## World with No Conscience

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**World with No Conscience**

by [Tickle2Kill](http://archiveofourown.org/users/Tickle2Kill)

**Summary**

Back on Midgard, Steve Rogers has to find the princes of Asgard, navigate a world he
hasn't seen for over half a century, and deal with the ghosts of a past he didn't get to live.

The princes of Asgard are hidden from Heimdall's vision somewhere on Earth and Steve has agreed to find them and release them from whatever is keeping them in shadow. He teams up with street level heroes and an organization led by an old friend to find Loki and Thor.

But he isn't the only one invested in the princes of Asgard. Someone knows about the worlds beyond Earth and they don't take too kindly to the new arrivals. Especially not the ghost of freedom that Steve represents.

Notes

Yay! This will be my very first sequel and I have big plans, so wish me luck. It's a continuation of Steve's adventures in World So Cold, so if you haven't read that, I'd suggest popping over there. A few things won't make any sense without it. This is part 2 of a 5-part series I have planned, but it's still a bit Dame Seatofherpants Mcfly because I have it plotted, but I haven't written it all out. Also, tags for this might change, but I didn't want to do the gradually adding thing I did for WSC. I always find tags to be a little spoiler-y, but meh, it'll be easier to find if I tag it out the wazoo. *waves hands* tactics! Also also, I'm testing out multiple POVs in this fic. I've done this in the HP fandom, but not in the Marvel fandom.

As always, I'm open to feedback, so feel free to drop me a comment.

Please enjoy and if you do, consider buying me a coffee!

Title from the Three Days Grace song Anonymous.

You can also drop me a line on my Tumblr.
With a bagel in one hand and coffee in the other, Skye watched her laptop boot up. The bagel had a little too much cream cheese and her tongue was poking out of her mouth in an attempt to catch it all as she savored a bite. The coffee was black, for lack of sugar or creamer, but she was used to making do with whatever she managed to scrounge up. The Rising Tide had learned quite a bit about that from her.

As a group of random citizens united in the cause of protecting society from their imperial overlords, Rising Tide had been cobbled together as new members joined them but it was still made up of rough edges and far too many mistakes. They learned as they went, hard as that was to stomach with real lives in the balance, and did the best they could. Skye tried to believe that as long as there were more successes than there were fuck-ups, the world was in good hands.

Her screen flashed from black to bright blue in a blink and she set her coffee down to start typing one-handed.

Mr. Green had been off-radar for weeks, and in his - or hers, or their...she hadn’t been able to track down their real identity yet - absence, she and the Rising Tide had been forced to make some hard calls. Mr. Green was a member of the Advanced Sciences Division that Hydra had set up after the War, and he specialized in Gamma Radiation. Skye had tried to pin him on the scientists she had on file, but nothing really stuck to him. His IP address never matched up with any of them and when she tried to tap into satellite surveillance for facial recognition, it always locked her out. She was one of the smartest hackers she knew, but whoever made that system was a little smarter. It annoyed her to no end.

Today, her message box was flooded and she spent a good hour or so rifling through them for anything pertinent. Sometimes, the members of the Tide tried to get friendly, as if they were buddies at work or something. Skye was a lot of things, but she wasn’t anyone’s friend.

Well, except for Mike.

Towards the back of the modified prisoner transport bus she called home, laid out on a pile of
blankets, Mike Peterson was catching up on some much needed rest. He and Skye had been nonstop since Mr. Green went dark and Mike had been doing overtime. She looked back at him over her shoulder, taking in the perpetual frown on his forehead, and wished she was doing more.

Her laptop pinged and she opened the newest message.

*Hey S,*

*Got a new batch headed your way from Rollins’ Pick-Up. Twenty, twenty-five heads. Here’s the ID list. Go get ‘em!*

Attached was a list of twenty-five people, all between the ages of ten and thirty, cataloged by usefulness. The transfer sheet said they were headed for Zola’s. Skye sighed, shoved the rest of the bagel in her mouth, and sent off a quick message that they’d intercept in thirty. She sipped enough coffee to wash down the bagel then headed to the back of the bus.

“Mike, we’ve got a batch,” She shook him by his boot, having been on the business end of his fist when she loomed over him once. He came to fast, eyes bleary as they searched out hers, and then he was up.

“What’s up?” he asked, accepting the coffee she placed in his hand. He gulped it like it wasn’t fresh and hot - *how is that even possible?* - and stretched his neck from side to side.

“Koenig messaged, says we’ve got some.”

“How many?”

“A quarter.”

“Ace?”

Skye swallowed, looking away. Mike took a deep breath, crumpled the empty coffee cup in his hand and tossed it to the trash bin by the front. His mechanical leg whirred as he made his way to where they kept his gear. She watched him suit up for a second, trying to decide what to say. Usually she had the answer for everything, but this one eluded her. It eluded Mike, too. Skye ran her index finger over the small tattoo on her right wrist, the playing card inked into her skin to
never let her forget. She always told herself maybe next time, maybe someone else in the Tide would do what they hadn’t been able to...but so far the result had been the same.

Zola’s facilities were no joke, and most people never made it back out. People were used for extremely dangerous work, the kind that took apart everything you were and replaced it with something new. Skye remembered it like it was yesterday. It was something she could never forget. But she grew up, got lucky, crawled her way back to the world from under the weight of every person she left behind to survive. The Tide had been a fledgling thing when she found it, housed in basements and bunkers, locked up behind a thousand firewalls out of fear. They did good work, but it took them ages to mobilize and not all of them knew the system like she did. She landed on them like a meteor and shook their entire game plan up. Within a year or two of her joining, they had saved three hundred people.

It never made up for the ones she had abandoned, never washed away the memory of them, but it made it a little easier to sleep at night. Ace was the reminder that her work wasn’t finished and she couldn’t give up. Everybody out there had an Ace of their own, somebody they lost to the machine their secret emperor Schmidt had created. Bit by bit, person by person, she was giving them back. She had to.

“How we doing this?” Mike asked, pulling her right back to the moment. He was decked out in black, his chest protected by fancy armor Mr. Green had managed get his own network to cough up. It stopped almost every type of bullet and could withstand almost any normal attack, there were gaps but it had kept Mike alive this far. Skye hurried back to her station and pulled up the bus route.

“Looks pretty standard. The route takes them under at least three of our tunnels. We should have this done by noon.”

“Don’t get cocky.”

“That’s anatomically impossible, besides I’ve got you and you’ve got me. Hydra don’t stand a chance,” Mike let a small smile curl his lips and Skye counted that as victory.

She started up the bus from her station and set it on auto, digging through the ID list and tagging anyone who stood out. Most were average citizens, probably caught for minor offenses or for crimes against the Empire they didn’t even realize existed. Those crimes could range from helping yourself to a five finger discount to attempted murder to just being too damn smart, but the punishment was pretty much the same. There were options in the facilities to serve a ‘work sentence’ and be returned to society, but that was usually reserved for people deemed too important to waste away. Only one person on the ID list qualified for the latter. She marked them and sent their info off to another member of the Tide. Whichever underground drop-off had the honor of
dispersing this batch would handle that person.

Out of the twenty-five, one was a special case and one was a nobody.

Skye, having done as much as she could for the special case, turned her attention to the nobody.

The nobody was a John Doe. She skimmed his small file, looking for any clue as to who he might be. White male, 6’2”, black hair, green eyes, tagged as a delusional. She looked at the prisoner photo they had attached and used her own facial recognition software to find him. As it ran through databases for a hit, she read the Rollins Rounders report on him.

_Suspect was found breaking into the Manhattan offices of Stark Industries; claimed to be a king and assaulted the agent who attempted to apprehend him. Possessed superhuman strength, but easily subdued by the team sent to investigate. Matches no known record; recommended for Zola._

Well, definitely delusional. Then again, if he had superhuman strength, he might be off-the-rocker for reasons he couldn’t control. Attempts at recreating the super soldier serum had done nothing but make monsters. Schmidt’s puppet soldiers, the Kommandos, had a monster of their own that they aptly named _Abomination_. Still, their leader, the Red Captain, _was_ kinda hot...in a deadly assassin kind of way.

_Get your head in the game_, Skye rolled her eyes at herself and decided she couldn’t make a decision about the nobody on her own. Her second opinion was checking his guns over and getting that serious face that meant he was about to destroy anything that got in his way. Skye didn’t know what she would do without him.

“Hey, Mike, can you come take a look at this prisoner? He’s...well, I’m not sure what he is.”

“He’s not like your president soup guy, is he? ‘Cause you know my opinion about that kind of guy,” Mike smiled at her and stepped behind her station to look over her shoulder. A frown gradually took over his brow. “You think it’s Centipede?”

“I’m not willing to cross them off the list yet, but...” she looked at the picture of the strange man and just _felt_ like she had to get involved. It wouldn’t be the first time she had made a gut decision about someone. She would alone in this van if she had ignored it. When it wasn’t complaining about the junk food she was eating, her gut was _always_ right.
Sighing, Mike pinched the bridge of his nose. “You want to keep him?”

“I didn’t say that,” Skye said hurriedly before biting her lip. “But... I mean, I helped you out... and I thought...”

“You thought he might be another stray you could rehabilitate?” Mike chuckled and shrugged. “I’m not going to stop you if that’s what you really want, but I’m warning you now... he’s going to be more trouble than he’s worth.”

“So were you, at first,” Skye grabbed Mike’s hand before he could get out of range. “But now you’re family. Besides, we might need more muscle if we have to take on Hydra to find Ace.”

“As long as your head’s still in the mission, Skye,” Mike squeezed her hand before letting go. “Then I’m with you.”

Normal bus rescues usually went down one of two ways.

Either they caught the buses in one of their special tunnels, which they had set traps in ahead of time, or they - meaning Mike - would launch off their bus and onto the target one and incapacitate the driver and guards. Skye did the tech work and human relations, which was in her wheelhouse anyway, while Mike did the fighting. She was many things, but a martial artist she was not. She could introduce her knee to people’s groins or her fist to people’s jaws, but she wasn’t an expert. She had pepper spray and a taser for that. What normally followed was a series of relieved or confused people thanking them and filing into the bus. She would set the bus to auto and see the newly free people off to their new futures.

Again... normal bus rescues went that way. It had almost been a textbook one, too, until they got everyone inside their bus. Her gut’s chosen redemption case was anything but normal. She was three seconds away from knocking his teeth in.

“I’m going to need you to practice inside voice, dude,” Skye grit out, handing out business cards to each person. Their respective drop-off and reintroduction agents would sort them by them.
“Do not presume to order me about, you wretch,” The guy was really, really, close to a bullet instead of a fist.

“Let me guess, you’re some king from some place that doesn’t exist and we’re all beneath you,” Skye sighed and forced a kind smile for the kid that was watching them. One of these days, that kid would be Ace and she would have fulfilled her promise. “Newsflash, high-and-mighty, no one believes you. Shouting it isn’t going to make us change our minds.”

The man opened his mouth and inhaled, his eyes narrowing, and Mike discreetly stepped into view. Snapping his mouth shut, the man crossed his arms. He didn’t seem to like the shiny gun on Mike’s hip. His flickering gaze reminded Skye of a frightened deer and she wanted to knock her own teeth out. There’s got to be a point where you put a band-aid on your bleeding heart.

“Look,” Skye began, crossing the bus until she could crouch in front of the guy. She reached out slowly for his hands and nodded in understanding when the man yanked them back. “We aren’t here to hurt you, but you’re going to get everybody else hurt if you don’t behave. If you don’t want to be chill for yourself, do it for the rest of us. Please,” she pleaded with him and he stared at her.

“If I had my powers, I could dispatch of all of you in a heartbeat,” he whispered to her and she didn’t doubt he believed that. Though, what powers he was talking about, she didn’t know.

“But you don’t have your powers, do you?” she stood and nodded to the boxes of donuts she always had at the ready when they had a new batch. “Eat a donut, drink some coffee. Calm down.”

She didn’t give him a card.

Steve

Seeing as the man with the bow and arrow was his first real encounter in this still unknown version of Earth, he was reluctant to start a fight. Of course, that was one of the many thoughts that filtered through his head as he blocked the next arrow with his enchanted shield, threw the shield at the man’s hands and leapt up to the metal fire escape, climbing it with his arms alone. He caught his shield and jumped from one level to another. The man whistled as Steve threw his legs over the bars on the level where the man was and squared up. He hadn’t done close quarters like this with
someone his own size in ages, but he was mindful of the fact that this man was human. He would have to go easy.

“I do not want to fight you,” he said slowly, his shield in between them.

“Okay,” the man said just as slowly. “Enhanced?”

Blinking, Steve frowned. “What?”

“I’ve seen some parkour, I’ve even done a bit myself, but that...that was something else.” The man raised his bow and arrow, aiming for Steve’s head. “I’m impressed, and still waiting on an ID.”

“Are you police?”

“In this particular patch of Brooklyn? Yeah,” The man smiled a little bit. “I’m Robin Hood without the damn tights. Who are you?”

Habit made Steve hesitate, reluctant to reveal his name for fear of losing it. He had to remind himself that Earth didn’t have that kind of magic. At least, it didn’t when he was still a bonafide citizen. Everything could change in fifty years. He bit back the immediate desire to lie and decided he wouldn’t restart his reputation that way either.

“A name for a name,” he said, rising from his fighting stance, though he kept his shield high.

“Okay,” the man relaxed the tension on his bowstring and tilted his aim towards the wall a little. “You first.”

“Stig...” He sighed and shook his head. “Steve...Steve Rogers.”

Frowning in amused disbelief, the man chuckled. “Your mom a fan of Captain America?”

*She was a fan of* me, he thought but instead, he let a grin curl his mouth. “Something like that.”
Shaking his head, the man shrugged. “I’m Clint, Clint Barton. And before you ask, I don’t know who my parents were a fan of.”

There was probably a reference there, but Steve didn’t know it. “Well, Clint, mind if I come inside?”

He would throw this Clint off the roof if he had to, but for now he would play nice.

“You giving me a choice, Steve?” Just as Frigga had when he had given a fake name, this man didn’t believe him. He grinned even more.

“Of course. I’m not always rude, only when I need to be.”

“Huh,” Clint breathed out, his mouth working as he seemed to be weighing his options. “See, usually, I wouldn’t invite you in. Strange guy with a hood, an invisible weapon and renaissance faire attire is not my thing, but I’m curious...and cold.”

Clint stepped toward one of the apartments and Steve fought a laugh. “If you’d been where I was the past...few years, you’d be thanking every god you know for rain and not snow.”

“Yeah, and where was that exactly? Antarctica?”

Following Clint into the apartment through the window, he let himself laugh. It was either that or cry. “Something like that.”

If he’d been on the Valkyrie and Schmidt had been transported, he might have had to crash the plane in the Arctic. Would Loki have still destroyed Jötunheim?

“You know - Lucky don’t lick him! He’s dangerous - keeping details to yourself doesn't really help with the trust issue here.” Clint weaved through the mess of an apartment he lived in and his dog curiously licked at Steve’s hand. There was a slice of pizza on top of a precariously piled stack of papers.
“You wouldn’t believe me,” Steve didn’t attempt to find a place to sit. It wasn’t worth the effort or the avalanche.

“How do you know?”

“If I didn’t live it, I wouldn’t believe it either,” Steve sighed and slid his shield on his cross harness. He had to appear non-threatening even if Clint couldn’t actually see his shield. “What year is it?”

He could have leaned over and figured it out from one of the newspapers lying about, but he didn’t want to run the risk of the papers being ancient. The dust on them didn’t reassure him.

“Okay,” Clint pulled the pot from what smelled like a coffee maker - which smelled heavenly after mostly mead - and gulped down some before he turned to Steve. Lucky had decided he wasn’t a threat and curled up on the couch. “Please tell me you’re joking.”

When Steve only maintained his gaze on Clint’s, the archer blew out a gust of air and guzzled some more coffee. “For the love of coffee and sanity, please be human, at least.”

“You get a lot of aliens?” Steve’s shoulders stiffened and he frowned. Maybe his mission would be easier than he thought.

“First, there was that incident in New Mexico four years ago that my retired ass knows just a smidgen of. Then, there was an incident on my front porch a few months after that and fuck if I know what happened here either.”

Thor and Loki. Steve let out a breath he didn’t realize he was holding. “Tell me everything you know.”

“Hold your horses there, Captain,” Steve had to clamp down on the surge of emotions that rose up at the absurd wholeness of hearing that title now that he was back on Earth. Clint noticed, but said nothing. “I still doubt you’re human.”

“I’m human. Just...a little more than.”
“How so?”

Steve wished he was wearing his full get-up from before just so he didn’t have to explain. “It’s a long story.”

Clint started another pot and took a seat, tossing his jacket on the nearest available surface. “I’ve got nothing better to do.”

“If I tell you the truth, will you tell me everything you know about Tho...about New Mexico and here?”

“Depends on what the truth is.”

“Well, it starts about...” he paused. “What year is it?”

Clint laughed but when Steve only waited patiently for him to get it out of his system, he blinked. “You’re serious.”

Steve tilted his head and narrowed his eyes. Clint sat forward and wiped his mouth, looking into the middle distance. He whispered under his breath to himself before shrugging. “It’s 2004.”

“So,” Steve sighed. “About sixty years ago, I was on a plane...”

Clint

The guy was built like a slightly - and by slightly he meant it was splitting hairs - smaller version of the Red Captain and if he weren’t a grown ass man, he might have been intimidated. Of course, with the whatever the hell it was the guy was throwing around, there was a bit of uncertainty and wariness.

Lucky liked the guy. Steve Rogers, he had said as if it wasn’t a bold-faced alias wrapped up in
nostalgia. So the guy was a brick shithouse with a haircut that Clint was just a tad envious of and proportions that should probably be illegal...that didn’t mean he wasn’t completely insane. Actually it made more sense for him to be crazy. No one sane could look that damn good.

He needed to hit the gym again. He might also need to call Natasha.

“So, let me get this straight,” Clint was halfway through a biodegradable container of pad thai and was almost sad that he had to stop eating to talk. Steve, the black hole, had already devoured everything set in front of him as if it was going to either vanish or come to life. “You’re an eighty-year-old super soldier from the forties who just came back from Asgard, literal Asgard, where you were living after your other world, Yogurt-time, was destroyed by one of the two Asgardians that were banished here and that you’ve been sent to find?”

“In a nutshell,” Steve grinned as if the horse he’d bet on had just broken its leg. “Yes.”

“Well,” Clint passed a beer over to Steve and the man had the nerve to toss it back like water. “You did say I wouldn’t believe you.”

“I did, but it’s true.”

“Yeah, you keep saying that like I’m gonna suddenly change my mind.”

“I don’t need to change your mind. I need to know about the two incidents. New Mexico was Thor and New York City was Loki. I’m here, so tell me about them.”

Clint definitely needed to call Natasha. Damn it, he was retired! Why were strange things landing on his porch? Was he some alien beacon? Grunting at the thought, he stood up and pushed past his dirty clothes basket to get to where his cell-phone was charging. It was only at seventy percent and it had been on for four hours.

“Fucking tracksuits,” he muttered under his breath and pressed Natasha’s number. Ivan Banionis had put an illegal flow-inhibitor on the self-sustaining battery in the building and had been raising rates to force Clint and the rest to pay more or do without. As soon as his severance pay cleared, he was gonna buy the whole damn building.

"Romanoff," Her voice met his ears and he immediately wanted to throw Steve through the phone.
She was so much more prepared for stuff like this.

“Nat, I’m gonna need to call you in. There’s...uh...something the Director might not want to even know exists sitting on my couch.”

“Director?” Steve asked, but Clint waved his hand. He wasn't going to even pretend to answer that. Who knew what kind of reaction he would get.

“Clint, who’s with you?” she said it as if he was just going to repeat over the phone all the bullshit he’d just listened to.

“I’m not in danger,” he said instead then paused and glanced back to Steve who shook his head. “Yeah, I’m safe-ish. Just put a little pep in your step, huh?”

“This better be something serious,” she grit out and he smiled.

“You bet it is. Red, white, and bullshit serious.”

“I’ll be there in ten.”

“How am I supposed to entertain him for ten minutes?”

“You’ll think of something.” And she hung up.

Letting his frustration out through internal screaming, Clint set his phone back down. It had lost four percent already. When he turned to Steve, the man was standing about three feet away. Clint jumped.

“Fuck! Make some noise, asshole,” he shivered at the incredibly dark and immovable glare in Steve’s eyes. He should have told Nat to be here in five. “What?”

“Tell me about the princes, now.” Steve’s voice was iron and steel and every other hard metal he could think of. Suddenly, he came to the realization that Steve would crush him in no time flat if he
felt inclined. Honestly, Lucky was a damn traitor.

“I just called in someone who knows more than I do, or do you not understand the word retired?”

“I’ve never retired.” Steve was freakily still, as if he didn’t need to shift his weight or anything. “Who did you call?”

“A friend,” Trying to reclaim his domain, Clint puffed up his chest a bit and sidled around Steve so he could sit back down. “They’ll be here in ten minutes.”

“I heard. Who are tracksuits?”

“You heard...” Clint leaned far away from Steve and pulled the most disgusted face his muscles would allow. “What are you?”

“Right now? Annoyed. Tell me what you know,” Steve moved back to his spot across from Clint and resumed glaring. Clint knew it was a fucking tell as much as shouting it to the open air, but he shifted uncomfortably in his seat anyway. This guy...

“You realize my friend is going to rehash all of this when they get here?”

“When she gets here. Nat, you said. Is that short for something?”

“Okay, rule one of being allowed to sit in my house, don’t eavesdrop. That’s like...kindergarten level of trust requirements.”

“It’s both too quiet and too loud here in a way it wasn’t on Jötunheim or Asgard. Never-ending blizzards change your standards of sound. But I apologize, it was unintentional,” Steve offered a softer smile that Clint would have believed in if the man’s hands weren’t balled into fists. “Now, please, tell me what you know.”

Raising his hands to the air as if tossing control into the ether, Clint began. “About four years ago, as I said, there was an incident in New Mexico. Not sure what the incident was, hence me calling for back-up - I mean, a more knowledgeable person. Then it happened here and all I know is there
were strange markings burned on a street a few blocks from here and the government quarantined the whole area for months. I don’t know what exactly went down. Again, retired.”

“Why did you retire?”

Blinking, Clint sat forward. “I didn’t agree with my superior officers. It was either retire or end up in Zola’s playhouse.”

“Zola?!” Steve shot to his feet and knocked quite a few things to the ground. Clint lamented the inevitable clean-up he was going to have to do. “He’s here? He’s alive?”

“Well, yeah,” Clint said, frowning up at his guest. He knew his Cap history like any other red-blooded American and the reaction wasn’t too far off the mark. Except, this guy was obviously an enthusiast. Right? “Unless I missed a news broadcast about his demise.”

“This is normal for you?” Steve seemed both confused and angry. His brows kept twitching from tight in the middle to raised and he pulled away as Clint had a bit ago. “He’s not...he’s the enemy.”

“For a lot of people, yeah,” Clint checked the time. He had about three minutes. “He’s got his playhouses littered all over the world. You break the law, you become his property. It’s kept the prisons quiet and the streets quieter. President Stern swears up and down it’s the best solution. He’s full of shit, but...he’s president.”

Steve rocked where he stood and looked about two seconds from either screaming or barfing. Clint slid one of the rain buckets closer with his toe and put his hands just below his ears. He watched Steve pace until Natasha knocked on his door. Steve didn’t stop pacing and Clint hurried over to let her in.

“Nat, this is way over my head,” Clint moved out of the way as she stepped inside. Her hair was cut short now and she lingered beside him, her eyes checking him for injury. “I’m fine.”

Natasha raised a brow, but patted his arm. She took in his filthy apartment, Lucky fast asleep on the couch, and then the pacing renaissance man. She stilled and looked him up and down. Flicking her gaze back to Clint, she clicked her tongue.

“You’ve really outdid yourself, Clint. How’d you find him?”
“He found me. He swears his name is Steve Rogers and he’s been on Asgard for the past sixty years.” Clint twitched a little when Steve stopped pacing and focused his gaze on them both like a wolf catching a scent.

“Jötunheim for a little over fifty, Asgard for the rest,” Steve marched towards them and Clint raised his hands once more in surrender, moving back to his seat.

**Steve**

The friend that Clint had called was a woman with fiery red hair that Volstagg would have been proud of and a bearing that Sif would have complimented. Wearing dark colors and cuffs that looked like a little more than jewelry, the woman, Nat, looked him up and down. He stopped just short of her and nodded.

“I’m Steve,” he didn’t offer his hand, but neither did she.

“I’m Natasha,” she didn’t seem in the least bit afraid of him and Steve admired her for it.

“Clint says you can tell me about the incidents in New Mexico and New York.”

“Thor and Loki, respectively,” Clint interjected from where he was resting against his seat.

“The Norse gods?” Natasha asked and Steve bobbled his head from side to side.

“Norse, perhaps, not gods. They might have above average strength and talk like crazy people, like me,” Steve watched Natasha as she considered him.

“Clint,” she said, not looking towards the other man. “You do realize this means you have to come in.”
“Nuh-uh, I’m retired.”

“You lost that privilege when you let him in. Now, get up. You know the protocol.”

“Oh, come on, Nat.” Clint whined a little, pushing himself to his feet. “I did all the hard work, I listened to the soundtrack to insanity here, I called you in. I did my civic duty.”

“Deputy Director Fury is going to want to debrief you.”

Groaning, Clint punched Steve in the back and met his shield. Grinning at Clint’s gasp of pain, Steve looked over his shoulder. “Don’t touch me without permission.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” Clint rubbed his knuckles and looked to Natasha. “He’s made of stone and ice.”

Steve watched as Clint put his jacket back on. “Where are we going?” he asked.

Clint looked up from checking his pockets to give Steve a take-a-guess look. “We’re taking you to our leaders, obviously. That’s standard protocol for aliens.”

“I’m not an alien.”

“And we can verify that,” Natasha said quietly, stepping closer to Steve. “If you’ll come with us.”

Laughing, Steve looked down at Natasha and though he admired her, he wouldn’t hesitate to take her down if he needed to. “You think I’ll just follow you?”

“Personally,” Clint said, pulling his keys out of his pants pocket with a triumph fist pump. “I think you’re batshit crazy and not worth the walk, but if Natasha wants to go through the whole process with Simmons, she can be my guest. I’m gonna get debriefed and hightail myself back home. It’s not my fault that you popped up on my doorstep.”

Clint slipped out the open doorway and Steve listened to his footsteps retreating. Or, at least,
pretending to retreat. He could still hear the archer breathing. Sighing, Steve eyed Natasha.

“All I want to know is what happened in New Mexico and New York. That’s all.”

Natasha smiled without teeth. “We have the files on all of that, but you have to follow us.”

“Why?” Steve didn’t move, didn’t posture, but he did cross his arms. He tucked his hands where he could reach his knives.

“Because you aren’t the first Steve Rogers and you probably won’t be the last. Our Director has a strict policy of how to deal with Steve Rogers. If you want to know about New Mexico and New York, if you want people to believe you...you have to come with me.”

Rocking a little, his hands lowering, Steve frowned. “I’m not...people are pretending to be me?”

“Or you’re pretending to be someone you’re not. Either way, the only choice you have is to follow us,” Natasha smiled at him with one side of her mouth. “And just a fair warning, if you try to run: there are worse ways to bring you in. I’m...the soft touch.”

Steve wondered if she was being modest, but she didn’t seem the type. He thought of Sif and of how Asgard had treated him until they were sure he wasn’t about to murder them all. Arms length was a safety measure that he understood. Especially if he wasn’t the first Steve Rogers to show up in their lives. He sighed and let his arms fall to his sides.

“If this is trap, know that I won’t be soft in any way.”

Natasha looked him up and down again. “Ice and stone, right?”

“You have no idea,” Steve walked ahead of Natasha and they caught Clint before he’d finished descending the stairs. The archer looked up curiously.

“Did you lock the door?”
Skye

The drop-off point was a warehouse that had been abandoned when Schmidt had announced through President Stern his plan to make it a test site. Strangely, telling the populace you had brainwashed that you were going to murder them if they stayed made them want to move. How funny. Skye had already told all of their passengers what to expect when they went inside the building and repeated ad nauseum the importance of forward movement.

“If we spend more than fifteen minutes here, you’ll be rounded right back up. So keep your head down, find the symbol on your card and go there. Follow the person who greets you and stay quiet. You’ll be safe and sound in no time.”

“But what about our records?” an older woman asked and Skye patiently repeated that she had already wiped them. The agents they met would give them a new one and they should be able to return home.

“Any more questions?” she asked, the whole ordeal had worn her down. It always did. These people didn’t ask for this, at least most of them didn’t, and they were being tossed from one unknown to another. They were being asked to walk on faith in a faithless world. Skye just hoped there was enough left to keep them going. Loki, the dark-haired John Doe, made a noise and she turned to him. “Don’t be shy.”

“You haven’t given me a card,” he didn’t sound eager for one, but he must have noticed he’d been singled out from the word ‘move’.

“You’re not going anywhere. You’re staying with us,” Skye realized just how horrible that sounded when it hit her own ears and she shook her head. “It’s not an order. You can go with the others if you want.”

“Then why do I not have a card?”

“Do you have a life to get back to?” Again, it sounded cruel, but she didn’t correct herself.

“I’m a king,” Loki asserted for the hundredth time and the others groaned or laughed. Loki raised his hand but nothing happened. He looked at his own palm in fear. When he looked back at the others who mocked him, there was even more fear. Skye watched him throw his anger up like a
“Loki,” she caught his attention and he looked up at her in desperation. “I’m offering more than a fake name and a fake life. Everyone else here has a family and homes to get back to. If you don’t, or you can’t, then I’m offering a place with me and Mike. We could use another pair of eyes.”

“An expendable pair, you mean.”

Skye knelt in front of Loki and took his hand. This time, he didn’t pull away. “No one is expendable, you understand? Every life matters.”

“Not every life.” Loki’s lips thinned and he started to turn away.

“Your life matters, Loki. You matter,” Skye squeezed his hand. “I’m offering you a chance to prove it. Stay with me and Mike, help us free people like we freed you today. Isn’t that what being a king is? Serving his people?”

“These are not my people,” Loki gazed at the people in the bus like she would at gum on the sole of her shoe. “These pathetic Midgardians...”

“You’re one of us, dude. Whether you want it or not,” She let his hand go and glanced to the nav-dock of the bus. They were less than two minutes from the drop-off spot and she needed to start lining everybody up. “Make your choice.”

Skye let Loki slip out of her mind as she let the motions take her through unloading her cargo to the next phase of their freedom. Mike stood just outside the bus, looking out for threats. Her surveillance system should alert them of incoming hostiles, but it wasn’t foolproof. Even with all her connections in the Rising Tide, she didn’t have access to all the best tech. What she did have, she scavenged from the places they raided. It had been a couple years since she’d managed to find a loophole in the Stark Industries net and exploit it for her nav-dock, the autopilot device and a sustainable battery. So long as they maintained the bus, they could do this until they died or got caught.

Mike patted the side of the bus three times to let her know all the people were in the warehouse. She turned back to make sure no one had left anything and her eyes met Loki’s. She stifled her smile a little, walking to her laptop rig and setting in another destination.
“What do you want your new name to be?” she asked him without turning around and she saw him shift in the dark parts of her screen. She pulled up a fresh file.

“My new name?” he seemed reluctant to rise from his seat and she sighed, glancing over her shoulder.

“Me and Mike will call you Loki, but during missions or on the public file, you have to have a name. It’s to keep us legit if we get caught,” When he hesitated, she shrugged. “I’ve always liked the name Loren.” She typed it in and tapped the first last name she could think of. “Loren Olsen. Loki Odinson.”

Finally standing, Loki was tensed from head to foot. “I am no son of Odin.”

Leaning against the wall of the bus closest to her, Skye took in his posture and the fear still burning in his eyes. She understood it probably too well. Someone else's words came to mind. “Keep your lies closest to the truth to remember them.”

He blinked at her for a moment before some tension leaked out of him. “Loren Olsen.”

Skye smiled to lighten the mood. “Want some pizza? I’m starving.”

“I sure do,” Mike grunted, coming back aboard the bus. The doors closed behind him and the bus started moving. Loki slowly sat back down and proceeded to engage in a staring match with his palms.
Steve

There was a sleek black vehicle waiting outside the front of the apartment building as Steve, Clint and Natasha stepped out into the drizzling rain. Two shady men in loose-fitting clothes with stripes down the arms and legs were sizing up the vehicle and laughing. Steve got ready for a fight, but Natasha called out to them in Russian, and waved. One of the men, with a black eye and his arm already in a cast, patted his friend and jerked his head. They walked awkwardly away.

Clint snorted, standing back as the door slid open, and climbed into the passenger side as the guys took off running. “Those are tracksuits, Captain.”

“Who beat them up?” Steve asked, watching them run around the corner.

“We did,” Natasha said, smiling as she gestured for Steve to get in the back. The seat were lit by a thin strip of blue light and it was oddly spacious inside. He looked for restraints or anything that could spring out and attack him. “It’s just a backseat.”

Steve looked at her, then climbed in. The car door closed on its own and the air started to cycle around until it barely smelled or tasted real. Pressing in an address and buckling up, Natasha relaxed back in her seat. The car took off on its own, a slight hum the only indicator that it was moving at all. The windows were blacked out in the back and though Steve could see out, he hadn’t been able to see in. Clint started poking around at the bright screen affixed to the center of the vehicle and music began playing from nowhere. Steve looked for the speakers, but they weren’t visible.

“Technology has...really advanced since I was gone. Does this thing run on gas?”
Clint laughed until there were tears in his eyes. “Man, you’re a method actor, I’ll give you that much. But I’ll play along and answer this one. Gas was phased out before I was born. The world’s been running on Stark-patented AES70-batteries for decades.”

“Stark?” Steve sat forward, leaning a little bit into the open space between Natasha’s seat on his left and Clint’s on his right. “Howard Stark?”

Snorting, Clint leaned his head back and turned until he could look at Steve. “Dude, I’m not about to give you a speech about Earth history just to get to the end of this and have you be some elaborate ruse. I literally don’t have the patience. Howard’s been dead for...what?” Clint looked to Nat for a moment and she offered a year. “Since ‘91. And yes, he made the batteries.”

Steve felt his breath leave him again and he looked away. Howard was gone. It was just another body on the mountain amassing behind him. He ran from it like he would have from Nedra’s, fearful of an avalanche. His past was a cemetery and every step he took was another row. He had thought the same thing on Asgard and now...now he was seeing the proof.

“What about the Commandos? Surely Morita or Dugan or Falsworth are still around,” Steve didn’t hear his own voice but it felt reedy coming out of his throat.

“Not the old school Commandos. A few died in combat after the real Steve Rogers vanished, the rest made it out of the war but time caught up with them.”

“All of them?” Steve couldn’t even be sure he had managed to speak or if he was only thinking it so loud it sounded like speech.

“Well, Gabe Jones is still kicking and I think Dernier was building schools in France or something like a few years ago,” Clint shrugged. “I didn’t keep tabs on all of them. I liked them like any other kid, but I wasn’t obsessed.”

Natasha looked to Clint and he laughed. “Wait till he sees him, Nat,” Clint had lowered his voice, but Steve heard it loud and clear. “Phil is gonna lose it.”

Steve didn’t ask who Phil was, didn’t even attempt to force a serious face and demand they be more forthcoming. He was still reeling. He collapsed a bit against his seat and covered his eyes with his hand. If this had been anywhere else, he would have wept. But he didn’t truly know these
two people and he didn’t feel comfortable enough in this nightmarish world to let that kind of emotion show. He had already shown enough. Still, the knowledge was settling on his heart and in his mind.

Howard was still young and energetic when Steve was transported, full to the brim with ideas and hope. Steve was already older now than Howard had been when he died. What had happened to the Commandos and Phillips? Had they gone down fighting Hydra and Schmidt? Was Schmidt still around? How many people were paying the price of his failure? Steve wrapped one arm around his middle and started rocking. It was too quiet, even with the music and the humming of the vehicle. It was too still, too foreign. He felt like he was going to burst out of his skin.

“Stop the car,” he demanded, his voice weak and shuddering. When nothing changed, he slammed his fist into the nearest window and it shattered. “Stop the car!”

He felt the humming reach a different frequency and he pushed until the door screeched as the metal bent. Steve jumped out of the moving car as he had once jumped from a plane above Austria. His knees buckled when his mind was prepared for open air and met concrete instead. He rolled and grunted, his limbs smacking into the ground as he came to a stop. He couldn’t breathe.

Steve pushed himself to his feet and found the closest solid surface to press hands against. A brick wall bit into his palms and he pushed more until the stone started to crumble.

He had thought he was ready for this, ready to deal with everything that his disappearance had caused. He had been so settled on Asgard before he left, so ready to face his failure head on. Now, it was worse than kneeling at Hela’s feet, worse than reliving every death connected to him. This was what he had been putting out of his mind for decades on Jötunheim just to survive. This was the reality that he had been too afraid to confront even as he demanded a way back. This was the mourning he hadn’t allowed himself when he saw Peggy through Heimdall’s eyes.

His Earth, just like Jötunheim, was gone. He was an alien.

“Rogers?” Natasha asked softly and he jolted, but he still couldn’t breathe. “Rogers, look at me.”

Steve’s fingers dug grooves into the wall he was touching and he forced himself to take a step back, to turn around. He couldn’t really see Natasha, his vision was blurred and he shook as she stepped closer.
“Tell me what’s happening,” she didn’t touch him and part of him thanked her for that.

“It’s all gone. I...I left and...I left them...” Steve swayed and felt himself start to rock again. “Who else is dead? What have I done?”

“Rogers...Steve,” Natasha was closer now and he held up his hand. He was terrified that he would hurt her as he had been planning to. Kingslayer, he remembered and wondered if he was more than that. Garm’s brother, Hela had called him. He was a hound of Hel. “Listen to me. You need to breathe. In and out. Can you do that?”

“The air’s thicker here than on Jötunheim. I...” he inhaled, trying to slow his heart rate. He had lost control somewhere. He had let his grief free again. Letting the cold and cruel part of him take hold, Steve shoved everything back down until he could lock it up. He closed off his past until he was focused on his mission again. This Earth would need Asgardian help and that meant finding Loki and Thor. He didn’t have time to mourn. Exhaling, Steve shook his head. “I’m fine. I’m sorry.”

“Steve,” Natasha began, her voice so soft and so...concerned that he couldn’t control the ice in his voice when he cut her off.

“I don’t matter to you, so don’t pretend,” Steve pushed away from the wall and sighed. “Just...take me wherever you’re taking me.”

Natasha looked like she was thinking of saying something else, but she shook her head. “Fine, but I’m going to have to restrain you. I told you I was the soft touch. You tore through that door like it was paper and you’re emotionally unstable.”

She spoke like he was a specimen under a microscope. He said nothing.

“Will you fight me if I put cuffs on you?” she asked and he shook his head. “Okay, good.”

The cuffs were a slim metal cylinder and gave him no choice but to have his hands almost crossed in front of him, one atop the other at the forearm. As they pneumatically hissed closed, he closed his eyes and thought of the wind blowing from atop the spires and of the dark sparring grounds. He searched for peace.

The emptiness that greeted him was almost kind.
The Williamsburg diner wasn’t much to look at and outside of the regulars who might as well have had booths with their names on them, they didn’t really get newcomers. Darcy Lewis wasn’t really a fan of yellow and red, but after years wearing her uniform, she had learned to tolerate it. Of course, it wasn’t the only uniform she wore, but the old man nibbling at a pancake didn’t need to know that. She refilled his coffee and sidled back behind the counter.

The TV was squawking loud enough to drown out the sound of cutlery scraping against ceramic and Darcy thanked all of the deities for that. For lack of something better to do, Darcy leaned against the counter and let the newscast filter in.

“The Red Captain is said to make an appearance at the Maria Stark Foundation gala next month, which would mark his first public appearance in six years,” the anchor, Christine Everhart, always had her blonde hair perfectly styled and her winning smile at the ready. Darcy hadn’t gotten far enough through Sarkissian’s Academy to pull off that much benevolence. “His whereabouts have been kept a secret, but the other members of the Kommandos have assured the media that it was simply time for a break. The Kommandos’ duties were lightened after the Mandarin Campaign in the mid-nineties and have yet to be reinstated to active. This is seen by many experts as a reassuring sign. With me today to give us a better idea of why it isn’t a cause for concern, is a current member of the World Security Council, Gideon Malick.”

The camera shifted to a medium shot and the smarmy face of Malick came into view. He smiled at Everhart and Darcy flipped the bird to the screen.

“Mister Malick, thank you for being here.”

“Thank you for having me.”

“First off, can you explain to the people at home what the Kommandos are? This is often a source of confusion.”

“Well, the Kommandos are an institution built from the proud history of Captain America and the
Howling Commandos, a team that made this world safer during World War 2. As the years went on, it changed to fit the conflicts of its time, and has had many members. They are highly trained, extremely intelligent, and can put a stop to terror long before it comes to our shores.”

“A global task force?” Everhart asked, her voice sharp. Malick shifted in his seat.

“A global protection force, Miss Everhart. They keep the boogeyman a myth.”

“Right,” Everhart rifled through her notes quickly and Darcy saw the crack in her perfect persona for all of a moment. The years of hard training kicked in a moment later and the winning smile was back. “Tell me more about the Mandarin Campaign and how the Kommandos helped end that conflict.”

Darcy knew just like the rest of the graduates of the Academy about the Kommandos history. They might have learned more but she had opted for the fast track out at sixteen. SHIELD had swooped in soon after and then her age had made her ripe for certain missions. Like pretending to be a Culver University student under-qualified for an internship. After the incident four years ago in New Mexico, they had needed a way in to the research team around it and there had been an opening in Culver. Darcy was knowledgeable and young enough to fit the mold. All had been going well until Zola had tried to pull rank. She had been relegated to exclusive promiximity work when it came to working with the scientist as the deal brokered with Agent Coulson to keep Jane’s pet hunk - alien - project out of Zola’s hands required a change of scenery. The facility where Jane now worked was top secret and they hadn’t thought Darcy’s low-level cover was worth the effort of giving her a permanent residency. Still, out of respect to Jane, she was allowed to work part-time with the astrophysicist when she was in on Norwegian soil. She also knew too much about the incident to be left completely out of the loop. Too bad they hadn't wanted her stationed in Tromsø full-time. She missed her friends.

She tuned the sounds of the TV back out and wiped her expression when her boss walked up to her. Angie Martinelli was a former actress and dancer from the forties and fifties who had never stopped moving. She even wore her dancing heels for everyday things. Darcy wouldn’t last an hour in heels unless it was for a date. Again, she hadn’t been that high up on Sarkissian’s list of potentials, even if she had had the physique for it as a young teen.

“Max, can you turn that gibberish down? I lived through all of this, I don’t want to hear it again.”

“Of course, Angie,” Darcy tapped on a seemingly empty square on the wall behind the register and a glowing blue screen popped up. She typed in her employee code and accessed the TV’s remote. As soon as the edge was off from the blaring sound, she locked the screen again and it vanished.
“Thank you,” Angie sighed, looking out at the regulars. “It’s a slow day.”

Groaning, Darcy shook her head. “Please don’t say that. It’s like asking for chaos.”

As Angie went to speak, the door opened and three people walked in. Darcy gave Angie a look and snatched three menus and silverware up from her station. She hurried around the front counter and up to the podium where the three people were waiting to be seated. Two men and a woman, all the sort of young people Darcy would hang out with. So definitely not their usual fare.

“Hi, and welcome to Williamsburg Diner. Table or booth?” she greeted by rote and smiled. It wasn’t as good as Christine Everhart’s but she wasn’t kissing politicians asses on live TV.

“Booth in the corner, if you don’t mind,” the woman answered, offering up a smile of her own. Darcy didn’t even pretend to notice how fake it was.

“Follow me,” she said, leading them to the one without any windows. Only junkies or fugitives liked these seats. One man took one side while the other two took the other side. Darcy laid the menus, silverware, and her name card out, then pulled her small order tablet out of her apron. She tapped her stylus on the screen to wake it up. “I’m Max and I’ll be your server today. What would you like to drink?”

“Coffee,” One of the men said, already flipping through the menu. He was focused and built, his dark skin marred by a few scars. Darcy pegged him as the soldier type.

“I’ll take a Coke,” The woman said, leaning forward a bit to whisper to the other man. Pale and with long black hair, the other man was frowning.

“Mead or Ale,” he whispered to the woman and she shook her head.

“They don’t have those here,” she told him and pointed to Coke. “Try this and if you don’t like it then we’ll order water.”

“I’m not a child,” the man hissed, but the woman only nodded.
“Children aren’t the only ones who don’t know things, Loki,” the woman turned back to Darcy and she pretended to have not overheard the conversation. “He’ll have a Coke.”

“Okay, I’ll be right back with your drinks,” Darcy took her time gathering the drinks, watching the three in the back booth.

It wasn’t completely unheard of to have strangers come in, but usually they were drifters with no clue how to get from point A to point B. Being what her occupation was, Darcy was hard-wired to observe people. Both the Academy and SHIELD had trained her for it. Of course, being a glorified doorwoman wasn’t exactly what she had planned when she joined, but it was better than anything Sarkissian had planned for her. She hadn’t actually been cleared for combat until a year ago anyway. She could be using that combat training to protect Jane and Erik in Tromsø, but no.

As she watched the three interact, she saw from watching their lips that the soldier-looking guy was Mike and the woman was Skye. Lip-reading was one thing she had actually tried to learn and not just brushed off. It came in handy. Knowing she had delayed as much as she could, Darcy put the three drinks on her tray and carried them out.

She set the Cokes down first and then the coffee. With creamer and the pot, it was a little more involved. Mike asked her to leave the pot.

“Are you ready to order?” she asked and watched to see what Loki’s reaction would be. Mead or Ale, he had said. Where was he from, Europe?

“Two large pepperoni pizzas,” Skye answered, gathering up the menus. Mike refilled his cup.

“That’ll be about fifteen minutes, is that okay?”

“Sure,” Skye nodded, turning her attention back to her companions.

Darcy sent the order to the kitchen, which she didn’t need to walk over there for as it was instant, but she did anyway. Leaning into the open window, she drummed her fingers against the wood. Antoine Triplett glanced up at her as he was putting sauce on the fresh dough.

“What’s up, baby girl?” he asked, using the stool he was sitting on to slide over to the container of pepperoni. He had been shuffled down to this light duty until his leg healed. From what Darcy
remembered, he had been shot and it had broken the tibia and fibula when it ricocheted. For the next few months, he was gonna be her friend. They got on like a house on fire and she dreaded the day he was back to active SHIELD duty. He had been the only bright spot at the diner since she was transferred here.

“The three in the back booth,” she said, not looking back at them. “What do you think?”

Antoine flicked his gaze up at them a couple times and shrugged as he put the first pizza in. “They don’t look like hostiles. Did they say something?”

“No, but I’m paranoid, sue me. They’re strange.”

“Strange like magic? Strange like alien? What kind of strange are we talking here?” Antoine glanced at them again. “That one looks like he’s had some training.”

“His name’s Mike,” Darcy offered, sneaking a couple slices of pepperoni before Antoine could put them away. “She’s Skye and the other one’s Loki.”

“Did you lip-read them? Cause I’m still not used to that.”

“It’s the closest thing to telepathy that I can do,” Darcy saw Angie coming around the corner and she shot back up. “I’ll be back for the pizzas. Tell me what you think about them.”

Loki

Coke, as the mortal Skye had called it, was bubbly and burned a little on the way down. It also oozed sugar. He sipped from it as they waited for their food. Skye had assured him that she could help him, but he knew she had no true idea of what he was. Mike seemed to have a feeling though he was too kind to be completely aware. The only thing keeping him from killing them right now was the fact that he didn’t know enough about this world.

From the clothing to the language and the attitudes, everything was foreign. He would never have been treated this way in Asgard. He was a king, not some orphan left out in the cold. He should
have people falling at his feet not knocking him to theirs.

He ran his fingers over his palm, searching for a power that wasn’t there.

Odin had stripped everything away from him and left him to the Midgardians. He hadn’t even given him shelter. It had been snowing when he arrived what felt like centuries ago and he had been on the run since his boots hit the paved roads. Flying contraptions with blades that circled above them to keep them afloat had come in great number and shone bright lights towards where he had landed. They had rained down soldiers in black gear who spread out like ants with weapons held at the ready. Loki had fled, knowing he couldn’t fend them off in that great a number without a weapon or his magic. He had been forced into a great body of water and had used his advanced physiology to remain under the surface of the water until the coast was clear. He had nearly passed out from lack of oxygen, but he knew a mortal would have died in the same situation.

The frigid water had done little to affect him and he was reminded of his heritage. Of the blue that lurked beneath the pink flesh he ran his fingers over. He was a monster.

He had nothing but time to think now. Without his powers, without his throne, he was only himself and he found that he did not like what he saw. He could not even trust his own flesh, for it was an enchantment to make his false family comfortable around him. The Midgardians under the bridges and in the alleyways had not thought him crazy when he told them of his origins, but he soon learned it was because they were all mad. He had lived with the crazed invalids in the dark for months before he understood. In anger, he had followed the trail of power the papers spoke of. Stark Industries had more power than they could ever hope to understand and he had planned to get ahold of some, to get himself back home.

Unfortunately, he had underestimated his weakness here on Midgard. He had been thrown in chains and left to imprisonment. Then Skye and Mike had appeared. He wondered where in Midgard he would be if they had not come.

“Loki,” Skye called him softly and he gazed up at her. She was pretty, for a mortal, and far too kind. He could end her without his magic. He could kill her with his bare hands. She would probably forgive him even as the life left her body. Mike would shoot him through the skull if he did, though.

Skye took his hand so he couldn’t run his fingers over it and he fought the urge to grip it tighter. She was gentle and earnest like Frigga, and of all the Asgardians he held accountable for lying to him, she was the only one he couldn’t bring himself to hate. Frigga had loved him as her own and he had loved her back. Skye met his eyes without judgement, without fear, and he should loathe her for it. He was a beast in sheep’s clothing and she should quiver at the sight of him. Instead, she ran her own fingers over his palm and frowned.
“Why do you do that?” she asked and he watched her draw patterns on his skin. He couldn’t understand why Odin would torture him this way. He had been nothing but a loyal son.

“My...the All-Father banished me here and stole my powers,” he reached out and stopped her hand from moving. “I cannot feel it. It is as if a part of my soul has been cut out.”

He had shouted at the sky until he was hoarse when he realized he was powerless. He had raged at the clouds and the unmoving darkness until he had no energy left. Odin should have killed him instead.

Skye squeezed his hand and he looked back at her face. There was something far too good behind her brown eyes. He would spoil it before too long. The Asgardians had pretended to want him, too, until he realized the truth. Skye would want something from him, something he would not give. She would want his trust.

The servant girl Max came back and brought two large circular disks that she slid onto the center of the table. The pizza was baked bread with some kind of red sauce, melted cheese and unknown meat cut into rounds. It sizzled a bit and Loki would not deny that his mouth watered. He hadn’t had food that hadn’t been cold or won without a fight since he had arrived here.

Skye and Mike tucked in immediately, so he followed suit. It melted in his mouth a little and Loki blinked in surprise. Even with the grease and the great amounts of bread, it was delectable. He devoured his first piece, then proceeded to veritably inhale another and another. His hands were a mess of grease and sauce and his hands slid slightly on his glass of Coke as he washed the pizza down. A heaviness and an energy clashed inside of him and he reached for another piece.

“How fast down,” Skye was laughing, her own slice only halfway eaten in her hand. “You’re going to choke.”

At first, he thought she was mocking him as the others on the bus had, but she only handed him a bunch of little paper cloths and gestured at his hands and face.

He wiped at his face and hands, disconcerted to see that he had been covered in grease. Even the hoodie Mike had let him borrow hadn’t escaped the mess. He gave the other man an expression of apology that he only half-meant.
“When’s the last time you ate, man?” Mike asked him, pulling the empty metal disk beneath the other. There was still pizza left on the top disk. Loki would deny until his dying breath that he had sidled closer to it.

“I cannot recall,” Loki answered, taking another slice. He had assaulted a man with a cart of meat and bread before he had attacked the Stark Industries building, but men in black suits had come and he had fled with only a little food.

Skye and Mike shared a glance and Mike nodded before raising his hand. Max came back and she smiled at them. Loki watched them all in silence as Mike ordered another pizza. Max brought them fresh drinks as they waited.

Slowing a little, Loki narrowed his eyes. “What do you want?” They would want repayment for the food. He set the piece in his hand back down.

Skye shook her head. “You don’t owe us, Loki. You can still leave if you want.”

“Why did you save those people?” he asked, knowing they had been sent off into a strange building. “Where do they go?”

Mike took a sip of his coffee and sighed. “We save them because we have to. We’d be no better than Hydra if we left them. They get to go back home. Those people didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Then why were they in chains?”

“Why were you?” Mike countered, and Loki’s jaw clenched. You are unworthy! Odin had shouted, just as he had at Thor, ripping Loki’s cloak and helm from his body. You are an arrogant, petulant child.

“I had the audacity to try to find my way home,” he said, his anger barely contained.

“Asgard?” Skye asked and if she had not made it clear that she did not believe him, he might have mistaken her tone for curiosity.
Laughing, Loki began to sidle out of the booth, his back to the door. His next words died in his throat as he heard people entering. He looked over his shoulder and saw a familiar face. The blue eyes in the serious Midgardian’s face were turned away or else he might have seen Loki, too. Terrified, Loki dropped back into the booth, flicked his hood up and turned his face away. Skye and Mike watched him with concern, before looking up at who had come in.

*How had that Midgardian convinced Odin to send him here?*

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**Steve**

They pulled up in front of a small, nondescript diner and Steve looked out in confusion. The diner was, he realized, *retro* enough to be from his time. Even down to the brick façade and colorful posters. As he climbed out of the back and joined Clint and Natasha on the curb, he wondered if it had been here before. He didn’t recall it, though he wasn’t sure if that was because it was in this strange new world, or if it was because this was all a heavy dose of nostalgia for the people who lived here. In either case, the imagery was marred by the blue glow that permeated everything. It was as if they had coated everything in a rim of glow-weed.

He had calmed down enough that when he asked Natasha to remove the cuff, he thought she might. Instead, she gave him a regretful smile and shook her head.

“So I’m a prisoner?” he asked, though he had already decided this would happen one way or another. It had been in the same in Asgard and in Jötunheim. Until he proved himself or necessity called, he would be forced to play along. Still, he was tired of being held captive.

“No, but until we can be certain that you aren’t a threat, you have to keep the cuffs on,” Natasha grabbed him by the bicep and Clint yanked off his jacket to drape over Steve’s cuffed hands. The cuffs were slim enough that the jacket camouflaged them. Slipping her arm through his, Natasha put on a dopey expression and Clint rolled his eyes, walking ahead of them.

The door jingled merrily as they entered and Steve scanned the patrons quickly, but he didn’t see any threats. There were a group of young people hunched over pizza in a corner booth and he smiled at the two who were looking at him. The third one seemed to be half-asleep over the food if the angle of his hooded head was anything to go by. Natasha and Clint ushered him up to the counter and while Natasha was pretending to dote on Steve, her hand on his chest, Clint was smiling up at the young woman who came to wait on them. She was decked out in a yellow and red
uniform and had the pin-up look down pat. Steve offered her a smile and she looked him up and down quickly in open interest.

So, some things were the same on Earth, too.

“Welcome to the Williamsburg diner. What can I get ya?” The waitress, Max - by her name tag, asked and Clint flashed a card of some sort so quickly that Steve didn’t see it.

“A ‘45 special, if you don’t mind,” Clint flicked his eyes back to Steve and the grin he gave him was off-putting. “My friend back here just loves the throwbacks.”

Taking the chance to look him up and down again, Max raised her eyebrows. “Me, too.”

“Max,” Natasha said lowly and Max blinked. The young waitress blushed and turned away, waving them through. They passed through the front counter area and into the kitchen where a young man on a stool was watching them. His name tag said Trip.

After the kitchen, they turned into a narrow hallway that was invisible from the front counter and headed down it. The waitress didn’t follow.

“Where are we going?” he asked, looking back to where the now-obvious diner front had been. The car was probably already gone, too. Peggy had taken him into a place like this, except it was a storefront not a diner.

“You’ll see,” Natasha said, having released her embrace on him. She pulled him along by his bicep again. Clint was hopping a little as he led the way, running his fingers along the walls.

Steve geared up for a fight.

They reached the end of the hall and it look like a dead-end. Natasha let Steve go and leaned toward a seemingly random section of the wall. A beam of light blue light shot appeared and fanned out, scanning Natasha’s eye.

“Romanoff, Natasha,” a Irish woman's announced, and the brick wall shifted to the side. An
elevator waited on the other side.

“Let’s go,” Clint said eagerly, walking in. Natasha resumed her grip on Steve’s bicep and he followed her in. The door slid closed and he wondered if the brick looked exactly as it had when they walked up.

“Take us to Fury, FRIDAY,” Natasha said into the open air and Steve felt the elevator jerk into motion. As it carried them from the diner, Steve offered Clint’s jacket back. Taking it as if he’d forgotten about it already, Clint nodded his thanks.

“If you cooperate, you’ll be out of cuffs and on the roster before you know what hit you,” Clint said, slipping his arms back into his jacket. He had looked slightly uncomfortable in just his purple t-shirt. “Probably stationed in Antarctica because of your face, but...it’s not so bad there, right? Yogurt-time was colder.”

Steve didn’t even try to correct him. “So long as I can find Thor and Loki, it’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, dude, just...stay on mission.” Clint shared a glance with Natasha that Steve pretended he hadn’t seen.

The elevator came to a stop and opened to reveal a brightly lit hallway with a somewhat familiar symbol on the wall in black. The bird’s wings had fallen, however. He frowned at it.

“Is this the SSR?” Steve tried to take in more of the place as he was led around the corner and through a hall of glass. There were advanced labs to either side of him and he attempted to see everything in them, but he was led up a set of stairs and into a more office setting. There was still a lot of glass.

“I wish it was that short,” Clint chuckled and Natasha sighed.

“Strategic Homeland Intervention Enforcement and Logistics Division,” When Steve looked to her in confusion, she shrugged. “SHIELD for short.”

“Is Peggy here?” he asked, looking around to see if this place resembled the one he had seen through Heimdall’s eyes. They were marching too fast for him to see into the offices they passed. Neither Clint nor Natasha answered him.
They turned another corner and at the end of that hall there was only one office. It was substantially larger than the ones they had passed. Clint scratched the back of his head as they approached and sighed slow. “Here we go,” he muttered under his breath.

Clint held the door open as Natasha led Steve in and as Steve took in the room, his eyes landed on the man at the desk. A black man with an eye patch like Odin had only in black leather. Shooting out of Natasha’s hold, Steve stopped just short of the desk.

“I saw you,” he said breathlessly, taking in the man’s face as he rose to standing. It was the same man he had seen through Heimdall’s eyes. “You were with Peggy. She gave you a file. She’s here.” Suddenly both eager and desperately afraid, Steve stared the man down. “Take me to her.”

Not showing a reaction on his face, the man held up a hand as he came around the desk. He wore black from head to foot. Steve looked to the man’s hand and then over his own shoulder. There were at least three people in dark blue outfits with guns pointed at him, as well as Natasha. He frowned.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he said, taking in their rigid stances and then looked back to the other man. *Fury*, Natasha had said. “Fury, I don’t want to hurt you. I’m here to help, I swear.”

“Okay,” Fury waved off the agents and then gestured to one of the seats in front of his desk. “Then take a seat.”

“But Peggy...”

“Take a seat and we’ll talk,” Fury stepped back around the desk. Natasha took a seat to his left and Clint to his right. Slowly, as the door to the office closed, Steve sat down. “What’s your name?”

Meeting the man’s eyes, Steve knew he was truly asking. Eager to talk to someone who might believe him, Steve leaned forward. “Steven Grant Rogers.”

“Let me guess, you were born 1918?” And the belief in his words was siphoning away already.

Sighing, Steve shook his head. “I don’t know how I can convince you,” He had lost his uniform to
the wolves and the fire, the picture of Peggy to the winds of Jötunheim, and he had given his compass to Brynja. It hit him as he remembered why he had given her his compass. *If something happens, find New York, find Brooklyn...it’s my Utgard...take my shield.* He shot to his feet. “Take the cuffs off. I have my shield. There’s only one like it.”

“You have a vibranium shield?” There was a heavy dose of disbelief in Fury’s tone and Steve felt his chance slipping away from him.

“Yes, but it’s enchanted. You can’t see it,” his words hit his own ears and he cursed under his breath.

“You have an *invisible* vibranium shield,” Fury looked to Clint and then to Natasha. “Take him to Simmons and report back here once he’s secure.”

“Yes, sir,” Natasha answered immediately, standing and wrapping her hand around Steve’s bicep once more.

“Wait! Wait!” Steve pulled until Natasha was forced to stop because she couldn’t move him. “You have to believe me.”

“I don’t have to do anything, Rogers, if that is your name. But if you want us to believe you so damn bad,” Fury walked towards them and gestured out the door. “Go see Simmons, go through the hoops, and I’ll see you back in my office soon enough.”

*One day you will learn patience, Stígandr,* Ólafur had told him and he bit back all the words he was going to say, letting Natasha lead him back out of Fury’s office and back the way they had come.

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*Darcy*

Skye, Mike and Loki had paid and skedaddled soon after the ‘45 special and she hadn’t been able to make them stay for cupcakes or anything. They even brushed off free drinks. Loki had his hood up and Darcy went to Antoine as soon as the bell stopped ringing.
“I’m telling you they were up to something,” she said, her fingers drumming a beat again. “They were spooked by the agents that came in. They took off as soon as the agents were out of sight...” she made to say more, but he reached out for her hand.

“You’re an active duty SHIELD agent, Darce,” he reminded her and pointed to the diner’s old-fashioned time clock. “Clock out and get to it.”

“You’re a genius!” she gasped, pulling him forward so she could kiss his cheeks. “Absolute genius and love of my life.”

“They’re getting away, you know,” he said through pursed lips because of the grip she had on his face.

“Oh, right,” Darcy sprinted to the time clock and inserted her card. Antoine laughed at her as she rushed off to the employee break room. Changing out of her uniform and into her jeans and t-shirt, Darcy threw her uniform back in her locker and shoved her arms into her backpack. There were enough weapons and first aid supplies to outlast the first wave of a zombie apocalypse. Or a Hydra raid. “Tell Angie I’ll work a double shift!”

“Tell me what now?” Angie called out but Darcy was already out the front door, her only reply was the sound of the jingling bell.

She headed where she supposed they would have gone, as most odd characters parked in the alley out of sight if they didn’t walk the whole way, but the alley was empty. Thinking fast, she pulled herself up the fire escape and got on the roof. It was easier to see vehicles from this height, anyway. There was a Rollins’ Pickup Bus headed away from the diner and she knew for a fact that they didn’t come this close. There was a reason the diner had been placed here and not on the other side of the borough.

She couldn’t chase it, not on foot, but she could tag it. Pulling out the parts to a rifle, Darcy put it together at a pace Sarkissian would have been proud of and loaded a tracking bullet. She aimed, let out a breath and fired. It latched onto the back bumper. As the bus bumped along the back alley until it reached a main street and vanished from view, Darcy got back to the ground and took the first car she saw in the hidden garage beside the diner. The sleek black car was obviously for higher ranked agents, but she didn’t really care. It had a beat-up door in the back as if someone had tried to make a sardine can out of it, but it still had functionality and the defense measures. Hopping into the front seat, she slid the shell of the tracking bullet into where a cigarette lighter might be in a classic car and waited for the car to read the info. The GPS oriented around the moving bus and Darcy switched the car’s mode to pursuit. The blue lights inside went red and the
car took off like a rocket.

As Darcy watched the little blip of the bus make for the Brooklyn Bridge, her phone beeped at her.

She pulled it out to see three messages from Angie about protocol and two from Jane Foster. Tapping on Jane's messages, she saw a single picture and the caption: *Erik snuck in Kjøttkaker for dinner.*

Thor, the man from the storm, was smiling at the camera with his mouth full of food. There were still medical patches all over him to monitor his vitals. Jane was in her lab coat and Erik had a beer on the table. They looked happy.

The blip stopped suddenly as soon as the bus crossed into Manhattan and Darcy dropped her phone. “No way!” Having lost its target, the car slowed back to leisure driving. Darcy collapsed back against the seat in frustration. Now she knew for sure they were up to something. How had they found the tracker on the middle of a bridge? Better yet, how had they gotten rid of it so fast?

Slamming her hand into the dash, Darcy screamed out her frustration. She didn’t have the clearance for an investigation of a hunch and she was going to be in enough trouble as it was for ditching the diner. Reaching down to the floor for her phone, Darcy typed a couple messages.

To Jane: *i need a favor, so act like there’s an emergency. I'll be there on the first flight out*

To Angie: *Sorry, Doctor Foster needed me. Will work double shift when I get back!*

Her phone beeped quickly a few times and she checked Angie’s message first.

Angie: *Triple shift and a write-up.*

Jane had sent another picture, this time with all three of them reaching out for the camera with smiling faces. *Hurry up, we miss you!*

Changing her destination to her apartment so she could pack, Darcy sent a message to Antoine, too.
They got away in Manhattan

He took all of a minute to reply. *They ran?*

*Like bats outta hell. ditched the tracker b4 they left the bridge*

*can’t catch em all, darce*

*i can try*

She rested her head against the seat and let the hum flow over her before she couldn’t take the silence anymore. Turning on the music, she scrunched up her nose.

“Who listens to the soundtrack of Blade Runner?”
Steve

Natasha led him back to the elevator and asked FRIDAY, whoever that was, to take them to Medical. Clint had stayed with Fury. In the silence of the elevator, Steve swallowed back his frustration and looked to Natasha. She stared resolutely ahead as if this was an everyday occurrence. Perhaps it was if they had a protocol and code words set up for it. They weren’t going to let him leave.

“How many?” he asked, watching as Natasha glanced at him.

“Doppelgangers?”

It stunned him a bit how perceptive she was, but then again that was her job. “How many times has this happened?”

Seeming to give it some thought, Natasha sighed. “There were at least twenty soon after the war. It slowed down until sometime in the eighties, when an assassin nearly got close enough to kill the Director. Since then, there’s been a no tolerance policy.”

“Then why am I here?” The elevator came to a stop but the doors didn’t open right away. Natasha looked down. Steve carefully wiped his face of all expressions.

“Fury’s not convinced Steve Rogers is a lost cause. He thinks he’s still out there.”

“I am,” Steve told her urgently, though he knew it could all be a lie, leaning a little so she had to look at him. “I’m right here.”
Natasha stared up at him and he saw her unreadable face waver just a little, then it was a mask once more. “Simmons will assure us of the truth. She’s nice.”

The doors opened and she pulled him along.

Medical was a maze of glass and metal, with people in lab coats dotted all over the place. Once the cuff was off, Steve could crash through the walls if he needed to, but that wouldn’t do anything to convince these people that he meant no harm. If Peggy was in the building, if Heimdall’s sight was true, he had to do everything in his power to be...himself.

But he wasn’t the Steve Rogers they remembered. That man had died on Jötunheim.

He had to be a ghost.

“Who’s Simmons?” he asked as they turned yet another corner and he was reminded of Nedra’s mountain. The storm giants had tried to turn him around, too.

“Doctor Simmons is a biochemist. She’ll be running tests on you to prove your identity.”

“Do they still have my blood?” There was laughter coming from the lab up ahead of them and Steve relaxed a little. It sounded like young people, maybe as old as he had been when he joined the Army. He wasn’t sure if that would make them more jaded to the idea of him or more nostalgic. He hoped it made them at least open to the idea. Anything to get their guards down.

“They’ve probably got everything short of Steve Rogers’ body.”

Natasha tugged on the glass door and the two scientists, who were laughing over a small metal contraption that was floating on its own, shot to attention.

“They can’t have my body,” Steve said quietly to Natasha. “You have your hand on it.”

Meeting his eyes for a second, as if telling off for his joke, Natasha turned to the young
woman and young man. “Fitzsimmons,” she called and they both hurried around the tables to greet their guests. “This is Steve, a ‘45 special.”

The young woman gasped and clapped her hands. “I’ve never actually done one on my own before!” Blinking, she blushed. “A test, of course. Obviously.”

Steve noticed she was British and wondered if that was Peggy’s influence over this situation. The young man chuckled nervously and pointed at the young woman. “That’s Simmons.”

“He’s Fitz,” Simmons said almost immediately and he looked between them both.

“Fitzsimmons,” he acknowledged and looked to Natasha. “Are you going to stay?”

“Are you going to hurt them?”

“Have I hurt you?” he stared at her and the other two shifted nervously. They probably weren’t ready for a fight. Fortunately, Steve was.

“You did tear up my perfectly good car,” she reminded him stepping around so she was in between him and the other two. “You still haven’t apologized for that.”

Steve raised his cuffed arms and put on his best smile. “I did ask you to stop,” Natasha met his eyes and he grinned. “And I’m sorry.”

“Do I have your word you won’t hurt them?”

“Wait,” Fitz breathed out, taking a step back. “You...you aren’t letting him loose?”

Steve sighed. “You have my word, but if it makes them uncomfortable...”

Simmons stepped forward. “You can remove the cuffs, Agent Romanoff. We’ll be fine.”
Looking to Simmons, Natasha shrugged. “I’m needed in Fury’s office. Call a Big Green if he does anything out of line.”

“Of course,” Simmons smiled gently and took Steve’s hand as soon as Natasha removed the cuff. “Come along.”

Steve paused for a moment, leaning in close to Natasha’s ear. “You believe me. Don’t you?”

Raising a hand to the back of his head so he couldn’t stand up straight without yanking out of her grip, Natasha had a smile in her voice. “Fury’s not the only one with hope, Rogers.”

“Have fun!” Natasha called out to them and was gone, the glass doors to the lab closing behind her with finality. Considering the knee-jerk reaction to him rushing Fury earlier and the cuffs that Natasha had only just removed, Steve wondered why he was suddenly allowed a little leeway. Maybe it was a test.

Alone in a relatively quiet lab with Fitz and Simmons, Steve rolled his shoulders. He felt overly large beside the smaller duo, which was jarring after having been the smallest thing around for half a century. He tried to find something common in this room to the Healing Halls of Asgard, but there was too much silver and black. Machines whirred and there was something beeping. The floating device swerved towards Steve’s head and his hand shot out to grab it before he could think.

Fitz made a noise of panic and rushed towards Steve, but thought better of it at the last second. Holding his hands out with his palms up, Fitz bowed his head a little and said with what Steve identified as a Scottish brogue, “Can I have Snow White back, please? She’s delicate.”

“Oh,” Steve looked at the device pinched between his fingertips and raised an eyebrow. He could crush it now and gauge their reaction. Bully. He gently laid it in Fitz’ palm. “Sorry, reflex. Is it damaged?”

Looking it over, Fitz sighed and his shoulders lost their tension. “No...she’s fine.”

“See, Fitz, he’s nice. Hmm?” Simmons drew Steve’s attention back to her and she offered a kind smile. “I have to check your blood pressure and everything. Like a normal doctor’s visit, okay?”
Steve relaxed a little more. These people weren’t threats. If anything, he felt like he might need to protect them. Of course, that could all be a ruse, like they all thought he was. Perhaps if he’d been a little more violent, they wouldn’t have gotten this far. No tolerance policy. Simmons led him further into the lab and to a strange contraption. It was shiny silver metal, formed to fit a human body almost exactly and upraised in a way that reminded him of the Vita-Ray chamber, though much smaller and open.

“What is this?” he asked, stopping in front of it as Simmons had released his hand. She went to the clear screen beside it and entered a few things.

“This is a diagnosis machine. It will read your blood pressure, heart rate, take a sample of your blood and tissue, and provide us with a full reading of your body. It’s relatively painless,” She pressed a couple more buttons on the screen and turned back to him. “Just remove your...um...is that a jerkin?”

“He has leather trousers, a floofy shirt, and a fur satchel, but it’s the jerkin that throws you?” Fitz asked, setting Snow White into a thick plastic case. There were seven others waiting in the open case.

“I wasn’t looking at his trousers, Fitz.” Simmons shook her head, then turned back to Steve. “Everything above the waist, if you don’t mind.”

“Will it interfere with the testing if I refuse?” He narrowed his eyes, watching Simmons closely. She blushed a little under his scrutiny.

“It may give off inaccurate readings. You can have them back afterwards.”

Steve stared at her for a moment longer, then loosened the leather strap that kept his pack up high and pulled it over his head. He set it on the nearest table, tucking his shield beneath it, and began unclasping his jerkin. Simmons took it from him and he pulled the undershirt over his head as well. Fitz made a strange noise behind him, but when Steve looked, the engineer was actively looking in the other direction. Simmons had turned away as well.

“Stand in front of the diagnosis machine and face the lab and we’ll have you processed in no time.”

“Processed?” Steve asked, settling against the machine. Something whirred and then pricked his neck and he felt it rush through his body like flames.
The cold metal against his naked back hit him like a system reset and he found himself instantaneously back on the highest spire in Utgard, completely at peace. He closed his eyes for a second, lost in the suddenness of the feeling, and all the tension sloughed off of him. Ymir was in the cold. His mind became the wastelands beyond Utgard and the lab faded out of sight. It could have lasted for an hour or only a moment, but it came to an abrupt end as he felt cuffs secure his wrists and ankles.

He jolted, pulling himself out of whatever haze had come over him, and fighting against the new cuffs. They wouldn’t budge.

“What is this?” he slurred, the metal still frigid against his back. He shivered a little.

“A diagnosis machine,” Simmons repeated and he watched her walk back to the control panel on the side. She pressed a couple buttons and the contraption shifted. It pushed at the back of his knees and bent his elbows, only coming to a stop when it was more of a chair. His weight rested against the cold metal and he shook.

“No,” Steve clenched his fists and fought against the cold. “Why is it so cold?”

“Cold?” Simmons reached a hand out and touched the chair. “It should warm up with your body heat soon. You’ll be out before then.”

He was on the spires, high above anything that could harm him, but he was also in a lab on Midgard and couldn’t move. The images collided in his head and Simmons was speaking to him but he couldn’t hear her. She leaned in close, frowning as she snapped her fingers in front of his face. He jerked toward her and she gasped, stepping back.

“Where are you?” She asked him, holding an electronic chart up as she catalogued his reactions. At least, he supposed that was what she was doing. He looked to the other side of the lab, where Fitz was digging through his pack.

“Midgard,” he answered, blinking slow. “...Jötunheim....”

Something pressed into his temples and a strong shock buzzed through his head, flowing down his nerves and his hands shook. It stopped almost as soon as it started.
“Where are you?” Simmons asked again and Steve panted, trying to shake his head, but unable to.

“Midgard.”

“Are you human?”

“No,” he whispered, disoriented but aware enough to realize he was being tested. The second shock hit him just as strongly as the first and he shook with it.

“Are you human?”

“Yes,” he grit out past clenched teeth.

“What is your mission?”

“To find the sons of Odin.”

Simmons frowned, writing something down with her inkless pen. “Who are you?”

“Steven Grant Rogers,” he let the chair hold him instead of fighting against it and tried to regain his sense of awareness.

“Are you a clone?”

Frowning, he blinked. “No.”

“Why do you want to be taken to Director Carter?”

“She’s...I...” The third shock took him by surprise and he cried out, his nerves aflame. “She would
know me. I need to explain.”

“Explain what?”

“Explain why it took me so long to get back.”

“Do you work for Hydra?”

“Never.”

“Who sent you?”

“Queen Frigga and King Odin of Asgard.” The storms of Jötunheim were alive in his head and though he couldn’t hear them howling, he felt their arctic bite. He couldn’t stop shivering.

“Fitz,” Simmons stepped out of Steve’s field of vision and heard them whispering. It was the voices of his family, calling to him from the void where Jötunheim had once been. It was every person who’d suffered for his absence. It was the ghosts of the world he left behind.

He struggled against the cuffs that bound him, wanting to either escape the voices or to reach out for them. The air was thin at the top of the spires and he gasped for it, straining against the metal until he felt it give, until he felt it break. His fingers ached as he ripped at the cuffs on his ankles and he felt soft hands press against his shoulders. Nothing soft had ever done him any good on Jötunheim. He shoved it away.

Something loud and screeching began to sound and he grimaced, covering his ears until he could handle it. He freed one foot and began working on the next. There was a mechanical whirring and a deep shock stung his back, right between his shoulder blades. Grunting, he twisted and grabbed the spider-like arm that protruded from the chair. It sent a shock up his arm and he shouted as he ripped it out. Sparks shot up into the air and he threw the broken bit of machinery across the room. The second ankle cuff came loose and he tried to stand, only to stumble to his knees.

Whatever had pricked him was still running through his veins and he pounded his fist into the floor, leaving a dent and clinging to the pain of it. Pain was clarity, pain was unencumbered by anything. He slammed his fist into the floor once more and forced himself to rise. Simmons was ducking behind a counter and Fitz was leaning out of the door Natasha had brought him through,
calling for help.

Sighing, Steve went for Fitz, wrapping an arm around his neck and pulling him back inside the lab. Flailing, Fitz cried out and Simmons began begging Steve to let him go. He glared at her, the soft touch, and reached into the partially sorted pile of his belongings for one of his knives. Simmons’ voice rose a few octaves and Steve tucked Fitz close to his chest, shifting his grip on his knife to press his index finger to his lips.

“Hush,” he breathed and repeated it until both Fitz and Simmons quieted down. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“You have a w...weapon,” Fitz stuttered, his hands trembling as he held onto Steve’s forearm.

“You drugged me,” Steve stumbled a little and tensed his body to remain upright. “You shocked me with...with that machine. I played along, nicely, and you attacked me.”

“It’s protocol,” Simmons desperately told him and he felt a grim laugh escape his chest.

“Protocol. Another way of saying that you’re just following orders,” The alarm that had been blaring went silent and he turned his head to gaze at the entrance to the lab. A stream of agents were flooding in and spreading out, their guns held ready. Steve flipped the knife quickly, pressing it into Fitz’ neck. “Put down the guns,” he said softly. “Please.”

Natasha pushed to the head of the group and met Steve’s gaze. “You gave your word.”

“And I kept it. I meant what I said. I don’t want to hurt anyone if I don’t have to. I’m here to help you.” Steve walked backwards with Fitz as the agents pressed in. “Stay where you are. Don’t make me do this.”

“What do you want?” One of the agents asked. He was an older man and though he was staring as seriously as the rest, he didn’t have a gun. At least not pointed at Steve.

Simmons hurried over to the man, who squeezed her hand and nodded to her before refocusing on Steve. “I told the truth,” Steve shifted his gaze to Simmons and she swallowed. “Tell them I answered your questions.”
“Jemma?” The man asked and glanced back at her.

“He did. Well, a few of them. He had a strange reaction to the machine before I could get through them all.”

“Strange how?”

“The last one I processed with Dr. Sterns took the injection and became very open and forthcoming. He answered all the question as best he could, though they were wrong. He was telling the truth. This one,” Simmons looked down and seemed to remember the electronic chart in her hands. “Look at these results. His blood is positive for Reinstein’s serum. It’s a perfect match and the DNA is further evidence that he isn’t a copy. He deliberately lied when asked questions he clearly knew the answer to. He was testing me.”

“Through the injection?”

“Through it all.”

Steve ignored the man as he processed that and turned his attention to Natasha. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” She had put her gun away as well and took a couple steps forward, but paused when he shook his head.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here. I should have been here,” Fitz stood in confusion as Steve sighed and slowly loosened his grip. “I said I wasn’t going to hurt you.”

As soon as Fitz seemed to realize he was being released, he scrambled to get to Simmons. Steve leaned against the counter where his sketches and shield were laid out beside his jerkin and undershirt. He pulled his shield closer by a single strap, exhaustion rushing up to greet him. He set his blade down on the countertop with a clatter and slid down until he was slouched with one leg bent and the other straight out ahead of him. His head was pounding, his heartbeat audible in his own ears. Natasha walked over to him and crouched, reaching out to lift his head by his chin. He blinked sluggishly as he stared up at her.
“I’m Steve Rogers,” he told her, tired and feeling empty down to his core. “I was Captain America. And...” he gripped the enchanted straps as tightly as he could and pulled. As soon as the straps were hanging loose from one side, he felt the enchantment fall away. A few people gasped and he watched as Natasha pressed her hand to the shield’s silvery surface. “I’m here to help you.”

Natasha’s hand shook and then she retracted it in the blink of an eye. “Lazarus,” she breathed, then turned to the man speaking in low tones to Fitzsimmons. “Coulson, it’s a Lazarus protocol.”

Gobsmacked, Coulson waved down the other agents until they were no longer pointing guns at Steve. He pressed a finger against his ear and cleared his throat. “Deputy Director Fury? Lazarus protocol...it’s him, sir.”

Steve collapsed against the counter, resting his head against it. You never give up, do you?, he heard clear as day in his mind and he started laughing. It punched out of him and he couldn’t stop it. He laughed until there were tears in his eyes and he had to suppress a sob. He wiped the wetness from his cheeks with a rough hand and as he dropped it to his lap, Natasha caught it.

“Welcome back, Rogers,” she whispered to him and he half-wept to hear the sincerity in her tone.

“Steve,” he sighed. “Call me Steve.”

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Loki

Loki had been in ‘Manhattan’ before, but it hadn’t been a long visit. He had been too preoccupied to sight-see. Even now, he didn’t want to see it. Every inch of Midgard was a prison he sought to escape.

As soon as Mike ripped the tracker off the bus and cast it into the waters below, Skye had set a course for a hideout and walked back towards Loki. She didn’t even need to watch where the bus was going. There was a power in what she could do. He eyed her computer station.

“What was that back there?” she asked him, sitting across from him. He ran his hand through his long hair and looked away.
“Nothing to concern yourself with,” he crossed his arms and settled more into the seat as it bumped along.

“The thing is, Loki, what affects you will affect everyone in the bus,” Mike had finished securing the back and one of his legs made a mechanical noise as he shifted against the door he stood beside. “If you want to be here, you’ve got to think team.”

“I am not part of your team,” he asserted with a sneer.

Skye sighed and shook her head. “I know you’ve still got your guard up. It makes sense. We could be worse than what had you in the first place. I get it, I do. But you aren’t going to find another option like this. For now, this is the best you can do.”

“You Midgardians always think you’re more important than you are,” Loki goaded her, poking at the kind-hearted woman who presumed to help him. Her kindness had to come from somewhere. People did not go out of their way to aid one another without first having something to prove. This Skye had sinned at some point in her life, and in her guilt she sought to rectify her mistakes by serving others. He would not accept a penitent’s altruism. “Why do you really save these people? Who are truly attempting to save? Yourself?”

A pained expression came over Skye’s face and Loki could have crowed with triumph. Except, his victory seemed hollow, as Skye pulled her sleeve up and away from her wrist, revealing an image. It was some sort of card with the letter A and the erroneous caricature of a human heart. She offered up this image and the vulnerable inside of her wrist to him and he frowned.

“And what is this?”

“A reminder. Mike’s son, Ace, he was taken by the same people who took you,” Skye held her wrist out until it made Loki uncomfortable. He pushed it back towards her. She looked away and smoothed her sleeve back down. “Every bus we rescue is another step closer to finding Ace. Another step closer to bringing him home.”

Loki took in both Skye and Mike, tied up in their solemnity, and began to laugh.

“You think the child still lives?” Loki laughed some more and clapped his hands together. “How quaint.”
“I know he’s alive,” Mike said, the conviction unaffected by Loki’s mirth. “I know my boy’s out there.”

“How?”

“A father knows,” Mike sat beside Skye and she gripped his knee. “He’s smart and he’s fast. And we’re going to find him.”

Loki grinned from ear to ear. “You have no hope of finding him. Fathers feel nothing for their children.”

Mike breathed out a laugh. “Fathers in general, or just yours?”

The humor died in an instant and Loki crossed his arms. “You know nothing of what you speak.”

“Of course I don’t,” Mike shrugged. “You’re the only person who has ever suffered.”

Before Loki could retort, Skye raised her hand. “Make your choice, Loki.”

“There was never a choice.”

“Fine,” she stood up and went back to her station. After a set of beeps, the bus came to a stop. The front doors unlocked and opened. She pulled a blank card from one of her nooks and scribbled on it. “If you don’t want to work with us and you don’t want to tell us the truth, take this card and get out.”

“Skye,” Mike began, his voice pitched low. “Are you sure?”

She nodded and Loki felt both betrayal and satisfaction at the same time. Of course she didn’t really want me here.

“You were right, Mike. I have to stay on mission. If having Loki here jeopardizes that, then he has to go,” her voice wavered as she said it, but she didn’t take it back.
Incensed, both at the fact that he felt disappointed and by the fact that he was upset he’d been proven right, Loki shot to his feet and snatched the card from her hand. “I knew it was only a matter of time before your false hospitality revealed itself.”

“If you want to be enemies, Loki, then we’ll be enemies. If you want to try something else, then sit down and tell us the truth.”

Loki thought of Jötunheim, of his heritage, of the blood that ran through his veins. He thought of Thor and Asgard of Frigga and even of Odin. He thought of everything that had been taken from him. There was pain he refused to see and lies he refused to accept. Both from himself and others. There was betrayal he would not forgive and wounds he would let fester. He smirked at Skye.

“I don’t need you,” he whispered to her and she crossed her arms.

“She’s mine,” Mike said and Loki turned back to him. He shrugged and made his way to Skye. The other man rubbed a hand against her shoulders and Loki could still feel Skye’s hands against his own. He bit back the longing that bloomed in his chest and crushed the card in his palm.

Loki scoffed, storming out of the bus. As soon as his feet hit the ground, the doors closed and the bus began to pull away. He watched it, smiling in an empty triumph, until it vanished from sight.

Standing in the middle of a sidewalk, he realized that he had no idea where to go next or what to do. He didn’t have a place to sleep or access to the currency of this world. He was penniless, homeless, and friendless. The sounds of the city began to weigh down on him once more and he pushed the thought of Skye and Mike from his mind.

He walked for as long as he could, but it began to rain terribly and he was forced to seek cover. The doorway of some brick building kept him relatively dry and he looked out into the downpour. Cars, the metal wagons that these Midgardians drove, hummed through the storm without a care, their passengers dry and comfortable inside. He heard music streaming out of a building further down the street and he followed it, letting the rain drench his cloth hood until the fabric was plastered to his skin.

He felt the cold, which struck him as ironic, and he shivered. Crossing his arms, he felt the card Skye had given him wrinkle and he started to throw it into the gutter, but couldn’t bring himself to open his fingers.
No one is expendable.

Loki let out a frustrated sigh, but tucked the card into his pocket. Jeans weren’t his favorite of Midgardian clothing, but they lasted the longest. He had found a shelter for the homeless a few months into his internment in this backwards realm, and they had given him a fresh set of clothing to wear as well as a cot to sleep on and a couple meals. He had gotten into an altercation with a servant there and had been forcibly removed from the premises, never to return. After finding and being ousted from a few more, his reputation preceded him to all the others and the mere sight of his face was cause for concern. He had worn these jeans for at least two Midgardian years and the sneakers on his feet had holes worn into them. If it weren’t for Mike’s offering of the hoodie he was wearing, he would have been stuck in his thin cloth shirt with the shortened sleeves. He had demanded a green one, though the color had faded over time. It looked grey and worn now, with a couple holes in it as well. He had fought other homeless cretins for warm spots or hidden ones so the authorities wouldn’t cart him away, and the fabric had been torn in the tussles.

The building emitting the haunting music was made of smooth stone and polished bronze, with elegant statues outside the grand entrance that resembled avenging valkyries. An aria began from within the building and drifted out into the street, wrapping around his ears and yanking at his heart. It was a lament for something dear and precious, and through the magic of Allspeak, he could understand the woman’s tragedy. She was the last of a forced diaspora, having out-survived her mother and father, her brothers and sisters, and everyone she had ever known as a child. In a strange world, surrounded on all sides by those that despised her, she cried out for everything she had lost.

Dripping wet, he closed his eyes and let her voice wash over him.

Instead of rising in the power of her voice, his heart sank the more she sang. Her world was gone, the stories of her people were falling silent, the songs of her people had lost their rhythm, and in her memories lingered only ghosts. She cursed the one who brought her people to this point. As she reached a long note and held it with an emotional vibrato, it hit Loki that he was not the woman singing her sorrows with all her heart.

He was the man who took it all away.

The Jötunn had never stood a chance against him, with the might of Asgard behind his actions. They had succumbed without a true fight and he had brought about their destruction. He tried to feel the pride that he had felt when he had defeated Laufey and shown Odin that he was the best choice for heir to the throne. There was no pride in Odin’s eyes as he had cast him down to Midgard. It was not even disappointment. It had been acceptance. You will never be what I had wanted, Odin’s eye had screamed even as the Allfather had been silent, you will always fall short.
Strings and horns painted a sorrowful landscape in music and Loki found himself searching for what he had lost in the sounds. He had been a prince once...and a king. But he had never been a son...he had never been a brother. He was as fraudulent as Skye’s goodwill or Mike’s hope. The Jötunn menace would never die so long as he lived. He was the last and paltry example of the frost giants and Odin had done what Laufey had before him. He had been abandoned by both of them to the wilds.

*You matter,* Skye had told him and he tried to find the reason. What could he possibly mean to anything?

Lightning flashed and thunder clapped above him and Loki jerked out of his reverie. The music had died away and the cold had returned. He gazed up at the storming skies and looked for Thor. Though he had been banished before Loki, they had not crossed paths in all the time he had been here. A part of him, deep down and weak, longed to return to the days before the coronation. At least then he had the illusion of a purpose, of a family. At least, if he could admit it only to himself, he could have his brother back.

In the street, alone, Loki could not bite at anyone. He could not lash out or blame anyone. He had only himself. As he had learned in the first months of his time on Midgard, he found his own company wanting. His hands shook with the need to create, to manipulate, to control, but there was no power to call upon. Skye’s fingers had run along his skin and she had been unharmed. He could not even call upon his inherent Jötunn magic. He was as inert as the Midgardians he was surrounded by.

*You’re one of us, dude, whether you want it or not,* Skye had told him and though he loathed to admit he had been lowered this far, he could not deny that he was no more powerful than the waitress who had served them at the diner.

Skye had power. It was a mortal power and nothing compared to what he was capable of at his strongest, but it was still a method of control and manipulation. She could erase the crimes of the past, rewrite the lives of others, and create a shield around them in nothing more than the lines of text she inputted into the computer in the bus. She could find a way into Stark Industries and he could find his way back to Asgard.

Or, he would have been able to if he hadn’t been so... *arrogant and petulant,* as Odin had deemed him to be.

The doors to the building he stood in front of began to open and people streamed out with umbrellas held aloft to ward off the rain. Loki retreated from them in all their finery and back into
the dark.

He had been a fool.

Ducking back beneath another doorway and digging into his pocket, he attempted to straighten the card back out. There was a line of numbers and the words *Call me if you change your mind* on the face of the card and he stared down at it with some emotion he could not name. Perhaps he had been even more wrong than he had assumed. Perhaps...he had found the two Midgardians with honest goodness within them. Running a finger over the slightly blurred ink, Loki felt Frigga’s influence in giving him hope when he had lost it all. This was a kiss upon a wound to stop him crying, an embrace to ward off his loneliness.

Even if he could not feel her magic in the way he should, Loki believed his mother was watching over him. He had not been abandoned, after all.

Though he had not used them himself, Loki knew how to dial a cellular phone number. He eyed the people pouring out of the building and tucked the card back into his pocket. Pickpocketing these Midgardians would be almost too easy.
Ghosts

Chapter Notes

I'm the worst...*throws chapter at you and flees*

Please enjoy and if you do, consider buying me a coffee!

Tony

It haunted him sometimes; the fact that the last word his father ever heard him speak was coward. It haunted him more to think he had stubbornly remained so far across the room and ignored his mother’s farewell. His last memory of his parents was their backs as they walked out of the room and nothing could bring them back.

Thirteen years later and he understood.

Howard the coward had never been true, at least not for the reasons he had believed it.

Tony Stark had lived a sheltered life for many years. It was, he thought in retrospect, an attempt to preserve his innocence for a heartbeat longer, for just another day. Howard had been a futurist, too, but not much of an optimist. At least, Tony had seen him that way. In the end, the great Howard Stark would fall and all his castles with him. Everything would cascade down to Tony’s shoulders.

The company, the tech, the legacy...the expectation. Stark Industries AES70 batteries, Tony’s mass produced twin, had changed the landscape of the future and he had to live up to the hype. Self-sustaining batteries could power hover cars with hyper intelligent navigation docks, whole city blocks and small towns, even little villages miles from civilization. Tony became the master of miniaturizing and packed all that power in batteries flatter than a piece of card-stock and no wider than a finger. StarkPhones, StarkTabs, StarkTVs...if he could slap his name on it, the company produced it. Clean drinking water and WiFi signal where even God couldn’t find you. He would make Coruscant look like Tatooine.

All with the miracle of the Tesseract.

All with a little bit of his soul.
Clean water and clean energy came from unclean hands, and had since the saint had paid the sinner for the right to own a piece of something greater. In exchange for sole access to the Tesseract, Howard had signed his weapon manufacturing contract to the people who were loaning him the cube of blue death in the first place. Hail Schmidt and the mighty tentacles.

Raised by the people who lived through the second World War and fought beside Captain America, Tony had a hard time - *an incredibly hard time* - accepting that his family was providing weapons to those criminals. His father had tried to convince him that it was all for SHIELD, all for the greater good. But when the government wears HYDRA pins on their lapels and their *elected* president was another spoon-fed zealot, it was hard to see how this was helping.

*Coward.*

At twenty-one and righteous, Tony had been forced to put his money where his rebellion was and swallow down the same thing his father had.

Starks hadn’t belonged to themselves since they got the Tesseract out of the ocean, had it claimed by the government and then rented it back. There was no rebellion there, no uprising against the fiendish overlords. If it wasn’t Howard making weapons, it was someone else, someone with less brains and more greed. If it wasn’t Tony making weapons, it was civilian casualties in the hundreds instead of dozens. He was a Merchant of Death, but he got to control his product and Schmidt enjoyed having him around.

*The future of my empire,* the despot had declared, a hand on Tony’s neck, *The mind that will make even the cosmos hesitant to challenge me.*

Tony had smiled and raised his fist to the sky. *Hail Hydra! Hail Schmidt!*

Aunt Peggy had pulled him out of a bottle hours later and given him a harsh truth. If he wanted to tear down an empire from the inside, he couldn’t be wasted. Schmidt wouldn’t allow him to jeopardize the empire with drunkenness. The futurist was the biggest hope for the future and if he didn’t step up, they may never have another chance like this.

So Tony swallowed the rhetoric and the imagery, pinned a skull to his heart and built HYDRA’s empire. At the same time, he loaned FRIDAY out to Aunt Peggy and maintained a consultant position to SHIELD in everything. Of course, that fact was buried under mountains of code on a separate server that only JARVIS and FRIDAY had access to.
He was everything Schmidt wanted and everything Peggy needed him to be. What was in between was...well, he hadn’t figured that out yet.

Digging his fingers into a hologram of the Jericho missile he was working on, Tony discarded the unnecessary casing. It need to be light and quick. A German metal band blared out of his speakers and he mumbled along, deciding how best to sabotage his own work. If he delayed much longer, he’d have a thin, gaunt and disapproving face staring at him with unnatural stillness.

*Herr Kleiser,* he’d say and put on his best media face, *we both know our Emperor demands perfection.*

*Perfection,* Herr Kleiser would softly repeat, *should be as breathing to you. Do better.*

Do better was his constant state of being. He had much to live up to, but also much precedent to make for everyone who would dare come after. Tony Stark was as close to an heir as Emperor Schmidt would ever have.

“JARVIS, what’s my mission again?”

“To save the world, sir.”

“No pressure, huh?”

“None at all.”

Across his workshop, volume irrelevant in the harsh beat, the news played. Pepper had told him he had a bad habit of dwelling, but there wasn’t much else he could do. In the eyes of the Emperor, he was married to his workshop and everything that was born of his hands and his mind were his dutiful and preordained children. He liked to know if his children were wreaking as much havoc as their pseudo-grandfather wanted from them. He liked to know how many more people had died with shards of his family name in their chests. Filled with morbidity and moral penitence, he glanced up at the carefully emotive face of Christine Everhart as she began to speak. He couldn’t hear her, but that was kind of the point. Info-graphics worked just as well and he didn’t have to look into anyone’s eyes to read them. Cold hard numbers, plain and simple facts.
That’s where his in between resided. That’s where he built his home.

*President Stern to hold Press Conference tomorrow morning to address the spike in bus attacks,*
*read the crawl at the bottom of the screen, Assures public that incidents are still isolated and that no violent criminals have escaped during these attacks.*

*Rising Tide,* he thought, spinning the hologram of the Jericho around aimlessly, *Noble, but doing about as much good as a man with a bucket on a sinking ship.*

He did what he could for groups like that - which cropped up with every decade to fight HYDRA - but unless they stopped it at its source, this fight would never stop. Years ago, he had thought that they could just...assassinate Schmidt and be done with it all, but it had already been too late for that when *Captain America* vanished before the end of the war like some mythical spirit.

Something...worse had found them all and getting rid of Schmidt would only clear the way.

It was all...delicate.

Frustrated, Tony closed the programming and pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. JARVIS shut the music off almost instantly and he rocked in the silence.

Something had to give. Something had to change.

He couldn’t remain the rock between his two worlds anymore. One side was going to tear him apart and the only thing he didn’t know was which would do it first.

“Sir, you have an incoming call,” JARVIS informed him and Tony blinked rapidly, pulling himself up and pasting on the most unaffected expression he could muster.

“Who is it, J?”

“Herr Kleiser, sir.”

Breathing deep, Tony slid his chair back and stood, assuming a militant pose with his hands behind his back. He wiped all emotion from his face and nodded to the open air. JARVIS connected the
call and a screen popped up in front of him. A pale face, small and angular, with dark eyes that seemed to stare knowingly out through the screen appeared. Thin lips curved into a moue of disapproval and Tony swallowed.

“Herr Kleiser,” he greeted, balling his right hand into a fist and placing it over his heart. “The Jericho proceeds as planned. It will be on schedule.”

“Good.” Kleiser had a barely perceptible German accent, though no records existed of his ever being on German soil. There were no records of a Herr Kleiser anywhere and though the man had plagued Howard long before Tony came along, he didn’t look a day over forty. “But it is not the Jericho I wished to speak to you about.”

Blinking, Tony struggled to keep a frown off his face. “Sir?”

“You will come to Norway within a week. The test subject is ready for your other project.”

Glancing at the deconstructed metal chair in the darkest part of his workshop, Tony scrambled for a delay. “I thought he was being used for medical testing.”

“It was an indulgent fantasy by the Advanced Sciences Division. I know his kind,” Tony didn’t doubt that he knew various kinds. “Their physiology will not unlock the secret to their resiliency. Zola thinks to make more soldiers for the army. But, as I said from the beginning, that resiliency will unlock other secrets. Ones far more important than soldiers.”

“What kind of secrets, sir?”

“The kind that brings kingdoms to their knees and worlds to their bellies. The kind that makes all your hard work worth it.” Herr Kleiser narrowed his eyes and tilted his head minutely. “Unless you are not willing to serve HYDRA...”

Flinching like a whipped dog, Tony pressed his right hand in a fist to his heart again. “I am always loyal to HYDRA. To our Emperor.”

Herr Kleiser’s laughter was like stones hitting Tony’s face. “Indeed.” As the laughter died away, Tony maintained his rigid posture and emotionless face. “A week, Anthony, and we will know the truth of your declaration. Hail Hydra.”
“Hail Hydra!” Tony threw his arm out in front of him and held the pose until the call disconnected before crumbling to his knees. His breath stuttered out of him and he shook in the terror he hadn’t allowed himself to feel. One word from Herr Kleiser, one, and he would never see the light of day again.

Clamping down on the urge to run, to just hop in one of his cars and drive until he reached the ocean or to climb in one of his jets and fly into the cold north and vanish like Captain America, Tony pushed himself back to his feet and reached out for his keyboard. His fingers hovered in the air above it and they were dripping blood. Sucking in a breath, he clenched his fist and closed his eyes, exhaling shakily into the open air. When he opened his eyes, his skin was clean.

*It’s an illusion*, he thought, calling up the schematics of the chair and casting them around him in a blue halo.

Hours could have passed and he wouldn’t have known it. He was nearly finished reconfiguring the chair for its newest victim when JARVIS’ voice broke through his haze. The welding torch in his hand turned off and he raised his visor.

“Sir,” the AI sounded vaguely hesitant and Tony frowned.

“What is it, now?”

“Sir, FRIDAY has sent a message. SHIELD has triggered a Lazarus protocol.”

The torch fell out of his hands and he shot up. “Repeat that.”

“SHIELD has triggered a Lazarus protocol, sir.”

“Are you sure?” *I’m not emotionally stable enough to handle a doppelganger right now.*

“It was called by Agent Coulson and put into effect by Deputy Director Fury.”
“How long ago?” *How long has Captain America been back?*

“How long has Captain America been back?”

“Less than an hour, sir.”

Pulling off his welding gloves and yanking off his visor, Tony sprinted for the door. “Have my quinjet ready for take-off, J. I’ll drive.”

“Yes, sir.”

Steve

After the multitude of agents cleared out, only Fitzsimmons, Coulson and Natasha remained. Steve watched them go in silence, wanting nothing more than to find a fire and a dry cave and sleep. Asgard may have had soft beds and golden sheets, but he had gotten used to sleeping on stone. If the floor wasn’t so metallic, he might have taken comfort from it. Instead, he shifted restlessly.

“Fitz, go get some standard SHIELD issue clothes for Captain...for Steve,” Coulson ordered gently and Fitz nodded, taking off out the glass doors. Steve watched him go.

“He’s probably terrified of me now,” Steve said ruefully and Natasha shook her head.

“You kept your word,” she squeezed his hand and he offered her a toothless smile. “When the adrenaline wears off, he’ll be fine.”

“Will I?” he joked and she returned his smile.

“You’ve survived this long, Rogers. I’m sure the injection won’t kill you.”

“I’ve died once, I really don’t plan on doing it again any time soon,” he sighed and climbed to his feet. Natasha didn’t ask what he meant about dying. Maybe she thought he was talking about when
he vanished from Earth. Maybe it was better they didn’t know.

“Were you really on...Asgard this whole time?” Coulson asked, looking down at the electronic chart he had taken from Simmons. She was picking up a few things that had fallen to the floor. Steve met her eyes when she glanced up and offered her a smile. She smiled back.

“Jötunheim for a little over fifty, Asgard for the rest, right?” Natasha said and Steve nodded.

“Jötunheim?” Coulson asked and Steve sighed.

“Will you take me to Director Carter?” She’s not Peggy to you anymore. You lost that right.

“No,” Coulson crossed his arms. “Until you’ve been debriefed by Deputy Director Fury, she won’t be informed of the Lazarus protocol. It’s for her protection.”

“From me?” he asked quietly, though he didn’t expect an answer. I’m a weapon, he had told Sif, and Ólafur’s voice haunted him still. Do you enjoy being right?

It pained him to think his very memory had been turned into a weapon against those he loved. Was Bucky subjected to fake Steves in knock-off Captain America costumes? Did they hurt him too as they had hurt Peggy? Did SHIELD know where Bucky was? Struck by the need to focus on anything but how much his absence had hurt the woman he would have spent the rest of his life with had the events on the Valkyrie been different, Steve cleared his throat.

“Is...would you know if...Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes,” he remembered asking Colonel Phillips this and remembered the hope that punched through him at the thought that he wouldn’t be too late. Now, that hope was dangerous and terrifying. This wasn’t a dream from across the branches of Yggdrasil. If Bucky was still alive...they were on the same soil again. The thought stole his voice for a moment. “I know he...fell from a train and was considered KIA, but...” Hela, the Queen of Helheim told me he’s alive. “But...is there a chance he...that he...”

Natasha shrugged and Steve focused on her. “Director Carter started a search for him a little after you vanished. It came up empty.”

That doesn’t mean he’s not alive. That doesn’t mean Hela lied.
“So there’s a chance?”

An unreadable expression crossed Natasha’s face and she looked him up and down. “I guess so.”

Sixty years he’d been gone and they’d found nothing but dead ends. Yet, here he stood. That had to mean something, right?

Fitz came back with trousers and a shirt but Steve only took the shirt. He pulled it over his head and tucked it into his leather trousers. Being that Asgard hadn’t cared about nakedness, he could have stripped down and worn it all, but Steve had gotten used to a few things. Hard stone, the cold, a beard, braids in his hair, leather trousers, and...since the SHIELD issued shirt didn’t warm him up enough, a fur-lined overcoat. He pulled a navy blue one out of his pack and slipped into it, adjusting the high collar so that it covered the sides of his neck. As he rolled his shoulders and relaxed into the comfort of the overcoat swishing against the back of his thighs, he glanced up to see all four of the people in the room looking at him. He frowned.

“What? It’s cold,” He turned to his pack and started piling everything back into it, wrapping the fur around it and binding it off with a leather strip. He eyed the strap to his shield, but he would only have to undo it again if he reattached it. Until they were positive it was him with no reservations, he would leave it undone. He slipped into his cross harness and settled his shield against it. When he had collected all of his things, he noticed something missing. “Where are my knives?”

“Confiscated, for now,” Coulson informed him and Steve sighed, tying his pack around his waist.

“I’m getting those back,” Steve said, meeting their eyes through his lashes as he tightened the knot at his waist.

“Of course,” Natasha stepped forward and Steve looked up at her. “Are you ready?”

“I’ve been ready for sixty years, Natasha. Let’s go.”

The office Coulson and Natasha led him to wasn’t the same as the first one. A decoy, he realized and shook his head. They had done this enough to know not to bring him to any location that actually meant anything. The lab where Fitzsimmons had been was probably a setup, too. The whole world has been crafted to handle fake Steve Rogers and he wondered who had tried to infiltrate this place with his name. Who were the doppelgangers? Where had they come from? If
Zola was still around, did they have a form of Erskine’s serum? Where they all Hydra? Where there more?

Now that he was back, he would have to weed them out and destroy them. There was only one super soldier named Steve Rogers and he wouldn’t abide by any others.

There was even more glass in this office and Steve imagined giants crashing through them. Everything was so breakable.

Deputy Director Nick Fury, as Coulson had explained to him, was the gatekeeper to Director Carter. Either he won Fury’s favor, or Director Carter might never know he had been here.

“You can’t keep me hidden forever,” Steve stated plainly, though he didn’t blink as he met Coulson’s gaze. The man seemed unfazed for a moment, then looked away.

“There are ways,” Coulson replied and Steve laughed.

“Hela herself couldn’t keep me hidden forever, and I have a little more faith in her.”

Fury was standing when they walked into his office, and Clint was off to the side with his arms crossed. The retired archer shook his head in exasperation when he saw them coming. Steve led the way again, holding out his hand. “Steve Rogers,” he greeted and Fury took his hand. “We got off on the wrong foot.”

“I suppose we did,” Fury chuckled and waved at the seats. “Let’s try again.”

Steve picked the middle seat as he had before but no one joined him. Fury sat behind his desk.

“So,” Fury sighed, lacing his fingers together and leaning back in his seat. “Where’ve you been for sixty years, Cap? We could’ve used you here.”

Looking down, Steve nodded and untied his pack. He pulled it free and rifled through it until he could pull out his bundle of sketches. Passing them across the desk to Fury as Peggy...as Director Carter had a folder, Steve set his pack in one of the empty seats. Fury unraveled the leather and
spread the parchment flat. As his drawings were looked over, Steve began his tale once more. Again, he glossed over the fact that he had been killed and brought back, unsure how well that would set with them. They had only just now believed he was himself, Ymir only knew what they would think if he told them a Death Queen had restored him to life after a giant had buried an axe in his head.

“This Loki,” Fury said after a long moment. Steve’s sketches were littering Fury’s desk. He pressed one finger to the sketch of the prince. “He used a device of transportation to destroy Jötunheim and was banished here?”

“Yes,” Steve had stood a while back, when recounting the time in Asgard. “But that’s not your jurisdiction.”

“I never said it was,” Fury was standing as well. “But if he’s a threat and on Midgardian soil, then it is my jurisdiction.”

Steve pressed his fists into the desk. “There’s nothing I want more than to make Loki pay. It was my family he killed. My godsons were still nursing,” Thinking of Helblindi and Býleistr brought tears to his eyes and he bowed his head. “They deserve to see him punished. But he’s the last of his kind and one of Asgard’s princes. He has to be returned along with Thor.”

“Asgard dumps their unruly children, who both sound like sons of the year, on Earth and you’re...what? Their nanny?”

Steve looked out the glass walls of Fury’s office to the halls beyond. He looked to the gleaming world hidden beneath the ground. He half-expected to see a portal to Muspelheim and to see torches of magical flame along the walls. Down here, SHIELD were as the storm giants to him. He balked at the thought that that meant his people were like HYDRA. He shook his head. It wasn’t the same.

“Zola’s a deterrent for disobedience, this world is lit up by the Tesseract, and you’re buried so far underground the sun’s probably forgotten who you are,” Steve grit out and thought of Sif. Believe in light again. “This is not the world I risked my life for. This is not what I fought through giants and magic to get back to. Whatever you’re doing, it isn’t working!”

Steve paused to take a breath and exhale out his anger. He closed his eyes for a moment and imagined the spires and the winter wind.
“Asgard has agreed to aid me, to aid Earth, once their princes are returned to them. I find them and take them back, and we’ll have an army at our disposal that doesn’t play by Earth rules. They give me a run for my money,” Steve met Fury’s gaze and pleaded with him without speaking. “All I need is help finding them and assurance that you won’t detain them at Ellis Island if they look at you the wrong way.”

Fury waited until Steve had calmed down a bit and then he spoke. “While you’ve been playing Medieval Times in Space, Captain, the rest of us have been keeping this world safe. Sure, SHIELD’s in deep cover, but without us, there wouldn’t a world for you to get self-righteous about. It’s SHIELD and whatever we’ve been doing that’s allowed you the luxury of not being shot on sight. There’s more going on here than your gatekeeper told you. You can’t just throw your shield at HYDRA and blow up bases anymore, Captain. The world didn’t wait for you while you were gone. Maybe, maybe, instead of standing in my office making demands for your personal agenda, you should take a step back and learn where exactly it is you are.”

Steve swallowed and frowned. He had been so caught up in his mission that he had forgotten. He didn’t have control. Jötunheim had taught him that and Asgard had let him forget a little. He unclenched his fists and relaxed his shoulders. He hadn’t slept for what might have been days. He had been pacing for hours on Asgard, planning and mulling everything over, packing and sparring and feasting. Patience, Hogun’s voice washed over his mind and he stepped away from the desk. He dropped into the middle seat and put his head in his hands. The same exhaustion he had felt in the lab returned and he rubbed at his eyes.

“I’ve waited sixty years to get back,” he laughed humorlessly and wrapped his arms around his middle. “All I’ve thought about, all I’ve done...even when I lost Jötunheim and my family...It’s always been Earth. It’s destroyed me to think I’d left all of you without a trace. It’s killed me...” he gasped in a breath to stave off the swell of his grief. “Killed me to think about what my absence meant for the war...for everyone I fought for,” He felt himself rocking and tried to stop. “H...Howard’s gone. Clint said most of the Commandos, too. Phillips has to be gone. How many more? How...how many...”

Steve’s voice broke and he forced himself to stop talking. He blew out a breath and blinked until he had his tears under control. He couldn’t stop rocking.

“This mission is the only way I know how to...to...” To beg forgiveness. To say I’m sorry.

Fury sighed again and when he spoke, Steve found himself waiting for the guillotine. Instead, Fury’s voice was almost gentle. “You don’t have to save the world right now, Cap.” And Steve looked up at him with a different kind of plea. “You need to rest. We can keep the world safe until you’re ready. We’ve been fighting for decades without you. We can wait a little longer.”
“But you shouldn’t have to,” Steve said, his heart aching in his chest to think he was already letting them down.

“You’re no use to us like this, Cap,” Fury told him and it was like Brimer’s axe slamming into him. He wanted to rage but found himself devastated instead. *You aren’t worthy,* rang through his head and he pressed a hand to his temple, right where a scar should be but Hela’s magic had erased that possibility. *I’ve come so far,* he shouted inside his head, *don’t turn me away. Please.* “You’re home now. Get some sleep, read up on what you missed, and when you’re ready...we’ll help you find these princes.”

Steve had begged at Hela’s feet for a second chance and he slid from the seat before Fury’s desk to his knees without thinking. “I can’t...I can’t fail you twice,” he whispered and closed his eyes. “Please...I can’t...”

Hands pressed against his head and his shoulders and both Clint and Natasha were pulling him back to his feet. “You won’t, Steve,” Clint told him and there was an understanding in his eyes as he helped settle him back in the seat.

Natasha sat in the seat to his left and Clint took the one to his right. “If you want to find Thor and Loki, if you want to help us take out HYDRA, you need to be at your best. There’s sixty years of stuff you don’t know.”

Steve looked to her. “You got files on all of that?”

“You betcha,” she grinned. “You’re quick. It shouldn’t take you long to get caught up.”

“And we’ll be waiting for you, Cap,” Fury was staring at Steve with a promise. *There is always a place for you.*

“I...” Steve hesitated, but found himself nodding anyway. “I don’t have a place to stay.”

“You can stay at Clint’s,” Natasha offered and the archer groaned.

“Aw, come on!” His grip on Steve’s shoulder didn’t let up in the slightest. “Between me and Lucky there’s no space.”
“I’m sure Banionis has an empty apartment in your building.”

“That reminds me,” Clint turned to Fury. “When am I getting my severance pay?”

“You aren’t,” Fury began gathering up Steve’s sketches. “You were never actually retired.”

“What?” Clint gaped, and his hand fell away.

“You needed a break and you got one. Welcome back, Hawkeye,” Fury raised an eyebrow and Clint collapsed against his seat.

“Son of a bitch,” he breathed and looked to Natasha. “You knew, didn’t you?”

“Well,” she shrugged. “I didn’t not know.”

“God...” Clint cut his own curse off and glared at Steve. “This is all your fault and I hate you.”

A snort escaped Steve before he could stop it and he cleared his throat. “I’d say the feeling’s mutual but I think Lucky’d take offense.”

“We’ll have an account opened under an alias,” Fury’s tone was clearly a dismissal and Steve leaned forward.

“Stígandr Birgirsson,” he said and pulled one of the sketches free. It was of Birgir, Brynja and Adalbjörg with the mountain in the background. He ran his fingers over it before putting it back with the others. “There’s no way anyone would know that was me.”

“Alright,” Fury nodded and Steve stood. “Barton and Natasha will ensure you’re provided with everything you need. If you have any questions, you can...”

The doors to Fury’s office burst open with the cacophony of many voices and Steve spun to take in
the newcomers, hoping against hope that it would be Peggy. Instead, he was greeted with a slightly
disheveled man in a black t-shirt and jeans who had stopped a few steps into the office and was
panting as if he’d run all the way here. Behind him was a handful agents who looked both
apologetic and harried. The man staggered forward a couple steps and took in Steve with wide
eyes. The man was strangely familiar. Frowning as he tried to place him, Steve was shocked to
hear Fury’s greeting.

“Mister Stark, I should have known we’d see you sooner or later.”

“Stark?” Steve gasped and his heart leapt into his throat. Was he Howard’s son? Steve took a step
forward and so did the man. He tried to find Howard in the man but it was like grasping for a
ghost. He gave it up as quick as he started it; that time was gone. In the light of this man’s eyes he
saw the same hope he’d held onto for decades. Not everything had been destroyed, HYDRA didn’t
take everything.

“He passed the tests?” The man asked though he didn’t take his eyes off Steve. Fury sighed.

“Most of them,” Fury said, and the man seemed to fall out of a trance. He sidestepped Steve and
walked towards the desk.

“What do you mean, most of them?” Stark snapped and his entire demeanor changed. His body
became rigid. “I didn’t design them for partiality.”

“You designed that chair?” Steve asked, off-put. It was nothing short of a torture device. He was
ignored.

Tapping on his desk, Fury summoned some kind of keyboard out of nothing and pulled up various
charts. They flooded the screens on the wall behind him. Steve looked up at them. “DNA positive,
blood positive for Reinstein’s serum to a degree we’ve never encountered before…”

“What kind of degree?” Stark asked and then paused. “That’s not possible.”

“100% match, Stark,” Fury watched Stark fumble for words.

“But the questions,” There was a hint of desperation in his voice and he glanced back at Steve. “He
only answered a few of them.”
“Ask me anything,” Steve interjected, drawing Stark’s attention back to him. “Anything at all.”

Stark’s rigidity collapsed and his eyes flickered from the screens and back to Steve. After a long moment, he gasped, “Where were you?”

In the absolute devastation on Stark’s face, Steve realized he had been wrong. HYDRA hadn’t spared anyone. He fought for words, for an explanation, for anything to wipe that look off Stark’s face, but he didn’t get the chance. The office doors opened once more and Steve glanced up to see who else could possibly storm in now. The air left his lungs in a single word.

“Peggy?”
I literally can't look at this chapter anymore; I'm going crazy. And I've got THIS stuck in my head.

Please enjoy and if you do, consider buying me a coffee!

Peggy

In the dark at night when she had only herself to account for, Peggy Carter had accepted something unacceptable. Steve Rogers was never coming back. The kiss they shared on the dark tarmac of Schmidt’s base wasn’t for luck. It had been goodbye.

She hadn’t even gotten the chance to hear his voice again before the Valkyrie had vanished from all radars and left them in silence. At first, it had been inconceivable to think that Steve Rogers was gone. The months went on, the war ended, and Peggy had hoped - as the Commandos, and Colonel Phillips, and Howard had hoped - that Steve would come marching back to them with a grin and an excuse. A broken radio in one hand and his shield in the other. Peggy would stare at open doorways with expectation.

Time weighed on that hope with everything it had but Peggy had stood her ground. Steve was alive and he would be back.

A few years after the war ended that hope had been rewarded.

Reports came in from Concordia, Argentina that an enhanced individual matching Steve Rogers’ description had been spotted. Howard had been busy in the North Atlantic searching for the Tesseract, so Peggy took a small group with her to investigate. Dum Dum Dugan, Jim Morita and Gabe Jones had accompanied her, as well as a handful of SHIELD agents. They had been snuck in and approached the small building the man had been seen coming in and out of.

It had been a trap.

It had also been the first glimpse of an organized HYDRA since the Valkyrie’s vanishing. They
had been outnumbered and hemmed in. Thankfully, they had gone in with a plan for escape. Narrow and desperate, they had retreated empty-handed. Peggy had swallowed that close call with all the grace she could muster and wrapped her hope up in gauze and tape, shuffling it off into the depths of her. Things always became harder the closer one came to the truth.

More years went by and HYDRA grew and spread. The biggest problem was finding them. They had shed their black uniforms and skull insignias, curtailed their rhetoric and their hero worship, and assimilated into the cracks of society. *Hail Hydra* was whispered in close quarters not shouted to the masses, the insignia became obscure and hidden behind other imagery. Peggy had tried to stem the tide, to catch the hurricane in her outstretched hands. She had failed.

Rebranding had served HYDRA well and in their silent war they had overcome many things they had been unable to before. Nations bent to their will and leaders who had stood stalwart against everything they stood for turned their backs on their convictions to join them. Peggy had been stunned to see those who had sworn never to aid HYDRA pledge fealty in back-rooms and secret meetings. It couldn’t be true.

Then, Howard had come to her home with a skull pin on his lapel.

_We can’t get ahead of this, Pegs. We can’t. It’s not a war now, it’s a coup. This, and he had ripped the pin from his suit jacket with fingers that smelled of scotch so he could wave it in her face, This is how we beat them. From the inside. I can make weapons until I die, but it won’t stop HYDRA. We have to poison them, we have to corrupt them, we have to wire a fail-safe into their circuitry before it’s too late. It might already be..._

Howard’s plans came tumbling out of his mouth until his sobriety had claimed him once more and he placed a battery the size of her fist into her hands.

_AES70*, he whispered to her, staring at the battery with shining eyes, *He won’t understand. He won’t know what a world without HYDRA is like. I need your help, Pegs. They can’t have him. They’ll take me. Obie’s...he’ll give in, too. Maria would die before she’d join them. But he’s..., Howard had scoffed shakily at himself and met her eyes, *He’s better than I’ll ever be. Stronger, smarter...he won’t give up.*

*Howard, she had begun, gripping his hand with her own. The battery felt like a weight heavier than time. *He’s not a weapon. He’s not circuitry. He’s your son.*

Her disgust must have reached Howard, even in his frantic surety that he had found the weakness in the HYDRA machine. He sighed and tapped the battery in her hand. He couldn’t meet her eyes.
I’ve helped shape the future with metal and electricity…but he’s the greatest thing I’ve ever created. Not Steve, not SHIELD, not the Arc Reactor, not Stark Industries…Tony’s everything. He’s the one thing Schmidt won’t see coming…that Kleiser won’t see coming.

Tony’s a newborn! she had screamed and Howard had shook his head.

He’s poison, he’s corruption, he’s the weapon that will bring down an empire, Howard had begun to laugh and Peggy recoiled from him. He had reached out for her and she had retreated, looking at her friend as though he had turned into something alien. Perhaps he had.

Peggy slipped her gun from its holster and pointed it at him. She wondered if he would bleed green. Howard stared down the barrel of her gun and smiled.

He needs you, Pegs. He needs someone to protect him until he’s ready, until he can take my place, until he can surpass me.

I’m not going raise a child soldier, Peggy had snapped, flicking the safety off, and Howard flinched.

They’re coming for me, Howard told her, dropping his arms to his sides. Kleiser…he knows I took the serum. I’ve got it hidden and Kleiser has no proof. If I stay under the radar, Schmidt won’t have a reason to look at me. But he has to. He has to invest in Tony. This is the only way.

Howard had convinced himself there was no other way. Peggy tried to reason with him, but he had already become so embroiled in his plan that he couldn’t back out now. He stared at her like a man in a sinking ship. Take my child, he begged her with his eyes, take him before he drowns with me. Tears had blurred her vision and she shook her head.

What do you want, Howard?

He needs an anchor. Schmidt, Obie, Kleiser…they’ll try to lead him astray. He can’t fall. You’re the strongest person I know, besides Maria and Ana, Howard had let out a wry laugh. Make him strong, Pegs. With my mind, Maria’s heart, and your strength…he can defeat HYDRA for good.

Watching one of her oldest friends gaze at her with such desperate entreaty, Peggy had felt part of her fall away. At the expense of a child?
My child, Howard had said, running a hand through his hair. It was losing its color. My child in exchange for the world and its future. If I’m not willing to pay that price, then why am I fighting?

And you want Maria to pay that price? And me?

Dropping that infernal pin on the carpeted floor between them, Howard straightened his tie. It was nervous movement, spurned on by his hesitation to speak. One life for billions..., he swallowed and the way his hands clenched made her think he was itching for another scotch. Not every sacrifice is noble, Pegs. But that doesn’t mean it’s not worth making. Kleiser’s not human...Schmidt doesn’t care. We can’t pretend we have much ground to stand on anymore.

Howard, she began again, but he held up his hand. The pin had pricked his palm and a bit of blood had come to the surface. It was vibrant red.

It’s done, Pegs. Schmidt and Kleiser have already met Tony though all he did was drool. They’ll be waiting for me to make a mistake and then they’ll snatch him up. There’s no going back, he turned and started walking away. Peggy watched him go for a moment before calling out.

For Tony, she said and he paused at the doorway. I’ll do this for Tony, but this is the last time we will speak as friends. I’ve stomached everything you’ve done since the war, but this...this is too much. This is something I can’t forgive.

I don’t need forgiveness, Pegs, Howard met her eyes and they said nothing for a moment. Thank you.

Peggy wanted to pull the trigger now. She wanted to wipe the relieved gratitude from Howard’s face. She flicked her safety back on and Howard was gone. She stared down at the pin on her floor, the garish skull looking back up at her and clenched her fist around the battery in her hand.

HYDRA knew the way to draw out SHIELD was with Steve Rogers and it was a trick they tried to employ many times. Peggy had fallen for it a couple times, but the rest had been stopped by SHIELD. She had gotten used to putting her own shields up when the name was mentioned. A protocol was put in place after tests had been made to screen for the truth.
Her hope was a battered and bruised thing, wrapped up in armor and spikes. Over and over, the false Steve Rogers’ had driven home one painful fact. He would never come back. She let them set up their protocol and agreed to enforce it, but she no longer expected it to matter. The instances of doppelgangers had slowed down in the eighties and Peggy had put it out of her mind. That is...until one had found a way into her house.

She had yet to tell anyone but Tony about it in detail, as it was far too delicate a thing to be revealed. That doppelganger had been...something different. After that encounter, there had been no doppelgangers spotted for a decade at the least.

Now, coming across her desk in glowing blue, there was a Lazarus protocol.

She hesitated to register its presence, her hand hovering over it as she deliberated the chance of it being a mistake. Scrawled at the bottom was a recognizable signature: Nick Fury. Her hope beat against her chest and she pressed a hand to it. That was impossible.

Standing, Peggy stepped around her desk and made her way to Nick’s office.

Peggy stood in silence about a foot into Nick’s office and couldn’t move a step closer. She had seen every doppelganger since the first, even if not in person, and she knew all of their faces. None of them had been close to the one looking at her now. None of them had the minute frown carved between furrowed brows, or earnest blue eyes framed with long lashes, or full lips that she knew by heart even if they had only touched hers once. His hair was longer than it had been when he left, but also shorter. She had never thought of Steve as a mohawk person, much less a braided one, and she had never seen him with a beard. He was just as tall and strong, just as rigid and braced for impact, and she could see his shield peeking over the strange fur-lined overcoat he wore.

Her hope crashed through its armor and spikes and burst inside her heart.

Tony hurried over to her and she blinked as she realized he was standing in the room. She couldn’t look away from Steve, but she pulled Tony close and he breathed out a shaky Aunt Peggy in greeting against her ear. She breathed in slow and tried her best to retain her composure. Even if Schmidt had carved him from marble to exactitude, she would not believe simply because her eyes beheld him. She blinked again and looked to Tony.

“It’s...” Tony said and his voice gave out and his jaw worked. She pressed a hand to his cheek.
Oh, the stories she had told him, the fantasy that must have grown in his mind about the great Steve Rogers. She had not lied to him, but time had made her nostalgic and she doubted her recounting had gone without adoring embellishment. He was the dream she had given Tony to guard him against Schmidt. If Steve couldn’t stand and fight for himself, then they would all rise in his memory. Tony had clung to that righteousness and truth for dear life and now...now that flesh-and-blood man was among them. Peggy tried to keep the tears from her eyes, to keep the professional face of the Director of SHIELD, but she could not hold both her work and her heart at the same time.

Tears fell from her cheeks and she sighed. “He passed the tests?”

Tony shook his head and she felt her hope burning. “DNA and serum are a 100% match. He reacted strangely to the machine and the injection.”

“He has to pass everything, Tony. Hope must be smart,” she pulled her strength back to her and ignored the man who stood motionless in front of Nick’s desk. “Nick, the questions.”

With a held gaze, Nick nodded slow. He would shoot this man through the temple if he proved false. She had absolute faith in that. Even if Tony, heavens forbid, fell to HYDRA, Nick Fury would see the war through. He brought up the questions and began to read them off. Peggy turned her attention back to her godson. He wanted nothing more than to watch as the questions were asked, but Peggy had to build her walls back up. She pulled him out of Nick’s office and into the hall. It was deserted.

“I thought you were in Malibu?” she asked him and it took a moment for his mind to switch tracks.

“I was in Malibu,” he crossed his arms and Peggy took in his wrinkled shirt and grease-streaked skin. His hair was in need of a trim and a lock of it had fallen into his face. There were dark circles under his eyes. Peggy shook her head. “JARVIS got the Lazarus protocol alert from FRIDAY and I came as quick as I could.”

“You know your presence will draw Schmidt’s attention here,” she said and Tony looked at her without blinking. Don’t remind me that I’m on a leash.

“I followed all the procedures, Aunt Peggy, I swear,” he told her with a note of eagerness in his voice. He was a grown man, but she wondered how many years had been snatched from him. The light in his eyes was the only reason she let him continue as he was. Howard’s self-sustaining
battery that powered the resistance looked at her with all the hope she kept locked away. “It’s him. I can feel it.”

“It could be another trick of Kleiser’s,” Peggy didn’t know when she had become the voice of doubt, but she couldn’t take things at face value anymore.

“It’s not,” Tony took her hands and he offered her a smile. “He’s back. Captain America is home.”

Peggy returned Tony’s smile with a bittersweet one of her own and squeezed his hands. “We’ll see.”

Steve

Stark had paced forward to Peggy - Director Carter - and she raised her hands without looking away from Steve. She clasped Stark’s hands and pulled him into a hug. Standing frozen in the middle distance, Steve watched as Stark whispered to Director Carter. He could have easily eavesdropped, but he wanted to respect their privacy. He was an interloper here.

Surprise bloomed across Director Carter’s face and she whispered back. Nodding and glancing to Steve, Stark’s brown eyes were wide. Steve felt rooted to the spot and despite the decades he had waited for this moment, he couldn’t bring himself to move.

It felt like an illusion, like a dream he had concocted to fool himself. He shivered where he stood, despite the fur at his neck, and felt bile in his throat. Steve bite down on the fear that burst inside his chest. He had known she was alive, had seen her through Heimdall’s eyes, but there was a part of him that couldn’t believe it. She spoke to Stark for another moment, then her gaze skipped over him to lock on Fury.

“Nick, the questions,” she said and Fury held her gaze for a moment. Steve swallowed as Director Carter pulled Stark out of the office and shut the glass doors.

“What did Margaret Carter say to you about the fall of James Buchanan Barnes?”
Steve’s attention flew to Fury at the question and he frowned. “What?”

“What did she say to you?”

“That...” he glanced back to where Director Carter was talking with Stark. “That...I should...allow Bucky the...dignity of his choice.”

“Correct,” And Fury began asking more questions.

Steve answered them all to the best of his knowledge and when Fury was finished, he was itching to speak to Director Carter. She and Stark had come back in as soon as Fury was done, posting themselves at the back of the room, and he stepped towards them.

“He got all of them, Director,” Fury announced and Stark’s face broke out in a smile. Director Carter only nodded.

“So...” she began, holding herself proudly. “You are Steve Rogers.”

“Yes,” he answered and stepped closer. Director Carter held up a hand and he stopped. “Peggy...it’s me. I’m back.”

The pursing of her lips and the glistening of her eyes was like a bullet through his heart. He didn’t know what to do. She looked exactly as she had through Heimdall’s eyes and he tried to imagine all the years that she had seen without him. What kind of life had she lived? Had she found love again after him? Did she have children, too?

He hadn’t wanted to come back a ghost. He hadn’t wanted to bring the pain back to them if they had healed, but as he watched her gather up something to say, he saw that he had done exactly that. He had come to Earth and ripped off every stitch she had bound her grief with and he hated that his existence was a wound.

_Hela’s hound indeed_, he thought and nodded to her silence in acceptance. He had become his own worst nightmare.
“Where were you?” she finally asked, repeating what Stark had asked. Her voice broke and she looked away.

He owed them all sixty years of lost time and grief, but he couldn’t give that back. The only thing he could offer, paltry though it was, would be an explanation.

“The Tesseract isn’t just a cube of energy. It’s more than that,” Stark seemed to take his words with a healthy dose of fear if his widening eyes were anything to go by. “It’s a means of transportation. The Asgardians called it an Infinity Stone. I picked it up on the Valkyrie to keep it out of Schmidt’s hands and it...it sent me across the cosmos.”

Fury came around his desk and was frowning at Steve. “Infinity Stone?”

Steve realized he had left that part out. He nodded, but kept his eyes on Peggy. “There are more out there. The Tesseract is only one of them.”

“How many more?” Fury asked and Steve glanced back to see in Fury’s eye the same kind of determination that must have shone out of his own whenever he perceived a threat.

“Five. There’s six in total.”

“And you didn’t think to mention that earlier?”

“As far as I knew, the Tesseract was the only one on Earth. Unless,” Steve’s mission leapt up into the forefront and his hands found their way to his hips. “Unless something changed while I was gone.”

“A lot changed, Cap,” Fury grit out and crossed his arms. “You need to tell us what you know about these...Infinity Stones and if the Asgardians you’re searching for know about them.”

“Thor and Loki aren’t hunting for Infinity Stones,” Steve countered, but Fury scoffed.
“Okay,” Fury marched back to his desk and drew up an incident report from something called Rollins Rounders. “Explain why a madman with borderline superhuman strength tried to attack Stark Tower a couple weeks ago.”

There was a grainy picture attached to the report and Steve would have recognized it even if it had been a shoddily drawn sketch. “Loki,” he breathed and Hjördís’ voice burst into his mind. *Great power in the hands of a Jötunn.* “No,” Steve marched towards the image and his hands shook. “No...not here.”

“No here?” Peggy asked from behind him and Steve felt the cold winds of Jötunheim wrap around him. The air thinned as it had been on the spires and he turned to her in terror.

“The world he was transported to was destroyed by Loki,” Fury explained what he couldn’t find the words for. “Frost and storm giants, male, female, and children...all killed.”

He saw pain lance across Peggy’s face. Stark frowned and looked at Steve as though he hadn’t seen him before that moment then blinked rapidly. He looked down then back to Peggy, actively ignoring Steve. He watched Peggy grip Stark’s hand and something in him shook down to its foundations. Everywhere he went, destruction followed. So much of Hjördís’ predictions had come to pass. What if she hadn’t only meant Jötunheim? What if he had brought her prophecies with him? What if Hela was still tied to him, even without the fanged gauntlet, and Death coiled inside of him just waiting to strike?

“No,” he repeated and fear swarmed through his heart. If Loki gained control of the Tesseract...if there were more Infinity Stones on Earth...he *couldn’t* lose this world. He had just gotten it back. He turned back to Fury. “We have to find Loki and Thor now.”

“We’ve been over this, Cap,” Fury sighed. “Until you’re acclimated to Earth as it is now, I’m not going to jeopardize my agents because you have to have training wheels.”

“I survived sixty years with frost giants and Asgardians, I’m sure I can handle whatever you throw at me;” he snapped, his fear escaping his control, and Fury shook his head.

“How’s this, then? Three months probationary period after which you will be assessed and assigned to active duty, if and *only* if, you pass the assessments,” It was said with complete seriousness and Steve heard Clint whisper something to Natasha. From behind him, he heard Peggy coming closer. He backed down a little, wary of being a weapon in her eyes now that he had returned, and watched her approach from the corner of his eye.
She stood close to Fury and turned to look at Steve. “Six months.”

Steve’s next words died in his throat and he stood in front of people he had bargained with Death herself to get back to in silence. The winds of Jötunheim screamed in his head and he pulled his overcoat tighter around him. This was out of his control.

“You’ll be provided with an alias and an account in SHIELD,” Fury repeated to him and looked to Clint. “Is there a vacant apartment in your building?”

“Nonsense,” Stark interjected, coming forward as well. “There’s a ton of space in Stark Tower.”

“Tony,” Peggy admonished lightly, her lips curved up a little. “It’s bad enough you’re here now. How are you going to hide him in that beacon of a building?”

Shrugging, Tony Stark smirked. “I’ve helped hide SHIELD for years. One man shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Schmidt’s poster boy is just gonna acquire a man who looks like a Captain America look-a-like and nobody’s gonna bat an eyelash?” Clint asked, an eyebrow raised.

Steve frowned. “What?” He looked to Tony, whose smirk faltered, and then to Peggy. “Schmidt’s what?”

Throwing a stern look at Clint, who raised his hands and took a seat, Peggy stepped forward. “All of that can be explained later. For now, you will need a place to stay.”

“I’ve already offered the Tower,” Tony reiterated and his tone gave off the air of finality.

“He has not chosen the Tower,” Peggy countered and Tony flinched. Letting out a small breath, Peggy looked to Steve. “The probationary period is nonnegotiable, but you may decide where to reside.”
Schmidt’s poster boy, Steve looked away from Tony and to Clint. “I’ll stay in Clint’s building.”

“Great...” Clint groaned, elongating the word and over-pronouncing the last letter. “This’ll be fun.”

“Then it’s settled,” Peggy laid a hand on Fury’s chest and he nodded to her, then she turned and headed out of the office. Steve paused for the space of a heartbeat before he followed. Tony’s hand shot out and grabbed him.

Steve looked down at the hand holding his bicep and glared at the owner. The hand didn’t move. “Let her go,” Stark urged him quietly.

“Schmidt’s poster boy?” he asked, both curious and angry.

Flinching again, Tony released his hold. “You...you don’t understand.”

“Oh, I’m sure,” Steve looked back to the hall but Peggy had made quick work of vanishing. He let out a frustrated breath and turned to Fury. “Six months from this moment?”

“Yes,” Fury watched him closely.

Steve went to the chair where his pack was and gathered it up. He held his hand out for his sketches. Fury slowly handed them over. Once all his things were packed away, he looked to Clint.

“Let’s go.”

Tony

“His world’s 2D, Stark,” Agent Romanoff said as she walked him back to the surface. Tony stared straight ahead. “He doesn’t know anything about what’s really going on here.”
“He looked at me like I was...” *Hail Hydra!* “Like I was an enemy.”

Romanoff hummed. “He’s been...” she waved vaguely at the air. “...around for sixty years. His enemies and allies aren’t the same.”

“Around?” Tony approached the elevator and FRIDAY greeted him. He was a little surprised. Agent Hill had rubbed off on her for the first few months after her installment.

“Asgard and Jötunheim,” Romanoff said it without any inflection and he glanced at her.

“I honestly can’t tell if you’re super spying me right now not,” she smiled at him and he was even more unsure.

“I’m not lying. This time,” she said with a grin and he shook his head.

“Did he by chance meet Tinkerbell or Peter Pan on his journey through the stars?” The door to the elevator opened and a couple agents spilled out. He slid his shades onto his face and looked away.

“You know,” Romanoff said as they stepped into the elevator and she pressed the button for the top floor. “Treating him like a crazy relic isn’t going to win you any favors.”

Tony didn’t reply for a moment, watching the ascension of the elevator by the numbers. “How long’s he been here?”

“He landed last night,” Tony glanced at his watch. It was just now 2 a.m. “He needs time.”

Shaking his head, Tony burst out of the elevator the very second the door opened. “He’s had sixty years, Agent Romanoff.”

“No,” she called out to him from the elevator. “We’ve had sixty years. He’s had a few hours.”
Tony paused. “I offered him the Tower. It’s the safest place for him. He’d have access to everything he could ever need.”

“The Asgardians had access to everything, too, Stark,” she told him and he turned to look at her. “But one of them destroyed Jötunheim and everyone on it while they had him locked in a golden cell without his memories. Maybe he needs the old-fashioned approach.”

“I’d like to know everything about what happened to him sixty years ago,” he wondered how their conversation would have turned out if Infinity Stones hadn’t took over. “Not just the apocalypse recap.”

“There’ll be a file waiting for you in a few hours,” she said and leaned against the door to the elevator.

“The Tower’s still open...if he changes his mind,” he said and tucked his hands in his pockets.

“I’ll make sure he knows that. Bye, Stark.”

“Romanoff.” And he finished his trek out of the back hallway and into the diner beyond.

He made it as far as the kitchen before he was set upon by strong hands and a frown. Light blue eyes bore into his own downcast ones even through his shades and he sighed. “Aunt Angie, I have to go.”

“You stormed through here pretty fast, Tony,” she pointed out, standing firmly between him and the way out. “I heard a Lazarus protocol went into effect.”

“Yeah, it did,” he fidgeted and rocked on the balls of his feet. “Shouldn’t you be consoling Aunt Peggy or something?”

Angie squeezed his elbows before pulling him into a hug. He tried to pretend he didn’t need one, but his resistance lasted all of five seconds. His hand twisted in the tie to her apron. She smelled like Avon, burgers and fries. He closed his eyes for a second.
“I’ll see her tonight at home. I made Lasagna yesterday, you should stop by,” Angie pulled back to look him in the eye and he chewed on the inside of his cheek.

“I can’t come to your house, Aunt Angie. I risked a lot coming here. I’m not going to put you in more danger.”

“Oh, Tony,” Angie brushed a hand down the side of his head, tucking his hair behind his ears. He might as well have been twelve, not thirty-four. “Neither of you should be alone tonight. Sneak out and come to dinner. That’s an order.”

Tony sighed and nodded. “Yeah, yeah, okay. Dinner.”

Rolling her eyes, Angie bopped him on the back of his head. “Go take a shower and get some sleep,” She shoved a biodegradable container into his hand. “Eat first.”

“Yes, Frau Martinelli.” He snapped his heels together and she bopped him again. “Hey! I need my brain for dinner.”

“Go on, Tony, before I take that burger back.”

He clutched the container to his chest and skipped past her. “I’m going, I’m going.”

Tony hadn’t been in the Tower for almost a year, which meant Pepper was going to go ballistic when she got the alert from JARVIS that he was in the building, and he clapped his hands as he entered his penthouse and set the container down on the coffee table.

“J, let’s skip the foreplay,” he dropped onto the couch and opened up the container. A little of his tension sloughed off at the scent of Angie’s best burger. He had the best family. “Call Pepper. Oh, and send Rhodey a message to see if he’s free.”

“Shall I tell Mister Rhodes about the Lazarus protocol?”
“Of course,” Tony answered through a mouthful of burger. “You don’t even need to ask.”

“Sir, I must remind you that it is...”

“J, call Pepper.”

After a pause. “Yes, sir.”

As the call went through, Tony stuffed more food into his mouth. He nearly choked when Pepper’s worried and sleepy voice came through. “Tony, what’s wrong?”

Tony struggled to swallow and rolled his eyes at himself when he realized he hadn’t sat down with a drink. Shooting up, all with Pepper’s increasingly worried voice in his ears, he hurried to his fridge and pulled a bottled water out. Gulping until his throat was clear, Tony laughed aloud.

“Oh, my god,” he gasped and Pepper made a strange noise. It was somewhere between a scoff and a gag.

“I’ll...I’ll just hang up now,” he could hear her shuffling around.

“Pepper,” he said and made his way back to the couch. He plopped down and set the water bottle on the table. “A Lazarus protocol was triggered late last night.”

The shuffling increased and he heard the click of her lights. He imagined her sitting up in bed and rubbing at her eyes. “Where are you?” He heard silence for a moment and then a loud sigh. “Please tell me this alert is false.”

“I’m in the penthouse, right now, Pep,” he said and attempted to eat again.

“Did you fly all the way here?” When he didn’t reply, she sighed again. “I’m coming up.”

“Pep, it’s...” he glanced at his watch. “It’s 3 a.m. You should go back to sleep.”
“If you wanted me to stay asleep, you wouldn’t have called,” she was moving around and he heard her sit the phone down. “Give me ten minutes.”

“Pep,” he said but she clicked her tongue.

“Ten minutes max.”

He had kicked his shoes off and tossed his shades on the table by the time Pepper came up and she curled up beside him on the couch. After stealing a few of his fries, she leaned against the back of the couch and eyed him.

“What was he like?” she asked and he crossed his feet on the coffee table, relaxing into the couch.

“Big,” he began, sipping from his water. “Really broad in the shoulders and tall. He actually looked better than the pictures. Oh, and he had a mohawk...and a beard.”

“Captain America had a mohawk?”

“And black leather pants,” he snorted. “He had also been in space for sixty years.”

Frowning, Pepper crossed her arms. “In space? He’s been on the moon?”

“Oh, no,” Tony set his water down again and turned to face Pepper. “Asgard and Jötunheim.”

“Fictional space...” Pepper looked increasingly less convinced.

“I should have a report soon about it all,” he reached out for Pepper’s hand and she took it. “I offered to let him stay here.”
“Tony,” Pepper said his name like an admonishment and he looked away, out into the brilliant skyline. “It’s too dangerous here. You shouldn’t even be here.”

“It’s my Tower,” he whined, a familiar argument and one he knew he would never win.

“And it’s only a borough away from SHIELD. You’d force them into deep cover when you’ve got a perfectly good place in Malibu.”

“So, I’m going to be on house arrest for the rest of my life? I never see anyone unless they come to me.”

Pepper pulled him close until his head was in her pajama-clad lap. She ran her fingers through his hair. “You’ll see a lot more than you’ll want to in a month.”

“What’s in a month?”

“The Foundation gala? Even the Red Captain’s coming.”

Groaning and covering his eyes with both hands, Tony shook his head. He regretted it when Pepper’s hand stopped running through his hair. “Kleiser wants the chair for that project in Norway.”

“I thought you dismantled it,” He moved his head until Pepper got the message and started again.

“I did, but he called to make sure I had it ready within the week.”

“Is that why you smell like you need a shower?”

Gasping, Tony looked up at her. “I’m offended.”

“So is my nose. How long were you in the workshop this time?”
“Uh...” he didn’t actually remember much before the Lazarus alert. He’d sort of mentally wiped his schedule.

“Two days and fifteen hours, Miss Potts.” JARVIS gladly provided and Tony cursed his own creation.

“Tony, you can’t protect the world if you’re too tired to stand. You’ve got to take better care of yourself.”

“I take great care of myself,” he looked at his hands, and was glad he didn’t see blood. “Most of the time.”

Shaking her head, he saw her visibly let it go.

“So,” Pepper began and Tony glanced back up at her. “What was he really like?”

Tony dropped his hand and let the images play back in his mind. “He was scared...something about the Infinity Stones spooked him.”

“And apparently you’ve got one in Malibu.”

“Yeah,” he chuckled, “Just like me to have a weapon of mass destruction on a pedestal.”

“It’s in better hands with you than with Zola or Kleiser.”

“I’m not better than them,” Tony corrected her, turning on his side. “I’m just not as crazy.”

“Right,” Pepper stared down at him and he couldn’t meet her eyes. “Because there’s nothing you’d want more than to watch the world burn.”

“Controlled fires still burn, Pep,” he said, watching the lightening of the sky.
“Sir,” JARVIS said suddenly and both he and Pepper looked up. “There’s an incoming call.”

“Is it Rhody?” Pepper asked before Tony had the chance to and at JARVIS’ confirmation, she ordered he put it through. “I suppose you’ve heard the news?” she asked.

“From all the way in Stuttgart,” Rhodey said and Tony could hear cutlery in the background. “What’s breakfast without drama?”

“Boring,” Tony said and Pepper poked him.

“So he’s back?” Rhodey kept his voice low and his words short. If he was on duty, then this most definitely couldn’t be eavesdropped without everything falling apart. “When’d he finally show up?”

“Late last night, apparently,” Pepper answered and looked down at Tony. “He’s taking it pretty well.”

“Did he talk to him?”

“I’m right here, ya know?” Tony quipped and Rhodey laughed. “And, yes, I talked to him. He thinks I’m a dick.”

“Well...” Rhodey began, laughing when Tony protested. “Was he a dick?”

“I’m not going to call Captain - him a dick, Rhodey.”

“A spade’s a spade, Tones. Was he a dick or not?”

“No. Sort of. He was...a lot.”

“So, he was.”
“I’m not soiling your image of him.”

“There’s no image to soil. He’s the one who left us.”

“But he came back,” Tony sat up and exhaustion was weighing on him. “He came back, Rhodey.”

“Yeah, after all this time. Makes me wonder what brought him back,” Rhodey sounded as if he had gone to peak suspicious mindset already and Tony sighed.

“Some guys named Thor and Loki. One of them...” he snapped his fingers and pointed at Pepper. “One of them tried to break into the Tower.”

Blinking, she slowly uncrossed her arms and reached for her phone. “A couple weeks ago there was a homeless man raving about being a king. He attacked a few employees and was taken by Rollins Rounders.”

“That’s Loki,” Tony nodded, then remembered Rhodey was on the phone. “I’ll set up a private call when I’ve got the file on all this, Rhodey.”

“Good,” There was a sharp sound of boots snapping together and Rhodey cleared his throat. “Schmidt’s here. Gotta go.”

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**Clint**

He was stuck in a car with a madman again, though this time the madman was the bonafide truth. It was a bit disconcerting to think he’d been talking shit to Captain America himself since he arrived back on Earth.

“Wait,” Clint said as he watched the diner fade into the distance. “Am I the first person you talked to in sixty years?”
Steve had been staring at his clenched fist since they climbed into the car and he didn’t look up to answer. “The first human. I’ve spoken to quite a few people.”

“Right,” Clint breathed out a laugh. “Giants and gods and spirits. You’re a popular guy.”

Silence met his words and he looked at the other man with a frown. He supposed the meeting of Steve and Peggy could have gone better. Every kid worth their American salt knew the story of Captain America. It had been romanticized into myth after so many years, but there were always kernels of truth. Not to mention the fact that he had only been verified as himself a couple hours before. The injection had to have done a number on him, even if the serum had worked it out of his system. It was meant to plow through mental barriers and leave the recipient open to suggestion. Usually it would just lower inhibitions so they could get the closest thing to the truth. The diagnosis machine would read brain waves to establish truth from fiction and subsequent questions would be judged by the initial parameters. It wasn’t foolproof, but it was so extensive that even one wrong answer was considered grounds for failure.

Stark Junior charging in hadn’t helped, though Clint supposed it was a matter of time before HYDRA found their way into SHIELD. Their poster boy was the creator of their AI and upgraded their tech. They should have just thrown themselves at Schmidt’s feet. He had retired as soon as he realized the voice in his ear during missions, the bow in his hand, and the body armor keeping him safe were crafted by a man that designed the weapons HYDRA dropped on civilians. It was bad enough that AES70 batteries were in damn near everything and StarkTech was branded on everything from coffeemakers to underwear. Knowing Stark hail’d hydra! was a bit too much.

Natasha told him he was being stupid, but he had a limit to what he was willing to stoop to. Colluding with the enemy, even if it was supposedly for the greater good, just wasn’t going to fly. But if he wasn’t really retired, that meant he would right back where he was.

“Six months’ll go by quick, man,” he said, drumming his fingers on his thigh. Steve had vetoed music the second Clint turned it on. “Compared to sixty years, it’s nothing.”

“Earth might not have six months. It might not have six weeks. If the Infinity Stones get into the wrong hands...what happened to Jötunheim will happen here,” Steve ran his hand over his forearm as if searching for something. “I have to stop it.”

“We can help with that. But you’ve got to learn about what happened while you were gone,” Clint reached back into the space behind Steve’s seat and pulled a StarkTab out of the care package SHIELD had assembled before they left. He swallowed his disgust of the name etched onto the back and turned it on. It had a few declassified files loaded onto it, enough to get him started. “Learn the tech and the history. If all that stuff you said is true about Asgard’s big library, then imagine this is a condensed version.”
Steve took it gingerly and stared down at the Stark Industries logo. “What did you mean about him?”

“Stark? He’s an engineer and billionaire. Schmidt’s empire wouldn’t be what it is today without him.”

Clenching his fist tight enough to nearly crack the screen, Steve glared up at Clint. “He’s helping HYDRA?”

“For the greater good,” Clint parroted Director Carter.

“Loki targeted his Tower. Why?”

“AES70 batteries are Tesseract-based for a reason. Starks have had it since a little after you vanished.”

All emotions drained from Steve’s face and he looked down at the tablet. “How much does this thing do?”

“Nearly everything. I’ll show you when we get back to my building.”

Blazing blue eyes bore into Clint’s. “You’ll show me now.”
Loki

It took a couple days to make the call because the mortal had weaved an enchantment of sorts around it that required the proper assortment of numbers. He had seen these before, but hadn’t bothered to understand or decipher them. Of course, that didn’t mean he hadn’t picked up a few tricks. He was a Trickster after all.

The few miscreants he had stayed with on the streets from time to time had told him that people were sentimental and predictable. If he had known how much Midgardians had resembled Thor in his first few days, he might have had an easier time. He could walk circles around Thor, even now.

Loki found a quiet, out of the way spot to attempt to break the coding on the phone. He had also stolen the patchy wallet the man had carried. Inside was an identification card that bore the name: Ellis, Matthew. It also had his date of birth. If that failed, the man had a picture of his son with a date on the back. After a couple tries with that failed, Loki waited for a bit, then tried again.

Don’t swamp it with randoms, man, one of the vagrants had told him, pointing to the cracked screen of a stolen IPhone, ya gotta finesse it, right? Like cracking a safe, or somethin’.

Loki wasn’t given the chance to try on any of that man’s stolen phones. The man was captured by men in black uniforms with red emblems that bore a strange double R over the heart. Soon after, he had moved locations to avoid the same fate. It hadn’t seemed too difficult when the man had showed him, but he hadn’t understood the mechanisms back then. He didn’t understand them that much now either, but he was at least willing and open to learning.

A couple days and countless attempts later, he managed to unlock the phone. The screen changed from a vague blue swath to a picture of a family smiling with a lake in the background. The father, Matthew Ellis, had an arm around his beaming son, whose teeth weren’t altogether there. The mother had two fingers held up behind her husband’s head and two more in front of her child’s chest. Bunny ears and peace as he had learned from random strangers. He found the call icon, eager to press the phone to his ear and dismiss the happy picture. It was all a falsity anyway.

He dialed the number on the card and waited as it rang. The city was still quite alive, even in the dead of night, and he watched the lights of cars whiz by. The ringing cut off and Skye’s voice issued forth.

“Hello?” she sounded sleepy and Loki dug his knuckles into his chest when his heart skipped a beat. He did not care for this mortal, he only wanted her for her Midgardian magic.

“I have changed my mind,” he began and there was a shuffling on the other end.
“That means you’ll have to tell us the truth, this time.”

“And I will,” A version of it at least. “If it pleases you so to hear it.”

A pause. “We aren’t doing this to punish you, Loki,” and something bitter roiled in his throat at the thought. “We have to trust you and you have to trust us.”

“Mortals have done nothing to win my trust,” he said and felt the bitterness scorch his tongue.

“That happens, Loki. People disappoint me all the time. That doesn’t mean I give up on them. We have to keep trying or what’s the point?”

It was Loki’s turn to pause. He sat with his back against damp brick and felt the gravel on the roof dig into his behind. “I was a king...the rightful king of Asgard.”

Skye sighed. “Tell me where you are and we’ll come get you.”

Looking around himself, Loki searched for a street sign, but the building he sat upon obscured it. He shrugged to the open air. “Atop the roof of a building that is lit by the lights of some musical venue.”

There was beeping and then Skye giggled. “I’ll track your phone. Gimme a sec.”

The clacking of computer keys and of a coffee machine percolating filled his ear. After a moment, he heard the hum of the bus. “Give us about five minutes, Loki,” she said. “And get off the roof, you drama queen.”

“King,” he corrected and Skye laughed once more. He ignored the tugging on the corners of his lips.

“Drama is nonbinary.”

Mike yanked him into the bus before it could stop and they were off before the doors closed. Loki stumbled to keep his footing as Mike released him and marched back into the back to lay back down. Skye sat with two cups of coffee in her hands. She had dark circles under her eyes and her hair pulled back into a messy bun.

“Here,” she said, offering up one of the cups. “Sugar’s over there by the coffee machine.”

“I don’t...” he looked down at the black liquid and turned his nose up at the smell. Skye turned back to him with a frown and he sipped some of it with a grimace. “I don’t need sugar.”

For a moment, Skye watched him, then she giggled again. “You don’t have to drink it if you don’t like it, Loki.”

“But...is it not common custom to partake in your host’s proffered drink?”
“It’s America, HYDRA overlords and all. You have the freedom to choose.”

Loki handed the cup back to Skye and she poured it into her own cup. “What is HYDRA?”

Pausing, Skye tilted her head as if he had said something peculiar. “You...you didn’t learn about them in school?”

“I confess I did not pay much attention to Midgard in my studies. I found my own land far more interesting.”

“Midgard?” Loki took a seat as Skye crossed her arms. “Where are you from?”

“Asgard, as I have said,” He sighed. “I did not lie.”

“From what I’ve googled...that’s not exactly true, is it?”

“What have you heard?”

“Loki the Liesmith. Did you take on the persona for a reason, or...?” Skye waved her hand in the air and he watched it. She had no magic coming from her fingers and yet she could do magic all the same. He bit his tongue to stem his knee-jerk response.

“Many have tried to shame me with words such as these. It is not a persona. I am Loki of...Asgard. And I am king.”

“Okay,” Skye set her coffee down. “You’re from Asgard. Isn’t Odin the king?”

“He...” Loki swallowed against the spike of pain inside his heart. There had been a time when Odin smiling upon him filled him with joy. Now, to think of him brought only pain. “He fell into Odinsleep. I took up the mantle.”

“But...you said the Allfather took your powers and banished you. Why did he banish you?”

“I did not...I was not what he wanted me to be.”

“And what did he want you to be?”

“Thor,” Loki replied before he could stop himself and he cursed under his breath. Skye was frowning once more and he looked away. Mike had already begun to snore and Loki envied his easy comfort. “He means nothing.”

“I doubt that,” Skye stood up and crossed the bus to sit beside him. “Is Thor your...brother?”

She was guessing and he eyed her. “Did your google not inform you of everything?”

“Google only gave me the myths. I guess we don’t get Asgard Daily News down here.”

She said it with a smile, curling her legs beneath her on the modified bench. Loki stared at her, looking for the darkness in her inquiry. He found only a childlike openness. He wanted to smother it before it could grow.

“Thor is my brother. The chosen son,” Again, the bitterness filled his mouth and he didn’t bother to
swallow it back.

“Odin didn’t choose you? Why?”

“I...I am not what I thought I was. What I believed I was.”

The knowledge of the blue lingering beneath his pale skin made him want to slough it off and show her. He wanted to see the fear on her open face and the revulsion he himself felt. Subjected to a powerless existence on this infernal realm, he would keep the art of creating fear. It was all he was born for anyway. Groomed from birth to love those that hated him and for the sole purpose of keeping war at bay. Well, he had never succeeded at being what was desired of him. Odin had made it quite clear how easy it was to fail. So Loki would do more than that. If war was what his existence was to prevent, then it would be his mission to visit war upon any place he chose. It had happened to be Jötunheim in his sights first. Laufey, the abonder, got his poetic comeuppance at the hands of that which he left to die. Odin should have seen Loki then as he never had.

Still, he could not separate his genetics from his being. He was what he was. The universe would learn to rue the day he survived.

“Yeah,” Skye sighed and relaxed a little more into the couch. “I understand.”

“How could you?” Loki asked in disbelief, scoffing at the notion that she would have even an inkling of what it was like to be cast aside.

“I don’t even know my own birthday,” Skye whispered, wrapping her arms around her middle. “I don’t know my real name...or where I was born. It’s almost as if I appeared one day at St. Agnes.” At his frown, she elaborated. “It’s an orphanage.”

That surprised him and he felt as if it shouldn’t. He looked at her. “They abandoned you to the wilds. Why do you fight to save them? Are they not all culpable for your abandonment?”

Snorting, Skye shook her head. “I’m not blaming the world for the actions of a few. The way I see it, I’ve got two choices. Make the best of a shitty situation and help some people along the way or I can let those that left me behind win.” She glanced back at Mike who was fast asleep. “You don’t know me well enough, Loki, but I don’t like losing.”

“Ace,” he surmised, raising a brow. “How did he lose his child?”

“Mike got injured at work, but instead of helping him, they cut their losses. He lost his house. Some lady approached him during therapy. She offered him something better than stretches and debt.”

Skye shrugged and looked back out the window. One could see out from the inside, but not in from the outside. Ingenious. “The people he got tied up with were bad news. They kidnapped Ace and tried to kill Mike. I helped him get out.”

“And now you have sworn in ink to reclaim his son?” Loki took Skye’s wrist in his hand and ran a finger over the tattoo. “Why such loyalty to him?”

“If I could find my family, I wouldn’t let anything stand in my way. I want the same for everyone else.”
“It’s noble, but futile. Those people you aid will be back in another bus soon enough for something just as meaningless. But perhaps, this time, you aren’t able to free them. Where do they go?”

Skye seemed to balk at the thought that she was doing this for nothing. She turned a little bit away from him. “Zola’s facilities. He tests on people...he’s...a mad scientist.”

“And you try to rescue them from this fate?”

“Someone has to. Someone has to be there when everyone else is gone,” The conviction in Skye’s voice touched something in Loki and he swallowed.

“Often there is no one. Alone, we all end up alone in the end.”

“No,” Skye’s hand was warm on his jaw and he let himself enjoy the kindness she offered. “Not with people like me, or Mike...or you?”

He frowned at her, his eyes burning. “I’m not a savior.”

“Neither are we. You don’t have to be Joan of Arc to lead the charge anymore. What we do might not be global. And yeah, we might be delaying the inevitable. But if that means a mother gets a few more years with her child, or a father can find his son,” Skye smiled, soft and bittersweet. “Then it’s worth it, don’t you think?”

“No,” he muttered, but held Skye’s hand to his face. “But you do.”

Blinking, Skye bobbed her head from side to side. “Well, this doesn’t make you activist of the year, but it’s a start.”

She stood once more and headed back to her bench. He noticed it was draped with a blanket and a pillow. Skye crawled beneath her cover and sighed as she burrowed deeper. “There’s blankets and pillows...” she yawned before pointing vaguely to the space beneath his bench. “Take as many as you need.”

“I want to learn computers,” he told her as she closed her eyes and she raised her fist with her thumb sticking upwards.

“Get some sleep, Loki.”

Skye was asleep less than five minutes later. Loki stood and approached her station, taking in the whole array. Some things were familiar enough from living on Midgard, but others were baffling oddities. He reached out for the keyboard that Skye so often used, but Mike’s sleep-roughened voice stopped him.

“Go to sleep, Loki,” Mike ordered and Loki turned to him with a scowl. “It’s protected and coded to Skye only. Even I can’t turn it on.”

“She asks for trust and does not give it?”

“More like she takes strangers into her home and is smart enough to lock up the goods first. Caution isn’t deceitful, it’s necessary.”

“Mortals are strange creatures,” he muttered and Mike laughed.
“So are guys who think they’re magical kings,” without another word, Mike turned over and went back to sleep.

Loki sat back down and pulled a pillow from beneath the bench. The hum of the bus let him relax enough to close his eyes. The darkness that came up to greet him was long overdue.

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**Steve**

The ‘starter kit’, as Clint called it, contained a charger cord and headphones to go with the StarkTab. There were also a couple files with things for Steve to research and pour over. His alias gave him access to a basic level of SHIELD’s network, so everything he searched SHIELD could see. He wasn’t allowed to pursue either Thor or Loki until the six months were up. How they planned to ensure he didn’t go off on his own, he didn’t know. If they tried to use that chair again, Steve would have a few words (and fists) for them.

Clint advised him to just keep his head down and stay under the radar. He told him to think of it as a small prison sentence. The easier he serves it, the quicker it goes.

“I’ve spent enough time in prison,” Steve bit out and Clint hummed.

“Then you should be used to it by now.”

“No one ever gets used to chains.”

Clint looked away. “Some people don’t have a choice.”

Clenching his fist, Steve stared pointedly at the StarkTab. Clint had shown him how to use it, and though it was still a bit confusing, it was becoming easier. “Where do you suggest I start?”

“At the beginning?” Clint shrugged, picking at a loose thread on his jacket. “Start when you left and work your way forward.”

“I’ve already done that,” Steve’s fingers hovered over the digital keyboard on the screen.

Sighing, Clint glanced at him. “The first step of recovery is admitting you have a problem, Steve. You missed sixty years on Earth. A lot happened while you were gone.”

Everyone had told him that at least once since he landed. He didn’t understand where he stood anymore. “Who...who am I to you? To Midgard?”

Steve looked to Clint and awaited his answer. The other man shifted in his seat until he was facing Steve head on. “Truthfully, man, you’re a myth. To think Captain America is alive is harder to believe than actual gods roaming the earth. They sealed every file that even mentioned you to stem the tide of doppelgangers in the sixties. A couple generations have grown up with you as some...old Americana urban legend. Teenagers in my neighborhood used to dress as you to scare the shit outta the old codgers who survived the war.”

“The warehouse where a few of them were stored caught fire in the fifties. The rest were finally put on the web about three years ago, but by that point people thought they were fake. They thought some actor filmed them with a black-and-white filter, interlaced it with real news footage and passed it off as genuine. People would have an easier time believing Bigfoot’s walking around. At least he left footprints. You vanished before the end of the war and life moved on.” Clint looked out the windshield as it started to rain again. “It was kind of like a reverse Pearl Harbor. Captain America disappearing was...some ancient sign of peace. The war ended a little after you vanished. Two plus two makes V-Day.”

A laugh bubbled up in Steve’s chest and clawed out of his mouth brokenly. “I spent all this time with living myths...now I am one.”

“Could be worse,” Clint offered him a roguish smile. “Could be dead.”

“I’ve done that, too.”

Scoffing and shaking his head, Clint sat back in his seat properly. “What haven’t you done?”

Steve looked out into the rain and lifted the tablet from his lap. “Kept my promise to Midgard. I haven’t saved my home, yet.”

“I’m sure you will,” Clint didn’t say it harshly, but there was a bit of disbelief in his tone. “What did you mean you’ve done that? Died?”

It was one of the many secrets he had yet to share. Steve bit his tongue. “I’m not the man that left. He died on Jötunheim with my family.”

Nodding, Clint patted Steve’s knee. “Loki sounds like an asshole.”

“If he wasn’t the last of his kind and part of my bargain with Odin, I’d kill him myself,” It wasn’t up for debate. Steve would suffocate the life from Loki with his bare hands if he had the chance. It was only because he had to think of Earth’s well-being that he held back his own hatred.

“What’s Odin bringing to the table?”

“Asgard and all its might. An army of beings far stronger than even me. They have magic and weapons we’ve only dreamed of. If Loki hadn’t destroyed Jötunheim, I could have rallied the Jötunn behind me, as well. Asgard alone will have to do.” Steve would have to have more control on Midgard before he brought the Asgardians down. He tapped the blank screen and searched for everything from the year 1944. Perhaps he could get a headstart.

“You know,” Clint began fiddling with the radio again. All the music sounded like metal scraping against metal with screaming piercing throughout. “Considering all the hell Asgard’s put you through, you’d think you’d want nothing to do with them. I mean, if someone killed an entire planet and murdered my family, I’m pretty sure I’d have a scorched earth policy towards them in every form.”

“The realms...” Steve processed what he was about to say before it passed his lips. “The realms are
more complicated than that. We will need Asgard’s aid to stop Hydra.”

“Secrecy’s been our only saving grace for years, Steve. Hydra’s not a rogue science division of Nazi Germany anymore. It gave up that gauche ghost when Hitler offed himself and Schmidt vanished with you.”

“Hitler killed himself?”

Collapsing back in his seat, Clint nibbled on his thumb. “I...I’ve never actually met anyone who didn’t know this stuff. It’s like...common knowledge for nearly everyone.” Blinking, Clint sighed. “You’ll read up on it soon, I’m sure. Anyway, Hydra’s not what you remember.”

“It’s worse,” Steve guessed and the rain seemed to beat down on the car with more force. Thunder clapped overhead and Steve jerked against his will.

“In some ways. The hardest part isn’t fighting the guys with Hydra pouring out of their mouths. It’s the quiet ones that worry me.”

Steve frowned, but said nothing.

Since Steve didn’t technically exist yet in the public record, he followed Clint back up to his apartment. Lucky greeted them at the door. Whining a little, Lucky nuzzled Clint’s hand.

“Yeah, bud, I know,” Steve watched Clint walk further into the apartment and shut the door. There were a few locks and Steve occupied himself fastening them all. “I would have done that.”

Ignoring Clint’s courtesy protest, Steve stepped forward. “I’m going out on the fire escape.”

“O..okay. Sure,” Clint waved him on, slowly extracting himself from his jacket. “Knock yourself out. There’s an umbrella next to it.”

The rain was still pouring. Steve snatched the umbrella from its place behind a purple vest and ducked out the window. He sat just beyond Clint’s vision if he peeked out the window and huddled beneath the umbrella. Water and electronics were bad news, Clint had told him when they climbed out of the car. He set the starter kit in his lap.

Scrolling through the ‘Wikipedia’ page for 1944, Steve found himself back with the Howling Commandos, charging into Hydra bases and fighting side-by-side with the Allied forces. He moved on to 1945. Then he reached his disappearance, the war effort after he was gone, the lengths his own country had gone to for peace. He poured over a slew of images of mushroom clouds and he thought of Clint’s scorched earth policy. This was Loki and Jötunheim, right down to the children...right down to the devastation. Americans had done this.

Steve set the tablet down and covered his eyes with his hand.

He had been so focused on Schmidt, on stopping the weapons on the Valkyrie, that he never once assumed his own people would have something like that. He had disabled the Valkyrie with the self-assurance that Schmidt’s bombs wouldn’t visit upon any major capitol. It felt like...like he’d risked it all for nothing. Sure, Schmidt wasn’t able to follow through, but Midgard didn’t need Tesseract energy to lay waste to each other. He skimmed the next few decades with a painful
expectation of even more horrendous acts.

Despite the wars and the new technology, Steve didn’t see Hydra by name outside of historical texts. It was as if they had vanished into thin air as soon as the War ended. The focus shifted from Germany and Hydra and became Soviet. Yet in the red, there was no proof of Hydra.

Zola was just a scientist at the forefront of human innovation, an admirable figure who helped keep the streets safe by putting miscreants to work for the betterment of the rest of the populace. They never mentioned that he was Hydra. Even his biography said nothing about his Tesseract-centric scientific discoveries, focusing instead on his biological science studies. Conversely, it was Howard splashed all across the internet with his futuristic weaponry, AES70 batteries, and his controversial standing in a society that shunned the old methods of war.

There were pages for people on the internet and Steve dived into his old friend’s. Howard’s death was ruled an accident. A car crash on a back road with his wife, Maria, in the passenger seat. Stark Industries were inherited by his son Anthony - Tony - whose initials and birth year had named his father’s batteries. A man named Obadiah Stane stood beside him. Even in these pictures, he could not see Hydra plastered onto their faces. How did SHIELD know who to fight?

The folders contained redacted debriefs on the doppelgangers and Howard’s attempts to find the real Steve Rogers. His last known location was wherever the Valkyrie had vanished to. He would have been long gone before the Valkyrie fell from the sky. All that time spent looking for him...Steve ran his fingers over the words written by Howard and Peggy in the debriefs on that. Neither of them had given up, and he thanked them for that, but Peggy’s devotion nearly got her killed in the eighties and Howard’s had brought the Tesseract to American shores. Maybe it would have been better if they had thought he was dead.

And all those men who masqueraded as him...

Had they been willing or taken like Bucky was by Hydra? Where there more out there somewhere, waiting for a moment to strike? If there were, Steve would have to find them. It was just another mission on top of all the others he had. His work would never be done.

Having exhausted the folders and sickened himself with the history of the world he left behind, Steve set everything back inside the box. He stared out into the rain. There wasn’t much a view, seeing as the back of Clint’s building looked out to another, but he wasn’t taking in the sights anyway.

Steve’s hands shook and he clenched them tightly, but it did nothing to stop the movement.

_Six months..._he might as well call for Heimdall and ask to be taken back. The princes could be dead already. Or worse, they could be in Hydra custody.

Steve moved before he even realized it, punching the metal walkway and leaving a warped dent in the shape of his fist. The umbrella had fallen to the walkway by his feet and the rain ran freezing cold down his hair and into his collar. He shuddered and closed his eyes.

_Ymir is in the cold,_ he told himself and forced himself to breathe.

“There’s a boxing gym down the street,” Clint’s voice broke through his light meditation and he turned. “Not sure how well it’d hold up to you, but it’s better than tearing up my building.”
“Thank you,” Steve grit out and picked up the umbrella, which bore his abuse as well if the crushed handle was anything to go by. The starter kit was slightly damp but had avoided the worst of it.

“Laura from next door brought brunch. If you’re hungry,” and Clint vanished back inside. Pausing for a moment, Steve let his anger go. Or bottled it up, whichever.

He climbed back into the apartment and set the slightly dripping umbrella to the side. Standing in the kitchen of Clint’s apartment was a woman with long brown hair and a kind smile. She looked up as Steve stepped into the room and looked him up and down.

“Taking a bath on the fire escape?”

“Catching up on the last sixty years,” Steve set the starter kit on the counter and crossed his arms. “I’ve been abroad.”

Glancing to Clint, Laura from next door narrowed her eyes. Clint shrugged. “He was...overseas for a while. Long deployment.”

A sad look came over Laura’s face and she nodded, holding out her hand. “I’m Laura Cardell.”

Steve glanced at her hand and back to her face. Minutely, he shook his head. “I’m Birgirsson. Stígandr Birgirsson.”

Getting the message quickly, Laura smiled. “Welcome back, Stígandr. What branch were you in?”

“Army,” Steve moved to the stools near the breakfast bar and sat on one. “I was a Captain.”

“Was?” Laura turned from him to retrieve a plate from one of the cabinets. Clint was leaning against one of the counters and sipping from a mug. Steve smelled coffee.

She set the plate in front of him and he swallowed. “I...I was discharged.”

“Honorably?”

Clint cleared his throat and came forward to pull a salad and some pasta from the containers on the counter. “Of course it was honorable, Laura.”

“With the company you keep, sometimes...” she patted his shoulder and Clint smirked. “It was good to meet you, Stígandr.”

“You’re leaving already?”

Laura was putting her purse back on her arm and buttoning up her jacket. “Barney’s PT starts in less than an hour.”

Steve watched Clint’s humor fade. “How is he?”

“Not as well as he wants to be, but pretty damn good by medical standards,” Laura pressed a kiss to Clint’s cheek. “He still doesn’t want you to visit.”

“I know.”
“I’ll call you after the doctor’s examined him. Update you on his condition.”

“Thanks.”

“Of course,” Laura waved to Steve and left.

After a pause to let the silence fill her space, Clint picked up his mug again. “Do you sleep or did the super juice fix that?”

Shrugging, Steve started to eat. The pasta was still warm. “I sleep. Why?”

“I passed out a little after we got back, but I wake up and you’re still out on the escape. It’s been six hours.”

“I’ve stayed up longer than six hours, Clint,” Steve joked and twisted his fork in the noodles.

“How long were you up before you came back to Earth? How long have you been up since you got back?”

Steve swallowed what was in his mouth and narrowed his eyes. “Why do you want me to sleep so much?”

Scoffing out a laugh, Clint sipped his coffee. “I don’t even want to know what happened to make you so suspicious. Even Nat’s not this bad. Humans sleep, Steve. It’s a requirement.”

“I...I don’t need to sleep.”

“Why do you want to stay awake so much?” Clint asked, parroted his words back to him.

Steve focused on his food, the answer fleeing from him. He knew he was back, but...there was so much to do, so many things that were wrong with Earth. He had to find the princes and bring them back before he could even properly get started on cleansing Earth of Hydra. He...he didn’t need to sleep, he needed to be out there. He needed to be useful.

“Look,” Clint said when it became clear he wasn’t going to get an answer. “Six months aren’t going to go by quicker like this. And proving you’re ready to help us is only going to be harder if medical finds out you’ve been avoiding sleeping, forgetting to eat and are emotionally unstable. Six months free in my apartment building is better than six months in a facility for PTSD and whatever else space did to you.”

Leaning against the counter with his crossed arms, Clint continued. “I’m on your side, Steve. Friends don’t let friends have self-imposed insomnia. And you don’t just need physical rest.”

“I’m not broken,” Steve snapped, dropping his fork on his empty plate.

“Soldiers coming back from war aren’t broken, Steve. But they are hurt. Physically and otherwise. Being super doesn’t make you impervious. If you want to help Earth, you gotta start by helping you.”

Clenching his jaw, Steve frowned. “I’m not suffering from war neurosis.”
Clint sighed and stood back up. He refilled his cup as he spoke. “I don’t know who told you that needing help is a weakness, but, man, you can’t keep acting like you survived sixty years in space, gained and lost an entire world, and came back whole. You said yourself that the old Steve died on Jötunheim - yeah, I know how to say it, I was just giving you shit - and I’m not sure you’ve dealt with that. I’m not sure you’ve dealt with any of it.”

“I’ve dealt with it,” Steve insisted, standing as well. “I’ve dealt with more than you’ve even dreamed of.”

“And I don’t doubt it,” Clint set his coffee down and crossed his arms. “But did you process it? Losing time? Your...your family; Birgir, Adalbjörg, Brynja, Helblindi, Býleistr, all the rest. You didn’t even get to bury them. There wasn’t anything to bury. When did you mourn them, huh? Between sword fights with the people who attacked your people in the first place and sketching their faces in the same machine that killed them?”

Pain burst in Steve’s heart and he stepped back from the kitchen. “Don’t talk about them like that.”

“Who? The people who sent you back to Earth so you could wrangle the sons that brought death to your home or the ones you call family? How old was Helblindi again? A couple years?”

“Stop!” Steve lashed out, throwing his fork at Clint. It embedded in the wood beside his head and he flinched.

“So that’s what dealing with it looks like?” Clint muttered, staring at the utensil out of the corner of his eye.

Fuming, Steve spun on his heel and made his way to the door. Clint was coming up quick behind him, but Steve was faster. He bypassed the locks by ripping the door nearly out of the wall and stormed out.

“Damn it, Steve. Come back!”

Ignoring Clint, Steve sped down the stairs and out onto the street. He picked a direction and started running.

Tony

The roads were pretty clear as Tony headed up to Peggy and Angie’s place. He had taken a nondescript car from the garage at the base of the Tower and dressed down. Someone with a keen eye could probably figure out it was him, especially if anyone saw the quinjet land on the roof. He didn’t think they would have, being how late it was and the fact that he kept the lights down, but he was used to things not going his way.

He had gone over the file Natasha had sent with the debrief of Steve Rogers’ return and whereabouts. If he had gone through half of that, he would dead. Fighting giants that were tall enough to peer into third story windows and wolves the size of horses didn’t seem like a party he wanted to attend. That would explain why he was so stony. Maybe he had been too hard on the old man. It wouldn’t be the first time.

Aunt Peggy and Angie lived in a mediterranean villa in Newark, comfortably away from
SHIELD’s HQ. Tony and Rhodey used to spend the summers here when they got the chance, though Rhodey was half-and-half at his own parents’ house. Pepper had spent the last three Christmases with them.

After his parents’ funerals, Peggy had stepped in to guide him. She and Obadiah had jointly tried to fill the void in Tony’s life with some success. The gap between his protected youth and his predestined adulthood was traversed. He wasn’t sure how he would have been scored on it, seeing as the transition had been spurred on by the devil of necessity. At the very least, he’d survived and not become a raving lunatic. Pre-coffee ramblings and guilt-filled tangents were inadmissible on the grounds that even he didn’t understand himself sometimes.

The pebbled driveway glowed blue-green under the light of his Mercedes. He kind of missed the audible crunch of tires old-fashioned cars used to have. Instead, the steady hum of the AES70 battery carried him up the slope of the driveway and into the carport. He turned off the car, sat in the ringing silence, and let himself remember when this place had meant pure joy. Tony remembered what it was like to love a place not for its capacity for isolation but for togetherness. With a wry smile, he climbed out of the car and headed to the front door.

A four-leaf clover was still pinned to the blue door. There were already painted eggs and flowers popping up in the yard. He’d spent New Year’s in Malibu with Happy and Pepper. He made a mental note to spend at least one holiday with his Aunts this year. Maybe Halloween. He could dress like like Fred Astaire and Aunt Angie would be his Ginger Rogers. A half-smile worked its way onto his face. As he raised his hand to knock but the door came flying open and a slim hand grabbed his own. He came stumbling forward as he was pulled inside and the door slammed shut. He got a split second glimpse of long blonde hair and attentive brown eyes in a teenage face before he was yanked into a hug.

“Uh...” he hesitated, his hands up a little. “Not that I’m not flattered, but kids aren’t my type.”

A laugh issued from somewhere near his chest and he jerked when nimble fingers pinched his side. “Hug me back, asshole.”

Closing his eyes at his own delayed realization, Tony did as he was told. “I’m sure Aunt Peggy would love to hear you talking like that in her house, Sharon. Aren’t you still in preschool?”

Pulling away and brushing her hair behind her ears, Sharon Carter rolled her eyes. “Being a genius doesn’t make up for your shitty excuses for defense mechanisms,” she poked his chest. “Thanks for the Audi, by the way. When I drove off into the sunset with my diploma in the passenger seat, I was the coolest person to ever live.”

“I exist, so that’s not possible,” he slung an arm over her shoulders. “How much do you know?”

Glancing up at him, his cousin raised a brow. “About your defense mechanisms, what we’re having for dinner or the night of the living dead man?”

“Let’s burn the first, I already know the second and how on earth do you know the third?” he gazed at her with a stern frown, but she only giggled.

“Ears, Tony. I have ears,” she reached up to tug on one of his lobes. “Aunt Angie was having a serious discussion with Aunt Peggy in the sitting room. I listened from the stairs.”
“How is she?” He knew better than to approach this blind.

Peggy often looked at him with a weary gaze, especially when she thought he couldn’t see. It’s the between, Tony, dear, that worries me the most. She had pressed a firm kiss against his unruly hair and pulled him close. It’s a mother’s worst fear. The moments between my protection and someone else’s. It’s a crack I can’t bear to let you fall through for Maria’s sake. Or for mine. He tried to tell her he’d be fine, but it would only make her bittersweet expression more morose.

After the return of Captain America, she would probably be more mournful than ever.

“A glass of red and the promise of having us together without a holiday has made her very happy. I’m sure there’s more tears,” Sharon shrugged, but held onto his wrist so he couldn’t remove his arm. “It’s sappy,” she waved her hand in the air. “Sad-happy.”

“So a normal Carter-Stark get-together?”

Chuckling, Sharon poked him. “It’s good to see you, Tony.”

“Yeah,” he smiled, “You, too.”

“First of all,” Sharon began, her fork pointed at no one in particular. “What do you mean he was wearing leather pants? The Statue of Liberty doesn’t wear stilettos or carry whips.”

Half-choking, Tony sipped some wine. “I’m not gonna ask how you know that. We’re related by proxy, so I probably already know. And don’t treat Lady Liberty like a prude. That dress could be hiding anything. Stilettos, fishnets, butt-”

“Anthony Edward Stark!” Peggy snapped, the severity diminished by the upward curve of her lips.

Angie smacked her arm. “Let him finish.”

Peggy blinked owlishly at Angie. “Whatever for?”

Grinning, Angie twirled her fork. “Sharon should hear the birds and the bdsm talk from family.”

Sharon covered her rapidly reddening face and burst out laughing. Tony wiped tears from his eyes. Peggy was pointing a finger at Angie, saying something under her breath. Angie cackled.

“A mohawk, leather pants and a beard,” Sharon gasped through a laugh, shaking her head. “Is Red Skull going to pop up in pastels and lace wearing snap bracelets and Hot Topic skull earrings?”

Slightly horrified at the imagery, Tony’s laugh caught him off guard a little. Usually Schmidt put him on the defensive, his ear ready for missions. He covered his lapse with a bite of lasagna.

“Why not Hello Kitty earrings?” he asked and Sharon considered it. “A skull wearing skulls is a little cliche.”

“He had a red skull and named himself Red Skull. He is a cliche.” Sharon’s fork screeched against her plate.
“Speaking of cliches,” Tony set his cup down and looked to Peggy. “Now that the prodigal son has returned, what’s the plan?”

Peggy sat up a little straighter and he watched the shroud of impartiality fall over her face.

“I don’t trust him,” she said and Angie took her hand. “I don’t trust that he’s here for us. He says he is, but the Steve I knew...the Steve I lost...is not the man we saw.”

Tony stroked his chin. “Sixty years in space...I can’t blame him. If he’s to be believed, we have more to worry about than HYDRA.”

“Herr Kleiser has been on my radar since before you were born. There has always been more than HYDRA. How much more should be our focus.” Peggy leaned forward. “Steve knows about what’s out there. We’ll have to find out everything he knows.”

“Are you going to cut his probation short?”

“No,” There was an anger in Peggy’s gaze that Tony thought he understood. “Further debriefs will be part of it. I don’t think he told us the whole truth.”

Sharon took another helping of lasagna. “What would he have to hide, Aunt Peggy?”

“He’s here at the bidding of a King and Queen. Unless something drastic changed in those sixty years, I have my doubts that he’s here of his own volition.”

“Winter?” Tony asked, watching his words. Sharon knew a lot, but Peggy had only told him about the last doppelganger. Even Angie didn’t know.

“We can’t dismiss the possibility,” Peggy met his gaze and he nodded.

“Well,” Angie began, standing with a sigh. “Who’s ready for dessert and a movie?”

“Singin’ in the Rain!” Sharon scooped the last bit of lasagna into her mouth and shot up.

“Absolutely not!” Tony protested, but Sharon was already stacking plates.

“I’ll do the dishes.”

“Singin’ in the Rain, it is,” Angie decided and handed Sharon her plate. Sharon looked at him with a sly grin.

“Fine, but we’re watching it in Italian,” Tony declared and pulled his phone out.

“I’m fluent in three languages and Italian is one of them,” Sharon sing-songed, dancing into the kitchen.

Tony shifted on the couch as the credits rolled. Sharon was curled up against him, fast asleep, and Angie was snoring lightly in her recliner. Peggy sighed as the music swelled and met his gaze in the dim light. She offered him a smile.
“Thank you for coming, Tony,” she said and he brushed Sharon’s hair out of her face. “I’ve missed you.”

“Maybe I can spend more time on the east coast,” he couldn’t meet her eyes. “It’s quiet in Malibu.”

Peggy paused before she answered and he hid his resignation by leaning down to press a kiss to Sharon’s head. “It isn’t safe, Tony.”

“I’m not safe in Malibu, Aunt Peggy, and you know as well as I do that we can’t keep hiding.”

“We cannot go public until we know what Schmidt and Kleiser are planning. Rushing would only put all our agents in jeopardy. Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes is on the front lines. One whisper of doubt and he could pay the price.”

“I’m not putting Rhodley in danger by being here. As far as anyone knows, you’re retired and running a diner with your wife.” Tony guided Sharon so she was laying on the couch and he could move. He perched on the edge of the couch. “I’m playing your game, I’m Schmidt’s little soldier, but I’m not a machine.”

A frown formed on Peggy’s face and she reached out for his hand. She didn’t speak until he took it. “No, you aren’t a machine, Tony. I regret that you were put in this position. If I’d had my way, you would never have had to do this. But we cannot undo what has been done.”

He rubbed his eyes. “Something has to change. This isn’t working.”

Peggy’s hand twitched in his own and he looked up at her. For a long moment, she seemed to have seen a ghost. Then she shuttered her expressions and cleared her throat. “Things have changed,” she pressed a kiss to his knuckles. “Captain America has returned.”

“A possibly brainwashed Captain America, you mean.” He said, tilting his head to catch her gaze so she could see his smile. It faltered a bit. “He doesn’t like me.”

Chuckling quietly, Peggy shook her head. “You can’t know that. You just met him.”

“Yeah, I’ve been told it takes less than a ten seconds to make an impression.” Tony wondered what conclusion Cap had come to. It can’t have been good. “I might have blown it.”

Peggy released his hand and beckoned him closer. He stood, only to lower himself to her feet so he could press his back against her chair. She ran her fingers through his hair. “I told you far too many tales about him. I made a myth out of his ghost,” she sighed. “You don’t have to measure yourself by his approval, Tony. Do your best, do what’s right, and do what must be done. Not a man on earth can fault you for that.”

“There’s a few billion who would disagree with you.”

“Bugger them all,” she said dismissively. “You have nothing to prove, Tony, that you haven’t already.”

Closing his eyes, Tony crossed his arms. “Kleiser wants me in Norway.”

“Then you can stay in the Tower.”
Jerked, Tony craned his neck to look up at her. “What?”

She patted his cheek. “You were here for me, Tony. Let me be here for you.”

“I can handle Kleiser,” he put on his toughest face, but released it when Peggy only looked at him with her brows raised. Resting against her leg, he waved at the air. “Thanks.”

“I love you, Tony, dear,” she said softly.

“Love you, too, Pegs.”
Recalibration

Chapter Notes

Okay, so if you read the first posting of this and wondered, where the heck did it go?: I was dissatisfied with it, so I took it down and rewrote it a bit. There's an extra 3k words that weren't here before, but I'm happy with it now. Yay? ;D

Please enjoy and if you do, consider buying me a coffee!

Steve

He felt foolish when he found himself at Fort Greene Park. His reactionary fear had drained out of him as he ran and now he had to face the fact that he had just...fled from a fight. It hadn’t even been a fight, truly. Clint had many good points. Steve had heard his own doubts spoken back to him and he couldn’t deny them. He cared about the Asgardians, as muddy as that made his loyalty to the Jötunn, and he knew he couldn’t wish harm upon them. It wasn’t just the fact that he wanted back-up against Hydra. It wasn’t even because he had grown close to Sif, the Warriors Three and Frigga. If someone threatened Asgard, he would join the fight against them. He would suit up and stand beside them. Beyond myth and necessity, that’s who he was deep down inside.

But he wasn’t suffering from PTSD...whatever that was. He just...he needed a mission. For the past sixty years he had kept himself going by always having a mission to focus on. From the moment he landed on Jötunheim, Steve was driven by the need to get home. Then he strove to get out from under Adalbjörg’s magic and he used that freedom to save the Jötunn from Brimer. From there his mission became returning them to Utgard, protecting them from Nedra, fighting the storm giants. There was always something to do, something to strive towards.

Being told by those he came back to help that he couldn’t and having his main mission sidelined...Steve didn’t know what else to do. There was nothing but finding the princes and stopping Hydra. He couldn’t back out of his deal with Asgard now; it would only make an enemy out of a powerful ally. He had to find the princes and he had to bring them home.

Six months. In the scheme of things, that was nothing at all. A cycle on Jötunheim lasted far longer than that. The Asgardians would not blink in six months. He had to think of it like a cycle on Jötunheim. Six months was nothing in giant time. He just had to learn about this world like he learned Jötunheim and its ways. Hopefully without losing his name to magic.

He found a bench and sat down to cradle his head in his hands. Exhaustion rushed up to embrace him and Steve rested back against the bench.

He had spent sixty years leaning on his own strength when it came to survival, even when he was surrounded by his family. They had understood his loss when it came to those closest to him, but they could never understand losing an entire world. Clint wouldn’t understand either. There were two worlds ripped from Steve’s hands and now he was forced to play the third’s rules. Part of him, buried deep down inside, wondered when he would lose this, too. If he had Asgard’s full force
behind him, he might feel a little more secure. It must say something about him that he sought comfort in the power of a former enemy.

Steve listened to the birds as they called from one tree to another and let the sounds of the city filter into his mind. It buzzed against his ears which had grown used to raging winds and the clanging of armor. Earth was a peculiar place now, even if he knew the streets and the customs. It wasn’t just the sounds or the buildings, it was the people and the technology. It was skeleton of his old world that this new one was built on. It was the irrefutable fact that his time was gone and he was powerless to do anything about it. The world kept spinning without him, and there was a disturbing realization that he could sacrifice himself again to no avail. Even if he ended Hydra, Asgard would most likely seek his aid again.

Another mission...

He crossed his arms and tried to make himself small. It was strange. On Jötunheim, he had to sprint five yards for every step his Jötunn family took. He had to climb higher, move faster, be stronger. To live in a world of giants, Steve had been forced to be giant. On Midgard, he was too big, too old, too mythical. In order to finish his mission, he had to be small. He had to fit into the space they had for him.

“You know,” Steve jerked and glanced up to where Clint was panting. “If you wanted to go for a jog, you just had to say.”

Steve sighed. “I shouldn’t have run away.”

“Well, I was a little tinsy bit harsh,” Clint gestured to the bench beside him and Steve slid over to make room for him. Clint sat down with a groan. “My approach might have been wrong, but I meant what I said.”

“After I got my memories back...I spent so many days trying to understand. I lost everything in the same way twice. I closed my eyes on the Valkyrie and lost Earth for sixty years. I slept in a cell in Asgard and lost Jötunheim forever. I can’t...I can’t sleep.”

Clint didn’t say anything for a moment, then he crossed his arms. “How can you fight Hydra when you don’t sleep?”

“I don’t need as much sleep as the average man.”

“You’re enhanced, not magical,” Clint ran his hand over his face. “Look, I’ve got nothing to do and nowhere to go. If you’re worried you’ll lose Earth again, I’ll...god, I can’t believe this is my life...I’ll watch over you.”

“I...” Steve crossed his own arms and pressed his fists into his sides. “I don’t need a babysitter.”

“No, you need backup. You’re still fighting a war, Steve. I can’t shrink you, I’m not qualified, but...” Clint waved his hand at the air. “Lucky’s - well, he’s not a service dog - but he’s a cuddlebug. If I’m out and you need somebody, Lucky won’t let you down.”

“My mission,” Steve began, straightening his back. “Six months is too long, but I can do it.”

“I know you can, Steve. I didn’t doubt it. You were making it harder than it needed to be.”
“My life isn’t exactly easy.”

“I don’t think you want an easy life, Steve. You want to do what’s right and so do I. Come back to my place, fix my door, take a nap, we’ll eat takeout and talk some more. And when six months are up, I’ll help you find the princes.”

“Where’s that gym?” Steve asked and Clint laughed, clapping him on the back.

“Come on, I’ll show you tomorrow. My door’s hanging off its hinges thanks to you.”

They started back towards Clint’s building and Steve pulled his overcoat tighter around him.

“I’ll fix it,” Steve said, sighing. “I shouldn’t have ripped it off in the first place. I’m used to more space.”

“Literally,” Clint snorted, but sobered quickly. “I shouldn’t have goaded you like that. I was...uh...testing boundaries.” Pausing for a moment, Clint glanced at Steve. “Do you...I mean, you don’t have to if you don’t want to, but would you like to talk about them? Your family?”

The memories hurt him deeply, but he found the pain came in the constant reminder that he would never see them again. He and Eiríkr hadn’t been reconciled after the Vault, and he hadn’t been able to make up for dragging Sverrir, Fannar and Ragnheiðr to their deaths. He hadn’t made his mistake right before Odin whisked him away to Asgard. There was still so much he had to say, so much he had wanted for them all. All that potential gone in the blink of an eye. Brynjía had been so sure they could reclaim the glory of the Jötunn and Steve had seen a bright future for Helblindi and Býleistr once they were grown. Dagný, Inga and Úlfr were young, too. Steve wondered now if Eiríkr had fled through the paths to the wastelands that Steve had shown him. Had they died in the wastelands, huddled together as the power of the Bifröst rained down on them? Had Hjördís seen it coming?

Steve bit back the pain with a grimace and blinked up at the sky. “I miss them,” he confessed and the aimless anger he had felt in Asgard washed over him. He didn’t want to miss them. He wanted them back. He wanted his life back. He wanted Bucky back. “I miss everything.”

Clint didn’t say anything, so Steve filled the quiet. “All I had on Jötunheim was the hope of getting back to Earth. And after so long there, I...” The fact hit him, but it wasn’t painful. “I had given up. For a while, I just enjoyed the life I found myself with. Then Loki came and promised freedom. I traded my family for it.” He hated himself as he spoke, hated the truth of it all. “I wanted them and I wanted Earth and I did whatever I had to. Now, I don’t have either one.”

“You’ve got Earth, Steve,” Clint muttered, waving his hand all around them. “It might not be the one you left, but you aren’t the Captain we lost, either. I want to understand you, because I have a feeling I’m going to be spending a lot of my time with you. But if you’re really back, and I mean, really, really back, then you’ve got to try to understand us, too.”
Steve nodded and swallowed. “I do. I do want to understand.”

He did want to understand this world and how it worked now. He wanted to understand SHIELD and what HYDRA was now. He wanted to learn about the world that had survived without him.

“Okay,” He and Clint crossed the street and he could see the apartment building just up ahead. “We’re here for you, Steve.”

“I...” he shook his head. “Thank you.”

“What do you say we get some burgers? Asgard might have turkey legs and mead, or whatever, but Earth has bacon cheeseburgers,” Clint patted Steve’s arm. “Who’s the advanced civilization now, huh?”

Steve’s smile hurt his cheeks a little, but it felt good to feel...happy.

Tony

Packing and shipping the Chair took up a little of his time, but not enough. Tony bounced from board meetings to contract negotiations to press conferences for the rest of the week. The more he took on, the less he had to think about Kleiser being in Norway. He could handle Schmidt and Obie, and even stomach one-on-ones with President Stern, but Herr Kleiser was another level of fear. He cherished his independence while he could.

“You’ll do fine, Tony,” Pepper assured him, twirling a fork in her fettuccine. “Just be what be wants you to be.”

Stifling a bitter laugh, Tony jabbed at his own pasta. “I’m human. I failed before I started.”

“You’ve lasted this long. Schmidt won’t let Kleiser hurt you.”
“Not mortally, but pain brings order. Schmidt’s not going to protect me. He can't even protect himself.” Tony shook his fingers as if to erase the topic. “Rhodey said he’d be at the gala.”

“That means Schmidt will be at the gala,” Pepper pursed her lips. “Have you heard anything?”

“I’m just tech support. I’m not that close to the table. Rhodey hasn’t answered my question, yet,” Tony glanced down at his phone where he had been texting Rhodey during dinner, and read the coded message JARVIS was relaying. “Scratch that, Schmidt’s planning something big. It’s tied to Kleiser’s trip to Norway.”

“What’s the message?” Pepper was attempting to read it upside down. “Reinstating the Kommandos?”

“Rhodey says the Abomination is out of lockdown,” Tony typed a reply with one hand and took a bite of garlic bread with the other. “Peggy didn’t tell me they were up to something.”

“Maybe it’s not SHIELD.”

“God, I hate being out of the loop,” Abandoning his dinner, Tony began typing with both hands. “I need to know what’s going on before the gala.”

“Then you should probably get to Norway. Kleiser is sure to give something away,” Pepper’s phone rang and she answered it, then covered the receiver. “It’s Stane.”

“Tell him I’ll have the new batteries ready when I get back from Norway,” Rhodey’s last coded message was short and to the point. Space is new focus. “And tell Richards he was right.”

“Anything else, Mister Stark?” Pepper asked, though it was with a healthy dose of snark.

“I’ll let you know when my head’s unscrambled,” Tony laid a hundred out on the table and stood. “We should do this more often, Pep.”

Smiling, Pepper patted his arm and gathered up her bag. She was listening to her phone. “Of course not, Obadiah. The empire’s future is more important.”
“See you, Pep,” Tony whispered and kissed her cheek. She hugged him tight.

Tony slept on the flight, tucked under thick blankets. The bed on his plane was soft and he let himself forget what he was headed towards. If he dwelled on it, it would be worse when he had to grin and bear it.

Kleiser was one enemy amongst many. Zola might be cozy with his experiments and government-approved facilities, but he had never quite forgiven Howard for taking the Tesseract from him. Tony, as it often happened, bore the sins of his father. Zola didn’t agree with Tony’s place in Schmidt empire and tried to undermine him every chance he got. Because Kleiser also saw something in him, Zola’s plans never panned out. Still, it made his life unnecessarily hard.

Maybe Cap would take on his old enemy and rid them both of that madman’s schemes. God, he was playing that game again. Maybe Cap would come charging in with his shield aloft and kick Schmidt’s ass so Tony wouldn’t have to pretend anymore. Maybe Cap was just waiting for his signal. He’d spent so many years of his life waiting for Captain America to come charging in and now that he had, Tony didn’t know how to handle it. The man hadn’t even wanted to stay in his Tower. Rhodey still thought Cap was an asshole.

If Peggy’s theory about Cap held any water, then Tony definitely couldn’t wait for a knight in shining armor. He’d have to be his own.

Why would the Asgardians brainwash the Captain in the first place? According to Cap’s recounting and Tony’s knowledge of the subject in Tromsø, the Asgardians had enough tech to be unmoved by Earth’s spaceward movement. If they wanted an inside man, they could have done that without sending their princes first. Cap’s arrival hadn’t been caught by any of the scanning satellites that orbited the planet after New Mexico and New York, and the diagnostic machine hadn’t caught any otherworldly residue on him either. If Asgard could sneak Captain America back to Earth, then why would they need to brainwash him? They could have just sent one of their own.

Maybe the brainwashed Captain America was a paranoid theory formed in Aunt Peggy’s suspicious mind, or maybe he was too nostalgic for his own good.

In any case, he would find a way to be in the room when Cap came in for further debriefs. He wanted to know more about the Tesseract and what exactly Cap meant about it being a means of transportation. Intergalactic visitors popping up in Malibu in the middle of the night wasn’t exactly his idea of a good time.

The programmed taxi that picked him up had no windows and none of the fun amenities of a normal taxi. Kleiser called most modern things a contrivance, seeing as they served only to distract the user from their true course. Tony had left most of his gadgets with his luggage and carried only his Starkphone.

The lab in Tromsø was a little of a hidden gem, with its unassuming utilitarian exterior and relatively small size. Since the man in the storm had come crashing down in New Mexico, Kleiser had been on high alert. Apparently, sky-borne immigrants were a touchy subject for him. One of
the first things he’d done was give Tony the schematics to a strange new device. Tony had built it, but it hadn’t come with a power source. Kleiser had wrapped it around the subject’s neck and it had glowed gold.

“Tracking choker?” Tony had asked, but Kleiser had shaken his head.

“Where one falls, more shall come. Now they will not know where to follow.”

Tony hadn’t been allowed to ask what more meant. With a wave of his cane, Kleiser had pointed his attention to the hammer. It was immovable and had become a permanent base in Puente Antiguo. He had made a replica out of titanium.

The clear-headed part of him wanted to track down Cap and drag him to Norway. *Here’s one of your princes, Cap. Do you want to stay in my Tower now? I’m good, see? I’m your friend.*

The rest of him wasn’t stupid enough to think he could chance Kleiser’s ire by sabotaging his favorite space man. If the massive blond guy went missing, Tony would probably be the first under suspicion. He knew the system well enough and was capable of both breaking him out and secreting him away with little fuss. But Tony couldn’t risk losing his standing in Kleiser’s eyes in an act of rebellion. Not even for Cap. Besides, so long as the big guy was in one place, Tony could pick the right time to break him out.

It was...delicate, like everything else.


Darcy

The atmosphere of happiness and joy she had seen through the pictures Jane had sent was all but gone. In its place was a sterile, emotionless lab straight out of a horror movie.

Thor was tied up to a medical table with thick bands of metal at his neck, wrists, waist and ankles. The band around his waist was the only thing protecting his modesty. Sprouting out of his body like tentacles were many bundles of wires and tubes. He was unconscious and there was an oxygen mask over his mouth. A golden collar was wrapped around his neck.

Darcy had seen him this way many times since he fell out of the sky in Puente Antiguo.

She had been a fresh graduate from Sarkissian’s Academy and was speed-tracked through SHIELD training, then thrust into her first mission just after he landed. Thankfully, at the outset, it had been simple work. Paperwork, pretending to be a regular college student and not an overly trained teenager with a shit ton of baggage, and the occasional Pop Tart run. Of course, like all good things, it hadn’t lasted.
The Destroyer had come out of the sky with a mission to kill and the residents of Puente Antiguo had been caught in the crosshairs. Reservist Kommandos had come charging in to help and in the aftermath, Zola had attempted to stake his claim to Thor. Agent Coulson had stepped in on behalf of Norway to claim Thor as theirs. Tromsø had a facility waiting and ready. Darcy was pushed out by virtue of her being a college student and not worth the money or time to maintain. However, since they wanted to keep their scientist happy, Darcy could visit whenever she wanted and have access to the facility, but she was bound by an NDA and miles of red tape.

Her visits were also only a week long at max. That just meant she had to do a month’s worth of work in a quarter of the time. No biggie.

She went straight over to Jane.

“What’s the fuss this time?” She asked, pulling Jane into a tight hug. The astrophysicist looked a little worn, her brown hair twisted around itself in a thoughtless bun and her face completely free from makeup.

“Doctor Stark will be here soon,” It came out like a declaration of surrender.

Darcy looked to Thor. “And there’s nothing we can do to stop this?” She’d be damned if she let him fall through the cracks of this flawed system without a fight.

Jane sighed and turned back to her monitor. “Where would we go, Darce? He’s not exactly inconspicuous.”

“We got him away from Zola, we can get him away from Stark.”

“It’s not Stark I’m worried about. Our occasional supervisor is here,” Jane didn’t look to the observatory above the lab and she didn’t stop typing. “He’s brought a replica of Mjölnir and a strange outfit.”

“Why?” Herr Kleiser was a strange and offputting man with a slimy, reptilian quality that made Darcy’s skin crawl.
“I don’t know,” Jane glanced at Thor and then back to her monitor. “My being here isn’t even necessary anymore. They’ve given up trying to get locations out of him. Doctors Banner and Ross have been made resident.”

“I thought they were giving up on the biological side, too?”

Scientists had been salivating over Thor since he landed and moving to Tromsø had only made him more interesting. He was an alien and claimed to be a character from myth. They wanted to know how he worked, how his hammer couldn’t be moved, how he had survived a fall from the atmosphere. They wanted to know the technology behind such transportation and they wanted to know how an alien’s landing could further human gain. Darcy couldn’t say she would be averse to flying chariots and fancy dresses, but she drew the line at medical torture.

“They have. They aren’t here to dissect him.”

Taking in the entire lab, with Doctors Ross, Banner checking the wires and tubes, Darcy noticed there was a large box sitting in an open area. Erik had removed its contents and was setting it up against the wall. The Chair looked ominous, even with all its smooth metal and sleek design. Maybe that was the point.

“Why would Kleiser want...?” Darcy’s question trailed off into silence as the door alert went off. Sighing, Darcy stepped back. “I’ll go get it.”

She stepped out of the lab and headed to the front doors. Only the scientists that had residence here could open the doors from the outside, everyone else had to be let in. Since Darcy was the lowest on the totem pole, she often got saddled with getting the door. Still wasn’t as bad a rush hour at the diner.

From the screen beside the door, Darcy saw who it was. She clenched her fists, but typed in her code and let him in. Dressed in dark colors and with pink-tinted shades shielding his eyes, he seemed as if he’d stumbled in by accident. She shored up her anger and glared at him.

Tony

He was greeted at the door by an assistant who turned her nose up at him.
“Mister Stark, can’t say it’s a pleasure to see you,” The name tag said Lewis, but he knew her by a different name.

“Well, if it isn’t Agent Poptart,” Stepping inside the building, Tony made a beeline for the lab the subject was being held in. “Aren’t you supposed to be stateside?”

“Bureaucratically speaking, sure,” Agent Poptart said, hurrying to catch up to him. “But I’m here visiting and that’s not illegal.”

“Makes two of us,” he replied, looking at her with narrowed eyes. “Doctor Banner in?”

“Banner, Ross, Selvig, Foster. Even your chancellor of creepy Kleiser is here. Your box of evil is also here.”

“It’s not evil. And if your Swede would just tell us what we need to know, I wouldn’t have needed the chair.”

“I’ll remind you of that when Kleiser puts you in it.”

Tony frowned at Agent Poptart but didn’t reply. He couldn’t say it wouldn’t happen. Kleiser would do whatever he wanted to achieve his own ends.

The lab was incredibly active when he walked in. The subject was unconscious, locked down under heavy restraints at the wrists, ankles, waist and neck to a modified surgical table. He was entirely nude and there were both wires and tubes connected to various parts of his body. His hair had been cut short so they could access his neck better. The golden collar that Tony had made was still in place around the subject’s neck. Doctors Ross and Banner were occupied with readouts of the subject’s blood, Selvig was checking over the chair and Foster was hovering over the subject. The latter glanced up quickly when Agent Poptart slammed the door shut behind them.

“You!” Doctor Foster made short work of the space between them and Tony immediately brought his arms up in self defense. She made to slap him but he blocked it and sidestepped her. It was the same reaction every time since he had brought the Chair the first time. He had started to wonder if maybe it was an act.

“Doctor Foster, how nice to see you,” Tony smiled at her with far too many teeth. “How’s Sleeping Beauty?”

“He’d be better if you didn’t torture him,” she stomped back in front of him and glared up with her hands on her hips. “It was bad enough bringing him to Tromsø in the first place, and now he’s nothing more than a lab rat!”

“See, I’d be on your side, if your loverboy here hadn’t tried to level a town. What was the casualty count again? Forty-six or was it sixty-four? Oh, yeah,” he snapped his fingers. “There was no official count because half of them were obliterated without a trace.”

“That wasn’t him,” Foster asserted for what felt like the millionth time and batted his hands away when he reached for the cuffs at the subject’s wrists. “He was being attacked, too. He tried to save us.”

“And let the citizens of Puente Antiguo bear the brunt of his family drama? How rude,” Tony left
the subject alone and turned instead to Doctor Selvig. “How’s my chair? Comfy?”

“For what it’s worth, the craftsmanship is exquisite,” Selvig began to run diagnostics on his tablet. “However, it takes a sadistic, psychotic mind to come up with something like this.”

“Thanks,” Tony grinned sharply and snatched the tablet out of Selvig’s hands. “Would it make me look any better if I said it wasn’t my invention?”

“Improving something horrible into something even worse doesn’t make up for anything,” Selvig was the sort to meet his eyes and not look away. Tony focused on the readouts from the chair. “Adding sins upon sins only creates more sin.”

“It’s either me or someone else, Selvig. You know that.”

“Maybe it should be someone else, Stark,” Selvig sighed. “Your mind is the worse thing to ever happen to good people.”

Swallowing back the pain that comment caused, Tony booted up the chair. “Wouldn’t be the first time I heard that. Wake up the princess, would ya?”

“How do you live with yourself?” Agent Poptart hissed from beside him and he turned to her with a smile.

“Mansion in Malibu, Tower in Manhattan, and a smattering of other houses dotted across the great U. S. of A,” he leaned close to her. “Got a real nice bed in my private jet, too.”

“You’re disgusting,” Agent Poptart made a noise in her throat and stomped away.

Darcy

Doctor Banner turned at the noise and Doctor Ross muttered something to him. Darcy watched Banner shuffle over to Stark, only to stop when Kleiser came down from the observatory. Darcy moved toward Thor.

“We should wake him up,” she told Jane as she passed by, and the scientist finally broke away from her monitor.

Jane followed behind her and she made a soft sound in the back of her throat. “Maybe it’ll be better if he’s unconscious.”

Darcy bit her lip. “He’d want to see what’s coming. He’d want to face it head-on.”
Jane met Darcy’s eyes over the table Thor was laid out on and Darcy saw a familiar fire in Jane’s eyes. It was there when her sensible side had enough. “He doesn’t deserve any of this. He risked his life for us.”

She reached over Thor to take Jane’s hand. “We have to stick it out for him. I hate this as much as you do, but I don’t know what to do right now.”

“There has to be something,” Jane insisted and she glanced up to the observatory above the lab. “He won’t be here forever.”

“I’ve only got a week. If we’re doing something, we’ve got to do it soon.”

“Okay,” Jane released Darcy’s hand and fiddled with the IV machine. “We’ll do it together.”

“Together,” Darcy repeated and held Thor’s forearm as he started to stir.

__________________________________________________________

Jane

Bright blue eyes snapped open and the blond brows above them furrowed. Jane took his hand as he struggled a little against his bonds. Thor was always confused when he woke, and if she or Darcy or Erik weren’t there to greet him, he would often respond with violence. It was one of the reasons she had been kept on after her scientific usefulness had been exhausted.

“Hey, Thor,” she whispered to him and he turned to her. She put on the best smile she could muster. He looked her face over for a moment, then he returned it.

“Jane,” his voice was rough and deep. Darcy snatched a bottled water off the desk where Jane had been working and angled the straw into Thor’s mouth. He drank as if he hadn’t ever had water before. “Thank you, Darcy,” he gasped out.

“Doctor Stark’s here,” Jane told him and he laid his head back against the table.
“And the chair?” Thor asked. Jane squeezed his hand.

“Yes.”

Closing his eyes for a moment, Thor nodded. “It is as it should be.”

“No, it’s not,” Jane hissed at him and his eyes opened again to look at her. “You don’t deserve this, Thor. No one deserves this.”

“My brother will see reason. He will allow me to come home. But I must pay penance first, for the war I brought upon Asgard...for the death of my father.”

Jane looked to Darcy, but the young agent only pressed her lips tight together and shrugged. It was a conversation they had shared with Thor on multiple occasions and it was one thing they could never convince him to disbelieve. Ever since the Destroyer had been held off by the Reservist Kommandos and the town evacuated, Thor had taken the deaths upon himself. Hydra had come along with SHIELD and it had been a mad dash to find the safest place for Thor. The Reservists had set-up camp around Mjölnir and when Thor had come to claim it, they had locked him up. Word of a nonhuman entity in New Mexico had travelled fast and members of Zola’s facilities had come to examine him. If it weren’t for Agent Coulson, who wouldn’t have even come in time if it hadn’t of been for Darcy’s quick-thinking, Thor would be in one of Zola’s playhouses. There’s no telling what would have happened to him, then.

It hurt her deep down inside to think that this fate, even if it was horrid and evil, was better than what had awaited him in Zola’s hands.

“You have done enough,” she whispered to him, and he frowned at the earnestness in her tone. “You have paid enough. But now it’s time to fight.”

“Uh,” Darcy interjected, her face twisting a little at the wording. “What she means, dude, is you gotta stay with us mentally, okay? I’m not sure what they’d do to you if you actually started throwing these hands around.” Jane watched Darcy fist bump Thor’s hand and he smiled.

“It is worth this pain to know you all,” he turned his head a little until he could see Erik. “Without you, I would have no faith in Midgard.”
“It’s not so bad,” Darcy said, though she squinted for a moment as if critiquing herself. “There’s still Pop Tarts and pizza and the joy of showing you movies.”

“And teaching you how to drive a stick,” Jane remembered the short-lived attempts at teaching him so he could drive himself if push came to shove.

“I would rather fly by hammer, but I appreciate the effort,” he joked and Jane’s heart leap in her chest. She would rearrange the stars for this man, she really would.

Darcy sighed. “Hang in there, Thor, alright?”

Staring at the young agent, Thor found a way to grab her hand as well. “I am in no danger.”

Jane and Darcy shared another glance, but they both decided to paste smiles onto their faces. “Of course not,” Jane said and she leaned down to press a kiss to Thor’s lips.

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**Tony**

Tony looked around for Kleiser, wanting to get this over with already. He really wanted to go back to his Tower. As if summoned by his thoughts, Kleiser entered from the observatory right above the lab. Coming down the stairs slowly, carrying his golden cane and pushing his glasses back up his narrow nose, Kleiser’s dark eyes bore into Tony’s as he descended.

“Anthony Stark,” came slithering out of Kleiser’s mouth and Tony’s back straightened automatically. He removed his shades and stuffed them in his pocket, then he slipped into a salute by balling his fist and putting it against his heart.

“Herr Kleiser.”

“It seems you have no friends among your peers, Anthony.”

“I don’t need friends to do what’s best for the Empire.”

“Oh, it is always humorous to see humans behave so mechanically,” Kleiser stopped in front of him and pressed his cane against Tony’s sternum. “Allow me to make it easier.”
From the point of contact between the cane and Tony’s chest, a rush of something warm spread through his body. Between one breath and the next, all his fears vanished. In their place, there was only Kleiser’s will.

“Free will is a myth, Anthony, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Herr Kleiser,” Tony replied, his voice distant and foreign.

“Your Aunt may comfort you, your Emperor may trust you, but your loyalty will always lie with me. What will happen if you fail me?”

“My family will pay the price.”

“Heil Hydra,” Kleiser whispered and Tony heard it echo in his mind.

“Heil Hydra,” he repeated, blinking watery eyes.

Darcy

“If you’re done romancing the subject, Doctor Foster,” Tony Stark came towards them and Darcy looked to him. Jane stayed leaned over Thor for a moment.

“We’ll get you out,” Jane whispered to him.

“You would be killed,” Thor said, relaxing back against the table. “I am not worth your life. This is my punishment, not yours.”

“It’s not punishment,” Stark said, coming closer, his eyes a strange blue. “Pain brings order and order brings obedience.”

“I have agreed to do what you ask, but I cannot tell you what I do not know.”

“The Aether is in Odin’s possession,” Kleiser said, and he raised his cane. “Your mind fights my power. Perhaps it will concede to something less...magical.”

The cuffs that held Thor to the table detached and Darcy helped him up. The ones on his wrists and ankles remained. She was used to his nakedness by now and there was nothing sexy about the way he docilely went to the chair and sat down.

“No invention of Midgard will create a memory I do not have.”

Kleiser never smiled, but the way his eyes sparkled was close enough. “If you will not give me the Aether, then I will put you to better use. Anthony, begin.”
Stark’s eyes glowed and his fingers flew across the screen of his tablet almost inhumanly fast. The chair’s magnetic body clung to Thor’s restraints and he was forced against the surface of the chair. A strange halo extended from the top and curved around Thor’s head, encapsulating it entirely.

“Last chance. Where is the Aether?” Stark asked and Darcy chewed on her lip. Until Kleiser left, she couldn’t do anything rash.

Thor breathed out slowly. “I do not know.”

The halo pressed tight to Thor’s head and he began to scream. Jane covered her mouth and turned away. Doctor Banner had already left because he couldn't be overly stressed. Doctor Ross hurried over to Jane and embraced her. Darcy forced herself to stay where she was.

With a gasp, Thor seemed to be freed from the pain.

Kleiser gripped the back of Stark’s neck. “If you cannot break them...”

“Remake them,” Stark finished robotically and tapped something on his screen.

Thor began to scream again, but it was sharper and more desperate. This time, it did not let up. Convulsing, Thor’s eyes rolled in his head and his muscles bulged against his bonds. The machine continued, even through his seizing and Darcy swallowed back the bile in her throat. Her hands shook and she watched Kleiser closely.

At some point, the tall, thin man would leave, his will imposed on them and then Darcy could end this torture. She could recalibrate Doctor Stark to an annoying and culpable member of the mostly sane society. She waited for the moment to strike like a snake in the grass.

It seemed to last forever and Doctor Ross led Jane out before she could break down in sobs, leaving only Darcy, Doctor Stark, Kleiser, and Erik with Thor. Erik decided to leave as well, but he paused at the door to wave Darcy with him. She shook her head and he reluctantly left. As the torture continued, Kleiser stepped away from Stark and turned to the room. His eyes looked over everything until they landed on Darcy. She didn’t look directly at him, but he came towards her anyway.

“By the time you act upon your impulses...Lewis,” he tapped her name plate. “This prince of Asgard will no longer be his own. You abhor order and desire chaos. You shall receive more of it than you ever imagined.”

Kleiser leaned closer to her and Darcy let her very real fear and disgust come through. She bowed her head to him.

“Look at me, Lewis.” She gulped and did as she was told. His eyes were black holes that sucked up all light. “I see into you. Do you think your SHIELD can protect the world?”

“I don’t...I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Humming quietly, Kleiser tapped her with his cane. She braced for something to happen, but it only left her feeling queasy. “I am the only reason SHIELD still exists. That you and those like you exist.”
“We’ll stop you, too,” she snapped, glaring at him. His lips pulled back until she could see his teeth. She realized it was almost a smile.

“You won’t. You can’t. You don’t want to,” he pressed the cane into her chest and she felt a wave of something warm wash over her. “You want to free the prince.”

Blinking, Darcy frowned at Kleiser, her mind blank. “Sir? What were you saying?”

Kleiser stepped back from her and Darcy was confused. When had he come so close? He lowered his cane and she remembered Doctor Stark. Refocusing on Thor in the chair, Darcy apologized to Kleiser.

“Excuse me, Herr Kleiser,” she said and moved past him.

“You are excused, Agent Lewis.”

Darcy’s mind stirred from beneath some fog but she shook her head and it was gone. When she turned to look back at Kleiser, he was gone as well.

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Tony

The screaming man in the chair he’d built should have made him balk, but as the fog that wrapped around his brain grew denser, he found he didn’t care. This man meant nothing to him and he had orders. He changed the intensity of the electrical pulse and typed in a new command.

In between bursts of pain, Tony spoke. Tony had followed an old pattern, something he had undone in another man. Over the three years since Tony had first become part of this subject’s life, he had worked these words into his framework. The chair had been used before, but he had never fully instated the words. Kleiser’s hand left his neck and Tony began.

“Uverdig,” the word seemed to hurt the man in his chair and Tony clenched his fist. “Forvist.”

“Please,” The man gasped and his eyes met Tony’s. “You do not have to do this.”


“Stark...” The man grit his teeth against the pain. “It is not your fault. You want this no more than I.”


“Berserker,” Tony said and the man nodded before speaking.

“Jeg overholder.”

Something heavy hit the back of Tony’s head and he fell to the floor.
Darcy

As soon as Stark hit the ground, she rushed over to him and snatched the tablet out of his hands. She quickly released Thor from the chair and reached for his hand. He stood up without letting her take it and shoved her backward. Darcy landed on her back hard and the tablet clattered to the floor.

“Ikke rør ham,” Thor said lowly and he turned to where Stark was unconscious on the ground. He lifted him up and started to walk towards the exit.

“Thor!” Darcy called, but he didn’t respond. Thinking quickly, she shouted, “Berserker!”

He paused and turned slightly. Darcy’s Norwegian wasn’t fluent, but she knew enough. “Stå ned.” Thor’s shoulders relaxed and he turned back to her. “Hva er mine bestillinger?”

“Du må komme med meg,” she stepped forward and placed a hand on the unconscious Stark. “Han er ikke din håndterer. Jeg er.”

“Darcy?” Jane’s voice came from behind her but she didn’t turn. There was no telling what Thor would do. “Thor? What’s going on?”

Darcy waved her hand behind her. “Jane, I’ve got this.”

“Did you knock out Doctor Stark?”

“He was brainwashing Thor and I didn’t have my taser!” Darcy chanced a glance back to Jane and tried to express how stressful this was. “He’s all...Terminator’d. We’ve got to do something.”

“Where’s Kleiser?”

“He left.”

“This is a trap.”

“Trap or no trap, we’ve got to do something.”

“Like what?”

“Let’s put him in the box the chair came in and cart him out of here.”

“Are you kidding me? That’ll never work,” Jane came closer and Darcy turned back to where Thor was waiting. If Stark’s weight was bothering him, he didn’t show it.

“Well, you’re the genius, you come up with something,” Darcy looked around. “Where’s Erik?”

“I don’t know. Thor stopped screaming so I thought maybe it was over...” Jane looked at Thor, then walked over to the cabinet in the corner and removed a set of scrubs big enough for him. “How...How did you get him to listen earlier?”
“I spoke Norwegian. Uh...” Darcy turned back to Thor. “Berserker, kle på deg.”

Thor nodded and walked to the metal table where he was laying a little ago. He laid Stark down gently and took the scrubs from Jane. As he dressed, Darcy turned back to Jane.

“What about the brainwashing? What if he has...trigger words or something?”

“We’ll figure it out, but we need to act now or Kleiser might come back.”

“This is crazy,” Jane hurried over to the box where it was still on a wheeled flatbed. “This isn’t going to work.”

“Not with that attitude,” Stark mumbled and groaned as he sat up. He gingerly touched the back of his head. “Who hit me?”

“Guilty,” Darcy raised her hand and Thor looked at her curiously. She smiled at him, then turned back to Stark. “It was totally worth it.”

“Where’s Kleiser?” he asked, looking around. He spotted Thor and frowned. “What did I do?”

“You brainwashed him, asshat,” Darcy crossed her arms. “How do we undo it?”

“Like hell I’m digging a deeper hole for myself,” Stark threw his legs over the side of the table and stood. “I was knocked out the whole time and never saw a thing. There are no cameras in here to prove otherwise.”

“We need to get him out and if Thor was right that you didn’t want this, then you need to help us.”

“I don’t need to do anything,” Stark stumbled past Thor and collapsed into the nearest chair. It rolled back into a desk. “But you’ve got about five minutes before a guard comes to escort Sleeping Beauty back to his cell.”

“You’re not going to stop us?” Jane asked and Stark looked up at her.

“I tore that chair to pieces years ago because of what it did to someone else. Kleiser forced me to build it again. The words will wear off in an hour or so and unless they’re said in exactly the right order, he won’t be triggered again.”

“But Kleiser will punish you when he finds out the truth,” Jane pointed out and Darcy looked at her with wide eyes.

“Are you trying to convince him to stop us?”

“He’ll punish me anyway when he realizes the triggers aren’t permanent. If I fail again, he’ll just take your buddy to Zola’s labs. You’ll never see him again and you know it, Foster.”

Jane saw something in Stark’s gaze because she stood up straighter and started unlocking the box. “Berserker, kom inn og vær stille.”

Thor moved without hesitation and climbed into the box. Jane sealed it and turned to Darcy.
“Let’s go, Darce.”

Pausing, Darcy looked to Stark. “You’re still an asshole, but thank you.”

“Go fuck yourself, Agent Poptart,” Stark sighed and stood once more, walking to the chair. He lowered himself to the ground and pretended to be knocked out. “You’ve got less than a minute.”

Darcy turned to the box and helped Jane roll it out of the room.

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**Tony**

He watched them go with the echo of Kleiser's voice in his head. *Unleash Asgard's son onto your precious Earth, Anthony. Unleash Thor's fury.*

Even if they got Thor out of the facility and out of Norway, even if the words faded out of his mind...he had one mission above them all. Find the hammer and defend Kleiser.

It was something he hadn't been able to undo because it wasn't his order. Kleiser had implemented that command before Tony had even rebuilt the chair the first time. The core mission of the Berserker was to defend, and free of this facility...he might do just that. No matter who got in the way.

Tony laid on the cold floor and closed his eyes. He could hear the guards coming and felt the blood on the back of his head cooling in the air. He might be punished for this, but in the end, Kleiser's plan would proceed undeterred.

And it was all his fault.

He thought of Peggy and Angie, of Sharon and Rhodey, of Pepper and Happy, of JARVIS and Dum-E and U. He thought of everyone he considered family and he tried to convince himself he had made the right choice under duress. His head was pounding, both from Kleiser's influence and from Agent Poptart's blow. His first stop, once he'd set the guards on Foster and her wayward crew and handled the administration part of losing a valuable asset, would be to his jet. The sooner he was home, the sooner he could start preparing counter measures for whatever Schmidt and Kleiser had planned. Then he could start tracking Thor through the choker he wore so he could make sure the damage was minimal if anything went wrong.

As always, Tony would have to be damage control. This wasn't the first time Kleiser had used his power on Tony, but Kleiser never allowed it to stay for long. *If I wished to erase you, Anthony, I would.* A small comfort and it always ensured he bore the brunt of his actions under Kleiser's influence. His crimes were his own, even when they were without his consent. He turned his mind to something else.

*Space is new focus*, Rhodey had said. The scanning satellites hadn't picked up anything recently, but maybe he needed to recalibrate them. *Where one falls, more shall come.* Tony had to be ready for what was coming.
Your mind is the worse thing to ever happen to good people. Tony let that burn him as deep as it would go and tucked it away as a reminder.

I'll prove you wrong, he thought and the guards burst into the room.
Aces High

Chapter Notes

I just realized I never made Skye's age clear. She's a little older in this fic than she would have been in 2004 (like a lot of characters have to be since I based it before the MCU technically started - movie release dates not in-verse chronological order - to change the dynamics. I'm saying she's...late teens here? Like eighteen/nineteen. Might change once I've completed the story, but for now, that's what I'm running off of.

Also, I haven't learned to code or anything yet, so this is all hand-wavy.

Also, also, I don't own any comics, so references are from panels I find on the web and some...sometimes intense research. If the details aren't exactly right, that's why.

Please enjoy and if you do, consider buying me a coffee!

Chapter Title.

Loki

Coding was an interesting language that Loki took to with aplomb. Skye had given him an old laptop that she didn't mind him destroying and began teaching him. He approached it like any other magic. There was a system and a method to everything and the art of computing was no different. The magic at his fingertips didn't have the same power as his own, but it was still fulfilling to know he could affect the world with his hands and mind alone. He did not sleep as much as Skye and Mike, so he learned in days what took mortals weeks. Skye seemed impressed with him and he actively refrained from showing her his own pride at reclaiming a bit of himself.

“It is not the same,” he told her, typing away. “But there is power in this.”

“Of course there is, Loki,” Skye said, ruffling his hair as she passed by. He paused to press it back down. “Now, are you going to be okay in the bus by yourself?”

“I am not a child,” Loki huffed in his usual way, dismissing a warning message and trying again. “I will survive your trip to the market.”

“Alright,” Skye pulled her knit hat down around her ears and pushed her dark lensed spectacles closer to her face. “Did you want anything?”
“I...” he paused, thinking. “I do not know what they offer.”

Sighing with a smile, Skye held out her hand. “Come with us, then.”

He stared at the wall of text in front of him and shook his head. “Perhaps next time. I am very busy.”

“Suit yourself.” Skye descended the steps out of the bus and the doors closed behind her.

In the quiet, Loki focused his mind back on task.

The news on the computer had been chirping about a gala held by one Tony Stark and Loki saw in the glittering photos of previous galas an opportunity. He needed the Tesseract to go home and Stark had it in his possession. If he got to Stark, he could get to the Tesseract and then he could find his way back home. It was all in front of him now in a way it hadn’t been for the few years he’d spent roaming the Midgardian streets. This Earth magic would prove useful indeed.

The invites were digital and physical, which suited Loki just fine. He could pretend to have lost his physical copy and rest on the knowledge that he would be on the guest list anyway. A few keystrokes and some falsified information later, his alias of Loren Olsen was a few spaces below a woman named after a Midgardian state and a kitchen instrument. Midgardians were so strange.

Skye would probably not be happy that he was using her shared knowledge to free himself from this wretched world, but he didn’t care for her feelings. She was a means to an end, just like Mike and everyone else. If Odin had sent the mortal Captain down to Midgard, then perhaps his banishment was not enough of a punishment to him. There must be a reason that the Allfather would sic a barbaric human on him, but for the life of him he couldn’t decide why. The fact that he had been banished after dealing with Thor and killing Laufey made it quite clear that he was not, nor ever had been, welcome in Asgard. The lies that the Asgardians had told themselves when they showed him loyalty and affection were just that: lies.

Still, his power lied in the hands of the Allfather and he would have it back. By any means necessary. He would weigh this entire world against whatever price the Allfather would put on his powers. Nothing mattered more to him than getting his magic back.

Skye’s station beeped and Loki frowned up at it. He closed the window that held the list of the
gala’s guests and rose to his feet. She had locked it like always, but he was curious. Stepping up to the array of screens and Post-It notes littered all over, Loki set his fingers upon her keyboard. It was the same as the one on the laptop he had been using, but the keys were worn down a bit from use. Tentatively, Loki booted it up. The screen went from black to blue in an instant, then flashed a strange symbol at him before prompting him for a password. He stared at it, then at the keys and wondered what kind of password Skye would use for her most precious machine.

It could be something to do with Ace, who mattered enough to her to ink onto her skin, or it could be Mike, who seemed to be her closest friend. It could be something completely unrelated to anything, like the random words she sometimes spouted at him. He still did not understand why milkshakes could bring all the boys to the yard. What yard? Why only boys? Why milkshakes? It was another of Earth’s baffling idiosyncrasies.

He curled his fingers back and forth over the keyboard, but he did not know enough about Skye to make an attempt. It wasn’t like Ellis’ phone. He did not know how many tries he could have before the computer either alerted Skye or shut him out completely. Gritting his teeth, Loki powered it back down and backed away from the computer. He would have to watch her closely and memorize her movements.

Mike and Skye returned to the bus and the doors opened for them. Loki hurried back to his seat and pulled the laptop back onto his thighs. He looked up at them curiously when they climbed up the stairs. Mike was in the lead and he jerked his head at Loki.

“Here, beanpole, we’ve got more out there,” Loki narrowed his eyes but stood once more. Mike shifted a handful of bags into Loki’s arms and he quickly got a hold of them before they fell to the floor. “Stick the bags in the back, there’s a pantry and a fridge.”

“I’m not your servant, mortal,” Loki sneered, but Mike only scoffed and rolled his eyes.

“Complain about menial labor in the back of the bus, your prince-ness,” Mike waved him on, “You know, where the pantry and the fridge are?”

Mike had already gone back out of the bus before Loki could form a response. Stomping to the back, Loki dropped the bags onto the small table and started to petulantly go back to his laptop. Skye stood between him and the rest of the bus. She carried a heavy box labelled ‘Pingo Doce’. It rattled a little like glass against glass. He reached out to take it from her and she smiled at him gratefully.

“Mike said if I insist on drinking this poison, then I should carry it myself.Something about not
enabling me, but...” she pulled open the fridge and started loading it up with the bottles of yellow-green liquid. “He didn’t stop me from buying it.”

“You’re a grown woman, Skye,” Mike brought in two armfuls of plastic bags and set them beside the ones he had given to Loki. “It’s up to you at what age you keel over from heart failure.”

“Dramatic dad syndrome,” Skye whispered to Loki, their face inches apart and she rolled her eyes.

“I have experienced the affects of that I believe,” he told her, lowering his voice as she had. “It led to my banishment.”

Snorting, Skye glanced at Mike. There was very little room in the back of the bus and the back of Loki’s knees bumped against the bed. It made it hard to stand up completely straight, but he had dealt with worse. Mike must have finished collecting their haul from outside the bus because he crossed his arms and leaned back against the wall.

“Hear that, Mike? You’re as bad as Odin.”

“Let me just sacrifice my eye and we’d be twins,” Mike shook his head. “What do you want for dinner?”

“Anything with chicken,” Skye replied and looked at Loki. “What about you, Lokes? They’ve got turkey legs in there. I can go back and get some.”

“You offer him turkey legs but not me?” Mike sounded affronted, but Loki saw the grin on his face.

“I’ll get you turkey legs, you get fried rice, and we’ll throw some pheasant in for the prince here. It’ll be a stereotypical holiday dinner.”

“I’ll bring the yams if you bring the wontons,” Mike was chuckling and Skye burst out laughing.

Loki stood between them confused for a moment, then a thought came to him. “Would I be amiss if I brought roast boar?” Mike snorted and started to cough, Skye just laughed louder. Loki’s lips
pulled up a little and he turned back to the bags. “Shall we put these away now?”

“Did they really eat roast boar where you come from?” Skye asked, getting back to putting the drinks away.

“Roast boar, a variety of fruits and vegetables. We did have pheasant,” Loki thought about the spreads laid out across golden tables and cups overflowing with mead and wine. “There were banquet tables as long as this bus and attendants would refill your drink before you could empty it. Festivals would last for weeks and we were never short of food.”

Both Skye and Mike had gone quiet. Loki realized it was the most he had told them about Asgard since he had been found by them. He almost turned from their attention, but now that he had their ear, he wanted to keep it.

“Occasionally we would dine with the warriors in Valhalla. Or we would receive the kings and queens of other realms,” he could feel their curiosity like a cool breeze against his skin. Not laughter, not humor, only curiosity. “King Eitri of Nidavellir hated me with a vengeance.”

“I wonder why,” Mike said dryly, but there was no heat behind his words.

“Liesmith,” Skye said, taking a box of dried noodles from one of the bags and sticking it in the pantry. “I bet you conned him, didn’t you?”

“The dwarves have more than their fair share,” he began, but Mike shook his head and came closer, collecting the empty bags altogether.

“Let me guess, you were Robin Hood.”

“I...I do not know who that is.”

Skye waved her hand in the air. “What did you do to King...Eitri?”

“I did nothing to him,” Loki told her and smiled. “His senators, however...”
He recounted the event to them and they listened to him. He branched into stories of his magical exploits and they laughed in all the right places. A part of him did not believe their willingness to hear him without scorn, but if they wanted to pretend openness, he would pretend as well. He told tales both of his successes and his failures, gauging their gullibility. When he mentioned his magic or his princely duties, they would exchange glances they thought he couldn’t see. He tried to avoid bringing up Thor, but when one tale would not work without him, he was forced to mention him. Skye’s raised eyebrows told him that he had made a mistake.

“He was always eager for battle,” Loki shook his head as he remembered the bullheadedness that had nearly led to war with Jötunheim. “He even took a Bilgesnipe as a pet. Can you imagine? Named the beast Bilgy, of all things.”

“Is Thor still in Asgard?” she asked and he paused.

“What?”

“Well, it’s just that you use past tense a lot when you talk about him. You didn’t do that before.”

Loki’s jaw worked. He should never have mentioned his name at all. “No, he isn’t in Asgard.”

“What happened to him?”

“He was banished before me,” Loki had not thought about Thor down here with him on Midgard. It had been easier to forget his former family, to attempt to forge ahead on his own. Still, like ghosts clinging to the air around him, they remained. “I have not seen him since.”

“How long ago?” Mike asked and their curiosity felt uncomfortable now.

“A little more than four of your Midgardian years.”

“Have you tried to find him?”
Loki’s hands curled into fists and he glared at Skye. “Why does it concern you so?”

“He’s your brother, Loki. What if he was taken by the Rounders, too?”

“Ah, I see,” Loki’s glare became a grin, then a mocking laugh. “You seek to motivate me to your cause with a common tie. Unfortunately for you, I do not care what happens to him.”

“Because Odin chose him over you?”

Anger filled him and Loki shot to his feet. “Odin was a fool and a thief!” Again, he had their full attention. His seething hatred for the old king boiled over and he had no more control over his words than he had over himself when he first landed on Midgard. “He stole me from Jötunheim, from death, only to hold a crown where I could not reach. I showed him how flawed his favorite son was and he should have chosen me, but he didn’t! He kept my own heritage from me. He told us the horrors of the Jötunn, hovered over my bed and wished me good night, knowing what I was. What I am.”

The steam of his anger fizzled as the pain of it struck his heart. Even Frigga had known, even his beloved mother had kept the secret from him. She had cradled him to her breast, knowing what was beneath his false pink skin. To protect him, they said, but now he wondered. Had it really been to protect them? Was he no better than the creatures in the dungeons or the relics in the vault? Was he only a weapon to be stored away so it wouldn’t harm them? Had they ever really loved him at all?

There were arms around him and he shook in them, his well-constructed façade crumbling. Without his magic, without his family, without Asgard, he had nothing. He had destroyed Jötunheim. He had nothing left.

“I have nothing,” he whispered to himself, breathing the truth to the air. The arms around him tightened and he could smell water lilies.

“You’ve got us, Loki,” Skye reassured him and she pulled back so he could see her face. “I bounced from foster family to foster family my whole life. I thought I’d be alone forever. But I found Mike, and I found you. Sometimes, family is what you make of it, not what you’re born into.”

“We are not family,” he said and she smiled.
“Just say the word, Loki, and we are.”

He looked to Mike, but the man only nodded. “It’s that easy.”

Skye’s station began beeping urgently and she pulled away. “Think about it, okay?”

Loki nodded once and she took off for her station.

He heard her gasp and Mike took off. Loki followed behind slower. Skye was typing furiously and there was code scrolling across the screen faster than Loki could read it. Mike came up beside her, but Loki hung back.

“It’s Koenig,” Skye seemed breathless and Loki came a little closer. “He says he’s got a lead on Ace.”

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**Clint**

Grills was waiting with Lucky in Clint’s living room when he and Steve finally got back. His neighbor was an older man, but trustworthy. Lucky trotted over to him before he’d stepped past the threshold. It was odd to see his apartment wide open from the hall. Grills blew out a breath as he stood and followed Lucky.

“So, this is the vet you said ripped off your door,” Grills looked Steve up and down, which Steve endured with a mildly annoyed look on his face. “I can see it.”

“Yeah, me too,” Clint patted Lucky’s side just to hear the hollowed out sound. “I owe you one.”

“Nah, Hawkguy, we’re good.” Grills held out his hand and Clint shook it. Then Grills turned to Steve. “Nice to meet you - what’s your name again, son?”

“Stígandr Birgirsson,” Steve replied, the name sounding almost truthful.
“Nice to meet you, Stig,” Grills shook Steve’s hand with a little too much force. It barely seemed to faze the super soldier. “How ‘bout you lay off the deconstruction, huh? This building’s already falling apart without your help.”

“Yeah, I’ll work on that.”

“You better. Hawkguy here is a real stand-up guy and I’d hate to see him being taken advantage of.”

“Grills,” Clint interjected, exasperated. “He’s dealing with some heavy stuff.”

“Heavy stuff or not, it doesn’t excuse destruction of property. Man’s gotta take some responsibility for himself.”

“You’re right,” Steve said softly and Grills backed down a bit. “I’ll try harder.”

“Yeah, you do that,” Grills passed between them. “See you around, Hawkguy.”

“Hawkeye, Grills,” Clint called out to him. “It’s Hawkeye!”

“Yeah, Hawkguy!” And Grills was gone.

Sighing, Clint looked to Steve. A curious frown stared back at him. “What?”

“What’s Hawkguy?”

“It’s Hawkeye and it’s an alias. Special Agents go by code names, you know. I mean, you were Captain America, not Steve.”

“Why are you called Hawkeye?”
Steve lifted the door off the wall where Clint had maneuvered it and set it back against the open hole. Aside from the splintered wood, it was almost good as new. Clint went to fetch his toolbox.

“I’ve got good eyes,” Clint said distractedly, moving a couple empty boxes. “Like a hawk.”

“Is that your superpower?” Steve set his pack and shield down on the couch just as Clint dug out the toolbox.

Letting it clatter onto the kitchen counter, Clint crossed his arms. “I don’t have powers, Steve. I’m one hundred percent normal.”

“And you’re enough,” Steve’s voice was nearly monotone, but willfully so. Clint narrowed his eyes, taking in the tightness in Steve’s shoulders and the rigidity in his movements. Picking up the toolbox, he came closer to the super soldier and crouched at the bottom of the door.

“We’re what we need to be, Steve,” he dug out a screwdriver and began loosening the screws on the door.

Steve did the heavy lifting while Clint did the up-close work. It took a bit, but they had the door in working order within the hour.

“Teamwork!” Clint declared, smacking Steve’s hand. “I’m gonna go take a quick shower. The remote is somewhere on the table if you want to watch the news or something. I’ve only got basic cable, so...” he realized who he was talking to and shook his head. “Let me show you.”

Turning on his TV and giving Captain America himself a quick run through on how to operate it, Clint patted him on the arm and headed to a much needed shower.

Steve

WHiH World News was already in full swing by the time Clint had finished showing him the
mechanics of it all. At the press of a button, he could watch all sorts of things. It wasn’t as freeing as the tablet SHIELD had given him, but he appreciated another connection to modern society.

The woman on the screen was called Christine Everhart and she was running through what he realized was a rapid fire recap of the week.

“On Monday, President Stern addressed the nation ahead of the Easter holiday to reassure us that the situation in Afghanistan is not escalating. These comments were in direct conflict with the reports flooding in from Afghan forces of increased military presence in the region. It would not be the first time the President has misled the public with erroneous statements,” Miss Everhart turned to face another camera. “Lieutenant General Ross had this to say on Tuesday.”

The picture changed to that of an older man with a thick mustache and a severe countenance. Steve recognized the Army in him immediately. He listened closely.

A reporter stood amongst a congregation of them who were seated in front of a podium. Behind the podium was a blue backdrop with a seal of the United States. Lt. General Ross squinted at the reporter and listened to her speak.

“How is the Administration planning to deal with the resurgence of the Ten Rings?”

“Do you want me to lay out our entire campaign in this press conference, Miss Harris?”

“The President said Monday that the situation in Afghanistan was stable, yet Ten Rings released a propaganda video hours later showing an attack on a civilian encampment near Gulmira and swearing further action. We would like to know what the President’s response is to this blatant show of force by Ten Rings.”

Ross settled both his hands on the podium and leaned against it. “If the President spent all his time answering terrorist’s hate mail, he wouldn’t be able to perform his duties.”

“And his recent trip to Tahiti was for foreign relations?”

“Look, Harris, I’m not going to waste my time answering puff piece questions. The situation is under control and the President’s statements yesterday were the truth. Next question!”
The picture changed once more to Everhart. She gave an unamused smile to the camera for all of a heartbeat, then blinked and spoke. “As always, the Stern Administration is keeping quiet on their plans to handle this threat. In my recent interview with World Security Council member Gideon Malick, he gave the same kinds of responses. It is at least clear that the Administration is putting up a united front. As the Kommandos are still inactive, it is possible the President’s bluster is supported by fact. In the past, the Administration has measured its engagement with other nations by the number of Kommandos on active duty.”

Steve frowned at the screen, trying to understand what a group of mercenaries had to do with America’s safety. Surely one group of individuals couldn’t protect the whole country? Rising, Steve went to where he’d left the box from SHIELD and dug the tablet out. He typed Ten Rings into the browser and hit search. As Everhart turned to other news, something about the Red Captain’s upcoming appearance at the Maria Stark Foundation gala, Steve read up on all the public information about Ten Rings.

It was an international terrorist organization that had been on the map since the mid-eighties, led by the mysterious Mandarin, a title given to him by the UN. The real identity of the man remained unknown. One of Howard’s last acts before his death was to arm the Kommandos in the campaign that finally ran the Mandarin off the world stage in the nineties. Howard never got to see the outcome his weapons brought to fruition. He died a year after filming a propaganda film that showcased the Kommandos’ strength. At the head of the pack, decked out in a suit that was clearly based off Steve’s old uniform, was the Red Captain.

The cowl was red as were the shoulders and the upper chest of the uniform with black sleeves and black trousers. Where Steve had red-and-white stripes down his stomach, the Red Captain had blue-and-white. The star in the center of his chest was blue, as was the star on his shield. There was a star on his left arm, right on the shoulder, but it was gold.

Steve stared down at his replacement with a twinge of jealousy. That was supposed to be him, not some random guy with military training. The fact that the man was most likely Hydra only made it worse. His former title was a farce, twisted and mangled into something Schmidt could use.

*Join me, Captain,* Schmidt had said to him on the Valkyrie all those years ago, *Our work has only just begun.*

The Kommandos were celebrities, soldiers and political figures all wrapped into one. They visited hospitals, aided citizens during natural disasters, fought villains both big and small, and were the heavy hitters in overseas engagements. Their names alone got them in the door and there were pictures of them... *getting groceries, walking a dog, taking out the trash.* Steve couldn’t fathom anyone being *that* interested in some famous person’s life, but the internet was full of blogs.
dedicated to their favorite Kommando and everything they did. The Red Captain was at the top of the list, though the top topic on the message boards was about that fact that no one could seem to get a clear look at his face.

Steve memorized the others, who had no compunction about being photographed. Brock Rumlow, Jack Rollins, Emil Blonsky who was known on most pages as the Abomination, Grant Ward, Yelena Belova, Cain Marko. They had posed for a team photo and Steve stared at it. This was the current roster of the Kommandos, and if they were Hydra, they would have to be taken down. Even with the good deeds they had done, they served a vicious ideal that would undo every life saved in the end. Just like his doppelgangers, Steve pinned the Kommandos down on his list of potential enemies.

Everhart’s voice broke through his scheming and he looked back up at the screen.

“Stark Industries are reinventing their historic AES70 batteries next summer. The latest reports are that the new batteries will be sleeker, more affordable and more powerful. The original models cost a whopping two hundred dollars when it debuted in 1970; that’s nearly a thousand dollars today. Howard Stark named the first battery after his son, Tony, and the proficient magnate celebrated his son’s birth for many years by releasing new technology to be powered by the batteries. Tony Stark has done the same since inheriting the company from his late father and experts say the thirty-fifth anniversary will be big.”

Steve stared at the picture of Tony’s face until it was taken off the screen.

Schmidt’s poster boy, Clint had said, but Peggy had stood beside him, had embraced him, and there was no way she would have held a Hydra operative to her like that. To the media he was a revolutionary inventor and charitable member of society. The Maria Stark Foundation was a strong humanitarian organization that had been up and running for years. Steve pulled up Tony Stark on his tablet.

There were so many pictures of him, doing literally anything, though the blogs about his daily life weren’t as prevalent as the ones about the Kommandos. This man had the Tesseract in his possession. Loki had already targeted him and tried to infiltrate his Tower in Manhattan. Where was he keeping the Tesseract? Was SHIELD monitoring his use of it? Zola had made vaporizing weapons with it and he had been limited by the resources of his time. Tony Stark seemed to have the world at his feet, and if Loki got a hold of him, the entire world would be at Loki’s feet.

Steve wouldn’t kneel. Hela is the only one, aside from Fury, that he had knelt in front of and he had no plans to do it again. If Hela called him back to her realm, he would not beg to leave again. If Fury decided he couldn’t serve Earth, if Peggy never learned to trust him again, he would not wait around for their approval. Loki would not rule over Earth and he wouldn’t destroy it like he had
destroyed Jötunheim. Steve would kill him before he got the chance, agreement with Asgard be damned.

He still had six months to plan and Steve would put it to good use.

Clint

The shower helped to reset his mind and he shook loose the stress of realizing there wasn’t going to be a cool early retirement for him in this building with Lucky. After he’d reached his tolerance level when it came to dealing with how deep the Hydra well went, Clint had settled in this apartment to figure out what he wanted to do with himself now. There was always Rising Tide, but Clint wasn’t a tech guy on the whole and had no desire to masquerade around with a bunch of kids with attitudes. He had spent nearly all of his life being older than his years and he didn’t want to have to restart his career as the babysitter to the rebel youth.

Now, honestly, he might take the kids instead.

Clint’s phone beeped at him as soon as he washed the shampoo out of his hair and he turned the water off. Climbing out into the slightly chilly air and wrapping a towel around his waist, he picked up his phone and checked it for messages. There was only one.

Expect a package with your asset’s new cards. Yes, YOUR asset. Welcome back to the fold.

He shut off the screen and rolled his eyes to the heavens. He needed divine help on this one. He wasn’t cut out to be a handler, not anymore. He had given up that kind of life when he retired. Clint wasn’t ready to launch full tilt back into it for Captain America.

Then again, just like with the falsity of his retirement, this was out of his hands. He had already been put through all the paperwork on SHIELD’s end and if they were calling Steve his asset...god, he really didn’t want to do this.

Ducking into his room, Clint got dressed and rubbed his towel over his hair one last time. The news was still playing on the TV and he slowly entered the living room, keeping quiet as his instincts rushed to the surface.
His...asset was hunched on the couch, glancing between the tablet SHIELD had given him and the news. A well-aimed glance of his own told him that Steve was reading up on Tony Stark. There was a picture of the billionaire from a previous gala and a lengthy article about his tech. Of course, considering what Steve said the Tesseract could do, it made sense that he would be researching about the man who had control of it. It also didn’t sit well with him that Loki had targeted the genius. Where the princes went, Steve would follow and Clint wasn’t okay with the potential bleeding effect being around a personality like Stark would have. Hydra was an insidious thing and though Steve seemed to be the last man on Earth to give into Hydra, Clint had seen good men and women fall.

Turning back to his room, Clint went back to his phone and ordered some food. Part of handler duties was keeping your asset in good health. He might as well keep the super soldier on his couch well-fed, even if he couldn’t keep him off his self-imposed mission.

Besides, if Steve’s little space mission came to fruition, Clint would rather be on the alien gods’ good side instead of lumped with the rest of the mortal populace. His luck had never been the best.

Steve

“So, star-spangled man with the plan,” Clint was dressed in loose grey trousers and a worn t-shirt. He had coffee in one hand and a burger in the other. “I get the feeling you’re one of those guys that needs something to fixate on. Do you have anything in particular you want to do? I mean, a hobby or something?”

Steve swallowed the burger in his mouth and took a sip of Coke. Steve was surprised it had survived the War. “If I’m staying in your building for a few months, then I suppose we should deal with Banionis.”

Clint sat up a little straighter and raised an eyebrow. “I was going to buy the building with my severance pay, but that’s not happening. Thanks for that,” he pointed a finger at him, but then shook his head. “I won’t have the money on my SHIELD income alone to do it.”

“Fury said he would open an account for me. I don’t need the money.”
“Of course you do. There’s a free apartment in the building and you’ll need new clothes. You’re not turning my apartment into your prince hunt headquarters.”

“Banionis still owns the building. Why waste my money being jipped when I could save up and help you buy the building?”

“First of all, remove jipped from your vocabulary. Second of all...” Clint inhaled deeply, then let it out in a burst. “You just got back and I don’t feel comfortable taking your money like that.”

“I’m giving it to you.”

“You’re putting everybody else first, Steve - which is not a problem,” he hurried to say, setting his food down. “But right now isn’t about everybody, remember? Right now is about you.”

It sat like a stone in his chest to think about putting himself ahead of everyone. He put himself ahead of the Jötunn and look where that had left him. It didn’t matter what happened to him if he didn’t do his best to serve the world he sacrificed so much to get back to. There was a pain in his palm, and he looked down at it, but it was only his own blunt fingernails digging into his skin. He consciously unclenched his fist.

“Then I’ll buy the building.”

Clint scoffed. “Oh, hell, no. I’ve been waiting for the chance to boot Banionis for months. You don’t get to waltz in here and take the glory.”

“So, I’ll give you the money and you can buy the building,” Steve felt a smile tugging on his lips and he watched the disbelief tumble down Clint’s face.

“Did you just work me?” Clint snatched his burger back up and took a bite. “Fine, whatever, it’s your money.”

“No,” Steve popped the last bite of his own burger into his mouth and stole the last napkin to wipe the grease off his hands. “It’s your money.”
“Where are those princes when you need them?” Clint asked Lucky in exasperation and Steve found himself laughing.

“Tell me when you find out, huh?”

Clint bid him a good night when the streetlights came on and left him in the living room with a freshly cleared couch and a bundle of linen. Steve made quick work of laying everything out on the couch and stripped down to his undertunic. With a groan, he stretched out on the slightly lumpy couch and tried to relax.

The TV was off and he turned his back to the reflective black surface, disturbed by the warbled look of himself. The couch creaked beneath him as the springs rose and fell and he held himself rigid to stop the noise. Someone slammed a car door outside the apartment and another person’s shout echoed through the alleyway. Steve swallowed to soothe his dry throat and the quiet rang in his ears. He focused on his breathing, in and out, and forced himself to feel the expansion of his chest with each inhale. His legs were restless and he curled his toes into the sheet, pressing his tongue to his teeth as the cloth made him shiver.

He kept his eyes closed.

A buzzing in his skin began down his back and he rolled onto it. The springs were like the screams of the Jötunn as fire rained on them. He felt wetness under his eyelids and pressed his palms into them. It hurt a little, but not enough.

A click-clacking sound disrupted the silence and he shot up, grabbing his shield from the ground beside the couch. He squared up, looking for a challenge.

Lucky stared back. The dog was standing in the kitchen and only paused long enough to realize Steve wasn’t a threat before loping over to his water bowl. As he lapped up some of the water, Steve’s tension broke and he laughed. It was low and empty, but it raked like nails up his throat.

Steve grabbed his overcoat and shrugged it on. He found himself at the window and he crawled out onto the fire escape. The cold wind slammed into him and he could have cried in relief.

“Ymir is in the cold,” he whispered to himself.
He tucked himself into a ball on the bench and pulled his hood up around his face. He was out like a light as the wind whistled through the buildings.

Skye

The location Koenig had sent them was the Roxxon Energy Corporation Headquarters in Manhattan. Not exactly inconspicuous or under the radar and Skye would rather their faces weren’t plastered all over security cameras. She parked the bus close enough to access their wireless network but not close enough to be seen by their outside surveillance. Mike put his armor on under his shirt and hovered by her shoulder as she hacked into their system. It was pathetically easy.

Honestly, if this Rising Tide thing ever went belly-up, she could run the markets on companies by writing malignant code from one device and fixing it from another. It’d be a never-ending source of income. That or she could just tap into an executive’s bank account remotely and take out just enough to get by. She could be sneaky if she wanted to be, but that wasn’t why she had this bus or had learned code in the first place. Still, having a future plan, even if she never used it, was good practice.

“So? What’d you find?” Mike’s fingers were tapping in a staccato against the side of the bus and it was going to drive her crazy.

“Amazingly vague records for such a big company. The numbers are like a maze. Koenig said a source gave him a copy of an email to an A. Lukin about a special new project. A kid matching Ace’s age and ethnicity was included in the attachment.”

“So you have the picture?”

“No,” she paused long enough to pat Mike’s arm. “The file was corrupted by the time it got to me. Koenig said the copy was a temporary file with an incredibly short life. I’m not surprised.”

“Why are we here, then?” Mike stepped away and Skye glanced over to Loki. Their resident prince was staring at both of them with a strange sort of intensity. He didn’t even seem to blink. She turned back to her screen. One problem at a time.
“Koenig can’t ID Ace. He needs us to. If I can track down the source of the email, I might be able to find the picture on their servers.”

“Do you really think Roxxon would be that sloppy? You don’t build a tower like that with mistakes.”

“You haven’t seen these guys' tax returns.”

Mike huffed and paced away.

Skye went back to her first priority and spent the next few minutes filtering through a crapton of info. There was a lot of interesting things that she flagged for later, just in case she needed more leverage next time she ran aground in the corporate sphere. It had happened from time to time, before she learned her boundaries. Miles would be proud she’d gotten her act together, but a little miffed when he realized she had a personal mission. Koenig hadn’t told anyone about her secret mission to find Ace. Though the members of the Rising Tide liked to get friendly, having too many ties outside the organization usually just made you a target. If they knew she saved Mike (not to mention if they found out about Loki) she could be shut out for being a liability. Family made you vulnerable.

Just as Mike paced back to her, a file surfaced above the rest. She clicked on it.

A picture of Ace, dressed in a hospital gown, a couple years older than he had been when she last saw him, and with his hair shaved clean off stared back at her. Her breath caught in her throat and she blinked. Mike’s pacing footfalls had fallen silent and Loki had stood from his seat. They both converged on her at the same time.

“This is the boy?” Loki asked, but it fell into silence.

Skye turned to Mike, who was staring at the picture of his son as if it were a miracle. In a lot of ways, it was. They hadn’t had anything but hearsay and shadows to chase for so long. It took all of a second for him to break and a sob erupted from him. Skye hurried forward, wrapping her arms around him. He hugged her back and she tried not to cry. This was the one thing they had been waiting for and now it was here. They had visual on Ace. He was alive.

“Your computer is flashing red,” Loki said softly and Skye pulled away from Mike to look at the screen. Their tech support must have found her digging around.
She dashed over to her station and saved the photo, systematically removing herself from the network and burning her trail. As she shut down the program, Koenig sent her another message.

*There’s a bus being loaded in your area. The same kid is on the ID list.*

Mike read it before she could turn to relay it. “Let’s go!”

Skye inputted the bus’ location into her nav-dock and set it to auto-pilot. As soon as it was rolling down the street, she turned to say something to Mike - anything, really - but he was already suiting up. This is the closest they’ve ever been to him and if this slipped out of their hands now...she wasn’t sure how they could handle it. They would. They had to. But it would be devastating to have Ace within their grasp and then watch him slip away.

Tucked beneath her computer station in a box, was her own body armor. It wasn’t much, but it had kept her safe. Settled at the very bottom of the box, under a few highly important files that contained all the information about her own origins, was a pistol. It was small, easy to hide, and still unused. She didn’t really like bullets. Mike was trained to use them, though he had been forced, and he handled himself better than she ever could. Usually, she only took it out for emergencies. This seemed to qualify.

As she stood and started to suit up herself, Loki walked over to her.

“The boy lives?” his voice was strange. It wasn’t surprised and it wasn’t aloof, but somewhere in a muddy middle distance. There was a frown on his face that made him look...young. Skye wasn’t that old herself and she wondered if maybe Loki was like her. No real history, no real family; just a drifter with an imagination and a talent for picking up things to survive. It would explain his assertion that he was an Asgardian prince. Anything to make life a little more bearable.

“A father knows,” Mike responded and he stared at Loki with a seriousness she hadn’t seen in his face for ages. There was a smouldering fire inside of Mike that had been stoked to full flame. Loki swallowed. “My son is part of me and he’s a fighter. I’m going to bring him home.”

“Let me help you,” Loki rushed to say and Skye saw something flicker in his eyes. Just like his voice, his mannerisms were both anxious and adamant, but also calm and unconcerned.

“You aren’t qualified for a mission, Loki,” Mike said and then he looked to Skye. “I’m not passing
up this chance to get my son back so you can trial run your pet project.”

“Mike,” she began and holstered her gun. “He’s not a pet project and we’ll need all the help we can get.” Skye glanced to Loki. “Can you fight?”

“Bring me knives and I can hold my own,” he nodded his head to her almost demurely. Skye had a frown of her own, but she didn’t have time to psychoanalyze Loki.

“I’ve got knives in here somewhere,” Her station beeped at her that they were only a minute away. “You stay behind me and Mike, you got that?”

“I will follow you,” Loki agreed and she dug a couple switchblades out of their cache. He flicked them back and forth for a moment before nodding. “These will do.”

Mike went to the front of the bus and held onto the metal bar by the doors. “Aces high,” he called to her, raising his arm.

Skye raised the tattoo of the Ace of Hearts high in the air. “Aces High.”

With her arm raised and her attention on Mike, Skye was unprepared when the bus was jackknifed off the road.
Skye

They had been crossing an intersection and the bus was thrown onto its side. Skye landed on the other side of the bus with a yelp, her ribs protesting the collision with the hard surface. Thankfully they didn’t roll, but the momentum of the crash left them skidding across the asphalt in a symphony of screeching metal. It lasted for only a few moments, but it felt like forever. Skye gasped in pain as the bus jerked to a stop and took a second to breathe through the pain before forcing herself to stand. It was odd to be looking up at her station with seats as her floor, but she couldn’t waste time worrying about it.

“What was that?” she called, holding her ribs gingerly. She hoped they weren’t broken.

The loose blankets and pillows that were under the seats behind her station had come flying out of their compartments and so had nearly everything else that wasn’t tied down. Skye had to climb over it all to find Loki. He had been cut up by broken glass, but he didn’t seem worse for wear. She held out her hand for him to take.

“What was that?” he snapped, pulling himself to his feet without taking her hand. In this small space, he towered over her. She hated having to look up at people.

“Someone jackknifed us,” she pushed past him towards the front of the bus, but Mike was already on his feet. He grabbed the bent metal in front of him and curled it inward.

“The windshield’s blown out. Grab the bug-outs and let’s go,” Mike pulled his gun out of its holster and cocked it.
Skye nodded. “Loki, do you still have your switchblades?”

“Yes, they’re in my pockets.”

“Good, go help Mike while I cover our tracks.”

Surprisingly, Loki took off for the front of the bus without argument. Almost as soon as he turned his back, a bullet pierced the bus and burrowed into the space he had just left. Skye jumped with a stifled scream and Mike smacked the bus.

“Hurry up!”

Skye spun on her heel and pulled their bug-out bags from their secure spot near her station and removed her hard drives. She wouldn’t be able to carry the whole rig with her, but she could save her data. She logged in, which wasn’t an easy feat because she had to climb up to it and balance on its rig, and erased everything with a kill switch. As the computer sparked and caught fire, Skye dropped back down to what was now the bottom of the bus and ducked below where the first bullet had come. More bullets were hitting the bus, but they were in a denser part of the chassis and were relatively safe. Loki glanced back at her and she handed him one of the backpacks.

“Put this on.”

“What is it?”

“Supplies to hold us over until we can get out of this,” She shrugged her backpack on and secured the front clasps above and below her chest. “Neither one of us is going to be getting too physical,” she pressed herself to the cool metal of the bus as something - possibly an explosive - detonated right outside the bottom of the bus.

Mike grabbed Skye by the forearm and pulled her out of the bus. “Go! The smoke’ll cover us for a bit.”

Skye took off without question, not even looking back and darted into the nearest office building. The receptionist screamed in her face and ducked under her desk. Skye hurried over to the woman’s desk and leaned over. “Where’s the back exit?”
Terrified brown eyes gazed up at her and the woman looked on the verge of tears. Sighing, Skye came around the desk and crouched. “Hey, I’m not going to hurt you. But those guys out there want to hurt me...” Loki burst into the building and the sound of bullets and explosions followed him into the almost silent office. She glanced at him, then back at the receptionist. “Please. Tell us where the back exit is.”

“It’s...it’s down that hall. Follow the signs.”

“Thank you.” Skye rose and beckoned Loki to follow. “Let’s go.”

“What about Mike?”

“He’s coming, but we’ve got to secure an exit or we’ll be trapped in this building,” Skye hurried forward, passing by closed office doors. Her footfalls were absorbed by the coarse carpet beneath her feet and she ducked past the break room as she headed for the back. The signs were little arrows in strategic areas of the hall that were probably for fire evacuations. She had never been so happy to see the glowing light of an exit sign in her life. Her hands hit the push bar on the door heavily.

“Skye!” She heard Mike call from far behind her and she leaned her shoulder against the open door as she turned her head to look. She saw Loki right behind her before she saw Mike a little further back and both of them looked spooked.

“What...” Skye started to say, but a hand came up from outside and wrapped around her throat. She was pulled out of the building and dragged across the concrete outside. Choking, she tried to get away and spotted one of those armored SUVs parked at the end of the alley.

Loki and Mike had followed her out and she turned her head to look at the man who had pulled her out of the building.

“Jack Rollins,” she breathed as the head of the Rollins Rounders faced off with Mike and Loki. He didn’t even flinch. Skye hadn’t actually seen any of the Kommandos up close and she was just glad it wasn’t the Abomination. She had a feeling she would have been dead already if it had been. Especially with his hand on her throat and his arm around her chest. She wanted to reach for her gun, but she felt cold metal press into her side and she blinked rapidly in fear. “Please don’t.”
“Skye, are you alright?” Mike asked and she nodded, slowly relaxing. If she could get to the SUV, she could hotwire it and maybe they could barrel through however many Rounders were waiting for them. She glanced to the SUV and back to Mike.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“I don’t appreciate your little crew attacking my buses. Do you know how much they cost?”

“Three hundred thousand, give or take?” Skye guessed, knowing the answer. The hand on her throat tightened.

“The way I see it, you and your little group owe me a lot of money,” he breathed a laugh and Skye swallowed. “I had to leave Tahiti for this.”

“That’s too bad,” Mike said and moved a little away from the building and away from the SUV. Rollins turned as well and Skye stumbled a little to follow suit. “Maybe you should have invested in something else.”

“Oh, no,” Rollins cocked his gun and pressed it firmly into Skye’s side, right below the body armor. “I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.”

“Too boring in Tahiti?” Skye asked, testing her range of movement. If Mike and Loki could distract him, she could attack him and break free.

“It’s life-changing,” he pulled her a little closer and she reacted instinctively.

She dropped like dead weight and his grip only slowed her a little bit before she hit the ground. He hooked his fingers in her body armor and started to yank her back up, but Mike had already seen the opening she provided him. A bullet slammed into Rollins chest and a little blood sprinkled Skye’s face. His hand went limp and she slipped out of his grasp. Her whole body was shaky as she scrambled to her feet and sprinted for the SUV. It took her three tries to open the door and another to shut off the theft alert. She pulled the panel protecting the wires off, smearing blood all over it.

“Come on!” Mike was shouting and he kicked Rollins’ gun down the alley. Loki jolted into action and followed Mike.
Skye got the engine to start and she made quick work of overriding the commands and shutting off the tracking system. She had been doing this for years. This SUV was a much nicer ride than the hoopties she had stolen as a kid. It was even armed with guns that the main computer could control. Once she got a chance to sit with this baby and her tools, it would be a godsend for them. She still needed a bus.

Mike pulled open the passenger side door and Loki went to the door behind hers.

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**Loki**

In all his time in the bowels of the Midgardian slums and he hadn’t actually had to deal with guns. Of course, he had seen them and knew what they could do, but he hadn’t had access to them. They were archaic weapons compared to his magic and the weapons of Asgard, but on Midgard they were as normal to see as hats or coats. He had thought to take one, just to blend in with the populace, but when the man with the phones had been taken, so had any with weapons. He was overlooked because he had no substances, weapons, or a ‘record’ as they called it. He was uninteresting for his lack of the norm.

Still, guns fascinated him. Not in a way he would incorporate into his fighting style when he got his magic back, but just in their mechanical intricacies and prevalence. The knives Skye had given him would help quite a bit, but it still wasn’t magic. The laptop had probably been broken in the crash and he was back to where he had been before meeting Skye and Mike. At least where his Midgardian magic was concerned. He would have to steal one like Skye had told him she had taken hers. Perhaps he could get something stronger when Skye inevitably replaced her own station.

The office building they ducked into was stifling and overwhelmingly still. It was as if life itself had come to a screeching halt inside. Skye was crouched beside the desk and was talking to someone he couldn’t see. He came up to her side and saw a woman cowering on the floor.

Skye asked her for the exit and beckoned him to follow as soon as she had it. The halls were possibly worse than the entranceway. How did humans live inside such horrid conditions for their whole lives? He missed the sprawling expanses of Asgard keenly. Fresh air would do him a lot of good.

Mike must have done something to ensure a clean retreat, because he came charging toward them
with his gun at the ready. “We’re good,” he said, panting and looked to Skye. Loki saw his face change from exhausted to terrified. Loki spun, ready for a threat, but only saw Skye’s curious expression and a man’s arm reaching in from the alley outside. “Skye!” Mike yelled but it was too late.

The man pulled Skye out of the building and into the alley. Despite his own assurances to himself that he didn’t care for her, Loki’s heart leapt into his throat when the man pressed his gun into her side. If he had his magic, he could easily dispatch this man and they could be on their way. He was realizing that his ability to use magic was a crutch. He would need to learn to use guns as well as computers, if he wanted to survive on Midgard.

Everything happened so quickly.

The man was on the ground, bleeding from the chest and Skye was sprinting to the black vehicle at the end of the alley. Mike kept his gun trained on the man and Loki stood somewhere in between the two Midgardians. From his right, the engine to the vehicle revved and Mike walked backwards to it. Loki left the guarding to Mike and went to the side door. Skye glanced back at him through the thick glass of the windows. She looked both relieved and scared.

He pulled the door open with his left hand as Mike pulled his side open and felt something sharp pierce his side, right under his arm. Strangely, he managed to finish his movement, climbing into the back of the SUV and shutting the door. The latter action was difficult as his hands were covered in blood. No sooner had the door snapped shut than Skye was rocketing out of the alley. Loki groaned as he reached up to the wound on his side and his hand came away drenched in blood. He looked up and caught Mike’s gaze. The man was frowning at his wound.

Loki closed his eyes as a wave of nausea swept over him.

Skye

“Holy shit!” The roads a couple blocks away were almost too clear, but she wasn’t complaining. “We should get t-shirts. ‘I survived Jack Rollins and his Rounders!’” she laughed her fear and nervousness away, turning to look at Mike for a second. He was glancing into the back.

“Loki’s hit,” Mike said, flicking his safety on and tucking his gun into its holster. “Give me your pack.”
“What?” Skye took her left hand off the wheel and unbuckled the pack so she could wriggle her left arm out of it. Mike pulled it the rest of the way. “How bad is it?”

“Bad...” Mike climbed into the back and she could see him in the rearview frantically moving Loki from his bent over position. A towel was yanked out of her pack and pressed down on Loki’s side. Now that Mike had moved him, Skye could see the damage.

“Oh my god,” Skye set their destination and turned it to auto-pilot, then moved until she was facing them. “He needs a hospital.”

“You know we can’t risk the cameras.”

“What will happen if we don’t try?”

“He’ll bleed out in the back of this SUV,” Mike was maintaining pressure on the wound and Skye’s hands were shaking. He wouldn’t even be here if it weren’t for her. She’s the one who wanted him to stay.

“If we do this,” Skye had already set their destination. “We’ll have to stop outside of camera range and carry him up there. They can’t see the SUV.”

“And even if we carry him up there, we can’t stay.”

“I’m not leaving him.”

“If you want to get caught, we might as well drive all the way up there. You can hack the cameras.”

“He can’t wake up in a hospital alone, Mike,” Skye reached out for Loki’s hand and gripped it tight. She released it a second later with a cry. Her palm was icy cold. “What the fuck?”

Mike looked from her hand to Loki’s skin. It was turning blue. “What is he?”
“Not human,” Skye’s voice shook and she gasped. “What are we going to do?”

“Take him to the hospital, drop him off. Once we’ve covered our tracks and he’s stabilized, we’ll come back for him.”

“He won’t believe that.”

“He doesn’t have a choice.”

Skye swallowed and slid back into her seat. The hospital was just up ahead. She wanted to scream.

Loki

He didn’t remember passing out or the ride to wherever they were. He didn’t even remember being pulled out of the vehicle and carried up to a stone building with glass doors. People in strange colored uniforms rushed out with a bed and he was laid atop it. A woman gripped his hand and leaned over him.

“We’ll be back for you, Loki, I swear,” It was Skye and she pressed a kiss to his forehead. “Take care of him, please,” she said to the strangers and stepped away.

He reached out for her, but she was gone. So was Mike.

“Where am I?” he asked the glaringly bright lights that shone into his eyes.

“Mount Sinai,” one of the strangers told him, panting slightly as they pushed him down long hallways.

“What is that?”
“A hospital. You’re safe.”

Loki blinked heavily and his vision blurred. He felt cold...so cold....so cold and alone.

Steve

He knows he’s dreaming.

Kneeling in front of Hela with Garm at his side, Steve feels nothing but relief. Hela is speaking but he can’t hear her. He smiles anyway. His lips curve upward to bear his teeth and they grow large inside his human mouth until they tear his lips apart and a muzzle takes its place. He’s grinning like a wolf and Garm howls. He finds himself howling as well and the sound reverberates in his throat until it’s all he can hear. The howls become screams, become cries, become whispers and he’s washed away in a wave of fire. The Jötunn are melting all around him, like candles frozen in place, burning from the top down. He’s reaching out for them and Helblindi reaches back, the child almost old enough to walk. Helblindi grows before his eyes and a frost giant no larger than Loki stares back at him.

“Where did you go, godfather? Why did you forsake us?”

I didn’t, he tries to say, but only a howl comes out. He pushes into the ground with his feet, only to find his feet have become paws and his hands have as well. He bows to shock of it and the fire surges. Helblindi vanishes from view.

The Bifröst’s rainbow colors turn fire into the dark of space and he finds himself staring down at the Earth as if he were Heimdall. The whole of it is covered in light...the same glow of the Tesseract and the Earth has become a beacon. Steve wants to protect it from itself and from everything else. He thinks of his fanged gauntlet and within a blink, he’s standing in Odin’s Vault. The golden gauntlet sits beside the one gifted to him by Hela and he finds a wolfish grin curving his face again as he sees he could wear both. They would fit, one on each hand. He reaches out for them and the ground becomes metal.

Like the spires on Jötunheim, he stands high above everything. His eyes burned and his mouth falls open in a scream. There is a heat inside of him, burning from within. It feels like Surtur’s magical
flames. He can feel it pushing through him and he lets it, sinking into the metal mountain beneath him. He can’t struggle and the metal crawls up his body until he’s encapsulated in it. As the heat reaches its peak, he feels it leave through his open mouth in a solid beam. It’s enough to let him pull free from the mountain and he crawls out and back into Odin’s Vault.

Across from him, his spear held aloft is Odin. There is a white expanse behind Steve and the Casket of Ancient Winters in front of him. He realizes as he towers over the Asgardian king that he is the Destroyer.

Odin doesn’t say a word, but he slams his spear into the ground at his feet, the same way he had done to dismiss his guards, and Steve is forced to step backwards into the white expanse. The dark and complicated wall forms in front of him and he screams.

His scream echoes not into an open hall but into a smaller room. When he opens his eyes, he is back inside the golden cell in the Asgardian dungeons. He expects to see other prisoners or Loki or any other thing. Instead there is only ice.

The golden walls turn silver, the white floors turn to thick ice, and now it is the wind that howls. Steve’s skin turns black with frostbite, he can’t breathe the arctic air, and with the wind comes the wash of snow down a mountainside. He is smothered in the avalanche.

Steve woke with a desperate gasp, and a layer of sleet and snow tumbled off of him. He pulled himself into the corner of the bench and folded his legs in tight.

“Ymir is in the cold,” Steve panted, trying and failing to ground himself. He couldn’t feel Ymir, not even with the snow draped over him. He found himself shaking, but it wasn’t from the snow.

Why did you forsake us?

“I’m sorry,” Steve apologized to the cold air. Maybe their spirits could hear him. “I should have stayed with you. I should have protected you.”

“My wolf...my poor little wolf,” the voice that broke through his own yanked him out of his spiral and he looked up. Hela in all her glory looked back at him, her arms crossed. “How pathetic you are.”
“Hela,” he gasped, relieved and confused all at once. Something about her presence comforted him in the way Bor and Ymir had. He leaned toward her.

“Look at you,” She walked closer and he tilted his head up to look at her. “Where is my fierce wolf? Where is Garm’s brother?”

“I’m not...I’m not...” Steve could feel the metal of the Destroyer on his skin and his throat burned. “I came to save Midgard.”

“No,” Hela reached out and grabbed his chin. Her touch felt ghostly and he shivered. “You came to find your Bucky. You abandoned Midgard ages ago.”

“They need me.”

“They need a hound of Hel.”

He closed his eyes. “Why did you come?”

“You belong to me,” Hela’s grip tightened. “I want what was promised. I want my wolf back.”

“Hela...”

“Who’s Hela?”

Steve blinked and Hela was gone. In her place was Clint. He held out a steaming cup of coffee. Pulling back and tentatively taking the cup, Steve surreptitiously looked for Hela. She had vanished.

“What?” Steve muttered, sipping some coffee. It was bitter and grainy, but tasted almost as good as the mead in Asgard.
“Oh, so you’re hard-of-hearing now?” Clint turned Steve’s head side to side roughly. “Huh. See, mine...” And Clint removed something from his ear. It was a small device. “It’s tiny, but it’s visible. Besides, aren’t you superhuman?”

Steve turned away.

“Okay, now you’ve lost your sense of humor,” Clint pushed at his arm until he slid down the bench. It was just like the park. “Flashback, nightmare, memories of an ex-giantess?”

Steve inhaled slowly and didn’t exhale until he was positive everything mean would go with it. After a moment, he sighed. “Nightmare.”

“About?”

“What I left behind...what I am.”

Clint hummed and shifted a little to pull a small box out of his coat. He set it on his lap and tapped a staccato on its lid. “You’ve mentioned Hela a few times. What is she to you?”

“She...” Steve ran his hand down his face and felt the collection of snow in his beard. “She saved me...from death.”

“Well, considering it’s thirty-three degrees out here and the weatherman says there’s another storm coming, she might have to save you again.”

Steve looked out to the buildings across the way. They were covered a layer of ice like he was and as he remembered Jötunheim storms, he knew he could survive anything Midgard could throw at him. Thirty-three degrees was almost warm.

“She would only save me once. The next time death comes for me...I won’t have a way out.”

“Then, maybe,” Clint held the box out for him. “You shouldn’t make it so easy for death to find you.”
Steve took the box and set it on his lap. “What is this?”

“ID and a prepaid card with your first cut from SHIELD. Welcome to Earth, Stígandr Birgirsson.”

Steve looked down at the plain black box and he could hear Hela’s voice in his ear. _I want my wolf back._ The one thing he had wanted above all else when he had begged for a second chance to live was to find Bucky. Hela had told him he was alive and he wanted more than anything to find him. He had found Peggy and Howard’s son. Maybe one of these days he could find the rest of the Kommandos, too. He opened the box and pulled his ID out. There was a picture, perhaps from the machine they had put him in. It looked like a normal picture of him, albeit, without the fake smile he had donned in all those bond tour photos. He didn’t really recognize himself. His hair did grow just a little shorter right above his ear where Brimer’s axe had hit him, but aside from that, there was no sign of his time. His hair looked a little red in the light and his beard was a little darker than he initially thought. His birthday was still July fourth, but the year had been changed. Apparently he was thirty-three.

“How much is rent in this building?” Steve asked and Clint snorted.

“What day is it? Tuesday? And the wind’s blowing...” Clint licked his index finger and held it up. “From the north. So...how much do you have?”

Steve pulled the slip of paper in the box out. He almost dropped it. Jötunheim worked more off a barter system, if they needed to weigh the worth of something, but usually what the whole needed, the whole gave. It was a community lifestyle. On Asgard, he had been kept as a guest of the royal family and treated to food and clothing and such without having to ask. Now, here on Midgard, he knew he wouldn’t be handed things he needed just because he needed them. It didn’t work like that. But this...he hadn’t really thought about money for so long, he had almost forgot what it was like to have none. The number that stared back at him was far too much.

“Well, don’t keep me waiting in suspense,” Clint leaned over to see the amount and his eyebrows raised. “Well, shit. Hell of a backpay.”

“Backpay?” Steve ran his finger over the number again and then stuffed it back inside the box. “I didn’t make a hundred bucks when I left. This...this is too much.”

“I guess they adjusted for inflation. That’s not enough to buy the building, but I’ve got savings...we’d still have to convince Banionis to give us the building. Unless you’d rather just pay...
Steve clenched his fist, thinking of what he could have done with his fanged gauntlet. He *missed* the weight of it on his arm. “I’m not one for playing around. If Banionis is a problem, let’s take care of him.”

“Alright,” Clint stood and shivered. “Fuck me, it’s cold. Let’s get inside. I’ve got to walk Lucky and I don’t really want to thaw out twice.”

The inside of the apartment was only marginally warmer, but that was probably his fault. Steve wasn’t sure if he had shut the window back or not. Lucky was pawing at Clint as soon as they both came in. Steve dug through his pack and found a clean overcoat and a new shirt. It wasn’t much, but it was much warmer than his ice encrusted clothing. He hadn’t been wearing his boots or pants when he climbed out the window.

“Was the couch not to your liking?” Clint asked as he patted Lucky’s back.

“Not the couch. It was too quiet.”

“Right, ’cause you’re used to howling winds.”

His nightmare washed over him and he touched his face just to reassure himself he wasn’t covered in metal. “Ymir is in the cold.”

“Who’s Ymir?”

Steve glanced up to Clint and back to his pack. He closed it and retrieved his tablet from the first box SHIELD had given him. He turned it on and walked to the kitchen counter. “Oldest of the frost giants, perhaps the first. He’s...a sort of deity to them.”

“And why do you keep saying he’s in the cold?” Clint was refilling his cup of coffee and Steve remembered his own. He took another sip and then a gulp.
“Ymir is the winter wind and the raging storms. He is the snow and the ice. He protects his people.” Steve paused, his hand hovering over the tablet. It glowed Tesseract blue, just like the Earth of his nightmare. “My family is with him now.”

“He’s like...a security blanket?”

Steve blinked at Clint with a frown, then shook his head. “He’s...I can’t feel him on Midgard. It’s just habit.”

“Feel him? You could feel this guy?”

“Like...like the bite of the wind, the pinch of the cold, the way the wildlife behaved. It was...there was magic in Jötunheim. I could feel it inside of me. Right...” he laid his hand against the center of his chest, where glow-weed had painted it and his star had once been. “...there’s nothing now.” He dropped his hand.

“Come walk with me and Lucky. I’ll show you the gym and we can brainstorm our plan.”

Steve tucked the tablet into his pack and pocketed his new ID and card. He slid a knife into his boot and tucked one into his overcoat. Clint had leashed Lucky.

“Ready?”

“Yes.”

Clint

“Contract says one renter, bro.”

They hadn’t made further than a few feet out of his apartment before two tracksuits came
lumbering up the stairs. He had wondered when they’d notice he had a plus one. A couple days tops. Which meant they were wising up. Now he’d have to add sabotage and sky high rent to his list of concerns. He’d pencil them in right below traumatized super soldier who sleeps outside in the snow.

“Contract says nothing about guests, bro,” Clint walked with the intent to barrel through them if they didn’t move. One of their hands came up and pushed his shoulder back before he could get close enough.

“Rent double this month, and you pay for broken door.”

“What broken door?”

The bozos glanced behind him to his door but it was bolted shut. The one that had stopped him huffed. He was taller and rotund, his companion was short and thin. Neither had bruises or bandages, which meant he hadn’t taught them a lesson yet.

“Double rent,” the tall one repeated and Steve came up close. Clint held a hand up to stop him and was surprised that he heeded it. Clint, Captain Wrangler Extraordinaire.

“Message received, douche-canoe,” Clint stepped forward again and Steve followed. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’ve got shit to do literally,” he gestured to Lucky. “Unless you’d like to clean up after this guy.”

Turning to his comrade, the short one sneered, “Let’s go, bro.”

Clint watched them leave and waited a minute before he followed. Steve sighed behind him. “Why don’t you fight them?”

“Me kicking their asses gets a lot of people hurt. You forget that I live in a building with civilians, including children. I’m not endangering them to make an alpha move on some nobodies,” Clint started down the stairs and Lucky followed, panting as his tail wagged. “I can hack at the branches all day, it won’t uproot the tree.”

“Banionis,” Steve sounded like Clint expected him to. He sounded like Captain America would; tough and straight-to-the-point. “How do we uproot that tree?”
Clint glanced over his shoulder. Steve’s face was set in a darkness from the eyes down. Whatever had made him sleep on the fire escape in a winter storm and talk to things that weren’t there had brought a seriousness over him. This no nonsense attitude was free from the desperation of the man that had knelt in front of Fury’s desk. This was the man that he had imagined as a kid. This was the man with the shield and the plan. Clint was kinda relieved to see him. He didn’t know what to do with the heaviness of the Steve that had landed on his doorstep.

He didn’t even deal with his own heaviness.

“We don’t plan in the hallways run by the tree, that’s for damn sure. Stop talking until we get to the gym.”

Steve’s sudden acquiescence weirded Clint out a bit. He was cool with it, to a point, but feeling like a mad scientist with his hand on a killswitch just...wasn’t his thing, man. Being deemed an official handler didn’t sit well with him either, especially if he wasn’t getting any kind of resistance. Well, it wouldn’t be terrible for his job to not feel like a job ever so often. Still, he didn’t like the lack of fight. He was starting to hate how much dealing with Steve was making him examine his own hang-ups. Who needs a shrink when you’ve got a brooding super soldier and no manual.

“Not to beat a dead horse, but...” he began as they stepped into the cold air. Clint had bundled up, but the cold still hit him like a brick. The temps must have dropped in the last hour. Lucky dug his nose into the nearest pile of snow and rooted. “I know you’ve got a lot of time to kill, and once we sort this whole living situation out, you’re gonna have an open schedule. What’s your focus after Banionis?”

“Aside from getting Thor and Loki?”

Clint felt a smile tug on his lips and rolled his eyes. “You’re like a broken record. God, yes, aside from Tweedledee and Tweedledum.”

“The Tesseract is in the hands of Hydra. If Stark is working for them,” a look passed over Steve’s face and Clint took in the furrowed brows, slightly open mouth and clenched fist. Hesitation, doubt, not anger. Strange. “The Tesseract has to be removed from his control. Loki has already targeted him and if he has his way, he’ll do to Earth what he did to Jötunheim. I won’t let that happen.”

“You want to arbitrarily confiscate a private citizen’s property on the basis of...personal history?”
“I thought you didn’t like Stark.”

Clint tugged on Lucky’s leash and started down the block. “I don’t have to like the guy to poke holes in your shitty plan.”

“It’s not about politics, Barton. The Tesseract will invite something worse than Hydra. It has to be destroyed or hidden.”

“Didn’t work so well last time. Schmidt found it in Norway, then proceeded to wreak havoc.”

“I know. I was there.”

“Yeah,” Clint let Lucky sniff at a patch of frozen grass. “And so was the Director. She thinks it’s better in Stark’s hands. To be honest, I doubt she’s making the best choices, considering they’re like family. But Fury agrees with her and I trust him. And Nat trusts her, which is saying a whole heck of a lot.” Lucky decided to keep walking, so Clint tucked his hands in his pockets and lowered his head against the wind. Steve stood in it as if it was a sunny day. “But they aren’t completely wrong. Where would you hide the Tesseract?”

Steve was quiet for a second too long. Clint gestured with his hand to his own exhibit a.

“Sometimes the devil you know is better than... fuck,” Clint pinched his nose and tucked his head down. “God damn you, Steve.”

“What did I do?”

“I retired because one of the most influential men in the world and in SHIELD was funding Hydra projects and you’ve got me defending the fucker. And calling out my own decision to retire. Sonovabitch,” Clint stopped as Lucky finally found a place to pee. “I’m starting to hate you more than Stark.”

“The devil I know is different from yours. Zola made weapons of horror and he was limited by forties’ technology. Stark has...everything. Loki can’t have him.”
“What do you want to do, Steve?” Clint crossed his arms. “You aren’t authorized to do anything about it. SHIELD’s monitoring what they can for now. You’re gonna have to trust them.”

“I trust myself. It’s my mission to find the princes.” Steve said it with edge of possessiveness that Clint was only half-willing to let slide.

“Aren’t an army of eyes better than a single pair?” Clint patted Lucky and they continued on. “Stop worrying about getting a ‘gotcha’ card and let the pieces fall where they may. You’ll get your princes and the Director will get her time-out from you. Just...I was gonna say chill, but I feel like that might be offensive.”

Chuckling, which lightened Clint’s heart a little to hear, Steve crossed his arms as well. “My...nightmare reminded me of what’s important.”

“Hela?”


The name was familiar from far too many days curled up with comics and junk food. Trying not to seem too intrigued, Clint let that sit for a bit. When he did speak, it was in the lowered voice Steve had used. “Nat told me you think he’s alive.”

“You and...Nat talk about me?”

“Well, you aren’t the only thing we talk about, but sure, we’ve mentioned you,” Clint turned them toward the gym. “Why do you think he’s alive? From what I remember - and I wasn’t the best student - he fell off a train into a ravine. There was even a documentary about it a few years ago. It was called The Price of Freedom.”

Steve rolled his shoulders and seemed to puff up a little. “He’s alive.”

“You seem sure, but they recreated the whole thing in the documentary. The scientists they consulted were positive only a superhuman could survive the injuries from a fall like that.”
“If anyone could do it, it’d be Bucky.”

Clint didn’t say anything. He couldn’t begrudge the guy his hope for something from his past, but even if Barnes had survived the fall and mingled with the locals, there was no way the guy was still kicking after all that. Unless, of course, Steve had some magical mumbo-jumbo to thank for his apparent omniscience where Barnes was concerned. He’d owe Steve a home-cooked meal if he turned out to be right.

“So, you want to find Barnes? Is that your focus after we take out Banionis?”

“Yes,” Steve seemed to have decided that on the spot. He nodded. “Maybe I can explore this new world while I’m at it.”

“Well, it beats you sleeping on the fire escape. Might have to clear that with SHIELD though.”

“Of course. Wouldn’t want to think I’m slipping my leash.”

Clint snorted and then coughed. The cold air was merciless on his throat.

The gym was on a corner and the lights were on inside. It was small and had started taking in classes of kids for self-defense classes to keep the doors open. Bishop’s Gym was a little glimmer of light in a dark world. Clint spent a lot of time here when he wasn’t out getting groceries or dealing with Banionis. It kept him in shape and in contact with other humans that weren’t his neighbors.

“Fair warning, the owner’s a...well, you’ll see,” Lucky started twirling around in excitement and nearly pulled Clint down to the concrete. “Cool it, man.”

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Steve

The gym Clint had taken him to was drenched in purple. Even the lights gave off a purple hue
instead of the pale blue he had expected to see. Music was playing loud enough for him to hear from outside the front door and there was a group of children and teens practicing in front of a mirror. A teen in work-out gear was walking through them, calling out what Steve realized were poses. The kids switched their stances and shouted out the pose, yelling into their own reflections. Clint knocked seven times and pulled the door open, letting Lucky go in first.

The teen at the forefront paused and looked up with a frown that morphed quickly into a wide grin. She called for a break and sprinted across the room.

“Hawkeye!” she called out and Steve thought she was about to leap into his arms. Instead, she slowed down and knelt in front of a happily panting Lucky. “You brought Lucky!”

Letting the leash go, Clint shared a look with Steve, then stuffed his hands in his pockets. Steve crossed his arms. “Hiya, Kate. I’m doing fine, thanks. No, I’m not up to much. Oh, this guy, he’s just a living legend. No biggie.”

Looking up at them both, Kate frowned and raised an eyebrow almost comically high. “Who’s this guy?”

Clint scratched his head and looked back at Steve. “In one ear and out the other.”

Steve looked back to the girl. “My name is Stígandr Birgirsson.” He didn’t hold out his hand.

She stood akimbo and narrowed her eyes. “He looks like a viking mercenary.”

“Good eye,” Clint complimented her, patting her on her shoulder.

“Hawk eye,” she countered with a smile and took his hand. “So who is this guy?”

“New friend. He’s...uh...he needs a little outlet.”

Kate pursed her lips, then shrugged. “Don’t we all?” she turned to Steve and looked him up and down. “Let’s get started. Lose the fur and anything with sharp edges. You’re gonna do yoga with third graders, not boxers.”
Darcy

Getting out of the facility wasn’t too bad. At least, it wasn’t at first.

Darcy was used to being ignored by the security guys and it wasn’t unheard of for her to be moving heavy stuff. She was the low level employee that carried tons of coffee and research materials at once. She was almost certain they didn’t even know what her face looked like. Jane, of course, was easily recognizable. Her hunched shoulders and darting eyes were a bit of a give away too.

“Act natural,” Darcy whispered to her and nodded to the guard posted at the freight entrance. She didn’t maintain eye contact or walk any faster than normal. The first thing to give a person away was acting abnormally. She even focused on breathing and her heart rate. Scientists were supposed to look panicked and sweating; crunching numbers as big as Jane did on the regular had to be taxing. Without Jane’s ‘I’m guilty!’ tells, they could be out on a coffee run or something.

Darcy pretended not to see the security cameras and thanked her lucky stars the box had already been marked for disposal. Now if they could get down the service ramp and out of sight enough to sneak Thor into a vehicle...

“Hello, Doctor Foster!” a young man called out and Darcy nearly choked on her own heart as it seemed to dart up out of her chest. Turning slowly but not slowing her stride, Darcy glanced back to see who could possibly be disturbing their masterful escape plan that she was lovingly dubbing ‘Dumb As Hell’.

Her eyes could not possibly roll further back into her head if they tried. Ian-motherfucking-Boothsby. Darcy’s worst mistake with two long legs and an accidental death wish. That's the last time she let's a fling entice her. There’s a reason for the phrase ‘don’t shit where you eat’. The start of the service ramp had a bump and Thor grunted as they crossed it. Darcy tensed up, but kept going.

“Darcy! Oh,” Ian had made to touch her shoulder, but her death glare stopped him. Good. She couldn’t steer this damned flatbed and Vulcan chop a man at the same time. Even small time agents have limits. “Where you off to?”
“The beautiful land of fuck-off-Ian,” Darcy let a huff of relief out when the flatbed reached the ground safely.

“Where’s that?” he asked, his eyes round and empty of wit. Darcy could almost cry at the sight.

“Aren’t you supposed to be working with Zola halfway across the world, right now?”

“Funny story,” she just instinctively knew it wouldn’t be. “He said there was a mix-up with the paperwork,” Ian’s laugh used to charm her and she was a fool for it. “Paperwork, Darce. He’s a...well, not walking...but he’s a machine.”

“Aren’t we all?” The trash was coming up and if they didn’t ditch Ian, they’d waste valuable time in their getaway. “Well, it was nice to see you again. Bye.”

“The garage is that way,” he pointed out, literally point in the opposite direction.

Jane smiled at him and took over the flatbed as Darcy stopped his forward progress with a hand on his chest. “Look, Ian, as much as I’d love to continue this conversation, Jane and I are late. So, you can...stop following us now.”

“Are you doing something illegal again?” His earnest eyes were starting to irk her.

“Is it illegal to take out the trash?”

“That box made a noise.”

“That box is made of wood, Ian. Wood groans.”

“Floorboards groan, Darce.”

Inhaling and exhaling very deliberately, Darcy stepped back from him. “Please, leave us alone.”
“I can help!”

“You’re going to get us hurt if you don’t stop. I don’t want or need your help, Ian.” Darcy poked him in the chest sharply and spun on her heel. She was relieved beyond belief to hear him walk away.

Jane looked up at her as she approached the trash and Thor stood behind her stoically. He was eerily expressionless. She hated everything about his despondent face, knowing it had been forced onto him. His golden collar gleamed and Darcy tugged off her sweater so she could tie it around his neck. Now he looked like the world’s most jacked suburban mom who probably worked at the local animal shelter.

“He looks ridiculous,” she commented, tugging him by the wrist so he’d follow.

“You’re the one wearing a ‘Praise Thor’ tank top.”

“This was hand-made on my day off.”

“It’s below freezing.”

“Fashion knows no bounds.”

An alarm blared and Darcy jerked. “That’s us. Let’s go.”

On second thought, she admitted as they fled across the parking lot to the nearest vehicle, maybe they should have just waited for a better plan. The searchlights kicked on and she was a barbed wire fence away from a cartoon jailbreak scene. The guards would follow and if they got into a fight, she wasn’t sure Thor’s brain could handle being a protector and a berserker. She was sure there weren’t a whole host of successfully brain-washed Asgardians littering the cosmos. All of this was untested. If it weren’t for Kleiser, maybe it wouldn’t have existed at all. Jane’s boots had a little better grip than Darcy’s and she reached the car first. The blacked-out windows and lack of headlights were both comforting and terrifying to Darcy. These cars had to have tracking device built it. If she had to hack a car, they might have to take the pub brawl version of this escape.

“It’s locked!” Jane shouted and Darcy really should be better prepared than this.
“Åpne døren,” She commanded Thor and he gripped the handle tightly. The metal screeched and whined, then it popped open. Alarms immediately screamed at them. This was why she failed Sarkissian’s Academy. It had to be.

“What are we going to do?” Jane asked her and Darcy’s brain was a bit of a mess. She wanted to get Thor free, but she hadn’t really thought this through and it felt like she was just following orders. Whose orders? There was a blank in her mind when she thought of it and it worried her. If they were caught, Thor would be taken by Zola and Jane would be stripped of her privileges, not to mention that Darcy would be shipped back to the States in a her own suitcase. Zola would probably be worse than Stark. And if Zola got a hold of him, there was no telling if she would ever see him again.

The desperation almost made her want to cry.

Screeching tires and a honking horn yanked her out of her reverie and she slid into a defensive stance in front of Thor. As the little car swerved in front of them and burned rubber as it came to a wobbly stop, Darcy realized who was driving it.

“Ian!” she gasped and took back every bad thing she had said. Well...most of it. “You absolute treasure of a man!”

“Get in before the guards come!” he yelped and Jane agreed with a small cheer.

“Road trip?” Jane called to Darcy and she snorted as she closed Thor in to the backseat.

“International spy level road trip, Jane. It’s like...second on my bucket list.” Her door slammed shut and Ian took off like a bat out of hell. She had complimented him on his stuntman driving before, but if they managed this, then she owed him a beer.

“Where are we going?” Ian asked and Darcy glanced at Jane. The scientist was brushing Thor’s hair behind his ears.

“Erik should come with us. They’ll think he had something to do with this.”
“Where is he?”

“Back in the facility,” Ian informed them and Darcy shrugged.

“We can’t save them both, Jane.”

“Will they hurt him?” Jane’s eyes were wide and watery. Darcy wanted to climb into the back and hug her but she refrained.

“They might. But he wasn’t in the room and they’ll see he had no idea about this. Stark can vouch for him.”

“You think he’ll do that?”

“He let us go, didn’t he?”

Jane looked back to the facility as Ian joined the main road. “Why did he let us go?”

Darcy frowned. “You think it was a trap.”

“We got out with Thor, Darce.”

Darcy felt a sinking in her chest, but her hope pushed it away. “This might be our only chance.”

“And if it’s a trap?”

“You’re a genius, Thor’s a god, I’m a secret agent and Ian’s our sidekick. We’ll superteam it out.”

Jane laughed and Darcy smiled.
As the facility faded from view, Darcy heard a strange voice in her head. *You want to free the prince.* She did...she had...but why did she feel so uneasy?
I'm alive!

It's the beginning of the holiday snowball of events and I kinda got swept up in it. A couple birthday parties and a Halloween party later and I found some quiet to finish this chapter. Whew!

Please enjoy and if you do, consider buying me a coffee!

Chapter Title.

Loki

John Doe, Loki soon learned, is what they called people with no known identity. Perhaps it was apropos to have been labelled such a thing in this macabre Midgardian healing hall. The healers wore garish outfits with strange glyphs and colorful miniature people on them. They poked him with needles and put him to sleep, only to wake him and pester him with questions. He knew enough from his time on Midgard to not answer their questions. Snitches, a young vagrant child had informed him, get stitches. He had quite enough as it was from the bullet.

“We’re trying to help you,” Nurse Temple insisted gently, leaning over him and forcing eye contact with a smile. Her hands were always warm and her tone a quiet pleading. Help me help you, she seemed to say.

“I don’t need help,” No matter how many times he repeated it, the nurses still insisted on offering it to him. “Leave me alone.”

“Look,” Nurse Temple took his hand and part of him thought of Skye. But she had left him behind. “The cops are going to be here soon. We have to call in gunshot wounds. If I didn’t have a little weight around here, they would have been here already.”

“Why aren’t they?” his side ached where the Midgardians had pulled him back together and the incessant beeping of the machines was driving him mad.

“Because the two people with you were worried sick about you. Whatever got you shot sent them
running. Tell me what it was.”

Swallowing, Loki put on his smuggest grin. “Do you seek glory, Nurse Temple?”

“What?”

“Do you seek the recognition of the cameras and populace? What do you hope to gain from me?”

Sighing, Nurse Temple pinched the bridge of her nose. “God, I hate defense mechanisms.” She let go of his hand and reached up to fluff his pillows. He watched her closely. “You’ve got until the end of my shift. When I leave, my help goes with me.”

She stood and exited the room. Loki watched her vanish out the open door and into the busy area his room looked out onto. Though the sounds outside his room where many, nothing seemed to conquer the beeping of his own machines. Shifting delicately against the pillows, Loki tried to settle. Skye and Mike had left him alone in the hands of strangers and now authorities were likely to come and claim him. It would be as if he had never left the Rounders’ bus in the first place.

He had fooled himself into believing that he had found a place amongst Skye and Mike. They must have known the authorities would come after the source of his injury became known. They had chosen their own ends over keeping him. He understood; it was something he would have done. Yet the trust, however small, he had afforded the pair now spoiled in his heart and turned to bile. He had known, he had assured himself from the start, and now it had come to fruition. When push inevitably came to shove, the mortals would not choose him. The same outcome had come from the Asgardians. He was what the healers called him.

John Doe, a man from nowhere, without a name and without a place, with no one to claim him. He should have bled out in the armored SUV.

His body felt unreal to him and he clawed at the port where the tubing connected to him. It stung and he felt the metal inside of him move. A shiver wormed it’s way up his neck and he got a good grip on it. Yanking quickly on it, he hissed at the pain. Blood oozed from the spot and he pressed down on it as hard as he could, gripping the side of the bed and pulling himself up. As he did so, another tube snagged on his arm and he fell back with a wave of pain and nausea. They had a tube inside of him where his wound had been. A small bubble-like container with reddish liquid inside of it sloshed and he had to blink many times to understand what it was. His wound was draining into the bubble. He didn’t yank it out, though he felt the urge, but rose to his feet. He managed a couple steps before the movement and the weight of his own body overcame him and he crashed to the floor.
The machines screeched into his ear, the heralds of his own unconsciousness.

Laura

Laura Cardell’s lunch breaks usually consisted of a premade meal and a thirty-minute long call home. When her neighbor Clint wasn’t home or free to watch her daughter Lila and her son Cooper, she usually managed to convince one of the others to do it for the promise of a home-cooked meal. Tonight, it was Grills. That often meant she’d have a mess to deal with when she got back. The kids liked to get as hands-on as they could with his crafty projects.

“He brought his tackle box, Mama!” Lila yelled in her ear, the sound of Cooper whooping in the background drowning out Grills’ own holler. “I want to go fishing!”

“You want to go fishing?” She was staring down the barrel of a double shift stretch soon and knew only a miracle could make a fishing trip happen. “I thought you didn’t like fish.”

“Fish-ticks not fish, Mama,” Cooper called out and Laura wondered what else Grills had been teaching them. “Dey poss unk.”

“They’re what now?”

“Processed junk!” Grills answered, the sound of his footsteps drew nearer. “How’s the hospital, Ms. Cardell?”

Looking about the relatively quiet floor, Laura spotted Claire coming out of their gunshot patient’s room. She had sworn to Laura that the John Doe might have something to do with the Rounders shootout victims a station over but had kept it quiet. Laura was all for hard cases, but she wasn’t about to go against the Rounders for a stranger. If she had been childless, then maybe, but she wasn’t. She was too busy being a mom to be a martyr. Claire shrugged and tapped her watch. In about another hour, they would both be tapping out and going home. I guess John Doe had a ticking clock on his play. She hoped he took it, for Claire’s sake.

“It’s still standing, so I guess it’s alright,” Laura sighed. “I’ll be home soon.”
“The kids’ll be waiting, Ms. Cardell,” Grills said softly and she smiled against the receiver.

“Thanks again, Grills.”

“Don’t need thanks, ma’am, but I will take some of your roast beef.”

“I’ll start it when I get home and it should be ready by lunch tomorrow. Sound good?”

“It sure does!” Grills must have made a gesture at Lila and Cooper because they cheered. “See ya, Ms. Cardell.”

“Call me Laura, Grills,” she laughed but he made a noise of protest.

“O’course, Ms. Cardell.” And he hung up.

Laura managed to swallow down the last bite of her sandwich before the alarms started blaring from the John Doe’s room. Shooting to her feet and wiping her hands clean with an antibacterial wipe, Laura rushed into the room. Everything was normal except for the patient sprawled on the floor with his IV undone. Sighing, Laura called for help and checked his pulse.

All normal, if slightly elevated, though his skin was a bit clammy. She turned him onto his back being mindful of the drain, and set about checking him for fall injuries. Aside from a small bruise on his chin, he looked no worse for wear. Claire came sprinting around the doorway and Laura waved her over.

“What happened?” Claire asked, getting a good hold of his legs as Laura carefully got him in a vertical position.

“He and the linoleum got acquainted. He pulled out his IV.” Laura blew out a breath as they lifted him back onto his bed and situated him under his covers.

“Should we tie him down?”
“I thought you wanted him to be free?”

“You and I both know Rollins Rounders aren’t the good guys. Morning cartoons don’t change the injuries we have to treat because of them. This guy and his crew managed to shoot Jack Rollins himself point blank in the chest.”

“He survived, Claire.”

“But he took a bullet first,” Claire lowered her voice and made short work of fixing the man’s IV. “I want to know how they managed it.”

“What, so you can march over to Rollins’ room and finish the job?”

“Laura,” and she’d be hard-pressed not to cave-in to Claire’s completely reasonable gaze. “This guy’s body rejected the O neg during transfusion and he managed to survive surgery without it. The bullet clipped an artery. John Doe should be dead, but instead he turned blue and survived. It’s bad enough the government lets the Abomination out to save us, I’m not handing this guy over to them.”

“You can’t take him home with you,” Laura had silenced the machines and it gave the room an eerie feeling. She wondered if the Rounders were watching them. “He’s not a stray dog.”

“But he’s something, Laura,” Claire tucked the covers in around him. “I want to know what.”

“Do you think he’s one of those enhanced?”

“Look how fast he’s healing. He’s not human, or at very least, not normal.”

Laura watched the man’s vitals normalize. “Maybe superhumans are the new normal.”

“They’re an infinitesimal part of society. The Kommandos are just...larger than life and splashed on any merchandise companies can sell. Even the bad guys they take on don’t have armies of
enhanced individuals at their beck and call,” Claire tightened her hair tie and rolled her shoulders. “It’s not like super-powered humans are going to come flying out of the woodwork.”

“Clint thinks it’s only a matter of time.”

“He was a Kommando, Laura, of course he’d think that.”

“He fought on the same team as the Abomination for years,” Laura crossed her arms. “He’s seen high-powered humans. I trust his judgement.”

Claire’s shoulders dropped. “Fine, but does it sit well with you to just...let them take people we’ve saved to Zola’s labs? You know that’s where they all go. Lawbreakers, the sick, and anyone who says a word against President Stern. He’s up for reelection this November. I can bet you now that he’s going to win. He helped change the face of our country and Zola’s right there with him. I’m tired of watching good people get sucked into their machine.”

Laura thought of her ex-husband, a man she wasn’t likely to ever see again. He had tried to steal from some rich guy named Killian and got caught. The next thing she knew, he was packed up in one of those transport buses and sent to Zola’s. Everyone understood, in that silent way that people communicate, that once you went in...you never came out. She took in John Doe’s face and sighed.

“What do you want to do?”

“I just want to give him an option. It’s up to him to take it.”

Glancing to the quiet nurses station outside the door, Laura nodded. “Okay. But if he doesn’t take it, we’re done.”

“Yeah,” And Claire gave her a lopsided grin. “We’re done.”

Loki
His unconsciousness didn’t last long and he blinked awake to the feel of scratchy sheets against his skin and the infernal beeping of the machines. Growling, Loki reached for the IV again, but a soft hand stopped him.

“Leave that alone.”

“Leave me alone, you wretched woman,” He cast Nurse Temple’s hand off of his arm and turned away, only to meet the patient eyes of yet another healer. “You’ve scrounged up reinforcements?”

“If that’s what you want to call me, sure,” the other woman remarked, taking a seat. “Or we can be civilized people and you can call me Nurse Cardell.”

“What can we call you?” Nurse Temple asked and Loki looked between them. Kill them with kindness, he supposed, as they were attempting to do to him.

“Loren,” he offered, swallowing thickly. Nurse Cardell must have noticed because she rose and stepped out of the room. A moment later, she returned with a cup of water. Loki drank from it heartily and this seemed to please the nurses.

“So, Loren,” Nurse Temple began and she leaned against his bed with her arms crossed. “Are you ready to tell me what happened to you?”

“Nothing that your skills could not put to rights. It is you I have to thank for my continued life?”

“No, that would be Doctors Burstein and Strange. Not quite sure how you managed to survive them both. Especially since your body rejected the blood we tried to give you.”

Digging his fingers into his skin, Loki frowned at them. “You put mortal blood inside me?”

“Wasted it would be a better description,” Nurse Temple sighed. “I’m going to level with you, I know you’re not human.”

“Oh, do you?”
“Skin that turns blue and an aversion to the universal blood type? There’s not much else to work with.”

“Perhaps there is no explanation for me.”

“Or perhaps you’re wasting time insulting our intelligence,” Nurse Cardell chuckled at Nurse Temple’s quip and Loki’s jaw worked.

“What have you to offer me, then, for my cooperation?”

Nurse Temple leaned away from the bed and glanced out of the room. “Jack Rollins and at least six of his Rounders are a station over. I could easily raise the alarm that you’re sitting right here with a drain in your side. You couldn’t even get out of the room without passing out. What do you think is going to happen if you have to put up a fight?”

“I will not be bested by mortals,” Loki pulled himself up to a sitting position, attempting to ignore the pull of the drain. “I shall do what...what my comrades could not.”

“You didn’t fare too well the first time.”

“One cannot win every war.”

“No, I guess not,” Nurse Cardell shifted and seemed to be offering him an air of secrecy by getting closer to him. “But my friend here is determined to help you win this one.”

“And you are not?”

“I’m just a bystander,” The woman leaned back from him and glanced up at Nurse Temple. “Ten minutes until shift change.”

Nurse Temple sighed. “The government wants people to look away while mercenaries terrorize the public. I’m not going to look away.”
Loki’s mind turned once more to Skye and he wanted to rip out his heart as he had that infernal tubing. She had abandoned him here to this fate. All her platitudes had been for naught. She would never have risked her wholesome crusade for him. Mike and his young boy, Ace, would always take first place. Aces high, they had said. Loki would never be able to reach...oh...oh, that’s something.

“My comrades searched for a boy...he was taken by the...mercenaries. I want to find him.”

Nurse Cardell frowned and shrugged at Nurse Temple, who in turn raised her eyebrows. Loki watched this exchange quietly. Finally, Nurse Temple looked back to him.

“Will you do everything I say?”

Relaxing against the bedding, Loki fought the beginnings of a smile. “I am at your command.”

Clint

Some time at Bishop’s Gym had done Steve some good. Maybe it had been the presence of so many children, many of which fawned over him once they realized how gentle and strong he could be. Out of all the yoga poses he grudgingly participated in, Clint had to say that the Christmas tree was the best. The kids squealed as he lifted them up and hung them from Steve’s flexed arms. Kate had giggled herself to tears at the stoic expression Steve had taken on for the duration.

Of course, Steve had brought her mood down when he confessed some of his past in order to alleviate her embarrassment. Apparently, Helblindi and Býleistr had hung from him, too, and their shrill cries were far louder than that of the little human children. At least, Steve had said softly, their touch doesn’t burn my skin. Kate had stared at Clint with wide eyes behind Steve’s back but Clint had just pressed his lips together and shrugged. Not his tale to tell.

After a few hours and a promise to return as soon as they had a moment, Clint and Steve headed back. As the snow crunched beneath their feet and the wind howled, Steve gave a heavy sigh.

“Thank you,” he whispered into the breeze and Clint nodded without looking at him.
“I take it you liked Kate?”

“She said she owned that building. Where are her parents?”

Clint glanced back at the gym. “Let’s just say she cut the cord before the poison could spread. She’s a good kid.”

“Yeah,” Steve’s face managed a miniscule smile. “Reminds me of someone I used to know.”

Clint stared down the street for a moment and let Steve have a moment with his past. “About taking down the tracksuits...” He began and Steve’s shoulders pulled up tight.

“You wanted to buy the building,” Steve said, and he crossed his arms. “Is Banionis selling it?”

“He’s got offers from a few companies. Gentrification sells, doncha know?”

“And he’s raising rates until everyone’s gone?”

“Well, he thinks he’s being smooth. It’s within his rights to do what he wants with the building, but all the people still there don’t have an option two. If they leave, they most likely won’t have a place to land.”

“You do,” and Steve looked at him intently. “But you haven’t left.”

Letting out a tense breath, Clint pulled Lucky away from a trash can. “I’m the last line of defense. If I leave, it’ll be short work to get everyone else out.”

“Why? You’re just an average citizen, right?”

Clint forced a smile and a nod. “Of course. As average as they come.”
Steve blinked once, narrowed his eyes, then turned away. “Average citizens don’t have code names.”

“I work for a super secret organization. Still average.”

Steve smiled without teeth or light. “Right. And your neighbors just happen to know your super secret code name?”

“Look, I worked hard to get out of a bad situation and I burned a lot of bridges to do it. But at the end of the day, I’m just an average guy with an above average skill who wants to take a nap. There’s no subterfuge, no thrilling origin story. I’m just...a normal guy.”

“And that’s why Banionis can’t get rid of you? Your sense of normalcy is invulnerable?”

Breathing out a laugh, Clint shook his head. “I’m just a tough guy to uproot.”

Steve actually broke a real smile this time. “That’s good.”

Letting out a mental sigh of relief, Clint got a little pep in his step. “I’m starving. Let’s grab a--”

Steve reacted before he knew what he was reacting to. He stepped between Clint and the buildings in front of them, bringing his shield up. Something metallic slammed into it and fell to the ground. Steve glimpsed it from a quick glance at his feet. A bullet. Clint ducked behind a wall and dragged Lucky with him. Steve stood for a moment longer, looking up towards where the shot came from.

“Steve! Get behind cover!”

Steve stood to his full height and waited...and waited. “They’re gone,” he said after a moment.
Clint hesitated for a second, then slowly emerged from behind the wall. As soon as he was close enough, Clint smacked Steve’s bicep.

“What the fuck were you thinking?!?” Clint didn’t even bother lowering his voice. “You’re superhuman not invulnerable.”

“I wasn’t the target.”

“You don’t know that!” Clint snapped and Lucky barked. Nodding his head towards the dog, Clint gestured to him for emphasis. “See, even Lucky agrees. You’re a dumb ass.”

Turning slowly, Steve slid his shield onto his back. He met Clint’s eyes with a hint of annoyance. “I’m not worried about my safety. Someone just shot at you and you’re yelling at me about it. Seems pretty dumb to me.”

Pulling back, Clint scoffed. “You want to chase the shooter or you want to sit around arguing semantics with me?”

“The shooter’s gone,” Steve said and started walking towards the apartment building again.

“How do you know?” he called out, tugging Lucky to start following Steve.

“If they were still here, you wouldn’t be.”

Clint started to speak, but found himself at a loss for words. Steve turned a corner ahead of him before he could catch up and Clint kicked a pile of snow. He looked up at the place where the bullet came from, checking the windows of every building within his eyesight. He spotted the crack at about the same time that Steve appeared at the corner.

“There’s ambulances and police at the apartment!” Steve shouted to him and Clint tore his eyes from the cracked window as his heart leapt into his throat.
Laura

Claire’s sense of justice was going to get her killed, Laura knew that much. She had clocked out a half-hour ago and made a quick trip to the grocery store for roast beef. Claire had sworn to keep her informed but out of the danger. Laura was just thankful the man hadn’t been violent. As far as she knew, he was just one of those Rising Tide hackers that Claire went on about. The Rollins Rounders had been attacking a bus not unlike their own from the footage the news had been running all day. According to Claire, the Rising Tide people were helping, even if only in small doses.

Had she been a few years younger and a couple kids short, she might have joined them in their crusade. Lord knows she was always far too caring for her own good. It was a big factor in deciding her career. If she didn’t care about people, she wouldn’t be working in healthcare. Still, after her ex-husband...after Lila and Cooper...Laura had lost that risk-taker mentality. She couldn’t afford to risk it all on hard cases. If something happened to her, there was no one to take care of Lila and Cooper. It was an open secret that Zola’s Algorithm, the terrible name for President Stern’s horrible pipeline to torture, had a specially crafted line for kids in the system. It was easier to mold young people than older ones.

Laura would die before she let her children be taken by Zola.

Claire only had her mother and herself to worry about, and both of them were the kind to weigh public rebellion above personal safety. Well, within measure at least. Laura didn’t expect Claire to go off guns blazing against the Kommandos or anything.

Well, she hoped at least.

Seeing as the upcoming Easter holiday had created a bit of a crowd at the grocery store, Laura was running a little behind getting home. A couple ambulances had passed her by as she walked the last few blocks to her apartment building and she thought nothing of it. It was a common noise for her to hear and unless they slowed down to pick her up, she wasn’t involved in whatever mayhem they were undoubtedly answering the call for. She sent up a prayer that everyone at the scene would be alright and kept walking.
It wasn’t until she rounded the corner a few yards down from her apartment that she realized where the ambulances had headed. Nearly dropping her groceries, Laura sprinted across the street and dove into the chaos. Police were swarming around the entranceway and she almost bowled them over trying to get inside.

“Ma’am!” the nearest officer called, grabbing her by the shoulders. “I’m gonna need you to step back.”

Glancing down at his nameplate, she glared up at him. “Listen here, Officer Simpson, my children are in that building and if you don’t let me through, I’ll...”

“Laura!” Clint Barton called from behind her and she spun on her heel. The former Kommando was standing by an open ambulance door with Cooper and Lila. Her heart plummeted down to her toes and she shoved her groceries into Officer Simpson’s arms. He flailed, but managed not to drop any of it. She made quick work of getting to her children.

“Mama!” They rushed her and held onto her tight. She pulled them close, her relief and fear warring in her heart and felt something wet on Cooper’s back. Pulling away, she gazed down at her hand. It was coated in blood.

Shaking, Laura’s mind went straight into thoughts of gunshots wounds and she lifted her son’s shirt to see his skin. “What happened, baby? Where are you hurt? Who did this to you?”

Clint’s hand fell on her elbow and squeezed. “It’s not his blood, Laura.”

“What?” Her gaze flickered between her son and her neighbor quickly. The only thing that stopped her was the dead-eyed look in Clint’s gaze. She pulled her kids to her once more and frowned at him. “What...whose...whose blood is it, then?”

Clint looked down and shook his head minutely. Laura felt herself pulling away from him.

“No,” she whispered. “My god, no. I was just talking to...”

“I’m sorry.”
“Sorry?” Laura let go of her children and slid her body between them and the once famous archer. “What did you do?”

Clint’s face closed down a little and the shock morphed from pain to defense in a heartbeat. She’d seen the same look on his brother’s face in the ICU. *Just because they were aiming for me doesn’t mean it was my fault.* Of course it was...it always was.

“Laura, I was at Bishop’s Gym when this went down.”

“And today’s when you would usually be watching the kids. But you got mixed up in whatever drama this guy,” and she pointed to Birgirsson, who bowed his head. “dragged onto your doorstep.” Breathing out a painful laugh, Laura shook her head. “This wasn’t a fluke. Whoever did this was coming for you, in my apartment where you would have been with my kids.”

Clint’s shoulders dropped and he reached out for her, but she pulled away. “Please, I’ll make this right. I’ll catch the guy who did this.”

“And what? Kill him? They’ll just send someone else. There is *always* someone else,” her heart racing, Laura turned back to her kids. “Lila, Cooper, are you alright? What did you see?”


“He did?” And tears were burning Laura’s eyes between blinks. “How...how’d he do that?”

“He carried us out when the...the guns went off. He pushed us behind the big pillar in the kitchen and told us to be small.” Lila’s voice wavered and she frowned. “Is Mister Grills okay, mama?”

Inhaling sharply, Laura pulled her kids into another hug. “I don’t know, baby...I don’t know.”
Jack Rollins had laughed him out of the room when he had announced his retirement to the Kommandos over drinks at headquarters. It had been a running gag that he wasn’t capable of putting down his bow. Of course, Clint was always one for challenges and took that one happily.

“I’ll be honorably discharged by Monday morning. Garrett’s already signed off on it,” he had been so full of bravado.

“Oh, yeah?” Rumlow had inputted from his reclined position on the couch. “And you think the Captain is just gonna let you walk away?” The man in question was posted up against the wall watching them like a gargoyle. If his piercing grey eyes weren’t flickering to each of their faces in turn, he would have looked like a gothic statue in his stealth get-up.

“I told him first,” he informed them, easy and quick like that hadn’t been the most terrifying conversation he had ever had. And it had paled in comparison to informing Fury that he wasn’t going to be his inside man anymore. He’d had enough...and he couldn’t stomach another second of it all.

“Don’t worry, boys,” Yelena had said, her voice the sweet edge of poison. “He’ll miss us and come crawling back.”

“Not likely,” Clint had scoffed and Rollins had laughed.

“You’re a Kommando, Barton, and that’s for life,” Rollins had told him, laying a heavy hand on his shoulder. “You don’t get to walk away, discharged or not.”

Clint stepped away from Laura and the kids, his lips pressed tight and as soon as he managed to escape their gaze, he headed for the apartment. The officers saw him coming and raised their hands to stop him, but one look at his face and they dropped their hands. You don’t get to walk away. Clint shoved into the building and he could feel Steve like a shadow at his back. It was almost like having the other Captain at his six. Big shadows to carry around...like always.

The climb to his floor took less than a blink since he was too busy wiping Laura’s betrayed gaze from his mind’s eye. Your kids are safe with me. He had told her that when he moved in, because someone of his clout was hard to ignore. Of course, thanks to SHIELD and the fine print in his Kommandos contract, he was able to disappear without press or fanfare. As far as the average citizen was concerned, there never was a Kommando named Hawkeye. A few fan pages actively
tried to revive his image, but he was as much a conspiracy theory to the world as Steve.

Now, he felt like all of that was just a stopgap holding off an avalanche of fallout for thinking he could be free. *You were never actually retired. You don’t get to walk away.*

There was crime scene tape blocking off Laura’s apartment and they had already loaded Grills’ body into a gurney in the hallway. Clint marched all the way to him and pulled the sheet back despite the protests of the officers around him. Half of Grills’ face was gone and Clint choked back a sob as someone ripped the sheet out of his hand and draped it back over Grill’s face. They started down the hall and Steve seemed to hover quietly beside him until they vanished around the corner.

“Clint,” Steve began, but with a wave of his hand, the super soldier fell silent.

“God dammit,” Clint bit out, trying and failing to keep his emotions in check. It was shit like this that led to his retirement in the first place. That and knowing it was courtesy of Stark Industries and the man himself that innocents were dying in droves. There wasn’t a single Kommandos mission that could have evened out the balance of lives. Every second of his freedom was paid for in civilian blood. “*God damn it!*”

“Triple rent,” said a familiar voice and Clint glared at where Banionis was standing proudly at the end of the hall by the stairs. “Cleaners not so cheap here.”

“You piece of shit!” Clint closed the distance between himself and Banionis in a heartbeat. He landed in a good volley of punches before the cops in the hall came and pulled him off. Apparently, Steve must have backed him up because the cops were holding him, too, with little success. “I know it was you, Banionis!”

“What’s going on here?” One of the officers asked and Clint spit at Banionis. “I’d suggest cooling off, sir, or else I’m going to have to arrest you for assault.”

“Get him out of my building,” Banionis hissed, and Clint started to wrestle out of the officer’s hold to get his hands on Banionis’ throat.

“Alright, that’s it!” The officer shoved Clint into the wall and would have slapped handcuffs on him if Steve didn’t roughly shoulder the officer out of the way.
“Don’t touch him,” Steve quietly ordered and Clint had to bite down on his urge to rip this building to shreds with his bare hands.

“Stand down, Steve,” Clint whispered and Steve glanced at him from the corner of his eye. “Stand down.”

“He played his hand, Clint,” Steve said, gesturing to Banionis. The officers were slowly advancing on them and Steve didn’t seem bothered in the slightest. “If you don’t make your move now, you’ll forfeit.”

“Life isn’t a game, Steve,” Clint growled and held his hands up. “Arrest me for assault, officers,” And he shoved Banionis as hard as he could. The snapping of bone was so satisfying as the man tumbled down the stairs. He came to a stop on the landing in a crooked position and the officers rushed Clint. He let them.

Steve was cuffed for being with him and as they were loaded into separate squad cars, the officers called up the EMTs. Laura met his eyes from where she was sitting with her kids and he looked away. Banionis may have set it up, but someone else pulled the trigger. The person who had shot at him down the street was a warning. Clint would answer with finality.

Steve was cuffed for being with him and as they were loaded into separate squad cars, the officers called up the EMTs. Laura met his eyes from where she was sitting with her kids and he looked away. Banionis may have set it up, but someone else pulled the trigger. The person who had shot at him down the street was a warning. Clint would answer with finality.

Tony

“How disappointing you’ve become,” Herr Kleiser commented as the medics stitched the back of Tony’s head back together. The facility had called Kleiser as soon as the guards found Tony on the ground. Kleiser had barely made it back the airport. “Overpowered by interns and astrophysicists. Pathetic,” Kleiser was pacing around him and Tony clenched his teeth together. Would he have felt worse if he had let them be captured? Probably, but then again, as with everything he had done since his first memory, he could never pick a safe option. People like him weren’t afforded safe options.

“Yes,” he answered a question that hadn’t been verbally asked.

Of course he was pathetic. He was human. Always fallible in Kleiser’s eyes. Why did he even try? Oh, yeah, because failing on purpose was like poison in his veins, especially when he had the likes of Schmidt looking down on him as if he were Atlas, Sisyphus and Prometheus all in one. Destined to carry the world, fail the world and give it light for all eternity. It’s what you were born for, his
father would say and he would nod to make him happy. Who cared if the burden was too much, or the world too eager to fail, or the light too bright? He was his father’s son, he was metal and oil and the sound of humming engines after a gas-powered purgatory. He was the future and everything that entailed.

Kleiser’s hand came up to his head and Tony fought a shudder as the long-fingered hand met his skin. Kleiser’s skin was always clammy and cold. The touch of death wrapped in black eyes and a cruel yet genteel smile. “So much potential inside this mind of yours...” Kleiser dug his fingers into his skin as if he wanted to scoop Tony’s brain out with his fingernails. “If you cannot bring HYDRA into the future...I will find someone to lift the burden from your precious brain.”

Swallowing, Tony stared up at Kleiser. “I am loyal.”

“No,” And the touch became light and almost creepily nurturing. “You are weak. And in your weakness you seek those of strength. A house of cards must meet its fate eventually, Anthony.” Kleiser placed his other hand on Tony’s head and tilted it so he was looking down. “Starks are made of iron, are they not?”

“Yes,” Tony responded and relaxed in Kleiser’s hold.

“Then be iron. Be steel. Be titanium...be anything you can create,” and Kleiser pressed his thin lips to the top of Tony’s head. “But do not waste my time with failure.”

“Yes, Herr Kleiser,” Tony’s body regained its rigidity as Kleiser stepped back.

“I assume I have your complete certainty that the programming will hold?”

“Of course. The subject will go to New Mexico to retrieve his hammer, then he will look for you.”

“As my sworn protector until death?”

“Until death, just as you ordered.”

“Good,” Kleiser turned away. “Your work is done here, Anthony. Return to New York. Your gala
approaches and you must not disappoint the Emperor.”

“Hail Hydra,” Tony forced himself to say, hiding his clenched fist in a salute against his heart.

Kleiser smiled at him like a doting father. “Hail Hydra.”

Tony managed to keep up his persona up until he boarded his jet.

It came crumbling down around him as soon as the door closed behind him and he headed straight for the bathroom. He had barely eaten anything, but he threw up whatever managed to find its way into his stomach anyway. The blow to his head had left him slightly nauseous, but Kleiser’s scrutiny had broken the last of his barriers. Curled up alone on the cold floor, Tony pretended he wasn’t on the verge of breakdown. By the time he landed on American soil, he would have pulled himself back together and he could get back to the grind.

He just...he just needed to fall apart for a second. For a brief moment, when no one and nothing could see him do it. He needed to crumble to build himself back up. He needed to break to make himself whole again. It was the bottom of his futile hill and he had to face the eagle’s hungry appetite once more. Tomorrow he would rise again, climb the hill, grow a heart, lift the weight as if he had never dropped it. But for now...for now he couldn’t climb out of the dark.

He hid his puffy eyes behind dark shades and hurried from his jet to his car and to his Tower without seeing anyone but Happy.

Waiting in the backseat of his car was a few burgers and fresh fries, still warm in their wrappers. Tony gave into an impulse and hugged Happy until he received a mild pat and a soft, “Alright there, boss?”, before climbing into the back and devouring all of it. The drive to his Tower was mostly quiet and Tony both loved and hated it. The flight was quiet, too, but mostly because he couldn’t be bothered to pull himself out of his bedroom, not even to eat. The flight attendants knew better than to disturb him and aside from a brief run-in when he had paced his room to no avail and had a wild thought to try the rest of the plane on for size, he hadn’t seen them at all. Probably the easiest money they ever made.

Happy parked the car under the tower and joined him in the elevator, standing at the ready beside
him. Tony stood a little closer to Happy than he normally would, glad to feel heat coming off the man’s skin. Here was a real human being, here was a true friend. Burgers and warmth, his bar had really been knocked low over the years.

“Welcome back, sir,” JARVIS said and Tony nearly broke down again. Whenever he had to deal with Kleiser or Schmidt, he put JARVIS in silent mode. His AI could still hear and record everything, but only from a state of low power. Both Kleiser and Schmidt were wary about JARVIS. With good reason, of course. Tony really didn’t want to listen to what had happened in Norway.

“There’s...uh...there’s,” Happy stuttered suddenly and Tony looked at him.

“What?”

“Miss Potts told me not to tell you, but...”

“Not to tell me what?” When Happy turned slightly red and scrunched up his face, Tony narrowed his eyes. “Did you break the hot tub again?”

“That was one time and it wasn’t even my fault!” Happy yelped and Tony found a laugh springing out of him. It felt good.

“Well, what is it then?” he asked and the elevator reached the penthouse. The doors opened and Pepper called out.

“In the living room, Tony!” she sounded happy and in a really good mood. Tony wanted whatever she was having.

He and Happy rounded the corner and Tony stumbled as his eyes processed what he was seeing. “Rhodey?”

Raising a brow and looking around himself, James Rhodes cracked a smile. “You know any other devilishly handsome and over-worked guard captains?”
Tony didn’t even give his friend the option of a hug; he demanded it with strength and speed alone. He hadn’t seen him in the flesh in so long, his scent alone was enough to knock the breath out of him. He embraced him in something just shy of a death grip and Rhodey gave as good as he got.

“God, I’ve missed you,” Tony managed through the odd angle his neck was bent at to maintain the hug.

“Missed you, too, Tones,” Rhodey told him and slowly pulled away. “I heard you’ve been in Norway,” Rhodey patted the back of Tony’s head in exasperation and Tony hissed as the blow struck his stitches. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine,” Tony began, but Pepper carded her fingers through his hair and found the wound.

“Who hit you?”

“It’s nothing.”

“I count six stitches of nothing,” Rhodey said and leveled a serious look in Tony’s direction.

“I said I’m fine!” Tony snapped and put some distance between them. He had crafted himself like the machine he was supposed to be before the plane landed. He couldn’t afford to rebuild himself again so soon. “Just...just a little mishap.”

“How bad of a mishap?” Rhodey asked and Tony sighed, deciding how to phrase it.

“The subject escaped the facility,” JARVIS informed them neatly and Tony took a seat.

“See? Nothing to worry about?”

“The crazy man who thinks he’s a god,” Rhodey pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head. “I’m sorry, the man who is a god just...walked out of the facility?”

“Yep, right out through the back door,” Tony didn’t meet any of their eyes.
“You let him go.” Rhodey stated after a moment and Pepper lowered herself into the seat opposite him. “I thought Rogers needed him?”

“And I thought you were going to keep an eye on him until Rogers’ probation was up,” Pepper didn’t sound disapproving, but it wasn’t an endorsement, either.

“It was spur of the moment, okay?” Tony shot to his feet and headed to the bar. “There was an opportunity and...I let them take it.”

“Kleiser can’t have been happy about that. Did he do that to your head?” Rhodey asked, following Tony up to the bar.

“No, it was Agent Poptart and Doctor Foster. Looks realistic, doesn’t it?” Tony smiled at them and poured the first thing his fingers found. He didn’t even bother looking at the label. “He’ll be headed for New Mexico to get his hammer, per Kleiser’s programming. Kleiser will surely follow.”

“And you’re not going to pay the price for this?” Pepper asked, though she was the first one to ensure Tony he had Schmidt’s support.

“They took his dog out for a walk, but it’s a short leash. A slap on the wrist...that’s all this is.”

“Kleiser’s up to something,” Pepper declared and both Tony and Rhodey nodded.

Rhodey crossed his arms. “Schmidt called the Kommandos back into active duty. The Abomination is out of his cage. He’s getting ready for something.”

Tony let it stew for a little, then snapped his fingers. “Kleiser had me set Thor to protector mode. Once he lays a hand on his hammer, his next objective is to defend Kleiser.”

“Defend him from what?”
An inkling of an idea hit Tony like a speeding train. “From Schmidt.”
Human

Chapter Notes

I struggled a little with this chapter, ngl. Then my aunt’s dog ate my laptop cord (which was *distressing*), but my mom’s a saint and replaced it. Sorry for the super late update. Also, I'm shamelessly using my many years of watching Law and Order to bullshit my way through police procedures.

Please enjoy and if you do, consider buying me a coffee!

Chapter Title.

Steve

Despite the fact that he could break the handcuffs with one quick movement, Steve refrained from using his significant advantage. Since the police had separated them into two different squad cars, Steve couldn’t tell what Clint’s plan had been - if he had done any of it with a plan in the first place. For all the talk of taking on Banionis, Steve had never thought it would escalate to that point.

Raising rent and flexing muscles? Sure, that was classic skeezy owner behavior. Having a resident killed with children in the crossfire...now that was something Steve could happily say he hadn’t really dealt with when he was on Earth. Kids getting shot at on foreign shores were a different matter. He hadn’t been shored up by little ones whose ages were still in single digits. He had only met Laura once and that had been a couple days ago. To have this happen, so soon after his arrival at the building...

I’m a weapon, a hound of Hel.

Again he wondered if Hela remained inside of him, like a poison in his veins, leaking out into the people around him and bringing them to harm. He no longer believed her gift came without strings. Had he fulfilled his part of the bargain? Had he traded enough life for his own? Or was his existence merely a chain of unfortunate events bound together by the tragedy that befell anyone he met?

“How’d you get mixed up with birdbrain, anyway?” The officer driving him asked and Steve glanced up at the man. He wondered if the man was Hydra, if this had all been a ploy to separate
Steve from help or back-up.

“A god king sent me down to Brooklyn and he took me in.”

“Uh huh,” The officer huffed and Steve read his badge through the rearview. Simpson. “Mind telling me what you smoked today?”

“I don’t do drugs.”

“Sure, buddy. So, you’ve never even sampled some?”

“Once. I grew three sizes and a few people died. I wouldn’t recommend it.”

Officer Simpson laughed and slowed to a stop at a red light. The car carrying Clint kept going. “Must’ve been something strong to involve kids like that.”

Steve relaxed into the seat and watched Simpson. The man was blond and might be an inch or two taller than him. He wasn’t built the same as Steve, but he looked like he could hold his own. Steve sighed.

“Did you find the person who shot Grills?”

“It’s an active investigation, Mister...?”

“Birgirsson, like my ID says.”

“Right, Birgirsson. Like I was saying, it’s an active investigation. I can’t reveal information to you. Besides, you’re a suspect after the shit you and Barton pulled in that hallway.”

“Will Banionis survive?”
“Do you care?”

“If it means the loss of my friend’s freedom...yeah, I care.”

“Funny, seein’ as you assaulted an officer and were an accessory to his attempted murder of Ivan Banionis. You’re batting a hundred on life choices, Birgirsson.”

“Yeah...I get that a lot.”

Steve had broken quite a few laws, but he hadn’t actually been in lockup. Last time he’d been this close to bars on Earth, he’d been breaking the 107th out. He bore the procedures and stares of the other offenders with detached stoicism. Clint was carted away for questioning.

As he was fingerprinted and photographed for the record, Steve watched them enter it all underneath his SHIELD moniker. Stígandr Birgirsson would be a bona fide citizen of Earth, lawbreaking and all. Director Carter probably hadn’t meant for him to spend his probation this way, but needs must. He just wished they had brought the fight to Banionis before people got hurt.

If Banionis didn’t survive his tumble down the stairs, there was surely another lowlife waiting to take advantage of the residents of Clint’s building. They’d have to buy it. Of course, he wasn’t sure what the procedures were for criminal landowners. Aside from a few decimals, he presumed it was the same for law-abiding citizens.

If he didn’t blow all his SHIELD allowance on bail that is.

They shuffled him off to lock-up, his pack and overcoat having been surrendered. Steve rolled his shoulders as they shut him in with a few drunks and looked at the officers. Considering they couldn’t perceive his shield, he still had it pressed against his back. A few good hits and he’d be out of here quicker than he’d been brought in.

That wouldn’t do anything for Clint or for his probation, but Steve was itching to put his strength to good use.
“Yer a big fucker, aren’t ya?”

Steve turned slow and steady, sparing the short man who had spoken less than a brief glance before finding a place against the wall to stand. The man scoffed and sniffed, wiping his nose with a knuckle.

“I said...” the man began and Steve let out a long sigh to interrupt him.

“I can hear just fine.”

“Is that right?”

“It is. But if you want to have the same privilege...” Steve stepped into the man’s space, forcing him to retreat. “I’d suggest staying far away from me.”

“Now, now,” and Steve’s head jerked up to see Natasha Romanoff standing akimbo on the other side of the bars. “Imagine my surprise when I come to get you and Clint, only to be told you had both been arrested for assault and attempted murder.”

“To be fair,” and he grinned at the man until the man walked away. “I can’t say Banionis didn’t have it coming.”

“True, but how does getting locked up play into your ‘save the world’ mission?”

Steve shrugged his shoulders. “You’ve made it abundantly clear that you don’t trust me. You know who I am. I’ve told you everything that’s happened to me and you still handle me with kid gloves,” He closed the distance between himself and Natasha as best he could and eyed her. Despite the gentling of her gaze, she didn’t give anything away.

“This isn’t going to convince anyone that you’re ready for active duty.”

“I’m not a soldier...not anymore. I’m not going to be on active duty. I don’t work for you.”
“Your bank account says something different.”

Swallowing, Steve glanced down the hall where the officers had taken Clint. “We were going to buy the building. Do it right, do it honest. Banionis would have killed Clint if he hadn’t been taking me and Lucky for a walk. Banionis was willing to put children in the crossfire to get to Clint.”

“That makes attempted murder okay?”

Clenching his jaw, Steve bit back a thousand things. “If you attempt to justify...”

“I’m not justifying anything,” Romanoff stared him down. “You said you wanted to help us. There’s very little evidence to prove that.”

“I can’t control every person I encounter.”

“I’m not asking you to,” she stepped closer and Steve glanced toward the officers on duty. They seemed to not notice. “But less than a week back on Earth and you’re right in the middle of a homicide and attempted murder. If you wanted to prove you were ready to work...”

“I just wanted to find the princes. I didn’t want to be benched. I didn’t ask to be put on probation. I wouldn’t have even been with Clint today if it wasn’t for...your people. And Banionis was a problem long before I got here. Where were you when Clint needed you?”

Natasha paused and shifted her weight. Her arms were tightly crossed in front of her. She opened her mouth, then closed it and swallowed, only to open it again. “It’s complicated.”

“I’m sure,” Steve scoffed and Natasha held her hand up. He let her talk.

“Clint saved me against orders. He risked everything for me. And I...” she sighed. “I didn’t return the favor.”

Frowning, Steve loosened his stance a little. “Those men from before, the ones you two beat up...what was that?”
“Clint calls it flexing. A power move to dissuade your enemies from maintaining course. Tonight must have been...Banionis’ answer,” She looked behind her and then back at him. “He will pay.”

“As far as I know, Banionis is hanging on by a thread. He did take a tumble down the stairs.”

“He killed a friend and nearly killed my little friends. Near death is a kindness.”

Steve smiled and he could feel the press of Hela’s lips on his forehead. His shoulders dropped a little under the remembered weight of a wolf’s head hood.

“Yes,” he said softly. Blinking, he pushed the feelings in him away. “But if Banionis dies, it won’t be attempted murder that Clint’s locked up for.”

“Then I suppose we should keep him alive,” She waved her hand slightly and one of the officers hurried over with the jangling of keys. He opened the door to the cell and beckoned Steve out.

Pausing, Steve glanced between the officer and Natasha. “What’s this?”

“Clint has confessed to acting alone in that hallway. All charges against you have been dropped.”

Swallowing, Steve slowly exited the cell. “You’re letting him take the heat for this?”

“He’s letting you go. It was Clint’s decision to take the blame,” The officer removed his cuffs and Steve massaged his wrists. As the officer relocked the cell and walked away, Steve stepped closer to Natasha. She patted his shoulders. “You’ve been summoned by the Deputy Director.”

“Why?”

“There’s a lead for your mission. One of your guys showed up on the guest list to the gala. I came to bring you two in.”
“What about Clint?”

Sighing, Natasha turned away and headed for the exit. Steve followed.

“Clint’s in time-out. He’s been a bad boy.”

The entrance to the police station came up in front of them and Natasha stopped. “Head on out. I’ve got something to do.”

“Are you going to break Clint out of here?”

“No,” Natasha stared at him without saying another word. Steve nodded.

“Alright. Meet you outside?”

“Give me a few minutes.”

____________________________

Clint

Pacing the interrogation room was pointless, but it stopped him from wanting to slam his fist into the next person to walk through the door. Considering the fact that he’d shoved a man down a flight of stairs in front of a few NYPD officers, Clint understood why they might think he had something to do with Grills’ death. Then again, they were mistaking his grief for motive, so maybe they were treating him a little unfairly.

Sighing, Clint stopped for a moment.

God...They weren’t treating him unfairly, were they?

He might not have pulled the trigger and he might not have even been on the premises at the time,
but those bullets were meant for him. Cooper and Lila could have been killed, because of him.

He left the Kommandos because he couldn’t stomach the idea that he was the face of an organization that was okay with civilian casualties to keep the secret regime from falling. He couldn’t live with himself knowing he was playing a long game that meant he wasn’t just wearing the Devil’s clothes, but owning them. Clint had spilt blood for greater good, but this was something different.

There was no greater good here. There was just him and the innocents he had collected around him like a cloak of invisibility. He had taken up residence in a civilian locale, stripped himself of his uniform and played the couch potato, but it didn’t matter.

You don’t get to walk away.

The door to the interrogation room opened and Clint tensed up. Here we go.

“Look,” he began, running his hand over his face. “My statement isn’t going to change. I had nothing to do with...” As he turned, his words died in his throat. “Nat...”

“You’re better than this, Clint,” her gaze was steel and he faltered. Lying to himself was easy, when it was only himself he had to lie to. “You and I both know that.”

Blinking, Clint struggled to decide what to do with himself. He couldn’t pace without getting closer to Nat - which was a stupid idea right now - and he didn’t really want to sit down. His hands shook and he tucked them into his pockets.

“Have you been spying on me?”

“No, because unlike some of us, I have a job.”

“Then why are you here?”

Stepping forward, Natasha’s heels clicked sharply against the concrete floor. “The Deputy Director sent me to bring you and Birgirsson in. Had a mission for you both. Looks like it’ll be me and
Birgirsson, instead."

“...there was a lead on the sons?”

“Well, I would tell you everything, but...” and she glanced up at the two-way glass. A soft smile curved her lips. “You’ll just have to settle with ‘yes’.”

“Where’s Stígandr?”

“Your confession let him off the hook.” She stepped closer and Clint narrowly avoided retreating. “He’s waiting in the car with Phil like a good boy.”

“And I’m the bad boy?”

“Right now? Because of what you did? You’ll be lucky if the Deputy Director steps in. I’m here because I’m...I like to think I’m one of your friends. And friends, I’m told, confide in one another,” Nat sighed and Clint felt the disappointment like a sharp cut. “After your discharge, you wanted space. I gave you that. The Deputy Director gave you that. And after a while, they started to think that maybe it wasn’t temporary. Maybe you were...done. But I know you, Clint. You can’t take a backseat when the world is at stake.”

“I can’t walk away,” he whispered and Nat stepped even closer.

“None of us can. We can try, we can...retire for a little while, but...we can’t quit. We can’t surrender the world to what threatens it when we get tired. Because they need us. The world needs Clint Barton. Not just as Hawkeye, not as a Kommando. The world needs you, even the parts of you that eat too much pizza and drink too much coffee.”

Clint laughed and it was thick in his throat. “Who needs a selfish asshole who gets innocent people killed?”

“I do,” Nat said, her voice wavering. She blinked and looked away from him.

“Nat...” he began, but she shook her head.
“I’ve spent the last four years buried in work but I’ve kept an eye on you. I was waiting for a sign, a call to action, something that would show me you were ready. And when Birgirsson showed up, I thought...but it never...” she swallowed and shifted her weight. It was a fighting stance she was falling back into, but he didn’t think she was going to attack. Maybe it wasn’t him she was combating. “You called me to rough up some lowlifes and occasionally for dinner. I was a convenient outlet to what you liked about your former life. You were using me like you used those civilians.”

“I didn’t...I just wanted to stop,” Clint gasped out, holding his hands out. “I just needed to stop, all of it. You were shaped into a tool, I...I let myself become one. I was between a rock and a hard place and I was willing to cut the cord and let myself fall if it meant...for one second I could stop.”

The wetness rolling down his cheeks took him by surprise and Clint turned his back to the room. He wiped angrily at his eyes until the burning lessened. The loudness of his quick sniffle felt like a betrayal.

“I would have caught you, Clint. I’ve always had your back.”

Scoffing, Clint forced a smile onto his face. It made his face ache. “Maybe I wanted to crash.”

The emotion washed off Natasha’s face and she shook her head. “Now you have. You got what you wanted. I just hope...that maybe...you’ll forgive yourself. No one blames you for what you had to do. You used to know the difference between necessary sacrifice and willful negligence,” Her hands on his face sent a shiver down his spine. Some part of him had expected pain. More tears ran down his cheeks. “Try to find the line, Clint, before you make a mistake that can’t be fixed.”

He closed his eyes and listened to the clicking of her heels as she went to the door. He opened his eyes just to see her one more time. As she walked out of the door, two men walked in. One had long sandy hair and the other...

“A deaf man and a blind man walk into an interrogation room...” Clint joked and the sandy haired man humored him with a soft chuckle.

“Pretty sure I’ve heard better jokes.”

“Yeah, I’m a little out of practice.”
“Well, thankfully, I’m not,” The blind man held out his hand. “I’m Matt Murdock, this is my partner, Franklin Nelson.”

“Cops, hubbies, what?” Clint asked, taking a seat.

“Lawyers,” Nelson answered, pulling out a chair. “We’ll be handling your case.”

Sighing, Clint settled back in his chair. “Great. I love Law and Order.”

Darcy

“Okay, so I know I said that babysitting got me through a few rough months, but this is...” Darcy tossed a few sandwiches to her resident *children*. Ian fumbled his and Jane let hers land on the table. Thor was already making short work of his. “Well, it’s not as weird as I thought it would be.”

“The running from a secret organization of doom or hiding out in some backwoods cabin?” Jane asked through her hands, which she had folded as if in prayer.

“Well, it’s not the first time I’ve run from a secret organization of doom...” Darcy paused. “Come to think of it, I’ve also hidden in a backwoods cabin. Maybe it’s the brainwashed god-dude.”

Thor hummed as he finished his sandwich and squashed the wrapper in his fist. He raised it up and Darcy felt a little hope in her heart. But instead of casting it to the ground, he flinched and set it gently on the table.

“Do...do you want another?” Jane asked, laying her hand on Thor’s. He stared at it for a long moment, then gently extracted it and stood.

“New Mexico.” It was the first thing Thor had said since they left the facility.
“What?”

“New Mexico,” Thor repeated and he crossed his arms. “You must take me to New Mexico.”

“New...” Jane unfurled herself from where she was perched on a cheap chair. “We can’t go back there.”

Narrowing his eyes, Thor advanced on Jane. Darcy hurriedly stepped between them.

“Hold your horses,” she pressed a hand to his chest. “What she meant was, we can’t go back there yet. Right, Jane?”

“Uh...uh, yeah, yes,” Jane moved up beside Darcy. “You need identification and a passport and...”

“How are we going to get those?” Ian queried, chewing a bite of what appeared to be mostly bread.

Jane looked to Darcy.

“What? Why’re you looking at me?”

Scrunching her eyebrows in that way Jane did to express disappointment, she waved at the entirety of Darcy’s body. “You’re the super spy!”

“I’m a waitress!”

“A fake waitress.”

“I’m not an active agent...well, I mean, I am but not really? Does that make sense?”

“No, but you’re the one with black market connections.”
“I got you a connection to a wanted biochemist one time...”

“You got him connected to SHIELD and they managed to give him a safe place in Tromsø.”

“Banner was already on his way, I just gave SHIELD a good excuse to lock him down.”

“And he helped us with Thor. Just because you devalue yourself doesn’t mean we do,” Jane sighed and grabbed Darcy’s arm. “I need to ask you something.”

Thor and Ian leaned toward them and Jane glanced their way. Clearing her throat, Darcy forced a smile. Still wasn’t as good as Christine Everhart, but some people just had a knack for professional fakeness.

“It’s a girl issue, boys.”

Ian recoiled a little, but Thor only stepped closer. “Are you wounded?”

“No, but I need a minute with Darcy. Okay, Thor?”

Narrowing his eyes, Thor stepped even closer.

“Stoppe. Bare vent her. Vær så snill?” Darcy waited while Jane pressed a hand to Thor’s chest. “I know the prince from the storm is in there somewhere. He knows me. He knows Darcy. And he knows we would never hurt him.”

“You could not harm me.”

“Then it won’t hurt for Darcy and I to have a private conversation about...girl stuff?”

Thor nodded and Darcy pulled Jane into the other room. Jane shut the door softly and pressed her forehead against it. Darcy watched her shoulders fall and fought the urge to hug her. As soon as
Jane had collected herself enough to turn around, then she’d hug her.

“Mjölnir is in New Mexico, Darce.”

“I know.”

Jane spun and rested back against the door. “This feels wrong. All of it feels wrong.”

Darcy nodded. From her experience, there were no gifts without a price. Free things were rarely ever truly free. Getting the boon that was Thor out of that facility had been...too easy. She wasn’t one to look a gift horse in the mouth, but she was staring hard at this one.

“You’re thinking New Mexico’s a trap, aren’t you?”

“What else could it be?” Jane paced forward and only to turn and pace back to the door. “We almost lost Thor to Zola in New Mexico, and Tromsø was just an excuse for Herr Kleiser to get leverage over him. All my research was seized by SHIELD and Hydra can’t have been happy about that. What happens if he still can’t lift it?”

Jane's eyes were wide and watery. The last time Darcy had seen her friend so torn up, they’d been arguing with SHIELD for the right to stay together. Sighing, Darcy closed the distance between them and pulled Jane into a hug.

“We’ll deal with that when we get to it.”

“It won’t be like last time,” Jane breathed into her ear. “He’s been brainwashed. What if not lifting the hammer triggers something? What if he slips and forgets we’re friendlies? What if...?”

“Shush,” Darcy whispered and Jane gasped in a breath. “Thor’s not going to forget us. We’re the first people on Midgard he ever met and we’ve stayed with him through everything. He loves us, we love him.”

“Will it be enough?”
Swallowing, Darcy held Jane tighter. “We’ll make it enough. Now,” and she pulled away. “I have to contact SHIELD and get us a way out of here. This safe house is stocked for at least a month, but with Thor’s appetite...”

“And I don’t suppose we could do a grocery run as fugitives?” Jane asked, laughing. Her face was still wet with tears, but she was pulling it back together.

“Depends on how low our pop tart supply gets.”

It felt good to laugh, even if it didn’t really sit well in the air around them. Darcy sighed.

“I’ll figure this out, Jane. I’ll keep us safe.”

“Why come back, Darce? You were living the comfortable life in Brooklyn. Why come back to Norway?”

“There were some strange characters in the diner and I went after them,” Darcy sat on the stiff mattress and crossed her legs at the ankle. “Thought I might get mixed in their drama, stretch my legs or something...”

“Well, did you?”

“Yeah, I stretched them all the way to Norway,” Darcy tried to laugh but it faltered. “I just...just missed you guys,” She hugged her arms around herself tightly. “I don’t remember why my parents gave me up. I used to live in a suburb in the Midwest until I was six. Then...then there was Sarkissian’s Academy and then...SHIELD. There’s nothing in between. No holidays, no life. The first time I felt like I belonged...I was cowered behind a burned car with you and Erik in Puente Antiguo with a giant metal monster bearing down on us.”

Jane crossed the floor until she could sit next to her. Darcy let Jane wrap an arm over her shoulder and hooked her own around Jane’s waist.

“The worst day of my life was having to watch you guys fly off to Tromsø without me,” Jane pulled her closer and Darcy curled into her side. “I don’t know about Einstein-Rosen Bridges or
the reason why space is as groovy as it is. I didn’t even make it through the basics of Sarkissian’s Academy. I’ve got street smarts and I talk too much. That’s it. That’s the full list of my importance.”

“You’re an idiot,” Jane whispered and Darcy laughed.

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“You’re not smart because you know common sense stuff. You’re smart because you know how to use it. Erik and I get so caught up in research and numbers...we forget that we’re human. We forget food and breaks and other things. And you...you were always there to remind us, to ground us. You kept us sane, Darce,” Jane’s chin rested on Darcy’s head and her self-deprecating laugh shook them both. “What would we be without you, Darcy Lewis?”

Darcy closed her eyes and let Jane’s warmth seep into her.

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Angie

Williamsburg Diner had always been a safe haven for Angie Martinelli. When she was young and trying to be an actress, she had fallen back on the diner for a steady paycheck. Between dancing and playing second fiddle to some well-to-do, Angie had tried to make her mark.

And maybe, somewhere down the line, her mark had changed.

Audition after audition, bit part after bit part; Angie danced along the edge of the spotlight but never got the chance to stand inside it. It was a hard pill to swallow that she was never going to achieve her dream. Too unrealistic, too big, too far out of reach. Peggy told her different, even Ana Jarvis had tried to convince her, but Angie knew how to take a hint. She had moved out to California to chase the dream, leaving her life behind. All alone, nursing her ego and her childhood hopes, Angie had debated what her next move would be.

A wave of new blood had forced her to make a choice.
Home was home, even if she had tried her damnedest to leave it, so Angie headed back to the East coast. She had helped Peggy and Howard Stark on and off until an opening presented itself.

Williamsburg Diner had gone up for sale, SHIELD had shown an interest in the property and Angie had fallen on hard times. It was the moment when she got to bring her life back together. Slowly, but surely, she had formed something new and happy around herself. She had...lived a full life in the service of her country and life at the diner had started to take on a new light. It was hard work, sometimes unappreciated work, but it was fulfilling in a way.

Sure, she didn’t get the spotlight or the awards, but she had a purpose. And anyone who didn’t think being the first line of defense between SHIELD and the world was important, didn’t deserve her homemade apple pie.

Today the diner was quiet, full of regulars who minded their own and ate slow. Sometimes, Angie watched them. She tried to imagine her life if she had made different choices, if she had kept her nose out of SHIELD business. Even though her younger self would have balked at her life now, she was happy. She was a watcher at her post and she got to go home to her wife, and she got to watch over a new kind of young blood.

Maybe her children weren’t her own, maybe her family wasn’t typical, but Angie Martinelli was happy.

Midway through the lunch rush, Angie’s phone rang. She handed her tray off to the first waiter she saw and stepped towards the back to answer. Trip gave her a look and she nodded to him.

“You’ve reached Williamsburg Diner. What can I get you?”

“I need a pepperoni, an Italian Delight, and a Transatlantic Special, please.”

Angie clicked her tongue. “Max.”

“Hey, Miss Angie...” Darcy sounded bone-deep tired, and wind was blowing hard and fast in the background. “I’m sorry I took off like I did.”
“Was it worth it?”

“I don’t know...” she sighed and Angie stepped further away from the bustle of the diner. “The big guy’s been...well, his basket’s been tossed a few times. He wants to go back to the desert.”

“Oh?” Angie eased herself into her favorite chair in the breakroom. “And how’s your sister? Is coming back from the north?”

“Yeah, me, my sister, the big guy, even my cousin.”

“Which one? Young or old?”

“Young. He picked us up from the spa. We’re spending the night in the old house. You know, up the coast?”

“When you thinking about heading out?”

“As soon as we can get that order.”

“I’ll get started on it right away. You just hang tight, alright, Max?”

“Of course, Miss Angie. I’m with family.”

“It was good to hear from you, Max,” Angie straightened the edge of her apron. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Give everyone my love, Miss Angie.” and Darcy hung up.

Angie set her phone down and listened to the dull noise of an active diner. The mess in New Mexico had spun them all into a tizzy. Strangers coming down in beams of light, opening up the world to the idea of beings from other worlds. Peggy had divulged to her that SHIELD had suspected alien life was on Earth, but that it hadn’t been severe enough to warrant the secret organization’s time. After all, they had Hydra to deal with and regular political issues. Confronting the idea of aliens just wasn’t in their periphery.
Then New Mexico and New York had rained the cosmos down on them and they hadn’t been able to ignore it.

Angie had warned Peggy that their negligence would catch up with them and it had. Thor, the first to fall, had led to the wreaking of one town. The other, who apparently was Thor’s brother, had vanished into the populace of New York City. Until Rogers had shown up, they hadn’t gotten a hint of Loki since he touched down.

Darcy’s closeness with the Asgardian had worried Angie a little, since he seemed to invite chaos, but she had insisted that he was like the brother she never had. Considering Darcy’s family had dropped her as soon as they could, it made sense for her to cling to anyone who would show her affection. Thankfully, she was a little more discerning than that. Thor had earned Darcy’s trust and Angie knew first hand how much of a task that was.

Blowing out a breath, Angie levered herself back to standing and groaned at the popping of her back. Damn, she was getting old.

“Who was it, Miss Angie?” Trip asked as soon as she came back around the corner. His leg was still healing, but she could tell he was itching to get back to field work. Coulson had lamented his absence.

“Darcy. She plans to head back soon.”

“Alone?”

Narrowing her eyes, Angie stared at Trip. He scratched his neck.

“I might have overheard a little.”

“Did you now?” Angie turned back to the SHIELD entrance and Trip followed her. “Do you often eavesdrop on your superior officers?”

“No offense, Miss Angie, but you aren’t my superior officer,” Trip was quick on his crutches and he got the door for her. “Is Darcy coming back with the Asgardian?”
“Perhaps. They might have a layover in the West.”

“She’s alright, though, right?”

“She’s surviving, Antoine,” Angie stepped into the elevator and Trip stood outside of it. “She’ll be alright.”

“Just...keep me updated. Please?”

“You two are close, hmm?”

Antoine smiled, ruefully. “She’s my little sister, Miss Angie. She doesn’t have much blood family.”

“No,” and Angie returned his smile. “But she’s built one, hasn’t she?”

“We all have. It's the nature of the job.”

“I think you’re right, Agent Triplett,” Angie squeezed his arm. “Mind the counter, would you? I’ll be right back.”

Tony

Despite standing beside Rhodey and Pepper, Tony still felt like there was a gulf between them. He enjoyed their company and was grateful beyond belief to know that he had people to come home to. The Tower was always too big and too open, seeing as it had enough space for all of SHIELD, and it was rare for it to feel small and comfortable. He had never really had a cozy house of his own. He could have bought one, but comfort was dangerous. The more freedom he gave himself, the worse off it would be when he had to go serve SHIELD and the Empire.
Ever so often, he let himself relish in the closeness he did have. Rare as it was.

“Do you have a plus one, Rhody?”

“To the gala?” Rhody laughed lowly and crossed his arms. “Unfortunately, Schmidt gets the first dance. You’ll have to wait.”

“Well, if we’re headed face first into civil war, I’d like to enjoy my last party.”

“Knowing the Emperor, it’s unlikely to be a long war,” Pepper has curled her toes under Tony’s thigh for warmth and she wriggled them ever so often just to watch him squirm. She seemed to hear herself after a moment and shook her head. “I’m sounding like one of them now, aren’t I?”

“I wasn’t going to say anything,” Rhody began and scratched the back of his neck. “You used to hate those Imperialists and it took you ages to get them to listen to you.”

“It did not! And I still hate them. At least I’m not guarding the Emperor.”


“I once knew a man who said ‘People that can hurt you, the ones that can really hurt you, are the ones that are close enough to do it’,” Rhody stared out the thick glass that served as the East wall of this floor and beyond. “He was right. Schmidt trusts me, for better or worse, and that’s not something you can buy. No offense, Tony.”

“Well, I didn’t take offense until you apologized.”

“The point is, when the time comes, I’ll be the knife between his ribs.”

“And how many people suffer until we get the go ahead from SHIELD?” Tony sighed and pulled himself off the couch. “Aunt Peggy’s worried that rocking the boat could get you killed, Rhody, and I have to say it has crossed my mind.”
“Don’t worry about me, Tony,” Rhodey crossed his arms. “It’s my risk to take being so close to him. It’s for the greater good.”

“See, that’s...” Tony had spun quickly and with a bit too much anger. It took a full second to shove his vitriolic retort back behind his armor. “That’s what’s wrong with all of this. The greater good for who?”

Pepper and Rhodey looked at him for a moment and he sighed.

He had been fine, or at least visibly fine, with the status quo for so long that any deviation was cause for concern. He had even convinced himself that everything he did was for the greater good. Now, on the heels of an encounter with Herr Kleiser and that cane of his...Tony couldn’t help but to question his reality. This was habit by now, so ingrained into his system that he performed it by rote. This time, though, was different. Tony’s mind served up the look of suspicion on Steve Rogers’ face at the knowledge he was working for Schmidt. It wasn’t just his reality that he had to confront, it was the reality of everything.

Captain America, the golden son and fallen hero, had returned at long last like a myth come to life. Aunt Peggy had filled his childhood with tales of adventure, tales of goodness, and tales of honor. The star of which had been the incomparable Steve Rogers. Now, living and breathing - and greatly disappointed in him - Rogers had reminded Tony of what was important. Or more accurately, what was inevitable. He had let himself get comfortable in his reality, comfortable in the status quo, in the use of his body and his mind like some machine. He had done what he feared and let himself fall asleep, fall still, to fall into the role set out for him.

“We have to be ready,” he began, his fingers itching for his keyboard, his mind alight with plans. “We have to assume war is coming and we have to be prepared for when it does arrive. The Emperor wants the Jericho and Kleiser wants my mind. Maybe I should give them what they want.”

Rhodey’s small frown was a thing Tony felt like he had to overcome. A counter-argument for him to rebuke. But Rhodey’s tone was soft. “Tony, you’re talking about anarchy. About full frontal assault. That’s suicide.”

A biting laugh escaped him and he watched Rhodey and Pepper exchange looks. Those were the looks of an upcoming intervention. It was a silent conference about his welfare. He loved and hated them for it.

“What are we doing here, Rhodey? All we do is wait, all we do is endure. Don’t rock the boat,
don’t step out of line, don’t fight back. It’s defeat in slow motion. I can’t...I won’t watch this world fall to ruin when I could have done something. If the world has to pay for my inventions, I should give them something better than a promise. I should give them what only I can.”

“And what’s that, Tony?” Pepper asked, leaning against the back of the couch.

“Freedom,” The word tasted like poison on his tongue and he swallowed back the bitterness of it. “My father died for it. My...my mother died for it. As much as I hate to repeat the past...” Tony paced away from them a little more. “If I can give my life to rid the world of HYDRA...”

“Tony,” Pepper bit out and he looked up at her. “There’s a better way to do this.”

“No.” he shook his head. “There’s a slower way. There’s a way where I stay safe and more people die. I refuse to let that happen.”

“So you’ll...what? Pour gasoline on the civil war and hope it burns the Emperor and Kleiser down?” Rhodey had crossed his arms tighter.

“It’s a civil war, Rhodey. Brother kills brother, father kills son...son kills father.”

Something dark must have entered his gaze, because Pepper blinked rapidly and swallowed before looking away. “SHIELD has a plan, Tony.”

“No, they have their fingers in a hole and they’re just waiting for the flood to stop. But it won’t. This world is hemorrhaging corruption and it is my job, my purpose to end it. Nothing I do matters if all I’m doing is holding back the inevitable. Either I do something now or I stop doing it at all.”

“Stop what?” Rhodey asked and Pepper stood.

“The weapons, the funding, all of it,” he spread his arms out wide. “If SHIELD and HYDRA want to fight each other, they can do it without me.”

“And what about all the people in between?”
“If I’m not funding the governmental version of terror organizations, maybe I can swing protections for the rest of the world. You know, while I’m on vacation from holding everyone’s petty parties together.”

“You can’t just slough off your responsibilities because Captain America makes you feel guilty for not being stupid.” Perceptive as always, Rhodey closed the distance between them. “Tony, he’s one man. One superhuman man with a reputation for idiocy and risk-taking. That might have worked during the Second World War, but this isn’t 1945. Things have changed, war isn’t like it was. His tactics won’t save us.”

“And SHIELD’s will?” Tony let Rhodey grip his shoulders and fought the urge to look away from his gaze. He failed. “He looked at me like I was an enemy,” He had told Romanoff the same thing before. “Captain America’s enemies were my enemies, Rhodey. Because Captain America was a hero and I thought I could be one, too.”

“You can,” Rhodey assured him, his grip shifting to Tony’s elbow. Guiding him along, even if they weren’t moving.

“Not like this. No man can serve two masters,” He hadn’t really gone to church, but his mother had. Some things flow like blood from parent to child, and he had far too much Scripture burned into his mind. What good it did him...he hadn’t quite figured out. “There’s got to be a breaking point.”

“Sir,” JARVIS cut in genially and Tony stepped back from Rhodey and the moment.

“What’s up, J?”

“There’s breaking news,” The TV kicked on and they all turned to it.

Christine Everhart was situated behind her newsdesk like always and Tony’s eyes darted down to the crawl beneath her without thought.

*Kommando Jack Rollins in critical condition after bus attack.*
“Well-known Kommando and leader of the organization known as Rollins Rounders, Jack Rollins, was shot in the chest this morning while attempting to apprehend fugitives from the criminal organization known as the Riding Tide. It is the latest in many bus attacks that the Rising Tide has been involved in. Despite President Stern’s convictions that they are under control, the footage from the attack says otherwise.”

Christine Everhart was replaced with surveillance footage of a street with an overturned bus. It was clearly one of the Rounders’ buses, tipped onto its side, being riddled with bullets by the Rounders. Rollins stood at the front for a moment, then shouted orders and climbed back into his SUV and sped off.

Everhart reappeared. “The business where Rollins’ was shot didn’t have a CC feed, but eyewitness reports state that Rollins attempted to stop the self-proclaimed hacktivists and was shot point blank. We will bring you updates as they become available. I’m Christine Everhart and I’ll see you on the WHiH World News at 6.”

A commercial for the newest Starkphone splashed onto the screen before anyone said anything.

“Civil war, right?” Tony asked, and headed off to the elevator. “I’ll be in my workshop.”

“You’re leaving already?” Pepper asked.

“I should get going too, actually,” Rhodey inputted, pulling his phone out of his pocket and sending off a quick message.

“A Kommando has just been gunned down on the streets of Manhattan. The Emperor and Kleiser are gearing up for fisticuffs. And Captain freakin’ America is alive,” Tony stepped into the elevator as soon as the doors opened and spun on his heel. “No time like the present, Guard Captain Rhodes!”

“See you at the gala, Tones!” Rhodey called back and Pepper shook her head at them both, slipping back into her shoes.

“If we make it that long!”
He managed a good hour alone in his workshop before JARVIS broke through his haze. It was eerily reminiscent of when Captain America had returned.

“Sir, Friday has sent a message.”

“Let me guess, Captain America’s disappeared to the other side of space?”

“No, sir,” and the AI had the audacity to sound miffed. “Prince Loki’s alias was flagged by SHIELD in the event he used it. The name Loren Olsen was found, sir.”

“Found where, J?”

“On the guest list to the Maria Stark Foundation gala,” JARVIS paused for a beat. “Your presence is requested at SHIELD.”

Tony pressed his palms into his burning eyes. No rest for the wicked.
Chapter Notes

I still live! Managed to get past Chistmas intact, so hip-hip-hooray! Hope you all had a great holiday, too! I’m gearing up for the scenes I’ve had in my head since day one of this series. I managed to get certain ones into World So Cold, and now I get to make them come to life in World with No Conscience. I’ve got more for the third, fourth and fifth parts, that I hope I get the chance to bring forth, too.

Since I probably won’t get another chapter out before the New Year: Happy New Year, loves! Let’s hope 2018 is bigger and better! All the love!

Please enjoy and if you do, consider buying me a coffee!

Chapter Title.

Steve

The journey from the police station and back to the diner was nearly silent. Natasha had come back from her quick chat with Clint in a fog of darkness. She commanded, with a brisk wave of her hand, for Agent Coulson to drive and settled back in her seat with arms crossed. Steve watched her, but didn’t press. In this instance, he didn’t want to court the danger. It wasn’t his place to meddle in their affairs, in any case. Instead, to give Natasha space, he turned to Agent Coulson.

“How are Fitz and Simmons?” he asked and Coulson glanced over his shoulder at him before returning his gaze to the road.

“They’ve recovered, Captain Rogers.”

“Please, call me Steve or Stígandr. I’m not a Captain anymore. Besides, I’ve heard that my job was taken while I was gone.”

“Oh,” Coulson hummed and a reluctant smile curved his lips. “I see you’ve been doing your research.”

“The Red Captain was a bit hard to miss.”
“He’s a recluse. Some people call him a ghost or a shadow. He sure hovers like one.”

“You’ve met him?” Steve’s eyes narrowed and he eyed the back of Coulson’s head. Despite himself, Steve still felt a bit of jealousy that the Red Captain had claimed what was rightfully his. Even if the spot was as a poster boy for HYDRA. He thought of Tony Stark and wondered again how loyal the man was to HYDRA.

“Not for long, but yes. He’s…a mystery, to put it frankly. There’s not much information about him. Some say he came from Russia, others think he came out of Zola’s workshops. Some say it’s in between. He could have dropped out of the sky for all we know.”

“I doubt it,” Natasha muttered, her stoicism back in place. Steve met her eyes for all of a heartbeat and she offered him a quirk of her lips. “He’s human, Phil.”

“I’m human,” Steve interjected with a wry grin, “and I dropped out of the sky.”

“You have made a habit of falling out of the blue, Rogers,” Natasha commented drily, kicking her feet up. “You and the Red Captain might get along.”

“I have a feeling we might disagree on a fundamental issue, Romanoff.”

“Give love a chance,” she replied with a self-deprecating laugh and Steve found himself thankful to know her.

“What is the lead on the princes?” Steve turned his mind back to the task at hand and Coulson cleared his throat.

“The guest list for the Maria Stark Foundation gala was tampered with. One Loren Olsen appeared on it last night. We think Loki might be trying to get to the Tesseract again.”

“And I’m being brought in, because…?” Steve was very aware that his probation period had hardly been able to start before all this mess with Banionis. He hadn’t even gotten the chance to find out who had killed Grills. He was torn. Part of him wanted to help Clint sort out the mess at the apartment and the other was desperate to get back on his mission. He wondered if Heimdall could
see him now. Would he be able to speak to him? Steve made a note to himself to try.

“The Deputy Director thinks you should have a chance to be involved. The princes are your mission, aren’t they?” Coulson asked and switched lanes.

“Of course,” Steve replied, and crossed his arms to feel the weight of his daggers in his hands. “But why now?”

“Why now what?”

“Why bring me in now? I wouldn’t have had a clue about Loki and the gala. You could have let me rot in that cell back there and handled it yourself.”

Natasha ran her tongue over her teeth. “The climate of things has changed since you came back. We might not have six months to wait for you to acclimate. The Deputy Director needs you battle-ready. It seems you learn on the go pretty well. This is a test run.”

“A test?” Glee, old and new, rose inside him and Steve cracked his knuckles. “A test I can do.”

“Good. You’ll be debriefed inside,” Coulson pulled into the garage beside the diner and they exited the car. “Let’s go.”

As they walked towards the entrance in the garage, Steve caught sight of a slightly expensive looking car. Standing beside it with a gleaming Starkpad in his hand, was a man with a round frame and keen eyes. The man glanced up at him as they passed and his eyes narrowed as if he suspected Steve was a thief. Steve maintained the gaze until he had to step into the elevator.

“Who was that?” he asked in confusion and Natasha chuckled.

“Happy Hogan. Stark’s chauffeur.”

Steve glanced in her direction, but neither Natasha nor Coulson were looking his way. He sighed.
Deputy Director Fury was standing at the ready in a conference room that was deeper into the SHIELD base than Steve had been. He trailed in behind Natasha and Coulson, who immediately split to take up places on either side of the oval-shaped table. As soon as they stepped out of his eyeline, he locked eyes with Stark. Dark brown eyes met his with a strange eagerness and it almost distracted him from the weariness the man was exuding. He looked...young and tired. Steve was confused by the rush of something unnamed that darted through his chest. Stark shot up out of his seat quickly and weaved his way over to Steve.

“Rogers, I...” Despite the speed and confidence with which the man had approached him, his words faltered. A flickering cycle of emotions passed over the man’s face before he settled on reserved. “We got off on the wrong foot.”

“Schmidt’s poster boy?” Steve asked again, more curious this time. Surely, Peggy’s trust had not been misplaced.

Stark flinched almost imperceptibly and clapped his hands together. “I can explain that, if you...if you’d like.”

Considering the offer, Steve nodded sharply. His next words were met with an inaudible sigh of relief. “I would.”

“Well, if you two are done making up,” Fury called out and held a hand out to designate where they should sit. “Good to see you again, Rogers. You look like you got a good night’s sleep.”

“A storm blew in,” Steve began, taking the seat opposite Stark and beside Natasha. “The cold was familiar.”

Fury hummed in acknowledgement and turned to a screen attached to the low ceiling. It shone with an inner light and Steve discreetly looked for the Stark emblem. He couldn’t find it. Well, if SHIELD got infiltrated, at least Stark wouldn’t be implicated.

“I assume you know the situation, Rogers?” Fury asked and Steve nodded. “Good. The Foundation gala is in a few days and, as the current Founder, Tony Stark is required to attend. Normally I wouldn’t care about well-to-dos in fancy dress, but this event is different. Loren Olsen, or Loki of Asgard, was placed on the guest list remotely.”
The blurry image captured at Stark Tower appeared beside a clearer one on an ID. The second one showcased a less wild Loki, and if Steve hadn’t known the Asgardian and what he was capable of, he might believe him to be a good man. Blinking at the image, Steve clenched his fist at the wave of frigid air that seemed to encircle him. *Vengeance*, the cold reminded him, *justice for the Jötunn.*

“SHIELD currently is in the dark about his whereabouts, which makes this disconcerting. Rogers, what do you know about Loki’s plans here on Earth?”

Steve leaned forward, out of the cold, and rested his elbows on the table. He anchored himself to this room and this moment. “The Loki I knew thrived off of power and privilege. Odin banished him and stripped him of what he wants most. He won’t have a title or magic here and that’s a problem he will do anything to rectify. Gaining the Tesseract has already crossed his mind or he wouldn’t have attacked Stark Tower. He knows where the power lies and he’s coming to get it,” he looked up at Stark seriously and held his gaze. “He’s coming after you, Stark.”

Stark smiled and Steve was a little off-put by how charming it was. Maybe that’s why SHIELD needed him and HYDRA had him. Why Loki had turned his attention to him. Power and privilege...brains and charm. He was as much of a weapon as the Tesseract in the right hands.

“I can handle him, Rogers,” Stark asserted and there was a brightness in the man Steve hadn’t seen since Asgard. *Fight, fight, fight.* In a human, it reminded him of himself, when he was small and angry at the wide world. It reminded him of the urge to topple the giants that surrounded him, simply to see them fall. *Conquer*, the brightness seemed to say, *before you are conquered.*

“No alone, you can’t.” Steve reminded him, reminded himself, and turned to Fury. “What’s your plan?”

“Loki’s going to be at that gala and his target is Stark. That’s his mistake. You want your chance to nab one of your princes, Rogers? This is it.”

Steve stared up at Fury for a moment in shock. “What about my probation?”

“This is make or break, Rogers. Complete this mission without incident and I’ll take you off probation. This is a one-time offer, void in one minute.”

Steve inhaled deeply, then exhaled. “I’ll do it,” he declared, as if he had been given a choice. This was his sole purpose for having returned to Earth. Find the princes, bring Asgardians to Earth to
defeat Hydra, finish his mission.

“Then let’s get started.”

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Tony

He wasn’t going to lie.

Seeing Captain America in the flesh was still messing with him. Years of clinging to the imagery of the flag-clad hero had warped his sense of right and wrong in favor of a dream. That’s what Steve Rogers was in the end. A fever dream of freedom concocted in the minds of people who had needed a hero in the dark. Now, as when he first laid eyes on him, Tony was filled with a rush of something he couldn’t name. This was the man who had defended him from nightmares, who had came sweeping in whenever he was scared. This was his hero...he was real.

He snuck as many glances at Rogers as he could while Fury laid out his master plan.

Despite receiving the file on Rogers’ report of his whereabouts, Tony hadn’t been able to bring himself to look at it. He had passed it on to Rhodey, though. Aside from being side-tracked by Herr Kleiser, it felt...intrusive, in a way, to pry into the darkness in the man’s blue eyes without his consent. Of course, as per SHIELD protocol, once the file had been turned over to Tony, the consent was considered given. Yet, he didn’t think Rogers would appreciate the assumptions he might come to. After all, a clinically typed retelling by what was most likely a disinterested secretary wasn’t exactly from the horse’s mouth. Rogers hadn’t seemed to care for Tony’s offer of the Tower and had looked at him with something just short of disdain last time they met.

His tactics, as always, would have to change.

Tony might feel like he knew Steve Rogers better than the man knew himself, but he only knew the myth the man had left behind. If he wanted to find an even keel between them, he’d have to give him an offer he couldn’t refuse. That was why, when Fury offered up his plan with a bow wrapped around it, Tony stayed silent.

“Considering the amount of times the people attending this gala have tried to kill each other outside of it, it’s safe to say that security is practically an accessory. Not to mention the Red
Captain’s custom of never taking off his trademark mask has spawned a new tradition at the gala. Masks,” And Fury leaned against the table. “You and Romanoff will pose as bodyguards, infiltrate this gala, and apprehend Loki Laufeyson in private.”

Rogers inhaled as if for speech, then released it. It took another moment for him to speak. “What happens to Loki after he’s...apprehended?”

“You and Romanoff will return with him to SHIELD where he will be interrogated.”

Rogers’ full lips curved dangerously into a wolfish grin. “While I understand your caution where Loki’s concerned, I can’t let you interrogate a prince of Asgard without due process.”

“And what’s the cosmic version of due process, Captain?”

“Well, first things first would be to contact the Asgardians. Heimdall, for reasons unknown to me, cannot see Loki or Thor. Part of my mission is to reveal them.”

“SHIELD interrogates him and then you contact the Asgardians,” Fury haggled and Rogers leaned back in his seat. He looked cold and burning all at once.

“Ten minutes and I will be present.”

“Deal. Now,” and Fury glanced in Tony’s direction. “You’ll need a body to guard. Romanoff, Rogers, say hello to your temporary boss.”

Tony put on his best camera smile and glanced between them. Romanoff was an old hat to his antics and gave a soft chuckle. Rogers, however, narrowed his eyes.

“Boss?”

“I promise I’ll be fair and honorable, Rogers. Besides,” and he leaned forward with a conspiratorial air. “You were going to see my Tower eventually.”
Rogers blinked once and tapped his fingers on the table. “Peg...Director Carter trusts you. I’m not so sure yet. You’ll have to convince me.”

“Of my loyalty?” Tony felt a cold, clammy hand on his neck. He bared his teeth to the feeling and managed to curl his lips into a grin. “Want me to salute you? Sing the Star-Spangled Banner? I’m told I’ve got a great voice.”

Rogers’ eyes were sharp like daggers and they cut through his bravado as if it was paper. “Trust is earned, Stark. I’m willing to give you the benefit of the doubt.”

“Oh? How generous,” Tony stood and straightened his jacket. “I’ll get your rooms ready. Unless you’d like to sleep on the roof? Another storm front is supposed to roll in by the end of the week.”

Rogers watched him, far too closely, before breathing a laugh. “I hope you don’t plan on keeping this up. I might fail to guard you on purpose.”

Tony smiled, caught off guard by the humor. “You won’t let anything bad happen to me, Rogers.”

A darkness bloomed in Rogers’ eyes and he blinked rapidly before looking away. The absence of attention in that moment yanked at Tony’s certainty. “We’ll see.”

Fury stopped him as soon as they left the conference room. “Norway. How’d it go?”

Tony pulled himself to a stop and rocked back on his heels. “About as well as it usually does.”

“Agent Lewis has a different story to tell,” Fury was humoring him and Tony faced him with his chin up. “Something much more dramatic than usual.”

“Well, Agent Poptart has quite the imagination.”
“Why did you let them go?”

Tony swallowed and diverted his eyes from staring into Fury’s by surveying the hall they stood in. “I didn’t. They caught me off-guard. Must have been an off day.”

“Tony,” And the weight of Fury’s hand on his shoulder forced him to settle into the truth. It was simple and almost as effective as Hydra’s brainwashing. A little bit of gentle, respectful attention and he was just a couple wobbly knees away from being putty. Authority was supposed to be hard and cruel and immovable. Yet, it never failed that Fury would bring him to bear with a simple word or gesture. “What happened?”

“Herr Kleiser wanted him loose. He made...I used the chair on him, Kleiser left and Agent Poptart knocked me out. That’s what happened.”

“Are you sure?”

The cruelty of the question wasn’t in the words, but in their implication. Tony was Schmidt’s man and SHIELD’s man and Stark’s legacy. With so many faces, it was taken as gospel that he was without true form. Tony Stark was whatever laid in the eye of the beholder. Then Herr Kleiser would crawl inside his head and play. In those moments, even being a genius, Tony couldn’t say for sure who he was or what was real. Fury had seen him after Kleiser, when Tony was reluctant to let even heaven see him. He knew what Tony’s devastation looked like. Tony fought for the evenness in his voice when he spoke.

“I’m sure,” he nearly gasped out and Fury tightened his grip for a moment, then turned. Somehow, Fury knew exactly when to push and when to ease up. Whoever gave him the Tony Stark manual...well, he was sort of grateful.

“Do you plan on telling him?” Fury asked suddenly, as if he only just remembered the man on the other side of the door.

Tony inhaled, but it caught. “After the gala. When he trusts me.”

“You seem sure that he will.”

The smile that twisted Tony’s lips was desperately confident. “Of course he will. He’ll positively
love me before he goes back to space.”

Fury chuckled. “New mission?”

Tony let himself laugh. It was too thick, but he let it out regardless just to feel his muscles tense from something other than fear. “An addendum. Save the world... with Captain America.

Shaking his head, Fury crossed his arms. “I expect a full debrief on Norway before the gala.”

“Aye, aye,” Tony forced out past the lump in his throat. He made quick work of the trip to the elevator without looking back.

Steve

Romanoff pulled him aside as Stark and Fury left the conference room and he kept his eyes trained on the exit.

“Just to be clear, I’m taking point on this, Steve,” Natasha held his arm right above the elbow in a tight grip. It was an anchor and a command without words. Stay put.

“Don’t trust me?”

“You know combat - you even know magic - but I know people. More to the point, I know what this job requires on a believability level alone. We’re secret agents, yes, but not to the people we encounter. To them, we’re just silent protectors. They don’t want our opinions and they definitely don’t want posturing.”

“You think I’m going to jeopardize this mission for pride?” Steve’s jaw worked and he had half a mind to tear free of his hold and leave. The sensible side of him, small though it was, kept him rooted to the spot.
“No, but when Loki shows up, there’s no telling what you’ll do,” she stared him down and he realized quickly that he wasn’t going to sway her. “I have to know that you won’t react emotionally. I can’t trust you here if you don’t have a handle on yourself.”

“I’m fine, Romanoff.”

“You punched a hole into a door when you found out about Howard Stark. You hadn’t seen the man for sixty years. What’s going to happen when you set eyes on Loki, the man who destroyed Jötunheim and killed your family?” When Steve couldn’t muster up a response, she sighed. “I’m taking point. Follow my lead. If you think you can’t hold it together, tap out.”

“Tap out?”

Natasha paused and seemed to mull something over. “Give me a safe word.”

Steve frowned and waited until Natasha filled him in. She did so with a wry grin.

“A word that communicates you’ve reached a limit you are unwilling or unable to cross. If it gets too much, you say that word and I’ll cover you while you get some air.”

“What if Loki attacks while I’m not there?”

“You said yourself Odin stripped him of his powers.”

“That doesn’t mean he’s harmless.”

“I didn’t say it did,” Natasha let him go and he swayed forward. He hadn’t realized how tense he had been. “But I can handle Loki.”

Steve breathed in and out for a moment. “Bucky.”

Confusion passed over Natasha’s face for a brief moment, then she nodded. “Right, Bucky. And then you step out until you’re under control again.”
“Fine,” Steve acquiesced and jerked his head towards the door. “Can we go now?”

“Sure,” Natasha said, crossing her arms. There was a soft smile on her face. “But the next time you take that tone with me, I’m putting you in time out.”

“Yes, mother,” Steve chuckled, and left the conference room. He held the door open for Natasha and she swatted the back of his head as she passed.

Police had roped off Laura’s apartment, but Clint’s was still open. Steve let himself in without fanfare and was surprised when Lucky didn’t rush him. Maybe Kate had taken him. During all the excitement, Steve had kind of lost track. He weaved his way through the apartment until he could lay his hands on the package SHIELD had given him. The Starkpad was still charged and he settled it back in the box before picking it up. His pack was simple and almost always ready if he needed to make a quick getaway. It was a hold over from his time on Jötunheim, when a strong storm could box him in if he didn’t make a move.

Natasha was downstairs, waiting in the car. Steve made quick work of gathering his belongings and headed back out of the apartment. Laura Cardell was standing against the opposite wall when he emerged and she eyed him for a solid second without speaking.

“Where’s Clint?” she asked and Steve shut the door behind him. It was already locked.

“In jail. He pushed Banionis down the stairs.”

“I heard,” Laura was still wearing her uniform, which meant she was either coming or going to work. There was a bag slung over her shoulder. “What about you? They carted you off, too.”

“Clint’s confession cleared my name.”

“And you’re...what? Clearing out while he sits in jail?”
Steve paused and clenched his fist. “I came here for a reason.”

“And what was that, huh, Captain Birgirsson?” Laura stepped closer to him and he held his ground. “Why did you come here?”

The edge of tears in her eyes pained him and Steve’s shoulders fell. “I came to...to save Earth.”

Frowning in alarm, Laura tilted her head to the side. “What?”

“I came to save...to save all of you.”

Laughter, sharp and angry, filled the air. “God, you’re all the same.”

“Laura...”

“Miss Cardell to you,” Laura corrected him with a snap and he stopped talking. “I knew...I knew when you came it was going to bring nothing good. Clint always surrounds himself with the worst kind of people. And it always comes back to bite him in the ass.”

“I’m sorry,” Steve told her, swallowing and tucking his box tight under his arm. “I won’t be here long. Soon enough, I’ll be gone again and I won’t come back. Not here, anyway. I won’t bring the darkness with me again. Your kids will be safe.”

“No,” There was fear in her eyes. It was the kind he saw when the frost giants had come near to Surtur’s flames. “No, they won’t. Not anymore. Not with people like you and Banionis and whoever shot Grills. They’ll never be safe again.”

Steve took two steps forward and wrapped an arm around her. She fell into his chest as if it was only now hitting her that she was off-balance. She shook with tears and he tightened his hold. For a moment, he didn’t say anything. There was nothing to say. Something had been stolen from her that he couldn’t return. A sense of security was fragile and he knew that losing it was like being set adrift. He had lost it when he had landed on Jötunheim. Laura had nearly lost her children, had lost a friend, and Steve felt helpless. This was something he couldn’t fix and it bit at him like one of Brimer’s wolves.
“I got a job,” he began softly, breathing his words out into her hair. “The person I’m going to work for can help. I’ll set something up. A place to stay, security systems, guards. You shouldn’t have to be afraid, Miss Cardell.”

She leaned back a little, enough to slide her hand between them to wipe at her face. “You’re describing a prison, Stígandr.”

“It doesn’t have to be. It doesn’t have to be, Miss Cardell,” he pulled back and met her eyes. She ducked her head down and brushed under her eyes with her knuckles. “Until the person who killed Grills is caught, it can be...normalcy.”

“My friend, Nat, offered something similar and I said no,” Laura laughed through her tears and shook her head. “I have a feeling the universe is trying to tell me something.”

“Maybe you should listen to it,” Steve smiled, and Laura sniffed. “I know first-hand how convincing it can be.”

Laura sighed and brushed her hair out of her face. “Walk me to the bus stop?”

“Why don’t I drop you off?”

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**Loki**

He woke up the second before a wad of cloth collided with his face.

“Wake up and get dressed,” Nurse Temple ordered, moving quickly around the room. She had a bag at her hip that was secured to her torso by a long strap. She flipped the top flap up and stuffed a couple things into it. Her hair was pulled up out of her face and her eyes were darting back towards the open door. When he was slow to move, she sighed. “Do you want to get caught, Loren?”

“You barbarians have attached this...” and he gingerly raised his arm to show the drain. His IV was
conspicuously absent. It disturbed him that he didn’t remember it being removed. “...infernal contraption to me. Forgive me if I am wary about it.”

“Throw your legs over,” she said, stepping up to the side of the bed. He eyed her for a moment, wondering if she was going to rip it out of him. She rolled her eyes. “I’m going to help you get dressed.”

Loki bore her help with ill grace, but she seemed to regard him with a little humor. He must be like a child to her, wild and foolish and in need of a guiding hand. “I can manage,” he assured her, as soon as the shirt and jacket were settled on him. He pushed himself up to standing and wriggled his way into a pair of trousers. Nurse Temple patted his chest when he displayed himself and beckoned him with a curl of her fingers.

“You follow me, you understand?”

“Do I have a choice?” She held his gaze until he cleared his throat and looked away. “Of course.”

Nurse Temple leaned out of the doorway and glanced around. Loki couldn’t see much from his place behind her, but he stayed close nonetheless. Without his magic, he felt extremely exposed. And here he was, hiding behind a mortal woman. He glared at the back of her head, furious at his reduced station. His expression fell as soon as she turned to look at him. He was discomfited with his place, but he was not a fool.

“The elevator is around the corner and it’s the late shift. If we time this right, no one will see you leave.”

“And if we don’t?”

Letting out a quick breath, Temple shrugged. “Then things get tough.”

She glanced once more out into the hospital before darting out. Despite the strangeness of his new clothing and the dizziness that seemed to come upon him in waves, he stayed in stride with her. She tapped the button to the elevator frantically and Loki gazed around them for anyone. Waiting for the elevator was like standing in front of a loaded gun. He saw the symbol for the stairs and stepped that direction.
Nurse Temple’s hand held him back. “We can’t go that way.”

“Why not?”

“Doctor Strange likes to take the stairs. He’ll be on his way up. Besides, the elevator can take us straight to the ground floor and it’s a quick walk to the garage.”

“You’ve planned this, then?”

“What?” She scoffed. “You thought I just risk my ass on a whim?”

“How many others have you...helped?”

“None of your business.” The doors opened with an obnoxious ping and she hustled him inside. She pressed the button marked *A. ”Keep your head down and mouth shut. We’ll talk once we’re out of the hospital.”

The doors began to close and she tapped her foot anxiously. Loki watched her, but refrained from saying a word. He still wasn’t sure why she wanted to help him. Aside from potentially being a wanted criminal, he was an unknown to her. Yet, he guessed, being an enemy of his enemy made him her friend. What strange bedfellows they would be.

Steve

Miss Cardell was grateful for the ride and she climbed in the front seat at Steve’s request. Natasha met his eyes through the rearview as they put their seatbelts on. Laura smiled at Nat and then glanced back to Steve, before narrowing her eyes.

“So, is this some conspiracy, Nat? You don’t win me over so you send the suspicious beefcake?”

“I promise it wasn’t planned, Laura,” Natasha reassure her, pulling away from the building.
“Where are Cooper and Lila?”

“Kate from Bishop’s Gym is watching them. She’s got a security system installed and that vet from Williamsburg Diner, Antoine, agreed to sit with them.” Laura laced her fingers together in her lap and sighed. “And before you ask, yes...they’re handling it okay.”

“I’m sorry,” Natasha offered and Laura unlaced her fingers to take Natasha’s hand.

“It’s not your fault, Nat. I should have known that having a Kommando in our building would bring hell. Just look what happened to Rollins yesterday.”

“Rollins?” Steve asked, racking his brain for a face to that name. It came along with an image of the Kommandos. “What happened to him?”

Laura turned in her seat a little and faced him. “He and his men were trying to apprehend some hacktivists from the Rising Tide and he got shot point blank in the chest.”

“Did he die?”

“No, but it was a close call. He’s on my floor in the hospital.”

“From the reports I saw, they said he claimed to have wounded one of them severely,” Natasha inputted and Steve dug through his belongings to find his StarkTab. He booted it up while Laura spoke.

“Yeah, I heard that, too...” Laura cleared her throat and resettled herself in her seat.

Natasha blinked a couple times and Steve watched her take in Laura’s whole body before sighing. “What do you know?”

“Nothing!” Laura said quickly and Steve pulled up the news.

The reports were varying from source to source, but Rollins seemed sure that he had clipped one of
the Rising Tide members he had attacked. The images of the whole event were a little blurry and incomplete since they came from CCTV feeds and random cell phones. An overturned bus, gunfire, it looked like something out of a nightmare on a normal city street.

“Laura,” Natasha warned and Laura shook her head.

“It’s nothing, I swear.”

The hospital loomed in the distance and as they pulled up to the lower level, Laura pulled her things close. Natasha pulled up to the back entrance that faced the garage and put the car in park. She locked the doors before Laura could pull the handle.

“If there’s something wrong, Laura, I need you to tell me.”

Steve locked the screen of his StarkTab and put it away. Natasha had both her hands on the steering wheel, but she was staring at Laura. They seemed to exchange a long nonverbal conversation, then they both sighed.

“I’ll tell you, Nat, okay? I’m not going to keep you in the dark. But it’s nothing. Really.” Laura squeezed one of Natasha’s hands, and the doors unlocked.

“Take care of yourself, Laura,” Natasha said softly and Laura nodded.

Steve moved from the backseat to the front as Laura made her way inside. As the doors opened, he heard Laura speak to a coworker who was headed out. “Hey, Claire! Late shift again?”

Loki

The doors to the hospital opened without prompting and the cold temperatures outside washed over him. He shivered. Nurse Temple had set a brisk pace and had already tucked her bare hands into her pockets. They got through the first set of doors and were in the middle distance between the interior of the hospital and the exterior doors, when Nurse Cardell came up from a sleek black car. Loki caught sight of the man sliding into the passenger seat and nearly slipped as he tried to
turn around. Nurse Temple stopped him and smiled at Nurse Cardell.

“Hey, Claire! Late shift again?” Nurse Cardell asked and her presence in the doorway stopped it from closing.

Loki’s heart began beating wildly and he tugged at Nurse Temple as discreetly as he could.

_That damned mortal is everywhere!_ Loki turned his back to the outside and held his breath. He focused his hearing almost entirely on the humming sound of the car idling in the drop-off lane. He waited for it to take off, but it simply sat still. The urge to run was building inside Loki’s body and he swallowed. He wasn’t afraid of a mortal. He wasn’t afraid of Steven Rogers, Stígandr, or whatever the man was calling himself. He tried to convince himself of that, but it was like yelling into the wind. The vibrating anxiety filling his body was proof. The mortal scared the life out of him.

What did Odin have planned? Why send the mortal? Was this his punishment for Jötunheim? Was his banishment not enough?

He was yanked back into the moment by Nurse Cardell’s hand on his arm. “Breathe, Loren. In and out.”

Loki’s eyes scrambled to find the black car, but it was gone. The doors had shut and the threat had passed. A hysterical laugh burst out of him and he halfway collapsed against the wall. Both nurses came closer to him and he covered his face. The relief shattered his pride. He had been shaking in terror at the thought of being confronted by a mortal man. How low had he fallen? How low, still, did he have to fall?

“Loren, it’s okay. Let’s go,” Nurse Temple pulled him back to standing and he let her. In this moment, she was stronger than he was. In this moment, he was truly...at her mercy. “Let’s get you out of here.”

“Good,” Loki whispered and followed Nurse Temple with his head down against the whipping wind.

_Skye_
They had to ditch the SUV they stole from Jack Rollins before it was used to track them and traded it in for a beemer that had somehow missed the hover-tech switch phase. The tires were a little worrisome, but Mike had experience driving them.

“These were out of fashion before you were born,” Skye reminded him as he switched gears.

“Only rich kids learned how to drive with hover cars, Skye.”

Rolling her eyes, Skye relaxed in her seat. “Well, I learned how to hack the hover cars. You know, the five finger discount works for cars, too, right?”

Mike laughed, turning off the main road and heading west. Until the heat let up, they couldn’t be seen running the streets in New York. She would miss it, but she would be back. This wasn’t the first time she had been forced out. Of course, this also wasn’t the first time she had been forced to leave someone behind. Faces, numerous and exhausted, gazed back at her through the darkness of a pitch black night. She had reached back for them, in her dreams, in her nightmares, but there was nothing she could do. This time, she had left someone on purpose.

“Do you think he’ll be okay?” she asked, tucking her hair behind her ear. “He...he needs people and he’ll think we...we abandoned him.”

“Skye, Loki’ll be fine. He’s crazy enough to land on his feet and princely enough to not settle for anything less. We’ll come back for him when we get the chance. He’s going to be okay.”

“But will he understand?”

Mike didn’t respond right away. Skye watched him in silence.

“I like to think Ace will understand. That he knows I’m coming for him. I don’t want to think of him hopeless with those people,” Mike changed his grip on the steering wheel and wiped his nose with a knuckle. “But the truth is, I don’t know. I don’t know if he’ll understand that I never stopped looking for him. I don’t know if he’ll forgive me for taking so long. I just...I hope. That’s all I can do.”
Skye swallowed and watched the snow-covered streets go by until she couldn’t make out a single detail. *I’m sorry*, she thought, praying Loki could hear her, *I’m coming back, I swear.*

Her backup laptop wasn’t anywhere near as capable as her rig and she lamented the time it would take replace it all. She was sure the loophole in Stark Industries was patched already. Maybe Rising Tide could hook her up. She logged into their server and was met with an immediate bombardment of vitriolic messages. She expected it after coming that close to being taken by Rollins Rounders and the loss of her bus and rig was going to hit them hard. She searched for Mileshacker, but came up with nothing, so she opened Koenig’s message instead.

*S,*

*I’m sorry to be the one to tell you this, but you know the drill. See you on the other side of this. Good luck. p.s. check your favorite spot for a parting gift.*

Skye logged out and closed the laptop. She closed her eyes and let out a long breath.

“Bad news?” Mike asked and she snorted.

“Rising Tide has blackballed me until I’ve fixed this. They drop hot potatoes until they cool down.”

“So what’s our next move?”

Skye pulled herself up in her seat and opened the laptop again. “Head to our first hideout. They left me something.”

“Sounds like a trap.”

“No, I messed up with them before. It’s something to help me get the heat off. If they take me out, they’ll have to handle the heat themselves.”

Mike shrugged and turned them around. From this angle, Skye could see the cloudy sky. It looked like another storm was headed this way.
Young and Menace

Chapter Notes

I might start writing shorter chapters just to be able to update more frequently. 
*shrugs* I'm trying, y'all, I'm trying!

Please enjoy and if you do, consider buying me a coffee!

Chapter Title.

Steve

“Who’s going to help Clint while we’re gone?” Steve asked as they pulled away from the hospital. It had been weighing on his mind since he stepped foot into the apartment building. The ghostly quality that hung over the hall in front of Laura’s apartment was just another reminder. Garm’s brother, a hound of Hel, the darkness. Steve was a living shroud, a banshee, a siren’s call to the damned. Natasha’s sigh shook him out of his spiral.

“SHIELD will take care of it, Steve. And if they don’t, the gala is only for one night. We might be back before he’s out for long.”

“Might?” Steve ran his hands along the outside of his thigh, separating it from the car door so it wasn’t shaken by the hum. “And what if we aren’t back before then?”

“Steve...” Natasha turned a corner and Steve could see Stark Tower gleaming in the distance. “Stop worrying. We’ve got to focus.”

If he hadn’t been so off-put by the implications of Hydra’s involvement in its construction, he would have said it was an Excalibur jutting out of the sometimes monotone buildings to either side. It was glass and light and looked both dominating and fragile. He could knock it over with a stiff breath or be crushed by it on a whim. The innate danger of a building that big should scare him more, but Steve had lived among giants with earthen structures that stood taller. Skyscrapers weren’t what they used to be in his eyes.

“How long until the gala?” he asked, wondering how long he would call the Tower home.
“In a week’s time. More than enough time to get you adjusted to high society life.”

“Oh, I know where my knife and fork are supposed to be,” he said, craning his head as they drew closer to the Tower. “Though,” he began, pausing to look at her. “Do I tuck my napkin or drape it?”

“Drape it, if you’re lucky enough to be invited to sit. Only children tuck.”

“Sounds fancy, Romanoff,” Nothing Midgard had shone him so far had matched the pomp of Asgard. He doubted this gala would either. “I don’t think I’ll be able to cut it.”

Natasha grinned at him without taking her eyes off the road. “That’s too bad. I was starting to hope you were more than a pretty face.”

“You think I’m pretty?” Steve fiddled with his beard with a smile. “Ruggedly handsome, maybe.”

Natasha laughed. “Rugged, I agree with.”

“Ouch.”

A security guard stopped them at the entrance of the garage, and Natasha handed the man a clear card. He tapped it against a device in his little box of a post and it beeped green.

“Welcome to Stark Tower, Miss Rushman, Mister Birgirsson.”

Steve nodded curtly as Natasha took the card back and drove them inside.

The garage below the Tower was spacious and Steve was starting to wonder if the height above was an indicator of the height below. They parked in a spot near an almost invisible elevator that was embedded in the wall and stepped out. All Steve owned could fit on his person, aside from the
small box from SHIELD which he hadn’t taken apart yet. He carried it under his arm as they stepped into the elevator.

“Penthouse, Jarvis,” Natasha said into the open air and the elevator started up.

“Miss Rushman, it is good to see you again,” said an Englishman without preamble.

Steve blinked rapidly and glanced around the small space. He expected to see some robot hovering in the corner or something, but he remembered SHIELD’s elevator. “Jarvis? Any relation to Friday?”

Natasha smiled and turned her head to look at him. “AI, built by Stark.”

“I assure you, Miss Rushman,” Jarvis intoned, “I am in no way artificial.”

“Of course not, my apologies.”

Jarvis hummed in what Steve could only describe as Catholic nun disapproval.

“Is Stark in?” Steve asked, risking the same disapproval. He was much more used to it that he cared to admit.

“Mister Stark is currently in his workshop.”

“Of course,” Natasha crossed her arms. “We’ll see him later.”

Steve frowned, wondering why the person he was set to protect in a week wasn’t even going to greet them at the proverbial door. Maybe it was a power play. The Asgardians had been forced to interact with him from the jump. They owed him for their negligence and since they couldn’t pay the Jötunn, they had been forced to alleviate their guilt upon the sole survivor. Stark owed him no such debt and it was his Tower that was being encroached upon. He supposed if it had been different, if it were Stark who came to his spires on Jötunheim, he might have left the man to shiver without greeting him. Then again, Steve would have clung to the first Midgardian he laid his eyes upon, if only because he had convinced himself he would never see them again. Surely
Tony Stark had embraced enough Midgardians to last him a lifetime. What was two more?

The doors to the elevator parted and Steve followed Natasha into the spacious interior of the penthouse. It reminded him, surprisingly, of the architecture of Asgard, if muted in comparison. Wide and opulent space, adorned with views that bordered on dysfunctional as they required so much glass, more space than could be filled by a single person. Space, though plentiful in both Jötunheim and Asgard, was still strange to see in Midgard. Why would a man need so much empty air? What void couldn’t he fill with metal and bright lights?

Steve stood in the center of the room and strangely felt as if he’d stepped through the darkness of space and back into Asgard. A thought occurred to him then and he turned to Natasha.

“Which way to the roof?”

Standing in the frigid air that blew like mad across the top of Stark Tower was eerily reminiscent of being atop the spires in Utgard. He simply stood in the elements, letting the chill seep into his bones and he felt his family. He felt Brynja and Helblindi and Býleistr and Ýríkr and Ólafur and Nedra; he even felt Dagný and Úlfur and Inga. Distantly, as though across time and space, he could feel them once more.

An emotion, one he didn’t want to experience, rose up in him and he shuddered under its strength. He missed them so much.

Steve felt tears gather in his closed eyes and he let them fall. He reached back into the feeling inside of him. It was the dark of Nedra’s mountain and he was lost. He followed that feeling until he was back in the darkness. Somewhere, in his memory, his family waited for him. It was...cathartic.

“Heimdall,” he called, barely a breath, and turned his face up to the sky. “Give me a sign if you can hear me. I am close to finding Loki. And I...” he opened his eyes and saw the stars. But they were not Midgard’s stars. He lowered his gaze and saw Heimdall as though he were standing on the edge of the roof. “I just needed to reach out.”

“Twice I have glimpsed Loki since you have come to Midgard,” Heimdall informed him bluntly and Steve took a single step forward.
“Where?”

“Nearby you. It seems you have come close to him and your nearness revealed him for a moment.”

The thought that he had been within arms reach of Loki only for him to slip from his grasp infuriated Steve. He clenched his fist. “Where did you see him?”

“An eatery and a healing hall. You were at both of these.”

Steve thought of the Williamsburg diner, of Peggy and of SHIELD. Had Loki been trying to infiltrate them? Where had he been? How could Steve have missed him? And a hospital? The closest he had come to a hospital had been...

“The man in the doorway!” he shouted into the night air and made to say it to Heimdall, but the guardian was gone.

“Do you make a habit out of talking to yourself, Rogers?” Stark asked from behind him and Steve spun on his heel. Stark was more prepared for the weather than he was with the puffy red coat he was wearing.

“What did you see?”

A worrisome frown overtook Stark’s face and he made a show of his bottom teeth while raising his hands in surrender. “Uh...nothing. I didn’t see anything but you talking to yourself. I’ll repeat, is it a habit of yours?”

“I wasn’t...” Steve felt displaced. He was on Jötunheim, on Asgard, and on Midgard at once. He was in the past and the present. Steve shook his head and stumbled as he marched back inside. “It was nothing.” His voice echoed oddly off the space and the lack of whipping wind ripped him out of the peace of Jötunheim’s darkness. It was far too bright in this building. He was suddenly on the Valkyrie, swallowed up by a blinding light and became weightless.

No!
He didn’t want to be lost again! He didn’t want to start over again! He wanted to stay. He wanted to live!

Steve was fighting giants and Asgardians and ghosts and demons. He was fighting the man he was and the man he had been before that. He was living the death of every life that had he touched during the war and on Jötunheim. He was back in Helheim. He was dead.

A hoarse scream met his ears and Steve tried to discern the source, to turn away from it, but it seemed to follow him. He realized that it came from him. His eyes were clenched shut and he was mercifully in the dark. He curled into a tight ball and wondered if Brimer’s wolves were coming for him.

“Rogers!” a voice called and he jerked. “Steve? Steve, look at me.”

No, he didn’t want to see the light. It was too bright, too much. Asgard had blinded him at first, too. It was too much.

“The lights are off, Steve. You’re safe.” Hands were gripping his shoulders and he flinched, expecting pain, but felt only warmth.

He opened his eyes and the first thing he saw was nothing. The lights were gone. He had found the darkness again. The tension in him faded and he felt himself collapse. He must have been hyperventilating because his head spun with lack of oxygen. He pulled himself away from whoever was touching him and crawled further into the dark.

“Steve?” It was Stark. The man must have...have followed him in from the roof.

The roof! Loki! He had spoken to Heimdall and...and he had seen Loki at a hospital!

“Mount...Mount Sinai,” he gasped out and Stark’s silhouette shot across the distance to him.

“Are you hurt? I have a medical floor,” Stark was not so much touching him as fluttering his hands from place to place as if unsure of where to land.
“No, I’m...I’m fine,” Steve cleared his throat and stopped Stark’s frantic hands by pinning one to his shoulder. “Loki was at a hospital.”

“How do you know that? Do you...do you have visions?”

“No, Heimdall saw him when I was near. And the last time he saw him it was before we came...” Steve pulled himself off the ground and headed for the elevator.

“Where are you going?”

“Back to the hospital. Loki was there.”

“And he’s probably long gone by now. You were out on the roof for an hour. Romanoff went to her floor already.”

Steve slowed to a stop and his shoulders fell. Of course. He was...he wasn’t thinking straight. He raised a hand and covered his eyes. By Ymir, he was tired. A hand fell on his shoulder and he sighed.

“I need...I need to rest.”

“Okay, I’ll show you to your floor.”

“I don’t need a floor. I need a room or a cot or a place to lay my furs.”

Stark seemed at a loss for words. “Right. And you can do all of that on your floor.”

Steve frowned. “What...what are you talking about?”

“I told you I was getting your rooms ready. Romanoff went to her floor to check out her rooms while you were on the roof. Just...” And Stark loped his arm around Steve’s. “Follow me.”
Steve was reluctant. It had nothing to do with Stark and everything to do with the fact that he...he finally understood what Natasha had meant about safe words. If he fell into one of these...episodes during the gala...he could ruin their chances of getting Loki.

“I’m sorry,” he offered as Stark led him into the elevator.

Jarvis seemed to need no instruction and closed the doors as soon as they entered. Stark didn’t let go of his arm. “What...what happened to you?”

Steve blinked and turned a little bit towards Stark. He couldn’t meet his eyes. “Surely you’ve read my file? SHIELD compiled one about me.”

“Oh, I know about your file, but...I wanted to hear it from you.”

The quiet of the elevator was a little distressing and he almost felt the urge to scream just to be rid of it. Instead, he clenched and unclenched his fists. “It’s a long story.”

His floor came up quick and before he could swallow past the nausea of the strange drop, they were walking into it. It wasn’t as open as the penthouse, where two or three floors had been spliced into one, but it was still far too expansive. Stark gestured off-handedly at the space and explained some of the features, but it all blurred to Steve. There was a distinct unreality to him now and he simply followed Stark as he was led from the open common area and towards what he vaguely heard Stark call the master bedroom.

A space of time seemed to slip away from him and he slid back into place as he felt his boots being taken off. “Stop,” he murmured, frowning at the space around him. The bedroom was far too wide, far too empty and far too...Midgardian. “I can...I can do that.”

Stark’s hands paused where they were poised to remove his left boot, his right was already on the floor, and Steve tried to shake himself out of his funk. It was sluggish in his mind like the wet mud on the banks of the river in Jötunheim. Stark pulled his boot the rest of the way and set it aside. “You’re supposed to protect me, you know,” Stark whispered to him, his tone and his touch as light as a feather.

“I will,” Steve swore, sighing against the void unfurling inside of him. It was the gaping maw that had been born in the cells in Asgard. It was the emptiness of the Midgard he lost and of Jötunheim. It was his grief, growing and twisting inside of him like poisonous snakes. Stark met his eyes and
he was reminded of Frigga’s eyes when he first came to in the cell. It was an apology without prior offense. “I’m fine.”

“Let’s be honest here, Steve,” Stark stood and then sat beside him. “You’re fucked up.”

Steve laughed and it felt like daggers in his chest. The cold was leaving him now and he fought for equilibrium in the warmth. They sat in silence for a moment and then Stark sighed.

“So what happened to you?”

Tony

Getting Steve - *Steve*, not Rogers, not Captain, but Steve - to open up was surprisingly easy once he had settled on the edge of the bed in the master bedroom. After Kleiser, Tony was a little too clingy and talkative, so he thought maybe he understood. Not entirely, of course, but enough.

Steve began, where most stories did, at the beginning. His vanishing wasn’t as clear cut as Steve made it out to be in his retelling. When Tony was a child, the stories ranged from Captain America sprouting wings to vanishing into thin air by the power of freedom. But according to the man himself, he had simply touched the Tesseract with his bare hand and been transported across the cosmos.

Once he had gotten started, everything seemed to pour out of him at once. He told him everything Jarvis had assured him was in the file on Steve, but also things that he must not have thought to mention while at SHIELD HQ. Especially the part where he apparently hadn’t been the survivor they had assumed.

“An axe?” Tony asked from where he sat across from Steve on the bed. Steve had moved against the headboard and removed his fur pack. Splayed out in between them were sketches of giants and gods and structures out of myth. “You took a giant’s axe to the head?”

“I...I was distracted,” Steve pulled a sheet of paper close to him. It was crisp and new because Tony had JARVIS order art supplies when Steve mentioned being unable to properly describe something. He also grabbed a sketch pencil and set to work. “It happened so quickly. I don’t really remember the pain, at least, not in that moment.”
Tony tried to imagine it. A dark cave, surrounded on all sides by an enemy he couldn’t really fight
head-on, and then...nothing. It sounded like a nightmare. “What happened next?”

Steve’s pencil faltered and he glanced up. “Schmidt’s poster boy. You said you could explain.”

Tony broke eye contact and occupied his hands by slowly shifting through the sketches in front of
him. Steve’s gaze was like a spotlight. “After,” he began and cleared his throat, holding up a sketch
of two children to the light. “After you disappeared, things changed. Hydra had always been...loud,
bright, uninterested in subterfuge on a large scale. But after the war, they were pariahs. The world
realized what it had allowed itself to become and tried to reset itself. It wasn’t entirely successful,”
he ran his finger down the line of a child’s face. This child had no eyes. “Hydra was more
fortunate.”

Steve began to sketch again and his eyes focused on the image he was creating. Tony let out a
silent breath in relief.

“I don’t know the particulars. I wasn’t even born yet and Aunt Peggy - Director Carter - didn’t see
fit to give me the details. Howard made a plan of his own by the time I came along to stop Hydra
from the inside. It was a last ditch effort.” He was the Hail Mary of SHIELD and of his father. He
was the Obi-Wan Kenobi. Hopefully he didn’t become one with the Force by the end. He kind of
liked the idea of sticking around for awhile after everything was over and Hydra was gone.

“What was his plan?”

Tony breathed a laugh and set the drawing back down. “Me.”

Once more, the scratching of Steve’s pencil ceased and Tony glanced up to see Steve staring at
him. “You? But...how was he going to stop Schmidt with you?”

Tony had asked himself the same question. Obie assured him that Howard had been small-minded,
had been unable to see the big picture past his own ego. Tony wasn’t going to destroy Hydra, he
was going to make it better. Aunt Peggy had disagreed. She assured him that he was going to bring
Hydra to its knees.

“From the inside. I was...how did he put it? *I'm poison, I'm corruption, I'm the weapon that will
bring down an empire,*” he took on his father’s voice and facial expressions as he remembered
them. It had been repeated ad nauseum for years until he had lost his father and his mother. Aunt Peggy wouldn’t say the words, but the expectations for him were the same. Kill, destroy, decimate. “It’s what I was made for.”

Steve set his pencil down and passed his new sketch over to Tony. The charcoal had been smeared with Steve’s thumb and the shading was almost eerily good, so good in fact that he wondered if the woman on the page was going to pop out at him. Her extravagant horns spread out like branches on a tree and her lips were curved up in amusement.

“Who is she?”

“Hela, goddess of death,” Steve said it with such ease, as if he were talking about the color of the sky. Tony stared at her for a moment longer, then set the sketch with the others.

“How’d you two meet?”

“Well, apparently, an axe to the head will kill you. What do you know?” Steve pulled another piece of paper to him and set about sketching something else. “When I came to, I was in her realm. I was dead.”

Tony jerked his head up sharply and frowned. “Like...actually dead?”

“Completely.”

“Then how...?” Tony crossed his arms. “How are you here?”

“She brought me back to life,” Steve’s lips pulled up in a tight smile and he scribbled harder. “She asked a life for a life and I swore to give her that and more. So she sent me back to Jötunheim with a fanged gauntlet that could kill and I...I made good on my vow.”

The next sketch was of the fanged gauntlet and of a massive wolf with glowing eyes.

“That’s my...” Steve stopped himself and shook his head. “That’s Garm. Hela’s hound.”
“She gave you a wolf’s fang of death like her...hound?”

“Yes.”

“Got space for a merchant on your super team of death? I’ll bring the bombs,” In the quiet, his words felt artificial and empty. They were.

Steve set his paper and pencil aside, leaning against the headboard and crossing his arms. “So, you’re in Schmidt’s pocket and...what? When does the other shoe drop?”

His next words were rehearsed, rehashed and recycled so much they had lost meaning and he couldn’t make them come out. Instead, he sighed. “I don’t know.”

“How long are they going to keep this up? It’s a war of attrition.”

“Until one of us gives out,” Tony had envisioned it in his weak moments, the ending of this silent war. No more struggle, no more righteousness, just pure and unending peace. It was as unreal as the thought of a goddess of death bringing a man back to life. “Or until the war is won.”

Steve closed his eyes and covered them with his hand. “I’ve seen war without end. I’ve lived through it. I won’t let it happen to Mid... to Earth,” he dropped his hand and looked down at it as if it were covered in something. Tony wondered if his hands were covered in blood, too. “What can I do to help?”

The entreaty in Steve’s eyes was something Tony had never thought to see aimed at him. He clapped his hands and stood. There was nervous energy in his body, suddenly, and he was determined to work it out. “Well, first things first, you can’t let me die. Without me, the stalemate is over and the real war begins. It might start anyway, if Herr Kleiser has his way.”

“Herr Kleiser?” Steve was frowning and the soft look in his eyes was gone. Tony wanted to drag it back.

“He appeared a little after you disappeared. Claims to be German, there’s not a ton of proof. He feuds with Zola and Schmidt on the regular. He’s always been in my life. Don’t know where he
came from exactly, or what he is, or how his stick of mind-fuckery works or...” His rambling was cut off abruptly by Steve moving off the bed and standing.

“Stick of...mind-fuckery?”

“It, uh,” Oh, right. Fury’s face floated into Tony’s mind’s eye and he spun around so he wasn’t looking at Steve. He could tell him now and forget about waiting until after the gala. It would give Steve some hope for after. Besides, if he knew how close he was to both of his princes, he might thank Tony for filling in the missing piece. Or he might scramble up both princes and vanish again; this time for good. Selfishness, so deeply embedded in him and yet so underused clawed its way to the surface and he shoved Thor and the chair and Kleiser out of his mind. “It’s nothing. We’ll talk about it later. You should get some sleep.”

Tony headed towards the door, but with less than half of his strides, Steve managed to overtake him. “What are you hiding?” Steve growled, actually growled, and Tony came up short.

“Nothing. I don’t want to talk about it,” he crossed his arms to emphasize that it was not open for discussion.

“Will Herr Kleiser be at the gala?”

Tony swallowed and wobbled his head back and forth. “Depends on whether or not he decides to declare independence from Schmidt’s empire.”

The blue of Steve’s eyes seemed to glow. Almost like the Tesseract. “Is he a threat?”

Tony felt Kleiser’s clammy hands on his skin and felt the beehive of fear tip over inside of him. “Not if I obey.”

Steve said nothing for a moment and Tony made to leave. “I need you to swear you’ll tell me the truth from here on out. Even if I don’t like it.”

“Only if you reciprocate.”
“Fine.”

“Once the princes are safe in Asgard...are you coming back?” Tony asked the question to the space just over Steve’s shoulder. He didn’t look over into his eyes until every word was out of his mouth. Steve’s jaw worked.

“Of course I am.”

“And you won’t take sixty years this time, right?”

Steve laughed and it sounded real. Tony found himself smiling back.

“Not if I can help it.” Steve sighed. “Are you loyal to SHIELD?”

“I’m loyal to Director Carter, to Fury, to my family, to Earth.”

“So am I.”

“Well,” And Tony clapped his hands again just to hear the sound. “I guess that makes us best friends. Get some sleep.” He stepped around Steve and opened the door.

“One more thing...”

Tony would’ve taken any excuse to not leave but he wasn’t entirely sure he’d stick to his promise. _Tell the truth._ I will, he said to himself, _after_ the gala.

“My neighbor in Clint’s building, Laura, she needs a place to stay. Somewhere secure for her and her kids. I was wondering if you...”

“You want me to take in rugrats? You just got here.”
“No,” Steve crossed his arms. “I was thinking more along the lines of a quiet, safe place with security.”

Tony almost raised his arms to gesture at the room they were standing in, but settled for scratching his head instead. “I’ll...uh...see what I can do. Laura what?”

“Cardell. She’s a nurse at Mount Sinai.”

“Right. Well, good night...Steve.”

“Stígandr,” he corrected and smiled. “Good night, Mister Stark.”

“Tony,” he offered, but Steve just shook his head.

“After the gala. Until then, Mister Stark.” Steve started a salute, thought better of it, and turned his back to walk over to the bed.

Tony slipped out without another word.
Loki

“Nurse Temple,” Loki began as they turned yet another corner. It was a short walk from where the cab had dropped them to her home, she had told him, and he had scoffed. Midgardian cities were not that large to him. Now, slightly out of breath and with the drain clipped to his shirt, he regretted his earlier bravado. “Might we...might we pause for a moment?”

She glanced at him without turning her head, then came to an abrupt stop. Loki gladly ceased walking as well. Nurse Temple’s hands grabbed his arms and she led him backwards until he was forced to sit on someone’s front porch. His lungs felt as if they were going to shrivel in his chest and vanish. The cold air had never affected him like this before. He panted as he let gravity bear his weight and stretched his legs out in front of him. Nurse Temple stood in front of him and she patted the arm without the drain beneath it.

“Put your hand on top of your head and breathe through your shirt,” she ordered him softly and he swallowed the vitriolic response that rose up in his throat by rote. Slowly, feeling like a complete fool, Loki raised his hand and put it atop his head.

“Shall I dance...for you, Nurse Temple?”

She shook her head with a smile. “So I can watch you bust your ass on the ice? Sure,” and she reached forward to pull his jacket tighter around him. “I’d love to carry you the rest of the way.”

Loki looked up into her dark brown eyes and found himself chuckling. “You couldn’t hold my weight, Midgardian.”
“I lug patients around all day,” she tucked her long hair behind her ear. “And I’m not the one out of breath from a short walk.”

Loki granted her that. He breathed in as deep as he could and winced at the pain from his wound. It wasn’t healed yet. He wondered, as the drain bounced against his chest, if the Midgardian contraption was interfering. “When will you remove this...pustule from me?”

“It’s supposed to be in for a few more days, but...” she crouched, and placed a hand on his knee. “I know you aren’t human, but...do you have healing powers or something? I need some guarantees you aren’t going to develop a hematoma if I remove it.”

“Have you removed the bullet?”

“Yeah, that’s one of the things your emergency surgery was for.”

“Then, I should be fine,” Loki neglected to tell her that he had no guarantees. He had never been wounded without his magic before.

Sighing, Nurse Temple nodded and ran her hand through her hair. “When we get back to my place, I’ll see about taking it out. You’re gonna have to deal with it for now.”

Loki felt as if he could resume their walk and pushed himself to his feet. “How far is your abode?”

“Not far...” Nurse Temple watched him for a second as he found his balance, then tucked her hands in her coat. “But we’re going to make a pitstop first.”

The warmth inside the interior of the diner they stopped at slapped Loki in the face. Temple didn’t even pause to adjust. She stomped heavily on the mat just inside the entrance and continued on. Loki mimicked her and cast his eyes about the space.

There were booths lining the sides of the restaurant, which were mostly glass that looked out upon
the streets, and a double line of them down the center. Dotted around the diner, minding their own business, were patrons hunched over their food, or nursing their cups. It reminded him of the Williamsburg Diner. It reminded him of Skye and Mike. Despite having survived on Midgard by himself for so long, he had regrettably grown attached to the two. Skye had shown him unconditional kindness and Mike had done the same. They were...they were soft in a way he wanted to mock, but without their softness he might never have learned a new magic. He might have remained in the lower caste of Midgard without hope to reach something greater. In fact, without them, he might still be headed toward whatever destiny awaited those on the buses.

Then again, without them, he might never have gotten shot.

Nurse Temple was speaking quickly with an older woman in a different language. Loki understood it, which he expected, but he did not eavesdrop. His mind was not...not quite present at the moment. All-Speak had not been affected by his banishment. Powerless, but not completely striped. He supposed Odin would want him to understand what the heathens on Midgard were saying as they ripped him apart.

With a wave, Temple called him over. The older woman stared at him with a critical eye and greeted him with a stiff nod. Temple turned to him and brought him closer with a hand on the center of his back.

“Mama, this is Loren Olsen,” Nurse Temple pushed him a little and he stumbled. “Loren, this is my mother, Soledad Temple.”

Loki did not want to engage in the Midgardian custom of shaking hands, but thankfully neither did Temple’s mother. She gave him a once-over, then sighed. “You listen to my daughter, every word she says, or a bullet will be the least of your worries.”

“Mama!” Nurse Temple exclaimed in exasperation, but Loki felt a grin overtake his face.

“No,” he said, holding up a hand. “I like her.”

Shaking her head and laughing in the same way her daughter had, Temple’s mother shrugged. “You know my opinion, mija.”

“But you’ll give him a shot?”
“When he is well enough, he can carry out the trash and clean the tables. If he behaves, then we’ll see.”

“Thank you, mama,” Nurse Temple darted forward and pressed a kiss to her mother’s cheek. “Well, we better head back. A storm’s supposed to hit soon.”

“They said ten inches. Ten!” Temple’s mother was smiling and Loki tried to remember that he had no power here. He waited until Nurse Temple had said her goodbyes and led him outside before he rounded on her.

“Carry out rubbish and clean tables? What was she talking about?”

Nurse Temple rolled her eyes and tugged him so they could start walking back the way they’d come. “I can’t take off work to watch you and you can’t just sit at my place eating my food. Unless you’ve got something better to be doing or some friends you can call, you need honest work.”

“As a servant in your mother’s kitchen?” The indignation was back in full force and Loki felt almost like himself again. The fear from earlier had faded away over time. “I would not stoop so low as to...”

Temple stopped in her tracks and poked him in the chest. “First of all, you should be honored my mother is willing to take on the responsibility of helping you. There’s a lot of people in this world who would sell you to the Rounders for the hell of it.”

“Sell me?” Strangely, despite everything he had experienced, Loki had not seen anyone sold.

“Yeah, the Rounders have civilian contractors out on the street who look for people like you and drag you in for monetary compensation. It’s almost like a part-time job now. Without me, without my saint of a mother, you would be another statistic. So, please, spare me your self-righteousness about having to earn your keep.”

Loki opened his mouth, then closed it. “You have my apologies.”

“Let’s go,” and Temple took off again.
He watched her for a moment and wondered, not for the first time, if Odin and Frigga were watching him. Was this another lesson of theirs? Was there something they needed to feel he had learned before they let him return? He gazed up at the sky, looking - he supposed - for an answer. Above him was only the thick white canopy of a winter storm front. He tsked at it and hurried after Nurse Temple.

“Come over here,” Nurse Temple demanded as soon as they stepped past the threshold of her apartment. “And close the door.”

Loki stepped further inside the space and closed the door behind him. A flash of the Midgardian soldier went across his mind and Loki fitted all the locks into place before following Temple.

She stood in a small kitchen and divested herself of the layers she had on. When she was down to simple healer’s vestments, she rolled up her sleeves and dug through one of the drawers.

“How short is too short for you?” she asked, seemingly at random.

Loki was taking in the minimal decoration and heavily curtained windows in interest. This was not a place of relaxation. This was a place of hiding. Turning to Nurse Temple, he frowned. “What?”

“You hair,” and she lifted up a pair of slim metal shears. “We need to cut it.”

He raised his hand to his hair and found himself incredibly reluctant. “Why?”

“There were other nurses and doctors who helped you. They would be able to identify you. I’ve got some clout in the hospital, but not everyone is going to risk their careers for a good cause. We have to muddy the tracks a little. If we cut and dye it, you’ll be less noticeable.”

Nurse Temple came around the counter and Loki balked. “You are not going to maim me!”

“It’s hair, Loren, it’ll grow back,” and she came closer.
Something he couldn’t identify at first exploded in his chest and he shouted before he heard himself. “Midgard will not take everything!”

There was silence for a moment and Loki felt compelled to fill it. “You people have tried to take my freedom, have taken my name, have nearly taken my life...” he gasped as he realized. “You don’t...you don’t get to take everything from me. Not you, not the Allfather...no...”

His entire world felt like it was slipping straight through his fingers and no matter how desperately he attempted to grasp it, it was for naught. His magic, his title, his home, his idea of himself, his identity...all of it had been stripped from him when he was banished. It was as if the universe itself was trying to erase him. Piece by piece, concession by concession, he was vanishing into nothingness.

The last of the Jötunn would seep into the mediocre cracks of Midgard and never be seen again. Loki backed even further away until his back hit something solid.

“You can’t...you can’t...”

He heard the sound of metal on wood and flinched. The footsteps that grew closer to him were like funeral knells. He covered his head, ignoring the pain of stressing the tubing inside of him, and waited for the inevitable. Instead of feeling his hair being cut, he was surrounded in warmth. In the quiet, he could hear a heartbeat. He glanced upward and saw Nurse Temple’s face. She was embracing him.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered to him and he was confused. “I didn’t know...it’s okay. It’s alright.”

Shh...Frigga would whisper to him when he was young and had found some way to injure himself. It will be alright. You are my son, you will survive.

Something soft and small inside of him shattered and Loki could not stop his tears. He...he was the last Jötunn. Once death took him, there would be none left. And it would be his own fault.

Perhaps that was the lesson he was being taught. After all, the fear and grief he felt now was nothing compared to what he had seen in the Midgardian soldier. It was nothing. He mourned himself and what he had hoped to achieve, but they were petty things. The soldier had mourned, had...had fought...had won. And Loki, was less than he had ever been, less than before the coronation. He was...pathetic.
Most of all, as he sat upon the floor of a mortal dwelling without magic or pride to his name; he realized he was not worthy.

He was a destroyer of worlds. He was exactly what the Asgardians had made frost giants out to be. He was the nightmare they told their children about at night.

Loki had been clinging to the idea of himself from before it all fell apart and had even tried to convince Skye and Mike that he was that man. But here, clinging to the lengths of hair around his head, he...he knew that man was dead. Loki Odinson, Loki Laufeyson, Loki...was dead.

A strange numbness overtook him and he relaxed against the wall behind him. “As short as you would like, Nurse Temple,” he said and closed his eyes.

“Loren, we don’t...”

“Just do it.”

Nurse Temple hesitated for a moment, then rose to standing. Even behind his eyelids, he could perceive her shadow. “You have to get up,” she told him and he nodded.

It took him a moment to corral his limbs, then he was following Nurse Temple down a hallway and into a bathroom. She guided him to the edge of the porcelain bathing basin and he sat upon it. With gentle hands, Nurse Temple combed his hair and set to work. The snips were the only sound in the bathroom for a long while. Loki avoided watching his hair fall. He closed his eyes and kept them shut.

Nurse Temple had cleaned the hair that had fallen outside of the ‘tub’ as she called it, and brought him new clothing to wear. He stopped her before she could leave and did not meet her eyes.

“Can you remove the...drain?”
“I...” Nurse Temple sighed. “Sure, just, let me get some stuff.”

Loki nodded and let her go.

He pulled himself free of his jacket and shirt, numb to the pain, and caught his reflection in the mirror above the sink.

He looked thinner than he could ever remember being and his face had become sallow. The darkness of his hair, even short and curled around his head, gave him the pallor of the dead. Fitting, he supposed, for the late prince Loki.

Nurse Temple returned with gauze and blue gloves. She slid the gloves onto her hands and had him sit once more. The affair was quick and relatively painless. She tucked the tubing and pustule away into an orange bag with black writing on it and bound it shut with black tape. She left again with the bag. Loki stood, turned to the mirror and raised his arm. He watched the small hole in him until, finally, it closed. He didn’t feel whole, but the feeling of weakness began to abate. A small gasp met his ears and he glanced into the hallway through the mirror.

Temple was standing just out of view and she met his eyes in the reflection.

“So, what exactly are you?” she asked and he broke eye contact.

“I don’t know,” he pulled the clean clothes towards him and reached over to close the bathroom door.

Steve

Earth was burning. Stars went out like dying fireflies. His world was engulfed in a pale blue light and cold wind pushed the debris around in manic circles. High above the chaos, Excalibur in its glory shone the brightest. Yet, it shone with the same pale blue light. Great power in the hands of a Jötunn, Hjördís foretold. Steve gazed up into the blinding light of Stark Tower and saw Loki. The Tesseract gleamed in his open hand and Steve reached for it, only to meet the shocking gold shimmer of Asgard’s cell walls.
He reared back to punch the wall and caught a glimpse of his own reflection. He stood in a puddle of melting ice and snow, covered in dried mud and wet fur, the cloth of his tunic and the leather of his pants pressed tight against his skin. On his forearm, just as strangely comfortable as it had been since he got it, was his fanged gauntlet. He paused for only a moment before letting his fist fly. The fang punctured the golden walls and they fell. Steve painted a swath of dead all around him as he struggled back to the Bifrost. Heimdall was not waiting for him, so he found a way to open the doorway himself.

Across space, through the darkness, he followed a white flame that danced. Steve stepped out of the vortex and into a familiar place.

It was the expanse of nothingness that lingered just below Utgard. He was following the path that led down, just like he shown Eiríkr before...before the Vault. The path had been worn clean with time and he left no footprints. The dark seemed to stretch on into eternity and Steve was lulled into some kind of trance.

It was shattered by the touch of a burning cold hand and he spun on his heel. High above him, taller than he remembered, was Brynja. She stared at him as if he were the most terrifying thing she had ever laid eyes on. He opened his mouth to speak, but she beat him to it.

“Brother?” she whispered, her voice a broken yet happy thing. In her other hand, she clutched his compass. For a moment, as he stood there in the darkness, he saw the needle point North.

Steve could see the others behind her, gathered under an outcropping. They all focused on him when Brynja spoke. Helblindi and Býleistr had grown, but not by much. They stood on their own, tiny for frost giants, but growing quick. Helblindi wore the wolf skull helm Steve had made for him and the glow-weed shone just as bright. Býleistr wore the belt of stones and leather that Steve had made, too. Steve felt himself reaching out, desperate to be burned if only to have them back again.

“I’m sorry,” he gasped out and felt a sharp pain in his heart. “I should have died with you.”

“We aren’t dead, Stígandr,” Eiríkr said and Helblindi cried out. The boy ran across the distance, his gait unstable and ungainly. He pulled his helm up to reveal his face.

“Godfather!” Helblindi yelped and Steve knew this had to be a dream. But he opened his arms regardless and wrapped them around Helblindi tight. Helblindi was just a foot shorter than Steve now. The blue skin burned his own and he could have cried in relief. This pain was real, was grounding, was healing. The burn of his skin was an affirmation and he pulled Helblindi away just
so he could press their foreheads together. There were no eyes on Helblindi’s face, so Steve closed his own.

“You deserved more than this,” Steve whispered to Helblindi, his heart aching all the way through. He had envisioned the boys’ futures and...and now...”I should have saved you.”

“But you did, godfather,” Helblindi told him, his voice just as quiet. Like it was a secret. “You did.”

Steve hated this dream. He hated it with everything he was. He wanted to rip it to shreds with his bare hands. Instead, he held Helblindi for a moment longer. He wanted the burn to consume him whole.

“Come find us, brother,” Brynja urged him and Steve felt a sob escape him. “Come find us and bring us with you.”

Steve shook, from the cold, from the memories, from the burden of knowing this wasn’t real. He pressed a kiss to Helblindi’s forehead, holding the boy’s head with both hands. “I love you,” he whispered into the darkness. “I love you all. And I’m sorry.”

They faded from view as if they had never been there.

As Steve sat up in a modern bed in Stark Tower, he gasped in a breath. His lips were burning, his whole body was burning. He cast off his covers and darted into the bathroom. Without warning, he was forced to hunch over the toilet and expel whatever had been in his stomach. As he retched, he gripped the seat. For a moment, he thought he must have gotten something on his hand and he wiped at it. The skin was black, burned beyond recognition.

The realization hit him a moment later and Steve scrambled in front of the mirror. He took in his own reflection and could have screamed.

His lips were burned black, as was any part of him that had been touched by bare Jötunn hands. Stemming from his hairline down to the bridge of his nose and the tops of his cheeks, his face has
been burned as well. He blinked, rapidly, trying to bring himself back to reality.

He scrubbed at his hands, clawed at his lips, trying desperately to prove it wasn’t burned. As the serum kicked in, the color returned to his skin and Steve struggled for the relief he should feel. Instead, there was a hollowness to it.

It had to have been magic. He must have activated it by sheer desire alone. Jötunheim had been destroyed. There would have been nothing for them to survive on. It was all in his head.

Steve curled up on the floor and wept.

His talk with Stark had left Steve with more questions than answers. He wanted to know how far Schmidt had gone in his absence, how deep the well was that Stark drank from. He felt...deceived. Stark, despite returning his willingness to reveal parts of his past, had kept things hidden. Steve didn’t want to know every aspect of Stark’s life. He found he didn’t even want to know the man that Howard had become if his plan to use his son as a weapon was true. Steve knew what being a weapon could do to a person’s mind. Yet, even he wasn’t sure what it had done to his own.

The next day, Steve found Natasha waiting for him on the couch in what was apparently his living room. He detoured his course from the elevator and took up a seat across from her. She watched him for a moment without speaking.

“How’d you like the view?”

Steve’s lips curved upward and fell in the span of a second. He waved his own memories away. “I spoke with Heimdall.”

“The Asgardian gatekeeper?” Natasha sat forward and Steve nodded.

“He says he saw Loki. Twice. Once at the diner and once at the hospital.”

“Places you’ve been. Can he can see him because of you?”
It amazed Steve a little that she understood, but he supposed he underestimated Midgardians as the 
Asgardians and Jötunn had. “My proximity reveals him, I guess. Loki was at the hospital when we 
dropped Miss Cardell off. He was standing just before the exit with another nurse.”

“Stark told me you knew he was at the hospital and I’ve already contacted SHIELD. They’ll be 
looking into it.”

“What are we supposed to do?” he asked, confused at her nonchalance.

“Our jobs. Guard Stark at the gala and wait for Loki.”

Steve shot to his feet. “He was there! He was yards from me and you want me to sit it out? I 
should be out there finding him. He’s a danger to Earth.”

“And SHIELD can handle it, Steve,” Natasha didn’t rise, nor did her voice change from a level 
tone. “Until we have reason to believe his plans have changed, our best bet is to catch him at the 
gala. He’s going to be there for a reason and we have to be there to stop him.”

“While I’m playing by your rules, Loki is out there free. He destroyed an entire world on a whim. 
Diminished he might be, but I don’t doubt he’s plotting something far worse than crashing a gala,” 
Steve could see Loki standing atop Stark Tower with the Tesseract in his mind’s eye and he felt 
something shift inside his chest. “Where’s Stark?”

“In a meeting with SI. He’s set-up an appointment with his tailor for us. I was waiting for you to 
wake up, so we could go together.”

Natasha was watching him and he pressed everything from last night into a corner. He could last a 
week. He wasn’t going to break down. He could handle this.
So...I caught a cold...then wrote nearly twenty thousand words only to realize I had skipped a bit of set-up and had to hack off half of that and rewrite. Major plot reworking went down and I have a part-time job now, so it's been tight time/energy-wise. I'm feeling a little better about this chapter, but if you notice anything out of place - please let me know!

Here's an extremely late chapter. I had to cut this chapter in half. It was getting outrageously long and the characters wanted to talk a lot. I even pushed some stuff back to the "After-Gala" section of this story. The gala chapter will be, if the characters don't mess with the plot anymore, the middle point of this part. We've almost reached the halfway point of part two! Part two is shaping up to be twice as long as part one. I'm hoping part three is a little shorter, but we'll see. Part Four was supposed to be the long one. *sighs*

Please enjoy and if you do, consider buying me a coffee!

Skye - One Week until the Gala

Their original hideout was an abandoned warehouse that reeked of mildew and something rotten. It hadn’t changed much since they had gotten the bus and moved on, except for the little congregation of teenagers that scattered the second Mike cut the engine. They left cigarette butts and crushed cans of beer in their wake.

“They’re quick,” Mike said as he checked his gun.

“They probably think we’re with the Rounders,” Skye climbed out of the car and hurried inside, Mike in step with her.

“So, what does a parting gift consist of?”

The concrete floor was a minefield of snow piles and ice patches, so Skye took her time weaving through the natural obstacle course. Mike’s leg whirred as he made his own way.

“Usually, it’s a small mobile rig and a little cash. Just enough to tide someone over until they can
“fix what they broke.”

“How do you plan on fixing a run-in with Jack Rollins?”

“There’s gotta be something bigger. The world is always falling over itself to spread more bad news. I just...I’ve got to find it and break it. WHiH always has a backdoor for me, even if they don’t know it.”

“Is that our next step? Breaking the news?” Skye looked back at him for a moment, but he was looking at the ground.

“We’re gonna find Ace. Once we get the heat off of us, I’ll make it our top priority,” A particularly slick patch nearly took Skye out but she clung to the rusty metal of a rebar for balance. The cold burned her hand and she blinked back the image of Loki’s blue skin.

“Then you admit it wasn’t?”

Skye came up short and her shoulders fell. “Mike, I...”

“It’s okay, Skye,” and it hurt to hear the evenness in his tone. He wasn’t angry and that was probably worse than if he had been. “Loki’s real...tangible. You can touch him and talk to him. He’s...easier to save.”

“Mike,” Skye began as she turned to face him and he shook his head.

“I mean, I get it. You’ve had only me to look at for God knows how long. He’s probably a sight for sore eyes,” Mike smiled, small and humorless. “Ace is...a fiction at this point. He’s not real anymore. He’s an empty goal.”

“No!” Skye stomped forward and pulled her phone out of her pocket. She brought up Ace’s image, the new one, and held it up between them. In the emptiness of the warehouse, her phone shone like a beacon. “He’s right here and he’s alive. He was on that bus. If we hadn’t been ambushed by the Rounders...”
“Where is he now?”

Skye swallowed. “That’s what I have to find out.”

Mike closed his eyes. “We’re back to step one. He was...he was right there.”

Skye shoved her phone into her pocket, closed the distance between them and pulled him into a hug. She didn’t realize until her face was pressed to his chest that the temperature was dropping. She held him tight. “We’ll find him, Mike. You weren’t wrong. He’s a fighter.”

“I just...”

Skye’s phone started beeping loudly and she jerked away from Mike to pull it out of her pocket. A message flashed across her screen in bright blue. It wasn’t words, it was a symbol. A stylized bird with its wings to either side. SHIELD. After the close call in the diner with Loki, Skye had set her phone to detect SHIELD’s presence by the tech they used. She hadn’t had a chance to see if it worked...until now.

“It’s SHIELD!” Skye sprinted deeper into the warehouse and up to where she used to stash things. It was a little cubby hidden behind a slab of fake concrete. Inside was a backpack, loaded down with her parting gift. She snatched it up and hurried back to Mike. “Let’s go.”

The journey back to the beemer was a blur and she was a little surprised she didn’t slip and fall. It must have been the adrenaline. As Mike started the car, Skye shoved the backpack into the backseat and climbed into the passenger seat. She barely had a chance to shut the door before he was peeling out of the maze of warehouses. Skye turned around in her seat to watch for a tail and stayed that way until they were breaking out into a more commercial district. Mike slowed down to the speed limit and Skye sat properly in her seat.

“That was too easy,” Mike muttered and Skye agreed. She let Mike get them out of the danger zone and glanced back at her parting gift. Sighing, she patted Mike’s shoulder and crawled into the backseat. She sat sideways, with the backpack in front of her, and unzipped it.

A puff of rainbow confetti shot out and littered the backseat. Mike snorted and glanced at her from the rearview mirror. “What’s that?”
“I...” Skye reached into the depths of the bag and found an envelope. It was crisp and clean with the letter S printed on the front. She turned it over and ripped it open. Inside was a bit of cash and a thick card. As Mike came to a stop at a red light, she lifted the card out. “I don’t know.”

Rollins, Loren, Mike. Third strike; you’re out.

Skye looked up to Mike, opened her mouth to speak...and thought of Ace. Of Mike’s son in some facility somewhere, waiting and waiting. Of the tattoo on her forearm and of Loki bleeding out in the back of a stolen SUV. If Rising Tide wanted to shut her out...then she would just have to do it herself. She crumpled the card in her fist and turned her attention to the small rig in the backpack. She might as well get started now.

Loki - Six Days until the Gala

Nurse Temple had headed out in the early morning hours with strict instructions for him to stay put. Until she was positive he was healed, she wouldn’t clear him to work at her mother’s. She had said to give it a few days. She showed him where the leftovers were and how to turn on the TV, then was gone. Loki stood in the middle of her apartment, or safe dwelling, and pondered what his next move would be. He had plans before the Rounders had attacked them, and now he wasn’t sure how to go about them. He reached up to run his hand through his hair and was startled to feel how short it was. He knew, of course he knew, but he had forgotten.

Clenching his fist, Loki stalked around the small space. The TV was a noise box whose flashing lights had worked to give him a headache and he turned his back to it. For lack of anything to do and feeling vulnerable, he began rifle through all the drawers and cabinets. He started in the kitchen, where he was found a couple small knives he could fight with if he needed to. All of his belongings had been lost when he had been dropped at the hospital. Perhaps Skye and Mike had kept them.

Knelt beneath the sink, Loki got an idea.

He shot back up and shifted his focus to the electronics in the living room. It was serviceable, but sparse. The TV was a bit small, there was nothing beneath the short table in front of it and the shelves held only books. Loki started down the hall, to the room Nurse Temple had been sleeping in and he pushed the door open a little rougher than he probably should have. It banged off the wall and swung back towards him. He caught it with his palm and restrained himself a little as he opened it again.
The room was painted in neutral colors and the bedding was a soft blue. A lamp stood beside the bed on a set of drawers on one side and a bureau on the other.

“Where do these mortals keep their possessions?” he asked the air, then started with the bedside drawers. The top held some medicines and toiletries, and a few stray cords. The bottom held a couple books and some socks. Frustrated, Loki sighed and ducked a little to look beneath the bed. There, between a pair of shoes and a stack of books, sat the prize he had been searching for.

He pulled it out and crawled up onto the bed. The laptop was smaller than the one Skye had gave him, but he was sure he could make use of it. He glanced up at the doorway, but he knew that Nurse Temple would not be back for a long while. He got to work.

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Skye

She was fully engrossed in the lines of code on her screen as she worked to get them a bubble of safety to work in. Mike had turned the radio on low and was humming along with the music as he cruised down the I-78 headed to Harrisburg. It was one of many escape routes they had in place. She was tracing the path of the bus that Koenig had told her Ace was on, hoping to figure out where it might have gone and what had happened to the passengers. She could give them a headstart on finding Ace and save their asses at the same time.

Gritting her teeth a little at the thought of Rising Tide’s blackout, Skye pushed herself to do more. She couldn’t let Mike know they weren’t getting back-up anymore. She couldn’t take the hope of getting Ace away from him again. She wouldn’t.

Her rig beeped and a message floated up into her periphery. She was hesitant as she paused to look at it, since it was coming from somewhere in Harlem and she didn’t know anyone based there, but she wasn’t a coward. She could code circles around almost anyone. She tapped on the message to open it. The special coding on it was a shock since she had only given it to one person.

S,

Is the mission still on? Aces high?
Skye’s heart skipped a beat and she hurriedly wrote a reply.

You’re already out of the mountain? How?
And yes, of course. Aces high.

She glanced up at Mike, then decided it wouldn’t hurt for him to know. “Loki’s out of the hospital.”

“What? When?” Mike asked, moving the rearview so he could see her better. “How do you know?”

“He’s messaging me right now.”

“Are you sure it’s him?”

“Yeah, I gave him a special code to use if he needed to contact me directly.” Another message appeared and she looked back to her screen.

I am not human, remember?

She laughed and brushed her hair back behind her ears. Another message popped up before she could reply.

Where are you?
Glancing up at the interstate passing them by, Skye typed her response.

_Somewhere fancy. And you?_

_I will be headed somewhere fancy in a few days._

Skye frowned and pulled the rig a little closer. _Where?_

_You informed me that giving locations is dangerous._

_I can trace you._

_Don’t. Are you safe?_

Skye met Mike’s eyes in the rearview and gave him a reassuring smile. _Yes. Are you?_

_Yes._

_When can you get somewhere secure? We’ll pick you up._

Loki took a minute to reply and for a moment, she wasn’t sure that he would. _I have something to do first. I’ll contact you again._ His signal vanished in the next second, just like she’d taught him to do. Skye let out a sigh and forced herself to get back to work.

“He’ll contact us again,” she said and Mike hummed.

“He say where he was?”

“No, but...he’s safe.”
“Good,” Mike shifted the rearview back into place and Skye got back to work.

Steve - Five Days until the Gala

Natasha had decided that his first order of business after the tailor’s should be to familiarize himself with the guest list. He didn’t disagree.

“If you know who to expect, it might help you keep a lid on things,” she had said and guided him to the living room on his floor. The screen on the wall was near invisible to him, but it lit up the room when she turned it on. Steve sat right across from it and leaned forward so his elbows rested on his knees.

“How much do you know about the Kommandos?” Natasha asked, stepping away from the TV, but only so she could stand to the side of it. She watched him closely and he gave her nothing by keeping his expression neutral.

“How much do you know about the Kommandos?” he crossed his arms. “Will they all be attending the gala?”

“Not all, but there’s usually about three of them at things like this. This year, it’s Brock Rumlow, codename Crossbones,” and a picture of Rumlow slid onto the screen. Steve knew his face from his own searches. “He’s been with the Kommandos since before the Mandarin Campaign, and is closer to Jack Rollins than any of the other Kommandos. He’s a stalwart Hydra operative and would throw you to Schmidt without a second’s hesitation if it got him a promotion. You’re new to this gala and to Stark’s employ, so he’s going to be looking at you with a critical eye.”

“Is he human?”

“Yes.”

“Then, I can handle him.”

Natasha stared at him for a moment with an eyebrow raised, then continued. “Next is Yelena
Belova.”

This picture was one he hadn’t seen of the only woman member of the Kommandos and it made her look more...terrifying than the others did. Dressed head to toe in black with a red hourglass symbol at her waist, she looked like a...

“Code name Black Widow, she and I were trained by the same people,” she looked to Steve and then back to the picture. “She has also been with the Kommandos since before the Mandarin Campaign, though as far as we know, she has no set ties to any of the Kommandos outside of their duties. Like the rest of the Kommandos, she’s Hydra, though...” Natasha glanced back to Steve. “I’m sure if someone offered her something better, she’d jump ship. Like me, she doesn’t really have an anchor into the organization.”

Steve let that settle for a second, then leaned back. “You don’t have an anchor to SHIELD?”

“Do you?”

He blinked, then looked away. “Who else is going to be there?”

“The last of the Kommandos set to be there is the Red Captain himself,” The other Captain’s photo pushed Rumlow and Belova’s out of the way. It was from some red carpet event and he stood out like a sore thumb against the white background in a black suit. He had long dark hair and piercing blue eyes. Aside from that, the only thing that visible on the man’s face was a black mask. It started just below his eyes and went down to his jaw. He had a silver metal arm and was built like a slightly bigger version of Steve. “Outside of the Kommandos, he’s a ghost. No relatives, no permanent residence, no one even knows what his real name is. He’s known as the Red Captain, in and out of service.”

“Why’s he so mysterious? What’s he hiding?”

“If we knew what, then he wouldn’t be a ghost,” she pressed a button and the Red Captain’s image vanished. “Now, let’s get into the rest of the guest list.”

Aside from high society names and a few tech magnates, no one really stood out to him. Until Natasha started on those high in Hydra’s ranks.
“Herr Kleiser,” The picture that was queued up was of a pale man with a face full of sharp angles and gauntness, with eyes like black coals that bored into the viewer. Steve frowned at the image and stepped closer. Natasha continued, rattling off his information. “Masquerading as a rich, reclusive private citizen, Kleiser has his hands in a lot of scientific research and development. He’s also a high ranking officer in Hydra. He reports directly to Schmidt.”

Steve forced down the urge to ask everything about Schmidt, and focused on the man in front of him. “What does Kleiser have over Stark?”

Natasha paused. “What?”

“The mention of his name sets Stark on edge. Stark said...” Steve recalled the image of Stark’s face as they spoke. “He said Kleiser wasn’t a threat so long as he obeyed. Obeyed? Why does he have to obey? And what is a stick of mind-fuckery?”

Natasha blinked, rolled her eyes and shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Right, I’m just the muscle here. Romanoff,” Steve leveled her with as serious a look as he could muster. He almost wasn’t sure it worked. “Tell me the truth.”

“Technically, it’s not my place to tell you, but I’m the one who has to work with you, so...” she sighed. “Herr Kleiser isn’t...we don’t think he’s human. He doesn’t age, he’s incredibly strong and he’s even got Schmidt’s ear. How? I don’t know. I’m telling the truth. As far as I can tell from the reports I’ve read, he has some kind of device that influences people.”

“Stick of mind-fuckery,” Steve muttered and his mind was full of scenarios where the presence of it could go wrong. Below it all was a vein of fear and he was reminded of the circumstances surrounding his introduction to Asgard. Asgard, he thought and the extensive libraries burst into his mind’s eye. The magical pages twisted and turned, distorting the images a little. Still, he saw the Tesseract and...

“No,” Steve whispered, clenching his fist as he considered the possibility. “No...”

Natasha’s face changed as if by the flip of a switch. She was as prepared for a sudden threat as he was. “What? What is it?”
“Infinity Stone...there’s six of them. The Tesseract is...Space. It can control space itself. This...this stick is...could be the Mind Stone,” Steve ran his hand down his face and took a deep breath. “Two...there might be two planet-ending weapons on Earth,” he laughed and it was anything but humor. “What’s next?”

Steve paced away from the TV for a moment, taking deep steady breaths. He thought of Hogun and tried to remember his control. But in that moment, the only thing he wanted to do was destroy. He wanted to rip something to pieces with his bare hands. He wanted to fight Brimer’s wolves or spar with the Asgardians. He wanted something he could handle on his own. His hands shook and he closed his eyes. **No,** he told himself, **you are in control of yourself if nothing else. You will not succumb.**

“Rogers,” Natasha called him and he slowly turned to look at her. “You don’t know that it’s what you think it is. It could be something else.”

**Right,** he clung to her words and nodded. “There’s a chance. There’s a chance I’m wrong.”

“Of course there is,” Natasha watched him, then queued up another, far older, image. It was a visage he knew well. “Schmidt’s going to be there, too. Let’s handle one thing at a time.”

Steve pulled himself back on task and took a seat. He stared down his enemy, the same face after all these decades, and he felt an old anger rise up. The last time he had seen the man in the flesh, they had been standing across from each other and Steve had held the Tesseract in his bare hand. *You fool, what have you done?* Schmidt had said and Steve still had no answer. The future looming ahead of him was bleak, if only because it was everything he had feared for Earth when he had dreamed of finding a way back. This was the version he had tossed and turned in the night about, this was the nightmare he had dreaded.

Everyday brought a new level of darkness to it and he was only now breaching the surface layers. How far down did this go? How thorough was the corruption? How high were the odds against them? Would bringing Asgardians back with him even stem the tide that rose against them?

“Emperor Schmidt, as he’s known in secret, is the head of Hydra. I don’t suppose I have to tell you how big of a threat he is?” Natasha was watching him closely and he supposed it was a test. How would he do against an image, and what did that say about how he would do in person? Steve could see the gears turning behind her unreadable eyes. She was figuring him out, top to bottom, before she would have him at her back.

“No, I know him well.”
"You know this version of him, but..." and the image of Schmidt in his Hydra uniform was swept aside in favor of a man Steve could have passed in the street without noticing. The pale skin and mousey brown hair gave him an air of vulnerability and Steve frowned at the image. "You don't know him at all. Cyrus Fenton, an eccentric millionaire known for his strange habits. He is an unassuming character compared to the rest of them, but that's the point. Schmidt's in deep cover right now. Only a select few even know he's Cyrus Fenton."

"And SHIELD knows because?"

"SHIELD on the whole doesn't know. Myself, Deputy Director Fury, Director Carter and a few others do. It's need-to-know. We have an eye on the inside."

Steve nodded. "What's the protocol around him?"

"Well, we have many operatives in place, but until we're sure of the order of succession, it's a risky gamble to take him out. You know as well as we do that Schmidt doesn't take anything lightly. If we strike and miss..." She clicked her tongue. "It's not an option right now."

"You need an opening," Steve said, his voice low. "One thing at a time."

Pausing, Natasha crossed her arms. "Schmidt is off-limits."

Steve raised his hands in mock surrender. "I'm here for Loki."

"If all goes to plan, Loki will be in SHIELD custody by the morning after the gala. If not...we pull the plug. That means a full stop. We have one mission here and one mission only."

Maintaining eye contact, Steve nodded. "One mission."

Natasha turned back to the screen and began to speak when the elevator dinged. On edge by thoughts running through his head, Steve grabbed his shield and stood in front of Natasha in less than a blink. He barely felt his knife slide into his hand, but he could see it out of the corner of his eye. Aside from the doors closing, the only other sound was the clicking of heels. Natasha pressed a hand to his shoulder and began to step around him. Still unsure of the newcomer, he wrapped an
She laughed at the same moment a woman with strawberry blonde hair came around the corner and Steve frowned. “Rogers, she’s a friendly.” Natasha patted him again and stepped out of his hold. “Miss Potts, it’s good to see you.”

“And you, Miss Rushman,” Miss Potts smiled at Natasha, then turned a terse look Steve’s way. “And this must be the infamous Captain everyone’s been telling me so much about.”

“I’m not a Captain,” Steve corrected her, slowly easing out of his guard. “Stígandr Birgirsson, ma’am.”

“We’re all friends here, Rogers,” Miss Potts stepped closer to him and Natasha hung back with a smirk. “Aren’t we?”

“Depends on your definition,” he replied and slid his shield onto his back.

“Well,” Miss Potts stepped closer and her heels clicked sharply. “Mine is simple. I don’t have very many friends, but the ones I do have are trustworthy, loyal and dedicated to the cause. I have worked with Miss Rushman before. She has proven herself. I understand you have history on your side, but that’s not good enough. From what I’ve learned about you, you are unstable and headstrong. What guarantees do I have that this won’t jeopardize Mister Stark at the gala?”

Steve straightened his shoulders and set his jaw. “I have it under control.”

“Really?” Miss Potts pulled out her StarkPhone and tapped something. The huge screen changed to a grainy video that showed the side door of a business. The video played on its own.

Out of nowhere, Steve appeared. He stumbled and rolled, then climbed to his feet and stood against a wall. His fist carved a hole into the wall before Romanoff appeared behind him. The video cut to black and Miss Potts tapped something else. This video was obviously from inside Stark Tower and showed Steve’s episode up until the lights cut off.

He stared at the screen until Miss Potts spoke again. “Under control, huh?”
Blinking, Steve took a deep breath and turned back to face her. “It won’t interfere with my ability to protect Stark.”

Miss Potts stepped closer to him. “There is nothing I wouldn’t do to keep Tony safe. You need to be on the same page. There can be nothing more important, not even catching Loki, than protecting Tony Stark.”

Miss Potts stared him down and he felt himself rise to it like he would any challenge. The fact that she felt it necessary to have this conversation meant that she was already doubting him. Despite the world actively falling apart around him, Steve was determined to not fall with it.

“He’s safe with me...and Rushman,” he nodded. “You have my word.”

Narrowing her eyes, Miss Potts pursed her lips. “That doesn’t mean anything to me, Rogers,” she pinned him with a glare for a second longer, then sighed. “But it does mean something to Tony. Don’t disappoint him.”

Steve looked down at the pristine floor and nodded. “I’ll do my best.”

**Tony - Four Days until the Gala**

SHIELD had a file on Laura Cardell, mostly because she had interacted many times with Clint Barton and his brother. The former Kommando’s vacation had been catalogued down to the day and any person of interest had been given their own file. Tony read through it all, including the incident with their landlord Banionis, on his way to a meeting with Stark Industries. His StarkTab shone brightly in the elevator as it carried him down multiple floors. Since his birthday was just a couple months away and they were probably losing their collective minds about his surprise release.

He flipped back to the pictures of Laura and her kids, Lila and Cooper. They were really tiny people and he wondered what about them had charmed Steve. Was it the good guy stereotype that made him want to take care of them? Was he filling the hole that had been left behind by Helblindi and Býleistr? After reading through the Banionis case, he wondered if maybe it was guilt. He hadn’t been back on Earth for very long and there was already a homicide in the same building he was living in. Not just a homicide, but children had been put in mortal danger. Considering the circumstances, Tony had already started working on getting everything in order for Laura and her
kids. At this point, it wasn’t even for Steve. They needed a place that was safe and he had given his word.

The elevator came to a stop and Tony let out a breath, locking the StarkTab and getting back into a business mindset. He didn’t hate this side of things, but he much preferred the more hands-on side of things. Pepper was much more comfortable with all of this. He wondered if she was willing to take a promotion and a raise to save him the time. He filed it away to examine later.

“New bodyguards?” Obie asked as they exited the boardroom after the meeting, laying his hand heavily on Tony’s shoulder. There was a small second where Tony nearly flinched, but he put on a smile and leaned into the touch. “You know you’ve got to go through me for their clearance. After the last fiasco with Rumlow....”

“I didn’t choose Rumlow. Besides, I’m grown now. I can choose my own bodyguards, Obie.”

Pressing his lips together and scrunching up his face, Obie breathed out through his nose. “Tony...Tony, you don’t need to think about these things. It’s what Potts is for, what I’m for. You make the tech, you improve the product. We handle the messy stuff. Now, who’re these two? Where’d they come from? What kind of training they have? See, I’ve got a whole crew lined up for you and the gala. They’ve gone through the wringer, passed the tests, and are ready to go. What’s two bodyguards compared to six?”

“Well, they’re kind of an army all on their own. I’ve got it handled, Obie. Trust me,” Tony patted Obie on the back and tried to extricate himself, but Obie squeezed a little tighter to keep him in place.

“I would Tony, but...with your track record,” Obie sighed. “Let me take a look at them. If they pass inspection, no harm no foul. If they don’t, the crew’s waiting in the wings. Everybody wins.”

Moistening his dry lips, Tony turned his face away to look at the people walking towards the elevator up ahead. “I’ll think about it.”

“Well, don’t think too long, Tony,” Obie squeezed him once more, then let him go. “The gala’s coming up fast.”
“Yeah, yeah, I’ll get back to you before the gala.”

“You better,” Obie pointed at him, his expression serious. Then it broke into a smile and he laughed. “You look good, Tony. Kleiser gave me reason to believe you would be a little rough.”

“Kleiser?” Tony asked, clearing his throat when his voice came out high. “You talked to Kleiser? I thought you two hated each other.”

“Oh, we do, we do. But we talk about a common interest. We talk about you,” Obie straightened his suit jacket and his tie. “You’re the future, Tony. You have to be protected. It’s something even the Emperor believes in. A unifying force: Tony Stark. Who woulda thought?” Obie laughed again and waved to Tony. “Send me their info, Tony.”

“I’ll get on that,” he called back, trying to keep his tone light. “See you at the gala!”

“Sure thing, Tony!”

Tony maintained his smile until the elevator door closed. His expression fell and he let out a shuddering breath. His hands shook and he yanked his sunglasses off his shirt, shoving them gracelessly onto his face. He glanced to the people passing by him and straightened his shoulders. One of these days, he wouldn’t have to keep rebuilding his armor. He marched to the elevator once everyone else had gone and headed back up to the penthouse.

Steve

“So,” Steve began as he took a turn around the kitchen table on his floor. The settings were incredibly fancy and, surprisingly, looked even richer than Asgard’s had. Of course, that could just be his perception of things now that he was back on Midgard. “Bodyguards don’t eat?”

Natasha smiled and glanced to Miss Potts who shifted from foot to foot and crossed her arms. “We do, but not when our bosses do. There’s a reason most bodyguards work in teams. It’s either switch off to get a bite or eat before you come. There aren’t very many chances to eat once the gala begins. It’s...uncouth to eat on the job.”
“Right,” Steve nodded, crossing his arms. “I can go a long while without food, so it won’t bother me.”

“Did you starve much on Jötunheim?”

Weighing his definition of starving, Steve hummed. “People have had it worse than me.”

“That’s not what I asked,” Natasha stared at him pointedly, then turned away. “Now, this part’s relatively short. There’s more legwork than anything with this sort of job. As the current founder of the Maria Stark Foundation, Stark is going to be a popular person. This is where the big names try to make connections. You’ll have to field a lot of people. The trouble always comes when you can’t see who’s coming up fast. So, watch Stark’s reaction. If it’s good, relax, but be on guard. If it’s bad, be ready for anything. Remember, no one gets to touch him without his consent. We’re here to keep him safe. If we blend in with the crowd, Loki won’t notice us.”

“Keep an eye out for Tiberius Stone and Justin Hammer. If you give them an ear, they’ll talk it off,” Miss Potts reached out and fiddled with a wine glass. “You do know that...Emperor Schmidt will be there?”

*Emperor Schmidt. The crowned Red Skull. Hydra triumphant.* Steve swallowed back the taste of bile at the thought. He blew out a breath and mustered up a wry smile. “Yeah, he’s on top of the world now. Sixty years without me in his way. I suppose he took advantage of it.”

“Well, he hasn’t had a peaceful walk to the top. And the ground beneath him isn’t very steady,” Miss Potts was pursing her lips again, though he assumed it more more out of habit than anything. “One stiff breeze could blow him down.”

“How many others?” Steve asked quietly, thinking now as he had in Jötunheim that the more he knew, the better he could deal with it all.

“It goes all the way through, like a bad stain,” Miss Potts commented with a disapproving flick of her fingers.

“It’ll be hard to wash out,” Natasha muttered, then cleared her throat. “That’s a lot of red.”

Steve saw the storm giant guard he had killed, saw the wash of blood that drenched him, and felt
the heat of Surtur’s flames. He blinked and clenched his jaw. “After the gala, once we have Loki and Thor...we take on Hydra head-on. Their time is up.”

“Will you even be here, then?” Natasha asked and Steve heard it like an accusation.

“I didn’t leave Earth by choice sixty years ago. I won’t abandon it, now. I’ll return with the might of Asgard behind me.”

“Fire to put out a fire,” Miss Potts murmured, then straightened her posture and righted her shoulders. “I should get going.”

“Do you have guards for the gala?” Natasha asked, and Miss Potts shook her head.

“I don’t need them. I’m not in power,” she smiled at them and pulled out her StarkPhone. “I’ll see you there?”

“Of course,” Natasha replied and Miss Potts waved goodbye to them before disappearing into the elevator.

“Are all Stark’s friends like that?” Steve asked and Natasha chuckled.

“You haven’t met Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes yet. Pepper is only the start of the crucible.”

“Where’s Rhodes?”

“With Emperor Schmidt. He’s guard captain.”

“The Emperor’s guard captain?” Steve was beginning to understand the need for caution. How many inside agents did they have littered throughout Schmidt’s empire? “He’ll be at the gala, then?”

“He will,” Natasha tapped the table. “Let’s get back to work.
Having dwelled on it for a day, Steve could no longer keep his worries to himself. The idea, vague and uncertain as it was, that the stick Kleiser possessed could be an Infinity Stone haunted him. Hjördís’s words were on repeat in his head.

*Great power in the hands of a Jötunn.*

Ólafur’s voice joined in, a question and an admonishment. *Do you enjoy being right?*

He shook off the deja vu.

A package had been waiting for Steve in the living room and inside was a bunch of clothing. Shirts, pants, socks, shoes. Anything he could ever need and more. Even underwear. The style was similar to what he had been given on Asgard, but distinctly Midgardian in construction. He chose a dark grey tunic and black trousers, then threw on his boots and black overcoat. He had unbraided his hair to take a shower and hadn’t sat down to put it back. The hair from his mohawk hung down a little past his shoulders. Running his hand through it, he decided it wasn’t worth the effort.

He headed toward the elevator and gazed up at the ceiling. “Jarvis, is Mister Stark in?”

“He is currently in his workshop, Mister Birgirsson. Shall I put in a request to allow you entry?”

“If you wouldn’t mind. I would like to talk to him.”

Jarvis was quiet for a moment and Steve stepped into the elevator. As the doors closed, Jarvis spoke. “Request approved. You have been given clearance to - and I quote - ‘everything but my bedroom’.”

The elevator started its downward journey and Steve chuckled to himself. He had no plans to invade Stark’s personal space. If it wasn’t for Loki, he wouldn’t even be in this Tower right now. He would be busy helping Clint with Banionis and finding Grills’ killer. This whole mission, this whole set-up, was solely for the chance to bring Loki in. He didn’t plan to get personal.
The workshop was apparently on its own floor and the elevator opened up on a slim entrance that wound towards the center of it. Steve stepped off the elevator and the doors closed behind him. He paused for a moment, then headed further in, taking in the bright atmosphere as he went.

The walls were glass, like the labs in SHIELD, but were opaque. He could see the shadows of things, the silhouettes stood out against the rheumy white. Deep inside, obscured by the opaqueness, shone a bright blue light. It reminded him of glow-weed and of the Tesseract and of the memory of Bucky’s eyes.

The nagging part of him dug a little deeper. So many things were connected in his life, so many things mimicked one another. He arrived at the proper entrance to the workshop and heard Jarvis announce him. Sighing, Steve let himself in.

Stark was perched on the edge of a stool, his elbows on the worktable holding up some kind of missile. A fizzle of smoke drifted up from his fingertips and he set a pen-like iron to the side. Turning, his eyes huge behind a pair of magnifying lenses, Stark smiled bright. He was surrounded by the blue glow Steve had glimpsed, but the light came from a multitude of translucent screens floating freely in the air. With a wave, they vanished and Stark pulled off his magnifying glasses. The move ruffled his hair and it fell a little into his face.

For a moment, and it passed by like lightning, Steve was struck speechless. He wasn’t sure why and his heart leapt a little. Swallowing, he cleared his throat.

“I...I wanted to talk to you,” he began and Stark’s eyebrows rose in curiosity.

“You’re doing good so far,” Stark joked, then sobered and stood. “Was it another episode?”

Steve felt pain in his palm from his fingernails and consciously released the clench of his fist. “No, I’m fine. It’s about the Tesseract.”

“Oh,” Stark turned back to his table and brought up two smaller screens. It seemed to be schematics of some sort. “What about it?”

Steve stepped further into the workshop. “Where is it now? Is it in the Tower?”

Without looking away from his work, Stark shook his head. “I may look innocent, but I’m really not. It’s nowhere near here. Why are you so interested?”
“Not near here...” Steve frowned, realizing he didn’t know enough about Stark to figure out where else he would be hiding something like the Tesseract. He got closer. “Where do you live, when you aren’t at the Tower?”

“Oh, you’re cute,” Stark glanced his way. “Trying to suss out potential hiding spots. I’m not going to tell you where the Tesseract is, even if you are Captain America.”

Steve nodded. “Okay. I guess I don’t have clearance yet. Does it come with the bedroom package?” Stark dropped whatever projection he had been fiddling with and coughed suddenly. Steve laughed. “A little more innocent than you think, huh?”

Stark spun and stared at Steve with narrowed eyes. “First Loki, now the Tesseract...” he leaned forward. “What are you angling for, Rogers? What do you want?”

There were only a few feet between them but it felt like inches. Steve’s spine straightened and he rolled his shoulders. “My mission hasn’t changed, Stark. It’s been the same since the Valkyrie. Stop Hydra, save the world. The Tesseract is a threat to this world. So is Loki, but he’s more than that. He’s what stands between Midgard and Asgard, he and his brother. Getting them back will help bridge the gap between our worlds. The Asgardians owe me after Jötunheim. I’m going to return the princes and come back with an army.”

Stark watched him quiety. “And then what?”

“We take out Hydra.”

“With an alien army whose track record for dominating other worlds is disconcerting? What if the Asgardians are just using you to prep Earth before an invasion? What if you’re an alcohol swab before a lethal injection?”

Blinking, Steve could see Hela in his mind’s eye. The wolf, the kingslayer, the deterrent; if anyone could split a passage through into the heart of Midgard...he turned away from Stark. “I can’t...I can’t believe that.”

“Our son destroyed an entire world and killed everyone you had known for fifty years. Then they turn around and demand you retrieve him? You’re negotiating for his safe passage back home,” Stark stood and stepped nearer to him. “It all sounds too good to be true. Tell me you can see that.”
Steve let out a breath and nodded. “I know. I know it’s a possibility, just like I know it’s a possibility that Kleiser’s stick is another Infinity stone,” he flicked his gaze to Stark sharply. “I am well aware that both of them are using us. But I am using them, too. And if they deviate from what serves me, I’ll be...” His voice, which had risen and become more severe, died in his throat.
*Garm’s brother, the darkness, a Helhound.*

“The weapon that brings their empire down?” A note of self-deprecation colored Stark’s words and Steve remembered their conversation. “Now *that* is familiar,” Stark pointed at him, then spun around. The schematics vanished and were replaced with images of the Tesseract and Kleiser’s stick. “Let’s make a deal, Rogers. After the gala, if I survive and you get your man, I’ll share what I know about these two headaches. In exchange, you bring me in on the Asgard stuff.”

Considering it for a moment, Steve crossed his arms. “Bring you in how?”

Stark crossed his own arms. “Keep me informed, let me and my people have first contact, let my Tower be the...the space embassy,” he reached up and scratched at his chin. “I can’t protect Earth if this goes south if I don’t have my foot in the door.”

Thinking of Frigga, Steve closed the distance between them. “I’m not going to put you between Asgard and Earth. I’m a supersoldier, I can handle that. You...”

Stark’s eyes turned steely. “Don’t you dare...”

“I wasn’t trying to...”

“Yeah, you were,” Stark pushed into his space and glared up at him. “I have been between Hydra and SHIELD my whole life. If you think for one second *Asgard* is going to break me...”

“Stark,” Steve interrupted, raising his hand quickly. Stark flinched. “I don’t doubt you, not in this. But it’s too dangerous. I can’t - I *won’t* - put you in that position.”

“It’s my life and my choice. If you want my help with the Tesseract, then you give me this.”

Stark stared him down, a frown affixed between his brows. Steve knew instantly that there would
be no negotiation in this. Either he agreed or the deal was off the table. Now was his turn to stare.

“What does S.H.I.E.L.D think of this?”

The defiant air grew stronger. “They don’t have anything to do with this. Their loyalty to freedom places them opposite to Hydra, but that doesn’t mean they align with impartiality. I do. I don’t have red tape and ego in my way. I can put Earth’s safety above everything else. I’m a private citizen and that means I don’t dance to the government’s fife.”

“No ego?” Steve scoffed, gesturing to the entirety of Stark and the room. “You’re standing here demanding I grant you the monopoly on Asgardian interactions. What qualifies you to represent all of Earth?”

Crossing his arms tight, Stark half-shrugged. “I don’t represent all of Earth. I can’t. But I’ve built the Abomination’s containment cells for years and I work closely with the Kommandos. If anyone can neutralize the Asgardians if things went wrong, it would be me.”

“You can’t negotiate from a place of fear and doubt,” Steve sighed and looked up at the ceiling. He felt as if he were reaching through time and space to remind himself. “Look, we’ll compromise. The Asgardians stay at your Tower while they are here, but you aren’t the authority. If things get violent, isolate them in the cells. Otherwise, they are allies.”

“And S.H.I.E.L.D handles the logistics of bridging the gap between Earth and Asgard. Logistics is in their name after all. I’ll keep the fires burning and the mutton flowing, and I’ll have Jarvis record it all for posterity,” Stark smiled but it was sharp as a knife. “After the gala, I’ll give you full access to all information concerning the Tesseract.”

“Access to everything?” Steve asked, knowing Stark would have the inside track on both Hydra and S.H.I.E.L.D.

Stark blinked rapidly, then hurriedly looked away.

“At least take me out for dinner first,” he laughed and held out his hand. “But yes, access to everything you need to help me save Earth. It’s yours.”

“Okay,” Steve took his hand and they shook. “Thank you for your time, Mister Stark.”
Offering up a sly grin, Stark patted his arm. “You do know my door’s always open, right? You don’t need a mission to talk to me.”

Steve shifted from foot to foot. “This is temporary, Stark. Once I’ve got Loki in custody and the Tesseract secure, I’ll be out of your hair.”

“You aren’t an inconvenience,” Stark countered, sliding his hands into his pockets.

“Be that as it may, I won’t be here long. Thank you again,” Steve made quick work of exiting the workshop, not turning back to look at Stark.

“See you around, I guess,” Stark muttered, low and off-hand, but Steve caught it anyway.

He paused for a heartbeat as he stepped over the threshold and glanced back. Stark was moving things around his work table aimlessly, not settling on anything in particular. From this angle, with the glowing lights of his projections behind him, Stark looked luminous. Unbidden, a thought came to Steve’s mind.

Moon-berries, Adalbjörg had told him as the elks ran by, for light in the caves.

The taste of them, sweet and strong, burst against his tongue in his memory and he swallowed. Stark seemed to sense that Steve hadn’t completely left and glanced up. Steve was gone before he could make eye contact.

Skye - Three Days until the Gala

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” Miles Lydon sighed in lieu of a greeting as soon as he opened his door. “You’re blacklisted, Skye.”

“True,” She stepped closer to the doorway and leaned against it so he wouldn’t be able to close it. “But I distinctly remember you offering your house if I ever needed it.”
Miles groaned and ran his hand across his forehead. “That was before you started taking in strays and attacking Kommandos, Skye. You’re bad news, now.”

“Well, I was hoping to crash here for a little bit and see about creating some good news. What do you say? For old times’ sake?” Skye put on her best puppy dog eyes and even pouted a little. If Mike could see her face, he would be rolling his eyes. She was internally doing that herself. “Please?”

Letting out a long suffering sigh, Miles wrenched the door wide open and ushered them in. “Hurry up before someone sees you.”

Miles hadn’t upgraded much since she had last been here. He had a new set of servers and his rig had expanded to take up a whole wall, but she still saw space for his mini fridge. Her stomach growled and she wandered towards what she hoped was some leftovers.

“Don’t even think about it,” Miles snapped, locking his door tight. “If I have to house you for any duration of time, I’m not feeding you, too. You’re a gremlin.”

“Rude,” Skye flicked her hair over her shoulder and met Mike’s eyes. He was surveying their new surroundings with a keen eye. He noticed the cameras at about the same time she did. “You keep tabs on your own place now?”

“You know what kind of work we do, Skye. I can’t leave anything up to chance,” He pushed the closest webcam to the side. “Don’t worry, it’s an output only set-up for when I’m broadcasting. The others are for safety. And I’ll delete the footage before you leave. Unlike some people, I’m very careful with my work.”

“It’s not like I planned to cross paths with Rollins. He ambushed us. I think he was tipped off,” she turned to Mike and crossed her arms. “Do you have any clue who would want us to get caught? Especially considering how much I know about Rising Tide?”

Miles shrugged and sat heavily in his computer chair. “There could be a couple people in the Tide, but to be honest, I assumed it was because you took on that Loren guy. You do know he’s on SHIELD’s most wanted list, right?”

Skye blinked and dropped her arms. “What? When did that happen?”
“Like last week or so,” Mike pulled his keyboard close and opened a notice up on the screen. It had the ID picture Skye had taken for Loki’s false identity and all the information she had given him. “This looks like your work.”

“That’s because it is. How did SHIELD get his alias so quick? I just made that,” she was staring at the ID up on the screen and frowning. Behind her, she heard the whir of Mike’s leg as he came closer. “Who is he?”

Miles called up some more files and notices and spread them out on his four screen display. It was more information on his short-lived attack on Stark Tower, his capture, and even had Skye’s bus on file with the Rollins’ incident at the top. SHIELD had been watching her, too. Spooked, Skye turned away.

“Okay, so SHIELD’s got my number, too. Maybe they tipped off Rollins?”

“Why would SHIELD hand you to their enemy?” Mike asked, tucking his thumbs into his vest. “It’s more likely that Hydra is in Rising Tide and gave away our location.”

“Hey,” Miles protested, pushing back from his rig. “Rising Tide are the good guys.”

“Rising Tide only helps those that help them. Don’t forget how you treated me before you realized I could help with the buses,” Mike stared down Miles without blinking. “You blackballed Skye then, too. What makes now any different? Rising Tide is as bad as SHIELD and Hydra. You’re all self-centered and short-sighted.”

“Oh, like you and risking the entire operation for one kid?” Miles retorted with a sneer and Mike unclipped his gun from his holster.

Skye stepped between them with a gasp. “Wait! Wait! Nobody’s shooting anybody. Okay, just... take a deep breath or something.”

Miles clicked his tongue and went back to his rig. Mike took a step back and put his gun back. “He was a dick back then and he’s an even bigger one now.”
Skye blew out a breath and shifted her weight. “Look, I get that you two don’t get along, but could we please try to figure this out? It’ll help all of us if this gets fixed before it gets worse.”

“Worse how?” Miles interjected and started tapping away at his keyboard. “You’ve got the Kommandos in a tizzy, that Stark gala’s coming up and all the heavy hitters are going to be in town, not to mention Zola’s facilities have gone into overdrive while you’ve been playing Where’s Waldo. It’s pretty fucking bad, Skye.”

“His name is Ace, Miles,” she corrected and he snorted. “He’s just a little boy.”

“Exactly. He’s a kid. There are hundreds of kids getting shipped off to Zola’s every month and you catch maybe a fifth of them in your bus runs? Mister Green has gone off the map and Mister Blue is being investigated by Zola’s for inappropriate use of the research grant. You’ve got to get your head out of the clouds and back on the ground where the real issues are. The kid’s probably dead anyway.”

Mike nearly put a hole through the wall before he yanked a small thumb drive out of his collar and hooked it into the nearest port on Miles’ rig. The ocular view from Mike’s cybernetic eye relayed onto one of the screens and Ace’s picture floated to the surface. It paused there.

“Who’s that?” Miles asked and he looked over at Skye. “Is that...is that Ace?”

“Yeah,” Mike said quietly before pulling his usb free. Ace disappeared from Miles’ screen. “My boy is alive and we have a lead on where he might be. We were following it when Rollins attacked.”

“We lost the bus and Loren got shot. We had to drop him at Mount Sinai,” Skye still felt guilty as hell for leaving him, especially now. He had found a way out of the hospital and she hadn’t been there for him. “Now with the Tide blackballing me, I don’t have the resources to find him on my own. I need your help.”

“Let me get this straight,” Miles stood again and tucked his hands in his jeans. “I help you find Ace and you’ll leave me alone?”

“Yep, it’s that simple,” Skye looked to Miles’ rig. “With all this, which I helped you get by the way, we should be able to track Ace down in no time.”
Miles looked to his rig, then back to Skye. “Alright, but you can use my network. You can’t use my rig.”

Skye pulled the backpack with the small rig in it around so it was against her chest. “I brought my own.”

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**Skye - One Day until the Gala**

Having access to Miles’ network did wonders for Skye’s progress. She had already managed to track down the bus that they had been tracking before the Rounders showed up. Figuring out where the bus had dropped off its passengers would be a little harder, but she had time and the resources now.

“What are you going to do when you find him?” Miles asked, narrowing down the bus routes on one of his screens while he decoded something on another.

“Rescue him,” Skye said absentmindedly and started on breaking through the protections around a series of manifests.

“What about everyone else?”

“We rescue them, too,” Mike was staring through the small space between the curtains out the window at the street below.

“Without Rising Tide’s help?” Miles laughed. “Good luck with that.”

Skye scoffed. “They dropped me, not the other way around.”

“You shot a Kommando point blank. That’s like declaring war. But you represent the Rising Tide, so it’s not Skye declaring war, it’s all of us. Do you know the amount of shit we’ve had to deal with since you went all Rambo?” Miles had turned his back on his rig and was leaning forward to meet Skye’s gaze. She sighed.
“I’m not a child, Miles. When you were framed as a rat, I helped you clear your name. You’d be in my position right now if it wasn’t for me.”

“I wouldn’t have been framed if you hadn’t rocked the boat because you thought you knew it all. Without me, you’d be with Ace in one of Zola’s playhouses.”

Skye clenched her fist and felt tears burn her eyes. Her phone started beeping, but she was too furious to check it. “You’re a piece of shit, Miles.”

“Yeah, just you wait...” Miles turned back to his rig and closed down all the operations. He stood and moved towards the wall away from the rest of the room. “Have fun.”

“Skye!” Mike shouted and she felt him tackle her to the ground.

The front door blew open, shards of wood flying in all directions. Skye only caught a small glimpse of soldiers in SHIELD gear before Mike rolled and sprinted for the windows. A high pitch whistling sound filled the air along with shouts for them to surrender, and Skye felt Mike go limp. She fell out of his hold and crashed to the hardwood floor. Winded and in a little bit of pain, Skye forced herself back to her feet and turned to see if Mike was okay.

The next thing she knew, there was a foot in her face and she was out like a light.
Novocaine

Chapter Notes

Duuuuuuudessssssss....

I have had this gala planned since the very beginning and so much changed in the writing of this that a lot of it had to be reorganized. *stress* But I kind of like where it started to go. I didn't try to force it places, I just let it go. This was probably why 1.) it's so long, 2.) I had to break it into a separate chapter from the last one, and lastly 3.) why so much is going down here. I'm not entirely happy with it all, but *shrugs* I could always go back when it's all done and rewrite. Let me know what you think!

*lugs chapter at you and flees*

Please enjoy and if you do, consider buying me a coffee!

Loki - The Day of the Gala

Laid out on the kitchen counter when Loki awoke was a small bundle of clothing. It was folded very neatly and was all black and white. A white shirt, black pants, black shoes, a black jacket. It was all very modern Midgardian and in pristine condition. He wondered how Nurse Temple - Claire - had found everything in his size. He dressed in the bathroom where he could look at himself in the mirror and as he shed his borrowed hospital clothing and slid into this new outfit, he felt as if he were passing from one realm and into another.

The collar was slightly starchy and stiff and brushed against his throat roughly. He had been told to button it all the way up. The pants were creased down the center of the leg and were ever so slightly too short for him. He could manage. The shoes fit perfectly and he wriggled his toes in them for a moment as he imagined what he would have to be doing. It seemed unimportant and incredibly momentous at the same time. He took a deep breath and brushed his hair back compulsively, only to find that it didn’t need coercing. It laid about his head in any way it chose. It was slightly curly since he had washed it and he fiddled with the curls for a moment.

He was wasting time until he had a better plan. Of course he was. He didn’t want to be doing this. If he failed at this task, if he disappointed them...he did not know what he would do.

He could return to Skye and Mike, help them find Ace and hope in the shuffle he could find a way home. He could make an attempt on Stark Tower again, but that would be foolishness. Surely, they knew his face by now. Surveillance cameras were the bane of his existence. He had taken Claire’s suggestion to heart and hid his face behind scarves and such whenever he walked outside. He hid behind a mask to survive. It was similar, he supposed, to his life on Asgard. Except...Claire and
Skye and Mike knew he was not human. He wasn’t living a lie now.

Loki stared into his own reflection for a long while before mustering up the will to move.

He wasn’t living a lie now, and that meant something. He could make it mean something. Instead of fighting against Midgard, he could work with it. He could dominate this world and he could thrive. He could prove Odin and all of Asgard wrong. He straightened his spine and glared into his own reflection.

He didn’t need the Tesseract to prove his worth. He didn’t Asgard to be a king. If Odin wanted him to be on Midgard, then he would show him how much he underestimated Loki’s potential. He would make him rue the day he rejected him.

“Loren, are you ready?” Claire called out from the living room and Loki let out a breath he didn’t realize he had been holding.

“Yes,” he called back. “I’m ready.”

“Then let’s go, drama king! My mom is going to kill us both if you’re late.”

Loki took one last look at himself, then turned off the light and exited the bathroom. He affixed his apron around his waist and presented himself to Claire with his arms out to his sides. She shook her head with a smile and waved him on.

“You clean up good, Loren.”

“But do I clean well?” he asked sarcastically and put his scarf around his face.

“There’s nothing to it. And it pays twice a month. Not much, but there’s nowhere to go but up from here.”

Loki smiled without teeth and narrowed his eyes. “Yes, all the way up.”
Peggy

It wasn’t often that Maria Hill came charging into her office with a bone to pick, but...it had happened. Usually it concerned her practices and habits, which Hill found often contradicted the rules and regulations. This time was no different.

“You said yourself that he needed a long probationary period and now he’s guarding Stark at a very public event? Where’s the logic there?” Hill had her arms tightly crossed and a frown carved into her face. Blinking, she seemed to remember herself. “Ma’am.”

Nick stood neither on Peggy’s side nor Hill’s, but somewhere in the middle. He watched them with a small curve to his lips that pushed his cheek into his eyepatch. He had wanted Captain Rogers back in the field earlier than anyone, and he had seen a prime opportunity in the current climate. There wasn’t outright war yet, but Nick knew better than anyone the importance of having an army ready just in case. Peggy had taken ages to agree with him, which she supposed was unprofessional, but in the end...it was what it was. They would need a supersoldier like Steve in their team long before Schmidt or Kleiser or the Kommandos became a problem.

She eyed Hill for a quiet moment with a stern expression, then she laughed. “Oh, Maria, darling. You are one of our greatest agents. But if there’s one thing I would ask you to improve, it is your impulsivity. Of course it doesn’t make sense to activate him so soon, but the truth of the matter is this: we need him, he needs a mission, and I know first hand that he works best when he has something to work towards. I will admit, at first, I relished in the idea of watching him sit on his hands after so long. But you’ve read his file, you’ve heard his story. If Loki and Thor are his mission and we stand in the way...what do you think he will do?”

“React unpredictably, but inevitably cause trouble for all of us. Why?”

“Steve Rogers leapt out of a plane into enemy territory against orders to save his best friend and he did so single-handedly. He was thrown across space itself, battled with giants and wolves and magic, and he survived. If this Asgard is to be believed, he sparred with gods and survived,” Peggy tried to picture it as more than just his sketches, but it was all fairy tale. It was everything she would have came up with when she desperately needed an explanation for his disappearance. None of it felt real. Yet, here they were. “He won’t be satisfied with a small apartment and a terrible landlord. That man was born and bred to fight the great fight. Nothing less will suffice.”

“And at this point, we’ll need him,” Fury added and flicked his coat out of the way to place his hands on his hips. “He’s a natural tactician and when he’s focused on a problem, he can conquer anything. He has a mission now and he needs it.”
“What if he fails?” Hill asked, her voice soft and worried. That’s what Peggy adored about her. She was tough, she was sharp, and she cared. With a little more work, she could be a great director. Maybe she would take Fury’s place when he tired of keeping the worst at bay.

“He won’t,” Peggy assured her, trying to convince herself. “He will be what he needs to be.”

“And the Red Captain?” Fury asked, turning to face her. Peggy swallowed.

“What about him?”

“You know.”

“He doesn’t.”

Fury nodded, letting out a breath. “Okay, Director. We’ll see.”

“Yes, we will.” Peggy refused to believe anything else.

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**Steve**

His three-piece suit was royal blue and despite the cut of it being foreign, it reminded him morbidly of Balder’s clothing. He felt as if he was inhabiting a dead man once again. The mask he had sketched for the tailor didn’t help.

“A skull?” Stark asked as he took in both him and Natasha.

She wore a svelte white dress with a skirt that detached to reveal form-fitting trousers. She had slim holsters on both thighs and strange metal cuffs on both wrists. Just like Steve’s, her shoulders and collar were draped with fur. The only difference was Natasha’s fur was a light grey and his was black. Her mask was more of a veil and it fit to her face like a second skin.
“It’s a wolf skull,” Steve explained, as though it changed the facts. He understood a little of Stark’s hesitation. It was a stylized wolf skull that was formed to fit him like his old Captain America cowl had and was painted the closest to a neon glow-weed blue he could find. The wolf teeth that jutted out right above his mouth added a little more...wildness to it. “I made one like this for Helblind before...before I left.”

Stark blinked rapidly, then nodded. “Right, well, you both look good.”

“And you,” Steve offered. Stark was wearing a garish red suit with white and black fur around his collar and shoulders. He seemed to stand a little taller, his shoulders a little broader.

Natasha snorted. “He’s Cruella De Vil.”

“Oh, low blow, Rushman,” Stark whistled, but Steve didn’t know who that was. He looked between them as they chuckled and Stark clapped him on the shoulder. Stark avoided his back where his shield was secured and enchanted. “Don’t worry about it, old man. Are you ready for this?”

“Of course. Are you?”

“Please,” Stark pulled at his cuffs for show and smirked. “I was made for parties.”

Natasha waved them towards the elevator and he let Stark go first. Stark paused. “What?” Steve asked, confused.

“Rushman said you had a safe word. Normally I’d make a few jokes at your expense, but I swore I’d be on my best behaviour. So...what is it? Freedom? Justice? Dead wolf?”

“Bucky,” he answered, his voice low and reluctant. “My safe word is Bucky.”

“Ah,” Stark seemed at a loss for words. “You...hmm. Right, Bucky. Okay.”
“What?” Steve asked again, but Stark shook his head.

“It’s nothing. Just thought it would be something else.” Stark seemed to shake himself from head to toe in a single movement. “Come on, geezer, you’re holding up the show.”

The ride to the fancy building that held the gala was over in a blink. Steve got out first and kept his eyes peeled for any familiar faces from the guest list. He knew them all now, thanks to Natasha. All he saw were civilians and partygoers waiting in the wings to either side of a red carpet. Stark exited the sleek black car to the sound of flashing lights and he posed for the cameras with his smooth metal mask on display. The lights were blinding and Steve felt on edge as his world became narrow and small. He waited as the photographers shouted for Stark to look this way and that, then took Natasha’s cue to herd him towards the doors.

“I love you, Tony!” Someone screamed and Stark spun on his heel to blow a kiss to the crowd.

“Love you more!”

Steve met Natasha’s eyes behind Stark’s back and she tilted her head with a smile. Welcome to the jungle, she mouthed at him and he sighed. This was going to be a long night.

“Fair warning,” Natasha whispered to him as they pulled open the doors for Stark, “The people at these galas can get handsy. If they do, just remind them who you belong to.”

“Belong to?”

“That’s me, Spangles,” Stark interjected as he passed by, looking through the slits of his mask at him. “You belong to me.”

Steve watched Stark enter the building, then looked to Natasha. “Do we get to kill him after this is over?”

“We’ll see how the night goes,” Natasha smirked and they followed Stark.
The venue was multiple floors connected by an atrium that stretched up into the sky and to a huge skylight. Up above them, casting blue and purple lights into the place so it looked like the ocean floor, were bright beacons. Classical music filled the air and gave everyone present an air of impenetrability. Steve kept his spine straight and paused behind Stark with his hands crossed in front of him.

“Here we go,” Stark whispered to them, then descended the short staircase that let them into the main part of the party.

Steve stuck close to him, casting his eyes about for Loki. With all of the masks and the pomp, it would be difficult to place him. Maybe with his proximity, Heimdall could see him. He looked up toward the skylight and hoped Heimdall was watching. Someone was coming up quick through the crowd and Stark tensed. Steve stepped forward a little so Stark was behind him. With his hair quaffed and a mask of white bird feathers attached to the glasses on his face, Steve almost didn’t recognize the man. The grey suit with white gloves was a bit much to Steve’s taste, but he was wearing a skull. Who was he to judge?

“Hammer, long time not long enough,” Stark greeted him, glancing past him to the rest of the party. “Don’t you have someone else you can bother?”

“And miss out on being the first to talk to you? Tony, buddy, listen...” Justin Hammer stepped closer with a conspiratorial air and Steve put one hand on his chest.

“Step back,” he ordered with a small push of his hand, his voice as stern as he could make it. Hammer hopped a little in place and sheepishly pushed his glasses back up his nose.

“Hey, man, relax. Me and Tony go way back. I’m not a threat.”

“Yeah, way back to when I was glad to be here,” Stark patted Hammer on the arm, while looking past him. “Obie! Look at you! Excuse me,” Stark walked away from Hammer and Steve followed.

“Good talking to you, Tony!” Hammer called out before they lost him in the crowd.

“A little less brick wall, Birgirsson,” Stark whispered to him as they approached a man who wasn’t wearing a mask.
Bald with a well-groomed white beard, the man stood tall and a bit imposing as they approached him. Steve took him in with a keen eye and wondered why Natasha had warned him to be careful around him. He was one of the Stark Industries guests and apparently was a close friend of Howard’s after Steve was gone. A businessman through and through, Obadiah Stane was the closest person to Stark in the company. If something were to happen to Stark, this man would take the reins. Despite himself, Steve stayed a little closer to Stark than entirely necessary.

“I see you ignored the dress code, Obie,” Stark said, taking Obadiah’s hand in a firm shake.

“And I see you conveniently forgot to send me the credentials of your bodyguards. They look good,” Obadiah looked from Natasha to Steve. He narrowed his eyes at Steve. “Rushman I’ve seen before. Who’s this one?”

“Birgirsson. Stígandr Birgirsson,” Stark introduced him and Steve met Obadiah’s gaze head-on.

“Hmm,” Obadiah ran his tongue over his teeth. “Norwegian?”

Steve kept his mouth shut and his body rigid. Stark would speak for him. “Something like that.”

“Uh huh,” With a final look up and down, Obadiah turned back to Stark. “You pick him after Tromso? Bringing your work home with you? Stress relief?”

“He’s not a prostitute, Obie,” Stark laughed and grabbed Steve’s bicep. “He’s a soldier. He was trained in extreme climates. Spent some time in the ice, lifted some polar bears, hunted with his bare hands. A real outdoorsy type. Not mine at all.”

Steve glanced to Stark and back to Obadiah. Were all bodyguards also…companions? Some servants slept with the Asgardian warriors and Steve knew about that, but he hadn’t expected it on Earth. Well, maybe he should have. He shouldn’t be surprised anymore. Did that mean they all would assume Stark had slept with him and Natasha? Should he suspect that of the guards he could see around the room?

“He’s big and strong, Tony. Those are always your type,” Obadiah chuckled. “Next time you clear them with me or Potts, understand?”
“I had it under control,” Stark assured him, smiling. “I can handle a couple guards.”

“Tony...” Obadiah wrapped his arm around Stark’s shoulder and walked a little ways away from them. “Who had to scrape you off the ground after Howard, huh? Who had to look out for you when you were too drunk to look out for yourself?”

They moved even further away and Steve could still hear them, but Natasha turned to him.

“Quick on the draw there with Hammer,” she said, looking to where he had been standing. “Good eye, but ease up a little. We haven’t even talked to the worst yet.”

“How bad does it get?”

Natasha gave a short laugh. “Oh, it can get really bad. The night has just begun.”

Being that he wasn’t actually supposed to do much conversing, Steve found himself able to focus on the crowd. He felt like he would know Loki’s silhouette anywhere, but the increasingly dense group of people was making him reconsider his assumption. Some people wore dresses like Natasha’s with very little extra fabric and others wore enough cloth to dress at least four other people. The masks were just as extravagant and decadent, covered in feathers and stones and metal. They sparkled and shimmered, and cast beams of reflected light all over. Some were tall and grand, others were understated and demure. Compared to some of the people here, Steve’s wolf skull was tame.

Carved out of the middle of the room and lower than the ground, there was a dance floor. It was bathed in blue light from below and it wasn’t until Steve got closer to it as Stark made his way around the room that he realized it wasn’t a lit floor. It was thick glass and the light was coming from the enormous fish tank below it. All sorts of fish swam below, casting shadows of their own that became mammoth as they projected against the walls of the building. He caught himself staring at them when Natasha tapped his elbow.

“What is this?” he asked her and she gazed down.

“The Foundation funds a lot of charitable causes. This year, among many other things, is ocean
life. It’s all about lowering mankind’s impact on the oceans and their ecosystems,” she turned back to Stark. “Next year it will be something else important for the rich to throw their money at.”

“Does it help?” Steve asked, looking down at the fish again.

“If anyone but Stark was in control of it, I would say no. But he directs the funds properly. Every cent from tonight will go to the right places.”

Stark started to walk further away from the dance floor aquarium, so Steve got his head back on task. Across the room, walking down the stairs from one of the upper floors, Miss Potts appeared, holding her mask in her hand. Steve poked Natasha lightly and nudged his head in Miss Potts' direction. She glanced that way, smiled a little, and looked away. Steve gazed up to the higher floors, trying to see if there was anyone else he could recognize, but none of them were standing near to the sides.

He wondered if Schmidt was up there, waiting. Would Schmidt remember what he looked like? Would the man come and talk to Stark? He clenched his fist and set his jaw. *Control*, he told himself, and kept his eyes peeled for Loki.

Tony

Schmoozing was a special kind of hell. Thing was, he didn’t hate it, not really. He could do without it, but it wasn’t a burden. He had been taught to do this kind of thing before he learned to walk. It was only hell because there was never an end to the amount of people that just had to talk to him directly. He should open a booth and set a price.

“Mister Stark,” a familiar voice broke through the cacophony and he turned with a grimace. Christine Everhart was staring at him with a look of pure bliss. The cat had caught the canary. She was wearing a mask, which was rich coming from the WHiH queen of them, and the metal beak looked sharp enough to cut him. He shivered.

“Miss Everhart, what a surprise! I was just thinking this room needed a little panic,” he put on a smile and tried to surreptitiously look for Romanoff and Rogers. His duo was close, but not quite close enough. He couldn’t retreat now. “Let me guess, you’d love to talk about SI?”
“Actually, I was wondering what your opinion is on the recent exposé about the Mandarin. According to the reports, the Kommandos are active again because the Mandarin has resurfaced. What do you have to say about that?” Tony checked her hands for listening devices, but she simply tilted her head and narrowed her eyes.

“Well, if that’s the case, shouldn’t you be asking Lieutenant General Ross? Or President Stern? I’m a private citizen. Surely you don’t think I have some inside track?”

“Oh, Mister Stark,” Everhart gave him a condescending purse of her lips. “Surely you don’t think anyone believes you and Stark Industries aren’t on the front lines of this? Who benefits the most from war? The man who provides the weapons.”

“I provide the weapons, I don’t fight the battles.”

“If you give matches and gasoline to an arsonist, it doesn’t matter that you didn’t start the fire.”

“Well, my matches are engineered to minimize casualties,” he smiled without humor. “It’s better me than someone else.”

“That’s funny,” Everhart looked him up and down. “Minimal casualties, but the house is still burned down.”

“And with the funds allotted to the Maria Stark Foundation, we can rebuild that house,” Tony saw another familiar face in the crowd and took the out before it vanished. “If you’ll excuse me.”

“Of course, Mister Stark,” Everhart watched him go and Tony let out a breath.

“That was interesting,” Steve muttered and Tony laughed. He looked at Steve and met his blue eyes through the holes of the wolf skull.

“That was Christine Everhart.”

“I’ve seen her on the TV. Is she always that intense?”
“She let me walk away without drawing blood. It must be an off day,” Tony stepped past a group of people and ran into another minefield. Just as tall and confident as ever, Tiberius Stone had his light brown hair combed back behind his eagle mask. His lips were twisted into a smirk.

“My my,” Ty commented as he stepped up to them. His hands immediately went to Steve’s bicep and he grabbed at him roughly. He only glanced at Natasha, but she had nearly ripped his fingers off the last time they met. She watched him with narrowed eyes. “You’ve outdone yourself, Tony. This one’s an Adonis.”

“Stígandr, actually,” Steve corrected him, pulling his arm free from the Ty’s grasp.

“Ooh, and fiesty, too. I wonder, do the streets match the sheets?” Ty pressed up closer to Steve and Tony didn’t have a chance to stop him before Steve lightly shoved him backwards. A flicker of annoyance flashed across Ty’s face and Tony sensed a fight brewing.

“Hands off,” Tony said as he stepped between them, attempting to ease the tensions. “He’s mine.”

“Oh,” Ty laughed and Tony caught a whiff of alcohol. “Being selfish, as always, huh, Tony? Starks must have it all and leave none for the rest. Well,” he reached back behind him and pulled one of his guards forward. The woman was obviously reluctant, but she stood at attention nonetheless. “I just got this one. She’s fresh out of the academy. Sarkissian said she was very promising.”

The guard shifted a little, her shoulders tight, and stared straight ahead. Her hair was pulled up high on her head and she wore a domino mask. Tony had half a mind to offer her a place at Stark Industries just to get her away.

“Does she have a name?” Tony asked, swiping a flute of champagne from a passing waiter.

Ty looked at the glass in his hand, then back to his guard. He pushed her behind him. “Palamas. It’s not important,” Snatching his own flute, Ty downed half of it. “I hear you’ve got a surprise coming for your birthday. I hope you aren’t going to sully the market with more of those StarkPhones.”

Sipping, Tony rolled his eyes. “I’ll have you know they did just fine, even with your smear campaign. Brave of you, orchestrating that farce from the safety of Europe.”
With a grin, Ty dropped his hand on Tony’s shoulder. “It’s all good-natured fun, Tony. I can’t let you think you run the world. Somebody’s got to knock you down a peg.”

“That job’s taken, sorry. I do have a position open for runner up, though you’d have to compete with Justin Hammer. Oh, wait...you already do.”

Sneering, Ty clicked his tongue. “You’re just as god-awful as I remember.”

“Yeah, so are you,” Tony smiled. “It’s good to see you, Ty.”

Ty rolled his eyes, then looked down his nose at Tony. “You know you missed me.”

“Like a knife in the back,” Tony laughed and pulled Ty in for a hug. “Don’t worry, I’ll send you a condolence bouquet when I wipe the floor with you yet again.”

“We’ll see about that.”

Ty patted him on the back, then made his exit with his guard, Palamas, following behind. The space he had occupied was immediately filled by a familiar red-head. Tony could have danced with relief.

“Pepper!” He took in her long dark blue dress and silver carnevale mask with surprise. “You look amazing.”

“Don’t act so surprised,” she brushed her hands down the side of the skirt. “Does it look alright? I was kind of rushed.”

Scoffing, Tony took her hands. “I’d marry you right now if you let me.”

Rolling her eyes and fighting a smile, Pepper squeezed his hands. “As if I would betray Rhod ey like that. He and I are going to run away together.”
“Yeah, right,” Tony laughed and looped his arm behind Pepper so they could walk side-by-side. He had to pause when he realized the dress had no back. “Risqué, Miss Potts.”

“It’s all planned,” Pepper looked over at him and ducked her head a little. “It’s a masquerade. I thought I’d live a little.”

“Not that you need it, but I approve,” he led them towards the dance floor. Considering all the people who had talked to him, they were quite a ways from it.

“How’s the night been so far, Birgirsson? No mishaps?” Pepper asked, and Tony watched Steve nod and step closer.

“Everything’s been fine. I’m okay,” His voice was gentle and firm at once, and he held Pepper’s gaze as if to reassure her. Pepper reached out for his hand and Steve let her take it.

“It’s just a couple more hours and then it’s over. You can manage a couple more hours, right?”

As Steve nodded again and Pepper released his hand, Tony looked between them both in confusion. “When did you two become support buddies?” Romanoff let out a low chuckle and Tony turned to her. “Are you in on it, too?”

“It’s all in the name of protecting you, Stark,” Romanoff told him, then jerked her head to indicate something ahead of them. “Here comes the Red Captain.”

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**Steve**

At Natasha’s declaration, Steve’s gaze flitted all around the room until he could see what she was seeing. Entering through the same entrance that they had, the Red Captain was alone. He had no guards nor guests to either side of him and he stood tall as if he owned the place. He wore something similar to the picture Natasha had shown him, except he had on a black leather jacket instead of a suit jacket. His silver arm was on full display with a golden star at the shoulder. He walked slowly down the stairs, causing a bit of a build-up as no one wanted to rush past him and the people at the front were stepping over themselves to make a path for him. Steve at first thought that it was out of fear, but the longer he watched, the more he realized it was out of excitement.
Women were chatting with each other and giggling, men were patting each other and pointing. Whenever the Red Captain looked anyone’s way, they seemed to rise and wilt at once. Steve watched the Red Captain’s progression through the room until Stark cleared his throat.

“Well, he’ll find me eventually. Let’s dance, Pep!”

Steve and Natasha escorted them to the stairs leading down to the dance floor, and he paused. Natasha grabbed his elbow and pulled him along. “We dance beside them,” she whispered to him and he nodded.

The dance floor felt a little slick, but he attributed that to the illusion of dancing along the water’s surface. Stark and Miss Potts started a box step and Steve tried to mimic Stark. He itched for a fight or for something to solve, but this was a whole different kind of problem. This was something he hadn’t thought of since before the Valkyrie. Sixty years in space and he had never encountered this scenario. Fighting giants, snowstorms and Asgardians had not prepared him for something as simple as this. He wasn’t in any danger, but he felt as if he was a second away from stepping on a landmine.

“I don’t know how to dance,” he admitted and Natasha looked up at him.

“You didn’t dance during the war? I thought it was all the rage back then.”

“It was. I wasn’t. The most I know how to do is the dance routine from the bonds tour. I...didn’t have a chance to do much else,” he thought of Peggy, of the right partner, of all his missed opportunities. “Can you...can you show me?”

Natasha took his hands and placed them on her shoulder and waist. She held his gaze as she started the first step. “Follow my lead.”

Tony

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Romanoff direct Rogers in a simple waltz. He only stumbled once or twice, before seeming to catch on. Tony turned his attention to Pepper.
“Obie tells me they want the Jericho moved up, that the Emperor wants it sooner,” he looked around the dance floor, but no one was close enough to overhear him. In private, they could talk about Schmidt all they wanted, but in public, he wasn’t the Emperor. Cyrus Fenton was just a wealthy man with many connections, who seemed to have everyone’s ear. “And Christine Everhart tells me the Mandarin is back?”

Pepper sighed. “They are suggesting you move up the release...”

“Which means they want it now.”

“And those claims about the Mandarin are unsubstantiated. The report came from some website and was spread by the media.”

“So the Mandarin isn’t angling for another shot at the world? It’s just Kleiser and Schmidt playing war with us in the middle?” Tony turned them again and they crossed by Romanoff and Rogers.

“Rhodey was going to contact me after the gala with some more information about the Emperor’s mindset. He’s busy for the next few months and won’t be able to check in,” Pepper pressed her lips together for a moment, then huffed. “Will you be staying in the Tower until further notice?”

Tony loved Malibu, but for now, he was going to enjoy his east coast vacation. “Yeah, I’ll stay until Rogers is gone with the princes.”

“I’ll schedule the rest of the SI meetings in the Tower, then. SHIELD is going to want more access to you as well, since you’re so close. I’ll have to reopen the back channel.”

“I’ll do it. Better yet, I’ll have JARVIS do it. J?”

From his jacket pocket, his AI piped up. “I have informed FRIDAY that the direct contact line is reopened.”

Pepper let her hand drift to Tony’s chest pocket. “Thank you, JARVIS.”
“My pleasure, Miss Potts.”

“Why do I feel like I’m wading further into the muck?” Tony asked no one in particular and Pepper guided them towards the stairs that led up off the dance floor.

“It’s because you are,” she leaned forward and pressed a kiss to his cheek. “We’re all wading with you. Now,” and she stepped back. “I’m going to go socialize.”

Pouting, Tony pushed his mask up a little. “I still want to dance.”

“Then ask Rushman or Birgirsson,” Pepper turned to the guards in question and waved to them. “I’ll see you back at the Tower if we don’t run into each other again tonight.”

Both of his guards waved to her, then she was climbing the stairs and vanishing into the crowd. Tony turned to them. “Which one of you wants to dance?”

Romanoff shook her head. “I’m going to get something to drink and look around for our target. You two have fun.”

“Wait,” Rogers called out to her, but she was halfway up the stairs already. “I...I only just learned how to dance.”

The latter part was obviously a disclaimer meant for Tony, and he shrugged in response. “My toes will recover, I’m sure. Let’s go.”

They walked back out into the dance floor and Steve waited for Tony to assume the lead. It took Tony a second to realize it was because Romanoff had led their dance and Tony had led his dance with Pepper. He got them started and Steve caught up quick.

“You don’t have to woo me, Birgirsson,” Tony said coyly, trying to ease the stiffness of Steve’s shoulders, but his earnest eyes on him were knocking him off his game. “You are coming home with me.”

“Don’t take this for anything more than it is, Mister Stark,” Steve said firmly, turning them around
the floor easily. As if Tony didn’t weigh anything. Natasha must be a great teacher. “This is a job. I’m here to work. And you’re here as bait.”

“Bait?” Tony asked, incredulously, “This is my gala. This is my arena. I’m Caesar and you’re just a gladiator.” He regretted it as soon as it left his mouth.

“Sure, that’s me. But me and Natasha, we’re the only thing standing between you and Loki. Just think, Caesar, your life in the hands of a mere gladiator. Tell me,” Steve’s voice was steel and it piercing straight through Tony’s chest. “How many people in this room want to skewer you just to see you bleed? I’m willing to bet its enough to kill you. Keep that in mind when you insult me.”

Tony felt a rush of words fly to his throat and he wanted to let them all loose, but they choked him and he broke eye contact. “You won’t let anything happen to me. You’re too good for that.”

“Maybe I was, before,” And Steve looked at him without blinking. “But it’s been a long time, a lot has changed. I’ve changed.”

“Not that much. You’re still...you,” Tony clung to Steve’s shoulder as they spun. “And the guy I think I know, he wouldn’t let them hurt me.”

“So, am I a gladiator, made to die...or am I a good man who would save your life?”

Tony blinked, then laughed. “Clever, using my own words against me.”

“Well, you are the best at making weapons, aren’t you?”

He stared at Steve as if he had never seen him before, off kilter by the quickness of his wit. He had expected a lot from his image of Captain America, but the reality was always surprising him. He felt a smile crawl its way onto his face.

“May I cut in?” Someone asked, their voice muffled slightly by whatever mask they were wearing, and Tony turned with his smile wide to see the Red Captain standing beside them.
Steve

Steve had forgotten a little about the rest of the guests as he and Stark danced across the floor. His mission slammed back into him as soon as he looked up at the Red Captain. They were of a height with each other and he could look directly into the fierce, icy blue eyes of the man without having to make a concession of raising or lowering his head. He instinctively stepped out of the dance and turned to face the Red Captain. He nearly made the mistake of reaching up for his shield, but stopped himself at the last moment.

“Captain,” Stark greeted, but he neither went in for a hug nor held out his hand. “It’s been a while.”

“I heard you rebuilt the chair,” the Red Captain had an accent, but Steve couldn’t place it. “You broke our agreement.”

Stark licked his lips and clapped his hands, looking between the Red Captain and Steve. “Kleiser was adamant.”

“Did you dismantle it after you were done?”

“Of course.”

“It is back in your workshop where it belongs?”

“You have my word.”

Steve frowned at the back and forth, curious as to how these two knew each other and what chair they were talking about. Was it the one in SHIELD? Was it the one they had put him in to question him? Or were there more? The Red Captain looked to Steve abruptly.

“Who are you?”

Swallowing, Steve set his jaw. “Stígandr Birgirsson.”
The Red Captain frowned. “Birgirsson. Where did you come from?”

Stark laughed lightly and patted Steve’s arm. “That’s not important. He’s just a guard I have for tonight.”

“I didn’t ask you, Stark,” He said it without breaking eye contact with Steve. “Answer the question.”

“Brooklyn,” Steve replied, feeling as if he should be armed and ready to spar. He unconsciously started to loosen up in preparation.

The Red Captain considered him for a moment. “I’m originally from Brooklyn, too.”

“Originally?” Steve knew he was pushing his luck and Stark seemed as if was waiting for something to pop off.

“You remind me of someone,” The Red Captain said thoughtfully, then turned back to Stark. “I want to see proof that you dismantled the chair.”

“You’ll get it,” Stark replied, his tone solemn.

“Who did you use it on?”

Stark glanced to Steve, then bit his bottom lip. “I can’t tell you.”

The Red Captain’s eyes narrowed and he looked at Steve for a moment, then tsked. “Did you use it on him?”

Stark looked offended. “I’m not a monster.”

“Anyone who uses that thing is a monster. You helped me, but helping me wasn’t a license to use
“I don’t have a choice,” Stark grimaced, and he started to wring his hands. “I have to obey.”

“No,” The Red Captain snapped and stepped closer. Steve stepped up to meet him. Piercing blue eyes turned to him in disregard. “No one has to obey. No one has to comply.”

Stark let out a breath. “It’s not the same. It’s not human. I can’t fight it.”

“Of course you can. You’re Tony Stark,” The Red Captain declared as if it was a commonly held belief that Stark could fight anything. “I expect nothing less from you.”

Stark seemed to crumble as he looked away from the Red Captain’s gaze and focused instead on the floor. The Red Captain didn’t seem to care about the reaction. He crossed his arms and stared at Stark until the other man reluctantly looked back up again. The odd smallness Steve saw in those brown eyes was disconcerting.

Steve observed them both for a long moment, then slid further between them. “Excuse us,” he said and took Stark’s hands once more. Stark didn’t fight him at all.

As he started to turn back to the dance floor, the Red Captain reached out to grab Steve by the back of his suit to halt his progress. The sound of metal hitting his shield echoed into the space and Steve froze. He looked back to the Captain and there was a strange look in the man’s eyes. His metal hand hovered in the air between them and he was staring at Steve’s back. For a moment, he feared the enchantment had fallen away, but the moment passed and Stark urged him to move.

In a few turns, they managed to put quite a bit of distance between themselves and the Red Captain. In a blink, the Captain vanished. The rest of the dancers hadn’t seem to notice the interlude.

“How do you two know each other?” Steve asked, casting his eyes around the room to find the Captain again. His replacement was a strange and intense man. And to think he was originally from Brooklyn. Who was he? How did he get that metal arm? How did he become the Red Captain?

Stark clicked his tongue and refused to meet Steve’s eyes. “I don’t know. He’s just always been
“You said the same thing about Kleiser. You don’t know where he came from or what he is. Are you lying to me?” Steve didn’t need to blink as often if he didn’t want to. He had stared down Brimer’s wolves and giants during snowstorms. He could outstare a normal human without any true effort. Stark caved long before he even felt the urge.

Meeting his eyes, something like pain darted through Stark’s face. “There are some things you don’t need to know. And there are some things it’s not my place to tell you.”

“You can’t tell me about the Red Captain? He’s a very public figure.”

“But he’s not, is he?” Stark shifted his hand on Steve’s shoulder. “You two have more in common than you think.”

“Oh? There must only be two guys in Brooklyn.”

Snorting, Stark looked up at Steve with a grin. “I wasn’t just talking about that. You’re both...super, you’re both Captains, you’re both leaders. It’s just...you didn’t have to hide who you were when you were Captain America. He can’t be himself and be the Red Captain. It would be serving two masters.”

He let that sit in the air for a moment, then spun them. “You’re wrong, by the way.”

“About what?”

“I’m not Captain America. I never was,” Steve caught sight of Natasha as they danced near to the steps that led out of the dance floor. She shook her head. No sign of him. “He was a myth made up for propaganda. I just...I used it as much as the government did. Being Captain America gave me something I didn’t know I needed. I had been fighting the world at five feet tall for years. I was raging against mountains. Being Captain America gave me the strength to move them. I didn’t have to move for anyone. I could dig my roots and defend. I could tell them to move.”

Steve frowned. “I had something to fight for. I had something to protect. At first it was Bucky, then it was the Commandos, then it was America, and on the Valkyrie - it was the world. I would have died for the world if I hadn’t been taken from it. I would have died for Jötunheim if I hadn’t been taken from it, too.”

Stark put up resistance and they slowed to a stop. For a moment, Stark didn’t move. Then he dropped his hands from Steve and pressed the heel of his hand into his eyes. “I’m not as strong as you are. I wouldn’t have survived Jötunheim. I can’t beat Schmidt like you did.” Stark looked up at him and Steve saw someone familiar. Someone with his back against the wall and only one option. Fight or die.

Steve gripped Stark’s shoulder and made him look at him in the eye. “I don’t believe that,” he smiled, gesturing to the room around them. “Look at this. It’s pomp and circumstance, and I won’t say I understand it, but...all these people are here because of you. You’re not even trying and look how many people want to win you over or murder you where you stand. What could you be if you tried? How do you know how strong you are until you flex your muscles?”

Stark’s eyes lit up and he laughed. “That’s all it takes? I flex and I can take on the world?”

“Why not?” Steve let Stark go. “What have you got to lose?”

__________________________________________________

Tony

This close, with Steve’s scent in his nose and his body heat lingering at his shoulder and waist, Tony felt like he could conquer the world. He could be everything that Steve thought he was capable of. He could fight Kleiser and Schmidt and he could win. Tony Stark could rise.

It was a dangerous feeling.

“A lot, actually,” he scratched the back of his neck. “Let’s go make the rounds again.”

“Whatever Kleiser’s got over you,” Steve began, keeping in stride with Tony as they headed for the steps where Romanoff awaited them. “Whatever his stick is...I’m in your corner.”
“It’s not a fun corner to be in,” Tony warned, taking the first step up. “But thank you.”

“The Emperor’s here,” Romanoff whispered as they topped the stairs and Tony inhaled sharply.

“When did he get here?”

“A couple minutes ago,” she glanced to Steve. “Rumlow and Belova came in after him. The whole bunch is here.”

Tony cleared his throat and shook himself. “Are you ready for this, Birgirsson?”

Steve seemed to become a living statue. “I am.”

Nodding, Tony let Romanoff take up her position to the other side of him and led the way towards the Emperor. There was a learned fear washing over him and he steeled himself against it. Right behind him stood the only man to beat the Emperor at his own game. If anyone could get him out of this safely, it would be Captain America. He just hoped Loki didn’t decide to crash this party.

Steve

Schmidt wasn’t the looming threat he had been before Jötunheim to Steve. Somewhere along the line, during a blizzard or a battle, or maybe even when Brimer’s axe had cleaved his head, Steve had found bigger enemies. He had found the Goddess of Death. Schmidt, in comparison, was diminished. The grand-standing figure who had planned to rain down hell upon the earth stood in a disguise not unlike the one he had when he was simply Johann Schmidt. The pale skin and brown hair looked like an aberration on the man.

Steve followed Stark, feeling an absence of vengeance. This wasn’t the man he struggled for the Tesseract for. This wasn’t the virulent enemy he had been anticipating. He wore black clothing like he had been the last time Steve saw him, but more modern. It was almost humorous.

“Anthony,” Cyrus Fenton acknowledged as they stepped up to him and his guards. The guards were a nearly impenetrable barrier around him, leaving only a small space in front to interact. He
clasped Stark’s hand in his own and held it tight. Stark was like stone. “I hear the Jericho is coming along well now. After the delays, I was beginning to believe you incapable of completing it at all.”

“I would not fail you,” Stark assured the man. “It will be ready.”

Staring unblinking back, Fenton narrowed his eyes. “You failed Herr Kleiser. You have also failed me.”

Steve hovered a bit closer to Stark, well within striking distance of Fenton. He felt Natasha’s hand on the small of his back.

“I have done all you’ve asked,” Stark said, his voice wavering. “How have I failed you?”

“Your sole purpose in my empire is to improve it. You are better than your father ever was, but he suffered from an affliction of the heart. He cared too much for the insignificant things,” Fenton released Stark’s hand and Steve saw Stark clench his fist tight before lowering it to his side. “Was Rollins your doing?”

Steve glanced to Stark who shook his head. “I had nothing to do with that.”

“Then common street urchins stole your tech right beneath your nose?”

“What?” Stark’s voice was cold and soft.

“You had not heard?” Fenton raised his eyebrows. “It is even worse than I thought.”

“I will look into it.”

“It is far too late for that, Anthony. Jack Rollins is recovering, but who else will your lapses injure? How many others shall pay the price of your ignorance? How many of my enemies possess that which is rightfully mine?”
Stark bowed his head. “Emperor...”

“Silence.” And it fell immediately. Those closest to them glanced over, but turned their gazes away quickly. “I have been too kind to you, too easy. It is time you remember your place.”

Many things happened at once.

Fenton raised his hand, Stark flinched, a glint of something bright caught Steve’s eye and he reacted instinctively. Pulling his shield from his back, Steve stepped between Fenton and Stark, wrapping his arm around Stark behind him and pulling him close. He could feel Natasha squared up at his flank. Fenton’s eyes narrowed, his guards moved to match them in hostility and everything went white and loud.

From behind his shield, Steve felt the heat and concussive force of whatever was causing the brightness and he pulled Stark closer. He withstood the strength of it for all of a second, then it forced him off his feet. They flew backwards towards the aquatic dance floor and Steve knew neither Stark nor Natasha would fare well upon landing, so he yanked Natasha up in front of him and Stark as well, letting go of his shield. Natasha let out a small yelp and Stark grunted as they collided together, but they were safe in his arms and Steve closed his eyes.

He slammed into the dance floor with a sickening thud and felt his head crack against the thick glass. The heat of the explosion whooshed over them and he passed out.
It's gonna take a while to get a new computer, so I'm stuck with writing on my phone. Updates may be sporadic for a bit and not the average 7k word count, because 7k is hell to edit on a tiny screen. I'm still very much into this story, but the method is gonna change a little because of recent circumstances. Bear with me, y'all, I'm trying! (It's like I'm seventeen again with my little light green sidekick and very active thumbs, maxing out the word count on my notepad. I'm cry-laughing at these first world struggles. Someone save me please...:_;) Also, please feel free to inform me if there are any mistakes. I'm not joking about the small screen editing struggle. Anyway, all the love y'all!

Please enjoy and if you do, consider buying me a coffee!

Chapter Title.

Natasha

Despite the arms wrapped around her - both Stark’s and Rogers’ - the impact with the solid glass dance floor knocked her out for a bit. When she came to, the chaos of the gala reached her ears before the pain in her body did.

Somewhere above and behind her, people were screaming and crying. To her left, where the dance floor had become a slippery hole into the depths beneath it, there were people trying to help each other back to their feet. Fire raged all around, having caught anything flammable and eaten it alive. Something explosive had been shot through the skylight and gone off right around where they had been standing. If it weren't for Rogers' shield, they might not have come out at all.

She assessed her wounds quickly, head to toe, and aside from the sharp and burning pain in her upper left thigh, she only had minor cuts and bruises. She had dealt and been dealt worse. Natasha had to squint when the bright flames of still burning debris met her gaze head-on. The gala was alight, from the top to the bottom of the building. Someone had wanted them erased.

“Stark,” she called out, pushing herself upwards and getting a good look at her leg. Something sharp had pierced it in the thicker outer layer and gone straight through to the other side. Taking a deep breath, she ripped her skirt and made a tourniquet out of it, binding her leg just above the wound. Tight, but not too tight. It would do for now. She had more important things to worry about. "Stark?"
Getting to her feet was no easy task, but she managed. Her legs wobbled for a second and her head swam, but she pulled herself back to center with an iron will. She couldn't take a break until she got her target out of danger. Stark wasn't calling back, so she assumed he must have been knocked out like she had been. If her ears had been anything to go by on impact, Rogers would also be down for the count. To protect them, he had abandoned his shield and taken the brunt of the fall. As far as she knew, being a super soldier *enhanced* one's natural abilities; it didn't add them on. If Rogers hadn't been immune to damage before he became super, he sure as hell wouldn't be now.

Amongst the debris about ten feet from her, Stark lying prone near where the dance floor had been crushed in on itself. His red suit was soaked through and his dark hair was plastered to the side of his face. A rush of fear lanced through her heart, but she shoved it aside. As quickly as she could, she fielded the broken dance floor to reach him. The skin around his wrist felt like ice against her fingertips, but she felt a soft beating in his veins. She let out a minute sigh and checked him over before rolling him onto his back. There were scrapes and a couple burns on his face, but aside from that, he didn't look worse for wear. She hooked her arms underneath his and pulled him further away from the broken dance floor. If the glass decided to break further, it wasn't going to take him with it.

The stairs that led up out of the dance floor were covered in bits of concrete and glass, so she set him down beside it and turned back to the mess. A few people were struggling to pull themselves out of the water and even more were trying to tend to their wounded friends or fellow partiers. She scanned them all, looking for Rogers. She found him by the pool of blood seeping out of his head and into the cracked glass beneath him.

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**Steve**

There was a chill to the air that he knew, but that still felt foreign on his skin. He shifted, pushing away from the stone beneath him. His eyes were heavy with exhaustion and he struggled to open them. In the darkness, he heard the scraping of claws on the stone and of footsteps. He shook his head, groaning at the pain that burst behind his closed eyes, and blinked until he could see clearly.

Garm was inches from his face, staring deep into his eyes. Steve bared his teeth without thought and Garm returned the instinctive greeting. Beyond the hound, a crownless Hela hummed softly and Garm retreated back behind her. Her hair hung loose down her back and she looked the same as she always had. Adorned in skin-tight clothing in green and black, she seemed to be both alive and dead, all at once the flower and the rot beneath it. Steve took in his new location with a keen eye and frowned.

“I’m not dead,” he muttered, feeling the stone of Helheim under his palm and shivering. “I’m not dead.”
“No,” Hela assured him and he rose to standing. He was still wearing the outfit from the gala, even the mask. His shield wasn’t on him. “Not yet.”

Steve reached up to lift his mask, feeling suffocated. Hela’s hands cupped his face before he could lower his hands. He blinked at the power he could feel in her fingertips. “Why am I here?”

An amused expression flickered onto Hela’s face and her lips quirked. “You are my wolf. You will always return home to me.”

Swallowing, Steve fought against the sinking feeling in his chest. “If I’m not dead, then let me go. Our deal is finished.”

Chuckling deep and rich, Hela shook his head back and forth as if he were a toy. “I say when it is finished. It was my mercy that gave you life,” her grip turned hard, then loosened, then she grabbed him by the throat. With little effort, she held him off the ground until he was above her. “And it will be by my whim that I take it away.”

His head, which was pounding and throbbing already, was seemingly shot through with a white hot poker and he jerked. A scream bubbled up out of his throat, stumbling past Hela’s choking hold. The space above his ear, right where Brimer’s axe had embedded, began to split. His right eye rolled up in his head. He couldn’t catch his breath, he couldn’t see, his muscles seemed to atrophy and his bones became brittle. Steve shook and twisted. Gasping for air he could not breathe through his dead lungs, kicking with lead-like legs, Steve felt the darkness of the mountain coming up around him. But this darkness had no end.

*Earth,* he thought, reaching out for his reclaimed home, *I’m not done yet.*

He screamed until his voice gave out and Hela dropped him to the ground. Air entered him like a punch and he coughed. As soon as he could, he felt around the wound Brimer had given him, but it was healed once more. He breathed heavily, staring at the ground where he could only see Hela’s feet.

“What...” he began, coughing. “What do you want from me?”

“You have something you did not have before. You have something to live for,” she walked away from him towards her throne, taking her place smoothly. “You do not want my hospitality? Fine,” she gestured at him. “If you wish to be rid of me, then you must free me.”

Steve sat back on his heels and gazed up at Hela. There was a brightness in her eyes he hadn’t really seen before. He sighed and pressed the heel of his palm into his closed eyes. “Free you?”

“Kill Odin Borsson, and I will release you from this curse of a half-life.”
Her words registered in his mind like a heavy stone and he felt honest panic settle in his chest. *Kingslayer,* he heard Laufey say. Shooting up, Steve advanced on her. “I can't kill Odin. I need him and the Asgardians to help save Midgard.”

Tilting her head to the side, she smirked. “You need to be *alive* to save Midgard, do you not?”

Clenching and unclenching his fists, Steve grit his teeth. What sway did he have over the goddess of death? Then again, everything came with a price. Perhaps, in time, he could exact his own.

“How do I kill a god?” he asked, watching as Garm paced around him. He carefully avoided looking too closely at Hela.

“I gave you all the weapon you would ever need,” She informed him, running her left hand over her right forearm. *The fanged gauntlet.* “Get it back.”

He gasped in a breath, his head swimming. He was cold down to his bones and he couldn’t shake it. His head still pounded and he raised a hand to where Brimer’s axe wound should be. There was nothing there.

“Rogers?” Someone called out quietly and he blinked. Turning his head toward them, he took in the concerned blue eyes that stared at him. Natasha was hovering over him, her hand cradling the back of his head. It felt cold and sticky.

"Romanoff," he replied, ensuring her he was still present. Even if he wasn't quite sure about it himself. "Are you hurt?"

She breathed out a laugh and guided him as he sat up. His head was still aching, but he didn't feel any more blood pouring out of his scalp. He breathed in the scent of ash and flesh, dust and chemicals, feeling like he had gone all the way back to the front lines once more. He could still taste the petrol in the air when bomb raids had caught their vehicles or the sickening stench of flesh and cloth burned into one being. He hated that it was happening here, where the majority of people were civilians. Even in a world controlled by Hydra, these people didn't deserve this.

Natasha sat back on her heels for a moment and he shook himself free of the dizzying influence of head trauma. The serum would kick in soon and he would be able to think clearly without effort, but until then, he was a little woozy.
“Hey, sleepyhead,” Natasha said, a softness to her smile. “You know, you don’t get paid to sleep.”

Steve laughed and forced himself to stand. The glass beneath him cracked. He remembered they had landed on the dance floor. Water was gathering in a few places and there were a couple people floating beneath them. From the gashes across their bodies, he knew they were gone. Breathing in again just because he could, Steve gauged the damage. He was looking for the place that people needed his help the most, when his eyes landed on a red clad form lying by the stairs. His heart leapt up to his throat and Steve sprinted across the wet glass and debris.

Stark was on his back, unconscious, a little battered and bruised, but not actively bleeding from any wound. Steve's hands checked him from top to bottom, looking for shrapnel wounds or worse, but didn't find any.

"You know..." Stark whispered, his voice a little rough. "If you wanted to feel me up, you could have just asked."

Steve sat back in relief and Natasha joined him as Stark opened his eyes to see them. The brown seemed a little black in the light and Stark frowned.

"That's a lot of blood there, Stígandr," he reached up to lightly touch the back of Steve's head.

Natasha hummed in agreement. “How’s your head?”

Glancing at her, he shrugged. “Still attached. You?”

“Just fine. A lunkhead took the fall for me,” she looked around. "We need to get Stark to a secure location. There's no way to know if he was the target or not."

"I'm not leaving until we get these people out," Stark interjected, pulling himself up off the floor with a groan. "This gala's got my name on it and I'm not leaving until this is handled."

Steve looked to Natasha, but she shrugged. He looked back to Stark to see him wide-eyed and desperate. "Where's Rhodey? Where's Pepper?"
Tony

At first, he had been positive that he was dead. Schmidt wouldn't be the first to get tired of putting up with him. Obadiah told him all the time that he could be unreasonable and stubborn to the point of pushing away anyone who tried to help him and that is what Schmidt was trying to do. Wasn't it?

Reprimand. He doesn't like to be reprimanded; he'll do and say anything to avoid it. He doesn't like the whip. He doesn't like the knife. He doesn't like the pain. And that's what disobedience is, isn't it? Just constant pain. The pain of failure, the pain of seeing the disappointment in the eyes of his commanders. He hated the pain. Their disappointment made him feel small, and he was already so small already. Miniscule and fragile. Kleiser demands perfection. What is more perfect than a newborn, than a gullible child?

His mind comes back to him in a rhythm, a cadence of I'm loyal, I'm loyal, don't hurt me, I'll comply, and he surfaces on a cold, hard floor. Conditioning kicks in and he keeps himself still, keeps his eyes closed, feigns unconsciousness. They don't come back to do more damage if he doesn't move. They don't like it when he passes out. Sleeping prey is no fun to hunt. The sounds of pain meet his ears and he might as well be in Kleiser's hands, held down by the neck, Kleiser's cane pressed against his head, repeating his mantra I'm loyal, don't hurt me, I'll comply.

Hands, strong hands that don't resemble Kleiser's cold ones, run themselves up and down his body, avoiding personal areas, but thorough nonetheless. They pause for a moment and Tony lets himself court danger by cracking open an eye just a smidge. It's nothing more than a glimpse through lashes, but Kleiser would have spotted it. Instead, hovering over him, is Steve. How would Captain America punish him for failure? What would disappointment look like in his eyes? Would he hurt him, too?

"You know..." he whispered, his voice a little rough, the memory of disuse heavy in his vocal chords. "If you wanted to feel me up, you could have just asked."

Steve rocked back onto his heels and sighed. It looked like amusement, it looked safe. Romanoff joined him as Tony opened his eyes fully to see them. Romanoff had her skirt torn and wrapped around her thigh and Steve...well, Steve looked a little dead around the edges. There was so much red.
"That's a lot of blood there, Stígandr," he reached up to lightly touch the back of Steve's head. His fingers came away bloody, but not dripping. He was already healing, then.

Romanoff seemed to agree with him. "How's your head?" she asked quietly, not reaching up in the way Tony did. He noticed the red already coating her fingertips.

It was eerily similar to the red he saw while at his keyboard. Guilt without reason flooded into his system and he felt the overwhelming urge to run. But he was well trained. Tony stayed put.

Glancing at her, Steve shrugged. "Still attached. You?"

"Just fine. A lunkhead took the fall for me," she looked around. "We need to get Stark to a secure location. There's no way to know if he was the target or not."

Leave? No, he couldn't leave. He couldn't run. Running was death. He had to stay, he had to stay until he was allowed to leave. He had to make up for whatever he did. What did he do? Jack Rollins is recovering, but who else will your lapses injure? How many others shall pay the price of your ignorance? How many of my enemies possess that which is rightfully mine? Rollins? That was a bunch of low level rebels with stolen...tech. His tech. No good deed goes unpunished in the end, right? He should have let those Rising Tide kids starve. But how was he supposed to know they were going to go after such a public figure, and a damn Kommando at that? The ones who took his nav-dock and AES-70 had been bus thieves and kidnappers. They took people off the Zola lists and made them disappear into normal life. Those kinds of people didn't want to be seen on the big stage. It would jeopardize everything they worked for.

They were people like him on the inside. They wanted peace and they wanted to do it with as little fighting as possible. Death and killing wasn't their game. It wasn't his either. It was a last resort.

He looked to the ruins of his gala. His mother's gala. Whose last resort was this?

"I'm not leaving until we get these people out," he stated sharply, pulling himself up off the floor with a groan. His whole body ached and his ears were ringing. "This gala's got my name on it and I'm not leaving until this is handled."

Steve looked to Natasha, but she shrugged. They were talking without him. They were deciding whether to obey or to override. Machines with their cogs clicking together to move forward. He wondered why his word had to be weighed and considered for legitimacy. History told him that
Steve would have said the same thing, would have refused to leave until everyone was saved. Was he so different in the end? He just wanted to protect his friends and....

Friends...panic bloomed inside Tony's chest and he spun on the spot. His hand raised to his jacket pocket, but instead of his phone, he found pieces of broken metal. The blast must have shattered it. He would have to add an upgrade to it. Blast-proof phones would sell like hot cakes in this climate. People loved morbid indulgence.

"Where's Rhodey?" Tony looked back the way they had been standing across from Schmidt, where the most damage was. Rhodey had been there, just beside the Emperor. There was nothing in that spot but a crater. Fear met panic and made something ugly in his heart. His gala should have had more security protocols. This shouldn't have been able to happen. I'm not putting Rhodey in danger by being here, he had told Aunt Peggy. He'd made a liar of himself.

"Where's Pepper?" She wouldn't have had armor to protect her. He hadn't expanded his tech to high fashion Kevlar and she had been in a back-less dress. She didn't even have guards to defend her. Not high profile enough. He should have given them to her anyway. Do your best, Aunt Peggy had said. This wasn't his best; it wasn't even close.

"Stark, come back! We need to work together," Romanoff was talking to him, but he wasn't really listening.

The steps out of the dance floor were falling apart, the concrete pockmarked with blast damage and crumbling from the concussive force. It had cracked all the way through. The banners that had hung from the upper floors and the ceiling were in tatters or burning, their thin embers trailing down to the ground. Tony stumbled through the wreckage until he got to the edge of the crater. Despite the damage to everything else, Schmidt wasn't evaporated on the spot. His body was splayed in the crater, burnt to a crisp. His guards didn't fare so well. Tony couldn't see Rhodey anywhere. He shook where he stood, terrified of what that could mean. What it meant.

"Stark," Steve was at his side, holding his arm. It became the only thing keeping him standing. "Oh..." It seemed Steve had seen what he had. Tony glanced up to him.

"I don't see Rhodey. I don't..." He swallowed the smoke and the taste of ashes. "Maybe he got thrown like we did."

Romanoff came to his other side and nodded. "And we'll find him if it did. But we have to get you back to the Tower. It isn't safe here, we don't know if..."
Steve darted behind them both and a barrage of bullets rained down. It snapped Tony into action. He tucked behind Steve, but it wasn't just Steve. Standing beside him, something upraised in front of him, was the Red Captain. The bullets' momentum seemed to die as they hit it and the shooters must have noticed. They let up for a moment and without having to speak, the four of them hurried for cover. Romanoff pulled him away and he lost track of Steve and the Red Captain. She yanked him behind a sheltered bit of debris and handed him a gun.

"You remember how to shoot, don't you?" She asked, a glimmer in her eyes and a curve to her lips. Tony felt like he was going to be sick, but also like he was about to fly. He jerked his head in what he hoped was a nod.

"No, I just design 'em, Romanoff," he checked the chamber and the magazine, then cocked it. "What's the plan?"

"Getting you out alive."

"I'm not leaving without Rhodey and Pepper. I'm not leaving until emergency responders are on the scene. I have a responsibility to these people," He glanced out of their cover to where he had last seen Steve.

"And I have a responsibility to get you out of here alive. You're a civilian in a warzone. This isn't your area of expertise."

"Merchant of Death," he reminded her, gazing out of the corner of his eye at her. She didn't look back. "I don't have any other area of expertise."

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**Steve**

Just as with Clint, Steve felt the danger before it arrived. He moved around Romanoff and Stark, to shield them, and raised his arm only to realize he had dropped his shield. He didn't have time to think about it, because the bullets were flying. He took one to the shoulder and another grazed his ear. He braced himself to take more, to shove Romanoff and Stark down into the crater, when the bullets abruptly stopped. Blinking, he looked up.
Icy blue eyes met his against the backdrop of metal and leather, and Steve looked down to see what was stopping the bullets. The Red Captain was holding his shield, the enchantment broken along with the strap. He locked eyes with the Red Captain again and the man tilted his head as if asking a question. Steve had no answer.

The bullets stopped and they moved. Steve followed the Red Captain and his shield, Romanoff pulled Stark in the other direction. The closest pillar that was intact was wide enough for both of them and Steve slipped behind it just before the Red Captain did. He blew out a breath and took in the entirety of the building. Men and women in black tactical gear were moving into new positions at the third floor level and higher. Cable ropes were secured from the destroyed sky light, allowing them entry to whatever floor they wanted to be on. A couple went all the way down to the ground floor. Steve turned back to the Red Captain, ready to relay his plan of attack, and found himself held against the wall by a forearm. The Red Captain stared him down and held up his shield.

"Where did you get this?"

"It was a gift."

"From whom?"

"An old friend of mine," Steve pushed against the Red Captain's hold and felt it double down. "He's dead now. So if you wanted to buy one, you're out of luck."

The Red Captain reared back and slammed the shield into the concrete pillar. Bits of it flew off and littered the ground. Steve leaned into the pillar and kicked out at the Red Captain to break his hold. As he stepped back, the Red Captain grabbed Steve's face to stop him from darting out of range and got his mask instead. The thin straps that held it on snapped and the Red Captain had to take a couple steps to prevent himself from overbalancing. Steve glared at the Red Captain, angry that this imposter had the nerve to take his shield and threaten him.

There were gunman in the building and he was worried about Steve's shield. Even Clint had been convinced he was nothing more than a wannabe. Why would the Red Captain care if he was pretending to be something he couldn't possibly be?

He expected to see anger in the Red Captain's eyes to match his own, but instead he saw shock. His shield hung at the Red Captain's side and the man had lost his aggressive stance.
"Steve?" The Red Captain breathed out through his mask and it sounded almost familiar. Steve had heard that voice before, but he couldn't place it with the mask. It was too different. How did he know this man? How did this man know him? Who was he?

Narrowing his eyes in confusion, Steve decided to maintain cover. "Who the hell is Steve?"

Gunfire started up again and Steve shook his head. He had to stop the gunmen before they could kill anyone else. He took off for the closest rope and started climbing. If the Red Captain was going to play twenty questions, he could play it by himself. He pulled himself up to the second floor and took the stairs the rest of the way. There was a gunman right on the other side of the door to the stairs, so he burst out with a vengeance, kicking the door off the hinges and sending the man and the door tumbling down to the ground. He didn't even have time to scream. He turned to the next assailant and was met with a hail of bullets. He dodged to the side before the woman could aim at him properly and snatched a hunk of debris off the floor. He tossed it up to test its weight, then threw it with full strength at the woman's head. She went down with a yelp and he darted over to her, divesting her of her automatic rifle. It was quite a bit different from the weapons he had when he was still on Earth and he found himself longing to have Balder's swords back. He aimed at the next few gunmen and took them out. He heard shouting and gunfire from the floor above him and heard the distinct sound of bullets ricocheting off of his shield. The Red Captain had gotten on task. Steve looked down over the edge, down into the center of the building where the most damage was.

He could just see Romanoff and Stark behind what was left of the bar, and the crater where Schmidt's charred body was still lying. He scanned for Stark's Rhodey and Miss Potts, but with the coating of dirt and dust over everything, it was hard to pick out colors or faces. Not to mention the debris.

The Red Captain dropped down onto his floor and walked towards him. Steve saw a ripped piece of cloth in his free hand. "What's that?"

"These bastards are the Mandarin's men. Ten Rings," The Red Captain seemed extremely frustrated by that. "No wonder we were reinstated."

Steve held out his hand. "Are you done playing with my shield?"

The Red Captain paused and stared at Steve. "Do you know me?"

He didn't know what the Red Captain was angling for. Peggy Carter herself hadn't believed it was him, even with a run of tests. Surely the Red Captain didn't believe he was...himself?
"Should I?"

"You should. You would...if you were you."

Frowning, Steve swallowed. "I am me. Who are you?"

"You used to call me..."

"Birgirsson, we found Rhodey!" Romanoff called out and Steve looked away from the Red Captain. "We need help!"

"I'm on my way!" He called back. The Red Captain bumped his arm and he glanced over. His shield was being held out to him.

"We'll talk when this is over," the Red Captain said with a self-assurance that Steve envied. He was never assured. Hela's voice in his head was his only assurance.

Steve took his shield, maintained eye contact, and fixed the strap. Frigga's enchantment fell over it again and he watched the Red Captain's reaction. Surprise and confusion warred with uncertainty. Steve felt a strange sort of happiness that he had taken the man's assurance. It was cruel, but it was nothing more than what his life on Jötunheim demanded.

"We'll see."
Amongst the stench of sulfur, accelerant, and concrete dust, gunpowder smoke bloomed in hazy clouds and muzzles flashes lit up the darkest spaces. Each burst of light was a neon target and Tony aimed steadily. One exhalation, a tight squeeze, and a light went out. Where one light was snuffed out, another appeared. Tony fired again and again, but they just kept coming.

"They're inside," Romanoff announced, her voice almost a sigh. "It's likely they've been inside the entire time."

"How do you know?"

"Look where they're coming from," she nodded her head to the lower floors.

Across the way were conference rooms that were regularly rented out by Stark Industries, used mostly for mediating between companies or for various events. Streaming out of those rooms almost faster than they could be dealt with, men and women in black tactical gear with patches on their chests were joining the fray. Considering the handguns he and Romanoff had, it wouldn't be long before they were out of ammo.

"We need to move," he said, inching back towards the crater where Schmidt's body was. There was a hunk of upper floor that had fallen down behind it and he backed up until he felt it against his back. He could see Schmidt's body from this angle and it made him a little sick. Tony turned his face away from the sight and scoured the debris for somewhere to retreat to. Up above him by about a foot or two, there was a space big enough for him to get into. It would provide enough protection from the gunfire that maybe they could find another way out of the building.

He didn't want to leave without his friends, but staying alive would help him a lot in finding them.

Tony jumped to the opening and started to pull himself up. The concrete and metal whined with his added weight and then he heard a piercing scream. Shaken, Tony dropped back to the ground. He followed the scream to its source, ducking beneath a sudden hail of bullets.

Tucked under a corner of the concrete with only his legs visible, one of Schmidt's guards was pinned by the debris. Tony slid between the destroyed bar and the hunk of the second floor. Shards of broken bottles scratched Tony's bare hands, drawing blood. He pushed through, panting in the hot, dusty air, and made it through to the other side of the fallen concrete.

Coughing, the source of the scream turned to him. "Tony?"
Brushing a few little bits of glass off his palm, Tony glanced up. Dark brown eyes peered into his own and he could have screamed himself. Tony felt a pressure bubble up in his throat and he couldn't tell if it was bile or laughter. Maybe it was a strange cocktail of both.

"Rhodey?! Oh my god..." He felt a shard of glass cut into his shin as he scrambled closer. "I thought you were dead!"

Rhodey lifted a hand to weakly punch Tony in the arm as soon as he was close enough. "You thought a little bomb could kill me? I've survived you for as long as I can remember."

"Oh haha," Tony scooted closer and checked Rhodey's head. He didn't see any blood pooling yet. "Where does it hurt, honey bear?"

"I..." He coughed a couple times, huffing angrily afterward, then settling. "I don't know if you saw, but I'm kind of holding up a second-floor balcony with my knees. It's getting a little heavy..."

Rhodey pretended to push against the rubble, but dropped his arms after a second. His eyes slid shut as he focused on breathing. "I saw you brought Captain Dick. Does he mind putting those super muscles to good use? I'm kind of...struggling here."

"Yeah, yeah, let me get him, okay?" Tony started back to where he had come in. "Just, give me a second to get him and..." he waved his hand in Rhodey's general direction. "You just...just keep holding up the building."

"No problem, Tony," Rhodey chuckled, relaxing with a wince. "I'll just wait here for you."

"Sounds like a plan, Jim-jam," Tony smiled at Rhodey's snort and backed out of the alcove.

"Rushman, I found Rhodey!" He avoided touching the concrete as he turned to see her. "He's pinned. We need Birgirsson's muscles!"

She nodded sharply and called out. "Birgirsson, we found Rhodey! We need help!" She shot three more gunmen, before turning back to Tony. "How bad is he wounded?"

"His legs are trapped under the rubble. He's conscious, though," Tony hesitated for a moment, then spun on his heel. "I'm going back."

"Stark, be careful."

"I'm not the one being shot at!" He ducked back behind the debris.

Steve

Up close, the Red Captain incited a strange familiarity in Steve. He knew him, somehow...but he couldn’t place him. He was too young looking to be from his era and he hadn’t been on Earth long enough to have met him before. Outside of newsreels and the brief times they had encountered one
another at this gala, Steve had never seen him before. Yet, the man claimed to know him.

He tried to get it out of his head and focused instead on navigating his way back to Stark and Natasha. If Rhodey, or Lt. Col. Rhodes, was alive then that would be his priority. Of course, the way down turned out to be less than ideal.

“There’s more of them,” the Red Captain sighed, taking the right of the stairwell and waving Steve to the left. He went without a word. “I’ve got two Kommandos down there, but we’ll need to clear the hostiles before we start helping the wounded,” he glanced Steve’s way, a frown on his face. “Any objections?”

“No,” Steve still didn't trust this man and he wasn't in the mood to start fighting for a spot he no longer occupied. The last time he led people in a mission, only he and Brynja escaped alive. However short-lived that ended up being for her. “It’s your house.”

Narrowing his eyes, the Red Captain nodded. “Watch my six.”

He burst through the stairwell door and out onto the bottom floor, and Steve followed, sticking close to his flank. The gunmen noticed them a moment too late and Steve unleashed his shield, taking out a few with his knives before it ricocheted back to him. The Red Captain was a storm in front of him, ripping guns straight out of the assailants’ hands and turning it on them. He never looked back to see if Steve was there, nor did he do much ordering. He fought as if he already knew what Steve was going to do, and trusted him to perform without question. When Steve threw his shield, the Captain ducked out of its path without blinking or pausing his stride and when an attacker sent it off-course, he snatched it out of midair and cast it back Steve’s direction. It seemed they both favored knives and were efficient with them.

As Steve took in the man, he wondered... *was he a doppelganger?*

“Birgirsson!” The Red Captain shouted and Steve bowed backward, narrowly avoiding a hail of bullets. One sharp crack echoed in the space and the man who had shot at him was dead.

For an ear-ringing moment, silence reigned. Then Steve heard someone scream.

*Tony*
Rhodey had passed out.

That was fine, it was fine...he was fine. Tony’s hand shook as he brushed dust and dirt off of Rhodey’s face. It was just the strain. It had to be. Rhodey was the toughest guy he knew, but everyone had limits.

Tony pretended the sudden wetness that dripped onto Rhodey’s face was just the remnants of the aquarium’s splash. Even as he sniffed back the ache in his eyes and adjusted himself so he wasn’t leaning too much, he refused to admit how absolutely terrified he was.

They hadn’t even had a chance to find Pepper. What if she had it worse?

Romanoff shouted for him, asking if he had any more ammo. He shook himself, leaning forward and pressing his head to Rhodey’s.

“I’ll be back.”

He crawled out of the debris, his mind a mess, and glanced up to Romanoff. She held out her hand and he flicked the safety on before tossing his gun to her. She caught it effortlessly and flicked off the safety.

She shot three more gunmen, before turning back to him. She opened her mouth to speak and Tony blinked. In the darkness cast over his eyes as he blinked, something shot up in front of him. He felt the whoosh of air and a wave of something burnt, and his eyes flashed open wide.

Rising above him, his charred flesh oozing something green and viscous, Johann Schmidt bared his multitude of yellowed teeth and let out an inhuman screech. Tony didn't have time to speak, to call for help, or to raise his hands to protect his face. Schmidt moved faster than he had ever seen someone move, and the next thing he knew, he was on the ground.

Schmidt was insane. Also, insanely strong. Somehow, Tony had pissed him off enough that he was ready to relieve him of his mortal coil.

With claw-like hands he ripped at Tony's skin, cutting and digging into him. Tony didn't have time to raise his hands to block his face and Schmidt managed to scratch straight down his cheek. Blood ran in rivulets down towards his ear and he tucked into a ball, either not brave enough or not stupid enough to try fighting back. He had tossed Romanoff his gun and hadn't made a habit of carrying an arsenal around with him. After all, the war usually wasn't on his doorsteps, occasional kidnapping attempts and brainwashing aside.
I'm going to die, he thought, too terrified by the image of Schmidt's hand so close to his face to reach around him for something to defend himself with. Schmidt's hands were almost like knives and he cut Tony's forearms and legs with abandon. Tony's sight was shot, full up with blood and whatever gore Schmidt was extracting from his flesh. He could hear Romanoff unloading into Schmidt, but all it managed to do was enrage the superhuman and he bore down on Tony with even more fervor. One bony finger clipped his chest, right over a rib and Tony could have sworn he felt the bone slide out of his skin. No matter where he turned, there was a flurry of wild attacks. He couldn't escape him.

Screams slipped past Tony's control, both from the pain and the fear, and he let them out. Kleiser would have punished him, but Tony didn't care. Wasn't this punishment enough?

Something loud echoed right above him and the next thing he knew, Schmidt stopped.

"Captain America," he said and Tony heard himself whimper, turning on his side and pulling with everything in him to get away. Chunks of concrete dug into his cuts, catching on the edge of his split skin and he bit back more sounds of distress.

He had to get away. He had to hide. He had to find his gun. He had to disappear. Play dead, he thought, quick and weak. Only fools play dead, Anthony, Kleiser had said, yanking him up from underneath the rigored corpse of a fellow trainee. Are you a fool?

"No," he had replied, a blatant lie.

"We shall see," Kleiser had replied and dropped him.

He pulled himself as far from Schmidt as he was able while the man was distracted, ignoring as best he could the wounds covering his body. He felt like he had been hit with a mack truck a few times.

"Stark!" Romanoff called, then she appeared in his tunneling vision and swam before his eyes. "Hey, hey, eyes open!"

He felt himself attempt to scoff, but he didn't have enough oxygen. "I'm...trying," he gasped out, his hands shaking as he came to a stop. He couldn't crawl anymore. The world was spinning underneath him and he felt nauseous. All that adrenaline must be rushing to his head. He felt like he could float away if he let himself. It got dark for a second, but he remembered Romanoff's voice. Eyes open.

But he was only human. He fell into the darkness almost by accident.

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Steve

The scream he heard sounded again, even louder and more desperate. Steve spun on his heel, gazing that direction and saw... Schmidt? Schmidt was alive, though burnt through to the bone, and clawing at someone on the ground. Natasha was firing at him, but he didn’t seem to feel the bullets. Steve hurled his shield, aiming for Schmidt's head, and scored a direct hit. The clang of it connecting filled the air and Schmidt paused his attack. Slowly, calculatingly, he turned to face
Steve.

His face, oozing and burnt, with one eye missing, seemed to transform.

“Captain America,” Schmidt said slowly, enunciating every syllable. His ruined face pulled and twisted, bits of dead flesh flaking off.

Steve schooled his face, showing no recognition, no emotion at all. He paced forward as if there was no debris to slow his steps, no other people around. He closed the distance between them in a heartbeat and set to work.

He angled for Schmidt’s empty eye, hoping to catch him in his blind spot. But Schmidt seemed to anticipate it and sidestepped the attack, twisting around to catch Steve's fur collar and pull. He overbalanced, tucking himself under and letting his own body weight force Schmidt to bend to keep hold of him. On his back, Steve grabbed the hand holding him and kicked up. His boot heel caught Schmidt's cheek and he used the momentum of Schmidt’s recoil to get to his feet. Spinning, Steve kicked at him again, knocking him further away from the person he had been attacking.

Steve gave himself a second to glance back, to see if he had saved the person in time. Stark, no, Tony's battered face and arms were all he could see. He's safe with me...you have my word, he heard himself say.

He was knocked across the jaw for his lapse of focus and he barely felt it.

Steve remembered Laufey's reprimand, remembered the words he had spat at him. Your word is air, empty air. Maybe it was. Maybe every promise he made was nothing more than that. He had sworn to stop Schmidt all those decades ago, yet here he stood. He had vowed to stop Hydra, and it was thriving in his absence. He had declared himself for Jötunheim, and left them to their doom. Every word from his lips ran the risk of being false. Given enough time, he would break every promise he had ever made. He supposed that was true of every person alive...but he stood by his word. In some ways, he had lived and died by it.

Or watched others die because of it. But not today.

Schmidt's fist came at him again, but Steve caught it. He didn't have his shield, his knives were sheathed, he had left his fanged gauntlet in Odin's Vaults. He had nothing more than his fists and his anger. It bubbled up in him like magma, burning through the images of his failures, of his lies. It burned through the faces of his family, from Brynja to Helblindi to Nedra. It made cinders and ash of his memories and he gave it all to Schmidt.

His knuckles burned and ached as he rammed them again and again into Schmidt's face, feeling bone break and greenish blood spurt, but not being satisfied. It wasn't enough to repay him all the time lost, all the loved ones who were no more, all the life he would never be able to live again. Steve ripped and tore at the man in front of him, exacting a paltry token of revenge for over sixty years of separation, of devastation, of life.

Burnt flesh gave in to his blows, bones snapped, blood coated Steve hands and arms and face. He didn't stop, even when Schmidt went limp and someone began pulling at him. Nor when voices rose around him, demands to cease, assurances that Schmidt was dead. They didn't know, they could never know, that Schmidt wouldn't settle for death. He and Steve were alike in that regard. There would never be enough brute force or explosives, or certainty in the world to stop such a man. Steve wouldn't let him walk away again.
"Birgirsson! Stop!" Natasha was in front of him and if he didn't hold his attack, he would hit her. He tensed immediately and his body reeled from the sudden stillness.

Reality came back to him with a sickening clarity and he blinked. Panting, Steve looked into Natasha's steady gaze. There was something dripping and green on her face, soaking into the lace mask she still wore. Steve had to focus to hear her speaking to him, and still, it felt like she was screaming through a wall.

"He's dead..." She was saying, reaching for his hands, but he yanked them out of range. The fire in his veins would burn her like Surtur's flame.

Steve forced himself to stand and realized his hands were shaking. His eyes burned sharply, then began to blur. "Bucky..." He whispered to her, gasping in a breath. "Bucky."

"Okay," she acknowledged, stepping over the mess of a body that was Schmidt. She held her hands up to him as if he were a wild animal. Perhaps he was. "I've got you. The threat's dealt with, the first responders are here. You've done the fighting. It's time to help recover the wounded. Rhodes, remember, and Stark - our boss?"

Steve nodded and glanced around the room. EMTs were already aiding the injured, firefighters were handling the fires, partygoers were holding each other up as they took in the carnage around them. Quite a few were staring at him and many averted their eyes from him when he met their gaze. It wasn't the respect and admiration they had displayed for the Red Captain. It was fear. Steve swallowed thickly and opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out.

"Loki?" He managed after a moment and Natasha pursed her lips. He closed his eyes in resignation before she could answer.

"I don't think he came. This was the work of the Mandarin. It was a bad lead."

Sighing, Steve nodded once more. "Yeah." The start of his downward spiral flashed into his mind's eyes and he frowned. "Where's Tony?"

Natasha only glanced behind her where EMTs were surrounding the space he had last seen Tony. He followed her gaze until he saw, lying on a stretcher, his skin torn to shreds, the very man he had been sent here to protect. He had been triaged and found desperate enough to warrant an immediate evacuation. Something told him it wasn't just the fact that his name was on the venue.

Steve forced himself away from Schmidt's corpse and closer to Tony. His red suit and white fur was almost black with blood and his skin had paled significantly. The emergency responders were working frantically to prep him for transport and Steve kept having to step back to avoid getting in their way.

Something cold and empty settled in his chest as he realized that there was nothing he could do for him. He was entirely out of control here, once again.

"Sir, you need to step back."

Steve blinked, then blinked again. "Right, sorry," he stumbled away, only to find a strong hand on his elbow. He glanced back to see the Red Captain. There was an odd emotion on the man’s face. A wariness mixed with happiness and muddled by pain.
“He’ll be alright,” the Red Captain said, his voice strange and quiet. Once more, Steve could feel his brain working, trying to figure him out. Inexplicably, he thought of Brooklyn and a metal stairwell. He closed his eyes to the memory and stepped out of the Red Captain’s hold.

“Miss Potts,” he said, then cleared his throat. He turned to Natasha. “Do we...has she been found?”

Natasha looked to the Red Captain, then guided Steve towards the hunk of concrete and twisted metal that had made up the second-floor balcony. “Let’s start with Rhodes. We’ll find her if she hasn’t been found already. Let’s stay on task, yeah?”

Steve swallowed, nodding his understanding. He felt hollow, scraped clean of anything that even resembled emotion. His fire had burned too well.

His heart had been closed down inside his chest. Steve let Natasha lead him where he needed to be, but he had all but left the gala.

Maybe it was for the best.

As the EMTs struggled through debris to get him out, Tony came to a little and his cries of pain stabbed into Steve. That was his fault. He watched them carry Tony out, frozen in shame at yet another victim of his lapse in judgement. His job had been to guard Stark, but instead, he’d ran after his shield like a lifeline. It had survived Jötunheim when nothing else had, not even him. When he should have been between Schmidt and Stark, he had been halfway across the building.

Worlds away when he should have stayed home.

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**Natasha**

Steve Rogers had vacated. She could tell by the way he held himself, the way he followed her orders without trouble. He stepped where she told him and did as she said. There was still globs of green viscera on her lace mask and she ignored it in favor of keeping track of her suddenly robotic supersoldier.
Clint had told her about Steve’s penchant for going somewhere in his head. It could be the past, it could be his own internal worries, or it could be something else. Missing protocols in brainwashed soldiers tended to make them react in various ways. Usually, it would be violent, since they tended to fall back on instincts they were trained in. The frightening ones were the ones that held their struggle inside without a sound. The more reactionless they were, the more the danger.

Natasha shadowed him, but she was aware that she wasn’t quite alone in that endeavor.

The Red Captain was hovering far too closely, watching Steve just as she was. As they raised the debris off of Lt. Col. Rhodes and the EMTs rushed in to gather him, the Red Captain spoke quietly to him. She couldn’t hear the words over the sound of everything, but Steve nodded. The Red Captain’s eyes crinkled at the edges and she surmised he was smiling behind his muzzle.

“They make a good team, don’t you think?”

Natasha blinked, then turned to look at the person who had spoken. Bright blue eyes gazed back at her, shining with mirth, framed by short blonde hair. Recognition was instantaneous.

“Yelena,” Natasha said as a greeting, her face carefully blank.

“Natalia,” Yelena replied, her lips curving into a smirk. “Is SHIELD still holding on to your spine?”

“Is fear still infecting yours?” Yelena’s nostrils flared, a minute thing, but enough for Natasha. She nodded and turned back to watching Steve. “I see your ticks survived, too. That’s a shame. You had such a talent when we were younger.”

“I am a national hero. I have action figures. I made it further than you ever did,” Yelena crossed her arms. “All you got for your altruism were shackles.”

Natasha smiled, glanced sidelong at Yelena. “And yet, I’m not begging for approval from people I think are beneath me. I know my worth, with or without them.”

She stepped forward as Steve and the Red Captain settled the debris back on the ground. Rhodes
was being stabilized by the EMTs, an oxygen mask over his face and tourniquets on his legs. Yelena didn’t follow her.

“You didn’t fail,” the Red Captain whispered and Steve swallowed. “Sometimes missions go bad.”

“It didn’t go bad,” Steve countered, digging his thumb into his eyebrow as if to ward off a headache. “I left him behind. You don’t...you don’t leave your...your friends behind. I...I learned that the hard way.”

“I learned that, too,” the Red Captain laid his hand on Steve’s shoulder. “But guilt is consuming, like fire. Don’t fuel it.”

Steve frowned at the ground, but nodded slowly. He turned toward Natasha as soon as he saw her. “Nat...We should look for Miss Potts.”

“The last time I saw her, she was on the other side of the bar,” she stepped that way and Steve followed. “Care to join us, Captain?”

Both Steve and the Red Captain looked up at her and she waited. Steve shook himself, glanced back at the Red Captain and stepped aside. After a moment, the Red Captain cleared his throat. “Go on ahead, I need to speak to my Kommandos.”

“Of course,” Natasha nodded and started towards the other side of the bar.

The debris wasn’t as bad towards this side of the building and she led the way past the bulk of it.

“If Loki wasn’t here,” Steve began, his voice soft. “where is he?”

Sighing, Natasha crossed her arms. “SHIELD will keep searching for him. Considering how bad of a job we did protecting Stark, I’m sure they won’t keep you around under that pretense. You might be free to start helping them find him. Let’s just clear the building and we’ll deal with that later.”

“If it wasn’t for my mission, I wouldn’t have been here. St...Tony might have been fine with real bodyguards. You protected him more than I did.”
“Stop.”

“I...”

“Berating yourself for things you couldn’t control isn’t going to help save anyone. We do what we can, when we can, and we have to be content with that. You have to be content with it. Now, dig yourself out of your spiral and stay on task.”

Steve exhaled heavily and swallowed. “Lead the way.”

Tony

He came to in the ambulance a couple times, but they put him back under. All he returned to was the pain anyway, so he didn’t fight too much against the influence of the meds. Time was an inconstant thing, but his thoughts maintained a strange lineal pattern.

Every effort he had made to remain a neutral party in the struggle between SHIELD and Hydra had failed. If he leaned too far one way or the other, he would be burned. Yet balancing on a razor’s edge was not his only mission. He had to juggle all the projects Schmidt and Kleiser demanded of him whilst running Stark Industries and improving SHIELD’s tech to keep them in step with all their rivals. He had handled it all with aplomb for years, having no other choice, and now...now he wanted to do what he had said before.

Step out of the dance and let SHIELD and Hydra step on each other’s toes. They all thought he wouldn’t have the nerve to do it. They all thought they had him shackled down to their causes and their ways, but none of them cared to check. Kleiser would squeeze him until he emptied him of will, Schmidt tried to murder him, and SHIELD hadn’t been able to protect him. Even Captain America hadn’t been able to save him.

As the doctors rushed him into the OR and began the preparations needed to dope him into unconsciousness and put him back together, Tony felt only one certainty in his heart.

He would prove them wrong and he would protect the world from their machinations. Steve had
been right, out there on the dance floor. *What could you be if you tried? How do you know how strong you are until you flex your muscles?*

Counting back from one hundred, Tony closed his eyes. He would survive the Mandarin, he would survive Schmidt, he would survive Kleiser, and he would show them all how strong he really was. He would take on the world.

Chapter End Notes

August was actual hell to me. Car broke down, lost main source of income, having a time of it finding a new job...lots of stress. I'm trying to keep writing, but fanfic is done for free and as much as I love it, it can't feed me. I'm going to keep writing however, and posting when I can, because I really do love it. I'm assuming I caught all the mistakes, but maybe not. Let me know. Thanks for reading and sticking with me. Love y'all.
Hey, y'all, I'm still chipping away at it as much as I can, but it's hard. Thanks for reading!

Please enjoy and if you do, consider buying me a coffee!

Pepper

She didn’t run the company but it was a close thing. It wasn’t that Tony was incapable of keeping his business in order - he did mighty well considering all the other circumstances - but he was often pulled thin. Pepper found herself loosening his ties to things in an effort to keep him from ripping apart. She knew that he probably noticed, but she doubted it. Where his purview fell short to other things, she came to mind the gap. In that way, he never had to worry about dropping the ball.

Nowadays that happened to be fielding the divide between Tony and Obadiah. They were increasingly beginning to see the future of the company in different ways. Tony wanted to expand his father’s late-in-life efforts to revamp the idea of free and renewable energy, to cut back on the overwhelming demand for new and more lethal weapons, and to expand in things that could counteract the prevalence of the Zola Act. There were plans sitting in holding patterns, waiting for the argument that Tony would make to win over the shareholders in Stark Industries, most of them the kind that would get him labeled a threat to his own company’s image.

There was also the competition, such as Justin Hammer and Tiberius Stone. Stone’s recent attempts at smearing Stark Industries, Hammer’s new line of smart vehicles and his bid for the private arms market. Then there was the political pressure from President Stern and Schmidt under the guise of Cyrus Fenton to serve his nation and the world. Pepper kept in close contact with Rhodey at all times, always through secure lines and on burner phones that Tony had built especially for that purpose. They were made to be destroyed at a moment’s notice. Even if whoever managed to take them could crack the codes on them, which would be a feat, they wouldn’t have a chance to. Between Pepper, SHIELD, and Rhodey, they kept Stark Industries and the great Tony Stark running.

That was why she had been gazing sidelong at Tony as he spoke with Cyrus Fenton from across the room. She had a champagne flute in her hand, clinking her glass with Obadiah’s and bearing his genial mood with grace as he pulled her close and gestured to the party as if he had planned it all himself. Funny, she thought, since I spent the better part of six months ensuring everyone had an open schedule slot available to attend. And I booked all the lighting technicians for the fancy lights, the caterers for the food, coordinated with the zoo and sea life organizations to ensure the
animals were well taken care of for the duration of the event, set up secure transactions so the proper places received their portion of the proceeds of tonight’s event, and bought or negotiated with art collectors to display sea related paintings and sculptures for auction.

And sure, she had hired someone to oversee all those things, but she took it as a point of pride that she double-checked their work. If even the smallest thing went wrong, a lot could domino behind it. So she found herself checking on those things just as ardently as she would anything else. Especially for the Maria Stark Foundation. Tony’s mother had been killed before she joined the company and she hadn’t been able to meet her beforehand, but she knew how much her memory meant to Tony and to the world. If there was one event where she demanded no mistakes be made, it would be this.

Her hopes that this would be another successful night were quite literally blown to pieces.

It all happened so quickly that she didn’t really register it until about a minute after the dust settled.

She had been staring at Tony, waiting to see if he was handling Fenton’s mood well when she heard the beating of helicopter blades and gazed upwards. In slow motion, a flash of light came from the side of it, which could have been mistaken for the flashing of the fancy lights, and then she heard the shattering of glass. Her voice caught in her throat and the flash of light traveled without hesitation across the room. She was pulled down by Obadiah before she saw impact or where it was headed, and then there was the hellishly loud explosion. The heat burst outward and whooshed over her bare back like the kiss of a summer sun, leaving behind the aching burn and was followed by the sting of debris cascading down on them from the epicenter.

Her ears were ringing and she wanted to scream. It felt like it had piled up inside her throat from the moment she saw the helicopter and now it was finally striving to break free. She opened her mouth to let it go, but all that came out was a cough at the smoke and dust-filled air. It smelled of chemicals and accelerant, clogging up her nose and she struggled to pull herself away from the heaviness against her side. It took her a moment to realize it was Obadiah, clinging to her and trying to guide her to an empty conference room that seemed untouched by the blast. He was saying something to her, but she couldn’t hear. He seemed adamant and she couldn’t figure out why.

A sharp whistle broke through the ringing and she blinked as she saw the concrete in front of her had just been struck by a bullet. Spooked, she felt herself squeak and her feet finally moved in the way Obadiah wanted. Before she could catch her breath, she was crouching behind a set of overturned tables with Obadiah in the conference room.
“Potts, snap out of it!” Obadiah was shouting and she nearly retched as she heard his voice just slightly above the chorus of rapid gunfire and screaming.

“Oh god,” she gasped, pulling her dress away from her feet so she could move. “Oh, my god!”

There was blood on her legs and on her hands. She was sitting in a pool of it. Pepper followed the trail of it to her right where one of Obadiah’s guards was lying cold and pale with a hole in his cheek. Another scream nearly burst out of her and she made to cover her face only to feel the slick of blood on her skin. She scrambled up away from the blood and Obadiah had to pull her down on the other side of him.

“Stay down and keep your head low,” Obadiah was peeking over the table to where they could just see the rest of the venue through what was left of the frosted glass that offered privacy to those having a conference. He had a gun in his hands and if the empty holster on his dead guard’s chest was anything to go by, he had grabbed it as soon as the man went down. “I need you alert, you got that?”

His voice was too calm, too collected. It was a complete juxtaposition to her own mind at the moment, but perhaps it was exactly what she needed. She nodded to him, swallowing the lump in her throat. He offered her one of his patented grins, doing the closest caricature of a demented Santa as she could imagine at the moment, and gripped her shoulder.

“There’s an emergency exit in the back of this room. As soon as it’s clear, we’re going to run for it. On my count...”

Pepper glanced back behind her, at the rest of the overturned tables and saw the bright red exit sign casting a light against the wall. She was this close to escaping the hell that had just dropped on her life and yet...

“Obadiah...I can’t...I can’t leave...” It sounded like insanity coming out of her mouth, but she turned back to the party, to the carnage. She could see people cowering just outside the door, unknowingly standing just feet from reaching safety too. She couldn’t leave them behind.

“You’re going to follow me, Miss Potts, or you won’t have a job after this,” Obadiah hissed at her, probably hoping to lean on her future if not her present. Which, she thought, was probably more important to her right now than a job anyway.
“With all due respect, Obie,” she began, hitching up her skirt and tying it in a knot at her knees. If her mother could see her now. She reached out for his hand and squeezed it tight. He would understand after this blew over. He had an affinity for her quickness and problem-solving, and she knew he liked that she could corral Tony when others couldn’t. “I don’t work for you.”

“Potts!”

Without glancing back, she darted past the table where they were hiding and forward to the nearest person. It was a terrified server still holding on to their tray, shaking like a leaf. At her soft touch, the person swung the tray, missed her by a mile and fell on the ground kicking. She calmed them without a word and they nearly broke down in tears.

“It’s my birthday,” the young person babbled thoughtlessly, clinging to her arm as they realized she was friendly. “I can’t die on my birthday. My mom baked a cake for me tonight. I can’t die...I can’t...I...”

“It’s okay,” she whispered to them, taking the tray gently. The words felt like bile in her mouth. “You see that conference room?”

They nodded sharply and she smiled as best she could. “When I tell you, I want you to run to that room. There’s an exit out the back. Can you do that for me?”

“Okay, okay,” they said over and over, but she could tell the weight of everything was hitting them just as it had hit her.

“Ready?” Pepper glanced over the hunk of concrete and saw the flashes of gunfire aimed towards where the blast crater was. Taking a breath, she urged the server to run. “Go!”

They took off, stumbling and tripping, but scrambling nonetheless, until she saw them vanish past the table where Obadiah had been. She didn’t know if he was still there. She spared a moment to see if he was, but he never showed. Shaking her head and taking another deep breath, Pepper moved toward the next person.

The next two people she found weren’t going to run anywhere. With a set of holes in his chest and one in his arm, the older businessman that she thought might have been the art curator she met just
last week, was dead. Her hand lingered over him, but she couldn’t bring herself to touch him. He had been chatting to her happily about his upcoming retirement and how he had demanded to be the one at this event to oversee the auction because his daughter was a marine biologist. The issue of sea life had been close to both of their hearts and he had looked forward to accompanying her on dives in his retirement.

Tears burned her eyes and if the person lying half under Mister Ayton hadn’t moaned in pain, she might have let the tears fall. Instead, she jolted and eased Mister Ayton off, being gentle as she laid him to the side. Revealed to the light, covered in blood just as she was and holding his stomach, was none other than Justin Hammer.

“Hammer,” she called to him, checking his pulse. It was slightly erratic but at least it was there. “Justin, look at me.”

Hammer’s eyes fluttered and he blinked them open. Immediately, his brow furrowed and he curled into a ball. “Oh, shit,” he groaned, his neck straining as he grit his teeth. “I’ve been shot!”

“Shhh!” Pepper covered his mouth with her hand, glancing up to see if the gunmen had heard him.

Across the floor, fighting tooth and nail, were the Red Captain and Rogers. She could see Rogers’ shield and apparently so could everyone else. They were doing quite a good job of occupying the gunmen and before long it seemed like they wouldn’t be an issue. She was about to breathe a sigh of relief when she heard an ear-splitting scream. She looked to its source and nearly screamed herself.

Some creature was hovering over Tony, clawing at him with long fingers, ripping and tearing at him. She could see blood flying and reams of his red suit flying. She started towards him, uncaring for Hammer’s tight grip on her hand or the fact that she would very much have no means to hurt the creature. Before she could wrench her hand free and find her footing, a shield came flying through the air and panged loudly off of the creature’s head. With a slow movement, it revealed its face.

Schmidt.

She was forced to look away from the carnage, unable to watch after the bones in the creature’s face gave with a sickening snap and she turned her back to it. The sounds still reached her, the wet
sound of the blows, the crunching of bone, the shouting to cease. She slid down to a seated position behind the serving cart where Hammer was lying and tried desperately to keep herself together.

Under control? That’s what she had asked Rogers and yet part of her would have done the same thing if she’d had the strength.

“Help me,” Hammer gasped at her, frantically scrabbling for purchase on her arm. “Don’t just fucking sit there! Help me!”

“Shut up!” she snapped, regretting it immediately. “I’m sorry, I’m...just...” she blew out a breath and took Hammer’s hand. He seemed to relax a little and she sighed. “You’ll be fine, okay?"

He looked up at her, struggled to muster up a smug grin, but it fell a moment later into a grimace. “I’ll sue Stark Industries into the ground when I get out of here.”

“Not really convincing me to save your skin, are you?” she pursed her lips and glanced over to Mister Ayton’s body. He was half out of his suit jacket as if it had been blown off of him slightly. From the scrunched collar at his neck, she supposed he was pulled from behind...by someone...

Blinking, Pepper turned back to Hammer. She opened her mouth to speak, paused, then reached down to his lower abdomen where he held his own bleeding wound. Almost on auto-pilot, she pressed down roughly. He let out a sharp cry, jerking away from her, but she had him by the weight of Mister Ayton’s unmoving legs and her own at his shoulder.

“You piece of shit,” she hissed, digging into his side until he whimpered. “You used him as a shield, didn’t you? He was going to retire after this. He had a daughter, you selfish prick!”

“He was dead already...” he gasped, fighting through the pain. She pushed him away from him and stood.

Pepper made to speak but someone called her name before she could. Glancing up past the wreckage and the body of Mister Ayton, she saw both Rogers and Rushman coming her way. Rogers was covered in dark green gore, his mask gone, but his face hidden beneath the viscera. Rushman was splattered with the same dark green spray. She had never been more happy to see two people in her life.
She stumbled their way, ignoring Hammer’s weak calls for her to stay, and she waved back at him. “He’s been shot.”

Rogers paused beside her, but she looked away from him. The gore on his face was a reminder of the rage he’d flown into, the control he hadn’t been able to maintain, the lies he’d told her when he’d said that he’d keep Tony safe. She should never have trusted him. He bowed his head, swallowed, and continued on to Hammer. There was much complaining and moaning behind her, but she stared straight ahead.

“Miss Potts,” Rushman began, her voice low and as soft as she’d ever heard it. “Are you injured?”

Drawing in a breath, Pepper licked her dry lips and gazed about the ruin that was the Maria Stark Foundation gala. All these people...the guest list had been lengthy and full of rich and important people. But it wasn’t just them she was thinking of. Just like Mister Ayton, there had been a massive amount of servers, musicians, attendants, cooks, bartenders, cleaning crews....so many people had brought this event together and made it function and there was no telling how many were laying dead in the wreckage or already on the way to the hospital or maybe never to be found because they had been too close to the blast.

The aquarium dance floor has been destroyed and she didn’t doubt people had drowned or worse in there. The lights were still going, clinging to the last bit of functioning electricity in the building. Blues and whites and greens flickering all over the room, casting a strange pallor over the space. Pepper felt instantly dizzy and blinked rapidly.

She was going to be sick.

Quickly moving away from Rushman, Pepper stepped to the side and retched. Barely digested hors-d’oeuvres and flat champagne came rushing back up out of her mouth and her nose. She nearly choked and tears blurred her vision.

Oh, god, she thought, coughing and fighting back the urge to sob, all these people...

“Just breathe,” Rushman advised, holding her hair back and rubbing circles across her bare back. “In and out. Can you do that?”

She wanted to scream that, of course, she could, that she wasn’t broken, but she found herself following instruction without hesitation. She might think she knew, but at the moment, breathing
seemed to be the last thing she knew how to do.

*In and out. Swallow back the bile still rising in your throat and stand up straight.* She could hear Sarkissian in her ear, drilling into her mind where even her own mother couldn’t reach. *Only children fall apart, my dear,* she would say, holding the back of her neck in a vice, *but not MY children. Never my children.*

With each breath, she pulled herself back together and she stood up straight. She nodded to Rushman, signaling that she was fine, or as fine as she was going to be at the moment. Rushman gave her space and she looked to where Hammer had been. Only Mister Ayton remained. An EMT came by and marked the spot with a flag. Pepper looked to Rushman and seemed to get her message across without saying a word.

Rushman led her to the exit, keeping her silence.

*No, she thought, not injured...not me. Never me.*
Chapter Notes

So...hi. I'm alive! Yay! I'm still working on this story, so worry not, though I've been struggling to keep my motivation up and a bout of writer's block kicked me off my stride. I'm finding it again, as best I can, so please bear with me. Thanks for sticking around and enjoy!

Steve

The Medical Buses, or Medbuses as the emergency responders called them, pulled up in front of the gala and lined up like white dominoes one behind the others. Steve was guided by firefighters and SWAT towards the medbuses, where an EMT took Justin Hammer from his arms and started to work. Another EMT started to fuss over him, asking him if he had been hurt, trying to make him sit, and frowning in confusion at the green gore that coated him. He shook them off and began to head back inside.

The media were crowded around a cordoned off section right outside the line where the emergency personnel was stationed. They called out to anyone who looked their way and jostled for a spot near the front. Steve had ignored them on his way out, even as they snapped his picture when they realized he was carrying Justin Hammer. He ignored them once more as he ducked back inside the doors. The photographers that had lined the entranceway were gone and in their place were police and SWAT, patrolling with their guns in full view. They paid Steve no mind since they had seen him walking out with the wounded.

Natasha and Miss Potts were headed his way as soon as he crossed the threshold and he met them in the middle.

“Birgirsson,” Miss Potts began and Steve pulled up short, meeting her gaze as he would Brynja or Adalbjörg’s when they were about to reprimand him. It was best to take his lumps when they were served. Running almost never played out well for him, at least where his mistakes were concerned. She paused for a moment, pulled in a deep breath, then swallowed. “Thank you.”

Steve’s brow furrowed and he blinked. “For what?”

Miss Potts glanced towards the mess that the Not-Schmidt had left behind and let out a deep breath. “For stopping him...for saving Tony and...Jim...and...” Her eyes were red and though she
seemed well in control, her hands were shaking. She reached out and took his wrist in her hand.

“Keep your promise. Find you who did this and make them pay,” her expression morphed into something almost cold. “And not just for property damages and wasted champagne.”

“You have my word, Miss Potts. I’ll make this right.”

Looking away, then looking back to the gala, then settling on the exit where the bright emergency lights were shining, Miss Potts let go of his hand.

“Ready?” Natasha asked softly. It was a tone he had never heard from her. She was almost delicate. Miss Potts simply nodded and they started again towards the medbuses.

“Birgirsson!”

Steve took a moment to ensure that they made it all the way to the exit and safely beyond it before he turned to find out who had called his name.

Agent Coulson stood with his arms crossed. He nodded towards the mess of Not-Schmidt, then headed back towards it. Further inside the gala, amongst the debris of the crater and the aquarium, SHIELD agents were gathered around the remains of the Not-Schmidt. Aside from Coulson, who stood at a distance, the rest were dressed in hazmat suits in a dark blue. There were no emblems visible, but he could tell they were under Coulson’s command. He stepped up alongside him as Coulson crossed his arms tighter.

“Hell of a job you did with Schmidt,” Coulson began, rocking a little on his heels. “They might have to take the concrete, too, at this rate.”

Steve glanced around, taking in the scene, beforemustering up a response.

“He wasn’t human...” He said, his voice low.

“How do you know?”
“I don’t bleed green and neither did Schmidt.” It hadn’t stopped him at the moment, and it was likely he would have done the same thing even if he’d bled red. Schmidt was Schmidt, unless...

Another frown furrowed his brow. “Am I...am I the only one with doppelgangers?”

“What?” Coulson asked, not taking his eyes off the people gathering up pieces of Schmidt. He still hadn’t unfolded his arms.

“So, I’m not,” Steve nodded, stiffening his spine. “Of course, I’m not.”

He looked up and away from the body and Coulson, casting his eyes across the room. The Red Captain was staring a hole into him. He stared back for a moment, but the Red Captain was called away by his Kommandos and he went without hesitation. Steve looked back to Coulson.

“How many more are there? Like him?”

Coulson finally uncrossed his arms and sighed. “The number is currently unquantifiable. Short of running biological tests on all six point four billion people on the planet, there is no official way to ID them. Some doppelgangers are just lookalikes and those we can track. This guy...” He gestured to the mess Steve had made of this false Schmidt, being carted away. They followed behind the agents, headed toward the exit. “He’s something else.”

Steve clenched his jaw and nodded. Kleiser was something, too. It apparently wasn’t the first and won’t be the last. “What kind of something?”

Smiling ruefully, Coulson shook his head. “That’s classified, Birgirsson. Which means it’s above your clearance level.”

“And who’s in charge of my clearance?”

“Honestly?” Coulson turned to him, deftly avoiding the flash of cameras as one of the agents set something on the ground and a rigid black cloth partition sprang up to shield them. “On any other occasion, I would say the Deputy Director. But you warrant the Director’s approval.”
Steve let out a steady breath. “Lucky me. Any chance I can catch a ride with your team?”

“As it happens, my orders are to collect you,” Coulson seemed to stand a little straighter. “I trust you won’t be a problem?”

Steve watched the man for a moment, taking in the placement of his hand over his belt where some kind of gun was holstered and clipped. It was a silent threat. Despite the fact that he could easily disarm and incapacitate the man, Steve simply nodded his head.

“I’ll behave.”

“Then let’s go, Mister Birgirsson.”

Without a tether to keep him at the gala, Steve nodded and hurried after Coulson and his agents.

James

It was quiet now. The wounded and uninjured had been removed and sent on their way. The dead were being gathered and identified, The authorities on the scene wouldn’t need the Kommandos any longer.

Turning slightly, just to catch Yelena’s attention where she stood to the side of him, he met her eyes. “Bring the SUV to the back.”

“Avoiding the media?” She asked, taking the keys from Rumlow’s pocket. He glanced down at his pocket, up at her, then rolled his eyes.

“Strategic silence will work best for us now. They have seen us here, seen us bring out wounded and more. Our service in plain sight is finished. Now our real work begins.”
Nodding, Yelena smiled. “Sounds like a plan, Captain. Shall I call up the others?”

“Not yet,” From his pocket, he brought the Mandarin patch he had removed from one of the gunmen. Yelena had removed the rest of the patches from the assailants. “If the Mandarin has returned, it is best we handle it in secret. The fewer that know we know, the better.”

“Yes, Captain.”

Yelena went after their transportation and Rumlow watched her go before turning to him. “You sure that’s the best plan, Cap?” He shifted where he stood, cracking his knuckles. “Our last round with Ten Rings and the Mandarin was a public affair. It worked out pretty well.”

Narrowing his eyes, James tilted his head. “It also had preventable casualties, wild goose chases, and far too much media conjecture coloring the public’s collective mind. The cleaner we handle this, the easier it will be to resolve.”

“But, Cap, we have an opportunity here to put ourselves at the front lines before the bureaucrats stick their agendas in our business. We can stake our claim and have leverage over them. And we need the media to spin in our favor.” For a moment, James watched Rumlow. This had been one of the first things that made the man stand out. He paid attention to the media and how it could affect the opinion of the public at large. Of course, it was Rollins who was really the best at spotting an opportunity in the cameras. Rumlow must have been taking notes.

“No spin is worth more than our boots on the ground. What the media knows, the Mandarin knows. He cannot know anything we don’t let him know. Can I trust you to follow my orders?”

Sobering quickly, Rumlow jerked to attention. “You can always trust me, Cap.”

“Then trust me. I know stealth better than you.”

Rumlow barked a laugh and patted him on the arm. “Aye, aye, Captain.”

Stepping back, he nodded sharply. “Good.”
Yelena drove the SUV away from the gala with Rumlow in the front seat beside her and James sat in the back. It might have been a holdover from his past when the asset always sat between two specially-trained agents with stun batons and a set of his command codes. Or perhaps he just didn’t shout shotgun as fast as Rumlow. Today, it felt a little like the former.

It never got easier, remembering the past. The sound of his handlers’ voices as they barked out orders and reset him with a long dose of the chair. The chair...It had always been Hydra’s power over him. It allowed them to rewrite him again and again, forcing him to be subservient. It may have stayed that way, too, had Hydra not been so adamant that they cut off all the heads of SHIELD. Phillips had gone because of cancer, an aggressive form that ushered him out in weeks. Then, because of his closeness to Project Rebirth and his possession of the refined serum, James had been ordered to end Howard Stark. Maria, his wife, had been an unfortunate victim. Hydra should have stopped there, but they were power-hungry and prideful. Also on their way out of the power game entirely for a few years, but they didn’t know that at the time. So James took on Captain America’s form, something that the remaining head of SHIELD found hard to fight, and drew Peggy Carter out of hiding. It worked, or at the very least, SHIELD made it look that way. They captured him and unraveled him with painstaking precision. When his pieces were laid out flat, they reassembled him and the past came back.

He still didn’t really know how they’d done it. He figured they wouldn’t want him to know. They kept him for a long while. As it turned out, he hadn’t actually been woken up by Hydra, but an old enemy with a grudge against Carter. Hydra had lost track of him a couple of years back. SHIELD took it as a victory and kept him and the chair for months. They had removed his code words and given him freedom. Of course, he knew well that freedom wasn’t free.

He found himself liberated from one master and leashed to another. SHIELD made overtures about working for the betterment of mankind, but they were just the other side of the coin. The political agents in SHIELD’s employ dropped hints into their representatives' ears and they took the bait. The Kommandos were formed by the President, who caved to the whispers of reelection and had James reintroduced to the public in the form of the Red Captain. His expertise and obedience made him a great asset and Hydra ate him up. The Winter Soldier became a figment of the collective spook mythos. A ghost.

If for a second, someone realized who he really was, everything he’d worked for would be ruined. The fact that he’d thought, for a heartbeat, of showing his face to Steve at the gala was proof he was slipping.

As long as he did his duty as the Red Captain, he was without fault. He had done everything he could to maintain that. He couldn’t stop now.
Rumlow twisted in his seat enough to glance back. He always seemed to be smirking, even when he was sad or angry. His lips never went straight or arched downward at the corners. Always, always smug.

“We promised to visit Jack tonight before all this went down, and he’ll be expecting us. We were still going to go if you wanted to come?”

It was an offer, but also a request. Often his Kommandos wanted to be reassured that they were a family, bound together by more than duty and necessity. He never expressed as much, but it felt dangerous to allow them that. He knew himself, but he also knew the tightness of the bond that could form from simply being around someone long enough. He had to remember who these people were and what they meant when they pressed their fists over their hearts and proclaimed ‘Hail Hydra’. They could be no more different at that moment if they tried. Yet, he defended them and they defended him. It was a fine line to walk.

“Of course. But I won’t stay long. The Mandarin won’t wait for us.”

“No problem, Cap. He’s still on the juice, so he’ll probably pass out. We’ll just drop by and let him know what’s going on, and that we haven’t forgotten he let himself get shot by amateurs on national television.”

Stifling a chuckle, James nodded. “Those amateurs shot a Kommando, evaded authorities, stole a federal vehicle, and caused thousands of dollars in damage without getting caught.”

Shrugging, Rumlow slid back into his seat. “Beginner’s luck.”

Gazing out the window at the city, he wondered how many beginners were going to get the jump on him and his Kommandos. How lax had they been that they didn’t see this attack coming? Or the Rising Tide turning to violence after years of low-level attacks on an increasing basis. All of these things should have left a trail, a scent, some movement to track and predict, but none of them had been seen or acted upon and he felt wrong-footed. They were on the defensive, which was never a good place to be. Even more disconcerting, they were on the defensive from more than one front and neither one had a clear face.

The Rising Tide was a group of hacktivists behind screens that could hide their identities behind a million firewalls and the Mandarin had copycats just like any other successful evildoer. Until they did the footwork, there was no assurance that this wasn’t just an old enemy resurfacing.
He pulled his Starkphone out and unlocked it with his ring finger, swiping through his contacts until he found a restaurant on the Upper East side and he called it. It rang out, then beeped in a particular cadence. He listened, committed it to memory, then hung up.

“Want to go through the back?” Yelena asked, tapping the steering wheel with her nails. Up ahead was the hospital and the front was swarming with reporters and medbuses full of the gala’s injured.

He met her eyes in the rearview mirror and nodded.

They pulled around to the visitor parking and snatched a spot in the middle, between a church van and a beat-up sedan. They climbed out together, Yelena locked it tight, and they headed inside. The visitor’s entrance was a little more demure, but there were a couple of photographers loitering around. They raised their lenses when they spotted him and his team, but with a look, they turned away. He had no doubts they snapped a couple of shots without flash on their digital cameras as soon as their back was turned, but he let it go.

The nurses at the front desk were a little starstruck and fell over themselves to give them the directions to Jack’s room. Rumlow played them up before they headed down the hall, smiling and smirking, and rustling up a few blushes for his efforts. Yelena pinched his side, right where his vest ended and his belt began. Rumlow had to stifle a yelp, straightening out his attire and giving one last smirk to the nurses.

James stood stoically watching it all and shook his head as soon as they were on their way. “In and out, Kommandos.”

Jack had his own room, with his own TV, his own mini-fridge, and a couple of take-out menus tacked to the corkboard above his room heater. He was laid up in his bed, pillows under his knees, eyes fixated on the TV. James could hear Christine Everhart giving a quick rundown of everything they knew so far about the gala attack. Aside from his pallor and the thick swath of bandages across his chest, Jack looked almost normal.

He glanced their way when they stepped into the room, then a half-smile broke out on his face.

“Couldn’t wait for me, huh? Had to ruin a perfectly good evening with your shenanigans while I’m laid up here. It’s rude.”
Rumlow darted forward and stole the closest seat to the bed, dragging it closer and spinning it around to sit in it backward. He knocked his knuckles against Jack’s and smiled. “We didn’t put you in the time-out corner, Jack. You’re independent. You did it all on your own.”

“Yeah, well, maybe I wanted a break. Of the four of us, I’m the only one running a successful company.”

Yelena took a seat on the other side of the bed, waving her hands until Jack scooted his legs over for her. He grimaced as he did so, then rubbed his hand over the thick bandages where his sternum was. She laid a hand on his knee and he mustered up a smile for her. Jack was usually as stoic as James, at least in public, but he loosened up a bit when it was just the Kommandos.

“Of the four of us, who let a nobody shoot them point blank in the chest?”

Jack sighed and shook his head. “I was wearing my vest. It shouldn’t have gone through. They had some fancy bullets that are far above their pay grade.”

“Did they bring you the bullet?” James asked, crossing his arms.

“Yeah, I demanded it,” Jack reached into the drawer of his bedside table and pulled out a small biohazard bag. He handed it Yelena who passed it to James. “StarkWear’s gonna need to upgrade their standards. My vest was top of the line and that sucker cut through it like butter. There are soldiers in active war zones with less advanced armor. It’s a problem.”

James angled the bullet into the light. It wasn’t made in America, that much was certain, but he wasn’t actually surprised. There were too many laws and red tape in place limiting the kind of bullets that civilians would have access to. A lot of black market weapons streamed in from elsewhere and were distributed to the highest bidder. He wouldn’t put it past the hacktivists to turn to less than legal means to protect themselves from retribution. They were dancing a fine line as it was since President Stern had put them on the map in a big way by speaking of them on national television. Maybe it was time to shake up their nest.

“I’ll get this analyzed,” he announced and tucked it away with the Mandarin patches.

“Thanks, Captain,” Jack relaxed a little. “So what happened tonight? The media’s not worth shit this soon after an attack. Can’t see anything for the smoke.”
Rumlow crossed his arms over the top of the chair. “It looks like our old buddy might be back again. He shot a rocket through the center of the party, sent in some mercs to finish the job. He must have bought them off the thrifty side of the deep web.”

“They were very easy to subdue,” Yelena seemed to coil up at the foot of the bed, her evening gown draped over her now bare feet. Her heels were discarded on the floor.

“We can’t underestimate them,” James settled back into parade rest and Jack shifted up a little in response. “What do you know about the people who shot you?”

“They were one of the teams that had been attacking my buses. It was a duo, by all accounts, and a very efficient one. The girl was only known as Skye and the guy was a Centipede cast-off named Mike Peterson. Our insider said they were looking for a boy named Ace, so we found him first. Dropped some bait, waited for them to take it. Cleared the street beforehand, isolated them, ran them into a nearby building and was waiting for them in the alley behind it. It should have been simple.”

“So what went wrong?” Rumlow asked, his chin resting on his hands.

“I...I don’t know. It’s like I froze. There was a new guy with them, some guy I’ve never seen before. The girl dropped like dead weight, I tried to get her back, and the next thing I knew I had a slug in my chest. They went after my car, I got one off, and hit the new guy. Straight shot to his axillary artery. He should be dead unless they got him to a hospital.”

Looking to his Kommandos, James raised a brow. “Have we checked the recent intakes to local hospitals?”

“I checked soon after,” Yelena said, leaning against Jack’s legs to glance back at him. “But there weren’t any GSWs registered that matched. Could be they dealt under the table, but short of interrogating the staff that day, I’m not sure we’ll get a lead. They’re part of Rising Tide, so we’ll have to go through them.”

“Do your Rounders have any leads? The boy, perhaps?”

“Ace Peterson,” Jack informed them, grabbing his phone and unlocking it. He pulled up a picture of a young dark-skinned boy who had been processed through Zola’s labs. James shoved down the anger and sickness that flooded him and committed the picture to memory. “We know where he is
and we have a deal with Zola to keep him from the rotation until we get the bus-snatchers.”

“Where is he being held?”

“A small lab in Harlem. Doctor Whitehall’s looking after him.”

Nodding, James looked away. “I’ll do the legwork, you heal up. We’re going to need our best when we attack.”

“I’ll be ready, Captain,” Jack assured him, raising a hand to salute. “You have my word.”

“Good. You two,” he looked to Yelena and Rumlow. “I’ll see you at 0600 tomorrow at HQ. We’ll get started.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“You got it, Cap.”

“Thanks for checking on me,” Jack called out and James met his eyes.

“You’re a Kommando, and as long as you are, I’ll be here.”

Jack blinked, swallowed, and turned back to his comrades. James ducked out into the hall and made quick work of leaving without being seen.

Yelena

The boys were always foolish. They took unnecessary risks to showboat and prove one of them had bigger balls than the others. It all seemed futile to her since bigger balls simply meant bigger targets for her notably sharp knees.
“Well, if Captain Tightass is done talking shop,” Rumlow would never presume to talk like that with the Captain in earshot. He wasn’t known for his bravery, as the Captain wasn’t known for his leniency. She shot him a look, but he ignored her. “Did President Stern update you on the Rounders’ government status negotiations?”

“Not before I took a bullet. Why? Did he roll over to his advisors?”

Laughing, Rumlow sat back in his seat. “Nah, buddy. That show you put on won over the public. You’re officially one of the suits!”

Jack wasn’t one for overt reactions, but he had his own way of expressing excitement. Usually, it was habitually checking his guns and vest for readiness, even if he had done that five times already. Or he would post himself at her side, obsessively overlooking the plan and all its moving parts as if only he could spot the one flaw. It could be read as anxiety, but she knew him too well. He was just overflowing with an eagerness that lit up the dark circles under his eyes and brought a flush to his cheeks.

“Rising Tide won’t stand a chance now.”

Yelena blinked and stood, padding barefoot to the window to look out at the city. Flashes of blue and red light popped up all over and the front of the hospital was organized chaos. She was delighted to see so much activity. These times were always fun. She could almost smell the dust of upheaval and it made her giddy. Part of that could be bumping into her erstwhile sister at the gala, serving the dogs of the past in the form of goodness and light. They may have taken a bird as their sigil, but these days they stayed well underground. The canaries in a coal mine, just waiting to sing. It would be their first and last aria if she had anything to say about it.

Straightening her back, she glanced toward Rumlow. “Tell him the bad news, Rummy.”

“It’s not bad news,” he argued, gaping a little as both she and Jack served him with glares. “It’s just...okay, so maybe there’s a little conflict of interests, but we can sort that out. Right?”

Jack frowned. “Conflict? With what?”

“Buddy, I’ll go talk to Stern, grease the wheels,” Rumlow began, but Jack just turned his gaze to her.
“Give me the fucking bad news, Lena.”

Sighing, she did. “Effective on the first of November, you will be transferred to veteran Kommando status and released from your duties with us to focus on your new position.”

Jack collapsed a little against the pillows. “Cap said...” he shook his head. “He knew already, didn’t he?”

Yelena nodded. “We knew before the gala. The President will make a formal announcement soon.”

“Goddamnit!” Jack balled his fists and his jaw worked. “I should have known those bureaucrats would pull some shit like this.”

“You wanted to move on, you just never assumed you’d actually have to,” Yelena came back to the bed. “It’s too late to change your mind now.”

Jack closed his eyes. “Give me until the end of the month to heal up and I’ll be with you against the Mandarin.”

Rumlow patted his arm and cocked his head to the side. “Three-piece suits stand out in a battlefield.”

“Shut up, asshole.”

Smiling, Yelena leaned down and pressed a kiss to Jack’s cheek. “Enjoy each other while you can. Your relationship is about to become very long distance.”

Rolling his eyes, Jack squeezed her hand. “You know you’ll miss me, too.”

“Like a false tooth.”
“Did that new bodyguard of Stark’s seem off to you?” Rumlow asked at random and Yelena nodded.

“New bodyguard?” Jack wondered, adjusting against his pillows with a wince.

“At the gala,” Yelena informed him. “Tall, strong, and the Captain seemed to be fascinated by him. He thought we did not notice, but we did.”

“Did you see him without the mask?” Rumlow asked, a smirk on his face. “Guy was a dead ringer for a doppelganger.”

“That answers many questions and raises many more,” Yelena wondered after Natalia’s involvement with a doppelganger. SHIELD avoided them like the plague since their presence had only ever brought about destruction. To have one so close and to pose as a guard to one of their strongest false hopes...there had to be more to it.

“They fought pretty good as a team, though,” Rumlow leaned back in his seat and stretched his shoulders. “He might be a good addition to the team.”

Jack’s expression changed from amusement to offense. “Replacing me already?”

“I move on quick, Jacky-boy. You snooze, you lose.”

“On that note,” Yelena located her shoes and her coat with ease. “You should be sleeping.”

“Where are you going?” Rumlow asked as she slipped back into her heels. She twirled the car keys around her finger.

“Some of us have real work to do. I’ll be in the car when you’re done.”

“Doing what?”

“Making some calls that can’t be overheard. It’s a matter of national security.”
Rolling his eyes, Rumlow stood up and walked around Jack’s bed, pulling her into a side-hug. “Leave something for the rest of us, sweetheart.” He smiled at her with all his charm. She thumped his nose just to hear him snort.

“Call me sweetheart again and even the carrion won’t be able to find your bones.”

“You Russians are always so damned dark,” he groaned, but let her go. “I’ll be down in a bit.”

Stepping to the door and pulling it open, she turned back. “I won’t wait forever.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Rumlow resumed sitting beside Jack’s bed. “And it’ll be a cold walk home if I take too long. I got it, Widow.”

Narrowing her eyes, she glanced to Jack who simply smirked.

Fools, the both of them.

The hallway outside Jack’s room was sparse except for spare medical equipment and the occasional nurse hurrying to someone’s room. Yelena paused for a moment, making a show of straightening her coat while she looked for cameras. This wasn’t the main hallway and thankfully was free from them. She smoothed out her coat and headed toward the stairs.

For various reasons, Yelena had become familiar with the layout of this particular hospital and it served her well as she descended three floors to her next destination. The heavy stairwell door swung closed with a thud, but she was long gone by the time it did. The room she was looking for was only a few feet from the stairs, perfectly situated to her needs. She slipped inside almost silently and closed the door with a little more care.

The resident of this room was a somewhat portly man with a pale complexion who was tucked in and snoring lightly, his tattooed arms garish against the fresh sheets. A rat in a rich man’s bed. Yelena approached the bed, her gait loose and bored, as she reached for the nurse’s button and hid it out of reach. The man didn’t seem to notice the movement, though he snored and shifted a little. Breathing out her annoyance through her nose, Yelena snuck her hand beneath the covers at the
man’s feet and pinched his foot.

“Wake up and listen, you idiot,” she snapped as the man flailed, then moaned in pain.

“What the-?!”

“Hush. And. Listen,” Yelena took a seat on the bed, leaning forward over the man. “Your part is done.”

“He broke my back!” the man snapped, far too loud. Yelena’s fingers looked pale against his flushed skin as she gripped his throat.

“And I will do worse,” Settling back, Yelena released his throat. “Your part is done. You will be compensated, but...”

The man swallowed thickly. “But?”

“Drop the charges,” he made a motion to protest, but she gestured to his neck again and he stilled. “I am being kind by allowing you to live. I could keep my money and convince the world you died from complications of that unfortunate fall...”

Laughing, the man laced his fingers over his stomach. “Your little friend would go down for murder.”

“No, not while I live.”

“What do you want, Yelena?” he asked, smug. “I want more money.”

Narrowing her eyes, she grit her teeth at his nerve. “For damages?”

“For wasted time.”
“This is a waste of time,” Yelena stood and moved to his IV, she dug within her coat for a syringe. As soon as he saw it, he balked.

“Wait, wait, wait,” he reached for her, but she stepped away.

“I’m done waiting, Ivan. It has been a very long night,” she removed the cap from the needle and prepared to insert it. “It’s time for you to sleep.”

“Yelena, wait!” he groaned in pain as he overstretched to catch her sleeve. “I drop charges.”

She angled the needle carefully and tensed her thumb on the plunger.

“I drop charges! Please!”

Pausing, Yelena raised a brow. “And?”

“And...and...and I go home. I go home to rest.”

“All the way home,” she clarified, letting go of his IV. “Tell no one where you’re going.”

“No one, I swear.”

“Good,” Stepping back, Yelena capped the syringe. “Safe journey, comrade.”

Ivan Banionis watched her as she tucked the syringe away. She nodded to him as she headed for the door. “And remember, Ivan, I will hear if you betray me. I still have our friend on speed dial. He’ll make what happened to that man in your building look tame.”

He nodded to her quickly and she dismissed him with the soft closing of his door behind her.
Rumlow arrived at the SUV only moments after she had settled in the passenger seat and began scrolling through her phone. He paused, narrowed his eyes, then climbed into the driver’s seat.

“My lucky day?” he asked her, turning the keys in the ignition.

“I have a feeling I’m going to be very busy soon. Besides, you love it when I let you drive.”

He inputted her address and set it to manual. He glanced at her as he pulled out of the parking lot. “Last time you let me drive, I had to bring you two diplomats in black hoods.”

“Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth, Rummy.”

“Yeah, and let that horse bite me in the ass later? No, thanks.”

Relaxing in her seat, Yelena focussed on her phone. “Shut up and drive.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

James

When the Kommandos were active, he stayed in the private rooms allotted to them at the Kommandos HQ. Despite the relative safety of the place, he was never comfortable removing his mask. There were always government agents milling about, since the HQ was overseen by the Department of Defense, and he wouldn’t put it past them to rig their rooms with hidden cams. After all, they were high-powered individuals held on flimsy leashes.

He also didn’t take private calls or answer private messages in that room. He kept everything perfectly above board, to the point of being considered vaguely robotic about his duty. He didn’t deviate much at all from whatever routine he ended up employing during his stay and they avoided him like the plague unless they were bringing him equipment or information. James liked that just fine.
However, when the Kommandos were inactive, he found himself eager to leave the constraints of the HQ behind. So, soon after the Mandarin campaign, James had used his hefty salary to buy himself a house. It wasn’t modest, but it also wasn’t extravagant. If it had belonged to a normal family of four, they would have fit in it with a little room to spare. He had converted the main bedroom into a war room, the guest bedroom into a storage closet for his weapons and tac-suits, and given himself the smaller bedroom. It had a simple bed, a minimum of three exits, and just enough space if he needed to take down an intruder in close quarters.

The living room, which shared its space with the dining room in an open floor plan, held simply a couch and a tv. He stepped into his entryway and shut the door behind him. It had both electronic and old-fashioned locks, and he set out moving the older ones as the newer ones set themselves.

“Welcome home, James,” a soft, yet mechanical voice greeted him. He sighed and shrugged off his jacket and made quick work of his shirt and boots. Barefoot and shirtless, he was almost human again. Just one last thing in the way...

“Call Her Majesty,” his voice always sounded foreign without the mask. It didn’t seem to be as deep or his accent as thick, and yet it felt more real than what he was accustomed to. He set his mask on the table by his couch and settled in front of his tv. It flared to life with an array of screens that displayed news of the gala attack, Jack’s operation, and a select other projects he had going. With a wave of his hand, he dismissed a few of them and made room for his new project.

Doppelgangers were nothing new since they had been a regular occurrence for years after Steve disappeared. He had been gone himself in more ways than one and missed out on the majority of them. He came to in the eighties, just in time to save an old friend from one. His life had changed greatly that night and it hadn’t gone back since. Part of him was glad for that, for the freedom this new future held for him, but other parts of him struggled without the guidance of his orders and his strict government routine.

Still, seeing so many agents take on Steve’s face, his personality, however erroneous, and his suit, had left him with an innate hatred of them. This time, though, he knew he wasn’t looking at a fake. There was just something about his Stevie that no actor could reproduce. He had known the second he heard his voice, but he had been fooled before. He had been so sure when he saw his face, but even that hadn’t convinced him. What really did it, what really made it so clear that he was staring at his best friend after sixty years...was how he fought with the shield. Despite not having been born with it, Steve had made that damned disk look like it had always been attached to his arm. Not a single doppelganger had been able to replicate it. Steve knew how to throw it, where it would go and caught it without having to look. Bucky had learned ages ago to move out of its way and it had felt like old times to weave his movements around it. He was sure he could have done it blindfolded now, with his improved hearing.
A small input box appeared on the screen and he entered a passcode. A brief tone sounded from his tv, then some of his screens minimized to make room for a video call.

“Sergeant Barnes, I assume you aren’t calling to chat about your evening?” A posh British accented voice spoke before the video connected. When it did, he found himself staring at the slightly wrinkled face of his old friend.

“The Lazarus protocol must have missed my inbox. Unless you left me out of the loop on purpose?” He tapped the reflective black glass on his solid coffee table and a panel opened to reveal a cooler. He pulled a beer out and the panel hissed as it closed. He popped the lid and relaxed into the couch as she answered.

“We believed it best that very few knew, until...”

“Until what, Carter? Until I had to find out on my own at the gala?” he downed half the bottle in one go, then set it down. “Is he real?”

He couldn’t quite convince himself it wasn’t all an illusion, especially with whatever technology had enabled him to cloak his shield. He had learned a long time ago that if you wanted something bad enough, it started to appear everywhere.

Peggy sighed and leaned forward until her elbows were on the table. Bad form, Your Majesty, he thought, but she closed her eyes and laced her fingers and he straightened up quick.

“It’s him, isn’t it?” Peggy simply glanced up to him and he bit out, “Answer me, Carter.”

“Yes,” it was soft, broken, and a little hesitant. “He’s ours. Flesh and blood.”

It was James’ turn to close his eyes to the weight of it all. Sixty years they had been looking and each one was harder than the last. He had mourned Steve a thousand times, had forgotten him, remembered him, and mourned him once more. Hope is like fire; it must have fuel. They had run out of that decades ago. Now, suddenly, here he was. Real. Alive. Home.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked and was frustrated to find his voice revealed a little more of his emotions than he liked. Tears were forming in his eyes, but he wouldn’t let them fall. Not yet.
“I...” It was one of the few times he had seen her so off-centered. It was a novelty he didn’t enjoy. “I couldn’t get your hopes up until I was absolutely sure. There have been too many false alarms. I always swore to you I wouldn’t fall for another one and he...he looked too good to be true. His story was far-fetched, he wore furs and leather, grew a beard. It wasn’t anything like the Steve I was waiting for. Maybe...maybe that was the problem. I was waiting for the Steve who left, not the Steve who came back.”

“What happened to him?” James asked, frowning up at the screen.

“Well, I think it’s best you hear it from him.”

“Carter...”

“Wait a moment.” A file appeared beside the video call. “I’m afraid I have pressing matters to attend to.”

“You aren’t getting out of this that easy.”

“For now,” Peggy began, offering him a smile. “I am. Watch the video, Sergeant. That’s an order.” And she ended the call. He opened the file.

The multiple screens were replaced by a camera feed from inside what looked to be a shell office, where the Deputy Director stood with his back to the camera behind the desk. Across the desk from him was Natalia Romanov who was SHIELD’s Black Widow, Hawkeye himself Clint Barton, and Steve, or at the very least the bearded, fur-wearing, leather-encased new version of him. He looked even more strange than he had at the gala with his wolf skull mask and furs. At least at the gala, he had looked like something off an avant-garde runway, here he resembled a Viking lord. Steve’s voice was clear as a bell on the audio and he began a story that started off where they last saw him.

“I fought with Schmidt on the Valkyrie,” Steve was saying, his hands firmly on his knees. He had taken a seat heavily just before he spoke. “We were evenly matched for the most part and so I had to tip the odds in my favor.”

*By doing something reckless as all hell and just daring Death itself to call your bluff,* he thought to himself, shaking his head.
“He was protecting the Tesseract, more than the plane, so I made a play for it. He fought me off, got me with a couple of rounds, but I kept going. I pulled it out of its casing, tried to make it mobile.”

“God damn idiot,” he breathed, watching as Steve’s gaze turned to his once gesturing hand.

“The Tesseract was activated somehow. It threw off a lot of energy and I half-expected to be vaporized.”

James remembered the way the Hydra guns had erased men from existence with one blast. He’d seen men get blown up by hastily built shrapnel bombs and torn apart by artillery fire, but there was something just...terrifying about a man being wiped from reality without so much as a bullet being fired.

“Instead,” Steve said, his voice drifting off for a moment. “Instead, the universe opened up above me and I was gone.”

“Gone?” The Deputy Director pressed, arching an eyebrow at Steve.

“The Tesseract isn’t just a cube of energy. It’s more than that. It’s a means of transportation.”

“And where did it...transport you?”

“Jötunheim.”

What followed was a long tale of survival and loss on an alien world, far from Earth and safety, where he struggled for a reason to live. Steve had been left alone, well and truly, in a world of beings larger than life. He had fought a foreign war, on a strange planet, without knowing if he’d ever come back home. It was like the War, but worse in a way.

After the saga of Jötunheim, Steve was imprisoned on another foreign planet where he seemed to find new footing. He skirted over the destruction of Jötunheim but there was too much in what he didn’t say. James wanted to ask him how he’d coped with losing both worlds. Steve was used to loss, but nothing of that magnitude. It was a miracle he had returned to Earth at all.
As Steve finished his tale with his reappearance in Brooklyn, James cut the video.

The man he had fought with at the gala fit the man in the video. All of that time, all sixty years in space, encapsulated in the tension of his shoulders and his hard wariness. His Steve had been strong, but bright-minded. Even in the darkest of days, Steve could find the one spot of light. This Steve was tarnished and worn, reflecting far less hope. He had maintained his drive, but his spirit...it had suffered.

Sighing, James glanced at the clock. He’d have a few precious hours to sleep before he’d have to get his Kommandos on task. He closed the file and erased it, then rose from the couch and headed to bed. Tomorrow he’d deal with all of this. Tonight, he was done.
Steve

There apparently are multiple entrances to the SHIELD base underneath the Williamsburg Diner. Steve found himself riding in the back of the nondescript SHIELD van, right alongside the bagged and tagged remains of the Not-Schmidt, staring resolutely at the smooth interior in front of him. There were a few SHIELD agents to either side of him, but he paid them no mind. One of them was a medic and had looked him over before they took off, deeming his shoulder wound and his ear to be non-life threatening.

The doppelganger’s blood was cracking on his skin, making him feel itchy, but he had grown accustomed to being caked in blood, in snow, in dirt, and ignored it as well.

Whatever the doppelganger was, or wherever it came from, its presence still meant the real Schmidt was out there. Maybe he was dead, maybe he was held captive as Steve had been, maybe he was lying in wait somewhere. The possibilities were endless and it gave Steve even more things to think about. Of course, it was all speculation for now, unsupported by SHIELD or his own investigation, but he couldn’t banish it from his mind.

He had dwelled on the fate of Midgard for decades whilst on Jötunheim and though he had nightmares of Schmidt destroying the world as he had threatened, he hadn’t put too much thought in having to face off with Schmidt again. It had crossed his mind, but he realized now how much he had avoided truly accepting the reality that Schmidt would be freely operating on Midgard. He had hoped, perhaps naively, that Schmidt would die as he had.

Now he was almost positive that he wasn’t the only ghost haunting this world.

“What are you going to do with the remains?” Steve asked, glancing past the body bags and the other SHIELD agents to where Coulson was typing a message on his phone. It was a Starkphone like almost all the others that Steve had seen so far.

“Our labs will take them, run all the tests they need to identify them, and get back to us with the results,” Coulson looked up at him for a moment. “What did you think we were going to do with them?”

Steve’s lips quirked up in the corner. “It’s the future. You’ve got hover cars and cellular phones.
There’s no telling what else you’d get up to if given the time.”

“You had sixty years to get up to whatever you wanted. What did you get up to?”

There was something Steve was starting notice about everyone he came in contact with. Every time he asked too many questions or delved too curiously into new things, they would find some way to bring his sixty years on Jötunheim to the front. It was a defense mechanism, but he couldn’t quite pin down what they were defending. What was so bad about him knowing about the future he found himself in? What were they hiding from him that he didn’t already know or wouldn’t by virtue of being his hyper-aware self?

Steve looked back to the body bags. “It wasn’t all good.”

“He wasn’t all bad,” Coulson tucked his phone away in his breast pocket. “And SHIELD isn’t perfect, but we are trying to protect the world from something worse.”

He could understand that. It had been something he’d come to grips with about the Allies as well. And Erskine had told him to not be a perfect soldier, but a good man. Perhaps SHIELD was doing the same. Not perfect warriors, but good people. His family were good people too and look what had happened to them.

Steve sat straighter in his seat as the van came to a stop. He made to stand but Coulson shook his head and there was a jolt, then a plummeting feeling that Steve remembered from every elevator ride he’d ever had. It came to a stop almost as quickly as it began and the van moved forward again. It was a hover vehicle and so Steve couldn’t feel the bumps and shakes of a normal rubber tire car, but he could feel the vibrations of the engine as it started and now as it stopped.

This time he stood without waiting and met the backdoors as they swung open to reveal a quartet of SHIELD agents who were there to receive them. Two of them held the doors open while the other two began to confer with the agents who had gathered up the remains. Coulson stepped out before they began removing the body bags, and gestured for Steve to follow.

“We’ll need to confiscate your clothes, Captain Rogers. It’s covered in evidence.”

Steve sighed. “And Stark paid a pretty penny for these, too.” He frowned before turning back to Coulson. “How is he?”
“I haven’t been updated on his condition. You’ll have to ask after the debriefing.”

Coulson led him from the garage area into a featureless hallway, then into a small lab not unlike Fitz and Simmons’. He cast his gaze around the room, but aside from the counters and medical equipment, there wasn’t another chair. Stark and the Red Captain had spoken about a chair, one that Stark himself had used on someone. That must mean there were more of them out there. If SHIELD was using them, did that mean that Hydra was as well? What did those chairs really do? Stark had said that it wasn’t human and he’d had no choice but to use it, Kleiser was adamant...

Could Kleiser be like Not-Schmidt? Stark had said he didn’t know what he was either. If Schmidt wasn’t human or even himself, who was to say Kleiser was? This world was more like his adventures abroad than he cared to admit.

There was a small stack of folded clothing awaiting Steve along with a bright orange biohazard bag, and a gnarly-looking shower. Coulson pointed him toward it and instructed him to clean himself thoroughly with the soap provided after putting his clothing in the bag.

“We don’t foresee you succumbing to some alien toxin, but we can’t reliably say you won’t. Best to air on the side of caution,” Coulson held out his hands. “I’ll need your shield.”

Steve narrowed his eyes, but retrieved it from his back and spun it around. He presented it to Coulson.

“What about you?” Steve asked since Coulson had been around the possible contamination just like Steve, even if he’d kept his distance.

“I’m going to decon now. There’ll be agents outside. Don’t go running off.”

“Yes, sir,” Steve saluted with the smallest hint of a respectful tone, turning his attention to the stainless steel shower and its various knobs.

The future liked to throw a lot of things at him, including more buttons than he had fingers to press them. He was starting to prefer Stark’s flat screens with easy to understand options. Steve stripped down and folded his tailored suit, stuffing it, his briefs, and his shoes inside the biohazard bag. His mask was back at the gala, probably part of the clean-up by now.
Standing naked in the middle of this lab, Steve turned toward the doors Coulson had just gone through. This reminded him of Asgard, when he was standing in the room they provided, just as naked and just as captive. Of course, here he could overpower the guards if given enough incentive, but just like on Asgard, it was more trouble than it was worth to fight. There were easier ways to get out. If he arranged his face just right, said the things they wanted him to, he could walk out of here with their blessing. He learned that lesson on Jötunheim and again on Asgard, now he could put it to good use here.

The initial shock of coming back was beginning to fade, sloughing off and leaving behind that tried and true sense of duty.

Steve stepped away from the doors and walked into the shower. He might as well get clean and dressed. If Loki wasn’t at the gala, it was either a decoy from Loki himself, or someone knew what he was here for. Then again, he mused as he scrubbed himself under the hot spray, maybe the Loki situation was disconnected from the attack. Maybe long-standing animosities had reared their head, twisting themselves into his mission and knocking him clean off course. After all, it was Schmidt that took the full brunt of the attack, Stark’s tech the only thing between them and death. Even the Kommandos had jumped into action, the Red Captain a capable warrior who seemed to take to Steve’s style of fighting with ease.

Despite his mission being the discovery and safe return of Thor and Loki, Steve was finding himself continuously drawn towards Midgard’s current dramas. If Loki had nothing to do with the attack, then the enemy was elsewhere. Many people had died tonight, more had been injured, and a sense of security had been lost. Steve thought of Laura and her kids, of the loss of innocence and the bitter taste it left in his mouth. The Kommandos were being reinstated, it was the anniversary of one of their major victories, Schmidt was possibly alive, and Kleiser was something inhuman. This world was a hell of a lot more complicated than Jötunheim or Asgard and they were full of giants and gods.

Until he found a solid lead on either of the Asgardians, Steve might as well commit himself to the world he was so adamant that he wanted to save. Stark would be a good place to start if he could convince SHIELD that he could protect him. Tonight hadn’t been much good for that but he was good at charming himself into second chances. Or stealing them, but he’d take them however he could get them.

With his skin rubbed pink, his hair free of dried blood and dust, and his fingers clean of filth, Steve turned off the shower, dried off and changed into the outfit provided. A soft t-shirt, modern briefs, fitted jeans, socks, and lace-up boots. It fit him, but it was too foreign to be comfortable. He wouldn’t miss it when he got back to Stark Tower and changed into his own clothing.

The guards outside the room turned to him as he exited and a person in a hazmat suit stepped into the room, claiming his soiled clothing. The guards waved him forward and led him through the
halls back to the elevator. They subtly crowded him in and pressed their badges to the panel on the wall. A small light lit up at the top of the elevator and bright beams of blue light fanned out, seemingly sweeping the contents of the elevator, then disappeared. A moment later, the elevator doors shut and it jerked into action.

The ride to their destination was silent and Steve had an urge to disrupt it. But silence gave him time to think, to figure out exactly what he was going to say to Fury or whomever he was going to be debriefed by so that he could stay on with Stark and Romanoff. If they kicked him back to Clint and Banionis when he had been this close to his mission, he might riot. As much as he wanted to help Clint with his building, he had come here to find Thor and Loki and help restore Midgard to...

And wasn’t that just ironic? He wanted to save Earth from Hydra, had demanded Asgardian help in this, and yet he was going to cast aside a Midgardian to pursue his Asgardian mission. But perhaps by stopping whoever it was that had attacked the gala, he might just fulfill part of his mission: saving Midgard.

With a bright tone, the elevator stopped and the doors opened. The guards led Steve out into the hall, guiding him through almost familiar hallways that led either to labs or to offices. These offices, however, did not resemble the one Fury had debriefed him in when he first got here. These were fancier, but also not covered in so much glass. As they got further in on this floor, Steve realized they were approaching the actual SHIELD offices, the official ones that required specific clearance. The guards didn’t seem to have it, because they told him to continue on and it would be the first office on the right. They turned in unison and marched back down the hall.

Cameras tracked Steve as he followed the guard’s directions and the plain office door slid open like something from a science fiction novel just as he stepped in front of it.

“Come in, Cap,” Fury’s voice rang out, and Steve tentatively stepped inside.

Fury was standing in front of a large screen full of images from the gala, newscasts and private cell phone videos, interviews and pictures. He wasn’t alone. Beside him, with a large tablet in hand was a woman he felt he might have seen before. She was average height, slight build, her dark hair pulled back into a neat bun at the base of her skull, her pale skin stood out against her dark blue SHIELD uniform. She had a communications device in her ear and seemed fully invested in whatever it was she was doing, but she glanced up to him the second he breached the threshold. “Rogers, meet Agent Hill. Hill, Rogers,” Fury made introductions as if they were afterthoughts, stepping towards Steve as he advanced and turning back to the screens as soon as Steve was beside him. “You sure know how to make a debut. So what happened?”
Steve found himself falling into old habits, settling into parade rest and describing the night with military precision. His superiors had always loved his debriefings because they seemed to see his eidetic memory as a superpower in and of itself. Fury and Hill weren’t much different, asking him for specifics that most people wouldn’t be able to give. He could remember individual scents, sounds, voices, faces, clothing, weapons and more. He could detail an entire encounter from start to finish and not forget a detail.

It was a boon for missions and debriefs, but his superiors didn’t have to live with all of them when the missions and the wars were over. They could forget. Steve had never been given that gift.

“Aliens, huh?” Fury asked him after he explained his fight with Not-Schmidt. “I suppose I should say, more aliens.”

Fury sighed and crossed his arms. Despite almost always looking as if he had been through hell and back in the last half hour and was sick to death of it, the man just chuckled.

“Well, it wouldn’t be the strangest thing to happen on Earth. Would you believe this isn’t my first run-in with extraterrestrials? The nineties were fun...” Looking to Hill, then back to Steve, Fury uncrossed his arms. “This attack looks like the work of the Mandarin, but it was sloppy. Either he’s slipping up after all this time, or there’s been a change in management, or...and here’s where things get complicated...it wasn’t the Mandarin at all. Which means we’re dealing with some knock-off.”

“A knock-off who hasn’t released a manifesto or mission statement to the press, leaving us in the dark as to their motivations,” Hill chimed in, her eyebrows knit. “I find that more dangerous than a sloppy comeback.”

“As do I,” Fury agreed, and Steve nodded.

“Until we know who it is behind this attack, we’re vulnerable,” Steve said, sensing where this was going. “And we don’t know who the attack was aimed at. The doppelganger took the brunt of the blast, but Stark was at the epicenter too. He might have been a target.”

“We’ve considered that possibility and decided it would be best if you stayed on with Stark. If the Mandarin or his copycat strike again, it’s probably best Stark has you on his side,” Fury reached out and gripped Steve’s shoulder. “You did good work out there tonight, Rogers.”
Steve broke eye contact and his jaw worked. “My responsibility was to be Stark’s bodyguard and...I failed.”

“Admittedly, Stark being hospitalized wasn’t ideal, but you neutralized the threat and stopped the gunmen. You did good. You even worked side-by-side with the Red Captain. He’s a smart guy. Steve Rogers and his doppelgangers are well known in the intelligence community. You might watch yourself around him.”

Something was nagging him and Steve couldn’t stop himself from trying to solve it. “Who is he?”

“The Red Captain? No one knows.”

“Was he birthed like Athena, fully-formed? He had to have come from somewhere. He told me he was originally from Brooklyn.” There was frustration buzzing underneath Steve’s skin. The Red Captain was uncertainty that seemed familiar and it bothered him. “He knew me, or he seemed to at the gala. He called me Steve and he knew the shield. He said I knew him.”

Fury and Hill exchanged glances but said nothing. After a beat, Steve scoffed.

“You want me to help you with all your problems, but you won’t give me anything. Why would the Red Captain know me?”

Fury stood akimbo and met Steve’s gaze head-on. “That’s classified.”

“I’m classified,” he replied with narrowed eyes and clenched fists. “I’ve been classified for the last sixty gods-damned years. I just spent my evening being blow up and shot, and you can’t even tell me the truth.”

“Calm down, Captain,” Hill ordered and he barked out a laugh.

“Calm down? I don’t think you understand how calm I’m being. I’ve tried to be understanding because this is not my world. I left my world decades ago. But this is my home and it is being threatened. I can’t defend it if I don’t know where the next hit is coming from and I can’t know that if you leave me in the dark. Why does the Red Captain know me by name? Why would he say that I know him, or that I should?”
“Captain Rogers, we don’t have the answers you want,” Fury was crossing his arms again and Steve was beginning to wonder if all SHIELD agents crossed their arms when withholding information.

“But you have answers?” Steve accused, sick of all the subterfuge. “You have the truth and you won’t tell me.”

“It’s need-to-know.”

“And I don’t, apparently?”

“Apparently.”

Blinking, Steve shut down the instinctive urge to push back against that. He was being shut out and he knew it. They still didn’t trust him with whatever it was that the Red Captain was hiding. Maybe he was an inside man for them after Clint stepped out. Maybe if they told him his cover would be blown. Whatever excuse they had for not telling him, it didn’t soothe the sense of distrust that washed over him. They didn’t believe in him and he found he didn’t believe in them either. At least it was mutual.

Switching tracks, Steve tried to ignore how hard his teeth were grinding in frustration. “What’s Stark’s status?”

Both Fury and Hill seemed to take a breath at the change in topic, but he saw them shore up their armors anyway. At least they were smart enough to know he wasn’t going to let this go, but he was letting it slide for now.

Hill pulled up a report on her tablet, but it didn’t go up on the big screen. She read it quickly, then informed them.

“He was rushed into surgery to stop the internal bleeding from the attack. They just left the OR. As far as we know, he’s stable, if still in critical condition.”

“If I’m staying with Stark, I should be at the hospital. In case of further attack.”
Fury nodded. “Sounds like a plan.”

“I need my shield. Coulson took it to be tested and cleaned.” Steve was eager to leave the SHIELD premises as soon as possible. If he had to stand around these people for one more minute, he’d launch back into a tirade about the hypocritical way they were treating him.

“We’ll have it dropped off at the hospital when it is done. You go on ahead. A car should be waiting for you in the garage.” Fury said, turning his back to Steve to watch the screen.

Steve didn’t bother saluting or dropping a ‘yes, sir’. He spun on his heel and began to march out of the office.

“We’ll be in touch,” Fury called out almost in dismissal and Steve forced himself to just keep walking.

The car they had prepared for him was sleek and nondescript as all the rest he’d seen since he arrived and already had the hospital’s address plugged into its automatic navigation system. As soon as Steve settled in the front seat, it took off.

The silence and solitude of the car ride to the hospital gave Steve room to think.

SHIELD was going to continue to withhold information from him and there wasn’t much he could do about that, except go above their heads and straight to Director Carter. But Steve knew he’d lost his leverage there when he came back different to what she had known. He wasn’t the man Peggy Carter had fallen for and she wasn’t the woman Steve Rogers had fallen for. Sixty years had torn them apart and there wasn’t a way to bring them back. Maybe he could play on what they had left, convince her it was better to have him in the loop. He might be able to pull it off, but a failed attempt might make it all worse.

If he wanted information, he was going to have to get it in a sneakier way. He didn’t know enough about this world’s tech to break into anything, but he just happened to be the bodyguard of a man who did. Stark would have to be curious as to what SHIELD was hiding unless he knew already himself. If so, then Steve was going to be very short on options. After all, he didn’t have many connections in this world.

Maybe Clint would know something. He kept on and on about how he was retired, but he had been
in the loop before and he had been a Kommando. If anyone might have some insight into the Red Captain, it would be him. But Steve didn’t have access to Clint. He was in jail and it was far too public to have that kind of conversation.

Sighing, Steve covered his eyes. He’d have to let it sit for a while and decide what to do with his questions later.

Turning instead to the next problem, Steve went through everything from the gala, just like he’d told Fury and Hill. There hadn’t been a sign of Loki for the entire event, which either meant that he was hiding in plain sight or that he wasn’t there at all. It appeared, for all intents and purposes, that Loki had never shown up. That could mean that the name on the invitation was a trap, or that he’d been sidetracked from his plan, or that maybe he was working with the Mandarin now. There were just too many options to choose from. He would need more intel to narrow down the possibilities. Loren Olsen had not attended the gala, but he had to be out there somewhere. If there was a Loren Olsen anywhere in this city, Steve needed to know.

He couldn’t trust SHIELD to tell him unless it suited them, so he’d have to rely on Stark.

The very same Stark laid up in the hospital fighting for his life. The world sure had gone to hell in a handbasket fast. He was going to have to regroup, maybe get something to eat, take a nap, come at this clear-headed in the morning.

As much as he loathed to admit, he couldn’t do anything at the moment. He would have to wait. Thankfully, Jötunheim had taught him well.

The hospital was very much abuzz with the media and a dwindling stream of medbuses bearing more injured from the gala by the time he got there. The car pulled around to the back without his instruction and parked itself in the nearest empty spot. It powered down and the door swung open.

“Thanks for the lift,” he muttered, stepping out of the car and heading inside. He heard the door shut behind him. There were photographers hovering just out of reach of the security cameras and they turned their cameras on him before deciding he wasn’t important enough to bother with. At least he had that going for him. Back during the war, he’d have to fight the media off with a stick to be left alone. Now, he walked through the back doors of the hospital without a single camera flash.

The nurse at the welcome desk looked up wearily when he stepped up.
“Sir, unless you’re here to volunteer blood, I’d suggest going home,” she stood from her chair and leaned forward. “Visiting hours are over and we’ve had enough reporters trying to sneak in tonight.”

“I’m not a reporter, ma’am. I work for Tony Stark. Can you tell me what floor he’s on?”

“Did you not hear me? Visiting hours are over. You’ll have to come back tomorrow.”

Sighing, Steve reached into his pocket and fished out his phone. He called one of the preprogrammed numbers in his contact list.

“Mister Birgirsson?” The voice of Stark’s chauffeur burst out of the phone and he turned from the nurse.

“They won’t let me up to Mister Stark. Mind explaining the situation to them?”

“Me?” The man both seemed surprised and incredulous. “Why’d you think I could do that?”

“Well, Miss Potts and Miss Rushman were taken in a medbus from the gala as was Mister Stark. You’re the only other person I know who’s available and capable.”

“Oh. Uh, right. Yeah, I can do that. Just, uh, one second.” The line went dead and Steve turned back to the nurse with his bonds tour smile.

She frowned at him, then jumped when her phone rang. She picked it up, listened for a moment, then ran her tongue over her teeth. Clicking her tongue, she gently placed the phone back on the receiver. Reaching into one of the drawers at her station, she pulled something free and began typing at her computer.

“I’ll need your ID.”

Steve dug it out of his pocket and handed it over. He watched as she scanned it, then scanned the high tech visitor’s badge she’d gotten out of her desk. The badge turned green and his face appeared on the visitor’s badge as well as a strange code. She placed both on the desk in front of
him and sat back down.

“Head down the hall to the first elevator on the left, scan the badge, and it’ll take you to your floor. Have a good night, sir.”

Steve took his ID and the badge, then paused. “Sorry for the trouble, ma’am. And you, too.”

The nurse nodded to him, seemingly less annoyed with his presence and he made his way to the elevator.

This elevator was like any other elevator that he’d ever been in since landed back on Midgard, fancy and far too high tech considering its job was pretty much the same. He pressed the badge to the smooth glowing panel and it glowed green and the doors slid shut smoothly. One thing this elevator had over some others was its almost imperceptible jolt as it shot upward. In the blink of an eye, he had rocketed from the first floor up to whatever floor Stark was on. The badge hadn’t said, nor had the panel, but when the elevator stopped and allowed him off, he knew it was the right one.

Steve stepped out into a pleasant hospital floor, with its linoleum tiles and warm-toned lights. It was obviously more of a recovery floor, meant for comfort and with enough space for visitors. He was drawn towards one that had two kevlar-clad guards standing in front of it. As he approached, they stood at attention.

“Birgirsson,” he announced himself quietly, raising his badge.

The guards looked at his badge, at his face, then the one on the left leaned towards the door. “He’s here, sir,” the guard called out just as quietly as Steve, mindful of the other patients.

“Well, let him in!” came the hissed reply and the guards stepped aside.

As soon as he stepped into view of the bed, he found himself moving a little faster. Stark was laid out under what looked to be a mountain of white sheets, his arms, and chest wrapped in thick gauze, bandages on his head, neck, and a large one on his cheek. He looked pale and his eyes were purplish as if he’d gone a few rounds with a boxer. His heart rate was being measured and was beating steadily. There was a bag of fluids connected to him, as well. He was completely unconscious.
He noticed Happy Hogan almost as an afterthought. Turning from where Stark was laid out, Steve held out his hand. “I don’t think we’ve formally met. I’m Steve.”

Happy was a big man, if a little nervous, and he sized up Steve for a moment before taking his hand. “I heard.”

It was a bit of a cold reception, but Steve was used to colder. “How is he?”

“Aside from over a hundred stitches, three wounds so deep they needed staples, and the fact that he was half a pint away from death?” Happy gasped for breath towards the end, tilting his head and crossing his arms. “Just fine.”

Steve lowered his gaze and nodded. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, well...” Happy took a seat by the bed and pulled out his Starkphone. “Tell him that.”

Swallowing, Steve grabbed the other chair and set it up across the bed from Happy. “I will,” he met Happy’s gaze head-on. “My mission was to keep him safe while we waited for Loki. I failed that...on both ends. But I never give up. Loki is still out there and the gala was targeted for a reason. Stark might still be in danger. As long as he is, I’ll stay on as his bodyguard, if...if he’ll have me.”

Happy huffed and typed something on his phone. “We’ll see when the boss wakes up.”

Steve looked back to Stark, with his dark lashes standing out against his sickly pallor, and settled further into his seat.

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**Loki**

Soledad's diner became an almost claustrophobic place for him over the course of the day. Too many people piled into one small building ordered too quickly and stayed far too long. The place was rife with the smell of food and though he had no plans to eat it, his stomach hadn't seen a feast in years. He felt as if he understood Volstagg a little more. If only in the veracity of his hunger.
For most of the night, Loki had been stuck in the back, washing dishes and fetching things for Herb Kinnaird, the portly cook whose specialty seemed to be enchiladas. Soledad’s diner was frequented by many locals and apparently had quite a few regulars. Soledad made it clear to him that his introduction to them must be good or he would stand out like a sore thumb.

“Don’t make enemies,” Claire had warned him before she left for the hospital.

“No promises,” he had replied, and Claire had rolled her eyes before ducking out the door.

With a few hours under his belt, Loki was willing to admit he sort of liked the mundane work. He had never really taken in the amount of time he spent using his magic until he couldn’t anymore. He was used to doing things with his hands, creating and manipulating the objects around him. Of course, he did feel off-put by the drab clothing, awful smells, and menial labor, but there was also something...terribly quaint about it all. Something soft in the way Herb patted his back when he caught up with him, or the way Soledad brushed her hand down his cheek when he brought her something.

Humans were...soft. Not all of them, of course, as he had learned the hard way in his first few years on this realm. But well-adjusted ones like Herb and Soledad were gentle and kind, made up of all the things that made it simple for people like him to take advantage. Skye and Mike had been those sorts of people. They cared too much about other people and were left quite vulnerable for all of that empathy. Loki did not feel the same need to show affection to every person he encountered, as Soledad did, or to shore up others’ confidence with simple gestures, as Herb and Claire did. He was not made of the same material.

Perhaps all Jötunn were like him, disconnected from that kind of display. But, he realized quickly, Laufey’s people had accepted the Midgardian warrior as if he were their own. They had taken him in and protected him as he seemed to protect them. A mere mortal had accomplished more in the way of becoming important to Laufey than Loki himself, who was the frost king’s own flesh and blood. What did Steve Rogers have that Loki did not? Was it Soledad’s iron will wrapped in nurturing kindness? Was it Herb’s goodwill and trust, even in the stranger that stood beside him in a kitchen full of weapons? Was it Claire’s determination to risk life and livelihood for what she knew to be alien out of a sense of justice? Was it Skye’s loyalty to her cause and her found family? Was it Mike’s faith in his own ability to save his son from Hel herself? What about humans made them so easily adaptable?

The sounds of some human sport cut off abruptly from the television, causing quite an uproar of dismay.
“Breaking news at nine,” the news reporter declared dramatically, staring determinedly into the camera. “The Maria Stark Foundation gala has been attacked. Early reports say as many as twenty-seven have been killed and many more injured. Now to Chess Roberts at the scene with the latest. Chess?”

The images switched quickly to a young woman with dark hair who was moving out of the way of the emergency personnel. Loki gazed quickly at the patrons, who had all but abandoned their meals in favor of the screen.

“Thank you, Christine,” Miss Chess adopted a somber expression as she settled in front of the camera. “I just spoke with the NYFD Chief on the scene and he said the gala was attacked by what is assumed to be a rocket launcher from a helicopter, then by armed gunmen. The origins of the helicopter or the reason for the attack have not been revealed, but there are FBI on the scene. Area hospitals have been taking in the wounded at an incredible rate. For those who weren't aware, the Maria Stark Foundation was created by the late Maria Stark to...” He didn't much care for the reasons for the gala. It hadn't mattered to him.

Loki had been on the guestlist for that event, had plans to steal into Stark's good graces and weasel the Tesseract from his grasp. These mortals...Skye...had stolen his focus. He would have been there, instead, he had laid upon a hospital bed and languished. In the end, it might have been a boon to have been shot. That, on top of everything, made him furious. He should have regained his magic by now, which would have made Midgardian weapons obsolete, and he should have left Midgard behind. Yet, if he had, would he have met Skye and Mike, or Claire and Soledad and Herb? Would he have cared? He might have destroyed Midgard as he had destroyed Jötunheim. The realization that he feared for Midgard stunned him, even if only because its fate held the fate of the humans would have aided him.

“Mijo,” Soledad whispered, her usually gentle hand gripping his arm tightly just above the cuff. “Are you okay?”

Loki blinked rapidly, gazing down at himself. The plate in his hand was frosted over with ice and it shook as he realized what that meant. Soledad took the plate with a clean cloth, carefully setting it aside.

“Take a break,” she ordered him, pushing him lightly. “Out the back door to the alley.”

Loki didn't hesitate.
Standing beside the rank dumpster bin, Loki found himself utterly enraptured by his own hands. He stared at the whorls as if they held the secrets to the universe. Odin had taken his magic, but Loki had thought that meant all his Jötunn magic as well.

There was no way Odin had forgotten to strip him of that too. He had tried countless times when he had landed on this realm to call upon his ancestral magic, yet none had come to him.

What changed?

Gazing up at the hazy night sky, he wondered if Heimdall was looking back. He and the gatekeeper had never gotten along, truth be told, but the thought of him perhaps keeping watch made him oddly melancholy. Surely Odin was simply toying with him, granting him more freedom for behaving. Four years of not entirely dastardly behavior had apparently earned his Jötunn powers back.

“How long until my debt is paid?” He wondered aloud, freezing the half-empty bottle of beer left by some miscreant atop the rubbish bin. Ice and winter flowed through his veins and, for once, not feeling the cold felt like a triumph instead of some innate dysfunction in him.

Loki was jolted out of his thoughts by the sound of screeching tires and blaring horns. Far off in the distance, he could hear police sirens. Though he knew they weren't coming for him, it made him paranoid. He ducked back inside.

Claire called the diner to tell him she wouldn't be able to walk him back, so Loki found himself marching through the frigid winter weather alone. Herb and Soledad were walking in the opposite direction, arms linked and bundled up. They looked small in the distance and he watched them cross the street safely before putting them out of his mind.

The wind picked up and ruffled his scarf, threatening to reveal his face to the world. He pulled it back tight and held his hand out to the sky, spinning his fingers in a slow circle. The wind rushed at him yet again, but this time, it stopped short of him and dissipated. He felt his lips curl up in amusement.

“Thank you,” he whispered to the storm, not expecting a response.
The ground rubbled beneath his feet, the wind blew strong enough to force him backward, and the lights went out. He braced himself for a fight, holding his hands as he might if he still had his magic. The darkness became a form, rising taller than the apartment buildings around him.

Loki blinked, everything seemed to have a blurred edge to it and shook his head. He had to be losing his mind.

The giant stooped forward in a rush and Loki was swept off his feet into the giant’s grasp. The view of the city he might have had from this height was blocked out by bleached white skin and deep blue veins.

Dangling in the air, Loki was staring straight into the blood-red eyes of a frost giant. Yet, he knew deep in his soul, it was not just any frost giant.

“Ymir,” he gasped, his eyes watering as he couldn’t bring himself to blink.

“Fimbulvinter,” Ymir rasped, his voice the bite of the harshest winter wind. “The first flakes have fallen, Laufeyson. Cast by your hand. More shall fall. I will rise again.”

Loki struggled against the hold of the great giant, twisting and turning. He felt a weight in his chest, burrowing deep, stealing his breath and sapping his strength. His scarf flew off in the breeze and he strained to reach for it but overreached and fell from Ymir’s hand. He collided with the icy asphalt and the breath was knocked out of him.

Gasping for air, Loki remained prone. The snow melted into his coat, wetting his sleeves, but he didn’t move. The weight in his chest had vanished, but it left behind a hollowness. He closed his eyes, trying to wipe the piercing gaze of Ymir out of his mind. It only seemed to make it worse.

“Hey, man, you alright?”

Loki jolted, gazing up. A Midgardian was standing where Ymir had been, bundled up in a thick coat and a hat. The young man seemed hesitant to reach out, but was stood quite close regardless. Loki waved him off, clambering to his feet.
“I’m fine, mortal,” he said, brushing the snow off his hands. “Thank you for your concern.”

“Yeah, man, just...you know, be careful.”

Loki stared at the man for a moment, seeking something important, but there was nothing to be found. Sighing, he nodded to the man and continued on.

It wasn’t until he was outside the door to Claire’s hideout that he realized he had lost his scarf.

His fingers hovered over the keyboard of Claire’s laptop and he found his focus wavering. He had to contact Skye. He shouldn’t have cut their conversation short before. The long winter raged in him and he felt as if he could see beyond today and tomorrow. Ragnarok itself stirred within his heart.

Something was coming.

Collecting his thoughts into something coherent, Loki sent a message to Skye. Last time, she had responded quite quickly, so he kept his fingers poised for a response himself. But one minute went on to two, then three. He sent another message and waited again. When he had still received nothing, he set the laptop aside.

She was probably busy freeing another bus or searching for Ace. His vision of Ymir had him on edge. Taking a few deep breaths, Loki left the laptop and went to the kitchen. There were simple ingredients in the pantry that he could make food from. He’d just give Skye the time to respond.

And he’d give himself time to calm down.

He ate, he paced, he froze the water in the sink for sport. Two hours passed by extremely slow and yet there was no message from Skye. Loki tried to put it out of his mind, chock it up to his unsettled mind after the vision of Ymir and the return of his Jötunn powers, but he had never ignored the whispers of his instinct. They were almost always right. It’s the feeling that helped him avoid attacks and teleport out of danger. Every scar he had ever gotten came from not heeding
those instincts.

Now, as he found himself sitting at the table with the laptop open, he gave into those instincts.

He typed up another message, Aces High, and sent it off.

Then he used the information Skye had given him to log in to the Rising Tide server. He navigated to the forums, looking for something about Skye amongst endless messages about Rollins Rounders, the Gala attack, the Kommandos, Zola’s labs, human trafficking and more. None of the posts seemed to hold anything of value until he found one posted by someone named Mileshacker.

4.1.04 Chicken Little posted by : Mileshacker

At first glance, it appeared to make no sense, considering the usual topics in this forum, but something about it drew him in.

4.1.04 Chicken Little posted by : Mileshacker

the chick and bot are the eagle’s problem now.

4.1.04 RE: Chicken Little posted by : Queen-JoCastAww

you laid the bait?

4.1.04 RE:RE: Chicken Little posted by : Mileshacker

chick always takes the parting gift. three strike rule.

4.1.04 RE:RE:RE: Chicken Little posted by : UltimateTron
Loki read over the lines, confused. Why were they talking about a little chicken? Who was the eagle? He clicked off of the thread, then paused. Something was prodding him, telling him to go back. There wasn’t another post by Mileshacker in that thread, but there were many declaring their happiness at the news.

Frowning, he turned to Google.

He typed in Chicken Little and was bombarded by a Midgardian folktale about talking animals afraid of...the sky...falling.

Sky...Skye? Was Mike the bot? Who was the eagle? Wait...

Loki remembered Skye mentioning some organization called SHIELD who had a bird-like emblem to represent them. Perhaps this is the eagle Mileshacker wrote of. Skye and Mike must have crossed the wrong people and been taken. But taken where?

There were no posts explaining the locations of SHIELD bases, perhaps because the Rising Tide was aware of the high probability of flies upon their walls. Loki did not have extensive knowledge of coding or its intricacies, but he was willing to use his middling knowledge to do something.

Since the first post to even hint at a lead was posted by Mileshacker, Loki focused his attention on them. Skye had taught him how to trace things, mostly because it had been what she was doing at the time and Loki hadn’t let her be until she explained it to him. Breaching a lowly staff account to forge his name on the invitation to the Stark gala had been almost easy and tracing Mileshacker through his posts to Rising Tide’s well-hidden underlayer that Skye herself helped build proved just as simple. Beneath the facade of a simple forum site, buried in the coding, was an almost invisible location grid. It only had coordinates, which Skye had informed him when he’d stumbled upon a post listing Zola’s lab locations.

He returned to Google with the numbers, which he realized were just...an hour or two outside of the city limits. If he took a car, he’d be there before the sun deigned to rise.

Soledad expected him in the morning when the diner opened, but he had joined with Skye and Mike long before he met Claire and her mother. One loyalty came first and it did not escape him...
that his loyalty now lies with mere mortals.

He dressed himself warmly, despite not needing the layers. The hood would help obscure his face should this Mileshacker person know him on sight alone. The only money he had was from the tips he’d earned tonight and a little that Claire had left for him in case of emergencies. He supposed it would have to be enough.

Hailing a cab in the middle of the night, during a winter storm, proved near impossible. But, as it turned out, not completely impossible for the humans of Harlem. After a couple of blocks in the direction of his destination, Loki spotted one of the notorious yellow vehicles.

It was a hover cab, which he had come to know were newer after they had become the cheaper mainstay. It buzzed along the road, unhindered by the icy roads. He stepped towards the road and raised his hand, which he had witnessed many Midgardians doing since he’d landed in this city. It worked and the cab pulled over gently to the curb. The rear passenger door popped open on its own and he slid into the warm interior. The driver, a young man with half-lidded eyes and a slouch, lazily turned to look at him.

“Hey, man, put in your destination so we can get going.”

In the middle of the seat-backs were thin touch screens with spaces for one to put their destination’s address. Loki navigated the screens easily, having gotten used to the format thanks to Skye. As soon as he pressed the accept button, the driver stretched his hand out for the amount of money that appeared on the screen. Loki handed it over and the driver placed it somewhere near his middle console. The cab took off from the curb and headed out onto the roads, humming along steadily.

“So,” the driver began, looking straight ahead. “How’s your night been?”

Loki was never one for small talk, but he had quite the experience with entertaining foreign dignitaries from the Nine Realms and beyond. This mortal, who seemed only half interested in his answer, was hardly a challenge.

“My Jötunn powers have returned to me, I was visited in a vision by Ymir, father of frost giants, and I am going to pay a stranger a visit to find a lost friend,” Loki watched the driver carefully, but the man merely smiled wide.
“Yeah, dude,” the driver said, still smiling. “That sounds boss. My day’s just been blah, ya know?”

Without needing to focus in the slightest, Loki tuned out the driver.

The ride to the coordinates wasn’t extremely long, though it was over an hour and a half. Loki spent most of the time staring at his hands, crafting small gems and jewels made of ice in fits and starts. His Jötunn powers were there, always had been, and now he felt it stronger than ever. Perhaps it was the distance from it these last four years, or it could have been the severe lack of magic here on Midgard. Still, it gave him something, something he hadn’t realized was missing. A power he had missed dearly. And now, as the cab pulled up outside a modest house and the car door popped open to let him out, he let that power fill him up.

“Have a good night,” The driver said as a goodbye and Loki simply nodded, letting the door shut behind him.

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