

"No!"

"No? What do you mean 'no'?" Methos demanded. "That's how this works, remember? We die publically, then that's it, life over."

"Not this time." His face had a determined look, his green eyes daring Methos to disagree. "Charlotte would want Tony to know."

"I don't care," he said witheringly. The boy was delusional. Charlotte Sparrow was dead, and she had to stay that way.

"That's patently obvious," Ezra snapped.

"Now wait just a minute...."

"With your help, or without it, Tony is going to know the truth," Ezra interrupted. "She's my family, and Tony's my best friend. It's my decision; you have no say in the matter, not anymore."

Throwing his hands up in the air, Methos shook his head in disgust. "Fine, but leave me out of it—you explain to the mortals. I'll take care of Charlotte." Turning away, he motioned to Amanda, who was comforting those same mortals on the side of the salon farthest from the bodies. As she and Ezra passed each other, she reached out, squeezing his shoulder.

"What's the plan," she asked as she joined Methos.

He didn't immediately answer, his fingers stroking Charlotte's cold cheek. Then he said, "The plan is for all hell to break loose."

"What are you talking about?"

He elaborated, "Ezra is going to tell them what she is; what we are."

"Is he insane?" Amanda looked over her shoulder to where Ezra now sat with Tony and Pepper.

"Apparently," Methos snapped. "Hey, he's your boyfriend." Then he sighed tiredly, rubbing at his eyes. "Tanimura," he called to the former Marine, who was examining the body of the assassin.

"Sir?"

"Go take a look around the rest of the ship, make sure there are no more surprises in store." The other man nodded. "We'll decide what to do with the body of our party crasher later." As

he left, Methos asked Amanda, "Help me clean her up please? I don't want Charlotte coming back lying in a pool of her own blood."

"Sure, honey, whatever you need."

With Amanda's help, he got Charlotte out of her bloody clothes, washing her skin clean with wet towels from the bar. As they worked, he heard Stark's angry voice, along with Pepper's distressed one, and he wondered just what Ezra was telling them. But that wasn't his problem. Gently, he laid her on a couch, wrapping a black linen tablecloth around her like a sarong before sitting next to her. "Always jumping in front of bullets meant for someone else," he said with exasperated affection, brushing a strand of ink black hair from her face. Later, he'd be angry, but not now.

He heard the others approach, glancing up at Stark as they came to a halt at his side. It wasn't hard to read the man; certain Ezra was lying, but desperately holding on to the hope he wasn't. Turning his attention back to Charlotte, he wondered if Jarvis, the AI majordomo, actually had a sense of humour, albeit a dark one, as Nickelback's *If Today Was Your Last Day* began to play over the stereo system.

Against the grain should be a way of life
What's worth the prize is always worth the fight
Every second counts 'cause there's no second try
So live like you'll never live it twice
Don't take the free ride in your own life

Taking her hand in his, he thought, *Dearest Charlotte, you wouldn't want this to be the last day, the last memories Stark had of you, would you?* He might not like it, but Ezra was right; this was what she would have wanted. Aloud, he said, "Anytime now."

"This is for real then?" Stark asked. Methos realized the question was directed at him.

"More real than you can imagine," he answered. As if on cue, an almost imperceptible tremor ran up her body, and then she was gasping for breath, her back arching up off the surface of the couch. "Stark's fine, they all are," Methos told her. It was the first thing she'd want to know. He helped her sit up, the hand he still held gripping his hard. Then the second thing, "Ezra said you'd want him to know."

Nodding, she looked past him to where Stark stood, Pepper clutching his arm, both of them still trying to process what they'd just witnessed. "Are you okay?" Charlotte asked Tony in a voice that trembled.

Stark took a shaky breath. "I don't know."

Wrapping her arms around herself protectively, Charlotte dropped her eyes. "I'm sorry."

His laugh was as sharp as a scalpel. "Honest to God, Birdie, I don't even know which thing in particular you're sorry for."

Ezra was looking like he might be having doubts about sharing their secret with Stark. He stepped in front of him. "Tony, I know you have questions, and I know you're upset, but can you please give Charlotte a moment to gather herself?"

"Tony, come on." Pepper tugged at his arm, drawing him away.

"He hates me," Charlotte whispered.

"No, he doesn't. Cousin, he's just in shock; you need to give him some time."

"Ezra's right," Methos said. "I've seen that look before, and just like then, all will be well once he's had time to let it sink in."

"Before?" she asked.

Methos nodded. "Stark looks just like Jack did, that day of your first death." He kissed her cheek. "You really need to stop jumping in front of bullets." His voice was love and irritation mingled.

"I'll do my best." She tried to laugh, but tears fell instead. Methos gathered her in his arms, holding her tight. Taking several deep breaths, she steadied herself. "I'm fine." Methos drew back, helping her to her feet. Her gaze fell on the dead assassin. "That will have to be dealt with."

"We can dump the body overboard," Methos said.

"No, there's too much potential for complications." She looked at Ezra, and in a low voice asked, "Can you nudge Pepper into calling Agent Coulson instead of the Coast Guard?"

"I think that could be managed," Ezra agreed.

She pulled Ezra close. "Then you need to call Nicholas and tell him what's happened."

"Would you two mind filling me in?" Methos was reminded once more of how little he knew about the lives Charlotte and Ezra had shared over the last century and a half.

"Later, I promise." Charlotte brushed his lips with hers.

They all turned as the presence of another Immortal was felt, Amanda entering the salon shortly after, holding a pile of clothing. She handed a black t-shirt to Tony. "I thought you'd like something clean to wear." The shirt he currently wore was covered in Charlotte's blood. Then she joined the group of Immortals on the other side of the room, giving Charlotte a button up shirt of pale blue cotton and a pair of jeans. "I don't think tablecloths are your style," she said lightly.

Taking the clothing, Charlotte looked down at herself. "No, I suppose not. Thank you, Amanda." As she undid it, Amanda took the edges, holding the table linen like a screen while Charlotte dressed. Once she was done, Charlotte took the cloth back from Amanda, walking over to the body on the floor, studying it silently before covering it.

Methos stood next to her, putting his arm around her shoulder. "It's going to be fine, I promise." She nodded, but she didn't look like she believed him.

Then she looked up at him. "Thank you for not saying 'I told you so'."

"I'm sorry this happened, you know that, don't you?"

"Of course I do." Then she turned her attention to Stark, who was approaching them. "And now, it's time to pay the piper."

Charlotte met Tony halfway, leaning against the bar for support, flinching at the hurt in his eyes. She knew he felt betrayed, and in all honesty she couldn't blame him. The thought that one day she might tell him about her immortality was something she'd considered from time to time, but it had always been an ephemeral 'what if?'. All the reasons she had for not revealing her secret still held true, but up against the reality of the pain she'd caused her best friend, none of those reasons made her feel better.

“Tony, I...,” her voice faltered. She looked down at her blood covered blouse, pooled on the floor at her feet. “I’m sorry,” she finally said softly. Ezra put a hand on her shoulder, handing her a tumbler of scotch with the other. Gratefully, she took the glass, taking a long drink. God, she hated being shot.

"Sorry? You think that makes it all better, Birdie?" Tony demanded.

"Of course not," she began, only to be interrupted by Methos.

"You do not get to blame Charlotte for this, Stark," Methos said angrily. "None of this would have happened if you hadn't decided to tell the whole bloody world you were Iron Man!"

"No, you're absolutely right; she would have still been living a lie!" Tony shot back.

"Don't do this," Charlotte pleaded.

Before Methos could respond, Amanda took his arm. "Come on, they need to work it out between the two of them and this isn't helping." For a moment Charlotte wasn't sure if he'd listen to Amanda, but finally he nodded, letting her draw him away.

She made another attempt. "Tony, please try and understand."

“Oh, I’m beginning to understand a whole lot of things, Birdie! This is why we were never together, isn’t it?” Tony demanded. “I never had a chance.” He laughed bitterly.

“No, Tony, it wasn’t like that! Please, let me explain.” She glanced over at Methos leaning against the bulkhead behind Tony. She couldn’t read his expression; his eyes carefully blank

of all emotion. She felt trapped between the two men she loved, each in their own way.

Ezra squeezed her shoulder sympathetically. Never had she been so grateful for his presence. She didn't know what she would have done without him and Amanda there as a buffer between Methos and Tony.

"I think we all need to take a deep breath," Ezra said calmly. "Too much has happened for any of us to say or do anything we'll regret later." He shot Methos a look before turning his attention to Tony. "She's your best friend and she loves you; nothing about today has changed that. You need to remember that, Tony."

It seemed as if Tony was going to say something, but instead, he just shook his head, beginning to pace, scrubbing his hand through his hair in a frustrated gesture.

"Is there anything you need?" Pepper asked her, retrieving Charlotte's bloodied blouse from the floor and placing it in the trash.

"No, thank you, Virginia, I appreciate everything you've done already."

Stopping in front of her, Tony said, "We need to talk, Birdie," obviously dismissing the others. He turned away, staring out the window at the ocean.

That got a reaction from Methos, and Charlotte quickly tried to forestall any further altercation between the two men. "Yes, we do. Matthew, please?" Her eyes begged Methos to let it go.

"Fine," Methos bit out, abruptly pushing away from the wall and practically stalking from the room, Amada following.

"I'm sure you have questions, Pepper," Ezra said into the strained silence. He extended an arm politely, which Tony's assistant took hold of, looking relieved to be able to escape. He gave Charlotte one last reassuring look before leading Pepper from the room.

"Well?" That one word made her want to cry. It was heavy with accusation and anger.

"I can't tell you that a part of it wasn't because I was Immortal; I won't lie to you."

"It's a little late for that now, isn't it?" he asked caustically, turning around to face her.

"That's not fair! I never lied to you! Never lied about my feelings for you, or who I was. You may not have known I was Immortal, but you know me better than almost anyone ever has."

"But you would have, in the end," he accused. "What was it going to be? A car accident? Your boat going down at sea? And me left to grieve for you! Was that what was going to happen, Birdie?"

Her fingers clenched around the glass she still held in her hand. How could she not have realized he would have already worked his way to the inevitable end? God, how could she not have known that this was at the core of his anger more than anything was? She knew

Tony feared abandonment. Under his cocky, self-assured exterior was a man who thought he'd always be left behind.

“Honestly?”

“That would be a start.”

“Fine! I don't know! Is that honest enough for you?” she practically shouted before sinking down onto one of the small sofas that dotted the large room. Her hand was shaking so badly that the glass slipped from her grasp. Then Tony was there, grabbing it before it could shatter on the marble floor.

“I'm sorry—dying, it makes you unsteady,” she offered by way of explanation, wiping at her eyes.

He set the glass on a table next to her, looking down at her. “Did you ever think about telling me?”

“Yes, I thought about it; more than once.”

“But you didn't trust me enough to actually go through with it,” he stated stiffly.

“No! It was never about trust, Tony. Never.”

“Then what was it about? Tell me, Birdie!”

“I don't know how to explain it to you. It's just.... We, Immortals, don't share our secret with mortals as a general rule; for so many reasons.” She sighed in frustration, not able to find the words.

“But there have been those you've told.” It wasn't a question.

“Yes, over the centuries, there have been a few. Some I've told, others found out much like you did today. But not for a very long time, not since my last husband was killed and I watched my children grow old and die. Not since then,” she whispered. She pushed back the memory of Chris's blood soaking into her dress as she cradled his dying body in her arms.

Then he was taking her hand in his, sitting next to her. “You were protecting yourself.”

She looked up into his deep brown eyes, and nodded slightly. “That's part of it, and part of it was protecting you; though I don't know if you will believe me when I tell you that.”

“He's the one, isn't he?” At her questioning look, he elaborated, “Your husband that was killed. He was the one you told me about that night. You said there had been someone you loved very much and that you would hold him in your arms when he was troubled until he fell asleep.”

Charlotte was surprised Tony remembered that conversation. It had been not long after his return from captivity and he had been drunk and almost incoherent from lack of sleep. “Yes.”

"Maybe you could tell me about him one day?" he asked, seeming to sense she wasn't up to talking about her late husband now.

"I'd like that." She placed her hand over his. "Tony, I truly am sorry that I hurt you. I love you so much, and I wish that I could change the past. But I can't. I just hope you can forgive me."

"I'm probably the last person who should be judging anyone, Birdie, let alone you." He kissed her cheek. "And I guess I should thank you for saving my life. But, Birdie, when I thought you'd been killed because of me..." his voice broke, his grip tightening.

"Matthew's already chastised me for my penchant of jumping in front of bullets," she observed dryly.

"Matthew, he isn't just some guy you met a few months ago, is he?"

"No, he's not. He was my teacher when I became Immortal in the eighteenth century. He's looked out for me for a very long time; thankless job that it is. Before we found each other a few months ago, we hadn't seen one another for a hundred and fifty years"

"I still don't like him," he told her with a wry grin.

"I can assure you, the feeling's mutual."

"And Ez?"

"I've known him since he was a child, helped raise him, and when he became Immortal, I was his teacher."

"And when was that?"

"1866."

"He wasn't a photographer back then," Tony observed.

"No, he was a gambler and a lawman," she said with a smile.

"Damnit! No wonder he wins at poker so often."

"You're one of the few people he considers a challenge," she told him. Tony looked pleased at that. "Ezra wanted to tell you about us, but I wouldn't let him, so please don't be angry with him."

"I'm not angry; at him or at you." He hung his head. "As much as I hate to admit it, Matthew's right. This is my fault."

Sighing, she shook her head. "Tony, what's done is done. We can't take back what's past, we just need to deal with it and move on."

"I don't want anyone else to die for me, Birdie." The poignancy of his words broke her heart.

"I know, Tony." She leaned her head against his shoulder, wishing she could tell him a comforting lie. "But that is not within our power to control; the only thing that is in our power is choosing what to do with the time that's given us, mortal and immortal alike."

Tony chuckled. "Thank you, Gandalf."

Charlotte smiled up at him. "You're welcome. And Gandalf or no, it's true."

"Yeah." Then narrowing his eyes, he cocked his head. "Hey, wait a minute; they're not real too are they? Elves, wizards, those guys," he elaborated.

"If they are, no one's told me about it." She laughed.

"Good to know." He joined her laughter, hugging her.

The salon door burst open, Pepper running in, her eyes wide with fear. "Charlotte, Matthew needs your help in the medical bay; Happy's been shot."

Payment Due In Full

Chapter Summary

Nick wasn't happy that he got bumped from the story, so he got back in; though I'm sure he wasn't expecting what that would mean.

Chapter Notes

It's finally finished! Thanks to everyone who has stuck with me till the end, and special thanks to those that have taken the time to comment. It's my cheese! I started this before IM II had even come out, and that, along with the subsequent movies, Thor, and Captain America, have shaped the story. This story is set between the two Iron Man movies, and the sequel will take place during IM II. Maybe I'll get it written before The Avengers comes out - or not. Hope you enjoy this last part, and thanks again!

"Jacob found him under one of the lifeboats," Pepper explained as they raced down the steps to the next deck. "They moved him to the medical bay, and Matthew says he's a doctor." There was a note of question in the last.

"Yes, he is, was, never mind. The bottom line is that he's Happy's best chance right now." Charlotte looked over at Tony, grim and silent next to her. "Tony, this isn't your fault."

"Isn't it?"

Shaking her head, Charlotte didn't have time to respond, entering the medical bay and rushing to Methos' side. "Fill me in."

"He's lost a lot of blood, but fortunately for him, our assassin was extremely inept, managing to shoot everyone but his target, and not very successfully at that." Charlotte winced at his words, sparing a glance for Tony, who looked like the weight of the world was on his shoulders. "The bullet's still in there; we need to get it out and stabilize him, or he won't make it till the cavalry arrives."

Nodding, Charlotte went to the counter, pouring rubbing alcohol over her lower arms and hands, shaking them dry before ripping open a sterile packet containing latex gloves and pulling them on.

"At least this boat has more than a first aid kit on it," Methos said approvingly. "It's stocked well enough that we might just be able to pull this off." He looked up at Charlotte. "When

was the last time you dealt with a gunshot wound?"

Pausing to consider, she said, "World War Two, I suppose."

"It's like riding a bike, you never forget how," Methos said with a grin. Then he seemed to notice his audience for the first time. "Ezra, get them out of here."

"I'm not going anywhere!" Tony said. "Hogan's my responsibility."

Methos gave him a considering look. "Yes, he is, isn't he? Fine, but you stay out of our way."

Surprisingly, Tony didn't dispute Methos' authority. Ezra nodded to Charlotte, and Pepper squeezed Tony's shoulder before they left the room.

"We have no general anesthetic, Tony, so your presence will be very helpful if Happy begins to regain consciousness. Can you please stand here at his head?" Charlotte asked gently, motioning Tony to the top of the table.

"I can do that."

"Let's get started then, shall we?" Methos said.

Out on deck, Pepper stared down at the ocean as it ran by, her hands gripping the railing. Ezra stood next to her, placing a comforting arm across her shoulders. "Happy couldn't be in better hands," he told her.

"But you don't like him, Matthew." It sounded like an accusation. "And yet you're trusting him, putting Happy's life in his hands!" She pulled away. "Is he even really a doctor?"

"I will be the first to admit that Matthew and I have had something of an antagonistic relationship in the past, but that in no way diminishes his skill as a physician. I swear to you, Pepper, Matthew will do everything in his power to save Mr. Hogan." She nodded, looking as if she just might believe him. "And Charlotte is no slouch herself when it comes to dealing with such matters. Between the two of them, they have dealt with literally thousands of battlefield wounds."

She turned, crossing her arms, leaning against the railing. "How old is she, are you? No, wait, that's probably rude, isn't it?"

Ezra laughed. "Charlotte is nearing her three hundredth year, and as for myself, two hundred."

"It seems unbelievable."

"True, and yet, I am surrounded by the creations of the twenty-first century, marvels that would have seemed like magic to me in the century of my birth; unbelievable, but undeniably real."

"I suppose when you put it that way." She smiled. "What about Matthew?"

While Ezra had the almost irresistible urge to tell her the truth, he settled for, "Considerably older than Charlotte and I combined."

"So they've known each other more than a few months."

"Charlotte has known Matthew since she was mortal."

"Can I ask one more question?"

"You may ask as many questions as you like."

"How do you love someone for centuries? I usually can't even make it past a second date. Matthew and Charlotte—" she shrugged, "—it's just hard to wrap my mind around all those years."

"They weren't always romantically inclined towards one another. Charlotte was married to Matthew's best friend for many years, till his death." Ezra paused. "But your question is better put to Charlotte herself." He understood Pepper's natural curiosity, but it was up to Charlotte what she might wish to share of her past.

She looked uncertain. "Maybe." Turning partly away, she wrapped her arms around herself. "You know, it really isn't any of my business."

Ezra sighed and placed a hand on Pepper's wrist. He needed to make her see that Charlotte, that the Immortals Pepper thought of as friends, were the same people she'd always known. "Let's sit down." He guided her towards two deck chairs, waiting till she'd seated herself before following suit. "When I was a child, my mother and I accompanied Charlotte on a trip to England. In those days, Charlotte owned her family's merchant fleet. She still does actually, through layers of subsidiaries," he added as an aside. "I was beside myself with excitement, not just that we were traveling to a place I'd only read about in books, but the sea voyage itself. The ship was commanded by a Captain Gregg, a favourite of my cousin's, and a man I had quite the case of hero worship over."

"I bet you were a cute little boy."

Ezra flashed a cocky smile. "I was." Pepper giggled. Then he continued his story, "Mother suffered from nearly unending seasickness, and kept herself drugged to insensibility for most of the voyage, much to my delight."

She raised an eyebrow. "Let me guess, Charlotte was an easier touch?"

"Something like that," he replied. He had no intention of delving into his relationship with Maude at this juncture. "I followed the captain around like a puppy, learning all I could about seamanship, determined that when I was grown, I would be a captain too. I would tell

Charlotte all of this, of course, and she taught me how to use a sextant, and how to navigate by the stars. In the evenings, before bed, she would embroider, and I would tell her of all the exotic places I would sail to. She, in turn, would tell me tales of the places she'd visited, and I would go to bed dreaming of adventures. Near the end of our journey, Mother once more joined us, except she was not amused by my tales of derring-do and my dream of being a ship's captain. She berated Charlotte for encouraging my 'ridiculous notions' and 'fanciful nonsense'. Charlotte let Mother run on till she was out of steam, then she smiled at me, picked up her embroidery and said, 'Maude, all little boys deserve to have dreams, especially Ezra.'."

"Did you ever run away to sea?"

"Heavens no! By the time I was an adult, I was far too fastidious, with an aversion to manual labour. But those fantasies of my childhood sustained me for a very long time. My point is, Pepper, we all have dreams, whether we're thirty, three hundred, or three thousand. Immortals, like mortals, have hopes and fears, joys and sorrows. Charlotte is still the same friend that you go shoe shopping with in Milan and to Fashion Week in Manhattan, the friend who overnights you freshly baked double chocolate chip cookies when she knows Tony has you tearing your hair out." He touched her cheek with his fingertips. "Your friendship will only change if you change it."

Nodding, she reached out, hugging him. "Thanks, Ez."

He returned her embrace. "You're welcome."

"The crew's preparing the helipad," Amanda's voice called from behind them. "Captain says that the authorities should be here in under an hour." Drawing even with them, she dropped into a chair next to Ezra. "Any news?" She cocked her head back towards the medical bay.

"Not yet," Pepper answered.

"Matthew's a great doctor. He'll be fine," Amanda said in a voice that was utterly confident as Jacob joined them.

"I cleaned up Charlotte's blood from the salon," Jacob told them. "Got rid of her clothes and anything else that might point to her being shot."

"What's our story going to be?" Pepper asked.

"Your Agent Coulson will be far more concerned about the security implications involved than noticing the impossible." Not to mention, Coulson knew about Immortals and would make sure that no one would know anything that Ezra and Charlotte weren't ready for them to know. Nick Fury had reassured him on that point when Ezra had contacted him, reminding him that SHIELD took care of their own, even if they had retired sixty years ago. "Our story is simple: Matthew saw the gun, wrestled the assassin to the ground, and in the struggle, the man was killed."

"Are you sure he's going to buy it?" Amada asked doubtfully.

Ezra captured Amanda's eyes with his. "Absolutely certain," he said, putting as much weight into those two words as possible. He nodded slightly.

Amanda pressed her lips together, searching his face, before nodding in return; her expression making it plain she'd want the entire truth later.

Ezra wasn't looking forward to that conversation any more than he knew Charlotte was. He wasn't relishing the thought of the two older Immortals discovering that a secret government agency knew about their kind, an agency both he and Charlotte had worked for during the last world war. But that was a worry for later; now they had more immediate concerns. As if on cue, in the distance, he heard the sound of an approaching helicopter.

"Ma'am, sir," Agent Phil Coulson said softly to Charlotte and Ezra, who had fallen back as the others watched Happy's stretcher being loaded onto the chopper. "It's an honour to finally meet you both."

The two Immortals looked at each other, discomfited by the admiration evident in Coulson's simple statement. "Thank you, Agent Coulson, but as I think Ezra would agree, we only did what needed to be done, like countless others did, and still do today."

The SHIELD agent grinned. "If you say so ma'am." Then the smile was gone. "I'll interview everyone, of course, but can you fill me in on what the others know?"

"Tony and Pepper now know about Immortals, but they don't know about our past association with SHIELD; and we'd like to keep it that way for now," Ezra said. He and Charlotte had agreed that sharing their activities during the war were best kept for a later date.

Coulson nodded. "And the rest of your party?"

Charlotte seemed uncomfortable at the question, but it had to be answered. "It won't be a problem; they're...." She stopped, waving a finger at herself and Ezra.

Coulson looked surprised, albeit briefly, before composing his expression back to its well-trained blankness. "But they don't know about us knowing about—" he mirrored Charlotte, pointing at the two of them, "—do they?" he guessed, picking up on their increasingly obvious discomfort.

"No, they don't, but they'll have to when all is said and done." Charlotte sighed. "And they're not going to like it one bit."

"For God's sake, Charlotte, did you and Ezra take out bloody billboards?" Methos demanded, pacing around the room where they were being 'interviewed' by Agent Coulson.

"It wasn't like that," she began, only to be stopped by Coulson, who held his hand up.

"If I may, ma'am?" Charlotte nodded. "Mr. Adamson, what I'm about to tell you is classified, but under the circumstances, I've been authorized to share the information with you. Neither Agent Black, sorry, Miss Sparrow—" he corrected, "—or Mr. Sanbourne is responsible for my organization knowing about your kind. There were several highly placed Immortals within the Nazi's scientific research directorate, an organization called HYDRA. Immortals like Miss Sparrow and Mr. Sanbourne were invaluable to the Allied effort in destroying HYDRA."

Methos had sat back down during Coulson's explanation, and was now looking at Charlotte with intense curiosity. "You never cease to surprise me, Charlotte; and just when I think I have you all figured out." His words were warm with affection. "So what exactly did you get up to back then?"

Charlotte smiled, relieved that he was so quickly mollified. She glanced at Coulson before replying, "I'm sorry, darling, but that's still classified."

"She's right, Mr. Adamson."

"You've got to be kidding."

"We never kid about security, sir." Coulson's lips twitched at the dumbfounded look on Methos' face. "But I will tell you that she and the team she served with were heroes."

Cheeks pink with embarrassment, she waved away his praise. "You exaggerate my part, agent; it's those I served with that were the heroes, not me."

"I respectfully disagree, ma'am; I've read your file."

"Be that as it may...." She shook her head. "Let's get back to the matter at hand, shall we?"

Coulson nodded in understanding, letting the subject drop. "We think the assassin was part of the same cell as the Ten Rings agent you killed at Stark Industries."

Sitting up straight, Charlotte blinked in shock. "Mannus was a Ten Rings agent?"

"You didn't know?" He seemed genuinely surprised.

"Of course I didn't! Does he honestly think that I wouldn't have reported it if I'd known?" she demanded.

Now it was Coulson's turn to look uncomfortable. "Director Fury," he paused, clearing his throat. "I wouldn't presume to answer for him, ma'am, but he will be relieved that he... misinterpreted the incident."

"Misinterpreted!" She took a deep breath, pushing down the anger. She and Nicholas were going to have words the next time she saw him. Then she looked at Methos, who was sitting next to her. He'd been uncharacteristically silent during her exchange with Coulson, and a suspicion began to form.

"Agent Coulson, you seemed very certain I knew; why is that?" While her question was directed at the SHIELD agent, she kept her full attention on Methos.

He looked at Methos, then back at Charlotte. "You're aware that we've had avenues into the Watcher organization in the past?"

"Yes, that's how I was recruited into the SSR; a dinner party at my grandson Kevin Tanner's home before the war." She was still watching Methos; pretty sure she already knew what had happened.

Nodding, he continued, "There was an inquiry into Mannus' Watcher file, and it was flagged since he was a person of extreme interest."

"Let me guess, no, wait, why don't you tell me, Matthew?" She stood, crossing her arms, her eyes angry. "Why don't you tell me that the search originated from my own property, from Joe Dawson's computer, and that you knew all along who and what Mannus was!"

"Charlotte, I can explain," Methos began, now standing as well.

"He was trying to protect you," Coulson interjected calmly. "The only way you could warn Stark of the danger was to tell him what you were, and he didn't trust Stark enough to let you do that. That sound about right?" he asked Methos.

Methos looked surprised all over again. Exhaling sharply, he shrugged. "Your insight is remarkable, Agent Coulson."

"You should have told me!" Charlotte said angrily.

"Hey, we've both been keeping secrets, so why don't we just call it even?" Methos snapped back.

Tony handed Ezra a scotch, a thoughtful look on his face. They'd all been interviewed by Coulson and now they waited for him to finish with Charlotte and Adamson. Even though he'd witnessed Birdie coming back to life before his eyes, he was still grappling with the reality of what his two best friends were. He scratched at his eyelid with one finger, trying to decide what to ask first. Ah, screw it. "If Birdie's like a mother to you, why the hell did you try for so long to hook us up? Makes even less sense now."

Ezra choked on his drink, looking sharply at his friend. "That's your first question?"

"Hey, I have a whole list, but this one is as good as any. So?"

Grimacing, he ran his thumb down his jaw. "Charlotte had been alone for a very long time, and I thought you'd be good for her. And you were, just not quite the way I'd anticipated," he admitted ruefully.

"Okay, I guess that's a vote of confidence. I mean, I don't think I'd want my mother involved with me." Ezra began to laugh and couldn't stop. Tony glared at him. "You know what I meant!"

"Dear God, Tony." Ezra gasped for breath. "Don't ever change."

"Whatever. Birdie said you'd been a gambler and a lawman. I don't know, I think I can see it; the whole Wild Wild West thing."

"More like Maverick."

Tony pondered, nodding. "James Garner or Roger Moore?"

"James Garner, of course," Ezra replied with a grin and a wink.

"I gotta tell you, Ez, gambler, lawman, the Old West...I'm just a little envious."

He shrugged, and then looked at his friend sidelong. "I'm assuming that she left conman off my résumé?"

"Conman? Seriously?" Tony reassessed his friend. "I always did say you were the smoothest son of a bitch I've ever met. Guess you come by that honestly, so to speak." He slapped Ezra on the shoulder.

Ezra snorted. "So to speak. You've met Maude, though granted, Maude on her best behavior. Immortals can't have children, Tony; my mother found me in an orphanage when I was two. She knew what I was going to be – we can sense the potential – and adopted me, so she could train the perfect partner, the perfect grifter. Charlotte had been Maude's teacher after she became Immortal, and Mother used her as a convenient place to dump me when she didn't want a little boy interfering in her schemes."

"That's rough, man." Tony was beginning to regret his questions. Immortality had seemed like a shiny amazing thing; he hadn't considered that with more years came more pain. "So when did you stop being a conman – assuming you have stopped," he added with a grin.

"It was—" Ezra considered, "—a process."

"I bet." He looked out at the lightening sky; it was nearly dawn. Taking a drink, he fell silent before asking, "What was Birdie like? Back then?"

A soft smile settled on Ezra's lips. "Honestly? Much as she is today; she is fiercely protective of those she loves, as I think you know. She loved me unconditionally, the good along with the bad, never judging, trusting that, in the end, I would make the right choices. She had more faith in me than I did for a very long time"

"To be loved; that's not a bad thing, is it?"

He didn't realize he'd said the words aloud till Ezra replied, "It is the one thing that truly matters in the end, Tony; the only thing."

Charlotte, her hands tight around the railing, leaned out over the bow of the ship, closing her eyes and breathing in the salt air. Maybe in her next life she would go back to sea. She missed the time spent aboard ship – some days more than others. Opening her eyes, she watched the approaching shoreline. The ocean was a quilt of colors and shapes as the depth changed, with porpoises in the distance, breaking the surface as they raced across the water.

"Couldn't sleep?" After Coulson and his team had left, they'd all decided to grab a catnap before they docked. It had been a very long night.

Looking over her shoulder at Tony, she shook her head. "It reminded me too much of dying." She didn't know if Tony would understand, but didn't know how else to explain it.

"Sometimes, just before I wake up, I think I'm back in that cave," he admitted, not looking at her.

Turning around, she held out her hand, which he took, and she squeezed it hard. "I could lie, tell you that time heals all, but it's not true. There are still moments from my life, even though they happened a century ago, that haunt my dreams."

"Thanks for that cheery thought, Birdie." He shot her a crooked smile, releasing her hand. She shrugged, smiling back, leaning against the railing, looking up at him. "Coulson called; told me Happy's going to be fine. The doctors say he wouldn't have made it without the medical attention he got here. I guess I owe Matthew one."

"Told you he was good."

"Yeah, well, it's going to take some time for me to wrap my mind around it. It's not like I ever thought Matthew and skilled surgeon at the same time."

Laughing, she said, "You've actually seen an example of his work before."

"I have?"

"The scar on my back."

"The one you said was from a car accident? Let me guess – no cars were involved."

"It was how we met. I'd been thrown onto a shattered mast during a storm at sea. Shards of wood were imbedded in the wound, and it became infected." Tony winced. "Matthew not

only saved my life, but worked his magic to assure the scar was as minimal as possible."

"Then I owe Matthew two," he said very seriously. She looked at him suspiciously. "It would be a real crime if you couldn't wear a bikini."

"I think the world would survive," she said dryly.

He winked. "But I wouldn't."

"At least you're predictable, if nothing else."

Now he was peering at her, studying her intently. She unconsciously wiped at her face. "What?"

He shook his head. "It's nothing." But he was still staring at her.

"Tony...", she said warningly.

"Fine, okay, I have to tell you; honestly, Birdie, you don't look a day over two-hundred." Now he was grinning broadly. Before she could respond, he continued, "And you've been holding out on me! Pirate, Birdie, seriously? I always said you'd look great in a corset, but I had no idea." He waggled his eyebrows. "Did you keep a dagger in your garter?"

"Ezra has a big mouth," she grumbled. "Technically, I wasn't a pirate; I was married to one."

"A little more than just some pirate, Birdie," he objected. "Captain Jack Sparrow! Come on, he was a legend."

She raised her eyes heavenward. "So I've been told."

"My Aunt Peggy gave me a book about him when I was five. I read it over and over, even planned to run away from boarding school and become a pirate."

"Aunt Peggy? I don't ever remember you mentioning an aunt." She shouldn't ask, because she was pretty sure she knew the answer, but she couldn't help herself.

Tony came back to the present from whatever mental adventure he was revisiting. "She was a distant relation of Dad's from England. She only visited a few times when I was small." He paused, a wistful smile on his lips. "She was also my first crush." He tilted his head, considering. "Now I think about it, you kind of remind me of her – the accent, the dark hair... the attitude."

Charlotte had never known that Peggy Carter had met Tony. She blinked back threatening tears, remembering her friend and what might have been had the war not been so cruel.

"You okay, Birdie?" He looked concerned.

"Fine, I'm fine; just thinking if I'd known you as a little boy."

Pressing his lips together, he shook his head. "Now you're just weirding me out."

"Sorry," she said unrepentantly.

"So how many times have you been married anyway?"

"More than you, less than Elizabeth Taylor," was her lightening response.

"Funny." He sounded exasperated.

"Fine, three. Happy?"

"Details?" He waved a hand at her.

She scrubbed at her face. "Tony, I promise that I'll tell you all about them one day. But not now, not today, please?" She hoped he would understand. The last twenty-four hours, hell, the last few weeks, had been traumatic enough. It was too much to delve into her past, remembering the men she'd loved, right now.

"I'm sorry." He looked abashed. "I'm a jerk."

"No, you're not!" She grasped his arm. "Tony, you're curious, that's natural. I just need some time to get my act together."

Nodding, he kissed her forehead. Then he said, "Just one more question."

"Okay."

"Can you dress like a pirate wench at your next Halloween party?"

Their mingled laughter floated out across the waves.

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Epilogue

The black car with tinted windows pulled up next to her as she was leaving Stark Industries Manhattan offices, the door swinging open. Nick Fury's voice emanated from the interior, "Need a lift?"

She looked into the car. "Would it matter if I said 'no'?" She was still angry with her old friend.

"Come on, Charlotte; don't make me make this official."

"Would serve you right if I did," she said as she slid onto the seat next to him, pulling the door shut behind her.

"It would," he agreed, "but you wouldn't put me through that; you like me too much."

"Is that so?" She looked at him balefully, not at all appeased by his smug grin. "We are full of ourselves, aren't we?"

"I did try to apologize," he pointed out. "But you wouldn't accept my calls."

"That's what voicemail is for."

"Charlotte—" he took her hand, "—I'm sorry."

She knew he meant it, but she was still angry. No, that wasn't it, she was hurt, and that made her angry. "You should have told me about Mannus, Nicholas. It was stupid to assume I knew — you should know better! If I'd known, then maybe what happened last week wouldn't have happened. You left me out there without the information I needed to keep my friends safe. As it was, Happy almost died, but what if it hadn't been me who got in the way of that bullet? It could have been Pepper, or Tony!" She'd had all week to reflect on the cycle of events that had begun with Mannus challenging her, and damn it, Nick was going to hear her out. "I've been thinking about it; what if that assassin was in response to Mannus' death? What if this was all my fault? Ten Rings doesn't know what happened, they just know one of their operatives was killed. Or did he just disappear?"

"The latter. Charlotte, none of this was your fault, and you're right, I shouldn't have made the assumptions I did. But I warned you before that Stark had painted a target on the back of everyone close to him; this was the fallout. And it's only the first salvo." He waved her off as she began to protest. "No, Charlotte, you know it's true, you're not stupid. You need to step back and look at the reality of Stark's life as it is now. You can't protect him, he's made his choices, and you need to accept that those choices mean more violence, more attempts on his life, and more threats to the safety of those close to him — including you."

"I can take care of myself!"

"Yes, you can, and you know that's never been in dispute," he said, voice rising. Then, more gently, he continued, "But, Charlotte, you and I both know that being Immortal is no protection against the evil that's out there."

Turning her face away, she shivered, pushing back dark memories. "What is it you want, Nicholas?" she finally asked, finding her voice.

He sighed tiredly, rubbing his temple at the edge of his eye patch. "I'm not asking you to come back, I know how you feel about that, and I accept your decision. But I think the past two weeks have proven that, whether you like it or not, you are involved. I need you to keep me informed, Charlotte. This isn't just about your friendship with Stark anymore; lives are at stake."

She looked at him, nodding. "All right." He was right, as much as she hated it. She was just giving in to the inevitable.

"There's something else." It was plain that whatever it was, she wasn't going to like it any more than he was going to like telling her.

She drew back, crossing her arms. "What?"

"I've already spoken to Ezra. You can't tell Stark about your association with the SSR during the war, or with your connections to present day SHIELD."

"Now wait just a minute!" This was too much to ask. "You can't expect us to keep that from Tony!" While she and Ezra had decided to hold off on telling Tony about that aspect of their past, they'd fully intended on doing so once the idea of their immortality had settled in.

"I'm sorry, Charlotte, but that's the way it has to be, for now, at least. You're both still bound by the oath of secrecy you took," he reminded her.

"Oath? That's the way you're playing this, Nicholas?" She was furious. "After everything we've been through together, you do this? We're done here, Director Fury. Please stop the car."

Nick banged the glass between them and the driver, and the car slowed to a stop. "Charlotte, please—"

"I'll keep your secrets," she said coldly, "but nothing else. Don't ever play on our past again, because you've destroyed whatever was left of what we had then." She didn't even give him a chance to respond, practically throwing herself from the car.

She watched the car pull away, sinking onto a bench, still shaking with anger. Looking around, she realized she was in Central Park. Then her cell phone began to ring, strains of 'Turn On Your Hear Light' coming from her purse. Pulling it out, she debated answering it. With a sigh, she pressed 'accept' on the touchscreen, raising it to her ear. "Tony, I know, I'm late... Yes, I saw the pavilion for the charitable division at the Expo this morning. It's going to be spectacular.... Only another month till it opens.... It will be quite the entrance, but do you ever make any other kind...? Okay, I'll see you at the restaurant in about twenty minutes. Bye."

Ending the call, she felt a sharp sense of loss that was almost physically painful. One day, Tony would find out about her past, that she'd known his father, her association with Nick Fury, and honestly, she didn't know if their friendship could survive any more secrets. Everything had changed the day that Tony told the world he was Iron Man, but she'd never realized that the price for those changes might be more than she could bear to pay.

End

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