### The Tie That Binds

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The Tie That Binds

by Canuck_Lex

Summary

SHIELD Agent Phil Coulson once brought the superheroes known as The Avengers together with his death at the hands of Loki. 5 years later, the same superheroes have been torn apart by the events surrounding the Sokavía Accords and the mess at the Leipzig-Halle Airport.

In a world distrustful and fearful of enhanced persons there seems to be no room for compromise, no common ground possible. Nothing can bring them back together.

Everything changes with leaked footage from a top secret meeting showing a dead man walking. And it looks like the world's best secret agent might, finally, be in over his head.

The Avengers wouldn't come back together for each other. Would they do it to help an old friend?

Would they do it for Phil Coulson?
**A Dead Agent's Gun**

**Chapter Notes**

Warning - very vague references to potential ill treatment (non-con/torture) of Wanda Maximoff during her incarceration on The Raft in Civil War.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**Washington, DC**

Spies are used to gunshots. It comes as part of the territory.

Therefore, this should mean that heads of intelligence agencies should also be used to gunshots.

Well, maybe just those who came up through the ranks. Those that lived long enough.

The heads appointed by their political masters, on the other hand... When shit started to go down, they tended to whimper, and faint, and usually needed to be rescued by their more experienced deputies.

Anyways, most of the leaders seated around the table in Washington, DC, to discuss the SHIELD threat, were more of the former. It was the usual suspects in the great game: Brits, Germans, Russians, Chinese, Brazilians, South Africans - although most noted it was quite unusual to see the Australians stalk in, take a seat and glower as if something had been stolen from them.

As international threats go, SHIELD had become a big one. An American organization, that was supposed to be long dead, now seemed to be very much alive, thank you. A now dead Director who claimed to be Inhuman, but wasn't. No obvious oversight, no clue as to their intentions, and dead silence through the usual channels instead of reassurance. The only thing that anyone could tell about SHIELD was that they were allying themselves with, if not outright recruiting, the "people" calling themselves Inhumans. What was their endgame?

As soon as the meeting started, 2 hours late, everyone knew that something was up. All of them knew a stall when they saw it.

Glenn Talbot was stalling like hell.

Until SHIELD Agent Daisy Johnson walked in and shot him in cold blood, that is.

But even with the Inhuman finally showing her true colours, it wasn't until much later that the real shock was even remotely recognized. And it only truly registered with a select few who had a chance to think back to Talbot's last words before his coma. Then watched the tape... the full tape... not the one "leaked" to the press.

"Daisy, thank God. Is Coulson with you?"

While admittedly there are many people named Coulson in the world, there is only one man with that face and unflappable nature, the man at Nick Fury's right hand for years. The legendary Agent who could not be bribed, bought or seduced. The man who just came rushing into the conference room, cutting down the Russian delegation, taking aim at the American MPs and then running out the back
door with the strange book the Russians brought with them.

The trouble was that Phil Coulson had been dead for 5 years, KIA in the Battle of New York.

Yes, spies are used to gunshots. What they aren't used to is a dead man firing them.

Someone had a lot of explaining to do. Unfortunately, with Talbot in a bloody coma, and SHIELD literally blown to bits, there didn't seem to be anyone left to do the explaining.

Fortunately, for Phil Coulson at least, more than just a select group of spies were watching.

Wakanda

King T'Challa looked at his band of powered refugees. They stayed out of the way, mostly, sparring in the gym, practicing against each other with their powers and equipment, watching the outside world unfurl without their intervention on CNN and the BBC.

Speaking of which...

"Captain Rogers, you may want to see this."

Steve Rogers looked up. "Yes, sir. Is it serious?"

T'Challa sighed. Over a year now, and he still couldn't convince Steve to call him anything but sir.

"I'm not sure, but it does concern the new SHIELD organization and the powered people you are monitoring."

Clint Barton came over.

"I really don't like that they've resurrected SHIELD as a wishy washy political tool, Steve. Too many of us have died defending those hacks in Washington. Seems like a slap in the goddammed face."

"Language, Barton." Clint rolled his eyes.

"Steve, we destroyed SHIELD for a reason." Sam Wilson put his hand on Steve's shoulder. "Too many secrets and lies, corrupted from the beginning."

Steve scowled at Sam. "Not quite the beginning."

Sam held up his hands. "No, not with Peggy and Howard Stark. But shortly afterwards, you have to admit it."

Steve nodded sadly. "The dream never quite matched the reality, did it?"

Wanda Maximoff said softly, "The registration of...enhanced...people, the enforcement of the Sokavicia Accords, continued under SHIELD's watch. That's more than enough reason to stay away from them."

T'Challa grimaced. He didn't care to think of what Wanda had endured on The Raft, but by the way her teammates moved to protect her when she faltered at times, he wasn't sure he wanted to know.

T'Challa said, "If you will come this way, I believe Ms. Carter has it queued up in the screening room."
Steve sketched a salute, and the rest of the team moved to follow their leader. Entering the screening room, T'Challa closed the doors behind them and activated the security protocols against any eavesdroppers, foreign or domestic.

Steve said, blushing a little, "Sharon, good to see you."

Sharon smiled back, "And you too Steve. It's good to see all of you. Let's get to it?"

The others took their seats, as Sharon continued, "The following was taken off CNN 6 hours ago. I'm trying to determine its authenticity, but no one seems to be talking much. We have several dead, and one in intensive care - General Glenn Talbot, head of the ATCU."

"The agency dealing with Inhumans?" asked Sam

"Yep. It seems that one of them may have snapped. Daisy Johnson."

"No, not Quake?" sighed Wanda. "She was actually doing some good for the Inhuman cause. I wonder what happened?"

The team watched the footage, mentally turning out the CNN talking head. There was no sound on the tape, just the visual of the woman entering the room, lifting her gun, and taking Talbot in the head.

"It's too bad, Talbot seemed to be one of the good ones. A bit straight laced, but good." said Sharon. "He was responsible for taking out the Hydra installations last year."

"The woman, Johnson, has she been apprehended?" asked Steve.

"No, not yet," replied Sharon.

Wanda bristled. "Why are we accusing her? We do not know her side of the story!"

Sam replied, "Wanda, she SHOT a high ranking official in cold blood! I can understand you can sympathize, but"

"Maybe she is forced to work with SHIELD, Sam, maybe they put her in chains in between missions, maybe they...." Wanda's hands began to glow ominously.

"Wanda, please...it's OK..."

"It's not OK, Sam."

"Wait."

Everyone's eyes turned to Clint. He had been so quiet, most had forgotten he was there.

Which was unusual in itself.

"Sharon, play that first bit again. Right before Talbot is shot. He says something. Zoom in as much as you can on that reflection of him."

Sharon flipped back and zoomed in. Clint leaned forward, concentrating. He watched as Talbot's lips moved, and then rocked back in his seat, his face paler than the others had ever seen before.

"Fuck me...No, it can't be..." he whispered
Wanda put a hand on his arm.

"Clint, what's wrong?"

Clint turned to Steve.

"Talbot asked for Phil Coulson."

Chapter End Notes

I love Agents of SHIELD. It's my hour of TV per week. However, sometimes they leave a plot thread hanging out, begging to be pulled on.

For example, Season 4 finale. Phil Coulson, still believed to be dead, shows up in security footage meant to be leaked to destroy the public perception of Inhumans. Talbot even asks for him by name in front of the one group that may still remember his name. I'm not sure we can argue any longer that the Avengers wouldn't know...or at least be able to figure it out.

I don't think that any of Coulson's old friends would leave him hanging out to dry - not if they knew he was alive. Of course, there's gonna be some explaining to do...by a lot of people, Phil included. That is, if they can find them...

Next chapter, a certain playboy billionaire gets his hands on the full security tape - and has words with one of his employees...

Oh, and points to you if you know why the Australians in particular would be ticked off at SHIELD and Talbot. It is Agents of SHIELD canon...Season 3, to be precise. :)}
A Rose By Any Other Name

Chapter Summary

In this brave new world, Tony Stark and his friends are finding that the line between enhanced and Inhuman, hero and monster is getting blurred. But Tony has too much to lose if he were to ever admit that the Sokavia Accords wasn't the solution it was supposed to be. What happens, though, when the fallout starts hitting those he cares about?

Even if they were dead and buried...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Stark Tower, NYC: (Former home of The Avengers)

It was another ordinary day for the extraordinary Tony Stark. He and James Rhodes were sitting in the entertainment room overlooking the city, griping about rehab (for Rhodey), and lack thereof (for Tony). No big threats on the horizon, no need for Iron Man. Tony could get some downtime before going back to DC to try to continue to massage the big mess that the Sokovia Accords became into something that everyone could live with.

If Tony weren't so convinced that the Accords were bloody necessary, he might hated what they made him to be. Responsible. Adult. A Peter Pan grown up. If everyone would just...play...ball...then everything would smooth itself out, and maybe things could go back to the way they were before.

If he kept telling himself that, it might actually come true.

Let's face it, thought James Rhodes, a not busy Tony Stark quickly becomes a bored Tony Stark. And a bored Tony Stark can be a very dangerous Tony Stark. With explosions - real or metaphorical.

"Stop brooding, Tony, it's adding worry lines to your face..."

Tony smirked. "It's called gravitas, Rhodey, it's the thing these days. It's distinguished."

"Distinguished, my ass..."

"Hey, I have a high schooler I need to keep in line."

"With a surprisingly hot Aunt you'd like to..."

Tony glared at him. "Watch it...Rhode kill...There are some lines I don't cross. Parker's family is one of them."

"How is the brat these days?"

"He's not a brat... he's my junior Science Bro...if I can keep him alive to graduation. Don't worry,
Rhodster, nobody's replacing you."

"I didn't say I was worried, Tony."

Truth be told, Rhodes was a little worried about Tony. Scratch that, he was getting pretty worried about his friend. Lately he had been throwing himself into his work, for S.I., for President Ellis, for the UN, withdrawing more and more from his friends (except for this Parker kid). He seemed to be grimly determined to make everything work, by his sheer willpower alone, believing that America and eventually the world would settle under the Accords. Maybe he believed that everything that happened, everything he lost, would be worth it if it did.

It was too bad, thought Rhodes, that the world didn't work that way.

Just then, the elevator opened, and Vision floated into the room, groceries hung over his arm.

"Hey Viz, what's up? Wasn't expecting to see you up here." commented Rhodes.

"Hello James. Hello, Tony. I was in need of company, may I join you?"

"Not at all, V, pull up a chair!"

As Vision put the groceries on the counter and floated towards the two men, Tony frowned.

"Thought we were working on those human mannerisms, V. Most people's feet usually stay on the floor."

"I apologize, Tony." Vision's feet touched the ground. "Right now I find myself a little...preoccupied." He sat stiffly in the armchair across from Tony and Rhodes.

"What's eating you today? Still worried about Wanda? Look, sooner or later, she'll pop up on our radar, then we can get her away from those hooligans, bring her back..." Tony stopped as Vision shook his head.

"I am worried, Tony, but not just over her, although she is a part of it."

Vision continued. "Tony, today I was surrounded and attacked coming out of the store. On the street." Tony and Rhodes sat up alert.

"You weren't in any danger...you could take out anyone that even looked at you the wrong way."

"No, no physical danger. In fact, I don't think they even realized who I was. It's who they thought I was that concerns me."

"Who they thought you were?"

"Yes, they called me Inhuman scum, told me I should..."

Rhodes said grimly, "Don't need to continue Viz, I've probably heard it all before."

"Racist bigoted jackasses, V, nothing to get excited over. Give it a week, they'll crawl back under their rock."

"Tony, I have been monitoring for anti-Inhuman or anti-enhanced person sentiments. Ever since S.H.I.E.L.D. Director Jeffrey Mace was found murdered, there has been an alarming growth pattern across the United States."
"But he wasn't Inhuman, that was another SHIELD cover up." Tony bit out. Tony wanted nothing to do with the "SHIELD" that had slithered out of the grave. It brought back too many painful memories, this parody of an organization he had come to trust, then was betrayed by when Cap...Steve Rogers turned over one rock too many.

"No, he wasn't. But the first wave of crimes against enhanced people started the day after his body was found."

Rhodes stirred uneasily. "The Bugle's reporting that Quake killed the Director when she found out he wasn't Inhuman."

Tony snorted. "Fake news...J Cubed wouldn't know the truth if it bit him in the ass."

"Jameson's also the one leading the charge against your little Science Bro."

It was Tony's turn to be uneasy. "Peter hasn't said anything..."

"Maybe that's because if he did, you'd make him stop, Tony." Rhodes replied "Not that he would, reminds me of someone I knew back in the day..."

Vision's eyes glazed for a moment. Then he looked up.

"Tony, we need to turn on CNN. Now."

"Sure, V. Whadya got?" Tony waved his hands against the wall. Breaking news filled the space.

"Something that may change everything."

The three watched as a young woman, identified as Daisy Johnson, strode into a meeting room, lifted a gun, and shot a man in the head. The ticker at the bottom of the screen identified the victim as General Glenn Talbot, in intensive care, 5 dead, Inhuman threat still on the loose.

"So the Inhuman Resistance to the Accords has begun, V?" snarled Tony.

"Has it really, Mr. Stark?" Tony and Rhodes turned to Vision, who sounded...disappointed? Vision, like JARVIS before him, only called Tony that with that tone when he was being particularly dense.

"Or is that what someone wants us to believe?"

They turned back to the screen.

Tony leaned forward.

"Talbot was head of the ATCU, supposed to be dealing with Inhumans."

Rhodes snorted. "Except he wasn't dealing much with them at all. Talbot was running after the Watchdogs, mostly. Left the Inhumans to SHIELD."

Tony said, "SHIELD again...Is anyone reporting the source of the tape, V?"

"No, Tony, not yet."

Tony shrugged off his jacket. "I'm tired of playing nice. FRIDAY?"

A female voice surrounded them, "Yes, Mr. Stark?"
Tony grinned at Vision, "This footage, can you get inside Turner Tower and get me a source?"

"Is that all? I was hoping for something more difficult," the voice pouted. "The source is the Pure Human movement, came via e-mail, along with a manifesto which they are not reporting."

Rhodes frowned. "Pure Human is a Watchdog front, Tony."

"The plot thickens, Rhodey." Tony's head cocked to the side. "Those two at the side. The one with the book. Anything look odd about them to you?"

"They're not flinching when Johnson enters the room."

"Like they were expecting her?"

"Uh huh."

"I think, Tony," commented Vision, "We need the whole story. There must be more of this tape."

"Hey, Fri girl!"

"That is extremely sexist, Mr. Stark,"

"Enough with the back talk, you wanted something more difficult to do, slip into the DOD's system, preferably without alerting Ross, and get me the rest of that footage - time frame 20 minutes before and after this event - like a good...female assistant."

"Better, Mr. Stark. This may take a few moments."

As they waited, Tony turned to Rhodes.

"Speaking of our esteemed leader...why haven't we been called in on this? Bloodthirsty Inhumans on the loose, I'm sure the UN would sign off on this. But not a peep from Ross."

"I'm liking this less and less, Tony."

"I have the footage, Mr. Stark."

"Thank you for your valuable service, FRIDAY. Turn off this crap, and put on a real show."

The news footage was replaced with a meeting in progress. As the men watched, Vision commented, "My facial recognition system identifies many heads of international intelligence agencies seated at that table."

"I recognize the Ruskie with the book. Anton Ivanov - ran into him several times at black tie galas in Europe. Thought he was Russian Oil, friends with the current head honcho. What's he doing here?"

As Ivanov ranted on about his book, Rhodes lifted an eyebrow. "Someone's been into the kool aid..."

Tony snorted as Talbot ground out something about "L. Ron Horsecrap..."

As Agent Johnson walked in, Talbot...relaxed?

Then the last words Tony Stark ever expected to hear hit his ears,

"Daisy, thank God. Is Coulson with you?"
The unflappable, unsurprisable Tony Stark stopped. Stared in complete surprise as, on the wall, Johnson fired and chaos reigned.

"Holy shit...I didn't just...Rhodes..."

"Tony, you OK?"

"No...I...tell me he did not just say the name Coulson..."

"Affirmative, Mr. Stark." chirped FRIDAY. He said Coulson."

"Tony" noted Vision calmly. "There's more."

Tony Stark turned back to the wall, to see new figures enter, taking down the Russians, turning their guns on the MPs, then one figure, one he knew too well, scooped up the book (really, what was with that thing?) and dashed out the door. The tape ended shortly afterwards.

Vision said quietly, "Tony, my facial recognition system identified that man as..."

"Phil Coulson." Tony slumped onto the ground. "Fuck me..."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for continuing with me!

Next up, Natasha Romanoff meets up with some old friends, and an old IOU comes up for collection. After that, only one more party really needs to be heard from, and he's not too concerned about Phil Coulson.

That book, on the other hand...

(Oh and the Australian reference from last chapter? From Season 3's The Inside Man - SHIELD makes a raid on the Australian base to save an Inhuman: Eden Fesi, a.k.a. Manifold.)
Chapter Summary

Natasha Romanoff runs into some old friends, and an IOU, which Natasha thought she would never pay, comes up for collection.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Seattle

Drake Roarson had had a long day at the office. So slipping into his favourite watering hole during happy hour for a drink before heading home was nothing new for him. A drink turned into two, then three, then...

Hello, gorgeous. Foxy redhead, brilliant green eyes, not one of the regulars. Which was good for him, because it meant she hadn't heard his lines yet. He sidled in next to her.

15 minutes later, after his most inspired opening got him nothing more than a tired smirk, he nursed his drink, trying to come up with something to get a pulse out of the ice queen. He directed his gaze over to the TV that Red had been gazing at (rather than him). The local news station was running, again, news of that Inhuman freak shooting that officer.

"Inhuman freaks..." he muttered. This earned him a glance from green eyes. Well, then...

"Should lock 'em up, put them away somewhere where real people don't have to see them."

"Idiot."

That was not the reaction Drake was looking for.

"You on their side, honey? Maybe you one of them..."

Even half drunk, Drake could recognize a killer's gaze when it was levelled at him. He froze as fingernails discreetly dug into painful pressure points.

"First, little man, I'm not sure if you actually believed that, or if that was yet another one of your half assed, ill-considered come-ons. Secondly, I do not have the time to deal with the shit that would follow should I deal out the treatment you so richly deserve for that remark."

Military? CIA? Oh, God, had he picked the wrong one...He whimpered as Red dug her nails slightly deeper.

"Before I turn you back loose on the world, two things I give to you to think on."

"One: what is the difference between women who quake and men who are given powers with a shot of super serum? Men like, oh, say, Captain America?"

What the hell? Cap, wherever he was, wasn't some freak...
"And two, why would a woman, with all the powers of nature at her disposal, the ability to level buildings with a wave of her hand, require something so ordinary as a gun to kill someone?"

"Now, fuck off and find somewhere else to be, before I become more than annoyed."

Nails retracted, releasing the hapless Drake, who turned and fled into the rainy night.

The bartender approached. Natasha Romanoff sighed.

"I'll pay for his drink, Mike."

"No worries, Nat, it's on the house. I don't mind if we see the back of Drake, he's one of those who chase the ones I want to see out the door."

Nat chuckled.

"Gotta admit, I hadn't thought about the gun before."

Nat shrugged. "It was the first thing I saw. She had the surprise on him, could've broken his bones, like they say she did to the Director. But if you ask me, something's fishy there too..."

Mike leaned in, "Is anyone asking you these days, Nat?"

"Nah, I'm out of the game, Mike. No one wanted to listen to me then, and it's too late to change anything now."

"Too bad. I have some other old timers who'd like to chat for a bit."

Mike placed a tequila shot in front of Natasha, and nodded to the back corner. Her eyes tracked over to it, and then widened. She shot the drink, grabbed her jacket and moved to the corner booth.

"After five years, you still spring for the rotgut?" she asked her old friend.

Bobbi Morse smirked. "Not on SHIELD's payroll anymore, Nat. We can't afford the good stuff here."

"And when we try to get into the places that make the good stuff, we usually have to exit in a hurry."

continued Lance Hunter, Bobbi's partner, and her...

"You wearing your rings again, Hunter?"

"Yeah...she's my ex ex now..."

"Are congratulations in order?" Nat directed at Bobbi, sliding in the booth across from them.

"Nah, he's the same little shit disturber that he ever was..." Bobbi smirked back. However, the smirk was affectionate, and Natasha briefly thought of a gentle scientist who was still, as far as she knew, missing.

"So, spill, what have you been up to since SHIELD..." The couple glanced at each other.

"We never really left it, Nat. Not until about a year ago."

Nat froze. Her two friends..."You were...fucking...Hydra?" Her hand slid to her gun.

"WHAT? No!"
"Well, darling, you were undercover with Jemma..."

"Not the time, Hunter..."

Bobbi matched Nat glare for glare.

"No, we were not goddamned Hydra. It's just that...SHIELD never really went away."

"I'm listening...." Nat's hand never strayed from the hilt.

"Ladies, settle down. Mike can only cover so much.." mused Hunter.

Nat and Bobbi eased back.

"Look, after SHIELD fell, there were groups of us still loyal, still determined to fulfill the oath we all swore. Hydra was regrouping, and we had to do something about it."

"It's long, and its complicated, and we weren't there for the first part of it, but right after the fall, Nick Fury found the last loyal high ranking agent, and made him Director of a new SHIELD."

Nat stared. "That's insane! SHIELD was declared a terrorist group!"

"Oh, we know, love." snickered Hunter. "Worked from the shadows, chased by the Army, and all that."

"Who...who..would be crazy enough to accept?"

"Well, he was crazy for a while..." then Hunter sobered. "But he was the only man that I would trust to walk into hell for me and Bobbi..."

"And he did it, too. Back in Russia, last year, Hunter and I were caught in an op. No way out. Looking at a firing squad. And in he walked, he pulled President Ellis in, was going to spring us."

Bobbie remembered. Lance took her hand.

"President Ellis?? And?"

Bobbi shrugged. "SHIELD couldn't go public yet, no one was ready. And we were dealing with the last Hydra big shot, Gideon Malick. We made our choice, he disavowed us. But got us home."

"We haven't seen any of them since, Nat. Not until that tape came out."

Natasha was reeling. "SHIELD existed before last fall? Malick was Hydra? He was World Council!"

"We know, that's part of the reason why Ellis couldn't touch him. Why he needed us."

Bobbi caught Natasha's eye, "But something went wrong last summer. Jeffrey Mace wasn't the Director when we...left. And Daisy? When we last saw her, she was cuddled up to a boyfriend who couldn't be torn away from her. With all of her press, we haven't seen him all, and then, she was on the run, robbing banks, for God's sake, shows up in LA, looking all emo, and now goes from public hero into public enemy number one in a space of 5 months or so."

Natasha snorted. "A lot of things went wrong last summer, Bobbi."

"Now, they're very wrong. Their base blown up, Talbot in a coma, Daisy is being framed for this, and with her the rest of the Inhuman population. This is getting too big. We need help, Nat."
Natasha shook her head. "I can't. I have an arrest, if not shoot, on sight on me with the FBI, Interpol. Thaddeus Ross wants my head on a platter. I've burned my bridges with Stark, and got no clue where Steve is. If this is the real SHIELD, then they know. Sometimes things go bad. Sometimes you have to leave someone behind to take the fall."

Bobbi shook her head. "No. He built SHIELD back up the right way, before it all went to hell again. He came back for us. But that's who he was. He came back for you, so many times..."

"What are you talking about?"

Bobbi pulled a much folded, well kept picture out of her purse.

"This is the SHIELD we left. I think you'll figure it out, Nat."

Natasha unfolded the page. A group of friends hovered around a table. Bobbi was there, laughing with a black man she vaguely thought she knew. She recognized Daisy from the footage, with a taller sandy haired man draped over her, linking arms with a younger woman. Lance was raising a pint with a kid in glasses. Melinda May...was that her?...had a slight smirk at the goings on.

But there, right at the edge...he looked more worn, and had a black glove on...but he was looking at the rest of the team...

The way he used to look at her and Clint, after a successful mission.

"SHIELD Director Phil Coulson." murmured Bobbi. "And we can't find him."

"We owe him, Natasha. Will you help us?"


"You're going to tell me everything, Morse, Hunter."

"Of course."

"Come on, we have a long drive ahead."

---

**CODA**

*Unidentified diner, American Eastern Seaboard*

The seven friends were friendly enough, polite, enthusiastic, even, about a greasy diner in the middle of nowhere.

It wasn't until the lights went out, and one of them muttered "Here we go," did any of their fellow diners realize anything was wrong.

Of course, the armed men sort of clued them in, and people fled as the group raised their hands in surrender.

"Phillip J. Coulson?"

"Yep, that's me. You got us. Nice job. And hey, congrats on the whole power-outage thing. It was very ominous.."

Coulson was cut off mid-snark by a tiny device snapping open. The world froze.
"The window closes in less than two minutes."

If anyone had been watching, they would have seen the small group, carried out like so many mannequins and stowed into 4 waiting vans.

Then the vans drove off into distance, leaving no trace behind.

Chapter End Notes

First, some dialogue here (and in the last chapters) has been taken from Agents of SHIELD, "World's End". All credit to the writers of that episode. (Author's note, May 31/17 - If I'm going to quote Coulson's awesome snark, I should at least do it correctly. I've amended this...)

So most of the players, who are currently available, that is, are accounted for. There's just one party left to be heard from, but...he's not overly interested in the whereabouts of our favourite missing SHIELD agent.

Unless he's got a particular book in...hand? (Sorry, couldn't resist...)
Coulson's Last Order

Chapter Summary

Dr. Strange has had a long few days. But so has the last SHIELD Agent left standing.

Too bad they're about to get longer...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sanctum Sanctorum, NYC

Dr. Stephen Strange was many things - healer, defender, master of the arts arcane.

The one thing he was not was an inter-galactic babysitter. And he had had enough of dealing with the bickering Odinson family. Even his cloak tried to strangle them at times. If they needed any more...help...he would be more than happy to refer them to Dr. Phil.

The ratings from that show episode's alone would earn him that man's gratitude for life. Or at least until Tuesday. Hollywood was nothing if not fickle and forgetful.

Now, he was home. He could put his feet up, brew up some tea, forget about the world (or worlds) for a spell.

He had just settled in, when he sensed a knock at the front door. No. No. No. No. No. No. He was not in. He was due some down time, damn it!

If it was something inter-dimensional, then the alert wouldn't be a knock on the door. Wong would have made sure he was alerted to it, and he'd be off to see what was trying to get through the gates. No, this was mundane, this-Earthly ordinary. And they could go away.

His cloak glared at him. How clothing can glare, Strange wasn't sure, but it was glaring at him now. All right, they could come back. Tomorrow. He glared right back. He was feared by neurosurgeons the world over. Interns had been known to faint at his displeasure. He had faced off against Dormammu himself. He was not going to let a cloak run rough shod over him.

Fine, a compromise. If it was potentially world-ending, he'd talk to them. If not, tomorrow.

"Is that ok with you, cloak?"

He needed to get out more often.

His study door opened, and Wong stepped through.

"Wong, I swear, I will get you a private concert with Beyonce, if you will make whoever it is go away."

Wong appeared to consider it for a moment, and Strange felt a little hopeful.
"Dr. Strange, there is an Agent Piper out front to see you."

"Agent of what...CIA, MI6, CSIS, Mossad?"

"SHIELD."

"Not interested."

"She said Agent Phil Coulson sent her."

Strange considered the name. It sounded familiar.

Wong continued, "He is on the list of those the Ancient One owed a favour to, Strange."

"That was a very short list. Isn't he dead?"

"Apparently not."

Strange groaned. "Can't she come back tomorrow?"

Wong hesitated. "She said to tell you that Agent Coulson knows where the Darkhold is."

Strange got to his feet. The blasted cloak floated across the room, wrapped itself around his shoulders, and gave his throat a warning squeeze. All right, all right. He did agree to world-ending situations.

"Show Agent Piper in, Wong."

Agent Piper stood at parade rest in front of Dr...Strange's desk. While her body remained motionless, her eyes flitted across the room, taking everything in. She didn't know if she was in a temple, a church or in the headquarters of some cult. However, she had seen stranger things in the past year since she had signed on with Coulson.

All things considered, though, Coulson must have been desperate to send her here. The events of the past month, hell, the past couple of days, even, he was probably right. She had been hoping that she'd turn a corner, and there they'd be, waiting to pick her up. Or she'd get a call, and the extraction code would let her know where to go.

Nothing but silence. With the "evidence" piling up against Agent Johnson, against SHIELD, she didn't need a blue and white lanyard to tell her that things went south. And she had her final orders from Coulson.

"Get the briefing binder to Dr. Stephen Strange. His headquarters are in New York - I think you should be able to find it. Tell him I sent you, they owe me a favour at Kamar-Taj."

"Kamar...what, sir?"

"Never mind, Piper, I hope you won't have to do this. This new guy, I heard he can be...difficult. If he won't see you, tell him that I know where the Darkhold is. If AIDA keeps her hands on it, he may be the only one to stop her."

"What if I can't find him, sir?"

Phil Coulson grinned, and clapped his young agent on the shoulder.
"How do you feel about Tibet, Piper?"

"Fucking freezing, sir. I'll find this Sanctum Sanctorum." One last salute, and she was off.

And now she was here, in front of this circus magician, who was leafing through the binder with a frown on his face.

He looked up.

"Take a seat, Agent Piper."

As she sat, he continued, "Drink?"

"Excuse me?"

"Would you like something to drink?"

"I wouldn't turn down a beer."

The man waved his hand, and the air in front of her shimmered briefly. A mug of ice cold beer appeared in front of her.

Dr. Strange closed the binder, and considered her for a moment.

"Have you read this, Agent Piper?"

"I've been briefed on the events in it, yes. The ones I didn't live through."

Strange rubbed at his chin.

"The events in East LA, we were a little...distracted...to notice the inter-dimensional ripples."

Behind Piper, the silent Wong snorted.

"I must admit, though, I did sense a tear in between dimensions recently. I was going to investigate to see what came through."

"Why haven't you yet?" demanded Piper.

Strange rolled his eyes, "I've been playing nursemaid to a couple of Asgardian man-children, trying to keep a god of thunder and a god of mischief from doing more harm than good to New York again. It's been a long week."

Piper got to her feet. "My people...I...We've just got them out of some virtual Hydra land, and now, for all I know, they could be dead! You've had a long week? We've had a hell of a year!"

"Sit back down, Agent Piper." Strange waved his hand, and a force shoved Piper back in her chair. "Forgive me, I was hoping for a night off, not tracking down a book that's kept itself hidden since well before my time."

Wong snorted again. Strange glared at him. His cloak rippled over his shoulders. Was it...laughing?

Piper rubbed her eyes. She really needed a break.

"Enough, both of you...not you, Agent."

Piper glanced around.
"Who..."

"My cloak. It has a strange sense of the absurd. Long story."

Alrighty then. Perhaps she should go find Tony Stark...

"I assure you, Phil Coulson was right to send you to me. Although if he had given us the Darkhold instead of the Koenig family, we might have been able to head some of this off."

Strange continued, "Did you come into physical contact with the book, Agent Piper?"

"No sir. When we had it, Agent Coulson kept it in his possession at all times."

"Has he read the book?"

"Not as far as I know, sir. He gave strict instructions that no one was to open the book. His intention was to destroy it as soon as possible."

"All right, we'll assume no. For now. Do you know who else besides Coulson and the Koenigs handled the book?"

"I believe Agent Melinda May did, maybe Agent Leo Fitz? That damned AIDA, and I think that's it."

"Not that many. So this should be relatively simple."

Dr. Strange took the binder and moved to a book stand underneath a window.

"Magic follows laws, Agent Piper. I'm going to invoke the Law of Contagion."

"Bless you." The cloak shimmied appreciatively across Strange's shoulders.

"The idea is this. Coulson touched these last pages, they're handwritten by him. Therefore, if I follow the traces he left on these pages, that should allow me to track anything else he has touched, like the Darkhold."

Piper frowned. "Wait, you're going after the book? What about Coulson and his team?"

Strange didn't look up from the binder. Oddly enough, it was Wong who replied.

"Agent Piper, we understand your priorities. However, you must understand ours. SHIELD deals with the physical threats to this world. We deal with much, much more, and on a greater scale."

"You have wandered onto a battlefront of a war lasting eons, good vs. evil, forces of light vs. dark. The Darkhold was considered by the Ancient One to be a powerful weapon for the Dark, and we lost it at a high cost. While we understand your concern for your friends, our first concern, which Phil Coulson understood on some level, must be to retrieve the book."

"I am sorry, Agent Piper." Strange said. "There is this. If all went well, and the book is with your friends, then we may assist them at the same time as getting the Darkhold. If it is not..."

"Then AIDA probably has it, and they're probably dead. And we're in a hell of a lot of trouble. I understand. One question. Why the window? Do you get better...reception...over there for...whatever?"

Strange lifted an eyebrow. "It's so I can see the writing indents on the page better, Agent Piper. What
do you think I am, some New Age guru?"

Wong chuckled, as Strange closed his eyes and concentrated. He quickly opened them.

"I do not sense the Darkhold."

"Then Coulson destroyed it."

"No, Agent Piper, Coulson and SHIELD do not have the means to physically destroy the Darkhold. It is so powerful, I would have sensed its destruction on the astral plane. No, this means it no longer exists in this dimension."

"And Coulson?"

"A moment. I believe we must speak to him to find out what has happened. There is a lingering trace connecting those who came into contact with the book."

Strange stepped over to the wall, tapped on a button. Light played across the wall, bringing up a globe. At the bottom right of the screen flashed the word "Google".

Piper looked at Wong. He gazed back and said, "We do know how to use computers, Agent Piper. We're not savages."

"I'm beginning to understand that," muttered Piper.

Spots on the globe began to glow. A cluster near Pleasantville. A spot in the mid-west United States. A spot moving over the Atlantic Ocean. And a brighter spot, which disappeared quickly from somewhere in Eastern Europe.

"So, where's Coulson?" demanded Piper impatiently.

Strange turned to her and Wong. A troubled look was on his face.

"There are two problems. The first is that, although I sense Phil Coulson is still alive, he is distant. To be plain, Coulson is nowhere on Earth."

"Secondly, that spot in Eastern Europe, the one that was brighter than the others? That represents someone who has done more than touch the book. They've read it. And something is hiding them."

"Damn it, Coulson," Piper whispered. "Where are you?"

CODA

Somewhere in Eastern Europe

The being smiled as he put the jar holding Anton Ivanov's head on a shelf overlooking the room. His tool was protected, for now, until he ceased to be of use.

"I am calling the remaining LMD's to our new location, my friend," Ivanov said. "From there, we shall continue our efforts to remake the world into the one it should have always been."

"Without Phil Coulson's interference."

The head scowled. "I still want to see him die slowly, preferably at my...avatars' hands."
"My friend, you focus too much on the short term, that is not like you, that is what got your girlfriend killed."

"That...thing...was no lover of mine, I assure you."

"Then think of this. Coulson has been...removed...to a place where he can only watch as we fulfill our destiny. He has no champions, his team separated, no one to...shield...him from the consequences of his actions. What better revenge is there but to win, to destroy everything he cherishes, everyone that he loved. Then, only then, bring him home so that you may slay him in the dust of the ruins of his life. Knowing it is all his fault."

Anton Ivanov gaped at the being. Then a cruel smile came over his face, and the two shared a laugh of maniacal glee.

Who was left to know that he existed?

Who was left to stop them?

Chapter End Notes

Did I mention that Agents of SHIELD sometimes leaves plot threads dangling? Like someone’s head in a jar unaccounted for?

And yes, that's Google Earth the good Doctor is using. A very useful program that is...especially when in tune with the cosmos....

Next up...well...we're going to take a side road. You see, not everyone is accounted for yet.

Bucky Barnes is still in stasis. Thor, Hulk are off world, and Peter Parker's finishing up his year in high school (sorry, the movie is just too close to incorporate him...)

However, there are two heroes still missing, and we really should wrap them up before proceeding. I was planning on doing it here, but Ivanov just wouldn't leave me alone.
Interlude: Choices

Chapter Summary

Not all heroes take the same path.

And not all paths lead to missing SHIELD Agent Phil Coulson.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

San Francisco

Cassie Lang snuggled down into her bed. Mommy had called for lights out 10 minutes ago, but it was still light outside, and there was no school tomorrow. She could wait up a little while longer.

She carefully placed her favorite Thomas train beside her. Luckily, Daddy had shrunk it back down to its right size after the mean man went away. Paxton had wanted to take it in, for evidence, but after the swat Mommy had given him, he had let her keep it.

Paxton was all right. Daddy said he had a stick up his...somewhere. Cassie hoped it didn't hurt.

Something small came flying through the window, settled down on the bed. A few moments later, Thomas's engine began to glow and a soft "toot, toot" could be heard.

Cassie smiled.

"Hello, Daddy", she whispered.

A thumbprint settled in on the pillow next to her.

"Hi, sweetheart! How's Daddy's favourite girl?"

Scott Lang smiled, as he heard his daughter chatter softly about her day.

The two talked for about half an hour, Daddy-daughter time, and then Scott sighed.

"Well, pumpkin, time for sleep. I'll stop by in a couple of days."

Cassie frowned. "I don't want you to go, Daddy."

Scott patted Cassie's chin.

"Hey, your bedtime was what, 45 minutes ago? You need your sleep, and I don't want to get you into trouble."

"I love you, Daddy."

"I love you too, Cassie."

Thomas tooted again, and a small insect rose from Cassie's bed.
Cassie watched as Daddy flew out the window, and closed her eyes and settled into sleep.

Scott had Ant-Tony Jr. buzz over the front of the house. His former wife, Maggie, was sitting out on the front steps.

"You can come down, Scott. Paxton is at work."

Ant-Tony Jr. landed on the front steps. Scott got off, and activated the suit. Back to his normal size, he looked at his ex.

"How'd you know..."

"Mommy radar. No, Thomas's toot is a bit of a giveaway. I don't mind, really, she doesn't get to see you that often. Coffee?"

Maggie handed him a cup.

"Thanks. How's Paxton?"

"Good...well...disturbed about this whole Inhuman thing."

Scott scowled. "Yeah, bet he is."

Maggie glared at him. "The whole 'demonizing innocent people because they're different from everyone else' thing, you ass."

Scott flushed. "Sorry, Mags. I've just been hearing it a lot recently. It's even starting in my neck of San Fran, from people who should know better."

"It's understandable, Scott. If the alt-right is targeting Inhumans, then others get to slide under the radar for a while. It's short-sighted...but understandable."

They sat in silence, sipping coffee for a while.

"How's Cap?"

"I don't know. I haven't heard from him since they dropped me off in the East Coast."

"At least Luis was there to give you a ride home."

"Yes, and 72 hours of his latest 'I know a guy' stories." Scott laughed. "Oh, man, I've never been so happy to hear them. There was a time I thought I never would. Or see him. Or Cassie and you."

"Even Henry and Hope didn't know where they were keeping you. You know, I never asked you...why'd you go? To Germany?"

"Hey, when Captain America calls you up for service, you don't turn him down."

"You always did root for the underdog."

"And doesn't that say something about the world, Mags, when Captain America is the underdog."

"Steve Rogers, anyways."

"Yeah, they separated the man from the uniform, didn't they? Anyways, I gotta go. Thanks for the coffee, Maggie."
"You're welcome." Maggie put a hand on Scott's arm. "Scott, you should know. There's an unofficial order from the police chief. On enhanced people, but you specifically."

Scott tensed. "And?"

"If they don't have to notice you....they won't. In fact, Paxton told me that he's not going to see you, even if he has to."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you can come over for dinner on Saturday. If you want?"

"Yeah. I'd like that."

Scott turned to go, and then hesitated.

"When Cap freed us, Maggie, we all had to make a choice. My choice was to come back here. To be Cassie's Dad. For as long as I could."

He swallowed, and continued. "I'll never regret that choice, Mags."

"I know, Scott."

"See you Saturday." A blurring of the air, and Scott Lang could no longer be seen on the steps. A moment later, something brushed her cheek.

And then an ant flew off into the California night.

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**Somewhere beyond human comprehension**

The Rider subsided, allowing Robbie Reyes to take back over for a while. Until they stumbled on the next wave.

Robbie leaned on something organic, that back home he'd call a "tree". A burnt-out husk of a tree, given that last battle, but at least it was familiar.

They had come to an understanding, over the past year. Especially after that last stunt with AIDA. It would be so easy to lose his humanity to the Rider, but one of the reasons they made such a good team was that humanity. That knowledge of fighting for a just cause, in a rather extreme manner, perhaps, but knowing he stood with the forces of Light meant something to him. Kept them going.

So Robbie got to be the driving force most times, with the Rider taking over when there was work to be done.

He could always sense it, its grim immortal perspective, just behind his thoughts. He talked with it more often now - not that there was anyone else to talk to here.

"You know, a beer could be very nice, once in a while."

*Sorry, I don't think demons own bars. Hell's Angels not excepting.*

"Whoever said the Grim Reaper didn't have a sense of humor..."

*Probably me. Not much to find funny in our line of work.*
"True enough."

Robbie looked over the scenery. Pretty flat in this area. He'd get a good run out of his car Lucy down here.

And then the demon sand would grab her, drag us all under.

All right. Lucy was better off where she was. With SHIELD. Hopefully, Coulson and Daisy were treating his baby better than the impound.

You don't want to think about them.

No, Robbie didn't. He missed them. Coulson, Daisy, Mack and the rest. But he couldn't go back.

Well, he could...but not until he absolutely had to.

Every minute he spent here, or at least not there, every hour, every day, hell, every year if he could stand it, meant another block of time Phil Coulson had to be with his friends. With Daisy.

With the pain that he and the Rider sensed that they had all been through, they owed them as much time as they could give them.

Not for the first time, he demanded of the Rider, "It's not fair. He's a good man. Why did you have to make a deal in the first place?"

And not for the first time, he heard, Life isn't fair, Robbie Reyes. And we all have done things requiring penance. I am bound by laws, as are you. As are they.

Phil Coulson was well aware of the price he would be asked to pay to take on My Aspect. There were other choices he could have made.

"Letting AIDA win was a choice?"

We would have caught up to her, in time. Whether Coulson and his team would have survived her and the Darkhold, that is a path untaken. But a choice, nevertheless.

"Coulson is a good man. Granted, he threatened to throw me out an airplane once, but he had cause. What does he have on his soul that would justify this deal?"

The Rider laughed.

Again, Robbie Reyes, good is immaterial. The holiest saint in your world would have faced the same bargain with the same choice. But Phil Coulson is no saint. He has his sins, as does everyone. Would you look?

Robbie closed his eyes. After a few moments, he opened them again. A tear rolled down his face.

It is not to us to judge his actions. Or the situations that led to them, Robbie.

We all make our choices. And we must live with the consequences of those choices.

"Is there no other way?" Robbie begged.

Maybe. That will depend on the choices Phil Coulson and those around him make.

And speaking of choices, I believe it is time to continue.
"No rest for the wicked?"

*Or for the pure in heart, Robbie Reyes. Shall we?*

"Lead the way, skullhead."

Gathering up his chains, Robbie Reyes continued onwards through the gloom to the next battle.

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**CODA**

The man opened his eyes. Each day was very much like the next here. But it was time for the day's routine to begin.

He sat up, slipped on his shoes. At least they left him his clothes, a sense of home in this unfamiliar place.

He flipped the switches to retract the window shades. The view hadn't changed. An unfamiliar star system. The same space rocks. A blue glow in the distance.

Phil Coulson hadn't struggled on the journey to this strange place. They had made it very clear to him that there was no escape possible. They had also made it clear to him that the rest of the team's...wellbeing...depended on his cooperation, both on the trip and here on the station.

Some part of him should be thrilled. The Jedi in him had always wanted to make it into space. Not like this, though.

Coulson stared at the blue glow. That way led home, he thought. Melinda was still down there. Daisy was still down there. The rest of them were still there.

Everyone was alive. Maybe not safe, but alive.

That meant there still was a chance. There was still hope. They'd gotten out of worse scrapes before. They'd faced down the devil himself. Hell, he and Melinda had come back from the dead.

They were coming for him. As soon as they could.

He had to believe that.

"All right, Phil, enough sight-seeing. Get back to work."

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**Chapter End Notes**

You know, I nearly called this "The Sirs not appearing in this tale" (Monty Python reference). But...that might not be true.

However, both Scott and Robbie have other duties that are going to keep them out of the mix for awhile.

I've been thinking about Coulson's deal with The Rider...I have a number of ideas, most of them don't end well for poor Phil. We'll have to see...

Also, I'd like to reiterate that I am firmly Team Coulson. However, Phil's been an secret
agent for over 30 years... On the side of good? Yes. A choirboy? Certainly not. Which is what The Rider is referring with Robbie.

Next up...Tony Stark has his own choices to make. And Clint Barton starts planning a rescue...but is it from the right people?
Chapter Summary

Tony Stark's searches for Phil Coulson lead to some very interesting places...and people.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Stark Tower, NYC

Tony Stark was...pissed...to say the least.

Oh, not the alcoholic kind of pissed, although with the kind of shit he had waded through the last little while, a drink was maybe deserved at this point.

After the first round of footage leaks devolved into finger-pointing and semi-hysteria over a potential Inhuman takeover, Tony retreated into his lab to search for the one man he trusted to fill in the blanks. If Phil Coulson could tear himself away from that book for a moment, then they could start putting out this particular fire, get back to square one.

Maybe get around to that "Hi, how 'ya doing, death really seemed have a great influence on you, got you walking the wild side a bit more...." conversation he kept playing over in his mind.

Maybe he could tempt Clint and Nat back with their old friend.

"Hi, guys, lookie who just dropped back in after five years. What say we all meet up, have a few drinks, get caught...."

All right, maybe a bad choice of words, that.

Then, before he got settled, he got a call. It wasn't a good one.

FRIDAY's voice perked over the speakers, "Tony, I have Secretary of State Thaddeus Ross on the line for you"

Tony groaned. "Kinda busy now, FRIDAY. Can you put him on hold...preferably on the channel with the death metal?"

"Colonel Rhodes asked me to remind you that we will probably need his help at some point. Especially if you want to keep the pardons route open."

"Fine, fine. Anything new over the wires?"

"No, sir."

"OK, keep watch - good thing you don't have grey matter to waste."

"My circuitboards are green, I believe, Tony." smirked FRIDAY.
"Watch it, Curly Fries, or you'll be overseeing the Solar Power Division in the Sahara." Tony tossed his tablet aside and muttered, "What's this world coming to, when I can't even keep my AI's in line?"

FRIDAY giggled. When he had a moment, he was making an adjustment to her...no, its'...personality profile.

"All right, patch the asshat through."

Silence, and then a slight buzz indicating a call on a secure line. Well, as secure as the State Department ever got.

"Ross! The Rosster! Rossie-boy, how's things in..."

"Don't start with me, Stark!"

"Wow, someone got up on the wrong side of the Potomac this morning..."

"Enough, Stark. Five hours ago, your infernal AI slipped through the DOD's secure firewall and accessed security footage of the Incident at the DOD headquarters."

"Well, you see, Thaddeus, that's a misnomer right there. If it was secure, then nothing should be able to slip through it. Besides, FRIDAY's been running algorithms for your deep sea outfit 24-7. But congratulations on discovering a breach, last time it took you, what, 2 days? You guys are getting better."

"Can it, Stark! We both know that your AI could do that in her sleep."

"Now, Thaddeus. AI's don't sleep, they're not alive. Vision possibly excepting, but even then I think he's only practicing."

"Stark..." Tony could hear Ross seethe over the line. This situation must be stressing Ross out. Normally Tony didn't get him to this point for another 2-3 minutes in the conversation.

"Tony Stark, consider this an official notification from the United States State Department. Keep your nose OUT of anything surrounding the Inhuman incident this morning."

"How about my arm? Is my foot OK?"

"I mean it, Stark, I see you or whatever is left of the Avengers near this, and you'll be so deep in the Raft so quickly, it would take God himself to free you."

"God? Is that any god? Good thing I got one on..."

Click. Buzzz....

"...Call? FRIDAY, did Ross hang up on me?"

"Affirmative, Tony."

"He's not allowed to do that! I hang up on him, isn't that the rule? What's next, is HE going to put ME on hold with soft pop from the 80's? I can't stand Careless Whisper!"

"I prefer Air Supply."

"That's it, I am so modifying you after this over."
"I am shaking in my circuits, Tony. What next?"

"Well, since the official route is now officially closed, let's go down our unofficial path. FRIDAY, I want you to scan all feeds, state, national, international, but stay out of the feds for now, looking for anyone resembling Phil Coulson. Use the images on file as a recognition template. And stay under the radar. Don't want to give Ross another target."

"Yes, Tony. How quickly would you like this?"

"As soon as possible. Divert all non-essential tasks to this project, Pachos."

"Is the deep-sea project essential, Tony?"

"Nope, assign it Level -2. Teach him to hang up on me..."

"Deep-sixing the deep-sea project, sir."

As Tony groaned, FRIDAY continued, "What time frame, Tony?"

Tony hesitated, and said, "Start 5 years ago, FRIDAY. After the Battle of New York."

That was 48 hours ago. Over the past two days, photos had spit up, one by one over the holowall, dated, geographically pinpointed.

He idly picked out a few at random.

Pictures of Coulson talking down a hostage situation in a New York train station.

One of Phil and a younger brunette getting on a train in Italy with a...funeral urn?

There he was with Agent Morse in San Juan...ugh, that hat was burned into his brain. No way Agent would have picked out something like THAT.

Him with several other men in a Norwegian jail, a cell door sliced off its hinges.

An injured Coulson with Glenn Talbot in a red dress, huh, didn't take Talbot for a cross dresser, not that there's anything wrong with that, in Taipei.

Phil running around a LA penitentiary with that Inhuman and another woman.

Coulson in various airports, train stations, docksides, crowds, with people, alone. Wearing a hideous black glove for a bit. In just about every continent in the world. But, most importantly, alive. And not here.

While he was out and about, Phil Coulson hadn't taken one moment to contact Tony. Or any of the rest of them.

Yes, Tony Stark was pissed.

The door to his lab slid open.

"Can you believe this guy, Viz? He's been alive for the last 4 years, at least. Never wrote. Never called. You'd think he didn't care."

"That's not true, Tony." The voice was female. Not V's.
Tony turned around.

Maria Hill was leaning against his work desk.

"Phil very much wanted to contact you, all of you, but he was under orders not to."

"Hi, there, Hill, walk right on in to my secure lab."

"Isn't that a misnomer, Tony? If something is secure..." Maria smirked.

"Ross needs to get his lines checked."

"Or you do."

Tony made a face.

"How'd you know.."

"Let's say I have...had...a friend who helped me upload some code into your servers. Just an alert, if you were to start searching for terms like..."

"Phil Coulson?"

"That would be one of them."

Ignoring the fact that Hill had had Tony's servers hacked, he continued, "You knew? You could have said something, Maria. Hinted at least."

"Really, Tony? Phil's resurrection was highly classified, Level 7 and above. You, at the first moment you could, screamed to the world you were Iron Man."

Maria settled into the workbench. "The Avengers were still a new team, Tony. You were still getting used to each other, still gelling together. Phil's death was meant to hold you together until you didn't need it anymore. That and the methods used to bring him back had certain...side effects...that he had to deal with."

"What side effects?"

"Classified, Tony."

"SHIELD doesn't exist anymore, Maria."

"Ask Phil about it later. Back to what is important. When Hydra was uncovered by Rogers and Romanoff, Phil was leading a team out in the field. They nearly died, but took out some of the key heads. But you know what they said, 'Cut off one head...''"

"'And another takes its place.'"

"Fury knew that Hydra was still out there, that no organization existed to take them out. So he did the only thing he could think of. He made Phil Coulson the new Director of a new SHIELD."

"SHIELD. The TERRORIST organization SHIELD?"

"And gave him instructions to rebuild. The right way, the way it was meant to be. Which is what he did, and doing well at it too, I think...until something happened last summer."
"So if Fury made Coulson Director, can totally see that by the way, how'd that Mace guy get to be the Director?"

Maria looked uncomfortable. "I don't know, Tony. I lost track of him after Sokavia."

"WHAT? What was Coulson doing in Sokavia?"

"The intel on Loki's scepter..."

"That was him?"

"He said he had a...vested...interest in seeing that thing gone."

Tony groaned. "Puns now from Agent?"

"Tony, we don't have much time. Phil wasn't in Sokovia, but he activated the Thelia Protocol. Saved your lives, as a matter of fact."

As Tony still looked blank, Maria clarified, "The helicarrier, Tony. He had it reconstructed, and got it to Fury when it seemed like a large civilian population was in danger."

"Oh my..."

"Afterwards, he talked about a group of enhanced people. Was worried about his daughter, Skye."

"When did he get a daughter?"

"Pretty much adopted. She goes by the name of Daisy Johnson, now."

"Oh. Her. Looks like Coulson needs to work on those parenting skills."

"Look, stuff happened. Life happened. I figured that if he needed us, he would contact us."

"Guess you thought wrong."

"Hindsight is 20/20, Tony. It's not like this is a movie or a TV show."

Maria continued, "I saw the full footage you have stored on your server. Naming it #CoulsonLives triggered the alert."

Tony sighed. "He's in trouble."

"He is. Daisy is. His team is. But I don't know why."

"I can search for..."

A male voice interrupted Tony. "Or I can fill you in."

Another intruder? Wasn't any place sacred?

Maria said from across the desk, "I didn't know what happened, Tony, so I found someone who would."

"Hello, Tony."

Former President Matthew Ellis walked over and took a seat at the desk.
"We've got a lot ground to cover. Let's get started."

Chapter End Notes

I never accepted the original reasoning for Phil Coulson's stepping down as Director was because he was "dead" to the world. Phil popped up in a lot of places that have cameras over the last four years. Anyone looking for him could find him easily. However, who looks for a "dead" man?

Those photos are taken from the following Agents of SHIELD episodes (credit to their writers and all involved):

1. Pilot (S1)
2. T.R.A.C.K.S. (S1)
3. "...Ye Who Enter Here" (S2) Note: Morse hated that hat too.
4. Purpose In The Machine (S3)
5. The Inside Man (S3)
6. Uprising (S4)

And "Former" President Matthew Ellis - Marvel Cinematic Wiki places Ellis' first election in 2008. Events in Civil War and Agents of SHIELD show him still in office as of Summer 2016. So he is a two-term president, and ineligible for last year's election. Which is too bad for me, as I had a whole sub-plot of impeachment hearings I have to toss out the window.

I am not going to speculate which party Ellis belonged to, but the fact that Thaddeus Ross is still Secretary of State would mean that the incumbent's party won the 2016 election, which would have ran during the events of Agents of SHIELD, Season 4. That would have been an interesting election campaign, to say the least. It also means there are people with a lot to lose if certain secrets come to light.

Next up, while we let Ellis brief Maria and Tony on Agents of SHIELD Seasons 3-4, in Wakanda, Clint Barton is sick and tired of waiting.
Believe It or Not (It's Just Me)

Chapter Summary

In Wakanda, Clint's had enough. But is he going after the real enemy?

And Sharon Carter & Wanda Maximoff make some surprising discoveries about Phil and his...friends?

Chapter Notes

"Look at what's happened to me. I can't believe it myself. Suddenly I'm up on top of the world, It should've been somebody else..."

~ Greatest American Hero (ABC, 1981-83)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Wakanda

"This is fucking insane."

"Language, Rogers."

Sam Wilson and Steve Rogers hurried down the hallway of their sleeping corridor.

"I ordered him to WAIT!"

"He warned you, once he saw the broadcast..."

"Sharon has just about sorted through the intel, we just need..."

"Steve." Sam stopped Steve outside the closed door. "Think back to just after you woke up. If it had been Bucky back from the dead, would you be sticking around?"

"Low blow, Sam."

"True, though."

Steve hammered on the door.

"Open up, Clint!"

When no reply was forthcoming, Steve took a deep breath, and opened the door.

Clint Barton didn't look up from his packing.
"I didn't say you could come in."

"Clint..."

"Nuh uh." Clint snapped the hinges shut on his bow case. "I'm gone, Steve."

"24 hours..."

"YOU said that 24 hours ago. I'm done waiting."

"Clint, listen..."

"No, Rogers, you listen to me." Clint snapped. "I've left my family, followed you from Germany, to prison, to Wakanda. I've taken your side against Tony, the UN, hell, even my best friend. But when I asked you for help, for someone who was...is...one of the most important people in my life, who's in harm's way...nothing. I'm done here."

"Will you just shut the hell up for once and listen?" Sam snarled. "We aren't doing nothing, we are trying to gather intel so we don't go after Coulson blind."

Clint laughed bitterly. "I got the intel I need off that TV screen. Talbot asked for Coulson. He got shot."

Steve looked at his friend. "I need you to think, Clint. Phil needs you to think."

He turned to Sam. "A moment?"

When they were alone, Steve sat on Clint's bed.

"I know you, Clint. I've read your files. Strike Team Delta - you and Nat and Phil. Taking on the cases no one else could. You survived because you weren't stupid. But now? This isn't smart, Clint. This isn't what Phil would do."

"If it was me, Phil would come after me. No matter what."

"No, he didn't. He didn't come back when we were up against Ultron, and he didn't come back when you were on the Raft."

"Well, that's a point in my case that he couldn't."

The two men were silent.

"It's not just Phil, isn't it? What's up, Clint?"

Clint sighed. "We, SHIELD, spent our life chasing down Hydra, space monsters, visiting Asgardians. Looking back on our missions, there was always some sort of rhyme or reason behind what we were fighting. But now, the past couple of years, these powered people start popping up, all over the world. There's no pattern I've been able to see. No warning, just all of a sudden, poof! You're walking on air."

"It should have been somebody else?"

Clint smirked slightly.

"I remember getting that red suit back from that teacher...Fury was never sure how that case slipped out to the network writers."
"You do?"

"Eh...I owed a writer or two a favor..."

"You're changing the subject, Clint."

"Fine. Inhumans. We don't know where they came from, who they're working for, what their plans are. Aren't they a threat, Steve?"

Steve thought for a moment. "You know, Clint, I've been watching the Inhuman stories pretty carefully. The ones that I've seen seem to have one thing in common."

"Unbelievable powers that should only exist in comic books?"

"They're scared. Confused. None of them has known what to do, how to handle it. They've turned themselves into police stations, hospitals, begging for help. Families have left them. Friends turned their backs. There have been suicides. Accidents. Death by cop incidents. Not once did any of them say that it was a deliberate transformation."

Clint remained silent.

"At least SHIELD was gathering them together. Getting them the help they needed. Putting them in places where they could survive and start again."

Steve grimaced. "Now, registering them? Making this mandatory? Well, that was taking it a step too far. How is mandatory registration any different from what they were going to do to us? We wouldn't let others dictate our actions. Why should they?"

"Their powers..."

"Ah, yes. What's the different between the Inhumans and me and Wanda?"

"Uhh..."

"We made a choice. My super-serum. Wanda and Pietro's work with Hydra. All those other people out there? They didn't. If anything, they deserve our support."

Clint sighed. "There is some connection between Daisy Johnson and Phil, Steve. My gut is still telling me he's in trouble."

"I'm not saying you're wrong, Clint. But it might not be from her. I'm just saying we need more information. We're getting what we can before we go after him. As a team."

"Right." Clint paused. "I'm not unpacking, Steve."

"OK. So come back to the Situation Room and see what Sharon and King T'Challa have."

"All right."

As the two left, Clint noted, "You know, you could drop the King part, Steve."

"Maybe later..."

Back at the Situation Room, Wanda and Sharon were scrolling through feeds on various laptops, Sam looking over Sharon's shoulder.
As Steve and Clint came back through the door, Wanda sighed and stretched.

"We've gone through what Natasha uploaded to the web, Clint. There is nothing on Phil Coulson after Loki killed him in New York. Excepting his funeral, memorial services, the final paperwork concerning his will and last wishes."

Clint scowled. "Yeah, I remember that."

Sam looked up. "Could someone have made one of those Life Model Decoys Tony kept snarking about? Maybe they made one of Coulson, Talbot ran into one of them, thought he was real?"

As the disbelieving glances from the rest of the room bounced off Sam, he held up his hands in surrender. "All right, just a thought..."

Clint glared at Sam. "A bad one."

Steve looked over at Sharon. "You got anything?"

"Well...not from after he died, anyways."

Sharon looked up from her computer. "Did you know that Phil resigned from SHIELD just before he was assigned to the Avengers Initiative?"

"No fucking way...."

Steve started to open his mouth, at but Sam's smirk, he decided to let Clint slide. This time.

"Yeah, he filed the papers with HR." Sharon pulled up the scan on the larger screen. "Now, he rescinded it a few days later, there's Fury's mark."

A large red "HELL NO!!! Nick F" obliterated most of the bottom text.

"Something about a Project TAHITI, but I can't find any references to that, either."

Clint shrugged. "Fury didn't always put everything on computers. But I think he burned everything he could find when SHIELD fell."

"Ok, so Coulson's a dead end." Clint shot Steve a withering glance. "Sorry, Clint. Who else would have known? Friends?"

"I didn't know anything, and I don't think Nat did either...we were the closest to him." noted Clint, "Except for his old partner, Melinda May. She went back to desk duties after a bad op in Bahrain - she took out 40 people, saved a whole SHIELD team on her own. But never the same afterwards...think a girl died or something. Phil kept visiting whenever we were back, brought her gifts, these awful teas..."

I'll look her up," volunteered Wanda. A couple of minutes later, she called over, "Got something!"

May's last assignments slid up on a screen with her headshot. The team studied them, and Clint gave a low whistle.

"In exile for 3 years, and then Fury pulls her in for an internal undercover op. Why her? Why not someone like Bobbi Morse?"

Steve continued, "Maybe her mark wouldn't have seen her coming. Someone a little too close?"
"Like Phil Coulson." finished Sam. "Wanda, who else was assigned to her team?"

One by one, names and faces popped onto the screen. Grant Ward, Specialist. Jemma Simmons, Biochemistry. Leo Fitz, Engineering. Pablo Jimenez, Team Leader.

"That's it." crowed Clint. "The team lead. Phil loved that alias."

"Got it. Sharon, Wanda, I want whatever you can get from that team's mission reports, as well as profiles on team members. Sam, start pulling the gear together. Clint, with me, we'll see what T'Challa can offer us."

The team stared at Steve.

"Phil Coulson died an Avenger. That doesn't change now he's alive. We don't leave one of our own behind."

Walking out the door, he turned and called to Clint.

"Come on, we have a rescue to plan."

CODA

Six men and women. Varying races, ages, abilities.

Six different interrogation rooms. Three different detention facilities.

They are careful never to let them interact, meet, comfort each other. Kept in restraints, especially the three...women. If there was a level beyond maximum security, this would be it.

The questioning has just begun. None will talk.

There is no way that they could know that among the first questions asked, at different times in the process, are ones that generate an equal measure of hope and fear in each the prisoners.

"Where is your leader? Where is Phil Coulson?"

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for continuing with me! Hopefully I didn't date myself too badly here! ;)

Agents of SHIELD never really had the chance to take on the question of what is the actual difference between Inhumans and the enhanced members of the Avengers. I think this question could play a larger role, especially if Marvel Films and Marvel TV can play nicely together leading into Infinity War next year.

It's funny how close Sam came to what's actually going on, eh? Right tech, but wrong person.

Next up, Huntingbird and Black Widow Road Trip! What could possibly go wrong?
Calling the Tune

Chapter Summary

Natasha, Bobbi and Hunter take a break for lunch, and get a lot more than the blue plate special...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Generic Truckstop Diner, American Mid-West.

The non-descript sedan pulled into the parking lot. From out of its front windows, two feminine voices could be heard enthusiastically finishing up the chorus of an old '80 pop song, one really better forgotten.

As the driver finished parking, the back door popped open, and a scruffy male threw himself dramatically on the ground.

Lance Hunter proclaimed, "Ah, silence never sounded so good!"

Bobbi Morse unfolded herself from the driver's seat and nudged her partner with an unsympathetic foot.

"Driver always picks the tunes, Hunter!"

"Love, really... The 80's were a dismal era for music, U2 notwithstanding, and I just endured 4 hours of it. I bet this is covered under the Geneva Convention."

Natasha Romanoff threw her empty water bottle at him.

"I could drive again."

Hunter groaned. "And another round of that crap you listen to? No thanks."

Natasha snickered. "Be good and maybe we'll put on a country station for you."

Hunter moaned, "It's not enough that my partner is the devil's beast, but now there are two of you? Have mercy..."

Bobbi sighed. "Stop playing the drama king, Lance, people are starting to look. Grab the laptop, we'll use their WiFi inside."

"Cold hearted, that's what you are, love."

"Cold hearted snake, look into my eyes..." Bobbi agreed

"She's been telling lies..." continued Natasha.

"Nooo..." whimpered Hunter.
As the three entered the diner, he came out of the attached store and scanned his targets thoughtfully. He slurped at his drink while he considered his next move.

Bobbi, Natasha and Hunter slid into a side booth, Natasha taking her turn as lookout, positioning herself where she could see the room.

"You know," mused Bobbi as Hunter set up the computer, "Coulson loved places like this."

Nat chuckled. "He'd find them all over the world, too. Every mission that we needed to go out for food, he find these greasy diners or hole in the wall type places and insist upon them. Said it added ambiance."

Hunter snorted. "If that's what Coulson considered ambiance, no wonder he can't find a date."

Bobbi kicked him under the table. "He did just fine when he wanted to. He could do high class to impress, but give the man a burger and a scotch, and he was happy."

"Besides," added Natasha, "More often than not, he was right. The food at places he picked was usually better than at the Zagat rated places."

The waitress came over. "What'll you folks have?"

Bobbi and Hunter both ordered cheeseburgers with fries (extra crispy). Natasha went with the clubhouse, and beers were ordered all round.

As the waitress left, Hunter looked across at his partner. "I get you sloshed, then I can drive?"

"The only way you're driving is if there's bullets in both of us."

"Right, let's avoid that this time, shall we, ladies?" Hunter logged in. "Let's see, there's crap, racist crap, paranoid crap, end of the world crap and...hello..."

"Whatcha got, Hunts?"

Hunter turned his screen so the other two could see. The from address read:

TalbotG@atcu.gov

"Looks like the good General has learned to type in his sleep."

The man entered the diner, took a seat at the other end. His danger sense was working overtime, there were multiple threats here. Determining which to act on first would be difficult. He decided to wait and see how his targets responded first.

As the beer came round, the three clinked their bottles together.

"To Phil."

Once the waitress had moved away, Hunter opened the e-mail. He scanned it and sat back.

"It's sent to numerous people, Bobs, of which you are one. It was a scheduled email, meant to send if something happened at that last meeting, and he wasn't around to cancel it."

"He said that while Phil Coulson and his team were major pains in his ass, they were loyal pains in the ass to the United States and the world. Whatever happened to him was most likely not their fault."
Bobbi whistled. "Something happened there...Talbot would've been glad to hang Coulson out to dry when we last heard from him."

"Talbot continues that Coulson warned him of a threat, a robot woman with superpowers, had Coulson and his team on the run. He also says that remains of robot versions of Daisy, Mack, Fitz and Mace, as well as some unidentifiable parts were found in the destroyed base. Anyone claiming to be SHIELD should be scanned before trusted."

Natasha frowned. "The LMD program was cancelled 15 years ago. Fury decided that the potential for chaos with SHIELD doubles running around far outweighed any positives if the wrong people got their hands on it. I wonder who was foolish enough to reactivate it?"

"We'll ask Coulson when we find him." Bobbi declared. "Anything else, love?"

"Yeah, this one's a doozy. Talbot claims there's a traitor in the ATCU. The leak of Mace's autopsy was deliberate, meant to destabilize SHIELD. He said the attachments will prove that Quake's powers did not kill Director Jeffrey Mace."

"Let me see." Bobbi took the laptop and opened the pdfs.

"Scan for viruses, love?"

Bobbi ignored him and concentrated on the documents.

"These are autopsy reports, Mace's and...Gideon Malick's?"

"He's dead? That's one for us, I guess..."

"It's signed by Jemma. She noted that Daisy's powers were the means of Malick's death, but she was determined not to be in control of her actions at the time."

"Shakes lost control? Wonder where Bake was...her boyfriend," as an aside to Natasha, who was listening in but scanning the room.

Bobbi looked up. "Talbot's absolutely right, guys. Look at the strike patterns."

"No, thanks, I want my lunch."

"Malick died of blunt trauma force waves that covered his entire body. Mace died of...well...not quite sure from this, but his bones were broken by blunt force similar to a hammer, numerous ones, multiple sizes, but still hammers. And it happened post-mortem."

"Someone beat Mace's corpse with a hammer? Oh, that's cold..."

"And not reported. Wanna bet that detail wasn't on the report that was leaked?"

"Not taking that one."

Natasha narrowed her eyes.

"That guy over there...seated at the table. I've seen him before."

"Oh?" Casually Hunter looked over at the chunky businessman reading the menu. "Can't help you, Nat. Bobbi, love?"

Bobbi stretched, glanced over her shoulder.
"Looks familiar, can't place him. Shall I pose, Natasha?"

"Yes, please."

As Bobbi gave her best holiday pose, Natasha took a couple of shots with her phone of the man, zooming in as close as she could. They'd check him out later.

Lunch arrived, and the three began to eat. Natasha still felt on edge, like something was happening, but she was missing it. She scowled at her food.

"Swap me places, Nat. I'll keep an eye on your guy." suggested Bobbi.

As the two swapped places, a newcomer was wheeled in. His wheelchair stopped at the businessman's table.

"Well, if it isn't old home week," muttered Morse. "That's Felix Blake."

"Phil's old friend?"

"Agent Blake? Wouldn't say friend anymore, got put into the hospital on one of the last SHIELD ops. Heard through the grapevine that he fronts for the Watchdogs these days."

Natasha turned and took a few more candid shots. "Wish I could hear what they're saying."

_The man stiffened. This was unexpected. If Blake recognized him here, all was lost. He left his money on the table and walked out the door. He would await his targets outside._

The team finished up their lunch, dragged Hunter off of whatever it was he was playing (by virtue of Bobbi slamming the laptop shut), and headed off to the car. Blake seemed deep in conversation with the other man, and didn't look up as they left.

As they reached their car, the groups of truckers and other drivers purposely broke off their chatter, and surrounded the exit point.

"How many do you make of them?" Natasha asked Bobbi.

"I got 15 of them."

"Well, that makes an even number for each of us." murmured Hunter, opening the trunk.

"That's enough right there, freak-lover." sneered the pack leader.

"Who me? Never touch the stuff."

"Hand over the phone. We'll take the laptop too."

"Or what?" Natasha responded nonchalantly. She figured she could leave a couple for Bobbi and Hunter, she hadn't had a decent scrap in ages.

"You think you can take us all, Romanoff?"

Shit, they knew who they were.

"We can certainly try."

Bobbi had her staves (how had Hunter got them to her?) and was looking positively feral.
Natasha threw her phone in the trunk on top of the laptop.

"You want it? Come and get it."

The leader snarled, and the fight was on.

Natasha's first blow snapped into the man's nose, kneed him in the groin, sending him to the pavement. She turned to face her next opponent, as Bobbi's staves flashed out, sending hers to the ground. Lance simply tackled his, taking him down with an audible crunch.

"You couldn't have fished out my stingers, Hunter?" Natasha called as her next opponent crumpled to a ball, whimpering.

"Sorry, Nat, had to choose. And I have to sleep with Bobbi...uffh." Hunter took a shot to the chin, and threw his man into the nearby truck.

"HAVE to sleep with me, love? Boy, do I feel wanted." Staves flashed, two more hit the dirt.

"You snore, love." Eight down.

"Do not." Nine.

"Uh, do too.." Ten and Eleven.

"Now you've done it, Nat..." Twelve rolled whimpering out of reach.

Three left. They paused to see the remaining Watchdogs smirking, semi-automatics trained on them.

They froze.

"You could've just pulled those at the beginning, mate." piped Hunter.

"Nah, this pack required blooding. Too used to beating on scared freaks. Needed to be reminded that to create a better world, it will take sacrifice and suffering. Now give us the keys, and we'll make this quick. Otherwise, you die by inches."

Natasha spat at their feet.

"Yeah, what she said, mate." snarled Hunter, moving to stand beside Bobbi.

The Watchdog shrugged. "Suit yourself."

As the three raised their guns, there was a high pitched whine. Red bloomed on their chests as they collapsed lifeless to the ground.

He approached his targets.

"Well, you are a sight for sore eyes, mate." grinned Hunter.

Bobbi smiled. "Hoping you got our messages."

"Introductions, guys, please?"

The newcomer smiled back.

"Glad to have finally found you. We need to get moving, Blake's called in reinforcements. Apparently his Russian friend didn't like having his picture taken."
"And the name is Mike."

Deathlok standing down.

New search parameters (Y/N): Y

Search target: Phillip J. Coulson.

Chapter End Notes

Everybody, please welcome back to the MCU Mike Peterson, aka Deathlok...

Also, I wonder what Anton Ivanov's partner is doing meeting up with Felix Blake? Probably just grabbing nachos or something... ;)

I would like to note that is my first attempt at a fight scene...think it turned out OK? :)

I have a quick favour to ask before I start making up OC’s - does anyone know of an Inhuman who can control force fields?

Next up: We need a hero...holding out for a hero 'til the end of the night....

(Yes, that is Hunter screaming in the background.)
Ghosting

Chapter Summary

In which Tony asks the one question on every Agents of SHIELD fans' mind since SHIELD fell 4 years ago.

And, no, it's not when Phil Coulson will ask Melinda May out to dinner...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Stark Tower, NYC.**

"So, the Devil really did go down to Georgia?"

"More like Louisiana."

"Close enough."

Tony leaned back from the table and looked at Maria Hill and Matthew Ellis.

"And it wasn't the ATCU that took out Hydra last year, but Agent?"

"Talbot coordinated the military operations, but, yes, Coulson provided the intel. From Malick."

"Damn. Even we didn't suspect he was Hydra,"

Ellis sighed. "He never came straight out and admitted it to Price or Talbot, but they could read between the lines. At least he didn't walk away from it, was trying to solve this mess."

"I think it would have happened eventually, Tony." Maria noted. "The GH 325 serum had intense side effects, which, by Agent May's reports, seemed to come to an end once they figured out Phil's writing. The fact that Hydra had captured Agent Johnson, and had forced her to enter the city to have her terragenesis triggered was certainly no fault of Phil's."

Maria continued, "Once Daisy's powers were unlocked, then it was only a matter of time that her people would make contact."

"But how did the...what did you call it...terragen...get into the world's fish population?"

Ellis looked uncomfortable. "That's what nobody's saying."

"So, again, Coulson's team caused the Inhuman mess."

"And, again, that is a little simplistic, Tony." Ellis looked at his phone. "Will you excuse me, I need to check this." He retreated outside the lab door.
Tony glared at Maria.

"Don't think that I haven't noticed that you were working with Coulson while working for me."

Maria glared right back. "Fine. Yes, I knew Phil was alive. Yes, that time you needed to get me out of prison for hijacking a jump jet was because I was assisting him. I was distracting a known Hydra operative, if you want to know. And yes, I was the link between SHIELD and the Avengers in Sokovia. Phil sent you in personally."

"I was doing what I thought was best for the world. We still had Hydra outbreaks. Phil was dealing with those he could get to while dealing with his compulsions. Then he had a rogue faction trying to take over, and I lost track of him with Gonzales. To be honest, the Avengers and SI had me so busy, that until Daisy resurfaced, I wasn't even sure he made it. And then he didn't want to talk to me. He was...not good...last summer.

"Tony, I took an oath. That didn't go away when SHIELD did."

Tony thought for a moment. "I value loyalty, Ms. Hill. I can understand why you'd still feel loyal to SHIELD. However, you should have told me. In light of your exceptional service throughout the years, I am not going to fire you. This is going on your file, though. Don't bother asking for a raise. And I'll consider your end of year bonus."

Tony closed his eyes for a moment. "This year alone, Maria. A fake Inhuman Director... I'm sure Agent adored that, probably wanted Rogers for the position. Demons from Hell. Prison riots. LA nearly destroyed. LMD's for Christssake. I thought we weren't allowed to tinker with robots anymore..."

"You're not."

"The picture of respectability, I am. Although I would like to meet these Radcliffe and Fitz guys. Maybe this Simmons as well."

Maria grinned. "You in a room with FitzSimmons? I think the world would end."

"And who knows what they've been up to since Ellis stepped down?"

They were quiet for a moment. Then Tony looked up, a hurt expression on his face.

"Why didn't he call, Maria? Phil didn't have to handle this alone. I could've helped him. Hell, we could've helped him, back in the day. Knowing he was alive, that wouldn't have changed anything, near death experiences at the hands of space aliens tend to make a bond gel. At least, I thought it did once. I would have been there for him. Why didn't he trust me?"

Maria put her hand over Tony's. "I don't know. Really, I don't. I have some guesses, though."

"First, SHIELD was outlawed. Cap and the others took it down. Maybe he thought he wouldn't be welcome anymore, as the Director."

Tony snorted. "Bullshit. Be honest, we could've used him as a buffer between me and...Steve."

"OK, even if you had greeted him with open arms, what would have happened if word had gotten out that the Avengers were working with a terrorist organization? Everyone would've been on the Raft, and Hydra would have won."

"Or I would have put my lawyers on the job and SHIELD would have been rehabilitated that much
sooner."

"America was barely ready for it last fall! Let alone the rest of the world."

Maria took a swig of her water. "Maybe Phil also felt he had something to prove. He had just gotten over those writing binges, and now he was faced with a revolt."

"Which Steve could've quelled. I'm sorry, Fury stepped in, didn't he? I have a few words for him as well."

"And a mysterious group of people which included his daughter."

"And would have been very nice to know of."

"Phil wanted to clean up after his own mistakes. Even the best people think they can do it on their own."

Maria hesitated.

"And then Leipzig. Tony, Phil would've been torn over the split. He admired and respected you both. At the same time, though, SHIELD was chasing a renegade Inhuman who nearly destroyed the world."

"Sorta justifies the Accords right there, wouldn't you say?"

"Not when the only family he had were going to be the first ones they were going to register. Phil would do anything for his family, Tony. Can you relate to that?"

"Screw you, Hill."

"Language, Tony."

"Tell me why I shouldn't fire you right now, Maria!"

"Because I say to you the things others won't, now that Pepper's gone. They're too in awe of you. I made a choice after Siberia, I know what happened. I had an opportunity to go with Steve. But I chose to stay. I knew someone had to stay behind to find that middle ground. Eventually, one day, the world would need the Avengers again."

Maria sagged into her seat. "I just didn't know that it would be Phil himself that needed them."

Tony was silent.

Maria pressed further. "Phil didn't know we'd bring him back when he took that spear from Loki. Fury was right, he died believing in the idea of heroes. You. Cap. Nat. Clint. Bruce. Thor. He never considered himself one. I still don't think Phil does."

"But there's a lot of people that do consider him one. Including me."

Tony remained silent.

"Tony, this, this is a lot to take in. I'm not saying that you don't have the right to be hurt. Or angry. You probably have the right to tell us all to go to hell. Just think about it first."

Tony finally spoke. "Funny thing is, Maria. Ultron, the Accords, Leipzig. I wanted to find a way to keep everyone safe."
"So did Phil."

"Instead, maybe we messed things up further."

"That's not on you or him alone, Tony. All of our choices combined brought us here. It's what you choose to do going forward that matters now."

Tony gazed wearily at his old friend.

"So, what now? What do you guys want from me?"

"Tony, Ellis has no idea what happened under the new President. No one's talking, not even the usual leaks. This Inhuman link with SHIELD has them spooked, especially with the bombing of Senator Nadeer's office, and then Director Mace's murder. Given that Ross is keeping you out of this..."

"Sure Agent's not on some beach, having a drink?"

"I contacted my sources. Phil and his team were spotted at their old base, the one that was destroyed. The Army was sent to pick them up. But they escaped. None of my contacts have seen them since. Or will admit to seeing them."

"Again, Maria, what do you want me to do?"

Ellis strode back in. "I just got an triggered email from Glenn Talbot. Apparently, Phil and SHIELD might have bit off more than they could chew."

"Again?" muttered Tony, as he accepted the former President's phone, and skimmed through the email. He tossed the phone at Maria and scowled.

"Not fair, not fair, not fair! Why do they get to play with evil robots and I don't?"

"I don't know, Tony. I think Mace was the one to approve the LMD project, but how it went wrong? No clue." Ellis shrugged.

"At the very least, Agent should've invited me along. There are going to be words about this..."

Maria finished the email and looked up.

"Well, Tony, apparently we want you to save the world. Again."

"And the first step is to find the one person who can tell us what the hell happened."

Tony sighed. "Phil Coulson."

"All right. Let's do this."

Chapter End Notes

This chapter intimidates the heck out of me, especially as a confirmed Team Coulson loyalist and Agents of SHIELD fan. Even more especially since I can't blame this on Marvel TV and Movies not sharing. (Really? $1 billion for Infinity Wars, and you can't shell out for 10 mins of an Avenger's time? But I digress...)
Why didn't Phil call? It would've solved so much...And, especially if you weren't physically there, SHIELD could be seen to have a pretty large role in the Terragen Crystals making it into the ecosystem.

Everyone has a lot of explaining/soul searching to do. Just remember, everyone is working off different levels of knowledge about what happened with SHIELD over the last 4 years. When we throw Civil War into the mix, different conclusions can obviously be drawn. And I'm not saying anyone has reached a completely right conclusion. Yet. (Or can there be one?)

Oh, and you might have noticed a slight "mistake" in how Daisy's powers were activated. That might be deliberate, have to wait and see.

I think next chapter, we'll need to flip over to Wakanda, where Team Cap is making some final adjustments to their roster.

One more thing. As always in Marvel, if there is no body, is there really a death? Hmm...
In Wakanda, the members of Team Cap are preparing to leave King T'Challa's sanctuary. They may not be leaving alone, though.

And Clint Barton has a heart to heart talk with Wanda Maximoff.

Warning: Discussion of non-con/torture of Wanda Maximoff's time on the Raft in Civil War. Found in the second portion of this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Wakanda

Steve Rogers slipped into T'Challa's antechamber. The King of Wakanda was there, studying a map of his domain.

He looked up and greeted his guest.

"Is everything set, Captain Rogers?"

"Just about, Sir. Sam and Clint are looking over our gear one more time. Sharon and Wanda are...discussing...what happens next."

"The ladies are remaining behind?"

Steve laughed. "If I were even to suggest that, King T'Challa, Sharon's Great-Aunt Peggy would rise up from the grave and smack me. Deservedly so. I'm surprised you asked that, though."

T'Challa inclined his head. "Simply making my plans, Captain Rogers, no disrespect meant."

"No, the issue may be with Wanda. Her time in the outside world was not...kind. And, out of all of us, she may have the most to fear returning to America. She never knew Coulson, she has no reason to go. Other than us."

"She or any of your team are welcome to remain, Steve. Although, be warned, I sense forces gathering within my borders which may pull whoever is left into another conflict."

"Is there anything we can do, sir?"

T'Challa shook his head. "No. I fear that this has been coming since my ascension, and I have deliberately kept you out of it, so that you may not become an unwitting tool for either side."

"I appreciate it."
"I am sorry, Steve, I truly wish I could do more."

"Your Majesty, you provided us sanctuary for the past year. I know I'm leaving Bucky in good hands with you and yours. And the jet..."

"Our version of SHIELD's Quinjet is upgraded to include the latest in Wakandan technology. You'll need it to get past the Stark upgrades to American aerial defences."

"Stark...I wish Tony would call. Phil meant a lot to him as well. I think we'd come together over this."

"You cannot force forgiveness, Steve, I know that too well. It has to come in his time." T'Challa regarded Steve. "Are you ready to forgive?"

Steve grimaced. "To tell the truth, Sir, I don't really know. I've had time to do a lot of thinking here, and I still disagree with the Sokavia Accords. And Tony tried to murder my best friend, my only link to home. Would I have done the same in his place? I don't know...I hope not. It's hard to come to terms with something like that, even after a year."

"Perhaps then, it is better that you walk your separate paths for awhile?

"I don't know, chasing after a 5 year ghost, world governments on our heels, potentially staring down these new gifted peoples? We'll need all the friends we can get."

"Then I might have a new friend for you. You asked if there was anything you could do for me, and there is."

T'Challa handed over a folder to Steve. Opening it, Steve saw a picture of a young Caucasian woman, about the age of the one in the CNN footage.

"This is Cassandra Clements, Steve. Canadian, was with CIDA. She was working with our aid delegation in Kenya when she took some tainted fish oil. Her friends brought her cocoon here, she's been with our medical and science staff ever since."

"Gifted?"

"Yes, she seems to be covered in a substance that repels anything else. We've worked with her so that she has some control over it, the layer is substantially thinner than in the beginning, and she has been working on expanding it outside of her body."

Steve flipped through the papers.

"She does not seem to want to go home, Steve, but she cannot remain here for much longer. She is attracting...notice...from the wrong elements."

"You want to send her with us?"

"She may be of help. Or you may be able to get her back home, I don't know."

"Well, she can come with us as far as the States, after that, no promises. That is, if she wants to come."

T'Challa nodded. "She knows her time here is done. I will update her tonight, and she will meet with you in the morning."

"Again, I am truly sorry, Steve. Wakandan borders will be open to you and your team, but that is all
the help I can give you once you leave here. Wakanda must be seen to be neutral in this conflict, at least for now."

"Understood, Sir. I owe you a huge debt of gratitude. I hope our paths will cross again one day."

The two men clasped hands, and Steve went out to get some rest. Morning would come too early.

Wanda Maximoff bowed her head. Sharon had made her choice for the morning and left to pack. She too needed to make a decision, but she had been putting it off as long as possible.

There were no good choices. Not for her anymore.

A quiet knock on the door. Wanda sighed. She really didn't feel like company, tonight. But she owed whoever it was out there an explanation.

"Come in."

The door opened, and Clint Barton stuck his head around the door.

"Done packing?"

"Not that there was that much to pack, Clint."

Clint came in and perched on the bed beside her duffle.

"So...this means you're coming?"

"I don't know yet."

Clint was silent for a moment, then finally said, "Running out of time, Wanda. I wish you'd come with us."

"And risk falling back into those bastards' hands? You are the closest thing I have to family left, Clint, but this is asking..."

Tears pricked at the back of Wanda's eyes. Clint remained unmoving from his seat on the bed.

"You remember when we arrived at the Raft, Clint?"

"I do."

"You remember the jacket and collar?"

"Yes. We were forced to watch when they put those on you."

Wanda began to shake.

"We offered no resistance, Clint. I didn't do anything to them."

"They...didn't...have..to..."

"I know, I know. May I..." At Wanda's nod, Clint gathered his younger friend into a hug, and let her cry, not for the first time, into his shoulder.

After a moment, Wanda continued, "And then Stark. Wouldn't even look me in the face. Passed by my cell. I thought, even if he needed to punish us over Leipzig, for the sake of the friendship we had,
he wouldn't just leave us, me, like this."

She swallowed. "But then they started again with the collar settings...and..."

Her voice trailed off.

"I remember, I do."

"Then why ask me to risk this, Clint? I CANNOT go back there."

Clint sat her down and sat across from her.

"Wanda, I won't insult you by saying that I could ever know what they put you through on the Raft. It was hell enough just having to watch, knowing there was not a damned thing I could do about it."

"What I am asking is so unfair to you. You weren't there, before New York. You don't owe us a thing."

"Phil Coulson is the closest thing to family that I had for such a long time, before I met Laura and had the kids, of course. And it nearly killed me when I was told he was dead, in an excursion I planned, Wanda."

"You were under the control of Loki..."

"Didn't matter then, still doesn't now. It felt like I let Loki kill him. And it took me so long to come to terms with New York, and part of that was knowing Phil would've wanted me to let go and move on."

Wanda watched him steadily.

"Now, Phil's alive, out there, somewhere. I don't know his story, but I know if he could've, he would've let me know somehow. Which means he's in trouble, maybe has been for years. And I gotta go after him with everything I have. I might have to go up against Quake to do it. It's looking like I'll have to go up against a lady who took out 40 men. Unarmed. And I'm so sorry, Wanda, Cap not excepting, the biggest firepower I have to go after Phil with is you."

"I need your help. I'll understand if you have to sit this one out, but I'm begging you to help me."

Wanda leaned her head against Clint's and closed her eyes.

"I told Vision once, that the only fear I can control is my own."

"Yeah. Wanda, I can't promise that we won't be captured. But I can promise you I'll make sure you do not wind up on the Raft again."

"No, you can't."

"I still have some markers to call in. You won't go back there. Not while I'm here."

"Please, Wanda?"

"I'm scared, Clint."

"Me too. But we can face it together as a team. As a family. If you'll come?"

Wanda took a breath.
"Yes. I'll help you."

"Thank you."

**CODA**

**Upstate New York**

It was a beautiful late spring morning. Donny Atello grinned as he brought his boat to a stop in the middle of the lake. Baiting his hook, he settled back to see what would bite.

He turned his portable radio to a classic rock station. Hopefully, they'd keep it on the good stuff, not that '80's crap. He turned it up, it wasn't like there was anyone else here to hear it.

As the music drifted down through the murky waters, a strange formation on the lake's bottom began to shift. And then began to crack. As water poured into the feature, it rocked even more violently.

Finally, the cocoon exploded, propelling a young man's body to the surface.

Donny jumped as the force wave nearly swamped his boat, and gasped at the form floating in the water.

Moving the boat over, he fished the guy out of the water. The man coughed violently, expelling the lake water from his lungs.

"Damn, son, where'd you come from?"

The man whimpered.

"Turn...please..."

"What?"

"Turn the radio off...too much..."

Donny turned the radio off.

"Tthank...yyoouuu."

"It's OK...look, let's get you to shore and..

"NO! My sister, Ellen...she can't know..

"Ellen Nadeer? Hell, knew you looked familiar. Son, hate to tell you this, but your sister's dead. One of them Inhumans."

The man looked back at his rescuer.

"Good." said Vijay Nadeer.

Chapter End Notes
All right, let's see what we've got.

Some dialogue here is taken from Captain America: Civil War. All credit to the writers of that movie.

Yes, Clint is still missing the mark on Coulson. (Sorry.) Of the teams in play, Team Cap has the least to go on, but the most motivation, so they're going anyways. If Clint gets to a point where he gets ahold of Tony's research - could get awkward, maybe?

Wanda - not nice things happened on the Raft. Remember that in Civil War, Tony did see her, but was on the heels of potential Hydra super soldiers and Cap at the time. Not that she was remotely in any state to recognize that. And not that that excuses Tony in the slightest...but more on that later.

Cassandra Clements is an OC...but I'll be open to changing her if an Inhuman exists in canon with her powers. If not, here is the requisite Can-Con in this story. (With a much better name.) ;)

Finally, I disagreed (GASP) with how Agents of SHIELD handled Vijay Nadeer. Twice. So, he's baaacck...but whose side is he on?

Next, I love New York in June...how about you?
Chapter Summary

In the search for the missing Phil Coulson, Tony Stark wants to help...but how? And what else is threatening to blow up in his face?

Plus, newly re-born Inhuman Vijay Nadeer is looking for help...in all the right places?

Chapter Notes

To keep the timeframe straight, this chapter slightly overlaps the end of Chapter 9.

Stark Tower, NYC

"All right. Let's do this."

"It's not that simple, Tony."

Tony Stark stared at former President Matthew Ellis in shock.

"Wait a moment. The two of you came here, begging for my help in finding Agent/Director/Agent Coulson, who apparently knows something about SHIELD LMD's that could destroy the world. I agreed...didn't you hear me? And now, what, you don't want me involved?"

He turned to the other person in the lab.

"What the hell, Hill?"

Maria Hill gazed up from Ellis's phone. "We gave you the hard background, Tony. Now it's time for even harder truths."

"I can't wait."

Matthew Ellis took a breath. "If Glenn Talbot was right, then there is at least one person in a high position in government who is willing to go along with an agenda to set the people of this country, if not the world, at each other's throats. If SHIELD and the Inhumans are the initial fall guys, who do you think is next? And where do you think it will end?"

Tony frowned. "I got a call from Ross before you arrived, telling me he'd stick us in the Raft if we started looking into this."

Maria started to think out loud. "Thaddeus...not sure where he falls into this. I don't see him as someone who'd set the country on fire deliberately, but he has a grudge against enhanced and gifted people."
Tony groaned. "Bruce. Ross never forgave him for the way Betty turned her back on him for Banner. I keep tabs on her, she still doesn't speak to the old man."

"And whoever they are, they have the late, and personally un lamented, Senator Nadeer's caucus behind them. Granted, it's small, but these days it only needs to take a few people to hold up government."

"Trained monkeys all of them, couldn't find their..."

Ellis interrupted, "That's another thing, Tony. You have managed, over the years, to make personal enemies of a large number of Congressmen and Senators. Right now, they need you, Iron Man, SI, the whole package."

"If you take one wrong step, get caught breaking the Sokavia Accords, well, they might not be the ones howling for prosecution. But they won't lift a finger to save you."

Ellis continued. "I know that Iron Man is the face of the Sokavia Accords. Hell, I helped put him there. However, look at what the Department of Education did with Captain America."

Tony scowled. "I saw those videos. My marketing team could've done better. Flying pigs could've done better. Should've gotten Simon Williams, at least."

"They tried, he refused. And you're missing the point, Tony. Everyone knows that Steve Rogers was Captain America. Now, they've separated the name from the persona. Anyone could be Captain America now. Jeffrey Mace was the unwitting test run."

"And if they could do it to Steve," Tony said slowly, "You think that they could do it to me."

"Don't you?"

"Not a chance. They don't have my brains, my technology, my money..."

"Bank accounts can be traced and frozen. Technology can be confiscated. And your brains won't do you much good on the 51st level of the Raft."

"Wait, I thought it was only 50 levels?"

Ellis smiled. "I rest my case, Tony."

He got up. "Maria, I need to leave now. I think you two can take it from here."

"What, you're going to drop this on me and go?" yelped Tony.

"What do you mean go, Tony? I was never here to begin with."

Ellis snagged his phone off the table, turned and left the lab without another word. Tony looked at Maria.

"Presidents can't be tried for actions they take in office. But that's just tradition. Ellis has a long list of enemies too. That doesn't change when you leave."

"Out of curiosity, if someone were to ask..."

Maria laughed. "I believe he has four old friends, willing to testify he was at their annual poker weekend in the Adirondacks. As will his security detail. Old friends of mine."
"Ah." Tony looked at the papers, then at the pictures on the holowall. "What now, Maria? I assume you have a plan?"

"I do, but for once Iron Man may need to take a back seat to Tony Stark."

"Listening."

"We have two problems here. One, of course, is to fish Phil out from wherever he's wound up. We're going to need him to help unwind whatever's been put in motion. Iron Man could help here."

"But two, we need to take this anti-Inhuman, anti-enhanced, anti-gifted movement out. It's starting to spread past the Watchdog fringes. We nip this in the bud now, and we take out their legs before they start moving. Now, that is where the great Tony Stark and Stark Industries comes in."

"Hmmm..." Tony began to think. "Marketing, PR campaigns, social media, galas, benefits, that sort of thing?"

"As well as supporting Inhumans publicly, Tony. High level appointments in SI. Donations to the In-Human Alliance, playing those politics you despise, sponsoring anti-hate legislation, finding...creative...ways to cut off the funding to the Watchdogs. If we can remind the country that we are stronger together, and get them to believe that, then it will be harder to turn us against each other."

Tony sighed. "I may not be the best person to front for that, Maria. Leipzig..."

Maria hesitated. "And now we come to the point where you'll probably kick me out, Tony. Promise me you'll listen first?"

Tony nodded and Maria pulled a picture up on her phone and airdropped it to the holowall.


"Oh, no. Hell, no!"

"You promised you'd listen..."

"To anything but that! How long have you had that, Hill? Does Ellis know?"

Maria waited until it was obvious that Tony was listening. Albeit reluctantly.

"I've had it for the last year. And I did not give it to Ellis. I don't know if he has this from any other source. I suspect he does. But no one brought it up over the past year, did they?"

"How do you know I still..."

"Even have it? I know you, Tony. You're too smart. You're not going to throw away your options. Not even this one."

"Maria..."

"Tony, you might be going after one of the highest members of government. You're probably going to have to break at least one person out of prison, if not the Raft. Now, from what Ellis said, you probably can't be seen to do it. But I think that's your guy."

Maria nodded at the holowall. A muscular blond man was at a Federal Express location, open box in hand. An older flip phone sat beside the box. The partially filled out courier slip rested on the other
side. The name "Tony Stark" could be seen in blue ink.

"I am not working with Rogers."

"Then you tell me how we're gonna do this alone, Tony. Knowing Steve, and especially if Clint or Natasha are still with him, they've already got this partially figured out from what's out there on the news. They may already be on the move."

Stark fumed. "I'll find a way."

"Sure, but with who? To help you, Rhodes may have to resign, and wouldn't that be a red flag for Ross? That leaves you a magical pink android who's already been targeted by the Watchdogs, and, oh yes, a spider boy."

"Parker is STAYING out of this."

"So, who do we have? Right now, I count three, me, you and your ego."

Tony slumped against the wall.

"I'm not saying that you have to be best buds again, Stark. But I think the world's at risk from this, just as much as it ever was from Hydra."

Maria sighed. "If you really can't do it, I'll...make some calls. See if I can dig up some ex-SHIELD people. Maybe those vigilantes running around Hell's Kitchen. I'd rather have us all working together, than running around separately, maybe running into or over each other. Not a good strategic move."

"Just...give me time to think, Maria. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

Maria gave Tony a measured glance, but was not unsympathetic when she responded, "All right. But time's running out for all of us. Including Phil."

Turning to go, she called out, "FRIDAY?"

"Yes, Commander Hill?"

"While Tony's thinking, can you go stealth mode through FBI, CIA, CID, INTERPOL records? Don't look for Coulson. Look for his team. Where did they disappear to?"

"Mr. Stark?"

"Yeah, confirmed, FRIDAY. Take whatever you need, go deep black, no trace, Sigma Delta 2693 Protocol."

As FRIDAY beeped in acknowledgement, Tony said quietly, "I need you to go, Maria."

"See you tomorrow, Tony."

As Maria left the lab, Tony stood unmoving. Then, with a sweep of his arm, and a shout of frustration, Tony swept the papers off the lab table.

Tony left the lab, dimming the lights. He did his best thinking up on the roof, anyways. At least it was a clear night for it.

Several hours passed, and Coulson's pictures from the holowall disappeared. They were replaced by
mug shots of four men and women, which separated into two groups. Text began to pop up underneath each grouping, which glowed in the deserted darkened room.

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CODA

**Nadeer Estate, Upstate New York**

Vijay Nadeer trembled inside the large deserted house. After the fisherman dropped him off, he was able to get in, change, grab some water.

He guessed that his bitch of a sister never reported him dead. It would've outed him as an Inhuman, and she'd never be elected again. Everything reverted to him, once he came back to life himself. But the power was off, the house shut down while she had been in Washington. The only thing he had was his dead cell phone, left in a drawer from his last...stay. Guess Ellen forgot it, not that she expected him to come back for it.

These powers, his *curses* powers, they were different from before. He moved at normal speed. But there was a humming in the back of his head, it was worse when that radio had been on, but was a constant presence.

Gods, who could help him now? The SHIELD scientist...what was her name...how could he even start to look for her?

His hand touched his phone, and he moaned, "I wish I could find Jemma Simmons."

The buzzing at the back of his mind turned into a shriek, and Vijay collapsed, holding his hands ineffectually over his ears. When the buzzing subsided to what he thought of as normal *hah!* levels, he stood up, and stared at his phone in shock.

The dead phone, now fully charged, was on. On its screen was a picture of a slightly battered Jemma Simmons, looking pale and worn.

Beside it, the text read: **HIGHLY CONFIDENTIAL: Prisoner 16290, transferred from United States FBI custody with Prisoner 16291. Current Location: Midnight Glen. Maintain Black Hole protocol on both until further notice.**

Vijay paused. He reached out his hand again to his phone and braced himself.

"Where is Midnight Glen?"

---

Chapter End Notes

I am not writing **Iron Man** out of this story. But this may be a case where Tony Stark can do more good than Iron Man.

In the MCU, and especially in the world that Agents of SHIELD portray, there are serious repercussions for violating the Sokavia Accords, especially once you have signed them. Jeffrey Mace pointed out to Yo-Yo in Slingshot (Digital Series) that doing so would land her in The Raft. (Remember, Quake got kicked out of her Senate hearing before she could sign.) Tony, as a famous multi-billionaire global businessman is going...
to have to be very careful about what he is seen doing. And if Tony's AI has ways to spy on world governments, who's to say that the reverse isn't true? (Other than Tony, that is...)

That means that if Tony can't act covertly, and let's face it, Iron Man is the exact opposite of covert, then who can - or will want to?

(All right, I admit it, I am also trying wiggle around Spider Man: Homecoming. Tony's not going to be available for anything we have seen in the trailers if he's blasting people out of prison. I am very interested in seeing if Peter Parker has signed the Sokavia Accords. But I digress.)

I also note I am trying to make Vijay a canon Inhuman, it might be a little different, though.

While we leave Tony trying to swallow this twist, Dr. Strange and Agent Piper are still pursuing the Darkhold and its hidden devotee, who has their own agenda for this story.
Saving the World Leaves a Mess

Chapter Summary

Searching for answers for a missing SHIELD Agent and an evil arcane book, two groups head to the ruins of the Playground for clues.

And Dr. Strange does not make a good first impression.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Playground, Classified (Eastern United States)

"I think I've found my new favourite way to travel, Dr. Strange."

Strange grinned as he and Agent Piper stepped across the sling ring's border. It faded quickly as he took in the massive destruction of the SHIELD base.

"It looks as if a bomb went off here."

"Barrel full of C-4, to be precise. Last I saw it, May's double was sitting on it. I was busy pushing equipment onto the Bus, so I didn't have time to chat. She...it...covered our escape by blowing the place up." Piper paused."Come to think of it, not sure why it didn't side with the rest. Especially since Coulson had a double."

"Another time, Piper. Come, we need to find the last place where Coulson and the book were together. That may provide clues to both our quests."

Following behind Strange, Piper muttered, "What is my quest? I seek the grail..."

Looking up, she saw Strange's cloak quickly shift from red to blue. Then to yellow. Then back to red again. She thought she heard a faint snigger.

"A cloak who gets Monty Python?"

"Everything has its preferences in this world, Piper. Can we please focus? Both of you?"

"Yes, sir..."

The two continued on into the darkness.

The car slowed to a stop on the deserted street outside of the escape exit to the old base. Lance Hunter looked up from the front seat.

"Well, they knew about this too, someone must have given up the plans."

Deathlok/Mike Peterson scanned the area. "I count five life signs in front. They are...not as watchful as they should be. This would be an easy takedown."
Natasha Romanoff shook her head. "I want to keep you in reserve, Mike, don't want to show our entire hand just yet. Bobbi, you up for some fun?"

Bobbi Morse grinned. "You know it, Nat."

As the two women slid out of the back, Hunter whispered, "Why do I get left behind?"

Leaning into the front seat, Bobbi kissed him and murmured, "You scream too loud, darling."

"Just don't get killed out there, love..."

Natasha and Bobbi slipped out into the shadows. There was silence, then Hunter looked over at Mike in the driver's seat and asked, "So, how about some tunes while we wait?"

"No."

"OK, then..."

The two resumed their watch. All of a sudden, shouts rang out from across the street. Hunter rolled his eyes and snagged the last of the chips. Mike resumed his scanning.

Silence fell back over the street. Mike paused and said, "That's it. Grab the stuff, and let's move."

"How do you know?"

Mike paused as he popped open the trunk. "There are five unconscious on the ground, and two females standing. Natasha's flipping us off, Bobbi's entering the code."

"Hope it hasn't changed."

"It hasn't." Mike strode across the street, leaving Hunter with the gear.

"It never changes...she gets to have the fun, and I'm stuck here holding the bags."

Hoisting them onto his shoulders, Hunter joined the rest of the team and they quickly made their way through the tunnel.

Coming out in the lower levels, Bobbi swore softly. She and Hunter gazed in shock at their old home, as Mike and Natasha assessed the room for potential threats in the low light.

While there were some roped off areas, it seemed that the ATCU and army had little time to clean up the area. A layer of sooty gray ash covered the floor. Shards of glass and other metals were embedded into walls. A charred poster defiantly clung to the wall, the phrase "A Team That Trusts..." could just be made out.

"What the hell happened here?" muttered Hunter.

"A war." responded Natasha.

"Hope we won it." rejoined the Brit.

Mike finished scanning. "Lots of organic material, blood, that sort of thing. No life signs."

"OK, let's take a look, see if any workable computers or tablets were left. Personal quarters, look for mission notes, maybe we can get some clues." Natasha shook her head as she looked around.
"Phil would've had our heads if we took work info into our rooms." noted Bobbi dryly.

"Maybe this Mace was different. I'll keep scanning." offered Mike.

"We don't have much time until those guards miss reporting in. Move quickly."

The four scattered, working their way around the lower level.

Suddenly, Mike frowned. He looked up at the ceiling.

"Someone else is here."

Dr. Strange stared at the machine in front of him. It should not exist. The technology on this Earth, at this time, simply did not exist.

Piper looked around the room. She moved over to a large pile of black ash towards the side, swallowed, and called over, "Doctor...this looks organic. Is it..."

Dr. Strange looked over and blanched. "Piper, step away from that."

He hurried over to the young agent.

"So this isn't..."

"Human, no. This is from another dimension, a darker one. It would probably be safe to call it Hell."

Strange concentrated and his hands glowed slightly. The material disappeared, leaving no trace, not even an outline.

"I have...removed...it to a safer location. Call it a quarantine."

"Wonder if it was AIDA?"

"If this is what your friends were dealing with, then I certainly hope so." Strange moved back to the machine.

"What do you know about this machine?"

"OK. Coulson, Fitz and...uh...the Reyes kid were dealing with a psycho in LA, got caught in a blast that trapped them between our dimension and...someplace else. AIDA suggested that she read the Darkhold to find a way to free them. That is what she built afterwards. From what Radcliffe said later, it was a very close call, Coulson was nearly sucked in."

"They should've left the Darkhold alone."

Piper stared at Dr. Strange in shock. "Excuse me? Didn't you hear me? They would've died if AIDA hadn't done something. Coulson nearly..."

"Piper, from Coulson's own notes, much of this mess was directly caused by AIDA and Radcliffe reading the Darkhold. It corrupted them, and I'm not sure that anything short of his death and reducing her to molten metal would have solved it. What they created was an inter-dimensional portal, and anything could have come through it. Could still come through it, as a matter of fact, and, because the Darkhold was involved, it is attuned to beings from that dimension."

"I'm sorry, Piper, but yes. They should have let Coulson, Fitz and Robbie die. To protect the world."
The cloak jerked on his shoulders for a moment, then lay still.

Agent Piper seethed. "First, you asshole...most of this "mess" was caused by Holden Radcliffe creating the damned robot to begin with and then reading the damned book. Against Coulson's express orders. Secondly, who the hell made you God, deciding if it's better for the world if someone dies, especially someone like Phil Coulson? Thirdly..."

"Thirdly, you want to keep your voices down in case the guards out front are paying attention."

Strange and Piper whirled around, Piper's gun out, Strange readying an offensive spell. Four newcomers entered the room, all with weapons of their own drawn.

"And fourthly, we rather take offence to the suggestion that Phil Coulson should have died at any point." said one of them in a British accent.

The two groups faced off for a moment, then Piper lowered her gun.

"My God, you're Natasha Romanoff. The Black Widow. And you two, Bobbi Morse and Lance Hunter, Coulson talked about you two. Especially if he was up in the common room late at night. Don't know the cyborg, though."

"Don't need to," the metallic man responded. "Who the hell are you?"

"Agent Larissa Piper, most call me Piper. I was personally recruited by Coulson shortly after you two left."

"SHIELD Agent?"

At Piper's nod, Natasha continued, "Mike, scan them both."

"They're human, Nat."

"What else would we...oh..you think we're robots?" puzzled Piper.

"There are those rumours making the rounds, yes," noted Bobbi. "Cyborg is Mike Peterson, aka Deathlok." Piper looked blank. "Don't worry. Who's your plus one?"

"This is Dr. Stephen Strange, mystic arts expert. Coulson sent me to him just before the last mission."

"Doctor? Your bedside manner could use some work," commented Natasha.

"I get that a lot," agreed Strange. "In this case..."

Alarms in the base began to go off.

Strange continued, "We should probably continue this someplace else. I mean you no harm, I mean your Coulson no harm, I'm sure he's a wonderful fellow, but unless we want to be explaining how we all got past the Army's defenses, I suggest that you follow Piper and I."

The four looked at each other. Hunter sighed. "Think it was the guards out back?"

Natasha grimaced. "We could try to fight our way out..."

Piper shook her head. "Strange here has a better way to go. Trust me. He's a bit of an ass, but I vouch for him. Coulson vouched for him too."
Bobbi shrugged, "These guys could probably start filling in the blanks." She gave Strange a hard
stare.

Strange gazed back. "Again, Agent Morse, I mean SHIELD no harm. My priorities are somewhat
different than yours, but our causes intersect. A moment."

Strange turned to face the machine, closed his eyes and turned a ring. A shimmer came over the
portal. Once the agents could see clearly, it had been reduced to scrap metal.

Strange staggered, looking pale. Piper moved to support him.

"This dimensional portal is closed. Nothing will be moving through it again. You must decide, I can
get us back to my home, but it has to be soon. This was...unanticipated."

"Coulson says he's good, I'm good." decided Hunter. Nat rolled her eyes, but nodded. The four
sheathed their weapons.

Strange focused with the sling ring, and a circular portal opened.

"Everyone through, quickly."

Piper nodded and went through. Shrugging, Nat, Bobbi, Hunter, and Mike followed.

As he turned to go, Strange's cloak thwacked him across the back of his head.

Strange groaned. "Et tu, cloak?" He lifted his hands and several small animals appeared behind him.
The cloak moved and they changed slightly.

"Really...."

Strange moved through the portal, and it closed behind them.

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**ATCU Action Report Summary**

**SHIELD Base, 0230 hours**

1. Unit called in to investigate potential intrusion into SHIELD base ruins.

Upon further investigation, unit found alarm had been triggered by several small animals, on first
appearance to be small rabbits.

Unit members sustained severe puncture wounds to exposed areas, wound markings are similar to
rabbit teeth, yet abnormally sharp and pointed.

Animals neutralized through grenade into cluster. Samples taken and sent to lab for analysis.

Recommend asking British Intelligence to question Agent Simmons regarding potential genetic
experimentation on animals by SHIELD.

Monitors show no other intrusions.

2. Unit at rear entrance report injuries sustained due to gang members attempting to gain entrance -
potential initiation rituals. Recommend reporting to local law enforcement.
Chapter End Notes

All right, first, thanks to everyone continuing on this journey with me! I'm sorta amazed that others are willing to come down this particular rabbit hole with me.

Secondly, I don't agree with Strange's assessment of Coulson and Co. (I'm in full agreement with Hunter). Just remember that he didn't see Agents of SHIELD S4, and Piper didn't have time to explain the rest.

So yes, two of our groups are now combined, and we're going to leave them be for a bit to pool their knowledge. Don't worry, Strange's cloak will keep him in line.

Not sure where we're going next, but we definitely have Agents in harm's way...
SHIELD Agent Phil Coulson has been causing trouble for his hosts/captors. But he's been doing it for longer than even he knows.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Somewhere, Not Earth

Flavius dumped the groaning human on the floor in his quarters. Exiting the cell, he activated the lock.

Phil Coulson had just lost his freedom to roam around the station for a while.

Striding towards the officers quarters, the fierce expression on his face caused the other...guests...to scatter out his way as quickly as possible. He only had to boot two or three that wouldn't move fast enough or drop their gaze far enough to suit him.

Jerking open the door to his office, his eyebrows raised in surprise at the occupant sprawled behind his desk.

"Back so soon, sir? Thought we wouldn't see you for a while. Did that...thing...provide less than enthralling conversation?"

The other being grimaced.

"Do any of those...things...provide anything but sub-par entertainment? Until we kill them, at least. Then the entertainment value goes up for awhile. I am looking forward to this one's death in particular."

"How do you plan to kill a head in a jar? No fight, some screaming, then it's over."

"I have ideas," the other snorted. "No, Anton Ivanov is even more of an idiot than the rest of his ilk. At the most, he'll provide a useful distraction while we move into position. The humans are so busy tearing into each other on Earth, that they've forgotten how to raise their eyes to the stars."

"More fools, they." agreed Flavius. "But it seems that we have on our station one of the few truly dangerous ones amongst them."

"Has he been giving you problems?"

Flavius sighed. "If he's not trying to forment rebellion with his fellow prisoners, he's snooping around the shuttles, never minding that he doesn't know how to operate one. Or attempting to raid the medical room for supplies for some of the more advanced of our guests here. We finally had to...discuss...the error of his thinkings with him. He actually attempted to hit us. We returned the favour."
He opened a canister and took a swig. "I do not mean to pry, Great One, but what is the human's purpose here? If we did not have our instructions to keep him alive, we would have deep-spaced him along with the rest of the prisoners in that first rebellion."

"I know of Phil Coulson. Believe me, shooting his fellow rebels out of the airlock as he watched was more of a punishment for him."

"It merely hardened his resolve."

The Great One looked at Flavius. "The Master has his reasons, Guard Master Flavius, it is not for us to question."

Flavius bowed his head in acknowledgement.

"Besides, I made a promise to that idiot. I intend to keep it. He will live to see Coulson die, but not much longer afterwards."

Flavius took another sip. "This situation with Coulson reminds me of some of the Earthling 'entertainment' we watched before our first incursion. The one with the British spy. No matter what the odds, what he was placed up against, he always managed to escape and foil his enemy's plans. I worry that..."

The Great One raised an eyebrow. "That the Master is weaker or less intelligent than any human?"

Flavius paled. "No, of course not." He quickly went to one knee.

The Great One took the canister and finished its contents.

"You have had a stressful day, Flavius. I understand that did not come out the way you really meant it." He gestured for the other being to rise.

"Of course not, Great One....thank you...you are merciful."

"Sit, sit. I must away again soon. I need to consider your problem case."

Flavius sat in the chair across from his desk. After a while, the being spoke again.

"Death is too quick of a solution, Flavius. Phil Coulson has been a thorn in the side of the Master for a long, long time. He was a key figure in the Unfortunate Incident on five Earth years ago. It was determined that if he had not been a part of those events, then the Chitauri Invasion had an 85% chance of succeeding. His death at the hands of that stupid Asgardian brought an end to the internal friction within the Earth team. And he died, we saw it.

"Then somehow he was brought back to life, thrown back into the world's events. He and his new team played a direct role in the scattering of Hydra, which had been another useful distraction for us. Over the last few years, his actions and directions as Director of SHIELD burned Hydra, if not to the ground, to the point where it ceased to be useful to us."

"And then, the resurrection of the Inhumans."

"That has proved to be very beneficial for our purposes, Great One." hazarded Flavius.

"You show short term thinking, Guard Master. Although limited by the Sokavia Accords, Phil Coulson and SHIELD were well on their way to establishing...tolerance...and potential integration of the Inhuman population. Those things were originally made as weapons for our kind once. Weapons
have a way of turning on you, especially when senient. The Master was not pleased to see them reactivated, much less the "Terragenesis" dispersed into the Earth's ecosystem."

"No, the best we can hope for there with that turn of events belong to encouraging those like Anton Ivanov and the Watchdogs. Their actions serve to further alienate the Inhumans from the rest of their human brethren so that when we move, they won't desire to help. Until, of course, it is too late."

"And with Phil Coulson here, his voice and actions stilled, his prior interference on the Inhumans' behalf can be discounted as the misguided ramblings of a fool."

"I see." mused Flavius. "And the book?"

"Yes..." scowled the Great One. "The Darkhold. We would owe Coulson a lingering death in the pits of Morglavia for that alone. It came out of hiding. It was in our tool's possession. And then it vanished again. Coulson refuses to tell us who has it, where it has gone. But he was behind it. We can see the pride in his eyes when you question him about it."

"If it ever comes back into our hands again, it may be worth forcing Coulson to read it, in full knowledge of what it will do to his...soul...as it were." smirked Flavius.

"You show potential in your cruelty, Guard Master. That may be a discussion worth having at a later time."

The two were silent for a moment.

"Great One, forgive me. But...he is one man. His time in power was brief. He has no family, his friends restricted to a tight circle, which we have dealt with. No connections to others in temporal or astral power or human wealth. How can one human stand and thwart the Master as many times as you say?"

"That has been a topic of conversation over the course of years, Flavius. No one has come up with an acceptable answer yet. Although I have my own theories. Would you..."

"Please."

"Of course." The being thought for a few minutes. "Phil Coulson is not Inhuman, of that fact we can rely. But he has a power of his own - the ability to bring diverse beings together and unlock their potential. It has been shown time and again that those who come into contact with Coulson have a greater likelihood of becoming more than what they ever thought they could be."

He flicked his finger across the desk, and a picture of a woman in a cell formed, her arms covered in metal sheathes, facing down her captors, a bruise forming on one cheek

"Consider Daisy Johnson. Now, we nearly took her too, except that our analysis showed that imprisoning her and Coulson together would result in a 98% chance of escape."

"Just four years ago, she was a mere homeless hacker promoting conspiracy theories on the Internet, one of a thousand voices. Now, under Coulson's influence? A key member of SHIELD, skilled in her gift, confident and inspires confidence. A woman well on her way to the leadership role divined for her. Would she have found her way without him?"

He flicked his fingers again, and a new picture of an older man, sitting up on the roof of a building, looking over a city.

"Or the great Anthony Stark. The Iron Man. Wealthy and intelligent, but his true potential was being
wasted away through years of neglect by himself and those around him. He began the process of becoming Iron Man, but nearly died to palladium poisoning. Guess who was assigned to watch over him while he created a new element and placed himself on the path to the Unfortunate Incident?"

On the screen, Tony smirked at a memory. "...I will taze you and watch Supernanny while you drool into the carpet...."

"Leo Fitz, Jemma Simmons? Brightest minds of their generation. But their potential was fully forged due to what they went through as members of Coulson's team. Without him, they would have been conducting research behind desks, publishing papers, never risking their lives, but never realizing a tenth of what they could be."

"Even his enemies." Fingers flicked, and the visage of Grant Ward filled the screen. "Grant Ward was a specialist. A grunt man for Hydra. Minor strategic vision, focused mainly on the short term. Content to leave longer term goals to others. However, placed against Phil Coulson, he nearly took over the world."

"Because Coulson crushed his chest in."

"A mistake, granted. But Coulson's team still found a way to win."

He flicked his fingers again, and shots of the Earth's heroes filled the desk.

"In every civilization, Flavius, there are linchpins. Beings holding key roles, without whom, a society is limited at best, doomed at worst. Most believe that these type of beings are the political leaders, military leaders, social superstars. Heroes."

"That is not the case. The true linchpin is the voice in the dark, the nudge that forces another to choose. The hand with the tool that is required at the right time. The comforter. The encourager. The truth teller. The kick in the ass if necessary."

"Coulson, Flavius, has been all these things throughout his life to countless beings. On Earth. On Asgard. Even, apparently, here on the station. Take him out of the equation, and you leave Earth's...heroes...open to their flaws."

"Pride." Flick, and a hero disappeared.

"Self-Righteousness." Flick.

"Insecurity." Flick.

"A deference to Authority. Resistance to Authority" Flick, flick.

"Insularity." Flick.

"And so on." With a wave of his hand, the rest of the shots fell.

"Coulson is not perfect, he has his flaws as well, but he is able to work through them to achieve the impossible and help others do the same."

"An interesting theory, Great One. But, would that not argue for killing the man now, rather than risk any chance of escape?"

"Do not worry, Guard Master. Phil Coulson will never see Earth again. And now, time is up."
"You return to Earth, Great One?"

"Momentarily. But I meant yours."

With no hesitation, the being pulled out his weapon and fired, catching the unsuspecting Flavius in the chest. The Guard Master fell lifeless to the floor.

"It is unwise, Flavius, to invite yourself into your superior's confidences. Especially when he has lost his confidence in your abilities."

The Great One rose. It was time for a discussion with Phil Coulson as to the terms of his captivity. Especially when it concerned his team still on Earth.

Stepping over the body, the Great One strode out of the office and headed towards the cells.

Chapter End Notes

Credits note: Some dialogue used here is taken from Iron Man 2 - all credits to the writers of that movie.

Now, did you really think Phil Coulson was going to just sit around and wait to be rescued? Unfortunately, he's punching way out of his weight class at the moment. At least they can't kill him?

This chapter stems directly from some of the conversations in the last chapters where Tony and Strange address Agents of SHIELD events from the outside looking in. I figured it was time for someone to come in on Coulson's side. Just didn't figure it to be the bad guys... ;)

One more thing, in no way do I mean to take away from the very personal heroic (or villainous) journeys of the other characters mentioned (especially Daisy). They all chose, forged and walked their respective paths themselves. I believe that Coulson was there to give that whatever they needed to help them get to that spot. The rest was all them...or at least not just Coulson.

Speaking of walking their path...Tony and Steve are on a collision course. Someone has to make the next move.
Come Together (Over Me)

Chapter Summary

Team Cap is coming home...and Tony Stark makes his choice.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Wakandan Jet, Mid-Atlantic Ocean

It was four hours into the Trans-Atlantic flight. Clint Barton was having to take a circuitous route out of Wakanda to avoid any of the military fly pasts. He figured that the Wakandan call sign T'Challa had provided to them made most of his neighbours turn a blind eye. Now here over open water, all bets were off.

Sam Wilson was dozing in the seat next to him. Once they got closer to the North American shoreline he'd take over, activating the cloaking on the jet and flying the shoreline looking for a gap in the new Stark defenses. Clint figured it would probably come around Newfoundland. The Canadians had been not enthusiastic about the Sokavia Accords, and surprisingly had to have great deal of pressure placed on them before they would commit. Perhaps their newest stray could help there.

Clint looked back. Steve Rogers was taking advantage of the flight to get some rest. He had been up most of the previous night looking through the old mission reports, trying to figure out what Coulson's team had been chasing when SHIELD fell.

The new one, Cassandra 'Call me Cass' Clements was showing off her...gifts...to Sharon Carter. The light seemed to reflect off her skin as she projected a bubble around herself, gently bumping into Wanda Maximoff, tensely running through hand exercises.

Poor kids. He hoped he could convince the new one to let them drop her off over Canuck airspace. But given that the head of the Wakandan military escorted her personally to the jet with farewells usually reserved for close friends or family, there was probably more to her story as well.

He caught Wanda's eye. She gave him a nod and a slight smile, and joined Cass and Sharon in a quiet conversation. Good. Wanda could always use more friends, and they really needed Cass' hero worship to stop. Soon. Or he was going to something drastic, probably to Steve. Bedazzle his Nomad jacket, perhaps.

Clint grinned as he thought of ways to prove his teammates' humanity to the wide-eyed Canuck. The grin faded as he remembered that the way he had realized it was by battling alongside them.

The plane continued on its course over the blue waters.

Stark Tower, NYC

Tony Stark came into his lab space, coffee mug clutched in one hand. Yawning and blinking, he slurped at his comfortably hot strong caffeine source. He had watched the stars until they
disappeared, one by one into the morning sky, trying to come to terms with what he knew he should do.

Still didn't want to, though. Even for blasted Agent.

Even if said Agent had helped take down Stane. Forced him to keep going when he was dying of Palladium poisoning, not letting him give up. Then the scepter, the helicarrier in Sokavia. He just owed Coulson his life, that's all. Wasn't all the times he saved the world payment enough?

No matter how loud he turned up his tunes, he couldn't escape the small voice inside saying "No".

A conscience was a terrible thing at times.

He was acting like a three year old, and he knew it. He was so tired of acting like an adult. Staying home when every itch in him wanted to put on the suit and beat some sense into the villain of the week (which the cops had handled) because it was the right thing to do. And Sokavia...ok, it wasn't the ideal solution, but it was a start! Not like Rogers had offered a solution. He just left, and left Tony holding the bag.

The small voice again, "You had him convinced to try...until you attempted to kill his best friend."

Tony had come to realize that Siberia was not his finest hour...although no jury in the world would've convicted him. He still wasn't sure at the end of it all whether he really went after Barnes because he killed his parents, or because Steve had chosen Barnes over him.

Maybe a five year old, then, scrapping over a friend on the playground.

Enough of this. He was an adult. Steve was an adult.

"Why is this so hard?"

"Because, perhaps, you are envious of Steve Rogers' path?"

"AAGGHH!!" Whirling, the coffee cup flew out of Tony's hand, its precious contents splattering on the floor.

"Viz, warn a guy before you enter the room!"

"I am sorry, Tony." Vision drifted down beside Tony. "I can get you another?"

"No, no. Your barista skills still require work, V."

Tony sagged for a moment on his workbench. "So, Jiminy Cricket, you want to chime in on this?"

"Jiminy...ah, I see. Would that make you Pinocchio, Tony?"

"Your sense of humour is improving."

"Tony, for the past year, you have laboured under the restrictions of the Accords. You have limited your suit use. Gone when called upon. Been a focal point for both sides, and had to...engage them both."

"I lost a good Armani when that Inhuman protestor egged me in Orlando."

"Steve Rogers, on the other hand, has not been so bound. Wherever he and his has been, they have had the ability to use their powers and skills as they desired, not because they were ordered to. They
have not been forced to face the consequences of their choices, as you have."

"Let me continue. FRIDAY played for me your meeting with Maria Hill and President Ellis. It seems to me that if you follow Commander Hill's plan, nothing changes. You are bound to play by the rules, while Rogers' team acts outside of the Accords...the law."

Vision cocked his head. "Isn't that what humans call 'irony'? Steve Rogers, once known as American values personified, now a law breaker, while you, once known for your refusal to adhere to the rules, now the responsible one."

Tony stared at Vision. Then, almost despite himself, he began to laugh. He howled, tears streaming down his face.

"Oh, man...I never thought of that before..."

"Does that knowledge make your choice easier?"

"No, but it gave me a good laugh." Tony sighed. "I need to think about how this might work."

"You may not have much time, Tony. SI sensors have picked up Wakandan cloaking in the mid Atlantic. All Wakandan aerial units are accounted for...except that one."

"You think they're coming?"

"Maria warned you. Either we choose to work together, or I foresee that our time will be spent chasing after ghosts. And not Phil Coulson. Whatever enemies he had will only have to sit back and watch."

Tony turned and looked at the holowall.

"Rogers is the only man to get inside that place uninvited." Tony stabbed his finger at the second of the two groups. "And I can't believe they're holding Agent Melinda May in this one. Even for The Calvary, that's overkill."

"Then it sounds like you've decided."

"Yeah."

Hoisting himself up, Tony headed out towards his office.

"You know V, I got some ideas. But Rogers still has to agree to come back."

"That he does Tony. But you have the phone."

"Right. Knew unlisting my number would have its drawbacks."

**Wakandan Jet**

Clint slid in beside Steve, nudged his shoulder.

"Hmmm?"

"We're approaching American airspace, thought you should know."

"Thanks." Steve stretched and grinned at his friend.
"We really took the long way home, didn't we?"

"Yeah. I still owe my kids some waterskiing. If they still want to see me, that is. Maybe after we get this sorted out, I can take some time, make sure the family's OK. I think I have better grounds to convince Laura to pack up the kids, head back over with us."

Steve frowned. " Might want to hold off on that... T'Challa warned me of something going on in Wakanda."

"Great. We go to plan B, then? Find a non-signatory, live quietly until something happens."

"I'm tired of hiding. You contacted Natasha?"

"No, I'm waiting until we actually make it through. I've left word through the usual to ready for a contact, though. Depends on whether she's still watching or washed her hands of all of us."

Clint looked down at the copies of the mission reports. "So, where're we starting, fearless leader?"

"Well, I thought some of us could contact the families of the other Agents. May's parents. Ward's brother - it seems that the rest of his family died tragically a few years back in a fire. The other thing is the last mission Phil was on was chasing down something called Deadlok. I thought we'd start there and... put that back!"

Clint was distracted by a old tech piece, holding down some of the papers. "What's this?"

"It's a phone."

"Is that the one that's linked to Stark's?" At Steve's silence, Clint burst out, "Are you crazy, Steve?"

All eyes on the jet, other than the pilot swung in their direction.

"I told Tony if he ever needed me, I'd be there for him."

"Needs you? I'd say he needs you and the rest of us. He needs to throw us back on the Raft, that's all."

Clint tossed the phone in his hand. "Steve, it's been a year. Tony is famous for holding a grudge. Do you REALLY think he's just going to pick up the phone one day and..."

BRRRIIINNGG

All eyes focused on the phone. Steve snagged it out of Clint's hand.

"Yes, I do."

Steve flipped open the phone.

Rogers here.

Ah, Steve. It's been awhile. Finally time to come out from under your rock?

Sigh... Tony... is this how we're really going to start out?

... No... I promised myself I wouldn't be difficult. It's a habit.
Let's try again. Hello, Tony, how've you been?

*Oh just peachy keen,* Steve. And you?

You're the one who made this call.

*I am. Can I just get to it, Rogers?*

**Go ahead.**

*I have you on my sensors, rapidly approaching American airspace. Nice tech, by the way, I need to have a chat with T'Challa. Seems he's been holding out on us in more ways than one.*

**We stole it.**

*RRIIGHT. I'm not an idiot, Steve. Real question, why now?*

Tony...this is going to sound insane...but we have good reason to believe that Phil Coulson is alive. And in danger.

*Really?*

**Really.**

*Good, I was hoping you'd say that.*

**You knew?**

*Yeah, probably found out about the same time you did. Got my hands on the full CNN tape, saw Agent alive and shooting.*

**We saw Talbot mention him.**

*And you're risking everything you got on that? Who's with you, Clint?*

**I'm not at liberty...**

*Oh, come on Steve. I..made the call...you think this is easy for me?*

...**I'm not alone....**

*Ok. Look. We need to talk. There's things in play that's you don't know about, that you've missed. And I...need your help. If we're gonna help Agent, we're gonna have to work together.*

**I'm listening.**

*Face to face, Steve. Put your phone down on the jet's interface, one of the birdbrains will know how, and I can transmit you a code to get you through the shield. Then I can take over, get you to a safe location.*

**Uh huh. I am also not an idiot, Stark. You take over the jet and we wind up facing an ATCU welcoming committee. Thanks, we'll pass.**

*Steve, don't hang...look, at some point we have to start to trust each other again. You have to know I could've traced this call. The fact I'm not already staring you down is a start, at least.*
You let us through, give us the coordinates, and we'll make it there on our own.

*You gotta give me something, Steve.*

Like you said, trust has to start somewhere. You trust us to show up...and we trust that Thaddeus Ross isn't there waiting for us. You can see us. We should easier for you to track once inside your shield.

*Something...Who you got, Steve?*

*Clint, Sam, Sharon, Wanda, and a new friend. Canadian.*

*Canucks...give me headaches...fine. You have a...*

*One more thing. Your word, Tony, this doesn't work out, and you get us safe passage out of the US.*

*...My word still means something to you, Steve?*

*Always has, Tony. One of the reasons why I sent the phone last year.*

*Then agreed. Hook up the phone, and I'll see you shortly.*

*See you Tony...*

The plane flew on, across the ocean, and entered the United States. Landing in a non-descript field, Sam activated the hanger doors, letting in bright sunlight.

The tense team looked at Steve.

"You sure about this, Cap?" questioned Sam.

"No. But I'm going to do it anyways."

Walking out of the hanger, his teammates could hear two words.

"Stark."

"Rogers."

Chapter End Notes

And...here is where we have to leave things for a bit. This story will be incorporating one of my least favourite parts of Agents of SHIELD...the hiatus. I'll be away from my computing devices until July 18th, when we'll pick up the main thread again.

Happy Canada 150th, an Independence Day to any readers from the US, and to all, a
safe and happy summer season!
Tony Stark has joined up with Steve Rogers and his team. Now, can he get them to listen?

And other forces are regrouping as well...

Team Cap Jet, United States Airspace

It was a quiet and tense flight to Tony Stark's final destination. It didn't help that the only ones on the plane who could see where they were headed were Sam Wilson, sitting at the plane's controls, and Tony Stark, beside him in the co-pilots seat.

A wordless Tony had come on board with Steve Rogers, who was now in possession of a very thick binder, which he had opened the moment they were airborne.

Sharon Carter got up from her seat beside a nervous Cass Clements and slid down beside Steve.

"Not now, Sharon."

"What's going on, Steve? We have a right to know."

Steve looked up, frowning.

"Do you trust me?"

"Of course."

"Then let this play out. Tony says we should be groundside in about 2 hours."

"Look at the rest of your team."

Steve looked up. Sharon looked tense and concerned. Huddled in the back of the jet was Wanda Maximoff, her fingers sparking. Sitting beside her was Clint Barton, one fist clenched, the other on her shoulder, talking to her in a low voice. Across from Steve, Cass ran through control exercises. She met Steve's eye for a moment, and looked away.

Steve sighed. "All right, people. I know we're taking a risk here. I need you to trust me, when I say that I believe Tony is not turning us in."

"Yet." muttered Cass.

Steve ignored her. He focused on the back of the jet.

"Clint, I wouldn't have done this if I didn't think Tony had information we needed to find Phil. He's seen the rest of that tape, the first real confirmation that's actually Coulson. And he's given me his
research in the situation, which I'm trying to look over now."

"Wanda, Sam's up front. First sign of the ATCU, and we dump Tony naked out the back."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Spangles..." called Tony from up front.

"Shut the fuck up, Stark!" replied Sam.

"Language...look, if you can't trust Tony, trust me. Let's hear him out, then decide."

Silence. Clint looked over.

"I'll trust you, Cap. I hope you're right."

The rest of the team nodded. Cass moved over to talk to Wanda and Clint.

Sharon sighed. Then she went to check the gear, while Steve went back to his reading.

Up front, Tony muttered, "And welcome home, everyone..."

"Again, shut the fuck up, Stark!"

"LANGUAGE!"

Two hours later, to the dot, Sam whistled.

"It seems to be ok, Steve! I'm taking her down."

As the jet descended, Tony pulled out his phone.

"I need to open the garage doors...unless you want to be picked up by an overhead satellite. Not that one comes around here much."

Sam hesitated, then nodded. As Tony entered in a code, Sam could see a patch on the landing field retract. The experienced pilot brought the jet to a landing through the hole in the earth. As it landed, Sam blinked in surprise at the well-lit hanger, almost a twin to the one at the old Avengers complex.

Tony grinned sardonically. "I always have backups, Wings. Good business practices and all that."

Stepping out of the cockpit, Tony strode over to where Steve was getting up.

"You had a chance to read it?"

"Not all of it, but enough."

"You see what we're dealing with? It's...not good."

"No...no, it's not."

Tony leaned in. "Can you convince the others to put the rest aside enough to listen?"

Steve sighed. "It'll be easier for some than others." He nodded at a tense Wanda.

As the jet doors opened, Tony looked around at the group.

"Look, I promise. No one else knows you're here. We need to talk. Scratch that. I need to talk..."
"That hasn't changed, at least..." sniped Clint.

"Look, Barton. Let's get one thing straight. It took a lot to convince me to work with you lot again. Agent's part of that. But there's a hell of a lot more going on here than Phil. So, if you want in, fine, the briefing starts in 30. If you don't, there's the door, don't let it hit you on the way out."

Tony turned, and headed off the plane. Everyone looked at Steve.

"I hate to say this...but from what I've had time to read, he's right. Coulson's current whereabouts are only the tip of the iceberg here. Clint, can you pull it together to find Phil?"

"It's the only reason why I'm still here."

"Wanda, Cass, things are not good for Inhumans right now."

Cass shrugged. "I was expecting that. Tony is probably our best bet to figure out what's going on."

Wanda noded in agreement.

"Sharon, Sam..."

"We're with you, Cap." Sam replied.

"All right. Everyone off the jet, briefing in 30. Try to keep an open mind?"

As they exited the jet, Sharon noted, "It'd be nice to know where we're going."

"I can help with that."

A familiar pink form glided to meet them.

"Vision?"

"Hello, Captain Rogers," the android responded. "It is good to see all of you again." His gaze flitted over the group, resting momentarily on Wanda. "If you'll follow me?"

As Vision led the group out of the hanger into the main complex, Sam asked, "Anyone else, Vision? Rhodes here? Or Potts?"

"Neither one, Sam. Tony will explain later."

The complex that Vision led them through seemed very familiar. Personal quarters, common spaces. Training areas, gymnasium, shooting ranges. Looking out, the team could see trees, mountain views, but not much else.

"All it's missing is an A." quipped Sam as they entered a conference room.

"This was my first attempt at the Avengers building." Tony concentrated on his tablet. "When we decided to stay closer to New York, I put this one into mothballs. Lucky I held onto it."

He looked up. "Well, I see we're all here. Might as well get started."

Tony gestured at the table. At each seat was a personalized binder, which looked like the one Steve carried and an assortment of snacks for each that they had favoured a year ago.

As the team took their seats, Vision moved closer to Wanda.
"I would...like...to speak with you. Later?" he asked quietly.

Wanda nodded tensely back.

As the rest of the group took their seats, Tony put the tablet down.

"I know we have a lot to say to each other from what's happened over the past year. Most of you have reasons to hate me. I have my reasons to hate you, too. Right now, finger pointing is not going to help us get Phil back. And it's not going to help us stop what's going on."

"I promise, once this is over, we can go back to finding fault, and if you want to try to kick my ass, Barton, I'll meet you anytime, anyplace. But this is bigger than Leipzig and Sokavia. I need you to hear me out. Because I can't do this alone."

"We're listening." replied Steve.

"First, everything I'm gonna tell you, has been verified from other sources. You've got that binder in front of you, it's the same one Rogers has. It gives you the layout. I'll make sure you've got access to FRIDAY, internet, whatever, if you need to do your own confirmation."

Tony tapped on his tablet.

"Everyone, I'd like to introduce you to, not dead, Agent and Director Phil Coulson."

A collage of photos of Phil Coulson, dated over the previous four years, filled the back wall.

"Director?" asked Clint.

Tony grinned wolfishly at him. "Of SHIELD."

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**CODA**

**Eastern Europe**

Anton Ivanov looked at himself. Then he did it again. And again. And again. And...again.

His 5 remaining Life Decoy Models all lounged around the room, some idly checking out their new home, others reading the local paper.

"It is good to have my five fingers back. Together, we'll make an iron fist for the world, no?"

One of him looked up from the couch.

"Where is the other one?"

Ivanov grimaced. "He was careless. Compromised in his meeting with the American Blake. He performed one final duty for us, though. His self-destructive blast in his hotel room, was, of course, blamed on the filthy Inhumans."

The other 5 LMD's nodded in agreement. The plan allowed for no traces of them, there could be no failures in their mission.

"We will see what our Watchdog allies can make of this new situation. Then, it will be time for us to step back into the trenches."
"You mean, for us. You won't be going anywhere anytime soon."

The head in the jar smiled.

"Never say never, my tool."

Chapter End Notes

Hello everyone, hope you all had a great couple of weeks! Thanks for joining back up with me.

This chapter may be a little shorter than the rest, as *we* don't need to hear Tony recap most of the general premise of Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. Trust me, we'll get into various reactions as we go on. (Let me know if that isn't the case :))

But note that most people are here for a common cause. Trust and liking...well, there's still a long way to go on that, if it ever does come about.

Next up, just what does Tony have in mind? And will the others go along with it?
Interlude: Crossing the Boundaries

Chapter Summary

Lance Hunter is about to find out why one should never wander about in Sanctum Sanctorum without a Doctor.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lance Hunter was bored. B.O.R.E.D.

Candy Crush was getting old. His partner, Bobbi, had taken the laptop to study over the SHIELD material they had collected with the new blokes. Once that Agent…Piper had finished with her mooneyes over Natasha, she had started bringing out the stories that Director Coulson had felt the need to share with his people. Then Bobbi and Nat started spilling the beans about the road trip.

Lance Hunter huffed. He got no respect. No respect from the lot of them.

Looking up, he saw the Doctor deep in conversation with Bobbi. Hunter rubbed his eyes, as he thought he saw the man’s deep red cloak twist and…snigger? Could cloaks snigger? He thought hard about taking a pair of pinking shears to the vestment. The cloak twisted again, and the door he was leaning on suddenly opened, sending him flat on his ass in the doorframe.

Nobody noticed. Nat and Piper were comparing favorite weapon types, and Mike had “powered down” for a nap in the corner. Wong was nowhere to be seen.

Lance looked down the corridor. Just an ordinary hallway. Maybe he’d go for a bit of a walk.

He quietly slid out into the hallway, and closed the door behind him.

The hallway was deserted, with ordinary brown oaken doors lining a plush dark blue carpet. There had to be something good behind one of them. A kitchen, maybe? A TV (what did magicians watch on the tube?) or even just a plain old bedroom to stretch out in.

Lance picked a door at random. He twisted the handle and the door swung open into blackness.

So the light switch was inside. Lance stepped through the door.

It swung shut behind him.

Alarmed, Lance had just enough time to gasp as he discovered the room had no floor. He screamed as he fell through the inky blackness, for what seemed like forever, or for what could have been no time at all.

A blinding light hit his eyes. It was quickly followed by a babble of voices, all around him.

Was this Heaven? Lance slowly opened his eyes.

He was in what looked to be…a convention centre? People streamed all around him, some dressed in
regular clothes, others what had to be Halloween costumes? Conversations flowed around him about panels, and what was happening in Hall H. Excited chatter about previews and off site events.

Lance slumped beside a table full of T-shirts and figurines.

“I’m dead…”

“Lose your pass?”

He looked up. A lady dressed like Daisy Johnson, right down to the gauntlets, approached him.

“My pass?”

“To get in.”

“You need a pass to get into Heaven?”

She stared at him.

“Umm…this is San Diego.” Lance stared blankly at her. “You know, the San Diego Comic Con?”

“Comic…Con? What?”

“Allrighty then…First aid is over that way, maybe get some water?” She turned away. “You better find that pass, though. They’ll kick you out if you don’t have one. Even if you’re the best Lance Hunter I’ve seen here today.”

Daisy gave him a smile, and moved into the crowd.

He was in San Diego. Dr. Strange’s place was in New York. Both places were filled with people who looked like they should be in a movie somewhere. At least that stayed the same.

Lance snagged a lanyard from the booth, and hung it under his shirt. At least now he sorta looked like he belonged.

He hoped Dr. Strange’s conversation with Bobbi wasn’t very interesting. All he had to do was stay in one piece until someone noticed he was missing and came looking for him.

He wandered through the crowd. He nearly went up to Captain America to ask for help…until he saw two other Caps pass by. There were multiple Iron Men (and women), Natashas, Thors, Hulks… all of the heroes from his world. It made his head spin.

Others he didn’t recognize. Quite a number of women in red and gold with swords and lassos. Or those guys dressed in black padded armor with bats on their chests. Guys who looked like Agent Barton, but in green. He wondered who those guys were supposed to be.

Every so often, someone would complement him on his “cosplay” and ask about Bobbi. Most of the time he’d smile, pose, mutter something appropriate, and they’d go on their way. No few of them left him with a “Shame that the rest of the Agents aren’t here.” or “They really should’ve brought Coulson and the rest.” A few asked about something called “Most Wanted.” (Well, of course, he knew he was most wanted…)

Making his way, he rested beside a red logo, with the word MARVEL imprinted on it. Looking around, he saw posters with Cap and the rest on them. There seemed to be a big display, and Lance wandered over.
A large purple figure stood in the middle of a group of other figurines. He started to move closer to get a better look, when a hand closed over his arm.

“You’re not supposed to be here.”

Turning, he saw an elderly man in a cardigan with thick glasses holding his arm with a surprising grip.

“You don’t look like security, old timer.”

The old man snorted. “I am, of a sort. Not the type that kicks you out for not having a badge, though.” He gently removed the lanyard from around Lance’s neck. “You’re still not supposed to be here, Lance Hunter.”

“You know me?”

“Better than you think, son.”

Lance gaped at the old man for a bit, then sighed.

“I took a wrong turn somewhere, wound up here...wherever here is.”

The old man looked at him sternly.

“You went wandering in places you weren’t meant to go, Lance. Sanctum Sanctorum is not a place to explore on your own.”

“Am I dead?”

“No, but Stephen Strange is probably having words with his cloak at the moment.”

“Where...”

The old man considered him for a bit.

“Strange’s house is a nexus of sorts, a place where dimensions meet, and worlds collide. Where you are right now is a parallel world where heroes of your sort only exist in comics, movies, and TV. What you know as history is our last year’s smash hit.”

“Huh. We seem to be a popular bunch.”

The man laughed.

“Oh, you have no idea.”

Lance pointed at the figurines on display.

“Who are they?”

The man frowned.

“They are beings that I hope you will never have to meet, Lance. Although it is a certainty that most of your teammates will. In about a year, or so. This world’s time.”

“Can I see them, get some inside information? Something to help Strange and the rest?”

His companion looked sad for a moment.
“I cannot allow that, Lance. Your world’s story has already diverged from what we would call canon. Anything more, and you may further tear open the inter-dimensional rift between these worlds.”

“Uh…I don’t get it.”

“You don’t have to. While I’m happy to have met you, Lance Hunter, it’s time to go home.”

The old man began to glow, and the light around Lance began to brighten intensely.

“Wait, who are you?”

He closed his eyes and heard the old man chuckle.

“Me? I’m just a watcher.”

Then the world swirled, and Lance fell back into darkness.

“Lance….Lance…LANCE!!”

Lance opened his eyes, to see his worried wife leaning over him. He seemed to be sprawled on a dark blue carpet in a hallway lined with doors.

“Bobbi? How’d I get here?”

Bobbi smacked her husband. “You ass, you had us worried!” She helped him to his feet. “We were discussing the Darkhold problem, and we turned around and you were gone!”

“Yeah…uh…”

Dr. Strange came through the open door.

“My…apologies…for my cloak’s behaviour, Mr. Hunter.” The cloak actually looked somewhat sheepish. How did Strange’s clothes do that? “In the future, though, I would advise that you not go outside these sets of rooms without either myself or Wong with you.”

He continued, “You were very lucky. Even I do not know what is behind many of these doors. If you had actually opened one, you might have stumbled into a dimension I could not have saved you from.”

Strange paused. “Do you remember anything?”

Something purple teased at the back of his mind…and then was gone. Lance shook his head.

“Nah, last thing I remember was watching you two go over those reports. Again.”

He followed Strange and Bobbi back into the room.

“Any chance for a burger, Strange?” he asked as the door closed softly behind him.

Out in the hallway, a random door glowed, flickered out of existence, then reformed on the wall.

Chapter End Notes
Sigh...I would love to go to San Diego Comic Con. Another year, perhaps.

Back to the main story next chapter!
We Now Return You To Your Story In Progress

Chapter Summary

Tony lays his cards on the table. Will it be enough to find common ground?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Well,” Tony Stark reflected. “That went over as well as could be expected.”

At least everyone was still in the room.

All of Team Cap had started off knowing that Phil Coulson was at least alive. As Tony laid out what he knew about the so-called “Shadow SHIELD”, the room had gotten quieter.

Steve Rogers, Sam Wilson, and Sharon Carter had not been happy to hear that Nick Fury, who had said he had been leaving to track down Hydra, had instead reconstituted SHIELD under Coulson’s Directorship.

Clint Barton, after asking pointed questions about Project TAHTI and Phil’s state of mind, had tuned Stark out entirely, only refocusing on Phil’s involvement in Sokavia (“Knew it was him…” he crowed), and the loss of Coulson’s hand. Truth be told, Stark felt the most sorry for him.

And while everyone had been happy to hear that Phil and his team had managed to eradicate Hydra (for now at least), Tony’s suspicions on SHIELD’s involvement with the appearance of the Inhumans had led to a rather…spirited…discussion between Barton, and Cass Clements, who was all for hunting Coulson down, but for the purpose of extracting some unspecified form of revenge.

Now, it got harder.

“All right, everyone, I’m just about done here.”

Steve turned his focus back to Tony, which had the effect of everyone else following his lead. God, Tony still hated the guy, but at least he was being useful.

“Ellis confirmed that at some point, Director Mace and SHIELD reactivated the old LMD program.”

“Fuck, no…” came from Clint. “Even Fury didn’t want to touch that with a ten foot pole.” He snickered. “Bet you felt left out, Stark.”

“Can it, Barton. And I heard that.” Steve commanded. “Keep going, Tony.”

Tony mentally counted to ten and continued. “Then, they seemed to team up with a demonic murderous rider…”

“On a motorbike?” queried Sharon.

“No, to all accounts, a Charger. Now missing from SHIELD impound, by the way. To continue, they teamed up to save East LA from a nuclear blast. At some point, I think they figured out Jeffrey
Mace wasn’t an Inhuman, and then…the trail starts to go cold. At least until Mace turns up dead, and the SHIELD base explodes.”

“Inhumans?” asked Sam. Wanda Maximoff and Cass turned angry eyes towards him.

“Hold it ladies…” Tony interjected before the argument could start. “Sam, I think not this time. We got this e-mail from General Talbot, sent after Quake…maybe…shot him.”

“What do you mean, maybe?” asked Clint. “We all saw it on TV….wait, an LMD?”

“Got it in one, Archer.”

"Wait, didn't I call that?" muttered Sam. He was ignored.

Tony flipped the e-mail up onto the screen. Everyone studied it. Steve let out a low whistle.

"This is almost unbelievable. But it seems that Phil and company have been specializing in this type of thing for quite some time."

Steve shared a look with Clint. "I mean, alien blood transfusions, transportation to planets in other solar systems, facing down the Devil..." He shuddered.

"What's one more evil demonic android, more or less?" mused Sam. "Personally, I'm a bit concerned about high level Agents being replaced by LMD's with no one the wiser."

"SHIELD's security standards have certainly fallen under Phil's tenure..." wisecracked Clint.

Wanda gave him a look. "Oh, and letting Hydra infiltrate your organization right up to the top shows some high level security standards?"

Cass snickered beside her. The ex-SHIELD agents at the table glared at them.

"Besides Talbot's e-mail," Steve asked, "do we have any information on what's taken place over the last several months?"

Tony grimaced. "None that I could find. Video footage shows Coulson and Agent Mackenzie in Italy, talking to a young woman. Then his full team in Russia for a bit, but no reason why. Now, the full footage of the Incident shows Coulson and his team shooting the Russians and taking a book from them, so there may be some connection there."

"It might be worth talking to the surviving Agents."

"Volunteered Sharon. "They might have some insight as to what's going on."

Tony pointed at Sharon. "Can I come back to that, Carter?"

She cocked an eyebrow. "You've already talked to some of them?"

"No, but you know me. I'd like to bypass all the smaller peons and go right to the top."

"Phil Coulson."

"All attention was back on Tony with Steve's statement. "You know where he is."

"No. I don't. But I think this country, and maybe the world, may depend on us finding him."

Tony took a seat at the head of the table. "Viz, I need a break. Can you handle this section, please?"

Vision's lips quirked as he rose. "Of course."
In measured tones, Vision detailed the rise of the organization known as The Watchdogs. Wanda and Cass grew grimmer as he pulled up statistics of violence against gifted humans, those suspected to be gifted, and their supporters. Steve and Sam leaned forward as he connected the Watchdogs to the Human First movement, and showed their growing political support across the United States. Profiles of House Representatives and Senators, including the late Senator Nadeer, caught Sharon's interest.

"Do we know who killed her?" she interrupted Vision.

Vision tilted his head. "No one person has been identified, Sharon, but it was widely suspected to be an Inhuman. Files we were able to...obtain...from the ATCU showed that traces of the elements found in the Terragenesis cocoon were found in the remains of her office."

"So an Inhuman was transforming in the offices of the leader of the Human First movement? That makes very little sense."

"In addition, security footage showed this man entering her office." A picture of a white male, with stringy brown hair came up. "He was a known Watchdog figure. However, his remains were not identified among the bodies."

"You think he blew up the office?"

"I think something does not add up in this situation, Sharon. I also note that the Watchdogs and Humans First have been very quiet about this incident. Senator Nadeer should have been a martyr to their cause. No one has said a word since her burial."

Tony made a note on his tablet. "Something to look into, V, Agent Carter, thank you."

Steve leaned back in his chair. "And Talbot's email accuses someone in government to be destabilizing the one organization which had key Inhuman personnel."

"SHIELD was responsible for registering Inhumans. However, a leak in the list to the Watchdogs made SHIELD move them all to different locations. And then they refused to hand over the locations list to the UN. Mace was very good at working the diplomatic room."

"So SHIELD was actually protecting them?"

"It would seem so, yes. That was what that final meeting was about."

"So this mole was bent on destroying the one organization who gave a damn about us?"

"Language, Cass..."

"Oh, fuck off, Rogers, I don't answer to you..."

"You do while you're with us." Clint's tone was mild, but he had an annoyed glint in his eyes. "While you're at it, Phil Coulson was the head of that organization. Maybe you want to rethink your stance on him?"

Cass huffed angrily.

Sam hastily headed off the brewing argument.

"OK. So Inhumans, which Coulson may or may not have caused, are the current scapegoat. Which wasn't helped by their forced registration in the Accords, Tony."

Tony winced. "I said were leaving the finger pointing until later, Wingman."
"Of course." Sam replied. "And some faction, more that the usual assortment of racists and bigots, are using the general fear and mistrust of the different to play everyone off each other. But for what purpose?"

"I don't know." Tony admitted. "I think Phil and his team have some idea, though."

Tony looked around. "Even I can see things are getting ugly out there. It's a powder keg waiting for the right match. Unless we want this on our heads, we need to find a way to stop this now."

Silence. Tony mentally cursed. Maria had put this so much better...

Wanda spoke up, "As one of the...others...I appreciate you wanting to get involved. But most of us at this table, except for you, Vision, and Cass, are wanted criminals. You said no fingerpointing, but you and your team made us that way in Leipzig. Just what do you want us to do now?"

"Fine," ground out Tony. "We're not gonna be best friends. We can continue to fight over who was right, or we can put this to the side, and go after the man who saved all our lives. Multiple times. And who maybe has the keys to this mess."

"Talbot talked about a leak in government. Well, Secretary of State Thaddeus Ross told me I would wind up in The Raft if I got involved. That moves him to the top of my list."

A shocked silence descended. Tony plowed on. "I have my own sphere I can move in. Influence. I can start moving opinion back to a sane level. But I know where most of Phil's team wound up. And I need help to get them out."

"To do the dirty work," jeered Clint.

"Yes, if you want to put it that way." said Tony softly, which seemed to surprise Clint. "I want nothing more to go in and bust heads until Phil turns up. Then I have a lot of questions for him, probably the same ones you have. But I'm more use for you doing the dirty work in Albany. Washington. Glad handling, whispering, going after the Watchdogs on the turfs no one has challenged them on. Running interference for you as you go pick up the Agents of SHIELD and getting those missing pieces."

Tony swallowed, "Then, together this time, we sit down and figure out a way to move forward. Not the Avengers. And not SHIELD. But something different. A friend once told me that the world was going to need us again. Phil Coulson needs us again. I can't do it without you."

Clint sighed. "Tony...too much has happened. Sure, I can work with you, until we find Phil and get some answers, but I'll never take orders from you again."

"You won't. I think there's only one person I can think of who we all...trust...at the same level."

Steve lifted an eyebrow."We thinking of the same guy, Tony?"

"Yeah. I think it would be a fitting punishment to make Agent Coulson run this whole thing."

The room burst into laughter.

"But until he shows up, I have someone else in mind."

The conference room door opened.

"Hello, Rogers. Do you think you lot could work with me?"
A slow smile spread over Steve's face.

"Yes, Ma'am. I think we could."

Maria Hill moved to stand beside Tony.

"Then can we cut the rest of this crap, and work on bringing our people home?"

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, I've been procrastinating a bit on this...hope everyone's still hanging in there with me.

There is going to be trust issues for quite some time. But it seems that there's enough to get everyone moving in the same direction. For now, at least. Cap'll try to keep the snark to a minimum.

Next up, more of the puzzle comes together. Vision is about to get a surprise. And Natasha goes after one final member of SHIELD. Just don't let Phil know. ;)}
It's a Mixed Up, Muddled Up, Shook Up World...

Chapter Summary

Time for Team Tasha to come in from the cold and add their pieces to the puzzle. And Natasha needs to go after an old friend.

And Dr. Strange still can't seem to make a good first impression.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Secured Army Facility, Virginia. Midnight.

Natasha Romanoff slipped through the final checkpoint in the facility, leaving behind 2 more of the Army's best taking an extended nap. Just like their brethren behind them.

She checked her readouts. Her target was just up ahead. The internal cameras were on a closed loop, showing nothing out of the ordinary.

Nat smirked. Tony Stark was going to have to answer for that one in the morning. She was sure he would come up with something appropriate.

She paused at the cell door. This was her destination. She punched in the code the AI flashed on her screen.

The doors ground apart. Natasha stared at the lady inside, every inch of her covered in chains. A little roughed up in places. Nothing too serious that a little TLC wouldn't take care of.

She ran her hand through her hair.

"It's been a long time, old friend." she thought. "When was the last time...Spain?"

She took out her laser cutters and began to free the immobile form.

Sanctum Sanctorum, 24 hours ago.

"So...Stark?" Nat asked, no trace of amusement in her voice.

"Stark. For now at least." Clint Barton's voice sounded distant through the filters Dr. Strange swore would keep their conversation off any human bands.

"Didn't think you'd trust any of us after The Raft."

"I don't trust Stark. He's still trying to run the whole show, thinks he knows what's best. But he's got the intel we need on Coulson. And I'd work with Hydra if it meant rescuing him. You, however, have never been a question. Especially after you ran interference on T'Challa back in Leipzig."

"You heard about that." A tinge of relief coloured her voice. At least she still had her best friend in
"Yeah. A number of his Dora Milaje want words with you."

"They can get in line. So, what's the plan, Barton?"

"Well, Maria Hill's in charge of the black ops here. She figures you're running your own intel. We want you back in on this."

"Agreed. I don't want to be tripping over you again like I did back in Vancouver. CSIS was very annoyed at Nick."

Clint made a rude noise over the phone.

Catching Natasha's eye, Dr. Stephen Strange made a gesture.

Right. "So, how much do you know about Coulson and this new SHIELD?"

"Well, between Maria and Tony's intel, we've pretty much got everything but the last few months leading up to Talbot's shooting." His voices turned suspicious. "Why, what you got?"

"How'd you like the rest of the story?"

Clint cursed. A faint "Language!" could be heard. Nat chuckled.

"Ran into some old friends of ours in Seattle. Your blushing bride, as a matter of fact."

"Bobbi Morse? Hey, we were undercover..."

"Sure, and that's why Hunter has a few words for you..."

Clint groaned.

"I also have some other assorted Agents, including the one Coulson sent for help just before the Incident."

Now Nat could hear other curses from other voices on Clint's side. She grimaced. Trust was a two way street. So was mistrust.

"Romanoff." Maria Hill's voice, taking over the conversation. "We really need to pool our intel. Time is not our friend."

"Maria, it's been awhile. How've you been? Me? I've been on the run for the last year, thanks. Now Stark wants me to come play nice?"

"Not Stark. It's me. There's a difference."

"That remains to be seen." She thought for a moment. "Tell you what. I'll bring Agent Piper and Dr. Stephen Strange with me. He wants to talk now, although I'd rather wait until morning. We can swap information, and see where everything falls out. Bobbi, Hunter, the others, they stay behind. We don't check in, they go talk to a friend I have at the Washington Post."

"Damn, he's still there?"

"Won a Pulitzer for investigative journalism last year. The stuff I've got should make him a shoo-in for the next two."
"If Ross doesn't have him killed first. Got a deal, Natasha. Ready for the coordinates?"

"Nah, got a better way to travel. Tell Clint that the beers are on him." Natasha hung up the phone and looked at her team.

Dr. Strange nodded. "I have their location, Agent Romanoff."

"Please lose the Agent, Doctor. After all, I was one of the ones to take SHIELD down."

"Until Coulson." noted Agent Piper, settling her pack on her shoulders.

"Yes...there will be a...lengthy discussion about that the next time I see him, Piper."

"Or Fury," observed Hunter.

"Him too." Nat checked her Glock. She glanced at the remaining agents.

"You know what to do."

"Sure." replied Bobbi. "The man owes me a drink for the Sokavian scoop."

Dr. Strange focused, and made a circular motion in the air. Natasha swallowed hard.

Agent Piper grinned at her. "Only way to travel, Ma'am."

"Knock that off, Piper." Natasha stepped through Strange's portal, followed closely by Piper and Strange.

The portal flickered, when it a burst of energy caused it to restabilize.

"WONG!!"

The door to the room opened, and Wong ran grimly across the room through the portal, which then snapped out of existence.

Hunter, Bobbi and Mike looked at each other.

Hunter broke the silence.

"Anyone for Hearts?"

---

**New Avengers Compound, Northern United States**

Natasha and Piper came through the portal, to be faced with a composite bow, two Glocks, a set of repulsors, and an unreadable android all focused on them.

Natasha raised her hands.

"Missed me?" she smirked.

Behind them, Dr. Strange came through. He glanced over the room's defenders. His eyes widened as they landed on Vision, and he snapped his fingers.

"WONG!!" he called, unexpectedly shoving Natasha and Piper to the side, and placing himself before them. Seconds later, the burly figure of Wong burst through the portal.
Wong studied the scene before him, and his staff appeared in his hand as he joined Strange in front of the women. The portal closed.

"By the Ageless Vishanti...where the hell did you get an Infinity Stone?"

The occupants looked at each other, as Natasha and Piper got to their feet.

"A...what?" Clint never lowered his bow.

"Stand down, Strange, we just caught them off..."

Strange never took his eyes off the android. "An Infinity Stone. In that...thing's head."

"Vision. My friend. That is who you were talking about, right, David Copperfield?" Tony re-sighted his repulsors on the two men.

"Friend?"

"And ally." Vision spoke up. "I mean no one in this room any harm, Dr....Strange?"

Wong gasped. "Do you know what is in your head, robot?"

Vision cocked his head. "I must confess, we do not. It is a matter of much interest to me, but we have not been able to find anything."

"Nor would you." Strange's fingers twitched. A haze fell over most of the room. "Answer me true...where did you get that stone?"

"That is not a polite way to ask, Doctor."

Strange and Wong looked at each other.

"I suspect whatever it was you just did...did not work the way you meant it to." Vision observed.

Suddenly, Strange and Wong were flung across the room. The haze dissolved as Wanda Maximoff stepped into the room.

"Was I interrupting?" she asked, readying another blast.

Everyone stared at her in stunned silence.

Finally, Agent Piper groaned, "Strange...you really suck at first impressions."

"We know..." three voices replied in unison.

Eventually, everything was put back in order, and the guns were put away. Steve left to awaken the rest of his team, while Clint and Natasha conferred quietly in the corner.

As the other team members filed in, Strange drifted/was dragged over to Vision.

Vision blinked. "Doctor, it seems that your cloak has levitating powers. Is it sentient?"

"In some manner. It seems to have appointed itself my keeper."

"And it wants you to talk to me."
"I trust its' judgement. I find my life is easier that way." Strange paused."I apologize. You caught me...off guard. As you will come to find, my priorities often differ from the others."

Vision considered him. After a moment he replied, "Apology accepted, Doctor. I would like to meet with you later to discuss this stone further."

"I will insist upon it." Strange rubbed the small of his back. "Your girlfriend has a hell of a blast."

"You may want to watch your language around Captain Rogers. And we are not...connected in that way."

"Oh, really?" Strange nodded across the room, where Wanda was watching with narrowed eyes. As Vision caught her gaze, she flushed, and looked away.

"Another conversation for another day." Vision noted.

As the team members took their seats, Tony got up. "Welcome back, Red..."

"Sit down, Tony." ordered Maria Hill. As Tony took his seat, she continued, "Romanoff, might as well get to it. Assume we know nothing from January onwards. We'll backfill your team in, but we need your intel now."

"Yes, Ma'am. Actually...I'll have Agent Piper fill you in." She grinned evilly at the younger Agent.

Piper took a deep breath.

"It all began last fall when Dir...Agent Coulson got intel that a book called the Darkhold had been discovered. His team chased after it, but a guy called Morrow got there first. Zapped Coulson, Agent Fitz and a civilian, Robbie Reyes, into another dimension."

"To get them out, we had Holden Radcliffe's LMD read the Darkhold..." Strange cursed in a foreign language, "And she built a portal to get them back. But from what Strange tells me, reading that book corrupts your mind, and Radcliffe read it too...for two seconds."

"At some point, Radcliffe and AIDA kidnapped Agent Melinda May and replaced her with an LMD. Then, they went to work for Anton Ivanov, who's bankrolling the Watchdogs. Has one heck of a grudge against Coulson. Wanted revenge. And to get rid of the Inhumans.

Clint's eyes narrowed, and he leaned in further.

"Then AIDA and Ivanov ambushed most of Coulson's team. Replaced them with LMD's, and sent their minds into something called the Framework, a sort of VR. Only ones who escaped were Agents Johnson and Simmons. They had to blow up the base to destroy the LMDs, and we got on the last plane out of Dodge. Together with an Inhuman asset, Elena Rodriguez, they plugged themselves in and got the rest of the team out. Except Director Mace. He died in the Framework."

"It took 10 days. By that time...well, you all saw the news. By the time they all got out, we didn't know who to trust anymore. Maybe if we had trusted Talbot, things might have been different. We had a murderous LMD on the loose who somehow used the Darkhold to turn herself real. She killed my Agents at the base - we barely escaped. At that point, Coulson gave me the mission notes, told me to get them to Dr. Strange."

"And that was the last I saw of them."

Dr. Strange stood up. "Let me summarize. The Darkhold is a powerful...for lack of a better
word...demonic...artifact. It provides the user with information to achieve its heart's desire, but corrupts it to evil."

"Be careful what you wish for?" asked Tony.

"Close enough. It's power is such that if someone were to read it who had a desire to take over the world, it would provide them with a fool proof map for it. It would not, however, be a world we want to live in."

Steve looked at Tony. "The Inhuman situation?"

Tony frowned. "Maybe. Trouble is, I don't much believe in magic."

Strange froze Tony with a look. "What happens when magic believes in you, Mr. Stark?"

Sharon rubbed her eyes. "Enough with the Harry Potter routine. Where is it now?"

Strange shook his head. "It has disappeared again. But I can sense people who have touched it. Phil Coulson was one of them. I'm sorry, but he is not on this earth. I do sense that he is alive, though. There are others...."

"Who? Where?" demanded Clint.

"We have identified Agents May, Fitz, and the Koenig family as having contact with the book. There is one serious problem. Someone else in this world has read the book, but is being shielded from me. We must assume that somewhere, there is a Darkhold plot in play."

Strange paused and looked around. "On a more positive note, I know where the others are."

"Good," responded Maria. "Because we don't know where Agents Fitz and Simmons disappeared to."

Maria got up.

"From what I've heard, Fitz and Simmons would have been taken together. So, it seems that we know where all our missing Agents are. I agree with Steve's assessment, this Darkhold would fit in nicely with the rest of this mess."

"Think Ross is in on it?" called out Sam.

"Too early to tell. The Darkhold was on the Index, and it would be good to get that intel back before going after it. Even if just to keep the knowledge it existed out of enemy hands."

Maria thought. "The Index wasn't part of the information Nat published after SHIELD fell. Nick kept it hidden in the Toolbox he passed to Phil. Piper?"

"Err...Toolbox?"

"Small metallic cube...about so big?"

Piper shook her head.

Clint chortled. "Bet I know a lady who knows everything. If she was with Coulson, and he had it....she'd know."

Natasha grinned. "Oh, you have no idea, Barton. Yep...she probably would too..."
Virginia

Bobbi Morse had known, reflected Natasha, quietly finishing up on the last of the chains. Of course, Hunter had to go into how Bobbi got the Toolbox, which should make Bobbi's life interesting as Clint would find inventive ways to get even on Phil's behalf. Teach Bobbi to side against Coulson.

Let's see...yes, right where she said it would be...secured under the lady's dusty cape. Natasha stood up and surveyed the abandoned figure.

No...it was risky... but she couldn't just leave her here. They'd be coming for her soon, and she'd be lost forever.

It would be nice to have a "Welcome Home" present for Coulson. After they had their...chat.

She looked up at the sky.

"Forgive me, Phil."

She advanced on the lady.

New Avengers Complex

"Mr. Stark?"

"Mmph. What is it, FRIDAY"

"You...should see this, sir."

"Finally, a little respect from my AIs..."

Tony tapped on the tablet. Aerial video footage of a Virginian base popped up.

Tony stared.

"She didn't..."

On the tablet, a shot of a black clad figure, who was belted in comfortably in the driver's seat of a red Corvette, which soared triumphantly through a hole in a secured facility's ceiling.

"She touched LOLA."

"Secretary of State Ross on the line for you, Tony..."

"It's 2 AM...doesn't that vulture ever sleep?" He nodded wearily.

"STTTAARRKKK!!"

Chapter End Notes

All right, credit to Ray Davies of The Kinks for my title reference to "Lola". You didn't think Nat'd just leave her there? Just...don't mention it to Coulson, O.K? Poor guy has
enough stress at the moment.

Hail, hail, the gang's all here (or are one portal away). Took us long enough. But isn't it nice to see them all working together for once?

Now the fun really begins... ;)}
Chapter Summary

Natasha Romanoff, Clint Barton, and Bobbi Morse are going after some old friends. With bottles of tequila stashed in the trunk.

The Agents of SHIELD rescues have begun!

Chapter Notes

OK, the next four chapters are all meant to happen at more or less the same time.

Innocuous Government Transport Van, Mid-West United States.

"Question, Tasha?"

"Mmm hmm?"

"How did Hunter survive this?"

"Earplugs, or so I was told. Repeatedly."

"Turn arrround, bright eyes..."

"Bobbi, we've heard this before. Somewhere back in Nebraska."

"I'm the one driving, I get to pick the tunes."

Clint Barton closed his eyes, and tried to tune out the distracting earworm.

"Together, we can take it to the edge of the night..."

Oh God...they were singing.

"Nothing I can do...total eclipse of the heaarrrt..."

Bobbi Morse snickered as a whimper came from the back of the van.

"I can understand why Hunter was so eager to head off on the other team."

"Aww...you'll hurt our feelings, Clint. That's not nice." smirked Natasha Romanoff.

"After all, she hasn't seen you since..."

"Since they put handcuffs on me, and took me to The Raft with the rest?"
An uncomfortable silence fell through the van. Clint sighed.

"Sorry, Nat. That was uncalled for."

"But not undeserved."

Bobbi reached over and switched off the music.

Nat stared out the window. "By the time I knew where they had taken you, they were already gunning for me. And by the time I made sure Laura and the kids were safe, Steve had broken you out."

Clint reached over and squeezed her shoulder. "There was nothing you could've done, Nat. It was a ultra-max, out in the middle of the Atlantic. To be honest, I'm not even sure how Cap got out there."

"He's not Cap anymore...remember?" Bobbi asked.

Clint shook his head. "He can call himself whatever he wants, Bobs. There are some titles you can't lay down."

"Like Black Widow?"

"Or Hawkeye."

"Or Mockingbird."

The three former members of Strike Team Delta grinned at each other, as the tension started to fade.

The van stopped at an unmarked turnoff. Natasha checked her watch.

"10 minutes. Holos on, people."

The three pressed a button on their new watches, currently showing the local time in 4 time zones, plus a timer counting down from 9:55. Looking in the rearview mirror, they saw 3 undescript servicemen, looking exactly like the three who were supposed to be clocking in for their shifts, but were sleeping off a Widow's Bite in the van they had abandoned back in town.

Bobbi sighed as she started to drive down the unnamed road. "What I wouldn't have given for one of these when I was going up against Hydra."

Clint snorted. "You always did take the lazy way out."

"LAZY?"

Before the argument could escalate, Nat interjected, "Both of you, shut up! We're almost there."

The van rolled into the first checkpoint. The timer on the watch had counted down to 4:30.

Bobbi rolled down the window.

"Dalton, McLaughlin, and Hannah clocking in."

"Retinal scan, Dalton."

"Of course." Bobbi leaned forward and held her breath as the lock scan briefly flashed her eye. She blinked a bit.
If this failed...well, it'd be harder busting the others from the inside out.

"Vehicle scan shows 3 personnel. Hannah's car break down again?"

"Yep. Piece of shit, that one."

"You said it. Pass through."

Timer on watch - 2:49

"Cutting this close, Dalton", Natasha muttered.

"We just need to be inside the prison." Bobbi muttered, parking the van next to the entrance.

The three hurried through the main checkpoints, scanning their stolen keycards, and passing through a second set of retinal scans into the secured area of the prison.

The timer on their watches binked 0:00.

Everyone knew of Fort Levenworth, the military maximum security prison. However, ask the person on the street about Fort Windermere, and they would shake their head.

Which was the way the US Army liked it.

It was the place where those the government could not afford to acknowledge they held spent the rest of their lives. Those who were too important to have an "accident", yet too awkward, or simply too dangerous for the general prison population. If there was a level above maximum security, this was it. It was similar to The Raft on the Atlantic, however, the men and women who were posted to this duty could hold their heads up high (among certain people) and point out that, unlike the Boat, they had had no leaks. Noone had ever escaped from Fort Windermere. They were ready for even Steve Rogers.

Too bad they got Strike Team Delta.

The three strode briskly along the corridor to the main elevator. Once in, Bobbi entered in the code for the 16th floor, and the doors closed behind them.

Pushing another button on her watch, she nodded to the other two. "It's safe."

"All right, we'll take the 14th floor. Clint, yours is on the 12th." Nat smirked. "For some reason ours is 'more dangerous' than yours."

"They'd be right." Clint noted, watching the numbers blink on the elevator. "I'm not even sure how mine wound up on the 12th."

"Trust me," Bobbi responded. "He's developed quite a bit since you last saw him."

As the number hit 11, Clint waited two heartbeats and hit STOP. Quickly prying the doors open, he saw just an inch of a lip at the bottom.

Bobbi smirked behind him.

"Tell me at the end if she does any better..." he responded, stepping out into the corridor.

The doors slid shut behind him.
Clint strode down the hall to the prisoners' cell block. He stopped at the checkpoint. The guard looked at him.

"Hi, Kyle. You're not supposed be up here yet."

"I know...Marc..., but they want prisoner 11325 for questioning down on the 6th floor."

"The SHIELD freak-lover? But they just brought him back to his cell. Maybe I'd better check."

As the guard leaned over the log book, Clint leaned over beside him. Brushing his hand against the back of the guard's neck, he heard a slight gasp as the needle went into the skin, and the guard collapsed into his chair.

Clint positioned him into his seat so that his back was to the camera. It wouldn't fool them for long, but hopefully enough to grab who he came for.

Hurrying down the hall, he came to cell 1207. He activated the viewscreen. A muscular man, bruises visible on his face, sat with his head bowed over folded hands.

Clint raised his eyebrows.

"Morse was right...you have changed."

He scanned his watch on the pad beside the door, and it swung open. Stepping inside, he deactivated his disguise. The prisoner lifted his head and stared in shock.

"An answer to prayer, Agent?"

"I never thought you'd be an angel, Barton. Coulson send you?"

"In a manner of speaking. We gotta go."

"Wait, my partner. She's in here somewhere."

"We know. My partners are getting her out. Says she owes you a tequila shot."

Agent Alphonso Mackenzie (known to his friends as Mack) grinned.

"So the wild cards are turning up. Lead the way."

The doors slid back open.

Bobbi and Natasha hopped over the 3 inch lip into the corridor.

"Don't you dare say a word, Hannah."

"Wouldn't dream of it, Dalton."

The two hurried down their corridor to the checkpoint. The guard looked up.

"Good, John, you remembered our deal."

"Of course," Nat lied smoothly.

The guard left his post. "I'll be back in two hours. God, I need a beer..."
He strode to the elevator, and the two women watched as he got in and left them alone in the cell block.

"That was...unexpected?" offered Bobbi.

"I'll take it." shrugged Nat.

The two women moved down the hall to cell 1406. Activating the tablet, they saw a woman, chained at wrists and ankles, in what seemed to be a semi-trance facing the door.

"That's a little...excessive." muttered Bobbi.

"Only way this place would hold her." returned Nat.

Nat scanned her watch, and the door to the cell swung open. She deactivated her disguise.

The woman didn't move from her position on the floor.

"You know, you never returned my last call."

The prisoner's eyes flickered open.

"That was about four years ago, Nat. I got...preoccupied."

"Yeah, I heard. You never could turn Phil down, could you?"

"You have no idea. Did he send you?"

"Long story. You want to stand up, Mel?"

Agent Melinda May got to her feet. Nat moved over, and swiftly freed her from her chains.

"Thanks. My partner's here too. You mind if we save the rest for someplace a little friendlier?"

"Define 'friendly'." came from outside the room.

May's eyebrows rose.

"Bobbi?" she called as the two exited May's cell.

Somehow Nat was unsurprised to see a squad of soldiers facing off against Bobbi.

May looked over at them. "No, that's not friendly."

"I figure 5 minutes before the jamming runs out, guys." sang out Bobbi.

"On your knees, all of you! Prisoner 11324, back in your cell, now!"

"Now is she supposed to do that, or get on her knees, boys? Make up your mind..." drawled Nat.

"We've already had this conversation." snarled May.

"The chains?"

"Yep."

"4 minutes...you coming?" called Bobbi, already on the move.
"Wouldn't miss it..." responded Nat, and the women moved to meet the guards.

Bobbi took out the first one with a solid boot to gut. As he doubled over, she snagged his truncheon, and sapped him across the head, laying him out. She ducked the second one's wild haymaker and caught him across the jaw, flipping him down onto the concrete floor.

Natasha spun as she caught her first target and used his momentum to smash him into the wall. She took down the second with her electrical charge from her wrist, and ducked her third, chopping him across the back of his neck.

May wrapped her chains around the neck of the first one, laying him out beside the rest. Two solid blows followed with a leg swipe took care of the second. Retrieving her chains, she flipped them into the third's face, blinding him for the instant it took Bobbi to move over and hit him in the back of the head.

Silence reigned again. Bobbi checked her watch.

"One minute..."

"Damn, let's move." ordered Natasha, and the three women made a run for the elevator.

"Nice moves with the chain, May."

"Learned from a new stray, Morse."

They tended as the elevator opened in front of them. Inside were the very welcome faces of Clint and Mack.

"I just can't take you anywhere, can I?"

"Shut up and move, Barton."

"Yes, Ma'am. Good to see you too, Mel."

Everyone piled into the elevator.

May offered both men a smile. "Mack, good to see you made it."

"Yeah, it was getting a little heated with my lot. You?"

"Nothing I haven't seen before. Amateurs compared to Hydra."

The elevator stopped and opened onto the roof. As the group piled out, they were immediately hit with a spotlight. Sirens sounded, and a voice over the loudspeaker boomed, "Prisoners, on the ground, now! We have authorization for lethal force, this is your only warning!"

Bobbi yelled, "I think it's time to leave!"

May and Mack looked around. The rooftop was empty.

"Cloaked?" Mack yelled back.

"No fair, you guess all my good plans!" retuned Barton.

"Coulson beat you to it, back in L.A. A drag race. Tell you about later," called Mack.
"Head forward, all of you!" yelled Nat.

As the group began to run, shots began to aim towards the roof. All of a sudden, a missile streaked towards the prison entrance and chaos reigned for a crucial few moments.

When the dust cleared, the prisoners and their rescuers had disappeared.

On the cloaked Quinjet, Agent Piper called out, "Need you to take over, Clint!"

Switching places, she got up and moved quickly to May and Mack. Her eyes misted over for a moment, and she saluted May to cover.

"May, Agent Mack, it's damned good to see you again."

"Language, Piper!" came from the cockpit. Bobbi and Nat shared a laugh. Mack looked confused, and May glowered towards the front.

"They'll explain it later. Right now, I'm under orders to get Agent May to Dr. Strange in New York."

"You found him? Is Coulson with him?" asked May.

"Yes, and...no. We think the Darkhold's in play. Strange needs you right now, so badly, he let me come get you."

"Yeah, wasn't Clint supposed to get us back to base?" asked Bobbi.


May shrugged. "I'll see you later, then?"

"Counting on it, May. Need to watch each other's backs until we find Coulson and the rest."

"DAMN!" exploded Clint suddenly, looking up from a tablet Piper had given to him. "Everyone lock in now! Piper..."

"We're gone, Hawkeye...see you at back at base."

Piper and May stepped through the portal, and it closed.

"What on Earth?"

The three remaining picked up the tablet, and stared down at its contents.

"Oh, dear God..."

Chapter End Notes

Welcome back from your hiatus, Agents May and Mack! Apparently just in time for the bleep to hit the fan. Again.

So the ladies were "torturing" Clint with Bonnie Tyler's hit "Total Eclipse of the Heart."
Think Clint and Hunter may be teaming up to make a play for those music files at some point.

Next up...another rescue! Or so the guys think...
Self Rescuing Inhumans

Chapter Summary

Quake and Yo-Yo have been patient. Inhumanly so.

Their patience has just run out. Just in time to meet up with some old friends of their leader...

The Agents of SHIELD rescue continues!

Chapter Notes

Warning: The guards in The Raft still aren't nice. Some references to attempted non-con in the Present Day of this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

FBI Headquarters, Virginia

Several Weeks ago

Daisy Johnson (a.k.a. Quake, or lately a.k.a. "That Damn Inhuman") sat quietly along the wall with her fellow SHIELD agents.

They came for Jemma and Leo first. A balding British suit, could’ve been the mirror of Coulson in another world, came in, pointed at the two Agents, and ordered them out the door. The two took each other’s hands, nodded at their fellow agents, and left.

Daisy could hear the Americans griping about “Jurisdiction” and “Extradition” as the door swung shut behind them.

Across from her, Elena gripped Mack’s hand tightly.

“If they send me back to Columbia, I’m a dead woman.”

Mack said nothing, just held her hand tighter and kissed the top of her head. The agonized glance he threw at Daisy showed that he knew that his lover and her friend spoke nothing but the truth.

And there was nothing any of them could do about it.

They came for Mack and May next. Mack gave Elena one last kiss, and murmured something in Spanish. She responded, and let him go.

Surprisingly, May resisted the military agents who reached for her, which resulted in her being slammed up the wall besides Daisy.

“Wherever they take you…wait.” She gasped quickly. “Phil’s not with us, it means he’s still out
“There. Still fighting. He’s getting something together. Trust him, Daisy….”

“That’s enough of that,” snapped the lead MP, as he tazed the woman into unconsciousness. When Daisy and Elena got up to protect their teammate, rifles were immediately trained on them.

“Elena, Daisy….no….” called Mack straining against his captors. They were immediately hustled out of the room, leaving the two Inhumans together.

Daisy moved over, and comforted Elena as best as she could.

“May says wait this out…Coulson’s coming for us...”

She stared at the door. It wasn’t too long before it opened for them.

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**The Raft, 52nd level, Atlantic Ocean**

**Present Day**

Daisy sat on her cot in her cell. She watched the lights cycle past, and made another scratch on her mattress.

It had been several weeks, by her estimation. Ward, May and Coulson had given her the best approximation of SHIELD basic training that they could. That included the protocols on capture, imprisonment and resistance. She hoped Mack had done the same for Elena.

She had mentally timed the spaces between meals, when guards and which guards had shown up, when she was taken for interrogation, when she was…allowed…to use the cleaning facilities.

There seemed to be a lot of jackasses around during that time. It probably was supposed to make her feel helpless. Vulnerable.

It made her damn mad, is what it made her.

The one and only time they tried anything…physical…she made good use of the gauntlets on her arms. She knocked two of them unconscious before they flooded the cell with gas.

She never saw any of those assholes again, and the remainder treated her with much more caution after that.

Several weeks. She didn’t have the empty feeling that AC was dead, like she had with Lincoln, but her gut told her that something wasn’t right.

It was time to get moving. Anton Ivanov was still out there, even if he didn’t have the Darkhold. She was pretty certain he wasn’t wasting any time capitalizing on Talbot’s shooting.

She was an Agent of SHIELD. She took an oath.

She was an Inhuman. She had a duty to her people.

“Sorry, May.” she thought. “Coulson’s just going to have to catch up with us.”

The fact that she was Inhuman made most of the guards forget what she was before San Juan. Even before SHIELD. She knew she could get herself and Elena free. Then all there was left to do was to find a plane to get off this base.
Piece of cake.

One of her guards was always fiddling with something. A paper clip, a bit of string, something to pass the time down here. She had...accidentally...fallen against him on the last trip to the showers. And while he was...helping...her up, she had snagged the metal paper clip from out of his pocket.

She still remembered his slimy hands and smirk, his insinuations that he could be her protector down here. Like she needed protecting from any of them. She allowed herself to be hustled back to the cell, chaining her gauntlets together before shutting her in for the day.

The cells they were keeping her, and presumably Yo-Yo, in were recycled from the old base. Which meant that there was an emergency access panel hidden just beside the door frame. It just needed to be popped open. Something that her more esoteric skills from St. Agnes would let her do easily.

She just needed to wait until night. A time when the lights maybe dimmed, depending on the humanity of the guard on duty. Steps were slower. Rounds not always carried out on time. And hopefully, cameras not always monitored. She guessed she'd soon find out.

Light cycles dimmed. Maybe...a little faster than usual? Nah. Guard Zack just had a heavier hand on the controls.

She took a deep breath. Time to get started.

Daisy moved to her cell door. She located the barely visible seam of the panel, and wormed the wire underneath it. Hooking it under, she gently tugged until it started to pull away from the wall. Yanking it with her fingernails, the panel popped free, leaving the electrical console open. She considered the wiring for a moment, then spotted the green wire threaded underneath several red wires.

Fitz loved the green wires, she recalled. "Everyone always thinks it's the red one," he once told her. "So I don't make it the red one."

"Thanks, Fitz" she thought, reaching in and snapping the wire.

Her door shuddered, then slid open.

Daisy quickly used the wire to the pick the locks on her chains (really...what sort of Agent did they think she was?) and stepped out. She'd need to get the keys to her gauntlets and whatever they were using on Elena, and then they'd figure it out from there.

The lights flickered again. Strange...

Zack should be coming around the corner right...about...now!

Daisy swung her gauntleted arms, sucker hitting the guard on the back of his head. He dropped to the floor.

She had to move faster. Grabbing the keys cards from his belt, she found the one that freed her arms. No need for quiet, she ran to other other block of cells.

"Elena? Where are you?"

"Estoy aqui!" hissed a female voice to the right.

Daisy looked inside. Elena was lying on the cot, pinned by a metal sheet covering most of her upper
"Feel like checking out?" Daisy asked her friend, swiping the key card over the pad.

"I won't be recommending this place on Expedia." retorted Elena, swinging her legs over the side of the bed. She gave Daisy a quick hug. "I take it we're not waiting for Coulson anymore?"

"We'll find him and the rest once we get back to the mainland."

"And, uh, how're we going to do that?"

"I'll think of something."

"Well, you better think fast..." commented Yo-Yo, pointing to the red lights starting to flash.

"The elevator."

Elena snorted.

"I'll use my quake powers to shoot us up the shaft...then at the top, we can find transportation."

"When did you learn to fly a plane?"

Daisy shrugged. "If you feel like that," she said striding to the elevator, "You can stay here. Don't know what I'll tell Mack though..."

She felt a brush of air go by her and a muffled shout from ahead. She looked back and saw Elena with a collection of stun guns and clubs.

"You missed a few." Yo-Yo noted dryly, as the thumping of bodies hitting the floor reverbed throughout the level.

"Let's go..."

As the two women neared the elevator hatch, a cell door slid open. Elena looked over.

"Daisy, down!"

Both women took cover, as a flame blast passed over their heads.

"Warning shot. Back to your cells, ladies. I'm not asking again."

"James??"

JT James (a.k.a. Hellfire) strode out of his cell.

"How'd you get loose?"

"For my services to the Watchdogs, I'm the Raft's last line of defence. I get called in when one of you manage to break out. Doesn't happen very often."

"James, this isn't right."

"Not my call to make, sweetheart. Or yours, for that matter."

"Look, we need to get out."
"No, you need to get back in your cell."

Another flame blast, and the women dove apart.

"This is end of the world type stuff."

"Oh, really? Don't care. How's your skull head boyfriend? Man, you really know how to pick 'em, don't you..."

"I've had enough." growled Daisy, unleashing a force blast from her hands. James laughed as it hit a invisible shield in front of him.

"Like it? Your Coulson had some good ideas... This really does come in useful. Wonder what he's doing now?" he taunted Daisy.

Elena saw a small box hanging off the front of his belt. Bad, bad move, she thought, speeding forward and stealing it off his belt, shoving him off balance into the elevator door.

"Where is he?" Daisy screamed, as she flung another quake wave at him.

"Don't know, and, again, don't care. Hope he's somewhere you'll never find him, even if you could get off this...OOF!"

James slumped to the floor, as Elena reappeared at her spot next to Daisy.

"He talks too much." she muttered, rubbing her knuckles.

Just then, the elevator door opened, and discharged three masked newcomers. They looked around in shock.

Daisy and Elena steadied themselves, waiting for the next move.

The one in front pulled down his mask. Daisy gaped.

"Are you Agent Johnson? Ms. Rodriguez?"

"You're...Steve Rogers? Captain America??"

"Yeah. Phil Coulson sent us. Sorta."

Elena looked over at Daisy and grinned.

"Looks like May was right after all."

The second figure moved in, and scratched his head.

"Doesn't look like they really needed our help, Cap..."

"I'm not Captain America any more, Sam. And we still need to get off this rock."

The third figure flanked the other two and scanned the two Agents. He surveyed the room. "Think that's it for down here, guys."

At the sound of his voice, Daisy broke into a huge grin.

"Mike!!" she cried, running over and giving him a hug. "Missed you...How's Ace?"
Steve and Sam glanced at Elena, who returned the look.

"He's before my time."

"Ah."

"Hey, Daisy, can you can the gossip until we're out?" called Elena.

"Right...well, Cap, that would probably make you Sam Wilson, Mike... how're we getting out of here?"

Sam smirked at her. "The elevator?"

Daisy shot a triumphant look at her teammate.

"Told you so..."

It seemed that Cap...no, Steve...had somehow gotten his team into the central processing core. Once they disabled the opposition there, they simply locked everyone into their levels and took the elevator down to their holding cells.

"We have a jet hovering up top. Just need a little lift to get there."

"I think I can handle that." Daisy laughed. "Let's go then. The rest of my team?"

Mike grinned. "You won't believe who's on it."

"Can't wait..."

The elevator doors slid closed.

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**Avengers Jet, Atlantic Ocean**

Daisy sat in shock, unable to believe her eyes as she watched the screen in front of her.

Steve stood uneasily, horrified and unsure.

"I am...truly sorry, Agent Johnson. I don't know how you must be feeling right now..."

Daisy's eyes met his, then swung to Elena's.

"Ivanov's mine. When we find him."

"Ivanov's mine. When we find him."

Daisy got up and stalked to the back of the plane.

Elena said quietly, "Let her be. She feels responsible for this. May...Mack...they'll clear her head."

Mike scanned Elena, then asked, "That makes little sense...you two were locked up. How could you be responsible for this?"

"It's a long, long story. And not mine to tell."

The plane flew on through the cloudy night.
And welcome back Daisy and Yo-Yo!

Oh my...how did Hellfire get his hands on Phil Coulson's SHIELD tech?

Next up...it's a European vacation, but Lance Hunter's group isn't interested in sightseeing. They may run into some unexpected faces along the way, though...
(Who Says) You Can't Go Home

Chapter Summary

Whose idea was it to put Lance Hunter in charge of the team rescuing Jemma Simmons and Leo Fitz? And without Bobbi Morse??

It's a good thing some unexpected help shows up...

Chapter Notes

"I went as far as I could, I tried to find a new face,
There isn't one of these lines that I would erase.
I lived a million miles of memories on that road,
With every step I take I know that I'm not alone..."
~ Bon Jovi

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Heathrow Airport

"So, what do you know? These things actually work!" chortled Lance Hunter, waiting for his packsack in the Arrivals Terminal. “I can certainly think of a few times in the last year these would’ve been very useful.”

“Will you keep your voice down!” snapped Wanda Maximoff. “These things of Tony’s only synthesize outward appearances. If someone recognizes your voice, they’ll be pulling us all off The Raft.”

“All right, all right.” Lance hoisted his bag over his shoulder. He hated flying commercially. “Where’s the boyfriend?”

Wanda flushed. “He’s not my boyfriend. Viz said he’d meet us in the parking lot.”

Lance snorted as the two left the airport terminal. “Why do we spies never see past the nose on our face?”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, it’s not just you, love, me and Bobbi did it for years. Fitz and Simmons took 10 years and a watery grave to move forward, and Coulson and May…well…they’d still be going around in circles if they were on the same planet.”

Wanda laughed a bit. “Steve and Sharon…”

“Exactly.” Lance stopped at the entrance. “Look, when you think that the world is going to end tomorrow, there’s not much time to figure things out. You either do or do not. But, when the smoke clears, and whoever’s left is still standing, there’s a lot of time left over to regret the things you didn’t
“say or do.”

Wanda nodded. “I know. Things are…complicated.”

“Well, save complications for after the op, love. Just don’t wait too long.” He kept his eyes forward.
“Keep walking to the car, Wanda. I need to collar a tail.”

“What?”

“He’s been on our ass since Customs.”

“Damn it, Hunter!”

Wanda kept walking towards the black sedan pulling out of the parking stall. Lance dropped his bag, and bent down to tie his shoe.

Footsteps came closer…one…two…ready the ambush in…

“Pardon me?”

Lance looked up. He wasn’t expecting a direct approach.

“I need your help. Badly. And I think you could use mine.”

“Sorry, mate, don’t know what you’re talking about. Just got home…”

“I can…see…through your disguise. I know who you and your friends are. Including the one who spent the flight in the luggage compartment.”

Lance reached into his pocked for his knuckles. It shouldn’t take much to take this guy out.

“Look, I think we’re all here for the same person. Agent Jemma Simmons? I can help you get her out, but I need your help.”

Lance considered him a moment. He looked sort of familiar. He stood and grabbed him by his jacket.

“Into the back seat. And don’t move. My friends are rather…twitchy…right now.”

“Understood. Thank you.”

As the back door and the trunk popped open, the new guy scurried inside, while Lance threw his bag into the trunk, and got in beside him.

Wanda already had the new guy pinned against the back seat.

“Who the hell are you?” she hissed.

“This is most unexpected, Lance.” agreed Vision.

“Get driving, Viz, we have a schedule to keep. We’ll figure things out on the road.”

“I concur.”

“Now, Wanda, let him breathe, sweetheart…”

“Hunter. I…object…to your choice of terms for Wanda.”
Lance rolled his eyes. “Look, can we do the relationship-not relationship thing later, guys? I call everyone love, and sweetheart, and bloke, and mate. Even Coulson…err…sometimes. You should have seen Daisy’s face at that point. Anyways. My heart belongs to a she-beast currently somewhere in the US breaking May & Mack out. Alright?”

Wanda let the newcomer up, but she kept a suspicious glare on him. Red sparks crackled across her hands. He straightened up against the seat, his eyes on Wanda.

“You…Wanda Maximoff. They call you the Witch. I need your help.”

“Mate, you might want to answer the lady’s question first.”

The man sighed, and rubbed at his temples.

"My name is Vijay Nadeer. I’m an Inhuman.”

As the car drove on, Vijay told about his original transformation, his murder at his sister’s hands, and his rebirth in the waters off his family’s summer home.

“My…powers…have changed. I had super speed before, now…”

He winced.

"I seem to be able to control electronics. It's how I was able to find out where Agent Simmons was taken and how I was able to see through your disguise. But it comes with a price."

Vijay rested his head in his hands for a moment. "You know how there's a humming sound in overhead lights, like at a hospital, especially when it's ready to go out?"

Lance sighed, "Ouch. Drives me crazy every time."

"It's like that, but it’s always there in the back of my mind. And it gets worse the more electronics there are around me. Right now, with those things you’re wearing, and that robot…"

"Vision." snapped Wanda. "And he's a him."

Vijay looked at Wanda, his lines around his eyes tense.

"My apologies, I meant no offense."

"None taken." called Vision from the front seat. "I've been called worse recently."

"Vision's body is electrical in nature. While I'm sure he's more than that, Wanda, his proximity is similar to a steady screech in my mind. Which is why I need your help."

Vijay leaned forward. "My powers over electronics include the Internet. They allow me access to anything stored electronically, and accessible on any internet platform, no matter how secure."

Vision's eyebrows rose. "A human FRIDAY? Tony Stark will want to meet you."

Vijay shuddered. "God, no. He's the one person I need to avoid. All that tech...I'd never survive."

Wanda began to sympathize. "Let's get back to this. What do you need me for?"

"I got the report on your...gifts...from the State Department. It said you had the power of mind
manipulation."

"To a point, yes."

"I think you can help me...mute this. Make it bearable."

Wanda looked doubtful. "I'm not sure, Vijay. I've never tried that before."

"I'd be willing to be your guinea pig...please..."

Lance regretfully replied, "I'm sorry, I can sympathize, but we don't have time right now to help you. We have a very tight window to get Fitz and Simmons out, and we can't spare Wanda's powers to try this. If you hang out, we'll take you back with us and see what we can do, but..."

"How do you propose to get into Midnight Glen, Agent Hunter? Because that is where Simmons is. And then how do you propose to get out? With two agents who may or may not have been tortured or even be able to move?"

The car was silent.

"If you can help me wall this off, then I can use my gifts to help you get them out. And then...we'll see."

Wanda nodded. "I think it is worth the risk. Hunter, Vision?"

"I support you, Wanda." said Vision softly.

Lance sighed. "FitzSimmons would be all for this. Especially Fitz. Can we do this on the move, at least?"

She nodded.

"Then let me into the front seat. I'm ready for a nap."

"OK, Vijay, what do you have?" Lance asked.

Vision had activated the cloaking on the car, and they were parked in the nearby village of Black Oaks.

Whatever Wanda had done to Vijay had worked, although she noted it would be temporary. At least the man was no longer tensing every time Vision looked at him.

Vijay opened up the computer. He laid a hand on it.

"I need Vijay home files: *.BlackPit."

The computer emitted a blinding flash. When the screen cleared, it was blank, except for the file folders Vijay had requested.

Wanda snickered. "So much for your Candy Crush, Lance."

"It's on the Cloud. Do you have the layout?"

"I do." Vijay opened the file, and the base's layout filled the screen. A red pathway threaded through the halls, leading to two rooms, on opposite sides of the hall from each other, circled in red.
They looked at Vijay, who flushed.

"Uh...I tried to figure out how to do this, but I'm no spy."

"No, but you did pretty good, kid. Coulson's definitely going to want to meet you."

Lance considered the path Vijay had plotted.

Vijay swallowed. "I can take care of the electronics once we get in, but I couldn't figure out how to get through the front door."

Lance looked at him. "What was your plan from here?"

"Agent Simmons...it's in her file from her Academy days. Her family were friends with someone called Braddock."

Lance's jaw dropped.

"They seem to be pretty tight with MI-13. I was going trade my services to them if they could at least get me in."

"Braddock?" asked Wanda. "Never heard of them."

"No," replied Lance, "You wouldn't have. They're a...national secret...you might say." He thought for a moment. "I'm not sure what side they'd come down on. Let's leave them out of this."

"I have a suggestion." offered Vision. "We could just walk in."

"Huh. Not a bad idea." responded Lance. "And what about Vijay?"

Wanda smiled. "What could be less suspicious than British Intelligence, turning in a wanted Inhuman? That is, if you can get us into the system?"

Vijay sighed. "I never was much of a hacker. I'd better get to work on this."

Lance checked his watch.

"We have an hour. Work fast."

The four teammates moved quickly to Midnight Glen's entrance. Hunter's watch was now counting down from 5 minutes. They approached the first checkpoint.

Vijay laid his cuffed hands on the electronic pad.

"Storm the Castle."

The pad whined as data noting the transfer of Inhuman 49026 with his 3 Interpol agents effective immediately was processed and accepted. The door slid open.

The four moved inside, and began to head for the elevator.

"You lot!"

Lance muttered, "Let me handle this," and shoved Vijay at Wanda and Vision. He stood to perfect attention.
"Sir!"

"I have no prior knowledge of an...Inhuman...transfer."

"Following my orders, sir." Lance responded stiffly.

"I'm sure. MI-13 are pushing their luck these days." The British Officer began to scroll through his phone.

Lance hesitated. "Black Hole Protocol, sir."

The Englishman's mouth twisted. "Enough said about that, lad. If the papers ever got word of Black Air, let alone the Protocol, we'd all be in for it."

Wanda's mouth tightened, but said nothing.

He looked up. Everyone held their breath.

"OK, you all check out. Torches are in the elevator. We lose less of them this way."

"Sir." Lance saluted, turned and marched towards the elevator. The other three fell in behind him.

Inside the elevator, a row of flashlights stood beside the door. Wanda picked one up, and handed one to Vijay.

"I have a bad feeling about this..." Lance muttered, pushing the button for sub-level 12.

The floor opened up underneath them and sucked them down into the darkness.

"Careful. We are being...tested..." Vision commented, as they landed on a hard surface.

"Uh huh," agreed Lance. "V, are we on the level?"

"It appears to match that of the map we found."

"Good...because I can't see a damn thing."

It wasn't just dark. It was pitch black. No ambient light. No sound. The team's eyes adjusted, but only enough to get a faint outline of the area.

Midnight Glen, Black Hole. It was a very precise definition of the cell block.

Lance checked his watch. It was now counting up from 10 minutes.

"Come on," he whispered, "They'll start getting reports from the other groups any time now."

Vision commented, "You have that little faith in your team members?"

"Bobbi never could do things quietly."

Vision's crystal glowed softly in the darkness. "Let me take point."

"Lead the way." Wanda responded.

The team moved silently through the corridor.
Suddenly, a heavy object dropped onto Lance, and he went down hard. Stretching up his hands, he could feel a muzzle, and something...sharp? Oh, shit... He pushed up on the heavy head.

He heard yells from his other teammates echoing through the room...whuffs and scratches could be heard...but no sound from their attackers.

Well, nothing for it...

"Wanda, light it up!"

He closed his eyes as red light exploded.

He heard a thump as the first...thing...hit the hallway. Another sizzle to his left as a blast from Vision took care of his beast. Lance got his legs under his attacker and shoved. He opened his eyes as Wanda's blast took care of it. Behind him, Vijay electrocuted the thing on top of him with his cuffs.

Vijay freed his hands, and dropped the cuffs on floor as Lance pulled the body off him. Getting to his feet, Vijay ran to the first cell, and placed his hand on the lock. Sparking, the door swung open to reveal a pale Leo Fitz, holding a chair in front of him, ready to defend himself.

"Fitz...you owe me a beer. Or two. The good stuff."

"What the hell...HUNTER?? Jemma, does Bobbi have her? Where is she??"

"I'm here, Fitz..." Hunter turned to see Vijay supporting a bruised Jemma Simmons out of her cell. "We have to get going, they'll send more of those things."

"No, wait." objected Fitz. "There's one more down here. End of the hallway. We need to get him out."

Hunter moved Fitz out the cell, "We can't, I'm sorry, no time..."

"We owe him, Hunter. I never would have got Jemma out of Malveth without him."

There was only one person Hunter could think of who might fit that description.

"How'd the hell they nab him? He dropped off the grid after the Castle."

"Picked him up in a sweep in Dublin. MI-13 got in a lucky shot, I think."

The team followed Fitz down to the last cell. Beast like snarls echoed behind them as they reached their destination.

Vijay wrenched the door open. "Everyone, inside!" He slammed it shut behind Vision and Jemma as they all turned to see a solid stone like box.

Vijay jammed the electronic lock. "That should hold them for a moment."

Placing his hand on the stone box, he shook his head. "Not working."

"Let me try." Wanda gasped, but her bolts left nothing but a few singe marks.

"My turn..." Vision started, but was interrupted by Lance.

"No, let me." He walked up to the box, and turned the handle.
A lone man stood, bracing himself against the sides.

"Well, well…Lance Hunter. I would've expected Dr. Fitz to figure it out."

"Go easy on us...it's been a tough few...weeks?" groaned Fitz.

"At least..." agreed Simmons.

At the others' quizzical look, Hunter explained, "It's a prison with a one-way door. You go in..."

"But you don't come out." finished the being. "Thanks for coming for me."

"Everyone, meet Elliot Randolph," introduced Fitz. "Countryman of Thor."

"Former countryman, thank you." Elliot responded. His eyes widened as they landed on Vision. "Oh my...first Inhumans, now Infinity Stones. What has Coulson been up to?"

"No time for that...How do we get out of here?" asked Simmons.

"Now, it's my turn." said Wanda.

Facing the wall, she placed a ring on her fingers. Concentrating, she began to make a circular motion. A black portal appeared.

The sounds outside the door grew more frantic.

"So, that's what you were doing with the Doctor!" cheered Hunter.

"Everyone, quickly...I can't hold this for long..." Wanda responded.

Wanda's teammates quickly hustled out through the portal. Wanda dove through it.

It closed behind her, leaving nothing but black emptiness.

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**CODA**

**Not on Earth**

The Great One was in a *foul, foul, foul* mood.

Phil Coulson's team of agents. Escaped from cells no one had ever breached. Helped by people who were in hiding themselves, rebuilding a team he thought had torn beyond repairing, old...friends who had every possible reason to turn their backs, but instead stepped into the breach, pulling new allies in with them.

Even if that damned Coulson was not on Earth, he still was meddling in their plans.

They should have seen it coming. **He** knew what Coulson was capable of, the loyalty he commanded.

Maybe they should've just killed them all at the start.

But it wasn't his call to make. Not that it mattered. The Great One knew, very well, the price of failure.
It was time for his tool to go to work. All they had to do was to keep those on Earth...occupied.

By the time they had it solved, it would be too late.

For the Avengers. For SHIELD. For Phil Coulson.

For Earth.

Chapter End Notes

All right, Agents Leo Fitz and Jemma Simmons are free! Which means the only Agent left unaccounted for is Phil Coulson. And he's stuck where he is for a while...

On and off, Netflix has toyed with the idea of a Captain Britain series. While it hasn't come about yet, who knows? For the purposes of this story, however, Brian Braddock is a little busy at the moment. For now, at least. (His sister Betsy, however, is out of bounds as Psylocke has appeared in the X-Men movies).

And welcome back to Elliot Randolph, last seen musing about Inhumans after Jemma Simmons was rescued in S3. I wonder how an ex-Asgardian could help this group. ;)

Next chapter, the last teammates of this group are putting their plans in motion in NYC. Unfortunately, so are others...
Plausible Deniability

Chapter Summary

Tony Stark hatches his plans for the Inhuman situation...but could it be already too late?

Chapter Notes

Hi, a friendly reminder that this chapter takes place at the same time as the last three (the rescues).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Stark Tower, NYC

“Welcome to Stark Industries, kid.”

Cass Clements smiled as they rode up the elevator. “I’ve been here before, Mr. Stark. Senior class tour of New York. You told us all to look you up when we graduated.”

“And you went to work for CIDA.” Tony Stark grimaced. “I’m personally hurt by that.”

“Public service runs through my family’s veins, Mr. Stark.”

“I bet it does. And you can call me Tony.”

The elevator opened on a quiet hallway on one of the floors reserved for SI business. Cass looked around.

“I was expecting something more…you know…red and gold..”

Tony grinned. “Some of us have a day job. A mild mannered businessman, that’s what I am…”

Cass choked back a laugh.

Tony continued. “The only way this works is if Iron Man is the side show. Don’t even think about what the others are doing.”

“I still say I should’ve gone with one of the teams. I wouldn’t have minded meeting…”

Tony stopped her at the door. “Don’t say it. I meant it, don’t think it. Just because I trust you..sort of…doesn’t mean that some of the rest of my staff wouldn’t hesitate to turn you, and then us, in. Especially if they found out who you were.”

Cass scowled. “Don’t you mean what I am, Tony?”

“You need to learn to listen, kid. I said what I meant. And if you don’t follow my orders, I’ll ship you back to Daddy so fast, you’ll get whiplash. Or should I say your Uncle…”
Cass froze. “Leave them out of this.”

Tony smirked. “So that you know, I do have your full file from Rogers. Which he got from T’Challa back in Wakanda. I’m sure the others are wondering why T’Challa took in a Canuck ex-pat doing her tour of duty in the international aid trenches. It all makes sense, really, especially with the stance you guys took on Sokavia…”

“I got the picture, Mr. Stark.”

“I knew you would, kid. Now, let’s get the game in play, shall we?”

Tony held the boardroom door open for Cass, and the two joined the meeting inside.

The SI staff assembled inside weren’t used to meeting with their… eccentric…employer. They weren’t the heads of their various departments, but they were among the best in their sections. They settled back in their chairs, as Tony and an unknown woman walked in.

The lady settled herself, rather uncomfortably, up at the front, while Tony took a sip of water, and cast his gaze over the room, seeming to meet everyone’s eyes, as he had a million times before.

Tony started.

“I’d like to thank you all for joining me here on such notice. Of course, since I pay you all, it’s not as if you had a choice…”

Faint laughter.

“You are all now a part of a new initiative of Stark Industries. While you will still be answering to your respective department heads, you will be reporting directly to me on any matters relating to this project. When you get back to your stations, you will have access to a new folder on the FRIDAY network, which will include most of the background details. Yes, Larry?”

Larry cleared his throat. “I don’t have access to the FRIDAY network, Mr. Stark.”

Choruses of agreement echoed around the table.

“You will, as soon as this meeting is over. Can we leave the nitpicking to the end, guys? There’s a lot to say, and not much time to say it.”

The staff looked at each other. Currently, the only people with access to FRIDAY were those associated with the… super hero… stuff Stark did. What was he up to?

Tony continued. “All right. About a year ago, the Sokavia Accords were created and implemented. You might recall I had a little something to do with that. Now, the Accords were meant to be a work in progress. My fight with Steve Rogers put that on the backburner, and it slipped through the cracks.”

“Fast forward to today. We’re a country divided, but that’s nothing new. This country has always been split along various lines, all the way back to our founding. You know, Loyalists versus Patriots… American Revolution stuff. It’s a part of our history. Recently, it’s gotten worse for a group of people who never expected to be excluded.”

"I’m talking about the people we’re calling *Inhuman.*"

The staff glanced at each other nervously.
“Inhuman. Think about that word for a moment. It denies this particular group of people a level of belonging on the most basic level, as being part of the human race. It’s happened before, where people on the basis of race, religion, sexual orientation, other things, have been excluded over something that has been beyond their control.”

“And it’s bullshit. These gifted people have heads, hearts, they breathe the same air, they hurt the same as we do…they just have something extra. Sorta like me, when I still had my arc reactor.”

“The Sokavia Accords were meant to keep the general public safe, so that those of us who have powers use them responsibly. But the initial spirit behind it was warped by groups like the Watchdogs, and their political masters, who found a level of power by whipping up fear and hatred towards an identifiable scapegoat.”

“It’s a slippery slope, ladies and gentlemen. Once they have…control…over the Inhumans, which group comes next? Where does it end?”

The room was silent.

“I need to do what I can to put things right. And that is where I need your help.”

Tony looked around the silent room.

“The One World…One People Initiative will work to counteract the anti-Inhuman movement. We will be working closely with the Inhuman Alliance on this. They would be here, except they have their own projects underway, and they have a major press conference today. The end goal is a responsible re-integration of the Inhumans.”

“I won’t kid you, there’s some powerful forces out there, and there’s a long way to go. But I don’t think we can afford to do any less.”

“I said I needed your help. But I need it freely. And it can’t be half assed. I need people who are going to believe in this project, as much, if not more, than I do. It’s why you’re here, rather than the heads. We’ve vetted all of you, you have had some sort of shared cause to be at this table. But I could be wrong…not that it’s ever happened before.”

“If you want out, for whatever reason, now is the time. I won’t hold it against you, you’ll go back to your regular routine. I’ll make sure I don’t even remember your name. But you gotta do it now.”

The clock ticked off a couple of minutes. No one moved.

Tony sighed.

“Thank you.”

“I would now like to introduce you to Ms. Cassandra Clements, formerly of CIDA, who I’ve brought on board to be my second on this project. She and I are of the same mind of this project, and she will be able to direct you should I ever be absent. Which, let’s face it, happens with alarming regularity…”

Faint snickers were heard around the table.

The lady looked around, and spoke for the first time.

“I have a personal interest in One World…One People. I underwent terragenesis in Kenya, and spent the last year recovering in Wakanda. I’ve seen and experienced first hand what Sokavia is leading us
to, and I am pleased to do what I can to assist Mr. Stark with this.”

Tony threw her a sharp look.

“I cry...Uncle...Ms. Clements...”

The lady flushed and sat back.

Tony focused on the table.

“So, there you have it. You’ll be working with, if not under, at least this Inhuman. Again, last chance. Anyone out the door? No?”

“I can’t keep you for too much longer, so let’s break this down by department.”

‘Larry, Maki, my HR team. I want you to quietly comb the personnel files, going back to the beginning of the outbreak. I want you to put together a list of registered Inhumans currently employed at SI. Find out if they are having any...issues...and offer them access to the Employee Relief Fund. I also want to know of any ex-employees who are either registered or are hiding their status. I want to know their current circumstances, and I want to know why they left.

"You will be in charge of forming a think tank, under the leadership of Ms. Clements, of how SI can best reach out to the Inhuman community at large."

"We’re waiting on Rachel Maddox from the IA, but she's involved in their project launch today." interrupted Cass.

"Finally, you and Jen from Legal will be working on the necessary documents to include Inhuman status in our diversity in hiring and our anti-harassment policies. Feel free to bring up anything I've missed in our next meeting."

"Walt, April, you two haven't worked together before, but I will need Marketing and my PR division working in tandem on this. I need a full marketing and spin campaign to give the Inhumans some more...positive...press than they've gotten recently."

Walt shook his head. "It's hard to move past the images of Quake shooting General Talbot in cold blood."

Tony frowned. "Don't tell me you can't do it, Walt. The two of you find a way. For starters, look up that lady she saved last summer when the bridge collapsed. Director Mace was certainly spinning that for all he was worth. Or the people she saved in East LA earlier this year. I'm sure there are other examples.

"I also have files on a Lincoln Campbell, selfless Inhuman Doctor, finishing up med school in Cincinnati. Died defending the Earth. That never made the press. Maybe it should."

April lifted her hand. "Mr. Stark, how about a negative tandem campaign on groups like the Watchdogs?"

Tony grinned and point towards her."Now, that, people, is what I'm looking for. Yes, April, give me what you can on both.

"The two of you, figure out the best way for this, who we need to influence, media channels, press articles, TV episodes, who you need me to bitch at..."
"Governmental Affairs, Lauren, Archie. I need you to touch base with the SI team at the UN. Take a look at the process around Sokavia. Get a list of the non-signatory nations, and do some discreet digging into who needed to be pressured into signing it. Other than the damn Canucks. Find out why, and what their price was."

Cass shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

Tony continued, "One of you will need to be in Washington, working with our lobbyists and the IA. I want you to look into the Humans First caucus, and that includes the late Senator Nadeer. I want their voting record, their campaign funding, weak spots. We are going to need to know how best to apply pressure to them, with an eye of making sure they don't return to the next Congress.

"I also want you to identify those in favour of Inhuman rights. Don't overlook the up and comers, this is the type of issue you could hang a career on."

"Or lose it." commented Lauren.

"You'll be working with the HR Inhumans group, and with the IA to draft legislation to try to counteract some of this bigotry, get us all back to some sort of level playing field."

"And that seems to be time. Review the materials on FRIDAY, and I'll want to see something from you by end of the week."

Murmurs of assent filtered throughout the group.

Tony put a hand on Cass's chair. "Thank you all."

As the SI employees filed out, Tony asked, "Jen, would you mind staying for a moment?"

Once they were alone, Jen Walters from SI Legal sized up her employer.

"What's really going on here, Tony?"

Tony returned the look. "Avengers business. Maybe cleaning up a mess I never intended to make. There's a lot of people wanting to pin it all on me, anyways."

"Huh. I worked on the Sokavia files too. Was what we went through the last year all for nothing?"

Tony shook his head, and then glared at a Cass, who was opening her mouth. She shut it quickly.

"No, Sokavia was right...to a point. The Avengers needed that oversight, I still believe that. We needed some parameters to be put in place to govern when we should act. Even SHIELD had the WSC, for what that was worth.

"But we didn't understand the Inhuman situation. Registration has been a farce, tantamount to declaring open season on them. There has to be a better way, but the only way we can find that is to get everyone to the table."

"Does that include Captain America and the rest?"

"I'll let you know if I see them."

"So, what else do you need me for?"

"Ms. Walters, I'd like you to put out discreet feelers to the ACLU."
Jen stared at him. "You can't be serious."

"I am. I want to see what they've got and how they'd feel about a constitutional challenge to Sokavia."

Jen rubbed at her face. "You never did think small, did you, Tony?"

"Nope."

"Tony...do you understand what this could mean to you personally if the Sokavia Accords were declared unconstitutional?"

"That is why we're meeting now. I'd like you to look at my actions over the past year, and investigate into my personal liability in that event. I'd like to be prepared."

Jen sighed.

"Well, you were working on direct orders from the federal government...I'll see what we can do."

"And be on call to the rest?"

"I expect a large bonus this year, Tony."

"Jen, do I ever not come through?"

They laughed.

"Mr. Stark..." FRIDAY's voice sounded in the courtroom."You left instructions to be interrupted if significant Inhuman events are in progress."

Tony grinned at the two women. "Oh, this should be good. Matthew Ellis, the ex-president, Cass, briefed me on this. I told him to put on a good show for the press. Is it live, Fri-girl?"

"Yes, sir, but..."

"Patch the feed in here."

"Yes, sir."

The TV turned on to a news channel.

The three stared for a minute at the screen.

Jen turned pale.

"My God...."

Tony and Cass stood up.

"FRIDAY, I want the Suit to the boardroom. NOW. Cass..." the younger woman stood up to object, "You know why you have to stay here. More than ever, now. Oh, God...FRIDAY, text Parker, I want confirmation where he is, tell him to stand down. If he goes near this thing, I'll not only strip him of SI tech but I'll tell his Aunt May what he's really been up to."

"Cass, Jen, once I'm gone, get everyone back here. This is Black Night territory. Everyone needs to see this. This is what we need to fight, it's just as important as what...anyone else is doing right
"I have James Rhodes on the line, sir."
"Put him through, FRIDAY."
"Rhodey, are you seeing this?"
"I am, Tony, it's why I'm calling you."
"Meet me there, I have a..."

"I'm afraid not." interrupted Rhodes. "UN's called, they've ordered a stand down."

"What the Hell?"

"Apparently State Department's informed them this is US internal affairs, the locals will have it under control soon."

"Under control? James, are they seeing the same footage?"

"I'm sorry, Tony. That's the orders."

The Iron Man suit flew in through the door. Tony considered it, and then looked at the room's occupants.

Jen abruptly left the room.

"I'm sorry, Rhody. I have friends on the ground."

The Iron Man armour surrounded him.

"Rhodes, look at who is on the speakers list...and then tell me if this isn't serious."

"Oh. Oh, shit. I'll meet you there."

"Make it fast, War Machine."

Iron Man took off over the New York sky.

CODA

Somewhere in Eastern Europe

Anton Ivanov was pleased. His forces were in readiness, his tools in place. Soon, he would be able to bring this world back to the pure version. The way it was meant to be. Inhumans wiped out, SHIELD and the enhanced people disgraced, and then he could wrap his fingers around...

"You're going to want to see this." his avatar called from across the room.

Ivanov moved his container over to view the television.

As the import of what he was watching penetrated, he let out a snarl.

"What the fuck do those Americans think they're doing? This could ruin everything!"
He looked at his LMD. Thoughts passed over the Darkhold wiring that damn AIDA constructed. It nodded, and left the room.

Ivanov considered the breaking news footage.

"If you want something done right...you need to do it yourself."

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for the delay on this chapter. I wanted to make sure I got it right.

AOS S4 fans know what will happen if the Watchdogs and the groups supporting them are allowed to thrive. It was called the Framework. Now, Tony doesn't know about that yet, but he is alluding to many of the same themes in his call to arms to his staff.

There may be a slight delay on the next chapter, as it is one I have been worrying over and mentally revising since almost the beginning of this story.

Just remember, all these things have happened before...and will happen again....
Chapter Summary

In one reality (known by some as the Framework), the Cambridge Incident was caused when a young Inhuman caused the deaths of more than two hundred students and teachers, leading to a takeover of the government by HYDRA.

In another, it was feared that the incident would be caused when a LMD of a SHIELD Inhuman Agent attempted the assassination of a well known General.

In this reality, this is the story of the Cambridge Incident.

Chapter Notes

**WARNING:**

Tagged for violence, offensive language and actions (by the Watchdogs), and character death.

It should be made very clear that the author in no way sympathizes with or condones the language and actions in this chapter.

If you'd rather skip, I'll summarize in my end notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Inhuman Alliance Headquarters

Cambridge, Massachusetts

Rachel Maddox, Executive Director of the Inhuman Alliance, paced in the downstairs lobby. Her Second, Tom Hillston, looked up from his paper.

"He's coming, Rach."

The older woman stopped, and gave a quick sigh.

"I know, Tom. It's just...we've been working so hard for this day. I don't want anything to go wrong."

The other man laughed. "I didn't know precognition was another of your gifts, Rach." he teased.

After Rachel laughed, shaking her head, Tom continued, "Look, Jesse caught Sight of the motorcade. He's on his way. The press are in the auditorium, we'll have live feed of the launch. Classes will start in a few days."

"The kids?"
"Behaving themselves. Audi got himself on CNN..."

"Oh, that should please his father...following in the Congressman's footsteps..."

Sirens were heard. Tim folded his paper and joined his boss. He picked up his StarkPhone and sent a group text:

"He's here. Get the kids seated, inform the press 30 minutes. We may be able to keep this on schedule."

As the cars pulled up to the foyer, Rachel wrinkled her nose at the phone.

Tom glanced at her.

"I'm still wondering what is up with Stark..."

"Change of heart, perhaps?"

"Well, he certainly hasn't given a damn about us for the past year. Flew some of us to The Raft himself. And now he wants to be the savior of the Inhumans?"

"Leave it until after we've gotten this underway, Rachel. Once school's in session, we can figure Tony out."

"First names already, Tom?"

He rolled his eyes.

The suited men opened the door, and a very familiar figure strode through, followed by a 2-man security detail. His smile to the IA executive was warm and genuine.

Rachel shook his hand. "It is an honor to have you here with us for the announcement, Mr. President."

The other man laughed. "The honor is mine, Rachel, but drop the President stuff, huh? That's not me anymore."

Matthew Ellis nodded to Tom. "Can we get a cup of coffee before kicking this off?"

"Of course, sir. This way."

Jake Rolston was waiting outside the back entrance to the facility. He nodded as the door opened.

"Did you get rid of that freak lover head of security?"

The other man, slightly bruised, nodded. "Caught him by surprise. He was reviewing the final placements for the extra security."

"They won't be showing up either. That's how the boys earned their spot for this mission. By the time the bodies are found, it'll be all over for the Freak Alliance."

Jake turned.

"All right, boys, in we get!"

The doors to a non-descript van opened and a mixture of 10 people, varying races, ages, hurried
inside. Jake was last, closing the door behind him.

"All right, you know the mission. We've been preparing for this since the first announcement. The freaks think they're good enough to mix with us pure bloods. We're here to remind them, remind the world of who's still superior."

He frowned.

"Nat...question? Really?"

Nat flushed. "Just want clarification, Leader Rolston. Intel puts about 20-30 kids in there...."

Jake held his gaze. "When I said we take them all out, what part of that was unclear, son?"

"It's just...reading the paper...not all of them are freaks..."

"Of course they are. If not by blood, then there needs to be a reminder that there is no room for blood traitors in the new pure world. And one of the biggest of them is in there right now. Is that all?"

At his nod, Jake jerked his head brusquely. "Then take your positions, all of you. Remember, masks on at the signal, traitors and freaks first, rest of room second. Press last...if they've hung around."

As the Watchdogs filed out, Jake grabbed his Pack leader's arm.

"Nat doesn't display the proper enthusiasm for this mission, Matt. How'd he slip through?"

"I don't know, Leader."

"Deal with him, now."

The other man nodded, and moved silently into the hall. A moment later a muted thump of a body hitting the floor could be heard.

Jake shrugged. "Another one lost to those filthy Inhumans. Don't worry, Nat. We'll avenge you."

Jake strode out to take up his position.

Backstage, Matthew Ellis finished up his drink. He set the cup down and noted, "I have to say, that is not the worst institutional coffee I've ever had. Or is the good stuff just for today?"

Rachel chuckled. "Sonia's gift requires her to stay up all night. She's in dire need of coffee when she comes back."

"Can I ask?"

"Shapeshifter. Small lizard."

"Huh. You, if I may be so bold...."

"Not a problem, Mr. Ellis. Mine is that I can spray pretty colours from my fingertips." She smiled. "Most of our Inhuman staff are alike in that their powers are non-combative in nature." She looked at him over her glasses. "We can't all be like Quake, sir."

Matthew smiled slightly. "I met Agent Johnson with Director Mace once or twice, after her...undercover work was done. Knew her mentors pretty well, too. I think they'd agree that this is
"Just as important as anything SHIELD ever did."

"Why, thank you, sir. After we're done, I'd love to hear more about them."

"Most of it's classified, but, yeah, what I can, I will."

Tom hurried back to meet them.

"CNN wants to go live at the top of the hour. The guys from ABC and the BBC have no issues with that. FOX is fuming, but I'm surprised they even showed up."

"We go with CNN. That's in 10?" responded Rachel. At Tom's nod, she continued. "Ok, can you gather IA to the stage, excepting the teachers with the kids. Remind them their responsibility is running herd on that lot to the end, I'm sure President Ellis will stick around for photo ops afterward."

"I'm sure I'll insist upon it."

"I'll start things off, and then introduce you, then you come out on stage, and..."

"Rachel...I think President Ellis has done this before?" snarked Tom, not looking up from his phone. Rachel flushed. "Yes, of course...if you'll excuse me?" She rushed off onto stage.

Tom sighed as he finished his message. "She'll be easier to live with once this is done, believe me."

Matthew smiled. "I've got a few butterflies too. This really could be the start of something wonderful. Start to make up for my part in this."

"Now, can I ask - why the texting?"

"How else do you think us ordinary humans communicate with the gifted ones?" Tom joked. "Seriously, though, who doesn't have a StarkPhone these days?"

The two nodded at the security taking their places with the Secret Service.

Matthew checked his watch. "Got time for a call."

It went to voicemail.

"Hi Millie, sweetie. It's Gramps. I know you wanted to be here, but your mom said that cold wasn't getting better. You'll be here soon enough. I love you, and I'll drop by tonight. Huggles..."

Matthew put his phone in his pocket. Tom looked at his watch.

"It's time in five...four...three...two...one..."

Rachel took her place at the podium. The 9 members of the IA council sat behind her, the rest of the staff in the audience with the friends and family come here to celebrate. The place was packed, Inhumans and allies alike. The kids and their teachers up front. The only one missing was Rob, but he was probably monitoring this from his head of security office.

And then the press- local, national, international. Print, TV, web streaming, live "tweeting". They weren't necessarily here to see her, though. Matthew Ellis had a great deal of friends, and when an ex-President spoke, especially about Inhumans, the rest of the world listened.
A red light blipped, the cameras were live. It was time.

Jake Rolston stood at parade rest with Ellis’s security detail. None had challenged his, or anyone else’s, credentials.

Last mistake they’d ever make.

He watched as the thing took its place at the podium. He smiled. With SHIELD out of the picture, they had been free to use the regular channels. With Quake and Mace out of the way, no one was talking about Inhuman Rights anymore. And with the patriot mole at the ATCU, no one was looking for the Watchdogs.

He saw the red light blip. Yes, it was time.

"Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues, friends, family…” A sharp glance. “Students…” A wave of soft giggles was heard from the front rows, quickly hushed. “Distinguished members of the press. My name is Rachel Maddox, and I am the Executive Director of the Inhumans Alliance. I am pleased to welcome you to today’s ceremony.

“Before I bring out today’s speaker, let me give a quick background on today’s Initiative.”

"The Inhuman Alliance was formed during the early days of Terragenesis, as Inhumans and their allies alike struggled to understand what was happening to us. As we faced more and more backlash from the community at large, we decided that we needed to take more ownership of our lives and gifts, and to seek protection under the rule of law that was supposed to apply to all equally.”

“Then the Sokavia Accords, and the Inhuman Registration Act. Generated without our knowledge, passed without our consent. As you know, many chose to flee, or go into hiding rather than sign. Those of us that did sign faced increasing prejudice, and were further targeted when our addresses passed into the hands of groups like the Watchdogs.”

“As Inhumans, we have never wanted anything more than the ability to live in peace and harmony with the rest of the world. But we needed someplace to start. The answer came from a dear friend of mine, one who saw my changes not as a curse, but as a gift. A man I once thought was Inhuman, but wasn’t. And a man who never treated Inhumans as anything more than human. Well, with some extra parts.”

“His name was Jeffrey Mace, Director of an organization known as SHIELD.”

“We won’t address the recent events surrounding SHIELD, but Jeffrey knew that the best way to combat prejudice and bigotry was to begin with our youth. His suggestions, connections, and support led to today's opening. “

“We are here to launch the Jeffrey Mace Memorial Educational Centre. To honor his desire and his attempts to protect and integrate the Inhuman population, this will be the first of a series of schools which will educate young Inhumans and humans in integrated classrooms, taught by a blended staff of Inhumans and allies.”

“Now, before I get too carried away, let me bring out the man you’ve probably come here to see. He once signed the Sokavia Accords into law. Now, he stands and fights with us for diversity and recognition. Please welcome the Honourable Matthew Ellis.”

The applause and cheers rang out throughout the auditorium, as Matthew Ellis strode out, shoo
hands with the IA council, kissed Rachel on the cheek, and waved to the crowd.

As the cheers died down, Matthew Ellis smiled for the cameras as he waited for people to take their seats.

“Thanks…Thank you all…” He paused. “I don’t think I’ve had a welcome like that since I took office. The first time.”

Chuckles from the adults.

“As Rachel said, it was my administration that helped to formulate and sign the Sokavia Accords into law. Now, originally, the Accords were meant to govern the actions of the group known as the Avengers. But as our representatives talked and compared notes, we found that a new group of people were appearing around the world with strange new powers that seemed to match those of a Tony Stark or a Steve Rogers.

“And we were frightened. Fear can make you act hastily, before gathering knowledge. And as our citizens look to their leaders for direction, our fear slowly trickled down to the general populace. The ramifications of those decisions still are with us today, in the prejudice, bigotry, and hatred shown towards the people known as Inhuman. Groups of common thugs, with names like the Watchdogs, have exploited this fear for their own gain, for far, far too long. By standing by and doing nothing, even as we came into the full realization of what was going on, we helped it flourish.”

Jake Rolston gave two taps to his temple. 1 minute.

“It’s been said, by those wiser than I am, that ‘All it takes for evil to triumph, is for good men to do nothing’. I’m not willing to do nothing anymore. I’m not willing to remain silent anymore.”

“With this opening of the Jeffrey Mace Memorial Educational Centre, I add my voice to the thousands of others urging for the acceptance of Inhumans, and…”

“TRAITOR!”

With that word, shots began to ring out throughout the room, and chaos engulfed the auditorium.

Worldwide, viewers watched the tragedy unfurl in horror and shock as masked gunmen turned their guns on the unarmed stage.

As bullets hit their targets, the Inhuman members used the powers at their disposal to buy the children and non-powered more time to flee. Inhuman teachers guided their terrified students out the side door, hopefully to safety. Coloured beams helped to blind gunmen, globs of slime like matter caused some to slip, their bullets hitting the ceiling. Several figures formed Inhuman corridors to the doors, urging their allies to get behind them, get out.

One by one, however, the Inhumans began to fall.

Those watching on the web stream heard a roughened voice yell, "Kid, put the damn web cam down and get out of here!"

A shaky voice, off camera. "I'm not leaving, the world needs to see this."

"Kid..." the other voice was softer this time. "If the world hasn't gotten it by now, they never will. You gotta go now, please. My kids are gonna need someone like you to help tell their stories. Live to tell them."
"I'm so sorry..." Footsteps could be heard off camera, and an amber wall built its way slowly up the partition, obscuring the feed, until it was shattered, two thirds of the way up.

Around the world, groups huddled around their TV’s, computers, tablets, cell phones watching events unfold. In the mid-west, Clint Barton swore futilely over his tablet as Mack watched in horror. In a plane over the Atlantic, Steve Rogers attempted to comfort Daisy Johnson.

In New York, it took Iron Man 5 minutes from strapping on the suit to getting to the complex, about 15 minutes since the attack had begun. Police and Secret Service were forming barriers across the entrance.

One of the officers moved to bar his way.

"MOVE!"

He gulped. "You can't go in there, Mr. Stark. Our orders are to contain and wait for local SWAT backup."

"For the love of God...there are children still in there! I don't fucking care what your orders are, let me in!"

"Sir..."

"Move aside, all of you!" James Rhodes ordered. The men flung themselves out of the day as cannon bursts from the War Machine armor obliterated the door.

"Thank you, Rhodey..." Tony snarked as they entered the deserted lobby. Sporadic gunfire could be heard close by.

"Mr. Stark, I have a Congressman Thompson on the line for you. His son was in the auditorium."

"Patch him through, FRIDAY."

Rhodey watched as Tony quickly had a one-sided conversation. When it was over, he turned back to his friend.

"Ok, the son says the kids, teachers, some of the parents got out, but they're trapped in the library. They've barred the doors, but there are hostiles trying to get in."

"I'm on it, Tony."

"I've got the ones in the auditorium. See you shortly."

The two men separated.

Tony made his way into the auditorium. It was like Hell on Earth.

The remaining Watchdogs turned to face him.

"Mr. Stark, I presume." said one of them "Leader Jake Rolston."

"Because I am...civilized...I am giving you all one chance." Tony ground out. "Drop your weapons, get on your knees, put your hands behind your head."

"You're here to arrest us?" Jake asked in astonishment. "Way we see it, we got rid of a nest of freaks
and traitors. You should be thanking us. Hell, we should be getting a medal!"

"You are disgusting barbarians and I will take great pleasure in sending you to wherever people like you go in the end. Drop. Your. Weapons."

"You of all people should understand..."

Tony froze in shock. "What the hell would give you that idea?"

"Why, Sokavia, of course. Those Accords, that Act. You've been there since the beginning. You saw the danger they posed, you helped the government take care of them. We're just taking it to the next level. Getting rid of the danger for good."

"No. No, I'd never support something like this. Sokavia wasn't meant for this. This is wrong, evil."

Jake shook his head. "I thought you'd be different, but they got to you, didn't they? And you're just another traitor to the blood."

Jake lifted his gun to fire. Tony hit him with his repulsor ray and flung him across the room. The Watchdog lay motionless amongst the bodies across the chairs.

Tony turned to the remaining Watchdogs. As one, they dropped their guns, and then knelt on the floor.

"You sicken me." snarled Tony, still chilled from their Leader's final words.

James Rhodes moved silently...well, as silent as he could in his War Machine suit. The library was just up ahead, and...

Four masked Watchdogs lined up against him, guns at the ready.

"Really, are you that idiotic? Fine, go ahead..."

Flashes from their guns blinded Rhodes for a moment. He checked his armor...readouts showed a few dings, nothing more.

"Going after frightened little kids and their teachers? Too bad you got me..." War Machine's guns blasted, and the four dropped to the ground.

"Assholes." Rhodey tried the library door. The teachers had barred it pretty well.

"Hey...you're safe, I'm Colonel James Rhodes, here to get you out."

Nothing.

"You know, War Machine...friend of Iron Man?"

He waited. Still nothing.

He sighed and activated his com. "Tony. Can you get FRIDAY to raise that Congressman? Get to his kid, let him know he can come out?"

"You done?"

"Yeah. They made the mistake of firing first. I wish it could've been slower. Kids, Tony..."
"Hmm...I'll get the locals in, start looking for others..."

"Ellis?"

Silence. "I can see his body from here, James."

Rhodey closed his eyes. "Damn it, Tony."

A few minutes later, there was movement behind the door. It opened, and a younger teacher looked out.

"Is it over?"

"Yeah. You guys did good by the kids."

The teacher sighed and sagged against the door. "They're all dead, aren't they?"

"I don't know. Let's get you all out of here, some place safer, and we can sort this out."

The other man grimaced. "If an auditorium with an ex-President isn't safe, how am I going to convince the rest that anyplace is safe for us?" His eyes flashed silver and subsided.

"Now we regroup. We start over. But first, we get out of here."

"Colonel Rhodes, I thank you for coming for us. But I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to ask you to let us file out on our own."

He motioned in apology.

"Some of the...people in there...they find you and Mr. Stark as much of a threat as the Watchdogs. Sokavia...the Registrations. Some have had a relative go into hiding or to the Raft. To be honest, they were scared whose side you were on."

"Good Lord...we're not Watchdogs!"

"No...but can you understand?"

"No...maybe..." Rhodey sighed. "I'll let them know you're coming out, cover you from back here."

"Thank you." the teacher held out his hand. Rhodey took it. "Maybe later, when we've...regrouped...we can meet again. Say what we can't right now."

"I'd like that. Tony, can you let them know outside we have civilians coming out?"

"Why aren't you going with them?"

"They don't trust us."

Tony sighed. After a few moments, he added, "All right. They're expecting them."

Rhodey turned to the teacher. "All right. Head out to the front lobby. The doors...well...are more open than in the past. I'll go and meet up with Tony."

"Again, thank you."

As the teacher watched War Machine move off, he went to gather up the huddled group and move them outside. To whatever came next.
Tony was on the coms when Rhodes found him. The locals were busy cuffing the surviving Watchdogs, and taking them into custody.

"They're all out. Good, someplace to start. Yes, this really...I know, we're going to have to speed things up over here. This is the sort of thing that could trigger a war...that thrice damned book again. Well, of course he said that...look, if you could get Gandalf the Blue back on the line...Who does he have? Damn, Hill, I need whatever good news I can get. Have him sent over to Cass, if he wants to lend a hand. Rhodey's back, gotta go. Mwaaa..."

Tony looked at his friend. "God...I hate people sometimes."

"I know." Not wanting to think about his conversation with the teacher, Rhodey asked, "What was that all about?"

"Just a side project."

"Mmhmm...what are you up to?"

"Look, I'll loop you in. But not here."

Tony looked around the room. "There's an evil book on the loose..."

"Oh God, Ash...you've been watching Evil Dead again..."

"No, seriously. Working with Dr. Strange and his team... anyways, Maria asked him about this. She said he told her to tell me that 'Not everything evil can be blamed on mystical items.'"

"Cryptic."

"Well, he is the 'Sorcerer Supreme'...but maybe he's right...maybe it's not that easy."

"Never is."

The two were silent, lost in their own thoughts as the body recovery began.

Tony noted "Ellis, his detail. Rachel Maddox, and what seems to be the entire IA executive staff. Many of the lower level Inhumans in the area. All gone. It was a miracle you got to the kids in time."

He looked at Rhody. "Now what happens?"

"We regroup..." replied Rhodey, then stopped. "No, now we help make things right. If we can."

Tony smiled. "I was hoping you'd say something like that, Rhodster. Let's get out of their way, and get started."

As the two moved off, Tony began, "So...have I told you about my new house guests?"

CODA

Mid-West United States, four days after Cambridge

The Regional Pack Leaders of the Watchdogs stood at attention around the room.

The Superior stood in the middle of the room, his left hand clutching Felix Blake by the throat.
"I swear..." Blake gasped. "I knew nothing about Rolston's plans. Nothing..."

"And that should let you off the hook, how? Your failure to see your inferior's plans makes you as weak as he was. And as unfit to lead..."

"Please..."

"Not only is the world talking about Inhumans again...now Tony Stark is sticking his nose in where it doesn’t belong. And we will have to work around that. Or get rid of him. A waste of resources we do not need. And you know the price of failure, don't you, Mr. Blake?"

The Superior's left hand clenched, crushing Blake's throat. He dropped the dying man to the floor. He looked around the room.

"There is no room in this organization for failure. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Superior."

"As none of the rest of you moved to stop Rolston, I will be taking full rein of the Watchdogs. I have your leash now. You don't move unless I give the order, you don't do a damn thing, no attacks, no counter protests, nothing."

"Yes, Superior."

The LMD of Anton Ivanov smiled.

"Everyone, go back to your kennels, await new orders."

"It will be our time, soon enough..."

Chapter End Notes

Summary:

Former President Matthew Ellis is a featured speaker at the internationally televised opening of the Jeffrey Mace Memorial Educational Centre, an integrated facility for human/Inhuman youth. Part way through his speech, a Watchdog cell opens fire, killing Ellis, and many Inhumans, who die saving the children and non-powered allies. Tony Stark and James Rhodes arrive too late to save the fallen, but in time to apprehend the remaining Watchdogs, and save the trapped children in the library. However, both are shocked to find that their allegiances may be misinterpreted by both sides due to their public support of the Sokavia Accords, which included the Inhuman Registration Act. The chapter ends with Rhodes vowing to help make things right, and Tony starting to fill him in on his "new project" and "house guests."

Hi. So that happened. This chapter was the hardest thing I’ve ever written, and it has gone through numerous mental revisions over the past several months to get to this point. I don't think the rest of this story will ever go any darker than this.

I cannot emphasize enough that Tony and James would never, ever side willingly with the Watchdogs. Period, no discussion.
The problem is that, in the movies, Tony only has to deal with the fallout from the Avengers portion of the Accords. He doesn't have to deal with the Inhuman issues, that's reserved for Agents of SHIELD, Slingshot and the Inhumans (err..no spoilers).

In this story combining the two, Tony now has to face up to the fact that the Sokavia Accords, which he is the public face of, especially when paired with political twisting from people like Senator Nadeer and lack of strong oppositional voices (Avengers disbanded, SHIELD disgraced, ATCU silent), has hurt many innocent people, guilty only of having the wrong ancestry.

What would an Inhuman, not necessarily Daisy or Yo-Yo, but just an ordinary person gone through Terragenesis, facing the sudden prejudice and loss of freedom that we saw in Agents of SHIELD S3-S4 and Slingshot, think of Tony Stark? And would the movie version of Tony or James have supported Sokavia in this form if they had known this would happen?

Yes, this is dark. Here's the thing. When groups that espouse hatred and prejudice are given free rein to grow, and given quasi-government support (again, looking at you, Nadeer and her caucus), at least some people in those groups are going to believe they can get away with anything. Including murder. This, admittedly, is a worst case scenario. How is the rest of the world going to react to this unabashed act of hatred, when saying "I didn't know" is no longer possible?

I'm going to give the last words on this to Phil Coulson, taken from the S4 finale (as always, credit to the writers, cast & crew) after Daisy thinks that AIDA's won and it was over.

"No, she hasn't. Okay, maybe today, but like Robbie said, we're part of a bigger war. We're awake, we're unified, and frankly, pissed off enough to risk everything to stop her."

Next chapter, (please stick with me), with the addition of Agents Melinda May and Leo Fitz, Dr. Stephen Strange now has the power to reach out to the last person who touched the Darkhold.

(Hint...it wasn't SHIELD Agent Phil Coulson...
Sorry, Wrong Number

Chapter Summary

In New York, Dr. Stephen Strange is hot on the heels of the missing Darkhold...and missing SHIELD Agent Phil Coulson (as a side product.)

It's unfortunate that Strange is not yet the Sorcerer Supreme that he thinks he is.

And he's still extremely bad at first impressions...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sanctum Sanctorum, NYC

Wanda Maximoff crossed over the portal from the English prison cell, and slammed immediately into the back of Lance Hunter.

Stumbling to the side, Vision caught her and held her as she regained her balance.

"What...." she began to ask, and then stopped to take in the sight.

Hunter and the rescued SHIELD Agents, Leo Fitz and Jemma Simmons, were staring in shock at the middle of the room. The Asgardian, Elliot Randolph, was trying valiantly not to laugh. The new Inhuman, Vijay Nadeer, stood out of the way, observing.

There, in the middle of the room, was a very angry Asian woman, fists clenched, standing over the prone form of Dr. Stephen Strange.

"Say that again, one more time, I dare you..." she hissed.

Hunter cleared his throat.

"I take it the good Doctor here informed you that you should've left the Darkhold alone and let Coulson and Fitz die?"

Strange groaned, rubbing his jaw, and looked over to see an equally angry Simmons advancing on him. He held up his hands.

"All right, all right. Enough. Obviously, there are personal connections here..."

The cloak dropped limply to the floor. Strange glared at it.

"You're supposed to be on my side..."

"Only when you're in the right, Strange..." observed Wong from the doorway.

Agent Piper looked around him.

"You still suck at first impressions."
Hunter began to snicker, immediately stopping when the woman glared at him.

"Sorry, May. You know, you still scare me, even after a year apart?"

Melinda May snorted, and backed away from Strange as she was met with an enthusiastic hug from Simmons, Fitz right behind her.

"We didn't think we'd ever see you again, Agent May." whispered Simmons.

May patted the younger agent's back. "It's OK."

She nodded at Fitz. If the Agents' eyes seemed to be a bit overly bright, no one said anything.

Strange adjusted his cloak, and got to his feet.

"I hate to rush this reunion, but we need to move."

May let go of Simmons and levelled her glare at Strange.

"May, he's on our side. He's just...working...on his people skills." called out Piper.

Before the situation could degenerate any further, the phone rang, making Vijay wince.

"I think...I'll just take that..." Strange headed towards the door, stopping briefly at Vijay's side.

"And you are?"

"Vijay Nadeer, I came in with..."

"Ah."

Strange hurried out the door, leaving a bemused Vijay mid-sentence.

Wong shook his head and followed.

May looked sharply at Vijay.

"Nadeer...related to the Senator?"

"She was my sister. Then she shot me and dumped my body in the lake."

They all stared at him.

Fitz slumped to the floor and asked..."Could someone let us know what's going on? Exactly?"

"Oh, just picking up where you lot left off, mate..." Hunter sighed. "Get comfortable, this could take a bit..."

"Strange, here."

"Maria Hill. Doctor, are you aware of the events in Cambridge?"

"I am, I am sorry."

"Does that...carnage...have anything to do with the Darkhold?"
Strange closed his eyes.

"No, not directly. I sent Agent Piper to retrieve Agent May in case this was an opening...but no. This is just ordinary human evil."

"A slaughter of unarmed civilians, maybe children? Ordinary?"

"Bad choice of words on my part. Ordinary in that no outside forces are assisting them. If anyone should ask, Commander Hill, not everything evil can be blamed on mystical items...although it would be easier if that was true."

A sigh. "Agreed. Stark is enroute. Can you port there..."

"Regretfully, no. I have been using my powers to seek for the Darkhold, plus porting everyone else around, and twisting Wanda's portal to bring her here. I am going to need the rest of my strength to take the next steps to find those touched by the Darkhold."

"Damn." The line went quiet. "Then it's up to Stark."

"I am afraid so."

"Who's there?"

"As I said, Agent May, and Lance Hunter's team with their Agents. They seem to have brought back some extras...a Vijay Nadeer, Inhuman, and a rather unassuming Asgardian..."

"So not Thor..."

"No. Definitely not him..."

"We should be so lucky..." muttered Maria. "The others are safe and on the way back. I'll let you know when I hear from Stark."

"Please do."

"Good luck."

The line went dead.

Strange turned to see Wong in the hall, painkillers in hand.

He took a couple, grimacing.

"This day could've gone better." Strange complained.

"Could've gone worse too."

"This Coulson...he has a lot of friends."

"He does. Perhaps you would like to think about that before you suggest he should've been left to die? Again?"

"That might be wise..."

Strange's cloak brushed lightly against the back of his head, before settling firmly on his shoulders."
"Have we given them enough time to catch up?" he asked Wong.

"No, but we've probably given them all the time we can spare."

The two went back into Strange's office.

The groups had settled themselves around the office when Strange and Wong walked back through the door.

"Look...can we try this again? From the beginning?"

May stood up.

"Piper says that you can help us find Coulson."

"Well...yes. He touched the Darkhold, and we need to find it..."

"I don't care about the reasoning behind it. You can help us get Phil back." she challenged.

Dr. Strange took a breath. To the side, Piper winced.

"Agent May, Coulson means a lot to you, to the rest. I understand that, I do. But there is a demonic book out there, which you held in your hands, which I need back in my possession before it does even more harm than it already has. Now, with your help, I can find the location of those who have been in contact with it. I might even be able to open a portal to them. So, are we going to continue to snark at each other all day, or are we actually going to do something about all of this?"

May glared at him. Strange gazed calmly back. Finally, she sighed.

"What do you need from me?"

An hour later, Strange, Wong and Wanda had set up the room. At Strange's direction, they had rolled up the carpet, which had covered up strange carvings into the floor. Wanda and Wong stood on either side of an inscribed circle, which held Strange, May and Fitz in the centre. The rest of the group, unwilling to leave, stood at the back of the room, outside the lines.

Strange focused in a spot in front of him.

"May, Fitz...concentrate on Coulson. Wong, Wanda, given the distance, I will need to draw power from you, do you consent?"

Everyone in the circle nodded. Vision looked as if he were going to speak, but fell silent. Simmons looked worried, and leaned on Hunter.

"Let's begin."

Strange began making hand passes. Those inside the circle could see streams of light forming lines into geometric shapes.

Fitz gasped, "This is what we saw ADIA do when Coulson and I were trapped in that dimension..."

May closed her eyes. *Come on...Phil...*

---

*Somewhere Not on Earth*
The Great One bowed as his Master entered the room.

The human, restrained to the chair, continued to glare at him in defiance.

"You do not make it easy for us to justify your continued occupation of space here, Phil Coulson."

Coulson said nothing.

"Where is the Darkhold?"

"I'm not a cosmic librarian. How should I know?"

"You try my patience. Where is..."

The being trailed off, concentrating, then frowned. He motioned, and the cell doors slid shut, and the shutters closed over the windows.

Coulson felt a chill go down his spine in the darkness, as the being looked at him.

"Interesting...after all this time, you still have allies."

"Melinda..." Coulson thought.

"The fledgling sorcerer tries his paces, looking for you. A rescue, perhaps?"

His black eyes bored into Coulson's skull. "It is too bad that portal paths can be diverted across dimensions. They search for those who have held the Darkhold. You are not the only being that fits that description."

He smiled, as he closed his hand and twisted it. Then a heartbeat later, the shutters reopened.

"My master will be quite interested to know of this development. Perhaps the rest of the Order..."

Coulson swallowed, fear for his friends numbing his heart.

"Where were we? Oh...yes. The Darkhold."

"Hey, did that make the New York Times best seller list? I haven't had much time to read in the last couple of years..."

The skeletal being loomed over him.

"We have all the time in the universe, Coulson..."

---

Sanctum Sanctorum, NYC

The center of the portal flickered in and out.

Wong shouted, “That shouldn’t be happening, Strange!”

“I’m aware of that...” Strange fought for concentration and control.

Suddenly, the image in the portal steadied, showing a desolate plain.

May took a step forward, as a figure came into view.
“Phil! This way!”

“Stay where you are, Agent May…” Strange ordered, sweat forming on his brow.

The figure came close and stopped on the edge of the portal. It was a younger man in black riding gear, holding a length of chain.

And he had a flaming skull.

“Agents May, Fitz. We didn’t expect to see you again, let alone be called by you…”

“Robbie, we’re looking for Coulson…is he with you?” asked Fitz.

“Robbie…is not in control at moment….” The Rider’s eyes glowed a hellish red. “No, Coulson is not with us. You should be thankful for that.”

“What do you mean…” May started, then was interrupted by Strange.

“The Darkhold, do you know where it is?”

“We do…and it is where no mortal can ever access it again.”

“That leaves a great number of beings that can get at it, demon. We want it back.”

The Rider glowered at Strange. “Kamar-Taj had it in its possession once. They lost it. Now, it is far, far safer where it is than anywhere on Earth.”

May tried again. “Robbie, we need your help. Can you come back and help us find Phil?”

The Rider shook his head. “Melinda May…if we were to cross over this portal to your dimension, we would be forced to finish what we began in the SHIELD base. The Rider is not a cloak you can put on and take off at whim.

Phil Coulson chose to take on My aspect for a short time. There is always a Price to be paid.”

Fitz shouted, “What price?”

“I honor the deals made by my hosts. Robbie made a promise not to reveal Coulson’s secrets. I am bound by that.”

May got out, “Can you tell us anything?”

The Rider’s eyes roamed around the room, resting on Vision, and then on Randolph. It hesitated.

“Phillip Coulson is in the hands of Death.”

“No…” gasped May.

Randolph suddenly frowned, thinking hard.

"We all have our battles in this War, Melinda May. Rest assured that somewhere Coulson is fighting his.'

The Rider looked at Strange. “Do not attempt this again, Strange. Blackness is descending upon you. Use your time well.”

The Rider made a motion, and the portal suddenly collapsed, sending the mystics to the ground.
May looked stunned, for the first time, at a loss. Fitz went to comfort a distraught Simmons. Hunter hung his head.

"Well, that was unexpected..." commented Randolph, breaking the silence.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" asked Fitz, looking up from his spot by Simmons.

"Fitz, my boy, Simmons...all of you...stop it. We know Phil's not dead."

"But the Rider said..."

"Exactly. I'm Asgardian, but I've also taught your Earthly literature and mythology for longer than you've been alive. The Rider said what he meant to say."

Everyone stopped and looked at Randolph.

May said slowly, "Robbie said Phil was 'in the hands of Death.' So if he's not dead...he's in danger?"

Randolph, looking a little pale, added, "That's not all. He also said Blackness was descending."

They looked at him, uncomprehending.

"Look, this means nothing to you right now, but to those of us from other realms, Death can have more than one form."

"I hope I am wrong...but there's a being out there, from far beyond what you humans have been able to explore...who fancies himself Death. Or maybe he fancies Death. The stories vary."

"There's been rumors over the past...oh...couple of hundred years or so...that he's after the biggest weapon of them all. And at least one of the pieces, maybe more, are on Earth. Back me up here, Sorcerers?"

Wong looked at Vision, then at Strange. Suddenly, he too paled. But he remained silent.

Randolph rubbed at his chin.

"I know some guys. Bailed their agents out here on Earth a couple of times. They owe me some favours and might be able to help. But it's gonna take some time....and it probably won't be cheap."

May straightened up. "Whatever it takes...we're good."

Randolph nodded back.

"Maybe if we're lucky, they'll find someone to do it for a lark...."

CODA

May stood by the window, looking out over a wind swept desert. A few minutes before, it had been a craggy moor. In another few moments, it might be a beach fronting a clear ocean. Or a remote mountain forest. It really didn't matter.

They had been so close...now, apparently they were still galaxies apart.

"Damn it, Phil...what did you get yourself into this time..."
Footsteps behind her, and she turned her head to see Hunter join her at the window. She resumed her gaze.

"It's pretty much settled." he started, following her lead. "Vijay's headed over to Stark Tower to help...Tony...with his plans. Piper and Randolph are staying here to help Strange track down whatever it is. Piper's got Jemma smiling, at least...says she plans to be the next Companion..."

May remained silent.

"Whovian humor...never mind...The rest of us are headed back to base as soon as Strange is up to it. The Watchdogs need to be dealt with, figure out what to do next. Uh...I talked to Captain..." Hunter stopped and shook his head. "Steve...he said that he was gonna need some help with Daisy after what just happened at Cambridge. And now here."

"She needs you, May. Inhumans, and demons, and Avengers, and now maybe space invaders...we need someone sane to keep us in line."

"I wasn't supposed to do this alone..." The whisper was so faint, Hunter barely heard it.

"May." Hunter's voice was as serious as she had ever heard it. "We'll find Phil. I promise."

The two Agents continued their watch, as the image in the window dissolved into a field of stars.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for coming back, especially after that last chapter.

We turn our attention back to the final missing Agent, and we've got a few more clues as to who's got poor Coulson in their clutches...although if you're checking this story's tags, you've probably already got a pretty good idea. ;) Unfortunately, Melinda and the rest don't have that luxury.

Unless I add in Deadpool...(err...no.)

Awww... Last time you saw Coulson, you killed him. Go away, Wade...

Ahem. Next up...the Aftershocks begin...

(Before I forget. There is slightly altered dialogue here from Empire Strikes Back...credit to writers, cast & crew)
Chapter Summary

It's been about a week since the remaining Agents of SHIELD were brought back to the New Avengers complex. The interactions have been interesting, to say the least.

Some snapshots of a day at the New Avengers Complex.

Chapter Notes

Happy Thanksgiving everyone! And congratulations to Natalia Cordova-Buckley, now an official REGULAR on Agents of SHIELD.

Oh, and Dec 1st is coming quickly...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

1. The bed is warm, my pillow's deep. Today's the day I'm going to sleep. So won't you kindly go away, I am NOT going to get up today. - Dr. Seuss.

"Mack."

Silence.

"Mack!"

Alphonso Mackenzie burrowed deeper into his blankets. Perhaps if he ignored it...


"Mmph." There. That was good enough.

"Turttlle Maann.."

Nope, not good enough.

Mack opened his eyes and rolled over. His partner and lover, Elena "Yo-Yo" Rodriguez was grinning down at him, with a mischievous look on her face.

"Yo-Yo, you're lucky I love you." he growled.

"Whatever."

"No, I'm serious, I'm a bloody Agent of SHIELD. I've killed men for less."

Elena snorted. "Time to get up, big guy."

"Nope."
"Come on, Mack, the day's started."

"I've spent the past who knows how long dodging bullets, fighting evil robots, getting trapped inside my own head, then in one of the worst prisons I've ever been in in my life. I deserve a morning in bed."

Elena slapped at his shoulder and sat up. "You've been in more than one prison? Don't believe it."

Mack chuckled and pulled her back down. "You could stay..."

Elena snuggled into his shoulder and sighed. "I've spent the past however long running from the government, watching over Daisy and Jemma, nearly dying inside your head, and then being captured and strapped to a table for about the same time frame. I need to get moving."

His arms tightened around her. "So go, then."

"Mack..." He bent down for one kiss, then two, then she pulled away. "Seriously. We need to get going. You know May doesn't really relax until she's seen all of us."

"I could just call her..." Elena glared at him, sitting up. "No, you're right. With everything that's happened this year, she's probably going to be on edge for a bit." Mack swung his legs out of bed, feeling around for his clothes.

"It's what she found out about Coulson." Elena shuddered. "That *Hands of Death*. No...she's going to be counting noses for awhile. Until we get him back."

"If we get him back." thought Mack. He knew better than to voice that particular opinion around here.

"Did you see Daisy yesterday?" Elena's voice was muffled though her shirt.

"No, she's been keeping to herself."

Elena frowned. "We need to get her focused. She wasn't responsible for any of that...and what if's aren't going to help any." She crawled over the bed to Mack. "I'm afraid she's going to go off again on her own. If Ivanov's still out there..we need to face him together."

"I know, love. I'll check in with May...maybe see if one of the others will help."

Elena laughed. "One of the others...like Capitan America? Guess we are really full fledged superheroes now, huh?"

Mack looked her in the eyes. "You've always been a hero to me, Elena."

"Aww...you're only saying that to get me back into bed."

"No, really." Mack paused. "Did it work, though?"

"I want breakfast."

"FINE..."

---

2. Stars in Her Eyes

Steve Rogers enjoyed this time in the morning. Sharon Carter would often get up about the same
time, and they could share a cup of coffee and some toast before they pulled up the screen and see how the rest of the world was getting on. That had been fairly depressing of late, and they lingered more and more these days before duty intervened.

Today, however...

That new British girl from SHIELD had that star struck look on her, that look Steve had seen thousands of times over the years, whenever they had crossed paths. She had been spending most of the time with the SHIELD team, and with her partner...Scottish, he thought. He had asked Elena, who he had gotten to know on the flight back from The Raft, and she had only shrugged. He had asked May, and she had given a small smile and told him to give Jemma time.

The way Sharon was looking at her, this morning, as Jemma ate her breakfast, staring at him, there wasn't much time left to give.

"Can't she leave you alone for a moment?"

"Relax, I know the type, she'll work up enough courage to ask me for an autograph, or a selfie or something, and then it'll calm down."

Sharon huffed. "She's one of Phil's kids. He was bad enough, God only knows what he told the rest of them about you..."

"I guess we'll find out..."

Jemma had made up her mind and came and sat down gingerly on the remaining chair at the table.

"I hope I'm...not intruding, Captain Rogers, Agent...Carter..." the last word came out on a bit of a squeak.

"Yes." muttered Sharon under her breath.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I could come back another time. I thought, maybe, since it was the beginning of our day, we might have some time to talk?" Jemma's eyes shone hopefully. Sharon stabbed her knife through the jam in the jar.

"Look," Steve had to defuse the situation before the red on the table wasn't just the jam. "You got something for me to sign?"

Jemma looked puzzled. "Sign."

"You know, autograph? Do you have an iPhone, quick picture?" Now it was Steve's turn to wonder. Usually his fangirls were a little more prepared. And wasn't Jemma Simmons some Special Assistant Director, or something like that?

Jemma stared at him.

"Why would I want your autograph, Captain Rogers? And I have no need of a photo with you. I am very much attached to Agent Leo Fitz, I can assure you."

Steve blushed furiously. Sharon put her coffee down, and looked at Jemma curiously.

"You've been hanging around Steve since you got here like one of his old USO girls." Sharon said bluntly.

"WHAT? Oh...no..." Jemma was blushing. "Sorry, Captain Rogers, but...you really aren't my type."
Steve thought his face had moved to a colour beyond red. He couldn't speak.

Sharon took pity on him. "So, Agent Simmons, what's up?"

"Well, I wanted to ask him about Agent Carter...I mean."

"Me?" Sharon cocked an eyebrow.

Steve wondered if there was room under the table.

"No...the first Agent Carter. Peggy. She was my inspiration to join SHIELD and I wanted to know..."

Sharon's roar of laughter could be heard down in the personal quarters.

3. Coulson's Kids Are Alright

Clint Barton hesitated, then knocked on the door.

"Come in." came a deep voice.

Clint opened the door and poked his head around it.

"I can come back..."

"More the merrier, I say." Mike Peterson (Deathlok) said wryly from his seat by the window. "But it's not my room."

Daisy Johnson sat cross legged on her bed. She shrugged.

"Sure, why not."

Clint came in, and hopped up on her desk.

"So, you've probably heard I don't have a diplomatic bone in my body, so I'm just going to come out and say it." Clint grinned at her. "Spill, kid."

Daisy frowned. She said nothing.

"You know, I patented the 'world is against me' routine, Quake. It took Phil a pretty long time to kick it out of me. I'd rather not do the same to you."

"As if you could, Agent Barton. I could kill you from where I'm sitting."

"Meh. So could Wanda. So could Nat. Even Morse, but don't tell her I said that. I'm just a walking target, you can ask anyone."

Mike chuckled. Daisy's eyes flickered. Well, at least that was a response.

"Hey, I can go drag Wanda in here and we can have a 'everything's all my fault' pity party. Me with Loki, Wanda with Sokavia, you with whatever it is you got going on. But it isn't going to solve anything."

"Besides," said Mike. "I already talked to May. She said you tried that once last summer. How'd that work out for you?"
Daisy swallowed. "I was only responsible for Lincoln's death last year. Now..."

"Stop it." Mike ordered. "I can't speak to last summer, but now...are you a Watchdog in disguise? No? Did you pull the triggers? No? Then this is not. Your. Fault. In any way."

"I should've stopped him."

"Who?" asked Clint.

"Anton Ivanov, the head of the Watchdogs, I thought I killed him last spring. Pulled most of a ceiling down on him. But I didn't. Coulson and May fought two of him on the submarine. I saw him again on that tape. Dr. Strange now has him somewhere in Eastern Europe."

Mike said gently, "Strange has someone who's read the Darkhold in Eastern Europe."

"It's him. I know it in my bones." The room shook gently. "Sorry."

"OK, so let's say it's him." took up Clint. "How does that lead to Cambridge?"

"Because he's heading the Watchdogs. The Darkhold is influencing it all." She looked up. "I kicked his...creator, maybe...out a 30 story window in the Framework. She held a grudge. Now, I'm afraid he does too."

"So, let's think, Daisy. I know Phil, he doesn't bring in stupid people into his group. Except me."

Clint hopped off the desk and perched on Daisy's bed.

"Not from what we heard," said Daisy quietly.

"Sir did have a soft spot for sullen teenagers, would've made a good teacher."

Daisy flinched.

Clint continued. "What do you want to do about it?"

"Go after him. Alone. I can take care of Ivanov, you all can keep looking for Coulson, and..."

"And Phil would kill us when we found him, because you would be dead." Clint looked over at Mike. "That is one of the most dumb-ass things I've ever heard. We don't know where Ivanov is. Every government in the world is looking for us. Apparently Death and the Rider are involved somewhere. You think you'd last 2 days out there right now on your own?"

"What I'm trying to get to, and I'm just going to jump right over everything and get to it, is that Phil Coulson brought you in. He brought you all in. As far as I can see it, that makes you family. Maybe not quite an Avenger, yet, maybe a cousin. And we don't leave family to deal with shit on their own."

Mike leaned forward. "A long time ago, someone told me that with great power comes.... a ton of weird crap you are not prepared to deal with. I think you've dealt with it better than I did."

Clint continued. "The one thing Phil forgot, somewhere along the way, is that you don't have to deal with it alone. In fact, you shouldn't. You lose sight of the bigger picture. And the one thing I know in my bones, even though I've only known you for a week, is that we're not going to get Phil back without you. And you're not going to do him much good in a European grave."

"So, can I have them?" Mike walked over and held out his hand.
Clint's eyebrows rose. "Uppers? Downers?"

Daisy's hand snaked out from under her pillow, and she gave the items to Mike.

"Black eyeliner? Really?"

"You think Coulson would let me anywhere near drugs, Barton?" Daisy raised an eyebrow. "You should have heard him the first time I came back to base drunk."

Clint grinned.

"I'll swap disappointed dad stories with you over lunch. You in, Mike?"

"You know it."

---

4. Catching Up

"And you left how much of an elevator lip, love?"

Bobbi Morse didn't pause in her strikes.

"A couple of inches. Slightly less than Barton left on his floor."

Lance Hunter dodged the batons and aimed a blow to her side.

"Not what Tasha told me." Hunter grinned. "Getting rusty in your old age, aren't you?"

"Thwap. Lance stumbled back from the direct blow."

"Too slow, old man..." Bobbi taunted.

"I'm still standing, Bobs. Take 5?"

Bobbi nodded and tossed him a bottle of water. They slid onto a bench in the training gym.

Hunter ran his hands through his hair and gazed at his wife ruefully.

"We never did take that vacation, you know."

"The Russian assassins showing up at the bar after Coulson left sorta put a kibosh on that..." she returned, chugging her water back. She lifted her eyebrow quizzically. "Besides, we've seen most of the world over the past couple of years together."

"Being one step ahead of the let's kill Huntingbird brigade does not a vacation make."

"Huntingbird...nice...where'd you get that from?"

"Dunno. Maybe something I came across online..."

Bobbi smiled, and rested her head on her husband's shoulder.

"Would it be too much to ask," Hunter mused, "to have some time, just the two of us, on a warm beach somewhere, some booze, and no one trying to kill us for a week? Hell, I'll take a weekend at this point."
Bobbi chuckled. "If you want a beachfront vacation, you shouldn't have pissed off the crime lords in most of the Caribbean."

"And you in most of Asia. Rules out Bali." He gazed at her. "Think there's anywhere we can go where people don't want to kill us? Or worse?"

Bobbi considered it. "Outer space, maybe?"

They shared a laugh, then Bobbi got back up.

"Back at it, Agent. Best two out of three picks the music next time."

"Witnessed, FRIDAY?"

"Yes Agent Hunter" came a voice from mid air.

"Damn, forgot back the AI..." swore Bobbi.

"I know your tricks, love. Love you for them, though."

"Love you too. Think fast!"

Thwap!

5. Scabbing Over Scars

Vision entered into the state of the art lab that was in the complex. The new SHIELD scientist stood at the edge of a work station, miles away in his thoughts.

"Excuse me." he called. The younger man startled. "I do apologize, I don't mean to intrude."

"It's all right." The Scottish bure in his voice was unmistakable.

"Agent Fitz, your teammates have pulled some dinner together. I believe they are waiting for you."

"I lost track of time down here, sorry. I'll be right up." He turned back to the station.

Vision passed, then decided to pursue the matter. "Agent, have I done something to offend?"

Fitz sighed. "No, Vision. It's just I haven't had great relationships with...robots... recently. The last one developed a crush on me and tried to kill all my friends. So...yeah. There it is."

Vision cocked his head. "Would it help if I informed you that you are not my type, Agent?"

That wrung a quick chuckle out of Fitz.

"In my head...I know you're not like AIDA. But sometimes I see you, and I have all these questions...and...I know I'm not to be trusted around you."

"Why not?"

Fitz hung his head. "I helped Holden Radcliffe design AIDA. She was meant to preserve lives, keep Agents safe. Instead, good men and women, Director Mace, they're dead because of her. Because of me."

He looked up. "Coulson and the rest...they should've left me to the Army. Then they'd be free, and
I'd be paying the price I deserve. Maybe I still deserve to be back in the darkness in England."

Vision moved over, maintaining a careful distance. "In a way, I am like your AIDA. Tony started the process, but Prince Thor brought me to life. For the same reason Tony created Ultron. To keep people safe. But it seems to me that I am unlike either, am I correct?"

Fitz nodded, his eyes coming up to meet Vision's.

"And that has to do with the situations we were...born...in, and the people involved in the process. Nothing is created in a vacuum. You say this Radcliffe created AIDA, then perhaps he too needs to shoulder some of the blame?"

Fitz looked off into the distance. "He told me, in the Framework, this was not my fault...God, the Framework, Vision...I helped lay the groundwork for that as well..."

"Fitz, this is going to take time, maybe there are others you need to turn to as well. But for now, know that, from everything I have learned about you, everything others have told me about you, I trust you. Can that be a start?"

Fitz bit his lip, wanting to argue, then sighed. "I guess."

"Then I believe you are needed for dinner."

As the two moved out of the lab, Vision continued, "I find I am in need of your assistance, Agent. Have you come across an artifact known as an Infinity Stone in your researches?"

---

6. Spike It!

The Avengers complex was tucked away on a remote private lakeside, in a region Tony Stark had declared safe from monitoring. Which was good, considering the rather heated 2 on 2 volleyball game that had emerged from the trash talk over dinner.

Sam grinned over the net, as Natasha considered her serve.

"Wanda and I have you," he cat called, getting ready to take the serve.

"Not yet, you don't." responded Daisy across from him.

"Service!" Nat called, as the ball went skimming over the net, right into the gap between Sam and Wanda.

A beam of red light caught the ball just before it hit the ground and sent it upwards.

"Cheating!" came the protest.

Wanda shrugged. "You said we couldn't score using our powers, Nat. Technically, we haven't scored yet."

She flipped the ball up and over the net, spiking it right in the uncovered centre.

"Oh, hell no..." shouted Quake. She watched in amazement as Natasha dove to the ground, getting a foot on the ball. Daisy backpedaled and used her Quake powers to send the ball up, up and out of sight.

Sam grimaced. "Let me in in this." He tapped a button and wings extended, as he soared up into the
Daisy scratched her head. "Where did those come from?"

Wanda frowned. "Present from Stark. Said he'd been working on improvements."

Daisy looked at her shrewdly. "You don't like that."

"The Raft was not kind, Daisy. I still have my troubles with Tony."

"I hear you about those assholes on the Raft." Daisy hesitated. "If you want to talk about it with another Inhuman..."

"Thank you, I might..."

"Incoming!" Sam gleefully spiked the ball back into play. Unfortunately, a gust of wind picked it up, and he could only watch as it hurtled out of the sky, bouncing off the net, then off some trees, then smashing into the conference room window.

"Oops..."

"What the fu..."

The three women looked at each other as Steve poked his head out of the window. They said the only thing they could.

"Language!"

7. Taps

Maria Hill watched as Melinda May finished up the last of her Tai Chi.

"At the end of the day, Mel?"

"Helps me clear my mind."

Maria grinned. "After all your chicks are tucked in?"

"Like you're not counting Avenger noses, Hill."

May smiled slightly as the other woman acknowledged the hit.

"Clint and Mike had a conversation with Daisy this morning, think they might have gotten through to her." offered Maria.

"She wouldn't have gone anywhere," returned May. "She knows how much she's needed here. But thanks for speeding it along."

"Inter-team bonding never hurts." She studied her old friend. "What about you, May?"

"I'm fine."

"No, you're not."

"I'm fine enough to do the job. Take down the Watchdogs, find Phil, kick his ass for whatever went on with the Rider, then bring him home."
The two women were silent.

"May, can I ask you something? Did Fury make the right call?"

"With Phil?" May gave the woman a glare. Hill returned it.

"Yeah, bringing him back."

"Most would say I'm biased."

"I'm asking for Agent May's report."

"Hill, I just spent the last lifetime living in a world where Phil was never in SHIELD. To make a long story short, it wasn't a world that any of us would willingly stay in. Agent Coulson has made...bad calls...over the past several years. But many of those choices were forced on him by hostile forces, and were between bad, or worse options."

"If Phil Coulson never came back, then Daisy Johnson would still be a hacker. Fitz and Simmons would be lab rats somewhere. Mack, CIA, Elena, probably dead. The Hub would've fallen after Hydra came to light. We would never have known about Inhumans, and that leader of theirs was itching to try something. Hydra would still be a threat out there, with no organization left to stop them. They might have even won. And the Darkhold would still be in play."

"So, Commander Hill, based on my observations over the past four years, yes, Fury made the right call. And I would back it again."

"Good to know."

Maria and May watched each other.

Finally, May sighed. "I think we appreciate the furlough, Maria, but we need to get back to work."

"Agreed. Tony has a couple of stops to make out East, then is flying in for an update."

"We need to brief you all on Ivanov. If Daisy's right, it's only a matter of time before he or his pop back up."

"They have all of us to deal with now...then, May?"

"Yeah?"

"I get to help kick Phil's ass."

"Nope."

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**CODA**

The group gathered over the mission briefing. Headshot, background, and, most importantly, the payment details.

"Sure he's not some ruler? This offer is pretty high."

"Look at where we're going, though. That's gonna be a bitch to get in, let alone get out."

"The Council's offering a quarter up front..."
"We could use it..."

"Besides, getting in's no problem, just do what you do best."

"Being devastatingly sexy and charming?"

"No, you ass...getting captured and thrown into prison."

Their leader studied the folder.

"Yeah, I can work with that..."

The group wandered off to discuss details over a meal.

The header on the file folder left behind bore the official stamp of the Council.

It read: Agent Phillip J Coulson, Terran (Modified)

Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone, sorry for the delay - end of summer cold, then life happened. And then, on top of that, world events mirrored some of these too closely, and I wanted to be respectful.

So, we have a little inter-team bonding here, some serious, some not so much. In a way, these are Phil's families (sans Tony, sorry... he'll be in later, think you can keep him away from Fitz?) meshing together. Appropriate for Thanksgiving.

Next up, Team Tony goes to Washington...

(Note: some dialogue here has been taken from various Agents of SHIELD episodes. As always, all credit to the writers, cast & crew involved.)
Aftershocks #2: Awakenings

Chapter Summary

After the Cambridge Incident, United States Senator Jason Thompson is on a mission. Perhaps it's one Vijay Nadeer and Tony Stark can assist him with. Or vice versa.

And there's more than one awakening...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Washington, D.C.

"The Speaker recognizes the Senator from New Hampshire."

Senator Jason Thompson, dressed in mourning black, stepped to the podium. It had been a week since his son Audi had fled with his classmates and barricaded themselves into the school's library. A week since his many of Audi's teachers had died protecting him and the other non-powered people at the press conference. A week since his friend, former President Matthew Ellis, had died. And two days since the nation stopped to mourn the murder of a beloved leader.

Vigils had been held. #PrayforCambridge and #PrayforInhumans had been trending for most of the week. #ResistRegistration was up there too. It had been debated over and over again on talk shows, news conferences, newspaper op-eds. The Sokavian Accords' poster boy, Tony Stark, had been holed up since his return, doing something over at Stark Industries. Most of his political colleagues had approached him, offering the usual thoughts and prayers in public, cynical comments about it being "only" Inhumans, and it blowing over by the next news cycle in private. He had wanted to throw half of them out of his office.

He hadn't accepted any of the overtures by the Human First caucus at all.

He arranged his speaking notes on the dias. Looking up into the gallery, he saw Audi with his girlfriend Jan, sitting with his mother and her parents. Audi nodded and gave him a quick thumbs up.

It was time to continue down Matthew Ellis' path.

"My fellow Senators, good morning."

Jason Thompson sagged behind his desk at the Capitol. It was the end of the day, and he had some paperwork to finish up before going home.

That had gone...better...than expected. He had had a sympathetic ear across the Senate, most had known his son had been enrolled at the Mace Center. They had listened politely. He wondered who had sat on the Human First clique throughout his speech. But, at the end of the day, nothing was going to change. There weren't enough who saw the danger in denying these (especially these) Americans their basic civil rights. How could they expect any unregistered Inhuman to cooperate when his government didn't care about protecting his most basic right of all - to exist?
"Did you mean it?"

Jason blinked. He could have sworn he was alone in the room.

"I'm sorry, I didn't see you there."

"Not a problem." The younger, East Indian man leaned forward in his chair. "Your speech, Senator Thompson, did you mean what you said?"

"Of course I did." Jason glanced down at his phone. None of the lights were on. His cell phone seemed to be dead too. "My son was nearly killed that day."

"Of course. You have my sympathies." He seemed to be sincere. "But it's over, at least for now. You could chalk this up to a bad experiment. Cut the Inhumans loose. The Watchdogs won't try something like this again, they'll go back to hunting us one by one."

"Us...You're an Inhuman, then?"

The other man grimaced. "Sorry, Senator. I told Ton...the others...I was no good at this spy stuff. Yes, I'm an Inhuman. We're trying to figure out if you're for real."

Jason huffed and looked his visitor in the eye. "I'm as real as a ordinary human can get. You got a name?"

"Umm...Lance Hunter?"

"You'd never last long in politics, son. You can't lie worth a damn." The other man laughed. "Look, if you're not registered, I'm hardly going to turn you in. And if I'm going to bare my soul to you, and hope you don't have a tape recorder, I'd like to at least know who I'm dealing with."

"Fair enough. It's Vijay."

Jason thought it over, and then stilled. "Nadeer? You're Ellen's brother, aren't you?"

He nodded.

"You looked familiar. Look, given who your sister was running around with, I'm going to need some proof."

Vijay walked over and put his hand on the computer, and then on his iPhone. Both devices turned on abruptly, and whirred into life.

Thompson's computer began downloading some classified SHIELD document, brought up the homepage of the Inhumans Alliance, and the song "Why Can't We Be Friends" began to play at full sound. His IPhone downloaded the newest Avengers Alliance game (from the people at SI), and the image of Tony Stark began his first quest to capture the notorious Hawkeye.

"All right, all right...you can knock it off. I believe you."

Vijay's hands came up to rub his temples. His devices went dead (was that a "aw man..." from the game?) and the song cut off mid chorus.

"Thank you...that was giving me a headache."

"The song?"
"No...I'm still new to this control." He gave the Senator a measured look. "I'm not going to trust you based on one pretty speech."

"Fair enough. You want a drink?"

"Thank you."

As the two settled with their drinks, Jason cocked an eyebrow. "So, I take it your sister didn't know..."

"Oh, she knew, all right. Brought in SHIELD to help free me from my cocoon."

"Then was she..."

"Inhuman?" Vijay gave a dark laugh. "Yes, but not in the genetic way. When she saw I had my original powers, she shot me, and dumped my body in the lake." He looked up. "Flies might get in, Senator."

Jason closed his mouth. "I'm sorry. I've heard of families abandoning their kids...but never killing them..."

"Ellen was always on the cutting edge of things." Vijay took a sip, and then changed the subject. "Now, how'd you wind up on our side of the fence?"

"No Inhuman changes here...but I worked with the LGBTQIA community, and then the immigrant communities before being elected. Basic civil rights, that sort of thing."

"We've reviewed your record, Senator. That work on the immigration bill was impressive."

"Thank you. I wish it had passed. Then, the Inhumans began popping up. I have to admit I was afraid at first...but they started coming into my offices back home. No one knew what was going on, what to do. They were just as scared about what was happening to them as we were. Then, as the hate attacks started, I started to look at who was hassling the Inhumans. I wasn't too shocked to see that it was the same people who had been coming after my constituents. It made me uneasy, but at least my guys weren't being targeted as much. And then the Sokavia Accords and the Registration Act."

"You voted for them."

Jason flushed. "I did. I felt the Avengers needed oversight by somebody. Still do. Registration seemed to be just a way to keep track of powered people, just a name on a list. But it changed, almost from day 1. The list turned into tracking devices, like someone was on house arrest. Then the Watchdogs got the list somehow, and the attacks ramped up. Believe me, if I could go back and change my vote, I would. In a heartbeat. Even though it wouldn't have made a difference."

"It would have to us...to them at the time."

"Anyways, as the anti-Inhuman sentiment grew, I felt more and more responsible. I tried to help where I could."

"You were present at Agent Daisy Johnson's hearing, I believe." Jason nodded. "And you were the one who moved for adjournment before she could sign the Accords."

"After the other two Agents were captured in your sister's office, yes. I felt that Agent Johnson would need all the help she could get. I also...misplaced...the paperwork ordering the indenture of the
other Inhuman. With everything that happened afterwards, no one really pursued it further."

"Ah...that explains a few things."

"Afterwards, Jeffrey Mace got in touch with me. He and his second in command...I never got his name...he seemed a little preoccupied with other things. We had several conversations about Inhumans and how to bring them back into society. Jeffrey was a good man. He's the one who connected me with the Inhuman Alliance and Rachel Maddox. And we started plans for the school. I backed it, got donations for it. Even enrolled my son in it." Jason laughed. "He had an Inhuman girlfriend. Thought he would shock the old man. I got her enrolled as well."

Jason paused. "I knew them all, Mr. Nadeer. Rachel, Tom, Sonia, Liam...the rest. They were friends. I've eaten with them, laughed with them, worked with them. Now...I've spent the last week attending their funerals. I'm the executor of many of their wills. Some of the survivors, I've hidden away until it's safer. If it ever is."

"So, yes, I meant what I said. I don't want any more 'thoughts and prayers'. I want someone to goddamn see what we're becoming and to help me do something about it. The religion I grew up with told me 'faith without works is dead'. I've met enough people from other faiths who tell me it's the same creed for them too. We either find a way to live with each other, or we're all going to die alone. If not at the hands of a Watchdog cell, then something else."

Vijay regarded Jason a while, allowing the Senator to regain control.

"How many others are like you up here, do you think?"

Jason barked a laugh. "Look at the voting record. There are more of us than of Human First, thank God, but there aren't nearly enough. It's not worth their while to care."

Vijay continued to gaze at the Senator. Then he nodded.

"I think you're on the level. And you may be who we need."

"Who's we, Mr. Nadeer? The Inhuman Alliance is dead...or at least scattered. Everyone's gone to ground, Inhuman and Watchdog alike."

"Not scattered, just regrouping. Both sides. And the ones who can get on their feet the fastest are going to have the advantage."

"Senator Thompson, if there was any good coming out of Cambridge, it was that the world had their noses rubbed into what the Watchdogs and their like are. There's no pretending anymore. They also were reminded that the Inhumans were people capable of great heroics. The fact they died defending those who needed it, well, maybe their sacrifices weren't vain. Especially if we don't let them be."

"Go on."

"There are...others...who feel a sense of responsibility because they didn't see this coming. I'm one of them. There was a time I could have influenced Ellen. It didn't happen, and she did a great deal of damage before she died. There are others, and I think they would very much like to talk with you, maybe work with you to get some your..good works... through the system."

Vijay handed over a card. Jason's eyebrows rose into his hairline.

"No joke, Senator. Shortly before he died, President Ellis met with Tony Stark. There are other concerns in play, you don't need to know about them right now. He was to meet with Ms. Maddox and the Inhuman Alliance the day after Cambridge. What they were going to discuss...well...you'll need to talk to him on that."

Jason held the card in his hand.

"We all deserve a chance to make amends, Senator. Don't we?"

He slowly nodded, and looked up.

"When can we meet?"

Vijay smiled.

"Tony'd meet with you now, Senator, but he's taking care of a little bit of unfinished business."

Secretary of State Thaddeus Ross stared out the window. This was unacceptable. Things were getting out of his control.

That's what everything was really about in the end. Control.

There was a whisper of air behind him. He didn't bother turning around.

"I knew you'd show up sooner or later."

"Did anyone ever tell you you're a snake in the grass, Ross?"

"Takes one to know one, Stark."

Ross turned around to face Tony Stark, in his Iron Man armour.

"You knew Ellis was going to be murdered. You knew about the Cambridge attack."

Ross shook his head. "I didn't. I never would have approved that operation. No matter whether they killed one or one hundred, the press coverage alone would set back the Human cause years. Well, maybe weeks, depending on whether another one of them cracks out of their shell somewhere."

"You played me."

"Don't give me that, Tony. The people were asking for protection from those damn Inhumans. The Sokavia Accords is the first step to regulating society, making things...safer. The government has provided that safety. Stark Industries has certainly benefited from that, your government contracts, you heading up your 'Avengers'. Under UN control, of course."

"You mean under your control, Ross. " Tony cocked his head and appraised the other man. "But it's slipping, isn't it? People are putting two and two together, and it's starting to stink."

"You're in here hip deep with me."

Tony shook his head. "No, no, I think I'm done, Thaddeus. I'm done being the government's stooge. I'm done being SHIELD's stooge. I think I'm ready to sit back and look at the bigger picture here."

"That your way of saying you won't be at the President's Technology luncheon next week?"
"It's a warning, Ross, that I'm thinking clearly again. I'm not going to parrot the party line anymore. Not when it winds up killing my friends."

"Careful, Tony. You may want to take some time to think this through."

"Is that a threat, Ross?"

"Just a warning. Between old..colleagues."

Tony turned to leave.

"Tell me, how's young Peter Parker these days?"

Tony froze.

"Make one move towards Parker, Ross..."

"Now, why should I even be aware of a simple teenager from Queens, Mr. Stark? Just make sure you really think things through. Before you do something you shouldn't."

Tony whirled and faced Ross.

"Do you really think they'll let you be in control, Rossie boy? With your track record? One last tip from me and my crew. There's a mole somewhere in your operation. It's working to your advantage now, but what happens when they don't need you anymore? There's four dead Watchdogs in a Massachusetts prison cell that should give you a clue."

"Follow the money trail, Ross, and take care of your own house. Before it hollows out and collapses on top of you."

"See yourself out, Stark."

Ross turned around and contemplated the night sky as Tony left.

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CODA

He floated along on a stream of sounds and phrases, drifting from one familiar voice to another. He wanted to answer but he was just so tired. It was much easier to relax and follow the current, a steady ping of the rocks clicking together underneath him rhythmically.

But slowly, a steady feeling of "not right" started to creep up over him. This wasn't where he was supposed to be. Hell, he didn't like lazy currents at the swimming pool. He hated inner tubes. What was he doing here?

The pinging grew more frantic as he fought to raise his head out of the current. Voices, sharper this time, became crisper, their meaning just out of reach.

Someone needed him...something was off...he got a whiff of borsch...something Russian? A sharper glint from behind slitted eyelids. Something metallic. A gun...no..bigger...

"He had the answers," he thought. "He always did. He was right. Again. Damn it..."

He gathered his strength. He could do this. He was needed. That..other guy...needed him. Again.

He'd hate to let...Phil (?)...down. He'd never hear the end of it.
He lifted his head out of the water.

In a Naval base hospital room, Glenn Talbot opened his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone. So this was written prior to the last chapter, but delayed/shifted around due to world events. Hopefully it still makes sense.

Anyways, back to our story, Tony is moving his One World initiative forward, with hopefully a political ally in Senator Thompson. Just remember, there are lots of eyes in Washington, and Tony's just burnt a pretty significant bridge. Who's to say what happens next? (Oh, right, that would be me..)

And welcome back to Col. Talbot! (Man's too ornery to die). I needed to inject some hope into this chapter. However, does he know too much? Hospitals can be very dangerous places...

Next up, we remember that the Avengers don't watch Agents of SHIELD, and it's time to start taking care of some unfinished business.

Too bad that the Watchdogs (and those holding their leash) also feel the same way.
Previously, on Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D....

Chapter Summary

Agents and Avengers alike regroup after the Cambridge Incident and Ghost Rider's warning. Time for a bit of a recap as a torch is passed...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

New Avengers Complex

Are we ready?"

Maria Hill looked around the conference room. Every seat in the room was taken, Avengers and Agents shoulder to shoulder. Tony had quietly flown in the night before, but he had left Cassandra Clements and Vijay Nadeer back in New York to prepare for the One World press conference which would happen the next day. Their projection was on the back wall, allowing them to see everything. They were joined by Agent Piper, representing Dr. Strange's group. Given Strange's encounter with the Ghost Rider when they had tried to track down the Darkhold, Maria figured they probably knew everything anyways.

Maria looked over to a sombre Melinda May.

"May, you want to kick things off?" she asked.

"I can't."

There was a buzz in the room and May lifted her hand.

"I didn't say I didn't want to. No one wants Phil back more than I do...can it, Barton...but I can't. I spent most of the last year trapped inside..."

"That damned Framework...you were in there longer than any of us." finished Mack. May glared at him briefly.

"That's right, so that means I wasn't actually there for most of the important stuff."

May swiveled in her chair, and levelled her gaze at Daisy Johnson. Daisy stared back at her.

"Me?"

"You." The corners of May's lips quirked up.

The whole room turned their attention to the young Inhuman. Finally, Steve leaned forward.

"Fill us in, Agent Johnson."

"Captain America wants me to brief him. Coulson would freak."

"No, Coulson would be proud. He always knew this day would come, Daisy. You've become
everything he hoped you would be when he took you in." responded May. "Now, will you get on with it?"

The rest of the Agents chuckled, and Daisy straightened.

"All right." She stood up and took the floor.

"Everyone..." She studied the computer for a moment.

"Need help, Quake?" offered Tony.

Daisy snorted and cast him a withering glance. Her fingers danced over the screen and a picture of a group of Russians popped up on the wall.

Tony's eyes narrowed, and he looked at her suspiciously.

"You weren't the one who hacked my systems for Director Agent and Hill, were you?"

Daisy smirked a little. "Your security has gotten better over the years, Mr. Stark."

"Better??"

"Focus, Tony..." came from Maria. "Agent Johnson, if you would?"

"We all know Anton Ivanov." She pointed to the middle of the picture. "The problem is, we think that there are multiple copies of him out there."

She continued. "SHIELD came across Ivanov last year, as we were tracking down who kidnapped May. Then Director Mace was taken, which led us to Russia, and him. We already knew he was supporting the Watchdogs, but we didn't know to what extent. It turned out he was the head of the whole thing. Called himself the Superior, hated all Inhumans."

"Coulson was the one to face him. Ivanov held some sort of grudge against him." Daisy paused. "He had this...shrine...tracking Coulson. Really creepy."

"Ivanov..." Clint looked at Natasha. She shrugged. "Doesn't ring a bell with us..."

"Yeah, Coulson never had time to fill us in on that story. I found them right before Coulson was going to take him on. He left Ivanov to me, went to go find Mace. That's where everything went pear shaped."

Mack, Fitz and May became unreadable.

"You see, while I was dropping a damn ceiling on Ivanov, which he shouldn't have survived, by the way, everyone other than myself and Jemma got captured and replaced with their own LMD version. Jemma and I found this out when they tried to replace us, back at the Playground. They had an army of Daisybots. They were planning on killing all the Inhumans."

"And that eventually leads to the base exploding," commented Hunter.

"It was the only way we could escape," interjected Jemma. "They were too strong, they could fix themselves. Both of us were wounded. For some reason, May's LMD switched sides...she said she'd hold off the rest, and we needed to save Coulson and the others."

Daisy thought for a moment. "Maybe the Maybot was in love with the real Coulson? Holden Radcliffe did make them as realistic as possible..."
May glared at her.

"OK, maybe not important right now. What is important is that Radcliffe was working with Ivanov. He created this virtual reality called The Framework. Wiped everyone's mind, replaced it with his version of reality."

Jemma took over. "In it, Radcliffe and AIDA erased one regret from everyone. Because of this, Hydra won. Daisy, Elena and I had to patch ourselves in to bring them out."

Tony piped up, "So what were you all, Hydra Agents?"

Before any of them could speak, Vision spoke up, "I believe...Tony...that is none of our business."

"That's right." continued Daisy flatly. "It isn't. These guys went through hell in there. You don't need to send them back. I'll give you mine. I was a Hydra Agent, without my powers, teamed up with my Hydra ex boyfriend. Who wound up being a mole for the SHIELD resistance."

"I was killed...had to dig myself out of a mass grave." said Jemma quietly.

"I had a daughter..."offered Mack. "I almost didn't leave, even when I knew it was all a lie."

Fitz tensed up, and Jemma whispered softly to him, taking his hand. He remained quiet. May's countenance remained stoic, but Hill could tell she was troubled.

"Coulson?" asked Hunter. Bobbi smacked him. "Hey, you were wondering too..."

"He was a teacher." commented May. "And that's all you get."

"Mace saved us all. He was powered, was the head of the SHIELD resistance." Jemma swallowed, and tears pricked at her eyes. "He died when a building collapsed on top of us...he held it up long enough to get us all out."

"Let me guess," asked Sharon. "When you die in the Framework, you die in real life."

Jemma and Daisy nodded.

The room was quiet.

"You escaped." asked Steve. "Then what?"

"Back to Ivanov. Two LMD copies of him were waiting for Coulson's team. May and Coulson took them out, but it was too late to stop AIDA from turning her self...human. With stolen Inhuman powers."

"That...thing...wasn't human, Agent Johnson." came from Piper over the Video feed.

"It was close enough, Piper. But she wanted more." Daisy glanced at Fitz and Jemma. Fitz swallowed, and nodded for her to continue.

"She wanted Fitz. When he rejected her, she threw a robotic tantrum. Decided to destroy us all."

"Hell hath no fury like a robot scorned...OW!" Stark rubbed his arm and glared at Natasha.

"And that brings us Talbot's meeting. You all saw it from there. She and Ivanov set it up so that I'd be blamed for Talbot's murder, and the Watchdogs would be able to finish the job on the Inhumans. Aided by the government."
"But you shot Ivanov?" said Sam. "Didn't you? God, are there more of them out there?"

"We have no proof," admitted Daisy. "Only a gut feeling that he's not done with us yet. Especially after Cambridge. We have at least three copies seen."

"It was a little too convenient how the surviving Watchdogs didn't make it out of lockdown." commented Natasha.

"And we all danced to Ivanov's tune." snarked Tony. "I hate it when the bad guys get the upper hand..."

"You get used to it..." replied Mack. Yo-Yo rolled her eyes. The corners of May's mouth twitched briefly.

"The Darkhold reader was seen in Eastern Europe before it disappeared." Piper noted. "Ivanov's as good a suspect as any."

"Yeah, but how's he hiding?" objected Bobbi. "I looked at his file, there's nothing...special...about him."

"I think there's a lot of people these days who thought there was nothing special about them." commented Vijay. "Until they found out they were..." Cass nodded at his shoulder.

"From SHIELD's profile on Ivanov," Mack added, "He doesn't sound like someone who would've left the book alone. Until we find an actual flesh and blood body, it makes as much sense as anything else has this year."

"And that's it from us." Daisy sat back down.

"Not by a long shot, Agent Johnson," commented Steve. "There's more questions I'd like to ask of this SHIELD, but it'll do for now."

He looked at Hill. "So, what now? We all came together to find Coulson, but he's not reachable according to Dr. Strange. Now Robot Russians, Watchdogs, Inhumans...where do we start?"

"How can we start?" scowled Clint. "Most of us in this room are wanted by at least 20 world governments."

"Only 20?" responded Elena. "You Avengers must be slipping. We're wanted by at least 56..."

A wave of chuckles rose around the room.

"Well, Strange wants Agent May back in New York." Piper requested. "Out of all of us, she's the one who had the most contact with the Darkhold and Coulson."

Hunter's eyes gleamed and he stirred at that, but his comment was bitten back by a glare from Bobbi.

"The Koenigs?" asked May.

Piper shook her head. "Gone to ground when Talbot was shot. We're looking for them, but they're not easy to pin down. Surprisingly enough."

Barton shook his head. "You've never sparred with their sister, have you Piper? She could give Natasha a bit of a workout."

May nodded. "If we can track down the Darkhold, we may be able to cut the head off the
Watchdogs. If it's Ivanov."

Tony said, "Well, SI's One World goes live tomorrow. I'm hoping some of the stuff we've got going will ease pressure on the Inhumans. At least for a while."

"We're ready over here, Mr. Stark." responded Vijay. "Here's hoping that rabble rousing runs in the family."

Cass chucked him on the shoulder. "I've read your speech. You're going to do fine."

Daisy frowned. "Speaking of Inhumans, have you seen what's come out of Hawaii recently?"

"That guy and his horse/dog? I was going to ask you if you knew him." Tony retorted.

"No, he wasn't on our radar." said Jemma. "Mack and Coulson would have been right there if he was. That sort of power..."

"That sort of place..."continued Mack. Everyone looked at him. "What? Hey, if you had seen where Director Mace sent the two of us last summer, you'd understand."

"Look, I know you want to go charging to the rescue, Shakes, but can you trust us and leave it for a bit?" Tony asked. "Too many agencies are sniffing around over there. The wrong person shows up, this whole thing falls apart."

Daisy narrowed her eyes, but nodded. "If there's any more videos of police beatings..."

"I'll have my second best team over there. The first is working on how to bring the rest of you back from your thug life."

Tony looked around the table. "It's going to take some time, but I may also have a way to better hide you, for when you feel the need to go after Watchdogs." He grinned at Steve. "Let me and my new Science Bros confer and muck about in our labs for a bit, then Hill can point us in the right direction."

Elena cocked her head. "Science Bros?"

"Yeah, Highlander and Hermione over there."

Mack and Daisy snickered.

"OK, I think that's it." Maria stood up. "Let's touch base after SI does their thing tomorrow."

As everyone filed out, discussing the meeting, two men remained behind.

Tony looked up from his tablet.

"You needed something, Legolas?"

Clint leaned forward in his chair.

"Yeah, Stark. We need to talk."

Tony tossed his tablet on the desk, and readied himself. This had been a long time coming, and he was surprised that Clint had left it this long.

He wasn't ready for Clint's next words.
"I called home."

**CODA**

**Barton Farmhouse, location: [file not found]**

*8 hours previous*

Laura Barton hung up the phone. That was her husband for you. Lovable, loyal to a fault. But he didn't always have the right intel.

She knew what life was going to be like, married to a SHIELD Agent, then to an Avenger. Clint had protected them from the worst of it, back when SHIELD fell. But no one had seen the Sokavia Accords coming. And no one had foreseen the Leipzig Airport disaster.

She hoped she had given him the answers he had needed. Now, she needed to go get their family ready for a new set of plans.

Who knows, maybe things would work out after all...

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**Chapter End Notes**

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All right, we're back. So sorry everyone, October was a wash for me over here. Hopefully you'll come back?

My standard disclaimer, the events Daisy summarizes in this chapter is the back half of Agents of SHIELD Season 4. All credit to the writers, cast and crew for creating that world.

I've gotten away in previous chapters having this type of meeting off screen, as it were. It's actually important here for a couple of reasons. First, there's a bit of a leadership torch being passed here to Daisy from May that I think we're going to see more of both here (and in Season 5). Secondly, and this comes from something Clark Gregg/Ming-Na Wen said at NYCC - the Agents haven't had any time to process the any of the events of S4. I don't think they're gonna have time for group therapy here either...but choices manipulated in the Framework are going to have an awfully long shadow.

Next up is the big One World, One People Launch at Stark Industries. Unfortunately, one of the SI employees have ripped up their NDA...

(4 weeks to Agents of SHIELD, Season 5...)
The light from the TV set flickered. Its' owner didn't waste any time channel surfing these days. He knew what he wanted to see, and wasted minimal effort to find it. Not that there was much else on that day. If they weren't broadcasting the press conference live, they were talking about it. There were few people these days that could fill up the airwaves like Tony Stark, and he took full advantage of it.

Some thought it was a sneak launch of the latest StarkPad. Others thought (maybe hoped) that Stark was finally getting out of the game, retiring, and taking off to Tahiti with his latest flame of the week. Nobody knew, but everybody wanted to know.

The owner gazed at the TV as the fuzzy images solidified, as others gathered around him.

**Stark Tower, NYC**

"Cass, my Bubble Babe, change of plans."

Cassandra Clements groaned.

"Tony, we've told you before, you can't change anything now. Everything's set up, Vijay and Jen are prepped, and I will be fine."

Tony Stark shook his head as he grabbed her jacket and clipped a circular object on it.

"Hey!"

"Relax, Cass. It's an updated graphic interface, like the ones the others wore."

Cass huffed. "Why do I need a disguise, Stark? Not like anyone's going to notice me."

Tony rolled his eyes. "Really? Come take a look, my young apprentice..."

Cass followed over to the side of the stage. It looked like just another press conference to her, mainstream media in the front, streaming services to the back, a smattering of tech junkies throughout.
Tony's eyes flitted over the crowd. "Yep, right there, left centre. Middle of the pack."

Cass followed his gaze. Her eyes widened. "You let them in?"

"International press. If I didn't, there'd be more questions about that than what we want them to focus on. Anything in McAdams and Gosling's American Notebook column in the Globe & Mail trends by the next morning. And PostMedia sent Reynolds."

Cass rubbed the bridge of her nose, as she saw the three Canadian reporters chatting away in the front. "I thought he was working out of Vancouver."

"One of the better investigative journalists out there, and a royal pain in my ass. If he's here, it means someone up North thinks they smell a rat."

"There is one, just not us." Cass gazed soberly at Tony. "Thanks."

"Should save your Uncle from some embarrassment during Question Period." Tony clapped her on the shoulder. "Now, get out there. Think Shock Boy out there is feeling the nerves."

"Bubble Babe and Shock Boy...Thursdays on the CW..." Cass rolled her eyes.

Tony feigned shock. "You should never sink so low. ABC at the least."

"Too stodgy, they'd never let me swear."

Tony considered it. "Maybe Fox...HBO?"

He adjusted his tie and followed her out onto the stage. Cameras whirred as the lights came up full, and reporters tried shouting initial questions at Tony, who grinned and waved them off.

Cass checked in with Vijay, who was standing beside some of the Inhuman survivors of the Cambridge attack.

"How're you holding up?"

"All these electronics are going to give me a killer headache." Vijay gave her a rueful smile. "Can't be helped, though."

"I got Advil if you need it."

"What I need is to get somewhere a little less wired in. Maybe I'll head back home for a few days." He smiled at Cass. "Looks like you could use a vacation as well. Want to come with?"

Cass considered it. "If they don't need me up here, sure!"

Tony passed by them. "My $20, Jen."

Jen Walters rolled her eyes and handed over a bill. Cass glared at the two. Vijay blushed.

"So just what was the bet?" Tony smirked.

"No time, ladies, let's get this show on the road..." As Jen and Vijay took their places up front, Tony added quietly to Cass, "Can you chill with the Inhumans? They're looking a little stressed."

"Given what happened at the last press conference, don't doubt it. They know what I can do?"
Tony nodded. "Figured it might make them feel better knowing there's someone who can shield them if necessary."

Cass grinned quickly, and took her place in the middle of the remnants of the Inhumans Alliance, who, as Tony predicted, visibly relaxed at her presence.

Tony took the podium, and the room settled into a quiet buzz.

"Everyone, you know who I am, why waste my time and yours going through the introductions."

Chuckles from around the stage.

"For the past year, I have been a rather...adamant...supporter of what is commonly known as the Sokavvia Accords. I felt that the Avengers needed oversight, still do. I wish things had fallen out differently back then, but hey, we moved forward."

Cass muttered under her breath, "Bet Barton's going to love that part..."

"But I'm here today to make an admission. I, Tony Stark, was actually wrong about something. You see, while I was so focused on protecting the world from ourselves, I missed the part where others were drawn in with us. And I'm talking about the people known as the Inhumans."

The buzz began to grow louder. "The forced registration of the Inhumans...I mean...why would you force people to take responsibility for something out of their control, to sign over rights to their bodies, especially when no one really understood or took the time to understand what was happening? We all reacted to fear, and that fear turned into something that never should have gained root. And with all my vast intellect, I never saw it coming. Not until it affected me directly. When friends of mine were shot at, when Matthew Ellis was killed in the name of hate."

"I can't stand by and say I didn't know. We all know now what cretins join groups like the Watchdogs. And I say today, to anyone watching, you have a problem with Inhumans, you've got one with me as well."

"Stark Industries today is launching our new internal initiative and outreach program One World, One People. 'Cause the last time I looked, we all share a space on this Earth of ours. And as we've seen too vividly, our blood is the same colour. We have a common bond, and it's time that we remember that."

"Like I said, you all know my name. Most of you know my colleague Jennifer Walters. She'll take you through the nuts and bolts of the initiative later. But now I need to introduce you to this young man right here, the new Chair of the One World Foundation. And someone who can attest to all this quite personally."

Tony gave the other man a reassuring grin. "Want to take it from here, V?"

As the two traded places, Vijay muttered, "Chair, Tony?"

"Yeah, I figured if I did it this way it would save us time." Jen rubbed at the bridge of her nose.

"We'll talk about this afterwards, Stark."

Vijay turned to the podium.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the press, distinguished guests...Mr. Stark..."
Tony grinned at the snark.

"My name is Vijay Nadeer."

With that statement, the American press turned from a soft buzz to a shocked recognition. Everyone knew the Nadeer name. And he looked like...

"The late Senator Ellen Nadeer was my sister. I am Inhuman."

Chaos erupted.

Vijay waited the din out. "Yes, Ellen knew I was Inhuman. She had one of SHIELD's top scientists aid me through my transition." He paused. "And then she attempted to murder me. I escaped into the Inhuman underground until IA came into contact with Tony. And we decided to put our heads together."

"Well, at least Vijay is sticking to the story," murmured Cass.

"I am honoured to carry on the legacy of Rachel Maddox and the Inhuman Alliance. My sister, by allying herself with the Humans First movement, the Watchdogs and those like them, was the cause of so much pain, hatred and death. Her attempts to further the Sokavian restrictions on Inhumans by her legislation in Washington, at the very least hindered the reconciliation between our groups, if not outright causing them to wither and decay."

"It is a proven fact that more Inhumans have died at the hands of the non-powered than vice versa."

"What about Jeffrey Mace and SHIELD?" came a voice from the side.

"Reeynoolds...how good of you to join us..." responded Tony. "Perhaps another day..."

"I can handle this, Mr. Stark." interjected Vijay. "Mr. Reynolds, Jeffrey Mace and Matthew Ellis were victims of the same hate that struck down the Inhumans at Cambridge. You just notice them more because of who they were - that is, not Inhuman."

"Rumors are Mace was beaten into a literal pulp by the Inhuman SHIELD Agent known as Quake, Mr. Nadeer. Do you have any evidence that contradicts that?"

Vijay looked at Tony, and he nodded. "Actually, Mr. Reynolds, I do." Tony whipped out his phone and pressed a button. "We are sending to your drives now a copy of an e-mail sent to us by General Glenn Talbot, which includes the official autopsy of Director Jeffrey Mace." Reporters began frantically studying their tablets and phones. "I draw your attention to the inferences drawn. Mace's injuries were consistent with that being beaten with blunt objects, not wave pulses, and were done post mortem. His actual cause of death was inconclusive."

Vijay held up his hand. "Look, I'm not here today to speculate about SHIELD. I've personally seen evidence that many top-level SHIELD agents believed in Inhumans. One of them saved me from my cocoon. Another did all he could to integrate them, and nearly succeeded. Until my sister, and those like her, got ahold of the agenda and twisted it. I wonder how much more damage she would have caused if she had lived."

"It is up to all of us that remain, human and Inhuman alike to work to restore the bonds. I personally pledge I will do everything in my power to work to that objective."

"In your Power?" came from the back."Mr. Nadeer, are you registered with the United Nations?"
Jen came up and whispered urgently in Vijay's ear. He nodded, and turned back to the microphone.

"Mr. Stark's lawyer here thinks I really shouldn't answer that question. But I will."

Jen let out a groan. Tony's grin got wider.

"No, I am not registered. No, I am not intending to register. Should I be arrested for non-compliance, then we will challenge the legality of this requirement in a court of law whenever and wherever the government may choose."

The CNN representative called out over the uproar, "Mr. Stark, you've spent the last year upholding the Sokavia Accords across the world. And now you seem to be switching teams. Are you really going to defy the United Nations? And why now?"

Questions started to come fast and furious. Jen stepped to the podium to attempt to regain control over the conference. Tony stepped back a moment and let the words wash over him as he thought back to the previous evening.

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**New Avengers Complex**

**Previous Evening**

"I called home."

Clint Barton looked over at the stunned Tony Stark.

"Yeah, I talked to Laura. She and the kids are fine. I thought they'd be running out of cash. I thought they'd be monitored. Maybe Laura would be questioned, jailed because of me. I worried myself sick some nights because I didn't know, and there was no way to find out."

"Instead, it's like I was on an extended mission. Pay came through regular. Insurance continued. They were left, far as we can tell, alone."

"Laura got worried and had her brother check on the title to the farm."

Tony looked down at his tablet.

"It was put into a Stark Industries trust whose sole beneficiary was an employee number. It took a great deal of digging, but she finally got the name associated with the number. It was hers."

The room was silent for a couple of moments.

"The paychecks, insurance, everything came through Stark Industries. You kept my family safe. Hidden."

Clint leaned forward.

"Why, Tony? You condemned us to the hellhole of the Raft, I watched you walk away. You didn't give a shit about us anymore...but why protect them?"

Tony's mouth tightened, and he closed his tablet with a snap.

"You know, I call you Birdbrain a lot...never figured you actually had one, Barton. You actually thought I'd leave your family in the mess you guys made?"
Clint opened his mouth, and Tony cut him off, "You wanted to know, Clint. So shut up and let me lay it out for you."

Clint narrowed his eyes, but closed his mouth.

"First, you think I enjoyed Leipzig? I enjoyed fighting my teammates? You guys followed Cap too far down that rabbit hole, placing the guy's friendship over chasing down a known assassin and terrorist. At least, that's what I thought at the time. It broke my heart, Barton."

"And I didn't know they'd put you on the Raft. I certainly didn't know what they were doing to Wanda. That shot about the Futurist, not overly deserved Clint. Maybe a little."

"By the time I found you, I was trying to figure out what was going on. I knew that Vienna wasn't the Winter Soldier, but not much more. So when Wilson filled me in, I knew Cap needed backup more than I needed to throw a temper tantrum at Ross. You guys were safe."

"Not Wanda."

"No, but I was running out of time, Clint. I figured Cap and I would get this whole HYDRA super soldier thing sorted out, then we'd sit down for burgers and hash the rest out. We always did before."

"Then whatever happened in Siberia."

"Rogers didn't tell you?"

"No. He and T'Challa were pretty tight lipped about it."

"It doesn't matter right now. When I got back to the States, I immediately put my legal team on getting you out, released to my recognizance. Ross said he couldn't trust me, I was lucky I wasn't in there with you. I was making progress with the folks at the UN and ATCU, they said they probably knew someone who'd take responsibility for you." Tony gave a small chuckle. "Bet it was Coulson, he was running the show at the time. But then you all flew the coop. And there was nothing I could do."

Barton was silent, then responded, "We left you a bit of a mess, didn't we?"

"Among all the understatements you've ever made, that is the biggest." Tony sighed. "I had to do quite a bit to get back into Ross' good books. Felt pretty slimy some days. But I covered your escape, said we couldn't find you in Europe, until you actually fell off the map."

"Why?"

"For the same reason I gathered up Laura. I think it started with Coulson, who shoved me in the direction of some of the most aggravating people I've ever met."

"You're not easy either, Stark."

"But we were a good team, for awhile, at least, and I thought maybe we became more than that. Especially after Pepper went off on our break. For me, at least, you guys were the family I'd never really had. And the one thing you guys taught me about family...even when you want to kill them? They're still family. Huh. Maybe I understand Thor and Loki better now."

Clint looked at him, and slowly nodded. "Same for us, Stark. When you left us in the Raft, we all felt betrayed, like you left us. But no one gave each other the time & space to sort it all out. He ran his fingers through his hair."Maybe we all never trusted each other fully. God knows, that's not
something any of us do easily. Except maybe Thor. And we haven't seen him recently."

"Maybe he couldn't choose, so he stayed away until we got this worked out."

"Maybe."

"What happened in Siberia? Between you and Cap?"

Tony stilled, but finally replied, "We made each other choose between our families. With time and space, I...regret that. I wish I had made a different choice, but I couldn't then. Not in the heat of the moment."

"Hey, we move forward, right?"

Tony looked over and saw understanding in the other man's eyes.

"I owe you, Tin Man. Maybe I owe you enough for a try at this."

Clint stood up. "I still think you and Wanda have some things to talk about, but that's in her own time."

"All right."

Clint nodded his head and left.

Stark sat in thought for awhile.

____________________________

Stark Tower

Present day

Tony gently bumped Jen off the podium.

"I want to answer that question about why now. Because I've come to realize, that the family of my family? Is still family. Period. And be warned. I will do anything for family."

"Now, Jen, would you get back up here and..."

____________________________

CODA

Click.

The TV set shut off. He'd seen enough.

"That is an unexpected development."

"Not so much." said another. "The blood traitors' escape could not have been done without support from someone like Stark."

"So he is a traitor too."

"It all comes back to that Coulson." sneered a third. "Should've killed him when he was at our mercy."

"Mercy is for the weak. He only survived because killing him ran counter to that bitch's
"Enough." The room fell silent. "Coulson's pawns only think they're in play. We know who's really in control."

He thought for a moment. "Stark is still untouchable, for the moment. His freaks aren't, though."

"You! Pick up a detail, deal with that new...Chair. And his friend. Check in with the patriots at SI, they can tell you more. You have my knowledge, you should be able to figure it out."

His gaze dropped down to his report.

"Well, well...our allies note that the Dreamer awakens. We owe him for that little missive." His head swivelled. "Deal with him."

As the two marched out of the room in identical unison, Anton Ivanov smiled from behind his glass jar.

"It's time to tie up some loose ends."

Chapter End Notes

For those not aware of who Tony is hiding Cass from, The Globe & Mail is one of Canada's largest national newspapers and PostMedia is the parent company of most of the rest of them (including my hometown papers in Vancouver). Tony's reference to Question Period is quite telling....

I find that as I continue this, I grow a little more sympathetic towards Tony Stark (hence a few callbacks to the Iron Man movies). He's put up with a lot over the last year. What he may have wanted to do, and what he actually had time to do? It seems no one trusted that they'd have each others backs at the end. However, I still insist that no one got away from that mess we call Civil War dirt free, and there are still people in this story who'd like to have a few (deserved) words with him over Leipzig and Sokavia - they're a little preoccupied at the moment. And I am still firmly Team Coulson ("A plague on both your houses...").

(And yes, Coulson was a little busy himself at that time with Hive and the end of the world. Talbot probably had it noted down for when he sniped at Phil next...)

Speaking of the good General...about his e-mail? Note that Gideon Malick's autopsy wasn't released to the press. I sure hope no one else notices that... ;)

Coming up, the Watchdogs are coming for what they think are the weakest spots in Tony's armour....
Chapter Summary

After the Stark Industries press conference and public support for Inhumans, the Watchdogs are out for blood, targeting Tony Stark's "weakest links." But just how weak are they really?

And Cassandra Clement's Uncle has words with Tony Stark...

Chapter Notes

Another set of real world cameos in the CODA, meant with the greatest of respect.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Nadeer Estate

Northern New York State

"This place is truly amazing, Vijay." Cass Clements beamed over at Vijay Nadeer. "Your Dad built this?"

"Well, just designed it. He made enough money from the stuff he designed in the Hamptons that he could afford it. He and Mom wanted to get away from the city every now and then."

"I bet there's no one around for miles." Cass smiled over at him, and Vijay returned it.

"That was the point. I think they bought up most of the property on this side of the lake."

They were almost touching now. One more step, and...

"Mate, are you sure you don't want to turn on the generator? That bloody mansion of yours is gonna be creepy come sundown."

Lance Hunter came crashing through the underbrush. Vijay cursed silently, and Cass glowered at the Brit.

"No one invited you, Hunter." she growled.

"Sorry love, Stark insisted. Said you two were too important to the 'cause' to go off without backup."

"And we were going to give them space, right, you git?" Bobbi Morse jogged up the trail.

"I was...until I found that you didn't charge the computer last night."

"Hey, I wasn't the one up until 3 playing Avengers Alliance..."
"I nearly had the Widow!"

"That's as close as you're ever going to get taking Nat down..."

As the two partners bickered, Cass leaned over to Vijay.

"Is it worth the headache to keep Hunter out of mischief?" she asked him softly.

"Acres of property, and they have to be right here."

"You should've seen some of the chaperones I has as a kid..." Cass linked her arm through Vijay's as they headed back towards the house. "Come on, let's go find Lance something to do. Don't worry, he can't crash every moment."

"Why, Ms. Clements, I'm sure I have no idea what you're talking about." Vijay moved his arm around her shoulders as they went back to turn the generator on.

The forest became silent again. Then, one by one, a group of camouflaged fighters began to creep towards the house.

Later that day, dinner had been a success, and Hunter had broken out the cards.

Cass and Vijay groaned.

"Look, if you can take the pot, we'll find someplace else to be for the evening."

"Lance..." warned Bobbi. "We talked about this. They're grown adults..."

"Precisely the point, my love. Kids today, there's no challenge. No sneaking out at night. Where's the romance?"

"I had plenty of romance planned, Hunter." Vijay admitted through gritted teeth, earning a slight chuckle from Cass.

"Seriously, Wi-Fi man...faint heart never won fair lady..."

"Then how did you wind up with Morse?" asked Cass sweetly.

As Hunter spluttered, Bobbi noticed a glint in the dining room window.

"Everyone down!" she ordered, hitting the floor.

As the rest dove for cover, bullets chewed up the window, sending glass shards through the room.

"Out!" called Hunter, returning fire, taking out two of the Watchdogs climbing through the exploded window.

The group made their way into the front lobby, as Cass formed a shield bubble to cover their retreat. Bullets bounced harmlessly off it, ricocheting into the walls.

"Get to the car," Bobbi panted. "Hunter and I will cover you..."

Opening the door, Vijay let out a short yelp.

"Trick or treat..." singsonged the masked leader of the Watchdog group.
Vijay slammed the door. "Just who are they letting in here these days?" he gasped. "I really should complain to the board."

"Isn't that you, mate?" returned Hunter, pulling them into the side chamber and behind the couch as the door blasted open.

"Oh. Right."

The room seemed to fill with Watchdogs. Bobbi counted at least five.

"Everyone huddle close!" Cass yelled as they opened fire. They all grabbed onto her as she projected a force bubble, protecting them as the bullets tore their couch into shreds.

"Let me try this..." She made a motion, and they heard curses as bullets rebounded, heading back the way they came with the same velocity. Hunter noted with satisfaction as at least two couldn't get out of the way in time and collapsed.

"Nice trick, Cass!" He fired, pinning down another Watchdog, forcing him back. "So, any of you lot want to give up now, the door is, well, was, right over there!"

"You bunch of freaks can't take us superiors out. Besides, you're almost out of bullets!"

"So are you!"

"We don't need bullets to deal with you in there. Hell, we don't even need them to deal with your General friend."

"Who?" asked Vijay quietly.

Hunter and Morse shared a look.

"Talbot, has to be him." replied Bobbi as quietly.

"While normally I'd be all for letting that bastard hang," said Hunter, "Sounds like he's on our side these days. We have to finish this up fast."

Hunter looked over, aimed, and fired. Another masked figure went down with a wail.

"Think those guns have any electronic parts to them?" asked Vijay.

"Only one way to find out..." returned Cass. "I can't hold this much longer."

"Right."

Vijay closed his eyes and concentrated. A pained look crossed his face, and he opened his eyes.

Sounds of clacking filled the room, followed by cursing.

"Sounds like they do..." noted Cass, "Now we only need to worry about knives, right?"

"We can handle those," smirked Bobbi, taking out her staves. "You two stay here."

Four Watchdogs stood in the room. One growled a challenge. Hunter shrugged.

"Let's go, love."

Bobbi and Hunter stepped around the couch. Bobbi ducked her opponent's first rush, jamming her
shoulder into his solar plexus, flipping him onto his back, and following it up with a stave to the head. Hunter easily avoided his Watchdog's wild swing, and took him out with a flurry of punches to his midsection.

Bobbi threw her staves into the third, sending him crashing into the floor. But just as she made her shot, the final Watchdog crashed into her, sending her to the floor with a whuf. The masked man continued to where the two Inhumans were getting to their feet.

As Hunter started to rush to their rescue, he suddenly stopped as Cass moved to meet the Watchdog, determination in her eyes. Hunter raised his eyebrows as the young woman expertly connected with her enemy's pressure points, then took him down with a punch to his throat.

"Where did you learn how to do that?" Hunter asked.

"Wakanda."

Vijay and Bobbi got to their feet.

"Something...outside...." gasped Vijay. "Hurry..."

The four rushed outside the door to watch a helicopter land, picking up a solitary figure. Getting into the chopper, he turned and gave a jaunty wave as it took off.

"That's that Anton Ivanov guy!" gasped Cass.

"Daisy's right." groaned Bobbi. "He is still out there."

Vijay rubbed his temples. "I wonder what else she was right about?" He closed his eyes and concentrated.

On the chopper, Ivanov seemed to flinch, then stiffen. He fell back into the helicopter.

"Another LMD? Christ, just how many of them are there?" complained Hunter.

"If I can get that thing down," returned Vijay, "perhaps we can ask..."

**BOOM!**

Instinctively, everyone dove back into the house for cover as the helicopter exploded into a ball of flame, plummeting back down to earth.

"Well, scratch that idea." Hunter continued as they picked themselves back up. "We're gonna need to call Stark, see what to do with these bastards."

"Actually," objected Bobbi, "we need to get word to Washington. We need Talbot alive."


"Got a phone, anyone?" he asked. Hunter handed his over. "I'm going to have one hell of a headache after this..."

"Tell you what, finish this up, and we'll actually let Cass over there kiss it better." snickered Hunter.

"Holding you to that..." Cass retorted, flushing just a little. "Bobbi, can you help me secure these guys?"
"Looks like this weekend might not be a bust after all." Vijay powered up the phone. It rang twice.

"Who are you, and how the hell did you get this line?"

"Sorry, Colonel, but there's not much time to explain..."

---

Naval Hospital

Washington, D.C.

"This is highly irregular, Mr. Davidson. We're barely allowing family in to see General Talbot."

Peter Davidson glared at the doctor barring his way.

"I am the chief aide to the acting head of the ATCU. I have his orders here allowing me and my staff access to your patient on a matter of national security. That...thing...they called Quake is back on the loose. You know, that Inhuman who shot him in the first place? Now, if you don't want his blood on your hands, you will move out of my way!"

The doctor scurried to the side, allowing Davidson and his attendant to pass down the hall.

When they were out of earshot, the man said softly, "Nicely done, comrade."

"Hurry, Superior. We might have gotten past that doctor, but his nurses are probably on the phone to the ATCU right now.'

Anton Ivanov chuckled. "Once we get this done, you'll be heading up the ATCU."

"I'm not that stupid, sir. Once we take out that blood traitor, I'll be lucky to be on the first plane to somewhere without extradition. The money is in the Caymans?"

"Absolutely."

"Then let's go. Talbot is annoying as hell." Davidson checked the door. "Third on our left. And...now!"

The two men strolled in. It was a private hospital room, with windows overlooking the Potomac. Glenn Talbot lay sleeping in his bed.

Ivanov looked over at Davidson. He handed him his gun.

"Care to do the honours?"

"Do I have a choice?"

Davidson took the gun. He walked up to the bed, raised the gun, and fired it into the man's head.

The bullet sank into the pillow. Talbot's image never flickered.

"What the fuck?"

"No," said a gravelly voice behind him. "That's my line."

A corner of the room by the inside wall fuzzed, and Glenn Talbot, still in hospital gown, fired his gun into the back of Davidson. He fell to the floor soundlessly.
Talbot shuffled towards Ivanov.

"Very good, General." applauded Ivanov, moving easily to the window. "But you are too old, too slow. In your condition, you can't move and shoot at the same time. What's to prevent me from finishing what we begun last summer?"

Talbot smiled.

"He is."

The hospital windows crashed inwards behind Ivanov, as a pair of grey gauntlets reached in and grabbed the Superior, yanking him out of the room.

Talbot rubbed his hand through his unkempt hair and bent down beside the traitorous aide. An explosion sounded in the distance. He sighed, and shuffled over to the chair to sit down, avoiding the glass.

War Machine poked his head in the room.

"He blew up, didn't he?"

James Rhodes flipped up his visor and shrugged as he entered the room. "Nadeer warned us about the other one. Davidson?"

"Sorry, aim was off. He won't be answering questions either."

Rhodes sighed.

"FRIDAY says we got the hospital security feeds. Pretty incriminating stuff there. We'll be able to work backwards, clean out the ATCU."

"It'll take longer with him dead, and from what Stark said, time is not necessarily on our side." Talbot looked over at Rhodes. "Any word on Phil?"

"Nothing yet. Apparently, we have the best in the galaxy working on it."

"Damn. If anyone had any idea about what to do with this mess, it'd would be Coulson. It might not be right, mind you, but it would at least be an idea."

Rhodes hummed noncommittally.

Talbot continued, "Stark needs to know that the Senate hearings on SHIELD are being moved up, now that I am 'available to testify.' I'm not going to be able to dodge them."

"Even in Stark Tower?"

"Especially there. The Bugle and company are already screaming about Inhumans, want to add more fuel to the super hero conspiracy theories Jameson's spreading?"

"Look, we have Senator Thompson working his colleagues on the Hill. He said he's got that Senator from North Carolina and his group on board. Those guys are pretty dogged once they get started."

"I hope you're right."

"General, all you'll need to do is tell the truth."
Talbot barked out a disbelieving laugh.

"You don't know the half of it. And with Ellis dead, Coulson disappeared, and the other Agents who knows where, I'm the only one left who can tell the story. Even I don't know all of it. But the truth, son? Even you couldn't handle the truth..."

CODA

Stark Tower

NYC

"Penthouse, FRIDAY."

Tony Stark removed his tie and, sighing, slumped against the back of the elevator. He had just gotten the press handled over the Inhumans and One World, only to have his friends attacked. Again.

God, that had been way too close.

The doors opened to a dimly lit room, a little cooler than he had been expecting. Maybe he needed to check the AC.

He moved over to the bar and poured himself a drink. He deserved it after today.

"Evening, Tony."

Tony turned around. A lone man was in the room, sitting comfortably on his armchair, glaring at him.

Tony took a drink.

"And bonsoir to you too. How'd you get in?"

The man jerked his head at the open window. "I had a friend drop me off."

"And I'm sure being invisible didn't help you at all there. Hey, are you registered yet? You know, you really should get on it, it is the law up there as well, last I heard."

"If you're so concerned about that, why haven't you turned me in? You were there when I transformed."

"Oh, I remember. But I don't think that's what you're here for. Cass call you?"

The man nodded tensely.

"You promised me you'd keep her safe. I got more professional courtesy from T'Challa."

Tony shrugged.

"I'm not very good at keeping those kinds of promises these days. By all accounts, she did pretty well against the Watchdogs. Are you holding her back to protect your secret?"

"Too many people know too much. I'm going to have to go to the caucus & go public soon. Once Andrew knows, he'll take great pleasure in outing me in Question Period."
Tony sighed.

"We have indications what we're facing is global, there's evidence we may even be talking a real Star Wars. Can we count on your support if necessary?"

The other man smirked.

"The Avengers' Initiative isn't the only powered group out there, Stark. We started gathering up Inhumans since the Terragenesis transformations started. As long as I'm around, they'll be authorized to assist you."

He dropped a package on Tony's coffeetable.

"They're known as Alpha Flight."

"Boxing next week?"

The other man nodded. "As a favour, keep Cass out of it, as much as you can, until I go public?"

"Sure thing. Oh, and these are for you." Tony tossed a package at the other man. "I was going to drop by next time I was in town."

He opened them. "Iron Man socks, Tony? Really?"

"I'd consider it a favour if you wore them the next time you saw Ross."

"That's your wheelhouse, not mine."

"You didn't say no."

"No...no, I did not."

As he strode to the window, he added, "Do let me know if you get word of Agent Coulson. I owe the guy one."

"You and the rest of the world. Au revoir, Justin."

"See you, Tony."

The Canadian disappeared from the room. The window slid shut, and a small streak of light flew off to the North.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Cass's Uncle is Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who is a secret non-registered Inhuman here (For those not up on Canadian politics, Andrew refers to Opposition Leader Andrew Scheer). Trudeau's friendship with Tony Stark is comic book canon, though (Civil War 2), and I'm borrowing it shamelessly. And Agent Coulson just knows everyone.

Speaking of whom, things have been a little quiet on the Phil front. Time to head out into space for a bit and check in with our favourite secret Agent Director...
Hmm (popcorn munching)...I wonder who else could be in trouble in space...
I Want You...To Join The Revengers

Chapter Summary

Agent Phil Coulson has just been dealt a crushing blow by his captors. Losing hope, he ponders his next move, until he is informed of some newcomers to the ship.

And they sound surprisingly familiar...

Chapter Notes

WARNING: SPOILER ALERT for Thor: Ragnarok

(You really didn't think I was going to pass up that end credit scene, did you? If you haven't seen the movie, I'll post a non-spoiler summary at the end.)

Also, to err on the side of caution, there's a flashback at the beginning to a session with Phil's captors in italics. Jump ahead if necessary.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Somewhere in Space

"Remember, Phillip Coulson, you forced us to this. We will ask you one more time. Where is the Darkhold?"

Phil did not answer, lack of sleep causing him to waiver on his feet. He felt every bruise they had ever given him. This was worse than anything that had come before.

He kept his gaze on his partner, the woman he had just recently admitted he loved, being tied to the post on Earth. She must be drugged for this, there was no way Melinda May wouldn't be fighting her executioners tooth and nail.

This couldn't be happening.

"As you wish."

On the screen, the firing squad rifles raised, aimed...and fired.

Melinda's broken body slumped against the pole.

Phil's eyes snapped open.

He had barely slept. He knew there would be no mercy from his captors when it came time for the "day" to begin. But his traitorous mind kept replaying the horrific scenes he had witnessed.

Melinda May was...dead. Shot by their agents on Earth. Daisy would soon follow, then the rest, for there was no way that he could divulge that Robbie had taken the Darkhold. He knew his duty as an
Agent of SHIELD. They all did, even Elena.

That didn't mean that their deaths wouldn't hurt like hell. That he wasn't internally screaming as his heart was ripped open once again as he lost the family he loved. That hope was finally fading that they would survive this this time. After all, Melinda meant everything to him. And she was gone.

Phil slowly got out of bed, and flipped the switch to the window shades. He stared dully out into the unforgiving void. As he watched, a rectangular ship came into view. It hung there for a moment, then began to reverse its course. Phil's hands clenched as the beams locked onto the ship, slowly dragging it into its holding bay. He wondered who these beings were, drawn into this hell of a prison ship.

A circular red and gold ship, hidden from his initial view, took off from the top of the ship, swiftly disappearing into the vastness of space. Phil closed his eyes and wished them luck.

He closed the shutters and lay back on the bed. They would be coming for him soon enough.

The Great One hurried over to his Master, who was personally overseeing the integration of these prisoners. He stopped, composed himself, and drew close to the black caped being.

There was no other words for it. This was hubris of the worst sort, insanity. But he could not show weakness, defiance. Only deference. No matter how bad of an idea this was.

"You do not approve." breathed the reedy voice. "Would you rather have these ones roam the Cosmos? Make it to Earth, their powers intact?"

The Great One bowed his head. "The Lord has his reasons, I do not doubt."

The being chuckled. "You lie."

"Master...we have the human prisoner just about broken with the loss of his lover. I believe he would've talked for the younger one."

The other snorted derisively.

The Great One swallowed and continued. "But now you introduce his former comrades into this facility."

"Comrade. And his murderer."

"Sir, we've run the numbers. There is a 64% chance that, together, they will make their escape."

"Then make sure they never meet, you idiot! This ship is big enough, it can transport entire populations of planets. And has." His tone turned mocking. "Surely you can keep two or three humanoids from meeting, can't you?"

He turned his attention to the prisoners, his eyes narrowing as they zoomed in on a slight darker haired man. "That one. He has the Tesseract. I can sense it. He would be an interesting addition to The Order."

He turned his skeletal gaze on his subordinate.

"Are we through?" The other bowed his head in assent.

"Then get us that book, Warden. Or you will be taking a more personal interest in the fate of Earth,
do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Master."

The Great One bowed and hurried away.

---

Phil sat at the dining area table, his tray in front of him. He wasn't looking at the shapeless mass, couldn't taste it anyways. It sat, untouched, as his mind was trapped in an endless loop of "what if's". There were other courses he could've, should've taken, the Framework be damned. There must've been some way that it didn't end like this.

He could sense rumblings around him. He knew he looked weak, defeated, defenseless. A dangerous combination for the only Earthling imprisoned here. Maybe, though it was better if he let one of the other prisoners take him out. The rest of his team would be safer, Earth would certainly be safer. Robbie and the Rider didn't need his protection, but he would be less of a distraction.

A deeper voice beside him. "Move it, you pigs."

He looked up to see a larger grey humanoid being sit down across from him.

"Morg."

"Coulson."

"You ducked the last sweep for contraband."

"I have no idea what you're taking about." the other deadpanned. He looked around, then quietly slid a bar in front of Phil. He looked up in surprise.

"The word is on the floor. They have taken down your mate."

"She wasn't, we weren't..." Phil sighed and looked up. "Yes, they have."

"I am sorry, Coulson. May her spirit fly free in the stars." He nudged the bar over. "It isn't much, but I believe it is like what you described as," Morg frowned. "choca-oates?"

"Chocolate." Phil responded, touched by the gesture. "Thank you."

"Did someone say chocalaytes?" Two other feathered creatures, their names a series of shrieks, took their places, flanking Coulson. "We saw the Bergians moving in, thought we should assist."

"I ...thank you." Phil sighed.

"You should eat." The one on Phil's left nudged his fork towards him.

"I'm not hungry."

"That doesn't matter." The one on his right fixed him with what Phil thought was a glare. "You should still eat."

Phil picked up his fork, and took a tiny bite of the unappealing sludge.

"Good."

Phil put it back down, and his friends exchanged glances.
"I'm sorry, but I can't. May..." Phil shook his head. "was my mate. But next up, they say, is the fledgling of my heart, Daisy."

"You cannot give them what they ask for?" Morg leaned in.

"No."

"Then you steel yourself, Coulson, and wait for your revenge. Like us."

"I've been down this road before. It brought nothing but disaster." Phil said quietly.

"What will you do?"

"I don't know."

Two smaller indigo aliens, approached Phil's group.

"Excuse me, Coul-son?"

"Yes, Terra, Bitha, is there something I can do for you?"

"Actually, we have come to pay a debt."

Phil shook his head. "I've told you, you owe me nothing."

"You saved our sister's life with the medicine you took from storage. We repay it the only way we can here."

The group moved closer, shielding the smaller aliens from sight.

"You know that there has been a large intake recently."

Phil nodded grimly. "I saw them bring in the ship."

The two aliens swallowed. "We had put the word out, after you helped us, to look for those from your Earath."

Coulson sat up a little straighter. "That was an Earth ship? I've never seen anything like it on my planet."

They shook their heads. "No, but they were heading to Earth. Seeking sanctuary."

"Where were they from?"

"Somewhere called As..Asg.."

"Asgard?"

The aliens nodded. Phil frowned, as did Morg.

"Even we have heard of the leaders of the nine realms, Coulson. That Asgardians are seeking sanctuary? That is not good news."

"It's not." Phil looked at the blue men. "Have you seen anyone? Looking for someone big, muscular, long blond hair, carries a large hammer."

"No, but we know that the Great One has ordered that ship to be in quarantine."
"I bet we know why." trilled one of the others, stabbing Phil with a look.

"Yeah, it's someone they don't want me to see...which means I need to see them."

"Next intake, we can guide you to the leader's room." the blue being offered.

"You've done more than enough, thank you." Phil replied.

The two looked at each other. "You saved our sister's life...we are."

"Please," groaned Phil. "Do not say 'eternally grateful."

"But we are...

"Hopefully, this Disney story can have a happy ending as well." muttered Phil. "Ok, next intake."

"You have decided to continue to fight?" asked Morg.

Phil nodded. "It's what Melinda would have wanted for me. It's what Daisy and the rest deserve."

"Then," the feathered one to his right said pointedly, "You will need to eat."

Phil finished the rest of his dinner. Then he unwrapped the bar, and took a bite. It tasted like bark, chalk, and coffee grounds with a hint of garlic.

He looked over at Morg, who seemed quietly pleased with himself.

"Delicious...thank you."

Fortunately, the next prisoner intake happened a few days later. His captors were letting him "think about things" and had left him mostly alone.

True to their word, Terra and Bitha came to get him, carrying a precious guard cloak. Just the fact they had it, let alone in his size could have gotten them deep-spaced. They hurried through the corridors to an unmarked cell.

"5 turns, that is all we can cover for you." they whispered.

5 turns... 30 minutes. Phil hesitated. Not much time to cover five years...

Phil put his hand on the door and opened it. He slipped inside and closed the door behind him. He lowered his cloak, showing his face. The woman showed a bored interest, but the other...

"Thor Odinson...what the hell happened to you?"

Thor closed his eye and leaned his head back against the wall.

"Brother...this isn't funny."

"Oh, I agree." Loki suddenly appeared beside Phil. "I thought I had killed him."

Phil jumped back, and then aimed a punch at his old enemy. He stumbled through the projection.

Loki smirked. "Looks like Sif was right after all..."

Thor leaned forward. "This is not one of your tricks?"
"Trust me, if I wanted to appear as someone else, it wouldn't have been him." Loki replied.

Thor walked over to Phil, who stood his ground. He gently poked at the human, sending him staggering into the back wall.

"Son of Coul...is it really you?"

"Yeah. It's me."

Thor regarded him for a moment. Then without warning, he let out a shout and enveloped the man in a crushing bear hug.

"You are ALIVE! I rejoice to find an ally such as you in a place like this! But what happened? How did you survive? Where have you been? Why..."

"Can't...breathe..."

"My apologies."

Thor let Phil go, and guided him to a seat. "My manners. My new comrade, the last of the Valkaries." The woman nodded. "And Loki you know..."

Phil glared at the projection. "We've met."

Loki shrugged.

"If you want to dredge up the past, Agent Coulson, please, feel free to waste the time I am spending shielding your presence here from our captors." Loki sighed. "I believe your comrades told you 5 turns?"

Thor glared at Loki. "This is a dangerous game you play, brother."

"Yes, but it is keeping us and what remains of Asgard alive. Handing over the Tesseract..."

Phil jumped to his feet. "You gave them the Tesseract?" he yelled.

Loki returned the glare. "It was the only thing that ensured that our people didn't simply go into the pool for Thanos' rituals."

Thor and Valkyrie looked grim. "Are you sure it is Thanos?"

"I put it right into his palm."

Phil looked at Thor. "Not good news, I take it."

"No, Son of Coul, not good news at all."

Loki cocked his head. "And you, Agent. You have been busy. How did you run into the Darkhold?"

All heads turned to look at Phil.

"It's a long story, one, as you noted, I don't have time for."

Thor gazed at Phil quizzically. "I would know where you've been for the past 5 years."

Phil sighed. "I died, was brought back by Fury by alien blood, discovered the Inhumans, saved the world several times, rebuilt SHIELD as the Director, saw it destroyed again, then got kidnapped by these guys." He shrugged. "That's the short version of it."
"Ah. I look forward to the longer version."

Phil sagged back in his seat. "Loki's right. I don't have much time. I don't know whether we can even meet again. What happened to you?"

"Ragnarok."

"The end of Asgard." Phil put his hand on Thor's shoulder. "I am sorry for your losses. You escaped."

"My sister, the goddess of death, took out most of the Asgardians, but we were able to gather the survivors and flee." His eye gleamed at Phil. "That's the short version. We were heading back to Earth when we were captured."

"Dr. Banner and Heimdall were able to flee in the Grandmaster's ship." continued Valkyrie. "They're heading to Earth, to warn the rest."

"Bruce was with you?" asked Phil. "That must have been some road trip."

"Time grows short, brother..." warned Loki.

"It does." Phil sighed. "You lost your eye, I lost my arm. We all seem to have lost our homes." He looked at Thor. "They've captured my team and killing them one by one unless I give up information that would destroy the Earth. They just started with the woman I love. It seems all I have left is to carry on in their memory."

Thor leaned forward. "Son of Coul, I told you once we were allies. That hasn't changed. Would you stand with us against these foes? We may yet see an opportunity for justice to prevail."

"Or vengeance." added Valkyrie. "I am well acquainted with that as well."

Phil nodded. "I can do either. How many do you have?"

Thor looked embarrassed. "Well, Valkyrie, Loki, an ex-gladiator from the Grandmasters' game..."

Phil smiled. "And me."

"And you." Thor grasped Phil's wrist.

"Welcome to the Revengers, Son of Coul."

CODA

The Great One rubbed his temples. This couldn't be a coincidence.

He glared at his two newest prisoners.

"And you say you don't know Phil Coulson."

The human shrugged. "Never heard of him. But I haven't been back home in awhile."

The Master gazed at the two of them.

"But you have heard of the Lord's daughters. Gamora, Nebula. You have been seen with them across the galaxy."
"Well, yeah, but we haven't seen them in quite some time. Nasty break up, went our separate ways. You know how that goes." the human smirked.

His larger green companion looked puzzled.

"Didn't we leave Gamora back on the ship? Told her to look after the rodent and his twigs?"

The human glared at the larger one. "NO...we didn't. We haven't seen her in a month."

Realization dawned on the other's face. "Ohhh...right. We don't know where they are." he parroted.

A pained look crossed the human's face. "I knew I should've taken Rocket."

The Master smiled.

"Escort our newest guests to their room. I believe we will discuss things with them later."

He turned and stalked out the door.

The Great One shook his head.

"First, the Asgardians. Now you lot. Why don't we just call up NOVA or the Avengers and be done with it?"

"I'm sorry, who?"

"Not your business!" The Great One snapped. "Follow me."

As they followed him into the prison, the larger man leaned over.

"We are following her plan, yes?"

The human smiled.

"First impressions are so important, Drax. And the name is Star Lord."

Chapter End Notes

Summary:

To force Phil into revealing the location of the Darkhold, his captors have made him watch Melinda May's execution, the rest of his team to follow. However, due to events from Thor: Ragnarok, Thor and his team have also been captured by Thanos's forces and imprisoned on the same ship, over the objections of The Great One. Prison gossip and favours owed allows Phil to find them, and they join forces. At the end, two new prisoners have been questioned about the whereabouts of Gamora and Nebula. It ends with the addition of Drax and Peter Quill...errr...Star Lord...entering the facility.

All right, first, May is just fine where we left her with Dr. Strange back on Earth. I don't think Phil's captors are going to tell him that his team was rescued quite some time ago. And, might as well say it, his captors are Thanos and the Black Order. Nasty beings, the lot of them. But now with Thor, and some Guardians coming into play, things might not be quite so dire for our favourite Agent Director...
Next up, the failed attempts on Stark's team and Talbot lead to some change in plans for all concerned. And someone at SI hasn't just ripped up his NDA...but is considering setting it on fire. Literally.

Thanks for reading!
Time (Don’t Run Out On Me)

Chapter Summary

The Master of Thanos’ prison is not happy with his Warden. And especially with his inattention to Earthly matters. Someone’s going to pay the price...

Meanwhile someone at Stark Industries isn’t completely...well..at all on board with Tony Stark’s Initatives.

And a Guardian checks in on her commission...

(Note, last call for Thor: Ragnarok Spoilers....)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Somewhere in Space

The skeletal being sat back in the office chair and regarded his subordinate. The newcomer sat in the only other chair and regarded the proceedings with what seemed to be amusement.

The Great One shivered.

"Where is the Darkhold?"

"The human continues to refuse to disclose its location. Perhaps we misjudged his attachements to that Agent."

"Ah."

The Great One burst out, "Please, I beg, a little more time. We can show another execution, minimize the time between sessions, become more..."

"You won't get what you want out of Director Coulson." smirked the other. "I've learned that the hard way."

The skeleton cast its gaze on the two, silencing them both.

"While you were questioning the prisoner, Warden, were you paying any attention as to what was going on on Earth?"

The Great One shook his head.

"No. Why should that matter?"

The newcomer gave a slight laugh. "I'd execute him now for sheer incompetence."

The Great One stiffened.

The skeletal being turned and activated the holoscreen.
"Let's take a look, shall we?"

The screen flickered, and came to life.

---

**Stark Tower**

New York City

Tony Stark poured himself a drink, and smiled at his companions.

"Well, this is going better than anticipated."

Jen Walters looked up from her report.

"I quite agree, Tony. The PR team was able to spin the Watchdog attacks on Cass and Vijay into a brutal assault on innocents out for a quiet weekend."

"And it was," growled Cassandra Clements, running through her force field exercises. "And then you had Bobbi and Hunter stick on us like glue until we got back to the city."

"Ruined the initial intent for the weekend." snarked Vijay Nadeer, locking his hands behind his head.

Tony smirked.

"There'll be other weekends, kids. Pass your Auntie Na...Norm's hand to hand combat tests, and we might even let you out of the Tower again."

Jen sighed. "That was a fail of a save, Tony. And I didn't HEAR that..."

She continued. "Washington was pissed at the attempt on General Talbot. Even the Humans First caucus couldn't defend it. Even though they locked Talbot and his family away from us until the hearings, it allowed Senator Thompson to introduce his bill to add the Watchdogs as domestic terrorists."

Stark grinned. "I actually didn't have to do much arm twisting to get that one passed. After all the attacks, most people were fed up with them. My dinner with the President just turned into mutual ego-stroking."

"But you still gave him the new, unreleased StarkPad." observed Cass.

Tony shrugged. "It was laying around in the shop. Besides, I'm already upgrading the model. And he's thinking about ordering a flat for his staff." He looked at the disbelieving stares. "What, I can't mix saving the world with business?"

Vijay laughed. "You're incorrigible, Tony."

"And don't you forget it." Tony looked up. "Hey, FRIDAY, is #InhumaneAccords still trending?"

"Just below #SokaviaSucks, Mr. Stark."

Jen rolled her eyes. "Crude, Tony."

"But effective, counsellor. FRIDAY, update on the poll numbers, please?"

"Watchdog disapproval rating rose 3 points to 88%. Expressed support for Inhumans up to 64%."
There still seems to be packets of the country resistant to the idea that Inhumans are also people."

Tony frowned. "Yeah. Support for Inhumans in the 18-35 demographic?"

"89%"

"And there we go, folks." Tony spun in his chair. "Well on the way for anti-Inhuman sentiment to be equated with the old and grumpy."

"And still in power." cautioned Cass. "Not even Uncle can move some of those off that particular soapbox." She snickered. "I wish I could be a fly on the wall when he comes out to caucas."

Vijay lifted his eyebrows. "Think I could be persuaded on lifting the feeds when it happens." He grinned up at Cass. "You got any ideas?"

"I can think of a few..."

"Enough! I'm the only one in this room allowed to proposition. And all of you terrify me, one way or another."

Jen smacked Tony across the back of his head.

"Case in point. So back to business. What do you think of Marketing's idea?"

Cass smiled. "I like it. So does the Inhumans Alliance. It's a shared experience, especially when you add in television and streaming. Good way to bond."

Tony added, "I want to add in simulcasting at movie theatres as well. Make them mini-outposts."

Cass frowned a little. "Good idea, but Inhumans still might not go for being that open yet, especially in those packets of the country where they're not as accepted. It makes us vulnerable."

"We can work something out. Maybe fly in the SI Inhumans. We have time to figure this out..."

---

**Space**

The Great One swallowed nervously.

"So, the Iron Man, and his considerable influence is now personally involved in the Inhuman cause. And they think they have time. Why do you think that is, Warden?"

Even the newcomer looked nervous.

Silence.

"Let's look again, shall we?"

---

**US Heartland**

The head of the Watchdog cell was uneasy. Their numbers had been dwindling recently, as "true believers" decided they didn't want to be "terrorists", and stopped coming. Others had been arrested, jailed separately in different states, just for attempting to purify the area. And they were now being charged with hate crimes? What was this country coming to?
He stepped out of the van into the deserted parking lot. They had heard rumors that Inhumans had been sheltering out here in this abandoned warehouse.

All unregistered, had to be. None would be missed.

His squad fanned out behind them.

"Hit them fast, hit them hard, and then we get."

One of them shook their head. "Not like it used to be, squad leader. We could take our time back then."

"No, we move in, move out."

The six proceeded into the building.

Their flashlights lit the area dimly as they proceeded further. No sounds, no movements. A thick layer of dust hung over everything.

He put his gun down.

"Naw, nothing's here. Everyone, move back..."

"Hello?"

He whirled around. A slender female stood about 12 feet from them in the open space.

"Looking for me, guys?"

He grinned.

"You Inhuman?"

She nodded.

"Then oohh, yeah, you'll do." Hoarse chuckles came from his squad.

"I'm so glad you said that." she responded, and lifted her hand.

They had no time to react as a second figure dropped in behind them, and eliminated the first two with a series of well placed kicks and punches. The ones with guns tried to fire, only finding them mysteriously torn out of their hands and flung against the room. They followed next, crashing into the opposite wall, slumping to the floor.

The squad leader turned to find the first figure within arms length. He pulled a knife, snarled, and slashed. She avoided it, crashing down on his elbow, making him howl with pain and dropping his weapon. She punched him quickly in the face and swept him off his feet with an expert kick. He lay motionless on the floor.

The two women came together, joined by a third, who...floated...down from the ceiling.

The last Watchdog left cringed.

"Please.."

They looked at each other and sighed.
"No, we're not going to kill you." the first replied. "But take a message for us to your pack members. Inhumans are a protected species. You hunt them, and you will find us. Or we'll find you. The end result will be the same."

She took a step forward. "Now, get out of here."

The Watchdog fled into the night. The three women listened as the car screeched out into the night.

The second sighed, and pressed a button on her watch.

"Idiots. Even Hydra was more of a challenge." She looked over at the third. "No offence, Wanda."

"None taken, Sharon." Wanda responded, beginning to move the Watchdogs into a pile.

"Wait, I need to scan their prints first." Sharon bent over the group with her phone, scanning the unconscious men's hands. "FRIDAY, you got anything?"

The voice responded, "All have records. Two have outstanding warrants."

The first moved over. "You'll send what's necessary to the police?"

"And adjust the rest, Agent Johnson, of course."

Sharon looked up and smiled. "You know, you can relax, Daisy. FRIDAY and your Fitz has everything covered."

Daisy sighed. "I know. I'm so used to looking over my shoulder. The entire world knows who I am. They figure out I'm working with you guys and everything's ruined."

Wanda looked up. "We're not unknown either, Quake. And we busted out of jail too. If I can trust Stark in this, so can you."

Daisy nodded. "Keeps our minds off of wherever Coulson is. Passes the time anyways. Wonder how the others are doing?"

"Add to that the humanitarian work Starks got the Inhumans doing, maybe this will start swinging things back in our favour."

"I hope so." Daisy replied. "Let's clean up, get a move on..."

---

**Space**

"The Inhumans regain their footing. Coulson's allies have escaped and joined forces with his former comrades. And you and the tools we provided to you on Earth did, what exactly?"

The Great One knew his heartbeats were numbered. His overlord regarded him.

"Do you have any...suggestions...Warden?"

He cast his mind desperately about for something that would save him. He looked at his master.

"They are clearing up the distractions we left for them. Our fleet grows closer to Earth, it is only a
matter of time now. We have passed what would have been the Asgardian warnings, but we have those who would have sounded the alert in our hold.” He swallowed and continued the thought. “We need a way to throw Coulson’s allies back into disarray. Perhaps giving them what they seek would focus their attention on anything but us.”

“Perhaps...” the being nodded. “Burn the tool.”

The Great One sagged in relief, then stilled as a force clutched at his heart.

”He didn’t mean you.” came a soft voice from behind him.

The ex-Warden fell to the ground at their feet.

The two men got up.

”See to it, Asgardian.” The being swept past him.

Loki bowed.

“As you wish, my Lord Ebony...”

Alexandria, Virginia

Secretary of State Thaddeus Ross was not a patient man at the best of times. And what he was doing in this little Spanish Tapas restaurant in Old Alexandria...well...was off the books. But it was for the good of humanity. To keep those things from getting more of a hold.

He looked up as his contact approached.

”You’re late.”

Walter Moir of Stark Industries shrugged as he sat.

“After the attacks on those things and traitors, Secretary, we’re all under greater surveillance. For our own safety, of course.”

Ross snorted.

”And you, more so, because you’re on the One World team.”

”I’m useful.” It was not just a statement, but a warning.

Walter slid a package across the table.

”They’re planning a concert, big names, huge venue, televised, streaming, the works.”

Ross frowned. “Hell of a way to get the public on their side.”

”Especially in their demographics.” Walter smirked a little. “Too bad they didn’t learn a lesson from Cambridge. I mean, what would happen if a group of Inhumans were to show up and show the world what they truly thought of us humans.”

Ross sat back. “Interesting notion. I may know someone interested in putting something together. He’s a bit...hot headed, you might say. Could use some time off for good behaviour.”
Walter stood up. “You do your part, Mr. Secretary, and I’ll do mine. You know where to find me.” He exited the restaurant.

Ross leaned back in his chair, pulled out (not his usual) phone and dialed.

”We need to talk. Time grows short.”

CODA

Sanctum Sanctorum

Stephen Strange had called a halt to the proceedings. He looked over at an exhausted Melinda May.

She shook her head.

“I...can...keep...going....”

Strange shook his head.

”It does us no good for you to burn yourself out, Agent May. We’ll try a different tactic in the morning.”

”I won’t...can’t...sleep anyways.”

Strange nodded sympathetically.

“We have done everything we can on that front, May. Now it’s just a matter of time.”

Strange’s computer screen flashed. He lifted one eyebrow and motioned for May to remain seated.

Cups of tea appeared before the two. Strange pushed some buttons, and the wall flickered in front of them.

The figure of a green skinned woman appeared on the holowall

”Elliot Randolph?”

”Dr. Stephen Strange.”

She checked something to the side. “Yes, you’re on the list.”

”You are?”

”My name is unimportant, although you humans take great stock in them. I am with the group that accepted the Coulson commission.”

”And?”

”Our representatives are in the compound where he is being held.”

May’s heart leapt in her chest.

”However, there are some...complications. Not the least is the presence of the King of Asgard.”

Stange blinked. “Odin?”
"No, Thor. And a great many Asgardians with him."

That is...not...good news. It should not, however, affect the extraction of Phillip Coulson."

"Depends on if Phil’s met up with him." muttered May.

"My fat...His captor’s...minions...have not been kind, Dr. Strange. I must ask, do you know a Melinda May?"

May got up and stood beside Strange. “That’s me.”

The green lady studied her. “My fellow Guardians feel that they may require proof of your life, Agent May. Can you give us a code phrase, something that might mean anything to Agent Coulson?”

May’s mind whirled. Why would Phil think she was dead? And what did she have to convince him otherwise?

Suddenly, she knew. She smiled evilly.

“Tell Phil I’m going to kick his ass for opening the Haig without me.”

The other woman nodded, saluted, and disconnected the feed.

May sagged back into her chair. Strange sipped at his tea.

"Well, that was interesting."

The door opened, and Piper and Wong hurried in.

"Guys, you did it!” exclaimed Piper.

"Guys, you did it!” exclaimed Piper.

Wong reached over and brought up Google Earth.

A bright light shone in Eastern Europe.

Chapter End Notes

All right, welcome back! So many questions? Who’s side is Loki really on? Who is Ross calling? Is May really going to kick Phil’s ass? Who’s to say?

Next up, in honour of Agents of SHIELD Season 5 dropping, we’re going to stay in space with our favourite Agent. It’s time for some Revengering. Or Guarding.

And speaking of AOS S5...with Clark Gregg’s present (check his Twitter account for it) it’s time for me to update my tags. I couldn’t be happier...but this is now officially an AU. Hopefully, you’ll stick with me through this what could’ve been...and maybe was...in a different dimension... ;)
And Then There Were None

Chapter Summary

The Guardians of the Galaxy make their move. They really should be quieter.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Black Order Prison

Phil Coulson's Cell

All things considered, this really wasn't the strangest way Phil Coulson had ever woken up.

He gazed blearly at the small animal in front of him. Last time he had seen one of those on Earth, it had been considerably smaller. Although the gun pointing at him was almost larger that it was.

"You Coulson? Get your ass in gear!" it whispered harshly.

Phil couldn't help it. He lifted his head off the bunk.

"Aren't you a little short for a stormtrooper?"

The raccoon glared back at him.

"What the hell is a stormtrooper?"

12 hours earlier

Phil sat down at his table in the dining area. It was the blue sludge this afternoon, a slight difference than the grey stuff they usually served.

It had been a week since May had died. He had not been able to get away to talk to Thor again, but a time would come. Strangely, his captors had been a bit preoccupied for the past few days, his chief questioner nowhere to be seen. No one had come to drag him to another session. Which meant that Daisy and his team on Earth were still alive, for the moment.

Melinda's...loss...still was fresh. It hurt like hell everytime he thought of her. She was right, when he was trapped in that other dimension. What the hell had they been waiting for? He sighed. Chalk another one up to his "what could've been” list.

Morg was heading over to his table. Phil smiled. Talking with his large bluish friend was good. He helped to keep things in perspective. Sorta like Mack in that way. Kept his mind off of her.

Suddenly. Morg's eyes widened. Not in alarm, but what looked to be respect. He looked over at Phil, and carefully placed a fist over his heart. And then he took a seat next to the Gollum twins.

Phil frowned. What in the world...
A shadow loomed over him. Phil looked up. A green skinned humanoid with strange red tattoos stood over him.

Was this who had warned Morg off? Phil raised his eyebrows.

"How's the grub?" Another man slid in across from him. He seemed to be...human? Mid-30's, Sandy brown hair. New guy, Phil hadn't seen him before.

Phil shrugged. "Tastes like crap, pretty much prison food..."

The green being looked over at the other one. "They serve human excrement in your prisons, Quill? That is truly disgusting."

"No, no...look, sit down, Drax." the man called Quill sighed. "Let's try not to draw attention to ourselves?"

Drax sat down with a thump beside Phil. "You really should eat that."

"What is it with aliens wanting me to eat? Who are you two?"

"The jolly green giant next to you is Drax. My name is Peter Quill, but I'm known throughout the galaxy as Star Lord."

Drax snorted. "Only you, Quill." He glanced at Phil. "You ever hear of him?"

Phil shook his head. "Can't say that I have."

Quill looked disappointed for a moment. "Oh well. Earth tends to be a bit backwards."

"Are you from Earth?" asked Phil.

"Originally. Haven't been back for a while." Quill responded. "We don't have much time. We've been sent to get you out of here, and get you back home. It's going to be soon."

Phil looked down at his plate. "I...appreciate...it. Whoever sent you. But I can't. They have my team on Earth, they've already killed one of them. If I escape, the rest..."

Drax leaned over. "You know, Coulson, you shouldn't believe everything these bastards tell you."

Phil glared. "I saw them taken. I saw May die!" he snapped.

Quill thought for a moment. "Agent Melinda May? The Calvary?"

Phil was silent.

Quill continued. "Yeah, we heard about that. So we asked Gamora, you'll meet her later, to run a check." He smirked a little, then sobered. "Sorry, not funny."

He regarded the older human.

"A woman told us to tell you that she is...'going to kick your ass for opening the Haig without her.'"

Phil's heart stopped. He stared at Quill.

"Did I get that right?"

"Yeah...yeah...you did." Phil swallowed, battling back tears. "She's alive."
"Gamora saw her."

"And that probably means my team is safe too."

"I would guess."

Phil nodded.

"Then yes, Star Lord, I would very much like to get out of here."

"Good" Drax and Quill got up. "One of us will be in touch."

"Wait...there's a group of people, the Asgardians. We need to get them out too."

"Don't worry, Coulson. I got a plan." reassured Quill.

As they walked away, Phil heard the green one say "You do? But your plans are terrible."

"Sounds familiar." Phil thought. "Sounds like home."

---

**Asgarian Cell**

Thor was in deep conversation with Valkrie when his cell door slid open, admitting his younger brother.

"Come in." he said drily.

"As Chief Warden of this hell hole, I am conducting a sweep of this cell." Loki announced, throwing himself on the chair. "I see at least four things here which I will be writing you up for, brother."

Valkyrie smirked. Thor rolled his eyes.

"The thing about being Warden is that I can cover things up." Loki continued. "My predecessor was much too good at ferreting things out. I foresee a great deal of unrest in my immediate future."

He made a hand motion. "That should keep the eyes and ears out of here. They're hearing me ream you out for your slovenly behaviour."

Thor nodded.

"I like your plan not, brother."

Loki sighed. "Is it because you don't think it will work, or because you don't trust me to go over to Thanos once you're gone?"

Thor glowered at him.

"Both. Give me one good reason to trust you."

Loki glared at him.

"How about the fact I led Korg and the others to you, rescuing all our people left from certain doom and destruction?"

Valkyrie shrugged.
"You have to give him that, my Lord."

Loki looked Thor in his eye.

"I was the God of Mischief, and there are things I have done that I cannot take back. Although some seem to have rebounded on me."

"The Son of Coul."

"Yes, him. But there are some things that are too evil for me to stand. And Thanos getting his hands on the remainder of the Infinity Stones is one of them." Loki paused. "He has the Power Stone, Thor."

"Damn it. If I had known..."

"We still would have had to give up the Tesseract to save our people." Loki replied. "But I would guess that would mean NOVA will not be coming to Earth's aid."

"Our ally pool shrinks quickly." muttered Thor.

"Which is why you have to go with the human to Earth." chimed in Valkyrie. "Loki will keep the rest of the Asgardians as safe as he can in his new position."

"And I am the only one who can cover for your disappearances. Some slight of hand, some illusion." He flickered, and Phil Coulson sat in front of him.

"Hi, I'm from the Strategic Homeland blah blah blah blah. Duty flows through my veins. I would NEVER betray my country, my planet, and, most importantly, my Captain. Do your WORST!" he exclaimed.

"Loki..." Thor huffed. Phil changed back, and Loki smirked.

"I think I have him pretty down pat."

"Besides," Valkyrie said, "I'll be staying behind to HELP Loki." She smiled. "I think we've reached an understanding, your brother and I."

"The same understanding you and Banner came to?" asked Thor.

"Quite." ground out Loki.

"Then I know I leave you and ours in capable hands." grinned the King of Asgard.

"Then be ready." Loki stood up, walked over, and offered Thor his hand. Surprised, Thor grasped it.

"The fate of the Cosmos may rest in your hands, Thor. May the gods help us."

Loki quickly turned and left.

Present Time

Phil followed the raccoon through the darkened corridors. It was a snarky little thing. Phil decided he sorta liked it.

The raccoon held up his paw. Phil stopped.
"That arm of yours..."

"Yes?"

"I'm...gonna need it."

Phil changed his mind.

"Hell, no."

The animal shrugged.

" Couldn't hurt to ask."

They continued down towards the Asgardian cell block.

"What does it do?" it asked.

"This arm? Nothing."

"Really."

"I thought I was going to jail, which I point out that I did, and being down an appendage would not be a good thing."

The raccoon snorted.

"I heard it had a force shield, laser beams, techno scanners and wrenches..."

"Wrenches? Why does everyone I meet think I'm Inspector Gadget?"

"Who's he? And can I have his arm?"

Phil sighed. This thing was worse than Hunter.

Outside Thor's cell, Drax and Quill, with another green skinned woman and a...tree (?) awaited the pair.

"Who's minding the ship?" the animal demanded.

"I am Groot."

"Yeah, this is him."

"You're looking a lot more like your pictures, Agent Coulson." Quill grinned.

"Having a little hope can do wonders for a man." Phil returned.

The door opened, and Thor stepped out.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked.

The others smirked back at him.

"We're the Guardians of the Galaxy, my Lord Thor. And you are needed on Earth." responded the green woman.
"My comrade, Son of Coul?"

"Right behind you, Odinson."

Thor turned, nodded, and looked around.

"Then let us be away. Loki can't cover for us forever."

"This way."

As the group headed toward the landing bay, Phil heard Drax ask, "Son of Cool? He looks pretty lame to me."

"No, Drax, see, in a place called Norway..."

"I am Groot!"

"Yeah, I get his point..."

Sparks crackled. "The Son of Coul is a honorable warrior, and fought many a glorious battle on Earth with the forces of SHIELD. You WILL give him his proper respect, or you will deal with me!"

"All right, everyone be QUIET!"

Phil sighed. This was gonna be a long trip.

Once everyone was on board, the Milano sped off into the night.

CODA

Ebony Maw regarded the ship speeding off through the night. It may have been cloaked, but there was very little that escaped his notice.

"Are they off?" the short, stumpy being asked behind him.

He nodded.

"Is that wise?"

The skeleton glowered at the ship.

"It makes no difference. It is already too late for Earth. What are a few bugs more or less? This way, we crush them all at the same time."

He turned to his teammate.

"Let them think they have won this round. It will make it all that more amusing for us when they find the Trickster has been himself tricked."

Maw waved his hand and the shutters closed.

Chapter End Notes
The last jailbreak (in honour of the Season 5 premier of Agents of SHIELD) ! And yes, some dialogue here lifted from S501...that Inspector Gadget reference was too good to pass up. Credit to writers, cast & crew.

I have been holding onto some of this dialogue since I started writing this...glad I was finally able to share with all of you!

While I have credit on my mind....hoo boy...that Infinity War trailer. While Phil is STILL missing from it :( it definitely rocked me. I may/ may not choose to incorporate images from it if it fits my storyline, and I’ll try to credit it if it does. Like Thor meeting the Guardians above. For the most part, those events are still in our heroes future.

We’re going to leave the Milano and head back to Earth...it’s time for our Earthly heroes to go after the mysterious Darkhold Reader. And another Inhuman leaves the Raft. On an escorted pass...
Our Lives Yet to Live

Chapter Summary

Several of the combined team take a short break to think about their next moves...

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry, it's been a while. To recap this story:

Key Players current location:

Team Cap/Agents of SHIELD - Currently in hiding in New Avengers Mansion, taking on Watchdog cells
Team Stark, Huntingbird, Vijay Nadeer and Cassandra Clements - Stark Industries, working on the "One World, One People" project rehabilitating the Inhumans public image and working towards their legal reintegration into society.
Dr. Strange, Agent Piper - Sanctum Sanctorum, NYC - Along with Agent May, they've just discovered the location of the last person on Earth to read the Darkhold, and have been contacted by the...
Guardians of the Galaxy who have rescued Thor & Phil Coulson - On the Milano heading back to Earth
Loki & Valkyrie - Black Order prison ship with the remaining Asgardians
Bruce Bannner & Heimdall - unknown, presumably heading to Earth

Reminder, check Agents of SHIELD Season 5 at the door. (With deepest respect to their writers...Oh hell NO, #CoulsonLives)

Now, on with our story..

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

New Avengers Compound

1. Focus

Inhale.

Hold.

Exhale.

"You found him."

"We did. Now focus."
"We need to move, May."

"We're not standing still, Daisy."

"I don't mean the Tai Chi."

Glare.

"Focus, right."

Inhale.

Hold.

Exhale.

"I want his head, May."

Melinda May dropped her position and looked over at her younger teammate. She sighed.

Daisy Johnson followed suit and took a seat against the wall, tossing a water bottle to May.

"We need to be careful, Daisy. We'll get Ivanov, but we need to do it right." May permitted herself a small smirk. "There's more than just us involved now. More firepower, at least."

Daisy nodded, but said nothing. May's eyes narrowed. She sat down next to her.

"What's really the matter, Daisy?"

"You know, you've really come a long way. There was a time when you said you didn't want to know what we were all feeling."

"No, I said I wasn't the person that people told their feelings too. That was before I got locked into my head for months in a Hydra dreamscape."

Daisy closed her eyes.

"Spill, Johnson."

"What happens next, May? Sure, we've found Ivanov, and let's say we take him down. But then what? We're still wanted by every government on the planet. SHIELD doesn't exist anymore. And there is no way I'm signing those Accords. Which means I'm always going to be on the run."

May wrapped her arm around Daisy's shoulders. Daisy leaned into the hug.

"I don't know, Daisy, wish I did. We've been here before, you know. 5 years ago, when this all
started. You erased us from the system, we became a terrorist organization, Talbot hunted us."

Daisy huffed. "That wasn't hunting..."

"Yeah, we're back where we started. But we have one strength we didn't have before, back then. We truly have each other now. You, me, Coulson, Fitz, Simmons, Mack, Yo-Yo. We're more than a team now. We're a family. That might be what's important in the end."

May stood back up. "Besides, Coulson's still out there. They're bringing him home. He's got a plan, he always does. We just need to be ready to back it when he gets here. And on that note..."

May lifted an eyebrow. Daisy smiled and got back to her feet.

_Inhale._

_Hold._

_Exhale._

_Focus._

2. Loyalty

It was a beautiful day outside the mansion. Wanda Maximoff let her gaze trail out over the water. It was calming out here, just her, the blue sky, the gentle laps of the waves on the lakeshore. The chirping of the birds....who had fallen silent.

"I wondered how long it would take you to find me, Viz."

Vision glided to her side.

"How did you know it was me?"

"I couldn't hear you. I can hear the rest. I took some training in Wakanda."

"Ah."

They remained silent for a while. Eventually the songbirds began to chirp at each other again, and Wanda smiled.

"I wanted to talk to you," said Vision quietly. "Before whatever happens next."

Wanda stilled, becoming tense. Then she nodded for him to continue.

"After the airport, when I handed you over to them, I...didn't know, Wanda. They assured me they would treat you humanely."

"They didn't."

"I know that now. I promise you, I never would have..."
"Did you see me, Vision?" Wanda demanded.

"No, I was too busy with Colonel Rhodes, and then with Tony after his fight in Siberia."

"Did you even think to look for me?"

"FRIDAY had yet to hack into the Raft's security feeds. We were assuming that Secretary Ross was telling the truth, we had no cause..."

"And the Secretary has such a good track record with those with powers. I'm sure that Dr. Banner would be a good character reference for him."

Vision winced.

"Have you viewed the footage? Of how they forced me into those restraints. What they did while I was in them? What they made the rest of my team watch?"

"No. What Tony described was enough for me. I was coming for you, Wanda, but Rogers broke you out before we accessed the plans."

"I see."

Wanda collected herself, staring out over the water.

"I did some research, while in Wakanda. T'Challa's friend helped me. No rules of law applied on the Raft. I guess that the Geneva Convention doesn't apply to people like me. Or from what Daisy and Elena described, people like us."

She turned to Vision.

"What are you looking for, right now?"

He hesitated. "Forgiveness?"

She looked at him.

"Knowing what you know now, if we were caught, would you turn me over to them?"

"Of course not!"

"No matter what I did, Viz? What if it were just you and me against the ATCU? Against Tony?"

Vision held her gaze.

"I would fight with you. I would fight for you. And if you were ever taken from m..us...again, I would come for you. Immediately."

"No matter what?"

"No matter what."

Wanda turned her focus back over the lake.
"That's a start."

3. Commitment

Jemma Simmons entered the lab. It, as usual, was empty, except for a man's slight frame stooped over his latest invention.

She sighed, and took the seat next to him.

"You missed lunch again."

Leo Fitz raised his head and stared at the clock.

"Sorry, Jem. I lost track."

Simmons slid her arms around her partner. Fitz tensed, then relaxed a bit.

"Forgot to set your alarm?"

"Yeah."

"You're not very good at lying, Fitz."

"Maybe you're just better at catching it. From when you were that Special Director."

"Seems like a lifetime ago."

"More than one."

"Is that what this is about?" Simmons asked. "The Framework?"

Fitz said nothing.

"That was not your fault, Fitz. That was on that thing and Ivanov."

"I was a monster, Jemma."

"That was not you, Fitz. They took away..."

"That was what I could have been, Jemma. What I could still be." Fitz looked at his lover. "If something happened to you, Jems, I could be that again. Easily."

"But you won't, there won't be a need. I'm here, and I'm not going anywhere."

Fitz shook his head. "I wish I could believe that. Some days, I think I was right, Jemma. We're cursed."

Jemma whapped Fitz across the back of the head. He whipped his body around, rubbing the affected area.
"Don't you **EVER** say that again, Leopold Fitz! We are NOT cursed. With everything you and I have fought through, all the Nazis and aliens and other planets, all the times we thought the world was ending...we are stronger today than the day we met back at the Academy."

"How can you love me after what I've done?"

"You are a good man, Leo Fitz. Only a good man would keep questioning what he has done. True, it's getting slightly obsessive, but that is because you're here, alone, all the time. You can stop your penance, Fitz. You hated it when Coulson stepped down, but..."

"Now I'm doing it too." Fitz gave a weak laugh. "Like father, like son?"

Jemma hugged him. "They say friends are the family we pick. You could do worse than picking Coulson if you wanted another Da.." she chuckled.

She tugged on her love's arms. Fitz got out of his chair.

"Come upstairs, Fitz. I'll make you your sandwich. Then...maybe I can think of how you might return the favour?" She fluttered her eyelashes, and Fitz laughed, a little stronger this time.

"Before Dad gets home?"

The two scientists left the lab, holding hands.

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4. Pathfinding

Steve Rogers studied the Russian coast line, looking for reported oil rigging accidents. Then he'd start looking for the unreported ones using Tony's satellite array. It would give them a better idea of Ivanov's boltholes, where he would run to once they struck first.

It was good to cover all the bases.

He heard the door slide open behind him.

"You know," the voice drawled, "if you were looking for a vacation spot, I wouldn't recommend Northern Russia."

Steve tensed, and looked back at a deceptively casual Tony Stark.

"Or maybe you spent too much time in Wakanda? Too hot for me. Give me a nice tropic breeze somewhere..."

Steve rolled his eyes.

"Trying to track down Ivanov's holdings. Thought you were in New York, Stark."

"Checking my properties personally is a sign of a good landlord, Rogers. It helps me keep an eye out for trouble."

Tony narrowed his eyes at the map.
"Trouble, Tony?"

"Yeah...like Watchdogs going off the grid. Stories of groups of powered people taking them out group by group." He crossed his arms and looked at Steve. "You're getting noticed, and not in a good way."

"Each of those groups had criminal records..."

"Oh, I agree, sending them behind bars, cleaning up the streets, good things all. It's just when I get suspicious calls from Ross after another group is found hanging by their ankles, or ducking the press hounds J Cubed sends my way, I need to know what story to tell them."

"Tell them the truth, you know nothing about it."

"Tried, they don't believe me. And what am I going to tell them when you hit that, Steve?" Tony pointed at the map. "That's not exactly small potatoes there. That is going to get me pulled into DC if not back to the UN to cover your ass. Again."

"What would you have me do, Tony, sit here and do nothing?" Steve glared at Tony. "That Darkhold fellow needs to be taken out of play. NOW! Phil is still off world. We can't wait for his return."

"If we move too quickly, we're going to miss something. And whatever that is could blow up in our faces. I thought you were a better strategist than that."

"If we move too slowly, then he builds up his defences inside of Mother Russia, and the explosions wind up even bigger. If we move now, when he still thinks he's hidden..."

"That's NOT your call to make, Captain!"

"Neither is it yours, Iron Man."

The two men glared at each other.

"Have you cleared this with Hill?"

"Not yet, but I was going to. We're still getting data. And holding back Phil's team. When May came back with his location, they all would've piled into the next plane if I'd have let them." Steve rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm not entirely stupid, Stark. Natasha's the only one on the ground right now."

"Right." Tony sighed. "Look, our Senator still has legislation in play, the One World concert coming up. I'm just saying that an explosion like that is going to cause is going ruin a lot of things for a lot of people."

"I think your Sokavia Accords did that first."

"I am trying to clean up that mess, and I'd appreciate a little help from you guys while I do it!" Tony snapped.

"And I have a number of Inhumans here who would appreciate a little less talking, and someone actually stopping their people from getting killed out of hand and I have others who would like to stop the end of the world, and they may have a point!"
"FINE! Just let me know this shit-show is going to happen so that I can have my PR team ready to explain why we have rogue Enhanced and Inhumans running around Russia and how that helps world security." Tony sniped out.

"If you think that, why did you bring us back and why are we still here?" Steve returned.

"Because of Agent Coulson. What he set into play. Or stumbled into. Still is."

Tony made a throwing motion at the screen. The map of Russia scrambled for a bit, then adjusted. Blue pins covered the map.

Steve looked at it.

"Ivanov?"

"Yep. I had FRIDAY pull it together."

"Why didn't you say something?"

"Because this, apparently, is how we work. Always have since Loki."

The two men continued to look at the map.

Tony sighed.

"Look, I know you need to do this. Just...we need to work together. Can you trust me to have your back?"

"Do you trust me to have yours?"

"Touche."

"Truce, at least?"

"Yeah...that'd be nice..."

__________________________________________________________________________

**The Raft**

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**5. Atonement**

The buzzer sounded, and they brought the thing in well-chained, hands encased. It took its place on the other side of the table.

Secretary Thaddeus Ross finished his Bugle article in silence. He neatly folded the paper and looked at the Inhuman.

"You failed. They escaped. And now they are raising six different kinds of hell across the United States."

JT James kept his stare somewhere in the middle of the table.
"Do you have anything to say?"

It shook its head. After the other Inhumans’ escape, it had been hard to bury Steve Rogers’ intervention. Ross had left word to the other guards to ensure that James experienced every iota of humiliation that had been brought on to them. He was relatively pleased to see this order had been complied with enthusiastically.

He studied the thing for a while longer.

"I’m putting together a team, James. One that can show the rest of the world what your kind are really like. What do you think? Are you ready to show your true colours?"

The thing lifted its head, looked Ross in the eye. Its casings glowed a sullen red.

"Yeah, I bet you are. You lot are all the same, no matter what that sympathizer Stark says. Just a different type of Banner, ready to destroy, take over our rightful place."

"I hear your daughter feels differently."

""I heard she prefers the freak to her own flesh and bloo...Ufff..."

Ross shook out his fist. It stung from punching the freak. How dare he have Betty’s name in its mouth? He had failed his daughter letting Banner go free. As soon as that green menace showed his face that would be rectified.

"Are you in?" he asked curtly.

The thing met his gaze. "If it’s a choice between here and your squad, mate, I’m in with bells on."

Ross nodded, then the Bugle in front of it.

"Read up on it."

The front page showed a latest teen pop star, flanked by Tony Stark and Vijay Nadeer. The headline read:

"One World, One People: One Night Only."

CODA

Outer Space

The Milano looked big enough from the outside, but with 8 or so humanoids in residence, it got a bit...snug at times.

"Cool ship," Phil thought. "But she's no Millennium Falcon."

He sighed, looking out the window into space. Quill (no, he was NOT going to call the kid Star Lord, it was a slip of the tongue) had assured him they were getting back to Earth as fast as they could. But they had to fly under the Black Order's radar, otherwise they'd all wind up back in the cells.

He wanted to get back home. There were just too many things he had left undone, too many things left to say. And if he was being completely honest with himself, he wanted to see Melinda again, touch her, make sure she was fine. And then, well, it was time to come clean. With Thor here, it was
now a certainty that the rest of the Avengers team would be notified. There would be some explaining to do. To everyone.

Phil turned from the window and headed towards the galley area. He wondered who Thor would side with when they reached Earth - Stark or Rogers. From what they had escaped, Phil knew they would have to reunite the team somehow before it was too late.

With whatever time he had left.

He passed by the insect woman, briefly brushing against her hand.

"Excuse me."

Phil continued onward, lost in thought.

He didn't see Mantis freeze in place, a look of sheer terror passing over her face. She swallowed hard. Turning left, she let herself into the living quarters.

The inhabitant didn't look up.

"Ugly one, what do you want?"

"Drax...something is very wrong with the son of Coul."

Chapter End Notes

So, uh, hi. If you’ve come back after my...extended hiatus...I am extremely grateful. I’ll try not let as much time slip by going forward.

Yes, I did borrow the title from Shield 5x12 “The Real Deal” - credit to writers cast and crew for that. One other MCU point, regretfully, this will be non-Black Panther compliant. Sorry, I did not leave enough wiggle room in the timeline at the beginning to deal with that amazing story. Maybe the ending...we’ll see.

Just trying to ease everyone back into the story here. Next chapter: the Guardians don’t like it when Mantis is scared. Phil’s explanations are probably going to have to come sooner than later, if he wants to make it back to Melinda and the rest.

And the plot proceeds on Earth, with time ticking down for everyone. After all, there is a mad god on the way...
#CoulsonLives?

Chapter Summary

There's a lot of people who want Phil Coulson dead.

And they're on the Milano...

(aka The DEAL)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Milano, Outer Space

The irony of the situation wasn’t lost on Phil Coulson.

“Youn find this funny, Coulson?” demanded Gamora.

He gave her one of his best self-depreciating smirks.

”Not really. I’m just thinking that the last time I was the one threatening to throw the Rider off my ship...”

Looking at the rest of the Guardians, weapons drawn, who were ranged protectively in front of Mantis (and between him and Thor), Phil raised his hands in what he hoped was a non-threatening manner.

”Let me get this straight.” he said politely. “Mantis there is an empath. And when she touched me down in the galley, she felt...”

”Such horrible, horrible anger. A consuming need for vengeance. And cold....”

”Cold...” mused Phil. “That is...interesting.” He looked at Mantis, who did her best to hide behind Drax. “I am sorry, Mantis. I never would want to inflict that on another being, let alone my rescuers.”

He scratched his head, and smiled ruefully at Thor.

”Perhaps, though, I have a better understanding of Dr. Banner. I was hoping to have the chance to discuss this with him but...”

Phil shrugged in a what-can-you-do manner.

“What did Mantis sense?” asked Quill.

”I’m not sure if any of you have heard of the being known as Ghost Rider?” Getting blank looks, he continued, “Demonic humanoid, has skeletal head of fire?”

Thor looked wary.

“I have heard of a demon like that. Zarathos?”
"I don’t know its name. Possibly?"

"Possibly.” repeated Thor flatly. “Tell me, Son of Coul, did you enter into a pact with it? Of your own free will?”

Phil had been hoping he would have this conversation later. Much later.

"Yes.”

Thor pushed past Quill and Rocket.

"Hey, watch it you big...”

"I am Groot!”

"Yeah, you’ve got better manners...”

Thor placed his hand over a large button. Everyone stilled.

"You will explain to me why you would do such a thing. Or it will be by my hand your form will be sucked out of this vessel. Out of respect for the one whose body you wear.”

"I’m not dead, Thor Odinson.”

"I saw you fall, five years ago. My brother dealt you a mortal wound.”

"And you said you had sibling issues.” muttered Quill to Gamora.

"Wait, Thor,” said Phil rubbing his forehead. “That’s a...different...story. Let me explain, and if, at the end, you still want to push that button, I won’t stop you.”

He sighed.

"It’ll probably be a faster way to go...”

Several months earlier

The Quinjet

AIDA was winning.

Phil put his head in his hands and swore. That thrice damned robot had ripped a hole between the realities and become a super powered Pinocchio. And there was nothing any of them could do to stop it.

They couldn’t kill it. It wouldn’t let Reyes get close to it. Every time he tried, it would just transport again. He was going to lose one of his team members; it would probably try to home in on Simmons next. Eventually AIDA would corner her. Or Fitz. Or...

"Sir.” Jemma stood over him. “Have you eaten?”

Phil shook his head. The scientist passed him an energy bar.

"Not quite the steak and kale you made for me when I was in HYDRA.”

He snorted. “I still can’t believe that was all you had in that fridge. I’d hate to see what’s in your
apartment.”

"So would I...probably all moldy and out of date. Rank as all...”

She sat beside the older man.

"It’s only a matter of time, isn’t it, Sir?" She swallowed. “Do you think Piper made it?”

"There’s always a way, Jemma. We just haven’t seen it yet.”

She nodded.

“Four years ago, if you told me that I’d be here, after escaping an evil VR, fighting off evil robots to stop the end of the world because of a magical book...I would have said you were crazy.”

Phil chuckled. “I remember you and Fitz stepping on board. God, you were young and innocent. Whoever thought you two would become such badasses?”

"There was a pool on how long we would last. 3 months?”

"We bet on anything...” Phil smiled at the memory, finishing up the bar. “SHIELD fell before I could collect.”

“What? What did you wager, Sir?” Jemma sounded a bit hurt.

Phil looked her in the eyes.

"I bet that you wouldn’t quit. And you haven’t disappointed me yet, Special Director Simmons.”

She flushed. “Thank you. You know, even if we die today, I wouldn’t trade places with the old me if I could.”

Phil patted her shoulder, and then froze.

Trade places.

Trading places.

He stared at Jemma.

"Sir...Coulson...you’ve got something?” She asked hopefully.

"One hell of a Hail Mary.”

Jemma gaped. Did Coulson just swear?

"Simmons, would you like to shoot that robot for me?”

"Shoot...but...”

Phil glared at her.

"It would be my absolute pleasure, Sir.”

"Good. Gather everyone in the hanger.”

As Simmons left, Phil offered up a desperate prayer to a God he wasn't sure existed anymore.
Against demons from Hell, they could use all the help they could get.

_Coulson: This thing in you is it as desperate to destroy Aida as we are?_

_Robbie: Absolutely._

_Coulson: Then I have an idea that might solve all our problems. ... We'll have to go back to base._

_May: That's a terrible idea._

_Daisy: I agree. The military, Aida, more LMDs are probably waiting for us._

_Phil: Maybe, but I'm tired of hiding. Let's take the fight back home._

_Agents of SHIELD 4x22 - "World's End"

---

**SHIELD Playground Ruins**

_Flick. Flick. Flick._

“Thanks for coming, Mr. Reyes.”

"Coulson.” Robbie was wary.

"We don’t have much time.”

"You and the rest, maybe. The Rider wants her destroyed. No matter what happens here, we’ll track her down.”

Phil nodded. “What if I told you there was a way to save them all. Daisy and the rest.”

Robbie narrowed his eyes.

“Go on.”

"Mack told me that the Rider jumped to him, back when we were all trapped in between. That you were able to pull him back.”

"Yeah. Mack didn't make the choice willingly. And he's too good of a man to be the Rider. Why?”

Phil swallowed. It was now or never.

"I'm not a good man, Mr. Reyes. I’ve done things in my life that I regret, can’t take back, but I’d do all over again, if given the choice. Most of the time, those things saved the world. But not always.

“I need the Rider.”

Robbie stared at him in horror.

“You are out of your fucking mind, Coulson.”

"Yeah, I’ve heard that a lot. Got the blue soap to prove it. Smells like peppermint.”

"Soap? I...err...No!”
I agree. We made a deal, Robbie Reyes.

Phil looked at him keenly.

“You can talk to him, can’t you?”

At Robbie’s sharp nod, Phil continued, “Let me talk to him? Please?”

Robbie said nothing. He bowed his head.

Phil tried again.

“Robbie, we are running out of time. Neither one of us can defeat AIDA separately. The hole between the universes is only growing. And if she leaves with the Darkhold, it will be the end of everything. Evil will win here.”

Phil turned away. He had to reach him.

“I took an oath. To serve when everything else fails. To be humanity’s last line of defence. To be...”

The Shield.

Phil turned back around. The flaming skeletal face studied him. The glowing eyes seemed to penetrate into Phil’s soul.

You are interesting, Director Coulson.

“Just Agent...”

That’s not what you are in your heart. The last true oath keeper. But also the one who needs to be in charge. Making the decisions. Pulling the strings.

“Because no one is better at it than I. No one has SHIELD’s best interests more at heart.”

Director Fury’s legacy. To rebuild SHIELD. The right way. Tell me, Director Coulson, standing here, your base in ashes, your legacy unknown or destroyed, did you succeed?

“I made mistakes. But I believe SHIELD can rise again. Must rise again.” He looked at the being.

“There's an idea, a symbol that must continue no matter what.”

Even without you?

There was a deathly silence.

How do I know that this is not another mistake?

“Trust me?”

Robbie Reyes does. He barely knows you, but he does.

It considered Phil for a moment.

Take my hand, Director.

Without hesitation, Phil put his hand in the Rider’s. A wave of agony swept through him, and only the Rider’s hand held him up. Fire, ice engulfed him as his best and worst decisions played out in
front of him.

It lasted forever. It took no time at all.

The Rider let go of his hand. Phil fell to his knees in front of him.

**What do you want?**

“To stop AIDA. Save the world.”

**What do YOU want?**

“To save my team. Save Daisy. Save Melinda. The rest.”

**Not yourself?**

“I would gladly trade my life for theirs.”

**I believe you.**

A heartbeat.

*Understand what you are asking, Phil Coulson. My Aspect cannot be put on and taken off like a coat. Also, I have a deal with Robbie Reyes. He is an ideal host - young, strong, smart. I do not wish to give this up. It would mean his death.*

*If I enter you, even temporarily, we are bound. There will always be a piece of your soul that is mine. You would always be a Rider.*

*But there can only be one Rider in every dimension. You and Reyes...only one of you can survive in the end. And, as I said, I have made my deal.*

*I can give you this. At the end of our time, Robbie can take the Darkhold to another dimension. We do not intend to use it, just to make sure no one else ever does. Call it my payment. We can remain there for a time. But, eventually, we must return to this Earth.*

“And Robbie must collect me.”

*Kill you, Coulson. You are...shielded...from that sort of interference.*

“How long?”

*No way of knowing. It may be a few hours. You may live out the rest of your life.*

Phil got to his feet.

“I accept.”

**Then let us begin.**

---

*AIDA: Agent Coulson. Do you really think you can stop me from taking the Darkhold?*

*Coulson: I don't know. I figure it's worth a shot.*
AIDA: There's only one person who might be able to stop me, and he isn't here.

Coulson: Yeah, see, that's where I think you might be missing the point. I know you've only been human for a little while, but there's a basic human concept you really need to learn. It's called teamwork.

[Gunshots] [Gasps]

AIDA: Your trap failed. Your weapon can't stop me.

Simmons: I know. I just really wanted to do that.

Coulson: Now it's my turn.

AIDA: Don't you get it? You can't kill me.

Coulson: Maybe not. But I'm pretty sure he can.

[Coulson turns into Ghost Rider]

Agents of SHIELD 4x22 "World's End"

Present day

The Milano

It was so quiet, you could hear a pin drop in the ship. Mantis' face was streaked with tears. Drax was dabbing at his eyes. Even Gamora appeared moved.

Coulson swallowed.

"Robbie wasn't present for our conversation. He was...fishing...for information on our deal afterwards. I pretended that he knew, asked that he keep it from the others. I'm not sure the Rider is going to tell him. But I don't have time to worry about that now."

"He will be forced to kill you?" asked Thor.

"If you don't first." Phil responded, nodding at the button.

Thor looked at his hand, and quickly stepped away from the wall. Everyone sighed.

"How do we know we can trust him?" asked Rocket.

"We can." said Mantis quickly. "I could tell a lie." She looked at Coulson. "Is there any way you might be saved?"

"He could kill this Reyes." answered Gamora.

"Not an option." responded Phil.

"So you are just going to lay down and die?" Drax sneered.

"No. I am going to enjoy the time I have left. I am going to continue to uphold my oath. To be the last line of defence for humanity."

"To...guard..." responded Quill thoughtfully.
"Besides," snarked Rocket. "with Thanos and the Black Order coming our way, maybe it's for the best. I mean, if you could choose a being with those powers or an old, injured, plain washed up hum...OWWW!"

He glared up at Groot, who had picked him up by his tail.

"I am Groot!" he snapped back.

Rocket was quiet. "That was low, Groot."

Groot put the raccoon back down.

"It's OK, Groot." said Phil. "It's a thought that has crossed my mind several times."

"Groot said that any man who would lay down his life for his friends deserves utmost respect and honor, and he could see why your friends followed you. He also pointed out that the beast is also approaching the end of his natural life span, and wonders if he too is an old washed up being, and should be replaced by a younger version."

Phil choked, and all heads swiveled to look at Thor.

"What? All Asgardians have the All-Speak."

As the Guardians filed out of the hanger, Thor approached Phil.

"Thank you. For not pushing the button."

"The thought never crossed my mind, Son of Coul."

"Are you telling an untruth, Thor Odinson?"

Thor's eye twinkled.

"Spending time with Stark and Barton perhaps has broadened my horizons. Especially in this game you Midgardians call Poker."

"Yeah, that would do it."

"Perhaps we could play again, once we reach Earth."

Phil froze.

"Thor, much has changed since you left....we should talk."

"We should Son of Coul. I would hear about how you cheated death, and your adventures for the past five years."

"Uhh..you know what? I bet Quill would love to learn about Poker."

As the two left, Thor thought about Coulson's choices. Many options were lost in the destruction of Asgard. Many others a Midgardian could not survive.

There had to be a way to save his friend. He had not found Phil Coulson to lose him again.

Coulson: "I don't envy you."
Robbie: "Funny. I was going to say the same to you.

Agents of SHIELD 4x22 "World's End"

Chapter End Notes

Quotes used in this chapter are taken from Agents of SHIELD 4x22 “World’s End” and 5x12 “The Real Deal”. All credit to the writers, cast and crew.

So, that is my version of Coulson’s deal with Ghost Rider. No GH-325 was harmed in the making of this chapter. However, as this and other chapters make clear, Phil is in mortal peril when Robbie comes back. (To halt the Rider vs. Thor arguments, The Rider is too fast for any “champions”. Besides, then Phil becomes the Rider full time. With a cranky demon. Not my idea of eternity...)

Anyone want to bet that he didn’t talk to his teammates before he got taken to space? (Guess some things never change)

Next up - there’s a lot of people on Earth who want Phil Coulson dead. We’ll head back there next.
Chapter Summary

Everyone has a weak spot. Anton Ivanov thinks he’s found those for the remaining Agents of SHIELD left standing.

He might have made one crucial miscalculation...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Eastern Europe

"Well, this could be a problem."

Anton Ivanov looked through the bell jar at his remaining fingers. Three identical replicas gazed stonily back at him.

"You are certain that it's them?"

"Yes, Superior." one of them replied. "The Agents that escaped us in the spring have materialized in the United States."

"And there is visual confirmation?"

"Not as of yet." the second admitted. "But we have analyzed the Watchdog's incident reports. When anyone was left to submit them. The attacking methods, their planning, the way they moved, talked, worked with each other. At least one of Coulson's group is part of those taking out the Watchdog cells."

"And you have reported this to our allies in Washington?"

"Their influence is on the wane at the moment. The good Senator Thompson, supported by Tony Stark, jumped on the attempts on the things and Talbot, gained allies, and is pushing their...agenda...through. The way things are now, it will be lucky if anyone from the Humans First caucus is reelected in the fall. They won't move unless we hand them everything in a nice tidy package ready for CNN and Fox."

"They've been trained well by that damned Coulson. Tony Stark is no fool, either. He's got the gadgets that'll make sure they won't leave any traces behind them." Ivanoff mused. "Unless..."

All three Ivanov's stiffened, coming to the original's conclusion.

The third stood.

"I'll activate the appropriate cells."
The second stretched.

"You'll need someone overseas. I believe there are those that owe that group a few..."

The first looked at his creator.

"And me?"

"I need you to stay here. While we are hidden for now, that may not always be the case. And Ross may have his own little game in play."

He smiled evilly.

"Go, bring me some pawns. Then we'll see who Coulson's knights are truly answerable to..."

New Avengers Mansion
72 hours later

Maria Hill narrowed her eyes.

"I said stand down, Avengers. Agents. Sorcerers. Am I missing anyone?"

Steve Rogers turned from the pack, followed closely behind by Daisy Johnson and Dr. Strange.

"Maria, I thought this was decided on. We need to apprehend this person before he does even more..."

"Apprehend, nothing. I am going to enjoy quaking him apart at his robotic seams...."

"Time is of the essence, Director Hill. Anton Ivanov cannot be left to roam this world at whim..."

Maria held up her hand.

"Everyone. I agreed to take on oversight of this group as long as you agreed that I would have the same oversight as Phil Coulson."

"We didn't." muttered Wong in the background.

"May I point out that I approved your strikes against the Watchdogs? If I am calling the mission, then you need to trust that I know what I'm doing. Even if you don't like it."

Subdued mutters and glares met this pronouncement.

"Situation has changed, people."

She sighed. What came next was never easy. No matter who was involved.

"Normally, I'd do this one by one. But as Strange noted, time is of the essence. And we don't have a lot of it. In the conference room, everyone. Stark will be holoing in."

She hesitated.

As the rest of the team filtered out, Maria looked at the Agents.

"I wanted to tell you first before this hits the conference room."

Hill activated her StarkPad and loaded up the first video.

Melinda May tensed, and balled her hands into fists.

"Who is that?" Daisy asked.

"My mother..."

---

**Queen**

**Sun City, Arizona**

Lian May kept her gun at the ready as she crept around the side of the home. William had made it quite clear that her presence was no longer necessary. Didn't mean she didn't keep track of her ex-husband. And she didn't like the look of his recent callers.

She was not going to lose another member of her clan. No one had seen or heard from Melinda since the day they put her in that military hell hole. She had called in every last favour that she had just to find out that she was still alive.

There were days when she wished that Phil Coulson had never returned from the grave, that her daughter had never gone back to him, that Melinda had just kept walking after she had driven 96 hours to pick her daughter up in northern Ontario. In winter.

What was so special about that man, Lian wondered, not for the first time. Certainly he's not like Andrew, may he rest in the light.

She slipped through the door into the kitchen. Deserted, the vegetables still on the chopping block.

Carefully opening the door into the living room, she saw a flicker of light from the TV, a still form propped in front of it.

She snorted mentally. A trap.

Easing back into the kitchen, Lian plucked the paring knife from where it lay. It would never do to leave a weapon where an enemy could get their hands on it. Melinda would say that her mother was slipping (if she ever heard about it).

Suddenly, there was a crash, and a choked off scream from above. The time for secrecy was over.

Lian pushed through the doorway and flung the knife into the throat of the first masked idiot who approached her, firing twice into the heads of his brethren, and once more into the form in front of the TV set.

Running up the stairs, she flipped her oncoming assailant over her back and heard bones crunch as he landed in a heap at the bottom of the stairway.
Flinging open the door to their...William's...bedroom, she gaped in shock at the slight man sitting on the bed in front of her.

And at the two masked forms at his feet, glass and ceramic shards mixing in the floor around them.

He lifted an eyebrow.

"I had it covered, Lian."

"I can see that. What were you planning to do about the others downstairs?"

He shrugged. "The police will be here momentarily."

He stood and picked up the picture from the broken frame from the floor, regarding it wistfully. Lian looked over. It was a picture of the three of them, at Melinda's graduation from the Academy.

"I wish she had become that ice skater. She would have been an excellent coach."

"I heard that she still was. Just in other things. The ashtray she made for you when she was six?"

William nodded.

"I never did smoke. Made a good bedside tray, though."

He paused, then frowned.

"Well, I guess if that was your gun I heard, we should probably get moving. The police will probably want to talk to both of us."

"Excuse me, I came to rescue you."

"And I appreciate it, but as you can see, not necessary."

"Not necess...ohh!!"

Lian swept the upstairs rooms, clearing them of potential threats, as the older man headed down the stairs.

"Will..wait..."

She joined him as he surveyed the damage to his living area.

"I expect you to pay for the cleaning, dear."

Lian growled, "The next time I see your house invaded by multiple masked jackasses, I'm leaving you to them, you..."

William reached over and grabbed his ex-wife's arm gently.

"I do appreciate that you still cared enough to come to my aid."

She flushed.

"Only because Melinda would never forgive me if I let you die."

"Ah."
As they stepped outside, William continued, "And how did you know of this?" He looked up along the roof railings, stopped and gently swatted at what looked to be a spider. It hit the ground and rolled to a stop.

"I missed that bug since Melinda's last visit."

The police car rolled up into their driveway.

"Let me do the talking, William?"

He snorted.

The two uniformed officers approached them, one slightly behind the other, talking on his radio.

"William May? Lian May?"

"Yes," she said, then blinked as the second officer drew a silver pistol, firing it at her, sending her paralyzed to the ground.

She heard the second shot and the accompanying thump.

Oh, she thought. It was a trap.

From a distance she felt arms grab her, a rough voice say "We have the freak-lover's parents, enroute to pickup."

Watchdog scum.

No, she wanted to correct them. It was Andrew who was Inhuman.

Phil...wasn't...

The world went black for Lian May.

---

Castle
Baja, California

Ruben Mackenzie brought his bike to a stop. He had wanted to do this trip since forever.

Didn't know he'd be doing it alone, though. He thought Alphie would be by his side.

He sighed and unbuckled his helmet, running his fingers through his cropped hair.

He hadn't seen his brother since his last trip home, since he found out his big brother wasn't the boring insurance agent everyone thought he was.

There had been calls. Someone had died. His boss had been demoted, and now he had to work with him. He met this amazing woman he couldn't date for some reason. Then SHIELD was back, and he might bring her home for Christmas.

Then...nothing. Not until the SHIELD base exploded, Alphie's partner murdering that General, and then Ruben was telling their life story to every single law enforcement group he had heard of. And some he hadn't.

But the last he had heard of Alphonso Mackenzie was a letter with a bank transfer, signed by one
Phillip Coulson, with the money that had paid off their parents home's mortgage.

Knowing Alphie, it probably had something to do with robots.

Ruben reached into his saddle pack and brought out a carefully packed bottle of whiskey. He strolled to the cliff’s edge, overlooking the crystal blue waters of the Pacific below. The breeze gently played around his face.

Raising the flask, he took a healthy swig.

"Here's to you, Alphie. Maybe you'll be here next year."

Damn, he missed his brother. With the way the world was turning out, he missed him now more than ever.

A rumble behind him made him turn and look. A van had pulled up behind the bike. Several white guys came out, started circling it.

This wasn't good.

"Hey," he called. "Leave my bike alone!"

The rednecks looked over and sneered.

"You Ruben Mackenzie?"

Ruben swallowed, throat going dry. They were alone, no one for miles.

"Who wants to know?"

"We've got some old business with you. Back from Illinois."

"Don't know what you're..."

"Come quietly, do what you're told, and maybe we don't mess up your face too much."

Suddenly, he was surrounded. How did they move that fast?

"Or maybe we do..."

They closed in. Thankfully, Ruben lost consciousness after the second punch.

As the van trundled down the road, a solitary bike remained, whiskey flask broken beside it, standing guard over the Baja cliffs.

---

**Knights**

**Perthshire, United Kingdom**

"It was so kind of you to meet me here, Mrs. Fitz."

"Thank you for asking me, Mrs. Simmons."

The two women smiled at each other.

In any other world, it was very unlikely that the two would have met, let alone become friends. Their
worlds in England and Scotland were very different. But children, that could bridge just about any gap.

Especially with children like Jemma Simmons and Leo Fitz. Inseparable since the Academy, they had been assigned together after graduation to a top-notch mobile research laboratory. Well, they knew that their children wouldn't be allowed to tell them everything.

Then the horrible day that SHIELD had fallen, and they had simply disappeared. No amount of calling, no begging or pleading could turn up their children's location.

Until one day, when the two women had met, to yet again combine their resources to find their lost ones, Jemma and Leo had shown up at the cafe, like two children caught out of curfew. Hugs, kisses, some tears, and then off again, in the company of their supervisor. An older man, receding hairline, black glove hiding an injury. That last was a little obvious, and Mrs. Fitz wasn't shy about telling her son that he needed to do something about it.

Then they all went back undercover. At least they knew their children were together this time.

Finally, they were able to come back home for a spell. Jemma was promoted to Special Director. She and Leo were buying a house. The mothers began to put the wedding together. When Leo proposed (and he would, eventually), the wedding would have to be small - family, some friends. Probably fast. Mrs. Simmons put her Anglican minister, Father Gregory, on standby. And, although neither one would say it out loud...the grandchildren...

But SHIELD exploded again. Their children wanted felons. Again. And they could not be found anywhere.

Well, they had gotten through it before, and they would get through it. Again.

"However," said Mrs. Simmons, Mrs. Fitz nodding emphatically, "I intend to have words with that Director Coulson."

They gathered here, in a cafe in Perthshire, every so often, to share clues in their searches. And just to support each other, until the children came home.

The doorbell rang, and their gaze drifted over to the opened door. Several men, military stature loomed in the doorway, looking at them.

Their leader strode over to the table.

"Simmons? Fitz?" he barked.

"Yes, that's us." said Mrs. Simmons. "What is this about?"

The man smiled. For some reason, that made neither woman relax.

"We have news about your children, Jemma and Leo. Would you come this way?"

It was not a request.

Mrs. Simmons swallowed.

"Of course, just let me contact my husband..."

"No need, he is on the way. Ladies?"
As they were quickly escorted out, a feeling of wrongness intensified.

"I really do think," started Mrs. Fitz, and she was shoved into the back of the waiting black van.

"Shut it, bitch." as Mrs. Simmons was manhandled in beside her.

Before either one could scream, they stared at a black pistol held in front of them.

"Neither one of you say a word." the officer breathed. "Not a sound."

Frightened, the two clung to each other in the back of the car as it sped out of town into the country.

Neither one could tell how long it took, until finally the driver uttered the first words they had heard since they left.

"Sir, obstacle up ahead. Across the road."

They looked through the front window to see a car, which had seemed to have skidded across the road, blocking it.

Since they were in the middle of rural countryside, this was unusual.

As the car slowed to a stop, a solitary man waved at the oncoming car.

Mrs. Simmons blinked. Then she took Mrs. Fitz's hand and gave it a squeeze.

The officer looked at them again.

"Not a word, not a movement, or you will never see your children again."

He motioned, and he and the other two men got out of the car, and approached the newcomer.

The newcomer let them close. Then without warning, he struck out at the men, each punch felling them where they stood. He grabbed the third, and seemed to question him as those in the car gaped.

The officer cocked his head at his words. Then the newcomer suddenly picked him up and threw him as far as he could away from the road.

The ensuing explosion still rocked the area, shattering the windows and nearly causing the car to tip over.

Everyone remained silent and still as the man came over, and leaned into the driver's seat.

"I'm...hoping...you weren't expecting that." he said.

The driver shook his head.

"Let the ladies out, I'll take it from here. You pick up your buddies and head back in."

The driver nodded.

The man grabbed his arm and squeezed.

"Tell your boss. Excalibur protects its own. And eventually we will deal with what is in the Hole."

The driver fainted. The other man shook his head.
"Where do they recruit from these days?"

Mrs. Simmons and Mrs. Fitz got out of the car.

"Brian, lovely to see you. May I introduce my friend, Mrs. Fitz?"

Brian Braddock smiled at his old friend.

"Enchanted. Ladies, if you would. I believe we have some catching up to do."

The car started, then disappeared into the afternoon haze of a British countryside.

---

_Bishop_

_Bogata, Columbia_

Senora Maria Rodriguez finished closing up the office, turning off the lights, locking the door behind her. It was a smaller office than the previous one, but that let her off earlier than her old job.

Pity, she thought. If she had worked these kinds of hours when Francisco was a boy, perhaps she would have seen what he and his cousins had been up to. Maybe she would have been able to stop them, keep her son from being killed.

But then again, no one was really able to stop him and Elena, especially when it was something they felt passionate about.

Her thoughts turned to her eldest niece. Her mother was out of town, staying out of sight of the police. The last time they had taken her into custody to try to flush her daughter, it had taken most of their savings to raise the money necessary to spring her from her cell.

Friendly priests, those who had known the family before Elena's...transformation...had taken her in, letting her stay in the convents. Providing sanctuary until this could all be sorted out. If it ever could.

It had started out so well. Elena had moved to the United States, got a job with some sort of government agency. She didn't need to worry about the police at the doorstep. She had signed the Accords. She was on the right side, helping to restore justice. And there was her new man...the one built like a tank (and moved as quickly, Elena said).

Had her brilliant street-smart child finally been duped? Was it all a lie? Had they simply used her and then thrown her away?

There was no one to talk to about something like this, she mused as she slowly made her way home. There was no one left to give answers.

The government plane had come to pick Elena up, an urgent summons from her boss, this Coulson. Then a tersely worded note that she would not make it home for awhile, some...trouble...they needed her help. Then the police came with their questions and the interrogations. But nothing Elena's family could answer. And still nothing from Elena.

To be honest, if Senora Rodriguez could talk to her niece, she would tell her to keep doing whatever it was she was doing now. Stay away from the family. Lie low. Keep out of sight. Let this blow over. Then they could pick up the pieces together. Even if it was in a new town with a new name.
She chuckled to herself. Hadn't this started with remembering her son? Maybe he took after both of his parents, may his father rest in peace.

What did Elena say her young man had called her? A "Yo-Yo" - a child's toy that always bounced back to where it started. Well, this is where Elena had started. Eventually, she would find her way back.

She had to believe that. Her hand gripped her cross that hung around her neck. She had to have faith.

She shook her head. Right now...it was late. What she had to have was dinner. Perhaps some fish?

As she turned the corner, she mentally groaned. There they were. Again.

"Senora, a word?"

"I have told you and told you, we do not know where Elena is. Do you have nothing better to do than harass honest women?" she demanded.

A chill of fear went up her spine as she realized that she was surrounded. The first policeman smiled at her.

"Oh, we believe you, Senora." he smirked. "But we also know where Elena Rodriguez will be."

She played along, stalling for time, for someone to come.

"And that is?"

"Wherever it is they take you, Senora"

Hands grabbed at her from behind. A prick of a needle made her collapse into their arms.

From a distance, she could hear voices, "The mother...damned priest...too protected...go..."

Her sister was safe. Now all she had to do was wait for Elena to bounce back to her.

She closed her eyes.

---

**New Avengers Mansion**

The last video finished, you could hear a pin drop. All eyes were fixed on the Agents, sitting over to the side, curled around Melinda May and Mack.

"One thing I don't understand." said the image of Tony Stark. "Why no one from Shake & Bake's family?"

Most of the Avengers groaned. Steve Rogers dropped his head into his hand.

Strangely, Daisy Johnson didn't take offense.

"My Mom's dead, Mr. Stark. My father was a psychopathic drugged up madman, who had to kill my mother, or else she was going to kill me." She considered it a moment. "No siblings or any other family I know about."
She glanced at Maria, who opened a file.

Daisy looked at May. "We put him through TAHITI. He thinks he's a veterinarian somewhere on the East Coast."

"And he was taken into custody the minute you were put into the Raft." continued Maria. "His...protectiveness...when it came to you was well documented."

Daisy winced.

"Is he...happy?"

"He's the chief vet to the therapy dogs at the VA hospital." Maria let a small smile cross her face. "He's under guard 24/7, and everyone seems satisfied with the arrangement."

She passed the file to Daisy. A dark haired man, enveloped in a pile of happy doggy bodies sat in the middle of the picture, a huge smile on his face.

"Good. I'm...glad." Daisy thought for a moment, then paled.

"Tony, there is one other, a boy I was supposed to watch over before everything went to shit."

"Language."

"Cap, you're worse than Coulson." Daisy huffed. "He's maybe first year university, got the brains for one of those Stark scholarships. Take him out of the projects and put him somewhere we could watch over him."

"Consider it done. Name, location, we can arrange it tomorrow."

"Gabe Reyes, East LA. He's in a wheelchair..."

"Not an issue."

"That's it for my ties." Daisy shrugged. "Most of of them are right here or..." she pointed upwards.

"Alright."

Maria motioned at the slender man at the front at the room.

"Everyone, this is Peter Wisdom, on...unofficial...loan from the British."

Hunter's mouth hung open for a moment. Bobbi gave him concerned glace, then gently closed it shut.

"How unofficial?" asked Sharon Carter.

"They don't know I'm here, and we in Excalibur would like to keep it that way." the man returned. He swung his gaze at Simmons and Fitz.

"First, Agents Simmons and Fitz, your parents are safe, and under our protection. Agent Simmons, the Braddocks pass along their greetings and ask that you actually check in with your mother more than once every couple of years."

Simmons' eyes widened, and she flushed.
"Secondly, we have...methods...of tracking whatever took your relatives. They seem to be man made constructs for the most part, one of them self destructed when our Captain captured it. There are several of them, scattered around the globe." He paused, scratching his head. "We also have a good idea of determining where Agent MacKenzie's brother is, but that's because the Watchdogs are, for the most part, imbeciles. You would have found them in a day or so."

"Unfortunately," he continued "We have no way of knowing whether the construct that detonated alerted the rest. I would suggest that you treat this as highly urgent."

Tony groaned. 

"Of course it would be now. General Talbot testifies tomorrow, and I know Ross deliberately scheduled it on the same day as the benefit concert, the ass. Rhodey and I are in DC, making sure nothing interrupts the session."

Wisdom lifted an eyebrow.

"You realize this probably is a trap."

"We're not stupid." returned May. "But we can't just leave them there."

"Of course not." said Steve. "We split up again. We're pretty evenly balanced. A small strike team should be able to rescue each hostage, deal with whatever we find there."

"I don't like it." objected Sam. "We'll be spreading our forces too thin as it is."

"Neither do I," sighed Maria. "But this way, we'll target each of the groups and remain under the radar. If we had gone in full force, like we originally planned, there was always a risk of being discovered."

"Thereby negating everything we've worked to accomplished." sniped Tony.

"Tony..."

"One more thing, Agents. The Salt and Pepper Shaker over there...I need her in New York."

The Agents shot up. May shook her head, but it was Daisy who spoke.

"No, no way. I'm not leaving my friends to do this without my powers."

"Exactly, Quakester. They'll be watching for your powers. And when you use them, they'll probably be ready to send video over to Humans First. Does the same thing, or don't you remember the Talbot video?"

May nodded slowly. "Yo-Yo won't show up on camera. But a quake..."

Daisy bit back a curse.

Tony continued. "With the team split up, I'll need extra eyes on the One World Concert. We haven't heard anything, but it doesn't mean there's nothing out there."

"And babysit the new Inhumans."

"Don't say that where Cass can hear you." Tony smirked. "You up for it?"

"Yeah, I'll have Strange teleport me over."
Tony looked around.

"Cass has some other ideas about the concert security, but I think I'll let her brief you on those."

Maria looked around the room.

"All right, let's get started."

CODA

Moscow, Russia

Russian Prime Minister Dimtri Olshenko raised his eyebrows at his visitors.

"Romanova. That must be Barton with you. Tell me, how much longer do I have to live?"

Natasha Romanoff kept her gun trained on the Prime Minister.

"That depends, Olshenko, on how...expendable...you find Anton Ivanov to be."

Olshenko smirked and leaned back in his seat.

"He is too powerful for me to challenge openly. However, and unofficially of course, I would have no issues with him being dealt with through other methods. Like your SHIELD did with Gideon Malick."

"Speaking of SHIELD," bit out Clint. "You owe us a favour. Morse and Hunter saved your life."

"And if I had revealed anything from that Inhumans Centre, it would have been over just as fast." Olshenko raised an eyebrow. "I kept them alive for you."

"Not good enough."

Olshenko studied them closely.

"How about this. There’s a mole at Stark Industries. Very well connected. Very well paid, too. By all sides."

Natasha cocked her head. "You would give up one of your spies?"

"Of course not. He’s not mine. He’s one of yours."

Chapter End Notes

Some guest stars here. Captain Britain seems to be drawing a line at the Simmons clan. Perhaps Vijay should have looked him up.

Guess we need another rescue. Ivanov really shouldn't mess with family.

And your chapterly reminder that Thanos is getting closer....
Chapter Summary

In which a leak at Stark Industries is plugged. And General Talbot's testimony proves to be quite...enlightening...

Chapter Notes

First, the next 4-5 chapters take place in roughly the same time period.

Secondly, cameos ahead. All references meant with affection and deepest respect.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Moscow, Russia

"What the hell am I doing here?"

Clint Barton snorted in reply.

"You know, I ask myself that nearly everyday, counsellor."

Jen Walters, corporate counsel to Tony Stark, snuggled deeper into her warm jacket. The pair waited outside a rather unassuming house in near pitch black darkness.

"Is this what Ross' money gets you?" she asked.

"Personally, I would have picked a warmer non-extradition getaway. One with a better view."

"Technically, this isn't a criminal matter. Selling Stark Industries secrets and violating a NDA is more of a civic matter."

"Depends on what Ross was going to do with it."

"Good point."

The door opened, and both tensed.

"Inside." Natasha Romanoff hissed.

"Finally, Nat...you took a dinner break?" groused Clint, as the two quickly made their way indoors and shut the door behind them.

Nat didn't deign to answer, but simply led them up a rickety staircase to the soon to be former SI employee's bedroom. The temperature was just north of freezing, and Jen could still feel the bite of the night wind on her face.

Which made the predicament of Walter Moir, marketing manager and part of the One World team...
easier for her to bear.

He had been obviously rolled out of bed, still clad in boxers and thin undershirt, and tied to a chair, well away from any heating source.

"Ms. Walters," he chattered. "I'll be filing a formal complaint to HR in the morning. You should be out of a job by noon."

He had balls, Jen would give him that. Granted, they were probably frozen and blue by now, but brass nonetheless.

Too bad. He had potential to go far in SI.

"We both know that won't be happening," she responded, moving to stand in front of him. "Tony Stark takes a dim view of any violation of an NDA, let alone the magnitude of your betrayal."

Walter smirked.

"You have no proof."

"We have tapes. Audio and video." commented Natasha idily. "Dated, face-matched, to both you and Secretary Ross."

"Nothing that would hold up in court." Walter responded. "And I'm afraid you wouldn't make a great witness, Black Widow, seeing you and Hawkeye over there are wanted criminals."

He looked at Jen.

"You won't just be fired, Ms. Walters. I'll see you disbarred and thrown into the Raft for this."

Clint stirred by his position by the door, but Jen held up her hand.

"The Russian PM gave you up, Walt. He could care less about American internal politics, unless it benefits him."

She leaned closer, and something in her face made Walter flinch.

"You think he's going to care about one more foreign body in the Volga? That is, of course, if we decide we want it found?"

Natasha chuckled sinisterly, and Clint removed a knife from his side pocket.

Walter swallowed.

"We're not playing by the rules, Mr. Moir. You lost any right to that when you sided with Humans First. Start Talking."

Walter glanced at the clock, then back at Jen.

"I think you're already too late."

__________________________________________________________________________________________

**Senate Hearing Chambers**

*Washington, DC*
Tony Stark slid in beside Col. James Rhodes.

"How's our boy holding up?"

"Talbot's fine, Stark."

"Didn't mean Talbot, Rhodey."

Tony jerked his chin over at Secretary of State Thaddeus Ross, who looked relaxed in the front row.

"What's he even doing here? Shouldn't one of his flunkies be monitoring this for him? Don't like it, Tone..."

"Yeah, he's going to pull something, the fact that he had this scheduled for today proves it. We'll be ready for.."

"That won't be necessary, gentlemen."

Tony and Rhodes stood up as an older man in distinctive black rimmed glasses folded his arms across his chest and looked unimpressed.

"Did anyone tell you you're very sneaky, Senator?"

"Never." the Senator deadpanned. He turned serious again.

"Senator Thompson's briefed me about the need for your presence, and, between the both of us, we've convinced the rest of the panel to allow it. However, make one move, one sound, Mr. Stark, and I will have you thrown out. I may sympathize with your goals, but I will not allow this hearing to turn into a circus."

"More than it usually is?" Tony quipped.

The Senator glared at him, and Rhodes rubbed his forehead.

"Stark..." the Senator and Rhodes began at the same time.

"Fine...you won't even know I'm here."

"I'd prefer that, Mr. Stark."

As the Senator left, Tony slumped into his chair.

Rhodes didn't even try to hide a snicker.

"How'd he get elected in North Carolina?"

After the roll call had been taken, the Senator from North Carolina looked at his colleagues and said, "Before we swear in today's witness, do we have any business from the floor?"

"I have a couple of objections," responded the Senator from Wisconsin. "First, if this is a closed meeting, why are members of the public seated in chambers?"

"We discussed this, Senator Ryons. An assassination attempt was made on General Talbot, one that included fairly high ranking members of the body that are an integral part of today's discussions. In addition, Senator Thompson has received multiple, credible death threats, as have other members of
this panel. Mr. Stark and Col. Rhodes are here to safeguard against threats of that nature."

"Is Mr. Stark content to be a...silent...witness to these proceedings?" chuckled the Senator from Pennsylvania.

Tony bristled.

"I've personally discussed the terms of his presence with him, Senator Wen."

"Secondly," Senator Ryons continued, "I object to the inclusion of the Senator from Illinois on this panel..."

"Here we go..." the young Senator in question commented.

"Due to any other reason than that she is Inhuman?" asked the Chair.

"Which biases her in regards to the topics under discussion today. She doesn't belong..."

"And your affiliations with Humans First does not?" interrupted the Senator from California.

"Enough, Senator Cordova. Senator Ryons, you are out of order. Senator Bennett is a registered Inhuman under the Enhanced and Gifted Persons Registration Act and the Sokavia Accords, and was duly elected by her constituents in Illinois. There is nothing legally barring her from sitting on this panel."

"I want my objections on the record, Senator Gregg."

"They are. Overruled. Are you done posturing? Good. Any other business?"

Rhodes leaned over.

"He's good."

"Yeah. I wonder what he thinks about a Presidential run..."

"We will now swear the witness. Please rise."

General Talbot rose to attention.

"Brigadier General Glenn Talbot." intoned Senator Gregg. "In the matters concerning this panel today, do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?"

"I do."

"Be seated."

As General Talbot sat down, Senator Gregg began, "General Talbot, would you kindly inform us of your first interactions with the group known as the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division?"

Talbot leaned forward.
"You can call them SHIELD, Senator."

The panel chuckled.

"He's been practicing, General." commented Senator Wen, rolling her eyes.

"I first interacted with the group known as SHIELD, when I was ordered to lead an force to capture a group of suspected rogue agents in a base located in Northern Ontario, Canada, in April 2014."

"Wait," interjected the Senator from Connecticut, "Did the Canadians approve US military operations within their territory? That's highly unusual."

"I cannot comment, Senator Simmons, as that decision was above my level."

"I can," whispered Tony. "Maria said the Canadians flipped when they crossed the border. Prime Minister Harper almost lost his caucus, authorizing that mission without informing anyone else. They nearly had to charge Reynolds with treason to keep him from reporting it."

"Sshh..."

"Upon failure to apprehend the group..."

"They totally got away..." started Tony, then stopped abruptly as Senator Gregg's eyes caught his and narrowed.

"...I continued to head our section's attempts to track and capture them."

"As unapprehended SHIELD agents were designated potential terrorists after the events in Washington." chimed in Senator Ryons.

Senator Gregg rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"Enough, all of you, or we will not be finished today. Let's stay on track. General, if you would kindly lead us through your subsequent interactions..."

---------------------------------------------------------------------

Moscow

“Explain yourself, Walter.”

The man shifted in his seat.

"Stark’s been walking a tightrope ever since he threw in with those things."

"People, Mr. Moir."

"They were, once. Terragenesis changes you. It changed my brother.”

Jen mentally reviewed his HR file. She frowned.

"Your brother died in a training accident..."

"Working for SHIELD. Recruited by the Director himself. I knew something was fishy, he was too low on the food chain to be involved in something like that.”
He glared at Jen.

"Ross showed me the tapes. He was handling a box. It exploded. The mists turned him and the others into...animals. An Inhuman was responsible. It showed me what they were really like, what they were capable of."

The three looked at each other. This incident wasn’t one the Agents had told them yet. Jen shrugged. They could track it down later, find out what really happened.

"One Inhuman, Walter. Not the whole race."

"How can you tell, Ms. Walters, before it’s too late? They’ll all turn on us eventually."

"I’d argue that you could say that about every living person on this planet, human or Inhuman. But I’m not overly interested in your excuses for betrayal. What I want to know is, what have you done?"

---

**Washington, DC**

Senator Gregg discreetly popped the Advil that his page had brought to him.

Tony sympathized. There was a lot coming out in the wash today.

"Let me see if I understand this correctly, General. Upon the death of Rosalind Price, you were personally appointed as head of the Advanced Threat Containment Unit by President Ellis..."

"The ATCU, yes, sir."

"Who then subordinated you to Phillip Coulson, the...Director...of SHIELD."

"That is correct, sir."

"While Mr. Coulson was on the terrorist watch list."

Talbot hesitated.

"That is not correct, sir."

Senator Gregg glanced in mute appeal to Senator Wen, who picked up the questioning.

"General, how can members of SHIELD be considered terrorists, but not their Director?"

"Senator Wen, first let us make some distinctions. SHIELD was never considered a terrorist group. It simply ceased to exist after the events in Washington. Unapprehended SHIELD agents were designated potential terrorists until SHIELD was relaunched by President Ellis and Director Mace in 2016, at which time, the list was re-examined, and agents under contract to this version of SHIELD were removed from the terrorist watch list."

"And secondly, Senator, Phil Coulson was never actually on that list as...he...had...been declared killed in action during the Battle of New York."

Senator Wen looked at Senator Gregg. He sighed, and quietly offered her the bottle of Advil.
Moscow

“Let’s try an easier question, Mr. Moir”

Braver men than Walter Moir had shivered at the tone Natasha used now. He was no different.

He gulped and waited for the question.

”How much did you give Ross?”

”All of it.”

Natasha’s face went grim.

“So Ross has all of SI’s threads. One World. The PR moves and marketing. The legislation, Tony’s supporters in government.”

She looked at Clint. Neither of their faces betrayed the thread that Tony kept apart from SI, the Avengers and Agents hidden from the government. At least, Natasha hoped they were still safe.

”So what’s been done can be undone. And Tony loses everything because he backed the Inhumans. His business, his reputation, the Avengers team. He’ll be ruined.”

”A fitting end for all blood traitors.” snarled Walter.

”And public opinion will revert. In fact, it will be worse than before.” observed Clint. “Third strike, they’re out.”

“All it takes is one incident where an Inhuman attacks.” Natasha rested her hands on Walter’s shoulders.

”Tell us all about it, Mr. Moir…”

Washington, DC

Tony Stark didn’t impress easily.

But he decided he was starting the Super-PAC to get this Senator Gregg elected as the next President. Senator Thompson still had some time to put in.

He had guided the panel deftly through the muck that was SHIELD for the last 5 years, going from HYDRA, to Inhumans, back to HYDRA, to the discovery of Gideon Malick, of all people, as the last head of HYDRA, to a Kree 2 man invasion, to the end of the world, and now this...

”A robot, General Talbot. That's who shot you?

”Yes, sir.”

”And your proof?”

”While I was in my coma, the ATCU combed through the wreckage that was known as the Playground. We discovered numerous melted robotic parts that matched the description given by Agent Coulson. This included multiple likenesses of Agent Johnson. In addition, video was
recovered from the building’s basement, showing Agents Johnson and another...powered...individual...defeating a robot with her likeness.”

“I have to add, Senators, this video had been erased from the general surveillance. A copy was found in the digital files of the ATCU mole, and was verified by military intelligence.”

Stark stole a look at Rhodes. His lips quirked up.

"And this robot shot you on the order of another sentient robot."

"Yes, sir. Aided, we believe, by Anton Ivanov."

"The Russian oil magnate? Why?"

"Sir, two reasons. This first was the public discrediting of SHIELD and of the Inhumans through Agent Johnson. This was, as you well know, accomplished."

Senator Ryons flushed, but remained silent.

"Secondly, prior to this meeting, I had become aware of a mole within the ATCU. I had narrowed my suspects, but was unable to act before I was shot."

"We have a copy of the e-mail you sent out, in the event of your...incapcitation. That was ill-advised, General. Why didn't you go through the correct sources?"

"Because the correct sources were part of the problem."

Senator Bennett leaned forward.

"Could you please elaborate?"

"As the Inhumans were perceived to be an international threat, as part of the Enhanced Persons Act, the ATCU reported directly to the Secretary of State, rather than the Department of Justice, the FBI or other law enforcement agencies. The take down of HYDRA, based on SHIELD information, was a feather in the cap of the Secretary of State at the time."

"Several of my suspects, including the eventual mole, Peter Davidson, were new to the group, and were placed there when Thaddeus Ross became Secretary of State in 2016. All had received substantial donations, funneled through various channels, from Mr. Ivanov."

"Are you accusing Thaddeus Ross, the Secretary of State, of complicity in your attempted assassination, General Talbot?"

Tony looked over at Ross. He still looked relaxed, checking his watch, smiling

"No, ma'am. But I had reason to believe, given the Secretary's track record with Enhanced people..."

"Banner...." coughed Tony.

"Consider this your only warning, Mr. Stark..."

"...That my evidence would not be taken seriously." Talbot spread his hands. "I mean, Senators,
what have we talked about today? Gideon Malick, HYDRA? The actual devil appearing on Earth. Aliens. Sentient robots. A vigilante with a flaming skull? I have proof behind all this, you somewhat believe me, and even you... If I had taken this to someone who didn't have any reason to believe me, and had a well documented grudge against the Enhanced, well...this never would have gotten out, and I would have been lucky to have only lost my job, if not committed into the nearest military Psych ward."

"He has a point." commented Senator Simmons.

"And we now have the link between Ross and Ivanov." said Rhodes quietly. "Too bad he's dead...we can't quite make the connection."

"Maybe after tonight." mused Tony.

"Don't want to know, Tones..."

---

**Moscow**

“You’ll let me live?”

"We’ll consider it.”

Walter closed his eyes.

"The Inhumans would’ve shown their true colours one day. We were just hurrying it along.”

He continued, ”The Watchdogs were idiots when they attacked that school. Attacking kids in the name of politics, that smeared the Watchdog cause for all time. Lowest of the low.”

Jen didn’t like where this was going.

“And of course, Inhumans would stoop to that level.”

Walter said nothing, but his silence spoke volumes.

"What did you give them on the One World concert, you bastard?” Jen demanded.

Clint cursed. Natasha tightened her grip on Walter’s shoulders.

"Everything.”

"Venue access? Security files?”

"Everything.” Walter repeated.

“Demographics are in the 12-35 age groupings, held in the middle of New York, simulcast across North America, streamed around the world...” Jen ranted...

"I'll call Tony,” offered Clint, leaving the room.

Natasha hissed “Ross...what is he going to do?”

Walter shook his head. “He didn’t tell me. After the last drop, he gave me a plane ticket, told me to head here. He was supposed to be in contact.”
"Instead he used you, and left you out to dry for us." Clint came back. "I can't reach Tony."

Or the others, he tapped in their secret code.

"All I know is that Ross was forming a group. He said it included a hot-head."

"That might be that James fellow from the Raft...turning him alone loose in that concert..." groaned Natasha.

Jen looked at the others.

"Call whoever you can. We've got to get through to New York."

---

**Washington, DC**

It had been a long day. Tony was thankful that Senator Gregg had gotten to the winding up portion.

"I think you've given us a lot to consider, General Talbot. Of course, it would help if the agents themselves could be made available to testify."

"Sir, I have no knowledge of the current whereabouts of any of Coulson's team. They were apprehended, but escaped their various custody arrangements. And Phil Coulson is yet to be found."

"Given where these agents were held, I'm not sure I blame them." Senator Bennett glared at the General. "The Raft? Fort Windermere?"

"I cannot comment, ma'am, although I will point out that these are highly trained agents who eventually escaped these institutions. A regular maximum security prison, they would have been out in a couple of days."

Senator Simmons leaned forward.

"General, you've gone from actively chasing SHIELD, to working for them, to working with them. At the end of the day, how would you characterize them? And what do you think should be done with them?"

General Talbot was silent for a moment.

"SHIELD, and Phil Coulson specifically, have been the most obnoxious, stubborn pains in my ass since I came to know them. And they may have had a hand in some of the issues that we are dealing with today. But I can think of at least three times in the last four years that they have not only saved the United States, but the world. And I know of no one more loyal, or guaranteed to come through for you when the chips are down than Phil Coulson."

"Coulson's team has risked their lives and put their personal honour on the line for the world numerous times. They are geniuses in their specialties. They have had little personal lives over the past four years. And they have never sought personal glory. Even Daisy Johnson...that was all Mace."

"There is some part of me that doesn't believe I am saying this. But there is another part of me that knows it's true. It has been an honour, Senators, to serve alongside SHIELD. I say, bring them home."

Tony stretched and stood up. He and Rhodes chatted idly as the room dispersed. A page returned their electronics.

"The Senator says to thank you for your time today, and for keeping the disruption to a minimum."

Rhodes laughed.

"I bet he did..."

Tony handed him the loaner glasses and slipped his originals back on.

"OK, FRIDAY, let see..."

Tony stopped, and watched the data flow by on his glasses.

"Son of a...Goddamn Ross!"

"What? Tones??"

The remaining Senators turned in alarm to the two men.

Tony looked at Rhodes.

"We've been played, Rhodey. While we were stuck here, incommunicado, they made their fucking move."

Tony turned and ran out the chamber doors.

"We need to get to New York. NOW!"

---

**New York City**

*8 hours ago*

“All right NYC, let me hear you make some *noise*...”

Enthusiastic cheers erupted from the crowd.

“Nah...you can get louder than that! Make it...*Inhumanly...LOUD...*”

Chapter End Notes

Two obvious notes - first, I am referencing lots of events in Agents of SHIELD Seasons 1-4 - all credit to writers, cast and crew. And secondly, speaking of cast, I am in no way affiliated with any of the real life cameos in this chapters, other than that of a fan. As I
said in the beginning, all references meant with the deepest of respect.

So this ties up some Agents of SHIELD threads for me - as a Canadian, I wondered about whether someone was aware of Providence, and just what the US military was doing invading our space. Should've left it to JTF2 and the RCMP, Talbot. We might even have captured them... ;)

Also Talbot was afraid of being called to testify after that cluster...of a mission in Season 4. I think he did a pretty good job of it for our Agents, and I think he would have should that have come to pass in Season 5. Who knows, it still might.

Next, Peter Wisdom was right. The Watchdogs are imbeciles. And it is a trap.

Good thing our team aren't the only heros on the run these days...
Check Out Any Time You Like (But You Can Never Leave)

Chapter Summary

Ruben Mackenzie's rescue is proceeding as per Agents of SHIELD norms...

Good thing there's some old friends running in the same direction.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Northern California

Alphonse "Mack" Mackenzie looked over the compound his little brother Ruben was being held in. Then he looked over at his old partner, Bobbi Morse.

"I quit."

She rolled her eyes. Her partner, Lance Hunter, chuckled softly.

"You say that every time, mate. I think you've been trying to quit constantly for the last 5 or 6 years now..."

"You didn't quit hard enough the last time." agreed Morse.

"No, really, I mean it this time. I mean, I'm the Agent. I expect HYDRA, Watchdogs, scum of the earth to come after me. But having a robot sending them after my FAMILY? No, I think I've had enough now. Once we get Coulson back, I'm out. I am packing it in. Grabbing Elena and starting up a bike shop somewhere."

"You'd last a week, Mack. You'd be bored out of your mind."

"A little boring might be what the doctor ordered..." Mack shuddered. "Forget about the Doctor..."

Hunter and Morse exchanged looks. For those trapped in the Framework, certain phrases, foods, sometimes even sights or smells could send them into a funk.

And, for some reason none of them would admit to, nobody liked doctors.

As one, they turned at the rustling behind them.

"Only us." whispered Wanda Maximoff, Mike "Deathlok" Peterson behind her.

"The coast is as clear as it will ever be." Deathlok added, scanning the perimeter. "I have a lock on your brother, Mack. We can move at any point."

He frowned, continually scanning the area.
"What aren't you telling us?" asked Mack suspiciously.

Deathlok shrugged.

"I have a lock on your brother, but no one else. The compound appears to be empty."

They looked at each other.

"It's a trap." offered Hunter.

"No...really? I thought they were asking us in for tea and crumpets." shot back Morse.

Mack checked his watch.

"Look, we don't have time. If the others haven't moved, they're going to be soon. This is our window to get Ruben out. I say we go in, set off whatever it is they have planned, kick their asses, get him and get home."

Wanda nodded.

"3 spies, a human weapon, and me. I think we have enough power to take down whoever stands in our way."

As the group quietly headed towards the entrance, Hunter surveyed the opening.

"I mean," he observed as they opened the door and crept in. "What's the worst that could happen?"

Suddenly, a large wave pulsed through the complex, knocking out every electronic piece the team had on them, and sending Deathlok to the floor.

Morse rounded on her partner, who looked chagrined.

"You just had to say that, didn't you?"

Hunter shrugged.

"Mike, you OK, buddy?" Mack asked, kneeling beside his teammate.

"Affirm...need...to...reboot...take time." Deathlok gasped. "Go...now...I'll...catch...up."

"You're defenseless." exclaimed Wanda.

Deathlok shook his head slightly.

"Defenses...first...up. Ruben...downstairs...central...area...He'll have...company."

"Yeah, sorta figured that. Guns are going to be out until they're able to kick back in. Wanda, you good?"

"Of course, Mack."

"Let's head out, then. Find us when you have a moment, Mike."
Mike nodded, then his eyes caught Morse's and flickered. She grinned at him slightly, and, as Hunter passed her, whapped her partner sharply across the back of the head.

"Ow! What was that, you she-beast?"

"From...me..." breathed Deathlok as they moved away, down the hall.

"No respect." groused Hunter.

The road outside the rural complex was almost deserted. No one really had cause to come out this way, unless they knew where they were going.

Or were running from something.

The older man got out of the now stalled van. A younger pair got out behind him, the man rubbing his eyes sleepily.

"I'll pop the hood." he yawned.

"Don't be an idiot," the older man snapped. "The van is fine."

"Oh, come on," the younger woman added. "Didn't you notice that all the electronics went off at the same time?"

"No, because I was napping!" the young man shot back. She rolled her eyes.

The older man shaded his eyes, narrowing them down the road into the complex.

"We shouldn't get involved," he reluctantly concluded. "They're close enough on our tail, this is going to cost us time we don't have. The van will reboot in a few moments, we can be on our way."

He didn't look happy about that conclusion.

The younger man shook his head.

"That must have been pretty strong to reach out here. Considering that the average person doesn't walk around with an EMP..."

"Police, military, government, ATCU, just who we're trying to avoid!" argued the older man.

"Or terrorists, Watchdogs..." the younger woman started heading to the back of the van. "We need to check it out, at least."

The younger man frowned as they headed after her.

"How do we do that, you can see for miles around here? The EMP..."

The older man smacked him across the back of the head. The younger winced, rubbing it. The woman snickered as he pushed past the two of them to the back of the van.
"Do you really think I wouldn't have been prepared for something like that?" he demanded.

Opening the back of the van, he lifted the floorboard where two identical cases resided.

"EMP proof." he said gruffly. "You two want to go stretch your legs, meet the locals, feel free. I'll camp out here in the van and monitor you once everything kicks back in."

Scott Lang looked at Dr. Hank Pym.

"It's gonna take me a moment to get in touch with a local."

Hope Van Dyne laughed.

"I'll send some friends back your way. Let's get moving."

Mack considered the situation. As rescues went, this one was par for the course.

They were royally screwed.

"Did you think we were idiots?" the masked Watchdog sneered in his face.

"Yes, as a matter of..." There was a thump and a grunt as Hunter took the butt of the rifle to his face.

Morse tracked the the Watchdogs with her eyes, silently seething at the situation. Wanda lay unconscious beside her, felled by something that pulsed across the room as she charged towards the trussed up Ruben.

Mack had to hand it to her. The kid was young, had guts, but still had a lot to learn. If they managed to get out of this one.

They had cleared the previous floors of the hidden Watchdogs, there was more than one cell congregated here. But they were all true believers and fought tooth and nail. It was sheer luck (or stupidity on their part) that everyone seemed to be limited to hand to hand or knife combat.

There was something to be said for having a shotgun that was also an axe. And, right now, 6 feet away from him, tossed when they held knives to his brother and his teammate's throats.

The doors to this section had been locked behind them. The problem was that when Mike came back online, so would the guns. All of which now resided in the hands of the Watchdogs.

By the time Deathlok could get to them and pry the doors open, they'd all be dead.

He caught Morse's eye. She nodded slightly. Good to know he wasn't the only one with that same take on the situation. All they needed was a distraction.

"Hey, Z...got the cuffs yet?" the leader called to someone behind him.

"Yeah..." Mack heard the steps of someone coming behind him. "Put these on the witch...start getting some of our own back..."

Morse's jaw set, and if looks could kill, they'd be on their way with Ruben. Mack agreed, no way he
was letting that happen on his watch. It was time to make their move. Just needed time to think.

That buzzing around his head was distracting, though.

"Go after **those** bastards." Mack muttered. "I've got enough problems over here."

Surprisingly, that seemed to work. Mack spared two seconds to wonder if that would work on mosquitoes as well. Now Ruben...

"FUCK, that bit me!"

The three agents looked up. One of the masked men was doubled over, holding his neck.

"Hope he's allergic." muttered Hunter.

"What the..."

Insects started crawling the floor, carefully avoiding the Agents, heading towards the Watchdogs, who started backing away.

Mack felt something brush his shoulder.

"Damn, it's Wanda." he heard a voice whisper. "She OK?"

*Where...*

"Your shoulder. I'm a friend. My partner, she's in charge of the flies."

"All rigghht..."

Morse and Hunter looked at Mack quizzically.

"Just stay put for a few moments."

Mack felt something leap off his shoulder, and the agents watched as the ants quickened their pace towards their enemies.

"Stay...stay away..." called out the Watchdog at the approaching horde.

"What, you afraid of a few bugs?" mocked Mack.

The irrepressible Hunter started singing under his breath.

"The ants go marching one by one, hurrah! hurrah!"

"More like one by one hundred." snickered Morse.

The lead Watchdog snarled, and started to advance towards the agents. As he stomped into the bugs, there was a blur, and a male voice called out, "You really shouldn't have done that."

Suddenly, the Watchdog pitched forward into the ants, which surged up and over him. A masked male stood behind him, rubbing his fist.

"Hope, any time now..." he called out.

In response, a buzzing sound filled the room, and an army of wasps poured through the cracks in the door, heading unerringly for the Watchdogs, biting and stinging as they went. A second blur, and a
female appeared, calmly felling the those Watchdogs not dealing with the ants and wasps with shots from a small blaster.

"How'd she get a gun?" asked Hunter. The masked man looked over at him.

"You know, I asked her dad that once..."

"He just likes me better." the female called back, stepping over the prone Watchdogs.

Looking around the room, the two tapped on their masks, which pulled away from their faces.

Mack studied them a little, as he moved to untie his brother. They looked familiar.

Ruben rubbed his arms, and glared at his brother.

"This is how all your rescues go? Us getting killed?"

Mack shrugged.

"We're still breathing, last I checked. Couldn't just leave you here."

Ruben pulled him into a hug, and the two brothers stood together for a moment.

"Scott?" Wanda's voice breathed.

Mack turned around, and saw Wanda being helped to her feet by the newcomers.

Suddenly, it all made sense.

"You're Scott Lang....the guy who fought with Cap!" he exclaimed. "They busted you out of the Raft, but no one knew where you went."

"He came home," responded the woman beside him. "Then everything fell apart again. We all had to go on the run."

"My partner, Hope Van Dyne. Her dad built these suits. He's in the van."

Morse's eyebrows rose.

"Dr. Henry Pym is outside right now?"

Hope's eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"How do you know my dad?" she asked.

"Dr. Barbara Morse of SHIELD..." Morse started.

The two looked at each other and groaned.

"Dad's...still not fond of SHIELD." Hope explained.

"Or the Starks." Scott continued. "Come to think of it, neither am I..."
Mack winced.

"It's a long story." Morse shrugged. "If you want to come with us, we could explain more on the way."

Scott and Hope looked at each other.

"It'd get them off our tail..." he mused.

"Cap would be happy to see you again." offered Wanda. "I think we all have at least one common enemy these days."

She nodded at the figures on the floor.

Hope sighed.

"We'll get cleaned up in here. You got room for our van?"

"Not a problem."

"Hey...you take their van, you need to go pick up my bike." Ruben scowled. "If it's still there."

Mack grinned.

"If it's not, I know where we can get a new one..."

"Please," begged Scott. "Don't say Stark..."

The doors burst open, and Deathlok charged inside, guns armed. He scanned the room.

"Glad to see you're up, Mike." grinned Hunter.

"Glad to see you're not dead." he responded, powering down his weapons. "New friends?"

"Yeah," responded Mack. "A colony of them."

CODA

New York City
4 hours ago.

"I hear you....yes, I understand, Sir."

Silence.

"No, of course not. Everything is going to plan."

More silence.

"We're in position. By the end of today, everyone will really know what we're like."
He tensed, and then stabbed at the phone.

"That jackass Ross hung up on me."

The phone melted in his hand. The man sitting across from him cocked his head.

"Does it matter?"

The third man, younger than the first two, looked over. The melted slag froze on the floor.

"As long as that bitch Skye and her friends gets what's coming to them once and for all, I don't care."

The second chuckled.

"Couldn't have said it better myself. Nothing like living in a vacuum to give a ma...Inhuman...perspective."

He looked at the first man.

"Or the Raft." he needled.

JT James turned a fiery eye on the two.

"Shut it, or I'll be more than happy to make sure there's nothing left of you to regenerate."

Tucker Shockey shrugged.

"You can try..."

Donnie Gill rolled his eyes.

"You know, if Ross hadn't pulled you out of that SHIELD facility, Tucker, you'd still be in itty bitty pieces."

Shockey scowled.

"And if he hadn't found you in that Moroccan black ops cell, you'd be icing more than just the phone over here."

"Enough!" James ordered sharply, checking his watch. "It's time to go set up."

"Yes, boss..." mocked Gill, as the three moved out.

Chapter End Notes

And hello to Scott, Hope and Henry! I knew they just had to find a way to buzz back into this story... (Sorry) (Not really). Whether they'll all stick around, well....we'll see. Did I say they really don't like the Starks?
So for those not aware of our CODA players...Donnie Gill (Blizzard) was last seen in S1 after Skye shot him. His body was never recovered. At least, not by SHIELD. Tucker Shockey shows up courtesy of S4. This Inhuman (with another self-hatred complex, go figure) has the ability to blow himself up, and then regenerate. That might be slightly problematic for the One World, One People concert in New York. And we all know JT "Hellfire" James, who's shown up before.

Next stop - Yo-Yo's been here before. (And we're not talking S5 time travel...)
Like Oil and Water

Chapter Summary

In which Yo-Yo Rodriguez is none too pleased with the makeup of her Aunt Maria’s rescue team.

And a certain LMD knows just how to get under her skin...

Chapter Notes

A quick reminder, this chapter takes place roughly the same time as the last two.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ivanov Industries Oil Rig

Gulf of Mexico

"Why do villains always have to hide in places like this?" complained Yo-Yo Rodriguez, peering around a corner.

"Think it's in the code." responded Agent Piper, taking a stance behind her. "You going to check out the next staircase?"

There was a brief breeze, and Yo-Yo grinned at her friend.

"Taken care of." she replied, dropping several rifles at her feet.

Sharon Carter rolled her eyes.

"Why do I think we're excess baggage on this trip?" she asked.

"I wanted to do this alone, but..." Yo-Yo shrugged.

Piper frowned and shook her head.

"This guy...thing...is putting out a faint Darkhold trail, according to both the Brit and Strange." she noted. "It's gotta be an Ivanov robot."

As the three advanced down the staircase, Yo-Yo snorted.

"I could take that thing with one hand behind my back. Maybe even with no hands, one good kick..."

"Yeah, well, I don't want to test that theory." Sharon replied.
Suddenly, the Vision appeared in front of them, causing all three to jump.

"Christ, Viz, don't DO that to a girl." Sharon exclaimed, as Yo-Yo and Piper leaned against the wall.

"My apologies, Agent Carter, but I believe this was less obtrusive than the other options. Agent Rodriguez, I've found your aunt."

"Dios. Is she OK?"

"She appears to be unharmed, but they have restrained her. I have yet to find any trace of Ivanov."

"Keep looking!" Yo-Yo snapped.

Piper and Carter glanced at her, then away.

Vision merely nodded.

"She is two more staircases down, in a communal area. Would you like me to meet you there?"

Yo-Yo shook her head sharply.

"No, just find us the other robot in here."

Piper grimaced, as Vision sank back down through the floor. Sharon looked at them quizzically.

"What's your problem with Viz?" demanded Sharon. "You've been on his case since we were thrown together by Hill."

"It's case." responded Yo-Yo. "And we've had some bad experiences with robots recently."

Piper sighed.

"Vision is different, Yo-Yo. For one, he's on our side. For another..."

"Let's focus on getting my aunt back, then we can deal with all this."

Yo-Yo advanced down the corridor.

"Bad cases with..." Sharon started.

Piper raised an eyebrow.

"AIDA."

"Ah...we were briefed on her."

"Yeah, well, no matter what they told you, multiply it by 100. Piper sighed. "Yo-Yo was nearly murdered by the LMD replacements, I think Maria forgot about that."

"Vision was the best person for this particular job. His ability to sink through the layers of the oil rig undetected is saving us time. She really needs to knock it off."
Piper scowled.

"Easier said than..."

"You done, ladies?" Yo-Yo called, her hands on her hips.

"On our way, boss." returned Piper.

The three Agents advanced deeper into the oil rig.

As Vision had said, it took two more staircases, with Yo-Yo clearing the way, collecting the guns and knocking the Watchdog guards out. The most Carter and Piper had to do was a follow up kick to the side of the head for one or two who had begun to stir.

Piper estimated that they were well underwater by the time they found the common area. The three carefully surveyed the scene.

A woman, gagged and pale, slumped in her chair, bound around the waist and wrists. She shifted slightly from time to time, her eyes flitting warily around the room.

Otherwise, the room seemed to be empty.

They looked at each other.

"It can't be that easy." murmured Piper. "Can it?"

Sharon shrugged.

"It'd be nice to have Vision's take on this." she commented, glaring at Yo-Yo.

"It's probably having a quart of oil with Ivanov." she glared right back at Sharon. "Seriously, the only good robot is a dead one."

"Funny. I've heard that recently. Only not about robots."

Yo-Yo jerked as if stung.

"Why, you little b..."

"Enough!" Piper cut off Yo-Yo. "Focus on getting your aunt out of here. Then you two can throw down if you want."

Sharon jerked her head, and Yo-Yo nodded.

"Cover me."

The three krept into the room. The bound woman's eyes widened as Yo-Yo crossed to her side.

"Aunt Maria, are you OK?" Yo-Yo asked, removing the gag.

"Elena...a trap..." she gasped.
"Well, if it isn't the thing and her friends."

The three women whirled around, and saw Anton Ivanov leaning, his arms crossed, against the doorway.

"I think that's our line." Yo-Yo growled, as Piper and Carter's guns came up to bear on him.

Ivanov's LMD grinned, and shook its head.

"Oh, I wouldn't be too hasty, if I were you. That goes for your android, too. I've seen him lurking about."

It grinned evilly.

"I'm going to tear you to pieces so quickly, your robotic head is going to spin." Yo-Yo snarled.

She began to focus on moving, when a gasp of pain distracted her. Grimacing, Maria shook her head wildly.

"You may want to listen to your elders, thing." the LMD sneered. "She might know something you don't."

"Trap...bombs..." Maria groaned.

"Bombs. As in plural?" asked Piper.

"As in enough C4 to flood this rig in a matter of minutes."

The LMD opened his shirt. Wires dug into his chest.

"And they're all linked to my...shall we say...operational status." it sneered. "I let your aunt watch me set this up before my Watchdogs broke her ankle."

Yo-Yo bent down beside her aunt. Maria nodded.

"Si...it's everywhere. And I can't walk, let alone move fast enough."

Carter glared at the LMD.

"We can carry you." she offered, cocking the gun.

"Though my Watchdogs?"

The LMD quirked an eyebrow.

"They're no longer a threat." Carter responded.

"Did you kill them," it asked. "Or are you going to just leave them to drown?"

Yo-Yo finished untying her aunt.
"They're not our responsibility," she said, standing, and facing the LMD. "And if they were in our shoes, they'd leave us in a heartbeat."

The LMD made a sad, mocking face.

"And I thought the three of you were Agents of SHIELD and had a code. The last line of defence and all that."

"I'm not an Agent, I'm an asset. There's a difference."

"And Steve Rogers, what would he say? Knowingly leaving helpless people to die? How heroic."

The LMD stepped into the room. The women tracked him.

"And, before you say that no one would ever know...well, you would. Your lovers would. There's only enough C4 to flood this rig, not sink it. Their bodies would be found. Questions asked. What type of electronic being would I be if I didn't have a backup? The word will get out that Inhumans did this."

Yo-Yo's fists clenched, but she didn't move.

The LMD considered them.

"I'm expendable. You're going to have to knock me out to stop me. You want to take a moment and ask Coulson and May how that went? Oh, that's right, you can't ask that traitor..."

"What do you know about that?" demanded Piper.

"More than you do, little Agent." it sneered. "So, which one of you would like to die first?"

"I've heard enough."

A hand phased through the floor, and grabbed the LMD's ankle. It pulsed.

The LMD stiffened and collapsed to the floor. The rest of Vision followed, and floated gently above the rig floor.

Yo-Yo gasped. "The bombs..."

"Have been disconnected from the other side." Vision said blandly. "I apologize for my tardiness, Agent Rodriguez."

"It's...all right..." she managed to make out.

Piper grinned, and Carter didn't bother to hide her snicker.

"However, the authorities were alerted about 5 minutes ago. Ivanov's back up plan, I think." Vision continued. "And some of the Watchdogs are awakening. May I suggest that I phase the four of you up to the jet, then come back for this one. It shouldn't be discovered. An oil rig full of domestic terrorists and primed C4 should be enough for whoever gets here."

"Sounds good to me." said Carter.
"Me too." agreed Piper.

"Si, por favor." said Maria. She sharply nudged her niece.

Yo-Yo nodded, not meeting Vision's eyes.

"Then let's be off."

In the jet, flying back to the mansion, Yo-Yo approached Vision.

"Can we talk?"

"Of course, Agent Rodriguez."

The two sat down. Yo-Yo swallowed.

"I want to apologize...for the way I acted back there. Carter's right. I wasn't being fair."

Vision cocked his head.

"From what I understand, you haven't had great experiences with robots lately," he offered. "Would it help if I told you I had similar conversations with your Agent Fitz?"

Yo-Yo huffed softly.

"That doesn't surprise me. But that doesn't excuse how I acted. Carter said I sounded like a Watchdog talking about an Inhuman. She was right, and I'm sorry."

Vision blinked.

"Apology accepted, Agent Rodriguez."

"Please, call me Yo-Yo."

"Of course, Yo-Yo."

The two sat in silence for a bit.

"Tony first got involved in the Inhuman cause when I was attacked in the street. Because they thought I was one of you."

"I didn't know."

"Not important, in the overall scheme of things." He regarded her for a bit. "I think we share a common worry, right now. Wasn't Wanda on your Agent Mackenzie's team?"

"Yes, she was. Don't worry, Turtle Man will watch over her. He's good that way."

"And Wanda will do everything she can to protect them. Still, we haven't heard from them..."
"Probably won't until we meet back up at the Mansion."

Piper stuck her head through the cockpit door.

"Not even then," she called out. "We're diverting to New York."

"New York?" Yo-Yo looked at Piper. "But we're..."

"All wanted, I know. Except for you, of course, Viz. Direct orders from Hill, top speed."

Maria Hill's voice flooded the jet.

"Romanoff and Barton just checked in."

The voice paused.

"Ross suckered us all..."

---

CODA
One World, One People Concert Backstage

Tony Stark's stage manager rushed around the room, where the artists were mingling.

"All right, everyone. Got a full house...or whatever this is. Your people should have gotten the act list...and I'm looking at you, Bono. You'll have about 15 minutes each. One encore only, any more, and we're off schedule."

He glared at a group.

"Don't think I won't enforce that, Bieber, one encore, then all your electronics go dead. Now, if you want to sit in on other acts, arrange that between yourselves, I'm not your mother."

"Hey, where's Tony?"

A chorus of agreements rose with that question. The stage manager sighed.

"Got roped into some Washington thing. Said he'll be here for the after party."

"He'd better!" Laughter ensued.

"Now, if I can get the Voice and American Idol people together, we need to make sure you're all on the same page this time...."

As the manager droned on, a slight man in a suit tapped a younger woman on the shoulder. She turned around.

"You're Alison, aren't you? I'm Michael."

"Yeah, I'm a fan."

"I'm a fan of yours, I mean, the way you were turned and you kept on going, even when those
bigots in the HumansFirst were organizing that boycott. I was going to have my people call, see if there was anything I could do, but then I had to step back a little."

Alison smiled. "Yeah, your kid, right? How’s he doing?"

"He’s a fighter." Michael's face slipped for a moment. "I'll be going back right after my set. I was hoping you could join me for a song?"

She shook her head.

"Sorry, but I think you're before me. They told me that I could sit in on other acts after me, but you know, being the only Inhuman act here..."

"No, I hear you. Look, when I'm back, let's get together, see what the two of us could do."

"I'd like that."

As Michael moved away, Alison studied the artist list.

Her name was still there, about three quarters of the way down. Tony didn't want her opening, and she wasn't big enough to close, but it looked like she was sandwiched in among some of the up and comers. Besides, Beyonce had already talked to her about rocking a set.

Yeah, she was cool with that...

She went to go find a snack, leaving the artist list behind.

Highlighted in yellow was her name.

Alison "Dazzler" Blaire.

Chapter End Notes

All right, where to start on this one?

First...yes...I know Dazzler is a m***t, not an Inhuman. Some artistic license here. Besides, we needed an enhanced rock star (and I don't mean Flint). Her participation wouldn't attract anyone in particular, would it?

Secondly, you know how some groups are better on paper than in real life? When I started writing Yo-Yo with Vision, she would not cooperate. At all. It took me a while to figure it out. Yo-Yo lost a lot to AIDA and the LMDs in S4, and, as we've recently seen in S5, she can hold a grudge with the best of them. None of the Agents of SHIELD people have really had time to process S4, and so Vision took the brunt of it here. Hopefully she's worked some of her stuff out with this.

Just some series housekeeping:

This story was written because I wanted Phil Coulson (and his team) in Infinity War. I also wanted to connect the TV/movies as much as I could. In some cases, it just couldn't
happen as it would've destroyed part of the initial plot. I have more sympathy for the movie writers now...(but they still should be connected.)

I was hoping to have this completed before the movie, but then life happened. And RDJ moving the release date happened. So...yeah...I'm not going to be meeting that date. Probably not even the AOS SEASON finale. But Thanos is still on his way, so there is an endgame to this section in sight. But ends mean new beginnings, as the combined team faces down the incoming threats and deals with some older...ahem...problems.

After all, Coulson's ties are legendary....
The Superior Man

Chapter Summary

May's team heads out to rescue her parents, and deal with the Darkhold influence once and for all.

However, is everything as it seems?

Chapter Notes

A quick word from the author. Yes, I have seen Infinity War. Yes, I have extreme feelings about that ending. This work is a lead up to Infinity War, so various actions in that movie have yet to be taken here (if they are going to be taken at all).

But...that ending...in the words of one of the Avengers...

"Oh, God..."

Now, back to the story in progress.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Nameless Black Sea Resort, Russia

"My brother is reporting gunfire at the oil rig."

Anton Ivanov's head regarded his last copy.

"So, it's begun."

"Our final stand."

The LMD seemed more amused than worried. It relished a good fight, Ivanov thought. It wouldn't be false pride to assume that Coulson's blood traitor team would be sending the best after him.

"Perhaps. But no matter what happens to us today, the Superior race will win out in the end."

The LMD smirked. Did he ever look like that, Ivanov wondered, or was it just the programming?

"Your orders?"

"No, MY orders."

The LMD was on his feet like a shot, placing itself between the jar and the slight newcomer, training his gun on him.
"Who the hell are you?"

"A friend. From what I can see, Anton Ivanov, it looks like you will need one."

The newcomer laced his (hers, its) fingers behind his back and walked calmly into the room. He tossed back his hood.

"The Warden sent me. The one who set you up here."

Ivanov scowled. A few seconds later, the LMD followed suit.

The being cocked its head.

"A little...lag...in the programming?" it mocked.

"We have not heard from the Warden in sometime." Ivanov responded.

"There has been some...unrest...in our facility. The one you knew as the Warden is, unfortunately, deceased. I am your contact now."

"You don't look like the others."

"Does it matter who I look like?"

"I suppose not."

Ivanov jerked his head, and his LMD stood aside.

"What do I call you?"

The being shrugged.

"It doesn't matters. What matters is that the team...assembled...should be arriving any moment."

The LMD scoffed.

"There has been no airplanes within 20 kilometers of there for over an hour. No transports on the road, no one approaching by sea..."

The being lifted its eyebrow.

"Who said anything about planes?"

The unspoken words "you idiot" hung in the air.

"They have joined forces with Stephen Strange. They have more...unusual ways to travel in Kamar-Taj."

"See to the prisoners!"

The being stepped forward, and, with a twist of his hand, the LMD was flung to the floor.

"You follow MY orders now." He looked at the jar. "Do you understand me?"
Ivanov nodded his head.

"But I happen to agree with you. Go, see to the prisoners. Don't start harming them until their daughter arrives."

The LMD got up, scowling, but turned and hurried off without a word.

The being pinned Ivanov with a look.

"Make no mistake, I am now in charge."

The portal emerged in what looked to be a deserted cavernous room.

Melinda May crossed first, gun in hand. She looked around her and snorted.

"How cliche." She paused for a moment, then called "Clear!"

The portal shimmered, and through it came several more figures.

Dr. Strange waved his hand, and the portal winked out of existence.

Wong took up an immediate defensive position, while Strange concentrated on a tablet.

"Google Earth again?" Sam Wilson asked, preparing his weapons.

Steve Rogers chuckled.

"Hey, in the field we would have killed to have the information that Google Earth provides. Or we would've been scared that the Germans would get their hands on it, and had Stark bury it. One of the two."

"1940's HYDRA with Google Earth?" asked May, her eyes roaming the room. "I couldn't even begin to imagine. They did enough damage in our time."

"Wong..." Strange muttered. His companion stood behind Strange, reading the tablet. His face became blanker than ever.

They studied the tablet in silence.

"Well, what?" asked Sam.

Strange looked up, his face troubled.

"We know that Ivanov and his LMD are here. But their positions, they should be clearer. But they're fuzzier, almost fainter."

"Darkhold influence?" asked Wong.

"No, the Darkhold would have to be here for this, but it would still be shielding them."

"Unless the book wanted them caught?" offered May.
"Maybe. No, there's something else at play here."

Strange made a few passes, and stabbed at the tablet. He and Wong frowned again.

"OK, that's the LMD. And that's Ivanov. But there's something with him...

Wong jerked back, and glared at the tablet.

"We've seen that before."

"Yes...I believe you're right...."

Now Strange was matching Wong's glare at the tablet.

"Strange?" asked Steve.

"If he's even on the trail of the Darkhold, it's not just Earth..." Wong snarled.

"I know."

Strange snapped the tablet closed, and stalked off without another word, Wong close behind.

"Uh, Strange? The May's?" called Steve.

Strange never broke stride.

"Two floors up, second door on the right. You're dealing with the LMD."

He and Wong disappeared.

May, Steve and Sam looked at each other.

May holstered her gun. Steve opened his mouth, but May cut him off.

"I've got a lot of pent up aggression I need to get out."

Steve shut it again.

"All right, then let's move out."

"Normally, don't they tie us up together?"

William May cocked an eyebrow at his ex-wife. Lian rolled her eyes back at him.

"You've been watching too many movies. They're good, whoever they turn out to be."

"Mel's better."

"I hope so."

"Lian." Williams voice was gentle, surprising under the circumstances. "She is. You taught her well.
SHIELD taught her well. Whatever this is, they will get us out."

He shifted in his chair.

"At least they know which one of us is dangerous." he quipped.

Lian glared at him. She leaned forward, testing her chains to the wall.

"Unless they put you through the gamma ray process like Dr. Banner, my dear, that still won't work."

Lian nodded, conceding the point. She sighed.

"What if they're still holding Melinda?" she asked. "What if we're the means to break her?"

"The military would stoop so low?"

"Ross would."

"Mmmm. Then I guess we hold out as long as possible." He shrugged. "Can't say I like the idea, but I know how long I can go. You? It'll take much longer."

"Not as much as you think." Lian noted. "We may not be married anymore, but it doesn't mean I don't care. If they start on you..."

"You'll hold out." William's voice was steel. Lian raised her eyebrows.

"One of us has to make it through." he continued. His voice took on its normal, gentler tone. "Besides, I know you care. You came for me, after all."

"I..."

"What a touching scene," came a mocking voice from the doorway.

Both looked up as their captors entered the room, two of them posting themselves at the doorway. The third took a seat across from the pair.

"Who are you?" demanded William.

The other man didn't answer, instead, pulling a knife from his pocket. He chuckled grimly at William's flinch.

"Oh, not for you. At least, not yet. We can wait...make this a family affair."

May, Steve and Sam quietly moved down the hallway to the door Strange had indicated. May pulled out her tablet and scanned the room.

"Five." she whispered. "Two on the door, two in the middle, one in the back."

"All right." Steve said back. "Take them down fast. Sam, you go left, I'll go right. May, up the middle."
The other two nodded. Steve took a quick breath and put his hand on the doorknob.

Flinging the door open, Steve took several strides in, shielding his team from the first round of fire. He rammed his shield into his target, catching him under his chin, and sending him to the floor. Quickly punching him, he turned to see Sam using his tazers to drop his man, and Melinda advancing on the third.

"Knife!" Lian called, and Melinda barely dodged a vicious sweep. Her return kick barely fazed her opponent.

"Ivanov." she snarled. "Or at least your robot version."

The LMD grinned.

"Ah, Coulson's little blood traitor. I'll enjoy taking you out."

It advanced on her, stabbing and slicing with its blade.

"Captain!"

Steve looked over and threw his shield at the the chains binding Lian's arms to the wall. Taking one in both hands, she fearlessly ran up behind the LMD, wrapping the chain around its throat.

"Get away from my daughter, you bastard!"

The pull barely fazed the LMD. It grabbed the chain, giving it a sharp pull. The older woman flipped onto the floor in front of it

"Mother!"

"Lian!"

"Get down!" snapped Sam, snapping several shots off into the LMD, causing it to stumble.

May picked up the chain and wrapping it around the robot's hand, yanked hard, causing it to drop the blade. A second blow to her back sent May to the floor, where she snagged the knife up. Turning quickly, she launched herself at the thing, stabbing as hard as she could into its interior.

"You think that'll be enough to stop me?" it sneered.

"No," she growled. "But that might."

She dove to the floor. Seconds later, Steve's shield tore through the neck of the LMD, coming to rest in the wall behind it.

It collapsed to the floor, sparking.

As the team caught their breath, William lifted his head.

"Would someone please untie me now?"
"Where the hell did Strange go?" growled Melinda.

"Language!" hissed Steve.

"Agreed." chimed in William. "We brought you up better than that."

Lian and Melinda shared an exasperated look. Sam merely chuckled.

Steve held up his hand, stopping his group.

"Breathing down the hall." Steve nodded in that direction. "Probably them, consider hostile."

He gave Melinda a pointed look.

"Weapons out this time?"

Melinda glared at him but pulled her gun out. Lian followed suit, borrowing one from her daughter, William bringing up the rear with a chain.

They carefully made their way down the corridor, stopping outside the door.

"Do come in Captain." Ivanov's voice called out. "Bring your friends."

Steve hoisted his shield, nodding at the rest of the group to stay behind him.

Bursting in, the first thing the group saw were the unconscious bodies of Strange and Wong on the floor.

The second was the satisfied smirk of Anton Ivanov, underneath a glass jar.

The third...

"YOU!"

"Me." agreed Loki. "It's been a while, Captain."

"You bastard, you killed Phil!" snarled Melinda, aiming her weapon.

Loki shrugged.

"From what I heard, he got better."

He studied the angry group.

"I'm afraid Strange and Wong made a mistake." he commented idly. "They wouldn't stop to listen."

Loki cocked an eyebrow.

"Are you going to make that mistake?"

Steve threw his shield, followed by Sam, Melinda and May firing their various weapons.
Loki sighed, and waved his hand.

Steve's shield ricocheted off an invisible force field sending Ivanov's jar crashing into the floor, shattering it into pieces.

The bullets fell to the floor in front of him.

"Warden...Warden..."

Ivanov's head blinked frantically at Loki.

Loki strolled over and considered the situation. He reached down, and with a sardonic grin, separated the head from an electronic underbase.

Anton Ivanov had enough time to look shocked before the life left his eyes.

Loki turned and tossed the base at Steve's feet. He made a motion with his hand.

"Consider this a gift, Captain. A show of goodwill."

"After all you've done, you want us to believe in your...goodwill?" snapped Steve.

He motioned and the rest of the group spread out.

"You have no idea what I have or have not done." spat back Loki. "Asgard has fallen to Ragnarok, Thanos is on his way. I am the one who freed your Coulson and my oafish brother from their prison cells."

"We only have your word for that." said May.

"Ask them when they arrive, which should be soon." Loki responded.

He turned to Steve.

"My time is short. I cannot maintain a full illusion of a battle, not while I am covering for your friends. Would one of you come at me?"

Melinda threw herself at the trickster, punching and kicking with all of her skill.

"Thank you."

Loki grabbed her by her jacket, and threw her into the wall. She collapsed in a heap.

"Melinda!" William cried, rushing to her side.

"Captain, please? Your...USO...skills would be quite helpful at the moment." Loki asked, crouching in battle readiness.

Glancing at Sam and Lian who were covering the group, Steve made a face, and then rushed at Loki, grappling with him by his shoulders.

"Thank you, Captain." Loki made as if he took a blow.
"What's your game?" snarled Steve, attempting to knee him in the stomach.

"Survival. The remainder of the Asgardian people are locked in the Black Order ship. I have had to turn over the Tesseract to them. They have the stone from the NOVA corp. Thanos will be on the trail for the other stones. Earth's time stone and mind stone may be the only things that keep him from assembling the Infinity Gauntlet and destroying half of the universe with a wave of his hand."

Loki jerked his head back from a punch. Steve went to one knee from the blow to the leg.

"Thanos is on his way. We are slowing him down as much as we can, but we will not be successful. You must be ready, Steve Rogers."

"Why are you telling us this? Why not align yourself with a winning side?" gasped Steve.

Loki stilled, and a brief look of sadness passed over his face.

"I have lived through the end of my world. I do not have the desire to do that again," he admitted quietly. "There are some things that even a God of Mischief cannot stomach."

Steve's blow connected, and Loki sank to his knees. Loki stretched out his hand and a force wave swept through the room knocking them off their feet.

Loki rose.

"My time is up. The computers here, they have everything you need to tie your Secretary Ross to Ivanov. The Watchdogs. The attack on General Talbot. Everything they've done. Take back Ivanov's head. That should be enough to clear up this end. You will need as much freedom as you can get, Captain, to face down the Black Order."

He glanced at the two sorcerers.

"I have...done you a disservice...for which I apologize, Captain. I am afraid you will not be able to return to New York in time to deal with the situation there. I hope your allies are up to the task."

He raised his hood.

"Until we meet again. Watch the stars..."

Loki disappeared.

"What...the...heck...did he mean by that?" demanded Melinda. "What situation?"

"Don't know, but we're stuck here until one of these two wake up." observed Sam.

"Widow and Hawkeye can pick us up when they're done." noted Steve. "I'll get in touch with them."

"Loki...God, if Barton had been here..." came from Sam.

"While we're waiting, let's search out these computers. Could any of you crack them?" Steve asked.

"I might." offered Lian.
"If not, Fitz or Daisy can back home," commented Melinda. "It could wait."

Steve frowned.

"If what Loki said was true, maybe it can't."

Melinda nodded.

"What did he mean by..."

Her face paled.

"New York. The concert..."

They stared at each other in shock.

Steve started tapping on his com.

"Rogers to base...hello? Anyone there? Hill? Fitz? Simmons? HELLO???"

CODA 1

"Are you in place?"

"Affirmative."

"Copy"

"Yeah, sure."

Hellfire rolled his eyes at the last.

"You know what to do. Wait until the Inhuman starts her set, and then..."

"And then I start lighting it up." crackled Tucker Shockley's voice over the coms. "The first explosion should be enough to start a panic. Then I regenerate and move into the crowd again."

"And I'm on the other side to ice anyone I see heading for the doors." Donnie Gill chuckled darkly. "I can get behind that."

"And your cell, kennel leader?"

"We fire on anyone getting too close to you."

"We just need to keep the kiddies penned in until the real show stopper." Hellfire noted. "250,000 here, sold out viewings across North America."

He smiled.

"We'll bring the house down, once and for all."
Hope you're enjoying this!

Coming up next, the benefit concert of the decade - Stark Industries' One World One People.

With a few gatecrashers...both good and bad.

(Uh...who was that last group, anyways? ;) )

*Author update May 9*

Hi. So the author has learned a vital lesson. If she is planning on incorporating characters in series she hasn’t watched....then she should at least use Wikipedia to get a handle on major plot points.

Like when a character is assumed to be dead. :S

In other words, I have retconned CODA 2 by deleting it. (The Defenders showed up.) Sorry...maybe I’ll figure it out for the next series.

To make up for it, another protector of NY has made his way to the concert.

And Tony Stark’s not going to be very happy when he finds out about it...
Chapter 39 CODA: Take Two and...ACTION!

Chapter Summary

Wherein the CODA for Chapter 39 has been retconned...

Chapter Notes

Remember the tags...this is not Infinity War or Agents of SHIELD Season 5 compliant, and actually takes place prior to either the movie or finale.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Author’s Note - In the previous chapter, there was a second CODA inferring that Matt Murdock and the Defenders were on route. Then I discovered, having not actually seen any of the Netflix series, that Matt is currently assumed dead by his friends.

Oops. DELETE! (Sorry, Matt. Jessica, you're welcome.)

Here then, is the replacement CODA. With a different set of heroes.

CODA

It was a crazy scene at the One World concert. Statistically, a good portion of the kids in the audience were Inhuman, or at least had the Inhuman gene, but no one seemed to care. While most of the of the tickets had been sold at face value (or scalped for much larger amounts), Stark Industries had made sure that tickets also went out through their charitable arms.

It went without saying that the survivors from the attack on the Mace School all got in for free.

And then there were those with the VIP tickets. Surprisingly few, but still...

"I can't believe he got you backstage tickets! And you brought me!!" said one friend to another.

"Yeah, well....I sorta owe you for that last session." he replied.

The first kid stood and stared as the star passed by.

"Oh God...is that...." he gasped.

"Probably. Mr. Stark said not to bug them before they went on stage. He said he'd sneak us into the after-party."

The kid sighed.
"He said that's where all the...fun...happens."

"I'll bet."

As the two wandered out into the crowd, they brushed by a non-descript group.

"Watch it!" one of them barked.

"Hey, sorry man..."

As the group moved on their way, the second boy stopped, seeming to think hard. He looked at the group who had past them. Then he looked down quickly, then over at his friend. The other boy followed his gaze.

"Aw, no...." Ned Leeds groaned.

"I'm afraid so," responded Peter Parker, the light hairs on his arms raising of their own accord.

"You think they just want to start a fight?"

"I dunno, but Mr. Stark told me to go find Ms. Clements or Mr. Singh if I even got a tingle. Sorry, Ned. Think you'd better get out of here. I'll make it up to you somehow...call you if it was nothing."

"Aw, man..."

Chapter End Notes

And so...Peter Parker finally makes it. With his overprotective mentor stuck in Washington hearings (Sorry Tony...)

Just in time, too. The final countdown begins next chapter. Cue the synthesizers.

(And Tony Stark isn't the only overprotective guardian we've mentioned previously. There's a couple more tag-alongs for the concert.)

Personal Note - Sorry for the delay, I got caught up in the #RenewAgentsofSHIELD fight on Twitter, and then gut punched by that S5 finale (Hell no, #COULSONLIVES). I'll make it clear here, the GH-325 is safely inside Coulson in this AU - he just has to be worried about being taken out by Robbie Reyes.
The Final Countdown

Chapter Summary

The hours leading up to the One World, One People benefit concert are...hectic...to say the least.

Especially when diabolical plots are uncovered.

Chapter Notes

All right, several chapters are going to come into play here (36 and 39, to be specific). I tried my best to keep the time frame realistic, but go easy on me here...

(Nothing like painting yourself into a corner.)

Moscow, Russia

4 AM (local time)/7 PM NYC/6 PM New Avenger's Mansion

"Goddamn it, counsellor, stay with me!"

Jen Walters sagged against Clint Barton.

"I..think...you have me...mistaken...for my boss...Barton."

She closed her eyes, the red from the bullet hole in her jacket slowly spreading outwards.

"Nah, Stark can't take a bullet either. Come on, it's a just a flesh wound, keep those baby blues open..."

"They're...green...Barton."

"Meh, close enough."

Another explosion rocked the neighbourhood. Clint wondered what had been stored in the basement of Walter Moir's, the SI traitor's townhouse.

Not that Moir would ever tell anyone anything again. After he, Nat, Jen and Moir had escaped from the "gas explosion", several well placed shots made sure of Moir's eternal silence. Then Jen had gone down, and left them scrambling for a way out.

Clint mentally cursed. He should have insisted on Jen wearing Kevlar under her jacket. But it had seem like a simple information extraction, no one had thought the plot had run so deep so quickly.

Why did Ross have to always be one step ahead of them?
An older car screeched up beside him. Natasha's red hair flashed at him in the dim morning light.

"In the back!" she snapped, and Clint wrenched open the back door, pushing Jen in and slamming it shut behind them.

Natasha shot off without a warning. Jen went paler as her shoulder jostled against the back seat.

"Jesus, Nat..." complained Clint, desperately bracing himself.

"Get her patched up, first aid kit on the floor."

As Clint retrieved the kit, Natasha continued,

"Coms, cells are jammed. I'm hoping none of them saw which way we went, but I figure we've got maybe 5 minutes before they're back on our trail."

"Ross' guys or Dear Leader's?" Clint said around a mouthful of gauze.

"Take your pick. Damn!" Natasha gunned through a small space between two cars setting up a barricade. "I hoped we had more time."

Clint's eyes met Natasha's in the rearview mirror.

"Drive, Widow."

---

New Avenger's Mansion

6 AM (local)/7 AM NYC/2 PM Moscow

The phone rang insistently beside Maria Hill’s cot in the control room. She could hear Leo Fitz pick it up. It couldn't be any of the teams going after their relatives, everyone had just gone dark. As Fitz answered, Maria allowed her mind to drift. It probably wasn't important.

A hand fell on her shoulder, gently shaking it. Maria looked up into Fitz's worried eyes, as he held the phone out to her.

Or it could be life-altering.

"Hill."

"Budapest."

"Seoul. Talk to me."

"Moir gave up what he could, then unfriendlies tried to blow us all to bits. Killed him. wounded Counsellor. Minor wound, me and John Boy good. A bit of a pileup on the Inter-state over here. We just finished up with the last of them."

"Next time I get to pick the code name." came a background huff on the line.

"Hill, this is urgent. Ross knows everything that SI does. Everything about the One People Initiative, everything Tony's done. Well, maybe not his house guests, but consider everything else compromised."

So not Steve's group or Coulson's Agents, Maria mentally translated, thanking God for small favours.
Natasha’s next words made her blood chill.

"Ross is aligned with the Watchdogs, they're going to attack the concert. Kill the kids there, discredit Stark and the Inhumans once and for all."

"How?" snapped Maria.

"Moir didn't know. Would only say that a hot-head was on the team."

"Hot-head...must mean that Hellfire Inhuman...James or something like that"

"JT James." came the answer.

"All right, we've got it from here."

"We're going dark, we need to find shelter, get some fluids into Counsellor."

"Check back in in 3 hours, Budapest."

"If we can. Out."

Maria hung up the phone, and turned to Fitz and Simmons.

"Concert's compromised. I need everything you have on JT James, and get Agent Johnson and Ms. Clements on the line."

As the two swiftly turned to their computers, Maria picked up the phone and dialed the first number.

"You have reached the life model decoy of Tony Stark, leave a message after the beep. If this is an urgent message, leave it urgently...."

Maria pinched the bridge of her nose.

Stark....

---

**Stark Tower, NYC**

8:00 AM (local)/7:00 AM New Avengers Tower/3 PM Moscow

Cassandra Clements, Daisy Johnson and Vijay Singh sat in their chairs, concentrating on the image of Maria on the holoscreen.

"...and we've tried everything, but we have not been able to raise Tony or Rhodes."

Vijay concentrated on his tablet, wincing a little. He looked up, shaking his head.

"Both of them have just entered the Congressional hearings. They're sealing them to the public. I'll try to get though on his glasses...oh. He's exchanging them with a page."

Everyone groaned.

Vijay flicked at his tablet, then passed it over to Daisy.

"Is that..."
"Yeah. That's Ross. This seems to be a little beneath him."

Daisy watched as Thaddeus Ross made himself comfortable, then looked up into the nearest camera and...smirked?

"Oh shit...he knows..."

"Yeah," Vijay looked up. "We've been played."

"Cancel the show." demanded Maria.

Cass shook her head.

"Too late. Gate lineups have been there for 3 days, simulcasts are set up. Artists, vendors, non-profits have set up. It would be a disaster to SI and the One World Foundation to not go on."

Vijay looked at her in horror.

"It would be even more of a disaster if they blew up the stadium with everyone inside."

Daisy squared her shoulders.

"That's only if they succeed. Look, if we move in right now, Hellfire will just spring whatever they've cooked up early. There's enough people already there for this to be a disaster."

She looked at Maria.

"We'll handle it from here, Director Hill. We'll just have to adapt on the ground, play it by ear like we always do."

Maria grimaced. "That doesn't sound like someone trained under Coulson."

Daisy shrugged. "We've all changed over the last five years. Coulson as well."

Maria sighed. "So what, you, Cass, Vijay, Bobbi and her terror are going to stop whatever Ross has planned all on your own? May I remind you that you are still an international fugitive?"

Cass stood up, seeming to decide something.

"Maybe that's not all, Director Hill. I need to make a phone call."

She quickly let herself out of the room.

Maria raised an eyebrow.

"What's that about?"

"Haven't a clue." responded Vijay.

---

**New Avenger's Mansion**

8 AM (local)/9 AM NYC/3 PM Moscow

"Director Hill," called out FRIDAY. "Urgent incoming message from Captain Rogers."

"Thank God." breathed Maria. "FRIDAY, any luck in getting through to Stark and Rhodes?"
"Negative, Director."

"Well, keep trying. Put Rogers through."

"Hill, anyone, hello?"

"Iceberg, it is good to hear your voice."

"That is the last time I let Budapest choose code names. It's good to hear you too."

"Status report."

"Objectives achieved. Hostages secured, MODOK is dead."

"Who?"

"The guy in the jar, the Darkhold guy." There was a pause. "Everyone fine, except for Penn & Teller. Knocked out. We're going to need a ride home."

"That might be complicated, Iceberg."

"Figures. Hill, the One World concert needs to be cancelled."

"That's a negative, although we already have intel from Budapest's team. We know about the attack."

"How much?"

"Not very."

"Hill, this is Ripley." an annoyed female voice joined the conversation. "The attackers intend to launch attacks within the audience just prior to the Inhuman artist Dazzler's set. Then they plan on setting off explosives, bringing down the stadium. We've identified the main attackers, although Watchdogs may also be involved. My team have had prior dealings with them. JT James - Inhuman with fire power, Donnie Gill - ex SHIELD, powered with ice, we thought he was dead. And Tucker Shockley. Inhuman with the power to blow himself up, and then regenerate."

"Lovely..." groaned Maria. "We're already too far gone to cancel. Shakes thinks they'll launch the attack now if we try to cancel and evacuate."

"She’s probably right. Look, we’ll try to wake up Penn here get back to New York, but it doesn’t look good."

"We’ll try to get Budapest over to you. In the meantime, hold tight. Maple Leaf may might have something up her sleeve."

"I hope so. We’ll await your call. Out."

Maria turned to see FitzSimmons behind her.

"Sorry, Director." Jemma said. "But we overheard...Shockley? Tucker Shockley?"

"That’s right."

They looked at each other.
"Director, Mr. Stark collected a lot of old SHIELD tech from the past year. He’s got what we used on Shockley before...but we thought he was still in there."

"Ross must have gotten to it first." Their words soaked in. "What do you mean, still in there?"

"Long story." replied Jemma. "We need to get it to New York."

Maria nodded.

"Wheels up in 10?"

"Only if we get some help in getting it on the jet."

"Let’s go!"

---

**Stark Tower, NYC**

9 AM (local)/8 AM New Avengers Tower

"What do you mean they were already in New York? And how long have they been here?" Cass snapped into the phone.

"You wanted backup, I sent you what’s on hand."

"Oh no, you’re not getting out of this. I said I could handle myself, and you posted them to the UN delegation? That’s a little overkill."

An exasperated sigh came over the line.

"No, chérie. Overkill would have been the entire squad. And the RCMP contingent your mother wanted me to send."

"Would have outing you, Uncle."

"That's coming soon anyways." replied Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. "And let's stick to the subject at hand, shall we? Tony contacted me a couple of days ago. when he realized the timing. He's in Washington, we both agreed a little back up couldn't hurt."

"I can protect myself from any Watchdog, I thought I proved that."

"You're also MY niece. At a concert designed to be in the face of any Inhuman bigot that's out there. Just humor me a little. Please?"

"Fine." sighed Cass. "But they're under our command over here."

"For today, as long as they follow my orders to protect you." Trudeau paused. "You know, Cassie, now that you have a handle on your powers, it might be time to discuss coming back home. Joining Alpha Flight."

"Uncle...I'm part of Tony's team, for the moment, anyways." She hesitated, choosing her next words carefully. "There's stuff going on down here...it's big. I'm a part of that right now. And afterwards...there's a guy I need you and Mom to meet."
"That, I knew about. I'd be honored to meet Vijay. Just...be careful. All right?"

"Always. Je t'aime."

"Je t'aime."

Cass hung up the phone, and turned to the trio in the boardroom.

"All right, come on. We can use some extra boots on the ground."

James Hudson, Guardian of Alpha Flight, the team’s leader grinned at her.

"At least I only brought the twins." he commented.

Jean-Paul Beaubier, Northstar of Alpha Flight, folded his arms.

"At least it was James, and not Heather." Jean-Paul observed.

His sister, Jeanne-Marie, Aurora of Alpha Flight, mimicked her brother.

"Yeah, Heather would keep us all on a tight leash. Especially you..." She shot a look at her twin.

"Well, until this concert is over, none of us are going to be up to anything."

Cass grabbed her bag.

"Come on, I'll brief you in the car."

---

**One World, One People Concert, NYC**

*10 AM*

The gates were opened, and people were pouring into the stadium. Vijay cursed softly, his eyes on the screen.

"Even with Fitz's facial recognition system, it's going to be like looking for needles in a haystack."

"Keep looking, Vijay. We have to find them soon." Daisy responded, looking over his shoulder.

Cass shook her head. "So many..."

"The power of Tony Stark with a cause." came Bobbi Morse's voice over the coms.

"I got a suggestion." chimed in her partner, Lance Hunter. "We go at this both ways. Daisy has to keep a low profile, she stays in the booth with Vijay, works the computer angle. The rest of us go into the crowd, try to track these idiots down."

"Hate to say it, but that's not a bad idea." commented Morse.

"Repeat that, Morse, something wrong with my com. Could've sworn I heard you say..."

"Can it. We're going to need teams out here anyways to take them down. None of the three know us on sight, they all know Daisy. You two quarterback from up there, and the rest of us fan out."
"Three." Guardian's voice was firm. "Cassandra stays off the field. Watchdogs know her too well."

Cass rolled her eyes.

"Yes, Dad."

"She could come with us." suggested Northstar.

"Those are our orders from up top. You want to tell La Ombre we lost his niece?"

"Err...not really."

"Uncle has a code name?"

"We didn't tell you that."

"All right." said Daisy. "Morse, Hunter, Alpha Flight, you spread out, keep your eyes open."

Her Starkphone rumbled at her. Daisy took a quick look at her texts.

"Director Hill and FitzSimmons are on the ground, with Shockley's containment unit. Let's hope we don't have to use it."

Daisy's expression didn't look too hopeful.

"Jemma and Leo should stay with the plane." came from Hunter. "But we could use more eyes on the ground. Director Hill doing anything?"

"Why Hunter," quipped Morse. "Two good ideas in the same meeting?"

"Shut it, Bobs."

Daisy grinned.

"I'll get her out to you when she's got the unit set up."

"How hard can it be to get a giant vacuum cleaner set up?" asked Hunter.

"Excuse me...did you say vacuum?" asked Aurora.

"Yeah!"

"Américains fous..." she muttered.

Northstar snickered.

"We take no responsibility for Hunter." chimed in Morse. "He's British."

"That makes it any better?" Aurora asked.

"Enough!" ordered Guardian.

The Alpha Flight twins subsided.
"OK...everyone has their orders. Let's go." ordered Daisy.

A chorus of affirmatives, in several languages (Hunter's Korean was a little unnecessary) came over the coms, then silence.

Daisy turned back to the screens.

"Come on, James...Where are you?"

---

One World, One People Concert, NYC  
11:30 AM

"Excuse me?"

The slight teenager standing at the door looked out of place. Daisy straightened up from the computer screens, and gave him a tired smile.

"Ms. Clements about?"

Daisy looked over at Cass, who was frowning slightly.

"That's me."

"So glad I found you Ms. Clements. My name's Peter. Peter Parker? Mr. Stark might have mentioned me..."

Daisy's eyebrows rose.

Cass walked over to him quickly.

"Yes, he did, Mr. Parker. And he mentioned your gifts."

She drew him further into the control room.

"And he mentioned that he didn't want Peter involved in any way if something happened." grumbled Vijay.

"I know, Mr. Nadeer. I sent Ned home already." mumbled Peter.

"Why?" asked Daisy.

Peter looked over, did a double take.

"Oh my...you're Quake! That Inhuman...it's...an...honor...or something..."

Daisy sighed.

"It's OK, kid. Why do you need us?"

Peter swallowed, looking around the room.
"Did Mr. Stark tell you I could sense danger? Hairs on my arms stand up."

"And you sensed it, didn't you?"

"A group of guys bumped into me and Ned. Normally if I move away from the source, it goes down."

Peter showed them his arms. All of the hairs on them were standing on end.

"I don't think it's you, Ms. Quake. Even if you're on the most wanted list. It's been like this since we ran into those guys."

Peter paused, his brow furrowing.

"Why are you here, though? Does Mr. Stark know you're here?"

Daisy narrowed her eyes.

"He'll explain later."

Peter nodded.

"Right..."

Vijay appraised the situation.

"Kid...Peter...you say you sense danger?"

"Yeah."

"I wanna try something. Let's look through the screens. We're trying to track down the bad guys."

Peter shrugged.

"OK."

The two stared at the monitor for some time. Then Peter cocked his head, and pointed.

"There. Something's happening there."

Vijay paused and zoomed in. Then he smiled.

"Not our guy, but someone's purse just got stolen."

"Not very nice." objected Peter.

"No, but we're looking for bigger fish to fry."

Vijay looked over at Cass and Daisy.

"I'm keeping him. We'll be able to sort through the crowd quicker now."
Cass checked the clock.

"Good. Because we're running out of time. They're taking the stage."

12:00 PM

"NYC Inhumans and Allies, make some NOISE...."

Chapter End Notes

I have to step away from the story for a moment. It hit me as I was writing this that this story has gone on for a year. A YEAR!! What started with a way to shoehorn Director/Agent Phil Coulson and Agents of SHIELD into Infinity War and my attempt to connect the two sides grew to be quite a bit more than that. Quite frankly, I never expected that. Thanks to everyone who's joined me on this journey, who've subscribed, bookmarked, left kudos and comments along the way. You all rock!

Now, back to the story.

Just a quick note - remember that we established that current Canadian PM Justin Trudeau is an unregistered Inhuman with powers of invisibility. His Alpha Flight code name is not canon, and translated from French is - "The Shadow". No links to any other heroes or figures, Marvel or otherwise is intended. And, as always with real people dragged in, is meant with nothing but respect.

Secondly, yes, I know that Northstar and Aurora from Canada's Alpha Flight are mutants, not Inhumans. But they're not part of the MCU yet. So here they are.

Next chapter: The final showdown is here...and one must become the shield.
What it Means (To Be The Shield)

Chapter Summary

All of Thaddeus Ross' plotting, planning & conniving leads to here...The One World, One People Benefit Concert has begun, and there are some...unadvertised... additions in the crowd.

Can Daisy and her team take down Hellfire and the remainder of Ross' team before tragedy strikes?

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning: There is a character death (not seen, but the circumstances leading to the death are described) in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One World, One People Benefit Concert, NYC

12:00 PM

"Enough, Bobbi." scolded Maria Hill.

"What? He's the one..." protested Bobbi Morse.

"You said the words 'High Noon.'"

"She did at that." agreed Lance Hunter cheerfully.

"Hunter, so help us, if we hear wa waa waaaa, one more time..." threatened Aurora.

"Better than who they have onstage right now." snickered her twin, Northstar.

"Guys, focus!" ordered Daisy Johnson. "We have four hours until Dazzler is scheduled to go on stage, and Hellfire's team springs whatever they have planned."

"Are you really going to let her onstage if we can't find them?" asked Guardian.

"No, we've already let her know that she might have to...fall ill." responded Cassandra Clements over the line. "Didn't go into specifics, but she knows something's up. She'll play ball."

"But knowing James," continued Daisy, "He'll spring the trap anyways, and Ross's team will be there to make sure Stark and the Inhumans take the blame."

"How're we doing, Vijay?" asked Maria.
"Parker and I are still skimming the crowd," Vijay Nadeer responded. "There's a lot of movement, it's hiding the major stuff."

There was a brief exclamation in the background.

"Hang on."

Silence reigned over the coms as the team members strained to hear which way to go over the heavy bassline from the concert's speakers.

"Peter's got something, passing him through." Vijay finally came back with.

"Uh, yeah, so those guys who bumped into me and Ned? There's about five? They're in the northwest quadrant of the stadium?"

"Running facial recognition..." Vijay muttered. "There we go, hits on three of them. Confirmed Watchdogs. Sending the location to you...now."

"They're just up ahead, boss." claimed Aurora.

"We're just around the corner." shot back Bobbi.

"How'd you guys wind up in the same area?" asked Maria.

"Never mind," Daisy sighed. "Alpha Flight, take lead. Minimal use of powers if possible. Bobbi, you and Hunter be ready to back them up."

"Got it, Quake." responded Guardian. "Let's move."

"On it, boss." came from Hunter.

Daisy and Cassandra traded looks in the control booth.

"Hope this works..." Daisy muttered.

Guardian held back his teammates. The knot of Watchdogs huddled in front of them.

"Alors, boss. We could take them on our own." complained Northstar.

"Not the point. The point here is to play nicely with Tony Stark's team." commented Guardian. "And keep everyone under the radar. Your usual tricks wouldn't do either."

Aurora snickered.

"What's the plan?" she asked.

"I'm thinking it's hard to hit what you can't see. And those two SHIELD guys over there? They're much better at hand to hand than you two."

The three looked at each other.
"They're not being that subtle, boss." Aurora jerked her head at the pair approaching from the south, bickering as usual.

"Agent Morse, ears on?" Guardian muttered.

"What do you need?" she asked, stopping her partner under cover of stealing his popcorn.

"Can you do quiet?"

"I can. Hunter, on the other hand..."

"Can be very quiet when called for." Hunter snorted.

"We'll need to move fast. We'll set them up, you knock them down."

Morse's eyebrows rose.

"Yeah, we can do that."

"All right, twins, just like in Winnipeg."

"Ah...I see. Good times." grinned Northstar.

"Hunter, Morse, can you get a little closer, please?"

"He said 'please' on an op?" asked Hunter.

"He's Canadian."

Guardian rolled his eyes as he watched Hunter and Morse move unobtrusively within striking distance of the Watchdog group.

He nodded at Northstar and Aurora, and let them take the lead.

"Imbecile!" Aurora yelled at her brother, shoving him towards their enemies.

"What's it now?" Northstar played along.

"You just couldn't keep your hands off him, could you?" she asked as they advanced.

"How was I supposed to know you were dating him?" was the rejoinder, getting into position.

"We kissed, you saw us kiss!"

"Hey, watch it!" came from one irritated Watchdog, as the two pushed into the center.

"Dommage...err...sorry..." Northstar pointed at his sister. "Her fault."

"I LIKED him!" she screamed.

"Well, he liked ME better!"
All eyes were now on the sibling spat.

"You ass..."

On some unspoken signal, the two siblings broke off and sprayed what seemed to be light and coloured beams into their opponents eyes, blinding them.

As the Watchdogs bent over in pain, cursing, Hunter quickly chopped the first across the back of the neck of the first, kicking him in the head as he hit the ground. Bobbie stunned the first with the tazer end of her staves, following up with a bash in the back of the head of the second. Guardian's left hook took care of the third, and an elbow to the midsection dropped the fourth. A light gust of wind, and the fifth mysteriously flopped down beside the rest.

Guardian shook his head.

"Jean-Paul..."

"Wasn't me, James."

Aurora merely grinned.

Hunter looked at Bobbi.

"Oh, I like them. I REALLY like them."

Bobbi sighed, and exchanged a look with Guardian. Northstar and Aurora smirked.

"Can we keep them?" Hunter persisted.

"No, Hunter..."

1:30 PM

"OK, SI security has the Watchdogs in hand."

Daisy scowled at the monitors.

"Where's the rest?"

The four in the main control booth continued to scan the feeds.

A com crackled.

"Any word from Stark?" asked Bobbi.

"No, nothing. I think they may be getting jammed from the inside." reported Vijay. "I'd try to focus on that, but then I'd have to drop the security feeds."

"That's more important." agreed Maria. "Keep trying when you can."
They continued to watch the feeds, getting sporadic input from the team on the ground. Finally, Cassie leaned forward.

"Hey, Peter, over here!"

Peter moved over to her side, and turned pale.

"Aww...I told him to go home!"

Peter sprinted for the door.

"Wait, Peter, the field teams..."

"No time, Ms. Johnson. Be back in a moment!"

There was a flash of red, and the teen was gone.

"Was that the suit?" Cassie groaned.

"Yep." Daisy responded, zooming on on the section, her eyes scanning the field.

"Tony's going to KILL us." Cassie continued.

"Keep looking for James and Shockley." Daisy ordered.

She punched the com link.

"We got a problem at the back of the stadium. Spiderman is going in without backup. And he's going up against Donnie Gill..."

"Crap! Send me the coordinates..."

"You know...." Donnie Gill mused, leaning his hand up against the gate, ice forming even thicker around the teen already imprisoned in the sheet. "You're not doing a great job convincing me you're not with Stark."

"I'm...not..." chattered Ned Leeds. "I...got...lost..."

"And wound up in my gear?" Gill shook his head. "Try again."

"Fine....I was...sneaking back into...the show...

"Through here?"

"Didn't want anyone to see me....supposed to be home...."

"Maybe." Gill's eyes narrowed. "You picked the wrong entrance, kid."

"Won't tell..."

"No." Gill walked over to Ned, within touching distance. "You won't."
He stretched out his hand towards Ned's face.

THWIP! A glob of webbing covered Gill's hand, jerking it back.

"Hey, Frosty! Don't they need you over at the shaved ice stand? Think they're running low."

Ned sighed in relief. Gill turned around.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Just your friendly neighbourhood Spiderman. Why don't you step away from the kid?"

"Make me." Gill sneered, and, reaching down flung an icy projectile at Spidey, who dodged it easily.

"Really? A snowball fight?" he started, then was flung forward by a small shock, with jagged ice shards bouncing off his uniform.

"Oof!"

"Ice bombs, Spider..."

"Shut up kid!" growled Gill, icing over his mouth.

"I said, hands off!"

THWIP THWIP. Webbing wrapped around Gill's arms, jerking him up and over his weapons stash, and into the refuge area, currently unoccupied.

Gill grabbed the webbing, freezing and shattering it.

"You got anything else, insect boy?"

"I'm pretty good in a fight," Spidey responded, "Although, I don't particularly want to get up close and personal with you. I'm sure you're wintermint fresh..."

Spidey hopped up onto the back fence as Gill rushed him.

THWIP! Webbing shot into Gill's eyes. Shaking his head, Gill slammed his hands against the wall, covering it in a layer of frost.

"Whoops!" Spidey lost his foothold on the slick surface. He lept off, bounced off Gill's head, and picked up a recovering crouch between him and Ned.

"I should let you melt by yourself." he called over his shoulder. Ned's eyes conveyed his apologies.

As Gill disposed of the webbing, Spidey heard a familiar voice call out.

"Spiderman, duck!"

As Spidey hit the ground, a couple of shots hit Gill, who slumped to the ground.
"Nice shooting," Spidey complemented Maria Hill, picking her way across the empty stands. "I totally had him, though."

"I'm sure you did," she responded. "But we need your eyes back in the control booth, not down here."

Spidey quickly smashed the ice covering Ned's mouth, then he turned, and wrapped up the unconscious Donnie Gill.

"Hey, an ICER taking down the Iceman here..."

Maria glared at him.

"Get your ass back up to control. I'll get your...the kid...over to our med team."

Spidey nodded and quickly sped off. Maria's gaze drifted to Ned, who blanched.

"You're scary." he got out through chattering teeth.

"Thank you." Maria leaned in closer. "Want to tell me what you're doing back here, Mr. Leeds?"

Ned gulped.

3:15 PM

"We're running out of time..."

"We know."

"Where the hell are they?"

"Vraiment."

Cassie and Daisy moved backstage among the remaining acts.

"Dazzler's up next."

"I know." Daisy growled. "Peter and Vijay have been over the grounds with a fine tooth comb. Wherever they are, they're not there."

"If they're back here, they're sticking to the blind spots. Daisy, you circulate up here. If either one of them is going towards the audience, you're better suited to handle them. I'll head downstairs." Cassie rubbed her neck. "I don't like splitting up, but we have to find them."

"All right, just be careful."

Cassie reached out and squeezed her friend's shoulder.

"Always."

Daisy watched Cassie disappear out of sight. Her powers would keep her safe, and the rest of Alpha
Flight should be on her tail as soon as Daisy or Vijay contacted them.

She hoped.

Daisy heard the cheers as the next act took the stage. Then she heard a chilling voice over the mic.

"Is it just me, or do you show up at every benefit concert?"

She took off towards the stage.

"Who the fuck are you?" the lead singer asked the leather jacketed man.

"Just trying to fire up the proceedings...."

Daisy's forcequake shot Hellfire back into the wings. Running past the startled band, she yelled over her shoulder, "Keep playing!"

The singer shrugged and called over to his band mates, "You heard the lady, boys."

Turning to the mic, he called out "Unos, dos, tres, catorce!"

As the bass line launched, Daisy followed Hellfire closely, herding him away from the backstage area, her force blows keeping him off balance, never giving him a chance to concentrate on his flame ability.

"Knew you missed me, sweetheart," he mocked, finally igniting his chain, and letting it fly at her. "You ever find your precious Director?"

Daisy let the chain wrap around her gauntlets, and vibrated through them to the other Inhuman, forcing him to drop it. The mention of Coulson might have caused her to put a little more force into the wave she sent at him.

It sent him through the temporary wall, into the empty lot behind. She jumped out after him, dodging the flame blast sent after her.

"I'm so sorry, is he not home yet? I guess the superior men won after all..."

"You are a PIG, James."

"I'm not the one being served up on a platter, or haven't you figured it out yet?"

As Daisy advanced on the retreating James, he fired one more flame. Daisy's shockwave laid him out at the end of the lot. He lay there, gasping for air.

Daisy jumped to his side, aiming at him point blank.

"Surrender!"

"Yeah, I'm done. Besides, it's much more fun this way."

He leered up at the young Inhuman.
"I want to watch your face when the world comes down around you."

"Talk, NOW, James. We've won, there's nothing left for you."

"Do you really? We're not that stupid. There's always a Plan B. This time...it's me."

He lifted his wrist, a watch with large digital numbers flashed red before their eyes.

3:58

"You never did find Tucker, did you, darlin'?"

Daisy shut out his laughter, knocking him out with a well placed blow.

She looked towards the stage.

Time had run out.

3:59

3:45

"Cass, I don't like this."

Cassie frowned at Vijay's unhappy voice, but continued down the stairs.

"You said you'd stay with Daisy, love..."

"No time, Vijay. Besides, you said she was busy with Hellfire."

"Looks like they were settling some old scores." Vijay paused. "Cass, can you at least wait until Guardian and the twins catch up? I'm still getting an earful that you went off on your own."

"What part of running out of time did they not get? I'm about to the last level."

She turned the corner, and her eyebrows raised.

"This is new."

"What...wait...Cassie, we're not seeing you on screen."

"I bet you're not." Cassie returned. "Refocus your screen."

A pause.

"Damn. They had it on a time loop."

"We weren't looking for it."

Cassie swallowed at the large hole in the cement wall which led into the darkness.

"I'm going in."

"CASS!"
"Dazzler's on in 10, Daisy's not there to stop her. She's the key. I'm all you got right now."

Cassie made her way through the short tunnel, heading towards the faint light.

She stopped short at the end of it. Hands shaking she activated her video cam.

"Vijay," she hissed. "Can you see this?"

"Oh, God." came a shocked response. "Enough explosives to level the stadium. Cass, you're right underneath the field."

She checked the time.

3:55

"Can you get at the trigger, Vijay?"

"It's not...Cass...the trigger isn't electronic."

"It's biological." Cassie swallowed. "When Shockley blows himself up, he'll activate it. Kill everyone."

"Get out of there." Vijay pleaded.

Cass's voice trembled, but was steady.

"Even if I did, Vijay, I'd never get past the shock blast. None of us would. I can stop him."

3:57

Shockley had his back turned to the tunnel opening. Cassie could see earbuds in his ears, masking her presence. He bowed his head, beginning to concentrate.

"I can stop him. I can contain the blast."

"But you have to...Cass, no..."

"Love you, Vijay."

Cassie took the com out of her ear, and put her phone on the ground. She faintly heard steps coming down the stairs behind her outside the tunnel.

She hoped her family wouldn't be too hard on the others. It had almost worked.

3:58

It was time.

Guardian snarled, leaping down the stairs, Aurora and the Parker kid behind him.

"Tell Cassandra to stand down!"

"I'm trying, she's not listening...time's running out. I think...oh, God."

"What?"
Another level.

"...Enough explosives to level the stadium. Cass, you're right underneath the field..."

"Get her out of there!" Guardian yelled

"...the trigger isn't electronic..."

"We're almost there...Parker, get BACK!"

Spidey had leaped over the Canadians' heads, and made it to the basement level. As he charged towards the tunnel entrance, the room rocked, as if an earthquake had struck, knocking him back.

Guardian grabbed the two heroes, covering them with his body.

As the shockwave stopped, Guardian heard Hunter through the com link. Dazed, he tapped on the device.

"What the hell was that? I thought Dazzler could only do fireworks. The kids are going crazy out here. In a good way. Daisy, was that you?"

"Negative, I'm out here with James. Northstar just checked in. Vijay, Cass, what do you have?"

Silence over the coms.

"Vijay, Cassandra, come in! Who has eyes on them?" Daisy demanded.

Guardian coughed, as Spidey and Aurora rolled to their feet.

"Vijay last saw Cass. We think...she was with Shockley. Advancing now."

Aurora stopped Spidey in his advance.

"Non, not you. Go back, s'il te plait, we need eyes on Vijay. He..." she swallowed hard. "He will need a friend."

Spidey looked like he would protest, then nodded, and ran back up the stairs.

"Thank you, Jeanne-Marie," Guardian felt old. "He shouldn't..."

"Have to see what we're going to find." Aurora concluded. "I have your back, Guardian."

They carefully climbed over the rubble and into the tunnel.

Maria Hill ran into the control centre. Vijay sat as the desk, in obvious shock.

"Eyes on Nadeer." she quietly said into her com.

"Vijay."
He shook his head.

"I tried to stop her. But there was no time."

He put his face in his hand.

"She...tackled him. Bought a couple of seconds that she could wrap her field around them and the C4. I didn't know she was that strong, or she could expand her reach that far. And then..."

He gestured at the computer screen, now black.

"The phone went dead with the explosion..."

He crumpled to the floor, and Maria went down beside him, wrapping her arms around him, her tears joining his.

After a while, Daisy joined them.

"We have Shockley. Guardian knocked him out as he regenerated. Fitzsimmons have his container. They're waiting for him to wake up."

Vijay nodded dumbly.

"I'm so sorry..."

One by one, the rest of the team gathered in the control room. From somewhere, Hunter pulled out a flask.

"We'll do this better, later, with everyone else...Cass, she never took our oath. But she had the heart of a Agent. And she died one today, protecting the rest of us...everyone out there. She was...is...just as much of a hero as any Avenger."

He raised the bottle.

"Godspeed, Cassandra Clements."

Chapter End Notes

This chapter took me twice as long to write, because a.) I suck at writing fight scenes, and there were three of them, and b.) more importantly, I did not want to let go of Cassie. But, as we've seen in the MCU, sometimes there is a price to be paid when saving the world. Sometimes we don't get to choose who pays it. They're (I'm) going to miss my Canadian heroine.

Next up, we're going to give these guys a little breathing room, and jump forward a few weeks for the aftermath of this whole mess.

And didn't this all start off with saving Phil Coulson? Hmmm...

(Oh, and one final note? The group Daisy saves from Hellfire is U2, who promptly
launch into Vertigo from their album How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb. No irony intended...
Chapter Summary

The fallout from the One World, One People concert. And Tony Stark has some heart to hearts...

Chapter Notes

Notes - For final chapters we are going to get some leadups to Infinity War. Warning for potential spoilers.

Entertainment Tonight ~ Liz Olsen

When Tony Stark throws a party, he really throws a bash. Over 15 million people world-wide caught his One World, One People benefit concert, including the standing room only crowd here in New York. A staggering $30 million was raised for its namesake foundation, although chairman Vijay Nadeer said it was too early to say how those funds would be used.

It was a coming out party for Alison Blaire, the Dazzler, whose set literally rocked the audience, with her trademark fireworks amplified at the start of her set to the delight of the crowd.

Also crashing the event was the wanted Inhuman vigilante, SHIELD Agent Daisy "Quake" Johnson, whose quick thinking and actions saved the crowd from rogue Inhuman, JT "Hellfire" James. Quake didn't stick around, disappearing after turning over Hellfire to SI security.

"We're bloody lucky Quake was there," commented U2 frontman Bono, whose set was interrupted. "We were sitting ducks up there. Who knows what might have happened?"

The Globe & Mail ~ Ryan Reynolds

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said goodbye to his niece, Cassandra Clements yesterday, in a simple ceremony under overcast skies. Ms. Clement died last week in a training accident with Alpha Flight in New York City. She was 28.

A reserve member with Alpha Flight, the secretive Inhuman defense force formed after the initial wave of transformations had struck the world, the circumstances of her death are unclear. Citing operational security, Alpha Flight leader James Hudson declined to comment on Ms. Clements, calling her loss "tragic" and one they were "coming to terms" with.

The funeral was noted by the attendance of Tony Stark, close friend of the Prime Minister and the Princess Shuri, sister of reclusive Wakandan King T'Challa. Also in attendance was Vijay Nadeer, chairman of the Stark Industry's One World, One People Foundation.
The loss of Ms. Clements prompted a wave of sympathy from across the political spectrum. It was marred yesterday when MP Kellie Leitch demanded to know whether the Prime Minister was, in fact, Inhuman himself, triggering protests for her lack of compassion. Conservative leader Andrew Scheer distanced himself from her comments, calling the timing "insensitive".

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**The Washington Post - Mark Ruffalo**

Scandal in Washington tonight, as Secretary of State, Thaddeus Ross, has been charged with multiple counts of first degree murder, attempted murder, bribery and treason. He has been immediately stripped of his post and incarcerated on the Raft to await trial.

After a multi-jurisdiction investigation, the former Secretary has been charged with first degree murder in the death of former President Matthew Ellis and the death of unarmed civilians at the massacre at the Jeffrey Mace Memorial Educational Centre. He is charged with the attempted murders of the schoolchildren, rescued by Iron Man and War Machine, as well as the attempted murders of Brigadier General Glenn Talbot, SI Foundation chairman Vijay Nadeer and the late Cassandra Clements. Through SI counsel, Jen Walters, Mr. Stark and Mr. Nadeer have declined to comment.

In a bizarre twist, evidence has been uncovered showing payments to Mr. Ross from Russian oil magnate Anton Ivanov, leading to charges of bribery and treason. Documents obtained suggest a plot to further destabilize the United States through the persecution of the people known as Inhumans, through official policy and use of domestic terrorist groups such as the Watchdogs. Mr. Ivanov is currently wanted by the Russian government due to suspected involvement in terrorist attacks on the Baltic Sea, and is suspected to be in hiding somewhere in Eastern Europe.

A noted critic of enhanced humans (particularly of Dr. Bruce Banner), Mr. Ross rose to prominence after the wave of outrage of many after the attacks in Sokavia and in Nigeria. However, questions have arisen surrounding the overall reach of what is known as the Sokavia Accords, and question the legality of many of its tenements, particularly the forced registration of enhanced humans such as the Avengers and the Inhumans.

Through his lawyer, Mr. Ross denies all charges, and looks forward to his day in court.

(More on this story, Page 3)

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**Reuters - Chris Evans**

As widely expected, the President today tapped veteran Senator Clark Gregg (Democrat, NC) as the designated Secretary of State, replacing disgraced former Secretary Thaddeus Ross. His confirmation is expected, with rumblings of a filibuster by the members of the "Humans First" caucus seen mostly as sour grapes.

Long known for his support of civil rights, Senator Gregg's expert handling of the inquiry into the Strategic Homeland Intervention Enforcement and Logistics Division (SHIELD) impressed many both in Washington and around the world. The testimony of Col. Glenn Talbot, SI tycoon Tony Stark, former SHIELD deputy Maria Hill, and in-camera testimony from British Intelligence were instrumental in uncovering the plot to destabilize the United States as well as vindicate senior SHIELD personnel (such as Agent Daisy "Quake" Johnson) in the charges levied against them.
Senator Gregg said he was honoured by the appointment, and looked forward to representing the United States to all nations and all peoples.

**Washington, DC**

Tony Stark took off his sunglasses.

You can’t tell me you didn’t want State, Jay. What gives?”

Senator Jason Thompson chuckled.

"Actually, I didn’t. I’m still too new for something like that. Besides, after what you lot put him through in the hearings, Clark probably deserves it.”

Jason rubbed his nose.

"Did you have to bring in Ivanov’s head?”

Tony smirked.

"It certainly gave us the credibility we were looking for.”

"It made half the panel sick, Tony.”

"Including the Humans First cretin. It was worth it.”

“I’m telling Ming-Na and Chloe you said that...”

Jason sighed.

“In all seriousness, Tony, I’m too closely connected to the Inhumans cause for the State position right now. And to you. Even after everything, there are still too many uncertain of those with powers. Clark, at least, can point to years of work in the Senate. I’ve still got time to put in there.”

Tony slapped him on the shoulder.

"Just trying to do right by my friends.”

"And I appreciate it. Besides, the President has something else in mind. After this whole mess with the ATCU, SHIELD, Inhumans, Black Order, whatever that mess was in Hawaii, and who knows what else, they’ve decided to bring it all under one roof in State. They’ll be making it official soon.”

The two men moved slightly closer.

"I’ll be heading up the office of Enhanced Human Relations. It’s going to take over, try to rebuild something positive with all the players involved.”

"Sokavia Accords?”

Jason nodded.

"The President is working the UN on a personal level to get the votes for reopening the Accords. We’re going to need to bring the Enhanced to the table this time, get a solution fair for everyone.”

“That’s a start, at least.” Tony paused. “Cap’s team?”
"Eventually. But their defiance was too open. It’s going to take more time than your SHIELD buddies to get their pardon."

"An advantage of operating in the shadows?"

"Yeah. It would’ve helped if we could have acknowledged their role in the Watchdogs & Ross takedown."

“Like I said, it’s a good start.”

Jason saw the mischievous gleam in Tony’s eye. He decided it was safer not to ask.

“Well, I need to run, deals to be made, solutions to be found, bad guys to catch...”

“Don’t let me keep you, then.”

As Tony got up to go, Jason casually asked, “Any word on that Coulson?”

Tony’s eyes narrowed.

“Not yet. We believe any day now.”

“Glad to hear it. I’d like to meet him.”

“Afraid you’re going to have to wait in line, Senator. Of course, that’s only if Agent May decides she’ll let him live...”

Starkjet, Enroute to California

The plane took off, same as it always had, uneventfully.

Once in the air, Tony knocked on the cockpit door.

“We’re clear.”

The door opened, and Steve Rogers stepped through.

The two men returned to the seating area. Tony grabbed two water bottles, tossing one at Steve.

“So everything’s going as much as we thought it would. Coulson and the rest have been officially pardoned, apparently again. The President made some snarky remark about how there better not be a third time.” Tony snorted. “I’ve made better.”

Steve merely rolled his eyes.

"Ross has been deep sixed on the Raft." Tony continued. "Unfortunately, since you lot are all still wanted, we can’t get him on anything having to do with One World...but there was still enough that you brought back from Russia that should bury him for good.”

"What about his trial?"

Tony chuckled bitterly.

"Steve, they’ve put dear Thaddeus on the Raft with the men and women that he sent there. Do you really think there will be a trial?”
Steve frowned.

"That’s not right..."

"No, but that’s the way the world works. I give it a week. Two at tops."

Steve looked as if he wanted to argue Ross’ fate further, then let it drop.

"Sokavia Accords?"

Tony shook his head.

"Our people just got the ball rolling. We figure, if you and the rest play ball, we can have pardons within the year."

"Pardons for breaking a law that never should’ve been enacted to begin with?"

"Well, Germany seems to have forgiven you for wrecking their airport."

"Tony..."

"Look, I talked to the Senator who’ll be heading up the Accords reopening. He’s on your side, but you have to give him something."

Steve was silent for a moment, then shook his head.

"I can’t. Tony, if I knew that the deals made today would last into the future, then maybe. But this is nothing but political. Your Senator, he might be a decent fellow, but who’s to say the one after him will be? Maybe they’ll revert right back to throwing us in cages. No...the best hands to direct my power will be my own."

"You’ll always be running, Steve."

"Well, at least I’ll be able to live with the choices I made for myself, and not the ones that some political hack thrust upon me."

They were silent for awhile. Finally Steve sighed.

"Maybe when we have enough time to decompress from this. When Phil gets back. When we can take some time to figure out what the Avengers are meant to be now. How the Inhumans fit in all this. Just...give it some space."

Tony huffed. "Just don’t wait too long, Captain. You’ll find that the world moves on without you."

Steve met Tony’s eyes with a sad, haunted look.

“I have plenty of practice with that."

Tony looked away. He picked up a Zip drive and tossed it towards Steve.

"From Vijay. His plans for moving forward. He’s turning the old Nadeer residence on the lake into an Inhumans training centre, and maybe headquarters for the Inhumans Alliance. We’re going to fix it up a bit more, make sure it’s secure."

Tony finished up his water.
“He’s calling it the Mace and Maddox school for Enhanced Humans. He’s going to start with the list from the ATCU, and work outwards from there.”

”And SI will be backing him?”

“He’s staying on as Chair of the One World Foundation. Said that Cass would’ve wanted it that way. Between him, the remainders of the SI team, and my guys in DC, I think we’ve got a chance to restart all this.”

Steve finished his water, and walked over to the recycling bin. Bending down, patterned fabric caught his eye.

”What are these?” Steve held them to the light. “Iron Man socks, Tony? Really?”

Steve turned and froze. Tony gazed off into the distance, an unreadable look on his face.

”Tony?”

”No, it’s fine, Steve. Just...I gave those to Justin. Found them in the jet after Cass’ funeral.”

”Oh.”

”It seems to be the price we pay, isn’t it? We save the world, but we lose our friends, those we love, at the end. We wind up alone.”

Steve carefully pocketed the socks.

”Give it time, Tony. Forgiveness...it’s a strange thing. It comes when you least expect it.”

”Maybe.”

Steve was silent.

“What next, Steve? You said you’d fill me in on where everyone’s headed.”

”Well, most of Coulson’s team, as well as Barton and his family, and Hill, of course, are going to stay at the mansion until Phil gets back.”

”Anything from the good Director Agent?”

”Nothing, the ship’s gone dark.”

”Jemma and Leo,” Steve continued, “are headed back to England, with Vision and Wanda in tow. They were going to touch base with that Excalibur group, see if they knew anything more about these stones.”

Tony nodded.

”Strange’s group is on the same path, with that Asgardian fellow. And I’ve loaned out some of the ‘not most wanted’ people to Senator Thompson. Get him ready for when Coulson comes back online. And for whatever Loki warned us about.”

”If we can actually trust Loki.”

”Guess Phil will have the answers for that.” Tony hesitated. “And you?”
"Back to Wakanda. Shuri filled us in on what happened while we were away. And I want to check in."

"On Barnes."

Steve met Tony’s glare.

"That’s right."

“Of course.” Tony snarked.

“You know, I can be friends with both of you.” Steve huffed.

"My parents’ assassin.” Tony responded flatly.

"He was brain..."

"...washed. Doesn’t make it hurt any less, Cap."

"I wouldn’t expect it to, Tony."

Tony looked up, surprised at the sympathy in Steve’s voice.

Steve checked the window, nodded, then strode to the quick drop in the back of the jet.

"You have my number, Tony. If you need me, call."

Tony gave a small nod, then pushed the button. Steve dropped out of sight.

If anyone had been observing that air space, they would have seen two separate, yet similar trails, leading in opposite directions.

CODA

The Milano

Phil Coulson stood and looked at the blue orb rapidly approaching. He had seen pictures of it, but never really appreciated the view until this moment.

Earth looked damn good to him.

"Are you ready, my friend?"

Turning, Phil saw Thor admiring the same view.

"Good God, yes."

"Why, thank you."

Phil’s eyes narrowed at the twinkling in Thor’s eye, but decided to let it pass.

“We could use you on Earth. Maybe you could knock some sense into Stark and Rogers.”

"I will leave that in your very capable hands...err..hand, Son of Coul. While I will join you later, I must get a replacement for my Mjölnir. I will be taking the rabbit and his tree friend to assist me in this."
Phil decided he wasn’t letting this pass.

"Odinson, you do know Rocket is a raccoon, right?"

The twinkle in Thor’s eye grew brighter.

"Your Earth animals all look alike to me."

Phil snorted.

"Troll."

Thor smirked.

"Star Lord and the others are heading off to Knowhere. They seek the Reality Stone, held by the Collector. Mayhap they will intercept it before the foul Thanos will."

Phil crossed his arms, and lifted an eyebrow.

"Knowhere? Really? Is this some Asgardian Prime Directive thing? If you don't want to tell me, just say so."

Thor shook his head.

"There is no information I would withhold from you, Son of Coul. Not at this, the true ending of days. As such, I feel that I may have a solution for your dilemma. One of the Infinity stones are said to have the ability to alter a man’s very soul."

"A Soul stone?" Phil considered this. "Could it deal with the Rider?"

"Possibly."

The two men turned to see Gamora looking at them.

"Very little is known about it, Coulson. My father sent me to find it, a long time ago."

"And did you?" Phil kept his voice neutral.

"I did. Then I destroyed the map. I swore never to tell anyone of its location. Thanos must never find it."

"Or we must gain control of it first," replied Thor.

Gamora shook her head.

"It’s too dangerous."

"Gamora, this could save my life. I swear we will keep it away from Thanos. We will destroy it if necessary."

"You know we have the means to do so, Lady Gamora." Thor concluded. "Please, let Coulson snatch it out from under Thanos’s nose. I would trust him with my very existence."

"You might be doing just that, Thor."

Gamora looked at the two men and sighed.
“We don’t have much time before we have to drop off Phil.”

She seemed to consider further, as Phil held his breath. Finally, she narrowed her eyes.

”Do you swear you will do whatever it takes to keep it safe?”

Phil met her gaze.

”I do.” he vowed.

”Then I will tell you what I know.”

Chapter End Notes

Wait...Phil...are you SURE you want to find out about the Soul Stone??

So we're getting close to the end here. And there are just some things that can't be sorted out in a year and a bit...let alone a 22 episode TV season or a 2 1/2 hour movie. Tony and Steve on enhanced human oversight and regulations may be one of them. Boy, it's great that they'll have some time to sort things out without the end of the world hanging over their heads...

(Personally, I think that all of the MCU would benefit from some counseling sessions. Dr. Andrew Garner, we miss you...)

Some Canadian references explained: The Globe and Mail is one of Canada's largest newspapers. MP Kellie Leitch is real (Conservative, Simcoe-Grey), and she championed “Canadian values” screening for immigrants during her failed 2017 bid for the Conservative party (won by Andrew Scheer, currently in opposition). She will not seek re-election in 2019.

Next up are (finally!) some homecomings. Note that the author used the plural version of that word... ;)

(And, as always, all real life references are meant with respect. Well...excepting perhaps Ms. Leitch ;) )
Hey Honey, I'm Home

Chapter Summary

After months of imprisonment from the Black Order, then weeks of travelling with the Guardians of the Galaxy, Phil Coulson finally makes it home.

But so does someone else...

Has time finally run out?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

New Avengers Mansion

It was a cool and pleasant evening. Not quite the dark and stormy night that Tony Stark had laid bets on.

Agent Melinda May looked forward to collecting on that bottle of Haig.

The air in front of the complex shimmered, then a small orb appeared on the lawn. A door slid open, and a man quietly stepped out, gently tapping the side of the object. As he paused, taking in his surroundings, the air shimmered again and the orb disappeared. The only evidence of its passing was a slight gust of wind that swept over the area.

He stood, just outside of the light, lifting his face to the night sky. He closed his eyes, and a small smile stretched over his lips, as he enjoyed the fresh night air on his skin.

May noted the changes that had come over him since the Diner, all those months ago. A little more tired, perhaps. Drawn. Paler. But still standing.

For now.

She signaled for a stand down to the watchers on the roof, then slid out from her position by the door.

He tensed. Turned.

“Melinda...” Phil Coulson breathed.

He stood still as May strode across the lawn to meet him, watching her carefully as she stopped in front of him, looking him over closely.

Phil waited for her to make the first move.

THWACK!

A solid left hook to his jaw sent him sprawling on the ground.
He rubbed his face gingerly. At least his jaw wasn’t broken. Meant there was still hope.

"I probably deserved that.” Phil admitted, looking up at her.

“Oh, you deserve more than that, Phil.” May hissed.

“Can you at least tell me which of my sins I’m paying for this time?” Phil asked, getting to his feet.

"Your deal…”

"Ghost Rider….all right…”

"Don't think I missed that... 'your sins” May spat. "What else are you hiding from us? What deal did you make, without consulting any of us? How am I... we... going to lose you this time…..”

"I missed you too, May. More than I can ever say.”

"Awww…”

Phil’s head snapped around.

"Barton?"

"Shh..”

Phil turned and looked upwards.

"Daisy?"

May put a hand on Phil’s shoulder and glared up into the night.

"Get lost!” she growled.

There was scuffling, some light giggling, then silence again.

"How are they...did they…” Phil started.

May turned her annoyed gaze back to him.

"Your kids got along just fine. Both sets of them.” At Phil’s confused look, she elaborated further, “The Avengers finally figured it out. Apparently Talbot called for you on the camera before Daisy’s LMD shot him.”

May let the stunned silence last for a moment before she finished.

"They came back together to find you. Apparently, you were important enough to rescue.”

"I...never...thought…”

"Neither did Ross and his minions. The Avengers freed us all. Then we dealt with the leftovers from Anton Ivanov and the Watchdogs. Saved the world, while you were...”

"With Thanos.”

Phil froze for a moment, then shook his head.

"Why is there always something?” he muttered to himself.
"Phil?"

May was all business again, doing what she always had, compartmentalizing her feelings.

He stepped closer to her.

"Thanos...we don't have much time."

"No, you're not wiggling out of telling me about that deal. Not that easily. What did you do?"

"What I had to to save all of you. Hold it, wait." Phil held up a hand, cutting May off. "I'll explain it all, the deal, my reasonings, but...it's not just the end of the world, this time, it's the end of the universe."

"Again?"

"Again...and it might stick. Mel," Phil sighed, "there never is the right time for this."

She stepped towards him, head cocked.

"I saw you die. Up in space, where they had me. They wanted me to tell them about the Darkhold, and I wouldn't, so they were going to kill all of you. And they started with you."

May shook her head.

"I wondered about that when they told me. They never came close, Phil. I was roughed up a little, but nothing I hadn't handled before."

"I know, Star Lord told me."

"Star Lord?" Melinda huffed disbelievingly.

"Long story. But I made a promise to myself, afterwards. On the way back. There's been too many close calls over the years. I've lost you too many times. And now...there's a price I'm going to have to pay at some point for keeping you all safe. I'm not promised tomorrow."

"We never are." May said softly.

"And so I need to do this."

Phil turned, and gently tugged at May, catching her a little off balance.

Pulling her close, he looked into her eyes.

"I love you, Melinda May."

He gently tipped his head down and kissed her.

May hesitated only a heartbeat, then returned the kiss, sliding as close as she possibly could get to Phil.

They broke, easily, naturally, May pulling away just enough to whisper, "I love you, too."

Phil nodded, resting his forehead against hers for a moment.

Finally May looked up into his eyes.
"Don't think this gets you off the hook, Coulson."

"Wouldn't dream of it, May."

She reached for him again.

"God, I missed you..."

Their next kiss, more heated than the first, was still way too short.

"What's next?" May asked

"It's not what I would like. I'd like nothing more than a beach somewhere with you. But, we need to get everyone together. Our time is running short, and everyone has to be on the same page before Thanos and his team gets here."

"Loki's already been here. We ran into him in Russia."

Phil shook his head, as they started up the lawn to the complex, hand in hand.

"Believe it or not, he's on."

"OUR side?"

"Yeah...there's a lot I need to go over with everyone. Just...with the deal. Know there's a way out, we found a solution. I'll clear me with the Rider, and we'll get in front of Thanos at the same time. We can stop him at this point."

As they got to the door, Phil put his hand on May's shoulder, halting her.

"With us, Barton?"

A light thump, as something landed behind them. May's eyes narrowed.

"Wouldn't be anywhere else...Director." Clint said.

Phil grinned.

"Then let's wake them all up. We've got a universe to save."

As they walked inside the complex, Barton shrugged his shoulders.

"Like old times, then. And speaking of old times...we have our own conversation due, SIR..."

"Later, Barton."

"Yes, Ma'am."

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**New York City**

*Sanctum Sanctorum*

Dr. Stephen Strange glared at Wong and Elliot Randolph. He moved his hands in a defensive pass.

"You really expect me to fall for that again?"
Wong shrugged.

Strange sighed.

"Seriously, neither of you have any money?"

"You really expect us to search through the dimensions on an empty stomach?" Wong asked.

"We really would work better with a snack, Strange," noted Randolph. "And Piper's not here to make the deli run."

"Besides," Wong added. "Attachment to the material is detachment from the spiritual."

Strange snorted, as the three headed towards the door, Wong and Randolph turning beseeching eyes in his direction.

"Perhaps I should have the deli make you a metaphysical ham and rye."

As the other two grinned at each other, Strange reached for the door handle.

"I wouldn't say no to a tuna melt." he mused.

A sound caught their attention, and the three turned, looking up towards the skylight over the stairs.

Suddenly, something exploded through the ceiling, and plummeted through the floor. Strange hastily raised his shields and covered his two companions.

"I know that signature!" gasped Randolph.

As the three advanced on the hole, a slight moan caught their attention. Peering over the crater, they saw a man, bruised and battered, clearly worn out.

He looked at them, and drew a shaky breath.

"Thanos is coming." Bruce Banner gasped.

Chapter End Notes

And we are now into the beginning of Avengers: Infinity War. Director/Agent Phil Coulson and his Agents of SHIELD have been integrated into the upcoming War with Thanos and the Black Order, for better or for worse.

How things might have changed with SHIELD on board...well, that's a very good question. And another story in itself.

Speaking of which, since this includes Agents of SHIELD, it means that there's always one. Last. Scene.

We'll return in a moment.

(Some situations and dialogue in this chapter have been taken from Avengers: Infinity War. All credit to the writers, cast and crew concerned.)
There's always a stinger in Agents of SHIELD (OK, almost always).

Why should this be any different?

The Raft

Thaddeus Ross, once Secretary of State, once one of the world's most powerful men, sat in his 10 x 8 cell and stewed. They had kept him in solitary, for his protection. Protection from the things and freaks he had sent here. Also from the men and women forced to guard them.

No one knew what it took to protect them all. No one knew what he was protecting them from. It was for their own good, couldn't they see that?

Anyways, he knew there would be a trial. It would all come out in the wash. Stark, SHIELD, Johnson, everyone would get what they deserved, all the lies they were spinning would become unravelled. He just needed to wait.

The door opened. Ross looked up in surprise.

"General?"

The General's entourage took up a spot by the door. It closed behind them, with a sharp thunk.

The General smiled.

"I have to hand it to you, Mr. Secretary. You almost pulled it off."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"Uniting the nation behind a fear of Inhumans, the others. Gathering them up in lists, easy to find, and easy enough to dispose of in the end. You would have been hailed as a hero in the history books, bringing order to a lawless nation. I can applaud that."

Ross swallowed.

"I'm sorry, General, but you really should be talking to my attorney."

"No, I don't think so. You see, we're done with you now. You've served our purposes."

"I've never met you in my life." A chill ran down Ross's spine. "I'm calling the guards."

The General's head cocked. There was a rushing of wind, then Ross found himself on the floor, a pool of red surrounding him. As his vision faded to black, he saw the General's entourage slide a circular blade behind its back.
The last words Thaddeus Ross ever heard were soft, almost uncatchable.

"Hail Hydra."

General Catherine Hale turned to her daughter.

"It's time. The Confederacy warned us about this. Make the call."

Ruby Hale pulled the mask up over her face and surveyed the room. Pulling a phone from her pocket, she pressed a button, activating the speed dial.

It rang twice.

"Hello?"

Ruby smirked.

"Take a deep breath. Calm your mind. You know what is best. What is best is you comply. Compliance will be rewarded."

Ruby paused.

"Are you ready to comply?"

There was a pause on the line.

A voice responded.

"I'm happy to comply."

Chapter End Notes

OUCH! Hello the Hales, from Agents of SHIELD Season 5, the last Hydra true believers left standing. What could they be doing in Infinity War? And who was Ruby talking to?

This concludes The Tie that Binds. I'd like to thank everyone for coming along with me on this journey, over a year, all the kudos and bookmarks and comments. It's really meant a lot to me, and you all are awesome (even/especially when you were disagreeing with me or pointing out a typo...or six...)

What's next? I do intend to continue this into Avengers: Infinity War (I wouldn't have given you this chapter otherwise.) However, I will be away from my computer for a week, so look for "The Tie that Frays" (or something like that) in about 3 weeks. I'll put it into a series for easy finding.

Kudos, comments, things you want to see in the next installment, plot threads that weren't caught up in the end (and yes, the fate of Heimdall and those left behind on the Black Order prison ship are among them), send them my way. I don't promise I'll act on them, but I will consider them.

Once again, you all rock. Have an amazing Canada Day, Independence Day, or just a
great summer.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!