

MARVEL MANIFESTOR

Chapter 441 441 – Wenwu Arrives

Over the next few days, Shang-Chi continued sparring with Ying Nan. More often than not, however, she was guiding him—teaching him how to sense and draw upon the surrounding qi, and how to use it.

The most basic application of qi was to neutralize an opponent's attack. This was also the crucial step that had allowed Ying Li to catch the Ten Rings and turn their power back.

A towering structure must be built from the ground up. Only by first grasping the basics of qi could one hope to reach higher realms.

Under Ying Nan's guidance, faint breezes began to swirl around them. Bamboo leaves at their feet stirred, eventually forming a circular field that seemed to isolate everything within it from the outside world.

With a sudden push, Ying Nan sent Shang-Chi flying. The turbulent qi blasted him backward more than five meters before he crashed to the ground in a heap.

"Did you understand?" she asked, crouching beside him.

Shang-Chi said nothing, lowering his head in thought.

"Now isn't the time to keep running. That will only trap you in your pain."

With that, Ying Nan stood and left, paying him no further attention.

Shang-Chi remained where he was, head lowered, his expression hidden, his thoughts unreadable.

At a base of operations, Wenwu sat behind a massive desk covered in ancient texts and bamboo scrolls, carefully reviewing them.

Suddenly, he felt something and looked toward the sofa nearby.

There—he saw Ying Li.

She sat holding a young Shang-Chi in her arms, gently lulling him to sleep.

Wenwu froze.

Ying Li looked just as she always had—untouched by time, as youthful as the day they first met.

She lifted her gaze to him.

"We'll be reunited soon."

Her voice was soft. The child in her arms lay still, as if already asleep.

Wenwu stared blankly at her.

"Boss—!"

A voice suddenly snapped him out of it. He turned toward the doorway, where one of his men stood.

"The team is ready."

Wenwu's eyes sharpened instantly.

"The path to Ta Lo will open at dawn tomorrow."

The subordinate nodded. "I'll prepare the vehicles."

After he left, Wenwu turned back to the sofa—

But Ying Li was gone.

That night, Shang-Chi sat alone by the river.

Memories surfaced—his mother's death. Enemies had come seeking revenge. At the time, Wenwu had already put aside the Ten Rings and withdrawn from the world.

But the enemies hadn't cared.

Shang-Chi had watched his mother die before his eyes.

After that, Wenwu put the Ten Rings back on—and everything changed. The once gentle father became harsh and consumed by rage. He led Shang-Chi in slaughtering their enemies... and Shang-Chi himself had taken part.

Xia Ling walked over and sat beside him.

"Thinking about Mom?" she asked softly.

Shang-Chi nodded, gazing up at the night sky.

Xia Ling said nothing more. She simply leaned her head on his shoulder, just like when they were children, sitting on the rooftop watching the stars.

All around Ta Lo, the animals grew restless.

Flocks of birds circled the sky, refusing to land. Beasts retreated into the mountains—or moved toward the village.

Everyone in the village was already on high alert. They donned dragon-scale armor and took up their weapons. Even the two guardian Suanni were outfitted with armor forged from dragon scales.

"The animals can sense a foreign presence," Guang Bo said, standing at the bamboo forest's edge. "And it makes them uneasy."

Above, phoenixes circled with the birds. Deep within the bamboo forest, roars echoed faintly.

Creatures like the nine-tailed fox and Chaos—lacking combat ability—hid themselves. Only qilin, suanni, and other large beasts stood watch, staring toward the entrance—the cave.

Shang-Chi and the others soon arrived as well, though Ying Nan had already taken position.

"He's here."

She glanced at them before turning back to the forest, as if she could see through it to the cave beyond.

Every man, woman, and child in the village stood armed and ready.

In the distance, a convoy of off-road vehicles sped toward the village. They burst through the bamboo forest and came to a halt outside.

All the villagers had gathered at the forest's edge—waiting.

One by one, black-clad soldiers disembarked, wielding weapons that glowed with blue light.

At last, Wenwu stepped out and moved to the front.

He hadn't expected his son and daughter to already be here—standing with his enemies.

"You would side with those who imprisoned your mother?" Wenwu said, his face filled with pain.

"Ying Li isn't there," Ying Nan replied from beside Xia Ling. "That creature is deceiving you. It wants to destroy us all."

"That's what they told you?" Wenwu ignored her entirely, looking straight at Shang-Chi.

"I know your mother's voice. I could never forget it."

"She was my sister," Ying Nan said firmly. "I miss her as much as you do. But she is dead. There is nothing of her behind that gate."

Wenwu refused to listen.

"Fine. If he won't listen, what's the point of talking?"

Tony stepped forward, clad in his red-and-gold armor, which gleamed against the crimson dragon-scale weapons.

"So you're the guy behind the Ten Rings? The so-called 'Mandarin'?"

He lifted his faceplate, eyes blazing.

"Watch your mouth, boy," Wenwu snapped. "When I was conquering the world, your ancestors didn't even exist."

"Just an antique that belongs in a museum," Tony shot back. "You should stay where you belong."

Wenwu swept his gaze across the group.

"The Avengers... I didn't expect you to be involved. What is it? Interested in this place?"

His eyes lingered on Carl—the one known as the strongest Avenger.

A flicker of caution appeared in Wenwu's gaze. Having lived for over a thousand years, he knew far more than most. Despite Nick Fury's efforts to erase records, Wenwu had still seen the footage—those monstrous transformations Carl could take were no trivial threat.

At that moment, Steve stepped forward. His imposing frame radiated authority.

"Wenwu," he said firmly, "you've been involved in multiple acts of terrorism. You're coming with us—to face justice."

As the face of the Avengers, Steve naturally took the lead.

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Chapter 442 442: Fighting Wenwu

"Haha—just you?" Wenwu narrowed his eyes, the Ten Rings on his wrists glowing with a cold blue light. "Avengers, don't you think a little too highly of yourselves? In front of me, you're pathetically weak."

"Last warning—let me pass!"

His gaze was sharp as lightning, the rings beginning to float and hum with power.

"Not a chance!" Yingnan replied.

The moment her voice fell, everyone behind her dropped into stance, their weapons blazing with red light. At the same time, Wenwu's forces mirrored them, weapons raised. The air itself seemed to freeze as both sides faced off.

Wenwu gave Shang-Chi one last look, then turned away.

"Burn this place to the ground!"

At his command, the black-clad soldiers surged forward. The clash erupted instantly—chaos engulfed the battlefield.

Shang-Chi wielded his staff, sweeping through enemies. The dragon-scale weapon glowed intensely, red streams of qi bursting forth with every strike.

Tony and Sam had already taken to the air. Repulsor blasts rained down in rapid succession, while Sam, wielding dual dragon-scale blades, swooped like a falcon—each strike claiming a life.

The Avengers weren't bound by any "no-kill" rule. Even Peter had killed before. Mercy toward enemies often only led to endless trouble—showing compassion to foes was cruelty to oneself.

With the Avengers' support, the village quickly gained the upper hand.

Karl, however, hadn't truly joined the fight. Aside from a few wind blades and fireballs, he held back. Wenwu wasn't his target—Tony had claimed that fight.

Karl's eyes were fixed on the creature behind the gate.

Even with the Azure Dragon beneath the lake, that monster had nearly broken through before. But now, with Karl and the dragon together, he was confident they could destroy it completely.

Meanwhile, Tony scanned the battlefield relentlessly for Wenwu. He needed to defeat him face-to-face—anything less would leave a knot in his heart.

Wenwu had already slipped into the ancestral hall.

He knew Ying Li's spirit tablet was here.

Sure enough, the moment he entered, he saw her portrait.

After lighting incense, he hadn't even turned around when Shang-Chi rushed in, gripping his dragon-scale staff.

"You think you can defeat me alone?" Wenwu said with a faint smile.

"Yes. And I'm not afraid of you anymore."

Shang-Chi's eyes were resolute, his staff glowing.

"No... you're still afraid."

Wenwu's voice was calm. The rings flared—and he struck.

A palm landed on Shang-Chi's chest.

Shang-Chi was sent flying, but he drove his staff into the ground, forcing himself to stop, carving a long trench behind him.

"You've lived your whole life in fear—running, hiding."

Wenwu advanced slowly.

Shang-Chi swung his staff, but Wenwu tilted his head and dodged effortlessly. The Ten Rings surged, blasting forward.

Shang-Chi blocked with his staff, channeling qi to deflect the force, then counterattacked.

They clashed in the open space before the hall.

Shang-Chi's talent was undeniable—within days, he had already grasped the basics of qi. Crude, but real.

Wenwu, on the other hand, fought with overwhelming force—wide, aggressive movements backed by the immense power of the Ten Rings. Without qi, Shang-Chi would've already been crushed.

Then—

An opening.

Shang-Chi's staff swept wide, leaving his chest exposed.

Wenwu leapt and drove a kick straight into him.

Boom!

Shang-Chi smashed through the wall, flying over ten meters before crashing down.

The explosion drew Tony's attention.

He immediately locked onto Wenwu and fired a repulsor blast mid-flight.

Wenwu crossed his arms. The Ten Rings flared, blocking the attack. Then they lashed out like whips toward Tony.

Tony dodged, igniting his energy blade and diving down for a strike.

The rings snapped back, forming a shield that stopped the blade. Wenwu countered with a kick, enhanced by the rings' power—sending Tony hurtling skyward.

At the same time, Shang-Chi charged again.

Wenwu punched upward—the rings shot out and slammed into Shang-Chi, launching him dozens of meters away. He skipped across the lake's surface before sinking beneath it.

High above, Tony deployed his drones.

They aligned before his chest, nanotech shifting to form a massive cannon.

"Energy fully charged. Ready to fire," J.A.R.V.I.S. reported.

A brilliant blue glow gathered—

BOOM!

A massive beam crashed down from the sky toward Wenwu.

The Ten Rings rose instantly, forming a barrier above him.

Explosion.

A small mushroom cloud erupted near the lake. Shockwaves rippled across the water and battlefield alike.

Tony descended slowly, hovering five meters above the ground.

"Sir, detecting a powerful energy surge—"

Before J.A.R.V.I.S. could finish, a blue ring-whip shot out from the smoke, wrapping around Tony's ankle.

With a violent yank, Tony was hurled toward the lake—following Shang-Chi's path.

He stabilized mid-air, regaining control effortlessly.

Then—

A roar echoed from across the lake.

Tony turned, zooming his vision toward the source—

The massive red gate on the mountainside platform.

"Come save me...!"

To everyone else, it was a monstrous howl.

But to Wenwu—

It was Ying Li's voice.

Without hesitation, Wenwu struck the ground with the Ten Rings, launching himself across the lake.

He didn't even glance at Tony as he passed.

Tony immediately gave chase. Faster than Wenwu, he reached the platform first, landing directly in his path.

"Move."

Wenwu's gaze was icy, filled with killing intent.

He was already at the gate.

One step away from "saving" her.

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Chapter 443 443: The Monster Emerges

"Don't be stupid. Your wife is already dead. Whatever's behind that door, it's not her."

Tony had already learned Wenwu's true motive over the past few days—and that he was being manipulated by the creature behind the gate.

"Get out of my way, boy. Or I won't mind killing you right here."

Wenwu clenched his fists. The Ten Rings floated up and down, surging with power. Blue light spread along his veins, glowing faintly beneath his skin.

Tony didn't move. He stood firm, blocking Wenwu's path.

Anyone with eyes could tell—there was no way a person was sealed behind that massive, ancient gate. It hadn't been opened in ages. Who would imprison someone inside a mountain like this?

But Wenwu, already ensnared, refused to listen.

He knew his wife was inside.

He had heard her voice.

Bzzz—

The Ten Rings vibrated, humming ominously.

Tony's drones deployed behind him. He raised both hands—repulsors and drones charging simultaneously, energy gathering rapidly.

But Wenwu was faster.

The Ten Rings shot forward like bullets, slamming into Tony and launching him backward. Without slowing, they carried him straight into the lake behind.

Wenwu didn't spare him another glance.

The rings returned, and he stepped up to the massive dragon-scale gate.

From within—

A voice called out again.

"Take me home... save me..."

Wenwu's expression trembled with emotion.

He had never mistaken her voice.

"They really locked you in here..."

"We're going home. I'll take you home."

Without hesitation, he punched the gate.

Boom!

Blue energy surged into the scales. Their red glow dimmed instantly.

Another punch.

Then another.

Each strike heavier than the last. Blue energy spread across the entire surface, the once-glowing scales fading—some turning pale, lifeless white.

Yet—

The gate still held.

Unyielding.

"I don't believe you're this tough!"

Wenwu drew back, then slammed his fists together. All ten rings shifted to his right arm.

The energy spiked.

Blue flames seemed to flicker around his fist.

BOOM!!

A full-force punch crashed into the gate.

A shockwave rippled outward. The dragon-scale seal shuddered violently—then every scale lost its color, turning dull and gray.

"Not good! The seal won't hold!"

Guangbo swept aside enemies with his staff and turned toward the mountain. Even from across the lake, the pressure of that final blow was unmistakable.

The battlefield fell silent.

All eyes turned to the platform.

Then—

Something pushed through the cracks.

A tendril.

Then another.

Bat-like wings followed.

A grotesque creature forced its way out and shot into the sky.

Wenwu didn't notice.

The gate wasn't fully open yet—so he kept attacking it in a frenzy.

Across the lake, the creature swooped down.

"The monsters are here!" Yingnan shouted.

Everyone looked up.

A hideous creature circled overhead.

"We have to work together to fight them!" Xialing kicked an enemy aside and shouted.

"Hah! You think I'll fall for that?"

The one-armed brute sneered as he approached her.

"Your weapons can't even—"

Before he could finish—

The creature dove.

A tendril pierced a black-clad soldier—and pulled out a glowing mass.

A soul.

Thud.

The body collapsed like a ragdoll. Lifeless.

Another creature swooped in, targeting the brute.

He reacted quickly, slashing it in half with his energy blade.

But—

The creature reformed instantly.

No wound. No damage.

Panic flashed across his face as the tendrils lunged toward his chest.

He stabbed wildly—but every strike passed through uselessly.

Just as he was about to die—

A rope dart shot forward.

Thwack!

It pierced the creature's head.

The monster disintegrated into purple ash.

The brute stared, pale, at Xialing.

She and Yingnan both looked at him—speechless.

"I... we should work together," he stammered.

He immediately ordered his men to release the captured villagers.

Meanwhile, the first creature had already returned to the platform, carrying the soul. It slipped back through the deadened scales into the cave.

"What are they doing?" Natasha asked, watching the other side.

More than a dozen creatures were now emerging.

"They're feeding it," Yingnan said grimly. "That thing behind the seal survives by devouring souls. If it recovers..."

She didn't finish.

It didn't need saying.

"If it breaks free... that's when the real war begins."

At the lakeshore, everyone regrouped.

Villagers and Ten Rings soldiers alike now wielded dragon-scale weapons, united against a common enemy.

After witnessing souls being ripped out, no one doubted the truth anymore.

There was no woman behind that gate.

Only monsters.

At the front stood Steve and the others—shield raised, ready. As always, he took point, protecting those behind him.

Then—

BOOM!

The lake exploded upward.

A red-and-gold figure shot into the sky, arcing before landing beside Steve.

Tony.

"You guys will not believe what I just saw down there!"

Even without opening his helmet, the disbelief in his voice was unmistakable.

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Marvel Manifestor

"Forget the lake for now—look over there."

Steve pointed across the water. Tony followed his gaze.

Wenwu had just thrown another punch. With that strike, countless creatures burst out from the cave. The seal was on the verge of collapse.

The sky darkened as a swarm of monsters poured out, blotting out the heavens. Their only goal—

Human souls.

"Archers, ready!!"

Guangbo raised his hand sharply. Dozens stepped forward behind him, drawing their bows and aiming at the incoming swarm.

"Avengers—!" Steve shouted, shield in hand.

"Three hundred paces!!" Guangbo roared.

"Two hundred paces!!"

"Fire!!"

At his command, bowstrings snapped in unison. Arrows blazing with red light shot forward like flaming meteors, streaking toward the monsters.

Beneath the lake, Shang-Chi continued to sink.

Suddenly—

His eyes snapped open.

Strangely, the water didn't flood his nose or mouth. He felt no suffocation at all.

He stared into the depths.

Something was approaching.

A shadow.

Then—

A massive head appeared beside him.

Shang-Chi turned sharply.

A colossal creature loomed in the dim water. He couldn't see it clearly—but its eyes shone like galaxies, fixed upon him.

It drew closer.

And finally—

He saw it.

Above the water, arrows tore through the swarm. Many creatures were instantly destroyed, falling into the lake as ash.

On the shore, everyone braced themselves.

The monsters were less than a hundred paces away.

"Tony, Sam—Avengers! Take them down!!"

Steve gave the order.

Tony and Sam shot into the sky, charging headfirst into the swarm.

Then—

Ripples spread across the lake.

Suddenly, the surface exploded.

A colossal figure surged upward.

Over a hundred meters long, with twin horns, azure scales, crimson whiskers, and limbs beneath a serpentine body—

The Azure Dragon.

"Holy—!!"

Sam veered sharply midair. He had almost been swallowed whole—the dragon's massive jaws had brushed right past him.

"That's it! That's what I saw down there!!" Tony shouted excitedly.

A real Eastern dragon.

And far more magnificent than anything from Western myth.

The Azure Dragon soared into the sky, devouring monsters in great gulps.

"Look!!"

Xialing pointed.

On the dragon's back—

Shang-Chi.

Everyone on the shore stared in shock as the dragon weaved through the sky, Shang-Chi riding atop it.

With each strike, the swarm thinned—torn apart by claws or swallowed whole.

Karl looked up as well.

His heart surged.

A dragon.

A true dragon of Huaxia.

For someone with the soul of a Chinese man, it stirred something deep—his blood seemed to boil.

His cloak responded, unfurling behind him and lifting him into the air. It expanded rapidly, growing until it stretched over a hundred meters, blotting out the sky.

Karl spread his arms.

The clear sky darkened instantly.

Thunder roared.

Storm clouds gathered, lightning flashing like violet serpents within them.

BOOM—!!

Bolts of lightning rained down, striking the soul-devouring creatures.

They were obliterated instantly—no chance to resist.

The Azure Dragon glanced back at Karl, then surged forward again into the swarm with Shang-Chi on its back.

But—

More and more creatures continued to pour out as Wenwu kept attacking the seal.

Their numbers were overwhelming.

Even Karl couldn't wipe them out fast enough.

"Shang-Chi! You have to stop your father!!" Yingnan shouted.

If Wenwu wasn't stopped soon, the great monster behind the gate would break free.

And even the Azure Dragon might not be enough then.

Shang-Chi willed it—

The dragon turned toward the gate.

Tony and Karl followed closely, landing atop its head.

But suddenly—

The dragon flipped, swatting Tony away with a claw.

Yet it allowed Karl to remain.

Everyone who saw it was stunned.

Earlier, Karl had ridden a qilin without resistance.

Now—even the Azure Dragon accepted him.

Something that should have been impossible.

The dragon carried Karl and Shang-Chi to the gate.

They leapt down.

The dragon wheeled away, diving back into the swarm.

Shang-Chi rushed forward and kicked Wenwu away from the gate, sending him flying over ten meters.

Karl landed calmly before the seal, looking up at the massive circular gate—over a hundred meters tall.

The scales were crumbling.

Some had already shattered.

The seal was moments from collapse.

Karl didn't even glance at Wenwu.

That fight belonged to Shang-Chi—and maybe Tony.

Wenwu stood up, madness in his eyes.

The woman he loved was just beyond that gate.

He had to save her.

"Dad, stop. Mom isn't behind that door."

Shang-Chi tried one last time.

Everyone knew the truth.

Everyone but Wenwu.

"If she were there, her soul would've already been taken," Shang-Chi added.

"Don't stand in my way... son."

Wenwu's voice trembled with disbelief.

He was so close.

And now his own son would stop him?

"No."

Shang-Chi took his stance.

Qi flowed around him.

Wenwu said nothing more.

He struck.

The Ten Rings flared, exploding with power as his fist shot forward.

Shang-Chi moved.

His hands guided the surrounding qi, meeting the attack—

Then pulling back at the last moment.

Using softness to overcome strength.

Wenwu was caught off guard. His arm was seized and redirected, his own force turning against him as he was pushed aside in disarray.

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Chapter 445 445: A Filial Father and Son

Shang-Chi suddenly seized Wenwu's arm again. Then, like a Tai Chi motion, he pulled Wenwu into a spinning circle, gradually dissipating Wenwu's Qi—so much so that even the glow of the Ten Rings dimmed.

Wenwu broke free with force. The Ten Rings shot off his arms and lashed toward Shang-Chi like whips.

Shang-Chi sidestepped to dodge, then immediately struck out with a palm. Wenwu nimbly evaded as well.

Meanwhile, more and more creatures began attacking the Azure Dragon. Taking advantage of their small size, agility, and speed, they targeted its weak points—especially its eyes.

At this moment, dozens of creatures had already latched onto the dragon's eye sockets with their tendrils, preparing to tear into its eyes. No matter how the Azure Dragon struggled, it couldn't shake them off. The monsters were just about to bite down—

Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!

Suddenly, several blue energy beams shot toward the dragon, precisely eliminating the creatures clustered around its eyes. At the same time, Tony flew past in his armor, circling around the dragon as his shoulder cannons and repulsors fired continuously, clearing away the monsters clinging to its body one by one.

The Azure Dragon turned its head and let out a low roar toward Tony in gratitude, then once again charged ferociously into the swarm.

On the platform, Shang-Chi and Wenwu were still evenly matched. Wenwu wielded the Ten Rings like whips, launching relentless attacks, while Shang-Chi moved with remarkable agility—even using Qi to deflect the Rings at the last moment before impact.

Karl, meanwhile, stood in front of the seal, watching this "heartwarming" father-son showdown. Scenes like this—sons overthrowing their fathers—were as cliché as they came.

Suddenly, Shang-Chi seized an opening. Channeling his Qi, he struck Wenwu square in the chest with a palm. Wenwu was sent flying over ten meters.

Using the Ten Rings to cushion himself, Wenwu stabilized midair and landed smoothly. Then, with a flick of his left hand, five Rings shot out like crescent blades, hurtling toward Shang-Chi as their energy surged violently.

Unfazed, Shang-Chi extended both hands, guiding the Rings with Qi. As they spun in midair, their force was gradually neutralized.

Even more astonishing—upon landing, the Qi around Shang-Chi pulsed, and the Rings' blue energy transformed into a radiant golden hue.

The golden Ten Rings circled him obediently, like well-trained children responding to his will.

With a wave of his arm, the five Rings began orbiting him, like loyal bodyguards ready to defend at any moment.

Nearby, Karl glanced up. The dragon-scale seal over the cave entrance had cracked significantly. Endless monsters poured out from the fractures, some even turning to attack him.

Karl casually took out a Chocobo whistle and blew it.

A swirling vortex opened beside him, and Onion strutted out with swagger, its armor gleaming. Its sharp beak and claws gleamed dangerously, exuding a presence no less imposing than the Qilin or the Suanni.

But the cool entrance lasted less than three seconds—

The next moment, Onion immediately burrowed into Karl's arms, nuzzling him, its big head practically trying to live there.

Karl gave it a few pats, then fed it a wild vegetable.

"Go on. Help them deal with those monsters."

In just a few bites, Onion finished the food, its eyes blazing with battle intent. At Karl's command, it shot into the sky, charging straight into a cluster of monsters. With a single swipe of its claws, several creatures were torn apart instantly.

These monsters were normally immune to conventional attacks—but Onion was no ordinary bird. It was a magically enhanced Chocobo... one that had even been canonized as a Buddha.

Despite its modest size, its strength was formidable. Nothing survived its claws. Even the beating of its wings sent out sharp wind blades—though not as powerful as Karl's, they were more than enough to slaughter these lesser creatures.

Back on the platform, the battle between Shang-Chi and Wenwu had reached its climax.

Each now controlled five Rings, fighting on equal footing. Originally, Shang-Chi was far inferior—even with Qi, the gap was enormous. But now, with half the Ten Rings in his control, he could match Wenwu blow for blow. Combined with his Qi, he was even beginning to gain the upper hand.

Their usage of the Rings, however, differed greatly.

Wenwu mainly wore them on his arms to enhance his strikes, occasionally using them as whips or shields—but ultimately relying on brute force.

Shang-Chi, on the other hand, controlled them entirely through Qi. The Rings floated around him, sometimes acting as independent support, sometimes forming armor over his limbs when needed.

Clearly, Shang-Chi's understanding of the Ten Rings had surpassed Wenwu's. And with Qi guiding them, his attack range was far greater.

Wenwu blocked Shang-Chi's flying side kick with his arm. Their Rings collided violently—but neither side gave way. The impact triggered an explosion, forcing both men back over ten meters. The blue and golden Rings returned to their respective masters.

At that moment, Wenwu leapt into the air. The Rings gathered around his arms, blazing with blue light. A dangerous aura erupted—so intense that even Karl, who had been casually spectating, took notice.

Boom!!

The five blue Rings shot out like cannon shells, slamming into Shang-Chi. Dust and debris exploded outward, and a shockwave rippled across the platform.

With no Rings left to support him, Wenwu fell back to the ground.

He rose slowly, staring toward where Shang-Chi had stood. Dust still hung in the air, obscuring his view.

Then—

A golden light flickered on, like an eye opening in the darkness.

Then a second. A third.

Until ten golden lights shone brightly.

They began to orbit in a precise pattern, forming a mysterious array—the Ten Rings.

With a sharp pulse, the golden energy blasted away the surrounding dust.

At the center stood Shang-Chi, proud and steady.

Behind him, a hand pressed firmly against his back—the owner of that hand was Karl.

When Wenwu's attack had sent Shang-Chi flying, Karl had teleported behind him and caught him. In that brief moment, Shang-Chi had focused entirely on connecting with the remaining Rings through Qi—successfully transforming all ten into gold.

Karl withdrew his hand.

Shang-Chi stepped forward, walking toward Wenwu. The golden Rings circled him, constantly shifting formation.

Wenwu suddenly realized—

His connection to the Ten Rings had been severed.

No matter how he tried to summon them, they no longer responded.

Shang-Chi's gaze was calm now—no anger, no impatience. Like a still pond, undisturbed.

He raised his hands in front of him.

The Ten Rings gathered between his palms, spinning faster and faster. The golden light grew ever brighter, intensifying with each passing moment.

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Chapter 446 446: Breaking the Seal

Shang-Chi held his hands in a loose embrace. Between his palms, the Ten Rings spun faster and faster, the golden light growing ever more brilliant.

At last, a golden sphere of energy formed at the center of the Rings. Surrounded by their rapid orbit, it shone like a radiant dragon pearl.

For a brief moment, it seemed as though the "dragon pearl" would burst forth from Shang-Chi's grasp—

But just then, he suddenly dispersed the Qi in his hands.

The Ten Rings dimmed instantly and clattered to the ground.

In the end, Shang-Chi couldn't bring himself to do it. He neither wanted nor was able to kill his father.

No matter what—no matter that his father was the world's most powerful terrorist, no matter how many atrocities he had committed—he was still his father.

And so, Shang-Chi chose to let go.

Without his control, the Ten Rings lay scattered like worthless scrap metal—so unremarkable that even a beggar passing by wouldn't spare them a glance.

Wenwu was equally stunned. He couldn't understand—Shang-Chi had clearly gathered enough power just now, so why abandon it at the last moment?

But then, realization dawned on him.

Wasn't he the same?

The one standing before him was his son—the son he had raised with great expectations, the one meant to inherit everything from him.

If Ying Li hadn't died, perhaps he would have lived like an ordinary father—watching his son grow into a man, seeing his daughter laugh and circle around him, even worrying over their futures.

But none of that belonged to him anymore.

Without Ying Li, he was still that ruthless, bloodthirsty terrorist—an immortal shell who had lived for a thousand years yet remained nothing more than a walking corpse.

"Son... I have to save her. I must save your mother... she's calling me..."

Wenwu's voice was hoarse.

He had never regretted trying to save Ying Li. He would even destroy all of Ta Lo if necessary—so long as she could return to him.

And once she did, he would seal away the Ten Rings without hesitation, live out the rest of his days with her, and die by her side.

Tears welled in Shang-Chi's eyes.

The greatest regret of his life was not standing beside his mother when their enemies came—watching helplessly as she died before him.

If she truly could come back, he would join his father without hesitation... perhaps even become the most ruthless among them.

But he knew—

She wouldn't return.

There was no mother behind that seal.

Only a monster that had deceived his father.

"I wish it were true too, Father. I want her back even more than you do... but it's not. Behind that door, there's nothing but more monsters. Look at what's coming out of it right now—don't you understand?!"

Tears streamed down Shang-Chi's face. He couldn't bear to see his father reduced to this madness because of his mother.

He was still trying to make him stop—there was still time.

But Wenwu couldn't hear him anymore.

His mind was set on breaking the seal. He refused to believe anything else.

At this point, Wenwu had already been deeply manipulated.

This wasn't something mere words could accomplish. Brainwashing a person normally required a long, brutal process—like what HYDRA had done to Bucky.

But under the influence of a mysterious force, things were different.

That force could directly interfere with the mind, twisting perception and judgment. A few whispers—or even none at all—were enough to control someone completely.

That was exactly what had happened to Wenwu.

Though he appeared rational, his deeper consciousness had already been ensnared. The creature had exploited the weakness in his heart, reinforcing it with supernatural influence until even the most absurd lie felt like undeniable truth.

"Father, you still have a family! You still have me and Xialing! We need you!"

Shang-Chi called out desperately.

He had realized the truth—Wenwu was being controlled. The only way to reach him now was through what he cared about most: his children.

And it worked.

Wenwu hesitated. His gaze wavered, softening as he looked at Shang-Chi. Yes... besides Ying Li, he still had his children.

"Help me... please... let me out..."

Just as his resolve faltered, Ying Li's voice rang out again.

In that instant, the manipulative whisper crushed his hesitation, snuffing out any thought of giving up. His eyes hardened once more.

This time, everyone heard it—not just Wenwu.

Shang-Chi. Karl. Even those fighting across the lake.

And Shang-Chi and Xialing recognized it instantly—it was their mother's voice.

Yet neither of them wavered.

Because they knew—

It wasn't her.

Rumble—!

Rumble—!!

Suddenly, the dragon-scale seal trembled violently. The entire mountain shook, stones cascading down its sides.

The already dim scales turned completely black.

Then—

A massive creature burst through the seal, tearing out of the cavern.

It opened its gaping maw, jagged horns like blades, enormous bat-like wings lined with spikes, and a tail of writhing tendrils covered in barbs.

Its sheer size blotted out the sky—larger even than the Azure Dragon.

At that moment, everyone on the battlefield froze, looking up in horror.

The grotesque form of the creature struck fear deep into their hearts.

On the platform, Wenwu stared blankly at the monster.

He couldn't believe it—wouldn't believe it.

The "voice" calling to him... was this thing?

The creature looked down at him and let out a mocking roar—laughing at his ignorance, his weakness, his blind devotion.

Then, it dove straight toward the platform—

Its target: Wenwu and Shang-Chi.

Boom—!

In an instant, a towering wall of ice rose before them, blocking the creature's descent—only to shatter immediately under the impact.

At the same time, thunder roared across the sky. Dozens of massive purple lightning bolts crashed down, striking the monster's enormous body.

Then came countless wind blades and fireballs sweeping past Shang-Chi and Wenwu, while the shattered ice transformed into a storm of sharp icicles that shot toward the creature.

Boom—!!!

"ROAR—!!!"

Explosions erupted across its body as fire, wind, and lightning detonated upon impact.

Foul, putrid blood rained down from the sky.

The creature was blasted backward, its massive form riddled with wounds, its flesh scorched black.

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Chapter 447 447: Wenwu Comes to His Senses

At the same time, the Azure Dragon lunged forward and slammed headfirst into the monster, clamping its jaws onto the creature's body. Atop the dragon's head, Xialing clung tightly as the two colossal beasts tore into each other midair.

"Shang-Chi, take the Ten Rings. They belong to you now."

The crimson cloak billowed wildly as Karl stepped out from behind them and spoke to Shang-Chi.

"Wenwu, you should be clear-headed now. Go with Shang-Chi to the village and help fight those creatures. Someone will deal with your reckoning afterward."

Karl's expression was calm. If he hadn't intervened just now, the monster would have devoured Wenwu's soul, and in his final moments, Wenwu would have passed the Ten Rings to Shang-Chi anyway.

But Karl didn't want Wenwu to die like that. Tony had been fixated on him—no matter what, the two needed a proper fight to settle that lingering obsession. As for afterward, Wenwu likely wouldn't die; Nick Fury would probably lock him away in some black-site prison.

Wenwu said nothing. He simply turned to look at Shang-Chi. Now fully conscious, he understood that he had been deceived all along.

"Send me over. The Ten Rings... are yours now."

A faint, relieved smile appeared on Wenwu's face. Though his mind had been clouded, he remembered everything that had happened—and knew his son had grown strong enough to surpass him.

Shang-Chi nodded, casting a grateful glance at Karl. Then, using the force of the Ten Rings, he carried Wenwu in a great leap toward the village across the lake.

At the village, as Shang-Chi landed, everyone snapped out of their shock at the colossal monster. Seeing father and son arrive together, both sides immediately converged.

"Wenwu! Look at the mess you've made!!"

Hot-tempered as ever, Guang Bo swung his staff at Wenwu. Wenwu's subordinates reacted instantly, turning their weapons toward the villagers. Former allies stood on the brink of clashing once more.

"Guang Bo, my father was under the monster's influence before. He's fully recovered now."

The Ten Rings shot out, instantly coiling around the staff just before it struck Wenwu's head. Golden energy pulsed from them, locking the weapon in place no matter how Guang Bo struggled.

Wenwu merely glanced at Guang Bo before ignoring him. Back then, it was this old man who had deemed him unworthy of living in Ta Lo, driving him and Ying Li away. Wenwu held no goodwill toward him.

"From this moment on, my son Shang-Chi is the new leader of the Ten Rings. All of you will obey his commands. Understood?"

"Understood!"

At Wenwu's command, his entire force responded in unison. Their allegiance had shifted—Shang-Chi was now their leader.

Everyone froze for a moment, then all eyes turned toward Shang-Chi.

With a thought, the Ten Rings returned to his wrists. Their once cold blue glow had transformed into a warm gold.

"All of you—follow me and eliminate those creatures!"

"Yes!"

The black-clad warriors immediately sprang into action, now following Shang-Chi's orders. Wenwu himself joined them without hesitation.

Ying Nan watched Shang-Chi with a satisfied smile, tossing her staff to Wenwu and casually picking up a Dragon Scale blade instead.

Wenwu glanced at her and smiled in return—a smile of release, of clarity. His obsession had faded, and his mind felt lighter than ever before.

"Son, Xialing is still over there. Bring her back safely."

Wenwu pointed his staff toward the far side of the lake, where the Azure Dragon and the monster were locked in a brutal struggle.

"Don't worry, Father. I'll bring her back safely."

With a thunderous boom, Shang-Chi leapt skyward. In the distance, the Azure Dragon seemed to sense his intent, turning and swooping down to catch him perfectly.

Then it skimmed across the lake's surface. As its speed increased, green energy began to ripple across the water, slicing through it like blades as it surged toward the monster.

Boom!!

The energy struck the creature, sending foul blood spraying everywhere. A massive wave rose behind the dragon, chasing after the monster—like twin dragons vying for a pearl.

Gradually, the water closed in, forming a tightening ring around the creature. Trapped within, the monster struggled violently.

But just as it seemed to weaken, a sudden change occurred—

Countless smaller creatures rushed in, each carrying stolen souls—human and animal alike—and fed them into the larger monster.

With every soul consumed, violet energy surged within its body, replenishing the power it had lost during its long imprisonment.

"ROAR—!!"

The monster howled as purple energy flooded its form. With an explosive burst, the surrounding water shattered into a torrential downpour.

Its body swelled, growing larger and more powerful. Bony armor began to form across its frame as it dove toward the Azure Dragon.

The dragon met it head-on.

The two titans collided midair, and the shockwave sent towering waves crashing across the lake below.

"ROAR!"

The dragon's cry echoed throughout Ta Lo. Its body tilted under the impact, if only for a moment—but that was enough.

Shang-Chi and Xialing were thrown from its back.

Reacting instantly, Shang-Chi grabbed his sister. The Ten Rings shot out, wrapping around the dragon's body, and with a burst of golden energy, they pulled the siblings back onto its head.

But by then, the monster's tendrils had already coiled tightly around the dragon, their barbed hooks embedding into its scales. No matter how the dragon struggled, it couldn't break free.

"This is bad! If that thing devours the dragon's soul, no one will be able to stop it!"

Guang Bo looked up in alarm. The dragon was firmly restrained, unable to move. The monster opened its massive maw, violet energy churning violently in its throat.

At the same time, radiant, multicolored energy began to seep from the dragon's body—its very soul.

As it drained away, the dragon visibly weakened, its struggles growing feeble.

At that critical moment, Wenwu drew a bow.

He nocked an arrow, aimed straight at the monster's throat—

—and released.

The Dragon Scale arrow streaked through the air like a blazing meteor, piercing cleanly through the creature's throat.

"GRAAAH—!!"

The violet energy in its throat instantly dissipated, and the Azure Dragon seized the opportunity to break free from its restraints.

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Chapter 448 448: Bahamut

With a furious roar, the monster abandoned the Azure Dragon and suddenly charged toward the village at incredible speed—so fast that even the dragon couldn't stop it in time.

"This is bad!! Run into the bamboo forest!"

Ying Nan immediately shouted a warning.

Everyone turned and fled toward the bamboo forest in panic, casting aside armor and weapons in their rush.

"Captain, we need to move too!"

Sam hurried to Steve's side.

"Tony, you and Sam are faster—fly out of here and find Karl. Don't worry about us."

Steve looked at Tony. For all his usual antics, in moments like this, Tony was someone they could trust without hesitation.

"Stay safe!"

Tony wasted no time. He shot into the sky, flying toward the opposite side of the lake. Behind him, his floating cannons unleashed relentless, indiscriminate fire.

For a moment, Tony became a living turret—any creature that flew near him was blasted into fragments by a storm of energy fire.

Then suddenly—

The entire valley fell into eerie silence.

Even the shrieking of the monsters vanished. In the distant mountains, countless animals grew restless. Smaller creatures fled frantically to their dens. The phoenix led its flock to perch silently in the trees. Qilin and Suanni threw their heads back in silent roars—their mouths open, yet no sound emerged.

Then—

A beam of silver light shot skyward from the platform across the lake.

The silver glow, carrying a primal and violent aura, filled the entire Ta Lo valley. Even the charging giant monster halted, turning back to look at the pillar of light.

The beam pierced the heavens, stirring the storm clouds into a massive vortex, its center anchored by that terrifying silver radiance.

From within the light, a pair of enormous silver wings unfurled.

Their span was vast enough to blot out the sky, lined with blade-like bone spurs and glowing yellow energy cores.

"Th-that is...!!!"

Everyone froze, staring at those sky-covering wings.

"That direction... could it be Karl?!"

Natasha murmured. Though her voice was soft, everyone nearby heard her clearly.

"Karl? That kid who came with you?"

Guang Bo stared in shock. In his memory, Karl was just a spellcaster—his martial skill didn't even measure up to his own.

"That's right—it's Karl! That's his new form!!"

Tony flew back, hovering in the air. JARVIS had already scanned the energy signature—it closely matched Karl's previous transformations.

Rumble—!!!

A deafening roar shook the valley.

The massive wings beat once, and a violent gale swept across the lake, raising tsunami-like waves. Then, from within the light, a colossal figure surged forth.

Between those wings was a dragon—

A perfectly streamlined body, packed with explosive muscle. Long, elegant horns crowned its head. Its entire body was encased in massive, armor-like silver scales.

Behind it, a powerful tail bristled with ringed spikes, its tip sharp as a spear, gleaming with cold light—its length alone rivaling three times its body.

This dragon—

Was none other than the legendary supreme summon: Bahamut.

Each beat of Bahamut's wings stirred violent winds. Hovering high above, its majestic form eclipsed even the Azure Dragon.

"ROAR!!"

The giant monster, as if provoked, charged straight at Bahamut. Purple energy churned violently in its throat.

In contrast, beneath Bahamut's wings, golden energy cores began gathering a brilliant blue power. Before its body, countless points of light shimmered like stars.

Boom!

The monster fired first—a beam of purple energy blasting toward Bahamut.

At the same moment, Bahamut unleashed its attack.

The sky itself seemed to collapse into apocalypse—

Countless meteors streaked across the cloud-covered heavens, blazing like radiant blue lines. But behind their beauty lay pure destruction.

Bahamut's signature move—

Gigaflare.

BOOM!! BOOM!! BOOM!!

Meteors rained down, tearing the world apart. The lake seemed to evaporate, rising into thick clouds of steam. The falling fire engulfed everything, blotting out the sky.

It was like the end of the world.

On the ground, people screamed in terror. Even the Avengers scattered in panic.

Bahamut's attack spared no one—its sheer range threatened to annihilate the entire Ta Lo village, flattening even the surrounding bamboo forest.

The land turned charred black.

No one would have survived—

If not for the Azure Dragon summoning massive waves to shield them. Without that protection, everyone would have been reduced to ash beneath the Gigaflare.

"Holy—!!! Karl, are you trying to kill us too?!!!"

Tony shot into the air, amplifying his voice to maximum as he shouted furiously at Bahamut.

Bahamut didn't even glance at him.

Beneath its wings, energy began gathering again—because the massive monster still wasn't dead.

Indeed, the creature had proven cunning.

At the moment Gigaflare descended, it had summoned all the smaller monsters to shield itself—using their bodies as a living barrier.

Every single lesser creature was obliterated.

Not one survived.

But even with that sacrifice, the giant monster was left in a horrific state.

Its body was riddled with wounds. Its wings were shredded beyond recognition. Only a few of its tentacles remained. Foul blood poured endlessly from its mangled flesh—it was barely holding together.

"ROAR!!"

For the first time, the monster showed fear.

It turned and fled, staggering through the air in a pitiful retreat—completely different from its earlier ferocity. Bahamut's attack had shattered its bloodlust and greed.

Meanwhile, Bahamut gathered even greater power.

The energy converged toward its chest, now crackling with streaks of golden lightning—far surpassing even Ramuh's thunder in intensity.

Boom!!

In the next instant, the energy erupted.

A devastating beam shot forth like an unchained beast, racing toward the fleeing monster. Golden lightning coiled around it, carrying an ancient, savage force.

The beam engulfed the monster instantly.

It didn't even have time to scream—

It simply vanished, erased from the world of Ta Lo without a trace.

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Chapter 449 449: The Monster's End

Struck by the beam, the monster didn't even have time to scream before it was completely annihilated—erased silently from the world of Ta Lo.

"ROOOAR—!!!"

Bahamut threw its head back and roared. The sound waves were so powerful they became visible, rippling across the entire valley. Everyone on the ground clutched their ears and collapsed in pain—promptly earning another barrage of complaints from Tony.

Bahamut hovered proudly in the sky. Compared to it, even the Azure Dragon seemed small—barely the size of Bahamut's tail.

Fear flickered in the Azure Dragon's eyes. Yet it understood that this being, radiating primal violence, was not an enemy. It recognized the familiar soul within—it was the human it felt close to.

Bahamut lowered its gaze, its vertical pupils locking onto the dragon below. That single glance carried overwhelming dominance, like a sovereign observing an insignificant creature.

Gradually, Bahamut's massive form dissolved into countless points of starlight. The sky-covering figure faded from existence, until only a red cloak fluttered in the wind.

Then—a streak of silver lightning shot in and dove straight into the cloak's embrace.

It was Onion.

Karl rubbed the creature's large head vigorously, then mounted it like a victorious knight returning from battle, descending before the crowd.

"Karl, you idiot! Were you trying to kill all of us just now?! You even tried to kill me—you—!"

Tony zipped over instantly, unleashing a nonstop rant. The energy Bahamut had released earlier was beyond even JARVIS's detection limits—far exceeding the maximum capacity of Tony Stark's current systems.

Karl shoved Tony aside, cutting him off.

At that moment, the Azure Dragon also descended, carrying Shang-Chi and Xialing. The two leapt down lightly.

The dragon turned its gaze toward Karl. The violent aura was gone—only a sense of soul-deep familiarity remained.

They stayed in Ta Lo for a few days to recover.

During that time, Tony and Wenwu had their long-awaited fight. Wenwu once again wore the Ten Rings, while Tony donned his nanotech armor.

In the end, Tony won.

Granted, Wenwu seemed to hold back—but Tony's armor was no joke either. At one point, he nearly blasted Wenwu to death with a single shot.

Afterward, Wenwu left with Steve and the others, heading to the Avengers facility to atone for the crimes he had committed over the centuries. Gone was his former dominance—now he was simply a father.

The Ten Rings organization was fully handed over to Shang-Chi and Xialing.

In the United States, criminal organizations weren't entirely illegal—but terrorism certainly was. With Nick Fury's tacit approval, the Ten Rings underwent a "clean" transformation.

No more terrorism.

They rebranded as a security company. Their members became mercenaries, mostly taking contracts in cooperation with government agencies—protecting key personnel and the like.

Under Shang-Chi and Xialing's leadership, they no longer served evil causes.

After returning from Ta Lo, life went back to normal.

Karl resumed his laid-back lifestyle. The Avengers continued saving the world. Tony locked himself in his lab again.

"Tony's giving a donation speech at MIT. He invited us to come along."

That evening, Gwen returned to the office. Pepper had visited earlier to extend the invitation. MIT also happened to be Gwen and Peter's alma mater.

"What's he up to this time?"

Karl poked his head up from the couch, still gaming.

"Pepper said he's setting up a scholarship fund—open to all students. Anyone who qualifies gets financial aid, no repayment required."

"Oh? Then we should go check it out. I haven't seen your school yet. When is it?"

Karl tossed aside his controller and leaned over.

"Next Wednesday evening. Pepper said we'll fly there together."

Gwen handed him the invitation.

Karl didn't even glance at it before tossing it aside. If they were going with Tony, what use was an invitation?

Wednesday afternoon, Pepper arrived right on time, pushing open the office door. Tony followed behind her, looking half-asleep.

Karl looked no better—sprawled on the couch, his suit wrinkled beneath him. Gwen and the others were already prepared.

"Karl! How many times have I told you—sit up! I ironed that suit for you!!"

Gwen snapped.

Karl jolted upright instantly, sitting ramrod straight.

Tony yawned, plopped down beside Karl, and slumped into the couch without a shred of elegance.

"It's fine. The plane has professionals to handle our wardrobe. Even the worst wrinkles can be fixed."

As he spoke, both he and Karl melted into the couch like boneless creatures, their lazy postures perfectly synchronized.

That evening, the speech began as scheduled.

Karl sat in the front row, watching Tony on stage. Wearing holographic glasses, Tony stood inside a small, temporary set.

Inside it sat three people: two men and a woman—a gray-haired older man, a well-dressed elegant lady, and a young man lying on a couch with his head covered.

"Sweetheart, wake up. Say goodbye to your father."

The woman played the piano, her music echoing beautifully through the hall.

"Huh?"

Karl frowned.

This scene... felt strangely familiar.

The young man on the couch suddenly sat up—a Christmas hat on his head. He looked exactly like Tony, just younger.

"Since when do we have a homeless guy on our couch?"

The older man, dressed in a suit, carried the air of a seasoned capitalist.

"I come home for Christmas, and every time I do, you leave."

Young Tony muttered groggily, clearly dissatisfied.

Karl grew more confused. The scene felt so familiar—but he just couldn't place it.

On stage, the argument escalated between young Tony and his father, Howard Stark. If not for the mother mediating, it might have turned into a full confrontation.

After the couple left, the scene froze.

Tony, now in a suit, appeared beside the piano.

"This is my latest technology—the Binary Augmented Retro-Framing system. Though the name's a bit long—I'll probably change it."

He blew out the candle on the piano as the entire scene dissolved, removing his glasses.

"I spent nearly 600 million dollars developing this. No sane person would fund a project like this—but now, I'm donating it to MIT."

Tony stepped forward, walking out from the temporary stage set.

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Chapter 450 450: MIT Speech

"For this device, I've spent nearly six hundred million dollars. No normal person would fund a project like this—but now, I'm donating it to MIT free of charge."

Tony slowly stepped out from the stage set.

"MIT's mission has always been to generate and preserve knowledge, and to apply that knowledge to meet the world's greatest challenges. So, I've established this scholarship."

He paced across the stage at an unhurried pace. In front of him stood a massive teleprompter screen, scrolling through his prepared remarks.

"Starting now, any student who meets the criteria will have equal access to funding from Stark Industries. All your research projects can apply—once approved, you'll receive financial support. No strings attached. No taxes."

Tony's announcement drew thunderous applause and cheers from the audience. This fund was essentially free money—especially for research projects that had struggled to secure backing.

At MIT, most research projects relied on private capital. The school itself provided limited funding, so researchers or project leads usually had to seek sponsors on their own. But those investors were often exploitative, offering little money while attaching a mountain of conditions—sometimes turning researchers into unpaid labor.

Now, with Stark Industries establishing a dedicated fund, they no longer had to worry about money. They could focus entirely on their work. Who wouldn't be excited?

"Next, Miss Pepper Potts will introduce the details of the program."

With that, Tony wrapped up and stepped off the stage.

Backstage, a bald, overeager sycophant trailed behind Tony, chattering nonstop until Tony's patience finally snapped.

"Stop. Excuse me—I need to step away for a moment."

The irritation in Tony's voice was unmistakable. The man awkwardly smiled, clearly picking up on the hint—after all, Tony was the one signing the checks.

Tony walked alone to the elevator in the hallway, planning to head up to the rooftop for some air. At that moment, a middle-aged Black woman stepped up beside him, also waiting.

An awkward silence fell. Anyone who knew Tony understood—he had never been good at social interactions. In the past, he wouldn't even share an elevator with strangers.

"You've done a good thing for those young people," the woman said first.

"Oh... sure. It's nothing, really."

Tony shrugged indifferently, not even looking at her.

"From what I've seen, generosity is often rooted in guilt. But then again—when you have money... a few mistakes don't seem to matter, do they?"

Her words struck a nerve. Tony immediately glanced at her, forced a polite smile, and pressed the elevator button.

"Going up?" he asked awkwardly.

The woman didn't answer. Instead, she reached into her handbag. Instantly, Tony grabbed her wrist.

"What are you doing?!"

She frowned at him.

"Sorry. Occupational hazard."

Tony let out a breath. Ever since becoming Iron Man, he had developed a reflexive wariness toward strangers. Without his armor, he was just a regular man—if she pulled out a gun and emptied a magazine into him, that would be the end of him.

The woman pulled her hand free.

"I work in congressional human resources. I'm not a famous capitalist like you, but this job lets me support my son. And I'm proud that he became someone useful."

As she spoke of her son, her eyes began to redden.

With a sharp motion, she pulled out a photograph and slapped it against Tony's chest.

"His name was Charlie Spencer. You killed him. In Sokovia."

Her voice trembled with emotion. She had witnessed her son's death with her own eyes—helpless to do anything.

"Maybe to superheroes like you, it's nothing. You don't even know the names of the people who die."

Her tone turned cold.

"You think you're fighting for us? For ordinary people? No—you're fighting for yourselves. So tell me, who's going to avenge my son, Mr. Stark?"

"He's dead. And it's all your fault."

With that, she turned and walked away without another glance.

Tony stood frozen, the photo still in his hand, lost in thought—until Karl came looking for him.

"Hey... what's wrong?"

On the rooftop, the two sat atop a metal pipe frame. Karl could tell immediately that something was off.

"Do you think what we're doing is right?"

Tony looked up at the night sky. It was unusually clear—the stars visible even in the city.

"What do you mean?"

Karl frowned, not quite following.

"Just now..."

Tony recounted what had happened.

"So tell me—are we so-called superheroes saving people... or killing them?"

Karl let out a short laugh and looked up at the sky as well.

"You can't save everyone, Tony. Not me, not Steve, not any of us. No one can save everyone in a disaster. We're not gods. All we can do is save as many people as possible. The rest... even we can't help."

He sighed. He had never truly wanted to save the world—only to protect the people close to him. As for everyone else, he neither cared nor concerned himself.

"But we have hurt people. People have been injured—or killed—because of us."

A sense of helplessness welled up inside Tony.

"They didn't die because of us," Karl said calmly. "They died because of the criminals. Without us, the death toll in New York—or Sokovia—would've been far worse. It's because we were there that casualties were kept under control."

His words were cold—almost devoid of compassion. But the truth often was.

Karl didn't care. They had saved countless lives. In the Battle of New York, without them, Loki might have conquered Earth—or the nuke would've wiped out the entire city. In Sokovia, without them, the whole country—and possibly half the planet—would've been annihilated.

So to Karl, the dead were not a burden. They didn't weigh on his conscience.

It was like that famous dilemma: two railway tracks—one with a single person tied to it, the other with several. A train is coming. Who do you save?

To Karl, the answer was simple. Normally, he'd choose the many.

But if that one person was someone he cared about?

Then even if the other track held the entire world—

He would still choose the one.

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